

Chair's report

Liberal Democrats in Europe 2024 AGM

November 2024

Sad to say, following the opening of the 2023 Chair's report with the tribute to Anne Jarvis , I need to open this year's report with a tribute to Martin Bennet, Chair of the Luxembourg Branch who passed away this year after a short illness. We miss him at our executive meetings and I know that he is sorely missed by the Luxembourg members. He had generations of pupils read J S Mill On Liberty and this prompting made me re-read it recently too. It was a shock for many of us that he was taken from us so quickly. My condolences to family and friends.

If any member would like to mark his or her appreciation of Martin's life, donations can be made towards the [Hospice Haus Omega](#) in Luxembourg, which cared for Martin at the end of his life.

We are a political party and our goal must be to win political power and gain political influence to further the principles of our party and the policies agreed by our members. The 2024 General Election has seen the return of 72 Liberal Democrat MPs to Parliament, an absolute triumph for the party's campaign, leadership, organization and the total implosion of the Conservatives!

[You can see the full summary report of our activities in the GE campaign here](#)

This General Election was the first one where we, as Libdems abroad, campaigned actively to encourage UK citizens to register to vote and then cast their vote for our party. We learned many things, achieved a lot, but in the end did not succeed in many of the objectives we set ourselves. Most disappointingly, although the abolition of the 15 year rule expanded the potential franchise amongst overseas citizens hugely, the actual number of registrations fell from the previous general election. In addition more than 50% of the postal ballots issued to Brits Abroad did not find their way back to the voters' constituencies in time to be counted.

Of course, these disappointing figures are not entirely our fault! Although registrations rose in the UK, turnout fell too (down to 59.7% from 67.5%) but the registration rate for eligible overseas

voters fell from around 17% to around 5.5% (the figures will only ever be estimates as no-one knows how many eligible overseas voters there are). This left us with only an average of 300 odd registered overseas voters per constituency. Although there is a concentration in some seats, at maximum - there are less than 1500 overseas votes in any constituency, on average 0.4% of the total.

All in all, this is not a great argument for political parties, including our own, to take a great deal of notice of overseas citizens. There were very few seats where we lost by fewer than the number of overseas voters and there were no seats where you could say that the influence of the overseas vote was decisive.

We believe that this is a great shame. Whether UK citizens overseas are interested in politics “back-home” or not; decisions taken in Westminster and Whitehall can and do have major influences over their lives - Brexit was and is the key issue for us here is in Europe but there are many other issues from Pension Rights to Consular services where our voice needs to be heard.

So although the UK General Election was a triumph for the LibDems there was another election in 2024 that I think can also inspire us to reach what we need to achieve. I speak, of course, of the election to the French Assemblée Nationale in which, of the 11 seats reserved for - in a turn of phrase I find quite pleasing - French Citizens established outside of France - 10 of them were returned for the Macronist centre and their allies.

Overseas constituencies are the policy of our party, restated at conference and appearing in our manifesto. By giving representation, at of course much reduced rates per person, to British Citizens abroad, we believe that their (our) concerns and issues will have greater prominence and we are less likely to be forgotten in policy development and implementation.

Of course, there is no easy route from our manifesto pledges to the statute book but I believe this manifesto commitment and its consequences needs to be our organising principle in LDE and the wider LibDems Abroad family.

Our challenge is then to make our local party fit to be a nominating party for candidates and an election winning machine to get them elected. There is so much work to do to make this happen that I believe we need to start now and not wait for overseas constituencies to happen. This

means recruiting far more members, organizing ourselves country by country and us becoming the natural home for the millions of people who look at the erosion of Liberal Democracy, mutual respect, rule of law etc across Europe with horror.

A big thanks to everyone who has given their time to the functioning of the party this year especially my predecessor Tom McAdam, Ian Franks our Vice-Chair, Rob Harrison - Treasurer, Andrew Burgess - Secretary and the rest of the Executive team.

Special thanks to Stuart Pallister who single handedly ran our press office for the GE and Rhys Howell whose digital mastery contributed greatly to our digital campaigning - both of whom have decided to step down from the Exec this year.

Also thanks to Hannah Betesworth and Nick Catephores, Nicholas Wakefield for their contributions to the Exec.

In the end it is your (the members' party) and this is our branch if you live in Europe so do get in touch and tell us what you think we should be doing (or not)

David Sapiro
david.sapiro@libdemsineurope.org