Conference Round-Up

Saturday 13th – Wednesday 17th September 2008

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LEADER'S SPEECH: "LIBERAL DEMOCRATS THE ONLY PARTY FOR A FAIRER BRITAIN"

In his keynote conference speech, Nick Clegg presented the Liberal Democrats as the party to deliver social justice and fairness for Britain. Nick's speech focused on the current economic difficulties, which he described as 'a firestorm', "raging through our financial system, ignited by reckless bankers and fuelled by complacent politicians." He set out the party's Fairer Future economic recovery plan (see economy section of this round-up for more).

Nick also:

- Said he wanted to make Britain the first truly green economy in the world
- Spoke of the importance of achieving energy independence within the EU
- Set out his aim of making government 'people shaped', with benefits shaped around the needs of people and families, not bureaucrats
- Repeated his commitment to the 'pupil premium' to target extra cash at deprived children
- Made clear he is ambitious for the party, repeating his target of doubling the party's number of MPs

[News article on speech] [Full speech] [Watch speech]

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS BACK VISION AND VALUES PAPER

Conference backed the ambitious Make it Happen document, setting out the party's vision and values as the basis for developing the next General Election Manifesto and campaign messages for the remainder of the Parliament. After a lively debate, party members rejected an amendment to resolve that any reduction in overall levels of public expenditure should be a lower priority than measures to reduce inequality in British society, improving public services, and making the investments needed to tackle climate change. It was argued by speakers including Shadow Chancellor Vince Cable that this amendment would tie the hands of the party unnecessarily.

Make it Happen includes plans to:

- Deliver big tax cuts for people on low and average incomes paid for from taxing pollution and closing tax loopholes used by the rich.
- Invest more in the education of the most disadvantaged children.
- Deliver on an ambitious green agenda, including forcing energy companies to pay a large share of their windfall subsidy to help homes use energy more efficiently.
- Protect civil liberties, scrapping ID cards and introducing a Freedom Law to get government off people's backs and keep personal data private.
- Clean up the political system and bring an end to the influence of big money on politics.

[News release and text of motion] [Make it Happen PDF] [Lib Dem Voice liveblog of the debate] [Guardian liveblog of the debate]

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FINANCE, WORK AND THE ECONOMY

CLEGG SETS OUT ECONOMIC RECOVERY PLAN

In his leader's speech Nick Clegg announced the key points of the Liberal Democrat Fairer Future economic recovery plan, describing them as "four steps to a better economic future" –
1) Action to stop unjust repossessions (see story below for more)
2) New approach to regulating the City - limiting the excesses of the market
3) Put in place the building blocks for future economic stability - interest rates that take house price changes into account, and independent monitoring of our fiscal rules
4) Tax cuts for families who are struggling
[Full speech]

CONFERENCE SUPPORTS PLANS TO TACKLE HOUSING AND MORTGAGE CRISIS

Conference approved the party's plans to help families who are unable to pay their mortgages and facing the threat of homelessness due to the downturn in the housing market. Shadow Chancellor Vince Cable said: "Rapid action must be taken to ensure that banks only ever repossess as a last resort." The plans include proposals to:

- Introduce regulated Mortgage Rescue Schemes to allow families struggling with repayments to sell all or part of the equity in their house and rent it back from a housing association or private firm to help keep them in their home
- Allow councils and housing associations to borrow money to buy up land and vacant new homes for use as social housing
- Give courts guidelines to only allow homes to be repossessed as a last resort, making the mortgage lenders' voluntary code binding on all lenders

[News release and text of motion] [Lib Dem Voice report]

CABLE'S SPEECH: REGULATION TO STOP THE BINGE OF IRRESPONSIBLE LENDING

In his keynote speech to conference, Shadow Chancellor Vince Cable argued that government should do fewer things well, rather than many things badly, and said that that would help to give the party the resources to hand money back to ordinary people. Vince also:

