

REPORTS

The 2010 election in historical perspective

Conference fringe meeting, 19 September 2010, with Professor John Curtice, Professor Dennis Kavanagh and James Gurling. Chair: Tony Little.

Report by Dr Mark Pack

IT HAS become a Liberal Democrat History Group tradition at the first Liberal Democrat conference after each general election to hold a fringe meeting looking back on the results and placing them in historical perspective.

The historical context

Psephologist John Curtice from Strathclyde, a long-term Liberal Democrat watcher, started by asking Liberal Democrats in the audience to think back to the Friday after polling day, pointing out how few people's immediate reaction was that it was a great result for the party. He therefore went on to reverse the usual roles of party members talking up the party's position and outsiders talking it down by arguing instead that the general election result was, in historical perspective, highly impressive.

Not only had the party ended up in government for the first time since 1945, but it secured the second highest share of the vote for the party or its predecessors since 1923 and the second largest number of seats since 1929. Had expectations not been raised so high during the campaign, this would have been seen as a much more promising result than the immediate post-election reactions painted it.

The gap between the polls and the result

Looking at the gap between the campaign's opinion polls and the actual result, Curtice suggested that the explanation was that the poll surge after the first TV debate had been a brittle phenomenon, fuelled by the personal popularity of Nick Clegg,

which did not transfer strongly to other views of the party. The surge was dominated by people who were less likely to vote and more likely to change their minds. He also suggested that the weighting rules used by pollsters may have exaggerated the Liberal Democrat position in the polls, though even the raw data showed more Lib Dems than turned out to vote.

Finally, there was a body of voters who usually voted Labour and were not happy with their party in 2010, but in the end held their nose and voted for their traditional party. Despite these explanations, Curtice said that he thought they did not add up to the full story and further research would be needed to tell the full story.

As to why the Liberal Democrats went up in votes but down in seats, Curtice put this down to a large number of seats where incumbent MPs were standing down (6 of these 10 were lost), some fallout from the expenses scandal, the fading of the very positive circumstances of 2005 (particularly the Iraq war and its effect on Labour support in Muslim communities) and Labour's strength in Scotland. In addition, in six of the nine Labour seats which would have fallen to the Lib Dems on the national swing but did not, there had been a relatively low increase in unemployment. Economic and political geography combined in a way favourable to Labour.

John Curtice's look at the 2010 election concluded with a warning: beware of short-term surges in the campaign. Support is built up through the five years of the Parliament, especially as local campaigning and organisation

play a key role in winning or losing seats.

Lessons for the future

Turning to the future, Curtice said that he did not expect future TV debates to have anything like the same impact as they did in 2010. Lack of novelty in the future will probably see their audiences decline, and the advantage Clegg gained by getting the technique right whilst the others did not can only be won once.

As for future strategy, Curtice said the Liberal Democrat plan had always been a choice between realignment (usually of the left) – with the implication that the party is closer to one of the other two main parties – and equidistance. As he pointed out, the party's power does not depend to that great an extent on the number of seats it wins. Influence depends on having a hung parliament, and the appeal of the equidistance strategy is that to maximise that influence the Lib Dems have to be willing to do a deal with either of the other two main parties.

With the changing way in which first past the post works in the UK already having made hung parliaments more likely, Curtice did not see defeat in the AV referendum in May 2011 as necessarily dealing a large blow to the party's future influence – though, if introduced, AV would probably strengthen the Liberal Democrat position in Parliament. Either way, equidistance would give the party greater negotiating muscle than a strategy of realignment.

Under AV Curtice said he expected many non-Liberal Democrats who had voted tactically for the party to switch their first preference to the party of their real choice, reducing the number of first preferences the Lib Dems would win. In addition, being in coalition may deter Labour voters from listing the Liberal Democrats even as their second preference – though since in Scotland the Lib Dem coalition with Labour had not stopped many Tories still putting Lib Dems second Curtice did not expect this impact to be too large.

