

THE LIBERAL DEMOCRAT PARTY CRISIS

Summary

The Liberal Democrat party is facing an existential crisis. It has no core vote, it barely exists in most constituencies and is ignored by the media. Even its recent by-election victory has not brought relevance. The party itself appears to be unconcerned at the situation. The current political opportunity is clear: the values brought to the fore by the pandemic are exactly those that Liberalism speaks to, and both major parties are in disarray. However the Liberal Democrats are incapable of grasping the opportunity. Revival is possible but only if the party transforms itself and [a] produces a clear exposition of Liberal philosophy setting out a vision of a Liberal society; [b] committed local leadership; [c] a thorough strategy for reviving derelict associations; and [d] consistent campaigning on Liberal issues. There is no sign that the party is ready and willing to undertake this change.

1 Context

The Liberal Democrats face an existential threat. We do not state this lightly nor with any sense of fatalism. It is simply that in many decades of active Liberal involvement and advocacy we have never known the party to be less relevant or less conscious of its political identity. It is operating on the fringe of politics with all the trappings of a party without any of the substance. Its weakness and vulnerability is not inevitable nor is it the consequence of external events but is entirely self-caused. Not only does it not exist as a countrywide organisation but it fails to accept its situation and, indeed, it openly expresses itself satisfied with its meagre electoral support. It has virtually no core vote and no apparent sense of direction. As the supposed representative body for the powerful and highly relevant philosophy of Liberalism its current situation is shameful. If it is prepared to accept the reality of its situation then revival is possible, otherwise it will disappear as a relevant political organisation.

The Batley and Spen by-election is the nadir of the party as a political force. In a West Riding constituency with a long tradition of Liberalism, sitting Liberal Democrat councillors, including a Life Peer who was recently leader of the Borough Council, the party's excellent candidate finished fourth, polled just 3.3% and lost his deposit. Such a result is hardly surprising when the party leader, in a barely disguised facebook statement on 28 June, actually encouraged Liberal Democrats to vote Labour. Such disloyalty and disrespect is incompatible with leadership of the party. The party president exacerbated the damage by saying that the leader's statement was agreed by the candidate and local campaign - this at the same time as that campaign was urging party members to go to help the by-election campaign. The Campaign Chair of the Yorkshire and Humber Region has bizarrely stated that had we not stood the Conservatives would have won. There is simply no way of determining how many of our meagre vote would have bothered to turn out nor how those that did so would have divided between Conservative and Labour. It is not the purpose of the party to assist its opponents. It has also been stated that we were campaigning towards the next year's local elections, though whether our derisory vote encourages anyone to support local Liberal Democrat candidates in the future is highly questionable.

The remarkable by-election victory in the Chesham and Amersham by-election could have been seen as providing the party with a lifeline and the possibility of rescue from a desperate political situation. The urgent question is whether the party can still grasp the opportunity. We hope so but we are deeply pessimistic. Hardly had the commentators reached for their pens than Liberal Democrats began to talk of a “progressive alliance”. Does this party never have confidence in the power and attraction of the Liberal vision? At the very moment it demonstrates the ability in otherwise safe Conservative seats [a] to catalyse swathes of former Conservative voters to switch; [b] to destroy the Labour party; and [c] to demonstrate that the Conservative government’s apparent capacity to deceive is a thin veneer, the party fails to issue a powerful call to arms and, instead, talks tactically of diminishing its electoral appeal.

This paper is rather long but it needs to be in order to give chapter and verse. We hope that those with influence in the party, at whatever level, will persevere with it and read and apply it. It is in fact a distillation of a great many collective years of experience in Liberal politics at every level. There is no point in having that experience and simply letting the party vehicle move inexorably over the cliff edge. We do not want yet another political opportunity to be missed. We need to stop yearning for “progressive alliances” with illiberal parties and set about producing Liberal success. History shows that any seat can be won over time given [a] a clear exposition of what a Liberal society would be like, leading to a national core vote; [b] committed local leadership; and [c] consistent campaigning on Liberal issues.

