**5. The Liberal Democrats: Green Shoots of Recovery or Still on Life Support?**

Responding to Theresa May’s decision to call a snap general election, Liberal Democrat leader Tim Farron was in upbeat mood, proclaiming it as ‘your chance to change the direction of your country….if you want to avoid a disastrous Hard Brexit…if you want to keep Britain in the Single Market…if you want a Britain that is open, tolerant and united, this is your chance’ (Farron, 2017). The Liberal Democrats had some good reasons to feel positive. Two years previously the party had been utterly humiliated at the ballot box following five years in coalition government with the Conservatives. Driven out of natural heartlands and only 25,000 votes from total wipe out, the party was left with a rump of eight MPs, most with precarious majorities (Cutts and Russell, 2015). However the referendum decision to leave the European Union provided the Liberal Democrats with a potential political lifeline. With Labour in apparent disarray, the Liberal Democrats had an opportunity to be the voice of those who wanted to remain in the European Union. An unequivocal ‘Pro-European’ message and support for a second EU referendum on the terms of ‘Brexit’ gave the party political space and a potential distinctive identity. A return to the 1992 level of parliamentary representation of 20 seats at least seemed a realistic goal. After all, if the Liberal Democrats could not win a healthy number of seats in 2017 and re-impose the party as a third force in British politics when could it? The reality though proved to be much different. Despite the salience of ‘Brexit’, the Liberal Democrats failed to gain any electoral traction. Was the party strategy wrong or were other factors to blame for lack of Liberal Democrat progress? We examine what happened and why, and evaluate whether the party has a political future in British politics or Remains on life support.

**The ‘Brexit’ Bounce**

Before the EU referendum there were few signs that the party had turned the corner. Despite a new leader – Tim Farron – and a record number of people joining the party, the Liberal Democrats continued to record lower poll numbers than their 2015 national vote share. The party performed poorly in by-elections and in the 2016 English local elections the Liberal Democrats managed to take control of one council (Watford) and make only 45 net seats gains despite their historically low local base. The Liberal Democrats retreated further in Wales in the Assembly elections and despite winning two constituency seats in Scotland they did not increase their representative numbers in Holyrood. However, the vote to leave the European Union on June 23rd 2016 turned British politics upside down and opened an unexpected opportunity for the Liberal Democrats.

In the chaotic immediate aftermath of the ‘Brexit’ vote, Cameron resigned prompting a Conservative leadership contest and Labour began to turn on Jeremy Corbyn. A lacklustre performance during the referendum campaign was the final straw for many in the parliamentary Labour party and this became the catalyst for a second leadership election. Amid this turmoil, the Liberal Democrats continued to court the 48% ‘Remain’ vote, as Farron became the self-styled spokesperson for the progressives. Immediately this paid off as the Liberal Democrats gained almost 16,000 new members in the three weeks following the referendum. At the party’s conference in September, party members overwhelmingly backed a resolution demanding a second referendum to ratify Britain’s final Brexit deal. As the new Prime Minister May stressed that ‘Brexit means Brexit’, Farron laid out the Liberal Democrats’ position, arguing that “if we trusted the people to vote for our departure then we must trust the people to vote for our destination” (Farron, 2016)

Internally the Liberal Democrats were gearing themselves up for a ‘snap’ general election. The focal point of their strategy was the reselection of as many defeated 2015 Liberal Democrat MPs as possible. Party strategists felt former MPs retained significant goodwill from local electorates and could tap into a local personal vote, especially as a number of the former MPs seemed to compare favourably to their replacement from other parties. By mid-July 2016, the party had reselected 14 former Liberal Democrat MPs who were defeated in 2015 to stand again. `Re-selection of former MPs was only part of a broader strategy. Those not willing to re-stand were replaced quickly to ensure a head-start in campaign preparation. In those 2010 held seats where a new candidate stood in 2015 and subsequently lost, the Liberal Democrats decided to reinstall as many of these candidates as possible to ensure continuity. The party also installed candidates in seats where the Liberal Democrats had fared well in the past, retained a respectable vote in 2015 and had a strong local campaign team to enthuse voters to the cause.

From late October 2016, the Liberal Democrats began to regularly record double digit poll ratings. There was also evidence that Liberal Democrats were starting to pick up at the ballot box with more council by-election gains (31 in total and 28 net gains) in 2016 than ever before. Complementing this upsurge in its local base was a historic by-election win in Richmond Park. The party had always maintained a strong local base and organisation having held the seat from its creation in 1997 until 2010 and controlled the council. It was also a strong ‘Remain’ constituency with more than 70% of residents voting to stay in the European Union. Although the incumbent Zac Goldsmith was officially independent in the by-election, the Liberal Democrats Sarah Olney took the seat by just over 1,800 votes, recording nearly 50% of the overall share, an increase of more than 30% compared to 2015, and a swing of more than 21% from Goldsmith.

Following Olney’s victory, there was talk of a political realignment in British politics, as Brexit could supersede traditional cleavages to determine party support, although there was scant evidence that the Liberal Democrats were actually ‘hoovering’ up discontented ‘Remain’ voters. The Richmond Park by-election did provide a welcome boost for the party’s famed campaign machine that misfired in 2015. Whether heavily focussed campaigns in target seats would be as successful in the heat of a general election was still a moot point. It was still unclear if lessons had been learnt from the 2015 campaign and whether the culling of experienced activists partly through changes to the internal party structure and latterly because of heavy losses sustained during the coalition era would still come back to haunt them. Nonetheless, there were signs that the Liberal Democrats had not forgotten how to win.

