

Northern Discomfort:
An Analysis of the Liberal Democrat
Performance in the 2017 General
Election

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Contents

Introduction	4
Seats	4
Second places	5
Deposits	5
Vote share	6
The leadership dimension	7
How to recover?	8
Conclusion	8
About the author	9

Introduction

Having spent months out campaigning, first for the County Council elections, and then the general election, I took a break afterwards by examining the election results! It is clear the Liberal Democrats made good progress in terms of seats: a 50% increase from 8 to 12 MPs compared to 2015; and, agonisingly, fewer than 500 votes away from doubling our seats to 16.¹ This was achieved, however, against a slightly lower vote share of 7.4%, compared to the already-low point of 7.9% in 2015, and an accompanying further decline in our vote in many seats.

Looking at the pattern of results, it was clear that we had polled reasonably well in many Scottish seats, and in quite a few seats in London, the South East, and the South West, particularly in Tory Remain-voting areas. However, in the three Northern regions, plus the Midlands, Wales, and to an extent East Anglia, we had been hit by a further decline.

After Labour's fourth consecutive defeat in the 1992 election, Labour MP Giles Radice wrote the first in a series of pamphlets on Labour's "Southern Discomfort", examining Labour's poor performance in the South of England at that election.² Looking at the results of this election, it appears the Lib Dems are suffering a "Northern Discomfort", with the party losing seats and vote share across the three Northern English regions. And this was not limited to "The North" itself, but also held true across the Midlands and Wales.

Seats

On the seats front, we succeeded in gaining 8 seats. All 8 were in Scotland, the South, and London. 3 were in Scotland, 2 in London, 2 in the South East, and 1 in the South West. Here, the party's Pro-EU platform paid off in terms of seats. Whilst only an estimated 1 in 3 British constituencies voted to Remain in the EU referendum, 7 out of 8 (87.5%) of our gains are believed to have voted Remain.³ The one exception was Eastbourne in the South-East, where the phenomenally popular Stephen Lloyd avenged his narrow defeat in 2015, though did so by explicitly rejecting the party's policy of a second EU referendum.⁴

Of the 8 seats we had won in 2015, we comfortably held the one seat we were defending in Scotland, Orkney and Shetland; held onto our one London seat in

¹ All results analysis, unless otherwise stated, carried out using "The Times Election 2017" supplement, *The Times*, Saturday 10 June 2017.

² Giles Radice, *Southern Discomfort* (London: Fabian Society, 1992); Giles Radice, *More Southern Discomfort: A Year On — Taxing and Spending* (London: Fabian Society, 1993); Giles Radice, *Any Southern Comfort?* (London: Fabian Society, 1994).

³ Dr Chris Hanretty, '[Final estimates of the leave vote or Areal interpolation and the UK's referendum on EU membership](#)', *medium.com*, 24 March 2017; Chris Hanretty, '[Areal interpolation and the UK's referendum on EU membership](#)', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* (forthcoming), online version published 17 March 2017.

⁴ Stephen Lloyd, '[Former Eastbourne MP rejects Lib Dem stance for 2nd EU referendum](#)', *Eastbourne Buzz*, 18 November 2016.

Carshalton and Wallington, and Norman Lamb held North Norfolk in East Anglia, though in his Leave-voting constituency, he did so on a platform of rejecting party policy on the European Union.⁵ We lost our last seat in Wales, Ceredigion, by a painfully narrow 104 votes. During the party's last really dark period of the 1950s, it was Welsh seats which helped keep the party in business;⁶ sadly for the first time since at least the early 19th century, we are now without a Welsh seat.

The remaining 4 seats we were defending were all in the north. We lost ex-leader Nick Clegg's seat in Sheffield Hallam, lost Leeds North West, and fell to third place behind Labour in Southport. In only one of our four seats in the north did we hold on, leader Tim Farron's seat in Westmorland. Farron's majority was way down from his nearly 9,000 majority in 2015, then our safest seat, to just 777 votes. Without Tim's phenomenal personal popularity there we would almost certainly have been totally wiped out in the north.

Second Places

What of the second places we were defending? The party went into the election first or second in 71 seats, 11.2% of all seats in Great Britain (8 firsts and 63 seconds; or 9 and 62 after the Richmond Park by-election). Following the election, we are in the top two in just 50 seats — 7.9% of all seats in Great Britain (12 firsts and 38 seconds).

