

# Catastrophe: the 2015 election campaign and its outcome

Evening meeting, 19 July 2015, with Phil Cowley and Olly

Grender; chair: William Wallace

Report by Neil Stockley

**T**HE GENERAL ELECTION of 7 May 2015 was a catastrophe for the Liberal Democrats. The party won just eight seats and a mere 7.9 per cent of the votes cast in the worst result for the Liberal Democrats or their predecessors since 1970. The party's hopes that strong constituency profiles and effective local campaigns would enable at least twenty-five MPs to hang on or that enough voters might show their gratitude for what the party had achieved under the coalition were dashed. As Phil Cowley, Professor of Parliamentary Government at the University of Nottingham, told the summer meeting, the dismal outcome meant that a generation's work of growing the party was undone.

He went on to place the result in its historical context, which was even more brutal. The Liberal Democrats' share of the vote crashed by 15.2 per cent compared to the 2010 result. Professor Cowley had to go all the way back to the Liberal debacles of 1918 and 1931 to find an occasion when a major party had suffered such a huge loss of support in a single general election. The Liberal Democrats held on to barely a third of their total vote in 2010, another feat that no major party had achieved since the Liberals' collapse in 1931. And, in holding on to just 14 per cent of their Commons seats, the Liberal Democrats performed worse than any major party in any election since 1832. A total of 341 Liberal Democrat candidates lost their deposits, more than in all the general elections between 1979 and 2010 put together. And, as he reminded us, the rules for losing deposits were made more generous in 1985.

Ever since the rise of the Labour Party, the Liberals and then the Alliance and the Liberal Democrats had been undisputed as the third party of British politics. Whether measured in terms of votes or seats, that was no longer the case, he said. Half of all Liberal Democrat candidates came fourth in their

contests and one in four ended up in fifth place. More finished sixth than won their seats. In four seats that the party won in 2010, they fell back to third place and one sitting Liberal Democrat MP suffered the ignominy of coming fourth. The party was only in second place in constituencies they had held until recently. And, over the previous five years, the party had suffered the loss of half its local government base and all but one of its seats in the European Parliament.

One possible explanation for the catastrophe was that the Liberal Democrat campaign, and particularly its messaging, had badly missed the mark. Perhaps, though, there were deeper, more fundamental drivers. Had the voters punished the party for what they had done when in government? Or for the very act of going into coalition with the Conservatives?

Phillip Cowley was in no doubt that the reasons should be traced right back to the party's decision in May 2010 to go into coalition with the Conservatives. The 2010 general election result left the Liberal Democrats facing the toughest of dilemmas. They could enter into coalition, or some other kind of power sharing deal with the Conservatives. Or they could attempt either with Labour. Or they could remain in opposition. All of these options had clear downsides. Professor Cowley described the Liberal Democrats' predicament as a *zugswang* – a German chess term used to describe a situation when the player has to move, but there is no positive outcome available: any move will leave them worse off. The skill when facing a *zugswang*, he said, was to find the least damaging move. The party made a hard-headed calculation to go into coalition with the Conservatives. But he was far from convinced that the Liberal Democrats took the option that was, or could ever be, 'the least bad' for them.

Professor Cowley cited the debacle over tuition fees, which was widely seen a totemic issue that

had done so much to destroy the voters' trust in the party. He put up a familiar argument: 'if only you'd have stopped them, everything would have been hunky dory and the party wouldn't be where it is now'. Then he tested a counterfactual. The Liberal Democrats could have dug in during the coalition negotiations and successfully blocked the rise in tuition fees. Still, he suggested, the Conservatives would surely have insisted on another big policy concession. There would have been 'another great betrayal' that placed a wedge between the party and a large number of its supporters. The Liberal Democrats could have united and voted down the Browne package in the Commons, thereby breaking the agreement. But in so doing, they would have wrecked the coalition and, possibly, triggered an early general election in which the party's fate would have been uncertain.

Professor Cowley's key point, though, was such an outcome 'surely would not have been as damaging as what eventually transpired in May 2015, however you add in the problems with the "what-ifs"'. This was also true, he argued, of any of the scenarios under which the Liberal Democrats left the coalition, at least until late 2014. The party could have left the coalition in May 2011, after its humiliation in the AV referendum, or following its disastrous showing in the European Parliament elections of May 2014. Or, had it not entered into coalition in 2010, there may well have been a second general election that year. Or, Nick Clegg could have resigned as leader in 2014. Under any of these scenarios, the voters may well have punished the Liberal Democrats, whenever the election came. Still, he was sure that the party would have ended up with more than the eight seats it eventually won. Moreover, he said, a general election before late 2014 would have taken place without the SNP surge that followed the Scottish Independence referendum, with all the damage that ended up doing to the party. Then Professor Cowley asked whether the Liberal Democrats' policy legacy from the coalition was really worth the electoral price that the party paid on 7 May 2015. The

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audience did not really take up this challenge. Perhaps feelings were still too raw a matter of weeks after the election.

