

On Conservatives, Labour and The Liberals

A letter to the Herald, Nov 2007

Sir,

It is true of course that parties do agree on some things, and I don't think we should invent differences for the sake of it. Lib Dems and the Conservatives both oppose ID cards and support stronger, binding, measures against climate change. And David Cameron has committed to supporting the parts of Mr Brown's programme where we can find common cause.

But there are major differences between Labour and Conservative, not only of policy but of principle. On a number of these, I'm afraid it remains unclear which way the Liberals lean, with or without a leader.

Conservatives believe people should be encouraged to work, provide and save, for themselves and their families. With the Tax Credits fiasco, ill-designed Pension Credits, and creeping Inheritance Tax thresholds, Labour have done the opposite.

We believe that once you employ people to manage public services you should trust them (and hold them accountable) to run them as they think best. Labour's command-and-control target-driven culture has stifled public services. We want to let teachers and health professionals get on with what they joined those professions to do.

And we recognise that only business creates the wealth that funds those public services. That's why we would do away with so much of Labour's red tape.

Labour don't care much for villages and the countryside, but we know that in areas like East Hampshire (the 7th most expensive rural area in the country) more affordable homes are urgently needed for local young people.

Conservatives want to extend the property-owning democracy further, just as we did with council house sales in the 1980s. That's why we've committed to taking 9 out of 10 first-time buyers out of Stamp Duty altogether.

Labour believe in the virtue of the State, in and of itself. Conservatives, by contrast, believe that individuals, families and communities generally know what's best for them, and government's real job is to help them get on and do it.

A word on Council Tax. The Liberals like to say they would "axe the tax" (a nice rhyme, I admit) but as a rule omit to go through the details of their proposed replacement, the "local income tax". It would particularly disadvantage working families in areas like ours. Using the Liberals' own figures, in East Hampshire it would be over £2,000 for the average working couple. And they want a property value tax on top of that.

Gordon Brown has undoubtedly added policy theft to his habit of taxing by stealth. The pre-budget statement laid this out, and the Queen's Speech formalised it. But there is now a real debate over the future direction of Britain, and a real choice of who should lead it: Mr Brown or David Cameron.

Sincerely,

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