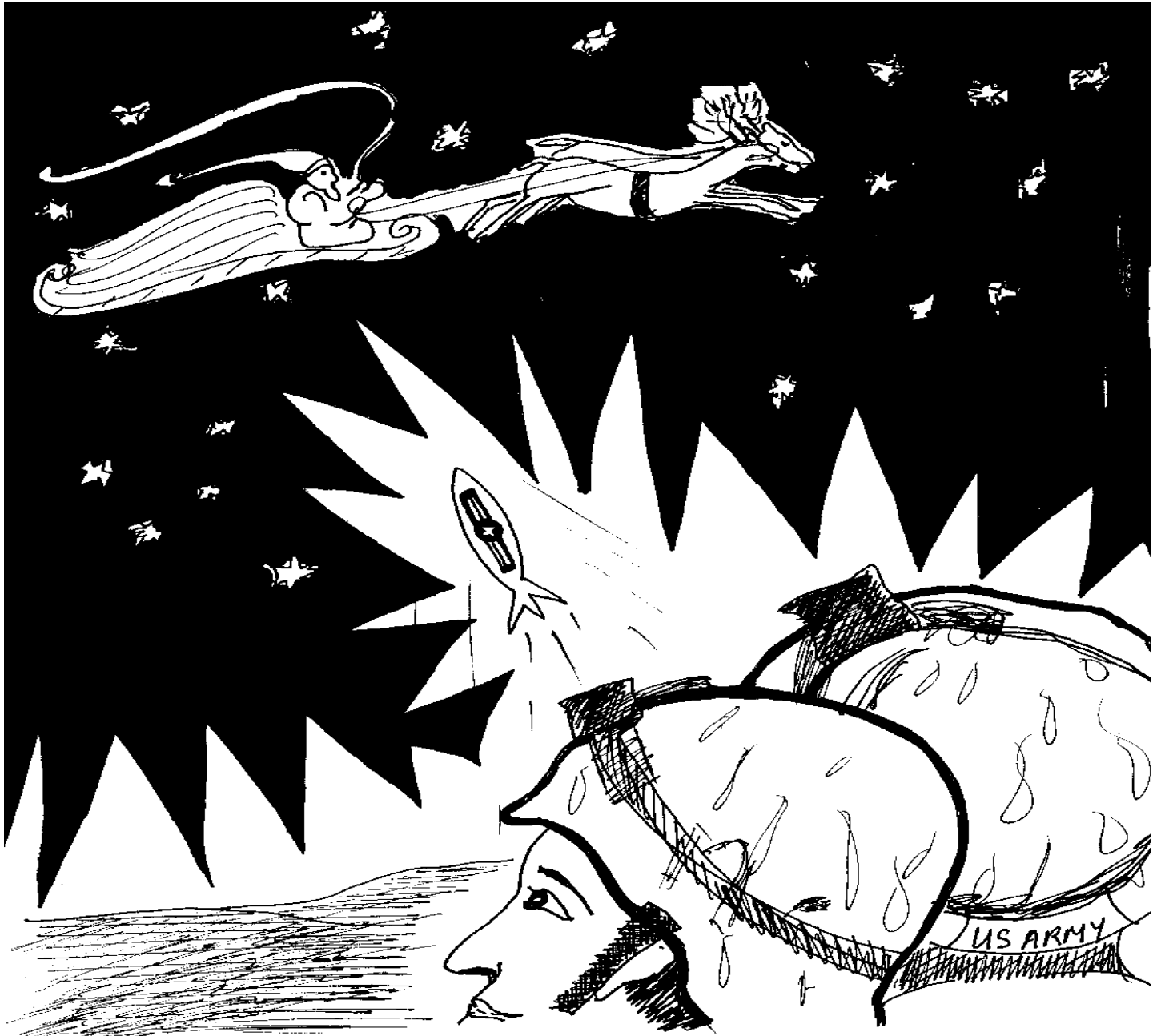


# liberator



Well He Goddam' Looks Like Bin Laden to Me!

## In this issue

- ✱ Blair's Fascist Mayors - Matthew Huntbach
- ✱ Avoiding the "Jerking Circle" - Simon Titley

- ✱ Watching Kosovo Vote - Sue Simmonds

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- welcomes written contributions on relevant topics, up to 1500 words.

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# COMMENTARY

## CONSEQUENCES

The fall, if not as yet eradication, of the Taliban is an entirely good thing. Amid the triumphalism of the American and British governments we might though pause to consider how the Taliban got there in the first place, as the process offers some food for thought about relations between the world's powerful and less powerful states.

The war was not fought for the specific purpose of restoring the Northern Alliance to power. It may be back in effective charge, but it was only chased out in the first place because its assorted warlords behaved so appallingly in their previous spell in power that the Taliban were initially welcomed for bringing order.

Left to itself, Afghanistan might still have been the backwater it was in the 1970s, when its affairs hardly troubled the rest of the world.

Successive meddling by the Soviet Union, the US, Pakistan and others reduced it to the condition it is in today.

The process that started with arming fundamentalist tribal armies to fight the Russians, ended with the attack on the World Trade Center.

This ought to teach the world's powers (not that it is likely to) that meddling in the internal politics of other countries can have counter-productive results.

As British ministers suddenly changed their tune in late November and made supportive noises about raids on Somalia, Sudan and Yemen, though not as yet Iraq, all thoughts about laws of unintended consequences went out of their heads.

An attack on Iraq could spark a conflagration in the Middle East. And how did Saddam Hussein come to be armed to the teeth in the first place? Courtesy of the United States in the early 1980s, when he was waging war against Iran.

There is a world of difference between international engagement with the object of making peace, even if that involves a temporary war such as in Kosovo, and engagement with the object of backing one side in a conflict in the hope that it will become a dependent client.

Worse still is the sort of intervention that accomplishes one objective and then leaves the country in question to rot while armed factions murder each other.

Yet the first, benign, type of international engagement is just what the Bush administration turned its back in its first eight months in office.

If it continues to ignore it, and does not follow up with some serious nation rebuilding, it may be condemned to repeat its experiences with the Taliban and Saddam.

## CONGESTION

Research conducted for the government now shows Britain to have the most congested roads and decrepit public transport in Europe. While the worst culprit is the former Conservative government and its catastrophic rail privatisation, the problem is compounded by decades of under investment.

But why, after four years in office, does Labour still feel it necessary to commission research? In 1998 it produced a transport policy from which few Liberal Democrats dissented based around the idea of improving public transport in order to reduce car dependence, pollution and road building.

Since then almost nothing has happened. Blockades by tanker drivers scared Labour away from environmental taxation on motor fuel, the road building programme has returned with a vengeance, with talk of 14 lane motorways, and the national increase in bus passenger miles is almost wholly accounted for by London, where buses escaped the Tories' deregulation disaster. Meanwhile, having in a hamfisted way put Railtrack out of its misery, the government is obstinately going ahead with a similar track and train split privatisation for London Underground, which has been denounced as dangerous, wasteful and pointless by councillors, safety experts, financiers and the previous board of London Transport.

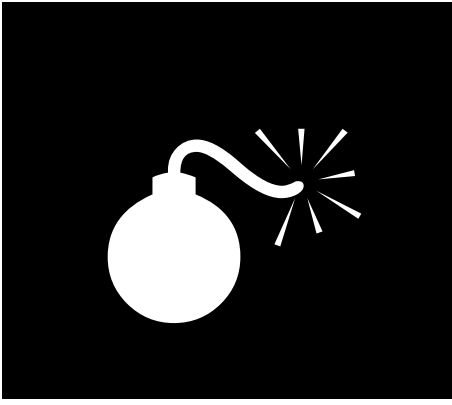
The question in next May's London borough elections must be: how many Londoners is the Labour Party prepared to kill and injure in order to prove Gordon Brown's Thatcherite credentials?

This is not just a London issue; it affects the prospects for public investment and influence over public transport in general. Outside the capital, the state of public transport is if anything worse with the chaos of deregulated buses and erratic local train services.

Building more roads will become a vicious circle, just as Labour's own 1998-vintage transport policy predicted. New roads means that journey times become quicker, attracting more cars to make the journey concerned, and attracting development to the route path in question. Traffic then increases until the new road clogs up and another has to be built, and the whole process repeats itself.

No serious body of opinion disputes these links. But nor is it likely that a significant number of motorists will abandon their cars unless public transport is improved first through significant investment.

This approach was once a Liberal Democrat issue. Labour's brief lurch into sanity in 1997/98 meant it ceased to be one of the party's 'distinctive' issues. Now that Labour has thrown in its lot with the roads lobby, transport can again be the Liberal Democrats' issue.



# RADICAL BULLETIN

## TRUE COLOURS

To no one's great surprise, Labour has treated the war in Afghanistan as a splendid excuse to continue its war against civil liberties in Britain.

Identity cards still lurk around as an option, and now David Blunkett wants to take powers to allow the police to lock up without trial or appeal any foreigner of whom they disapprove. Lawyers' conversations with clients, medical records and other confidential information will be open for fishing expeditions by the authorities.

Even the Thatcher government did not impose such measures when the IRA came close to assassinating the entire cabinet.

The Liberal Democrats got their response largely right by arguing against the legislation and threatening to try to change or block it in the House of Lords. After initially only abstaining, they opposed the legislation in the commons.

This was all a great improvement on Paddy Ashdown's shameful support for the post-Omagh terrorism legislation, which led to the rebellion or deliberate absence of most Liberal Democrat MPs from the vote in question (Liberator 255).

At least one party thinks that civil liberty is part of what makes Britain worth defending against terrorists. Labour's espousal of these measures must mark the final disappointment to those foolish and naive Liberal Democrats who once thought Tony Blair was some sort of liberal.

## OATEN NETTED

Who could deny that the party's obvious unity is one of the Liberal Democrats' greatest assets? Mark Oaten, chair of the parliamentary party and MP for Winchester, for one.

In an interview with Nyta Mann for the BBC News website about the forthcoming review of policy on public services, he is quoted as saying:

"We haven't got a Clause Four, Militants or rot at the core of the party. Oddly enough, if we did it might be helpful because we could then make a big demonstration of tackling them and the public could then engage in what it was about."

When the establishment starts to talk like this, beware: there is always the danger that they will single out some innocent group within the party in order to appear tough by taking them on.

That said, there are some people in the Liberal Democrats with very strange views - notably Oaten himself.

In the same interview he is quoted as saying that the Liberal Democrats must start sounding more Tory, "rather than like a left-wing party". He predicts: "By March, you'll begin to see the development of something, I hope quite distinctive, which will be both tough and tender, which journalists can say puts us to the right of Labour."

If the party is to "make a big demonstration of tackling" anyone, perhaps it should be Oaten and his bizarre views?

## OOH GET HER

Liberator was shocked by Shirley Williams' bitchy remarks about Paddy Ashdown, also to be found on the BBC News website. She explains the former Lib Dem leader's infatuation with Tony Blair as follows: "Part of it, which you have to allow for, is when people suddenly find themselves in a very politically significant position and they've never been a minister, let alone in the cabinet or anything like that. It's very dazzling."

