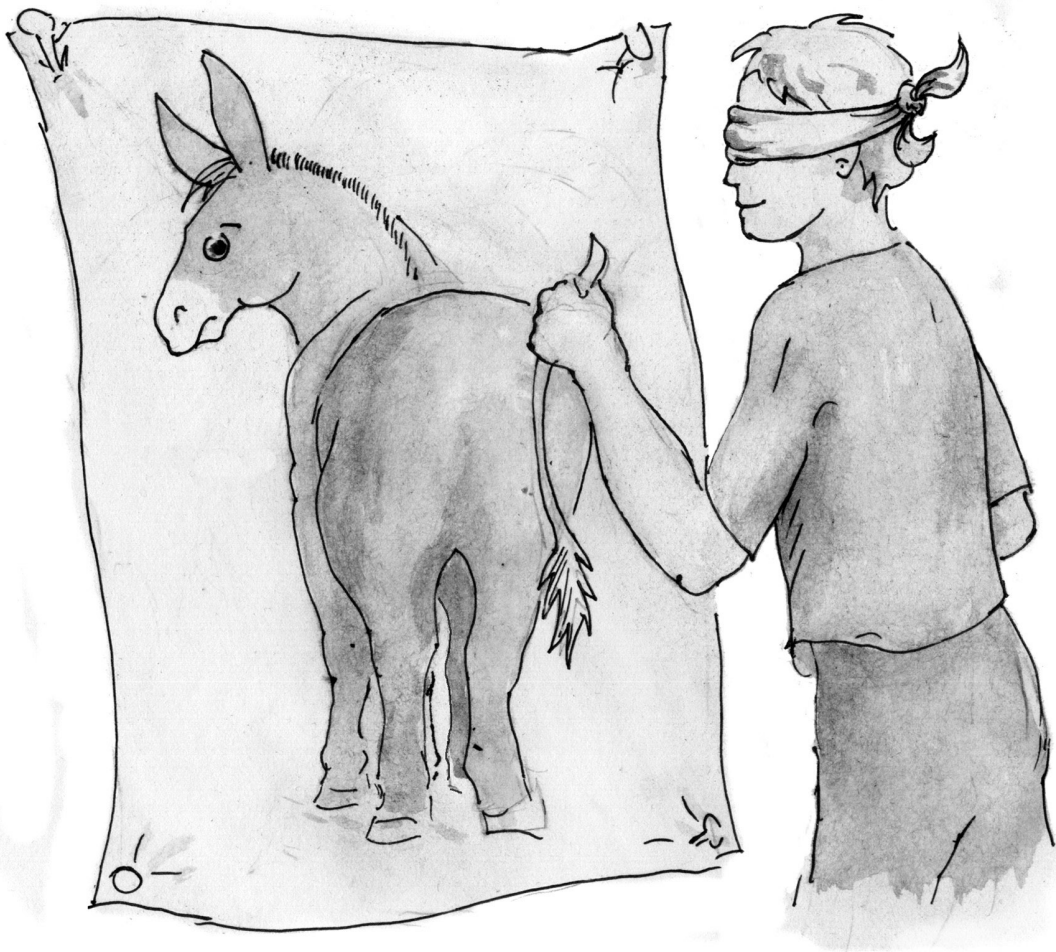


liberator

Shock revelation



How the Lib Dem general election strategy was chosen

- Well, that didn't go to plan. General election reflections: Simon Hughes, Nick Harvey, Liz Barker, Tony Greaves and more
- All the presidents' answers - Mark Pack
- How we did Unite to Remain - Peter Dunphy

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Liberator Publications
Flat 1, 24 Alexandra Grove
London N4 2LF
England

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Liberator (ISSN 0307-4315) is printed by Lithosphere, 110 Mount View Road, London N4 4JX

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🔊 was founded in 1970 and is produced by a voluntary editorial collective.

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Cover design: & Photo Page 28 Christy Lawrance

COMMENTARY

DREAMING THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

If ever a politician fell through believing their own propaganda it was Jo Swinson.

At the start of the election she was unknown to the public and yet she appeared more or less from nowhere announcing that she was going to be prime minister and would revoke Article 50 without further ado.

The first of these propositions was so self-evidently unbelievable that it should never have been made.

Lib Dem leaders in the past have talked about what they would do in government, but not claimed they were about to enter Downing Street, let alone done so when they were new to the role and no one had heard of them.

The claim sounded both foolish and arrogant and (see pages 4-7) tanked when tried out by pollsters.

Finding out who was responsible and how this became front and centre of the campaign is something the general election review should try to establish - but judging by the embarrassed silences when anyone is asked it may have some trouble.

The problem with 'revoke' was different. It made perfect sense that if there was a Lib Dem majority government there would have been such a seismic shift in public opinion on Brexit that 'revoke' would be both possible and popular.

But since no-one in their senses thought there would be a majority Lib Dem government this argument instantly fell apart and the whole thing gave the impression that the Lib Dems had abandoned support for the entirely justifiable second referendum option.

Even the most extravagant internal polling reported to parliamentarians suggested 200 Lib Dem seats - still far short of a majority.

Yet with 'Swinson for PM' and 'revoke' both destroyed within days as effective policies, the campaign failed to shift onto anything else.

There was in a partial electoral pacts with the Greens, yet the national literature made little of the party's environmental policies.

Putting 1p on income tax for the NHS was a potentially popular policy but was not emphasised.

Instead there was endless repetition of vacuous slogans on Brexit, a focus on 'revoke', which offended even some moderate Remain supporters, and the branding of the entire party as 'Jo Swinson's Liberal Democrats', to which a voter might well have responded "Jo who"?

For once, money was no object and the party had entered the election buoyed by the May local and European elections, a stream of defectors and the sense that Remain gave it (also for once) a clear message.

This had been the right thing to do. The party clearly had a reserve of goodwill among Remain supporters and with Leave supporters unlikely to vote for it anyway there was no purpose in trying to split the difference and appeal to them as well.

But during the campaign the clear Remain message was irredeemably muddled by 'revoke'. Attempts to keep the defector MPs in parliament - only two of whom fought their previous seat - consumed disproportionate resources in places of questionable promise.

Few had a good word to say about the content of the national leaflets but the general election review might also examine their quantity.

There are widespread anecdotal accounts of both party activists and members of the public objecting to forests being felled by a supposedly environmentally conscious party, such was the vast number of leaflets.

No cow comes more sacred than leaflets - indeed the party can seem like membership of a leaflet-delivering cult - but the review should question whether it is still effective to drown voters under reams of paper, even had the content been any good.

There should also be questions about the targeting. Was this driven by people who seriously believed the party would win 200 seats?

It became well-known there were 40 target seats - reasonable enough in the political context of last summer. But a further 40 were in a second tier and consuming both financial and human resources.

Another topic for review will be the decision to back Boris Johnson's call for a general election, which forced Labour to follow suit.

One idea is that President Macron would oppose any Brexit extension beyond October and with insufficient MPs backing a second referendum it was worth the gamble of an election or Brexit would happen anyway.

Another is that caution was thrown to the winds by people who believed the Lib Dems would form a majority government.

These are all questions to be answered from which lessons should be learned. While she has her share of responsibility, using the departed Swinson as a convenient dumping ground for the party's problems would be both unfair and futile.

The election has left a parliamentary party of 11, of whom eight are either completely or nearly new, one has already been leader and two carry Coalition baggage.

There will now be a leadership election in May and June. Many members will face a difficult choice but should look for someone who understands what caused the problems in 2019, has ideas to turn them round and will be convincing to the public.

RADICAL BULLETIN

HOW NOT TO DO IT

Among those seeking new jobs this year will no doubt be the coterie of advisers around Jo Swinson, who came up with such campaign masterstrokes as a 'revoke' policy that was inexplicable to voters, a personality campaign built around someone unknown to most of the public and the hubristic assertion that Swinson could become prime minister.

A degree of 'groupthink' was surely part of the problem - getting carried away by the party's poll ratings and flow of defections in the late summer and then refusing to change course or message in the face of a downturn that grew worse as the campaign progressed.

Nick Clegg was often criticised for surrounding himself with an echo chamber of genuflecting 'yes-men' and refusing to listen to anyone who knew more than he did. Swinson took the same 'ears shut' approach, the difference being she was surrounded by genuflecting 'yes-women'.

She has form on this. When Vince Cable gave her the foreign affairs brief in 2017 she had had little previous experience in this field but refused to engage with the party's Federal International Relations Committee - which was filled with experts - on the grounds many were middle aged white men.

This lack of knowledge may help account for her unqualified "yes" response to an interview question about whether she would press the nuclear button - which made Swinson sound like the first politician since David Owen who didn't mind starting a nuclear war.

She also bears responsibility for ousting chief executive Nick Harvey (Liberator 398) when an imminent general election was almost certain, and replacing an experienced politician with a chief executive who - whatever his merits - was new to the party and does not have (or to be fair, claim to have) any expertise in elections.

Thus the usual chaos ensued, with Swinson, then-president Sal Brinton, campaigns director Shaun Roberts, Swinson aides Rhiannon Leaman and Baroness Grender and campaigns committee chair James Gurling among those with fingers in the pie.

That was not all. People on a conference call with Brinton over the 'remain alliance' were startled to hear her describe Miranda Roberts - newly-appointed as Swinson's liaison officer with the party - as being "Jo Swinson's general election manager" as though there were not already more than enough people in that role.

There is supposed to be an independent 'warts and all' review of the general election campaign - let's hope it does not suffer the fate of its predecessor.

After 2017, the Federal Board was unable to find anyone to lead a review on the Federal Audit and

Scrutiny Committee, the body charged with leading this.

When the music stopped Portsmouth council leader Gerald Vernon-Jackson was chosen and carried out the review but without any resources being provided.

He reported to the FB in December 2017 and his conclusions were so embarrassing to certain important people that the report was swept under the carpet by being 'received'.

Several copies then found their way to Liberator and we published extracts in Liberator 389 and more extensive ones on our website, where it may still be seen.

The party finally got around to publishing a heavily redacted version on Lib Dem Voice in August 2018.

This cannot be allowed to happen again. The review must be properly independent and published with - at most - material redacted only where it would obviously disclose something sensitive to opponents. The main purpose of it is not so blame can be attached - those where anyone is culpable they should take responsibility and be removed - but so that lessons can be learnt.

Setting up the review falls to the new FB, which at least reduces opportunities for arse-covering by the old one.

YOU WERE WARNED

With nine days to go before the general election, a warning to the Lib Dems was published based on statistical analysis by a company called Datapraxis.

How widely this went out isn't clear but since it was titled 24 Seats Where

Liberal Democrats Could Still Beat Boris Johnson it is inconceivable that those directing the general election campaign were unaware of its findings.

Datapraxis said 24 seats could still even at that stage have been gained - and 12 held - despite finding "the party now languishes lower with every pollster than it stood at the beginning of the campaign".

It noted: "Liberal Democrats nationally, locally and individually would be well-advised to consider the lessons from this data seriously; if headquarters is slow to pivot, local campaigns can take the lead."

Whether the national campaign pivoted slowly, or indeed at all, is something for the general election review to find out, but Datapraxis had given some clear steers on what was not working.

It said: "It now seems quite clear that the headline change in policy from a People's Vote to revoking Article 50 was a mistake. We have found that statements which propose putting Brexit back to the people generally perform significantly better than those which refer to 'revoke'. In focus groups and on doorsteps, voters often cite this as a reason to doubt

that the Liberal Democrats are the sane or sensible option in this election.”

While neither Jeremy Corbyn nor Boris Johnson were popular, the quasi-presidential campaign centred on Jo Swinson failed and the statement “Jo Swinson could be the next prime minister” was found to be “among the poorest-performing that Datapraxis has tested anywhere in Europe”.

It added: “This strategy has been widely criticised as hubristic. Some of the corollaries include an overly centralised campaign, with resources spread too thin; assigning challenging seats to big-name defectors from other parties who are now under severe threat; and a reliance on long-lead print campaigning materials that risk ending up proving counter-productive.”

Amid all this the party had also lost its traditional ability to build campaigns around “strong local candidates and hyperlocal messaging”.

Datapraxis is run by Jon Alexander - described as an active Liberal Democrat - and Paul Hilder, whose background includes openDemocracy, change.org and Avaaz,

Its says its work was based on 269,838 polling responses supplied by YouGov, with typically 350-400 responses per constituency.

Therefore it is hardly a hostile organisation and its constituency predictions were pretty accurate too. So, did anyone who mattered in the Lib Dem campaign see and act, or try to act, on Datapraxis’ warnings?

FRENCH LETTERS

It was an obvious gamble for the LibDems to back a ‘Brexit election’ when they enjoyed a pivotal role in the hung parliament and might well lose this.

A somewhat unexpected culprit has emerged in the shape of President Macron. He had by October lost patience with the UK and could have permitted the EU to offer only a two weeks extension for Boris Johnson to try to get his deal through parliament.

He said the only grounds on which he would grant a longer extension were if a ‘democratic event’ - a general election or a referendum - took place.

Some think this was a further example of the brinkmanship Macron exhibited throughout the Brexit saga and that other EU leaders would have talked him round.

His view was though communicated between members of Macron’s La Republique En Marche party in the European Parliament and the ALDE grouping to which the Lib Dems belong.

When Lib Dem MEPs contacted then Brexit spokesperson Tom Brake they say they were told that the numbers were not there in parliament for a second referendum and were if anything getting worse as Labour and Tory rebels lost their nerve.

The second problem was that chief whip Alistair Carmichael told the MEPs that from legislating for a second referendum to holding one would probably need 20 weeks. But the EU had a deadline for agreeing its Multi-Annual Financial Framework - effectively its long-term budget - and needed to know if the UK would still be a member by the beginning of June to set this.

This meant the referendum would thus have to be voted through in January but the UK Parliament seemed oblivious to this looming deadline. Patience over extensions was running out in France, and

backing an election seemed to some at least worth a try if the alternative were no deal or Johnson’s deal.

IT’S A TWO-AND-A-HALF HORSE RACE

Liberator 398 reported attempts from on high to bully Putney candidate Sue Wixley into standing down in favour of Tory defector Sam Gyimah.

Wixley, who had only recently been selected, refused and stood in what proved to be the only Labour gain from Conservatives of the election. She polled 16.9%.

Gyimah was slotted instead into Kensington - also a Tory-Labour marginal - and polled a slightly better 21.3%.

Given that Kensington performed better than Putney anyway but neither was winnable, why did the powers that be think that arm-twisting the Putney local party and undermining Wixley were useful activities?

Gyimah himself was well-liked but the Kensington campaign saw the two horses in the time-honoured two-horse race unprecedentedly change mid-stream.

It went from saying only the Lib Dems could beat Labour to two weeks later claiming only they could beat the Tories.

In the event the Lib Dems could not beat either and much effort was squandered that could have been directed to Wimbledon and Carshalton, both of which were lost by less than 700 votes.

A CANTERBURY TALE

Heads are still being scratched in Canterbury Liberal Democrats over the peculiar series of events there before the general election.

In September Canterbury was told by party headquarters to halt its candidate selection, without any reason being given for this intervention.

It’s thought the Lib Dems entertained hopes that Labour MP Rosie Duffield would defect, since she was plagued with Momentum problems.

When she did not, Canterbury was finally allowed to select and it chose Tim Walker, a journalist who had quit the Daily Telegraph in protest at its pro-Brexit bias, and who had worked with the Remain campaigner Gina Miller, including on tactical voting campaigners.

Here, the mystery deepens. If Walker supported pro-Remain tactical voting why on Earth did he want to be the Lib Dem candidate in Canterbury, which was a Labour-Tory marginal with a pro-Remain Labour MP?

As the general election neared Walker was nominated despite a number of prominent local Lib Dems making it clear they intended to vote tactically for Duffield.

After being nominated Walker then suddenly withdrew in Duffield’s favour. Since the Lib Dems could not allow electoral pacts to be made on the hoof by disgruntled candidates they hurriedly found Mole Valley councillor Clare Malcolmson to stand, who narrowly saved her deposit.

As a former national newspaper journalist and prominent associate of Miller, Walker could have had his pick of more promising places than Canterbury to fight.

Some in the local party suspect that, as a tactical voting enthusiast, he sought the Canterbury nomination precisely because he always intended to stand down at the last minute for Duffield and did not

want some more determined Lib Dem to be selected to fight her.

BOWLING A MAIDEN OVER

An improbable dispute with a local bowls club was among factors that saw Jo Swinson become the first leader of any significant party to lose their seat since 1945.

We are indebted to the Milngavie Herald for the news that members of the 300-strong Allander Indoor Bowling Club turned their backs on Swinson at the count over the Lib Dem-Tory local council administration evicting them from a leisure centre development.

On its own this dispute might have been embarrassing but not fatal to Swinson, but Liberator's sources in Scotland say there were far deeper seated problems that saw her lose by 149 to the SNP.

She had a 5,339 majority on 2017 and so the seat looked reasonably safe. But Swinson, who is married to former Chippenham MP Duncan Hames, now lives with her family in southern England.

This gave offence to some Scottish sensibilities, and the SNP made hay with her absences. This offence was compounded by her trying to import an English campaign organiser. When the local party resisted that, one was found from Glasgow but it was too little, too late.

When a call went out rather late in the day for activists elsewhere to make haste to East Dunbartonshire the response was lacking.

Liberator has been told that some activists did not want to work for Swinson because of her driving role last year in getting former Liberal party leader Lord Steel suspended from the party because of what he said to the tribunal investigating allegations against Cyril Smith.

Steel is now very deaf and less alert than he once was, and his friends have said he either misheard or misunderstood the tribunal's questions and so appeared to admit he had known about Smith's abuses but not acted. Steel was later reinstated.

Other activists stayed away deeply annoyed by Swinson's unqualified "yes" about her willingness to push the nuclear a button.

One source told us the East Dunbartonshire local party "isn't great" and so clique-ridden that an activist arriving from hopeless Glasgow Central was quizzed as to why they had come.

East Dunbartonshire was not seen as marginal until very late in the campaign, when the Scottish party HQ sent emails looking for help but not underlining the risk.

Indeed as late as 7.45pm on election night the party volunteers in the London call centre were told to drop everything and phone East Dunbartonshire voters. It is debatable whether it was helpful having people with English accents phone voters that far into the evening.

Another source said: "I suspect what really drove it was a perception that Swinson wasn't really interested in the constituency, and the local structures didn't protect her...the naïve nature of assuming that a GB leader role could protect her in an election where the focus was remorselessly on Scotland's place in the union and where the SNP were playing a grievance card very well speaks volumes."

WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE BESIDE THE SEASIDE?

When the Remain Alliance was concluded the Green party got Dulwich and West Norwood, which displaced enthusiastic young Lib Dem candidate Ade Fatukasi.

A simple solution to his disappointment was at hand as former London region chair Chris Maines was a paper candidate in neighbouring Lewisham East and happy to stand aside.

Before this could happen word came that Fatukasi might wish to stand in Bethnal Green & Bow, displacing candidate Josh Babarinde.

Far from having caused any offence, Babarinde had a vital qualification. He is a native of Eastbourne and so the party designed to impose him as the candidate there in place of Stephen Lloyd.

Lloyd, the Lib Dem MP from 2010-15 and 2017-19, had resigned the party whip in 2018 due to an incautious election pledge to his largely Leave-voting constituents to back any Brexit deal put by the government.

