

## Liberal and Liberal Democrat campaigns

Chris Rennard, former Director of Campaigns and Chief Executive of the Liberal Democrats, interviewed by York Membery

# The Changing Face of



Chris Rennard (left) visits John Leech's campaign HQ, Manchester Withington, 2010

**L**ORD RENNARD, THE Liberal Democrats' Director of Campaigns and Elections from 1989 to 2003, and the party's Chief Executive from 2003 to 2009, tells York Membery how electoral campaigning has changed over his forty-year years in politics.

*What was the first campaign you were involved in? What did you do? What was your impression of the campaign? Did we win?*

My first ever campaign was when I saw in the *Liverpool Echo* that someone was organising a

petition to try and save my local cinema. I was about 12 and went round neighbours' houses collecting signatures. The organiser was Harry Davies, the Liberal candidate for Childwall. He didn't quite win, but then moved to Three Rivers in Hertfordshire where he was one of the main inspirations behind us winning and controlling the council there. My first election campaign was when I was 13 and went round with Liberals delivering leaflets in the city council elections when we first won control of Liverpool in 1973. It was exciting because we won.

# Election Campaigning

*How big a role did you play in campaigning as deputy chair of the Liverpool Liberal Party? Did you campaign in across-the-board council elections?*

I was elected to that position in 1981, at a time when I was organising many of the battleground wards in the city, we were in control of the city council and fighting the Militants. I worked with a small group that included Trevor Jones (council leader), Mike Storey (his deputy), Ann McTegart (the chair), Chris Davies and others, and I recruited many activists to the party from the university who were crucial to our campaigns at that time.

*Who were your mentors and what did you learn from them?*

Cyril Carr, our first councillor and first council leader, was my original mentor. He and his team were responsible for the invention of *Focus* leaflets, in Liverpool's Church ward. He helped my family with casework, discovered my interest in politics and current affairs, and got me to attend the ward AGM, at which he suggested I become treasurer. I wasn't yet 14, but I was good at maths at school. Trevor Jones spread the *Focus*-style campaigning across Liverpool and then across much of the country as he oversaw by-election triumphs such as Sutton & Cheam in 1972. I learned a great deal from him about campaigning, as well as from David Alton, who was Trevor's protégé for a long time.

*You worked on David Alton's Edge Hill by-election campaign. What was your role? How did we achieve victory?*

The Labour MP for Edge Hill was threatening to resign and force a by-election from the summer of 1977 onwards in protest at his deselection. It was a difficult time for the Liberal Party, and Edge Hill was one of very few realistic hopes that we had of winning in a general election. I worked continuously as a volunteer until the by-election in March 1979, following the death of the Labour MP. In many ways, David ran his own campaign, having overseen the winning of all four wards within the constituency. I had numerous minor roles, as this was well before the era of the party sending in paid professionals to by-elections, although most of the staff in the very small Liberal Party Organisation Headquarters came up for the last couple of weeks. My roles ranged from running

the 'front of shop' in the HQ, designing and printing some of the local leaflets, organising the public meetings and running a committee room on polling day. I was 18 and I learned a lot of the skills about being an agent from John Spiller, who had been John Pardoe's agent in North Cornwall and had organised some of the by-election wins of the early 1970s. We gained the seat with an 8,132 majority, and the result ensured the survival of the Liberal Party in the general election that came five weeks after the by-election.

*You were David's agent at the Mossley Hill constituency in 1983 in which you achieved a 14 per cent swing. How?*

The Boundary Commission process led to Edge Hill being split up. We didn't know what the new boundaries would be until the summer of 1982, and the new 'Mossley Hill' seat was considered an impossible prospect for us as we had been on deposit-losing level in two-thirds of it at the previous general election. The organisation in the new seat was very small, but in less than a year I increased the number of active members working in it from under 100 to over 600. There were council by-elections in two of the five wards (one of them after the death of Cyril Carr) and I acted as agent in them both, securing over 60 per cent of the vote in each case. I ran the local election campaigns in each of the five wards and our aggregate vote share in the 1983 local elections was 49 per cent. It was very hard work. I didn't have a day off in the six months before polling day, as we built a delivery network capable of delivering over twenty leaflets to every household in that time, as well as knocking on almost every door in the constituency twice. I concentrated on writing the leaflets and building the organisation whilst David Alton was high profile as a brilliant local MP. I was just very determined, and at 22 nobody told me that I couldn't run a campaign and manage 600 volunteers.

