



The listening leadership

The federal party has also reacted quickly to regional concerns. Nick's office responded immediately to the chair's appeal for help in assuage major anxieties.

Currently, key figures in the leadership team – including Party President Tim Farron (above) - are personally calling around a dozen key West Midlands activists in the week following the elections.

The issues discussed included a broad range of education issues, the NHS, the party's performance in the campaign and our inability to handle the hostile media.

This also strengthens the partnership agreement signed up to by Jonathan and the Executive last year and underlines the important role of the region and grass-root members within the party.

Keen to play an active role, **NewslineWM** is committed to ensure the grassroots are listened to on a regular basis and guarantees to both publish members' views and ensure they are seen by the party hierarchy.

"This is a members' newsletter," stressed the editor. You can send your letters to Newsline@westmidslibdems.org.uk



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regular online newsletter for **west midlands liberal democrats**

Region reacts to election setbacks

Major consultation with the Local Parties

The two weeks since the disastrous local elections and voting on AV have seen an encouragingly rapid response from regional chair Jonathan Webber and his executive colleagues. Greater attention to the needs of local parties is the keynote of the accelerated implantation of the Region's five-year plan.

"The results across the board were so bruising that we have agreed to bring forward as many of our proposals as possible," he said.

A major consultation exercise will allow Local Party chairs to air their concerns at a lunchtime session on Saturday, June 11 at the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce (full details will be in a letter from Jonathan in the next few days).

"We will mainly be listening to colleagues' frustrations and concerns after the most bruising setback any of us can remember. Assessing the feedback will be the beginning of a process that will help us deliver support as best we can. There won't be any quick solution but at least we will make a start."

The region has suffered a major financial hiccup when the Cowley Street re-organisation removed support for the key campaigns officer. He is the



Regional chair Jonathan Webber is making the executive's priority more constructive support for the grass roots. He is determined not to let the party be dominated by the centre.

central figure in any re-building programme.

"The shared costs now dry up at the end of the month and we will have to seriously adjust our budgeting plans. I think we will just about be able to accelerate our fund-raising plans to ensure there is no shortfall," said Jonathan. "But we will be asking for members help."

In addition to the consultation, the regional executive is planning a series of advice and training sessions. In particular, the Communications Group is planning a series of training sessions aimed at improving our ability to handle the media. Full details will be available soon.

Austin Rathe's election round-up is on next page

Local elections round-up by Austin Rathe

IT DOESN'T GET TOUGHER

May 5 undoubtedly represented the toughest set of elections the Liberal Democrats have faced in our history and the first time we have ever faced the electorate from a position of Government.

The results in the region matched those across the country. We lost a lot of good councillors and candidates, including many who had done everything by the campaigning book for a number of years, due to national factors.

There were highlights. We gained seats in Malvern Hills and held our own in Warwick, Worcester and Telford.

However, beyond these bright spots it was a very tough year and we should expect the next few campaigns to be tough as well.

So what can we do about it? One of the things that mostly held true in these elections was the advantage of established incumbent councillors who had a record of action (and a record of sticking that on leaflets!).

That doesn't mean everyone or anyone who lost wasn't doing a good job but it was clear that the stronger the local record the higher the chances of bucking the trend.

In next year's elections every candidate needs to have a real record of action that they sell to voters. This isn't the time to be modest or to assume that you're "well known." It won't be enough.

Over the summer, start surveying local residents and picking up issues street to street. Follow these up with street letters and petitions, along with regular *Focus*, through the rest of the year. By Christmas every voter needs to be able to name something on their street that we've done for them (rather than just us being able to name it!)

We also can't afford to forget the squeeze. One factor that cost us seats this time was Labour and Green votes shooting up in places where in the past they had not been a factor. Your area won't be immune from this but don't worry, we have loads of examples of good squeeze leaflets on www.libdems.org.uk/huddle.

Start building these in now and remember, saying it once isn't enough!

The next set of elections will be also tough but if we learn the lessons from this year quickly and don't waste any time, we'll be giving ourselves the best chance next year.



