

LIBERAL DEMOCRAT STRATEGY 2018-2021

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1 Analysis

1.1 The party's low vote and representation in parliament following the two recent elections is not new. In 1970 we had 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%. This was mainly based on a run of five by-election victories. A similar situation could occur again. Sadly the party failed to capitalise on this relative success and the October 1974 election was a disappointment. The subsequent, 1979, election was even worse. The February 1974 vote had not been consolidated, with eventually dire consequences.

1.2 The Alliance and merged party years had their own specific difficulties and the Liberal party's four year programme started after the 1979 election going from philosophy through values to manifesto was cut short and blunted by being unable to promote its own identity. It is difficult in retrospect to see what lasting electoral benefits the SDP brought. Certainly, the SDP's initial boost was not consolidated. Quite apart from the damage done at the 1983 and 1987 general elections by seat allocations, I would argue that the merger blunted the Liberal identity, with the lasting deleterious consequences we see today.

1.3 Targeting was introduced following the 1992 general election and there was a significant rise in seats won at the 1997 election. Subsequent general elections did not produce significant 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. It has also hollowed out the party's organisation and now very many previously healthy constituencies are derelict. The resurgence in membership, particularly since the EU referendum, is consequently difficult to draw in and develop in many areas. This was vividly shown at the 2017 election at which our vote declined still further. I have written elsewhere on the consequences of twenty-five years of targeting but the single fact that above all illustrates this is the fact that we have no MP in Wales for the first time ever. Probably two-thirds of constituencies have no party activity at all.

1.4 The depth of the disaster of 2017 can be seen by comparing it with the 1950 general election which was regarded by earlier Liberals as the lowest ebb ever of the party. At that election the party fielded 475 candidates and it polled 9.1%. (Had we fought all seats the vote would have been around 11.5%). We lost 319 deposits at the then 12.5% level. Had the level been the present 5% we would have only lost 29 deposits! By comparison, at the 2017 general election we lost 375 deposits at 5%; 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%. Revival is going to be

exceptionally difficult.

1.5 The main failed political opportunity came with the Iraq invasion. Alone of the major parties, the parliamentary Liberal Democrat party was united in opposition to the war and every MP was present and voted against the invasion. This was extremely popular and the party was consistently at 22% in the MORI poll. The party failed to hammer home this stance at each and every opportunity, and the possibility of drawing this vote into the party and motivating it on a wider Liberal spectrum was consequently missed.

1.6 The next big missed opportunity came with the party leader debates at the 2010 election. Nick Clegg's performance lifted the party's poll rating by an astonishing 10% virtually overnight. At one point we actually went from third to first place but we were unable to capitalise on this, partly because by this time there was no party organisation in a majority of constituencies as a consequence of targeting.

1.7 There are other historic Liberal policies, such as worker co-operatives, 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. Because a policy is old is no argument for abandoning it.

1.8 The media do not now give us any reasonable exposure and I am weary of seeing discussions of the failure of the parties over Brexit without any reference to Liberal Democrats – despite the Liberals sixty-five year long commitment to a united Europe. Rarely now do Liberal Democrats appear on *Question Time* or *Any Questions?*. It is because we do not matter. We have no national presence and our national vote is stuck in single figures. Why, when Brexit negotiations are mired in disarray, and the Labour Party is failing to expose and hammer the Conservative government, are we not doing better? Because we not seen as a viable alternative.

2 Failure

2.1 The party's key failure from, say, 1962 onward has been its inability to convert electoral "success" into membership and activism. The Liberal party survived in the 1940s and 1950s because a relatively small number of party officers and candidates knew and understood the nature, uniqueness and importance of Liberalism and were determined to ensure its survival. The party continued in the 1960s to produce policy reports, such as the Grimond inspired series from 1962, the Young Liberals' *New Orbits* series from 1959 and the long series of briefings, *Current Topics*, edited by Harry Cowie, plus definitive statements of Liberal philosophy, such as *Liberals Look Ahead* in 1969. Following the poor 1979 election result the party embarked on a four year philosophy and policy exercise, commencing with the half-day philosophy debate at the 1979 party Assembly, continuing with my commissioned *Liberal Values for a New Decade* passed at the 1980 Assembly. In the following year this was translated into a strategy document, *Foundations for the Future* prior to the preparation of an election manifesto. But at this point the project was hijacked by the alliance and the eventual merger with SDP and, arguably, there was no further