**The electoral reality**

Liberal Democrat optimism of an electoral ‘bounce-back’ in the snap June 2017 election was high. A shortened campaign period seemingly favoured the party that had been out resourced by the Conservative ‘decapitation strategy’ across the south of England in 2015. Then a highly effective ‘joined-up’ Tory campaign operation driven by vast amounts of money thrown at key battleground seats not only within but outside the regulated campaign period for nine months or more, outgunned Liberal Democrat opponents. In 2017 a shorter timescale meant that Conservatives had lost some of that advantage.

In reality however a significant Liberal Democrat resurgence was unlikely despite the shadow of ‘Brexit’. Figure 5.1 shows the % Remain vote from the EU referendum by Liberal Democrat margin – the difference between the constituency Liberal Democrat vote and the winner at the 2015 election – for the 40 most marginal Liberal Democrat targets in 2017. There are three visible seat clusters illustrating the difficulties facing the Liberal Democrats. A cluster of nine seats were most vulnerable to the Liberal Democrats if the ‘Remain’ vote from June 2016 switched to the Liberal Democrats *en masse*, but only four of these seats were held by the Conservatives and two by Labour.1 The remaining three seats were held by the pro-‘Remain’ SNP. A second cluster of ten seats existed where the ‘Remain’ vote was 50% or more and the Liberal Democrats were up to 20% behind the winning party. Again even a Brexit realignment would limit Liberal Democrat success – only three of these seats were Conservative-held, two were Labour and the other five SNP.2 The final cluster included a mix of extremely marginal and less marginal seats many of which were around or just under the national average ‘Remain’ vote but where the Liberal Democrats were between 12-18% behind the winning party in 2015. These were primarily Conservative-held seats where the swing needed by the Liberal Democrats was possible if difficult to achieve. For success across this seat cluster, the Liberal Democrats needed to be the undisputed party of destination for the ‘Remain’ vote and still rely on some ‘Leave’ voters either not voting or voting for their chosen party for other reasons than ‘Brexit’.

In reality the 2015 electoral context had changed too much. UKIP was haemorrhaging support – and even candidates. Previous evidence suggested that UKIP’s emergence had supressed Conservative support, with those who supported UKIP in recent elections overwhelmingly from those who voted Conservative in 2010 (Evans and Mellon, 2016). Further evidence from wave 10 of the British Election Study panel suggested that just over 70% of those who had already switched from UKIP had gone to the Conservatives, while a quarter of supposed UKIP loyalists actually had a high probability of supporting the Conservatives on polling day (Cutts and Goodwin, 2017b). UKIP defections were highest in seats where the Conservatives’ main challengers were the Liberal Democrats, particularly across their traditional heartlands in the south-west of England. In fact in 2015, UKIP secured more than 10% of the vote in all but one Conservative-Liberal Democrat battleground seat that polled a lower ‘Remain’ vote than average, and in 15 of the 16 south-west seats with a higher than average ‘Leave’ vote. With the Conservatives actively tempting UKIP supporters through a ‘hard Brexit’ message, there was an effective ‘blue wall’ of Conservative support that would resist Liberal Democrat challenge and even threaten a number of incumbent Liberal Democrat MPs (Cutts and Goodwin, 2017a).

Moreover, pre-election polling data revealed that ‘Remainers’ were becoming increasingly fractured. A majority believed that the government had a duty to carry out the vote to leave the EU rather than ignoring the result of the referendum. While roughly a quarter supported the Liberal Democrats’ position of a second referendum once Brexit negotiations had been completed, fewer than half of ‘Remainers’ supported it, while more than three quarters of ‘Leavers’ opposed it (Wells, 2017). Evidence from the British Election Study (wave 10) found few Conservative pro-Europeans or ‘Remain’ voters willing to abandon the Conservatives in favour of the Liberal Democrats (Fieldhouse et al, 2016). The Liberal Democrats seemingly faced the twin problem of an impenetrable Conservative ‘Leave’ vote reinforced by ex-UKIP voters who saw the Conservatives as the best vehicle to deliver Brexit, and a soft ‘Remain’ vote, a majority of whom accepted the outcome of the referendum, simply unwilling to leave the Conservative fold.

The May 2017 local elections provided some context for the Liberal Democrat challenge. Despite a four point increase in their vote compared to 2013, the Liberal Democrats’ national share (18%) was still well below their pre-coalition performances in local council elections. There was a small ‘Brexit’ bonus with the party polling three percentage points higher on average in those wards with the highest ‘Remain’ vote and there were signs that highly targeted campaigns in previous strongholds or areas which contained an above average Remain vote could result in the Liberal Democrats increasing support. However this did not translate into seats. While their national vote share increased, the party recorded a net loss of 40 councillors. The ‘Blue wall’ of support in Liberal Democrat versus Conservative seats posed a serious threat to Liberal Democrat prospects. The task of a revival in old Liberal strongholds looked particularly bleak with large parts of Cornwall, Devon and Somerset impenetrable.