As the election loomed Lloyd considered he had discharged this pledge and wanted to resume the whip and stand for the party. Leader Jo Swinson objected and went looking for alternatives, lighting upon Babarinde.

The rest of the parliamentary party though dug its heels in, well aware the while Lloyd was unlikely to hold the seat it was almost certain no other Lib Dem could.

Thus through Swinson's gritted teeth Lloyd got the whip back, Babarinde stayed in Bethnal Green & Bow and Fatukasi fought Lewisham East.

ONE WAY TO GET VOTES

A Lib Dem leaflet issued in Penrith & The Border listed among the party's policies "insulting every home".

Candidate Matt Severn's explanation of the error to a local newspaper was a notable example of trying to find a silver lining: "If it helps draw attention to all of the other fantastic Lib Dem policies, then I don't mind."

Interesting policy from the @LibDems in Cumbria there going to Insult EVERY house



#BBCDebate @theJeremyVine



LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Canadian consultants employed by the party were proud of the online tool they built which showed people their nearest target seat. Except it didn't.

Either the facility itself didn't understand local geographies or it was fed duff information about target seats, or possibly both.

For example, Daisy Cooper won St Albans but activists from only four seats were told to go there, one of which was in Essex and an unreasonable distance for most people to travel.

Activists in Radlett, which is within walking distance of the St Albans boundary, were directed to distant Finchley and Golders Green.

YOU'VE GOT MAIL

The defection last summer to the Lib Dems of Philip Lee, then Conservative MP for Bracknell, caused a monumental row over alleged homophobic comments he had made, which led to the resignations of a number of prominent members of Lib Dem LGBT+, including Zoe O'Connell and Sarah Brown, who live in Cambridge.

Imagine their surprise when a Lib Dem 'Tory squeeze' mailshot came to them addressed to 'Dear The Brown and O'Connell Families' featuring Lee saying how appalling Jeremy Corbyn was, and that only the Lib Dems could beat Labour there.

Both of those things were true but the net effect may have been to so alarm soft Tories about Corbyn that they stayed Tory after all.

Even worse, it went out far and wide to people who were never inclined to be Tories, soft or otherwise.

THWARTED EXPERIMENT

The suspension of Hackney North Lib Dem candidate Ben Mathis for offensive tweets meant nothing was done in that seat for the second part of the campaign.

This decision had the side effect of depriving the party of the results of a potentially valuable experiment.

With nothing at stake in either Hackney seat, but neither derelict, it had been decided that Mathis would run a conventional campaign with the Post Office free leaflet while Hackney South candidate Dave Raval would campaign solely through social media, then compare the results.

In the event Mathis got 7.5%, an improvement of 0.8%, and Raval 8.9% an improvement of 3.2%.

Circumstances make proper comparisons impossible, but when the opportunity comes this is surely an experiment worth repeating fully.

COBBLED TOGETHER

When Oxford West MP Layla Moran announced she was in a pansexual relationship with Rosy Cobb this was the first most of the public had heard of the latter.

Cobb though had surfaced in the news during the election for concocting an email with a fake date on it and sending this to a journalist from the Open Democracy website.

This was in response to an enquiry about the Lib Dems's sale of an electoral register to the Remain campaign in 2016. When Open Democracy complained about the fake date former party chief executive Chris Fox - who headed election crisis management at headquarters - intervened and Cobb was suspended.

The unanswered question is whether there was anything improper about the original sale in 2016?

There is hardly anyone left at HQ who was there at the time and those now in charge of the party are struggling to establish who sold what and whether any problem arises.

GOOD RIDDANCE

The Lib Dem peers bore with fortitude the departure of Baroness Falkner to the cross benches, a defection apparently occasioned by her opposition to the idea of a second referendum on Brexit, let alone 'revoke'.

Falkner has rebelled before on this. Liberator 384 reported how then leader Tim Farron refused to re-nominate her to the bureau of Liberal International after she defied the whip to oppose a second referendum.

ME, MYSELF, I

Have pity upon the Mitcham and Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet, for it must soon traverse an entire region.

The toilet, awarded by Liberator since 1983 for the worst motion submitted to each conference, heads to the West Midlands region, which submitted something that can barely even be dignified as 'a motion'.

Conference representatives are rarely confronted with the phrases "In my view" or "I meet people from all walks of life every week", for the simple reason that motions should be written to commit the party to something, not just express the view of an individual.

It's unclear who in the West Midlands submitted this eccentric mess, which reads like an angry letter to the Daily Telegraph and lacks any structure, not even a 'conference resolves' section at the end.

A few samples of this diatribe will suffice: "Despite my personally remaining strongly pro-remaining within the European Union for all the reasons that everybody in this party will be well aware of, the country has no appetite for further debate on this issue."

"A war is a long-term undertaking and we now must take the long view to reach our D-day."

THE COMPANY THEY KEEP

The so-called Liberal party's final disgrace came in the general election when it fielded three former members of the far-right Ukip - two of them former Ukip candidates - in seats in Cornwall.

In all the party fielded an unusually large 19 candidates, paid for by a declared donation of £28,000 from one Peter White. All the candidates received derisory support and none saved their deposit.

This escapade followed the incident in 2015 when the party's Cornish branch withdrew its general election candidates in favour of Ukip (Liberator 372) an action that led to the lightest of slaps on the wrist but also the departure in disgust of prominent members Fran Oborski and Rob Wheway, who joined the Lib Dems.

The party's manifesto for the 2019 general election contained a suspect-sounding intention to: "Introduce a preference in favour of candidates from former Commonwealth countries, who have shared our culture, language, customs and who have long established communities in the UK to encourage integration."

THE HORROR SHOW SEEN FROM OUTSIDE

Professional roles meant Simon Hughes had to spend the general election campaign on the sidelines for the first time in decades. What he saw of the Lib Dems alarmed him

It is probably wise to begin by showing some historic self-awareness, as well as to explain my present position.

In my 52 months as our party's federal president and 42 months as commons deputy leader I am very aware that both leadership teams of which I was part did not always make the right strategic decisions.

In particular the 2010 coalition agreement did not sufficiently protect our party from being committed to mistaken policies negotiated in government in some of the most sensitive areas, especially university tuition fees.

More recently, from October 2018 and for the first time for 38 years, I ceased to be a party candidate and agreed with London South Bank University that during my term as its chancellor I would not be involved in active or public party politics.

So for the last 15 months I have renounced all opportunities to make public comments on Conservative, Labour, Green, Brexit or nationalist parties, representatives or candidates and have stepped back from door knocking, leaflet delivery, telephone campaigning or similar in Bermondsey and Old Southwark and elsewhere.

I have remained a party member, retained the right to comment or take action on local, national or international issues and policies like support for the Remain and the People's Vote campaigns, kept contact with good friends who are still active party members and continued to engage in party elections and occasionally in internal deliberations.

So after attending one leadership hustings and voting, but without going public with my preference between two good former colleagues, I intervened privately and then more publicly at conference (with my local party's support) to make sure that we had a separate vote on the proposed additional policy to revoke Article 50 if we formed a majority government - and that members at conference had a chance specifically to vote against it.

FEAR AND WORRY

Sadly our new leadership publicly and fulsomely endorsed this new policy, and therefore not surprisingly Conference by a majority supported it. However, every fear and worry expressed in the debate by Andrew George from St Ives, Niall Hodson our Sunderland council group leader and by me (as un-confrontationally as I could manage) became in my view increasingly justified every week from then until 12 December. The policy may have come from amendments properly submitted, but from the moment they were selected by conference committee the party

leadership should have made clear that though well-intentioned, this was flawed and foolish in many respects. And unnecessary.

We already had a very clear, well-established and well understood position as the largest UK party fully committed to a second people's vote and to campaign 100% to remain in the EU. I accept that this policy was not different from Green, SNP and Plaid Cymru policy, but that was a strength not a weakness. Most importantly this put us clearly in a fundamentally different position from the divided Labour leadership and Labour Party. I know of course that the 'revoke policy' did not replace the existing people's vote policy, but it certainly confused it and, worse, increasingly obscured it - attracting increasing opposition not just from regular opponents but from the politically unaligned and our own supporters.

The oft repeated qualification that this new 'revoke' policy would only apply if we won a commons majority only confirmed how unnecessary a distraction and mistake it was.

More and more people concluded how unrealistic this outcome was. In addition the proposition that a view expressed in the 2016 referendum (though technically advisory) could be overridden just by MPs and should not require a second express public vote on the details of the withdrawal deal was arrogant, certainly not democratic and never likely to put us on the side of the people against the political establishment.

And the further assertion that a UK parliamentary majority in a general election could be successfully presented as a mandate to ignore the referendum failed to take into account that a majority of seats does not imply a majority in public support (see the result), and that general elections are never fought or won on one single issue alone, however important, and that there is never one single reason for which we win each and all of our seats.

And then the strategy took further steps in the wrong direction. We promoted the leader nationally and locally as a candidate for next UK prime minister. I completely understand that as a UK party with a new leader and deputy much less well-known than the Conservative, Labour and Brexit leaders, we needed to promote our new leaders more. I also completely understand that with a much younger and first ever female leader we wanted to promote her as a significant and welcome contrast to the three older, male leaders of the other three leading UK parties. But the Liberal Democrat leader should have been promoted as the leader to build bridges between the parts and parties of the UK and not as candidate for PM.

Why? Because we don't have a presidential system, because we were going into the election as the fourth party (with about half the SNP's number, and with Labour and the Conservatives both many times bigger than us), and because, sadly, the idea of a Liberal Democrat becoming the next PM was a second nearly incredible proposition.

Also, promoting the new leader over everything prevented us from presenting our leadership in a way that we hadn't had the opportunity to do for many years, certainly since the formation of the Liberal-SDP Alliance.

Principally as a result of eight MPs from the two biggest parties joining us, women and men, black and white, northern and southern, of different faiths and none, some at least as well or better known than our leaders, we had the opportunity to present ourselves as a party with an impressive and diverse leadership team drawn from the three biggest parties rather than the party of one new relatively unknown leader, however talented.

We offered a team of great breadth, depth and skill to straddle political traditions and unite the country – including among others people such as Dr Sarah Wollaston, the former Conservative and highly respected health select committee chair and Chuka Umunna, the former Labour shadow business secretary.

Then there was the serious mistake of not accepting that if a motion of no confidence was passed against Boris Johnson, of course the leader of the opposition should have the next chance to seek a parliamentary majority before other options were tried.

We had already said that we wouldn't vote to support a Labour government led by Jeremy Corbyn, and nor would any Conservative or former Conservative, so Corbyn was never going to win the confidence of the commons. But if we had made clear that we supported Corbyn's right to put his case, then there may have been considerably more support from Labour MPs for a short term caretaker multi-party government to legislate for a second public vote and then step down at the first practical opportunity after the result.

The last big wrong move was to change tactics in the commons before every available option had been exhausted to secure a people's vote amendment to the Withdrawal Bill after Boris Johnson's successful Brussels negotiations.

I know the arguments: we wanted to outflank Labour and not be outflanked by the SNP. But the SNP had an obvious reason for wanting an election before Christmas to avoid it happening nearer to Alex Salmond's criminal trial. And the opinion polls were so poor for Labour that they were not likely to suddenly jump ahead of us to support a December election. I know too that assessments of possible parliamentary outcomes are of course contested, but given that several senior MPs across parties were clear that with every day that passed the chance of a majority for a peoples' vote amendment was becoming more likely,

“The Liberal Democrat leader should have been promoted as the leader to build bridges between the parts and parties of the UK and not as candidate for PM”

I am sure we could have tried for longer to win this, using whatever tactics were needed.

Also, we did not have one single strong enough main election message. To counter the strength and simplicity of 'Get Brexit Done' we should have had one equally strong and simple principal rejoinder, for example 'Don't be conned. No Brexit'. 'Bollocks to Brexit' had worked surprisingly well. Liberal Democrats fought against Brexit

but also under a 'motherhood and apple pie' 'Brighter future' slogan when the Conservatives were fighting a hard-edged campaign reflecting people's impatience and alienation.

SOMETHING VERY WRONG

And last, for now, yet again our targeting appears to have been far too ambitious. I do not know other regions as well as mine, but to lose Carshalton and Wallington and Wimbledon by so little and yet spend so much effort in other seats which we lost by miles appears to suggest something very wrong in the analytical abilities of headquarters.

In conclusion, I do not pretend to be close enough to know over the months from July where the party's power lay and who were responsible for the various strategies that saw our positive national position of August to be so much weakened by December.

Many senior people involved are or have been friends and colleagues, and I regret that I have to be so critical. Leaders, deputy leaders and chief whips in the commons and lords, plus the federal president and the Federal Board; the chair and members of the Campaigns and Communication Committee and our two 2019 chief executives may all have played a part.

The inquiry just constituted has to find out as quickly as possible what happened and why, and report fully to members many of whom worked so hard for ever declining reward. I believe we could have won at least more than 30 seats instead of 11, and that could have meant a Conservative majority reduced by at least 40 – and a wholly different parliament.

With an even more successful campaign we could have made sure the country was able to vote on EU membership again, then had a chance to win a people's vote, stop Brexit and get other good things done.

Our reduced number of seats hugely contributed to the very sad fact that that the UK will from this year be outside the European Union. I regret the party and national outcomes greatly. And I am convinced that one or even both desperately sad outcomes could potentially have been avoided if our leadership in 2019 had not made so many mistaken judgments.

Simon Hughes was a Liberal, then Liberal Democrat, MP for North Southwark & Bermondsey 1983-2015, federal party president 2004-08 and deputy leader 2010-14.

EIGHT ERRORS AND COUNTING

The Liberal Democrats got a lot wrong in the 2019 general election, many of them repeated mistakes never learnt from, says Nick Harvey

The most dispiriting feature of our third electoral catastrophe in four years was the mistakes we repeated. Some were down to factors beyond our control, but some were not. We also made new ones! I have identified eight mistakes.

MISTAKE 1

The biggest was agreeing to holding the election. Our pivot – to back the Tories and SNP in supporting an election – left Labour no choice but to agree. Simply put, we caused the election to happen. Why?

With the Tories in a commanding poll lead and the SNP poised in Scotland, surely experience and calculation should have left no doubt that we and Labour were in for a kicking. It handed Boris everything he wanted, gift-wrapped for Christmas: a working majority, Brexit and given the state of the Labour Party, possibly ten years in power.

It remains a mystery why, how, or by whom that decision was taken over the weekend of 26-27 October. The stated line was that because 19 Labour MPs had backed Johnson's deal, it had become inevitable that the old Parliament would deliver Brexit. Nineteen Labour MPs had indeed backed the deal, but some of them were still up for supporting a People's Vote amendment as well – the so-called confirmatory vote in the 'Kyle-Wilson Amendment'.

How many would have done so, we will never know. It needed at least eight. It would certainly be a gamble to slog through a winter of trench warfare in both houses, but a lesser gamble surely than an election? We could have hung Boris out to dry in his hopeless minority position, while Farage feasted on the corpse, and in a March/April election he would be seen to have failed just like Theresa May. Instead we handed him an election where he looked to have succeeded, in contrast to his hapless predecessor.

It has been murmured lately that Macron's sabre-rattling - that he would not back an extension unless there was either an election or referendum on the table - was the reason we switched. This seems even more foolish as he had taken similar lines throughout, only to be talked out of them by other EU leaders.

MISTAKE 2

Revoke was another gamble which backfired spectacularly! In early August, shortly after Johnson took office, we doubted he truly wanted a deal and his demands seemed to make one unlikely. His summer offensive looked like a charade. I was party to a discussion about what we might do if, come the autumn, he 'cut and run' to the country on a No-Deal ticket. Several of us thought that at that stage it

might make sense to respond by raising the stakes back – and taking a Revoke line – leaving Labour stranded in the middle. It would need careful thought and testing.

Without any of that, it was decided – again a mystery why, how or by whom – to go out front with Revoke. (Some say that the conference would simply have passed it anyway, which may be right.) However, some polling – qualitative more than quantitative – could have probed the views of soft Tory/Lib Dem waverers on this beforehand, as it landed very badly from the outset. And once Boris surprised everyone by securing a deal (albeit worse than May's), middle England decided the deal offered the craved-for end to the Brexit saga, and our Revoke stance was left looking extreme – and in the view of many, undemocratic.

MISTAKE 3

Our third new mistake was to build a personality campaign around Jo Swinson when nobody had ever heard of her. It was suggested well in advance, by the communications team, that in the first days of an election campaign we might run a tongue-in-cheek line about her being a possible prime minister – solely to help lever her into any televised leader debates. But someone, somewhere, made the fatal mistake of believing our own publicity....

The proposition that the leader of a party with just 12 MPs at the previous election (and even with defectors, going into this election with just 21) could become PM was just not credible. By contrast, the proposition which, in various iterations we had offered for at least the last 50 years, that a strong group of Liberals/ Lib Dems would be a benign and positive influence on politics, has always been very believable.

Even when we had leaders who were genuinely electoral assets: Paddy, and early in their tenures Charles and Nick, we never hyped them in this absurd manner.

Quite bizarrely, we spent thousands pumping glossy magazines about Jo into our target seats – as if they would have any interest whatever in someone standing in faraway East Dunbartonshire. I have no idea whether Jo herself embraced this weird cultish approach, or just went along with it out of a misplaced sense of duty. But I am completely certain that it fuelled the negative perceptions of her which most canvassers reported from the doors.

MISTAKE 4

Among old mistakes repeated, pre-eminent yet again was the shortage of clear, simple and appealing messages. Beyond the ill-fated Revoke and 'the prime

minister Britain deserves' nostrums, what did we say that might actually motivate voters to support us?

I presume that 'Jo's plan for Britain' was an attempt to address wider issues, but can anyone remember anything catchy, interesting or popular? Too much intellectual effort goes on policy – which often loses votes – rather than messaging, which can win them. We have limited bandwidth – we need stronger lines.

MISTAKE 5

Another was the skewed balance between local and national campaigning. Yet again, too much resource and emphasis went into the national rather than local. Electoral law drives some of this, capping candidate spending in the short campaign to around £15,000, whereas party campaigning in a battleground seat is typically £100,000+ for all three parties. For the first time, we raised as much as the others and spent up towards the national limit. The fund-raising team deserves great credit for this. As ever though, most of the money came in once the gun went off, whereas it would have done more good over the preceding year – throughout most of which we were in a financial straitjacket and woefully understaffed.

Nevertheless, we seem to have forgotten that what built us up over half a century – from the community politics debate in the seventies through to the Coalition – was strong local campaigning on local issues with credible and appealing local candidates.

Skilfully calibrated national materials can add volume to local campaigns but are no substitute for them and at worst are counter productive. If we had simply given the 80 target seats £50,000 each and told them to spend it creatively on party campaigning (or pre-election candidate campaigning), that would only have taken £4m out of the £19m limit. Some would have spent it well, others less so. Some of it might have been quite idiosyncratic. But I bet we would have ended up with more than 11 seats.

Our campaigns staff are very talented people, working ridiculously hard for sparse remuneration. But with unprecedented millions at our disposal, some might have been spent bringing in professional copywriters and designers to augment their efforts and offer a wider range of more novel and interesting materials. You can't give such people free rein. Our campaigners would have to retain control. But armed with strong clear messages, surely we could have come up with less bland and 'samey' stuff?

