

# liberator

Can you spot all the **Lib Dem** seats?



Hours of fun!

🗳️ Election reactions – Rob Greig, Gareth Epps, Richard Kemp, Marianne Magnin, David Grace and many others



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# COMMENTARY

## WHAT ARE THEY FOR?

What are 72 Liberal Democrats MPs actually going to do?

Part of the answer is obvious - assiduously establish themselves in their constituencies, ask questions, sit on select committees do media interviews and take any other opportunity to promote liberalism.

That though isn't a strategy, and the result from 4 July is so far outside the party's experience that it is not obvious how it should respond over this Parliament and while Labour has an unassailable majority.

The last time anything remotely similar happened was in 1997 when Paddy Ashdown's ultimately fruitless collaboration with Tony Blair meant that the Lib Dems barely functioned as an opposition party until Charles Kennedy quietly ended Lib-Labbery and the Iraq war completely ended that episode.

Given that relations between the Lib Dems and Labour were quite cordial during the general election campaign - since neither had much interest in attacking the other - it may be that some limited influence can be brought to bear on the Government.

All well and good, but what will the public see? Ed Davey can't spend five years engaging in ever more perilous stunts to maintain the party's profile; it will have to find some issues of its own to campaign on. Carers and sewage may be two of these but over five years, who knows?

One issue that will present itself given the past form of Labour governments is authoritarianism. It is seldom remembered now that even quite left wing Liberal Democrats contemplated the coalition in 2010 as the lesser of two evils given that Labour then wanted turn the UK into a police state with compulsory identity cards and 90 days imprisonment without charge.

Labour devoted its last spell in government to an assault on civil liberty. This Labour government may not have such overt authoritarian tendencies as in the Blair and Brown era but the whole "Whitehall knows best" attitude and desire to posture as 'tough on security' is seldom far below Labour's surface. There should be plenty for Lib Dems to go for there that will give the party a distinctive role.

There is also an issue of which part of the public the Lib Dems seek to address, which depends on how good the party's knowledge really is of who just voted for it.

A glance at the map shows the Lib Dems are now a party of the West Country and the shires and suburbs of the south.

Well, somebody has to represent the south and if that is Lib Dems so much the better. It could even be argued that the current map of seats gives some geographical coherence for once to where the party represents and also matches where most of its members have always been. But the party's presence elsewhere in England amounts to just two seats in the west midlands and four in the north.

This might draw a 'so what' response; the party is bound to be weak in some places and among some people. But all governments become unpopular and voters take this out on councillors and at parliamentary by-elections.

It is possible that the next general election will be a repeat of 2001 - when few seats changed hands and the country's settled opinion of each party did not alter much.

But it is also possible that the Starmer government will by then be monumentally unpopular, and the Tories have ended their suicide mission. If so, it will not then be enough to be 'not the Tories'.

The Lib Dems do not look well placed to start taking many council seats off Labour, let alone seats at parliamentary by-elections, since there were fewer than 10 constituencies where the two parties were in even remote contention this July.

This is the downside of a highly successful targeting exercise.

Winning 72 seats and coming a strong second a few dozen more was an astonishing result but was gained at the expense of the party in the rest of the country, which found itself in fourth place or worse having been told to do little or no local campaigning.

These neglected areas - mostly Labour held - could be where the party has to look for growth for the next few years, so has any thought been given to rebuilding and then supporting operations in such places and to how that works with the need to defend some frankly rather surprising gains among the 72?

Obviously having 72 MPs bring vastly more human and financial resources into the party than it had before and entitles it to more media coverage and attention, but how will the party use that?

It will also bring several hundred people whose jobs will depend on those MPs holding their seats, and probably additional councillors in these newly orange areas.

And what ends will the party direct its new strength towards? Holding what it has? Winning more of the same? Advancing into Labour territory? There are reasonable arguments for any of these but decisions will be needed sooner rather than later.

The fiasco of the 2019 general election was marked by Baroness Thornhill's thorough and excoriating review of what went wrong and the lessons learnt. The 2017 version was deemed so embarrassing to the party establishment that it was suppressed until leaked to Liberator.

Will there be a similar exercise to Thornhill this time? The lessons might be more positive but the results throw up a fresh batch of questions that need examination, which might be summed up as "where do you go after a target strategy succeeds"?

# RADICAL BULLETIN

## **SPEAKING WITH ONE VOICE**

Heaven forfend that spontaneity might creep into any Lib Dem MP's or candidate's count speech.

Party HQ sent out template speeches - together with stern injunctions against speaking to national media without permission - asking candidates to pull off the awkward feat of staying on message while "not sounding like robots".

The draft speeches appeared to owe something to AI. They included thanks to Ed Davey "who has truly led from the front throughout this campaign. Injecting some much-needed fun into this election, while also putting front and centre the issues of care and caring that are so important".

Candidates were later to declare their love for the area concerned and to list people they had met such as "the families and pensioners who are struggling to make ends meet, the small business owners at the heart of our local economy, who need more support".

For those who had lost there was a slightly different message that thanked locals "for welcoming me into your homes, your town halls and your businesses. Thank you for sharing your worries and your hopes for the future. I hear you. The Liberal Democrats hear you".

It's all a long way from late Bill Pitt's announcement at his victorious count at the Croydon North West by-election "no, no not all over my bloody suit" as champagne was sprayed.

## **MINORITY REPORT**

One aspect of the general election that didn't go so well was the party's efforts to increase ethnic minority representation and gain support from these communities.

Only 7% of Lib Dem MPs are from ethnic minorities compared with 16% of Labour and 12% of Conservatives.

Labour's vote in constituencies with a large ethnic minority, and particularly Muslim, population plummeted, but those votes generally went to the Green Party, George Galloway's mob or to independents, rarely to the Lib Dems.

The Liberal Democrat Campaign for Race Equality (LDCRE) is annoyed that six years after Lord Alderdice's review of the party's engagement with ethnic minorities - and five years after Baroness Thornhill included a lack of ethnic voters in her review of the 2019 general election fiasco - more or less nothing has happened to carry out their recommendations on improving racial diversity in the party.

This is despite the party's audit committee having signed off that the Thornhill Review recommendations had been carried out when - according to LDCRE sources- nothing of the kind has happened.

It has analysed the recommendations made by Alderdice and Thornhill and the extent to which these have been implemented.

The results were so lamentable that LDCRE had to promise not to disclose these before the general election.

One example is that the party does not have ethnic monitoring in its online membership application process, with

the result that it has no idea how many ethnic minority members it has, or to which communities they feel themselves to belong, and consequently no way of telling if it is meeting targets for ethnic minority recruitment even if these existed.

## **CLUBBABLE TYPES**

The National Liberal Club (NLC) likes to call itself the Home of Liberalism. It appears though to no longer be the home of a valuable painting, a famous Victorian cartoon, a board that commemorated past chairs, and its most recent chief executive.

An NLC newsletter of September 2023 noted "a highly-critical report" had been presented by librarian Seth Thévoz on behalf of himself and the club's art curator and archivist, in which they said "they felt bypassed, with decisions taken about moving or removing artworks or other heritage assets without any consultation".

This is understood to include a Victorian painting of the Palace of Westminster, valued at some £6,000, the whereabouts of which are now uncertain. They also complained of pressure to sell heritage assets and all three later resigned.

According to the members' newsletter Thévoz and his colleagues complained: "A large framed picture had gone missing and no one knew where or when. People were no longer being signed in to use the Library which is kept under lock and key, so if anything went missing the club was unable to track it down."

The three curators were also "very uncomfortable" at being asked about the value of some artworks and other heritage assets, and whether any of these could potentially be sold, the members' newsletter stated.

Also missing is a print of the Victorian cartoonist Spy, noting the Tory FE Smith came into the club daily to use the gents toilet and on being told he was trespassing in a private club, famously replied: "I didn't realise it was a club as well." This hung for decades above the urinals. No more.

While the club's wish to expunge Cyril Smith's name from its gilt list of past chairs was entirely understandable, it was only partly obliterated and the board was removed and later reinstated with none of the names visible. The building and its fixtures are listed and the NLC seems to have omitted to secure listed building consent for this change.

Artworks are in any event understood to belong to the club trustees and not to either the board or the members council, relations between whom have hardly been smooth.

The board is supposed to run the NLC limited company, which provides services for members and manages the club's business affairs, while the members' council is a representative body for the membership.

Immediate past chair Karin Rehacek sat on the NLC board but was removed from that body after a complaint was made about her, despite this not being upheld.

The members newsletter of April 2024 notes Rehacek was removed from the board without notice and the members' council in consequence set up a panel to investigate what

happened, chaired by the former MP Michael Meadowcroft.

Yet another newsletter, this time relating to the 2024 annual general meeting, noted Rehacek's dismissal "came about using faulty processes which led to [her] dismissal plus apparent unauthorised leaks of material relating to key meetings".

There was no prior indication in the 24 hours advance notice that the agenda would include a motion to expel her nor any written indication of the nature of the supposed "good reason" required for expulsion.

Rehacek did not hold back: "So, in deciding to expel me, 75% of the Board ignored the rules of natural justice, ignored the clear advice of the Chair of the Trustees – Lord John Alderdice – as well as normal good practice in dealing with complaints and grievances. They also ignored Club Procedures and took no account of the findings of other Club bodies."

Things may though be about to change with arrival as chair of Gordon Lishman, incidentally also chair of the Social Liberal Forum.

His election followed a campaign in his support run by 'political' members of the club (those that declare themselves to be liberals), and to elect Judge Tim Herrington as vice-chair. Chief executive Andy Young then resigned after 16 months in office. A message to members from the board noted: "With the recent change in Club leadership, he felt the time was right for him to depart."

Lishman and Herrington have said they will devise major plans to increase membership and return the club to its traditional role as a centre for political debate, working with the new Liberal Democrat MPs.

How relations will fare between the board, members' council and trustees remains to be seen.

## ONE THAT GOT AWAY

In addition to the 72 MPs there was a former Liberal Democrat elected on 4 July too. Ayoub Khan won Birmingham Perry Bar from Labour as an independent candidate,

He was signed up into the party in 2003 by the former MP for Birmingham Yardley John Hemming and later served on the council and as a cabinet member.

How Khan and the party fell out is, inevitably, a matter of some dispute.

A statement from him on the Who Can I Vote For website said: "Ayoub declared that he would stand as an Independent following his reluctance to be silenced on the topic of Gaza by his former political party.

"Ayoub said that political leaders have a duty to represent the residents without fear. Politicians are slaves to the public and NOT political parties."

He has been reported as refusing a request from the Lib Dems to undergo anti-Semitism training over posts he made concerning Hamas and Gaza, though Hemming believes Khan was badly treated by the party.

## ZOMBIE POLITICS

The pro-Brexit continuing Liberal party ran only 11 candidates at the general election the twelfth, Chris Twells, stood in South Cotswolds as an independent and not as a Liberal as the party had billed.

Twells is best known for having simultaneously been a Lib Dem councillor in Cotswold and Salford but appears to have resigned from the latter and fallen out with the Lib Dems in the former. He garnered 225 votes, which still put him ahead of the reheated SDP's haul of 156.

As ever, the only place where the Liberals gained a result that

was better than humiliating was in Liverpool West Derby, where party president Steve Radford is a long-serving councillor and saved his deposit.

The party website's general election content included an extremely strange picture in which the top half of an ectoplasmic Radford - but not the rest of him - featured to introduce a video on how he had worked with a local Pentecostalist church to find it premises after the United Reform Church kicked in it out. Surely a subject of rather specialised interest for the statement of a party leader?

Meanwhile, what of the extremely unpleasant revived SDP - which describes itself as "a patriotic, economically left-leaning and culturally traditional party"?

Its website's first policy entry for the general election was: "We will reduce net migration to 50,000 per annum and promote a generation long 'mass immigration pause' in the interests of integration and social cohesion.

"We will withdraw from the 1951 UN refugee convention, the ECHR and all other international instruments which deny UK border sovereignty." Not even the Tories wanted to do all that.

The SDP just managed to save deposits in Leeds South and Doncaster North while its other 123 candidate's secured derisory totals in most cases below 1%. Someone has wasted an awful lot of money on deposits.

## EMBARRASSING RELATIONS

The ALDE Liberal grouping in the European Parliament has decided to deal with the embarrassment of two prominent members entering deals with the far right by not doing anything much.

Dutch party the VVD - the more right-wing of that country's two liberal parties - is in a coalition that includes Geert Wilders anti-immigrant PVV party, while Sweden's Liberalna, again the more right wing of two liberal parties, is in a government propped up by the extreme right Sweden Democrats.

ALDE was diminished by last month's European Parliament elections and members feared that throwing out either or both of the VVD and Liberalna would have resulted in two separate smaller liberal groupings.

It has therefore appointed 'observation missions' which can report to ALDE on what these two members are doing.

What these missions can do and what if any action will be taken if either party turns out to support something disgraceful remains to be seen.

Similar problems may confront Liberal International, of which both are members.

## YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN

One group of Liberal Democrats entitled to mixed feelings about the general election result are those in no-hope seats who followed instructions to help target seats instead of campaigning locally, and as a result lost their deposit.

Some may of course have lost their deposit anyway, but the outcome is that weak constituencies with little fund-raising ability must now find £500 from already meagre budgets.

Since calls for headquarters or regional parties to bail these places out are likely to fall on deaf ears, there is an obvious danger that calls to go to target seats may be ignored another time.

## BITTEN TONGUES

Chief executive Mike Dixon was evidently fearful of what ill-disciplined members of federal party committees might say when Ed Davey appeared before the inquiry into the Post



Office's Horizon scandal.

A heavy-handed missive went out: "Please make sure you check with media office before commenting at all on this - even on personal twitter accounts. As a party, everyone who works and volunteers here is much more in the public eye now."

Did this apply to those who wished to defend Davey? There are hundreds of people on party committees and surely the media office would have been overwhelmed at being called upon to approve every tweet.

