

In November 2000 Paddy Ashdown published the first volume of his *Diaries*. Andrew Rawnsley, Duncan Brack and Harriet Smith interviewed him on his period as leader.

Ashdown as Leader

In August 1999, Paddy Ashdown MP handed over the leadership of the Liberal Democrats, drawing to an end a dramatic and sometimes controversial eleven-year span as party leader. Just over a year later he published the first volume of his *Diaries* (reviewed in this issue of the *Journal* by Tony Greaves), covering the period 1988–97. The Liberal Democrat History Group organised two interviews with him on the topics covered in the *Diaries*: the first, at an evening meeting in Politico's bookstore, where the questions were put by *Observer* journalist Andrew Rawnsley and members of the audience; and the second, with Duncan Brack and Harriet Smith. This article reproduces edited extracts from both.

The *Diaries*

Q: I thought we'd begin by asking Paddy why you wrote these diaries and what you hope to achieve from publishing them?

PA: Tam Dalyell suggested I should. It was the morning of 28 July 1988 – the day of the Liberal Democrat leadership election count – and I was walking through the House of Commons Members' Lobby and I met Tam there, and he said: 'Paddy you are going to win today – congratulations. And here's a word of advice – keep a diary.' And I did, starting that night. I must say I wish I had kept a diary before, because it is a fascinating thing to do. Looking back on the eleven years, it's an odd thing to sum up at the end of the day what you have done that day, not in a militaristic fashion – Andrew would like to pretend that I'm only capable of thinking like a roaring commando captain with a dagger in his teeth and blackened face – but it sums up what you've been doing and helps to point you where you will be going the next day.

The next thing I decided was that if you are going to do a diary, you have to do it *for* somebody; you can't just do a diary in a vacuum. I had no intention of publishing them until about a year or eighteen months ago, when I showed Richard Holme a copy of a meeting with our present Prime Minister and he said: 'you really ought to be publishing these'.

However, I didn't dictate them for you and they would have been worse diaries if I had done, because I think I would have been a bit more self-conscious than I otherwise was. I dictated them, in fact, for my grandchildren, as then unborn; what I tried to do was to try and express for them what politics in our time was like at my level. I think that has made them more frank and, I hope, a little more unvarnished, than they would otherwise have been.

I want to add two warnings for you. One, diaries are the most seductive form of historical inaccuracy – they appear to be historically accurate because they are contemporaneous. I dictated these every night – well all right, I'll admit it, sometimes the next day, and just really very occasionally the day after – and I would note if there was a conversation; I would note it down immediately I left, if it had been a meeting with Major or Thatcher or the Secretary-General of the UN or, of course, Mr Blair. So they appear to be a historical record, but of course they are not, because they are one person's view, how I saw things. On one particular occasion, you will see that my mind played tricks with me – in the Tricia Howard affair, when I thought we had taken a set of decisions and everybody else who was there said we had *not* taken them for the same reasons I thought we had taken them. I put a footnote in there saying everyone else didn't see it that way. So, underlined several heavy times – this is *my* view, *my* recollection of events, no more and no less.

The next point about diaries is that you then have to decide why you are going to publish them. It's very difficult to answer this question without sounding pompous, so let's start off by saying: because of the money, which isn't nearly as much as you all think. But also I genuinely think they are a record of eleven years of politics which people may find interesting.

My second reason was because, as you will see, I conceived the idea of what has come to be known as the 'project'. Actually I didn't conceive it, but I decided that this was what I was going to do, that I wanted the Liberal Democrats to play their role in the reshaping of the left in politics as early as 1989, long



before Tony Blair was even a gleam in Peter Mandelson's eye. It wasn't even my project; it was the project of my predecessor David Steel and before him Jeremy Thorpe but, most profoundly of all perhaps, Jo Grimond. This is a project about the realignment of the left which we in the Liberals and the Liberal Democrats – or at least some of us – have wanted to achieve for a very long time. I am passionate about it. I genuinely believe that this is something that had to be done, and is a big event waiting to be done in politics – and our failure to do it has given the Tories too many chances to have a go at government, and progressive politics too few chances to govern and bring the kind of things we believe in.

That's not to say we are the same as Labour; but I think working together to 'heal the schisms' is a useful and good thing to do. I hope that these diaries will give that a boost, for two reasons. I hope that at the end of reading them and thinking about that aspect of the diaries, people will say: 'goodness, didn't they get close?' and the next thing they'll say is: 'wouldn't it have been a better thing if they had succeeded?' Because I have no doubt that this would have been a better government if we had been involved in it. It would not have been a government that made the mistake of not investing in health and education for the first two years – which Tony Blair now admits to be one of the cardinal mistakes of his government; it would have tackled the issue of Europe earlier; and it would have been a much greener government.

It wouldn't necessarily have been a much more liberal government, but I think I am right in saying, without being too breast-beating and pro-Lib Dem, that it would have been a more in-touch government. I hope it will give that project a boost. I think it probably will, particularly in the light of the new climate for partnership between the two parties that's working well in Scotland and Wales.

The early days

Q: Why did you want to stand for the leadership of the party?

PA: Because I didn't know what position the party was in! – though I don't think it would have changed my mind if I had. David Penhaligon once said that one of the reasons he was elected Member of Parliament for Truro was because he was too naïve to know it was impossible – and I think the same is true of my election in Yeovil, incidentally. But I had no idea of the financial state of the party. And it wasn't just the finances. What we didn't realise was the extent to which party support and everything else fell apart behind us in the three months of the leadership election campaign, because it was leaderless.

Q: Given the state of the party in those early days, when we were all so naïve, what did you think you could achieve?

PA: Very early on, I formulated a three-stage strategy, in my normal military fashion. In many ways, my early leadership was like my early leadership of the Yeovil constituency. I took over something in about the same state of disrepair and I was quite goal-oriented, plan- and strategy-oriented. I laid out a three-stage strategy. Stage 1 was to put the thing back together again. We had to concentrate in the first two or three years just on ourselves, rebuilding, recreating the structures, getting the thing working together, getting a decent headquarters and so on.

