

## Clegg struggles to be noticed



Times are tough for the UK's third party. With opinion polls indicating that the Conservatives will form the next Government without having to worry about a hung parliament, this week has seen the Liberal Democrats once again struggling to find their *raison d'être*.

Meanwhile, a recent opinion poll showed that over one third of voters don't know who Nick Clegg is.

Typically, the Liberal Democrat's Conference is a venue for grassroots activists with a greater emphasis on policy development than those of the other main parties. However, Nick Clegg's announcement on the need for 'savage cuts', his sudden U-turn on Liberal Democrat opposition to tuition fees and the threat of the axe to regional quangos will have taken many delegates by surprise. Unfortunately, the question going through the minds of many political commentators was: *"Is anybody listening? And do they care?"*

Indeed many of the delegates – including some front benchers - looked uncomfortable as Treasury spokesman Vince Cable MP and Nick Clegg MP started the process of reversing many of the Party's recent spending promises in an attempt to show that that could also balance the nation's budget. However it remains to be seen if the Party that has marked its territory in UK politics by promising to spend more, can re-model itself as one that cuts public spending instead.

There is much debate in Liberal Democrat circles about who to attack in the forthcoming General Election. The Conservatives seem to be making ground in Liberal Democrat marginals in the South of England, but in the last two General Elections, the Liberal Democrats have done extremely well in the northern university cities.

It was therefore of note that they reserved their most vitriolic attacks for the Conservatives, with Nick Clegg calling David Cameron a 'conman', Vince Cable saying that the only accounts the Tories had managed were their 'Bullingdon club accounts' and Chris Huhne telling the assembled activists that George Osborne had "never done a real job in his life" and that he would be "a Chancellor learning on the job".

What is clear is that this Party Conference has begun a debate on the Liberal Democrats' future direction – but it could be argued that this conversation should have happened last year. Is it too much change, too late? Now must be the time for Clegg to be casting off his Cameron-lite image and leading a focused Party, sure of itself and confident in its vision. Many voters don't know who he is, and after this Conference, many of his own Party - including front benchers – may be unsure about which direction they are heading. The sea at Bournemouth may have washed up more questions than answers.

### Nick Clegg's Speech

- **No Coalition:** Nick Clegg made it clear that he wants to be Prime Minister
- **'Blue-red, red-blue' politics:** Liberal Democrats a viable choice for voters. Said the duality of British politics has caused nothing but problems and finished by calling upon all voters not to choose David Cameron through default
- **The Progressive Party:** They hope to replace Labour. This is reflected in their focus on targeting Labour seats instead of Conservative ones
- **Fairness:** Called spending cuts the 'price of fairness'.
- **Radical electoral reform** - Do away with safe seats

### Liberal Democrat Policies – IN

- **Raise the income tax threshold** to £10,000
- **'Mansion Tax'** plan to tax properties worth over £1million
- **Spending cuts** including reducing bureaucracy, reforming tax credits, defence procurement, no like-for-like replacement of Trident
- **Tackling youth unemployment** by promising young people that they will not be unemployed for longer than 90 days before finding them work or training. New "Paid Internship" scheme paying £55 per week .The Child Trust Fund would also be scrapped
- **Environment:** focus on taxing 'polluters'

### Liberal Democrat Policies – OUT

- **Scrapping Tuition Fees:** no mention of this within Clegg's keynote speech
- **Scrap Council Tax:** It is unclear where this policy stands in light of the plan to tax properties worth over £1 million
- The full details of **'Invest to Save'**, especially with regards to the funding of green technologies and the NHS, are yet to emerge