

liberator



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Chris Davies***



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COMMENTARY

RAM IT DOWN THEIR THROATS

It is rare indeed for a single issue to dominate politics for a year, but that has happened with the Iraq war and its consequences.

As the party conference season began in September 2002, the Government published its now infamous dossier on the dangers that Iraq allegedly posed.

As this year's season begins, the country is waiting for the Hutton report, well aware that, whatever its outcome, the prime minister's standing has been irreparably tarnished by his insistence on pursuing an unpopular war on the basis of guesswork, lies, exaggerations and instructions from Washington.

The Kelly affair has not merely destroyed Tony Blair's 'regular guy' façade; it has, through the Hutton inquiry, laid bare the inner workings of the Government. It is not a pretty sight.

Through the accidental and unforeseen mechanism of Hutton, Labour has, at least in one respect, fulfilled its 1997 manifesto pledge over freedom of information.

In normal times, the entire documentation released by Hutton would have stayed secret for decades, and the country would have been denied the opportunity to see that it is ruled by a group of unelected cronies obsessed to the point of mania with the government's media profile.

Alistair Campbell, a jumped-up tabloid journalist with no obvious qualification to do so, helped to shape decisions of war or peace, and enjoyed more power than anyone in elected office other than Blair himself.

Individual MPs and select committees can raise questions but none could have got near to this unmasking of the inner workings of the Government, a situation that throws into stark relief how deficient accountability is in the UK and how over-mighty the executive has become.

These issues are normally rather recondite matters that interest some Liberal Democrats and not a lot of voters.

But, just as the public resentment the Iraq war has caused about relations with America may open up the chance of a positive hearing for closer links with Europe, so disgust at the picture laid bare by Hutton may make voters more receptive to governmental reform. Both issues are opportunities for the Liberal Democrats.

While Hutton's disclosures have been useful, the whole Kelly affair should not allow the Government off the hook over Iraq.

As of early September, no-one has yet produced a weapon of mass destruction, and none were used during the war, never mind fired at the west at 45 minutes' notice. We now have the word of Blair's own chief of staff that, a year ago, Saddam posed no threat to the west, and little to anyone except his unfortunate subjects.

Blair led the country to an unnecessary war of dubious legality on the basis of at best naivety and at worst lies.

This should be rammed down the throat of every Labour candidate from parish councils upward; so long as he is prime minister, they are willing public representatives of a party content to have someone like Blair as leader.

Coming on top of general dissatisfaction with public services, cynicism about Labour's obsessive headline chasing and boredom with a prime minister in office too long, Labour is facing serious dangers.

Liberator went to press before the Brent East result was known, but earlier indications were that the party would carve a huge hole in the Labour vote in a previously safe seat.

Labour, in its present incarnation, is a fragile thing, whatever its poll rating says.

This is because the people who hold any party together, support and work for it in the worst of times, are, in Labour, those least enamoured of Blair and least committed to the 'new' Labour package. They went along with it but never really believed, insofar as there was anything to believe in.

They would quite happily see Blair fall so that they could reclaim their party for its traditional union-dominated state socialism.

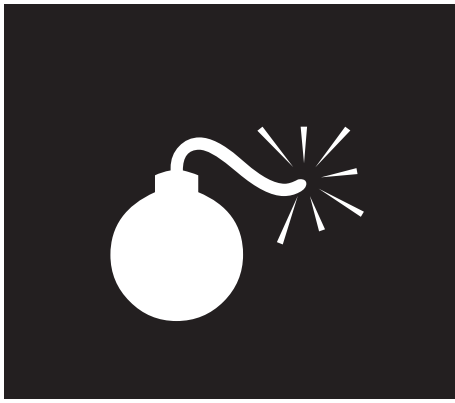
This is another opportunity for the Liberal Democrats. There are vast numbers of people who wanted a progressive administration that would improve public services, keep its hands clean, and modernise governance while not intruding unduly into their lives, bedrooms or pockets.

Instead they have found they have elected a group of instinctive authoritarians who confuse artificial targets with real improvement, govern as secretly as any Tory government did and presumes to intrude in everything from intercepting e-mails to telling people how much fruit they should eat.

Neither the Tories nor Labour traditionalists will appeal much to this disillusioned group, which is quite likely to cease voting.

This means that the Liberal Democrats should rethink their message about 'replacing the Tories as the main opposition'. Sure, it's been a good propaganda point as the Tories have fared worse than any opposition in history, but there is not much logic to it.

Beyond a certain point, it is neither possible nor desirable for the Liberal Democrats to try to win over Tory support. But it is entirely possible for them to target the mass of people who drifted to Labour in the last two elections.



RADICAL BULLETIN

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

A policy paper titled Setting Business Free is on the agenda for the Liberal Democrat conference, and those behind it seemed to have worked on the tried and tested assumption that hardly any conference representatives bother to read the indigestible tomes laid before them.

Hidden in the depths of this one are proposals to privatise the Post Office and to curtail the right to strike in public services. Even the Thatcher government never attempted the latter.

The paper argued that limiting the right to strike would be essential to avoid 'disruption', rather like the argument used by dictatorships the world over to derive workforces of this essential right.

Britain already has the worst record on employee rights in the EU, something the present government has done precious little to change since Tory times.

However, if someone wants the Liberal Democrat conference to debate either Post Office privatisation or curtailment of the right to strike there is no reason why these propositions should not be put forward.

But the motion does not do that. It does not mention the Post Office at all and refers only to 'introducing compulsory arbitration,' a phrase which hardly gives the full flavour of the policy document.

It looks as if the authors of Setting Business Free have not got the courage to argue their case in public and prefer to slip it through conference in this shifty way hoping no-one will notice.

They also appear to wish to bind the working party on employee rights, which has not yet started work, with this piece of agenda setting.

The whole tone of the document sits rather oddly with the party's attempts in recent years to cultivate friendly relations with trade unions, and is pervaded with references to putting the interests of consumers ahead of those of producers.

Lets leave aside for a moment the fact that most people are simultaneously both consumers and produces.

There are few things more producer dominated than the Liberal Democrat policy making process. Need a policy on business? Get a lot of people who run business. Education? Send for the teachers. Health? Round up the doctors.

The whole policy process, and not just on this paper, reeks of vested interests and the defence of professional interests.

MARKED MAN

With the Liberal Democrats having resumed what now seems to be their customary media silence during

August it was left to a small story in the Times to remind voters outside Brent East that the party still existed.

This speculated on a limited reshuffle of the shadow cabinet after conference, involving the removal of Evan Harris for what some see as his ideologically unsound attachment to the National Health Service, and a promotion for, wait for it, Mark Oaten.

Whoever could have briefed the journalist concerned in such a fashion? Perhaps it was the same person who has briefed the press in an exactly similar fashion several times in the last year.

One MP who has decided to go early is culture, media and sport spokesman Nick Harvey.

He was shunted amid some dispute into this post from the health role two years ago. Having recently become a husband and father, Harvey has decided to sit on the uncrowded backbenches after 12 years as a spokesman, where he will "enjoy the greater freedom to take up regional and national issues," his resignation statement pointed out.

He also said that with 53 MPs, it is no longer necessary for every MP to hold some post or other.

This means that Harvey joins Malcolm Bruce as the only MP with no job whatever, so surely these two founders can pass the time by reconvening the Grumbles group in the Westminster restaurant of the same name.

STIRRING UP TROUBLE

Amid the customary propaganda, the last issue of Liberal Democrat magazine Informed contained a curious article by Charles Kennedy in which he said he wishes "to continue to encourage serious and constructive internal debate".

Well, that is a welcome change from David Steel, who used to spend the summer having his minions brief the press that the sky would fall in if the conference dissented on anything, and from Paddy Ashdown, who caught this habit in his later years. But what on earth was Kennedy on about?

He was writing in the context of debates about public services, decentralisation and reducing the size of central government.

"It will not be without controversy internally and we should not shy away from it," he wrote.

"Critics may attempt to 'discover' supposed splits of focus excessively upon personalities. That is not our way."

But even reading the entire thing would have left readers none the wiser about what great controversy was about to be promoted or what issues might give rise to splits.

It is certainly an original approach to announce in advance that something contentious is about to happen but not say what it is. Suppose party members decide to have a row over something entirely different and miss whatever Kennedy was referring to?

HOLIDAY SEASONS

Despite its 20 years of service, there are times when even the Mitcham and Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet feels like a rest, so it will have been delighted by the choice of this conference's winner of the award for the worst motion submitted.

What is more, Canterbury's effort on public holidays is in keeping with spirit of original motion in 1983, on the siting of public toilets, by proposing a reform in mind-bogglingly minute detail.

Few will argue that more public holidays would not be desirable, but this motion called for the following list:

“Retention of the existing five public holidays at Christmas, New Year and Easter;

Replacement of the two May Monday public holidays with May Day and Midsummer Day holidays;

A variable late summer Monday holiday between the third Monday of July and the first Monday of September, the date in each area to be determined by the Scottish Parliament, Welsh assembly or, in due course, the appropriate English regional assembly;

A new public holiday on United Nations Day;

A new public holiday to celebrate peace and unity in Europe on a common day across the EU, the date to be decided by the European Parliament;

A new public holiday to promote national civic consciousness by celebrating a stage in the development of parliamentary democracy in the UK, the date to be determined by the House of Commons after full public consultation; provided that where a calendared holiday falls on a Saturday or Sunday, it will be taken on the following Monday.”

It goes on to suggest that the formation of the British Parliament (1707), the Peterloo massacre (1819), the Great Reform Bill (1832) or full gender-free franchise (1929) might suitably be commemorated.

Anyone for the Massacre Day bank holiday?

PUGH WHAT A SCORCHER

Southport MP and former philosophy lecturer John Pugh is not a person one would instantly associate with pornography. So there were red faces all round in Southport and Scotland when the link that should have sent people to Pugh's website from Charles Kennedy's website turned out to lead a French porn site.

The link from Kennedy's page has now been changed to the correct www.johnpughmp.com instead of www.johnpugh.org, a site “pour adultes”.

Embarrassingly, the mix-up was spotted by two Liverpool councillors who had to hurriedly notify the chief executive that they had not been browsing porn on council machines.

The mystery remains – why does someone in France think the words ‘John Pugh’ are erotic?

BALLS TO THAT

It seems the LDYS ball (Liberator 289) was an even greater disaster than first thought, managing to lose of the order of £3-4,000. With £25 tickets this seems scarcely credible,

so members should be asking their executive why an expensive venue like the Globe theatre was chosen, and at what cost. Simon Hughes was heard saying that, while he was happy that LDYS had chosen to mark its centenary in his constituency, the choice of venue was nothing to do with him and cheaper ones were available.

ON A SHOESTRING

If anything goes wrong at conference, don't blame the staff. Following the departure of Penny McCormack, the office has been staffed by two junior staff members, plus Stuart Marritt, who was brought in as temporary organiser, and Vera Head, whose welcome reinstatement comes four years after she was ousted by former chief executive Elizabeth Pamplin.

Marritt has been hit by the departure of Natalie Buck in midsummer, who has been described as the “best appointment in that office for years”.

At least if people have to queue outside the centre at Brighton, as happened in Torquay, there are plenty of seaside rock shops.

Perhaps this lack of staff explains the error in the agenda where it mentions ‘the Liberal Democrat revue’. As any fule kno, it is the ‘Liberal Revue’, which is the name the performing troupe has used for 19 years.

TRANSPORTS OF DELIGHT

A strange website called www.statesmanorskatesman.co.uk has been set up by a Jason Wiley, on which various politicians were asked if they had ever been photographed on a skateboard, roller skates and/or blades, a space hopper, go kart, death slide, non-motorised scooter, BMX bike or “any other locomotive child's toy”?

The reason was that his father had found a picture of Enoch Powell on a pogo stick and remarked that politicians did not do that kind of thing anymore.

Lembit Opik had ‘almost’ travelled on a space hopper and was able to supply a picture of himself on a bike.

The other Liberal Democrat respondent Shirley Williams confessed to using roller skates and a scooter in her youth, but said that most of the modes of transport mentioned had not been invented then.

David Owen replied that he had used none of them but said he had done some political photo opportunities which “no doubt made me look rather ludicrous”. He did not for some reason include running the continuing SDP in this category.

HOME OF THE HOBBY HORSE

North Cornwall's troubled selection of a successor to retiring MP Paul Tyler has been delayed following complaints from local activist Fran Tippett that the interviewing process did not follow procedures laid down by the Gender Balance Task Force.

Despite having been advised by Ludlow MP Matthew Green to desist from her complaint and seek nomination elsewhere, Tippett succeeded, to the embarrassment of those involved, in winning her appeal on the point.

It seems that those who aim to enthrone former MEP Robin Teverson as candidate may have to wait a little longer.

TIME TO GO HOME

Eurosceptics have helped to sell British independence to the Americans, argues Chris Davies, Liberal Democrat MEP for the North West

It's the oldest lesson in the game; take your eye off the ball and you risk losing possession. Yet in what must rank as amongst the greatest feints in world history, British public opinion has been so distracted by yells of from the sidelines that it can't even see where the ball has gone.

Invective against the European Union pours from the mouths of the yobs in the stands. "We're being pushed around by Europe," they shout. "Don't surrender our sovereignty to Brussels." Wrapping themselves in the Union Jack, these people have taken over the Conservative Party and set up the UK Independence Party. But from whom do they want independence?

Within the European Union, decisions about foreign affairs are made collectively; no nation can be forced to adopt a policy with which it disagrees. The EU has no military forces other than those provided voluntarily by its members. It is a genuine partnership and, with proportionally the largest military spending, Britain has huge influence.

So why do those who seek UK independence not turn their fire on the real target?

There are foreign military bases on our soil over which the British government has no real control. 'RAF' Fairford, the B52 launch pad, 'RAF' Molesworth, 'RAF' Croughton and the rest are USAF bases under the exclusive control of the Americans. Britain serves as a useful foreign outpost for 13,500 American military personnel distributed across 30 bases. Not a single non-American is employed at the space tracking post 'RAF' Feltwell in Norfolk.

British MPs are denied information, a reality well known to Norman Baker, who has been tabling questions on the subject since his election. He didn't get very far either with his request to visit Menwith Hill near Harrogate, an outpost of the US National Security Agency that has been used to eavesdrop on military, diplomatic and civil communications for more than 40 years and will play a key role in the US missile defence scheme.

One reply that Norman did secure summed up the situation. Responding in 1999 to his request that the government disclose the terms of any agreements covering America's use of Menwith Hill, the then armed forces minister Doug Henderson referred to a 1951 "status of forces" pact and to other arrangements for the purposes of the common defence of the UK and USA. "These arrangements are confidential," he said.

It is said officially that the use of bases in times of emergency is a matter for joint decision between the governments of the two countries.

In practice it is not at all clear that Britain has any sort of veto. On successive occasions over the years the US has acted independently, informing but not consulting British officials about the use of the bases. The American missile defence scheme will reinforce this reality.

Military occupation is just one part of the tale. Britain pretends it has an independent nuclear deterrent. In fact our US-built cruise and Trident missiles can be fired only with the express permission of the USA. Even if they were to be used they depend entirely on guidance and navigation systems controlled by US satellites.

Our GCHQ communications centre in Cheltenham collects information from across the world and shares it all with the Americans; they share with us only what they choose. The US imprisons British citizens at Guantanamo Bay without charge and without access to lawyers. Now we have the extraordinary situation of Home Secretary David Blunkett signing a treaty that gives the US an absolute right to extradite British citizens to stand trial in the USA, but does not give Britain the same rights to extradite US citizens charged with crimes here.

People of impeccable military pedigree, such as Air Marshall Sir Timothy Garden, the assistant chief of defence staff in the 1990s, question whether Britain anymore has the ability to do things separately from the United States. The failure of our ministers to register a word of protest against the foreign policies of the American administration reinforces the impression that Britain has become a client state.

