

liberator

*"Welcome to the
governor of the 51st
state, Tony Blair"*

**Any jobs
going in a few
months' time?**



In this issue



Labour TV policy threatens our culture - Janice Turner



Reopen positive discrimination - Ros Scott



Support this regional breakthrough - Ed Davey



Europe gets a constitution - Andrew Duff

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COMMENTARY

PLAN FOR BLAIR'S EXIT

Is there anyone in the country, cabinet members aside, who still believes Tony Blair's justification for the Iraq war?

One has to ask 'which justification', as it has changed so often from disarming weapons of mass destruction, to ousting a brutal dictator, to halting weapons of mass destruction *programmes*.

As each twist and turn has gathered pace, with sexed-up dossiers, plagiarism, forged documents, ordinary exaggerations and a mysterious suicide Blair's stock has fallen yet further.

It is time to start thinking about the shape of politics not merely without Blair but without 'new' Labour.

This is because Blair depended to an unusual extent on his 'regular guy' act and, for a long time, it served him. His speeches and manifestos were short on specifics. What specifics there were, were mostly modest.

He never called on people to buy into a vision of a particular kind of society and only offered pragmatic stewardship, much as if he were minding the shop rather than heading a government.

Unlike Margaret Thatcher, he has been neither widely loved nor hated, he has merely been there.

In circumstances where a politician does not offer much to believe in, voters are asked to believe in the person. If they cease to do that, there is not much left.

Whatever the precise details of who forged and exaggerated what in the run-up to the Iraq war, Blair's standing with the public has been irreparably harmed by his deceits. Few any longer believe a word he says and, once trust is lost like that, it cannot be regained. Blair is damaged goods and a diminishing asset to Labour and, sooner or later, the Labour Party will notice this.

If Blair is ousted, 'new' Labour will go with him, even if this is strenuously denied for a while.

Since 'new' Labour never amounted to much more than a policy of cautiously splitting the difference, attacking civil liberty and acceding to any demand made by powerful business lobbies, it will not be missed.

Whether Blair is succeeded by Gordon Brown or anyone else, the whole brand has been damaged and any successor will be forced to pay more attention to what the Labour Party wants.

And, since 'new' Labour was a top-down imposition rather than an organic growth in that party, that is likely to mean a reversion towards Labour's traditional concerns.

Blair's record has made those Liberal Democrats who thought him 'a sort of liberal' look silly, and those who never trusted him feel vindicated.

But a post-Blair Labour Party would pose a number of questions for the Liberal Democrats.

It would almost certainly recolonise the public services agenda that the Liberal Democrats have made their own in the past few years and put a stop to the brief flirtation of some trade unions with the party. It would also abandon constitutional reform – this has been timid, disconnected, inadequate and largely done because of commitments inherited from John Smith, but has never been a priority of the Labour mainstream.

The Liberal Democrats ought to be thinking ahead from the base the party has established as the only one in the country interested in defending liberty. While other parties talk about defending freedom only in the sense of allowing consumers a choice, the Liberal Democrats can offer decentralisation and civil liberty, ground on which neither of the other parties can fight.

Europe may also start to become a positive, rather than something the Liberal Democrats prefer not to mention.

Much of the resentment against Blair is fuelled by his grovelling acceptance of whatever President Bush tells him to do. This has not only caused disapproval because of a lack of faith in Bush's ability and motives, it has been a real demonstration of loss of sovereignty.

Not only are British citizens being held without legal rights at Guantanamo Bay, at the time of writing, but Labour's awful record on civil liberty is shown up by its agreement to a treaty with America under which UK citizens can be extradited there on demand, without the need for the American authorities to present prima facie evidence of a crime. That would be outrageous even if it applied reciprocally, but it does not.

This is far more an infringement of sovereignty than anything, real or imagined, done to the UK by the European Union.

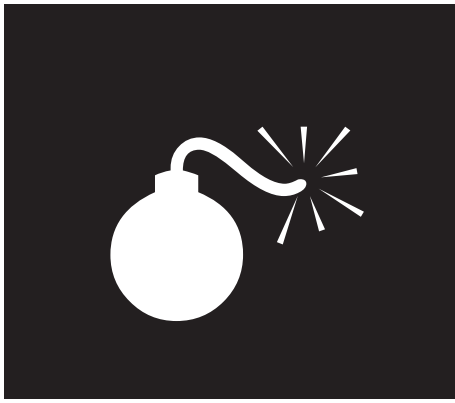
And, in its relations with the EU, Britain has a powerful voice and is working among partners with similar rights – it is not just taking orders.

It might be different if the rightful winner of the 2000 election were in the White House, or if a Democrat wins in 2004 but, for the moment, the idea of being part of a bloc powerful enough to stand up to Bush will look attractive to many in Britain.

After all, what use is a Government that refuses to defend its citizens' liberty when a foreign power simply announces that it wants them in its hands?

LIBERATOR 290

Copies of the next issue of Liberator will be distributed from our stall at the Liberal Democrat conference in Brighton, and posted shortly after to those not present.



RADICAL BULLETIN

ROOM AT THE TOP

In a meeting marked by heated rows, considerable puzzlement and a dispute over a posting on Cix, the Liberal Democrat Federal Executive managed to set in train a process to find an overall chief executive. Perhaps. If a suitable person can be found. And everyone is kept happy. And the FE ratifies the decision of a sub-committee which anyway comprises about half its membership.

The origins of this reach back to the mid-term review, after the 1997 general election, which split the top posts into a director of campaigns, held continuously by Chris Rennard, and a director of everything else, mainly the administrative functions.

Confusingly, the latter post is titled 'chief executive' and is held by Hugh Rickard, who despite being chief executive is not Rennard's boss.

This division of labour continued happily enough until the row erupted over the lack of backing given initially by the party organisation to the FE's decision to support the Iraq demonstration in February (Liberator 286 and 287).

FE vice chair Donnachadh McCarthy found that Rickard had no control over Rennard and that neither had any control over the press office, which is based in parliament, or the treasurer's unit.

The press office is part of the Political Office of the Liberal Democrats and separated from the party generally because it is paid for from the funding allowed to opposition parties a Westminster.

McCarthy proposed that whole lot should be placed under one chief executive in a conventional management structure.

However, Rickard also thought all as not well, though for different reasons. He last year made it known that he thought the split responsibility at the top of Cowley Street was inhibiting the party. Rickard also indicated that if such a change resulted in there being no post for him, "so be it".

Partly as a result, Federal Finance and Administration Committee chair David Griffiths initiated a review.

But the case for change was not overwhelming, and Griffiths and everyone else concerned was well aware of Rennard's standing in the party. He is a widely popular and respected figure and most MPs and target candidates would go ballistic were any threat to his position perceived.

Griffiths proposed that POLD and the treasurer's unit should be left as they are, while a new 'top' chief executive should be installed at Cowley Street if a suitable person could be found.

He ended by proposing, "a selection committee with full powers of appointment be set up to recruit a chief

executive/ secretary general if a person matching the person specification can be identified". This person is supposed to possess the skills to oversee both campaigns and administration.

The 'everything else' functions overseen by Rickard would go to a new head of core services.

It is of course pretty unlikely that anyone can found whose campaigning skill exceeds Rennard's.

The FE was faced with Griffiths' recommendations and McCarthy's paper. The latter was withdrawn on the night despite a manoeuvre by Charles Kennedy, who appeared to want it definitively voted down.

Now the proposed selection committee is due to try to sort all this out before conference.

Despite all this, enthusiasm was muted, with the Griffiths plan received an exactly overwhelming endorsement, with seven votes in its favour, five against and six abstentions.

One group of people somewhat left out of this convoluted process are the Cowley Street staff.

Although Griffiths has held meeting to explain what he proposed, there is understandable disquiet about what might be going at the top and its possible consequences for staff.

It remains to be seen whether the whole upheaval adds anything to the party's campaigns or management.

TAKEN OVER BY MACHINES

In scenes reminiscent of the disaster movie *Airplane*, members of the Federal Finance and Administration Committee metaphorically poured petrol over themselves and fell upon samurai swords as they ground line-by-line through the minutiae of chief executive Hugh Rickard's 11,000-word exegesis of the registration cock-up at Torquay.

As the report summarised: "Problems were experienced at registration on the Saturday morning of 2003 Spring Conference at Torquay. The length of time that representatives were required to queue was unacceptable. In order to prevent voting representatives being disenfranchised through being held in a queue for hours, temporary voting slips printed on white paper were issued without reference to the usual membership, finance or registration checks."

Just as well the Comedy Terrorist had not decided to pay a visit.

The problems were obvious to anyone stranded half the morning in a queue while the badge making machine recovered its health and strength (Liberator 287).

But Rickard is emphatic that no individual is to blame. The report is a tale of high staff turnover and malfunctioning machines.

Rickard wrote: "Badge printing had been scheduled for the weekend 1st/2nd March. However the badge printing machines were not serviceable in time."

Staff assumed they would be in working order having functioned perfectly well at Brighton, but "discovered that they had never been properly maintained or cleaned and that they had a history of unreliability." When they did become usable the heavy colours selected for badges could not be printed properly.

When the badges were sent out, some perplexed recipients found they said neither 'voting' nor 'non-voting' but simply 'member'.

Registration opened on the Friday early evening with staff assuming that they would have only about 70 badges to print, but were instead swamped by badge requests from people who had not pre-registered, including numerous MPs.

The report says: "The level of staffing at registration was insufficient in that there was nobody sufficiently senior front of house, there were not sufficient numbers of staff or volunteers trained in badge production to enable an 'overnight' shift to run to catch up the backlog, nor were there enough staff or volunteers trained in badge production to allow the regular conference office staff to emerge to deal with the more difficult problems both at registration or elsewhere in conference as they arose."

Rickard says that at 10:10 on the Saturday morning "problems became so acute that [FCC chair] Liz Barker brought me into the situation. After discussions with Liz Barker, [conference director] Penny McCormack and [chief steward] Chris Maines, the issue of temporary voting slips was authorised. Badge production did not catch up with demand until 17:00 that day. Many who registered as non-voting were simply issued with a cardboard pass."

The report notes shortages of resources and staff at Cowley Street, and goes on to describe: "a culture in HQ which, under the pressure created by the shortage of resources, has difficulty in 'owning the problem'."