The grisly details of May 5

Council	Previous	Defending	Now	change	%loss
Birmingham	31	10	24	-7	70
Bromsgrove	0	0	0	0	NA
Cannock Chase	15	5	11	-4	80
Coventry	1	0	1	0	NA
Dudley	1	1	0	-1	100
E Staffordshire	2	2	1	-1	50
Herefordshire	9	9	3	-6	67
Lichfield	4	4	0	-4	100
Malvern Hills	5	5	11	6	-120
Nastle-u-Lyme	18	6	12	-6	100
N Warwickshire	0	0	0	0	NA
Redditch	3	2	1	-2	100
Rugby	9	3	8	-1	33
Sandwell	4	1	3	-1	100
Solihull	18	8	12	-6	75
S Staffordshire	1	1	0	-1	100
Stafford	4	4	2	-2	50
St Moorlands	6	6	4	-2	33
Stoke-on-Trent	4	4	0	-4	100
Stratford	20	5	16	-4	80
Tamworth	0	0	0	0	NA
Telford/ Wrekin	3	3	3	0	0
Walsall	6	2	5	-1	50
Warwick	9	9	9	0	0
Wolverhampton	5	2	3	-2	100
Worcester	3	1	3	0	0
Wychavon	11	11	5	-6	55
Wyre Forest	3	3	0	-3	100

New regional vice chair



The vacancy for Vice Chair (Urban) left by David Nikell's resignation, has been filled by Telford's Lee Dargue.

Lee joined the regional executive at the beginning of the year when he was elected as an ordinary member. He also took on the IT portfolio and modernised the region's basic e-communications. He will maintain that responsibility but will also now become a member of the important Local Parties Committee.

If you really want to know the AV result in the West Midlands, read Martin Turner on page three



After AV should it be ATD or KBO?

Winston Churchill usually signed off policy submissions in one of two ways. The first was the dynamic ATD - action this day. The second way was the more prosaic KBO - keep bugging on. Faced with the verdict of the country in the elections, Liberal Democrats have to make some rapid decisions on whether our response should be ATD, KBO or some combination of the two.

From a few colleagues we are already getting responses reminiscent of two of my favourite characters from *Dad's Army*. Some - like Corporal Jones - are shouting with just a hint of hysteria: "Don't panic, don't panic!" Others sound more like the dour Scot, Private Fraser opining: "We're all doomed!"

I am not being frivolous about the situation which faces us. I know that many decent and able colleagues have been rejected by the electorate not because of any personal failings on their part but because of our conceived



**Tom McNally
on political life
after May 5**

failures in the first year of the Coalition.

When we met in Birmingham a year ago, we all knew we were signing up to a difficult period of national recovery and reconstruction. I firmly believe that decision, taken in full knowledge of the difficult times ahead, saved us from a summer of chronic political uncertainty and possible economic meltdown.

Yet, we have been punished both by a sense of betrayal and a feeling that we are providing the cover for a Kind of Thatcherism Mark 2. The tuition fees saga is

responsible for much of the case for betrayal.

So what should our response be - ATD or KBO?

Well, the idea that we don't have a choice and are now prisoners in Cameron's Coalition is plainly absurd. It's free to us, as it was a year ago, to opt to go into opposition, perhaps with a guarantee of political stability by promising support or abstention for confidence and supply.

However, KBO is also not an option. We need to learn the lessons the electorate has taught us. We have to make it clear we're not about to morph into a continental-style free-market Liberal Party. That would not be sustained by our core supporters. They will not stay with us if they sense a sea-change in direction and philosophy.

As well as having immense personal courage, Nick Clegg is a quick learner and the party is nothing if not resilient. That can ensue May 5 was the end of the beginning, not the beginning of the end of Liberal Democrats in Government.

A reflection on the Yes-No interlude

by Martin Turner

COMPROMISE NO ONE WANTED

The West Midlands result on the AV referendum was disappointing. On a turn out of 39.62%, 1,157,772 (71.48%) voted NO against 461,847 (28.52%)YES.

We should have seen his n advance and there are things we need to learn for the rest of the life of the Coalition We need to accept AV was a compromise that no one wanted. We knew AV was a preferential, not a proportional system. It would have delivered perhaps 80 Lib Dem seats at the last election, not the 150 or so that our vote deserved. Of course we can argue the Tories would never have offered anything to give us so many seats.

