

2015 Election Review

Campaigns & Communications Committee

Introduction

In the aftermath of the May 2015 election, the Campaigns and Communications Committee of the Liberal Democrats was tasked by the Federal Executive with reviewing the election.

The purpose of this review is not to apportion blame or airbrush reality, but to maintain Party accountability by identifying root causes and most importantly of all recommending actions that the Party can take to minimise the chances of a similar result in elections up to and including 2020.

The Review Group has comprised CCC members Candy Piercy, Martin Tod, Sal Brinton, Neil Fawcett and myself, James Gurling. We have been fortunate to have received the regular input from CCC member Lord Razzall and from two additionally co-opted members Jo Foster and David Green to provide insight from a Welsh and Scottish perspective respectively. And this report process has once again only been possible through the administrative assistance and contribution of HQ staff member Rachael Clarke.

We received feedback from over 7500 party members, and conducted interviews with professional staff, elected representatives, volunteers, the campaign leadership and Parliamentary Parties in Commons and Lords and many local Parties. We are grateful for and appreciative of the detail and consideration that has gone into the vast majority of these responses.

As the size of the response was overwhelming, so too was the sense of optimism, hope and belief that the Party has the capacity to sustain and rebuild itself in the months and years ahead.

Optimism, hope and belief are important, because the size of the task ahead is immense.

In May 2015, the Liberal Democrats lost 86% of our Members of Parliament. This was but the final chapter following five years of devastating elections for the party, where we lost over 2000 councillors, control of several major local authorities, 12 Members of the Scottish Parliament, a Welsh Assembly Member, and all but one of our MEPs.

A summary of our findings are below. They have been agreed in full by the Federal Executive and will be closely and regularly monitored for action and implementation in the months and years ahead.

James Gurling
Chair, Campaigns and Communications Committee

Executive Summary

- I. Our result in the 2015 election was rooted in the aftermath of the 2010 election. Entering government after long fighting as outsiders and insurgents was always going to prove difficult – a fact that was widely recognised at the time. But the combination of being a smaller partner in coalition, a wider political and media system that did not understand that coalition legitimately required compromise, and our understandable wish to demonstrate that the first peace-time coalition at Westminster could deliver stable Government worsened the experience. It was a lesson that had been learned before by smaller coalition partners from D66 in the Netherlands to the Greens in Ireland.
- II. In addition, there was a critical disjunction between what we had published on the front page of our 2010 manifesto - which the leadership had intended to be the basis for measuring success in coalition negotiations and the delivery of Lib Dem priorities in Government, and what the public and media understood to be our priorities – namely, the abolition of tuition fees.
- III. The effects of the move into government might have been mitigated if the party had been better able to withstand external criticism. But the weak public understanding of our party and political opinions meant that our move into government was not well understood. This was only exacerbated by the nature of running hyper-local campaigns with differing messages in different parts of the country, our rapid rise in popularity over the final weeks of the 2010 campaign, and the vast imbalance in financial resources between us and either Labour or the Tories. By late 2010, these factors combined to lead to a daily reality for the party of public rejection, falling internal morale, and consistent electoral destruction.
- IV. Our members have been very clear with us – we did the right thing for the national interest by going in to coalition. But we singularly failed at using our new position to garner support, retain and communicate our vision, or maintain a unique offer.
- V. By setting aside the ‘national interest’ narrative in favour of emphasising that of ‘coalitions can work’ we unwittingly manoeuvred ourselves into a position of appearing content to be willing appendages to our coalition partners. The decision on tuition fees in autumn 2010, which represented a high profile ‘broken promise’, exemplified this, and with memories of the Rose Garden moment still fresh in the collective memory, this narrative embedded early in the public mind. It did nothing for the morale and sense of purpose for a great number of our own members.

- VI. These fundamental positioning and policy decisions should have been taken in full knowledge of how they would be perceived by our remaining core voters – but partly as a result of dwindling funds, no polling activities of note were undertaken at all during the first two years of Coalition. Those making decisions were effectively flying blind, and despite consistent feedback from members and activists, including Federal Committees, the message that things were going significantly awry did not prompt change. Once a comprehensive polling programme was reinstated in 2012, the fundamental damage was already done.
- VII. The importance of party morale to the Liberal Democrats cannot be overstated. We do not have anything like the funding of the Conservative Party or the Union backing of the Labour party – we rely on our local credentials, small businesses, and our committed membership. Over the last parliament, we suffered from a damaging combination of falling membership to 2012, financial pressure, ageing members, and deflated morale – all of which fundamentally harmed our electoral prospects. And without the financial support of a small band of dedicated backers, levelling out the imbalance of the existing system, the political plight of the Party could have been far worse.
- VIII. Morale was damaged not only by consistently poor polling and election results or the disappointing outcome of the AV referendum, but also by a series of decisions made at a Parliamentary and Governmental level to support Conservative proposals on a range of issues. The inability to publicly highlight differences or misgivings left the party activists at odds with the public statements being made by Ministers. A not insignificant number of respondents to our survey considered these decisions (such as over Tuition Fees, the Health and Social Care Act, the ‘Bedroom Tax’, and ‘Secret Courts’) to be bad policy, bad politics or both.
- IX. Nowhere were the effects of declining morale more obvious than in the running of campaigns at held and target seat level. Many local parties had become trapped in a cycle of too small a team of activists working on permanent overstretch to deliver campaigning in an area of steadily reducing support and against an increasingly challenging political backdrop. Constant exhortations to meet Key Performance Indicators often flew in the face of capacity at the coal face.
- X. For some MPs, local leadership took a back seat to the demands of Westminster. In many seats, late selection of candidates denied local parties the focal point to rally around. While in others the hollowed-out base of local councillors deprived parties of campaign infrastructure and finance. At the same time, our targeting seemed to have