- Attacked the Tories for claiming to be a party of fairness when their top two tax priorities are lifting millionaires out of inheritance tax, and remove the burden of stamp duty from share dealers.
- Accused Labour of incubating "a culture of financial gambling with other peoples' money" and "a dangerous dependence on debt".
- Took on those who argue that the language of tax cutting is "right wing", saying he did not see what was right wing "about wanting to cut the taxes of millions of people who earn less or barely more than the equivalent of the minimum wage."
- Set out priority areas for cuts in spending, including industrial subsidies, ID cards, questionable IT projects, cutting the number of MPs and requiring senior non-front line public sector employees to reapply for their jobs.

[News article] [Full speech] [Watch the speech]

OTHER FINANCE, WORK AND THE ECONOMY STORIES

- Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary Jenny Willott outlined plans to help working people out of poverty and to reform welfare to work programmes. She said Britain needed a radically simpler benefits system, with a Single Working Age Benefit, and which would be harder to defraud. [Full speech] [Watch the speech]
- Conference backed plans to immediately reintroduce the link between the Basic State Pension and earnings. The motion also reaffirmed the party's policy of moving towards a Citizen's Pension, based on residency, not contributions, and the end of mass means-testing of pensioners. It is 100 years since the decision by the Liberal Government to introduce the first state pension. [News release and text of motion]
- Conference called on the Government to ensure that taxpayers get value for money when using Private Finance Initiatives (PFI). The party agreed that private finance should only be used when it is shown that it can provide better value for money to the taxpayer than public finance. The motion also called for local and devolved government to be allowed to borrow money to invest, rather than having to use PFI. [News release and text of motion] [Lib Dem Voice report]
- Monday afternoon saw an urgent issue debate on the recession and rising energy and food prices, and their impact on poverty. Linda Jack opened the debate, with Jeremy Browne MP, the party's shadow chief secretary to the Treasury, responding. David Boyle summated at the end of the debate.
- On Sunday morning there was a discussion on social mobility, featuring a panel including Jenny Willott MP and Martin Narey – chief executive of Barnardo's and chair of the party's Social Mobility Commission.
- Lord Newby chaired an Economy Q&A session with MPs Vince Cable and Jeremy Browne, and Professor Paul Ekins from King's College, London. The panel answered questions on the global economic crisis; the Bank of England's ability to control inflation; tax and lower and middle earners; the 10p tax rate and ways to bring lower earners out of tax; environmental taxation; the public perception of Lib Dem tax policies; and economic growth and sustainability. [Listen to Podcast]

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS BACK PLANS TO SAFEGUARD FREEDOM AND SECURITY

Conference backed an ambitious long-term strategy to ensure Britain remains safe and free in the face of terrorism, climate change and an increasingly authoritarian Government. Speaking in support of the motion, Liberal Democrat Shadow Foreign Secretary, Edward Davey said sticking to traditional British freedoms made us stronger in the fight against terror, not weaker. He attacked the historic and long-lasting damage done by the neo-Conservatives' Iraq war, which had, among other things, begat Russia's illegal invasion of Georgia. And he said the Liberal Democrats should begin the campaign for a world without nuclear weapons: "Universal nuclear disarmament is no longer a dream. It's a necessity."

Proposals in the policy paper 'Security and Liberty in a Globalised World', include:

- Addressing climate change by pushing for more ambitious post-Kyoto international emissions targets
- Cutting Britain's nuclear arsenal by 50%, and announcing its willingness to renounce Trident and any successor at the 2010 non-proliferation treaty review
- The development of European capabilities for conflict prevention and reconstruction, alongside greater cost-sharing between EU and NATO members for operations
- Initiating a comprehensive Strategic Security and Defence Review to ensure Britain's military capabilities are in line with its commitments
- Support for humanitarian intervention under UN authority, based on the Responsibility to Protect principle

[News release and text of motion] [Policy paper]

CONFERENCE SUPPORTS STRONG EUROPE TO DEFEND BRITISH INTERESTS

On Tuesday conference representatives backed plans to put Britain in the driving seat of the EU, refocusing the union on measures to protect the global interests and domestic security of the UK and its European partners. Among the measures in the policy paper 'Shaping Our World Through a Strong Europe' are:

- Greater cooperation among member states to tackle terrorism, international crime and people trafficking.
- Ensuring energy security and effective action on climate change by increasing the EU's carbon reduction target and developing a common EU energy policy.
- Eliminating obstacles to cross-border economic activity within Europe.