We repeat them only because we suspect there is a lot of truth in them.

## BUNCH OF DOPES

When will the Liberal Democrat federal policy committee stop trying to be a substitute for party conference and start doing the job it is there to do?

Time and again, faced with a controversy, the FPC tries to settle the debate and send some bland confection to be rubber-stamped by conference, instead of letting the conference decide.

What it should do is frame propositions between which the conference can choose where there are some substantial differences in policy.

It has happened again on drugs. The working group's policy paper went to FPC, and at Simon Hughes' insistence, the reference to supporting decriminalisation of cannabis was removed, and replaced with a bland evasion written by Alan Beith and John Burnett, who both object to such a reform.

The FPC duly collapsed in heap, despite warnings that decriminalisation was bound to appear as an amendment, that the conference committee would be bound to accept it, and that the conference would more than likely pass it.

So instead of the FPC letting the conference choose between the Hughes/ Beith option and the original proposal from the working group on drugs, the committee took this task upon itself.

Yet again, it has tried to quash an essential debate and has made itself look ridiculous.

## GETTING SHIRTY

Some unsisterly fallout is still going on after the debate on all-women shortlists at the Liberal Democrat conference (Liberator 277).

After losing, some supporters of closed shortlists were to be heard denouncing their opponents, who had been led by a group of young women from LDYS.

"They only won because they wrapped their boobs in those flimsy t-shirts and waved them at all the middle-aged men in the audience," said one who could not grasp that her side had simply lost the argument.

This sort of thing has continued with insulting letters about the LDYS women in Liberal Democrat News and elsewhere.

Those who lost the argument seem to have decided to advance the cause of female candidates by the unusual route of hurling patronising abuse at some of the party's most promising young women politicians. Liberator understands two of the tee-shirts in question remain unsold.

## LESSER EVIL

Continuing with the unwritten rule that all senior posts in the Liberal Democrat team in the House of Lords have to be held by ex-SDP members, their lordships had a choice for leader between Shirley Williams and Tom McNally.

They awarded the post to Williams by 39 votes to 23, despite the latter's slick campaign.

William Wallace was going to stand, but withdrew when he realised he would come third. As Liberator went to press he was due to contest the deputy leadership with McNally.

Williams' majority was a rainbow coalition of women who wanted a woman, Liberals who wanted a Liberal (or nearest equivalent), an old guard who think McNally has not got the class to command the house, and activists who did not want McNally, not least because of his open and aggressive support for closer links with Labour.

Other factors in Williams' victory were the belief that it would be impossible to explain this icon's defeat to the party at large, and the feeling of others that Williams would give the group some vision.

McNally's defeat was a blow for the establishment figures in the group, almost all of whom were backing him.

Williams' most vitriolic critics were to be found among the former SDP's bloated ranks, and the reasons for their hostility to her went back to resentments which predate the pre-merger.

Apart from John Roper, who as chief whip kept aloof from the dogfight, the whips were working hard for McNally - led by his two proposers, Navnit Dholakia and Angie Harris. The fact that these two old-time Liberals were backing McNally raised a lot of eyebrows. The fact that his chief lieutenants were Lords Oakeshott and Holme raised them rather less.

But part of the reason for some surprising support for McNally was that he has been making a decent fist of the home affairs portfolio, attacking Labour from liberal principles over civil liberties issues.

At the hustings meeting (an innovation that had the old guard harrumphing with vigour) Williams turned in a dreadful performance while McNally was impressive.

Williams has said that she only wants the job for one parliament, so McNally is well placed to succeed her, though four years is a long time in politics - particularly in the House of Lords.

## MAN OVERBOARD

A prominent casualty in the federal executive election this year was Gordon Lishman, who was runner-up. The problem is, he is the Liberal Democrats' international officer and to continue in the post he must be on the FE. Will he co-opted despite the people's verdict?

## PEERING AHEAD

The Liberal Democrat federal executive has been trying to decide what to do about the interim peers list. When the election for the 50-strong panel took place in 1999, the FE rules stated that it would continue in existence up to the general election, and then be reviewed.

It had been expected that there would be more new Lib Dem life peers than turned out to be the case (nine working peers in spring 2000 and five dissolution honours furry bits for ex-MPs).

The FE only got around to this review in October, after prompting from those who had become alarmed by rumours that the powers that be believed that the list had lapsed.

But the FE resolved that the list still stood until new elections are held. It also decided to consider whether to recommend the spring conference to hold a new election for the panel (or for it to be topped up) in the autumn of 2002.

Charles Kennedy accepted this, but reminded members that he had the right to appoint one member ("Charlie's Choice") of his own choosing each year.

In the event, few people think there will be any more working peers for the time being while the proposals for "reform" of the Lords are being discussed.

## APART FROM THAT...

Local Liberal Democrat annual general meetings are rarely of any note, but Hackney's managed a quadruple whammy. First it was billed to take place in September, when party rules stated it had to be later in the year. Then it was noticed that the calling notice asked for nominations to be sent to a returning officer who had not accepted the post, at an address at which he did not live, by a deadline which was not stated. London region stepped in and rescheduled the meeting for mid-November.

## LET THEM EAT LAMB

It seems Liberal Democrat policy is to wish an unvaried diet on the people of Afghanistan. Liberal Democrat News' front page on 23 November offered 'what Afghanistan needs now - Lamb'. This turned out to be a reference to the opinions of the MP for North Norfolk.

Seasons Greetings and  
a Liberal New Year  
to all readers from  
the liberator collective

# BLAIR FLIRTS WITH FASCISM

Labour's concept of executive mayors is, in the original meaning of the word, fascist, says Matthew Huntbach, whose council is just getting used to the idea

The recent round of referendums on executive mayors has given an inconclusive result. The idea was neither so soundly rejected that it will go away, nor accepted anywhere (with one exception) with great enthusiasm.

The London Borough of Lewisham, where I am an opposition councillor, was one of several councils where a referendum result in favour of an executive mayor went through only very narrowly (and in our case with enough concern about procedural irregularities that the result is being questioned).

What concerns me is the argument used in favour of executive mayors. It is essentially one against representative democracy.

As Liberals, we believe power over any body should lie with the people who together form that body. In small bodies, this may actually be with general meetings of all the people. As the size of the body and the number and complexity of the decisions increases, so we prefer to delegate our decision-making to representatives. We will elect people we can trust to make the decision we would make if we had the time, inclination and knowledge to make it.

The executive mayor idea rejects this model of democracy. It condemns it as "slow" and "inefficient". It is suspicious of decisions made after debate, and the necessary compromises between representatives in order to reach a consensus. It argues that this is "faceless" because we cannot name a single person who is accountable for a decision. It argues that decision-making should instead be placed into the hands of one individual.

This is clearly more efficient in terms of the speed. But it is also argued that it is more "accountable" because we can clearly see and know the one person who is responsible.

Furthermore, such a person may better act as a champion for the body in the wider world, since he or she will gain respect due to his or her power and authority. The glamour of having such a person in full control of the body will reflect well on its people. In a sense, its leader will be their human embodiment.

It is important that we recognise the attraction of this argument. The glamour of rule by a king or emperor and the perfidy of rule by committee have featured in many times and places since. In its 20th century form, it was known as fascism.

When I have put it to proponents of executive mayors that they are advocating fascism, they have reacted with outrage. We have become so used to "fascist" as a vague

political insult that we have forgotten it once had a precise political meaning, and achieved some admiration from political thinkers, even from some who thought of themselves as "liberals". We have forgotten, too, that the racial theories of nazism were later additions to fascism, and not part of the original model propounded by Benito Mussolini.

The essence of fascism was that rule by a single charismatic individual was better than rule by a parliament. Its name came from the fasces, the bundle of rods made strong by tying it round a central axe, symbolising the idea that rule by one charismatic individual was to the nation's benefit.

After the 1998 elections, my borough came under the control of a stridently New Labour group, which was determined to become one of the first local authorities with an executive mayor.

I was struck then not only by the essentially fascist nature of the proposal, but the resemblance between the language they used and that used to argue for fascism in the early 20th century.

There was much talk about the need to have a "charismatic leader" who would be "above politics" and "get things done", or "knock heads together".

There was much bad-mouthing of the trappings of representative democracy, of debate and decision-making by consensus. There was the insistence that rule by one charismatic figure was "modern" and that committee decision making was "old fashioned".

In the 1920s it was equally believed that liberalism was old-fashioned, and that authoritarian forms of government, whether communism or fascism were the "way of the future".

Fascism was born from disillusionment with the first experiences of mass representative democracy, and one of the main arguments used today in favour of executive mayors is to play on people's disillusion with modern party politics and claim it will bring in non-party figures.

It is alarming that the one local authority which has voted in favour of an executive mayor by a large majority is one where a local police chief, who became noted for his authoritarian methods and gained the nickname "RoboCop", has expressed his wish to stand for mayor. This is believed to be the reason why voters there were so enthusiastic for the idea.

Am I suggesting that fascism is imminent in Britain, and that those proposing executive mayors are trying to bring it about?

No. I am simply alarmed that no-one seems to have noticed the parallels or bothered to show concern for them. The media have by and large supported the idea, repeating the absurd claim that it is a form of “devolution”, which results in “more accountable” government.

Opposition has generally been dismissed as self-interested councillors jealously guarding their own power. If what is enthusiastically proposed for local government were repeated at national level, it would mean the abolition of parliamentary votes, and rule by prime ministerial decree. If this were proposed would the press denounce any MPs who protested as self-interested whingers?

It would be easy to write off the mechanisms of parliamentary democracy as “Victorian” and hence unarguably (in the view of those who use “modern” to mean “I am so right that I needn’t give any real arguments for what I want”) due for the scrap-heap.

It could be argued that the whips fixed all parliamentary votes anyway, so it would be no great matter to abolish them.

Finally, suppose there were some “RoboCop” figure, who had shown an ability to “get things done” in the army or police force, who had announced to popular enthusiasm his intention to stand as directly elected prime minister?

That few in the Labour Party - even opponents of directly elected mayors - see it this way is an indication of how fundamentally different their concept of democracy is from ours. Labour sees the purpose of elections as the election of an executive, not a representative body.

That is why most Labour people have a horror of coalitions and cannot understand arguments for proportional representation.

To Labour, real participatory democracy with its discussions and compromises takes place within the party, not within the representative assembly. In Labour-dominated councils, meetings of the Labour group are where the real politics takes place, and council meetings are a formality.

In the Old Labour view, everyone should be in a trade union, and all unions should affiliate to the Labour Party, so representation takes place within the party and the representative nature of constitutional democracy is unimportant.

The Old Labour argument against executive mayors is that it takes power away from the Labour group. This is also part of the New Labour argument for executive mayors.

Central to the New Labour attack on the committee system is that it was “secretive” because the real discussions took place behind closed doors, in group meetings.

We Liberals need to defend and promote true representative democracy. If we thought elections were simply about choosing an executive, we would not be so bothered with proportional representation.

