A RAINBOW TO BEAT REFORM

The Lib Dems should formally work with other parties to ward off Reform, says Sophie Layton

It's said "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". Take my home city of Sheffield. Made up of six constituencies (Central, Hallam, Brightside & Hillsborough, Heeley, South East, and Penistone & Stocksbridge), in 2024 it became an entirely Labour city, after the Conservatives won Penistone & Stocksbridge in 2019. But now, it's changing.

Sheffield Central is one of the Green Party's target seats, the 1 March Nowcast predicting that they take it, as well as Heeley and Brightside & Hillsborough. Reform is projected to take Sheffield South East and Penistone & Stocksbridge. And Sheffield Hallam is the Liberal Democrats' top target for 2029.

A city entirely of red, projected to be fully depleted of it just five years later.

In many ways, this would be a fantastic outcome. After an uninspired five years in government, the Labour Party kicked out of hundreds of seats across the country, dozens of them heading left to the Liberal Democrats and others who are more closely aligned to our aims.

But by this prediction, Reform is just 10 seats off of a majority, which added to the Conservatives' 53, plus any that hard-right parties such as the DUP garner, a right-wing coalition is not only possible, but would leave the rest of Parliament, made up of 83 Liberal Democrats, 78 Labour, 44 SNP and 42 Greens with no meaningful way to challenge the set-up.

It paints a bleak picture, because in truth, so much time is spent on purely 'blocking Reform', that we forget that they may not need to get a majority, or even get close, to have a chance of sending Farage to Downing Street. Unknown factors from the Conservatives to the DUP mean that predicting how low Reform has to be kept to keep them out is impossible.

How many seats do Sinn Féin win? Changes the maths. How many parties stand a reasonable chance in key battleground seats? Changes the maths. How many 'safe' seats truly exist for anyone anymore? Changes the maths. Keeping Reform out of office is perhaps the political battle of the century, to decide who we truly are as a nation. And the result in Gorton & Denton recently shows that Reform can be beaten. But if we want to safeguard this, we must be prepared to work for it, and that might be an uncomfortable experience.

Because the truth is: the Green party can't win Sevenoaks. But the Liberal Democrats can. The Liberal Democrats can't win Sheffield South East. But Labour can. Labour can't win Ayr, Carrick & Cumnock. But the SNP can. Labour can't win Montgomeryshire & Glyndwr. But Plaid Cymru can.

People are prepared to vote tactically to keep Reform out, but we've got to do our bit to help. We all saw how confused some people became in Gorton & Denton, certain they wanted to keep Reform out but unclear whether that meant voting for the Greens or for Labour. We can't risk this at a general election, when there are 650 battles fought simultaneously, so what can we do?

Firstly, we should still stand candidates in every constituency we can. Everyone should have the option of voting Liberal Democrat, whether it is strategically advantageous or not. As recent party communiqués have stated, we have to give voters that option, and assuming that they are simply electoral blocks to be moved to who we want by not standing is not only likely to backfire but simply not how we should be treating voters.

However, as a party, the Liberal Democrats should be conscious of where resources are being spent. This involves identifying target seats, identifying seats where we can win, and crucially, identifying those that we can't. By targeting resources in these places, we give candidates the best possible chance of winning in these key areas, and increasing our representation in Westminster.

But in those seats we can't win, and we know we can't win, we have to face facts. If the Green Party is within five points of Reform, or Plaid are, or Labour are, by mounting an extensive campaign, we risk splitting that vote and letting Reform in the middle. And this is where a Rainbow Coalition must be forged. If we can get all of the UK's major centre, centre-left and left parties to do the same, in a one-time-only alliance, we can truly keep Reform out.

Would it be difficult? Yes. Would we struggle to get some of the other parties on board? Absolutely. Is it the way we want to be doing politics? Not really. But if this is our best chance to stop Reform and the Conservatives in their tracks, do we not owe it to the country and our children to take this chance?

If Gorton & Denton has shown us anything, it's that Reform can be beaten. If this can be emulated across the country, the British people can deny Reform a majority and leave the Conservatives too weak to prop them up.

But we can only do it with a strong alliance. Without it, we face the very real prospect that Reform will form the next government.

Sophie Layton is a Liberal Democrat member in Sheffield