

LIBERAL DEMOCRAT PROGRAMME FOR ACTION 2020-2023
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1 Introduction

The December 2019 general election was a considerable disappointment to the party. Unfortunately, despite the potential pro-EU vote as shown by the opinion polls and by the party's relative success at the European Parliament elections just seven months earlier, poor tactics and the lack of a positive and consistent campaigning strategy meant that we missed the opportunity. The fear of Corbyn achieving power also was seen by some pro-EU Conservatives as more dangerous than Brexit and pushed them back into voting Conservative.

All of this points yet again towards the need for the party to build up a core vote which identifies sufficiently with Liberalism as to retain their electoral fidelity. The urgent task, therefore, is for the party to adopt a three-year strategy building on its strengths, particularly including [1] its principled internationalism which produced its stand on a united Europe including the UK which has been the main catalyst for recent recruits to the party, [2] agreeing and publishing an updated statement of its philosophy and values, [3] compile and publish an easy-to-read statement of its main policies, and [4] to revive the many derelict constituency associations. The problem is that the party is currently ill-equipped to achieve this and has no countrywide strategy in place. This paper attempts to rectify the situation.

2 Context

2.1 The party's low vote and representation in parliament following the three recent elections is not new. In 1970 we polled just 7.5% -fewer votes and MPs than after the 2015 election -and yet four years later, in February 1974, we polled 19.3% with a small increase in MPs to 14. Had we fought all constituencies our vote would have been around 23%. The change in fortunes was mainly based on a run of five by-election victories. A similar situation could occur again. The party failed to consolidate this vote in the months following and it fell back at the October 1974 election. This was followed by a far worse result at the 1979 general election, with only 13.8% of the vote.

2.2 After the 1979 election the Liberal party took immediate action with a four year programme, started soon after that 1979 election, going from the philosophy debate at the subsequent party assembly, through a booklet on values in 1981 and consultations on the future manifesto in 1982. This strategy programme was cut short in 1983 when the party subsuming its own identity within the Alliance with the SDP.

2.3 Targeting was introduced following the 1992 general election and there was a significant rise in seats won at the 1997 election. However, subsequent general elections did not produce substantial additional electoral benefits and it could not prevent the post-coalition debacle of 2015 nor the further decline in votes at the 2017 snap election. In particular it has not succeeded in the retention of held seats – we currently hold only ten of the 62 seats won in 2005. It has also hollowed out the party's organisation and now very many previously healthy constituencies are derelict. And, perhaps most vividly of all, at the 2017 and 2019 elections, for the first time since the Reform Act of 1832 no Liberal MPs from Wales were elected to the UK parliament. As the number of winnable seats has steadily declined so has the number of targeted constituencies reduced in parallel with an increase in derelict constituencies.

2.4 I am not arguing for a complete lack of special attention to seats with better prospects of victory but for this to be additional to working across the board to ensure a viable Liberal Democrat presence in every constituency, which in itself assists winnable seats by demonstrating the party's strength, maximising media attention, keeping the other parties more tied up in every seat and building up a vote total which maximises the Short money entitlement, enables more television and radio time and increases the status of the party leader in parliament.

2.5 Historically the party's worst result in terms of lost deposits was 1950. However, had the deposit level then been the present 5% we would have only lost 29 deposits! By comparison, at the 2017 general election we lost 375 deposits at the 5% figure; had the level been the earlier 12.5% we would have lost an additional 162. In other words only 92 constituencies managed to poll above 12.5%. The number of lost deposits declined to 136 in 2019 but it is still almost a quarter of constituencies. A further 287 candidates polled between 5% and that 12.5%. In other words, in two-thirds of constituencies we could not get more than one in eight of the electors to vote for us. Revival is going to be exceptionally difficult.

2.6 Building a core vote requires basing policies firmly within the party's basic values. The party's commitment to international law produced its unanimous parliamentary opposition to the Iraq war and its support for federalism brought a commitment to a untied European including the UK. There other historic Liberal policies, such as worker co-ownership, land value taxation, pluralism and even electoral reform, which are unique to us and which are potentially hugely popular but which we have somehow completely dropped. All these are practical expressions of the basic Liberal philosophy.

3 Failure

3.1 The last party document focusing on the party's values was the 2002 document "It's about Freedom", eventually published in 2011 as Freedom, Liberty and Fairness. The world of 2020 is vastly different to that of 2002. We have had the disastrous Iraq war, the banking crisis of 2008, the reactionary decision to leave the EU, the huge dangers of global warming and now the global pandemic of the COVID-19 virus. We need to rewrite the philosophy and values within the context of all these issues, plus the need to confront the increase in dangerous nationalisms across Europe. The welcome decision of the Federal Policy Committee to embark on a fresh statement must press on and provide the party with a document that can entrench and enthuse current members and help to bring new recruits. In the meantime the best current statement of Liberal values is that produced recently by Liberal International: (<https://liberal-international.org/who-we-are/our-mission/landmark-documents/political-manifestos/liberal-manifesto-2017/>). Certainly there is nothing currently available from party HQ.