erred on the optimistic side – remaining wider than evidence and experience told us we could support on then-current trends.

- XI. It is important to acknowledge the huge effort that went into creating and promoting our ‘wins’ in Westminster such as the pupil premium, equal marriage or the pension’s triple lock. But this was not matched by sufficient work to either distance the party from Conservative Government initiatives, or, in the early years, take credit for blocking Conservative policies. In addition, the Conservatives remained hugely effective at taking credit for Liberal Democrat initiatives – the £700 tax cut for instance. It made voters’ decisions all the more difficult – for if you supported the work of the government and had previously voted Liberal Democrat, it was hard to believe that the Tories would depart from the Lib Dem initiatives they were now extolling.
- XII. So it was that entering into the short campaign in 2015, the party lacked a fighting force of members and campaigning champions to lead their local parties. To compound problems, campaign preparations were late and lacking in oversight. Much of this, the review Group attributes to the lack of a single, professional campaign director responsible for taking strategic decisions about all aspects of campaigning.
- XIII. The establishment of the ‘Wheelhouse’ Campaign Committee to co-ordinate the campaigning activity for 2015 made up substantially for this organisational lacking, but it did not entirely compensate for it.
- XIV. A prime example of this can be seen with the lack of message discipline during the short campaign. Three years of ‘Stronger Economy Fairer Society’ were swept away to make way for the weak, confused messaging of ‘Look Left. Look Right. Then Cross.’, with various forays into ‘Blukip’, ‘head and heart’, and ‘stability, unity, decency’. It was not the fault of staff, campaigners, and spokespeople who worked tirelessly throughout the campaign, but a symptom of the driving force behind the campaign – that in the absence of a plan that was working, ‘something must be done’.
- XV. All of these aspects of our campaign were placed against an unfavourable backdrop. Despite our failings, we might not have done so badly except for the strength of the late Tory message about the weakness of Ed Miliband and English voters’ fear of the SNP in control in Westminster. No party had a response to this. In Scotland it served to boost the SNP position. And where this overarching message was combined with hundreds of thousands of pounds of central and local money spent in Conservative target seats, Liberal Democrat chances were simply swept away.

- XVI. The Party's position was not helped by the inaccuracies in public national polling. Constantly reinforcing the proximity between Labour and Conservative simply served to fuel the Conservative fear campaign of a Miliband / Salmond alliance at Westminster. It served also to maintain the prospect of a Coalition involving the Liberal Democrats and required us to campaign accordingly.
- XVII. Another external factor was the nature and format of the Party Leader debates. It was always going to be difficult for Nick Clegg to achieve anything like the cut through of 2010, though our members and media made clear at the time, that they thought his performance was strong. The impact of the 2014 debates against UKIP also served in advance to take some of the sheen from the public expectation of Nick's performance. Unfortunately, in their haste to ensure that the debates took place at all against shrewd Conservative negotiations, broadcasters agreed a format that effectively removed the party from positions either as a challenger or as an incumbent.
- XVIII. The loss of some of our longest-held seats, and with them our most experienced and nationally-acclaimed MPs, is the culmination of a perfect storm sweeping them away on a wave of Tory message and money, a weak Labour party, an anti-Westminster SNP campaign that built on the Scottish referendum, a misdirected public perception of proximity between the Labour and Conservative parties, a hollowed-out Liberal Democrat activist base, and general disengagement as a consequence of policy decisions such as tuition fees.
- XIX. There was much that was beyond the ability of any campaign organisation committee, however formatted, to influence positively. But there are many things that the Party can do better, and can learn to do again. Failure to do so will serve only to deny the significance of the achievements gained in the liberal cause through participation in Government. As Nick Clegg said in his resignation speech:
- XX. "If our losses ... are part payment for every family that is more secure because of a job we helped to create, every person with depression who is treated with a compassion they deserve, every child who does a little better in school, every apprentice with a long and rewarding career to look forward to, every gay couple who know that their love is worth no less than anyone else's and every pensioner with a little more freedom and dignity in retirement then I hope at least our losses can be endured with a little selfless dignity too".

