

# Revealed: Lib Dems planned before election to abandon tuition fees pledge

**Exclusive:** Documents show Nick Clegg's public claim was at odds with secret decision made by party in March

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**Nicholas Watt**, chief political correspondent

- guardian.co.uk, Friday 12 November 2010 21.30 GMT
- 



In addition to the party's manifesto pledge, Nick Clegg signed an NUS pledge in April to vote against any increase in tuition fees. Photograph: NUS press office

The Liberal Democrats were drawing up plans to abandon Nick Clegg's flagship policy to scrap university tuition fees two months before the general election, secret party documents reveal.

As the Lib Dem leader faces a growing revolt after this week's violent protest against fee rises, internal documents show the party was drawing up proposals for coalition negotiations which contrasted sharply with Clegg's public pronouncements.

A month before Clegg pledged in April to scrap the "dead weight of debt", a secret team of key Lib Dems made clear that, in the event of a hung parliament, the party would not waste political capital defending its manifesto pledge to abolish university tuition fees within six years. In a document marked "confidential" and dated 16 March, the head of the secret pre-election coalition negotiating team, Danny Alexander, wrote: "On tuition fees we should seek agreement on part-time students and leave the rest. We will have clear yellow water with the other [parties] on raising the tuition fee cap, so let us not cause ourselves more headaches."

The document is likely to fuel criticism among Lib Dem backbenchers and in the National Union of Students that the party courted the university vote in the full knowledge that its pledge would have to be abandoned as the party sought to achieve a foot in government. Within a month of the secret document, Clegg recorded a YouTube video for the annual NUS conference on 13 April in which he pledged to abolish fees within six years.

"You've got people leaving university with this dead weight of debt, around £24,000, round their neck," the future deputy PM said in the video.

Clegg also joined all other Lib Dem MPs in signing an NUS pledge to "vote against any increase in fees". The leaked document showed that during the preparations for a hung parliament the Lib Dems still intended to fulfil that commitment.

The Lib Dems, who are now under intense pressure after agreeing in government that tuition fees should be allowed to rise, said the document was designed to work out how to reach agreement with the Tories and Labour, who were "diametrically" opposed to them.

As the party was isolated, the negotiators concentrated on trying to win ground where they could find consensus. Sources say that, in government, they have succeeded in tackling the discrimination against part-time students identified in the secret document.

The Lib Dem document is disclosed in a new book on the coalition negotiations by Rob Wilson, Conservative MP for Reading East. Wilson, who interviewed 60 key figures from the main parties for Five Days to Power, reveals that:

“ The Lib Dems made no attempt to stand by their two key economic election pledges – no deficit reduction this year and opposition to a VAT increase – in the coalition negotiations. A Clegg aide told Wilson: "The thing that changed minds was George Osborne saying that he had seen the figures and it was quite horrific in real life as opposed to spin life."

“ Alexander, appointed by Clegg last year to lead a secret four-strong coalition negotiating team, had thought the Lib Dems would only support a minority Tory government and not a coalition because of a "substantial gulf" between the two parties. In his confidential document on 16 March, Alexander wrote that it "would make it all but impossible for a coalition to be sustainable if it were formed, and extremely difficult to form without splitting the party."

“ Chris Huhne, a member of the secret team, wrote a dissenting report to Clegg saying the Lib Dems would have to form a full-blown coalition with the Tories, and not prop up a minority government. He warned there was no precedent for a minority government delivering a fiscal consolidation, raising the prospect both parties would face a backlash. "Financial crises are catastrophic for the political parties that are blamed, and we should avoid this at all costs."

“ George Osborne, who had long feared the Tories would struggle to win an overall parliamentary majority, persuaded David Cameron to allow him to form



the Tories' own secret coalition negotiating team two weeks before the election. The Tory leader demanded total secrecy and asked only to be given the barest details for fear that he would blurt it out "unplanned in an interview".