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The TV debates

Dennis Kavanagh, the co-author since February 1974 of the Nuffield series of general election studies, started by emphasising the impact of the TV debates. He pointed out that the parties had prepared for traditional election campaigns, with press conferences, major TV interviews, poster launches and so on. When it came to it, however, much of this went by the board because of the dominance of the TV debates. The idea of each party holding an early morning press conference each day died with this campaign.

For the TV debates, Kavanagh revealed that Clegg put in more preparation over longer periods than either Cameron or Brown, who relied more on expensive advisers from the US. Despite what has been said in public about the debates, based on his numerous interviews with senior campaign insiders, Kavanagh believed that Cameron and Osborne were pleased with their impact. Rather than being a problem for giving a profile to Nick Clegg, they benefited the Tories, in their eyes, by reducing the amount of attention paid to policy issues such as taxes and cuts. Kavanagh also pointed out how the instant polls cut the legs from under the post-debate spin doctoring.

Kavanagh did, though, question how real the debate surge was, pointing to how the other two main parties observed that their canvassing returns and other feedback did not pick it up.

Kavanagh went on to comment that, ironically, Cameron has been able to change the political landscape since the election because he failed to win it – comparing that with Blair’s inability to change the landscape after 1997 because he succeeded. Success does not always beget success.

As with Curtice, Kavanagh put some of the explanation as to why the Liberal Democrats did not do better in 2010 down to the conditions in 2005 having been so good. Since then the party had had three leaders in two years, with poll ratings below the 2005 election for nearly the entire Parliament.

Preparing for a hung parliament

One thing the party did get right was its preparation for a possible hung parliament. Clegg had a detailed plan, drawn up with Danny Alexander and others. By comparison, Labour had done almost no preparation and Oliver Letwin’s work for the Conservatives only started very late in the day. Helped by this superior preparation, Clegg kept his nerve during the negotiations and wisely made efforts to take the party with him during the talks.

One factor in favour of a Cameron / Clegg deal, Kavanagh argued, was that they are both of the same generation, part of the shift currently under way in British politics. Gordon Brown was old politics from a different age.

The people with Brown on the road during the election thought that Labour would win the most seats right until the end, and Brown was confident that he would be able to do a deal with the Liberal Democrats. He never considered the question of personal chemistry; it was always a huge blind spot of his, fostered by his failure to grasp the change of generation in the Liberal Democrat leadership from the likes of Menzies Campbell and Paddy Ashdown to Nick Clegg, Chris Huhne and others.

The changing nature of British politics

Looking to the future, Kavanagh suggested that a new political era is coming, with TV debates an established presence further personalising and presidentialising politics. This may be to long-term Liberal Democrat and Labour benefit, as it reduces the importance of money and the traditional Conservative advantage there.

Westminster has now joined Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in not having one-party majority government; there are now ten political parties exercising executive rule in the UK. Hung parliaments and assemblies are the norm – and in turn coalitions are likely to be the norm as the growth in strength of other parties and the decline in the

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number of marginal seats makes a single-party winner increasingly unlikely. The traditional idea of general elections being a simple choice between two parties, one of which then has a mandate to govern according to its manifesto, cannot survive in this new form of politics.

At the next election the Liberal Democrats will, for the first time, have to fight an election based on a judgement of what they have done. The ‘plague on all your houses’ vote, concluded Kavanagh, will no longer gravitate towards them.

The party’s post-election review

James Gurling, Chair of the Liberal Democrat Campaigns & Communications Committee, then talked about the review the party had carried out of the election campaign. He said that all three parties failed at the last election – Labour lost power, the Tories failed to win an overall majority and the Liberal Democrats lost seats and failed to increase the Parliamentary Party’s diversity.

He praised the TV debates for giving party leaders direct access to the public, presenting policies directly in their own words. A TV debate bounce for Clegg had been expected, as it would be his first major media exposure to the public, but in the end the bounce greatly exceeded expectations. That gave people huge enthusiasm and also – as it turned out – false hope.

This meant that the campaign plan was knocked off message, and at the grassroots it diverged from the party’s targeting strategy. Just 4,000 votes going the wrong way cost the party no less than ten seats, showing how close the result had been between losing and gaining. Lessons should be drawn from that about the importance of targeting for the party’s future.