2015 Election Review Report

1. The path from 2010

From 2010, the running of the Party in coalition meant that we could not expect a good result in 2015. Messaging and operational weaknesses meant that we were closely associated with the least popular of Conservative policies, whilst consistently failing to project our own vision of a Liberal Democrat Britain. During this time, the Party Leader, as Deputy Prime Minister, became the natural focus and mouthpiece for most of the Party's public positioning. This drew with it considerable opprobrium from all sides, overloading the office concerned, and arguably ushering in focus on Governmental priorities over Party practicalities.

The early political priority of maintaining the appearance of a united government at almost any cost could not have laid a worse foundation for our positioning over the next five years. The U-Turn on tuition fees and other high profile policy decisions like the Health and Social Care Act and the 'Bedroom Tax' only served to worsen matters. Many of these policy issues were raised by the wider party at the time, often including passing Conference motions such as the Federal Executive's own motion in spring 2011, but various party structures failed to heed these calls until it was too late.

While it was not a foregone conclusion that we would come out of the 2015 election with eight seats, it is almost impossible to envisage a scenario where we were ever going to win more than 30 – and that must be attributed to our actions over the previous five years.

Tuition Fees

The U-Turn on tuition fees significantly damaged our reputation and credibility, so it is right to single that decision out for particular scrutiny.

Early policy issues cannot be better summed up than with the story of tuition fees. In the run up to the election, the leadership team had disagreed with the FPC and Conference on maintaining our 'abolish tuition fees' line. Where FPC and Conference were in favour of keeping it, a succession of senior figures including Nick Clegg, Danny Alexander, and Vince Cable were all keen to have the policy axed to recognise that in a post 2008-crash environment, there was a need to provide an affordable plan in a costed manifesto. They were defeated at Conference, and we went into the 2010 election with a promise of a staged abolition over six years.

Not only that, but we engaged actively with the NUS 'pledge' campaign that resulted in a number of photo opportunities with our MPs and candidates holding onto a pledge that claimed we would never vote for an increase in tuition fees. It resulted in a sizeable increase

in support from younger voters – for instance our vote amongst women aged 18-24 was 34%, higher than any other party and 8% higher than in 2005.

The carefully negotiated Coalition Agreement included the following commitments:

“We will await Lord Browne’s final report into higher education funding, and will judge its proposals against the need to:

- *increase social mobility;*
- *take into account the impact on student debt;*
- *ensure a properly funded university sector;*
- *improve the quality of teaching;*
- *advance scholarship; and*
- *attract a higher proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.*

“If the response of the Government to Lord Browne’s report is one that Liberal Democrats cannot accept, then arrangements will be made to enable Liberal Democrat MPs to abstain in any vote.”

It is almost incomprehensible, therefore, that six months on the Liberal Democrats ended up with 27 members voting in favour of a tripling of fees, a package negotiated by one of our Secretaries of State. 21 MPs refused to vote in favour, including Jenny Willott and Mike Crockart who had to resign their government roles.

Polls which had languished in the low twenties since coalition was formed (down from 30% pre-polling day, but compared to a general election result of 23%), dropped to around 14%. They had only further declined by Election Day 2015.

The fact that explanations surrounding tuition fees often boiled down to a lack of understanding as to the impact it would have on our core vote and the assertion that as the policy wasn’t on the front page of our manifesto it clearly wasn’t a red line only worsened the situation.

Knowing it was taking a highly controversial position, there was also much that was lacking in the internal communication with Party members. Even the most loyal supporters reported finding themselves bereft of adequate messages and materials to defend the decision. In the information vacuum that resulted, Party members took their lead from not entirely impartial external sources in the media and elsewhere.

Wider Policy Issues

Further policy flash-points - such as ‘Secret Courts’, cuts to legal aid, and the Bedroom Tax - might have assisted in making the case that coalition government can work, but they were devastating in terms of political positioning of the Party, undermined public trust, and sapped activist morale.

Key Recommendations

If there is anything that the electoral events of 2010 and 2015 teach us, it is that the Great British electorate is a difficult force to predict. There are learnings therefore which naturally relate only to our period of Coalition Government. Because the likelihood of Coalition Government does not seem imminently likely at present does not absolve the Review Group from making recommendations based on the learnings we have observed which relate to it. That we do so in relation to the workings of the Party in Coalition should not therefore be taken to imply we have any fixed view should a future coalition be the outcome of the voters' decision.

- To ensure that the interests of the Party are not overlooked or made secondary to those of the Parliamentary Party or leadership in any Administration, a clear protocol needs to be drawn up covering the manner in which the Party is governed in and out of periods in Government – including the roles of key Party Officers, Special Advisers, campaigners, and senior party staff.
- The wider interests of the party should be reflected with a specific member in any future coalition negotiation team.
- It should be made clear at the outset of any future coalition that Liberal Democrats will only automatically vote for legislation covered by the coalition agreement, and not all legislation brought forward by the government. It should also be made clear which are supported as a part of our manifesto commitments, and which are the price of coalition government.
- The Federal CEO should be directly answerable to both the Party President and the Federal Executive.
- It should be the responsibility of the Party President, particularly in Government, to assist the Leader and explain Parliamentary positions taken both internally and externally.