## IN THE SHADOWS

Whether or not Ed Davey revives the pre-2015 practice of calling party spokespeople a 'shadow cabinet', eager newcomers will have to wait a while to be given any role.

Instead the 15 survivors of the previous parliament have kept their roles and others will only be allocated later in the year.

This is partly to allow new MPs time to establish themselves in their constituencies. It's also partly because there are so many of them that some are unknown to Davey and other senior figures and time is needed to assess their talents.

## GREENS STRAINED

This general election saw the end of the pact between the Lib Dems and Greens in Richmond-upon-Thames. This dated from when the Greens stood down in the 2016 by-election when Lib Dem Sarah Olney gained the seat from the Conservatives.

In return, the Lib Dems stood down in a number of council seats, allowing the Greens a clear run at winning these.

This pact was never popular in the Twickenham half of the borough, though Richmond wanted to keep it.

But it succeeded too well with the council now comprising 49 Lib Dems and five Greens, all of whom owe their seats to the Lib Dems having stood down, leaving the mad position of the entirety of the ruling and opposition parties being elected on the same slate. Hostilities in fully resumed in both seats for the general election.

## NICK OF TIME

Rumours that former London Assembly member Caroline Pidgeon intends to take the title Baroness Pidgeon of Trafalgar Square are sadly untrue, but with their first new life peer for years now appointed the Lib Dems expect a few more. Starmer intends to create more Labour peers and the Lib Dems are hopeful that form's sake he will give them a few too, which has caused excitement among those who think they ought to be ennobled.

And who might want such a post? No sooner did it become obvious that some peerages were in the offing than Nick Clegg - how returned to the UK - tweeted: "Huge, huge congrats to @EdwardJDavey and his fantastic team for securing the largest haul of seats in over a century - a total vindication of your fun yet disciplined campaign. Great to see the Lib Dems back where they belong, a major Parliamentary force once again!"

Clearly space did not allow Clegg to note who was leader in 2015 when the party recorded its worst results in 45 years and ceased be a 'major parliamentary force'.

## ONE DOWN, TWO TO GO

The legal case brought against the Lib Dems by Natalie Bird came to a rather unexpected halt when the party chose not to defend itself against her allegation that it had broken the Equality Act.

Bird had been banned from party office for 10 years for wearing a tee-shirt at conference that read: "Woman. Adult,

human, female", a statement interpreted by some as transphobic.

A statement from chief executive Mike Dixon said: "We have decided not to spend money defending a case about our previous complaints system taken by Natalie Bird.

"The potential costs legal here were just disproportionate; we have chosen to spend the money instead on staff and campaigning."

Bird's case originated under the old complaints process run by state parties rather than its successor.

There is understood to still be a hearing to come to decide on any damages or remedy that Bird should receive.

Meanwhile, the interminable cases brought against the party by Jo Hayes continue and in the offing is one from former Sutton candidate David Campanale, who argues he was discriminated against as a Christian when removed as candidate for Sutton & Cheam.

## INNER DYLAN

The prize for 'campaigning innovation least likely to be widely adopted' goes to Carlisle Lib Dem candidate Brian Wernham for a Facebook film in which he sought to explain Lib Dem social care policy in the style of Bob Dylan's famous video for Subterranean Homesick Blues.

In this Dylan has the lyrics of the song written on cards which he throws away as each line is sung.

Wernham's version saw him juggling cards on which an exposition of the policy had been written, ending with one hurriedly turned upside down, presumably as someone had told him the imprint had to be shown.

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# SUCCESSING TOO WELL AT THE TARGETS

## Could 2024's targeting success turn into 2029's collapse? Rob Greig looks at how second places have vanished

The election of 72 Liberal Democrat MPs is rightly being celebrated. It is a huge achievement and firmly places the Party back on the national political stage - delivering an unprecedented (in living memory) number of seats and returning us to that precious third-party status in Parliament. Celebrations must, however, go alongside immediate and deep thinking about how we build on this result and prevent a collapse back to a handful of MPs in 2029.

The success of 2024 arose as a direct consequence of a rigorous targeting strategy, hard work by numerous local activists and a national campaign that managed to hold sufficient public and media attention to maintain our overall vote level.

It was also fortunate (in part) and built at the expense of greater long-term success (in part). The fortune arose from the gradual implosion of the Tory party, the interventions of Nigel Farage and the vagaries of our electoral system. Greater long-term success is, paradoxically, jeopardised by that successful targeting strategy.

### STAGING POST

Having 72 MPs brings many benefits including parliamentary and public profile, national politicians to champion policy priorities and senior capacity to build the Party. However, we are still a minority party in parliament and, with such a large Labour majority, Liberal Democrat capacity to influence and shape legislation and society has grown only marginally. Having 72 MPs must be seen as a staging post to further growth and influence. The 2024 result should enable the party to grow beyond those 72 seats, so that by a 2029 election we are in a position to move into being a serious player in government.

This is where the challenging questions begin to arise. There were only 15 seats in 2024 where Liberal Democrats came second with a vote share (around 25% or more) from where victory next time might be feasible - 14 of those being second to the Tories and only one to Labour. At best, that indicates a potential growth of only 15 new seats. That 15 figure, though, almost exactly mirrors the number of seats won in 2024 where the Liberal Democrat

majority over the Tories was less than 70% of the Reform vote.

This is a figure that a number of commentators have indicated is the proportion of Reform voters in 2024 who might, in past years, have naturally cast their vote for the Conservatives.

Those seats are thus immediately vulnerable to a resolution of the Tory/Reform stand-off, and 72 thus immediately looks like a potential 2029 high water mark rather than a figure from which further growth can be achieved.

Overleaf, Table 1 shows second placed Lib Dem seats with a vote of around 25% or more and Table 2 shows Lib Dem seats susceptible to Reform votes moving to the Tories.

Beyond this handful of promising second places, (there are also a small number of others in the low 20%) the chances of success elsewhere in the country are close to zero.

The targeting strategy and resultant lack of campaigning in around 85% of seats resulted in the party ceding the position of progressive alternative to the Green Party in swathes of England, Scotland and Wales.

If third place in a constituency in the 2019 general election with a vote of over 10% is taken as a respectable starting place from which to campaign and grow, then in 52 seats this July we surrendered that position to the Greens.

Liberal Democrat candidates ended up with single digit vote share and (usually) fifth place behind both the Greens and Reform (and often sixth behind an independent). If the 10%+ vote threshold is ignored and a 2019 single digit vote share is included, then the Green Party overtook us to assume that progressive alternative mantle in over 100 further seats. That means there are now nearly 200 seats where the Greens start better placed to attack the incumbent than the Liberal Democrats.

Our reversal to the benefit of the Green Party is most noticeable in major cities. Across Edinburgh, Glasgow, Cardiff, Manchester, Sheffield, Nottingham, Bristol, Newcastle, Liverpool and Leeds, the Liberal Democrat candidate only beat the Green candidate in nine seats. The Green candidate was ahead in a staggering 47.

In many of these and other places, there is a significant Liberal Democrat local government presence. We know that translating a

*“Greater long-term success is, paradoxically, jeopardised by that successful targeting strategy”*

local vote into a national vote is not easy. It takes time to persuade people to transfer their local trust into a national vote. The 2024 election has taken that process backwards in all non-target seats and has given the insurgency lead-role in nearly 200 seats to a competitor - the Greens. (Before readers argue that the Green Party is/ should be an ally, I am struck by the number of people who have said that the elected Green Party representatives that they have to deal with, both locally and nationally, are amongst the most tribal and unwilling to work on a cross-party basis).

So, we cannot significantly attack in new constituencies from second place because there are only 15 (at most) seats where that is feasible and the vast majority of respectable third places with a decent local government base have disappeared. The Liberal Democrats have, therefore, hit an effective ceiling of around 72 seats for the foreseeable future.

This is not to argue that the targeting strategy was wrong. It has clearly delivered a sizeable victory and substantial parliamentary growth. Rather the circumstances of the last election contributed to some unanticipated outcomes from targeting

Firstly, the fall in support in non-targeted seats was perhaps greater than expected. Only working 15% of seats meant that the lack of profile 'on the ground' in the other 85% depressed the party's national opinion poll rating. It was consequently more difficult to generate momentum and an upward trend in poll ratings. The non-target seats naturally feel the consequences of that in the absence of numerous Liberal Democrat leaflets falling through letterboxes.

Secondly, the Greens' late surge was surprising – perhaps encouraged by the likely clear Labour victory in many places enabling voters to feel able to register a Green 'protest vote' in favour of their climate concerns.

Thirdly, while our policies went down well with many commentators and got a decent press, our victories (just like Labour's) were more an anti-Tory vote than overt support for our policies and party. For example, in just under 30 of our winning seats, the Liberal Democrat growth in vote share was 10% or less – not a ringing endorsement from the very poor 2019 performance after such a relentless campaign.

Finally, Reform coming to the table created huge uncertainty – the prime beneficiary being the Labour Party and leading to us facing an enormous Government majority.

Despite their huge victory, Labour strategists reviewing this election should be concerned.

With only 34% of the vote and (given the low turnout of just 52% of the eligible adult population) the support of less than 18% of adult citizens, they have no genuine public endorsement. In 107 seats their majority over the Tories was less than 70% of the Reform vote in that constituency. If a Farage-led Reform had not appeared and many of those voters had returned to the other immigrant-baiting, culture war fighting party (i.e. the Tories), Labour would potentially have won 107 fewer seats. That would have left them with only 307 MPs and no overall majority.

In this scenario the Liberal Democrat targeting strategy would have left a different parliamentary picture. Whilst the

*“We cannot significantly attack in new constituencies from second place”*

absence of Farage-led Reform and resultant higher Tory vote could have resulted in only(!) around 50 Liberal Democrat MPs, not 72, they could have been holding the balance of power to a minority Labour government. That opportunity to gain profile for our policies and influence Starmer's Government into adopting key Liberal Democrat changes (and claiming the credit for them) would have enabled the party

to go into a 2029 election having demonstrated what voting Liberal Democrat could achieve nationally. (Who knows, maybe even progress on electoral reform). In that context, recovering the lost ground in 2024 non-target seats would have become an immeasurably easier challenge.

However, we are where we are and targeting has given us the success of 72 MPs - accompanied with the downsides of having almost no additional target seats open to us for 2029 and a Green Party stepping into our shoes as the viable, local progressive alternative in nearly a third of seats.

Add to that a Tory Party that may (big may) get its act together, a platform in parliament and elsewhere for a hard right Reform agenda, and a Labour government that by 2029 may (hopefully for the country) have implemented successful and thus popular policy changes. Liberal Democrats could find themselves entering the next election with holding onto those 72 MPs being a major challenge. A 2015 style collapse back to around 20 MPs could be a real possibility, as tactical Labour voters return to the fold, tactical Green voters feel emboldened to support their newly strong Party and (some) Tory voters with short memories go back to their traditional home.

Action to avoid that becoming a reality requires widespread and thoughtful debate across the party. One outline approach might be a twin-track strategy involving:

Explicitly demonstrating our progressive credentials by being a constructive opposition to the Labour Government. A clear focus on climate change and environmental protection, rebuilding public services, equalities and human rights, and an internationalist perspective, would encourage Labour and Green tactical voters to stay with us (and possibly be converted into longer term supporters) whilst also not 'turning off' the soft conservative voters who voted Liberal Democrat this year. The retention of that coalition at a local level, alongside an effective, locally-driven building of capacity led by our new MPs could help to maximise the potential for retaining newly won seats.

Nationally investing in a modest tranche of 2019 third placed seats where there is a reasonable local government base to develop them into seats with potential – not for 2029, but for the election after that. This essential rebuilding of the Party as a national political force on the ground (rather than in just around 80 seats) is not only an essential pre-cursor to any ambition for real national political power, but also helps to grow support for national opinion polls. Crucially, it also backs up those hard-working councillors who are currently concerned about the need to reaffirm their voter base after it deserted the Liberal Democrats for other parties in this year's national election.

An approach such as this could see the party emerge from the next election with somewhere around 72 seats still intact. If the Tory Party regains some element of common sense and tracks back to the centre ground, this would likely see a reduced



**Table 1. Second placed Lib Dem seats with a vote of around 25% or more**

Constituency	Tory/Labour vote	Lib Dem vote	Lib Dem %
Godalming and Ash (Tory)	23293	22402	41
Romsey and Southampton North (Tory)	19893	17702	35.4
Hampshire East (Tory)	18509	17234	34.4
Dorset North (Tory)	18208	16619	33.5
Farnham and Bordon (Tory)	18951	17602	33.2
Shropshire South (Tory)	17628	16004	31
Sheffield Hallam (Labour)	23875	15686	30.4
Cotswolds North (Tory)	17426	14069	28
Hamble Valley (Tory)	19671	14869	27.5
Beaconsfield (Tory)	18494	13039	27.3
Buckinghamshire Mid (Tory)	20150	14278	26.5
Sevenoaks (Tory)	18328	12888	25.8
Hertfordshire South West (Tory)	16458	12002	24.9
Hinckley and Bosworth (Tory)	17032	11624	24.3
Worcestershire West (Tory)	19783	13326	24.2

**Table 2. Lib Dem seats susceptible to Reform votes moving to Tories**

Constituency	Lib Dem majority over Tories	Reform vote
Ely and East Cambridgeshire	495	6443
Hampshire North East	634	6673
Brecon Radnor and Cwm Tawe	1472	6567
Eastleigh	1546	6151
Newton Abbot	2246	8494
Newbury	2377	5357
Melksham and Devizes	2401	6726
Horsham	2517	6116
Norfolk North	2585	6368
Thornbury and Yate	3014	7529
Tiverton and Minehead	3507	7787
Epsom and Ewell	3686	5795
Sutton and Cheam	3801	5787
Witney	4339	6307
Torbay	5349	8660

number of Labour MPs and the possibility of Liberal Democrats being in a position of greater influence. It also creates the potential to grow further in the following election. If, on the other hand, the Tory Party tracks further to the right and does a deal with Reform, then all bets are off as millions of soft conservatives will be looking for a new home and a major UK political realignment becomes a growing possibility.

