of target seats was brought on stream. Effective use was made of bulk buying. Over two million leaflets were commissioned through the bulk-buying arrangement and over fifty million digital ad impressions. Leaflets in key seats were printed and ready for distribution for whenever the election was called. In the course of the campaign, we knocked on the doors of over 2.7 million voters.

The discipline that characterised the whole strategy informed Ed's fun visual images and stunts too. To the average viewer they looked random. In fact, they were targeted on the messages of most concern to the voters. Yet surely the main message was: 'Ed's an ordinary, likeable human being.' With the two 'major' parties offering as alternatives an android lawyer and a human spreadsheet, Ed proved to be the gift that kept on giving.

The meeting provided two interpretations of the 2024 general election. The challenge is how to use these interpretations to foster change. Change to secure success in the current parliament and the next general election. ■

Peter Truesdale was a councillor and the Leader of the Council in Lambeth..

Friends or Enemies, Allies or Competitors? Liberals and Labour 1903–2019

Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting, 15 September 2024, with David Laws and Jim Wallace. Chair: Wendy Chamberlain MP
Report by Neil Stockley

The History Group's autumn conference fringe meeting took place barely two months after a new Labour government was elected, in a 'loveless landslide'. The campaign saw little open conflict but also no outward friendliness between Labour and the Liberal Democrats; each party quietly left the other to defeat the Conservatives in constituencies where they were best placed to do so. This was different to the two parties' cordial relationship when Tony Blair's government was elected in 1997, or the mutual hostility that followed the Liberal Democrats' entry into coalition with the Conservatives in 2010. So, are Liberals and Labour friends or enemies, allies or competitors?

David Laws, the former Liberal Democrat MP and schools minister, told us that the answer was a bit of both. 'The parties have at times been friends and allies, at other times bitter enemies and competitors,' he said. David went on to trace four main phases in the parties' relationship since the beginning of the twentieth century. In the first phase, which lasted from 1903 until around 1914, the Liberals and Labour were allies. With only two MPs elected in 1900, the newly formed Labour Representation Committee was struggling to establish itself as an independent political force. Meanwhile, the Liberals had been in the political wilderness for nearly twenty years, having lost a string of general elections to the Unionists. So, in 1903, 'they did a deal with Ramsay Macdonald', in which the Liberals stood aside for Labour candidates in thirty constituencies. At the 1906 general election, the two parties mounted a powerful pincer movement against the Unionists. The Liberal Party won a historic landslide victory, despite having a modest 5.5-percentage-point lead over the Unionists in the popular vote. Additionally, twenty-nine Labour MPs were elected, most of them

in seats where Liberals had stood down. They soon recruited the 'Lib–Lab' MPs to form a fifty-strong Commons grouping.

Just as important as electoral strategy, David explained, was the extent to which the two parties were aligned on the big issues of the day: free trade, home rule, progressive taxation, pensions and foreign policy. Labour supported the Liberal government's policies, most notably on the budget and House of Lords reform. At the 1910 general elections, the Labour Party was, as David put it, 'fairly well contained' and, by 1914, all the talk at Westminster was of further seat deals, pacts and alliances between the Liberals and Labour.

This harmonious arrangement ended with the First World War, which saw the Liberal Party bitterly split after Lloyd George replaced Asquith as prime minister. The Labour Party soon adopted a new electoral strategy: to push the Liberals aside as the main alternative to the Unionists.

The war brought other changes in the political dynamic, David explained, as the state became much bigger and more powerful and the Bolshevik revolution in Russia convinced some that state socialism was the economic future. In 1918, Labour inserted Clause IV into their constitution, committing the party, in theory at least, to nationalising the means of production, distribution and exchange. David argued that the debate over economic policy was no longer 'free trade versus tariffs', in which the Liberals and Labour were on the same side against the Unionists, but 'capitalism versus socialism … big state versus smaller state' in which they were not. As their electoral strategies and ideological positions diverged, the two parties' relationship entered a second phase, of overt electoral competition, that lasted until the early 1980s.

There were, David took care to explain, important exceptions. The Liberals sustained minority Labour governments in 1923–24 and 1929–31. In some ways, he suggested, these administrations were 'to the right of Lloyd George and the Liberal Party' on economic strategy. Prime Minister Ramsey Macdonald was determined to prove that Labour governments could be moderate and responsible in their economic management and his chancellor, Philip Snowden, was the most orthodox of economic managers.

The Labour Party itself split in 1931, with Macdonald and Snowden joining a Conservative-dominated National Government. The party then became more recognisably socialistic in its outlook, leaving much less common policy ground with the Liberal Party. There was a new electoral driver too: the struggling Liberals were on a 'Conservative-inspired life support machine' until 1956, with most of the party's MPs reliant on local electoral pacts to hold their seats.