[News release and text of motion] [Policy paper]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE - CONFERENCE DEMANDS ACTION

Conference passed an emergency motion in response to the collapse of world trade negotiations. The motion, which was supported by the party's Shadow Secretary for Business, Sarah Teather MP, proposes a fundamental reappraisal of the role of the World Trade Organisation. The party is calling for a number of actions to make world trade rules more friendly to the twin goals of development and the environment. These include:

- Developed countries to proceed with the reductions in agricultural subsidies they had offered during the Doha trade negotiations
- Much greater investment in 'aid for trade' assistance to the poorest developing countries, helping them to open up their economies to international trade without suffering excessive disruption
- Establishment of an International Leapfrog Fund to facilitate the development of lowcarbon technologies, energy efficiency and renewable energy technologies in developing countries

[News release and text of motion]

OTHER INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS STORIES

- The Liberal Democrats called on Britain to push for a strong EU response to the Georgian conflict, including the possibility of sanctions if Russian aggression continues. An emergency motion introduced by Edward Davey called for any further Russian aggression to be met with targeted sanctions such as visa restrictions, and for the prospect of NATO membership be held open to Georgia and Ukraine, but only when existing territorial disputes have been resolved and NATO countries can credibly deliver on their defence guarantees [News release and text of motion]
- Conference backed plans to extend and strengthen the role of the International Criminal Court in bringing to account heads of government who persecute civilian populations. Edward Davey said: "The British Government needs to put pressure on the next President of the United States to sign his country up to the ICC, and remove this major stumbling block to bringing it fully under the umbrella of the UN Security Council." [News release and text of motion]
- The party agreed that the Government must stop deporting gay and lesbian people to countries where they face persecution. The Government currently deports gay and lesbian people to countries such as Iran and Nigeria where they face severe punishments, including the death penalty. [News release and text of motion]

HOME AFFAIRS AND THE CONSTITUTION

CONFERENCE BACKS RADICAL PROPOSALS TO REFORM POLICE AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Conference backed radical plans to reduce crime by focusing on catching more criminals, rather than tough rhetoric and posturing on penalties. Controversial proposals to directly elect a majority of police authority members were retained and proposals to put councils directly in control of police forces in all areas rejected. Shadow Home Secretary, Chris Huhne said: "Labour has failed to transform the system, and we know from experience that the Conservatives won't. Only the Liberal Democrats are committed to meaningful reform of the police force."

The proposals include:

- 10,000 extra police on the streets, paid for by scrapping ID cards
- Decentralising the force by scrapping counterproductive central targets, introducing the local setting of priorities and budgets and the direct election of the majority of police authority members
- Creating a National Crime Reduction Agency to assess police and criminal justice policies on evidence and to spread best practice
- Respecting independent decisions on police pay

[News release and text of motion] [Lib Dem Voice report]

BETTER POLICING, MORE EFFECTIVE PRISONS - HUHNE SETS OUT ROUTE TO CUTTING CRIME

In a keynote speech, Shadow Home Secretary Chris Huhne attacked Labour and the Conservatives for competing to sound tough on crime, rather than actually reducing crime through better policing. Chris also addressed –

- Knife crime, calling for visible policing, intelligence led stop and search of hot spots and working with the local community to gather leads and encourage witnesses.
- Prison reform, calling prisons ‘colleges of crime’, and saying that “We need prison for serious offenders and for serial offences. But we need reformed prisons that educate, occupy and prepare prisoners for life outside."
- Low conviction rates, highlighting that criminals currently have a 99 per cent chance of getting away with it
- Civil liberties, drawing attention to recent illiberal demands by the Conservatives, and asking: "[I]f the Liberal Democrats did not exist, who would stand up for civil liberties?”

