

Why Centrism Doesn't Work for Minor Parties

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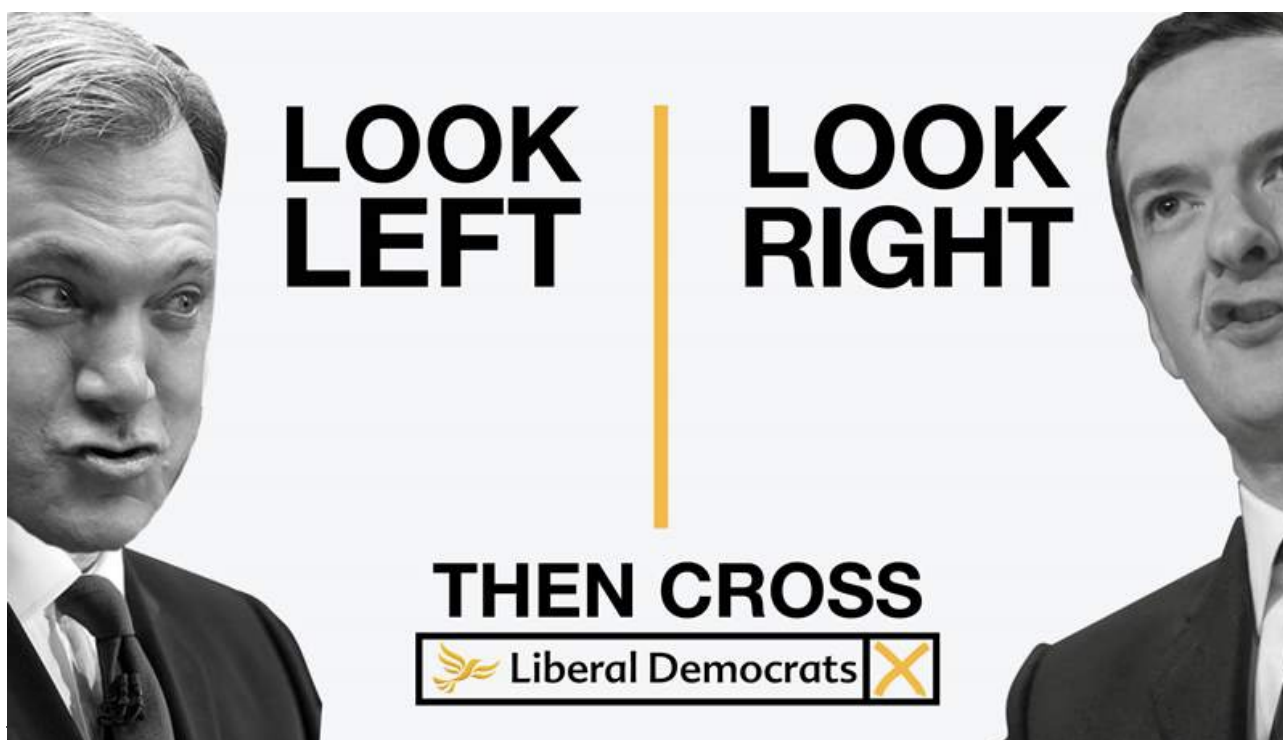
Introduction

It is often observed in British politics that to succeed electorally, political parties should stick to the centre ground. Under Nick Clegg's leadership, centrism was placed at the forefront of how the Liberal Democrat Party positioned itself to the public. While he was correct to recognise that the main dynamic in British politics is currently not illiberal/authoritarian versus liberal, but right versus left, he was wrong to conclude that the Party's response should be centrism. The 2015 General Election showed us that pursuing a centrist strategy was a catastrophic error. As Cambridge's former MP and City Council Leader Professor David Howarth told us immediately after the General Election last year, it is something 'we must never do again'.¹

Liberal Democrats who still think centrism can take the Party to success hold a paradoxical stance where their preference over the Party's positioning is incompatible with it achieving a General Election breakthrough. More generally, many do not fully understand why centrism will not work, failing to realise its impact upon wider strategy and thinking. The electoral reality for most minor parties means that they need to pick a left/right side and work within it - especially one whose support is geographically dissipated and which operates under a First-Past-The-Post system. This pamphlet will argue that for simple, compelling and strategic reasons, the Party should not pick the Right, but the Left. This will be an unpalatable proposition for some, but it is vital that this dilemma be addressed so that any Liberal Democrat fight back is based on solid foundations.

Centrism can work as a strategy, but usually only for major parties

A centrist position can work as a short term electoral strategy for the main parties of the left and right; but for most minor parties, it doesn't work at all. This is because it is much safer for left- or right-inclined voters to continue support a centrist major Party, such as Tony Blair's 'New Labour'. It seems unlikely that a vote for them will directly lead to the other main Party getting into power. By contrast, small centrist parties are perceived as



¹ David Howarth, '[Thoughts on the Way Forward](#)', *Social Liberal Forum*, 9 May 2015.

being prepared to lend support to either the left or the right which, as we saw in 2015 (but should have learned from the past) is a recipe for being aggressively squeezed.