2 **Historical comparisons**

Much has been made of the comparison of Chesham and Amersham with the Orpington by-election of March 1962. Certainly there are many similarities but there is one key difference: the Orpington Labour vote was significantly squeezed - down to 12.4% - but it did not disappear as it did in Chesham and Amersham. Also there was a subsequent huge opinion poll surge for the party and this barely happened following the Chesham and Amersham by-election and it reverted to single figures after Batley and Spen. But there is one potential similarity that must be avoided: the failure to build on the result nationally. Such was the national impact of the Orpington by-election that at the local elections just two months later we gained over 500 seats, almost entirely from the Conservatives, including many with barely any campaigning. The party thought that the Liberal hour had arrived. It came as a shock just a year later when we failed to win the Colne Valley by-election that Richard Wainwright had been nursing assiduously for seven years. Then at the May 1963 elections Liberal candidates failed to win many of the wards gained in the glow of Orpington. The reality is that success has to be consolidated otherwise it will soon ebb away.

The lesson of 1962 is salutary now following Chesham and Amersham. Unless the party rapidly provides a philosophic and political underpinning to give voters a reason for supporting Liberalism and a cause to become active in, any boost will simply fade away, particularly as the Batley and Spen failure has already sidelined Chesham and Amersham.

In many ways a more accurate comparison with the recent by-election is the Rochdale victory of October 1972. Before it the party languished at 8% in the opinion polls (compared to 15% before Orpington) and we had had a disastrous general election two years earlier, polling just 7.5% of the UK vote - and losing Orpington. After Rochdale our poll rating jumped to 15% and provided the springboard for the by-election victory out of the blue in Sutton and Cheam six weeks later, followed by the Isle of Ely and Ripon the following July and Berwick on Tweed in November 1973. This fortuitous run of five by-election victories rescued the party and led to it polling almost 20% of the vote in the February 1974 general election. Had we fought every seat the total vote would have been nearer to 23%. Other by-elections at the time were not uniformly good; two were not even contested and in two others we lost our deposit (then at 12.5%). The difference is that today the party's "basic" vote alongside victories is down to some 2%. We fail dismally in consolidating our successes; since the war, up to Chesham and Amersham, Liberals or Liberal Democrats have had thirty-four by-election victories but only Richmond Park is now still held. The party's poll rating has been in single figures for seven years.

The other huge difference is that the Liberal party of the early 1970s was in better political shape than the Liberal Democrats today. It had a solid philosophical foundation having had a high-powered "Liberal Commission" producing a substantial report "re-examining Liberal principles and their application to modern conditions." It was a document that could confidently be given to any new potential Liberal activist or even member. Today there is no such basic publication, indeed the last time the party had a document on its basic principles was nineteen years ago. The political world has changed out of all recognition in that time and we have nothing to relate Liberalism to it. Unless the party has an attractive and substantial document setting out its values and its vision, by-election victories cannot be consolidated. Some of us have been lobbying for some years to get a new publication but there has been little interest. Even now the Federal Policy Committee's work on a new document has no sense of urgency and it talks of producing "a short statement rather than an exhaustive one." This is a wholly inadequate response to a critical situation. (See for comparison Liberal International's excellent document: <https://liberal-international.org/who-we-are/our-mission/landmark-documents/political-manifestos/liberal-manifesto-2017/#jump-English>). The Chesham and Amersham victory will produce a number of potential members interested in the political vision of the party; unless we have good quality material to give them they will lose interest. There are just a few potential political recruits in each area and they need to be sought out and nurtured. Without such people we cannot make the necessary contacts with the wider electorate. We cannot baptise people with a hosepipe and we have to draw in those individuals who can be imbued with an awareness of the Liberal vision that will persuade them to commit to the party over the long term.

3 **Politics today**

The current state of British politics is an open goal for Liberalism. The values that have been highlighted in society during the pandemic and which will continue in its aftermath are essentially Liberal values:

- solidarity between individuals, recognising a common need;
- community identity to focus on support for “neighbours” and on carers;
- recognition of the importance and value of the public service;
- a greater emphasis on human as opposed to economic values;
- the value of Keynesian economics;
- the necessity for job creation, particularly using co-operative and common ownership structures;
- the recognition of the need for internationalism.

