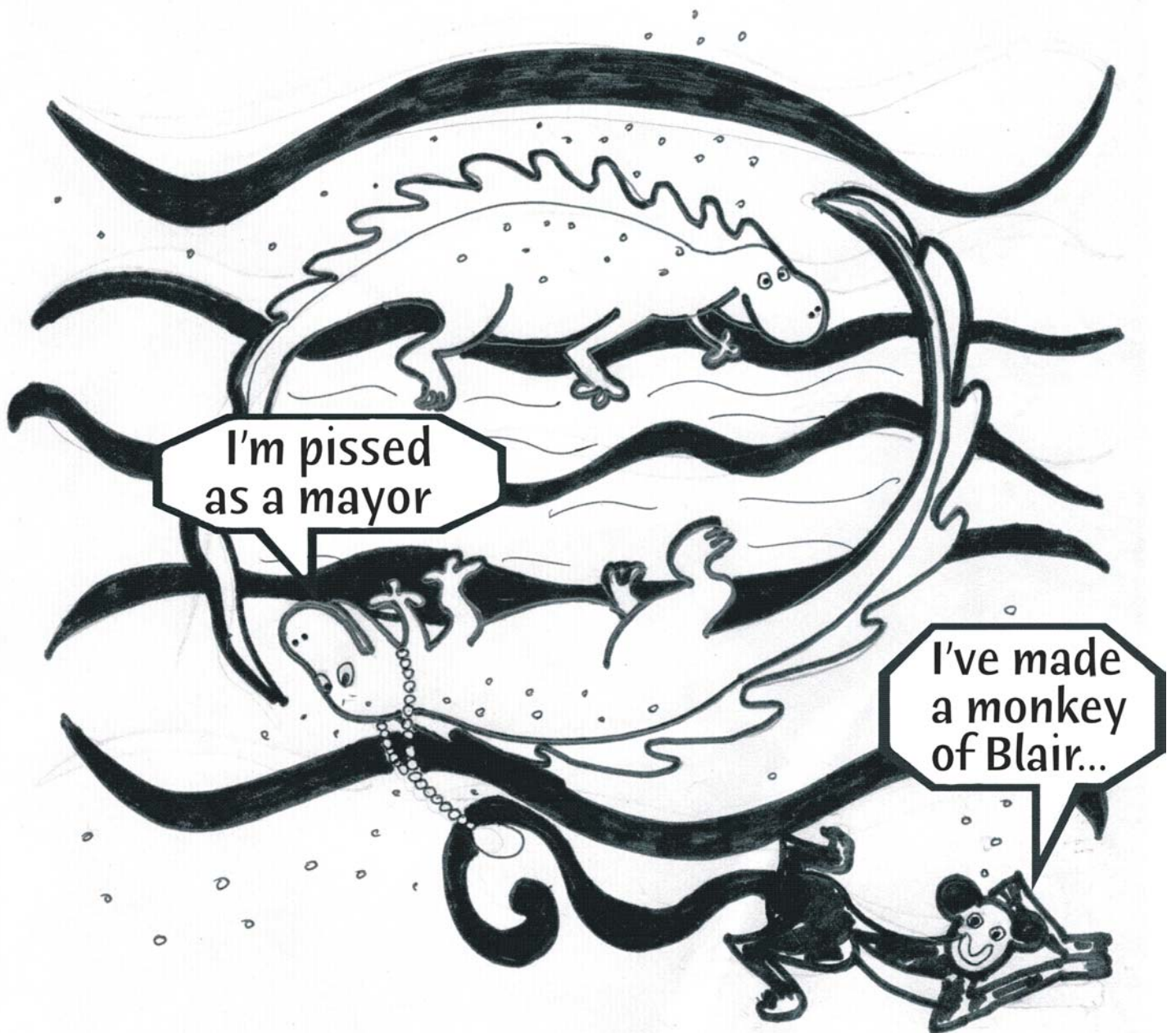


liberator



In this issue

- 💣 ***Why Europe's far right has revived - Simon Titley***
- 💣 ***The system not the sexism - Martin Tod***
- 💣 ***Co-operative solutions - Gareth Epps***
- 💣 ***How GM invades our food - Donnachadh McCarthy***

CONTENTS

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Commentary 3

☛ **Radical Bulletin** 4..5

TURN RIGHT FOR DEFEAT 6..7

Supporters of more private sector involvement in public services are so busy looking at 'blue skies' that they cannot see the answer before them, argues Alistair Carmichael, MP for Orkney and Shetland and a founder of the Beveridge Group

SYSTEM NOT SEXISM 8..9

The Liberal Democrats have too few female MPs, but not because of sex discrimination, argues Martin Tod

MAKING A MONKEY OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY . . 10..11

Gimmicky new voting methods dodge the real issues behind the decline in local election turnout, argues Mark Smulian

SPRINGTIME FOR HITLER? 12..14

Recent elections in France and the Netherlands have highlighted the revival of the far right in Europe. Simon Titley examines the causes and considers a Liberal response

THE DEFENCE OF APATHY 15

Matthew Platts argues that political inaction sometimes has more effect than political action

MUTUAL FUTURE 16..17

Gareth Epps reflects back on recent discussions on the relationship between Liberalism, mutualism and the cooperative movement, and draws a map for the public services debate

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT 18..19

The Liberal Democrats are due to vote on GM foods in September. The right to grow and eat organic food is more important than the right of multinationals to grow GM crops, says Donnachadh McCarthy

Letters 20..21

Reviews 22..23

Lord Bonkers' Diary 20

COMMENTARY

WE'VE GOT YOUR NUMBER

Short of allowing arbitrary detention without trial (and give David Blunkett time on that one) it is hard to imagine any more dangerous assault on civil liberty than Labour's e-mail snooping proposals.

As Liberator went to press these had been withdrawn in the face of outrage in the press and a threat by Liberal Democrat and Conservative peers to throw them out.

They will no doubt return with trivial modifications and be slipped through on a day that looks good for burying bad news, unless the pressure is kept up.

At least the threat of hostilities in the Lords could still be made - if the government had had its way the upper house would be stuffed full of party leaders' cronies, many of them, no doubt, lavish donors to Labour.

If Labour's snooping proposals had gone through on the nod as an obscure regulation, as Blunkett had intended, pretty well every official body in the country would have been able to sequester the e-mail and telephone records of anyone they pleased, without any need for a court order.

Not the least of the threats in this would have been the power for Labour activists in Labour-controlled local authorities to snoop on their political opponents.

The fact that Labour wanted to take these Orwellian powers on the quiet tells us a good deal about what a dangerous enemy of liberty it has become.

One reason why Labour tried this is that it thought doing so would play well in the tabloids. It would generate some headlines about 'cracking down', 'taking firm action', 'getting tough on crime' and so forth, that would buy Labour another few months of ineffectual grandstanding before the electorate starts to rumble the government.

Even worse is the possibility that Labour really believes that all public bodies are benign and responsible, and never abuse their powers.

But sadly this episode was not a surprise. If there is any contest between liberty and authority, Labour always comes down on the side of authoritarians.

It would, in passing, be interesting to know what those naive and deluded Liberal Democrat 'project' supporters now make of their claim that Blair was 'a sort of liberal'.

The effects of the authoritarian streak that always ran through Labour are being made worse by Blair's refusal to ever confront populist opinion.

A government elected twice running with a colossal majority ought to be in a position to lead, rather than follow, public opinion. Whether, perhaps, in garnering support for effective solutions to crime, rather than simplistic 'lock 'em up' approaches, or by arguing the

view that the UK workforce will need immigrants, rather than stoking racial hatred of asylum seekers, Labour ought to be in a position of some strength and authority to challenge saloon bar wisdom.

Instead it goes along with it. While the Thatcher government cared little about what appeared in hostile newspapers, Labour cannot accept that the Daily Mail and Telegraph speak for people who disagree with it, and that these titles will always support the Tories because their readers do so.

Instead Blair leads an undignified grovelling at the feet of his political enemies to the despair of those who might once have been his friends.

Never once in his career has Blair tried to lead public opinion, only to follow it. Thus if the Tory tabloids say 'something must be done' about crime, Blair obligingly unveils plans to snoop on the entire nation's phone and e-mail records, instead of facing down his opponents' propaganda.

Moral cowardice is the defining feature of New Labour and its leader. It is also why it remains highly unlikely that the UK will enter the euro in the foreseeable future.

To counter years of nationalist bile, a determined campaign led clearly by a prime minister with a large mandate and moral authority would be needed to take on and defeat the emotional flag-waving of the 'keep the pound' brigade. That prime minister would need to risk unpopularity in a cause which he believed to be worth winning.

Blair has never risked unpopularity, never countered the Tory tabloids, and never tried to lead opinion when he had the option of following it.

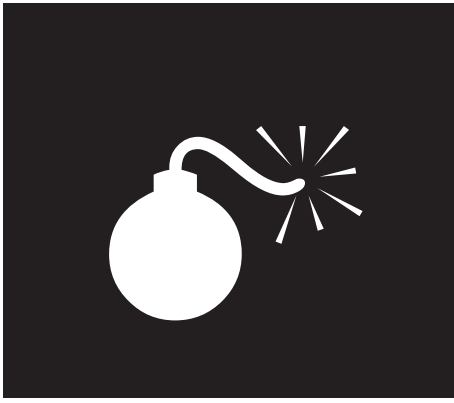
The pound, ironically, is probably perfectly safe with a government that has never once got off its knees long enough to take on right-wing populism.

MISSING, IN ACTION?

Summer is here, and politics will soon take a break until the conference season. Liberal Democrats could use some of their holiday to think about how the party can take the initiative against a government held in declining popularity and little affection, and a main opposition party that does even worse on both counts.

The Liberal Democrats may have been beavering away, but Norman Baker and Simon Hughes have had higher public profiles than Charles Kennedy throughout the late spring, and while voters are fairly well disposed to the party, it looks as though it lacks any strategy to exploit this fortuitous political gap.

Politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum. If the Liberal Democrats do not exploit the misfortunes of the two big parties, who else might try?



RADICAL BULLETIN

GIVE ME EUROPE, BUT NOT YET

While other European Liberal leaders were attending a summit of their own in Seville alongside that of the European Union, Charles Kennedy was also in Spain, but to attend the wedding of a friend of his partner Sarah Gurling.

This might strike some as admirable, in that the wedding was probably more fun than a Euro-fest. But then no-one forced Kennedy to stand for party leader, and attending these summits goes with the job.

It also appears that Kennedy may not be at the ELDR conference in Bath in the autumn, which seems a curious choice for a leader who is forever calling for early entry into the euro.

The Liberal summit included the leaders of all three EU institutions (Romano Prodi, president of the Commission, Pat Cox, president of the Parliament, and Danish prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who has become president of the council of ministers.

Also there were the Belgian prime minister and the prime ministers from three applicant states – so how's that for a missed photo opportunity?

Rasmussen deserves closer scrutiny, however. He belongs to the Danish party Venstre, which is not to be confused with the respectable Radikale Venstre party, also a Danish ELDR member.

Venstre is in coalition with that country's conservatives, and the government depends for its survival on the fascist Danish People's Party.

It is rather as if the Liberal Democrats governed the UK on the sufferance of the British National Party.

Among the Venstre-led government's initiatives have been removing the legal right of refugees and immigrants to bring their families to Denmark, refusal to grant a residence permit for at least seven years, and barring anyone under the age of 24 from living in Denmark with a non-EU spouse.

Asylum seekers are prevented from marrying while their applications are being processed.