The Party's strategy during the last Parliament played perfectly into its opponent's hands. The usual warning at General Elections from the main two parties that a vote for the Liberal Democrats could be a vote for the other main party, resonated very well thanks to a Lib Dem campaign that reinforced this as distinctly possible at almost every turn – affirming both the Party's centrist credentials and setting out what Lib Dems would try to bring to a coalition with either main party. Far from aligning the Party with more voters, the



Party's pitch worked in tandem with our opponents', to help generate a lot of fear about voting Lib Dem. Our invitation to look left, look right, and then cross was not a route to success, but an invitation to get run over.²

Moving away from centrism was key to the Party's 1997 breakthrough

2015 wasn't the first time in recent history this strategy had failed. Keen students of history, or those who have been around liberal politics long enough, will remember that the Alliance pursued a centrist strategy in the 1980s. Though dogged by questions over who it would side with in a hung parliament, in 1983 it aspired to build a big enough coalition of support so that it could form a Government in its own right – not readily rely on either Labour or the Conservatives and so get caught in either of these parties' orbits.

High on ambition and coming within 2% of second place in the national vote, the votes it received in 1983 spectacularly and notoriously failed to translate into seats under First-Past-The-Post. Out of the 633 seats contested, it achieved 314 second places, but only 23 all-important first places. Nationally, the Alliance was still some way off hitting a threshold where its vote share translated into many gains. If the Alliance did not get centrism to work under the electoral system from a much stronger position during the 1980s, there should have been little doubt to its inappropriateness in the 2010s.

As Lib Dem blogger Nick Barlow set out in 2015 (after writing a Master's Degree dissertation on Liberal Democrat positioning and strategy), it is uncommon for liberal

² Laura Archer, '[Look Right, Look Left, Then Cross with the Liberal Democrats](#)', *Liberal Democrats website*, 26 March 2015.

parties to flirt with centrism and, in the few countries where it has previously worked well, the party political landscape has been very different from Britain's.³ In these countries the main parties of the left and right sometimes form Governments with each other (forming a grand coalition), which has the effect of playing down the left versus right dynamic in political debate and accentuating an illiberal/liberal one. Barlow found that where liberal parties were otherwise still centrist they would have a strong appeal beyond centrism and, using Europe as an example, the only European party he could find operating in this way was the Finnish Centre Party, which also firmly operates as an agrarian party. He noted:

'In short, it is possible for a liberal party to alternate between supporting governments of left and right, but it only happens in systems with three or four parties where the liberal party has created a distinct ideology for itself beyond mere centrism, and where the parties of left and right are close together and can form governments with each other, excluding the liberal party. When those conditions don't apply – especially when there are more parties in the system – it's rare to find a liberal party remaining in the centre. Instead, they tend to pick a side and work within it, not alternating from one to the other.'

In countries with an especially strong liberal political culture and multi-party system, two liberal parties are sometimes found. This can currently be witnessed in The Netherlands, Denmark and Estonia. At a national level these parties do not tend to align with each other, but with other parties within a respective right or left wing bloc. In these countries, national Governments usually have a liberal pillar (fulfilling the desire of some centrist Lib Dems for Governments of either left or right to have a liberal voice), but due to the inclusion of one liberal party at a time. If we look at other countries in the world with a sole liberal party, we find the parties (whether a major or minor one) usually also operate as either of the left or right.

Barlow argues that equidistance can be effective for the Liberal Democrats in winning votes (it certainly was far more so in the 1980s, than after 2010), but not in winning seats and argues that moving away from equidistance was key to its breakthrough in 1997, when the number of its MPs elected were twice that in 1992.⁴ The breakthrough, which was entirely at the expense of the Conservatives, occurred despite the party losing national vote share, and New Labour encroaching onto centrist ground. Barlow argues that: 'it wasn't just that the party got better at targeting seats, but that the way the party had positioned itself made it more attractive to tactical anti-Tory voters', and cites British Election Study data to back this up: '... at the 1992 election, 44% of voters thought the Liberal Democrats were closer to the Tories, 38% to Labour, but by 1997 that had shifted to 56% saying closer to Labour, and just 10% to the Tories'.⁵

It is certainly the case that by 1997 the Party was more able to squeeze anti-Tory votes because it had finally picked a side. The process of realignment began immediately after the 1992 election with Paddy Ashdown's Chard Speech (which came two years

³ Nick Barlow, 'European Liberal Parties Don't Alternate Between Governments of Left and Right Anymore', nickbarlow.com, 5 July 2015.

