

Coalition

Matt Cole examines the effects of participation in government on twelve constituency campaigns during the 2015 general election.

Liberalism in Power: Watching the Titanic

The Conservative party desire to kill us, the Labour party desire to eat us, and, if we do not take care, there will be nothing left of us.

Captain F. E. Guest MP, 21 January 1924

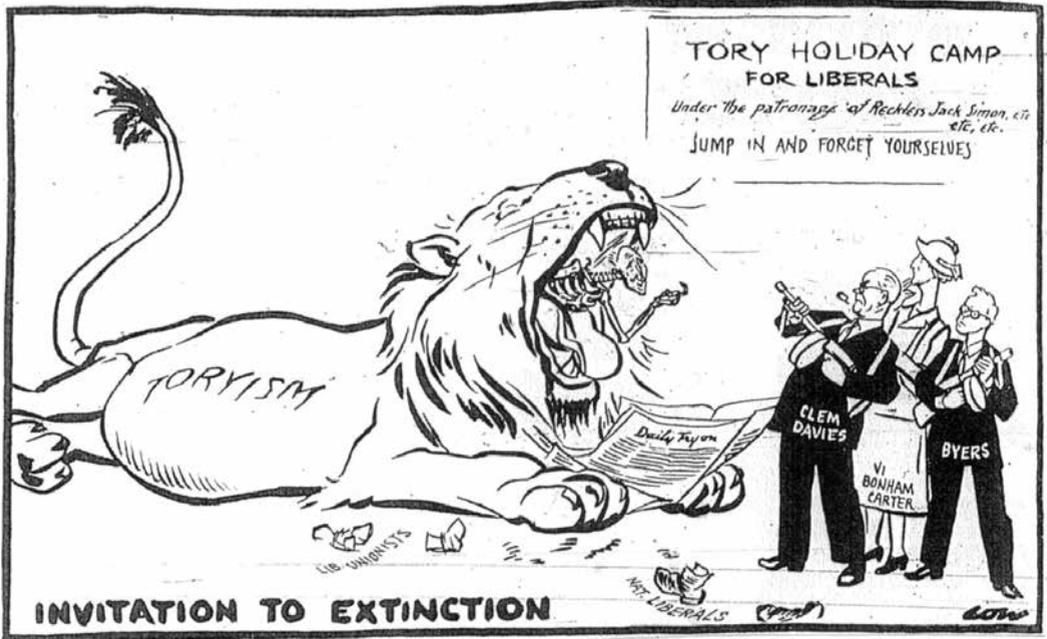
WHEN THE LIBERAL Democrats went into coalition with the Conservatives in 2010, the historical precedents were as plentiful as they were pessimistic. Arrangements with other parties to share in government, as the examples above illustrate, are the corollary of the pluralistic politics of Liberalism, but at the same time jeopardise the party's identity and even its existence by entering into an unequal relationship with an ultimately hostile partner. This was the dilemma of the Liberal Democrat MPs after 2010, and its challenges were every bit as severe as the historical precedents suggested. With the approach of the election following the coalition, the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust supported a study of the costs and benefits to Liberalism, its aims and identity, of the arrangement. The electoral consequences are only too obvious; but a decade later, following another dramatic general election contest, it is worth Liberal Democrats reflecting on the experience of working with either of the major parties. Some of the benefits were more real than visible; yet the dangers were entirely predictable and sometimes avoidable. The following is the text of that

report: *Liberalism in Power: a report for the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust.*

The findings of *Liberalism in Power* are based on monitoring of twelve constituencies held by the Liberal Democrats during the 2010–15 parliament, in the context of the 2015 general election campaign. The twelve constituencies were chosen to include a balanced range of situations by length of incumbency, location, size of majority in 2010 and challenger party. At each constituency interviews were held with the campaign organiser and team as well as, in ten of the twelve, the MP.

Ten campaign teams were interviewed both before and after the election, and two either before or after, at least one of these meetings in each case being conducted *in situ*. All but one of the pre-election interviews were completed in November 2014; the post-election interviews were completed in May 2015. The aims of these visits and interviews were to ascertain:

- Fluctuations in levels of electoral support and membership under the coalition;
- Reasons for these changes, noting perceptions of what Liberal Democrats stand for;
- Strategies used in these constituencies to maximise the benefits to Liberalism, and minimise the liabilities, of coalition;
- Effect of the short campaign upon those fortunes, and lessons to be learned from it.



Top: *Evening Standard*, 1 December 1949

Bottom: *The Guardian*, 13 May 2010

A brief interview was also conducted in October 2014 with the chief executive of the Liberal Democrats to confirm approval of the project, and another with the party president in July 2015. Consideration has also been given to public comment by party figures in the autumn of 2015 and academic analysis published then and in the New Year. These offer useful context, but this report is primarily an account of campaigning on the ground in a representative sample of Liberal Democrat-held seats. The focus of the report is also qualitative rather than quantitative; it is the effect of coalition on party values.

Summary of findings

- No MP or campaigner expressed dissent at the decision to join the coalition, and many regarded it as a brave and virtuous decision; all campaign teams sought to use Liberal achievements in office in their campaigns, though these differed by audience.
- The Liberal Democrat election campaign at national level was widely criticised for its negativity and lack of focus on Liberal values. Its images and themes failed to integrate into campaigning in the seats visited, and in many cases the campaign organisation was considered to suffer from overbearing management.
- Votes were lost to Labour because of the damage to the Liberal Democrats' reputation for attachment to social justice caused by the conduct of the coalition. Some of this damage was considered by some MPs to have been avoidable.
- Votes were lost to the Conservatives because of a combination of scare tactics, particularly late in the campaign, and colossal spending in their target seats. The first of these factors was made more significant by the damage to Liberal identity indicated above; the second highlights deficiencies in electoral law regarding party

expenditure which the Trust may wish to consider at greater length.

- Liberal Democrat constituency campaigns showed many traditionally successful and distinctively Liberal features, but these, incumbency and municipal representation were of unprecedentedly limited effectiveness in protecting the MPs monitored.