The UK Independence Party claims that it wants to restore full authority to the British parliament. Yet, while its statement of aims abounds in false claims about the EU, it makes no mention of American influence over British policy. The eurosceptics stand accused of being involved in a grand deception to distract British people while the Americans take possession of the entire pitch.

With the cold war long since over, justification for the subjugation of British policy to American interests has passed. Sovereignty can be shared if the object is to find shared solutions to common problems through democratic partnerships like the EU, but not otherwise. With due gratitude for help given in the past, it is time to tell the Yanks to go home.

VERDICT OF HISTORY

The Hutton Inquiry is a red herring. What matters is the situation in Iraq, argues Iain Sharpe

On the same day that Alastair Campbell announced his intention to resign, 80 people were killed by a bomb in Najaf, Iraq. It was par for the course that the BBC and the following morning's newspapers in Britain should report the political demise of the 'king of spin' ahead of the real death of so many Iraqis. The Hutton Inquiry has given politics junkies something to talk about during the 'silly season'. Yet it is the events in Iraq that provide the really damning evidence against the decision to go to war.

The circumstances surrounding the death of David Kelly may be grabbing the headlines now, but essentially they are a political sideshow. Who leaked whose name to whom, whether a dossier was 'sexed up' or not, questions about weapons of mass destruction or 45-minute threats are issues that fascinate conspiracy theorists as much as they irritate the government, but in the end matter very little.

Tony Blair recognised as much when he told the US Congress 'History will forgive us' for the decision to go to war. He is relying on the positive outcomes of the invasion being plain for all to see. If the invasion of Iraq has broadly beneficial consequences for the citizens of that country, for stability in the Middle East and for world peace generally, few people will care about the technicalities of why we went to war in the first place.

Unfortunately for the British and American governments, all the signs are that the situation in Iraq is bad and getting worse. Terrorist violence is filling the power vacuum left behind by Saddam Hussein and it remains to be seen whether the newly formed and American-backed government has sufficient popular backing to endure. The length of time it has taken to set it up gives little cause for confidence. The growth of terrorism is shown most starkly by the two highly publicised bombings in Najaf and at the UN headquarters in Baghdad, but also by the fact that more American troops have been killed since the war officially ended than during the formal conflict. An occupied country with a fragile indigenous government is the ideal breeding ground for terrorism.

The uncertainty over what would happen after the war was won was always the strongest argument against an invasion of Iraq. Those who supported the war could point to the appalling record of Saddam Hussein's government, both in Iraq itself and externally, as clear evidence that regime change would be a good thing. But it could only ever be so if the Western allies could be confident of restoring stable, self-government to Iraq within a short period of time and that the government would have the confidence of a broad consensus of the Iraqi population.

Iraq is a country with considerable ethnic and religious divisions and a long history of internal conflict. From its inception in 1921 it experienced a series of rebellions, coups and revolutions. It has not known stable,

democratic government. It was therefore always going to be difficult to establish an Iraqi-led government with a sense of legitimacy among the population and with dependable pro-Western sympathies. The prospects are therefore not good for the new administration. If its authority remains dependent on American occupation, then it is likely to be met with growing hostility by the Iraqi population. If it does not succeed in establishing its authority pretty quickly, there will be a power vacuum that has the potential to de-stabilise the whole region. Terrorist groups are already taking advantage of the current situation.

Prior to the war, America and Britain were unable to establish any clear links between Saddam and al-Qaeda, yet the four men arrested in connection with the Najaf bombing are all believed to have al-Qaeda links. If al-Qaeda wasn't active in Iraq then, it certainly is now. In other words, the invasion has actually given a boost to terrorism rather than helping to defeat it.

The harsh reality is that things are now more dangerous in Iraq than they were before the invasion. There is also little prospect of things getting better. It is a rather uncomfortable truth that sometimes tyranny is preferable to anarchy. It was all too easy for politicians like Blair and Bush, who are so confident of their own good intentions, to believe that Western military intervention was bound to produce something better than the horrible regime of Saddam Hussein. It may not be a particularly pleasant thought, but the cause of peace and stability in the Middle East and beyond was probably better served by a cowed Saddam living in fear of an American invasion than an actual invasion, with all its attendant complications.

Back in London, at the time of writing this article, it seems that the government is doing quite well at the Hutton Inquiry. Although Geoff Hoon's buck-passing got a bad press, there have been no further damaging revelations. It is the BBC and Andrew Gilligan who have looked shifty and unconvincing. The media have reported many 'bad days' at the Inquiry for the Corporation, but few if any good days. Blair seems likely to survive intact and, even if Hutton criticises Alastair Campbell, he is now out of the picture.

If Hutton vindicates the government, however, it will be a Pyrrhic victory unless there is real progress towards self-government and a restoration of order. History's verdict will not be based on what Hutton says, but by the effects of the invasion on Iraq and how that impacts on the wider world. At present, there is little cause for optimism!

NOT SO FAST...

As the clamour grows within the Liberal Democrats for the resignation of Charles Kennedy, Simon Titley argues that the party should look before it leaps

Here at Liberator, we are well practised in the art of demanding the resignation of party leaders. Thorpe, Steel, Ashdown... all have felt our wrath down the years. Indeed, all of them resigned, eventually.

It seemed long overdue for us to do the same thing to Charles Kennedy. The trouble is, most of the parliamentary party appears to have got there first. One member of a party committee told me recently that 47 of the party's 53 MPs now want Kennedy to go. In the absence of a formal ballot, I have no idea how anyone can arrive at such a precise figure and I doubt its credibility, but the mere currency of these statistics is a sign of the times.

Speculation about Kennedy's future has been mounting for more than a year. It would probably have been the media focus at last September's conference, but for the premature departure of lobby journalists back to London for the emergency Commons debate on Iraq (as Chief Whip Andrew Stunell admitted in his report to the party's Federal Conference Committee).

So you want to change your party leader? The danger in this exercise is of a false analysis leading to a false prescription. The widely held assumption is that Kennedy must go because of his alleged drink problem. The risk is of selecting a replacement solely on the grounds of sobriety, a quality that is neither necessary nor sufficient for party leadership.

The drink-related allegations had been floating around Westminster for some time, but did not surface publicly until the infamous Newsnight interview with Jeremy Paxman in July 2002. This year, the story was revived by major press reports in Scotland on Sunday (29 June) and the Daily Mail (4 July), both obviously the product of leaks by fellow MPs. The allegations are no longer taboo and we can expect more of the same. But is this the main issue?

There are two significant failings in Kennedy's leadership, neither of which has much to do with alcohol. The biggest failing is that Kennedy's leadership has no point. There is no question to which he is the answer. He offers no vision or direction. During the last leadership election, one perceptive critic said, "Charles's problem is that he has always wanted the leadership but has never known why."

The second failing is Kennedy's lack of activism as leader. Many critics have misleadingly described this as 'laziness', which does not get to the heart of the matter. It is the quality rather than the quantity of leadership that is missing. Kennedy could have had a long lie-in every morning if he wanted, yet still be an effective leader, by the simple device of well-timed interventions. But repeatedly he has missed open goals, most notably during the Tory disarray in the summer of 2001.

One thing for which Charles Kennedy cannot be criticised is that he misled people about his faults. All were well known long before the leadership election. Like most MPs first elected at an early age, Kennedy was instantly dubbed "the next leader but two" and his subsequent career has been a process of osmosis. His election as leader was widely regarded as inevitable, even though none of his supporters could produce any positive justification. Warnings about Kennedy's lack of motivation went unheeded. Had it not been for the egotism of so many no-hope rivals, he would probably have lost the leadership contest.

Even so, throughout Kennedy's leadership, while votes and poll ratings have not soared, neither have they slumped. The lack of a crisis has led to complacency and a failure to examine the party's strategic weaknesses. In the absence of any serious analysis, the drink allegations have proved a handy stick with which to beat the leader.

The campaign to remove him is being propelled by fellow MPs, many of whom have ulterior motives. Anything that any parliamentary critic of Kennedy says should therefore be taken with a large handful of salt. Most of them supported Kennedy in the last leadership contest and many are no strangers to the sauce themselves (as any casual observation of the conference hotel bars will confirm).

Any MP's advice on the optimum timing of Kennedy's departure is invariably guided by calculations about personal advantage. Three categories of MP are emerging.

The first category is those MPs who want a leadership election now, so that they can exclude as many rivals as possible. Simon Hughes (the front runner, were he to stand) will be tied up with the London mayoral elections until next May. Meanwhile, two MEPs with leadership ambitions likely to inherit safe Westminster seats, Chris Huhne and Nick Clegg, are ineligible until after the next general election. Hold a leadership election now, and all three candidates are out of the running.

The second category comprises those people whom the first category wishes to exclude. In between is a third category, those MPs arguing for an interregnum. They would rather not have a leadership contest now but believe that Kennedy's position is becoming untenable. They propose to install Ming Campbell as a caretaker leader for one election, and then hold the real contest afterwards.

All three options carry serious risks. Hold an election now, and risk electing Mark Oaten or Lembit Opik as leader. Delay until after the next election, and endure election media coverage dominated by the issue of Kennedy's alleged drink problem. Elect Ming, and have a credible leader elected on an incredible platform of being a temporary leader.

So, before you leap to embrace any new candidate, you must be clear; what is the question to which a new leader is the answer? No matter how serious Charles Kennedy's weaknesses, there is no point in changing the leadership unless a new leader can deliver an effective improvement in strategy, tone and policy.

This is not change for the sake of change. Kennedy judged (correctly) that the wheels had fallen off Ashdown's strategy of deals with New Labour, but failed to propose a coherent alternative. The party has fallen back on a reliance on local election tactics, which is fine if all you want are a few incremental gains at each election, but is not enough to deliver a national breakthrough.

So a new leader must propose a clear strategy. Whatever other predilections this leader might have, his strategy must meet three criteria for success.

Firstly, the party has to stand on its own merits. For the first time in over thirty years, there are no longer any pre-election pact options in prospect. Talking about the virtues of one's own party rather than potential partners requires vision and the ability to project it, rather than a focus on short-term tactical calculations.

Second, a new leader must revitalise the party as a campaigning force. This means championing success and exploring innovation, but also challenging obstacles, in particular the tired rituals of much of what passes for 'campaigning' in the party.

Third, the party must identify a target demographic rather than try to be 'all things to all men.' And this is where there is good news – a liberal demographic is emerging. There is a direct correlation between higher education and liberal (with a small 'l') attitudes. As an increasing proportion of the population becomes better educated, more liberal and tolerant attitudes will prevail. This is not speculation, but was one of the key findings of last year's 'British Social Attitudes', the 19th annual report of the National Centre for Social Research.

The party's best hope of success is to tap into this social trend and it should therefore target its appeal towards the growing 'enlightened middle classes', particularly young graduates. The progress in seats like Guildford and Maidenhead at the last general election suggests a start to this process. It also suggests that those, such as MPs Mark Oaten and David Laws, who wish to reorient the party's appeal towards right-wing Conservatives, are very wide of the mark. Demographic change means there will be decreasing electoral mileage in pandering to the prejudices of declining groups such as rural conservatives.

The promotion of liberal values among the enlightened middle classes is the key to getting the right tone and policies. There has been a serious public loss of faith in the democratic process, not all of it politicians' fault. But the contribution politicians have made to their own decline in public esteem has been their over-massaged language and a 'sameness', which people find cynical and alienating.

A new leader must reject the orthodoxies of Blairite 'style over substance' and the perceived need to pander to the agenda of the Daily Mail. Rather than compete with the two main parties for the mythical 'middle England' vote, a new leader should offer the electorate a contrast and a real choice. He should aim to make the next election a fight about the things people care about, not a consensus-fest. He must be assertive, unafraid to state liberal values and able to speak from the heart.

A new leader should cast off the apologetic tone and rebuild the party's self-esteem. Both the Labour and Conservative parties subscribe to a type of machismo that delights in toughness for the sake of toughness and brands liberalism as 'namby-pamby'. This sort of macho posturing repels the Liberal target demographic. The party leader should be proud to be a Liberal, confront authoritarian prejudices head-on and give cheer to his party's natural constituency.

When it comes to policy, again there is much scope for connecting Liberal values to the target demographic. The first thing a leader must do, however, is to sort out the philosophical mess at the heart of the party. The Liberal Democrats cannot offer coherent policies on tax and spending until they have a clear idea of which concerns belong in the public sphere and which in the private sphere.

This is not a question of taxation or privatisation, although it underpins both. For example, if someone has difficulty finding housing or a job, is that purely the individual's problem or is it a shared problem for society? The past thirty years have seen a migration of previously shared problems to the private sphere. People increasingly regard social problems as their individual responsibility.

What has confused matters is that traditional socialists (and their conservative opponents) have equated the public sphere with the state. But the 'public sphere' can just as easily mean local communities, mutual organisations or local politics.

A leader must be able to articulate, from a liberal standpoint, which issues are legitimate political concerns and which are none of our concern. Only then can he talk meaningfully about levels of tax.

This brings us to the issue of tax. The Liberal Democrats have claimed to be the only party to be 'honest about tax' but they are not nearly honest enough. The big problem in all western democracies is people wanting something for nothing. They want better education, healthcare, pensions and transport, but want to pay less tax. This problem will become more acute as the 'baby boomer' generation reaches retirement. The tax base will become unable to sustain public demand for healthcare and pensions, and something has got to give.

The next party leader's term of office will coincide with a global crisis, as state pension systems throughout Europe start to collapse and elderly middle class Americans can no longer access affordable healthcare. The new leader had better be prepared with an answer.

The other distinctive policy a new leader can bring to the economic sphere is an end to the uncritical worship of business. This is a residue of 1980s Thatcherite values, which created the specific notion that business exists in a moral bubble and is not subject to the same social obligations as the rest of society. The other side of this coin has been the systematic denigration of public sector workers.

This is not to say the Liberal Democrats should become an anti-business party. But one would have thought by now, with the scandals of Enron, 'fat cat' pay and the closure of pension schemes, it should be obvious that business cannot be trusted uniquely to operate outside any regulatory or moral framework.

...Continued on page 27

FORCE FEEDING A FAMINE VICTIM

It is no wonder public services are still failing when the Government expects miracles on a shoestring, says Conrad Russell

On 4 September all the people who want to rein in the excessive power of centralisation are welcoming the announcement that a permanent civil servant is to be given authority in running the Government communications machine.

We have reached a pretty pass when the old maxim that 'the gentleman in Whitehall knows best' has become the battle cry of those who are vainly resisting further centralisation.

Yet that is the point we are now at. What is urgent is to assert that there are some subjects about which some people know more than Tony Blair.

This has been the real lesson of the Hutton inquiry. He thinks he knows more about evaluating intelligence than intelligence specialists. He thinks he knows better what is a weapon of mass destruction than the head of the relevant section of the Ministry of Defence. He does not understand that a weapons programme is not the same thing as weapons.

Yet there is nothing new about all this. The Hutton inquiry has merely shown the defence scientific establishment being subjected to the same process of restraint as the universities, the health service, police, magistrates and judges.

In all of these, professional codes of values and a great volume of experience have been subjected, not merely to the values of the gentleman in Whitehall, who, though he does not know best, sometimes knows something about something, but to the party leader who, as Hugh Gaitskell memorably put it "knows less and less about more and more".

This means that the party leader or prime minister is putting himself further and further out of reach of independent advice. If the advice is independent, it does not reach him.

Those who say Blair ought to tear his mind away from foreign affairs and give his mind to public services are no friends to public services. When Blair's mind is elsewhere, as he does no good, so he does no harm. That is a blessed state of affairs.

Our public services working group, one of the most important working groups we have had since we became Liberal Democrats, has got us started on the right lines.

