

*Thursday 6 May 2010*

## *General election day*

My alarm clock went off at 5am. My second alarm went off at 5.05am. Logic would suggest that after a long general election campaign, and with many an hour without rest ahead, I should be sleeping soundly until at least 7am or 8am. But it is the curse of Liberal Democrat MPs that we are not expected to leave the hard work on election day, or any other day, to our activists and supporters.

In my Yeovil constituency, this Lib Dem tradition of 'leading by example' had, over time, been bolstered even further by my predecessor as MP, Paddy Ashdown. Paddy used to be the last to leave constituency fund-raising events after personally sweeping the floor of the relevant village hall – a precedent with obvious, undesirable, implications for his successor.

So, after weeks of pavement pounding and media performances, after eight hours a day of knocking on doors for almost two months, I dragged myself out of bed to join our local volunteers for a 6am leaflet drop in the centre of the town of Yeovil.

All political candidates hope that their election day will be sunny or at least that it won't rain. We dread the thought of trying to drag unwilling voters out to the polling station on a wet evening and always assume that our own party voters will be peculiarly susceptible to the

rain, wind or the cold, while the supporters of other parties trudge bravely out to cast their votes.

I had, therefore, prayed for sun, but a glance outside my bedroom window confirmed the worst: a cloudy day with rain threatening. The gloom outside offset my pleasure that, at last, the 2010 general election campaign was almost over.

I sighed, showered, started my car and headed off to Yeovil, dressed in my 'delivery' clothes and not my usual suit.

I had first been elected as MP for Yeovil in 2001, but this was my fourth time as a parliamentary candidate, having first lost to Michael Howard in Folkestone and Hythe in 1997.

My majority in the Yeovil constituency had climbed from 3,928 in 2001 to 8,562 in 2005. In early 2010 I had feared that the result in Yeovil might be closer this time. However, Nick Clegg's strong performance during the election campaign, and the positive reception we were getting on the doorstep, made me dare to hope that my majority might rise into five figures or even exceed the total of over 11,000 achieved by Paddy Ashdown in 1997.

I met up with three members of our hard-working campaign team at the bottom of Westfield Road in Yeovil at 6.10am. Our task was to deliver 'Good Morning' leaflets to the residents of Yeovil West, just in case they had somehow managed to miss the fact that this was the day of the general election.

After leaving the others to cover the huge Westfield estate, I drove off to Freedom Avenue and Springfield Road to deliver my 300 leaflets.

I passed the occasional early riser, including those who were amazed, baffled or impressed to see their MP out delivering leaflets at 6.15am.

After I had completed Freedom Avenue, I switched on my mobile phone for the first time since the previous evening.

On my phone was a text message, asking me to call Nick Clegg's chief of staff, Danny Alexander, who was up in his constituency in Scotland. I noted that the message was timed as having been left sometime on the previous evening, but I was confident that Danny would be up and about, and so phoned him, at around 6.45am.

Danny answered straight away. He wanted to know when I was expecting to be back in London after the election count in Yeovil. The polls were still pointing to a high possibility of a hung parliament and I was one of four MPs who had been asked by Nick Clegg to be part of a negotiating team to deal with such an outcome. We were due to meet early on Friday morning to assess the election results and be ready to advise Nick on his return to Westminster.

The team had been secretly established at the end of 2009. It was done without great fanfare or consultation to avoid the party becoming distracted by post-election game playing, when people needed to focus on getting our policy messages across, and winning as many seats as possible.

Sensibly, Nick did not chair this team himself – he selected the members, told us what he wanted and left us to get on with the work. Nick knew that the party needed to be ready for a hung parliament outcome, but – refreshingly for a Lib Dem leader – he did not spend all his time obsessing about this.

Nick's focus was always on building the long-term future for our party. It was not obvious, even privately, which of the two other parties he would prefer to do business with. In private, as in public, he was instinctively equidistant between Labour and the Conservatives and he was acutely aware that in most hung parliament scenarios the choice of viable partner would be made by the voters and not by us.

The team which Nick selected to advise him on strategy in a hung parliament, and to do the negotiating itself, consisted of four MPs –

Danny Alexander (MP for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch & Strathspey), Chris Huhne (MP for Eastleigh), Andrew Stunell (MP for Hazel Grove) and me.