Trapped in the Rose Garden: the 'Betrayal' problem

It was widely acknowledged that a proportion of 2010 Liberal Democrat voters regarded participation in coalition with the Conservatives, or specific decisions which it came to entail, as a betrayal of the party's values and commitments it had made. This perception cost votes, and some members, who migrated to Labour, the Greens, or into abeyance. These votes were lost to Labour candidates who beat Liberal Democrat MPs and to third-placed Labour candidates who had no hope of winning but refused tactical support given in the past. All interviewees acknowledged that this problem was to some extent unavoidable; all recognised points at which its impact could have been diminished with better strategy and management by the party. Considerable difference existed amongst MPs and activists over the balance between these two observations.

Some interviewees took the view that this syndrome was inevitable as soon as the coalition was agreed: one MP argued that the 2015 results could have been predicted 'on the Tuesday after the 2010 election, when the Parliamentary Party agreed to go into coalition.' This was the fatalistic message embedded in the party leader's rebuke to the left in his resignation speech, and by the Liberal Democrats' election strategist who concluded that 'it is probably not possible to succeed electorally in coalition government under first-past-the-post while remaining equidistant from the

two big parties.¹ It is also reflected in the subsequent analysis of some academic observers: Philip Cowley characterised the Liberal Democrats' position as one of *zugswang* (the position in chess in which any move results in a loss).²

Certainly, the organisers and MPs in Labour-facing seats were more ready to concede likely defeat in November than their Conservative-facing counterparts, and municipal results usually gave them good reason for anxiety. But even the MP who claimed to have foreseen defeat in May 2010 agreed that no one had foreseen its scale or scope. This had been determined by a number of policy decisions which had – partly unnecessarily – merged the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives too closely in the public mind. These included the trebling of tuition fees; the 'Bedroom Tax' (though certain MPs rejected this as a factor); and association with the austerity programme more generally. The central controversy of the break of the pledge on tuition fees was recognised by all as a mistake, but in different ways:

- Some (including the party leader) saw the pledge itself as a mistake, often blaming a small number of party figures for imposing it on colleagues some time before the election under pressure from the Labour-sympathetic leadership of the NUS, who used the episode cynically (as these Lib Dems claimed) against the party after the election;
- Some thought the presentation, including the title and political marketing, of the new student finance scheme – effectively a limited graduate tax – was badly conducted;
- Some thought the decision to enter this into the coalition agreement, and then to support it when the agreement did not require ministers actively to vote for it, was the mistake.

All agreed that the perceived breach of promise was symbolically significant in a way in

which the policy itself was not. Voters unaware of and unaffected by the policy (including those in Scotland, where the policy did not apply) expressed indignation at it. A Scottish MP said that for some months streets full of previously welcoming doors were slammed to Liberal Democrat canvassers on this issue alone. An MP with a large student electorate claimed that the voters most aggrieved about tuition fees were women in their fifties. This confirms the view taken by Philip Cowley, who points to the collapse in Liberal Democrat poll ratings at the formation of the coalition, some six months prior to the tuition fees debacle. Yet precisely because of this, to have retained more public independence on this issue and some others – including the health reforms where real concessions were wrung from the Conservatives – could have strengthened Liberal Democrat claims to a different role in government from the Conservatives', and might have robbed Labour of some of the effectiveness of the 'betrayal' weapon already established. This is the view taken by David Cutts and Andrew Russell: 'the little party does not need to get smashed ... the Liberal Democrats were overly supportive.'³

Moreover, the divisions created by the issue wounded the parliamentary party in a way which was wider than the student finance question. One MP involved in persuading colleagues to vote for fees reported the damage to the parliamentary party, which had been 'like a family: everyone [knew] everyone else; everyone [had] everyone else's mobile number.' The MP still felt 'very angry' towards named 'selfish' rebels who could have abstained, but whose 'No' votes (in this MP's view) necessitated others to vote in favour. 'There were stiff drinks and hugs in the Whips' office that night; there were tears.' Even one of those who rebelled over tuition fees later came to the view that 'some [MPs] were not loyal enough'.

The campaign team of the only successful candidate were clear that his 'disloyalty' had immunised him from much criticism, and he himself argued that without his defiance of the whip on key issues 'I would have been toast.' It is noticeable that the three MPs studied here with the smallest falls in their vote share were three of the four most rebellious against the coalition whip (see Appendix). The MP who was second best in England of those studied at holding on to the 2010 Liberal Democrat vote agreed that 'being an independent-minded person prepared to stand up to the party helped.' Another argued that Liberal Democrat whipping throughout the 2010–15 parliament had been 'aggressive', and that party managers became like the victims of sci-fi 'bodysnatchers', saying things they would previously have 'laughed at' about re-presenting coalition policies in a way which was palatable. The new reality of being in government had not been acknowledged by whips: 'they thought it was like before – that we were all the same. But some were on ministerial salaries and had to vote with the payroll.' This was in stark contrast to Conservative whips who watched rebellions on their backbenches over equal marriage, Europe and Lords reform with sanguinity. The raising of HE fees, the MP argued, was the key error because it destroyed trust which could not be recovered. This was particularly true given the high profile of the 'Broken Promises' broadcast in the 2010 campaign, and extent to which the party leader's appeal rested upon a presumption of honesty.⁴

One campaign organiser complained that Liberal Democrat achievements in government were not publicised early or proudly enough 'like we do in Focus leaflets every time we achieve something against opposition in the local council.' An MP reflected following defeat that 'we spent the first two years apolo-gising for being in government'.

As well as greater policy differentia-tion there was room for a different structural

relationship in government, an issue given some thought by parliamentarians during the coalition and by academic observers afterwards.⁵ Significantly, the Liberal Democrats were left with no official speakers in parliament apart from government ministers, and they were the minority of ministers in every department. The predicament this created was fully illustrated by the episode in which the party leader was forced to contradict the schools minister for views he had expressed about the employment of unqualified teachers in Free Schools. An attempt was made to remedy this situation with the institution of backbench committees in both houses of parliament (which had some impact in, as a peer put it, 'prodding' Lib Dem ministers on health, justice and schools), and with the appointment of Simon Hughes as deputy leader – but his freedom to criticise government policy was curtailed by his own ministerial appointment. The image of the Liberal Democrat and Conservative leaders in the Rose Garden at No 10 Downing Street in May 2010 was symbolic of the impression of a culture of suffocation of independence, and the image was a difficult one to escape.