MISTAKE 6

I listen to the Labour leadership debate with interest. MPs (and ex-MPs) from the north say they have become too metropolitan, middle-class and London-centric. I dearly hope we will undertake the same self-examination. We have flushed our rural and poorer seats down the pan. Our west country, Welsh and northern seats are badly lost, with only Tim Farron (ace local campaigning) and some Scots (in four-cornered politics) hanging on. A core vote is fine, but very few seats have a sufficient concentration of middle-class chatterati to make a winning bloc. We must address a wider audience and think how our messages land with them. This is a wider issue than Europe.

MISTAKE 7

We can only build winning blocs in seats if supporters of other parties 'lend' us their votes. We have always known this. It will always be true. Most crucial is persuading Labour voters to back us in Tory-facing seats (the majority of our targets). Soft Tories also count, but the serious numbers are from Labour. We saw in 2017 how it totally backfired to attack Corbyn, who is popular with Labour members and supporters whatever anyone else thinks. Yet we repeated this in 2019, with exactly the same result.

Tory seats are our biggest battleground. When will we learn that if we are trying to build winning coalitions of the left and centre in those seats, we have to make people feel good about supporting us, not feel bad? In such seats, Tories are the opposition, Labour are the competition. Head on attacks just won't work. Of course, the dynamics in Labour-facing seats are different. Such is the importance of keeping local focus.

MISTAKE 8

We are more adept at using data in campaigning but must not become its prisoners. Gut instinct and common sense are vital. The big MRP poll in June, showing us ahead in 73 seats and able to reach 219 with a perfect 5% swing from exactly the right place in each case, was an illusion which set hares running. It was built on Farage's temporary Euro-election bubble. By September these figures were 27 and 50 seats respectively, showing a clear direction of travel.

Similarly, early positive approval ratings for Jo Swinson were to be expected. The British public gives a newcomer a chance. Only arriving with terrible baggage would you score negatively. But this should never have fed a belief that she was a great asset to be hyped. More time would have given us longer to test that. We have stopped using Focus groups or qualitative polling, through lack of funds and changing fashions. But Thatcher and Blair built their success on them and our messages, slogans, policies and personalities need testing on real people.

In summary, much of our misfortune was beyond our control: Johnson securing the illusion of a good deal, Farage copping out, Corbyn driving people to the Tories. But much was self-inflicted: miscalculation, hubris, fuzzy lines of command leaving the leader far too much say, as in 2015, when the campaign belongs to us all; and forgetting that splendid bit of ALDC artwork: 'Warning – keep it local'.

But we now have time – five years; resource – more solvent than before; and momentum – in local government. We must rebuild patiently and strategically, both from the bottom up and getting things right at the top. Back to basics, as John Major might say.

Nick Harvey was chief executive of the Liberal Democrats 2017-19 and MP for North Devon 1992-2015.

LED BY DONKEYS

The general election saw the Liberal Democrats fail to find messages that resonated with voters, and the campaign was appallingly led. The next leader must be chosen for their ability, not what they are, says Liz Barker

There was one good thing about our 2019 general election campaign. The manifesto and the spending plan which was overseen by Ed Davey was deemed by the Institute of Fiscal Studies to be the most coherent and convincing of all the main parties. So we have a policy platform upon which to build.

But our general election campaigns since 2015 have been dismal, or deficient, as judged by the public.

Following each disappointment members were promised a thorough review. If they happened, criticisms of campaign management were watered down, ignored or omitted. Nobody ever took responsibility, lessons were not learned, and the same mistakes were repeated.

In November 2015 at the Oldham West by-election on a storm-battered hillside when I said to the people with me that the leaflets were too sodden to deliver their response was: "Don't worry, they are rubbish." We lost our deposit.

In summer 2019 in Brecon we were putting out the same leaflets bearing little more than the candidate's name. We scraped a win because the Greens stood down and the Brexit Party split the Tory vote. General election 2019 was so dire that the long needed change is now urgent.

SERIOUS MISAPPREHENSION

There was time when we won elections, and we steadily won seats in general elections. Since 2015 members often say that we have stopped winning because we rely on old techniques, but that is a serious misapprehension. We have updated and invested in digital, and the Tories and Labour still use leaflets – because crafted well they work. Our problem is that we are using techniques without thinking about the voters to whom we are trying to appeal or what they need to hear.

We have fallen into the trap of equating technocratic activity with engagement and we have lost our intuition about what voters really think.

It doesn't matter under what electoral system one has to fight, nor which media one uses, if you don't have a clear message which enables electors to see how their lives will be better if they vote for you, you are bound to lose. Some voters knew that we opposed Brexit (I canvassed some who didn't), and in a few seats they had worked out that this would benefit them. For the rest we gave them we did little to explain how voting Liberal Democrat would benefit them and their families.

It is well understood that in any election campaign the two important messages are the one in the first

week, in which you establish your unique appeal, and the final week, when you counter your opponent's squeeze.

Our first was that Jo Swinson was aiming to be prime minister, and our last was...er, no she isn't.

I doubt we will ever know who made that catastrophic choice or on what basis. Recently I have heard members mount the defence that Jo would have to respond to that inevitable question from journalists. Well, she could have looked at how Charles Kennedy handled it by saying that he would not be PM, but every vote for a Liberal Democrat candidate, and every Liberal Democrat MP would have a profound effect on the leadership of the country... but she didn't.

Our messaging was so lamentable that it will be a huge effort to regain credibility. Why did we spend time hammering out agreements with the Greens, only to say nothing about why they should vote for us?. Our candidates did their best in hustings and on the doorstep, but our air war often felt like friendly fire. Today when we have technology, such as Connect and Facebook, which gives us more data, much more quickly, we should be able to target and tailor messages. Instead we churned out phrases like 'Build a better future' which candidates report meant nothing in most seats.

Over the last three elections it has become increasingly clear that our data, or our understanding of it, is nowhere as accurate as it was prior to 2015.

In the last three elections, we had a string of near misses like Richmond Park, North East Fife, and Carshalton, whilst we've directed resources to seats like Maidstone, Streatham and North East Somerset. It is now evident that our polling methodology is flawed and decisions about when and where to deploy assets, most importantly volunteers, are unacceptably poor.

We cannot afford to be so wasteful. Independent pollsters and market researchers will analyse the campaign. We must learn why we have misread the electorate for so long,

We have to address the issue of leadership because it was a central factor in our defeat. Jo's supporters have dismissed criticism of her as misogyny, but that doesn't explain why Nicola Sturgeon did well again or why the voters of East Dunbartonshire elected another young woman to replace Jo.

At the start of the campaign few people knew Jo, and many wanted to support a young woman. So why didn't they? As Camilla Long said in the Sunday Times: "Why has this once decent, honest, sane and promising politician...blown the golden opportunity to be the only reasonable person in British politics?"

“She has managed to alienate female voters while being the only main female leader, partly by screaming ‘sexist’ at every opportunity, which irritates as many women as it does men.”

To dismiss this as the view of one just journalist would be to miss an important lesson for the future.

When members did not support Jo’s leadership campaign we were accused of sexism and/or ageism. I have never had a conversation with Jo, so it was simply from watching her as an MP that I realised she is a tireless campaigner on subjects which she cares about personally. However, she is not a good listener, and that impacts on her understanding of people around her and her judgement.

During the leadership campaign there were indications of her lack of leadership skills. At no stage did she give any evidence of having built and led successful teams. She indulged in bad politics by trashing the Coalition. Her social media claque assured us this would attract Labour voters to us. Of course, it didn’t. Throughout the leadership campaign she insisted that she would cut through the media, but never explained how. While her rehearsed speech got her through most hustings, just about, but whenever she was challenged she floundered fairly quickly.

Nevertheless many members desperately wanted a female leader and that meant criticism of Jo was muted. People who had worked with her, and had doubts about her ability to do the job, were dismissed as dinosaurs.

DOWNRIGHT NEGLIGENT

Good leaders surround themselves with people whose judgement they test over time and they actively include people who are unafraid to disagree. I don’t know whether Jo did this, but, as Sean O’Grady pointed out in the Independent, agreeing to the election date which the Tories and the SNP wanted was an elementary mistake. To do so without having your own team fully prepared sorted and equipped with a plan B was downright negligent.

We need to go back and look at the experience, skills and qualities that our successful leaders like David Steel, Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy had, and Tim Farron and Jo did not. We need people who have proven substance to the politics, and have shown wisdom. Above all we need to elect leaders for their ability to do the job, rather than who or what they are.

We have a small amount of time to sort ourselves out and establish our credibility with voters, many of whom are angry with us for running such a bad campaign. There are things we must do, and some that we should not.

We should not blame first past the post, with this campaign we would have been marmalised under any system.

We should not waste time blaming Labour or talking about realignment. No matter who wins their leadership co-operation on the left will not happen anytime soon.

We should overhaul our governance and decision-making structures, but not until we have dealt with more urgent matters, such as the lack for campaigning skills.

When the Tories lose focus they ruthlessly on their own faults. So should we. To do that, staff and officers who have made the key decisions in the elections since 2015 have to go, and quickly.

We need campaigns staff who can read voter intentions accurately and craft messages accordingly, so we need to change our polling methodology. We will need to work smart, because we will only have limited resources.

Leader of the Liberal Democrats is the toughest job in UK politics. To do it, one must be resilient, distinctive and have outstanding judgement. You also need a communications team who are wise, sharp and able to work smart with few resources. Oh, and they need to play to the leader’s strength not their weaknesses.

The most urgent task for us as a party is to work out how we make Liberalism relevant to people in communities across the UK who feel left behind and for whom financial worries have crushed hope for the future

At the same time we have to have distinctive and credible proposals on national issues, such as housing, and international issues, such as climate change. However, we have to always make clear exactly how we will make a positive difference to people where they live. While doing so we need to focus particularly on young people.

Our new leader has to start by going back to basics and engaging with councillors and members, especially in areas where we did badly to think through what we are saying, to whom and how. I would start by talking to our colleagues in Sunderland who at last autumn conference told us that we were not doing that. How right they were.

We need to forget distractions like core vote strategy, dust off the resources we used to win seats prior to 2015, and with updated technology, train a new group of campaigners as we have done in seats like Wimbledon. While we are at it, we should learn from Leave EU and the Tory 2019 campaign whose messages were highly effective.

We cannot take another disaster. It will take skilful leadership to take us back from the brink. We need a leader who has experienced setbacks and success, and has the courage to take hard decisions. They will need the nous and judgement to work with a new staff team, and work with teams in Scotland, Wales and the regions where there are elections soon.

Liz Barker is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords

HOLES IN THE RED WALL

Labour's collapse in its small town heartlands could be filled by something even worse than the Tories, warns Tony Greaves

I was walking along the side of Parliament Square in January, in the middle of six consecutive House of Lords sitting days on the Withdrawal Agreement Bill. A cluster of people with EU flags were standing around the wonderful Steve Bray, smiling as ever. "We'll be here every Wednesday to make sure they keep their promises," he said. I didn't know whether to smile or cry.

By the time people read this we'll be out of the EU but Brexit won't be over. We'll have started the 11 months (or more) of what the Withdrawal Agreement calls the transition period and the Government call the implementation period.

Week after week of more grinding negotiations, more red lines and more cave-ins as Johnson gets desperate to avoid an extension before the end of the year. So where does electoral politics go now? First we need to recognise where we are. This analysis is mainly about England because I believe that is where the most perilous threats lie.

The crazy result of this general election in which the Tories got a majority of 80 from a 1% increase in their vote and just 44% of ballots cast will surely have dramatic long-term consequences.

At least 37 of the 58 Conservative gains were in or very near the former English coalfields, added to the handful won in 2017. Then there were other industrial towns such as Scunthorpe, Redcar and Barrow-in-Furness.

Does this mean the so-called Red Wall has been knocked down? Well, not quite. There was indeed a Conservative landslide which made a very serious breach in the north Midlands (Staffordshire 12 Con, Derbyshire 9 Con 2 Lab, Notts 8 Con 3 Lab). Further north we see Lancashire on 11 Con 4 Lab and a Labour wipe-out in Cumbria (5 Con 1 Lib Dem). In the north-east there were remarkable Con gains (Durham 4 Con 3 Lab; Teeside 3 Con 3 Lab). But the main urban Labour heartland of Tyne and Wear including Newcastle, Gateshead and Sunderland held firm (0 Con 12 Lab).

Other Metropolitan counties, which include the main cities, were similar. Merseyside was Lab 14 Con 1, and South Yorkshire Lab 11, Con 3). But the West Midlands (14 Con 14 Lab), West Yorkshire (9 Con 13 Lab), and Greater Manchester (9 Con 18 Lab) were mixed.

They contain a lot of smaller towns, and the Tories always did better in the old textile areas of Lancashire and Yorkshire. In broad brush in all these regions, Labour won the main cities and the Tories picked up the outer towns. In the seven big cities of Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, Bradford and Newcastle upon Tyne, Labour won every seat except Birmingham Northfield. Even in the north midlands

Labour held the three seats each in Leicester and Nottingham.

In the south of England outside London, including East Anglia and the south-west, the Tories hold almost every seat, other than a scatter of university towns and some industrial ports. By contrast Greater London breaks down as 21 Con, 49 Lab and 3 Lib Dem.

GRUMPY ABOUT MODERN TRENDS

What this means is that Labour is largely confined to the big urban areas, particularly London and the other major cities, and to the fragmented remains of the Red Wall, which has not fallen but is full of holes. The new Labour leader is going to have to work out how to reconcile winning back the older less educated but community minded voters (generally grumpy about modern trends) in the seats they lost, with large drops in their votes even where they held on, and holding onto London and other relatively thriving cities with their graduates, younger electorates, and more modern views on life. Good luck to that.

But what about Brexit? Remainers argue that the votes are not quite as it would seem from the seats won and lost. The proportion of people voting for parties supporting a new referendum was around 53%. The proportion for the Johnson deal was 47%. In line with the shift in opinion polling on Brexit itself, perhaps.

"Perhaps" is a crucial word though, given the ambiguity of Labour's position and all the other things that without doubt affected people's votes. Those of us who argued all along that the last way to try to break the political deadlock was a general election turned out to have been right. Anyway there are few signs that the election has salved the wounds of a very divided country. If anything it's made them worse. And what matters is the 80-strong majority in the Commons.

Governments with big majorities get into trouble, in the country if not in Parliament. With its crazy cast of circus performers to the fore there is no reason to think this one will be different, even if ongoing Brexit delays the arrival of a traditional mid-term slump.

The Conservatives on their honeymoon will do well overall in the elections in May outside the big cities. I will be surprised if a new Labour leader makes much difference to their poor performance except perhaps in London. But in the longer run it is hard to see what the Tories can do to keep their new 'Get Brexit Done' support in the seats they have won in the north Midlands and north.

Liberal Democrats will win seats this May in a few strong areas and pockets elsewhere but, as the general election results show, in at least half the constituencies the party hardly exists as a campaigning force. The level of morale after another swathe of appalling general election results is likely to be patchy and good

results will be surrounded by deserts.

But Mr Johnson and the Tories have to satisfy all the shires and commuter and rural areas in the south broadly defined, including the south-west (a different region with different needs) and similar constituencies in the midlands and north.

They also have to satisfy all the seats they have won on and around the old coalfields and similar places including leading manufacturing places such as Barrow, Pendle and Scunthorpe.

How can they do this? The heavy pressure on them will come from city and sub-regional elected mayors who will be based in the big cities and want the money to go there – where the Tories have no electoral interest at all. Funds will not be limitless!

There is a lot of talk about new infrastructure particularly in the north where Transport for the North has an ambitious strategic plan in the melting pot, and that can be funded from capital sources.

But such projects take years to plan, design and build, they are full of problems and bad press when they are late and overspend, and frankly in many cases they lose as many votes as they gain (see HS2, *passim*). The big vanity promise is a high-speed rail route for the 40 miles between Leeds and Manchester, with some trains stopping at Bradford. Not a vote winner elsewhere. Meanwhile the extra NHS and schools funding will just about keep them stuttering along, but no one will vote Tory as a result of 40 (or perhaps six) new hospitals opening somewhere else in 2030. If Johnson spends his money in the north he will have to spend less in London and a lot less for the south-west.

Brexit has given a further dramatic loosening to the traditional ties that people had half a century ago to their lifetime voting habit. But it has not permanently attached those votes to anywhere else.

The traditional class ties have significantly loosened and while new class groups may have emerged (educated liberal professionals?) their allegiances are not fixed. And so the winners at the euro-elections were the Brexit Party and the Liberal Democrats. Six months later, simplistically, the Brexit vote went Tory and the Lib Dem vote went Labour.

People are more footloose than ever and there are no signs this is going to change. For many people each vote is a consumer choice and one day it's a Mars Bar and the next Maltesers. In an era of social media – partly anarchic and partly uncontrollable party activity – it's a potential nightmare for the parties. The new division between Brexiters and Remainers may subsist for some time but how that will pan out electorally is a different question.

The longer-term loosening of automatic ties between social class and voting habits - and indeed the steady softening of the old class identities and boundaries themselves - means that both Labour and Tories have lost ever more of their automatic support. But as we have just seen that does not mean that one or the other won't win the new footloose contests – just that their 'new' votes won't necessarily stick with them. Liberals

“Brexit has given a further dramatic loosening to the traditional ties that people had to their lifetime voting habit. But it has not permanently attached those votes to anywhere else”

used to welcome these trends and looked forward to a day when it brought massive Liberal victories as people broke away from ‘the two old parties’. But there was never any guarantee that people would come to us once we were no longer the only ‘third party’ on the block.

EVER-PRESENT DANGER

Meanwhile the rise of new third parties of the Right is an ever-present danger. So far the ever-present tendency of rightwing parties to splinter has saved the day. The old NF, BNP, UKIP, Brexit have all been unable to hold together. Now Farage is threatening to set up a new ‘Reform party’ from the ashes of the Brexit party, which he will claim is of the centre while adopting a nice set of neofascist structures and policies, strong on welfare for the (mainly white) workers and good public services, nationalist in overseas relationships, anti-immigration and ‘others’, interventionist on the economy, big on leadership and the national leader, anti elites as defined by them, anti-Muslim, top-down in its organisation. And a real concern is this kind of party might find a better leader than Farage.

The new Tory Blue Wedge in the old Red Wall might just be a successful breeding ground for such a venture. Brexit over and done with, otherwise nothing changed, deep Tory mid-term blues, Labour still fighting each other and floundering, Liberals often nowhere to be seen. Perhaps the members and supporters and local parties in these areas should now become a higher priority for the Liberal Democrats than posh parts of London full of well off City types.

But first, perhaps, we need to understand why we are active in politics, what we stand for – what our party stands for – Liberal principles instead of vague ‘values’, and policies based on those principles rather than following opinion polling and focus groups.

Then, as Liberals, we might be prepared for the fight against both Johnsonian populism and a neo-fascist upsurge if it comes about. Plus a fight-back against Labour in its new heartlands – the big cities – and a new regional Liberal uprising against the inevitable neglect of the south-west.

Tony Greaves is Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords

NICE PEOPLE DON'T USE BAR CHARTS

Liberal Democrat campaign techniques have become hopelessly outdated and non-political, says Ruth Coleman-Taylor

2019 looked a good year for us. The Liberal Democrat vote rose above expectations to deliver nearly 700 seats in May's council elections and our best-ever European Parliament results. We won the Brecon & Radnor by-election and gained several more MPs - all very welcome - through defections. Entering the general election as the largest and most committed Remain party, facing a variety of Brexit parties, it was surely reasonable to expect that this vote would confirm our return to the mainstream of UK politics? Wasn't it?