Danny Alexander was to chair our team. Danny was only elected in 2005 and he was the youngest of the four of us. He had quickly shown himself to be hard-working, pragmatic, ambitious and effective. He had helped run Nick's leadership campaign in 2007 and had then become Nick's trusted chief of staff. Danny's great skill was to be able to get on with people of very different political views, without losing a hard edge on policy and strategy.

Chris Huhne was our Home Affairs spokesman and the runner-up to Nick in the 2007 Lib Dem leadership election. After he lost to Nick in 2007, and following a fairly rough leadership contest, Chris had won respect for his loyalty and hard work. He had lost, and lost narrowly, but he accepted it. He was still clearly ambitious for himself and for the party. But he knew that this ambition could only now be realised through Nick as leader and so had become part of Nick's trusted inner team. Chris played 'Gordon Brown' to my 'David Cameron' in the mock leaders' debates with Nick Clegg before the general election.

Chris had been a respected economics journalist and had gone on to help run a credit ratings agency in the City. He was elected to the European Parliament but had switched to Westminster in 2005. Chris is strongly pro-European, dry on economic matters and formidably intelligent. And although Chris would more easily relate to centre-left politics than to the Conservative Party, he is an ambitious realist – admirable characteristics in a party where both these qualities are too often in short supply.

Andrew Stunell, the third member of our team, was a former Chief Whip with lots of local government experience. He is an

expert on green issues, political reform and campaigning. Andrew was trusted not only by the party in Parliament, but by our councillor and campaigning base beyond Westminster. Andrew was on the team in part to ensure that the wider party's perspective would be properly represented. I am not sure if Andrew is actually a sandal-wearing Liberal Democrat in his spare time, but he looks as if he could be.

Andrew also brought to the table the pragmatism of someone who is used to Liberal Democrats sharing power with both other parties in local government. No one would ever class Andrew as a 'right-winger' politically, but his local government background meant that he was used to fighting both other parties and that he understood the need to strike the best deal when no party had a majority.

Nick also attached to our group his trusted aide and deputy chief of staff, Alison Suttie, who has years of experience of Lib Dem politics and personalities. Alison had worked with both Nick Clegg and Chris Huhne in Brussels, and therefore had a good understanding of the process of negotiation between political parties.

This was our planning team for a hung parliament eventuality and it was also to be our team of negotiators after the general election, in the event a hung parliament materialised. It was a team capable of dealing with either Labour or the Conservatives.

Our team had met on four or five occasions in early 2010, largely in February and March, and had talked through in detail all of the different post-election scenarios.

Our common view was that if any party had an outright majority it was highly unlikely that there would be any 'deals' or coalitions, and in such a scenario we firmly expected to be sitting on the opposition benches.

But the polls continued to suggest that the election outcome might be close, with a hung parliament a distinct possibility. Our planning

assumption, in line with almost all of the opinion polls, was that the Conservatives were likely to be the largest party, and that a Lib Dem–Conservative arrangement of some sort was the more likely outcome. But given the workings of the British electoral system, we could not rule out the possibility of a Lib Dem–Labour working majority. So we were determined to be prepared for every possible scenario.

Our team was united in the opinion that in any hung parliament the Lib Dems would need to play a constructive and positive role in forming a government. To do otherwise would not only confirm the widespread prejudice that hung parliaments lead to weak governments – a particular risky and unpopular result given the difficult economic decisions that were likely to be necessary – but could also rapidly lead to a second general election.

We all considered that a second general election would be damaging to our vote if we could be blamed for failing to play a constructive role in forming a stable government. We were absolutely determined not to let that happen. ‘Doing nothing’ in a hung parliament would be the worst possible outcome, and one that we would do everything to avoid.

If the Conservatives emerged as the largest party, we fully expected David Cameron to make a bold offer to bring the Lib Dems into a coalition government. The Conservatives seemed to have all to gain, and little to lose, from making such an offer – whether we responded positively or not.

We were conscious that to walk away from such an offer, to be seen to be afraid to take responsibility, could be very dangerous for us and bad for the country – not least given the state of the economy and the financial markets. Britain’s deficit was one of the largest in the developed world, and if the markets concluded that Britain’s government

was too weak to tackle this deficit there would be a high price to pay in falling bond prices and rocketing interest rates.