Unfortunately, there was not enough time to discuss the period between 1956 and the early 1980s, given Jo Grimond's active pursuit of a 'realignment of the left' and David Steel's 'Lib–Lab' pact with the Callaghan government. It would have been interesting to examine why Harold Wilson was not interested in working with the Liberals. Was this because of basic differences over policy, especially given Labour's attachment to public ownership? Or did Labour's trade union base and party tribalism cause a cultural chasm that could not be bridged?

The 'Lib–Lab' pact of 1977–78 presents a paradox. David recounted that, in the 1970s, Labour adopted manifesto positions in favour of large-scale nationalisation of industry and price controls and against membership of the European Community and NATO which, Laws argued, made it even harder to imagine that the Liberals could work with Labour. Yet David Steel took his party into a formal pact that sustained the Callaghan government, which remained broadly committed to the 'post-war consensus' – including a mixed economy, and egalitarian and redistributive approaches to taxation and public spending – using prices and incomes

policies to keep inflation down, along with a strong commitment to NATO. The Labour Party was divided, and Callaghan was happy to rely on the Liberals for support when the parliamentary arithmetic demanded it.

Following the defeat of the Callaghan government in 1979, Labour moved decisively and indisputably to the left, which soon led to the formation of the Social Democratic Party and its alliance with the Liberal Party. The 1980s thus saw a third phase in relations between the parties, which David called a 'furious competition' between Labour and the Liberal–SDP Alliance to be the main centre-left force in British politics. By the end of the decade, Labour had prevailed. This he attributed to two main factors, the Falklands War, which restored the Conservatives' political fortunes in 1982, and the first-past-the-post electoral system, which worked decisively to Labour's advantage. At the 1983 general election, Labour won 209 seats against 23 for the Alliance, even though they were just over 2 percentage points ahead in the popular vote.

The fourth phase, from 1992 to 1999, saw greater cooperation between the newly merged Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party. After four consecutive general election defeats, Labour were desperate to find new paths back to power. In 1994, Tony Blair became leader of the party and reached out to Paddy Ashdown, who had broadly similar views on policy and recognised the potential for cross-party working. Their collaboration eventually delivered a series of important constitutional reforms. Both also wanted to bring their parties together on a more long-term basis, but it did not happen. After winning a massive Commons majority in 1997, Blair simply did not need the Liberal Democrats.

David added that the two leaders were working towards quite different objectives. Blair did not see why the Liberal Democrats needed to exist as a separate party and envisioned their eventual merger with Labour. Ashdown's end destination was different; he sought a pluralist working relationship between the two parties, enabled by electoral reform. Even though many Liberal Democrats were worried that Paddy might be too pragmatic and accept a modest version of electoral reform, he pushed for the 'AV-plus' option recommended by Lord Jenkins. This was not deliverable in the context of the late 1990s.

So, after all these twists and turns, are the Liberal Democrats and Labour natural allies or really adversaries? David may have surprised many in the audience when he pointed out that, since 1903, the Liberals have been in government with the Conservatives for nineteen years, compared to just nine for Labour, in which he included the Callaghan–Steel pact of the late 1970s. Only by adding together the Blair–Ashdown collaboration of 1997 to 1999, the minority Labour administrations of the 1920s and, arguably, the period from 1906 to 1915 can we see twenty-three years of 'Lib–Lab' cooperation in government. In only two periods, 1903 to 1914 and 1992 to 1999, were relationships between the two parties 'close, constructive and ally like'. David added that the parties also worked closely together in the 1929 to 1931 government, with Labour battling to remain in office and the Liberals seeking a change to the alternative vote system. Just as important, he stressed, were the lengthy periods of electoral competition, most obviously from 1931 to 1956 and from 1979 to 1992, that saw next to no cooperation between the two parties.

In his summing up, David identified five enablers of distance and proximity between the Liberal and Labour parties: the extent of policy alignment, the enthusiasm of the larger party to work with the smaller one, the size and clout of the smaller party, the attitude of the larger party to electoral reform, and the size of the governing party's majority. During the question-and-answer session, the former MP David Howarth suggested an intriguing sixth enabler, whether the culture of the larger party includes the view that the smaller party should exist at all. David Laws responded that his second enabler covered this point, though he acknowledged that Labour

was a tribal party that resisted cooperating with other parties, as were the Liberals and Liberal Democrats.

David then argued that the Liberals and Liberal Democrats have not necessarily performed poorly at general elections which have seen Labour governments voted out of office. 'What has really damaged our party has not been Labour in power,' David explained, 'but our proximity to power, either by being in a coalition, minority government, a 'Lib–Lab' pact or even when the governing party has a tiny Commons majority.' He went on: 'When the electorate has decided they want a change in government' – or perhaps more precisely, to give either Labour or the Conservatives a decisive mandate – 'as in 1924, 1931, 1951, 1966, October 1974, 1979 and 2015, the Liberals have paid an immense price for being anywhere near national government in the United Kingdom'.

