

liberator

BOURNEMOUTH – A NATION SLEEPS

Conference notes:

- 1) The Liberal Democrats' policy making process is arranged so that any group of self-described experts can seize control of a policy working group;
- 2) That most of those involved will be professionals with axes to grind;
- 3) That it once met someone in a pub who said his aunt's cousin's neighbour had read a Liberal Democrat policy paper right through, but apart from that no-one does;
- 4) That it hasn't the faintest idea what it is about to vote on, as it hasn't read the policy paper either and the motion is 756 clauses long.

Conference believes:

- 1) That the result of this process is tedious agendas full of things that are worthy, dull and uncontroversial;
- 2) That anything remotely topical can't get debated or is shoved into some odd corner where it can't be dealt with properly;
- 3) That if this situation persists there is a severe danger of delegates pouring petrol over their heads and setting themselves alight out of terminal boredom.

Conference resolves:

- 1) That the merger was 16 years ago, no-one gives a toss what used to happen in the Labour party, that the Liberal Democrat conference is a gathering of adults who can debate and weigh-up political issues and that it should be allowed to do so.

In this issue



**Hughes or Opik –
Liberator's presidential hustings**



Eyewitness in Iraq – Fazil Kawani



Putting the policy process right – Jeremy Hargreaves



Our duty in Europe – Howard Cohen

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COMMENTARY

WHAT THE BUTLER SAID

Those who appear in court have to promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. They are also unable to choose their own judge.

After four inquiries into aspects of the Iraq war, all led by people of his own choosing, prime minister Tony Blair wants the country to believe that only the truth passed his lips during the entire build-up.

Unfortunately for him, but fortunately for the Liberal Democrats who opposed the war, most of the country according to any poll thinks he is a liar.

Blair claims that he acted in good faith, as though this were sufficient alone to exonerate him on the charge of having dragged the country into an unpopular and unnecessary war on the basis of wrong or doctored intelligence.

Exactly how 'good' is the faith of a prime minister who, as the Butler report made clear, received intelligence laced with caveats about Iraq and then removed them all in the version made public? What good faith is there in being told privately about doubts and probabilities and telling the country that these were certainties?

And what good faith was there in watching senior BBC figures take the rap for running a story that the country now knows to be substantially true; in concealing information from the Hutton inquiry; and in then announcing that no-one in the government is to blame?

Blair went to war because George W Bush told him to. Determined to follow his master, he would bend any truth and exaggerate any supposition to try to win the argument. He will go to his political grave with '45 minutes' chiselled on it.

At one level, Blair's predicament is splendid news for the Liberal Democrats, as July's two by-elections showed.

As the only party of any significance (at least in England) to oppose the war, it is well placed to reap the benefits of public disgust with Labour over both Blair's behaviour and scandals like the mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners.

This issue has also helped the party to a significant electoral breakthrough among ethnic minority communities, something that had eluded it for decades, despite well-meaning efforts.

On another level, it is less good news. Blair's conduct has brought the whole of politics into disrepute, and politicians get tarred with the same brush whatever they actually say or do.

If a million people can march through London, and countless more elsewhere, and still be ignored by a vast majority in parliament, what does that say about how representative the system is?

If a prime minister can start a war on a whim and kill tens of thousands of people as a result without the least expression of contrition, never mind any penalty, what signal does that send to people about the need to behave responsibly towards others, a subject this government never ceases to bleat about?

Smash up a bus shelter and Labour will have you subject to an anti-social behaviour order, electronically tagged or possibly in prison. Smash up a country and nothing happens.

It is hardly a surprise that, in this climate, public cynicism about politics and politicians grows, and the Liberal Democrats cannot expect to gain automatically the votes of those, in particular, who are disillusioned with Labour – they may be disillusioned with everything to do with politics.

Labour desperately wants to forget about Iraq, 'move on' as the spin doctors put it, but the fact that it has been quite unable to for more than a year demonstrates starkly that the public does not want to move on, it wants answers, an apology and punishment of those responsible.

Very few people, on either side of the argument, could have foreseen at the time of the Iraq war that this would be a potent issue able to cause serious political damage more than 15 months later. The fact that it can shows the depth of public anger.

Iraq presents an opportunity to keep Blair's lack of trustworthiness, and Labour's responsibility for this, firmly in the public eye until the general election.

What would cause cynicism would be if the Liberal Democrats did this without looking at the faults in the system of government that allowed Blair to behave as he did.

It is all very well to keep reminding the public that Blair is duplicitous, but the party needs to tackle the factors that make it possible for a prime minister to be that and still act as he pleases and get away with it.

Parliament holds the executive to inadequate account, its committees can scrutinise until they are purple in the face but cannot require anything to be done, and inquiries are appointed by the person accused.

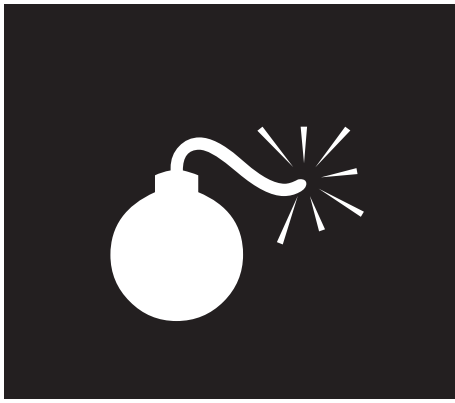
Liberals have for decades complained that constitutional reform is important but that no one is interested.

Iraq just possibly offers a means to attach this issue to one that is of real public concern. In a system with proper checks, and with a culture of openness and accountability, it would take more than one person's whim to start a war.

YOUR NEXT LIBERATOR

Liberator 298 will be published at the Liberal Democrat conference in Bournemouth in September.

If you are a subscriber and attending the conference, please come to the stall to collect your copy and renew your subscription if it is due. Copies will be sent to other subscribers during the week following the conference.



RADICAL BULLETIN

LASHED TO THE MAST

On 15 June only 460 votes stopped the Liberal Democrats from achieving a feat not managed since 1973 – winning two parliamentary by-elections on the same day.

According to an e-mail circulated to activists by party chief executive Chris Rennard, 100 or so extra helpers in Birmingham Hodge Hill on polling day would have been enough to secure victory alongside Leicester South.

It might have been even more helpful if certain party members and supporters had not been in Hodge Hill at all.

Recriminations have been flying in Birmingham over the role of some party members in fanning the controversy over candidate Nicola Davis's job in public relations for the mobile phone mast industry.

Local party members presumably knew what Davis did for a living (no-one has suggested that she concealed this) before she was selected to fight a seat where masts were not merely an issue but where opposition to them had featured in the party's city campaign in June.

Therefore, there was a need from the outset to recognise that this could become an issue and manage the situation. Opinions differ as to how well this was done.

An organisation called Mast Sanity, which campaigns against masts, circulated a statement which claimed that, among other unhappy Liberal Democrat supporters, former council candidate Amanda Wesley had urged voters not to support Davis, and that Pamela Chapman, described simply as a Liberal Democrat councillor "from Wales" had urged party members to "look hard" at their loyalties.

Two former local candidates, Tony and Maxine Foley, were quoted in local newspapers as refusing to support Davis over the issue.

Relatively large numbers of Liberal Democrat candidates earn their living in public affairs and this should not disqualify them from seeking selection. But all candidates will need to be clear about whether their job comes with any electoral baggage and constituencies need to plan accordingly.

A QUESTION OF PRIORITIES

While most Liberal Democrats who could do so spent 15 July working in Leicester South or Birmingham Hodge Hill, members of Liberal Democrats in Public Relations had other things to attend to.

Organiser Chris Fox (who, besides being Chair of LDiPR, also moonlights as Chair of Liberal Future when he is not sitting on the Advisory Board of the Liberal Democrat Business Forum) e-mailed members to remind them that that evening saw its annual reception on the terrace of National Liberal Club complete with the chance to hear "David Seymore of The Mirror issue his end of term report".

"Who knows, we may have won a couple more parliamentary seats by the time last orders is called," Fox enthused.

Whether LDiPR's prioritisation of an evening of swilling and exchanging business cards made a difference is a matter for speculation.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Anyone who lived through the post-merger name debate, which eventually settled on 'Liberal Democrats', would probably rather eat their own genitalia than go through the experience again. But not Graham Watson, leader of what we must now call the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe in the European Parliament.

After the 10 June elections, what had been the European Liberal Democrat and Reform group was boosted by seven members of Germany's Free Democrats and a handful of new members from eastern Europe, but had still made no progress in France or the Mediterranean countries. It provisionally had 67 seats, against 52 previously.

Watson decided to try to bring in the UDF, a French party of the non-Gaullist centre-right, plus some additional parts of Romano Prodi's 'Olive Tree' coalition from Italy.

Both were problematic. The UDF is a successor to Republican Party, the Giscardiens, whose presence in ELD, as it then was, caused persistent attempts within the British Liberals to end their membership of the group.

Prodi's group is an even odder collection, being a coalition rather than a party, with members split across the conservative, liberal and socialist groupings in the parliament.

Watson negotiated with a component party of this coalition called La Margherita, whose nine MEPs were initially split 5:4 between the conservative and liberal groups, even though La Margherita was listed by ELDR as among its member parties.

Both these parties objected, for reasons that lie deep in the history of continental politics, to the word 'liberal' in the group title, and Watson was ready to accommodate them by dropping it.

This then set off an angry debate within the Westminster parliamentary party, with Malcolm Bruce reporting that the established parties of northern Europe did not want to lose the 'liberal' title.

Charles Kennedy, possibly for the first time, sent for a copy of the party constitution and established to his satisfaction that it was for the federal party in the UK to decide which group its MEPs should adhere to and the mood at Westminster was that MPs did not want the Liberal Democrat identity mucked around with in Brussels.

Kennedy felt that losing the 'liberal' name would be a big mistake. The judgement of several UK Liberal Democrats was that Prodi wanted to be able to say in Italy that he led the 'centre', since in the Italian elections the centre and left collaborate against Berlusconi, and that consequently the

argument over 'liberal' had more to do with Italian internal politics than anything in Brussels.

The new leader of the British contingent of liberal MEPs, Chris Davies, then proposed to his flock (which includes Watson) that they should join only a group with 'liberal' in its title, but found himself embarrassingly defeated.

While negotiations continued, Watson addressed a remonstrance to Liberal Democrat News in which he argued that unnamed people were trying to prevent him from forming a large 'centre grouping', "for the sake of a label".

In language straight out of the name debate of 15 years ago, he argued that one did not need to be called a liberal in order to be a liberal.

This provoked a response the next week from treasury spokesman Vincent Cable, who asked reasonably enough that, if that 'liberal' label were as unimportant as Watson claimed, why were the UDF and La Margherita so keen to get rid of it?

The compromise name was duly reached, and what we must now call ALDE emerged blinking into the Brussels sunlight.

While Cable was right on this point, his letter threw a little light on a curious undercurrent of euroscepticism that has emerged in the Westminster parliamentary party.

Cable asked: "If liberalism is to be jettisoned by our MEPs as the main unifying feature of the group, what is to replace it?"

"The track record of the new recruits suggests that it may be an extreme euro-federalism.

"If that is the way our MEPs want to go, they will drive a serious wedge between themselves and their parliamentary colleagues in the UK and will become seriously isolated from the UK public."

