

The 20% Strategy:

Building a core vote for the Liberal Democrats

By David Howarth and Mark Pack

Contents

Preface to the 2 nd edition.....	2
The Liberal Democrat core vote problem.....	3
Why the Liberal Democrat core vote has always been small.....	3
Where to find a core vote.....	4
Leaning how to build a core vote.....	8
Base the party's research on building a core vote.....	9
Campaign on issues that illuminate the party's values.....	10
A new three-pillar campaign structure.....	10
An elected Deputy Leader to act as the party's campaign chair.....	11
A dual development route for local parties.....	12
A safety net for areas where local parties are weak.....	13
Reinvigorating target seat campaigning.....	13
Offer core voters the chance to be more than just voters.....	15
Reforming the party's policy-making process.....	15
A party structure than enhances reputation.....	16
Boost diversity.....	17
Conclusion.....	19

David Howarth was Liberal Democrat MP for Cambridge and a member of the party's Federal Policy Committee. A Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge, from October he will be a Professor of Law and Public Policy at Cambridge University.

Mark Pack ran the party's internet general election campaigns in 2001 and 2005 and is co-author of the party's agents manual and election law handbooks. He is an Associate Director at Blue Rubicon.

First published July 2015. Second edition January 2016.

Licensed under Creative Commons CC BY-ND. (This license allows for redistribution, commercial and non-commercial, as long as it is passed along unchanged and in whole, with credit to the authors).

Preface to the 2nd edition

It may seem odd, even ungrateful, for authors to bemoan a paucity of complaints, disputation or even hostility to their words. However, the overwhelmingly very positive reaction to the initial publication in the summer of 2015 of our pamphlet setting out a ‘core votes’ strategy for the Liberal Democrats, is rather unsettling.

That is because although we, the authors, are obviously both convinced of the merits of our case, implementing it would also mark a radical departure from the party’s previous strategies – not only from that of Nick Clegg, many of whose advisors were opposed to the idea of a core votes approach, but also from that of his predecessors.

By rights, therefore, this pamphlet should be controversial – and the risk is the kind comments simply presage everyone carrying on as before. Hence one of the motivations for this second edition, to give the debate on such matters further momentum. Alongside that, we have taken the advantage of the passage of a little time with the extra hindsight and evidence that generates, to expand and bolster the argument where appropriate.

As with our first edition, we hope you will find our case convincing – and if you do, to join us in doing what you can to turn it into reality because, with just 8 MPs and a shrinking base over many years at other levels of election, the Liberal Democrats have never more needed the right strategy than now.

That is why amongst the new content in this 2nd edition you will find, in the ‘Where to find a core vote’ section information on what to ask on the doorstep, in surveys (both paper and digital) and in phone calls to help identify potential core voters in your own patch.

Good luck, and do let us know how you get on.

The Liberal Democrat core vote problem

The current Liberal Democrat core vote is tiny. At around just 1 in 20 of the electorate, it is so small it is barely enough to ensure the party's survival - and nowhere near large enough to help the party through tough times with any sense of security let alone success.

Whilst other political parties face the challenge of how to reach out beyond their core vote, the Liberal Democrat core vote starts so small that our challenge is how to increase the core vote.

However, as we will show below there is a sizeable share of the electorate – around 1 in 5 voters – who share the same attitudes and values as our current core vote.

That makes a 20% core vote strategy desirable and plausible. It would be a specifically *Liberal Democrat* core vote as it would be made up of people who think the same way as our current voters and who have the same outlook on the world.

It would also be a core vote large enough to make a real difference. We would still need to reach out beyond our core vote to win many elections. But a 20% core would enable far greater electoral success.

In elections with a list PR or STV element– Welsh Assembly, Scottish Parliament, Scottish local government, London Assembly and the European Parliament – being able to reliably poll at least 20% would transform our electoral prospects.

In elections without any form of PR, 20% would of course not be enough to win. But it would mean the party starts far closer to the winning line. That is both a direct advantage in itself and also an indirect one, because the closer we start to the winning line the more effectively we can target swing voters to take us the last part of the way to the winning line. The sort of clever targeting of intensive activity on a small number of voters which has been widely praised as a hallmark of the Conservative 2015 general election campaign simply does not work if you start as far away from the winning line as we usually do.

Other parties – Labour and Conservatives in particular – regularly demonstrate the advantages even under first past the post of having a larger core vote. The Liberal Democrats need to seize some of that advantage for ourselves.

Securing a 20% core vote would provide the party with both the solid loyalty to see it through tough times and with a clear sense of purpose and strategy to avoid being buffeted every which way by events. Buffeting which always risks causing an overly deferential attitude towards those establishment experts who so often advise our elected office holders to be wise, responsible... and not shake up existing power structures.

Why the Liberal Democrat core vote has always been small

Not being a party of collective interests or nationalists anchored in one part of the country, a core vote comes harder to the Liberal Democrats than to other parties being based instead on shared attitudes.

More generally, political parties can be divided into three types: parties built on a coherent set of values; parties whose main objective is to further the interests of a specific group of people; and parties whose objective is principally to secure the rewards of office for itself. In short, parties can

orient themselves to values, interests or manoeuvre. Admittedly, most parties contain elements of each, but they often have a dominant purpose or characteristic way of resolving conflicts between values and interests.

On that basis we can classify the Liberal Democrats as a party of values. The party does have elements of interest and manoeuvre, particularly at times when the party's representation at Westminster is weak and so when the geographical interests of the constituents of its remaining MPs come to the fore. But as a general rule, the party characteristically takes up causes on the basis of its substantive political beliefs rather than because of characteristics of the people intended to be benefitted.