This problem was exacerbated by the repeated insistence of the party leadership to members and opponents alike that the coalition was a full-term agreement with no escape clause.⁶ Liberal Democrats who questioned this publicly quickly reviewed their position.⁷ Those who saw the coalition as an historic exercise in changing British political culture feared any perceived fragility in the arrangement would undermine it; the price, however, was that, as David Davis put it in 2011, the Liberal Democrats had 'the best seats on the plane but no parachute' and were therefore unable to leave regardless of the direction of travel.⁸ It is worth considering that the departure of the Liberals from the Lib–Lab Pact in 1978 began a period in which the party's poll rating rose from 6 per cent to 14 per cent before

the 1979 election – a benefit the Liberal Democrats did not enjoy in 2015.

For any future parliamentary cooperation, the party should consider ways of sustaining an independent voice whilst in government. This issue was raised by one constituency organiser experienced in municipal power-sharing in a presentation after 2010 to the parliamentary party, but MPs were (according to the organiser) unreceptive; they had also been made a presentation by continental Liberal politicians with the express purpose of stressing the need for undiluted public loyalty to any coalition the party joins. Lord Greaves complained that throughout the parliament the party leadership's message had been that 'we had to own the policies of the coalition'⁹ and one constituency organiser complained of being 'fed the mantra' about the virtues of coalition by national election strategists. This strategy was keenly reiterated in interview by the chief executive of the party, who again raised comparison with continental experience. It was born of determination to make coalition respectable; but the price paid was needlessly high.

Measures to avoid this might include:

- Appointed party representatives or committees capable of drawing public distinctions between Liberal Democrat policy and that of any administration in which the party is engaged;
- Greater acceptance of division in the parliamentary party by whips;
- Readiness to end any arrangement before the completion of a term of office and, if necessary, at short notice.

Incumbency, policy and local campaigning

The traditional strengths which have protected Liberal and Liberal Democrat MPs from fluctuations in the national party's poll ratings are personal appeal of the incumbent,

constituency campaigning and a solid municipal base. All of these strengths were drawn upon in 2015, and for the first time none made a significant impact on Liberal Democrat MPs' fortunes.

Incumbency

If anything, incumbency was a liability at the 2015 election to Liberal Democrat MPs. Those studied here first elected in 2010 saw an average fall of 4.4 per cent in the Liberal Democrat vote; in the seats first won in 2005 the average fall was 17.2 per cent; in those held for more than ten years the average was 18.2 per cent (see Appendix). One long-serving former MP argued retrospectively that there is a point of diminishing returns in incumbency, at which the electorate becomes complacent about the local MP's prospects; but this never affected Liberal Democrat fortunes in, for example, Berwick-upon-Tweed or Southwark and Bermondsey before 2015. In 1979, the last time Liberal MPs went to the country having supported the government, most of those returned owed their seats to the fact that they resisted in their own constituencies the national fall in the party vote share. The fact is that in 2015 long service as a Liberal Democrat was no longer an asset.

All of the MPs studied here made explicit appeals across party lines and often avoided their party label altogether in campaigning, issuing unbadged literature in the format of glossy lifestyle magazines and campaigning in vehicles without the party logo or using stickers and posters showing only the candidate's first name. One campaign organiser said of their candidate that 'what sells [X] and the Lib Dems is [X]. We fought an intense ground war and ignored the air war.' Another said their campaign was 'super-localised. [X] was our key to winning, hugely. People didn't vote Lib Dem; they voted for [X].' The MP who retweeted national campaign materials more regularly than any other nonetheless

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commented afterwards that ‘most of the focus was on local material. There wasn’t an awful lot of mileage in national material given our poll position. It was very much a local campaign.’ The only MP of the twelve to retain a seat did not retweet any national materials. Much emphasis was placed on cross-party campaigns in which the MPs had participated, or local construction or employment projects which had been achieved with the MP’s help. In most cases, however, this did nothing to stem the decline in the Liberal Democrat vote.

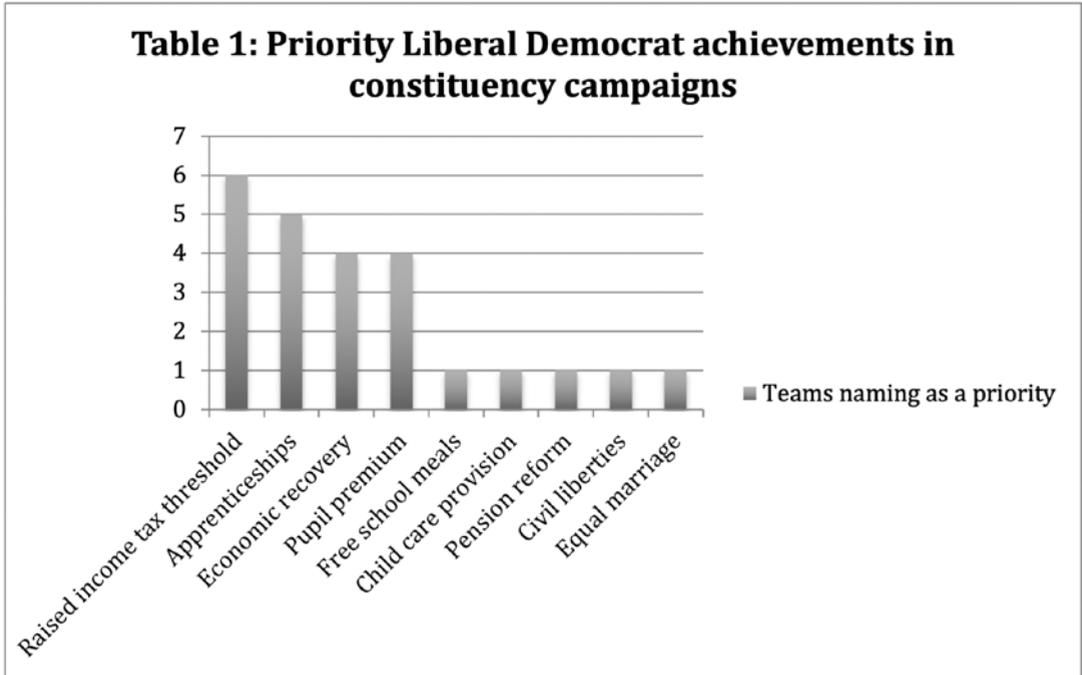
Municipal election success

All twelve of the local parties studied had impressive records of local election success within their constituency boundaries, usually winning over half of the seats in the relevant wards, and in three cases holding all of them in 2010. Conscious efforts were made to bind the campaigns of these candidates together throughout the parliament, usually by combining Focus leaflet campaigns, or in one case by listing seventeen councillors on the

