

The other leadership race that really matters

Blog post by Practice Lead Tom King, 13 June 2019

There is only one cast-iron certainty in British politics. That is that whoever replaces Theresa May in Downing Street this summer will be faced with the same set of problems. Of course, the identity of the prime minister matters. But it is not likely to change the questions facing MPs of all parties come the autumn.

Largely unnoticed, there is another leadership contest underway that might have a much more important effect. The Liberal Democrats had an exceptional spring, roaring back into the public eye with a strong local election performance before comfortably pushing Labour into third place at the European Parliament elections.

Ironically, the Lib Dems probably have a smaller party to thank for this turnaround. The party's 'Libby' bird logo had been thought more of a dead duck, its brand too toxic after the coalition years to be restored. Under the directionless leadership of Vince Cable - who seemed to behave more like an analyst than a politician - there seemed little hope.

And it was because of this that Change UK was born. The hodgepodge of frustrated Conservative and Labour Remainers, informally led by Chuka Umunna, Heidi Allen and Anna Soubry, chose to plough their own furrow rather than join the largest Remain-supporting UK party. It made sense: they simply looked over at the Lib Dems and thought, 'we can do better than that'.

The now divided Change UK's biggest legacy may turn out to be to have forced the Lib Dems into action. Three years of calling for a referendum - a process, rather than an outcome - had got the party nowhere. Suddenly, with competition from the centrists, the party's liberal, internationalist credentials were brazenly reasserted. The populist-aping "Bollocks to Brexit" slogan upped the ante, turning the 'People's Vote' obfuscation into a clear message that could be hammered home on the doorstep. And with over 100,000 members, the Lib Dems had the activists to take that message *to* the doorstep.

The big question now is: what next? Edward Davey and Jo Swinson are the two leadership candidates. Both are sullied by their participation in the coalition, and any Labour waverers are likely to have their voting records on the bedroom tax, tuition fees and welfare cuts tattooed on their eyeballs before long. If either Davey or Swinson can overcome this, it will be because they are willing to be bold on the biggest issue in politics - Brexit - and build a policy platform around it that feels fresh.

In the meantime, their rising influence poses a question for both Labour and the Tories. Labour - which lost 22% of their vote to the Lib Dems in the European elections - must decide whether to counteract the Lib Dem threat by moving decisively towards a stronger Remain/second referendum position. They may, of course, have cover to do so if Boris Johnson wins the Conservative contest and moves the dial towards no deal. It's unlikely, though, that Corbyn will choose to mollify the social democrats in his party with a softer approach on domestic policy; there's already plenty that the two parties align on.

But the new Tory prime minister - whoever it may be - also faces a liberal threat. 24% of the Lib Dems' support in May came from 2017 Conservative voters. Across all southern regions of the UK, Tory MPs will

be looking nervously at their majorities. We can already see the consequences of this in areas like immigration, where there is strong consensus among leading Conservatives that the time has come to liberalise the restrictive regime imposed by Theresa May. The question will be whether such tweaks to domestic policy will be enough to distract voters from the Brexit elephant.

A final thought: if the Lib Dems maintain their momentum - perhaps winning a potential by-election in Brecon and Radnorshire - and the two big parties continue to tear themselves apart without any sign of unity, a general election occurring before the UK leaves the EU will be the biggest opportunity for the Lib Dems since the interwar period. Who could have seen that coming in 2015?