liberator

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COMMENTARY

THE GUNBOATS RETURN

It was not only Saddam Hussein's statue that was pulled down in Baghdad, so was the venture that has gone on since 1945 to construct an international order based on rules.

Although the UN and its structures still exist, the American government seems intent on reducing it to a humanitarian organisation. That is still worthwhile work, but the most sustained attempt to impose a framework of legality on international relations lies in pieces.

The Iraq war has created a precedent that will allow any country that objects to another's conduct to invade it, remove its government and occupy it at its pleasure.

One can share in the joy of Iraqis at the fall of a notably brutal dictator, and sympathise with the plight of those killed and injured, and still recognise that the dangers for relations between states that result are huge.

With the invasion of Iraq, we are back to the colonial age in which powerful governments dispatched gunboats to deal with troublesome foreign rulers, and considered themselves to be bringing civilisation to their subjects whether they wanted it or not.

Even while the war was in progress, the American government made bellicose noises about Syria and Iran, noises that appeared to be too much even for the ever-obedient Tony Blair. Where will be next? Blair has helped the Americans to establish the precedent that any country is fair game for being invaded.

At the time of writing, Baghdad had fallen and appeared to be about to succumb to anarchy, while sporadic fighting continued in parts of Iraq and Kurdish forces had occupied the northern cities.

It is impossible to predict what will have happened by the time this Liberator is published. It might even be the case that a huge cache of weapons of mass destruction has been found.

These weapons are the great mystery of the Iraq war. As he prepared to dispatch his gunboats, the bargain basement version of Lord Palmerston who now sits in Downing Street claimed repeatedly that this was a war to deprive Saddam of weapons of mass destruction.

The course of the war has so far suggested that Saddam scarcely had conventional weapons worth the name, never mind those of mass destruction. If he had them, why did he not, in extremis, use them? The Americans and Blair claimed before the war to have irrefutable proof that these weapons existed. Why then, a month after fighting started, have they not located more than some bags of fertiliser? Were they ever there in the first place? Or were they invented as an excuse for Bush to complete his father's unfinished business in Iraq?

The reconstruction of Iraq is a huge task and its political dimensions unknown. There does not appear to be anyone who can claim legitimacy even if the Americans wish to hand over its government to Iraqis. We can only wait and watch whether Iraq really is transformed into a democracy.

If it is, it might well elect Islamic fundamentalists. It will certainly elect supporters of the Palestinians, and it may elect those who wish, for example, to nationalise oil and keep Americans companies out.

These sorts of policies will test how real is the American commitment to Iraqi democracy. Many Latin American countries had American-backed military brutes imposed on them for far lesser displays of impertinence. The suspicion must be that Iraqis will be free to elect any government of which the White House approves.

Blair was much given to pledges about democracy and oil for the Iraqis to counter the explosion of anger in his party and among the public over his backing for Bush.

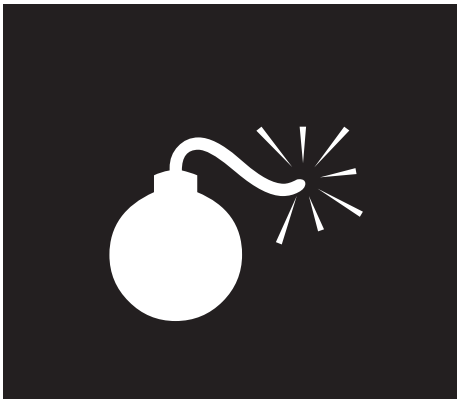
In Britain, beyond the immediate effects of the war on the morale and support of different parties, a larger question looms – why do we tolerate a constitutional order in which the power of the prime minister is so untrammelled that the incumbent can do everything from appoint a judge to declare war without the slightest reference to parliament?

Blair's record on democratisation and civil liberty is a disgrace, and the only reason there were debates in parliament on the Iraq war at all was the public outrage that would have followed any refusal.

Blair was forced for the first time to treat parliament seriously. It would be better if the prime minister were required to seek parliamentary approval for these serious actions. After all, such a system seems to work in America.

This is the sort of constitutional reform issue that liberals have banged on about for years while no-one listened. There may now be more of an audience.

One unintended consequence of Blair's behaviour has been the re-engagement of young people in particular with politics. Long after the Iraq war has faded, those who took part in the protests will show more interest in politics than they did before. Whether the Liberal Democrats can profit from this, as the only party that at least opposed the start of the war, remains to be seen.



RADICAL BULLETIN

JAW JAW AND WAR WAR

Late on the Friday evening at the Liberal Democrat spring conference, the federal conference committee met in emergency conclave, amid an unfeasible quantity of leftover Twiglets, in a Torquay hotel room.

The reason was the appalled response to the first draft of the emergency motion on Iraq tabled by Charles Kennedy.

He had entrusted the drafting to some hapless underling, and it contrived to fail to mention that a further UN resolution should endorse military action, and talked in a vague fashion about 'evidence' from weapons inspectors without saying this it should be.

Worse, it forgot to say that the party did not support the war, which at that stage had not started. Since this would have caused a riot had it been put to conference, an alternative was hastily drafted for the emergency meeting.

This incorporated a section on introducing human rights monitors into Iraq from an alternative draft motion tabled by Donnachadh McCarthy, but otherwise omitted everything from his motion.

McCarthy, who almost single-handedly ensured the party had a credible presence on the 15 February anti-war march (Liberator 286), is aggrieved that a representative of Kennedy was allowed to attend the emergency FCC meeting but he was not, despite being the only other person to submit a motion.

He also objects to Kennedy having e-mailed his original draft to FCC members, which he saw as a bid to bounce them into accepting it.

The revised motion included a form of words from chief whip Andrew Stunell, which he advised was in line with the text then being negotiated with the Labour and Tory rebels in parliament. The FCC accepted this with relief.

But the paragraph on what to do if war began stated: "The case for military action is not yet proven, but in the event that UK forces are committed to action, conference offers its full support to the personnel engaged in the Middle East, and hopes their tasks will be swiftly and successfully completed with the minimum loss of life."

McCarthy had wanted a motion calling for UK troops to be withdrawn from the area.

As emergency motions can be neither amended nor subject to separate votes, there was a 'take it or leave it' debate, which forced both those who opposed the war in all circumstances, and those who supported military action, to speak and vote together against the motion.

Kennedy moved the motion himself. Perhaps, in the circumstances, he had to be seen to do so, but it turned the motion's passage into an issue of support for him personally.

Thus did procedure mean that even with such an international emergency at hand, the conference spent half an hour on Iraq and half a morning on the mind-numbing fine detail of information technology policy.

All something to do with deliberative policy making no doubt, but it stifled entirely legitimate views from being argued and must have given the public a curious idea of the party's priorities.

If ever there was case for tearing up an agenda, suspending standing orders and allowing a full scale debate on an international crisis, this was surely it. The result would probably have been the same, but all concerned would have felt fairly treated, and the Liberal Democrats would have gained in public esteem by being the only major party with the courage to openly and fully debate what was being debated in every pub and home the length of the country.

The effect of the final motion was to allow people to interpret the party's stance however they wished.

The party could claim it did its best to oppose the war but in some unspecified way now 'supported' British troops. War opponents could claim the party's position was either reasonable in the circumstances or a let down; war supporters could claim either that the Liberal Democrats had accepted their arguments or were being hypocritical.

More puzzling was Charles Kennedy's claim after war began that the Liberal Democrats accepted the decision of the House of Commons in voting for it, even though the party had opposed it.

Come off it. The House of Commons passes motions that offend Liberal Democrats every day it sits. While the party does not normally advocate breaking laws, mere passage through the Commons does not mean that all subsequent criticism has to be silenced.

Nor is 'supporting troops' very credible. The armed forces are not made up of fools; they would all have been keenly aware of divided opinion at home about the war.

Some leading Liberal politicians of the day risked their careers and personal safety to oppose the Boer War while it was in progress. In the First World War issues of principle tore apart Asquith's government. Even in World War Two, lively disputes about its course occurred in parliament. It is what parliament is there for. The idea that all debate on a war must stop for its duration is nonsense.

If the Iraq war was of dubious necessity and legality before it started, a vote in parliament did not make the immoral moral.

Meanwhile, the row over the torpor that overtook the party machine in the run-up to the 15 February anti-war demonstration has continued.

The Federal Executive saw the embattled campaigns and communications committee chair Tim Razzall, widely blamed for the slow organisation for this event, circulate an enormous collection of postings from cix intended to discredit McCarthy.

Razzall claimed that McCarthy's subsequent criticisms of him over the march were in part both untrue and intemperate.

This provoked an outburst of intemperateness from Tony Greaves, who had attacked Razzall in Liberator 286 and who believes that cix material should remain confidential (it is supposed to be a set of private e-conferences for party members).

Charles Kennedy then joined in to say that he considers it his job to find out what party members are saying and thinking and that keeping cix secret hardly accorded with principles of open government and freedom of information. Cix users take note.

ACT OF FAITH

Connoisseurs of attempts to square circles would have been gratified by the Liberal Democrat Spring conference debate on faith schools.

Pay attention at the back; this is complicated. A working group was set up to look into this issue after a motion was referred back the previous year. It produced recommendations which were then mangled to make them more favourable to faith schools.

The conference was thus confronted with a motion proposed by shadow education secretary Phil Willis, which would allow faith schools to continue but outlaw back door selection and attempt to make new schools 'multifaith'.

One amendment sought to reinstate the original working group proposals. Another, from LDYS sought to scrap faith schools entirely, and a third from London region chair Jonathan Davies, essentially said that more faith schools the merrier.

These four choices proved insufficient and several speakers then called for rejection of the whole lot, on the grounds, if not quite in the words, that it was not worth starting a fight with every organised religious denomination over something that had few votes in it.

The result was that the LDYS amendment was defeated, though attracting about one-third of the votes. Davies' amendment went down somewhat more badly. The amendment from the working group was passed, and then the whole motion thrown out by 171 votes to 167.

Was Willis annoyed by the year's wasted effort by his working group? Probably not. As one other MP remarked, "If there is no policy the spokesman can say what he likes".

TALKS ABOUT TALKS

For the past several months, informal talks have been going on at senior levels between the Liberal Democrats and the Liberal Party.

The first most people knew was when they were referred to at the Liberator fringe meeting in Torbay by Liberal Party chair Rob Wheway.

The talks are not about anything as specific as the Liberal Party's members either wholly or partly joining the Liberal Democrats.

Rather, there is some bridge building going on to see what common ground is there. Relations between the two parties around the country vary from poisonous in Liverpool to a de facto joint council group in Peterborough.

One thing that needs to be established is to what extent divisions between the two parties are personal or political.

Personal differences, most either over wounds nursed for 15 years or local slightings, are hardly amenable to debate; people either loathe each other and feel insulted or they do not.

Political differences can be discussed, and the question has to be posed of whether any position is held by the Liberal Party which could not be argued for within the Liberal Democrats.

