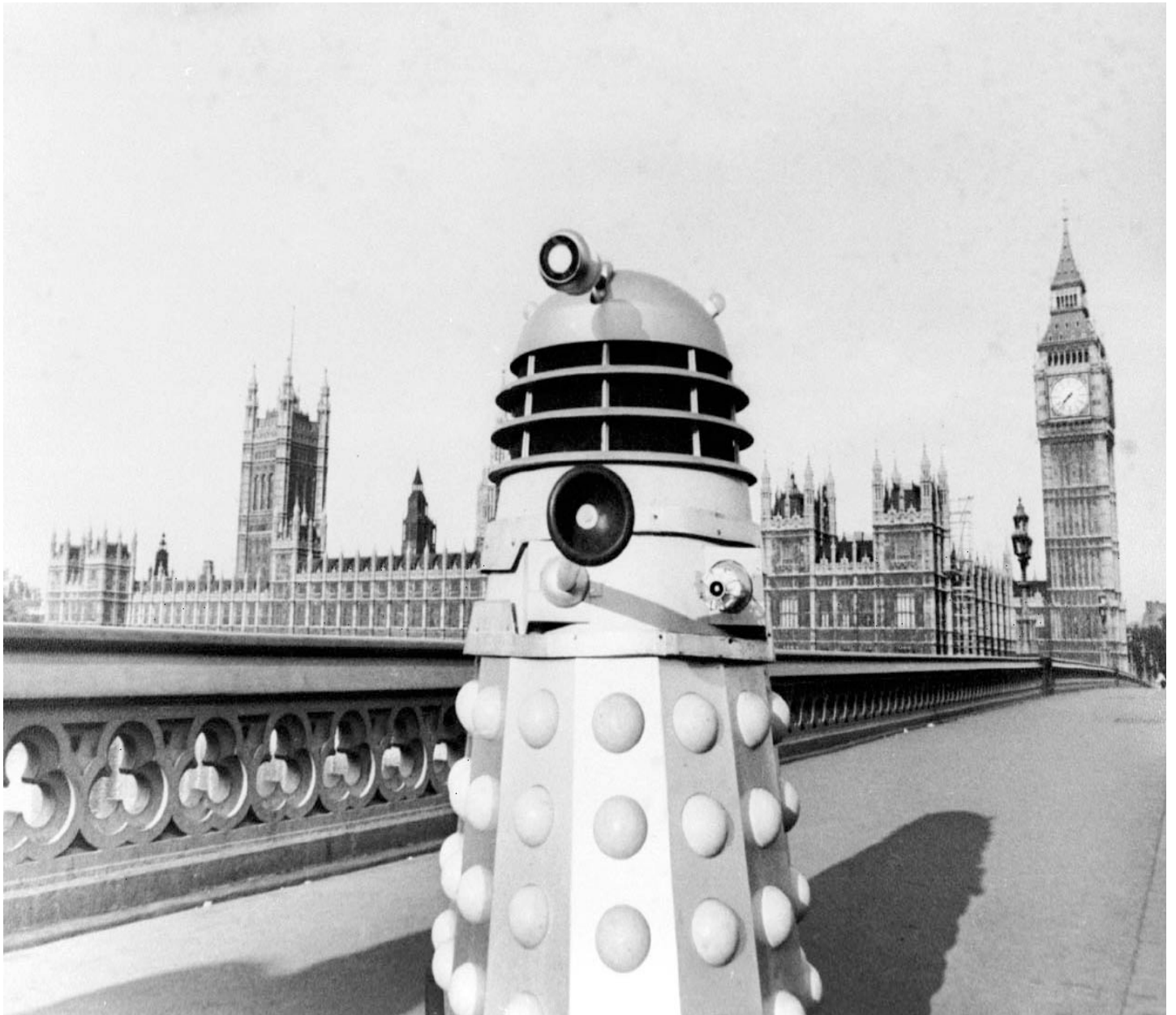


# *liberator*

## **Party Discipline - Kennedy Gets Tough**



### ***In this issue***



***Howard's narrow vision - Michael Meadowcroft***



***Not a question of sport - Simon Titley***



***Dr Who made me a Liberal - Alex Wilcock***



***Europe tries again - Andrew Duff***

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# CONTENTS

<b>Commentary</b> . . . . .	3
<b>✪ Radical Bulletin</b> . . . . .	4..6
<b>IS IT LOCAL?</b> . . . . .	7
Scrapping council tax is not enough, says Guy Burton	
<b>HOWARD'S WAY</b> . . . . .	8..9
Tory leader Michael Howard deserves praise for trying to express a philosophy. The problem is that it ignores communities and the rest of the world, says Michael Meadowcroft, former Liberal MP for Leeds West	
<b>NOT A SPORTING CHANCE</b> . . . . .	10..11
Politicians are placing a huge weight of expectation on sport, which it cannot sustain, argues Simon Titley	
<b>PUT IT IN A PAMPHLET</b> . . . . .	12..13
Kiron Reid celebrates the return of the political, with three recent examples of Liberal thinking'	
<b>DOCTOR WHO' MADE ME A LIBERAL</b> . . . . .	14..15
It wasn't a Focus, but a Tardis for Alex Wilcock, vice-chair of the Liberal Democrat Federal Policy Committee	
<b>SORTING OUT THE SHAMBLES</b> . . . . .	16..17
The Irish presidency stands a chance of pulling the European Union out of the mire over its constitution. Liberal Democrats should support this publicly, says MEP Andrew Duff	
<b>BLUNKETT'S POINTLESS CRACKDOWN</b> . . . . .	18..19
Government measures to control asylum seeker numbers are probably counter productive and ignore the need to tackle the issue at root, says Portsmouth University researcher Siamak Goudarzi	
<b>Letters</b> . . . . .	20..21
<b>Reviews</b> . . . . .	22..23
<b>Lord Bonkers' Diary</b> . . . . .	24

# COMMENTARY

## BETTER THERE THAN NOT

A few days after this Liberator went to press, the twin-pronged attack was due on prime minister Tony Blair of the tuition fees vote and the Hutton report.

If he has enjoyed victories, they will be hardly worth having. The tuition fee proposals were near enough torn up and recast to appease a rebellion so large that it threatened even a government with a 160-odd majority.

What is significant is less the nature of the concessions made than the fact that any issue could come along to menace a government with such a huge majority. How on earth does the Labour leadership come to be so vastly out of tune with its MPs in the first place?

Readers who remember the latter stages of Margaret Thatcher's descent into arrogant isolation will recall the routine speculation about the Tory backbench rebellions that attempted to stop, among other things, the poll tax.

They always failed as stretched loyalties were pulled taut one more time, favours called in and patronage distributed, but a fat lot of good these Pyrrhic victories eventually did Mrs Thatcher.

So it will be while Blair, with far fewer roots in his party than Thatcher had in hers, continues to pull Labour in directions it does not wish to go. It is all downhill from here.

Introducing top-up fees, we note, breaks a manifesto commitment. How many more voters will be lost to cynicism and apathy by the spectacle of a Labour government demonstrating that its manifesto was a pack of lies?

Unless directly accused, it seemed likely that the Hutton Report would leave Blair bloodied but standing.

But what we already know is damning enough: the sexed-up dossiers; the gross misrepresentation of the '45 minutes' claim; the suppressed advice that deposing Saddam would help not hinder Islamist terror; the promotion of forged claims about Iraqis buying uranium in Niger; and, above all, the lies about weapons of mass destruction.

Britain did not go to war to depose Saddam because it disapproved of his government (a proposition that would lead to international anarchy) but because of the WMD claim. Nearly a year later, none has been found, yet British troops were sent, ill-equipped, to fight and die for this chimera.

We now have the word of a former member of president Bush's cabinet that Bush was determined on war with Iraq from the outset, no matter what the pretext.

Blair lied to drag Britain into a war, and into greater danger from terrorism that it previously faced. That much is clear whatever the details of the Kelly affair.

From a purely partisan point of view, it is greatly to the Liberal Democrats' advantage that, at the next election, Labour should continue to be led by a discredited liar than by any new figure who would enjoy an electoral honeymoon and the benefit of the doubt.

Between now and the next general election, barring some quite unforeseen development, Blair will be twisting in the wind, despised by many voters and unloved by most others. Having never tried to inspire his own supporters, or anyone else, with a vision, it will be dreadfully difficult for him to motivate voters now.

This gives us the chance to really take on Labour in its heartlands, and indeed there are startlingly optimistic noises being made by Liberal Democrats in major urban areas about this year's local elections.

It may be that Michael Howard has managed to stem the Tories' decline, though, given his record and unpopularity, it is unlikely he will be able to reverse it much. This may limit progress against the Tories outside the well-defined group of target seats.

But richer pickings than ever may be on offer in Labour areas as its support collapses into hostility or apathy. This is surely worth going for.

'Going for' has not been a description much applied to the Liberal Democrats in recent months, though.

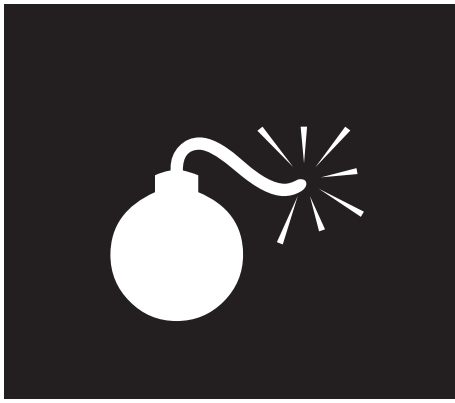
Charles Kennedy has resurrected the hoary old theme of an aversion to 'yah boo' politics as a core message, which by itself hardly amounts to much.

Voters may be turned off by abuse (though perhaps not when they care about the subject concerned) but they are not turned on by silence.

Having ages ago established a position against both tuition fees and the Iraq war, the Liberal Democrats managed to get crowded out of both debates during this winter.

More extraordinary is Kennedy's cowardice in the face of the media circus surrounding Jenny Tonge and her remarks about Palestine. Instead of caving in to media pressure and sacking Tonge, why did he not take up the plight of the Palestinian people? After all, Blair reportedly extracted promises of action from Bush in exchange for his complicity in the war on Iraq?

The party should be carrying the battle to Labour in judiciously chosen parts of its heartland in the coming months. While fighting the Tories, let's not forget that, under Blair, Labour has become a rotten hulk in many places.



# RADICAL BULLETIN

## END OF THE PEERS SHOW

Remember the peers list, elected in 1999 to provide the group from which Liberal Democrat life peerages would be drawn? If you have a copy, look upon it fondly, as it may not be there for long.

A select group of Liberal Democrats has been eagerly awaiting the chance to phone their ermine suppliers for several weeks now (*Liberator* 292). But they will have to wait a bit longer. And if there are any further peers after them, it seems they will be appointed by a patronage mechanism devised by those close to Charles Kennedy.

Labour is desperate for a new tranche of working peers, for several reasons: Labour keeps losing votes in the Lords and wants more people in its lobby; it is short of active people to promote to government posts and do backbench jobs; too many of its existing peers are reluctant to turn up for votes, which can be at any time up to midnight; and it wants to get as many peers in as possible before the hereditaries are kicked out, to try to give itself an effective working majority in the Lords.

The original proposal floated in the press was for Labour to get 20 new peers, the Tories 5-6, and the Liberal Democrats 4-5. Kennedy apparently stuck out for more (and the Palace is reluctant to go ahead without agreement from the parties), and is thought to have secured eight.

The system for appointing Lib Dem peers was agreed by conference and in 1999 the party held a vote of conference representatives for a panel of 50 people. This was at a time when the Cook-Maclennan proposals were on the agenda and the party would have got up to 25 new peers to make up the right proportion based on the 1997 general election vote.

In the event, only one allocation of working peers was made, of which the Liberal Democrats got nine. Kennedy stretched the rules to appoint one former parliamentarian in addition to the personal nomination he was allowed, respectively John Roper and Jamie Erskine. The other seven were appointed from the list: Lindsay Granshaw, Ros Scott, Joan Walmsley, Rupert Redesdale, Tony Greaves, Matthew Oakeshott and David Shutt.

