

DEATH BY FUDGE

Small parties on 7.4% of the vote can either be radical and outspoken or diminish into irrelevance. Why have the Liberal Democrats chosen the latter, wonders Paul Hindley

Britain seems to be on the verge of chaos. The deadline for Brexit is drawing ever nearer. The Conservatives are riven with civil war and plots of regicide. Jeremy Corbyn and his socialist Labour Party have never been closer to power. Into this calamity enters Vince Cable as the new leader of the Liberal Democrats. With the two big parties getting gradually more extreme this should be a great opportunity for a radical liberal party to make real progress. However, the Liberal Democrats continue to languish at around 7% in the opinion polls.

The Liberal Democrats have yet to engage in the battle of ideas that is raging between Labour and the Conservatives. Some progress was made at the Bournemouth autumn conference in September in strengthening our opposition to Brexit, although this came after a confused response from the Federal Conference Committee to the request to suspend standing orders to allow a debate on Brexit to take place.

Sadly, the response of the federal party to the Opposing Brexit motion was the latest in a long line of conference policy fudges. These range from our policy on Trident, to our Coalition economic policy, to our response to the Health and Social Care Act in 2012.

INTELLECTUALLY OUTFLANKED

The more Liberal Democrat conference is gripped by a centrist mentality of delay and policy fudges, the more the party is in danger of being intellectually outflanked by Labour, the Greens and even the Tories.

Our conference must be a hive of radicalism, not a collection of bland and uninspiring policy motions. We need to be imaginative and creative and engage in the big ideas and big policies which were once central to the Liberal movement.

When radical policy motions are debated (and there is usually at least one at every conference), the federal party must not thwart them or even try to prevent them from being debated in the first place. Our conference must not become a bi-annual social gathering, where bland centrist policies are debated and the only time we recall our radical heritage is when we sing The Land at Glee Club.

I fear that the radical heritage of the Liberal Party, the SDP and the Liberal Democrats under Ashdown and Kennedy will be lost and forgotten. Our heritage is one that founded the welfare state, expanded the right to vote, legitimised workers' rights, legalised abortion and allowed same-sex couples to get married. We called for land taxes in 1909 and for Keynesian economics in 1929. We called for membership of Europe in the 1950s, the inclusion of workers on

company boards in the 1970s and an end to the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Our intellectual heritage is being challenged by the other parties. Corbyn is committed to a radical expansion of cooperatives, the abolition of tuition fees and a Keynesian overhaul of the economy. The Greens proudly support land value taxation. Even the Tories have toyed with social reform and putting workers on company boards.

On the occasions when a policy platform does reflect our radical heritage, we are often reluctant to advertise it to the public. A good example of this was shown in the 2017 general election when the party had stronger welfare policies than Labour, but the leadership completely failed to emphasise this in the national campaign. You can have the best policies in the world in your manifesto, but if they are not part of your election campaign, then it is meaningless.

We failed to capture the public imagination at the last two general elections. Our headline policy offering at both elections (but especially in 2015) was safe, bland and quite boring. Talk of "stability, unity and decency" was thoroughly uninspiring. This further compounded the problem of not getting enough media attention. Any anti-establishment liberal party which positions itself as the defender of the status quo is on course for disaster.

In the 2017 general election campaign we did have one policy that captured a lot of media attention. Ironically it wasn't our policy on Brexit; it was our policy on cannabis.

The party got a lot of exposure from its policy to legalise cannabis; this included interviews, debates and column inches in national newspapers. The policy was radical, liberal and distinctive. The party was saying something that neither Labour or the Conservatives were willing to say. In short, we were challenging the complacency of the established status quo on an important social issue. We should learn from it and do more of it.

We still must ask ourselves the searching question of why many of the people who put their faith in us in 2010 are now turning to Corbyn. Despite our opposition to Brexit, most Remain voters backed Labour in 2017. They would rather back a left wing party that was ambiguous towards Brexit, than a centrist party that was clearer in its opposition to Brexit. Most Remain voters after all supported progressive and left-leaning parties. A recent YouGov poll found that many Remain voters had not yet 'forgiven' the Liberal Democrats for going into Coalition in 2010. The shadow of the Coalition continues to hang over the party and our attempts to attract Remain voters.

