

Tim Farron's challenge: why Brexit creates risks for the Liberal Democrats, as well as opportunities

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7/15/2016

Following the Brexit vote, and with Labour having entered into a leadership impasse, the Liberal Democrats have gained over 15,000 new members, making the current situation an opportunity to raise the party's profile. But their underlying position remains weak, writes [Peter Sloman](#), and outlines some of the challenges and opportunities for the party.



As the political establishment reels from the aftermath of the Brexit vote, the Liberal Democrats could be forgiven an uncharacteristic bout of optimism. A year on from the cataclysmic losses of the 2015 election, the task of articulating the benefits of the EU and challenging the stampede towards Brexit has given the party a renewed sense of purpose.

With Labour, the Conservatives, UKIP, and the Greens all preoccupied by leadership contests, Tim Farron has taken the opportunity to raise his profile, pitching for the support of Remain voters by demanding that the terms of exit should be put to a second referendum. The party has also gained almost 16,000 members in the three weeks following the referendum, raising membership to 74,000 – more than 75 per cent up on its low point under the coalition. Just as Jo Grimond's enthusiasm for European integration helped fuel the original Liberal revival half a century ago, activists hope that Farron's appeal to the 48 per cent can give momentum to the party's fightback today.



Despite the optimism, though, the Liberal Democrats' underlying position is still quite weak. A series of heavy local

election losses during the coalition years hollowed out the party's traditional 'pavement politics' base, especially in northern and urban Britain, and the modest gains in this year's council elections have only partly reversed this. Becoming the fourth largest party in both the Commons (behind the SNP) and the popular vote (behind UKIP) has starved Farron and his colleagues of publicity. The party's opinion poll ratings also continue to fluctuate around the 8 per cent which it gained at the general election.

Perhaps more fundamentally, it is becoming increasingly clear that the anti-establishment territory which the Liberal Democrats made their own under Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy has been lost to the more strident populisms of Jeremy Corbyn and UKIP. Nick Clegg's full-throated embrace of globalization, and the compromises of coalition, have weakened the party's claim to be the voice of Britain's far-flung provinces and forgotten communities. Not only did the old Liberal heartland in the West Country vote decisively for Brexit, but so too did a clutch of northern towns and cities – such as Hull, Burnley, Rochdale, and Chesterfield – where they used to be the main opposition to Labour and at one point ran the council. Even some of the party's remaining local government strongholds – notably Eastleigh, Eastbourne, Three Rivers, and Sutton – were won by the Leave campaign.

With a working-class background and a folksy Lancastrian charm, Tim Farron is well placed to revive his party's outsider credentials, but the prospects for regaining seats from Labour and the Conservatives are far from clear. The Liberal Democrats could perhaps win middle-class and university constituencies like Bath, Cambridge, Cheltenham, and Oxford West and Abingdon on a pro-European platform, but the list of such places is not very long, and the party cannot assume that all its own seats are safe.

In particular, Norman Lamb's constituency of North Norfolk voted for Leave, whilst the new salience of the EU issue may make it harder for Nick Clegg to win anti-Labour tactical votes in Sheffield Hallam. Farron's call for a snap election, then, may not be in his party's best interests. The only real advantages of an early poll are that it would preempt the boundary changes due in 2018, and allow the Liberal Democrats to challenge new Conservative MPs before they build up an incumbency advantage.

If Theresa May does call the opposition's bluff, both the Liberal Democrats and Labour will have to think carefully about how to fight a snap election. One approach would be to tap into the anti-establishment mood by running hard on decentralization and devolution, perhaps on [the lines suggested by Lord Salisbury's Constitution Reform Group](#). The great irony of the Leave campaign was that it managed to mobilise provincial voters in defence of a Westminster Parliament which few profess much love for. The desire for greater political agency in the north and south-west of England is hardly likely to be satisfied for long by the repatriation of powers from Brussels to London. As the British state becomes engulfed in the economic and diplomatic fallout of Brexit, liberals will never have a better time to make the case for a new constitutional settlement which takes full account of local and regional identities.

Secondly, the pro-European parties should think creatively about how they can make the 'Remain dividend' tangible to voters for whom economic growth is an abstract concept. One idea might be to recreate the Migration Impacts Fund, axed by the coalition in 2010, on a much bigger scale – perhaps allocating it [all the income tax paid by EU migrants](#) in their first five years in Britain, which would create a pot of about £2 billion a year for public services in the most affected areas. Another possibility would be to scrap HS2 and channel some of its £42 billion budget into transport links across the north and rural Britain.

Thirdly, the opposition parties can play to their traditional strengths of health and education – issues which have dropped off the agenda since the referendum campaign began, but which are still highly salient with the electorate. No doubt Theresa May will be keen to emphasize her progressive credentials in this area, but the financial constraints are bound to be tight, and the decision to keep Jeremy Hunt in post suggests there will be no let-up in the dispute with the junior doctors. Remainers can plausibly claim that EU membership would offer a better fiscal outlook and so allow them to invest more in the public services than the Conservatives.

Finally, on the EU issue itself, Farron's argument that the government's Brexit deal should be put to a second

referendum is probably the right one. Though Theresa May has ruled it out, she might come to see it as the best way to ensure that the necessary legislation gets through Parliament and to defuse the sense that the nation has been conned into leaving on a false prospectus. This would certainly be a reasonable demand for the Liberal Democrats to make if they found themselves holding the balance of power. Of course, all this is likely to be moot if the Labour Party doesn't get its act together. If Theresa May were to call an election tomorrow, with Jeremy Corbyn still in place, we might be looking at a landslide of 1983 or even 1931 proportions. The only question then would be which Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs were still around to pick up the pieces.

About the Author

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