The list was supposed to lapse after the 2001 election and a fresh one would be elected but, since democratic reform of the Lords was in the air, and there had been fewer peerages than expected, the Federal Executive agreed to continue the same list until things changed. This was reported to and approved by conference.

Last July, the FE resolved (and minuted) that the old list should continue to be used as a basis for any appointments.

Greaves raised the issue at the December FE and asked Kennedy if the minute of the July meeting, which

he read aloud, still stood. Kennedy gave a one-word answer - "yes". On that basis Greaves did not pursue the matter any further.

The eight names that Kennedy is understood to have submitted to Blair as new peers are: Jane Bonham Carter, Roger Roberts, David Alliance, Ian Vallance, Kishwer Falkner, Julia Neuberger, Tim Garden and Hugh Dykes.

Of these, only Bonham Carter and Roberts were elected to the panel, though Falkner stood unsuccessfully.

Those who wanted to see the party's elected list used to fill the vacancies now feel that Kennedy deceived them at the December FE, and that the democratic decisions of the party have been ignored, whatever the individual merits of those he has nominated.

The Kennedy list is significantly light on party activists and councillors, with only Roberts, Falkner and, more or less, Dykes, coming into either category.

Of the rest, Bonham Carter is a former party press officer, Alliance and Valance are former captains of industry, Neuberger is a rabbi and Garden a retired senior air force officer.

There has certainly been some muttering in the ranks among existing peers as to whether this is really the mix of people needed to bolster their ranks, especially as on the previous list all nine could be counted as active party members in some way. There is also expected to be grumbling over the failure to achieve a 50/50 gender balance.

Meanwhile the January FE voted (with only Donnachadh McCarthy in opposition) to abolish the elections for the peers panel and institute a system in which anyone can be put on the panel, without limit to the number, on the nomination of 25 conference representatives.

Since all MPs and peers are conference representatives in their own right, it will hardly be an onerous task for the party leadership to merely stick their own nominees on the list and pretend that some democratic process has taken place.

Greaves (who is not a member of the new FE) commented that this was the latest example of the party establishment stitching up the party to its own agenda - something that has been happening ever since the Iraq march, when they were bounced into taking part against their wishes.

Since the original decision to have a peers list was taken by conference, it cannot be simply overturned by the FE. A lively debate is in prospect at the Southport spring conference.

## TONGE TIED

What sort of signal did Charles Kennedy think he was sending out by his decision to sack Jenny Tonge from the front bench over her comments on suicide bombers? Indeed, did he think at all before caving in to the surrounding furore?

One can almost hear the kitchen cabinet telling him he had to be 'tough' and show he had taken 'firm action'.

A spokesperson should be sacked only for bringing the party into disrepute. Sacking Tonge over her remarks looks more like trying to shut down debate on an issue where passions run high on both sides.

If Tonge had condoned suicide bombing, she would have brought the party into disrepute and deserved to be fired. But she didn't.

Here are her words: "This particular brand of terrorism, the suicide bomber, is truly born out of desperation. Many, many people criticise, many, many people say it is just another form of terrorism, but I can understand and I am a fairly emotional person and I am a mother and a grandmother.

"I think if I had to live in that situation, and I say this advisedly, I might just consider becoming one myself. And that is a terrible thing to say."

That does not condone suicide bombing, it seeks to understand why some people turn to this desperate measure.

It is instructive to consider what might have been made of Tonge's remarks in another context. Suppose she had said, a few years ago, that had she grown up in a nationalist ghetto in Northern Ireland during the years of Protestant ascendancy she might have joined the IRA.

There would no doubt have been a furore over that too. But the lasting, if shaky, peace that exists in Northern Ireland is there only because enough people were prepared to make the effort to see the conflict through the other side's eyes and understand what might tackle the grievances sufficiently to start a peace process.

If everyone who made that step over Northern Ireland had been treated like Tonge has been, would there have been any progress? Conflicts will not go away just because it is forbidden to raise difficult issues related to them.

Kennedy should have defended Tonge's right to speak her mind, and defended his colleague against the distortion that she had condoned the bombers.

Instead he collapsed in a heap without it even being clear that he was under pressure from any organised body of opinion that carries great weight.

Panic in the face of an awkward or unorthodox opinion does not look very liberal.

This is not the first time that Liberal Democrats have found this issue too difficult to handle.

Asked by an activist last September whether the party should debate the Middle East at a conference, Menzies Campbell replied that it was "unsuitable" because of the "effort needed to get a resolution acceptable to both sides".

Isn't the point of a debate that one side convinces conference representatives and wins, while the other does not?

## OATEN WATCHED

Thanks to the internet, Mark Oaten has been honoured with a weblog. Unfortunately for him, it is not his own.

Oaten's elevation to shadow home secretary, rapidly followed by some sloganising about 'tough liberalism', has prompted a group of party activists to set up 'Oatenwatch', which can be accessed at: [oatenwatch@hotmail.com](mailto:oatenwatch@hotmail.com)

Oatenwatch describes itself as "a new liberal organisation. Unlike other new liberal organisations (the Peel Group, Liberal Future) it wasn't founded by Mark Oaten, rather it's devoted to him. Oaten Watch will keep track of Mark Oaten's career as Shadow Home Secretary."

No one is known, now or in the past, to have felt the need to set up a service to monitor the utterances of any other Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

The reason for this initiative, we assume, is that home affairs is a touchstone for many party members. Being a Liberal Democrat often means taking a position on home affairs questions that is neither simple nor an obvious vote winner, but is a matter of principle.

So long as Simon Hughes had the home affairs portfolio, and before him Alan Beith, party members could get on with whatever their main activity was secure in the knowledge that there was no need to minutely scrutinise every pronouncement of the home affairs spokesperson for right-wing populist nonsense.

Not any more. Oaten's belief that the way to beat the Tories is to become more like them has set many alarm bells ringing.

Oatenwatch, which is not connected with Liberator, has noted that Oaten has opposed identity cards, but voices the same concern we did (Liberator 292) that he is emphasising their cost and practicality rather than the civil liberty issues.

But it was distressed that the YouGov website listed Oaten alongside the more credible Hughes and Menzies Campbell, and the more self-promoting Lembit Opik, as the only choices for a future party leader. Where were, to name but a few who might try, Ed Davey, Nick Harvey, Steve Webb and Vince Cable?

Oatenwatch also noted that Oaten's first parliamentary question in his new guise was: "Does the Minister accept that it is a disgrace that 41 per cent of a policeman's time is tied up on paperwork and that we want much more done to get our police out on the streets? With that in mind, will she support me in calling for all police on the beat to be issued with palmtops and mobile technology so they can be seen doing their work, rather than being back in the station? Does she also accept that this is the age of techno cop, not paper-clip cop?"

As Oatenwatch noted: "It's a bit of a rubbish question really, and hardly a Liberal Democrat priority".

Worse still is a piece on Oaten's own website uncovered by Oatenwatch in which he deplors the state in which a group of travellers left some land in his constituency.

What was done was no doubt unpleasant and offensive, but one has to be careful how one throws around the term 'gypsy', as it describes an ethnic group.

Those who join Oatenwatch but wish to unsubscribe might like to note that this is done by putting "Mark Oaten for next Tory leader" in the subject line.

## **INVISIBLE WOMAN**

A spread in the Liberal Democrat members' bumf-sheet, *Informed*, carried an article by Sarah Teather and a panel in the Women in Targets Seats initiative.

How embarrassing that the opposite page omitted Sandra Gidley, the only female shadow cabinet member in the Commons, from the picture line-up of the new shadow team.

## **DICKING AROUND**

Liberal Democrat campaigners will surely have raised their eyebrows at a letter in the *Guardian* (12 January) from Dick Taverne, the first-ever social democrat, objecting to the party's intention to vote with the Tories, other parties and Labour backbench rebels against top up fees.

"I regret that Lib Dem MPs apparently intend to vote with the Tories, whose policy amounts to a straight cut in university funding. My fellow Lib Dems may not consider top-up fees to be the best solution, but surely they should at least abstain from associating themselves with the worst?"

He raised the matter again at the weekly meeting of the Liberal Democrat peers where he received support from some but not all of ennobled SDP colleagues.

It looks as if, when a serious threat to New Labour and Blair emerges, certain of these remnants revert to the two-dimensional view of political life in which if you are against one party you are automatically in favour of the other.

Or is it that, despite the events of the intervening years, some of these ex-SDP peers have never got over the infatuation they developed with Blair in 1994?

Ming Campbell assured the assembled Lords that he expected there would be 54 Liberal Democrat MPs voting solidly against the Government.

## **TAMAR TROUBLES**

Popes get chosen more quickly than Liberal Democrat prospective candidates for North Cornwall.

More than a year after Paul Tyler announced that he would stand down at the next general election, the seat finally chose local activist Dan Rogerson as its candidate.

The whole thing has dragged on so long that original favourite, former MEP Robin Teverson, dropped out for business reasons.

Part of the reason for the extended process was a complaint from Fran Tippet that the interviewing process did not follow procedures laid down by the Gender Balance Task Force (*Liberator* 290).

She felt moved to lodge a 110-page appeal with the English Candidates Committee, members of which at one point had to fly to Newquay to hold a hearing.

Tyler spoke in favour of all-women shortlists at Bournemouth in 2001 and was understood to favour Judith Jolley as his successor in one of the party's safest seats, but she lost narrowly to Rogerson.

The Gender Balance Task Force has succeeded in increasing the proportion of female candidates in target seats quite substantially, into the mid-30 per cent range.

But in seats where a sitting MP is retiring, only one woman has been selected, Susan Kramer in Richmond Park, and she is succeeding a female MP.

Some speculate that seats that have never elected a Lib Dem MP see themselves as needing a different set of skills in a candidate to those that have, with the latter taking a

rather traditional view of the sort of candidate who 'looks the part'.

## **LONG SERVICE AWARD**

Basil Wigoder has stepped down from the Lords' Privileges Committee to make way for John Roper after a 26-year stint.

This marathon has taken place because no-one knew he was there. He was appointed while chief whip in 1977 and the party then forgot to take him off when he left that post.

When the change was announced, Wigoder said: "I am glad that my name appears on the Order Paper without the word 'deceased' in brackets after it.

"I do regret leaving the committee just when I'd got the hang of what was really going on".

## **A LONG FIGHT WON**

*Liberator* has played a very small role in the successful resolution of a miscarriage of justice case, which saw Terry Pinfold's conviction quashed by the Court of Appeal in January.

*Liberator* publicised the case after collective member Kiron Reid, a law lecturer at Liverpool University, became interested in it (*Liberator* 243). Indeed, the magazine was subsequently cited in a thesis by someone who is now an acknowledged expert on miscarriages of justice.

Pinfold was convicted in 1980 at the Old Bailey of procuring the murder of his business partner in a soft toy making venture in Essex. Later evidence showed that the alleged killer whose confession implicated Pinfold was unreliable. Also, the police withheld evidence that a senior officer in the met believed the victim was living with a woman in Soho some time after he was supposed to be dead.

Pinfold fought the case largely on his own from his prison cell, with the help of Danny Simpson of the civil liberties solicitors, Howells. One of Pinfold's attempts at an appeal ended up in the law textbooks.

He was released on bail in July 2001 after the Criminal Cases Review Commission referred his case back to the Court of Appeal.

After 23 years in jail, Pinfold now lives near his family in Hornchurch, Essex, and maintains an interest in other victims of miscarriages of justice that he met in prison.

Reid says there is a particular lesson to be learnt from the Pinfold case. It took the CCRC four years to deal with it and the Conservative government, which set it up, clearly underestimated the amount of work the commission has to do.

Labour is in danger of doing the same thing with the Independent Police Complaints Commission - having estimated its workload based on current work of the Police Complaints Authority and not looking at the experience of the CCRC.

With an expected large increase in complaints to the new independent body, complainants may find a large delay, Reid warns.

# IS IT LOCAL?

## Scrapping council tax is not enough, says Guy Burton

So we're going to scrap the council tax and replace it with a local income tax? That's our big idea for local government?

Big deal. Am I the only one who thinks this shows a lack of ambition, a wasted opportunity?