The second stage was, having done all that, to make the party matter to the electorate again. The 1992 election was about making the party relevant. And the third stage was, having made it relevant, how do you play on the scene? So to give it a sporting analogy, the first

stage was building a team, the second stage was putting the team on the field and making sure people knew we could play, and the third stage was trying to score some goals.

Q: What did your victory signify in terms of party thinking? Was it a rejection of 'old Liberalism', a fresh start after Steel, the triumph of the ex-SDP element of the new party, or something else?

PA: I don't think it was a triumph of the ex-SDP. One always writes things after the event to suit oneself, but I think there was a determination, a deep recognition in the party that if we could retain the strengths of the old Liberal Party – campaigning ability and strength on the ground – and match that with the new strengths brought in by the SDP – intellectual rigour, a few quite high-profile people and a more efficient approach to things (not all things, but some things) – then we could create something. There was a desire to build something new; I think the strategic mistake that Alan [Beith] made in the leadership election was that he wanted to recreate the old Liberal Party, whereas most of the members wanted to create something fresh, something different.

Q: You refer early on in your diary to SDP/Liberal tensions. Which of the two groups did you find it easier to work with?

PA: My natural bent was to find it easier to fit in with Liberals, because I had come from a grassroots campaigning background, because ALDC had helped me win Yeovil, etc. I can't tell you what the answer is, but I don't think either of them was easier to work with. The people I got on with were those who believed that past differences didn't matter and that we had to get to a position where everyone believed they didn't matter. In the construction of my first leader's office I quite deliberately chose 50% of the people who had voted against merger, from both sides, because I knew that unless I brought them in, I couldn't rebuild the party.

Q: When did SDP/Liberal differences cease to matter?

PA: There is a date – some time before the 1992 general election. I have a suspicion that Des [Wilson] may have

been responsible for that more than anyone else, because although Des could be very bitter about some things – I think the thing that keeps him together sometimes is his hates – he was in fact very inclusive during the election campaign. If there's one thing that got us over the differences, it was the election campaign; it proved we could do it, we were together, we were a force, we did matter. Des's remarkable team-building style, with some exceptions, was part of that.

Party policy and organisation

Q: The Diaries hardly talk about policy – why is that?

PA: The reason is the editor, who naturally wanted to pick out the bits that were of interest to a wider circle; there isn't much about the constituency either.

What I am clear about is that, especially in the first phase, the creation of a body of policy which was Liberal and which gave the party heart was absolutely crucial. Frankly, chairing the Policy Committee was a crucifixion, but it's a crucifixion I had to bear because if I hadn't had a hands-on approach, we would not have created that body of policy that it gave us. Michael Meadowcroft used to say that in order to win the votes you must first win the

vote-winners. I am not sure how much policy does apply to people out there, ordinary voters, but it certainly applies to the vote-winners.

Q: What were the key elements in that? What were the key components of the new liberal party?

PA: Somebody said to me that one of the seminal moments was Hong Kong passports. I think that's right. It was because we were alone, we were opposed by everybody else, and it was Liberalism.

An important strain was economic policy, where Alan Beith, as Treasury spokesperson, and I quite deliberately went about seeking to change the policy of the party away from – and I don't mean to be insulting to others – a soggy corporatism towards a more liberal policy, more interested in competition, small businesses and enterprise. We shifted the economic policy deliberately quite strongly to the right.

The second was based on the citizen and citizens' rights. I think the party still has a problem here, which is that because

of our local government base we tend to articulate far too much the view of the producer and not the consumer.

The third element, internationalism, was a passion of mine. I think that the three proudest moments of the party in terms of events were the Hong Kong

passports issue, which I think was mine, actually; the second was the Maastricht debate, which I still believe was our proudest moment in the House of Commons – Maastricht would have fallen if we hadn't voted with the Conservatives; and the third was

I found it very difficult to get the party to think afresh. For a radical party, we can be extremely resistant to new ideas and new concepts that swim against what was the accepted wisdom.

Bosnia, for which I have taken a huge amount of credit, but actually the architect of our policy was Russell [Johnston]. It was Russell who said we must take this position and it was Russell who persuaded me to do so, and I have benefited greatly from what was Russell's moral leadership.

The environment is also very important. Charles [Kennedy] chose the environment as the thing he wanted to make a splash on early in his leadership campaign, and so did I. I wanted us to be the greenest party and I think we probably were, by a long way, and that was a considerable revolution in the early days.

The Balkan wars were a constant theme of Ashdown's leadership (cartoon courtesy *Liberal Democrat News*)



Q: All your proudest moments were on international issues?

PA: Those were the big policy events, it seems to me, and I think it was and is true to say that in terms of personalities the party enjoyed an ascendancy over Labour on the foreign affairs and defence fields. Menzies [Campbell], Steel, Johnston and myself were able to present a much more cogent and consistent argument in the Gulf War, over Maastricht, and in the Balkans than anybody else. They are all foreign affairs but I suppose that's because that was the niche we could occupy – the niche that others, particularly Labour, didn't pay much attention to, and which played to our personal strengths.



Ashdown and Sir David Frost

Q: Where did you get your ideas from? What were the sources that influenced your thinking?

PA: Ken Baker once accused me of being a picker-upper of unconsidered trifles. I'm fascinated and driven by ideas. That's why I enjoy speaking to Gordon Brown so much, because he's the same. I sort of go around hoovering up ideas and testing them and then being attached to them. Is there a single source? You'd have to go to people like T. H. Green, Gladstone, Keynes on the economic side, Ralf Dahrendorf – the pretty standard Liberal Democrat thinkers. I didn't take my creed lock stock and barrel from any one individual.

Q: What were the problems you experienced with the process of putting together that body of policy?

PA: I found it very difficult to get the party to think afresh. For a radical party, we can be extremely resistant to new ideas and new concepts that swim against what was the accepted wisdom. For example, I still think that mutuality is one of the key tasks for our age and we missed a real opportunity there.¹ Look at the party's response to neighbourhood school trusts,² which, incidentally, true to Don [Foster]'s prediction, have now been adopted by both the other two parties. We could have been ahead on that. We are hopelessly resistant to really interesting new thought in the party and we ought not to be. We used not to be and that may well be a failure of my leadership.