Finally, he reflected, electoral reform has been a key enabler of inter-party cooperation. In the early years of the twentieth century, the Labour Party were trying to convince the Liberal government to change the voting system for the Commons. When the Liberals became less influential, the two parties' positions on electoral reform were reversed. David argued that most of the party's attempts to secure electoral reform at Westminster have been 'relatively rushed and somewhat opportunistic' rather than being 'planned over a period of time.' The time to make progress on big constitutional reform, he contended, was when parties arrive in government.

There is, however, one part of the United Kingdom where the Liberal Democrats have successfully executed a strategy to secure electoral reform: Scotland.

The second speaker was Jim Wallace, former leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats and deputy first minister in the 1999–2005 Labour–Liberal Democrat coalition government. Jim explained how the Scottish Liberal Democrats had achieved a Scottish parliament elected by a proportional voting system. After the 1978 referendum and Margaret Thatcher's rise to power the following year, he recalled, the cause of devolution was stalled. Then, in autumn 1988, Jim Sillars won the Govan by-election for the SNP which 'left the Labour Party a bit spooked'. Labour agreed to bring the people who wanted a Scottish parliament together in a constitutional convention to see how such a Scottish parliament might work. The convention included representatives of the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party, the Communist Party, civic government, local government, churches, the STUC, the islands movement – but not the SNP.

By 1991, the Scottish Liberal Democrat leader Malcolm Bruce had gained agreement for the principle that a system of proportional representation would be used to elect the parliament. Still, there were many bumps on the road. There was, for example, no detail as to the system to be used and no proposal for a Scottish parliament's fiscal powers. Then, the 1992 general election saw the Conservatives increase their number of Scottish MPs, much to the surprise of many people involved in the convention.

When the convention eventually resumed, a special group nominated to devise a proportional voting method ending up proposing the Additional Member System (AMS) despite the Liberal Democrats' best efforts to secure a commitment to the Single Transferable Vote. Jim recalled how he and George Robertson, the Scottish Labour leader, split the difference between their two parties' positions and agreed to propose a 129-member parliament, to the distress of both their respective parties' activists.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats' position was stronger than it may have seemed. The absence of the SNP and the Conservatives left the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats as the major parties in the convention. Labour relied on Jim and his colleagues to give the exercise credibility, he stressed. After prolonged negotiations, both parties included the Scottish parliament proposal in their manifestos for the 1997 general election.

The previous year, however, the Labour Party had suddenly promised to hold a referendum on the Scottish devolution proposals. Jim described the referendum idea as 'tricky' given the many negotiations in the convention on how to entrench a Scottish parliament. Legislation for entrenchment could simply be repealed by a future UK parliament, but the convention explicitly rejected the option of a referendum. The pledge therefore came as a surprise to the Scottish Liberal Democrats who 'were not at all happy' but then, as Jim recalled, Labour's shadow devolution minister learned about it from him.

In September 1997, the incoming Labour government held a referendum that invited Scottish voters to decide two questions: whether to establish a Scottish parliament and whether it should have tax raising powers. Despite the friction over the referendum, both the Liberal Democrats and Labour (and the SNP) campaigned together for a 'yes, yes' outcome. Jim reflected that he and his colleagues were wrong to oppose the referendum because Scottish voters resoundingly approved both proposals, thereby giving the Scottish parliament 'a political entrenchment which we never going to get with a legal entrenchment.' He was clear that 'you couldn't disband [the parliament] without a referendum.'

The parties then went their own separate ways to fight the first Scottish parliament elections. Jim recalled the 1999 campaign as 'one of the most liberating I have ever fought'. With the Scottish parliament question resolved, all parties were free to debate such matters as education, health and transport. As widely expected, Labour emerged as the largest party but were well short of a majority and, as Jim said, 'we made up the difference.'

Jim then used David's enablers to assess Labour–Liberal Democrat relations when Scotland's first coalition government was formed. The two parties were 'pretty aligned' on policy, 'the two manifestos did overlap' and a subgroup of the negotiating teams were able to synthesise them into a coherent partnership agreement for the incoming coalition government. On David's second and third metrics, the reality of proportional representation was clear: Labour needed the Liberal Democrats form a government. As for his last two drivers, the choice of electoral systems had been made, and the two parties' partnership gave the coalition a working majority in the Scottish parliament.

Jim gave a compelling, incisive account of how the Scottish parliament came about. But I would like to hear more about the Liberal Democrats' experiences, achievements and learnings from the coalition governments between 1999 and 2007. In contrast to the Liberal Democrats at Westminster, and junior coalition partners in comparable countries, the Scottish Liberal Democrats did not suffer a sharp drop in their electoral support at the end of one, let alone two terms in government. Their policy accomplishments and electoral performance during and after the coalition with Labour would be an interesting topic for further study by the Liberal Democrat History Group. ■

Neil Stockley is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group executive.