

SO YOU WANT TO REVIEW POLICY?

Charles Kennedy plans to conduct a post-election policy review. Simon Titley offers this step-by-step guide

Just after polling day, Charles Kennedy announced he would be conducting a review of party policy. Not just any review, but a “massive policy overhaul”.

This was not a sudden response to the election result, since the review was originally announced in January. The Times (31 January) reported that Kennedy “wants bold environmental policies, more progressive tax plans to help the low-paid and a fresh look at the party’s position on Europe and the euro. Some long-held Lib Dem policies may be abandoned, such as commitment to regional government, after the North East overwhelmingly rejected a regional assembly.” The report added, “Mr Kennedy wants to speed up his party’s policy-making process, which is felt to be too inflexible when plans need updating.”

Compare these aspirations with what Kennedy has said more recently. The goalposts are moving and it is not clear precisely what the policy review is now meant to achieve.

So you want to review party policy? Here is Liberator’s handy cut-out-and-keep guide.

1. Before you can know the answer, you must find the question.

Charles Kennedy risks coming up with the answer “forty-two”. He has stated some positive and justifiable objectives – to make the most of the new parliament and to be prepared for the next election. He has also expressed dissatisfaction with the current system of policy-making (albeit based on a false claim – see 3 below).

However, his review appears to be based on the premise that policy was the main problem in this election. Is this a valid assumption? For example, to what extent were the problems with local income tax intrinsic to that policy or was it more the case that this policy was not rehearsed, promoted or defended competently?

“My aim as leader of the Liberal Democrats is to put the party in a position to challenge for power at the next election,” says Kennedy. By focusing exclusively on the detail of policy, is there not a danger that other important factors may be neglected?

More important than policy detail is the moral core that should underpin party policy, and the passion with which it is expressed. More important too is the party’s ability to relate its policies to real concerns, chief of which is the deep sense of insecurity and powerlessness that informs most people’s attitudes to political issues.

And what are the powers of this policy review? Will it change policy or merely recommend changes? Will it take a strategic overview or get bogged down in the production of a

laundry list of policies? Will it stimulate debate or attempt to pre-empt it?

With no clear terms of reference other than a vague idea that party policy is not quite right, the omens are not good.

2. Wood, not trees

In Charles Kennedy’s press announcement, he promised to “look at every single policy” Is he serious? Has he any idea how many there are? Most conference delegates haven’t the time or the inclination to plough through every policy paper, so it’s doubtful the leader has.

The risk is of being unable to see the wood for the trees. The work of the policy review would be accomplished quicker – and would have more impact – if it focused simply on establishing a moral core, a target audience and a few key themes. The details would then fall into place.

3. Cut the crap

When Charles Kennedy briefs the Guardian to blame “embarrassing policies introduced by grassroots activists”; when he tells the Glasgow Herald that he “would introduce moves to stop radical factions from embarrassing the party”; and when he stigmatises the party conference as committing the party to “specific and controversial policies on the basis of a brief, desultory debate in a largely empty hall,” he is in greater danger of deluding himself than anyone else.

If Kennedy thinks party policy is a liability, it is his own fault. In almost every case, the policies ridiculed by the Lib Dems’ opponents during the election were drawn from policy papers, written by working groups and approved by the Federal Policy Committee (chaired by Kennedy).

So why tell lies and blame the conference when none of ‘embarrassing policies’ originated on the conference floor? The only possible reason for this dishonest spinning can be to soften up opinion in preparation for an attack on the conference’s already limited powers. It is both a shabby trick and a distraction from more important tasks.

If existing party policy really is a liability, and given that working groups and the FPC are responsible for generating it, attacking the conference will leave the source of the problem untouched.

4. Don’t re-invent the wheel.

Following the publication of Jeremy Hargreaves’s booklet *Wasted Rainforests*, both the Federal Conference Committee and the Federal Policy Committee discussed proposals for reform of the party’s policy-making procedures, and changes are already being implemented (see Jeremy’s article in this issue).

In addition, the FPC has set up a strategic exercise called *Meeting the Challenge*, which will consult at this autumn's conference and conclude at the 2006 autumn conference.

Since Charles Kennedy chairs the FPC, one assumes he is already aware of these initiatives. Why, then, does he say that his policy review will "overhaul the way policy is made," when a reform process (of which he presumably approves) is already underway?

