

THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

A STRATEGY FOR A RELEVANT BASIS OF PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICAL VALUES – AND FOR REVIVING AND DEVELOPING THE PARTY

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1 Introduction

I put forward this paper on the basis of sixty-two years as a Liberal activist, with service at local constituency level; then as a member of the party's staff, both at headquarters in London and in Yorkshire; a by-election agent; the first Liberal city councillor in Leeds and thirteen years as party leader in that city; a metropolitan county councillor; a national officer, including four years as Assembly Committee chair; Liberal MP for Leeds West; a responsibility for election manifestos; and the last elected president of the Liberal Party. I have written many books and articles on Liberalism and its application. I set all this out only to make the point that I am not some armchair pundit pontificating on the current situation, indeed I was very much involved in reviving the Liberal Party after the electoral debacles of 1970 and 1979. The difference in those latter days, as it was in the dark days of the 1940s and 1950s that the "mighty handful" of active Liberals knew what Liberalism was and were determined to maintain it.

2 Context

As a political party the Liberal Democrats are virtually dead. The party languishes at 6% in the polls and makes hardly any impact in the media. The party has virtually no core vote. At last year's general election 423 of the party's 611 candidates polled fewer than 12.5% of the vote. In other words seven out ten Liberal Democrat candidates polled fewer than 1 in 8 of the votes cast - the deposit level up to 1987. I believe that most of these constituencies lack any viable organisation, ie a constituency association that campaigns, develops a strategy across the constituency and is a "self-starter" in terms of a minimum of election activity. In some constituencies there may well be one or two individual wards that function but what makes it worse is that the enforced adherence to constituency targeting over twenty years has meant that even where a ward previously elected Liberal Democrat councillors regularly it often now has only a nominal vote. Today, once a ward has been lost there is seldom a broader organisation able to revive it. There are many dedicated Liberal Democrat councillors who survive on a basis of casework and parochial campaigning and incessant Focus delivery but without encouraging an adherence to Liberal values - indeed in most cases community campaigning has reversed the original concept of empowering communities and is now a type of "clientalism" where casework and local issue campaigning are now relied on to build enough votes to survive. Even in local government the party has great difficulty in holding seats: in 1996 we had 5078 councillors; today we have just half that number –

2527. We have a tiny parliamentary party of brave MPs trying to cover the whole range of subjects plus a larger group in the Lords also speaking on behalf of a Liberal constituency that barely exists. The retention of seats, targeting or not, has also been appalling. For instance, today we hold only one – Orkney and Shetland – of the seventeen seats we held during my time in parliament 1983-87. The party has an impressive structure of committees at federal and national levels but it is all a facade without any semblance of an activist political membership underpinning it. Finally, it lacks an up-to-date statement of its basic philosophy and values which is essential as the foundation for the development of policy and the inspiration of its candidates and officers.

I set out the current situation as it is as starkly as possible in an attempt to concentrate attention on the steps required to rescue Liberalism and to build a movement capable of confronting the post-virus country we face and of creating a society that understands human values and believes it worthwhile working with us to promote them. If we do not grasp the party's desperate state we will simply stagger on to a fourth election result similar to the past three. At the heart of the problem during and after the coalition was the lack of a deep understanding of what the Liberal Democrats were based on and what was the unifying thread that pulled together all its policies and campaigning. No-one in the electorate knew what Liberalism was, and few amongst our members could explain it. We put forward policies in isolation and, whether or not they were good - which most of them were - they were not related to a unifying view of society. The most obvious, and recent, example was the party's passion for British membership of the European Union at last December's general election. In terms of our election campaign it virtually stood alone. It was a great policy and potentially had the support of a majority of the electorate but we lost out because it was unrelated to our fundamental belief in internationalism, and to a deep Liberal antipathy to Labour's hegemonic and centralising socialism. We had little to say to voters not keen on Remain and the fear or Corbyn drove many of "our" voters to the anti-EU Conservatives.

It is the existence of a philosophy that defines a political party and if we identify, research and put forward good ideas simply on each's merits we might as well be another think tank similar to Demos or Compass. But we are not Liberals because we are in favour of a united Europe including the UK; we are not Liberals because we opposed the Iraq invasion; we are not Liberals because we oppose identity cards; we are not Liberals because we favour worker-co-ownership; we are not Liberals because we support a tax on land values to return to the community the finance it creates; we are not Liberals because we are passionate about pluralism, not least in the need for a powerful local government; we are not Liberals because we understand the need to enhance the status of the public service; and we are not Liberals because we favour a fair and powerful electoral system. It is the opposite way round: in every case of these policies, all unique to Liberalism, we support them precisely because we are Liberals. Without this awareness, and without an up to date statement of Liberal philosophy in today's context, we will always struggle to create a separate, positive and attractive presence in

elections and we will be unable to attract individuals in the community who are Liberals but who are as yet unaware of it. In particular, in any coalition it will be impossible to maintain our identity both within and outside it. The test question for each and every policy is whether it is a step, however small, towards our ideal of a Liberal society.

