A LOST WINNING STREAK

The Liberal Democrats used to pull off surprise by-election wins, but what will they do if faced with Reform in a winnable seat asks Sophie Layton

By-elections are all the rage. Just two years after the 2024 general election, we've had five, and one each at Holyrood and Cardiff.

tAnd with another on the horizon in Clacton, it's important to note two facts: Reform UK have been supremely confident in their winning prowess, yet have cinched only one of them (and even then, only by six votes), and the Liberal Democrats were a non-entity, every single time.

Many people are determined to keep Reform UK out of office, an unwritten alliance of tactical voting that is denying it victories. But a party with a central tenet of being against Reform, and the Trump-ism that UK politics risks irrelevance. This is even more starkly demonstrated when we consider the winners: Runcorn & Helsby ~ Reform UK; Gorton & Denton; Green Party; Abroath & Broughty Ferry SNP; Aberdeen South, Conservatives;

Makerfield, Labour; Caerphilly, Plaid Cymru; Hamilton, Larkhall & Stonehouse, Labour.

There are three points which must be considered. Reform UK has only won one of seven by-elections, while in at least four they were confident they would emerge victorious.

All of the major parties (bar one notable exception) have clinched a parliamentary by-election since 2024, proving they can do so in diverse areas. The Liberal Democrats have been non-entities.

And with the Clacton by-election now on the horizon, there is a distinct possibility that Count Binface may win a by-election before Britain's third-largest party does. It may be that none of these areas lend themselves particularly to Liberal Democrat victories, but if the party wants to make further progress, we need to be doing better at the very least.

Even if Nigel Farage is returned in August, and ends up facing a second by-election, I can confidently predict that the Liberal Democrats will be a non-entity again. In every by-election so far there have been non-entities – but the Liberal Democrats are the only one so in all seven.

I am all for voting to keep Reform out, and lending votes to other parties where needed, but much must be done to make sure that the tactical option, let alone the popular option, is a Liberal Democrat.

So how do we change that, in the case that a Liberal-favouring constituency is up for a by-election, or better yet, for any constituency of any background? Firstly, the party needs to fundamentally rethink how it positions itself. Hopefully, the strategy consultation will be key to helping redefine this, but there is little widely-appreciated reason to vote for the Liberal Democrats. Labour have that they're not Reform, the Conservatives and Greens have that they're not Labour, the SNP and Plaid Cymru have their nationalist agendas, Reform state they're against the establishment, but the Liberal Democrats have only that they're not Reform.

Even when we do, if we do, there needs to be a strategy specifically for fighting by-elections in an era of Reform. The renaissance of Liberal by-election victories came in the 2019-24, but that is a fundamentally different environment to now.

Reform absolutely can be beaten, as has been proven particularly in Caerphilly, Makerfield, and Gorton & Denton, and as a party, the Liberal Democrats need to find their own approach to do so.

One of the biggest limitations is the lack of high-profile policy. For those familiar with politics, we know that the Liberal Democrats are their best when talking about electoral reform, social care, water and the European Union, but these areas rarely top the issues most people are engaging with – who in the wider public knows the party's position on the cost-of-living crisis, defence, improving the economy, Gaza, or other issues that are central to people's day-to-day viewing? The party needs to find a better way to articulate its policies, simply, recognisably and yet with all the logic and humanity that they still have.

But finally, the Liberal Democrats need to be louder and prouder of what they're doing. So often, the party has solid policies, even ones directly relevant to a by-election, but isn't doing much to combat or shift a narrative, remaining a commentator on another party's actions, rather than making the headlines.

For example, did you know that a greater proportion of Liberal Democrat MPs supported the motion in favour of disapproving the EHRC's anti-Trans+ guidance, than Green MPs (76% to 60%)? By being proud of liberal values and the causes we champion, the party can prove that it's a year-round centre of progressive attitudes, particularly for those areas who aren't considering the party currently.

So with by-election number eight in sight, and with the respectable political world choosing to boycott, now is the time to develop a solid strategy that can take the fight to Reform.

Because If a second Farage by-election does come to pass, it would be the prime opportunity to show the party can be a real alternative to Reform – what better way than emerging victorious over the head of the far-right in Britain?

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