But most of us doubted that the Conservatives would be willing to offer what had long been a key Lib Dem condition for any coalition – a referendum on voting reform.

A few years before, I had spoken privately to George Osborne in his Westminster office and had told him bluntly that the Lib Dems would never go into coalition without the prospect of electoral reform, but neither he nor any senior Conservative had ever seemed keen to pursue this possibility. In fact, there didn't seem to be any real support within the Conservative Party for voting reform or any movement in this direction.

So despite increased media speculation about the scope for Lib Dem–Conservative co-operation, it was difficult to see how it could work in practice.

As a result of this, Danny, Andrew and I all believed that in a Conservative-dominated hung parliament the most likely outcome was a 'confidence and supply agreement' in which, in exchange for a commitment on some of our key policies, the Lib Dems would promise to support the government on economic issues and on confidence votes, while remaining on the opposition benches.

We were not, however, confident that such an arrangement would last long. Taking the tough decisions on the deficit would be unpopular and the risk was that both parties would look to end the agreement at a time of maximum political advantage to them – a dangerous game at a time of national economic emergency.

That was certainly the view of the fourth member of our team, Chris Huhne. Chris argued strongly that a confidence and supply arrangement would be the worst of all worlds, resulting in the Lib Dems

taking no credit for the government's achievements, but all the pain for sustaining it in office.

Chris can be a tiger when he gets an idea into his head, and he continued to push the full coalition option hard, whether we secured voting reform or not.

After weeks of work and debate, the negotiating team was due to report its conclusions to Nick Clegg at a meeting on Wednesday 17 March. Danny Alexander, as chair of our team, had produced a fifteen-page summary of our conclusions.

Many of the conclusions were uncontroversial – including the identification of our four key policy objectives, which were simply those highlighted in our election manifesto and in our election campaign. We were clear that we would need progress on all four policy objectives in order to consider an arrangement with another party.

Danny also set out a strategy for consulting our party on the negotiations and recommended provision be made for a special conference, if needed, no later than nine days after polling day. This appeared to be the requirement of a 'triple lock' provision which had been passed by a party conference way back in 1998, when party members feared being bounced by Paddy Ashdown into a coalition with Tony Blair's Labour government.

So, on 17 March, we met to discuss these issues. As well as Nick Clegg, we were joined by Vince Cable, Chief Whip Paul Burstow and Party President, Ros Scott.

To my surprise, the night before our meeting, Chris Huhne had tabled a 'Minority Report' pushing the coalition option very hard indeed.

In his twenty-point, two-page note Chris argued forcefully that a full coalition for at least four years had to be our negotiating objective, whatever the balance of each party's MPs in a hung parliament.



Chris concluded that arms-length confidence and supply deals lead to a lack of willingness by parties to take tough decisions on the deficit and on public spending. He argued that without a strong coalition arrangement the result would be ‘worse policy outcomes and a higher budget deficit’.

Research Chris had commissioned showed that minority governments rarely deliver big fiscal consolidations, while he claimed that seven of the ten biggest fiscal consolidations in the OECD area since 1970 were carried out in hung parliaments with coalition governments.

Chris went on to claim that ‘half pregnant’ deals ‘are weak and look weak. . . they are more likely to lead to a loss of market confidence . . . and a full-blown economic and political crisis.’

If we were blamed as a party for such a crisis, Chris noted, the political costs would be huge. So good economics would also be good politics, and both in his view pointed to coalition.

I did not disagree with this economic analysis, and nor I think did Nick Clegg, Danny Alexander or Vince Cable. Indeed, Danny had highlighted the risks of economic instability very clearly in his summary of the group’s conclusions. We even proposed to publish an ‘Economic Stability Plan for Britain’ on the day after polling day so that we should be seen to be acting early and responsibly to reassure the markets and tackle the budget deficit.

But the issue for us was what our bottom-line negotiating position should be. And the majority of us believed that voting reform had to be key to any coalition agreement.

Without some credible mechanism to progress voting reform, we thought it would prove difficult to argue for a coalition.

