

Lib Dems must now hold Johnson government to account

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As a candidate standing for the Liberal Democrats in this last General Election, Thursday December 12th 2019, two moments stick out in my mind.

Firstly, when the Brexit Party declared they would not run against sitting Conservative MPs and secondly when the Exit Poll was announced on the eve of the General Election itself. Both came as shocks.

The first was seismic in that any hoped for impact from splitting the Leave vote was foregone and the second, the exit poll, even though it was all over by that stage, came after the earlier polls had predicted the possibility that it would be close, perhaps even a hung Parliament. The fact that Mr Johnson and his team were foreseen as gaining an 86 seat majority was devastating at the time....and to make matters worse the news was broken to me by a reporter who warned me that I would find it 'shocking'.

In West Worcestershire where I was contesting the seat as the Liberal Democrat candidate, the big battle was to move from a fairly far-behind third on c5k votes into second position. The Labour Party had overtaken the Liberal Democrats following the Coalition years with our vote share tumbling from 37.7% in 2010 to 9.7% in 2015 and a paltry 9.4% in 2017. Labour's vote share had more than trebled from 6.8% in 2010 to 23.7% in 2017.

So it was against this bitter backdrop that the Liberal Democrats doubled their vote share in West Worcestershire from 9% to 18% and from 5.3k to 10.4k votes, whilst the Labour Party dropped 7% points back to 16.5%. The Conservative candidate came home with her majority intact at 24k taking the seat for the fourth time in succession. The Lib Dems +8.7% vote share increase was double the national party's increase at 4.2%. It was, however, scant

consolation for an otherwise dismal evening for our party which concluded with our leader, Jo Swinson, losing her seat.

Whilst our party's losses were saddening — with our new MPs losing their seats as the Lib Dem Tory and Labour defectors were all defeated — the Labour Party's loss of 42 seats was of far greater import alongside the Conservatives huge 66 seat gains. What happens now in the Labour Party will be significant in ensuring that the country has some serious opposition to hold the Conservatives to account.

What did I take out of the evening and early morning results?... That the electorate had bought into the '*Get Brexit Done*' messaging. That they no longer wanted a stalemate in Parliament. That they preferred to see a Johnson majority over a Corbyn government, perhaps propped up, they feared, by the SNP and Lib Dems (despite denials from Jo Swinson).

That the Lib Dems policy of Revoking Article 50 in the event of a majority government had not played well...but in addition the Lib Dems had a chronic paucity of slogans to match the soundbite firepower rattled off regularly by the Tories — something only too obvious following leadership Hustings — and that the Presidential style campaign had not been a success for our party given the breadth of talent we'd acquired during the last parliament.

For the defeated parties there's much to do in holding the majority government to account with so many promises yet to be delivered.

The Conservatives have pledged EU withdrawal by Jan 2020 and to deliver a trade deal with the EU by December 2020 — which they are seeking to pass into law. Additional friction is anticipated for exporters to 27 EU countries and 510m people taking 45% of our exports. A 'bare bones' or "zero tariff, zero quota" trade deal is outlined, however, this would not include services, due to be part of an 'equivalence regime'.

Freedom of movement and border controls may also continue to cause concern for manufacturers, for example, aerospace, relying on the movement of personnel across the EU with Airbus, has indicated

its personnel make 80,000 business trips between the EU and the UK each year.

The new government is aiming to spend £80bn on infrastructure in the North – some of the money must surely come to the long-overlooked Midlands.

In Worcestershire sustainable transport integration remains a distant dream – with severe congestion making journeys to work a daily drudgery for thousands of road commuters. Bus services have been cut to the bone, cycle paths are few and disconnected and rail electrification, dual-tracking (enabling more regular services) along with longer, serviceable modern carriages, a much-cherished mirage – often promised but not appearing.

For our young and key workers affordable housing is next to non-existent with our own District Council surveys showing that 87.1% of our housing need in South Worcestershire is for one and two-bed homes whereas in fact we continue to build 85% of our homes as larger three, four and five bed houses attracting older incomers whilst our young leave.

The PM is adamant in stating that he represents ‘*One Nation*’ Conservatism, but the potential breakup of the Union must hang heavy over his and his soon-to-be revamped Cabinet’s heads. They are getting in early with their refusal of a second independence referendum in Scotland which voted 62% Remain, despite the huge gains made by the SNP taking 48 seats north of the border. In Northern Ireland – voting 56% Remain – we will see a ‘*single regulatory zone*’ in place between the North and the Republic whilst the North will leave the EU’s Customs Union along with the UK.

How border checks are to be implemented on goods from the UK crossing through Northern Ireland into the Republic or from the North into Ireland and vice versa is not yet clear, although Dominic Raab has stated that Customs Declarations forms will be required. Trusted Trader status has been touted as part of the solution with only 365 applications out of 749 granted between 2016-2019.

A new process for *Transitional Simplified Procedures* has been proposed with companies needing to register. By 8th March 2019 there had been 57k registrations out of 240k firms that need one.

For me personally, I'm delighted to be returning to Birmingham City University to my think tank, IDEA and to the Centre for Brexit Studies, having taken annual leave to fight this campaign. Delighted too to be returning as a District Councillor to my Economic Development Portfolio in Malvern Hills as well as to supporting the smaller start-ups I've founded over recent years.

I return realising we are about to witness tremendous change in how we do things as a country. As a European and Europhile my heart is heavy, but change brings both threat and opportunity. With this in mind, I will do my bit to make sure we get the best arrangements possible for our local firms, residents, researchers, staff and students.