It is some years since Austria's Freedom Party (even pre-Jorg Haider) was ejected from Liberal International after having been taken over by former Nazis.

If Venstre is bringing Europe's other Liberal parties into disrepute by consorting with Nazis, it too should go.

SITS VAC

Despite the defeat at Bournemouth last year of the concept of all-women shortlists where an MP is retiring, stand by for plenty of pressure for just such a move.

Rumours around Westminster suggest that Alan Beith, Paul Tyler and Menzies Campbell may stand down at the next election, possibly joined by Archy Kirkwood.

Given the conference vote, no-one ought to be able to impose an all-women shortlist, though the Gender Balance Task Force should by that time have persuaded many more female candidates to come forward. Or will it?

There are complaints (see Martin Tod's article in this issue) that task force meetings have been infrequent and largely secret, and the unworthy suspicion is doing the rounds that supporters of all-women shortlists want it to fail.

The federal executive and others have been mystified that a £30,000 donation to the task force's work had, as of late May, been left hanging.

The generous donor, a prominent male councillor and former PPC, must have his bafflement lessened only by accounts presented to the FE in May which showed the task force as having spent nothing.

But then Federal Finance and Administration Committee chair Robin Teverson delivered himself of the opinion at the June federal executive that the task force was bound to fail and so the party might as well go for compulsory quotas.

Meanwhile the Women Liberal Democrats appear to be boycotting the whole thing, and some FE members, led by Susan Kramer, have tried to start unpicking the motion and targets agreed by Conference.

SPRING SPRUNG

The row over the future of the Liberal Democrat spring conference (Liberator 281) rumbles on unresolved.

There is a three-way fight between those who want to keep it, those who want to abolish it on grounds of cost, and those who want to abolish it and replace it with regional conferences. For these purposes, Scotland and Wales are counting as 'regions'.

The Federal Finance and Administration Committee simply wants to save the £33,000 cost. Most of its members, like bean counters the world over, don't give a toss about accountability or democratic policy making. A recent meeting noted that the state parties were lining up a constitutional amendment to pave the way for the abolition of Spring Conference, not that that is any of FFAC's business.

Meanwhile, certain protagonists from English party have got together with Scots and Welsh parties (neither of which, of course, can be arsed to send more than a handful of people to the federal conference) to set up an amendment to replace the

spring conference with conferences in the English regions, Scotland and Wales, none of which could discuss any federal matter.

At a meeting of the obscure English Council last month Jonathan Davies (see letters this issue) said that because the Federal Conference Committee is in the middle of a review of both conferences, there was no point in submitting such an amendment. But he wanted an 'indicative vote' taken on the principle.

Friends of the spring conference sensed a fix, and demanded that the FCC review should not be prejudged by means of an indicative vote. The issue was dropped when next business was moved by Cec Tallack.

However it is unlikely that the last has been heard of this issue. Spring conference may be expensive, but who said democracy came cheap?

FLAT BEVERIDGE

Beveridge Group members were invited to attend the May meeting of the federal executive. Why is unclear, given the way they were treated.

MPs John Pugh and Alan Reid sat through the first hour, which including a ridiculous debate about allowing the Association of Liberal Democrat Engineers and Scientists to be a specified associated organisation.

We might note in passing that this privileged status is supposed to be only for groups such as youth and students, women and ethnic minorities, not any old party interest group.

The rules now seem to be drawn so slackly, with the success of ALDES' application, that pretty well anything short of a drinking club can gain recognition.

So engrossed were FE members in this non-issue that 15 minutes after Pugh and Reid were supposed to have spoken, chief executive Hugh Rickard suggested that if they had anything better to do, like voting in parliament, they might as well go.

The pair returned at 7.45pm, and the FE ignored them again, after which they again departed to vote without having presented anything.

Since the Beveridge Group was formed to counter Mark Oaten's Peel Group, and the party faces the prospect of organised factions fighting in parliament, the presentation might have been of interest to the FE. But who cares about politics when there is bureaucratic trivia to be debated?

BY THE HORNS

Bristol Liberal Democrats found themselves advised by ALDC to put out photos to the press of their candidate Terry Thomas with horns on his head, after 581 postal voters received a ballot paper calling him a "Liberal Demoncrat."

The mistake was only discovered a week before polling day, when a voter complained to the council.

A letter received by Thomas the day before voting said that the postal vote would stand, but all the papers for the normal vote the next day would be reprinted.

Kingsweston was lost by the Lib Dems by only 29 votes in the last comparable election in 1999. This time Labour made sure their MPs and councillors ran around for most of the day knocking up to raise their majority to 222.

Despite this, the ward was not even targeted due to a dispute between ward activists and the city's Lib Dem targeting team.

ALDC's further advice was that the mistake with the name of the party was not so important because people could still see the bird logo. The Bristol activists can only speculate what Labour's advice to their people would have been in the same circumstance, but "sit on your hands and do nothing" would probably not have been it.

WHO DID WHAT?

A website with the innocuous name of www.disabilityuk.com boasts of discussing issues relevant to people with disabilities.

But when last examined it contained a good deal of highly offensive, and at some points obscene, abuse directed at Liberal Democrats in general and at members of the former administration in Richmond-on-Thames in particular.

It does not become clear what Richmond actually did, or was alleged to have done, to deserve this, but the Liberal Democrat Disability Group might care to investigate.

MOVEABLE FEAST

Arrangements for two upcoming Liberal Democrat conferences have had to be suddenly changed. The first is the spring conference (the last of its kind if certain people get their way), which was due to be held in Liverpool next year.

It is customary for host local authorities to pay a contribution towards the costs of the conference in recognition of the boost given to their local economy by 1,000 or so hungry, thirsty people descending in the off season.

Liverpool has a new conference centre, to which it was keen to invite the party.

But then it seems senior figures in Liverpool looked a bit closer at the subsidy issue, and started to imagine the headlines in the local press about a Liberal Democrat council 'giving' money to the party.

That conference is now headed for Torbay, though Southport remains an outside runner.

Meanwhile the 2003 autumn conference, which should have been in Eastbourne, will instead be in Brighton, after a complicated balls-up, the details of which remain unclear.

But for 2006 the dreaded possibility looms of a return visit to Blackpool, something successfully avoided since 1988, given the foulness of its climate in late September and the lingering "don't you know there's war on" approach to customer care in many hotels and restaurants.

LOST DEPOSIT

One mayoral contest from which the Liberal Democrats were absent was Newham, a perennial black hole and Labour one-party state.

This time there was some activity in one target ward, and the idea was to use the mayoral campaign to raise the profile of the party and one of the target ward candidates. But it was not to be. The Newham party has no cash itself, and London region declined to stump up the £500 deposit.

TURN RIGHT FOR DEFEAT

Supporters of more private sector involvement in public services are so busy looking at 'blue skies' that they cannot see the answer before them, argues Alistair Carmichael, MP for Orkney and Shetland and a founder of the Beveridge Group

Mark Oaten is right about one thing. A liberal party, as he says, should always be prepared to discuss new ideas and to look at new approaches to old problems. I have no problem in agreeing with that. Who could?

He is also correct when he says that we should be sufficiently mature to discuss these new ideas in a way that is rational and does not rely on name-calling and personal attacks.

That, of course, cuts both ways and should mean that party spokesmen should be able to promote the existing policy position without being accused of being Stalinist or similar.

In this spirit, the Huhne Commission on public service provision has been constituted. It exists, we are told, to think deep thoughts, consider the blue skies, sacrifice holy cows. Nothing is ruled in and nothing is ruled out. Pick your metaphors and mix them as you wish.

The Beveridge Group has been formed as a response to that challenge. It exists for one very simple reason – to ensure that in the search for a big new idea we do not ignore the possibility that we already have it. It is a loose coalition of the great and the good along with a good sprinkling of the average and frankly second rate. Its members all adhere to a broad statement of aims and objectives which states

“The Beveridge Group exists to promote debate on the subject of public service provision within the Liberal Democrats. The group seeks to advance thinking which will better define the public service ethos and its place in party policy. It seeks to re-establish the standing of people working in public services and to promote recognition of the contribution which they make to the wider community.

“The group approaches public service provision from the basic premise that public services must be accountable and responsive to community needs and wishes. They are therefore best provided by democratically elected bodies and as a consequence of that are most likely to be paid for out of general taxation which should wherever possible be progressive and transparent.”

Is the Beveridge Group really needed if that is all that it is about? Obviously, as a founder member, I would say 'yes'. The great danger with blue skies thinking is

that it brings with it a presumption of the need for fundamental change. There are those within the party who would like to see that sort of change. That is why the Beveridge Group is needed – to put the case for motherhood and apple pie. The party can make its decision this autumn on the direction in which it wishes to go, but only after it has had a proper debate in which both sides of the argument have been put.

That is not to say that we would not like to see change in the way we provide our public services. We would hardly be liberals if that were the case. The current monolithic and largely centralised structures are ones with which we cannot feel comfortable, largely because they do not work. If there is a big idea to come out of the Huhne Commission then it will come from changes in delivery rather than from changes in the means of funding.

Those who argue for an increase in private funding of public services do so, implicitly or expressly, from a wish to improve our party's appeal to disaffected conservatives.

It is a curious logic that says that we can appeal to people who are disaffected with the conservatives by making ourselves more like the conservatives. This is a problem with which the party has wrestled more or less constantly since I first joined the Scottish Liberal Party in 1980.

The constant difficulty which has faced all those arguing for a more conservative stance has been simple. If we define ourselves politically according to someone else's agenda then we shall fail. If our message to the electorate is that we are like the conservatives (be they Tory Party conservatives or Labour Party conservatives), but less so, then we should not be surprised if the electorate decline to vote for us.

We live in an age when the Conservative and Labour parties promote public service agendas that in terms of their use of private finance differ only in extent and not in principle. That should provide the Liberal Democrats with an opportunity to promote a different agenda.

This time last year we were all knocking on doors preaching a message of the need for better public services, telling people that we would be honest about how they would be paid for.

That was a message which struck a chord with many people and allowed us to hold our own and make a modest advance in circumstances where all the pundits were predicting our wipeout. For the first time in a long time people knew what we as a party stood for and responded to it. Our message last year was that we wanted better public services and would pay for them. To change that to 'we want better public services and we will allow our children to pay for them' may not be quite so attractive.

The use of the private finance initiative or public/private partnerships for the provision of public services gets us out of a hole today. It will get us out, no doubt, of a few more holes for the next 20 years or so but eventually these schools and hospitals will have to be paid for. Will the next generation thank us for burdening them with this sort of debt when they too will be wanting to build their own schools and hospitals? I think not.

Those who argue for the use of private finance cannot square the circle. Private finance will only invest in public service projects if there is to be a return to be made on the initial investment. That surely is the whole point of private investment.

Figures which show great savings as a result of the use of private finance are to my mind either a skilful use of the accounting equivalent of smoke and mirrors or else an admission that our model of civil service is so

bureaucratic and inefficient that it needs reform from top to bottom. They might even be both.

They are not, however, a convincing argument for using taxpayers' money to provide a handsome return for private investors. When we can truly afford that I might be persuaded that the country can afford tax cuts.

The conservative ground in British politics is crowded at present. The Conservative and Labour parties are engaged in a struggle for the mantle of the true successor to Thatcherism.

Let them. That is not a prize which I find in any way attractive. Their struggle, however, offers the Liberal Democrats an opportunity. My predecessor as MP for Orkney and Shetland, Jo Grimond, inspired a generation of Liberals with his vision of a realignment of the left. In fact, what happened was that the Labour Party abandoned Clause Four socialism and so brought about a realignment of the right. No one could blame Jo for not foreseeing that that would happen!

