

12

From Protest to Power – The Progress of the Liberal Democrats

Chris Rennard

The rocky road to 2010

The fifth General Election since the Liberal Party and the SDP merged to form the Liberal Democrats provides an opportunity for some longer-term reflection on the party's electoral progress. These five campaigns took place over a twenty-two-year period since the 'Alliance' parties headed by David Steel and David Owen became the Liberal Democrats, first led by Paddy Ashdown.

The consolidation of the party's position in the 2010 General Election should be seen in the context of the many points during these twenty-two years when the party made progress in spite of relatively frequent forecasts of imminent demise. In the early days, this demise was even feared by those within the party. Two years after the party was formed, Paddy Ashdown would often jokingly refer to the asterisk next to the party's name in opinion poll listings. This indicated that the party might not have any support at all – or that it might be below the 3 per cent margin of error in those polls.

The new party struggled at first to establish itself, while the media were able to make fun of it for saying that it claimed to know how the country should be run but did not know what to call itself. Former supporters of the Liberal/SDP/Alliance could not understand the new 'Social and Liberal Democrat' party name or the short-lived 'Democrat' tag. David Owen led a rump of the SDP that rejected the majority pro-merger view of its members. This group sought to retain the name of the Social Democrat Party formed in 1981 and stood its own candidates in opposition to those of the merged party. These

interventions had a significant effect in parliamentary by-elections between 1988 and 1990¹ and prevented the new party from making the sort of early breakthroughs that could have launched it successfully.

Electoral success at national level eluded the party in its first two years, and it finished the 1989 European Elections with just 6 per cent of the vote and in fourth place, well behind the Greens. Its first leader, Paddy Ashdown, suffered some very poor ratings in those early years (-18 at one point) and it was generally thought that the traditional 'two-party squeeze' had reasserted itself after what was considered to be the 'aberration' of some success for the Alliance in the 1980s. This era had come to an end after the disappointment of only winning twenty-two seats in the 1987 General Election. It is a shame that the only major work on the SDP (Crewe and King, 1995) was published when it looked as though the SDP-Liberal merger might have been a failure, rather than at a later point, after 1997, when it proved to be much more successful.

It was at the very low point of the party's fortunes that I became its Director of Campaigns and Elections in August 1989. Any suggestion then that by 2010 the party would have secured between 17 per cent and 23 per cent in all five General Elections, elected around fifty or sixty seats in the last four of them and entered Government with the party leader becoming Deputy Prime Minister would have seemed fanciful. The start of the post merger recovery was the Eastbourne by-election in October 1990² when a 16,000 Conservative majority was overturned to become a 4,550 Liberal Democrat majority. Lib Dem poll ratings increased from around 8 per cent to 18 per cent after the by-election.

The progress towards 2010 was certainly along a very rocky road. The Liberal Democrats survived the 1992 General Election with twenty seats and a nascent strategy for targeting seats (Denver and Hands, 1997). But the effect of that campaign was for the Conservatives to appear to be invincible, having won a surprise fourth term victory. After a year in which the Liberal Democrats appeared invisible, back-to-back parliamentary by-election victories in Newbury and Christchurch led the Liberal Democrats to rise to within 3 per cent of the Conservatives in the August 1993 ICM poll.

Following the election of Tony Blair as Labour leader, for a few years it looked as though the Liberal Democrats could be made irrelevant, as 'New Labour' took much of the support available for a centre-left party as well as much of the disillusioned Conservative vote. The Lib Dem victory in Littleborough & Saddleworth in 1995, however, showed

that the party's campaign skills could still lead the party to capture Conservative seats despite high-profile Labour challenges. These skills brought about the party's big breakthrough in the 1997 General Election campaign when its number of MPs rose from eighteen (estimate based on the new boundaries if they had existed in 1992) to forty-six. This was in spite of the fact that the Lib Dems were on just 9.5 per cent in an opinion poll in the December before the 1997 General Election and began that campaign with another poll rating of just 11 per cent. The national campaign increased support to 17 per cent of the vote on polling day (Holme and Holmes, 1998).

