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Report

Election 2017 – A Missed Opportunity?

Evening meeting, 5 February 2018, with James Gurling and Professor Phil Cowley; chair: Baroness Olly Grender.

Report by Neil Stockley

THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS entered the 2017 general election campaign with high hopes. They had left behind the grim years of coalition and now, as the only major UK-wide party unequivocally to oppose Brexit, the party had a defining issue and the basis of a distinctive appeal to 'the 48 per cent' who had voted at the June 2016 referendum to remain in the European Union. With the Labour Party bitterly divided under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, the snap election seemed to present the Liberal Democrats with new opportunities.

But the results were a huge disappointment. The party won 7.4 per cent of the votes cast, a drop of 0.5 per cent from two years earlier and the lowest share for the Liberal Democrats or their predecessors since 1959. Twelve Liberal Democrat MPs were returned, representing a net

gain of just four seats compared to the previous general election.

Professor Phil Cowley of Queen Mary, University of London explained the full extent of the party's failure. If the 2015 general election was a catastrophe for the Liberal Democrats, he told the meeting, then 2017 was 'catastrophe-plus'. The party suffered a decline in its share of the vote in all parts of England, except for London, where it rose by 1 per cent, and the south east, where it was up 0.8 per cent. In Wales, the party won no seats for the first time since the formation of the Liberal Party. In Scotland, the Liberal Democrat vote was down 0.8 per cent, although the party made a net gain of three seats. A total of 375 Liberal Democrat candidates lost their deposits, well up on the historic figure of 341 at the previous contest.

Professor Cowley reported that there was a 'single magic number of four' to the party's showing: just four constituencies elected Liberal Democrat MPs at both the 2015 and 2017 general elections, which demonstrated that the dream of a resilient 'core liberal vote' was even more elusive than ever. The party's electoral base had changed significantly since its heyday under Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy, he said, and was now more focused on university graduates and the south east of England.

The meeting discussed why the party's hopes had been dashed so badly. James Gurling, chair of the Liberal Democrats' Federal Campaigns and Elections Committee, concentrated on the immense organisational and tactical challenges the party had faced during the campaign. James recalled how, unlike

many party colleagues, he had always doubted that the party would be able to marshal 'the 48 per cent' who had voted Remain to support the Liberal Democrats in seats that the party could win. Weaknesses in the Liberal Democrats' ability to run successful local campaigns had become apparent by 2010, he said. During the coalition years, its activist base had been hollowed out, leaving the party badly exposed for the 2015 contest. But the subsequent two years in opposition still had not 'cleansed the system', James argued, and the EU referendum had failed to 'reset' the Liberal Democrats' fortunes in the way that many people had expected.

James told the story of the Liberal Democrat campaign in some detail. In the second half of 2016, there were signs that the party was recovering, albeit slowly. The Liberal Democrats had made a strong showing at the Witney by-election of October 2016, which was followed two months later by Sarah Olney's victory at the Richmond Park by-election. From then on, James suggested, fate had not been kind to the party. A by-election in the Labour stronghold of Manchester Gorton had been scheduled for 4 May, and the Liberal Democrats' canvass returns were encouraging. But when the snap general election was called, the poll had to be cancelled, depriving the party of a chance to gain more momentum and credibility.

James recalled how he stood in 'silent horror' when Theresa May moved to call the snap election because 'we were unready' for a national contest. Some important elements of the campaign were in place. Candidates had been selected for the target seats and the manifesto was mostly 'ready to go'. But the party had concentrated its resources on the by-elections and, as a result, it entered the general election campaign without any opinion survey results from key constituencies or research to test its key messages.

James explained how the timing of the snap election had other consequences for the Liberal Democrats. First, it badly weakened the party's ability to communicate to voters in key seats that Labour had voted with the Conservatives to trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, giving two years' notice of the UK's intention to quit the European Union. Second, in the target seats, the early election diverted media and public attention from local issues and on to the national scene. Sections of the media

then reframed the election as a rerun of the July 2016 referendum, which was to prove fatal in areas such as Cornwall, where the party had performed strongly in the past, but where most people had voted Leave. Third, the calling of the snap election blunted the impact of the party's campaigns for the May local elections. The Liberal Democrats had polled well in local by-elections for some months and, although the party won 18 per cent of the national vote on 3 May, it was unable to capitalise on this respectable showing.