There might be policy differences, but do differences of principle remain? The Liberal Party's anti-EU stance might be a problem, but since it was only adopted on a 26-24 vote at its assembly it is hardly the settled view of its members.

Within the Liberal Democrats, there are plenty who would regard many of the Liberal Party as old friends with whom they would wish to work again.

Liberal Democrat members who have joined since merger may on the other hand look at the Liberal Party's parlous electoral showing and wonder what the fuss is about, and indeed in very few places does the party pose an electoral threat to the Liberal Democrats.

But for many this is about reuniting a divided family where grievances real or imagined have festered for too long.

REGIONAL ROW

A deal struck between the Liberal Democrats and the Government has led to the resignation of Tony Greaves as a spokesman in the House of Lords.

The Liberal Democrats tried and failed in the Commons to amend the regional assemblies bill, and so decided to play hardball in the Lords where, with Tory votes, they could defeat the Government.

Protracted negotiations saw the Liberal Democrat team extract most of the concessions they sought, but with one exception.

This was the Government's insistence that, if a region votes for a regional government in a referendum, there must also then be single tier local government in that region.

The Liberal Democrats objected, but were told that this had to stay in the bill at the insistence of the prime minister. Blair does not much care about regional government, and was quite prepared to see the bill lost completely unless this provision remained in it.

Thus the Liberal Democrats were faced with a choice: did they accept an imperfect bill in order to see regional government introduced at all, or did they reject it in the Lords, in which the case the Government might drop it altogether, or use the parliament act to force it through without its concessions?

Ed Davey, who shadows the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, gained the support of his parliamentary team and of the executive of the Liberal Democrat group in the Local Government Association for the deal.

Greaves, a very longstanding supporter of regional government, resigned because he did not accept it.

The concessions are that there should be a second question on the referendum to give voters a choice between at least two options for unitary government; agreement that boundaries of existing unitary councils can be considered by the Boundary Committee where councils agree; publication of a draft 'powers' Bill before the first referendum, which will allow for debate on which powers should be devolved; and public confirmation that the White Paper is not the final word on powers to be devolved.

Devolution is only likely even in the medium term in the North East, North West and Yorkshire and the Humber, where there are clear boundaries and regional identities.

Further south no-one is much interested, though that might change long-term were the three northern regional governments to prove a success.

TIME TRAVEL

One Liberator reader who was invited to dine recently with a prominent defector from the Conservatives was startled to be told that the Pro European Conservative Party regards itself as a predecessor party of the Liberal Democrats.

The idea that the PECP is of equal status with the pre-merger Liberal party and SDP is an extraordinary conceit. It seems to have come about because the PECP's not-very-large membership decided en bloc to join the Liberal Democrats.

Quite how one can retrospectively become a predecessor of something that already exists has not been explained.

Meanwhile, there is clearly some money floating around the Peel Group, the body chaired by Winchester MP Mark Oaten that exists to recruit former Conservatives into the Liberal Democrats.

It appears not to have occurred to Peel Group members that choosing as chair an MP noted for pursing a divisive pro-market agenda might not be the best way to convince others of its good faith.

The aim of recruiting Conservatives is welcome and laudable so long as they are recruited by Liberal Democrat policy and do not have this shifted around to be tailored to them.

If the Peel Group simply said, "come on in the water's lovely" to their former colleagues, it would be fine. But its conference handout states: "we have already started to produce pamphlets and policy papers".

Sorry? Why does a group which seeks to promote the Liberal Democrats externally need its own policies? Or does it hope to promote these policies internally?

WONDERS OF TECHNOLOGY

The sight of a long queue snaking its way into the Liberal Democrat conference at Torbay at first sight looked impressive – clearly there was such an enthusiastic turnout that hall could not hold all those wishing to take part.

Sadly, there was a less flattering explanation – an appalling cock-up with the production of conference badges.

The conference office, run by events organiser Penny McCormack, tried a new system of badge making, which, staff have said, did not work properly when first installed.

After modifications, only a proportion of the badges needed for Torquay was made in time but it was assumed the rest could be made in Torquay.

To make matters worse, the conference committee had agreed to try a new system of sending badges out. This did not work either with, for example, non-voting reps getting voting rep badges, and others not getting badges at all. MPs were bemused to find they received only their 'parliamentarian' badges and not their voting ones.

The frail badge making system could not cope at Torquay and the immense queues began to form.

Who exactly from Cowley Street should have taken charge to sort it out is a matter of lively dispute.

People waiting became increasingly irate; some who had travelled a long way burst into tears and others lost their tempers and drove home.

The respected chief steward Chris Maines was horrified that he and his team of volunteer stewards were left by Cowley Street to face the wrath and chaos, and came up with the idea of providing everyone who was a voting rep with a little piece of white paper with 'V' written on it in felt pen, so they could vote. This partially solved the problem, and eventually the badge maker creaked back into life, though security was hardy assisted.

FCC chair Liz Barker issued an apology to everyone affected in the post-Torbay edition of Conference Call. She wrote that the problems were "unacceptable and we are taking the complaints very seriously".

Chief Executive Hugh Rickard, McCormack's manager and the person with ultimate responsibility for Cowley Street, "is conducting an investigation into what went wrong so that changes will be made to ensure that such a situation does not arise in future", Barker wrote.

TOP SHELF

The normal sober atmosphere of the House of Lords has been disrupted recently by streams of obscenities.

This is because of the passage (ooh er, missus) of the Sexual Offences Bill.

As one Lib Dem peer pointed out, this has led to hours of elderly lawyers talking dirty, such as on the amendment which said "Page 2 Clause 1 Subsection 2A Insert 'anus'".

During the same debate, peers were bemused to hear the elderly Lady Soltoun argue that oral rape was impossible because everyone has teeth as a natural defence.

Reports that copies of Lords Hansard have never been in such demand in the Commons, and MPs have seen sniggering on the benches, are of course wholly untrue.

HERE, OR THERE?

The looming political battle will be between the rival visions of the EU and America, says John Stevens

If I, a former Tory, invite Liberator readers to forget this war in Iraq, will I not excite your keenest disapproval? But hear me out. The really important battleground is not in the Middle East, nor in the myriad locations around the world which may, perhaps more surely now, be touched by terrorism. It is here in Britain.

Think back to that more than half century-long rift in our body politic which was finally resolved in 1688. The issue was: could the national economy, that had come into being largely as a result of increasing royal power, be run other than by absolutism? Or could it, in fact, be better run by an oligarchy, the germ of political liberty?

Across most of Europe, absolutism was triumphant. France, the superpower of the day, dominant politically, economically and culturally; in its way modern and progressive, centralised, efficient, certainly magnificent, was the model that inspired Charles I and his two sons.

But there was an alternative, based upon old, medieval representative institutions, partially crushed by the Thirty Years War, and the failure of the Protestant revolution, but still persuasive: Holland. If Britain had gone with France, the Dutch cause would have been lost. But after immense upheavals, which split the nation, and took another half century to heal, we did not, and so we changed the world, for the better. Does any of this sound faintly familiar?

We find ourselves today wondering about the political implications of the new global economy. The issue is: can there be an effective international rule of law and an international democracy? Or are these only real within a nation state, within a national demos, so that the maintenance of world order must fall to the greatest such state, to the dominant superpower?

Though the thought is naturally encouraged by Washington's current apoplectic antipathy to Paris, it is nevertheless true: George W Bush's America resembles in many ways the France of Louis XIV.

Wall Street and Hollywood are the new Versailles, a gilded cage for the elite, a fantasy for the masses. And resting on, perhaps, just as financially uncertain foundations. There is no doubting America's immense military might, and the absolute conviction that it can be applied to bring to others a superior civilization, would have gladdened the Sun King's heart.

For the Dutch, of course, now read 'Old Europe'. Despite all its many faults and failures, the process of European integration, the Commission, the Luxembourg Court, the Strasbourg Parliament, the euro, constitute the only really serious attempt, anywhere in the world, to create an effective international rule of law and an international democracy. By comparison, the UN is an irrelevance. The greatest dispute in the world today, is that between a 'New American' and an 'Old European' model of globalization. Such is the true depth of the divide across the Atlantic that has been revealed in recent weeks.

What happens in Britain will decide the outcome. If we go with the Americans, their agenda will prevail. If we go whole-heartedly with the Europeans, given our deep democratic traditions, the prospects for their succeeding will be good. The Republican Right know this. That is why they are pushing the containment of 'Old Europe', the 'New Kennan Doctrine' (after the architect of Cold War containment).

This consists of keeping Britain outside the euro, combined with promoting resistance to further deepening, especially in the new member states formerly in the Soviet bloc, so as to strangle the emergence of the EU as a serious rival to US power.

Here, they can claim immensely powerful support: nothing less than the whole, very significant, dollar-orientated side of our economy and its mouthpieces Rupert Murdoch and Conrad Black.

Never let it be said again that the anti-Europeans are just tweedy little Englanders, who can be swept aside by the government announcing the five economic tests for euro entry are met. Having turned the Conservatives, under Hague and Duncan Smith, into the American Party, they have now captured the Prime Minister, who as late as the last general election was still seen as the great hope of the pro-Europeans.

So who will champion the cause of Britain as a European nation, rather than an American satellite, with all which this implies? Who will denounce the new Strafford and the new Treaty of Dover? Who will usher in the new Glorious Revolution?

Do I really need to spell it out? It is we, the Liberal Democrats, who hold this precious charge in our hands. We alone can reverse the current, headlong retreat of British pro-Europeanism.

For all is far from lost. Beyond the revulsion against Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, who can doubt that our going it alone with the Americans to Baghdad has uncovered a profound unease in the British people about Washington's vision for the world? An unease shared with the vast majority of continental Europeans. An unease which is bound to grow as the global economic, as well as military and political, consequences of American policy begin to bite, exposing ever more cruelly the intense vulnerability of our once so highly prized role of trans-Atlantic bridge.

Gordon Brown, in his budget speech, has blamed Europe for the failings of his stewardship of the economy.

We must blame Bush's America. We will be right. And, in time, we will be believed. It will be a harder fight than anyone has hitherto imagined: the nearest thing indeed to a civil war that we have experienced since the 1600s. But it is a fight which, when we fully understand the scale of the responsibility that is now upon our shoulders, we will win. It is the fight that will carry the party to government and Britain to the heart of Europe.

FEAR AND LOATHING IN THE ARAB WORLD

The war in Iraq has provoked mixed feelings in Britain, with relief at the speed with which Baghdad was reached offset by dismay at the chaos that has followed and the level of civilian suffering. But in the Arab street, from Morocco to Oman, there is seething anger, which has serious implications for the future, Jonathan Fryer argues

The Liberal Democrats officially opposed war as a 'solution' to the problem of Saddam Hussein, and I remain convinced that we were right to do so. For understandable reasons, once hostilities started, several leading parliamentary figures felt they had to temper their opposition as British forces were in the field, though in my view, a war that was wrong before it began was no less wrong once it had.