These sentiments fit with Cable's announcement before the elections that the party would take a more eurosceptic line (Liberator 295). It also fits with rumours that some south west MPs, spooked by UKIP, want to take an anti-EU line.

It is quite proper for Cable, or anyone else, to try to change the party's position on Europe and the correct ways to do this are well known.

However, this looks like another example of Cable arrogating to himself the right to tear up party policy and replace it with his own unrepresentative prejudices.

First was his attempt to wrench the party's economic policy backwards 100 years, by gaining control of the Setting Business Free working party while no one noticed, and slipping through huge changes in the depths of a little read policy document.

Now he wants to uproot a European policy of 50 years' standing simply by making public statements.

There are legitimate ways to do both, and if Cable can convince the party he is right then good luck to him. He should put up or shut up.

NAKED TRUTH

During the Euro election campaign in Hungary, the Free Liberal Democrats promised to free more than one might expect. An out-take from one of their election videos started to circulate online, with a young woman promising, "Boys, if you vote for the liberals, I'll take my clothes off."

NO, NO, THRICE NO?

The Liberal Democrats have been committed to English regional devolution for decades, but as referenda impend in the north east, north west and Yorkshire and The Humber this November, an awkward problem has appeared.

Some north west party members are threatening to campaign for a 'no' vote on the grounds that they think the offer is not good enough, and that more powers should be devolved.

An additional complication across all three regions is the government's insistence that, if regional government comes, one tier of local government must go.

Thus, voters will be faced with an additional choice between turning the existing county councils into colossal single tier authorities, or dividing them up into medium-seized councils, with the loss of any county identity. Either way, the present shire districts would go.

While members elsewhere might not care whether these regions get devolution or not, the Liberal Democrats face a problem if regionalism is rejected, since most of the public services policy agreed in 2002 is contingent on decentralisation.

CENTRE STAGE

When, or more likely if, the referendum comes on the European constitution, the Liberal Democrats will no doubt be campaigning for a 'yes' vote, but the condition of the overall 'yes' campaign is in question.

The official campaign body Britain in Europe has not merely been useless at putting its argument in public, but has been so thoroughly Labour dominated that Liberal Democrat contributions have been confined to a spokesperson being allowed giving us five minutes at the far edge of the platform.

Up with this the Liberal Democrats will no longer put, noting that they will be unhappy if the referendum is lost, but prime minister Tony Blair could be brought down, and so now needs them rather more than they need him.

SHORT AND OFF THE POINT

A worthy contender has emerged for the Mitcham and Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet for the worst motion from among those submitted for debate at Bournemouth in September.

Aylesbury has proposed: "Conference believes that the Data Protection Act should be repealed."

That's it. No 'conference notes', nothing it should believe, no reasons for such a move and no suggestion of anything that should take its place.

In light of the election season in June, the deadline for the toilet has been extended so there is still time for other constituencies to submit something inappropriate, stupid or ill-written.

Liberator now possesses a model gold-coloured toilet, which will be exhibited on our conference stall but, like the Ashes, awarded only symbolically.

A PAIN IN THE ARSE

The Mitcham and Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet has been a much-coveted award at Liberal Democrat conferences for many years. Liberator has therefore decided to augment this with a new award, the Blackpool Commemorative Beige Haemorrhoid Cushion (named in honour of everybody's favourite conference town).

Whereas recipients of the Gold Toilet never get their motions on the conference agenda, contenders for the Cushion must do so to qualify.

The Cushion will be awarded to the motion that, above all, produces arse-numbing tedium. But what specific criteria are the judges looking for? First, the motion must be uninspiring. It should lack any passion or ideological backbone. These failings are always boosted by hackneyed ideas, such as calls for a dedicated cabinet minister.

Second, the judges are looking for flatulence – long-winded pieties, empty gestures, worthy platitudes, tired and worn out slogans. The third criterion is an inability to see the wood for the trees. A long screed of technocratic or arcane detail helps

here. The final quality is the most difficult to pin down, but is essentially a lack of irony, such as a call to set the people free followed by a lengthy dissertation on how the various layers of government and officialdom should achieve this.

This summer's preliminary agenda has produced a highly competitive field but the judges have nevertheless produced a short-list of tedious motions. The current favourite is the Federal Policy Committee's effort 'A World Free from Poverty', which runs to two pages on development issues without once expressing a moral standpoint, while getting stuck into the nitty-gritty of structural reform of the relevant departments of the European Commission.

A second contender, 'Personal Best' (on sport policy, also from the FPC) is, at one-and-a-half-pages, not quite as long but scores through its prescriptive detail and ultimate futility. The motion 'Reducing the Risk of Terrorism' is an outside bet, although the judges were impressed by the line "Conference believes a terrorist attack on the UK is possible at any time" – just the sort of vain wake-up call that can single out a winner.

The judges were particularly struck by 'Valuing Tourism and Tourists', which, among other things, advocates "Promoting the sustainable growth of tourism by measures such as encouraging existing visitors to return" – yes, the '10 conference reps' responsible for this trite gem have flatulence down to a fine art.

Last but not least is 'Wealth for the World', an FPC motion on international trade, which gives the favourite a good run for its money. Two pages of lacklustre and dessicated managerialism, which will have delegates running for the exits.

Don't miss the next RB, when we will reveal the winner.

LET US PREY

There is a website that at first glance resembles the real Liberal Democrat one, but has content that is entirely hostile and should be taken head on by the party if challenged on it.

Try, or rather don't, <http://mysite.freemove.com/libdembriefing/ldbrhome.htm>, which comprises a diatribe subtitled "What Christians should know about the 'nice' party."

These Christians cite the right-wing conservative commentator Peter Osborne as a 'respected journalist' and have filled their site with links to the Sun and Daily Telegraph, which should give viewers some idea of what to expect.

Among the crimes the Lib Dems are accused of are: hostility to church schools; restrictions on Christian broadcasters; 'undermining the unique status of marriage'; gay adoption; legalising dangerous drugs; legalising prostitution.

There are plenty of Christians in the Liberal Democrats who would not agree with this site, let alone with the idea that some right-wing group can lay down what all Christians should think.

TAKE A SLEEPING BAG

After an interval of 15 years, Blackpool is making a return as Liberal Democrat conference venue for September 2005.

Delegates have so loathed this decrepit town, with its cavernous and decaying conference venue, primitive hotels, ghastly food, and arctic September weather, that the conference committee has since 1990 resisted all entreaties from the local tourist office to return.

Indeed, even the Tory and Labour parties have boycotted the place in recent years and they have less choice of venue, having somewhat larger conferences.

With both Brighton and Bournemouth undergoing renovations at the same time, the committee had chosen the new conference centre at Gateshead as an experiment.

Unfortunately, those who took the booking in Gateshead omitted to realise that the Great North Run would clash with

conference and fill every hotel for miles around and suddenly contacted the party with the bad news.

Stumped for a venue, the committee had to book Blackpool as the only hall in the country physically able to hold the conference at the right time.

On its last visit, the party was obliged to share the conference venue with The Kranksies, the best places to eat were chain pizza restaurants and the town was the final redoubt of the "don't you know there's a war on" approach to hotel management. Improvements are promised. We shall see.

Passports to Liberty 5

The latest in the series of booklets designed to promote debate on Liberal issues comprises two essays:

'Liberals & the Global Economy'
by Bernard Salmon &
'Defending Families'
by Jonathan Calder

edited and produced by Bill le Breton and Kiron Reid

Copies are available price £3.50 from:

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DANGEROUS GROUND

Fazil Kawani returned to his native Iraq this spring to join reconciliation projects between its communities, but the security situation was too bad to even start this work

I fled from Iraq in August 1980 when I was only 19 years old. In the last 24 years, I have monitored many different internal conflicts around the world. In recent years I have been very impressed by what has been achieved in South Africa and Northern Ireland through peaceful negotiation and dialogue between divided communities.

Inspired by what has been achieved in these two countries and believing that long-term solutions to this kind of internal conflict can be achieved only through dialogue, negotiation and reconciliation between divided communities, I decided to go back to Iraq to work on a project to reconcile its divided communities.

The aim of this project was to conciliate between Kurds, Arabs, Turkmens and Christians in Kikuk, in north Iraq.

In the last 30 years, there have been tensions and fighting between these groups. Thousands of innocent people have lost their lives and many Kurds have fled the city. After spending 24 years in exile, and spending the last 12 years working with refugees and asylum seekers, this project was very interesting and challenging work for me to be involved with.

I travelled to Iraq in April this year hoping to start this work; unfortunately, because of fighting and lack of security, this work was cancelled. I was very disappointed.

Iraq has an area of 440,000 sq kms and a population of about 20 million. Up until the First World War, it formed part of the Ottoman Empire. Independence came in 1921 after a period of British control under a League of Nations mandate.

In recent times, the country's name has been synonymous with Saddam Hussain, who wielded power since 1979.

Internally, he was involved in violation of human rights and his grip on power was based on brutal suppression of minorities, social and religious groups. Externally, he has led his country into two major wars, both sparked by territorial disputes. From 1980-88, Iraq was in conflict with its larger neighbour Iran, during which one million people lost their lives in both countries, and, at the end, the Iraqi regime did not hold on to any of the territorial gains to which it had aspired.

Then in 1990, Saddam sent his troops into a smaller neighbouring country Kuwait; one which Iraq had long believed should legitimately form part of its own domain.

Western countries, alarmed at the prospect of oil supplied from Kuwait being dependent on the whim of the Iraqi leader, reacted militarily, hence the first Gulf War. Although the Iraqis were defeated, the western powers along with their Arab and other allies did not prolong the fighting to attempt to remove Saddam from power.

The Iraqi population is divided to three main groups on the bases of their ethnicity and religion.

Sunni Arabs live in the centre of Iraq; they represent ruling middle class nationalist Arabs and many support Saddam Hussain.

The Kurdish minority lives in the north and speaks a different language, and shares its ideology and identity with Kurdish minorities in Turkey, Syria and Iran. Most of them are Sunni Muslims, though there is a minority of Christians among them.

Shia Arabs live in the south, where 90% of the population are working class Shias. There are other smaller groups like Turkmens and Christian Arabs.

When I arrived in Iraq, there was fighting between American forces and Sunni Arabs in Falluja. Arab fighters in the area are either supporters of Saddam Hussain or Arabs from other countries who support Al-Qaida, who travelled to Iraq to fight American troops and destabilise the country. These two groups are well organised and there is a very strong link between them. In Falluja, up to 700 people were killed, and there is no doubt that there were many civilian casualties because the fighting was in a densely populated area.

There was also fighting in Najaf between American forces and Shiha Arabs loyal to Muqtada Al-Sadder. Apart from these two major clashes, there were other minor clashes in other parts of Iraq.

In my view, the American forces have failed to provide security and basic human needs like medicine, electricity and water. They either don't have any experience in nation building and rebuilding societies, or are not interested in doing that.

In contrast, Basra, which is occupied by British forces, is different from other major cities, which I think proves that British forces are much more experienced in dealing with this kind of security situation, because they involve local communities, communicate better with people and understand sensitive issues like culture and religion.

There are also some very interesting positive developments in Iraq. For example, the new Iraqi government represents every section of society, unlike the previous regime, which only represented nationalist Arabs. Minorities and other social groups are treated equally and their rights are respected.

