

# liberator



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# COMMENTARY

## VOTE FOR YOURSELF

So long as Labour seeks to impose compulsory identity cards, and continues on its present authoritarian course, no Liberal Democrat supporter should cast a tactical vote for it at the next general election.

But Labour supporters should still vote tactically for Liberal Democrats.

That might sound a rather unreasonably one-sided exchange, but the whole point of tactical voting is to get half of what one wants.

For most Labour voters, the Liberal Democrats' commitment to public services, civil liberty, active local government and internationalism offers a fair amount of what they once got, but no longer do, from Labour. Faced with a choice between a Liberal Democrat or Tory win, the former is the obvious choice for a Labour voter in a seat where that party's cause is lost.

But for a Liberal Democrat voter in a Labour/Tory marginal, the choice is not clear-cut.

What does it matter if it is a Labour MP or a Tory one who casts their vote to destroy civil liberty, invade Iraq or extend central control from Westminster? The outcome is the same, unless one candidate has some particularly outstanding record to the contrary.

Voting Liberal Democrat in even a hopeless seat at least swells the party's national total and helps it to establish a presence in areas where it is weak.

It does something more important too. Labour's unrelenting war against civil liberty will stop only if it judges the electoral consequences too great. It is the only language Labour understands.

If the price of Labour's instinctive authoritarianism is the loss of Liberal Democrat tactical votes, and so the loss of Labour held seats, it might just make it realise that there is a price to be paid for this government's obsession with trying to control every aspect of everyone's life.

The party has tried co-operation at varying degrees of enthusiasm and formality with Labour and been rewarded with a government that oozes contempt for liberty from every pore. It is time for liberals to fight Labour, not appease it.

Ever since Tony Blair became Labour leader, he has operated on an assumption that Labour voters had nowhere else to go and that Liberal Democrats would vote tactically for Labour where this mattered. With these bases secured, Labour could therefore pitch its appeal to the right, since it would never lose any significant number of votes to the left.

The result of this is the process in which Labour allows its policy making to be led by the Daily Mail and Sun, where each concession given to these shrill organs of the authoritarian right, and those who support their

world-view, sees them come back for more, which Blair in turn concedes.

Long ago, Blair's prestige might have allowed him to take on the right and fundamentally undermine its influence. Instead he chose to appease it and collude with it, with the result that we now have a Labour government that poses at least as much danger to liberty as its Tory predecessors.

It remains to be seen whether the Liberal Democrats can make political capital out of Blair's instinctive authoritarianism and intrusiveness into matters that are properly people's private business.

But supporters in hopeless seats should at least vote for what they believe in. As a Liberal Democrat slogan in the 1960s asked: "Which Twin is the Tory?"

## IT WON'T LAST

Michael Howard's installation as Tory leader calls for the Corporal Jones approach to politics from Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy - don't panic.

It is hardly surprising that the unusual experience of being led by someone even half competent should raise Tory morale and perhaps recover the allegiance of some previous Tory supporters. There was, after all, no obvious group of diehard Duncan Smith supporters to be alienated by his fall.

But Howard offers no way for the Tories to break out of their heartland of the elderly, wealthy and bigoted.

Howard was widely hated when he was in the last Tory cabinet - much more so than was John Major - for reasons that have not gone away.

Anne Widdecombe's gibe that he had "something of the night" about him struck a chord because it was obvious to the public that there was large element of truth to it.

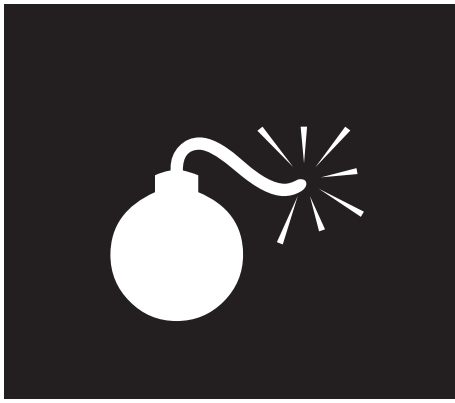
If one were asked to describe the personification of the Tories as the "nasty party", it would still be Howard.

His attempts to humanise himself by gestures such as offering his MPs a free vote on same sex marriages and criticising the Government for being too brutal over refugee children come over as irredeemably fake.

The Liberal Democrats need simply to hold their nerve until the novelty wears off Howard. There is little he can offer to those Tories who might vote Liberal Democrat, let alone to those who have already switched allegiance.

The worst response would be to allow a mildly rejuvenated Tory party to start dragging the Liberal Democrats in their direction.

Two conservative parties are more than enough, without any need for a third.



# RADICAL BULLETIN

## RACE FOR THE PRESIDENCY

America will not be the scene of the only presidential contest next year. In the Liberal Democrats' corner of the political world, the race to succeed Navnit Dholakia, who has served the maximum two terms, is already in progress.

The most semi-declared candidate so far is Montgomery MP Lembit Opik, the prospect of whose accession to this high-profile post is regarded with undisguised horror by a number of senior figures.

This is because, whatever Opik's jovial public persona on television light entertainment shows, they fear his lack of any very obvious track record on policy or philosophy leaves him chasing every passing issue, and wonder at the extent of his political depth.

"What does Opik stand for?" is a question few have bothered to ask until now, but they will if he stands for president and he will need some answers. Being famous for an obsession with asteroids and as a reader of UFO magazines may not exactly cut it at this level.

More to the point for some MPs is the fear he would use the presidency as Charles Kennedy did, as a stepping stone to the leadership.

"We can't go into a general election led by chat-show Charlie and late-show Lembit" one MP said.

The other semi-declared candidates, Joan Walmsley and Jenny Tonge, are worthy but probably not big enough hitters or well enough known to beat Opik, so other names are being approached, such as education spokesman Phil Willis, and senior MP Paul Tyler, who retires at the next general election. Watch this space.

## COSTS AND VALUES

Anyone worried about Mark Oaten's appointment as home affairs spokesman will hardly have had their fears soothed by his performance in the first parliamentary debate on identity cards.

Home secretary David Blunkett's plan to finger and iris print the whole population certainly drew objections from Oaten, but not ones based on the affront to civil liberty involved.

Instead Oaten raised practical objections about whether biometric data collection would work, whether the cards could be falsified, and their cost.

All perfectly valid points in themselves, but this is primarily an issue of civil liberty, not of technology or funding.

Even if the technology were proven and the costs minimal, the cards would still be unacceptable as they involve the storage of data about which the holder cannot know and, almost certainly, a requirement to

produce them to establish one's right to be acting lawfully in a public place.

Blunkett was able to make Oaten look a fool by throwing back at him his vote last year in favour of a 10-minute rule bill to introduce ID cards.

Is it possible that Oaten did not put the libertarian argument against ID cards because he either does not understand it or, even worse, does not agree with it? If either of these things is correct, what is he doing in his present job?

## SHUFFLING TO THE RIGHT

The reverberations from the October reshuffle, which elevated the Liberal Democrats' right wing, have scarcely abated (*Liberator* 291).

A letter to the *Independent* from Tony Greaves denounced the whole thing as a lurch in the wrong direction and, in particular, attacked the removal of Simon Hughes from home affairs.

Those close to Charles Kennedy insist that Hughes would have gone at some point anyway to free him up for his campaign for mayor of London, though there was no justification offered for the decision to replace him with Mark Oaten.

Replacing Matthew Taylor as shadow chancellor with Vince Cable has also gone down badly in some quarters, since Cable is identified with the free market wing of the party, and is not thought to represent even a majority of the parliamentary party, let alone the party more widely.

Taylor was demoted to parliamentary party chair with some sort of role in relation to preparing the manifesto. Whether he will use this post in the rent-a-quote style that Oaten did remains to be seen.

Greaves' attack drew a predictably juvenile response from Liberal Future, the mutual therapy society for the party's right wing.

Its website described his views as "pathetic attack on party by serial loser".

Serial loser? Greaves? The man who is one of the originators of community politics and who has won, or inspired others to win, more elections than most Liberal Future members have had clients in their lobbying firms.

## GAGGED BY REDS

The march to protest against President Bush's visit drew about 150 Liberal Democrats to their official meeting point. This was obviously fewer than on the main demonstration against the Iraq war last February, but not a bad turnout for a midweek afternoon event.

Cowley Street seems to have avoided the opprobrium around its lack of organisation of the February event

(Liberator 286) by ignoring this one, and leaving its management to the Peace and Security Group.

A very wide range of people marched, from church groups to Trots. But the organisers showed that even this range is not enough to overcome the sectarianism of the average socialist, as they refused to have a Liberal Democrat speaker at the Trafalgar Square rally.

Jenny Tonge was available to speak, but excuses were made as to how only Charles Kennedy, who was not available, would be acceptable. It ought to be for the party and not the Stop the War Coalition to decide who should represent it.

Lib Dem baroness Sarah Ludford, who was on the march, recalled the same thing had happened a year earlier when she was due to speak at one of the early anti-war rallies only to be pushed further and further down the batting order and eventually told it was too late.

Since the Liberal Democrats are the only important political party to oppose the Iraq war, one can only speculate on the organisers' motives. Presumably it is the usual inability of socialists to cope with anyone from outside their own irrelevant factional politics.

Labour dissidents were not very numerous on the march although, ironically, one prominent Labour banner was that of its Brent East branch.

## JUST A MINUTED

The row over lobbyist lords continued at the Federal Executive in November with a touch of surrealism (Liberator 291).

Conference voted in 2001 to restrict the ability of Lib Dem peers to work for payment as lobbyists, with a two year phasing in period of the new rule.

When the FE reached the minutes from its previous meeting, covering the section where Lord Razzle had managed to kick into touch Donnachadh McCarthy's motion endorsing the original conference decision, they accomplished the feat of facing both ways.

Bemused FE members found minutes that stated that the issue was one between conference and the Lords, so the FE would take no position, but also that, in the FE's view, the safeguards in place were now sufficient to allow peers to continue to sell their lobbying services.

McCarthy complained that these two positions contradicted each other and asked which represented the FE's position.

Lord Dholakia said from the chair that it was the FE's view that it was this was a matter for conference, and not for the FE. McCarthy asked for this to be minuted only to be told that clarifications of minutes could not be minuted.

The row about whether or not the lords have observed the 2001 motion is thus likely to return to conference at some point, presumably in the spring when fewer people are likely to notice.

Lobbying lords' interests are now listed on the House of Lords website and those of some Lib Dem peers make interesting, and indeed lengthy, reading.

## SOAP OPERA

Yes, it's Westminster Enders. The story so far. Paul left one party two years ago and joined another, since when he has, while away from his wife at Westminster, had an affair with a journalist and snogged a researcher.

To make matters worse, he has recorded these events in poetry and put them on his website for all to see.

Meanwhile, his wife is standing by him, but Sandra, who lives a little way down the bench, is enraged on her behalf and had told the newspapers that Paul "didn't do anything for her" and that she "hadn't realised Paul was so interesting".

Horrified at this outbreak of embarrassing public exchanges, a group of neighbours, known as the whips, has gone round to tell Sandra to shut her mouth and Paul to shut his flies. The story, unfortunately, may continue.

Seriously, Paul Marsden is not a public moralist and what he does in his private life would therefore be no-one's concern except for those involved, had he not taken the idiotic decision to advertise the matter in verse on his website.

Sandra Gidley's "oh look, a fire, let's chuck some wood on it" approach was hardly less misguided.

In a joint statement between Gidley and Marsden's wife Shelly, one of the more unusual things ever to appear on the Lib Dem website, Ms Marsden said she was "appalled to read in a national newspaper today that Sandra Gidley has launched a deeply personal attack against my husband and I".

Gidley said: "The remarks attributed to me in the Mail did not reflect the overall tone of the interview I gave. I did not foresee the selective angle that the piece would take. With hindsight it would have been better not to have commented."