Quite apart from the inappropriateness of brute force in the 21st century, it was clear that invading Iraq would open a pandora's box, not only in that ethnically and politically diverse society, but in the wider Arab world. At times, the Bush administration in Washington gives the impression that it doesn't really care. But Britain cannot afford to be so cavalier.

Monitoring the Arab media over recent weeks, I have been very conscious that a different war has been reported there from the one shown on the BBC, not to mention CNN. The more balanced Western channels have tried to put over some of the complexities of the issues, as well as reflecting some of the devastating impact of the war on the ordinary people of Iraq. But in general, coverage has been from the perspective of the so-called coalition forces: how far have 'we' advanced today; just how many of Saddam's henchmen have been killed.

Watching Al Jazeera or Abu Dhabi or Moroccan TV is another matter entirely. There has been little or no support for Saddam Hussein – who has long been viewed with contempt across the Arab world – but the empathy with the Iraqi people has been intense. Bombs falling on Baghdad hit the hearts of Arabs across the world. Dead and injured Iraqi children were mourned as if they were their children. Just as the TV footage of 9/11 traumatised many people in the West, so the images of the Iraq war have shaken many Arabs to the core. And they have had to watch different images and new horrors day after day.

The sense of solidarity among the Arab people is partly related to religion. Not all Arabs are Muslims, of course (how many Americans know that, I wonder?), but the vast majority are, and as such are part of the worldwide brotherhood of Islam, to which hundreds of millions of non-Arabs also belong. For Christians, it is hard to imagine just how important that sense of community is, transcending differences of nationality, ethnicity and language. For Jews, it is considerably easier. In normal times, that Muslim sense of community is felt at its most intense during the Haj or pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. But in recent weeks, the Iraq war has produced a similar level of fervour, particularly among the young.

Thousands of young Arabs – including many Iraqi exiles – responded to the outbreak of war by heading towards Baghdad, to join the fight against the invading armies, if necessary as suicide bombers. Many have died, or will do so. Others will be arrested, and some will doubtless end up as prisoners in that brilliant advertisement for freedom and Western values, the US camp at Guantanamo Bay.

But even more significant, I believe, are the millions of Arabs who have not headed for Iraq, but who remain in their own country – or indeed in Europe, as immigrants or students – seething with anger and frustration. George W Bush and Tony Blair can argue until they are blue in the face that this is not a war against the Iraqi people, much less a war against Arabs or Islam. But most Arabs simply don't believe them.

For Bush and Blair, this has been a conflict to promote freedom and democracy. Based on hundreds of interviews I have done with Arabs from across the Middle East and North Africa, as well as in the Arab diaspora, I know that the overwhelming perception amongst them is that this is an American neo-colonial exercise (with Britain hanging on to Uncle Sam's coat-tails), to grab Iraq's oil, humiliate the Arab people, and bolster Israel.

Even those who accept at face value the Anglo-American arguments about promoting freedom and democracy, challenge the 'right' of the West to tell the Arab world what to do, based on Western values.

Of course, the Americans have hardly helped their cause by being so gung-ho about it all. Seeing US marines with war-paint on their faces as they approached Baghdad, or draping the stars and stripes over toppled statues of Saddam, may have warmed hearts in the American mid-West, but it has inflamed feelings amongst many Arabs to fever pitch. The overwhelming mood regarding the United States that has been conveyed to me is one of loathing, tinged with fear. Americans often complain about anti-Americanism, but I wonder if they realise just how much the United States is now hated in much of the Arab world.

The fear I mentioned is understandable. There has indeed been an element of 'shock and awe' in the Iraq war, even if recent events have underlined a certain impotence on the coalition's part. The US has proved once and for all that if it feels it is right to zap an Arab country – even if on spurious grounds of national security – then it can and will, regardless of cost. This is hardly a situation conducive to Arabs sleeping tight in their beds at night.

Moreover, the Bush administration has itself encouraged what could all too easily develop into a form of Arab paranoia by its sabre-rattling against Syria. No Liberal Democrat would claim that Syria is a bastion of democracy and human rights, though it has improved considerably in recent years. But many Syrians are getting nervous that they are the next on the US hit-list. And after them, where? Libya?

The situation is made far worse by the way that some in Israel, from Ariel Sharon downwards, have made it perfectly clear that they would be delighted if the whole Arab world were brought down a peg or two. Now many friends of Israel – including in the Liberal Democrats – argue that there is no link between what has been happening in Iraq and the Israel/Palestine question. I can understand why they would prefer there to be no link. But as far as the Arab world is concerned, the link is cast-iron. And to his credit, Tony Blair keeps reminding George W Bush that the Palestinian dimension cannot be ignored. In response, Mr Bush rather irritably keeps patting Mr Blair on the head, rather as one does to a poodle that keeps pestering you for a dog-biscuit, but that is another matter.

It is to the West Bank and to Gaza that one needs to go if one wants to understand the true ramifications of the current situation. The Israeli media has made much of the fact that some young Palestinians openly demonstrated support for Saddam Hussein, and proclaimed their willingness to die in the fight against occupation: the US/British occupation of Iraq, and the Israeli occupation of Palestine. I can well understand why Israel finds that disturbing. But unless one understands what Palestinians are thinking, one will never understand the true challenges of the Middle East.

The Iraqi conflict has turned the Western media spotlight away from Israel and Palestine towards Iraq (very conveniently so, from the point of view of the Israeli Defence Force). But that is not true to the same degree in the Arab world. Iraq has made the divisions between the West and the Arab world – real or perceived – far wider. And a solution of the Israel/Palestine problem is seen as being more urgent than ever.

So where does that leave Liberal Democrats in this country? I believe we should be arguing for Britain to disassociate itself clearly from some aspects of US policy towards Iraq and the wider Middle East, which increasingly strikes me as not just wrong but stupid. We need to build bridges with our partners in Europe, several of whose governments have positions much closer to Liberal Democrat values than Mr Blair's, let alone Mr Bush's. And we should be championing the cause of the United Nations, despite its many shortcomings, as the appropriate lead player in peace-building, relief and reconstruction.

At the moment, many Liberal Democrats have their minds focussed sharply on the local elections, and understandably so. So talk of relations between the West and the Arab world may seem way off the horizon. Yet just as Gladstone realised that a concern for the fate of Bulgarians or Afghans was an essential part of Liberalism, so we should acknowledge that Liberal Democracy requires an awareness of what is going around the world, especially as modern communications have brought it right into our living rooms.

Tony Blair likes to think he is giving Britain moral leadership, including in its relationship to the Middle East. We should not let him try to monopolise that moral high ground, particularly in those cases such as Iraq where he gets it wrong.

The writer and broadcaster Jonathan Fryer is Number 2 on the LibDem Euro-list for London.

SPLIT ISLAND IN THE SUN

Wendy Kyrle-Pope looks at the troubled journey of Cyprus to the European Union, and why its young people are the most sceptical

The accession of a united Cyprus to the EU in 2004 has been the driving force in the rush to break the deadlock between the Turkish North and Greek Cypriot South, and the subject of frantic UN negotiations to heal the rift by the time of the Copenhagen Summit last December.

They failed. The next deadline was 28 February. Kofi Annan arrived on the island on 26 February, to spend two days attempting to solve a 29-year-old problem.

This initiative failed. Annan then called the leaders from both sides to Holland in March for a final attempt at reconciliation - this too failed. Negotiations are still continuing, but the eyes of the world have shifted eastwards to Iraq.

However, southern Cyprus will be admitted to the EU. During their European Presidency in 1999, the Finns, having seen the writing on the wall (and the graffiti on the Green Line which divides the island,) decided that Cyprus could be admitted, united or not, provided it met the necessary economic and political criteria.

The threat of a Greek veto on all the accession of all the candidate countries if Cyprus was not included in the first wave dramatically increased the pressure to find a settlement.

But why is it so insoluble? The rhetoric on both sides is for peace and reconciliation; the carrot of EU membership for the entire island is tantalisingly close; the world (especially Turkey and the EU) is watching. Any eventual agreement will be based on a UN plan to govern the island on the Swiss cantonal system, which gives each region greater autonomy, and which also fits neatly into the EU preferred regional devolution policy. To understand the apparent irreconcilable differences, one first must understand something of the island's history, ancient and modern, and, crucially, the events and changes of the last 29 years.

Cyprus is a beautiful island in the sun, well endowed with minerals, rich agricultural lands, wines and olive oil, strategically placed on trade routes of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Everyone who was anyone has invaded Cyprus at one time or another in the last 10,000 years. It belonged to virtually every empire in the history of the western hemisphere and, finally, the British. Each has left its legacy; temples, churches and mosques; good roads and pillar-boxes; and bitter political division.

The Treaty of Zurich-London in 1960 established Cyprus as an independent republic, with Greek and Turkish Cypriots in government together. But both sides found the 1960 constitution flawed and unworkable.

In 1963 the president proposed some amendments to it, and the Turkish Cypriot cabinet members walked out, the Turkish Cypriot civil servants stopped work, and Turkey threatened to invade. There was a massive migration, mostly to England, in the 1960s.

In 1974 Turkey carried out its threat; after the military junta in Athens instigated a coup against the Cypriot government, Turkey invaded the island, occupying 37 per cent of the land and displacing 40 per cent of the Greek Cypriot population, with thousands disappearing without trace, killed, ill treated or forced to emigrate.

Cyprus is not the same island as it was in 1974. Sweeping demographic changes in the north have changed the make-up of its population; economic success and freedom to travel have changed the attitude of the younger generation in the south. Their paths may have diverged too far apart to bring them back together. The proposed cantonal system may work, but it also may create a different form of economic and political segregation from the Green Line. Only the support of the rest of Europe in the form of good will, arbitration when necessary, and financial help for the north can make it work.

Any conversation with a Cypriot today reveals that the hatred and loathing on both sides is still evident. Any mention of the T (Turkey) word in the south, or the G (Greek) word in the north, leads to hissing and outpouring of vitriol. Greek Cypriots rails against the human rights violations of their people by the Turks, and accuse them of repopulating the north with the poorest and least desirable of their citizen. Turkish Cypriots claim an equal right to the island.

So how has each side fared during the 29 year division?

Southern Cyprus has done well economically (hence its successful candidacy). Economic growth was 2.6 per cent in 2001, and industrial growth 2.2 per cent. Services, mainly and tourism, makes up 75 per cent of the economy and employs 73 per cent of the work force. The UK is by far the most important economic partner, taking 17 per cent of all exports, and accounting for more than 60 per cent of tourists. Modern roads, good communications, strict building controls, an entrepreneurial outlook all contribute its success.

Although emigration continues, many are returning to live on the island, at least for part of each year, and the population is around 600,000.

Life in the north has been very difficult. Isolated and impoverished and suffering under an international embargo, its economic growth is estimated at 0.8 per cent, but industrial growth at -0.3 per cent. Turkish Cyprus is very dependent on Turkey as a trading partner, which takes 51 per cent of its exports.