For me, the most surprising development was freedom of expression and information, which was denied under Saddam Hussain. Now you can speak against the government and Iraqi leaders without fear from security forces.

Fazil Kawani is an Iraqi exile who works with refugees in the UK

SITUATION VACANT

There are not one but two presidential elections this year. We're taking a look at the other one – the election of a new president of the Liberal Democrats. Liberator asked the two contenders a series of questions and here are their answers

Does the election of the Liberal Democrats' president matter? It is tempting to dismiss this internal contest as a sideshow. The party's machinery is more centralised and less accountable than its predecessor in the Liberal Party. The job of party president has tended to be whatever the incumbent has made of it.

Yet with increasing controversy within the party over a number of party management issues – the lack of accountability, dubious fund-raising methods, a loss of confidence in the system of policy-making and the lack of an obvious national strategy – the role of party president is potentially significant.

The post combines two roles – the chair of the party's Federal Executive (an influential bureaucratic job within the party machine) and a figurehead role in the party at large, in particular as a guardian of the party constitution. The incumbent needs to be both a competent party manager and an independent representative of the party members' interests – some in the party argue that these two roles are incompatible.

A postal ballot of the whole party membership elects the party's president (though turnouts in these elections rarely exceed 50%). Given that the electorate comprises both active and 'armchair' members, the contest has tended to be something of a beauty contest, and only parliamentarians with high name recognition stand a realistic chance of winning.

The president is elected every two years. The present incumbent, Lord Dholakia, is coming to the end of four years in

the post, the maximum term permitted under the party constitution.

At the close of nominations, only two candidates had been nominated, both of them MPs. This in itself raises serious questions about how either candidate can give the job of president the attention it needs.

In this Liberator exclusive, we asked the two candidates for brief biographies, and posed some searching questions on your behalf, and here are their replies.

Q1 – What is the single most significant and distinctive change you would bring to the role of president?

SH: I will share the president's responsibilities with a small team of deputies, each responsible for key tasks. These will include: promoting women in winnable seats; ensuring ethnic balance among our elected representatives; challenging Labour; challenging Conservatives, and challenging nationalists.

LO: I offer inspiration, motivation, results for individuals, and thus the party. My presidency would be characterised by my belief that we shouldn't set limits; we should set outcomes. Enough people out there want to hold us back without us helping them!



Simon Hughes MP for North Southwark and Bermondsey

English, Welsh, Scots and Austrian family – born 1951 – became a Liberal at 14 – rural upbringing to 18 – first campaigns as Young Liberal in Hereford – student union president twice (and ULS member) – three years studying and working abroad – employment and human rights barrister – elected youngest opposition MP with still record swing and now largest ever general election majority – local councillors from 0 to 29 and now in charge – five major portfolios, most recently Home Office – runner up to Charles Kennedy for leadership – increased London mayor vote by 40% – and all round good thing!

I develop people. In Newcastle upon Tyne, I turned a mainly Tory ward into a 100% Lib Dem one, and did my bit on the path which led to overall control of the council. It was a collective success based on individual success. I agented Peter Arnold's election campaign for councillor in my ward. Now he's Newcastle's first ever Lib Dem council leader. Fiona Hall – our first MEP in the North East - started as my employee in 1994. Cardiff Central PPC Jenny Willott was my first Westminster staff member. I hope they'd confirm that helping others succeed is something I really care about and work hard at.

Q2 – Do you think the post of president should be split into a chair of the Federal Executive and a figurehead presidential post, or would you prefer the two roles to remain combined? Either way, why?

SH: The existing roles of the president should not be split between figurehead and FE chair. We can't afford the luxury of figureheads! And if the president is to be the voice of party members within the party and the voice of the party to the outside world, then he or she needs to have the influence and authority which comes from chairing the FE as well as the senior constitutional role.

LO: I would not split the role. From my 13 years' experience on the Federal Executive, serving under four successive presidents, and as a federal vice president for many years, I'm convinced the president should not be just a figurehead, but a serious organisational and inspirational figure. The president needs to 'carry the can,' by chairing Federal Executive, which is basically the Lib Dem 'Board of Governors.' Breaking that link weakens the voice of the membership to the leadership and the 'centre.' That matters when there's a conflict. For example, in 1996, during the vexed debate on potential coalitions with other parties, Robert MacLennan used his authority as president to commission me to formulate a consultation system for the party in the event of, say, a hung parliament.

That way, he achieved 'buy in' by leadership and membership. A 'figurehead' couldn't do that, and if that's all the president was, I wouldn't want the job.

Q3 – What would you do as president to ensure that the Federal Executive does its job properly, and to chair meetings of the FE more effectively?

SH: I am a very efficient chair and would make sure the meetings deliver! Everybody on the FE will be asked to take on a specific responsibility appropriate to their experience and skill. We should of course set ourselves regular objectives and be judged by them.

LO: On the first point, I'd focus the Federal Executive on its core task – strategic decision making, and only very occasionally, on specific operational matters arising, say, from committees reporting to it. I'd therefore resist long debates about the wrong things. If, for example, there's an issue about membership cards, I'd get the committee to agree a plan to fix it, but not attempt to solve the problem there and then. However tempting, it's not a good use of the Federal Executive's time, and undermines the role of those elected and employed to do that.

On the second point about effectiveness, that also requires good chairing. I'd aim to stop people continually repeating what previous speakers said – current president, Lord Dholakia, has expressed the same sentiment. I'd maintain a professional, business-minded attitude – I would keep discussions respectful, even when the subject matter is emotive and evokes strong feelings. I believe I've got the skill and confidence to chair the committee effectively.

Part of my job is also to feedback to the leader what members are thinking... even when it's stuff the leader may not want to hear. I'll be a voice for you in Charles's office, just as Navnit has done in his time as president.

Lembit Öpik, MP Montgomeryshire

Born in Bangor, Northern Ireland, to Estonian parents, Lembit was Bristol Student Union President (1985/86) and NUS Exec member. He's worked in brand management and global training for Procter & Gamble. Lembit is shadow secretary of state for Northern Ireland and Wales. As youth spokesperson, he helped found the UK Youth Parliament. In 1998, he survived a near-fatal paragliding accident. Engaged to TV Weather Presenter Sian Lloyd, the wedding date is 'Up to Tony' – to avoid clashing with the general election! Lembit's media appearances include everything from Question Time, Any Questions, to Have I Got News for You.



Q4 – Your presidential term will include a general election. What would be your role during the election campaign, and how would this role complement that of the party leader?

SH: The president must play a key role in the core group planning and executing the general election campaign and ensuring it is properly accountable to party members. At all times, the president must support the federal party leader and our leaders in Scotland and Wales.

With an inner-London constituency base and happily a majority nearing 10,000, I am able to act as a media resource complementing Charles and Ming and other colleagues as they are out and about in their constituencies and around the country. In the 24-hour media age, having an experienced, senior and nationally recognisable figure, not tied down by a heavy parliamentary workload and easily able to make it to radio and TV studios, must be an advantage. I shall regularly sort out with Charles and the election campaign team how best I can add value to what everybody else is doing.

In the run-up to the general election and during it, I see my principal task as winning sympathisers, turning sympathisers into supporters, supporters into members and members into activists – and enthusing all of them! My hope and plan is that, by the end of my term in office, we have overtaken Labour's present membership total – which really does mean tripling our membership.

A central job of the president is to ensure that every elected Liberal Democrat feels valued and is supported and that every member receives a good service – bluntly, much better than now!

Another job I want to do is to collect some more influential and some new rich supporters so that we can be promoted from the first division to the premier league in British politics.

LO: My role should fit what the leader and general election campaign team need. Frankly, we can't have two people trying to run one election campaign – that road leads to disaster! As president, I'd anticipate my role being 'morale officer' and 'chief engineer' to the leader, who is 'captain' of the Lib Dem ship. The captain sets the destination. The president makes sure we're seaworthy with a crew motivated to reach it. This means developing a relationship with the key groups, so members become stakeholders in our success. I'll do that by being accessible and making personal relationships with our activist base – which involves a lot of travel – as well as LDYS, EMLD, ALDC, the PCA and so on. I'll also address the fact that councillors have, to an extent, been taken a little for granted.

Also, for me, the president's role is not policy development. The leader clearly owns that process and chairs the Policy Committee, and conference has a core function in defining policy. The president must ensure the messages are conveyed in a clear way that means something to voters – partly through the media, and largely inside the party. Also, devolution means we ourselves have to accept the right for divergence across England, Scotland and Wales.

Incidentally, I'm not keen on negative campaigning. I just don't think it's all that effective. After all, despite an onslaught of negativity from other parties in Birmingham Hodge Hill, Nicola Davies (also a former member of my staff) still achieved a larger swing to the Lib Dems than we did even in Leicester South. Let's treat politics as a competition – not a war – and be more positive.

Q5 – The media are bound to allege that your presidential candidacy is a prelude to a bid for the party leadership. How will you answer this allegation?

SH: The party must now choose the best person to be president for the next two years – and there is no leadership election in the offing. Charles has had my unqualified support since he beat me to be the leader, and he will continue to have my 100% support for as long as he wants the job. I have absolutely no intention to challenge him again. All leaders since the war have done about 10 years each and, even if I won the maximum two presidential terms, I expect Charles to be the leader at the end of them.

I had not planned for this job until a few weeks ago and only when others approached me after the June election campaigns were over. It is not in the Hughes nature to plan now for jobs that may never again become available to me!

All ideas for how to make the next presidency just what the party needs are of course most welcome – and the sooner you let me have them the better!

My campaign website is www.votesimon.org.uk – If you would like to support me and help my campaign please make contact and persuade your friends to vote for me too. It really is a two horse race – and Conservatives and Labour can't win here!

LO: I've been on Federal Executive – the committee the President chairs – for over a decade. I've been federal vice president for roughly half a decade. I've told people I'd like to be president for about three years. I really, really want to be president, and that's what this election is all about.

DOES MY MAJORITY LOOK BIG IN THIS?

**Yes, it's the 20th Anniversary Liberal
Revue at the Liberal Democrat
Conference in Bournemouth**

**Tuesday 21st September, 9pm in the
Pavilion Theatre**

**Tickets are £10, available only from
the Liberator stall in the conference
exhibition area**

**It's either that, or an ALDC training
session on leaflet folding techniques**

RED LEICESTER ROTS

Leicester was once a Liberal-free zone and the changes which culminated in the by-election victory may change the party too, says Mark Smulian

I had a special reason to go to Leicester South, as I fought my first election there. At least, I think I did.

The by-election result was impressive by any standard, but jaw dropping to anyone who knew the Liberal Party in Leicester in the 1970s (when I was a student there).

Taken with the local election results on 10 June and the recent steady progress in urban areas against Labour, it was more evidence of the Liberal Democrats' ability not just to mount successful one-off campaigns in cities but to become part of their political fabric.

But just as the Liberal Democrats have changed the shape of politics in urban areas, will urban areas change the shape of the Liberal Democrats?

Ever since the Liberal Party rose from its deathbed in the mid-1950s, it has seen its most promising territory as being remote rural areas and outer suburbs.

This was a perfectly valid strategy, since it built on what support existed, but it also meant that the Liberals and Labour tended to keep out of each other's way.