Yes, we can try to sell the idea of a local income tax by showing low paid workers and older people they will pay less. I don't know what formula we've finally settled on, but the calculations I saw recently suggested the level at which local income tax could become more costly than council tax was quite low: earn less than £25,000 and you're doing fine; earn more and you'd be better off under the old system.

Ultimately, what is the council tax/local income tax debate all about? All it does is remove one form of tax collection for another. Look at it from A Voter's perspective: is she going to care which method is used?

That's not to say I love the council tax. I dislike paying the nearly £1,000 which Tower Hamlets demands each year. And yet I can't see how a local income tax would make much difference. The housing block would still be covered in graffiti, the local children still have nowhere to hang out and the street lighting would still be too dark for old people to walk home.

How would changing one form of tax collection for another change this?

The fact is it won't. But if the best the Liberal Democrats can come up with is to 'axe the council tax', there are going to be a lot of disappointed voters when they realise a local income tax won't make an ounce of difference to the quality of their lives.

But there is an alternative. Surely the way forward is to look at the issue of financial resource allocation as opposed to financial resource collection? I know councils already operate under various best practice guidelines and statutory requirements to consult with members of the general public on a whole range of issues from community safety to housing. We have strategies to tackle the street lightening, urban planning and waste collection. But it's not joined up. And it doesn't address the most important issue of all: the way councils allocate their overall budget.

True, councils are obliged to consult stakeholders before agreeing the budget. But unless you're an active and enthusiastic council watcher, the average voter is not going to have much say or input into the process.

Is it any wonder that voters feel jaded and cynical? All they see is a set budget which they can't influence. Likewise, politicians become fed up, when the public complains their concerns and views are not taken account of.

But there is a way forward which can counter this divide and open up the budgetary process. For more than a decade, the Workers Party in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre has had a system of participatory budgeting. It brings elected politicians together with local people in their neighbourhoods. Through an intensive series of

street-level meetings, council officers establish the priorities of local people, from the quality of pavements and lighting to basic amenities like waste disposal, water supply and school and medical provision.

Not only do local people get their say in how the council's money should be spent in their part of town, the process has been shown to help educate them about what the council can and can't do. In addition to learning about the opportunities and challenges faced by the municipal authorities in balancing the needs of different, sometimes competing demands, there is evidence local people are becoming more civically-minded and politically engaged.

The participatory budget process brings together these different priorities at neighbourhood level and establishes a financial plan for the following year which accommodates them as widely as possible. But wait: even at this level, there are representatives from outside the political class who are involved. The process requires representatives be elected to serve as delegates all the way through the participatory budget system, from the neighbourhood level to the city-wide budget committee. In this way local people feel the budget is not only the politicians', but theirs as well.

Since the system was pioneered in 1989, other Brazilian cities have taken the idea to heart. Seven years later the UN highlighted it as an example of best practice. It has since been adopted in varying forms elsewhere.

Yes, I know what you're thinking. There may well be the small problem of self-selection. Even in all the years since Porto Alegre first began the scheme, the city has never achieved the involvement of the majority. But in taking the budget into neighbourhoods and communities, the city discovered many citizens who were interested but had never been involved in politics before.

Why? Because no one ever asked them. And even if it is a small group of people who have become engaged through the participatory budget, public satisfaction with it has been positive; indeed it has grown. Since the Workers Party implemented the process it has been re-elected to power at the last three municipal elections and looks on course for a fourth later in October this year.

So let's see an end to this talk about different forms of tax collection and more talk about voter participation. Besides, it's a red herring to bang on about local income tax. We're nowhere near to making it a reality, not least because we're in no position in Parliament to bring in the necessary legislation. But there is no impediment to Liberal Democrat-controlled councils adopting participatory budgets. If we believe in devolution we should be trying to bring voters into the decision-making process, not leaving them out in the cold.

# HOWARD'S WAY

Tory leader Michael Howard deserves praise for trying to express a philosophy. The problem is that it ignores communities and the rest of the world, says Michael Meadowcroft, former Liberal MP for Leeds West

The reinvention of Michael Howard took a rather curious turn with a New Year message in the form of a personal "I Believe" credo. It was treated with dismissive amusement by opponent and commentator alike and, certainly, there is much in it which is risible.

However, it would be much better to treat it as a document with serious intent and to use it as a basis for debate with Conservatives. It hardly befits those of us who have criticised the increasing superficiality of politics today to dismiss any attempt to express philosophical beliefs. Banal Mr Howard's credo may be, but it's the best we've got.

The importance Michael Howard attaches to his 16 statements is clear - they are "the set of beliefs which brought me into politics", and he believes that "these beliefs are distinct from those which motivate politicians from other parties." Well, that's a relief!

The first thing that should strike a Liberal when reading Howard's credo is that it is entirely confined to Britain. Not one statement is international in content nor even refers to men and women outside the UK. It is as if human society and individual aspiration does not exist, or at least does not matter, outside our national border.

As has often been remarked upon in relation to Michael Howard, as the son of a Romanian Jewish immigrant, it is particularly puzzling that nothing of his family's history influenced his entry into politics.

As a member of a party that does not recognise the notion of national sovereignty, I am in principle in favour of abolishing borders. Consequently, not only do I welcome Howard's family to the UK as refugees in danger, but I also welcome economic refugees who, after all, are only following the example of Norman Tebbit's father who, famously, got on his bike and looked for work. Michael Howard apparently only believes in assisting British citizens.

The second aspect of it that is significant is the complete lack of any sense of community. For Michael Howard only individuals, families and the nation state exist. Given the ease with which even a suitably anodyne phrase could have been inserted, one can only assume that any concept of men and women freely associating within a neighbourhood, or joining together to achieve common aims, does not occur to him.

Nothing seems more natural to the Liberal, or, apparently, more unnatural to the Conservative, than the manifest existence of that human society to which people instinctively and naturally belong. Of course, there are legitimate individual aspirations; of course, there are anti-social elements; and of course there are those who see combination as a tool of exploitation, but a politician

who lacks an awareness of the vital importance of human society, with neighbourhoods evolving with sympathetic 'state' assistance, rather than being planted by planners, is doomed to continue the relentless, incremental and unrewarding path of repression so beloved of David Blunkett and his Conservative predecessors. Producing medicine for symptoms rather than treating the disease is the besetting sin of modern politics, nationally and internationally.

Howard's mind is at least typically Conservative in that he sees individuals as essentially selfish, just as, at the opposite pole, the socialist sees individuals as essentially altruistic. The Liberal understands the duality of human nature - that selfishness and altruism exist within each of us, and that one of the politician's key tasks is to foster the altruistic dimension and to inhibit the selfish.

In this context, the parallel with the role of the jury is instructive. Patrick Devlin, that great jurist of the 1960s and 1970s, compared the election campaign to the proceedings in court, and the electorate to the jury. He argued that, just as juries regularly produce verdicts that are 'progressive' rather than 'populist' - such as in the Clive Ponting and the Randle and Potter cases - so can the national 'jury' providing the same aspects apply, that is the electorate has a sense of a group identity, with interaction within the group, that the case for each party is thoroughly argued in front of it, and that what it decides happens. Given such a context Devlin argued that the elector votes as he or she sees a 'right thinking person' voting, rather than from his or her own prejudices.

Third, there are no direct statements of belief on the environment and on ecological imperatives. Without the survival of our planet and without the balance of nature being preserved, everything else is castles in the air. Shimmering such castles may be, but they are chimera nonetheless.

Having first focussed on what is missing it is easier to analyse what is present. Half of Michael Howard's statements - eight out of the 16 - can, I believe, be subscribed to by Liberals and by most Social Democrats. These set out the individual's aspiration for health, wealth and happiness and the state's responsibility to facilitate it, rather than stifling it.

Two are plainly wrong: Howard states that he does not believe that "one person's poverty is caused by another's wealth." Unless he has discovered some hitherto unknown alchemy that can create money without detrimental consequences or which can enable "added value" to continue indefinitely, this statement is wholly contrary to simple arithmetic, and is certainly antipathetic



to Margaret Thatcher's anti-inflationary zeal. More or less, there is a finite pot of money available, with the consequence that whatever one person receives leaves less for everyone else. It follows, therefore, that one person's wealth directly causes another's poverty.

The second statement that is wrong is that he does not believe that "one person's sickness is made worse by another's health." There is health 'pot' that is the equivalent to the economic 'pot' in the sense that there is a finite amount of health care available.

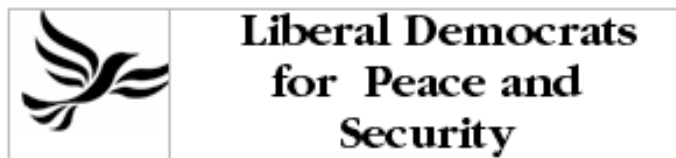
At whatever level this is pitched (and, in passing, I would comment that health produces by far the most hypocritical statements by politicians of all parties), it will be finite and, consequently, a treatment received by one patient depletes the pot for others. A West Leeds constituent once came to see me in some distress. Her 60-plus husband had been diagnosed as being in need of a heart bypass operation and had been told by the surgeon that it would be at least six months before this could be done on the NHS. On the way out of the consultation, the surgeon's secretary told my constituent that, if they could pay, then the operation could be done by the same surgeon the following week. Of course, she was unable to pay, hence her quite understandable distress. Clearly a well off person's private health provision made my constituent's sickness worse.

Next, there are three of Michael Howard's statements that seem acceptable at their face value but which make me feel uncomfortable. These relate to the glib and ambivalent comments on the need now to be protected from aspects of the state's apparatus initially introduced to protect us.

All three statements imply judgements on values that should disturb Liberals. In particular they suggest that those intelligent and astute enough to be able to cope - presumably economically - ought to be able to exploit that capacity without reference to those left behind, even though the divisions in society thus caused will undermine stability and eventually render their wealth unspendable. Liberals do not value academic intelligence intrinsically above sensitivity or above artistic or cultural skills. The innate ability of each individual should be at their disposal and the community's.

Finally, Howard ends with two populist and essentially obscurantist statements. His number 15 is that Britain should defend her freedom "at any time, against all comers, however mighty". Against George W Bush, and the imprisonment of British citizens for over two years at Guantanamo Bay without charge or legal representation? As Germany and France had the vision to see, more than 50 years ago, freedom comes by integration and by sharing sovereignty. Three wars in 70 years were enough for them. Spain and Portugal were fascist dictatorships until the mid-1970s. Greece was in the hands of the military until 1974. All are now solid democracies within the EU. Freedom is not a nationalistic slogan for the next election but a statesmanlike choice in the best interests of society as a whole.

How then should Michael Howard's credo be judged? A gold star for effort, and he can put the pencils out tomorrow. But, let's take his final, sixteenth, statement on the "noble past" of the British people and their "exciting future" and debate with the Conservatives whether that has to be a Liberal future or the crumbling and repressive future of ID cards, CCTV, and the police state, whether run by Howard or Blunkett.



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# NOT A SPORTING CHANCE

Politicians are placing a huge weight of expectation on sport, which it cannot sustain, argues Simon Titley

“Do you like sport?” asked the Monty Python ‘nudge nudge’ character. If you were similarly nudged, the chances are you would say “no”. One of the great myths of our age is that everyone likes sport, when perhaps only a third of British people do.

If you are male, you are subjected to huge social pressure to like sport. The relentless media propaganda and peer group pressure make it difficult to admit you’re not interested. But if you want the truth, simply look at the statistics.

When the English rugby team won the World Cup final last year, the UK’s live TV audience reached an estimated 10 million. That’s only about one in six of the population, for the alleged sporting event of the decade.

At most, about half of all British men and about a quarter of British women show any interest in sport. And this is a very generous definition of the word ‘interest’, since it is an aggregate of all participants and spectators, including blokes in pubs drinking in front of the ‘big screen’. Last September, Sport England conducted a survey of schoolchildren to assess their interest in sport. It concluded that 38% disliked sport, only 25% were enthusiastic ‘sporty types’, while the remaining 37%, though not averse to sport, were not that interested.

The most popular sport in Britain is supposed to be soccer. Next weekend, take a look at the football results in your Sunday newspaper and the attendance figures for each game. While a handful of premiership teams attract capacity crowds, the vast majority of clubs have just a few thousand people rattling around in their stadiums. Most British professional football clubs are not viable enterprises, but are kept afloat through the indulgence of rich local businessmen.