Vince Cable partly understands this problem. He is on record as saying that the party is right to oppose the so-called bedroom tax, a policy first introduced during the Coalition. He's also begun to grapple with the thorny issue of tuition fees by announcing a review, which may yet support their replacement with a graduate tax. However, it will be much harder to overcome the sense of betrayal felt by many for the Coalition years and for trebling tuition fees.

It would be foolish to think that Brexit alone will revive the party's fortunes at the ballot box. There were scant examples of this in June. The party received its lowest vote share in almost six decades. Added to this, it is not impossible that Labour could develop a more solid pro-Remain platform. Kier Stammer has emphasised the importance of staying in the Customs Union and the Single Market during a transition period, post-Brexit. Sadiq Khan has openly discussed having a second referendum (imitating the policy of the Liberal Democrats). Even Corbyn, a lifelong Eurosceptic, has said that he would vote Remain in a second referendum.

It is concerning that beyond Brexit, the Liberal Democrats have been reluctant to engage in the battle of ideas or to develop new ideas. Back in the 1960s, when the party then as now only had a handful of seats, it was a hot bed of new radical ideas. This approach currently appears to be lacking. It is essential that we regain our political imagination. We need to offer Britain a radical vision of social justice and political reform. We Liberal Democrats must regain our spirit of wanting to fundamentally change Britain.

To do this the party needs to break its addiction to centrism. We are not a centrist party. We are a liberal party. We are a radical party. Centrism is bland, boring, establishment and status quo. Liberalism is a philosophy of radical change. It is exciting, imaginative, anti-establishment, while seeking to end the complacency of the status quo. Small parties on 7.4% of the vote don't have the luxury of complacency. They can either be radical and outspoken or diminish into irrelevance.

With Labour's overt move to the left, there is space for a social liberal party calling for capitalism to be reformed and for a fairer distribution of wealth, power and opportunity. This is the historic territory of the Liberal Party. The Liberals coined the phrase 'social reform' while introducing the first welfare policies over a hundred years ago. Unlike socialists who want to gradually dismantle capitalism and conservatives who are blind to the inequalities caused by rampant free markets, liberals aim to make capitalism fairer and more egalitarian.

The Liberal Democrats should aim to become the main centre-left party by offering a distinctive non-socialist alternative form of progressive politics. If our critique of Corbyn is just more of the same Coalition era watered-down Toryism, then we will fail to win

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over any new progressive voters. Labour's ambivalence towards the welfare state is its Achilles' heel. We need to emphasise that our welfare policies are more progressive than Labour's; from reversing more welfare cuts to ending benefit sanctions. Labour has abandoned welfare politics in favour of a staunch left wing platform of re-nationalisations and state control.

OWNERSHIP FOR ALL

The Liberal Democrats require fresh thinking. We should revisit our economic policy and find solutions to the inequalities within the gig economy, the centralisation of asset wealth and the threat to jobs caused by technological innovation and automation. The party must revive its 20th century mantra of 'ownership for all'. In fairness, Vince Cable has already begun to develop a new idea of having a learning fund for young people paid for by increasing inheritance tax and introducing new wealth taxes.

The party must become more strident in its support for political reform, not just electoral reform and Lords reform but also federalism for the regions and nations of the UK. A radical decentralisation of political power will be both distinctive and anti-establishment. We should also support the decentralisation of economic power by supporting an extensive expansion of cooperatives and credit unions, as well as establishing new building societies.

The party needs to support radical social reforms, such as the possibility of introducing a universal basic income (UBI) for every adult regardless of social background or employment status. We should pay close attention to the UBI trials currently being conducted in Finland, the Netherlands and Canada.

We Liberal Democrats should also revive our reputation for improving public services and once again become the champion of public sector workers in health, education and local government. This naturally means revisiting Coalition era public service cut-backs and calling for them to be reversed. Some contrition wouldn't be lost either.

The time for bland centrism is over. The Liberal Democrats need to become both radical and imaginative. The uninspiring policy platforms in 2015 and 2017 contributed to the bad election results.

Liberal Democrat conference needs to once again become a radical policy making body. We can no longer continue to abandon our radical heritage to other parties. We must defend and advance our historic big ideas. Britain needs a radical liberal response to socialism and free market conservatism, not a centrist one. If we fail to think big then we will be caught in an intellectual pincer move by the other parties. Not only will we lose ownership of our big ideas, but the cause of radical liberalism itself may dwindle into obscurity.

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