There were important exceptions of course but, in general, direct Liberal and Labour clashes were pretty unusual until the 1990s.

Where there was direct competition, it was largely in areas where super-activists ran local parties, who took little interest in anything outside their patch and rarely troubled to sign up a large number of members.

Consequently, urban areas had very little influence in Liberal Democrat policy making, strategy or election planning, all of which remained firmly skewed towards a rural or suburban audience.

Which brings me back to Leicester as a measure of how the electoral position has changed.

Back in the mid-1970s, the city was a Liberal disaster area. There were no councillors, nor were there remotely likely to be any.

It was the epicentre of the National Front upsurge and in 1977 the Liberals ran fourth to them in all but one ward.

Since the NF had declared it would fight every seat, the local Liberals decided it was a point of honour to do likewise.

Thus, two weeks before my degree finals, I was a paper candidate in a ward the location of which I still have no very clear idea about, but was probably in Leicester South. I met my running mate for the only time at the count. We were fourth by miles.

Two Young Liberals gained an above-average result with a mistyped leaflet which referred throughout to 'radical liberalism'. It was that kind of place.

Things started to change in the cities in the 1980s, but the party's ability now to take seats off Labour at the low point of its period in government is truly something new.

An equally striking and more recent change has been the party's ability, due largely to the Iraq war, to attract support

from ethnic minority voters. This is something it used to talk about doing but rarely managed.

Experience over the last 20 years has tested to destruction the 'super activist' approach to urban politics – it doesn't work long term because the super activists either end up running the council and the party organisation goes to pot, or they burn out and there is no-one to replace them.

Therefore, the urban areas will need to recruit members and get them involved just as the party would anywhere else.

If local parties can do this, they may change the party nationally more than can be foreseen.

In the past, big city success has been a sort of agreeable extra but, apart from Simon Hughes and Mike Storey, none of those involved has been very influential. If large numbers of party members start to be drawn from the cities, and rich crops of winnable seats appear there, the party will have to stop aiming its message at some imagined average middle class voter in a shire district and start to think more about housing, transport, regeneration, race and jobs.

This is not a north/south issue, since some of the best urban performances have been in London, Portsmouth, Southampton, Norwich and Bristol, but it is one of a party that mainly served areas of 'haves' suddenly finding it represents large numbers of 'have nots'.

It may also change the party's attitude towards future power sharing, which, the collapse of Paddy Ashdown's plots in 1997/98 notwithstanding, has tended to assume working with Labour to defeat the Tories.

Rural and suburban Liberal Democrats tended to have a benign view of a Labour party that they had not normally fought seriously, but urban party members can have very different perceptions of Labour where it has been the local establishment for decades.

In Birmingham, Leeds, Lambeth and North East Lincolnshire, there are formal Lib Dem/Conservative council administrations, and people who have spent years fighting Labour there see nothing odd in these alignments.

Come the next general election, the Liberal Democrats will have to try to hold onto the support they have and simultaneously seek to exploit this new standing in the cities.

Having taken votes from Tories in 1997 and 2001, and from Labour since, it will be interesting to see whether it is possible to construct a message that plays well with both groups and still means anything.

Mark Smulian is a member of the Liberator Collective

WASTED WORDS

The Liberal Democrat policy process is good at wasting paper but poor at delivering usable political ideas, argues Jeremy Hargreaves

It's time to look again at the way in which the Liberal Democrats make party policy. The current procedures, put in place at the birth of the party 15 years ago, have served us well in the task of creating a body of policy for a new party.

But, too often, they now stand in the way rather than helping us to develop the clear, comprehensible and politically distinctive policies, which an organisation aiming to become a party of government needs.

Our current process certainly has strengths. It is an open and admirably consultative. It comes up with robust, well thought-through policies, which are respected by experts in the field.

But the problem is that these strengths come at the price of the loss of some things which a party like the Lib Dems needs from a policy-making system.

The first trap our current process too often falls into is the temptation to go into too much detail. A delegate to federal conferences receives, over the course of a normal year, something like six or eight full policy papers, which you are supposed to read before you go to conference to vote on them.

Now, it may be that you are one of the diligent delegates who actually does read them – and if you are, then I salute you. But if you don't mind me suggesting it, it is statistically more likely that you are one of the large majority of conference delegates who, over the course of this summer, despite the best of intentions, will not find time to read, say, the 35 pages of detailed policy on sport, or the 40-odd pages outlining our views on pensions.

I'm not trying to make you feel guilty – as I say, the great majority of your fellow-delegates will also not manage to wade through all that detail.

No, the point rather is that if even most elected delegates to our party conference, committed Liberal Democrats, don't read our policy papers, then how can we really expect anyone else to? If even we don't think they are that important, who else will?

The irony is that we really don't need all this detail. At a UK level, we are still an opposition party, and the reason for opposition parties having policy is surely not that we have a fully worked-out programme of government. The aim of opposition policies is to outline the key proposals – the ones that the public are most interested in, ones which embody the party's underlying approach and enable the public to understand and (hopefully) support where they are coming from. There is actually really no point in us producing large quantities of detailed policy, which nobody – not even ourselves – ever actually reads.

Of course, not every motion on conference agendas is a mega-motion from the Federal Policy Committee, accompanied by an even more detailed policy paper.

Agendas in recent years have also been studded with motions on some distinctly more minor issues. Some of these have had the further disadvantage that, although relatively small in actual significance, they have been high-profile issues, which have

inevitably eclipsed debates on duller but objectively more important issues – an obvious example has been pornography.

But some have had nothing wrong with them other than that, in the grand scheme of things, they are not priority areas. I have nothing really against, for example, the proposal for our policy on maritime piracy, but there are surely significant question marks against whether making policy on this is a high priority.

The reason we have ended up debating some of these issues at conference is that it is, surprisingly, easier to get a motion on the agenda about maritime piracy, or archaeology, than it is about our general approach to major policy areas, like crime, or health, say.

In the two years it typically takes to research and draft the major policy papers, the Federal Conference Committee will not take any motions on these areas. So, for example, this autumn's conference will have a full policy paper on health, but the shadow of this paper has meant that it has been impossible to have any discussion at conference about the broad thrust of health policy for the last couple of years.

A policy-making and conference system which actively militates like this against our discussing the most crucial political subjects more than once every two years, and encourages instead discussion of obscure subjects, is surely not giving us the support we need to develop and communicate hard-hitting policies in the key areas.

Finally, I wonder if you have ever turned on the television to see the news, and heard a Labour minister announce a new policy on something that sounds very familiar from a recent Lib Dem policy paper? Frankly, if you haven't had this experience, then you can't watch much TV. The Lib Dems have sometimes been accused of being merely an influential think tank. Of course, we'd rather be a powerful political party, but if you look at the number of our ideas that do get taken up, then we are indeed very influential.

You don't have to look very far to see the reason for this. We have become very good at consulting professionals, and drawing in the views of those working in a particular policy areas about how they could be better managed, and then making their views our own party policy. Unfortunately, what seem to them and us to be sensible managerial improvements usually appear quickly to the Government to be the same thing, and they take them on board.

This gives us an immediate difficulty – we no longer have a distinctive policy – but also reflects a deeper concern. For we are supposed to be a think tank coming up with better managerial ideas about how a particular sector could be better organised?

What makes us different is that we are supposed to be a political party that has distinctive political ideas about how the world should be organised, proceeding from a Liberal Democrat philosophy.

If a government of a different political colour, with a different underlying philosophy, can so easily adopt our views, then surely we had the wrong policy in the first place.

To sum it up, our current policy process gives us policies that try to do too much and, as a result, the policies go unread and unnoticed by the world. It moves at too slow a pace, and results in obscure areas being given a higher billing at our conferences than the key ones. And it encourages the creation of policy that is sensible managerialism, but not distinctively Liberal Democrat.

We need some changes. Centrally, we should be much more political about the approach we take to making policy. As an opposition political party, we should be focussing on making policy proposals in just the key areas. And in devising them, we should concentrate most of all on what is distinctively Liberal Democrat about them.

We should, of course, seek the advice of those working in the fields concerned, but what we say should be our own political statement, not (as is too often the case at the moment) some Hegelian synthesis of the views of the trades unions and the management trade body concerned.

For at present, the working groups that draw up our policy papers are composed almost entirely of those with many years' experience of working in the field.

Once chosen, these experts are sent off for 18 months to come up with pretty much whatever proposals they want. The policy papers they come up with are then rarely challenged (and, in fact, in 16 years conference has never yet rejected a single one!), and so they become our party policy.

This is the wrong way round. The starting point should be our distinctive political position, informed by the evidence of the professionals.

Changing some of this is a task for the Federal Policy Committee, which of course selects the members of working groups, and is responsible for setting their remit and approving their final proposals. FPC is elected by conference to be a political body, and it should be prepared to make political judgements (and not just abstract 'policy' judgements) about who to appoint to working groups, and the political approach it wants to see policy working groups taking.

But some of it is a matter for all of us as party members, to focus what we are saying on the key politically distinctive areas.

To focus mainly on these issues is not irresponsible or abdicating our responsibilities to other policy areas. For, regrettable though it may seem to those with expertise in some of the more infrequently-visited areas of policy, it is not the Lib Dem position on health and safety in the widget-manufacturing industry which will win us the millions of votes we need. It is simple, comprehensible and politically distinctive proposals in a few key areas, which voters can understand and which illustrate to them what is different about us, what we would be like in government and why they should vote for us.

Our conference also needs to focus more on the political, and less purely on making new policy. We are all surely attached to the principle that only conference can finally make party policy, but this does not mean that all that conference can do is make policy.

Conference needs to change, to become a wider and livelier political event. As well as continuing its role as the sovereign policy-maker, it should also be prepared to have open debating sessions, which don't actually make policy.

Hundreds of organisations around the country with an interest in society – from tenants' associations via the WI to the Oxford Union – are able to debate political issues without feeling the need actually to make formal policy on the subject – so why shouldn't we?

If the entire political world is talking about, say, the government's proposals for shaking up the NHS, why can't the Liberal Democrat conference talk about this? We don't necessarily need a whole new policy paper on it: but if we could discuss it at conference nevertheless this would meet two needs: firstly it is of course a very good opportunity to communicate to the world what Liberal Democrats think about it, and secondly it is a genuine chance for Liberal Democrats to communicate and discuss it with each other.

For the question of whether we think our priority is always creating new policy, or taking a distinctive political stand, goes right to the heart of what we think our purpose as an organisation is.

Of course, there is an important role for detailed policy. But we are a political party, and what we bring to the table is a distinctive political approach and an idea of what the Liberal Democrats, and in time a Liberal Democrat government, will be like.

Whether we achieve that depends on many things – but rather than being at best irrelevant to achieving it, or at worst an obstacle to it, our policy-making should support that.

Jeremy Hargreaves is a member of the Liberal Democrats' Federal Policy Committee and the Federal Conference Committee. This article contains some of the ideas outlined in the author's pamphlet, *Wasted Rainforests: an essay on the policy-making process of the Liberal Democrats*. Copies can be obtained for £2.50 from jeremy@jeremyhargreaves.org

MOHAMED CLIMBS A MOUNTAIN

Heard the one about the Somali, the Yemeni, the Catholic and the Jew? Richard Clein reports on a successful multi-ethnic campaign in Liverpool, which shows the Liberal Democrats' new ability to engage with minority communities

Just over a month after the first ethnic Somalian councillor was elected in Liverpool and our first Asian MEP won in the North West, an MP from an ethnic minority was elected in Leicester South.