To many Liberal Democrat members and supporters, Jo Swinson looked like the modern leader of a modern party: a working mother who had successfully pursued a professional career since her early 20s, joining the increasing number of younger women who hold positions of influence in Britain and other European countries.

Liberal Democrats know Jo well from her years as a leading member of the party, but how well-known was she outside the party? Did anyone think about this? Was there a campaign to raise her profile with the general public, to help people out there to feel that they knew her, before the next round of elections?

TWILIGHT ZONE

One of the difficulties Jo faced is that the press and media take a presidential approach: they attribute all party policy and initiatives personally to the leader. If the party's ideas sound weird, the weirdness rubs off on the leader. So why did the party move straight into the political twilight zone?

Announcing Jo repeatedly as the next prime minister was cringeworthy and embarrassing even in the comfort zone of party conference. Pursuing a legal case against the TV companies to give her equal time with Johnson and Corbyn may have been logical: but was it sensible? For most voters, the legal challenge sounded like the whine of a poor loser and damaged her reputation and the party's.

Then there was Revoke. Undeniably, if a Liberal Democrat government were to be elected with a manifesto commitment to revoke Article 50, then the people would have voted for us to do that.

That's with a stress on the "if": but since few voters believed we could win the general election, it just blurred into yet another attack on the sacred democracy of the Referendum. Changing people's minds about leaving the EU was going to need much more than a brave declaration of what might logically happen following an extremely unlikely event.

Changing people's minds needs the party to engage in political arguments. Amongst ourselves, at party conferences, there is political debate and during

general elections the party equips our candidates with daily bulletins on our policies and on what arguments to use in debates and discussions. But our primary means of communication with the electorate - the leaflet - has become a curiously politics-free zone.

Many Liberal Democrat leaflets in the last few years seem to be for what can best be described as the Nice Person party: lots of nice photographs, strong on identifying the Nice Person's links with their community, celebrating their campaign successes and sharing positive comments from other local Nice Persons.

You would look in vain for the political analysis that motivates the Nice Person's activities or the political argument that would motivate people to come out and campaign with the Nice Person. It's as if we are more worried about upsetting people by trying to raise their awareness than by the powerlessness of their lives.

The Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats had a well-deserved reputation for smart political campaigning and innovations in voter contact, (including, I believe, the election leaflet, first used in the 1890s!)

People certainly seemed to enjoy the mix of political arguments and visual representations in our literature and they used to like the pie charts, bar charts, graphs and other explanations of how the votes were stacking up for us and for our opponents. Many of the comments in the leaflets actually came from real people!

That was then, when our party was actively promoting a serious dialogue with the electorate, seeking to persuade and convince people that the world needs to change and that it will only happen if we work together. Our aim was to mobilise opinion and encourage action, not to avoid upsetting people.

Now that reputation, and our success, seems to have vanished whenever we stop telling real stories and no longer try to rouse people to join us in challenging the power structures: and our clever maths-based charts have become a dubious cliché.

One of the certainties in this perilous electoral game we play is that, if you keep doing what you always did, you continue to get the results that you always did. As losers in the last three general elections, we need to change our approach, starting by learning from what went wrong.

If we are to explain the movements in opinion during the general election that flowed towards us, away from us and, in some cases, straight past us, then we need to work harder at understanding what local people are thinking, what is important to them and what motivates their political opinions.

Canvassing in the 2019 general election, even more than in the recent run of elections, revealed a fearful gulf in political language and political understanding

between us and our pro-Brexit opponents.

There was almost no common acceptance of the facts of governance and governmental structures here, in the EU, the World Trade Organisation and the wider world from which to start a political dialogue.

The shocking fall-out of the election has brought the worst kind of Brexit to our door, with the attendant risk that the new governing class will abandon the UK's commitment to combatting climate change as quickly as it trashes and crushes the poor and the weak in our society.

The new base of Liberal Democrat support, in the many seats where our vote increased and we are now the clear challengers, has shifted decisively towards more urban, educated, middle-class voters.

MENDACIOUS TRICKS

They are not going to be satisfied with Nice Person nostrums and mendacious mathematical tricks. Our party needs to treat our supporters with respect. While we celebrate the increase in voter support, we need an honest and realistic analysis of why those votes did not translate into seats and power in Parliament.

What was wrong with the data coming into the party about voting intentions? There has been a huge investment in the Connect system: so why did no-one pick up that we were losing in Carshalton while piling up votes in Richmond and Twickenham? Or the different success rates in the Scottish seats? Why did the late surge in Labour voters switching directly to Conservative ("to get Brexit done") come as such a surprise?

What did we learn about dealing with the Momentum teams sent into many of our target seats to stop Liberal Democrats winning? Can we do better next time?

People haven't forgotten the Coalition but hardly anyone remembers what actually happened then. When our opponents made vicious and unjustified attacks on what we allegedly did in 2010-15 - targeting Jo Swinson in particular - where was the rebuttal from the Liberal Democrats?

No-one else is going to publicise the Liberal Democrat successes during that time - such as gay marriage and all the environmental achievements - if we say nothing. It leaves it open for the Tories to take the credit. Why didn't we inform people - repeatedly - of the policies they like that originated from our party?

So what should the Liberal Democrats do next? Most Remainers aspire to re-join the EU at some point, but it is hard to see how and when. It's also hard to see how we could settle back into politics as usual when there seems to be nothing usual about what's going on now.

This year is dedicated to negotiating with the EU, who have said, repeatedly, that one year won't be enough. In January 2021, therefore, it seems likely that the prime minister will either be trying to extend the negotiations (against his party's wishes) or leading the UK off a cliff into a much less certain economic environment, with only the bare bones of an EU-UK deal. Meanwhile, many more companies will

"Our primary means of communication with the electorate - the leaflet - has become a curiously politics-free zone"

take their business elsewhere, because their location here was predicated on full access to the EU market, and others will simply fail.

Later this year, the Government plans to convene a Constitution, Democracy and Rights Commission to address the issue of trust in politics.

Under the heading of making every vote count the same, they will apparently retain First Past the Post, introduce voter ID and reduce the number of MPs.

Liberal Democrats would agree that there is a lot of unfinished reform that could make the UK work better: such as devolution of power, redistribution of resources to regions and localities, common standards for delivery of services: but I doubt that the snippets from the Tory manifesto will inspire confidence.

The Government doesn't seem to be living in the same country as the rest of us. There seems to be no recognition of how broken Britain is and no attempt to make things better.

If no-one else is addressing the deep gulf between London and the rest, between cities and small towns, as well as between Leavers and Remainers, then we need to start making the policies to make our country function again.

As the Brexit era develops, we will no longer be arguing about competing visions of the future, the future will be all around us. No more Project Fear, we can simply observe what is happening to people like us in nearby countries and we will be able to compare and contrast whether life is going well for them in the EU and whether the UK is or is not enjoying great new opportunities. We could call it Europe-Watch.

Our historic role has always been to defend and promote Liberal values. These will be much needed in the coming years. So get out your party constitution, read what it says and remember what we are here for.

Ruth Coleman-Taylor is a long-time Lib Dem activist, member of the party's Federal International Relations Committee a representative on council of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe

SHARING OUT THE SEATS

Is Unite to Remain the beginning or the end of electoral pacts asks Peter Dunphy, who was in the thick of negotiations?

In December 2016 the Green Party had stood aside in the Richmond Park by-election, successfully won by the Lib Dems. In August 2019, the Lib Dem by-election win in Leave-voting Brecon and Radnorshire was facilitated by ‘stand-asides’ by the Green Party and Plaid Cymru in part negotiated by Unite to Remain. These by-election successes provided a proof of concept for electoral collaboration.

In 2019 Unite to Remain (UTR) successfully negotiated the largest multi-party electoral pact in the UK since 1918. Both the instincts and constitutions of all UK parties start with assumption they will stand in as many seats as possible and that other parties should be regarded as enemies. Reaching agreement in 60 seats was therefore a great and unique achievement surprising many commentators.

MAXIMUM CONFIDENTIALITY

The process was complex and included each constituency association of each party being consulted (in the case of the Green Party with the final say) and sign-off by national, regional and federal committees and the political leadership of each party while seeking to maintain maximum confidentiality.

The positive impact of the adoption of a seat by UTR and the corresponding stand-aside is clearly demonstrated with a differential increase in the UTR vote in these seats of over 5%. In other elections, this increase in vote share would easily convert into seats.

Ultimately for a majority of UTR candidates to have won, the participating parties would have needed to poll significantly higher. In particular the Liberal Democrat vote fell during the campaign from 20% in October and 16% as the election began to 11.6%. The corresponding ratings for the Conservatives were 33%, 39% and 43.6%. As the large majority of Liberal Democrat target seats have always been Conservative facing the relationship between the Lib Dem and Conservative vote has been the critical factor in Lib Dem seat wins.

Nigel Farage’s decision to pull all Brexit Party candidates from Conservative seats was

undoubtedly the key moment of the campaign in determining the outcome as YouGov polling shows that the Conservatives were able to mop up 92% of Conservative Leave voters (only 2% voted Brexit) and 33% and 46% respectively of Labour and Lib Dem Leave voters.

Between the 2017-19 elections the Green Party vote increased from 1.6% to 2.7% but the Plaid Cymru vote did not increase.

During the campaign the question arose, particularly in relation to seats in which Labour was competitive, as to whether the intervention of UTR could assist the Conservatives. However polling before and during the election was very clear that where a Green or Liberal Democrat option was removed from the options the large majority of Green or Lib Dem voters would vote firstly in a reciprocal way for the Liberal Democrats or Green Party respectively, secondly for the Labour and only in very small numbers for the Conservatives.

UTR commissioned a YouGov poll with the following question on 12 November 2019 before the Brexit Party pull out.

Imagine that in your constituency the Liberal Democrats [and Plaid Cymru in Wales] do not stand a candidate, and instead endorse the Green Party. The Labour Party, Conservatives, [SNP in Scotland] and Brexit still run candidates. If there were then a general election held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?

Only a tiny (7%) of Liberal Democrat voters switched to the Conservatives with 55% and 33% switching to the Green Party and Labour respectively. Although not polled it would seem entirely reasonable to suggest that Green Party voters faced with a choice between Labour, Conservative and Lib Dem divided in higher proportions to Labour or Lib Dem rather than Conservatives indeed this assumption led to a large number of Green Party stand-asides for Labour in 2017 and a smaller number in 2019 (e.g. Hastings, Chingford, Calder Valley).

While the number of seat wins was very disappointing, the vote share improvement of UTR parties in UTR seats was significantly better than in non-UTR seats.

Party	UTR Seats - Vote Share Improvement	Non-UTR Seats - Vote Share Improvement	UTR Seats vs non-UTR Seats - Vote Share Improvement
LibDems	9.2%	3.6%	+5.6%
Green	6.9%	1.1%	+5.8%
Plaid Cymru	1.8%	-1.1%	+2.9%
Total	7.9%	2.3%	+5.6%

In another election with a slightly less strong Conservative performance, this would easily convert into a significant number of seats gained. In some seats, such as Esher & Walton, the UTR collaboration helped produce outstanding vote swings in favour of UTR Parties, creating new marginals.

The summary of UTR seat vote swings is as shown in the table on Page 18.

The Liberal Democrats achieved some very large swings from the Conservatives in UTR seats including Chelsea & Fulham, Hitchin & Harpenden, Wimbledon, South West Surrey and Esher & Walton. There was plenty of evidence of additional volunteer help from the Green Party, unattached political campaigners and celebrity endorsements in many seats. Senior Lib Dem politicians who have already called for further cross-party working include former leader Vince Cable and Layla Moran. Newly elected MPs Sarah Olney and Munira Wilson were beneficiaries of UTR support and active assistance from the Green Party, and Tim Farron almost certainly owes his re-election to the arrangement.

The Green Party had led the work for a Green/Labour Progressive Alliance at the 2017 general election and, although some unilateral stand-asides had been decisive in creating a hung parliament, had received no reciprocal stand-asides from Labour and only two seats from the Lib Dems.

In 2019 the party looked for ways to counteract Brexit and a more extreme Conservative government. At the autumn conference of 2019, membership passed a motion allowing leadership to enter into national negotiations with other parties if it led to more Green MPs, led to a People's Vote on Brexit and proportional representation, and more decisive action on the climate emergency.

A number of Green Party spokespeople indicated that the door was also open to Labour to discuss electoral collaboration, something that was seen as essential for Labour and the country given the likely outcome of the election under FPTP. No collaboration was forthcoming.

The Green Party stood in 10 UTR seats, holding Brighton Pavilion easily, gaining two new second places in Dulwich & West Norwood and Bristol West, overtaking the Conservatives in both, saving deposits in all 10 UTR seats (out of 31 nationally and compared to only eight saved deposits in 2017).

The swing to Green Party candidates in UTR seats was an average of +6.9% compared with +1.1% in non-UTR seats.

Nationally the Green Party increased its popular vote from 507,000 in 2017 to 866,000, an increase of 71%.

Plaid Cymru was early and enthusiastic supporters of the initiative and the results may be disappointing. While UTR candidates achieved vote increases these were not as large as hoped and the overall performance of Plaid Cymru fell short of hopes and expectations, although Plaid Cymru retained the three UTR seats previously held. Plaid Cymru did nevertheless perform better in UTR seats registering vote share gains that were not registered elsewhere and may have been instrumental in the retention of at least one seat in Arfon.

UTR did not organise in Scotland due to two factors; the SNP began the campaign competitive in every constituency, and secondly the pro-independence versus unionist divide would have made any kind of agreement between Remain parties both impossible and possibly counter-productive.

BOOST ACHIEVED

The UTR stand-aside mechanism proved to be in itself successful by consolidating the votes of the participating parties successfully and importantly achieving the 'Remain Alliance' boost that had been identified in polling before the election by Best for Britain in their major MRP polls.

This boost was the effect by which if given the option to vote for a consolidated 'Remain Alliance' candidate, the total votes add up to more than the sum of voting intentions for the parties. Plaid Cymru also identified this factor in private polling in Wales.

In short had UTR not existed the results would have been worse, but more positively if the Conservative vote falls and the result of the next general election is closer, it can be argued that a UTR-type arrangement will be essential to transmit such a vote reduction into significant seat losses for the Conservatives and corresponding gains for opposition parties.

Of course this in future would not be with a specific 'Remain' but a wider progressive and PR-supporting aim. Clearly some kind of arrangement with the Labour Party would be transformative and a move by Labour towards PR and the upcoming change of leadership may present an opportunity at least for engagement.

Electoral collaboration in the future, especially with the expected introduction of boundary changes and voter identification that will further benefit the Conservatives, appears essential for the opposition parties to gain power at any time in the next 15 years. The alternative appears to be continued powerless opposition to a more extreme Conservative government that has removed most of its influential one-nation Conservative MPs.

The constitutions and policies of UK political parties will need to be brought up to date with the new reality that voters and rank and file party members appear to anticipate and support the principles of parties working together.

Peter Dunphy is director of Unite to Remain and was instrumental in the formulation and negotiation of the electoral pact. From 2012-18 he was registered treasurer of the Liberal Democrats

LEADER OF THE PACK

Mark Pack found himself both Liberal Democrat president and joint acting leader in December. The general election disrupted a Liberator with the usual questionnaire to presidential candidates, so he answers these here. Christine Jardine had also agreed to answer a similar questionnaire

YOU'VE LONG BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH THE IDEA OF SEEKING A CORE VOTE STRATEGY. WHAT DOES THE PARTY'S CORE VOTE LOOK LIKE AFTER THE 2019 GENERAL ELECTION AND WHAT SHOULD IT LOOK LIKE?

One part of the story of the 2019 general election was a good old-fashioned two-party squeeze of which we were the victims. That is a reminder of why we need to build a much larger core vote – one that can help us withstand such squeezes and even squeeze other parties.

The values that inform our support for the European Union – such as tolerance, internationalism and valuing co-operation between countries – are still very relevant and continue to provide us with a distinctive space in the political landscape.

The challenge is on us to do much better to fill that space. We will do that by better communicating and campaigning on our values, building a durable base of support that can then be added to by the personal votes of candidates and tactical squeezes to take people over the finishing line in elections.

WAS THE 'REVOKE' POLICY A MISTAKE?

The party is setting up an independent review into the general and European election and this will be one of the major issues for it to consider. I don't want to prejudge what it will find. I hope though it will look at the question as really two: what is the right policy at the time it was adopted and, if it was, did circumstances subsequently change (such as when Boris Johnson secured a deal by abandoning his red lines and promises to both Conservative members and the DUP) in a way that the party didn't react to adequately?

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE VOLUME AND CONTENT OF NATIONALLY-PRODUCED LEAFLETS IN THE RECENT GENERAL ELECTION?

There's much we will need to learn about what did and didn't work in the general election, and the independent elections review will be crucial to our future success.

Again without wishing to prejudge its outcome, I hope (and if necessary, will be suggesting) the review will look at the impact of our literature campaigns as

being the interaction of quantity, quality and logistics. Low quality makes voters much less tolerant of the quantity, and three leaflets over successive days is a rather different matter from three leaflets all on the same Saturday, for example.

Likewise, the review should take into account the lessons from when other parties have run similar levels of activity against us but we didn't match it, such as in particular the Conservatives in the 2015 general election. That had a devastating effect on us from which we've tried to learn with the volume of our own activities. Have we learnt the right lessons and have we applied the lessons as well as we could?

ASSUMING BREXIT NOW HAPPENS, SHOULD THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS BECOME THE PARTY OF 'BACK IN' THE EU?

There isn't any possible Brexit that is as good as our current membership of the EU. That isn't just a pragmatic judgement about practical benefits. It is also a reflection of our values. We are an internationalist party that believes in co-operation across boundaries and welcomes countries opening up their borders rather than putting up barriers, whether physical or metaphorical.

We should therefore still always seek close links with our European neighbours. For 2020, that means fighting for an effective deal which minimises the harm of Brexit before Boris Johnson's Christmas 2020 cliff-edge.

What it will make sense to argue for immediately beyond that depends on many uncertainties over what happens between now and then. But two things we can be sure of. We'll still be pro-European and we'll still have party members set the policy, democratically through conference.

DO YOU WANT TO USE YOUR ROLE TO HELP DRIVE THE PARTY IN A PARTICULAR POLITICAL DIRECTION, AND IF SO WHAT?

There are major questions of policy and political strategy which the party has to decide on. The leadership contest will be an important venue for that debate and for members to get to choose which plan they want for our future.

So I see my role as two-fold - first, helping to ensure that debate happens and is well conducted and second, making sure we have the organisation and structures right to deliver on the choices that members will make when they vote for their preferred leader.



THERE HAVE BEEN CRITICISMS THAT THE POST OF PRESIDENT IS UNWIELDY, BEING FEDERAL BOARD CHAIR, BEING “THE PRINCIPAL PUBLIC REPRESENTATIVE OF THE PARTY” AND REPRESENTING THE PARTY OUTSIDE PARLIAMENT TO THE PARLIAMENTARY PARTY. SHOULD THE JOB BE SPLIT UP?

I ran for election to the post with a very clear emphasis on the party organisation and strategy part of the role, while Christine Jardine, the other candidate, emphasised much more the public representative side of the role. That gave members the chance to choose which emphasis was the most important in the current circumstances. That seems to me a good model – let candidates set out their stall for what is most important in their eyes and then let members choose which pitch they find most convincing for the party’s needs at the time.