Sport is a minority pastime - and active participants an even smaller minority. Yet sport is supposed to be our saviour. It is being promoted on two fronts. First, as a means of making the nation healthier. Second, as a means of restoring national pride. Both projects are doomed to failure.

“Blair tells flabby UK to get fit,” screamed the front-page headline in the Observer on 12 October last year. The article continued: “Tony Blair has admitted privately that Labour’s efforts to raise the number of people taking up sport have failed.” Is there any wonder?

Hasn’t the Blair government invented enough targets, without telling private citizens how to lead their lives? Obesity is now emerging as a major health concern, but sport is not the answer, since the majority of overweight people haven’t the slightest interest in sport (not unless you count darts).

Realising this, the government has planned a £1 million publicity campaign for this year, to persuade us to do more gardening, walking and even housework. It won’t make the slightest difference, because it doesn’t tackle the real issues. The government won’t recognise or address the fundamental economic and lifestyle changes that have made people less fit.

Meanwhile, as part of its uncharacteristically Soviet-style campaign, the Observer is “demanding” that all schoolchildren have at least two hours of school sport each week. Just what exactly is that supposed to achieve? I recall having two hours of sport each week when I was at school. I can tell the Observer and Tony Blair exactly what happened. The ‘sporty types’ played team sports (and had the full attention of the teachers), while the rest of us did everything we could to skive off. Trying to force kids with no interest or aptitude in sport to participate will not make them any fitter and will do nothing to improve their fitness in later life.

Still, there are a lot of children who do enjoy sport and get a lot out of it. What is the government doing for them?

We can judge the hypocrisy of Labour by its attitude to the sell-off of school playing fields. In the ten years before Labour’s 1997 election victory, an estimated 5,000 playing fields had disappeared. Labour’s 1997 manifesto pledged: “We will bring the government policy of forcing schools to sell off playing fields to an end.”

By 1999, the Labour government boasted that it had “already put a virtual halt to the sell-off of playing-fields,” forced local education authorities to think twice before proposing such plans and saved countless green spaces.

The truth is somewhat different. The National Playing Fields Association estimates that, between October 1998 (when the education secretary took direct control of the disposal of school fields) and June 2003, some 2,000 playing fields had disappeared and that 15% of all remaining fields were under threat. These figures are probably an underestimate, since they do not include fields developed for school buildings.

There remains no statutory protection for playing fields. Despite having a power of veto over local authorities, the government approves approximately 97% of all sell-off applications. In 2002, the number of applications rose by 40%, and the proportion of applications where Sport England decided not to object rose from 75% to 85%.

The government is doing nothing because it knows the political reality. Hard pressed schools and education authorities need the cash, and the sale of playing fields helps to offset demands to spend more on education.

Sport and PE lessons are disappearing from the school timetable, and break times are being shortened, because of unrelenting government pressure to provide more time for the national curriculum and the battery of tests.

Meanwhile, the government is window dressing by focusing on the development of elite sports. At the apex of the government's strategy is a bid to bring the Olympic games to London in 2012. The bid is likely to fail, partly because of the debacle of the World Athletics Championships (won and then lost by London), partly as a punishment for British foreign policy, but mainly because London's transport infrastructure is inadequate. CrossRail can't be built in time, so at the core of London's bid appears to be a promise to lay on some extra buses on the number 30 to Hackney Wick.

The government is also making much of its other investments in elite sports, a strategy modelled on the successful policies adopted in Australia. This is fine for the narrow stratum of athletes who compete at this level, and also brings greater national success in international tournaments. But it will not trickle down to the mass of the population who take no interest in sport, and will do nothing to make the nation fitter.

The need to win international tournaments brings us to the second of the great expectations made of sport, that it can somehow restore a sense of national pride and identity. This is expecting far too much. A big win, like England's rugby victory last year, delivers nothing more than an adrenalin rush. We're really talking about an English rather than a British problem here, since English identity is ill defined and has only become an issue in response to Scottish and Welsh nationalism.

The turning point came during the 1996 European Cup, hosted by England, when the song 'Three Lions' hit the charts (remember "football's coming home"?). For the first time, large numbers of people in England were waving English flags as opposed to the Union Jack.

Politicians and pundits assumed that this would cement some sense of English identity. But, at best, major sporting victories can supply only a sporadic sense of national euphoria. And even then, most of the population won't be watching.

English national identity is in a state of flux. It isn't yet clear, for example, how the process of devolution will play out, how attitudes towards Europe will develop or how economic and technological change will alter people's sense of identity. These are profound questions, and it is facile to assume that sport can provide an answer.

Labour is expecting big things of sport and is placing it at the centre of its target-driven approach to government. But what emerges is a fear of addressing the real issues.

Ask yourself why people are more overweight and less fit. Is it because they're not playing enough sport? The reality is that human beings have evolved as a species over millennia, whereas the profound social and economic changes, which have created more sedentary lifestyles, have occurred in only a few decades.

Until about 50 years ago, the majority of men worked in manual occupations and the majority of women worked as housewives (without the benefit of labour-saving devices). Most people did not have cars and often had to walk or cycle. They did not have the spare money to spend on fattening foods. Yet, despite the physical exercise, they were even less fit than we are today. They had a lower life expectancy. They had less protection against cold and damp weather, industrial accidents or contagious disease. Their diets were poor, due to a lack of essential nutrients rather than a surplus of food. So let's not look at the past through rose-tinted spectacles.

There's a limit to what governments can achieve but, if you really wanted to tackle the issue of obesity, what might you do? For a start, you could stop selling off school playing fields - but then you'd have to find several hundred extra million pounds to make up for the shortfall in the education budget. You could try banning the 'school run' and force children to walk or cycle to school - but that would alienate Daily Mail-reading mums who insist on taking their kids to school in their four-wheel drives. You could make it safer for children to walk or cycle by lowering speed limits on residential roads - but then Jeremy Clarkson would lampoon you on 'Top Gear' and in the 'Sun'. You could end the nonsense of 'choice' in school canteens and supply nutritionally balanced meals - and get rid of the soft drink vending machines in schools - but then you'd alienate the manufacturers of processed foods.

That's the problem. Labour is afraid to confront the powerful vested interests who benefit from excessive car use and junk food. Instead, it prefers to engage in publicity stunts and petty 'nanny state' initiatives.

In a liberal society, when it comes to questions of individual lifestyles, the role of government is to inform choice, not to make choices for people. Government's role is to facilitate, not prescribe. It is to supply adults with unbiased and reliable information - and let them make their choices and live with the consequences. But where are the targets in that?

# PUT IT IN A PAMPHLET

## Kiron Reid celebrates the return of the political, with three recent examples of Liberal thinking

This isn't a review but a celebration. When Bill le Breton and I started the 'Passports to Liberty' pamphlet series in 1997, one reason we did so was because of the dearth of Liberal publishing.

We remembered the old days when pamphleteers like Michael Meadowcroft published important contributions to the political debate. By 1997, the only regular Liberal publication of political writing in Britain (as opposed to news) was *Liberator* itself.

Six years on it is good to see that political pamphlets are back on the scene and covering a wide range of interesting topics. *Liberator* remains the only regular magazine of Liberal thinking, although a number of organisations or groups join in with their publications (including 'New Radical' and 'Liberal Future' publications).

Bill and I are quietly pleased that five 'Passports to Liberty' pamphlets have been published under the *Liberator* imprint. *Politicos*, mainly due to the sterling work of Duncan Brack, Tony Little, Mark Pack and others in the Liberal History Group, has played a key role in ensuring that more books of interest to Liberals and Liberal Democrats being published.

All this activity contributes to the rebirth of Liberal England (not the first writer I am sure to take on that theme) that David Walter writes about. As he says, circumstances may be more favourable to the Liberal Democrats electorally than ever before and in part the renewed intellectual vigour in the party and around Liberal politics in general is evidenced by the revival of the political pamphlet.

No longer are a small band alone in holding the field, as in the mid-1990s. Those who did, such as Conrad Russell, the John Stuart Mill Institute, Richard Kemp, Tim Beaumont (although no longer with one of the Liberal parties), and occasionally the youth and student wing, have now been joined by others.

So, the three actual pamphlets. In the first Liberal Institute pamphlet, 'Political Access Broadcasting', Rob Whewey deals with a topic of perennial interest to politicians and participants in politics "How to engage the electorate?"

Rob argues that the outdated party political broadcasts should be abolished and replaced with a system of political access broadcasting at both local and national level that would give all candidates a right to take part in broadcasting with the media to put their messages across.

He argues that this would invigorate the political process locally, on the one hand as candidates could get a chance to have their say, but on the other hand journalists would be involved in production and therefore ideas

would be tested by the involvement of the public.

Nationally, too, the replacement of the PPB adverts with meaningful debate between candidates could remove some of the cynicism (much undoubtedly media generated, much deserved) about spin. Rob (recently elected to Wyre Forest Council) has since published 'Human Therefore Political - the basis of human civilisation is agreement-making' for the Liberal Institute, which is a more mainstream political work and may appeal to a wider range of interests. The Liberal Institute is a think tank associated with the 'continuing' Liberal Party.

'Putting the Local Back In Government' is excellent as we see ALDC returning to a role that was influential in the 1970s and 1980s, when it encouraged ideas and policy debate, as well as the campaigning so brilliantly explained by exponents like Tony Greaves.

It has done this ad hoc (the Liberal Democrat LGA group do as well) but 'Putting the Local Back In Government' is particularly important because it is an input into the modernisation debate, of great concern to many Liberal Democrat activists, and at the same time reminds us of the context in which that debate is played out, of the historical context, the battles and the successes that Liberals have fought and won (and lost) in the past.

It brings together thinkers like Alex Wilcock, strategists like Hywel and Bill themselves, and those really at the hard edge like Richard Burt or Alan Thompson, fighting the Labour machine in Dudley and Wansbeck respectively, or Moira Toye in Broadland against Conservatives.

Each knows exactly what they want to do and why more power needs to be returned to local government. Bill and Hywel make the case for real devolution to area committees (of which I remain sceptical though the arguments are compelling) while Stewart Rayment reminds us of the good work done in Tower Hamlets. Stewart also explains how some of the problems they had to deal with in the 1980s would have been resolved today. That article reminds us that, while some criticism of the Liberal Democrat administration in the borough was justified, a huge amount of pioneering good Liberal work was done.

John Strak's account of the fight for access to information will be familiar to those who fought the battles as opposition on Tory and Labour councils. This pamphlet overall is a readable and useful (with short essays) contribution to the debate on modernisation.

Tony Blair does deserve credit for shaking up local authorities when many were moribund, and for directly

contributing by his own pamphlet to the reform of local government. This writer sees many good points about Labour's modernisation, including abolition of the old committee system. Some authorities, like Liverpool, have been able to shape the reform in a way influenced by our Liberal political beliefs, but we all realise that a complete change in central Government policy is necessary to do a lot more. We should be ready with our ideas for when that happens.

The obsession with targets is very familiar in local government and is a theme that is very apparent in control of the police as well. All of us will have examples of the police lacking efficiency and of not using their resources correctly (I was told on a Sunday afternoon that no officer could pick up a medical bag found after a robbery, could I drop it into a police station the next day).

All have stories of police management pursuing their own political agenda. All of us, though, have many examples of police overstretched, not able to cope with demand from the public (reasonable or unreasonable) and of spending a huge amount of their time chasing targets because the Government makes police forces and police authorities jump through hoops. Some police authority members love all this detail – I hated it, as it rarely got to the core dual work of delivering effective policing and holding the police actually to account on behalf of the public.

'Drawing the Boundaries: Prisoners of Profit?' is extremely helpful for two reasons. Firstly it is written by a former chief superintendent in the Metropolitan Police, so this is someone with the authority to talk about the police experience.

Secondly, at more than 60 pages, it is a detailed and well argued analysis yet readable and gives plenty of useful information for those interested in this area (which presumably is any MP or councillor whose casework is probably dominated by police issues, and anyone active in a community). David Boyle made some of these arguments in the sections about targets and criminal justice in his amusing but actually serious 'The Tyranny of Numbers'.