party document focussing on Liberalism until the 2002 document, eventually published in 2011 as *Freedom, Liberty and Fairness*. The "Agenda 2020" project could have provided a new definitive statement but ended up concentrating too much on policy. The best current statement of Liberal values is that produced recently by Liberal International and this could fill the gap. Certainly there is nothing currently available from party HQ.

2.2 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, such as the opposition to the Iraq invasion and a united Europe - and even the Coalition - has meant that once the harsh political winds blew, our vote was swept away. We have now to rebuild the party with more solid foundations, not least because otherwise electoral support we gain from our long and principled support for Britain in Europe will ebb away, just as with every other popular but apparently ephemeral Liberal policy. Members recruited in recent years, on the basis of specific policies have no means of knowing what the party's basic beliefs are.

2.3 Curiously the lack of applied ideology has also transmuted the original rigour of community politics into the superficial tyranny of the "Focus" leaflet. Because for many years hyper-activity and often fake surveys and other "techniques" provided a path to local success, this has contributed massively to the failure to embed Liberal values - ie "Why" we campaign - and a healthy continuing political party. (It is self-indulgent to quote oneself, but I find myself recalling the warning I gave to the 1979 party assembly's philosophy debate that inaugurated the four year project: "Electoral success may fall into our grasp, but political success has to be worked for".) There has 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.

3 Appeal

3.1 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.

3.2 I note this story 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.

4 Positioning

4.1 Labour’s electoral implosion began years before Jeremy Corbyn became the party’s leader but we need to be very grateful to Corbyn for adding a new dimension to Labour’s plight. Perversely we should also be grateful to UKIP for helping to break working class voters, particularly in industrial areas, away from their tribal affiliation to Labour. Once that link is broken, and these voters see, first, that their views are very different to any brand of socialism, and, second, that it is not obligatory for them to vote Labour, then its class-based vote can be ended. The cycle of the Left that inexorably put the Liberal party out of office from the lethal split of 1918 (not forgetting the Macdonald-Gladstone Pact of 1903 which presented Labour with its first viable parliamentary party) could have been continued, with us replacing Labour as the broad party of the Left (accepting for a moment the shorthand terminology of this spectrum). The abject Conservative campaign at the 2017 election, and the Liberal Democrats’ failure to take off, not least by failing to capture the Remain vote, has given Labour an unwarranted partial legitimacy, which we have to confront intellectually and consistently. Many electors, particularly younger people, determined to vote against the government, went straight across Labour without considering us. We were simply not in the game.

4.2 Scotland has shown how rapidly under First-Past-the-Post Labour can be replaced. The SNP cleverly abandoned its potential for winning Conservative votes - as had been its appeal in the 1960s and ‘70s - in order to present itself, seductively, as a more electorally sensitive home for voters weary of voting Labour for no apparent benefit.

4.3 The Liberal Democrats should subtly do the same. Not necessarily by proclaiming itself to be on the Left, but rather by

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

4.3.2 giving more prominence to policies to reduce inequality;

4.3.3 emphasising our long and principled commitment to civil rights;

4.3.4 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;

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

4.4 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.

4.5. We need also to present ourselves as the party of principle, with a long commitment to the points in 4.3.3 and 4.3.5 above, plus - crucially at the moment - our sixty year commitment to a united Europe. Only the Liberal Democrats can claim to be the party of Remain and the united opponents of Brexit, and we need to plug this at every conceivable opportunity. The 48% who voted Remain, and the four million plus voters who signed the petition for a second referendum, form a massive reservoir of potential support, particularly as the Leave vote does not have a single party embracing its viewpoint. We need to present our pro-Europe views in the context of the principled arguments for Remain, rather than, as at the referendum, an over-emphasis on the economic case. Apart from accepting the referendum result as somehow legitimate, Tim Farron played the European case skilfully. Unfortunately he became impaled on theological issues which fatally hijacked his later media appearances.