"Instead it evinces a kind of defensive mentality that finds refuge in being satisfied that individual actions are adequate. There is no space, under this kind of pressure, to develop any holistic feeling for the collective effect that

the sum of all these individual actions have on the Party or its members that HQ exists to serve.

"It is a kind of institutional blindness, or an institutional disregard for our clients. The way we are organized and behave corporately appears to fail to meet our aims when viewed from the perspective of those who are entitled to receive better from us."

Rickard made 42 recommendations for improvements, and said: "the presumption should always be that it is better to let one representative have a vote to which he or she is not entitled than to disenfranchise several voting representatives who have been duly elected in accordance with the constitution." Quite like old times.

It subsequently became apparent that Vera Head is in the frame to become the 'registration champion', though this might seem to be a task of conference office rather than a volunteer.

After the FCC had ploughed through Rickard's opus, it complained that "it is still unclear with whom overall responsibility for registration lies. The need for clarity on that point is the crux of the matter."

LIGHTS ON AMBER

Let he who is without sin cast the first stone. Anyone who has seen the average Liberal Democrat conference bar in action should hesitate before condemning others for drinking too much alcohol, so who has been briefing the press to the effect that Charles Kennedy is suffering a drink problem?

Large pieces have appeared in the *Daily Mail* and *Scotland on Sunday* making the sort of allegations about Kennedy's impairedness that few newspapers would print without internal sources.

The Times and *The Guardian*, though not making allegations about drinking, both carried stories that other Lib Dem MPs were exasperated by Kennedy's "lacklustre" leadership, with some of the complaints from anonymous MPs worded identically in each.

It is certainly true that the party appeared to enter a long slumber after the local elections. There was a low profile until mid-July when allegations about the Government's duplicity over Iraq, and the launch of the plan to abolish a number of ministries, showed some sign of life.

Liberator Fringe Meeting
Foreign policy after Iraq
Sunday 21 September - 6.15pm
Ambassadors Room Metropole Hotel Brighton
Speakers to be announced

But this was a period when the Government has been on the ropes and the Tories had for the first time in years made a splash with policy announcements (Liberator 288).

The immediate cause of these stories appears to have been Kennedy's absence from the parliamentary statement on the euro. This is a cause with which he is identified and one of those big occasions when he could have made an impact.

The explanation offered by the party that he decided to watch it in his office instead, rather invites the question "why"?

Whether Kennedy's suffers a medical condition, tiredness, temporary boredom, difficulty in getting a hearing or genuinely felt he was following sound tactics, ultimately only he knows.

Whichever, it is unlikely to be helped by the some of the briefings from "senior sources" seen in the papers, so the old question has to be asked "who benefits"?

The most surprising of the possible answers is "Kennedy". One theory is that these stories have been fanned by his friends in a misconceived attempt to shock him into action.

Another is that it is all the work of the Tories, or possibly the Government in revenge for the party's stance on Iraq.

Indeed they would benefit from Kennedy being seen in an unflattering light, but the public would dismiss it as the small change of political insults unless the story turned out to have Liberal Democrat sources.

Those youngish men in a hurry who fancy their chances of being leader may want Kennedy to go quickly - not out of any concern for him or the party but because they fear competition from Chris Huhne and Nick Clegg after the next general election, assuming both these MEPs win Westminster seats.

They seem to have neglected to note that, if the party faced a sudden crisis leadership election, it would almost certainly be won by Simon Hughes, the close runner-up last time.

BALLS AND GLOBES

For anyone who remembers Young Liberal conferences, it is hard to describe the surreal inappropriateness of the hundredth anniversary ball organised by LDYS in an enormous space beneath London's Globe Theatre.

Praise where it is due, LDYS recognised the centenary as an opportunity and must have made some money from the event, and it ran without any obvious hitch.

But was this the best sort of event to run? The title 'ball' normally implies music and dancing yet, apart from half an hour of a string quartet rendered inaudible by the acoustics, there was neither. Indeed, the acoustics also rendered Simon Hughes' speech unintelligible.

Then there was the confusion about the nature of the event. The invitations and advertisements never actually said 'black tie' but word got around that this was expected. Since hire of this costume would turn a reasonable £25 ticket into about £75, there were understandable objections on financial grounds from many people.

Worse, this had absolutely nothing to do with what the Young Liberals were. They were an organisation that from the mid-1960s to their demise at the merger took the 'do your own thing' attitude at its word in dress, behaviour, alcoholic consumption and indeed politics.

One punter, who did eventually attend, replied when told it was 'black tie preferred', "you must be joking, that's the antithesis of a Young Liberal conference".

The result was that, of about 200 attendees, there was a strange mixture of a couple of dozen in black tie, most in casual clothes and some in between in lounge suits.

After the string quartet and Hughes had departed, nothing further happened until a raffle was drawn two hours later. People just stood around chatting in a cavernous room with one small makeshift bar wondering why no-one had thought to book the contemporary equivalent of former Reading councillor Trevor Cotterell's disco, a feature of YL events.

The Liberal Revue might have provided a source of entertainment at the event and, in principle, its members would have performed, but not when asked at ten days' notice. As it was, the event lacked any focal point.

Nor was it well promoted. NLYL and ULS were never that big and it would have been possible to contact a high proportion of the living former active membership by email, but requests from collective members were met with silence when they asked LDYS to supply details of the event, and clear up the dress code point, so mass emails could be sent to old contacts.

Most of those present were still active in the party anyway, and almost the entire YL generation of the mid-1980s was missing.

Surely something billed as a 'reception', without the 'ball' trappings and which made some effort to mimic the final night of a YL conference, would have been more appropriate, and early approaches to ex-YLs would have pulled in a bigger crowd. It was a missed opportunity.

A SLOGAN TO REMEMBER

The impending by-election in Brent East does of course have literature rather different from that used in the 1979 general election, when the late Chris Wilding was despatched there as a last-minute candidate.

Armed with a deposit, the name of one local member and a few thousand centrally produced leaflets, Wilding set to with a John Bull printing outfit (this was before desktop publishing and Risographs) to fill in the space left blank for local candidate details.

To complete this Herculean task he offered various stockbroker friends what Wilding would have described as "oceanic" quantities of whisky to assist him, and soon some of the spaces became filled with unauthorised slogans.

Legend has it that several hundred homes receive leaflets that read: 'Your local Liberal candidate Chris Wilding likes girls with small tits.'

THUMBS UP

Why does a disorderly group of Labour MPs greet every parliamentary speech by Lembit Opik with raised thumbs and ribald smirks? Is it something to do with the weather?

WHAT A SWELL PARTY

Ramesh Dewan threw a huge bash at his Harrow home to mark Charles Kennedy's 20 years as leader, at which no doubt a good time was had by all.

But some attendees' back-of-the-envelope calculation is that the event cannot have left much change out of £50,000. It featured 400 guests, a champagne buffet, the

Band of Scots Guards, large marquees and a massive firework display.

Dewan's generosity is well known and it is his business how he spends his money, but is this really the best use that could be made of such a vast sum with so many calls on the party's finances?

PLANNING A COMEBACK?

When Paddy Ashdown spoke in London at a Refugee Week meeting, he politely excused himself from answering a question about Iraq by pointing out that he is nowadays an international civil servant and confined to matters Bosnian.

He said it was a question he would have been happy to answer when he was in British public life, and would do so when he was again.

Does this just mean returning to his seat in the House of Lords, or has he wider plans?

OFFICE POLITICS

A proposal to leave a policy officer post in Cowley Street vacant when Jennie Ripley leaves at the end of July has greatly agitated policy chief Richard Grayson, who fears the proposal means that the culture, media and sport brief would remain uncovered and other work go by the board due to overloading of the remaining staff.

His mood is unlikely to have been improved by a response from chief executive Hugh Rickard, which notes that the Federal Finance and Administration committee has decided that, between Cowley Street and Westminster "the proportion of the party's total staff resource expended on policy and resource is too high and therefore, in the future, there would be no presumption that staff vacancies in these areas would be automatically re-filled". The idea is to redirect resources to campaigns.

He notes that nothing in Grayson's plea "should lead the FFAC to conclude that they should reverse their existing view that we need to reduce the amount of resources dispensed by the party in [policy]."

Rickard suggested that a "modest reduction in Policy Unit funding may lead to the restoration of our spending on local authority campaigning be it via G8 or ALDC for example".

BOILED IN THEIR JACKETS

In the recent heatwave, the bar and restaurant of the National Liberal Club, which has large south facing windows, have becoming stifling.

When Liberal International members dined there after their AGM, party elder statesman Russell Johnston, in acute discomfort due to the heat, committed the sin of removing his jacket, and Hugh Dykes promptly did likewise.

Club rules require a jacket even with the temperature pushing 30 degrees, and his LI hosts were embarrassed to find themselves berated in front of Johnston by members of the club old guard who would sooner boil to death than appear jacketless.

By way of apology Johnston next day sent LI a postcard of the House of Lords noting that 'taking your jacket off' should not always be interpreted as wanting to start a fight.

THERE GOES RHYMIN' PAUL

One of the more unusual parliamentary websites is maintained by Paul Marsden, the Shrewsbury MP who joined the Liberal Democrats from Labour in 2001.

It contains no less than 19 poems of his own composing, which if nothing else must be a record among the parliamentary party.

<http://spruce.he.net/~paulmars/poem-index.html>

THEY'RE AT IT AGAIN!

The Liberal Revue takes to the stage again at the Liberal Democrat conference in Brighton on Tuesday 23 September.

9pm in the Viscount Room, Metropole Hotel.

Tickets are £10 and strictly limited, available only from the Liberator stall on the ground floor of the Brighton conference centre.

THE FIRST STEP

Regional government is coming to England and Liberal Democrats should support this breakthrough even if they dislike the detail, says Edward Davey, who shadows the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

What stance will our regional parties take, now English regional devolution could be about to start?

Three referendums will take place some time next year, probably in the autumn - in the North East, North West and Yorkshire and Humberside. A "yes" vote could lead to elections to new assemblies just after the next general election, perhaps in May 2006.

The timetable for other English regions is unclear - but will certainly be much longer. "Sources close to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister" tell us there will be boundary reviews of the other regions if and when the first three regions opt for devolution. (Not even New Labour thinks the current West Midlands makes sense, let alone the South East.)