The resignation in 1999 of Paddy Ashdown, who had transformed his image to become the most popular party leader in the country, caused another crisis of confidence for the party. In his early years as leader, Charles Kennedy struggled to assert any sense of authority without the hugely increased media profile that comes to a Lib Dem leader with a General Election. Confidence that the party could retain its newly won seats came from the Romsey by-election, when a seat that was very safe for the Conservatives, even in 1997, went Liberal Democrat in 2000. Charles Kennedy became the outstanding leader in the 2001 General Election and the national campaign raised the party's share of the vote from around 13 per cent in polls at the start of the campaign to a respectable 19 per cent of the vote in June 2001 (Rennard, 2002).

The 2005 General Election proved to be the party's most successful in terms of seats won. Parliamentary by-election successes at Brent East and Leicester South in 2003 and 2004, the Iraq War and protests over Labour's introduction of tuition fees helped the party to begin that campaign at around 20 per cent in the polls. But the party failed to build significantly on this position during the campaign. It struggled to recover from the Manifesto launch that became a media disaster for Charles Kennedy two days after the birth of his son. But this struggle succeeded in the last two weeks of the campaign with another series of strong TV performances by Charles Kennedy and more identification of the Lib Dems with popular policies than had been the case in previous elections. The national campaign eventually added 1 or 2 per cent to the starting position so that the party reached an eventual vote share of 22 per cent. The party won a record sixty-two seats at Westminster with a net loss of just two seats to the Tories, twelve gains from Labour and one from Plaid Cymru (Rennard, 2007).

The party's crisis management capability was severely tested in the aftermath of the 2005 campaign. Charles Kennedy resigned in January 2006 amid much turmoil in the party and another slump in poll ratings.

Bitter divisions among the MPs were widely reported over how and why Charles Kennedy resigned.³ Early 2006 was another period in which many commentators considered the party to be more or less finished. A YouGov poll rating of 13 per cent was widely reported. But the party's fortunes again appeared to be restored in the classic way of the party by winning an astonishing parliamentary by-election in Dunfermline and West Fife. This by-election probably helped neighbouring MP Sir Menzies Campbell to become leader in March and restored confidence and support for the party. Preparations for a potential 2007 General Election began in earnest during the summer of 2006.

The Liberal Democrat strategy for survival and growth

Before looking at the start of Liberal Democrat preparations for the General Election that eventually came in 2010, it is worth reflecting on the factors that enabled the party to survive and prosper at national level during this period.

I would point to the following four factors:

- 1) *The party's local government base.* The Liberal Party had only a handful of Councillors in the 1960s, building to just over 1,000 by 1979. But the early pioneers of what the party called 'community politics' also paved the way for an effective electoral advance in local government. The growth to over 4,000 Councillors representing around 20 per cent of the local council seats in Britain gave the party something to focus on in most areas, a taste of electoral success and a demonstration of how effective campaigning and organisation, based on target campaigns, could produce a breakthrough. The party gained credibility and profile from winning seats and then taking over control of local councils. There was a very strong correlation between local government success and the twenty-eight seats gained in the 1997 General Election.
- 2) *The parliamentary by-elections.* It was the 'shock' win at Eastbourne in October 1990 that saved the merged party – and probably also triggered the downfall of Mrs Thatcher as Prime Minister six weeks later when Conservative MPs panicked in response to the Lib Dem success. The 16,000 Conservative majority was overturned with a 20 per cent swing by a party with just 8 per cent support in the polls at the time. The eleven Liberal Democrat parliamentary by-election victories between 1990 and 2006 almost all gave the party very significant boosts to profile, poll ratings, credibility, morale and funds.

