

THE HORROR SHOW SEEN FROM OUTSIDE

Professional roles meant Simon Hughes had to spend the general election campaign on the sidelines for the first time in decades. What he saw of the Lib Dems alarmed him

It is probably wise to begin by showing some historic self-awareness, as well as to explain my present position.

In my 52 months as our party's federal president and 42 months as commons deputy leader I am very aware that both leadership teams of which I was part did not always make the right strategic decisions.

In particular the 2010 coalition agreement did not sufficiently protect our party from being committed to mistaken policies negotiated in government in some of the most sensitive areas, especially university tuition fees.

More recently, from October 2018 and for the first time for 38 years, I ceased to be a party candidate and agreed with London South Bank University that during my term as its chancellor I would not be involved in active or public party politics.

So for the last 15 months I have renounced all opportunities to make public comments on Conservative, Labour, Green, Brexit or nationalist parties, representatives or candidates and have stepped back from door knocking, leaflet delivery, telephone campaigning or similar in Bermondsey and Old Southwark and elsewhere.

I have remained a party member, retained the right to comment or take action on local, national or international issues and policies like support for the Remain and the People's Vote campaigns, kept contact with good friends who are still active party members and continued to engage in party elections and occasionally in internal deliberations.

So after attending one leadership hustings and voting, but without going public with my preference between two good former colleagues, I intervened privately and then more publicly at conference (with my local party's support) to make sure that we had a separate vote on the proposed additional policy to revoke Article 50 if we formed a majority government - and that members at conference had a chance specifically to vote against it.

FEAR AND WORRY

Sadly our new leadership publicly and fulsomely endorsed this new policy, and therefore not surprisingly Conference by a majority supported it. However, every fear and worry expressed in the debate by Andrew George from St Ives, Niall Hodson our Sunderland council group leader and by me (as un-confrontationally as I could manage) became in my view increasingly justified every week from then until 12 December. The policy may have come from amendments properly submitted, but from the moment they were selected by conference committee the party

leadership should have made clear that though well-intentioned, this was flawed and foolish in many respects. And unnecessary.

We already had a very clear, well-established and well understood position as the largest UK party fully committed to a second people's vote and to campaign 100% to remain in the EU. I accept that this policy was not different from Green, SNP and Plaid Cymru policy, but that was a strength not a weakness. Most importantly this put us clearly in a fundamentally different position from the divided Labour leadership and Labour Party. I know of course that the 'revoke policy' did not replace the existing people's vote policy, but it certainly confused it and, worse, increasingly obscured it - attracting increasing opposition not just from regular opponents but from the politically unaligned and our own supporters.

The oft repeated qualification that this new 'revoke' policy would only apply if we won a commons majority only confirmed how unnecessary a distraction and mistake it was.

More and more people concluded how unrealistic this outcome was. In addition the proposition that a view expressed in the 2016 referendum (though technically advisory) could be overridden just by MPs and should not require a second express public vote on the details of the withdrawal deal was arrogant, certainly not democratic and never likely to put us on the side of the people against the political establishment.

And the further assertion that a UK parliamentary majority in a general election could be successfully presented as a mandate to ignore the referendum failed to take into account that a majority of seats does not imply a majority in public support (see the result), and that general elections are never fought or won on one single issue alone, however important, and that there is never one single reason for which we win each and all of our seats.

And then the strategy took further steps in the wrong direction. We promoted the leader nationally and locally as a candidate for next UK prime minister. I completely understand that as a UK party with a new leader and deputy much less well-known than the Conservative, Labour and Brexit leaders, we needed to promote our new leaders more. I also completely understand that with a much younger and first ever female leader we wanted to promote her as a significant and welcome contrast to the three older, male leaders of the other three leading UK parties. But the Liberal Democrat leader should have been promoted as the leader to build bridges between the parts and parties of the UK and not as candidate for PM.

Why? Because we don't have a presidential system, because we were going into the election as the fourth party (with about half the SNP's number, and with Labour and the Conservatives both many times bigger than us), and because, sadly, the idea of a Liberal Democrat becoming the next PM was a second nearly incredible proposition.

