

A CLASS ACT

The Liberal Democrats rightly want more of their MPs to be women, ethnic minority, disabled or gay. Simon Titley asks why the party lacks a similar concern about social class

Another conference, another diversity debate. Last September in Liverpool, a motion proposed by Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats was torn to shreds for emphasising the rights of ethnic minorities over other considerations. This March in Sheffield, a diversity motion was passed overwhelmingly.

The successful motion provides a formula to help women, black or minority ethnic (BAME), disabled and gay people to become parliamentary candidates. But it failed to acknowledge social class, even though Nick Clegg is making social mobility a major plank of his programme in government. It seems the party is content to allow politics to become an exclusively bourgeois pursuit.

The Liberal Democrats' angst about diversity begs the question: what is the party's fundamental idea of representative politics? A health polity reflects the whole of society; it would engage and involve everyone, regardless of gender, ethnicity, class, age, disability or sexual orientation.

But, in choosing our political representatives, there are more important criteria to consider, such as values, honesty, intelligence, articulacy, dedication, hard work and empathy. Gender or ethnicity does not trump any of these qualities.

Even so, the Liberal Democrats have a problem. Only 7 of the party's 57 MPs (12%) are women. Things are better in the Lords, with 29 of the party's 96 peers (30%). Women also fare better where there are list elections, with 6 out of 12 MEPs, 2 out of 3 London Assembly members, 4 out of 6 members of the outgoing Welsh Assembly, but only 2 out of 16 members of the outgoing Scottish Parliament. Just over 30% of the party's councillors are women.

This under-representation suggests something has gone wrong – but what? So far as women candidates are concerned, while there remain some isolated cases of sexism, the basic problem is not discrimination. The number of women selected as parliamentary candidates is actually proportionately higher than the number of them on the approved list. More important than overall proportions is the proportion of women candidates in the seats that matter. At the 2010 general election, 40% of the party's target seat candidates were women and 67% of candidates in held seats where the MP was standing down were women.

The problem is rather one of supply. Not enough women are coming forward for approval. This is partly a matter of self-confidence, which the party's Campaign for Gender Balance is addressing. It is also due to the absurd demands that local parties often place on their candidates, the result of a Stakhanovite work ethic that makes it impossible for many people to combine the job of PPC with their home life and career.

And we must also face the fact that fewer women

enter politics in the first place. Why should this be so? Why are women less interested in politics than men? Whatever the explanation, it is probably the same reason why fewer women than men watch TV news and current affairs programmes (as the viewing figures attest) and why fewer women than men read newspapers or current affairs magazines (as the circulation figures attest).

The Liberal Democrats remain divided over all-women shortlists but seem increasingly attracted to the idea. It would undoubtedly increase the number of women selected. But it would be an artificial fix that doesn't tackle the root causes and solve the problem of not enough women coming forward in the first place.

With BAME candidates, the problem is different. The party has no BAME MPs, MEPs, MSPs or AMs at all. There undoubtedly is discrimination, which is due not so much to racism within the Liberal Democrats as a fear of racism in the electorate. Bluntly, there is a crude calculation by some local parties that a BAME candidate will lose votes. As with women, there is also the question of supply, since proportionately fewer members of ethnic minorities join the party, let alone apply for approval.

CLASS SNOBBERY

The question of diversity is rightly agitating the party. What we rarely hear of, though, is the question of social class. Class snobbery is not just a problem in itself. If you tackle gender or ethnic imbalance in isolation, you will undoubtedly worsen class discrimination. If you offer new opportunities to women or ethnic minorities, the women and BAME beneficiaries will tend to be more affluent people. And since any advantage given to women or ethnic minorities will disadvantage white men, the men who lose out will tend to be the least affluent. Few if any sacrifices will be made by privately-educated men. In solving one problem, the party risks exacerbating another.

The Liberal Democrats have a problem with class, which they inherited from the pre-merger Liberal Party. They believe that, because class shouldn't matter, it doesn't matter, and therefore tend to deny there is a problem. But just look at the party's MPs. About 40% are privately-educated (compared with 7% of the population as a whole).

The party's antipathy to class issues has its roots in the post-war Liberal revival, which was a product of the decline in class-consonant voting. This sort of tribal voting – when most working class people loyally voted Labour and most middle class people loyally voted Conservative – reached its peak at the 1951 general election, when 97% of the electorate voted for either Labour or the Tories. Since then, class-consonant voting has steadily declined, with the Labour-plus-

Tory vote falling to a post-war low of 65% in 2010.

