

liberator

The Flight of the Brent Goose



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COMMENTARY

NOT BY BY-ELECTIONS ALONE

Perhaps each party got the weather to match at its conference this autumn.

The Liberal Democrats, fresh from Brent East, got largely uninterrupted sunshine in Brighton, Labour had some banks of cloud at Bournemouth and the Tories got the full horror of Blackpool's October weather.

As Liberator went to press the Conservative party appeared to be bent on a round of internal bloodletting of such poisonous extent that it makes the Labour party of the mid-1980s look amicable.

In a way, it is all irrelevant, since whatever policies they might adopt, the Tories will never win so long as they sound as if they wish to impose on the country the sort of codes of conduct and morals that might have prevailed in a bowls club in Worthing in 1951.

Quite apart from their other problems, the Tories have become a social anachronism.

At the same time, Labour has sunk into trouble through a combination of dissatisfaction with the condition of public services and, in particular, Tony Blair's persistent lies over the Iraq war and undignified servility towards President Bush.

These ought then to be boom times for the Liberal Democrats, and on the showing of Brent East, the party is well able to exploit this opportunity by taking votes off both the other main parties to such an extent that it can win a parliamentary seat in which it previously barely existed.

Yet if it were not for the lucky chance of a by-election would the Liberal Democrats be this confident, or showing as well in the opinion polls?

By-election gains can hardly be counted on, nor, short of the mass murder of MPs, can the Liberal Democrats do anything to increase their incidence.

No-one demands constant empty noise, but this year has so far seen the Iraq war demonstration, the local elections and Brent East/ conference, each punctuated by extended periods of near-silence from the Liberal Democrats.

The old excuse that 'the media' ignores the party won't wash. It doesn't. Once the party opposition to the Iraq war crystallised, the Liberal Democrats were a story and an essential part of any coverage of the war's effects on public opinion.

Come Brent East and the media was pretty well willing the Liberal Democrats to win, since a shock gain was story whereas a hold by some Blairite apparatchik was not.

If the party says or does something interesting, it gets covered.

A third party has to live by its wits, and it needs well-chosen interventions on major issues to remind

voters it exists. Whether the leader likes it or not, a lot of that role will devolve on whoever is leader just because of the way British politics now works.

Charles Kennedy's question and answer session at Brighton showed that, for the most part, he will come to conclusions that are basically liberal, as in his demolition of the case for compulsory identity cards.

The problem is not that he has nothing say, rather an unwillingness to say it often enough, or to get it heard. Whatever the cause of this, it should be addressed, since the party cannot count on lucky by-elections to keep up its profile.

While the troubles of the Labour and Conservative parties give the Liberal Democrats a great opportunity, they also present the danger of the party saying and doing contradictory or plain wrong things in order to attract every disgruntled voter who might be passing.

There is a clear fault line in the Liberal Democrats between those who argue that the party needs to sound more like the Tories in order to win Tory seats, and those who argue the opposite.

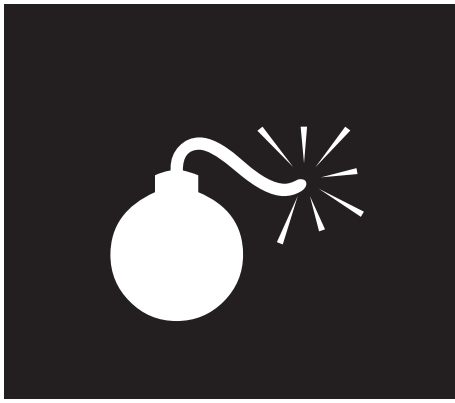
Even if the former were the correct position, which it is not, the Liberal Democrats could not move very far towards the Tories without rupturing their own support and losing any opportunity of gains from Labour.

But moving towards the Tories to win Tory seats is bad politics anyway. Winning these seats depends on being sufficiently appealing to Labour voters to squeeze Labour support. What is more, things must be approaching the point where the Tories are down to hard core and future gains will come from Labour.

This is why Kennedy's reshuffle of his shadow cabinet is so alarming. By putting Vincent Cable and David Laws in charge of the Treasury team he has surrendered this area of policy to a tiny group of free market enthusiasts out of line with the bulk of the party.

The danger of giving Mark Oaten home affairs is that in his customary zeal to appeal to former Tory voters he will be dragged in to a Dutch auction with the Tories, and indeed David Blunkett, over who can strike the 'toughest' postures on crime.

Despite the Tory party's current plight, there will always be 25-30% of greedy, selfish, bigots among the electorate willing to vote for them and it is counterproductive to try to adapt the Liberal Democrats' message to their views.



RADICAL BULLETIN

TIME FOR A BEVERIDGE

The Beveridge Group should soon rouse itself back into life after the passage of the Setting Business Free policy paper, an event that one of its members described as “wake up call”.

An even ruder shock awaited it a few weeks later when Charles Kennedy reshuffled his shadow cabinet and put free marketeers Vincent Cable and David Laws in charge of economic policy as shadow chancellor and chief secretary respectively.

Setting Business Free’s uncritical espousal of economic liberalism is exactly the sort of thing that a group of MPs dedicated to the rival philosophy of social liberalism formed the Beveridge Group to fight in the winter of 2001/02.

Its problem has been that while the free marketeers around Laws, Cable and Mark Oaten have assiduously briefed the press and raised their profile, the Beveridge Group has been almost invisible, despite its claim to represent a far larger proportion of the parliamentary party, including a majority of the 2001 intake.

It was formed to put a shot across Kennedy’s bows by making it clear that there were two rival points of view on the economy and public services and that he risked a row by ploughing ahead regardless on the Oaten/Laws /Cable side.

Given Kennedy’s dislike of internal confrontations, this worked at the time, but since then the Beveridge Group has done next to nothing, and Kennedy has either has his ear successfully bent by the ‘economic liberals’ or else concluded that he did not risk a row because the Beveridge Group had gone to sleep. Or both.

That now seems about to change. If the Beveridge Group can come back to life there is still time to make sure that the party’s next manifesto does not read like Thatcherism 20 years later.

The manifesto is in the hands of Matthew Taylor, shifted from shadow chancellor to parliamentary party chair. If Taylor is disgruntled at losing his old job, he might reflect on why he allowed Laws, his nominal deputy, to set the agenda and grab the publicity.

Simon Hughes had to be freed up for his London mayoral bid, but his loss from home affairs will be felt keenly since he was able to bring a sense of humanity and proportion to a portfolio in which it is easy to just go for headlines by announcing ‘tough’ policies.

His successor Mark Oaten is a leading light in efforts to recruit former Tories and may find himself walking a fine line.

However, if Hughes does not become mayor he will presumably have to be offered some senior post, necessitating another reshuffle.

Malcolm Bruce returned to the shadow cabinet with the trade and industry brief, having taken umbrage after the previous reshuffle when he was asked to shadow John Prescott’s cabinet office responsibilities, which turned out not to exist.

Setting Business Free (Liberator 290) well illustrates the sorry state into which Liberal Democrat policy making has fallen.

In this case, a group of free market campaigners was able to capture the policy working group and count on most of conference not reading the resulting policy paper and simply voting through an anodyne and selective motion.

But it could just as easily be any other type of faction, vested interest or cranks that captured control of a policy group and then exploited the lack of debate on the substance of these papers to drive through their viewpoint.

While sections of the party decry ‘producer interests’ nothing is so producer dominated as the party’s policy making process, with its reliance on self-described and self-nominated experts to write the papers.

This inevitably leads to policy groups packed with professionals in the field concerned all busy defending their interests instead of looking at matters politically.

Happily, there is an alternative model to hand, based on the scrutiny process used in local government. By using this, the party could appoint groups from the elected Federal Policy Committee to take evidence from the experts, those preserving their input but removing control from vested interests.

But it probably won’t happen because the vested interests that know how to hijack the present system will not be willing to let it go.

UNEASY LIES THE HEAD THAT WEARS THE CROWN

The Liberal Democrats have a new chief executive, and to the surprise of no one it is Chris Rennard.

Rennard is the right choice, but controversy remains over whether the post needed to be created at all, and over how it was filled (Liberator 290).

Since 1997, Rennard has been director of campaigns and an equal of various people who have been styled ‘chief executive’ but who were in fact in charge of ‘everything except campaigns’.

This arrangement of a twin-headed head was felt by some to be cumbersome and matters became pressing when chief executive Hugh Rickard protested that he had no powers to implement the Federal Executive’s decision to support last February’s Iraq demonstration (Liberator 286).

Rickard then suggested there should be a single chief executive with a more conventional management structure, and this passed through the FE in July even though a majority of members abstained.

Quite why Rickard suggested this has been a source of some speculation. It was likely that if a post combined oversight of campaigns and administration the party would conclude that it needed a campaigner who could administrate, rather than the reverse, and so appoint Rennard, who would be very difficult to replace were he to leave.

A short list of Rennard, Rickard and Dai Liyanage was interviewed and the panel unanimously offered the job to Rennard.

Those making the appointment would have been well aware that there would be a riot had Rennard been passed over and in effect forced to leave. MPs and target seat candidates would have been furious at the prospect of losing someone of his campaigning experience who manages the unusual double of being popular and competent.

The appointment then became subject to ratification by an FE sub-committee, a step that was, rather unusually, completed by email.

But FE deputy chair Donnachadh McCarthy supported Rickard for the post and tried to get Rennard's appointment blocked.

What the urbane ex-admiral Rickard and environmental peacenik McCarthy have in common puzzles many observers, but the pair had become colleagues.

McCarthy thus drafted a motion, sprung on the Finance and Administration Committee by his ally Becky Harvey, which argued that Rennard's appointment should be delayed because the party was heading for a £60,000 deficit.

The motion read: "In light of the current financial situation, specifically in the context of the high probability of a significant deficit for this year and serious pressure on the outline budget for 2004, this Committee proposes that implementation of the Selection Committee plan to appoint a new Chief Executive is suspended until the relevant financial consequences of any decision can be fully evaluated and costed and conveyed to the relevant committees.

"This Committee requests its Chair to communicate this resolution to the Selection Committee forthwith."

This was defeated on the casting vote of the FAC chair, but would anyway have had no effect since the FE is the senior body and had already ratified Rennard's appointment.

The projected deficit appears to have been caused by a failure to sell advertising space in conference publications and by a number of one-off items.

But income from Lib Dem Calling is understood to be catching up on budget and so there should not be a significant deficit at the end of the year. In any event the management changes are expected to result in cost savings in 2004.

Rennard thus combines both campaigns and administration and it will be important for him not to get sidetracked into the latter. Part of the original proposal was that a director of administration should be appointed below him.

Meanwhile Rickard sought a seat on the FE. He announced this at his leaving party at conference, at which point returning officer David Allworthy was forced to intervene to warn Rickard he risked disqualification for

canvassing, under the bizarre rules that prevent internal candidates from campaigning, if he continued in this vein.

Rickard also insisted on making a speech to the conference stewards' party, in which he hinted that he hoped to be back in a different role though did not say what.

Some stewards enquired what role he had in the first place, having no idea who the low profile Rickard actually was.

NOW THE HARD PART

Those who have seen previous 'Liberal revivals' will know not to read too much into one by-election, but all the same Brent East was pretty remarkable.