A core vote is a section of the electorate highly likely to vote for a party regardless of circumstances, and in particular regardless of how well the party is performing for the time being on issues of competence or trust.

Parties of interest have a distinct advantage in building a core vote since they can play on ideas of group identity. An example is the once powerful theme that 'Labour is the party of the working man'.

Parties of manoeuvre are at the other end of the scale, depending almost entirely on competence and trust, on 'valence' in the jargon of political science, to garner support.

Parties of value lie in between. Building a core vote on the basis of values and philosophy is not easy. There is a potential inconsistency between a politics based on rationality and a core vote based on loyalty and habit. But it is not impossible. It needs voters to feel that supporting the party as a matter of reflex is a safe option for them, one that they know from experience they can rely on without much prospect of disappointment.

Where to find a core vote

So how can the Liberal Democrats build a core vote? One clue lies in the perhaps paradoxical sharp increase in the party's membership after the catastrophic election of May 2015. Many of those new members reported that they had joined because they wanted the party's voice to continue to be heard and they cited issues on which the Liberal Democrat voice is distinctive – especially Europe and human rights. More generally, YouGov's profiling tool¹ finds that Liberal Democrat voters are very much more likely than other respondents to support international development and human rights charities and to agree with statements such as 'I like to surround myself with a diverse range of cultures and ideas'.

The chief characteristics of Liberal Democrat voters seems to be openness, tolerance and internationalism. Those characteristics link straightforwardly to the party's own values and philosophy, which has been determinedly internationalist since the 19th century and committed to toleration for even longer.²

The sensible place to look for a Liberal Democrat core vote is therefore in the part of the electorate that is culturally tolerant and open. The post-election face-to-face survey carried out by

¹ <https://yougov.co.uk/profiler#/>

² For more on the history of the party's beliefs, see *The Dictionary of Liberal Thought*, edited by Duncan Brack and Ed Randall, 2007.

the British Election Study provides a place to start. That survey, a near random sample of the electorate that avoided many of the sampling problems that plagued other political surveys and polls in 2015, asked a number of questions useful for dividing the electorate into the tolerant and open and the not-so-tolerant-and-open.

On the basis of answers to several such questions, together with counting voters who strongly object to immigration as not-so-tolerant-and-open regardless of their other answers,³ we can estimate the tolerant and open section of the electorate at about 38%.⁴

One problem we immediately encounter, however, is that, contrary to the repeated hopes of Liberal (and Liberal Democrat) politicians, much of politics has been fought out for many decades not in the field of openness, tolerance and internationalism but in the field of economics – ostensibly about the desirable degree of state intervention in markets but also about the degree to which the state should seek to redistribute wealth and income.

If we look at the 38% of the electorate that looks tolerant and open and consider their economic views, about a fifth put themselves right of centre on whether the government should redistribute incomes, about a fifth are centrists and three fifths are left of centre, of whom one in three are very strongly in favour of redistribution and two out of three somewhat in favour.⁵ Similarly on questions about privatisation, nationalisation and tax and spend, the median tolerant and open voter is on the centre-left. YouGov's profile of Liberal Democrat voters produces a similar result and what we know of the post-May 2015 new members is that many were motivated by left-of-centre issues such as proposed cuts in social security benefits and threats to employment protection.

In the recent history of the Liberal Democrats, the party's positioning on these issues, especially economic equality has been contested. The party's position during the leaderships of Charles Kennedy and Ming Campbell was centre-left, but Nick Clegg and his allies claimed to be 'centrist' (and in practice tended towards the right)⁶. If we turn to the voters, using attitudes towards redistribution for example, the tolerant and open centre-left turns out to be a much bigger group than the centre, by two to one or more (depending on exactly where one draws the line).

We could as a party concentrate solely on the centre-left, where, economically speaking, we placed ourselves from the era of Lloyd George up until that of Nick Clegg. One difficulty of doing

³ The specific questions used were: To what extent do you agree that equality for women has gone too far? To what extent do you agree that equality for blacks and Asians has gone too far? To what extent do you agree that people in Britain should be more tolerant of those who lead unconventional lives? To what extent do you agree that people should be allowed to organise public meetings to protest against the government? And to what degree do you agree that censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards? Respondents who answered the majority of those questions on the tolerant or open side of the central possible answer were counted as 'tolerant and open'. That yielded 56% of the sample. From these were removed any respondents who very strongly held the view that there were too many immigrants in the country.

⁴ ±1.8% (N=2956). The data was weighted using the BES's combined main study weight.

⁵ This uses the 'redistribution - self' question in the BES face-to-face survey, which asked respondents to place themselves on a scale of 0 to 10 from 'the government should make much more efforts to make incomes more equal' to 'the government should be much less concerned with making incomes more equal', counting '5' as centrist, '6'-'10' as right, '0', '1' as 'left' and '2' to '4' as 'centre-left'.

⁶ The party's centrepiece policy for most of Nick Clegg's term as leader was tax cutting, in the form of increasing the personal allowance. It is notable, however, how by the end of the 2010-15 coalition government even the keenest 'Orange Book' ministers were arguing for increased spending from the centre on public services, such as for an expanded Pupil Premium and for equality of treatment for mental health issues with physical health issues.

that, however, is that the centre-left is much contested and so might not be big enough a target group in itself. The main objective is to create a core vote around tolerance and openness. From that point of view the party should aim at quite a broad target in terms of economic attitudes, taking in both centre and centre-left (and perhaps occasionally left) voters. That is, the Liberal Democrats could aim to convert into core voters those who fall into a group that amounts to at least one in five (20%) of the electorate, and on some counts comes out at over one in four.

