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Nick Clegg, from Government to Facebook

The image of the traitor in politics

Abstract. — Nick Clegg, former British Deputy Prime Minister and current Vice President of Global Affairs and Communications at Facebook, is considered today as a “traitor” by many British people. If he was the first Liberal Democrats leader to access the position of Deputy Prime Minister, in the coalition government of Cameron (2010-2015), he is mostly well-known for not having been able to implement the ideas he had defended during his 2010 campaign. At the time, Clegg claimed that he was not like his opponents: his spirit of change, his attachment to ethical values and, most of all, the rejection of broken promises were based on a rhetoric of trust. However, the voted and applied policies during his mandate illustrate a completely different side of the party. What real consequences have Clegg’s actions had on his career and on the Lib Dems? Why can he be called a “traitor” and what sort of “traitor” was he really if any? Has he been able to be forgotten by choosing to work at Facebook? This article will answer these questions by comparing Nick Clegg’s political campaign speeches with the reforms engaged by the coalition government from 2010 to 2015. It will also analyze the perception of the party members along with the effects of Clegg’s decisions on the party.

Keywords. — British politics, British Civilisation, Nick Clegg, Liberal Democrats, political treason, tuition fees scandal, coalition government. Marie Marchand, *Les Cahiers d’AGORA*

Nick Clegg, de Vice-Premier Ministre Britannique à Vice-Président chez Facebook. La figure du traître en politique

Résumé. — Nick Clegg, ancien Vice-Premier Ministre Britannique et actuel Vice-Président en charge des Affaires Internationales et de la Communication chez Facebook fait aujourd’hui

figure de « traître » pour de nombreux britanniques. S'il a été le premier leader des libéraux démocrates à accéder au poste de Vice-Premier Ministre, dans le gouvernement de coalition de Cameron (2010-2015), il est surtout connu pour ne pas avoir su mettre en œuvre les idées qu'il avait défendues lors de sa campagne de 2010. Lors de celle-ci, Clegg revendiquait sa différence par rapport à ses adversaires, son esprit de changement, son attachement aux valeurs éthiques - et surtout, le rejet des promesses non tenues. Sa rhétorique était basée sur la confiance. Cependant, les politiques votées et appliquées durant son mandat illustrent une tout autre facette du parti. Quelles conséquences réelles les actions de Clegg ont-elles eu sur sa carrière et sur les Lib Dems ? Pourquoi peut-on le qualifier de « traître » et quelle sorte de « traître » était-il réellement ? A-t-il pu se faire oublier en choisissant de travailler chez Facebook ? Cet article répondra à ces questions en comparant les discours de campagne politique de Nick Clegg avec la réforme engagée par le gouvernement de 2010 à 2015. Il analysera également la perception des membres du parti ainsi que les effets des décisions de Clegg sur le parti.

Mots clés. — Nick Clegg, Politique Britannique, Civilisation Britannique, Libéraux Démocrates, trahison politique, tuition fees, gouvernement de coalition. Marie Marchand, *Les Cahiers d'AGORA*

I am sorry... There's no easy way to say this.... When you made a mistake, you should apologize. But more importantly, most importantly of all, you've got to learn from your mistakes and that's what we will do.... And if we've lost your trust, that's how I hope to start winning it back¹.

Nick Clegg, former British Deputy Prime Minister and current Vice-President of Global Affairs and Communications at Facebook, appears to many British people today as a good example of a perfect political “traitor”. His fall from electoral grace was all the more surprising as his election to the leadership of the Liberal Democratic Party (Lib Dems) in December 2007, was based on his tolerant and honest attitude, attuned to the changes needed. At the time, New Labour was in power under Gordon Brown and the continuous rise of anti-European feelings, expressed by the rise of UKIP, needed a counter expression in an open pro-European party led by a youthful and charismatic leader. Clegg would also become even more appealing after the dire consequences of the 2008 financial crisis. Therefore, when he accessed power, a mere 3 years later, in May 2010, agreeing to join a coalition government led by the Conservatives, there was a great deal of hope, particularly among the young, that he would be a force for good. For the Lib Dems, he was their first chance of tasting power since their creation in 1988. Therefore, his fall from grace would be all the more damaging as he had inspired so many initially.

So, what is a political “traitor”? As explained in *Keywords of Identity, Race, and Human Mobility in Early Modern England*, the word was “derived from Old French *traître* and Latin *traditor* (one who delivers or hands over)².” The definition goes on to explain that “While the figure of Judas Iscariot provided the ethical parameters that defined treason and traitors in popular culture, a ‘traitor’ was any individual who acted against the Crown³.” Therefore, most academics working on political treason in the UK have focused on the traitor as a person in power who would behave contrary to the interests of the State. The moral dimension remains essential because the political traitor is considered to “sin” against his own people in the same way that Judas had done against Jesus. In this sense, most historians have focused on spying

¹ CLEGG Nick, “Apologies for tuition fees manifesto promise”, in *Youtube*, Channel 4 News, 19 September 2012, 1:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-S8EqjgvBI>.

² NANDINI Das, MELO João Vicente, SMITH Haig Z., WORKING Lauren, “Traitor”, in *Keywords of Identity, Race, and Human Mobility in Early Modern England*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2021, p. 251.

³ *Ibid.*

and, on war treason⁴ or on radical politicians⁵. There is a gap in contemporary literature regarding the idea of the political traitor as a genre in Britain, besides the famous spy affairs. Of course, several chapters and articles have been written on the treachery of personal figures such as Edward VIII and his link with the Nazi regime of Hitler and other types of spectacular falls can also be recalled, such as the one of the former Tory Cabinet minister, Jonathan Aitken, convicted of perjury in the later 1990s. Nevertheless, what lingers on with Clegg is different. He is not a traitor in the legal/criminal sense of the term because he did not “act against the Crown”, i.e., against the State, but he seems to be unable to shed the moniker in a moral sense. To a certain extent, he has “sinned” against his own people (his party and his voters) and the suspicion he now inspires is the aim of this article.

