

REPORTS

Election 2005 in historical perspective

Fringe meeting, September 2005, Blackpool, with John Curtice, Andrew Russell and Chris Rennard

Report by **Neil Stockley**

The Liberal Democrats seemed to have much to celebrate as they gathered for the Blackpool conference in September 2005. At the general election on 5 May, the party saw sixty-two MPs returned, more than at any time since the 1920s. In terms of votes cast, the Lib Dems broke the 20 per cent barrier. For the first time, they won a handsome number of seats from Labour.

Yet a vague but real sense of disappointment came over the party during the summer. Simon Hughes, the party president, agreed that the party had expected to do even better. It was an open secret that the Liberal Democrats had wanted and expected to win at least seventy seats. After all, the unpopularity of the Labour government, coupled with the Conservatives' lack of credibility, seemed to present them with an open goal. Such was the backdrop to the party's gloomiest conference for many years and the History Group fringe considered whether the election represented steady progress or a missed opportunity for the Liberal Democrats.

All of the speakers reminded us that by many yardsticks, the party had made more than steady progress on 5 May. Andrew Russell (Manchester University) saw the election as a 'remarkable achievement'. He pointed out that the Liberal Democrats won 22.6 per cent of the votes cast and, for the second time in a row, increased both their overall support and their numerical strength in the Commons. They came second to Labour in Scotland

and the north-east of England and emerged as the main challengers in Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds and Cardiff. The Liberal Democrats also came second to the Conservatives in the south-east and south-west of England. Indeed, they were the only party to increase its share of the vote in every region of Britain and to take seats from both the other main parties in the Commons.

Professor John Curtice (University of Strathclyde) went even further, arguing that, by historical standards, the 2005 election was nothing less than 'mould-breaking' for the Liberal Democrats. One of the old rules of British politics held that when a Tory government is defeated, the Liberal share of the vote goes up; but during a period of Labour government, the Liberal share drops sharply. But in the two general elections since the Blair government came to power in 1997, the Lib Dems' share of the vote has grown by 5.5 per cent. Another tenet of conventional wisdom was that, barring mishaps, the party could not hope to win Labour seats. In all the general elections between 1945 and 2001, the Liberal Democrats and their antecedents took just four seats from Labour. On 5 May, eleven Labour seats fell to the Liberal Democrats.

The Liberal Democrats' Chief Executive, Chris Rennard, placed the results in the context of recent general elections. In 1992, when John Major won, the Conservatives outpolled the Liberal Democrats by 24 per cent. By 2005, this gap had dropped to 10

per cent. Over the previous thirteen years, the party had made a net gain of thirty-five seats from the Tories. Similarly, in 1997, the year of the first Blair landslide, the Liberal Democrats finished 26 per cent behind Labour. In 2005, this figure had dropped to 13 per cent. The electoral dynamics have changed and the Liberal Democrats are in a much stronger position against both the other main parties. They came second in 189 seats, well up from 109 in 2001.

But none of this could mask the brutal truth that with one exception the Lib Dems failed in their plan to dislodge senior Conservative MPs from marginal constituencies. Indeed, the party suffered a net loss of two seats to the Tories. Dr Russell highlighted the ways in which the jump in Liberal Democrat support was 'lumpy' and 'uneven'. Across the country, the party's vote went up by 4 per cent from 2001. In those seats where a Liberal Democrat was the main challenger to Labour, the Lib Dem vote increased by 7.7 per cent. Where the Conservatives were trying to take seats from Labour, the Lib Dem vote went up 4.7 per cent. By contrast, in the seats that the Liberal Democrats were defending against the Conservatives, their support rose by an average of 0.6 per cent, and where they were challenging the Conservatives, the Lib Dem vote went up by an average of just 0.5 per cent.

