

PUT POWER WHERE IT BELONGS

Liberals must rediscover our radical roots to tackle the endemic powerlessness that helped lead to Brexit, argues Norman Lamb

Returning to Westminster with 12 MPs felt like something of a triumph after a gruelling campaign, but there is no doubt that this was a sobering election for the Liberal Democrats.

The fall in our national vote share and a record number of lost deposits was disappointing given what we were up against: on the one extreme, an increasingly arrogant and unsympathetic Conservative Party with a prime minister who had fought a woeful campaign, content with sacrificing the country's economic and social interests in pursuit of a hard Brexit; and on the other, a backward-looking Labour Party in the grip of an emboldened hard-left, hoisting the red flag of 1970s socialism.

Two years after paying a heavy price for our role in government, the scene was set for the Lib Dem fightback. It failed to materialise. Theresa May's snap election gamble backfired spectacularly, but not enough to cost her the keys to Number 10.

Jeremy Corbyn is now riding high in the opinion polls. Meanwhile, the Lib Dems are floundering in the single digits, struggling to assert our relevance in a volatile political climate.

Liberals have to ask ourselves why we have been so roundly rejected at the last two elections, why our very existence is being so embarrassingly ignored at a time when the need for a progressive Liberal force, which could genuinely compete for power, is greater than ever.

Corbyn offers no solutions to the big challenges we face. But it has become painfully obvious that many people simply do not know what the Liberal Democrats stand for.

We have failed to articulate how our principles are relevant to people's lives, their concerns and anxieties. We came across to many of our natural supporters as arrogantly dismissing their views. I met countless people who felt that we regarded them as stupid for voting for Brexit. This is never a good position for a political party.

The irony is that the revolution under way in society – a smashing away of deference, technology giving people a voice, people no longer willing to accept bog-standard public services, traditional authority and elites – makes this age ideally suited to Liberals. But we have to understand and respond to these changes to prosper.

FRUSTRATIONS AND DISCONTENTS

If we are to rebuild our party and become the fulcrum of a new Liberal progressive force, we have to first understand people's frustrations and discontents, not

dismiss them.

We then have to define an optimistic and compelling vision which resonates with people. We have to win the battle of ideas for how we meet the big challenges – re-defining ourselves as a radical, dynamic and positive force for change. We will not win by just opposing, defending the status quo, hurling abuse at our opponents.

Liberalism has a rich heritage. But throughout its history, the core principle that has underpinned our philosophy is a fundamental belief in individual and community power: trusting in people, spreading power and opportunity, and giving individuals the freedom to flourish and shape their own lives. This conviction, burning at the heart of British liberalism, is the reason why I am, and always will be, a liberal.

Brexit was partly the result of people's concerns about power that is remote, unaccountable and bureaucratic.

It was also a symptom of a much wider social malaise: a crippling sense of powerlessness and injustice. Extreme and growing inequalities of wealth, a country horribly divided between the rich south east and the rest. The anti-establishment rhetoric of Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson et al exploited the discontent among the vast swathes of society who have long felt neglected, disenfranchised and left behind. They sought to divide people. Yet Liberals should be able to understand and identify with this sense of helplessness, of lack of power. We should think about how we address those concerns in a constructive way.

Powerlessness is endemic in modern Britain. I witnessed it with a vengeance as health minister. So often, I heard stories of people without a voice, ignored by an uncaring centralised bureaucracy. The father of an adult patient in Winterbourne View, who told me that he felt guilty that he could do nothing to help his son. No one would listen to his complaints. The treatment of Fauzia, a teenage girl with autism kept locked up in an institution for two years, suffering constant physical restraint and seclusion. The family banging their heads against a brick wall, trying to get her out of there with no-one listening. I hear it in my advice surgeries and constituency postbag. And here's the really disturbing thing. We got help for that family. But they were articulate. They knew how to contact their MP and fight the system. But what about those who can't? How can we tolerate this in a civilised society?

But it's not just in health and care. The residents of Grenfell Tower, for instance, had made their concerns clear, but nothing happened. And then the tragedy. Powerless citizens up against an uncaring

bureaucracy.

In the workplace, many employees see their real wages and pension rights eroded as company bosses award themselves massive hikes in salary. The High Pay Centre reported that leading bosses now typically earn 129 times more than their employees. And those employees have no say, no power.

