

Ourselves to blame: Clegg on the EU

Nick Clegg believes he can change the way people view politics. [Peter Campbell](#) talks to the leader of the Liberal Democrats about students, Europe and the possibility of forming a government in the future

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Nick Clegg is a man who has viewed Britain from three perspectives. He has been a journalist in America, a heavily involved member of the EU Liberals, and now resides as leader of the Liberal Democrats in Parliament.

Despite having counted himself out of the 2006 Liberal Democrat leadership contest saying he was “a rookie MP who had barely arrived”, he became leader just one year later. “I had a baptism of fire as the Home Affairs spokesman”, he laughs. “Once I’d done battles with bruisers such as John Reid and Charles Clarke I learned a lot about how the system works.”

During his five years as an MEP Clegg wrote a fortnightly column in the Guardian, which he privately admits that he now misses. He deplored a misrepresentation of the EU itself by the media. “I keep hearing that the EU is taking control away from us. I actually see it as the other way around!” He argues that an independent Britain would be helpless in tackling climate change, asylum immigration, or trade with America. “America will listen, because the EU is the largest single market in the world. Would they listen to us – a much smaller economic being? By doing things together we’re getting more bangs for our bucks.”

“I’m pro-EU but I’m extremely aware of the things that don’t work: any body that takes 15 years to decide on the Chocolate Directive is not a model of good governance.”

It is almost impossible to avoid the Lisbon Treaty. Clegg, however, blames the Conservatives for hindering a more important issue. “It seems that a lot of them just want to get out of the EU: They should have the courage of their convictions to say so. A lot of fuss has built up because we have not had the major debate – not some technical legalistic debate about one treaty versus another.”

At home, Clegg feels the public has been let down. “We have a system that is not democratic, not transparent, over-centralised, and unfair. Our Government holds the purse strings in a more centralised fashion than any other country except Malta.” He pauses. “Now Malta, is the size of Croydon.”

This is all the more worrying because of government inefficiency. “Gordon Brown always wrings his hands and says how awful it is and never does anything! The government are marching robotically ahead with this idea that all they have to do is to cut costs.”

Clegg desperately seeks to get more people interested in politics. “I’ve been leader of the Lib Dems for six or seven months and what has struck me is the degree to which politics is held in such a low esteem. In the 2001 general election more people didn’t vote than voted for the party who won.” He offers a radical solution. “As long as there’s a box saying ‘none of the above’, then it should be a civic duty to vote.”

Aside from opposition to Iraq and top-up fees, not many people could list what the Lib Dems stand for. Clegg outlines specific policies on housing, fuel costs, and funding for students.

He supports his concerns with statistics, saying that there are now six million people on the social housing waiting list. "Just dumping a housing development in the middle of the countryside is not a solution. We have put to the government new plans to allow local governments to buy up new stock to replenish our social housing."

Clegg is also concerned that many will be unable to heat their homes this winter. While he admits no magic wand solution exists, he sees a possible solution. "The Government handed the energy companies a £9bn subsidy. Spain have clawed back €1bn by forcing those companies to recycle those subsidies in installing smart metres, offering social tariffs to low-income families, and large insulation programs."

With a constituency in Sheffield, he encounters lots of students. "What people say to me again and again is that the real crippling factor is debt. There's still a plague on the fees for full-time undergraduates."

While Clegg is meticulously briefed, quoting all figures and details from memory, he suffers from one key setback – his likeness to David Cameron. The two are almost identical in background and education. An audio recording could easily pass for the Tory leader.

Finally, he addresses the issue that may be the most important politically: Can the Liberal Democrats win a general election under Clegg? "I've always said that my ambition is to double the number of MPs we have in two elections. If we succeed, then we will change the rules of the game forever."

NGS is hosting a Nick Clegg meeting on October 30



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