⁴ Nick Barlow, 'Equidistance is Good at Winning Votes, But Not Seats', nickbarlow.com, 23 September 2015.

⁵ *Ibid.*

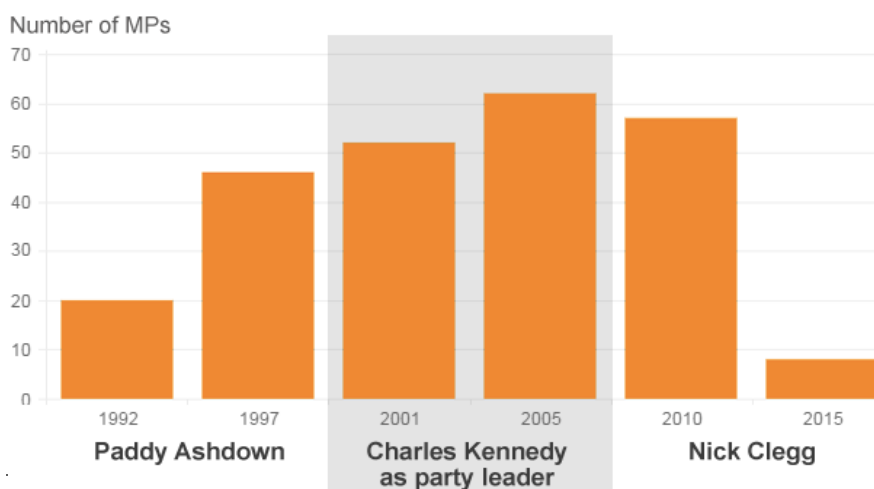
before the uber-centrist Blair became Labour leader).⁶ In the run up to 1987 election the Alliance suffered from a perception that it was conflicted about which major party it would prefer to support in a hung parliament (with SDP Leader David Owen perceived as favouring Thatcher's Conservatives, and Liberal Leader David Steel preferring Kinnock's Labour). By 1992 the Party had made its position clear - it was 'equidistant' between Labour and Tories – but this did little to resolve the issue and it was plagued by queries of who it would support in a hung Parliament during the 1992 Election campaign. But the Chard Speech kick started moves towards the Party again operating within the left, with Ashdown urging Liberal Democrats 'to work with others to assemble the ideas around which a non-socialist alternative to the Conservatives can be constructed.' The formal abandonment of equidistance - and so further confirmation of the Party operating within the left - was indirectly endorsed by the 1995 Conference, which accepted that year's Federal Executive annual report that stated the Conservatives would 'not be sustained in power by the Liberal Democrats'. This provided the Party with something of its own, albeit lower key, Clause 4 moment. However, as Liberal Democrat Director of Strategy and Planning (from 1995 to 1997), Alan Leaman, observes, 'the abandonment of equidistance was essentially a negative act – Liberal Democrats would not put the Conservatives back into office'⁷. This subtle approach could offer a useful lesson for future public positioning.

However, there were other factors at play behind the Party obtaining many more all-important first places in '97 than just squeezing anti-Tory votes. Its success was not just aided by the extent of Tory sleaze and unpopularity, but also due to Labour itself becoming more moderate. This made it easier for Liberal Democrats in target seats to gain 'soft Conservative' voters (as some Party canvassers would describe them) because the prospect of the Lib Dems propping up Labour became less worrisome for many of these voters. At the same time, Labour found it could squeeze more former Lib Dem voters in its marginal seats against the Tories. Whether by luck or design, the Lib Dems and Labour began operating in a way that was mutually beneficial – they began operating together as a more effective left wing bloc.

Further strides were made by the Party after 1997 under the stewardship of Charles Kennedy. The Government job-seeking-cosiness with Labour during the later Ashdown years was ushered away and the Party began to further differentiate itself from Labour. While managing to broadly maintain its coalition of existing support, it started to gain more support from the left.

The Party continued to operate within the left wing block, but now increasingly at Labour's expense, furthering a long held ambition of some (including famously, two-time Party leader Jo Grimond and later, as expressed during his campaign to be Leader, Ashdown himself) for

Seats won by Liberal Democrats at general elections



⁶ Paddy Ashdown, 'The Chard Speech, 9 May 1992', *Liberal Democrat History Group*, quoted from Duncan Brack and Tony Little, *Great Liberal Speeches* (London: Politico's, 2001).

⁷ Alan Leaman, 'Ending Equidistance', *Journal of Liberal History*, 19, Summer 1998, pp. 3-10.

the Party to eventually supplant Labour, to again become Britain's main progressive force (since the summer of 2015 it appears the Canadian Liberals have done precisely this at a Federal level at largely the left wing New Democratic Party's expense).⁸

The Kennedy era demonstrated – in sharper contrast to Ashdown's – that operating as a left-wing party did not mean the Party had to surrender autonomy to Labour. It also showed that the Party did not (unlike under Clegg) have to make how it self-defined according to the left/ right scale the major part of its pitch to voters, which it largely refrained from doing, instead defining itself in terms of its liberalism. Under Kennedy, the Party tried to make clear that Liberalism was the key dynamic it brought to political leadership, providing both differentiation and an honouring of core principles.

