

NO SHORTCUTS

Sarah Olney benefitted from a progressive alliance but says this approach has severe limitations

I haven't been able to listen to Cornershop's 'Brimful of Asha' since 9 June. The chirpy repetition of '45' in the chorus, which always sounded summery and joyful, now sounds rather mocking....

Fans of political statistics will already know that, despite the Richmond Park constituency having the third highest turnout in the country in the 2017 general election, the result came down to a difference of just 45 votes between myself and Zac Goldsmith for the Conservatives.

For those who hoped for a Liberal Democrat victory, it was particularly galling to note that Labour gained 5,773 votes, ending up a distant third. If only a small number of these voters had put their party loyalty aside and voted for the candidate most likely to represent the progressive cause in Parliament, we could have had a 13th Liberal Democrat MP, and one fewer Tory.

This of course is the essence of the argument for a progressive alliance. If the anti-Tory parties could get together and agree a joint seat by seat strategy, we could return a majority of MPs to Parliament that would be committed to progressive politics. Had such a strategy been adopted in 2017, the current make-up of the House of Commons would look very different.

Richmond Park, of course, has also recently had a by-election (you might have heard.....). This by-election has been held up by supporters of progressive alliances of an example of what might be possible if parties work together. The Green Party made a decision to step aside in that election and encouraged their voters to back the Liberal Democrats. The Liberal Democrats duly won that by-election, by a margin of 1,872 votes. The Greens had won 3,548 votes in the 2015 general election.

FRAUGHT WITH PERIL

As the Liberal Democrat candidate in both those recent contests, I am often asked for my views on the progressive alliance. My experience has led me to conclude that while a progressive alliance might be superficially appealing as a way for the Liberal Democrats to gain more seats, it is a strategy that is fraught with peril, and should not be pursued without extreme caution.

How does the proposed progressive alliance work in practice? Would a progressive alliance only field one candidate between them in each seat? This has been the approach that the Green Party have appeared to favour, which is what led to them standing aside in the Richmond Park by-election.

There are arguments against standing aside. The most important one is that it denies the voters a proper democratic choice, which Liberal Democrats need to think carefully about.

However, I believe that this argument needs to

be considered in the context of an already broken electoral system. The Electoral Reform Society's recent report on the 2017 general election estimated that 14m voters did not see their choice reflected in the outcome. A progressive alliance pact that put electoral reform at the front and centre of its programme would be doing far more to empower the electorate in the long run, for which the lack of a full slate of candidates in one general election might be a price worth paying.

Another argument is that we can't compel people to vote the way we wish them to. We have no way of knowing if the 3,548 Green voters from 2015 all switched to the Liberal Democrats in the 2016 by-election. Some of them will have stayed at home rather than give their vote to another party. Some of them will have switched to Labour (one of the less talked-about results of the general election is the huge drop in support for the Greens, with many of their former voters switching to Labour). Some of them will even have switched to Goldsmith, a prominent environmental campaigner.

But the only votes that count are the ones that are cast. And those who go to the polling station have to make a choice between the names on the ballot paper, and, if the party they would prefer to vote for aren't represented, then they are likely to opt for the next least worst option.

There was a great deal of pressure on Labour to stand down in the December 2016 by-election. Goldsmith was standing as an independent on that occasion, and was a highly divisive figure.

Many Londoners, in particular, found the campaign tactics he'd used while running for London mayor earlier that year, utterly abhorrent, and wanted to see a united anti-Zac campaign that would beat him. Labour, however, shrugged off these arguments and stood a candidate, who went on to receive fewer votes than the party had registered members in the constituency.

I believe that it was to our advantage in the by-election that Labour decided not to step aside. Goldsmith would not have hesitated to paint me as a Labour puppet and repeat some of the "Corbyn's candidate" tactics that he'd used on Sadiq Khan earlier that year. Jeremy Corbyn's reputation has improved somewhat since the general election, but back in December last year, he could not have been more unpopular, particularly in an affluent suburban constituency like Richmond Park. Any perceived association with Corbyn's Labour Party would have been very damaging to my campaign.

So, parties standing aside doesn't always help the progressive cause. What about paper candidates - putting a name on a ballot paper but not actively campaigning?