The Liberal revival was due to the party's ability to exploit the electoral space opened up by the decline in class-based voting.

The party appealed to an emerging educated middle class that did not share the tribal loyalties of its parents and grandparents. Neither the Liberals nor the Liberal Democrats relied on the blind loyalty of a social class, so it is easy to see why the party lacks class consciousness and denies that class is a problem. Hence there is no check on class snobbery within the Liberal Democrats.

ACE, KING AND QUEEN

How does the English class system work? It is rather like being dealt a hand in a game of cards. As in a real game of cards, it helps if you hold the top three cards.

The 'ace' is having been privately-educated. Despite comprising only 7% of the population, the products of our so-called 'public' schools dominate politics, the civil service, the judiciary, the military, merchant banking and, increasingly, newly-prestigious spheres such as the media.

The 'king' is having been an undergraduate at Oxford or Cambridge. And since nearly 50% of Oxbridge undergraduates come from public schools, an ace is the best way to acquire the king.

The 'queen' is to come from London and the Home Counties, provided you're also middle class (growing up on a council estate in Basildon or Peckham doesn't make the grade). The automatic disdain that people from the south-east show for those from the provinces is palpable.

For the record, my social background is neither privileged nor underprivileged. Like many others born in Britain in the 1950s, I was brought up on the cusp of the upper working class and lower middle class. Unremarkable, you might think, but crucially I hold none of the top three cards. And anyone without those cards can expect to be on the receiving end of some unpleasant class prejudice, particularly if they dare to trespass on what the elite sees as its territory.

Rarely have I encountered worse snobbery than within the Liberal Democrats. The symptoms are wearily familiar; the snide put-downs, the supercilious smirks, the casual discounting of one's skills or arguments. The low point came when a 'fellow' party member once addressed me as "your sort".

More generally, I'm struck by reactions to my articles in *Liberator*. If you're a regular reader, you will know that my style is polemical and therefore controversial. The intention is to provoke and stimulate thought. Despite this, a common reaction is not an engagement with my arguments but to question my right to express an opinion at all. My participation is treated as impertinence; it would seem that I don't know my place.

The Liberal Democrats must ask themselves why they still tolerate class snobbery within their ranks, when they no longer accept sexism or racism in the party (which, indeed, would probably lead to expulsion). Because it all comes down to the same

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thing: whether we believe in mutual respect.

In a just society, respect would be earned. You could earn respect over a lifetime in various ways; through your good character, your kindness and honesty, by raising a good family, by career success, through your talents and skills,

or through contributions to your local community. Likewise, you would lose respect by having the opposite attributes.

The English class system acts to neutralise these factors. Instead, it operates on the principle of an officer class. Just as a young new lieutenant expects to be saluted and called 'sir' by an experienced sergeant major twice his age, so the social elite expects automatic respect without having to earn it. Meanwhile, those not in the elite are denied respect, no matter how good or talented or hard-working they are.

To Nick Clegg's credit, he is doing something serious about social mobility. He has recognised that, for most people, their fate is settled by the time they reach the age of seven. Early learning and the pupil premium are a serious attempt to correct this problem. But English class privilege does not give up easily. Clegg faces stiff resistance from Oxford dons to his demand that the university may charge the maximum £9,000 fee only if it dramatically increases its intake of disadvantaged pupils from the state sector.

Our guiding principle should be Ralf Dahrendorf's concept of 'life chances', the social conditions that define how much individuals can realise their full potential. We should not tolerate class prejudice because the English class system is a barrier to providing equal life chances.

But the class system is deeply embedded. As another Liberal, Sir Roy Denman, put it, because Britain has had the good fortune not to have suffered a revolution or lost a war, its tragedy is that it has never had a house clearance of its establishment.

The Liberal Democrats are unlikely ever to be able to engineer that, but they can do something about the culture in their own party and their candidate selection system. If the party were serious about achieving 'balance', not just for women and ethnic minorities but also for anyone state-educated, the single most effective thing it could do would be to introduce an indefinite moratorium on adopting as candidates privately-educated white men.

But that will never happen. It will never happen because too many privileged people benefit from the present set-up. And that is why, whenever the party debates diversity, the special pleading of privileged women will always be heard over the voices of working-class men or women.

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