The safe Labour ward of Princes Park in Liverpool is indeed a microcosm of the safe Labour Midlands constituency. Both results heralded new ground for our party and showed how those from the ethnic minorities are willing to get involved in the democratic process if given the opportunity.

In 2003, the Liberal Democrats got just 264 votes (22%) in the old Granby ward. Boundary changes brought in parts of Abercromby (Chris Davies's former Liverpool Council seat), which consists mainly of multi-occupied Georgian terraces and student digs. There were three sitting Labour councillors in a seat we'd never won, with no voter information and no active members. It seemed an impossible task.

Step forward contender Mohamed Ali, a Somalian who had spent more than 25 years as a social worker in Liverpool and is now a freelance interpreter for the Home Office. He was well known in the area (as 'Jimmy') but had never been interested in party politics.

I encouraged him to stand and convinced him, myself, and some of our acquaintances, that if we started campaigning nine months out we could win.

But this was before we knew it was to be an all postal, all up election on the same day as the European election and fought under new boundaries. I also knew that, despite the multicultural nature of the ward, most people who voted would be white; after all I'd stood there myself in 1995 as a paper candidate. But having run a successful parliamentary campaign (in 1997 for Malcolm Bruce MP) and a local election campaign also in a safe Labour seat in Liverpool (in 1998 for Kiron Reid), it seemed another tremendous challenge.

Another local campaigner, Yemeni Nabil Sultan, was adopted and we embarked on a voter registration campaign while also putting out two leaflets translated into both Somali and Arabic. A few hundred names were added to the register, which were to prove to be crucial. However, with two Muslim candidates, I was nervous that the campaign could be seen to be unrepresentative of the multi-ethnic community.

We needed an ethnic mix that reflected all the different cultures and races. Therefore it was vital to adopt a third candidate who wasn't a Muslim. Paul Twigger, a young student, wasn't adopted until two months before the polls closed, but made a huge contribution to the campaign, nearly winning us a second seat.

A Somalian, Yemeni and Catholic, with a Jewish agent, sent out an important message to the community and was of great interest to the local media who dubbed us 'The World in One Ward' (Liverpool's strap line for its successful European Capital of Culture bid is 'The World in One City').

As the campaign progressed, casework was reported and rubbish was cleared, abandoned cars removed, streets regularly cleaned and potholes filled.

This enabled us to show we had a team capable of getting things done. The leaflets were often different to the citywide literature, to reflect the ethnicity of the ward and a typical by election-style campaign was run. A visit by the LibDem European battle bus with Saj Karim, who was bidding to become our first MEP from an ethnic minority, also helped to enhance our credibility. But it was some of the other things we did to get the community involved which proved most effective. Community Leaders were regularly briefed and their respective issues taken on board.

An Eid Mubarak card was produced – including a picture of the candidates and their contact details - and handed out outside the mosque.

Shopkeepers on all major streets in the ward displayed leaflets, eventually replaced by day-glo orange A3 posters and also kept lists to help us identify our supporters. A hand-addressed target letter was produced for identified Muslims.

A hand-addressed survey was delivered to most of the ward, giving us hundreds of identified supporters who we were then able to knock up, and a target leaflet was produced for students living in the Abercromby part of the ward.

A major issue in the ward is the state of homes in the Granby Triangle – an almost derelict area where Labour had sold the houses to housing associations more than a decade ago.

Since then, the Granby Residents Association has been quite vocal and campaigned for the area to be redeveloped. Early on in the campaign, we got a pledge from council leader Mike Storey and housing chief Flo Clucas that the homes would not be knocked down, as feared by the community, but done up. Some houses are in such a state of disrepair that there is no option but to demolish them. A special leaflet was produced and it was then Community Leaders like Dorothy Kuya (the city's first black community relations officer in the 1970s) felt they could back us. In fact Dorothy, previously a Labour supporter, became a significant ally and even proposed all three candidates. Developers are currently bidding for the chance to redevelop the area and it's no coincidence that turnout was the biggest for more than 30 years.



Another issue was the complacency of the three sitting Labour councillors, who often didn't turn up for crucial area committee meetings and seemed to do little for what is one of the poorest areas in the country. They were taking the people of Princes Park and their support for granted.

Early on in the campaign, they were therefore referred to as 'The Invisible Three' and that theme continued throughout. Unlike previous campaigns where one leaflet would suffice, Labour delivered four different leaflets and were even seen on the final Sunday with the local MP knocking up their supporters. We had them rattled and they knew they would have to fight for their seats this time around.

This was the first time the Liberal Democrats had run a serious campaign in the ward and proves that any ward in the country can be won if a committed team is assembled, the right issues are identified and an ALDC style campaign is run.

In the early hours of 11 June, history was made on two counts. Mohamed Ali not only became the first Liberal Democrat ever elected in the area but also the first councillor of Somalian origin in the country. The other two candidates also came close to winning and, if the Greens hadn't polled so highly, the result could have been even more spectacular. Minority parties stopped us winning in other seats across the country and in the recent by-elections - for example, in Birmingham Hodge Hill where Respect got 6.3% of the vote.

In fact, the minority parties also stopped us winning even more convincingly in some seats, again illustrated in the Leicester South by election where Respect got 12.7% of the vote. We must heed this message and ensure we approach the general election with a more focused and radical domestic agenda than the other two parties.

On the back of our success in Princes Park, we have already recruited a number of new members and the campaign has already started to make sure that Mohamed - who is also now the only black councillor in the city - gets re-elected in 2006.

Our ability to engage the ethnic minorities and, in particular, Muslims was clearly also a factor in Leicester South and Birmingham Hodge Hill.

Just a week or so after Mohamed's election, the by-election in Leicester South - a safe Labour seat in a multicultural constituency - was called. Step forward contender Parmjit Singh Gill, looking to come from third place (17% in 2001) and become the first Asian Liberal Democrat MP - sounds familiar?

Three weeks before polling day in Leicester South, Mohamed and I travelled there to help engage the disaffected Somalian electorate. With the candidate and Baroness Faulkner - both from an ethnic minority - we visited shops, cafes, community centres and a mosque in the Spinney Hills ward to get them involved in our campaign and persuade them Parmjit would ensure they got a fair deal.

Mohamed was treated like a hero by his fellow Somalians - hearing that he had been elected as a councillor in Liverpool showed they too could take control of their own destinies. Mohamed was invited back a second time and I have no doubt his involvement played a crucial role in our success.

In both Princes Park and Leicester South, the contests went right to the bell but the last couple of months should give the party huge encouragement, with three historic results at local, national and European level showing the other two parties that we can win any seat in the country and attract people from a range of ethnic backgrounds.

It is now, though, that the hard work begins if we are to sustain our success and hold these seats. There is no doubt that Saj, Parmjit and Mohamed moved a mountain but the real challenge is to find more people to do the same.

Richard Clein is a member of the Liberator Collective. He and Mohamed Ali will be speaking on 'How we delivered a knockout blow to Labour' at an ALDC fringe meeting in Bournemouth at 6.15pm on 22 September.

CONFUSED? TRY JOHN STUART MILL

Simon Goldie argues that government should aim to make people free, not happy

Charles Kennedy has been saying for quite some time that the battle of the 21st century is between authoritarianism and liberalism. This, he argues, will replace the old Left/Right battle over the market and a free or command economy. But what exactly does he mean? And who are the authoritarians? After all, aren't we living in a Western liberal democracy? Hasn't liberalism already won, with both Labour and the Conservatives accepting, albeit at times reluctantly, the essence of liberal ideas?

Mark Oaten proudly says we should shout out that we are liberal and Liberal Future goes out of its way to say what it thinks liberalism is. Full marks for effort boys and girls, but "taxation is the price for civilisation" doesn't really cut the mustard. What Mark and co. are doing is creating a Trojan horse. Look at this, this is the new liberalism, but inside is simply a collection of policies they quite like. Sadly the policies aren't coherent or that inspiring.

Perhaps all this is rather academic. The Liberal Democrats are doing better than they have done at elections for years. The Tories are still stuck in the polls and unable to break through. The government's popularity is crashing down around them. We could sit it out and wait for the electorate to come to us. But they won't come if they don't think we stand for something. Paradoxically, people don't like politics but they do like their politicians to believe in things. Offer up some good policies without vision and you will get nowhere. Offer up an ideological vision without reasonable policies and you will get nowhere even faster.

We have some good policies. We have creative and interesting ideas. We also have a political vision: liberalism. And Charles is right. The battle lines are drawn between two opposing poles. We must, though, be certain and clear about what we mean. The beliefs we have must shape the way we will run the country.

As with everything, there is a 'but' coming. We also have some clunky policies. At times, we come across as managers instead of politicians. We appear to be saying to the electorate, "we would build on what New Labour has done and we would do what they have done better." Surely, though – and here Mark Oaten and Liberator must agree – we need to be saying to everyone, look this is the way we see the world and how we think governments should behave and it is fundamentally different to the current regime and the nasty noises coming from stage Right.

So how should we argue for liberalism? The party is a broad coalition and Liberal Democrats come to liberalism from different angles. Some have been in the party for years, others came via the Social Democrats and more recently many disaffected Tories have joined. They bring an enthusiasm, a gut feeling that the other two parties have just got it wrong and they bring ideas that liberals might not have considered. I came to liberalism in the early 80s. I agreed with the ideas about

reshaping the country and I was appalled at how badly Labour lets down the people it is most supposed to champion: the poor. Then I read John Stuart Mill.

When I read Mill, it was like hearing my own thoughts read back to me. The arguments he lays down in 'On Liberty' are the best expression of liberalism. Mill says that the individual must be free to do whatever they wish as long as it does not harm others. Mill does not believe it is the duty of government to make people happy: its only duty is to guarantee liberty.

Now, we aren't an ideological party in the way the others are and we should never simply regurgitate ideas and then try and implement them for the sake of it. But I do think that the principles Mill talks about are as relevant now as when he made the case for them. How we interpret them and what we do may change, but the idea of liberty is at the root of everything for the party.

There are two ways that government can guarantee liberty. One is to stop people doing things that cause harm, the other is to make sure people can maximise that liberty as far as possible. Mill spends quite some time arguing that people must have the opportunity to reach their potential. They might not succeed, they might not wish to reach their potential, but the opportunity must be there.

It follows that anything that is an obstacle to liberty should be removed or whittled down. In that way a liberal government will take on poverty and ensure social justice, all with the aim of making people free and not attempting to level people up, down or sideways.

One of the big debates since the Reagan presidency is whether or not government is part of the problem or the solution. The Tories under Howard say it is the problem; Labour, even under Blair, says that it is the only solution. When Liberal Democrats enter the debate, we must make sure it is on our terms and not our opponents'.

Liberals are not anti- or pro-government in the way that others are. Liberals see government as a tool that can and should be used when appropriate. This is why taxation is not "the price of a civilised society". Taxation is part and parcel of the many tools government has. In fact, progressive taxation is a classic liberal idea. If the tax rates are set fairly then people pay what they can afford.