There is persuasive evidence that some central Government intervention has been a success – the street crime initiative for example. However, priorities for local areas should be decided locally and it is true that the

increase in funding ring fenced by the Home Secretary for particular projects has tied the hands of local police chiefs, where there would probably be consensus now between the chief constables and police authorities on where that money should be spent.

There cannot be a bottomless amount of money for any organisation and Government encouragement of efficiency in the police, as in local government, is welcome.

Having police jumping through hoops is not the answer, however. Alan Moss raises some hard issues about public sector and private business cooperation. The Centre for Reform concentrates on practical policy publications (probably a reason they some years ago rejected an idea for a Liberal philosophy based book edited by Bill and myself – though the fact it wouldn't have sold would also have been a good reason). This is another welcome addition to the literature.

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Political Access Broadcasting, by Rob Wheway. Liberal Institute, 2002. Available for £3.50 (payable to R. Wheway) from 87 Allesley Old Rd, Coventry, CV5 8DB

Putting the Local Back In Government: A collection of essays setting out a Liberal Democrat vision for local government (edited by Bill le Breton and Hywel Morgan). ALDC. Available from ALDC, the Birchcliffe Centre, Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire HX7 8DG. £5.

Drawing the Boundaries. Prisoners of Profit? Do financial considerations drive investment decisions too far in the Police Service? By Alan Moss (Centre for Reform, 2002). Available from Centre for Reform, Dean Bradley House, 52 Horseferry Road, London SW1P 2AF. £8

Passports to Liberty No. 5, 'Defending Families' by Jonathan Calder and 'Liberals and the Global Economy' by Bernard Salmon, £3.50 to Liberator Publications from Kiron Reid, 48 Abbeygate Apartments, Wavertree Gardens, High Street, Liverpool L15 8HB or email [kiron.reid1@orange.net](mailto:kiron.reid1@orange.net)

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# 'DOCTOR WHO' MADE ME A LIBERAL

## It wasn't a Focus, but a Tardis for Alex Wilcock, vice-chair of the Liberal Democrat Federal Policy Committee

When a set of Doctor Who-related questions came in during the 2001 general election, I was given the role of answering them (making the Lib Dems the only major party to do so). This started me thinking.

Last year saw an important anniversary for a great British institution. It has inspired countless young people to stand up against conformity, bigotry and oppression. It has fostered individual liberty, internationalism and human creativity.

But as well as being the centenary of the Young Liberals, it was also the fortieth anniversary of Doctor Who.

When Liberal Democrats talk about our political philosophy - too rare in any case - it's often in either dry, philosophical terms or in soundbites tailored for a headline or a Focus.

That is not how many people outside a political party see their beliefs, though. If they think about them, they're most likely to express them in terms of their religion, or in examples of how they affect people or things that are important to them; probably not a coherent philosophy, but rather referring to moral codes and ideas from which they've borrowed bits that appeal to them. So, perhaps the best way to get your beliefs listened to is by relating them to the way they arise out of things your audience cares about.

I'm not going to do that here. No, this is a roundabout way to justify saying Doctor Who is A Good Thing, and a Liberal one at that.

Though maybe with less of a defining impact on my moral code, than my parents or my Christian upbringing, Doctor Who probably did more than anything else to inspire my political interests. It fostered a free spirit, encouraged me to start reading, instilled a passionate internationalism, made me think about ecology, and give me a lasting hatred of prejudice; green scaly rubber people are people too. And, of course, it made me want to change the world, and believe that an individual can make a difference in achieving it.

I can't claim that everything about Doctor Who has a Liberal message - it would probably be very dull if it did. Some series are written for a particular point, or all by one guiding genius.

The new series, when it comes, will be under the guiding hand of the excellent Russell T Davies, creator of *Dark Season*, *The Second Coming* and *Queer As Folk*, but, much as I admire his work, I hope he'll not be tempted to write every one himself; the first claim for Doctor Who's Liberalism is its variety. No other political philosophy could point at the fact that something is all over the place and cry, "Look! That proves it's one of ours!"

Although Dr Who had two periods when it 'got a bit of politics', the early 1970s on TV, and the early 1990s in Virgin's excellent 'New Adventures' novels, it wasn't even consistent within those times, and certainly not between them. Today, you can find a new animated story on the BBC website, 'Scream of the Shalka', which features the Doctor making disparaging remarks about finding weapons of mass destruction.

In more than 150 TV stories and 200 original novels, let alone other media, it's possible to find support for pretty much any point of view - yes, it's even worse than Lib Dem policy papers. I'd be interested to read an alternative political case for Doctor Who, but this is how I find the series.

One of the few themes that is absolutely consistent, and born of its time, is a deep-rooted anti-fascism, yet this can seem a little at odds with its equally strong predilection for scary monsters whose nastiness is evident from their appearance. While the series often preaches against violence, it often has trouble squaring the circle with being for or against the military, and some cite the Daleks or the Dominators as attacks on pacifism, while the DVD commentary for the macho Resurrection of the Daleks has Peter Davison gleefully report a higher body-count than Terminator. Remembrance of the Daleks becomes perhaps the most controversial story for mixing up-front anti-racism with the Doctor making a Dubya-like strike to genocide the Daleks themselves (a mixed moral message on which even the author later changes his mind in his novel *The Also People*).

The series is frequently revolutionary, but monarchies are usually a fairy-tale good thing. Religion is usually dubious, but while a scientific approach is praised, scientists themselves are usually madmen who want to rule or destroy the world. Many of the stories that concern 'political systems' of any sort are hostile satires: *Tragedy Day* lays into Kilroy and *Children in Need*; *The Happiness Patrol* is a blatant attack on Thatcherism, but is just as harsh on state as on private control. However, where socialist and conservative fans see contradictions, Liberals can recognise that distrust of the controlling state and bureaucracy is hardly incompatible with often making big business, too, a villain, as in *The Caves of Androzani* - though perhaps we wouldn't go so far as *Vengeance On Varos*, which thinks neither governments, corporations nor the people can be trusted.

With so many stories, by so many authors, to claim one viewpoint seems a bit silly, yet there is a very Liberal and very British dislike of the big battalions that's rarely contradicted. The ingrained repulsion from fascism in which the series was born means that almost any Who

story believes conquest and control is a bad thing, whether of a planet or of the mind.

The first political pamphlet I wrote ('The Human Factor', in Kiron Reid's 'Riot and Responsibility') took its inspiration and several quotes from arguably the ultimate Who story, and one of the most unambiguously Liberal: 1967's 'The Evil of the Daleks'. The climax features the Doctor and the Daleks each attempting to instil in the other 'the Human Factor' or 'The Dalek Factor'. The definition of what makes humans human is tellingly Liberal: it starts with being a bit silly, and graduates to asking awkward questions.

Freedom of thought and expression is something Dalek society cannot stand; as the Doctor tells the Dalek Emperor, "Somewhere in the Dalek race there are three Daleks with the Human Factor. Gradually, they will come to question. They will persuade other Daleks to question. You will have a rebellion on your planet!"

This comes to pass, with furious Dalek commanders exterminating their underlings merely for the unheard-of intellectual rebellion of asking "Why", which on its own is enough to undermine everything Daleks stand for. In contrast, the Doctor defines the core of 'the Dalek Factor' as to obey, even before to exterminate. While from the first and in many subsequent stories the Daleks have been metaphors for the Nazis, only here are they broadened to encompass all enemies of free thought who simply do as they're told.

This message is perhaps the most explicit statement of the anti-establishment ethos that its original producer, Verity Lambert saw as the core of its appeal to children and a particular kind of adult. It was Sydney Newman and his original creative team that made the Doctor inescapably Liberal from the start - a curious traveller in time and space, unbound by rules and by instinct dismissive of authority, able to say that "Bad laws are made to be broken" and change things to get rid of them.

It's from casting the Doctor as an individual and not an enforcer that the consistent Liberal feel of Doctor Who comes, whatever the views propounded in any one story. Unlike, say, Star Trek, this series is not about an organised group but about a person, with a wariness of the military and a deep-rooted mistrust of everyone in authority. A hero that isn't a cop or a soldier or a secret agent or motivated by money, who is individualist rather than collectivist but looks out for the little people, is a Liberal hero, on just the right side of anarchism.

The Doctor is not a pacifist but, while caught in violent situations, he's not a man of violence - he tries to find other ways to resolve them.

That's why I loved the Doctor as a child and found my political ideals inspired by him as an adult. The Doctor always struck me as a good Liberal who travels around the place doing what he likes, but never harming others unless it's to stop them harming people, fighting injustice rather than fighting as a job. And he has fun. So, liberty, eccentricity, kindness, standing up for the underdog, not po-faced about it and sceptical of politicians - sounds like lots of the Liberals I know already.

As I started watching Doctor Who, aged three, in 1975, I got the books to keep up my 'fix'. That meant I had to learn to read much earlier than I would have done otherwise - 'proper' books at age five - and feeding the instinct for thinking and finding things out is a consistent theme of the series, too.

If the message of the series is a Liberal one of 'think for yourself', the messages of more than a few of the Jon

Pertwee stories are only a step away from cheerleading for particular Liberal issues.

The Third Doctor was exiled to Earth and, unusually, worked with the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce - a Liberal internationalist idea, if ever I heard one, and not too far from an idea you'll find in the 2001 Lib Dem Manifesto (at the same time as something that suspiciously resembles International Rescue. Go on, look it up).

Even his rarer time and space travels were 'our' sort of propaganda - 'The Curse of Peladon' was about a hidebound planet with a monarchy whose ruler wanted to join the Galactic Federation, but was threatened by conservative isolationist villains. Ecological themes pop up in a great many stories, including Robot, the first I ever saw, but the most blatant is The Green Death and its villainous, polluting oil multinational that wants to take over the world in a literal 'command economy' that will give freedom from all material hardship - at the cost of "Freedom from freedom".

Set a vague few years in the future, this 1973 show had a Prime Minister referred to as 'Jeremy' just as Jeremy Thorpe's Liberal Party was rising in the opinion polls (even more outrageous than a novel in which Asquith turns out to be one of the Doctor's mates).

The single most influential book I read was called 'Doctor Who and the Cave Monsters', a somewhat luridly titled novelisation of the TV story Doctor Who and the Silurians. I didn't actually see it until the not terribly impressionable age of 21, at 5am crashing on someone's floor during the Christchurch by-election. Ironically, this story had already long been a life-changing experience for me and, without having read the book, who knows? Perhaps I wouldn't have been there at all.

The story concerns some super-evolved reptile people being accidentally woken from the hibernation they entered to escape the destruction of the dinosaurs. Naturally, they have a prior claim and want their world back. Some of the reptile people are good, some bad; some of the humans are good, some bad. The situation escalates to near war, and the humans end up worse - killing all the reptile people.

I suspect this story buried within me a belief that working 'inside the system' can sometimes be the right thing to do. I read that when I was five or six, and while 'nasty monsters invading' never made me worried about 'foreigners', two sets of really very similar-acting people who had the same rights to live peacefully, one group different people to those I was used to, had a lasting effect on me. So, that's the point at which I became a Liberal.

Of course, even if you're not remotely interested in the many leases of life and Liberalism of a 40-year-old television programme, you could always try to work out what your own political inspirations were. We all get jaded from time to time, and it never hurts to remind ourselves why we got into all this business in the first place - or just pay attention when things spring up to remind you.

And it might help you to connect better with how other people form their ideas - not everyone's way of life has come out of things that are Terribly Important, and when we all sound terribly self-important, a lot of people switch off.

Besides, in its heyday, Doctor Who regularly had 12 million people supporting it, and we could do with a bit of that.

# SORTING OUT THE SHAMBLES

The Irish presidency stands a chance of pulling the European Union out of the mire over its constitution. Liberal Democrats should support this publicly, says MEP Andrew Duff

The drafting of the Lib Dem manifesto for the European Parliament elections is underway. Texts are shuttling back and forth between the Federal Policy Committee and the two parliamentary parties at Westminster and Brussels. Predictably, there is trouble. MEPs, 10 out of 11 of whom are standing again, are insisting on the right to explain and defend their own, largely creditable, record. There is the systemic difficulty that the MEPs, who enjoy a proportional representation regime, are inclined to campaign positively for what they believe in, while MPs, who suffer the first past the post system, prefer to offend as few people as possible.