2. Polling and messaging

Our approach to polling and messaging pre- and post-2012 should be set apart. Pre-2012 we concentrated on a message of unity in government, without the benefit of any polling to inform this decision. Post-2012, a comprehensive polling programme was reinstated, beginning with a national poll which resulted in the 'Stronger Economy, Fairer Society' slogan.

However, this polling programme had its own weaknesses – it eschewed qualitative research almost entirely, it did not test opponents' messaging, and no strategic seat tracking poll was established during the short campaign. This resulted in an absence of

messaging to combat negative opinions of the party, and a central message that lacked both distinctiveness and ownability. In addition, members, particularly those in key seats, expressed concern that this was, to some extent, comfort polling – that the messages they were receiving on the doorstep simply didn't reflect the story they were told from seat polling. These polling and messaging failings, many of which were simply a victim of lack of funding, were fundamental to the party's underperformance during the short campaign.

National Polling

National polling was conducted during the period 2012 to 2015, with an aim of understanding the opinions of those who would consider voting Liberal Democrat. This amounted to 20% of the overall poll. Concepts that were tested included opinions of party leaders, attitudes towards coalition, and the power and ownability of various policy ideas.

Overall, the quantitative polling operation played a useful and important role in helping to sharpen our strategy and political operation after the first two years in Government. In some areas, particularly the support for decision-making in government, it successfully took us into new areas that no-one in the party had done before. With the benefit of hindsight, there are ways it could have been improved, but the overall impact was positive and quantitative national polling should remain part of our operation.

Seat Polling

From April 2013 to early April 2015, the party ran a series of 136 seat polls in 72 seats.

Having had access to these polls, it is our conclusion that they were a good reflection of feeling in our key seats. Overall, we received strong feedback from local seats that they found the seat polls to be useful. They enabled and drove important strategic decisions such as the decision to switch to fighting the SNP in our target seats in Scotland after the referendum. They eased the decision to de-target certain seats. They proved useful in assessing seats that had a low canvass level or which lacked historical data to assess the strength of the local position. And they provided local seats with messages and targeting information that proved effective – at least in the short term – when used in local literature.

However, they lacked the ability to tell us how to solve the underlying issue of believability of our messaging and distinctiveness of our party and candidates. Most notably, in the 2015 arena, they did not take into account the wider concerns of voters about Ed Miliband or the Conservative attack messages that became gradually more focused and widespread.

Messaging

Messaging is the most important element of any campaign and the hardest thing to get right. The results we achieved showed that we didn't.

Our analysis suggests the following issues:

- Our overall messaging was generic. It failed to bring to life how we were different to other parties.
- We failed to address our negatives in trust and ‘likelihood to win’
- We failed to prepare for likely attacks.

From 2012, the party focused on the ‘*Stronger Economy. Fairer Society.*’ strapline. Our own research showed that this was a generic message over which we lacked ownership - supporters of all parties believed that their own party was the most likely to deliver both a stronger economy and a fairer society. Voters liked the sentiment but they simply didn’t associate it with the Liberal Democrats. In addition, many activists remained unconvinced by the message, which they felt was generic and failed to enunciate the fundamental values of the Liberal Democrats.

Nonetheless we remained successfully on message up until the short campaign – including in our attacks on other parties, which were hard to distinguish from the attacks of other, larger parties. By the time the short campaign had bedded in, the strap-line was side-lined in favour of a succession of other messages.

Key Recommendations

- Recommence a qualitative research programme using in-depth interviews on key political and campaigning issues, including training campaigns officers and making use of wider party expertise.
- Establish a small ‘Professional Advisory Group’ of party members with experience in polling and research to support staff with the polling programme and wider training in the effective use of polling and research.
- Continue seat and message polling, ideally with a widened base and including questions concerning ownership of our policies, distinctiveness of the party, and believability of party figures and central claims.
- Resource a target seat tracking poll during the short campaign in future General Elections.
- If we find ourselves in government, resource polling on critical political decisions from the start
- Research the most important national campaign messages and act on the results
- Future message development should include an assessment of the distinctiveness and ownability of our messaging
- Ensure that planning effective rebuttal to opposition messaging is integral to our campaign planning

3. Accountability & campaign management

Management of the 2015 campaign could be characterised as late preparation from 2010, with an element of blurred clarity as to who the decision-makers were. There was from the beginning no single, professional campaign director responsible for taking strategic decisions about all aspects of the campaign – this was then ceded to Paddy Ashdown as Chair of the campaign but the organisational problem remained.

Paddy established a General Election Committee comprised of staff and representative elements of the Party functions and committees. This committee was colloquially known as 'The Wheelhouse'. Its role was to use reports to make decisions about seats on fixed sets of Key Performance Indicators (such as membership figures, income, number of leaflets delivered), act as a sounding board to frame the decision making process, and to communicate to parts of the wider Party it was drawn from. A smaller 'Wheelhouse Executive' took all major strategic decisions and reported them up. There is continuing concern that these systems lacked proper and effective accountability to existing Party structures.