parliamentary candidate’s Christmas card to voters. But there was no relationship between the retention of these seats and of the Liberal Democrat vote in 2015 (see Appendix): good municipal representation was no help in saving a coterminous parliamentary seat. The seat in which the smallest percentage of councillors (3 per cent) was lost during the parliament nonetheless had the third highest loss of vote at the 2015 general election (over a fifth); yet the constituency party with the highest retention of the Liberal Democrat general election vote (over 95 per cent) had never had more than a third of the council seats in that constituency, and lost most of these during the 2010 parliament. One former MP said after the election that ‘the party was disconnected’ between the leadership and its local government base, where ‘the smashing of the local government base’ in 2011 was ‘dismaying’.

All interviewees who responded to the question reported larger numbers of activists – usually in healthy three-figure totals – than in 2010, more vigorous and committed

Table 1: Priority Liberal Democrat achievements in constituency campaigns



in terms of hours devoted to the campaign. Some – though not all – used social media very effectively to supplement their campaign. But none of this made any discernible difference. It is true that the most tweets were issued in the last week of the campaign by the only MP to hold his seat; but the one with the most followers on twitter lost over a fifth of the vote; and the MP whose vote share fell least managed barely a tenth of the number of tweets of the most active MP.

Liberal Democrat policy achievements

The campaign role of Liberal Democrat achievements in government was positive but varied in both scale and character between constituencies. Invited to identify two Liberal Democrat achievements which would be used to recruit support in their campaigns, the twelve teams in aggregate produced the choices presented in Table 1. Some of these had been identified following polling in the constituency; others were the result of canvassing or of a more intuitive interpretation of continuous communication with constituents.

It was unsurprising given the national context that the two-thirds of the key issues were economic, but gratifying for the Liberal Democrats that they felt they could claim credit for these policies. Similarly predictably, different achievements recruited different voters, with working-class voters in Labour-facing seats attracted to employment measures or increased spending on schools and childcare; Conservative-facing seats were more likely to favour pension reform or economic growth. The raising of the income tax threshold had appeal across class boundaries, whilst some policies (such as the pensions ‘triple lock’) were held to be difficult to convey simply, and others, including free school meals, provoked a backlash as a ‘waste of money’ in certain elements of the electorate. It is noticeable that traditionally distinctive

Liberal Democrat concerns with civil liberties and minority rights had little purchase. The JRRT may endorse wholeheartedly the Liberal Democrats’ central campaign’s efforts to raise the profile of mental illness in the 2015 election campaign, but its impact on the ground as an issue was probably limited.

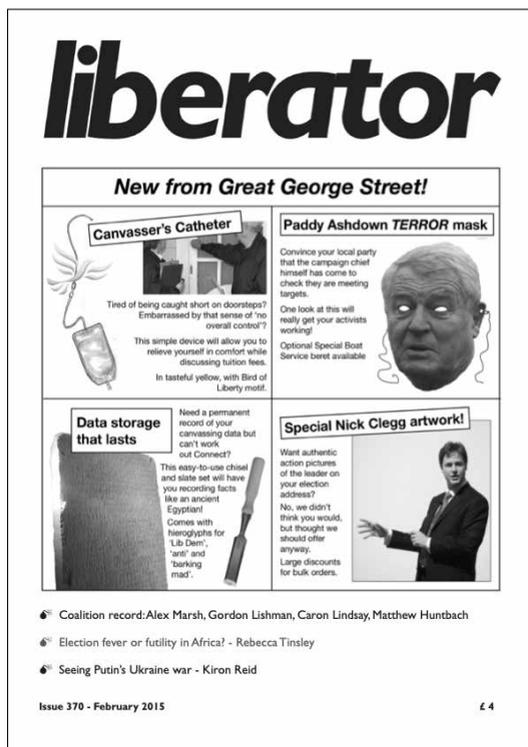
‘Splitting the Difference’: The national campaign

Central direction: technology and logistics

The campaign, as with other parties, made more intensive use of IT to identify target seats, districts and voters than in any previous election, and used this information to set targets based on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for each constituency campaign team. At the start of the 2015 campaign this system, called Connect, won plaudits from observers.¹⁰

Most constituency organisers were keen to collect and deliver the data, seeing the advantages of its electronic collation and national aggregation. The most outspokenly critical of the constituency organisers commended Connect as ‘brilliant.’ Another described Connect as ‘a Mercedes-Benz with no petrol’ – the petrol being the ‘real’ canvas data, which is supplied by the local party. That party had by November 2014 entered canvas data for between 13,000 and 14,000 voters, and planned to have another 8,000 completed by March, but not all organisations were so ambitious. Another showed figures averaging over 1,000 contacts a month by October 2014. A third claimed to have data for four-fifths of the constituency gathered ‘over the years.’

By no means all activists were ready to collect data on the doorstep electronically. Amongst the reasons for this were lack of familiarity with the technology and personal preference for the traditional ‘shield’ of



Liberator (February 2015) captured some of the activists' criticisms of the campaign organisation at the outset

the clipboard and paper sheet; and the suspicion created amongst voters by the electronic collection of data. Some complained that the computer programme directed them to houses no longer in existence or to neglect new homes; others that materials prepared for delivery in the constituency based on the data in the programme – including at least one official election address – had to be abandoned as unsuitable. Another constituency held by the Liberal Democrats but not included in this study notoriously suffered the delay of a leaflet delivery because of a dispute with HQ about font size. Similar stories of data-driven erroneous judgements about constituency opinion were reported from the previous year's European elections, too.