4.6 It is crucial that, with allies, we keep the Brexit negotiations, at whatever level, going until a general election which may come at any time. At this point everything is up for grabs. We need to develop a strategy to maximise our appeal at a post-brexit election that focuses on the European issue, judging nearer the time whether a second referendum is needed as opposed to a general election. My guess that it will be.

5 Local Government

5.1 As ever there were bright spots in this years local elections, not least in Hull and Sheffield, but, over all, the results were appalling, as were analysed at the Regional Executive meeting last month. In Leeds, where we led a coalition administration as recently as 2008, with an all out election, we could only manage to field one candidate for three vacancies in a third of the wards. There is only one ward out of the thirty-three where we have all three councillors and we have no representation in the inner city. In Horsforth, where there has been continuous representation for sixty years, we finished third with less than a quarter of the vote. Horsforth is a quarter of the Pudsey constituency where, thanks to targeting, we polled 3.26% at the general election last year. One cannot reverse such an abandonment of the electors in twelve months. Outside Yorkshire the situation is also worrying. Take Southport, held by us for many years until 2017, last year we won every ward but this year the results were worst for a long time.

5.2 The Panglossian statement on the elections issued by HQ – “Fantastic night for the Liberal Democrats – the best results in fifteen years” etc – demonstrates the party’s myopic problem: a failure to recognise the parlous state of the party. It is

one thing to try and fool the public, but to fool our own party is foolish.

5.3 We cannot rely only on local issues and activity to win and hold seats. Unusually, we are currently winning support on a national issue - Europe - rather than on mending pavements and saving post offices. Our local election campaigns need to recognise this and to link national and local issues.

5.4 The stark question facing us in Yorkshire and the Humber, and the party centrally, is whether we want the Liberal Democrats to be a national party or just one that can win the occasional ward or parliamentary seat. In other words, do we want to be a national political force, or just to be an example of the “cult of the exceptional”?

6 Three year strategy

6.1 The big task is to convert support on the one issue - Europe - into active membership. The signs are that, whilst the increase in membership is very welcome, too many of the recent recruits are joining for identity rather than for campaigning. 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.

6.2 The Agenda 2020 project was, in theory, fundamental to this. We desperately need an updated statement of our aims and purpose - the first since 2002. In fact, we really needed it immediately after the referendum in order to be able to give such a statement to the many new recruits. Unlike the 2002 statement, which had to be published in Leeds, it must be published officially by the party and made available at a subsidised price. In the meantime the 2017 Liberal International manifesto is an excellent statement of Liberalism.

6.3 We need 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. It 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.

7 Conclusion

Four immediate actions 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 a successor booklet to the “Liberal Values” publication for which Alan Beith wrote a foreword and which we have kept in print from Leeds. 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 – rather like the four booklets I produced between 1981 and 1983 to fill this need. To succeed electorally and to embed electoral success, we need to succeed politically.

[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.

[3] An intensive effort, particularly by “old timers” with experience of previous similar straitened circumstances, to tour every constituency and to lead sessions on values, policy and strategy. These have worked successfully in Leeds with “parlour” meetings with 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 targeting and, instead, a strategy of fighting elections in the many derelict seats we now have in order to find members and activists (instead of, primarily, at this stage, votes).

[5] We need to revive citywide party organisation in the conurbations. This is the main focus of political existence and drive and we lack the required political focus.

Finally, it is time quietly to drop the word “Democrat” in 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 and Dick Newby who continually refer to “Liberal” and “Liberalism.” There is, strictly, no such thing as “Liberal Democracy” and the current name simply fudges 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.

We have the greatest opportunity since our opposition to the Iraq invasion - which we failed to exploit and to turn into a party building issue. We must not miss the opportunity that the referendum, Corbyn and the appalling Conservative government has given us.

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