

LDER AGM November 21, 2024

Chair's Report - Keith Sharp

There were Good, Bad and Good outcomes for us in the seismic July 2024 General Election.

**GOOD** - largest third party in 101 years and a record number Liberal Democrat MPs elected -and with a manifesto prominently advocating a 'fair democracy' as a top five policy priority. (This was reinforced by passing a 'Fair Votes Now' motion at Autumn Conference 2024- <https://www.libdems.org.uk/conference/motions/autumn-2024/f29>)

**BAD** - the random, volatile first past the post electoral system has left us with a massive majority, single party government which is of course opposing electoral reform (What happened I wonder to the mantra: 'country before party'?). And this on the flimsiest of popular support foundations... (*Fun question: who nationwide won more actual General Election votes - Starmer in 2024; or Corbyn in 2019? Answer...come to our AGM to find out!*)

**GOOD** - led by our 72 strong parliamentary party, this is the most pro-PR Parliament ever. Literally hundreds of Labour MPs privately support PR, even if the leadership is ruling against. This is a massively strong platform for us to take the fight for change forward during the lifetime of the current parliament. And Ed has issued the challenge - we called for PR in both our response, and in our amendment, to the King's Speech.

So, what are we doing in these turbulent, unpredictable times? How can we turn a problem (single party anti-change government) into an opportunity - building an irresistible case for PR during this Parliament.

Since the election:

We have worked cross-party and with non-party allies to help create the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Fair Elections. Chaired by Alex Sobel (Labour MP) and with Lisa Smart, our MP for Hazel Grove, as Vice-Chair, the APPG will be launched on November 25 2024. Lots more to come on this strategic step forward.

We backed (three of our MPs sponsoring) a Labour Private Members Bill to abolish first past the post of Mayoral elections. The bill didn't go through, but the flag has been raised and the Government has now promised early action on this and related areas early in 2025. We'll be monitoring!

As a party affiliate organisation, we have sent in our response to the Tim Farron-led General Election review. As well as praising that excellent and successful campaign, we stressed the need to plan ahead to maximise the opportunities for positive change we now possess - including changing the voting system.

At Autumn Conference (September 14-17) we ran a massively busy and successful stall; staged, with our partner ally Unlock Democracy, a wide-ranging fringe (including guest speakers from Institute for Public Policy Research and the Institute for Government); and I spoke for LDER in the Fair Votes motion debate, stressing the call for us to continue to lead the campaign for fair, equal votes.

#### Knowing our new parliamentary party

Seismic post-election change - and 57 new MPs! - has of course led to a major reshuffle of our spokespeople. Select Committee memberships were only announced in late October and we are now working to meet and engage with the key movers for political reform. Sarah Olney is now Cabinet Office spokesperson and we've already had an introductory planning meeting with her and her team.

Briefing - and getting them signed up to LDER! - all our MPs is an ongoing and pleasurable task. We sent a pre-Autumn Conference introduction and briefing to the 72; and we'll follow up shortly now that roles and responsibilities are assigned and announced.

#### Content and communications updates

New General Election means re-design and update of all our materials; our core leaflets, our website, our conference exhibition posters and handouts. Big job and all done in a short space time, so we were sorted in time for the Autumn Conference.

#### Before the election

LDER's goal heading into 2024 was to 'secure a commitment to voting reform for General Elections in the King's Speech.'

Well, we didn't manage that. It was always a big challenge because so many variables and forces lay outside our influence, but no apologies for aiming high. The sheer public contempt for the Conservatives led to mass tactical voting which in turn led to Labour 'winning' a massive majority on barely a third of the vote and on a near-record low turnout. You can't control that - but of course as a party we 'gamed' the appalling first past the post better than we've ever done.

And, as a party, we were in about as good a shape as possible going into the election; and LDER played a full part in ensuring that.

Our manifesto reinstated voting reform as a priority - one of five key policies upfront in the manifesto, with more detail further in the document. Our HQ manifesto team, led by Lord Newby, was extremely accessible and available; and through a number of meetings we were able to agree small but significant modifications to what was already a strong draft.

Briefing papers. We sent a series of 'PR' briefing papers to the party leadership in April 2024. These were detailed but for future reference depending on an election result propitious for

electoral reform. In the event they remained of course unopened, but you can see some of those materials - including an assessment of electoral systems and draft legislation on our website - [lder.org/The](http://lder.org/The) Change We Need.