Many Liberal Democrats have yet to break free from the centrist strategy's inhibiting logic

Embarrassingly for Ashdown, it would appear from his chairing of the 2015 election campaign that he did not appreciate the shortcomings of centrism. This was despite arguments against it and moving away from equidistance being key to his 1997 electoral breakthrough (when titling his autobiography *A Fortunate Life* it seems he was genuinely not kidding).

Remarkably, Nick Clegg's last Head of Strategy and the Party's 2015 General Election Director of Strategy, Ryan Coetzee, has questioned the feasibility of the Party positioning itself to be able to alternate between coalitions of the left or right, but only expressed doubt after it was too late. In a post-election comment piece in late May 2015 he wrote:

*'My tentative conclusion is 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. If we can't win the fight for proportional representation, it may be that we have either to stay in opposition or pick a side.'*⁹

Despite this, it is evident from the implications of what some communicate – whether in speeches, comments pieces or just online debates - that the argument against centrism within the Party has not been fully won nor properly understood, and hence why I offer this article. In some cases members continue to mistake the centrist major party strategy as suitable for a minor party. By way of example, in an October 2015 blog post entitled 'In Defence of Centrism', Lib Dem blogger Harry Samuels argues that at the Election 'To the left, we lost trust, and to the right, in a national election with perceived danger, we were too risky a vote. But none of this says anything about centrism ... if we look at the most successful politicians of the past two decades, Blair and Cameron (whether we like that description or not, it is objectively true), both succeeded by appealing to the economically centrist, socially liberal values in most British people.'¹⁰

In other cases, members continue to give false hope to this flawed approach by apportioning blame for its and other shortcomings elsewhere. May 2015 was not some kind of freak natural disaster or a 'tidal wave' (as David Laws described it), but an event

⁸ Éric Grenier, 'ANALYSIS: Liberals Increase Support Since Election, Early Polls Suggest', *CBC News*, 2 March 2016.

⁹ Ryan Coetzee, 'The Liberal Democrats Must Reunite, Rebuild, or Remain in Opposition', *Guardian*, 22 May 2015.

¹⁰ Harry Samuels, 'In Defence of Centrism', *Politics and Psephology* blog, 8 October 2015.

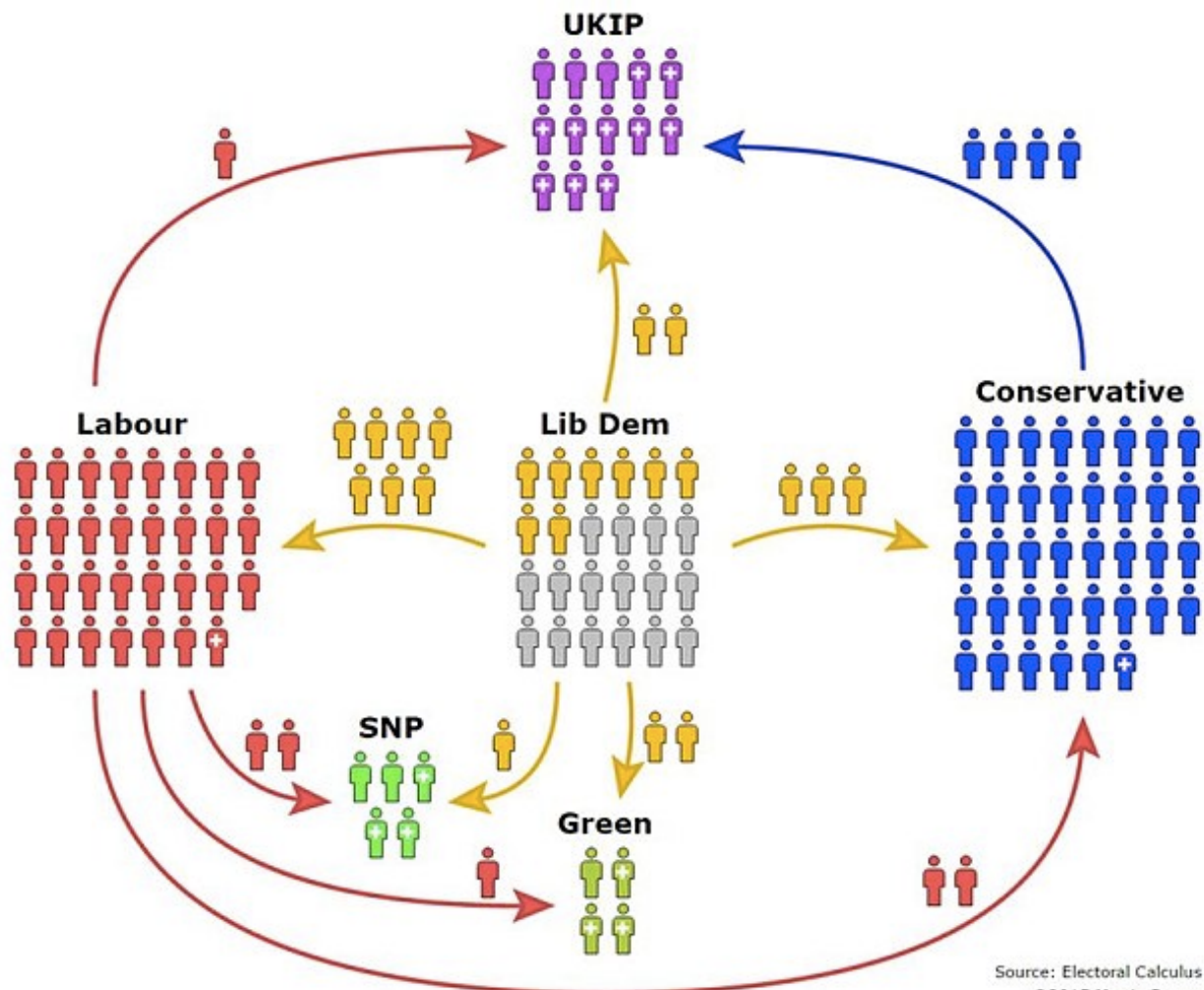
we were heavily able to influence.¹¹ Inviting pity for the Party as some have, blaming pollsters for the aggressive squeeze we received at the 2015 election (as Ashdown would have us do),¹² or encouraging members to believe voters will realise their mistake (and experience as Clegg argues ‘buyer’s remorse’)¹³ is not helpful when the Party is, to a large extent, responsible for where it finds itself. Centristism has never worked out well for the Liberal Democrats at Westminster, and is part of the reason the Lib Dem vote imploded so spectacularly in May.