This was, of course, much more likely to be an issue if the Conservatives were the only coalition partner – which always looked the more likely scenario, given the state of the polls.

As well as the possible impasse on voting reform, the majority of the negotiating team thought that it might prove difficult to resolve our other policy differences with the Conservatives in a credible way. And although we expected ‘an immediate, very warm, and very public approach from David Cameron’ (Alexander, ‘Post Election Strategy Recommendations’, 17 March 2010), we were of the view that the private preference of the Conservative leadership might still be to govern as a minority, rather than seeking a full coalition deal.

Our conclusion was that while we would draft both a Lib Dem–Conservative coalition document and a Lib Dem–Conservative confidence and supply document, we felt that the former was much less likely to ever see the light of day.

Nevertheless, I produced a first, full draft of a coalition ‘partnership agreement’ on 21 March, which was based on a similar approach to that used in Scotland in the first Scottish Parliament coalition in 1999. It was entitled: ‘A Partnership for Renewal’, and ran to a length of about sixteen pages. I also produced a much shorter ‘confidence and supply agreement’ (see Appendix 6).

Paul Burstow, our Chief Whip, drafted two ‘operational annexes’ for the ‘coalition’ and ‘confidence and supply’ agreements, setting out in detail how the two parties concerned would co-operate, and dealing with detailed issues such as allocation of ministerial posts, arrangements for Cabinet committees, details of collective responsibility and whipping arrangements, public appointments and so forth.

In the less likely circumstance of a hung parliament in which Labour and the Liberal Democrats had a majority, our team felt that the likely outcome was clearer – a full coalition. This was because Labour had already committed to a referendum on the Alternative Vote. Our

challenge would then be to open the door to more fundamental voting reform, going beyond the AV system.

Little would be gained by propping up a Labour minority government with a ‘confidence and supply agreement’, and we never gave this possibility any serious consideration.

We therefore drafted a Lib Dem–Labour coalition document, with a similar set of key policy pledges to that in the Lib Dem–Conservative scenario.

So the conclusions of our 17 March meeting were: firstly, that outright coalition was our favoured endgame; secondly, that this was much more likely if a Lib Dem–Labour arrangement was electorally possible; thirdly, that a confidence and supply agreement was the most likely scenario if we found ourselves dealing with the Conservatives, unless they conceded both on our key pledges and on progress on electoral reform.

We also discussed the major complication that would arise if Labour and the Liberal Democrats were to form a coalition – the future of Gordon Brown. This was not just a ‘post-election’ issue. At the time, it seemed highly likely to be an issue in the election campaign itself.

In the Conservative–Lib Dem battlegrounds a ‘Vote Clegg, get Brown’ message could hardly be more damaging, given the desire for change and the deep-seated hostility to the Prime Minister amongst many voters.

My view was that the Conservatives would repeat this message endlessly during the campaign, and that it could cost us hundreds of thousands of votes and potentially many seats.

So in late 2009, I went to see Nick Clegg and suggested that we might need to rule out supporting a Brown-led government after the election, given how toxic this issue could become.

I even suggested that Nick might make the announcement in one of the three scheduled election-time 'leader debates'. It would certainly have sent a dramatic signal and, I argued, it would be important in Lib Dem–Conservative marginal seats.

My view was that even if the public accepted a Gordon Brown-led coalition, and I did not believe that they would, he would turn out to be an impossible person to work with in a coalition government. As I argued to Nick: 'If his own Cabinet cannot work with him, what chance do four or five Lib Dem ministers have?'

I expected Nick to be sympathetic, knowing that he had never found Gordon Brown to be an easy person to work with.

But Nick was strongly against any announcement, delayed or otherwise, that ruled out working with Gordon Brown after the election. He argued that this would simply raise other questions about who else we would work with and what their mandate would be.

I understood these concerns. But in our six or seven practice sessions for the TV leader debates, when I played David Cameron, I endlessly challenged Nick on whether he would prop up a Brown-led government. 'I agree with Nick on many issues,' was my line, 'but he cannot rule out putting Gordon Brown back into Downing Street – vote Clegg on Thursday, and you could wake up on Friday with Gordon Brown.' Nick developed some good counter-attacks, but I admit to continuing to feel nervous about how effective this line of attack on us could be. To my surprise, it was not a line which the Conservatives exploited as effectively as I feared during the election campaign.