The problem, as many people have said, is monopoly: not monopoly in 'the producer', which is in any case a silly title for professionals such as a nurse. The problem is monopoly in the purchaser.

The Treasury, because it is a monopoly purchaser of public services, may insist on what unit cost it likes, may

insist on what condition of service it likes, and may insist on what performance indicators it likes. It might just as well do the job itself.

If what the treasury asks is impossible, all the public service can do is go out of business. People with mortgages and children are usually reluctant to do that.

Yet, though it is indubitably right to insist on breaking up the Treasury monopoly by regionalising the purchasing of public services, this is only a start. It is a policy on which we can fight the next election in perfect unison, but the debate begins when we go on to consider what sort of public services we would like this change to produce.

It is, of course, the charm of the new policy that not all regions will need to reach the same answers. They will be able to compete, and to have true competition, which is both in quality and price. Some of these questions need thought well before the next election.

I must declare an interest in this debate. I write, even though retired, as a man whose whole outlook has been formed in a public service job, whose friends are mostly in public service jobs, and who spent much of his campaigning time since 1988 forming alliances with other public services whose grievances I have recognised as the same as mine as a university teacher.

I know my views are one-sided, and I come into party debate ready to negotiate from that knowledge. Yet, since one of our great problems is now the unwillingness of people to take up public service jobs, or stay in them when they have done so, it is a point of view which deserves a hearing.

The relief with which I greeted the discovery that I had reached retiring age before I was forced to throw in my job in disgust is something I would have found unimaginable before the centralising assault which began in 1988.

That assault has not slackened since 1997: the Downing Street rhetoric may have changed, but what comes across a head of department's desk is unchanged. A historian reading only the material which reaches public services from the centre would never have guessed that there had been a change of government.

The evils are two-fold. They are the attempt to force on public servants a culture and a view of their job in which they do not believe, and under-funding, which has been continuous since the International Monetary Fund programme began to bite in 1977.

I know no good teacher who believes his success can be measured only in the level of examination results his

pupils reached. In fact, some of the very best decisions I remember my own teachers reaching were at times when they said: "damn the exam results, you've caught fire on this. Don't put that fire out, carry on even if it won't come up in the exam", In Blairite culture this is now a crime. I hope I have committed it.

The weapon of this attempt to change culture is the performance indicator. There are two main ways in which these may do harm.

The first is that they may compete with each other. Punctuality is a legitimate objective, and safety is a legitimate objective. In late August, there was a brief report in the papers of a train which was in danger of being late, and was struggling to be on time in order not to damage its performance indicators. The result was that it ignored the speed limits, and came round the bend next to the one where the Hatfield crash happened with, according to the passengers, only the wheels on one side touching the ground and all the passengers collapse on the floor. Here the performance indicator, by taking one issue in isolation, had had a corrupting effect.

A performance indicator may also conflict with the object of the exercise as a whole. To take a mundane example, it is important to keep speed limits. Yet if a car, while overtaking, finds a car coming round the bend ahead at excessive speed, it may be only by breaking the speed limit briefly that it is possible to avert a head-on collision. This is a case where the text 'the letter killed, the spirit giveth life' is to be taken painfully literally. It is the spirit which matters.

I met this in an acute form last time I took my wife into casualty. She was unable to walk, and I admitted her for a bad back, which I knew was capable of having this effect on her. The hospital, on pain of penalty, was bound to get her out of casualty in four hours. After twenty minutes, they reported to me that my diagnosis did not fit all the symptoms, and since they needed to know what they were treating her for, they had to do exhaustive tests.

Those tests took six hours, which was the speed of greased lightning, and they showed incurable and inoperable cancer of the brain.

That was a good, big and brave hospital. It had deliberately incurred penalties because the interests of the patient demanded it. How many others would have dared to do the same? In my experience and that of my friends, this inability to do one's job, as we believe it should be done, is doing more to destroy our sense of vocation than anything else. Take away that sense of vocation, and that dedication that governments have exploited so long will not be there any more.

That is equally the result of under funding. Labour keeps saying that, if one year's improvement does not show results, it will conclude that under funding was not the answer. It has never learned that you cannot force feed a famine victim.

Twenty-five years of under funding is unlikely to be out right in less than fifty. Blair is even more unrealistic in looking for improvements after one year of improved funding. The definition of under funding is not a state in which you cannot improve; it is one in which you cannot stay stationary without more money.

Most of us have at some time been in that state. We know paying debts and keeping the rain out have to come first. Schools, universities and hospitals are no different. If funding earmarked for cancer treatment is partly swallowed up in mending the roof or windows, not even as the husband of a recent cancer patient would I have

wished money to be diverted to her treatment at the price of leaving her exposed to last January's north winds.

Blair needs a much greater sense of realism when he tries to understand what under funding is. I remember, as long ago as the 1960s, a university which took over a hospital, and was surprised to find itself landed with a negative dowry of £1m for a single building.

It is only when stories like that are repeated many thousands of times that we can begin to understand the scale of the under funding of our public services. We must ensure that voters do not believe they can get instant results. If we stop things getting from going on getting worse, that might do something to end the sense of hopelessness which is the biggest burden most of our public servants have to carry.

It would be a mistake to think only of services like schools and the NHS. In the week before this article was written, we have had a burst water main which has left a quarter of my constituency without water, and a power blackout which may have left as many as 250,000 people stranded on the tube - my son among them.

Expert opinion tells us that both of these, like the power cut in New York, are the result of under investment. In every financial crisis, it is long-term investment which is cut first. The present state of the London underground stems directly from the cut of £393m in investment imposed by Norman Lamont in his first budget after Black Wednesday. We must not let the Tories forget that when they pose as champions of the underground.

Sooner or later, similar catastrophes will start happening to the London sewers. My great-grandfather was responsible for installing them in 1849. The Victorians built well, but they did not build that well. Even then, the Treasury, true to form, tried to halt the project by stopping the necessary funding. My great-grandfather needed a cholera epidemic to overrule them. I do not want history to repeat itself.

It will of course be said that the voters are not prepared to pay the necessary sums in taxation. In some cases we will be able, as the Victorians usually were, to get round that by using the bond system publicised by Susan Kramer as the remedy for London underground.

In other cases, voters will not be willing to pay. This, of course, is and must remain a choice for them. What we must do is explain the choices to them honestly.

We must not go on telling them that by making every public servant do the work of three people instead of two we can make the choice go away. They must make the choice themselves.

If they would rather be the only advanced country without a state system of education, that is their right. I was recently talking to my former newsagent's daughter who was a teacher. She was returning home to Nigeria because their schools, she said, were better funded and better disciplined than ours.

If that is what voters want, they must have it, but let them make the choice with their eyes open. That way, we may not carry the can for failure to do the impossible.

THE MAN FROM NOWHERE

Howard Dean, governor of obscure Vermont, has emerged frontrunner for the Democratic nomination for US president. But it needs someone who can win the south, explains Dennis Graf

In the strange place we call America, the idea of Arnold Schwarzenegger running the world's fifth largest economy surprises no one.

For much of the twentieth century, the American political scene was simple. There was a Republican party, led in large part by east coast patricians, with a base which was small town, business, Protestant and rural. This party included both provincial isolationists - usually voters who didn't live on the east coast, and internationalists, who usually did.

The Democratic party was made up of labour, Jews, the Irish and other ethnics, city people in general, white southerners, northern blacks and Roman Catholics. The Republican party has always tended to be unified and disciplined, while the Democrats have been a coalition of smaller, mutually hostile parties.

Richard Nixon was relatively centrist, but he set in motion a process which has shifted the entire political spectrum far to the right.

The Democratic party reached its zenith during the presidency of Franklin D Roosevelt, and later, Lyndon Johnson, but it has been in decline ever since. The labour union movement, the Democratic base, has been severely weakened, mainly by the loss of manufacturing jobs and the tendency of people who move to the fast-growing suburbs to vote Republican.

The Republican party has been taken over by extreme partisans, mainly from the southern and south-western states. Protestant fundamentalism, something which does not really exist in Britain, is an important cultural as well as religious force in much of the United States and this has become the base of George W Bush's support.

It is becoming more powerful, more politically astute and its people provide the foot soldiers of the Republican juggernaut. Bush's regional base is the formerly Democratic south, a region now considered to be the key to winning a national election. Southern whites vote overwhelmingly Republican and southern blacks are, in effect, disenfranchised.

Most observers now feel that the Republican party has become the natural governing party. There is much debate as to who actually runs the party, but it is generally agreed that Big Business and especially Big Oil call the final shots. The one indispensable element not often seen by people abroad is the Republican control of the great mass media propaganda machine, television and local "talk" radio - an accomplishment only matched by Joseph

Goebbels. For the average American, only one side - an extreme right wing one - is ever heard.

Thus, it would not be too much of an oversimplification to say that we now have two parties in the United States, a disorganised and weak conservative party called Democrats, and a strong and rather eccentric party of the radical right called Republicans. We have no significant party of the left. Left-wingers usually work within the Democratic party and they're usually frustrated.

These people consider themselves "progressives" the true Democrats, the heirs of Franklin D Roosevelt. "Liberal" is a dirty word in America and it would be a rare politician who'd use it.

Howard Dean is attempting to gather up these people and solidify them as his base. Dean was the mild-mannered governor of what is possibly our most rural and obscure state - Vermont. It's difficult to explain, but part of his appeal is that he's never served in the national government. Dean had the reputation of being a fiscal conservative - he vetoed any number of spending bills and he signed, but did not especially campaign for, the one issue which brought Vermont into national consciousness - that of a legalised civil union between homosexuals. For some mysterious reason, this is currently a "hot button" political issue in America right now.

Dean has been able to attract significant attention, and money, through his effective use of the Internet, a new dimension in American politics.

Since he was not in Congress, he's able to distinguish himself from the rest of the political pack by being the one person who did not vote in favour of war authorisation for George Bush. He is also attempting to harden this liberal base by speaking out in favour of an incremental health care reform, of rolling back the massive tax cut Bush was able to push through Congress, and, in general, speaking from a left-of-centre point of view.

His background is closer to that of FDR than to Clinton. Dean comes from what would pass for aristocracy in the United States, from the New York counterpart of Mayfair or Belgravia. His father was an investment banker and Dean attended Yale and later, medical school. His wife is also a doctor, and together they moved to bucolic Vermont. He was later elected governor five times. In

Vermont, Dean was generally well liked, though the voters on the left distrusted him.

Dean has the reputation of being a maverick and of being very sure of himself. He's a doctor and in America we say that doctors develop a "God complex." He's obviously bright and personable, but not the master political technician that Bill Clinton was.

Dean's opponents in the party nominating process include Senator John Kerry, from the neighbouring and much larger state of Massachusetts, a man with the reputation of being rather aloof, of flying over the crowd, as it were. Joseph Lieberman was Al Gore's running mate and is a very devout Jew, the first to make a serious run for the Presidency. (Barry Goldwater was of Jewish background, but was an Anglican.) Lieberman, alas, is boring.

Most Democrats consider it absolutely essential that their candidate appeal to Southern white voters, and there are two Southern candidates. Bob Graham of Florida is surprisingly critical of Bush and Senator John Edwards of South Carolina is attempting to make himself in the image of John Kennedy, but neither is showing much strength.

The other major candidate is Dick Gephardt from Missouri, the former leader of the Democrats in the House of Representatives. He's been a candidate many times before and, while he's considered experienced and capable, he's even more boring than Lieberman.

A "dark horse," a long shot and still undecided, is former General Wesley Clark, at one time the chief of NATO forces. He's fairly well known in America since he's been a regular commentator on military affairs for CNN. His political beliefs are a mystery but, as a former general, he would probably do well in the south. White southern men still have a romantic notion of the armed forces.

There is a gauntlet that all the candidates have to run through. The first obstacle is the Iowa caucus. Caucuses are open to anyone, but in practice they favour the politically committed. Dean is popular with the Democratic activists since he says the things these people want to hear, and he has done very little to offend them. He has cast no unpopular votes in Washington. Gephardt is also well liked and he comes from a neighbouring state, but whoever wins the Democratic caucus in Iowa will get strong news coverage and not much else. Carter was an unknown, but he won in Iowa and used it to start a momentum which led to the presidency.

The next big hurdle after that is New Hampshire. Here Dean will probably do well, since New Hampshire borders Vermont and the states are somewhat similar. But John Kerry, who has money of his own - he married the heiress to the Heinz ketchup fortune - is also strong there. New Hampshire people tend to be aloof, so Kerry's demeanour might not be all that damaging. It is essential for both Dean and Kerry to win in New Hampshire and the one who loses will probably be out of the race.

There are a great many primary elections soon after that and these determine who will win the delegates necessary for the nomination. The southern primaries will be closely watched and if Dean or anyone would win a substantial number of white votes - they can tell such things - he would be thrust into the limelight immediately.



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FROM CRANMER TO TATCHELL

Most politicians switch off to tax reform, but even minor changes could radically improve the lives of millions of people, says Wendy Kyrle-Pope, who has grappled with its complexities for 28 years

The tax system affects us all, and badly drawn, uncaring legislation can ruin people's lives. Progressive, liberal politicians and policy makers, rather than finding it dull and dry, should consider it the most challenging and thrilling area of reforming legislation, which could alter the lives of millions for the better, without really cutting much needed revenues.

An updated, more dynamic framework in the tax laws is desperately needed to lift the system from the 1950s into this century.

The taxation of individuals and their families has been the subject of confusion and constant chopping and changing with the prevailing fiscal winds, particularly over the past decade.

It does, to a limited extent, reflect the enormous social changes that have taken place; women's rights and their increased earning capacity, the rise in the number of children with a single parent, but many aspects have been neglected or left to wither. It is only 13 years ago that the separate taxation of a married couple came into being. Before that, the wife had to record all her income on her husband's tax return, which he, alone, signed.

Take the example of tax allowances for children. This was given traditionally to the man of the house, presumed to be the main breadwinner. It could be transferred to the wife, but only after a lengthy correspondence with the taxman. Mothers with children, but no husband (apart from widows) were the subject of endless enquires as to who the father was, and where he lived.

It was only in 1970s, and largely due to the custom of West Indians then becoming resident in Britain, where the norm was for a woman to have her children young, let them be brought up by her mother and other relatives, then perhaps marry later, that the Inland Revenue began to accept child allowance claims from single women without a fuss.

There have been so many changes in the last ten or so years in the way that tax allowances for children have been claimed, and the amounts given, then removed, then reinstated, that it would take the rest of this article to list them all. Today at least there is a (means tested) structure in place, the Children's Tax Credit, which delivers cash directly to the parent who needs it most. This is proving a nightmare to administer, and the claim forms are long and complex, which may deter some from applying, but at last tax relief for children seems set to stay.

One allowance that has drifted off the statute books was the Dependent Relatives Allowance, albeit a pathetic pittance available to a taxpayer who supported an elderly, impoverished relative. The relative was means tested, not the taxpayer. This pitiful allowance did, however, signal governmental support for those who cared for their old people, and should be reintroduced and updated, if only to give encouragement to the millions who are carers.

Older citizens are supposed to claim the various benefits available themselves; in practise most will not do this, despite the late, great Thora Hird spearheading a DSS campaign a couple of years ago. If an older citizen does have a family, an allowance given to that family might be more acceptable to all concerned. And what of those who give up their lives to look after elderly or disabled relatives? Our society is ageing, we are moving full circle back to the days when Victoria was on the throne; as the state is able to provide less, more and more people have to adopt the role of carer. Apart from a tiny National Insurance concession, they receive no fiscal recognition at all.

Most personal taxes are based on the concept of family. But what does that mean today? A husband, a wife and their 2.4 children? A grandmother, her grandchild and a budgie? Two sisters living together for companionship and financial necessity? A gay couple and their two dogs?

