

Party strategy consultation

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Introduction

Even beyond the chaos and uncertainty which came into play in 2019, the Liberal Democrats had not translated their beliefs into a clear and relevant vision or the strategy to put it into place, and whose structures and processes led to a culture which lacked cohesion.

A strategy should set the long-term direction – at least the duration of a parliament – aligning resources to a clear vision. Strategy by that definition was fundamentally lacking. **The 2019 Election Review**

As our [election review](#) found, a failure to create and adopt an effective strategy was one of the major reasons for the 2019 general election failure.

Fixing that is one of the essentials for our future success. It is not the only essential, but it is the one on which this consultation focuses. Other work over our vision and our organisation is progressing. Getting our strategy right is the way to ensure we have the plan and organisation to deliver our vision.

That requires a strategy both to be good and then to be used. During the last Parliament, party conference voted for a strategy which, whatever its theoretical merits, then had the major flaw that it was mostly ignored across the whole party. The priorities that conference voted for did little to guide what the different parts of the party subsequently did.

This consultation, therefore, looks at both what our strategy should be and also how we can make it one that is embraced across the party.

It forms a part of the process the Board is required (under Article 5 of our constitution) to carry out every Parliament. That process also requires a future conference debate and vote, which the Board is aiming to facilitate in 2021.

Strategy, however, is a behaviour rather than a possession. It is something that you implement, rather than simply something you have. The conference vote will be a key part of the process, but it isn't simply a case of 'job done' if conference votes it through. It needs to become a key guide to what we all do.

Key questions

The following set of questions do not cover everything our new strategy will need to contain. Rather, they concentrate on the key choices and risks which need debating, where there are a variety of plausible answers and where there isn't obvious unanimity of views among members. Similarly, the questions do not cover the party's values, because the Federal Policy Committee (FPC) is running a process dedicated to that question.

For each question, there are some brief notes to help prompt thoughts and to highlight particular angles to it.

Q1 What is our purpose?

One previous version of this is:

The Liberal Democrats exist in order to build a free and fair society by winning power through winning elections. We want everyone to be supported to have the greatest control over their own lives.

Our central way of doing this is to seek to build a mass political involvement of people who share these aims to win and exercise political power, at all levels, to help achieve this. To the extent that others share these aims, we want to work with them.

In addition, we need to think about the question on our purpose posed by the Thornhill Review, illustrated by the choices the party faced over Brexit. Should the party have prioritised timing a general election so as to maximise the number of Lib Dem MPs, or should it have prioritised timing a general election so as to maximise the chance of stopping Brexit? That question is now for the history books, but the question of the balance between securing policy ends and electoral advantage will return. Which comes back to: what is our purpose?

Q2 What does success look like?

A good way to think about this is what we want people to be saying about us in 5 and in 10 years time - and, along the way - what the experience should be for our members and supporters.

Q3 How can we secure competitive advantages?

Being a smaller party in a predominantly first-past-the-post electoral system, especially one with a strong two-party culture in Westminster, brings many disadvantages. However, Liberal Democrats have a traditional reputation for being more committed than other parties to year-round grassroots campaigning. But that competitive

advantage has been eroded in recent general elections, especially in 2015. We need renewed competitive advantages.

We have also, sometimes, secured a competitive advantage by carving out a clear public stance on issues which mattered to the public and which other parties were not able to match, either due to ideological differences or due to splits within themselves. Our opposition to the Iraq war was a notable example of this. What are the contemporary equivalents?

Q4 What are our key risks and how should we deal with them?

Our party is significantly smaller in terms of membership and annual income than rival parties. We also do not have the benefit of friendly media moguls. The party therefore always risks being defeated by the weight of rival resources. We need a plan to overcome these risks.

In addition, hung Parliaments in Westminster have not ended well. This was not only the party's experience in 2010-15 but also previously, such as in 1974-1979 and 1964-1966. It is also the experience of comparable parties in other first-past-the-post democratic systems. There is a bigger picture here than just the lessons of 2010.

Hung Parliaments are sometimes seen as a great opportunity, and have sometimes served us well in devolved bodies with other electoral systems, but they come with huge political risk. Again, we need a plan to overcome this risk - and any other major risks we can identify.

Q5 What are our electoral objectives?

Winning elections is certainly one of them. We'd like to win every seat, at every level, every time. But we won't.

So we need to have a sense of the priority for different elections, such as how important is it to win control of an extra council compared with electing an extra MP? Even though each helps secure the other, there is still a choice to be made over the allocation of resources.

There are also some types of elections where we do worse, on average, such as those with very large electorates and geographic areas, some list PR elections, or the contests for posts such as Police and Crime Commissioners or Metro Mayors. How important are such elections to us - and the more important they are, the better the answers we need to how to do better in them in future.

In addition, winning elections is also helped by moving to a fairer political system - voting system, party funding, etc. That is likely to require a degree of cross-party work to achieve, so we need to be clear about our aims and how we're willing to try to secure them.

Q6 How much should our electoral appeal be based on liberals?

This has often been a cause of debate in the party, epitomised by issues such as immigration. Should we emphasise our liberal approach on such polarising issues because they reflect our values, or should we seek instead to draw in wider support by minimising our talk of such issues?

Especially under first-past-the-post elections, the party wins by putting together a coalition of voters made up of three parts: those who vote for the party because they share many of its values (core vote), those who are won over by the candidate and local campaigning (local vote), and those who vote tactically (tactical vote). So another way of thinking about this issue is to ask what balance we should look for between these three different sources of support, as that will determine the messages we should use.

Q7 What should our attitudes be towards other parties?

This was a major question through all three of the big elections in 2019 - in the local elections cross-party arrangements of many types proliferated, including, in some cases, before polling day; in the European election we held out an olive branch to some parties and also spurned others; and in the general election the party stood down in some seats but also rebuffed pressure to stand aside for Labour elsewhere. Through all that, we continued to be in coalition in the Welsh government.

This mixed, complicated picture poses plenty of questions for what our future approaches should be.

Q8 What organisational priorities are needed for this plan?

Delivering on the answers to the above is not going to be easy, so we also need to identify where we need to change how we organise, and what should be the priorities for our resources (money, staff and volunteers). What will best help deliver the answers to the previous questions, and which parts of the party should do them?

Q9 How do we make a success of adopting a strategy?

The previous strategy was not widely embedded across the party; it is hard to find many changes in the federal organisation - and especially in the party at large - following its adoption by conference.

We, therefore, need to have a collaborative discussion about how to make more of a success of this one. A strategy is only useful if it ends up informing what we actually do. Given where resources rest in the party, that means it also cannot be successful if it is only a strategy for Lib Dem HQ or the federal organisation. It needs to end up being a strategy for all of us.

To put it at its simplest: what can we do in drawing up the strategy that will make all parts of the party aware of it and willing to change what they do as a result?

Responding to these questions

Members are very welcome to take part in the consultation session being held during our virtual September party conference. In addition, you can email your views to president@libdems.org.uk.

The party will be carrying out other consultations directly with members. On top of that, if you are involved in running a party body, such as a local party or an SAO, please think about organising a discussion around these questions and then sending in its conclusions to this email address.