Its burgeoning tourist trade is hampered by the fact that one can only fly into Northern Cyprus via Turkey, while Southern Cyprus has three international airports. The population is just under 200,000, but difficult to keep track of as more Turkish Cypriots than ever are emigrating. They have been worn down by decades of economic mismanagement, corruption and international isolation. They are being replaced by people from Anatolia and Kurds from south-east Turkey, with no connection with Cyprus. This change in the population is the major stumbling block in the reunification process. Many formerly Turkish-owned homes in the south are kept for them, and the mosques maintained by Greek Cypriots who are willing to welcome back Turkish Cypriots; but this welcome would not apply to non-Cypriots. And that is the crux of the matter. The older Greek Cypriots still cling to the dream of returning to the 'father house' in the occupied north. It is this idea, the island's reunification, which encourages them to support Cypriot membership of the EU; anything for peace and resettlement.

But the UN plan to create a Swiss-style confederation will not allow all 162,000 Greek Cypriot refugees back into all their towns and villages in the north. Financial compensation is irrelevant; the father's house (and land) is the father's house - it represents the spiritual home, which no amount of money can replace.

And what happens to the Turkish Cypriots who now live in their Greek counterparts' father houses? Will their future mirror that of the history of the Greek Cypriot enclave in the Karpass peninsula, whose 1974 population of 20,000 is now about 500, most of whom are elderly? Those who stayed say they remained "so that all (Greek Cypriot) refugees can return to their homes", but add that life for them in Karpasia has been like "being imprisoned for 29 years, without having committed a crime". (Cyprus News Agency report 16 February 2003).

Tassos Papadopoulos of the Democratic Party was elected as Greek Cypriot president in February. He and the ousted former President Clerides intend to work together to find a reunification deal acceptable to all, with EU membership for the entire island its most important aim. But they are of the generations who lived in (and fought for) the old, pre-1974 Cyprus.

Young Greek Cypriots are far less keen than their peers in the other candidate nations to belong to the EU. Many are already citizens as they hold British passports. To them, fed up with rises in VAT (from 3 to 15 per cent in three years) petrol and fags, rises all necessary to bring Cyprus into line with Europe, they want a full belly, and have no interest in the father house, or the need for reunification.

They blame the threat of this reunification and corruption for the dramatic fall in the Cypriot Stock exchange from 800 points in 2000 to only 80 in 2002. They acknowledge their financial (and to a great extent, cultural) dependence on Britain, and a long as it continues to support Cyprus, the EU is less important. They are cynical about the benefits, which many enjoy already, having been educated in Britain and able to come and go as they please, and fear rising costs will drive the tourists to cheaper Turkey.

In direct contrast to the other candidate countries, it is the younger Cypriots who say they may vote against entry, as opposed to the older generation who see membership as the most important factor to bring peace and the reunification of their island.

Turkey has been using Northern Cyprus as a lever to gain bargaining power for an early date of entry into the EU. Bitterly disappointed at last December's Copenhagen Summit, where Turkey's attempt to enter immediate accession negotiations was rejected, and put back to 2005, it is still a key player in the future of Cyprus. The Turkish Government is putting great pressure on the Turkish Cypriot leader Denktash, to make the peace and reunify. Denktash (at the time of writing) is still refusing to hand over 9 per cent of the northern territories as called for in the UN plan. The last major reunification in Europe was between East and West Germany. West Germany had progressed and prospered (like Southern Cyprus); the east was stuck in time warp, but the make-up of its population had remained virtually unchanged. There were innumerable problems during and after reunification, but the peoples were basically the same; Germans living in Germany. This is not true of Northern Cyprus, and there's the rub.

THE WORLD NEEDS MORE LIBERALISM

Internationalism is a fundamental principle that must inform our policy, says Charles Kennedy

Of all the principles which constitute Liberal Democracy, internationalism is the clearest, the most distinctive and the one with the longest history.

From the First World War onwards, the history of international relations in the twentieth century chronicled what was essentially a struggle between liberal internationalism and the forces of nationalism.

Even before Woodrow Wilson, however, the idea of transnational institutions was championed by Liberals in this country. Liberal Democrats and Liberals before them have been committed to the principles of human rights, international stability and international justice. They have also sought international solutions to those problems which demand collective attention.

The concept of far away countries of which we know nothing is totally alien to Liberal Democrats. There are internationalists in all parties. But internationalism does not define any other party in the way it defines the Liberal Democrats.

Human rights are a fundamental part of international liberalism. But they are not the only part. Liberalism embraces a broad range of principles, including openness, free trade and economic interdependence.

This vision of a liberal world has come under threat many times and it is under threat again at the moment.

Nationalism and expansionism led to two world wars. Then from the 1950s onwards, the Cold War with the Soviet Union often paralysed the effective working of international institutions.

Now there are new challenges. The prospect of global terrorism adds an extra dimension. When human rights are systematically abused, it raises the question whether it may be legitimate in some circumstances for the international community to intervene within individual states as well as in conflicts between states.

At the same time, however, it encourages some to simplify the issues at stake into stark choices between 'good' and 'evil' or between 'order' and 'chaos', or between 'for us' and 'against us.' That is a trap we should avoid. In the current uncertain climate, we must return to the principles of international liberalism.

I want to take a longer term look at how Britain pursues its foreign policy, in particular through the European Union, NATO and the United Nations.

At the core of the European debate after 50 years there remains one fundamental question. Is national sovereignty of supreme importance, or are we more effective when we pool it with others?

This view of internationalism starts with Europe but goes beyond the European Union to encompass our approach to the world. The large and complex problems which face the world will only be more soluble when we face them together.

Of course the European Union is far from perfect. But it is worth dwelling for a moment on its successes. We tend to forget why it was created. It was to prevent another war in western Europe. Half a century on, such a war has become inconceivable.

The enlargement of the EU to central and eastern Europe is an equally significant achievement. An enlarged union of 25 member states will need to do less, but do it better.

One of the problems about the structures of European institutions is that they are so hard to explain to people. That in itself creates a democratic deficit. People often complain about the European bureaucracy. In fact, the commission is a surprisingly slim-line body. The real issue is that it is insufficiently open and accountable. Both the commission and the council need major reform in this direction.

It would be a great step forward if the president of the commission were elected – I would suggest indirectly by the MEPs. There should then be fewer commissioners. The member states should put forward names, and the elected President should pick from the resulting list. That way the commission would become both more representative and effective.

The Council of Ministers is one of only three bodies in the world which pass legislation entirely in secret. The other two are to be found in Cuba and North Korea. It is high time the council voted in public, something the British Government has so far opposed.

There is another way in which accountability could be improved. National parliaments could be given the right to approve the agenda before a European summit and then to be briefed when their prime minister came back from Brussels.

This would be an obvious role for a reformed House of Lords – more power for the upper house which would not mean less power for the lower house, just more opportunity to scrutinise the Government.

Furthermore, the charter of rights should be at the heart of a new European constitution. That way we would enhance the rights of our citizens by curbing the excessive power of the British state. Unsurprisingly, the Labour government has been reluctant to advocate this.

In international trade matters the EU has achieved remarkable success. We now speak by and large with one voice on the international stage and in the WTO.

Unhappily, this is not the case in foreign affairs. The Iraq crisis has highlighted serious disagreements between member states. But it has also disguised the

fact that there is substantial consensus on many other aspects of EU common foreign policy.

The EU has been working in concert with the UN, the USA and Russia in producing a road map for the Middle East peace process. On human rights, trade and development co-operation too, as well as on much third country diplomacy, the EU works as one.

If the Convention on the Future of Europe recommends significant constitutional reform, I believe that my own party should consider making the case for a referendum on that reform. It is of the utmost importance that changes have the underpinning of democratic consent. Britain has a central role to play in the reform of the EU, but we must not lose sight of its clear relationship with the United States. It is an unequal partnership, but is worth preserving.

In Helsinki in 1999, the UK was at the forefront of developing the outline of a European rapid reaction force. But momentum has been lost. An EU defence capability within NATO would permit the Europeans to fulfil peace-keeping and humanitarian tasks when NATO did not want to become involved.

Britain likes to view itself as a bridge between the US and Europe. It could fulfil that role much better by taking the lead over strengthening Europe's diplomatic and military capabilities and promoting a European vision for global security. The risk is that Britain loses influence in Europe at just the time that the special relationship with the USA becomes more one of dependency.

The United States has for many years justifiably deplored the failure of Europe to provide adequately for its own defence. Shrinking budgets and poor use of resources have diluted Europe's defence effort. There will be times when European and American interests don't coincide. Future engagement in the Balkans, for example, is unlikely to be an American priority, but would be a European responsibility.

This country must therefore co-operate much more fully with our EU partners on defence. Inter-operability, common procurement and force specialisation must be made a reality. NATO must be both operationally and politically effective. Otherwise it will cease to have relevance for the United States.There is another international body which is of great importance – the Commonwealth, which is particularly important in the perspective which it gives us on the problems of some of the poorest countries in the world. But the institution which is most in the spotlight and which appears most under threat is the United Nations.

There has always been a tension in the United Nations. It is supposed to be the champion of international law. But in the Security Council, it reflects the current state of strategic relationships in the world. It is that contradiction which is at the heart of the dispute over Iraq.

We Liberal Democrats have always argued that justice, and particularly international justice, must represent more than the interests of the strongest. European liberals have always argued that the nation state cannot be the sole arbiter of what is right on the international stage.

We must not allow this belief to be placed in jeopardy. Instead, we have to build on the successes already achieved.

There are environmental problems which can only effectively be tackled collectively. Depletion of the Earth's resources and the preservation of the planet require collective action.

The agreements on access to retroviral drugs and other essential medicines in the WTO are concrete examples of what can be achieved. The development round of the WTO talks will be a crucial test of the commitment to making global trade fairer and making it work for the poorer countries.

The British Government deserves credit for increasing development aid. We must practise the free trade principles which we preach to allow fair access to western markets for poor countries. International problems demand co-operative solutions.

Iraq has been a severe setback for the United Nations. There is no time to waste in restoring its reputation. First, it should take the lead in the reconstruction of Iraq. I note that the motion we debated in the House of Commons called for the United Kingdom to seek a new Security Council resolution. This, it said, would affirm Iraq's territorial integrity; ensure rapid delivery of humanitarian relief; allow for the earliest possible lifting of UN sanctions; establish an international reconstruction programme; make all oil revenues available for the benefit of the Iraqi people; and endorse an appropriate post-conflict administration for Iraq, leading to a representative government which upholds human rights and the rule of law. That is a long agenda. The sooner we embark on it the better.For the longer term, we need reform to strengthen the UN's role in ordering world affairs. First, a constitutional conference, like the one which established the UN in 1948, should be called to discuss how the UN's Charter could be modernised and its procedures streamlined.

Secondly, there should be a complete audit of outstanding UN resolutions.

