

THROWING IT OPEN

A free ‘supporter’ status, no time restriction on applying as a candidate and a leader from outside Parliament?
Outlandish? Maybe, but Vince Cable wants all of them
in the Liberal Democrats

On 7 September I announced my thoughts on how we might grow the party in coming years.

The media, largely through guesswork has reported much of it, so there is no great surprise. And no one will be ‘bounced’ into sudden, controversial, decisions; I envisage a consultation at conference and, then, any consequent changes will take place through the party’s constitutional mechanisms. Nor do I intend this exercise to distract us from immediate political priorities – fighting Brexit; preparing for local elections in 2019; possibly a snap general election – but I do believe we should also be thinking long term.

Some people will say: “We are doing fine; why on earth does Cable want to shake things up?”

Well we are doing fine but not fine enough. After the string of very disappointing election results – parliamentary in 2015 and 2017; European in 2014; local and devolved government for much of the last decade we are reviving.

Since I took over the leadership I have been delighted by the string of local government successes, notably in May – the best results for 15 years - and the encouraging result in Lewisham East – our best against Labour since 2004.

ENORMOUS IMPORTANCE

I attach enormous importance to rebuilding our local government base and our campaigning capacity, as we are doing. But it will be a long, difficult, process. At parliamentary level, I expect further gains, but we are a long way off even contemplating the heady heights of 62 MPs we enjoyed in 2005, however committed our targeting and campaigning. Steady progress is not enough.

Snapshots of public opinion are not necessarily the best guide to real elections. But they do tell a clear story. After eight years of stagnation in single figures our poll ratings are – just – back in double figures. But this is at a time when confidence in the Government is low and the leadership of the Labour opposition is widely despised, even in Labour ranks. At the same time, around 40% of the electorate identify themselves with liberal values which we regard as our own. So far only a quarter of these would vote for us in a general election though a half or more are at least considering the possibility.

However, while we gradually rebuild trust and confidence there is a sense of panic amongst centre-ground voters (I use the phrase centre-ground loosely; I have always identified with the centre-left). They can see that Labour and Conservative parties are increasingly dominated by extreme factions. The Labour leader reflects the world-view of his entourage: the Stalinist wing of the microscopic Communist Party of Great Britain.



In the Conservative Party there is increasing arrogance and activity by the alt-right, and its opportunistic parvenus like Boris Johnson, as they confidently believe that their time has come. This polarisation comes at a critical time, and Brexit is both a cause and effect of it.

There is a temptation for many voters to think that, under the British voting system, they must support the lesser of two evils or they will let in the greater of two evils: a significant factor in our inability to make dramatic progress.

But this calculation is likely to be challenged by attempts to create a new political dynamic. The chatter around ‘new parties’ – which is likely to bear fruit in some form – partly reflects a naïve belief among some non-politicians that the French experience, with Macron, can be replicated in very different circumstances; but it also reflects the sense of despair amongst many worried people that ‘something must be done; something new’.

Added to that is the alienation of significant numbers of MPs and others from the Conservative and Labour parties: ‘one nation’ Conservatives and many Labour people, mainly social democrats but others too. There is a strong possibility that some will break away and try to operate independently. Many will seek private solutions to their conflicted consciences by retiring, running as mayors or busying themselves with select committees. But I think it likely that some will try to establish a new political grouping of some kind.

All this ferment may fizzle out (the Corbynites lose out; the Tories pull themselves together). But there is a potential – nightmare – scenario of a proliferation of groupings competing and us (and the Greens) for the same voters who are not tribal for either Labour or the Conservative party. And the frustrations of the disenfranchised middle-ground voters will simply grow.

I – and you – have two parallel tasks in this, uncertain, environment. The first is to make the Lib Dems the natural choice of this group of voters rather than one of several competing options.

To do this we have to start by recognising the way a lot of modern politics is done: online, interactive, impatient. And operating through broadly-based movements rather than narrower membership.

We often deride Labour’s Momentum but it has been very successful, and we should learn from it. We have been successful as a party in attracting members – now at a record level – but we should not delude ourselves; many new members see us as an effective anti-Brexit movement rather than a conventional party. Where this leads in terms of members versus supporters is already being debated in the party and I hope we shall see ourselves as an organisation which looks outward to attract and engage all who share our values.

There is some controversy around the idea of looking outside parliament for leadership. I am instinctively biased towards MPs since I have spent much of my adult life trying to get elected or re-elected to Parliament. And I know that the current crop of MPs has several outstanding potential leaders. But that will not always be the case and, in any event, political authority and respect is draining away from Parliament and its attractions as a career.

There is a wider point. We now choose top civil servants and governors of the Bank of England from a wider talent pool. Also, archbishops. Top football managers no longer have to be English, or Scots. Politics does not have to remain rooted in tradition; and successful parties will not be. I do not have simple answers to the practical questions around the changes I am recommending but what I am clear about is that simply doing what we have always done is not sensible.

The second task is for the competing options to work together rather than against each other. I have been talking to new or established rivals for what I would

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regard as our political territory (local alliances with the Greens have proved controversial but I have enthusiastically supported them not least in my patch, with some success).

There is a view that we (and particularly I) should be communicating our values and policies more effectively and that, if we did, support would build rapidly. I have learnt over the last year just how difficult that is, however. The main news bulletins are not interested

unless our news is sensational or scandalous.

I don’t pretend for a moment that process and organisational changes are sufficient. Values and policies matter; I have either led or encouraged new thinking in areas like housing policy and homelessness, tech companies, corporate governance and tax reform. I am optimistic that we are winning the arguments around Brexit and the People’s Vote and will get some political credit in coming months.

FOURTH PARTY

But we need to do more. I am putting forward some ideas for reforming the way we operate. Parliament is no help. Since we are categorised as the ‘fourth party’ in the Commons, I am allowed to ask only one question in prime minister’s questions every four weeks and my colleagues are rarely called. By contrast the SNP are allowed at least two questions a week, despite scoring nearly 1.4m fewer votes than us at the last election.

Surveys tell us that a large swathe of the electorate have little idea what we stand for. And, even on the main issue of the day – Brexit – where we have a clear, distinct, well-articulated, policy the public is as likely to associate anti-Brexit views with Labour (despite its divisions into reverse and ‘constructive ambiguity’) as with us.

In many ways we are still paying the price of the 2015 and 2017 elections; fewer MPs make less noise, and media coverage is more difficult to secure. We have, of course, to keep trying and we do. The gradual improvement in our position suggests that this is gradually paying off.

But my proposals for a radical overhaul to open up the party into a free and inclusive movement; to let that movement decide who its leader should be from a broad pool of candidates; to empower it by giving members and supporters a say over campaigning priorities; and to make it easier for new members to stand for public office, are designed to give a shot in the arm to our progress. They are the first step to remaking the party in the public mind and making real strides back to fill the huge gap at the centre of British politics.

Vince Cable MP is leader of the Liberal Democrats