And if the money raised is used wisely, it ensures that everyone has the opportunity to reach his or her potential. These days, we all understand that lower taxation makes for a more dynamic economy but, when arguing for income tax, we should put forward the liberal case, not a rather defensive argument that it is the "price of civilisation", as though ideally we would like to scrap it completely.

Before Liberator readers sit back complacently to think how wonderful this Liberal Future bashing is, people on the other wing of the party must also be vigilant in the sorts of policies they put forward and apply the same test of liberty.

The more complex our world becomes, the more opportunities there are for people and organisations to put obstacles in the way of liberty. In a liberal society, the role of government is to speak on behalf of people against other interests that curb liberty. This doesn't mean that the other interests maliciously wish to deprive people of their freedom: some might, but others are simply pursuing their own interest and need to be checked.

Government, too, can have its own interest and, as with any other authority, a healthy scepticism needs constantly to check government and make sure it doesn't also become an impediment to liberty.

What liberalism means has changed and evolved over the decades. But no matter how much liberalism takes on new ideas – bottom-up politics, environmentalism, aspects of social democracy – it is the pursuit of liberty that underpins all its ideas and policies.

Authoritarianism, in the shape of dictatorships, is easy to identify and battle against. The urge the Labour government has to tell people what to do and the way the Tories specify what our morals should be are not as terrifying as the secret police knocking on your door in the middle of the night. But it is still authoritarianism, and it is this type of authoritarianism that Charles is talking about.

Labour and the Tories come from very different political traditions, but they share a common idea, even if it doesn't tend to get associated with them. It is the utilitarian approach of Jeremy Bentham.

Ironically, many see Bentham as a liberal. He is credited with establishing the furniture of much of the modern state: bureaucracy and the prison system. Proof, if any were needed, that his ideas are not naturally liberal. But, as a child, Mill was raised on Bentham and without Bentham there would be no Mill.

The problem with Bentham's ideas is that he proposed government should govern with the aim of the greatest good for the greatest number. In principle this sounds perfectly acceptable, but it can quickly lead to the tyranny of the majority.

There is something else, though, about Bentham's ideas that to me lies at the root of the authoritarianism we face today: governments telling us what is best for us. The aim of his philosophy is that government should do 'good' for the greatest number. Aside from the possibility of an endless argument over what that means, the essence of the idea is to me objectionable.

As soon as government tries to do 'good' or make people happy, things quickly begin to go wrong. However much Liberal Democrats might appear to have things in common with

Labour in terms of policies or indignation at injustice, this is really the dividing line. Forget whether Labour is social democrat, New Tory or a bunch of management consultants running the country from the manual of someone who once did a MBA at a business school: they wish to govern for the greatest good for the greatest number. They think in terms of groups not individuals, and this way of thinking has gained widespread acceptance in the world we live in.

Each time we come to a policy issue or a topical event, we should always define the argument in our terms. We don't believe government or any authority should tell people how to think; people can make up their own mind. All a liberal government would do is provide them with the freedom to do so.

Utilitarianism gets people thinking it is their government that will solve their problems, that they should become dependent on government and that political society should be one where the people at the top tell the ones at the bottom what to think.

A liberal society would turn that upside down. Its government would frame things so that the individuals could take control of their lives and achieve their potential as much as possible. It would be bottom-up, would encourage and celebrate co-operation within society and would step in when obstacles got in the way. It would not govern for the greatest number but for all individuals: individuals who make up society. Crucially, it would champion liberty.

Simon Goldie is membership and communications secretary of Islington Liberal Democrats and a former stand-up comedian

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NOT WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED

Health Concern was a grassroots movement that took over a council and elected an MP. It might have been a pointer to a new local politics until its massacre in June, reports Mike Oborski

Amid the torrent of speculation as to how June 2004 election results will impact on the careers of Tony Blair and Michael Howard and their respective parties, it is hardly surprising that local election results in the Worcestershire district of Wyre Forest passed totally unnoticed.

Yet, three years ago, Wyre Forest was the centre of attention, having just elected Health Concern Independent MP Dr Richard Taylor with a massive majority – sweeping aside junior ‘promising’ Labour Home Office minister David Lock.

Commentators at that time noted admiringly that, even before Taylor’s parliamentary victory, Health Concern was already the dominant group in the coalition running the council.

Indeed, Health Concern went from being the largest part of a 2000/02 Rainbow Coalition (Health Concern, Conservative, Liberal and Liberal Democrat) to running the council on their own as a minority administration from 2002 through to 10 June, peaking at 21 of the 42 Council seats in May 2002.

It is impossible to convey to outsiders exactly how strong support for Health Concern had become. They soared above criticism. This was the people’s crusade!

On 10 June, however, Health Concern collapsed from 15 seats to 8, with its council leader among the victims in whole council elections on new boundaries. What went wrong? Are there lessons for other single issue groups and indeed for conventional political parties?

Taylor remains enormously personally popular and, if there were a general election today, he might retain his seat, albeit with a greatly reduced majority. The problem does not lie with him.

In a way ‘the problem’ lies at the very root of the whole enterprise. Health Concern council candidates stood to protest against the downgrading of Kidderminster General Hospital and that of course is exactly why local people voted for them.

The first snag is that the district council has no control of health matters in the area - let alone the hospital – and so can only huff and puff in protest but cannot deliver.

The second snag is that Health Concern candidates – driven only by their passionate support for the hospital – had little or no knowledge or experience of local government, no agreed policies, no common approach and no common philosophy with which to tackle the mundane problems of local administration which they were soon to face.

They were in fact a mixture of previous Tory, Labour, Liberal Democrat and non-voters united only by a single issue. The mix was all the more exotic because of a marked lack of any apparently effective candidate selection process and the

recruitment of several leftist ex-Labour members of the council who had gone Independent over an earlier housing row.

Some of the newcomers brought a fresh outlook and new skills to the council. Others brought nothing. They were all, however, bedevilled by inexperience and by the fear of a sizeable section of the group to take any decision in case it was the wrong decision. This fear of decision-taking was to prove an insurmountable barrier.

They had also created very high expectations. This was to be not merely a ‘different’ regime but also a ‘better’ regime. It was in fact to be ground down — like every other administration — by the dull reality of day-to-day mundane local issues and limited scope for action.

Locally, car parking slipped into chaos and a new kerbside recycling scheme received very mixed reviews, sliding into overspend. The failure, in a classic saga of Health Concern dithering, to get widespread council offices onto a single site, left the authority bleeding financially with devastating consequences.

Probably completely unintentionally, Health Concern somehow came to adopt a cloak of moral superiority. Being ‘independent’ was, we were endlessly told, morally superior to being a ‘political party’. It was somehow replacing murky political intrigue with true virtue. In time, confidence in its own superiority became the unchecked arrogance of unthinking controlling groups everywhere. When things did not go Health Concern’s way, it was easier to ignore the reality than tackle it. If other people could not see that it was always sunny, then they were simply being obstinate and bloody minded. There was a creeping bunker mentality.

When you are on a total roll, with the electorate completely behind you, amateur campaigning tactics and naive election literature simply do not matter. Indeed, they can be part of the charm and difference of the whole enterprise that attracts an otherwise disillusioned electorate.

When that attraction dims in the glare of harsh day-to-day political reality, then you need a more structured and professional approach in order to survive.

Here we return to the built-in flaws at the very heart of the project.

‘Independent Kidderminster Hospital and Health Concern’ councillors promoted themselves as being Independent candidates in the June 2004 elections.

Each of these candidates in multi-member wards had a completely separate leaflet proclaiming on one side their own personal independence while not even mentioning their fellow party candidates in the same ward. The other side of the leaflet was, however, identical to that of every other Health Concern candidate in the district. Were they 'independent' or not? Were they a team or not? They certainly did not look like a team.

In fact, they are all members of an 'Independent Kidderminster Hospital and Health Concern' political party, formally registered as such with the national registrar of political parties. In council, they block voted at least as much as conventional political parties.

Worse still, their cabinet members were all too often strangely mute. It seemed that only the voice of the group leader was heard, so further creating the impression of a tightly controlled conventional party entity, which conflicted badly with their declared aspiration to be seen as 'different' and 'independent'. In addition, they were remarkably poor communicators. It was as if having once told the electorate what was self evidently right and good for them, there was really simply no need whatsoever to repeat the message. This delusion reminded me of the early days of the SDP.

With honourable exceptions, some of their councillors totally neglected ward functions, never or rarely attending key tenant consultative meetings. A few were elected without knowing where their wards were. One reputedly told the first resident to phone him with a problem "Fuck off! What do you think I am, a bloody social worker?" There were no ward newsletters.

I am not sure how far Health Concern leaders and councillors were actually aware of the ultimate and most deeply entrenched flaw in the project. There seemed to be a fatal dichotomy between those of their members who saw the hospital cause as everything — the alpha and the omega — and those who saw a need to diversify and adopt policies to deal with actual council issues.

It would be unduly harsh to identify the first of their minority administration leaders Liz Davies (2002/03) with the former approach and her successor Howard Martin (2003/04) with the latter approach. However, those of us who were close observers of events find it difficult not to make the comparison.

In reality both were right and both were wrong. It was 'Catch 22' whether they realised it or not.

It was necessary for them to keep the hospital issue as the very core of their campaign. To dilute that appeal was clearly suicidal.

It was, however, also necessary, if they were to survive, for them to create a wider appeal as an administration capable of

tackling the whole range of council services. Without that assurance, they were also doomed.

The two aspirations proved to be disastrously contradictory rather than successfully complimentary.

Their misery was aggravated by a series of drawn out pre-election desertions to the Conservatives. The lesson here is that it is important to develop coherent and comprehensive candidate selection procedures from the word go. I would guess that the rest of the council knew perfectly well from almost day one that Health Concern had haplessly elected Tory cuckoos in their council group nest.

Nor did Health Concern understand the work rate required to hold seats when push comes to shove. While they put out one or two leaflets and plodded around looking lost in the June 2004 showdown, everyone else fought highly organised, intensive and tightly targeted campaigns. Indeed, as early as 2002, the Liberals had demonstrated that Health Concern was vulnerable to a sustained community politics-based campaign.

At the heart of the problem, however, was the failure to reconcile the various conflicting demands of 'hospital', 'council', 'group' and 'independence'. Almost symbolically, both Davies and Martin lost their seats on 10 June.

So where does that leave us? At its best, Health Concern was smart, new and inspirational. That I loved. Later, it was simply a rather inferior imitation of any other conventional political party. Will it return? No, it will now simply fade away, leaving a warm glow but no record of achievement. There is now no way back.

Mike Oborksi is a Liberal Party councillor in Wyre Forest and led a four-party administration on the council for two years.

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SOUND OF SILENCE

Why are the Liberal Democrats so scared of campaigning on Europe, asks Howard Cohen

Once again, the Liberal Democrat European election campaign in June played down the party's strong Euro-credentials.

I would go further in stating that, as the country's only consistently pro-EU party, the Liberal Democrats have to bear a huge responsibility for the amount of ignorance among the electorate about Europe.

Politics is about far more than elections. Ultimately, elections are simply a test of public opinion and reactions to issues and agendas. Increasingly the public have become reliant upon the media, but we should not fall in to the trap of blaming the media. They will always choose the easy option of reproducing the words of those who shout loudest, in preference to investigating the truth. The only way to make a real difference on issues such as Europe is to dictate those issues and direct the agenda.

