

by Michael Meadowcroft

If it is true that the prospect of death concentrates the mind there should be quite a number of furrowed brows amongst the Liberal Democrat MPs. There is little time left to rectify the ravages of the past four years, the seeds of which were sown some thirty years ago. The election results of 22 May, both local and European, should have come as no surprise to colleagues who have largely survived by dint of sacrificial commitments of time and energy in their wards and constituencies with very little external assistance from a party whose portrayal of the immense attractions of a Liberal society has been subdued to say the least. Sadly, whilst over the years many loyal colleagues around the country could manage to survive, they did not rise up and demand that the party fulfilled its prime task of defining, expressing and promoting Liberal values for today. That is not the immediate role of Liberal Democrat ministers or parliamentarians; it is not even that of the elected Councillors. Theirs is to apply Liberalism to the current political agenda and to show that it works in the day to day arena. The party is not driven in the same way by the practical day-to-day agenda and can - or should - define its own agenda, relevant to the needs of society. It has simply not done this in any way which has impinged on the wider debate. Increasingly the party itself has become dominated by its elected representatives and has lacked powerful political figures in their own right.

It is said that that that party is to undertake a review of the election defeats but I doubt that such a review will look beyond the superficial tactics and strategy that were inevitably incapable of overcoming the more fundamental weaknesses.

The fact that a few places were able to buck the otherwise ubiquitous trend - Eastleigh, Southport and Sutton amongst others - gives the lie to any suggestion that the results were somehow inexorable. The fact that these are places where, in addition to exemplary and consistent work, there is a longstanding awareness of Liberalism as a philosophy with its own values and view of society. I accept that a number of other places have also the same tradition but did not fare as well electorally for one reason or another, but the point is still valid. Without a healthy and effective party, and the intellectual foundation it provides, there is no possibility of political success beyond the very short-term. You cannot build tactics and strategy on sand. In a very real sense, the party is more important than its elected representatives. The party is permanent but its elected representatives, vitally important though they are, are temporary - in the corporeal sense if not bound by electoral limitations.

One example of the present malaise will suffice. When I was chair of the Leeds Liberal Democrats Campaign and Development Group (the then quaint name for the citywide party presence before it was killed off by the City Council Liberal Group) I had an excellent team which worked consistently to build up a political presence in Leeds, in addition to its work on organisation and on candidate recruitment and panelling we produced local literature, training materials and briefings but we needed a publication on the party's national and international values. To my astonishment such a document did not exist. In other words any interested person who contacted the party to ask for information on the party's values and philosophy could not be supplied with any such document. We were reluctant to produce something ourselves - an "official" publication was clearly needed - and an Islington colleague told me that a statement on values had been put together in 2002 and passed by party conference. With some difficulty I tracked this down on the internet, updated it only to accommodate changed circumstances, agreed the text with Alan Beith, who had written the original foreword, had it attractively laid out and published it in Leeds. It has proved to be attractive and effective and, thanks to the co-operation of Hugh Waterfield in Glasgow, it is now in its third edition. Before the recent elections I wrote to the editor of *Ad Lib* with a review by Hugh plus a scan of the cover, to ask for it to be publicised. I have had no reply! This monthly publication can manage to publish recipes, favourite records and four pages on a worthy but tiny by-election in Little Puddlecombe but not publicise a booklet setting out the party's essential values. It says it all!

The post-election outbursts came up with the rations but were even so depressingly naïve. Let's start with Matthew Oakeshott whose style and tactics did more to entrench Nick Clegg's position than any other single individual! One can

always get a good assessment of an individual's status when the deeply illiberal press describe him as "a leading Liberal Democrat"! I suspect that a fair number of party members would have heard of the name but wouldn't have had any idea of any party activity of his - for good reason. The penny dropped as to his background with some longstanding Liberal colleagues in West Yorkshire when he averred, with apparent seriousness, that he wanted to go back to the values of Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams and Bill Rogers (though, it appeared, not David Owen)! I guess that it might just rankle a little that neither he nor Shirley could win Cambridge but solid Liberals such as David Howarth and Julian Huppert could.