More significant was the unequal power relationship some organisers and MPs felt that

the technology exacerbated between the centre and constituency teams, and the way this played into the contest over values reflected in the campaign. There was understandable criticism from rural constituencies, or those with older activist bases, that KPIs were used to make critical comparisons with other 'better performing' constituencies with concentrated populations and young memberships able to deliver more leaflets, or to set unrealistic targets for seats with distinctive circumstances. One MP complained of HQ using the technology in a 'grinding' way to punish perceived under-performance by what the campaign team in the constituency had come to call 'marking our homework'. This punishment included determining how much 'pocket money' constituencies got. The punitive use of technology by a central campaign determined to sell the virtue of coalition as its central message was unrepresentative of parts of the Liberal Democrats and turned out to be counterproductive.

Siege tactics

A key feature of the campaign was a more robust targeting operation by parliamentary seat than has been used at any previous campaign, referred to by one academic observer as a 'Rourke's Drift' strategy.¹¹ Different reports referred to 75 target seats, or to the 57 Liberal Democrat-held seats, others to only a proportion of those: in all cases it was clear that the differential between activity, and resources deployed, in these seats and in non-target seats would be dramatic. Though there was resentment at the systems used to distinguish between constituencies hitting their activity targets and those failing, the principle of targeting was accepted by all interviewees. It was, however, not without its costs in longer-term campaigning potential, and brought no benefits in terms of representation.

All those asked confirmed that the circulation of neighbouring constituencies'

membership lists to target seats by regional offices had been a vital asset, even if some neighbouring constituencies were more helpful than others. The regional layer of the party received some criticism in the first round of constituency visits for delivering the leadership message too uncritically to MPs and activists; but in the election regional officers were held by some constituency organisers to have been a practical, mitigating force in tensions between leadership and constituencies.

On the other hand, monitoring of a wider range of constituency campaigns showed strong evidence of the costs of this strategy. Paper or parachuted candidates were often absent from hustings, or gave indifferent performances at them; some missed national media exposure opportunities on the openly acknowledged basis that they were campaigning elsewhere.¹² Ironically, candidates directed centrally to do this found that they were required to give full reviews of their campaigns to HQ within days of the polls closing on pain of removal from the candidates' list.¹³ This, together with the decline in local government representation endured during the coalition, will set back the Liberal Democrat recovery in many constituencies.

Most importantly, this strategy failed, brutally weakening the platform for Liberalism in the 2015 parliament from fifty-seven MPs to just eight. Only one of the twelve seats monitored was held. Some have argued that the siege strategy was in fact not pessimistic enough, and that '20 seats were fought which there was no hope of winning',¹⁴ but the suggestion of the outcomes in the seats studied here is that resources in fact made little difference, however distributed. The average fall in the Liberal Democrat vote in the twelve seats studied, 15.0 per cent, is only 0.2 per cent lower than the national decline in the Liberal Democrat vote. Those with the lowest declines were in fact those with least help as target seats. The reasons for this pattern were longer-term or

more external to the party than any targeting campaign could overcome; however, the nature of the targeting may have damaged the cause of Liberalism on the ground whilst failing to protect it at Westminster.

Splitting the difference

The national campaign accompanying the manifesto was widely and severely criticised amongst interviewees for its failure to integrate with their constituency campaigns or to win support from the public. Its central theme (reflected in the slogan 'The era of single party government is over' and the party leader's insistence in a TV debate that the Conservative and Labour leaders should 'go and lie down in a darkened room' if they thought a single-party government could be formed) was the anticipation of another coalition and the proposed moderating role the Liberal Democrats would play in it: cutting less than the Conservatives and borrowing less than Labour, for example. In this the Liberal Democrats were presented as better governing partners than SNP would be to Labour or UKIP to the Tories. Within this framework, there were individual claims to achievements in the coalition, and commitments for future government, particularly on protecting education spending, raising the priority of mental health services, and raising the income tax threshold further. There were two out of over two dozen formal interviewees – both constituency organisers – who expressed muted approval of this saying (unprompted) 'I didn't have a problem with it' and that 'it would be stupid of me to complain about the national campaign when I haven't got a better one – and I haven't. I felt completely empowered about the national campaign.'

All others who expressed opinions were at best disappointed and more often angry at the perceived weakness and negativity of the material provided. The emphasis on the Liberal Democrats' relationship with other

parties rather their own identity – particularly as the policy position of the two main parties shifted during the campaign – was commonly regarded as ineffective (the 160-page manifesto itself, conversely, was criticised for being too heavy and diffuse). Highlighting the threats of UKIP and the SNP was thought to have been counterproductive: one MP described the ‘BluKIP’ playing-card materials (pointing up the dangers of a Conservative government dependent on UKIP MPs’ support) as ‘useless’ and abandoned them.

Another MP dismissed the campaign at its start as ‘bland’ and ‘an afterthought’ the belated unveiling of which was caused by the leadership’s preoccupation with the siege strategy and micro-management of key seats; some of the less brutally scatological comments of organisers and MPs argued that ‘the national strategy was crap’, ‘the messaging was appalling’, said ‘I can’t see what the campaign was’; that ‘the national campaign never took off’ and that there was ‘not enough of a pro-active campaign’ and ‘too much of a split-the-difference message: we didn’t define ourselves as a progressive, radical party.’ In Scotland an organiser said the main theme of the national campaign simply ‘doesn’t apply up here’ because it didn’t address the SNP threat and that when any English leader visits ‘it feels like [they’re] lecturing the Scots.’ One former MP described the party leader’s answers to questions in the seven-way leaders’ TV debate as ‘awesome’ but was shocked that his prepared opening and closing statements reflected a ‘wishy-washy’ national message which was ‘not inspiring’:

I hated the messaging. People need a reason to be voting Liberal Democrat. It wasn’t about what we would do. I didn’t want to vote Liberal Democrat after that, and if I didn’t, who did?

It was noticeable to more seasoned observers and campaigners that the materials of the

national campaign looked derivative, echoing the equidistance strategy of the SDP–Liberal Alliance in the 1980s. Both the images and the messages show the resemblance.

The unveiling of the last of these images prompted the editor of *Liberal Democrat Voice* to ask: ‘is that really the best statement of our values that we can find?’¹⁵ The ‘Look left, look right’ motoring metaphor in election broadcasts was attacked by a characteristically loyal MP as ‘appalling crap’. The very provenance of the national campaign materials was mysterious. Even senior party officials were unable to say with certainty who had designed them, but believed that they had been prepared by one of the party leader’s staff. MPs recalled that, although the parliamentary party had ‘an awful lot of presentations at meetings and awaydays from Ryan Coetzee and Hilary Stephenson’ and that MPs came up with the ‘stronger economy, fairer society’ slogan, they were never shown the actual campaign materials during development. An MP who attended the parliamentary party meeting at which the campaign was unveiled remembered criticising it in common with colleagues, and being told by campaign staff that the themes reflected what polling evidence indicated were the Liberal Democrats’ key strengths.