Direct election of a one-person executive (a cabinet which is directly chosen by the mayor and requires no council endorsement really is a one-person executive) is the ultimate in disproportional representation.

New Labour claims that the system of council democracy needs to be changed because people have become disconnected from it. “Few people know their councillor’s name,” they say.

Whose fault is that - the councillors in the red rosettes who get elected on a once-in-four-years election address, or those of us Liberal Democrats who have slogged our guts out to get known as community champions, and get elected as councillors, in wards where it was once said they weighed the votes for our now defeated opponents?

Whose fault is it that people no longer feel politicians speak for them, when New Labour constructs a rigidly centralised image in which their party is a marketing mechanism in which its candidates are presented as emissaries of its national leader?

In community politics we discovered a mechanism in which people could be connected to politics through local government.

We too have at times and in places become too complacent in expecting support, and too ready to construct a slick image that talks down to people rather than involves them.

But at its best we have used local government, with its mundane powers, which are small on a global scale but big in ordinary people’s lives, to show that ordinary people can take control.

Our power lies not just in the ballot box, but in the nomination form as well: you do not have to be a political star or a celebrity to take control for yourself. At least, you don’t until they bring in executive mayors.

# NEW RADICALISM OR OLD HAT?

January's 'Radical Winter School' in Leeds prompts several questions that the participants might not find comfortable, argues Simon Titley

In the Marx Brothers film 'Horse Feathers', Groucho sings "Whatever it is, I'm against it." For too long, self-styled 'radicals' have been singing a similar tune. The only causes that seem to get them excited are internal party constitutional issues. It is no longer clear what 'radicalism' is meant to be or what it is for.

The New Radicalism movement's initiative, the 'Radical Winter School' in Leeds (described by James Graham in *Liberator* 277), is therefore very welcome. Any spontaneous debate should be applauded in a party so bereft of fresh thinking. But this meeting's first task must be to restore some clarity.

The modern history of Liberal radicalism can be traced back to the 1960s, when the Young Liberals emerged as a radical force. Young people throughout the West were in revolt, ostensibly about Vietnam and apartheid. Behind these issues was dissatisfaction with traditional power structures and the prevailing sexually repressive morality.

Sixties radicals belonged to the post-war 'baby boom' generation. They were the first generation able to take advantage of the expansion of higher education and the last to graduate before the 1973 oil crisis. With minds expanded by education (and other substances) and no worries about finding work, they were free to take up the plight of others.

At least that was the theory. When I was a student in the late 1970s, my university hall warden explained that actually it had all been about sex. Once universities abolished their late night curfew rules and students were free to sleep with one another, he argued, student protest largely fizzled out.

In the 1970s, Liberal radicals shifted their attention to advancing the cause of community politics in the party. Community politics is such orthodoxy now that it is easy to forget how this had to be fought for. Until the early eighties, most constituency parties (where they existed) did little more than hold cheese-and-wine evenings or run jumble sales.

Victory in this battle was a double-edged sword. It revitalised the party as a campaigning force but absorbed radical energy into handling local casework. The few radicals left with any spare time concentrated on opposition to pacts, deals and mergers. While often necessary, this internal focus heralded a descent into oppositionism.

'Radicalism' has to be more than whatever Donnachadh McCarthy happens to be doing this week. The dictionary definition of 'radical' is 'fundamental',

'far-reaching', 'thorough', 'going to the root'. Radicals, then, presumably differ from common-or-garden Liberals in that they do not believe in tinkering at the edges. They believe problems are deep-rooted and that fundamental reform is needed.

But radicals also have the same responsibilities as any other politicians, to address real concerns and produce outcomes that improve the quality of life. They have no special dispensation to masturbate.

Does the Radical Winter School promise a coherent vision of fundamental change? New Radicalism's list of five 'tenets' (as quoted in James Graham's article) is a profoundly disappointing shopping list. The dominant flavour is seventies-vintage muesli and bean sprout politics, which fails to address the current political, economic or social reality.

I am all for 'A Radical Agenda for a Radical Century', but this isn't it. The five tenets, far from being 'radical', have a disturbing whiff of resistance to modernity and a vague longing for some sort of rural communal idyll. Each one is a ringing declaration, with no indication of how it might be achieved.

The risk is that this Winter School becomes what Americans call a 'circle jerk'. The specific dangers are a focus on internal issues, a striving for purity and dogma, and what Lenin called 'infantile leftism'. If this happens, the outcome will be a ragbag of postures.

The first thing radicals must do is to understand the difference between values and policies. Our values are first order priorities, fundamental principles with two characteristics; they are timeless and non-negotiable. Policies are second order priorities; they change with the times and the issues, and are negotiable. The argument is whether they are in line with our values and whether they are sufficiently thorough.

I assume that radicals share the same values as other Liberals. Where they differ is a question of interpretation, consistency and thoroughness. The results of applying a radical critique will be unpalatable for many. Have the 'New Radicals' the stomach for a truly radical policy or party strategy? Do they have a positive vision rather than merely a desire to spite the party 'establishment'?



Another way of examining radicalism is to ask why the majority of Liberal Democrats are not radical. There are three possible explanations:

- They are broadly satisfied with the way things are and see no need for radical change.
- They believe in radical change but are afraid of saying so for fear of getting a hostile press and losing votes.
- They have no vision or values, only an obsession with micro issues or campaign mechanics.

Smug, cowardly, stupid - or just wet. What are we going to do about it? Here's my alternative radical agenda:

- The middle classes - The greatest barrier to radical change is self-interest. You can call it "the breakdown of civil society", or "the global rich-poor divide", or "public services", or "ecology", but it all boils down to one thing. The middle classes want something for nothing and don't really care about the consequences of their behaviour for the environment or the third world. The unspoken central dilemma for democratically-elected politicians is how to do what is right without losing the votes of the affluent majority. Most Liberal Democrats share a mainstream fear of upsetting 'middle England'. They prefer to take the easy populist route rather than confront selfish and unreasonable behaviour. Are you prepared to tell people to use their cars less or to stop complaining about refugees?
- The individual and society - Liberals believe in the primacy of the individual. Have we been cursed by getting what we wished for? Society is atomising, social bonds are weakening and people increasingly inhabit private worlds. Society can only function when there is a shared morality, but what now is the source of that morality? Moral relativism has left politicians and other leaders afraid to say something is 'right' or 'wrong' (that's "imposing your values") or 'good' or 'bad' (that's being "judgemental"). Are you prepared to stick your neck out and make moral judgements, even though that will offend relativists and people with a different moral view?
- Community Politics - Thirty years ago, radicals envisaged community politics as a means of empowering people. Today, it is little more than a local electioneering technique. It burns out our activists and creates a focus on micro issues. Far from empowering people, it increases their dependency. What was once a radical strategy has degenerated into a dogma that no one dares challenge. Are you prepared to tell the Liberal Democrats they're going nowhere fast and need a new strategy?

If the Radical Winter School is to be more than a talking shop, it should agree some practical steps to accomplish its goals, before everyone goes off to the pub. And this does not just mean agreeing a slate of candidates for the next round of party elections.

**Step 1** - Radicals should demand clear goals for the Liberal Democrats. Poverty of ambition is a problem from top to bottom in the party. It was evident from the beginning of Charles Kennedy's leadership campaign that he wanted the leadership but had no idea why. His silence over the summer was embarrassing. Radicals should tell him to piss or get off the pot. At local level, most of our council groups have no ambition beyond installing the odd pedestrian crossing here and there. Radicals at local level should be demanding clear goals and championing distinctive policies, while nationally they should conduct a systematic audit to identify and spread best radical practice.

**Step 2** - Radicals should demand an 'MOT' test for Liberal Democrat policies. This means hauling each one into the inspection pit and examining whether it addresses real concerns, whether it is rooted in any coherent values, whether it is intellectually rigorous, whether it expresses a clear vision, whether it offers practical solutions and whether it provides a platform for campaigning and asserting our values more vigorously. This process will radicalise policy formulation. Most policy is incoherent, flatulent and uninspiring - radicals should expose it as such, demolish it systematically, and replace it with something better.

**Step 3** - Radicals should be stimulating debate. There is very little thinking going on in the party. Radicals could have much more impact if they wrote articles for the local press, organised local debates, held online discussions, or campaigned on specific profile-raising issues.

**Step 4** - Radicals should oppose Liberal Democrats such as Mark Oaten MP who argue that the party should position itself to the right of Labour. To the right of David Blunkett and Jack Straw? It's nonsense, both intellectually and electorally, but who is challenging it? Radicals should be leading the counter-argument and establishing an alternative national strategy.

**Step 5** - To achieve steps 1 to 4, we need practical tool-kits to help radicals do these things and a website to share news and ideas.

The debate in Leeds will be valid only if it produces some firm commitments for action. Please, not another wankfest, no more 'declarations' or 'tenets', no more endless refining of abstract postures. This is not a battle for new convictions, but rather about persuading Liberals to have the courage of their existing ones.

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More information on the Radical Winter School can be found at this website: <http://www.leeds-first.co.uk/radical>

# PROFIT, BUT WITH HONOUR

Liberals should not be afraid to substitute private provision for failing public services, says Jeremy Hargreaves

The inside front cover of this year's Liberal Democrat conference agenda carried an advert from the National Union of Teachers with the slogan "Education is for Children, not for Profit". That is one view. The problem for liberals is that it is a socialist view.

Socialism is not something that many people will openly admit to these days, but readers of *Liberator* will remember that it is the political ideology of socialism that was driven by the desire always and everywhere to prevent profit being made.

It was socialism which focused not on outcomes - in this case, how good an education the pupil gets - but on the technical machinery which produces the outcome. For socialism, the definition of a good system was one in which no-one - the capitalist, the exploiter, call him what you will - makes a profit out of it.

Fortunately, liberalism has always taken a different view. We have focussed on empowering the individual, setting them free. In the context of education, for example, this surely means providing the individual with as good a schooling as possible. Who provides that service is a secondary consideration. The state's job is to make sure they get it. And, more than that, Liberals have often recognised that the private sector, and competition, can provide a better solution than the public sector. Take, for example, the issue of the repeal of the corn laws in the mid-1840s. British corn producers - 'capitalists', as Marx was soon to call them, or 'big business', as we might know them today, had taken the market captive. The public were being prevented by a cartel from obtaining food at a cheap, or market, price.

The solution of the Government that took office exactly a century later, in 1945, would have been to take over the corn production sector itself, and for the state to deliver food directly to the population. But the solution that the Peelites - a key part of the Liberal intellectual ancestry - actually took was to recognise the state's responsibility to provide affordable food, but to enforce proper competition among suppliers to deliver it. This, they believed, was the most effective way to provide the outcome which would be most appreciated by the poor.

This is the clear lesson from Liberalism for the current public-private debate.

First, we must be clear that what matters is the service to the public, not the mechanisms of production. The pupil, the patient, or the passenger is interested in getting a good service, not the precise employment status of the person who provides it.

And then we come to the question of how it is best provided. This is the point at which Blair mutters something about 'no ideological barriers' - in reality more of a description of Blair's psyche than an intelligent Government's thought-through approach to providing public services.