Obviously, the notion of treachery is a slippery concept. A traitor is the word that the accuser will use on the perpetrator but, apart from the Lib Dem voters, some would see a useful figure (for damaging his own party). What he cannot shed is the strong moral element in what is perceived to be his treachery. Clegg can never be absolved (what an 18-month prison sentence did for Aitkens) precisely because he remains in the no-man’s-land of moral traitors. And, he is stuck in moral “traitor-land” because he himself put so much emphasis on the idea of trust: the trust to be given to him, the one he initially inspired.

In *Traitors: Suspicion, Intimacy, and the Ethics of State-Building*, the two co-editors explain that “treason has often been treated as a pathology or distortion of political life. Its importance has, therefore, been sidelined in social and political analysis. However, [...], far from being pathological, the identification and prosecution of treason are constant, essential, and ‘normal’ parts of the processes by which attempts are made to reproduce social and political order⁶.” “Identifying”, “prosecuting” and seeing how Clegg defies a “normal” political process embedded in moral norms, will be the guiding line of this study.

Accordingly, the first part will consider the “identification of treason” and therefore the gap between the promises and the realities of Nick Clegg’s speeches, demonstrating the way in which he betrayed his voters. In the second part we will examine the “prosecution of treason” along with the “impact on the party”.

⁴ KING Robert D., “Treason and Traitors”, in *Society*, 1989, p. 40-47.

⁵ LAVELLE Ashley, *The politics of betrayal: Renegades and ex-radicals from Mussolini to Christopher Hitchens*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015.

⁶ THIRANAGAMA Sharika, KELLY Tobias, *Traitors: Suspicion, Intimacy, and the Ethics of State-Building*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, 2010, p. 2.

“The identification of treason”: between promises and realities

To analyse Nick Clegg’s path as that of a traitor and to identify his “treason”, the first argument one might advance would be the gap between his promises and what was really achieved, that is to say the reforms led or approved by Nick Clegg, the leader of the Lib Dems within the coalition government (2010-2015).

This first part will examine Clegg’s progression and identify the type of treason he is guilty of via three axes: first explaining his rapid accession to power, which made him a quasi-star in less than three months in 2010, then examining the Tuition Fees reform, the event which marked a turning point in the mandate of the Lib Dems, considered as their original sin; and finally, the VAT reform which illustrated Clegg’s lack of respect for his promises.

A rapid accession to power

When Nick Clegg appeared in the election campaign’s first television debates in 2010 few people knew him. While not a new arrival in politics, nor in the Liberal Democratic party since he was a Member of the European Parliament from 1999 to 2004 and entered the House of Commons in 2007, he was still unknown to the larger public. What is most striking in his case is the rapidity with which he succeeded in seducing and conquering the voters, since he was elected Deputy Prime Minister only three years after becoming a member of the House of Commons. How can such a victory be explained?

His television appearances were much applauded⁷, but it must not be forgotten that the Labour Party had been losing momentum since the departure of Tony Blair, appearing less and less attractive, particularly to young people. It was an opportunity for the Lib Dems to seduce this segment of the electorate⁸. Charles Kennedy, former leader of the party, had declared in

⁷ KETTLE Martin, “Nick Clegg was the winner in this historic leaders’ debate”, in *The Guardian*, 15 April 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/apr/15/leaders-tv-debates-brown-cameron-clegg> ; “Instant polls declare ‘third man’ Nick Clegg the debate winner”, in *France 24*, 16 April 2010, <https://www.france24.com/en/20100416-britain-election-debate-instant-polls-declare-nick-clegg-winner-brown-cameron>.

⁸ “Owing to the crippling financial circumstances in which we came into power, we were condemned to offend teachers, nurses, doctors, social workers, students – the educated middle classes and the public sector – who were the closest thing the Liberal Democrats had to a ‘core vote’ in 2010. We had won their support in large measure because of our opposition to Blair’s public-sector reforms and the appeal of our policies on issues like public-sector pay and pensions.”. CLEGG Nick, *Politics Between the Extremes*, London, Penguin Random House, 2016, p. 39.

1997 that New Labour occupied a place that the Lib Dems had long sought. This finally happened in the 2010 elections.

Clegg's personality explains in large part his success, particularly during the televised debate of 15 April 2010 on ITV. Clegg grew up in a family opposed to all forms of extremism, is multilingual, married to a Spanish lawyer and has charisma and charm which provide him with an attractive appearance.

The 2010 campaign is considered a major turning point in the British political landscape with the predominance of televised debates. Nick Clegg's success during the debate of 15 April 2010 which was watched by 10 million viewers launched what came to be known as "Cleggmania". At that time, the participation of a leader of what was thought of as the third party was considered surprising in a country where the Conservatives and Labour always fought over first place. This debate was an opportunity not to be missed, something Nick Clegg was fully conscious. That is why he prepared for it seriously and came out rather well⁹, thanks to a well-honed communications strategy: using the name of the person to whom a question is being asked while looking directly at the camera made him a great contrast to a nervous David Cameron and an ill-at-ease Gordon Brown.

When his personality is analysed, it is not difficult to understand the complexity of his character, but it is clear his charm, his charisma and his sociability are all qualities which contributed to his more-than rapid rise in public opinion. That night Nick Clegg succeeded in upsetting British politics. He represented an alternative to voters who were tired and disillusioned following the 2008 crisis.