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Rob Greig is a member of Frome and East Somerset Liberal Democrats and was the Liberal candidate in Sutton & Cheam in 1987.

# WHERE DO WE GO FOR HONEY NOW?

## Nick Winch looks at where the Liberal Democrats might prosper having won almost all the target seats

Despite what Laura Kuennsberg might sneeringly say, by any logical criteria there is no “I suppose” about it: the Liberal Democrat performance in the general election was a success against any number of yardsticks.

First is the traditional need for the party leader fighting his first election to build a profile and to be talked about. In this, Ed Davey did better than any leader since, arguably, Paddy Ashdown in 1992, even if much of the latter’s profile was due to the ‘Paddy Pantsdown’ story.

The photo-ops portraying a politician enjoying being on the campaign trail was in stark contrast to Sunak and Starmer who appeared pre-programmed and wooden. Davey attracted the attention of the media and then the general public: the stunts were all designed to raise the profile of policy positions and had some success in linking into the national campaign messages.

Furthermore, the broadcast of Davey talking about his family background and the challenges he faced, and faces as a carer was genuinely moving, bringing into public focus a subject which became synonymous with him and the Liberal Democrats, providing him with an on-going issue for the new Parliament, an issue which forms a clear distinctively Liberal Democrat message in a way not seen since the days of the 1p on income tax for education.

### TOP ESTIMATE

I suspect that a total of 72 seats was above the top estimate of most party campaigners. It demonstrates the success of a ruthless targeting strategy – particularly on the back of no significant increase in the share of the vote although as someone who lives in one of the gained seats, I was not aware of the sort of intensive leafletting campaign which might have been seen in target seats when I was more politically active.

I am not sure whether Sutton and Cheam was an official target seat or whether it was one that just fell into our laps. I got the impression that external support was given to it only when it was clear that both Wimbledon and the Carsharlington and Wallington seat were in the bag. That in itself is, of course, an excellent example of creating a targeting strategy flexible enough to adapt, in stark contrast to the errors behind missing Wimbledon in 2019 while building up massive majorities in neighbouring

Twickenham, Richmond Park and Kingston.

In addition, it was a welcome feature of the campaign that the party focussed on a few, clear distinctive issues which we can now own. There will be Liberals who lament the lack of prominence given to Europe in the campaign and I would like to have seen a response to the economic crisis by addressing the costs of HS2, Trident, a third runway at Heathrow and the ‘triple-lock’. (As someone who got my pension this May, I do regard the triple-lock as pandering of the worst kind, most notably when contrasted with the two-child benefit cap and the freezing of tax allowances).

However, the success of the campaign does leave the party with the need to address the “Where do we now go for honey?” question.

If we are to make progress over the next five years, becoming the chief benefactors of the inevitable disenchantment with politics in general and the Labour Government in particular, what should be our objectives?

First, it is clearly the case that the seats won were not gained by voters suddenly becoming Liberal Democrats. The party has a long record of winning support from disgruntled supporters of other parties (mainly Conservatives) but the challenge of winning their hearts has often proved elusive.

Support in previously held seats from Cornwall and the Isle of Wight to Berwick and the Borders declined as voters returned to their traditional political homes.

Many Liberal Democrat seats are held primarily due to the record of our MPs once elected campaigning in their constituencies. The concept of ‘the local champion’ has proved successful – notably with regard to holding the seats won in by-elections in the last Parliament.

However, it has proved difficult to pass seats onto new candidates when sitting members stand down. This suggests that work is still to be done in turning supporters of these local campaigners into confirmed Liberal Democrats. Local campaigning needs to be better integrated with activity by the parliamentary party in Westminster. The Parliamentary Party is set to receive over £2m a year in Short Money, much of which should be specifically directed at using Parliament to support local campaigns –

*“Much of the £2m a year in Short Money should be specifically directed at using Parliament to support local campaigns”*

showing voters how Liberal Democrat values and policies at a local level can be part of the national message.

Many years ago, Adrian Sanders, based in the Commons' Whips Office, produced Parliamentary Mailing for ALDC members and local activists. It needs to be revived. There also needs to be a return to local leafleting, reporting back on local issues and promoting liberal values, running petitions and asking about how the party can help promote liberal solutions to local problems, with reply slips designed to do more than just ask if people want to join the party.

I despair at Lib Dem leaflets which ask what voters can do to support the party. We should instead be asking what we can do to support the voters. In short, there is still a future for the old-fashioned Focus leaflet with its Grumble Sheet.

In addition to a strategy designed to ensure that what-we-have-we-hold, there needs to be clear focus on how to grow in new areas. As many articles in *Liberator* have pointed out over the years, targeting constituencies inevitably means reducing resources in, and support for other areas.

This has become an even greater real threat to future growth. Following the election, there are now only 27 seats in which we are in second place. In only four is Labour the incumbent party. In contrast, the Greens are second in 40 seats and Reform UK second in nearly 100, the majority of these seats held by Labour. How do we become the challengers to Labour in these areas?

In its desire to come to power, Labour became risk-averse, unwilling to commit to radical action on a host of issues – from the environment to taxation, from housing to democratic reform. Liberals must become the forceful voice for those who will inevitably come to feel let down by Labour timidity, who want to see fundamental progressive change in Britain.

“Never be to the left of Labour” is as untrue now as it was when Bill Rodgers gave such advice to Paddy Ashdown in the 1990s.

A further source of potential Liberal Democrat support can be found among the 40% who did not vote in 2024. These people are not all the “Am I bovvered?” apathetic section of society. Many abstained because they were too damned angry about the state of British politics – and at a time when Reform UK was appealing to, and hoovering up millions of those votes, the abstainers were clearly very angry indeed.

## POTENTIAL GAINS

Liberal Democrats need to show that there can be a political home for the disillusioned, offering a totally new approach to how we conduct politics in Britain. It was always the case that, when looking for potential new gains in council wards it was best to look at the wards with low turnouts – fewer people needed to be converted or brought on board.

The same still applies – and can apply to constituencies and well as council wards, with many Labour-held seats having traditionally very low turnouts. That is why it is important that the party does not get sucked into the parliamentary games which have so disenchanted the public, that Liberal Democrats not only talk about a new approach to politics but demonstrate it in practice, on streets and housing estates throughout the country.

Such action will also appeal to another key demographic. With Labour likely to lower the voting age to 16, anybody now aged 12 or above will be able to vote in the next general election. We need to engage with this section of the electorate now. There will be nearly five million new voters on the register in 2029, young people with specific concerns and interests. I remember



when constituencies like mine in Dorset had three active Young Liberal branches who campaigned on local issues – clearing rubbish off Bridport's beaches, petitioning for local bus services, calling for more leisure opportunities for young people – while also promoting radical Liberal policies at a national level within the party.

## LEADERSHIP IRRITANT

Those Young Liberals may have been an irritant to the party leadership at times, but at least they ensured issues were talked about and debated, and of course, were noticed by the public and the media. (The Young Liberals were, of course, separate from the Union of Liberal Students with a clear difference between campus and community campaigning.)

The party needs to invest in rebuilding branches and networks of young activists, working not just to secure Liberal Democrat electoral success with younger candidates, but ensuring the party appears relevant to all young people, promoting policies specifically designed to address the issue faced by young people, and not just issues such as housing, getting meaningful jobs and life opportunities in Britain's forgotten and run-down towns and cities; while important, these issues may be of less immediate relevance to teenagers and young people than transport, the fear of crime and the destruction of the environment.

Such a commitment by the party will require funds; it will require effort and it will require national commitment by party officers, but the party has shown, through its success in getting more women elected to public office, that such determined action can reap rewards. Perhaps some of our bright, young MPs should have specific responsibility for leading on these issues.

It must be likely that any strategy based on the Conservative Party declining still further and the immediate disappearance of Reform UK as a political force is likely to prove unsuccessful.

The path to further political success will surely lie in adopting progressive, liberal policies and demonstrating a commitment to them and in appealing to those who are or have not yet had the chance to be disenchanted with politics in Britain today.

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Nick Winch is a member of the *Liberator* Collective.

# HOW TO DESTROY A PARTY

No one ever warned leading Conservatives not to play with matches, and in 2024 they blew themselves up. J Frasier Hewitt explains how this happened

My dear old grandmother always cautioned me against playing with matches; her case was that not only might I get hurt but those around me would be put at risk too. So far as advice goes, it was solid, sensible and uncontroversial; the sort of thing you might expect from a loving grandparent seeking to ensure that the eldest grandson didn't burn her home to the ground.

Over the past ten years, it has become increasingly obvious that leaders of the Conservative Party did not receive such basic childhood wisdom.

The fire that these maladjusted morons created wasn't a flash-in-the-pan, it was a slow burn furnace loaded with wet wood and slag; creating the sort of noxious smoke as to make any man, woman or child physically sick.

The matchstick that began this decennium horribilis was David Cameron's Bloomberg Speech in which he promised a referendum on EU membership.

That the consequences of this intervention by the prime minister of the day would lead to the unfolding of UK foreign trade, food, rural affairs, regional regeneration, business and economic policies now seems obvious. That it infected our society with a party that lost its moral bearings, as an outcome of this failure to understand what policy is and why it is, is only natural.

## POLICY COLLAPSE

The collapse in policy created a void at the heart of UK government. In part, this was due to the fact that departments and their ministers did not understand the European institutions that we had, as a nation, helped to build.

For instance, for Home Office ministers and advisors, the Single Market was primarily about migration; only one of the 'four freedoms'. The Home Office team was therefore only looking at 25% of the issue that was important to our nearest and largest trade partnership. If this wasn't bad enough, the post-referendum prime minister came from the Home Office, as did a large swathe of her senior advisory team.

Following the Bloomberg Speech (2013) came the petrol on the fire, in the form of Theresa May's Lancaster House speech (2017). This contribution to the debate over the UK's future relationship was reckless, ill-considered and ultimately destined to fail, in that it went against many of the then prime minister's basic instincts - as was to become clear as negotiations dragged on.

That her government would implode over the purity of Brexit became a self-fulfilling prophesy. That it was an avoidable elephant trap should be a warning to those elected representatives who follow is undeniable: Rule 1. Don't forget where you come from and do not lose sight of what you, at heart, stand for.

If Theresa May threw petrol on the bin fire that was the Conservative Party, her successor was a Beelzebub type charlatan who's deal with feckless backbench MPs was to make the immediate third-degree burns go away.

I do not believe for a moment that the likes of Johnson, Gove, or Cleverly set out to remove the UK from the Single Market - if you go back and look at the record, they argued against it. But by 2019 the hysteria of the argument had become too much, and the corner Theresa May had painted herself into - pledging to first leave the Single Market but effectively ensure we retained membership until Northern Ireland was 'resolved' - was one that would envelop her.

## SCHISM AND MADNESS

It wasn't just about the issue of the UK's relationship with the EU27 anymore, it was about the purity of the issue when it

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came to who would command the Conservative Party. It became a doctrine. In doctrine lies orthodoxy and in orthodoxy lies schism and madness. The Conservative Party had in three short years gone from being the standard bearer for cynical, if practically minded, approaches to policy making to being overtaken by a peculiar form of the Taliban.

Johnson called an election having culled dissenters from the fold; heresy was a punishable offence and apostasy was the order of the day - seemingly logical individuals enjoyed the cold embrace of the 2019 general election and, in doing so, changed the face of the modern Conservative Party that so many of us had worked to build and defend.

In place of the economic arguments that addressed the notion of empowering regions (the Northern Powerhouse, the Midlands Engine – you may have laughed but they were well intentioned efforts) we got in their stead partisan local bidding wars for small pots of money – setting community against community and a label that called it all levelling-up.

This poisonous excuse for policy was the consequence of a logic driven group of people losing the thread of a basic belief system and embracing a dogma that overtakes ones senses and intoxicates the nervous system. This is what happened to the Conservative Party.

By embracing a false and impossible promise of making a process stop (processes do not stop, they proceed unashamed and without consideration), the party achieved an incredible victory in 2019.

But it was a victory built on sand. Reconciling Bishop Auckland with Bromley or Beaconsfield would always carry consequences, the question was how quickly the outcomes would take to manifest themselves. In the end it was hubris and exceptionalism that brought the tide to a swell and exposed sycophants and shits for what they were.

As it always is with this crowd of chancers – it is one rule for us and another for them. The compound fracture of trust on policy and a breach of trust on simple decency swamped a Conservative coalition newly built on half-truths and hopes.

And then there was Liz Truss.

If you want to know why you won Maidenhead and two dozen other seats look no further. It wasn't any revisionist strategy from Vincent Square that involved deluxe bakeries, it was the now former MP for Norfolk South West. Just go back and watch the footage of her in the House of Commons, while her chancellor was causing markets to more than flutter. She was giddy with excitement. And she still doesn't get it.

The damage that that woman did to my party was both systemic and fitting. Her ideological bedfellows now decry the notion that Liz Truss crashed the economy but I would suggest that anyone tempted to indulge in Tufton Street revisionism check the records - pension values did not collapse because traders took exception to her enthusiasm for pork markets. She was the coup de grace. The bullet to the back of the skull administered by one of the Conservative Party's own.

*“The Conservative Party had in three short years gone from being the standard bearer for cynical, if practically minded, approaches to policy making to being overtaken by a peculiar form of the Taliban”*

## UNADULTERATED STUPIDITY

Everything else is consequence to the shameless, unadulterated stupidity that went before. Rishi Sunak doesn't really enter into it; he's simply the poor schmuck that got caught holding the baby. The fact that he has no political hinterland made the job harder for him, it may have even made a few people a little bit angrier - his constant oscillation between Combat 18 policies and what he imagines a moderate approach to be was excruciating to watch. But look at the numbers. Look at the polling. The Conservative Party held a freakish lead through to 2021 - even throughout the loss of the supposedly 'True Blue' Chesham and Amersham. They held that lead all the way through until Christmas 2021 when news of lockdown parties in Downing Street broke. And crossover, a Labour lead. The next big moment? Liz Truss and her fiscal event.

