



Leadership Elections: Liberal Democrats

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On 2 March 2006, it was announced that Sir Menzies Campbell had won the election to succeed Charles Kennedy as party leader.

Sir Menzies announced his resignation as party leader, with immediate effect, on 15 October 2007.

This note outlines the rules under which leadership elections are conducted by the Liberal Democrats and provides details of previous leadership contests.

The Liberal Democrats were launched on 3 March 1988, following a merger between the Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party. The leaders of these two parties served as joint leaders of the new party until leadership elections were held.

Contents

A.	Leadership election rules	2
B.	2007 Contest	3
1.	Background	3
C.	2006 Contest	4
1.	Background	4
2.	Contest	6
3.	Result	7
D.	1999 Contest	7
E.	1988 Contest	7
	Appendices	9
1.	Liberal Democrat leaders since 1988	9
2.	Liberal Party leaders, 1900-1988	9
3.	Social Democratic Party leaders, 1981-1988	10

A. Leadership election rules

The rules for the election of a leader of the federal Liberal Democrat party are set down in its Constitution. The Constitution was agreed in 1988, on the formation of the Liberal Democrats.¹ No changes were made to the leadership election rules between the formation of the party and the 2004 edition of the Constitution, which specified:

- 10.1 The Leader of the Party shall be elected by the members of the Party in accordance with election rules made pursuant to Article 8.4.
- 10.2 An election for the Leader shall be called upon:
 - (a) the Leader asking for an election;
 - (b) the death or incapacity of the Leader;
 - (c) the Leader ceasing to be a Member of the House of Commons (other than a temporary cessation by reasons of a dissolution);
 - (d) the receipt by the President of the resignation of the Leader or of a declaration of intent to resign upon the election of new Leader;
 - (e) a vote of no confidence in the Leader being passed by a majority of all Members of the Parliamentary party in the House of Commons;
 - (f) the receipt by the President of a requisition submitted by at least 75 Local Parties (including for this purpose, the Specified Associated Organisation or Organisations representing youth and/or students) following the decision of a quorate general meeting; or
 - (g) the first anniversary of the preceding general election being reached without an election being called under any of paragraphs (a) through (f), provided that:
 - (i) the Federal Executive may postpone such an election for no more than one year by a two-thirds majority of those present and voting; and
 - (ii) this paragraph (g) shall not apply if the Leader is a member of the Government.
- 10.3 Upon election, the Leader shall hold office until death, incapacity or resignation or the completion of an election called under this Article.
- 10.4 Upon the calling of an election, the Federal Executive shall publish a timetable of nominations, withdrawals, despatch and receipt of ballot papers and the holding of ballots and shall appoint a disinterested person or body to receive and count the ballot papers.
- 10.5 Nominations must be of a Member of the Parliamentary Party in the House of Commons, who must be proposed and seconded by other such Members and supported by 200 members in aggregate in not less than 20 Local Parties (including for this purpose, the Specified Associated Organisations representing youth and students as provided by Article 13.8) and must indicate acceptance of nomination.²

¹ The party's full title was the Social and Liberal Democrats "but on 16 October 1989, following a membership ballot, the party announced that it was henceforth to be known as the Liberal Democrats (although for formal, legal purposes, it retained its full title)" [Butler and Butler, p169]

² Liberal Democrats, *Constitutions of the Liberal Democrats*, "The Federal Party", Article 10, August 2004, <http://www.libdems.org.uk/media/documents/const04ap.pdf>

Article 8.4, referred to in this section of the constitution, ensures that the election must be conducted by single transferable vote and by secret ballot.

However, at the Party Conference in September 2005, the rules were amended slightly. Changes were made to the nomination process (section 10.5). Any future nominee will require the support of at least 10 per cent of the parliamentary party in the House of Commons (in place of the proposer and seconder, referred to in the 2004 edition of the Constitution). The motion was proposed by Lord Kirkwood, who according to the BBC described it as a “tidying up exercise”. The BBC also reported that “the motion, which needed a two-thirds majority of delegates, passed comfortably”.³

B. 2007 Contest

1. Background

On 15 October 2007, Sir Menzies Campbell announced that he was resigning as Leader of the Liberal Democrat Party with immediate effect. In his resignation statement, he said that:

... it has become clear that following the Prime Minister's decision not to hold an election, questions about leadership are getting in the way of further progress by the party.