The tensions are most exposed when it comes to the new constitution, drafted by the European Convention and now thrown into doubt by the shambles of the Intergovernmental Conference.

The House of Commons as a whole seems to share Jack Straw's relief that the constitution is in jeopardy. MPs in general will be compliant if the government manages to put the Convention's draft into the refrigerator for some months only in order to declare its obsolescence during the UK presidency of the Council, which comes in the second half of 2005.

Unfortunately, too few Liberal Democrat MPs are ready to contest the government's plot. They have lost the European vocation that the party once had, that defining vocation which drove Roy Jenkins to break with Harold Wilson's Labour party and which led Paddy Ashdown to salvage the Treaty of Maastricht from Neil Kinnock's Labour party. This is a pity, particularly for this year's re-election prospects of MEPs, striving to recruit pro-European support.

Meanwhile, in the rest of Europe, events are moving on. The EU is emerging from the constitutional crisis into which it sank under the presidency of Silvio Berlusconi. When the new president of the Council, Bertie Ahern addressed the European Parliament in early January he was bullish about trying to get a settlement on the constitution. He left MEPs with the clear impression that if a deal can be done, the Irish presidency will do it. The IGC has been reconvened, if only informally, at ministerial level. The technical and legal work on the Convention's draft continues. Numerous political soundings are taking place, mostly under cover.

The legacy of the outgoing Italian presidency is meagre. Mr Berlusconi's claim that the IGC had reached informal agreement on 82 items turns out to be rubbish. Poor Mr Blair's announcement that he had 'banked' his notorious 'red lines' seems equally flawed. There remains much

negotiation to be done on the Convention's text before each and every head of government will be able to claim a famous victory for the national interest.

Mr Ahern has asked for help in brokering the deal. All member states must move, he says, if the outstanding problematic issues are to be resolved. The Polish, and to a lesser degree, the Spanish are being difficult over voting clout. The UK continues to be difficult over voting at all, and particularly over foreign policy.

The Italians, boldly, proposed that there should be qualified majority voting (QMV) in the Council when the new foreign minister makes a proposal. As he or she will be acting under the mandate of the Council in any case, which itself will conform to the strategy laid down by the heads of government in the European Council, this seems common sense.

UK politicians go apoplectic here but, if Mr Blair is genuine about wanting a common foreign policy, he should stand up to the Foreign Office and drop this red line. Otherwise there will continue to be very little or no common foreign and security policy.

The Convention wants qualified majority voting on social security for mobile workers. At the insistence of the UK, the Italians emasculated this provision by inserting an emergency brake clause allowing any one government to refer the matter to the European Council where fundamental principles of national social security systems are concerned.

Effectively, this puts a stop to the normal legislative procedure. The solution would be to return to the formulation presented to the conclave of foreign ministers in Naples in November: referral to the European Council without suspension of co-decision and with time limits to force it to act, preferably by QMV. If Mr Blair is genuine about wanting a more mobile workforce in Europe, he should stand up to the Treasury and drop this dreary red line.

The Brits are on the rampage again about QMV in fiscal policy. The Convention proposed to permit the Council, acting unanimously, to choose to use QMV in the administration of tax policy and to combat tax fraud and evasion. EU harmonisation of indirect taxation is constrained to removing obstacles to the smooth operation of the single market. At UK insistence, the Italians included the bizarre qualification that EU tax measures should not affect national tax regimes. For the sake of clarity, transparency and common sense, that rider should be dropped.



In the field of research and development, the Convention proposes ordinary EU law for the research and development framework programme, implemented by Council regulation. The Italians reverted to the atypical Council law, which is a step backwards, especially for the Parliament, which would be deprived of its legislative rights in this key area. Best to stick to the Convention.

Worst of all, perhaps, is UK opposition to judicial cooperation in criminal matters, including reaching common definitions of crimes and penalties. The Italian presidency installed an 'emergency brake' clause which would allow any minister to refer an item to the European Council on the mere invocation of conflict with the fundamental principles of his or her national judicial system.

This will prove to be an irresistible temptation for those, like the UK, which essentially opposes integration in this area. By putting a stop to co-decision, the legislative rights of the Parliament will be infringed, and the Convention's decision to suppress the Maastricht third pillar will be effectively undermined. In place of the Italian proposals, and in order to prevent complete inactivity, the IGC should insert a deadline within which the European Council had to act. The better solution would be to return to the Naples formulation (referral to European Council without suspension of co-decision and with time limits). Best of all would be to get the European Council to act by QMV. If Mr Blair wishes to respond to public opinion, which demands greater protection from crime, he should face up to the Home Office and jettison these red lines.

In a move that actually enlarges the consensus achieved by the Convention, the Italians sensibly proposed that the competence of the new European Public Prosecutor should be limited to the financial interest of the Union. And they inserted a 'passerelle' or bridging provision to enable the European Council, acting unanimously, to enlarge the Prosecutor's competence in future. However, the new proposal also requires use of the passerelle to be ratified in all member states by national parliaments or referenda. Such a requirement negates the flexibility gained by the passerelle and should be removed. The obligations of heads of government to their own national parliaments are properly a matter for each member state, and not the European Constitution.

If Mr Blair wants to placate the House of Commons he can easily subject himself to much stronger scrutiny both before and after he attends meetings of the European Council (as is the practice, for example, in Finland). But the insistence on formal national ratification in 25 countries for each and every amendment of the EU's Constitution promises certain paralysis, and undermines the European Council.

A general passerelle clause gives the European Council, acting unanimously, the power to shift any abnormal decision-making procedure towards the norm, which is QMV in the Council plus co-decision with the Parliament. This is a key article which gives the constitution an essential evolutive nature and enables future progress towards a more efficient and democratic union.

The Italians improved on the Convention's draft in one respect, by granting the Parliament the right of consent (and not merely consultation) over the use of this clause. However, they also inserted a nihil obstat provision for national parliaments, which rather negates the purpose of the flexibility provision. If decisions of the European

Council can be blocked by one national parliament, the leadership of the Union will find itself very frustrated.

The IGC would be wise to shorten the period in which national parliaments need to react from six months to six weeks. Another, even better option would be to increase the objection threshold of national parliaments to one third. Again, the relationship of each member of the European Council to their own national parliaments is a matter for the domestic rather than European constitution.

The UK also harbours doubts over the Convention's proposals for the reform of the financial and budgetary system of the union. In particular, it insists on unanimity for the decision on the reform of the own resources system in order to protect Mrs Thatcher's rebate. How it will argue this when some of the much poorer new member states will actually be contributing directly to the Treasury coffers is not at all clear - even to the Foreign Office. Best of British luck to them.

The Irish prime minister does well to remind his colleagues in the IGC that the Convention's text represents an inter-connected series of subtle and fairly complex compromises. The draft Constitution is a rich package deal commanding already a large consensus. That is why it should be accepted as the basis for agreement at the IGC and why Mr Ahern is right to warn member states not to raise new objections now.

The IGC will succeed quickly if it restricts itself to enlarging where possible the Convention's consensus and to making some necessary clarifications. All member states, and none more so than the UK, must be prepared to move on certain issues.

Liberal Democrats should be saying so loud and clear. If the UK moves, the Irish government has as good a chance as any of giving Europe the leadership it so desperately needs but has hardly earned the right to expect.

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Andrew Duff MEP led the Liberals in the Convention.

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# BLUNKETT'S POINTLESS CRACKDOWN

Government measures to control asylum seeker numbers are probably counter productive and ignore the need to tackle the issue at root, says Portsmouth University researcher Siamak Goudarzi

Asylum seekers have rights and needs like all other human beings but these rights are of an urgent nature. They are defined, accepted and legislated upon the international community. The most important piece of international legislation is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948.

According to Article 1 "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". Article 13 gives the right of freedom of movement to "everyone". Article 14 also states that: "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution".

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines an asylum seeker, sets the required measures for protection and calls the signatory countries to legislate domestically for the implementation of this convention. European countries are all signatories of the convention. They have also commitment to their own Human Rights Act that can be applicable to everyone in their territories including asylum seekers.

It follows therefore that, in order to implement the international legislation and put it into practice, signatory countries have to pass their own domestic legislation. At this point, countries begin to interpret the international articles and read them in a way that protects their public interest.

Because of conflicts in the third world, global economy, global movement and consequently the increasing flow of asylum seekers, most European governments are pressing ahead with new measures to deter potential asylum seekers from entering their countries.

There are various reasons that result in people leaving their homelands and crossing borders into Europe. Many asylum seekers have a little choice but to put themselves in the hands of illegal operators.

The UK is implementing its own initiatives in an attempt to end the 'soft touch' era and set itself the task of reducing the number of applications by half.

According to the latest measures, asylum seekers would not get any support if they do not apply immediately when they arrive in the country, they are

not allowed to work any more, they would be dispersed on a no-choice basis, appeal chances are reduced, asylum from the white list countries is assumed not to be genuine and can therefore lead to immediate deportation, and asylum seekers can be detained for an indefinite period of time without trial.

The most deterrent factor for asylum seekers is arguably found in their placement while their application is being processed. The word 'placement' is used simply because they are not always being accommodated while their application is being processed. Depending on the individual circumstances, some asylum seekers are placed in camps or detention centres, some small groups are being held in emergency accommodation in hotels and larger groups are being held in emergency asylum seeker centres. Once they are dispersed, they will usually be given a room in a house sharing with other asylum seekers.

In order to curb the flow of economic migrants to this country, there are other plans to place asylum seekers in temporary shelters in third countries.

The Home Office seeks to create protection areas outside the EU. According to an article in the Observer, a camp in Croatia would hold up to 800 people. It has been built in the village of Trstenik, 30 miles from Zagreb. The £1m centre, funded by the European Commission, would take refugees arriving in Britain from eastern Europe. They would be immediately shipped to the 'transit processing centre', where their applications for asylum in Britain would be assessed.

Longer term, there could be less formal camps in countries like Kenya or Pakistan.

There is perhaps a model for what New Labour has in mind in Australia. Its conservative government captures refugees travelling at sea or when they disembark. Instead of allowing them to make a claim in Australia, they are sent to poor neighbours.

Third world governments would normally be reluctant to take refugees, so Australia has bribed them.

Papua New Guinea and Nauru, the latter an island that phosphate mining reduced to a slag heap in the middle of the Pacific, are paid to act as transit centres.

According to the universal Declaration, everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well being. Some human right experts believe that removing asylum seekers from the European Union before substantive

consideration of their application would breach not internationally recognised human rights and refugee protection standards, and would be a breach of the United Kingdom's obligations under the Refugee Convention.

The major problem with this plan is that asylum seekers would be detained in processing areas for indefinite periods, in cases in Australia this could be up to ten years. This is why the High Court of Australia recently ruled that indefinite mandatory detention was unlawful, delivering a blow to the federal government's policy of detaining asylum seekers.

To make a comparison, in Australia, there are two types of refugees: those who are resettled under official humanitarian programmes (600,000 since 1945) and those who arrive unofficially by boat, seeking protection.

Anyone arriving without visas or passports and claiming refugee status is automatically locked away while their application is investigated. Those attempting to enter by sea are either turned back or sent to offshore refugee centres.

Similarly, the UK government has recently agreed to take part in the resettlement programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Under this scheme, the UNHCR organises the resettlement of refugees who have ended up in places where their life, liberty or health is under threat. Technically, the ultimate aim is to open a route under which refugees most in need of protection can get to Britain without having to use nefarious traffickers. Nevertheless, this scheme can only cover small numbers of people with the need of protection across the world.

This new agreement, to open a legitimate route for some genuine refugees but send away all others, is unlikely to work as deterrent. The reason for this is simple. Asylum seekers fall into three categories: genuine asylum seekers who fulfil the terms of the 1951 Refugee Convention; those who flee from human rights abuse; and economic migrants. Those who genuinely flee their countries to avoid persecution, human rights abuses and death do not generally think and plan for their destination.