â€¢ David Laws, a member of the secret Lib Dem negotiating team who briefly served in the cabinet, predicted on 24 February 2010 that the Tories would make a "very early offer of co-operation or coalition" in the event of a hung parliament. Laws told Wilson that he has a high regard for Osborne who tried to persuade him to join the Tories in 2006.

â€¢ Gordon Brown was so keen to form a coalition with the Lib Dems that on Monday 10 May, the day before his resignation, he offered to form "a completely new sort of government" in which Clegg would run EU policy. The Lib Dems understood they would take half of the seats in cabinet.

A Lib Dem spokesman said tonight: "These are selective extracts of documents which discussed a range of options ahead of any possible negotiations. As the Liberal Democrats made clear throughout the election and in negotiations, they had four key priorities which were set out on the front page of the manifesto. All of these priorities were agreed in the coalition document. The nature of the coalition agreement has meant we were able to set the foundations for a stable five-year government that will deliver many of the priorities the Liberal Democrats have long supported."

Clegg tried to downgrade the pledge to abolish tuition fees at the 2009 party conference, prompting a backlash from the left. A plan to abolish them over six years was included in the general election manifesto.

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- [hugatoryhugsnotvotes](#)

12 November 2010 9:31 PM

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- [verygoodyear](#)

12 November 2010 9:33 PM

Jesus...

- - Recommend (297)
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[smoothisland](#)

12 November 2010 9:34PM

Surely one of the most hated people in Britain right now. His political career is over. Shame he's going to take the lib dems down with him.

- - Recommend (1654)
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[nickmannion](#)

12 November 2010 9:35PM

I didn't think it was possible for these volta-face chancers to appear any worse....

Just goes to show eh...

- - Recommend (783)
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[DirtyStinkingLiberal](#)

12 November 2010 9:35PM

I was so young and naïve six months ago.

- - Recommend (1225)
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- [BarkingMad](#)

12 November 2010 9:36PM

Those who think Clegg has missed his opportunity to make the LibDems a credible party are missing the point - they were never credible to start with.

- - Recommend (376)
  - [Report abuse](#)
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- [Reflexive](#)

12 November 2010 9:36PM

Clegg, you lying waste of space. You sicken me more than any other politician does or ever has.

- - Recommend (1146)
  - [Report abuse](#)
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- [songbird1952](#)

12 November 2010 9:37PM

I thought that we had reached the pits.....but I am simply.....shocked  
.....

- - Recommend (843)
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- [Zogz](#)

12 November 2010 9:38PM

Lieing "jobsworth".

- - Recommend (199)
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● [acme](#)

12 November 2010 9:38PM

"I am a liar. Look My lips are moving! You can never believe a single word that I say.

I said anything that would get me elected to get into power and bring off a neo-liberalist coup d'etat which will destroy the economy, but I and my class can own the wreckage.

I have no shame. I have no morals. Do you agree with Nick?

- - Recommend (490)
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● [ThisIsMyAlias](#)

12 November 2010 9:38PM

To think I even entertained the thought of voting for this guy.

The shame, the shame...

- - Recommend (403)
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● [fen1x](#)

12 November 2010 9:39PM

This comment has been removed by a moderator. Replies may also be deleted.



[zeezi](#)

12 November 2010 9:39PM

Seriously how can it be possible in this "democratic" nation of ours that members of parliament can blatantly lie to be elected.? No, really i am dumbfounded.... And millions of people will just accept this and say... "oh well thats what they all do"  
I'm sick of this &%\$^

- Recommend (1059)
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[sqrl](#)

12 November 2010 9:39PM

"We will have clear yellow water with the other [parties] on raising the tuition fee cap".

LibDem pisses on students.

- Recommend (721)
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[pipefish](#)

12 November 2010 9:40PM

A politician who tells lies to get into power!! Whatever next?!

- Recommend (158)
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[perclue](#)

12 November 2010 9:40PM



good lord - who's going to break it to [tim farron](#)

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- [BarkingMad](#)

12 November 2010 9:40PM

Keep voting and they will keep lying. When will people learn?

- - Recommend (172)
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- [LindaLou](#)

12 November 2010 9:41PM

So who leaked these secret party documents, and why?

