

Tories including Churchill believed that their best chance of returning to power lay in capturing the ‘Liberal vote’. Ideally, this would mean swallowing up what remained of the mainstream party, itself in seemingly terminal decline. Having a well-publicised association with Liberalism through their partnership with the Liberal Nationals (renamed National Liberals in 1948) might, Tories hoped, ease the path of hesitant Liberals as they contemplated a move to Conservatism. The National Liberals thus acted, in the words of one local Tory chairman, as ‘a stepping-stone for wavering Radicals’.⁶ At the same time, in many constituencies what were, in practice, Conservative MPs were unwilling

to drop their National Liberal nomenclature for fear of forfeiting votes that ‘Conservatives’ tout court could never attract. Prominent Tories such as John Nott and Michael Heseltine fought their first parliamentary elections under the nomenclature of combined local party associations. Not, therefore, until 1968 was reality finally faced. With a minimum of fuss, the National Liberal Council was now disbanded, the party’s funds were handed over to the Conservatives and the National Liberal Party passed into history. ■

Since retirement from academia, David Dutton has focussed his research attention on the political history of South-West Scotland. He is currently President of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural

History and Antiquarian Society (founded 1862). His predecessors in this post include the Liberal cabinet minister, Robert Reid, Lord Loreburn (Lord Chancellor, 1905–12).

- 1 National Library of Wales, papers of the Montgomeryshire Liberal Association, C1988/27/3, executive committee meeting 21 Sep. 1935. Ultimately, Davies returned to, indeed became leader of, the mainstream Liberal Party.
- 2 *Liverpool Post and Mercury*, 12 Nov. 1931.
- 3 Bedfordshire and Luton Archives Service, Herbert Janes papers, JN330, Janes to Francis Felch, 2 Aug. 1946.
- 4 *Ibid.*, JN297, memorandum on Luton’s political situation, May 1946.
- 5 Bodleian Library, Oxford, Woolton MSS 21, fol. 58, James Stuart to Lord Woolton, 25 Jan. 1947.
- 6 Denbighshire Record Office, papers of the Denbighshire Conservative Association, DD/DM/80/9, Lt Col. J. C. Wynne-Edwards, ‘Future Policy’, Nov. 1951.

Reports

Breakthrough: The Liberal Democrat performance in the 2024 election

Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting, 27 January 2025, with Paula Surridge and Dave McCobb. Chair: Lord Wallace of Saltaire
Report by Peter Truesdale

Though a mere six months had elapsed since the 2024 general election, already it seemed a different world. Not, admittedly, quite as different

as the Trumped-up world we now inhabit, but different, nonetheless.
The only section of society that seemed not to have recognised

the change were the print and broadcast media. Not for them: ‘O brave new world, that has such people in’t!’ but rather a continuation of the Labour/Tory duopoly

of yesteryear. The Labour/Tory share of the vote fell from 75.7 per cent in 2019 to 57.4 per cent in 2024. That was treated as a minor tremor, not an earthquake. Over six times as many Lib Dem MPs were elected in 2024 as in 2019. That merited (perhaps) a minor footnote.

In the face of such denial, we were blessed with two speakers who could engage with reality. Professor Paula Surridge of Bristol University and Dave McCobb, director of field campaigns for the Liberal Democrats. Paula deconstructed what had gone on and what the implications were for the future. Dave laid out the steps that the Lib Dems took to ensure that, in whatever circumstances the election was fought, we would maximise our number of seats.

Paula opened by saying that the 2024 election story was not a simple matter. She registered the difference between national vote share and the number of seats gained. The collapse of the Conservative vote dominated the first. The second was more complex, relating to regional and constituency factors. She observed that the Liberal Democrats: '... could not have been better placed for the Conservative Party to collapse'. All those Conservative seats where in 2019 we were in second place, a blessing! She then unpicked the detail of the result and considered what it might portend for the future.

Who had the 2024 Liberal Democrat voters voted for in 2019? It turned out that only 45 per cent of them had voted LibDem in 2019. The main influx came from Labour and the Conservatives, with Labour having a slight edge. The switchers from Labour were much younger than the 45 per cent who had previously voted LibDem. The Conservatives switchers were slightly older. Given the age disparity, it was unsurprising that the Labour switchers were far less likely to be homeowners than those from the Conservatives. The top issues for both were health and the economy.

