

**CHAIR'S REPORT**  
**LIB DEMS OVERSEAS 2019 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**  
**via Skype, Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> December 2019**

In a world which is evolving in unpredictable ways, concurrent with a significant weakening of UK's influence globally as it heads for probably the biggest self-inflicted disaster in its history, it is more than ever important that Liberal Democrats abroad stand up for the values we believe in and take action as best we can in the fight against illiberalism and autocracy worldwide.

This was the first full year of Lib Dems Overseas (LDO) as a newly-established local party, the most far-flung geographically of the three local parties belonging to Lib Dems Abroad (LDA). LDO's territorial area covers all countries which are not members of the Council of Europe. By December, LDO membership had reached almost 400 members and over 120 supporters spanning 45 countries and territories across the world. It is the UK Liberal Democrats' one and only truly (g)local party.

**Fighting for Brits rights abroad**

Brits abroad are not treated the same way as Brits living in the UK. Loss of the right to vote after being away for more than 15 years, not having their own MPs representing them as a whole, frozen pensions, less access to health care and greater need for FCO services are just some of the more prominent deficiencies that need strong Lib Dems policies in place to correct. If a no deal Brexit occurs eventually, those Brits in the European Union outside the UK will join their counterparts further afield, suffering similar disadvantages.

On 15 September, LDO and Lib Dems in Europe (LDE) jointly launched the first ever policy paper of any UK political party in support of British citizens residing abroad entitled: "Modernising the relationship between Britain and its citizens living abroad" [www.libdemsoverseas.com/policy\\_paper](http://www.libdemsoverseas.com/policy_paper). Lib Dem Party President Baroness Brinton, Phil Bennion MEP and Irina von Weise MEP - along with the two local party chairs – spoke at the autumn party conference fringe in support of the policy proposals. The event was preceded by five articles

authored by the two local parties in Lib Dem Voice and a press release issued worldwide to Brits living abroad. There were around 600 responses to the policy paper consultation from the British community abroad. The policy paper was approved by the Federal International Relations Committee (FIRC) after review by members of the Federal Policy Committee (FPC). My thanks to Ian Wicks for having headed the policy team that created such a good set of policy proposals.

LDO and LDE worked together to ensure that the GE2019 Lib Dem Manifesto recommitted the party to supporting Votes for Life and Overseas Constituencies. This was then publicised to the British community abroad.

### **A Spate of Elections and Rallies**

As news spread of a possible General Election, LDO was put on a war footing. Members and supporters were reminded to register to vote if eligible. LDO's main GE2019 contribution was largely limited to fund-raising, given almost all countries where their members reside are excluded from connect calling using UK-based databases because of GDPR rules.

In cooperation with Lib Dems in Europe, LDO helped finance the GE2019 campaigns in four constituencies: North Cornwall (Danny Chambers); Streatham (Helen Thompson); Westmorland & Lonsdale (Tim Farron MP); and Dorset North (David Chadwick).

Despite distances, a number of our members joined the million strong People's Vote Rallies in London on 23 March and 19 October. During GE2019, a LDO executive member came from Thailand to spend two week's campaigning in Eastbourne while the Chair went to Dorset North to help former LDE Vice-Chair David Chadwick.

Internal federal party elections were held at the same time as GE2019. Lib Dems Abroad representation was achieved for the first time on the Federal Policy Committee, the Federal International Relations Committee and the ALDE Council. LDO used the opportunity to undertake an extensive social media campaign which raised its profile considerably with local parties in the UK. Thanks especially to Caroline Padbury for her excellent social media campaign.

## **Events and Activities across the Globe**

LDO Members met up early in 2019 to celebrate the New Year in New York, Cayman Islands, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Brisbane.

The then Lib Dem Deputy Leader and Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Jo Swinson held a Facebook Q&A session for Lib Dems Abroad members on 7 May in the lead up to the Lib Dem Leadership contest which she eventually won.

On 6 September, twenty persons from D66, LREM and LDO met in New York to start local contact between sister parties of Renew Europe. In early October, an LDO event on Brexit was held at the British Club in Singapore. Our New Zealand executive member met LDO members in Tokyo in November.

The Chair visited Taiwan in June, holding discussions with its ruling Democratic Progressive Party. In October, the Chair visited the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats and Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF) in Manila and took part in a FNF-funded seminar in Istanbul. The Chair met with Alan Leung of the Hong Kong Civic Movement in Brussels and Cambodian opposition leader Sam Rainsy with others at ALDE in Athens. He addressed a visiting group of young British apprentices at the European Parliament in Brussels in October at the invitation of Lib Dem MEPs.

## **Working with ALDE and Liberal International**

The Chair attended all meetings of the Lib Dems' Federal Relations Committee throughout 2019 which helped ensure LDO participation at both Alliance of Liberal and Democrats in Europe (ALDE) and Liberal International (LI) events.

LDO members participated actively at the ALDE Executive in Zurich and the LI Executive in London. Two LDO members attended the ALDE Congress in Athens (where the LDO led on amendments to the ALDE resolution on China). The Chair formed part of a four person Lib Dem Delegation at the LI Executive in Fes, Morocco in November. LDO members based in New York were also present at the LI event on climate change on 24 September.

Local LI parties are being contacted by LDO executive members in their own countries. The Democratic Progressive Party welcomed the recent arrival of

LDO executive member in Taiwan who has been invited to meet with them to build links prior to the Taiwanese elections due January 2020 which LDO will need to follow carefully on behalf of the party.

Work is also underway to sow some seeds of social liberalism in countries where they do not exist at this point. LDO is working with an Afghan Parliamentary grouping. Three LDO members and supporters met in Auckland and agreed to start up “Local Liberals” as a brand to campaign in the next round of local council elections in New Zealand in three years' time.

### **Significant Prospects**

Lib Dems Overseas is ripe to be developed into a political/ diplomatic global network, spreading liberalism internationally in cooperation with likeminded organisations such as ALDE and LI. LDO is strong in Asia-Pacific and must become as strong elsewhere. Despite GDPR constraints, LDO members and supporters need to be much more engaged to encourage greater activism across the globe. In all this, LDO will not restrict itself to just working with others in passing resolutions at LI and ALDE Congresses, but will also strive for concrete results and positive change on the ground.

### **A Truly International and Dynamic Executive**

The LDO Executive met monthly via skype, having had participation in its meetings from Australia, Brazil, Cayman Islands, Malaysia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and the United States.

My thanks especially to Caroline, Chris, Hauwa, the two Ians, Jenny, John (especially for the newsletter), Merlene, Nick, Paul (for coping with the time difference and without whom we could not communicate with our members) and Vaughan for their steadfast support and great work, all undertaken on a voluntary basis.

I am as always grateful for the enthusiasm, professionalism and dedication displayed by the LDO executive whose diligent work has made all this possible.

George Cunningham, Chair, Lib Dems Overseas

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