The party has been at war with itself since 2016, prior to that it was in a state of armed neutrality on the issue of Europe. 2016 asked the question no-one should have asked. It rang a bell that cannot be unringed. It exposed dividing lines and pushed decent individuals to do deals with least worst options. And least worst options led to here.

But why did the party allow itself to get into this state? Quite simply, because far too many of us – and I include myself within this – thought we knew better. We thought we knew what was better for the British public. The truth is, we didn't. We were making it up as we went along because we had lost what we stood for. And we were terrified that people would find out.

My concern out of all of this is that some idiot Liberal Democrat will take the view that is better not to have a view, after all you just won some seats. Nothing could be further from the truth. People need to know where your centre is. Now more than ever.

But when you lose it, which you will, don't pretend. Start again. Be honest enough to do so. People may come to respect you. And if they respect you, they're more likely to vote for you.

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J Frasier Hewitt is a northerner who, once upon a time, considered himself a Conservative party member and campaign manager

# THE THAMES VALLEY TURNS ORANGE

And not just because of sewage. For the first time since 1777 Oxfordshire has no Tory MPs and there was success in the wider Thames Valley after years of effective campaigning, writes Gareth Epps

Really? Really??? The clock was turning around 6am. As we awaited a counting discrepancy to be rectified so Calum Miller could be declared as the first MP for the new constituency of Bicester & Woodstock, the truth dawned that not only had Calum won, but so had four other Liberal Democrats across Oxfordshire. For the first time in almost 250 years, the county was Tory-free, Labour having gained Banbury.

In neighbouring areas, two lines stretched into the Cotswolds through Stratford-on-Avon and Lechlade (the bridge to a Lib Dem walk stretching from Barnstaple in the West to Eastbourne in the East); and with Wokingham and, more surprisingly, Maidenhead being won, the broader Thames Valley appeared to have turned on an historic level.

Just seven years ago, Oxfordshire looked very different. Only one council seat in the new constituency had been won; the party was fighting for survival until David Cameron's resignation triggered a by-election. It couldn't even find candidates in Bicester, which had only ever had one Lib Dem councillor, who won by one vote. It was clear that for motivational reasons, Tim Farron wanted to get the party campaigning again; and while it wasn't won, Liz Leffman losing the Henley by-election by 5,000 votes to Tory Robert Courts provided focus and a rallying point.

Historically the county has been a typical English shire. The extension of the franchise from 1832 coincided with rural radicalism, with some Liberal success; then the early 1920s came and the flame died.

Organisation across the county had been steadily developed by Neil Fawcett, formerly campaign organiser for Evan Harris; the 2017 election provided the welcome surprise of Layla Moran regaining Oxford West and Abingdon (OxWab). Local election gains in 2018 prefigured the following year's revival where planning issues atomised the Tories in South Oxfordshire, to be replaced by a Lib Dem/Green administration only two of whom had any previous local government experience. The county's opposition to Brexit provided a fertile recruiting ground.

As part of Layla's election, a formal arrangement was made with the Green Party with stand-asides at local elections and reports to party members. It divided up the two wards of Kidlington, one returning to the Lib Dem fold; the other subsequently won by the Greens.

As the Brexit chaos of 2019 unfolded, a new campaign emerged. A science-led campaign group along the River Windrush in west Oxfordshire started mapping the

extent of sewage pollution, giving a body of evidence that engaged people from anglers to farmers and, over time, ordinary citizens. It started to become apparent that the reaction was one of moral outrage, even in genteel riverside villages. The campaign group Windrush Against Sewage Pollution [WASP]'s effectiveness would prove in time to sting the Tories – and the salience of the issue was not lost on campaigners.

## 'REMAIN' CONSTITUENCY

The 2019 general election was treated as a staging post. Oxfordshire constituencies were among the broad list of targets, and the insights from the Witney by-election were usefully augmented by furious canvassing motivated by a distant and arrogant Tory, a Brexit supporter in a Remain constituency.

I found myself talking to new anti-Brexit members in places which had never had a Lib Dem presence, building a campaign force from a very low level and finding new and enthusiastic volunteers. The campaign was vigorous but ultimately a national swing saw a record high Lib Dem vote share but a 15,000 Tory majority; slightly better results were recorded in Wantage and Henley.

The pandemic hiatus was broken by the 2021 county council election, and that is where the mould was broken.

Ten Tory losses, eight including their leader to the Liberal Democrats, created the opportunity for a rainbow alliance to keep the Tories out, under Lib Dem leadership. This was followed by Chesham & Amersham, and further consolidation on the rural districts. T

The party started to have the organisation and funding to break out beyond OxWab.

The Boundary Commission's much-delayed work would create an extra seat in Oxfordshire. This split the old Witney seat into three, with naturally Labour-leaning territory going with Banbury and the very promising wards around Woodstock and Eynsham aligned with Kidlington (from OxWab) and Bicester, into a seat with no Labour councillors.

The surprise winner in the county elections was Calum Miller in Otmoor, a former senior civil servant whose late father was chief executive of the Scottish Liberal Party. His late arrival into politics was triggered by the early antics of the Johnson administration. Months and a 25% swing later, he was the party's first county councillor in north Oxfordshire for decades. Attention started to be focused.





Meanwhile, the Tories' reaction to South Oxfordshire's planning issues had been for Robert Jenrick to wrest control over planning policy from the council, whose mandate was to create a fresh local plan and push back on car-dependent building on an actively used former RAF airfield at Chalgrove.

The county seat there was won by Freddie van Mierlo. Parliamentary selections were brought forward (despite internal bureaucratic pressure) and campaigns run under a countywide organisation that brought some standardisation of approach – even resulting in breakthrough wins on the edge of Banbury amid concern in surrounding villages about the town's encroachment. The Tories were wiped out in Vale of White Horse in 2023, and the Henley constituency contained not a single Labour or Tory district councillor.

The county has lively debates around development, somewhat awkwardly for a party committed to building more homes. Fundamental to this is the beggar-thy-neighbour approach of Labour-run Oxford City Council to underdevelop in the city and dump housing on the surrounding rural districts. The UK's most expensive city outside London fails to meet its own housing need, with successive Tory rural districts mopping it up to trouser New Homes Bonus. Then that money dried up, and so did the incentive to build. The ever-rapacious management of the Blenheim Palace estate promoted a proposal for Europe's largest solar farm, an American leisure resort, golf course redevelopment proposals, and speculative applications that combined to create an atmosphere in which new housing was vilified more than most.

Oxford Labour had meanwhile done a deal with Oxford

United Football Club to sell its then-owner the land for a stadium, on an agreement with the loophole that it didn't have to be used for football beyond the first 25 years. Guess what?

## **TORIES ATROPHIED**

Although not all councillors saw it that way, by 2023 most campaigners in the county were eyeing up the parliamentary potential of the new constituencies, as Tory support atrophied.

This happened even in the new Witney constituency, which had selected former financier Charlie Maynard known for promoting the reopening of the railway which had closed as the town started to grow fourfold,

A series of issues were afflicting the Tories; the wards along the rivers saw former Tories turn against the party based on sewage pollution. Tory campaigning became shrill and shouty and attempted to channel discontent on local issues. The county council's flagship policy turned villages into 20mph zones, where parish councils and the local councillor supported this. A lack of funding for pothole repairs generated further disquiet; an excoriating Ofsted review of special educational needs provision highlighted other funding issues, with Labour walking out of the county administration after their lack of leadership in their portfolio was singled out in the review.

Meanwhile, in Cherwell, Lib Dem and Green gains by 2023 outnumbered the block of Banbury Labour councillors, and the Tories lost control; only to be propped up by Labour, on instructions from their national executive to not work with other progressives – an instruction later bragged about by tribal dinosaur (and new MP) Luke Akehurst.

In the year running up to the general election, a sense of focus and purpose descended, with healthy rivalry and competition a feature, with campaigners led by Neil Fawcett and Richard Buckley taking charge to build strong teams, pushing the party to allow organisation on a constituency basis, despite occasional complaint from those whose horizons were limited to the district council.

On the doorsteps, clear themes emerged. Pressure against housing targets and the lack of infrastructure to accompany development, particularly access to the first line of NHS care, sewage pollution and the cost of living.

As luck would have it, West Oxfordshire's Liberal Democrat-led administration was sitting down with Thames Water to address one strand of this. A condition required sewerage infrastructure to be built before occupation of new developments – common sense of a rare variety. Equally, an 'infrastructure first' requirement that is starting to create a more positive approach to development. The Tories tried 'culture war' campaigns over road safety measures such as 20mph limits, low traffic neighbourhoods and cycle lanes. These got nowhere.

The calling of the general election came amid plans for further capacity-building. Five hours before Sunak's drenching, a Zoom call took place to confirm whether we had our first leaflet in place.

## SUNAK'S PHOTOBOMB

It was at the printers before the Downing Street podium confirmed what was by then obvious. Well-laid plans were then rolled out. The moment things really caught fire was when Sunak's attempt to blow open culture wars from the genteel surroundings of Henley's Leander Club were photobombed.

Unknown to Sunak, a long-prepared Thames boat trip was to take Henley and Wokingham candidates van Mierlo and Clive Jones to expose issues of sewage pollution prior to the regatta. Sunak was spotted from a distance; two plus two was put together, and in the following days, members and poster requests in Henley went through the roof.

Meanwhile, the last Tory council to fall (Cherwell) saw a Lib Dem administration elected on the night the general election was called; decisions were quickly made to allow campaigners to get campaigning, and the town of Bicester for the first time saw poster boards going up by the dozens.

The main driver of the county's success has been organisational, though. Activity levels have been turned into a healthy driver of activity; one constituency's early work on a particular area of the general election campaign could be turned into positive motivation, with one result an enormous number of poster sites that nobody travelling through the county could have failed to notice. This has led to positive thinking that even saw the vast, northernmost, ultra-rural ward around Banbury with 26 settlements, gained by an insurgent Lib Dem campaign from a Tory who had been there since the 1970s.

While Labour form part of the administration in West Oxfordshire, elsewhere there is little Lib-Lab love. As the Oxford Clarion put it, "In Witney, Didcot, and Bicester, the

*"As with much of the Lib Dem success, the overwhelming desire to see the back of the Tories now needs to be replaced by substance and direction"*

third-placed party (Labour in each case) attempted to muddy the waters with selective use of polling and creatively worded leaflets. Voters weren't fooled. In an election where Labour dominated the national narrative, anti-Conservative residents coalesced behind a single candidate in each seat, whether that be LibDem or Labour. The fear that a split opposition could let the Conservatives through didn't materialise."

Relations with the Greens more broadly will be a hot topic for debate with external party pressure to trash what are, in the main, constructive working relationships, although they may in any case be running their course. The Greens, meanwhile, are becoming steadily more tribal and more rapidly Nimbyish.

As with much of the Lib Dem success, the overwhelming desire to see the back of the Tories now needs to be replaced by substance and direction.

Early campaigning by the new MPs has seen a focus on sustainable rail transport, the need to keep the Campsfield detention site closed, as well as campaigning on the NHS.

The extended platform afforded the third party spokesperson allowed Layla Moran to make a powerful in-depth intervention over the Gaza catastrophe during the King's Speech. Meanwhile the early days of a Labour government have seen battle lines drawn on planning and housing; the party will have to make the case for affordable housing to meet local need. Signs of continued nonsense over centrally-imposed 'devolution' may also reappear.

Lib Dem progress has been such that even with a hostile press and multiple challenges, the minority Lib Dem-Green county administration is likely to gain rather than lose seats in 2025. Days after the election, a hamfisted Labour attempted vote of no confidence was easily swatted away. It won't always be as straightforward, but the team built across the county isn't looking at a one-off result. It contains over 120 principal councillors, and is rightly feared by opponents. The campaign for a Tory-free Oxfordshire still has work to do, but we can safely say it's found its feet.

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Gareth Epps is a member of the Liberator Collective and was an organiser in Bicester & Woodstock.



# ‘NOTHING TO SEE HERE’

## The Liberal Democrat general election success came at the expense of the members it ignored in the rest of the country, says Simon Banks

During the election, Liberal Democrat members might have been led to believe by increasingly dramatic and desperate appeals for cash that Ed Davey’s seat was a goner unless they promptly sent £200.

The battle-hardened and sceptical will have been a bit more optimistic, noting that all the signs in their local couple of target seats were positive, but the actual tally of seats won shocked many. This was a real triumph which I don’t want to talk down. Many excellent Liberals have been elected. We have more than half the seats of the Tory party.

But a wise general, or chief executive, or football coach, always considers whether the very victory contains the seeds of defeat, or at least, of getting bogged down.

When I read chief executive Mike Dixon’s extended post about how we won, I went from sharing the exhilaration to deep frustration. We’ve done so very well by strict targeting, he said, so it doesn’t matter that we did it on 12% of the vote, 2/3 to little more than half of the vote we were achieving in successive elections from 1992 to 2010 and only a little more than our series of rejections in 2015, 2017 and 2019.

What next, he asked. Of course – just win some more seats, the ones where we came quite close (18 of the 20 closest are Tory).

### CONTROVERSIAL MESSAGE

Oddly for someone you’d expect to be a behind-the-scenes manager, Dixon has often been used by others in the leadership team to deliver a controversial message. Jolly good for volunteering to be first over the top, Jones, and good luck! A rather different message came from HQ to local party officers encouraging all local parties to make an effort now, the best time, to recruit new members.

What’s missing from the more-of-the-same strategy? Almost everything. The centre exhorts local parties to campaign more and more. In some places, there is take-off and plenty of new members, from whom good numbers of activists develop. In others, a few harassed campaigners stumble on. They do not put much effort into seeking new members and new activists because they’re too busy with the next Focus and the next executive meeting. If new members do emerge (and as we’re often told, most now join centrally and not because of local efforts), what is there to engage and excite them? Some leaflets to deliver. Important – and I love a party in which the leaders are expected to have started at the coalface – but not enough. Join the Greens, especially in a locality where they’re a force, and you are encouraged into a ferment of discussion, so I’m told. The dominant culture of the Liberal Democrats is now that anything not directly related to election campaigning is self-indulgence.