On 12 May 2010, after a hung parliament, he found himself in the role of Kingmaker and became Deputy Prime Minister in David Cameron's government. He thus became one of five Liberal ministers in the government, a situation which had not happened since 1977. This coalition was also made possible thanks to his good relations with Cameron: they had both received an elite-type of education¹⁰ and thus understood each other. Nick Clegg affirms in an interview that they were working well together: "Much though we were very different in many respects, I think both Cameron and I liked to work quite quickly, not weighed down with too many endless pre- and post-meetings. [...] The informal exchanges are, of course, tremendously important in any decision-making culture. Cameron and I would almost always speak on the phone on a Sunday night to compare notes on the week ahead, almost always on a Wednesday

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Nick Clegg went to Westminster School and Cambridge while David Cameron went to Eton College.

or Thursday as well, in addition to the Monday ‘bilats’. Much to the exasperation of civil servants, and being the generation we were, there was plenty of texting going on, which was deeply frowned upon¹¹.”

The opportunity to form a coalition government was a real coup for Nick Clegg and the voters expected a lot from him. If one starts from the principle that the Lib Dems only succeeded in taking over voters disappointed by Gordon Brown, not counting the members of the party who considered that Nick Clegg was on the right of the Lib Dem party, the coalition becomes a first point of friction – the sign of the start of a type of betrayal of his party.

One thing with which Clegg does not seem to have concerned himself with when the coalition agreement was signed is the following: in creating a coalition government with the Conservatives, Lib Dem voters who felt betrayed would no longer vote for the Liberal Democrats, which would imply a transfer of votes to Labour. It can be confirmed today that this alliance was undertaken against the wishes of the voters, and opinion polls indicated that voters preferred a coalition between Labour and the Lib Dems or a minority Conservative government.

Finally, the coalition between the Lib Dems and the Conservatives was not based on love between the two parties but on the well-thought-out interest of each party. But was the alliance between these two parties really understood by the Liberal Democrats and by Clegg? In his article *The Liberal Democratic Dilemma in Historical Perspective?* the constitutionalist Vernon Bogdanor affirms that British Liberals and Liberal Democrats have always had difficulty winning, but equally in taking responsibility for their influence and their positions because of their role as the third party¹². The coalition represented a real dilemma for the Liberal Democrats since they were torn between the desire to take part in government and the fear of losing their identity and their ideas. In spite of this, in an unusual result during peace time, the legislative elections of 2010 resulted in a coalition government from 2010 to 2015. While it resulted in the first real coalition between these two parties¹³, one must not forget that in 1974

¹¹ CLEGG Nick in THORTON Daniel, KIDNEY BISHOP Tess, “Nick Clegg reflect on how the coalition took decision, on the pressures of ‘being widely overstretched’ as Deputy Prime Minister, and on his relationship with David Cameron”, in *Institute for Government*, 19 April 2018, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-reflect/person/nick-clegg/>.

¹² BOGDANOR Vernon, “The Liberal Democratic Dilemma in Historical Perspective”, in *The Political Quarterly*, n° 78, 2007, p. 11-20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-923X.2007.00826.x>.

¹³ The Conservatives and the Liberal Party of David Lloyd George established a coalition in 1918. The Lib Dems had clearly forgotten their British history and, more precisely that of the coalitions which had been formed between the Liberals and the Conservatives. Each time there was a coalition between these two parties the Liberals came out of it much weakened politically (the best example is the coalition of 1918 to 1922 and the humiliating resignation of the Liberal Prime Minister, David Lloyd George).

there was no majority government and that the period 1977-78 was marked by an alliance between Labour and Liberals. Finally, an agreement between Tony Blair's New Labour and the Liberal Democrats was projected in 1997 but never happened. It is therefore the coalition with the Conservatives which is considered as the starting point of betrayal by certain voters and some of the members complained only a year after the election that Clegg had not clearly communicated the policies put in place thanks to the Lib Dems. Clegg was not perhaps as good a communicator as he first appeared.

Tuition fees: a turning in the perception of Nick Clegg

Only one year after his election, the Tuition Fees scandal obscured all other political decisions taken by the party¹⁴, and left voters feeling disowned. This scandal continued for the following four years, overshadowing all other political actions and left no chance for Nick Clegg to ever recover. Things had started very differently for him. During the 2010 campaign Clegg had asserted his difference from his opponents, his spirit of change and renewal, his attachment to environmental and ethical values – and, above all, his rejection of promises not kept¹⁵.

Nick Clegg was a real hope for the members of the Liberal Democrats and a key figure of the party, being one of the *Orange Bookers*, advocating for social and economic liberalism, he contributed to the *Orange Book* in which he published an essay on Europe¹⁶. He had been deeply involved in the party's transformation in the beginning of the 2000s.

The Tuition Fees reform (or university tuition fees) is the law voted in December 2010 which allowed universities to charge tuition fees to their students, up to 9,000£ (10,000€) per year. The objective was to compensate for another decision by the coalition government which

¹⁴ “It was the tuition-fees decision that came to symbolize the growing narrative about us: that our behaviour in the coalition was one of weakness and loss of principle”, “Or at least the lingering feeling that we had sold ourselves short, and compromised on principle, remained right through till the election in 2015.” CLEGG Nick, *Politics Between the Extremes*, *op. cit.*, p. 33, 35.

¹⁵ This is what he declared in the 2010 manifesto: “Don't settle for low politics and broken promises: be more demanding. Set your sights on the Britain you want for your children and your grandchildren, and use your vote to make it happen. Liberal Democrats are different. When it's come to the big decisions – on the banks, on the environment, on the war in Iraq – we are the only party that has called it right, every time. Only Liberal Democrats have the big ideas for fundamental, structural changes in the way our country works to make it fair... A strong vote for the Liberal Democrats means the end of red-blue, blue-red politics. It means the end of the stitch-up between the two old parties. It means the beginning of real change that works for you.”