What can we say about this group of voters? The British Election Study gives us some clues. Using the BES's face-to-face survey, we identified centre and centre-left voters by scoring them on another battery of questions.⁷ In addition, as a robustness check, we also allowed ourselves to use the very much larger BES post-election internet survey, albeit suitably weighted to counteract the problems in its sample,⁸ using questions to some extent different from those extracted from the face-to-face study.⁹

The first thing to say about tolerant and open centre or centre left voters (TOCCLs) is that although they were statistically significantly¹⁰ more prone than other voters to say that they were 50% or more likely to vote Liberal Democrat, the evidence is less strong that they were more likely actually to vote Liberal Democrat than the electorate as a whole.¹¹ They were statistically significantly both less likely to vote Conservative and UKIP and more likely to vote Labour and Green than voters as a whole, but nevertheless large numbers of them voted Conservative – in fact more than voted Liberal Democrat (a rather depressing fact that illustrates neatly the scale of the party's failure in 2015).¹²

What are the characteristics of tolerant and open centre and centre left voters? Compared to voters overall:

⁷ Seven questions were used were: To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (1) Ordinary working people get their fair share of the nation's wealth; (2) Private enterprise is the best way to solve Britain's economic problems; (3) Major public services and industries ought to be in state ownership; (4) It is the government's responsibility to provide a job for everyone who wants; and (5) Should the government cut taxes and spend less on health and social services or increase taxes and spend more on health and social services? (6) How necessary do you think it is for the UK Government to eliminate the deficit? (7) Should the government make much more efforts to make incomes more equal or be much less concerned with making incomes more equal? A centre and centre-left position, excluding both right and hard left positions, was defined for each question. Respondents taking a centre or centre left position on a majority of the questions were counted as centre or centre left overall.

⁸ See J. Mellon and C. Prosser, 'Investigating the Great British Polling Miss: Evidence from the British Election Study' Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2631165> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2631165>. Following Mellon and Prosser's advice, we weighted the BES Wave 6 data using rack (or 'rim') weights correcting for turnout, party members, age and region. Doing so produces final numbers much nearer to the actual result than previous weights, namely Conservative 36%. Labour 31%, UKIP 13%, Liberal Democrats 9%, Green 5%, SNP 4%.

⁹ For example, we used a more straightforward redistribution question on a five point scale to identify centre and centre-left voters and a tighter selection of questions to identify tolerant and open voters. The result was that overall the tolerant and open centre or centre left group was smaller than that identified from the face-to-face study.

¹⁰ For the purposes of this paper the criterion of statistical significance adopted is $p < 0.05$.

¹¹ In the analysis based on the face-to-face study, TOCCLs are more likely to vote Liberal Democrat than non-TOCCLs, but the difference is not statistically significant. In the analysis based on the internet Wave 6 study, however, a much larger sample and a bigger effect, the difference is statistically significant.

¹² The Conservatives' lead among TOCCLs is only 3% in the analysis based on the internet Wave 6 sample (with its tighter definition of TOCCL) but is over 20% in the analysis based on the face-to-face study.

- They are much more likely to hold a **university degree**¹³
- They are much more likely to be **pro-European**¹⁴
- They are **younger**¹⁵
- They are slightly more likely to use **Facebook**¹⁶ and **Twitter**¹⁷
- They are marginally more likely to be **women**¹⁸
- They are marginally more likely to be **not white British**¹⁹
- Their **incomes** are marginally above average²⁰
- They get their current affairs and politics news from **different newspapers**²¹
- They are much more prevalent in **London**²² and rather less prevalent in the **West Midlands**²³
- They are much less likely to cite **immigration** as the most important issue facing the country and more likely to cite **housing**, the **economy** and the **environment**^{24 25}

In some respects these are also characteristics of the Liberal Democrats' existing voters, such as in terms of education and the kind of issues they are interested in. But in important respects they are not at all the same. Those who actually voted for us in 2015 were well above average age,

¹³ 39.6% of TOCCLs hold degrees as opposed to 27.7% in the electorate as a whole. This rises to 45% if one includes university or polytechnic diplomas. Again the Wave 6 data yields a similar result (38.7%).

¹⁴ 65.1% would vote to remain, 16.5% to leave (13.1% DK) as opposed to 46.9% remain, 30.3% leave (15.5 DK) in the electorate as a whole. The Wave 6 data generated an even stronger pro-European effect (70% remain).

¹⁵ The median age of the tolerant and open centre and centre left voters is 44, that of other voters 49. There are statistically significantly more TOCCL voters in the 18-24 and 35-44 age groups and fewer in the 65-74 and 75 and over groups – in the last two groups by quite large margins, only 16.5% as opposed to 23% in the electorate as a whole. The Wave 6 data yields a similar result.

¹⁶ 60% versus 55%. The Wave 6 data produced 72% for TOCCLs.

¹⁷ 24% versus 16%. The Wave 6 data produced 34.9% for TOCCLs.

¹⁸ By about 2 percentage points (statistically significant only in the larger Wave 6 internet sample, but the same differential appears in the face-to-face sample).

¹⁹ 17.4% report ethnicities other than white British as opposed to 12.8% in the electorate as a whole.

²⁰ TOCCL median household income is around £35,000 as opposed to around £31,000 for the population as a whole. The Wave 6 data shows a slightly lower gap.

²¹ For TOCCLs the order is Guardian (27.6%), Mail (13%), Times (9.5%), Independent (8.9%), Telegraph (6.5%), Mirror (5.4%), Sun (4.9%), London Evening Standard (2.2%), Express (2.2%) and Financial Times (1%). For the electorate as a whole the order is Mail (19.6%), Guardian (14.6%), Telegraph (11.2%), Sun (9.2%), Times (8.6%), Mirror (7.8%), Independent (6.0%), Express (4.2%) Financial Times (1%), London Evening Standard (0.9%). The Wave 6 survey did not ask specifically about current affairs and politics news, but a more general question about newspaper readership shows a similar pattern of broadsheet readership with the exception of the Telegraph.

