

## **Introduction**

After the 2015 general election, the Liberal Democrats took pride in publishing James Gurling's review of that campaign, which if not quite 'warts and all' still had plenty of warts.

So what has happened to the 2017 version? Apart from a couple of references in Liberator it has barely been mentioned in public.

The Federal Audit and Scrutiny Committee in October asked former Portsmouth leader Gerald Vernon-Jackson to carry out the review, which he did and reported to the Federal Board in December.

Since then his report has vanished - it now has a zombie status of having been 'noted' but not 'accepted', let alone published. Presumably its findings were considered too embarrassing, even though the bulk of them concern people who have since departed.

Rumour has it that its acceptance was opposed by a combination die-hard Farron supporters, who resented its criticism of his conduct of the campaign, and those who think senior staff should be exempt from reproach.

Given that 2017 was a second consecutive disaster (if partly disguised by a net increase in seats) the need to identify what went wrong and put it right is surely compelling.

Parts have found their way to Liberator and with certain exceptions its evidence and recommendations seems entirely sensible, well-reasoned and to contain much from which the party could learn had the FB allowed anyone to see it.

Vernon-Jackson's nine-strong team interviewed 59 people, ranging from Vince Cable through candidates, senior staff and officers, from whom they drew their conclusions.

In the interests of both transparency and of allowing people to learn from the debacle of 2017, here are some extracts. There'll be more for subscribers in the next issue.

### **The review report**

Here are some highlights:

"It was not clear who was in charge [of the campaign]. This was said across the Country, within HQ and from activists and candidates in many places. The range of people that were named as being in charge included The Chair of the Campaign Committee, the Chief Executive of the Party, the Party President, the Director of Communications, the Director of Campaigns and Election and the Leader's Head of Office."

The report recommended: "Whoever is in charge of the running of the campaign must be full time. It is not fair for a part time volunteer chair to have to take this on. A Deputy Campaign Chair should be put in place to ensure a point of contact for staff and activists at all times. General Election Manager role needs to be recreated in order to facilitate these areas as soon as possible." The latter recommendation indeed has already been acted upon.

There was also confusion as to who was in charge of the party's messages and the report said: "The person with overall responsibility for the General Election must also have responsibility for message."

It also found: "There was a feeling that feedback from the ground was not being listened to. This was a view expressed to us from all over the country. Volunteers, candidates and campaigners should be treated with respect by HQ staff and their views listened to. This was also a recommendation of the 2015 Review. Arrogance is corrosive and destructive."

"Feedback that staff in HQ who were below 'Head of...' did not know what was going on and what they were meant to be doing or why. This may be connected to the very large number of meetings senior staff seem to have had."

In conclusions on the politics of the campaign that may prove controversial, the review group noted: "Ruling out a coalition seemed to say we would never be in power so we couldn't get any of our policies implemented. Voters don't seem to want to vote for a party aiming to be in opposition. We looked as if we lacked ambition to win."

It also said: "We also became known in the campaign for the Leader's views on gay sex, and for our proposals on cannabis. None of these policies proved popular with voters. The media kept returning to the issue of gay sex and this crowded out coverage of other policies."

Turning to target seats the review noted: "There was strong feedback from some seats that they did not know when they had been removed from the list of target seats or moved from Tier 1 plus to just Tier 1 seats. This caused real hurt and pain for some."

Headquarters sent direct mail to voters in target seats, with rather mixed results. As the report found: "There was strong feedback that seats needed to know what was being sent out from HQ in their seats. They needed a programme of delivery, so they didn't deliver leaflets on days when HQ was sending them out, and they needed input into designs, so they could negotiate on leaflets that they felt would harm their campaigns."

“There has been feedback and suggestion that national mailings could have been better balanced between positive messages and attacks on other parties. There was strong opposition to the content and particularly the photos used in some of the national direct mail. Strong feedback from some that this lost us some votes.”

Another problem was: “The Party website telling members to go hundreds of miles away to a target seat (Great Manchester told to go to Cheadle and Ceredigion but not Hazel Grove) is not realistic.”

One aspect that was successful was fundraising, as the report acknowledges, but it said: “While the campaign was successful at fund raising, the review found: “We have never been able to find and see a paper budget for the election, all financial control seemed to go through the CX.”