[News article] [Full speech] [Watch the speech]

‘PEOPLE’S BILLS’ ON THE AGENDA AS RADICAL REFORM MOTION PASSES

Conference backed new plans to give citizens a much stronger voice in Britain’s democracy. Justice Spokesperson David Howarth said the proposals “would not only transform the electoral landscape of Britain, they would give everybody a stronger voice in our democracy.” A proposal for a ‘people’s veto’, where a million voter petition could force a referendum on any Act of Parliament, was rejected, but the remainder of the motion was passed, including:

- Making it easier for people to petition Parliament, particularly online
- Introducing ‘people's bills', where the six legislative proposals which receive the most petition signatures are guaranteed a debate in Parliament
- Introducing Single Transferable Vote for all elections to the upper and lower houses of Parliament
- Setting up a constitutional convention to review and improve the governance of the UK

[News release and text of motion]

OTHER HOME AFFAIRS AND CONSTITUTIONAL STORIES

- Proposals to remove children from the DNA database and to reduce the amount of personal data kept by the Government were adopted by the party. The motion passed on Wednesday also proposes the introduction of extensive civil penalties for serious breaches of data security, and strengthening the role and funding arrangements of the Information Commissioner. [News release and text of motion] [Scottish news release]
- Conference backed proposals to change regulations that currently prevent football stadiums from providing ‘safe-standing’ areas that meet stringent safety requirements. The proposals recognise and seek to remedy safety problems that exist in all seater stadiums where, despite regulations, large numbers of fans regularly stand in areas designed for sitting only. [News release and text of motion]
- Speaking at the rally, Nick Clegg set out bold plans to fix our broken political system, attacking Westminster as "obsessed with pointless procedures and rules that make no sense in the modern world." Citing the experience of Gurkha veterans refused the right to live in Britain, Nick said Westminster was "home to a political class sheltered from reality and shielded from an increasingly alienated society. Its rules are designed to keep out real protest, real emotion, the hardships endured by real people." [News article] [Full speech]
- Journalist Henry Porter also addressed the opening night rally. He spoke on our sacred duty to defend civil liberties and hold government to account. [Full speech]
- Proposals to broadcast court proceedings on TV and radio were rejected by the conference. The proposers of the motion had argued that it would have opened up the workings of Britain's justice system. Those opposed argued that people would be more reluctant to be witnesses and jurors if they were going to be televised doing so. [News release and text of motion]

PUBLIC SERVICES, FAMILIES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS APPROVE RADICAL TRANSPORT REFORMS

The new transport policy paper received overwhelming support from party members. The paper sets out the party's plans to provide serious investment in public transport without passing the cost on to passengers, while providing a fairer deal for motorists and encouraging freight to be carried by rail and water. A number of amendments, including one to re-nationalise the rail franchises at the end of their current terms, were rejected.

The paper contains radical plans to transform Britain's transport system, including:

- Immediate start of a high speed rail programme, which would slash long distance journey times
- Rolling programme of rail expansion schemes in local areas including opening new lines
- Increased powers for local authorities to control bus services.
- Phasing out Vehicle Excise Duty and replacing it with revenue-neutral motorway and trunk road pricing, while making it cheaper to drive in rural areas where there is no public transport alternative
- Investment in public transport funded by a road pricing scheme for all lorries and a domestic flight surcharge
- Increased graduation of the proposed 'showroom' tax on the purchase of new cars, using the revenue to reduce taxes on income

[News release and text of motion] [Lib Dem Voice report] [Policy paper]

LAWS SPEECH: OPPORTUNITY FOR CHILDREN, FREEDOM AND EXPERIMENTATION FOR SCHOOLS

David Laws outlined his vision of an education system offering opportunity to children, freedom for schools and choice for parents. David highlighted the scandal of eight out of ten poor boys leaving school without decent qualifications. He said that the £1.5 billion committed to the Pupil Premium a year ago had now been increased to £2.5 billion, enough to bring the funding for a million of the poorest pupils up to the average level in private schools, delivering improvements including longer teaching hours, small class sizes, and resources to attract the best staff.