²² 38% as opposed to 26% in the electorate as a whole. The Wave 6 data also shows a larger proportion of TOCCLs in London.

²³ 20.9%. The Wave 6 data shows much lower proportion of TOCCLs in the West Midlands.

²⁴ For example in the electorate as a whole 35% cite immigration as the most important issue, whereas only 19% of TOCCLs do so (a similar difference also appears in the internet Wave 6 analysis). It is worth noting, however, that even for TOCCLs immigration is a leading issue – the leading issue in the analysis based on the face-to-face study and equal second with the NHS (after the economy) in the internet Wave 6 analysis.

²⁵ There are also some characteristics of this group which are quirkily interesting if not helpful. For example, fork-lift truck operators are disproportionately likely to fall within our core vote and fridge technicians disproportionately unlikely to. Aside from locating a national fork-lift truck driving conference, this data – as with previous media coverage of the yoghurt eating proclivities of different party supporters - is better suited for clickbait headlines than for effective political targeting.

considerably above average income, if anything less likely to be not white British than the electorate as a whole and more prevalent only in the South West.

If we are to look for a new core vote, we are going to have to look for it in places and in demographics where in recent years we have failed to attract support, especially as one of those categories is 'Londoners' and the elections for Mayor of London and the London Assembly make their once every four years appearance again in May 2016.

Outside London, too, now is a very fruitful time to identify (potential) core voters. This is because a different way of identifying them is not through their demographics but through their attitudes towards specific yet symbolic issues, especially on Europe.

Those campaigning in advance of the European Referendum should be aware that gathering data on people's European referendum voting intention is a powerful indicator that someone is likely to fall into our target group. That makes it a question useful to use across all our campaigning, including in circumstances when it is otherwise difficult to extract current voting intention data from people.

Even when we can get current voting intention (and that remains highly valuable), the European referendum question is still an important additional data point as it taps into longer-lasting values than current political party preference.

The other priority piece of data is the age at which people left full-time education. Combined with the European referendum question, these two questions have a very strong predictive power for identifying whether or not people fall within our target group and, being restricted to just two questions, are practical to work into our campaigning:

Do you think the UK should stay within the European Union, or should it leave?

At what age did you leave full-time education?

Whether asked on the doorstep, on the phone or in surveys of the paper or digital varieties, asking this pair of questions will enable the identification of potential core vote members. Not everyone who gives the 'correct' response will of course be willing to turn into a die-hard Liberal Democrat – and some will be core voters, just for other parties.

But using questions about values, combined with knowing the key demographic attributes of potential core voters, allows you to take the first step towards identifying the right people to target and, over time, turn into core voters.

Leaning how to build a core vote

The data, then, shows a promising picture for building up a Liberal Democrat core vote, and these insights can be turned into practical local data identification.

There are people the party can appeal to in order to build up a core vote and they are people who are both numerous in number – enough to give the party a core vote of up towards a fifth of the election, four times our current core vote – and also hold values which closely match our existing voters and long-standing beliefs.

There is no need for existential angst about changing the nature of who we are in order for us to succeed, as was necessary for New Labour in replacing Old Labour.

Building up a genuine core vote, four times its current size, would transform the party's long-term prospects and may be achievable, but it would be foolish to think it will be easy. The SDP never managed to build a core vote and even the Liberal Party in its previous revivals struggled to build a large core vote. It is also a challenge other parties, including in other countries, only rarely manage and even then usually do so fuelled by major historical events or trends of the like we are unlikely to have pushing us along.

We have outlined above how potential members of the putative core vote can be identified, both via demographic modelling and via direct questions for grassroots campaigning. Knowing who could become a core voter is, however, still some distance from them actually being one.

How then should the party rise to the challenge of moving from a core vote of 5% to one of 20%?

First, and most obviously, simply by setting out building up a core vote as being an objective for the party and expecting all parts of the party to build this into their own plans. There will be much to learn along the way about what does and does not work – and anyone coming along now with a fully formed detailed plan is over-estimating their own knowledge and under-estimating the amount to be learnt on the way.

With that important caveat in mind, it is better to start with a framework of ideas than with a completely blank piece of paper, so here is an initial outline plan – to be modified, to be revised and to be learnt from, but also a plan to get matters rolling:

1. Base the party's research on building a core vote
2. Campaign on issues that illuminate the party's values
3. A new three-pillar campaign structure
4. An elected Deputy Leader to act as the party's campaign chair
5. A dual development route for local parties
6. A safety net for areas where local parties are weak
7. Reinvigorating target seat campaigning
8. Offer core voters the chance to be more than just voters
9. Reforming the party's policy-making process
10. A party structure that enhances reputation
11. Boost diversity

Base the party's research on building a core vote

Evidence matters, which is why the party's future market research needs to depart from the past. The previous pattern for several Parliaments was to use national market research to test a range of individual policies, as if the route to political success lies through a pick'n'mix of the most popular policies that Liberal Democrat conference has passed, or might be persuaded to pass. That needs to change.

People with longer political memories may recall the sense of disappointment after the 2005 election in the party. Even though looking back now, 2005 was a high point, at the time it was widely viewed as a missed opportunity, with much of the blame being put on a manifesto and set of messages that were comprised of individually very popular policies but which overall did not add up

to a coherent message. Hence many tortured analogies after the election about how you need not only the right ingredients but also the right recipe to combine them. Or more recently, the summer of 2014 saw a succession of policies launched all of which individually polled well and which generally received good, positive press coverage. But the party's political fortunes did not budge. The reason? A collection of individually popular policies still did not add up to a coherent overall message 9 years on.