Those reviews will delay the process towards further referendums by perhaps a year, suggesting that further devolution votes are unlikely to occur before 2007. However, by the end of the decade, it is conceivable that all English regions could have opted for democracy.

On the face of it, this ought to be unalloyed good news for Liberal Democrats, champions of devolution when it was extremely unfashionable. English regionalism is not only the brother and sister of Welsh, Scottish, Irish and London devolution, it is also important in the overall Liberal approach to power: to create a modern pluralist democracy, with competing spheres of power, as the strongest bulwark against the Leviathan state.

One might also expect the prospect of this latest constitutional reform to be exciting those committed to our emerging policy agenda. Much of that leans heavily on regionalism - whether it's public service reform or cutting back the cost of Whitehall. Our vision of setting public services free from the Whitehall targetry and regulation yokes, to foster innovation and frontline investment, increasingly relies on new and strong regional democracy - as well as more powerful local government.

Our Treasury spokesman, Matthew Taylor, has rightly built our own internal spending review on savings that could be generated from a radical reduction in the size of Whitehall.

Yet, despite the many reasons for Liberal Democrats strongly backing Labour's plans for regional devolution, there is disquiet.

Many people in the party are concerned the plans lack teeth and ambition for regionalism. Some people feel the referendums may be difficult to win. A few think I and my parliamentary team "sold out" when we struck a deal with the Government over the paving legislation, and its inter-relationship with local government reviews.

I'm not surprised there are rumblings, particularly with respect to the powers that Labour proposes to devolve in

the White Paper, "Your Region, Your Choice". New Labour's regional agenda is thin, with few powers going down from Whitehall, and some powers actually being taken away from local authorities.

So what powers will elected regional assemblies get? Some in relation to the existing regional development agencies. They will have some strategic powers over planning and housing. They will have functions in matters such as tourism and culture. They will be "influencers" in areas such as transport and the environment. But only as consultees.

In other words, the rich Liberal Democrat menu of powers stripped from Whitehall is absent. No Regional Transport Authorities in charge of all transport from roads to rail and airports - even though better transport infrastructure is essential for striking a greater economic balance. No regional control over the Learning and Skills Councils for the education and training agenda. No presumption that all quangos in a region will account to the assembly - particularly frustrating for our agenda of sustainable development, as quangos like the Environment Agency, Countryside Agency, Forestry Commission and English Nature will still all look ultimately to Whitehall.

Given these deficiencies in powers, why aren't people like myself launching campaigns against this "sell out"? Because the powers still represent a start on which Liberal Democrats can build. Moreover, I haven't given up the fight for more, now. I strongly believe that the battle for a much stronger form of regional devolution can still be won.

And why do I think this? Because the tide is coming our way. New Labour increasingly, if belatedly, realises centralisation's shortcomings. There is a growing understanding that Whitehall targets and strings can often have perverse effects. Worse still, from Millbank's point of view, they realise that failed Whitehall targets means the finger is pointed at Whitehall. So there is a growing appetite among senior Labour politicians for some type of devolution.

And, before you even think it, no, I'm not naïve. I know most of the Labour Party and the Whitehall bureaucracy are not about to sign up to a real liberal politics of power pluralism. Just as with the House of Lords, they will cling on to power. But this clear change in the mood and the direction is something we can exploit.

We have many friends who are willing us on. Talk to most of the pressure groups. Listen to the academics and think tanks. Take the temperature of active civic society in many parts of the three northern regions. There's a real hunger for a richer menu of powers.

And then look at what is happening at Westminster. We are winning the argument there.

Part of the deal I negotiated with local government minister Nick Raynsford, in relation to the paving legislation for referendums on regional assemblies, was related to powers.

First, we won the concession that they would publish a draft Bill, setting out the powers of elected regional assemblies. Second, we won an acknowledgement that the powers proposed in the White Paper were not the end of the process. It is clear talking to ministers that they are genuinely open to ideas for further devolution. Liberal Democrats should be campaigning in Parliament and at all levels for such extra powers to be devolved. It will make our task in the referendums significantly easier.

And can we really win those referendums? It is probably too early to say. There is a huge degree of public ignorance about the regional assemblies, and what they can and cannot do.

On the positive side, if the main elements of both the Liberal Democrats and Labour parties are working together, then that provides a solid foundation. While business opinion is split, there will still be a strong “yes” business lobby. Moreover, these are some of the weaker regions for Conservative support – with not a single Tory councillor in Liverpool, Manchester or Newcastle.

Less optimistically, Labour’s regional government proposals are weak, and Blair has hardly been an advocate of the cause. The opponents will try to link regionalism with Europe, and could make some headway there. And one of the more tricky features of any campaign relates to the most controversial part of the deal we struck in Parliament with Labour – in relation to local government reviews. So it’s worth recapping that story.

Blair was utterly determined that regional government would only happen if it were accompanied by local government reorganisation. In other words, he wanted to neutralise the Tory attack of “an extra tier of Government”, by promoting unitary local government in areas that still have districts and counties.

In the original version of the paving Bill – the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill – the Government proposed that the Boundary Committee for England would produce one proposal for unitary local government and publish it before a referendum on regional assemblies. However, the referendum would only have one question – for or against a regional assembly – with no vote on the linked local government reorganisation proposal.

Our position was that there should be no link at all. We argued that any local government reorganisation should only come after a regional assembly was established - and then be organised by that newly elected body. Alan Beith and others backed Matthew Green and I as we tried to get ministers to understand that the areas facing reorganisations could effectively have those reorganisations foisted upon them, as the majorities who already live under unitary government – mainly in the big cities – could outvote them, via the regional question. This would be neither popular nor democratic. We tabled amendments to “de-couple” local government reorganisation from the regional referendum entirely. Ministers did not budge an inch.

Then the Bill went to the Lords. No Government majority. Superb Liberal Democrat opposition. And suddenly ministers were talking.

Yet after many more debates and meetings it was clear: Blair was not going to shift on unitary government, and

the Government would risk losing the Bill or might push the Bill through using the Parliament Act, accepting no amendments.

What should we do? Risk losing the Bill, and thereby lose all prospect of regional devolution for a generation? Risk the Government getting the Bill anyway, via the protracted process of the Parliament Act, but without a single favourable amendment?

Neither option was palatable. So we opted to continue to engage - and to negotiate the best deal possible within the parameters Number 10 was insisting upon.

And we decided to negotiate only after consultation with many of our local government leaders. While there were a few mixed messages, the clearest signal came, unanimously, from the Liberal Democrat Local Government Association executive, once we had got a deal: go for it!

The deal had several parts, including the two concessions relating to powers described above. Yet on the most controversial question of local government reorganisation the deal was unique.

First, the Government agreed to our proposal for a second question – something they had adamantly opposed previously. Thus, where local government reorganisation is proposed, only those affected will get to vote on it.

Second, voters will get a real choice. Rather than a “take it or leave it” option for unitary government, the Boundary Committee for England will have to produce at least two options to put before the voters. Coupled with the guidance to the committee, which sets no minimum size for a unitary authority, options could range from unitaries based on existing districts, to unitaries based on existing counties.

Never before have local people been given the chance to vote on the structure of their local government – let alone been given a choice. Whitehall bureaucrats were said to be twitching at this outbreak of democracy.

There are some who say these local government referendums may prove difficult. Yet that assumes that people are deeply attached to their local council, which has not always been my experience. If we are the party that has provided a real choice over how their council should be organised – in the teeth of opposition from both Labour and the Tories – isn’t that a positive message? So it will be interesting to see which way our regional parties jump on the forthcoming referendums in the three northern regions.

Do they campaign against the regional government on offer, because the present powers are too limited or perhaps because they don’t like the local government reorganisation the voters might choose?

Or do they campaign positively for regionalism – not just in the referendums, but now to persuade Government to devolve more, and afterwards, to get even more devolution later? The next three months will provide the answers

WHAT WILL BE ON YOUR TELLY?

Labour's broadcasting reforms could lead to a foreign-owned ITV network and regional identities disappearing from view. Janice Turner asks whether this is what Liberals really want

The scrap in Parliament over the Communications Bill could be summed up as between those who see broadcasting as just another business and those who believe it's a lot more than that.

Those responsible for drafting the Bill appeared to have taken reality as Channel 3's biggest owners would like to see it, and drafted the provisions to fit. Consequently, the draft Bill has got a mauling in the Lords before returning to the House of Commons, where it is now concluding its passage through parliament. The Bill raises many concerns, but two are paramount: ownership, and programme-making. These are crucial issues because of the role television plays in our society. People absorb what they see on the box and it informs their view of their world. It is a mechanism that can allow different sectors of society to have their voices heard, to have their culture seen and shared.

And this is not a niche view. The US government is a keen believer and is anxious to use all weapons at its disposal to export to the world American culture and beliefs, via its media and entertainment corporations, making more profits for the US in the process.

So the British government is playing a very dangerous game with its bill in proposing removing restrictions on non-EU ownership of ITV and Channel 5.

Unamended, it would result in handing ownership of significant parts of British broadcasting to global, especially American, corporate interests. There would be no significant economic benefit and a clear cultural loss - with corporate priorities determined outside the UK and a much greater pressure to import American programming.

And this is even more odd given that the US government has no plans to do a quid pro quo and amend its own regulations governing ownership of US media companies.

There is some speculation that the British government put this in with a bigger game in mind - the GATS negotiations.

The General Agreement on Trade in Services is an international treaty governing not only who can sell what to whom, but also the way global companies run their businesses around the world. Earlier this year all countries in the World Trade Organisation, which governs GATS, submitted "requests" for liberalisation in other countries' trading rules, and they all have until 2005 to finish their horse trading in which countries will be encouraged to

drop trade barriers, privatise public services and withdraw state subsidies.

US trade negotiators have, surprise surprise, requested that Europe should allow free access to the film, cinema, video, TV, radio and record industries, that quotas for the broadcast of local TV programming should be scrapped, and that "discriminatory subsidies" like the BBC licence fee, should be abandoned. If granted, these requests would turn the European, including British, cultural industries on their heads and probably kill some of them off completely.

We know that Europe will be making no requests of other WTO members regarding the audiovisual sector, in order to fend off these demands. However, that won't stop deals being cut where concessions could be made in, for example, the audiovisual sector, to win trade advantages in other industries.