It does, however, leave the way open for us to redefine what it means to be a progressive non-conservative (lets call it liberal for sake of convenience) in Britain in the twenty-first century. Our attitude to public services will be central to that redefinition. To tailor our liberalism to attract a handful of Tory votes in these circumstances is to waste an historic opportunity.

Time for a Beveridge, anyone?

THEY'RE BACK!

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SYSTEM NOT SEXISM

The Liberal Democrats have too few female MPs, but not because of sex discrimination, argues Martin Tod

In *Liberator* 281, Helen Bailey highlighted that there is sex discrimination in the Liberal Democrats' selection process - and she was right to do so. But she was wrong to blame discrimination by local parties: the primary problems lie elsewhere.

So why do we have so few women MPs?

It does not reflect the wishes of the voters. If anything, our vote increases slightly when we have a woman candidate. A recent MORI poll shows 70 per cent of the population think there are too few women MPs.

It does not reflect the wishes of our members. Sure, we have some sexist members. But we also have many members who would like to see more women MPs. As will be shown later, overall, our members do not discriminate against women.

So what are the barriers?

First we also have too few approved women candidates. Only 23 per cent of those on the approved list are women. We have so few approved women candidates that in order for every local party to have one woman on their short-list, each approved woman candidate would need to be short-listed in three or more constituencies.

Several selections this year for target seats, including seats with no incumbent candidate, have had to re-advertise or extend deadlines after no women applied for selection.

The second barrier is incumbency. Our sitting MPs, who, for historical reasons, were more than 90 per cent men before the 2001 General Election, always gain reselection. In 38 of our 52 seats there were sitting MP candidates at the last election - only 14 seats elected new MPs - and of these 21 per cent (3 out of 14) were women.

The smallest barrier is sexism in the members' vote. While women form 23 per cent of people on the approved list, they are 22 per cent of non-incumbent selected candidates, 23 per cent of candidates in non-incumbent target seats and 21 per cent of our newly elected MPs.

To put it another way, if we scrapped selections and had a truly fair (but random and undemocratic) process for selecting target seat PPCs - if we put all the names of people who applied for candidate approval in a hat and drew them out one by one - we would expect 23 per cent of our new MPs to be women. The actual figure is 21 per cent. If this degree of discrimination were the only problem, we would expect 46 per cent of our MPs to be women - not 10 per cent.

So why are women deciding not to become PPCs?

The recent Equal Opportunities Commission/MORI survey of candidates asking 'what do you think are the most important reasons that there are so few women in parliament' recorded more than half of all women candidates citing "family commitments and childcare issues" as the primary barrier, followed by the hours of work in Parliament.

Lib Dem women cited 'financial barriers' as the third barrier, followed by the 'gentlemen's club culture'. Fewer than 10 per cent mentioned 'sex discrimination within political parties'.

This makes sense. Running in a target seat and being an MP currently involves demanding working hours. The latest Government Time Use survey shows that - even when both partners are working - married or cohabiting women with children still spend around 90 minutes more per day on household chores and childcare than do their partners, leaving less time for politics. In addition, full-time women workers still earn only 82 per cent of their male equivalents, leaving less money available for politics.

The first thing we must do is to remove any obstacles to those women who are already on the approved list. This includes the cost of selection campaigns, which impacts on women more than on men.

One story of a Lib Dem woman candidate having to stay in a tent during her selection campaign is one story too many. We must review the selection process to eliminate money - and other factors such as childcare - as a factor in selections. As a start, the Joint States Candidates Committee should immediately require local parties to offer a free bed for the night to anyone attending interviews or who makes it onto the short-list.

The second area of work is an urgent review by the JSCC of the processes by which candidates are sought and approved - as required by the original gender balance motion.

The objective should be to eliminate anything that could unfairly discriminate against women - either intentionally or unintentionally - such as an excessive focus on management experience at work or on formal educational qualifications: statistically these both favour men.

This would also include a thorough review of the infamous application form to ensure that it focuses on assessing skills, rather than measuring people up against a middle-class, middle-management, 'no life but politics' campaigner template. Any form that discouraged a candidate of the quality of Sandra Gidley MP so much that she took a year to fill it out needs a rewrite.

The third priority is that all parts of the party, especially MPs and party officers, should be actively encouraging and supporting women to go for approval and selection.

Candy Piercy has already started organising regional training programs on behalf of the Gender Balance Task Force to encourage more women to come forward, get involved or get approved.

In addition, the task force is coordinating volunteers to provide support for women campaigners, such as help with artwork, telephone canvassing, driving, photography, websites, childcare or domestic support.

Finally, we need to think radically about our policies for parliament. If we reformed parliament and the job of MP and PPC from the ground-up to be compatible with childcare responsibilities, what would this look like?

We need to be publicly committed to policies such as:

- free childcare for target seat PPCs and MPs paid for by the party until we shame the Government into paying for it (at least for MPs).
- family-friendly working hours, voting practices and daily schedules building on the experience of the Welsh Assembly and other modern parliaments.
- multi-member constituencies to allow for more work sharing.

If we want to be more radical about reconciling parliamentary life with family responsibilities we should consider electronic voting for MPs from anywhere in the country – or even regional parliamentary chambers connected by high speed video links to allow parliament to meet virtually without the difficult travel arrangements and working hours that deter so many people.

This could also overcome the opposition to shorter working hours that comes from those who live further away from London who prefer to cram their work in Westminster into a few days in the middle of the week.

Finally, we need a relaunch of the Gender Balance Task Force to turn it into an open participatory mass campaign. While there has been excellent and dedicated work by many members of the task force (and many others too), there has not been enough focus on building a large and involved base of supporters.

Holding only two task force meetings in 10 months, and holding all other meetings in secret with only three or four attendees, is no way to lead change within the party.

In a strange way, it's reassuring to dig deep into the gender balance issue facing our party. The problems we face are not due to having a uniquely sexist membership, but are those that face society as a whole: basic issues of money, time, childcare and the sharing of household work.

If we can take a lead with radical liberal policies in successfully overcoming those issues, it will show the way and provide us with the tools for a much bigger transformation of society as a whole.

Finally, last month's article did not fairly summarise the anecdote from the EOC Report which said that "one candidate in the study really was asked about the colour of her underwear".

The full quote reads: "One Labour candidate was asked 'jokingly' about the colour of her underwear".

Are we just as sexist as the other parties?

No. The Equal Opportunities Commission report shows that, in most ways, we are less sexist than our opponents.

The main statistic cited in the article in *Liberator* 281 was that "40 per cent of our women candidates believe that they do not get a fair deal from local parties and members in the selection process".

This is not correct: the question that the article referred to was "are you aware of prejudice and sex discrimination in the selection process" – not necessarily referring to personal experience – 39 per cent of Liberal Democrat women said 'yes', against 52 per cent of Tory women and 47 per cent of Labour women.

On the question of 'fairness' the picture was more positive: 80 per cent of Liberal Democrat women agreed that 'overall, I felt it was a fair process', against 63 per cent of Tory women, 67 per cent of Labour women and 73 per cent of Liberal Democrat men. Only 13 per cent of Liberal Democrat women disagreed. This compares to 18 per cent of Liberal Democrat men.

While around a third of Labour and Tory women were asked inappropriate questions, fewer than 15 per cent of Lib Dem women were.

Gender Balance Task Force administrator Jane Jacomb-Hood can be contacted on janejacombhood@hotmail.com or by post at Cowley Street.

MAKING A MONKEY OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Gimmicky new voting methods dodge the real issues behind the decline in local election turnout, argues Mark Smulian

Let us consider, possibly for the last time, the words of Chris Morgan, the Tory elected mayor of North Tyneside, in *The Guardian*:

"I have carte blanche to deal with the financial crisis as I need to and legislation means I do not need the agreement of the council.

"To some extent I have been surprised by the power I have and Labour must be kicking themselves for shooting themselves in the foot by drafting the legislation so loosely to give the mayor so much power."

Quite so. The worst of Labour's local government gimmicks, the elected mayor system, brought forth last May a Liberal Democrat, a Tory, a monkey, a former policeman who had faced disciplinary charges, and only three Labour candidates, one of whom had beaten Blair's favoured contender in the selection ballot.

It may be that the Hartlepool monkey will have hammered the final nail into the coffin of elected mayors.

But Labour's other displacement activities – all-postal ballots, voting by internet and by phone – are all still there, and all are distractions from the real reasons for the public's disengagement from local government elections.

It is typical of this government that it should respond to a political problem by gimmick, rather than by tackling what is wrong.

The key reason for the collapse in local election turnout is that the outcome of these elections do not matter to enough voters, or at least not in ways they can see.

The largest areas of local government spending are education and social services, yet these are for the most part run in accordance with centrally dictated policies, or else in a way that conforms to the expectations of the inspectors who now minutely scrutinise local government.

Whatever scope a local authority has to make significant improvements to these two key services is pretty marginal. It could spend a bit more or a bit less, but the room for manoeuvre is relatively tiny.

So does a concerned parent, or a social services user, have any incentive to vote?

They once did. In the 1970s, for example, there were hard fought battles where I lived between the Tories,

who wanted to retain grammar schools, and the Liberals and Labour, who backed comprehensive schools.

Whichever view one took, no-one then disputed that the local authority had the power to decide this. If one was interested in education, there was a fairly powerful incentive to vote.

Scroll forward 25 years, and I happened to be at a meeting in the same town, where the Liberal Democrats were trying to write an election address. "Remember, if the Tories win, they will..."

Well, what exactly? The tight financial leeway and the narrowness of local authority powers nowadays meant there were precious few outrages that the Tories could perpetrate even if they wished to.

I imagined a similar scene in the Tory headquarters a few streets away. "If we win we will change, er, well, not at all really, we aren't allowed to."

People who are closely involved in local government and politics know that councils are still responsible for spending millions of pounds, and that a well or badly run authority can make a lot of difference to the well-being of an area.

But unless there is inescapably obvious incompetence it is not apparent to voters that crucial decisions turn on who is in control, so they have little incentive to vote.

It is this, not the physical siting, or existence, of polling stations, that is the root of the problem.

The old Liberal dilemma was how to resolve the conflict between decentralised power and ensuring adequate provision of services.

Should one allow local discretion to the point where services in some areas were blatantly inadequate compared with others?

This was answered decisively in favour of centralisation first by the Conservative government, and even more so by its Labour successor.

Where performance standards are not laid down centrally, there are now inspectors for every conceivable service, who are there to ensure that both standards and styles of delivery conform to a central norm.

It may be that this approach is driving up standards. But even if it is, it also steadily pushes local democracy into irrelevance, in danger of becoming a mere delivery mechanism for central government.

Labour, having taken alarm at low turnouts, has chosen to concentrate on almost every possible solution other than the one that would actually work; that of restoring enough powers to local councils to make their decisions matter again.

This year, the borough where I live held an all-postal ballot. It is difficult to imagine anything more open to fraud.

My ballot paper arrived in the heap of post in the hall for all four flats in the house. If I had happened to know that any of the other addressees were away, had moved, or took no interest in local politics, it would have been easy to scoop up the lot, complete them, add some bogus witness signatures and send them back. My neighbour found a ballot paper addressed to a former tenant who is abroad; nothing would have stopped her using it improperly.

Neither of us did do anything improper, but we easily could have done.

Worse than that, this must have been the first election since the late nineteenth century in which the vote was not secret.