Not that I'm complaining, mind. Clegg is leaving a legacy all right: his name will be in the dictionary under "hypocrite" for years to come.

- - Recommend (415)
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- [Hampshirehogs](#)

12 November 2010 9:41PM

Just another self serving greedy bastard climbing up the greasy pole.

- - Recommend (372)
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- [alfredahmed](#)

12 November 2010 9:42PM

I voted for the Lib Dem's because I believed they offered the best deal for young people. Today it makes me sick to the stomach looking at the increase in tuition fees which I thought was a result of the coalition deal.

But this article claims that BEFORE the election the Lib Dems planned to abandon the pledge. I can not believe what I am reading. I am asking myself over and over again, why should the young pay for the financial failings of the rich. The Lib Dems have failed the young over and over again. This time simply with bare-faced lies.

Clegg is the scum of the earth.

- - Recommend (1136)
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- [s2goon](#)

12 November 2010 9:43PM

Good luck holding on to your seat next time Nick

- - Recommend (347)
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- [TruckTurner](#)

12 November 2010 9:43PM

The next election can't come soon enough. The Lib Dems will be annihilated.

- - Recommend (635)
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HowardD

12 November 2010 9:43PM

So a party reneged on its election promises. What's new?

Labour in its written manifesto pledged to introduce sensible restrictions on smoking in pubs. Once in power, it went on to ban smoking completely, leading to the closure of thousands of pubs and the loss of tens of thousands of jobs.

In terms of assault on our liberty and social values, that is far more serious than a rise in student fees.

- Recommend (91)
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redskyinthewest

12 November 2010 9:43PM

Shame on him! I am a student and my political apathetic student friends turned to me and said 'you know what, i'm going to vote for this guy', first timer voters really believed in him, I saw so many new youngsters becoming interested and even involved in politics because of the hope this man gave, and he's just gone and shitted all over them. Shame on him!

- Recommend (726)
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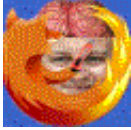
Smurfylicious

12 November 2010 9:43PM

If ever it was time for a totally new political party and a completely reformed political landscape then that time is now.

- Recommend (337)
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- [cuttingWaste](#)

12 November 2010 9:44PM

after 8 years of Charles Kennedy creating the party...

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- [Haiqin88](#)

12 November 2010 9:44PM

I don't know if Clegg is familiar with Scorsese's film 'Casino' but, figuratively speaking, during the next election, the electorate will be played by Joe Pesci while Clegg and the Lib Dems. will be Tony Doggs - the bloke with his head in a vice.

- - Recommend (98)
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- [mellelieu](#)

12 November 2010 9:44PM

It's Cameron who must be laughing his balls off.

Clegg is the lightning rod for hatred of this govt.

- - Recommend (926)
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- [holzy](#)

12 November 2010 9:44PM

Isn't this potential evidence of conspiracy to commit fraud?

Ridiculous behaviour that requires a heap of by-elections - there is no other possible solution.

Such profoundly undemocratic and deceptive conduct by the LDs, who have literally cheated thousands of people out of their votes, should not go unpunished.

If this is legal I assume that the Condems also think it's legal to commit 'distraction' crimes: 'just come to read your meter ...'

Bunch of cu ...

- - Recommend (407)
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- [stonecoldandmad](#)

12 November 2010 9:44PM

just further proof that they are lying scumbags.

- - Recommend (172)
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- [letsskiptotheleft](#)

12 November 2010 9:45PM

Just when you thought they couldn't get any worse?!!

FFS Guardian tell us where you stand now?!

- - Recommend (331)
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- [Shesellssanctuary](#)

12 November 2010 9:45PM

Soul destroying.

- - Recommend (160)
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- [FIVEHATS](#)

12 November 2010 9:46PM

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- [Oldy](#)

12 November 2010 9:47PM

So, lying to win elections. I thought I had heard that Phil Woolas had been sacked for that offence.

When does Cameron sack Cleggweasel then?

We must demand an answer!