Inheritance tax, which applies on the death of a taxpayer or if that taxpayer transfers capital, is still written solely with the traditional married couple in mind. These may still be in the majority, but for how much longer? And why should reforming inheritance tax be of benefit to anyone other than the rich, who can afford smart accountants and elaborate offshore schemes to shelter their vast wealth? The answer is simple; because in many areas of the country the price of even a fairly humble home has already exceeded the taxable threshold, currently £255,000. And many homes are not owned or inhabited by the traditional married couple, but by cohabiting partners, brothers and sisters, friends, or cousins.

If you are married, and have left even a simple will, bequeathing everything you own to your husband or wife, when one dies, no inheritance tax is payable on any part of the estate left to the other. If you leave your estate to anyone other than your husband or wife, anything over £255,000 is taxed at 40%.

If you make a transfer in your lifetime of over the £255,000 limit to anyone other than a spouse, you may have to pay 20% tax on it.

Take the example of a couple who have shared a home for many years, but never married. This home is a semi in Hendon, bought for a few thousand mortgaged pounds 30 years ago, but now worth £400,000. This house may be in joint names, or in a single name. On the death of one of the partners, the worse case inheritance tax scenario would be a bill for £58,000. This could cause tremendous hardship, possibly forcing the sale of the home. It is possible to use a rule whereby a taxpayer can make a transfer in their lifetime, but you have to survive for seven years to “start the clock” again. Were that same home in Hendon owned by a married couple, whether jointly or not, it would attract tax of precisely nothing. Is that fair?

Another example: two sisters who, in their declining years, move into the home owned by one of them. This could be a two-bedroomed flat in Croydon. No transfer has been made, and neither has any other assets. The flat is worth, at the time of the owner’s death, some £300,000. The surviving sister has to face a bill of £18,000, again possibly forcing the sale of her home. Fair?

Last December, the then minister for social exclusion and equality, Barbara Roche, announced that the Government planned to introduce a civil registration scheme for same-sex partners, which would grant them many of the legal rights that go with marriage. On the surface, a good idea, a veritable breakthrough if you like. But it was, quite rightly, roundly condemned by Peter Tatchell and many others for being blatantly unfair to heterosexual partnerships, and indeed the myriad of other types of relationships enjoyed by human beings.

Tatchell favours a more democratic, egalitarian alternative to marriage, and one which can also embrace non-sexual relationships. His version of a civil commitment pact would allow people to nominate as their next-of-kin and beneficiary, their “significant other”, be it a lover, old friend or cousin, who would enjoy the same rights as a husband or wife under the law.

At the start of the Reformation, Cranmer’s Prayer Book of 1549 prefaced the marriage ceremony by listing the three reasons for matrimony. These are: the procreation of children; the avoidance of fornication; and thirdly “it was ordained for the mutual society, help and comfort, that one ought to have for the other, both in prosperity and adversity”.

The past 454 years have seen many social changes. Children are conceived and cared for outside marriage; and the avoidance of fornication or not is now a matter of individual choice. One thing has not changed, and never will, and that is people live together for support, company and affection, whatever the nature of the relationship.

Although Cranmer and Tatchell are worlds and times apart, a combination of their intentions could form the basis of a fairer, kinder and more just tax system, and, indeed, reformed legal system. And it would be so easy to do. Although many people living together do not want to make a formal legal commitment, or, if they are related by blood, do not see the need to, everyone has to make a will. This legal instrument could include Tatchell’s version of the civil commitment pact, with the “significant other” named as “family partner/life companion”, thereby qualifying for exemption from inheritance tax in the same way as a spouse.

No Government can afford to allow capital to flow down from one generation to the next without getting its cut, but where does that leave the carer, who has sacrificed a career and possibly children for the sake of elderly parents, only to get turfed out of the only home they have to pay this tax? A very simple sliding scale, allowing 100% relief from inheritance tax on the family home for carers at age 55 or above, diminishing to nil at age 40, could easily be introduced.

The tax laws have always lagged behind other civil legislation. Their effect on the lives of people are not always as immediately obvious as, say, pension rights or adoption. However, inheritance tax is an area which could lead the way for other reforms, simply by amending two or three sections of the relevant acts. And rather than discouraging the family unit, it will strengthen it, because families are not just married couples, but encompass the whole gamut of human relationships, of people living together for their “mutual society, help and comfort”.

TAKE TO THE PAVEMENTS

The BNP can win seats like Heckmondwike where the main parties neglect voters. Have the Liberal Democrats forgotten the sharp end of community politics asks John Smithson

Astonishingly Tim Crowther resigned from both the Labour group and the Council in June and promptly called the by-election where he stood as the Independent. His reasons were "disillusionment with the Labour Party and politics in general." Labour had won every election in Heckmondwike since 1995.

The Conservatives, who ought to have been the main challengers, fought an abysmal campaign with an unpopular and idle candidate delivering one survey attacking us for closing older people's homes and a risograph A4 traditional election address. Labour, who struggled to find a decent candidate, started late but did deliver four leaflets including a glossy election address. They concentrated on attacking us with some reference to the BNP. Crowther put out one letter style leaflet late on crusading for an Independent Movement to sweep away politicians and bring back common sense and a focus on local needs. We put out more than one leaflet per week (seven in all) - mainly A3 apart from the first one, an A4, and the last one, a full colour newspaper. We also delivered a freepost crime survey and various target letters with a blue letter on the Monday before the election, an eve of poll and good morning leaflets. We canvassed most of it, although there were a lot of outs, and did a bit of telephone follow up. There was also the Stop the BNP group, which seemed to be taken over by the Anti-Nazi League, and who put out three leaflets and stuck up posters on bus shelters and other public edifices. Overall I don't think they were helpful to anybody but the BNP.

The BNP put out almost as many leaflets as we did, all risograph A4, A3 and A5 except a traditional A4 glossy black and white election address. They attacked us in the main but did have a go at Labour and Tory as well. They did a tremendous amount of canvassing and followed up thoroughly calling on some houses three or four times.

While we clearly did very well - prior to May 2003 we had just over 10 per cent of the vote - we failed to convince enough people that we really were the only viable alternative to the BNP. Both Labour and Crowther also claimed they were the only alternative. There had been no real election campaigning in this ward for many years - and none from the Lib Dems - and many people were genuinely confused about who to vote for. It was the most intensive and hectic by-election I have ever been part of. Our local teams worked very hard and we had significant support from elsewhere (including Ed Davey who came for two days). I am sure we fought the best possible campaign, and in Tabasum Aslam, who had virtually doubled our vote in May 2003, we had the best

possible candidate. When it was all over, I discussed at some length with Tony Greaves the similarities and differences between this by-election and the one in June in Padiham, Burnley, where the Lib Dems defeated the BNP by 11 votes. Important factors were size (Heckmondwike is around three times as big), no history at all of Lib Dem presence and the former Labour councillor was standing as an Independent. One other key difference was that in the North West they have an office and a telephone bank. They both provided crucial support to ensure that virtually everybody was actually contacted either on the doorstep or by telephone. No such support exists in Yorkshire and Humberside. I find this strange and unacceptable. Why can't our Euro MPs pay for a phone bank regionally? Such things are so often the difference between doing well and actually winning. Heckmondwike has more than 13,000 electors, about 10 per cent of whom are Asian (overwhelmingly Muslim). There are four discrete communities and a wide variety of economic and social backgrounds. The BNP found significant support from three main sources:

- A large unkempt, neglected 1960s council estate, which has probably never been worked politically with everybody arrogantly assuming its residents would always vote Labour. Many residents understandably now feel unwanted and abandoned. Any self-respecting Lib Dem councillor would be ashamed to allow such neglect to continue within their own ward.
- Areas of cheaper, modern private housing full of people who Thatcher seduced into believing that house ownership led to prosperity. They too feel let down and ignored as the Promised Land failed to materialise and are now probably worse off than they were before.
- Estates of comfortable well kept houses inhabited by nice people who don't understand what's happened to society and hark back with rose tinted spectacles to days when everybody behaved properly and were respectable and considerate.

All this adds up to a serious lack of the "feel good factor". They do not feel safe or comfortable any more and blame the political establishment for creating this situation and abandoning them to their fate. The Labour councillors simply were not doing their job.

The lack of any manifestation of genuine concern and desire to put things right by the established political parties has created a fertile feeding ground for the BNP's malicious but plausible theories.

	14 August 2003			May 2003		
BNP	1,607	27.7%	+27.7			
LibDem	1,493	25.8%	+3.9	901	21.9%	+10.5
Ind	1,147	19.8%	+19.8			
Lab	982	16.9%	-22.9	1,634	39.8%	-10.5
Con	490	8.5%	-22.9	1,291	31.4%	-1.2
Green	76	1.3%	-5.6	282	6.9%	+1.2
%Poll	43.8%			31.2%		

This is certainly true in Heckmondwike where no councillor or party would seem to have taken any initiative to have the place cleaned up, pavements repaired, street lights lit or open spaces looked after. This is simple bread and butter stuff but one of the main ways in which in the past we have made inroads into Labour and Tory heartlands. The fact that hitherto we have not had any self-starter in Heckmondwike or the resources to parachute in tells its own story.

Tabasum Aslam, our candidate, has now changed this and we have included Heckmondwike as a target ward for the full council elections next June.

We must however recognise that a fair number of people who have voted Lib Dem in the past have recently voted BNP. There is clearly a danger of us being seen as part of the establishment, especially and logically in areas where we run the council.

While much could be said about the activities of the *Daily Mail* and other such newspapers, to me it misses the point. It certainly does not help but there needs to be at least a kernel of truth in the stories for them to take hold.

It is not that all the electorate are largely or strongly racist (although some certainly are) or discriminatory in that sense, but they know things aren't right and have seen the outcome of much of the government's special funding such as SRB and now Neighbourhood Renewal Funding. It seems to them that it is always somebody else who gets a slice of the action while they never get anything. The key culprit in this shambles is the Labour Government. We can change that in time but when we do we must have effective policies and processes to put in place. I knew David Blunkett when he was chair of social services in Sheffield. I had a lot of respect for him: he was clear thinking, knew what people wanted and needed, and enthusiastically drove that agenda forward.

Now he's lost it and has become fearful and timid and, like much of this government's agenda, he has succumbed to appeasement. The very phrase "asylum seeker" is an insult to humanity. What is needed is a clear transparent approach towards people who wish to come and live in our country: the terms on which they can gain residential entry, what they are and are not entitled to when they arrive, a rapid transparent process to determine the outcome, and humane treatment and consideration throughout.

There is also far too much mystery and complication about the whole benefits systems and processes. No wonder the tales are legion about the vast sums that

people from abroad are given (as opposed to the long-suffering inhabitants) and the wonderful support and services they receive. We know this is all nonsense but what simple process is there to prove it to the person in the street? There is an urgent need to rectify this situation, to ensure that those in need do get proper support and everybody can see that the proverbial spongers are excluded.

Local government carries many cans for central government. It is cynically and deliberately under funded and given ever more responsibilities for which it simply has not the resources to cope. These are often about environmental matters such as getting rid of old fridges and dealing with waste and dereliction – the very things which are often at the heart of peoples' discontent. Until local councils' funding is properly independent of central government and the powers they have are commensurate with the responsibilities they are given, local dissatisfaction will grow ever greater. It is the reverse of the tale of the harlot – we have responsibilities without the means or the power to fulfil them.

But there are things we can and must do as local Liberal Democrat councillors and activists.

Our great tradition – for which we have been lambasted and derided by other parties – is that of being "pavement politicians." Never has it been so abundantly clear that that is precisely what is required to combat the evil of neglect and decay in our communities and on our estates. This does not just mean doing the casework and getting the grot spot cleaned up, it also means engaging with people and getting the message across as to what is preventing us from doing all those so obvious things that would improve matters significantly. We need to attack the real establishment (ie this dreadful Labour Government) vigorously and consistently and say how we would do it differently. Perhaps too many of us have felt we have moved on from – or even above – such relatively mundane matters. In particular those of us who are responsible for running councils – tempting as it is to focus on major issues and council wide initiatives – cannot in any case afford to neglect our roots for they have a terrible habit of coming back to haunt us.

We need to reassert our pride and commitment in working with ordinary folk to get the pavements mended, the rubbish cleared away, the streets cleaned, the graffiti removed. By continuing to do this consistently and thoroughly we will do as much as anything to destroy the breeding grounds of discontent on which the BNP currently feed.

PIGGIES GO TO MARKET

The Liberal Democrats' commerce policy paper contains almost nothing a Tory could object to, and should be thrown out, argues Andrew Toye

Following criticism that Charles Kennedy had been too quiet in the early summer, the leader of the Liberal Democrats burst into activity to announce the interim findings of the report into devolution and paying for public services, written by his treasury spokesperson's deputy, David Laws.

The media reported that this will form a central plank of the manifesto. In a speech to the think-tank, the Social Market Foundation, Kennedy proposed the abolition or merger of eight Government departments, the shrinkage of central government, and the devolution of power to the English regions.

Fine, we should think; we all believe in devolution, don't we? And, to offset the costs involved in setting-up new regional administrations, it would be sensible to plan some hollowing-out of the centre. The problem with this report is that it is not just about devolution and finding more money for the NHS.

In an address which was surprisingly dogmatic in parts, Kennedy proposed the saving of approximately £5bn. from Whitehall departments to concentrate on front-line services such as health and education.

Departments singled-out for the knife included the Department for Trade and Industry (a "corporatist relic"), and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. This was spun by the Guardian as a new strategy of trying to appeal to wavering Tory voters, rather than disillusioned Labour supporters (which is not our agreed strategy), and trying to perform the New Labour trick of (apparently) raising new spending money without increasing the income tax rates that were set by the last Tory government.

By an amazing co-incidence, the commerce working group had just issued a triumphantly free-market report, *Setting Business Free* proposing exactly the same thing.

The DTI and DCMS apparently represent "producer interests", and the Lib Dems were about to arrive, like St George on horse-back, to rescue the "consumer" from these corporatist dragons.

A new Department for Consumer Affairs would promote competition, deregulation and free markets (sound somewhat familiar?) The paper throws in a few crumbs of comfort for wavering representatives: on sustainability, employee consultation, and prosecutions for corporate killing; but goes on to further restrict the right to strike with compulsory arbitration in some sectors. Three years ago, we were honoured to welcome former TUC General Secretary, John Monks to our

conference. I wonder what our new friends in the trade union movement will think of us now.

Of course consumer protection is important - no-one likes being ripped off - but there is more to life than being a consumer. "Producers" are merely consumers who work for a living, and surely deserve as much dignity and respect at work as they do when they go shopping. Individuals are also members of communities, and to "get on our bikes" and go to where the work is, has led to the appalling geographical imbalance and fragmented communities that we have seen over the last 20 years or so.

Civil servants too are only human, and many earn well below the national average wage. Some will not find it easy to find new jobs, or move to regional centres hundreds of miles away. Redundancies and relocations should therefore be carried out in as sensitive a manner as possible, and phased over time. The Government should avoid large-scale lay-offs during recessions, or in unemployment black spots. Thatcherism had a devastating impact on communities, and left large numbers of people unemployed and excluded. To many, describing the 1980s as a decade-long consumer shopping bonanza sounds like a sick joke.

What is worrying about the tone of the spending review is the fascination for a neo-Victorian philosophy (William Gladstone seems to get a mention whenever party leaders propose a shift to the right), and, in the Commerce Paper, the gung-ho drum-beating in favour of "economic liberalism", an obvious reversal of the Liberal Democrats', and predecessor parties', economic thinking throughout much of the last century. Limits on the market boil down to sustainability, intervention to ensure competition, the regulation of natural monopolies, and the necessity of taxation to pay for public services. There are not many Conservatives who would disagree with these very basic limitations.

Treasury spokesperson, Matthew Taylor, complained about Government inaction over manufacturing in an article on the Lib Dem website entitled "*Manufacturing: No Recovery, No Action, No Plans*" (10 July). He concluded: "Gordon Brown's complacency on the economy is threatening jobs, investment and growth."