Since the Liberal Party had its first post-war by-election win in 1958 almost every such gain has come where the party was in second place anyway, successful in local government or at least possessed some sort of established presence.

Even in Bermondsey, Simon Hughes had had a dry run at the GLC election two years before, while Croydon North West, the nearest parallel to Brent East, was won at the height of the initial ballyhoo of the Alliance.

Brent East, by contrast, came out of nowhere, in a seat with hardly any members and in type of London area, neither inner city nor outer suburb, where the party has historically done badly.

Now comes the hard part of holding the seat. Croydon North West was an awful warning of what happens when a seat is won with no local organisation, the MP gets sucked into Westminster and being a national figure, and then finds there is still no local organisation come the next general election.

The party has got better at holding its by-election gains since then and would be well advised not to expect Sarah Teather to do too much outside her constituency.

An extraordinary aspect of Brent East was the light it threw on the pitiable condition of the Conservative Party.

Although some of the seat is inner city and council estates, the northern half is dominated by street upon street of obviously prosperous-looking suburban semis, and in Brondesbury Park it has an enclave of some of the most expensive houses in London.

The Tories had councillors, an established second place and had nearly won in the 1980s. If they are writing off Brent East as "not our natural territory", where exactly do they now feel wanted?

One thing Brent East Liberal Democrats clearly need is their own pub. The bar next to the headquarters was festooned in Labour posters, and the one a little further on was in the same building as the Conservative Club.

TROUBLE OVERHEAD

There must be many conference delegates who at one time or another have wanted to deck one or both of Philip Goldenberg or Richard Denton-White.

Matters came to blows after the debate on the Setting Business Free paper as delegates made their way out.

Denton-White happened to meet Goldenberg and described him as both a Tory and an alliterative word in vulgar use to describe part of the female anatomy.

Goldenberg replied that he was neither, and demanded an apology. A further altercation followed during which Denton-White gestured at Goldenberg.

Due to the latter's diminutive size, Denton-White's arm sailed straight over his head and struck Tim Leunig, a

bystander who happened to be standing by. Surely this is against standing orders?

OUT DEMONS OUT

An unprecedented event occurred at Brighton when a self-appointed exorcist attempted to drive demons out of the conference.

During the vote on the commerce paper a woman called a point of order and strode to the rostrum to announce that she was both a minister and an exorcist from Dorking and wished to drive out demons who had infiltrated the conference and distributed literature bearing satanic symbols.

The session chair Duncan Brack replied with aplomb “that is not a point of order relating to the conduct of the vote”, no doubt deciding that a riposte like “if you’re an exorcist, let’s see your head spin”, might be inappropriate.

Stewards intervened to try to find out how someone with a day visitor badge had been able to get to the rostrum and whether the exorcist was a party member.

Enquires revealed that she believed that 20 evil spirits were gathered around Simon Hughes’ head. Presumably, these were evil spirits who had got in without badges, or perhaps were non-voting spirits. It was never established which leaflets bore satanic symbols.

Spookily enough, when Brack had tried to turn off the exorcist’s microphone, the switch that should do this failed to work. Perhaps it too had been possessed?

OPEN GOVERNMENT

The Liberal Democrats never cease to whinge about their press coverage, but perhaps it is because of the way they treat the press.

Not all copies of the agenda and directory were posted out in advance of conference, making it difficult for journalists to plan their coverage, and nor was the final agenda on the party website even after conference had begun.

All that was sent out was a fragmentary timetable of major debates and a few semi-official fringe meetings.

Strangely, the former did not include either the debate on the monarchy or that on smacking children. Perish the thought that no-one wished to draw attention to them until Brent East was safely out of the way.

GIRLS’ NIGHT OUT

The Gender Balance Task Force was formed to increase the number of female parliamentary candidates in the Liberal Democrats and encourage the party to treat them more seriously and adopt more women in winnable seats.

How a meeting entitled ‘what not to wear when canvassing’ helps to get female candidates taken more seriously was not apparent to the stream of aghast women who came to tell Liberator about the meeting.

Liberator’s Catherine Furlong read out at the Glee Club some of the recommendations given, where some may have thought this was an outtake from the Liberal Revue. If only.

Among the advice proffered was “maximise cleavage to maximise ‘pull’”, “wear a corset over your clothes”, “wear lots of makeup, especially lip gloss”, and “no scarves”.

Flat shoes, bewildered delegates heard, are “asexual”, though as one punter said, “I just thought they were comfortable”.

Short women should not wear crop trousers and well-endowed ones should abstain from halter necks, delegates heard, before attempting to digest a final recommendation to wear “a conversation piece”. What about a talking parrot on the shoulder?

OFF WITH THEIR HEADS

At the end of Sunday’s conference parliamentary party meeting Charles Kennedy made it clear that MPs could vote how they liked on the motion calling for a referendum on the future of the monarchy, but he would take what he saw into account when deciding on shadow cabinet places.

Chief whip Andrew Stunell urged his flock to go in and vote against the motion but in dribs and drabs from different doors so they did not look like an orchestrated phalanx.

Only John Barrett and Paul Holmes are understood to have chanced Kennedy’s wrath by voting for the motion.

GOING FOR THE RIGHT VOTE?

Reader James Graham points out that Liberalfuture, the voice of the Liberal Democrats’ Thatcherite wing (M Oaten prop.) was distributing copies of something called as Liberal-o-Meter at Brighton.

Graham managed to calculate that according to this device, the policy choice “forced repatriation of immigrants” rated as either 0 (neither liberal or conservative) or +2 (slightly liberal) depending on whether you consider it to “work for social justice”.

LORDS A LOBBYING

The Liberal Democrat Federal Executive has taken the long saga of the parliamentary lobbying motion and finally kicked it into touch.

The original motion passed in 2001 had said: “No parliamentarian or their employees at Westminster should be a director of, an employee of, receive any reward from or hold a stake in any of the duly registered professional parliamentary lobbying companies (i.e. those offering their parliamentary lobbying services for hire to paying commercial and other clients)”, and set a two-year deadline of implementation.

Following legal advice by Willie Goodhart, which basically said that the lords involved could do what they liked regardless of a constitutional amendment or motion, the FE (in the absence of the original motion’s main mover Donnachadh McCarthy) decided to pass over the invitation it had agreed the previous May to recommend that conference be requested to endorse an extension of the deadline for implementation, for a further 12 months to allow alternative sources of livelihood to be found. However, the FE should give an undertaking to the conference that it fully supports full compliance with the conference decision from that date.

A group led by Tim Razzall decided to have a go at the whole process in McCarthy’s absence, stressing how much ill-feeling the motion had caused in the House of Lords and how it had caused those in ‘another place’ to launch verbal tirades about the FE. Fortunately it was remembered that the motion was passed by Federal Conference, and that in his report at Brighton (Lord) David Shutt had undertaken to report back in the Spring on progress on the subject.

DIDN'T WE USED TO HAVE A LOVELY TIME?

Liverpool activist Richard Clein used to be a conference junkie... now he doesn't bother!

So the conference season is over – some might say for good. Even I remember (at the tender age of 32) a time when conference was really sovereign and the views of the grassroots were really taken seriously – well, some of the time anyway.

All three political parties claim “their time is now” – but now the flag-waving, hat-wearing (did you see those Blair ones?) gleeful party anoraks have gone home – does the wider public actually care who or which political party actually governs?

Predictably, all three conferences became judgement day for the respective leaders - although IDS was so bad his reign could be over before Blair's – despite the PM having lost the trust of the people. This can hardly be called effective opposition and that's the tragedy. The media is more concerned with splits, standing ovations and whether Charles Kennedy knows anything about reality TV, rather than encouraging debate. Personality politics has become the norm and the word from California has left the rest of the world gobsmacked.

Questions not only remain about the ability of the ‘quiet man to lead – despite a rise in the polls – but also over our own leader (Liberator 290). This led to the inexplicable comments made in IDS's speech. Whatever the truth – the whole situation was put into context by Simon Hughes on a recent edition of Question Time – which can't have been easy for the man most would like to see replace CK.

Yes, people are bored by the political process and who can blame them? Stage-managed conferences and politicians afraid to speak their mind in case the pager sounds hardly encourage a healthy democracy.

Even the BBC recognised the need for a new approach by axing “On the Record”. But after the obligatory focus groups and no doubt thousands of pounds of licence fee payers' money they changed the name to dah dah dah. . . . the Politics Show, a real turn on!

The only answer to addressing this malaise is fair votes, although some Liberal Democrats in power could be accused of anything but “fair votes”, for example in Liverpool the cabinet members were appointed by the leader not elected by the council group or indeed the council as a whole.

Liberal Democrats should put into practice what we preach - by encouraging people to take and use power rather than alienating them. Adrian Sanders in Torbay and Iain Smith in North East Fife are prime examples of two

community politicians who despite reaching high office in Westminster and Holyrood are not involved in the constant leadership speculation.

They, unlike many of their contemporaries, have retained their core values. It may be an idea for some of our other politicians to go to Torquay and Fife and ask those communities what they think of their elected representatives. The group in Liverpool could have also led by this example and be a “radical, forward thinking” microcosm of Liberal Democracy – though I suppose delivering European Capital of Culture was a good start.

Back to conference, and sincere apologies to all those who live inside the week long conference bubble, but the only way to deliver more votes in real ballot boxes is by practising community politics.

Thankfully even though there is little to distinguish between all three parties (why else the rise of the abhorrent BNP?)– it is the Lib Dems who are winning the argument and the contest to be the next “Political Idols” - if only the next general election was decided by txt msge!

What happened to “thinking the unthinkable” and a radical vision which everyone is proud of? Making people who earn more, pay more is the difference and while it may not be a panacea for all Britain's ills, it does at least make common sense, unlike the current Tory plans for the NHS. In fact Tory spending plans hardly make sense at all – and it seems pretty unlikely the electorate will be hoodwinked.

So the opportunity is ours and we really are now at the stage where our already “effective opposition” could well be backed by the British people in terms of the number of seats delivered at the next general election.

That will mean winning seats from Labour and the Conservatives – campaigns are already underway in Liverpool and all-out elections next June should get people into the spirit.

I think it was the voice of Scooby Doo -Casey Kasem- that once said “Keep looking to the skies and reaching for the stars” –now is the time, fellow Liberator readers, to touch them.

ON THE SIDE OF THE RICH?

The Setting Business Free policy paper passed at Brighton commits the Liberal Democrats to Thatcherite dogma and must be reversed, says Alistair Carmichael, MP for Orkney and Shetland

The constitution of the Liberal Democrats asserts that *we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community*.

However, our policy paper, 'Setting Business Free', adopted at Brighton, starts with the line, "Liberal Democrats believe in freedom, choice and diversity". No mention there of our belief in equality and community. It is an inauspicious start and sadly the paper gets worse.

In its introduction we are told that, "Liberal Democrats start with a bias in favour of market solutions".

Do we? This certainly came to news as me. I always thought that as Liberal Democrats we had a bias in favour of what works best, be that private or public. Should the party of Beveridge and Keynes approach issues with a prejudice in favour of the free market system? Should we enter every policy debate with an underlying belief that private is always better than public? I certainly do not think so. That was the approach which led the Conservatives to undertake the disastrous privatisation of British Rail in the mid-1990s.