But the requirements of a fast-moving campaign sometimes meant that lesser tactical decision-making did not require attendance of Wheelhouse Executive members. The downside was that with different members participating at different times, consistency of opinion could easily be compromised. Useful innovations such as the crisis response team, designed to deal with bad news stories, were offset by not covering the basics – for instance, the Campaign Grid did not loop sufficiently in with ground campaigners. Furthermore, a certain price was paid as a result of the decision not to have a media monitoring unit.

Key Recommendations

- An expanded CCC - with formalised representations from State parties and Councillors (and possibly also regional parties) should be the main vehicle through which the Party's campaigns are co-ordinated. The CCC review group recognises that it has a close interest in its remit and function and therefore further recommends that these are matters which the Governance Review Group should consider as well.
- In future, there should be a named individual responsible for the campaign and gaining agreement to their plans from the CCC.
- Given the huge strategic and electoral priority of standing candidates in all British seats in General Elections, overall candidate approval and selection should fall within the responsibility of the Federal Party in the form of the CCC with the clear understanding that they would be delegated at the request of the relevant State

Party. But there must always be an opportunity to intervene federally should circumstances require.

- There should be an expectation that Approved Candidates will make themselves available for selection at General Elections. A survey of approved candidates should be conducted routinely in early advance of a General Election and those candidates wishing not to stand, or not replying, without good reason should be deemed to have resigned themselves from the list. The facility to licence candidates in particular circumstances should be reinstated and the Governance review should consider the role of the CCC in this.
- The Leader should not be expected to make day-to-day decisions during the fast-moving short campaign.
- A real-time media monitoring capability is the eyes and ears of campaign. It should be established either in-house or externally in 2020. A reactive or crisis-focused team should be part of the future campaign format
- CCC should establish a workstream, with representation from Scotland, Wales, and London, to consider the challenges presented by fighting elections under different electoral systems

4. The ground campaign

Campaigns over the last parliament were characterised by reduced campaigning capacity, fluctuations in campaigns staff, and focus on Westminster elections. Over the course of the parliament, party strength on the ground was diminishing – activists were ageing, councillors were losing their seats, and the impact of some of our decisions and messaging in government was a reduction in activists willing to turn out on the doorstep.

At every stage, targeting remained wider than evidence indicated we could support, and it took too long to tighten targeting even when we knew we needed to. Moreover, leadership at a local level was lacking as MPs were focusing on their London roles and candidates were not generally selected until late in the cycle.

At the same time, the Conservatives were devoting substantially increased resources to targeting an ever-larger number of Lib Dem seats. Despite the list of Conservative targets being public, the party was simply unable to match the resource and highly-focused targeting that they made use of. Several former Lib Dem MPs have expressed surprise at the sheer amount of high quality, national literature with a localised message that swamped Tory target constituencies from 2013 onwards. Ironically, the Conservatives credit our victory in Eastleigh as being the wake-up call for their campaigning operation. It was a by-election where we held our seat with huge support from activists, members, and donors

across the country, but it was a tough battle and it should have been clear that this effort could not be replicated for every held seat in a General Election.

HQ had developed their strategic seat selection criteria since 2010, focusing on a 'Dragon's Den' style selection procedure which proved a popular innovation. But seats who failed to meet the criteria over time were slow to be dropped, and Key Performance Indicator monitoring within seats was not a replacement for experienced staff having time to spend on supporting seats. The focus derived from national messaging was campaigning as a form of propaganda for our work in Government rather than an active campaign for change – so while aspects such as National Days of Action were successful, there was little to encourage voters to support the Liberal Democrats over other parties.

There was a very clear focus on winning the held and strategic seats in the General Election from most people we spoke to. In several interviews other elections were not mentioned, or only in passing. Where they were mentioned they were described as being 'interim' or other similar terms. We believe that this approach is flawed.

Key Recommendations

- The party needs to concentrate on rebuilding its capacity at every level, including on issues-based campaigning. This will need an increase in training, materials and advice in all aspects of capacity building throughout the party.
- The party should develop a much more robust model to assess our chances of winning seats based on hard data and any other relevant information available. We would expect this to include an amalgam of seat polling, national polling, tracking polls, Connect data, demographic data and activity levels.
- Candidates and their key team members need to be told clearly and sensitively what their status is. Support should be in place for any seat dropping out of target status to enable adjusting their plans to an appropriate level but avoid activity collapsing.
- We need to establish a culture that welcomes feedback, positive or negative, from staff and volunteers, and that this is fed into the decision-making process.
- Campaign leadership should not be the sole responsibility of candidates. Leadership, strategic planning, fundraising and campaign planning should be key parts of the party's training offer and should be available on an ongoing basis, enabling all Local Parties to have an appropriate development plan in place at all times.
- In order to re-establish a culture of movement to and mutual aid between constituencies a meaningful mechanism to both reward and encourage it needs to be established and maintained up to and including the 2020 election.
- The federal party should develop an ongoing campaign plan incorporating all levels of elections on a rolling basis, with clear targets for each round, and identifying where

resources will be targeted. This should be done in collaboration with other parts of the party.

