

A view from the Malvern Foothills

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Councillor Malvern Priory, Malvern Hills District Council

Only a few weeks ago the Lib Dems had been written off. Change UK was formed as the UK's new political force with some bright stars in the ascendant – Anna Soubry, Chuka Umunna, Heidi Allen, Sarah Woollaston, Gavin Esler, Stephen Dorrell, Rachel Johnson, to name a few. All came together in an uplifting solution to the UK's broken politics.

However, after 2nd May and the local election results, it seems there's still hope for the 'hopeless', with the Lib Dems, as a political Lazarus, emerging resurgent.

With Vince Cable heralded as a Charlie Chaplin character who accidentally launches a revolution, it seems that 'common sense' has become radical....A demonstration, perhaps, of the virtue of plugging away only to find the political landscape has changed, with the grassroots favouring, once more, the voice of common sense above a vacuous and increasingly polarised clamour – especially when it comes to something as important as Brexit.

Those promoting Remain knew what they were talking about, *warts and all* – having worked from within to shape our experience of EU membership for over 45 years. For those pushing the case to Leave, Brexit could mean anything on a broad spectrum from being in the Customs Union to leaving with No Deal. Three years on it still hasn't been clarified. What has been clear is that Brexit presages the rise of a shallow nationalism. One that ignores skills shortages across the board in virtually every sector in the UK. One where the talk is of taking back control but the reality suggests no control in future and too little voice for the world's fifth largest economy when trading with our most significant neighbouring economic block.

In the Euro election of the past week the Lib Dems have been able to list their own starry roll call including the likes of Tory grandee, Lord Michael Heseltine, Labour Peer, Michael Cashman, Lord Gus O'Donnell, the former Civil Service chief, who declared he had a 'civil duty' to endorse the (Lib Dem) party in this election, with Alistair Campbell admitting that he too might have to vote with the Lib Dems to act in 'the best interests of the nation'.

Looking ahead to the results of this election, Change UK looks like it may already be a spent force, polling at 3%, with the Lib Dems hitting 20% in some polls and hoping to move from 1 MEP, to perhaps 8 or 9 after the count on 26th May.

One of the direct and unintended consequences of Brexit is the impact it's had on the local election results, with 704 new Liberal Democrat Councillors being elected. This put the Party in control of 18 Councils, up from 10, delivering a 17% national vote share, up from a previous average of around 9%.

Amongst the many Conservative-controlled councils to fall in the recent local elections was Malvern Hills District Council, nestling in the heart of Elgar country, a place known for fostering its own strains of pragmatic originality, which, like the water, have bubbled to the surface over the years under the notable guises of Morgan Cars, its radar research establishment which morphed into the private company, Qinetiq, and the Malvern Hills Science Park.

It was within this rural idyll that the Conservatives lost 11 seats of 38 in total, moving from 24 to 13 and losing control in the process. The Liberal Democrats, not having taken control of this council since 2003, more than doubled their seats moving from 4 to 9 Councillors. The Independents gained 3 taking them to 10, with the Green Party gaining 3 to total 5. In addition the first Labour Councillor was elected, with the Lib Dems in Malvern Hills doing better than anywhere else in Worcestershire.

Nine of the Independents and all Green Party Councillors have since come together to form the Democrat Group. They've been in talks over the past week with the Liberal Democrats about forming a working partnership to run the Council, a process being mirrored

across the country as the dust settles following recent local electoral blood-letting.

This rural town in Worcestershire is typical of many across the UK that would, in normal times, be firmly under the Conservative 'yoke', to coin a phrase. The sitting MP, Harriett Baldwin, achieved an 18k majority in the 2017 General Election. However, so fed up are the people of Malvern that *Brexit did not mean Brexit*, that it really meant prevarication, national humiliation, rising extremism, and a great deal of uncertainty affecting all aspects of our lives, that they rose up against the status quo leaving this Council with no overall control in the immediate aftermath of the election.

For the Liberal Democrats in Malvern it was an extraordinary result. Out of 34k votes cast the party polled 9,500 votes or a 28% vote share – just under 1% point behind the established Conservative party, and up from a 9% vote share in the last General election.

As a Lib Dem Council Candidate, I was amazed to find myself elected on a narrow margin — just 15 votes ahead of the next candidate. And, having been elected I found myself being offered a place on the Executive running the Council with the chance to take on the Economic Development Portfolio in a somewhat unexpected, but welcome, turn of events.

In my ward, Malvern Priory, I was elected alongside an Independent, Cllr Cynthia Palmer, well-known as Mayor of the Town Council over the past three years. Between us we overturned two sitting Conservative Councillors (both well respected) including the '*father of the house*', who dedicated 46 years of valuable service to the District Council.

Whilst I'm delighted, I'm sorry to see these skills have left us and want to record my thanks to all those who've served the town. As we know politics is a harsh game. But for now, I will savour this success for the centre ground as it's played out in Worcestershire. A shock administered, as I see it, to call a halt to the rise of an extremist, idealistic and nationalist politics and a heartfelt cry for our pragmatic British common sense to rise once more to the fore as we continue to forge collaborative and original solutions to the urgent challenges facing upcoming generations. A new future awaits our town, and for

me too it's a fresh start with a first class view onto the sunny Malvern uplands.

Disclaimer: These views are those of the author and do not represent Centre for Brexit Studies or Birmingham City University.