Before we can consider and adopt a revival and development strategy we must first update the application of the party's philosophy to today's challenges. The last such statement was adopted in 2002 and in the past eighteen years there have been immense changes at both the international and domestic levels, (see attachment). The task of drafting, discussing, adopting and promoting a new statement is urgent and is a priority. This up-to-date statement is required before the party embarks on a comprehensive exercise in reviving local associations. We need to be able to lay the foundations for a strong, firmly based political Liberal party so that, in the future, individuals will be able to say, "I am a Liberal", just as many on the Left say, "I am a socialist."

[I wrote to Jeremy Hargreaves, Vice-Chair of the Federal Policy Committee, a year ago urging the appointment of a working group to prepare a draft for circulation and discussion. I attached suggested terms of reference. Jeremy was receptive and he finally wrote to me in March this year telling me that the FPC had agreed to go ahead with this project. I am very disappointed now to learn that this decision has been rescinded in favour of moving forward on a number of policy fronts (see Liberal Democrat Voice, 3 June 2020). This is getting the process in the wrong order. Philosophy has to come first in order to establish the basis and framework for policy.]

Following my time in parliament, I spent twenty years undertaking missions for the UN, the EU, the OSCE and other organisations in thirty-five new and emerging democracies across four continents. Many of these projects were based on securing elections that were sufficiently legitimate to secure stable progression to successful representative democracies. In most cases all we managed was to buy time in order to enable the necessary structures and practices to develop in place. Few of them used the time and the main, though not the only, reason was the lack of political philosophy. It is clear that if the political parties are based on tribes, religion, regions, charismatic leaders, a liberation movement or even on a policy package, a country's democracy will be ephemeral because it lacks a coherent basis to formulate and sustain effective government policies. I believe that no political party has been successful over any length of time unless it is based on some level of philosophy.

3 Strategy

An extended paper on "Liberal Democrat Strategy 2020-2023" is available at <https://www.beemeadowcroft.uk/liberal.html> (click on first item in list). I set out a summary here. We need to put in place:

[a] the appointment of a working group to prepare an up-to-date draft of Liberal values and principles; circulation of the draft to all members for comment and discussion; put to 2021 party conference for approval – Spring conference if possible, otherwise Autumn at the latest - followed by putting into attractive booklet format available cheaply, ie subsidised. The activities below should commence immediately after the 2021 conference and continue through the rest of that year and 2022. Thereafter the preparations for a general election in 2024 - or somewhat earlier - need to be put in train.

[b] identifying and training a cadre of experienced party members capable of taking the new document to every local association; introducing it with enthusiasm; leading a discussion. Given the state of a majority of associations it will be pointless waiting for them to ask for such a meeting - headquarters/regions will need to give each associations a choice of three or four dates on which our envoy will arrive. All the local contact will need to do is to book a room. These colleagues will need a supply of proforma leaflets for the association to send to likely recruits or, failing such capacity, for delivery house to house. These leaflets should be capable of being made bespoke to a particular association. Each envoy should not have more associations allocated than he or she can follow up, say, every three months, with pump priming activity financially where necessary. Wherever possible, a “mixed” programme of political and social activities to develop a camaraderie amongst members. If each envoy is allocated, say, five constituencies, we will need around 120 appointees.

[c] alongside the programme under [b] the establishment of a set of policy panels, each composed of “top” Liberals and “fellow travellers” from academia or the voluntary sectors, with the aim of producing a set of attractively designed booklets which can be promoted via social media and the print and electronic media, not least directly to relevant civil society bodies. The party leader and deputy leader, and the spokespersons in the Commons and Lords will need to give some time to the appropriate panel in their subject area in order to give their work more status.

[d] the replacement of rigid targeting by a commitment to ensuring that some literature goes out in every contested constituency and ward. All literature should have at least one paragraph on broader “values” taken from the new document. The category of “target” constituencies (and wards) should be replaced by “special” seats to which extra activity should be encouraged to go, aided by convivial activities alongside campaigning.

[e] training of designated individuals from each association in the use of social media to make the best use of both nationally produced material and locally produced items. Regular material needs to be circulated electronically by headquarters, not over-designed but more attuned to being able to be cut and

pasted for local use. Headquarters needs to be more transparent with the e-mail addresses of staff members, and of federal and national committee members being made available - if academics and journalists can be generally available our colleagues can be.

In the present state of the party and, indeed, of Liberalism I cannot see any alternative to a proactive strategy as set out above.

4 Finance

Obviously there are costs associated with this programme. It will need [a] a coordinator, not necessarily based at HQ; [b] an honorarium for each designated "envoy", around 120 of them, plus travel expenses and pump priming money; [c] secretarial support for the working party on party values, plus possibly some travel expenses for members; [d] the cost of designing and printing copies at a subsidised cover price; [e] similar support for the policy panels as for the working party under [d]. In theory the costs of undertaking this comprehensive strategy over the next three years will stabilise and, in due course, increase membership with accompanying income. The evidence of a more rigorous intellectual and campaigning party should also encourage individual donations.

5 By-elections

At any time a by-election or by-elections might occur which will provide an opportunity to boost the party's standing in the polls and make the strategy for party revival and development easier. All the party's resources must be invested in each such by-election.

6 Comments

I would, of course, welcome comments on this paper so that an improved version can be produced as soon as possible.

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