

# EIGHT ERRORS AND COUNTING

The Liberal Democrats got a lot wrong in the 2019 general election, many of them repeated mistakes never learnt from, says Nick Harvey

The most dispiriting feature of our third electoral catastrophe in four years was the mistakes we repeated. Some were down to factors beyond our control, but some were not. We also made new ones! I have identified eight mistakes.

## MISTAKE 1

The biggest was agreeing to holding the election. Our pivot – to back the Tories and SNP in supporting an election – left Labour no choice but to agree. Simply put, we caused the election to happen. Why?

With the Tories in a commanding poll lead and the SNP poised in Scotland, surely experience and calculation should have left no doubt that we and Labour were in for a kicking. It handed Boris everything he wanted, gift-wrapped for Christmas: a working majority, Brexit and given the state of the Labour Party, possibly ten years in power.

It remains a mystery why, how, or by whom that decision was taken over the weekend of 26-27 October. The stated line was that because 19 Labour MPs had backed Johnson's deal, it had become inevitable that the old Parliament would deliver Brexit. Nineteen Labour MPs had indeed backed the deal, but some of them were still up for supporting a People's Vote amendment as well – the so-called confirmatory vote in the 'Kyle-Wilson Amendment'.

How many would have done so, we will never know. It needed at least eight. It would certainly be a gamble to slog through a winter of trench warfare in both houses, but a lesser gamble surely than an election? We could have hung Boris out to dry in his hopeless minority position, while Farage feasted on the corpse, and in a March/April election he would be seen to have failed just like Theresa May. Instead we handed him an election where he looked to have succeeded, in contrast to his hapless predecessor.

It has been murmured lately that Macron's sabre-rattling - that he would not back an extension unless there was either an election or referendum on the table - was the reason we switched. This seems even more foolish as he had taken similar lines throughout, only to be talked out of them by other EU leaders.

## MISTAKE 2

Revoke was another gamble which backfired spectacularly! In early August, shortly after Johnson took office, we doubted he truly wanted a deal and his demands seemed to make one unlikely. His summer offensive looked like a charade. I was party to a discussion about what we might do if, come the autumn, he 'cut and run' to the country on a No-Deal ticket. Several of us thought that at that stage it

might make sense to respond by raising the stakes back – and taking a Revoke line – leaving Labour stranded in the middle. It would need careful thought and testing.

Without any of that, it was decided – again a mystery why, how or by whom – to go out front with Revoke. (Some say that the conference would simply have passed it anyway, which may be right.) However, some polling – qualitative more than quantitative – could have probed the views of soft Tory/Lib Dem waverers on this beforehand, as it landed very badly from the outset. And once Boris surprised everyone by securing a deal (albeit worse than May's), middle England decided the deal offered the craved-for end to the Brexit saga, and our Revoke stance was left looking extreme – and in the view of many, undemocratic.

## MISTAKE 3

Our third new mistake was to build a personality campaign around Jo Swinson when nobody had ever heard of her. It was suggested well in advance, by the communications team, that in the first days of an election campaign we might run a tongue-in-cheek line about her being a possible prime minister – solely to help lever her into any televised leader debates. But someone, somewhere, made the fatal mistake of believing our own publicity....

The proposition that the leader of a party with just 12 MPs at the previous election (and even with defectors, going into this election with just 21) could become PM was just not credible. By contrast, the proposition which, in various iterations we had offered for at least the last 50 years, that a strong group of Liberals/ Lib Dems would be a benign and positive influence on politics, has always been very believable.

Even when we had leaders who were genuinely electoral assets: Paddy, and early in their tenures Charles and Nick, we never hyped them in this absurd manner.

Quite bizarrely, we spent thousands pumping glossy magazines about Jo into our target seats – as if they would have any interest whatever in someone standing in faraway East Dunbartonshire. I have no idea whether Jo herself embraced this weird cultish approach, or just went along with it out of a misplaced sense of duty. But I am completely certain that it fuelled the negative perceptions of her which most canvassers reported from the doors.

## MISTAKE 4

Among old mistakes repeated, pre-eminent yet again was the shortage of clear, simple and appealing messages. Beyond the ill-fated Revoke and 'the prime

minister Britain deserves' nostrums, what did we say that might actually motivate voters to support us?