- Every level of elections should be treated as important in their own right because electing Liberal Democrats is important to communities at every level. Targeting in each round of elections within a Westminster Parliamentary cycle should not be solely based on Westminster targeting and local, European, state and regional elections should not be seen merely as ‘interim’ elections between General Elections.

5. The air war

Given the ultimate outcome, it is easy to overlook the fact that on Election Day 2015 the Party received significant endorsements from the balance of national newspapers - a relatively unusual position for the Party at any election. Nonetheless the Air War was controversial – largely owing to the fast-changing, complicated messages that conveyed a lack of strategic discipline. These issues were commonly raised amongst respondents.

After two years building the profile both internally and externally of *Stronger Economy. Fairer Society. (Opportunity for Everyone.)* the campaign focused at a national level on a message of “Look Left. Look Right. Then Cross”, with varying forays into ‘Blukip’, ‘head and heart’, and ultimately ‘stability, unity, decency’.

Our Party Election broadcasts did not show enough distinctive reasons to vote FOR the Liberal Democrats and, in the main, did not feature Liberal Democrat spokespeople. They made little sense in Scotland or Wales – where the message gave no reason not to vote for the Nationalist parties. They were also poorly integrated with our campaign on the ground.

While our coverage in the press remained relatively abundant, and visuals and stories of the Leader’s tour praised by journalists, the possibility of it influencing voters sufficiently seemed rather distant. Meanwhile the format of the televised Leaders debates significantly worked against the Party’s interests casting us neither as ‘key player’ nor ‘challenger’. Further to that, Nick was unlikely to achieve the cut-through he had in 2010 – a fact that was only accentuated by the 2014 European debates.

Our digital campaign largely focused on fundraising – rather than social media-based voter influencing as had been practiced by the Tories or on member recruitment which Labour had focused on – and while it remained comparatively successful at this task, the Review group is convinced greater advantage could have been achieved with our digital campaigning capability. This requires innovation and financial investment.

Key Recommendations

- Improve strategic discipline in our communication. Establish a simpler set of effective messages and stick to them.
- Keep the use of Scottish and Welsh variations of UK PPBs for Scotland and Wales. To enable this, involve Scottish and Welsh campaign teams from briefing stage onwards and, if necessary, test core campaign ideas for use in Scotland and Wales – as well as England.
- To improve our impact in the media, train people to create media friendly or social-media-shareable events, not just how to write press releases.
- Continue to drive digital fundraising – both centrally – and through increasing skills in digital fundraising locally.
- Mainstream social media-based advertising. Learn from the Tories and our success in 2015 and invest in testing and learning the most effective ways of using social media-based advertising – both locally and nationally.

6. Volunteer engagement and motivation

Low levels of Party morale and member activity were characteristic of the 2015 campaign, and more widely the 2010-2015 Parliament, contributing to local parties unable to turn members out onto the street and doorstep. There was a sustained loss of experienced, engaged activists and councillors which, despite the increases in membership in the second half of the parliament, contributed to low morale and reduced our campaigning capacity. For a Party based in the practice of community politics, this was a considerable deficit to overcome.

Much of this can be attributed to the wider political picture – the coalition, our national messaging, and in Scotland the overwhelming force of the SNP. A not insignificant section of lassitude in our strategic seats can be traced to the approach of HQ with a ‘one size fits all’ attitude, a command and control culture, and a seeming lack of willingness to listen to the difficulties being faced on the doorstep. The late recruitment and general inexperience of seat organisers did not help to motivate activists, especially in seats where there was a lack of leadership or other obstacles such as long distances to overcome.

Members from strategic seats or those who were active nationally were generally the most active and engaged with campaigning during the General Election. They saw close up the consequences of the disconnect between the national and local campaigns. Many were worried that the poor response they were getting on the doorstep was not reflected in what HQ was feeding back to them – and felt there was no way for them to get that message across. Two-way communication had effectively failed.

However, there were innovations such as the membership incentive scheme which from 2013 encouraged local parties to concentrate on increasing their membership, and 'Team 2015' which made good use of largely new and younger volunteers at a central level – using social media and telephone banking to lend their support to strategic seats, a project which should be nurtured for future campaigns. The Confidential Strategy Briefing booklet sent to all members was an excellent idea. It undoubtedly had a positive and motivating impact on the membership at large.

Key Recommendations

- Member Engagement Workshops should be run annually in every Region and State to motivate new members to get more involved and turn them into activists and to re-engage existing members.
- Election Planning Workshops should be run in every Region, in Scotland and in Wales in the first seven months of the year before a General Election.
- Campaigns staff and paid organisers should receive more training on leadership skills, and on engaging and motivating volunteers
- Membership recruitment must be viewed as a key campaign responsibility backed up by membership incentive schemes, training workshops and materials for staff and key activists.
- The FE's Digital Working Group should come forward with proposals to improve member engagement and activation at a local level using the internet and social media tools, expanding the best practice already in use in the strongest areas and strengthening our use of expert volunteers.
- Repeat the Strategy Briefing to members.