The national campaign materials were nonetheless used by most candidates in a secondary, bolt-on or default way, (what one organiser called ‘fill-in’), retweeting the latest output from HQ, particularly where there was a connection to local issues such as apprenticeships, the pupil premium, tax cuts and sometimes mental health. There was little evidence of the images and text being integrated into constituency campaigns, nor was this likely given the way the campaign was presented as a *fait accompli*.

In the same way, national speakers including the party leader were welcomed to most seats where offered, though their impact



Election adverts:
 Liberal-SDP Alliance, 1983 and 1987
 Liberal Democrats, 2015

was doubtful. Organisers stressed that the visit of the party leaders were accepted as a way of mobilising existing supporters rather

than to gain local press coverage or appeal to the public, amongst whom they were commonly named unprompted as a reason for not voting Liberal Democrat. It may be noteworthy that the only seat amongst the twelve case studies to be held in 2015 refused the offer of a visit from the party leader, and the only three candidates studied to suffer declines of less than 10 per cent in their vote had only one visit from any national party figure (not the leader) between them (see Appendix).

Nor can it be contended that this animus towards the national campaign is merely wisdom after the event, for it was foreshadowed in the first round of constituency interviews in November. One MP argued then that the party leadership did not understand the provinces, that ‘the effect of front-loading cuts in local government funding was not appreciated’ and that ‘the disconnect has not been learned from.’ Another described the national leadership and its campaign team as variously ‘arrogant’, ‘naïve’ and ‘stupid’ in certain of their tactical decisions and methods during the 2010 parliament, notably in not acknowledging mistakes early enough.

‘The Fear’: the SNP and the late Tory surge

The Liberal Democrats’ chief election strategist referred, in reflecting on the results, to ‘what I call the Fear’¹⁶ – a panic return by soft Tory voters to their party prompted by the prospect of a Labour government supported by the SNP. This appeal ranged from the official Conservative contrast between the ‘competence’ which they claimed to represent and the ‘chaos’ threatened by ‘all the other parties’, to Boris Johnson’s less restrained outburst later in the campaign against what he characterised as ‘Ajockalypse now’. Baroness Grender pointed to this factor in post-election discussions and claimed that ‘four weeks out we knew what was doing us damage was this

'one of 23 seats' message from the Conservatives' which was countered by the 'BlUKIP' campaign.¹⁷ The issue was raised unprompted in most post-election interviews in English seats as a feature of the last week of campaigning. This was a problem, as Coetzee pointed out, in Conservative-facing seats, but also in some Labour ones where the Conservative tactical vote disappeared in the last days of the campaign. One constituency organiser in such a seat found that Conservative tactical votes hardened between autumn and spring and that 'the squeeze on the Conservatives just didn't happen' partly because of Conservative leafleting late in the campaign.

The unanticipated crash in Liberal Democrat support was most notoriously demonstrated by Paddy Ashdown's assertion on seeing the BBC's exit poll that he would 'eat his hat' if the party were reduced to ten MPs, but it is notable that all MPs – even those who anticipated losing from as far back as November – believed that they would do better than they did until polling day, often even at the count. In some Conservative-facing seats Liberal Democrat organisers also reported that their Conservative opponents fully, but wrongly, expected to lose, even after the polls closed. One MP interviewed for this study stated that his team's spontaneous reaction to the BBC exit poll was 'bollocks' and that all of the team believed '30 MPs would be a bad result.' Another said that the result was 'a lot worse' than expected nationally – fifteen seats was regarded by the end as a worst-case scenario; thirty were hoped for (though colleagues in Conservative-facing seats had had some impression of the growing Fear later in the campaign).

These beliefs were based on canvassing data, in places on recent polls by Lord Ashcroft, by betting odds which showed the Liberal Democrat candidate as clear favourite, and sometimes strengthened by the evidence

pointed to by John Hemming – that postal votes showed a significantly better level of support than votes cast on the day.¹⁸ Lord Ashcroft's polls between autumn 2014 and the campaign showed better Liberal Democrat performances in nine of the ten constituencies polled than were gained on May 7, and four seats which were lost anticipated a Liberal Democrat victory in Ashcroft's polls (see Appendix). Although polls generally under-reported Conservative support, Ashcroft's was in fact the only organisation to anticipate the real outcome in a national poll (on April 26). Of the eight campaign organisers who claimed to know the outcome of postal voting in their seat, two thought the distribution was the same as on 8 May, three thought it closer than on polling day, and three whose MP lost claimed that they won the postal vote. One MP with a slim majority felt able to say after losing that 'if the election had been held two days earlier I might have won by 100 votes.'

This was the unexpected (and largely invisible)¹⁹ element of the campaign which accounted for a number of the losses, yet its impact is not unrelated to the values adopted in the national campaign. Having chosen to sell the Liberal Democrats predominantly as an equidistant party of coalition rather than on their independent values, the party would be especially vulnerable to hysteria about coalition amongst a small but strategically important group of voters.

To this was added the collective amnesia of the other parties about the Liberal Democrats' contributions to government, and an evident Conservative determination – spotted by some organisers in November – to spend unprecedentedly heavily in Liberal Democrat seats. One measure of the Conservatives' strategy of claiming credit for coalition achievements is language: constituency campaign material habitually targeted Liberal Democrat candidates as 'the current MP'

rather than by party name, and national propaganda followed suit (Liberal Democrats who had held junior ministerial office were criticised by Conservative challengers as ‘career MPs’). The Conservative manifesto attacked Labour by name thirty times, but mentioned the Liberal Democrats only once (in a dismissive comparison with UKIP); the word ‘coalition’ does not appear in the Conservative manifesto (nor in Labour’s, where the Liberal Democrats are also absent by name), but the Liberal Democrats promoted the virtues of coalition half-a-dozen times, particularly in the early parts of their manifesto.