Or compare where the party now has seats, with 1997-2010. The dead land of the East Midlands remains. We’ve heaved

ourselves back up a bit in the North, recapturing three old strongholds, but in the earlier period we were winning seats in Leeds, Sheffield and inner Manchester and weren’t far off in Newcastle. Our current northern seats are suburb, spa or sheepwalk. We are no longer winning in the Birmingham conurbation: our West Midland seats are a by-election gain held and Stratford-upon-Avon. We have an impressive clump of seats in outer south-west London, but are no-hopers across the rest of the capital. In Wales, we just clawed back Brecon and Radnor so we now have 25% of Plaid Cymru’s representation – and Montgomery has gone Labour.

Worse in a way, in areas where we used to be strong, and which still have characteristics friendly to Liberalism – not only Montgomery, but also parts of Cornwall and Northumberland – we’ve been gazumped by Labour and the choice next time will be Conservative or Labour.

For a third party, having marked areas of strength or weakness is not bad in itself: in fact, it helps, as a cluster of strength makes it easier to progress in adjoining seats. But the retreat from the conurbations and from the moderate-sized towns of the North and West Midlands is truly serious when coupled with the disappearance of Liberal local campaigners from many low-income wards. As many left-of-centre thinkers are saying, progressive parties have either taken low-income, basic education areas for granted while chasing the professionals (Labour) or have abandoned the poor areas because socio-economic profiling says they’re poor soil (Lib Dem).

The current Labour government will disappoint – even if it does a relatively good job. Will anyone else be there to respond to the bewildered frustration?

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Simon Banks is a former Liberal parliamentary candidate and councillor in Waltham Forest, and is a member of the Social Liberal Forum’s council.

# LET'S GO INTO THE CITIES

The general election left an orange band across the south's shires and suburbs but Liberal Democrats are urgently needed in the cities where their presence is least, says Richard Kemp

Ever since I moved to Liverpool 50 years ago from the leafy and green Ripon constituency where I was the agent in 1974, I have practiced my political trade in one of the toughest urban areas of the country.

For the first 21 years that I was a councillor I represented areas in Dingle and Smithdown which were among the poorest areas in the UK never mind Liverpool. They were poor before I got there and remain poor to this day.

Even though I now represent the fabulous and relatively well-off Penny Lane ward I have always had to be conscious of the needs of the poorer areas in the city. 60% of our city is designated as a super output area in which there are complex indices of poor education, poor health, poor housing, and well just about poor everything. As we created policy within the city, we Liberals and then Liberal Democrats had to think more about those areas rather than the areas which we represented which include - since we abolished the Tory party here - the wealthiest areas of the city.

No matter how successful we have been in the many general elections that I have been involved in since my first in 1970 there has always been someone who, after the elections, says, ...." but!"

So, it might as well be me! In fact, let me correct my own first sentence. For the first time since 1970 I have not been involved in the general election at all. Convention in Liverpool is that for the year that you are in office the Lord Mayor plays no part in politics so that he or she can act as the only member of the council able to speak during the pre-election period but also, as with the speaker, can be neutral throughout the year.

## SHIRES AND SUBURBS

My lament through the whole of this period has been that the Liberals and then Liberal Democrats have been a party of the suburbs and shires. A quick look at the map of where Lib Dems

took seats on Thursday will see that this has not changed at all. If you look at the list of target seats that we fought on 4 July there was only one where we were facing Labour. All the rest were Tory facing.

Look at the map of where we represent and there is now a healthy orange glow about it, but the large patches of orange can be seen to be large because of their rural nature. In the densely packed areas of red we have no representation at all.

I know that in all the areas of the country that we represent there are patches of poverty, and it would be wrong to forget the problems both of rural poverty and the poverty that often exists in the seaside towns built by the railways but hollowed out since the 1960s by air travel to the warm European seaside areas.

Having done a lot of work for the past five years in Devon and Somerset, where so many of our gains have come from, I know that my colleagues place great emphasis on social housing and other poverty alleviation policies.

I do understand the need for targeting and believe that this policy was absolutely necessary to ensure that we came back from the political wilderness to enable the party as a whole to be relevant to the law-making processes of the nation as a whole. But we have achieved that and my plea to Ed Davey and our other leaders is that now is the time to be bold and push for real representation in our major cities.

Now I know that we are not entirely unrepresented in urban areas at local level. We control Hull and have significant and growing numbers of councillors in places like Sheffield, Newcastle, and a growing re-energised presence in my own city of Liverpool. But over the whole of my 50 years in Liverpool we have had to do everything ourselves and fight a poorly funded urban guerrilla warfare against Labour's well-funded mighty machines. That is largely true of all those other areas as well. The big Lib Dem donors by choice or by desire have always supported the fight against the Tories which have always been,

in the short term either the most winnable or the most defensible.

I am proud of what we have achieved in those cities but strongly believe that we can and should do more within the nation's poorest areas where you will find the greatest aggregation of despair and poverty. Many of our approaches in Liverpool have been at scale and really transforming. At the

*"I think we have a moral obligation to take our liberalism of both policies and practices into those areas where help is needed most"*

end of the 1970s we had the first 'build for sale' programme and the biggest housing cooperative programme in Europe. In the 'noughties' we conceived and hosted the best European Capital of Culture. But good local action simply is not enough without a wider scale national policy and funding framework into which the good local actions can fit.

Why have I asked Ed Davey to look at this issue? Well for two reasons really.

Firstly, the political swing will begin, inevitably, to turn against Labour. Expectations are high and, given the appalling financial circumstances that the incoming government has inherited, solutions will not be simple, and they certainly will not be quick. The government has swung into action and begun to do some good things but already it is following some of the basic mistakes of both the Tories and the previous Labour government.

## IMPOSED TARGETS

If I take one example, the government immediately announced the resumption of housing targets being imposed on areas rather than being developed with knowledgeable local councils. If we take this route, we will build houses where the housing companies feel that they will make the most profit. New housing will not be directed to the areas where it could also have the maximum economic effect.

Most of our cities have large amounts of land where new housing could be built close to the jobs that people will have. Housing follows jobs but jobs also follow housing. Young people lead their early life in flats and small units but are pushed out into commuter land, with all its environmental disadvantages, when they want to move up to larger accommodation.

As a quick example, at the time of writing the Labour government seems to be turning it back on the removal of the two-child benefit cap which the Lib Dems and progressive members of the Labour party are campaigning for. This is a demand that is relatively inexpensive but would do much to reduce child poverty and improve the economies of our disadvantaged areas.

Secondly, we must give hope to those communities by showing our relevance to them. Being a councillor in tough inner-city areas and in tough peripheral estates is hard going. Every day brings more heart-breaking situations. Supporting a community which often has few community activists and increasingly few resources. Of course, there are many good Labour councillors and MPs, but I have seen how really good Lib Dem councillors with their emphasis on community politics and bottom-up decision making can make a real difference to those depressed and deprived areas.

But let me add on a third reason for the move back into those areas of deprivation. I think we have a moral obligation to take our liberalism of both policies and practices into those areas where help is needed most. We cannot claim to be a national party unless we apply those policies and practices to those areas where there is greatest need. We are almost saying that we don't care, I just don't believe that, but we are not showing that we have an offer to make to those areas and leave the field to Labour, and in the last parliament to the red wall Tories.

## NEITHER STUPID NOT FECKLESS

Changing round the fortunes of those areas of deprivation will take not only better policies and better money but a change in attitude. Even in this piece I have struggled to define what those areas should be called and talking about deprivation is itself a pejorative term. I believe that Toxteth and Sparkbrook and the



inner core of towns like Rhyl and Blackpool are areas of opportunity for our country. The people of those areas are neither stupid nor feckless but over the generations have had aspirations almost surgically removed from them by short-term projects such as single regeneration budget partnerships or City Action teams that only scratched the surface of the needs of an area. Long term problems need long-term planning and long-term investment if they are to be solved.

Our manifesto included policies which would have helped those people, but not enough. We can only really help them when we have our street fighters in place providing more practical and moral support to areas which feel largely neglected. So, I want to challenge our victorious leader to do three things:

Appoint in both Houses of Parliament a spokesperson for urban affairs to work with our hard-pressed councillors in cities and towns and visit them, support them encourage them and learn from them when they return to parliament.

Work with regional parties to select one tough seat in every major conurbation in the UK where the party will focus its efforts.

Use some of the money that will come in from an increased numbers of donors to support those nitty, gritty urban campaigns.

We will only be a truly national party when we represent people in all areas and from all walks of life. We will now have a greater resource than at any time in my political career to begin to achieve this.

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Richard Kemp has been a Liberal/Lib Dem councillor in Liverpool for 42 years and is a former Leader of the Lib Dems in the Local Government Association.

# BACK FROM THE DEAD

## Liberal Democrats regained a toe hold at Westminster, but only just, says Peter Black

It is no exaggeration to say that there was overwhelming relief among Welsh Liberal Democrats when the result in Brecon, Radnorshire and Cwmtawe came through in the early hours of 5 July.

From a party which once held four Parliamentary seats in Wales we had been reduced to putting all our hopes into regaining this one, much enlarged, constituency in the hope of starting to regain some relevance this side of Offa's Dyke.

And it was by no means a certainty that we would take it. The sitting Tory MP was well entrenched and the part of the Swansea valley that had been added to the seat was a Liberal Democrat black hole where both Labour and Plaid Cymru were strong.

There was to be no repeat of the 2019 by-election performance when the nationalists and Greens soft-pedalled so we could defeat the Tories and reinforce our opposition to Brexit.

This time, Labour in particular, had a popular local councillor as a candidate and Plaid had a stake in doing well too. Everything depended on securing the tactical vote in the south of the constituency, while building on our recent local government success elsewhere in Powys.

Fortunately, we had a hardworking and impressive candidate in David Chadwick, while Reform did enough to suppress the Tory vote to enable us to cross the winning line.

There is though a warning in the history of this constituency, which also applies to the Liberal Democrats in the rest of Wales.

In the 23 years we have held the Parliamentary seat of Brecon and Radnorshire since Richard Livsey's by-election victory in 1985, we have failed to properly consolidate our hold on it. Only the 1997 result was comfortable.

### RELY ON OUTSIDERS

A constituency held that long should not have to rely on people from outside to come back time-after-time to re-establish the anti-Tory squeeze in the southern wards. There should have been regular campaigning going on in those areas and membership recruitment.

This is a lesson the new MP and his team need to take on board. We now run Powys Council in coalition with Labour. The resources are there to build on recent successes. It is time that they were used.

For the rest of Wales, it was business as usual. We lost 20 out of 32 deposits but gained second places in Cardiff East and Ceredigion Preseli, albeit some distance away; seats that cover areas we once held. There was another reasonable result in Swansea West, where we added 50% onto our 2019 vote share, but really that was it.

One of the big issues was the way we were excluded from much of the TV and radio coverage. Broadcasters decided that balance meant they only had to give regular airtime to Welsh parties represented in the House of Commons. They won't have that excuse again.

The real game changer though, could come in 2026 when we

have the Welsh Senedd elections as Labour and Plaid Cymru have completely changed the terms of this contest.

There will no longer be a hybrid proportional representation system. Instead we will have 16 constituencies each electing six members using a closed list d'hondt system. That means that vote share is going to be very important.

On 4 July, the Labour vote went down in Wales by 3.9% from its 2019 baseline, which was described by some as its worst result since 1935. In contrast, Labour's UK vote was up on its 2019 level.

### LABOUR DOMINANCE

Labour's dominance of the Welsh constituencies was largely due to the Conservative vote dropping by 17.9%. The other big change was the 11.5% increase in the Reform Party vote from what the Brexit party achieved last time. There was also a small percentage increase in the vote for Plaid Cymru (4.9%), the Green party (3.7%) and the Liberal Democrats (0.5%).

Reform was second in all but Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly and Gower in industrial south Wales and will have a sizeable presence in the next Senedd if it maintains momentum.

Already pundits are predicting that Labour will fail, for the first time, to be the largest party in the next Senedd. That though does not help the Welsh Liberal Democrats, whose current vote share falls short of what we need to secure a reasonably sized group of MSs.

To get one MS elected in each of the new constituencies a party needs to secure at least 14% of the vote. That is a tall order for the Welsh Liberal Democrats in much of Wales, but not impossible.

There will be a lower turnout, and plenty of issues to campaign on, not least the disarray within the Senedd Labour group following the ousting of Vaughan Gething as leader, the very unpopular default 20mph speed limit, and the cost of all the extra politicians foisted onto us and many local matters.

A good, focussed campaign in these new constituencies could well build on what was achieved on 4 July, but it will need hard work and commitment, and activists will need to start now.

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Peter Black is a former Liberal Democrat member for the Welsh Assembly.



# DIAGONAL BANDS

## Scotland's volatile electorate has radically changed the country's political map, says Nigel Lindsay

The 2024 general election results in Scotland convey five significant messages: the Scottish electorate is more volatile than its English counterpart; analysing the Scottish vote is complicated by three-way tactical voting; the Liberal Democrats are back and have a springboard for 2026; the SNP vote share held up better than their seats total; the Conservatives and Reform did much less well in Scotland.

Electoral swings in Scotland have been wide and rapid over the past two decades. Old tribal loyalties have melted. Voters have swung between the SNP and Labour with alacrity, and flirtations with the Conservatives have been short and faithless. It is demonstrably easier to change the minds of voters north of the border.

Tactical voting to ditch the Conservatives was evident across the UK. In Scotland the picture was even more complex. While 'throw the bastards out' was the popular mood, Labour, Lib Dem and Conservative leaders were nevertheless of one voice in urging supporters to vote against the SNP.