That said, I’m sure there will be things I learn about the post from actually holding it. Whether it is on this issue or on others, no doubt my views about how we best do things will evolve from the novel experience I will have in the next three years. So perhaps this is also a question to ask me again when I am a year into the job!

WHAT SHOULD BE THE RELATIONSHIP BE BETWEEN THE PRESIDENT AND PARTY HEADQUARTERS?

The key element is that the president is the line manager of the party’s federal chief executive. In that sense, if HQ is not performing well, then the buck in the end stops with the president. But the way to ensure things are done well isn’t for the president

to get sucked into micromanaging what happens day-to-day. A relationship with the chief executive that is constructive, supportive and challenging when required is instead the way to do it – with a focus always not only on what immediate emergency or disaster might need addressing but also on the strategic and structural issues that need to be got right to reduce the number of emergencies and avoid future disasters.

The president also has an important role in being a link through to the other parts of the party that make up the overall Liberal Democrat family. We are at our most successful when the different parts of the party cooperate in pursuit of shared strategy and priorities. The president can play a key role in making sure that HQ and the rest of the party are pulling in the same direction – and in being a conduit

for feedback to HQ on how its efforts are going and a conduit for explanation from HQ to the wider party on why it is doing what it is doing.

WHO IS YOUR CURRENT POLITICAL HERO?

I am glad you used the word ‘current’ as my pick in a questionnaire some years back was an opposition politician in Africa who has displayed exceptional personal bravery in standing up to a dictator. Alas, his bravery was followed by mistakes and divisiveness. That is a reminder that those who are currently most due admiration and support often include many whose halos later slip due to events or due to changing evaluations of history.

For the moment, at least, I would stick with my pick from a Liberal Democrat History Group meeting, Earl Grey, who combined many years of support for civil liberties in the face of a powerful wartime government in the 1790s with subsequent astute success in stitching together a coalition that delivered major political reforms in the 1830s. He was particularly good at balancing the need for pragmatism to put together a governing coalition without thereby losing sight of the reformist aims of the exercise in the first place. And, thanks to his key roles in measures such as the abolition of the slave trade, his views have not aged nearly as badly as many of those of the time.

MARK PACK BIOGRAPHY

I’m an author with books including *101 Ways To Win An Election* and *Bad News: what the headlines don’t tell us*.

I worked for the Liberal Democrats 2000-09, including a period as head of innovations. In 2015 I wrote with David Howarth a seminal pamphlet on the party’s strategy: *The 20% Strategy: building a core vote for the Liberal Democrats*.

Outside the Liberal Democrats, I have worked in IT in both the public and private sectors and between 2009-19 was a communications and crisis consultant.

I have also been a visiting lecturer at City University in the journalism department.

SCOTLAND REPEATS ITS ERRORS

Nigel Lindsay reports on a Scottish campaign where the line on independence mimicked the Tories, the national leaflets were rubbish and the leader lost her seat. But he sees hope too

Let's be grateful for small mercies. Roughly one in every ten electors in Scotland voted Lib Dem, which is more than for some time. We went into the election with four seats, and emerged with four seats. We have recovered our position as third party in Scotland, and we were the only party to take a seat off the SNP.

For the rest, the story in Scotland was similar to that in England, with a sad retreat from the highs of the Euro-election. The party's ratings dropped almost as fast as those of the SNP rose. After the stupidity of helping to enable a general election which the Conservatives were bound to win, we were in freefall.

The national campaign in Scotland was essentially the backdrop to contesting five by-elections, four of which we won, and one we lost. The outstanding result of the night was undoubtedly Wendy Chamberlain's win in North East Fife, recovering a seat that has been important to Liberalism and its leaders for a century or more. This win was achieved after enormous amounts of hard work over many months by a single-minded candidate and keen Lib Dems from the constituency and nearby seats. The election campaign itself was a textbook example of meticulous organisation, run with enthusiasm by Kevin Lang who so nearly won Edinburgh North in 2010.

PRECARIOUS POSITION

Holding a seat is often harder than winning one, and credit goes to Alistair Carmichael and Jamie Stone for retaining the party's grip on the North Highlands and Islands. They faced strong SNP challenges, emerging in a more precarious position than before. Christine Jardine increased her majority in Edinburgh West, with a strong campaign inspired by the tireless Caron Lindsay (no relation). She was helped by support from former Labour voters, with the compliment returned in Edinburgh South, Labour's sole Scottish win.

The saddest result of the night was the loss of East Dunbartonshire, where Jo Swinson's 2017 majority of more than 5,000 was wiped out by a narrow SNP majority of only 149. Clearly much of the reason for this was that, as leader, Jo spent time campaigning around the country rather than focussing on holding her own seat.

She had to contend with a campaign on social media and elsewhere complaining that she was no longer local, since moving her home to the south of England. SNP victor Amy Callaghan called her a "pop-up MP", and said: "I've been there for this community and she hasn't."

But that is only part of the story. Lib Dems underestimated the SNP candidate. Twelve years younger than Jo, she was astute, ruthless, and familiar with issues of poverty and inequality from work on the children's panel. Her campaign focussed on the NHS and austerity, and emphasised Jo's role in supporting austerity economics during the coalition.

Jo's campaign, lacking a manager with experience of winning, faltered in a way that rhymed with the national campaign. Activists, perhaps put off by her enthusiasm for pushing nuclear buttons, went there in insufficient numbers and it was realised too late that victory was slipping from her grasp. The fall in the Lib Dem vote, the rise in the SNP vote, and the static nature of the Conservative vote were, interestingly, almost identical in East Dunbartonshire and in Orkney and Shetland, but of course the island constituency started from a stronger position.

Across the rest of Scotland our vote rose, but by less than in England. The national campaign in Scotland was inexplicably bland, often negative, and wary of emphasising specific policies. We came across as "Conservative-Lite" rather than radical. Non-target seats were hung out to dry, deprived of finance and information, which was a serious mistake as the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections will be held under a proportional system of voting, so our support needs to be spread across the country.

Candidates had often been parachuted in at the last minute, their arrival delayed further by tortuous selection processes. The coloured leaflet produced for them resembled the weekly circular from Farmfoods. It was headed with a picture of Boris Johnson, then one of Jeremy Corbyn, then one of Nicola Sturgeon, and finally one of Jo Swinson, captioned with the words "Make it Stop". Quite!

Instead of clear policy objectives, reasons given for voting Lib Dem included "The Liberal Democrats are winning across the country"; "Membership is at a record high"; and "a fresh start for the UK". One wonders if any of this rubbish had been past a focus group before publication.

Willie Rennie worked hard and seemed inexhaustible, as always. He made a huge contribution in North East Fife. But gone was the cheeky positivity of years past, and photo opportunities usually had him indulging in odd stunts with no obvious connection to politics or our campaigns.

He (and others) campaigned tirelessly, but they campaigned about the wrong things. Too often, we seemed to be talking about things that mattered only to Lib Dems.

Willie's repeated message "No to a second independence referendum", was a serious miscalculation on three separate fronts. First, it was negative when we needed to be positive. Second, voters saw inconsistency in our encouraging a second referendum on Europe while opposing the same opportunity on independence. Third, it was an exact echo of what the Conservatives were saying, and so further deepened distrust of us.

If the party is to have a better future in Scotland, much has to change, and to change quickly. There must be no rewards for failure, and there should be rapid recognition and emulation of those who engineered good results. We should start by learning the importance of holding seats once we've won them. Our parliamentary party would be stronger if we now held even the few seats we won in 2015 and since. So our first priority in Scotland should be to ensure that we hold Orkney and Shetland, and Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross. Any risk register for the party should have the possible loss of these seats at its head. After that (but only after that) we should prioritise re-capturing East Dunbartonshire, presumably with a strong local candidate.

We then need to take a long hard look at why we have allowed our former strength in the Borders and northeast Scotland to evaporate. These areas, like the Highlands and Islands, are culturally distinct from the rest of Scotland. All are areas where we have been able to make impressive gains in the past. Because party organisation was allowed to wither, seats that were once Lib Dem strongholds have now been won by the Conservatives. If we had held or won only one seat in the north-east and one in the Borders, we would now be Scotland's second party in Parliament.

Our third priority should therefore be to focus effort on winning back seats in each of these areas. One strategy could be to link the regional distinctiveness of these areas with our theme of decentralisation (an Achilles Heel for both SNP and Conservatives) but for this to succeed candidates will need to recognise and articulate the special concerns of these areas.

We need to match suitable candidates to constituencies at a far earlier stage and with much less bureaucracy. We particularly need to identify possible winners with some charisma who are prepared to work up a constituency over more than one election, and find ways of supporting them with finance and organisational help. Without new wins in hitherto unexpected places and ways of identifying where our voters are, we shall not challenge SNP dominance in Scotland.

RETHINK INDEPENDENCE

We must also re-think how Scottish Liberal Democrats engage with the debate on Scottish independence. We need to accept that for every Scottish voter who backed us, five preferred the SNP. Joining with the Conservatives in grumbling about another referendum makes us look like the knight in Monty Python and the Holy Grail who continues his futile bombast even after all his limbs have been severed.

One view is that electoral history in Scotland is beginning to resemble that in Ireland over a century ago, and that nationalist hegemony in Scotland will remain until independence is achieved.

That view is fortified by the tensions that are bound to arise from the actions in Scotland of a Johnson government with no local mandate, and particularly from Scotland being dragged out of the EU against its wishes without even the limited safeguards being offered to Northern Ireland.

Instead of negative, grudging opposition to giving people a new choice on independence now that circumstances have changed, we should be putting forward a positive and attractive alternative. Fortunately there is one readily to hand. Federalism was a feature of Liberal manifestos until quite recently but lately it has been mysteriously submerged. It has been mentioned more by the Labour Party in Scotland than by Lib Dems over the last couple of years. It would be interesting to explore exactly why this has been the case.

Now that devolution is well-established in Scotland and Wales, and developing in London and Northern Ireland, a federal union makes more sense than ever. Lib Dems have a unique selling point in federalism, one that gives Scotland equality with the other countries of the UK but without the separation, border controls and currency problems that go with independence. The difficulty remains the one identified by that great Liberal, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, in 1889: "that Scottish Home Rule involves English Home Rule, and that not one in a thousand Englishmen has ever grasped the idea of having a local [English] Parliament, as apart from the common Imperial Parliament, so that Scottish Home Rule must wait until the sluggish mind of John Bull is educated up to that point."

I started by enumerating small mercies so let me end by listing small hopes. The 2019 election left us with four parliamentary seats in Scotland and a couple of second places to work on.

There is a residue of goodwill towards us in the Borders and the northeast which, with efficient organisation, could eventually be turned back into votes. We have learnt what doesn't work for us, and we should have the courage to abandon it. We know that we succeed as a centre-left party, but we fail when we present ourselves as centre-right. We need to return to the joyful, positive, left-leaning optimism of Ashdown and Kennedy rather than perpetually grumbling about Labour and the SNP.

There will be a general election for the Scottish Parliament in 2021. That is a huge opportunity. We can choose to carry on as we have in the last three general elections and get the same result. Or we can make radical changes to the way we work from now on and succeed.

Nigel Lindsay was the first Liberal elected to Aberdeen City Council and was an author of *The Little Yellow Book: Reclaiming the Liberal Democrats for the People*

HOW THE WEST WAS LOST

Over-emphasis on Brexit helped to throw away what was once the Liberal Democrats' strongest region, says Theo Butt Philip

Liberal Democrats and Liberals have always done well in the south west – it has been the part of England which has most consistently delivered support for us. From our revival in the 1950s to very recently the south west (especially Devon and Cornwall) has been our heartland.

Torrington, North Devon, Bodmin, North Cornwall and Truro were the five south west seats which returned Liberal MPs prior to the Liberal-SDP Alliance (Truro was the only one which remained Liberal in 1979 when, as region's most prominent Liberal MP was awaiting trial for murder, the party suffered perhaps predictably poor results).

In 1983 our success spread into to Somerset, with Paddy Ashdown's victory in Yeovil and in 1992 the party's net spread wider still taking in the more metropolitan seats of Bath and Cheltenham.

All this helped prepare the ground 1997 when the party won four seats in Cornwall (St Ives, Truro & St Austell, South East Cornwall and North Cornwall), three in Devon (North Devon, Torrington & West Devon, and Torbay), five in Somerset (Yeovil, Taunton, Somerton & Frome, Weston-super-Mare and Bath), together with the Bristol-fringe seat of Northavon (later Thornbury and Yate) and the Gloucestershire seat of Cheltenham.

In the following 13 years, we went on to win many other south west seats: Teignbridge and Mid Dorset & North Poole in 2001, a clean sweep of Cornwall in 2005, Bristol West in 2005 and Wells and Chippenham in 2010.

RURAL AND ISOLATED

It is particularly noticeable that our success was concentrated in the more rural and isolated communities of Cornwall, Devon and (to an extent) Somerset, although over time we have held one or more constituencies in every county in the south west – it was never as concentrated in the likes of Gloucestershire or Wiltshire.

Constituencies such as Bath and Cheltenham, although definitely part of the south west – have far better links to London and other major cities than Devon and Cornwall – where a trip to London could still involve a sleeper train or a short flight.

The 2015 election saw us lose every seat in the south west (despite still being the English region with the highest Liberal Democrat vote).

As a resident of Somerset my nearest Liberal Democrat MP was either in Ceredigion or Carshalton & Wallington, there was certainly no one in my own or any nearby county sitting on the Lib Dem benches in the commons.

Since 2015 our recovery in the south west (as in much of the rest of the country) has been limited. We managed to regain Bath – one of the most affluent seats in the region - but we have failed to win back any

of those less affluent, more isolated seats in Devon and Cornwall which used to be our heartlands.

The survival of the Liberals (and Liberal Democrats) in these areas during the 20th century was in no small part connected to the lack of large industry and strong trades unions (to give Labour a foothold) and a distance from the centre which saw people mistrustful of central authority both politically and religiously (voting Liberal and worshipping at the Methodist chapel). I have often heard of Liberal Associations in the south west where the number of branches was exactly the same as the number of Methodist chapels in the constituency).

It is perhaps that mistrust of central authority which led to the relatively high levels of Euroscepticism (as evidenced by votes for Ukip at European elections and to leave the EU in the referendum) in seats which at general and local elections were returning Liberal Democrats.

These seats had in the past delivered strong showings for us in the European elections – it was Somerset and North Devon and Cornwall & West Plymouth which gave the Lib Dems our first MEPs in 1994 (with Devon & East Plymouth and Dorset and East Devon narrowly missing out).

But over the following 25 years Euroscepticism grew – much as our party decided to react to this by talking about almost anything other than Europe and was then surprised that, having failed to make the case, we lost the argument.

Nonetheless, at general and local elections, our south west heartland voters stuck by us, knowing that we were the ones who would best stand up for their communities.

We had MPs and councillors with strong records as local champions. But there was more to it than that – it wasn't just that our MPs were the voices shouting loudest for their communities and delivering the most leaflets.

In these communities there were large numbers of people who were instinctively in sympathy with a lot of the things Liberals and Lib Dems stood for: a belief in localism, scepticism of central authorities, social justice, investment in public services.

At the recent election we seem to have put too little emphasis on the issues which mattered to people who might have voted Lib Dem, but who either disagreed with us on Brexit or for whom Brexit just wasn't that important.

If our appeal was to be limited just to seats where the electorate was pro-Remain, then it was inevitable that the south west would not do well.

It is estimated that just 13 of the south west's 55 constituencies voted Remain in 2016 – of which just three have ever returned Liberal Democrat MPs: Bath, Cheltenham and Bristol West.

Bath remained Lib Dem, Cheltenham was a near miss, in Bristol West we withdrew in favour of the Greens as part of the Unite to Remain deal. Outside these seats, the only constituencies in the south west where we came within 10,000 votes of winning were those in which the former MP was standing again: St Ives (majority 4,280) and Wells (majority 9,991).

The seats we have won in the past in England have fallen into two broad categories: isolated rural/coastal (North Cornwall, North Devon, Berwick-upon-Tweed) or affluent suburbia/medium sized-cities (Bath, Twickenham, Cambridge).

There is nothing new about this – the 1962 Liberal by-election victory in suburban Orpington (credited with marking the start of the Liberal revival) was foreshadowed by the 1958 Liberal by-election victory in rural Torrington, Devon.

At the 2016 European referendum, on the whole the metropolitan seats voted Remain whilst the rural voted Leave (and certainly wouldn't prioritise stopping Brexit). By turning ourselves into a virtual single-issue party, we appeared to have abandoned half the coalition of seats on which we have previously relied for much of our parliamentary representation.

Few would argue against the decision the party made in the wake of the 2016 referendum, to continue campaigning to remain in the EU – successful or not it was the right position to take.

But while that position was right, it became too dominant over the following three years, so that very few people knew anything that we had to offer other than stopping Brexit. Hardly very helpful in places where stopping Brexit isn't a key priority.

Come the general election, too many voters in our former heartlands didn't think we had anything to offer that they wanted.

None of this should really come as a surprise. We have allowed ourselves to be painted as part of the "metropolitan liberal elite" doubtless because many of us are, but we have traditionally been and represented more than that.

Perhaps this refocusing on London and the Home Counties reflects what the party has now become, with an increased appeal but to a narrower group (the affluent and educated in London and the Home Counties). Our membership - in particular our new membership - is especially concentrated in London and the south east and a quick glance at the recent Federal Board elections shows no one from the south west was elected, while more than half the 15 places up for election went to Londoners and of those not from London only one came from more than about 60 miles of Westminster.

The question is: between now and the next general election, will the post-Brexit Lib Dems be able to reconnect with the areas from which we used to draw so much strength?

"We have allowed ourselves to be painted as part of the 'metropolitan liberal elite' doubtless because many of us are, but we have traditionally been and represented more than that"

Are we happy merely to focus our efforts on the more affluent and highly-educated seats of the Home Counties, or do we still believe we have a role as rural England's alternative to the Conservatives?

The answer to this question has two important ramifications: Firstly it will determine what sort of party we are going to be – a party for a small and affluent portion of London and the Home Counties or one with ambitions to appeal more widely again, to

the public sector workers and rural poor of the south west and further afield.

ABANDONED HEARTLAND

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, if we give up on our south west heartlands can anyone else win them from the Conservatives or are we just abandoning a large part of the electoral map to be forever Tory? If we are then I can see the chances of depriving Johnson and co of their majority in 2024 rapidly diminishing.

The south west is an area where we have won in the past and can win again. We made significant gains in Devon and Somerset at last year's local elections, when Cornwall did not have elections.

Our party still has an appeal in these areas, but our focus on Brexit seemingly at the expense of all else did not. We must reconnect with our heartlands and return to talking about issues which matter to people in our former heartlands if we want to be a party with a national reach again and if we are to play our part in removing the Tories from office at the next general election.

Theo Butt Philip was the Liberal Democrat candidate in Bridgwater and West Somerset in 2010 and 2015.

MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

Talk in public relations-speak and no-one will understand you. Liberal Democrats must learnt speak clearly again, says Tom Barney

The failure of the 2019 general election campaign is just the latest instance of the party's long-term failure to catch the public imagination. One aspect of this is the way we address the public, in the double sense of the language the party uses, and the way what we have to say is propagated.