Strange then, that he (or rather, his deputy) would also propose the abolition of the one department devoted to intervention, and to slashing industrial grants; relying instead on the mystical benevolence of market forces to save manufacturing jobs. (Just who is in charge of the Treasury brief, exactly, Taylor or Laws?)

The complete abolition of the DTI takes laissez-faire to its natural conclusion. Michael Heseltine famously promised to intervene 'before breakfast, before lunch and before dinner'. The commerce paper seems to be an attempt to outflank the Tories on the free market.

Other objections to the commerce paper are the privatisation of the Post Office (the complaint about the previous arrangement was the "siphoning-off" of profits by the Treasury; a privatised Post Office would surely "siphon-off" profits for its shareholders), and the insertion of sunset clauses in new Statutory Instruments affecting business – the risk is that perfectly sensible rules could fall by the wayside due to lack of time or parliamentary filibustering. Deregulation by default like this is also undemocratic.

Finally, this shows the limits of devolution. The economic drift from north to south-east is a national problem, and demands action by national government. Regional authorities will naturally serve the interests of their own residents, and will not have much regard for the bigger picture.

The "corporatist relic", the DTI, should set to work as a matter of urgency in addressing the economic crisis in the north, and as a side-effect, alleviating the housing crisis in the south. And allowing regions to reject regional weighting on minimum wages would obviously lead to Tory regions setting lower wages and trying to compete for business on that basis.

Devolution, yes, but there are surely more ways than one of devolving power to the regions. A large number of Liberal Democrats have been sympathetic to the ideas of Keynes and Beveridge, and the more recent ideas of Will Hutton, which involve intervention in the economy to promote employment and social justice (such as 'stakeholder capitalism'.) They surely require the retention of a trade and industry department of some description. Despite the constant whingeing of the CBI and IOD, Hutton points out that Britain is in fact the most lightly regulated economy in the European Union.

A question will arise in future as to how the federal party is supposed to make policy in the context of a control-freakish Treasury team armed with this report, if it is adopted.

Any culture working group will make policy in the shadow of a Treasury team that thinks its department should be abolished.

Alleviating poverty and feeding the hungry is highly commendable, but it is perfectly legitimate for Government to promote the arts, culture and sport. This

is food for the soul, and promoting sport has a knock-on effect of improving health. An employment group will be expected to pursue a "liberal deregulatory approach" (*Setting Business Free*, page 13, Para. 3.3.1, bullet point 2. I refuse to accept that "liberal" and "deregulatory" should necessarily go together.)

What would have happened if the commerce group had reached a different conclusion? This sounds horribly like New Labour. Or perhaps the co-incidence of thought between the commerce working group and the spending review was genuine. Members may have swallowed the argument that, as a Government minister put it, "We are in the consumer age whether people like it or not", and are frightened of being burned at the stake by Anne Robinson.

At Brighton last year, the party leadership told us not to be 'dogmatic' over public service provision, and to consider 'what works'. Point taken, but with the triumphalistic rhetoric over the commerce paper ("taking pride in economic liberalism" is the title of the introductory chapter), it is now they who are being dogmatic. This paper regrets the drift towards a market society, but with its narrow and simplistic view of the individual as half of an economic equation (the consumer), it does little to reverse this process. It sounds curiously out-of-place for Charles Kennedy, who hates yah-boo politics, to speak the rhetoric of producer-bashing. We might note that Southport MP John Pugh suggested in 2001 that there should be a swear-box for people who use such language. We may have moved on from yah-boo politics, but only as far as yah-boo economics.

It appears that the three main parties are running an ideological cartel between them, leaving faith in the free market as a monopolistic ideology and denying consumers the choice of any alternative.

I believe that the Liberal Democrats should promote an alternative, based on the thinking of JK Galbraith, JM Keynes, Will Hutton and others, and in the meantime reject or refer back the Commerce Paper.

PEACE OF THE ACTION

The Liberal Democrat Peace and Security Group has reconstituted itself with some challenging questions for both sides of the argument about Iraq, says Simon Kovar

'War terrorises,' a Liberal election pamphlet declared simply in 1929, and therefore to fight against it 'is to be the champion of freedom.'

In contemporary western societies, war can be debated in the abstract. It is something that happens to other people, in far away countries of which we know, on the whole, very little. Instead of the (obvious) equation of war with terror, we are told that wars are needed to fight terror.

Perhaps because of this detachment, the debates preceding the war in Iraq took place in an air of unreality. It appeared as if we were contemplating an upcoming sporting event, the outcome of which might determine the career prospects of one or two politicians, but with little sense that the consequences for others might be somewhat more severe. The war itself was played out on our television screens, complete with 'briefings' from the opposing teams, elaborate computer graphics, and commentary from academic and military pundits.

The air of unreality extended into the Liberal Democrat conference hall. In Brighton (2002), we passed a motion urging that any military action be 'designed to avoid as far as possible civilian casualties.'

Resolutions of this kind are an easy exercise in conscience massage, but they are intellectually and morally dishonest. Wars terrorise and kill innocent people – the casualties of policies and decisions on which they had no say and no vote. This simple and self-evident fact must give pause for thought to those based in a political tradition which trumpets the principle of consent. What mattered in the run up to war was not whether we hoped that civilian casualties could be avoided 'if possible' – the design of military action was outside our control – but whether or not we were prepared to stand up and be counted in opposition to the war itself. By this measure we were, ultimately, found lacking.

The debates in Parliament revolved around questions of process and legality. The Liberal Democrat critique did not centre on the morality of war. Rather, we were concerned with the hoops that needed to be jumped through before war could become acceptable.

When Charles Kennedy was asked to state his position, he said that he was 'not pro- or anti-war, but pro-parliament' – and, of course, pro-United Nations. Even this stance – a non-position on the war itself, but at least a defence of international law – was abandoned once the bombs began to fall.

One can draw a distinction between support for a war and support for our armed forces personnel who are

being placed in harm's way. But this should not be the same as saying that there is no place for protest once war is underway. If nothing else, such protest is necessary on behalf of our armed forces. The point at which people actually start getting killed seems as important a point as any to voice dissent – to exert pressure for a speedy cessation of violence and to make it harder for this or future governments to venture down similar paths in future. Instead, our credibility was damaged by a position which appeared to support war in practice when we had opposed it in principle.

This represented an abrogation of political leadership at a time when large numbers of people, who were strangers to the somewhat narrow world of conventional party politics, were being politicised. Not least among these were the many young people who left their schools to take part in a 'party for peace' in Parliament Square. One of their number said that she wanted the 'party for peace' to take place inside Parliament, not outside. Clearly the Liberal Democrats were not the answer to her prayers. We should ask ourselves why.

The Iraq war poses larger and longer-term challenges for our party. Party policy paper Number 35 Global Responses to Global Problems (2000) argues that our commitment to universal, inalienable human rights provides a moral justification for an interventionist foreign policy, and that national state sovereignty is a lesser principle when set against 'gross and persistent abuses of human rights, the denial of the right to peaceful co-existence of nations and communities or wilful and widespread environmental damage.'

Yet the paper does not succeed in mapping out a coherent picture of how such an approach can be implemented in practice, particularly in the context of an uneven distribution of global power. How can we avoid the challenge of double standards, with one law for the weak and another for the strong?

In recent years, our party has not been notably averse to supporting military interventions. In 1998, our MPs supported military action against Iraq, even in the absence of specific United Nations authorisation. On 17 February 1998, Menzies Campbell told the House of Commons: "it is my considered view that there is no further legal reason for a Security Council resolution before military action is commenced," since Iraq was in violation of its ceasefire obligations. On 17 December 1998, he told the Commons: "When considering the legal basis of the action, we must look at the body of resolutions as a whole and not seek to fasten on to one particular resolution or describe it or any

other as deficient." This same position, in the circumstances of 2003, would have ruled out any need for Security Council Resolution 1441, let alone a further resolution specifically endorsing military action.

Recent developments in Iraq and UK domestic politics appear to have greatly strengthened, albeit retrospectively, the case against the war. But there are challenging questions for those who opposed as well as for those who supported military action in Iraq.

In a recent interview, an American soldier was asked to comment on the demonstrations taking place in Iraq against the failure of the 'coalition' to restore basic services. He replied that at least Iraqis could now protest without fear of being shot. This remark can easily be condemned as insensitive and glib. Yet it raises an important question for those who claim to believe in the universality of democracy and human rights.

Is it right to argue that the removal of dictatorship is an insignificant gain? Are liberal democratic freedoms of no value in the absence of social and economic security? I do not mean to suggest for one moment that we should take at face value American or British claims that democracy is on the way in Iraq. However, I do want to challenge those who, in adopting an anti-war perspective, seem ready to deny that democracy and human rights are of universal applicability. Ready references to the 'Arab street' are a case in point. Colonial mindsets are not the preserve of the hawks. The arguments of writers such as Christopher Hitchens and Nick Cohen deserve serious consideration, even if we disagree with some of their conclusions.

It is difficult to think of a more dangerous state power than the power to wage war, and therefore a more pressing case for Liberals to insist on holding such power to account in an international and domestic context.

The American right's professed belief in 'small government' might apply to health care and environmental regulation. It does not apply to the

acquisition and use of military power. War may at times be justified in order to combat tyranny. Examples might include Europe in the 1930s and 1940s and India's intervention in East Pakistan in 1971. But war as a means seldom promotes Liberal ends, and the casualties of war are not for the most part those who can fairly be held responsible for the decisions which prompted the violence. We need to consider and debate these questions, and the reconstituted Peace and Security Group is a welcome vehicle to ensure that they stay on the agenda.

I referred earlier to the fact that large numbers of people were politicised by the Iraq war. I count myself among their number. At one level, this seems an odd thing to say. I studied politics at university and have been involved in party political activity for over 10 years. Yet, as events unfolded in the run up to war, I felt unrepresented. This was not simply a question of whether my party was voting for or against war. It was the absence of that political quality which inspires spontaneous standing ovations after speeches, rather than the usual mechanical applause. On this issue (as with others), the political initiative drained away from elected politicians and on to the streets.

It was by taking part in the various peace demonstrations, not listening to speeches in the House of Commons, that I felt inspired by the capacity of politics to change things for the better. Will the next 'party for peace' take place inside Parliament or outside? In either case, the Liberal Democrats should be at the heart of it, not wringing our hands on the sidelines.

For more detail on Liberal Democrats for Peace & Security contact Gareth Epps, 1 The Green, Charlbury, Oxford OX7 3QA; email garethepps@cix.co.uk

A SHORT HISTORY OF POLITICAL VIRGINITY



Cartoons by Chris Radley caricaturing the '80s rise and merge of the SDP - as exhibited in June at Gallery 33 and reviewed in August's liberator 289 - still available for sale.

To view: contact Maria Linforth-Hall
Gallery 33 - on 020 7407 8668
or email marvasol@btconnect.com

Passports to Liberty 5

The latest in the series of booklets designed to promote debate on Liberal issues comprises Liberals and the global economy, by Bernard Salmon and Defending Families, by Jonathan Calder.

Bernard Salmon is a journalist and Inverness councillor and has written a persuasive essay on economics, Liberal Democrat policy, which contributes to the fair trade debate and is also a good introduction for those new to the issues.

Jonathan Calder is a member of the Liberator Collective, a columnist in Liberal Democrat News and member of the Federal Policy Committee. His provocative essay takes a sceptical approach to the rise of professionals and gives concerns and pointers for Liberals concerned about children, parents and families.

This is the fifth in the Passports to Liberty pamphlet series edited and produced by Bill le Breton and Kiron Reid. Former writers include Conrad Russell, David Boyle, Jackie Ballard, Jeremy Chowings, Alex Wilcock and John Tilley.

Copies are available price £3.50 from Liberator stall at conference or by email from the editors (not from Liberator) at kiron@cix.co.uk

TAKE POWER

Liberal Democrat councillors should ignore Labour's failed local government reform and resurrect the committee system, says Lewisham's Matthew Huntbach

The aspect of the Local Government Act 2000 that gained most public attention was its promotion of directly elected executive mayors.

Relatively few councils chose to be run by an executive mayor, however the novelty of this possibility overshadowed the fact that the Act forced all councils, with the exception of a few smaller ones and one other which escaped through a loophole, to change their democratic structures.

Previously, power in a council was formally shared equally among all councillors. Under the 2000 Act, power in day-to-day decision making in councils has to be concentrated in a committee, termed the 'executive' of no more than ten councillors, while the rest of the councillors exercise an 'overview and scrutiny role'.

In those councils with a directly elected executive mayor, the mayor picks the councillors who will form the executive. In the others, the council chooses from itself who will form the executive. There is no requirement that the executive is representative of the council as a whole, indeed the assumption and usual practice is that if a single political party has a majority in the council, it will take all the seats on the executive.

The argument for this was that it is 'modern'. When people argue for something on the grounds that it is 'modern', it generally indicates a lack of convincing arguments and a determination to win by bullying or belittling objectors.

More charitably, the argument was that placing all decision-making in the hands of a small committee of councillors would be more efficient, and would lead to 'joined up thinking'. This replaced the committee system where the decision-making powers of the council were devolved to a collection of committees, each of which covered a portion of the council's work.

The supposedly clearer nature of decision-making under the new system was supposed to re-invigorate local government, leading to better decisions and making more people wish to participate in it as voters and candidates for election.

The role left for councillors not on the executive was described as 'scrutiny'. Freed of responsibility for day-to-day decision-making, they would conduct in-depth analyses of the council's work, and act as 'community champions' of the wards they were elected to represent.

It hasn't worked. The local government press is full of non-executive councillors complaining that, denied a role in decision-making, they feel there is little left to do.

There are widespread reports that it has become harder to find people willing to stand as councillors, and harder to get existing councillors to restand. Few examples of council scrutiny having a decisive impact can be found.

Councils quite obviously have not risen in the public's affection, turnout in local government elections has not risen. The formal process of decision-making in councils with its complexity of 'call-in' procedures is harder to explain than the old system. People are baffled to be told when they lobby their local councillor over some issue that it is pointless because he or she no longer has a decision-making role.

Those of us who have been members of the Liberal Democrats and its predecessors for some time are well aware from bitter experience that debates on constitutional matters are not a way of attracting the interests of the public.

My experience as a councillor concurs with the criticisms of the new system. My authority, Lewisham, as a self-styled 'flagship New Labour council' piloted the executive and scrutiny style of governance from 1999 before councils were forced to adopt it by the 2000 Act, and I now have almost equal experience of this system and the previous committee system.

Under the new system, I find I have much less feel for what is going on than I used to, much less opportunity to pass on the concerns of my constituents into the decision-making process, and am much less able to give informed replies to constituents' queries. The concentration of decision-making means that much that in the past would have received extensive discussion amongst councillors now goes through the executive on the nod or is decided entirely by officers with no public record in a council committee.

Still, the job of a council is surely more to keep the public happy by providing them with the services they need, than to keep councillors happy. So does it matter?

Firstly, if it has not produced better service delivery, it certainly does matter that large amounts of public money have been spent on making these changes.

Secondly, it is a frightening example of the weakness of democratic feeling in this country that this fundamental change to a layer of government should have been pushed through with such specious arguments and lack of public concern or understanding.

Thirdly, it challenges us, as a political movement whose revival depended much on local government as a key part of our theory and practice of community politics, to state our position. It is quite true that most people know and care little what their local council does, and if the reforms of the 2000 Act did nothing to change that, is there anything we could have done differently?

It is often the case that we take good things for granted, fall into stereotypical ways of using them, and fail even to see what they offer. Novel ways of presenting the familiar may open our eyes to possibilities we had not

considered. So it was with community politics as the Liberal Party developed it in the 1970s.