What of tactical voting? Paula noted that there were more tactical voters amongst the Liberal Democrat vote than amongst any other party. Yet there were very, very few tactical voters for the Greens, Reform or the Conservatives. The notable feature of those who voted tactically for the LibDems was that they particularly disliked the Conservatives. Almost six out of ten gave the Conservatives zero out of ten.

Paula ended by considering whether this latest decline in the dominance of British politics by Conservative and Labour was set to continue. Her conclusion: 'I certainly wouldn't bet against it and, if that's the case, we're going to be in a world of highly fragmented politics. 34 per cent ...' (the Labour national poll share) '... as a winning vote share might actually start to look quite high ...'

Her final point was that the numbers who would vote against the Liberal Democrats was negligible. She concluded: '... in a highly fragmented system where everybody hates politics, everybody's a little bit apathetic, being the party nobody dislikes ... might be a good place to be.'

So much for the world we're in and what prospect it offers us.

Karl Marx noted: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.' We were fortunate, therefore, to have the insights of Dave McCobb and a story focused on change. A story of how we had made our own electoral luck in the 2019–2024 parliament.

Like Paula Surridge, he opened by registering the two key measures of an election: vote share and seats. At the core of his analysis was the argument that the party had, in the build up to and during the 2019 election, pursued a 'PR strategy for a first-past-the-post election' – which did not yield seats. As a result, we were sidelined. We were the fourth party in the Commons behind Conservatives, Labour and the SNP.

The logical consequence of the 2019 result was that we should change to pursue a first-past-the-post strategy for the next first-past-the-post general election. He set out how that had been done. He framed his narrative with two observations:

... we'd underinvested in our ground operation consistently since 2010; we had alienated too many voters for a first-past-the-post election ...

There were too many people who didn't agree with the core proposition of the Lib Dems in 2019 to make as a viable proposition in enough constituencies to get a big enough coalition of voters. And the party was inconsistent and overconfident in the number of seats we were trying to win in 2019. So, a lot of the thinking was about how do we address these core problems?

The diagnosis of the problem was clear: organisational weakness; and not being aligned with voters' concerns.

The first step was investment in growing the party's field-staff team. That was not an end in itself. Rather, the purpose was, in the key constituencies identified, to build large teams of people on the ground united around a common structure and methodology. This was to be augmented by training. It was to be based on clear targets for the core activities; and it was a given that the activity on the ground must overcome the perception that Liberal Democrats can't win.

In the initial stages, the strategy focused on getting four things right:

- generating sufficient literature to get our views across to the voters;

- having more conversations with the voters;
- fundraising to facilitate the literature and conversations with the voters;
- growing the team.

As a result of this strategy, the party invested in local elections. It was a strategy that paid off. Winning a ward or a county division at a local election deflates the idea that the Liberal Democrats can't win in your parliamentary seat. Where wins at a local level happen throughout the course of a parliament, the effect is magnified. Dave gave Woking as an example. The raw numbers are instructive. In 2015 the Conservatives held twenty-four seats and the Liberal Democrats nine. The 2024 locals yielded a council with twenty-four Liberal Democrats and not a single Conservative. Clearly the argument that 'The Lib Dems can't win here' was going to gain no traction in Woking. And the more Liberal Democrat councillors there are, the more local activity and service to residents there is and the bigger the cohort of people who have skin in the game.

It is worth observing that the actions above are considered entirely unnewsworthy by the print and broadcast media. But they make a difference. Even though it is a difference that political commentators ignore.

The same cannot be said of parliamentary by-elections. These

do get coverage but, for the most part, are treated like one-day wonders. Even a string of by-election results does not usually massively shift the media narrative. That is not to say that they are unimportant. They can give insight. It was striking but not surprising that Dave told us that, when the first by-election was due to be called, he went to talk to the voters. He spent the whole day in towns and villages across the Chesham and Amersham constituency. The themes identified were relentlessly played back to the electors during the campaign. Their concerns were our concerns.

A broader exercise of the same kind was done to prepare for the general election. The three themes that emerged were health, the cost of living, and the environment. With low trust in politics, part of the winning mix was that people wanted to vote for a candidate they knew, and who they felt understood them and shared their concerns. This required a profusion of literature featuring the candidate and the key messages. Dave illustrated this with a slide where every new click brought up another picture of smiling Danny Chambers. By the end, dozens of images of Danny beamed out at us. Cheesy? Perhaps. Effective? Certainly.

The message was clear. Strategy alone is not enough. Good tactics maximise the returns. Following victory in the Somerton and Frome by-election, a second wave

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