Quite so, but what is the party to make of a shadow cabinet member who does not foresee that the Mail, of all newspapers, might take a "selective angle" from a Liberal Democrat?

## ERMINE CONTROL

A select group of Liberal Democrats was waiting, as Liberators went to press, to find out if they had been made peers.

The Government agreed to create a fresh batch and the question on the Liberal Democrat side was not merely who these people would be but whether they would come from the list chosen in the peers' ballot in 1999.

This innovation allowed conference to choose a list of people from whom peerage nominations should be drawn, although Charles Kennedy was left free to add one other nominee to each batch.

Kennedy assured the federal executive in the autumn that he would continue to appoint from the list, and it will be fairly obvious if he has not.

The list produced howls of indignation at the time from those who feared their chances of a peerage might vanish if party members were actually allowed to vote on the matter, but generally it worked pretty well.

Objections of varying degrees of lunacy, such as that the party as seeking to fetter the Queen's discretion in choosing peers, proved groundless.

But, over the past three years, very few peers have been created, and the list was largely forgotten.

It was never intended that the whole thing would simply be static until everyone on it had been elevated, and there should therefore be some way to replenish it by a fresh election.

This is likely to prove one of those awkward decisions that the party will accidentally forget to take.

Meanwhile, as of early December, the smart money was peerage for former air marshal Tim Garden, former Tory MP Hugh Dykes, former SDP luminary Julia Neuberger, and Jane Bonham-Carter.

# TOO TIMID TO TAX

## Liberal Democrats must spell out that essential investment comes with a price tag, says Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield and a Beveridge Group founder

In his successful presidential campaign, Bill Clinton famously had 'It's the economy, stupid' emblazoned around his campaign offices. Today in British politics this might be replaced with an alternative slogan - 'It's the money, stupid.'

The received wisdom is that Britain is a highly taxed nation and cannot afford to invest more, even in the worst pensions in Western Europe let alone in what are written off by many as highly inefficient public services.

Tony 'trust me' Blair, for example, has just launched his Big Conversation about all the key issues facing this and the next Government.

Except the question of taxation never raises its head - just the choice of rationing between different investment priorities. Michael Howard and the 'New' Conservatives on the other hand do mention taxation, claiming that taxes have soared and are being poured down the open drain of inefficient public services. The (Old) Conservative answer it seems is that public services like the NHS should be privatised and spending slashed by 20% in order to allow for tax cuts.

There are two fundamental flaws with this viewpoint.

First, despite the views of the average member of the public 'informed' to the contrary by politicians and newspapers like the Sun and the Mail, we are not a heavily taxed country. The most recent figures from the OECD show that, in 2002, Britain at 35.9% of GDP paid the fourth lowest total tax take of the 15 EU members. British companies paid the lowest tax of any EU country, personal taxation is among the lowest in the EU and our national debt is the lowest of any G7 country. Even Tony Blair admitted on 22 February 2002 that Britain "is a relatively low taxed economy," but it is not something either he or Gordon shouts out loud presumably because they do not want to upset Rupert Murdoch. Liberal Democrats too share this fear it seems. Early in 2002, Mark Oaten, as chairman of the parliamentary party, questioned the need for the 1p on income tax policy.

In autumn 2003, our new shadow chancellor Vince Cable said that any increases in spending must be met by cuts elsewhere and Charles Kennedy announced that we stood for 'fairer taxes not higher taxes.'

Insofar as that slogan means redressing a system where the wealthiest are taxed at 34% of their income and the poorest at 42% then I can support it, as with switching from council tax to local income tax. But if it means never again addressing the issue of chronic underinvestment in key public services, then I can't.

The second flaw is in the argument that investing more money in public services is the equivalent of pouring it down the drain.

Most recently we have the CBI/Michael Howard view, that increases in public spending are wasted because

productivity in the public sector is falling. What ludicrous nonsense.

In an NHS, for example, where administration costs are 4% compared with 14% wasted on bureaucracy in the privatised utopia that is the USA health system, a utopia where 20% have no medical insurance at all and where the biggest cause of bankruptcy among small businesses is trying to pay medical bills for serious illness even when you do have medical insurance.

If the wages of nurses or teachers go up to tackle the recruitment crisis, then productivity supposedly falls. If class sizes for 5-7 year olds are cut, then 'productivity' as measured by the pupil teacher ratio goes down.

Yet the quality of education goes up in ways that might not be measurable until many years later. These measures of productivity are as nonsensical as the voodoo economics that says that borrowing by local education or health authorities to build schools and hospitals is public debt and therefore a 'bad thing,' while borrowing (at higher interest rates), by private firms for the same purpose is economic growth and therefore a 'good thing.'

Liberal Democrats, of course, in Sir Humphrey's words, previously took the 'brave' stance of arguing for appropriate tax increases to raise more money for investing in services such as health and education.

A risky strategy, according to the pundits' received wisdom, but one which gave us our best election results for seventy years in 1997 and 2001. Most of the seats we won then were Conservative ones, where the voters nonetheless seemed to accept our argument that 'you don't get something for nothing.' They did not vote for us because we were more Tory than the discredited Tories.

New Labour, on the other hand, preferred the line of vote-buying income tax cuts before the 2001 election and an insistence that they would not need to increase tax. They even repeatedly attacked us for our honest stance, but in 2002 suddenly increased National Insurance (regressive and a tax on jobs), rather than use the much more progressive option of income tax.

Shame about the five wasted years from 1997-2002. Shame about the cynical and deliberate misleading of the public. At long last, though, we have the promise of real extra financial resources over the next few years. If optimistic economic growth forecasts continue to falter, however, will the Government also scale down the desperately needed investment in infrastructure and public services?

One or two years of real increases in investment cannot possibly undo the damage caused by a quarter century of underinvestment, from the IMF cuts of the 1970s, through Thatcherism and on to New Labour's deep cuts in 1997-99 and their double and treble counting thereafter.

An Institute for Fiscal Studies analysis shows that public investment in Britain was 8.9% of national income in 1975 but just 1.7% in 2000, the lowest level since 1945. The Wanless Report quantified a £267bn underinvestment in the NHS and reported that access was a far greater issue of concern than 'choice.' British Rail, hamstrung by old fashioned political interference, managed to renew an inadequate 500 miles of track every year, which plummeted to an appalling 200 miles under the privatised blessings of Railtrack. Network Rail (new style public ownership anyone?) has now increased this to 700 miles and by 2009 will be borrowing 2% of GDP to make good decades of neglect. But it will be 2014 before delays will be lower than they were in 1999.

New Labour, of course, made this even worse. The Government with the worst five year record of capital investment in public services since 1945 was New Labour in 1997-2002.

They spent less than the Tories did on transport. They have allowed core student funding in further education to fall since 1996. Spending in real terms per higher education student has fallen by more than 30%. Class sizes for most pupils aged 7-16 actually increased from 1997 to 2001. Education spending will reach average OECD levels for the first time in 2006 but it will take many years of 'average' spending to reverse decades of under investment.

OECD figures show that the UK was one of only four industrialised countries to spend less per pupil in 2000 than in 1995. Real terms spending actually fell by 1% in Britain while it rose by 30% in Ireland and 13% in France. Meanwhile, Britain fell from 13th to 22nd out of 32 industrialised countries for the number attaining five or more higher grade GCSEs, and has one of the worst post-16 staying on rates.

Pensions are an insult, with a complex maze of means testing on top that prevents one-third of eligible pensioners from gaining the pension credit they need to barely climb above poverty level. Yet, as private pension schemes collapse all around him, Gordon Brown boasts of the fact that state pension spending will be limited to 5% of GDP compared with up to 15% in the future in France and Germany.

You won't recognise these economic truths because the New Labour spin machine has portrayed a period of constant growth in investment. A self-defeating propaganda exercise in the long run, as the electorate is now increasingly receptive to the Tory line that six years of Labour tax and spend has shown the folly of investing in public services - so let's privatise it all and cut taxes instead.

All this in one of the richest countries in the world. The costs of the welfare system of which the Liberal Beveridge was architect were met by a near-bankrupt country immediately after World War Two. The first pensions, introduced by Lloyd George almost a century ago, were accompanied by a tax on land and an associated constitutional struggle with the Lords. Can Britain in the early twenty-first century really not afford to invest more in its public services and infrastructure?

Expanding university costs, for example, could be met from an equitable and progressive tax - such as income tax, of which well paid graduates would pay more, surprisingly enough. Or they can be met through Labour's fees, which have a deterrent effect on potential students and upon graduate recruitment to lower paid public sector jobs.

The Liberal Democrat answer - recognising also the need to provide immediate rather than deferred injections of money to improve university facilities and raise academic pay as recommended in the Betts Report - is to raise higher rate income tax from 40p to 50p in the pound on earnings that exceed £100,000. This affects just 1% of the population (82% of whom are graduates), leaves the top rate lower than the 60p that it was at during most of Thatcher's reign and also raises the money to pay for free care for the elderly.

In one of the richest countries in the world, with some of the lowest taxation in Western Europe, is this as far as we are able to 'push the tax envelope?'

Can desperately needed investment otherwise be met from increased tax revenue from economic growth, increased government borrowing or from cuts and 'efficiency savings' elsewhere? Excellent news if so but, if not, are we happy to continue to see health, education, pensions and transport stagnate or decline?

In all the debate about centralisation versus regionalisation, and public versus private, let's not lose sight of the fact that, however you hide the bill, someone still has to pay. Seventy-five per cent of social services authorities were spending more than the Government said they should in 2001. Charles Clarke unsuccessfully tried to blame the 2003 schools spending crisis on councils failing to pass on Government grants to schools, when the reality is that most spend more than the Government provides. The Disability Discrimination Act now requires disabled access to all educational institutions - who is going to pay for this or provide the money to fund the aspirations for learning disabled people in the 'Valuing People' White Paper?

Switching power and money-raising back from central government to local, or privatising the NHS, whether through Tory policy or Labour's foundation hospitals, does not alter financial reality.

The debate most people seem to duck is, what is the fairest, most efficient and most equitable way of recognising and delivering this increased spending? At least the Liberal Democrats have argued openly and honestly for increased taxation, where necessary, to fund specific key areas of investment.

The voters might in a Tory/New Labour world choose poorly financed public services or the privatised, dog eat dog, medical system of the USA. But, before choosing, they should at least be given the clear facts, rather than being left to the mercy of Labour, Tory and media distortion about the level of taxation or the efficiency of public services in this country.

The choice, in Galbraith's words, is between 'private affluence and public squalor.' The reality is that, however you disguise the question, the answer is still 'it's the money stupid.'

# NIGHT FALLS AGAIN

## The Tories are too far gone and his record too bad for Michael Howard to save the Conservatives, says former Tory MP Hugh Dykes

I was both somewhat amazed and slightly amused when I noticed some – not all – of my senior Liberal Democrat colleagues displaying at least tangible nervousness at the arrival of Michael Howard to the Tory party leadership.

A few sounded quite panicky even, for a while; now they have calmed down into more reflective mode.

Me, I was frankly delighted. Not, I emphasise, in an overconfident, unthinking way, I hope. I just regarded it as a marvellous opportunity for us to enter the harder phase two of our strenuous climb up the very steep cliff face towards overtaking the wretched unloved Tory party at long last.

With IDS at the helm of the leaky galleon, the Government was able to coast along on automatic pilot, except of course for the Iraq imbroglio, and moments when we were able to achieve concessions here and there.

Now things are very different. Ministers have to make much more exegetical effort. The New Labour administration, at a stroke, is obliged even to be more benevolent in its responses to us as well. Especially in the south, where their own activists will accept the reality of allowing us priority in many seats, they now need us to do well to keep the Tories down.