But Liberal Democrats can do better than that - we can be as ideological as we like in saying that pluralism, diversity and competition among providers produces better outcomes for the public. It is a matter of historical record that providers in the private sector, and with competition between them, have often provided better services than have those in the public sector.

Have Liberal Democrats ever advocated the nationalisation of every last school cleaner, every last taxi driver in the country? No - we have recognised that people employed by 'private' companies provide flexibility, value for money, and, above all, good services, which have a valid place in providing publicly assured services.

Of course this does not mean we support the mythical liberal creation of 'laissez-faire', or no role at all for government. Government has, first of all, a duty to ensure universal service for traditional public services. In the same way that gas, water, energy and the Royal Mail are required to provide service to all, regardless of geography or wealth, good quality health, education and transport services for all must be assured by the state. Ensuring provision of services like these to all is the reason why we have given power of legislation to government, and it is their duty to use it.

The Government has too a duty to ensure a level playing field between different providers. There have been some extraordinary stories of private finance initiative deals with hidden dowries, and gravity-defying mathematics in comparisons between service provision by groups broadly in the private sector, and those broadly in the public sector. Clearly distorted comparison is not meaningful comparison.

The particular government PPP schemes for London Underground and National Air Traffic Service have also brought a bad odour to the word 'private' in this context. But just because the first two apples you pick off the tree are rotten, it is not necessarily true that the whole tree is bad. There surely comes a point - after so many bad apples - when you must take a realistic view and condemn the whole tree. But for the moment, trying apples from, say, an entirely different part of the tree, is an approach which might bear fruit.

And in other areas it has. The fact is that there are pupils being taught, patients being treated, council tenants in housing, and prisoners incarcerated (ok - the last example is slightly less cuddly - but still essential!) in new and modern facilities which would simply not exist if they had not been built by private companies - people motivated - yes, ultimately, by profit.

The public sector tradition clearly has an awful lot to bring to this whole area. But so do the practices and instincts of other groups. The point is that we can try both, and see which provides the more palatable outcomes. Most of us can too think of our own examples of failures of private companies in providing traditional public sector services. But, with great respect, let anyone who has not at one time or another complained of grossly ineffective publicly provided public services, cast the first stone. There can be distorted comparisons here too - if a service has failed to tackle poor performance year after year in the public sector, do not expect the private sector to turn it around overnight.

Education is not - unlike water, energy, and perhaps transport, mentioned above - a 'natural monopoly'. If one does not like a school for one's children, there is enough diversity of provision - around 65,000 schools in the country at the last count - that one can usually

choose another. This is certainly the case in metropolitan areas, and the same applies to LEA's.

The point is - do you really care that you prevent someone else's enrichment so much that you are prepared directly to harm your child's education - as the NUT demand? Unless you do, it is surely pretty difficult to defend the view that your child's classroom can be best cleaned by somebody 'privately' employed, but that they cannot be taught by anyone tainted by the disfiguring miasma of any employer other than the state.

Liberals defending a state monopoly have forgotten what it is that we are trying to do.

The Government has made mistakes in involving the private sector in delivering public services, and of course we should criticise them for them. But let's not throw out the baby with the bathwater, as some in the party seem to want to do.

One regional conference this autumn applauded someone for calling themselves "a socialist". There was no future for Old Labour in being Old Labour, and there is no future for the Liberal Democrats in being Old Labour.

Pretending that history is not happening has never been the liberal way. Turning whatever is happening to the purpose of producing the most liberating outcomes for all, has been, and should be now.

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# THE WORLD WATCHES WHILE KOSOVO VOTES

Nearly 2,000 international polling station supervisors gathered in Kosovo in November to monitor the national assembly elections. Sue Simmonds was there

The national assembly elections took place in Kosovo in November. It was a moving event and felt like a real step forward after the pain of the conflict only two years ago.

The election organisation was massive. The OSCE mission in Kosovo (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) was responsible for providing 100 per cent international supervision for the election - which meant importing and training 2,000 international polling station supervisors who were responsible for the conduct of the elections. More than 12,000 domestic observers took part with more than 200 observers from the Council of Europe and various non-governmental organisations giving credibility to the process. There were supervisors from all over the world, including the EU, USA, Canada, Poland, Lithuania and Azerbaijan.

The training for polling station supervisors was straightforward and very thorough - three days in Greece learning the election regulations and using a radio (taught by a Dane), landmines and unexploded ordinance awareness (taught by a Gurka and a Russian) and map reading (taught by a Norwegian), as well as security briefings. There were also serious warnings about the standard of driving - more pertinent than the briefings on how to search your polling station for bombs!

We travelled overland to Kosovo to meet our teams and receive more training. Supervisors went all over Kosovo and others elsewhere including Belgrade.

Pristina, where I was based, now has a population of 550,000 having grown from 200,000 before the war. The signs of reconstruction are everywhere as is an atmosphere of ethnic and political tension, which still creates suspicion and distrust. An estimated 12-15,000 Serbs remain, mainly confined to their apartments for security reasons due to ethnically motivated attacks and harassment. About 1,800 Slav Muslims still remain and there is a large population of Turks.

Other minority communities are having a hard time. Only about 115-140 Roma remain in the municipality of Kosovo from a population of several thousand - the Kosovars told us that they fled because they took money from the Serbs for burying Kosovar bodies after massacres. A colleague told me that a Roma family came

to vote and he had to insist they did, as the Kosovar polling staff wanted to refuse to let them.

Entering Kosovo was suddenly to be surrounded by armoured cars in a land run by international experts - a bizarre combination. Each IPSS had a translator and a shared driver. We were briefed by KFOR who were taking a strategic role and not expecting any issues with which the local civilian police could not deal. We met our teams of five who would run the polling station (about 800 voters) and were nominated by the political parties. I was a little sceptical about having politically nominated polling station staff, (unlike in the UK where they are officially politically neutral) but the observers - who sat inside the polling station - were also from the political parties so the scrutiny process worked well.

The voting process was simple - voters were checked with ultra violet lamps for ink on their fingers which would mean they had voted before, they were checked against the full voters register - which contained a photograph - for eligibility to vote. A ballot paper was issued, their fingers were sprayed to make sure they could not vote again and a ballot box monitor ensured the ballot paper went into the box - frankly a more robust system than in the UK. There was a great deal of nervousness amongst OSCE staff that the queues would get long and this would cause disquiet, but this never happened. The Voter Education Teams had been working hard for months all over Kosovo to ensure everybody knew how to vote and that they brought the correct identification with them which meant a voting rate of between 60-80 voters an hour. The turnout was 64.3 per cent from a total register of 1.2 million.

My magic memory of the day was the first ballot paper going into the box - everybody in the polling station broke out into spontaneous applause. Voting was taken very seriously and seen as an important civic duty.

Old people who did not know how to hold a pen to sign for their ballot paper made huge efforts to vote although they needed assistance.

We also counted the ballot in our polling stations. This was slow. After the ballot box had been reconciled each ballot paper was held up and the result announced with great ceremony and placed into the correct pile. The contents of the ballot box added up and the result was totally transparent. Our results were later verified centrally.

Ibrahim Rugova's Democratic League of Kosovo (LDP) and Hashim Thaci's Democratic Party of Kosovo (KDP) were the two main parties. The ex-Kosovo Liberation Army (standing as the UCK) made very little impact at the polls. The Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) headed by Ramush Harainaj won eight seats. The Liberal Party of Kosovo (PLK) is quite prominent and attracts the support of intellectuals. Campaigning seemed fairly basic; rallies in the football stadium, lots of posters everywhere but without the sophistication of British advertising. Kosovars were astonished at how we campaign - canvassing, knocking up and direct mail - and felt that this was too intrusive for them (however they did appreciate some of the humour of our election stories!).

We went to the pre-election rally of the PDK - noisy but peaceful. It gave us a sense of how important this was - how many British voters would wait in the cold for several hours to listen to political speeches?

The winner of the election was clear - the LDK polled 46 per cent of the vote and got 47 seats although the system of seat allocation may mean they have to enter a coalition to get a clear majority in the 120-seat assembly. The KDP got 26 seats and 27 per cent of the vote. All the ethnic groups had set aside seats which means a level of representation, including 10 seats for the Serbs, four for the Kosovo Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian political entities, three for Kosovo Turkish, three for Kosovo Bosniacs and one for the Kosovo Gorani. This ensures over representation for these communities and therefore an incentive for their



The PDK rallies at a Pristina football stadium

participation. My polling station received a couple of votes for Serb parties and the shock amongst the polling centre staff was audible.

The Serbs planned to boycott the elections but ultimately committed to the process only a few days before the poll. Eventually one of the bishops came out to vote and to try to encourage others to do so - it partially worked - their turnout was very low. In Pristina Serbs had the opportunity to vote at home as special needs voters because many refuse to come out of their houses as the atmosphere is still very uncomfortable for them. Even prisoners were allowed to vote so that members of the opposition would not be arrested close to the day and denied a vote. Efforts were made to include voters in mental hospitals as well, by teams testing their competence - another model that perhaps the UK could look at.

Since the war in Kosovo ended in 1999, little has been heard in the mainstream media about how a civil and democratic society is being slowly rebuilt. These national assembly elections were a real step forward for self government and autonomy - the assembly will be able to pass laws and resolutions and be responsible for electing a president who nominates a prime minister. Other huge steps are being made with the international community and NGOs providing expertise and training.

However, there may be cause for concern in the future. The Kosovars want independence - most of the mainstream parties included this in their manifestos. If and when this can be achieved is open to serious debate, but it is a debate that has to take place sooner or later regardless of the outcome. Whatever the outcome of that debate, let's celebrate this major step on the democratisation process that they have taken.

# CAN OLDHAM MOVE ON FROM THE RIOTS

Asks Howard Sykes, who holds the Liberal Democrat council's regeneration and communities portfolio

Having your town on the front page of every national newspaper and subjected to comment from the entire media was the situation that faced Oldham earlier this year. All of it was less than complimentary, some of it was less than factual, and some was lies. But when did facts get in the way of a good story?

Our riots or civil disturbances certainly put Oldham and its Liberal Democrat council in the spotlight. One of the outcomes has been the establishment of an independent review, funded by the Home Office, to suggest ways forward.

I hope the review will add clarity to our many deep-rooted and longstanding problems and suggest practical and achievable action. A backward looking and 'finger pointing' report will contribute nothing.

The main areas for it to address are: regeneration; young people; residential, social, workplace and educational segregation; racial discrimination and prejudice; community leadership; resources.

There is a need to appreciate the complexity of, and interrelationship between, a multitude of factors. Any analysis which simply focuses on a single issue will be inadequate. What is needed is a report, which will provide a lead in policy terms, not just locally but nationally.

The council wants it to create a policy framework and long term programme for the regeneration of the borough which secures the commitment of central government, private sector investors, and most importantly, the people of Oldham.