Then, James said, Tim Farron 'became unstuck with a disconnect between his personal faith and his responsibility to uphold party policy' on the issue of same-sex marriage. James chose his words carefully, but later acknowledged that it had eclipsed the party's more positive messages.

Despite these handicaps, he argued, the Liberal Democrats began to assemble an effective campaign. They had a positive and coherent message, presenting an alternative to the 'heartless' Conservatives and Jeremy Corbyn's 'divided, pro-Brexit' Labour Party; offering to 'give people a final say' on any Brexit deal, and promising better funding for hospitals and schools. He gave Farron credit for sticking to a clear position on Europe, with the promise of a new referendum on the final Brexit deal, in the face of a lot of internal arguments. The Liberal Democrats headed off the other parties' attacks by pledging to enter into no coalitions, pacts or deals with any other party. In his foreword to the party's manifesto, Farron opined that the Conservatives were set to win a majority, an unusual move designed to make it easier for voters in target seats to support their local Liberal Democrat candidates.

Some former special advisers and party staff returned temporarily to HQ to bolster its reduced campaigning resources and experience. The campaign saw innovations in the use of social media, helped massively by experts from Canada's Liberal Party, and in the Party Election Broadcasts. The leader's national tour was well organised and effective. Manifesto pledges were 'dripped out' successfully in advance of the formal launch and some attacks on the Conservatives, most notably over their proposed 'dementia tax', hit home. But James conceded that the campaign missed opportunities to 'land a decisive blow' on Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party, who were able to avoid taking a

clear position on Brexit and thereby keep inside voters from both sides of the issue. They were also able to cleverly exploit the issue of tuition fees.

The pattern of plans frustrated and opportunities lost kept repeating itself. James and his colleagues intended to highlight a positive 'message of the day', a gambit that had generally worked well in many previous campaigns, because broadcasters were obliged to cover the parties' activities, using a weighted formula. In 2017, new Ofcom regulations on election coverage, which worked on a programme-by-programme basis, gave broadcasters more editorial discretion on which of the parties' activities should be reported. This, and the removal of the previous requirement on broadcasters to 'inform and educate' viewers and listeners, meant that the Liberal Democrats suffered. With few MPs and no local momentum from the local election campaign, 'we were left out of the big media stories,' James recalled. The party lodged a complaint with the BBC about the lack of coverage, but, by the time it reached the director general, the whole media was focused on reporting the terror attacks in London and Manchester, which, understandably, had an ongoing impact on the way the entire general election campaign was reported.

Yet it was the party's own lack of resources that appeared to cause James the most frustration. He explained that in the target seats, especially those that had voted Remain, the Liberal Democrats tried to match the intensity of the Conservatives' efforts in 2015. These local efforts were always important, because the party could not match the much better funded Conservative and Labour campaigns at national level. Around fifty seats were in play, but the party could afford to campaign effectively in only thirty and by mid-campaign, he said, even this number had to be scaled back.

Professor Cowley acknowledged that the Liberal Democrats 'did a lot right' with their campaign, including having the manifesto ready early on, with candidates, including former MPs, selected in key seats, membership at record levels and, with the promise of a new referendum on Brexit, a distinctive issue. Like James, he always doubted that all of 'the 48 per cent' would base their vote, let alone switch to the Liberal Democrats, on the issue of EU membership, but pre-election polls suggested that around 25 per cent of voters may have at least

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considered it. The dramatic improvement in the party's electoral fortunes after the June 2016 referendum suggested that the decision to concentrate on Brexit was understandable and correct. The Liberal Democrat campaign's high command seemed united and coherent, whereas Labour and the Conservatives both had two parallel, conflicting teams in charge of their campaigns.

So, what went wrong for the Liberal Democrats? Professor Cowley was clear that the context of the election could hardly have been more difficult for the party. The electorate was more polarised than for many years: 85 per cent of voters opted for either of the two major parties. Jeremy Corbyn's party enjoyed the biggest increase in its vote at any general election since 1945 and the Conservatives also had a historic, if less-noticed achievement: the largest increase in support for a governing party since 1832. These shifts left the Liberal Democrats, along with UKIP and Plaid Cymru, caught in a huge electoral pincer movement.

Professor Cowley also agreed with James that the party had been squeezed out of broadcast media coverage. He argued, however, that at the very time that the Liberal Democrats needed an effective campaign that 'cut through' to voters, they committed two basic errors.

