

WHERE LIBERATOR LEADS, NICK CLEGG FOLLOWS

Will the Liberal Democrats' pro-European election campaign appeal to target voters, asks Simon Titley

Liberator has a reputation for being a critic of Nick Clegg, so let us be fair and give credit where credit is due. The Liberal Democrats have long needed testicular fortitude on the issue of Europe. With his resolute pro-European stance in this year's Euro elections, Clegg has provided it.

But Liberator is also due some credit. As Mark Pack pointed out in his monthly e-mail Newswire ('Nick Clegg takes the Liberator line', November 2013), Liberator has long argued for such a strategy when most of the party preferred to duck for cover.

The Liberal Democrats fought previous Euro elections in a cowardly fashion. They campaigned mainly on local ward issues in the hope this would avoid causing offence to Eurosceptic voters.

This strategy failed. Hardly surprising, really. After all, if you are anti-EU, why vote Liberal Democrat when the Tories or UKIP offer the real McCoy? Hence at previous Euro elections, the Liberal Democrats have performed worse than their poll ratings.

Throughout this period, British public opinion has changed little, with roughly one-third being pro-European, one-third anti-European and one-third undecided. And the issue of EU membership is not a priority for most voters. It matters as a big issue only to about 1 or 2% of the whole electorate. But until now, the Liberal Democrats thought it was more important to avoid any risk of offending the two-thirds of the electorate that is not pro-European than to enthuse the one-third that is pro-European.

It was always unwise to dismiss that one-third. First, 33% may not be a majority but it is a much higher percentage of the vote than the Liberal Democrats received in recent Euro elections (14.9% in 2004 and 13.7% in 2009, lower than the party's opinion poll ratings of around 20% on both occasions). Second, every other party is also trying to appease Eurosceptics, leaving the pro-European field clear. And third, the turnout in Euro elections in the UK is low (38.5% in 2004 and 34.7% in 2009), giving any party that can enthuse and mobilise people a higher percentage of the vote than it gets in the polls.

Instead, the Liberal Democrats won a lower percentage of the vote than they got in the polls. If they had focussed on enthusing and mobilising the pro-European minority instead of trying not to offend anyone, surely they would have done better? So why was the party so foolish? The answer is sentimentality. Most party members seem to think that anyone and everyone can be persuaded to vote Liberal Democrat, so it's more important not to offend sceptics than it is to enthuse friends.

There is no evidence to justify this view. Over half of the electorate would never vote for the Liberal Democrats under any circumstances. It's the same for

every other party. Nowadays, no party can ever win more than about 40% of the vote.

If the Liberal Democrats were regularly polling over 30%, there would be a case for reaching out to more tentative voters. But they are polling only about 10%, so the need is to build and consolidate a base. The party should therefore focus its efforts on the minority of the electorate with the greatest sympathy for it. And as it turns out, the demographics of voters most likely to support the Liberal Democrats (younger, better educated, more cosmopolitan) are roughly in line with the sort of people most likely to be pro-European.

So it's good news that Clegg has at long last adopted a pro-European strategy, even though its success may be limited by the fact that it started only about six months before this May's Euro elections, and even though Clegg's performance in his two TV debates with Nigel Farage could have been better.

MOVING TARGET

But there's a catch. If you are going to focus your appeal on target demographic groups, you must do so not merely in terms of a dry exposition of your policies. You also need to understand the interests and emotions of these groups, and appeal to these too. Furthermore, you are aiming at a moving target, as voters become increasingly disillusioned with the political establishment and the economic system.

One rather extreme measure of this disillusionment was the sympathy Russell Brand won in his famous interview with Jeremy Paxman on BBC2's Newsnight (23 October 2013). Brand also set out his arguments in the *New Statesman* the day after the interview, in an article titled 'Russell Brand on revolution: We no longer have the luxury of tradition'.

It is easy to dismiss Brand's point of view. He argues that people should not participate in the political system but instead offers only a vague idea of a "utopian revolution" as an alternative, while justifying popular apathy in the meantime. Nevertheless, Brand has a point when he observes the extent to which politics has been taken over by a privileged elite that communicates in terms to which most people can no longer relate. Brand's arguments also explain why so many people under 35 are completely disillusioned with politics and never vote. This lack of participation actually makes things worse, since it enables politicians to ignore the needs of younger people and instead focus on the demands of the elderly middle classes. Even so, we need to understand the disillusionment and alienation that has led to this situation.