Where local elections had fallen into a routine affirmation of party loyalty, we reminded people that they were actually about local services and the sort of people who represented them, and that they did have the power through the ballot box to throw out those who had taken their allegiance for granted.

We did this by piloting political literature that was radically different from the conventional election address. I was reminded of this when I heard of an experiment where people were given a description of the role of a local councillor without being told what it referred to. They were excited by what they heard and eager to see the introduction of what they assumed was a new concept. Had they been asked what they thought of 'local politicians', their response would have been very different.

It is the image of politics and politicians that serves to prevent people from considering what democracy really means. In particular, political parties, which originated as associations to enable ordinary people to get involved in the political process, now act as a barrier because the image they present is something rather sinister, remote from the lives of ordinary people, and dangerous to get involved with. We in the Liberal Democrats need to be concerned about whether we too portray that image.

The importance of local government here is that councillors should not be seen as of some remote political class, but rather ordinary people living ordinary lives. It is a role that should not require any special knowledge, just basic common sense and an empathy with those the councillor represents.

Neither of the roles in the executive/scrutiny split of councillors of the 2000 Act fits in with this. Councillors elected to represent the people should not necessarily be expected to have either the administrative skills to perform the executive role, nor the investigative skills to perform the scrutiny role.

The reality is that councils already had an executive, headed by a person who is appropriately called the chief executive. There was no need to promote an artificial divide between councillors, giving some an 'executive' role, when the real divide between those running the council is between the appointed officers and the elected representatives.

It is quite right that day-to-day decisions on service provisions should be made by professional officers appointed for their skill and knowledge in their particular area. It is quite right also that the elected representatives should collectively have the final say on all decisions, and that officers should need to present their case and obtain agreement on decisions they have initiated. Good councillors should have a specialist knowledge of the area they are elected to represent, and an empathy with the people of that area, guaranteed by their electoral success, which can naturally be fed into council decision making in a top-down way in making major proposals, and in a bottom-up way in suggesting minor changes to routine service delivery.

There are two pits into which this system can fall. One is that elected representatives rarely challenge the officers or provide constructive input, treating the council as a social club, enjoying the trappings of office without seriously exercising judgement.

The other is for the representatives to intervene inappropriately, rejecting the advice of professional

officers on flimsy grounds, possibly due to a political ideology which has lost contact with reality, or possibly to hand out rewards to supporters. Clearly it is a matter of political judgement in electing representatives to avoid those who would fall into either pit.

Much local government work is mundane, but it seems to me that the best way in which it can be scrutinised is for it to be presented in full for agreement to elected representatives in a format which is formally decision-making. It should be up to those representatives to decide which areas to question in detail before agreeing, and the power to veto and ask for alternative proposals is essential.

This where I see 'scrutiny' as suggested in the 2000 Act failing to scrutinise. Without the overview provided by scrutiny being in a formal decision-making process, it is difficult to know which questions to ask.

My experience of 'scrutiny' under the new system is that I am denied the full overview of the council's work I used to get under the old committee system, and directed into areas to scrutinise rather than given the choice myself. It is notable that, where scrutiny has worked, it has been through the involvement of experienced councillors who use the knowledge they obtained through previous experience with the committee system. If new style scrutiny is to be undertaken, I suggest that is a role for a small committee of experienced councillors working in conjunction with external contractors with specialist knowledge, possibly through experience as officers in another council. It is not a job for newly elected councillors.

New Labour's 'local government modernisation' has been a quite spectacular failure, achieving the exact reverse of its stated aims.

There is no need for Liberal Democrats to go along with it. In the long term we need to investigate how we run local government, and I feel the key to building involvement is not structures of governance but how we interact with the public in political campaigning.

In the short term, however, we can show our contempt for the failed reforms by refusing to accept them. New Labour in my council ran an executive system under the old legislation which still formally dictated the committee system. We could do the opposite, and run what is effectively a committee system, once again giving all councillors a meaningful role, by setting up informal structures and leaving the executive structure dictated by the 2000 Act as a formality.

DON'T SHOVE IT DOWN MY THROAT

Flouridation is not just a breach of civil liberties, it is the mass administration of a poison, says pharmacist and Liverpool councillor Paul Clein

In May 1999, Frank Dobson ordered a “once and for all” review of water fluoridation from York University. This would be, we were told, incontestable “by anyone who was at all interested in evidence” and would give the green light to mass fluoridation. All animal studies and all research papers showing the effects of fluoride not derived from fluoridation schemes were excluded from the review. This was a blatant attempt to try to fix the outcome. Even so, the York review was properly done within these limitations.

Unfortunately for Uncle Frank, when it reported, the review showed the Fluoridistas had lied to us for over 40 years. After trawling the literature world wide, the main findings were:

- The claimed 50% or more reduction in tooth decay turns out to be an average of, er, 14.6%. In Liverpool, that would mean one third of one tooth less decay per child. Not a lot is it?
- The evidence base was “surprisingly weak” - which didn't surprise me at all - and “of poor quality”.
- There was no evidence of the claimed “lifelong benefits”.
- There was very little evidence of any reduction in health inequalities - supposedly the *raison d'être* of this made policy - and what there was is “weak, contradictory and unreliable”. It does not disproportionately benefit poor children.
- The claimed “hundreds of studies” showing the safety and efficacy of water fluoridation turned out to be 37 (out of the 214 admitted into the review) and none are of good quality. Not a single one.
- Long term safety could not be guaranteed.
- No clear evidence of any ill effects ... except that 48% of people in fluoridated areas suffer from dental fluorosis and in a quarter of those this would cause “concern”. So 1 in 8 will get brown or pitted teeth, which for many can only be disguised by application of veneers every four or five years. Not available on the NHS of course - if you can find an NHS dentist - but only £200 or so per tooth. But don't worry - pro-fluoride dentists classify these teeth as sound.
- There is a need for much more high quality research before any extension of fluoridation should be considered.

What should have happened after the publication in October 2000 should have been a concession by the Government that, well yeah, the evidence isn't that good, it doesn't do what it says on the box, the cranks were right, let's abandon the fluoridation schemes we've got and try something else.

On the basis of the York Review - their “once and for all” review - you shouldn't give fluoridated water to a dog.

So (of course) they spun it. New Labour claimed that this review proved fluoridation was safe and effective. This isn't what the scientists who carried it out say and they have protested to health ministers about the misrepresentation of their results.

Now Blair wants to fluoridate all of our public water supplies by the backdoor method of an amendment to the Water Bill allowing Strategic Health Authorities to compel this mass poisoning - after ‘consultation’ of course.

Those of us involved in the previous ‘consultation’, when Liverpool City Council and both local CHCs (not that we'll have those much longer) voted unanimously against, the health authority still requested it. Wisely, North West Water took the view that local opinion was opposed. They won't be able to do that next time. I confidently predict that every SHA will request compulsory fluoridation regardless of whatever evidence comes up in “consultation”.

They call it ‘fluoride’ but it is actually Hexafluorosilicic Acid, an impure waste by-product of superphosphate fertiliser manufacture, which in its concentrated form is extremely corrosive and dangerous. When a tanker load spilled in Florida a few years ago, it dissolved the freeway and the fumes put dozens in hospital.

As the use - many would say overuse - of these fertilisers proliferated, it created a major problem for the manufacturers. What could they do with this appalling waste by-product, expensive and dangerous to handle and difficult to render harmless? Some bright spark in the US Environmental Protection Agency came up with the idea of using it to fluoridate public water supplies instead of the impure sodium fluoride solution which they used to derive from aluminium smelting. Some didn't like it because of its other use as rat poison. Result - two birds apparently killed with one stone. What a scam.

The only legal status for this panacea is in part 2 of the 1972 Poisons Act - alongside such delights as arsenic, mercury and Paraquat - wherein it is licensed - in its pure form - as an insecticide.

Every other substance administered to humans in the UK for medicinal purposes has to meet the stringent

safety and purity criteria of the Medicines Control Agency – except this one. Could this be because the York review couldn't find any safety studies of administration of this poison to humans despite their world wide search? Thank goodness our British 'fluoride', like our British radioactivity, is completely wholesome, harmless, unlike the foreign rubbish.

In 1994 the World Health Organisation, which supports fluoridation, warned "Dental and public health administrators should be aware of the total fluoride exposure in the population before introducing any additional fluoride programme for caries prevention."

I have repeatedly asked the DoH for their research showing the nation wide levels of this background exposure. This hasn't been done.

Fluoridation is compulsory mass medication and represents the removal of freedom of choice from the consumer, which is probably illegal under common law.

In English Law, medical treatment without consent is only allowed by a court order or for the mentally ill or for minors with the consent of their guardians. Fluoridation is imposed without the permission of the recipient. In addition, we are dealing here with a medication widely available – by choice – in toothpastes and mouthwashes or as tablets and drops.

This is not about mere civil liberties. Fluoridation is also a breach of parts 3, 5, 8 and 17 of the UK Human Rights Act, Article 35 of the European Charter of Fundamental Human Rights and of the EU Codified Pharmaceuticals Directive as well as other legislation.

Should you be worried? You betcha! Fluorides and silicofluorides are cumulative poisons. One US reference book ranks fluoride in the toxicity Premier League immediately between arsenic and lead. There is an increasing amount of it from a variety of sources already sloshing round our eco-system and our food chain. It is naturally present in tea, fish and other natural and processed foods and also in tobacco, in car exhaust fumes (30ppb), as superphosphate fertiliser residues in food if you live in a fluoridated area can be absorbed through the skin when you bathe or shower.

Make no mistake – this is not a subject where an objective search for scientific truth is the norm – this is a propaganda war, where large amounts of taxpayers money are used to press the case for this failed measure.

Despite 70% of the USA being fluoridated, including just about every major city, 84% of US 17 year olds have tooth decay with an average of 11 affected surfaces. For black, low income and Native American children (the vulnerable groups fluoridation is supposed to help most),



Evil Fluoride - The Truth-Fairy (Sand picture at LD Spring Conference 1995)

there is 65%, 91% and 265% more untreated tooth decay than their peers. Aren't they drinking the magic water?

I'm ashamed to say that there are Liberal Democrat MPs and peers who support this dangerous, illiberal and illegal nanny state nonsense, including some of our health spokespersons.

Regrettably, Patsy Calton, Evan Harris, Matthew Taylor, Robert Maclennan and Andrew Stunell and all fluoridistas. They're not going to let mere evidence interfere with their prejudices.

Water fluoridation is a fig leaf policy to disguise the failure of this Government to provide NHS dental services or reverse the Tory cuts in the school dental service. This failed policy has been either tried and abandoned or banned by the French (1963), Dutch (1976) and Swiss (2003). Going by the Dutch experience, if fluoridation stopped in the West Midlands tomorrow, half a million people would immediately start feeling better. And surely there are better ways of tackling tooth decay than putting contaminated industrial waste in our water? I can think of several alternative strategies.

What should you do? Firstly, write to your MP. Second write to your local Strategic Health Authority and ask them what scientific research they have to show how much fluoride people in your area are already ingesting – they won't know – and why they want to poison you without knowing this basic information. Thirdly, write and inform your water provider that you don't want medication through the tap and formally withdraw your consent. And if you can afford it, join the National Pure Water Association (www.npwa.freeserve.co.uk) and help fight this menace.

WAGES OF SPIN

The public will not stand for manipulation, says David Boyle

Spin is one thing. Spin to ease along the passage to war – with the tens of thousands of deaths on either side that result – is quite another.

But behind what happens to a prime minister who, whoever unwittingly, made that cardinal mistake – colluding in the vilification of honest competent men like Hans Blix – lies a wider issue: is there such a thing as politics, where spin doesn't happen?

At one level this is unanswerable. At another, though, this is a question that seems to emerge increasingly every time we vote.

"Lib Dem leader Charles Kennedy showed us what was possible during the election campaign," wrote the trade secretary Patricia Hewitt in 2001. "Being right is more important than being 'on message' if the message conceals more than it reveals. We will have to find a different way of campaigning, a different kind of conversation with the voters."

And in the USA, the dream of 'real politicians' emerged briefly during the primaries for the 2000 election, when the utterly natural John McCain for a while threatened the slick, scripted, artificial charm of George W Bush.

Both Blair and Bush are slick extremes in the opposite direction. Blair because he was prepared to force through a war of dubious legality which he had agreed in advance with the Pentagon – or so former members of his cabinet say.

Bush because he even has the word "wow!" on his teleprompter – not to mention the word 'rats' which appeared subliminally on his TV adverts.

They both seem to have encouraged the emergence of what might be called 'real politics', still undefined – still a distant hope among the supposedly cynical non-voters – but nonetheless powerful for all that.

Real politics is honest. It tackles real issues – not just the ones that fit neatly into existing government demarcations, or which might play well in the House of Commons. It speaks clearly and unambiguously.

Above all, it is able to see beyond the Big Westminster Lie, which has so many Tory and Labour hopefuls in its grip – that somehow Westminster is a powerful place to be, and that the world's ills can be tackled there.

Actually, of course, Westminster politicians can make a difference – by inspiring people or bringing them together, but not until they see through the Big Lie, and decentralise power to people who are at the front line. Targets, centralised budgets, rigid bureaucracies all have to go – the basic truth the government can't grasp.

Where Liberal Democrats manage to achieve that, at local and national level – their distinctiveness is apparent, and they are successful.

The truth is that this is a bigger idea than it seems at first sight. What with dodgy dossiers, GM food, marketing databases of six-year-olds – when nearly every public discourse is managed or spun in some way – there is a growing hunger for what is perceived as authentic. For anything that has no hidden agenda, which is what it seems, which conceals no hidden manipulation.

That's why we are seeing the rise of real food, real beer, real music, real culture – as well as the revival of poetry, of organic food, free-range eggs, unmixed music, unpackaged travel, ethical business, and much more.

The large minority who are driving this movement – possibly up to half of the population – are of course quite happy to eat occasionally at McDonalds, consult a virtual doctor, get taught over the internet: they are not puritans. But they would defend almost to the death their right to the authentic choice.

And by authentic, they mean human-scale – small human institutions, food grown human-scale by people you can tell stories about, human doctors and teachers – not the virtual approximations that are being foisted on the poor in the name of lower costs. And human politicians, who are not automatons either, but can share real emotions and real understanding.

Lembit Opik has written widely about this kind of authenticity in politics, and he's right. It is the hope in politics that people are looking for, and it isn't something you can fake.

What's more these New Realists are a powerful constituency which mainstream politicians do not yet understand, because they are so stuck in their old ideas of how to make the giant systems work by pulling levers and twiddling knobs.

The trouble is, it didn't matter which side of the iron curtain you lived on for the past generation, you have been pedalled the same inhuman technocratic nonsense by your politicians.

The American philosopher Charlene Spretnak tells the story of a revealing visit she made to Slovakia in 1993. As she drove with members of Slovakia's Green Party from Vienna airport to Bratislava, the driver gestured towards the hideous soulless high rise flats blocks – familiar to anyone in the western world as well as the east – and said: "That's socialism".

Speaking to audiences there later, she reeled off the assumptions of modern politics – that people are simply economic beings, that you 'can't stand in the way of progress', that giant centralised organisations are somehow more efficient.

"This is what you were taught in school, right?" she asked. "It's what I was taught in school too. Even though we were assured in the strongest possible terms that our two systems were almost unimaginably alien to one another!"

The demand for authenticity is partly a response against living in a fake, constructed world, against being manipulated over the airwaves at every moment of the day, against the way virtual communication is cutting out human contact.

It is partly a simple reaction against modernity. But it is also something else: it's a demand for a different kind of life in the century ahead when, for the first time since the industrial revolution, questions about how we are intended to live – and how we should live – become central again.

David Boyle is the author of *Authenticity: Brands, Fakes, Spin and the Lust for Real Life* (Flamingo, £12.99).