**The electoral outcome**

*The results analysed*

The 2017 general election represented a return to two party politics in Britain. The combined Conservative and Labour vote share was the highest recorded at any general election since 1970. Unsurprisingly, all the other United Kingdom parties lost support with UKIP, Greens and SNP losing the most ground. It was no different for the Liberal Democrats. The party obtained 2.37 million votes, 43,952 fewer than in 2015 despite the increase in turnout. Liberal Democrat vote share declined by 0.5% to 7.4%, the lowest level for a ‘Liberal’ party since 1959. Although Liberal Democrat support increased in around one-third of all constituencies, the party fell well short of the eighteen seats targeted by Farron. The party’s vote share dropped but a net gain of four seats from 2015 was achieved, increasing their numbers in Westminster to twelve.

Thanks largely to effective targeting strategies, the Liberal Democrats actually gained five seats – Bath, Eastbourne, Kingston and Surbiton, Oxford West and Abingdon and Twickenham – from the Conservatives and three – Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, East Dunbartonshire, and Edinburgh West - from the SNP. However, Southport, where incumbent John Pugh had stood down, was lost to the Conservatives and by-election victor, Sarah Olney narrowly fell short in Richmond Park, also against the Conservatives. Meanwhile Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) and former leader Nick Clegg (Sheffield Hallam) both lost their seats to Labour. The Liberal Democrats were also wiped out in Wales where incumbent Mark Williams lost Ceredigion to Plaid Cymru.

Closer inspection of the results suggests that the Liberal Democrats came close to faring significantly better. Four seats – Ceredigion, Fife North East, Richmond Park and St Ives – were missed by wafer thin majorities (although victories in Westmoreland and Lonsdale and Oxford West and Abingdon were also very tight). Despite a low overall share, the party polled more than 30% of the vote in 28 constituencies. Worryingly, Liberal Democrats lost 375 deposits, more than in 2015, and only came second in 38 seats. Of those second places the party is within 10% of the winning party in just nine seats and more than 20% behind in 22 constituencies. There appears to be a low ceiling on the number of winnable seats.

The Liberal Democrats’ national vote share still obscures a fair amount of unevenness in their electoral performance. Despite winning four of the 59 constituencies in Scotland, the Liberal Democrats’ vote dropped below 7% (see Table 5.2). Three of the five largest declines in the party’s share of the vote were in former Scottish strongholds and Scottish Liberal Democrats lost deposits in 46 of the 59 seats. In Wales, the Liberal Democrats fared even worse. Not only is it now without any representation, its vote share declined by 2% to 4.5% and the party only held its deposit in four constituencies.

Across England, there is a north-south divide in the party’s vote. In 2017, Liberal Democrat support largely held up in the south of England albeit from a low base. The Liberal Democrats continue to poll relatively strongly in the area of traditional strength – the south west of England. Here there is some evidence that party support has bottomed-out with the Liberal Democrats getting around the same vote share as two years ago. The Liberal Democrats only gained support in two regions - London and the south-east. Liberal Democrat support also largely held up in eastern England and remains above the national average. Elsewhere the picture looks extremely gloomy. Across the midlands, the Liberal Democrat vote has collapsed and is now little above four per cent. There was also a two per cent drop in Liberal Democrat support across the north-east and the Yorkshire and Humber region. In the five regions outside the south of England, Liberal Democrat support is close to three per cent below its national vote share. There is also a geographic divide in Liberal Democrat representation. Westmoreland and Lonsdale is the only northern English Liberal Democrat seat. Of the 38 seats where the Liberal Democrats came second in 2017, only six of these were in the midlands and the north of England. Across the south, the Liberal Democrats lost their deposit in just over a third of the seats. However, in the north, the Liberal Democrats lost their deposit in 201 seats (more than three quarters of those contested).

Insert Table 5.2 (National/Regional Breakdown)

**The constituency battle**

Table 5.3 examines the Liberal Democrats’ 2017 performance by seat type. In 2015, despite the loss of all but eight seats, there was a very modest incumbency effect with the Liberal Democrats doing better in those incumbent seats where candidates were seeking re-election (Cutts and Russell, 2015). Two years later, despite losing five of the nine seats they held at dissolution, Liberal Democrat support rose by 3.3 percentage points in the seats they won in 2015. Incumbency did not save four Liberal Democrat MPs, but once again those Liberal Democrats incumbents seeking re-election did fare better. Where a Liberal Democrat incumbent stood again, party support increased by 4.2 percentage points. Incumbency matters for the Liberal Democrats but, as in 2015, any expectation that those seeking re-election would be immune from a national surge against them because of their personal standing in the area was simply misguided. More worrying for the Liberal Democrats, the defeats of Clegg and Mulholland suggests that even highly targeted local campaigns backed up by central resources and know-how are insufficient when the tide of support rises against them.