It must also examine how to apply funding for regeneration in ways that are not divisive. Targeting regeneration resources into tightly defined geographical areas in accordance with the "rules" of Government and EU funding programmes has been very divisive. Recognition needs to be given to the enormous potential of young people, and addressing the implications of the growth in their numbers, particularly in central Oldham. This represents a major challenge in terms, for instance of education, training, jobs, housing, and leisure facilities.

How to create the policies and programmes required to tackle the problems arising from the lack of mixing in our communities is important; in the workplace and in schools (which is itself a result of residential segregation at primary if not secondary level).

We also want to develop a clear understanding across all our communities that people need to be able to use English fluently to achieve full economic and social inclusion, and also at how racial discrimination and

prejudice within our communities can be tackled most effectively.

The report also needs to advise on how the local authority can best play its leadership roles, and on how the necessary level of financial resources can be provided.

There are many areas of Oldham that still exhibit obvious signs of their nineteenth century origins, with poor quality building, at very high densities, which typified this period of development.

There is a shortage of "new" land suitable for development. There are considerable "brownfield" opportunities but almost all these sites require expensive treatment due to past mining activity and contamination. The weakness of the property market in the inner areas means that this treatment will frequently involve public intervention and indeed development itself may need support, the opportunities are well located with respect to the key transport connections, but the solutions to Oldham's problems do not all lie within the borough boundary.

Our economy, like that of many northern towns, was in the past heavily dependent on a narrow range of manufacturing industries. For many years, Oldham reigned as "King Cotton". Today, however, the traditional industries, which made Oldham a thriving town, have all but disappeared.

The employment structure is currently dominated by small businesses - in fact 71 per cent employ fewer than 10 people - and the borough has historically experienced a low rate of business formation. Local people, particularly young people, need a higher level of skills if they are to take advantage of a wider range of better paid jobs in Oldham and across the sub-region.

The inner areas of the Borough are characterised by densely packed terraced housing constructed in the late nineteenth century. Most was subject to successive improvement initiatives to extend its life, which bought time, but did not provide a lasting solution. Now, of the 40,000 terraced properties, 10,000 are classed as unfit. The great majority is privately owned, in areas where household incomes are low. Many are very overcrowded.

However, significant redevelopment could mean that communities will be disrupted by large scale housing clearance, and there could be resistance, in areas of new development as well as of clearance. There is a need for new affordable homes both for those who are displaced and to address current unmet demand.

There are large gaps between the cost/value of new homes and what local families can afford. The cost of redevelopment needs to be weighed against that of renovation. It can be four times as expensive to redevelop as to renovate. The difficulty in accommodating replacement housing should be recognised. Even with the higher densities now being required under planning policies, it is unlikely the density of new housing will match that in the existing terraced areas.

Oldham has proportionally more children and young people than does the country as a whole. This is particularly associated with central Oldham and with our Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. For example, the proportion of the population aged under 16 is 20 per cent in England and Wales, 23 per cent in Oldham as a whole, but 29 per cent in the wards of central Oldham.

The numbers of young people in Oldham are also on the increase, again linked to the growth of Oldham's Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. As a result, young people in Oldham are disproportionately of minority ethnic origin. Whereas, 13 per cent of people in Oldham are from minority ethnic groups, the proportion rises to 23 per cent among people aged under 25 years.

Oldham's ethnic minority communities are concentrated in a few neighbourhoods in the centre. While in many towns ethnic minority communities tend to live in specific areas, the level of residential segregation is particularly marked in Oldham. Academic research following the 1991 census identified Oldham's Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities as the most geographically concentrated minority communities in Britain.

In contrast, there are a number of large social housing estates in which the population is almost exclusively white.

In addition to issues surrounding physical segregation, there are gender segregation issues. These add further dimensions to the challenge of achieving integration. Asian women particularly can miss opportunities because of cultural reasons and as a result of a lack of English. Again, where Asian women do participate in community activities, these are largely limited to single sex, single ethnic origin activities.

Although the council leadership has a reasonable balance of males and females, the great majority of people in formal leadership positions elsewhere are male.

On the other hand, much informal, but essential, voluntary work within communities is undertaken by women. Of particular concern is the level of ethnic segregation in Oldham's primary schools, with some schools in central Oldham almost entirely containing children from a single ethnic group.

This restricts opportunities to mix with children with a different ethnic and cultural heritage, and can create problems when children make the transition to ethnically diverse secondary schools and as they experience the difficulties of adolescence.

At the secondary stage of education any analysis of the issues facing the Borough needs to take account of the impact of faith schools which attract higher ability students. By virtue of their criteria for selection such schools can also reduce opportunities for mixing between communities.

Use of the English language is key to raising achievement amongst pupils from ethnic minority communities. Any child is very disadvantaged if he/she is not fluent in English at the time of entering school. The majority of children from ethnic minority communities have little or no English at the time of first entering school.

There is significant evidence of racial discrimination and prejudice in Oldham. This is illustrated by, for example, an increase in racist incidents in recent years and the support expressed for political parties with an overtly racist agenda. The nature of the segregated communities in Oldham has allowed discrimination and prejudice to develop.

It must be recognised that its ability to respond to a set of recommendations will be constrained by its current financial position. At present the financial projections for 2002/03 indicate a deficit of £11.5m if an inflationary council tax increase is set. A significant package of savings and service reductions totalling £8.8m was approved for consultation in October. The impact of decisions, when they are taken, will be serious. Certain services will be discontinued or reduced. The position in relation to capital expenditure is no better.

In addition to the problems with private sector housing outlined earlier, there is a total backlog of £393m of repairs and major improvements to our public sector housing stock; a repair bill of approximately £48m in relation to schools, and the costs of tackling other worn out public assets and buildings.

# NOT FAR ENOUGH

Jon Ellis looks at the government's limited reforms to the 'welcome' given by the UK to asylum seekers

Not many things in life are certain. Yet one thing that seems ever more certain is the constant change in asylum and immigration law. There were Acts in 1993, 1996, 1999 and now, it looks highly likely, in 2002.

After months of promising of action on asylum, home secretary, David Blunkett, confirmed this trend by saying, "I do not intend to tinker with the existing system but to bring about fundamental reform."

And there was a lot to reform fundamentally - for example the much derided voucher system, and the dispersal system, which had ground to an almost complete collapse.

So much of the government's motivation behind the 1999 Act had appeared to be in deterring asylum seekers. Yet embarrassingly for the government the numbers of asylum seekers has risen since this act was introduced and the government has been forced to look beyond mere deterrents.

Indeed trying to deter asylum seekers using such policies as vouchers, is in direct contrast to the view of the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees. In October last year the UNHCR concluded that asylum seekers are drawn to a country more by a presence of their own community and the importance of language than by its reception standards.

So Blunkett's announcement to scrap asylum vouchers should be warmly welcomed. This system of supporting asylum seekers was shown to be unfair, stigmatising and bad for asylum seekers health. Furthermore the encouragement of stores to keep the change from these vouchers as an income generator must rate as one of the most shameful moves by this administration.

We are not out of the woods yet with this scheme. It will only be scrapped in the autumn of next year. In the short term vouchers are to be up-rated in line with income support and the cash allowance increased. But early signals from the Home Office sadly indicate that this change will not happen immediately. The home secretary has told Parliament that this change will happen in the short term, and he should be made to honour his word.

In the longer term the vouchers will be replaced with so-called 'smart cards'. Much more detail is required on this proposal but some points are clear. If these cards are used by asylum seekers to withdraw cash, or used as a debit card, then this move should be welcomed. Any attempt to use these cards as a way of further stigmatising asylum seekers should be firmly resisted. And the Home Office's record of using new technology does not inspire one with confidence for a rapid introduction of this proposal.

Despite the warm words of the home secretary, until these changes do occur asylum seekers will continue to suffer under the existing voucher system.

The dispersal system failed for many reasons but mainly due to a lack of resources and support facilities, an absence of choice for asylum seekers, a centralised control system and a poor state of readiness in some communities to deal with asylum seekers. It did not fail because dispersing asylum seekers into the community was fundamentally wrong.

The government has also announced its intention to streamline the right of appeal, limited to a point of law. The crucial factor here is that asylum seekers should have access to proper legal advice to help make their initial application. This should become a vital campaigning issue. It will test how committed the government is to a fair asylum application process.

Allied to this need for advice is the staggering number of asylum applications that are rejected for 'non-compliance' - not filling out correctly the complex form in English. Last year almost one third of applications were rejected for 'non-compliance'.

Many people struggle to make the deadline of 10 working days for this form. Pressure needs to be applied here for the government to do more to tackle this issue, and ensure that all asylum applications are judged with access to the full facts without waiting for these to be revealed at a later appeal stage. This need assumes an even greater importance with the government placing increasing more energy into its deportation policy.

The salient hope is that the government does not become obsessed with a bricks and mortar solution to dealing with asylum applications. Building new accommodation centres is not an alternative to improving the support for and speeding up the application process.

The abolition of vouchers is an undoubted success for those who want a fair deal for asylum seekers. The voucher scheme had no place in a civilised society - it was stigmatising and unfair and it is good news that it will be scrapped next year. But despite this welcome change there are some worrying signs about the future direction of the government's asylum policy. From seeking to deter they now seem keener to contain, and the consequences of the tragedy of 11 September have served only to reinforce this impression.

There remains a strong need to defend the human rights of asylum seekers - people who have fled persecution and who need our support - as a white paper is to be published in the autumn, with a bill the following spring, this is a clear challenge for the months ahead.



# SLEAZE NATION?

After yet another Labour scandal, should the Scottish Liberal Democrats remain in coalition, asks Highlands councillor Bernard Salmon

The departure of Henry McLeish as Scotland's first minister has once again raised questions about how Scotland's coalition government between Labour and the Liberal Democrats operates.

Jim Wallace became acting first minister for the third time, and according to one joke, he now gets to keep the title permanently. However, this does demonstrate that the stability in government that was promised by having a coalition in Scotland's first-ever democratic parliament has not been wholly achieved. This has partly been due to the tragic death of Donald Dewar, which no-one could have foreseen.

But the scandal surrounding McLeish is just one in a series of problems which has beset the coalition since 1999. We have had the John Rafferty affair, the Scottish Qualifications Authority fiasco, the controversy over the parliament building and now McLeish. If one wanted to be partisan about this series of misfortunes, one could legitimately lay the blame for all of these on the arrogance, incompetence and sleaze of Labour ministers.

By contrast, the positive things that the coalition has achieved have largely been the result of Liberal Democrat pressure.

We have secured the abolition of tuition fees and a restoration of grants to the poorest students. We have secured a commitment to free personal care for the elderly and disabled.

Our freedom of information regime is going to be a lot better than the one down in England. We achieved the abolition of Section 28, despite a vicious campaign and the wobbles of some Labour ministers (including McLeish).

In these circumstances, it is legitimate to ask whether continuing in government with Labour might drag us down as we approach the next elections to the Scottish Parliament in 2003.

If we are just seen as the junior partners of an incompetent and sleaze-ridden Labour administration, we might well suffer for it.

