

# Report

## General Election 2019: Disappointment for the Liberal Democrats

Online meeting 8 July 2020, with Professor Sir John Curtice and James Gurling; chair Wendy Chamberlain MP

Report by **Neil Stockley**

**T**HE RESULTS OF the 2019 general election were a huge disappointment for the Liberal Democrats. There has been considerable debate within the party about what went wrong, and a comprehensive, critical review of the party's campaign, led by Baroness Thornhill, was published in May. At the Liberal Democrat History Group's first online meeting, the eminent psephologist Professor Sir John Curtice analysed the conclusions of the Thornhill Review in detail; or, as he put it, Sir John 'reviewed the review'. James Gurling, who chaired the Liberal Democrat campaign, had the unenviable task of providing an 'insider' perspective without falling into the trap of sounding too defensive. I drew five main conclusions from their thoughtful and candid discussion.

First, the party committed a fundamental strategic error in allowing the general election to happen at all. The Thornhill Review concluded that, by acquiescing with the SNP in passing the Johnson government's bill to, in effect, bypass the Fixed Term Parliaments Act and force an early general election, Liberal Democrat MPs had taken an unreasonable risk. As we now know, the gamble failed. The Conservatives won an overall Commons majority of eighty. The Liberal Democrats won just eleven seats, one fewer than in 2017.

The two speakers tried to explain why the party rolled the dice in late October 2019. Sir John said that the Liberal Democrats were determined to stop the UK from leaving the European Union without a deal, but that the window of opportunity was closing rapidly. Speaker Bercow had announced that he would resign at the

end of October. Few expected that Sir Lindsay Hoyle, the expected successor, would be as liberal in his interpretation of standing orders. The manoeuvres that had allowed the Benn Bill to proceed and force the extension of the Brexit date from October 2019 to the end of January 2020 were, therefore, unlikely to succeed again. In helping to bring on an early election, the Liberal Democrats sought to deny the Conservatives a Commons majority, and to install a new government that, however fragile, would stop a 'no deal' Brexit from happening at the end of January 2020. Sir John also recalled that the Liberal Democrats' opinion poll ratings had been stable at around 18 per cent for four months; just as importantly, Labour's support still showed no signs of recovering.

James Gurling agreed that their strong desire to prevent a 'no deal' Brexit was the key driver of the Liberal Democrats' decision to support an early general election. In continuing to oppose Brexit after the referendum, the party had, by 2019, found an issue that defined them clearly to voters, possibly for the first time since the Iraq War, he said. In other words, the party saw Brexit as a political opportunity.

As James said, this reasoning seemed to be vindicated by the Liberal Democrats' impressive performance at the English local elections in May, followed by their second place at the European elections later that month. Their local campaigning had also enabled the party to see off a challenge from the newly formed Change UK, which many commentators had perceived as a major threat. Then, in August, the Liberal Democrats won the Brecon and Radnorshire

by-election. Over the summer and autumn, eight former Labour and Conservative MPs defected to the party, albeit through some circuitous routes. At their September conference, the Liberal Democrats enjoyed a new confidence and had recently chosen a dynamic, young leader, Jo Swinson. It was against this optimistic backdrop, James said, that the party decided to go along with forcing an early election. Interestingly, he described it as 'a Westminster bubble decision ... a response to parliamentary tactics'; the importance of the change of Speaker, for example, was 'not well understood' by the public.

The party's problem was, however, that the electoral landscape had shifted significantly between July and October. Sir John showed that once Boris Johnson became prime minister, in July 2019, the Conservatives' poll ratings, which had sunk to around 25 per cent early in the summer, began to improve. In October, once Johnson had reached his agreement with the Irish taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, on the 'pathway' to a Brexit deal, the Conservatives further strengthened their position, mostly at the expense of the Brexit Party. The Conservatives were then on course to win 345 seats, enough for a comfortable Commons majority. Sir John concluded that, by the time they went ahead, voting for an early election was an 'extremely risky strategy' for the Liberal Democrats.

He added that, even if the party had maintained their support at 18 per cent, they would have picked up few new seats, so long as the Conservatives were recovering. The Liberal Democrats were, therefore, betting on their ability to damage the Labour Party, which was, he said, 'very bold'. With the Leave vote consolidating behind the Conservatives and the Remain vote still split between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, it was going to be extremely difficult for the opposition parties to deny Johnson a majority, unless the Conservative vote fell back again.