Alas, the Liberal Democrats have shown little sign of campaigning on these issues. In fact, there is great absence of Liberal Democrats campaigning on any issues outside their local wards. Meanwhile the Conservative government continues to flout civilised values, common decency and even truthfulness with total impunity and virtually unchallenged by any opposition. Any half-decent opposition would be able to expose and undermine this appalling government. And the Chesham and Amersham by-election has demonstrated how flaky the Conservative vote is.

Labour has ceased to be an integrated and values-based political party. It is increasingly obsessed with searching for a viable basis for unity. It has no answer to the loss of previously “safe” seats nor to its almost total absence in Scotland - which sent 56 MPs to Tony Blair’s parliamentary Labour party in 1997. Its disintegration in Chesham and Amersham was startling - down from 21% and second place just four years ago to 1.6% and fourth place on 17 June. Its class base has largely disappeared and the core voters on which it has relied since its inception have become disillusioned by the chasm between what they believe and the party’s expressed policies. The potential for a progressive, sensitive and intelligent Liberalism incrementally to replace Labour as the more formidable alternative to the Conservatives is apparent. Nothing would worry the Conservative party more.

The “progressive alliance” hankered after by too many Liberal Democrats is ineffective because, [a] Labour is not a progressive party - as anyone fighting it in its industrial fiefs knows only too well, [b] Labour dare not enter into such an alliance as it would hasten its disintegration, [c] publicity for a Liberal Democrat link up with Labour would inhibit transfers to us from the Conservatives, and [d] it would inhibit and hamper Liberals’ progress.

Despite having the most fertile ground for Liberal values, certainly since the Iraq invasion in 2003, and the abject state of the two major parties, the Liberal Democrats are making no impact nationally and is disregarded in almost all discussions of politics and elections.

4 **Challenge**

The party’s inherent problems still remain and the by-election does not of itself change them. Only the opportunity is different. It barely exists as a party. It has been way down in the national opinion polls averaging only around 7% and in two very reputable polls it was shown in fourth place behind the Greens. The party has no core vote. At the recent parliamentary by-election in Airdrie and Shotts on 13 May

it polled a derisory 220 votes - the lowest vote ever in a parliamentary election by the party or by its predecessor Liberal party. At the recent Mayoral election in West Yorkshire, traditionally a region with a strong Liberal tradition, the candidate lost his deposit, finishing fifth, behind the Greens and even the Yorkshire Party. This result is a vivid consequence of the rigid targeting strategy of the past twenty-five years. The party cannot kill off political and electoral activity in an increasing number of seats and then expect it to poll well when the entire county is one constituency. The same is also true of the regional vote in the PR elections in Wales and Scotland. If we do not have a significant core vote of electors who vote for the party out of loyalty to the brand, there is no prospect of winning mayoral, regional or PCC elections. And increasingly this applies to parliamentary elections. The party has become almost entirely a party of local redoubts, often isolated within a broader area and struggling to hold on against the odds by dint of immense activity and commitment. In too many areas genuine community politics have been subverted by the reliance on incessant delivery of Focus leaflets devoid of political content.

The party has a very impressive training programme but to what end? It has no regular news bulletin, information service or even a frequent political briefing. For forty years it had the weekly *Liberal News* then came *Liberal Democrat News*, scrapped apparently on grounds of economy. A political party requires ammunition if it is to be successful. The Liberal Democrats do not produce any such material. Nor nowadays is there any ferment of pamphlets or booklets from the various special interest groups. Occasional efforts, such as the publication pulled together by Layla Moran, Mark Pack's blogpost series and the "Generous Society" report by a number of Cambridge Liberal Democrats stand out as honourable exceptions.