It might be argued in response to this that being in government with Labour did not do us any harm in the Westminster general election, where we had our best ever result in Scotland. This is a legitimate point. However, we cannot discount the possibility that people will vote differently in Holyrood elections than they do for Westminster.

Even if the coalition continues for now, there are other questions to be asked.

Prime among these is whether the coalition should continue through to May 2003 or whether there should be a period where we leave government but give support where appropriate to a minority Labour

government, to enable us to concentrate on campaigning effectively for the next elections. I would have no particular problem with such a course of action, although I can see the benefits of continuing in office right up until polling day.

This then leads on to the question of whether the coalition should seek to continue in office after the next election. In my view there should be no presumption that it should. Quite apart from anything else, the mathematics might not allow it.

Another objection to the assumption that the coalition should automatically continue is that the electoral politics will be tricky. It will be difficult to strike a balance between taking credit for the coalition's achievements and criticising Labour for their failures (and they will be trying to do the same to us).

However, the most fundamental objection to the coalition continuing automatically is that we do not know what policies will be in the respective party manifestos.

In my view, the only basis for the Liberal Democrats continuing as part of a coalition with Labour would be if a significant part of our manifesto is included in the Partnership Agreement, as it was last time.

If that is not the case, we should seek to implement as much of our programme as possible from the opposition benches or in partnership with another party, if agreement can be reached with one or more of them (unlikely, but not impossible).

This raises the question of what themes and policies the Scottish Liberal Democrats should be pursuing in the run-up to the elections. It will be no good just relying on our achievements in office, as people will quite rightly want to know what we will do next time.

In my view, the things we should be campaigning on include greater emphasis on environmental issues, more powers for local government (including a fundamental reform of finance and introduction of STV), greater support for the social economy and the voluntary sector, and issues relating to equality.

In addition, there are the old standbys of continued investment in health, education and transport.

If the Scottish party adopts these themes, we should ask whether that means that we should be pressing for a reallocation of departmental responsibilities.

Ross Finnie has done a good job as rural affairs minister and is popular with farmers, but perhaps we should consider switching to issues of more significance to urban voters, maybe by having him take over the social justice ministry.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats face a challenging time over the next 18 months and some serious thinking needs to be done to address these issues.

## PROJECT PROJECTILE

*Dear Liberator,*

John Tilley has an advantage over me (*Liberator* 277). As one who is on record as regarding 'The Project' as a strategy which was misconceived and ill executed I have not been able to get past the first 200 pages of the Ashdown diaries.

However as John's snide article implies things about me which are simply wrong, some of which reflect badly and erroneously on the Federal Conference Committee, I may have to try again. For now I want to start the long process of setting the record straight.

In the run up to the Southport conference, Paddy had been pushing the party for a blank cheque to pursue co-operation with Blair and at a legendary Federal Policy Committee meeting a challenge was mounted.

I'm miffed to be omitted from the list of troublemakers, as I recall making the point strongly that losing our credibility on tuition fees was not worth a weak offer on electoral reform for the Euro elections. It is a view I still hold.

The meeting on 18 September was not "to discuss how to ride off" resolutions Paddy did not like. It was speech meeting. It is no secret that I was one of a team of people who contributed over many years to Paddy's speeches. I did not always agree with the end result entirely, and, as one of the few anti-Project people involved, I often counted my success in terms of things taken out rather than included.

As chair of the FCC I freely admit that I did, and still do, go to see the leader before each conference. Conversation ranges from what is on the agenda to more mundane subjects like timings and arrangements for particular events. There is nothing sinister about it and if we learned only one thing from the drugs and monarchy debacles it is that it is better to talk to the leader before the conference than after a media disaster.

It is also true that on the way up to Southport I ended up negotiating with Ashdown and Donnachadh McCarthy about the text of the strategy resolution. David Howarth had tabled his amendment, and throughout the preceding weeks whenever he was asked what his bottom line was he would reply

# LETTERS

"we're negotiating". The trouble was it was not clear just who was negotiating with whom and by default as the person chairing the debate the task fell to me.

It is not a role I would have chosen, although I am not the first chair of a conference debate to find themselves in that position, and I guess I will not be the last. Members of the FCC start from the position that anyone who has submitted a motion or amendment has the right to stick to their text if it has been selected for debate. However, we do from time to time become involved in discussions about texts and composites, usually in order to enable conference to get to a position which representatives actually want. Will anyone devote diary space to the lengthy negotiations over regional airport policy and revision of licensing laws I ask myself? If they do FCC T-shirts are available.

So it came to pass that I ended up at a phone box in Lime Street station alternately ringing Paddy and Donnachadh trying to reach a compromise which both, and I stress both, were seeking. Relentless note taking is one of Donnachadh's stock tactics so I am sure it is all recorded for posterity.

Was I wrong to act in the role of intermediary? Technically, maybe. However, the result was not just a form of words up with which both sides felt they could put; it was time in which scepticism about the Project grew.

Moreover, Paddy did not carry out his threat to resign. Had he done so abruptly after Southport I think the party would have been damaged and would not have done as well as it did in the subsequent Euro and general election campaigns. I also think that the aftermath of the Project would

have hobbled us as a party for longer than it did. All in all I do not regret being the go-between.

As to the debate itself, the decision about whom to call was informed by my aide Mark Pack but was mine alone. The same goes for the women's debate at Bournemouth this year despite recent allegations to the contrary on Cix. At Southport I was not lobbied by anyone, I did not consult anybody and I defy anyone who sat through that debate to prove that it was not fairly balanced.

John's observation about me being offered a peerage seems to imply that it was given for being an obedient FCC chair. Not over Southport it wasn't, nor can I think of any other incident which would justify that interpretation.

I do not know why Paddy made an offer so unlikely that my initial reaction was to laugh. I never asked. There were more important considerations such as, is it a job worth doing and is it possible to be a 'working' working peer. The chance to tackle issues such as pensioner poverty means the answer to the former is yes, but on the latter the jury is still out.

John's article confirms my thought that the true history of that period will not be fully known until other people produce their memoirs. When they do the real story of the battles between those who encouraged Ashdown's fantastic expectations of Blair and those who pulled Paddy back from the brink will make fascinating reading, not least for the definitive, surprising list of whom was in each camp.

*Liz Barker  
Chair, Liberal Democrat Federal  
Conference Committee*

We welcome letters by post, or by email to [collective@liberator.org.uk](mailto:collective@liberator.org.uk)

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## MODERATE REALLY

**Dear Liberator,**

Your Radical Bulletin piece on the conference debate on all-women shortlists (Liberator 277) sounds as if it were written by Marie Antoinette - not one of Liberator's regular literary models.

The party has no trouble in finding a fair proportion of women councillors, and even of council leaders. It has no trouble finding an adequate proportion of parliamentary candidates.

It is only when the seat becomes winnable that the chances of a woman being selected suddenly fall to a level which any serious believer in the laws of probability will find difficult to ascribe to chance.

The struggle for the equality of women has been in progress for 150 years, and has in theory been won. It is deeply discouraging to women who aspire to a parliamentary seat to find that it probably has another 150 years to run before it is fully successful - I doubt whether many of them expect to live so long.

I would of course have advised any of these women against wrecking tactics, but only those who have made no effort to listen to the past 10 years' debate can claim to be surprised. The women concerned, like Clive, are entitled to stand astonished at their own moderation.

*Conrad Russell  
House of Lords*

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## SIMPLY THE BEST

**Dear Liberator,**

Simon Titley's examination (Liberator 277) of a robust "real world" liberalism that doesn't equivocate when faced with illiberal totalitarianism, and which advanced the case for a prouder, more bullish assertion that "we've got it right", might well have been the best and most important thing I've read from a Liberal thinker in a very long time.

*Stephen Yolland  
Melbourne Australia*

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## RIGHT ALL ALONG

**Dear Liberator,**

A councillor Gillard has left the Tories to join the Liberal Democrats, claiming the reason is that the Tories are now led by a right wing leader. So what was Mrs Thatcher? Sweetness and light?

The fact is that each time councillors and MPs switch parties without going back to the voters they bring politics into disrepute. Of course no one party will reject defectors, so what we need is legislation that, if councillors or MPs leave one party to join another, there should be an automatic by-election.

Otherwise, we should not be surprised if people do not vote for candidates knowing their political allegiance is wafer thin.

*Steve Radford  
Liberal Party*

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## WIRRAL TOO BIG

**Dear Liberator,**

Tony Bevis agrees in a worrying sort of way with Simon Titley's view in his "Effective Opposition?" article (Liberator 275) that "traditional community politics is unable to cope with the increasing numbers of voters who do not have roots in their geographical community...they don't read the local press and they aren't interested in the parochial issues in 'Focus' leaflets."

I've been worrying about local government ever since Heath caught the "giantism" bug in 1972.

Here's a quote from my 1994 pamphlet *A Seamless Society*: "In the light of (a) a population more highly educated and, politically and environmentally, more aware than ever before; and (b) "global village" technology which now offers everyone instant access to every sort of information, the ward/parish has, once again, become a viable civic unit of truly local democratic government, capable of providing its own social and many other services if funding is also allocated to ward/parish level".

Our council team have asked me to research the benefits that might accrue to our Wirral population if the metropolitan council conceded parish status to some if not all its wards.

One has only to look at Part II of the Local Government and Rating Act 1997 which sets out the procedures for securing parish councils to see that we're in upside-down Alice in Wonderland territory.

In her second term Ma Thatcher at a stroke, either of genius or pure petulance towards her predecessor, Sir Edward, got rid of his

metropolitan county councils. Merseyside's was one of them, leaving Wirralians schizoid about the geographical county they belong to - Cheshire or Merseyside - and a great number saying "what the hell either way"; an identity crisis that continues to put paid to raising civic awareness, never mind pride and responsibility.

And that certainly applies in the case of these left over gargantuan authorities. They are neither local nor have real autonomy, and are seen by central government as its agents, and by "big business", national and supranational megaliths, as ideal partners in farming out long-term and highly lucrative contracts.

Putting parishes under the hegemony of unitary authorities is like putting falcons in charge of finches. Talk about feathering nests! Liberalism demands that we get democracy local, accountable, open and responsible.

*Eric Copestake  
Wirral*

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## NO TIME WASTED

**Dear Liberator,**

While I am grateful to Bob Pritchard for responding to my article (Liberator 277) I am surprised that he has resorted to a highly inaccurate personal attack.

He is right to draw attention to the relative success of the party in Leicester. Having worked in every set of local elections in Leicester since 1983 I know how much hard work has gone in going from no councillors in 1983 to 16 in 1999.

Bob may consider that my having been a PPC twice and a

European candidate once a "waste" compared to being a councillor.

However I cannot recall him mentioning this when I ran victorious election campaigns in 1996 first in the St Augustines ward then in North Braunstone. Both these victories were firsts for the Lib Dems in Leicester. St Augustines being the first time Lib Dems had recaptured seats lost to Labour, and North Braunstone being the first ever by-election Labour had ever lost to either the Lib Dems, Liberals SDP or Whigs etc.