The second thing is the constant battle with the local government-driven producers. That sounds much more insulting than I mean it to be, because in many ways I tried to model the party on our local government record; I saw what had been done there as a beacon for the rest of us to follow. These guys had taken power, grappled with it, dealt with coalitions, and come out of it on top and that's what I wanted us to have the self-confidence to do nationally. So if I'm being slightly insulting to local government in the party, I don't mean to be across the board. It's just the nature of people – you have a power base and you try to preserve it, of course you do. I do exactly the same, but it was this great burden we had to get through to persuade people that what we were doing nationally also made sense in their councils.

Q: The structure of policy-making in the party rests on a balance between the Federal Policy Committee, the conference and the parliamentary party. Did you have any problems with any one of those consistently? Were you able to play them off against each other?

PA: I loved the FPC – it was a crucifixion to chair it because it went on and on and on, but it was a bloody good committee to work with. We had some high-quality people and some superbly high-quality debates. It was the pace at which it moved that I found frustrating.

I don't think the parliamentary party has accepted or yet accepts the primacy of the FPC. The difficulty we had was that

very frequently we had the spokesperson in parliament going off and doing their own thing and frequently saying 'I'm not responsible to the party – I am responsible to my electorate, parliament is different.' There were considerable tensions and difficulties, still unresolved, between the freedom of action the parliamentarian has – and this applies equally, and perhaps more, to the Lords – and the FPC. In my view the FPC was on most occasions braver and intellectually more rigorous and in many cases more Liberal than was the parliamentary party. Again there is a reason for that, it's a human reason – it's not because the parliamentary party aren't Liberals, it's because they are dealing with the compromises of power.

Q: You say at one point you worry about the ability of the parliamentary party to hold together in a hung parliament. One does get the impression from the Diaries that they are a terribly undisciplined bunch of people. Do you think the party is well served by its parliamentarians?

PA: I think it's changing. One of the changes that occurred during my leadership, for which I can take no credit at all, is that the parliamentarians have become steadily more professional and steadily more influenced by practice in local government – in many cases because, like me, they have come up through the local government route and helped to build their local government bases and know what it's about. The Liberal Party as it was before I joined, pre-1983, was a collection of extremely powerful, sometimes vaguely eccentric, very well-loved local figures. I don't say they weren't Liberal – some of them were and some of them weren't – but that's what they were and that's how they got elected.

1983 changed that, with Archy Kirkwood, Michael Meadowcroft, Malcolm Bruce, Jim Wallace and myself all coming from a similar background. 1987 and then 1992 changed it again and 1997, I think, has made a phenomenal difference. If there's one MP who is an outstanding example of it, it's Jackie [Ballard]. Now Jackie and I have had our differences, and sometimes they have been quite personally hurtful differences, given that we were brought up together in politics; but what is true

about Jackie is that once a decision has been taken, however much she disagrees, she is unbelievably loyal to that decision and holds to it absolutely firmly – and there are others in the new lot who are like that too. So, the parliamentary party has got steadily better and better on this front.

Whatever worries I may have had about the parliamentary party's potential cohesion in a coalition were probably unsubstantiated. Just look at the Scottish parliamentary party – if you had looked at it before it was assembled, you would have thought: 'Jesus, how will this lot not break apart under the smallest

pressure?' Or the Welsh Assembly party. This did not look like a cohesive band of brothers, but they've been brilliant, and I think I underestimated the extent to which people rise to the political challenge. One of the things you discover as a Liberal is that you give people responsibility and they rise to it.

The Labour project – marriage, affair or casual sex?

Q: One of the aims of your leadership campaign was to replace Labour as the main opposition to the Tories. In 1997 you talked about replacing the Tories as the main opposition to Labour. Was either of these realistic?

PA: The first was realistic, it was deeply realistic. I was not to know then that the Labour Party would elect a new leader. What I was very conscious of, and where I think my analysis was right and has proved to be so, was that socialism as the basis of a political party was not going to work, and that there was a space in politics – which I would call Liberalism or New Liberalism or whatever you like – which the party could go for.

The deepest and most desperate point of depression in my whole leadership of the party was the election of Blair. In many ways it was the thing I wanted to happen, but in many ways I knew – and I

say this without a doubt – that he was going to occupy the space that I was designing for us. So the question then was: how the hell do we survive, how the hell do we ride that wave rather than have it swamp us? So I think our analysis that the Labour Party would be replaced and that we would have a go at replacing it was correct, but we were not to know they would elect a leader that would replace

the Labour Party himself.

I was puzzled by this 1997 thing, about can we replace the Tories as the opposition to Labour. You will see in Volume 2 of the *Diaries* [due out after the next general election] that I agonised

about what the role of the party should be in the face of the New Labourism of Blair. Should we be part of it, in the hope of reforming it and turning it, or should we be opposing it? But you will see that I have always rejected the possibility that we could replace the Tories. The reason is because there is a centre-right constituency in this country and the Tories don't represent it at the moment; as long as they don't represent it we can borrow votes and some people from it, but as soon as they come back to the centre ground we can't be a centre-right party, because we are a left party, we are a party of progress.

Ashdown in typical pose – with a computer



I remember us fighting on the slogan that the party was there to get rid of Labour – I didn't realise that a Labour leader would do it better than we could ourselves!

There has always been a choice in my mind. The two logical positions for the party are the John Tilley/Tony Greaves view that our job is to be Liberals and to argue the Liberal opposition to a non-Liberal government, whether socialist or Tory. That is a perfectly logical position for the party, and I have always accepted that as one option. I may have wondered whether we should pursue this line, but in my own mind I was absolutely clear – and in some key moments after 1997, even more clear – that this was an historic opportunity for us to shape the government and to be the government. And I think I can say that if we had been in government as a result of coalition post-1997 this would have been a far better government.