Setting Business Free states that, "Liberal Democrats believe that there is a role for increased competition to be phased in" in the Post Office's collection and delivery system. Additionally our party is apparently, "increasingly coming to the view that a privatised Post Office - with a universal service obligation and a regulator - on Dutch lines could have a better chance of succeeding than the present structure". This Liberal Democrat believes no such thing.

It is interesting that the paper refers to the Dutch post office, TPG. It is true that in recent years the financial performance of TPG has been better than that of Royal Mail.

However, the privatised TPG has not had to deal with competition in the Dutch mail market and will not have to do so until 2009. Indeed, Peter Bakker, the chief executive of TPG, has criticised UK proposals for introducing competition in the mail market too swiftly. TPG has operated as a privatised monopoly not a privatised company in a competitive market. The two beasts are quite different. This paper suggests not just privatisation of Royal Mail but a further opening up the market too.

It is of course the case that Royal Mail's financial performance has left a lot to be desired in recent years. It is coincidentally ignored in this policy paper that that is largely as a result of successive governments treating it as

a cash cow and failing to invest in technology and modern management practises. Using Government failings as the basis for ripping off a public service is not a new trick - both Tory and Labour government have used it over the last twenty years. To see the Liberal Democrats follow suit is galling.

If ever there was a case of a natural monopoly, the mail system is surely it. Fragmentation of the system would help nobody, least of all the consumer. If the market was opened up to unfettered competition we would see dramatic rises in mail prices in rural and remote parts of the country as new entrants to the mail market concentrate on more profitable urban networks

It may be enough to give the authors of "Setting Business Free" a fit of the vapours but regulation of a market can work. When buses were deregulated in the mid-1980s there was an explosion of new entrants and competition. Fares did drop initially as competing companies careered around our towns and cities. There was however no integration of timetables between competing bus operators or with other transport services.

There then followed a period of consolidation until local bus services were run by one or two companies. Fares have since risen and services concentrated in peak times. Unprofitable routes at off-peak times and in rural areas have been reduced. As Will Hutton concluded in 'The State We're In', "deregulation has led to the emergence of private bus monopolies, a patchier network, higher fares, older buses, lower wages, poorly trained workforces, and chaotic timetables". The only part of the country where the picture has been different is of course London where buses remain regulated. Between 1985 and 2000 the number of journeys by bus in London rose by 13%, in the rest of the UK it fell by a third. Tells you something doesn't it?

Those in our party who see competition and free markets as the cure for all of our national ills must explain how these potions will help our mail market. Why will their impact not be the same as it has been for our rail and bus industries?

The paper argues that a universal mail service can be protected if commercial entrants pay a levy towards the USO. For a party which now wants to wage war against bureaucracy this sounds like a recipe for a red tape banquet. The regulator would have to work out exactly how much compensation Royal Mail needs to sustain deliveries to remote areas.

They would then have to decide what levies to charge each commercial entrant. Will this vary according to how profitable the services offered by each company are? Account will have to be taken of the volume of mail commercial companies deliver. What if Royal Mail continues to make losses and the payments given to it are insufficient to cover the extra cost of delivering to the more remote parts of the UK? There would be increasing pressure to cut back the level of service to these areas. What if, like Railtrack and British Energy, Royal Mail became commercially unviable? Would we then take it back into public ownership? The paper is strangely silent.

When this paper was debated in Brighton many delegates expressed their discontent with this part of the paper. The response was that we “should always be prepared to consider ideas”. That goes without saying. But this paper does more than to merely suggest we should consider the issue. It states very plainly that, “Liberal Democrats believe that there is a case for increased competition” in the mail market and that, “we are increasingly coming to the view that a privatised post office...could have a better chance of succeeding than the present structure”. That does not sound to me like an invitation to discuss the issues but a decision in favour of one option. Given that we are now supposed to have a bias in favour of market solutions there can be little surprise that such a conclusion was reached.

Another quite breathtaking assertion to be found in the opening chapter of this paper is that, “Competition can help to create wealth and redistribute it”. Heard it before? Yes, probably in the Tory manifestos of 1983 and 1987. However, scant explanation of this Thatcherite thesis is offered. I fail to see how competition will reduce large and growing income inequalities in our country. It is axiomatic that in a competition there will be not just winners but losers too.

One society that has introduced competition into almost every sphere is the United States. Is that country a model for wealth redistribution? I think not.

According to the US Census Bureau, the share of national income going to those in the top fifth of American earners has risen from 44% in 1973 to 50% in 2000. The share going to the top 1% in 1998 was 15%, higher than it has ever been since the Second World War. Wealth disparities are even greater than income ones. The wealthiest 1% of US households controls 38% of national wealth, while the bottom 80% of households holds only 17%, according to the Economic Policy Institute. One is left with the nagging doubt that when the authors of “Setting Business Free” speak of redistribution they perhaps have in mind a model in which the rich get richer and the poor poorer.

The fundamental question is how will more competition, less regulation and smaller government lead to a more equal society? The answer in ‘Setting Business



Free’ is through greater employee shareholdings in the companies they work for. At last a little bit of liberal thinking slips in. However, we should not kid ourselves into thinking that such a policy will lead to redistribution of wealth to the poorest. How will a cleaner or burger bar worker, an unemployed person or pensioner see an increase in their wealth with this policy? Greater share ownership for some will result in additional income but for most of the really poor this policy is a non-starter.

This policy paper does propose some good measures. Allowing greater flexibility in the implementation of EU Directives, improving parliamentary scrutiny of regulatory bodies, extending one-stop shops for small businesses across the country and opposing the deregulation of pharmacies are all positive ideas. These aspects of the paper, however, seem to be there despite rather than because of the free market zealotry of its authors.

We all want to see unnecessary regulations reduced but this must be carefully balanced with the need to protect workers, our environment and local services. As constituents of mine know to their cost, under-regulated markets allow unscrupulous individuals to declare bankruptcy, avoid their contractual obligations and then re-emerge with a similar company using the same assets.

Unregulated markets allow exploitation of our environment and poverty pay for workers. Competition for its own sake can result in vital services being withdrawn from non-profitable areas, duplication of effort and falling standards of service.

I am delighted that the recent shadow cabinet reshuffle brings Malcolm Bruce back to the Trade and Industry portfolio. Malcolm has always been one of our best media performers and he has again got a job where his skills in articulating liberal values can be put to good use. He has a not inconsiderable job to do.

The party’s trade and industry policy has got to be wrestled back from the hands of the free-market zealots and some balance restored to it. There are already two conservative parties in British politics, both enslaved to the doctrine that markets cure all. There is no room for a third. We have an historic opportunity to fight the corner for a social liberal economic agenda which will deliver for our country the values of liberty, equality and community. The contribution of “Setting Business Free” to this? Er, well how about we demonstrate our commitment to the environment and send its many copies for recycling.

SOMALIA AGAIN?

The US/UK coalition is putting too few resources into restructuring and security in Iraq. Does it recognise the dangers, asks Richard Younger-Ross, Liberal Democrat MP for Teignbridge

I was prompted from my lethargy on holiday, having promised to write this article, by hearing a particularly loud group of American tourists in the beautiful walled city of Avila; I had an unworthy thought - don't they know where Iraq is?

Of course, I realised there would be many seeing a Brit on holiday having the same thought.

In Spain, no one said that to us, but certainly we felt that sentiment on a day trip to Morocco. There, while some young boys waved at our coach, a number of others threw small stones at the vehicle.

As the situation in Iraq continues and worsens, so anti-America and anti-British feelings will grow. For those of us who are passionately British but opposed to the war, this is very painful, but it is what the Liberal Democrats predicted and exactly what Charles Kennedy has continued to say.

Having once lived in Iraq, it is also exactly why I went to Iraq with six other MPs in June; I wanted to see if what we were saying was correct. I also wanted to see if things had improved in the country since I left some 21 years ago.

The reaction we received was extremely warm where we were.

The fact-finding trip to Basra was part of a series of visits organised by the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme. The scheme essentially exists to familiarise MPs with the workings of the services. Similar schemes work in the voluntary and business sectors and most MPs spend time on 'patrol' with the local police.

The visit allowed us to talk to British soldiers and Iraqis, both of whom were very forthcoming and expressed concerns at the slow rate of restructuring.

One visit took us to a health centre where we met a female doctor. The centre had been emptied by the looters after the arrival of British Forces in the city and their failure to protect such centres and hospitals was clearly upsetting to the locals.

However, having eventually quelled wholesale looting, the army were now helping the centre. They organised a local builder to repair the doors and to fix locks. A couple were employed to live on the site as 'caretakers' and a fridge was purchased for the drugs.

But the doctor pleaded with us for more help. She now had some drugs from the UN, but little equipment, never mind the lack of stethoscopes and other medical equipment. They lacked basics such as chairs and tables and as far as an examination couch was concerned, patients had to use the floor.

The army officers complained that they had too little money to spend, and the process of getting even medium

sized schemes off the ground was very long winded. They felt that the US seemed to want all the spending decisions taken at the highest level possible.

These officers dutifully told us that they had all the troops they needed, but then went on to criticise the Department of International Development for allocating money but having no one on the ground to spend it.

Tasks I witnessed the army undertake were organising the banking system; training police officers; organising street cleaning; organising contractors to repair power lines, water mains and sundry smaller tasks; and providing humanitarian aid, all in addition to their security role.

Humanitarian aid has, in my view, compromised the security the army are meant to provide. They simply cannot be in two places at once. The failure of other government departments is undermining the work of the army to provide resources on the ground. Providing security in Iraq is a complex issue as there are many problems.

First of all is the task of clearing up the vast array of munitions lying around. They have set about removing sundry British unexploded cluster bombs etc., but there are millions of Iraqi shells and mortars and other weapons sat in metal containers across the countryside and even in towns.

These munitions are looted by the Iraqis, not primarily for use as weapons, but for their core materials; for example, wood from the boxes, brass from the shell casing. We saw where mortars had been emptied out of boxes by children who took the wood home to burn so that their family could boil their water. With no reliable power system and no clean water system, scavenging wood is vital to many families to protect their health. The brass is simply sold on the black market.

Ordinance clearance has gone far too slowly and, as a result, an unknown (the minister won't say) number of children have died. The army use posters and contacts within the community to warn of these dangers, but they cannot stand guard on every stockpile and innocents die regularly as a result.

Providing security from looters, kidnappers and others has been a partial success, but crime is now higher than before the war and the employment and training of the police is vital.

However, the army get little support; the government admitted in a reply to my question that only two police advisors have been sent to help. In addition, the coalition forces refuse to use ex-Iraqi army personnel; indeed, they are not even meeting their legal need to pay them.



A warehouse of supplies in Iraq

But, their posture is contradicted by the employment of ex-Iraqi naval personnel to provide security to the World Food Centre in Basra.

On their own, they are not very reliable and indeed on the change of regiments, the 'Kings' decided to withdraw the small British force at the centre, it was only days before looters breached the walls. I'm glad to say that British forces are now back and security has returned. This incident clearly illustrates the pressures on a battle group commander over the deployment of his troops; the decision to withdraw was not his error; it was an error of ministers asking too much from too few.