The reality is, in a contest between an idea passionately believed by some and an idea mildly welcomed by others, the passionate belief tends to win out. We told ourselves it was a stepping stone to full Single Transferable Vote but it was hard to motivate ourselves to campaign all out for something we did not quite believe in.

The second reason is that this was positioned as a referendum on the Liberal Democrats one year into a government which, we knew from the start, would have to make difficult and unpopular decisions.

The timing was wrong. Perhaps in our eagerness to do something after so many years, we went too early. Three years from now, we will see many Labour supporters who were silent over the last six months call for voting reform, as an election stacked in favour of the Tories looms. 2011 was simply too early.

The third is that, in a landscape where lies could be told with impunity, the ruthless 'No' campaign dragged British political discourse to its very lowest level in a century.

Where does this leave us? First, we must learn that coalition is not always about compromise. Sometimes it is about give and take. We should let the Tories have some of their policies and make it absolutely clear they are not ours. Second, we must learn to be more political, more patient. It is time to look to the reform of the House of Lords. This must happen in this parliament but we must not again be hasty. Third, we must press for changes to the rules to ensure that dishonesty and calumny is removed as a tool of public debate. In a 21st century democracy, it is simply immoral that we continue to allow it.

Lord McNally, Leader in the Lords and Justice Minister, was writing in *Liberal Democrat News*

LIFE ON CAMPUS

by Will Mievell-Hawkins

'It is difficult to convey to people just how disillusioned students are with our party'



Will is Chair of the University of Birmingham Liberal Democrats and the Liberal Youth rep on the Regional Executive

Well it has certainly been a tough month for us all, what with the loss of the AV referendum and the disappointing local elections. Still, we must keep our heads up and keep trying to win hearts and minds and that must start, in my view, with young people.

It is difficult to convey to people just how disillusioned students are with our party at present. So many liberals I know just point blank refuse to support our party at present. The situation doesn't appear to be improving, especially when the government announces policies such as the rich being able to buy their way in to the top universities.

As a former supporter posted on my Facebook wall: 'Pass this on, get angry and remember never to vote Lib Dem again'.

Such a policy shows just how far from our original position we have come on tuition fees. I was hugely heartened to see an immediate back-down by the government after the uproar it caused.

However, I'm concerned that it was an example of the Tories playing politics with us. The Higher Education Bill, to be announced in June, is certainly going to be one of the more Lib Dem orientated policy documents

the administration puts forward. We are all looking for big bursaries and punishment for those universities that do not provide adequate value for money. I think the Tories were testing the water, seeing what we are prepared to accept. I worry that they will include some nasty measures in the policy, but know full well we will have to vote for it or get nothing at all.

On a slightly lighter note, when I took part in the very well attended AV debate at the Guild. it was fantastic to see so many people enthusing about politics. I came under heavy attack from one of our more left-leaning politics lecturers but I held my own and perhaps even converted some. I think when people hear the message that we are doing our best in difficult circumstances and punching way above our weight, they are willing to listen. We need to focus on that message and get it out to young people as much as we can. We have lost a generation of supporters that won't come back for nothing.

We will stand together but not so closely that we stand in each other's shadow



Nick reasserts the party's identity

The decision we took to enter full coalition with the Conservatives, a decision we collectively took, was absolutely the right one.

However it is important to be clear that the current government is a coalition of necessity.

The driving force behind the formation of the coalition was the need to act together in the national interest to sort out Labour's toxic economic legacy. I

t is not a national government but it is a government formed in the national interest.

In the next phase of the coalition, both partners will be able to be clearer in their identities but equally clear about the need to support the Government and government policy.

We will stand together but not so closely that we stand in each other's shadow. You will see a strong liberal identity in a strong coalition government.

We will not define ourselves in relation to the other parties. We are defined by a century and a half of liberal politics.

It is not left. It is not right. Not the anti-Tory party, nor the anti-Labour party, nor the anti-politics party. Instead a party of enterprise and fairness; a party which knows we can do more together than we can alone.

We are a liberal and democratic party. And we will stand our ground in the liberal centre of British politics.