If not overtly supporting a centrist strategy, then many Liberal Democrats are still caught in flawed centrist thinking. The Party’s priority cannot be to get into Government at Westminster as soon as is possible when it cannot readily alternate between supporting the left and right. I believe Labour’s move to the left under Corbyn also presents little new opportunity for centrism.

If Labour takes a harder left position then a centrist Liberal Democrat Party risks an even more aggressive squeeze in 2020, as Labour’s position will further stretch and accentuate the left right dynamic in British politics. In this instance, the Party might win some votes from Labour moving to the left, but it will likely find getting more all-important first places harder too. In fact, by Corbyn wishing Labour to assume some positions that are also attractive to s liberal voters (deescalating the international arms race, advocating more infrastructure spending, and reversing marketising reforms to public services that

ELECTION 2015

WHOSE VOTES WENT WHERE



demand universal provision and are natural monopolies), he makes a key Lib Dem challenge to differentiate and obtain distinctiveness harder. Corbyn is bad news for the Lib Dem revival.

Centrism in the 2010s was not devised according to solid evidence or popular demand, but was a lazily borrowed, misguided and disastrous approach adopted to suit the preferences of a small group who (rather than devising possible exit strategies from coalition with its historic arch opponent) hoped to increase the chances of sustaining government jobs. Although centrism accords with the personal preferences of some Lib Dems and can, on the face of it, seem like a sensible strategy, it is a recipe with devastating consequences. While the Party's emphasis on centrism has (thankfully) tapered since the Election, such was its emphasis during the coalition years that centrism has become synonymous with the Party in the eyes of some voters and new members, but as long as the Party prevaricates on this issue, its decision making will be undermined and accruing many more first places will be hard to come by. There was much to read between the lines of the Campaigns and Communications Committee's review of the 2015 election but, while it criticised aspects of the centrist strategy, including its messaging, it did not directly criticise the strategy itself.¹⁴

Once the deficiencies of a centrist approach is appreciated it becomes easier to comprehend why the coalition of support that had been knitted together within held seats during the 1990s and 2000s had by 2015 been spectacularly pulled to pieces. By 2015, not only did the Party have trust issues and sleaze of its own to contend with, but very many voters of an anti-Tory leaning went elsewhere. Similarly, soft Conservative voters had become more anxious of the left, including fearing how the rise of the SNP could push a Labour Government further to left or make it less stable, and so voted Tory rather than Lib Dem, to help avoid it.

It must be noted that far from being an unlucky event for Lib Dems, the SNP's success was significantly boosted by the Lib Dem's multi-faceted betrayal of anti-Tory and progressive voters during the coalition years. Moving to the centre was supposed to yield some electoral dividend, but votes were lost left, right and centre.