Before the Chesham and Amersham by-election the party was almost never mentioned in any consideration of the political situation, either nationally or in regard to a particular political issue. It has reverted to struggling for relevance, it rarely has a representative on any political programme. It still faces an existential crisis and yet no-one in the party regionally or nationally appears to be concerned about this. Saving one's deposit is now regarded as an achievement. Frankly, we are not interested in such a party; we are only interested in the promotion of Liberal values and in succeeding electorally in order to be able to apply those values in government.

5 Identity

There is no possibility of revival unless the party has a clear identity. It is now nineteen years since the party produced an extended statement of its values. Even that 2002 statement was not published in any readable format for wide circulation until the small Liberal publishing firm in Leeds produced it in an attractive format, since when it has sold well and has had to be reprinted a number of times. Its context is now very dated. There have been huge changes since 2002 - such as the Iraq War of 2003, the banking crisis of 2008, the coalition government of 2010-15,

Brexit in 2016 and the acceptance of the necessity for drastic measure to combat climate change. But the party has no key document which takes note of any of this. It is shameful. From 2015 we hoped that the "Agenda 2020" project would produce a key document. Nothing happened. Then the Federal Policy Committee was pressed to do so, but again no result. Even now the committee is only talking vaguely of having a short consultation document later in the year. Meanwhile the party has no extended document on its political philosophy to give to serious enquirers.

Liberal thinking and writing today is mainly coming from outside the party. It is writers and commentators such as Ian Dunt, Timothy Garton Ash, Simon Wren Lewis and Nick Barlow who are currently promoting Liberalism. Have approaches been made to Samuel Kasuma who recently resigned as No 10's race adviser for solidly Liberal reasons? How did the party fail to recruit Michael Sandel, the American political philosopher whose writings and lectures are absolutely in the Liberal mainstream? Such individuals demonstrate that the political argument for Liberalism can be intellectually sustained. The fact is that "celebrity" Liberals do not today identify themselves with the party. Even in the dark days of the 1950s the Liberal party attracted such names as Ludovic Kennedy, Robin Day, George Scott and, later, Honor Blackman.

A public awareness, however vague, of what a party represents is the basis for its "Identity". In this context "Liberal" gives an idea of what the party is, but when the concept is qualified by "Democrat" it loses that semblance of clarity. There is no "Liberal Democrat-ism" and to make revival more feasible we probably have to focus simply on the time-honoured "Liberal".

6 **The organisation**

The Party has a formidable bureaucratic structure. It has its federal committees, panels and working groups, many replicated at an English party level. It has a highly structured candidate approval system and it has a detailed appeals process. It is all very worthy but it has produced a party structure that exists to replicate itself and it takes an army of people willing to take on the array of posts simply to maintain it. Their time and effort is appreciated but the problem is that it is a structure commensurate with a nationwide major party when what is needed is more akin to a guerilla warfare organisation able to respond rapidly to political events and opportunities. The party simply doesn't exist in a majority of constituencies. It has been largely killed off by the strict targeting that has hollowed out the party over the past twenty-five years. The abject state of the party's organisation is largely hidden by the amalgamation of a number of constituency associations into one broad association within which there is perhaps only a single functioning constituency body. The campaigning staff at HQ are producing excellent literature but in most constituencies there is no-one to take it up and to use it.

We cannot continue to blame the coalition for the party's electoral plight as if the party will eventually return to pre-2010 levels as if by evolution. It will not do so and the interminable party bureaucracy is itself hampering the necessary changes. It needs a very different initiative that operates more as a guerilla force, with a new campaign plan, akin to the "community politics" initiative after the 1970 general election. The Chesham and Amersham by-election was essentially an insurgent tactic and it demonstrated that the coalition does not have still to be a dead weight.

Practical strategies to revive the party in the country are eminently possible but the party leadership and key officers apparently have no desire to revive derelict associations and thus rebuild the basis of a national party.