The party's limited research budget must be focused on understanding better our would-be core vote and how to appeal best to them. Policies are part of that, but only a part of it because the strong evidence is that the way voters decide who to vote for – and who to give their longer-term loyalty to – is determined by 'valence politics', the wider issues of reputation, competence and image in to which individual policies feed, but is only part.²⁶

That's why the Liberal Democrats did so badly in 2015. The individual elements of the manifesto were popular with voters – very popular in many cases. But voters didn't vote on the basis of the sum of the policies and so the party's spending on understanding the views of voters needs to be based on valence, not lists of policies.

Campaign on issues that illuminate the party's values

The party's revival from the depths of the Liberal/SDP merger which ended up nearly killing it off was fuelled by two apparently peripheral issues: campaigning for Hong Kong residents to be given UK passports ahead of the island's return to the Chinese and campaigning for vigorous international intervention in response to humanitarian catastrophes in former Yugoslavia.

Neither issue was near the top of voters' lists of concerns at the time. They were both almost wilfully peripheral, but they worked because they were possible to make high profile in the media and because they illustrated the party's values – open, generous, internationalism with a love, rather than hatred, of strangers.

We do not know exactly what similar opportunities events will throw up in the next few years, although there are some pretty good runners at the moment in the form of the European referendum and civil liberties. To embrace them and others effectively will require an approach to campaigning different from that which the party usually takes. Potholes are still important – and in their own way reflect an important value of concern for the local community – but they are not the only way to campaign.

A new three-pillar campaign structure

That's why the party needs a new campaign structure based on three pillars:

- Local government
- Westminster and devolved assemblies target seats operation
- National thematic campaigns and regional PR elections

²⁶ For example, see *Affluence, Austerity and Electoral Change in Britain* by Paul Whiteley, Harold D. Clarke, David Sanders and Marianne C. Stewart.

Simply listing these three pillars of campaigning shows the problem. Local council campaigning is supported to varying degrees by ALDC. Target seats are supported by the federal, Welsh and Scottish party HQs. But national thematic campaigns and regional PR? They don't really fall into anyone's convenient lap and are the poor cousin of the list.

Yet they're also at least as important as the other two for this is both where the party has many chances of starting to gain seats once more and also where the party can best display many of its values, helping build its core vote.

There are many sensitive internal issues of politics, budgets and accountability over how to structure campaigning so no one plan will be perfect. What is needed, however, is a structure that supports all three pillars, with clear coordination across each and with clearly identified teams accountable for each.

Where that means the most radical change is in the neglected third pillar – which is where the party's Deputy Leader comes in.

An elected Deputy Leader to act as the party's campaign chair

During their leadership contest, both Norman Lamb and Tim Farron supported moving away from the party's Deputy Leader (technically the Deputy Leader in the House of Commons) always having to be an MP. With all the party's MPs being white men, diversity fuelled this – but this desire for change also gives an opportunity to embed the new three campaigning pillars.

The Deputy Leader post should be that of a national party campaigns chair – elected by all members, and with a role therefore that is separate from, and compatible with, that of the elected Party President. An elected Deputy Leader can be the person responsible for coordinating all three pillars and with specific oversight for that neglected third pillar – the national thematic and PR campaigns.

With an elected Deputy Leader chairing in future the party's Campaigns and Communications Committee (CCC) that would give the CCC a meaningful role, party campaigning a clear accountability structure with a democratic element, and as a bonus avoid the need for contentious one-off separate structures to be created especially for different elections.

It will also provide a leadership figure to kickstart a refresh of the party's campaign tactics based on grassroots experimentation to see what works. Testing out different campaign tactics, such as different survey designs to randomly selected voters and comparing response rates, is a well-established part of American politics that both Labour and the Tories have been quicker than the Lib Dems to embrace too. Indeed, too much of Lib Dem tactics in the offline world is rooted in long in the tooth conventional wisdom or old research dating back to the mid-1990s.

Just as the party believes in evidence-based policy making, and just as evidence-based campaign tactics are increasingly the norm for online campaigning where testing is so much easier, we need the same approach to our offline tactics as we move into a new world of deliberately setting out to create a large core vote.

Taking this approach to an elected Deputy Leader will also address the main – indeed pretty much only – reason given for opposing the constitutional amendment to create an elected Deputy Leader which failed to pass at the Autumn 2015 conference in Bournemouth. This was that the amendment proposed creating the post without giving any details of how it should operate. With the role we

have set out for the post, it would have a very clear purpose and remit and one which compliments that of the Party President.

A dual development route for local parties

Running national thematic campaigns – learning from the way in which organisations such as Amnesty International or Friends of the Earth operate – will be a way for the party to demonstrate its values and build its core vote.

Moreover, as both those organisations illustrate, such national campaigning works well alongside having a network of local groups (local parties in our case). It provides an additional form of activity for them, which can be used to provide a dual development route for weaker local parties.

Currently the model for a weak local party is find one (more) ward, work in intensively and try to win it. That works well for growing the party's local government base and making a difference to local communities – if the local party has good people who really want to be councillors. That's a big if, and it's also a big leap from being a keen member interested in doing more to standing for council. That, combined with the four year, rather than annual, election cycle in many areas means it is also a development route which leaves many weaker local parties marooned: weak and without a plausible month by month road to getting stronger. As a result, progress does not happen.

Thematic national campaigns provide a way out of that trap: a second way of growing stronger and doing valuable campaigning even when you do not yet have keen would-be councillors and/or a council election is not yet even just over the horizon.