GK Chesterton, in his essay *A Glimpse of My Country*, argued that a problem with this country then was: "Its types do not typify". That is, its politicians, publicly at least, spoke worse, and appealed to baser instincts, than would an ordinary person. This is still true today, and sadly as true of our party as of the country as a whole – and this is especially galling when there has been such a great increase in membership, so that we now have a large pool of talent which surely does typify people of Liberal instincts. This pool of talent is not being properly used.

Yet the party needs a multiplicity of voices. It matters greatly who leads the party and how they go about it, but we have recently seemed to want a leader who will embody the party, one who will take us to the heights single-handedly. We are bound to be disappointed in this. Yet we tend to blame only the leader when things go wrong. If the party were habitually represented by many prominent voices this tendency would be greatly lessened. It would also ensure less damage would be done should the leader depart suddenly (as has already happened three times this century).

A wide range and variety of public voices for the party – some of them extra-parliamentary – would also get it noticed more easily and make it more part of the social fabric. We once had such voices. Even when the party was at its lowest ebb, people like Violet Bonham Carter, Ludovic Kennedy and John Arlott were identified as Liberals and spoke and wrote publicly and eloquently; as, later, did such as Nancy Seear, Conrad Russell and Tim Garden. Where are their successors today? Potential successors must exist, but we need a systematic effort to find and encourage them.

One advantage of looking to the wider membership for talented spokespeople is that most members of the party have other work and interests besides politics. We do well to ask: what do they know of politics who only politics know? Wide interests, and the wide social contacts they bring, give us a sense of proportion, encourage us to think from a greater number of angles, and help us to use livelier and more attractive language than political parties have in recent times been inclined to do.

Which brings me to the matter of the language itself. Chesterton had visited a debating club and been pleasantly surprised by the high standard of speaking there. "The members of this club were of all shades of opinion, yet there was not one speech which gave me

that jar of unreality which I often have in listening to the ablest men uttering my own opinion".

DISPIRITING SLOGANS

This is the crux. We may usually agree with what our own side says, but it still sounds dreary, and removed from the way most of us speak and write. Can there be many things more dispiriting than the slogans devised by our official campaigns, or the arch messages sent to members in the names of spokespeople who patently did not write them?

But this is what we must expect when communications are in the hands of a few, and those working in a bunker. We urgently need to free ourselves from the public relations industry, which from its honourable beginnings in the 1920s has become a fraud: its practitioners claim expertise in persuasion while sounding quite repellently unlike the people they reckon to persuade.

The wider membership of the party, who joined because they share its values, are far more likely than professional PR people to speak straightforwardly about those values and relate them to people's lives and experience. We should always bear in mind that, as Orwell put it: "A tremendous advantage is gained simply by not trying to be clever." We should speak with straightforward logic about what we propose and why; but, unlike the party's policy papers, it should be lucid, concise and memorable. The public is perfectly capable of understanding and relating to complex arguments if they are clearly put. And the elegant and clear presentation of evidence is better than any slogan or declamation at establishing a case and putting opponents on the defensive. But our expression (as well as our proposals) should also be bold and forthright. We need to arouse people's passions, and their curiosity about the Liberal alternative.

We should also allow and indeed encourage our spokespeople to speak for themselves. The language they use should be the idiosyncratic voice of the person speaking or writing. I believe the public likes "All things counter, original, spare, strange", and takes to its heart anyone who shows this kind of originality.

This applies also to social media. John Rowe Townsend, contemplating the future of children's literature, once argued that, despite prophecies of its demise, the book would survive because, unlike TV and films, it is not really a mass medium. A novel can break even on relatively few sales, and can therefore appeal to minority interests. Social media are not really mass media either, so why do we so often behave as if they were? Users are forever urged merely to transmit official material; they should rather be urged to devise their own. They will know better than anyone how to appeal to the particular communities they belong to. These appeals to many small communities

then become parts of a larger whole.

We are often told that a political party is not a mere debating society, but it is not only fighting elections to win which keeps it from being one. There is also the process of unacknowledged legislation. This is of two kinds. One is the overt engagement in polemic and argument in order to create an alternative, Liberal, climate of opinion. This is what Keynes and Beveridge did; the latter achieved the rare success of having HMSO publish a bestseller. The psychologist Liam Hudson once argued that the “stuff and substance” of intellectual traditions “lies in their control over the simplest levels of mental functioning – what we attend to, and what we dismiss out of hand”. We should look to create a mental world in which Liberal values are instinctively attended to and appreciated.

We should pursue this partly through our local campaigning. Paddy Ashdown, when first in parliament, spoke in an interview of lowering the threshold of people’s tolerance of the conditions under which they are governed. This should be the aim.

This kind of unacknowledged legislation can also be pursued behind the scenes. The development of policy and doctrine – of an alternative view of how society should be organised and institutions run – also contributes to the creation of a climate of opinion. It fuels the activity of our campaigning. Like our more public activity, it should be encouraged in both official and unofficial forms throughout the party.

The second kind of unacknowledged legislation – the one that Shelley, who originated the notion, had in mind – is to be found in the arts and learning. These are things Liberals should naturally encourage and support. It is their great virtue that they open minds to subtleties, to originality and to felicity of expression. They promote tolerance and open-mindedness. “The central function of imaginative literature”, wrote William Empson, “is to make you realise that other people act on moral convictions different from your own.” The arts and learning indeed expand the range of meanings it is possible to perceive. The practice and the appreciation of both should be spread as widely as possible, wherever we have political power, or can use members concerned in these fields, both professional and amateur.

INOCULATE AGAINST CLICHE

This would help to spread liberal attitudes among the wider public. It would also inoculate people against cliché, cant and the narrow-minded and intolerant view of the world that so many in politics and the press would like to foist on them and restrict them to. Our party works, not only for its own electoral advantage, but for a Liberal society. This kind of popular education should certainly be among our tools.

We need not wait for any official instruction, encouragement or approval to begin doing any of this. When have we ever? The Liberal local government revival was achieved by talented amateurs who worked on their own initiative and wrote their own scripts.

“Public relations people claim expertise in persuasion while sounding quite repellently unlike the people they reckon to persuade”

Some of them – see for example Martin Kyrle’s recent volumes of autobiography – bypassed and sidelined the dead wood among the official postholders in their local parties. Local parties were revived; but we should never forget that all this activity was the salvation of the national party too.

There should be a far greater ferment in the party: more

indignation and clamour in our campaigning, and more thinking, discussion, writing and publication by party organisations and by individual members. The party should indeed consist of a carnival of its members. Thirty-five years ago I would have said it was this. Despite the recent great increase in membership we seem to have lost it.

We cannot be complacent; the barbarians are inside the walls. But the facile slogans of three general election campaigns, and the inexorable slow grind of the policymaking wheels (now obsolete, I’d say) suggest we have been just that. All of us in the party need to find a sense of adventure, optimism and joie-de-vivre – and find it for ourselves, in our own way, not take it from above. Without that we are unlikely to campaign enthusiastically. Above all, without it we cannot hope to arouse such a sense in the country, or any sense of a better alternative.

I believe there is a Liberal spirit in so many people who have not recognised it, because it lies dormant. It is our job to awaken it. This we can do if we, the membership, recognise that it is the job of us all, and speak for the party with the unforced idiomatic ease that in our everyday lives we naturally speak to our colleagues, families and friends.

Tom Barney is a member of Lancaster and Morecambe Liberal Democrats, who has taught linguistics in higher education

FIGHTING THE BATTLE OF BEACONSFIELD

Sarah Green reports on the multi-party effort to elect Remain rebel Dominic Grieve, a former Conservative minister, in his Beaconsfield seat

When Dominic Grieve gave his concession speech in the early hours of Friday 13 December he thanked the local Liberal Democrats, who didn't stand a candidate in Beaconsfield. This was no tokenistic thank you.

Plenty has already been written about the Unite to Remain project. The decision to enter into such a deal was to my mind the right one. How that process was handled internally will no doubt feature in the upcoming general election review. The devil was always going to be in the detail.

While some local parties had understandable reasons for objecting to or even resisting a request not to stand a candidate, the Liberal Democrats in Beaconsfield needed no persuasion. What is not widely known is just how integral their support actually was to Dominic Grieve's campaign.

Our candidate, Rob Castell, willingly took the decision to stand aside, with the full support of his local party.

He heartily endorsed Dominic Grieve, recorded videos for social media and actively campaigned for him. Grieve's agent was a prominent local Liberal Democrat member who now has boxes of excess literature stored in his garage. The local party chair was unfailingly practical and helped to oversee the clerical operation (which at one point took over her kitchen and dining room). The constituency was divided up into areas with 'team captains', some of whom were Liberal Democrats. Local members took the opportunity presented to them and threw themselves into canvassing, leafletting and labelling.

In short, the campaign itself simply wouldn't have functioned as effectively as it did, as quickly as it did, without the active support and involvement of the local Liberal Democrat team. I feel it is only right that the wider party knows about and recognises their contribution.

They weren't alone. It was a truly cross-party effort – I spoke to volunteers who were active supporters of the Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Green Party, SNP and Plaid Cymru. This particular independent candidate attracted hundreds of supporters every day from the constituency and beyond. The vast majority of volunteers weren't members of a political party and this was their first election campaign. It was truly uplifting to campaign alongside such a wide variety of volunteers and to pool our collective ideas and experiences.

The independent nature of the campaign afforded the core team a level of freedom that was refreshing and, frankly, fun. It was an overwhelmingly positive experience. But it was not without challenges. What campaigners under the banner and protection of an established political party can take for granted we simply could not.

There was no pre-existing branding, no literature templates, no bulk-buy deals to take advantage of, no telephone banking facilities – or indeed telephone numbers - no data team to call on, no existing database to use, no walks to print off. And crucially no national campaign spend.

The core team along with the nuts and bolts of an election campaign had to be put together from scratch and I cannot emphasise how challenging that can be.

Despite the disappointing result, seeds of change for the future may have taken root. Hundreds of volunteers new to campaigning took part in an exciting election campaign. Across the constituency there are now groups of like-minded people who enjoyed working together. Some have now decided to continue that work to help improve their communities. I can't wait to see how that develops.

The fate of Change UK and the candidates who stood as independents in the recent general election is a stark reminder of just how hard it is to break through in our existing electoral system.

At the count in Beaconsfield, I watched as the votes piled up for the Conservative candidate. Despite the best possible candidate, great literature and a small army of committed volunteers we were simply unable to break the system.

The candidate himself was unfailingly professional, upbeat, willing to listen and open to ideas and suggestions. It was a privilege to be part of his team.

I never thought I'd say this, but I have been inspired by a rebel in tweed. My sincere hope is that those who took part in the campaign are equally motivated to take what they learnt and use it to see liberal values in action and Liberal Democrats elected in the not too distant future.

Sarah Green is a member of the Liberator Collective.

HOLD TIGHT PLEASE

The fate of a London bus gives a clue to the new prime minister, says Mark Smulian

Bear with me non-Londoners, new boarding arrangements for some of the capital's buses really do concern you, and not just because London's regulated bus system is serving as a template for other cities that want to improve public transport.

The New Bus for London, otherwise known as the Boris Bus, was dreamed up by the new Conservative prime minister when he was mayor of London, and its fate gives an insight into what to expect from him.

Far from being a man of radical action based on ideology, it's hard to point to anything substantive Johnson did in his eight years as mayor that was not connected with

personal showmanship - preferably indulged at dubious public expense.

The Boris Bus came with three doors, front, centre and middle and initially restored the lost role of bus conductor.

These replaced the widely-disliked 'Bendy Buses' introduced by his Labour predecessor Ken Livingstone, on which passengers were jammed together upright with no contact with the driver.

Johnson won partly on a pledge to get rid of them. But instead of replacing them with normal buses he had his own bus designed to mimic the defunct Routemaster, which had been beloved for decades by Londoners.

Conductors soon vanished as too costly and the back doors might as well have had a 'board here for free' sign such as the obvious opportunity for fare dodging.

Transport for London is now to block the rear doors and use the front for entry and the middle for exit.

The whole thing was typical Johnson - expensive, flashy, ill-thought out and of little long term use.

But it got Johnson publicity and popularity, which are what really count with him.

There's more. A cable car runs from the Dome to the Excel exhibition centre in east London, which attracted just 1.30m passengers in 2019, this in a city of eight million residents and countless millions of visitors and compared with 5.0m daily journeys on the underground.

Johnson of course made an exhibition of himself aboard this white elephant and left London with the bills.

He was, mercifully, stopped by losing the 2016 election to Labour's Sadiq Khan from wasting millions on an entirely pointless Garden Bridge across the Thames, the brainchild of his friend Joanna Lumley.

A review for Khan by Margaret Hodge, former Labour chair of the public accounts committee, concluded: "Decisions on the Garden Bridge were driven by electoral cycles rather than value for money. From its inception when there was confusion as to its purpose, through a weak business case that was constructed after contracts had been let and money had been spent, little regard has been had to value for money."

"What started life as a project costing an estimated £60m is likely to end up costing over £200m."

Johnson may yet face embarrassment over both this and London taxpayers' mysterious funding of his 'friend' Jennifer Arcuri.

On the other hand, Johnson kept Livingstone's public transport subsidies, support for the London living wage and bike hire scheme (though renamed the latter after himself),

Apart from partly

dismantling Livingstone's neighbourhood policing system it's hard to point to anything much that Johnson did as mayor that was not some self-serving stunt involving a white elephant.

He revelled in the 2012 Olympic Games, enjoying for example - when most politicians would be mortified - being photographed stranded on a zip wire.

Johnson wants to be liked and he wants to give the public circuses - such as the 2022 'Brexit Festival' - if not much bread.

His term as London mayor suggests he is propelled by personal ambition, popularity and attention-seeking, not ideology. Look for plenty of stunts and waste masking a lack of substance.



Mark Smulian is a member of the Liberator Collective

A SAUNTER INTO FANTASY-LAND

Promoting Jo Swinson as the next prime minister was folly, and the leaflets to back this up campaign were rubbish, says Les Farris

There were some considerable and basic errors of judgment at national and local level in the December 2019 general election campaign.

At national level the decision to promote Jo Swinson almost exclusively as the face of the LibDems was ill-judged. This was a fashionable strategy in all parties and, incidentally, one which contributed mightily to the demolition of Labour.

Equally serious for the Lib Dems because the media spotlight focused on a leader who had held office in the Cameron-led coalition government and who had voted for swingeing cuts to public services and for such austerity measures as the truly dreadful bedroom tax.

Swinson has subsequently apologised, but the taint of the Coalition damaged the party's prospects up and down the country and the Lib Dems are still widely seen as merely a junior party to the Tories - a perception exploited in full by their opponents at this election and the Tory press. And how could younger voters possibly support the Lib Dems given the about-face on tuition fees?

The advice given to Swinson to claim that she was a prime minister in waiting was a saunter into the land of pure fantasy almost on a par with David Steel's exhortation in 1981 when the Alliance was formed to candidates to "go back to your constituencies and prepare for government".

Every time Swinson made her claim to the highest office a large slice of whatever credibility she possessed was cut away. A close focus on the party leaders at this general election campaign could have been anticipated and the Lib Dem leader, although obviously a courageous politician, would have benefitted from advice about varying her tone.

In the 2016 referendum, in my local constituency of Yeovil, the vote to leave the EU was over 57% despite the fact that far and away the largest local employer, with a workforce of around 3,000, is Leonardo, an Italian-owned helicopter manufacturer which took over Westland a few years ago.

So it came as little surprise that at this election the widely criticised sitting Tory MP was victorious for a third time, this time with a majority of over 16,000. The election-winning machine built up by Paddy Ashdown before and after his election as MP in 1983, and maintained by David Laws until his defeat at the 2015 general election, does not appear, on the face of it, to have recovered at all.

We did not see the Lib Dem candidate in this part of the constituency and I was told that much of his campaigning was carried out over the internet. Laudable, of course, to update campaign techniques

but not to dismiss or downplay proven methods. (Reminiscent of the SDP's entry into politics?)

A deluge of leaflets came through our letterbox, most of them poorly written with little content. They seem to have contributed very little to the outcome but the cost must have been considerable. One of the country's most experienced constituency agents lives in Yeovil but his advice about the campaign was never sought at any time and that, to my mind, says it all.

It is time to recruit more talented and experienced organisers and campaigners at national and local level to train and take advantage of what I understand to be a healthy level of party membership. And it's time to sideline all those tarred with the destructive brush of the Cameron/Clegg coalition government to avoid compromising future election campaigns.

Well, at least there are probably at least 10 long years in which to recover.

Les Farris was an area agent for the Liberal party and press and information officer for it sWestern Counties region)

DON'T PUT IT THROUGH A LETTERBOX

Piles of leaflets once worked, but they're counter-productive now, and so are mass phone calls. says Mick Taylor

There are two bases on which those that direct these things organise Liberal Democrat campaigns: there is no limit to the number of leaflets and contacts that should be made; Connect is the best thing since sliced bread and wins elections.

I believe the 2019 election disproved both of these, but there was plenty of evidence beforehand of the problems.

Let's look at leaflets. In a number of election campaigns in 2019, especially parliamentary by-elections, I was told very forcibly by a large number of electors that they had been put off voting Lib Dem because of the sheer volume of repetitive leaflets that we had put through their doors.

This was especially true in Brecon and Radnor, where the campaign started to slip away from us in the last few days and quite a number of people we had down as supporters told us to get lost on polling day. These included lifelong Liberal supporters, who were utterly fed up with the unbelievable amount of paper we rammed through the doors of this large rural constituency.

One of the problems of campaigning is to balance paper with door knocking and it seems to me that because a lot of our helpers are reluctant to canvass, we use delivery as a substitute, instead of offering training and encouragement to members and supporters in order to get them out knocking on doors. The balance between leaflets and canvassing is, in my view, something the party gets wrong. When we started doing lots of leaflets, it worked. Now, it clearly doesn't and it's time for a rethink.

I believe that in many areas, especially target seats, we put out lots of leaflets that are basically repetitive and quite frankly insult peoples' intelligence. Somehow it is deemed too difficult for voters to understand complex political arguments, so we simply use platitudes. I think the party needs to have a serious rethink of what it sends out in its name and to start treating the electorate as adults. It also needs to think much more objectively about quantity. This is before we even get to the message, which would be the subject of another article.

That brings us to Connect and the claim that this is a wonderful tool that wins elections. There are fundamental flaws to this programme. In my town, not in any sense a rural area, up to 20% of houses do not have geocodes. This means that you can't use the delivery, canvassing or knocking up parts of the Connect programme as they stand, because they leave out houses without geocodes. You have to use less than satisfactory 'work-arounds'.

This is before we start with the utterly farcical turfs or walks, which appears to have to be redone every time you use the programme and even then your printout or Minivan round is often still in numerical order rather than in walk order. In Burnley, during the election printed rounds were in the order I wanted, but Minivan was not.

In those parts of the country with poor mobile access you are left without updating of canvassing or knocking up for lengthy periods and sometimes can't get data at all. Because Connect data only exists in a cloud, you can't even rely on it to stay on your mobile device, because it's never stored there anyway.

Now one of the features of Connect is phone banking. Here, too, because of indiscriminate phone calls, phone canvassers were being roundly abused by people complaining that they were the eighth, ninth or tenth person who had called and they had already said they would or wouldn't be voting for us and that we really must be desperate.

I suspect that this arose because of poor guidance, that resulted in lots of messages being left, otherwise how would electors know we had called before? Either that or Connect doesn't properly record and store responses to phone banking.