I am proud of my track record as a campaigner in

Leicester and elsewhere and am arrogant enough to believe it stands comparison with the best in the party.

If I had won a council seat as a candidate in either 1987 1989, 1996 and 1999 (yes Bob I was a candidate twice after 1989 check your facts) its difficult to see what more I could realistically have contributed to the local or national party.

To claim that I “disappeared” after the 1999 local elections is simply untrue as I attended meetings of the local party and the council group where I raised repeatedly the need for extra press coverage. I also worked full time on the party leadership campaign and helped edit the local party newsletter. I have not attended meetings since January 2000 because I am no longer a member of the party. My offer to help two of the Leicester general election candidates plan their campaigns was not taken up.

Bob’s claims that the council group in Leicester have won “successful” campaigns is broadly true. The group has from time to time had significant coverage for a few weeks either side of the budget

but then little or nothing for ten months of the year.

The Bob Pritchard I have known for nearly 20 years has always struck me as a person with broad horizons. To claim that someone who has worked consistently for the party, sometimes in a leadership role often quietly behind the scenes, has “wasted” their time talents etc because they never became a councillor reflects the myopia that inflicts to many Lib Dem councillors and council groups.

Mark Jones  
Leicester

inner city issues cam across as a broad theme.

At a stage when it would still have been possible to keep Mark in the Liberal Democrats, who was not listening, and why?

A group of serving councillors, Bob among them, were all undoubtedly busy, but they should never have been so loaded down with casework and so forth that they were not prepared for some real and robust internal debate.

By February 2000, which Mark clearly regards as the watershed, it was too late. People do not generally leave without huge frustration built up over many months or years.

In return, Bob says roughly that Mark appeared unprepared to do the work that would address the problems (a point on which I cannot comment) and uses the terms ‘Ann Widdecombe’ and ‘gadfly’; a mixed compliment indeed. Perhaps it would have been more rigorous and relevant for Bob to ask why on earth Mark ended up with Plaid Cymru, which is arguably stronger on rural issues than urban ones.

Kate Smith  
Amber Valley

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## WHO LISTENED?

*Dear Liberator,*

I was interested in the interaction between Mark Jones and Bob Pritchard (Liberators 276 and 277) although I do not know either of them.

At some stage before February 2000, Mark will have felt he had points to make which were not being heard. One of the more unsatisfactory aspects of his piece was that it was not always made fully explicit what these points were, though addressing poverty and

So the animals  
form a pyramid,  
And Tim climbs  
up to the top.



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**A Somerset Pomona,  
the Cider Apples of  
Somerset**  
by Liz Copas  
The Dovecote Press  
2001 £9.95

Any seasoned scrumper knows that cider apples are inedible, which perhaps accounts for their neglect in books on the fruit. Thus it is a complete joy to come across the likes of Slack-ma-girdle or Pople's Gutter Apple and Brown Snout... what a delight it would be if cider manufacturers were to inform us of the fruits they use as purveyors of the vine frequently do.

In an attractive book, Liz Copas, who is orcharding advisor to the National Association of Cider Makers, gives details of the history each apple, its identification and cider-making properties. From the line drawings, it may be difficult to differentiate between a Court Royal and a Dunkerton's Late, though the photographs of the 80 surviving species would help.

*Stewart Rayment*

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**Perspectives on  
Social Exclusion**  
edited by Mike Waite  
New Politics Network, 6  
Cynthia Street London  
N1 9JF 2001 £7.50

This pamphlet from the New Politics Network is a good agenda setter for the New Labour Government second term. 'Social exclusion' is, to be fair, a concept that was really invented or popularised by New Labour figures and, as highlighted in the Foreword by Peter Facey, "initiatives to address social exclusion and poverty were important in the first term of Labour's government." It may not be an aim of this paper, but in fact there is a huge amount of agreement among everyone working in the worst affected areas over what needs to be done. Poverty and social exclusion exist in every area, of course, but Mike Waite highlights the Northern urban areas in which many social problems are concentrated. The 'snapshots of exclusion' (p. ii) are certainly familiar to those of us in the North and the same situations occur in any of the big cities. In a country where most people do appear to have

# REVIEWS

videos, playstations and foreign holidays there can be debates over what is meant by poverty and how many people really are in poverty today. It is refreshing that Mike Waite picks some old fashioned examples to show that the problem still exists:

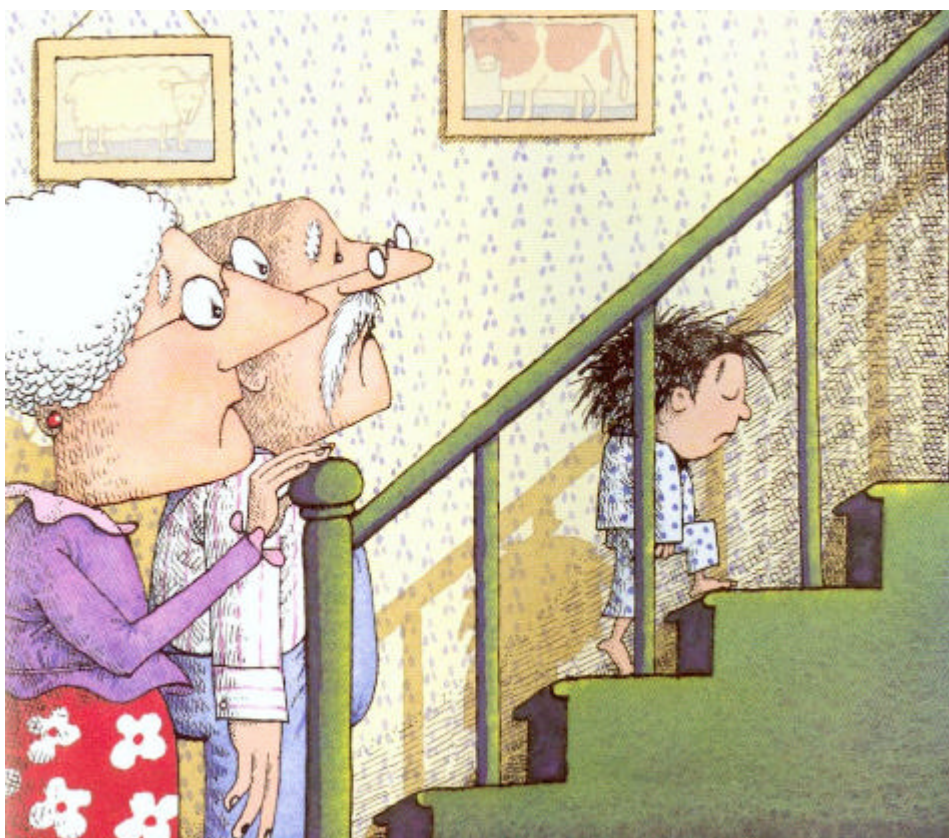
More than two million children go without basic necessities, such as shoes that fit, a waterproof coat, a warm house, or three meals a day.

The work of the Social Exclusion Unit, the Urban Task force with Lord Rogers' report, the Crime and Disorder Unit at the Home Office, all these highlight problems and encourage debate about solutions. The Government is targeting money into trying to support or rebuild sustainable communities. Genuine partnerships have probably increased exponentially since they

were encouraged, by the Conservatives originally, in the 1980s.

But local government does not have the real freedom or power it needs to make real change. Therefore bringing together an impressive range of people such as the contributors here should help put some pressure on Government. Those people include our very own hero, Conrad Russell (academic, philosopher, orator, anti-poverty campaigner, historian and partisan of smoking far too much and far too much sugar in his tea). Jean Lambert is here, and Rodney Bickerstaffe. So are key figures from Scotland and Wales and from voluntary sector, key campaigning organisations and pressure groups.

Refugee and asylum seekers issues are dealt with not just as an



add on but as an integral part of the work, which is good. A dozen short chapters easy to read for people who want a flavour of the current ideas, problems and thinking. Much will support what one already knows. The paper represents nearly every perspective, except the Conservatives. The chapter on 'politics excluded' is genuinely interesting instead of just the same attack on politicians or concern about voter apathy. It doesn't give solutions - which is probably the situation that most of us are in that we don't know what the 'solutions' are.

The exclusion of Conservatives is not just because that Party appears to be so much more extreme nowadays as a totality than it was in the past. "The New Politics Network works with parties and groups across the centre-left in British and European politics, providing a refreshing and practical view of the issues shaping the new political landscape." I am told that it is a continuation of the old Democratic Left. I've never had much time for communists but I always liked Democratic Left with their support for tactical voting and green issues. I didn't realise until fellow Liverpool (but Labour) councillor Steve Mumby pointed out to me, that these were the people who co-supported the very effective tactical voting movement headed up by Billy Bragg. It is good to see young (ish) people like Peter Facey (the Director) given positions where they can have an influence on political debate. It's always interesting where old Liberal Democrat youth and student executive members end up. But as he says "the purpose of our publication is to encourage further thought, leading to actions". I think they will do it.

*Kiron Reid*

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## **Heroin: the failure of prohibition and what to do now**

**Francis Wilkinson  
Centre for Reform £8**

Legalise heroin? Yes, this is the difficult drug. The argument on decriminalising cannabis has been largely won, a senior police officer has said that he will not waste his officers' time in persecuting

recreational cocaine users. But heroin is seen as irredeemably unpleasant and dangerous, so many will argue that it should stay illegal.

Wilkinson, a former chief constable of Gwent, mounts a devastating account of the supreme pointlessness of the UK's present drug policies, as does Sir David Ramsbotham in his foreword.

Ramsbotham introduced mandatory drug testing to the army, and took the same hard line to his job as chief inspector of prisons. He now admits he was wrong on both occasions.

He writes: "I came to the conclusion that there were distinct similarities with prohibition in America, which was a conspicuous failure. Current prohibitive policies are not working...indeed they could be said to be creating more misery and problems than they solve." Wilkinson's analysis suggests Britain's laws intended to limit drug use have instead fostered a huge growth in heroin use and in organised crime because of the futility of trying to ban any product which a significant number of people wish to obtain.

"There is surely no doubt that the effective regulation of the drug market in the UK would be by far the most effective crime prevention measure any government could take," he says.

It must be significant that much of the pressure for decriminalisation or legalisation of drugs comes from police officers, and others like Ramsbotham, who, unlike most moralising politicians, have seen the problems from the sharp end. At present they are outriders in the drugs debate, but the rate of change seems to be rapid.

*Mark Smulian*

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## **Must the State Always Provide?**

**Chris Fox and Simon Taylor eds  
ProBono Publications**

This pamphlet by Liberalfuture contains six essays with proposals for public services, which the authors claim to be practical solutions. The introduction claims that the pamphlet sets out to examine how public services can be reinvented to meet contemporary needs. While setting out a case for

change, it ignores the context within which the debate has arisen. There is no mention of the reluctance of governments to put the case for increased taxation to improve public services or the increasing pressure from big corporations to gain a foothold in public service provision.

Charles Anglin sets out five principles for service delivery in an essay full of buzzwords such as 'empowerment', but short on concrete proposals. While some of his ideas such as universal access and equality of treatment are uncontroversial (at least in our party), there are contradictions between some of the others, particularly between local accountability and consumer control of choice of provision.