Accordingly I now submit my resignation as Leader with immediate effect.⁴

Vince Cable, the Party's deputy leader, assumed the role of acting leader of the party.⁵

The Federal Executive Committee was already scheduled to meet on 15 October 2007, and it announced the timetable for the election of leader:

- Opening of nominations: 16 October 2007
- Closing date for delivery of completed nomination papers: 31 October 2007
- Despatch of ballot papers: 21 November 2007
- Deadline for receipt of ballot papers: 15 December 2007
- Announcement of new leader: 17 December 2007⁶

³ BBC News, *Lib Dems toughen leadership rules*, 21 September 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4267034.stm

⁴ Andrew Grice and Colin Brown, “Campbell quits, the loser of the election that never was – The resignation letter”, *Independent*, 16 October 2007

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ Rosalind Ryan, “Liberal Democrat election timetable”, *Guardian*, 16 October 2007, <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/libdems/story/0,,2192211,00.html>; BBC News, *Sir Menzies tells of ‘irritation’*, 16 October 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7046288.stm

C. 2006 Contest

1. Background

On 5 January 2006, after several weeks of questioning and reported criticism of his leadership of the Party,⁷ the Liberal Democrat leader, Charles Kennedy, announced his intention to give the Party's members "their say over my leadership":

I've called this press briefing to address an issue - directly - one that has been a source of concern to myself and to others for some time.

Over the past eighteen months I have been coming to terms with and seeking to cope with a drink problem. And I've come to learn through that process that any drink problem is a serious problem indeed - for yourself and for those around about you.

I've sought professional help and I believe today that this issue is essentially resolved. People close to me know that this has been a struggle and for extended periods I have consumed no alcohol at all. As a matter of fact I haven't had a drink for the past two months - and I don't intend to in the future.

I've learnt the hard way of the need to face up to this medical problem - one that is dealt with successfully by many others on a daily basis. I have chosen not to acknowledge it publicly in this way before because, if at all possible, I wanted to overcome it privately.

In a sense, this admission today comes as something of a personal relief. I should have been willing to talk about it more openly before. I wish I had.

This issue has - understandably - been of concern to several of my parliamentary colleagues.

They have been both understanding and supportive.

I am extremely grateful to them for that.

It also lies beneath much of the current leadership speculation within the parliamentary party.

Therefore, let me be clear. I consider myself capable and in good health - and I remain politically determined as leader of the party.

This party's members have shown me tremendous support over the years and overwhelmingly in recent weeks and days. It is a privilege to serve as their leader. I want to continue doing so, not least because the prospects in front of us in this parliament are so great.

⁷ e.g. Brendan Carlin, "Angry Kennedy is again forced to quell leadership rumours", *Daily Telegraph*, 13 December 2005; Peter Riddell, "Kennedy needs to decide if he has the stomach for the fight", *Times*, 14 December 2005; Ben Russell and Nigel Morris, "Campbell warns Kennedy he has three months to 'raise his game'", *Independent*, 17 December 2005; Christopher Adams, "Kennedy warned to raise his game by critics", *Financial Times*, 30 December 2005

Given my statement today I believe it is only fair now to give our party members their say over the continuing leadership.

It is open to any colleague who believes that they can better represent the longer-term interests of the party to stand against me in such a leadership election.

I am requesting that the party puts in place the necessary steps to enable this election to take place immediately.

Given the extremely personal nature of this statement I trust that you will understand that I do not propose to make further comments.⁸

Following this announcement, Simon Hughes, the President of the Party, confirmed that "The party Federal Executive will meet shortly to decide all necessary procedures".⁹

But then on 7 January 2006, Charles Kennedy announced that he was standing down with immediate effect:

I wished to make a statement this afternoon having, as I said yesterday evening, reflected over the leadership of the Liberal Democrats.

When I made my personal statement on Thursday afternoon I said then that I thought it was only fair to give our party members their say over my continuing leadership.

Accordingly, I requested the opening of a leadership election - which the party's Federal Executive will put in train at their meeting on Monday evening.

Since then it has been open to any other Liberal Democrat MP to announce their candidacy and to stand against me.

None have decided to do so.