Now what led me to that belief? The answer is this rather powerful thought, that you may think in the end a chimaera. I looked at our own party, and the seminal moment for me was Bob Maclennan's response to Blair's accusation in one of our meetings. Blair said 'we're all social democrats now', and Bob said: 'no we're not, I'm a Liberal'. And I said to Bob afterwards, 'hang on, you're SDP', and he said, 'I've become a Liberal'. And the same is true of Charles Kennedy. And here's the thought that occurred to me: if Liberalism is the only creed that continues to matter and the others have become irrelevant, then it is extraordinary that Emma [Nicholson] from one wing and Bob from the other, through contact with us, have become liberals. And I entertained the thought, which I still think is not unreasonable,

that Blair – who nearly joined the SDP anyway, I am told – was on exactly the same journey. Blair once said to me that he watched the Hillhead by-election, ‘and I listened to our candidate there and I saw Roy [Jenkins] there and I said “I’m in the wrong party, I should be in a party with him”’. That was the thing that led me to believe that the right thing to do for us was not to follow the Tilley/Greaves view, but to take a risk, be inside this process and turn it towards Liberalism. People will say I’ve failed, and ultimately, I suppose, I have.

Q: Do you think you judged Blair wrongly in that estimation?

PA: No I don’t. I will have to leave this to Volume 2, which has a degree of poignancy and tragedy about it. One of the real problems with Blair, that we can see very clearly now, is that he doesn’t have an ideological backbone. He’s about management, he’s trying to get there but he can’t quite make it. One of his problems is that he’s never been through hard times.

I think the potential was there with Blair. I think that I would have been derelict as leader of the party if I did not take what I perceived to be the best opportunity we have had in half a century, or probably more, to achieve PR and to achieve the realignment which Grimond and Steel were after, let alone me. I calculated that I would take any reasonable risk to try and bring that about. There will be more about that in Volume 2.

Q: We should at this point bring out the issue of sex, as you said there were three options: you could have a marriage, you could have an affair or you could have casual sex. Now there are some people who think what happened here is Tony Blair was the classic married man, and you were the mistress who he kept promising to make an honest leader of, but never quite did. I was struck with the number of passages there are with you wanting to bring this thing to fruition, and Tony appearing to be enthusing – but so many conversations end up with Tony saying: ‘yes, but I’ve got to square off Gordon, I’ve got to

deal with Jack Straw, oh dear, what do I say to John Prescott?’ And I wondered whether the alarm bell didn’t ring every time he said: ‘Yes Paddy, but ...’?

PA: Let’s deal with the sex. I’ve got two Garland cartoons – one is in this book and one is in the next book – in which we change sex. If you look at the first one, there’s a picture of Tony Blair as a very seductive woman dancing with a rose between her teeth, trying to draw my attention as I’m reading a newspaper and looking the other way. In the second one, I’ve become the disgruntled woman going off. Sex seems to have a

great deal to do with this discussion, in more ways than one.

I suppose the enemies of the project can easily write up one of two stories – Blair was a charlatan, or Ashdown was a dupe. But I think the story is different. Here are two people, leaders of their

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parties, who are outside the tribal normality of their parties; Tony Blair isn’t a Labour member in the same way as John Smith was, and I’m probably not a Lib Dem in the same way as David Steel was. Both of us have had other experiences, I suppose. We looked at politics and said:

‘Here’s a big thing to be done – let’s see if we can do it’. To believe otherwise you have to presume deceit on his part, and I have to tell you straight that I can’t presume that, given the amount of time he spent and the risks he took.

There are problems with our blessed Prime Minister. One of them is that he has such excessive charm. Was it Thomas Aquinas who, when he saw the devil, took a rusty nail and pressed it into the palm of his hand in order to make him feel real? – well, metaphorically I used to take a rusty nail whenever I went in to see Tony Blair. But I think he underestimates his difficulties. I don’t think he properly appreciates the barriers to achieving what he wants to achieve, and I think he overestimates the power of his charm, and I think he delays in making decisions. But I genuinely do not believe that he set out to do this with malice, or with the intention of seduction, or with the intention of doing anything else other than what he appeared to be doing, which was seeking to heal the schism on the left.

If you reject the evidence of the book, then listen to the evidence of his own mouth, in which he has said, perfectly clearly, that he has two big things that he wants to achieve in order to go down in history as a great Prime Minister. One is to lead this country into Europe, and the

Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors’ conference, November 1998



other is to heal the schism of the left in politics. He can reflect on the fact that he has achieved neither, and that he is further away from both than he was when he was elected on 1 May 1997.

Q: The other possible interpretation, which doesn't make you a dupe or him a charlatan, is that the PM was naïve in the forces of resistance he would encounter amongst his most senior colleagues, and weak.

PA: You could make that case, precisely because it required two leaders who were from outside the tribal boundaries of their parties. You could make the case that both of us underestimated the barriers. As it happens, he had to face up to his cabinet on 2 May – or, as I think I said, on the night of 1 May – before I had to face up to my party. I could easily have lost that too. He had to pull back. It may well be that the charge of naïveté, or lack of appreciation of the forces of tribalism, is one you have to lay against him, and I suspect is one you have to lay against me.

Q: Let's look at the conversation you had with him just before he's about to go to Buckingham Palace on 2 May 1997. He had actually said to you earlier on: 'If I get a big majority it's going to be easier to do that'. But he didn't pop the question – and at that moment you and, I think, others, such as Roy Jenkins, whose counsel you were sharing, express yourselves as relieved. But had he said to you 'despite this massive majority, Paddy, I still want to do it – you come into the government, we are going to do a proper programme, it won't be just a few Lib Dems administering a Labour programme', would you have said yes to him if he had asked you outright?

PA: Yes, and I say it in the book: I would have said yes.

There are several things that led to this outcome. Both of us remained in the psychology of the election campaign; what we hadn't done is to make the change to the psychology of the new administration. I was very clear in advance that that what was going to happen, so before we started the campaign I lodged with Blair a document,

which you will see in the *Diaries*, which shows how we would have dealt with a coalition. So he knew what would happen, we wouldn't misread each other's signals. Nevertheless, I think on polling day we did misjudge it. One of the things that weighed heavily in his mind, and on mine, was that with this massive majority, was it not undemocratic for us to diminish the power of an opposition and to increase his own majority? Now that, I think, was an error.