In fairness to Labour, it could be said that this is exactly what they did in the general election. I didn't see their candidate throughout the entire campaign

- the only time we met was at the count. As a resident, I had only a single piece of literature (the election address) and the candidate no-showed, or sent a delegate, to every hustings. This resulted in their third-worst result, by vote share, in the country, and the largest fall in Labour vote share for any constituency outside Scotland. There wasn't much more - or less - they could have done.

But a general election campaign is about the national message, as well as the local campaign. Labour fought a surprisingly effective national campaign which resonated with many people. They were particularly successful on social media, where 'organic' shares can't be geographically targeted. Their national message is always going to be 'Vote Labour', and they can't control how many people in Richmond Park are persuaded by that. There were some depressing anecdotes from polling station tellers about voters expressing disappointment that Jeremy Corbyn's name wasn't on the ballot paper. This suggests a lack of political understanding that goes well beyond not knowing about tactical voting.

So the experience of Richmond Park shows that, however much parties might co-operate, they cannot engineer the outcome on polling day. The theory of the progressive alliance doesn't always work in practice, which is something to keep very much in mind when considering deals with other parties

But I think that a far more important consideration for political parties is what happens next. My experience shows that we should look beyond polling day. After my election in December, I enjoyed (and continue to enjoy) a good relationship with the Richmond Green Party, and in Parliament, I was also a supportive ally to Caroline Lucas.

But I would occasionally hear grumblings from other parts of the Green Party, many of whom clearly felt that I would not have won without their support. I was quite clear that I had been elected as a Liberal Democrat and would represent that party. The Greens had stood aside to get a progressive MP elected and had achieved their goal. What more did I owe them?

This issue would be even more pressing if we were to do formal deals with Labour, especially now that Brexit is the biggest issue of the day. If Labour had stood aside in either contest, and encouraged their voters to back me, what would the reaction of those voters have been if I had voted with the Lib Dems against Labour?

I must stress at this point that I was very grateful to the Greens for standing aside in December. In Richmond, there is far more that unites the members of the various progressive parties than divides them, and there is an unshakeable logic to uniting behind one representative. By and large, it shouldn't be difficult for that person to represent the views of all the different groups when it comes to individual issues. The problem comes when you try to map local politics onto a national stage and MPs are required to vote with their party whips.

In the excitement of a general election campaign, when all political minds are focussed on which party

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will win which seats, and who will consequently form a government, it's easy to get carried away with thoughts of a progressive alliance, particularly for the Liberal Democrats who want a quick shortcut back to influence after the disaster of 2015.

CALL THE SHOTS

But, once the occupants of the seats have settled in, how does the progressive alliance affect the day to day workings of Parliament? If Labour have helped the Lib Dems to win a number of seats, they would surely use that influence to call the shots on the opposition benches.

As the larger party by far, they get first dibs on which seats they want to stand candidates in, and their long-term interest is surely to secure more Labour MPs, rather than to increase Liberal Democrat representation.

The experience in Richmond Park, I think, shows that although co-operation between the parties can have limited success in a one-off campaign like a by-election where there is broad agreement between the parties, and a single issue on which they are united, it is just as likely to be either unworkable, or counter-productive. Voters won't be told what to do, and any alliance is likely to put off as many voters as it attracts.

For political parties, the danger is that a progressive alliance can't work unless it's a co-operation of equals. The larger party will always be able to hold the smaller party hostage - "Vote with us on x, or we won't stand aside for you next time".

And the smaller party cannot hold the larger to account for failing to deliver their side of any bargain.

Consider the concessions we have made to the Greens in return for their Richmond Park support. We stood aside in Brighton Pavilion where we didn't have a hope. But did we stand aside for them in the Isle of Wight or Bristol West in the general election? Did we heck, and Labour would do the same to us, if they thought there was a chance of getting a Labour MP elected.

For Liberal Democrats, I think there is only limited value in the progressive alliance. We should be looking to build our own vote, on our own policies, according to our own principles. We have paid too heavy a price in the past for trying to wield power that was borrowed from others. There are no shortcuts.

Sarah Olney was Liberal Democrat MP for Richmond Park 2016-17