Anyone who has canvassed will have met voters who feel obliged to ask their spouse how they should vote. While this attitude is dying out, more common nowadays are some ethnic minority households where the father pronounces on behalf of his wife and adult children's voting intentions.

At least when going to a polling station people vote in secret, even if their spouse or parent is in the next booth. There is no such check on ballot papers completed at home. Voters may come under pressure from family members, or indeed visiting political activists, to show that they have voted the 'right' way.

Experiments with internet votes, text messaging and so forth throws up the same problems of security and secrecy.

Those Liberal Democrats who are obsessed with technological solutions to voter turnout do the party no favours – we are in danger of sacrificing the secrecy and security of the ballot, assuming that this is a 'solution', while ducking the issue of restoring local government powers.

Elected mayors were supposed to be Labour's prime means of reinvigorating local government.

As Matthew Huntbach argued (*Liberator* 278), the concept derives from a simple-minded belief that 'one strong figure' can 'get things done' without having to trouble with inconvenient compromise and accountability.

I do not doubt that the Liberal Democrat mayor of Watford Dorothy Thornhill will behave in a liberal way and with complete propriety.

The problem is that with little check on mayoral powers, there are few restraints against abuse. As mayor Morgan has discovered in North Tyneside, he can do what he likes, and the Labour majority on the council can only whinge.

Short of being jailed, a mayor cannot be removed. Even prime ministers are less secure in their post.

Corruption is notoriously rife in some Labour heartlands, to the detriment of voters' regard for local politicians.

Instead of tackling this, Labour has obligingly simplified matters by making it necessary to bribe only one mayor, rather than several committee chairs, councillors and officers. And the huge powers of a mayor make it less likely that impropriety will come to light.

London has the longest experience of an elected mayor, and there has never been a hint of corruption around Ken Livingstone, whatever the truth of allegations about Livingstone's behaviour at a party, these do not concern financial malpractice.

But it is London's good fortune to have an honest mayor, as a dishonest one could create havoc without anyone being able to prevent this.

Although the London mayor's powers are limited, those that exist are pretty much absolute.

The London assembly can negotiate his budget, beyond that it can consult, scrutinise, question and investigate until its members are purple in the face, but they cannot vote to require Livingstone or anyone else to do anything.

Labour should not be allowed to get away with arguing that a few technical gimmicks or 'strong leaders' will sort out the problem of the decline of local politics, nor fall for this ourselves. It is a question of powers, not postal forms.

SPRINGTIME FOR HITLER?

Recent elections in France and the Netherlands have highlighted the revival of the far right in Europe. Simon Titley examines the causes and considers a Liberal response

At June's EU summit meeting in Seville, the EU's leaders were originally due to debate the enlargement of the EU. However, at the prompting of Tony Blair and Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, the focus switched instead to the issue of immigration.

But there is no rational reason why immigration should be an issue at all. The number of immigrants attempting to enter the EU is only half what it was ten years ago, at the height of conflict in Yugoslavia. The birth rate in the EU has fallen to approximately 1.4 children per woman, which means the indigenous labour force will increasingly be unable to sustain the tax bill for pensions or healthcare. If every would-be immigrant and asylum seeker were admitted to the EU, it would still not be enough to compensate for the fall in the birth rate.

Consider also the benefits that immigrants bring. They contribute more to the economy per head than the indigenous population, mainly because a higher proportion are of working age, but also because they tend to be more entrepreneurial. We also know that societies that welcome immigrants are more vibrant, economically and culturally. There is a strong correlation between immigration and economic success. A new study by American Professor Richard Florida, in his book 'The Rise of the Creative Class', shows how the economic success of cities is directly linked to whether they are attractive places to live for bohemians, gays and ethnic minorities.

If immigration is not an issue on a rational level, why is there a problem? The answer is that it is an issue on an emotional level. A significant proportion of the public feels insecure and sees immigration as a threat to its identity. Attempts to justify immigration on rational economic grounds will not cut any ice, because they do not address the real problem.

While 'immigration' has become the focus of insecurity, let us be honest about the terms 'immigration' and 'asylum seekers'. These are code words for race. This is about old-fashioned colour prejudice. In Britain, tens of thousands of white South Africans, Australians and New Zealanders overstay their visas each year, yet no one regards that as an issue.

However, this does not explain why so many people in Western Europe feel insecure and why they choose to support the far right. This is not simply a replay of the 1920s and 1930s. Then, poverty and economic crisis were the breeding ground for the rise of fascism. Nowadays, mass unemployment and hyperinflation no

longer apply and most West Europeans lead relatively prosperous lives.

Today, the main source of insecurity is globalisation, which has destabilised society in two ways. First, it limits conventional politicians' freedom of manoeuvre and ability to deliver, which undermines public confidence in the democratic process. Second, it creates social dislocation and promotes a form of cosmopolitanism that leaves many people unsure of their identity.

Professor Terry Eagleton identified this problem in an article published two years ago: "The more culture comes to mean a vacuous cosmopolitanism for the privileged few, the more it comes to mean a militant particularism for the dispossessed. The more emptily global Culture waxes, the more virulently blind cultures grow. For every jet-setting intellectual, a neo-Nazi thug; for every transnational executive, a local patriot for whom the Other begins just beyond the mountains."

The far right has learned how to feed off the insecurity produced by globalisation, by promoting an exclusive form of identity politics. Globalisation has weakened national identities without providing a viable alternative. The global cosmopolitanism preached by political and business elites is fine for 'knowledge workers' who can take advantage of the new mobility. The less privileged are easy prey for far right populists, who seek to revive old national identities through the exclusion of minorities.

The centrist political establishment attempts to justify globalisation on the grounds that it ensures widespread prosperity and freedom, but the far right understands that it also produces losers. We tend to think of these losers as unskilled manual workers whose jobs were automated or exported to the third world. We forget that many more affluent people in previously secure occupations, such as middle managers and office workers, are also losing their jobs or are finding their incomes in relative decline.

The far right blames 'immigrants' (i.e. anyone who looks recognisably different) for the effects of globalisation. It taps into traditional nationalist identities to revive a fear of minorities and outsiders. It also benefits from increasingly dumbed-down media, where the emotive 'soundbite' predominates, and superficial arguments, novelty and sensationalism can always score over mature and deliberative debate.

In eight West European countries, there are now far right parties enjoying significant electoral support, and

in some cases forming part of coalition governments. In each case, they run on an anti-immigrant and anti-refugee platform, blame non-whites for crime and unemployment, and often promote some form of 'repatriation' policy for non-whites.

France is seen as top of this dubious league table, even though far right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen failed to win the Presidency or even a single seat in the subsequent parliamentary elections. The significance of Le Pen's success in the first round of the Presidential election was more symbolic than statistical. It was about shock value rather than a massive swing in votes.

Le Pen's vote increased only marginally, from 15.0 % in the previous presidential election in 1995 to 16.9% in 2002, and from 4.5 million votes to 4.8 million. However, winning a place in the second round ensured that Le Pen became the only issue in the election; no one discussed political programmes. Despite failing to win anything, Le Pen will not have been disappointed by the shock he delivered to the system.

Le Pen's success was a product of widespread political alienation, amplified by the electoral system. France's two-stage electoral system made Le Pen's coup possible but does not provide a complete explanation. Le Pen's vote would not have had as much of an impact under either a first-past-the post or a proportional voting system. Moreover, in a two-round system, voters have tended to vote with their hearts in their first round and their heads in the second.

The key to Le Pen's success was a general disillusionment with the political establishment and boredom with the mainstream parties. In France, as elsewhere in the west, a combination of globalisation and the collapse of communism created a situation where mainstream politicians, whether ostensibly right or left wing, propose very similar platforms, and have less ability to deliver on their promises. France is a centralised country and the ruling elite is perceived in the French provinces as a remote, Parisian establishment, which fails to listen to people's concerns. Voters feel abandoned, neglected and alienated.

This situation was made worse by five years of 'cohabitation' in the French government, where President Chirac shared executive power with Prime Minister Jospin. Since both shared responsibility for the previous five years of government, neither was in a position to differentiate their platforms.

Adding to the sense of boredom was complacency, a widely held assumption that Chirac and Jospin would inevitably fight the final round and that it was therefore safe in the first round to abstain or indulge in a protest vote for either Le Pen or another fringe candidate.

The support for Le Pen's 'Front National' party was not a flash in the pan, but represented the culmination of thirty years of steady growth. Though not represented in the national parliament, the FN has won seats in a number of regional assemblies and municipalities. It has appealed particularly to older and poorer urban white voters who feel insecure and marginalized. Significantly, in this year's first round of the Presidential vote, Le Pen scored highest among unemployed voters (38%).

Like all his far right counterparts in Europe, Le Pen has targeted the widely held feelings of insecurity. His key issues were crime and immigration, with the latter used a scapegoat for the former. The focus of hostility is France's large Arabic minority (mostly of Algerian or

Moroccan origin), although Le Pen wants all non-white people 'repatriated'.

The second European country to receive widespread attention this year was the Netherlands. The list led by the maverick far right populist Pim Fortuyn (who was assassinated days before the poll) won 17% of the vote in May's general election, to become the second largest party in the national parliament. Two months earlier in municipal elections, Fortuyn's 'Liveable Rotterdam' group gained control of the city of Rotterdam. Fortuyn's platform was unusual for a far right party, in that he was gay and attacked Islamic immigrants as a threat to the Dutch permissive society.

The most startling thing about Fortuyn's (posthumous) success was that his party came from nowhere, having been founded only a few months before the elections. A complacent centrist political establishment, used to trading in polite euphemisms, had no idea how to respond. While Fortuyn's party has no long-term future without its leader, his legacy will remain. Fortuyn succeeded in shattering the cosy political consensus and Dutch politics will never be the same again.

A similar pattern has developed in six other European countries. The most prominent far right success before this year was in Austria, where the 'Freedom Party', led by the charismatic Jörg Haider, won 26.9% of the vote in the parliamentary elections in 2000, and is now part of a conservative coalition government.

In Belgium, the 'Vlaams Blok' (Flemish Bloc) won 9.9% of the vote in the 1999 national parliamentary elections. It is the largest party on Antwerp city council. Only a pact by all the other mainstream parties excludes it from power.

In Denmark, the 'Danish People's Party' won 12% of the vote in the 2001 parliamentary elections and supports the new ruling coalition (though remains outside the government). ELDR member party Venstre leads this coalition, and seems to have had few if any scruples about treating with the far right.

In Italy, the 'National Alliance' (the direct political descendant of Mussolini's party) won 12% of the vote in the 2001 parliamentary elections. It is part of Silvio Berlusconi's coalition government and its leader Gianfranco Fini is now Deputy Prime Minister. Also in the coalition government is the 'Northern League', a far right regionalist party from the north of Italy, which won 3.9% of the vote.

In Norway, the 'Progress Party' won 14.6% of the vote in the 2001 parliamentary elections, to become Norway's second largest party. Although not part of the government, the party holds the balance of power.

In Switzerland, the 'Swiss People's Party' won 23% of the vote in the 1999 parliamentary elections, to become the second largest party, entitling it to cabinet posts.

Why are there are not similar far right parties in the rest of Europe? The answer is that there are, but they typically win less than 2% of the vote. The key factor behind their success or failure is whether the mainstream parties are offering voters a sufficient contrast and choice. If mainstream conservative parties pursue right-wing policies, there is less opportunity for the extreme right. If mainstream parties are locked into consensus policies because they are part of a broad coalition, then extremists are able to fill the vacuum.