The result is the looting of power cables for the copper, which causes power supply problems; parents refusing to send their children to school for fear of kidnapping and theft on a high scale.

Another security issue is the tribal and inter-faith rivalry. The latter makes the news here with a few high-profile assassinations but the almost daily shootings between tribes goes almost without mention, but we heard gunfire at least half a dozen times in our 36-hour visit. I slept through four of these.

Disarming these groups has been a high priority, but the arms amnesty was an almost total failure. Tony Blair told the House of Commons that all arms were being removed; the Ministry of Defence told me that families could keep handguns and non-automatic weapons. In reality the army leaves households with up to two automatic rifles. What they want are the grenade launchers and mortars and they know that disarming a gun-culture is very difficult, ask any Democrat in the USA who has proposed it.

And, above all this, the army's first priority is to protect their own forces. The British skill and understanding of peacekeeping has certainly helped reduce British casualties since the main conflict, but troops have still died.

My fear is that that the US has been trained by the Israelis in house to house searches and I have heard are now using Israeli terms of engagement, will alienate even our forces' friends. In which case, the body count will be high. It will not be another Vietnam - but could in places bear an uncanny resemblance to Somalia.

The future is not bright. The US seems totally unable to grasp the realities of the politics on the ground. There are signs with day to day running being taken away from Rumsfeld on a wide range of issues that they understand the need to speed up decision making, but their failure to see that Turkish troops deployment would be resisted by most Iraqis is as naïve as believing a Terminator can fix Californian finances.

The lack of restructuring and the failure of the coalition to make rebuilding Iraq an internationally agreed task, coupled with the US' inability to set a date for the Iraqis to take control of their own country, is playing into the hands of Al Qaeda, Ba'athists and others.

To me the future is bleak but as Michael Aspel said at the end of 'The War Game' - "In any unresolved situation there is hope" - indeed, Iraq is an unresolved situation and therefore there is hope.

However, unless the Department for International Development and US departments do more, unless we bring in the UN, then all hope may be lost and we will reap the whirlwind of the seeds that we have sown.

REVUE REVIEW 2003

2003 will be remembered as the year that the British prime minister lied to parliament, the British public and to the rest of the world.

Blair will forever be associated with his deliberate and calculated lies and deceptions about the "45 minutes" before Iraqi bombs started firing off towards us.

History may remember the name Hans Blix as the Weapons Inspector sent in by the UN and then thrown out by the USA. It may come to pass that the official history of 2003 airbrushes out Mr Blix, the UN and the world wide opposition to the war.

If so then the title on the programme of the Liberal Revue performed at the Liberal Democrats conference that year will be a confusing puzzle for Tony Robinson and the rest of the Time Team when they dig it up at some point in the far distant future.

'Hans, Blix and Bumps-a-Daisy' was as good a title as any for the revue at a time when the events in Iraq had dominated political discussion and action for months.

Memories of Liberal Democrat opposition to the war were still fresh in everyone's mind. The victory in Brent only days before had been put down in part to this opposition. People were meeting in Brighton having not met each other since 3,000 Liberal Democrats joined hundreds of thousands of others on the streets of London thanks mainly to

Donnachadh McCarthy. The Hutton Inquiry had filled papers and TV screens for preceding weeks. War, deception, death and dissent - all serious stuff but none of it had quite prepared the audience of the Liberal Revue for the impact of Mr Nobby Shuttleworth.

Even hardened veteran campaigners such as councillor Suzanne Fletcher, well-used to tackling the worst excesses of Labour Party fiefdoms in the North East, had to admit that after this performance she would not be able to look at a bacon slicer again. To this day she has been unable to eat a ring doughnut. For the first time ever it was recorded that someone actually walked out in disgust, during the Nobby Shuttleworth set.

Remarkably this person was still upset the following day and turned up at the Liberator stand to demand a refund for the price of her ticket. She was informed with customary politeness that the concept of a refund was not

one with which the Liberator Collective was totally familiar. But if you want the full story you will have to ask Catherine Furlong, who with Simon Titley directed the show, and who single-handedly saw off the complainer.

So what had resulted in such a reaction? Who was Nobby Shuttleworth and what had he done?

The reference in the programme for the revue seemed innocent enough; it read - 'The Wheeltappers and Shunters Liberal Club presents ... Mr Nobby Shuttleworth'.

And when someone looking remarkably like Nick Winch in purple shirt and a flared purple suit that possibly had not seen the light of day since the early 1970s bounded onto the stage one might have expected a few

jokes along the lines of that TV programme 'The Comedians' which older members of the audience might recall watching in the days when Focuses were stuck together with cow gum and Letraset.

Some of the audience perhaps caught on quicker than others. Some perhaps never caught on at all. It was possibly by the time that Nobby got to the question about the difference between a bowling ball and a Young Liberal Democrat

woman that the realisation hit that this script might not be as gender balanced as some might have wished. If zipping was going to be employed here it certainly was not with the intention of increasing the number of women candidates in winnable seats.

So how did the audience respond?

The media portrayal of Liberal Democrats is one of nice, middle of the road folk who if nothing else are on the politically correct side when it comes to humour. If the media image was correct then one might have expected more than one walk out. Did people object? Were there embarrassed silences? Did the stream of old filthy jokes in the worst possible taste offend people?

No they loved every minute of it. A revered lady member of the House of Lords was seen with tears rolling down her cheeks as she laughed her way through as Nobby's stream of vulgarities poured forth with immaculate timing. The ultimate accolade was perhaps the later comment that it proved that even Susan Kramer has a sense of humour as she too rolled with laughter. As



former conference supremo Alan Sherwell put it - it was evidence if evidence were needed that it is impossible to under-estimate the taste of a Liberal Democrat conference.

I know that many look forward to hearing Nobby Shuttleworth again. Requests for copies of the jokes thought too ripe for use on the night have been circulating on the internet.

This was however only one of more than a dozen acts. It opened the second half. The first half had started with Nick Winch as Comical Ali answering a press conference and this set the scene for the evening with a combination of good jokes and performances which also carried a political bite.

The songs were much better this year and the return of Janice Turner to the microphone and that amazing black dress was welcomed. It was particularly welcomed by Roger Hayes one of the backroom boys who had the delicate task of attaching the microphone to the black dress.

Fortunately this did not interfere with his own performance as one of the unseen commentators sounding uncannily like the late John Arlott discussing the bowling from the Baghdad end.

The writing was down to the usual team and whilst maybe too dominated by references to Iraq it was to a standard beyond what the BBC often pay large sums for. The costumes were also first class, although Peter Johnson dancing dressed as a genetically modified carrot was perhaps too surreal for some of the less organic.

But it was the lack of costume that was revealing in the sketch where a temptress called Oaten tried to seduce a Tory MP with an offer of a cheap thrill. By lamplight the attractive person in fishnets and suspenders caused quite a stir. Slowly the realisation struck that the fine pair of legs belonged to a man. The hushed but slightly shocked tones of someone behind me gave the game away - "Oh my god - its Gareth!!!" Gareth Epps was being complimented on his legs for some days afterwards.

The audience reaction to references in this sketch to Mark Oaten were almost as revealing as Gareth's stage persona. Winchester's lightweight MP might go down well with some right wing journalists but among Liberal Democrats his stock seems have gone down.

It was Ralph Bancroft's turn to reveal his legs in 'Carry On Knocking' where the echoes of a thousand Sid James and Barbara Windsor double entendres were reworked. This was my least favourite part of the show and as the end piece left everyone (well almost everyone) wanting the return of Nobby Shuttleworth.

The best combination of writing, song, costume and performance came with 'English Country Garden' which closed the first half. There were touches of real brilliance from David Grace, Harriet Smith, Ralph Bancroft and

Catherine Furlong. The subject material was the government's new Sexual Offences Act but the setting, floral print dresses and straw hats meant that the lines were delivered with a subtle twist which brought out the best in the writing. By way of comparison the Iraqi Cokey was a bit repetitive and did not seem to fit too well.

The George Parr sketch would not have disappointed fans of

'The Two John's' from Bremner, Bird and Fortune. Peter Johnson and David Grace have an ability to take on these roles with ease while not failing to drive home the political absurdities of Blairite Britain. Peter Johnson also delivered a good performance in Bargain Hunt. Peter is a good mimic and the concept of the sketch was appreciated. The inevitable 'Bobby Dazzler' and 'Cheap as Chips' were woven well into the script which included some good bits around the knock down prices of old Weapons of Mass Destruction.

The invasion of Cowley Street by US forces was better and this time Peter Johnson team up with David Grace who was remarkably convincing as a gum-chewing marine.

The Liberal Revue has built itself a reputation to such an extent that the expectations of the audience are as high as they would be for something done by professionals. On this particular night they were preceded by a special version of BBC Radio's 'The Now Show' performed live for the entertainment of Liberal Democrats.

It is a tribute to Bancroft, Epps, Furlong, Grace, Johnson, Smith, Turner and Winch that they can out perform Punt and Dennis at their own game and I would guess at a tiny fraction of the cost.

Next time the BBC starts whinging about the licence fee it would be interesting to consider how much money they spend on carting literally hundreds of people round the party conferences.

Which brings me back to the cricket.

Between sketches in a Liberal Revue it is traditional for the lights to go down and for 'The Men in White' - Stewart Rayment and Mark Smulian - to do a bit of low-key scene shifting. This cross between dumb show and furniture removal has taken on a following all of its own, to the extent that some seem to regard it as an integral part of the entertainment. 'Groupies' shout admiration and other things at the discrete duo. This year there was an additional diversion between sketches of a radio cricket match commentary in the tradition of the old BBC broadcasts when John Arlott took time off from being president of Hampshire Liberals to earn some money talking to Brian Johnson about the cake sent in by a lady from Dundee, as well as the Test Match they were attending.

This was a simple idea for a sketch but well executed. A sound only broadcast delivered in the dark but with the flexibility to be completely topical, politically sharp and as I understand it for ad libs to be thrown in on the night. It made for a hugely entertaining element of the revue and they should use it again.

The best value for money in the Liberal Democrats is of course a subscription to Liberator. After that the price of a Liberal Revue ticket follows pretty closely and the National Liberal Club Staff Fund benefits from the profits. If you are not absolutely delighted with the performance you can of course ask for a refund. You just have to see Catherine Furlong the next day. You won't get a refund but it is the best free training course in Assertiveness Skills in town.

I am sorry to report that Nobby Shuttleworth is no longer available for Liberal Clubs, Barmitzvahs and Bowling Competitions.



FAMILIES VALUED

Why are liberals so quick to call in the government when they see an issue involving children and families, asks Jonathan Calder

Earlier this year the Liberal Democrats' Federal Policy Committee held an all-day meeting in Cambridge. One of the agenda items was a presentation on new ways of categorising voters, drawn from research done for the advertising industry. Instead of seeing voters as Liberal Democrats, Tories or Labourites, we were told, we should think of them as innovators, self-actualisers or contented conformers.

To help us get a clearer picture of one of these new groups, its members were described to us as the sort of people who have pay-as-you-go mobile phones and believe that married couples should stay together for the sake of their children. And, as the speaker intended, everybody laughed.