The Europhobes have been left with a free run in the media and on the doorsteps to spout their xenophobic propaganda and, ultimately, that ignorance and misinformation has spawned UKIP.

Even more worrying are the increasingly xenophobic and racist attitudes of the public, which have been fuelled by the one-sided debates on both the EU and asylum seekers and have resulted in far more worrying electoral and opinion poll results than UKIP's bizarre collection of C-list celebrities and attention-seekers.

Politics has always been quite a negative science, mainly because it is far easier to campaign against something than in favour. This is why it is all the more surprising that a party which often struggles to have its voice heard should choose to be so quiet when it has a unique positive message to convey.

Those who are actively involved in politics often live a cocooned existence, where we assume that everyone knows what we stand for and how we differ from our opponents. Those of us who have broken out of that cocoon know otherwise.

We have to accept that Labour has too many doubts and splits about Europe properly to educate the public about the positive aspects of the EU. Likewise, no pressure group has the finance or credibility to take on both UKIP and the Tory Europhobes. It is true that there is a sizeable group of anti-Europe voters around the country, some of whom have genuinely well-reasoned and carefully considered opinions.

However, most only hold such views because they have never heard or read a credible pro-Europe argument. It is up to the Liberal Democrats to start pushing that argument at every possible opportunity. Here we have an exclusive stance on one of the issues of the moment, where there is not even a competent pressure group to argue the case, yet the party seems reluctant and fearful to take the bull by the horns.

It seems that somebody in the party has decided that the stance on Europe is an electoral liability and therefore must be swept under the carpet. Opinion polls constantly highlight the fact that the Lib Dems and Charles Kennedy are trusted and respected far more than the other parties. Yet the party still covers away from promoting one of its most consistent and

distinctive policies. Why is there so much fear amongst the party's managers about this issue?

At least the recent Euro election was not quite as bad as the previous one, when the Liberal Democrat campaign tried blatantly to use the party's pro-referendum policy to win votes from the xenophobic and ignorant. Nevertheless, it still chose to play down EU issues and made no attempt to take the xenophobes head-on. Clearly the vote has held up OK, as a result of the combined effects of the anti-war policy and some good local campaigning.

However, the final rise in support is only a comparison with the results from the previous poor campaign and is pitiful compared to the local election results on the same day. If only the party could have been as strong, consistent and forthright in projecting its Europe policies as it has been with the anti-war policies.

The anti-war campaign has been a perfect example of how the party can do well with national single-issue campaigning outside election times. It has proved that the Liberal Democrats can do more than just local campaigning. If it can be done on a generally popular issue like Iraq, it should also be possible on a more complicated issue like Europe.

We may eventually face a referendum on the EU constitution and maybe on the euro too. If the Liberal Democrats continue to act with such timidity, we will be faced with the frightening prospect of an isolationist Britain, marginalised and ineffective in Europe and beyond. Such isolationism can only bring with it further xenophobia and racism. The time to start the campaigning is now. The run-up to any referendum will be far too late to have any realistic effect.

The rise of UKIP may be a wake-up call for the Tories, but it should be an even bigger wake-up call for us.

Howard Cohen is a member of the Liberator Collective

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DON'T IGNORE THE RIGHT

Dear Liberator,

Simon Tittle's article *Kulturkampf* (*Liberator* 296) is right to point to the rise of the UKIP as more significant than a mere Eurosceptic jaunt by a bored electorate.

As a purely 'rejectionist' party, it has clearly hoovered up a wide variety of disaffected ne'er do wells and, unlike the BNP, because it is cloaked in apparent respectability, it may persist for some time.

As such, it fits neatly into the dynamic of populist right-wing parties popping up throughout the western world, fuelled by decades of below-par performance from leaders, and tapping into genuine grievances that the political establishment has failed to address.

Just because the subject matter makes us uncomfortable, or it is expressed to us in inadequate terms or uneducated tones, doesn't necessarily make the core disaffection of such voters in any meaningful sense 'false'.

We are going to have to deal with the things that irk them, or risk being swept aside in favour of those who claim they will. And tired old ideas dressed up in scrubbed but threadbare rhetorical clothes simply won't cut it. We actually have to start fixing things.

For example, does anyone really think the establishment parties have done a good job of tackling urban decline in the depressing, ugly, dirty, and often violent working heartlands of the old world?

Instead of addressing the problem from the ground up, the response of the elite, locally and centrally, has too often been to dump prestige projects in the middle of them and blithely expect people to be mollified.

Or, has any real community-wide effort been made to build a true consensus and sell the benefits of a vigorously and deliberately multi-cultural society?

Or (and here, if I tread all over the politically correct soul of the left, it is without apology), can anyone really pretend that a country like the UK is not outrageously over-populated?

Would it really break some immortal canon of belief to agree there is an upper limit to the number of people that can be squashed into a little island and we probably passed it some years ago?

I speak specifically here about population density and its effect on society and the environment, with no racial overtones.

LETTERS

Put any group of advanced mammals in a confined space serviced with inadequate resources and they will either retreat into depression and torpor, or eat each other. Why imagine that humans would be any different?

Of course, what we do about our responsibility for the world's less well-off if our answer isn't going to be "well, come and live here, then" is another story, and one that should be the real debate, instead of a sterile slanging match over immigration numbers.

Whatever the cause, the distress felt by ordinary citizens is real, because their perception is their reality. While we pontificate, debating the validity of their feelings, we fail to deal with the causes of them.

And if we just sniffily ignore them, then we simply open the door a little wider to populist demagogues who are always waiting in the wings with simplistic arguments and blunt-edged solutions.

In Australia, for example, the conservative government was emphatically out-flanked by the rise of the One Nation Party, a populist movement that appealed directly to those fearing being 'swamped' by Asian immigrants as much as to those simply fed up with the status quo.

Until One Nation started winning all sorts of elections, and threatened to undermine the major parties' vote dramatically, the political establishment completely failed to notice the rise of concern about the style and level of immigration. And worse, even once the challenge had been thrown down, they assumed that the status quo would remain essentially unchanged forever, and overlooked very obvious warning signals from an increasingly restive electorate.

But the cure was almost as bad as the sickness. The situation was only 'rescued' by a marked lurch to the right by the government, in particular the appallingly heartless treatment meted out to asylum seekers, locked up in virtual concentration camps, and enthusiastically

demonised as 'queue jumpers' at best, and neo-terrorists at worst.

Sadly, this policy was also enthusiastically adopted by a mesmerised Labour opposition, as the cancer spread.

It has taken some years, and a massive cultural effort by people not normally involved in the political process, to wreak some moderate change in this highly embarrassing situation; a situation created, ironically, in a society where tolerance and decency are generally taken for granted, which is among the most racially and culturally mixed on the planet, and has an almost complete lack of racial tension on the streets.

Ordinary people are disturbed by the pace of change they see around them; disillusioned by repeated failure of generations of governments; and frightened to live in a world where many of the traditional verities have been stripped away.

We must offer them leadership, explanations, empathy and ideas – and we must engage their imagination – or we will lose them to the quick quip of the mindless jingoist, with consequences that may well outstrip any discussion of the niceties of the Euro election results.

As Simon so presciently argues, you do not 'accommodate' with anti-democrats. You win, or you lose. To the barricades, brothers and sisters.

**Steve Yolland
Melbourne, Australia**

TAYLOR MADE

Dear Liberator

When a policy working group is still at 'first reading' stage, has produced no specific proposals and has not yet looked at any draft wording, it is a bit difficult to be sure what the outcome is going to be and is potentially futile to debate various people's interpretations of what is happening on the way to that outcome.

However, I do feel a duty to respond to some of the bizarre statements attributed to Professor Taylor (*Liberator* 296). He is quoted as saying that the ultra-economic liberals wanted him to put a preface into the final policy that

was in essence a call for free markets and suggesting that the aforesaid economic liberals would justify scrapping the factory acts and removing all worker protection.

It is true that, at his final meeting as chair, there was a strongly expressed view that the preface to the new policy should clearly link it into 'Setting Business Free' but, to my recollection, the detail of how that should be done was not discussed and the suggestion that this would be a simplistic 'call for free markets' is entirely his own and was not articulated at the meeting. The even more bizarre idea of scrapping the factory acts and removing all worker protection has never been suggested by anyone and would not receive any meaningful backing if it was.

Professor Taylor has made a significant contribution to this working group and much of his thinking seems likely to find its way through to the final policy paper. It is sad, therefore, that he saw fit to resign over what seems to have been an inaccurate assessment of the direction that the group was taking.

Particularly sad when, as chair, he had it within his power to actually find out what the group's view was by putting a proposition to it and asking for a vote. Had he done so, I think that I would have been very clear that neither of the positions to which his opposition is stated above had any chance of adoption by the group.

My assessment of the feeling of the group is that they oppose any unnecessary regulation on enterprise or unions but recognise that the economy needs a balance of power between capital, labour and consumer and that that means that regulation and law is needed in defined circumstances to ensure that the necessary balance is achieved. I don't know whether that is 'social market' or 'free market' - it just seems common sense to me.

**Cllr Alan Sherwell
Chair, Employment and Trade
Unions Working Group**

DOING THE BUSINESS

Dear Liberator

I agree entirely with Alan Sherwell's view (*Liberator* 296) that regulation should be proportionate and efficient, a view I expressed in my critique of the Liberal Democrats' anti-smoking policy (*Liberator* 295).

However, Alan is being either disingenuous or naïve when he defends the Liberal Democrat Treasury Team as wanting nothing more a regulatory tidying-up exercise. Vincent Cable and

David Laws have a much broader agenda, which appears to embrace a belief that economic liberty trumps all other kinds of liberty; the dogmatic extension of competition regardless of the outcomes; and the reduction of the EU to little more than a free trade area.

Alan begs us not to call these policies 'Thatcherite' but... if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's probably a duck.

There is a further risk in Alan's argument, that an undue emphasis on regulation as an issue inadvertently discredits regulation per se. After all, what is 'regulation' but a fancy word for rules and laws? Anti-regulatory rhetoric bolsters the notion, popular in the 80s and 90s, that business inhabits some sort of moral bubble and should not be subject to the same rules or morality as the rest of society.

There is a positive case for regulation, analogous to the need for laws to govern the ordinary citizen. The weak need protection from the strong. Alan paints a genteel picture of Britain's business leaders sipping tea round at the CBI, yet he must know that business attracts more than its fair share of aggressive 'alpha males', obsessed with accumulating money and power, and with few scruples about how they acquire either.

Business interests and individual citizens are not equal protagonists. Left to their own devices, powerful people will often take advantage of their muscle and enrich themselves through fake accounting, tax evasion, share option scams, raiding pension funds, polluting the environment and generally ripping off honest employees, shareholders and customers. There are enough recent examples of 'fat cat' pay and dodgy share deals to know that corruption has become almost commonplace.

To protect the honest citizen from this sort of behaviour, government and regulation is essential. Indeed, capitalism cannot work without regulation. The knowledge that honest behaviour is enforced by the rule of law provides the basis for trust, without which business cannot function.