In the House, the tone has changed already in a subtle way. Overnight, the Liberal Democrats can be operational but unsung allies. Hence we can exert pressure on the Government to secure more positive responses to our demands for adjustments in aspects of the legislative and related programme contents.

It is now our task to build on that net advantage accretion by ensuring, if we can, that our own ideas and policies attract the wider public, who will not be content to see a mere repetition of Labour's impressive election win in 2001.

But let us return first to the Tories and their new position with the new leader.

Of course, the American politician who, some years ago, said that predictions were always difficult, especially when they concern the future, was stating the obvious. (No, it wasn't George Bush!)

However some facts are undeniable at present in a way that will provide great heart to our members.

First of all, the Conservative MPs have selected a figure from the past with the immense and degrading baggage of one of the most reactionary, vicious and strident figures from the ranks of the outgoing Tory administrations finally chased from office in 1997.

Michael Howard was not merely disliked probably more than any figure except Thatcher herself. He too, like her, was despised for his harshness and unforgiving attitudes.

Hence the public memory bank became fed more and more with examples of obnoxious policies and attitudes, from which the thinking public quite rightly recoiled. At the Home Office, Howard was considered by some to be the most unpopular home secretary in the whole post war period.

His interference with the judicial field was memorable for the resentment it caused. He loved the poll tax – one of the ten items that caused the French revolution.

So his arrival does truly represent the return to the past that the broad membership of the party dearly wants.

They yearn for the Thatcherite revival in every way. They scoff if thinking pundits say that is the road to perdition. They do not believe it. No wonder the new leader caused such little resentment among the mass membership, when an apparent election became a coronation. No wonder Ken Clarke shuffled humiliatingly off the stage with his back view disappearing up St Stephen's Green. He knew that he stood no chance of winning a third time in a party steeped in irrecoverable reactionary anti-EU anti foreign extremes.

Paradoxically, of course, this is the reason why the MPs thought that they were making the right choice, not the wrong one, as events will no doubt begin to show in some months' time.

For they based their choice – I suppose understandably after the forensic miseries they had suffered week after week with IDS – on the one senior parliamentary performer (definitely the correct word here) who stood some chance of mauling the Government, and more importantly the PM, in the chamber.

What a horrendous mistake they have unwittingly made. For, in reality, they did not do this because they truly felt that Howard could win the next election. He could, however, help them to come closer to winning, in the future, by putting the opposition more on the map, by getting noticed in the press more and more. This is indeed happening already, but then that is only to be expected in the so called honeymoon period.

That phenomenon is the key to our advantage as the party offering the alternative to the Tories.

For on every occasion that Howard utters what the press call significant commentary on Government decisions, his words will be analysed by the electronic and human memory banks, to compare and contrast with what he really felt, thought and did on the same policy areas while in office.

When he recently expressed concern for immigrants' children being separated from their asylum seeking parents, his comments were dismissed as totally suspect and cynical, as well as mistaken on the actual facts of the matter.



We can rejoice that Howard's utterly damning past form in many areas of policy formation will return to haunt him again and again. This applies, of course, to his strong anti-EU stance as well as internal politics.

In the jousts at prime minister's questions that tediously pass off as intellectual occasions, in the childish exchanges that Howard has decided to inflict on Tony Blair, the odds are impossible for our Transylvanian knight to overcome, and hence to prevail.

First of all, Blair is the much more impressive practitioner of such skills and devices anyway, with years of

supreme mastery under his belt. Second, there is the form itself as mentioned above, which simply will not go away. Third, there is no equivalence between Howard referring to Blair's utterances when he was a greenhorn MP on the backbenches, and his own foolish and cruel positions when he was an operational and very senior member of the previous Tory government.

Indeed, if IDS had been an effective leader, Tory MPs would have made the 'ideal' choice, since he was without past awkward baggage, save for the anti-Europeanism, the one thing that comes back again and again to wreck their party's chances of achieving power anyway.

Another huge weakness for Mr Quelquechose de la Nuit was his strong support for the Iraq war, like all the main Tory chieftains except Ken Clarke.

Only Charles Kennedy among the principal party leaders has succeeded in dealing with PMQs as a mature moment for seeking vital information from the prime minister. Equally, he is the one leader to have led the opposition to an unpopular war in Iraq. These realities have embedded themselves in public awareness of what goes on in the Commons.

The public does not appear to relish the place the more they see of it. PMQ histrionics are one of the main elements in wider public alienation and boredom from politics, and a disgust at puerile behaviour, especially by Tory MPs.

However, Howard is stuck in a hideous dilemma, a Catch-22 variation of immense agony, and insoluble implications. If he goes quiet and thoughtful at these weekly occasions - or indeed debates - then his own colleagues will not bother to turn up to support. If he shouts and screams, which he appears to prefer for some strange reason, the public will be even more put off. He must have been mad to want the job.

Robin Cook has increased his already formidable stature (himself one of the most effective forensic debaters in the place of course) in recent times with memorable verbal and written comments on what is currently happening to British politics. On 31 October he wrote: "The Conservative Party needs to veer to the centre to survive, but is doomed by its membership and



The Iraq war and its perpetrator remain unpopular, and a potential danger for the government as the Hutton Report looms in the New Year. Around 150 Liberal Democrats joined the march to protest against George W Bush's visit to London in November

culture to continue on the rightward trajectory on which Mrs T launched it."

He went on to say; "the real beneficiary... may be... Charles Kennedy, whose party is now even better placed to pick up votes from one nation Conservatives."

Indeed, a poll last October indicated ominously that 26 per cent of voters are apparently less likely to vote for the Tories under Howard than under his predecessor.

Amanda Platell stated on 4 November: "The face of modern Conservatism is vicious, self interested, ruthless and, above all, nasty."

I was staggered at the time of the Tory conference when many journalists said the shame about the leadership turmoil was that it obscured some interesting new policies, such as passports (an ominous word in itself by the way) for health, education, even housing.

For these were just the notorious old vouchers of the 1980s, which were denounced by all moderate politicians as devices for a two-nation society. Incidentally, does this not show how the press itself has lurched rightwards in recent times, probably because of Mr Murdoch, Lord Black and the Daily Mail group?

So the big test for our party will be to hold and reinvigorate the moderate centre with our pre-manifesto and manifest suggestions.

This surely means that we should avoid any tendency to be quasi-Tory in the understandable policy imperative of giving the public more choice in public services.

We can surely do this without making the public anxious about our important adherence to the Beveridge tradition of universally available health and welfare provisions in the broad sense.

Many then-Tory voters on modest incomes, after all, suffered from some of the harsher forms of Thatcherism, including home repossessions, and wish surely for our basic national support systems to be maintained.

Finally, we must also work unstintingly to remind the public of the monumental disaster that scarred the whole country with the Tories' railway privatisation programme. Howard was, I recall, pretty keen on this dreadful saga too.

# TOKENISM IS NOT ENOUGH

The Liberal Democrats are attempting positive discrimination in candidate selection. Simon Titley argues that the real issue is political disengagement, not gender balance

Wouldn't it be nice if our elected institutions genuinely represented a cross-section of society?

Besides gender balance and equitable representation for ethnic minorities, there would be representative samples based on a carefully assembled matrix of class background, age groups, geography, education, profession, sexual orientation and disability.

Except that it is unlikely to happen. Participating in politics has never been 'normal' and is becoming less so. It is not simply that the number of participants is declining. The people who continue to participate are more unusual (in both senses of the term). They are not representative in the sense of being typical.

MPs increasingly are professional politicians. They go straight from university to a job as an MP's research assistant, then spend a few years as a lobbyist before getting selected. They are the sort of MPs whom veteran political columnist Alan Watkins always describes as never having had a "proper job".

The extent to which politicians and their electorates inhabit different worlds can be judged by the following outburst. A few days after the 2001 general election, the defeated Liberal Democrat MP Jackie Ballard wrote an article in the Independent headlined "What a politician really thinks about her ungrateful voters."

She didn't pull her punches: "The voters expect us [the politicians] to solve all their problems for them. They expect the council to do something about noisy neighbours, to mend all the potholes, to provide them with a house if they need one, to detect child abuse from five miles away (when the people next door haven't noticed anything amiss) and to dispose of their rubbish regularly without polluting the air with incinerators or using valuable land space. But they don't want to pay council tax. They want the government to lock up criminals but not to put a bail hostel or prison anywhere near them. They don't want to get asthma or to have their house flooded but they must drive their car 200 metres down the road. They don't want to have to wait a long time for a hospital operation and they want their children to have a good education. They don't mind other people paying higher taxes, but they don't want to themselves. They want their politicians to be 'normal' people who they can relate to, but they also want them to work 100 hours a week and be available any time of the day or night to sort out their problems."

People no longer regard politicians of any party – or either sex – as 'representative' in any meaningful sense. They are seen as a race apart and politics is widely viewed as an alien pursuit. Most people would not become politically active unless asylum-seeking paedophiles were dumping nuclear waste at the bottom of their back gardens.

I was therefore interested to read Ros Scott's arguments ('Opportunity is not enough', *Liberator* 289), in which she made a case for positive discrimination and dismissed her opponents as sticklers for 'procedures'.

Ros complains of women being held back in politics but it was not clear what she thinks the barriers now are. The situation is by no means perfect but never have more doors been held open – and never have so few people been killed in the rush. All parties are now desperately short of volunteers. Arms are twisted to persuade people to run for the council. Constituency executive positions are filled uncontested. The average age of party members continues to increase, while electoral turnouts are in freefall. The old joke that the country is run by the people who turn up was never truer.

My scepticism about the party's 'gender balance' strategy was confirmed in October, when Candidates Committee chair Brian Orrell reported in *Liberal Democrat News* that no women had applied to fight the Isle of Wight. This, remember, is one of the party's most winnable target seats, located in the south of England where most of the party's members live. Given the party's rules about balanced shortlists, the selection was re-advertised. The Candidates Committee also went to the trouble of inviting women approved candidates to apply but none would do so. In the end, the Isle of Wight constituency association went ahead with an all-male shortlist.

This experience suggests that the problem is not about selection but is further upstream. Yes, there are fewer women candidates and MPs than men. But this problem exists in the wider context of political disengagement.

There are two issues for the party. One is the strategy of the Liberal Democrats' Gender Balance Task Force and the party's attempts at positive discrimination. The other is the broader question of why, when fewer people are engaged in politics, disengagement appears even stronger among women.

The basic problem with the Gender Balance Task Force is that it is addressing the issue of women's representation

in isolation. If positive discrimination and tactics such as 'zipping' increase the proportion of women candidates, this must necessarily decrease the number of male candidates. Fair enough. But which men will make the sacrifice? Not the white, public school educated men who already predominate. It is more likely to be men from less privileged or ethnic minority backgrounds who are forced to give way.

I see little point in attaining a gender balance if all it achieves is to replace, say, ethnic minority men with privileged Home Counties women. There's the added risk that the party will regard this as a 'tick box' exercise and feel that no further action on its part is necessary. Political disengagement is becoming a major crisis and the Liberal Democrats can't afford token responses.

The broader question is whether many women care about politics in the first place. As in the film 'Field of Dreams', the Gender Balance Task Force can build it - but will they come? In a world in which fewer people are interested in or motivated by politics, why are women even less interested or motivated?

There are, I think, two basic reasons. First, women's preferred mode of discourse tends to be emotional and anecdotal, whereas the discourse of politics is necessarily rational and conceptual. Second, fewer women are motivated to participate because, whereas men tend to need intellectual pursuits and hobbies outside the world of home making, women tend not to.

A sexist or outmoded view? Sadly not. A poll of 5,000-plus teenage girls in this November's issue of CosmoGirl, reported in the Observer on 19th October, found that "their main ambition is to complete university and then return to the homestead... with 85 percent maintaining they would rather rely on their partner for financial support than be a successful independent woman."

