

# A WARNING FROM THE WEST

The 'core vote strategy' currently being articulated risks alienating large chunks of our regular support base, and writing off rural seats we held for years, says former MP Nick Harvey

Paul Hindley's excellent article 'A warning from the north' (Liberator 380), focusing attention back onto the concept of people being 'left behind', struck a chord with me in the south west.

The debate on a 'core vote strategy' stimulated since the 2015 debacle by David Howarth and Mark Pack (Liberator 380, but long articulated in Liberator by the late, great Simon Titley) contains some admirable analysis and suggestions, but leaves me distinctly anxious.

Our lamentable 8% vote in 2015, once stripped of tactical and protest voters, reveals just how tiny is our underlying core. Building it to 20% is a grand – if incredibly ambitious – goal. A reliable block of 20% support: what's not to like?

The question is where to find and how to build it. In the early days of voter segmentation – long before the Tories did such beastly things to us in 2015 – Party HQ overlaid Mosaic categories onto our EARS database, seeking to identify our most promising target voters.

Presently they sent a 'toolkit' to seats, and my organiser burst in one day to declare: "Good news! According to Cowley Street's latest wheeze, we have almost 600 Lib Dem voters in this seat!" (I had polled almost 24,000 at the preceding election).

To me, that illustrates how our brightest brains in London never remotely understood, nor came to terms with, who was actually voting for us in the half of our seats which were rural or at any rate less cosmopolitan.

## DOG SHOOTING

In the 1979 election the Liberal Party, despite dog shooting and other difficulties, polled 14%. An academic study of why people voted as they did, revealed that about a third voted Liberal 'to get us out of Europe', and a third 'to send the immigrants home'. One hopes the two overlapped, but these findings reveal our problem.

At the seven elections after that, we barely strayed more than 3% ('margin of error') from a 20% support level. There were discernible components of our regular support base: public sector workers, academics, students and young people, the dispossessed poor – whether rural or urban depending on our campaigning, and overlaying all this a sprinkling of the open-minded 'chatterati'.

During the Coalition we alienated each of these constituencies, appearing to collude with the Tories to savage public services and freeze wages, shaft students, disappoint the young and abandon the poor. We took some of the chatterati with us, but even there

our support diminished.

Small wonder so many peeled away in 2015. But any attempt to rebuild a regular 20% vote share must try to recover all of those constituencies, not just the chatterati and academics. We cannot afford to write off people with a long habit of voting for us just because we now decide they 'don't share our values'.

Through the 20th century, when Liberal fortunes ran pretty thin, North Devon elected Liberal MPs for more than two-thirds of those hundred years. In 1959, just three seats were won in genuinely open contests – Montgomery and Orkney & Shetland being the others. So it's not a bad place to start looking for a core vote.

When I recaptured the seat in 1992, I recall party HQ sending a consignment of manifestos after the campaign launch. An elderly volunteer asked me what should be done with them. In the pre-internet age, my response was simple: hide them in the cupboard under the stairs, and ensure that absolutely no one sees them before polling day.

It wasn't that I personally disagreed with the manifesto, but I judged it better pitched at voters in Islington than North Devon. With plenty of dispossessed rural poor and public sector workers (a higher proportion in economically marginal areas), but no universities so few academics or students, and a small middle class so few chatterati, it just wasn't hitting the right notes. In various roles thereafter, including chair of campaigns and communications, I attempted to drag the party's messaging to address the full cross-section of groups we needed to attract.

This isn't a left/right issue. North Devon's public workers and dispossessed voters hold firmly left of centre economic views on tax and spending. With strong Methodist traditions, they disdain authority and detest Conservatives. They are suspicious of power 60 miles away in Exeter, considerably more so of Westminster 220 miles away, and as for Brussels 450 miles away – well, let's just say that many people who have voted Liberal all their lives are trenchantly anti-European, including party members and sitting councillors.

Most such voters are quietly proud of British efforts on international aid, and any concerns about immigration are economic in motivation. They are accepting of equal marriage but would prefer us 'to make less fuss' about it, and passively approving of campaigns against ID cards and internet snooping – without seeing them as important priorities, just good opportunities to bash the authorities.

Some of them, bluntly, inhabit a different world from our manifesto writers and Federal Policy Committee (I've always thought FPC candidates' attendance

record is less relevant than their canvassing record – they should get out more). What they want to hear Lib Dems prioritising are rebuilding public services, taxing the rich and improving welfare policies, not banging on about Brexit – which they probably view as a done deal, for better or worse. In other words, the appeal to them is virtually the opposite of what voters in Richmond wanted to hear.

