

# CENTRE:FORUM

## **Waiting for Gordo: What will a Brown premiership mean for the Liberal Democrats?**

Harrogate, 3 March 2007

**Professor Paul Whiteley – see separate presentation.**

**Willie Rennie MP – MP for Dunfermline & West Fife**

Some impressions of Gordon Brown. Firstly, he is not surefooted; he is not totally at ease in the public eye, unlike Blair. Furthermore, he is just as much of a spin doctor as Tony Blair. Whatever figures come out of the Treasury, they are always used to show how successful he has been. Brown will always avoid any bad news. Finally, he appeals to the core Labour voters, the more activist members of the party, much more than Blair ever did.

Conclusion: Brown will be the next Prime Minister – the party has no appetite for a contest

What will be the broad effects of this? In terms of his positive attributes, Brown embodies traditional values, grassroots support. He appears more cautious, more prudent. He will play up his economic record, which is generally positive. His most positive attribute? He's not Tony Blair. On the other hand, he's Scottish. This does not endear him to English and Welsh voters. He also comes with baggage, and will be forever associated with Iraq, tax credits, personal debt etc. He also has little appeal to the middle class and young people. He will inherit a split party, as exemplified by Charles Clarke & Alan Milburn.

So what should the Liberal Democrats do?

We must handcuff Brown to Blair; make sure that people remember the association. We should also wait, and benefit from the attacks Labour will inflict on the Tories, especially in marginal seats. We should not drift to the left, but continue to occupy the centre ground, especially if Brown does start to drift to the left. Finally, Brown must be held responsible for his mistakes as Chancellor.

**Dr Vince Cable – MP for Twickenham & Shadow Chancellor**

Unlike Blair, who is very smart politically, but slightly trivial, Gordon Brown is very serious. He really does believe in social equality, child poverty etc. He's also a great admirer of American style capitalism and business, which has resulted in a strange mix of economic policy. He has been reasonably successful as Chancellor. The UK economy has done well and he must take some of the credit for that. However, the economy

is the sole basis of his reputation. This means he is very fragile, because if anything goes wrong with the economy, his reputation will disintegrate. We have already seen signs of that, given recent failings such as tax credits and pensions.

Brown believes that the state can drive change from the centre. He fails to understand the complexities of decision-making, as proven by the tax credits debacle. The theory and intentions are generally admirable, but it is the implementation that has been misjudged, too bureaucratic and rigid. He has never understood that centralised bureaucracy does not accommodate human beings.

So how do we respond as Liberal Democrats? If Brown does badly, then some voters will switch to the Tories, so we must concentrate on our core values: the environment, civil liberties and localism.