

Withhold the front page

With two new leaders and one in waiting, Politics passes judgement over the main parties, starting with the Lib Dems

By Justin Shorten
Political Correspondent

In 2001, Charles Kennedy declared that 'elections are usually about forming the government'. Unfortunately for the Liberal Democrats, any election they have contested since they were established has always been about forming the opposition.

Our electoral system of first past the post is not the most conducive to a three party system. We saw this in the 2005 elections, where despite a dismally low share of the national vote of 36 percent, Labour still gained their majority, despite gaining a few seats the Liberals were still left on the outskirts of Westminster.

Until there is electoral reform one can imagine the Liberals consigned to the peripheries of the political spectrum. The rise of David Cameron from the Conservative ranks has also pushed them from the spotlight. The papers are full of comparisons between Cameron and Blair, alongside speculation as to who could win the next election.

A recent BBC2 *Daily Politics* poll showed that there was a significant lack of interest in the Lib Dem leadership contest among voters living in the

top 20 Liberal target seats. Worse still was the fact that more than three quarters of those polled said they were 'only slightly interested' or 'not at all interested' in the contest.

With figures like these, the mainstream media has no obligation to offer the Lib Dems any significant coverage. Furthermore, only 19 per cent of those polled could see Campbell as a future PM, yet 49 percent projected David Cameron entering Number 10. So why should the mainstream media grant the Liberals valuable air time or paper space when it is evident few people care?



LIBERAL LIMELIGHT: are the days of such media attention numbered?

The public is also confused as to where the Liberals stand - and one suspects that party members are no less puzzled themselves. Do they become a revised left-wing option or fight for the crowded middle ground with New Labour and New Conservatism? David Cameron shifted towards a popular mainstream as soon as the leadership was his.

If the Liberals do what everyone else is doing will anyone take notice of them? If they dare take an alternate wing to the main parties, do they risk losing the voters they gained at the last election? The Lib Dems have to raise

the bar, not just for themselves but for British politics and Campbell knows this: "It's not surprising that we should have to raise our game because the political landscape has changed with the advent of David Cameron."

Another sticking point for the Liberals' portrayal in the media is the fact that Ming will be approaching 70 by the time of the next election. A fair question is therefore whether Ming will still be around by then. David Cameron, at 39, has the ability to lead the country for a long time should he gain office. With Ming winning the leadership battle suspicion arose that he was simply a temporary leader, an assumption that has been vehemently denied by the party. They insist Ming is in the job permanently.

While he certainly has the intellectual quality to lead the Liberal Democrats, one wonders if Ming has the media appeal of the youthful David Cameron. Will the press take what the Liberals say seriously, and will Ming get them the media coverage they need to build on their 2005 success? For the sake of good parliamentary democracy one hopes they will, but the limelight of the centre ground has been taken and it leaves us to ask the question: if the people don't care, why should the media?

THE VIEW FROM INSIDE THE PARTY



I think it's great news that Ming has been elected as leader of the Liberal Democrats. He has clear vision as to where he wants the party to go and is committed to making the most of the new talent within the party by promoting young people, women and ethnic minorities. Combined with his professionalism and drive, I believe the Lib Dems will be able to appeal to a wider audience and become a major force in British politics.



Ming Campbell has the advantage of being very well known to the public as Shadow Foreign Secretary, he led the opposition to the Iraq war. This bold and honourable stance on this has rightly earned him the reputation as a real statesman. He has already been very adventurous: he has appointed three MPs, only elected for the first time last May, among the seven most important Shadow Cabinet posts. I welcome that decision: we need some new faces at the top in our Party.



Ming is a respected and experienced MP who has already signalled his intention to continue the fight against tuition fees. Since David Cameron has decided he is in favour of top-up fees, this opposition is more necessary than ever. Ming was one of the leading figures opposing the war in Iraq and it is this energy and commitment that he will bring to the Lib Dems.

NEW MING DYNASTY

By Andy Rennison
Deputy Political Editor

Some say that a week is a long time in politics, and Sir Menzies Campbell has had nearly a fortnight since becoming the new Lib Dem leader. Yet I don't feel that Ming has found the time - or the press coverage - to introduce himself.