Second, the Liberal Democrats did not make a fatal error by promising to revoke the UK's notice, under Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, to leave the European Union, if they formed

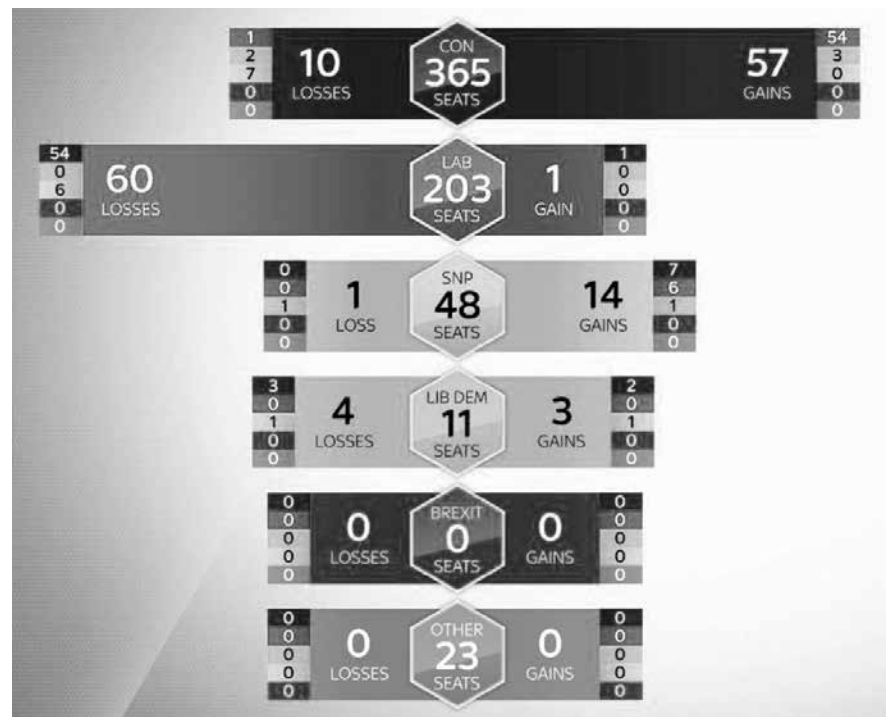
a majority government after the election. Just as importantly, however, the 'revoke' pledge did not prove to be a vote-winner for the party.

The Thornhill Review argued that 'revoke' had too little public support, and alienated both Leave voters, as well as a significant body of Remain voters who considered it undemocratic. (Another point of context: in September, the Labour Party promised to hold a referendum on a new Brexit deal, to be negotiated by an incoming Corbyn government – a potentially attractive position for Remain voters.)

James explained that rather than it being a 'strategic decision' by the party, the shift from advocating a second referendum to a promise of 'revoke' was made 'in full public vision' by the autumn 2019 party conference. He suggested that the party might in future want to test in advance how such a major shift might be communicated to voters. Still, James described 'revoke' as a 'sustainable' and 'sensible' position for the party's core audience. Brexit was also the only issue where the Liberal Democrats had any 'cut through' and with Labour's 'utterly unclear' Brexit policy gradually shifting, the Liberal Democrats sought to polarise the debate, he explained.

Sir John was not convinced by the Thornhill Review's conclusion. He cited BMG research from the summer and autumn of 2019 indicating that the British public was polarised over Brexit, with little electoral space for any compromise position that might appeal to both sides. The same research showed the Liberal Democrats' pledge to revoke the Article 50 notice was slightly more popular with Remain voters than the promise of a new referendum. During the election campaign, YouGov found that Remain voters preferred 'revoke' to Labour's offer of a new referendum. In late October, Survation polling suggested that the 'revoke' promise made Remain voters more likely to vote Liberal Democrat.

According to data from the British Election Study, support for the party's 'revoke' policy fell gradually as the campaign went on. Even so, Sir John argued, it is difficult to prove that Remain voters who preferred a



'second referendum' were more likely to defect from the Liberal Democrats than those who supported 'revoke'. His own research found that during the campaign, the Liberal Democrats were the most popular party with those who wanted another referendum and, more significantly, that party's support amongst Remain voters declined by about the same amount amongst 'revoke' and 'new referendum' supporters. Sir John concluded that the party's real problem was that the promise to cancel Brexit was 'rather ineffective': although the Liberal Democrats had support from both 'hard' and 'soft' Remainers, once the party started to lose votes, this occurred across all anti-Brexit voters. Here, Sir John argued, the Thornhill Review had 'missed its target'.

During the question and answer session, the speakers highlighted some of the tensions and strategic ambiguities around the Liberal Democrats' Brexit policy. Sir John contended that the party did not sell it very effectively and 'got all defensive' by, for instance, trying to highlight the promise to hold a referendum if they did not win the election outright. Having adopted the revoke policy, he suggested, they may have been better advised to campaign as 'the one vote [in England and Wales] to not leave the European Union' and draw a sharp contrast with the

Conservatives' simple pledge to 'get Brexit done'.