Mark Oaten offers a few ideas on the health service, mentioning the increasing use of contracting out. Simon Taylor criticises what he describes as the fallacy of public sector monopoly in the NHS and points out the excellent not-for-profit public services that are not run by the state. However, he adopts the "all professions are conspiracies against the laity" approach.

Chris Fox has constructed a framework for partnerships between public and state schools that would permit tax deductibility for public school fees for schools that had explicit partnerships with state schools, with verification through Ofsted. This is a rather bureaucratic version of a scheme suggested by Don Foster several years ago, but it is potentially divisive between those state schools with a partner, and those without.

Hugh Dykes' contribution gives the impression of the editors having sought a token contribution about an example of a privatised service brought back under public ownership to show that they are open minded.

His essay suggests a method of placing Railtrack under some form of public ownership in a manner that is probably the only feasible method, and that will probably be adopted anyway. The last essay, also by Chris Fox, is also heavily laden with the 'empowerment' buzzword and brings in the producer label to describe public sector employees, but thankfully uses the term 'user' rather than 'consumer' in an essay that adopts a confrontational

approach to service providers and their clients.

The authors appear to have little knowledge of Liberal history. The only reference to a past system is Fox's one to hospital almoners. There is no mention of the Liberal progressive tradition which brought in public health, or of those who regarded municipalisation as the only effective means of ensuring accountability to the electorate rather than an elected oligarchy.

Surprisingly, the pamphlet does not seriously attempt to think the unthinkable. It does not adopt an ultra radical approach. As it suggests, these are modest proposals, which with the exception of Dykes' essay tend to seek change for change's sake.

The antipathy towards public sector employees and professions that appears in much of the pamphlet is not the best way to bring about change with their co-operation.

Employee interests are regarded as vested interests, yet the commercial interests of potential service providers are not. The buzzword 'empowerment' may be a euphemism for telling people that if they want something done, they should do it themselves.

*Andrew Hudson*

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## Poetry For Palestine 2001

**Anthology from Agnes  
Meadows 1 Lockhart  
Street, London E3 4BL  
£6.50 incl p&p**

'I didn't know poetry could be like this,' the young Palestinian woman exclaimed, eyes shining with excitement.

If anybody had come to the 'Poetry for Palestine 2001' Benefit expecting sedate poems about daffodils or Greek urns, then they were in for a big surprise!

This was poetry with its hair down and a wicked glint in its eyes. This was poetry that took the skin off your heart, wrung the tears from your eyes, and then made you laugh out loud. This was poetry about love, about promises and broken dreams, about freedom and human rights - a celebration of life, a loud-voiced protest against war and

oppression. Daffodils quite simply didn't get a look in!

Following the success of last year's 'Poetry for Palestine', and the number of people who had been fired up by it, it seemed like a good idea to do the whole thing all over again.

Never mind the sleepless nights, the endless hours in front of my computer or on the telephone setting the whole thing up. So my fellow poet Casey and I sent out another *cris de coeur* to the poetic community in the UK, 'OK you guys, don't just sit at home in front of the tv moaning about injustice - come and support us!'

A challenge like this couldn't go unanswered. Within days we were overwhelmed by a flood-tide of enthusiasm, all the more extraordinary because arrangements coincided exactly with the events of September 11th in New York.

For one brief and dark moment we thought maybe we should cancel the whole thing.

But then we decided that people needed an event like this even more, to show the positive and creative face of support for the people of Palestine. This sentiment was clearly shared, because over two nights a total of 43 poets and singers gave us their voices and their words. At West London's gorgeous Kufa Gallery - an exhibition space specialising in paintings and work from Arab artists - on 2nd and 3rd November, they came and they rocked. We had performers from all over the UK, both famous poets and fresh untried poets, in an extraordinary display of raw talent, and genuine word power.

Dozens of poets of every possible culture, description, background and persuasion joined in and made the rafters ring with their words. Osagyefo, a Jamaican-born poet had flown in that very morning from New York and was determined to perform even though he was half blind with lack of sleep and jet lag. Benjamin Zephaniah sent a kind note saying he was touring elsewhere and therefore could only be with us in spirit, but he donated a poem to the 'Poetry for Palestine 2001 Instant Anthology'. Singer and poet Paul Cowlam had come from Germany, and sang about freedom and broken hearts. Nigerian-born Casey Abaraonye, working with Irish poet Niall O'Sullivan and James

Byrne from the UK performed an extraordinary three-voice poem condemning oppression and brutality wherever it is found - soft voices, hard messages. Charlotte Ansell read poignantly about refugees, while soul singer J B Rose gave us love songs that made us cry and shout at the same time.

It was as if we were a necklace of words and music, each one of us shining and different, but together making something extraordinary and beautiful.

This year's P4P Instant Anthology contained 38 poems by poets from literally all over the UK, the US and other parts of the world, and once again was an instant success.

This time we managed to raise around £1,600, to be shared equally between the INAD Community Theatre, still operating even though the theatre itself has been completely destroyed, and the Gaza Community Mental Health Project children's programmes.

That money will help some of those kids have a few hours of normality in a world gone crazy with violence and despair.

But our poetry and our sharing on those two extraordinary nights was not only about money. It was also shouting out loud, across miles and continents that the children in Palestine haven't been forgotten, and that despite messages to the contrary from others, there are a growing number of people in the UK who care.

"I didn't know poetry could be like this," said the young Palestinian woman, eyes shining with excitement. "Next time I'll bring all my friends."

I'd better start planning for 2002 now. And I still won't include any daffodils!

*Agnes Meadows*

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**Where's Tim's Ted?  
by Ian Whybrow  
illustrated by Russell  
Ayto  
Collins Picture Lions  
2000 £ 4.99**

Well, there could be worse fates for Social Democracy... they could end up tucked up with Blair after all, and it just goes to show what a little bit of inter-species cooperation can achieve. A charming little book.

*Stewart Rayment*

## Monday

Alarming reports reach me from Winchester, and I hurry to Hampshire to investigate. The position turns out to be just as I had been led to understand: the city's MP, Mark Oaten, has convinced himself that he is a Red Indian brave and insists upon being called "Rising Star" by his constituents. Far worse, his politics have taken a lurch to the right, as evinced by the following extract from his newsletter *Um Focus*: "Rising Star want to close um school. If um school close, Rising Star make heap big tax cuts. Winchester voters heap likum. Rising Star be new big chief." To be fair, it does go on to point out that "Rising Star even come round in war canoe when heap big rains come," but I am not sure that this is the approach likely to be endorsed by the party's review of policy.

## Tuesday

Did you see Paddy Ashplant on *This Is Your Life*? What fun it was! One never knew who would turn up next: neither, one suspects, did Mr Ashtray. I was reminded of my own appearance on the show many years ago. I thought I had been invited to address a gala luncheon in aid of distressed canvassers and was halfway through an anecdote about the Master of Elibank when Eamon Andrews leapt out with his red book. I thought at first he was from the Inland Revenue, but the misunderstanding was soon cleared up. Unfortunately, the Dalai Lama and Dora Bryan fell to fisticuffs in the hospitality room during the broadcast, and in all honesty I would not have been heartbroken if they had allowed the first Lady Bonkers to continue with her exploration of the Orinoco rather than bring her on stage at the end. Fortunately, I was able to escape through a window in the gentlemen's lavatory and found a taxi almost at once - I am told that it made very good television.

## Wednesday

The morning post provides its usual diversion: a letter asking me to help a party of trainspotters being held in the Jack Straw Memorial Reform School, Dungeness, and another, scratched on bark with the tip of an arrow, inviting me to a day's buffalo hunting by the banks of the Snake River. Unfortunately I have, if you will, heap full diary and am obliged to decline. Talking of correspondence, have you tried the new electric e-mail? It is the latest thing and really is Most Terribly Clever. Should any of my readers wish to write to me, I can be found at [bonkers.hall@btinternet.com](mailto:bonkers.hall@btinternet.com), and promise to lend a sympathetic ear to letters of praise or requests for advice.

## Thursday

People talk a great deal about Prince Harry, but I think you will find that the Eton wall game is but a tame copy of its Rutland cousin. This afternoon sees the annual Oakham vs Uppingham match, which brings together our two largest cities in sporting combat. I sing "Up Up Uppingham!" with the best of them, and the game goes well: our doughty team succeeds in immuring two of the Oakham backs, the first time this has happened, as John Motson points out, since 1927. Keen students of the game will know that not a single goal has been scored in the history

# Lord Bonkers' Diary

of this tie. This is not just because it would be considered Bad Form, but also because the ground was sacked by Oliver Cromwell in 1651 and the goalposts burnt to the ground. Being great ones for tradition, we have never seen fit to erect a new set. The loss of the last ball in the closing years of Victoria's reign also had its effect.

## Friday

Do you know Peter Hain? He used to think himself something of an expert on rugby football - though I should have liked to have seen him attempt to stop the first Lady Bonkers going over from a five-yard scrum. Now he fancies himself an expert on armed conflict: "Nasty things," he tells us, "happen in war." To which one can but reply: they do when

Mr Hain has charge of it. Since when has it been within the rules of war to bomb prisoners of war? In my day they would be treated decently, but kept safely *hors de combat*. Some would pass their time building gliders or tunnelling from beneath a wooden horse whilst chaps in footer bags vaulted overhead: others would dress up in women's clothes, paint their faces and put on musical shows. However they chose to spend their days in captivity, they were not troubled by the enemy's air force. Hain, you will recall, decided one day that he was not a Liberal but a Socialist; consequently, he joined the Labour Party and wrote a book to tell his new-found comrades all about the meaning of Socialism (one trusts they were suitably grateful). Later he must have decided that he was not a Socialist either, for he joined the New Party at its inception. One is left to reflect that it is felicitous that Hain should have decided to leave the Liberal party: it has saved us the trouble of throwing the fellow out.

## Saturday

How times change! When I was a boy all the land on the Bonkers Estate was given over to fields. As it happens, it is all given over to fields today, but you take my point.

## Sunday

Cast your eyes a little further down the page, gentle reader, and you will see what is known in the publishing trade as a footnote. It gives a severely potted account of my career (I refer you to *Who's Who* in the Liberal Democrats for a juicier curriculum vitae) and rather overstates little Calder's part in proceedings, but let that pass. As has been pointed out to me by a Mr Bunting, for the past two months I have been described as "Liberal Democrat" MP for Rutland South-West. As the aforementioned Bunting remarks, one should not rewrite history in this way. Of course, in those days one's party affiliation did not appear upon the ballot: a friend of mine attempted to use this to his advantage by promoting himself as a Conservative in one village and a Radical in the next. It worked, inasmuch as it got him elected to Parliament, but he never could decide where to sit when he got there. So let there be no more of this nonsense: we Bonkers have always been Liberals and always will be.

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Lord Bonkers, who opened his diary to Jonathan Calder, was Liberal MP for Rutland South-West 1906-10

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