The case for involving more women is not helped by those feminists who make a virtue of emotionalism. They have sought to exalt emotionalism over rationalism and, worse, have argued that emotionalism is the singular contribution women can make to politics. This is ironic, given that the case for involving more women in politics is rational rather than emotional. But it is also a dangerous development.

Last year, when the debate about 'naming and shaming' paedophiles was at its height, there was a panel discussion on BBC2 'Newsnight'. Each of the experts present, the police officer, the probation officer, the psychologist, explained how and why the public naming of paedophiles would make the problem worse because it would drive more offenders underground. Finally, the debate turned to the woman from the Portsmouth housing estate. Yes, she had heard all the arguments, but she still believed in 'naming and shaming' because it was what she 'felt' she wanted.

This is what happens when you exalt 'feelings' over rationality. Gut reactions prevail and play into the hands of unscrupulous right-wingers on issues such as Europe, asylum seekers and hanging.

This is why politics must ultimately be a rational exercise. Yes, many political issues arouse strong emotions and we must acknowledge the strength of those feelings. But the eventual political decisions, the reconciliation of competing interests and the allocation of scarce resources, need light rather than heat. When feminists stigmatise rationality and logic as some sort of male mental disorder, they do us all a disservice.

Any strategy designed to bring more women into politics makes no sense unless it is set in the context of the broader problem of political disengagement. That is not to say there is no case for positive discrimination or affirmative action, rather that these measures should be pursued only as an integral part of a coherent strategy for democratic re-engagement.

We don't just need more women in politics. We need more people. However, to re-engage people requires more imagination. Involving more people in politics is not just about standing for office. The party needs to work on a broader front.

For example, a big disincentive to greater participation is the 'long hours' culture. Like the Stakhanovite heroes of the Stalinist era, the Liberal Democrats prize MPs and councillors according to their volume of casework. But who in their right mind really wants to work an 80-hour week? If more women than men are turned off by this macho work ethic, it suggests they have more sense.

Beyond the world of representative institutions, in the wider polity, there is a need for generating more deliberative forms of involvement, where we could make better use of the internet. Creating these sorts of debate is a good way to draw more people in and shows that you can participate and still have a life.

Sadly, the various social advances of the post-war era, such as education and healthcare, were grasped mostly by the articulate middle classes and the disadvantaged were left behind. So it is with feminism.

I fear that the Gender Balance Task Force and the Liberal Democrats' token initiatives are really about the sharp elbows of the articulate middle classes. Without the wit or imagination to tackle the real problems, all the party will achieve is to give a leg-up to a few privileged white women.

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# HOW WE CUT CRIME

Liberal Democrat home affairs spokesman Mark Oaten's clichés about 'getting tough' on crime ignore the methods used by party councillors who have succeeded in reducing it, says Donnachadh McCarthy

I have, for some time, been uncomfortable with the one-dimensional campaigning the party has been carrying out on policing. I joined in as enthusiastically as many others in highlighting the cuts to police numbers that both the Tories and Labour had carried out.

As the Camberwell and Peckham PPC at the time, I organised demonstrations using Peter Carroll's (Lib Dem PPC in Folkestone - Michael Howard's constituency) excellent visuals of missing policemen during Jack Straw's visits to our constituency. The tragic death of Damilola Taylor, three days after my adoption as PPC for the area, brought this crisis into stark relief.

However, this is one area in which the government is actually now beginning to deliver. Police levels are starting to recover and we need to ensure that, while we acknowledge our contribution in campaigning for this, we must now adapt our campaigns.

We cannot continue forever churning out the ALDC 'Bobbies on the Beat' petitions. After all, we do not want police numbers to continue rising exponentially. Liberalism with our commitment to individual freedom is not compatible with a police state.

While mulling over this, I was prompted into writing by a chance meeting with the community beat officer from my time as a councillor representing the huge Aylesbury Estate in Peckham, which has 10,000 residents.

He presently works as a crime reduction advisor to a central London borough council. He asked me if I was aware that the community politics approach to crime prevention, which we three Liberal Democrat councillors had carried out in the mid-1990s on the estate, was now being quoted as best-practice not only in national police circles but internationally?

I had to admit to being a bit stunned. I had regarded our work as just traditional Lib Dem community politics applied to the serious local crime problems. I had no idea that our work had become an internationally quoted example of best practice.

He went on to point out that crime had dropped by an extraordinary 55-60% during that five-year period. He argued that an immense amount of this was due to the community politics leadership provided by the three local Lib Dem councillors. I have to admit that, in the middle of a period when I was feeling slightly disheartened at the unfortunate misguided press briefings of key Kennedy advisors that the party was shifting to the right, I found this gave a new spring to my step!

In the depressing light of yet another politician (Lib Dem spokesperson on Home Affairs, Mark Oaten MP) adopting the tabloid phraseology of 'toughness' in relation to dealing with crime, I thought it might be worthwhile

sharing here what led to our success on the Aylesbury Estate. This is an example of what can be achieved without using the tabloid 'tough' approach but instead by having faith in our own liberal community politics.

In 1992, I had decided to take on the project of winning Southwark's Faraday Ward, in which the Aylesbury Estate is situated, from the Labour Party. Ruth Bright (now Lib Dem PPC for East Hants) joined me and we also recruited a local tenants' association activist, the late Alf Langley, to our Focus Team.

Alf was very concerned about the level of violent crime in the area. There had been a recent serious bout of knifings, which had terrified many in the area. We decided to call a public meeting and, from this,

set up the Aylesbury Security Working Group (ASWG). We set out to include almost every organisation in the area. We had to get all the local residents, businesses, voluntary bodies and council departments working in the area involved if we were to be successful.

We adapted an ALDC crime survey and hand delivered it to every home on the estate and then called at each home to collect it or to fill it in on the doorstep. This personal interaction with the people living with and enduring the crime wave on the estate and harvesting their suggestions was essential to our success.

**FOCUS**  
Faraday Ward - Walworth

Liberal Democrats

Edited by Ruth Clark, Alf Langley and Donnachadh McCarthy

## Crime Survey - Massive Response

The Liberal Democrat FOCUS Team would like to give a big thank you to everyone who took part in our crime survey. Over four hundred residents filled out the questionnaire, and we spoke to many more. Some of you shared harrowing details of crimes you had suffered. But the news was not all bad. Many residents told us their common-sense ideas about how things could be improved.

And if decisive action is taken on the Aylesbury now, things will improve!

The vast majority of you felt safer in Walworth generally, rather than on the Aylesbury itself.

- 52% felt "not very safe" or "very unsafe" on the Aylesbury. This rose to:
- 69% in one block (which we won't name for safety reasons) which has a particular problem with serious muggings.
- 23% had personally experienced a mugging or attack. (These figures were noticeably higher in the high-rise blocks.)
- 35% also had personal experience of bin chute fires, or

**Alf tackles Home Office**

FOCUS editor and Wolverton resident Alf Langley is taking the battle for a safer estate to the Home Office.

As Chair of the Aylesbury Action Group, Alf is leading a delegation which will present the local case for urgent investment

I know Ruth and I have some 'fond' memories of that winter as we worked our way to all 3,000 doors on the estate. On some blocks, 70% of people said the estate wasn't safe. Ruth spoke to several women who reported serious crimes to her with the Lib Dem survey, but who would not do so to the police. We got the proverbial 'huge response' but, in this case, it was real. Crucially, we got a large number of practical suggestions as to what could be done to improve things.

From these and the suggestions made by the various community organisations and businesses represented at the ASWG, we prepared an action plan, which we then started to seek to implement. We also started campaigning for it through our Focus leaflets. We found that, by having monthly meetings of the ASWG, we were able to network and find a variety of different routes for implementing and funding the various proposals.

The action list included:

- Regular weekly police surgery on the estate (the local police station had been closed).
- Removal of the bridges that linked the pedestrian walkways on the estate and by which criminals were able to disappear into the estate.
- Recruiting a security guard company to patrol the estate.
- Ensuring that entrances were well lit.
- Installing a CCTV system on the adjacent busy East Street market.
- CCTV in lifts and lift lobbies.
- Ensuring that doorways along long internal corridors in large blocks had see-through glass installed (walking down corridors with fire doors that prevented one from seeing who was on the other side was especially frightening for many residents).
- Building links between the problem youths on the estate and the community police through footballing initiatives, etc.
- Providing counselling services for troubled families.
- Refurbishing entrances, so that they were better designed from a safety point of view.

Many of the ideas were dismissed as being impossible without a large government grant, but we were determined to implement as many as we could, while also starting the process of making submissions for relevant regeneration grants. Despite being one of the poorest wards in the country, it had no regeneration project whatsoever in place. It was the classic example of Labour neglect.

By providing a forum that built cohesion around the simple objective of reducing crime, we were able gradually to implement the action plan. Having the three of us elected as councillors greatly facilitated our ability to promote the plan in the various fora of which we were now officially part.

One of the most exciting days was when the major road through the estate was closed and a huge crane lifted an entire concrete footbridge, after it had been sawn free, from its bed and onto a waiting truck. The council had said it was impossible but we had managed to find the funds and got the agreement of the local community.

We knew we were getting our message across when local tenants were overheard following the demolition of further bridges saying "The bridges are coming down so the Liberals must have won." The pleasure was immense when an elderly resident, who had been on the estate since it was built in the 1960s, came to our surgery and said that since the bridge had been demolished, he had gained a sense of safety in his home for the first time ever.

The participation of the police and their commitment to working with the disaffected youth, rather than being 'tough' with them, was a huge contribution to the community effort. Simply playing football with them and treating them with respect worked wonders. The security guards, which we argued for the council to fund, were also an important factor.

Bit by bit, our work became recognised by the local powers that be and we started to get grants for various initiatives. These led to an SRB and later a massive New Deal for Communities application. Before we knew it, six years had passed by and crime figures for the area were collapsing.

I had, however, become burnt out as a councillor and decided it was best to stand down. Rather than simply adopting a tabloid approach, Mark Oaten should be looking at how we can address constructively one of the key problems with effective community politics - the immense strain it can often put on a small number of party activists.

Howard, Blair, Blunkett and Oaten are wrong. What we really want and need is not a tough policy but an effective one.

Talking tough to disaffected youth will only further disaffect them. Reaching out, and trying to find paths of communication that work, may be more difficult to sell to the Sun but it is a lot more effective than building yet more borstals. Being a teenager to Blunkett means being a prospective criminal. To us liberals, being a teenager is one of the most exciting times of individual self-discovery.

The estate statistics on crime reduction may look dry but they represent elderly people who were not mugged, women who were not attacked, youths who were not knifed and, almost as important, criminals who are not in jail because the crimes were not committed in the first place. This is what we are in politics to create.

Rather than disgracefully adding to the xenophobic tabloid frenzy over asylum seekers in his press releases condemning Labour for being soft on illegal workers, it would be far better if Mark Oaten had the humility to do some research first among the grassroots of his own party as to approaches that actually work, rather than simply issuing 'tough' sound bites that give good copy.

It is essential that we as a party contribute not only to effective prevention of crime but also to ensuring that we as a society celebrate the first hesitant steps to individualism that being a teenager represents.

Investment in physical crime prevention measures, involving the community in the solutions to their safety problems, reaching out as equals to our youth and investing in a decent education system for our inner cities are what we as a party need to be calling for.

The only 'toughness' I want to hear is intolerance for those who use the tabloid approach to the language of 'tough on crime'. Liberalism, while it can be difficult, is not about such toughness. It is about individual freedom, a warm respect for one's neighbour and effective policies that prevent crime in the first place.

