

by Michael Meadowcroft

The June 8th election results were not only a great disappointment but they are a vivid proof that the party is in a highly precarious state and that its future survival is far from assured. I am not scaremongering, indeed, sixty years campaigning for Liberalism, and maintaining a constant belief in the essential relevance and attractiveness of the Liberal view of society, have always underpinned all my writing and speaking on the subject. My fear now is based on the disappearance of any party presence in great swathes of Britain and the lack of intellectual resources to revive it.

Look at the stark statistics. Not only did our overall poll actually decline from its abject level of 2015 but the number of lost deposits increased - from 340 to 367. In other words in six out every ten seats in which we had token candidates less than one elector in twenty voted for us. To some extent the media failed to draw attention to the party's decline because we actually increased our number of MPs by four. We need to salute those remarkable colleagues who can somehow transcend the trend and win their constituencies but if we allow ourselves to be deceived by this gloss on the result we will have even less hope for the future.

Compare these figures with those in the 1950s when the continued survival of the Liberal party was said to be in doubt. In 1950 the party fought 475 constituencies and polled 9.1% of the total vote (equivalent to around 11.5% had all seats had candidates) but of those candidates "only" 29 polled less than 5%. The following year, when only 109 Liberal candidates fought the election, there was at least a solid cadre of party members around the country well-versed in Liberal philosophy who were able to produce literature and to address meetings all of which strengthened the faithful and nurtured the base for the revival which essentially started under Jo Grimond's leadership five years later. My worry is that today we do not have a sufficiently broad-based team to emulate that example.

Although the overall figures are appalling some individual constituency results buck the trend - both ways. Although not one of the fifty-seven seats won in 2010 got the vote back to that year's level, there were some significant increases on their 2015 vote. Whereas Vince Cable's 14.7% improvement might well be attributed to a high profile former MP and Ed Davey's 10.2% increase similarly so, what can explain the increase of 17.6% on the party's 2015 vote in Bath, with a new candidate, Wera Hobhouse, only adopted on 1st May? Or Leyla Moran's winning advance of 14.7% in Oxford West and Abingdon. Two other highly commendable results were in St Albans (plus 13.89%) and Vauxhall (plus 13.6%). By contrast there were some massive slumps on the 2015 vote, particularly in Scotland. In Aberdeenshire West and Kincardine, (down by 12.8%), Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk, (14%), Gordon, (21%) and Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, (19%), and in each of these we fell to fourth place. In Cardiff Central, Hornsey and Wood Green, Redcar and Solihull, all Liberal Democrat seats up to 2015, our vote declined by 10% or more on the previous election. Nor did incumbency help: in Bristol West, Burnley, Colchester and Manchester Withington the Liberal Democrat vote declined by at least 8% despite the presence of the Liberal Democrat who was the MP up to 2015. I draw a veil over the shameful treatment of David Ward in Bradford East, and the consequent party vote of 1.8% in that seat, which will have to be pursued elsewhere. Shamefully we lost our deposit in Colne Valley for the first time ever. And, the final ignominy, for the first time ever, there isn't a single Liberal MP in Wales.

Local election successes were no indicator of success on 8th June. Take Southport where we won every ward at the last borough election but we lost the seat, with the retirement of sitting MP, John Pugh, and were pushed into third place. Or take Pendle where we have had a significant council presence and controlled the council for eleven of the years since 1987, Gordon Lishman polled just 2.1%. Indeed, the transmuted of the original worthy objectives of community politics into a machine for delivering millions of contentless Focus leaflets has had a deleterious effect on the health of the party and has contributed to the dangerous diminution of the party's intellectual base.

The campaign never made an impact. We were lauded by the media for having a clear and principled stance on Europe but it never achieved any traction. The key reason for this is that we simply failed to identify ourselves clearly and

fearlessly with those of the 48% who were passionate about remaining in the European Union. An astonishing number of "Remainers" fall into this category. A petition set up in late May 2016, weeks before the referendum, ironically by a "Leave" campaigner worried that "Remain" might win by a narrow majority, call for a second referendum if the Remain or Leave vote was less than 60% based on a turnout less than 75%, and was "hi-jacked" by Remainers. Within one week of the referendum it had been signed by an astonishing four million voters. Here was the opportunity for the party to reject the referendum result as illegitimate and to put itself at the head of the campaign for a second vote<sup>1</sup>. A clear stance at this point might just have had a chance of taking off. As it was we fudged it, continually parroting that we accept that "the people have spoken" and producing a far too nuanced formula for a possible second referendum. Presumably those in charge of all this were hopeful of winning some support from "Leave" voters; this was hardly likely given our sixty years of campaigning for a united Europe, and, as it was, we got neither vote and were duly clobbered. We should have gone directly for the four million who felt strongly enough to sign the petition. They had nowhere else to go, as indicated by the thousands of new members who are likely to have joined the party because of Europe. Having failed to capture the "Remain" vote early on we were particularly vulnerable when terrorist attacks drew attention from what was envisaged in advance as a "Brexit election."