3.2 For decades there has been little attempt to embed Liberal values as such in party members. There has been considerable electoral success at local government level and, from 1997 to 2010, growing success at parliamentary level, but the lack of success in explaining "why?" we supported community activity and big issues has meant that once the harsh political winds blew, much of our vote was swept away.

3.3 The original rigour of the community politics strategy as a means of enabling and empowering those communities has become the mechanistic mass delivery of the “Focus” leaflet often stressing what the party’s representatives have done for the voters. There has even been a fairly common view amongst the “Focus” addicts that party membership per se was superfluous -all that was needed was a large enough team of “Focus” deliverers. You cannot consolidate votes into membership and into activists and candidates on such a flimsy basis. None of this will build a core vote. It will not even prevent the remarkable “churning” of the party’s vote from one election to the next: we have to be able to retain a high proportion of our vote and then to build on it.

4 Appeal

There is at least one example in the history of the Liberal party to demonstrate the effectiveness of a principled appeal to the electorate.

4.1 At the October 1964 general election the Liberal party faced the “wasted vote” argument much more acutely than it does today, but the lesson of the strategic decision the party made to confront it has a lesson for us today if we want to build a political party rather than trying to grab a short-term electoral bonus. In 1964 we started the campaign with the appeal to the individual’s self-belief, with the slogan, “People who think for themselves vote Liberal,” and this was developed into “If you think like a Liberal, vote like a Liberal.” The final election broadcast was pulled together by the professional broadcaster, Ludovic Kennedy. We ran out of recording time and Ludo had to do the final appeal live, direct to camera. It began with the statement that “you must have the courage of your convictions, and if you think like a Liberal you should vote like a Liberal”, and, as the camera tracked in close, he said, “and if you think like a Liberal and don’t vote Liberal you don’t have much courage at all -do you?” This one broadcast had a great effect and HQ’s telephone was busy all the next day with voters wanting to join! I believe that it played a significant part in boosting our poll ratings by 3% in that final week.

4.2 I note this history to make the point that a direct appeal to conscience and principle can be very powerful. Our future strategy should stress this point, not least by repeating the mantra time after time: “Why vote for the parties that get it wrong, when you can vote for the party that gets it right.” No appeal loses by repetition. By the time we are getting fed up with stating it, the electorate is just beginning to notice it.

5 Positioning

5.1 The Labour party is now trying to put the Corbyn years behind it and it remains to be seen whether Keir Starmer will be able to change the character of the party without sacrificing its youthful appeal and zeal. The party’s Left is already stressing that the leadership will still have to heed its strength. Starmer is certainly competent but he is hardly inspiring. The challenge for Liberal Democrats will be to develop its radicalism and to have a clear expression of its philosophy and its policies which can outflank Labour on so many issues, as we regularly did on civil liberties and on Iraq during the Tony Blair years.

5.2 The Liberal Democrats should subtly promote a careful appeal to Labour’s lost voters, not necessarily by proclaiming itself to be on the “Left”, but rather by

5.2.1 consistently exposing the deeply unpleasant, harmful and discriminatory policies of the Conservative government;

5.2.2 giving more prominence to policies to reduce inequality;

5.2.3 emphasising our long and principled commitment to civil rights;

5.2.4 developing a job creation and support policy with the aim of answering the dissatisfaction of the white working class male voters whose jobs in heavy industry have disappeared over the past decades;

5.2.5 publicising potentially popular policies which are uniquely ours, such as co-operation in industry and taxation of land values;

5.2.6 stressing the need for internationalism to confront global issues.

5.3 In Scotland we have an even more difficult task: to become recognised as the opposition to the SNP so that when the present administration falls on its face the “radical” vote comes to us rather than back to Labour.

6 Local Government

6.1 Unusually, we have recently been winning support on a national issue -Europe -rather than on mending pavements and saving post offices. Our local election campaigns need to tie in with this and to link national and local issues. We have to win politically rather than continuing to believe in the miraculous effects of the incessant delivery of thousands of Focus leaflets.

7 Three year strategy

7.1 One urgent task is to hold on to support on the key issue -Europe – and turn it into active membership. Europe has recently been the most potent recruitment issue but the signs are that, whilst the increase in membership is very welcome, too many of the recent recruits are joining to identify rather than to campaign for it. We need to persuade members that we support a united Europe because we are Liberals, rather than being Liberals because we support a united Europe. Each local leaflet should contain a paragraph on an aspect of Liberal philosophy.