Why the party has to work within the left rather than the right

If the Party's much-heralded 'fight back' slogan is to avoid fighting back against its former voters, working against the logic of the electoral system, or to not act as a mere rallying call aiming to distract the public from our recent mistakes, then the Party must accept the key dilemma of having to 'pick a side'. Only then will it be a meaningful return that will lead to us getting more MPs elected. I believe for strategic reasons alone the Party must choose the left. While special accommodation should be made for right-leaning Liberal Democrats, the case that the Party should again be allowed to operate on the left is overwhelmingly in the common interest.

In July 2015, Howarth and Pack set out their 'How to rebuild a core vote' strategy and argued that, as a values based Party, the Liberal Democrats should seek to build a core vote of people who hold a basic liberal outlook, e.g. tolerance and openness to others. They calculated this to comprise about 38% of the electorate.¹⁵ They similarly recognised that the major dynamic of British politics is however not liberal/ illiberal, but left/ right, observing that '... contrary to the repeated hopes of Liberal (and Liberal Democrat) politicians, much of politics has been fought out for many decades not in the field of

¹⁴ Campaigns & Communications Committee, *2015 Election Review* (London: Liberal Democrats, 2015).

¹⁵ David Howarth and Mark Pack, *The 20% Strategy: Building a Core Vote for the Liberal Democrats* (Cambridge: Howarth and Pack, 2015).

openness, tolerance and internationalism but in the field of economics'. When they then looked at the economic views of these voters with a broadly liberal outlook, they found that the group was skewed towards the left, observing:

*'about a fifth put themselves right of centre on whether the government should redistribute incomes, about a fifth are centrists and three fifths are left of centre, of whom one in three are very strongly in favour of redistribution and two out of three somewhat in favour. Similarly on questions about privatisation, nationalisation and tax and spend, the median tolerant and open voter is on the centre-left. YouGov's profile of Liberal Democrat voters produces a similar result and what we know of the post-May 2015 new members is that many were motivated by left-of-centre issues such as proposed cuts in social security benefits and threats to employment protection.'*¹⁶

Member surveys by *Lib Dem Voice* are completed by a self-selecting sample, but are the only mass member surveys currently conducted where the results are made freely available. They too have found the Party's membership is skewed towards the left, most recently finding in October 2014 10% self-defining as centre-right, 25% as centrist and 49% as centre-left.¹⁷

If we account for the Liberal Party only standing in a small fraction of seats in the 1955 and 1959 elections and a little over half of seats at the 1964 Election as did the Liberal Democrats in 2015 (the deposit threshold from 1918 to 1985 was 12.5%), the 2015 Election result is arguably the worst in the history of the Party and its predecessor parties. If we compare constituency results from 2015 with those where the Liberals also stood in the supposed nadir of the mid to late 1950s, we find generally that the Lib Dems in 2015 performed the worse. As Dr Seth Thevoz told us last year through the Social Liberal Forum, in 2015 the Party only obtained 63 second places – a tiny fraction of those obtained in 1983 or at any other election since the 1950s.¹⁸ However, if we look at the 8 held seats and 50 next most winnable by size of majority to overcome (areas from which any fight back at Westminster is to be based), our nearest competitor is the Conservatives in 37, Labour in 10 and the SNP in 11.¹⁹

It could be argued that by aligning with the Conservatives on the economy, as Nick Clegg tried to ensure we did during coalition, that the Party began to encroach onto right-wing territory. The only seat in 2015 where the Party led an overtly right alliance to success however was in Sheffield Hallam. Our candidate was Nick Clegg, an impassioned advocate of the Lib Dem-Con coalition, so a highly convincing figurehead for anti-Labour voters. The Lib Dems threw enormous energy and resources at the seat (in part trying to save the Leader from some of the consequences of their leadership), while the central Conservative Party did little to resist their vote being squeezed in favour of their important Parliamentary ally (the Conservatives came second in the seat back in 2010). This seat was fought in exceptional conditions, pointing to the great difficulty of its success being replicated elsewhere. Indeed, the only other time in living memory that the Party flirted with

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁷ Stephen Tall, 'Economic Liberals or Social Liberals? Pragmatists or Ideologues? How Lib Dem Members Describe Their Own Political Identity', *Lib Dem Voice*, 18 October 2014.

¹⁸ Seth Thévoz, 'Lib Dem Runners-Up: Just How Bad Things Are', *Social Liberal Forum*, 28 May 2015.

¹⁹ 'Liberal Democrat Target Seats', *UK Polling Report*, June 2015.

right-wing economic positions was during its low point in the 1950s (which should serve as another stark reminder of the electoral waste land that awaits British liberals on the right).