This created several anomalies. In some constituencies, Conservatives voted Labour to prevent an SNP win. In others, Lib Dem leaflets urged Labour and Conservative supporters to back our candidates for the same reason. This loosening of the apron strings, combined with the political promiscuity mentioned above, makes it hard to predict how present supporters of any party will vote in future elections.

### THIRD PARTY

It was an encouraging result for Liberal Democrats. We now have six MPs instead of four. We have become the third party in Scotland behind Labour and SNP. We re-captured the Highland areas once held by Russell Johnston and Charles Kennedy, and Alistair Carmichael's victory in Orkney and Shetland was of almost North Korean proportions.

Less happily, we failed to target or regain our former seats in the north-east and the Borders. Despite that, if our vote share of almost 10% holds up in the 2026 elections, we may hold the balance in the next Scottish parliament. There is already talk of reconstituting the Lib-Lab alliance which delivered such a progressive programme of government between 1999 and 2007. Meanwhile there is a diagonal orange band across the north Highlands and Islands on the electoral map of Scotland.

There is no doubt that the combined assault on the SNP by the other parties worked. The 48 seats won by the SNP in the 2019 election were reduced to just nine, with morale badly shaken. In a Scottish echo of the UK result, the governing party had been in power too long, had lost its way, and was tainted by suspicion of wrongdoing in high places. It lost good and high-profile MPs including Joanna Cherry KC, who had led the successful legal action against Boris Johnson's illegal prorogation of parliament.

Yet the SNP vote was much better than their seat haul suggests. They won all the seats in Aberdeen and Dundee. They attracted the support of 30% of the Scottish electorate, not much less than Starmer's winning 34% across the UK. Fair

voting would have given them twice as many seats as they won. Their unqualified support of EU membership and consistent calls for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza offered refuge to radicals from elsewhere. And support for independence, as distinct from the SNP, remains at around 50%. Set in the context of a volatile Scottish electorate, these factors mean that the SNP may be back quite soon. They have recovered quickly from greater setbacks than this in the past, notably between 2005-07. Meanwhile, there is a yellow SNP diagonal band across the south Highlands and north-east on the electoral map of Scotland.

### VOTER VOLATILITY

In another example of voter volatility, Labour recovered from its worst-ever Scottish result in 2019, doubling its vote share to 35%. With only 5% more of the popular vote than the SNP, Labour won four times as many seats and painted the many constituencies of central Scotland a red band on the electoral map.

The curious concentration of wins for each party in lateral bands of Scotland was completed by a thin blue line in the Borders. The routing of Scottish Conservatives was almost complete. Their vote share halved from 25% to 12.5% and they ended the night with only five seats, becoming the fourth party in Scotland.

Reform polled only 7%, less than half of its vote share in England. The Greens managed almost 4%, increasing their vote without winning a seat. Alba, the breakaway pro-independence party led by Alex Salmond, had a terrible night, with derisory votes and the loss of their representation in parliament.

Once Labour's UK honeymoon ends and it becomes unpopular again in Scotland, there will be opportunities for Lib Dems - but also for the SNP and for parties of the right. Planning for those scenarios needs to start now. For the Lib Dems to progress, we need to build sound constituency organisations. We also require a recognisable Liberal message that clearly answers the needs of Scotland's people. We shall have to be more than "not the Conservatives and not the SNP".

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Nigel Lindsay is a former Liberal Democrat councillor in Aberdeen.

# RESTORE THE RULE OF LAW

## The last Government rigged the law in its own favour, it's time to reverse this and change the voting system too, says Neil Hickman

Many years ago, I was one of a group of law students being addressed by Lord Denning. "Let's get one thing straight" he began. "You're going to be unpopular. All lawyers are".

As quite often, Denning hit the nail on the head. Shakespeare knew how his audience would react when he had Dick the Butcher declare "The first thing we do is, let's kill all the lawyers." Similarly Boris Johnson, sneering at Keir Starmer as "A lawyer, not a leader".

There are other views. In *A Man for All Seasons*, Robert Bolt has More declare "This country is planted thick with laws, from coast to coast, Man's laws, not God's! And if you cut them down..., do you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then? Yes, I'd give the Devil benefit of law, for my own safety's sake!"

### **'NOT A LITTLE BLOOD'**

Alongside the rule of law (of which lawyers are a necessary part) lies the idea of democracy. Nearly a century ago, the then Lord Chief Justice (and former Liberal politician), Lord Hewart, wrote in his controversial (but soundly based) book *The New Despotism*: "Much toil, and not a little blood, have been spent in bringing slowly into being a polity wherein the people make their laws, and independent judges administer them."

The new Parliament will lack the counsel of Jacob Rees-Mogg. But it is worth looking at some of that gentleman's recent pronouncements. The electoral system which the UK shares with Belarus has few virtues and little pretence at being genuinely representative. And Rees-Mogg was willing to acknowledge that in introducing the requirement for voter ID in the way it did (allowing elderly persons' bus passes as valid ID, but not those issued to young people, for example), the Conservative Party was seeking to gerrymander that system in its favour.

He also suggested, apropos of the Supreme Court's evidence-based decision that Rwanda was not in truth a safe country: "The Supreme Court should no longer be the final arbiter of the law". What did he mean by that? Parliament can always change the rules which make up the law. But it is for the independent courts to tell us what those rules mean and how they apply to the facts of a case. And it's in that sense that the Supreme Court is the final arbiter.

So who or what did Rees-Mogg and his colleagues believe should be "the final arbiter of the law"? Let's not delude ourselves about the fiercely independent MPs in the supposed mother of Parliaments. They, or a sufficient number of them, will do as they are told. If the final arbiter of what the law means, and how it applies to the facts of a case, is not the Supreme Court, it will be the prime minister and his circle.

Now, however adventurous the chancellor of the exchequer, no Government can wave a magic wand and instantly undo many years' worth of damage.

But one thing which would cost nothing would be to pass a short but clear cut Act entitled the Democracy and Rule of Law Act, which should repeal, as a minimum: the Rwanda legislation, on the basis that in using Parliament to overrule the courts on an evidence-based question of fact, the Conservative Government trampled on the Rule of Law; the voter ID provisions of the Elections Act 2022, which Rees-Mogg admitted were an attempted gerrymander; Sections 16 and 17 of the Elections Act 2022 (which removed the independence of the Electoral Commission); Section 3 of the Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Act 2022 (which spelt out that if, as Boris Johnson did, the Government suspends Parliament for improper purposes, this could not be reviewed by the courts.

It is often overlooked that the Scottish courts in the Miller/Cherry case found in terms that Johnson had sought the 2019 prorogation for an improper purpose.

There is much more that the new Government could and should do to establish that the United Kingdom is once more a country where "the people make their laws, and independent judges administer them".

### **LOBBY PROPAGANDA**

The limits on expenditure, which the Conservatives unilaterally increased so as to favour themselves, should be drastically reduced. The Electoral Commission should be invited (not directed, as its independence is being restored) to consider how expenditure by, and propaganda from, nominally independent lobby groups and think tanks can best be regulated. The Charity Commission should be invited to examine the charitable status of certain think tanks. The Electoral Commission should also be invited to consider how internet deep-fakery and targeted social media communications (even truthful ones) can best be regulated. But certain changes need to be made by primary legislation; and making them would be the clearest signal that a line was being drawn under the contempt for democracy and contempt for the Rule of Law of the last few years.

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Neil Hickman is a retired district judge. His book *'Despotism Renewed? Lord Hewart Unburied'* is available from Amazon at £24.95.

# MISSING ABROAD

## Thousands were newly enfranchised, but what happened to British overseas voters at the general election, wonders George Cunningham

You'd have thought that having some 2.1m more UK citizens overseas being eligible to vote this year, bringing the total to 3.5m – a potential electorate almost the size of Scotland's – would have caused some waves in the UK general election. Alas, that doesn't seem to have been the case.

Despite the Electoral Commission joining forces with the three main political parties, plus Brits in Europe and Breman in Spain, to encourage British citizens abroad to register to vote, it seems from projected numbers that overseas registrations will fail to match the 2017 and 2019 general elections, even with many more eligible voters in play.

In the 2019 General Election, more than 200,000 Brits abroad registered to vote, around 15% of the estimated 1.4m eligible voters at the time. However, rather than rising to at least half a million registered voters under the new franchise, less fewer than 200,000 British citizens – just 6% of the new eligible electorate total, seem to have applied in time or still had valid registrations.

We believe there are a number of reasons for the relatively low registration rate.

Overseas voters had to renew their registration annually until this year (when overseas registrations become valid for three years). While the EU referendum in 2016 and three general elections in 2015, 2017 and 2019 came in rapid succession, the much longer five-year gap from 2019-24 led gradually to a big drop in numbers re-registering annually, until the surge of the newly-enfranchised voters began on 16 January 2024.

The registration levels in 2016, 2017 and 2019 were all fuelled by a keen interest in the Brexit issue. This year, all the political parties downplayed the issue of Europe deliberately for fear of alienating their target voters at home, except at the very end of the campaign when the Liberal Democrats committed clearly in their manifesto to a European future for the country.

A number of overseas voters faced challenges in registering due to lack of documentary proof that they ever lived in their constituency, especially the newly-enfranchised (away from the UK for more than 15 years) where many local council records did not stretch so far back in time.

Once the electoral campaign got underway, we believe several other factors came into play.

The main parties unsurprisingly focused their campaigns on domestic issues. It was not clear what the offer was for Brits living abroad until party manifestos were launched halfway through the election campaign.

There was no sufficiently big policy offer that might have stimulated turnout, especially for the newly-enfranchised, who were clearly likely to be an older cohort of people. No political party came out with a policy to unfreeze the pensions of half a million British retirees abroad in countries such as Australia and Canada, a clear vote winner which probably would have stimulated considerable older voter participation.

Then there is the fiasco of the overseas postal vote. At best,

councils started sending out the ballot papers just three weeks before the election date, when parliamentary candidates had been nominated and papers barely printed. Some councils didn't dispatch them until the day after the voter registration deadline (from 19 June). Ballots were not received in time in many countries for British voters to send them back for the count in their last constituency. Clearly the possibility of asking for a (postal) proxy for a UK-based relative or friend to vote on behalf of the British overseas voter was not sufficiently advertised. This effectively disenfranchised many of the re-enfranchised, especially outside Europe. It will also act as a significant disincentive to register again for a future general election.

Clearly the job was only half done by the Conservative government in its 2022 Election Act. More work will be needed on electoral reform in the next Parliament. Surely, the serious shortcomings can be overcome by simply adopting a mix of what other countries are doing.

So, how can overseas voters' engagement in the democratic process be improved? Resource the Electoral Commission sufficiently to conduct the necessary publicity campaigns to inform overseas voters of their right to vote, especially the practical advantages of proxy voting, which would overcome many of the problems of postal voting.

Be more proactive in informing UK citizens living abroad about the opportunity to register as a voter, for example when they renew their passports. If automatic voter registration is brought in by a new Labour Government, it should apply especially to overseas citizens as well.

Consider introducing electronic ballot distribution to get ballot papers by secure means immediately to the overseas voter.

Allow voting in person at British embassies and consulates, as well as in designated polling stations set up by them if permitted by foreign governments.

Establish overseas constituencies to give a proper voice to those abroad and incentivise them to participate.

Of all the political parties in Parliament, ours is both the most committed to internationalism and to ensuring that all voters are properly enfranchised in a fair and equitable voting system. Adopting these suggestions would confirm our leadership in those areas.

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George Cunningham is chair of Liberal Democrats Abroad and an elected member of the Federal International Relations Committee



# BETTER THAN IT LOOKS IN BRUSSELS

## The European Parliament election was better for the pro-EU forces than the British media's emphasis on the far right might suggest, says David Grace

During the Brexit referendum a man asked David Cameron on television, why do we have to do what the European Parliament says. Did that great campaigner for Remain who actually inflicted the referendum on the country respond, "Because we help elect it and are in it"? No, of course not. He replied, "I don't like the European Parliament either", thus failing again to undermine the UKIP lie that the EU was a foreign dictatorship.

Shock news: the European Union is a democracy and held elections for the European Parliament (EP) from 6-9 June. Naturally these were largely ignored by the British media. You may have just picked up a headline that there were gains for the far right, nationalists and populists. One Liberal I know went so far as to conclude that the UK should not seek to join the EU because it was run by people like Marine Le Pen. This is nonsense generated by the fog the media spreads over Europe.

Let's deal with the democracy question first. The vast majority of European legislation has to be agreed by the Council of Ministers, the European equivalent of the British cabinet with ministers from all member-states, and by the European Parliament which the 450m European citizens elect every five years.

Is that difficult to understand? I recently pointed this out to the appalling John Redwood, thankfully no longer an MP. He

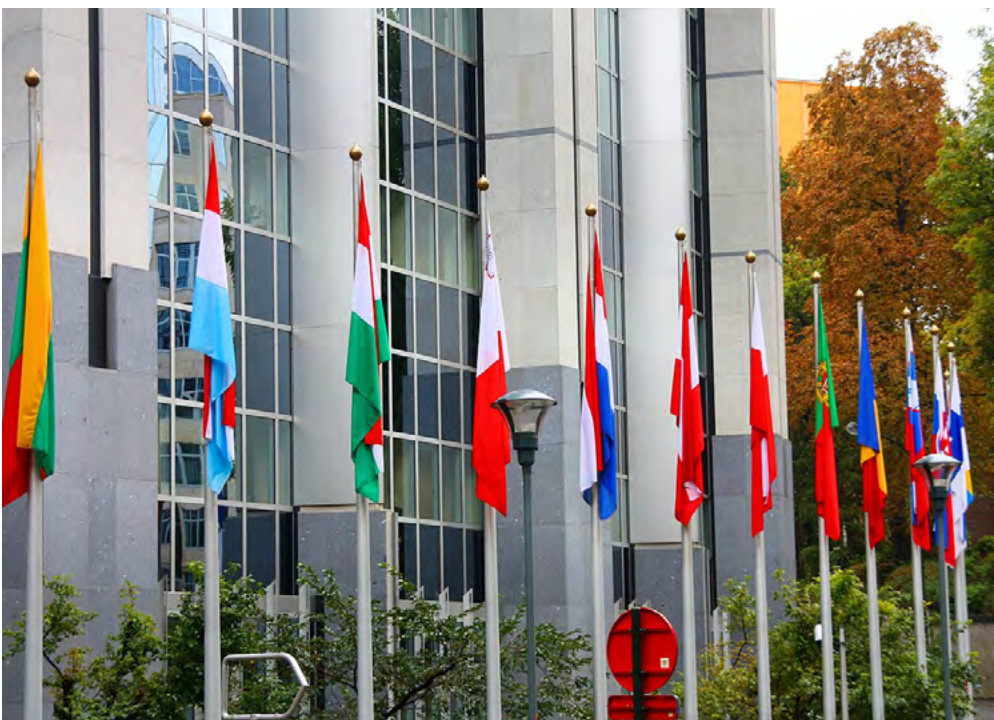
had just described the European Parliament as not a real parliament. He found this simple truth I told him boring so did not wait for my additional point that the European Parliament is a better legislature than the House of Commons, not only because it is elected by proportional systems but because it improves draft legislation with far more successful amendments than the Commons, where the whips ensure very few changes are made.