Was this the reason for this dangerous measure in the Communications bill? We don't know. Others speculate that it was a sop to Rupert Murdoch whose lack of opposition, Labour believes, helped them into office. Surely not!

And, since there are some in the Liberal Democrats who argue against cross media ownership controls, there must be others in the Labour Party who think the same.

But David Puttnam's proposed plurality test, which bidders for ITV or Channel 5 may face, is helpful. The proposal, accepted by the government, offers the culture secretary the power to refer takeover bids to the new regulator Ofcom to test the public interest and plurality of proposed media mergers. Senior government officials are insisting that this would not hamper the principle of allowing US media groups to bid for ITV or enabling Rupert Murdoch to seek control of Channel 5. But Lord Puttnam says the test would include defined limits on cross media ownership, including what share of the public voice it controls.

Exacerbating the ownership threat is the government's proposed light touch approach to content regulation and watering down of rules on regional programme production.

As the Government's earlier White Paper acknowledged, regional programme production has long been the strong and distinctive characteristic of ITV; strong regional production centres bring both economic and cultural benefits to regional economies, and they can

help address geographical imbalances within the national television production industry.

The regional production and programming quotas will remain, and the original production quota will apply to all public service broadcasters. However, the original draft bill had no specific minimum level for the regional production and programming quotas but merely a level which is 'appropriate', 'suitable' or 'sufficient' in the view of the proposed new regulator, Ofcom.

Film and broadcasting union Bectu argued that these quota requirements should be strengthened by specific percentage proportions which either match or exceed current levels; and/or by an additional requirement that each quota should be set at a level which is 'substantial and significant'. After much lobbying, the government has now agreed to include the word 'significant'.

Liberals should view regional programme production as a key requirement of public service broadcasting. Many people forget that the companies owning the ITV regional franchises were awarded them on behalf of the public - they weren't handed them on a plate to do anything they wanted with.

Regional programme making used to be seen as the jewel in ITV's crown. Now, following the concentration of ownership in the ITV network, it is seen by some executives merely as wasteful duplication of resources.

The statistics speak for themselves: four franchises made no programmes at all for the network in 2000 - Border, WestCountry, Channel and Grampian. Network production at Tyne Tees has suffered a disastrous collapse of 94 per cent from 92 hours in 1994 to just six hours (in a year) in 2000; next door in Yorkshire its 204 hours' production in 1994 had shrunk by more than a quarter to 156 in 2000.

Of extreme concern to those in Scotland, however, will be the news that Scottish TV's network output dropped from 225 hours in 1994 down to 136 in 2000. And that was the sum total of Scotland's contribution to ITV's UK-wide programming: just 7 per cent.

London and Manchester, however, rose over the same period from 964 hours to 1,157. Production there now represents more than 60 per cent of all Channel 3 network production.

Anglia in the only other franchise to have risen substantially: up from 151 hours in 1994 to 298 in 2000, in large part due to just one show: the daily daytime Trisha.

This disappearing production probably got worse last year, but the ITC, the outgoing regulator, has refused to supply the data.

The economic result of this is the closure of programme-making studios and the loss of jobs. But more than that, without programme making studios a region will be that much less visible to the rest of Britain. Its way of life, the regional accent, will be that much less noticeable. And anyone with an agenda of decentralisation will find it that much more difficult to achieve. Perhaps the outcry against this has been more muted because news studios (very small, without the capacity to make non-news programmes) have been carefully preserved so politicians maintain their outlet to their local electorate.

Leaving regulation of regional production to the regulator has already proved to be a disaster. Over the past few years the general pattern has been for the regulator to lean towards the commercial interests of the broadcasting companies rather than the cultural or even economic interests of the local population. The

programme-making studio in Liverpool was a case in point.

Granada had a big programme making studio at the Albert Dock where it made Good Morning with Richard and Judy. The company moved the programme to London and then proposed using the studio to make programmes for a shopping channel - nothing to do with its ITV franchise, in case you wondered.

The ITC ruled that this was acceptable because at least programmes were still being made in Liverpool. It wasn't long, however, before they stopped making these programmes and since the studio was no longer anything to do with ITV, it simply closed down. No terrestrial broadcaster now has its own programme-making studio in Liverpool, or in many other British cities.

In this context Liberals should be concerned, more than ever before, to secure:

- a broad range of regionally-originated programming of high quality from each licence-holder and with a suitable proportion in peak time;
- the use of the full range of regionally-based staff, freelancers and production facilities;
- a guaranteed minimum contribution to the network from each licence-holder in proportion to their size.

The threat not just to our regional economies but to our culture is real: it is cheaper to recycle a programme you made earlier than to make new original programming, so ownership by a US multinational will, like it or not, result in real pressures to allow greater imported programmes at the expense of first-run British productions.

Finally, there is a question mark over the Government's commitment to maintaining the role of public service broadcasting in the light of its avowedly light-touch approach and in particular with the proposed self regulation for the qualitative public service broadcasting regulations.

High quality and a broad range of programmes can be adequately delivered and monitored through self-regulation by the broadcasters. It is simply not sufficient for Ofcom to investigate retrospectively whether broadcasters have fulfilled their annual commitments in this respect.

Rather than self-regulation by the broadcasters, the new regulator should have a proactive and interventionist role in order to secure quality public service broadcasting standards. It will need, at an early stage, to demonstrate regulatory power in this area - especially in the context of proposed ownership deregulation.

Rather than dilute Ofcom's regulatory role in securing quality public service programming, the government should go in exactly the opposite direction.

This is a crucial piece of legislation, and the fallout from it will affect us all.

OPPORTUNITY IS NOT ENOUGH

It's time to re-open the debate on positive discrimination in candidate selection, says Ros Scott, Liberal Democrat transport spokesperson in the House of Lords

Liberal Democrats are often accused of special pleading. We want proportional representation, they say, because we would benefit from it at the expense of other parties; and they go on to say that we want devolution because we have more of a presence in local government than we are ever likely to get at national level.

But within the party also, the accusation of special pleading is thrown around between specified organisations and conference claques, and the issue which has attracted more of this criticism than any other has been that of women shortlists or other 'positive discrimination'.

This debate appears at Conference with predictable regularity to the extent that opinions on this have begun to harden and narrow; in a way that is rather un-Lib Dem.

So, before you turn the page with a snort, I will start by making it clear that I, the least of any woman I know, have been held back in my political career by being a woman, with the exception that I got a raw deal from the one experiment which the party made for positive discrimination. So there.

A certain amount of good luck has played its part; it hasn't hurt to be dealing with transport matters, for instance. As anyone who has dealt with transport will know, it is a very male industry; so male that being a woman gives a boost to one's profile with very little effort at all.

At a transport policy conference there will be one or two women amongst a sea of 200 charcoal suits and it is not difficult to stand out. While this can lead to a 'novelty value' profile; if you are on top of your brief it is not difficult to make a decent impact - and you will be asked to speak. And because most forums have an element that connects with what are perceived as *women's issues* (the family, the elderly, even the environment) your presence is, to a degree, guaranteed.

But for women to reach the stage where they can begin to make an impact on policy, they need to have an introduction to politics in the first place. And that introduction is best from another woman.

There is no mystical sisterly bond in all this; it is just that most women look at politics and, rightly, see an outwardly male arena and think to themselves 'that's not the sort of thing I could do'.

It is not helped by the very public school atmosphere which still persists in the Commons. Having prominent women politicians making front bench statements shows other women, who might consider an entry into politics,

not only that it can be done, but that it is done, regularly.

There is a problem here for the Lib Dems. We don't have many women in politics. In fact we are scandalously short of women for a party that makes social equality a priority.

Worse, the profile of women within the Liberals and Lib Dems has, for a long time, relied on political platforms that are unelected. I greatly enjoy my work, and I wouldn't be doing it if I didn't believe that I can make a difference in the Lords. But acknowledgement must be made that for many years the profile of women in the party has been, since the days of Violet Bonham-Carter and through to Nancy Seear and Inga-Stina Robson, far too little concerned with the Commons. When we have women political heavyweights in the Lords, like Shirley Williams, it is because we have inherited them from Labour via the SDP.

Likewise, the party's profile for the ethnic minorities - for whom we are fast becoming a real alternative to the big two - relies upon Navnit Dholakia. He is a worthy standard bearer; but he is a member of an unelected house. For a party like ours, which complains regularly of the over use of political patronage as a mechanism of government, it is a bitter irony.

As no Liberal Democrat conference has ever asserted that the representation of women, or ethnic minorities, within the parliamentary party is adequate, the party is, I believe, forced to consider why this is and more importantly, to remedy the matter. In seeing how we got here, we must first look at the sort of decisions the party has made and the processes that it has used to make them.

During my time in the party, the argument about representation of women (and ethnic groups and gays and lesbians) has divided into two streams of thought. The first is to do with procedures and the second is to do with outcomes.

The 'procedures' stream is, generally, unhappy with the concept of SAOs and what they represent. They are unhappy with over-centralisation (which is a good instinct to have, and one that is shared throughout the party, but which is not the end of the debate) and they are unhappy about any form of 'affirmative action' no matter what the outcome.

They maintain that they would generally like to see more women in the party, but they wish to preserve, unfettered, their ability to choose, as their PPC, either 'somebody local', or 'a nice young barrister from London' (male).

Many of them (sadly, all too many women) wish to preserve the right not to elect a woman - any woman. I don't believe this to be overt prejudice; it's just that in many constituencies the membership can only really imagine a man doing the job. In others, they once tried a female candidate and they didn't win so that's that.

If we are to progress as a truly representative party, we should stop obsessing ourselves with the purity of our procedures and start taking a long hard look at the outcomes. These are, as the party as a whole agrees, not satisfactory.

These points, raised at conference, are guaranteed to produce, in rapid succession a stream of speakers all spitting out the same venomous word with force. It is a word that is overused in this context: 'illiberal'.

Quite why the use of selected all-woman short lists - for instance - is 'illiberal' I do not know.

As far as I am aware, we have never believed in the primacy of absolute personal liberty over tolerance or equity. I could understand that if the use of all women shortlists were adopted across the board - so that only women could stand for parliament - then the use of these might be illiberal.

Likewise, it would be if use of these lists were proposed across the majority of constituencies, or even a substantial minority.