This little incident typifies a paradox about Liberal Democrats. Ask most activists what the party stands for – what in particular differentiates it from New Labour – and they will talk about personal liberty. Liberal Democrats cherish freedom and like to see it expressed through individuality and even eccentricity. Yet these activists are themselves almost certain to hold to a tightly circumscribed set of social values. As the laughter in Cambridge showed, any deviation from them is likely to be treated with ridicule.

To see this phenomenon at work, take the paragraph from Joan Walmsley published in *Liberal Democrat News* on 14 March 2003. Here is what she said:

We do not own our children. We have the privilege of caring for them, loving and guiding them while they are young. However, we owe them the best possible policies based on all the knowledge and expertise available to us. The UN Committee is made up of some of the greatest experts on child development, education, health and welfare. We should listen to what they say and put it into practice. The government must show its commitment to our children by implementing every recommendation in the report.

We are used to reading statements like this from Liberal Democrat politicians, but it is worth analysing this one at length because it illustrates the tension in the party's thinking. I choose it not because Joan Walmsley is particularly culpable, but just because her views are typical of the party as a whole.

To begin, no one will take exception to the statement that we do not own our children. Indeed, given that no one alive in Britain has ever heard anyone claim that we do own our children, you wonder quite why it is being made. Is this argument addressed to a 21st-century audience or aimed at some long-dead Puritan ancestor?

Then we are told we have the privilege of caring for, loving and guiding our children. Again this is true, and again you wonder why it is being said. At least it is clear who is being talked about. The “we” who do not own

their children, and the “we” who have the privilege of caring for them are parents.

Yet isn't “privilege” an odd word to use here? Wouldn't it be more natural to speak of a duty to care for our children? Privileges are what the authorities grant to prisoners and pupils, and their recipients know they can be withdrawn if their behaviour does not please their betters. Already parents have been marked out as an inferior sort of people.

Then the passage jumps from talk of domestic virtues like love and care to the statement that we owe children “the best possible policies based on all the knowledge and expertise available to us”. But who are “we” now? One does not ordinarily talk of parents having policies: it is governments that have policies.

Suddenly, caring for children has ceased to be the concern of parents and become the business of the state. This impression is strengthened by the way the idea that children are owed the best possible policies is introduced by the word “however”, implying some sort of incongruence with what has gone before. This suggests a belief that, while talk of love and caring is all very well, the important thing in raising children is government policy.

Anyone who has studied the matter will know that government intervention in children's lives is rarely an unmixed blessing. Yet even among enthusiasts for the state, one might expect debate about what that its role should be here. For Joan Walmsley, however, there are no difficult questions. The United Nations has assembled a committee of “the greatest experts on child development, education, health and welfare”, and all that remains is for the British government to do what that committee says.

There are all sorts of assumptions here. The central one, and we shall examine it presently, is that the question of how best to bring up children is a scientific one to be answered by experts. Fortunately, it is further argued, just the sort of disinterested experts we need are available to us.

What is also assumed, by the introduction of the United Nations into the argument, is that what is right for children in one society is right all over the world. This is odd, given modern sensitivity to the variety of races, faiths and cultures that exist just within Britain. Does childhood in the affluent West really have so much in common with childhood in, say, an African subsistence economy? Liberal Democrats tend to find the sort of policies UN committees advocate congenial, but they should not waive all objections in their eagerness to see them implemented.

Certainly, Joan Walmsley wants to see them implemented. Returning to Liberal Democrat News, we see that she ends by telling government that the way for it to show its commitment to children is by implementing every recommendation in the UN report. Even those who believe that there exists a single set of policies which is best for all children everywhere might want to pause and make sure that the UN had got it right, but here it seems an unquestioning enthusiasm is all that is required.

Such enthusiasm will be summoned up only by those who do not think very long. I recall a splendid harrumphing piece in the Spectator examining the human rights record of some of the countries advising Britain on how to bring up children.

More substantially, I recommend a reading of Kirsten Sellars' *The Rise and Rise of Human Rights*, and in particular her account of the extraordinary horse-trading that went on before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was issued. No doubt a study of the genesis of the UN's 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child would show the same combination of noble sentiments and low politics.

Such international declarations can be excellent things, but we should never forget they are human artefacts. To appeal to them as though they were brought down from Mount Sinai on tablets of stone is not grown-up politics.

So Walmsley's paragraph displays three beliefs about childcare common in mainstream Liberal Democrat opinion.

They are: that we should be distrustful of parental authority over children; that government should have an

extensive say in the raising of children; that there exist experts in childcare whose views should be accepted uncritically.

Each of these is questionable, and when put together they form a poor guide to policy. To see them in action, let's look at another example of Liberal Democrat writing. In the Summer 2003 issue of *The Reformer* Rachael Hedley wrote about rising levels of obesity in children. This is an important problem, and questions of public health are always likely to be difficult for libertarians. Nevertheless, her article was limited by its adoption of the three beliefs.

So, for instance, when Hedley concludes that children should be encouraged to take more exercise, she calls for government-funded sports co-ordinators to set up clubs and for government to use tax incentives to encourage business to sponsor them. This seems a convoluted way of tackling the question and, because it ignores any possibility that schools, parents or children themselves may have a role to play, a pessimistic and horribly centralising one.

After this, it will not be such a surprise that her favoured method of improving children's diets is for schools to run breakfast clubs. Again, parents have no part in solving the problem. It seems that parents are the problem and that the solution is to remove children from their influence for more of the day.

In an effort to turn Liberal Democrat thinking in a more fruitful direction, the rest of *Defending Families* looks at these beliefs in turn.

***This is an abridged version of Jonathan Calder's essay
Defending Families, which appears in Passports to Liberty 5
the latest in the series of booklets edited and produced by
Bill le Breton and Kiron Reid.***

Copies are available price £3.50 from:

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THE TIDE IS HIGH

University of Liverpool law lecturer, Kiron Reid, lambasts the pedlars of cheap stories of falling A-Level standards

Intelligent people every year bemoan the fact that the media, with tedious regularity, trots out the 'standards for A-Levels falling lower than ever before' / 'A-Levels no longer Gold Standard' story.

Invariably the story is supported by the odd teaching professional, Tory MP, 'business leader' and cynical academic.

Local or regional papers at least will concentrate on local good news stories of success (and photos of pretty girls) so it is mainly the national media that play this game every August.

It is nonsense. This article is a personal perspective and a small volley in the effort to put the record straight. I have taught in three of the established (two Victorian 'redbrick' and one 1960s) universities over the last 11 years, and have been a member of the law admissions team and schools and colleges liaison officer for the last year. Despite a trebling of student numbers over my time as an academic, demand is still very high (my now retitled 'law school' was this year more than three times oversubscribed).

Student numbers have increased massively and A-Level grades for entrance have stayed on average about the same or slightly higher.

They have gone up in even more popular institutions and others will still award places with lower grades as in the past.

What about quality? Some young keen (just got their PhDs usually) and older (trying to appear cynical professorial) types will moan about falling standards and have done throughout, but it is just simply not the case.

I don't know any academic who has said that A-Level grades are the best judge of intellectual ability or of how well a person will do on a degree course. Some students with very good grades do very well, others do not; likewise some students with poor A-Level grades do very well in their degree classification.

Universities do, however, need a system to decide which applicants to offer places to and the most fair and efficient way to do that at present for the vast majority of applicants is on the basis of A-Level performance.

When I talk to applicants they understand the intellectual limitations of that but also the reasons for it. Of course universities take account of a variety of criteria for mature, overseas and applicants who have not taken the traditional A-Level qualifications (those taking HNDs or International Baccalaureate for example).

So what about the quality of applications? The changes to the A-level system recently were a challenge for universities - it was very easy to look at UCAS forms' predicted grades for three or four subjects and decide whether to make an offer or not, and ask for an A and two Bs or two Bs and a C and so on.

The move to a mixture of AS and A-Levels, to students often starting taking five AS Levels and continuing to gain

two or three A-Levels and / or two or three AS Levels, and to results now being awarded in terms of numbers of points, certainly took some getting round for academics looking at the admissions process.

In fact it was a complete conceptual change. For a law academic who does not use numbers very much, it took some days and lots of studying of forms and guidance to get up to speed - the increased workload and adjustment required for pupils and teachers in schools and colleges appears to have been enormous.

There has been the outcry that the change was rushed through or botched by government, that tinkering has 'failed' or 'lowered standards' (again).

Government did entirely the right thing, or has tried to. Liberal Democrats for years have complained about young people being forced into boxes at 16, to make narrow choices that set out their career path for the rest of their lives. The party has always supported broadening the post-16 curriculum to give more choice, to widen intellectual horizons with broader knowledge, and to increase the level of education. It may be that the way it was done has created an unnecessarily increased workload or been particularly cumbersome. The constant attack on 'A'-levels may lead to a change to the International Baccalaureate or for a whole new system. Heavily oversubscribed subjects such as medicine, dentistry and law may in the future move to being postgraduate subjects. However, the principle adopted of widening the studies for post-16 was definitely right.

What of the new students? Well times have changed. In my criminal law lectures I refer to Lord Diplock's famous "Rubicon" test (from the case of John Stonehouse) as to whether an accused is guilty of a criminal attempt or not.

A fabulously mixed up test: "Has the defendant crossed the Rubicon and burnt his boats" that is, has he taken the last step before committing the crime.

Each year I ask the lecture room full of first years who was it who crossed the Rubicon and who burnt his boats? Until probably three years ago a declining number of the British students could tell me. Then only two German exchange students knew the answer as to who crossed the Rubicon. So clearly there is a lot less classical education around than there was. But there is a lot less study of Latin as well, and while study of Latin can be a fascinating exercise, lack of knowledge of Latin does not make one a worse law student or worse at studying anything else. (By Christmas students will know the dozen or so bits of Latin that are still regularly used in the course anyway and it is a couple of decades since judges in appeal would routinely break into ancient quotations). The new students today probably are worse at grammar and more importantly spelling. Their spelling for many appears to be significantly worse than mine when it used to be only a little worse (always my benchmark).

The government's concentration on numeracy and literacy at primary age may remedy that in time. However, the new students have all kinds of experience and skills and knowledge that students did not have in the 1980s or well into the 1990s.

Students come to us now routinely having undertaken work experience arranged by schools; most give evidence of work experience in or related to the subject they are applying for. Very many now have actual paid part-time jobs for a year or two before university. These all used to be much less common. The students have wider experience when starting university and most now work part-time, days or nights, throughout university which they never had to and usually did not do in the past. University authorities are much more sympathetic to this than they were - we realise that for many it is a necessity - but we still insist that studies are (usually) full time and must come first.

Across the board - exceptions now being notable as they stand out- 17 and 18 year olds combine sporting, dance, music, charity and voluntary work and a whole range of other skills with their academic study.

This admissions tutor is certain that the attainment of young people today coming into the university system is better than ever before, even given the increased numbers. Yes, in the old universities we have always had students who were at county or national youth level for sport or music or who did voluntary work, but the range now; the numbers who show that they excel in one or more areas of their life apart from school; the numbers who do charity or voluntary work, who help in primary schools or help younger children, the number who work to support themselves or their families; all these are more than ever before.