I presume that 'Jo's plan for Britain' was an attempt to address wider issues, but can anyone remember anything catchy, interesting or popular? Too much intellectual effort goes on policy – which often loses votes – rather than messaging, which can win them. We have limited bandwidth – we need stronger lines.

## **MISTAKE 5**

Another was the skewed balance between local and national campaigning. Yet again, too much resource and emphasis went into the national rather than local. Electoral law drives some of this, capping candidate spending in the short campaign to around £15,000, whereas party campaigning in a battleground seat is typically £100,000+ for all three parties. For the first time, we raised as much as the others and spent up towards the national limit. The fund-raising team deserves great credit for this. As ever though, most of the money came in once the gun went off, whereas it would have done more good over the preceding year – throughout most of which we were in a financial straitjacket and woefully understaffed.

Nevertheless, we seem to have forgotten that what built us up over half a century – from the community politics debate in the seventies through to the Coalition – was strong local campaigning on local issues with credible and appealing local candidates.

Skilfully calibrated national materials can add volume to local campaigns but are no substitute for them and at worst are counter productive. If we had simply given the 80 target seats £50,000 each and told them to spend it creatively on party campaigning (or pre-election candidate campaigning), that would only have taken £4m out of the £19m limit. Some would have spent it well, others less so. Some of it might have been quite idiosyncratic. But I bet we would have ended up with more than 11 seats.

Our campaigns staff are very talented people, working ridiculously hard for sparse remuneration. But with unprecedented millions at our disposal, some might have been spent bringing in professional copywriters and designers to augment their efforts and offer a wider range of more novel and interesting materials. You can't give such people free rein. Our campaigners would have to retain control. But armed with strong clear messages, surely we could have come up with less bland and 'samey' stuff?

## **MISTAKE 6**

I listen to the Labour leadership debate with interest. MPs (and ex-MPs) from the north say they have become too metropolitan, middle-class and London-centric. I dearly hope we will undertake the same self-examination. We have flushed our rural and poorer seats down the pan. Our west country, Welsh and northern seats are badly lost, with only Tim Farron (ace local campaigning) and some Scots (in four-cornered politics) hanging on. A core vote is fine, but very few seats have a sufficient concentration of middle-class chatterati to make a winning bloc. We must address a wider audience and think how our messages land with them. This is a wider issue than Europe.

## **MISTAKE 7**

We can only build winning blocs in seats if supporters of other parties 'lend' us their votes. We have always known this. It will always be true. Most crucial is persuading Labour voters to back us in Tory-facing seats (the majority of our targets). Soft Tories also count, but the serious numbers are from Labour. We saw in 2017 how it totally backfired to attack Corbyn, who is popular with Labour members and supporters whatever anyone else thinks. Yet we repeated this in 2019, with exactly the same result.

Tory seats are our biggest battleground. When will we learn that if we are trying to build winning coalitions of the left and centre in those seats, we have to make people feel good about supporting us, not feel bad? In such seats, Tories are the opposition, Labour are the competition. Head on attacks just won't work. Of course, the dynamics in Labour-facing seats are different. Such is the importance of keeping local focus.

## **MISTAKE 8**

We are more adept at using data in campaigning but must not become its prisoners. Gut instinct and common sense are vital. The big MRP poll in June, showing us ahead in 73 seats and able to reach 219 with a perfect 5% swing from exactly the right place in each case, was an illusion which set hares running. It was built on Farage's temporary Euro-election bubble. By September these figures were 27 and 50 seats respectively, showing a clear direction of travel.

Similarly, early positive approval ratings for Jo Swinson were to be expected. The British public gives a newcomer a chance. Only arriving with terrible baggage would you score negatively. But this should never have fed a belief that she was a great asset to be hyped. More time would have given us longer to test that. We have stopped using Focus groups or qualitative polling, through lack of funds and changing fashions. But Thatcher and Blair built their success on them and our messages, slogans, policies and personalities need testing on real people.

In summary, much of our misfortune was beyond our control: Johnson securing the illusion of a good deal, Farage copping out, Corbyn driving people to the Tories. But much was self-inflicted: miscalculation, hubris, fuzzy lines of command leaving the leader far too much say, as in 2015, when the campaign belongs to us all; and forgetting that splendid bit of ALDC artwork: 'Warning – keep it local'.

But we now have time – five years; resource – more solvent than before; and momentum – in local government. We must rebuild patiently and strategically, both from the bottom up and getting things right at the top. Back to basics, as John Major might say.

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