*By 1984 you were one of the party's national area agents. What lessons did you bring from your Liverpool days?*

In 1984, John Spiller pressed me to work for the party nationally with a brief based on spreading the kind of campaigning that I had been involved with in Liverpool across more of the country and in parliamentary by-elections. John wanted me to become chief agent in time, but that didn't happen as he became ill and Andy Ellis combined that

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## The Changing Face of Liberal Democrat Campaigning

job with being secretary-general. I was based in the East Midlands where I doubled our number of councillors in my time there. I also did a lot of training for the party in the region and at the annual Liberal Assemblies. But I found the 1987 general election campaign very frustrating as there were no winnable seats within the East Midlands region and a rigid regional structure limited my involvement across the country. Moreover the national [Alliance] campaign struggled with two leaders [David Steel and David Owen] and couldn't agree any effective political messaging.

*You were a member of the by-election campaign teams at West Derbyshire, 1986, and Greenwich, 1987. We came second in Derbyshire and won in Greenwich. What were the factors at work in the two by-elections and why were we able to win in Greenwich but not in Derbyshire?*

After being the winning agent in nine consecutive [council] by-elections, the first one which I lost was West Derbyshire in 1986, when after three recounts we lost by just 100 votes. It was a difficult three-way fight, and we were not helped by the former Tory MP, Matthew Parris, pretending that Labour were the challengers. I was overstretched and I decided in future that I should concentrate on being campaign director/manager in parliamentary by-elections while appointing someone else to oversee the logistics and legal side of the campaign. But there was also a significant failure to coordinate resources at national level, as we won the Ryedale by-election on the same day by 5,000 votes, while I had been warning that West Derbyshire was 200 votes either way. In Greenwich, we had a truly integrated Alliance campaign for the first and only time. Alec McGivan of the SDP was a brilliant agent and he had a team including Peter Chegwyn, Bill MacCormick and me writing most of the leaflets and generating the most sophisticated target mailings. SDP organisation and money combined most effectively with Liberal campaigning flair.

*In 1984 you became a member of the standing committee of ALC (Association of Liberal Councillors) and wrote some party publications on election campaigning and party organisation. What did you achieve?*

I worked closely with Tony Greaves and others in ALC, serving on their standing committee and writing a lot of their campaign, organisation and recruitment publications including a 160-page book, *Winning Local Elections*, and then their first guide to successful parliamentary campaigning, *The Campaign Manual*. I became an ALC-trained trainer and we provided the kind of campaign support and advice that helped the party elect over 5,000 councillors, take control of over thirty councils and provide a springboard for many of our parliamentary seat gains.

*In 1989, you were appointed as Director of Campaigns and Elections for the Liberal Democrats. What sort of changes did you make at head office?*

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At first none, because the Campaigns Department had been reduced from thirteen members of staff to just one (me), as financial difficulties followed electoral failures and political and organisational difficulties in the first eighteen months of the new party. My objective was simply survival for the party, and this had to be achieved with very modest resources.

One of my first priorities was working with Andrew Stunell and what had become the Association of Social & Liberal Democrat Councillors, running a series of campaigns and activist training days all over the country, branded as 'People First'. The aim was to train members in successful community-campaigning techniques and in ways that might help the party gain attention and rebuild trust locally after the disappointments and acrimony that followed previous electoral failures. We had a great deal of success which ensured that by 1990 we were again doing almost as well in local elections as we had done in the Alliance years, and made major advances in 1991.

I also prioritised parliamentary by-elections to help the party recover its reputation and regain credibility. Every by-election was fought with a view to either maintaining our share of the vote from the 1987 high level, or to win if we could. One of the most significant of them was the Bootle by-election in May 1990, when we faced competition from both David Owen's 'continuing SDP' and a breakaway 'Liberal Party' backed by former MP Michael Meadowcroft. Our relative success with very modest resources was sufficient to persuade David Owen that his party should fold. This helped to give us a clearer run when better prospect by-elections later came along.

*You are credited with winning thirteen parliamentary by-elections for the party (eleven gains and two holds), between 1989 and 2009, as Director of Campaigns (1989–2003) and then Chief Executive (2003–09). Your first big success was winning the Eastbourne parliamentary by-election in 1990, despite Paddy Ashdown's initial opposition to fighting the seat. How did you win that seat, and what were the consequences of victory?*

We were within twenty minutes of Paddy issuing a media statement saying that we wouldn't contest the by-election [following the murder of Ian Gow MP by the IRA], when I found out about it and stopped him making any such statement before the Eastbourne Lib Dems had considered the issue. I then persuaded the local party (who needed little encouragement) that we should fight it to win, and persuaded my friend Paul Jacobs to be the agent. I moved there for the duration (as I did with many by-elections in those days) and built on a base of local campaign issues which reflected national issues, such as the introduction of car park charges at the local hospital which had caused much annoyance and reflected wider concerns about the NHS. Much of what we did repeated the approach of by-elections before my time, including Orpington and Sutton & Cheam,

but I had made it my business to understand what had been done in them (how and why) and then to innovate with all the latest campaign techniques including targeting, with the use of data gleaned from canvassing, and extensive use of the telephone. When we overturned a 16,000 Tory majority to win by 4,550, the party went from 8 per cent to 18 per cent in the polls nationally as a result. Six weeks later Mrs Thatcher was forced to resign by panicking Tory MPs. The campaign showed that the merged party of Liberal Democrats could win again and this was the most essential part of building consistent support for us.