In light of all that the party had been through during the coalition, Professor Cowley saw the campaign as of little importance to the Liberal Democrats' final showing. Nick Clegg's personal ratings had improved steadily over the four weeks before polling day, suggesting that the campaign may not have been quite as bad as many people think. Yet the Liberal Democrats now relied on a 'jet age campaign machine in a digital era'. He concluded that such factors made only a small difference in the end ('Your fate was sealed much earlier'). Professor Cowley pointed to a simple, brutal fact: after the party went into coalition, their poll ratings went on 'a long-term downward cycle', which carried on for the life of the 2010–15 parliament. The modest recovery that he and many others had expected did not eventuate.

The second speaker was Baroness Olly Grender, Paddy Ashdown's second-in-command on the 'Wheelhouse Group' that ran the Liberal Democrat general election campaign, who reached a very similar conclusion to Professor Cowley. She made a convincing case, if a little defensively at first, that both the party's campaign and the disastrous result had to be seen in the context of the crises of 2010–11. The tuition fees debacle and the arguments over coalition's health reforms left Olly and her colleagues with a very poor hand to play. Echoing Phillip Cowley's point about the *zugswang*, she recalled writing in 2010 that the Liberal Democrats had to choose between 'death by guillotine and death by a thousand cuts'.

As Baroness Grender spoke, the sheer impossibility of the task facing the party's campaign became ever more apparent. The problems were huge and intractable. The first was the power of national issues. The party's internal polling showed that if the party was seen to be faring poorly in the national contest, then its MPs would lose at local level, even if they were popular, a grim prophecy that was fulfilled. And, in key constituencies, voters were much more likely to base their choices on the 'national vote'

than the local candidate. Relying on local MPs and campaigns was always going to be a longshot.

Second, the party had been badly mistaken about how many, and which, seats could be saved. Professor Cowley suggested that, from the start, Liberal Democrat election strategists might have been tougher with sitting MPs who could not win, more ruthless about cutting people loose. After all, the party seemed to have a realistic chance in between twenty-six and thirty-one constituencies, a number that, we now know, shrank drastically as the campaign went on. Baroness Grender explained that the party could not afford tracking polls in its key constituencies once the 'short campaign' had started. As a result, she and her colleagues could not tell which (if any) candidates still had a prospect of winning as the campaign progressed. And she wondered whether a tougher approach to targeting, or having the accurate data would have made much difference, given how hard it was to persuade candidates and activists to give up on their own contests and campaign in those seats.

This led into the third challenge, which Baroness Grender termed 'activation'. More than ever, the Liberal Democrats relied on 'boots on the ground' in their key seats. It was hard enough already to persuade people to come out to canvass for the party. She pondered whether the Liberal Democrats' much-vaunted superiority in on-the-ground campaigning in key seats might well be 'a myth in our minds from a distant, remembered past'.

Fourth, the Liberal Democrats were outgunned and outspent. The Liberal Democrats spent around £3 million during the short campaign, compared to £30 million for the Conservatives. They could afford the latest voter identification and data management technologies. The Conservatives contacted 'floating' voters in marginal seats three times during postal vote week, with a simple message: they lived in one of the twenty-three seats that would decide whether Britain had stable government with David Cameron, or the alternative, chaos under a weak Labour government, led by Ed Miliband in thrall to the SNP.

The Liberal Democrats tried to counter by warning that unless the Liberal Democrats were part of any new government, Britain faced the prospect of being ruled by 'Blukip' – an alliance of the Conservatives, UKIP and the DUP. It didn't work. Baroness Grender opined that the 'Blukip' argument 'didn't have the ring of authenticity', and suggested that had they been able to afford tracking polls, the campaign strategists might have been able to understand why it had failed. The party was not wrong to discuss hung-parliament scenarios, given what the opinion polls and electoral projections were consistently saying. The possible explanations for the failure of the 'Blukip' message can be taken further, however. Perhaps the public saw the Conservatives and UKIP as mortal enemies and simply didn't believe that they could work together? Or, perhaps they did not believe that the Liberal Democrats could make a real difference? Or, perhaps most voters simply did not want to think about any new coalition scenarios?