First, at the very start of the campaign, Tim Farron had taken 'an illiberal position' on homosexuality and same-sex marriage in an interview with Channel Four News. 'This was not sustainable for a liberal party,' he said, and had all but curtailed the Liberal Democrats' ability to project any other messages to the electorate. The party's own focus groups showed that Farron's stance on 'gay sex' was the only thing voters recognised from the Liberal Democrat campaign. Professor Cowley reminded the meeting that Tim Farron's views on homosexuality had come under scrutiny before, including during the party leadership election in 2015. The tough questions the Liberal Democrat leader faced from the very start of the campaign had hardly 'come out of the blue', he maintained, and the party could and should have anticipated them.

Second, whilst the Liberal Democrats had pledged not to enter government, they produced a comprehensive manifesto, full of detailed policies, almost none of which proved especially attractive to the voters. He cited a YouGov poll that tested the popularity of the main UK parties' key manifesto pledges.

Only one, a promise to increase NHS funding, came from the Liberal Democrat manifesto.

The promise of a new referendum on Brexit, by contrast, was well down the list of popular policies. Professor Cowley underlined how Brexit had not proved a vote-winning, 'turf issue' for the party when he pointed out that in the constituencies where the Remain vote was above 55 per cent at the EU referendum, the Liberal Democrat share of the vote had increased by an average of just 0.9 per cent. In those where between 45 and 55 per cent had voted Remain, the Liberal Democrat share was down by an average of 0.6 per cent. In those seats with a Remain vote below 45 per cent, the party was down by an average of just over 1 per cent. (In contrast, the Liberal Democrat vote went up by an average of 1.7 per cent in constituencies where a third or more of voters were graduates.) Earlier, James had suggested that the party's stance on Brexit had been 'too complicated' and too focused on process.

The party's approach to Brexit was a major point of interest when the meeting discussed how the Liberal Democrats might have run a better campaign. It soon became clear how limited were the options available to the party. One member of the audience suggested that the party should have committed to a straightforward 'exit from Brexit' rather than a referendum on the final deal. James Gurling agreed that such a stance would have been more comprehensible and that the party should have linked more clearly the process for 'giving people a say' to its desired outcome on Brexit. Professor Cowley replied that the problem was not so much the Liberal Democrats' precise position on Brexit, but the skillful way in which the Labour Party had straddled the issue to the satisfaction of both the 'remainers' and 'leavers' whose support it needed. He was sure that the situation would have been no different had the Liberal Democrats taken a more definitive position. He also reminded the meeting that a more 'straightforward' stance would also have been problematic for the party, given that a large minority of Liberal Democrat supporters voted Leave in the referendum.

Similarly, Professor Cowley gave short shrift to suggestions that the party could have expressly rejected the outcome of the referendum, and promised to remain in the European Union, given that it had previously promised voters an 'in-out' referendum on membership.

In considering 'what might have been', Professor Cowley pointed out, quite correctly, that the results could very easily have been much worse for the Liberal Democrats. Some pre-election forecasts suggested they would win a mere three seats and at one stage of the campaign, the Conservatives' modelling suggested that a single Liberal Democrat MP would be returned. He suggested that not much separated the 'catastrophe-plus' from a less disappointing result. After all, the party failed to win four more seats by a combined total of just 350 votes. And the immediate aftermath of polling day could have been much more problematic. Had the Labour Party performed only marginally better in a few dozen seats, Tim Farron and his colleagues would have been forced to decide whether Theresa May or Jeremy Corbyn would occupy Number 10.

Members of the audience offered some alternative histories of their own. Lord Rennard opined that the 2017 general election was a 'lucky break' for the Liberal Democrats, compared to what might have happened had the contest not taken place until 2020. For instance, five former Liberal Democrat MPs contested their old seats, three of them successfully, but may not have been available had the 2015 parliament been allowed to run its full term. A 2020 general election would have been fought on new constituency boundaries, which would have been very challenging for the party. Given that all Liberal Democrat leaders have found their early years in the role the most challenging, Tim Farron, like his predecessors, may eventually have established himself and learned how to handle the difficult media interviews. James replied that from his position, it was very hard to see the results as a lucky break!

