

eastern Agenda

from Andrew Duff MEP
no 4 Election Special 2001

This time, real change

“Liberal Democrats in the East of England face a huge challenge in the general and local elections on 7 June. It’s a challenge we will meet,” says Andrew Duff MEP



Four years on, it’s hard to remember how high the hopes of the country were in May 1997 when the Tories were at last swept from office. Whatever our individual positions on Paddy Ashdown’s ‘project’, Liberal Democrats shared those hopes. It’s a condition of Lib Dems that we are hopeful people!

So we feel more than let down by Tony Blair’s government. We feel frustrated, even angry, that Labour has squandered such golden opportunities. Of course, government is not easy, and this administration has had its share of bad luck, not least with foot and mouth disease, and in Northern Ireland where politics remain fairly intractable.

But there was no valid reason for Labour to get trapped inside Tory spending plans after decades of serious under-investment in all our public services. There is no excuse for Labour’s obstinacy over student fees. Why Labour continues with privatisation of the Tube is beyond me. It would have been difficult to devise a more botched reform of the House of Lords. Progress on the constitutional front has faltered badly: the promised referendum on electoral reform for the Commons has been shelved (whatever anyone says), and decentralisation within England has lost its way. Civil liberties have seldom been more threatened by arrogant ministers. Labour’s obsession with spin is just distasteful.

On Europe, Labour has been a fair disaster. It has believed its own propaganda about being at the heart of Europe while acting as if it wished to disable the European Union. The Labour government has been no different to its Conservative predecessor in hoping to run things in secret. It has been no friend of the European Parliament. It has seldom used the Union to push forward progressive social and environmental policies. It sought to resist the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and has not been in the forefront of those who argue for the consolidation of the single market.

Labour’s vacillation on the euro has possibly been the worst mistake of all. UK manufacturing industry is suffering body blows from which it might not recover. Confidence in the financial markets that sterling will one day join the single currency may be very misplaced, especially as the prime minister has shown no leadership whatsoever in the effort to turn public opinion away from its current mood of Euroscepticism and suspicious isolationism.

While all this has been happening the Tories have been failing to draw the right conclusions from their recent savage defeat. They remain unelectable and badly divided.

So we Liberal Democrats remain indispensable to British politics. We are a radical force, united, and well run. We remain hopeful that 7 June will bring about the real change we know the country needs and deserves.

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Four years hard graft - but I've enjoyed it!

Colchester MP Bob Russell, the Region's only Lib Dem MP, reports on his four years representing Britain's oldest recorded town.



Andrew Duff and Bob Russell listen to a farmer outside Colchester,

Being the region's only Lib Dem MP has one advantage: whenever regional television wants a 3-party programme they have no choice but to call me. That must be an excellent reason for colleagues throughout the East of England to get more Liberal Democrat MPs elected!

Being our party's sole representative, against 22 Labour and 33 Tory MPs, is a somewhat lonely existence. Simon Hughes in South London is my nearest colleague.

Obviously I cannot possibly attempt to represent all 56 constituencies in the region, but what I try to do is to promote the Party's interests as widely as I can.

My Colchester constituency is predominately urban, with a population approaching 100,000 including those aged under 18.

Every year since my election in 1997 I have registered the best voting attendance record of any opposition MP in the country, and here in the East of England I have also out-scored every Labour MP. It is an achievement which annoys the Tories, for in Essex my current figure of 92 per cent contrasts with the average of just 55 per cent for a Tory MP. They don't like having these figures pointed out!

I am the Lib Dem representative on the Home Affairs Select Committee and am also the Party's Sports Spokesperson. In addition I am an Assistant Whip. There are many all-party groups, and of the several of which I am a member I am Secretary to the Scout Group and Vice-Chairman of the Cycling Group. I am also a Parliamentary Advisor to The Royal British Legion.

Last year I served on the Police Service Parliamentary Scheme during which I spent nearly 30 days with the Police, much of it in Essex, during which I saw just about every aspect of policing. As a result I am now better placed to speak on Police matters both in the House of Commons and more widely.

Dealing with casework occupies a lot of my time. My regular Advice Bureaux are always well attended and in addition I deal with a considerable volume of correspondence. In the course of a year I write around 10,000 letters to constituents or on their behalf to Government and other agencies.

As a general rule I put in an 80-hour 7-day week.

I have greatly enjoyed the past four years representing my home town in Parliament. I trust that I will have the opportunity to serve a further four years.