AQ1

Newbury in 1993 re-established the party after 1992, and the crushing 22,000 majority with a 28 per cent swing, followed by an even greater swing of 35 per cent in Christchurch, showed the party to be a challenger to the other two main parties. The gain of Romsey from the Tories in 2000 took the wind out of William Hague's sails. Brent East and Leicester South in 2003 and 2004 showed how the party could advance against Labour. The gain of Dunfermline & West Fife in 2006 rescued a party that otherwise appeared to face oblivion after the resignation of Charles Kennedy.

- 3) *The target seat approach.* The old political science textbooks assumed that the constituency campaign made little difference to the result in a General Election. Most of the people in senior positions in all the parties agreed. But a study of some very diverse constituencies showed how a handful of Liberal MPs, such as David Penhaligon in Cornwall, Richard Wainwright in Yorkshire and David Alton in Liverpool, had consistently defied national swings and expectations. The campaign which I ran for David Alton in the Liverpool Mossley Hill constituency in 1983 saw a 14 per cent swing to the party (at a time when the Conservatives won a 144 seat majority nationally). Liberals and Liberal Democrats had elected Councillors and won parliamentary by-elections by concentrating resources (skills, people and money) on their target council wards, and in the 1990s began to develop this approach to target parliamentary constituencies. There were, of course, sceptics in the party, but the authority that came with overseeing the successful by-election campaigns helped persuade the party to invest much of its limited resources towards the target seats. A huge differential developed between the results that would have been suggested by a uniform national swing and the results achieved in the seats that were most closely targeted. The highest swing from Conservative to Lib Dem in 1997 was the 18 per cent achieved in Sheffield Hallam. The target seat strategy was the basis of the twenty-eight gains in 1997, eight further gains in 2001 and sixteen gains in 2005.
- 4) *The leaders.* The crucial role of the leader is perhaps even more important to the standing of the Liberal Democrats across Great Britain than it is to other parties. Liberal Democrat leaders (like Liberal leaders before them, such as David Steel) have all struggled to establish significant public profiles prior to their first General Election campaign. But the first election campaigns of David Steel (1979), Paddy Ashdown (1992), Charles Kennedy (2001) and Nick Clegg (2010) were tremendously successful in establishing them with very positive

profiles. The public standing that they established in these campaigns has given a much clearer and more prominent profile to the party generally. This has meant that they have been used extensively to promote the party's candidates in Parliamentary by-elections and in General Elections. The leader's national tours have been the main focus of the party's national campaigns and provided most of the positive coverage for the party that has helped to raise the party's level of support during those campaigns.

Much, of course, was also owed to some outstanding individuals among the party's parliamentarians (at every level), candidates, Councillors, staff and generous donors.

The party elected Members of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly who exercised power in coalition, Members of the European Parliament (who sometimes acted as regional leaders for the party) and Councillors who demonstrated the capacity to run their local authorities with majority administrations or in balance of power situations. Their efforts, and those who worked in their election campaigns and the parliamentary by-elections in particular, often rescued the party when it was in difficulty and provided the sense of momentum required for it to prosper.

The 2010 campaign

Liberal Democrat General Election campaigns have always been planned on two levels – but with an aim of successfully integrating the main messages. What I termed, for internal party purposes, the 'ground war' was all about the target seat campaign (identifying the seats and candidates, training, leaflets, local media, funding and concentrating efforts). The 'air war' was about the national media campaign and messaging guided by market research, including the manifesto, press conferences, speeches and election broadcasts. National policy messages were made relevant locally and local campaign issues identified and made the focus of attention for the constituency campaigns.