7. Staffing

There were several clearly distinct groups of staff involved in the 2015 election – HQ staff, field staff, Parliamentary staff, and former governmental staff. They each became involved at different points in the cycle and each had their own particular responsibilities and relationships to either HQ or specific seats. Previous chapters have noted the level to which each of these disparate groups had successfully worked together before the election, but there was evidence that Party staff operated in silos, with insufficient co-ordination of their efforts.

Working for the Party during a general election can be hugely positive, with a high degree of on the job experience for junior campaigners. However, the hangovers from restructures

since 2010 (particularly the 2011 restructure) had not been adequately dealt with, and the move to a more 'command and control' posture by the Elections and Field Department undermined mutual trust between some staff and between those staff and some activists.

The Elections and Field Department in particular seems to have had a very directive way of managing people and issues. Cultural change is needed to establish a more collaborative way of managing and running a campaign. Examples of how a positive approach to innovation can engage and energise staff are available elsewhere in the organisation.

Some of the most problematic staff relationships came with overzealous party committee members, who took their frustration with the structure out on staff members. Staff took on a lot of the pressure of a succession of difficult elections, and often found themselves having to withstand personal criticism from members and activists who were unhappy with results. These relationships could be improved by a better understanding on both sides of the challenges inherent in these roles.

If senior members of staff or party committees wish to deliver controversial content to key stakeholders, they must ensure that those communications go out in their own names and they must take responsibility for responding to the feedback from members.

Key Recommendations

- Comprehensive measures should be put in place to build a greater unity of purpose between field staff, HQ staff, Leader's Office staff, and staff working for our elected representatives eg in councils or parliament.
- The party should ensure that pastoral care provisions are put in place in advance of the election to care for staff and MPs who may be left without seats and employment. All staff, regardless of their location or employer, should be contacted, thanked, and offered support if they are in need.
- Compulsory training on how to work with staff appropriately should be put in place for all members of Party Committees who regularly have contact with HQ staff. A Code of Conduct should be drawn up to prevent intimidation and bullying of Party staff.
- To address the post-election loss of skills as staff depart, a proper career structure should be put in place for campaign staff with open and transparent pay grades for paid agents, organisers and field staff.
- Constituency agents and organisers should be hired as early as possible to enable them to bond effectively with their PPC, their local Party campaign teams and attend the appropriate training.

- Where agents and organisers are appointed late in the cycle an individual Learning Plan should be drawn up by the Campaigns Officer responsible for them. This plan should involve fast track training sessions and shadowing experienced agents.
- Where practical, field staff should be co-located in order to reduce the likelihood of isolation, encourage the sharing of skills and ideas, and make better use of overall expenditure on premises and equipment.
- In order to build a more positive working culture, all staff who work for the party and all committee members who interact with staff should attend a full day training workshop on Unconscious Bias and community engagement within 6 months of their appointment/election.
- A comprehensive programme of mentoring, training and individual one to one coaching should be put in place for senior members of staff to support them as managers.
- Where conflict is observed or reported between two members of staff or a member of staff and a member, more senior staff have a responsibility to intervene. They should seek mediation assistance from either the Pastoral Care Officer or a mediator suggested by the Pastoral Care Officer, within 8 weeks of the initial observation or report. The first response may be on an informal basis but more formal measures may be taken if this intervention does not resolve the problem.
- Constituency agents and organisers should elect representatives from each region to represent their interests to senior staff and committee members in regards to all aspects of their work life, i.e. conditions, training, support.

8. Fundraising

The fact that we received relatively little feedback on fundraising would appear to be a positive – although this lack of feedback can also be seen to be indicative of a scenario where funding is always scarce, and where uncomfortable decisions on budgets are commonplace.

Strategic seats were enabled to raise more at a local level with innovations such as NationBuilder, and with support from the central fundraising team in HQ. Since 2011 there has also been a regional fundraiser, working with seats and regions to supplement national funding. Despite increases in small donations, especially for specific projects and election goals, and small donors coming in above projections, small donors account for a comparatively small section of fundraising. Big donor fundraising increased above 2010 levels.

The prime weakness in terms of fundraising were strategic (largely held) seats that had not ingrained fundraising over a period of time. This lack of a fundraising culture was difficult to overcome – and when combined with targets that fell short of those laid out in relevant win plans, and difficult informal funding arrangements, meant that some seats were simply nowhere close to raising what they needed to win.