However, a few respected colleagues, and some others, did attempt to get a "Clegg to resign" movement underway. We can come to the substance of this idea in a moment but first let us ponder what scenario of Nick going could conceivably be other than even more disastrous twelve months before a general election. So we go through several months electing a new leader whereupon David Cameron welcomes him or her as Deputy-Prime Minister for, say, nine months. I believe the current abbreviation is LOL. Cameron would instead put on his serious face for a moment and state that the Liberal Democrats' instability and lack of commitment to government meant that he had to carry on with a minority administration until the approaching general election. Whereupon the other Liberal Democrat ministers would lose office and our MPs would have the unenviable task of voting Conservative proposals down or of allowing unpleasant items to go through. Each of these alternatives would put us in an impossible pre-election situation. Or, of course, with Miliband's connivance, an early general election could be precipitated. Again, try campaigning in that circumstance. Colleagues need to realise that, in effect, a fixed term parliament brings fixed term leaders, certainly in the last year or so of that parliament.

So what is the case against Nick Clegg? Assiduous readers of *Liberator* will be aware that I do not subscribe to the "silver bullet" theory of politics. To those who do subscribe there is always a simple way out of electoral problems: change the Leader, find the elusive winning slogan or grasp at the straw of an Alliance with the SDP. There is no such simple answer. Apparently the party was content to build local government successes largely on delivering thousands of contentless and often protest-based "Focus" leaflets. It fails to develop a political base firmly rooted in a vision of society, accepts a suicidal party (not leader-led) strategy of targeting which has destroyed all organisation in, for instance, twenty-seven out of thirty-three Leeds wards, and then be surprised when UKIP comes along and steals its clothes! Furthermore, then, instead of doing some rigorous analysis, it takes the easy way out of blaming the party Leader! Look at the history of the party in Eastleigh to see how to build a political party able to withstand these difficulties.

I have many criticisms of Nick Clegg. His espousal of an illiberal economic policy against all the evidence; his curious early belief in Cameron and the Conservatives as sincere reformists and reliable partners; his bizarre apology over tuition fees when the "new" policy was far better than Labour's and eminently winnable in argument; his poorly briefed performances against Farage - an entirely correct initiative in itself - and some early negotiating weaknesses inside the coalition. However, despite all this, he was [1] the correct choice in 2007 as very much the Liberal of the two eventual contenders, and, in the light of developments since then, a fortunate choice; [2] the party was happy to benefit from his performances as leader in the 2010 campaign; [3] the party signed on for a five year, fixed term, coalition under Nick's leadership; [4] No other Liberal leader has ever put himself about as much as Nick with his weekly radio broadcast, his willingness to debate and his many party "Any Questions" sessions around the country, [5] he has been the target of a sustained and quite scandalous personal media vilification, against which he has maintained a dignified and commendably positive response - I do not wish to give these anti-Liberal forces a victory.

The coalition was always going to be electorally damaging, indeed Mervyn King, the then Governor of the Bank of England, was reported as saying just a week before the 2010 election that the necessary austerity measure would mean that the victor "would be out of power for a generation". It may be perverse for the electorate to blame the only party not responsible for the economic crisis, but that is the reality of politics. But the heart of the problem in the local elections lies in the inability of most local associations to have a sufficiently healthy political basis to counter the national antipathy to the coalition. The mountains of superficial Focus leaflets are not in themselves capable of developing a political basis. Local election defeats certainly cannot be laid at the door of the leader.

Turning to the European elections, the party had an additional handicap: the inevitable consequence of twenty years of the targeting strategy. Arguably it is a risk worth taking for one single election but its constant repetition destroys the party where it does not campaign and produces diminishing returns in the target seats. I imagine that Leeds is not entirely untypical. As a consequence of targeting, the party is now defunct in five of the eight constituencies and has a presence in only one ward in two others. Consequently we now have only a miniscule "base" vote in twenty-seven out of thirty-three wards and the party has "retrenched" from thirteen target seats in 2004 to six today! Hardly a successful strategy even in its own terms. But worse still, when one comes to the European elections to be successful one has to have a significant vote across a whole region. Alas, targeting has killed off the vote in 80% of it. How then can one expect to win?

UKIP spouts dangerous nonsense, redolent of 1930s right-wing scapegoating, but it is the Teflon party, and nothing sticks to it. It has no policies, only the two aspirations of getting out of the EU and stopping immigration. It relies only on a picture of an ancient utopian society and the parties that only try to devise policies to counter it are doomed to fail. It can only be defeated by an alternative vision of society - a pluralist, diverse, convivial, attractive and liberal society. We have less than a year to take this view of society to the electorate.