Since the party nationally began taking a very serious approach to targeting at the Westminster level in 1994, efforts in many key constituencies remained continuous. The aim following the 1997 breakthrough was to focus on 'incumbency protection' as well as future gains. Only two of the twenty-eight gains made in 1997 were lost in 2001,⁴ although three more of them were lost in 2005. Resources to fund key seat operations had always run dry in the year or two after a General Election. The

effective start of the 'ground war' for 2010 was therefore not until 2006 but a full four years before the eventual polling day. With much more limited resources than those available to other parties, it was necessary to plan carefully the national expenditure that supported key seats (held and target) in 2006 and 2007 in anticipation of a General Election in 2007. The level of support for these seats was far greater and over a much longer period of time than in any previous Parliament. Major training events for MPs and target seat candidates were held during this period. Around two dozen Campaign Officers supported clusters of held and target seats to promote best practice, and a record number of professional agents (over eighty) were employed in the key seats from this period through to polling day.

The party's new Director of Campaigns, Hilary Stephenson, oversaw the introduction of Key Performance Indicators to carefully monitor progress in the key seats. Regular review meetings enabled the party to promote the best campaigning approaches that had been developed over the last fifteen years or so. But it also became plain that the other parties had now shifted their attention and much greater resources to the sort of key seat strategy that the Liberal Democrats had pioneered in the previous three General Elections. Liberal Democrats no longer enjoyed an effective monopoly on literature and direct mail delivered in these battleground seats. MPs from other parties that were under threat followed many aspects of the model incumbency protection techniques used so effectively by their Liberal Democrat rivals (some of these tactics having always been the policy of very good constituency MPs).

In some respects, Liberal Democrats felt that the 'ground war' battles of the 2010 General Election were like those of the First World War, in that it proved very difficult to make substantial progress when MPs from other parties were effectively well dug in. The national campaign and Nick Clegg's charismatic leadership gave a big boost to all Liberal Democrat constituency campaigns. But the appearance of such success also made it harder for the party to keep its activists focused on a realistic number of winnable seats as unrealistic hopes of victory rose in very many other seats.

Preparations for a better General Election 'air war' strategy also began soon after the 2005 General Election. The relative success of the 2005 campaign had brought more resource into the coffers of the parliamentary party (the party's 'Short' money increased as a result of the additional MPs and number of votes). A lack of integration between the Leader's operation, the party's policy function, the MPs' collective research team and the overall coordination of Policy and

Communications with a much too slender media team were identified as problems to address. The result of a review that I initiated was the merging of Policy and Research functions, a significant expansion of the media team and the appointment under me as Chief Executive of an overall Director of Policy and Communications.

This restructuring could not prevent the damage done to the party's reputation by the internal splits following the 2005 General Election. But it did help to provide a much sharper focus for how the party would eventually approach the 'air war' in the 2010 campaign. In the meantime it was fully tested as the party geared up for an Autumn 2007 General Election and quickly produced a campaign plan, draft manifesto, leader's tour schedule, election budget, press conference schedule, drafts of all election leaflets, and so forth.

If there had been a General Election in 2007 or 2009, I would have remained in place to oversee it. But, having overseen all of the preparations for the General Election campaign until then, I handed over my responsibilities as Chief Executive to Chris Fox in the summer of 2009. I had initially appointed him as Director of Policy and Communications. John Sharkey (whom I had made my Deputy Chair of the General Election campaign) was asked in the autumn to Chair the Campaign and Jonny Oates (whom I had also first appointed as Director of Policy and Communications) returned as Director of General Election Communications.

The post-2007 financial crisis inevitably meant that there was a quite different Manifesto, produced by a team led by Danny Alexander, than would have been the case previously. The party focused on four clear themes ('Four Steps to Fairness') based on making the tax system fairer for those on middle and lower incomes, the pupil premium to boost education spending on children from the most deprived backgrounds, moves to a much more sustainable and greener economy, and measures of political and constitutional reform. These were simultaneously the basis for a negotiation with any other party in the event that no party achieved an overall majority.

The launch of the Manifesto was probably the party's most successful ever. Its timing on the eve of the first leaders' debate helped, in my view, to warm up the electorate for the charms of Nick Clegg the following evening. Nick's performances in the leaders' debates were no surprise to me. I had met him in the 1990s before he had thought seriously about becoming an MEP or MP. I had been convinced then that he would one day be the leader of the party, and my view is that he won the party leadership election in December 2007 because of his performances

at the members' hustings meetings. The launch of 'Cleggmania' and the effective use of 'I agree with Nick' posters and stickers appeared to transform the election.