In the recent weeks and days I have been inundated by messages of support from Party members and activists throughout the country. It means a great deal to me - which I have appreciated enormously.

Many, many of them have made the point to me that we fought for and founded this party on the fundamental principle of one member - one vote.

I urge them to stick with us and to exercise that right in the leadership election which now follows.

However, it is clear now, that such support is not reflected strongly enough across the parliamentary party in the House of Commons itself.

In all of this the interests of the party have to come first. That is where my personal, political and constitutional duty lies.

⁸ Liberal Democrats News, *Kennedy calls for leadership election*, 5 January 2006, <http://www.libdems.org.uk/news/kennedy-calls-for-leadership-election.html>

⁹ Liberal Democrats News, *Comments on Kennedy statement*, 5 January 2006, <http://www.libdems.org.uk/news/comments-on-kennedy-statement.html>

Accordingly, I am announcing today that when nominations open for the leadership of the party I shall not now be putting my name forward.

And I am standing down as leader with immediate effect. ...¹⁰

Sir Menzies Campbell, the Party's deputy leader, assumed the role of acting leader.¹¹

On 9 January, the Federal Executive Committee met to "finalise details of the Party's leadership election". The Federal Executive Committee announced that nominations were open and confirmed the following timetable:

- Opening of nominations: 9th January
- Closing date for delivery of completed nomination papers: 4pm, 25th January
- Deadline for withdrawal of candidature: 4pm, 26th January
- Preparation of mailing to members: 27th Jan - 5th February
- Despatch of ballot papers: 6th February
- Deadline for receipt of ballot papers: 1st March
- Count and declaration: 2nd March¹²

2. Contest

When nominations closed on 25 January 2006, three candidates had been nominated.¹³ They were:

Sir Menzies Campbell	candidacy announced 7 January 2006 ¹⁴
Simon Hughes	candidacy announced 12 January 2006 ¹⁵
Chris Huhne	candidacy announced 13 January 2006 ¹⁶

In addition, Mark Oaten declared his candidacy on 10 January 2006,¹⁷ but withdrew on 19 January.¹⁸

¹⁰ Liberal Democrat News, *Charles Kennedy resigns*, 7 January 2006, <http://www.libdems.org.uk/news/charles-kennedy-resigns.html>

¹¹ Ben Russell, "Leadership contenders square up to battle over Lib Dems' top job", *Independent*, 9 January 2006

¹² Liberal Democrat News, *Timetable for Liberal Democrat Leadership Elections*, 9 January 2006, <http://www.libdems.org.uk/news/timetable-for-liberal-democrat-leadership-election.html>

¹³ BBC News, *Three contest Lib Dem leadership*, 25 January 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4645974.stm

¹⁴ Ned Temko, Gaby Hinsliff and Lorna Martin, "Kennedy resigns: Lib Dem leader bows to inevitable and says 'I put the party first': Support grows for Menzies Campbell", *Observer*, 8 January 2006

¹⁵ Brendan Carlin and Jonathan Isaby, "Bookies back Hughes as he joins Lib Dem race", *Daily Telegraph*, 13 January 2006

¹⁶ Patrick Wintour, "Huhne launches bid to be Cameron of Lib Dems", *Guardian*, 14 January 2006

¹⁷ Andrew Grice and Ben Russell, "Oaten enters leadership race suggesting that rival Campbell is too old for the job", *Independent*, 11 January 2006

¹⁸ Ben Hall, "Oaten gives up race for Lib Dem leadership", *Financial Times*, 20 January 2006

3. Result

On 2 March 2006, the Liberal Democrats announced that Sir Menzies Campbell had been elected party leader, following a postal ballot of party members:

Final round

Sir Menzies Campbell	29,697 votes,	58 per cent of votes cast
Chris Huhne	21,628 votes,	42 per cent of votes cast

First round

Sir Menzies Campbell	23,264 votes
Simon Hughes	12,081 votes
Chris Huhne	16,691 votes

The turnout was 52,036 (72 per cent¹⁹).²⁰

D. 1999 Contest

On 9 August 1999, Charles Kennedy was elected leader of the Liberal Democrats, following a postal ballot of all members of the party.²¹ The election was conducted on the basis of a single transferable vote:

Final round

Charles Kennedy	28,425 votes,	57 per cent of votes cast
Simon Hughes	21,833 votes,	43 per cent of votes cast

First round

Charles Kennedy	22,724 votes
Simon Hughes	16,223 votes
Malcolm Bruce	4,643 votes
Jackie Ballard	3,928 votes
David Rendel	3,428 votes

E. 1988 Contest

On 28 July 1988, Paddy Ashdown was elected leader of the Liberal Democrats,²² following a postal ballot of all members of the party:

Paddy Ashdown	41,401 votes,	71 per cent of votes cast
Alan Beith	16,202 votes,	29 per cent of votes cast

¹⁹ In the 1999 contest, the turnout was 62 per cent

²⁰ Liberal Democrats, *Ming Campbell elected Liberal Democrat Leader*, 2 March 2006, <http://www.libdems.org.uk/news/ming-campbell-elected-liberal-democrat-leader.html>

²¹ David Butler and Gareth Butler, *Twentieth-Century British Political Facts 1900-2000*, 8th edition, 2000, MacMillan, p169

²² David Butler and Gareth Butler, *Twentieth-Century British Political Facts 1900-2000*, 8th edition, 2000, MacMillan, p169

Between March 1988, when the Party was formed, and July 1988, when Paddy Ashdown was elected leader, David Steel and Robert Maclennan, the leaders of the merging Liberal Party and Social Democratic Party, respectively, jointly led the Liberal Democrats.

Appendices²³

1. Liberal Democrat leaders since 1988

1988 (March)	David Steel and Robert Maclennan ²⁴
28 July 1988	Paddy Ashdown
9 August 1999	Charles Kennedy
2 March 2006	Sir Menzies Campbell (acting leader: 7 January to 1 March ²⁵)
15 October 2007	Vince Cable (acting leader)

2. Liberal Party leaders, 1900-1988

1900	Sir H Campbell-Bannerman
30 April 1908	H Asquith
14 October 1926	David Lloyd George
4 November 1931	Sir H Samuel
26 November 1935	Sir A Sinclair
2 August 1945	C Davies
5 November 1956	Jo Grimond
18 January 1967	Jeremy Thorpe
7 July 1976	David Steel

Notes:

1. All were Liberal 'Leaders in the House of Commons'. Sir H Campbell-Bannerman from 1905 to 1908 and H Asquith from 1908 to 1926 were formally the only 'Leaders of the Liberal Party' from 1900 until the 1969 Constitution came into force.
2. After H Asquith's defeat at the 1918 General Election, Sir D Maclean was elected chairman of the Parliamentary Party but relinquished the post on H Asquith's return to the Commons in March 1920.
3. D Lloyd George was the chairman of the Parliamentary Liberal Party from December 1924.
4. After the general election in 1931 there were three Liberal groups in the House of Commons. Sir H Samuel led the main group of Liberal MPs. D Lloyd George led a small family group of Independent Liberals and Sir J Simon led the Liberal National group. On 25 November 1935 D Lloyd George and other Independent Liberals rejoined the Liberal Party in the House of Commons.
5. An electoral college representing all constituency associations voted: D Steel 12,541; J Pardoe 7,032, in the 1976 leadership contest. J Grimond was acting Leader 12 May-7 July 1976.

²³ Source: David Butler and Gareth Butler, *Twentieth-century British Political Facts 1900-2000*, 8th edition, 2000 (other sources are recorded in the footnotes).

²⁴ James Naughtie, "Steel wants new leader for SLD", *Guardian*, 7 March 1988

²⁵ Ben Leapman and Nina Goswami, "He never failed the party – it failed him", *Sunday Telegraph*, 8 January 2006

3. Social Democratic Party leaders, 1981-1988

The Social Democratic Party was formally established on 26 March 1981 but its first leader was not elected until July 1982. In the intervening period, “the Gang of Four [Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Bill Rodgers and Shirley Williams] took collectively all those decisions that had to be taken collectively”.²⁶

1982 Roy Jenkins

1983 David Owen

1987 Robert Maclennan

1988 David Owen²⁷

The party formally suspended operations in June 1990, although its three remaining MPs sat as independent Social Democrats.

²⁶ Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party*, Oxford University Press, p135

²⁷ James Naughtie, “Steel wants new leader for SLD”, *Guardian*, 7 March 1988