The tactic of re-selecting former Liberal Democrat MPs in key target seats had a modest positive impact on party support but there was unevenness depending on the political context of the seat. Twelve Liberal Democrat former MPs who lost in 2015 to the Conservatives stood again. In these seats, Liberal Democrat support increased by 5.4 percentage points, with three of these MPs re-capturing their seats. Other highlights were the strong performances in North Devon and Wells, while in St Ives Andrew George was just over 300 votes from winning back his seat. It was not all one way. The party went rapidly backwards in Colchester and barely made any ground in Eastleigh and St Austell and Newquay. Selecting previous incumbents proved to be largely ineffective against a resurgent Labour. Only six stood again in the hope of winning their seat from the Labour incumbent. Not only did all fail to get re-elected, but support in these seats tumbled more than eight percentage points as the party’s vote share dropped below twenty per cent. There were mixed results against the SNP. Jo Swinson won her seat back in East Dunbartonshire but Alan Reid in Argyll and Bute saw his vote crumble.

One way to illustrate this is to examine the effect of incumbency on Liberal Democrat support in those fourteen seats where the previous incumbent stood in 2015 and lost but did not seek re-election in 2017. Eight of these seats were held by the Conservatives while three were held each by Labour and the SNP. In 2017, the Liberal Democrats failed to win any of these seats back. Indeed, in only two (Lewes +3.8 and Brecon and Radnorshire +0.8 percentage points) did the Liberal Democrats increase their vote share. In the three SNP-held seats, the Liberal Democrat vote fell in 2017 by 15.7 percentage points. Likewise in the three Labour-held seats the Liberal Democrat vote fell by 12.6 percentage points. Even in the eight Conservative-held seats, where the Liberal Democrats enjoyed some success, the party’s vote fell by 4.5 percentage points. No doubt the decision of locally popular former MPs such as Adrian Sanders in Torbay (where the Liberal Democrat vote fell by 8.7 percentage points) and Steve Webb in Thornbury and Yate (where the vote fell by -6.5 percentage points) not to stand again hampered any chances of a recovery. Moreover, they illustrate just how much of a personal vote these former incumbents generated which was largely masked by the collapse in Liberal Democrat support in 2015.

The Liberal Democrats entered the 2017 general election as the main challenger in 62 seats. Across these constituencies, Liberal Democrat support fell by one percentage point compared to 2015 but again the role of political agency is important. Where the Liberal Democrats were the main challenger to Labour, support crumbled by 11.5%. It was slightly different in Scotland where the Liberal Democrats were caught in the cross-fire of post-independence referendum politics. Only in the four most marginal seats where the party deployed considerable resources did the Liberal Democrat vote hold up. In the 46 seats where the party was second to the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats fared better, increasing support by two percentage points. Despite reversals in Sutton and Cheam, Thornbury and Yate, and Torbay, closer inspection of the data does suggest marginality mattered. In the ten most marginal (0-10% difference) Conservative-Liberal Democrat battleground seats, there was a 4.2% increase in Liberal Democrat support.

Traditionally the Liberal Democrats’ ability to win Conservative seats depends on building and sustaining core support, appealing to wavering Conservatives and persuading centre-left Labour and Green voters to tactically support them to keep out the Tories. Aside from the ruthless and sustained Conservative targeting, a key factor in the Liberal Democrats’ 2015 collapse was the tactical unwind of its left of centre vote in these seats. In 2017 the Liberal Democrats enjoyed modest success against the Conservatives. But our evidence suggests that the Liberal Democrats’ ability to turn votes into seats was dependent on curbing the Labour vote. In the five seats it took from the Conservatives in 2017, only Eastbourne saw an increase in the Conservative share of the vote. Crucially though, across these five seats the Labour vote declined by 0.2 percentage points. Moreover, in the three seats where the Greens stood a candidate, their support fell substantially. Despite the Labour surge elsewhere there is plenty of evidence that in these Conservative-Liberal Democrat battlegrounds the Liberal Democrats managed to stop any further centre-left tactical unwind. However, elsewhere it was a different story. In the 20 other Conservative-Liberal Democrat battlegrounds where the Liberal Democrats were 20% or less behind the incumbent, the Labour vote increased by 7.9%. In five of these 20 contests, Labour even relegated the Liberal Democrats to third place. Many Labour voters in these seats, knowing Labour was unlikely to win put voting for their favoured party before lending their support to the second-placed Liberal Democrats. The pattern of the 2015 general election seems to have continued in 2017.

The 2017 general election signified a continuation of the Liberal Democrats’ retreat from their traditional heartlands. Of the 14 Liberal constituencies held in February 1974, only one (Orkney and Shetland) is held by the Liberal Democrats now. More worrying for the Liberal Democrats is how it performs in its 1992 seats. This base proved to be a springboard for later gains as the party translated votes into healthy levels of representation at Westminster. Only three of these 1992 seats (Bath, Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross and Orkney and Shetland) remain in Liberal Democrat hands 25 years on. The party also continues to lose ground in these seats partly because credibility gained from local success has waned and not recovered since being in coalition. One positive though is the improved performance in the ‘breakthrough’ seats which the Liberal Democrats won in 1997. These were overwhelmingly Conservative and were gained at the height of the anti-Conservative tactical alliance against John Major’s government. Given the Liberal Democrats’ low base in 2015 there is evidence of a ‘bounce-back’ in these seats two years on. Five of the 12 seats the Liberal Democrats now hold were first gained in 1997; eight of the 12 also elected Liberal Democrat representatives twenty years ago. Despite the increasing lack of representation from its traditional heartland areas, there is a semblance of historical legacy in Liberal Democrat support and Westminster representation.