It is my view that Nick would probably have done just as well during the course of the campaign even without the leaders' debates. His standing was rising before the first one took place, and I believe that it would have increased steadily with daily press conferences and the sort of national tour that had boosted Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy previously. The first debate accelerated this process massively, but the resulting attacks from most of the print media made it hard to sustain. The nature of the three debates also meant that much of the policy focus was on areas such as immigration, which previous Liberal Democrat election campaigns had chosen not to major on.

The net loss of six seats seemed like a terrible disappointment on the night (with ten seats missed by less than a thousand votes) but this was softened by the new high watermark in terms of vote share (23 per cent). With hindsight, two factors prevented the Conservative overall majority that I expected. First, Labour did well enough with their own incumbency protection programme to deprive the Conservatives of many of the gains that they might have made (just as Liberal Democrats had done in key marginal seats like Torbay). Second, I was surprised by the relative weakness and inconsistency of the Conservatives' national messaging. The Liberal Democrats aimed to get into a position of power. But, with Gordon Brown as leader, Labour was never likely to do well enough to make a coalition with the Liberal Democrats a very serious option. The result left the Liberal Democrats in a position of power but with little real choice of coalition partners and thereby unable to exercise the balance of power between competing options. Nevertheless, the party that was always criticised as the recipient of protest votes has in the end become a party of power across the UK.

Notes

1. The 'Owenite' SDP was formally wound up after the humiliation of polling only a third of the votes of the Monster Raving Loony Party in the Bootle parliamentary by-election of May 1990. I identified this by-election as being one of considerable significance because the party had to contend with both 'continuing Liberal' and 'continuing SDP' candidates. By almost taking second place and humiliating Owen's party into disbanding, this helped the Liberal Democrats clear the path to a breakthrough in the Eastbourne by-election in October of that year.

2. My decision to fight the Eastbourne by-election to win was initially opposed by Paddy Ashdown, whose first thought was that we should not contest it (see *Ashdown Diaries*, Vol. I, and Ashdown's memoirs *A Fortunate Life*).
3. The most comprehensive account of this period is in Greg Hurst's book, *Charles Kennedy – a Tragic Flaw*.

AQ2 4. See Andrew Russell and Ed Fieldhouse, *Neither left nor right? The Liberal Democrats and the electorate* for more on this – the most comprehensive side of the Liberal Democrats to date.

References

- Ashdown, P. (2000) *The Ashdown Diaries Volume 1: 1988–1997*. London: Penguin.
- Ashdown, P. (2009) *A Fortunate Life*. London: Aurum.
- Crewe, I. and King, A. (1995) *The SDP: the Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- AQ3 Denver and Hands (1997). *Modern Constituency Electioneering: Local Campaigning in the 1992 General Election*. London: Frank Cass.
- Holme, R. and Holmes, A. (1998) 'Sausages or Policemen?' in Crewe, I., Gosschalk, B. and Bartle, J. (eds) *Political communications: why Labour won the general election of 1997*. London: Frank Cass.
- Hurst, G. (2006) *Charles Kennedy: A Tragic Flaw*. London: Politico's.
- Rennard, C. (2002) 'The Liberal Democrat campaign', in Bartle, J., Atkinson, S. and Mortimore, R. (eds) *Political Communications: The General Election Campaign of 2001*. London: Frank Cass.
- Rennard, C. (2007) 'A new high water mark for the Liberal Democrats', in Wring, D., Green, J., Mortimore, R. and Atkinson, S. (eds) *Political Communications: The General Election Campaign of 2005*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Russell, A. and Fieldhouse, E. (2005) *Neither left nor right? The Liberal Democrats and the electorate*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.