



DOVER & DEAL LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

REPORT FROM MARTYN PENNINGTON CHAIR, DOVER & DEAL LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

2025 has been a year of turmoil in British politics. Labour's landslide general election victory in 2024 has been followed by Labour's landslide decline in popularity, not just with the public but even within their own party. Change? What change?

And whatever happened to the Conservatives? As I have often said, in my view the Tories are set for the place we occupied for far too long – a dwindling third or fourth party with little hope of a comeback.

But we're back! And how! With our 72 MPs we have pressed forward with our policy agenda in many different areas. And public opinion is shifting towards our core principles; take for instance our belief that the country's Brexit decision in 2016 was a mistake. Now the Chancellor is admitting the damage it has done to our economy and our growth prospects. The Conservatives tore themselves apart over Brexit and left us all with a botched deal that solves none of the real problems but creates a thousand others. We believe the Government should move much faster in building a closer relationship with our European Union neighbours.

When I first joined the Liberal party in the 1980's, I gave two main reasons: the first was I was pro-European, the second was that we should put an end to business as a battleground between bosses and unions. I'm sad that neither the Tories nor Labour appears to have policies to help business, particularly small businesses on which our local economies depend so heavily. The Tories back businesses as long as their MPs own them, and Labour talks about helping them, but then brings in ridiculous and damaging policies such as increasing the employer's National Insurance contributions. In Sandwich, I'm one of four councillors who are working with our local businesses to help where we can and ensure they can, as far as possible, help us to grow our town. And I know that all over this country, Lib Dem councillors are doing the same.

Which brings me to the so-called Reform party. Our main challenge this year was the elections in May for our county Council, and I admit I didn't really expect that result from my doorstep canvassing. True, in Preston there were a few who said they would "Vote for Nigel" when I was out canvassing with Barbara and David, but overall, there didn't appear to be the level of support for Reform which came out on 1 May. What did emerge for us that day was the beginning of a new order in which we are actually the main opposition party in Kent. And subsequent by-

elections have shown all over the country that where we are in a head-to-head with Reform, we can win.

So, as we move forward to the next round of elections, we can hold our heads up and look like winners. We live in a very tough area for our principles, here in this part of East Kent, and I was very impressed at the effort we made to deliver leaflets, put stuff out on social media and generally to influence the debate. It was an achievement to have a candidate in every division, so everyone had the chance to vote Lib Dem. I'd really like to thank people for that. It was hard work, but we often had fun! The results for us were encouraging, with an increased vote share in most areas, and let's remember how well our party did in Kent, winning more councillor seats and becoming the main opposition. I'm very pleased that the links between County and local party are becoming much stronger, and here in East Kent we are building a stronger common identity.

We have the wind in our sails, but we need to make the most of it to put ourselves in a much stronger position. Our membership has held its own, by and large, over the last year, and we had 5 new members in September alone (some as a result of attending the delicious Cream Tea event at Penelope's) but we must do more, especially by making membership more attractive, and building stronger teams in Sandwich and Deal.

I am a great believer in the Liberal Democrat party, and this year has been one I have enjoyed, but I'm not standing again because – frankly – I have too much on my plate, and aim to give more time to building a team in Sandwich. I have only managed to cope because of the huge and selfless effort of some of our members during the KCC election campaign and the support of Penelope, who has often done part of my job for me and has also done a fantastic job as communications lead; the numbers show how effective she has been; we have over 500 followers on Facebook, but we must do more to feed that page with interesting material.

The executive committee has been forward-looking and efficient. John has been the inspiration for us looking at practical ways to build the party up and recruit

new activists, which we will I think be implementing soon. I'm sorry Adrian is stepping down as treasurer and would like to thank him for his quiet and effective support; it's the sort of support you barely notice till it's not there! He'll be hard to replace. And Merrill Johns, who has been our honorary President, has always been keen to support our events and participate in Exec meetings. Last but not least, let me mention Di Osborn who has managed to produce excellent minutes of meetings within hours of them finishing.

There are so many others who have worked hard during the year, getting stuck in and showing their commitment. We have a great team here and after nearly ten years of struggle and disappointment, the future is bright. Let's get going and finish the job.

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