The second thing is that I was exhausted. I had made a plan to put Tom McNally in charge for forty-eight hours afterwards, and use Richard Holme precisely to try and change my

psychology, but I was absolutely knackered at the end of the campaign – and I was relieved. If you look at the book I'm not saying who was at fault on this –

Blair took the decision, but I was relieved about it. But I would have said yes, as the book makes very clear. And then take it to the party and see what happened; I think I would have got it through, others may disagree.

My final point is this. I think between 1 May, when I spoke to him from a school in Jackie Ballard's constituency, by arrangement, and he told me he knew by then that he was going to get a big majority; and 2 May, when he rang me just before he went to see the Queen, something happened. I don't know what it was. I think – and you may be able to find out – that that night he hit the blocks we were talking about – he hit Prescott, Brown and Straw.

Q: Would you have accepted a position in the government, and how could the Liberal Democrats support a government with Jack Straw?

PA: I genuinely have no desire to be a cabinet minister. I have a terrific desire to be Prime Minister, but that job appears to be taken at the moment. There is a point in the book where I say to Cherie [Blair] that I have no desire to be a cabinet minister but I wanted my other colleagues to be – a leader of the party doesn't have to be

in the cabinet, if you think of how they run it in Europe. So leaving me aside for a moment, we had three conditions to go into a coalition.

Firstly, it had to be a coalition about policy. You'll see at the end of the book that I said: don't ask me simply to add Liberal Democrats to a Labour administration running a Labour manifesto; it has to be a genuine coalition based on both our policies put together. We weren't in a position to ask for very much, but one of the things we were going to ask for, incidentally, was independence for the Bank of England.

Condition number two was PR – not that it should be delivered but that in a referendum Blair and the government would argue in favour. And condition number three – we did say it and I think we were probably right – was that we couldn't be in a government – after all, we are Liberals – in which Jack Straw was Home Secretary. I'm not saying he couldn't be in the government, but he couldn't be Home Secretary. That was with the experience of the Criminal Justice Bill in the House of Lords very fresh in our memories. I still think that judgement was not an inaccurate one.

Q: Can you tell us what you feel Tony Blair thinks about electoral reform, because he's been very coy in public – can the Liberal Democrats really rely on Labour? There's a footnote in your Diaries where he gives an interview to the New Statesman in which they portray him as ruling out PR, and he says to you that he was completely misquoted. But in fact that interview was a transcript. He had said in certain terms: 'I'm not going for PR – and he then comes to you and says: oh no, I'm being traduced.'

PA: I was aware of that. I'm going to expand the question from PR to constitutional reform but I think it applies to PR too. Constitutional reform is not the iron in Blair's soul in the way it is in Robin Cook's, for instance. Blair regards constitutional reform not as the absolutely essential thing you must do to get government right, but as a part of the process of modernisation. We will modernise the civil service, we'll modernise the arts, oh we'll modernise the constitution as well – it's just one thing you would do along with everything else, not the fundamental change you

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Paddy and Jane Ashdown (Dick (now Lord) Newby in background)

have to make to enable others. That is why he has tripped so much, for instance, on devolution.

There is a very interesting bit in the book where he says, 'frankly I'm not very keen on PR. I can be persuaded either way. I only want PR because it gets you guys in', which is why I believe that this rapprochement will come. It won't come now, in my view, from a position of strength, which was what we were trying to do as part of a grand vision; it will come when it has become necessary to do it. Maybe that's what politics is – maybe these things only happen when it's necessary, maybe it was naïve of us to try and imagine we could create circumstances that wouldn't otherwise have been created. So in one of two circumstances – when Labour realise they are going to lose the next election, or if they don't realise that in time and when they suffer another defeat – its chance will come round again.

Q: A lot of your negotiations with Tony Blair took place in secret circumstances, which presumably meant keeping it from your close colleagues, both in the parliamentary party and in the party in the country. Did you feel guilty at all, or was that a necessary deception because there were some in the party who just would not have accepted it?

PA: Well, three points – did I conspire with Blair to maximise our vote and maximise the defeat of the worst, most rotten and corrupt government we have had this century? Yes, I did and I make no apologies for doing that. I

think we were doing a service. Rallings and Thrasher calculate that we may have increased the numbers of seats we won together by about fifty. We exaggerated the Tories' defeat and won more seats for ourselves, and I make no apologies for that.

Secondly, was I operating outside the ambit the party had given me? I don't think I was. I took to them the abandonment of equidistance quite deliberately. Blair was already there then. I took that to the party and said I wanted to make it quite clear that we should now be working with those forces that are about the removal of this government – we should be co-operating with them, particularly on constitutional change. I lived and worked within that public ambit that was publicly taken and democratically supported at a conference.

Did we, nevertheless, do things in private? Well, yes we did. I think you can't conduct these negotiations any other way. But that's why the small group who were always in touch, who read the minutes, who read the diary bits that you are reading now, included the Chief Whip, who of course was responsible to the parliamentary party, and the President of the Party, who is elected by them and responsible to the party at large. They were involved in those closest circles.

My final point is this. In here you will see that we recommended to Blair what became known as the 'Big Thing', which was that we should go into the last

election on a joint heads of agreement. The document that I presented to him – which we almost agreed on – is in one of the annexes of the *Diaries*. Now that would have been a perfectly public and open thing. We would have said, 'here are the heads of agreement on which we are working, and this is how we present ourselves to you, the British people'. We never came to a conclusion about that. People say: why didn't you announce this; well, how do you announce a negotiation that you haven't succeeded in? You couldn't do that. So I don't say I'm free of criticism, but you asked the question: did I think and worry about it? Yes, I did and I tried to incorporate it into what we did. Whether or not perfectly is up for others to decide.

Q: When did it occur to you that your project was possible? One of the seminal moments for the realignment of the left was the John Smith lecture – how much have we forgotten of what John Smith did to make Labour more acceptable to Liberals, because of his commitment to devolution and other constitutional reforms?