# TERROR AND LIBERALISM

## Stewart Rayment looks at a comparison of western and Islamist thought

Terror and Liberalism - that struck me as a strange title, recent events notwithstanding. What could it mean? Paul Berman is an American, lauded in their press as someone on the left who thinks Bush has got it right on Saddam Hussein. His use of the word 'Liberal' seems, for the most, what we would deem 'liberal'. Late in the book, he calls himself a social democrat, and his Liberalism is such as generally pertains to that ideology.

At the advent of Gulf War I, Berman crossed swords, or pens, with Richard Nixon. Nixon had argued for war on 'vital economic interests' and American credibility. Honest Dick!

Berman identified totalitarian tendencies in Ba'Ath socialism, and called for an anti-Fascist war with progressive goals. For the record, while commonsense makes me abhorrent of all war, I was largely silent on Gulf War I. Insofar as they exist, it was a 'just war' because of the invasion on Kuwait by Iraq; I would see some sense in Berman's arguments, and felt that American politicians betrayed the war by not seeing it through to its conclusion - the removal of Saddam Hussein.

The consequences of that betrayal for the Kurds and Shi'ite Arabs were disastrous, as for the many servicemen operating behind lines waiting for the cavalry to arrive. I opposed Gulf Wars II and III (we seem to forget the hot aerial campaign, although in reality there has been continuous hostilities of some kind) because they lacked the concept of a 'just war' - the horrors of Saddam Hussein notwithstanding.

And with Gulf War III, those horrors made a late and somewhat insincere entry into the arguments. We tend not to go to war with a country over their 'domestic' politics and are even happy to ignore the plight of occupied and colonial peoples - Tibetans, Palestinians and Chechens to name a few.

With the demise of the Cold War, some American policy makers felt that another enemy was needed, and identified Islam, particularly as embodied by Iran, Iraq and Libya, as the prime candidate. One might note that certain Trotskyite elements in the Labour party also felt that the dynamic of revolution had passed to radical Islam. Berman points out, however, that on numerous occasions America had gone to war on behalf of Moslems - in Kuwait, Iraq, Somalia (where they somehow didn't get the message), Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan.

Over the last decade or so, the main areas of seismic activity in global tension have been on the borders of the Moslem world - the Philippines, Indonesia, Kashmir, Chechnya and elsewhere in the Caucasus, Palestine, the former Yugoslavia, Nigeria and Sudan.

But America, unfortunately, does not pay attention to detail in its foreign adventures. Reagan's policy in Afghanistan begets the Taliban and Osama bin Laden. Berman's search for the roots of radical Islam goes back further. He traces strong western influences in the nationalisms of the late colonial era and the terrorism they spawned. The Moslem Brotherhood in Egypt is his key filter of these ideas, and among the core texts that he uncovers are Islam, the West and the challenges of modernity, by Tariq Ramadan. Ramadan challenges Camus' analysis, upon which Berman relies to a certain extent. Ramadan teaches at Fribourg; Camus was an Algerian.

Camus had argued in Crossman's anthology *The God that failed* (a post Second World War soul-search) that, following the breakdown of an established order with the French Revolution, there was an impulse to rebel, which mutated into a cult of death. There is a lengthy analysis of this path through Romantic and decadent literature, its interplay with anarchisms, and its crystallisation in the classic totalitarianisms of the Twentieth century - Communism and Fascism.

Essentially this is a search for new certainties. Berman puts it thus: It was an ideal of submission... to the kind of authority that liberal civilisation had slowly undermined, and which the new movements wished to re-establish on a novel basis. This, of course, is the problem that radical Islam has with the west; our 'liberalism' challenges their arcadian status quo.

Abraham is a good starting point for Ramadan. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Berman tells us, Abraham's doubts and struggles at the sacrifice of his son 'testify to the sincerity of his belief'; in the Koran's version Abraham has no such doubts. We value Abraham's doubts, the rationalisation of his faith; Islam values his submission to the will of God. Prometheus takes the western mind-frame a step further and rebels. But there is a dialogue in western thought - essentially between Liberalism and Conservatism, individualism and authoritarianism. Berman is not alone in identifying the Romantics, along with the French Revolution, as a critical turning point in western thought.

The other poles of the dialogue are the rational and the irrational. Sade, as a nihilistic egotistical hedonist, extrapolates the virtues of the Enlightenment through the Reign of Terror, and calls upon republicans to go to the ultimate extreme in realising their freedom. (An altruistic egotistical hedonist, John Stuart Mill, for example, might set the limits of one individual's freedom with those of another's).

Berman picks on Victor Hugo - Hernani specifically, as the Romantic hero in revolt killing himself as the archetype for the terrorist. Hugo, who might be identified with Liberalism in a revolutionary phase, would probably be shocked. Baudelaire rejects the hypocrisies of bourgeois society and restates the Sadeian message 'declared for Satan'. Here is something of the root of the problem for (western) Liberalism - the transition from 'L' to 'I'. The apparent success of the Liberal revolution tames it, it becomes orthodox and, as the 19th century progresses, in Marxist terms at least, the dynamic of revolution passes elsewhere. Anarchists, socialists, fascists, react against bourgeois society, and Liberalism with it.

But what is this Liberalism that our enemies react against? Berman states as follows: 'It was the recognition that all of life is not governed by a single, all-knowing and all powerful authority - by a divine force. It was the tolerant idea that every sphere of human activity - science, technology, politics, religion, and private life - should operate independently of the others, without trying to yoke everything together under a single guiding hand. It was a belief in the many, instead of the one. It was an insistence on freedom of thought and freedom of action - not on absolute freedom, but on something truer, stronger, and more reliable than absolute freedom, which is relative freedom: a freedom that recognises the existence of other freedoms, too. Freedom consciously arrived at. Freedom that is chosen, and not just bestowed by God on high. This idea was, in the broadest sense, liberalism - liberalism not as a rigid doctrine but as a state of mind, a way of thinking about life and reality.' To me, such a definition still remains true.

Thus we have a basis for what we might call progressive thought and movements. But we must return to the dialogue. As Gilbert and Sullivan put it, every child that is born is either a little Liberal or else a little Conservative, and the two don't agree - importantly, because neither has the sum total of wisdom.

Many Victorian Liberals were opposed to Imperialism (others were not); it happened despite them, and the best they could seek to do was moderate its evils. Victorian Imperialism led to the First World War and a theoretical defeat for Liberalism - it loses its impetus for much of the 20th century. Challenges arise from an invigorated authoritarianism, of left and right, but we are all too aware of the similarities.

What the totalitarian rails against is the 'subversive dwellers of Babylon, who trade commodities from around the world and pollute society with their abominations'. Well, that's us I suppose - the old Manchester School formula - Trade = Mutual Dependence = Peace, which incidentally is the message we have to get across to that other bunch of nutters, the anti-Globalisation lobby.

From Berman's reading, radical Islam feeds on all of this. He examines the impacts of communism and fascism on the Arab mind, from the hotbeds of western universities back into the souks. Pan-Arabism tended to look towards the Axis because, Libya aside, the Axis powers were not their main problem, which was the 'liberal democracies' Britain and France.

Sayyid Qutb is identified as 'the single most influential writer in the Islamist tradition, at least amongst Sunni Arabs'. He was tortured and executed by Nasser. Bin Laden was one of his students. I have not read Qutb. In Berman's interpretation, Qutb dwells more and more on a 7th century Moslem ideal in his writings. Berman cites

parts of *In the Shade of the Qu'ran* (30 volumes and *Islam the Religion of the Future*, in particular).

Most Moslems have been corrupted by their exposure to western life. Qutb seeks to evangelise Moslems first of all. However, whether in his or other hands, this can lead to a rejection, indeed revulsion against things western, first in the Moslem world, then why not in the world at large? Berman also identifies a certain fatalism in Islam (he could have taken this from Baudelaire's essay on hashish), and the 'martyr' syndrome - suicide bombers et al.

At about this stage in the book, doubts crept in. Is Berman opposed to Islam per se? He does not say so, though it would be possible to take such a position. Berman's view of Islam is largely negative - conservative and above all anti-Jewish. I have never done more than dip into the Koran - indeed, school apart, have barely read the Bible. I recall, however, that Jews as well as Christians are people of the book, of whom Mohammed speaks highly. Mohammed had his problems with the Jews of Medina, but the pagans were his chief worry. Indeed, rather as early Christianity blossomed in multi-cultural Hellenistic cities rather than Jerusalem, Mohammed's success started in multi-cultural Medina rather than Mecca.

Berman will probably dismiss these doubts as woolly-minded liberalism, but I see it as the scepticism we first admired in Abraham, which forms the basis of our tolerance. Is Berman suggesting that Islam is something too dangerous to tolerate? Social Democracy is, after all, on the same path that leads to Stalinism.

Berman then sets against this the history of the Moslem world since the Second World War. There are two great banes on the radical Islamic conscience - the abolition of the Caliphate under Ataturk (a moderniser, but hardly a Liberal) and the creation of Israel.

The Arab world has a guilty conscience about Palestine - their response has been too little, too late, and most of it, Saddam's included, empty rhetoric. Another critical turning point was the Iranian revolution. Anyone with their eyes open (not a strong trait in American foreign policy) could have seen that coming a mile off. With the demise of the Shah, American interest was expelled from Iran and, shortly after, the Russians were expelled from Afghanistan. The tide had turned.

In summation, Berman points to the war of ideas waged against Communism in the Cold War and points to the need to address radical Islam in the same way. I agree.

There is, of course, the battle in the universities and in print; but where else? I happen to live in an area with a large Moslem population - mostly Bengalis and Somalis. I see some of their younger generation embracing the west, other rejecting integration. We must promote the very things Qutb feared most, and hope that they spread from Moslems within our society back to their parents' homelands.

Berman's book has many good ideas; it introduces us to aspects of Islamic thought that we may not be familiar with, nor easily able to obtain. Its faults are that what little I know of Islam suggests that there is more to it and, in his enthusiasm for his argument, Berman seems to lose touch with his tolerance.

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*Terror and Liberalism*, by Paul Berman. Norton 2003 \$21.

# THE WORLD PUT TO RIGHTS

## First time delegate Mark Smulian reports from the Liberal International congress in Senegal

Charles Kennedy, eat your heart out. When the leader of Senegal's Liberals, President Abdoulaye Wade of the Parti Democratique Senegalais, addresses a rally, he gets thousands of people dancing to a blasting sound system and a mass of enthusiastic drummers.

On this occasion, so did the slightly bemused delegates to October's Liberal International congress in Dakar.

As the coach approached the stadium for what was innocuously billed as the 'end of conference rally', I noticed increasing numbers of people lining the route wearing 'welcome Liberal International' T-shirts. Inside the stadium were several thousand dancing 'jeunesse liberales'.

Banners assured us that the Liberal youth of Senegal welcomed the delegates. Another said that the Young Liberals of the city of Rufisque were "united behind the realisation of the grand projects of the head of state".

Yet after the entertainment culminated in a (presumably) local star gyrating in a skin tight outfit that few women would wear in public in most majority Muslim countries, President Wade's speech was greeted with the hurried departure of hundreds of people.

Obviously, the singers had been the main draw. There must be countries in Africa where walking out on the president would get one shot, but not in Senegal.

Wade's party came to power in 2000 when his socialist predecessor did something relatively rare in Africa and accepted electoral defeat.

Senegal has democracy, a free press and religious tolerance on a continent where all three have been in short supply and, accordingly, the PDS's offer to host the congress was accepted with enthusiasm.

Thus the LI circus descended on the westernmost point of Africa for three days of debates that mattered little to anyone outside, and informal activities that may matter a great deal.

Even more so than at a Liberal Democrat conference, this is an event whose real importance lies in networking, training, fringe events, exchanges of experience and informal projects. The formal agenda, it seemed to me, provided only a reason for everyone to gather in the first place.

In some ways, it reminded me of a Young Liberal conference, with motions seeking rather immodestly to right the wrongs of the entire world.