I assume that the hopelessly over-optimistic messages sent to candidates and campaigners during the general election, were based on data from Connect and that it was this data that was used to decide to abandon a whole swathe of seats, previously top targets like Leeds North West, to focus on more prospective seats like Sheffield Hallam, none of which were won. Indeed, there must be a further serious question as to why the party didn't see Jo Swinson's defeat coming and use Connect to save the day?

There is no space here to debate why we won Richmond, St Albans and North East Fife, whilst losing Carshalton and North Norfolk along with every single MP we gained by defection or in by-elections, as well as our leader, but someone ought to be asking.

I realise that huge amounts of money have been spent on Connect. That seems to make it impossible for those running it to admit that it is an almighty cockup that needs to be abandoned. Loss of face, like losing seats, is difficult. Many of us have recovered from both and survived. It's time for a radical rethink of our campaigning fundamentals.

Mick Taylor is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Todmorden

BEYOND THE TRIBES

Britain's role in the world, the climate crisis and redistribution of wealth all call for political realignment, says Iain Brodie-Browne

The Social Liberal Forum (SLF) has a meeting at York 'After the shambles what is to be done?'

Chief whip Alistair Carmichael is kicking off the discussion and I am told he has robust views. If the debate to date is a guide it risks being conducted in an endless stream of clichés: heads must roll, people must fall on their swords, difficult conversations have to be had.

I understand and share the anger. There were mistakes and our party underperformed. I know significant changes must be made at both an operational and political level.

What is to be done? The place to begin is with the ideas, the values and the principles - the strategy will follow.

There are three big issues that urgently need our attention: Britain's role and purpose on the world stage, the climate emergency and the maldistribution of wealth and power in our society.

We are faced with another five years of Conservative rule. This is not the party of Major, MacMillan, Maudling or even Baldwin. This is a ruthlessly ideological group who owe more to the American Republican right with their culture wars and crude nationalism than to One Nation Conservatism. In the face of that challenge we cannot sit on the sidelines.

PEACE THREATENED

The belief in a rules based international order where war is replaced by law is genuinely under threat. Putin, America First and a new major economic power in China none of whom play by the rules threatens peace. Our isolation since Brexit removes our influence and our ability to champion Liberal values when

2020 marks the sixtieth anniversary of the Liberal Assembly when there was, what one historian has described as a 'rout' of the extreme free marketeers, the likes of Oliver Smedley, Arthur Seldon and SW Alexander.

Many of them went on to set the Institute of Economic Affairs and to provide intellectual succour for Thatcherism. Grimond chose to break them and membership of European Common Market was his tool. The party believed that political integration across Europe was intrinsically desirable. The Radical Reform Group (RRG), the SLF of its day, played a key part in combatting the anti-European free market ideas of the Smedleyites. William Wallace pointed out in a letter to The Journal of Liberal History how the activities of the RRG were important in assisting Grimond in reorientating the party. RRG provided a coherent alternative definition of Liberalism which was much closer to the radical Liberal tradition. Its members' instincts were antiauthoritarian and socially egalitarian.

The lesson I take from that episode is the need for a progressive leader and an active social liberal group in the party. A small party will always be prey to a well-funded group of individuals. You may be able to think of others who fit that pattern?

I digress, but the Liberal Democrats should not resile from the belief that our place is within the integrated and democratic Europe. It is only in that context that we can effectively influence policy on the environment, peace and security, economic reform - particularly in relation to multinational tech giants - and much else besides. Whether it was Gladstone declaring our place was at the heart of the concert of Europe or Grimond championing decolonisation, and the abandonment of the so-called independent nuclear deterrent, Liberals have opposed the nationalism that warps policy and leads to Suez and Brexit. It is not a 'Britain First' policy that will provide peace, prosperity and sustainability rather it is by breaking down the barriers between nation states.

The planet is ablaze. The science on climate change is clear. We need to act now. Not just nationally, but internationally. I am far from convinced that we have won the argument at home. We are all guilty of believing that everyone thinks like us. We mix with folk we agree with and often have little to do with others who see green measures as a cloak for tax rises and job losses. We need to cooperate with everyone who accepts the science to win the argument and to make the essential change now. There is no room for a tribal approach to this issue, the key to success is co-operation.

The third issue which should be at the heart of the current debate is the maldistribution of wealth and power. Liberal Democrats have always been good at laying out a programme for breaking up the concentration of political power: a written federal constitution with entrenched civil rights, home rule, enhanced local government, abolition of the House of Lords, Freedom of Information, electoral reform and so on.

It is a sign of how far we have yet to travel that the one candidate trying to become the leader of the Labour Party who endorsed such a programme could not even get himself nominated to go on the ballot paper.

Notwithstanding the difficulties we must continue to promote this agenda. The way we are governed is at the heart of why we are, as a group of nations and regions, dysfunctional. The winner takes all mentality, the lack of respect for dissent, seeing compromise as failure, short-termism and the exclusion of many of our citizen from participation in the decisions that impact on their lives is at the heart of our malaise.

Very often when well-meaning people advocate

‘progressive alliances’ they rather patronisingly assume that all we bring to the party is the package of constitutional reform. I disagree. It is also in our approach to economics that we can make a major contribution.

I am not talking about the libertarian, minimum state, extreme free marketeers who visit their misery on the party from time to time. I am talking about what the academic Stuart White has called Alternative Liberalism.

Writing on the Open Democracy website White argues: “The rich tradition of alternative liberalism has much to offer by way of solutions to inexorably widening inequality.” I would quibble with this tradition being other than mainstream, but after the coalition years where it appears to many that the poorest were punished for the financial crash, I understand why that might not be entirely obvious to those observing us.

The tradition goes back to JS Mill who advocated ‘co-operative production’, employee ownership in today’s language, as one of the ‘two great changes that will regenerate society’. The other was the emancipation of women. The ideas of profit sharing, co-ownership, workers’ co-operatives reverberate down the decades. They can be found in the Yellow Book 1928, they are central to the Ownership for All campaign started by the Young Liberals in the 1920s which continued for most of the 20th century. Jo Grimond was amongst the greatest advocates.

David Steel’s book *Partners for Progress* anticipates the impact of technology on skilled workers and argues for a substantial part of an employee’s income coming from profit sharing rather than wages. The book also contains an essay from the Nobel prize winning economist James Meade (who used to advise our party) with inventive ideas to break up large concentration of income and wealth which perpetuate class distinctions.

Paddy Ashdown’s book *Citizen’s Britain*, discusses universal basic income (UBI), participatory democracy, universal share ownership, and stakeholder capitalism and forms part of the Alternative Liberal tradition.

Liberal policy documents advocated reform of inheritance taxation, land tax and proposed universal inheritance schemes.

Grimond, in his promotion of the strategy of realignment of the left, speculated that co-operation with Labour could be based around ideas of workers’ ownership and workplace democracy which he rather provocatively aligned with syndicalism.

I joined the Liberal Party over 50 years ago. I have never seen Labour as a viable vehicle for the ‘widest possible distribution of wealth and power’. I joined in the aftermath of the Commonwealth Immigration Act, an openly racist piece of legislation.

I remember the Young Liberal campaign: Labour washes whiter. I do not need people to point out to me the nature of the Labour Party. I have lived and worked on Merseyside all my adult life. I understand what drove Luciana Berger, Jane Kennedy and Louise

“This is a ruthlessly ideological Conservative party which owes more to the American Republican right with their culture wars and crude nationalism than to One Nation Conservatism”

Elman from that party. I have sat in our council chamber and had to listen to Labour councillors rant on about class car and dismiss great tracts of Labour’s finest achievements as ‘before JC’.

WORST TRIUMVIRATE

The same is true on the Labour Right. The 2010 austerity manifesto has been erased from their history and has there been a worse triumvirate of home

secretaries than Blunkett, Straw and Reid? Their socially conservative and authoritarian instincts gave us policies like the cruel and futile war on drugs, 90 days detention without trial, mass snooping on internet communication and red mugs with slogans about immigration. Added to that there is the anti-Europeanism and the support for the Iraq war.

Electing Kier Starmer as leader will not rescued Labour. Across Europe social democratic parties are in decline. If the 21st century is to be a progressive era then we need a new alignment in politics, a new alliance of radical ideas, people and campaigns.

We are part of a different strand in politics which David Marquand has argued is based on “republican self-respect as opposed to monarchical servility, engaged civic activity versus slothful private apathy, and government by challenge and discussion rather than deference or conformism.”

The key issues that need our immediate attention are the climate emergency, Britain’s role in the world and the widest possible distribution of wealth and power.

None of this is possible if political tribalism amongst non-conservative citizens persists. If we advocate co-operation between nations and if we understand that the climate emergency requires cooperation it follows that the strategy to achieve those ends must also be co-operative. Notwithstanding all the difficulties it would be a failure of politics if we did not seriously set about forming those new alliances. Central to this approach must be a commitment to constitutional reform and specifically electoral reform. Without voting reform first past the post will deliver decade after decade of parliamentary majorities for the Conservative party and every five years we will hold a meeting to discuss ‘What is to be done after the shambles?’

Iain Brodie Browne is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Sefton and chairs the Social Liberal Forum. He writes in a personal capacity. <https://www.socialliberal.net/> Stuart Whites article can be found at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/alternative-liberal-solutions-to-economic-inequality>.

TRIUMPHS, FALSE DAWNS, DISASTERS AND LESSONS

Adrian Slade reflects on sixty years of general elections and think the Liberal Democrats should now identify with climate policy

When you have walked the streets as a candidate, canvasser, deliverer or all three in 16 general elections, 1 Greater London Council election and 17 borough elections, you have to keep reminding yourself that most general elections tend to end in disappointment or disaster for Liberals and later for Liberal Democrats too.

Overall, December 2019 was no exception. When hopes are high the electoral system works against us. When they are low the results disappoint even more. Now it has happened once again.

Luckily at least some activist enthusiasm is usually kept alive by success in a few seats. We had that this time in my area – Kingston and Twickenham held with substantially increased majorities, and, better still, Richmond Park, where our former MP Sarah Olney overturned the shallow Tory Zac Goldsmith's majority of 45 to win by nearly 8,000 votes. Sadly, despite a small handful of other holds and wins the party was left with just 11 seats, a result reminiscent of many previous years.

Disappointment and post mortems are in the air once again.

Activists with the longest memories well remember Eric Lubbock's amazing by-election win in Orpington in 1962 that was sadly followed two years later with a parliamentary gain of just three to a total of nine MPs. This did not take the party very far, however admirable a leader Jo Grimond was, and David Steel's excellent by-election win in 1965 was followed by only a marginal improvement to 12 seats in the 1966 election, not enough for Jo Grimond who resigned as leader after ten years in the job.

HOPE, DISASTER, TRIUMPH

The Thorpe years (1967-76) were a bewildering mix of hope, disaster, triumph and finally personal failure. The first three years promised well but ended in a catastrophic 1970 election won by Ted Heath, when the Liberal party was halved to six MPs, nearly losing its new leader in the process.

Yet in the next four years - perhaps a crumb of comfort for today - better party organisation, concentration on community politics, a number of by-election wins and the manifest failures of Heath's government helped to bring, a huge increase in the popularity of Thorpe, six million Liberal votes in the election of February 1974 (with an unfair total of just 14 seats) and a minority Labour government led by Harold Wilson. Sadly the party failed to capitalise on that in October 1974.

Neither Heath, Wilson nor Thorpe lasted much longer as leaders. Age and dementia caught up with Wilson and 'a very English scandal' finally caught up with Thorpe. By 1976 there were three new party leaders. Old Labour stager Jim Callaghan, a coiffed, softly-speaking and, at that stage, far-from-iron Tory lady named Margaret Thatcher and a young, bright and politically skilful David Steel.

To the later surprise of many, Steel's brave decision to take part in a 'Lib-Lab Pact' with the Callaghan government did not lead to heavy punishment for the Liberals in the 1979 general election, partly because the pact had been relatively effective in improving the national economy and partly because the new and most important enemy was the winner of the election, the re-voiced, and re-packaged Thatcher, who from that moment on was never going to be for turning.

This is neither the time nor the place for re-detailing the birth of the SDP and its subsequent Alliance with the Liberals. Most remember well that the Alliance's first general election in 1983 was a disappointment. Thatcher was fighting her second election, having gained considerably in voice and confidence and Labour's leader was Michael Foot who, however clever and amiable, was politically almost as unelectable as Jeremy Corbyn was in 2019.

As the election progressed it became increasingly clear that in the admirable ex-home secretary and historian Roy Jenkins the Alliance had a joint leader who was far from at home on the electoral stomp. Possibly that is why his party suffered by losing most of its seats in the 1983 election. Although Steel's Liberal Party achieved a useful handful of seats overall the election was a triumph for Mrs Thatcher.

Any chance that a reasonable post mortem of the Alliance result would take place was undermined by the replacement of Roy Jenkins by David Owen.

Owen had never much liked Liberals or what they had to say so his election as SDP leader was never likely to produce a more unified approach. In 1987 the 23 Alliance seats dropped to 22. It was hardly surprising that after this disappointment the large majority of Liberal Party and SDP members saw merger as the only sensible option, a position rejected by Owen and his faction who decided to go it alone, only to find themselves humiliated in a by-election in which they came fourth behind Screaming Lord Sutch.

Meanwhile, within the Alliance, productive discussions about future election strategy had to take second place to merger negotiations that were never going to be easy.

In retrospect, once the merger had been fully completed and accepted, things did begin to look up for the new party. Election results between 1992 and 2005, first under Paddy Ashdown and then under Charles Kennedy, aided in each case by Tory failure and Labour success under Blair, produced the largest number of MPs for the party since the 1920s – 62 at its peak. Suddenly, for the first time in many years, the Liberal Democrats began to be recognised as ‘a major party’ to which the majority of the media were willing to listen. Thanks to the economic wisdom of Vince Cable and the diplomatic authority of Ming Campbell, Nick Clegg was able to carry a picture of an experienced and convincing all-round team into the 2010 election and win 23% of the vote.

“Liberal Democrats are understandably unwilling to talk of any kind of coalition but to reject the concept altogether would be very unwise”

agreed party identity, expressed through national media, the internet and local campaigning, to maximise effective response.

And thirdly, we should recognise in ourselves that we are far the best party to lead the cause of climate change and the environment. We have stated our commitment and concern many times but now, with the environmental time clock ticking

faster and faster, the way of today’s world dictates that this will be biggest issue of the next 30 years. (will there be any more than 30 years to come?).

We already believe in the need to do more but, as a party, we don’t do nearly enough to put our views across. The best role for the party nationally and internationally is to seize the issue and make it our own in a way that, because of the vested interests of their backbenchers Labour and the Tories will always struggle to do, and the Greens will never have the resources to.

Every cause and policy in which we currently believe is linked, or can be linked with ease, to the importance of the world’s survival and Britain’s place within it. If we don’t take the lead in taking the issue really seriously we shall be little better than those who are in denial about the forecasts. In the right leader’s hands we would also be ensuring the survival of the Liberal Democrats.

The 2019 result was disappointing for the party but statistically better than it was for Labour and far from the worst that Liberals and Liberal Democrats have seen. The addition of MPs and members from other parties fighting seats for us, and in many instances running very close to winning, was very welcome in those few months when our hopes of greater gains were so high. They are as welcome with us now as they were then. The future can still be brighter.

Adrian Slade was the last president of the Liberal Party

DISASTROUS BETRAYAL

The future looked promising but what actually happened? A coalition with the Tories and a number of good Liberal Democrat ideas being taken up and implemented but all forgotten in the disastrous betrayal of party supporters over tuition fees and the complete failure to achieve any element of a fair electoral system.

The disastrous 2015 result became almost inevitable and despite all the new party members and defectors from other parties and the hopes and hype of 2017 and 2019 we have only a handful of seats with which to console ourselves..

So what lessons can be learned? First, we are definitely in for up to five years of one party Tory government, with no electoral reform on offer, so the party needs to decide now what it really thinks about coalition government with other parties, long before another election again puts us on that spot. Are we saying, ‘never’, ‘never with the Tories’ or ‘never with Labour’? At the moment Liberal Democrats are understandably unwilling to talk of any kind of coalition but to reject the concept altogether would be very unwise. As things stand, an overall majority is way beyond our reach (as it always was in 2019), so the implications of saying no to all three options is minority party influence but no direct say or chance of implementing our own policies.

Is that really what we want in perpetuity? During the last election we have reached out successfully to the Greens and other smaller parties to obtain fairer results but that is only scratching the surface. Our doors should be kept more widely open to all individuals groups and parties who share our views and might be willing to cooperate with us.

Secondly, an even more immediate priority for Liberal Democrats must be to do some serious thinking about likely political issues and events in the years ahead, and having done so, to elect a leader who is best able to talk sense and give direction on those issues and events.

If that means postponing the election for a year and working with an interim leader, so be it. It will have been a worthwhile exercise. When the choice of leader is finally made, he or she must be supported at national and local level by a clear expression of an

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**Slaves Among Us:
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Rowman & Littlefield
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Modern slavery touches us all, in the cheap fashion we buy, the minerals used in our phone, the bag of prawns in our freezer, the chocolate we consume, and when we get our car washed or our nails done. By telling the stories of three survivors of human trafficking, Monique Villa illustrates the horrors suffered by an estimated 40m people worldwide, 25% of whom are children.

The International Labour Organisation estimates human trafficking is worth \$150bn a year. Whereas a slave in the 19th century cost the equivalent of \$40,000, the price now is \$90, meaning slaves can easily be discarded when they become too ill to work.

Villa describes the conditions endured by 30m children in Indian factories, working 22 hours a day, sleeping beneath their work stations, and beaten with hammers by factory owners. She tells of a little boy, rescued by an Indian charity, who cannot understand why the NGO staff are nice to him. He asks they are trying to pacify him so they can take his kidneys.

Seventy percent of trafficked people are forced labour or in debt bondage, often tricked into working under the Kafala system in the Arabian Gulf. Their passports are confiscated and their wages withheld or never paid. They live and work in dangerous conditions, and when they return home, they must pay off the money-lenders whom they used to buy their flights. Interest rates of 60% are common, meaning it is impossible to ever repay the debt. The Arabian slave trade pre-dates the Atlantic one, yet not a single Arab academic has published a paper about the Arabs' role in trafficking millions of black Africans over the centuries. The amnesia continues to this day.

An estimated 30% of trafficked people are sex slaves. Virtually all women and girls who are trafficked are raped: violence and domination are key to control, convincing the slave that no one cares about them.



REVIEWS

Given that in 90% of cases, girls have been sold by a family member, this is a likely assumption. Although Villa does not delve into this enough for fear of making sweeping generalisations, there is a clear link between societies in which females are regarded as inferior, and the likelihood women will be bought, sold and mistreated.

Villa tells of teachers and social workers in the first world ignoring children turning up to school exhausted and covered in bruises, having been sold to men perhaps twenty times during the night. Officials also ignore the tattoos or brands showing which pimp owns the girls. Victims of trafficking are betrayed and made to feel helpless at every stage: no wonder so many become drug addicts.

Human trafficking is not possible without corrupt flight attendants, immigration officials, police, judges, parole officers and chief executives. Legal redress is made difficult by the widespread ignorance of trafficking in the justice system: there are fewer than 15,000 cases against traffickers worldwide annually.