PA: I formulated the idea of the project in 1988, just weeks after the leadership election. I remember us fighting on the slogan that the party was there to get rid of Labour – I didn't realise that a Labour leader would do it better than we could ourselves! But I was absolutely clear that in order to achieve 'the project', we had to make sure that Labour were defeated in 1992. Although in the long run I wanted to get us into a position where we could work with Labour, my first task was to defeat them.

John Smith then came in, and there's a record of a meeting with Smith in the *Diaries*. I was aware that because of that defeat, Labour had begun to take up the constitutional issue; Smith was leading that and that was very helpful. So I saw him and I said, look, this is what I think we can do. By the way, Kinnock's view had been: 'I'm not touching it with a bargepole, go away'. I went to see Smith and he said: 'I'm not touching it with a bargepole, I'm sorry, I'm tribalist' – well, he didn't quite say that, but he said: 'we can do our own constitutional changes in parliament, we don't need you, I have plenty of time to do this, so not interested'.

Then of course Blair came in, and Blair was the opportunity that we could not turn down. I had met Blair before he became leader; we had started having dinners together beforehand – the first one was at Anthony Lester’s house. As soon as he came in, he became the opportunity which, if David Steel had been there, if Jo Grimond had been there, and if I was there, we just had to take. But you are right that Smith made the constitutional agenda a salient that both parties could stand on, and this became an absolutely vital part of it. It is not insignificant that Scotland plays a huge part in this, what Menzies Campbell used to call the ‘fraternity of the Edinburgh shuttle’; the Scottish convention became the model that Blair and I tried to replicate.

Q: Is the publication of the Diaries an admission that the project has failed, because you wouldn’t have published them if you felt there was a real chance of it coming off?

PA: The reason I published them is because I think it *increases* the chance of the project coming off. Now you may make a different judgement, but I didn’t publish them because I think it is over.

There have been many attempts at doing this, from Jeremy Thorpe going in 1974 to Downing Street completely unbriefed, not knowing what to do, to David Steel and the Lib-Lab Pact. What we now have is a blueprint. It’s laid out in the book, the documents are all there – how it could be handled, what should be done. What we have done is assemble the means by which it will happen. Never again will the opportunity arise and people not know what to do with it. And what’s more, that blueprint has now been tried out, in Scotland and in Wales. These are policy agreements, shared responsibility in government – all the things we have laid down have been put into practice in two scale models already flying and already delivering, I think, rather good governments.

The interesting thing about Blair is that he is a man on a journey. I’m not sure where he’ll end up but I have a suspicion that he might end up somewhere close to liberalism.

The last point I would make – and my Lib Dem colleagues are not necessarily going to agree with this – is that I think the growing complementarity of the votes of the two parties across the country now makes the project an electoral necessity in due course. So, my judgement is that the project is not dead, the purpose of the book is to give it an extra boost and I think all the ingredients are there for it to happen when it ceases to be a vision in two leaders’ heads and becomes a necessity for the grassroots of politics.

Q: If you had been entering politics in 1994, would you have considered joining New Labour?

PA: No. I am a Liberal. I used to be Labour, incidentally; I was Labour when I was a Royal Marines officer, which was a very unpopular thing to be at the time, and I was Labour when I was in the Special Forces, and I left Labour in 1967 when Callaghan, cynically in my view, killed off what *In Place of Strife* meant in terms of reform of the trade unions. I knew that Labour, as far ahead as I could look, was going to be a child of the trade unions and I left them.

Then I was in the political wilderness until, quite literally, a funny little man in a furry hat turned up at my door in Somerset and said: ‘excuse me, are you going to vote Liberal in the local elections?’ I said: ‘certainly not!’ But he sat down for half an hour and I discovered I had been a Liberal all my life and I just hadn’t known. And that’s true of many others too – it’s true of Jackie Ballard if you speak to her. You are a liberal but you haven’t yet discovered liberalism is an actual creed, you think of yourself as a socialist. So I am a Liberal and I couldn’t be anything else, and I couldn’t belong to Labour.

The interesting thing about Blair is that he is a man on a journey. You look at Blair from the Beaconsfield by-election to where he is now: he is a man

on a journey, and I’m not sure where he’ll end up but I have a suspicion that he might end up somewhere close to liberalism.

Q: You obviously had a unique friendship with Tony Blair and still do. Do you see yourself, even though you are no longer leader of the party, carrying on that dialogue with Tony Blair?

PA: No, I really can’t. He’s a friend, and we meet and we get on well together but this is Charles [Kennedy’s] stuff now. I know what I did was right at my time, but Charles and you guys in the party have got to do what you think is right now. The notice up in the wheelhouses of the Mississippi steamboats used to say, ‘Don’t speak to the helmsman, don’t spit on the floor.’ I think that’s a pretty good motto for ex-party leaders. It’s certainly one that David [Steel] followed with me, and I’d like to think that though I can sometimes be exasperated and even provoked, I have the self-discipline to follow it with Charles too.

The strains of leadership

Q: One thing that comes over again and again in the Diaries is the sheer awfulness of the modern politician’s life. It’s full of getting up horrendously early – I know that suits you – but those sleepless nights for one reason or another, a press that is never generous however great your achievements, and at the end of it all, if you are an opposition politician like yourself, whatever achievements you undoubtedly can claim, that life has been unrequited without having actual power, giving orders to a permanent secretary, having that red box – and you wonder, was it really worth it?

PA: I’m accused sometimes of being a romantic, and the book is very unvarnished about some of those bumps and some of those difficulties. But there is nothing that I have done in my life that has even approached it. It’s the only thing I know that’s like active service; except active service is boring 99% of the time and shit-scaring about 1% of the time, whereas this is all the time.

It is the great game. You read in the *Diaries* about the Geoffrey Howe speech, and the paragraph at the end of that that says everything has changed. You see the election of Tony Blair – we

had the whole party set up; we had created a whole policy prospectus which I knew would sell to the British electorate, and Blair came along and took the whole thing over almost overnight. This is the great game to be played, and whatever the knocks and blows, there isn't anything else like it that I know of in the world. And it is a great thrill to be the leader of the party you belong to.

