SEND FOR A TASK FORCE

The Liberal Democrats should move into areas where they are unrepresented, says Sophie Layton

Each of our national, traditional parties has its own unique stories about their history and journeys through British politics. The Liberal Democrats are included – after entering the Coalition 15 years ago, wiped out a decade ago, and struggling to re-find our feet until 2024, the party has undergone a significant resurgence. Even now, during a time of such turbulence in the political landscape, the party tends to enjoy modest gains in council by-elections and came second in this year's local elections.

That's the headline, anyway. But despite those very significant developments, it can often hide the other reality. Our progress is minuscule, on a grand scale. According to the current Nowcast predictions, the party would enjoy a very modest net gain of three MPs if a general election were held tomorrow.

Council by-elections with 40%, 45%, 50% or more voting for the Liberal Democrats can be paired with others with 5%, 4%, 2% or even less for our candidates. While this isn't exactly abnormal for any party, the trend is often replicated in parliamentary elections, especially in Labour-held areas.

Take the Runcorn & Helsby by-election, for example. Labour won the general election with 52.9% of the vote, before it was overturned by Reform UK with 38.72%. And the Liberal Democrats? 5.1% and 2.88%, respectively.

NEWFOUND STRENGTH

It can be easy to disregard such results as 'not a Liberal Democrat area', or choosing to focus where we are winning. But given the potential in our party, the newfound strength of the parliamentary party, our positioning largely consistent with popular views of the public, we should be driving these numbers higher.

Looking at the areas in which the party achieved its most successful results in 2024, the areas we saw such a surge in May, and the type of by-elections we are winning, compared to those we are not; there is a general, and somewhat unsurprising, correlation: The Liberal Democrats tend to be most successful in areas where we already have a presence, or have a history.

So let's use that logic to look at the reciprocal case – the Liberal Democrats tend to be least successful where we don't already have a presence, or no history. It is this viewpoint that we need to focus most significantly on to start boosting our prospects in a time of significant political change that we simply are not benefitting from as fully as we should.

We pride ourselves on our localism, being the people 'who fix church roofs', and in many cases, this pays off significantly – many of our seats are considered 'safe' because once our candidates are elected, they tend to be entrenched in their communities. And therefore, it's fair to say that without that, people are much less able to appreciate the Liberal Democrats as a force for good, especially given our rarity in the media.

So I've just told you that the Liberal Democrats aren't present everywhere, and being in more places is a good thing – not exactly breaking new ground. I think we need a better acknowledgement of this alongside a tangible plan to turn it around, and boost our vote share from the most Conservative heartlands to the Brightons, Abderdeens and Bristols of the country.

We need a taskforce, to find our way into these communities where we are not represented or even considered, and to find out why.

Consider it a targeted and long-term canvassing operation. We need to get into these areas and figure out why the everyday voter is lending their loyalties elsewhere – is it they don't like our policies or our people? Is it that they specifically like, or dislike, their local incumbents and will do whatever they can to keep them in, or out? Do they simply not know about the work we're doing and would rather go with the devil they know, or think they know?

Once we know we can start to work on our weaknesses, become a greater part of the communities that don't currently feel that we are the ones for them. If we're not in their local elected offices, then we must work even harder to show them the benefits of having local Liberal Democrats as so many areas have already felt. We can't wait until elections to show up – trust me, that never goes down very well.

The Liberal Democrats are fantastic at representing their local communities. Once we have a few local council seats, we tend to grow our presence significantly. Once we have a strong council presence, we're much more likely to take the constituency. But it's getting those first few council seats that we struggle with so much, and it's here that we need a regimental focus.

Leadership must consider creating a strong initiative to begin this crucial work to make our case well ahead of the game. Hundreds of very safe seats are about to become perilous for their current occupants. We must be primed and ready to take them, even in areas that currently wouldn't give us a second thought.

Sophie Layton is an international political communication graduate from the University of Sheffield