But to propose them for only some target seats seems far from illiberal, not least because our current approach - let's be well disposed to women and the ethnic minorities to be sure, but let's not take any concrete steps to ensure their access to political office - is, in its outcome, intolerant and oppressive.

Let's be clear: Michael Howard is illiberal, David Blunkett is illiberal, Melanie Phillips (and the entire world-view of the *Daily Mail*) is illiberal, the horrific establishment at Guantanamo bay is illiberal. Institutionalising the chance of women and the ethnic minorities to having a proportionate role in our party and the country's future is not illiberal; although the way in which this word is repeated mantra-like at conference when this debate arises does give rise, I confess, to some of my more illiberal flights of fancy.

And I should know, better than most, the hard realities of policy implementation to ensure breadth of access.

As a candidate for the East of England in the 1999 European elections, I was subject to the zipping procedure for the selection of candidates and, the mechanisms of zipping being what they were, I knew from the outset that the best I could achieve was second place on the list regardless of what the membership of the East of England thought. So, my very able friend Andrew Duff went to Brussels and I did not.

I can't pretend to feeling other than personally hard done by at the time. But I acknowledged the essential fairness of the procedure then, as I do now, and more importantly, I acknowledge the fairness of the outcome. Because those elections remain unique within the history of the party as the only elections at which we achieved a fair balance of men to women in terms of those elected.

The Lib Dems are in grave danger of falling behind the Tories here and our general lack of representation in elected office mocks our rhetoric of opportunity for all.

The hard truth is that if opportunity remains as opportunity and nothing more then we will have failed as Liberals and as Democrats. The harder truth is that we have not been able to rely on the political instincts of our party members to voluntarily move us towards a fairer Britain.

Let's hear no more of positive discrimination as being 'illiberal'. Let's acknowledge our failure to deliver. In short, let's start behaving like a party ready for government.

ALL OR NOTHING

The European Union constitution makes it impossible to fight the next European elections on the Liberal democrats' usual 'yes but' ticket, says Andrew Duff

After eighteen months solid work, the European Convention closed its doors for the last time on 12 July. Along with the huge majority of its members, I signed the draft constitution, shook hands with our president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, and went off to lunch.

The convention was a radical departure from the way things are normally done in Europe. It was large, pluralistic and open, combining in its working methods the best of both parliamentary and diplomatic styles. By involving the European Parliament in constitutional reform it broke a taboo. MEPs played a key role at each of Giscard's three phases of the convention, 'listening', 'analysis' and 'drafting'. By involving national parliamentarians, the convention helped to recruit a new generation of MPs to a better understanding of and identification with European unity. By involving representatives of candidate states, the convention proved to be first-class training ground for the newcomers into the wiles and wherewithal of EU politics. By forcing government ministers to say more or less the same thing in Brussels as they said at home, and by obliging them to justify their positions in public, the convention was refreshingly subversive. The consensus formed at the end of the life of the convention was large, fresh and genuine. Nobody left triumphant. All had compromised. Most had refined if not realigned their positions.

For radical reformers, the convention was an historic success. The union's values and objectives, clearly set out, are liberal, democratic and progressive. The constitution, which can be found in full at <http://european-convention.eu.int> has clarified who does what in Europe. It strengthens the capacity of the union to act effectively at home and abroad. It establishes a single legal personality for the EU, and creates a new post of foreign minister combining the current powers of commissioner Chris Patten and Javier Solana, high representative of the council. The minister will be a vice-president of the commission, chair the Foreign Affairs Council and manage a single foreign affairs administration. This key reform should allow Europe to speak with more unity and purpose in world affairs.

European citizenship takes a leap forward, protected by the Charter of Fundamental Rights which, despite fierce British opposition, will be installed at the heart of the constitution and be binding.

The untidy jumble of instruments and decision-making procedures has been streamlined. There is for the first time a proper hierarchy of legislative and executive acts, with a new class of secondary law delegated to the commission, subject to scrutiny and callback by the two chambers of the legislature, the parliament and council. The huge pile of former treaties and protocols is cut down by about two-thirds.

The council will take many more decisions by qualified majority voting, and the parliament's powers both of legislative co-decision and of assent over international trade agreements has been multiplied. Tortuous arithmetic for establishing qualified majority voting has been changed to the simple formula of half the member states representing three-fifths of the population.

The commission's prerogatives to initiate draft law have been preserved, and it has won a new power to propose a multi-annual work programme to be decided at the strategic level by the European Council. The clumsy 'third pillar' of Maastricht in justice and home affairs has been quietly demolished. Normal institutional procedures, including the supervision of the Court of Justice, will now apply in this area.

Expect more differentiation in the enlarged union. The constitution makes it easier for a core group of member states to go forward faster and farther in any given policy area.

The eurogroup is ready and waiting to deepen economic integration between themselves. In defence, France and Germany appear to want to lead a number of close partners towards the creation of truly integrated European armed forces. These are good ideas.

Many bad ideas were suppressed by the convention. The British effort to re-create a third legislative chamber made up of national MPs was roundly defeated, as was Giscard's own plan for a People's Congress.

The UK government's plan for a super-president of the European Council who would supervise the work of the council and the commission has been watered down to such an extent that one should not wait for a rush of job applications.

Of course, not everything in the constitution is perfect. Some good-in-principle decisions - notably, the separation of legislative from executive functions - were not carried through to their logical conclusion with rigour. While almost everyone spoke in favour of more qualified majority voting in the council, many member states brought their own list of exceptions and derogations. Had it not been for the UK, there would have been more qualified majority voting in foreign policy, in fiscal policy where administrative cooperation, tax fraud and tax evasion are concerned, and in social policy for the protection of the rights of sacked workers.

The decision to move to qualified majority voting over the multi-annual financial framework was postponed, at the insistence of the Spanish, for another 10 years. (Watch out, therefore, for a big increase in the size of the EU budget.) The role of the court is extended to enhance the rights of individuals to challenge the legality of regulatory acts that directly affect them, but the court is still circumscribed in foreign, security and defence policy.

Little progress was made on the future revision and entry into force procedures. The union therefore remains effectively trapped in the dual lock imposed by Article 48 of the Treaty on European Union, namely, unanimity at the Intergovernmental Conference followed by national ratification in all 25 member states.

It was my privilege to lead the group of representatives from the European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party. We were about 30 strong, drawn mainly from national parliaments, but including representatives of four prime ministers. The convention certainly succeeded in strengthening the ties that bind together our transnational political party. A star in the Liberal caucus was Robert MacLennan, who brought legal and political weight to our proceedings, quickened by his vast contempt for the Labour government.

Indeed, the UK government, already marginalised because it invaded Iraq, made few new friends in the convention. Its ministers, parliamentarians and officials at the convention appeared leaderless and were not trusted. Nobody cared more for his country than Peter Hain. His catechism of 'red lines' drove people to the bar. The British Tories, meanwhile, joined with some Moscow trained anti-Europeans to oppose the consensus.

The performance of the British establishment at the convention has given the constitution an unpropitious reception in Britain. Even the pro-European press in the UK seems uncertain about its significance. The BBC has not climbed out of its Westminster dugout. The Economist trashed it. The Europhobic press has gone bananas: the Daily Mail declares the constitution to be a 'blueprint for tyranny'. This is anti-democratic and xenophobic stuff. It certainly has an effect. One of my constituents - not, thank god, a Liberal Democrat - appears to be trying to sue me for treason.

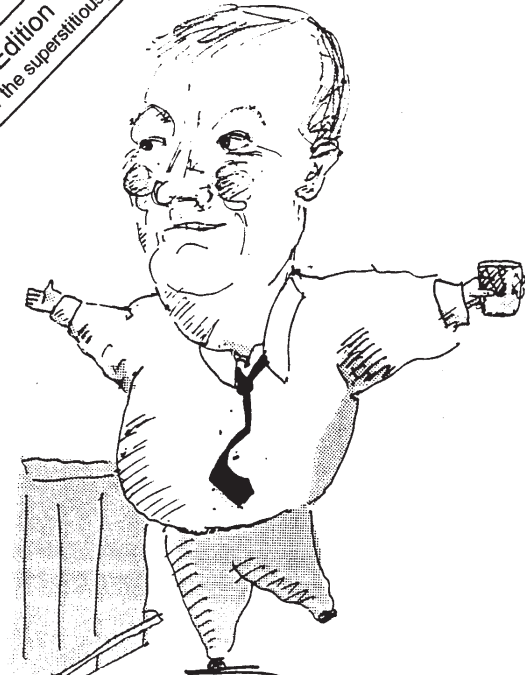
The outcome of the convention will certainly be a big issue in next year's campaign for the European Parliament. Many, both pro and anti-constitution, want a referendum to be held at the same time as the elections, as will indeed be the case in several countries. The referendum argument is superficially attractive, especially when set against Mr Blair's dismal cop-out on the euro. But beware. If a British referendum were to fail to endorse the new constitution, the reform package would be blocked not just for Britain but for all Europe.

My own view about a referendum is therefore guarded. Were the government to accept that the UK does not have a moral or political right to block the constitutional progress for the rest of Europe, a referendum could be feasible. But the risks are very great. If our partners chose to ratify the constitution, Britain would have no option, in the event of a 'no' vote, but to seek a second-class membership of a union that had been refounded on a constitutional, federal basis. Not an attractive prospect. No euro, no constitution, no say in the great decisions which will shape our continent in the twenty-first century.

For the UK Liberal Democrats the convention poses a big challenge. It will not now be possible to fight next year's elections to the European Parliament on the tired refrain of 'yes, but' to Europe. It is all or nothing.

Andrew Duff led the European Liberal Democrat group at the Convention and was Vice-President of the European Parliament's Convention delegation.
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WELL OUT OF IT

Iain Sharpe argues that the end of the obsession with relations with Labour has opened up the space for Liberal Democrats to think for themselves about what they want to achieve

In a recent interview in *Liberal Democrat News*, Lord Steel of Aikwood lamented Jim Callaghan's failure to call a general election in the autumn of 1978. According to Steel, such an election might have led to a Lib-Lab coalition from which 'everyone would have benefited' with the happy result that there would have been no Thatcher government.