We also sent a short overview paper with key messaging and research referencing to all parliamentary candidates in June, just as the election proper got under way.

#### Earlier in 2024...

We held an extremely packed and vibrant Spring Conference fringe (topic: 'Why Don't People Vote?' which of course proved sadly prescient given the low July election turnout). Speakers included Operation Black Vote - and a certain Josh Babarinde, then an aspiring PPC...!

We ran a PR Action Day in April. Some great toolkit contents: PRometer; leaflets to hand out at our stall and when door knocking; canvassing questions on Minivan. And we worked this with our Equality, Diversion and Inclusion team (massive thanks to London Assembly group leader and LDER exec member Hina Bokhari for contributing and joining). We see diversity and young voters as a key audience for our work - the disillusioned and left-out segments of society whom stand to benefit specially from a fair and equal voting system; and whom frankly we as a party need to do more to engage with. Also - we ran the day in Keir Starmer's north London constituency! Thanks to Charlie Clinton, our then local PPC, for initiating this.

The General Election then took over, but we want more action days as we go forward. We're in good discussions with HQ Field Campaigns about how to take this forward in 2025.

#### LDER strength and resilience

Looking at our own operations, we've made big strides this year, with a completed transition to the new 'Fleet' content management (website, sign up and joining and donation mechanisms). That's a big step forward but AOs are still in a sub-optimal operational situation as the HQ technical team has still to integrate us into Lighthouse. We're in dialogue as to how to fix this and so improve productivity, efficiency - and contentedness!

We have also built our following exponentially. Our Membership Secretary will provide details, but we now have record numbers of paying members and newsletter subscribers (non-paying).

I would like to thank our allies - Unlock Democracy (UD), Make Votes Matter (MVM) and the Electoral Reform Society (ERS) - for publicising us to their own LD members and supporters. This has helped boost our own numbers and we appreciate that.

We await a final round (for now) of recruitment with our own party HQ, by introducing us to everyone who's signed up for the Fair Votes campaign. This has been long agreed and we look forward to the green light and going ahead with that.

#### National Campaign and Trade Unions

Our work - networking and engagement - beyond our immediate party has been and remains a key LDER role. During 2024, we have cooperated in the formation of a National Coalition of PR-supporting allies, notably MVM, ERS, UD and Compass as well as reformers in other parties.

Initiatives such as the Fair Elections APPG have been noted above; another is to incorporate Liberal Democrat trade unionists into the movement for reform. We are working across the party, including with the Association of Liberal Democrat Trade Unionists to add our weight to the campaign

### Local PR in Wales

Thanks go to all the party's councillors in Wales, who made a determined and principled stand for replacing FPTP with STV for local elections. The obstacles to this happening, laid down by the Welsh government, were just about insurmountable but we gave it our very best effort. Change required a  $\frac{2}{3}$  majority Council vote, following a public consultation.

In all three councils where the consultation took place, there was a firm majority of the voting public favouring STV (60% in Powys backing STV; 67% in Ceredigion; 72% in Gwynedd), yet no Council vote to date has voted for change (Gwynedd one single vote short of the  $\frac{2}{3}$  majority specified...) and so we see the wishes of the people being overruled by the self-interest of the elected politicians. Deeply frustrating but a marker has been put down. As well as our councillors I know ERS and MVM made huge campaigning efforts. Next time, justice will be served and we'll win.

### Finally...

This AGM sees me complete my maximum allowed three year term as LDER Chair and so I am stepping down from the role.

I deeply wish we had achieved more - fair, equal votes are still out of reach while we witness our society and democracy suffering from divisiveness and exclusion; and millions left to try to work out who to vote for to keep out the candidate/party they most dislike rather than the party they want to support ('tactical voting' makes it sound so ordered and logical and it's neither).

But I think and hope I can claim we've made progress these past years. There is growing widespread acceptance that our political system isn't working for the people; and as a party and as LDER, we are stronger and clearer than ever before to press for what is right for our country and the health of our democracy and society.

On that note, heartfelt thanks to everyone who's contributed and worked to get us this far. The door to reform is not yet open, but it is ajar and its hinges are ruptured. Let's break through and achieve the change we all need.

Keith Sharp, LDER Chair 2022-24; October 31, 2024