

# DON'T BLAME NICK

## Liberal Democrats have no shortage of simplistic or absurd explanations for their catastrophic defeat in May. It's time they looked in the mirror, says Simon Titley

What was that you said? The Liberal Democrats had a terrible result in May because of what? Sorry, I can't hear what you're saying. There's a deafening noise of chickens coming home to roost.

This surfeit of poultry dates back over twenty years. You can blame more recent factors – Nick Clegg, the coalition, tuition fees, the cuts, the AV referendum – but you'd be wrong.

Let's begin by demolishing one myth: that the slide in Liberal Democrat support was due to tuition fees or the cuts. The party has suffered two sharp drops in support since the last general election. The first was on polling day in May 2010, when support fell from around 27-29% in the eve-of-poll opinion polls to 23% in the actual vote on the day. The second was during June and July 2010, when opinion poll ratings fell from about 20% to around 12-14%. Since then, the fall has been comparatively slight and, since November, poll ratings have stabilised around 10%. The party's estimated national share of the vote in this May's elections was 15%, historically poor but nevertheless higher than the prevailing poll ratings.

What does this tell us? It tells us that the main reason for the Liberal Democrats' loss of support is not tuition fees or the cuts (or the sense of betrayal attached to either). Neither of those decisions was announced until last autumn, several months after the party's opinion poll ratings had slumped. The significance of the tuition fees U-turn is not that it caused a drop in support but that, by destroying trust, it has made support much harder to regain. So far as the cuts are concerned, people are only just beginning to feel the effects.

The party's basic problem predates tuition fees. It predates the formation of the coalition or last year's general election. It even predates the merger. It is that the party has consistently failed to consolidate a sufficiently large core vote. While Labour and the Tories can each rely on at least 25% of the electorate to vote for them through thick and thin, barely 10% of the electorate is similarly committed to the Liberal Democrats. The rest of the party's support is 'soft' – the Lib Dem vote is like a bath with the taps left on and the plug left out. Consequently at each successive election, the party has to put a disproportionate effort into winning its previous vote afresh. It can't build out from a base because it hasn't got one.

Consolidating a core vote is simple, really. All you have to do is state clearly *what* you stand for and *who* you stand for. But the Liberal Democrats have always found this problematic because attracting some people necessarily repels others. The party refuses to do that because it would inevitably upset some of its MPs and councillors, who represent a very diverse demographic. So it has fudged the question, either by campaigning locally on issues about which no reasonable person

could disagree (e.g. everyone wants the dog shit cleaned up) or by attracting protest votes against the government of the day (e.g. opposition to the Iraq War).

To make matters worse, the party tries to make a virtue of this, with its slogan: "We can win everywhere". Well, yes, you can, but only if you avoid confronting people with serious moral choices. And since the resulting electoral support is wide but shallow and transient, the opposite equally applies: "We can lose everywhere".

### VOLATILE AND UNRELIABLE

Liberal Democrat support fell so dramatically during May to July 2010 because the party's voters lacked commitment in the first place. The huge support suggested by opinion polls during the general election campaign was volatile and unreliable. And transient protest voters – never a reliable source of support at the best of times – will not support any party of government.

The only long-term answer to this problem is to build and cement long-term support among demographic groups more inclined to hold liberal values. All the evidence – exit polls, opinion surveys and psephological studies – suggests that these are people who tend to be younger, better educated and more cosmopolitan than average. But consolidating a core vote would require the party to take a stand. It would have to enthuse some people sufficiently strongly that others might be repelled. It would have to stand up for the interests of some groups and not others.

The party hasn't the balls to do this. It is paralysed by a fear of giving offence, so won't take the risks necessary to develop clear and compelling messages, hence it fails to enthuse anyone. Into this strategic vacuum steps the party leader with the intellectually bankrupt concept of 'Alarm Clock Britain'. Meanwhile, as the party dithers, its support is reduced to a core of 10% because any other potential support is either too fickle or can see no compelling reason to support the party.

It is undeniable that the coalition has had a profound effect on the Liberal Democrat vote but it is important to understand how. The coalition is not the primary cause of the party's woes. Rather, it has precipitated more fundamental and longer-term weaknesses. In particular, it has tested to destruction the party's 'strategy' (if one could dignify it with such a term).

This strategy comprises three main components. All three were plausible only in opposition, all have been made untenable by the coalition, and all have prevented the party cultivating a core vote that it could fall back on.

## STRATEGIC FAILURE NO.1

The first component is exemplified by the aforementioned slogan “We can win everywhere”. It is an indiscriminate appeal to any and all demographics, based on the fallacy that everyone is equally likely to vote Liberal Democrat. But this can succeed only by saying different things in different places or by campaigning on uncontroversial local issues. And it can work only when the party is not in power.