I can appreciate that Lord Steel might see that moment in 1978 as having been his best chance for achieving political office. However, the fact that he thinks the country might have benefited from the continuation of Callaghan in office shows a lack of political judgement that helps to explain the failure of the Liberal Party and the Alliance during his leadership.

The 1974-79 Labour administration was probably Britain's worst post-war government, not least because its failures acted as midwife to Thatcherism.

It marked Labour's final failure to tackle the dominant political question of the time - the appalling state of Britain's industrial relations. The proliferation of industrial disputes and the large number of days lost due to strikes was a national embarrassment - the 'British disease'.

Restrictive practices in the workplace were rife, with the result that British industry failed to modernise or adapt to new technology at the same pace as its economic rivals.

In 1969, Labour had had its best chance to improve industrial relations. Surprisingly, it was the left winger Barbara Castle, with her *In place of strife* white paper, who was prepared to tackle the trade unions: proposing measures such as compulsory strike ballots and 'cooling off periods' before strike action could be taken.

It was the supposed moderate Callaghan who led the opposition in cabinet to Castle's proposals, thus winning favour with the union bosses and positioning himself advantageously for the leadership succession. Wilson and Castle were forced to back down, and Labour lost an opportunity to show that it could bring about industrial peace.

Labour then opposed tooth and nail the Conservatives' 1971 Industrial Relations Act, which actually contained many of the same provisions as *In place of strife* and in 1974 found itself the unexpected beneficiary of Edward

Heath's battle with the miners.

Scarred by the experience of 1969, Wilson was in no mood to take on the unions again, passing legislation that gave them further legal immunities, including the closed shop, as well as granting unsustainable inflationary pay increases in the public sector.

Callaghan reaped the dividends of his 1969 manoeuvring by succeeding Wilson as prime minister, but the unions were no

kinder to him, eventually destroying what little credibility Labour had left during the 1978-79 winter of discontent. Labour having shown itself all but unfit to govern, the country turned to Mrs Thatcher.

However much we may regret the advent of the Conservative government in 1979, it is hard to regret the passing of the Callaghan administration. Neither idealistic nor competent, its appalling track record so discredited the centre left, that the Conservatives were even able to win a general election in 1992 by evoking memories of 1978-79.



"Froggally, I don't believe in ghosts"

Lord Steel defends the Lib-Lab pact on the grounds that it showed two parties could work together, but inter-party co-operation is not an end in itself - you have to be clear what you want to achieve from it. There is no reason to suppose that the participation of the Liberals in a coalition with Labour in 1978 would have prevented the winter of discontent or reconciled the unions to technological change in a way that avoided the rather more brutal methods of the subsequent Tory government.

The pact and the record of the Labour government also did damage in undermining the claim of the Liberals and the SDP to represent a new political force in the 1980s.

With Labour tearing itself to pieces, there was a real opportunity for a non-socialist, but progressive, political force to offer a real alternative to Thatcherism. However, both parties in the Alliance were tainted with responsibility for the mess Labour had left behind in 1979.

Shirley Williams, Bill Rodgers and David Owen had all been prominent members of the Callaghan administration. Steel was also complicit for having propped up the Labour government after it had outlived any possible usefulness.

Had the Liberals stayed aloof from Labour in 1977, had Williams, Rodgers and Owen distanced themselves much earlier from the Callaghan administration, perhaps the Alliance would have had more credibility with those who reluctantly voted Conservative during the 1980s because there seemed to be no alternative.

I well remember canvassing people in the 1987 general election, who had voted Liberal in the past, but who would not do so again because of the pact. Such people were not natural Conservatives, but saw the Alliance not as something new, but rather as comprising the very people who had got the country into a mess in the first place.

David Steel's strategy of brotherhood of moderates working together across party boundaries did not succeed because co-operation was treated as an end in itself. The Conservatives dominated politics in the 1980s because they set out clear goals that the public could understand, rather than the wishy-washy recycling of failed policies from the 1970s on offer from the Alliance.

It has taken rather a long time, but only recently have the Liberal Democrats begun to escape from the obsession with relations with other parties and co-operation for its own sake.

The uneasy relationship between the two Alliance parties, followed by the prolonged obsession with Lib-Lab relations in the 1990s, stopped Liberals from thinking about and clearly articulating their own political goals. In one sense, some of the lessons of the 1970s were learned by the time of the next Labour government. While Paddy Ashdown's schmoozing with Blair at times threatened to destroy the Liberal Democrats' distinctive identity, at least the period of 'constructive opposition' from 1997-99 was based on advancing Liberal Democrat goals of constitutional reform.

One benefit of the cooling of relations between the Liberal Democrats and Labour over the last few years has been that it has given space for us to think for ourselves.

Whatever you think of Liberal Future or the Beveridge Group, at least they are raising issues about what the Liberal Democrats should stand for, what policies we should support and how we should apply our principles to the issues of the day. Debate within the party is no longer about how far we should cuddle up to other parties, but about our own goals and values. Paradoxically, by being free to think for ourselves, there is a better chance that if the prospect does arise of participating in government with another party, we will be better placed to do so through having a clearer idea of what we want to achieve through such co-operation.



"Nobody believes in long engagements any more."

HEADY INSPIRATION

Dear Liberator,

Paul Nettleton's article My Generation (Liberator 288) poses some interesting and important questions. The most fundamental of these is: have those of us who were around in youth politics 25 years ago actually made a difference to the society in which we live?

Although the evidence of those now in Government positions may be that they have sold out their core beliefs and values, I believe that, for many of us involved in liberal politics at the time, the answer to the question is a resounding 'yes'.

There is much evidence about that for those of us who chose to pursue a route into local government. There have been many opportunities to shape and influence policy in a more progressive direction - and those opportunities have, for the most part, been seized.

We may not be running the country, but many of us are indeed very much involved in running some of our leading local authorities. And I don't just mean by being better managers than 'the other lot', but by being serious on such issues as decentralisation, devolution and empowerment - all good, clean, liberal values.

The daily grind of local politics may be an acquired taste, but for those of us with the bit between our teeth (and, perhaps more importantly, control of the council) there really is no good reason why we can't make serious changes to the established way of doing things.

Admittedly, it helps a lot if you have a clear vision of where you want to go (hence our "cleaner, greener, safer, stronger" agenda in Stockport), but just as important is a determination to see it through and persuade those (sometimes) reluctant officers that, just because we've always done things the same way, doesn't mean that's the only way.

Things really can change for the better, if there's a will and a majority.

Many Liberal Democrat councils are now run (or led) by people who were actively involved in the Young Liberal Movement in the late 70s early 80s - and at risk of seeming to have a vested interest in the analysis - I believe there is much evidence of good practice and positive liberal influence.

LETTERS

Whether it's devolving power to local area committees in order to bring decision making closer to people, or allowing full speaking rights (for and against!) on planning applications, or even the decision to introduce a public question time at full council - of one thing you can be sure: the reactionaries and forces of darkness in both Labour and Conservative parties will always be united in their opposition - at least if our experience in Stockport is anything to go by.

These measure, whilst not exactly earth-shattering by themselves, are just a few examples of the way we Liberal Democrats have been able to determine the political agenda at local level. Taken together with our pioneering work in recycling (introducing door-step collections of cans, bottles, paper, and now green waste), and our record of innovation in many other areas, I hope gives a flavour of what a good (it's official - from the Audit Commission's comprehensive performance assessment) Liberal Democrat council should feel like.

So while it may be true that politicians of a certain age and background have failed miserably at national government level, and I'm certainly not going to mount a defence of New Labour in this regard or any other, it would be wrong to assume we've all long since lost our radical credentials.

There are a great number of Liberal Democrat councillors all round the country working hard to make a difference, and many of us owe our inspiration - at least in part - to those heady days when everything seemed possible. Even if we had to take a reality check somewhere along the journey, most of us still think our efforts are worthwhile.

I'm sure that when Paul Nettleton returns to Leicester he will rejoice in the knowledge that yet another Labour fiefdom has fallen, and that the Liberal Democrats - now the largest single party on Leicester

council - will have the opportunity of shaping the future there too.

Forget the metropolis and the disappointments of central government stranglehold for a few moments and enjoy the view, because gradually opening up in front of us is a whole new world of opportunity. It is up to Liberal Democrats everywhere to take up the challenge and prove progressive politics does have a future. We can make a difference!

Mark Hunter
Leader, Stockport Council

A PACT IS A PACT

Dear Liberator,

Joan Greene is right to argue that we must fight the BNP by emphasising the importance of community politics (Liberator 288).

But if BNP success has its roots in Burnley's weak democratic tradition as symbolised by the Tory-Liberal pact in the 1960s, then how does she square this by recommending parties stand down their candidates in particular wards?

Doesn't this just continue the absence of democratic choice which we want to end?

Guy Burton
Tower Hamlets

RED ALL OVER

Dear Liberator,

In Citizen Kane, Bernard Salmon has missed the point (Liberator 288). It is not only the sociological composition of the candidates' list that has resulted in the election of Socialist Party candidates to the Scottish Parliament, policies have also played a part.

The support for the far left in Scotland is nothing new, there has been a tradition of Red Clydesiders dating back to the First World War and the Fife coalfield was represented by the Communist MP Willie Gallagher for a considerable period of

time. Proportional representation has enabled the far left to be fairly represented.

The failure to select from a broad enough background is also nothing new for Scottish Liberals. In the nineteenth century, the Lanarkshire Liberals refused to select the miner's agent Kier Hardie in a by-election, unlike their English counterparts who had begun to start adopting miners' candidates in some coalfield areas, and the miners' support for the Liberal Party in England was to continue for some time after the formation of the Labour Representation Committee. Hardie's failure to gain the nomination was to have historical consequences for the Liberal Party.

One of the reasons for the SSP's success is that with the so-called new non-confrontational politics of the coalition, radical alternatives are not being provided by mainstream parties.

To give one example, when the EC demanded that the subsidised ferry services of publicly owned Caledonian Macbrayne, which provide a vital lifeline to island communities, be tendered, the executive didn't attempt to seek a derogation but complied.

Fortunately they survived but it is an example of why the voters feel powerless. Whilst a career structure has been established for professional politicians, the new breed of salaried politicians seems averse to accepting direct responsibility for running services. The politicians are becoming indistinguishable from civil servant like the pigs and humans in *Animal Farm*. No wonder people are voting for alternatives.