For those who come here for economic reasons, this new policy might have a little effect on stopping them from embarking. If the number of asylum applicants has fallen over the last few months, this is not because of deterrent policies, but mainly as a result of border control.

The Home Office published research, which was specifically commissioned to examine what kinds of effects different European asylum policies have had on the number of claims made.

This looked at the relationship between asylum policy and the numbers of asylum seekers in various European countries from 1990 to 2000. The main conclusion is that there is very little cause and effect between a country's asylum policies and the number of asylum seekers coming to that country.

Rather, the major factor determining the number of asylum seekers coming is the political and economic situation in the countries from which they are fleeing. This study shows the effectiveness of tighter border controls, such as visas and carrier sanctions, in reducing asylum claims (by Roger Zetter, David Griffiths, Silva Ferretti and Martyn Pearl).

This means that, although asylum seekers are being kept under the poverty line and being paid only two thirds of average benefit entitlements, if they are dispersed in a 'moral panic' on a no-choice basis and

placed in poor accommodation, this has had a little effect on the numbers.

One could argue that those who come here for a 'better life' can achieve it over time anyway. Many, as soon as they arrive, could go to the police and say that they want to claim asylum, but do not seek protection because they don't need it, but just require support for the time being. Because these people are generally hardworking, talented and motivated, they begin soon to work hard and pay back what they have received as benefit.

By implementing a new strategy of sending asylum seekers to a location outside European Union, the authorities are showing they hope that asylum seekers will realise that, by going to the police, they will not only be denied support but will be sent somewhere where there is no sign of 'better life'.

They simply won't do that. They will still make their way through and, once here, they will disappear. Organized criminals and those who can arrange illegal work will benefit the most. This disappearing process is already in operation and currently about two-thirds of those who are refused asylum in Britain go underground and attempt to remain here.

The plan for transit camps may not solve the 'problem' and reduce the numbers dramatically, but it will probably create a new burden on the police and the criminal justice system for tackling criminals and illegal migrants alike.

Public anxiety will not be appeased if these measures cost more and work less. Moreover, this has worrying implications for social relations in the communities in which recognised refugees eventually settle and risks social unrest in communities in which 'strange faces' are seen rarely.

Instead of investing billions in plans for deterring economic migrants and implementing policies that fuel public prejudice, effective measures should be in operation on: opening legitimate routes for genuine asylum seekers, like the recent UK settlement programme; opening legitimate channels for economic migrants, like work permits and the 'highly skilled' programme; and tackling root causes for originating asylum seekers.

The third solution seems to be more efficient though with longer term affects. This task is not as challenging as it appears to be for rich and influential Western countries.

It is evident that, over the past ten years, more than half of all asylum seekers entering the EU have come from just ten countries - the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkey, Romania, Sri Lanka, Bosnia, Somalia, Iran and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

These countries are linked not by poverty or low life expectancy but by conflict or human rights abuses.

Consequently, in addition to all short-term solutions, steps need to be taken as a priority by addressing the root causes that trigger the flight of millions of people throughout the world and by pursuing longer-term policies designed to prevent conflict and bring about social, economic and political development in the countries from which asylum seekers originate.

## TAXING PROBLEM

*Dear Liberator,*

Both Paul Holmes and Tony Vickers (*Liberator* 292) wrote in time for New Year's resolutions.

At last we seem to have some statistics which we can trust and on which those of us who worry about such things can make informed judgments. It is evident from these figures that, if we are to pay for all the improvements we would like to see made to the infrastructure of civilised life and the services which we expect to receive now in the UK, we need more, not less, taxation.

For, though our proposal to raise the higher rate income tax from 40p to 50p is sensible, it's hardly radical. Moreover, it is used by the Tories in attempting to discredit us as 'the tax-raising party'. So let's be the tax-raising party, but not through income tax.

It seems to me that, even if income tax is the fairest way to reduce inequalities in resource distribution - which I doubt - it's not cool. The Government expects us to work long hours, many of us for poor wages, and produce accounts at our own expense to send in for the Inland Revenue to scrutinise.

# LETTERS

So people take the law into their own hands, do work on the side for cash, or maybe revert to the age-old system of barter. Meanwhile, the fat cats have got hold of all the accountants who left the Revenue and can get out of paying their share by investing overseas in tax havens. Rupert Murdoch seems to pay no tax and has enormous power without responsibility.

What interested me particularly in Paul Holmes' piece most was the throwaway sentence about Lloyd George and the words 'accompanied by a tax on land and an associated constitutional struggle with the Lords'.

Surely, one of the best reasons for getting rid of the inherited basis for a seat in the Lords is that, willy-nilly, these members are not impartial on

matters of taxation, as they have vested interests in the land they own which got them their seat. Parliament got rid of pocket boroughs, but has not divested itself of Lord Cranborne, now Lord Salisbury. Just as the nobility does in most of the countries of this planet, the landed here dictate the law to the landless. (Of course, there are many rich people who do the same by using their lobbying powers.) Even the mighty Murdoch depends on offices in this country built on land which he has no moral right to own. 'Twas God who made the land', we sing at conference.

Once we've got rid of all the inherited element in the Lords, let's have a national land value tax. Don't ask me how, ask Tony Vickers. But it looks as though we also need a tax on land use - integrated with new planning legislation - in line with a comprehensive resource-based taxation system, and a tax on development, which would siphon off some of the unseemly profits made by developers.

*Pamela Sylvester  
Dorset*

## PANEL BEATING

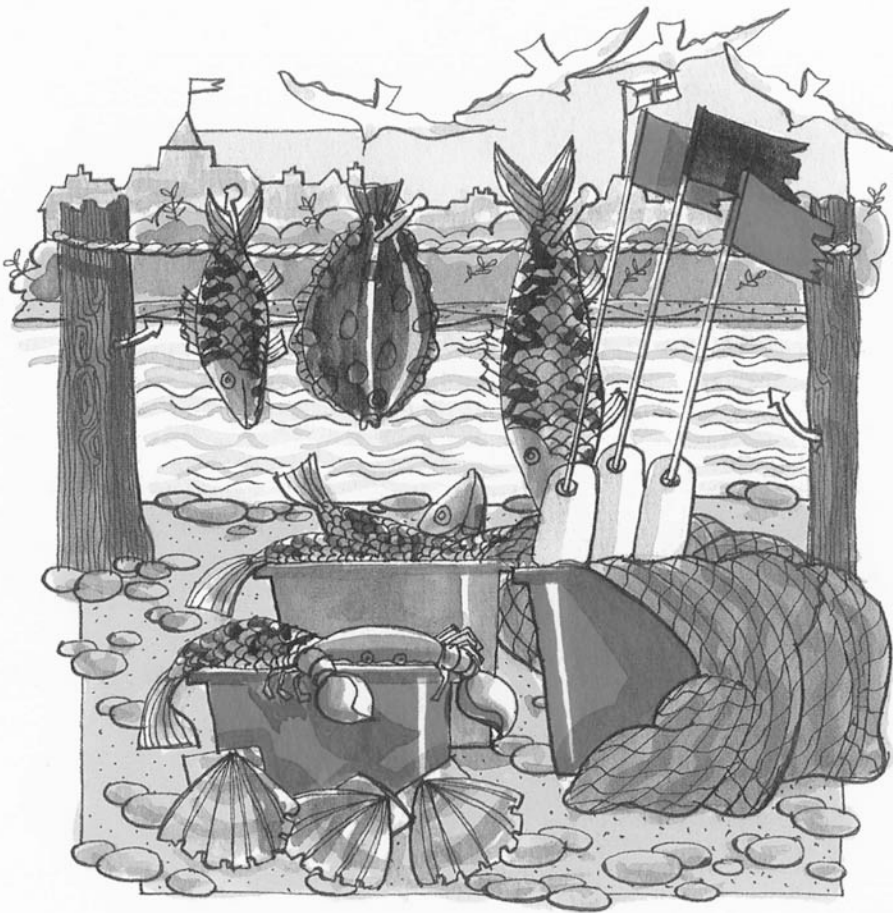
*Dear Liberator,*

How seasonal to include a gobsmacking piece of humbug from Donnachadh MacCarthy in the Christmas letters page (*Liberator* 292).

It is always a shame to let facts get in the way of a good story. However, because I was a member of the chief executive appointment panel, and believe strongly that recruitment processes must always be principled, fair and transparent, I have to correct one error in Donnachadh's version of events.

The recruitment panel was given the task of shortlisting and interviewing applicants for a job. It did so sticking strictly to the agreed person specification and job





description. Having made a clear and unanimous decision the panel promptly disbanded leaving its chair to check references and issue a contract of employment.

The subsequent attempt by members of the Federal Finance and Administration Committee, or anyone else, to delay implementation of the decision was not "overruled by the panel".

As the panel was never asked for its view of the proposal put forward at the FFAC, it is impossible to say what its response would have been.

However, I hope that, since panel members displayed an evident concern for the integrity of the party's employment practice and were mindful of the consequences for everyone involved, I would like to think that panel members would have seen this clumsy challenge after the fact for what it was and treated it accordingly.

**Liz Barker**

*Member of Appointment Panel  
Wimbledon*

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## CHINESE PUZZLE

*Dear Liberator,*

I try not to buy goods made in China because of opposition to that state's appalling human rights record. I know that this is very difficult nowadays as China in the 1990s became the modern Hong Kong or Taiwan.

It means avoiding most very cheap consumer goods. It may also be hypocritical, as my employer, Liverpool University, is extremely keen on recruiting Chinese students, and our city council values Chinese links, having the oldest Chinese community in Europe.

However, I try. It is most difficult, though, as products do not clearly display the country of origin. I always check but cannot always tell. On recent shopping trips to Matalan, Taskers DIY, B&Q etc I walked away for this reason.

I bought a BT phone made in China after trying three different shops and four different brands without an alternative. I have read in

the past that the EU bans compulsory labelling of country of origin as this is seen as a trade restriction. This sounds to me like a classic Euro-myth but can anyone confirm or deny?

Either way, Liberal Democrats in Westminster and in Brussels should campaign for labelling of national origin to enable consumers to make ethical choices. We should also support the EU publicising countries' human rights records so consumers know what they are buying into.

**Kiron Reid**  
*Liverpool*

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## TONGS OUT FOR KENNEDY

*Dear Liberator*

I fully support the remarks of Jenny Tonge and am appalled at Charles Kennedy's behaviour. Her comments were balanced and thoughtful and, once again, he has given in to fear of media comment. I am writing to him to let him know. She should not have to resign from the front bench. He should.

I have written to Kennedy along these lines. While I am typing this, the first question on 'Any Questions' on Radio 4 is on this subject and asks whether Jenny's dismissal from the front bench was a cynical political reaction or a matter of principle. Given that Kennedy's reaction changed as the day wore on, and given his record of pusillanimity over Iraq, people will come to believe the first interpretation. Kennedy is now a liability to the party as it faces a stronger Tory leader. He should go.

**David Grace**  
*Chard*

**30 Days: A Month at the Heart of Blair's War**  
**by Peter Stothard**  
**Harper Collins 2003**  
**£8.99**

# REVIEWS

Camelot gone sour? Jaded? Worn down? On the defensive and fed up with the outside world?

Perhaps this is how John Kennedy's administration might have looked had he avoided his trip to Dallas. But it is not a portrait of a Washington that might have been in the late 1960s; instead it is the image of our Prime Minister and the people around him in early 2003.

Just before the British-American invasion of Iraq, former editor of the Times, Peter Stothard, was given access to our Dear Leader's inner circle. The idea was to chart the daily life of Mr T Blair in the run-up to his fiftieth birthday for the Times Magazine. Coincidentally, it came at just the time when he was at his most vulnerable: when not being battered by his own side in the House of Commons, he was being jeered and slow handclapped by women on national television.

For 30 days Stothard followed his subject. From the barely veiled war summits in the Azores and Camp David to operations in his 'den' in Downing Street and bottles of wine which simply must get signed in his Parliamentary office, we not only get an insight into the mind of Mr Blair, but the antics of those around him.

And I can tell you, it is not a pleasant sight.

We see an angst-ridden Clare Short, wringing her hands as she squares her decision to stay with her family's opposition to war. Robin Cook bobs up and down, rather like his animal namesake. Prescott barks and Straw behaves as the poodle's poodle he is: "And I got in three sycophantic references to the prime minister, one to Gordon Brown and none to the international development secretary."