### LYING RANT

This man is a fellow of All Souls so Lord Bonkers would have to say he is "terribly clever" so why does he spout the lying rant of any ignorant Brexiter?

In those bizarre elections of 2019 when the UK was still in the EU although having decided to leave, the BBC still tried to cover the results. They kept saying that UKIP had won the elections because they had the largest group. Fortunately Alistair Campbell was in the studio and pointed out that the pro-EU MEPs outnumbered the UKIP ones. This year the BBC preferred to ignore the results, just summarising that the far right had gained.

The true picture is more complicated. National parties fight the European elections and their successful candidates join multinational groups. It took some years for the media to report that this was not like the Eurovision song contest and MEPs don't sit or vote in national groups. (I admit the French practice has been particularly complex some times, in that candidates formed national groups for the elections but when elected went off to different European groups.) For years there were three big groups in the Parliament. The European Peoples Party (EPP) brought together the main right-wing parties except the British Tories who found the group too keen on a united Europe, so started their own. Whose idea? David Cameron again. The second biggest was the socialists, now called Socialists and Democrats (S&D) which used to include the Labour Party. The third biggest was the Liberals and Democrats, the parliamentary





wing of the Association of Liberals & Democrats for Europe (ALDE). This group changed its name to Renew to accommodate President Macron's supporters, perhaps because to the average Frenchman the word 'liberal' summons up the image of an American neo-con. After that came the Greens and a variety of smaller groups which changed their names and composition regularly.

So what happened this June? I report the following results. Bear in mind that different news sources give varying figures dependent on changes during the last parliament but I am comparing 2019 and 2024 election results.

- The Left, formerly known as Gauche Unitaire Européenne (GUE) a mixture of socialists and communists now joined by the Nordic Green Left, gained seats, up from 36 to 46.
- The Socialists (S&D) lost seats, down from 139 to 136.
- Renew (Liberals and others) lost seats, down from 80 to 77.
- EPP gained, up from 184 to 188.
- The Greens gained 1 seat, up from 52 to 53.

Now for the bad guys.

The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), a Eurosceptic, anti-federalist group (yes, the one founded by David Cameron) has experienced many changes, arrivals and departures of national parties and is now dominated by Georgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy and the Polish Law & Justice party. They gained seats, up from 73 to 78.

The other right-wingers failed to reach agreement among themselves and have ended up in two groups. Patriots for Europe was founded by the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban and Czech and Austrian politicians. They have 84 seats, making them the third biggest group in the EP today. The other group, Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN), is led by Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) and has 25 seats.

In summary pro-EU and greater integration are S&D, Greens, Renew and EPP holding 454 seats. You could add the Left with 46 seats, although their united Europe would be rather different. Anti-EU (and not all of them want to end it) ECR, Patriots and ESN have 187. Shouldn't that be reported as a big pro-EU majority?

As you can see, worrying though nationalist and populist gains are, this is not quite the takeover some fear.

I have also calculated the pro- and anti-EU MEPs country by country, pro first and non-inscrit (MEPs without party groups) excluded (see table).

## NATIONALIST SEDUCTION

While I regret that Hungary and the Czech republic seem to have embraced the nationalist seduction, I note that all 25 other countries have pro-EU majorities.

Yes indeed there is fog in the Channel. The laziness of British journalists over European democracy is legendary so it is hard for us to see what is really happening.

If Donald Trump coughs in bed or wears an over-large bandage on his ear, the BBC will tell you repeatedly but their attempts to report or clarify what is going on in our own continent are nugatory. Indeed there is a dangerous man who thinks everyone who speaks his language should be in his country under his rule, but the 2020s are not the 1930s when dictatorship and autarchy spread after the Great Crash of 1929. Now democratic elections prevail and the EU maintains free trade within Europe and campaigns for freer trade at world level while the USA under Trump and Biden is protectionist.

The EU is very nearly united (curse Orban) in defence of Ukraine as confirmed by a vote in the new EP. The pro-EU parties in the EP came together to re-elect Ursula von der Leyen

## Pro and anti EU MEPs by country

Country	Pro	Anti
Austria	14	6
Belgium	16	6
Bulgaria	13	4
Croatia	11	1
Cyprus	4	1
Czech	6	13
Denmark	11	vs
Estonia	6	1
Finland	14	1
France	46	34
Germany	11	4
Greece	14	3
Hungary	9	12
Ireland	14	0
Italy	44	32
Latvia	5	4
Lithuania	8	3
Luxembourg	5	1
Malta	6	0
Netherlands	24	7
Poland	27	23
Portugal	19	2
Romania	25	6
Slovakia	7	1
Slovenia	9	0
Spain	51	6
Sweden	18	3

as President of the European Commission, against the wishes of Melon, Marine Le Pen, Orban and the rest. Traditionally positions in the EP, vice-presidencies, committee chairmanships etc have been awarded in proportion to the number of seats held by each group, but in response to the far right threat, the EPP, Socialists, Renew and Greens are now talking of creating a cordon sanitaire to keep the far right out of all such positions.

So don't panic guys. There is a growing reaction by the nationalist populists but the majority of citizens in Europe and the politicians whom they elect still want a united Europe and that should make a good news story.

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David Grace is a member of the Liberator Collective.

# FRANCE FRAGMENTED

## Marianne Magnin reports on the French general election and how the country's democracy could recover from Macron's gamble

“Last Sunday, you called for the invention of a new French political culture.” - Emmanuel Macron, 10 July 2024, letter to the Nation

The political turmoil sweeping across Europe and beyond shows no signs of abating. In the UK, a dramatic swing in parliament on 4 July upended expectations, exposing once again the volatility inherent in the first-past-the-post system but also the numerical imbalance between votes and elected representatives.

In France, the recent elections, encompassing the EU elections in June followed by the swift dissolution of the National Assembly, have similarly sent shockwaves through the political landscape. Whilst the result of the first round revealed that 11 million French cast their votes in favour of the far right, the results emerging on July 7 show a parliament with no clear winner, split roughly into three equivalent factions with no political group singly legitimate to qualify for governing and dictating their programme.

“Divided in the first round, united by mutual withdrawals in the second, and elected thanks to the votes of their former adversaries’ supporters, only the republican forces represent an absolute majority. I commend this mobilisation, a sign of the vitality of our Republic.” - Emmanuel Macron, 10 July 2024

This article does not delve so much into the specific election outcomes or the underlying societal tensions but focuses on the urgent need for reforms to restore faith in the democratic process and how these reforms could shape up at short, medium and longer terms.

### TUMULTUOUS LANDSCAPE

France's political landscape has been tumultuous, characterised by fluctuating voter sentiments and a fragmented electorate. The latest elections have underscored this volatility, with significant shifts in voter allegiance and the emergence of new political forces. Remarkably, the highest voter turnout since 1997, exceeding 67%, demonstrates that French citizens are deeply engaged with politics. This engagement is a significant positive outcome amidst the political turmoil.

As the nation and the President grapple with the implications of these outcomes, it becomes evident that a comprehensive overhaul of governance is not just desirable but essential.

These events are symptomatic of a deeper shift taking place - the unraveling of centralised power structures that are no longer fit for purpose in an age of polycrisis. The old orders are fighting back fiercely, exacerbating tensions, but they cannot stem the tide indefinitely. A new paradigm is emerging, one that embraces decentralised, networked forms of governance better suited to our complex, interconnected world.

The outcomes of the EU and French legislative elections laid bare the deep fissures running through society. Perhaps most striking was the surge in what the French term “dégagisme” - a

rejection of the entire political class and establishment. This manifested in an increased support for radical parties on both left and right.

We also saw a worrying rise in communitarianism, with Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France Insoumise appealing to identity politics and stoking divisions. The far-right under Marine Le Pen continued to exploit xenophobic sentiments, with echoes of Vichy-era rhetoric in proposals to exclude dual nationals from certain jobs. And antisemitism reared its ugly head once again.

These radical movements feed off society's problems, voting against solutions while simultaneously exacerbating tensions to expand their electoral base. The result is increasing polarisation around the very issues that require the most cooperation and nuanced policymaking.

It is clear that simply reforming the economy, public services, taxation or immigration policies will not be enough to quell the rising tide of discontent and anger. What is needed is a fundamental rethinking of how citizens are represented and engaged in the democratic process.

The election results have brought several critical issues to the forefront. One of the most pressing is the evident disconnect between the electorate and the political establishment. Many voters expressed dissatisfaction with the status quo, feeling that their concerns were not adequately represented by mainstream parties. This sentiment was particularly strong among younger voters and peripheral communities, who are increasingly turning to alternative political movements.

Another significant challenge is the rise of extremist factions. The election saw a notable increase in support for far-right and far-left parties, reflecting a polarised society. This polarisation poses a threat to social cohesion and highlights the need for a governance model that can bridge these divides and foster a more inclusive political environment.

The old model of democracy based on confrontation and zero-sum politics, as illustrated by a French journalist who said this week that “bringing together the losers to prevent the winners from governing doesn't seem to be listening to the French people”, is no longer fit for purpose.

This adversarial, masculine-coded approach centred on aggression and domination must give way to a more collaborative paradigm. We need to create spaces that can hold different opinions and construct consensus without compromising plurality. Only then can we build the widespread political and civic consent needed to tackle our most pressing challenges.

Dr. Tsai Ing-wen, President of Taiwan, articulated this new vision eloquently in her 2016 inauguration speech: “Before we imagined democracy as a clash, a showdown between two opposing values, but nowadays democracy must become a conversation between many diverse values.”

More and more French politicians are starting to recognise the need for this shift. Jean-Louis Bourlanges, former chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, has argued during the legislative campaign that “the formation of a durable governing majority including socialists, centrists, Gaullists and liberals is possible and even necessary.”

François Bayrou, leader of the centrist MoDem party, echoes this sentiment: “I’ve never thought that creating a single party was the solution. There may be new and more unifying ways to chart a common destiny for the country... I’m a centrist politician. I’ve always thought that the confrontation between left and right is not healthy for the country. I’ve always believed that compromises and different approaches existed.”

He goes further, calling for “a government beyond the extremes”, noting that “the situation we risk finding ourselves in has never been seen before. The major democratic and republican currents are obliged to come to an understanding. We are talking about the duty of each to come closer together and respect each other.”

So what might a new approach look like in practice?

In the immediate future, a radical change in mindset among the political class to enable experimentation with new dynamics built on project-based consensus at National Assembly level. This means moving away from obstructionism and hypocrisy in plenary sessions towards more constructive work in committees. We need substantial deliberations to build rough consensus instead of superficial political theatre. We must cultivate the art of compromise, as practiced in the European Parliament and German coalition governments built on programmatic accord.

Macron’s July 7 letter to the Nation is embracing this change in mindset: “It is in this context that I ask all political forces that recognise the republican institutions, the rule of law, parliamentarism, a European orientation, and the defence of French independence to engage in sincere and loyal dialogue to build a solid, necessarily plural, majority for the country. Ideas and programs must come before positions and personalities: this gathering must be built around a few major principles for the country, clear and shared republican values, a pragmatic and understandable project, and take into account the concerns you expressed during the elections. It must ensure the greatest possible institutional stability. It will bring together men and women who, in the tradition of the Fifth Republic, place their country above their party, the Nation above their ambition. What the French have chosen at the polls – the republican front, the political forces must make real through their actions.

“France’s new government, if built on wider consensus, would represent a step-change worth watching closely. We should also look to the resilience of citizens forming consensus-based communities. Decentralised decision-making can be far more efficient in determining priorities, enabling agile planning, and building collective momentum compared to top-down governance systems.”

The media needs to be held accountable, in particular by the regulator ARCOM for public media and social media platforms must also be better regulated to ensure fair play and avoid

*“The old orders are fighting back fiercely, exacerbating tensions, but they cannot stem the tide indefinitely”*

election interference, online misinformation, and echo chambers. The new EU directives obliging platforms to regulate content and combat fake news, and detect propaganda need to be systematically

In the near future, we need to see genuine power-sharing (or more accurately, responsibility-sharing) through electoral reform towards

greater proportionality. This was negotiated by MoDem in exchange for supporting Macron in 2017, but has been repeatedly delayed. We are finally seeing movement on this front, as articulated by a growing number of French political figureheads.

The longer-term future lies in the collective intelligence and empowerment of citizens.

Legislation alone is indeed not enough - citizens must be actively engaged to harness our collective capacity for sensemaking in the face of increasing complexity and ever faster pace of change. This will allow better coordination at all levels of society as we strive for “societal adulthood”.

This means building agency and decision-making capacity across society via decentralised architectures. By using participatory online platforms, we can foster genuine civic engagement and consensus-building. These new models of self-governance are essential.

Education is needed for both children and adults to cultivate vigilance and media competence. This includes teaching critical thinking skills to identify fake news and disinformation, as well as crowdsourced fact-checking. We must also improve understanding of institutions at local, regional, national and European levels.