The Lib Dems would, David said, bring forward an Education Freedom Act, to dramatically cut back the DCSF and give power back to schools, councils and parents. The national curriculum would be cut back, the freedoms granted to Academies would be given to all other schools too, and strategic oversight of all state funded schools – including Academies – would be returned to local government. But in turn, local authorities must embrace their new roles as purchasers of education, not just providers. David also argued that improvement could only be guaranteed by experimentation and diversity. "If federations, twinning with successful schools, and other interventions work - great. If universities, co-operatives, parents, independent schools and educational charities can help to turn around failing schools, or establish better alternatives, they too deserve our support and encouragement."
[Full speech] [Watch the speech]

KRAMER SPEECH: BOOST PROPOSED FOR CHILDCARE

In her keynote speech, the party's Families Spokesperson, Susan Kramer, outlined her aim to extend the amount of pre-school childcare that is provided free of charge for all families. She said the party should "join with families and make sure they have the tools that they need - time for both father and mother to bond with their children by offering extended parental leave; support for parents juggling work and family with free part-time childcare in the early years; development opportunities through enriched childcare for even the youngest children so that they are not shackled by background and income; support for families in the crises of mental illness and family break-up."
[Full speech] [Watch the speech]

LAMB SETS OUT PLANS FOR 'PEOPLE'S NHS'

Shadow Health Secretary Norman Lamb outlined the need for a more efficient NHS and discussed plans to give directly elected local health boards powers to focus on the priorities in their area. He also explained Lib Dem plans to allow patients to pay for extra treatment without losing the right to free NHS care, telling the story of his constituent, Barry, who has liver cancer. Barry's specialist recommended a drug readily available elsewhere in Europe, but the local PCT said no, and that if he took his doctor's advice and paid for the drug himself, his NHS care would be withdrawn. "That cannot be right in the NHS. It will not happen in our people's NHS," said Norman.
[Full speech] [Watch the speech]

OTHER PUBLIC SERVICES AND THE ENVIRONMENT STORIES

- Conference backed plans to greatly improve equality and fairness in mental health provision in the NHS. The proposals include the ending of mixed sex wards in mental health units, and the right to commission services outside the NHS if you experience long delays in accessing treatment. [News release and text of motion]
- The party re-affirmed its opposition to the Government's misguided eco-towns proposals, arguing that they bypass the planning system and ignore local needs and concerns. [News release and text of motion]
- The Kingsnorth protestors verdict; mass burn incinerators; planning regulations and continued economic growth were all on the agenda at the Environment Q&A session. [Hear the podcast]
- On Monday morning there was urgent issue debate on 'Polar Ice Caps: Accelerating Climate Change'. The debate was introduced by Jo Hayes, with Steve Webb MP giving the spokesperson's response.

PARTY DEBATES AND SPEECHES

CLEGG LAUNCHES 'MILLION DOORS' CAMPAIGN

Nick Clegg launched the party's plan to knock on one million doors across the UK, in his speech at the opening night rally. He said he wanted to put power back in the hands of those who know best: "That's why I'm announcing today that over the next nine months we'll be knocking on one million doors across the nation. Listening, connecting, and engaging with people. I want us to reinvent community politics for a new generation."
[Campaign packs for the 'million doors campaign' can be ordered from ALDC] [Clegg article]

NEW SCOTTISH LEADER VOWS TO SEND LABOUR "TO A FLAMING HORIZON"