Gaining North Norfolk – at the third attempt in 11 years

Norman Lamb is poised to win North Norfolk after 11 years of very intensive work.

“Norman is known by so many people,” says Andrew Duff. “He’ll make a first class MP, so it’s vital we give him the help he needs to win.”



Andrew Duff opens the North Norfolk Liberal Democrat Office in Cromer, with Mary and Norman Lamb and local Liberal Democrats.

Whenever anyone suggests to me on the doorstep that all politicians are in it for themselves, I gently and politely point out just what is involved in trying to become a Liberal Democrat MP! I explain that had I been interested in power for its own sake I could have chosen a far easier route.

It is now 11 years since I was first chosen as Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for North Norfolk. At that time we faced a Tory majority of about 16,000. Most people thought I was mad. From the start, I recognized that it would probably take three general elections to make the breakthrough and I have always been realistic enough to believe that even that might not be enough. To win this time will require a massive effort and an army of helpers. The Tories will fight every inch of the way to hold on.

So why have I given 11 years of my life to achieve this goal?

I want to play some part in helping to build and sustain Liberal Democracy in this country. It is worth, every now and again, returning to the words set out in the Preamble to our Constitution. They enshrine what we are all about: “Liberal Democrats exist to build and safeguard a fair, free and open society in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community and in which no-one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance and conformity.” That’s a pretty good starting point for me!

If election to Parliament could give me a platform from which to promote these values then, for me, this is a worthwhile challenge. In more parochial terms I am determined to give a voice to the non-Conservative majority in rural North Norfolk who have felt unrepresented for so long.

For Liberal Democrats seeking election to Parliament, the chances of future preferment and entry into Government is not something upon which one dwells for long! For me, the role as an effective Parliamentarian is, in itself, a noble calling. Over the last few years, the Executive has become ever more powerful. Parliament is taken for granted. The massed ranks of Labour MPs leave behind their critical faculties when they go through the voting lobbies supporting the Government – little different from those Thatcher years with enormous Tory majorities. Never has the need for effective scrutiny of the Government been greater. My namesake, Norman Baker, the Liberal Democrat MP for Lewes, has done a brilliant job, constantly probing and challenging Government Ministers. This is a vital role in sustaining a vibrant Parliamentary democracy.

Finally, I want to be able to play a role in the development of the party in the Eastern region. Winning Colchester in 1997 was enormously significant for the party in this region. It gave us a new credibility. Bob Russell’s presence in Parliament has benefited the whole Party. Now I want to create a new bridgehead in the north of the region. I would want to use that opportunity to help build the party into a real Parliamentary force in East Anglia. We can copy the experience in the West Country. These next few weeks are of critical importance to this party. Together we can make it happen.

from front page

Here in the East of England we've had a successful four years. Bob Russell's victory in Colchester was followed by my own election in 1999 to the European Parliament. We run more local councils than ever before. We are the force to be reckoned with at the regional level too.

In this election, Liberal Democrats will be working hard across the whole six counties. I will be visiting all the 56 Commons seats, supporting our valiant candidates and supporters, and working the press. I'll be in two places, however, much more often – Colchester and North Norfolk. Inside this special edition of *eastern agenda* you will see what Bob has done for us already in Parliament, and what Norman Lamb wants to be able to do.

Whatever you do in this election, please help the party in Colchester return Bob Russell MP with a bigger majority than ever; and please help the party in North Norfolk elect Norman Lamb MP.

I look forward to seeing you out and about on the stump, winning votes and seats in the general and local elections for Liberal Democracy - making sure, this time, that we seize the chance to make changes for real.

Andrew Duff

East of England Conference

Saturday 20 October 2001

An important policy conference for Liberal Democrats in the East of England will take place at Homerton College, Cambridge on Saturday 20 October.

The all-day event, which is intended for party activists and opinion-formers from across the European Parliamentary constituency, will focus on two topics:

- winning the euro referendum;
- more power for the English regions.

The conference is designed to put the Liberal Democrats at the front of the political debate on these key post-election issues. Put the date in your diary now. More details will be circulated in due course.

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Help in our target seats during the General Election

Help Norman Lamb
win North Norfolk

Beechview, Lime Tree Rd, North Walsham

Contact Ed Maxfield on 01692 403752

Help Bob Russell retain
Colchester

6 Barrack Street, Colchester

Contact Ian Horner on 01206 710172

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