Crucially, the failure of the party's campaign messages was more fundamental than its attempts to frame the choices on offer. As Baroness Grender explained, the Liberal Democrats could not sing their old tunes that they were the 'insurgents' on the side of the people against the 'establishment'. After five years in office, they were no longer credible as agents of change. Thus, she explained, the party promised to provide stability, and asked for a mandate and sufficient MPs to anchor the next government to the centre ground. Most voters saw themselves as being in the 'centre ground' of politics, but 'they didn't make the connection [with the Liberal Democrats] when they went into the polling booth.'

Baroness Grender argued that the party's campaign was overwhelmed by voters' fears of a Labour government led by Ed Miliband but reliant on the SNP to stay in power. The basis of such fears, Olly stressed, was about competence much more than policy. 'Middle England' voters were deeply worried that the SNP would wag the 'weak' Labour dog. She went on to speculate that voters in Tory-facing seats may have felt more positive about voting Liberal Democrat had the national opinion

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polls pointed to an outright Conservative victory. Perhaps, she suggested, the fate of the Liberal Democrats ultimately hinges on who ‘middle England’ trusts or fears the most? The party’s successes in 1997, 2001 and even 2005, when Tony Blair made voting Labour look like a risk-free option, seem to bear this out. Her comments, some of the most insightful of the evening, highlighted an inherent weakness in the Liberal Democrats strategic position, which as the third – and now, the fourth, party – they will need to address.

Baroness Grender also suggested that the party’s failure to rule out any kind of post-election deal with Labour may have added to its burdens. Professor Cowley agreed, such a statement from Nick Clegg may well have rescued some MPs, especially in the south west of England. But he added that it would surely have caused a catastrophic split within the party, given that many members had no wish to enter a new coalition with the Conservatives. Here, the party faced yet another zugswang.

Liberal Democrat peers, candidates and activists then added some more depth and colour to the grim picture. Following the speakers’ lead, the discussion focused on the party’s approach to coalition, rather than the campaign, as the cause of catastrophe. A long-serving party member argued that, in failing to keep their election pledges on tuition fees, the Liberal Democrats had lost the trust and respect of voters. In other words, the broken promise, rather than the merits of policy itself, may have angered the public more than Professor Cowley had suggested. A London candidate recalled how the party’s role in decisions like the ‘bedroom tax’ had eaten away at the morale of its campaigners. ‘I stopped listening to my own party,’ complained another member. Sentiments such as these may partly explain the lack of ‘boots on the ground’ that Baroness Grender had seen in many key seats.

‘We kept talking about the coalition, not about ourselves,’ recalled one member. ‘We looked just the same [as the Conservatives],’ lamented another. ‘The party wasn’t seen as standing for anything,’ complained Lord Greaves.

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There were strong criticisms of how the party had approached the presentation of coalition, most notably Nick Clegg’s appearance in the Downing Street Rose Garden with David Cameron in the hours after the new government was formed in May 2010. There was some truth in all of the criticisms. What I was really hearing, though, was different accounts of how the Liberal Democrat brand, as honest and reasonable players, committed to ‘fairness’, had been destroyed after 2010. Yet the party had not built a new, popular identity that was distinctive from that of the coalition.

The Liberal Democrats’ solution, in the second half of the parliament, was to try to gain more credit with the public for their achievements in government. This was a reasonable gambit. Professor Cowley was clear that most voters did not hate the Liberal Democrats; they acknowledged that party had achieved some important policy victories. (He also reminded us that, by the end of the ‘short’ campaign, Nick Clegg’s personal popularity was similar to that of David Cameron and Ed Miliband.) Baroness Grender added that voters in target seats reacted well when the party talked about its achievements and its plans for the future. She recounted how the party’s failure over five years to receive the credit that it deserved for its many initiatives and achievements ‘drove me crazy’. There were some important victories, she stressed, such as the shift in fiscal policy in the 2012 budget. Olly put this down to Nick Clegg’s and Danny Alexander’s preparedness to take risks and start a row with the Conservatives. ‘It’s a shame we didn’t have more of those moments,’ she mused. But George Osborne and his colleagues learned when to concede on key issues and deprive the Liberal Democrats of victories.

Baroness Grender went on to discuss another massive obstacle that the Liberal Democrats had to face when in government. Whitehall and its various communications channels were based on having a single-party government; the Conservatives as the senior partner in the coalition always had more power, and as a result, held much more sway with the media and the public. The Liberal

Democrats were not hated; they were seen as being irrelevant. And, much to her chagrin, some of the party’s ministers had ‘disappeared into their departments’.

So, if the Liberal Democrats go into coalition again, how can they be both perceived as relevant and popular? Baroness Grender contended that, in order to ‘prove its worth’, the minority party in a coalition government needed to have ‘a disproportionate and vast level of propaganda’. Also, she said, parliament had to change, in order to recognise that there were two parties in office. There were also suggestions that, in a future power-sharing arrangement, the party should not have to ‘own’ all of the government’s decisions, and that the rules of collective responsibility might be altered, to give it a more independent voice.