TV reporter Paul Mason, in a Channel 4 blog post ('Worlds collide as Russell Brand predicts a revolution', 24 October 2013), explained why younger people are

inspired by Brand:

“What Russell has picked up is that they hate, if not the concept of capitalism, then what it’s doing to them. They hate the corruption manifest in politics and the media; the rampant criminality of a global elite whose wealth nestles beyond taxation and accountability; the gross and growing inequality; and what it’s doing to their own lives.

“Russell’s audience get pay cheques, but their real spending power is falling. They don’t just need help to buy, they need help to pay the mortgage; help to get out of relationships that are collapsing under economic stress; help to pay the legal loan shark and meet the minimum credit card payment. Above all, they need help to understand what kind of good life capitalism is going to offer their generation. Because since Lehman Brothers that has not been obvious.”

The financial insecurity of the younger generation was also highlighted in Anthony Hilton’s column in the London Evening Standard (‘Sacrifice is needed to stop this slide into poorer times’, 18 December 2013):

“The Institute of Fiscal Studies published a forecast yesterday which suggested that people born in the 1960s and 1970s would be less well-off in retirement than those born 20 years before them.

“They will be in trouble, according to the IFS, because fewer will own their own homes, fewer will have good company pensions, and fewer will have accumulated significant amounts of private savings throughout their working lives. Unless they get a generous inheritance – and here the odds are stacked in their favour – they will be less well-off in old age.”

How can things have got worse? The Thatcher revolution, concludes Hilton, was not all it was cracked up to be.

Liberal Democrat blogger David Boyle also commented on the Brand-Paxman interview (‘Why Russell Brand isn’t completely wrong’, The Real Blog, 8 November 2013). He disagreed strongly with Brand’s argument that people shouldn’t vote. Nevertheless, he identified three reasons why Brand has a point about political disengagement: “the corrosion of political language”, in which conventional political language is no longer believed or listened to any more; “the hollowing out of political parties”, in which party membership has collapsed because parties no longer have anything to offer their members; and “there seems no purpose behind it all” because “modern politics seems so often to be defending indefensible and useless institutions or worn-out ideas, rather than imagining how things might be run more effectively.”

The situation is not entirely one of despair, however. In an earlier blog post (‘Why radical change is coming’, The Real Blog, 26 August 2013), David Boyle quoted from a speech he had just delivered at the Edinburgh Book Festival, in terms that were both revolutionary and optimistic:

“This is the calm before the storm. Given the poverty of the current political and economic arrangements – and our own understanding of the way things actually work – I believe that change is about to happen. If we

“The party should focus its efforts on the minority of the electorate with the greatest sympathy for it”

meet again here in five years’ time, there will be a different political spirit abroad. There will be a much greater focus on finding ways for our children and our children’s children to live meaningful, interesting, comfortable lives away from the tyranny of landlords and employers.”

David Boyle explained why it is not just the younger generation but also the older middle classes that will demand change:

“The middle classes are waking from their long dream, understanding that the economic destruction visited on the working classes is now in store for them – understanding the futures their children face: 25 years indentured servitude to their mortgage provider, in jobs they loathe, paying out such vast sums to tyrannical landlords in the interim that they can’t quite manage to bring up families of their own.

“What the middle classes want, they will eventually get. When they understand the dark future ahead – and the slow corrosion of UK life as our lives become unaffordable – they will create a political force capable of tackling it.

“Every generation or so, UK politics generates a radical shift. It did so in 1906, in 1940, in 1979. It is now 34 years since the last one and we are due another. It will happen sooner than we think.”

By this stage, you may be wondering why this article appears to have gone off at a tangent. It was meant to be about Liberal Democrat strategy for the Euro elections. What has the disillusionment of people with the economy got to do with this?

The answer is one of context. The people most likely to vote Liberal Democrat are also the sort of middle class people who David Boyle predicts are waking up to the danger of economic destruction. They will look for radical leadership, so the party must offer something radical to address their perceptions and needs. On European policy, the need for a context means arguing why the opportunities presented by the EU will help them through the economic crisis and create a more prosperous future.

The trouble is, Nick Clegg has reoriented the party around the prevailing orthodoxy of 1980s/90s economic ideology because he cannot imagine any alternative. If as a result he presents his policies in totally dry language or in terms of the appeasement of small-c conservative opinion, as he did in the recent TV debates on the Euro elections, he will fail to enthuse or mobilise more people.

It is not enough to be pro-European. If the Liberal Democrats are to mobilise significantly more pro-European votes than their 10% poll ratings, they must explain why their policies represent a radical approach to people’s problems rather than a safe establishment position. If Clegg hasn’t the balls to do that, expect support to remain stuck at 10% and a bad election result in May.

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