- - Recommend (331)
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- [FIVEHATS](#)

12 November 2010 9:47PM

And yes Guardian who are you backing now!?!?!?!?!?!?!? The editors should be ashamed at backing such spineless liars and cheats.

- - Recommend (504)
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• Retinette

12 November 2010 9:47PM

Continued direct action, NOW!

Solidarity:

<http://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/We-need-unity-defend-the-Millbank-protestors/128397300550227>

- Recommend (168)
- Report abuse
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• rolandb

12 November 2010 9:48PM

So if this is all true, we learn that 1) David Laws is a natural Tory, 2) Huhne is power mad and 3) Nick Clegg tells whopping lies. Danny Alexander is obviously living the dream, or should that be nightmare?

- Recommend (223)
- Report abuse
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• VoxAC30

12 November 2010 9:48PM

This is the smoking gun. Now go here and tell them what you think of them:

<http://act.libdems.org.uk/group/reclaimyourvote>

- Recommend (203)
- Report abuse
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• alfonsofish

12 November 2010 9:48PM

Lib Dems planned before election to abandon tuition fees  
pledge

Well thats alright then

- - Recommend (40)
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- [mattmcneany](#)

12 November 2010 9:48PM

what's the difference between having a plan to ditch fees before the  
election and ditching them with no plan?

Liars either way.

- - Recommend (75)
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- [worldgirl](#)

12 November 2010 9:50PM

All the more fuel for this fantastic song that's hoping to be a Christmas  
number one. Tell Nick what you think of him.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQFwxw57NBI>

- - Recommend (106)
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- [tatterdemelon](#)

12 November 2010 9:50PM

I wore out my shoes canvassing for these lying bastards. Never again.



- - Recommend (467)
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- [Reflexive](#)

12 November 2010 9:50PM

Recall Clegg. If you live in Sheffield, you owe the rest of the country this fight. If recall is impossible, make damn sure he's out at the next opportunity.

- - Recommend (562)
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- [Speranza86](#)

12 November 2010 9:50PM

Don't worry, Nick Clegg, we all make mistakes.

Mine was to vote for the Lib Dems in the first place.

But I learn from my mistakes, I won't make it again. Do you learn from yours?

The Tories are doing great whilst your own party's approval ratings are falling down quicker than a man who's had one too many drinks.

- - Recommend (340)
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- [doctorbidston](#)

12 November 2010 9:50PM

This is the End, my beautiful Clegg-shaped ex-friend,  
the End.

- - Recommend (195)
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- [defiti](#)

12 November 2010 9:50PM

The only Lib Dem policy I disagreed with was their silly 'pledge' that was never going to sustain itself so this all is sweet music to me.

Not that great tactically, Clegg, but you're doing the right thing.

- ○ [Recommend \(44\)](#)

- [Report abuse](#)

- [Clip](#)

- | [Link](#)



- [mattmcneany](#)

12 November 2010 9:50PM

a secret team of key Lib Dems

I imagine it would not be hard to guess the Orange-Bookers on that 'team'

- ○ [Recommend \(65\)](#)

- [Report abuse](#)

- [Clip](#)

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- [teacupinastorm](#)

12 November 2010 9:50PM

Fire extinguishers may have just become more dangerous than their absence.

- ○ [Recommend \(140\)](#)

- [Report abuse](#)

- [Clip](#)

- | [Link](#)



1649

12 November 2010 9:50PM

Voted Lidem for 25 years, not now.

I am so so disappointed n this lot. Liars, liars, smug liars. Are they as unprincipled as new labour? I think that's a close call.

What point the vote? Next time when the establishment whinge about turnout, we can point to this sorry lot.

Next time I'm spoiling my ballot

- - Recommend (238)
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[DickSocrates](#)

12 November 2010 9:51PM

Nick Clegg: Proven liar.

There's no other word for it, he's a liar. A confidence trickster. It's like there is actually something genuinely wrong with him. We thought Blair was bad, but at least he believed the rubbish he came out with, Clegg never did. Forget Woolas, they should investigate Clegg.

- - Recommend (822)
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