James shared many members' frustration at 'the over-complicated message' on Brexit. He recounted how the campaign had played up the 'referendum message' after facing 'friendly fire internally', and that it continued to come under heavy pressure from supporters who wanted to stop Brexit as the first priority.

Third, the emphasis on stopping Brexit turned the Liberal Democrats into, in Sir John's words, 'a one-trick pony' and meant that the party did not communicate its broader policy messages to voters. He cited Lord Ashcroft's research, showing that, on average, barely one voter in four recognised any of the party's policy positions, compared to 43 per cent for the Conservatives and 51 per cent for Labour.

Sir John rejected the Thornhill Review's suggestion that the party's potential appeal to Leave voters was limited by the revoke policy and that promoting popular policies in other areas might have helped the party to attract their support. He was clear that the party was 'always fishing in the waters of Remain voters'.

The real problem with the campaign's lack of 'a broader vision' beyond Brexit was, he stressed, that it hindered the Liberal Democrats in their battle with Labour for

## Meeting report: the 2019 general election

Remainers' support. Many Labour supporters had supported the Liberal Democrats in the European elections, and the party needed to keep them onside, but they started moving back to Labour after that party had promised a new referendum. The Liberal Democrat campaign had, however, failed to provide other reasons to vote for them, Sir John argued.

James Gurling believed that in the end, Labour Remainers 'slunk back [to Labour] to stop Boris rather than [voting] to stop Brexit'. He regretted the party's failure to squeeze the Labour vote, despite that party's huge problems with Jeremy Corbyn, Brexit and anti-Semitism. He also suggested that the Liberal Democrats had failed to develop an appeal to the full diversity of Britain's communities, especially in the inner cities.

Fourth, the Liberal Democrat campaign committed major tactical blunders. Sir John endorsed the Thornhill Review's conclusion that promoting Jo Swinson as a serious candidate for prime minister 'lacked credibility'. He reminded the meeting that her personal poll ratings had trended downwards throughout the campaign. Jo Swinson was 'not an asset', he said, which mattered for a party that always depends heavily on the leader to provide much of the impetus for its campaigns.

James explained that the campaign put so much effort into promoting Jo Swinson for the very reason that she was hardly known to the public. Both speakers reflected that, given more time to establish herself with the electorate, Swinson may have been more successful. James was also surprised and disappointed by the vehement and personal nature of some peoples' comments, including harsh criticisms of her appearance and clothes. He added, however, that in presenting her as a candidate for prime minister, the party reinforced the message that it was aiming to form a majority government, 'which took [us] straight over the top of the established promise to hold a [second Brexit] referendum and straight into revoke.'

The Thornhill Review also criticised the campaign for pursuing a poor targeting strategy and hinted that too

many resources had been directed to constituencies fought by MPs who had defected recently from Labour and the Conservatives.

Here, the Liberal Democrats seemed to be in a no-win situation. In explaining how the party had identified around eighty target seats, James appeared to allow that some choices may have been too optimistic given the party's past election results and organisational capacity in many constituencies. He added, quite reasonably, that many in the party would have been disappointed even if twenty more Liberal Democrat MPs had been returned. James argued that it was important to 'find homes for the defectors' and secure their re-election, because the new recruits had made the parliamentary party more diverse and increased the Liberal Democrats' potential appeal to, for example, BAME audiences.

Sir John showed that, whilst the party's vote increased by an average of 15 per cent in the seats fought by the seven defectors, they still finished an average of 15 per cent behind the winners. These were, after all, nearly all constituencies with no Liberal Democrat tradition.

Sir John also observed that, just as importantly, the party performed poorly in areas of historic strength. The ten seats where the party saw the sharpest drop in its vote between 2017 and 2019 were all held by the Liberal Democrats until very recently. He said that the party needs to recognise how much Brexit has changed the geography of its support and warned that it will 'need to think about sensible targeting in future'. Liberal Democrat support is now concentrated much more in 'Remain Britain' and, although no one knows how much longer that will last, the party cannot expect to simply go back to where it was in 2010, he said. Traditional Liberal Democrat territory such as Devon and Cornwall now tends also to be Leave territory and will be more challenging for the party than London, part of southern England and university towns.

Later, Sir John stressed how much the demography of the party's support has also shifted, towards middle-class voters who have a university education. More than the other parties, he

said, the Liberal Democrat vote is now defined by occupational class. And the party continues to face challenges appealing to BAME voters, which is especially important in London.

Fifth, the Liberal Democrats faced a major challenge that was outside their control. Many voters were still angry about the party's role in the 2010–15 coalition government with the Conservatives.