In contrast to Sheffield Hallam - and if we ignore forthcoming boundary changes and exclude Scotland - we find that the large majority of our target seats are susceptible to anti-Tory challenge. The experiences of 1997 and 2015 expose as fallacious the argument that Liberal Democrats need to move rightwards to beat the Conservatives – history shows the Party does better against the Conservatives at Westminster from the moderate centre left (and when Labour is relatively moderate itself). In Scotland the main dynamic of party politics is not currently left versus right, but has been superseded by the independence question and where, in some seats, the Lib Dems still operate as the main unionist party verses the SNP. However, especially strong anti-Conservative feeling among Scottish voters means the Liberal Democrats taking such a position will be of little impediment there.

We know that our membership and potential voter base lean towards the left, while the large majority of our targets are open or susceptible to anti-Conservative challenge. If we choose a side, it must be the left. When the right wing former MP Jeremy Browne complained in 2013 that the Liberal Democrats were like a ‘shopping trolley that defaults to the left’, his fundamental difficulty was with liberal opinion in Britain more generally.²⁰ Right wing voters with a liberal orientation are simply too small a constituency to coalesce around to achieve very many first places under First-Past-The-Post.

Implications for the Party of choosing the left

It is easy for social liberals to accept that the Party should return to its long-standing anti-Conservative roots. But this is a common need based around, not the personal preferences of social liberals, but the way our electoral and Party systems currently operate. I write this post for the Social Liberal Forum website as it is a centre of thought leadership that facilitates detailed discussion, but all Liberal Democrats should accept this cold analysis, and not repeat the all too often and tragic mistake of the Clegg leadership of assuming that because an argument speaks in favour of a social liberal position, it means it must be factionally motivated or wrong.

Strategic arguments against centrism are not new, but they are yet to be widely digested. However, in addition to ensuring these lessons about positioning are heeded and that the Party is allowed to return to its traditional anti-Conservatism, there is also need to find accommodation with the right of the Party and the fraction of liberals that favour the right over the left.

Nick Clegg’s leadership – where many on the left were ostracised and disenfranchised – provides a useful template of what not to do. He used his increased power from being a Leader in a time of coalition Government (of a coalition supposedly formed to provide security in a time of economic difficulty) as cover to realign the Party in a more rightwards direction; as Deputy PM he appointed as his first Head of Strategy someone who had already advocated that social-liberals should join Labour²¹ (and after leaving his post, argued that those of the centre-left should still look to Labour);²² he treated coalition economic policy as the Party’s policy, rather than the product of a necessary compromise in coalition; and he permitted policies (in opposition to the coalition

²⁰ Francis Elliott, ‘Lib Dems Like a Wonky Trolley, Says Axed Minister Jeremy Browne’, *The Times*, 18 October 2013.

²¹ Richard Reeves, ‘Social Liberals Should Join Labour’, *Guardian*, 19 September 2008.

²² Richard Reeves, ‘The Case for a Truly Liberal Party’, *New Statesman*, 19 September 2012.

agreement) to be implemented such as marketising the NHS and the massive subsidy of Nuclear fission energy. None of these efforts were attempts to try and shore up the left flank. In whatever way such abuse of power and trust is described, it certainly wasn't good or, as history shows, a successful liberal leadership.

Although Charles Kennedy became associated with the Party's social liberal heyday, it should also be remembered for its successful attempts at broadening the Lib Dem tent. Whatever someone's feeling about the Kennedy era, the right of the Party was not ostracised. Members of the Pro-Euro Conservative Party were accepted after the Party disbanded in 2001. Members on the right in the Commons were appointed to senior positions, including leading right-winger Mark Oaten to Home Affairs. Charles Kennedy signed the foreword to *The Orange Book: Reclaiming Liberalism*.²³ Aspiring to unite more liberals and lead by consensus should not be a naive suggestion for liberals, but second nature. The Kennedy era should provide some inspiration of how the Party can operate as a Party of the left and which also tries to be inclusive of liberals on the right.

Members on the right should be reassured that while parties operating within a left- or right-wing bloc develop some common strategic interest, operating on the left would and should not mean the Lib Dems having to become an adjunct of or surrendering autonomy to Labour (as the Kennedy era showed), or that being of the left must be the Party's main appeal. The Party should renew its commitment to federalism, decentralisation and to serving the needs of Britain's economic periphery – a part of the Party's long standing appeal significantly overlooked during years in Government with the Conservatives. Most importantly, the Party's main offer should be its liberalism, and its political liberalism - something that has long united the Party and been neglected in recent years - should again be thrust to the forefront, particularly proportional representation.

Clegg asserted in the summer of 2010 that the 'The Liberal Democrats aren't a sort of glorified form of the Electoral Reform Society',²⁴ but this was a strange and unnecessary thing for a Liberal Democrat leader to choose to emphasise in supposed exasperation. The interests of the Party and those who vote for it are aligned in seeking a fair voting system. Equal votes should be a basic prerequisite of a liberal society. As Dr Thevoz pointed out through the Social Liberal Forum in 2013, typically smaller parties only succeed in coalitions where they compete under a proportionate voting system.²⁵ For philosophic, moral and strategic reasons, a fair electoral system (not entering a coalition as soon as possible) should again be at the forefront of the Party's demands.