¹⁶ MARSHALL Paul, LAWS David (ed.), *The Orange Book, Reclaiming Liberalism*, London, Profile Books, 2004, p. 69-103.

reduced the budget allocated to higher education by 80%, a reform adopted in the context of austerity following the financial crisis of 2008.

This law, adopted only six months after the start of the coalition government, remains even today what voters and British observers retain from the Clegg mandate. But why was this law in particular perceived as an act of betrayal?

The Tuition Fees law was adopted in spite of many demonstrations by students¹⁷ and numerous internal conflicts¹⁸. Increasing fees had two consequences for higher education: first the financial burden on the consumers of higher education, that is to say the students themselves as well as their families; secondly it contributed to commercializing higher education, leading to significant competition among universities. It was thus a reform with an enormous impact on the sector, at odds with the beliefs of a number of Lib Dems.

However, this law seems to have been minimized by the Deputy Prime Minister and demonstrates poor communication on his part. The message to the voters was not sufficiently clear and it was evident that the promise made by Clegg to the National Union of Students to not raise tuition fees¹⁹ could not be possible in a time of austerity.

One might think that it was only the students and their families who felt betrayed by this manoeuvre. But more globally the views of voters were severe, and this happened very quickly after the Lib Dems came to power: in January 2011, 74% of people who voted for the Liberal Democrats in 2010 but who subsequently turned away from them thought that the Liberal Democrats had little or no influence on the decisions taken by the Government²⁰. Only one third

¹⁷ On November 10th 2010, about 50,000 students demonstrated against tuition fees. HANCOX Dan, “The 2010 student protests were vilified – but their warnings of austerity Britain were proved right”, in *The Guardian*, 12 November 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/nov/12/2010-student-protests-austerity-britain> ; COUGHLAN Sean, “Students tuition fees protests ends with 153 arrests”, in *BBC*, 1 December 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-11877034>. “In Birmingham about 30 protesters occupied the city council's offices [...] There were also protests in Leeds, Sheffield, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Belfast, Brighton, Manchester and Bristol, with school pupils joining students.”

¹⁸ “Our higher-education spokesman, Stephen Williams, spent a huge amount of time and effort valiantly trying to devise new funding systems for students and universities, but was ultimately unsuccessful at getting agreement from the party’s Federal Policy Committee. Vince Cable, who was responsible for the party’s economic policy at the time, was particularly opposed to a no-fees policy, which he felt was fiscally incredible – a case he made in vain to the committee.” CLEGG Nick, *Politics Between the Extremes*, *op. cit.*, p. 27-28.

¹⁹ WINTOUR Patrick, MULHOLLAND H el ene, “Nick Clegg apologies for tuition fees pledge”, in *The Guardian*, 20 September 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/sep/19/nick-clegg-apologies-tuition-fees-pledge>.

²⁰ The question that was asked was the following: “On balance, do you think the Liberal Democrats are having... 1. Little or no influence on the decisions taken by the Government. 2. A bad influence on the decisions taken by the Government. 3. A good influence on the decisions taken by the Government.”, in YOUNG, *The*

of voters thought that in entering the coalition, the Lib Dems had succeeded in putting into place real liberal policies²¹. These numbers say a lot about voters' perception of the capacity of the party to impose its views within the government.



Illustration 01. Students protesting against the tuition fees reform in 2011²²

In spite of clear signs of dissent, the coalition agreement did not pay much attention to Tuition Fees. Nick Clegg says himself that the subject was not part of his campaign priorities in light of the debates which the question raised. However, during a campaign visit to Cambridge in 2010, he proudly affirmed his commitment and promise not to increase tuition fees. During the reform vote he declared: “I remember vividly, as we agonised over the decision, Vince Cable and the Universities Minister David Willetts coming to see me in my office. ‘Why can’t we delay it for a year?’ I asked, looking for some way to postpone the day of reckoning. ‘The universities will go nuts—they have to issue their prospectuses to new students now’, came the answer²³.” It is clear that he was aware of the consequences such a law could have but that he could not or was not in a position to impose his views within the government.

Sunday Times Survey Results, 2011, http://cdn.yougov.com/today_uk_import/YG-Archives-Pol-ST-results-14-160111.pdf.

²² “Thousands march in student protest over university fees”, in *BBC News*, 9 November 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-15646709>.

²³ CLEGG Nick, *Politics Between the Extremes*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

This seems all the more surprising as the cover page of the 2010 party electoral program presents four large themes: fair taxes, a fair chance, a fair future and a fair deal – all based on a simple principle, justice.



Illustration 02. Liberal Democrat Manifesto 2010²⁴

These four priorities were consciously chosen by Clegg and his advisors, as explained in his book *Politics Between the Extremes*²⁵. This idea of justice strongly contributed to the voters choosing the Lib Dems.

The subject of Tuition Fees during the national campaign was not at the centre of the party’s communications. Nick Clegg did not once mention the subject during his campaign speeches. However, the 2010 electoral programme made clear the desire of the party to abandon “unjust” university fees²⁶.

²⁴ Liberal Democrats, *2010 General Election Manifesto*, cover page.