Thirdly there should be a new UN Rapid Reaction Disaster Force to tackle emergencies. And fourthly, there should be a new UN military staff college, to offering training in peace enforcement.

The conflict in Iraq was a huge setback to the authority of the UN. There is no time to be lost in starting to rebuild that authority. The legitimacy of international intervention depends heavily on the extent of involvement of the UN as peace makers and peace keepers. Liberalism is very vulnerable at the moment. Domestically, many of the rights and freedoms that we take for granted are being questioned. Internationally, many of the central tenets of the international order are under pressure from a United States administration less committed to multilateralism than many of its predecessors. The world is and has always been a dangerous place. The only way to make it less so is to pool sovereignty, and to sustain and enhance international institutions. The answer to new international dangers is not less liberalism but more.

Collective note: this is an edited version of Charles Kennedy's Chatham house speech, delivered as war began in Iraq.

DON'T KNOCK GLOBALISATION

There is a strong liberal case for globalisation, argues Razeen Sally

There has always been a root-and-branch rejection of capitalism in one guise or another. What could be called globalisation and social democracy, or the third way to globalisation, is different. This world view recognises some of the benefits of international economic integration. Nevertheless, it rejects the comprehensive liberalisation attributed to the so-called Washington Consensus, and advocates more-or-less radical change in the governance of the world economy, which sometimes travels under the label of "global governance". Globalisation and Social Democracy is not street theatre on the fringe; rather its champions are establishment figures – senior politicians, leading officials in international organisations (particularly within the UN family), large, well-organised NGOs, prominent CEOs, distinguished journalists and academics (including well-known economists such as Joseph Stiglitz and Dani Rodrik).

This vision was powerfully reiterated by Mark Malloch Brown, the administrator of the United Nations Development Program, at a public lecture at the LSE. His core diagnosis is twofold. First, globalisation is an engine of inequity, creating minority winners and majority losers within and between countries, and particularly marginalising and excluding the poor in the developing world. Second, the nation-state is in retreat. The core prescription follows: "global solutions" are needed to provide "global public goods". Global governance should take the form of partnerships involving governments, international organisations, NGOs, international business and organised labour, acting in concert across a very wide range of public policies.

A more 'economistic' treatment in this genre comes from Dani Rodrik, the Harvard economist. Professor Rodrik argues that, as globalisation bites deeper into national social fabrics, conflicts emerge over domestic norms and institutions. What is needed, therefore, is a trade-off between the gains from globalisation, on the one hand, and domestic social stability (especially in developed countries), on the other. Developing countries should also be able to restrict imports and pursue industrial policies as part of their development strategies. This leads Mr. Rodrik to advocate a "social-cum-development safeguard clause" in the WTO, which would sanction considerable trade protection by both developed and developing countries.

So what is the opposing case in favour of a liberal international economic order? It goes back at least as far as David Hume and Adam Smith. The point is to continually update the argument and make it relevant to modern conditions.

In this vision globalisation is essentially a positive-sum game, not an engine of marginalisation and exclusion. All-round material gain, for rich and poor countries alike, is the outcome of Smith's "liberal system of free importation and free exportation". Basically, removing restrictions on trade, capital flows and the movement of people expands the freedom of individuals to choose how to dispose of their property rights and strike contracts with foreigners. This allocates resources more efficiently and, over time, through dynamic gains such as economies of scale and the transfer of technology and skills, feeds into productivity increases, a rise in real incomes and economic growth.

So much for the standard economic efficiency arguments. Often overlooked, there is also a moral case for a liberal economic order, which is based on individual liberty as a "good" in itself. In a flourishing , open-ended international commercial society, animated by what Hume calls a "spirit of industry", people across the planet enjoy more choice; they have the possibility to lead more varied and interesting lives compared with the vegetative and parochial societies of old. Free trade (broadly defined) expands life-chances by bringing about widespread and peaceful contact among nations and breeding a worldly cosmopolitanism. Freedom and prosperity, therefore, are intimately related; and it is impossible to think of either freedom or prosperity without the freedom to engage in international transactions.

Economic liberals would argue that the evidence of economic history is on their side. Over at least the past two centuries (and probably stretching back to the classical antiquity), polities that have become more open to the world economy have become richer than those that have remained closed. One of Lord Bauer's major insights was that economic advancement in the developing world, over a broad historical sweep, has occurred in countries and regions that have had the most contact with the outside world, and particularly with the advanced centres of the world economy in the West. Indeed, no country on earth has delivered a sustained rise in the living standards of its people without being open to the world.

The evidence from the post-1945 period points in the same direction. As for the last two decades, a new World Bank study concludes that 24 developing countries, with a total population of 3 billion, and with progressively more liberal trade policies, are increasingly integrating into the global economy.

They have rising shares of manufactures in total exports; their ratios of trade to national income have doubled since 1980; and the growth of income per head in this group has increased from 1 per cent a year in the 1960s to 5 per cent in the 1990s. The bad news, however, is that about 2bn people live in 75 countries with stagnating or declining aggregate growth. These happen to be countries that have liberalised less, although they suffer too from other intractable problems, such as poor climate and geography, rampant disease, civil war and chronically corrupt governments.

Globalisation contributes indirectly to poverty reduction through growth-promotion. China is the emblematic example, with over 300 million people lifted out of absolute poverty since internal and external liberalisation began in 1978. This reflects the wider East Asian experience of dramatic poverty reduction in tandem with external opening and high growth over the past three and a half decades.

This is not to say that trade and other forms of liberalisation are a panacea. Other policy changes and thoroughgoing institutional reform are also vital. Only in interaction with domestic institutional change (such as ensuring political and economic stability, improving the protection and enforcement of private property rights and contracts, and rolling out transport and communications infrastructure) does external openness deliver abundant, replenishing long-term gains – a point grasped by Hume and Smith over two centuries ago. On the other hand, huge political, financial and technical obstacles block the path of sustainable policy reform, especially in developing countries, and these constraints differ between countries and regions.

Bearing these caveats in mind, openness remains a handmaiden of growth. It contributes to growth directly through trade, and the movement of capital and people. Indirectly, it provides the spontaneous stimulus for domestic institutional improvement – not least through the expansion of political and economic freedoms as governments engage in a competitive race to liberalise. The anti-liberal critique is wrong: marginalisation is in large part caused by not enough rather than too much globalisation. Market freedoms enable the progress out of poverty to prosperity, and are vital to civilised life across the world.

Lastly, global governance advocates are also wrong in saying that the nation-state is in retreat. Quite the reverse: the core functions of public policy continue to be performed primarily at the national level by governments, not by IGOs, MNEs or NGOs. National governance is as vital as ever. Globalisation, now as in the 19th century, continues to depend on law-governed nation-states and the sensible exercise of national policy choice, "from below".

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WHEEL OF FORTUYN

Sylvester Hoogmoed writes from Nijmegen on the legacy of the assassinated Dutch politician's challenge to consensus politics

Pim Fortuyn has been haunting Dutch politics ever since he was murdered, on May 6th last year. Just a week after the funeral, his party, the List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) won 26 of the 150 parliamentary seats at the national elections. But Fortuyn's followers had only one thing in common: they were all mavericks, just like Pim himself. Five months later, the Fortuyn party imploded completely. Two squabbling LPF-ministers were forced to step down. Consequently the Balkenende government fell and called a new election on January 22nd; the LPF was sanctioned for its impotence, losing most of its seats.

But that is not really the end of the story. The spirit of Pim Fortuyn survives. His influence during the election campaigns was twofold. Firstly, less embarrassed attention was paid to the immigration issue than would have been possible in previous years. Secondly, Dutch politics has become more flamboyant, and decidedly less genteel.

In the international press, Pim Fortuyn was often described as an anti-immigration extremist. One who was perhaps not entirely comparable with Haider and Le Pen, but who was nevertheless mentioned in the same breath. Many Dutchmen accepted this comparison, especially after a controversial interview with de Volkskrant, in which Fortuyn said: "I don't want to welcome any more immigrants. We have a full country." However, Fortuyn was far from a vulgar xenophobe. His running mate on his party list was a Cape Verdean immigrant. While calling for closed borders, Fortuyn also stressed the need for integration, and the emancipation of immigrant women. Shortly before he was murdered, he even called for a general pardon for all the illegal immigrants living in the Netherlands. It has also been noted that the homosexual Fortuyn more than once half-mockingly said how much he appreciated the company of beautiful Moroccan boys...

Instead of condemning immigration per se, Fortuyn in particular sought to warn against the threat intolerant islamist groups of immigrants pose to the principles of European civil society. A homosexual himself, Fortuyn identified the general issue raised by homophobic fundamentalist islamists. "It's a backward culture," he stated in the Volkskrant-interview.

For a long time it was hardly considered decent to discuss such a threat in the Netherlands, where 'political correctness' ruled. Pim Fortuyn ignored the taboo on discussing this subject. However, he was not the first to do so. The present European commissioner Frits Bolkestein paved the way during the 1990s, when he was the leader of the rightwing liberal VVD.

Then, the growth of immigration to the Netherlands was explosive, whereas the numbers have been falling back dramatically during the past few years. Immigration policies in the Netherlands have become so restricted that today it is hardly possible to hold up the image of Holland as a hospitable country. However, Fortuyn was right to draw attention to the issue of the integration of immigrants already living in the Netherlands. Here governmental policies have not been successful.

Yet, Fortuyn's significance lies not primarily in his message, important as it may have been, in some respects. More important is the way in which he delivered it. Charming, arrogant and narcissist, Fortuyn in no time became a media-favourite, being so different from the grey and timid leaders of the other parties. Because of his flamboyant manner, and striking appearance - totally bald, a tip-top dresser, chauffeured in a Bentley, holding two lapdogs that became his mascots. But also because of his un-Dutch habit of ventilating outspoken opinions. Fortuyn's image enabled him to promote not only debate about immigration and Islam, also about many other matters, like the morbid growth of Dutch bureaucracy.

Fortuyn's style helped him to deliver an almost mortal blow to the much-acclaimed 'Dutch Model', which the Dutch themselves call the 'Polder Model'. Since the middle of the 1990s Holland's economy had been booming. Many attributed this success to the Dutch habit of resolving differences round the table. Consultation, cooperation and consensus were the keywords, especially between the employers and trade unions, but also within the government, since the Labour party formed a coalition with the rightwing liberals in 1994. This Dutch Model attracted international attention and had prominent admirers such as Chancellor Schröder and President Clinton.

However, these admirers may have failed to notice something important. In the extremely consensual Dutch Model open debate lost out completely. The range of opinion expressed by the political class became cosily restricted. In consequence the electorate gradually became responsive to outspoken populists. Pim Fortuyn rode that wave. If he wasn't an outright populist, he certainly gave the impression of being one, having no coherent political program, frequently changing opinions and preferring speeches full of one-liners to deeper discussion.

Some say Fortuyn's political success was mainly due to the media hype he created. While the other party leaders were busy visiting small groups of potential voters in all parts of the country, Fortuyn concentrated on giving interviews.