Tavish Scott delivered his first conference speech as leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, calling for the Scottish Parliament to use its power to cut income tax by two pence in the pound. He said this would save the average Scot more than £300 a year. He issued a challenge to Scotland's other parties ahead of the forthcoming Scottish budget: "Are they up for helping people across Scotland?" Tavish also derided Alex Salmond for allying the SNP with the Conservatives kowtowing to Tory Thatcherism. He said the SNP would not dare to repeat that they "did not mind the economic side" of Thatcherism at the forthcoming Glenrothes by-election, taking place as it was in "coal-mining Fife; ship building Fife; manufacturing Fife; brought to its knees in the 1980s by Mrs Thatcher".

Tavish said the tectonic plates of Scottish politics were shifting: "And when they stop I am determined that the Liberal Democrats will be a dominant presence on the political landscape. My election as leader is not a prescription for more of the same. It is a mandate for change." He likened the Labour Party to the Viking longboats that are set alight and sent to sea at the annual Shetland fire festival: "a replica of something once feared but now firmly on the beach. In Scotland, and across Britain, Liberal Democrats stand on those beaches, ready to give the final push goodbye to this Labour Government… In Edinburgh, in Glasgow, in Aberdeen, across Scotland we Liberal Democrats are ready to send them to a flaming horizon."
[Full speech] [Watch the speech] [Lib Dem Voice report]

PRESIDENT'S SPEECH: HUGHES URGES PARTY TO DO MORE ON DIVERSITY

Simon Hughes gave his last speech to conference as federal party president. He urged the party to rally behind Nick Clegg in further developing its influence and support base. He expressed regret that party membership had not grown as he intended during his time in office. Recruitment, he said, had been difficult for all political parties. On diversity, Simon said the party had come a long way, but his successor and the party as a whole would need to do more: "We must consider whether our party then needs, on a temporary basis, special short lists, possibly combined with grouping selections together, or paying the £10,000 diversity premium proposed in the Bones Commission." And he launched a stinging attack on David Cameron, saying "his claim to the progressive mantle of politics is as cynical as it is laughable."
[Full speech] [Watch the speech]

OTHER PARTY STORIES

- On Monday morning Liberal Democrats debated the report of the Bones Commission on reform of the party organisation. More than 30 speakers contributed to a wide ranging debate. The most discussed topic was the setting up of a Chief Officers Group to act as the Management Board of the party. This was a consultative session so there was no vote. [Lib Dem Voice report]
- Nick Clegg faced the now traditional leader's Q&A session for the first time, with questions put by Steve Richards of The Independent, as well as party members speaking from the floor. Topics covered included the party's tax proposals, the euro and whether the job of leader was different from what Nick had expected. Asked about the party's continuing commitment to green issues, Nick was unequivocal. They would be the frontline message of the party's campaign for next year's European elections. [Watch the Q&A]
- Conference passed a constitutional amendment to make the party's elected mayors, members of regional assemblies and leaders of the party's council groups automatic conference representatives. Also passed were a constitutional amendment and an amendment to standing orders to change conference deadlines.
- Conference approved reports from the Federal Conference Committee, the Campaign for Gender Balance, the Federal Policy Committee, the Federal Executive and the Federal Finance and Administration Committee. [Full set of reports]
- On Wednesday morning the parliamentary parties of the Liberal Democrats presented their reports to conference. MPs Paul Burstow (chief whip) and Lorely Burt (chair) presented the report of the party in the Commons. Lords Tom McNally (leader) and David Shutt (chief whip) presented the report of the party in the Lords. MEPs Andrew Duff (leader) and Sharon Bowles (chief whip) presented the report of the party in the European Parliament. All then took questions from the floor. [Full set of reports]
- There were presentations from the Liberal Democrats in the European Parliament and the ruling group on Newcastle City Council to showcase their achievements.
- The Liberal Democrat blog of the year award for 2008 went to Alix Mortimer for her People's Republic of Mortimer blog. The full list of blog awards can be found here.