²⁵ CLEGG Nick, *Politics Between the Extremes*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

²⁶ Liberal Democrats, *2010 General Election Manifesto*, “We will scrap unfair university tuition fees so everyone has the chance to get a degree, regardless of their parents’ income” (p. 33) ; “scrap unfair university tuition fees for all students taking their first degree [...] We will immediately scrap fees for final year students” (p. 39).

spending proposals

	£m (in predicted nominal terms) ¹					
	2010–11	2011–12	2012–13	2013–14	2014–15	
Spending commitments						
1	Jobs and infrastructure package including: ²					
1a	Eco cash-back scheme	335	0	0	0	0
1b	Investing in wind energy and other renewables	420	0	0	0	0
1c	Insulating public buildings	400	0	0	0	0
1d	Bringing empty homes back into use	1,165	0	0	0	0
1e	Tackling youth unemployment	660	95	0	0	0
1f	Bus scrappage scheme	140	0	0	0	0
2	Cut class sizes – introducing a pupil premium ³	0	2,500	2,540	2,590	2,640
3	Scrapping tuition fees ⁴	600	685	740	1,570	1,765
4	Restore the pension earnings link	0	0	320	325	330
5	Recruit 3,000 more police officers ⁵	5	50	95	140	185
6	A pay rise and better homes for our troops	0	420	425	430	440
	Total spending	3,730	3,745	4,115	5,050	5,360

Illustration 03. Spending proposals made in the Liberal Democrats General Election campaign in 2010²⁷

It seems inexperienced on the part of Clegg not to have thought that the ideas defended during the campaign for his electoral district would not come out in the media. Below, he is seen brandishing the promise to vote against all fee increases and to pressure the government to institute a fairer alternative to the system.



Illustration 04. Nick Clegg signing a NUS pledge against any increase in fees in April 2010²⁸

²⁷ Liberal Democrats, *2010 General Election Manifesto*, p. 101.

²⁸ Photograph by the NUS press office in WATT Nicholas, “Revealed: Lib Dems planned before election to abandon tuition fees pledge”, in *The Guardian*, 12 November 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/nov/12/lib-dems-tuition-fees-clegg>.

He may also have been naïve to think that his position on the Tuition Fees question would not harm his party – as happened in 1998 for Tony Blair’s New Labour which had also made a radical change of course about increasing tuition.

The VAT increase, another example of Clegg’s betrayal

VAT is another subject on which promises and reality were not aligned. During his 2010 campaign Nick Clegg denounced the Conservatives’ proposal to increase the VAT to 20%, calling it a bomb, yet he voted for it, it was adopted during the coalition and became effective on 4 January 2011. However, no mention of VAT had been made in the coalition agreement of May 2010. It was agreed that the government was determined to increase the personal allowance, an amount above which tax is taken, in order to assist the middle classes and the poor, a change which the two parties agreed to prioritize above any tax reduction²⁹.



Illustration 04. Nick Clegg standing in front of a Lib Dems’ campaign denouncing the Conservatives’ proposal about VAT³⁰

He declared however in 2008, during his leader’s speech in Bournemouth “Like Angie, a middle-aged mum, who came to see me recently in my constituency. Who said she was finding it difficult to sleep. She told me about that sinking feeling she gets at the supermarket

²⁹ CAMERON David, CLEGG Nick, *Coalition, our programme for Government*, 2010, p. 30.

³⁰ BOWERS Chris, *Nick Clegg: The Biography*, London, Biteback Publishing, 2010, p. 186-187.

checkout and the petrol pump. Counting down the days until her cheap mortgage deal ends. Switching down to just half an hour of heating in the morning because it's all she can afford. You know how it feels, don't you?" "Raising taxes at the top will go a long way to cutting them at the bottom." Accepting the VAT increase only contributed to reinforcing the feeling of betrayal on the part of voters who had elected him and put their confidence in his party.

Can a traitor be forgiven?

The first part has made it possible to understand how Clegg could be considered a political traitor – but the story does not stop there. On 17 December 2012, the Deputy Prime Minister published a video in which he asked forgiveness from the British people, a video seen 146,486 times - a *mea culpa* made fun of by some and remixed on YouTube³¹ which collected more than 3,600,000 viewers. In what way did his excuses contribute to changing the opinion voters had of him and of his party? Could his excuses make them forget everything? This does not seem to be the case in the short term. In the long term the answer to the question is more difficult to assess.

In the video mentioned Nick Clegg, he presented his excuses to the public. To quote only a few passages, this is what he declared: "We made a promise before the election that we would vote against any rise in fees under any circumstances. But that was a mistake... we shouldn't have made a promise we weren't absolutely sure we could deliver.... I am sorry... There's no easy way to say this.... When you made a mistake, you should apologize. But more importantly, most importantly of all, you've got to learn from your mistakes and that's what we will do.... And if we've lost your trust, that's how I hope to start winning it back³²."

³¹ THE POKE, "The Nick Clegg Apology Song: I'm Sorry (The Autotune Remix)", in *YouTube*, 19 September 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUDjRZ30SNo>.

³² Detail of his excuses during his 17 September 2012 video. "We made a promise before the election that we would vote against any rise in fees under any circumstances. But that was a mistake. It was a pledge made with the best of intentions – but we shouldn't have made a promise we weren't absolutely sure we could deliver. I shouldn't have committed to a policy that was so expensive when there was no money around. Not least when the most likely way we'd end up in Government was in coalition with Labour or the Conservatives, who were both committed to put fees up... I am sorry. I know that we fought to get the best policy we could under those circumstances but I also realize that it isn't the point? There's no easy way to say this, we made a pledge, we didn't stick to it, and for that I am sorry. We you made a mistake, you should apologize. But more importantly, most importantly of all, you've got to learn from your mistakes and that's what we will do. I will never again make a pledge unless as a party we're absolutely clear about how we can keep it. I accept that won't be enough for everyone but I owe it to you to be upfront about it. And I don't believe it should cast a shadow over everything

Before his official excuses he had also recognized his error during his annual leader's speech in Birmingham in 2011. He explained: "we failed to properly explain those dilemmas. We failed to explain that there were no other easy options. And we have failed so far to show that the new system will be much, much better than people fear³³." Here in his presentation to the voters he did not question the reform itself but the failure to properly present the project to the voters. However, there is a two-fold problem with the subject: on the one hand, the voters felt betrayed because they had been lied to and, on the other, the reform as voted was not accepted because it was determined to be too severe and inappropriate. Clegg thus seems to mistake his target while admitting his failure. This was reinforced in his leader's speech in Glasgow in 2014 when he declared:

When I apologized for the disappointment and anger caused by our inability to scrap tuition fees, I knew we could never, ever make that mistake again. And we won't. We understand that political parties must show by doing: our promise of more must be built on a record of delivery, not just words.