But even a YL conference had conventional proceedings. I watched in open mouthed amazement as the final LI plenary session descended into a process of amendment by free-for-all.

This started when the Moroccans objected to being described as 'the occupying power' in Western Sahara.

This was changed to 'the parties concerned' by a process of haggling, involving upwards of 20 people butting in on their microphones, that would not have been out of place in one of Dakar's street markets.

The Moroccans' objection was that they had not known of this wording in advance as there had been no French simultaneous translation in the working group on the 'world today' motion.

Delegates can choose which working group to attend, and this time the main motion on Islam and the West was the biggest draw. The British delegation did a great deal of work in advance to drastically amend a motion whose original had been somewhat patronising towards Muslims, if well-intentioned.

This was a weighty enough subject for a motion but the one on the 'world today', which I attended, was yet more ambitious and sought to give a liberal view of the affairs of every corner of the globe.

At first, most of it was fairly uncontentious. We are, after all, all liberals, despite the obvious differences of emphasis, notably between the British Liberal Democrats and the economic liberal parties of northern Europe, there really is a basic unity of approach to international issues that meant most compromises were easy to strike.

There were powerful reminders that it is difficult to be a liberal in some countries.

David Coltart, of Zimbabwe's Movement for Democratic Change, gave a gripping account of the restrictions under which opposition politicians work in that country, and Ivory Coast's Rassemblement des Republicains explained the difficulties of conducting politics in a country wracked by civil war.

All went smoothly until the session reconvened in the afternoon to debate the Middle East. Even on this contentious topic, compromise had proved possible on everything except Israel's "so-called security fence", to whose construction a British amendment objected.

Israeli delegates, mainly from the secular party Shinui, which forms part of the Government, insisted that this phrase be substituted with just "fence".

Radikale Venstre, one of Denmark's two Liberal parties, then suggested a form of words that essentially recognised Israel's right to build fences around its own territory, but not on occupied land.

A map was displayed by British delegate Thomas Pereira to demonstrate the variation of the fence from the 'green line'. He argued that it was designed to ensure that the main settlements and aquifers would fall on the Israeli side of any final border.

Matters became surreal as the Israelis insisted there was no such place as 'the occupied territories', but merely a



stretch of land between the Mediterranean and the River Jordan on which there was no agreed boundary.

Then a man who represented the International Federation of Liberal Women (don't ask) argued in favour of Ariel Sharon's threat to kill Yasser Arafat, a position the Israeli delegation did not share.

After an hour, we agreed something regretting the construction of the fence thus far, calling for it not to be extended and urging that what was already there should be removed as part of the peace process.

I had suggested that the difference of opinion in the working group was such that the matter ought to be resolved by a vote in the plenary session. It was made rapidly clear that this was a faux pas on my part as a first time delegate, as LI seeks always to proceed by consensus.

More rewarding was the session the following day at which African delegations led a discussion on the continent's new economic partnership Nepad.

The substance was that the post-colonial boundaries had divided into small states what were in practice interdependent areas which had to work together to achieve economic development. Nepad, it seems, is designed to foster growth through small business and local level activity rather than the grandiose projects which have had rather mixed results in Africa in past.

Several days later, however, I saw Nepad stickers on lampposts positing a rail system from Cape Town to Algiers, and an elaborate system of trans-Africa highways and pipelines.

While no one wishes to open the Pandora's Box of trying to redraw African boundaries, there is a genuine will among its more enlightened governments for its states to work together. Indeed, much of West Africa has a currency union.

It is this sort of opportunity to learn about politics across the world, not the formal sessions, that brings LI Congress into its own.

One surprise, at least for me, was the extent of Liberal activity. There is, for example, an African Union of Young Liberals, which operates a mutual support body for people engaged in similar struggles across the continent.

The African Liberal Network, chaired by Bath MP Don Foster, has its secretariat at Cowley Street backed up by a Westminster Foundation grant. It does important work in supporting and linking Liberal politicians and channels help from elsewhere.

Liberalism encounters soils of varying fertility. Foster told me that he was taken aside by one delegate at his first conference in Gabarone to be told that "the rest of Africa is not like this Mr Foster, remember Botswana is the Hampstead of Africa".

CALD, based largely on the Taiwanese governing party the DPP, and the Philippines Liberals, does a similar job for Asia.

One triumph for lobbying by the British delegation was the award of LI's next Freedom Prize to the Russian politician Grigori Yavlinsky. The argument was that the publicity to be gained inside Russia from receipt of an international award might be enough to help the Russian liberal party Yabloko over the threshold in parliamentary elections.

The social side of the conference, and I don't know how typical this is, consisted of a series of evening receptions hosted by the prime minister, national assembly chair and president, and some excursions. These



were the best opportunities of getting to know Liberals from other countries.

One would not after all normally meet the leader of the Seychelles opposition over a beer by a swimming pool, a Philippines MP on a coach, or see a Dutch MP floating in a lake of naturally pink water, which one took the opportunity to do at Senegal's answer to the Dead Sea.

A historical curiosity of LI is that, despite being a federation of political parties, it is possible to join as an individual through national groups, which affiliate separately.

This provision was intended to allow people to join in countries without established liberal parties (and could for example be usefully implemented now in Australia).

But for reasons lost in the mists of time there has always been a British Group of LI separate from any party.

Until a few years ago, this had been a body that, insofar as I registered its existence at all, had seemed to me to be a Euro-centric private club.

Things are changing, and those Liberal Democrats who wish to involve themselves in the minutiae of Europe now have an entire recognised organisation in which to do this.

LIBG is now a worthwhile investment for any liberal interested in international matters, in particular in giving support to liberals in the developing world.

What of Senegal? I stayed on for a week as a tourist and explored a little. Few Britons visit, mainly because there are no direct flights, but it has long been popular with French visitors and has an extensive tourist infrastructure and transport system, interesting national parks and culture, good food and, for those that want it, western-style resorts on sandy beaches.

It offers a real taste of West Africa in a country that, unlike many of its neighbours, is safe and convenient to visit.

A World Development Movement report states that Senegal has suffered badly at the hands of the International Monetary Fund and is in its 'least developed countries' category.

Countries in this situation rarely have a functioning democracy and a liberal government, and so Senegal is a standing reproach to those who argue that Africa is not 'ready' for democratic government.

At present LI Congress is attended by those with the time, money and inclination to do so, in which category I must count myself. Since the organisation cannot pay anyone's expenses, this is unlikely to change. But for those who can attend a congress, the demonstration of Liberalism spanning the world will be an interesting and inspiring one.

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Liberal International British Group, Monica Skowronska, Secretary, 80 Sutton Court, Sutton Court Road, London, W4 3JF

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# LIBERALISM IN AFRICA

The Africa Liberal Network is developing liberal parties on a continent where they have struggled, reports co-chair Don Foster, Liberal Democrat MP for Bath

I was looking forward to my visit to Dakar, the capital of Senegal. Here, on a continent plagued by civil wars, coups and election fraud, was a successful and stable African country, mainly Muslim, which had seen a rare example of the peaceful, democratic transfer of power.

Less than four years ago the socialists, who had run the country for forty years, lost power and Senegal now has a Liberal Democrat government and president. So my visit would provide an opportunity to see Liberal Democracy in action and to see if the new government was improving the lives of the Senegalese. My French is rusty, and my knowledge of Wolof extremely limited, but this I hoped would not prove an obstacle.

I was in Dakar to co-chair a meeting of leaders of liberal parties in Africa. This meeting is part of a series of activities arranged and supported by the British Liberal Democrats, through our work with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

The party receives funds from WFD (though substantially less than the Conservatives and Labour Parties receive) for work on democratic development with sister parties around the world. Key to our work has been the development of a loosely affiliated network of African liberal parties, now known as the Africa Liberal Network.

The ALN developed from an initial meeting of parties in Mombasa in July 2001.

It was formally established at a subsequent meeting in Johannesburg in June 2003. This meeting adopted the Johannesburg Declaration, committing the parties in the network to “ensure the freedom and dignity of all people, through: establishing political and civil rights, and ensuring basic freedoms; the rule of law; democratic government, based on free and fair elections with peaceful transition; ensuring religious, gender and minority rights; fighting corruption; establishing free market economies”.

The network includes sixteen parties from fourteen countries, covering south, west and east Africa, and prompting us to brush up on our French, Portuguese and Swahili. A number of new parties has approached us asking to join, and we work with a number of other international institutes to provide a broad base of support.

Members of the network recognise the enormous benefit of co-ordinated, mutual assistance. Planned support will include opportunities, through a website and via e-mail, for the sharing of ideas, press releases and campaign strategies. We also hope to establish a pool of equipment for use by ALN members during elections and,

of course, there is a high demand for training. Some has already been held and a skills workshop for women politicians from network parties is due to be held in December in Johannesburg.

The Dakar meeting of ALN party leaders was held around the Liberal International Congress, and was an opportunity to plan practical and strategic initiatives, as well as to network.

The meeting also commissioned a steering group to determine the future direction and functioning of ALN. Although the British Liberal Democrats have been crucial in establishing the network, it is vital that it is run by the members for the members, so that it is African solutions that are found to African problems and so that African Liberal parties can speak with one voice about issues in Africa. The wide coverage of the joint statement, made in Dakar by ALN members, condemning the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe proved the value of such an approach.

To promote liberal democracy in Africa is a challenge. We are frequently reminded that Africa is a continent where liberalism is not a concept that is well understood or known.

Senegal, however, now provides an example of liberalism at work and in practice. President Wade has been a major player in the development of NEPAD, the New African Partnership for Development, where Africa takes the responsibility for ensuring its long term development and growth as a democratic and prosperous continent.

Wade was awarded the Liberal International Prize for Freedom for this year, recognising his long fight for democracy and human rights in Senegal. Wade first fought the presidential elections in 1978, and then stood in each subsequent one, until in 2000, and after imprisonment for his fight, he won. A year later, his party, the Parti Democratique Senegalais, overtook the Socialists to win a majority in the National Assembly.

Wade's energy remains extraordinary, and his obvious commitment to his country and his people has led to his huge popularity. Senegalese taxi drivers, street traders, hotel staff and other I talked to all believe that Wade, and his government, are making a difference to their lives.

Civic projects are springing up, a market economy is developing and there's a free press. But, possibly, the ultimate proof of the growing culture of Liberal Democracy in Senegal was the sight of Mark Smulian selling 'Liberator' at the LI Congress.

## RICKARD'S RECORD

*Dear Liberator,*

I thought the negative references to the Federal Party's outgoing chief executive (Liberator 291) were unfortunate.

Hugh Rickard in his three years as chief executive fulfilled extremely effectively all the tasks set him when he was hired. To express what appeared as snide references to someone who has just been made redundant despite this, is I feel in somewhat bad taste.

To also criticise him for being unknown shows some lack of acquaintance with the fact that almost all communications from HQ to members over the last three years emerged with the picture and name of the campaigns director attached and not the chief executive.

The article expressed derision for the fact that he and I had a good working relationship. This is strange, as having such a good relationship was in my opinion very helpful in our work respectively as deputy chair of the FE and chief executive. It was one of the most rewarding and pleasant political relationships that I have had over the last number of years.

I would also like to correct the accusation that the FFAC motion about delaying the HQ re-organisation until we could assess the financial consequences was entirely Becky Harvey's initiative but which, as a responsible deputy chair, I

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supported. It now appears unfortunately that her fears were well founded.

My aim in the HQ re-organisation was to keep the services of both our effective former campaigns director and chief executive but to restore the line management between the two, to ensure that the ridiculous former situation of independent fiefdoms within HQ was brought to an end. While successful in the latter task, unfortunately in the former I was overruled by a majority of the appointments panel. Such are the vagaries of politics.

