FENCE SITTERS

Abstaining in Parliament is no strategy for the Lib Dems, says Sophie Layton

Christine Jardine MP was one of my e Liberal Democrat front bench favourites. Principled, personable, a staunch ally of trans+ and women's rights, progressive liberalism and a kind, friendly soul, until she was unceremoniously removed from her position for…voting against a harmful Conservative amendment to Labour's Welfare Bill (Liberator 430)?

In the hours that followed, work and pensions spokesperson Steve Darling explained that MPs were whipped to abstain on this amendment, as voting against would imply that Liberal Democrats believe "the bill should be implemented in full without delay", and this could be used by the Conservatives against Liberal Democrat candidates in future campaigns.

Firstly, I completely disagree, that's not what voting against a wrecking amendment suggests at all. And even if it did, the Conservatives, and any party opposing us, will be able to find electoral ammunition no matter what we do.

But that's not what I want to focus on. Rather, that Liberal Democrat MPs were whipped to abstain. So what? No big deal, right?

Sadly, I'm inclined to disagree. The parliamentary party seem to increasingly be using abstention as a position in Parliament, whether for bills, amendments or anything in-between. While principled abstentions are a valuable position to take on occasion, they must be used sparingly, and here's why.

Parliamentary divisions, and increasingly all forms of political communication, rely on binary opinion – MPs vote 'aye' or 'nay', politicians agree with something someone else has done or they don't, an individual thinks they need to resign or thinks they don't. As such, on the Parliamentary website, MPs are shown to vote in favour, or against (or are absent). Simple. If MPs are whipped to abstain, there are two options – either don't vote at all, and have your MPs appear in 'no vote recorded', triggering accusations of laziness or lack of care, or vote in both lobbies, and appear on both lists simultaneously…at which point you open yourselves up to attacks from both sides.

Take the motion before recess to proscribe three groups as terrorist organisations, including Palestine Action. In this vote, MPs were whipped to abstain, due to disagreement on the proscription of Palestine Action, but agreement for the two other groups. This is all well and good on paper, but it gives the indication that many members simply just did not turn out to cast an opinion.

At a time when trust in politicians is already incredibly low, this does nothing to improve that. It also gives those on both sides the chance to attack the Liberal Democrat action – those on the Right can attack us for not voting to proscribe the Far-Right organisations; those on the Left can attack us for not voting against the proscription of Palestine Action.

And this all plays into a wider narrative – we don't have one.

So often, we ask why we get so little media coverage, why so few people recognise our politicians, our policy positions, why we remain stagnant at some 15% of the vote share even when Reform has climbed 20 points and Labour fallen by an even bigger margin.

I appreciate that the right-wing media's obsession with every word Nigel Farage utters is the primary responsibility for this, but we're doing nothing to stem this flow. We don't have anywhere near as strong a narrative as people inside the party seem to believe, and repetitive abstentions aids this trend. The clearer 'opinions' we as a party can put out there, the more of a chance we have.

The two policies that I genuinely saw generate the most attention in the past few months were showing Premier League games on Freeview TV and stopping music being played on public transport…great.

But we're not creating a story that people think we are. People don't care about what we're saying and abstaining at the rate we are will do nothing to change that. We're one year in with no significant gain in our appeal. If there was an election tomorrow, more than half of constituencies would change hands…and we'd gain a grand total of eight more. That's not amazing.

Abstentions, particularly principled ones, absolutely have their place. And as a centre to centre-left party, they are always more likely to be used by Liberal Democrats.

But if we want to seriously start making progress and chip away at Reform UK, we've got to get off the fence. Every time we abstain, people don't go searching for why, they just see that we didn't vote. That's not a story. That's not something our MPs and members can run with. If you need to explain to a lay audience why you voted a certain way, you will lose your listeners very quickly.

In the musical Hamilton, the titular Founding Father asks his rival, and the show's antagonist, Aaron Burr,"if you stand for nothing, what'll you fall for?"

For anyone who's seen it, or knows their history, you know what happens. If we want to be in the room people need to know what we're against and what we're for..

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