Of the 63 second places from last time, the good news was that 8 second places became firsts, as we gained seats. (Though 3 first places became seconds in seats we lost.) Of the remaining 55 second places, we kept 33, but lost 22 second places. We gained just 2 new second places, in heavily Remain-voting Vauxhall in London, and in heavily Remain-voting St Albans in the South East. The 22 lost second places were spread across the country, but included our last 2 second places in the North East region, and all 3 second places in the Midlands were lost. We lost the majority (9 out of 16) of the remaining second places we were defending in the North, the Midlands, Wales and East Anglia.

Deposits

A further bitter blow at the election was lost deposits. At the last election we lost 341 deposits, 54% of the deposits we were defending. This time round we lost 375 (59%). In Wales, which in the 1950s had been the last stronghold of the party, we lost a staggering 90% of deposits at this election.

There was some progress in saving 21 deposits this time that had been lost last time. These were heavily concentrated in London, Scotland and the South (71%

⁵ Norman Lamb, '[A statement on Article 50](#)', *Norman Lamb and North Norfolk Liberal Democrats*, 31 January 2017.

⁶ In the low-point general election of 1951, 3 of the party's 6 surviving MPs came from Wales, with Cardigan, Carmarthen and Montgomery all electing Liberals. David Butler, *The British General Election of 1951* (London: Macmillan, 1952).

of newly-saved deposits being in those areas). Conversely, we lost over 50 deposits in seats where we had saved the deposit in 2015. These new lost deposits were overwhelmingly concentrated in East Anglia, the Midlands, the North and Wales (72%).

Vote Share

When we look at changes in Lib Dem vote share compared to 2015, we see similar disparities between regions and countries. Our vote rose in roughly one-third of constituencies, and fell in two-thirds. Of the minority of seats where our vote share rose, again the vast bulk of increases were in London, Scotland, the South East and South West. Over 75% of seats where our vote share rose were in these areas.⁷ Some of the vote share rises were fairly minute, in seats where we were starting from a very low base; for example, seats where our vote rose from 2.1% to 2.2% or 3.2% to 3.4%. If you examine just those seats where our vote share rose by a more significant amount, at least 1% or more compared to 2015, we find there are 111 seats where this happened. The vast bulk of these rises (96 seats, or 86%) were again in London, Scotland the South East and South West. In just 15 of the 325 seats (fewer than 5%) we contested in East Anglia, the Midlands, the North and Wales, did we achieve a vote rise of 1% or more compared to 2015.

The party's vote share fell in over 85% of the seats we contested in East Anglia, the Midlands, the North and Wales compared to the already-low vote share from 2015.

Following the incredibly successful results in the Witney and Richmond by-elections, the party followed a strategy of heavily targeting Conservative Remain areas. This appears to have paid dividends, with our seats rising from 8 to 12, and Richmond itself nearly being held (Tory majority of 23,015 in 2015 down to just 45 votes this time, with a swing to the Lib Dems of approaching 20% compared to the last general election). At the same time, though, we suffered falling support, and a near-wipeout in the North and Wales. Meanwhile, our already-low vote share was hit further in the Midlands. Here in Bosworth, where I stood, we were disappointed not to win, but grateful we did manage to secure nearly 10,000 votes in a heavily Leave-

⁷ The party had a generally successful election in Scotland, going from 1 MP to 4, and with the party's vote rising in the vast bulk of seats — some 49 out of 59 (83%). However, largely due to 5 anomalous results in seats that had been held by the Lib Dems until 2015, but which at this election saw massive tactical voting in favour of the Scottish Conservatives, there was a fall in the party's overall vote share across Scotland, of -0.8%. The seats with the heaviest falls were Aberdeenshire West and Kincardine (-12.8%); Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (-14.0%); Gordon (-21.1%); Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch & Strathspey (-19.0%); and Ross, Skye and Lochaber (-15.0%). In the South West of England, the results were more patchy in terms of Lib Dem performance than they were in London and the South East. The party had undoubted successes in the South West, with the re-gaining of Bath and impressive rises in the vote in a number of the party's traditional stronghold seats — Cheltenham, North Cornwall, North Devon, St Ives, Taunton and Wells all saw vote share rises of between 5-10%. Due to fallbacks in some seats in the South West, notably in the Labour-leaning urban areas Bristol, Exeter and Plymouth, and in seats where the tactical vote seems to have gone Labour, our vote share was down fractionally (-0.2%); but at 14.9%, the South West was still clearly the strongest Lib Dem-voting area in Britain.

voting East Midlands constituency whilst sticking to the party line on the EU. It is a base vote which we can build on, to recover in future local and general elections.

The leadership dimension

Since the election we have seen the resignation, forced or otherwise, of Tim Farron. Tim Farron inherited a tougher situation than any recent Liberal leader. Not only did he inherit fewer MPs than any leader since Jo Grimond took over in 1956, but for the first time in 2015 the party lost its unquestioning position as the third political party across Britain, with UKIP outpolling us by 13% to 8% in the national vote. Farron was denied the oxygen of publicity which every previous Liberal leader has had.