5. Trust the members.

Charles Kennedy once belonged to the SDP, a party whose founding principle was paranoia (its founders having been badly bruised in the internecine warfare of the 1970s Labour Party, when regarding one's own members as swivel-eyed loons was second nature). What is Kennedy afraid of these days? He should learn to trust his members.

Thousands of them have been councillors. They've been responsible for greater amounts of public expenditure than Kennedy ever has. He should harness his members' experience and ideas instead of trying to freeze them out.

For too long, the party has focused on the mechanics of campaigning to the detriment of political thinking. If the Liberal Democrats are to become a government in waiting, they must first become the centre of debate and the place where big political ideas emerge. This won't happen if a few cronies at the centre try to stitch up everything in advance.

However, if this review does turn out to be a crude device for railroading unpopular right-wing policies through the party, the membership will gladly give Kennedy reasons to be frightened.

6. Fundamental means fundamental.

When announcing the policy review, Charles Kennedy called for "imaginative, innovative and bold" thinking. But just how fundamental is he prepared to be?

If he is serious, he should go back to basics. All he has to do is read the preamble of his party's constitution. It is as good a template as any for determining whether the party's policies are in line with its fundamental values.

If he wishes to be 'bold', he must confront some major crises that are heading our way, such as pensions, the house price bubble, consumer debt and global warming. There may also be a recession by the time of the next general election. Having bold policies mean confronting some powerful popular delusions and powerful vested interests. Local income tax will have been a picnic by comparison.

"Imaginative, innovative and bold" is necessary but don't imagine it will be easy or popular.

7. Don't panic.

When Charles Kennedy first announced the policy review back in January, among his goals was "more progressive tax plans to help the low-paid". Now, however, it is being suggested that the two policies the party proposed to achieve that goal, local income tax and a higher tax rate on those earning over £100,000, are a liability and may be scrapped.

Following the election, Kennedy said, "No area of policy will be more crucial over the course of this parliament than taxation and that is why we have already announced a major review of our tax policy."

Instead of dissolving into a moral panic about taxation, I wonder whether Kennedy read the MORI opinion poll published in the Observer on 8 May? Here, we learn that, when people were asked whether reducing taxes or reducing

government spending is more important, 56% said public services should be extended even if it meant higher taxes, 23% believed things should stay as they are, only 15% wanted taxes cut even if that meant a reduction in public services, and 5% didn't know.

Hardly grounds for a collective loss of nerve, is it?

8. Clarify the public vs. private spheres.

Liberal Democrats need to sort out where they believe the public and private spheres begin and end. Note that word 'sphere' rather than 'sector'. It suits both conservatives and socialists to conflate these distinct concepts.

To say that something belongs in the public sphere means that it is a legitimate area of public concern and therefore of political decision-making – it does not necessarily imply a role for the state, as conservative opponents and socialist supporters of the public sector would both have you believe.

The boundaries have been shifting. Curiously, while the public sphere is retreating from areas such as public transport or manufacturing industry, it is extending into areas of our private lives, such as personal health, family life and ID cards.

The Lib Dems are in as much of a muddle over this as anyone else. They are simultaneously crusading against business regulation while seeking to ban smoking in public places.

A coherent policy review is not possible unless a clear view is adopted on this matter. Further, the review must recognise that Liberalism is not an economic philosophy. Our primary concern is that people enjoy liberty and are free from oppression. The public and private sectors are both capable of offering freedom or oppression, and Liberals should judge them on their outcomes, not insist on a dogmatic preference for one or the other.

The policy review should not fall into the trap of agonising over whether to appeal more to Labour or Tory voters. Its first duty is to appeal to Liberal voters.

9. Show you mean it.

The biggest problem in the election campaign wasn't the detail of Liberal Democrat policy so much as a lack of nerve. It was the pervading air of timidity, reinforced by Charles Kennedy's failure to show any real passion or conviction.

Policy detail has less public impact than moral clarity. Dry reiterations of the party line are inappropriate when there is so much about which to feel angry. Passion allied to philosophical confidence should come through in our spokespeople's interviews and speeches.

That's why the policy review would do better to help establish a moral core instead of getting bogged down in the detail. The party won't be able to rely on Iraq to fill this emotional gap next time. The answer is not to be ashamed of our Liberalism but to declaim it proudly.

The Liberal Democrats can neither hope nor deserve to overcome popular cynicism about politics unless they make their values explicit.

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective.