One of the key election puzzles is how the Liberal Democrats failed to capitalise on the party’s anti-Brexit stance. Of the 12 seats the party currently holds, eight voted ‘Remain’ in the EU referendum. Two of the Liberal Democrats gains – Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross and Eastbourne – voted ‘Leave’ while the local personal standing of Tom Brake and Norman Lamb helped ensure their re-election in ‘Leave’ areas. Four of the five seats lost also voted ‘Remain’. Figure 5.1 shows a positive relationship (correlation of 0.15\* significant at 99% level) between the change in the Liberal Democrat vote 2015-17 and the percentage ‘Remain’ vote for all UK constituencies, albeit the line is relatively flat. Table 5.4 reveals how the Liberal Democrats performed in ‘Leave’ and ‘Remain’ seats in more depth. In 2017, the Liberal Democrat vote was four percentage points higher in ‘Remain’ areas than ‘Leave’ seats and 2.6% higher than their national vote share. When we break down these seats according to support for ‘Remain’ and ‘Leave’, it transpires that the Liberal Democrat vote in ‘Hard Brexit’ areas (with a 60%+ ‘Leave’ vote) is 3.3% lower than in ‘Soft Brexit’ seats. Liberal Democrat support was marginally higher in ‘Hard Remain’ (60%+) seats but there was not a great deal of difference. Table 5.4 also contains party vote share across the ‘Leave’ and ‘Remain’ categories in 2015 and notes the change in support. Overall, Liberal Democrat support in ‘Leave’ seats dropped by 1% but the real story is the lack of growth in all ‘Remain’ constituencies between 2015 and 2017. The Liberal Democrats were always unlikely to translate ‘Remain’ support into significant gains but there was an expectation that the party would at least record large shifts of support in their direction. It simply did not materialise.

Insert Figure 5.1 and Table 5.4

**Causes and Consequences**

*Farron’s Failure?*

It would be easy to lay the blame for Liberal Democrat underachievement upon Tim Farron. He struggled to combine his evangelical Christian beliefs with being leader of a party built on tolerance and openness to others. Farron’s discomfort and awkwardness was clear at the start of the campaign as he first declined to give a clear answer in an interview about whether homosexuality was sinful, only to later address it in the House of Commons. Media questions persisted and Farron’s responses on the morality of homosexuality haunted the campaign. Part of the context was Farron’s previous voting record – abstention on equal marriage bill (3rd reading); voted against the 2007 Equality Act (Sexual Orientations) regulations – although he had subsequently spoken up for LGBTI rights and supported gay marriage in Commons votes. Ironically Farron had also encouraged internal reform in the party. The manifesto for instance pledged all-LGBTI parliamentary shortlists. Crucially Farron’s personal stance was at odds with the very voters that the Liberal Democrats sought to win over: young, cosmopolitan, liberal ‘Remainers’ who collectively celebrated sexual equality.

Importantly for the party, the issue dominated the first 24 hours and then dogged the latter parts of the campaign just when the Liberal Democrats had an audience for its key election messages. In the past, media exposure during the short campaign period had led to surges in Liberal Democrat support (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005). Media focus tests the ability of party leaders to deliver messages in a manageable form. For third parties, the leader is arguably even more crucial. They have a limited time during the election campaign to get the right message across but often it is the first time that many in the electorate have paid attention to the leaders of parties other than the main two. Being embroiled in public stand-offs with the media therefore wasted valuable time, drew negative publicity and distracted voters from the party’s message.

Contrary to expectations Farron was unable to build a dialogue with the electorate. His approval ratings actually got worse during the campaign moving from -22 at the start of May to -26 in the week before polling day. Less than two weeks before election-day 52% of those asked in an Opinium poll could not name the Liberal Democrat leader (*Daily Telegraph*, 26th May 2017). By the final week of the campaign, 35% of those asked did not know if he was doing well or badly, compared to 11% for May and 13% for Corbyn (YouGov tracking poll). While a sizeable number of voters were unable to make a judgement on Farron’s leadership many others were unconvinced as he simply failed to cut through. Despite his moral anxiety on homosexuality a more fundamental problem was that the party had simply become an irrelevance for many.

Farron had been the overwhelming choice of the Liberal Democrats as the new leader after the 2015 debacle. He had offered a vision of a party reconnecting to its liberal roots, and activist base. Farron was always less comfortable in the Commons than his predecessors as Liberal Democrat leader. Under him the party failed to appreciate the Westminster-heavy knock-on effects of the 2015 result; usurped as the third party in the Commons by the SNP, Farron did not even warrant a weekly slot in Prime Minister’s Questions. The profile of the Liberal Democrats sank from the minor coalition partner led by the Deputy Prime Minister to subterranean gang of eight with an anonymous leader.

Whatever discomforts his personal belief system triggered in the party’s psyche, it is the inability of Farron’s leadership to re-establish liberalism as a viable concern that is his most marked failure. That the party chose 74 year old re-tread MP Vince Cable as his replacement in summer 2017 demonstrated a recognition that the party needed to re-establish itself as a parliamentary force again.

Finally even the ability to galvanise his local party deserted Farron. His Westmorland and Lonsdale seat was regarded as the template for Liberal Democrat revival after coalition, yet in 2017 he only held on to a Conservative challenge for the seat by his fingertips. The balance of top-down/bottom-up equilibrium in the party would have to be recalibrated and Farron clearly was not the leader to do this.