The Liberal Democrats had chosen a battlefield to which no other party (at least in England) turned up, and which made them vulnerable to the Fear. This was, as the British Polling Council’s own report confirmed, only exacerbated by the insistence of survey data that an unpredictable period of negotiation was likely follow the general election outcome if the Liberal Democrats and SNP held the balance of power.²⁰

There is also strong evidence that the Conservatives spent heavily to target Liberal Democrats. One long-serving MP with a large majority which was overturned claimed that £200,000 had been spent in his constituency, and the view of his staff was that ‘the Tories bought this seat’. Electoral law was circumvented not only by spending outside the campaign, but also by party billboard and press publicity not mentioning the local candidate. Other MPs and organisers spoke of unprecedented use of telephone canvassing and paid delivery of election material or use of social media which could be matched by volunteers. One seat held for decades was lost partly, according to its organiser, because ‘the Conservatives out-leafleted us for the first time’ using paid staff. Since the election, Channel 4 News has made similar accusations of over-spending by Conservative candidates.²¹

The Electoral Commission should be encouraged to find ways of ensuring that this undemocratic practice is prohibited.

Conclusion and recommendations

The coalition did a lot of good stuff, making things better for people.

Coalition has made it less clear to people what we stand for.

These two remarks after the election reflect the dichotomous situation of the Liberal Democrats and their identity: significant achievements to make Britain a freer and more just society – such as the pupil premium, equal marriage, raising the income tax threshold and some limited constitutional reforms including the Fixed-term Parliaments Act – were effected because the party took part in government. The party leadership claims that this amounted to three-quarters of the aims set out in the 2010 manifesto, and few have come forward to dispute that claim specifically. Other illiberal steps which a minority Conservative government might have attempted, such as repeal of the Human Rights Act, were shelved. Liberal values in this sense did well out of coalition.

Yet in May 2015 this went unrecognised and unrewarded by the electorate, who for reasons of resentment or fear too often set aside the very practical benefits which Liberal Democrat MPs pointed out had come to their constituents from these reforms; instead, they chose to punish or abandon MPs with whom they had kept faith in some cases for a generation. Liberal Democrats have two competing narratives to explain this:

- As a party principally of protest, the Liberal Democrats’ reputation as ‘insurgents’ would inevitably suffer substantially from participation in government.²² Little which was done by the party between 2010 and

2015 could have altered this, and targeting by the Conservatives and the national weakness of Labour during the 2015 campaign merely exacerbated this;

- The independent, progressive values of Liberalism were not promoted firmly enough in the coalition negotiations, in the implementation and development of policy and in parliament between the elections, or in the final campaign – in short, the party allowed itself to be trapped in the Rose Garden instead of treating the coalition strictly as a business arrangement.

Support for both these views was found amongst MPs and their teams in this project, both before and after the election. Though, as might be expected, the former narrative was more popular amongst those who had held ministerial office (and who were usually most ready to discuss future possible coalitions), it is interesting to note that the MP responsible for the first quotation above had been a backbench ‘outsider’ throughout the coalition, where the second remark came from a frontbench ‘loyalist’. No Liberal Democrat MP disowned coalition, and none denied any errors in government. The central finding of this report is to identify where there was avoidable damage to Liberal profile and to effectiveness in asserting Liberal values, and to emphasise that this should be avoided in future.

There is some reason to believe that the Liberal values brought to government will be recognised by the public in the absence of the party from office. The next five years may be a better advertisement for coalition than the last five. All candidates and organisers reported that they had benefitted from the surge in membership experienced by the party in the days following the election defeat and noted that the great majority of those joining were new members rather than prodigal returners. Whilst sketch writers for *The Times* mischievously write (as they have done for decades) that the party should pack up, *The*

Guardian remains positive, and even Kevin Maguire at *The Mirror* took little more than a fortnight after the polls closed to begin referring wistfully to the absence of ‘the restraining influence of the Liberal Democrats.’²³ Liberal values have had a better, if clearly imperfect, expression in government than for a hundred years; they remain present though they were unseen by many at the 2015 election; and the Liberal Democrats will be the vital, if regrettably and partly unnecessarily wounded, vehicle for those values.

The Liberal Democrats achieved more in implementing liberalism in government than they (or any other party) have done for generations. Yet in doing so, and in their presentation of that record, they damaged their chances of doing so at local and national levels for some years to come. The second half of this scenario was held by many MPs and organisers to have been unnecessarily costly, both in terms of the ‘Betrayal’ and the ‘Fear’. The party leadership, these critics argue, conducted and marketed the Liberal Democrat brand in a way which made it needlessly vulnerable. The experience of the election campaign gives substance to their claim.

Recommendations

- Participation in government was held at all levels and in all branches of the Liberal Democrats to have been right both for policy and constitutional reasons, and it promoted Liberal values albeit imperfectly and sometimes imperceptibly.
- In future, however, specific internal and external structural steps should be taken to protect the party’s ideological territory and identity and to encourage a spirit of independence in its officers. These could include retention of separate official speakers and fuller control of distinctive policy areas and departments.
- The Trust should sustain pressure for electoral reform and for measures to tighten

electoral law on expenditure and to provide support for more equal access to campaign funding.

- The Liberal Democrat Party should be urged to reassess critically the equidistance strategy of 2015 in national campaigns.
- The Liberal Democrats should be supported in targeting a small number of parliamentary seats with the best hope of retrieving representation and should reconstruct local bases in areas neglected by the targeting strategy but with a history of municipal success, drawing on these to inform national policy and strategy.

Dr Cole is grateful for their support and guidance to all of the participating constituency teams and to Hanneke Hart, Tina Walker and Alex Davies, but the contents of this report are entirely his own.

19 February 2016

Afterword (2024)

The lessons of the coalition for Liberalism – of the need to restore traditional Liberal scepticism about such deals whilst celebrating their achievements more boldly – came into focus with varying degrees of delay. Liberal Democrat Leader Tim Farron announced before the next election in 2017 that the party would not go into government with either major party; the experience of Brexit and single-party Conservative government drew enough voters back to the party to win the Richmond by-election in 2016 and to come second nationally at the last European Parliament elections in the UK in 2019. Since the last election there have been more by-election triumphs, and the party's percentage share of the polls has, on average, been in double figures. David Cameron's memoir that year went as far as to describe the Liberal Democrats' role in the government as 'proper partners, getting stuck in, making big decisions and working with us.'²⁴ The party's opponents

refer increasingly rarely to its record in government as a point of criticism, though the Liberal Democrats themselves are still reluctant to point to their achievements in coalition. This changing public perception of the coalition will doubtless continue to fluctuate, but the conclusions about inter-party relations for Liberal Democrats must be as they have always been: that tension is what makes the mechanism of coalition productive.

