

## **Don't Let This Liberal Suicide Pact be in Vain.**

The Liberal Democrats are dead. This is no exaggeration, but a fact, albeit one that has yet to be borne out fully. Liberalism itself won't die, indeed it could be strengthened by the legacy of what Nick Clegg's party have achieved. To usher through the coming referendum on voting reform that was a prerequisite of the coalition being realised represents the only real impact on parliamentary policy that the liberals have had since they were last in government, more than 80 years ago.

So where did it all go wrong? In the last election, during the first debate, Nick Clegg convinced a lot of voters that Liberal Democrat policies could work, and awakened the liberal in all of them. No Liberal Democrat in history has ever inspired a generation in the same way. Unfortunately as soon as someone whispered in his ear that it might not be a good idea to ditch Trident, Nick Clegg ate his words on national TV. The rest of the campaign was too timid to reach those heights again.

A week later, that poll lead had vanished when people started to think about what their vote would mean. I don't think this was all down to policy, though – what happened is what has always happens to the Liberal Democrats. It is clear in the polls and collected data that a large number of people voted Conservative to get rid of Labour. Looking at the massive swings in the polls towards the end of the campaign it is also clear that a lot of people voted for Labour at the last minute because they didn't want the Conservatives to get in. None of these people felt that their vote would count if they voted Liberal Democrat. People actually preferred to flock to a party who had spurned the best opportunity for real social reform in generations and who were led appallingly, plunging the country into the worst recession in memory; a party that had been in power for 13 increasingly stale and bloated years.

And what's worse is that these people were right to do so. Even if the Liberal Democrats retained their poll lead from the first debate they would still have returned less than a quarter of the seats in the House of Commons. Our electoral system is broken.

Although ultimately not so brave in the campaign, the Liberals were suicidally brave in entering this coalition. They must have known that entering into government with the Conservatives would have alienated all their left wing support. They must have known that their few policy successes (on civil liberties, on more progressive taxation, on voting) would be eclipsed by the savagery and likely nature of the inevitable cuts. They must have known they would be heralded as traitors to the liberal cause by getting into bed with the enemy. And regardless of the rights and wrongs of it all, they must have known that their support would be decimated, most likely irrevocably, by the decisions that they made.

Those involved at the top will pay a heavy price. Vince Cable, formerly seen as a sage and learned voice of reason and one of the most well-known and popular politicians in the country, has been tamed, neutered and strung up for the amusement of the popular press. Nick Clegg is rarely trusted to speak for the government these days, and to many of his natural supporters both within the party and beyond is seen as a traitor to the cause. What's worse is he's gone from being an eloquent lightweight to a cowed callow figure – the apprentice to Cameron's master, the two becoming indistinguishable in a manner which is tragic to behold. Where will they be in 2015?

That they still made that decision could demonstrate that it was borne of high principle, people putting the policies they hold truest above the fate of their party or the trajectory of their careers. Or... they could simply have failed to realise what a disaster it would all be – maybe they, like I, both expected and applauded the outcome of the election, without realising how unrealistically elevated the expectation of their supporter base had become.

In a way it doesn't matter. Whatever the reasons, in doing this they have paved the way for a future generation of liberals by putting electoral reform on the table. All liberals or left leaning thinkers, regardless of how they feel about the coalition, must not be distracted by the political side-show. The forthcoming vote on AV is almost as important as the General Election itself.

The electorate could easily use this as a protest vote against the Lib-Con coalition, and the cuts that have followed their election. But this is a once in a lifetime opportunity – neither of the major parties would ever agree to this referendum if left to their own devices. AV may be a very small step on the road to PR, but it represents the electoral reform that Liberal Democrats have been fighting for almost

since they were formed in 1988. It is the electoral reform that, regardless of your politics, must be one of the very foremost reasons why anyone would vote liberal in the first place.

The last awful Labour government, who nobody apart from Polly Tonybee loved and even she grudgingly, is a supreme example of why it is dangerous for the current electoral system to continue. With a very similar share of the popular vote to the Conservatives the government were able to bulldoze through whatever crackpot policies they chose. We have to improve our democracy, so that our politicians truly represent us. Whilst AV is a long way from a revolution, it is the only option we have on the table right now, indeed the only option we are likely to have for a long time. Regardless of the proposed system's inherent flaws, everyone has to get behind it if they believe in their vote counting and our country recovering its reputation for enshrining freedom and democracy.

Even if the Liberal Democrats fade into the political dark, then there will be others to follow them and take up the mantle. Their legacy could be the first step on a long road. Liberals everywhere must ensure that their sacrifice, intentional or otherwise, isn't in vain.