As with the local branches of Amnesty, Friends of the Earth and others, national campaigns provide opportunities to run street stalls, gather petition signatures, campaign online and more – and all of which also provides data to feed the party's future PR list campaign efforts.

They also provide interesting activities for party members and supporters who are motivated by an issue rather than an area. Some of our greatest activists are deeply passionate about the area they live. For others, it is about a particular issue which comes without geographic route. A dual development route caters for both.

Above all, and perhaps most radically, it is at least possible that such campaigns might work, that they might change government policy at national level – especially given the absence of a single-party majority in the House of Lords for the conceivable future, regardless of what happens in general elections, and the opportunities offered by Private Members' Bills. In fact, this used to be part of what the (predecessor) party did, most notably with Archy Kirkwood's campaigning for freedom of information in the 1980s, marrying up a series of Private Members' Bills with national campaigning – working with allies both from across the political spectrum and outside of party politics. The result was small but significant changes in the law in the short run and the terms of debate shifted for bigger success in the long run.

Indeed, community politics at local level was not originally designed to win council elections. It was designed to help people change their own social, political and physical environments. As the old Liberal Party slogan saying put it, elections are but the punctuation marks in community politics. We need once again to conceive of our party as a movement for change, not just an electoral machine.

A safety net for areas where local parties are weak

As well as providing a dual development route for local parties, national thematic campaigns can also be used to provide a safety net for where the local party is weak – giving a way to build up the party's core vote in areas where the existing infrastructure is too weak and too stretched to provide would-be new helpers and core voters with the sort of welcome and activity that is needed to turn would-be into actual.

The safety net comes in the form of the internet - which can both supply campaigns for people to take part in and a community for people to become a part of.

Campaigns on topics such as civil liberties shouldn't be confined to a digital ghetto – leaping into the offline world by using digital to encourage attendance at demonstrations and participation in virtual phone banks (VPBs) should be as much a part of them as optimising the latest social media message. Done right, these provide a means to campaign for the party and to see our values in operation regardless of where you live, the local electoral situation or what your local party is like.

Local parties are always going to be highly variable in their ability to welcome and engage new people and to build a core vote locally. The tragic frustration often is that in a voluntary organisation those most in need of more help are also those least able to find and nurture it.

Which is why as well as campaigning, the national operation should also offer an electronic welcome and community for members, supporters and even core voters, supplementing the work of good local parties and helping fill the gaps of those weaker local parties.

That needs more than just the (much improved) sequence of welcome emails and new members pack; it needs a community.

The Salesforce-based membership system already provides local parties with new member information in real time, and that has been put to great effect by some local activists during the post-election membership surge, impressing new members with the speed of their local welcome. Alongside that, the party should be developing the social-media based communities for party members, helpers and supporters so that there is an electronic community people can slot into, learning more about the party, becoming more committed to it and finding more ways to help.

Reinvigorating target seat campaigning

None of those should take away from the importance of restoring the number of MPs the party has in the House of Commons, and in due course reaching new record highs.

To do that will require target seat campaigns with more impact than was achieved in 2015.

With 8 MPs and 8% of the vote the party had a ratio of seats to votes of just 1:1, which is, by the party's previous standards, appalling.

With 650 (or so – the number varies) seats in Parliament but only a maximum 100% of votes, a 1:1 ratio is pretty poor if you wish to be represented in Westminster. Yet from 1970 to 1992 the ratio varied in the narrow and low range of 0.7:1 to 1.1:1.²⁷

²⁷ For full details of the seats:votes ratio over different general elections see *The Liberal Democrat approach to campaigning: the history and debunking some myths* by Mark Pack: <http://www.markpack.org.uk/66632/the-liberal-democrat-approach-to-campaigning-the-history-and-debunking-some-myths>.

The 1997 Lib Dem breakthrough saw the party's number of MPs leap up from 19 to 46 even though the party's national vote share fell. This triumph of targeting under Chris Rennard saw the seats:votes ratio hit 2.7:1, going up again to 2.8 in 2001 and 2.9 in 2005. The party was both growing in support and getting increasingly good at turning votes into seats.

But in 2010 it slipped back to 2.5 and now this year has collapsed to 1.0, as if the party has lost all its acquired ability over the last 20 years to show a campaigning edge in key seats.

Reversing this decline, rebuilding Westminster heartlands for the party, is part of what building up a core vote will require. Campaign organisers will be central to that.

The old joke about candidates being only a legal necessity is wrong but reveals an important truth about how just how important a good campaign organiser is.

That campaign organiser can come in many forms. They may be an employee or a volunteer. They may or may not be the legal agent. They do need good candidates to work with. And it is a bloody hard job to do well, especially as even in areas with annual local elections, other elections only come around every four or five years. Even for something as commonplace as fighting local elections on the same day as a general elections, it takes many years just to have experienced that twice.

Yet it is also hard to get that many years of experience, as so often the organiser is a young, low-paid person who – quite understandably – doesn't stay in the job for that long. If they are really good at running election campaigns, they are usually pretty good at other jobs too – ones with higher salaries, shorter hours and Bank Holidays off. As a result, many move on after just one general election leaving the pool of employed organisers talented but short of experience.

It is therefore not a surprise that so many of the places with consistent long-term electoral success have a key campaign management role played by someone from the voluntary party rather than an employee – and that it is a person with many years of experience behind them. Often a councillor, their long-term involvement in the party brings the experience that even the best of employees rarely acquire due to the high turnover rates.

Well though this model works in some places, when it does it is not really thanks to the wider party as those volunteer stars often get much less training and support from the party than employed constituency organisers and the like. Of course they can tap into the general training that is available to everyone, but we could and should do better for both groups of organisers, the employed and the voluntary.