Q: What was the best decision that you made in your time as leader?

PA: I think the best decision, and possibly the most difficult, was the abandonment of equidistance. By the time I had finished the 1992 election, I knew we were trying to present to the electorate a fraud. So we had to move the party away from the safe position that was equidistance into a position to say we are going to be one of the forces that gets rid of this government. That was the best, and I think an absolutely essential, decision. If we hadn't taken that decision and had stayed in equidistance, by the time Blair came along we would not have been about the wave for change and I think we would have been obliterated.

Q: Do you think we ever were equidistant in reality?

PA: No. We were not genuinely equidistant, but we pretended to be. Whenever a party pretends that something is logical that everyone else knows isn't, it's in an incredibly weak position. At the end of the 1992 election I simply said that I am not going to play this charade anymore, I am not going to pretend we could support a Conservative government. We couldn't have done it, you know we couldn't. If I had asked you lot to support the John Major government in a hung parliament in 1993, you would have absolutely crucified me. And, you know, I had to turn up to television studio after television studio and pretend we were equidistant and we were nothing of the sort. The lie was an extremely uncomfortable one for me to tell, and it also undermined our credibility. What

Did I bounce the party into the Joint Cabinet Committee? Yes, I did.



Ashdown on the street

are we known for? We are known for telling the truth. The truth was that we couldn't support the Tories but we couldn't say so. I think it fatally damaged our 1992 campaign.

Q: The complementary question, of course, is what was your worst mistake?

PA: I made so many mistakes! I say it in the book – the number of times I was saved from disastrous mistakes by friends and colleagues who helped me with advice is innumerable. The one that comes to mind is saying, no, I don't think we should fight Eastbourne,³ it's indecent to do so. Chris Rennard [Liberal Democrat Campaigns Director] wrote me a minute which said you must be joking. He didn't exactly say that but it's very pungent ly worded for someone who's paid party staff to a party leader. He risked a lot by writing that, and of course he was right. Fortunately I was saved from that.

The biggest mistake I made, and there are probably lots more like it, was over the name – and this comes from coming from slightly outside the tribe, as it were. I became leader of the party and we formed the Social and Liberal Democrats, the SliDs, or whatever it was, and I said 'we don't want social, we don't want liberal – we'll call ourselves the Democrats'. And I took it to the

party conference and I won, because of course I was the party leader and I had this sort of chromium-plated vision in my head, and I completely failed to understand that hearts run parties as well as heads. You could not ask people to divorce themselves from a tradition in which their heart was absolutely steeped, this tradition of liberalism. You will see in the early days there is a lot about it – Alan Beith being grumpy in the background, and various others as well, quite legitimately. I nearly wrecked the party – in a moment of great weakness the party could have gone out of existence. Eventually we found a way out of that, but it was a terrible mistake.

One of my failings is that I'm very goal-oriented. If I pick a goal, that's where I'm going to and that can lead to a degree of insensitivity and treading on people's corns from time to time.

Q: One particular mistake many people thought you made was walking off the stage after the conference debate on drugs in 1994.⁴ Do you think that caused as much of a problem as you feared it would? You mention in the Diaries fearing this meant a return to the old anarchic chaos of the Liberal Assembly.

PA: No, I don't think it did. I think there are two things here and I want to put the record straight. I was not opposed to what the resolution on the drugs debate said. What I was very cross about was the fact that we had framed a bad motion, which was unclear what we were saying. You will remember me

saying if we're going to be radical, be radical, but for Christ's sake know what you are doing; be radical with open eyes. What we had done was frame a motion that was misunderstood by both sides of the debate – those who were against decriminalisation thought we were for it and those who were for decriminalisation knew we were somewhere in between. I wanted to have a clear-cut motion so that the party could have a clear debate, and I was annoyed about that.

Of all the mistakes I have made, stalking off the stage was one which was silly. It was a misjudgement of the sort you make in ten seconds when you think, how is this going to be read? – it'll be OK. But it wasn't OK and it was the kind of misjudgement that I suppose many of us make lots of times. But, at that stage, remember, I was involved in this terrifically delicate minuet with Blair. The dialogue with Blair, as discussed many times in the *Diaries*, is that we both take a risk; my risk with you is that you swallow us up, you tell me you won't; your risk with me is that we are feckless, irresponsible and can't be trusted with power, and at exactly the moment I was trying to do that, we had a debate which would have us broadcast in the press as returning to our old ways. Inevitably I took it to be more catastrophic than it was. It didn't make that much difference in the end but that's what you do when you are locked into the particular cocoon of a conference.

Q: My experience is that leaders tend to end up hating people in their own parties much more than others outside their party – and often for very understandable reasons, those feelings are reciprocated. I did see you quoted as saying leading the Lib Dems was like climbing a mountain with a rock on your back. Was it the party, the country or your parliamentary colleagues you were talking about?

PA: I'm not going to answer that one! All leaders feel like that once in a while. There are very many moments of black depression in the *Diaries*, which I hope none of the rest of you saw. I had a fascinating discussion about leaders with Roy Jenkins, and I concluded from it that I don't think it's necessary for parties to love their leaders, but it is necessary

for leaders to love their parties. The party can respect its leader but it doesn't necessarily have to love them. But if a leader doesn't love his or her party, you just won't put up with all that shit for very long!

I can say I love being leader, I love the party. I think one of the problems of Blair is that I'm not terribly sure he does love the Labour Party. And I don't want to be critical – he was a brilliant leader of our party, the very best that we had – but I'm not sure that David [Steel] loved the party at the end of his days. You do need to love your party or you wouldn't put up with it for very long.

Q: It is a characteristic of leaders to become increasingly isolated from their parties, to become convinced that they are right and anyone who disagrees with them is wrong. Did that happen to you?

PA: The problem of leaders is fighting the business of being pushed into the bunker, and the question is: how long can you keep yourself out of it? I think probably we kept ourselves out of it until the last third of my leadership.