*The Campaign*

The 2017 Liberal Democrat campaign was a game of two halves. In the first the Liberal Democrats took the ‘Brexit’ challenge head-on. June 2017 was an opportunity to present the party as the political home for ‘Remainers’ and give European enthusiasts some hope. A second ballot on the details of Brexit would provide an opportunity for a considered re-think. Yet, for many it smacked of a devious way of re-running the referendum. Indeed one could reasonably make the case that the policy was illiberal and lacked respect for the original referendum result. The policy also lacked political nous since by their own admission, the Liberal Democrats accepted that they would not form the next government and had also ruled out any coalition agreement with Conservatives and Labour – meaning that despite the rhetoric they would not be in a position to implement the policy or have any hope of reversing the Brexit decision through this route. A more focussed approach on the economic merits of remaining in the single market and customs union might have proved a much stronger sell and maintained clear water from Labour’s ambiguous position.

Beyond Brexit the Liberal Democrats’ manifesto contained many headline proposals – 1p in the pound on income tax to raise £6bn for NHS and social care services; end the 1% public sector pay cap; reinstate university maintenance grants for the poorest students; extend free childcare to all two-year-olds. – all tailored to win back those centre-left voters who had deserted the party since 2010. However, this appeal was side-lined by Labour’s populist anti-austerity message.

With the Conservatives floundering on social care and the Prime Minister suddenly exposed as deficient in the campaign, the Liberal Democrats saw an opportunity to pounce. The second half of the campaign proved to be more successful as the party tapped into concerns about the so called ‘Dementia tax’ and more generally about Conservative plans for the elderly and social care, as the party sought to capture Conservative waverers, particularly in southern seats who were concerned by the Tory manifesto.

Despite the Liberal Democrats’ offensive drive in the second half of the campaign, longstanding problems on political identity and policy appeal remained. In September 2016, a YouGov study found that two thirds of all voters did not know what the party stands for anymore (Twyman, 2016). The figure was greater for those who voted Liberal Democrat previously, with 7 out of 10 of former voters stating they were uncertain. Moreover, even 22% of current supporters asked also confessed to not knowing. The 2017 election campaign not only provided an opportunity to put forward a raft of proposals and policy ideas but also to address longstanding concerns by showcasing a distinctive identity. It was also a chance to challenge competitors’ longstanding ownership of the most salient issues. Table 5.5 shows YouGov data, collected in the days prior to polling day, on the best party on the key issues in the election. After six weeks of national campaigning, it made grim reading for the Liberal Democrats. Aside from Europe, on which 7% of respondents named the Liberal Democrats as the best party, the Liberal Democrats simply failed to challenge the main parties’ ownership of salient issues. There were also few signs that the policies advocated by the party garnered any meaningful support from the electorate.

*The Legacy of Coalition*

The Liberal Democrats were still toxic for swathes of centre-left and young voters just two years on from the coalition. Labour’s pitch to these groups made Liberal Democrat rehabilitation harder. With little prospect of winning back large numbers, the party was left desperately appealing to these voters in target seats to lend them their support to oust the Conservatives. As we have shown, many declined.

The collapse in representation at Westminster also meant that mainstream media exposure became increasingly limited. Despite Farron presenting himself as a dissenter on coalition policies like tuition fees which caused the party so much reputational damage, this simply reminded voters of the coalition and for some what they saw was a betrayal. Whatever way the Liberal Democrats turned after the 2015 general election they were in a bind. In 2017, voters found it difficult to swallow Liberal Democrat assurances that they had learned the lessons from their time in coalition given that many of these words came from people who were heavily involved.

A key legacy of the coalition was the ‘hollowing out’ of local parties and the loss of experienced political campaigners. As we have noted, in the two years since 2015 the Liberal Democrats have made modest progress locally but remain way below the heights of the past. While the targeting strategy was relatively successful and more realistic than in 2015, the capacity of the Liberal Democrats to run effective campaigns is compromised by the losses endured when in coalition and by the internal reforms made by the party in the early 2010s.