Sure, diehard *Guardian* readers will have no doubt been gifted a lengthy biography of his life, probably instead of those rubbish DVDs every paper gives out free on a Sunday. But I imagine that there are those who know only three things about Sir Menzies Campbell: he's old, he's a Liberal, and his abbreviated name is open to tabloid abuse. These are the same three things that were known a fortnight ago.

Menzies Campbell has been an MP since 1987 and a Scotsman since 1941. Before being elected to represent North East Fife, he was widely known for being a speedy Olympic athlete. A husband for more than 35 years, Ming and wife Elspeth have no children, and, at nearly 65, he's unlikely to be kissing the foreheads of any babies in the near future.

Since 1987, Campbell has ascended the ranks to hold various top posts within the Lib Dems, and considered running for the party leadership fol-

lowing Paddy Ashdown's exit in 1999. Having regretted his decision not to, Sir Ming has now finally been elected to party leadership, only months before being eligible for a state pension.

So that's Ming in a nutshell. But far more important than what he's done is what he's going to do.

Thus far, what is clear is that the attitude has shifted from the days of Charles Kennedy. Gone is the era of cheeky witticisms, casual suits and seats on *Have I Got News For You*.

Ming Campbell is, on the one hand, a cornerstone of the Liberal movement. More respected and experienced than the majority of Westminster, he brings focused seniority to the table, as he outlined in one of his first speeches to the party.

"As we become more successful, so too we must become more professional."

Yet in the same paragraph, Campbell illustrated that he is far from an entrenched traditionalist.

"We are moving out of the comfort zone of opposition politics." "Opposing is not enough, our policies have to be fit for government."

In a post-New Labour world, the phrase 'fit for government' commonly translates as 'to hell with our principles', yet it is too early to be sure whether this applies here. Though various Lib Dem policy reviews are

not due for a number of months, we got a taste of Sir Ming's direction with the party's vote over the Post Office.

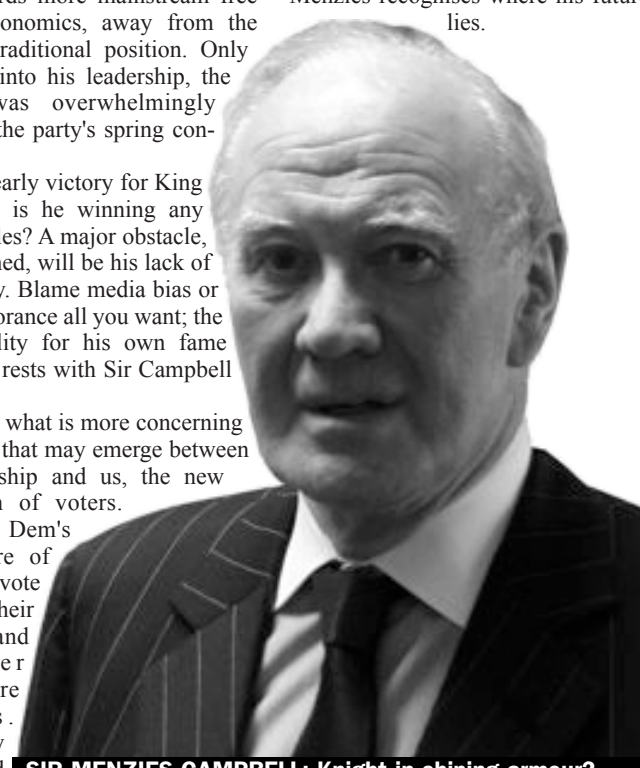
The part-privatisation of the Royal Mail had been rejected last year at the Lib Dem conference. It represents a shift towards more mainstream free market economics, away from the Liberals' traditional position. Only two days into his leadership, the motion was overwhelmingly passed at the party's spring conference.

So, an early victory for King Ming, but is he winning any larger battles? A major obstacle, as mentioned, will be his lack of star quality. Blame media bias or public ignorance all you want; the responsibility for his own fame ultimately rests with Sir Campbell himself.

For me, what is more concerning is the gulf that may emerge between his leadership and us, the new generation of voters.

The Lib Dem's large share of the young vote is key to their current and moreover their future success. Kennedy seemed

like someone you could share a pint with - as unfortunate as that idea is now. With around 44 years between Ming and the average graduate, his party's vibrant appeal may be lost in a new wave of haughty and excessive seriousness. Let us hope that Menzies recognises where his future lies.



SIR MENZIES CAMPBELL: Knight in shining armour?