*You notched up another scalp at the Christchurch by-election of 1993, achieving a massive swing against the Conservatives. How? And what were the consequences?* We won Christchurch in July 1993 on the back of the Newbury by-election in May that year. In both cases we exploited local angles on national issues such as the economy, the NHS and concerns about crime. We established ourselves as credible challengers and the principal opponents of the proposals [in Norman Lamont's budget of that year] to put VAT on domestic fuel bills, hitting those on fixed incomes such as pensioners particularly hard.

In Newbury we had an established position as challengers, based on control of the council, and we turned a 12,000 Tory majority into a 22,055 Liberal Democrat majority for David Rendel. Christchurch was most remarkable because there was very little base (one county councillor) and Diana Maddock had few very local credentials, and the Tories had held the seat in a bad year for them [with 63 per cent of the vote]. But we won with a 35 per cent swing against them, the biggest swing against the Tories since 1935. As a result, Norman Lamont was sacked, and plans to add full-rate VAT to domestic fuel bills were dropped. The Lib Dems were then on a par with the Conservatives in national polls and seen to be challenging for power.

*But your greatest triumph was arguably in the general election of 1997 in which you oversaw the party's target-seat campaign, which resulted in the Lib Dems nearly doubling their number of MPs from twenty-six to forty-six. What were the key factors behind the success of the strategy?*

The parliamentary by-election wins (six of them in four years) gave me much greater credibility within the party in trying to persuade it to adopt the style and methods of these campaigns nationally, and to invest in target seats seriously for the first time. (Before the 1987 election I had met the party's national campaign team and they had dismissed out of hand the sort of approach I outlined, based on promoting the kind of campaigning that I had been successfully involved in, in Liverpool.)

In 1992, the target seat campaign ran for only a short period before the general election and only

£120,000 was invested in it. But in 1997 I persuaded the party to invest an extra £1m in target seats over two and a half years before the election. By now I was building a stronger campaign team, including people like Candy Piercy, Paul Rainger and David Loxton, and we worked hard to spread best practice amongst the target seats and pioneer new techniques in the by-elections, which we also used as training exercises for the whole party. It was also crucial that we changed our approach to national messaging late in 1996 from being explicitly aiming for a coalition with Labour to emphasising our distinctiveness on the major issues. We also dropped the meaningless proposed slogans such as 'We're yellow, we've got courage' which was subject to much ridicule. I identified the issues from polling in the key seats and we focused on crime, health, education, economy, sleaze and the environment (which I called the CHEESE issues) and what difference the Lib Dems could make on each of them, compared to all the other parties.

*In 2001 and 2005, with Tim Razzall as campaign chair, and Charles Kennedy as leader, you directed the Liberal Democrats' general election campaigns, which further increased the number of MPs to respectively fifty-two and sixty-two, the largest total of Liberal or Liberal Democrat MPs since 1923. How did you achieve this? By pursuing a similar strategy?*

Yes, it was building on success. The strategy was based on incremental targeting of more and more seats (and incidentally electing more women Lib Dem MPs in each of these elections). This was all based on careful targeting, based on gaining credibility locally with effective candidates working over many years, strong local teams and usually dominating the local elections; but also powerful and well-tested messaging that emphasised our distinctiveness.

In 2005, the list of ten things 'we opposed' and ten things 'we proposed' was not popular amongst those most concerned with detailed policy in the party, but it was tested and found considerable approval (somewhat to my own surprise) among our target voters in our target seats, and we promoted it effectively in support of all our candidates. It was very difficult managing Charles because of his health problems, but on good form he was very effective in delivering the messages that we had devised.