We need an agile approach to governance architecture that reflects ground-level realities, with a constitution that protects institutions while remaining compatible with new democratic mechanisms.

We are in the midst of a deep societal revolution - a necessary transition for liberal democracies. Old power structures based on confrontation are resisting fiercely, but new collaborative structures are emerging to take their place.

Liberal democracies remain best equipped to allocate scarce resources, support citizens’ living standards, and thereby reduce popular discontent. But they must evolve.

This is how we can strengthen ourselves internally (at national and European levels) to better face external threats, starting with Russia’s transgressions of the rule of law. The stakes could not be higher - but neither could the potential rewards of getting this transition right.

It is highly encouraging that Macron is not rushing to nominate a new prime minister. This allows time for factional outbursts and individual ambitions to settle and reveal their limitations while negotiations progress to build a consensual proposal for the nation.

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Marianne Magnin is president for overseas members at Mouvement Démocraté, which is in alliance with President Macron’s party

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## Hillbilly Elegy. By JD Vance

Although it was published in 2016, this book is topical because of its insight into the man who will likely be America's next vice-president, and may succeed Trump in 2028.

Hillbilly Elegy was hailed as an anthropological work which helped explain the Brexit vote, the failure of Hilary Clinton's presidential campaign, and the global rise of populists like Trump.

In short order, Vance went from being a venture capitalist to a Republican politician. He started as a 'never Trumper', but then reality bit, and he humiliated himself to win the Senate primary in Ohio. When he campaigned for Vance, Trump reminded the audience of this, telling them, "Vance kissed my ass."

Reading Hillbilly Elegy in 2016, Vance's anger was striking, as was his brutal analysis of what had happened in America's left-behind places. Yet, he gave no hint of what should be done to improve the lives of the millions of working class citizens with whom he identified. There was plenty of self-pity due to Vance's tough upbringing, and a measure of sneering superiority because he had the grit to make it out of hillbilly country, whereas his feckless family were still drinking moonshine, taking Oxy in their trailer parks, and were in and out of prison.

Vance gave a blow-by-blow account of the factors that limit the ambitions of people born in places like West Virginia where mining and heavy industry have shifted off shore. Addiction and a lack of self-confidence contribute to creating an atmosphere in which few people know a university graduate. Equally, moving to somewhere with better employment prospects is unimaginable because people lack the resources and connections to believe mobility is possible. In other words, Vance's working class are in a death spiral.

Two observations stick with me, eight years after reading Hillbilly Elegy: although the vast majority of Vance's friends and neighbours claim to be religious, few of them attend church, strive to lead a Christian life or even watch tele-evangelists. Vance was also annoyed that "his people" believe they work harder than Vance and his fellow metropolitan financial whizzes. Yet, he observed, they made much less effort, preferring to embrace their victimhood, excusing their inability to thrive.

Vance's book made no attempt to offer



# REVIEWS

a road map out of this depressing situation. As his politics evolved, he blamed immigrants, climate activists, minorities, and left-leaning Americans for the nation's perceived decline. On the campaign trail he continues to focus on the left behind working class, verging on Marxist analysis at times.

His populism is potentially more dangerous than Trump's or Farage's because he is not simply a tool of corporate interests who want lower taxes and less regulation. He could harness a wider swathe of Americans in rejecting the country's existing democratic institutions. The planet is in danger if Vance gets his paws on real power.

Rebecca Tinsley

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## The Seaside. By Madeleine Bunting. Granta £10.99

If the economic reasons that created a town no longer exist, what is it for? Despite uncountable hours of thought and billions of pounds of public money directed to regeneration, this question remains unanswered.

Whether it's a mining village where coal can no longer be extracted, a mill town whose raw material is now processed in its country of origin or - as in this case - a resort where few now wish to spend their holidays, these places have struggled to find a new role.

Some problems are obvious. Coastal towns have only half an economic hinterland, since they face the sea, and lie at the end of road and rail links to relatively distant cities.

Others are less so to those who make short summer visits. The economic battering the coast has taken has lowered property prices, leading to concentrations of both retirees and younger people on low incomes for whom there are no jobs. Lack of employment, lack of resources to improve crumbling properties and the costs to local authorities of dealing with deprivation soon plunge many such

towns into irreversible spirals of decline.

Bunting has made a journey round most of England's coast, though omits the north east - and rather surprisingly the Bournemouth Christchurch Poole conurbation - and records tales of crumbling dereliction almost everywhere.

Some escape this. My home town of Southend-on-Sea, for example, has for decades doubled up as a commuter dormitory for London. Bournemouth and Brighton's service economies and universities have made at least parts wealthy. Padstow has gone to the other extreme with Bunting describing how foodie-driven trendiness has seen fortunes made by locals selling properties to second home buyers, though with remaining locals unable to access housing.

A fair-sized chunk of the south coast and Bristol Channel (plus North Norfolk) is now in Lib Dem hands, but it is no accident that Nigel Farage chose to fight Clacton or that two other Reform seats are on the east coast.

Bunting describes in Clacton, Skegness and Scarborough deprivation and resentment on a scale more usually associated with the worst inner cities. No wonder perhaps that populists have found an audience in places that are not only severely deprived but also overwhelmingly old and white. Elsewhere, Rhyl, Blackpool and Morecambe if anything sound worse from her descriptions.

It's not all grim of course. These towns grew up to provide fun and freedom. They are still attractive settings on a sunny day and even if the huge hotels are largely gone at least those near to population centres can still enjoy something of a visitor-driven economy.

The book though is long on descriptions and short on solutions. I don't expect an author to have cracked problems that have defied politicians and academic specialists for decades, but Bunting offers few ideas.

Local arts-based initiatives have had





some success, there are always calls for more money and Bunting rightly recommends that greater devolution would help. But the lack of solutions suggested by both the author and those interviewed rather drives the conclusion that some problems are insoluble.

Mark Smulian

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**The Big Con: How the Consulting Industry Weakens our Businesses, Infantilizes our Governments and Warps our Economies. By Mariana Mazzucato and Rosie Collington. Allen Lane**

I wanted to love this book. The argument made by the authors is enticing and they have articulated something many of us have long suspected: consultants with no particular expertise receive large sums of money for poor quality work which could and should be done internally. The problem was that Mazzucato and Collington never quite manage to seal the deal with tangible, damning evidence.

The book goes through the history of consulting chronologically. The big example at the beginning is IT outsourcing - most governments stopped developing their own IT capabilities and hired external companies instead. Over

time, IT infrastructure became so complex that it was impossible for governments to bring it back in-house as they had little internal IT knowledge. Mazzucato and Collington criticise this approach. But more could have been done to explain (a) why a specialised IT consultancy is different from a specialist internal IT department, whose work (presumably) most other civil servants would not understand either; and (b) what specific IT skills governments lack and how this has hindered them.

More recent examples come from the Covid-19 pandemic, when both established consultancies and newly-created companies received government contracts to provide various public health services, particularly in the UK.

Mazzucato and Collington argue that the UK government should have used its own extensive public health expertise to run the programmes, and also used this as an opportunity to learn and prepare for future pandemics. This all sounds very logical, but it would have been helpful to have more detail on what exactly the external companies were doing; and how the government could have done the same work - for example, did it have enough people or would it have needed to quickly recruit new

employees? If the latter, how would these new employees benefit from the government's institutional knowledge and would this be any cheaper than hiring an external consultant?

There are some good, specific examples of consultancy gone wrong in both the private and public sector. However, at times the authors just default to listing consultancy contracts and how much they cost. We are supposed to infer that they were poor value for money. I would have preferred more information on what the consultants were doing and how the maths would stack up if everything was brought internally.

I wanted some 'gotcha' moments which emphatically showed the problems caused by consulting. All too often, the evidence of bad practice was a report written in the same woolly language as a consultant would use, with no empirical evidence.

This book makes some good arguments against the consultancy industry but should be seen as the start of a research journey. With more detailed empirical evidence, the authors may be able to build a devastating case against 'the big con'. As things stand, they are not quite there.

Eleanor Healy Birt

### Monday

Seventy-two Liberal Democrat MPs elected! How the bells of St Asquith's rang that night! We drank the Bonkers' Arms dry and made an impressive dent in my champagne cellar. At Divine Service yesterday we sang 'I Was Glad', and I pulled rank on the Revd Hughes to insist he take his text from the Book of Cromwell: "A high act of the Lord's Providence to us and one of the most signal mercies God hath done for England and His people." This entry has been difficult to write because the Rutland Water Monster is romping on my lawns this afternoon. I find myself rushing out of the French windows every five minutes to say: "No, naughty Ruttie! Put Meadowcroft down."

### Tuesday

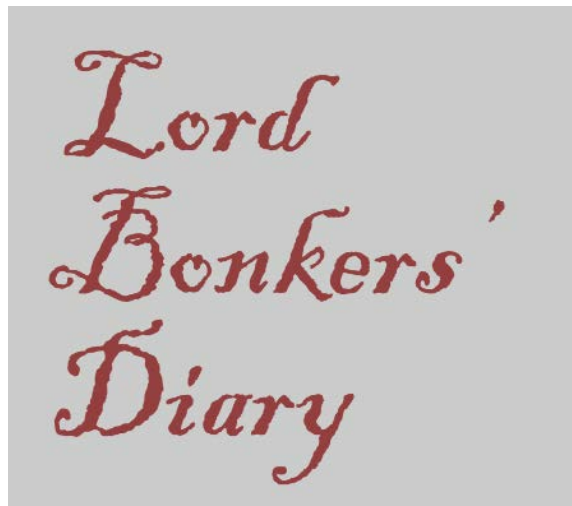
Yesterday's interruptions meant I did not have time to praise the splendid campaign fought by our leader Ed Davey, during which he became the first leader of a British political party to perform a bungee jump since Bonar Law. Though the details of his stunts were jealously guarded, those of us who helped train him inevitably learnt or guessed some of what was planned. The reason he proved so proficient an archer when he visited St Neots, for instance, is that I had him at the Hall for a week last summer practising with the Elves of Rockingham Forest. (I warned the party treasurer to check their invoice carefully before paying it.) Equally, I put Davey in touch with a three-times winner of the Tour de Radnorshire so he could prepare for his downhill bicycle ride in Knighton. It's attention to detail that makes all the difference in election campaigns.

### Wednesday

One stop I was particularly pleased to see Davey make during the campaign was that at Thorpe Park. I was instrumental in setting up this attraction after the February 1974 general election, when Jeremy Thorpe's stock was at its zenith. The hovercraft rides remain as popular as ever, but over the years interest in chasing Princess Margaret has dwindled, while the dog-shooting range had to be closed after some unfair coverage in the tabloid press. Yet when I brought the Well-Behaved Orphans on an outing in the park's early days, they were unanimous in the view that this last was "The Best Bit". Let's hope our leader's patronage will point the way to better days for the old place. I have today given instructions for a relaunch under the name 'Davey Park'.

### Thursday

The wet summer means the woods, meadows and hedgerows of the Bonkers Hall Estate are positively brimming with flowers and herbs. Not only will you find the Wise Woman of Wing and the Elves of Rockingham Forest out gathering them, you may also encounter the sisters from Our Lady of the Ballot Boxes. As well as distilling the most delicious liqueur from the booty of their foraging – I call at their convent in the wilds of High Leicestershire this morning to top up my stocks – they can be relied upon to sabotage the engine of the opposition's agent's car in a particularly tight by-election. Later, I visit one of the inns on Oakham Quay to catch up with the gossip. It was here that I heard the Conservative press gang was out looking for men



(and indeed women) to drag off to be parliamentary candidates and realised that Sunak's surprise election had come as a surprise most of all to his own party.

### Friday

One advantage that my political experience brings is the ability to spot talent, so I have been running my eye over our many new MPs. Epsom and Ewell's Helen Maguire, to take one example, is a former captain in the Royal Military Police and thus a chief whip in the making if ever I saw one. Roz Savage from the South Cotswolds is the first woman to row single-handedly across three oceans: the

Atlantic, Pacific and Indian. She did so in order to raise awareness of environmental issues, and I shall certainly invite her to cross Rutland Water with the same aim in mind, though not while Ruttie is in her current mood. As a former archaeologist, Charlotte Cane from Ely and East Cambridgeshire is bound to take an interest in someone as ancient as me, though I have my doubts about Joshua Reynolds, who took Theresa May's Maidenhead. These artist fellows can be A Bit Of A Handful – the tales I could tell you about my old friend Augustus John! At least I shall now have a reliable source among our team in the Commons in the shape of Steve Darling's delightful guide dog Jennie.

### Saturday

Neither Ed Davey nor even Andrew Bonar Law was the first member of parliament to take up bungee jumping. The accolade belongs to William Lenthall, that most celebrated of Commons Speakers, in the days when the ropes were made from the entrails of oxen. So keen on the activity was Lenthall, he would sometimes leap from the rafters of the Palace of Westminster while presiding over the House. Thus, his famous reply when Charles I turned up mob-handed to arrest the five members should be rendered as: "May it please your Majesty, [boing] I have neither eyes to see [boing] nor tongue to speak in this place [boing] but as the House is pleased to direct me, [boing] whose servant I am here.

### Sunday

I shall not forget the childlike gratitude of the two Labour activists when I handed over the box of Shuttleworths. We met on a rainy evening early in the campaign at a lay-by just outside... I had better not name the town; suffice to say, it was a seat where their party had some slight hopes of victory and we had none. Yet Labour High Command had cut off access to its national computer and ordered these two to canvass in some far distant constituency. Showing pluck and spunk, they had resolved to carry on in the old-fashioned way, the manual way, the Proper way – hence their need for Shuttleworths. Incidentally, Labour people call them 'Reading pads' after the town's sometime MP Ian Mikardo, whereas we Liberals know they were brought to England by Joseph of Arimathea. I was asked if I would get into trouble for helping them. I thought about Freddie and Fiona for a moment and replied: "No, they'd be much crosser if they heard I'd been helping our candidate."

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