There is lots of general training as a basic to moderate level available. What is missing is the more intensive coaching of individuals to help turn the most talented into stars.

Just as the Leadership Programme is nurturing the talents of a mix of people of varying levels of experience to help improve the diversity of our candidate list in future, we should have an Organiser Programme to help improve the range of skills and experience our organisers have in future.

Whether it is talented new employees or long-standing key volunteers, there is a huge wealth of potential out there – and the party should deliberately set out to enhance it, especially as there is now a new skill for everyone to work on: how to build a core vote.

Offer core voters the chance to be more than just voters

The combination of national campaigns and active local parties will offer supporters many ways to get involved in the party. Turning fleeting engagement into long-term loyalty does not come easy.

Membership for some is the answer, and the party's success at turning round its long term membership decline, increasing membership for seven quarters in a row before the general election and then the amazing surge after polling day, suggests there is much more membership growth to be secured in future.

That is why the party should continue through this Parliament the highly successful financial incentives provided to local parties in England for the last couple of years.

An extra boost to membership could also be secured by making it the norm for candidates in party selections and other contests (such as for Leader and President) to be provided with lists of lapsed members ahead of their renewal deadline. That way the candidates and their teams have an ability and incentive to re-sign former members (who, by virtue of being former members, will not simply be a wave of dodgy sign ups to pack a selection). In theory the Federal Executive (FE) agreed to do this for the party's leadership contest, although at time of writing it is unclear if it was actually carried out in practice.

Even the most enthusiastic projections of the impact of doing this still leaves membership well short of the growth in core vote the Liberal Democrats should be after. One answer to that is to experiment with registered supporters schemes, preferably given a less formal and more approachable name such as a 'Friends of the Liberal Democrats' network.

Already they exist in many informal ways with local parties including non-member helpers, donors and interested people on the mailing list for newsletters, on the invitation list for events and on the email list for financial appeals. Supporters are, in effect, registered now – just without telling them that they have been or with systematically recording the data so that people are not lost track of if they move between local parties.

There is a risk that more formal registered supporters scheme may cannibalise membership, but conversely it could fill the big gap between likely membership and desired size of core vote. Moreover, outside politics it is quite normal to offer tiers of involvement, rather than expecting anyone interested in a bit more to make the big leap all the way to fully signed up formal membership. That is why local pilots should be carried out.

Reforming the party's policy-making process

As both authors have served on the party's Federal Policy Committee (FPC), it is no surprise that we both think policy is important. As touched on so far, effective politics is about more than simply lists of policies. Detailed policy is needed, but on its own is not sufficient.

Which is why the party's policy-making process needs to fit with a core vote building strategy, focusing more on debating and agreeing the party's core values and then nimbly generating policy – especially in response to events – which illuminates them. Looking back to that post-1988 revival, it was policy on Hong Kong and former Yugoslavia that mattered much more than most of the long, detailed policy papers – and the future equivalents of such policy should come with the agreement of the party's democratic policy-making processes rather than being heard by party members for the first time on the radio one morning as John Humphreys interviews the party's leader.

Quicker, nimbler policy making will also be more welcoming to new party members, an especially important factor with around 1 in 4 members having joined since the general election, the vast majority of whom have not been a member ever before.

The core of the policy making process – policy working groups reporting to conference, with their eventual policy papers then the source material for a general election manifesto – means the answer to ‘how can I help make party policy on X?’ often is really ‘wait for a working group on that in a few years’.

That is a strikingly off-putting response. It is not quite the whole story because you can still put in motions to party conference before then – and some have a really big impact, so I don’t want to downplay that too much. But that is very much a one-off short term piece of involvement in policy making (and also constrained by conference agendas usually avoiding returning to the same topics too frequently unless something has happened in the outside world).

Structurally, the party’s policy making process is designed around paying attention to a few topics at a time, rotating around them over years. So if you are a new, keen member you may hit lucky – or hit very unlucky. That is not good enough.

The answer is to reduce the policy-making process’s dependence on a small number of large policy papers and instead move to more frequent, smaller and quicker policy-making groups – tied in to national thematic campaigns, making policy and campaigning work together and providing easy routes for people more interested in one to get involved in the other too.

A party structure than enhances reputation

Campaigning on the right issues in the right way to build a core vote is necessary. It is not sufficient for the same reason that a list of good policies is not sufficient: there is more to the valence decisions voters make than enumerating topics. The party’s overall reputation for competence and honesty matters too.

That means following through on the moves to reform the party’s approach to allegations of misbehaviour. As the long-running sagas over, to name but three, Chris Rennard, Mike Hancock and the Chesterfield local party showed, the party’s processes were far from up to scratch – and let down the accusers and the accused by failing to have clear, fair and timely outcomes.

The reforms in train need to be followed through, and two further areas tackled. The House of Lords is now the dominant part of the Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Parties, with more Lib Dem members than the Commons, European Parliament and all the devolved bodies put together. Yet it is also the most independent, with its members free from any reselection requirements and the decision over to give the party whip to one for the Lords themselves. It is easy to see how at moments of stress and controversy the overwhelmingly dominant ranks of Lib Dem Parliamentarians being so removed from the rest of the party’s structures being a problem. It is not an imminent problem, which is why now is the best time to resolve it when the principles – of both Parliamentary independence and also of a political party being a cohesive team- can be addressed without being diverted and muddled by arguments over any individual case.

At the very least, as the party’s own processes are reformed, the Lib Dems in the Lords should agree that the whip is dependent on the party’s overall disciplinary processes, and that it is not purely up to the peers themselves to agree who can call themselves a Liberal Democrat Parliamentarian.