*Donnachadh McCarthy*  
*Deputy Chair Federal Executive*  
*Liberal Democrats*

## TEMPTATION TO FRAUD

*Dear Liberator,*

I have researched all-postal voting and concluded that it will bring widespread fraud and corruption.

Elections will be corrupted by having all voting papers posted to

people, instead of the secrecy of the ballot box. Some of the scenarios are:

Streetwise voters will allow an agent of a candidate to look over their shoulders while they are completing the ballot paper. After the agent has gone, money (a bribe) "accidentally" left by the agent, will be found.

Many people will

see their voting paper as an item of junk mail and throw it in the bin. People will search in bins to sell them to candidates.

In multi-occupation dwellings, post for a number of homes is left in one spot, from which it can easily be stolen and sold to a candidate.

Postmen will be followed by someone who would knock on the doors of vulnerable people and persuade them to give away their voting paper - "I'm from the Council, we've sent you the wrong letter".

Vulnerable people will be intimidated into casting their vote while someone is looking. Alternatively they will be hoodwinked into allowing a 'helpful' person post it for them. It will then be altered or destroyed.

Where a husband or wife is a supporter of one particular party, then the agent may come and look over the shoulders of their supporter and at the same time cajole the partner to cast their vote in the same way.

It will also be easier, due to the quantity, to ask for the voting paper to be sent to a different address. If this were done for vulnerable people who would almost certainly not notice, then it would be easy to obtain extra votes.

The Electoral Commission has learnt nothing from Northern Ireland, where it is known that paramilitaries will go to postal voters and stand over them while they cast their vote.

I am not saying that all this would happen straight away but there would be an inevitable decline. It is a bit like asking referees to look away while the game is being played.

Many people would want to continue to behave lawfully but, once one side started committing fouls, then the temptation on the other would be to commit them as well.

*Rob Wheway*  
*Liberal Institute*



## BACKING THE TROOPS

*Dear Liberator,*

Simon Kovar argues constructively that Liberal Democrat opposition to the war on Iraq was principled, but that, once stated, support for the troops on the ground doing what they were told was not (Liberator 290).

What I would argue, along with many others, is that, with all its imperfections, support for troops on the ground is a general principle completely compatible with saying that the war was unnecessary, undesirable and possibly even counterproductive.

How was it that sections of the national media came erroneously to see the Liberal Democrats as self-contradictory on these points is, of course, another matter wide open to question.

What would the party's press office in hindsight like to say about this?

*Kate Smith  
Amber Valley*

## THE LAND, THE LAND

*Dear Liberator,*

There are two respectable Liberal views on local government finance:

One is that local income tax will solve the problem. It is fair (especially to old ladies in nice old houses), easily understood and very cheap to introduce. As for that old chestnut site value rating, it has no place in a modern party's portfolio of policies, least of all as an alternative to council tax. Nobody understands it well enough to explain to sceptical voters.

The other is that a modern version of land value taxation, which I call 'smart tax' could be the best source of equalisation funding, replacing a large part of general taxation on income, profits and sales within ten years.

Geographic justice would be achieved, pre-distributing wealth from over-heated high land-value areas to those economically depressed. At every level, government could tap into land values, with revenue shared out according to need, paying for public services provided by that level of government.

Unlike this system, local income tax does nothing to cure the 'balance

of funding' issue or liberate councils from remote control-freakery. It also makes worse the gap between young, debt-ridden earners and the (my) Saga generation spending the unearned assets stored in house values.

After three years of research, funded by £75,000 from the American Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, working with Liberal Democrat Liverpool City Council, I have firmly taken the second view. My findings are:

A 'rolling' national land valuation, continuously revised, could cost no more than the existing periodic valuations for property taxes, over the valuation cycle.

Smart tax could be phased in, as a full replacement to local property taxes nation-wide, while the 2003 (non-domestic) and 2006/07 (council tax) valuations and taxes based on them are phased out, over fewer than ten years, starting with trials in pilot areas. The changeover could be cost-neutral in administration terms.

Business managers overwhelmingly prefer smart tax to business rates, which they do not understand. They are particularly keen to see it being piloted in business improvement districts, where they do not believe a voluntary system of owner payments can work.

Value maps should be widely used to help make property taxes transparent, irrespective of any tax reform. The Government should fund their development.

Income tax will be with us for the foreseeable future and is more progressive than most other taxes (although it is very expensive for small businesses to administer and easy for rich individuals to evade). While much of income tax could – and should – be localised (allowing local authorities to set a local rate), it would actually be regressive between regions and generations to scrap the only, albeit flawed domestic property tax, whilst a more efficient and sustainable source of funding is available.

Campaigning for land value taxation did the Scottish Green Party no harm in 2003, when it went from one to seven seats in Parliament. Across the political spectrum the land tax debate is more lively than for decades. By all means let's Axe The (Council) Tax and replace it with something fairer. But let's not have local income tax. Let's modernise the fairest tax of all: land value taxation.

*Tony Vickers  
Newbury*

For the study referred to, contact;  
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## A SHORT HISTORY OF POLITICAL VIRGINITY

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



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

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**Passports to Liberty 5:  
Defending Families  
(Jonathan Calder) &  
Liberals and the Global  
Economy (Bernard  
Salmon) Liberator  
Publications 2003 £3**

One of the necessary steps for a political party before it moves from opposition to government is that it needs to ferment new ideas - and attract the think tanks, the opinion formers and the chatterers to debate around it.

Mrs Thatcher's stormtroopers managed the trick in the late 1970s; New Labour managed in the mid-1990s. Both became the centre of a whirl of discussion and new thinking.

For some reason, the Liberal Democrats have yet to grasp how important this is.

It will have to if it is going to make more political progress. But for the time being, all the party has in the way of a pamphlet series is Liberator's Passports to Liberty series, now on its fifth publication.

And both essays this time reflect some frustration with the conventionality of thinking in two of the party's recent policy papers: Bernard Salmon about the stultifying conventional macroeconomics policy Prosperity at Home and Abroad, and Jonathan Calder - at least by implication - about the forthcoming Early Years paper.

Both display exactly the kind of critique we need, and - although this might not be obvious at first sight - both from a similar point of view: the vital importance of putting ordinary people first, both in our economic policy and our child policy.

Both point out the way that conventional policy can become tyrannical when it assumes human beings are narrow economic machines in Salmon's essay, or when it assumes they are incapable of looking after their own children in Calder's.

Salmon's essay on Liberals and the Global Economy is a discussion in the Schumacher mould about consumption and sustainability, and going over ground that may be familiar to some - perhaps too much ground to really provide a sharp insight in a pamphlet essay.

But he is absolutely right to criticise the supreme begging of the key question in the party's

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macroeconomics policy: that where economic growth comes into conflict with the environment, hard choices have to be made.

Well yes, but how and what? Salmon thinks people ought to be told, and he is absolutely right.

Calder's essay Defending Families is much narrower in scope - and sharper as a result - and much more challenging, because this is a whole new area of dispute he is carving out for himself.

I have to declare an interest - he quotes me twice, which certainly gives me a bias in his favour - but it is worth reading for other reasons too.

Because under the guise of 'putting the interests of the child first', an all-powerful alliance of professionals and state agents is slowly chipping away at the idea that parents have rights and skills when it comes to their own children.

This is a skilful, exciting and thoughtful piece of invective and Liberator should be proud to publish it.

With Ofsted attempting now to 'inspect' grandparents who baby-sit for their stepchildren, this is an urgent area of concern for Liberals, and Jonathan Calder is both correct and brave to raise the debate.

But should party activists be raising such difficult questions, you can hear our most single-minded campaigners asking? Yes, they certainly should.

Because when we raise the standard of debate, people tend to cluster round.

When we build it, they will come.

And, what's more, if we struggle with the most difficult issues of the age - the places that seem at best paradoxical and at worst contradictory about party policy - then it's a strange thing, but brand new innovative and attractive solutions tend to emerge.

*David Boyle*

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**The Strange Rebirth of  
Liberal England  
by David Walter  
Politico's 2003 £10.99  
(paperback)**

The title of this book promises a great deal. First, it is play on George Dangerfield's 'The Strange Death of Liberal Britain', written in the 1930s, an idiosyncratic but classic history of the collapse of Liberal fortunes after the First World War. If you are going to invite comparisons with that book, you had better have something important to say. Second, there is the reference to 'England', which suggests a specifically English (as opposed to British) perspective.

This is not the first time someone has attempted a retort to Dangerfield. In 1985, Ian Bradley wrote 'The Strange Rebirth of Liberal Britain'. Despite having the words "A book which has been waiting to be written - David Steel" written in large print on the front cover, this was actually a reasonable stab at the topic. It examined in some depth the political and philosophical trends that had developed over the previous century.

Walter's book, on the other hand, turns out to be a rather pedestrian account of the past thirty years (the first three quarters of the twentieth century are dealt with in just a few pages). There is a distinct whiff of a press clippings cut-and-paste job. The lack of any serious analysis is made worse by the uncritical tone. Steel, Ashdown and Kennedy are each presented in glowing terms and there is an underlying assumption that the leader's strategy was always the right one. If this is Walter's view, he at least owes the reader some justification.

What have been the fundamental political, social and economic trends that have underpinned the recovery of Liberal fortunes since the nadir in

the 1950s? Why is the recovery only partially complete and will trends propel Liberalism onwards or act as a barrier? Walter apparently has no idea.

As for the 'England' in the title, there is no specifically English dimension to this book at all, unless you count the excessive focus on happenings in Westminster (the role of local campaigning in the rebirth of the party is scarcely mentioned). One can only assume the title was chosen to distinguish Walter's book from Bradley's.

If you want an undemanding trot through Liberal history, Chris Cook's 'Short History' does it much better. The definitive history of the past thirty years of British Liberalism has yet to be written, but Walter's book certainly isn't it. In fact, it is not at all clear what this book is for.

*Simon Titley*

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## **Through the Embers of Chaos: Balkan Journeys**

**by Dervla Murphy**

**John Murray**

**Paperbacks 2003 £8.99**

Murphy is now in her seventies but still travels the world by bicycle as a means of getting closer to the people and places she visits.

A lifetime's globetrotting has produced almost 20 travel books from exotic locations - this one takes in a country that was once closed to most of us (Albania) and one once open, then closed, and only in parts reopened (Yugoslavia).

Milosevic's campaign against the Kosovars, and the television pictures night after night of Kosovar refugees fleeing the Serbian police, led to wide support for the western bombing campaign that ended it.

It was of course different in parts of former Yugoslavia, and Murphy's extensive travels in that country (she omits only Macedonia) bring her into contact with an enormous range of people and opinions.

She gets where few politicians or journalists go, protected by her faith that few people will harm an elderly lady on a bicycle and that they will open up to her in a way they would not to anyone official. Her Irish passport helps to establish her neutrality too.

Murphy writes from the perspective of admirer of the Tito government, who laments the passing

of its ability hold together the jigsaw of Yugoslav ethnicities, cultures and religions.

The trouble is that nothing can bring back Tito, and his system depended on his status and force of personality. His human rights abuses may have been few by the standards of the old eastern bloc, but Murphy rather passes over these.

This stance leads Murphy to be hostile to almost every significant politician in the ex-Yugoslavia, who she blames for its demise. She believes that holding together the old Yugoslavia under some successor to Tito would have been a great deal better than what followed, and that outside interference was almost always malign.

She believes this even in the context of Kosovo, arguing that the privations the inhabitants suffered were not intolerable until the KLA started fighting the Serbs.

Western bombing of civilians and infrastructure in Serbia proper angers her deeply, and she is in general profoundly scathing about the role of international agencies, which she sees as little more than gravy trains for westerners who want to polish their CVs.

With a few heroic exceptions, Murphy sees the 'international community' (a term she describes as a 'reprehensible euphemism') as more concerned with roaring around in four-wheel drives looking important than doing anything of productive use for the inhabitants.