Looking to the future, Professor Cowley offered one crumb of comfort. He cautioned the audience against believing simplistic notions that 'two party politics were back'. The multi-party electoral contests in Scotland disproved such claims, he maintained, and the class-based voting alignments that underlay the two-party system of the 1950s and 1960s were now gone. Professor Cowley was sure that future elections would be marked by voter volatility rather than any solidity.

But he had a grim warning too. As Professor Cowley spoke, seven months after the general election, the Liberal

Democrats had still failed to break through in the opinion polls. (At the time of writing, they still have not.) This suggested that the party faced challenges that were bigger and more fundamental

than anything relating to the campaign it ran for the 2017 general election.

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Reviews

A truly remarkable man – but not a universal man

Richard Davenport-Hines, *Universal Man: The Seven Lives of John Maynard Keynes* (William Collins, 2015)

Review by **Ed Randall**

KEYNES LIVED A truly exciting and eventful life; one that had a huge impact on his fellow human beings, not just those who were part of his immediate and extensive social circle (many of whom he knew intimately), but vast numbers of people he could never have known personally. This book does more to convey that excitement and eventfulness to a general readership than any other I have read about John Maynard Keynes. No doubt that is because Richard Davenport-Hines did not set out to write another intellectual biography of Keynes.

If Davenport-Hines had wanted to enter that market he would (as he clearly appreciates) have found a crowded field, populated with works by genuine authorities on economic ideas. Not least, he would have entered a field dominated by Robert Skidelsky's magisterial, three-volume account of Keynes' life. Skidelsky offers unmatched intellectual insights to readers who want help making sense of Keynes' very active and extraordinary participation in – as well as commentary on – the world-shattering events of the first half of the twentieth century. Skidelsky also happens to have been especially well equipped, when the opportunity arose, to make the most of an unprecedented opportunity (in his *Return of the Master* (Allen Lane, 2009)), to extol and celebrate the economic thought of his hero. Keynes may have been dethroned by many in the Economics profession from his lofty position as father of macroeconomics, but he appeared, after

the Crash of 2008, to have been restored to a place atop an Economics Olympus.

Davenport-Hines' mission, in *Universal Man*, was to share his sense and appreciation of a life lived to the full and more often than not for a greater good. For Keynes, his academic discipline of Economics was never the most important thing. Regarded by some as a kind of intellectual Hercules, Keynes himself anticipated a time when Economics would be a subject for technicians and specialists; they might make a worthwhile but necessarily modest contribution to humanity. In his essay *Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren*, published in the shadow of the Great Crash of 1929, Keynes wrote:

... do not let us overestimate the importance of the economic problem, or sacrifice to its supposed necessities other matters of greater and more permanent significance. It should be a matter for specialists ... If economists could manage to get themselves thought of as humble, competent people, on a level with dentists, that would be splendid!

So Davenport-Hines (who quotes Keynes' statement about the limitations of economic ideas and economists) sets out to convince his readers that Keynes' joie de vivre, and his engagement with his own and other people's humanity, had much less to do with the development of economic theory than it did with the huge pleasure he derived from his activities: as a benefactor, what

Davenport-Hines refers to as an *altruist*; as a man – especially young man – of curiosity, what Davenport-Hines calls a *boy-prodigy*; as a public official or civil servant, an *official*; as a *public man* (or what we nowadays often refer to as a public intellectual); as a *lover*; as a *connoisseur*; and, last, but by no means least, as an *envoy* – an able person committed to representing the culture to which they belong to the very best of their ability.

Let us start, as Davenport-Hines does, with the benefactor and philanthropist – a man who could have made and kept a huge private fortune. Keynes certainly made fortunes (and on occasion lost them), but he inevitably invested a great part of the money he made into the things he loved so that they would benefit others. That included the Cambridge Arts Theatre, to which Keynes lent a prodigious sum. But, more important still, he gave the theatre, and many other projects, his time and energy. In 1934, Davenport-Hines records, Keynes made 'eight speeches altogether' (in one day, in support of the Cambridge Theatre scheme). Keynes himself believed '... they must have got tired of me! But the scheme went through.' Giving his time and energy to the things he believed in – whether a theatre project, Kings College (Cambridge), or representing his nation in the US at the close of the Second World War – was the hallmark of a man willing to commit vastly more than his money to the things he loved and believed in.

Keynes' curiosity, as a young man, was not just expressed in his intellectual