Your editorial quotes Paddy Ashdown as warning that the excluded would turn to the extreme right if they were abandoned. There is some consolation in the Scottish result in that where a radical alternative was provided, the far right didn't profit.

**Andrew Hudson
Leyton**



KILLS FROM A MOCKING BIRD Stewart Rayment looks at the work of political cartoonist Chris Radley

'A Short History of Political Virginity' was the title given by Chris Radley to his exhibition of his cartoons from *The Social Democrat* newspaper, which was held at Gallery 33 in Swan Street, Bermondsey, early in July. Not that there were many political virgins there, then, or at the time when he joined the Social Democrats.

Many of course, did come to the SDP from outside of politics, or at least party politics, and many continue their course outside of party politics today judging from conversations half heard. But one thing that the SDP did attract was professionals, and Chris Radley, as a cartoonist, if political virgin, was amongst those. His work appeared in *The Social Democrat* throughout the life of the (mainstream) party, and he has more recently aided the Liberal Democrats in Islington.

A number of things are clear from the collection. Val Taylor, editor of *The Social Democrat*, did not interfere with Radley's work, which was just as capable of pointing the finger at his party's leadership as any other. A fortnightly cartoon can be a creative nightmare, so Radley's pen captured the wider political arena, as well as that of the SDP and the Alliance. Steel and Owen, forever 'bride and groom'... it is a shame that his cartoon was not heeded by the doctor - though I confess to being amongst those with the twisted shotgun barrels in the pews. Even then, I'd have found Owen no more problematic than Steel had been as a leader. At least Radicals would have known where they stood, which proved not to be the case with Ashdown. A break-through at Epping might have spared us the current bunch of war-mongering liars who pass for a government.

Radley has a strong Scargill, Lawson was good, but I found his Thatcher perhaps too gentle, and Benn on the whimsical side to my mind. Few Liberals probably saw these works first hand, but the June issue of the *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* reprints some 47 of them, and enquiries can be made to Gallery 33 if you'd like one to grace your walls.

Gallery 33, 33 Swan Street, London SE1 1DF. Tel: 020 7407 8668, Fax: 020 7407 8998 email: marvasol@btconnect.com

Journal of Liberal Democrat History can be obtained from the Liberal Democrat History Group, c/o 38 Salford Road, London SW2 4BQ. email: subs@liberalhistory.org.uk

Letters to the Celestial Serbs

by Gojko Beric
Bosnian Institute 2003

The allusion in the title refers to the battle of Kosovo Field in 1389, the myths around which were responsible in part for serving as justifications for the wave of bloodletting set off 600 years later in Yugoslavia.

A dying Serbian prince was offered the choice between a terrestrial and celestial kingdom and chose the latter, according to traditional belief, since when 'celestial people' became a disparaging term for nationalist Serbs.

The author is a Serb, though for most of his life he did not think of himself like this. He was a Bosnian, from multiethnic Sarajevo, who thought of himself as Yugoslav and lived for many years in Croatian Dubrovnik or Slovene Ljubljana without anyone there caring whether he was a Serb or not.

His book comprises short chapters, as the title suggests all only the length of letters, dealing with the war and its consequences. Early on, he makes his position unambiguous:

"I hated Karadzic and the Serb fascist rabble more than my Bosniak and Croat neighbours could ever imagine, much more than they themselves hated them."

Beric saw out the siege in Sarajevo and, while unsparing about war crimes perpetrated by Bosniaks and Croats, has absolutely no doubt not only that Serb nationalists started the war but also that they bear by far the largest share of responsibility for atrocities.

REVIEWS

The style of the book means that it does not offer a continuous narrative nor much in the way of background, which is not a criticism but an observation since it is based on the style of newspaper columns.

But this approach of plunging straight in may leave non-specialists rather adrift: I found myself losing track of who was who and which faction was which at times.

That aside, Beric offers as powerful a denunciation of nationalism as one could hope to find.

Mark Smulian

The Best Democracy Money Can Buy by Greg Palast Robinson. 2003 £7.99

The fact that books like this don't bring down governments underlines the claims journalists like Palast make. They have become so controlled by legalised corporate bribery that exposing it doesn't threaten them.

I picked this book up several times before buying it. Its style pushes

'tongue-in-cheek' to new face-stretching proportions. But, don't make the same mistake I initially did of thinking this was a humorous book first and the politics was an add-on. There is material in this book of profound substance.

The strategy of combining humour with radical liberal writing undoubtedly adds up to successful campaigning. Only two days ago, in a pub in Deal, a guy approached me and asked, "Are you that Lib Dem guy?" This proved more than that photos in Focus work. He wanted to tell me he'd never voted, but he'd just read *Stupid White Men* and that this had persuaded him to vote from now on, and he was probably going to vote Liberal Democrat.

Palast's book is a few gears up from Moore. While the humorous style is undoubtedly popular there is serious content here. On every two or three pages of this book is a serious claim about political corruption in the US or UK.

There are some claims where the evidence is flimsy. There are too many anonymous sources quoted. But in 400 pages he includes more than enough sound cases. Palast has followed the trails of money and paper that show that the darkest recesses are in the highest offices.

This is the most powerful prosecution I have come across of political parties (especially Labour) being owned by, very often, foreign business interests.

Palast claims that former Liberal Democrat turned Downing Street apparatchik Roger Liddle offered to help him set up meetings between clients and "anyone in Downing Street".

Blair, Brown, and Straw are successively taken apart by Palast who doesn't stop short of comparing them to gigolos. The sad fact is he presents a case that justifies it. Cash for influence and insider information is the name of Labour's game.



Chris Riddley

Something that concerns me is that Palast, and a lot of good people like him, haven't recognised the Liberal Democrats as a vehicle for the kind of change they want to see.

We could do a lot worse than campaign to sort out the corruption that is the untold story in British politics today. And on dealing with corruption Palast shows the UK is a dreadful failure compared to his native America.

Watergate was an amateurish burglary but it led to every White House operative grilled on television. Palast has made extended claims of corruption involving aides to the highest office holders in the UK but he has never been called to give testimony to any committee of Parliament - but nor has anyone ever dared sue him or the Guardian or BBC for publishing his claims.

I don't agree with all of Palast's attacks on trade liberalisation but he makes his key point well, and it should be regarded as the essential Liberal response to Thatcherism, that scrapping a state monopoly is no good if all you replace it with is a private monopoly with even less external scrutiny.

I also, although many Liberator readers will not agree with me, admire Palast's determination to recover the notion of patriotism for radical liberalism.

The current global economic and political situation is not what Palast's father fought for in 1939-45. If we are going to rally millions of our fellow citizens to the cause of cleaner politics owned by the people then Roosevelt's Four Freedoms and the memory of our fathers and grandfather's generation that suffered for those ideals, are not bad places to begin.

Books like this remind me why I am in politics. Perhaps becoming the party that will roll back corruption and corporate control of our lives will persuade the British public they might like to become involved, say, by voting).

It might just put Liberal government back on track. Why have we never had a comprehensive policy paper on dealing with these problems?

If Liberal Democrats continue to fail to set the electoral sky alight, researchers like Palast can refute any claim that we don't have incendiary material.

Anthony Hook



WHITE'S TREE FROG

Litoria caerulea

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 November 1916.

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



KALOULA PULCHRA

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

Jutland 1916, Death in the Grey Wastes by Nigel Steel & Peter Hart

Cassell 2003 £25.00

The battle of Jutland, indeed the whole naval theatre of the First World War, is eclipsed by the experience of the trenches. Yet, albeit by deterrent alone almost, the Andrew's role in the ultimate and inevitable defeat of Germany should not be understated. Blockade broke Germany, and neither submarine warfare nor Jutland succeeded in breaking that blockade.

Both of the authors work at the Imperial War Museum. Hart, in particular, works on oral history, and this contribution, both British and German, from diaries and the like, enriches the work. I believe my grandfather's words were 'Keep shovelling if you want to see you mother', for the record.

Steel & Hart conclude that despite greater losses in men and ships, the British won the battle of Jutland. The immediate post-battle propaganda of the Germans, claiming victory, was soon proved hollow. The authors say little of the political background to the battle, but one element occurred to me. Asquith's government was

bedevilled by jingoistic demands for battleships - 'We want eight and we won't wait' screamed the headlines I believe. British losses at Jutland can to some extent be accounted for by inadequate design of our battle cruisers, as opposed to their German counterparts. It was inevitable that Britain would maintain a superior fleet; perhaps if less haste had been employed in its construction it may have fared better?

Stewart Rayment

The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes, the missing years by Jamyang Norbu John Murray 1999 £16.99; paperback 2002 £9.99

Jamyang Norbu is an interesting, and controversial figure in Tibetan politics. He advocates a more pro-active resistance to the invaders from the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) than the Dalai Lama, for example.

Watch out George Bush... Tibet is another instance where your country's covert operations have stirred things up, but then withdrawn and not delivered (a bit like Iraq after Gulf War 1).

Norbu is a voice of Tibetan resistance to come. Cuddling up to the PRC, like Russia, under the guise of 'anti-terrorism', is only bolstering tyranny against the subject peoples of the last

imperialisms. Norbu believes that the internal contradictions of the PRC are tearing it apart, that its (cyclical) period of instability is upon us, and that Tibetans must seize the moment.

It hardly seems three years since I met Jamyang Norbu, but a chance to be following in the footsteps of the great detective at Poldhu Cove, Cornwall (Adventure of the Devil's Foot) brought his book to my hands. Norbu seeks to fill in the gap in Holmes' career, between his apparent death struggle with Prof. Moriarty and his reappearance two years later - you will recall an aside to Watson that he had been in Tibet. This is told through the manuscript of Huree Chunder Mookerjee, late of Kipling's Kim.

And a right ripping yarn it is, through which Norbu takes the opportunity to acquaint us with snippets of Tibetan history. Indeed wider details of the customs of Tibet and its southern neighbours come through our interlocutor, who is not of the Angrezi, and this is one of the charms of the book.

A worthy follower of both Conan Doyle, and Kipling.

Stewart Rayment

Bush's Brain: How Karl Rove made George W. Bush Presidential By James Moore and Wayne Slater John Wiley & Sons 2003 £18.50

"Rove is Nixonian in his cynicism and manipulation of patriotic themes. The irony is that, [George] W. [Bush], in many ways, is the anti-Nixon. Nixon was brilliant but self-destructive. W. is dull but, in Rove's hands, maniacally disciplined. It's like Rove is Nixon's heir. Cold-blooded. Ruthless. Paranoid.