More than symbolically, he was shot at the Media Park in Hilversum, just after an interview on Radio 3, the national pop station. Like the Pied Piper of Hamelen, Fortuyn with his soundbites put a spell on his followers, it seems. His astonishing success came like a bolt from the blue. According to a report of the prestigious research institute SCP, published in June 2002, the Dutch on average felt safe in their country, and there was no lack of social cohesion. In a survey of the Netherlands, published three days before the murder of Fortuyn, The Economist stated that the Dutch were consummate pragmatists, and that their country was a fine place to be. The Dutch, according to The Economist, had done well during the last decade, both economically and in tackling some of the more vexing social issues. Politically for a long time The Netherlands made the impression of being a very stable nation. Early 2002, just a few months before the elections, the election polls still indicated anything but a landslide. But then, suddenly Fortuyn appeared, and needed only a few weeks to change the political scenery completely (because of rather hysterical media hype, one is tempted to say).

Still, Fortuyn would never have succeeded, had it not been for the extreme dullness of his adversaries. The leaders of the big parties made the impression of having participation in a new administration of caretakers as their one and only ideal. After years of consensus politics many voters yearned for some discussion, and political spectacle.

Since the elections in May last year, nearly all the Dutch political leaders have stepped down and been replaced by more colourful and outspoken personalities. They have been discussing more openly the fundamental problems of Dutch society, like the immigration issue. In the spirit of Pim Fortuyn, one may say.

The significance of Fortuyn's brief political adventure goes beyond the Netherlands, however.

First because he signalled the paradox facing all people whose ideals are libertarism, tolerance and open-mindedness. What are we to do when intolerant, fundamentalist sub-communities take advantage of the freedom open societies offer, and start to threaten freedom and open(-minded)ness? Answering this question will provide perhaps the major challenge for European libertarianism during the coming decade.

Secondly, Fortuyn's electoral success was another indication that consensual political systems can pave the way for populism. As in Austria, where Haider's rise was parasitic on decades of socialist-conservative coalition governments. Similarly, in France Le Pen got his biggest electoral success after years of left-right cohabitation. Trying to solve problems through consultation and cooperation while defusing public debate, makes a political class look self-serving. Apparently, there is an end to the amount of depolarisation a democracy can swallow.

FOUR ALARM BELLS RINGING LOUD

The Liberal Democrat policy of an NHS contribution through tax contradicts devolution, argues Robert Roffe, the party's Welsh policy officer

Hypothecated taxation and federalism do not mix well. One could even go so far as to say that they are downright contradictory. One must therefore ask why a party so committed to the dispersal of power is such a massive fan of an approach to tax that could only ever work if it were centrally administered.

On first inspection, the NHS Contribution seems an attractive prospect. We replace National Insurance Contributions with a new tax that will specifically fund the National Health Service, and we have a simple eye-catching policy to stick on our Focus leaflets.

Simple it may be, but practical it isn't. Someone forgot the small matter of devolution to Scotland and Wales, not to mention the Liberal Democrats' commitment to devolved English regions. So what, may you ask, is the problem?

A quick glance at 'Quality, Innovation, Choice', the Federal policy paper that contains this policy, will give you your first clue. It indicates that, although the NHS contribution will be collected on a UK wide level, the party believes it to be 'inappropriate' for the UK government to tell either the Scottish Parliament or National Assembly for Wales, and Northern Ireland, how to spend any revenue they receive from the UK government.

So, although the NHS contribution would be collected in every corner of the UK, there is no obligation for either Wales or Scotland to spend their share of the NHS contribution on healthcare. Alarm bell one begins to ring.

Federal policy states that the distribution of funds to the UK nations and regions should be determined via a Finance Commission of the Nations and Regions and based upon need.

Accordingly, the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish legislatures would receive their share of the NHS Contribution on such a basis. At a basic level, this means Joe Public in somewhere like Surbiton paying for part of the health service provided to Jones Public in Merthyr Tydfil because Jones and his community suffer from more ill health and are on lower wages than Joe.

Very few of us would object to the redistribution of money to poorer areas such as Wales, but it is worth bearing in mind how Joe Public would feel knowing that his NHS contribution was not being spent down the road in his local hospital. Again, there are no guarantees that this redistributed earmarked NHS expenditure is going to be spent on the NHS in Wales and Scotland. Alarm bells two and three now begin chiming.

Quality, Innovation, Choice also makes provision for a regional variation to the NHS contribution, so if Wales wanted to raise extra cash it could increase the rate of the NHS contribution on the employee, but not the employer. The policy document then explicitly states that it is up to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland as to how they want to spend the extra revenue generated. By allowing this, the notions of an earmarked health tax in the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish context begins to look slightly more than silly. Alarm bell four begins to ring loud and clear.

The offending policy paper also has an ominous message for those English regions that may seek devolution in the future. Although the Scots, Welsh and Irish can spend their extra NHS cash on what they like, the English aren't so fortunate. It states "English regional governments would be able to use all the money that increase raises in their region for the NHS".

From this reference, is one to take it that the federal party will not extend the same financial freedoms to the English regions, as it is promising to give to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland? It certainly seems that way, and I cannot find any reference that explicitly grants the English regions the right to determine their own spending priorities. A cacophony of concern is now filling one's ears.

The inference that one can draw from all of this is that the party is advocating a two-tier approach to devolution, with English regions losing out. In trying to convince myself that this is not the case, I find little comfort in Quality, Innovation, Choice. Restricting the financial distribution abilities of the English regions at least lets the NHS contribution work in England, but undermining English devolution is an abhorrent idea to Liberals and it makes a mockery of the notion of a UK-wide hypothecated tax.

It is easy to see why the party likes hypothecation. It provides good sound bites, and gives us a policy approach with which we are instantly identified. Narrow it down to a specific NHS Contribution and the message becomes clearer, but we cannot allow the quest for simple and popular messages to get in the way of issues like practicality and principle.

When advocating a Federal United Kingdom, also proposing hypothecated taxation is total nonsense. As for the NHS contribution, would NHS contradiction not be a more appropriate term to employ?

TIME FOR SOME DEMOCRACY

Voter apathy won't be cured unless we get real democracy, argues Rob Renold

Politics for the ordinary person in Britain today has become a yawn, a switch-off, because it appears to be corrupt, confusing and irrelevant to the issues that matter.

Citizenship does not seem to matter to many younger people in particular. This is partly because they have grown up under Thatcher's evil spell of materialistic individualism (is that a long enough phrase for your intellectual readers?). "There is no such thing as society" has had its effect, although we can hope that there is a serious prospect of "there is no such thing as the Tory party" in the not too distant future.

Britain is widely regarded as being a democracy. Why? Democratic involvement is minimal compared to many other European and North American countries, even for those who do vote. There is a common view that democracy is just about voting. We do it every four to five years for the elected dictator of the country, and a bit more frequently for the local authorities that carry out the orders of the elected dictator.

We have evolved a system where there is little debate and real decisions are taken in No.10, often by unelected officials, with both the Cabinet (remember that?) and Parliament being treated as a rubber stamp. There is little debate and little involvement in politics for the vast majority of people.

Tony Blair took the country to war against Iraq, against the wishes of a majority of the people (according to opinion polls), and seems to think it is OK for him to decide whether and when Parliament can be allowed to carry out its function of representing the people and approving government policy.

Going to war used to be regarded as a serious activity that required real leadership to ensure that the people would support it. Now we have a prime minister who can only be described as arrogant.

When are the people of this country going to get up off their knees and tell him and his cronies where to go? The Tories, of course, are no better. Are we sure that a Lib Dem government would actually make the massive changes that would be needed to introduce democracy into this country?

Our democracy and our liberties have been systematically undermined by successive governments over the last thirty years or so, with more and more restrictions on our liberties and a succession of Home Secretaries who appear to be more ferociously right wing than the last. It seemed to be impossible to have one more right wing than Michael Howard, but Straw and Blunkett have done it.

Yet there is still little public debate about the reduction in the right to trial by jury, the government snoopers charter, restrictions on the right to demonstrate, ending of the ban on trying someone twice in court, etc, etc.

Local government has now been reduced to little more than a rubber stamp for central government edicts, with the role of local councillors reduced to very little. Many activities are subcontracted out to an extraordinary variety of quangos over which local people have no influence. All in the name of 'progress'.

So it is hardly surprising that the ordinary person in the street thinks that there is little point in taking part in political activity, or even voting. There is some debate about why people do not vote, and suggestions about how to get more people to vote, including voting in supermarkets.

So politics is reduced to the level of buying soapflakes. Do you want the pink box, the blue box or the orange box? All the suggestions for helping people to vote are no doubt well meaning, but they avoid the real issue, which is that there is little point in voting because all to often it changes nothing.

If it seemed that voting might actually make some difference, people would be willing to make that little bit of effort to go down to the polling station. Postal voting and other ways of doing it tend to reinforce the remoteness of it all, as if a tick in the box can cleanly resolve all the issues. Of course, part of the answer is STV, but it isn't going to be the whole answer. We need face-to-face involvement of real people.

There is also a major problem with the recent changes to the voting rules. We have seen the Labour Party in various places involved in massive rigging of elections by applying for postal votes in large numbers to be sent to Labour activists. It has been happening before with Labour canvassers collecting polling cards from people who do not intend to vote and then impersonating them.

The possibilities for fraud if there is voting by e-mail or by mobile phone are frightening. How can anyone in government seriously propose these methods? It shows an astonishing lack of understanding of what really goes on in an election, especially if there is some possibility of it actually deciding something.

Real democracy is not like voting in Pop Idol or Eurovision. In real elections we need to make sure that each person votes only once, but hopefully most of them do actually vote because they believe that it matters.

OBITUARY

Viv Bingham pays tribute to Richard Wainwright, the former Liberal MP for Colne Valley who died earlier this year, sometimes described as 'the best leader we never had'

The music at a memorial service can often be as evocative of the life we are celebrating as the words spoken.

Richard's life-long Christian beliefs, his lay preaching in the Methodist church, and his work with the Quaker Ambulance Corps were reflected on at the service in a crowded Leeds parish church.

Bach, Handel, Parry, Holst and a special setting of Crimmond: two anthems and three singable hymns. The last hymn, Will Your Anchor Hold?, took me back many years to Truro Cathedral where it was sung at David Penhaligon's memorial service, and provoked one or two 'what if' thoughts in my mind.

What if, in 1967, Richard had allowed his name to go forward for the leadership when Jo Grimond stood down? What if David Penhaligon had survived and challenges with support from Richard for the leadership before the merger with the SDP?

But back to reality. Just as the formal part of the service was due to start, the splendid Huddersfield University Brass Band gave us a joyous rendition of the Floral Dance. Immediately there came to my mind the effervescent twinkle that came to Richard's eyes when he or others were challenging some 'official' line with which we disagreed. Non-conformity ruled his political life as much as his religious one.