Britain's regulatory system could undoubtedly do with improvement. But we need to get the problem in perspective. Business leaders are forever whinging about 'red tape', yet British business is probably the least regulated and least taxed in Europe. Perhaps the Treasury Team could explain how our continental neighbours nevertheless consistently outperform us.

**Simon Titley
Brussels**

KENNEDY MAJORS

Dear Liberator,

With all the manoeuvrings over economic policy and strategy (which have been widely commented on in *Liberator*), I think the question needs to be asked: "Where is Charles Kennedy in all this?"

The job of leader is, well, to lead, but we have heard little of any substance from the leader on these issues, apart from heaping warm praises on Cable and Laws at Southport (a favour he did not extend to Matthew Taylor while he was Treasury spokesperson).

Whenever Paddy Ashdown proposed something disagreeable, his misgivings were blamed on his 'inner circle' of senior MPs and advisors. Kennedy does not have this excuse: he may not know quite as much about economics as David Laws, but he is sufficiently educated in political philosophy to know what economic liberalism means, and how controversial it turns out to be in the Liberal Democrats.

It seems that Kennedy is in a similar position to John Major, with 'fools to the left of him and jokers on the right': refusing to choose between rival factions, but failing to stop a small cabal of 'bastards' from setting the agenda and grabbing the headlines.

Michael Dobbs wrote in *House of Cards*: "Who would be a leader in today's cruel world"? John Major is a nice man, and no doubt Kennedy is too, but this did not constitute effective leadership.

**Andrew Toyne
Exmouth**

LIVING OFF CRUMBS

Dear Liberator,

Were you to walk down the local High Street today and ask a random sample of 30 people what the Liberal Democrats actually stand for, the sad news is that, except in places where local party organisation is active, you would be fortunate to find more than one person who could say anything apart from Europe and Iraq.

You do not have to be a marketing expert to know that people will not buy vagueness off you or anyone else. They demand detail and they need/want clarity.

It is, therefore, the responsibility of the national party to begin to increase levels of public political consciousness, not to wait every two years or so for a campaign around an election. It should use every means of communication - TV, radio, newspapers, and of course the

internet, to raise the awareness of huge sections of the British electorate as to what it is all about, what we believe, what our position is on this issue or that issue and our specific policies.

The party needs, therefore, both communication and clarity. Beyond these, it needs above all a certainty of direction. This is not the stubbornness most people associate with politicians who come around every few years for another helping of cherry pie, but an imparted confidence, an authority that within itself it has the ideas and the conviction, which it can translate into strategies and solutions that respond to the needs of the British people; that it can both go out in front and lead as well as listen to/consult the electorate.

In recent years especially, it has been as if the philosophy leading Liberal Democracy has been to advance only through the fall-out of the other two main parties, to live off the crumbs of attrition as it were, hoping to increase by popular disenchantment with the others.

Not only has this entirely denied the party the overall breakthrough it needs, but also it has effectively disenfranchised huge numbers of voters from real choices, as so many hundreds of thousands, if not millions, seek to fulfil their expectations/take out their frustrations in a growing movement of single issue politics.

Certainly Liberal Democracy needs to build new coalitions from these votes; certainly the importance of local campaigns cannot be underestimated; but what the party needs above all is leadership which spurs communication, which spurs a clarity of purpose and conviction, which motivates allegiance, which hastens victory.

Until this happens, it will go on celebrating a one percent increase in the European elections as a reason for hope ad infinitum, and the British people will remain largely in the dark.

We need to be constantly seeking solutions, not magnifying hills into mountains, if we are to seize the space for the alternative agenda the party has built, but which still gathers dust in uncertainty and hesitation.

**Bill Haymes
Dudley**

REVIEWS

Stasiland - Stories from behind the Berlin Wall by Anna Funder Granta 2004 £7.99

Anna Funder's *Stasiland* is an extraordinary achievement and a fascinating book. This young Australian, who, from an early age, became obsessed with all things German, came to Berlin in 1996 to work for a television station, and becomes more and more drawn towards the world of 'before', the time between the end of the Second World War and 1989, when the Wall came down.

In her job, she comes across

All carry the scars.

Funder captures the grey of the East so vividly; "I inhabit the grey end of the spectrum: grey buildings, grey earth, grey birds, grey trees". The interiors are dull, full of moquette and brown walls. Even her flat lists, and is virtually empty. On the main thoroughfares, some of the buildings are painted to about 10 feet, the area which Honecker and his bigwigs could see from the back of a car as they sped by. Above this line of vision is just concrete. The greyness has seeped into the souls of those who lived there, just the concrete set in the minds of those who governed until 1989.

This was a land where approximately land one person in 60 spied on their neighbour. The church had more informants than members. The Stasi tried to recruit everyone, using blackmail, bribes, appeals to ideology. But they were not always successful. One factory worker was taken aside and recruited. She returns to the factory floor and gaily announces to all and sundry that she must be reliable as she has just become an agent.

Many who lived in East Germany, both oppressed and oppressor, have doubts about the new, free world they inhabit. The great experiment of equality failed, that is accepted, but there is little fairness in the West, just many things. Before, rents were low, there were plenty of kindergartens, and the bars had plenty of cheap beer, even if there was nothing much in the shops.

A couple came over to the West just after the Wall came down. They were shown a supermarket - "How many kinds of ketchup do you have?" they asked. And the West German who was with them understood, and wondered too why it is necessary to have 30 kinds of ham and 15 sorts of ketchup.

It is estimated that it will take the Puzzle women 375 years to finish their painstaking work. The two Germans were so out of balance it will take a long time for a proper reunification of the mind of the country, but, one hopes, not as long as that. Funder's book is a remarkable record. Read it.

Wendy Kyrle-Pope



references to the Puzzle women. When the Wall came down and the Honecker regime realised its days were numbered, the Stasi (state police) tried to shred every file they had, burning out their own shredding machines, and scuttling over to the West to buy more. But much of the shredded material remained, and it is the job of the Puzzle women to reassemble the documents.

People were reluctant to talk to Funder about the 'before', so she advertised in the personal columns, asking to meet anyone who would talk to her. Through these meetings, the story of the Wall, and the world behind, unfolds in their words; the wall builders, those who tried to escape, those who were Stasi. East Germany was a sealed world of political experiment, which dominated the entire population. Again and again, we hear from different voices how the end came. These are tales of courage and obsession, selflessness and selfishness.

Saturday

To London for the inaugural meeting of Liberals Against Choice. I have to confess that it does not sound My Sort Of Thing, but it is wise to keep an eye on these ginger groups: who would have dreamed, even a couple of years ago, that the Peel Group and the Beveridge Group would enjoy the prominence within the party that they do today? I did ask if the meeting could be held a little nearer Rutland, but I am afraid they had rather a “take it or leave it” attitude. At the meeting, the group’s organisers display the new campaigning materials they have developed – notably the “It doesn’t matter what you think” slip for Focuses. The lunch menu proves disappointingly limited and, as there is no sign of our being asked to vote upon anything, I use the tea-only break as an opportunity to slip away to Lord’s. No doubt I shall be informed if I am required to attend any more of the group’s meetings.

Sunday

The early summer has been wet in Rutland this year and I have been worried about the haymaking; walking my meadows this morning, I am relieved to see that the grass is just about ready to be mown. I return to the Hall, and Lord Rennard rings to ask if I can help the final week’s effort in Leicester South by putting up some of his crack canvassers and deliverers for a few nights. I reply that it would be a pleasure – the West Wing is almost completely dried out after last winter’s floods – and insist that he send them over at once. They arrive this evening and I lay on a slap up dinner and entertainment – the village children sing “Hurrah for Lord Bonkers!” (my own composition) and I read to the assembled company from my Thoughts on Free Trade. I am pleased to see that the party workers insist upon an early night, as this betokens just the dedicated spirit they will require for the struggle ahead.

Monday

Over breakfast I remark upon the arrangement that used to obtain in that excellent institution, the Youth Hostel. There the jolly lads and lasses in their heavy boots and khaki shorts would pay for the night’s accommodation by undertaking a few light chores before setting off to scale Kinder Scout or, as it might be, Brown Willy. I suggest to the assembled canvassers and deliverers that it might be a nice gesture if they were to offer to do something along the same lines. They agree more or less readily, and I set them to work with scythes in my meadows, directing operations myself atop the haywain. I return exhausted, but with that glow which an honest day’s hard work imparts, to be informed that Lord Rennard has telephoned three times.

Tuesday

Talking of telephones, one of my proudest boasts is that I was the first chap in Rutland to own one. As it happened, presumably because no one else had one, for years it never rang, which was something of a disappointment. Nowadays, however, everyone has a telephone and mine rings simply all the time. Why, today I had seven calls from Lord Rennard alone! Because of the compact nature of our county, the mobile telephone was slow to catch on here: shouting remained the most popular form of communication until well into the 1980s. To aid this, some enterprising fellows took to putting up towers that one could ascend in order to shout from the top. Though many had a

Lord Bonkers’ Diary

pleasant crenulated effect, they were not always welcome erections – I recall taking a fellow court when he attempted to build one next to my own Home for Well-Behaved Orphans – and I often wondered why people went to all the trouble of climbing them when they had nothing better to shout when they got to the top but “Hi, I’m in the tower”. I was not surprised that these towers soon lost their popularity, but their ivy-clad ruins dot the Rutland landscape to this day.

Wednesday

An early start in my meadows. I am disappointed to learn that a some of the canvassers and deliverers have tried to abscond overnight – they were rounded up when they broke cover at the Uppingham road. Having reassured myself that all is well with the haymaking, I have myself driven to Leicester: at a time like this it is incumbent upon every Liberal Democrat to do his, or indeed her, utmost for our great cause. I spend my time in the campaign headquarters raising morale and instructing neophytes in the use of the Bonkers Exploding Focus For Use in Marginal Wards in order that we may uphold the tradition of robust electioneering for which Leicester is rightly famed. (Unfortunately, at the very moment Lord Rennard looks in I am under the table retrieving a stray teller’s pad.) Upon my return to the Hall, I am informed that Rennard has telephoned me twenty-seven times. I know this “telephone canvassing” is the latest thing, but one can take it too far. I shall have a quiet word with him.

Thursday

Polling day in Leicester South. What with delivering leaflets, knocking up and giving people lifts in the Bentley, I am simply too busy working for my old friend Parmjit Gill to seek out Lord Rennard for our little chat. We do recognise one another from a distance, whereupon he waves vigorously and shouts something I am unable to catch. The day ends in glorious victory, marred only by our narrow failure to capture the Patricia Hodge division of Birmingham. When the result comes over on the ticktape I waste no time in telephoning our unlucky candidate, the delightful Nicola Davies, to commiserate with her. It transpires that I am interrupting her speech and I am sorry to have to report that she is rather abrupt with me.

Friday

After receiving the farewells – some of them tearful, I am gratified to note – of this week’s guests, I hurry to St Asquith’s for a service of thanksgiving. We sing “Lloyd George Knew My Father”, “Tramp, Tramp, Tramp Upon Protection” and “The Land”, and the Reverend Hughes preaches a sermon on the text: “Beware ye men who fly as birds and have silly dots in their surnames.” (I cannot place it, but he is particularly eloquent on the subject.) Leicester South has been won and my meadows have been mown. All is safely gathered in, what?

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