STREWTH, GREEN

Dear Liberator

I noticed a comment in a letter from Stockport about recycling, and I thought you might be interested in the experience of my local municipality. (Assuming that all that follows isn't old hat.)

They halved the size of our waste bins, and issued us with two other larger bins. One is for garden waste, which is collected every two weeks, and taken off and mulched. And one is for recycling, split into two halves, one half for paper items and one for cans and plastics. Collected every week.

Anyone requiring a second waste bin has to pay a hefty slug on their rates. Anyone using either of the other two bins for miscellaneous household waste risks being fined. (Mulch is then available for purchase from a Council depot at a reasonable rate. Very helpful in a dry climate, where anything that reduces water usage is critically important.) All this "green-mindedness" is reinforced by regular propaganda from the Council, and in local schools.

It's interesting to see how this mentality has taken hold in an impeccably middle-class suburb. Creating unnecessary waste, (or one step further back, excessive use of packaging from producers), is widely frowned upon and criticised. It seems that "green" issues are issues that the middle class are comfortable being radicalised over.

*Stephen Yolland
Melbourne*

ALL OUT, SEPTEMBER 27th

Dear Liberator

As I believe Liberator itself said of the Lib Dem presence in the anti-war marches of earlier this year - the Trots didn't believe there were so many of us. Those same Trots were confused by Kennedy's message when war finally broke, and will use that against us.

However the war isn't over, even if Blair hides it behind the mask of the Kelly Inquiry. Saturday 27th September in London, sees the first major demonstration against the occupation of Iraq, and the war won't end while the occupation is in place. It would be good to see a strong Lib Dem presence there.

LETTERS

Assemble 12 noon at Hyde Park
(Marble Arch).

*Janice Gwilliam
Tower Hamlets*

GIVE PEACE A CHANCE

Dear Liberator

Housmans is one of what I understand to be a small number of bookshops who sell Liberator. Most readers will probably know us better as Peace News. Like Liberator, we run on a shoestring, probably 15% less than we need.

Over forty years ago, generous individuals made funds available to buy and equip our shop, and since then it has been a resource not only for the British and international peace movement, but for a broad spectrum of radical and alternative groups. Peace groups apart, Gay Switchboard housed their phone lines here for many years and meetings to plan the defence of the McLibel Two took place here weekly during their record breaking three-year libel case.

Well King's Cross is now being tarted up, and we've got a slice of the regeneration fund to refurbish the shop. But we have decided to grasp this once-only opportunity to re-launch 5 Caledonian Road as a resource for the radical movement in the 21st century. Even before the appeal, several people had offered us £1,000 each to start us off. We warmly welcome donations of any size, so please contact us if you think you can help. Cheques can be made out to Peace News Trustees (Housmans Relaunch Appeal), 5 Caledonian Road, London N1 9DY (tel. 020 8673 0670 or email iandixon@btinternet.com)

*David Max McLellan
Islington*

...Continued from Page 9

A new leader should be more selective about the sort of business with whom he allies. Again, he should consider the target demographic, and promote business opportunities for young creative people attempting start-ups, rather than pander to the Poujadism of local Rotarians.

There is also much scope for a new leader to be distinctive in foreign policy. Both Blair and Duncan Smith believe Britain's interests should be subordinated to those of the USA. A Liberal Democrat leader can turn the Eurosceptic argument about 'sovereignty' on its head and challenge the patriotic credentials of the other two parties.

Finally, and most controversially, a new leader can be distinctive and appeal to the target demographic group by making the case for a secular society and insisting that religion is a matter of private conscience. Politicians are afraid to criticise unwarranted religious encroachments for fear of alienating specific religious or ethnic groups. A new leader should not be inhibited but should take on groups such as Christian fundamentalists who are trying to introduce creationism in schools, British Muslims who want to introduce shariah law, or British Jews who support the extremist settler movement. The leader should reject the moral relativism that has let these groups off the hook.

The only valid reason for a leadership election is to provide fresh leadership. At the last leadership election, party members opted for Charles Kennedy because of inertia. Next time, they must vote with their eyes wide open. There is no point electing a new leader if the only noticeable change is in the usage of the leader's office drinks cabinet.

Goodbye Lenin Dir Wolfgang Becker 2003

East Germany was a blot on civilisation – a country that had to wall its citizens in to prevent them fleeing en masse and employ about a quarter of the population to spy on the remainder.

Stalinist apologists say that, without the wall, most of the working population would have left, and so destroyed the DDR's economy. To which the answer is that, if that were true, it didn't deserve to survive.

But as with all dictatorships, it had its supporters who were rewarded with privileges and it had rather more people who just kept their heads down.

When the wall fell, the true believers in communism were left stranded by the DDR's sudden disappearance, and none more so than Christiane Kerner (played by Kathrin Sass) the mother of Alex (Daniel Bruehl), hero of the film.

She suffers a heart attack when she sees police beating her son during one of the riots in the communists' last few weeks, and awakens some months later from her coma in a

REVIEWS

highly delicate state. Doctors warn Alex that any shock could cause a relapse.

Since the country she believed in has meanwhile vanished, Alex insulates her from this shock by creating a fake East Germany in her flat.

How he goes about this provides some very funny moments of near farce, as ever more desperate excuses are invented to keep the world at bay. Alex's life becomes increasingly fraught as he searches for rare supplies of East German foods that no-one now bothers to sell and bribes children to perform communist songs in the flat.

Eventually, Christiane leaves her bed while Alex is asleep and sees for herself the last few weeks of East Germany before reunification, eventually dying a few days after her country. During this time she has a final meeting with her former husband who left for the west many years earlier.

There is a little slack plotting around the reasons for his departure and her reactions to them, but this does not detract from an original and humorous film that also manages to ask some serious questions.

I was in Germany during the spring of 1990, the period covered by the film, and remember something like a closing down sale

of entire country in progress in the east, with stalls flogging off communist tat to raise money to buy long forbidden western goods. The film captures this phenomenon in the background of almost every exterior shot as the Coca-Cola signs go up and the top half of a Lenin statue is removed by a helicopter.

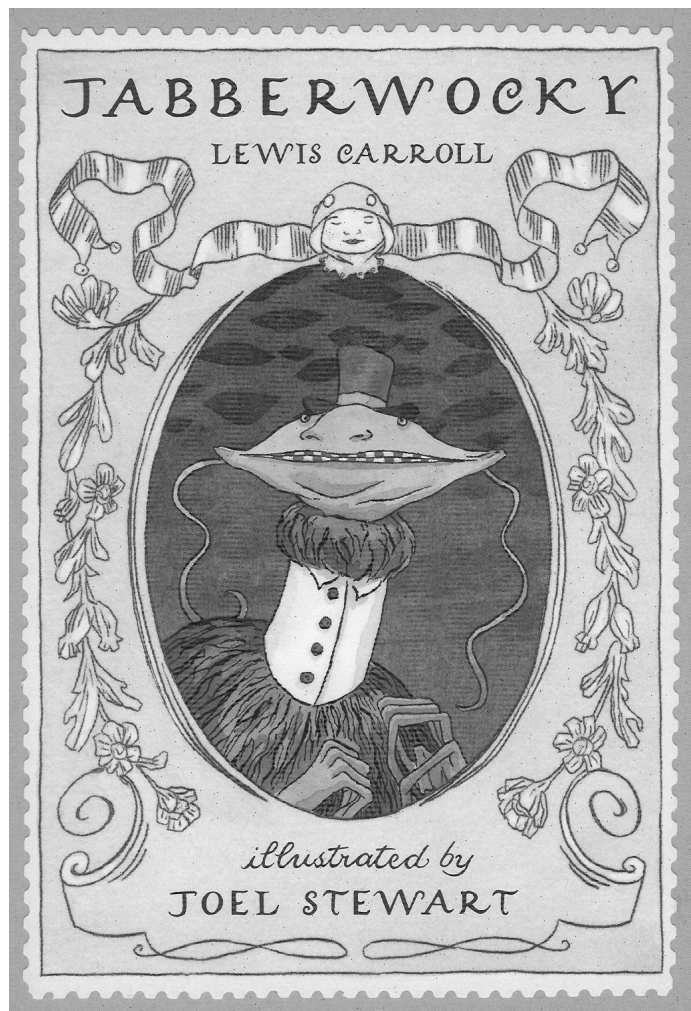
At this time, East marks were still valid, though no-one wanted them; only western cash, and western goods, would do.

But if reunification was looked forward to in the east, I never met anyone who had grown up in the west who regarded East Germany as anything other than a foreign country that promised to be an expensive encumbrance.

Nearly 14 years after the wall fell, the old east remains nowhere near to the old west's prosperity. East Germany is safely far enough away to have sparked a (probably partly ironic) nostalgia for its shoddy goods, poor food but all-enveloping security for those prepared to go along with the political climate.

Millions of its citizens must have accepted that this bargain was on offer and decided to make the best of it, and were then ill-equipped for making choices and taking chances when communism fell. Goodbye Lenin is their story.

Mark Smulian



Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix by JK Rowling Bloomsbury 2003

I haven't heard anything bad about the fifth Harry Potter yarn from a child. Certain 'major' literary figures have been more scathing and, whilst I agree that Rowling is not, nor probably claims to be, a Tolkien or White, nor necessarily a Cooper or Garner, so what?

I think that Alan Garner handles

teenage angst much better, in *The Owl Service*, for example, as does Susan Cooper in *The Dark Rising* series. Cooper develops her alienated youth more consistently over five books than does Rowling, so Harry's rebellion comes as more of a shock and is perhaps less convincing for it.

The books are not noted for their political content. The general view in the *Collective* was that Rowling was a rather conservative writer - given the elitist and hierarchical nature of wizardry, the class stereotypes.

So what of book five? Hermione's House Elf Liberation Front makes little progress, except in a candid remark by Dumbledore somewhere towards the end. But Blairism breaks through... the Ministry of Magic is interfering with schooling - now there's something we're all familiar with.

I daresay that the film makers will be studying *Zero le Conduit* in order to handle the inevitable rebellion. There is scope for more study here - I note a growing body of work on Harry Potter and Christianity, but not yet politics. Since the books are a phenomenal success, and children read them, this matter is important, though I'm not yet convinced that I'll be reading these books in 30 years' time.

Stewart Rayment

Radio Caroline: the Pirate Years **by Ralph Humphries** **Oakwood Press £13.95** **2003**

Turn your radio on and, BBC 3 and 4 apart, what you hear is more likely to have been influenced by Ronan O'Rahilly than by Lord Reith.

It is nearly 40 years since O'Rahilly launched his radio station in international waters off the UK and destroyed the BBC monopoly.

Today, local radio and music stations of all kinds are commonplace and their formats and presentational styles still owe much to the breakthrough of pirate radio.

Before O'Rahilly, one BBC station was the only outlet for music of any kind, except for the BBC classical station. The BBC and the government arrogantly denied that there was any demand for 24-hour pop music, a stance based on little more than a corporatist assumption that they knew better than their customers.

Radio Caroline, and the pirates that followed in its wake, proved this official complacency to be fundamentally wrong. Once the Government outlawed the pirates in 1967 by attacking their supplies and advertising, the BBC was forced into creating Radio 1 (for years a lifeless parody of the pirates), and local radio and commercial stations soon followed.

O'Rahilly seems to have had a romantic streak quite different from the hard-nosed commercial interests behind Caroline's slicker rival Radio

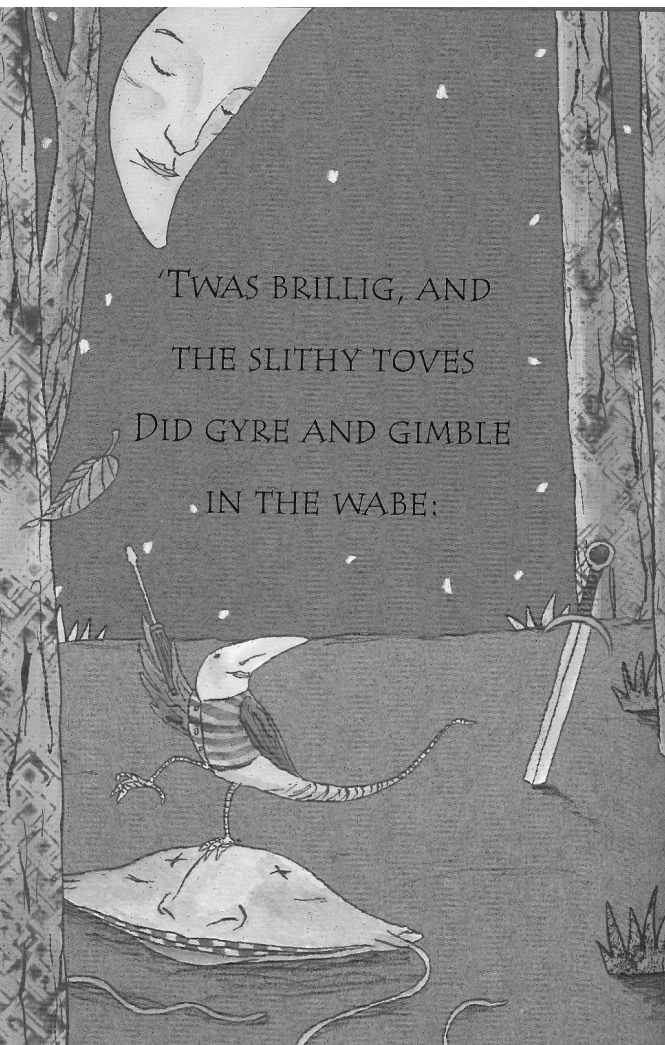
London. These led him to keep Caroline on the air after it became illegal, bring it back on ships several times over, and survive closures, storms, financial problems, official harassment and a sinking.

This is a fascinating story but Humphries has written a fan's book rather than something for the general reader or those interested in the history of either pop music or broadcasting.

The technical details of what transmitter was tested on which wavelength on which night, the damage sustained to different parts of the infrastructure in storms and the exact positions at which the ships anchored will no doubt prove wearisome to all but the most deeply interested.

There are a few howlers. Simon Dee most certainly did not open the station's second day in 1964 with The Beatles' 'All You Need Is Love' a song not recorded until three years later.

Amazingly given its troubled history, Caroline still exists; you can hear it on the internet. But you can hear its influence pretty much everywhere on the dial.



Mark Smulian

Web of Deceit: Britain's Real Role in the World **by Mark Curtis** **Vintage 2003 £7.99**

Britain is an outlaw state. Its government has repeatedly supported elites at home and abroad at the expense of popular movements and democracy. From war in Iraq and Afghanistan, to selling military hardware to Indonesia and overthrowing British Guiana's government, Britain's role in international affairs has been less than savoury.

Mark Curtis' account of British foreign policy suggests the recent justification for war in Iraq is part of a wider picture. In Israel, the British stand accused of siding against the Palestinians, while in Chechnya ministers studiously avoid raising concern at Russian atrocities. Further back, the British went to war to defend the business interests of western rubber companies in Malaysia and conspired to overthrow Iran's government.

As you might expect, the official British position is somewhat

different. Government ministers and officials maintain the lie that Britain acts a force for good. Given this divergence between rhetoric and reality, surely the public can see the contrast between what their political masters claim and what they see on TV, read in their newspapers and hear on the radio?

Not so, claims Curtis. What maintains this distortion is a 'web of deceit', in which the wider political and economic elite including the media, intellectuals, academics and businessmen, helps bolster the official government stance. Taking his cue from Edward Said, Curtis argues the media helps shape the elite consensus, by setting limits and parameters to debate and discussion. Any view or opinion falling outside this arena is therefore labelled 'deviant' and contrary to perceived wisdom.

So far, so conventional as revisionist views go. Yet as an explanation it fails to explain exactly why members of the public are still regularly hoodwinked by government and its cheerleaders. Indeed, levels of trust in politicians and journalists are lower than at any comparable time.