I have worked with a former bank employee who tried to whistleblow against his employer in the run up to the crash. He is now out of work with his health ruined, but none of the leaders of those banks who caused such mayhem have been held to account. My constituent has felt powerless and ignored by both his former employer and a regulator apparently unwilling or unable to confront the egregious behaviour of financial institutions.

We also know that people feel that their voices are ignored in Brussels, Whitehall and town halls. All of this contributed to the deep sense of anger that manifested on 23 June 2016. The remedy to such powerlessness will not be found in the statist, centralising instincts of Labour, nor in a Conservative Party that has consistently failed to tackle the gross levels of inequality that stain our country. If putting power in the hands of individuals and communities is the *raison d'être* of the Liberal Democrats, surely we should be best placed to address the concerns of those who feel that they have no control over their lives, their communities and their futures.

Our mission should now be a wholesale rethink of how we define and articulate Liberalism in the modern age. This will involve significant changes to how our party behaves. Too often it feels as if we are an exclusive sect divorced from the reality of 21st century Britain. We must learn to listen and to understand. And we must be open to working with others beyond our party as we shape a Liberal vision for our country.

Our guiding principle should be to confront and dismantle the concentrations of power which leave people feeling powerless and ignored. We should be on the side of the patient, the consumer, the tenant, the employee, the local community, and indeed the dynamic entrepreneur seeking to challenge monopolies and vested interests.

DISTRIBUTING POWER

Wherever power is concentrated, Liberals should be seeking to break it down, to distribute it. In our policymaking, we should scrutinise every proposal and ask ourselves: does this disperse or does it concentrate power? If it concentrates power, the presumption should be that it is rejected.

Here are just some ideas for the direction we should take.

First, we should recognise that the vital mission of building a united and prosperous Europe is undermined by the way in which the EU has evolved. As David Boyle and Joe Zammit-Lucia put it in their book *‘The Death of Liberal Democracy?’*: “The European project has been perverted by a remote, detached technocracy that seems more concerned with accumulating ever more power for its unaccountable institutions.”

It is sclerotic and resistant to change, just at a time when the world is changing at dramatic speed. Liberals must start to articulate a very different vision for the EU: flexible, dynamic, encouraging

variable partnerships between countries and regions to evolve. There is little sign of new thinking among the European elites - but let's at least articulate a Liberal vision. This may just be a more attractive proposition for the British people than the hard Brexit we are hurtling towards.

Second, we should develop a clear and radical Liberal economic policy which confronts the dreadful lopsided, unequal UK economy of today. Reform of finance, local lending institutions, radical devolution of power – critically, including taxing-raising powers – to the great cities and regions to allow them to take control.

Third, we need to rediscover Jo Grimond's passion for mutual ownership. Let's consider making reductions in corporation tax conditional on ownership being shared with the people who work for the company. That could start to address the gross inequality of power and wealth.

Fourth, the state should use its massive power to influence corporate culture. At national and local level, it contracts billions of pounds with business. Is it unreasonable to expect companies receiving public money to look after their employees' wellbeing and to behave as good corporate citizens? The concept of the B Corp from the US could be adapted to develop a standard that those contracting with the state must meet.

Fifth, public services could be transformed by transferring power from the bureaucracy to the citizen and to people who work in these services. In *‘The Alternative’*, Labour MP Steve Reed and I set out a vision for services provided by councils, the NHS and other public bodies, with the citizen in charge of how resources are used and citizens working in partnership with councils to shape their neighbourhoods, with power devolved from Whitehall to local communities.

Sixth, we should champion of the consumer, so often cheated by rip-off merchants, with the acquiescence of government. Tougher legislation is needed to sort out the unacceptable power of monopolies and oligopolies.

And seventh, we must build on our reputation as social reformers, using evidence and a sense of a moral purpose to liberate people from injustice and get the state out of people's lives when there is no case for it interfering.

Ending the spectacularly stupid ‘war on drugs’ so that, for example, we regulate the use of cannabis rather than criminalising people; reducing the number of people we incarcerate, recognising that we are failing to protect victims with such high reoffending rates.

These suggestions are far from exhaustive. In all we do, we should be guided by a moral purpose – driven by the ambition to liberate people to enjoy their lives while recognising, as a fundamental principle of liberalism, that we also accept a deep sense of responsibility for our fellow citizens. Now is the time to build a powerful, optimistic Liberal vision that can inspire people and give them hope for the future.

Norman Lamb is Liberal Democrat MP for North Norfolk