

## After the election – the Liberal Democrats' position

May 9 2010

While the leaders of the main parties take the weekend to negotiate, [Simon Bastow](#) discusses the Liberal Democrat position.

It's no wonder that Nick Clegg has urged everyone to 'take a little time' over the process of agreeing a new government. In the days after an election in which his party conspicuously under-performed against practically all expectation, he finds himself cast yet again into the role of heroic everyman with the weight of expectation laid upon him.

If the Lib Dem election result was a cautionary tale about the perils of underestimating a paradigmatic dominance of two party politics in the national psyche, Clegg will need to make sure that he and his party do not fall victim to the same kind of over-expectation a second time round, and fail to deliver anything substantial at all as a result of negotiations.

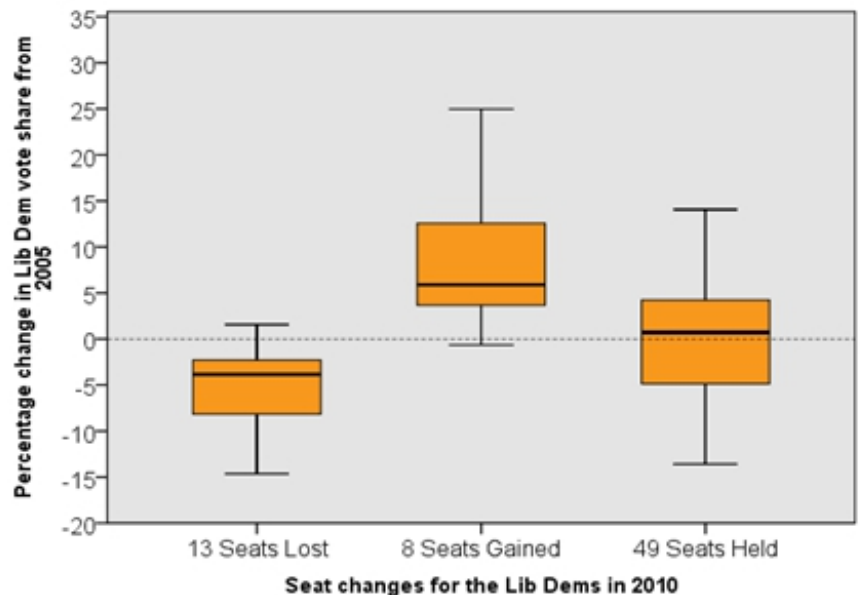
Clegg's description of the Lib Dem seat haul as a 'disappointment' must have been an understatement. The final count put them on 57 seats (a net loss of 5), losing 13 seats, gaining 8, and holding on to 49. It is difficult to reconcile in fact that level of expectation in the run-up to the election with the actual results. Pollsters, academics (including our own), media, and pundits were pretty much all complicit in sustaining the view that Lib Dems would achieve at least 80 seats. The exit polls and subsequent events exploded this conventional wisdom.

In the seats they did gain, the Lib Dems boosted their vote share by anything up to 25 per cent. The Figure below shows the inter-quartile range of vote share changes in these seats. Generally speaking, they needed to secure increases in the area of 10 per cent across a much wider spread of constituencies. This did not happen on anything like the scale anticipated by polling data.

### Lib Dem vote shares in their seats won, lost, and held

What might have caused this dislocation between support for the Lib Dems in the polls and the deficit in terms of actual votes?

One reason may be that the original 2005 'notional' results upon which projections for 2010 were based overestimated the level of support for the Lib Dems. Notional results for constituencies subject to boundary changes were extrapolated on the basis of local election results, and the tendency for the Lib Dems to do better in local elections may have had the effect of inflating the Lib Dem starting point used to project their support at general election level. This would be, admittedly, a minor effect, but should be taken into account.



More realistically perhaps, the Lib Dems were subject to the 'squeezing' effect of the two main parties as voters return to default settings in general elections of seeing their choice in bipolar terms of Labour or Conservative. This was perhaps not helped by a certain amount of hubris in the Lib Dem camp on the back of the 'Clegg effect', and pay-offs from Labour and Conservative attempts to vilify Clegg for taking an apparently a 'holier-than-thou' approach. Whatever the verdict here, a series of strategically naive decisions by the Lib Dem leadership on tactical voting and articulation of coalition intentions did nothing to help capitalise on the Lib Dem boost.

So if Clegg has learnt anything from this cautionary tale, it is that he cannot afford to allow this second wave of expectation to pass without capitalising on it. He has got to deliver something, and do so in a way that that 'something' will not dissipate as a result of being squeezed yet again by the coalescing main party. And it seems likely that it will be squeezed.

It is clear that his options are constrained by numbers on the one hand, and divisive policy issues on the other. An agreement with the Conservatives would provide an ample majority yet would lead to some very tricky navigation on key policy issues such as electoral reform. An agreement with Labour would promise fewer impasses on policy, but would suffer from being a precarious situation in terms of the numbers. Euphemistically described by Labour officials as a potential 'rainbow' coalition, it is hard to see how 258 Lab + 57 Lib Dem + 1 Green (+14 Nationalists) could be a sustainable (minority) arrangement – even for the most ardent Labour supporters – colourful though it would be.

The much-vaunted statements on Friday by all three leaders have marked the start to period of bilateral negotiations, casting the Lib Dems in the role of kingmaker and placing the onus on Conservatives and Labour to set their levels of indifference on the issues, and finesse the implications inside and outside of their parties.

Cameron's statement appeared as masterpiece of signalling and finessing. And under a thinly disguised veil of *noblesse oblige*, Brown sought to hide what now seems like an almost hopeless situation for his premiership. Conceivably Labour may find some strength over the weekend in the knowledge that offering any kind of commitment on electoral reform will be one stretch too far even for Cameron and his 'big, open, and comprehensive offer' to the Lib Dems.

On electoral reform, the image of the [Jenkins Commission](#) proposals lying in the long grass outside Westminster is still fresh in the minds of Lib Dem party colleagues and activists. Even if perhaps less so for their actual voters. But this issue has long been such a visible part of the Lib Dem project, that appearing to compromise on it would have severe implications for the Lib Dem project.

So, for the everyman Clegg, the risk is that a second Lib Dem bubble will burst at some point without any tangible legacy. Hypothetically (no, let's say, conceivably), another election within a year could return a Conservative majority, leaving the Lib Dems out in the cold with five less seats than they had before all this started and not much more. And under a Conservative government, there would be even less chance of any kind of sensible electoral reform.

This may be an overly pessimistic way to look at the 2010 election. Vaguely 'historic' things have happened to challenge the dominance of the main parties – not least the election of the first Green MP. But the very strong dynamics of a two party system have been well evident. It is fascinating to hear more enlightened pundits on the BBC refuse to accept the current situation as a 'crisis', reminding us that the vast majority of European countries consider post-election coalition negotiations as being something as normal as tea and toast.

Asked by a BBC commentator what was his personal highlight of the 2010 election, Menzies Campbell replied: 'Nick Clegg's coming of age'. Half peculiar, half patronising, there is much wrapped up in this statement which reflects the difficult relationship between expectation and reality for the Lib Dems in this election. The reality is that the party is in a worse position electorally than it was before the election. The expectation is that somehow its leadership will be able to use this as a basis to transform two party politics forever. So taking some time on this decision seems vital.



Nick Clegg, courtesy of the Lib Dem photostream on Flickr