Curtis accepts most ordinary people are wary and suspicious of what they see or read. But there is a real difference between what people observe and what they experience. He suggests that 'foreign policy is different from domestic issues, where you only have to spend time in a hospital or have a child who goes to school, to know the state of public services. But with foreign policy, people are overwhelmingly reliant on news rather than personal experience, which makes indoctrination much easier.'

While this might explain away some of Britain's past actions, including the little known removal of islanders from Diego Garcia so an American-built base

could be located in the Indian Ocean, it fails to explain why one million people marched through London against possible war against Iraq.

In reality the world is getting smaller. While news accessibility may have been limited in the past, the growth of alternative media outlets, from IndyMedia to Al-Jazeera, mean people have more choice than ever. And while ordinary people may not be directly involved in the events they witness, the rise in news service availability has been complemented with on-the-spot reporting, bringing distant events live into people's sitting rooms.

Curtis would like to see Britain join the side of the angels. Only by massive public pressure does he believe the public can force official thinking to change, from defending elite interests at the expense of democracy and fairer economic policies for all. In doing so, Britain will be less at risk from the world's ills, including terrorism.

While there is much to commend in this view, Curtis's faith in the British public may be overoptimistic. Despite changes in the media making

it vastly more democratic than before, the sad fact remains that, despite one million demonstrating against war with Iraq last February, within days of the invasion the proportion of the public for and against had reversed. Until the great British public becomes firmer in its views, it will continue to be led, rather than to lead.

Guy Burton

What should I feed my baby?

by **Suzannah Olivier Weidenfeld & Nicolson**
2003 £8.99

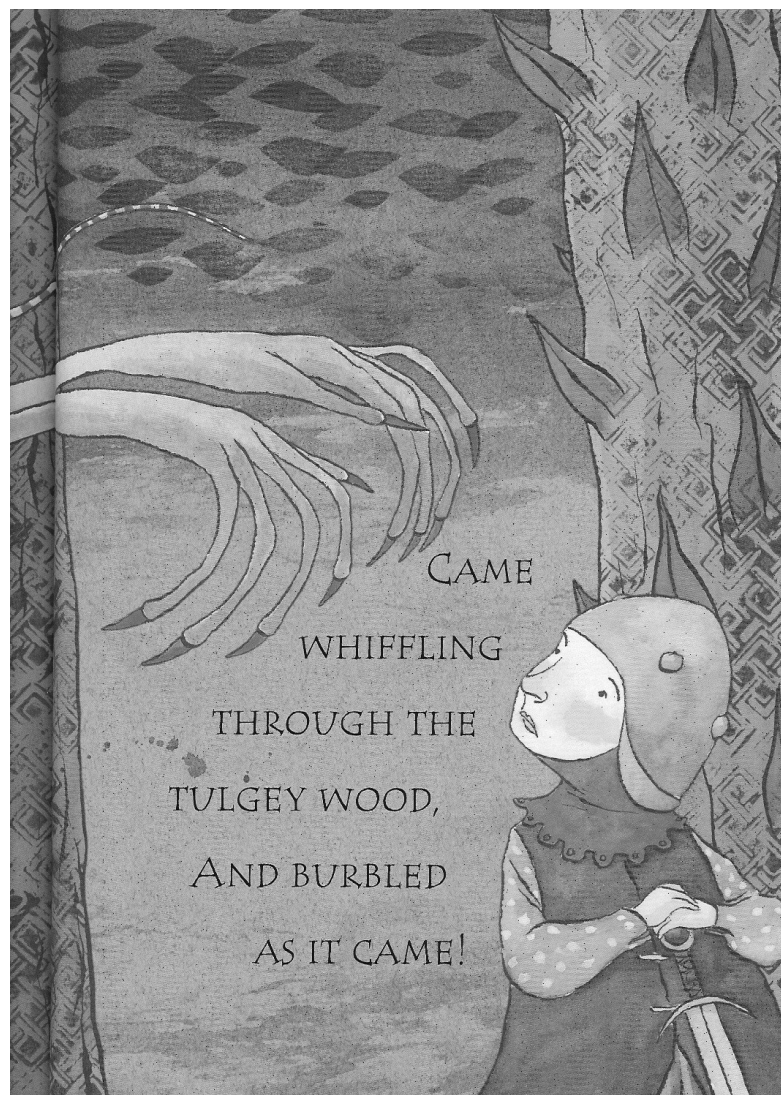
A new edition of a book which first appeared in 1998, when it cost £10.99. It is one of the best general books on nutrition that I have come across and, as such, its title belies its usefulness to anybody, with child or without. Do not be put off by the title. Here is a simple, straightforward guide to the kinds of foods you ought to be eating and why. It does not take much imagination to convert the information to an adult diet.

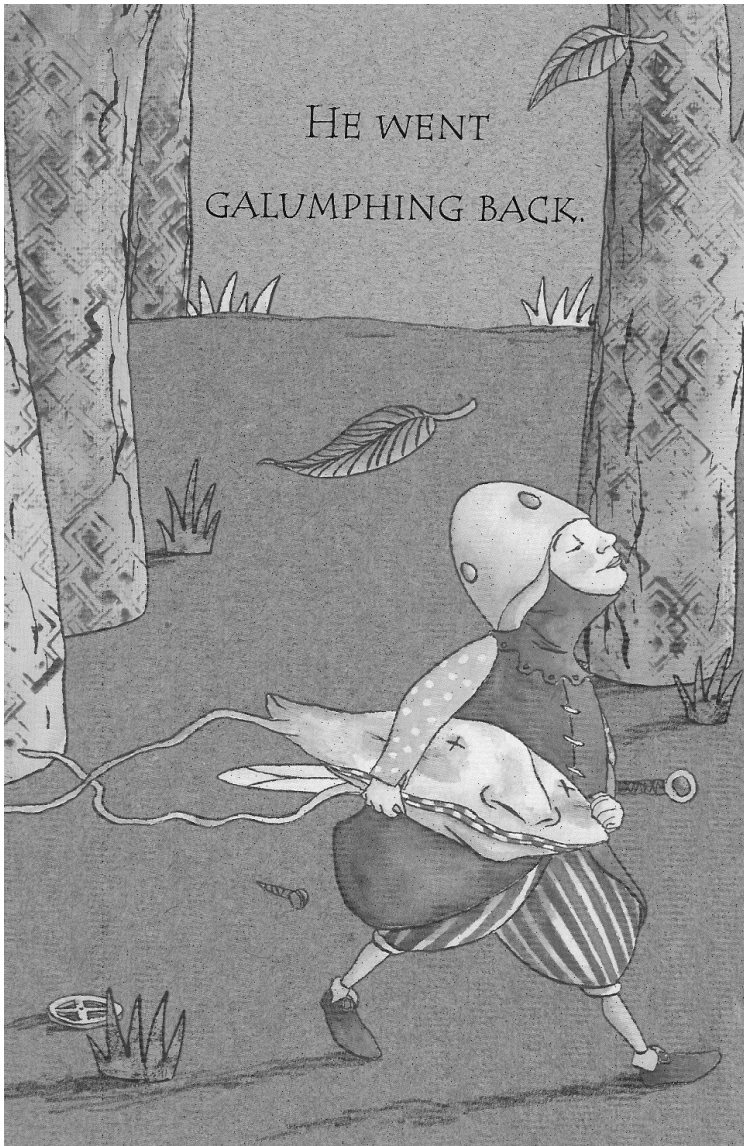
The references appear to house the most change in the new edition. There's a lot more on formula milks; hyperactivity is now a learning difficulty. There is a massive turn-over on organic food suppliers, casualties of Blair's anti-small farming policies no doubt. Remember, spend your money where it counts... think of the big supermarket chains that fund our enemies and hasten down to your nearest farm shop or farmers' market.

Stewart Rayment

Jabberwocky
by **Lewis Carroll**,
illustrated by **Joel Stewart**
Walker Books
2003 £9.99

Few people get past the second stanza when reciting from memory, so they forget the important role of one of Tony Beamish's ancestors in this





and the rules governing slavery under Islamic law.

Moslems were not supposed to enslave other Moslems, which led to accusations of apostasy when there were shortages of slaves so that the apostate could be enslaved. On the whole, slaves were better treated in the Moslem world than in the west. Some rose to prominent positions, particularly military slaves, some of whom rose to be generals.

The Chinese Admiral Zheng Ho, who it has recently been claimed

continues and the conflict in Sudan is a continuation of the process.

There is a special chapter on the Nation of Islam, which ignores the Moslem slave trade, and its survival in parts of the Moslem world are not condemned or even recognised. Nation of Islam is described as a racist movement that purports to fight racism as which ignores some of the basic teachings of Islam.

The author shows the origins of the transatlantic slave trade in Islam through the acquisition of some slaves left behind when Ferdinand and Isabella broke their promises and expelled the Moslems from Spain. They were transported to new colonies, which soon demanded more slaves. The difference with the transatlantic slave trade that makes it worse was that it wasn't a continuation of slavery in the west as much as a reintroduction of slavery.

The book is excellent reading in that it demonstrates that slavery was not purely attributable to western white cultures.

Andrew Hudson

The Illustrated History of the Countryside by Oliver Rackham Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2003 £12.99

This is an attractive reprint of Oliver's 1986 classic. It is a valuable handbook for anyone campaigning in the countryside seeking a deeper understanding of what we manage. There is little land within these islands untouched by the hand of man, but what we now touch should be to enhance rather than destroy. Avarice prevails all too often.

Stewart Rayment

poem. The Victorians were good at that sort of thing, after all.

Stewart's illustration strays from Carroll's account as relayed by Croft, but what of it? In later life, Lord Bonkers recalled the michie as a small deer, though I'd thought he'd shared the passion of Grey of Falloden. It makes for a happier tale anyway, and the Saxon origins of the first stanza shine through the artwork. You can almost picture them illuminating a scroll.

Stewart Rayment

Islam's Black Slaves: the other black diaspora by Ronald Segal Atlantic 2002

Written by a white member of the African National Congress, Islam's Black Slaves covers the less well known slave trade between Africa and the Arab world. The author gives an account of the origins of the trade

reached America before Columbus and sailed round the world, was a military slave and a Moslem although his enslavement was outside the Moslem world. Although castration was condemned by early Moslems, it became widespread, often being carried out outside Moslem territories prior to importation and sometimes by non Moslems.

The treatment of slaves in the Moslem world may have been better than in the west but the trade itself was just as brutal, with many slaves dying in transportation. The caravan routes across the Sahara are littered by the bones of slaves who didn't make it. Segal also shows that slavery in Africa still



Monday

Luncheon with Sir David Attenborough. He tells me that he wants to see the population of Britain cut by half. "If we do not take charge of our population size," he says over the fish course, "then nature will do it for us and it is the poor people of the world who will suffer most." A challenging view, but shouldn't one practise what one preaches? Why, to begin near home, do we need *two* Attenboroughs? Couldn't Sir David, as well as embarrassing gibbons by filming them doing things any thinking primate would rather were not seen by the masses, also appear with John Mills in films about the Second World War, thus saving an entire Attenborough? Come to think, do we really need two Dimplebys to make a lash up of election-night programmes? Wouldn't one suffice? I am reminded of the years when there were two Conservative MPs called "McNair-Wilson". This seemed terribly greedy in an era when many working-class children were obliged to go to school with no surname at all.

Tuesday

I settle myself in the library, but the morning's post makes sombre reading. First I hear grim tidings from an old friend in Freetown – how those poor librarians are suffering! Then I learn from a mutual acquaintance that an eminent German sociology professor I have long known is no more. It appears that he went for a walk in the Black Forest and fell down an abandoned Gemeinschaft. I am cheered by my reading of the newspapers, however, and in particular by learning of the demise of Idi Amin. I haven't laughed so much since King Leopold of the Belgians died. True to form, Dr David Owen, whom my younger readers will remember, goes on to the electric television at lunchtime to tell us all that he considered having Amin assassinated at the height of the Ugandan dictator's reign of terror: "I actually at one stage did raise the issue of assassination and it was not just frowned on but looked on as an outrageous suggestion." Funnily enough, at the height of the "Alliance" I considered asking Amin to assassinate Owen. I wouldn't say it was looked upon as an outrageous suggestion, but nothing came of the idea.

Wednesday

Have you been watching the *Restoration* series on BBC2? Let me take this opportunity to thank all those who telephoned Alexandra Palace to vote for the restoration of the West Wing here at the Hall. Already many of the trees have been felled and the stream had been diverted, and I am hopeful that the frescos – The Circumcision of the National Liberals, Jeremy Thorpe Resisting the Advances of Edward Heath, The Lamentations of Robert MacLennan – will be touched up before too long. If there are any funds left over I shall suggest they are devoted to the restoration of the career of Mr Griff Rhys Jones. If we, his viewers, can pay for a decent haircut and some coaching to stop him pulling faces to show that he is being serious, there is no reason why it should not regain its former glory.

Thursday

A day's shooting on the old Estate. It's a wonderful bird, the Rutland partridge: when fired upon it takes cover and shoots back. Now that's what I call good sport! Talking of country sports, I see that Mrs Bollard's stewardship of the RSPCA is going far from smoothly; so much so that the nation's animals are threatening to down tools as a result. I am reminded of the Great Spring Flower Dispute of 1925,

Lord Bonkers' Diary

when the tulips went on strike and the daffodils came out in sympathy. In an attempt to cheer Mrs B., and perhaps offer my good offices as a peacemaker with our four-legged friends, I travelled to Horsham the other day. I found the charity's headquarters surrounded by picket lines and was denounced as a "blackleg" by a rather chippy stoat when I attempted to cross them. Defeated, I retired to a telephone box and attempted to ring Mrs B. instead, only to find myself put through to a call centre in India. Helpful as the tiger was, I can see what the animals are complaining about.

Friday

Rather against my better judgment, I arrive at 10 Downing Street to attend an evening reception. I take one look at the assembled company – Melvyn Bragg, Ben Elton, Jamie Oliver, Lisa Stansfield, Melvyn Bragg, Mick Hucknall, Gareth Gates, Dame Judi Dench, Melvyn Bragg, Max Boyce, Lisa Stansfield, Emma Thompson, Lisa Stansfield, Sir Alex Ferguson, Mike Harding and Melvyn Bragg – and secrete myself in the garden. Eventually I am rounded up to watch the main entertainment of the evening. One of the drawing rooms has been cleared of all furniture and then filled to chest height with used notes, and on top of the heap are none other than the Blairs; she is dressed in her judges robes, he in a ridiculous plum-coloured suit. When I ask what is going on, I am told that the Blairs are sniffing their money and assured that watching them is the hot ticket in town. I make my excuses and leave for St Pancras.

Saturday

One of the heartening developments of recent years has been our advance in local government, and it has been particularly gratifying to see Labour bastions like Islington, Durham and Chesterfield fall to us. In Bristol, where we run things with what one may loosely call the help of the Conservatives, the council's leader has ordered staff not to call people "love" or "dear". You can see at once why the proud Bristolians threw out those dour, killjoy Socialists and elected us instead, can't you? Yet one wonders how we get on across the Severn in the Forest of Dean where they go in for greetings like "Where'st thou going, old butty?"

Sunday

The leaves are turning and there is a tang of autumn in the air; it is time to turn our thoughts to the political season that lies ahead. No doubt it will be dominated by the outcome of Len Hutton's inquiry, but we must also redouble our efforts in those seats that we aim to win from the Conservatives next time. If we do so, I believe that we shall succeed in driving Michael Howard from Folkestone and Hythe and David Davies from Haltemprice and, indeed, Howden. I believe just as firmly that we shall defeat Oliver Letwin in West Dorset and Tim Collins in Westmorland and Lonsdale. Above all, I have absolutely no doubt that we shall take Theresa May's Maidenhead.

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