Geoff Hoon, the defence secretary, appears side-by-side with Sir Michael Boyce, chief of the defence staff, at morning meetings. The pair comes across as Tweedledum and Tweedledee, always at each other's side. Ian McCartney does a good impersonation of Mini-Me, while standing over the dead bodies lying outside the Cabinet room, John Reid smacks his lips at his future career prospects.

But the politicians take second place to the main action. As the

sheen comes off the bright, new, shiny New Labour PM we all thought we were getting in 1997, Stothard presents the backroom boys and girls hard at work on his behalf.

Sally Morgan, the plain-speaking political fixer, twists arms on behalf of Blair. Her job is to make sure the rebellion in the House of Commons vote is manageable.

Jonathan Powell, the prime minister's distant and aloof chief of staff, keeps his eye on everything including listening in on his boss's phone calls. And Alistair Campbell, perhaps the most publicly known of this triumvirate, spinning the lines he wants us to hear.

Given the siege mentality behind the doors of Number 10, its perhaps not surprising gallows humour is everywhere in evidence. Blair gives his staff a 'that's enough stare' when he feels his acolytes are going too far, getting to close to the bone and, perhaps more importantly, raising the interest of the journalist.

But Stothard's account of Blair and his sidekicks is anti-climactic in tone. He begins his 30-day visit on 10 March and ends the day Saddam's statue is pulled down in Baghdad. The most hair-raising moments, Blair's do-or-die speech to the House of Commons and vote, are the highpoints when he may well have fallen from office. But after he sails through it, it's business as usual. With war voted through the focus shifts, away from political circles in Downing Street and Parliament, to the theatre of conflict itself.

Perhaps if Stothard had been given access the preceding month, during which period the prospect of conflict was up in the air - the ongoing diplomatic game over the second resolution, the two million who took to the street - we may have seen a prime minister more divided with himself.

Instead, we see him working the phones tirelessly as the UN endgame draws to its conclusion and taking on his 'masochism strategy' of talking to everyone in an attempt to get them to see his way is the right way. The only chink the armour comes when Stothard asks him how he feels when he sees the death of children as a consequence of his decision for war and he replies: "It really gets to you. It does really get to you."



But how deeply does it affect Blair? When Blair breezed into office seven years ago and promised us a better future than the Tories, there was a nagging feeling at the back of many of our minds: was his a victory one of style over substance? Would this man say anything to look good? Who is the real Tony: the image or the rhetoric?

Perhaps these jibes have stirred him and he feels the need to show us who he really is. Before war is voted through he says, "What amazes me is how many people are happy for Saddam to stay. They ask why we don't get rid of Mugabe, why not the Burmese lot. Yes, let's get rid of them all. I don't because I can't, but when you can, you should."

This from the man who published a dossier claiming Saddam had weapons of mass destruction which could be launched at 45 minutes' notice against us - so far not proved - and whose Government claimed Iraq had tried to buy nuclear material from Niger, later found to be false.

Surely it wouldn't take much to cook up a few claims - however bogus - against not only these two brutal dictatorships but also Syria, Libya, Cuba, North Korea, just for starters.

Guy Burton

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## Rumba on the River by Gary Stewart Verso 2003

'World Beat' moved from the fringe of popular music into the mainstream in the 1980s, as western fans discovered the music made in the third world. Slowly, the musicians themselves turned up in Europe or America and a cross-fertilisation occurred.

Congolese music, often known as soukous, was one of the most popular forms, combining African rhythms with instruments familiar in the west - there was no throat singing, oud plucking or unfamiliar scales here.

This turns out to be hardly surprising. What we think of as the popular music of both the former Zaire and its neighbour, the French Congo, migrated from Africa to the Caribbean with slaves, and then migrated back in the period immediately before and after world war two, creating a complex mix.

While the music of both Congos has tended to be more popular in France than in the UK, it is well

worth investigating and helped to open the way for other world music.

Mark Smulian

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## Sassoon, the worlds of Philip and Sybil by Peter Stansky Yale UP 2003

Befitting the author of William Morris to Sergeant Pepper, Stansky's latest opus might have been subtitled 'How did it feel to be two of the beautiful people?' Sir Philip Sassoon (1888-1939) and his sister Sybil (1894-1989) reasonably occupied that void, as members of the British upper classes, where wealth could overcome the possible prejudices of their Baghdadi-Indian-Jewish background.

Philip was a Tory MP of no great consequence, for Folkestone & Hythe as it happens, which, having resisted the onslaught of 1906, is now set to fall to us around 2006. Politically, there are two parts of the book that are of interest. Sassoon served as secretary to General Haig and later Lloyd George - almost a paradox. Whilst Stansky's use of personal correspondence deepens our understanding of the intrigues that brought Asquith's government down, it doesn't really open any new doors.

It is wonderfully gossipy and, in particular, deals with exchanges with Northcliffe and Esher. I remain rather inclined to go along with Esher's biographer, James Lees-Milne, that Sassoon had 'little ambition and was content leading a luxurious life', but am happy to note Stansky's statement that 'no evidence has survived of Philip's sexual activities' - who cares? I particularly liked the bits about the American artist John Singer Sargent, whom the Sassoons patronised, and whose Gassed is disparaged by E.M.Forster. It now hangs in the Imperial War Museum.

After the war, Philip became close to Lloyd George (they met increasingly towards the end in order to sort out the future of the appalling Haig). He eventually became LG's secretary; appropriately, since the Wizard was leading what was, in effect, a Tory government. The problem with this was that, once the Tories had no further use for Lloyd George, Sassoon's ambition would be tainted by association.

In Baldwin's second ministry, he became Under Secretary of State for

Air, maintaining that post, when the Conservatives were in office, until 1937. Although Sassoon is increasingly in the Churchillian camp (his cousin Siegfried's letters comment on this), there is no mention of Archie Sinclair. Though both played important roles in the development of the Royal Air Force, there is, of course, no overlap. Stansky probably does break some ground in this area of policy minutiae and the intrigues of the interwar period.

Politics aside, the Sassoons are also remembered as aesthetes. Sybil, reputedly one of the beauties of her age, features more in this side of the book. Their patronage of the arts certainly makes what might be a dry account of a largely ignored era into an attractive book. In any case, Stansky's account is far from dry.

Stewart Rayment



*A Rather Fishy Tail*  
By Jill Stott

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## A Rather Fishy Tail by Jill Stott Grandma's Nonsense 2003 £6.50

Another children's book set in or around Rye and, I think, the first of a shoal in which fisherman Fred meets Milly the mermaid. Simple stories, brightly illustrated, as probably told by Grandma Nonsense to Milly and Zeke in their earlier years.

The books can be acquired from Grandma's Nonsense, the Woolstore, 111 Winchelsea Road, Rye, East Sussex, TN31 7EL, email [grandmasnonsense@pobox.com](mailto:grandmasnonsense@pobox.com)

Stewart Rayment

## Monday

The new city of Maynard Keynes, as I recall, was planned upon the assumption that every inhabitant would own his or, indeed, her own motor car. I said at the time that it was a foolish idea, and you may feel that subsequent events have proved me right. By contrast, when Oakham was rebuilt after the Stilton Riots of the late 1840s, it was assumed that one day every citizen would own his own horse or, indeed, mare. I remain convinced that we shall one day attain that noble goal. Nevertheless, the automobile has made inroads even here and we Rutlanders are determined to do something about it. We have adopted, not traffic calming, but traffic alarming. Thus while the speed hump is all very well, our speed abyss is far more effective; similarly, speed cameras are more of a deterrent if they are adapted to fire death rays at the incautious motorist. I would write more, but I hear the chap from the RAC arriving to help retrieve my Bentley from the elephant trap. And to think I was warning Nancy about it only the other day!

## Tuesday

Now the old jalopy is back on terra firma and being polished by the Well-Behaved Orphans as a token of my belief in vocational education, I am at leisure to conclude yesterday's discussion. I shall add that, perhaps as a result of the robust measures described above, public transport is very well patronised here in Rutland. The buses, in particular, are crowded – so much so that I recently suggested to Phil Willis that we should use double-decker vehicles instead. He replied that he was against the idea as it would involve a two-tier service.

## Wednesday

What fun Christmas was at the Hall! I filled the place with the jolliest of guests: here were Plum Duff and the elves of Rockingham Forest enjoying a joke on the grand staircase; there was Hazel Grove (a lovely girl) listening to Emma Nicholson describing her plans for another mission to suppress vice amongst the Uzbeks. (Emma, by the way is terribly fond of the Marsh Arabs, though perhaps not quite of fond of them as the late Wilfred Thesiger was.) You may have seen that the appalling Blair recently snubbed my old friend the Dalai Lama by refusing to meet him: I, by contrast, was more than delighted to invite him to stay. By a happy chance, another friend who farms in Patagonia was able to come too, and brought his llamas. They all got on famously, though I did hear of an unfortunate misunderstanding at the airport when everyone was going home.

## Thursday

Who should telephone whilst I am taking my morning coffee but the leader of our party? "I expect you are looking forward to debating the Len Hutton report," I begin brightly. "I was," he returns, "but they have made a mistake with the arrangements. I have just had a letter saying I will be able to inspect a copy from six in the morning." "What's the mistake?" I ask. "Come on, your lordship," he chides me in his democratic Highland way, "everyone knows there is no six o'clock in the morning." When I finally convince him that such an hour exists, the poor fellow is frightfully embarrassed. "At least it explains one thing," he consoles himself, "I always wondered why Paddy called lots of meetings at six or seven but there was no one there when I turned up."

## Friday

# Lord Bonkers' Diary

To Great Smith Street in London to visit the Adam Smith Institute. In the past year these fellows have trousered more than seven and a half million pounds in foreign aid. Now, I know a lot of younger people are in favour of that sort of thing, believing that we in the West should use our wealth to bring benefits like clean water, primary education and true wickets to less fortunate parts of the world. When I was a young man I believed it too, but bitter experience has brought me to believe that such charity is often a very mixed blessing, doing more to salve the conscience of the rich than to improve the lot of the poor, whom it condemns to a life of

indolence. Thus I am not surprised when I find the natives at Great Smith Street in a sorry state. Dressed in filthy loincloths and with bones through their noses, they pass their days making human sacrifices in the hope of bringing about the return of the "Great White She Mother". A passing theologian suggests to me that they mean Mrs Thatcher, and I fear he is right. (I admit that the more primitive tribes in the upper Welland Valley still worship the first Lady Bonkers, but the Reverend Hughes assures me that these days they expect her return only "in a very real sense".) So there you have it: overseas aid does little good in the long run, but I am reconciled to the knowledge that I shall win few favours for saying so.

## Saturday

On the high Pennines to meet an American tenor who is walking from St Bees in Cumberland to Robin Hood's Bay on the Yorkshire coast and performing Schubert's Winterreise at every evening stop. (Do you know the Schubert? It's Terribly Good, but there aren't a lot of places where you are encouraged to join in.) I wish him well, and tell him of an enterprise of my own when first down from the Varsity. Anxious to bring culture to the labouring classes, I rounded up some of the fellows and we set off on a cycling tour of the Nottinghamshire coalfield. Every evening we staged a performance of one of Wagner's jollier efforts, and if you have ever seen the Valkyries pedalling like fury and ringing their bells for all they are worth, you will know just how exciting opera can be.

## Sunday

Did you see that a Conservative MP was asked to leave the chamber because Mr Speaker thought he was taking a photograph? That sort of thing is frowned upon, though you will sometimes find copies of photographs a Member took during the Norway Debate in 1940 in books on the period. ("Speak for England, Arthur, and you did take my better side, didn't you?" as Leo Amery said at the time.) However, I was the pioneer in parliamentary photography, and as a fledgling backbencher at that. Of course, cameras were rather cumbersome in those days and the flash one made by igniting explosive powder did make things rather conspicuous; moreover, I was, on mature reflection, ill advised to call out to Balfour to "watch the birdie". The resultant photographs were something of a disappointment, as my thumb features prominently, but you can just make out Carson's left knee if you know where to look.

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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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