And that highlights the dilemma we have battled with for decades. What appeals to Lib Dem voters in affluent London suburbs, and university seats like Bath, Oxford, Cambridge and Sheffield Hallam (and to Lib Dem activists and Liberator readers) can largely pass over the heads of voters in our rural target seats, like in the south west, Scotland and Wales.

We have reconciled this successfully by focussing on issues of most immediate concern constituency by constituency and campaigning effectively to resolve them. This ‘community’ approach ultimately elected 100 Lib Dem parliamentarians. Alternative strategies – trying to shift entire demographic groups through ideological and policy-based messaging – proved hopeless in 2015, rather as it had for the SDP.

I lost almost 18% of the vote in 2015, falling from over 47% to under 30%. It is instructive to see where it went: 1% to Labour and 4% Green, maybe reacting to the Coalition, but I could have ridden those out; 6% to the Tories, reacting to too much talk about hung Parliaments (not least from Lib Dems) and nonsense about the SNP. But the biggest defection was almost 8% to UKIP: people who have always voted Lib Dem, but no longer saw us as champions of the ‘left behind’, ready to cock a snook at the establishment, but rather as people who had ‘sold out’ and joined it – and apparently wanted more of the same.

## OUT OF TOUCH

We can win those people back, and must if we are ever to regain seats like North Devon and many like it. But we will have to address issues which matter to them and not look ‘out of touch’. Warbling on about small ‘liberal’ issues, which mean much to us but nothing to them, is not the way to achieve it. Not that they are implacably hostile to such ideas, but put simply: they couldn’t give a flying duck.

I am not remotely suggesting that we should change our beliefs or values and start espousing social conservatism. That is not the point; the voters I am describing would not respond positively to that – quite the opposite, we have looked too much like Tories, not too little. The debate is what we use limited air time focusing on, what we campaign about, what we tell people we are for and why they should vote for us.

David and Mark tell us their suggestions ‘should be controversial’ within the party, because they propose a ‘radical departure from previous practice’. God knows we need something radically different to the practices of recent years – look where they have got us. But the vox pops in Liberator 379 suggest that plenty share my belief that we must appeal beyond the floating voter

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element among the 48% of Remainers.

Low living standards and poor public services understandably alienate people who see others prospering from globalisation. We must rediscover our voice as champions for those people, and as campaigners against ‘the establishment’.

Surely, by now, it is a no-brainer to say that we must

talk to people about what matters to them, rather than what matters to us? ‘It’s the economy, stupid’ remains valid, and some of the alternatives – identity politics, for example – are ugly by comparison. We must urgently fight off the concept of a ‘liberal middle class elite’ and not reinforce it in our messaging and prioritising.

To some extent, the economic interests of our ‘dispossessed poor’ constituency could be at odds with those of our ‘chatterati’. But we have generally found unifying messages to address both in the past, relying on the altruism of the latter (though I remember lively friction in parliamentary meetings about the mansion tax). Unifying themes – a narrative or, as David and Mark put it, a ‘recipe’ to mix together the ingredients of our policies into something greater than the sum of their parts – are nevertheless at a premium.

Whatever our role in the austerity measures of 2010, repeating the medicine yet again now, years after the treatment was meant to have ended, means that NHS funding is in crisis, social care on the verge of collapse, prisons about to erupt, and schools (in Devon at least) near the precipice – but not daring say so while touting for pupils in a competitive market.

The environment has been abandoned. The consequences of Brexit are beginning to bite, with impact on public finances, living standards and economic performance sure to worsen over the next couple of years while the Government flounders around trying to control the monster it has created. (A clever campaign could yet secure another vote on the final deal, provided it doesn’t bolt too soon – timing is all).

No shortage of issues with which to engage our lost voters. It is surely not beyond the wit of our leaders, campaigners and policy wonks to grapple towards a formula to take the growing momentum from council and parliamentary by-elections and get us going forward nationally. This must entail a return to the centre-left ground we occupied from the time of Lloyd George through to 2010.

The one thing which might get in the way, however, would be taking our eye off the concerns of the ‘hardest to reach’ part of our traditional vote, and using our limited political bandwidth to focus on issues they perceive as irrelevant.

I really don’t want to revert to hiding manifestos under the stairs – apart from anything else, in the internet age I won’t get away with it!

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Nick Harvey was Liberal Democrat MP for North Devon 1992-2015 and minister of state for defence 2010-12.