7 Strategy

We keep seeing the trite statement that "Where we work we win". It is far from invariably true. In all but the smallest municipal wards even a vast amount of work is not now going to achieve electoral success without a substantial core vote of electors who vote Liberal as opposed to voting for a local individual, however hardworking. Moreover where massive effort has produced an initial success it cannot be maintained without that core vote. The comparison between the votes in wards with a huge amount of campaigning work and the pathetic vote in neighbouring token seats is stark and frankly embarrassing. The effort to keep on winning is killing and too many colleagues suffer burn out trying to carry on successfully. Without a vision of the kind of Liberal society we wish to achieve we cannot attract enough candidates and key workers. Mending pavements and saving post offices does not recruit long term local leaders. Our record of holding seats over a period of time is poor and one single national political set back, such as the effect of the 2010 coalition, knocks out far too many good colleagues. Today we have only half the number of Councillors that we had in 1996.

A further problem for the party is its almost complete failure to transfer a local vote to parliamentary elections. The clearest example is probably that of Hull. Last May Liberal Democrat candidates topped the total vote in the city. It was a remarkable result but at the 2019 general election Liberal Democrat candidates polled 5.3%, 6.1% and 5.6% in the three Hull constituencies. The same pattern is visible just about everywhere. Even the late, and much lamented Tony Greaves could not transfer the local vote in Pendle to the parliamentary contest. And Trevor Jones and his formidable electoral machine in Liverpool did not deliver a single parliamentary gain there at a general election. The evidence is that dedicated local campaigning can win council seats but does not build a Liberal core vote that will eventually enable parliamentary victories.

Liberals have a number of solid policies that are unique to a genuine Liberal party, including co-ownership in industry, land value taxation, civil liberties, human not economic values, federalism, devolution to regions and to local government, community identity, holistic and broad education, embracing the ecological imperative, a viable social care system, supporting refugees and asylum seekers, enhancing the public service and electoral reform, none of which are consistently explained and promoted. Even when we have a stance which is supported by the

public we do not run with it. Take the party's opposition to the Iraq invasion in 2003. We were the only party with 100% of its MPs present and opposing the government but we did not explain our commitment to international law that underpinned that vote and by the time of the next election we hardly mentioned it. Now, having been the sole party committed to a united Europe, we dilute our commitment to the EU and, completely unnecessarily, state that we will not campaign to rejoin the EU until "the time is right". We are aware from involvement in continuing pro EU campaigns that there are ex-Labour activists who are now footloose but are inhibited from joining us by this perverse and unnecessary decision.

8 The future

The Guardian's leading article on 19 June, following the Chesham and Amersham by-election said it all. It ended:

To keep the momentum going will require more than the politics of protest. Sir Ed must see the possibility of a major political restructuring and shape it. He should make a virtue of positions that decentralise power, free the individual citizen and promote quality in public services. He needs policies that are not only popular but also clearly associated in the minds of voters with the Lib Dems. Being a responsible partner to the EU, rather than a troublesome neighbour, would be a good start. **Liberalism is its own creed, and its adherents ought to make the case that it remains the one most capable of meeting the challenges ahead.** (emphasis added)

The country desperately needs Liberalism but the question is whether the Liberal Democrats are capable of promoting it. It may have declined too far to be able to be revived in its present form. The Liberal Democrats must be urgently reinvigorated if they are to provide a principled, effective, campaigning Liberal voice which is again capable of capturing the public imagination and winning across the United Kingdom. It needs a different type of party, more attuned to today's changing society and capable of expressing a Liberal vision for that society, exposing the inanities of the Conservatives and the impotence of Labour. It particularly needs to flourish with the opportunities and problems of social media. One of the most significant papers of recent years was that produced in 2016 by David Howarth and Mark Pack: "The 20% Strategy: Building a core vote for the Liberal Democrats." No attention has been paid to the crucial arguments in that paper. A core vote depends on a distinctive philosophy not on policy that shifts with events. Unless there is a dedicated set of Liberals who pick up that strategy and work towards it there is no future, not even with spectacular by-election victories - as the years following Orpington and the 1972-73 by-elections show. There is nothing wrong with the philosophy - all it lacks are the individuals to promote it. If not the Liberal Democrats then who?

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