

DEMAND BETTER THAN THIS

The Lib Dems can't go on being diverted from their political tasks by internal reforms and financial squalls, says Sarah Green

On the 7 September, Vince Cable launched his vision for a more open, inclusive party at an old, private members club in London. Those struggling to watch online didn't miss much as by that point the details of Vince's proposals to reform the Liberal Democrats had been leaked to the media. However, throughout the summer what we now know was code-named 'Project Ozark' had been a closely guarded secret.

Vince isn't the first party leader to find the democratic structures of the party inconvenient. But I've yet to fully understand why the federal committees needed to be kept in the dark for as long as they were.

The proposals are bold, interesting and some are worth exploring. All Vince and his team achieved with such secrecy was to foster suspicion and distrust with those who were persuadable. They might have even advocated for his reforms had he taken the trouble to bring them on board.

Preparations for autumn conference were disrupted as all-member surveys were sent out, consultation sessions hastily organised and Lib Dems invited to obsess about internal party process. Of course, the leader has every right to want to push through their vision. They are after all elected to lead and show vision. Unless they were unopposed and didn't have to persuade anyone of their vision.

The consultation on the proposed party reforms has now concluded. The Federal Board decided against holding the all-member ballot Vince had wanted and he withdrew his request for a special conference. The reforms will instead go to spring conference in York in the usual way. The one uncontroversial element - the supporters scheme - will launch early next year and whether to extend the right to vote for leader to these supporters will also be voted on at spring conference.

An elegant solution has therefore been found that keeps the leader's reforms on the table while avoiding the spectacle (and price tag) of a navel-gazing special conference. The party machine can now turn its attention back to where it belongs: stopping Brexit, preparing for local elections next May and planning for the possibility of another referendum or snap general election in 2019.

Or at least, that's what should have happened. Instead, an all-staff meeting called at HQ on 31 October revealed that up to 25% of them are being made redundant. The party committees were oblivious that a hole in the party finances existed that required such drastic action and were informed in a webinar hours after the meeting.

The reasons reported in the media include "fatigue amongst donors" and "less membership income received than expected". That is code for the forecasts

for membership income being over ambitious and major donors not seeing us as an attractive investment right now.

It runs counter to the narrative the Liberal Democrats have been peddling the past few years about being a growing party with a record membership, winning local by-elections up and down the country.

But this isn't a fiction. We are a growing party, we did reach record membership levels and we are winning local by-elections week in, week out. There has been no major electoral or political calamity that explains the need to make a quarter of staff redundant just before Christmas. This is management cock-up, plain and simple.

As the federal committees have shown in dealing with Vince's reforms, they are capable of asking robust questions, demanding answers and finding workable solutions. They must now insist on proper scrutiny and accountability.

All political parties in this country have been distracted by internal trauma and crisis these past few months. Scarcely a day goes by without a story about the chaos within the Conservatives and Labour. The SNP have their own internal trauma to deal with as Alex Salmond, arguably one of the best political strategists of his generation, turns his considerable firepower on his own side in response to accusations of sexual misconduct. Plaid Cymru spent the summer engaged in a leadership election.

And the Liberal Democrat leader decided to throw all his energy into tinkering with who can stand and vote for leader of the party. Brexit is such a runaway train hurtling towards the country that the entire political class is engaging in displacement activity.

It has to stop. Let's be quite clear, the party machinery was distracted by the leader's vanity project for most of the summer. This current financial crisis is a catastrophic failure of management. We have to call time on amateur hour. Our new party slogan is Demand Better. Perhaps it is time the party did just that.

Sarah Green is a member of the Liberator Collective