His love of the north (expressed so well by the brass band and choir) was fashioned in his Leeds upbringing and careers as a successful accountant and business director.

There were five attempts to become an MP before success in 1966 for Colne Valley, which he lost in 1970, regained in 1974 and held until his retirement in 1987.

The key to much of the northern affection for Richard in the Liberal Party came from his total commitment to all of that constituency. Roy Douglas describes the seat as "having a turbulent history", with all three major parties involved and associations over the years with Violet Bonham-carter, Edward Mallilieu and, less happily, Horatio Bottomley.

But it was the geographical, cultural and social enigma which Richard mastered; the seat spanned (until 1982) county, regional and topographical boundaries. He represented the Lancashire cotton spinners and weavers of Dobcross, Delph, Uppermill, and the Yorkshire wool workers of Linthwaite, Marsden and Golcar. Richard was a proud Yorkshireman, but he commanded as much respect in town halls, church halls and boardrooms in Manchester and Oldham as he did in Leeds or Huddersfield. Few others can claim that.

This appreciation was based on his obvious grasp of economic and industrial affairs, particularly in areas where structural decline was ending the jobs of many and governmental mismanagement drove too many small businesses to the wall.

His exposition of Liberal plans to increase worker participation and employee profit sharing, and to simplify VAT and so on were best evidenced during the days of the Liberal/Labour arrangement in 1976/78. One of the benefits of that period was that major companies, trade and management organisations and lobby groups became very interested in our ideas and the influence we might have on the Labour government.

As chair of the policy panel, I joined Richard on a number of occasions – a presentation to the board of ICI, meetings with textile, engineering and steel making employers and small business federations. It was a joy to hear his clear analysis of complex matters, his stout defence of good employment practice and his tactful rebuttal of some of the more Thatcherite views we heard.

Geoff Tordoff, in his excellent address at the memorial service, referred, as Michael Meadowcroft did in his Guardian obituary, to a period in the 1960s and early 1970s (during which Richard was only a name to me) and to his personal generosity to the party, his financial management of its meagre funds and his chairmanship of its executive. This loyal support continued in a quieter way through the rest of his life – for his beloved Yorkshire region, for ALC/ALDC, the seats that succeeded Colne Valley after redistribution, and to individuals and groups throughout the Liberal, Methodist and Quaker worlds.

"Et apres tout, il faut cultiver le jardin" (Voltaire). All of Richard is there for perpetuity. Inherited from his father, retained when they left the family house, it surrounds their retirement bungalow and was developed by Joyce and Richard – it has to be one of the most famous displays of delphiniums in the country.

With the death of anyone to whom one was close there is the mourning – what conversations did we never finish? It competes with the joyous memories of 30 years or more. One of many I shall cling to is tea at Adel a few months ago; Richard insisted it was a Yorkshire high tea with a cooked dish. His great delight was that both Yorkshire and the north west had Liberal Democrat MPs and MEPs. We then had his analysis of various Blairite misdirections, and a joint review of the progress of our respective families, before he said, "sorry Viv, I'm very tired. I must go and lie down".

Farewell good, loyal, incisive, twinkling friends. I hope that those who did not know you realise what a template of public, party and family service you set.

Requiescat in pace, but do tell the angels some of your Yorkshire stories.

REVIEWS

The World We're In by Will Hutton Little Brown £17.99

Will Hutton's previous book, The State We're In, created something of a publishing sensation, by being a work of political economy which was widely sold, although perhaps less widely read.

I think it is fair to say that The World We're In hasn't quite been so popular, although that is less to do with the quality of the work than with the climate in which it appeared.

The State We're In was popular because it appeared at a time when the Tories were heading for certain electoral obliteration and Hutton's book was wrongly hailed by some commentators as providing an intellectual justification for New Labour.

However, Hutton's thinking was in my opinion far closer to the Liberal Democrats than to Labour, and that is confirmed in this new tome.

His thesis is that the UK needs to stop dithering and join up with our European colleagues to provide a realistic alternative to the ravages of conservative American capitalism.

He demonstrates that over a wide range of issues, from our attitude to property ownership to our desire for equality, Britain is already a nation with much the same set of values as our European neighbours, in contrast to the free market conservatism which dominates current American political life.

He also presents a pretty convincing argument that the domination of Wall Street on current American and global economics has fundamentally weakened both the US economy and its society. For Europe to follow down the same road, as many on the right want, would be a disaster.

Hutton concludes that Britain's best interests would be served by fully committing ourselves to a common European project, exemplified by our joining the euro, which can act as a counterweight to American conservatism.

Although few liberals would disagree with either Hutton's analysis or his conclusions, there are one or two problems.

Firstly, as Hutton himself frankly admits, his work focuses almost entirely on Europe and the USA. However, to many people in the

Third World, the differences between European and American capitalism are less apparent and just seem like two sides of the same coin. In the same vein, there is little about what role countries like China or areas like the Middle East might play.

Secondly, he pays very little attention to environmental issues, a criticism which was also levelled at The State We're In.

Thirdly, and perhaps most seriously, there is little consideration of how the more liberal world order he believes in can actually be achieved.

Hutton says that, while Europe can take the lead, it will only be successful if the USA can be persuaded to adopt a more liberal stance.

However, there is little sign that this is feasible, at least in the short term. Hutton shows that the roots of the current unilateralist American approach stretch back at least as far as the collapse of the Bretton Woods system in the 1970s. With the American Democrats struggling both electorally and philosophically and the Greens still a rather marginal force, it is difficult to see where a challenge to the conservative orthodoxy might come from.

The World We're In is a valuable contribution to the debate on Britain and Europe's future role. But it has come out at a time when the UK is increasingly looking towards the USA for a lead, which is itself more blatantly pursuing what it perceives as its own national interests with ever more single-minded zeal. As such, it is unlikely to have much influence.

Bernard Salmon

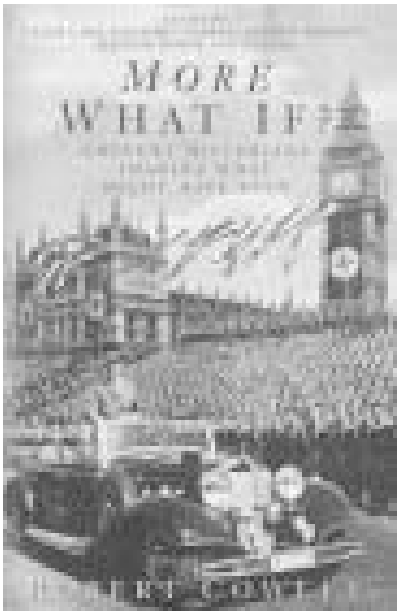
More What If: Eminent Historians consider what might have been edited by Robert Coley Macmillan 2002 £18.99

A sequel to 'What If', which was published two years ago, but with an emphasis on the political rather than the military consequences of events that are regarded as milestones in world history and extending the events beyond purely military scenarios.

Important religious events are even considered, including the consequences of Pontius Pilate acquitting Jesus and Martin Luther being burnt at the stake for heresy. However, the bulk of the essays consider the military consequences of political events, as opposed to the other way round in 'What If'.

The consequences of Lord Halifax becoming Prime Minister in 1940 and of Lincoln declining to emancipate the slaves are considered as likely to have altered history dramatically. However, John Lukacs speculates that, had Teddy Roosevelt been elected for an additional term in 1912, it would have had little impact in the long term, despite his hawkish pro-British views, as Congress would have been unlikely to support the declaration of war on Germany until the latter resumed unconditional submarine warfare in 1917 and would have also been inhibited by the desire to be re-elected in November1916.

Other potential alternative paths of history are considered, including the consequences of not dropping the atomic bomb on Japan, the effect of a successful assassination of Franklin D Roosevelt and the consequences of a Henry Wallace presidency. It also considers the consequences on the careers of three prominent Americans elected



to Congress in 1948 being different had any of the three failed to be elected. The three candidates were John F Kennedy, Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson, all of whom were lifted out of Congress by subsequent events.

Perhaps the most interesting is the speculation that history could have been different had the Chinese Admiral Zheng He reached the New World before his death in 1433 and the subsequent decree by the Ming Dynasty banning ocean-going vessels from being built. A recently published book cites evidence from old charts to substantiate the author's claim that Zheng He did reach America, suggesting that there may well have been little change.

As with 'What If', the bulk of the contributors are American historians, so there is an emphasis on American history, which is not entirely surprising as counterfactual scenarios tend to be used more by Americans. The best essay, however, comes from the British historical novelist Cecilia Holland, who speculates on the consequences of the Norman Invasion of 1066 being repelled.

Andrew Hudson

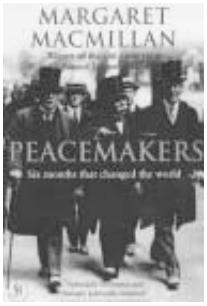
Peacemakers by Margaret Macmillan John Murray 2003 £16.99

The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 resulting in the Treaty of Versailles is the subject of a scholarly and in-depth analysis by the Canadian historian Margaret Macmillan, great-granddaughter of Lloyd George.

The author chronicles through 500 pages of authoritative narrative the lengthy acrimonious discussions leading up to the signing of the Treaty and its aftermath. There is little doubt that the punitive treatment of defeated Germany contributed to the resurgence of German nationalism, the advent of the Nazis and Hitler in 1933 and ultimately the Second World War.

The peacemakers were working against time. New lines on the map of Europe had to be drawn as their predecessors had done in the Congress of Vienna when the great upheavals set off by the French Revolution had subsided. In addition, Asia, Africa and the Middle East had to be considered. They had to act as policemen as well as feed the hungry and to create a new international order that would make another Great War impossible.

The question of penalising Germany for starting the war and settling reparation to France and Belgium, was paramount, Bulgaria had to have its treaty as did the Ottoman Empire. Austria-Hungary no longer existed with most of its territory gone to new nations. The expectations of the peace conference were enormous; the risk of disappointment great.



Thirty countries, each with its own agenda, sent delegates. A Supreme Council of Ten was formulated, meeting daily in the offices of the French Foreign Ministry on the Quai d'Orsay; the predominant figures Clemenceau, Lloyd George and Woodrow Wilson who together with the Italian Prime Minister, Vittorio Orlando, comprised an inner Council of Four.

Six thousand square miles of France which pre-war had produced 20 per cent of its crops, 90 per cent of its iron ore and 65 per cent of its steel had been devastated. A quarter of its male population between the ages of 18 and 30 died in the war, a higher proportion than that of any of the other participants.

Clemenceau, who insisted on the conference being held in Paris, was dedicated to exacting maximum reparation for the damage inflicted upon his country by the Germans. During the negotiations, there was an unsuccessful attempt on his life when an assailant fired several shots at his car. Clemenceau was severely shaken but was walking in his garden the following day and a week later back at work. Woodrow Wilson thought he was never the same man afterwards.