It is to their credit and brings a range of experience into the discussions in university tutorial rooms. Of course not everyone has done these things, but they get their place at university and have the chance to get a wide experience there apart from academic study.

A final word about the A / AS level system. My faculty used to be suspicious of 'non-academic' subjects which we thought of as more practical like art or music. Others still rule out general studies. We take the view today that students gain points and therefore we should take all subjects into account in making an offer, although we still look for good performance in traditional academic subjects as well.

Likewise we used to not consider students who had re-sits. The self-styled traditionalists bemoan that with coursework and modular A-Levels pupils can re-sit until they get the grade they want.

I was also suspicious of this. Then I actually read the applications and saw the work that students have done. If a student has got poor or perfectly good grades but put themselves through a re-sit, voluntarily done the extra work to get a better grade, then should we give them a chance?

Of course it isn't possible in every case and in departments that are heavily oversubscribed. Some students are poorly advised or wilfully blind when they won't make the required grades. Commitment has always been valued, though, particularly in the legal profession. When I see the effort that some students put in to improve their situation, to persevere, to get that place at an institution, then now I wish them well and hope that they do get a chance.



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STEPPING OUT OF THE DUSTBIN

Retiring Federal Executive member Gareth Epps despairs at Charles Kennedy's shuffle to the right, and sees one reason as the transformation of the FE from the party's strategic body to its organisational dustbin

Radicals have generally viewed October's Parliamentary reshuffle with dismay. It is easy to see the promotion to the pivotal treasury team of unfettered free-marketeters as a distinct move to economic free-market Liberalism of a sort associated with centre-right colleagues on the Continent.

At the same time, it represents a partial realisation of the fears of some of us, who suspected that a vote for Charles Kennedy as leader would see the return for the defeated and, indeed, duped supporters of the Blair-Ashdown 'project'.

This continues a process along the same lines that brought us memorable policies such as, er, the privatisation of the Post Office, and a macroeconomics paper that brought opposition from such diverse corners as Donnachadh McCarthy and Margaret Sharp.

It seems, perversely, borne of the desire to miss the opportunity demonstrated by Brent East. And this desire to fail, even more incredibly, comes after the almost public row about the narrow aversion of the failure of several senior Party figures to follow the clear instructions of the Federal Executive on the matter of the Iraq demo.

The process that has brought this about has seen a period of intense factional activity which has been almost entirely dominated by the pro-free market wing of the party. Where has the contrasting voice been? Good question.

The New Radicalism movement, founded with such gusto under the dark days of the 'project', has seen almost all of its own tasks accomplished, if not always properly implemented. Meanwhile others have been too busy running councils. And the party's local government establishment spends a significant amount of its time fighting internally to prevent splits on the more Manichean aspects of Labour's local government agenda.

Others still have been enjoying the dubious delights of the party's committees. Having now got the complete set (and retired from two), it is questionable whether this was not a complete waste of time.

The Federal Policy Committee is still a valuable forum for debate, although (as Alex Wilcock pointed out at Brighton) that debate will wither if (as last year) the number of candidates barely exceeds the number of places. Policy work outside the FPC and the Westminster Bubble has all but vanished. Conference agendas are beginning to testify to this.

The Federal Executive of the Liberal Democrats, notoriously, is the arm of the Party responsible for the overall strategy and direction. Yet it has not discussed strategy once in my two years of membership, and it is a rare discussion that has a direction, let alone is a coherent whole. And it is time that the role of the executive was questioned.

Some aspects of the FE's work have improved. The work of a number of us has now ensured that the FE discusses, regularly, aspects of the party's operation left untouched for many years. The discussions on such issues as building our local government base and better staff management are having mixed results, but this is a significant step forward. And the agreed motion on gender balance that set up the Gender Balance Task Force has helped. The monthly progress reports have been at times the only agenda item on which any actions to be taken have been agreed.

However, the FE still manifestly fails to do most of what it sets out to do. Iraq is the most obvious example: debates have taken place around two polarised viewpoints; the leadership has taken the gentlest criticism as a personal slight (depending on who is doing the criticising).

The amount of personal invective weighed against Donnachadh McCarthy in particular is quite staggering and appalling for a party that calls itself liberal and democratic. In one meeting a very senior party member made comments that implied the two of them should not even be in the same party, in a way that demonstrated a use of the party's power structure of questionable linkage to Liberalism.

After the last General Election the party engaged in one of its periodic 'strategy' exercises. A consultation session was held at Federal Conference. Yet nothing has been brought forward from that session. The work that has gone on concerning strategic issues (as a result of last year's FE away day, the first since the committee's inception) has suffered significantly from the time constraints of the work being done by volunteers.

Instead the committee has tended to be regarded as the 'dustbin' of the party. It deals with trivia, while the real business gets done elsewhere. And when that business is supposed to be the responsibility of the FE, or accountable to it, the FE seems incapable of or unwilling to monitor it. Accurate and detailed financial information, for example, is normally supplied on request, but rarely (if

ever) as a matter of course. This adds to an atmosphere wherein agreeing the party's budget, no matter what the financial situation or who chairs FFAC at the time, is one where the party's executive is treated like a bunch of naughty schoolboys.

So how should the FE be going about its business? Well, for a start it should be given (as a matter of courtesy) the right to scrutinise and ask questions to any part of the party. This is not going to bring down any edifices of Liberalism - but it might engender a culture of co-operation and mutual respect at the top of the party. It also needs to rapidly progress its work on the more strategic aspects, and decide what it is for. Some innovative thinking has taken place to bring the Party a business plan - yet the thing is not regularly monitored or scrutinised in the manner one might expect from an executive board. Changes in these ways would be a significant step forward from the current stand off.

Similarly, on the face of it, the recent reshuffle has seen the exit or demotion of some of Kennedy's closest leadership colleagues such as Matthew Taylor. However, most of the key unelected figures behind the Kennedy campaign have ended up on the FE, mostly (though not all) by appointment. Alongside his political staff (and I have never had a problem with any of his staff members) sit a 'kitchen cabinet' represented chiefly by Tim Razzall, most of whom are the same people behind the internal Party initiatives which have caused so much opposition, such as one member one vote for internal committees.

Of course, there have been several significant shifts in the constitutional settlement of the party, as the result of electoral success.

Firstly, there are significantly more parliamentarians and (thereby) resources, centralising significantly the resources of the policy-making process. This is unwitting, but, along with the party's involvement in government in Scotland and Wales, significantly enhances the 'civil service' aspects of the policy apparatus. That has also provided a much more secure and better-resourced base

for the leadership, whoever they are, to house their apparatchiks.

Meanwhile, it is time that the party's radicals took the bull by the horns. Significant policy is being formulated in the international sphere, in particular, where Vincent Cable's advice to MPs, astonishingly, gave the recent (mild) Oxfam fair trade campaign the cold shoulder.

The process outlining the next General Election manifesto is already well under way, and it has already been made clear that external scrutiny will be that much greater (the implication being that commitments made will be that much more feeble). There will be, or should be, an enormous row on FPC to ensure that laissez-faire economics and fiscal conservatism, combined with a desire to say nothing at all that upsets anyone with press accreditation, does not triumph.

Part of this work will only come about by way of a huge increase in organised activity to increase the amount of thinking and factional organisation in the party - especially as those on the other side are so blatantly doing it!

It also strikes me that radicals need to work to redress the balance among Parliamentarians, by working positively to ensure that fellow radicals are elected and can use their influence within Parliament.

It is time, therefore, for a period of particular and especial vigilance on all aspects of Liberal Democrat policy.

In particular, it is time for a revitalised grouping of radicals within the party to ensure that bold ideas are put forward, and that this happens both regularly and successfully. This needs to ensure that the Liberal case is clearly put (the newly promoted MPs will be under immediate pressure, particularly Mark Oaten in combating Blunkett's authoritarianism). But it also needs to start actively promoting a policy agenda that looks after the dispossessed rather than the middle classes, and pulls no punches towards what looks, for the first time, like a dying Labour Government.

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**Prime Minister Portillo
and other things that
never happened
by Duncan Brack and
Iain Dale, eds
Politicos 2003 £16.99**

This book describes itself as a collection of political counterfactuals, which, in human-being language, means a series of essays on "What if things had been different?"

The introduction reminds us that all history is based on chance; "a stronger heart, a trembling trigger-figure... History without the study of counterfactuals runs the risk of making everything seem predestined, of removing any elements of choice".

The essays, 21 in all, examine aspects of the political history of the twentieth century, from Lenin's train not making it to Petrograd in time for round two of the Russian Revolution, Kennedy surviving assassination, the wrong parties winning the wrong elections of 1964, 1970 and variations on 1974, and the eponymous hero of the collection not losing his seat in 1997, and going on to greater glory.

Some of the articles are serious and academic; Lenin, by Helen Szamuley, is particularly erudite and informative. Some are lighter and more whimsical, of which Iain Dale's Portillo is the most amusing. But the fine piece by John Charmley on Lord Halifax's victory over Churchill in May 1940 in particular strikes terror into the heart and mind because the new future is almost too distorted to contemplate.

That Churchill did succeed in 1940 was a great help to the Liberal Party, and, without him, they would have perished in the 1950s, according to Michael McManus. This contributor was Edward Heath's political secretary, a Tory candidate and author of "Jo Grimond: Towards the Sound of Gunfire".

Perhaps he is a tad biased in his contention that, were it not for Tory (Churchill's) charity, and electoral deals to defeat the menace of socialism, then rather than having a taxi full of MPs in the 1950s, the Liberals would have had just the one, Grimond, if they were lucky, and thus would have been completely annihilated. Biased or not, McManus knows his Grimond, and this is the best out of the Liberal essays, and probably the most interesting in the anthology.

REVIEWS

Simon Burns' "What if Lee Harvey Oswald had missed?" paints a fairy tale picture of the political and economic dynamism of the 1960s continuing on and on - troops withdrawn from Vietnam in 1964; detente; no Nixon; civil rights established a decade earlier; world peace. Happy days.

Well done, our Duncan and his Conservative History Group collaborator, Iain Dale. While it ain't "Fatherland", it is a nice conceit, in the most part well executed. Good Christmas present for the student of politics who has had everything.

Wendy Kyrle-Pope

**Empire: how Britain
made the modern
world
by Niall Ferguson
Penguin: Allen Lane
£25**

One hundred years ago, it was assumed by politicians left and right, Liberal and Conservative alike, that the British empire was a good thing. Critics of empire might have condemned particular aspects of imperialism - the jingo crowds, the Boer War etc. but few would have argued with Britain's right to have and to govern her empire.

Today, by contrast, few would explicitly defend British imperialism. Empire is synonymous with conquest, expropriation of land, and exploitation of people.

Britain's imperial past is a source of shame rather than pride. So it is quite brave of Niall Ferguson to try to make the case for the British Empire: that for all its faults it did more good than harm.

Ferguson can always be relied upon to put interesting and original arguments, although I find his Thatcherite political sympathies too easily drive his historical conclusions.

This was most true of his book *The Pity of War*, in which he argued that Britain had made a fatal mistake in entering the First World War, because this not only led to the loss of empire, but started the process that has pushed Britain into the arms of the dreaded European Union.