The campaign’s other failure was that not all of the party’s policies survived the scrutiny of the campaign, particularly on immigration. This echoed a point made earlier by Kavanagh about the post-election private polling for the Liberal Democrats.

It showed that party policy on immigration and the 'you can't win' argument were the two main reasons for people not to support the Lib Dems; the talk about what Clegg would do in a hung parliament also turned out to be a negative for the party. In addition, the Liberal Democrats lacked a strong closing message in the last few days of the campaign and below-the-radar scare tactics from Labour in urban areas helped them hang on in many key seats.

James Gurling also agreed with Denis Kavanagh that the form of campaigning changed in 2010, with party election broadcasts largely forgotten during the campaign, being overshadowed by the TV debates. Posters too appear to be on the way out, helped by the rapid spoofing of posters online.

Furthermore, the days of simply sticking your message on a piece of paper and putting it through the letterbox are gone. Technology is moving campaigns on

from blanket leafleting. One example of a change he gave was the traditional Liberal Democrat handwritten letter. This used to be seen as a powerful way of direct, personal contact with voters. Now, compared with direct personalised online communication, it looks like just another blunt form of mass contact.

What was notable across all three contributions was how many of the issues they discussed will almost certainly feel like old history by the time of the next general

election. The formation of a coalition government is reshaping British politics in unpredictable ways. While the lessons from previous elections were often very applicable to the next, in 2010 that is much less likely to be the case.

Mark Pack ran the Liberal Democrat 2001 and 2005 internet general election campaign and is now Head of Digital at MHP Communications. He also co-edits Liberal Democrat Voice (www.LibDemVoice.org).

LIBERAL HISTORY QUIZ 2010

This year's Liberal history quiz attracted a record level of entries at the History Group's exhibition stand at the Liberal Democrat conference in Liverpool in September. The winner was Michael Mullaney, with an impressive 18½ marks out of 20; as Michael was last year's winner too, we may consider barring him from future contests! Below we reprint the questions – the answers are on page 36.

1. Who was voted the greatest-ever Liberal in the poll run by the Lib Dem History Group in 2007?
2. Who holds the record as the shortest-serving Liberal Prime Minister since the party was founded in 1859?
3. Which constituency did Liberal leader Jeremy Thorpe represent from 1959 to 1979?
4. Who, on being elected to Liverpool City Council in 1972 at the age of 21, became the youngest sitting councillor in Britain?
5. Who wrote the book *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, the classic study of the decline of Liberalism, first published in 1935?
6. On 26 July 1973, the Liberal Party won two by-elections from the Conservatives; in which constituencies?
7. Who served as President of the Liberal Democrats from 1998 to 2000?
8. The Liberal Democrat History Group has raised enough money to have a plaque installed on the building which is now the site of Willis's Rooms, where the Liberal Party was founded in 1859. Where is the building?
9. Who was elected Liberal MP for Finsbury Central in 1892, becoming the first non-white member of the House of Commons?
10. In which English city was William Ewart Gladstone born on 29 December 1809?
11. Who, as President of the Liberal Party in 1947–48, presented a copy of Milton's *Areopagitica* to his successor, inaugurating the tradition of handing on the book as a symbol of the office of President?
12. Who was the SDP/Alliance candidate in the Peckham by-election of 28 October 1982?
13. Who was Gladstone's Chancellor of the Exchequer in his short-lived administration of February–July 1886?
14. Who served as principal private secretary to David Lloyd George from 1923 to 1945?
15. Whose memoirs, published in 2009, were entitled *Free Radical*?
16. Who was President of the Liberal Party in 1986–87 and went on to be the party's Campaign Director during the 1987 general election?
17. Which historian and thinker was the MP for Carlisle 1859–65 and for Bridgnorth 1865–66?
18. What was the name of the SDP think tank founded in 1982 by Lord Young of Dartington and wound up after the merger of the SDP with the Liberal Party?
19. Which Liberal cabinet minister had his career ruined by the Crawford divorce scandal of 1885?
20. Who became the first ever female Liberal minister?