In short, 5 May 2005 was really two elections. In the first, fought against Labour, the Liberal Democrats made significant progress. The other, fought against the Conservatives, was, if not a missed opportunity, then a source of major frustration. The speakers had more convincing explanations for the results of the 'Labour' election than they did for its 'Tory' parallel. Andrew Russell argued that in Labour-held target seats, the Lib Dems succeeded in scooping up protest votes against the New Labour 'project'. John Curtice added that the party was able to do

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so because of its clear, positive stances on the issues fuelling such discontent, most notably the war in Iraq and tuition fees. He noted that the Lib Dems were more likely to draw more votes from Labour in constituencies with a substantial Muslim population and in those with a relatively large number of students. But Andrew Russell was more cautious, noting that in the fifty seats with the largest Muslim populations, the Lib Dems were successful in just two, Brent East and Rochdale, and had indifferent results in nearly all of the others. He attributed this to the local credibility achieved through the by-election win in Brent East in 2003 and the fact that Rochdale had previously returned Liberal and Liberal Democrat MPs.

Similarly, the party won just six of the 'student seats' held by Labour but failed in the other eight. Otherwise, just two seats in this category were won from the Conservatives. All in all, Russell put greater store in the way that the 'student-plus vote' had deserted Labour and turned to the Liberal Democrats in target seats and across such cities as Manchester, Leeds and Sheffield. He described this grouping as urban and suburban, 'youngish middle class', graduates and working in professional jobs. They became very anti-Conservative in the 1990s (and remain so) and turned decisively to New Labour in 1997. By 2005, these types of voters 'had reached their own parallel critique of the New Labour project'. Crucially, they should not be confused with Labour's traditional base in the white working classes, where the Lib Dems did not do nearly as well.

The factors that enabled the Lib Dems to pick up support amongst this mainly public-sector salariat may have had implications for the results of the 'second election', the battle against the Conservatives. Russell suggested that such developments as the defection of former left-wing Labour MP Brian

Sedgemoor and 'some policies' may have helped to push away 'soft' or 'one-nation' Conservative voters. These were, after all, the very sorts of voter that had been so important in delivering many of the Lib Dems' past gains. In some ways, he suggested, the party's old positioning of 'neither left nor right' had become one of 'either left or right'. This argument was certainly plausible. But it was neither fully developed nor substantiated. For instance, we do not know for sure which offerings on the Lib Dem menu were the ones that Conservative voters in marginal seats did not find so palatable.

John Curtice agreed that the Liberal Democrats were more successful at peeling away middle-class Labour supporters than at making inroads into its white working-class base. However, he did not agree that this achievement came at the price of victories against the Conservatives. Yes, the Tories managed to increase their average support in seats where the Lib Dems were in second place in 2001. But this increase was only fractionally greater than in the seats where Labour was in second place. Curtice argued that the Lib Dems failed to win seats against the Conservatives because, quite simply, they did not win over Labour supporters in sufficient numbers. To put it another way, there was usually no Labour vote left to squeeze! But this was not wholly convincing either. We can see that Labour's support in these seats was heavily eroded in 1997 and 2001 and, in some cases, in 2005. In order to win those target seats, the Lib Dems needed to convert Conservative voters to their cause. But it is evident that very few of them switched over to the Liberal Democrats; indeed, the Tory vote firmed up and turned out to vote in these closely fought contests. Perhaps we will need to assess the full results of the British Election Study and similar exercises before reaching a conclusion on this important point.

Where have the embryonic breakthrough against Labour and the disappointing 'other election' left the Liberal Democrats? The party may make more gains at Labour's expense at the 2010 (or, more likely, 2009) general election. Another view is that the 2005 outcome is as good as it gets and that the Lib Dems may lose a number of seats to the main parties. After all, Labour will surely not be so vulnerable next time, given that there will be a new prime minister. The conflict in Iraq may still be controversial but it will not play in the same way. Similarly, the Conservatives may have 'flatlined' – winning the support of around 32 per cent of the electorate – for three general elections in a row, but surely they will not carry on making the same mistakes and with a new leader could even stage a full-scale revival as Labour falters. Indeed, when the meeting took place, most pundits were picking David Davis as the next Conservative leader; David Cameron's personal breakthrough was still to come.