But there are other important criteria for attracting wide support. Successful far right parties have a

charismatic leader (Le Pen, Haider, Fortuyn) able to create a contrast with the bland, equivocal leaders of mainstream parties. Far right parties must appear unified to be successful, and avoid the tendency of extremist parties to split into rival factions. They also have to adopt a more respectable image and either shed or conceal any violent 'skinhead' support.

Long term, the danger of the far right is obvious. Persecution begins with Muslims, then other non-white people, then Jews, gays, gypsies and so on. It has happened before and it can happen again.

The more immediate risk is that mainstream politicians either fail to address the underlying causes of insecurity and voter alienation, which leads to greater political instability, or attempt to appease far right opinion by adopting stricter laws on immigration.

The debate in Seville showed that this is already happening. Centrist governments, in a state of panic over the threat of the far right, hope that adopting stricter anti-immigration policies will solve the problem. All it does is make racist fears respectable and move the mainstream closer to the far right.

In practice, there is little that governments can do to prevent immigration. Like the so-called 'war on drugs', anti-immigration policies generate a criminal industry (in this case, people trafficking). They also raise popular expectations that illegal immigration will be stopped, which politicians cannot meet. Failure to deliver takes popular respect for politicians down another notch.

The rise of the far right also has serious implications for the European Union. The period of consensus, which has characterised politics since the collapse of communism in 1989, is coming to an end. There are likely to be some starker choices made about economics, society and politics. This adversarial debate would pose serious constitutional problems for the EU, which functions on the basis of consensus. The other danger is that far right demagogues will set the political agenda and force mainstream politicians to pursue more small-minded and isolationist policies. Such a trend would risk undermining the whole European political project.

Liberals need to rethink their response to these trends. First, no matter how strong the economic case for immigration, rational arguments by themselves will not work. If politicians argue for open borders or large-scale immigration without addressing the sources of people's feelings of insecurity, the political risks are very high.

Liberals could make a distinctive contribution to the debate by arguing for an immigration policy as opposed to an anti-immigration policy. A positive policy, similar to America's green card system, which emphasises positive criteria for entry rather than negative criteria for non-entry, would have the merit of fairness while demonstrating that necessary roles in our society are being filled. For example, few people object to the recruitment of teachers or nurses from abroad, because they know these jobs must be done. There is also a case for introducing a symbolic citizenship ceremony, as in Australia or the USA, which provides a rite of passage for both new immigrants and the host community.

Next, Liberals have to rethink their ideas about identity. I remain a strong supporter of the EU, but there is no evidence that the EU's institutions are providing an adequate substitute for national or regional identities. A 'European' identity can

complement but not replace them. Political and business elites may feel at ease in an international world but most people still need a sense of place and identity.

The concept of identity is not inherently racist. Yet it has been discredited by twenty years of politically correct propaganda. In England, especially, the bourgeois left has engaged in an extended bout of national self-abasement, while indulging in absurd pseudo-ethnic posturing. You've probably met the type. They lap up Irish folk music while deriding English folk music, even though these musical forms are similar. They fill their homes with ethnic knick-knacks and cheer on every English sporting defeat. They promote the fashion for 'victim chic' and publish reports saying that the term 'British' is racist.

They have sought to delegitimise English identity by denying people pride in the good things about their society. They justify these right-on postures in terms of atonement for colonialism, yet deny cultural validity to the least advantaged English people rather than the elites responsible for past injustices. Liberals should have nothing to do with this sort of over-compensating. Instead, we might learn something from the way in which ordinary decent people reclaimed the English flag during this year's World Cup.

Liberals must also abandon their belief in consensus politics, which has a stultifying effect on democracy. One of the main criticisms of PR was that it let in far right parties. The problem is rather that it can provide fertile ground for extremists by creating a permanent centrist government, where all the mainstream parties are locked into a consensus and offer no real choice.

Finally, Liberals have to examine the question of globalisation. It should be judged on its merits, not assumed to be necessarily good or inevitable. Liberals have always had the distinction of arguing that things should serve people rather than people serve things, and there is no reason why this philosophy should not inform our economic policies.

We should reject the notion that arose in the 1980s, that business exists in some sort of moral bubble and is not subject to any social obligations or the norms of civilised behaviour. It is not acceptable if people are thrown on the scrap heap or left in an increasingly insecure position. Business is not sacrosanct and we should not accept new economic arrangements that ruin people's lives through no fault of their own.

Globalisation is bringing about dramatic changes in the world economy and we must understand that there are both winners and losers. Political and business leaders inhabit a cosmopolitan world. They tend to forget that, while they see globalising forces as opportunities, other people perceive them as threats. Political extremism is always fuelled by individual feelings of insecurity. If any groups feel excluded, the door is left open to extremist politicians to exploit popular fears and damage freedom and prosperity for everyone.

THE DEFENCE OF APATHY

Matthew Platts argues that political inaction sometimes has more effect than political action

If the whole world, bar one man, lacked an object of desire, some pearl of unknown price, would the majority have any right to deprive the one man of it?

That would be an affront to his liberty.

If belief were a possession, would the majority have the right to deprive the minority of it?

That would be an affront to their liberty.

If right and action were possessions, would the majority have the right to deprive the minority of it?

That would also be an affront to their liberty.

I argue that belief, and right, and action, are all possessions; they are originated in the person who holds them, they are unique to the holder, and inalienable.

Apathy is a lack of interest, an indifference to the situation. In the political sense it is the belief that political inaction is as valid as action, that political action can lead to no change.

Although I am very much distant from being a Marxist, Friedrich Engels tells us that each social action has consequences - a strike may not compel the manager or the owner to improve the workers' conditions, but it will strengthen the workers' confidence or enlarge the trade union.

If one refuses to participate in the political process, then one is taking a social action; one is effectively saying that the political process must be transformed before it is worthwhile to participate. This may not compel the Government to change the conditions, but it will send signals to the pundits and encourage other citizens to engage in apathy.

Before long there will be a turnout low enough to worry the Government and the mainstream political parties - action will need to be taken.

There are a number of 'emergency actions' to be taken by the Government to remedy the situation. At the time of writing, we have just emerged from local elections in which a number of new voting techniques are being tested.

These include online ballots, text message and telephone message ballots, all-postal ballot elections, and for some reason I am yet to determine, touch-screen ballots. These have had a varying level of success, with only all-postal ballot elections raising turnout by any significant margin.

Clearly the Government and the Electoral Commission have failed to understand apathy.

Political apathy is not really related to difficulties in voting, and it is most certainly not remedied by electronic novelty gewgaws and trinkets. Instead it is a combination of disaffection and an act of protest, and

better described as antipathy. It is the product of opposition to mainstream politicians as a whole - this phenomenon of apathy is not restricted to low turnout, but also the turn to minority parties, notably the extreme-right.

Austria, the Netherlands, France, and even Britain are not merely suffering low turnout at the polls, but the increasing electoral success of extreme-right, Fascist, and Nationalist Socialist parties. As a libertarian, I hold such successes in great horror, but I will not deny the people their right to commit such horrors.

Apathy is a protest movement, not an organised one, but the most populous. Apathy is a method of forcing the mainstream parties to accept their disaffection and address their concerns. Apathy is caused not by showers of rain or long working hours, but the centre-right consensus the main parties have found themselves in coupled with the distortions of the first-past-the-post system.

Apathy is not a disease to be cured, but a message to be answered - it calls for clear choices of left, right, libertarian, authoritarian, and all colours in between.

I must defend apathy on the account of liberty. It is a legitimate act of protest, with Engels' social consequences, and as such it cannot be denied to any citizen. For what is it but an act of will, reinforced by a set of beliefs?

What are free will and belief but possessions, and what right is it of the state, the majority or society to impose its will on the individual?

If the people do not see the current political system as their representation or salvation, then they are allowed to choose an alternative, by failing to make choices within the system.

It is clear from the 60 per cent general election turnout last year that the people do want an alternative. Even if that alternative be the plebiscitical/dictatorial style of government which the extreme-right cherish and which strikes terror into my soul, we cannot deny it to them.

MUTUAL FUTURE

Gareth Epps reflects back on recent discussions on the relationship between Liberalism, mutualism and the cooperative movement, and draws a map for the public services debate

One of the surprising things about the Liberal Democrats' recent spring gathering was the amount of satisfaction.

I wouldn't put it stronger than that about the consultation document on the future of public services. The integral role played by mutualism has been welcomed and has helped to defuse the sometimes ill-tempered debate going on between various factions in the Parliamentary Party.

This was noticeable at the foundation meeting of the Association of Liberal Democrat cooperators (ALDCO) at which Chris Huhne spoke. For once, there was an alternative to the sterility, which the media's arbiters of the public/private debate have imposed on the various discussions.

Mutualism and cooperation are, of course, born of much the same premise - the desire to takeover power. From housing finance to shopping and even football clubs, and mirrored by 'new economics' developments, the mutual trend has reappeared with a vengeance.

While no one would pretend that mutuals could provide in every service area where the market fails, there's clearly a significant role to be played. The gathering of self-defining radical Liberals at Leeds in January looked at a variety of potential mutual provision from established 'new economics' (credit unions, co-ops, time banks) to things ancient and modern (community shops, even healthcare).

Worker share ownership and democracy reappeared as a strong theme too. The workshop sought to do three things: to define mutualism from a Liberal perspective; to look at what works, and to see if it indeed is the solution to de-sterilise the public/private debate.

The key towards this sort of activity, of course, is participation. But what if people don't want to participate? The extensions of the average working day and the lack of feeling that anything can actually be changed are a big inhibitor (apathy, of course, doesn't solely exist in the political sphere). Ignorance of the power of strong, independent, devolved bodies that make a difference, from the local co-op upwards, is part of the issue.

The failure of Liberal Democrats to promote effectively those bodies that do make that difference is another. Other barriers to participation that can be changed include the credibility of some of these initiatives.

The setting up of a credit union in rural West Oxfordshire is proving a long process; and one factor that didn't help was the resistance of many parish

councils to cooperating with publicity for the venture. The fact that the most vehement objectors were Tories, and the key proponents included myself and prominent Labour activists, was of course entirely coincidental. Indeed the Tories blocked a mere £1,000 of support at an early stage for a year.

The role of legislation and regulation for mutuals and cooperatives is the subject of hot debate. Some believe it is not the role of the State to regulate mutual, community enterprises. Others argue that the real enemy is the centralism and 'Whitehallism' that creeps into legislation. The ongoing revision of Credit Union legislation, and the progress of Gareth Thomas' anti-demutualisation Bill in Parliament provide tests not only for us, but for Labour too.

But mutual provision faces much more basic barriers, too. The community hospital and specialist Alzheimer's research unit at Burford was closed by Alan Milburn in late 1999 (and the closure celebrated a couple of weeks later by local MP Shaun Woodward moving from one Tory party to the other). Since then a consortium of voluntary groups, healthcare providers and the local community have been working to reopen the site as a 'Healthy Living Centre' providing services in a rural area for an ageing population. However the NHS Trust considers itself bound to get the maximum capital receipt from the sale, and has repeatedly increased the asking price for the property despite its stated wish to see health care services return to Burford.

A mutual approach will require flexibility, too, on the part of local government, something sadly lacking in this case, as West Oxfordshire District Council has failed to give a single penny of their £80 million-plus reserves to the project so far. Service provision is about tackling poverty too; ownership of money is as important in the services provided as it is to individuals. We need to make sure we support areas affected by poverty, and give control over enterprises where a mutual is effectively controlling someone else's money.

