

16 October 1994

Dear John,

**European Campaign - the aftermath  
Party Strategy  
Training Programme**

I have just finished writing our report on the conference in the Hague, which should be available at Exec on Thursday after the other participants have had a look at it. However, I would like to flag up a few points arising from it to you, privately for the time being. The first of these is related to the very last substantial point in the report - that after the dust has settled on each election campaign we should evaluate what went right and what went wrong. We never actually sat down to look at and list the (many) ways in which the European campaign could have been improved, and I am worried that we may make the same mistakes again in future.

The biggest problem, I believe, was that the precise lines of authority in the campaign were never made clear. Mary as the candidate effectively acted as her own campaign director because there was nobody else who had established themselves in that role right from the start - David has other duties and responsibilities, as do you; I became Director of Elections six months after Mary had been selected and anyway had neither the seniority within the party nor the experience for such a role. As a result we made the decisions (or rather failed to make them) which allowed the Great Video Affair to blow up. It is not reasonable to expect one person to be both candidate and campaign manager; the candidate is the least suitable person possible to make important decisions once the campaign's strategy has been fixed.

Further, Mary had no experience of fighting elections herself and very little of participating in other people's campaigns. As the campaign wore on, certainly Philip and I became increasingly worried that she was not generating enough press statements; and the negative impact of the one major interview which we got was quite immense. Again, this is partly our fault as a party; we should not have expected her to bring to her candidacy any experience of dealing with the media as a politician at all, and we should have provided her with some training before the event, rather than complaining at meetings of the so-called "campaign committee" that not enough statements were forthcoming, when it was far too late. We must provide training for our candidates, particularly the newer ones, for the Assembly elections when they come. This must include those in hopeless seats as well as those in winnable areas, since they will get just as much media exposure during the campaign.

We made no serious efforts to exploit Mary's undoubted network of contacts in business or women's groups, other than to ask the former for money. When I read through the American campaign literature which we picked up in the Hague, I groaned at the realisation of lost opportunities; in particular the "Ten More for Clinton/Gore" campaign pack, which could almost have been designed to exploit the kind of networks which exist among community groups here and which simply cannot be touched by Focus campaigns.

The one thing that went well during the campaign was coverage in local papers. The result perhaps demonstrates how little difference this makes to a Province-wide vote, but my gut feeling is that more local votes will respond better to good coverage in local papers. Peter Osborne has expressed deep reservations about the effectiveness of a constituency-wide paper; certainly the election leaflet we eventually produced in lieu of a newspaper probably won us no more votes at all.

Needless to say, I don't suggest that the above remarks be circulated widely. But I do think that there might be merit in a few of us - including perhaps Steve McBride, Philip and David - sitting down to discuss whether anything should be added or taken out.

My second point is an extension of one of the lessons of the European campaign. We had good issues but completely failed to capitalise on them. There was no central message, and no effective slogan. (I thought that "Strong, Effective, Caring" was quite acceptable, but it only appeared on the stickers at the end of the campaign, too late to be of any use.)

Again and again we were told in the Hague to decide on a strategy, an overall plan, and then to stick to it. When I was asked to state the Alliance Party's *raison d'être*, I found it quite difficult to put into words. After subsequent discussions with Philip, I could now happily state that our primary purpose is to heal the bitter divisions in our society. But I think we need something a bit more substantial, consisting of two or three themes only which we can then run with until the Assembly election. The Americans and Dutch were impressed with our main selling point, of Catholics and Protestants who are working together. We need a positive, forward-looking package of strategy and policies, which everyone in the party will be able to buy into. "Alliance - the Party of the Future" "the Party of Progress" "Forward Together"; that kind of thing. On other core issues, I think that parity of esteem à la Opsahl is of crucial importance (though obviously the sectarian veto proposed by Opsahl is not on). We can build into that a Bill of Rights; also the question of parity of esteem for both men and women. We also need a sensible policy on security, and I don't believe we have one - certainly not one that convinces me. Philip in particular has done a lot in recent months to expose the hypocrisy of the other parties, but we need to be positive as well; what kind of policing do we actually want, and how is that achievable from what we have at the moment?

In short, we need a strategy. And the present Strategy Committee is the wrong body to come up with one; it is a permanent committee, meeting too frequently with too large and fluid a membership. Siobhan has frequently put the case for Exec to spend a weekend deciding the party's priorities. Again, I am not convinced that Exec is small enough to come up with the goods, but the idea of a brief period (perhaps just one day) of intensive work is probably about right. I am very impressed with what has been achieved by the Constitution and Rules Committee, set up with a limited membership to achieve a set goal in a given time. I feel that there is a need for a similar, smaller committee, which will come up with a central message which can be summarised on a page - or better half a page - which we can then stick to until the Assembly elections.

This should probably include you, Sean and Seamus, and about three others who are active in various parts of the party - not old lags who are unlikely to be intimately involved in future campaigns. Not me either; I do not have a good enough sense of the currents and likely shifts within politics. Whoever is on this committee, it should report to you and then to Executive very soon; after all there is not much to decide, and the time to do it is now. These core proposals should be debated, amended if necessary and adopted by Exec, the Association of Alliance Councillors and Party Council (probably at the AGM in March) - perhaps even at our 25th anniversary conference in April. Without a clearly defined, positive strategy which is generally accepted within the party, it will be impossible to run a good Assembly campaign, particularly given the probable length of the time period over which we may find ourselves having to sustain the momentum.

My third point is quite separate. We have talked in a vague kind of way about looking for a volunteer, some gullible recent politics graduate, who could help out in 88 University Street. This really ought to be a priority. We need to draw up a convincing training scheme which would be attractive to such a person, find some party member who would be willing to offer board and perhaps food, and think about how and when we will advertise. Anne suggested to me that we could have such a volunteer trained in the use of PageMaker and set to typesetting and even editing the party newspaper, freeing up David for his other duties. A training course in PageMaker paid for by the party would be a strong temptation to any student wanting to hone their skills, especially if we can also find some way of paying their rent for them.

We should consider advertising in Lib Dem News (I have in front of me an advert for a volunteer in Liz Lynne's Parliamentary office, in LDN of the 7th October), as well as circulating an advertisement to every political science and Irish studies department in the UK. We might also think about casting our net a bit wider; the US? the South? the Continent (provided we made a good grasp of English a stipulation)? We might even be able to find a fund that would pay for this. One person who is quite well placed to draw up plans for such a training scheme is Julie Greaves, who has done this kind of job for us herself, is now working at a recruitment consultancy, and has plenty of contacts among European and even British liberals of the right age group.

I shall be bringing up the last two points at Strategy and probably also Exec during the week, and we have plenty of time to think about the first! Until then,

All the best,

