

Orpington all over again: why the North Shropshire electoral earthquake means the Liberal Democrats have turned the corner on the road back to recovery



[David Cutts](#) and [Andrew Russell](#) write that locally and, following the North Shropshire by-election, nationally the Liberal Democrats are re-establishing their mantle as the party voters turn to when they want to vent their disgust at the government.

For Boris Johnson and the Conservatives it was the nightmare before Christmas. For the Liberal Democrats, Christmas had come early. Two years since giving Johnson an electoral mandate, North Shropshire had done the unthinkable. Its longstanding love-in with the Conservative Party had come to a dramatic end as the Liberal Democrats turned a 22,000 deficit into a 6,000 majority on a 34% swing. The scale of the turnaround is historic. It has only been bettered by the Liberal Democrats' defeat of the Conservatives in the Christchurch by-election nearly two decades ago, and when Liberal Simon Hughes beat Labour's Peter Tatchell in the Bermondsey by-election in 1983.

Christchurch in 1993, like Orpington in 1962, prefigured a national shift in allegiance. Could North Shropshire be the signal that the nation is ready to decouple from the Tories once more? It also represented the second time in six months that the Liberal Democrats had overturned a large Conservative majority in a parliamentary by-election. But North Shropshire is different to [Chesham and Amersham](#). On paper, it shares few of the 'Blue Wall' socio-demographic and attitudinal characteristics which were friendlier to the Liberal Democrats in 2019 and since. This makes the Liberal Democrats' success even more spectacular and reinforces the impression that the 'party of protest' is back, thriving and electorally dangerous.

In the season of goodwill, there is little doubt the Conservatives gave the Liberal Democrats many gifts. And they gleefully took full advantage. Amidst on-going criticisms of 'dodgy Covid contracts', 'Wallpapergate' and growing public dismay at Johnson's own judgment and behaviour, the resignation of the previous incumbent Owen Paterson gave fresh impetus to a growing 'stench of sleaze'. Then nine days before polling day, there was 'Partygate'. Media reporting of parties in Downing Street in December 2020, when the country was in lockdown, provoked widespread public anger. Johnson and the Conservatives had seemingly lost their moral compass. Not content with gift-wrapping these national blunders, the Conservatives then selected a lawyer from Birmingham to fight the seat. The Liberal Democrats' homegrown candidate could not miss this 'open goal' stressing that if elected, being an MP would be her sole role while simultaneously tailoring her 'local' credentials to tap into major concerns about access to healthcare, local ambulance services, and anxieties in the farming community.

With ammunition readily available, the full force of the Liberal Democrat campaign machine was unleashed. The much vaunted 'ground campaign', combined with a formidable online presence, operated with ruthless effect. As ever with the Liberal Democrats, when voters deem the party as the credible challenger and firmly on the front foot, there are few party campaign machines across the world that can match the conversion and mobilisation competence, cold-bloodedness, and mercilessness of the Liberal Democrats. Their readiness to start campaigning as soon as Paterson stood down allowed them to immediately establish a constituency presence. Relentless intensive activism then helped the Liberal Democrats sell the story that they were the credible anti-Conservative voice despite polling third behind the Conservatives and Labour in the last two contests. It is a familiar story that has happened so many times before. And often, as the North Shropshire Conservatives have now experienced, it results in the same ending: the Liberal Democrats are near enough unstoppable in a by-election 'shoot out'.

Extrapolating the political direction of travel from a by-election is fraught with difficulty and subject to many caveats. Yet beneath the hullabaloo, both the Chesham and Amersham and this North Shropshire result should give renewed electoral optimism to the Liberal Democrats and send 'shivers down the spine' of Conservatives in Tory-Liberal Democrat battlegrounds. First, questions must now be raised about the formidability of the 'Leave vote'. As well as being an archetypal Conservative stronghold, North Shropshire is a solid 'Leave' constituency. Like Chesham and Amersham before it, the scale of the Liberal Democrats' success suggests that 'Leave' supporters were not immune from switching. The Liberal Democrats' ability to win over 'lean Leavers' could be the first sign that any 2019-and-beyond Brexit realignment is beginning to crumble. For some of these 'lean Leavers', getting Brexit done was a transaction – about honouring the result and finishing the job. Now, as the government falters, they are up for grabs, which brings the Liberal Democrats back into play. And Ed Davey's assurance that the Liberal Democrats would not, under his leadership, reapply to join the European Union has surely smoothed this process. While the media and commentators primarily focus on the Liberal Democrats' prospects in the 'electoral crescent' – London's commuter belt constituencies – the weakening of the 'Leave bloc' gives fresh heart to the party in its former strongholds across the South West. Here its vote was always a coalition of non-conformist partisans and liberal identifiers, Eurosceptics, soft Conservative Europhiles and lent support primarily from Labour. In light of recent events, rebuilding this coalition of support is far from a distant dream.

Secondly, the Liberal Democrats' ability to seamlessly harness lent tactical support from Labour and the Greens should chill Conservatives. Winning over 'One Nation' Conservatives has become easier since Starmer replaced Corbyn, but there are other reasons why Labour voters are now less reluctant to tactically support the Liberal Democrats when necessary. Under Corbyn, Labour (and Corbyn himself) embodied the anti-austerity agenda. As such, from their time in coalition, the Liberal Democrats were presented as the enablers of austerity. With Corbyn gone and the firebreak of the pandemic taking effect, the rhetoric from Labour has toned down. And with Starmer's Labour advocating fiscal prudence, an unofficial anti-Conservative alliance is beginning to emerge with the guns pointing in one direction and not at each other. For the Liberal Democrats, it means that the legacy of coalition which has beset the party and stunted their electoral recovery since 2015 is ebbing away. This is good news for Ed Davey who as the last remaining Liberal Democrat heavyweight from the coalition era seemingly faced the prospect of a 'Swinson style' scrutiny of his coalition misdemeanours by unforgiving Labour supporters. Crucially though, for more Labour voters, it gives the 'green light' to rebuild the tactical alliances of the past and lend their vote to the Liberal Democrats united in the shared desire to get the Conservatives out.

The Liberal Democrats of course face serious political and electoral challenges moving forward many of which have beset their existence. Leader Ed Davey courts minimal public opinion, predominantly because swathes of the electorate don't know who he is. For now, Davey's 'bank manager' style ceases to be an electoral liability and if anything suits the slow rebuilding process. The party remains largely absent from day-to-day Westminster political discourse which makes these by-election triumphs all the more important in 'flying the flag' and enhancing credibility. Yet with the pandemic stretching public services and a possible economic crunch likely as the cost of living spirals, the Liberal Democrats are waiting in the wings ready to exploit the government's woes. Locally and now nationally, slowly but surely, the Liberal Democrats are re-establishing their mantle as the party voters turn to when they want to vent their disgust at the government. For its rivals, North Shropshire sends a chilling message: the Liberal Democrats are back and should be ignored at their peril.

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