7.2 We urgently need the planned new statement of party values and to train cadres of party activists to take the document around the country, constituency by constituency, to explain it and to discuss it and to enable local officers to be able to use it at local political meetings. There will be no point in waiting for invitations from local associations -HQ needs to tell associations that we want a speaker to come to a meeting, giving a range of dates. Even if only the proverbial “one man and a dog” turn up, no matter -that man or woman may be the person to develop the party locally.

8 Social Media

Social media, ie Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc, are now the main channels of political communication and persuasion, particularly amongst younger voters. We need to exploit these crucial channels of communication, not only by direct initiatives by party headquarters but also by training, briefing and encouraging party members to post on social media in order to multiply the effect of central utilisation and paid advertising. Social media is not a substitute for “traditional” activity but an addition to it. In particular it can provide the seed ground for the recruitment of members and their involvement in running the party.

9 Conclusion

Five immediate action points are:

[1] It is vital to imbue members, and particularly new members, with a keen sense of the party’s values and of its vision for society. Without this nothing else can thrive and members will drift away when under pressure. It requires the successor booklet to the 2002 “Liberal Values” publication which the Federal Policy Committee is committed to. Party headquarters needs to be able to respond itself to enquiries for copies of such a publication. In addition we need to have literature analysing Labour, Conservative and Green party ideologies and explaining why Liberalism is different and superior.

[2] We need to take some time, at least two years, involving “fellow travellers” (or, in the Quaker phrase, “sincere friends of freedom”) as well as party members in rigorous thinking on topical issues -particularly those in the “too difficult” box, such as NHS finance, migration and borders, terrorism etc -towards the publication of a series of attractive booklets in a uniform format. Separate commissions on each topic with a deadline for producing a report will produce new and well-worked ideas.

[3] An intensive effort, particularly by “old timers” with experience of previous similar straitened circumstances, and an ability to train advocates for the strategy, to tour every constituency and to lead sessions on values, policy and strategy. These used to work successfully in Leeds with “parlour” meetings with a speaker and around a dozen individuals present, followed by a light supper. These meetings will have to be insisted upon rather than awaiting invitations, which will rarely happen.

[4] An abandonment of rigid targeting and, instead, a strategy of ensuring that some literature goes out in every contested election, including the many currently derelict seats we now have, in order to find members and activists (instead of, primarily, at this stage, votes).

[5] Party headquarters needs to be continually initiating social media activity. We need to train and encourage party members to follow up party initiatives and to place new material on the different platforms themselves.

Finally, it may be the moment quietly to drop the word “Democrat” in the use we make of the party’s name. Not by making a formal or legal decision but simply by usage, rather like Labour

under Blair became “New Labour.” By doing so we would only be following the practice of Nick Clegg, Dick Newby and others who continually referred to “Liberal” and “Liberalism.” There is, strictly, no such thing as “Liberal Democratism” and the current name tends to fudge the basis of what members technically believe. And when it is shortened to “Lib Dem” that means nothing at all. No voter aged under 50 has any idea how the name – let alone the abbreviation – arose. Also, curiously, the party’s constitution does not designate a party as such. Individuals instead join “the Liberal Democrats”, which sounds rather like that nice group of people over in the corner.

Politics is currently in a massive state of flux. No party knows precisely what the social and economic circumstances are going to be when life returns post virus to some form of normality. The issue for the Liberal Democrats as a party is whether we can start now to re-formulate our historic values and present them in ways that demonstrate that only Liberalism has the answers to the international dimension required to deal with the global challenges and that we have an understanding of human values that have a fresh appeal in a society where economics will have to play a reduced role.

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[A brief biographical note may be useful for those many colleagues for whom I am now at most a distant historical figure. I joined the Liberal party in February 1958 and was active as a local election agent and as a regional Young Liberal officer until I went to Liberal Party Headquarters in February 1962 as the party’s local government officer. From there I went to Yorkshire in 1967 to become the party’s regional agent. I was elected to the Leeds City Council as one the first Liberal Councillors elected for thirty years. Election to the West Yorkshire Metropolitan County Council followed and in 1983 I won the Leeds West constituency from Labour. Up to 1981 I served as a national party officer, including chairing the party’s Assembly Committee for four years. I 1987 I became the Liberal Party’s last elected President, when, alas, merger with the SDP prevented me from assuming office. I have consistently written on Liberal issues and a note of my archive can be found on my website: www.beemeadowcroft.uk]