The belief is that my style of leadership was: make a plan, tell people about it. I think this is inaccurate. Up until the advent of Blair, I don't think there had been a more consensus-building leader of the party than me. I used to go round the constituencies, I used to work with the FPC and so on, and I did it perfectly deliberately because I am a great believer in what I call the 'African chief' theory of leadership. African chiefs accumulate cattle in their corrals, and when they have lots and lots of them they sacrifice them in order to achieve something. I quite deliberately went round building up my popularity in the party, both by delivering results and also by being very consensual, conscious of the fact that when I started to play on the field in stage 3, I was really going to have to get rid of all those cattle. I say somewhere in Volume 2 that I've got to cash this lot in in order to be able to achieve what I want to achieve. So, insofar as I'd lost

touch with the party, a) it's what happens to leaders, I accept that it happened to me; but b) it was part of a conscious strategy to use this accumulated chunk of cattle to get to this point, to sell the project to the party. I say in Volume 1 that this is the point at which I have to make myself unpopular with the party.

Q: Looking back, do you think you should have concentrated less on goals and more on processes?

PA: I honestly don't believe that I neglected processes up until the last two years, and then deliberately so. Did I bounce the party into the Joint Cabinet Committee? Yes, I did. And I knew I was bouncing the party and I knew I was cashing in my chips. But I am absolutely convinced we would never have

got the party into the Joint Cabinet Committee – whether that was a good idea or a bad one – if I had gone through a consensual process. They'd never have done it. You cannot say I did

It was my driving passion, to get this party into a position where it handled power and handled power well and made a difference to people's lives.

not go through due process when it came to the abandonment of equidistance. I spent six bloody months trying to go round the party, but in the end, I readily conceived that on the Joint Cabinet Committee and the Joint Statement, I bounced them.

The legacy

Q: What would you like to be remembered for, looking back?

PA: Well there are easy things to say. We – and I mean those of us who ran the party during my leadership – ought to sit back and reflect for a bit. There are very few occasions when a new party is launched in Britain and survives and makes progress – I can't think of any. We were not an entirely new party, but nevertheless, new-ish. We gave it its name, we gave it its character, we gave it its body of policy, we gave it its physical symbols and we established its procedures, and that is not an insignificant

thing to have done. I don't pretend for one second that *I* did it, but the team of people who played the leadership role at all levels.

If somebody wanted to write one sentence, it was that over the period of my leadership the party converted itself from a party of protest to a party of power at every level. I mean local government level and potentially at national level too, certainly in Scotland and in Wales.

The passion that drives me is that I think Liberalism is fantastic. It is the only creed that makes any sense, the only one with which I feel comfortable, and I am passionate to make sure that other people benefit from it in government. It was my driving passion, to get this party into a position where it handled power and handled power well and made a difference to people's lives. If anything, I succeeded in all sorts of other things, but ultimately I failed to get the party into a position of power nationally.

Q: And what do you think you will be remembered for?

PA: I don't know – bouncing the party, I suppose, from time to time? I think I said to people after 1997, my words to the parliamentary party were: fasten your seatbelts, it's going to be bloody bumpy ride. I hope people will think it was exciting, I hope they will think it was difficult, turbulent and annoying – but exciting.

- 1 Ashdown's enthusiasm for a Universal Share Option Programme, or Citizens' Unit Trust (set out in his first book, *Citizens' Britain: A radical agenda for the 1990s* (Fourth Estate, 1989) was not shared by the Federal Policy Committee, who declined to include it in the party's 1990 policy paper on industrial democracy.
- 2 This proposal for local community-based groups to establish trusts to run local schools, included in the 1998 policy review paper *Moving Ahead: Towards a Citizens' Britain*, was rejected by conference.
- 3 The Eastbourne by-election of October 1990, caused by the assassination by the IRA of the Conservative MP Ian Gow.
- 4 Conference debated a wide-ranging motion calling for a Royal Commission to draw up a national policy on illegal drug use, but most of the debate concentrated on the proposal to include consideration of the option of decriminalisation of cannabis in the Commission's remit. Ashdown voted against this and left the stage as soon as the debate ended. The press, almost without exception, reported the outcome as straightforward support for decriminalisation.



Leader's Office, House of Commons (newspaper cartoon originals on the walls)

In this month...

What was happening in the Liberal world in the first three months of years gone by?

9 January 1943

London Liberal Party Executive Committee – a resolution was passed urging the Liberal Party Organisation to initiate immediately a nationwide appeal to call on the Government to adopt an open-door policy to the Jews fleeing persecution.

11 January 1945

Southport Liberal Association Executive Committee – It was 'recommended that representations should be made to the Lancashire, Cheshire and North West Liberal Federation regarding the cost of municipal elections to individual candidates, and also, if possible, to move the elimination of canvassing'.

19 January 1956

London Liberal Party Executive Committee – the East London Liberal Council was criticised for its part in a demonstration organised by the Communist Party against the eviction of council tenants in Ilford. The executive committee described the demonstration as a 'deliberate attempt to capitalise on the discontents of people'.

13 February 1956

Hampstead Liberal Association Executive

Committee laid out its plans for the forthcoming elections to the borough council. Thirty-six candidates would be stood in the borough in all wards, bar Kilburn. There would be a focus on active candidates who canvassed and held outdoor meetings. There would be weekly conferences. The cost was estimated at £275, with £100 to come from the candidates themselves, £50 from the constituency association, and the balance from the wards. Mr Salomon donated £50 at the meeting, enabling Kilburn also to be contested. [No Liberals were successful in Hampstead in 1956.]

28 March 1960

Liberal Party Organisation Standing Committee – There was a slim chance of a Liberal winning the forthcoming Mid-Bedfordshire by-election, but the current prospective candidate, W. G. Matthews, was 'not the type to fight a dynamic by-election campaign'. It was resolved that 'every step must be taken to prevent his re-adoption'. [Mr Matthews resisted these moves, fought the election, and came third.]

31 March 1962

Liberal Party Organisation Executive Committee – record *Liberal News* circulation of 26,668 reported.