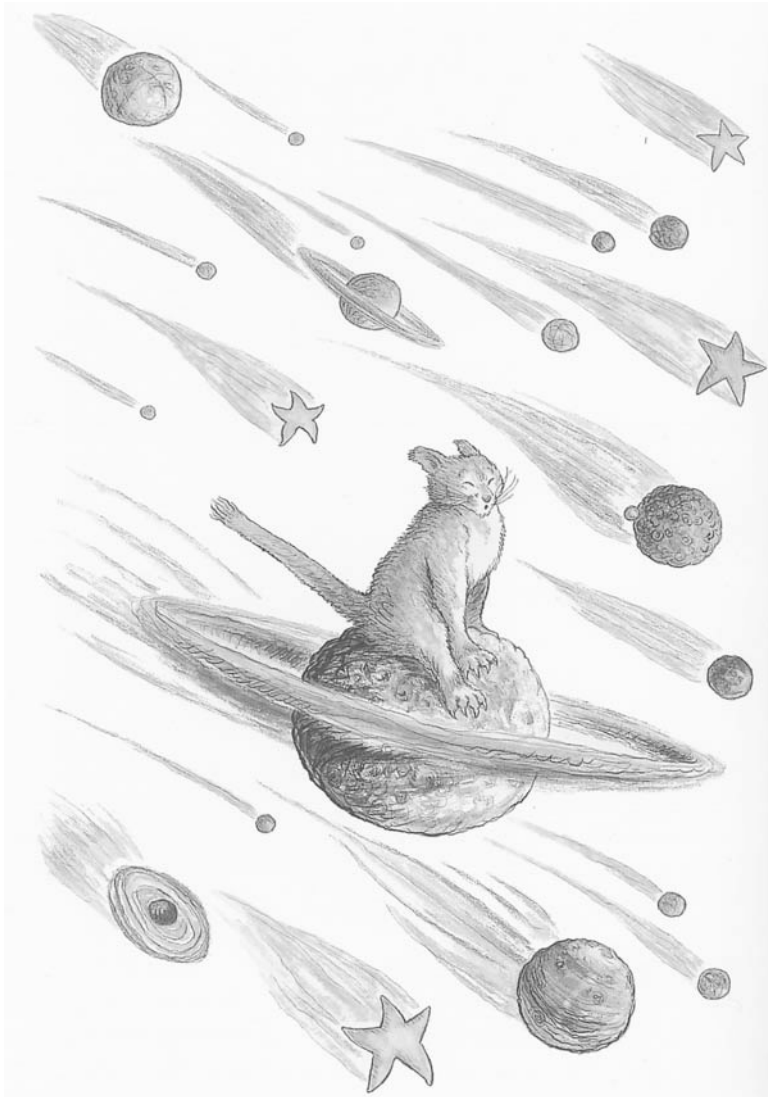
In a sense this book builds on that argument by pointing out what he sees as the benefits of empire not just to Britain but to the world. These include the growth of capitalism and free trade, abolition of slavery, mobility of labour and the spread of democracy.

He is not blind to the failings of empire: he doesn't shirk discussion of shameful incidents, like the Amritsar massacre or the concentration camps in the Boer War. Equally, Ferguson is honest about the extent to which desirable objectives - trade liberalisation, for example - were achieved by dubious methods - gunboat diplomacy and physical coercion.

As a brief history of the British Empire, this book works well. Ferguson is an engaging writer; he draws rounded portraits of some of the key figures described and manages to get lots of facts and figures in at the same time.

The problem comes at the end, as Ferguson forces a conclusion that is not really supported by the evidence presented in the rest of the book. Contrary to the view of most recent historians, he dismisses indigenous nationalist movements as unimportant in the process of decolonisation. He prefers to believe that the damage inflicted on Britain's wealth by two world wars, combined with the anti-imperialism of the two Cold War superpowers forced Britain to get rid of its empire. But no argument is offered for this other than bald assertion.

But even if Britain was not actually forced by military defeat to abandon empire, as happened to France in



Vietnam, it is hard to see how she would have benefited from retaining imperial territories in which there was ever increasing pressure for self-rule and independence.

Ferguson's unthinking dismissal of nationalism is perhaps best shown by the glib aside that Irish neutrality in the Second World War was "shameful". Does it not occur to him that a country that had struggled so long for self-government might have a problem in entering a war soon afterwards in apparently slavish support of its erstwhile ruler?

It remains unclear what other advantages Ferguson believes Britain might have accrued from keeping its empire. Would standards of living have been higher, for example? Would Britain have remained a superpower? Or would we simply have been engaged in a costly, counterproductive and ultimately futile repression of nationalist movements, before eventual concessions of independence.

Consistently in looking at the end of empire, Ferguson the modern-day

EEC trade. Surely as an economic historian Ferguson is aware that trends are important rather than just absolute figures - his statistics undermine rather than advance his case.

In short, this book, like the rest of Ferguson's work is highly readable, never dull and genuinely thought-provoking. But the reader has to watch out for the political sleights of hand.

Iain Sharpe

**Decide and prepare
by Matthew Taylor
Centre for Reform
2003 £8**

Matthew Taylor's new pamphlet on the euro reminded me irresistibly of the pre-Raphaelite Arthur Hughes' painting "the long engagement", although Hughes shows more feeling.

The painting shows a serious and drab man staring into the future

Conservative Eurosceptic is forcing the hand of Ferguson the detached historian. Thus he argues that it is true that the proportion of British trade with the countries that formed the EEC grew from 12 to 18 per cent between 1952 and 1965. But the share of total trade with the Commonwealth remained substantially larger: though it fell from 45 per cent to 35 per cent, it remained twice as important as

while a bright young blonde grips his wrist and gazes into his eyes. Thus Gordon Brown is awaited by Europe. The length of engagement is signalled by the name Amy carved on a tree but overgrown by ivy. For Amy read EMU overgrown by the tendrils of the five tests, six years and 18 Treasury reports. The artist does not explain why the engagement is so long and nor does Brown, says Taylor.

The pamphlet examines each of the five tests and the chancellor's pronouncements on them and argues that each test is already passed or could be, if we chose to. The economic arguments are simply expressed and persuasive.

But the tests are a smokescreen anyway and the real choice is political. "As long as the Treasury doesn't decide to take action to meet those targets, inaction is the mechanism to ensure they are not met." Gordon Brown's "wait and see" is not neutral; by waiting and not preparing we change what we see. Hence Taylor urges that we "decide and prepare" or as Amy might have put it, "Name the day, Gordon."

David Grace

**The Last Party: Britpop,
Blair and the Demise of
English Rock
by John Harris
4th Estate 2003 £15.00**

Even though I'm only 27, I must be getting old. Today I rarely longer listen to commercial music and I don't know what the kids are listening to. But for others like me, there is a way to relive those halcyon moments from our late teenage and university years in the early to mid-1990s. The Last Party, written by John Harris, took me back to the time spent in the LSE student bar and the sense of growing optimism my friends and I had that things were about to change for the better. The Tories were on their way out, Elvis was in the White House and a euphoric soundtrack including gems such as Girls and Boys, Champagne Supernova and Animal Nitrates blared out of the jukebox in the corner.

Of course, the moment didn't last. We all graduated and got sensible jobs; Elvis stained Monica's dress and Tony Blair decided to play sycophant to a war-mongering cowboy. Our TVs became filled with interior design programmes and the Spice Girls

began their remorseless assault on both our ears and the charts.

So where did it all go wrong? It wasn't the moment when Noel Gallagher swapped jokes with the new Prime Minister in Downing Street. Instead, Harris argues, it had come earlier. Blur, Suede and Oasis, the main Britpop bands, as this particular genre of music became known, had become weighed down by the excesses of alcohol and drugs and a change in musical direction before New Labour got elected. Yet ironically, it was at the moment of Britpop's decline when New Labour politicians embraced it as part of their forgotten and unlamented attempt to rebrand Britain.

And contrary to the title of Harris's book - and those who believe the rot started with Tony Blair - the Prime Minister didn't kill Britpop. At best he is a peripheral actor in a drama which first saw Suede and Blur draw swords before the latter clashed with Oasis. At root was personal and professional rivalry; Suede's Brett Andersen and Blur's Damon Albarn had a girlfriend in common, Elastica's Justine Fleishmann, whose band also features prominently in Harris's book. As Oasis eclipsed Suede as Blur's rivals, the camaraderie between the two groups led to personal animosity, characterised by the infamous battle for the number one spot in the summer of 1995.

But the personal chemistry only explains part of Britpop's story. Harris traces the success of these bands through a wide range of influences and origins. Inspired by the Beatles, David Bowie and punk, many of Britpop's bands also drew from the music of the late 1980s, including acid, the Smiths, Inspiral Carpets (with whom Noel Gallagher was a roadie) and Stone Roses.

The link with acid music is key to understanding Britpop. Through it Harris emphasises the importance of raves, independent record labels, music press like the NME and opposition to Tory governments in creating a loosely left-wing coalition in favour of change, politically and musically. These artists, commentators and producers spearheaded the independent music industry, but found their audience limited by the lack of airtime afforded their bands by the main radio stations.

A management sweep-out at Radio One in the winter of 1993-94 changed all that. Old presenters made

THE LAST OF THE PURPLE TIGERS

To Reeve Lindbergh



way for the new and the playlist changed. Bands which would otherwise have only ever appeared on John Peel's obscure Evening Sessions began to be played at peak time and were hitting the mainstream as a result. In 1996 Oasis played to a sell-out crowd of 250,000 at Knebworth over two days; Menswear, who barely anyone had seen, let alone heard, got caught in a bidding war between different labels, eventually signing to Island for £500,000.

But just as would happen in the world of dotcoms and reality TV programmes a few years later, the bottom fell out of the market. Britpop, which had seemed young, hip and cool in the mid-1990s, seemed to lose its way, becoming bloated and lethargic in the process. Liam Gallagher's boorishness began to lose its shine, his brother Noel escaped London to live life as a

country squire, Damon and Justine broke up and Elastica band members began to do cold turkey after years of knocking back coke and heroin.

Harris captures well the zeitgeist of the period. Alongside Britpop, he notes the rise of lad culture, best exemplified by magazines like *Loaded* and the insufferable Chris Evans. He charts the change in musical direction taken by the relevant bands, in particular Blur's break with the poppy sounds of Parklife and *The Great Escape* in favour of the grungier, heavier music of Blur in 1997. Oasis, whose commercial success was based on *Definitely Maybe* and *What's the Story (Morning Glory?)*, put out a relatively derivative record, *Be Here Now* in the same year. And the much overlooked Pulp presented a sombre sound in 1998's *This is Hardcore*; a record which to Harris appeared to signal the end of Britpop.

For Harris, Britpop was a fleeting moment. Prior to its entry into the mainstream, British teenagers' listening was dominated by American grunge, especially that of Nirvana. Nearly ten years later, British ears are once again hearing the sound of American guitars. But whereas before I knew what I was listening to, now I have no idea. In part this could be due to me having moved the dial from Radio One to Radio Four. But I fear it could also be indicative of the fact I'm getting older. What was modern in my eyes is fast becoming history.