**Conclusion**

Two years ago there were concerns whether the Liberal Democrats in their current form would survive. The party elected a new leader with the remit of rebuilding from the bottom-up. It was a long-term project. Then David Cameron set a date for a referendum on membership of the European Union. Six months later the public had voted to leave, both major parties faced divisive leadership contests and the Liberal Democrats were thrust into pole position as the spokesperson for the 48% who wanted to remain in the EU. Until Theresa May called a ‘snap’ general election, the Liberal Democrats were building momentum. Many in the party were convinced by the rather fanciful prospect of a strong performance (and even victory) in the cancelled Manchester Gorton by-election. Just how would the Liberal Democrats have fared in a general election after the Brexit negotiations had taken place? With Europe at the forefront of political debate the battle lines were seemingly drawn. While the rush was on to court the more nativist and authoritarian leanings of the majority, a significant section of the electorate was ostensibly far more sympathetic to a party more cosmopolitan in outlook, a defender of liberal values. In the face of Labour woes the opportunity was there for the Liberal Democrats to fill this void. Yet longstanding issues explain the Liberal Democrats’ current electoral predicament. There is little change in the weakness of the party’s social and partisan base. The Liberal Democrats still rely on votes that are lent rather than owned. Beyond their position on Europe, the Liberal Democrats lack a political identity and programme to enthuse support. Part of the problem is that of political distinctiveness and an inability to stake out clear political territory that appeals to voters who ostensibly share liberal values. Of course, the reputational baggage picked up from being in coalition hasn’t helped this cause. However, at its heart is not only an ideological and party positioning tension but more importantly it is about the party’s strategy of adopting quick-fix solutions at the expense of building a longstanding programme. The party has continuously opted for the former, stressing eye-catching proposals for public consumption. Few parties have produced more policy initiatives, documents and proposals than the Liberal Democrats. The 2017 manifesto continued this trend. Yet, outside the highly politically engaged, most electors would be hard-pushed to know what the Liberal Democrats actually stand for, or recall their policies. The debilitating struggle for media exposure has not helped but this is only a partial explanation. Likewise electoral credibility will always be a problem, but given the Liberal Democrats’ current political and electoral predicament, now is the time to play the longer game as the short-term quick-fix solutions seemingly no longer work.

The Liberal Democrats will take some heart from their targeting strategy, which was much more streamlined and focused than in 2015. Campaigning proved effective where the party was on the front foot, but less effective in defensive situations primarily against Labour. Party activism around community-based politics is a vital part of the Liberal Democrats’ armoury. It is effective but not a panacea. Comparative advantage offline has gone with other parties copying what works and then tailoring it to suit. Online, Liberal Democrat activity is competitive but has fallen behind the other parties, particularly the organic social media activism undertaken by groups and individuals associated with Labour. How the Liberal Democrats can match and even compete against this is difficult to fathom. Although targeting did help win seats, the strategy may have had unintended consequences. Only nine constituencies are now marginal with a gap of 10% or less between the Liberal Democrat challenger and the incumbent. Barring historic shifts in support, electoral growth looks hamstrung in the short to medium term.

The Liberal Democrats now face a monumental task. The return to two party politics inevitably means that the Liberal Democrats are a spectator on the side-lines rather than taking part in the main game. Nevertheless, British politics is in continuous flux and one would be foolhardy to assume that such clear battle lines will hold. With the Conservatives minority government struggling to see out a full term, Brexit negotiations to dominate political discourse, a Tory party leadership contest seemingly likely at some point, and continued internal party strife in Labour most likely, it is possible that the Liberal Democrats could suddenly benefit from any fall in two party support. However, key decisions about where the party stands, where it goes and how it operates need to be made. After the 2015 general election the Liberal Democrats were on life support and fighting for their political survival. In 2017, the party may have stabilised somewhat but it is still a in a critical condition.

Notes

 Conservative held seats: Bath, Twickenham, Kingston and Surbiton, Lewes – and the two held by Labour were Cambridge and Bermondsey and Old Southwark.

2 Conservative held seats: Cheadle, Cheltenham and Oxford West and Abingdon – and the two held by Labour were Cardiff Central and Hornsey and Wood Green

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**Table 5.1 Summary of Liberal Democrat Electoral Performance 1992-2017**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **LD** | **1992** | **1997** | **2001** | **2005** | **2010** | **2015** | **2017** |
| Votes (000) | 5,999 | 5,243 | 4,814 | 5,985 | 6,836 | 2,416 | 2,372 |
| % UK Vote | 17.8% | 16.8% | 18.3% | 22.0% | 23.0% | 7.9% | 7.4% |
| Seats Won | 20 | 46 | 52 | 62 | 57 | 8 | 12 |
| % Seats Won | 3.2% | 7.0% | 7.9% | 9.6% | 8.8% | 1.2% | 1.8% |
| Votes:Seats\* | 1.1 | 2.7 | 2.8 | 2.9 | 2.5 | 1.0 | 1.6 |
| Lost Deposits | 11/632 | 13/639 | 1/639 | 1/626 | 0/631 | 341/631 | 375/629 |

\*Votes:Seats Ratio derived from dividing LD seats won by LD share of the vote. In 1992, the Liberal Democrats stood in 632 constituencies; and in 2017 they stood in 629.

**Table 5.2 2015 Liberal Democrat Performance: National and Regional Breakdown (English Regions)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **National & Regional** | **2017 % LD** **Vote** | **2015 % LD** **Vote** | **Change****+/-15-17** | **Seats 2017** | **Seats 2015** | **Change** **15-17** |
| **Country** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| UK | 7.4% | 7.9% | -0.5% | 12/632 | 8/632 | +4 |
| England | 7.8% | 8.2% | -0.4% | 8/533 | 6/533 | +2 |
| Scotland | 6.8% | 7.6% | -0.8% | 4/59 | 1/59 | +3 |
| Wales | 4.5% | 6.5% | -2.0% | 0/40 | 1/40 | -1 |
| **Region** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| East Midlands | 4.3% | 5.6% | -1.3% | 0/46 | 0/46 | 0 |
| Eastern | 7.9% | 8.3% | -0.4% | 1/58 | 1/58 | 0 |
| London | 8.8% | 7.7% | +1.1% | 3/73 | 1/73 | +2 |
| North East | 4.6% | 6.5% | -1.9% | 0/29 | 0/29 | 0 |
| North West | 5.4% | 6.6% | -1.2% | 1/75 | 2/75 | -1 |
| South East | 10.5% | 9.4% | +1.1% | 2/84 | 0/84 | +2 |
| South West | 14.9% | 15.1% | -0.2% | 1/55 | 0/55 | +1 |
| West Midlands | 4.4% | 5.5% | -1.1% | 0/59 | 0/59 | 0 |
| Yorkshire & The Humber | 5.0% | 7.1% | -2.1% | 0/54 | 2/54 | -2 |