So if you meet someone who doesn't believe we'll raise the personal allowance to £12,500, tell them how we already raised it to £10,500. If they're not persuaded we can help young people with their travel costs to college, tell them we've created more apprenticeships than any Government since the war. If they're cynical about our promises to help with young children, tell them we're the first party ever to start providing free support to two years old across the country, tax free childcare and free school meals for infants. And all of it while fixing our broken public finances – so they can be sure we'll finish balancing the books fairly too³⁴.

What value can these excuses be given when, at the same time, during his 2011 Leader's speech in Birmingham he declared that the party always remained "faithful to its values³⁵"? How not to be perceived as overconfident and distant from reality and from the feelings of those affected by the measures such as the increase in VAT or the Tuition Fees? The hope of regaining

else the Lib Dems are achieving in government. When we're wrong, we hold our hands up. But when we're right, we hold our heads up too. We were right to leave the comfort of opposition to face the realities of government. And I know we're fighting for the right things day in and day out too. We're building our economy to make it strong, changing the tax system to make it fair, defending the vulnerable in these tough times. That's what my party believes in. That's what I believe in. And if we've lost your trust, that's how I hope to start winning it back."

³³ Detail of his excuses during the *Leader's Speech* in Birmingham in 2011 "The simple truth is that the Conservatives and Labour were both set on increasing fees, and in those circumstances, we did the best thing we could. Working tirelessly to ensure anyone who wants to go to university can. Freeing part time students from upfront fees for the first time. Ensuring fairer repayments for all graduates. But we failed to properly explain those dilemmas. We failed to explain that there were no other easy options. And we have failed so far to show that the new system will be much, much better than people fear."

³⁴ CLEGG Nick, "Leader's Speech", Glasgow, 2014.

³⁵ CLEGG Nick, "Leader's Speech", "True to our values", Birmingham, 2011.

voters' confidence by apologizing seems once again out of touch with voters but also poorly thought.

Impact of the betrayals on the party

The impact of such decisions on the party was not negligible and can be seen from different perspectives: first the loss of party members, and second the catastrophic results of the 2015 election, without counting Clegg's own loss in the 2017 election.

Between 2010 and 2012, that is to say the first two years of his mandate, membership numbers decreased dramatically, to attain their lowest level since 1988, that is 42,501, a net loss of 22,537 members, which represents approximately one third of the total.

These figures show that the members of the party no longer adhered to the values formerly defended and no longer wanted to belong to the Lib Dems.

2010	65,038 (62,036)	6,270
2011	48,934	-16,104
2012	42,501	-6,433

Illustration 05. Evolution of the number of party members between 2010 and 2012

Furthermore, a study in *Economic and Social Research*, undertaken by *YouGov*, makes it possible to better understand the way members perceived the party. In 2017 participants in the survey and members of the Lib Dems considered that on a scale of 1 to 5, their party was rated 3.2 (illustration 5, figure 12). This score is not very high (and shows a close to neutral view, approaching an opinion that is not expressed) and demonstrates that the members were lukewarm as to the effectiveness of the party in power. In addition, thanks to illustration 6 (figure 16), one can see that only half of the members surveyed said that the party fulfilled their expectations. They did not appear to be satisfied with their party.