Key Recommendations

- Continue to develop high net worth donors and expand the fundraising board, especially increasing its size and remit outside London. This should work as part of an integrated fundraising structure between regional and national fundraising teams and staff.
- Invest in small donor fundraising capacity including modelling, analytics and email acquisition.
- Advice, training and support for Local and Regional Party fundraising from donors should be increased in order to spread best practice from seats that do this successfully.
- Candidates in key contests at all levels, with their teams, should be given more training and support in fundraising for their campaigns and from much earlier in electoral cycles. They should not be put under pressure to use significant amounts of their own resources to fund their campaigns or to put their Local Parties into debt to fund campaigning.

9. Candidates and diversity

The key issue for candidates in the recent election cycle was ensuring they were selected. Largely at the English level, shortages of Returning Officers and Assessors meant that potential candidates were slow to be approved and that the number of selections that could be run at any one time was low. In addition to a refusal to select candidates before the potential boundary review had been considered in 2012, many areas were unable to gain local leadership from candidates until late 2013 and beyond. Indeed by December 2014, only 200 of the 632 candidates needed were in place. At this point, work towards selection without the benefit of licensed candidates was time-consuming and a distraction for senior party officers and volunteers alike.

The Leadership Programme helped to ensure that at the strategic seat level, candidates were more diverse than ever before. Praise was afforded to wider candidate support when it arrived in 2015, and to some of the training provided particularly to female candidates, with requests that these are provided earlier in the cycle in future.

Key Recommendations

- FE should broaden the CCC to have an overview of Candidates issues, so that candidate selection is always embedded in to the electoral cycle, always in conjunction with the three state parties. The roles and responsibilities of the Joint States' Candidates Committee should be reviewed.
- After each General Election, each state party should review ROs and Assessors in a similar way to the Candidates Review, including future willingness to serve. Based on those responses, an action plan for recruitment in each state/region should be presented to the Executive, and compiled into a post General Election report to the Federal Executive so that a wider UK view can be assessed.
- Regardless of the core numbers of ROs and Assessors, there should be specific campaigns to recruit ROs and Assessors from the under-represented groups (Women, BAME, Disabled, LGBT+) to ensure that they look more like the party and set targets to match the census figures for these groups.
- Reintroduce the role of Senior Returning Officer
- The Governance Review should consider how to make candidate selection in England more accountable and transparent to local parties.
- The Governance Review should consider how the English party can embed campaigns and the electoral cycle into the work of the English Candidates Committee.
- Ensure that the lessons from the telephone support and candidate portal are learned to repeat at future elections, but implement earlier in the cycle, at least 18 months before the date of the General Election and provide for other elections as well.
- Following on from the appreciative comments about peers' calls and personalised letters to candidates, HQ should re-establish a "communications with candidates" grid in the run up to the next GE, and work with the Lords' Whip's Office and future President's office to repeat the calls and letters.
- HQ ensure that the training available to candidates is available to all, and that enough training sessions are available to make this happen, including training for under-represented groups.
- The Federal party and the State parties need to work together to explore a wide range of measures that can be taken to improve the diversity of the party's elected representatives. Recommendations should be put to Federal Conference and to State Parties which should include use of unconscious bias and community engagement training.
- Review and consider continuing the Leadership Programme in the future.

The Election Review Team



James Gurling

- Chair of the Campaigns & Communications Committee
- Agent in Richmond & Barnes '92, Press Aide to Paddy Ashdown on the '97 General Election tour and Leadership Election Agent to Charles Kennedy
- Councillor in Southwark 1998 - 2010
- Communications consultant with 20 years' experience

Sal Brinton

- Party President
- Member of the House of Lords since 2011
- PPC for Watford in 2010 & 2005 and South East Cambridgeshire in 2001 & 1997
- Cambridgeshire County Councillor from 1993 to 2004, holding the Education portfolio and then as Leader of the Opposition.



Martin Tod



- Chief Executive at a national health charity, former Proctor & Gamble Marketing Director, former Head of Brand and Marketing at Vodafone
- Winchester City and Hampshire County Councillor
- 2010 Parliamentary Candidate in the target seat of Winchester. Stood for parliament in 2001 and 2005.

Candy Piercy

- Former Deputy Director of Campaigns, experienced agent in target and held seats, and professional trainer
- Member of Liberal Democrat Women Executive and founder of Campaign for Gender Balance
- President of the Agents and Organisers Association and edits the General Election Agents' Manual with Mark Pack



Neil Fawcett



- Experienced campaigner, agent for Oxford West and Abingdon in 2015
- ALDC Development Officer
- Oxfordshire County Councillor
- Previously worked for Liberal Democrat Youth and Students, Chris Huhne, and the Campaigns Department

Tim Razzall

- Chaired the 2001 and 2005 General Election Campaigns, and Chaired Campaigns & Communications Committee from 2000-2006
- Member of the House of Lords since 1997
- Councillor in Richmond for 24 years
- Former Treasurer of the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats



Jo Foster



- Welsh representative
- Former Chief Executive of the Welsh Lib Dems
- Former Deputy Chief of Staff to Nick Clegg (2011-2013)

David Green

- Scottish representative
- Former press officer and organiser for Charles Kennedy
- Former President of Liberal Youth Scotland