Effectively, much of this debate can be summed up by saying that the key need is to end the feeling that services are subcontracted from Whitehall. Mutualism, of course, cannot be imposed, neither can participation. It is the 'ownership' of services and enterprises which will lift us out of the current, sterile debate.

Now, to size. Size matters (so I'm told). As we see from the travails of some larger building societies, there comes a time when mutual ownership factor ceases to exist. (A problem affecting the co-op movement from time to time).

It is always crucial to build from the bottom up, starting small and letting people build upwards; even socialists involved in the Credit Union movement accept this, at least for rural areas. The Internet is presenting an increasingly attractive option for information sharing and networking. Most Western societies face, in the growth of the middle classes, a culture in which it is barely fashionable to participate in anything; it's certainly made less than rewarding.

A cultural shift needs to happen for this to change. In that, we need to have a new look at the concept of time, or at least how to reward the constructive use of it. Here David Boyle's examples of time banks, such as the one run from a doctor's surgery to provide therapeutic care, show just the value of constructive mutual volunteering. In fact, many of the challenges presented by 21st century life – the impossibility of the housing ladder in much of England, or the difficulties faced by agriculture in getting a decent price for produce present massive opportunities for the Cooperative movement.

At the Liberator fringe at Manchester it was noticeable that Liberals and co-operators share some powerful links: Lord's chief whip John Roper (a former Cooperative MP) being one prominent example. This would also link in well with a renewal of focus on local government.

Since the semi-planned explosion of the Liberal Democrat local government base in the Major years, most energies in local government have been dedicated to defending a base, getting largely inexperienced councillors into a position where they know what to do in positions of control, or more recently fighting and coping with the lunacies of Government wrecking agendas.

Such a renewed emphasis on the local would run neatly parallel to campaigning on the public services agenda. It would also function well as a statement of principle, helping to stem some of the Tory initiative being seen in some parts of the country (apparently based on some of the techniques used by ourselves at times to pick us up from the floor).

The polarisation of the private/public debate and, through insidious organisations such as the pro-PFI "New Local Government Network", its linkage to the so-called modernisation agenda has-been far too successful in diverting Liberals in local government (in all parties) from a community-led, bottom up agenda.

Much time seems to have been spent defending the interests of useless committee servers rather than redefining the agenda by which councillors and their communities help people to take power by providing the services they want.

So, despite the temptations of the Tory-leaning wing of Liberal Democrat MPs and of the trade unions, Liberals need to remain flexible on how public services are provided. Of necessity, there will be a very strong role for community-run mutuals to play in any Liberal solution. Equally, there will be some role for private sector companies where they clearly are best placed to provide service well.

The role, then, of government regarding mutuals is one primarily of promotion. Creative community enterprise of all kinds is barely acknowledged in the mass media or (in any substantial way) by government.

A system could and should be developed; maybe to replace the archaic, divisive honours system with something more meaningful. The tax system can be used a lot more positively to reward volunteering effort. Local government, of course, could have many roles to play in this.

However, local government thinking in the vast majority of local authorities is primitive to say the least in this respect. Some imaginative attempts have been made in South Oxfordshire (where part of the housing stock transfer windfall has-been used for a dramatically enhanced voluntary grants budget) and in Oxford City under the recent Liberal Democrat/Green administration.

However, in the latter case they were swamped in the tide of bad publicity that befell the Council, for reasons too complicated to go into here. The Scrutiny system, for all its flaws, does at least offer the chance for openness by allowing cooptees; why not encourage community activity through the scrutiny process? It's not something that needs to wait for some sort of action from Whitehall: quite the opposite, in fact.

Liberals can promote and propagate mutualism at all times. But given the urgency of the debate on public services, mutualism may just be the best Liberal hope yet.

Subscription forms to ALDC are available from garethpepps@cix.co.uk or Phil Cockayne at 119B Brook Drive, London SE11 4TQ.

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

The Liberal Democrats are due to vote on GM foods in September. The right to grow and eat organic food is more important than the right of multinationals to grow GM crops, says Donnachadh McCarthy

The Liberal Democrats have fallen at the post every time they tried to take a position on the genetic manipulation (GM) of crops.

In conjunction with the Green Liberal Democrats, I first submitted an emergency motion on the subject in 1995. This was the subject of a successful reference back proposed by the Federal Policy Committee, which promised a full Policy Working Party on the subject.

This finally reported to the 1999 autumn conference. It produced some good policies including supporting the five-year moratorium on commercial planting of GM crops, imposition of a statutory legal liability on the producers of the crops, outlawing the patenting of genes, phasing out the use of anti-biotic markers and opposing the use of transgenic animals for intensive farming uses.

However on the key issue of GM commercial crops that the working party was required to come up with a policy, the pro and anti factions had fought themselves to a standstill. The party decided not to take a position but declared that should clear evidence emerge that commercial growing of GM crops will inevitably pollinate organic crops then the party should urgently reconsider the appropriate policy response.

Numerous scientific reports, unsurprisingly confirmed that contamination would be inevitable, have been published and so we took the issue back via an emergency motion at the Autumn 2000 conference.

Just as I was about to summate on the debate a successful reference back was submitted by a member of the Association of Liberal Democrat Engineers and Scientists, assisted by Evan Harris MP. This time the issue was referred to the Rural Affairs Policy Working Party, which, despite living in the heart of Peckham, I am again serving on.

This policy paper is to be presented to September's federal conference, where hopefully we can finally get a democratic decision on this crucial issue.

More positively there have been many developments in the political sphere. The Lib Dem Welsh Assembly members successfully proposed that Wales should be a GM free zone as part of the partnership agreement. This was subsequently adopted as policy and the Welsh Assembly crucially also interpreted the EU Regulations on potential damage to the environment to also include potential cross pollination with organic crops.

Paul Tyler, and other Cornish MPs, have advocated a GM free Cornwall. Charles Kennedy and John Farquhar Munro have signed petitions objecting to the release of GM pollen resulting from the government's field trials. Lib Dem MEPs have supported moves to achieve full traceability of GM crops.

In Spring 2002, the Scottish Liberal Democrat conference adopted a policy calling for a full moratorium on GM crops and on field trials, with an exception made for those grown under laboratory conditions for medical purposes.

Thus it can be seen that the party across Britain has taken a clear lead on this issue practising what it preaches on the precautionary principle on such issues.

The evidence emerging since 1999 has confirmed the potential for the cross-pollination of some organic crops by GM pollen over significant distances, some exceeding even five kilometres. This evidence includes reports by the National Pollen Research Institute March 1999, the European Environment Agency, the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment, May 2001 and the National Institute of Agricultural Botany, Cambridge (2000).

This confirms that decisions about the precedence in law of the rights of organic farmers over GM farmers have to be urgently addressed. There is not a simple choice between choosing GM and non-GM, because by introducing GM crops you are destroying the potential for the existence of non-GM crops and therefore destroying the potential for a choice between them.

The EU is considering legislation that a field needs to have not been used for GM crops for more than five years for it to qualify as a non-GM field again. The Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors has warned that land values for GM farms could thus fall.

The EU is also considering new legislation requiring up to five kilometres, but there is widespread confusion as to how this would operate. The British Beekeepers Association has recommended that hives should be placed more than six miles from GM fields.

Since 1999, the National Farmers Union mutual insurance company has refused to provide insurance for farmers against losses due to cross pollination of other farmers crops, environmental damage or human health consequences, leaving farmers exposed to significant legal challenges in an area of currently non-existent legal framework.

The EU, which is adopting (if New Labour is not successful in blocking the proposals) a standard of below 1 per cent GM presence for products to qualify as non-GM. The presence of GM in non-GM seeds, crops and foods have been reported in almost every European country, sometimes exceeding the EU standards by more than 600 per cent.

A serious development since 1999 on the potential environmental consequences has been the February 2002 report by English Nature, which confirmed cross transference of herbicide resistance between different GM strains of oil seed rape crops.

This is called "gene stacking" and means that plants in the fields are combining through horizontal cross-transference all the genetic changes induced in a number of GM crops into one plant. Thus plants are already emerging with resistance to three major herbicides.

English Nature says, "Farmers might have to use different and more environmentally damaging herbicides to control them. It could also result in more intensive herbicide use in field margins and uncropped habitats which are important for wildlife."

The Scottish Crop Research Institute report of January 1999 confirmed harmful effects of GM plants on beneficial insects, as did the University of Minnesota, for Monarch butterflies, and the University of Illinois for Black Swallowtail butterflies.

Natural Toxins (volume 6, issue 6) in 1999 released a study providing evidence of structural changes to mice intestines fed on GM potatoes and the Lancet published a report raising concerns re GM fed rats in October 1999.

Finally in the US, the Northwest Science and Environmental Policy Centre has published a report into GM soya presenting evidence that herbicide use has actually gone up by between 10 and 30 per cent in nine US states using GM soya, with five states reporting modest decreases. It also reports that yields have been between 5 and 10 per cent lower compared to non-GM herbicide resistant soya and most seriously that weeds in the GM fields are already becoming herbicide resistant.

There are now more than 100 law cases involving farmers and the GM companies trying to apportion liability for various unforeseen consequences of planting GM crops. However most farmers are continuing to use the GM seeds due to the short-term simplification of weed control.

No new GM crops or foods have been approved by the EU since 1998, resulting in a de facto moratorium as a result of the actions of a number of EU countries which have blocked any new approvals. There is confusion over whether current legislation gives member states or regions the right to impose their own moratoria, with officers in Scotland and Wales, for example, giving different interpretations of relevant EU directives.

A new EU Deliberate GM Release Directive could come into force in October 2002 which would improve labeling of foods and requires post release monitoring of GM commercial plants. It however fails to tackle liability, cross-pollination, and use of anti-biotic resistant marker genes or provide a framework for medicinal GM plants. It requires the termination of unauthorised GM releases.

There are also proposals for new regulations on GM foods and feeds, which introduce for the first time authorisation procedures for GM animal feeds, but fail to require that products from animals fed on GM products should be labeled. They also unfortunately contradict the Release Directive proposals for unauthorised GM releases.

The evidence about the impossibility of having co-existence between most GM and non-GM crops is now incontrovertible. If there is full commercial planting of GM crops, it will become impossible over the medium to long term for organic and non-GM farmers to obtain seeds that fit the regulations for seed purity. The confirmation of cross-pollination also undermines the current process of field trials. Thus, the key question to be addressed is whether the rights of GM producers and GM farmers take precedence over the rights of those who wish to produce/ eat organic or GM free produce.

For liberals this presents a dilemma as we are committed to the freedom of the individual, so long as it does not impinge on the freedoms and rights of others. Should the right of a tiny number of corporate GM seed producers to operate in the free-market be allowed to bring an end to the practice of organic and non-GM farming?

The second guiding principle used by the party to assess environmental decisions is the precautionary principle: does the potential good of a new environmental procedure outweigh the potential for the procedure going wrong? Evidence to date does not indicate that in terms of food and novel crops that this is the case.

However, there is a strong case to be made that the medicinal potential of GM holds out significant hope for positive advances and a special case for such plants grown under licence in laboratory conditions preventing escape into the wider environment should be made. The Liberal Democrats should support the Welsh Assembly resolution accepting that the threat of cross pollination from GM farms and farm trials to organic and non-GM farms constitutes an environmental threat to such farmers and campaign to ensure that EU legislation is framed to ensure that any national or devolved Government can choose to be a GM free zone. It is an unacceptable loss of freedom that a Scottish Minister should feel compelled by international law to allow the release of GMOs into the environment against his party's wishes.

We should support the continuation of the current moratorium on commercial releases of GM crops and on crop trials until such time as research can prove that no-cross pollination / mingling with organic or non-GM crops will occur.