*Your campaign style – to focus ruthlessly on local issues and the local candidate and largely to ignore national issues – is sometimes described as 'Rennardism'. Do you think this is a fair description?*

We never ignored national issues. But we did seek to address those issues of most concern to our potential voters, as opposed sometimes to the policy interests of some of our paid-up members. The CHEESE themes were adopted in order to stop the party appearing to bang on all the time about issues such as electoral reform, which appeared to be self-interested. The 1p on income

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tax to pay for education was the most successful national policy of any party in three successive general elections. But simply stating national policies repeatedly never won seats. We needed local campaigns, local credibility and strong local organisation led by capable and well-trained candidates, agents and teams to be able to win seats, often after two or three general election campaigns. They were often able to exploit tactical voting ruthlessly.

*In 2005 there was some disappointment that we didn't make more gains – why was that? And do you think the party's decapitation strategy was a mistake?*

Many people were completely unrealistic about the number of gains that we could make in 2005 because they knew so little of our strength on the ground in the constituencies. They over-egged expectations so much that Charles Kennedy was damaged. Nevertheless we won more seats in 2005 than any party in the Liberal tradition had done since before 1922, whilst making twelve gains from Labour (more gains from them than we have ever made in their history). It was a mistake to focus on the 'decapitation' seats, but hard to change it once it had been announced that Charles was concentrating on them. The labelling of it in particular was poor politics.

*To the surprise of many, the Lib Dems lost seats in 2010. Why was that? Was it inevitable given the rise in Tory support? Or did we 'screw up'?*

Labour support had dropped by 6 per cent since 2005 (while we went up 1 per cent), so we should have made net gains from them, instead of winning three from them and losing three to them. We did not appeal to Labour-inclined supporters as effectively as we had previously, and many such voters in the seats that we should have won thought it likely that we would form a coalition with the Tories – which we did. The Tories won back support from us during the campaign after: (1) the brilliance of 'Cleggmania' subsided; (2) when we seemed to lose our way in messaging, focusing too much on immigration issues that could not be won in the short term; (3) failed to rebut firmly and effectively the plethora of attacks on us that the Conservatives launched; and (4) ran out of things to say in the crucial last week. We had much less idea what was happening on the ground in 2010 than in previous general elections and some of the constituencies were badly advised.

*How would you have approached the campaign, if you would have been running the show?*

Hard to say, but I was very involved in the Eastbourne campaign in 2010 when Stephen Lloyd gained the seat with a majority in excess of 3,000. I would not have been so complacent about some of the other seats that we lost, would have advised other seats differently and would have sought to avoid some of the campaign errors such

as literature in our own target seats appearing to present the choice as being between Brown and Cameron.

*The 2015 election was a disaster for the Lib Dems. Any thoughts on the by-election-style strategy we fought? Was it right or wrong? What would you have done differently? And what do you make of the argument that the 2015 election exposed the weaknesses of Rennardism – that it builds only weak support for the party because it largely ignores what the party stands for, making Liberal Democrat seats excessively vulnerable to a national swing against the party? To put it another way, because it views any elector as a potential voter, it does not concentrate on building a core vote based on support for the party's values and policies, which would be more likely to stick with the party in bad times.*

What I have seen of the James Gurling-led review of the Lib Dem 2015 campaign seems to be very good. We did not fight a strategy anything remotely like that with which we had so successfully campaigned in by-elections or previous general elections. I would say that the 2015 results exposed the weakness of the 2015 general election campaign, rather than the weaknesses of previous ones. When I stood down as Chief Executive in 2009, we had 100 elected parliamentarians. We now have 16.<sup>1</sup> Winning so many seats at different levels was not weakness.

Winning involves making people think that you are credible contenders, at least where they live. By 2015 we had lost many of our other elected representatives and much of our local organisation. The leaflets that had to be posted in to our target seats to make up for this weakness were not based on the sort of successful leaflet campaigns that helped us to win seats over the previous thirty years, and our capacity to canvass face to face had been greatly reduced as we lost council seats and active members. In the campaign, we were not really promoting the record of our MPs and candidates in much of the literature, and the attempt to argue vehemently that we existed to form a coalition with anyone willing to form one with us, on the basis that we did not have any major differences with the other parties, left us without a national *raison d'être* in the general election.

*York Membery is a journalist and contributing editor to the Journal of Liberal History.*

<sup>1</sup> Figure correct at the time of interview (summer 2016). In terms of elected parliamentarians, in May 2009 the Lib Dems had 63 MPs, 6 Welsh Assembly members, 16 MSPs, 12 MEPs and 3 Members of the London Assembly. In summer 2016 the party had 16 elected parliamentarians: 8 MPs, 1 Welsh Assembly member, 5 MSPs, 1 MEP and 1 GLAM. 'This also meant the loss of about 500 full time jobs in the party as well as the loss of the work of the parliamentarians,' said Rennard. 'We now have 105 members of the House of Lords, meaning that 87 per cent of our parliamentarians are unelected Lords.'