Figure 12. Members' overall impressions of their party

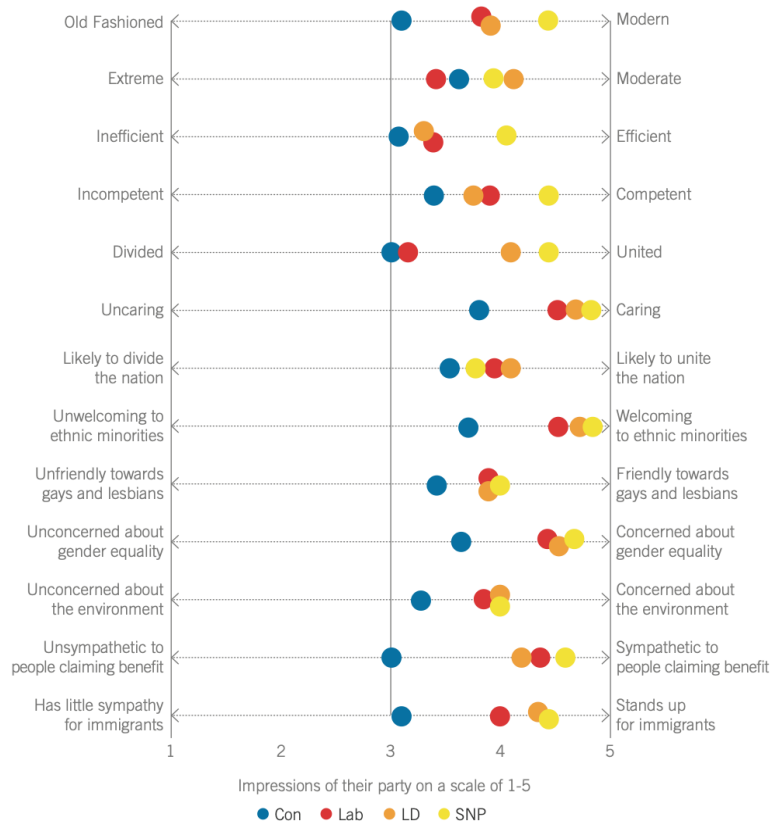


Figure 16. Members' satisfaction rates

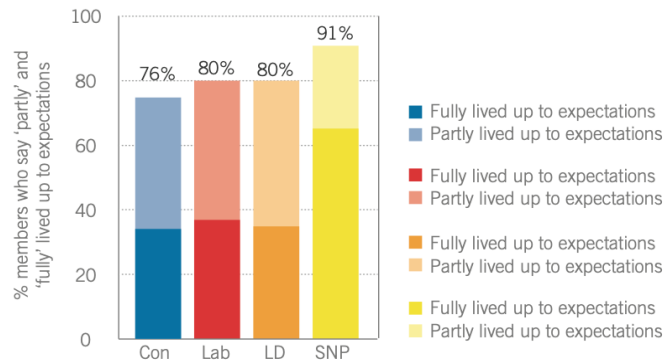


Illustration 05 et 06. Members' overall impression of their party and members' satisfaction rates³⁶

If one cannot state that the mandate of the Lib Dems and of Nick Clegg was the origin of this sentiment, it is probable that it played a role in the perception by the membership. In fact, the promises not kept and the difficulties of the Lib Dems to impose their will on the Conservatives during the coalition would not be forgotten.

³⁶ Figures 12 and 16 taken from BALE Tim, WEBB Paul, POLETTI Monica, "Grassroots Britain's party members. Who they are, what they think, and what they do", in *ESRC Party Members Project*, 2018, p. 28-33, https://esrcpartymembersproject.org.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/grassroots-pmp_final.pdf.

The results of the 2015 election

This is probably the reason why after the 2015 General Election the party fell into a black period in its history. The Lib Dems obtained only 8 seats in the House of Commons, a more than worrisome loss compared to the 57 seats which had been gained five years previously and which had enabled the party to join the coalition. To only cite three losses: Ed Davey former Secretary of State for Energy, Vince Cable, former Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, and Danny Alexander, former Chief Secretary to the Treasury all lost their seats. Nick Clegg was able to retain his seat – almost a surprise in the circumstances. Nevertheless, he was obliged to resign from his position as leader of the party. During the announcement of his departure, he declared “It is simply heartbreaking to see so many friends and colleagues who have served their constituents so diligently over so many years abruptly lose their seats because of forces entirely beyond their control³⁷.” The results of this election prove to what point the voters no longer had confidence in the party which could not keep its campaign promises. If Nick Clegg declared that his heart was broken and accepted responsibility for the party, he claimed to be extremely surprised by the results. He thus gave the impression that he still had not understood the damage caused by the Tuition Fees reform.

The results of the 2017 election: “Cleggsit”

The last blow came two years later and ended Nick Clegg’s political career. He lost his electoral seat of Sheffield Hallam at the General Election of June 2017. While certain people claim that the results illustrate the unhappiness of students following the reform of the Tuition Fees, since the electoral seat was largely composed of students, this does not seem likely. If that was the case, why had this not happened after the end of his mandate in 2015, which resulted in his re-election?

If the results cannot be directly attributed to the fact that students voted against Clegg, they mark the end of a period. On 9 June 2017 the hashtag “#cleggsit” to talk about Clegg’s departure abounded on Twitter as reference, by word play, to Brexit.

³⁷ STONE Jon, “Nick Clegg resigns: The Liberal Democrat leader’s resignation text in full”, in *The Independent*, 8 May 2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/generalelection/nick-clegg-resigns-liberal-democrat-leader-s-resignation-speech-text-full-10235830.html>.



Illustration 07. Tweet about Nick Clegg’s loss in the 2017 General Election³⁸



Illustration 08. Tweet about Nick Clegg and the pledge he had made to the NUS³⁹



Illustration 09. Tweet about Nick Clegg and the “revenge” of the students⁴⁰

³⁸ Telegraph Politics [@TelePolitics], “#Cleggxit – how Nick Clegg fell the full force of Britain’s youthquake telegraph.co.uk/women/politics...”, in *Twitter*, 9 June 2017, <https://twitter.com/TelePolitics/status/873145072014905344>.

³⁹ MARSH Ed, [@ted_harsh], “#cleggsit... students will never forget 2010, the @nusuk pledge campaign continues to influence politics hugely! #2017Election”, in *Twitter*, 9 June 2017, https://twitter.com/ted_harsh/status/872994104896081920.

⁴⁰ BONES Owen [@lesskeen], “Sheffield Hallam Uni students had their revenge... #NickClegg #sheffieldhallam #sheffieldhallamuniversity #GE2017 #Cleggxit #cleggsit #shu”, in *Twitter*, 10 June 2017, <https://twitter.com/lesskeen/status/873534547731906560>.

These failures on the part of Clegg not only had an impact on the perception voters had of him, but also of the party itself. If the Lib Dems seemed to have a promising future, the Clegg period remained, in the eyes of many, a failure. Certain proposed laws from Clegg's electoral programme saw the light of day, but they were not what voters remembered – and Clegg denounced this situation in his book *Politics Between the Extremes* (2016). This position can be analysed as an illustration that he had still not understood that the people who had voted for him needed above all to be understood and to have confidence in a party which claimed to be innovative and listening to them. Clegg was not the man he had portrayed himself to be. In the end, the number of laws or policies passed did not matter to voters. What mattered was that they hoped to be listened to and not be tricked on multiple occasions. In this matter, his excuses were not deemed to be sufficient, the harm had been done. After 2017, politics no longer seemed to be an area in which Clegg could continue to progress, even if he decided to publish *How to stop Brexit (and make Britain Great Again)* (2017) and created a Think Tank on artificial intelligence called *Open Reason* the same year. A year later, he took a decision which was to have a lasting impact on his political legacy: he decided to join Facebook. In his self-imposed exile to one of the California giants, Clegg has added a new layer to his perceived treachery.