While I welcome Harris's effort in bringing back the memories of yesteryear, I resent it too. Books about a generation's popular culture may help inculcate a sense of nostalgia, but they can also be cruel. When you've finished reading *The Last Party* and the memories of drunken nights spent singing along to *Three Lions* and *Wonderwall* fade, you quickly realise the world has moved on. And you haven't.

Guy Burton

Persia in the Great Game, Sir Percy Sykes, explorer, consul, soldier, spy, by Antony Wynn

**John Murray 2003
£25.00**

Iran is fascinating in that it is ostensibly one of the few countries of the world that was not colonised in the 18th & 19th centuries, yet its experience of imperialism has produced one of the most profound backlashes so far experienced, in the revolution of the Ayatollah Khomeini.

Sykes was Britain's agent in far flung parts of that country through the 1890s to the First World War. The sub-heading says it all; *Boy's Own* stuff this, and predictably Sykes' consular career was less successful than he probably deserves, since the rough edges grated the other Foreign Office Johnnies.

Sykes' career enables us to explore a largely forgotten corner. His arrival in Iran was at a time when Russia was expanding southwards, and Persian independence rested on Britain's unwillingness to allow them to take it over. To counter Russia's superior logistical position and its intrigues in the souks and amongst the mullahs

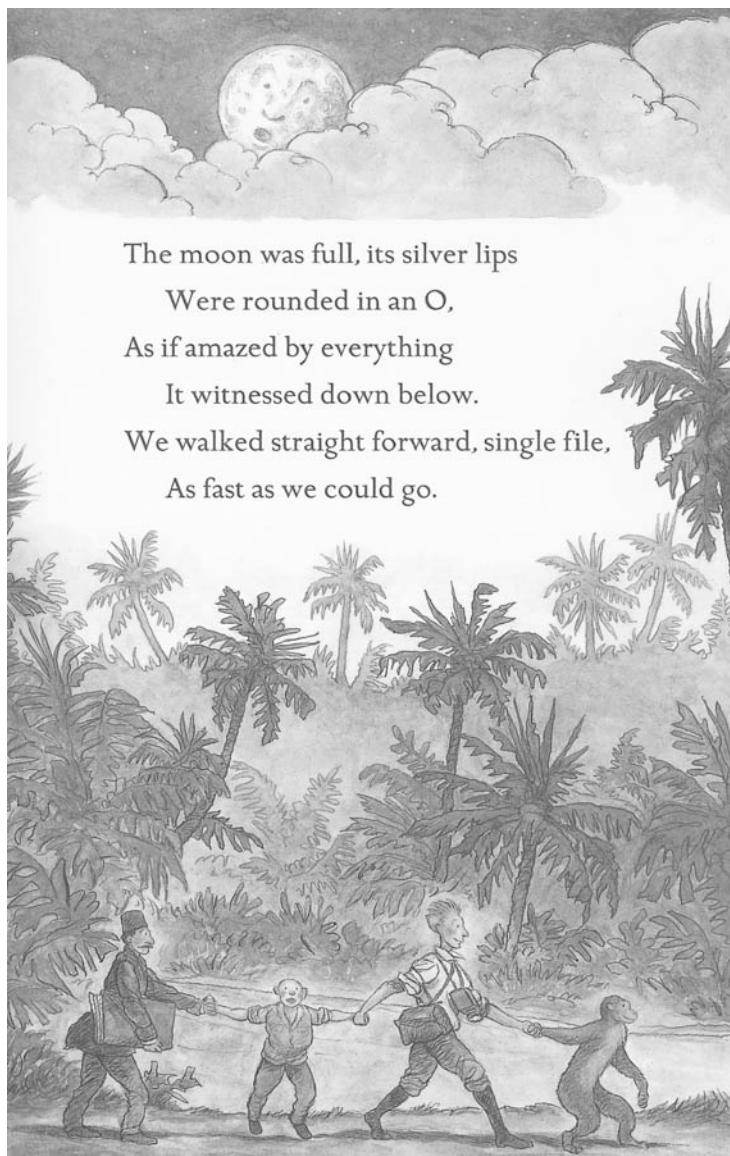
Sykes rarely had more than a handful of Indian soldiers and his own wits to stir up counter-intrigue. He wasn't a political man in the sense that we'd understand it, hence his trouble with his FO colleagues. Sir Edward Grey seems to have valued him, but real politics overrode local considerations when rapprochement with Russia was on the table.

So, apart from the ripping yarn what do we learn from this book? Largely, that there is nothing particularly new in Iranian politics.

Sunnis would persecute Shi'ites, Shi'ites would persecute other Shi'ites of a slightly different persuasion, the Baha'i, who probably never did anybody any harm, copped it worst of the lot. Some sects, followers of the Aga Khan for example, enjoyed British protection, and Christians and Jews similarly benefited from the imperial powers. Yes, both Iran and Islam is as diverse a religion as Christianity in the over Welsh valley, and the proponents hate each other as much as the SWP hates the WRP. We also learn that westernised, even liberal Persians such as Prince Farman Farma, had to mask their views and habits from prying religious eyes - a bit like Benazir Bhutto taking to the headscarf. Not much is new.

Wynn paints his picture of Sykes warts and all, and in so doing opens up to us an under-studied aspect of imperialism. If Bush and Blair, or even the United Nations try to invade Iran on some jumped up grounds, all out on the streets against them.

Stewart Rayment



The moon was full, its silver lips
Were rounded in an O,
As if amazed by everything
It witnessed down below.
We walked straight forward, single file,
As fast as we could go.

The Wishing Bone and other poems, by Stephen Mitchell, illustrated by Tom Pohrt **Candlewick Press, 2003 £10.99**

This book doesn't quite cross the Atlantic, but is such a beautifully illustrated collection of nonsense poems that it is well worth a look. *The Trial* might only approach the follies of the legal system in reality, but rhymes rather better. *The Last Purple Tiger* is a worthy follower to the hunts of Carroll, Lear and Peake. Pohrt's work is firmly in the tradition of the children's book illustration that accompanied those masters - I'm frequently reminded of Toby Twirl for some reason - probably the prosecuting pig. Rest your eyes on them whilst the poems grow on you.

Stewart Rayment

Monday

Good etiquette was more strictly observed in my young day – I had been married to the first Lady Bonkers for several years before I learned that her Christian name was Maud – so we elder statesmen are well placed to advise younger party members on such matters. (I served as the Young Liberals' Vice-President for Department throughout the 1960s.) At Brighton I was called upon more than once to show the proper way for a gentleman to accompany a lady through the revolving doors at the Metropole or the Conference venue. The principle is simple to establish: the gentleman must go first and push, but the lady must be allowed to leave the doors before him; it therefore naturally follows that the gentleman must go round twice. Should another lady join the door before he has made good his exit, then he must repeat the procedure. One should, however, be wary of pushing too hard. I recall that in the 1920s a prominent member of the Women's Liberal Federation was flung from the Grand with such force that she flew clean across the promenade and landed in the sea. This is considered Bad Form; besides, there may be children and donkeys playing on the beach if the tide is out.

Tuesday

Shortly after Conference I treated myself to a trip in the latest airship and enjoyed a short holiday in New Zealand. As those who have seen *The Lord of the Rings* at the moving cinema will know, it is a beautiful country, but I fear that fame has done no favours for the hobbits who live there. They no longer do any work, but sit by the roadside selling trinkets to tourists; I fear that whatever they make is spent on drink. Against my better judgement, I bought a ring from one of the furry-footed little fellows. I have it close at hand as I write; indeed, I have grown strangely fond of it.

Wednesday

The other day a television camera crew and a funny little Spanish chap turned up at the Hall. Before I could load my twelve-bore, the crew explained to me that they make a popular series in which the game Spaniard takes up a number of jobs for which he is singularly unsuited (single mother, Secretary of State for Defence) with, as they put it, Hilarious Consequences. So I agreed to give him a trial as an under-parlourmaid. This morning, after an unfortunate incident with a cow creamer, I was forced to conclude that he Simply Will Not Do. Nevertheless the people from the moving television seemed happy with their filming. Next week the doughty Iberian starts work in my Stilton mines.

Thursday

To one who has dined with Salisbury, Baldwin and Macmillan, the current Conservative leader does not cut an impressive figure: he may have lost his Yorkshire accent, but he is still bald as a coot. I read the other day that he has had all sorts of trouble because he once employed his wife as a secretary and people are asking how much work she really did for him. It happens that the other day I turned up an account of a typical day in the life of the first Lady Bonkers; some of the highlights were as follows: shooting snipe with me before breakfast; judging the pork pie class at the High Leicestershire Show; receiving the Bulgarian Ambassador; hosting a gala luncheon in favour of the Home of Distressed Councillors in Herne Bay; driving a tank in manoeuvres for the Rutland Territorials; playing eighteen holes with

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Bobby Jones; singing Brünnhilde at the Royal Opera House, Oakham. No one ever accused her of not pulling her weight.

Friday

When I read of renewed attempts to persuade members of our ethnic minorities to join the Metropolitan Police I recall my own days as an investor in commercial television and the efforts we made then. Each week our series *Mbopo of Dock Green* would relate the adventures of an African policeman seconded to the London force as he alternately clipped short-trousered youngsters around the ear and helped old ladies across the road. At the end

of the show he would deliver a homily to the camera ("Young Johnnie wasn't a bad lad, but he fell in with the wrong crowd...") before serenading the viewers with "Swanee River" whilst accompanying himself upon the tenor banjolele. Mbopo was played by a succession of leading British actors of the period, including Dirk Bogarde, Finlay Currie, Kenneth More and Nyree Dawn Porter. It was a sad day when it was taken off the air to make room for a grittier drama set in Liverpool: *Z Bicycles*.

Saturday

Did you see that Chinaman in space? I have no doubt that the plucky oriental will take his place alongside Raymond Baxter (who shall ever forget his becoming the first Englishman in space in the very year that Denis Compton conquered Everest and the young Elizabeth II won back the Ashes?) and our own David Chidgey, pilot of the *Bird of Liberty*. Quite where this leaves the question of Chinese Labour, I shall leave other pens to discuss.

Sunday

I write these lines sheltering under a hedge on the borders of Rutland; it is all the fault of that dratted ring. My old friend Lord Rennard arrived at the Hall unannounced this morning, and was shown into the Library. He unfolded a tale which made my knotted and combined locks to part and each particular hair to stand on end, like quills upon the fretful porpentine. It seems that the ring is immensely powerful; why, it could hold the key to the next general election! The only thing to do, Rennard assures me, is to summon up a jolly fellowship and head off with the intention of lobbing the aforementioned ring into the "Crack of Doom". (I cannot locate it in Wainwright's *Midland Second Places*, but no doubt we shall come across it sooner or later.) My fellowship consists of Meadowcroft (I am told it is traditional to invite one's gardener on such expeditions), Paul Burstow (the party's new elf spokesman), Lady Nicholson (here on behalf of the European Parliament to extirpate Certain Practices amongst the orcs), Rising Star ("to track um dwarves"), Nancy (my loyal elephant), Paul Keetch (it is always a good idea to have our defence spokesman to hand if it comes to fisticuffs) and a couple of Well-Behaved Orphans. I am not sure when we shall return, but I hope it will be in time for the opening of the skiing season in Lincolnshire.

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