**Table 5.3 2017 Liberal Democrat Performance by Incumbency and Seat Type**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Seats** | **2017 % LD** **Vote** | **2015 % LD** **Vote** |  **Change****+/- 15-17** |
| **Incumbency** |  |  |  |
| LD 2017 Incumbent Seats (9) | 39.3% | 36.0% | +3.3% |
| LD Incumbent Candidates (8) | 40.9% | 36.7% | +4.2% |
| LD Non-Held Seats (622) | 7.1% | 7.7% | -0.6% |
| **2015 Incumbency** |  |  |  |
| LD 2015 Incumbent Seats (57) | 27.3% | 30.1% | -2.8% |
| LD MPs lost 2015 stood again 2017 (20) | 31.3% | 30.6% | +0.7% |
| Con-LD MPs lost 15 stood again 2017 (12) | 37.2% | 31.8% | +5.4% |
| Lab-LD MPs lost 15 stood again 2017 (6) | 19.2% | 27.5% | -8.3% |
| SNP-LD MPs lost 15 stood again 2017 (2) | 29.8% | 32.2% | -2.4% |
| **Seat Type (LDs Second Place)** |  |  |  |
| LD All Second Place (62) | 26.2% | 27.2% | -1.0% |
| Con-LD Seats (45) | 27.9% | 25.9% | +2.0% |
| Lab-LD Seats (9) | 17.2% | 28.7% | -11.5% |
| SNP-LD Seats (8) | 25.2% | 32.8% | -7.6% |
| **Historical Legacy** |  |  |  |
| LD Legacy February 1974 seats (14) | 18.3% | 20.8% | -1.5% |
| LD Heartland 1992 seats (18) | 26.3% | 29.5% | -3.2% |
| LD Breakthrough 1997 seats (29) | 27.8% | 25.4% | +2.4% |

\*Note: Percentages derived from summing LD votes cast/Total Valid Votes Cast\*100. 2017 constituencies excludes the Speaker’s seat (Buckingham) and Brighton Pavilion both where the LDs did not stand a candidate. Heartland 1992 seats – Liverpool Mossley Hill and Tweeddale, Etttrick & Lauderdale were abolished. Of those LD MPs who stood again – David Ward stood as an Independent in Bradford East and therefore is not counted.

**Table 5.4 2017 Liberal Democrat Performance in Remain and Leave Seats**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Seats** | **2017 % LD** **Vote** | **2015 % LD** **Vote** |  **Change****+/- 15-17** |
| **Remain/Leave** |  |  |  |
| All Leave Seats (393) | 6.0% | 7.0% | -1.0% |
| All Remain Seats (237) | 10.0% | 9.8% | +0.2% |
| **Leave** |  |  |  |
| ‘Soft Brexit’ Seats 50.1-59.9% (240) | 7.3% | 8.1% | -0.8% |
| ‘Hard Brexit’ Seats 60% plus (153) | 4.0% | 5.1% | -1.1% |
| **Remain** |  |  |  |
| ‘Soft Remain’ Seats 50.1-59.9% (150) | 9.8% | 9.9% | -0.1% |
| ‘Hard Remain’ Seats 60% plus (87) | 10.4% | 9.7% | +0.7% |

\*Note: 630 seats. We exclude Buckingham and Brighton Pavilion.

**Table 5.5 Best Party on Issues: YouGov Tracking Poll June 5-7 2017**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Issue** | **Conservatives** | **Labour** | **Lib Dems** | **Others** | **None** | **DK** |
| Health | 22% | 41% | 4% | 2% | 8% | 22% |
| Immigration | 30% | 25% | 5% | 17% | 8% | 20% |
| Law & Order | 36% | 26% | 4% | 5% | 6% | 23% |
| Education | 25% | 36% | 5% | 4% | 7% | 24% |
| Unemployment | 29% | 30% | 2% | 4% | 8% | 26% |
| Economy | 39% | 25% | 4% | 4% | 7% | 24% |
| Housing | 21% | 35% | 4% | 4% | 9% | 27% |
| EU exit | 37% | 19% | 7% | 8% | 8% | 21% |
| Security | 37% | 22% | 3% | 6% | 7% | 25% |

 **Figure 5.1: % Constituency Remain Vote by % 2015 Liberal Democrat Margin**



\*Key: Blue = Conservative held; Red = Labour held; Yellow = SNP Held

**Figure 5.2: Change in Liberal Democrat Vote 2015-17 by EU Referendum Remain Vote**



Correlation – Remain vote & LD 2017 vote share = 0.25\*

Correlation – Remain vote & LD 2015 vote share = 0.19\*

Correlation – Remain vote & Change LD 2015-17 vote share = 0.15\*