Conclusion: a “one-of-a-kind” renegade?

Nick Clegg defies a “normal” political process embedded in moral norms. If he is not a traitor in the legal sense, he is a traitor in the moral sense, and that is why he might never be absolved.

We have seen that Nick Clegg seems very rational but also that he does not always understand his voters, a reproach that can be made of the party itself. The fact that he did not keep to his campaign promises cost him his seat in the House of Commons and contributed to turning him away from politics completely. The party unfortunately also suffered from its five years in government and from his leadership.

To put this betrayal in context, it should be remembered that the measures were taken under a coalition government where the Conservatives were not inclined to give room to their partners. Things might have been different in a coalition government with Labour, but this was a course Clegg was not prepared to take, feeling more at ease with Cameron than with Brown. In itself, choosing to help the Conservatives in 2010 was certainly the biggest mistake he made, not understanding that his relationship with Cameron and his Cabinet was not based on trust but on a political transaction which eventually damaged the Lib Dems irretrievably.

Moving from British Deputy Prime Minister to Vice President of Global Affairs and Communications at Facebook, from politics to a private company and from the UK to the USA, may appear somewhat fortuitous. And this in a period when Facebook was undergoing difficulties. As a reminder, in 2018 the company faced the resignation of several of its executives, its messaging services was accused of inciting violence, and uncertainty over its tax situation in the EU hovered over the company. Finally, Facebook's business model was accused of not respecting the privacy of its users. It is this which caused Mark Zuckerberg to testify before the American Senate⁴¹. Even more recently, in October 2021, Facebook had to face another scandal: the *Facebook Files*, after Frances Haugen, a former employee at Facebook, revealed some documents to the *Wall Street Journal* and found out that "Facebook Inc. knows, in acute details, that its platforms are riddled with flaws that cause harm, often in ways only the company understands⁴²."

What did Nick Clegg have to do with this *brouhaha*? When he announced on social media in October 2018 that he was moving to Facebook, he declared, almost like a prophet, that "I'm joining to build bridges between politics and tech. It's time that we harnessed big tech to the cause of progress and optimism. I believe that Facebook can lead the way⁴³." But we argue that Nick Clegg could have been a forgivable political traitor if he had not chosen to leave the country and join Facebook. He could have been on the road to redemption and, like Tony Blair and John Major, decide to become the experienced politician of the margins trying to stir the country in the best direction. He could have gained further support from the public and by consequence, change his traitor status.

Sébastien Schehr explains that in some circumstances, if the traitor in question is able to rally the support of a sufficient amount of people, they can impose another definition of the situation and thus implying a "good reason" that led to the said treason. In Nick Clegg's case, no such situation is observed. This is why we could qualify Nick Clegg of a one-of-a-kind political traitor. By not having the support of the public and not being able to convince - including voters or the media - he can be seen as the perfect moral traitor, the one whom the majority opposes. There is a consensus between the "Us" and the "They", on the definition of

⁴¹ Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg appeared before the Senate's Commerce and Judiciary committees Tuesday to discuss data privacy and Russian disinformation on his social network on 10th -11th April 2018.

⁴² "The Facebook Files. A Wall Street Journal Investigation", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 1st October 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/amp/articles/the-facebook-files-11631713039>.

⁴³ CLEGG Nick, "I'm joining Facebook to build bridges between politics and tech", in *The Guardian*, 19 October 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/19/nick-clegg-facebook-politics-tech>.

the situation and on the application of a negative identity⁴⁴. The situation he has been facing since the *Facebook Files* scandal seems to be a repetition of what he had to experience from 2010 to 2015, failing to convince the public opinion of his role and declaring in an interview for CNN that “blaming social media for the January 6 Capitol riot is ludicrous⁴⁵”. He seems to have learnt very few political lessons.

If one considers the analysis of his ideas and decisions, he is part of a long string of politicians who have chosen pragmatism in politics, not keeping their word and for whom being in power is more important than the promises they make. In the end, nothing is really surprising any longer on his part. Åkerström, quoted in Sébastien Schehr, defends the idea that the traitorous actions are associated with the idea of rupture: “defect, change in one’s ideas or loyalty implies the idea of a departure, a one-way movement that can be a physical or spatial break with a country or an organization⁴⁶.” In that sense, Nick Clegg can be qualified of a moral traitor who broke with his party’s intellectual ideologies, his own views but who also chose a self-imposed exile to the USA, at odds with everything he had ever stood for. He is also the living image of a missed opportunity for the Liberal Democrats who found themselves at odds with their voters and for Clegg himself, and who by leaving the UK to join the Californian Facebook team after his demise has secured a toxic legacy for himself: a man who stopped being loyal to his voters, his own country, and his political beliefs, that is, a moral traitor to his own.

⁴⁴ SCHEHR Sébastien, « Sociologie de la trahison », in *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, Paris, PUF, n° 123, 2007, p. 313-323, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-cahiers-internationaux-de-sociologie-2007-2-page-313.htm>.

⁴⁵ CLEGG Nick “Facebook executive: ‘Ludicrous’ to blame Capitol riot on social media”, in *CNN Reliable Sources*, 4 October 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/10/03/media/reliable-sources-facebook-vp-interview/index.html>.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

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