Lloyd George, then at the peak of his political career, thrived on challenges and crises. Acclaimed as a great orator - on his feet there was said to be no-one quicker.

Wilson, worldly-wise and arch mediator, arrived in Paris amid scenes of great enthusiasm with his 14 points and a dream of a better world and set about maximising American influence in drawing up borders and exercising his flair in hammering out peace agreements.

It was a Paris where every other woman was in mourning and demobilised soldiers begging for coins in the streets while the various delegations held balls and receptions at night in their splendid hotels.

The question of reparations was to prove crucial and helped to poison relations between Germany and the Allies for much of the 1920s and 1930s. The problem was that a large proportion of the German population refused to accept that Germany had lost the war. Ludendorf wrote that Germany had not been beaten on the battlefield, German soil had not been breached, no allied armies had invaded. When the peace terms became known there was a week of mourning in Germany.

While most of the 440 clauses of the Treaty have long been forgotten, those dealing with the question of reparations stand as evidence of a vindictive, poisonous document. The Weimar democracy inherited a crushing burden and the Nazis were later to make capital out of abiding German resentment.

The German delegates at Versailles expecting the treaty to be based on the 14 points were cynically treated as if they were prisoners in the dock. In Germany the political situation was chaotic, the coalition government was deeply undecided whether to sign the treaty but at the eleventh hour the resolution was finally passed by the National Assembly. Feelings were understandably resentful.

In hindsight, history may not deal too harshly with those who with the noblest intentions set out to forge a real peace. When in 1929 the Wall Street Stock Exchange collapsed, nowhere was harder hit than Germany, with millions unemployed, thus setting the scene for the rise of Hitler and galvanising young Germany into Nazism. Hitler became Chancellor in 1933 and, by the time of the 1934 Nazi rally, thousands of students and ex-military had rallied to its cause. But it was already too late for the rest of Europe - the elements were in place for Germany to avenge the humiliation of 1919.

This book should prove to be a major source of reference for future historians. Well researched and documented, Margaret Macmillan skillfully brings the characters to life with a few strokes of her pen.

As the main aim of the Treaty to prevent such a war from ever happening again by the creation of international order had clearly failed, she ends this illuminating and stimulating treatise by questioning "How can the irrational passions of nationalism or religion be contained before they do more damage? How can we outlaw war? We are still asking those questions."

Neil Dewhurst

Cutting the Wire: The story of the landless movement in Brazil by Sue Branford and Jan Rocha 2003

Last October, Lula da Silva won the Brazilian presidential election for the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores or PT) at the fourth attempt. For many, his election offered a real opportunity and seemed to suggest the country's democratisation – which began in with the collapse of the military regime in 1985 – was finally complete.

Yet, on taking office in January, the new Government was presented with a challenge: implement sweeping reforms now or take a step back and try and build support among the disgruntled dominant social and economic elite before proposing any far-reaching changes. The latter choice appears to have been chosen, much to the frustration of many.

Just two months on and the landless peasant movement, the Movimento Sem Terra (MST) has pulled out of an agreement to avoid occupying unproductive latifúndios (large landed estates). How the Government will react in what has been at times a tempestuous relationship remains to be seen.

Both the PT and MST were founded separately in the struggle against the military regime of the 1960s and 1970s. Their relationship has always been a mixed one. Many PT candidates have been drawn from the ranks of the MST, but while the PT has become increasingly moderant in its bid to gain power the MST has never given up its militant stance.

In Cutting the Wire, journalists Sue Branford and Jan Rocha offer a detailed insight into one of the largest social movements in Latin American, charting its origins, development and adjustment to the challenges it has faced since the early 1980s. Driven by necessity and the unwillingness of successive governments to address their plight, the MST became home to peasant farmers and labourers who realised they would need to take matters into their own hands. In doing so, they could draw on the support of liberal minded reformers in the Catholic Church and the agronomist who was to play a leading role in their development, Joao Pedro Stédile.

The MST has occupied hundreds of estates since the first occupation in 1982. Generally occupations take place under the cover of darkness and a camp is struck up. MST activists highlight not only the difficulty of getting land this way, but the desperation many feel to be prepared to engage in such struggle: irate landowners will often evict the squatters and are prepared to use force if necessary. Indeed, the most notorious case happened in April 1997 when 19 people were murdered by police forces on the road outside Eldorado de Carajas in the northern state of Pará.

For an occupation to be successful, those involved have to be prepared to return time and time again to an evicted camp until the Government's land agency steps in and buys the property from the landowner. Only then can the MST set about building a settlement to go alongside the land they have already begun to work.

The MST is a socialist organisation, but its commitment to self-organisation does not mean its agricultural methods and practices follow this logic. According to Branford and Rocha, during the early 1980s steps were taken by the leadership to impose a pattern of land ownership and production on the various settlements. Land was collectivised, settlements became increasingly mechanised and specialised in a particular product or process, encouraging intensive agriculture.

The MST believed if it was to survive it needed to compete with the larger, more dominant agribusiness industry. But it failed. Today the leadership has learnt from its errors. Instead of setting goals for each settlement and its communities, it provides guidelines and best practice guides.

As a result settlements are experimenting with different forms of land ownership and practices, producing different products and attempting to sell their produce locally. This approach recognises that small-scale farmers cannot compete in the much larger national and international market.

Yet, just as the decision to occupy was based on the lack of a viable alternative, so now are MST farmers discovering the benefits of being pressed into a non-intensive form of agriculture. In so doing a number of settlements are turning towards niche markets and in particular organic production.

Partly through its ongoing struggle against an intimidating and belligerent elite, the MST has received international sympathy and support. Yet just as this could not be anticipated before it happened, could the same be happening in relation to its agricultural methods?

As we become increasingly concerned about where our food comes from and how it was produced, could the decision by some in the MST to pursue a more traditional approach also encourage a rise of interest in this organisation and its objectives? Will we soon see a time when British shoppers, keen to show their support for ethical and natural food, will demand MST food in their supermarkets? If so, and the MST occupations continue, how then will Lula and his PT government react?

Guy Burton

Lord Bonkers' Diary

Sunday

Home from an aborted visit to the Hotel Splendide, Antibes, after a little unpleasantness at the airport. A chit of a girl had the gall to ask me if I had packed my case myself: I wasted no time in telling her (a little hotly, I confess) that no gentleman would dream of doing such a thing and I had, of course, left arrangements to my valet. For some accountable reason this caused consternation and I found myself detained by the authorities. After some hours of waiting I demanded to be put through to the Reverend Hughes, whose word carries some weight at the Home Office owing to the success of his Church Lads Ping Pong Club in reducing crime, and he soon secured my release. Despite what Whittington was telling me the other day, I feel sure he will make an excellent Mayor of London.

Monday

I wander the Estate this misty morning, wondering what to make of the bittersweet news from Iraq. Saddam has fallen and one's heart rejoices with the Baghdadis, yet one wonders at what cost this victory has been achieved. Like the Roman, I seem to see the Tigris foaming with much blood. So heavy is my heart that I return to the Hall and order the release of two Conservative canvassers I have kept chained to the cellar walls since they blundered into the ward at the last election. I had it in mind to feed them to Ruttie, but now that seems a tawdry ambition. At least I am cheered when I pass the village school and here the inmates piping an old Rutland nursery rhyme: "The Grand Old Duke of Skye/He was against the war/But when the bombs began to fall/He wasn't any more."

Tuesday

One reason for my melancholy at events in the Gulf is the trade that existed between the peoples of Iraq and Rutland in more civilised times. Rare silks and manuscripts in ancient scripts were brought from China by way of Merv, Bokhara and Samarkand; lush dates and chattering apes came from the dry and sandy deserts which are the banks of the Nile. All were assembled in the souks of Baghdad, then brought by camel over the Alps to the lowlands of Holland and thence by barge to Crowland. They were taken from there by ways known only to the men of the Fens (occasionally a camel would wander away from the caravan, which explains the wild herds around Littleport which many of my readers will recall with affection from the Isle of Ely by-election) to the uplands of Rutland, through the public bar of the Bonkers Arms, out the back door and through the yard, and then up the lane to my lodge gates. On the journey home they bore Melton Mowbray pork pies and Stilton cheeses from Cropwell Bishop, both greatly prized by the sheiks of Araby.

Wednesday

Down to the bookies to place a modest wager on myself in the Liberal Moustache of the Year competition. Imagine my chagrin upon finding that I am only second in the betting, with John Thurso installed as the favourite. Thurso, like his grandfather John O' Groats before him, is MP for Caithness and Sutherland, where the Douneray atom plant is located. I have often wondered whether this benighted establishment was the source of the "magic dust" with which poor Maclennan would play when his attention wandered in meetings of select committees. It had the singular effect of making him glow in the dark which, while no doubt injurious to his health, was useful when one was following him along one of Westminster's more obscure corridors. Now, I am not suggesting for a moment that the stewards investigate whether Thurso is using substances obtained from Douneray to make his moustache grow so luxuriantly, but shouldn't he come forward and settle the matter once and for all?

Thursday

What is one to make of the current American President? He does not strike one as a cultured or learned man, yet he is the only head of state in my experience (with the possible exception of King Hakon of Norway) able to peel bananas with his feet and this surely deserves some respect. Little Blair is clearly besotted with him and is often to be found in his presence, grinning at his side or squirming across the carpet like an unjustly whipped spaniel. Iain Duncan Smith, who many insist leads the Conservative Party, is also an admirer, but then he has been behaving very oddly of late in many ways. Did you hear him on the BBC Today Programme giggling manically as John Humphries tried to question him? Fortunately our own Jonathan Fryer, at Broadcasting House to read his "Thought for the Day", was on hand to tip a jug of iced water over his head and calm him down.

Friday

It is always pleasing to see the latest research informing our policies. Thus I am delighted that Jim Wallace has taken up a theory that I have pioneered here at the Lord Bonkers' Home for Well-Behaved Orphans. I have long maintained that it is not a good to idea to begin teaching children to read at too young an age, and I run the place with this in mind. Wallace has obviously been impressed with the results we obtain as he now wants to implement the scheme cross the whole of Scotland (or "Caledonia! Stern and wild", as the poet Scott has it). I have yet to convince him that there are some things which should be undertaken at the most tender age, such as sweeping chimneys and scaring birds, but I am sure it is only a matter of time before our Scottish manifesto shows the benefits of these insights of mine too.

Saturday

As I have learned over my long experience of public life, one should not believe all one reads in the newspapers. I recall, for instance, some disgraceful muck-raking over my entirely innocent investments in the Marconi Company. Nevertheless, I am dismayed to read that our chaps in Liverpool have forbidden the distribution of hot cross buns in case they offend people's religious sensibilities. Surely, in this jolly multicultural country of ours, we should be tolerating one another's religions? Here in the Church of Rutland we are happy to respect the Church of England's right not to believe in God, but in return we ask that they respect our right to continue to burn heretics at the stake. That is what Liberalism is all about.

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

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www.bonkers.hall.btinternet.co.uk