Also, promoting the new leader over everything prevented us from presenting our leadership in a way that we hadn't had the opportunity to do for many years, certainly since the formation of the Liberal-SDP Alliance.

Principally as a result of eight MPs from the two biggest parties joining us, women and men, black and white, northern and southern, of different faiths and none, some at least as well or better known than our leaders, we had the opportunity to present ourselves as a party with an impressive and diverse leadership team drawn from the three biggest parties rather than the party of one new relatively unknown leader, however talented.

We offered a team of great breadth, depth and skill to straddle political traditions and unite the country – including among others people such as Dr Sarah Wollaston, the former Conservative and highly respected health select committee chair and Chuka Umunna, the former Labour shadow business secretary.

Then there was the serious mistake of not accepting that if a motion of no confidence was passed against Boris Johnson, of course the leader of the opposition should have the next chance to seek a parliamentary majority before other options were tried.

We had already said that we wouldn't vote to support a Labour government led by Jeremy Corbyn, and nor would any Conservative or former Conservative, so Corbyn was never going to win the confidence of the commons. But if we had made clear that we supported Corbyn's right to put his case, then there may have been considerably more support from Labour MPs for a short term caretaker multi-party government to legislate for a second public vote and then step down at the first practical opportunity after the result.

The last big wrong move was to change tactics in the commons before every available option had been exhausted to secure a people's vote amendment to the Withdrawal Bill after Boris Johnson's successful Brussels negotiations.

I know the arguments: we wanted to outflank Labour and not be outflanked by the SNP. But the SNP had an obvious reason for wanting an election before Christmas to avoid it happening nearer to Alex Salmond's criminal trial. And the opinion polls were so poor for Labour that they were not likely to suddenly jump ahead of us to support a December election. I know too that assessments of possible parliamentary outcomes are of course contested, but given that several senior MPs across parties were clear that with every day that passed the chance of a majority for a peoples' vote amendment was becoming more likely,

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I am sure we could have tried for longer to win this, using whatever tactics were needed.

Also, we did not have one single strong enough main election message. To counter the strength and simplicity of 'Get Brexit Done' we should have had one equally strong and simple principal rejoinder, for example 'Don't be conned. No Brexit'. 'Bollocks to Brexit' had worked surprisingly well. Liberal Democrats fought against Brexit

but also under a 'motherhood and apple pie' 'Brighter future' slogan when the Conservatives were fighting a hard-edged campaign reflecting people's impatience and alienation.

SOMETHING VERY WRONG

And last, for now, yet again our targeting appears to have been far too ambitious. I do not know other regions as well as mine, but to lose Carshalton and Wallington and Wimbledon by so little and yet spend so much effort in other seats which we lost by miles appears to suggest something very wrong in the analytical abilities of headquarters.

In conclusion, I do not pretend to be close enough to know over the months from July where the party's power lay and who were responsible for the various strategies that saw our positive national position of August to be so much weakened by December.

Many senior people involved are or have been friends and colleagues, and I regret that I have to be so critical. Leaders, deputy leaders and chief whips in the commons and lords, plus the federal president and the Federal Board; the chair and members of the Campaigns and Communication Committee and our two 2019 chief executives may all have played a part.

The inquiry just constituted has to find out as quickly as possible what happened and why, and report fully to members many of whom worked so hard for ever declining reward. I believe we could have won at least more than 30 seats instead of 11, and that could have meant a Conservative majority reduced by at least 40 – and a wholly different parliament.

With an even more successful campaign we could have made sure the country was able to vote on EU membership again, then had a chance to win a people's vote, stop Brexit and get other good things done.

Our reduced number of seats hugely contributed to the very sad fact that that the UK will from this year be outside the European Union. I regret the party and national outcomes greatly. And I am convinced that one or even both desperately sad outcomes could potentially have been avoided if our leadership in 2019 had not made so many mistaken judgments.

Simon Hughes was a Liberal, then Liberal Democrat, MP for North Southwark & Bermondsey 1983-2015, federal party president 2004-08 and deputy leader 2010-14.