Achievements and expectations

The 2005 General Election campaign was the fourth contested by the Liberal Democrats (having been formed following the decisions of the Liberal Party and the SDP to merge after the 1987 General Election which they fought as the Alliance). For the Liberal Democrats, it was the most successful of the four election campaigns in every sense. Liberal Democrat vote share (UK) increased over the four elections from 17.8% (1992) to 22.1% (2005). Over the same four election period, the Labour Party's share of the vote increased by 0.8% (from 34.4% to 35.2%). The 1992 General Election result was considered to be a disaster for Neil Kinnock's Labour Party. But New Labour's performance in 2005 was an improvement of less than 1% in vote share compared to Neil Kinnock's last campaign. Labour Proclaimed a miraculous third term victory – but their drop in support since their 1997 victory indicates that they have been the least successful Labour Government in history, in terms of retaining support. The 1992 – 2005 period saw the Conservative Party's vote share fall by 9.6% (from 41.9% to 32.3%). The last three General Election results have been the worst three outcomes for the Conservative Party since the Great Reform Act of 1832. Michael Howard's improvement on the vote share obtained by William Hague in 2001 was just 0.5%.

In this election Liberal Democrats recorded a record number of seats won (62). This was the highest total for the party or its predecessors for over 80 years (1923) and since the Labour Party began contesting most constituencies. Liberal Democrats made 11 net gains (12 gains from Labour, 3 gains from the Conservatives and 1 gain from PC, with 5 losses to the Conservatives). The party came second in 187 seats (104 of them to Labour) with the result that the party is now in first or second place in 40% of the
seats in Great Britain. The aim of the 2005 Liberal Democrat campaign was, of course, to maximise seats and votes. Unlike the three previous General Elections, expectations were generally high about the Party's prospects. In 1992 the Liberal Democrats had to overcome media speculation about survival. In 1997 doubts were expressed about our capacity to make significant gains when it was obvious that Labour were going to replace the Conservatives. Prior to the 2001 campaign, there was a widespread belief that most of the 28 gains from 2001 would revert to the Conservatives. Overcoming these perceptions had been identified as one of the most significant barriers to our relative success in those campaigns. Polling evidence also consistently proved that there was a clear correlation between beliefs that the Liberal Democrats would do well with Liberal Democrats winning more support. A key aim for us in 2005 was, therefore, to raise expectations. Perhaps with hindsight we did this rather too effectively.

The background of declining support for Labour and simultaneous Conservative disarray seemed very favourable for the Liberal Democrats. A clear public decline in trust for Tony Blair followed his claims about 'weapons of mass destruction' as his basis for backing George Bush's war in Iraq. The Conservatives, who backed the Iraq war, seemed to be in general confusion, failing to recover lost support and forced to change their Leader eighteen months before the likely election. Polling support for the Liberal Democrats was consistently higher throughout the Parliament than had been the case in previous Parliaments, and almost all recent elections had seen an increase in Liberal Democrat support during the course of the campaign. The party had also done spectacularly well in parliamentary by-elections in the second half of the Parliament. In Brent East, Leicester South, Birmingham Hodge Hill and Hartlepool, Liberal Democrats came from third place in each case to win two of them (Brent East and Leicester South) and narrowly fail to win the other two (Birmingham was missed by less than 500 votes and Hartlepool by less than 2,000). Most expectations about Liberal Democrat prospects in 2005 were therefore quite high. With hindsight, the weakness of our principal opponents probably did not quite represent the 'open goal' that was widely perceived for us. The polarisation of the electorate into different camps that were either very hostile to Tony Blair's Labour or Michael Howard's Conservatives actually made it harder for Liberal Democrats to make as much progress in national polls during the course of the campaign as had occurred in 1997 and 2001.

Liberal Democrat candidates frequently reported former Labour voters in different types of seat wanting in principle to switch to us - but feeling that they had to vote Labour to keep Michael Howard out. Similarly, they found former Conservative voters indicating willingness to support us