Following California's example (the Transparency in Supply Chains Act), several countries have legislated. However, without enforcement, these are mere gestures. Reading this book will leave you feeling disgusted, but hopefully, ready to be a thoughtful and well-informed consumer.

Rebecca Tinsley

Hostile Environment
by Maya Goodfellow
Verso, £12.99

Published (unfortunately) on the eve of the election, this is an effective reference tome for anyone wondering quite why Britain is in the mess it is, without offering a clear route out.

In particular, Maya Goodfellow sets out the catalogue of overt racism, dog-whistle politics and media incitement and leaves few

smelling of roses.

For a book with a clear left bias, it excoriates Tom Watson for his appalling Hodge Hill by-election campaign in 2004 and rightly links it to Peter Griffiths, Enoch Powell and the rest. Any of us who have experienced Labour or the Tories (or both) using racism as a campaign tactic knows it, but many of its readers may have forgotten Labour's 'chequered' history on migration including its 1960s plans for virginity tests on women prior to the Commonwealth Immigration Act 1968.

Moving seamlessly through to Jack Straw, Gordon 'British jobs for British workers' Brown and their media puppetmasters, the scene is set for the encounter with Gillian Duffy in 2010 and its attendant hypocrisy. The reality of 'increasing public confidence' is rightly shown up as doublespeak.

Liberals, frustratingly, play only a bit part. The 1970s Grunwick dispute saw Young Liberals joining the picket line, but the book is silent on this; Vince Cable gets a passing mention for calling Theresa May out for burying evidence-based reports on the benign influence of migration on wages.

That aside, the account of the Coalition shows no Liberal influence; as those who saw the draft 2014 immigration policy paper with its sub-Daily Mail language of "count them in and count them out" and threw it out know, Clegg and those in his bunker showed no courage on this.

A fuller account might rehabilitate the braver, pre-2010 Clegg who tried to follow Charles Kennedy's lead, only to fall foul of the same tabloid hysteria. By contrast, Ed Miliband deservedly gets it in the neck.

The same cowardice shown by politicians failing to stand up to racist tropes on immigration is rightly linked to Brexit via free movement. Polling is "read.... not as a flashing warning sign but as if a helpful roadmap". The more recent

use by broadcasters of the language of 'legitimate concerns' is noted; the slippery slope of facts and evidence being set aside thoroughly set out. A rare 1979 challenge to the BBC's "It Ain't Half Racist, Mum" values is a reminder that it might not be as much of a slope as all that.

Ultimately, though, we need a way out of this mess. Beyond the sort of noble but small-scale campaigns most Liberator subscribers already support, or the occasional glimpse of positivity in places like Glasgow, there is precious little of that. But despite this being more an exposition of the problem than a path to the solution, *Hostile Environment* is essential reading for aspiring future leaders precisely because it shows the scale of the challenge ahead, and the depth of leadership required.

Gareth Epps

Sultan of Swing: The Life of David Butler **by Michael Crick** **Biteback 2019**

Psephology was effectively invented by David Butler who was in 1950 a young research student at Nuffield College Oxford invited by the BBC to take part in the first television election results programme. He was just 25, and so began an involvement in election night broadcasts both in front and behind the camera, that was to last for the next 65 years.

Michael Crick has written a fine biography of David Butler. Crick has worked BBC Panorama, Newsnight, where he famously hunted politicians on camera, later becoming political correspondent of Channel 4 News and was a frequent visitor to the Liberator stall at party conferences in his search for stories, most notably from the late Simon Tittley.

Butler's interest in elections started at an early age. In 1938 while still at school he conducted an opinion poll, highly innovative given the first professional opinion polls by Dr George Gallup arrived in Britain only that year. Butler recalled his poll was inspired by Gallup's early poll work.

Returning to Oxford after the war returning to complete his PPE degree he bought the 1945 edition of *The Times Guide to The House of Commons*, a book who could

be said to mark the very start of psephology.

Within a few months he would have developed new thinking that would revolutionise the analysis of British election results. Butler felt the simple totals presented in *The Times Guide* weren't enough. He thought of using percentages to describe the results, a remarkably simple step. Later a colleague Andrew Ensor was looking through Butler's percentage work, and floated the notion of swing; that the main parties' share of the vote might swing by a similar amount in every constituency, which in turn might be linked to a change in the number of seats. Ensor was not interested in the idea himself and was happy for Butler to develop it himself, which he did and popularised election nights with his *Swingometer* which first appeared in 1955.

Crick guides us through so many elections. In 1970 the BBC conducted the first exit poll in one seat and predicted Heath's win when the other polls suggested Wilson would hold on. In a 2am interview with Wilson, Butler contradicted Wilson's assertion he would win.

Butler first met the Canadian Bob McKenzie at a Liberal Party press conference in 1949. McKenzie, a lecturer at LSE, was fascinated by politics. Before long Butler and McKenzie became established partners on election night results programmes. A double act that lasted nearly 30 years until McKenzie's untimely death in 1981.

Crick's book delivers a thorough and warm account of the man and his personal life and alongside a history of his huge contribution to the science of voting patterns and elections. A man he knew as friend and colleague for over forty years. He concludes: "He started out before most of his rivals, and was still toiling long after they had retired or expired. If most of us managed just a tenth of David Butler's achievements, and enjoyed life our lives half as much, we'd have been pretty successful."

Peter Johnson

Guest House for Young Widows - Among the Women of ISIS **by Azadeh Moaveni** **Scribe Publications**

If there is a single visual image which sums up the migration of women to the Islamic State, it is the montage of three schoolgirls from Bethnal Green passing through security in Gatwick. Currently the only known survivor of the three, 20-year-old Sharmina Begum is stranded in a refugee camp in northern Syria, having buried three children, had her British citizenship revoked, disowned by her father, in daily fear of her life and facing a deeply uncertain future either in Syria, which cannot protect her, or in Bangladesh which does not want her.

What motivated this 15-year-old child to want to leave her home, family and future in the UK, to join IS remains a highly contentious debate even among academics and radicalisation experts.

This book seeks to explore and understand - rather than answer the question - why thousands of women from all over the world migrated to live in and build the IS. It is arranged as a series of in-depth interviews with women from Europe and North Africa whose stories provide some insight. Beautifully written and with real depth and compassion, it is compelling, readable and explores the perceptions, contexts, choices and dilemmas around these women and seeks to illuminate why they joined and why they left.

One of the central explorations focuses around how these women's decisions made sense to them and how the indicators of these choices were neither spotted nor addressed by families, schools, or government.

Instead, IS manipulated these young women's concerns and exploited them with sophisticated recruitment, so that migrating to the caliphate became a logical and life enhancing decision.

Emma an isolated, young German women, converted because she felt welcomed and accepted in the Turkish-German family of her friends. Nour, wanted to demonstrate her commitment to her faith by wearing a niqab to school against the strictures of the

Tunisian secular authoritarian regime. Sharmeena, the first of the British girls from Bethnal Green to go to the Islamic State (and is officially noted as missing) had lost her mother to cancer, turned to the local mosque for comfort and was encouraged to go online where she was groomed. These women migrated to live in a place where they felt validated and accepted.

The guesthouse of the title is where the young widows of IS come to live after their fighter husbands die. It is deliberately structured to be uncomfortable, so that the widows will remarry as soon as possible – effectively becoming permanent temporary wives. This experience and other stories of their lives in the caliphate provide real texture and some understanding of the IS phenomena through women's stories and testimony.

But what these stories really do is to illustrate Moaveni's wider analysis around attitudes to Islam, faith and identity, the challenges of being a second generation immigrant, broken families and searching for your place in the world. She provides commentary around the Arab domestic political events and their implications to provide a counterweight to the personal stories as well as words of rebuke to all of those who seek to impose their own answers and conclusions as to the reasons why so many young women left.

Susan Simmonds

Good Economics For Hard Times **by Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo** **Allen Lane £25**

This year's Nobel prize-winning economists, Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee, have thoughtfully provided us with the facts required to contradict your cousin Gary when he says "immigrants are taking all our jobs," or asylum seekers come here "to scrounge off benefits".

Banerjee and Duflo examine the thorny issues of mass migration, globalisation, climate disruption and the threat of automation, using data from randomised control tests. They reach surprisingly cheerful conclusions about our capacity to solve these problems, if only we learn from successful interventions.

Research shows that immigrants stimulate economic demand locally and slow down mechanisation by being prepared to do unappealing work. Native born workers actually benefit when they are promoted to more managerial roles to supervise the influx of immigrants.

Nor is it the case that everyone in the poor world is waiting to emigrate to Europe and North America. They are often escaping conflict and persecution; research shows that most of us would prefer to stay home, rather than taking a leap into the unknown.

In India, people are reluctant to leave the village to head for India's cities, even when given the travel fare to do so, and even when they know their income will increase. They value the support of family and friends in the village, and they do not want to lose their claim on a share of the family's land. Nor do they relish living in a slum and breathing the worst air in the world.

Many would-be migrants also tend to over-estimate the danger involved in moving, fearing the loss of face if they fail. Meanwhile, those with applicable skills can relocate with confidence, clustering in metropolitan areas where they are guaranteed a desirable lifestyle with like-minded people.

Back to your cousin Gary. Duflo and Banerjee suggest he probably refuses to blame himself for his failure to thrive, so he blames the 'other'. Undereducated white people in particular have battered self-esteem, and when confronted with facts, they feel their intelligence is being questioned and their moral failure is being pointed out. Evidently, we dislike minorities the most when our personal situations are closest to the caricature of how the disliked 'other' behaves. So, tread carefully when using the ammunition in this excellent book.

Rebecca Tinsley

Official Secrets **Gavin Hood (dir) 2019**

The era of Tony Blair and the Iraq war now seems far away, which rather begs the question of why tell this story as a feature film now?

Katherine Gun, played by Keira Knightley, was a translator at GCHQ when she received an email from part of the American security establishment asking for

British help to spy on diplomats from smaller countries on the UN Security Council with a view to pressuring them to support a resolution authorising the war.

Realising this was the UK taking part in an illegal act to promote a war Gun leaked the documents via an intermediary to the Observer newspaper.

This was not the obvious choice it might now seem. In 2003 the Observer had been reduced by editor Roger Alton to a pro-war New Labour lap-dog and some of its staff objected to publishing a memo that could embarrass Blair.

Alton, after wrestling with his conscience, eventually decides it's too good a story to miss and publishes.

This brings down the weight of New Labour authoritarianism on Gun after she eventually confesses.

Her Kurdish husband is almost deported, she is threatened by Special Branch heavies and left almost a year without knowing whether she will be charged.

Her defence team then ask for government documents about Lord Goldsmith changing his advice on whether the war was legal.

Appearing to realise these could be even more embarrassing, the government caved in on the first day of the trial and offered no evidence.

The film plays as a conventional newsroom drama (think *All the President's Men*) and then morphs into a human one about Gun and her husband and lawyers from Liberty working out a defence.

There are two Lib Dem aspects to it. Former Cheltenham MP Nigel Jones comes out of the film well for saving Gun's husband from deportation.

Lord Macdonald, once a Lib Dem now a crossbencher, does not. He is portrayed as vindictively using his post as director of public prosecutions to make an example of Gun as best he can.

An entertaining and engaging drama but the events recounted now seem distant.

Mark Smulian

Full Steam Ahead Felix **by Kate Moore** **Penguin/Michael Joseph**

In this sequel to the Sunday Times best-sellers chart-topping 'Felix the Railway Cat' the

adventures of Felix the (female) feline are further recounted.

Felix is getting a bit middle-aged now so she is not so agile, and indeed given to over-indulgence in foodie treats, but her empathy for distressed humans is undiminished. Of course the book is 'heart-warming' and gentle, but not everything in the lives of Felix's carers is happy or easy. So this isn't just sentimental slush.

I rather think this is a story of how a group of ordinary employees can create a special and positive force in the world if they are given the space and time to develop their own initiative. Full marks to Transpennine Express (though no doubt it boosts their passenger numbers too), and to Kate Moore for striking the right note throughout.

Highly recommended for all lovers of railways and the Liberator Cattist Faction. Follow Felix the Huddersfield Station Cat on Facebook. The royalties from the sale of the book go towards Action for Children and Huddersfield Samaritans.

Gwyneth Deakins

LETTERS

MOBILISE LIKE MOMENTUM

Dear Liberator,

So here we are, another general election has passed, and five more years of Boris lie ahead of us. We've all done our bit, but could we have learned something from Labour at the grass roots? It's worth taking a moment to consider one way we might energise our presence on the ground.

I've divided my time between two constituencies both with able Liberal Democrat candidates; Chippenham for Helen Belcher, and close to home here in Banbury for Tim Bearder.

As I did in 2017 I took a week off work for Chippenham, the North Wilts constituency office reviving me with coffee between rain-soaked rounds. It wasn't a peak target seat so there was no phalanx of big hitters, but I got to know both the hard-working staffers and the cross-section of other members like me. A Herculean task was being taken on by a small but dedicated group of busy local members, and any extra help would have been very welcome.

Psephologists, analysts, and historians will between them write screeds about Labour in the Corbyn era, but if there is a success story among the long faces it lies in how they mobilised their supporters.

Momentum members flocked to their target seats, and they were not simply taking an hour or two out from their normal schedules but taking annual leave to commit themselves to a week or more of campaigning. In a country with a different mood that valuable extra workforce might have delivered them the keys to Number 10. I can tell you from personal experience that a campaigner who is on the job continuously becomes a lot more effective as they get into the swing of their allotted task.

As I took my week off stuffing Wiltshire letterboxes, I thought a lot about those Momentum campaigners. If the Liberal Democrats could bring out an army of members like that prepared to put in a week or more at a stretch, we could make a huge difference to so many constituencies. We could reduce majorities in safe seats, create a fresh crop of marginals, and even pick up a few unexpected gains. If that sounds attractive to you as a fellow Liberal Democrat then I'd like to ask you to consider whether you could be part of it. With hindsight which would have been more important, an extra few days to put your feet up, or not having another five years with a Boris premiership? I know which I'd pick.

Unfortunately persuading the membership to take time off work is beyond me, but I know that reading this will be people with the motivational magic it takes to make that happen. Political parties are full of activists jostling to be noticed, and I'd say that revolutionising our electoral workforce would be a pretty emphatic way to do it.

The question is, are any of you up for the challenge?

Jenny List
Oxfordshire

Liberal Revue from the vaults!

**The Liberal Revue can now be
enjoyed again online at:
<https://tinyurl.com/ya2w617d>
or by searching on "Liberal Revue"
on YouTube.com**

**The revue entertained party
conferences with songs and sketches
in 1984-86, 1988-89, 1992-94, 1996,
2002-04 and 2008
before calling it a day.**

**You Tube now has all the shows that
were filmed from 1988 and onwards,
although sadly the recording of the
2003 show is lost.**

**Sound only recordings exist of the
first three shows, plus a one-off
performance in London in March
1986, and will be added when
efforts to improve the sound quality
are complete.**

**An archive of Liberal Revue scripts,
programmes and recordings has
been lodged in the
National Liberal Club library**

Monday

Well that was a bit of a damp squib, wasn't it? One minute Jo "Gloria" Swinson was telling us she was going to be prime minister and the next she was handed her cards by the electors of East Dunbartonshire. The Well-Behaved Orphans were particularly miffed at the way the campaign was run, having worn out their shoe leather (well, it was December) delivering leaflets in what were supposed to be target seats. Yet they reported finding themselves working for candidates they had never heard of in places that had never thought of returning a Liberal. Nor was our flagship policy of supporting 'Revoke but backing down the moment it is challenged' a great success. It seems my counsel is needed at the highest levels of the party once again.

Tuesday

Given the above shambles, I feel far from guilty at having stolen an evening during the election to attend a fancy dress party in Finchley. The boarding instructions required one to dress as a character from literature, so being a stan (as the young people say) of Arthur Conan Doyle, I went as the Hound of the Baskervilles. I hired my dog costume from a leading West End theatre and added a generous dose of phosphorous about its jaws. I was enjoying the party when there came a knock at the door, and as no one else showed any sign of doing so, I answered it, giving a playful bark as I did so.

I found myself faced with an actor fellow – I can't remember his name, but he's been in everything, including a film about a bear that was sent to prison. I have to say it struck me as Rather Far Fetched, not least because Liberal social reforms mean most bears are now diverted from the criminal justice system at an early stage. Anyway, this actor johnny must have been in a bad way because, as soon as he saw me, he cried "It's Rinka! Don't kill me! I'm sorry!" and legged it towards Golders Green – but then in my experience these theatrical types are often highly strung.

Wednesday

Congratulations to the Duke of Sussex for making it over the wall and quitting the Royal Family, together with his delightful wife and child. In my experience his family are a ghastly crew – in my young day it was common knowledge that the Jack the Ripper murders had been committed by Queen Victoria – and he is well shot of them.

Thursday

"How is Vince coping with not being leader any more?" people asked me in the run up to the election. All I could tell them was that he was concentrating on his hobby of beekeeping – it is customary to tell them when there is going to be a by-election – but I feared there might be More To It Than That. Word had reached me that he was taking his retirement rather badly and that the bee fancy around and about Twickenham had expressed concern at his activities; there were dark murmurings about Cable taking delivery of steroids and monkey glands.

Lord Bonkers' Diary

So I was not entirely surprised when the Swinson battle bus was assailed by giant bees after it had rolled up at a London youth centre. Whether this was a calculated attack on his successor as leader I do not know, but by good fortune no one was harmed and there may be an innocent explanation. Cable later told me that you get enormous quantities of honey from the breed and this has set him up for his retirement.

Friday

To the village hall for a concert in aid of the Home for Distressed Canvassers in Herne Bay. I am always pleased to help this cause, not least because a number of Liberal Democrat MPs who lost their seats in 2015 are still living there. At the hall I note that the new sign I ordered has been erected over the front door. You see, I was so impressed by that British diplomat who resigned her post rather than defend our new government's lies that I gave the order for the place to be renamed in her honour. As the sign declares, it is now the Alexandra Hall Hall Hall.

Saturday

The morning post arrives and with it a brochure for the Festival of Brexit Britain. I flick through it in a desultory way and find the programme pretty thin gruel – and as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Bonkers' Home for Well-Behaved Orphans I know a thing or two about thinning gruel. It turns out you will be able to insult Belgians at the Empire Pool, Wembley, watch the Black and White Minstrel show at the Blackpool Tower Ballroom or attend the birching at the White City.

So I shall be holding my own Festival of Liberalism here at the Hall and flatter myself that I can offer a more attractive day out. There will be close-formation Focus delivering by a troop of crack activists from the West Riding of Yorkshire, a completion to find the dog that looks most like John Stuart Mill and a performance of Donizetti's opera Luciana Berger di Lammermoor. Throw in a guest appearance by the Rutland Water Monster (I just hope she doesn't eat any of those attending) and there is only one winner.

Sunday

Britain in 2020 is a nation in fear. Foxes stalk the Inns of Court armed with baseball bats looking for QCs to attack and giggle to one another about this "silk bashing". If it were not for my narwhals basking on Rutland Water and my gamekeepers and their orchard doughties, I should feel afraid myself.

I am also comforted by the presence of PC McNally as he alternately clips youngsters round the ear and helps old ladies across the road. The other day I saw him forget himself and clip an old lady round the ear. She fetched him such a wallop with her duck-handled umbrella that I doubt he will make that mistake a second time.

Lord Bonkers, who was Liberal MP for Rutland South West 1906-10, opened his diary to Jonathan Calder