Under a proportional electoral system, the Party will be in a much stronger position to deliver key pledges, demonstrate its distinct contribution and deliver over the long term lasting political change. Under such a system it may even be possible for two liberal parties to succeed - one of the left and one of the right, as in The Netherlands, Estonia and Denmark - thereby providing a liberal voice in both Governments of the left and right. Although liberal fraternalism may endure, under PR right wing liberals may even be able to sustain their own grouping. But whatever happens, Lib Dems should stay united and unashamedly demand basic democratic equality for voters.

The need for consensus speaks in favour of a range of democratic reforms. These include, as the 2015 election review recommended, separating the interests of the

²³ Charles Kennedy, 'Foreword', David Laws and Paul Marshall (eds), *The Orange Book: Reclaiming Liberalism* (London: Profile Books, 2004).

²⁴ Haroon Siddique, 'Coalition Will Go One, Even if Electoral Reform Fails', *Guardian*, 20 August 2010.

²⁵ Seth Thévoz, 'It May Already be Too Late to Save the Liberal Democrats', *Social Liberal Forum*, 30 September 2013.

leadership from the Party during periods of formal working with other parties, but also a renewed role for directly elected Party committees, as this is where consensus, including over policy, can be better negotiated (better than by direct One Member One Vote alone). It was the centre-right Party grouping, Liberal Reform, that sought at the 2015 autumn Conference to give the Party Leader a veto over the Federal Policy Committee in formulating the General Election manifesto.²⁶ This did not seem to be in their or the collective long-term interest.

Conclusion

Returning to a position of equidistance was a major historic blunder. To some extent, it was the strategic equivalent of Labour re-adopting Clause 4. Until the prospect of a grand coalition becomes a distinct possibility, the Party is unlikely to ever be able to freely alternate between the left and right (regardless of the electoral system, though First-Past-The-Post is more punishing). Despite the 2007-2015 leadership believing it knew better, it lacked understanding about why many voted Liberal Democrat, and sadly oversaw the implosion of a Liberal Democrat vote that had taken decades to construct. Members should never empower such people as leaders while they still have such limited understanding.

Between 2010 and 2015, the Party ultimately assisted the Tories detoxifying its brand with some voters, while toxifying itself with many others. I would also recommend the Party investing in focus group work to improve its understanding of its reputational problems. It needs to establish credibility with target voters, before it can expect to establish better rapport.

Furthermore, a more inclusive and consensual internal culture should be rebuilt (complemented by a renewed democratic structure), though there can be little creative tension on the issue of centrism. The profile of Party members is such that a sizeable chunk is either personally content with or willing to acquiesce to the Party adhering to a centrist position. While those of a genuine centrist persuasion (and others) must play an important role in the Party fighting back, for it to do so requires those personally committed to centrism to understand why it and equidistance cannot be the Party's future, for all our sakes.

Centrism as a political strategy provides (even for major parties) a poor plan for sustaining long term political change. Amongst the myriad of impulses that drive voting behaviour, the transaction most wanted from their vote is, ultimately, good political leadership, not representatives lacking agency who simply echo an often-incoherent wisdom of the crowd. While accepting the current importance of left versus right, the Party should be cautious about further emphasising this dynamic and make clear in public that it is its liberalism that it brings to political leadership. While the Party should signal a willingness to work with others on issues of key concern, its outward focus should be asserting its priorities to voters. In so doing however it must again be free to reassert its anti-Conservatism, which chimes with its history, membership and potential voters. It should never again define as centrists willing to work with anyone, but as liberals with a natural skepticism of Conservatism.

Debate over the Party's policy platform is not the subject of this post, but it should have bold and distinctly liberal things to say about matters such as insecure employment, stagnant productivity (and its link to wages), housing costs, furthering international cooperation including beyond the West's borders, oversight of the state security apparatus, and political disenfranchisement. It must again become a Party of change. It should not mismanage expectations or lose sight of its goals, but cast achieving long term

²⁶ Joe Otten, '[A Small Step for Trust in the Manifesto](#)', *Lib Dem Voice*, 30 June 2015.

and lasting change, not as inconvenient barriers to forming coalitions, but synonymous with long term support for the Liberal Democrats.

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About the author

Paul Pettinger joined the Liberal Democrats in 1992 of his own volition, aged 11. He has served as a Liberal Democrat Exeter City Councillor and from 2006 to 2009 was Liberal Youth's member of staff. He has spent the last 7 years campaigning to ensure that the state funded school systems in England and Wales better promote integration and treat people of all religion and beliefs fairly and equally. He sits on the Board of the Electoral Reform Society.