I was not convinced by any of this. The Liberal Democrats should be proud of what they achieved. But they shouldn’t expect the electorate to be excited by all of their record, in some cases years after the policies were carried out. Second, both parties in a coalition would need to agree to any radical change in the constitutional conventions, which seems a tall order. Third, there is no guarantee it would work to the junior partner’s advantage. In New Zealand, another Westminster democracy, two decades of multi-party governments under a proportional voting system has led to some weakening of the doctrine of collective responsibility. Yet the electorate has cast the supporting parties in successive administrations aside. It seems that voters can perceive ‘the government’ only as the party of the prime minister and chancellor.

After hearing Professor Cowley’s figures and the ensuing discussion, the party’s future did not seem bright. The historian Lord Morgan once suggested that, just as Lloyd George coalition of 1918 ended the Liberals’ role as a party of government and the National Government of 1931 ended their role as a party of opposition, the 2010–15 coalition may have finished them as a third party. That may sound drastic, but Professor Cowley pointed to ‘the existential threats’ of a more competitive political market, where UKIP, the Greens and SNP have all pitched their tents in

different places. The new electoral boundaries for the Commons could put most of the remaining Liberal Democrat seats at risk in 2020.

I believe that, despite all these challenges, the Liberal Democrats can survive and prosper once more. Recovery and resurgence will take some time and the experiences of what now seems like the party's electoral heyday under Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy are unlikely to be repeated. If they are carve out a distinctive niche and grow again, the Liberal Democrats

will need to be clearer than before about 'where they stand,' their ideas and policies, particularly in the economic area, which is of most concern to the electorate. And their strategic positioning and approach to coalition will need to be rethought, starting with the basic question, 'what are we trying to achieve?'

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at odds with the more subjective measures of prime ministers, mainly by academics. Five of the six studies cited put Lloyd George (whose chapter is written by Labour peer Lord Morgan) as the leading Liberal prime minister, and the sixth has him in third place, pipped by Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith. I suspect that those assessments give due weight not just to Lloyd George's central role in the social reform of the 1905–15 government, but also as war leader. John Grigg has argued, persuasively in my view, that Lloyd George saved Britain from the real prospect of defeat in 1916. Those who criticise Lloyd George for splitting the party fail to take account of Asquith's refusal of the Lord Chancellorship or of the then still-fresh Victorian tradition of rival leaders serving in each other's cabinets.

Successful war leadership in an existential conflict like the First World War, closely followed by real legislative achievement, are surely trump cards in any historical assessment of a leader. For this reason alone, this book is unbalanced because of the decline of the Liberal Party after the First World War. Until the 2010 coalition, Liberal leaders had scant opportunity

# REVIEWS

## Leading the Liberals

Duncan Brack, Robert Ingham and Tony Little (eds), *British Liberal Leaders: Leaders of the Liberal Party, SDP and Liberal Democrats since 1828* (Biteback Publishing, 2015)

Reviewed by **Chris Huhne**

ROY JENKINS ONCE discussed whether Gladstone or Churchill was the greatest prime minister, and this book is in the same comparative tradition. Leadership matters, and it usually matters a lot. The book will be important reading for those interested in leadership and Liberal history.

The first part is a discussion of leadership qualities, and an attempt to rank Liberal leaders. The second part is a series of potted biographies, particularly useful for those leaders who do not merit full-scale book treatment. Some are very good, notably David Howarth's treatment of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. The third part is a series of interviews with living leaders – David Steel, Paddy Ashdown, Nick Clegg.

Charles Clarke's interesting chapter assembles electoral data to rank Liberal leaders by their electoral success (in share of the vote, and number of seats). The winner? Campbell-Bannerman, who won the 1906 general election and had

the good fortune – at least from the point of view of league tables – to die in Downing Street before his party was tested again at the polls. Sir Henry piled on 222 seats and 3.7 per cent of the vote between becoming leader and giving up leadership.

In the post-war period too, the numbers game is flawed. Paddy Ashdown emerges (probably rightly) as the most successful leader. However, it is not because of the crude increase in the number of seats during his tenure (plus 24) but more because of his rescue of the party from nowhere. The game is slightly given away by the cumulative fall in the share of the vote of 5.8 per cent under Paddy. Indeed, there was even a fall in the vote share between 1992 and 1997. Paddy won seats because the party's then main rival in key marginals – the Conservative Party – was falling faster than the Liberal Democrats and because of Chris Rennard's careful targeting.

Clarke points out that these assessments of numbers are wholly