A "GM commercial crop-free Britain" would not only save our farmers from a another potential BSE type disaster, but would make commercial sense in allowing us to brand UK agricultural products as such. We should however recognise the potential human benefits of GM medicinal plants and call for the development of a specific EU regime covering the licensed cultivation of GM medicinal plants, ensuring that they are not released into the general environment.

Products, which contain more than 0.1 per cent GM ingredients, should be labeled in the interests of freedom of information, as well as produce from farm animals that have been fed on GM feeds.

SAME STANDARDS?

Dear Liberator,

It is some time since I have put pen to paper (or is the idiom more properly finger to keyboard?) in reaction to a magazine article - particularly one written by someone with whom I am more often than not in agreement.

However Simon Tittley's article in Liberator 281 about the crisis in the middle-east has provoked just that.

The truth is - that there is no truth in middle-eastern affairs. The same incidents can be given widely different interpretations - depending upon the prejudices of the onlooker.

Simon talks about the consistent application of Liberal principles - and that we should not pull our punches on indulge the Israeli government - I agree.

In my view many of the Israeli government's actions were wrong - and I condemn them. However we must be equally consistent with the Palestinians. I am disappointed that Simon has not condemned, for example, any of the actions of Hizbollah and Islamic Jihad (and those that support, fund and arm them) - I cannot think of words strong enough to condemn their brainwashing of ordinary young men to give up their lives for the glory of killing innocent human beings.

On a more mundane level, Chairman Arafat's leadership of the Palestinian Authority is characterised by cronyism and corruption - on a scale that no Labour (or for that matter Tory) politician could hope to emulate.

Of course we all believe in truth and justice - just like motherhood and apple pie. As Simon says, equivocation corrodes our own morality, distorts international ethics and in the end does no one any favours.

Let's just make sure that we also apply our same high Liberal standards in judging the actions of the Palestinians and of the Arab countries as well.

*Nick Aleksander
London*

We welcome letters by post, or
by email to
collective@liberator.org.uk

LETTERS

WHAT ABOUT ISRAEL?

Dear Liberator

I would just like to ask Simon Tittley (Liberator 281) - why do you think that the Jewish people, out of all the peoples of the world, should not be allowed to have our own homeland?

Your unequivocal support of the Palestinian Arab side states that you wish to stop Israeli occupation of the "Occupied Territories". Where do these territories stop? There is probably not one Palestinian (who hasn't already been shot by his brothers as a traitor) who thinks it stops at Jericho. No, they want all of Jerusalem (the capital of Israel since its foundation in 1948), plus Haifa, plus Tel Aviv etc.

When Sharon talks about war because he needs security, he means it.

Of course occupation brings out brutality in soldiers, even nice people you would associate with Woody Allen and William Shatner (Captain Kirk). I support the hundreds of refusniks (soldiers who refuse to work in the West Bank territories), and the Israeli Peace Movement. But where is the Palestinian Peace Movement? Oh sorry, they've already been shot by their brothers as traitors.

Hamas have already shown by their continuing to brainwash young people into deliberately murdering children, elderly people, women shopping, teenagers going to a disco, men playing pool, etc, that they have no interest in any peace process.

And where are your personal interviews with the families of these murdered people? It seems to me that you are personalising Arab people's justifiable grief, whilst whitewashing over the equally justifiable grief of Israeli people.

So where do we go from here? It would have helped if the entire Arab world, with its huge wealth from oil

reserves, had paid towards housing the Palestinian Arabs in proper towns, and with their own industries, instead of forcing them to continue living in refugee camps so it would make the West look uncaring.

People complain that American Jews fund universities, scientific research establishments, food industries etc in Israel, but isn't that show of caring better than letting people live in squalor?

As for reimbursing Palestinian families for the loss of homes lost over 50 years ago, where is my compensation for my family's bulldozed house in Lublin, Poland, which we had to leave over 50 years ago, or be slaughtered? Where is my elderly cousin Ilona's compensation for her house in Paris, which she could never go back to, as one day in 1942 when she was on a trip, soldiers came and murdered her husband and children and gave the house to a good Christian Nazi-supporting Frenchman?

None of us can turn back time, and perhaps we shouldn't want to. It is important that people with liberal and social (and democratic) values act to help all people come to terms with living with each other. This means persuading both sides to be thoughtful, to see all people as worthy of care, not slaughter, and to wanting to practice the one true culture in the world, which is human culture.

This includes music, dance, bright clothing, poetry, enjoyment and happiness, and should not be divided into the repressions invented by the leaders of the religions that people are born into (on all sides).

I think we would do better to remind both sides of this, than to support any group which only wants more deaths.

*Hilary Leighter
London*

SPRING IN THE AIR

Dear Liberator,

Never let the truth get in the way of a good story.

I did not, contrary to Radical Bulletin (Liberator 281) propose the abolition of the Spring conference.

That is, as you rightly say, not a matter for the FFAC. What I did propose was that, when agreeing the budget for 2002, including a provision for the Spring conference in the sum of £33,000, the Federal Finance and Administration Committee should put down a marker over a year in advance that no funds will be made available to subsidise Spring conference 2003.

That was agreed by the FFAC, unanimously as I recall. It is then for Conference Committee to decide whether it can achieve a conference which meets its direct costs, either by increasing income or reducing costs, such as the very high costs of having a professionally built and lit stage set.

The direct cost of Spring conference was budgeted this year at £33,000, the difference between the income from that conference and its direct costs. The true cost may be somewhat higher, depending on the allocation of the conference overheads.

The question for the party is whether Spring conference is the best use of that money, or whether it would be better spent on, for example, employing a recruitment officer and/or increased G8 grants for the local elections and/or increase grants to ALDC and LDYS.

*Jonathan Davies
Barnet*

SITTING ON DEFENCE

Dear Liberator

A member of the recent Defence Policy Working Party regrets (Liberator 281) that the Party did not accept the recommendations from the working party that we should increase our defence budget by billions in order to be able to assist the EU to compete with US military power.

The proposal would have committed the party to increasing the basic rate of taxation by a minimum of between two and three pence in the pound. The party instead opposed any increases in taxation for defence purposes.

The call for a return to a form of Pax Britannica was reminiscent of the Imperial Liberals of the late nineteenth century at their worst. To advocate yet more billions to be spent on arms in a world already spending more than £800 billion annually on a technology that has no purpose in tackling the real problems of global warming, poverty and water shortages facing our planet is irresponsible in the extreme.

Thankfully the proposals were rejected by the party in favour of firmly basing our approach to defence in a context of prioritising conflict prevention and resolution.

It recognised clearly the threat to world peace posed by the corruption of the west's dependence on Middle Eastern and Central Asian fossil fuels and advocated international investment in alternative fuel sources.

The adopted paper, instead of diverting billions more of desperately needed tax revenues to military hardware, advocated instead that the massive waste in current European defence capability should be tackled first.

Europe's current defence budget amounts to 40 per cent of the US' defence budget but delivers only a 15 per cent equivalent in fire-power.

We have thankfully seen the reduction in the number of the world's military superpowers over the last century. There now remains only one. The radical liberal approach to this situation should be to seek to absorb this final superpower into an international system of accountability such as a reformed UN, not to seek to create yet another military superpower on this side of the Atlantic.

The liberal internationalism represented by the European Union to date must not be undervalued. Its work on conflict resolution and prevention represents a new and enlightened approach to conflict and must not be sacrificed on the altar of a renewed European/US arms race.

Other than the unfortunate survival of a fossilised Cold War nuclear policy (defended by an astonishing and breathtakingly dishonest parade of the Great and the Good from the right wing of the party) the defence paper as adopted by the conference in Manchester has much that radical Thatcherites/ Blairites might object to, but much of which radical liberals can be proud of.

*Donnachadh McCarthy Member
Defence Policy Working Group*

Liberator Fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrat Conference

"Liberalism - having the courage of our convictions"

**Speakers will include Nick Clegg
(Liberal Democrat MEP for the East
Midlands) and Simon Titley (regular
writer for Liberator)**

**Monday 23rd September 2002
6.15pm - 8pm
Belgrave Hotel, Brighton**

The New Rulers of the World

by John Pilger

Verso £10. 2002

This is the wrong place to review this book; it should be on the front pages of the Sun, Express, Telegraph, and the ads in the intervals of the World Cup games.

For Liberator's readership, John Pilger's book, written in the form of four essays on Indonesia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Australia, contains no surprises, only horrific, specific detail.

The New Rulers of the World (basically the old ones - the US, the UK, multi-nationals in new frocks, and the global media) conspire to create an unholy alliance to protect the interests of the West to the detriment of the people of those countries, whose only purpose is to keep the status quo.

So good are the propaganda machines and spin doctors, so all engulfing the global media, few in the wealthy G7 countries know how their comfort and choice is built upon the wretchedness and suffering of the many in the Third World. Pilger's style is humourless, grim and unrelenting, but then so is the human misery he describes.

In the first essay, "The Model Pupil", Pilger charts the US engineering of Sukarno's fall and Suharto's bloody seizure of Indonesia in the 1960s to bring about the new global economy, and the role of the World Bank in keeping him in power.

He graphically illustrates the cost of this new economy on the people whose labour drives it. Posing as a buyer from the UK, Pilger is given a tour of the Gap factory in Indonesia. Women work in 40c heat, with no choice of the hours they work (the long shift is 36 hours), often without lavatory breaks. None of them has seen the "code of conduct" Gap boasts about; their directors care only about rate of production and quality control. A Nike employee gets about 4 per cent of the retail price of the shoes, not enough to buy the laces.

So bad is the situation for the people of Iraq ("Paying the Price"), that long serving and experienced UN officials have resigned because they cannot condone the sanctions: "... the policy of economic sanctions is totally bankrupt. We are in the process of destroying an entire

REVIEWS

society.... Five thousand children are dying per month"

Dying of cancer at 12 times the pre-1991 rate, most probably from the depleted uranium used by the Americans and British during the Gulf War; of curable disease, because there is no medicine; of lack of sanitation and clean water, because the pumps have been destroyed by bombing and spare parts are embargoed. Literacy, 90 per cent in 1989, is falling with ever year since 1991. People cannot afford to read books, they are sold to buy food and fuel. And who helped Saddam to power?

The Australian chapter, "The Chosen Ones", differs from the others only in that it is one country who is abusing its own "First People". The condition of the 2 per cent of Australia's population is not improving much, despite the claims made at the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

Afghanistan is "benefiting" from the experiments with cluster bombs the US tried out first in Laos. Cluster bombs discharge dart shape fragments which move around the body for several days, destroying any organ and tissues in its way.

Geoffrey Hoon said that cluster bombs were "the best and most effective weapons we have" against the terrorists of al-Qa'ida. But who are the greater terrorists? The 11 September mob? Or the New Rulers of the World? Did you know that the US foreign aid budget in 2000 was \$75 million, one tenth of the cost of a (single) B52 bomber?

All grim reading; economic facts interspersed with stories of the human cost. One of the strongest messages to come out of this book, and one which anyone with any morality should strive for, is the reform of the UN.

"No fly zones" (in Iraq), despite US and British claim of their being legitimised by the Security Council's

Resolution 688, have no validity. There is no reference to them in any Security Council resolution, a fact Pilger took up with former UN head, Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali in 1992.

No fly zones were never even debated - "they are illegal" - said Boutros Ghali. Pilger recounts the story of one no fly zone policing raid, which killed a shepherd, his father, his four children, two sheep dogs and the flock of sheep, dangerous enemies of democracy to a man (or beast), to be sure.