Those process reforms also need to include a thorough shaking out of the complicated English Party. The lessons of the last Parliament, the Morrissey report conclusions about the over-complicated party structures,²⁸ and again the need to have structures that are welcoming to the huge wave of new members point towards needing to greatly simplifying the English Party structure and bring in clearer accountability.

Finally, part of the party's reputation is to show that we operate in the same democratic fashion that we wish to see more widely in society, which makes completing the introduction of one-member one-vote for the party's committees and national (federal) conferences a small piece of the puzzle, along with reviving and giving real status to the use of one-member one-vote (OMOV) ballots to help determine which Liberal Democrats might be offered peerages in the future. The means for all this is sitting there in previously agreed documents; it now must happen.

Boost diversity

There are many reasons to value diversity amongst the ranks of Liberal Democrat members, candidates and elected office holders, especially as politics is a team enterprise and good teams are made up of members who complement each other.

Diversity matters particularly for building up a core Liberal Democrat vote because of that persona drawn above – a young-ish Asian woman, which very much is not the typical image that you get when thinking of a Liberal Democrat. Do a Google image search of “Lib Dem activists” and see what impression of the party comes up: a reasonable smattering of female faces in amongst the male faces, but an almost solid wall of white faces. It is the same too if you look at pictures of elected Liberal Democrats at all different levels. The one small piece of good news is that at the 2015 general election the Liberal Democrats polled slightly better in constituencies with a higher BAME population than elsewhere²⁹, but it is only a sliver of good news in amongst the plethora of signs of lack of progress.

To build a core vote we have to feel familiar to our (would-be) core voters and to understand them. That comes in part from reflecting them in our own make-up.

That isn't just an issue for the House of Commons. At local level, for example, the proportion of Lib Dem candidates who are female has stalled at around one-third 25 years. The Leadership Programme made some progress at the Parliamentary level, and overall the diversity (gender, ethnicity and sexuality) of the party's Parliamentary candidates improved noticeably in 2015.³⁰ However, the end result was not only a failure to make progress but a big step backwards with an all-male Parliamentary party in the House of Commons. The focus on gender representation as being solely female representation also implies an increasing anachronistic binary view of gender.

²⁸ The full Helena Morrissey report is available from http://www.libdems.org.uk/complaints_further_information.

²⁹ See *Britain Votes 2015*, edited by Andrew Geddes and Jonathan Tonge, p.18.

³⁰ Just over 40% of candidates were female in the party's held and target Parliamentary seats in 2015. Over 1 in 10 were from a BAME and over 1 in 10 also were LGBT. Across all 631 seats contested, 26% of candidates were female (up 5% on 2010), 9% BAME (up 2%) and 5% with a disability (up 2%).

It is welcome, therefore, that the party's conferences in the Spring of 2016 are set to debate a range of radical options around diversity for Parliamentary candidates.³¹

Any such moves should also be accompanied by starting to track the diversity of party officers, especially at local, regional and state levels, along with diversity of candidates at all levels, especially local council. That would start to highlight where else should be prioritised for action beyond the existing debates over candidate selection.

The European Parliament elections also provide a major opportunity as the party, regrettably, only has one incumbent. The silver lining is that the absence of incumbents, combined with the fact that regional list of candidates are required, rather than single constituency candidates, makes introducing measures to enhance diversity much more practical. We have already seen the benefits of this for the London Assembly list selections held in 2015, where the party had measures to ensure a strong BAME presence in its selected list, resulting in a BAME candidate in a winnable place on the party's list for the first time since the GLA was created.

Since the first PR elections for the European Parliament in 1999 the party has operated rules to ensure gender diversity, and with success both in terms of outcome and in terms of the acceptability of the rules to party members.

As the party's European Parliament group of 1 MEP is 100% female, there is no longer the legal grounds for having gender balance requirements for the outcome – but these should therefore be succeeded by rules to ensure BAME balance.

Of course, there is more to diversity than gender and ethnicity and many of these other perspectives are, due to difficulties of definition (such as 'class' or 'wealth') or due to the relatively small proportion of the population involved, hard to turn into specific rules on candidate selection.

That is not to say nothing can be done, and one immediate practical step would be to flip around the usual relative neglect given to diversity issues in the English and Federal party HQ staffing structures. Traditionally, support for diversity has been seen as a subsidiary of other issues, with relatively junior staff posts associated to support it. For example, in the past at times this has meant a more junior member of staff working in the federal Candidates Office. Putting diversity into such a specific niche is doubling damaging, both downplaying its importance and treating it as if Westminster and European candidate selection are all that matters.

The answer, instead, is to put diversity first, at the top management table, with the specific support for Westminster and European Parliament selections which is provided by party HQ to be located within that.

As a further useful, if also symbolic, measure a simple rule change that during selections the candidates cannot be charged for entrance to party events would make it easier for poorer candidates to be able to compete with those who do not have to worry about the costs of going to another local party social. The initiative in London of a 'diversity fund' to help support financially a more diverse set of candidates should also be carefully evaluated and, if successful, rolled out more widely.

³¹ See <http://www.markpack.org.uk/136810/women-shortlists-debated-lib-dem-conference-york/> and <http://www.markpack.org.uk/134113/willie-rennie-calls-for-all-women-shortlists/>.

Conclusion

In an organisation with as many different pressures, centres of power, cultural habits and decision-making processes as the Liberal Democrats, a clear guiding principle is needed to make organisational and political reform more than just a smattering of individual good ideas which end up being less than the sum of their parts.

That would be true even in the best of times for the party. But in our current state failure would be far more dangerous.

Hence the need for a clear vision to infuse the party's rebuilding is all the more important. Deliberately setting out to build a larger core vote will provide just that vision.