All of this background work – potential scenarios debated and discussed, the documents prepared, and the challenges which we could soon face – were in my mind as I stood in a chilly Freedom Avenue,

on the phone to Danny, grasping a pile of leaflets and hoping that it wasn't about to rain.

'It seems to be going OK here in Yeovil,' I reported.

'My election count should be at around 2.30am and I hope to be away by 3am. I will drive back to London, and expect to be back in Westminster at around 6am. So I can meet anytime after that.'

I had pressed hard for all of us on the negotiating team to meet as early as possible on the Friday morning, riling those who thought that a few hours sleep would help to get a sense of perspective.

What I felt we would need was not a sense of perspective, but a sense of urgency and professionalism. The media demands would be huge and any notion that we were 'taking our time' would merely reinforce the journalists' natural instinct to think that Liberal Democrats aren't quite serious enough about life.

I imagined what the 24-hour media would make of: 'The Lib Dem team has gone home to get some sleep.' It was not a headline I wanted to see.

Before getting back to my leaflet delivery, I took the opportunity to check on the party's latest prediction of the number of Lib Dem seats.

'Eighty-five plus' was Danny's cheerful forecast, which seemed in line with general expectations following the Lib Dem poll bounce after Nick Clegg's strong performances in the three televised leader debates.

'Great,' I replied to Danny. 'That would be fantastic. Well, the election could hardly have gone better. Nick must be feeling very satisfied. Well done. I will see you in a few hours time. Good luck in your own election.'

So I signed off feeling confident about our national prospects, and convinced that there was a real possibility of our negotiating team having serious work to do.

The rest of the day went quickly: back home; a call in to Winsham

Primary School, near Chard, to observe their own election day event; and then off to the towns of Ilminster, Crewkerne and finally Yeovil to ‘rally the troops’ and get our vote out. To my relief, the rain held off and the voters seemed to be turning out.

I spent the end of the day in the Liberal Democrat heartlands of Yeovil East, as is my tradition, and by around 8.30pm I pulled stumps and drove back to my house near Chard.

There I had a shower, changed clothes and scribbled down a few notes for what I hoped would be an acceptance speech as Yeovil’s MP in just a few hours’ time.

I then set off for the village of South Petherton to have dinner with local party activist and stalwart, Joan Raikes. Joan and her husband Myles, now sadly deceased, had a tradition of laying on dinner for our parliamentary candidates on general election night. We would receive a hearty and healthy meal while watching the early results come in, and listening out for the phone call from our election agent, which would be the first news of how my own count was going.

The news from across Somerset seemed to be good. Everyone was very positive and optimistic. It looked as if we were going to hold our three seats and possibly win a further seat – Wells. This would leave only one Conservative seat in Somerset – hardly the sweep of the West Country which the Conservatives had promised.

I arrived at Joan’s house just in time for the close of poll and for the first exit poll from the BBC. We settled down for a pre-dinner beer, expecting to hear that we were on track for 26% or 27% and for a big increase in our total of seats.

For weeks, the whole Lib Dem election campaign seemed to have been going so well. But the first, unexpected, dark cloud arrived just after 10.00pm when the results of the exit poll were revealed.

The shock was that the BBC was projecting Lib Dem seats of under sixty – net losses of seats against our expectations of big gains.

‘What rubbish,’ I scoffed. ‘All that work, and they have got a totally duff result. How can we possibly end up with fewer seats?’

The results were so at variance with the other polls and expectations that even the BBC seemed dubious of their own figures. Determined to remain upbeat, we tucked in to a large dinner of three courses.

At about 11.30am the telephone rang. I knew it must be Sam Crabb, my election agent, from the count. I looked as disinterested as I could while Joan went out to take the call. This is a nervous moment for all election candidates. No matter how confident you are, or what your own canvas figures show, you are never quite certain until the real votes are counted out.

But Joan reported that the news was good – Sam had told her that his early sampling of the vote count indicated that we were heading for victory in Yeovil – with a majority of over 11,000. I dared to hope once again that we might even exceed the 11,400 majority that Paddy Ashdown had amassed in 1997.