The dominance of the (US controlled) Security Council must end. If all the states had had the vote on the sanctions on Iraq there would be none. The US dominates all the workings of the UN. Pilger reports a conversation with the Dutch Ambassador to the UN, and Chairman of the Sanctions Committee.

Pilger: "How much power does the US exercise over your committee?"

Ambassador: "We operate by consensus".

Pilger: "And if the Americans object?"

Ambassador: "We don't operate".

In a world where the economy of General Motors is larger than that of Denmark, a sovereign state, (as good a reason for Britain to join the Euro as any) and the majority of human beings cannot afford to eat enough protein or make a phone call, surely a moral revolution is overdue.



“It is the same the whole world over, you’ll hear the same refrain; It’s the rich what gets the pleasure and the poor what gets the blame” Pilger’s book echoes the sentiments expressed in that nineteenth century music hall song. It is the twenty-first century now; oughtn’t we to change it?

This is a shocking book, but the fact that its readership will probably be very small and select is even more shocking. Its contents out to be rammed down the throat of every teenager whining after new trainers or an upgraded mobile, and force-fed to every foreign secretary.

Wendy Kyrle-Pope

Political Access Broadcasting: Engaging the Electorate by Rob Wheway The Liberal Institute 2002 £3.00

The troubling general picture of the nation that doesn’t bother to vote has been much discussed, but potential for solutions has been thinner on the ground. This pamphlet is timely, and travels smartly towards a simple and probably workable idea, which is to re-engage the electorate by making it necessary for the local media to facilitate a broadcast about local issues, if two or more local election candidates request it during the campaign.

On the way, we take a tour around (to give just a few landmarks) the pluses and minuses of party political broadcasts, declines in factory-gate debate, the media’s role in concentrating power at the top, and the likely need for a regulatory body for public access broadcasting. I find little to disagree with in his points, though the underlying assumption that everyone avidly watches TV and that of those who don’t, practically all are potentially interested in politics, may be a little questionable.

It’s ably written and very readable. Stylistic glitches such as “it is likely that the media’s involvement would be likely to encourage attendance” (p 10) show haste; fortunately they are not usually confusing, but they are irritants. The whole text could have done with another proof-read, particularly for punctuation.

It would be interesting to know if Rob Wheway feels the distribution method (on trust to Liberator subscribers, with a request for £3) has worked; I didn’t get round to sending my own £3 until well over a month later, and some may not have done so at all.

I agree with Michael Meadowcroft in the foreword that it is “an idea well worth thrusting into the arena of public debate”.

The trouble is that most of that public wouldn’t know real debate if it bashed them on the head; the suggestions in this pamphlet have real merit, and would be a good step towards helping them get the idea.

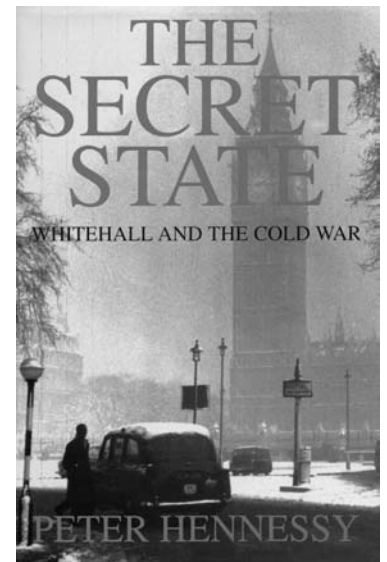
Of course the media aren’t the only source of the disengagement problem; now, who is going to write a similar pamphlet on how supermarkets undermine democracy?

Kate Smith

The Secret State - Whitehall & the Cold War by Peter Hennessey Allen Lane 2002 £16.99

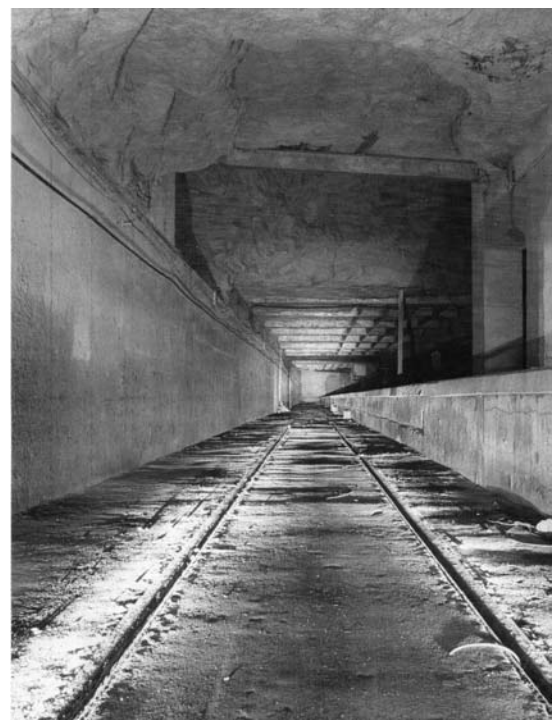
Over the years Peter Hennessey has built up a relationship with the Establishment, which makes his writings on their mechanations reliable. *Whitehall*, remains essential reading, not least for those who would tread the corridors. *The Secret State* expands his thesis through the Cold War. My memories of Brunel’s Box Tunnel chiefly revolve around a guard rushing excitedly through train announcing that we were going to break the London to Bath speed record. The tunnel did not bear the words ‘Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter In’ over its entrance, so who, the Russians aside, could have guessed that alongside it was Camp Armageddon (codename TURNSTILE)? Once the bear had the last redoubt it had to move, but Hennessey does not reveal its current location

Amongst the revelations of the book, the Prime Minister can



only authorise nuclear retaliation, not order it... We sleep more peacefully with Bomber Blair’s itchy finger... The other interesting point is that the Direct Action Committee and the Committee of One Hundred where, de facto, the last imperialists, unaware of Britain’s shrunken role on the world stage. Hennessey’s comments on Marwick (on CND) are probably close to the truth. After 1963, CND Mk.1 was nothing, there was some continuity in personnel with the late Sixties student activism, but not much... A bit like the Surrealists citing Lautremont, say. Why did Mods wear the CND symbol? Because it was cool. Liberals, not even Archie Sinclair, don’t figure. Conrad Russell might have something to say on this.

Stewart Rayment



15 The secret Cotswold Station ready to receive the last train

Monday

I was sad to read of the death of my old friend Thor Heyerdahl. No one gives him much thought now, but in his day he was Quite The Thing. If he thought a set of chaps in one place had come from another place then he jolly well set out to prove it. He was not afraid to sail a papyrus raft from Easter Island to Egypt (or perhaps it was the other way round?) if that would aid him in his pursuit of the truth. It happened that some years ago I had a dispute with the Duke of Rutland over the boundary of our estates. I shall not bore you with the details here: suffice to say I was clearly in the right. Nevertheless, to prove my point at Law I had to demonstrate that my ancestors has settled the northern shores of Rutland Water. With Heyerdahl's help I was able to construct a vessel from Stilton rinds and recreate their voyage. There was a spring tide running and Ruttie was in playful mood, but we made landfall and the Duke settled out of court.

Tuesday

Whittington telephones me. After some pleasantries, he asks if I would be so kind as to write him a reference. You know the sort of thing: "In my experience this cat is capable of anything." - I do them for former Orphans all the time. I reply that I would, of course, be only too happy to oblige, but express some surprise that he is applying for jobs as I thought that the fame he gained during the London Mayoral election meant that he would never have to work again. Why, requests for endorsements of choice brands of sardine were arriving by every post! Soon he pours out his story - a sad tale of overindulgence, gambling debts and unpaid bills at the dairy. Now he has heard talk of a cat being employed at the Commons and intends to apply for the post in the hoping of putting his finances back on an even keel. Let us all wish him well.

In the evening I visit the Bonkers' Arms and fall into conversation with a fellow. "My wife comes from Shropshire," he tells me. "Much Wenlock?" I enquire. "I get my share," he replies.

Wednesday

Have you come across David Laws? Once Paddy Ashplant had decided to try his hand as Governor General of the Sanjak of Novi-Pazar, or wherever it is, there was a need for a new MP in Yeovil and it was upon Laws that the election fell. I am afraid, however, that he has somewhat blotted his copybook. The other day he was questioning the Deputy Governor of the Bank of England at a meeting of the Treasury Select Committee and had the temerity to suggest that the fellow had toned down his views on the dangers of inflation in the hope of getting the nod when Eddie George hangs up his striped trousers. Not surprisingly, things got rather frosty. Laws should remember that only those with the highest motives go into banking. The sort of fellow who is filled with ambition for power and riches would never choose it as a career. It was probably a toss up whether the Deputy Governor went to work for the Old lady of Threadneedle Street or entered a monastery.

Thursday

Isn't this new Interweb arrangement clever? Already I have had a letter from a Nigerian gentleman tipping me off about a way of making some easy money, which is welcome as my bet on the Revd Hughes as the next Archbishop of Canterbury is in danger

Lord Bonkers' Diary

because of some Welsh fellow with a beard coming up on the rails. Now, with help from the Department of Hard Sums at the University of Rutland at Belvoir, I have a site of my own. So warm up the valves, point your aerial at Daventry and turn the dial to www.bonkers.hall.btinternet.co.uk and enjoy what has already been described by the High Leicestershire Radical as "a unique site". Make no mistake, gentlemen: these "computers" are here to stay.

Friday

As an experienced parliamentarian I am always on the look out for new talent amongst the younger Members. Richard Younger-Ross, for instance, has done much good work in alerting us to the dangers of ragwort - unlike Lembit Öpik's asteroids, it cannot be treated with a

simple ointment. He should, however, thank his lucky stars that he lives in Devon and does not have to tangle with our own Rutland ragwort. Not only is it poisonous, it is an accomplished mimic and can outpace a badger across open country. I once tried to raise the matter in the House, but was unable to get through my own lodge gates because the plant had read of my plans in that morning's edition of The Times and barricaded me in. For several days in was impossible to get any food delivered, and it was only when Meadowcroft's grandfather played his clarinet at it that the blessed weed relented and beat a hasty retreat to the arboretum.

Saturday

Wimbledon will soon be upon us, with its attendant pleasures of Pimms, strawberries and cream, and the lovely Sue Barker on the electric television. One does, however, have to feel sorry for Tim Henman: he does try Terribly Hard, doesn't he? Taking pity, I offered him a "wild card" entry into the Rutland Open. All went well earlier in the week and he made a steady progress to the final, dropping a set only to Lord Beaumont of Whitley. Unfortunately he is unable to sustain this form into the final, and Miss Dora Bryan wins a disappointingly one-sided contest. After the final I take them both down to the Bonkers' Arms. Bless me if I don't meet another bird with a wife from Shropshire. "Long Mynd?" I ask. "That's rather personal, isn't it?" he replies.

Sunday

To Worcestershire and a well-known kennels in the shadow of the Malverns. Like most gentlemen, I remove my moustache for the summer months and send it to live in the country where it can benefit from the lush grass and clean air. Who should I meet on a similar errand this morning but our own John Thurso? He will be known to many as the grandson of John O'Groats, who led the Liberal Party during the dark days of World War II. I do not wish to belittle his contribution to Britain's victory, but many thought that it would have been helpful if had been photographed in the newspapers giving his apostrophe to Boy Scouts collecting for salvage.

On the way home I stop at a public house and I am pleased to find that it serves Smithson & Greaves' Northern Bitter. I am even more pleased to find that no one there has a wife who comes from Shropshire.

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