Pretty well all her stances are controversial, though backed up by appendices about the course of the conflict, and this book will be thought provoking for anyone who thought they understood what happened in ex-Yugoslavia, whether or not they agree with Murphy's conclusions.

Albania gets less of a look in. Murphy is attacked on the road and leaves hurriedly in one of her rare trips by vehicle.

However, she records enough of Albania's poverty, lawlessness and backwardness to make it quite clear why no significant number of Kosovo Albanians wishes to have anything to do with the place.

Reading these stories through accounts gathered almost entirely from ordinary people is unusual and rewarding, even if it does not exactly fill one with hope for the future of most of the places visited.

*Mark Smulian*

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## **Pictures from the Fire**

**by Gaye Hilmaz**  
**Orion Children's Books**  
**2003**

"Outside, a wave of red swastikas had been sprayed onto the white wall opposite. Some of the paint had run down, and spattered like blood. Emilia watched as people going to work glanced up, and frowned, then hurried on. She remembered the shape of those marks from England though she'd never understood exactly what they meant."

This exciting and well written work of 'teenage fiction' conveys a vivid impression of the life of a young asylum seeker, driven from her home in Romania to a short, happy stay in England, and then back to a German hostel for refugees.

Her family locks her in when they go out to work or to beg, because of her ability to get them into trouble, especially by her skills in painting pictures; they do not know that she is secretly sketching episodes of her life in a hidden diary.

The author gives a good account of Emilia's family's very distinct culture, against which she rebels, but rather surprisingly uses the insulting term Gypsy, rather than Roma, to describe it.

*Bruce Ritchie*

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## **A Civilian Occupation,**

**the politics of Israeli**

**architecture**

**edited by Rafi Segal**

**and Eyal Weizman**

**Verso 2003 £13, &**

**The End of History**

**Afif Safieh Palestinian**

**General Delegation**

**2003**

**palestinianuk@aol.com**

There is nothing particularly new in *A Civilian Occupation*, except a heightened awareness of what the Israelis are doing to get us all killed as they flagrantly expand their settlements throughout the residue of Palestine. The maps in Afif Safieh's booklet show this equally graphically.

One of my greatest travel experiences was arriving in Jerusalem from Jericho via the desert. If I repeated that journey today, the experience would be marred by the suburbanisation of the area by illegal

settlements sponsored in the main by the Israeli government.

I can only hope that the desert reclaims them soon - like much Israeli town planning, they are barely sustainable except at enormous expense, by comparison to the Palestinian villages with their organic relationship to their geography. If I have a criticism, the book is too small for its illustrations - but that keeps the price down.

Afif Safieh has spoken on many occasions to Liberal Democrats. His pamphlet is a collection of his speeches over the last eight years, and may be recognisable as such.

Whilst his voice is necessarily of Palestinian officialdom, given his diplomatic role, Safieh's personal views make his message far more interesting than the normal embassy fodder. If there is to be any peace, the Israelis in particular should note his words well, and look for an opening.

Stewart Rayment

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## **Bomber Harris, his life and times** **by Henry Probert** **Greenhill Books 2003** **£12.99.**

Harris, it is often forgotten, because he was an airman, was one of the great generals of the Second World War. With hindsight, he is controversial; but there is no point in crying over spilt milk.

Nobody asked the Germans to invade Poland; nobody asked them to bomb cities. The problem is, when you bomb British cities, you might just find we perfect that technique - a war was to be fought, and there's no point in crying about it now.

Harris's political boss was Liberal leader Archie Sinclair, Secretary of State for Air. Probert draws on De Groot's biography of Sinclair and, I think, gives us a clearer view of the pressures under which both men were working and the stresses between them.

Probert levels that Sinclair could have been more forthright about the nature of the bombing campaign, and makes it clear that, while Harris was clearly the man for the job, pressures came from above - Churchill and Uncle Joe. There is still scope for more work on the relationship between Harris and Sinclair. In the detail of Probert's work, one might

find a guide, but much has to be read into this.

Stewart Rayment



All morning he stands and flashes.

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## **The Flasher: a day in the life of a Belisha Beacon** **by Magnus Irvin and Adrian Hobbs**

Who was the most famous Liberal of the 20th Century? A household name? Churchill? The Welsh Wizard? They have their claims, but how about Leslie Hore Belisha who, as minister of transport in 1934, introduced his famous beacons?

If you live around Crouch Hill, you may be familiar with one of these beacons... the work of artist Magnus Irvin who, among other things, has brought us the (not quite) *Daily Twit* over the last 25 years ([www.dailytwit.com](http://www.dailytwit.com)). This man obviously deserves to be very wealthy, so a lot of £2.56 postal orders (+ p&p) are going to be needed.

You can obtain this sad saga from Twit Towers, 11 Lancaster Road, London N4 4PJ, (email [dt@obe.abelgratis.com](mailto:dt@obe.abelgratis.com)), and watch out for Irvin's work at a gallery near you... you might even get a free dram.

Stewart Rayment

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## **No Sleep Till Canvey Island** **by Will Birch** **Virgin £7.99**

From kaftans to bin liners. A music scene that lasted four years and hardly existed outside a few London pubs might not seem worth a book, but pub rock provided the missing link between hippies and punks.

It was an early 1970s reaction to the excesses of progressive rock by disillusioned hippies, who decided they would rather play country or blues influenced music in seedy boozers.

This back-to-basics movement paved the way for punk's political, sartorial and stylistic innovations, most of which sprang originally from the same small pub circuit.

Pub rock's famous names were Elvis Costello, Ian Dury, Doctor Feelgood and Graham Parker - a relatively impressive haul for such an obscure and short-lived phenomenon.

Mark Smulian

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## **Eats Shoots & Leaves** **by Lynne Truss** **Profile Books 2003** **£9.99 (hardback)**

This little volume has become a surprise Christmas best seller. A surprise, because it's a book about that favourite topic of pedants everywhere, punctuation. If, like me, you wince each time you see a greengrocer's apostrophe, you'll love this. If, on the other hand, you dismiss correct punctuation as mere pedantry, consider this example of how punctuation can change utterly the meaning of words:

"A woman, without her man, is nothing."

"A woman: without her, man is nothing."

As one of the poor souls who proof-reads *Liberator*, I can testify that the standard of punctuation among *Liberator*'s contributors is appalling. Most don't know the difference between "its" and "it's" and fail to use commas properly to distinguish sub-clauses. Let the healing begin.

Simon Titley

## Tuesday

To Shrewsbury for a meeting of the Shropshire Literary and Philosophical Society – I am a Country Member. We Liberals and Radicals have always been proud to number poets amongst our number – one thinks of the Romantic brotherhood of Byron, Keetch and Shelley, and of the Reverend Hughes' late uncle Ted. Now they have been joined by Paul Marsden, who recently crossed the floor after addressing the following lines to Hilary Armstrong, the New Party's Chief Whip: "Because you kicked me in the slats,/I've joined the Liberal Democrats." This evening he reads that work in full, and adds such challenging verses as "I am a fierce and ardent suitor,/Please someone pay for my computer" and "And I shall hire a Hawker Siddley/To drop large bombs on Sandra Gidley". This Shropshire lad is no Peter Houseman, but I feel sure that we have not heard the last of him.

## Wednesday

What's that? You want to know how that business with the ring turned out? You left me and my companions, if I recall aright, sheltering under a hedge on the borders of Rutland and fortifying ourselves with nips of Auld Johnston from my flask. I found the burdens of leadership weighing heavily upon me; above all, I wished to avoid going down in history as being responsible for a disastrous enterprise. One thinks of Scott and the South Pole and of David Steel and the Alliance. Talking of Scott, when supplies of Auld Johnston were getting low I pointedly mentioned the example of the gallant Captain Oates, who laid down his life to avoid becoming a burden to his fellows. No one took the hint, even though I raised the possibility that Oates had been taken in by a family of kindly penguins and nursed back to health.

Things took a turn for the better later that evening when we saw lights and heard music deep in the woods. "Um rave," said Rising Star, but it turned out to be the elves of Rockingham Forest. These fellows keep themselves to themselves – apart from their traditional Whit Monday-fixtured against the Gentlemen of Rutland, of course – but they proved gracious hosts. They gave us princely gifts: jerkins of the lightest chainmail, swords of tempered steel and elven waybread for our journey. In return we taught them advanced committee room practice, and we parted the firmest of friends.

## Thursday

So we continued our journey, travelling along ancient forest tracks and crossing London by abandoned railway tunnels known only to the Freemasons, and so found ourselves in Kent. We chose this county as our destination because of something my old friend Lord Rennard told me during his portentous visit to the Hall the other day. I shall not pretend to remember all he said – it was a warm afternoon and the Wincanton meeting was on the moving television – but I distinctly recall his mentioning something about a Lord of Darkness who had to be destroyed. Consulting *Jane's Fighting Conservatives*, I deduced that this could only be one Michael Howard, the Member for Folkestone and Hythe. So eventually we struck camp at Dungeness, in the grim shadow of the atomic power station and the Jack Straw Memorial Reform School. I had some notion of dealing with the aforementioned Howard and then dropping my precious ring into the heart of the atom plant. Whilst there, I could perhaps borrow a little plutonium and see if it will do for my moustache what some wagging tongues allege it does for that of my old friend John Thurso.

# Lord Bonkers' Diary

## Friday

Early the next morning I awoke to find a familiar figure trudging across the shingle towards our tents. It was none other than my old friend Lord Rennard, and he was the bearer of the most extraordinary tidings. He told me that whilst my companions and I had been engaged upon our quest the aforementioned Howard had been elected as leader of the Conservative Party. Not only that, but confidential polling carried out on behalf of the Liberal Democrats in Melton Constable revealed that he has become one of our party's greatest assets. On no account, I was sternly informed, was anything to befall him. This rather leaves my doughty company at a loose end, so I treat us all to luncheon at the *Mermaid* in Rye before having myself flown home from Lydd Airport. I arrived home to find preparations for the Bonkers Hall Ward bric-à-brac sale in full swing, and was happy to lend a hand.

## Saturday

I was sad to see Concorde making its final flight, for it was a supreme example of British know-how, grit and spunk. However, as I told poor old "Barmy" Benn on its first outing, a machine whose engines could burn nothing save high-denomination banknotes was never likely to prosper in this Age of Prudence.

## Sunday

I have been home for several days now, yet I still find a fresh pleasure in the quotidian round of life at the Hall. Today we all process to St Asquith's for divine service. As the guidebooks note, the interior of the church, with its boxed pews and sightscreens, has been little touched since the days of the Prince Regent; in particular, it retains its splendid double-decker pulpit. The Reverend Hughes is in mid-season form and, as is his habit when the muse is upon him, he climbs to the upper deck for the all the finest passages in his sermon. ("Clement Davies fought Montgomeryshire in 1929 and, lo, a majority of over two thousand did he achieve.") I give my weekend guest and neighbour in the pew, Phil Willis, a hearty dig in the ribs and remark what a splendid spectacle this makes, but Willis replies that he does not approve of a two-tier service.

## Monday

Mist wreaths the trees in the park, and Meadowcroft sweeps up the leaves while muttering about my making him go "gallumphing after they fairies". Perhaps he blames me because it was not possible to find him a place on the flight back from Kent? Certainly, it was a long walk for him. I put this from my mind and hasten to supervise the latest trials of my self-delivering Focus. Perhaps I am still overdoing the gunpowder a little, and certainly the navigation has yet to be perfected, but I remain convinced that I stand upon the threshold of great things with this invention. Indeed my pleasure would be complete were it not for one nagging thought: I have not seen that ring Rennard was so concerned about since we finished boxing up the bric-à-brac on the evening of my return.

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

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