Andrew Russell tried to dissuade the audience from a rush to pessimism. He suggested that the Labour government is unlikely to be more popular at the end of its third term than it was at the end of the second. Lord Rennard stressed that Gordon Brown's government may be so unpopular that the Liberal Democrats would have big new opportunities. There are also no guarantees that even if the Conservatives start to recover, they will win back large numbers of Lib Dem seats. Indeed, Professor Curtice argued that the electoral bridgehead that the Lib Dems have established against Labour should help to insulate the party against a Conservative revival. He showed that even if the next election saw a swing from Labour to Conservative of 8 per cent, the Liberal Democrats would still have as many as fifty-five MPs, so long as their own vote holds steady. Curtice also argued that the new electoral dynamics make hung parliaments

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more likely from now on. The party needs to start preparing for such an eventuality.

Still, the Liberal Democrats will need to make some important strategic and tactical decisions in the next few years if they are to take full advantage of these opportunities. Understandably, the meeting presented the questions more assuredly than it provided the answers. John Curtice suggested that the Lib Dems should try to continue with the steady progress of recent elections, picking up a few more seats by ensuring that they are well placed to benefit from discontent with the Labour government. This would mean identifying the issues that are of most concern to voters in target seats and where public discontent is greatest and then establishing both clear positions and credibility with the public.

This is an incremental strategy and has the advantage that the party would find it familiar. Still, Curtice did not give any impression that it would be easy. For instance, he believed that one area where the government will be open to attack from now on is the economy – but this has often been a weakness for the Liberal Democrats in the past. Indeed, Curtice noted that the one region where Conservative fortunes definitely revived was the south-east of England. Here he suggested that the Tories, rather than the Liberal Democrats, had been able to benefit from simmering voter angst about the economy (and immigration?). The second challenge – not unrelated? – is the party's relatively poor showing in white working-class areas and Conservative-held seats as a whole. The Liberal Democrats may need to rethink how they appeal to these sorts of constituencies. Achieving all of this will be very taxing indeed – though not impossible. Most likely, further gains would come mostly at the expense of Labour.

Andrew Russell's prescription was no less challenging. He was clear that the 2005 results

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showed that a strategy of 'either left or right' will not deliver the kind of breakthrough that the party wants and needs. Rather, returning to a positioning of 'neither left nor right' – appealing to progressively minded voters by carving out distinctive and radical policy positions – 'is the only game in town'. This would mean making a 'positive appeal' based on the party's 'core values' but accompanied by, possibly, a 'retreat from certain ideological positions'. Andrew Russell was correct that gaining a few Labour seats but losing more to the Conservatives would not represent steady progress, let alone a breakthrough. But the question of which of the party's core values should be projected and how this should be done was left for the party to resolve another day. Similarly, the question of which specific positions that should be

jettisoned was not considered in any detail.

For his part, Chris Rennard was determined in his optimism about the future and was at pains to stress that the party would succeed by continuing to stick to its principles – even where these might be unpopular – and by being honest with the electorate. That was reassuring as the party buckles down to a major rethink of its policies and the way they are projected to the electorate, to say nothing of a fresh round of local government contests. For this fringe meeting showed how much the political terrain changed on 5 May, leaving the Liberal Democrats with a great deal to play for next time.

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BLPSG conference

Joint British Liberal Political Studies Group (BLSPG) and Liberal Democrat History Group Conference, January 2006, Gregynog

Report by **Russell Deacon**

The BLPSG held its first conference on 14–16 January 2006, in the splendid location of the University of Wales Conference Centre, Gregynog, Powys.

The mansion of Gregynog was once owned by the Liberal MP David Davies, later Lord Davies of Llandinam. It had also, in the 1930s, acted as a country retreat for Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin. It was with this historic setting in mind that delegates came from eleven universities, including one from France and one from Greece; there were twenty-four in total. The conference was co-hosted with the Liberal Democrat History Group, and the University of Wales Institute Cardiff acted as

the host institution. We believe it was the largest ever gathering of historians, political scientists and politicians, from across the UK and Europe, who study the Liberal Party and Liberal Democrats in the UK.

Dr Glyn Tegai Hughes, a senior Welsh Liberal and a member of the Liberal Party's National Executive during the 1950s and 1960s, was the Friday evening speaker. The audience was entertained with stories about Clement Davies, Megan Lloyd George and Violet Bonham Carter, to name but a few of the illustrious Liberals Dr Hughes had known in person. The BLPSG was also able to obtain Lord Carlile of Berriew QC, the independent reviewer of the Anti-Terrorism,