No longer could he rely on the near-parity of coverage with the leaders of Labour and the Tories, which every other recent Liberal/Lib Dem leader had benefitted from at general elections. UKIP were given huge coverage during the election, despite the progress Farron had made since 2015 to turn the Lib Dems into the undisputed third, Britain-wide, party again.

By the time of the general election:

- In terms of seats under Farron, the Lib Dems went from a ratio of 8:1 over UKIP, to 9:0, with the Lib Dems gaining Richmond and the sole UKIP MP Douglas Carswell being driven out of their party.
- In the local government elections in May, the Lib Dems won 18% of the vote — the best vote share for the party since the coalition was formed; and it elected over 400 councillors, whilst UKIP support collapsed to 5% and they won just 1 council seat in the UK.⁸
- In terms of parliamentary candidates, Lib Dems stood in almost every seat in Great Britain, some 629 constituencies, whilst UKIP stood in only 377.
- And in the opinion polls by the beginning of May, the Lib Dems were averaging 9%, consistently ahead of UKIP who averaged 6%.⁹

Yet despite this progress, Tim Farron was still denied the large-scale media exposure that may have allowed his passionate, driven personality to break through. As Tim Farron leaves the party leadership, he can at least take comfort in handing on to his successor more MPs than he inherited; and thanks to comfortably outpolling UKIP this time, the next leader should get a fairer crack at the publicity whip come the next general election, whenever it is called, than Tim Farron did at this one.

⁸ [‘United Kingdom Local Elections 2017’](#), *Wikipedia*, last updated 15:45, 15 June 2017.

⁹ [‘Voting Intention Since 2010’](#), *UK Polling Report*, last updated 7 June 2017.

How to recover?

How do the Lib Dems recover support then? After the Liberal Party's crushing defeat in the 1970 general election, the party turned to "Community Politics" as a means of recovery.¹⁰ Continuing with this approach, the key to survival is in local campaigning to carry on the re-building of our local government base, to win council seats, and thus to help turn lost deposits into saved deposits, and secure more second places — and first places — at the next general election.

In addition to local campaigning, community politics style, we also need as a party to re-connect with people nationally, by speaking about the issues that most concern them. We need to talk about down-to-earth, basic issues of the poor state of our public services, and how we as Liberal Democrats will improve them; and in doing so, how we will improve the lives of people across Britain. We have great policies to solve the funding crisis in both health and education. The Conservative government's record is abysmal: hospitals threatened with closure up and down the country, GPs massively overstretched, people having to wait weeks for doctors' appointments; schools underfunded, with most schools facing further budget cuts and the prospect of teachers and teaching assistants being made redundant. These are issues people care about, which we can hammer relentlessly against this already-weakened Tory government in the months and/or years before the next general election.

Using our national publicity opportunities, including our party political broadcasts, to set out our positive policies on the NHS and education, whilst laying into the appalling Conservative record, can help us connect with people again. Strong national campaigns can be localised, as most areas are facing education and health cuts. National campaign packs sent to local parties to adapt these messages, can help future target seat council candidates and PPCs to establish themselves, as local champions for their local health and education services.

Conclusion

Whilst increasing our MPs, and having four narrow misses, we have at this election still suffered a further loss of second places, a further loss of deposits, and a continuing fallback in large parts of Britain, particularly the North, the Midlands and Wales. We must urgently reconnect with people, particularly in those areas of Britain, if we are to be a substantial party again. In the four general elections between 1997 and 2010, we secured around 50 seats at each election (between 46-62). To secure 50 seats next time requires us to secure a staggering swing of 17.2%. Massively increasing the breadth of our appeal is essential.

We have the opportunity. A yawning chasm is opening up in British politics. With the Conservatives moving even further right with their new alliance with the hard-right, sectarian Democratic Unionist Party, and Labour still on the radical-left

¹⁰ Stuart Mole, 'Community Politics', in Vernon Bogdanor (ed.), *Liberal Party Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 258-74.

under Corbyn, there is a large potential market place for centre-left progressive politics.

This gives us the opportunity at the next election to present the public with a progressive, social liberal agenda, committed to fighting for quality public services; an agenda which can hopefully command the support of millions of moderate voters next time, and give our party the revival it needs in all the countries and the regions of Britain.

About the author

Michael Mullaney is a Leicestershire County Councillor for Hinckley, and has been the Liberal Democrat candidate for Bosworth at the 2010, 2015 and 2017 general elections.