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- 1 R. Coetzee, 'The Liberal Democrats must reunite, rebuild or remain in opposition', *The Guardian*, 23 May 2015.
- 2 P. Cowley and D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2015* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 100.
- 3 D. Cutts and A. Russell, in A. Geddes and J. Tonge (eds.), *Britain Votes 2015* (Hansard Society, 2015) pp. 80–1.
- 4 A YouGov poll on 12 April 2010, for instance, showed that 30 per cent of respondents considered Clegg honest, compared to 22 per cent for Brown and 18 per cent for Cameron.
- 5 N. Baker, *After the Rose Garden* (Institute for Government, 2015).
- 6 See, for example: 'Clegg says Coalition beak-up would be disaster for the UK economy', Bloomberg.com, 12 Dec. 2011; 'Lib Dem Future lies with the Tories: Nick Clegg insists party must not break up coalition', *The Mirror*, 26 Sep. 2012; 'Nick Clegg: Coalition Government will not break up', *Daily Telegraph*, 22 May 2013; 'Nick Clegg: Lib Dems will not pull out of coalition', *Daily Telegraph*, 27 May 2014.
- 7 G. Gibbon, 'Farron regrets coalition divorce talk', *Channel Four News*, 20 Sep. 2011.
- 8 *Dispatches: A Year in No 10* (Channel 4, 2011).
- 9 Lord Greaves, 'Catastrophe: the 2015 Election Campaign and its outcome', Liberal Democrat History Group meeting, House of Lords, 13 July 2015.
- 10 See 'Digital gurus find Obama campaign tough act to follow', *The Times*, 8 Apr. 2015.
- 11 Prof. Philip Cowley, 'Catastrophe: the 2015 Election Campaign and its outcome', Liberal Democrat History Group meeting, House of Lords, 13 July 2015.
- 12 In three hustings broadcasts organised by BBC Coventry & Warwickshire, for example, only one Liberal

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- Democrat candidate took part, whilst a BBC Radio 4 report from Swindon South found that the Liberal Democrat candidate was unavailable for interview because he was campaigning in Bristol West, from where he told listeners that only 'a miracle' would win Swindon South for the Liberal Democrats.
- 13 A discussion of this letter, in which several paper candidates reflected on their experiences, took place at Lib Dem Voice on 19 May, <http://www.libdemvoice.org/how-not-to-motivate-your-exhausted-defeated-candidates-46046.html> (accessed 29 May 2015).
 - 14 Cowley, 'Catastrophe'.
 - 15 Caron Lindsay, *Liberal Democrat Voice*, 11 Dec. 2014.
 - 16 Coetzee, 'The Liberal Democrats must reunite'.
 - 17 Baroness Grender, 'Catastrophe: the 2015 Election Campaign and its outcome', Liberal Democrat History Group meeting, House of Lords, 13 July 2015. The same timing of this realisation was confirmed by Ryan Coetzee in *The Guardian*, 23 May 2015.
 - 18 Hemming claimed on his blog on 8 May that 'the postal votes in Yardley which were cast about two weeks before polling day gave me 40%, but on the night I only got just over 25%.' (<http://johnhemming.blogspot.co.uk/>)
 - 19 Prof. Philip Cowley has commented since the election that the BES poll data show some evidence of this rising fear of the SNP, but the significance of this was not recognised at the time. See <http://revolts.co.uk/?p=897>
 - 20 P. Sturgis, *The Inquiry into the Failure of the 2015 Pre-election Polls: Findings and Preliminary Conclusions* (British Polling Council, Jan. 2016)
 - 21 'Election spending claims 'serious' says Conservative MP', *BBC News*, 9 Feb. 2016.
 - 22 This was a key theme of the Liberal Democrat leader's speeches at both the spring and autumn party conferences of 2013.
 - 23 See D. Finkelstein, 'RIP the Liberal Democrats', *The Times*, 27 May 2015; 'If they didn't exist, they'd have to be invented', editorial, *The Guardian*, 15 May 2015; Kevin Maguire, *The Mirror*, 25 May 2015.
 - 24 David Cameron, *For the Record* (William Collins, 2019), p. 241.

Appendix: constituency data

Constituency	2010 LD lead	Ashcroft poll LD lead	Postal vote	Incumbency (terms of office)	LD lead 2015	Fall in LD share	MP rebellion rate (%)	% councillor loss	Leadership visits
A	Very high	High	Unknown	2	Very high	25 to 30	0 to 1	65 to 70	3
B	Very high	Medium	As on 7 May	NA	Very high	20 to 25	NA	25 to 30	1
C	Medium	Very High	Closer	1	Very high	20 to 25	1 to 2	0 to 5	3
D	Very high	High	Win	4	High	20 to 25	3 to 4	15 to 20	3
E	High	Medium	Win	5	High	15 to 20	1 to 2	10 to 15	1
F	Very high	Medium	Unknown	4	Low	15 to 20	0 to 1	35 to 40	2
G	High	High	NA	2	Very high	10 to 15	1 to 2	55 to 60	4
H	High	High	Closer	2	High	10 to 15	0 to 1	45 to 40	1
I	Very high	NA	Unknown	2	Medium	10 to 15	7 to 8	25 to 30	3
J	Low	Very high	As on 7 May	1	Very high	5 to 10	2 to 3	25 to 30	1
K	Low	Very high	Closer	1	Very high	Under 5	6 to 7	5 to 10	0
L	Medium	NA	Win	1	Medium	Under 5	2 to 3	15 to 20	0
Very high	Worse than minus 15								
High	Between minus 10 and minus 14.9								
Medium	Between min 5 and minus 9.9								
Low	Between 0 and minus 4.9								
Low	Lead of 0.1 to 4.9								
Medium	Lead of 5 to 9.9								
High	Lead of 10 to 14.9								
Very high	Lead of over 15								