Long before the coalition, the shortcomings of this approach were exposed wherever the Liberal Democrats won control of a local council. Being in power forced the party to make hard choices in public. Oppositionism was no longer an option. With no idea what to put in their Focus leaflets, local Lib Dem councillors too often retreated into their role as administrators.

We are now seeing this problem writ large. Now that the party nationally is in government, it too must make hard choices. It can no longer hide or fudge its moral standpoint. But given the party has habitually avoided articulating a moral standpoint for fear of causing offence, its standpoint is being defined in other people’s terms.

## STRATEGIC FAILURE NO.2

The second component of the failed strategy is ‘incrementalism’, the thousand-year plan to achieve a Commons majority one ward at a time. Crucially, supporters of this ‘Very Long March’ strategy are hostile to any idea of mounting an effective ‘air war’. Hardly surprising, since it would require developing consistent nationwide messages, which would undermine the first component (“We can win everywhere”).

Defenders of incrementalism claim that it works. Yes, up to a point. Local campaigning remains vital for the health of the party and democracy generally. And it is true that the incremental expansion of territory by advancing gradually from target ward to target ward, target constituency to target constituency, has delivered numbers of MPs and councillors not seen since the 1920s. The problem is that, if this approach is not allied to a complementary national campaign, you eventually get diminishing returns.

The number of Liberal Democrat councillors peaked at about 5,000 in the mid-1990s then gradually declined to under 3,900 before this May’s elections and fewer than 3,100 today. In the May elections of 1997 to 2011 inclusive, the party suffered a net loss of councillors in nine years and achieved a net gain in only six (the last in 2008).

Still, we were assured before this May’s elections that “where we work, we win” and that sitting Lib Dem councillors could thereby defy the odds. But a ‘ground war’ can achieve only so much. Even the most ardent local campaigner would admit that it is easier to win council seats when you are opposing an unpopular government. The boot is now on the other foot. Without a complementary national ‘air war’ or a core vote to fall back on, hard-working Liberal Democrat councillors running faultless local campaigns can nevertheless be swept away by an electoral tsunami.

Meanwhile, Liberal Democrat local campaigning is being undermined by the steady decline in party membership, from a peak of about 102,000 in 1992 to around 60,000 now. It is a problem common to all

parties, which no one seems able to solve. And no incrementalist has satisfactorily explained how the exponential growth in local campaigning that their strategy demands can be sustained on a declining membership base.

Needless to say, the almost religious commitment to fighting elections solely by ‘ground war’ has provoked an equal and opposite reaction. The Liberal Democrats’ 2010 general election campaign was run by a right-wing clique of PR and marketing men convinced that local campaigning was redundant and that elections could be won solely by an ‘air war’. That theory was quickly tested to destruction.

## STRATEGIC FAILURE NO.3

The third leg of this wobbly stool is ‘equidistance’ – never saying in advance who you would prefer as a coalition partner but appearing even-handed until the deal is finally clinched. On the face of it, this is a respectable position. Expressing a preference before an election would alienate some voters and weaken your bargaining position.

Unfortunately it means that, when the Liberal Democrats do enter a coalition, they will inevitably alienate half their voters, whichever partner they choose. If the party had a substantial core vote, this would be less of a problem. But because the Liberal Democrat core vote is so small, the party has to ‘borrow’ a higher proportion of its votes from Labour and the Tories, which increases the proportion of its voters who will feel disillusioned with whichever coalition arrangement it makes.

So that’s how we got into this mess. And who is to blame? It’s you.

If you have ever held back from proclaiming liberal values because you were afraid it might offend someone, it’s your fault. If your Focus leaflets are a politics-free zone, full of hackneyed slogans that haven’t changed for thirty years, it’s your fault. If you think “we can win everywhere” is a satisfactory strategy, it’s your fault. If you think the party can advance solely by a ‘ground war’, it’s your fault. If you think the party can advance solely by an ‘air war’, it’s your fault. If you are an anti-intellectual who rejects political thought and debate because it gets in the way of leafleting, it’s your fault. If you think the remedy for the party’s ideological vacuum is to embrace neoliberal economic orthodoxy, it’s your fault. If you think politics can be reduced to brand marketing, or ‘efficient management’, or fixes and deals, it’s your fault. If you describe the Lib Dems as being in the ‘centre’ or ‘middle’ because you think the party should define itself by what it’s not rather than what it is, it’s your fault.

And until and unless you resolve precisely what and who you stand for, you will never get out of here alive.

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