I am always reluctant to criticise the party leader, not least because I abhor the constant emphasis on "presidential" politics rather than the broader based arguments on philosophy and policies, but one has to accept that in the era of the twenty-four hours media, there is going to be a pervasive detailed attention to party leaders. I like Tim Farron, he is an instinctive Liberal and because of that I voted for him as leader. Unfortunately once he impaled himself on theological positions, no attention was going to be paid henceforth to the political issues of the day. Whoever allowed him to get into this impasse bears a great responsibility. It was wholly unnecessary. As other evangelical Liberals have shown, the position is very clear: the state can only be secular and politics can only be based on reason and logic, invested by a view of society and an awareness of what is sustainable. One's faith determines one's embrace of a moral position which cannot, of itself, be imposed on society. Curiously, in demonstrating this distinction, Alistair Cameron was right in fending off questions on Tony Blair's Christian faith by saying, "We don't do God." Tim was forced very reluctantly into accepting the distinction in practice rather than by principle and it blighted the later stages of the campaign.

No doubt party headquarters was very busy. My question is: "doing what?" All that ever seemed to come from HQ was incessant appeals for cash. The frequency of these appeals was infuriating and cut out local fundraising efforts. The existence of a national register of party members has exactly fulfilled the worries of those who foresaw the centralised manipulation of members at the expense of local associations. Parties always need funds, particularly at election time, but struggling local associations are inevitably puzzled at the party becoming ostensibly mainly a fundraising machine when it had been boasting of having a membership of 101,000 - its highest ever. Even at the minimum £12 subscription this is producing some £1.25 million, a much higher figure than could have been anticipated. What has been done to consolidate these members and, indeed, to confirm longer standing members? I am very concerned that, following such a poor election, and the marginalisation of the party nationally, many of the newer members will not renew. What has been, or is being done, to persuade them that it is worth continuing to identify themselves with the party? One key way is to ensure that members - all members - understand what the philosophy and values of the party are, as part of an "induction pack". We have not had any such publication since the document passed by the 2002 party conference. This was never produced by HQ as an attractive publication for use by associations to embed members and to encourage them to be committed to the party and to campaign for it. In 2011, needing such a publication in Leeds we had to produce it ourselves and it has since proved to be very popular over the years and in many areas. An updated publication has been needed for some years and the Agenda 2020 project, co-ordinated by Duncan Brack, was designed to achieve this. The final text was delivered to headquarters many months ago and has not been seen since. We have no other document that can be a crucial component of welcoming new members and embedding old members, and we may well lose members because we have not explained to them why we espouse the policies in the manifesto and, particularly, in the current agenda, why we have always been in favour of a united Europe.

At the heart of the party's current problem is, thanks to the malign consequences of the targeting strategy, the lack of any party activity or even organisation in a majority of constituencies. This strategy has now been in place for some twenty-

five years and has reduced us to our current abject situation. It is a strategy that can only work once, as it did in 1997, otherwise it will incrementally destroy the party's organisation in all non-target seats, just as it has done. From six million votes, twenty seats and just eleven lost deposits in 1992, before targeting was embraced, we now have 2.4 million votes, twelve seats and 367 lost deposits! Some success!<sup>2</sup>

We were simply not in the game. We were just not visible. On the 18th May "Today" programme on Radio 4 they had a "focus" group of half a dozen "Remain" voters in Bedford and they were being asked how they were voting this time. They all still wanted Britain to stay in the EU but simply did not think of voting Liberal Democrat. Even when Nick Robinson prompted them and said the Liberal Democrats represented precisely what they would like, there was a kind of bemused thoughtfulness - and little more! We were simply not present. And with the vote in Bedford down from 20% in 2010 to 4.3% in 2015, it is no wonder. I do not agree with Tony Greaves that we do not have a "base" vote; we do have such a vote but it requires a modicum of activity to catalyse it into voting. It will not vote if they have been abandoned. The disappearance of the party in large swathes of the country increasingly harms even the target seat candidates. Those in heavily student seats such as Leeds North West, Sheffield Hallam and Cambridge had a large influx of late registrations, said to be mainly students. These voters had no knowledge of the party's work in these target constituencies and, having had no awareness of party activity in their "home" areas, clearly saw no reason to vote Liberal Democrat, and we lost. It is also significant that we did well in the five contiguous seats in South West London where Liberal Democrat activity in the whole area created a broader awareness of the party's presence and its wider appeal.

My concern now is how to recover from the present situation. I have no doubt that Liberalism is potentially the most attractive and persuasive of all the political philosophies. It is also the only philosophy that has an answer to the entrenched divisions and anonymity of society today. Only if we can get this over to party members can we hope to get them to commit to the sacrificial commitment that Liberal requires of its candidates and which is necessary if we are to transform our communities. We have to demonstrate clearly how we are firmly on the progressive side of politics but reject the hegemonic, centralising and authoritarian socialism of Jeremy Corbyn<sup>3</sup>, which has, partly thanks to the poor Conservative campaign, gained a certain legitimacy; above all we have to have an idealistic appeal to those younger people who, at last, are becoming politically active. The question is: where are the cadres of solid Liberal Democrat activists that are needed to go to association meeting after association meeting, however small, explaining the party's values? If there is at least a viable number of willing colleagues we can train them and send them out, but I doubt that they exist. But if they do not exist, what is to happen to the Liberal Democrat cause?

#### References

1. I and others have written at length on the reasons why the referendum vote should not be accepted. See my Liberator article in issue 381, November 2016
2. For a more detailed exposition of the case against targeting, see my article in Liberal History Journal, 89, Winter 2015
3. For an analysis of the 1982, Bennite, version of the same Labour position, see my Liberalism and the Left, on this website.