Both speakers agreed that attacks from Labour and some of the media on the party's – and Jo Swinson's – participation in the coalition caused major problems. Sir John described the stark dilemma that faced the party. By ruling out any arrangement to help the Conservatives stay in office, they were opening the door to a Corbyn-led Labour government; in their key target seats, however, the Liberal Democrats had to 'bind in' Conservative Remainers. James added that supporting a putative Corbyn government would have been anathema to many liberals, largely because of the anti-Semitism issue.

Both speakers also agreed that the electoral dynamics would be different in 2024, when the next general election is due. Sir John suggested that most voters would have forgotten about the coalition by then. James noted that Sir Keir Starmer would not present the Liberal Democrats with the same problems as Jeremy Corbyn.

Valuable as these observations were, I would have also liked to have heard more analysis of another, arguably more substantial barrier: the prospect of a Corbyn-led government deterred many people, especially in Conservative-held seats, from voting Liberal Democrat.

When the meeting touched on the Corbyn factor, the speakers shared some important, if uncomfortable insights. During the question and answer session, James lamented the party's failure to appeal to voters 'in the middle', who were unhappy with the 'polarised' choice between a 'right-wing' Johnson government and Corbyn's 'hard left' Labour Party. Sir John disputed the description of Boris Johnson as 'right wing', given that the Conservative manifesto was so

interventionist on economic issues. He also reminded the meeting that ‘left-wing’ voters were as likely as those on the right to back Brexit. Voters may, then, have seen the choice through a rather different prism to the one that is familiar to many Liberal Democrats.

By cutting across the traditional left–right divide, Brexit was a difficult issue for the major parties, Sir John said. ‘Brexit played to your strengths,’

he added. ‘Opposing Brexit was a social liberal issue, a home-made issue for you.’ But the party must face the harsh reality that a huge opportunity was squandered. Perhaps that is the greatest disappointment for the Liberal Democrats.

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I would have thought that Jeremy Corbyn’s election as Labour leader would qualify, but it does not because ‘the circumstances that enabled his victory originated from within the Labour Party’ and should therefore be considered ‘part and parcel of normal party politics’ (p. 34). But arguably, the relevant parties’ decisions to enter coalition in 2010 and to hold the two referendums of 2014 and 2016 also all originated within political parties – granted, they were clearly affected by external circumstances (Labour’s defeat in 2010, UKIP’s rise before the Brexit referendum), but, then Corbyn’s election was affected by Labour’s unexpected defeat in 2015 and the coalition’s legacy of austerity.

Be that as it may, this is a fascinating book, and an interesting new approach to analysing election outcomes – particularly those of 2015 and 2017, on which it mainly concentrates. It demonstrates how these five shocks all changed the landscape of party competition. For example, although the nationalist side lost the 2014 Scottish referendum, the campaign and its outcome enabled the SNP to consolidate the pro-independence vote, involving detaching a sizeable number of voters from Labour; it demonstrated to these voters that they cared more about independence than they did about class (or whatever they thought the Labour Party stood for). Similarly, the Brexit referendum destroyed the case

# Reviews

## The shock of coalition

Edward Fieldhouse, Jane Green, Geoffrey Evans, Jonathan Mellon, Christopher Prosser, Hermann Schmitt, and Cees van der Eijk, *Electoral Shocks: The volatile voter in a turbulent world* (OUP, 2020)

Review by **Duncan Brack**

**U**NDERSTANDING WHAT HAPPENED during the 2010–15 coalition government, what the Liberal Democrats did and what they could have done differently, and how the electorate reacted, is essential to the party’s future. Assuming it has any future prospect of a coalition, the party needs to manage the next one differently, whether through the negotiations leading up to it or the management of it or both.

This book, *Electoral Shocks*, provides an essential part of the background. Based primarily on British Election Study (BES) data, it offers a new perspective on British elections, focusing on the role of ‘electoral shocks’. It defines these as major political decisions, important events or political outcomes with three defining characteristics: they represent an abrupt and unanticipated change, usually coming at least partly from outside the political system; they are highly salient, so they are noticeable even to people not interested in politics and cannot be easily

ignored; and they are relevant to party politics, so have the potential to change how parties are perceived.

Electoral shocks affect electoral politics in three main ways: they change how important or salient different issues are to voters; they change the extent to which different parties are seen to be competent at handling different aspects of government, such as the economy, or immigration; and they change the social or political image of the parties by altering who and what the different parties are seen to represent.

The five electoral shocks the book analyses are the rise in immigration after 2004, particularly from Eastern Europe; the global financial crisis of 2007–08 and its aftermath; the coalition government of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats between 2010 and 2015; the Scottish independence referendum in 2014; and the Brexit referendum in 2016.

The book’s definition of an electoral shock is not totally convincing.