But unlike Nixon, Rove has figured out how to mask it all behind Bush's smile."

So said a contemporary of Karl Rove, the man that authors James Moore and Wayne Slater – long time observers of the Texan political scene – claim is George Bush's key political strategist.

Leaving school in Salt Lake City, Rove first met the younger Bush while working for his father, the then Republican party chairman, in Washington during the early 1970s.

Rove set himself up as a political consultant in Texas, where during the 1980s and 1990s he transformed the party's electoral fortunes. But it is the way he is alleged to have done so by Moore and Slater that has attracted controversy to this book in Washington. They recount a series of 'dirty tricks' campaigns, which have seen Democrats smeared by Rove's surrogates in a variety of different ways.

In one case Rove is alleged to have spread information about a kickback scheme whereby state funds were funnelled into Democrat campaigning – the result of which saw the imprisonment of three officials. In another, Rove passed along details of a Democrat candidate's failure to graduate, which resulted in her eventual defeat.

But Rove is not against attacking his own side when necessary. John McCain's presidential aspirations came to a halt during the 2000 Republican primaries by a series of distortions, including McCain's supposed support for abortion, questions over his role in Vietnam and having fathered illegitimate children.

Moore and Slater note Rove's ability to keep his hands clean. They

highlight his impressive memory for facts and figures, but which becomes distinctly unclear and vague when challenged about his involvement in negative campaigning.

That lack of clarity spread further than just Rove. Much of the authors' claims regarding Rove's involvement in tearing down and destroying his political opponents are based on suggestion and assumption, which frustrates the reader.

But they argue that nothing happens without Rove's say-so. And yet if the recent crisis over Iraq showed with differences opening up between Donald Rumsfeld and Colin Powell, there is more than one centre of power in the Bush White House.

The book also offers only limited explanation of Rove as a personality. On his political development, the authors fail to explain in any great detail the motivations which drove a teenager in the late 1960s to not only choose to align himself with, but willingly embrace, the conservative cause.

Glimpses are offered of Rove – generally by enemies – as a driven, Democrat-loathing individual, who will stop at nothing to see his clients achieve victory. But what is not clear is the reason for this aggressive streak. Many involved in politics are obsessed like Rove. But what causes someone to win at all costs, regardless of the consequences and with little concern for those who may be ruined along the way?

It comes as no surprise that Moore and Slater are concerned at the influence Rove has over the president. The challenge though is that in the light of such allegations, we would expect Rove to answer the charges. And he did offer grudging co-operation with the authors. Yet this book never really pins Rove down. We would assume where Moore and Slater fail, politicians would demand full disclosure

of Rove's activities. But given the preponderance of Republicans now in Congress who owe their place to Karl Rove, the chances of that happening remain less than slight.

Guy Burton

An Alphabet in praise of Frogs and Toads by John Norris Wood Inky Parrot Press 2002 £68.00

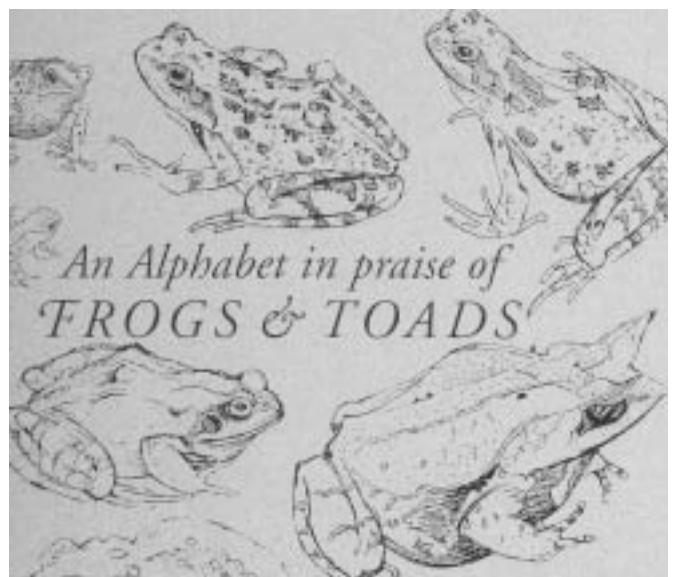
I'm not sure if John Norris Wood practices much these days; but his work has graced our postage stamps and reference books for the last four decades at least, disproving Bawden's advice that one might not make a living out of painting reptiles and amphibians.

Not only did Wood make a living thus, aided by his lecturing at the Royal College of Art, but also provided a livelihood for numerous creepy crawlies in his garden at Wadhurst.

'How does one get an alphabet of frogs and toads?' you might reasonably ask. By taking enormous liberties of course - a somewhat Churchillian cigar chomper, a self portrait (maybe two), which shows the sense of humour that flows from his pen, as well as anatomical correctness.

Certainly one of the most attractive books of last year, it is a limited edition of 360, available from Inky Parrot on 01993 881260 (The Foundry, Church Hanborough, Witney, OX29 8AB).

Stewart Rayment



Monday

I expect, like me, you watched Wimbledon on the moving television – Andy Williams must be so proud – but I never enjoy lawn tennis quite as much as our own game of Rutland tennis (sometimes called “unreal tennis”). It is something of a minority sport, as there is only one court in the world; by a happy chance it can be found here at the Hall. The playing area is bounded by the rear wall of the chapel, the Estate’s internal railway system, my orchid houses and a minor tributary of the Welland. Play is broadly as in lawn tennis, although the existence of features such as trap doors, a level crossing and high-voltage cables render it rather more challenging; at least rallying from the baseline is a less hazardous strategy now that the menagerie has been moved. I still play a decent game, though I have been known to resort to an electric Bath chair if the match enters a fifth set. Today I organise my guests into a doubles tournament and find myself playing with Phil Willis. I suggest to him that he occasionally vary things by climbing a spiral staircase and putting the ball into play from a balcony above our heads. He is against the idea because it would involve a two-tier service.

Tuesday

As I write these lines in the snug of the *Bonkers’ Arms* I have a foaming pint of Smithson & Greaves Northern Bitter at my elbow and a chaser of Auld Johnston close at hand. I have just returned from a week at young Kennedy’s Highland retreat, and in all honesty it is a relief to be home. The early morning runs! The carrot juice! The spur of the moment expeditions to climb Ben Bunny! If I had not been able to sneak away to my own Scottish establishment at Brig o’ Dread for regular stiffeners, I tremble to think what would have become of me. Yet, as Nanny often pointed out, every cloud has a silver lining. Last night, when I was pouring out my heart to Meadowcroft in his potting shed, the Hebridean hedgehogs remarked that it sounded just their sort of place, and they left this morning by the milk train. As Meadowcroft remarked, “They urchins be skedaddled.”

Wednesday

To Westminster for a meeting of the Parliamentary party. Of late stories have been appearing in the newspapers which suggest to the experienced eye that Certain People in the Liberal Democrats have been spreading malicious gossip about our leader. I decide that, as an elder statesman, I should make my feelings clear and therefore address the room as follows: “I expect you all enjoy watching the Teletubbies. Perhaps, like me, you are particularly fond of the part in the middle where one of the four shows a film on his (or is it her? I am never sure) tummy. Often it is about a farm, or something interesting like that, and you can learn the most useful things. But my point is this: *it doesn’t matter whose tummy the film is shown on*, because *all* the Teletubbies are pleased. I think we could learn a lot from that, don’t you?” I flatter myself that this shaft goes home.

Thursday

An old friend rings from the far north of Caithness to report that rabbits are burrowing into the stores of atomic waste at Dounreay and causing alarm from Wick to Thurso. Inspiration strikes and I enquire: “Do, by any chance, the rabbits that enter this atom plant emerge with splendid black moustaches?” When he replies in the affirmative, I quote the Swan of Avon to telling effect: “O my prophetic soul!” (That is from *Hamlet*, you know: a play about a Danish chap who

Lord Bonkers’ Diary

couldn’t make his mind up. Rather Hard Work, but he manages to work a lot of famous lines into it.) I retire to my Library to write to the steward of the Liberal Moustache of the Year Award.

Friday

This morning’s *Liberal Democrat News* contains a fascinating column by our own Andrew “Plum” Duff extolling the virtues of the new European constitution. He is particular keen on the idea of a European foreign minister. I am a little puzzled and telephone him to ask how this will work when, as in the case of the recent unpleasantness in Mesopotamia, half

the European nations take one view and half take the other. Plum soon puts me right. In such a case the minister will have two hats and make a strong speech in favour of war wearing the first of them. He will then leave the room, only to re-enter immediately by a different door, sporting the other hat, and make an equally persuasive contribution against. Events will continue in this fashion until the his trousers fall down (revealing a fine pair of polka dot boxer shorts) and he hides in the wardrobe as his wife and the vicar come into the room through the French windows.

Saturday

I read in the *Manchester Guardian* that some body calling itself the “European Stability Initiative” has published a report accusing our own Paddy Ashplant of “running Bosnia like a Raj”. I am not familiar with this “Initiative”, but I waste no time it writing it one of my stiffer letters. I also telephone Sarajevo to commiserate with Ashplant; it transpires that he is out shooting tigers, but the punka wallah promises to pass on my warm regards.

Sunday

Another one of those misty mornings in East Anglian ports about which I write so well – in my experience people always go for stuff about the lonely cries of hamwees, wheways and so forth. Today I am here to see off a boatload of emigrants as they head for the rocky coast around Stockholm, where there the call of the toksvig is a more familiar sound. Aboard I see many Socialists, but also some of my dearest Liberal friends, and I ask one fellow why they are leaving. “It’s very simple, your lordship. We have spent years signing each others’ letters to the newspapers saying how much better things are ordered in Sweden and how we in Britain should be more like them. Did you know they never speak harshly to their children and have more hygienic drains than we do? Anyway, in the end we decided that it would save a great deal of time if we simply went to live there.” I am sad to see them go, but console myself with the thought that it will now be easier to get a table in Islington’s more fashionable restaurants. I hasten to my field telephone and book lunch at a little place where they do a splendid terrine of hamwees.

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