liberator

THE LEMON BOOK

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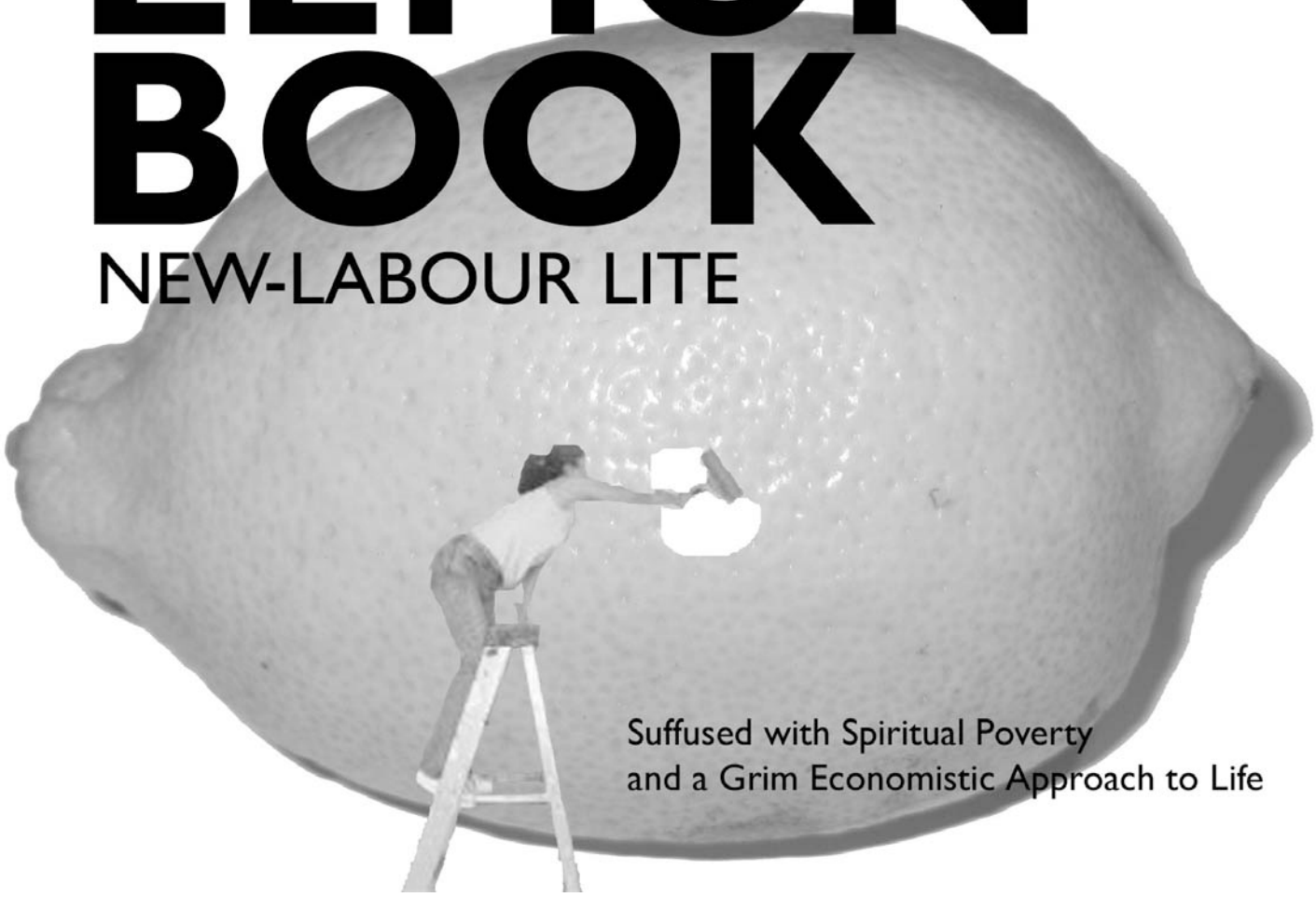

Suffused with Spiritual Poverty
and a Grim Economistic Approach to Life

In this issue

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THE LIBERATOR COLLECTIVE
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CONTENTS

COMMENTARY

SOME OF THE PEOPLE, SOME OF THE TIME

After the Liberal Democrats' successes in the local elections, the two summer by-elections and, to a lesser extent, the European elections, there is talk in the air of taking on both the Tories and Labour simultaneously and successfully, and of "appealing to all voters".

The old claim that "right and left have become irrelevant" is heard once again in the land.

This is understandable and, of course, any opportunities should be exploited. But before anyone gets too carried away with an image of the Liberal Democrats sweeping all before them, they should recall that we've been here before and it did not exactly go to plan then.

The wasted decade of the Alliance is only 15 years or so away, which is the last time that the same sort of wild talk was heard about creating a party that appeals to all voters.

That idea was tested to destruction in 1987 – people vote for all kinds of reasons and want all manner of different and conflicting things. The Alliance went from being all things to all people, to being nothing to anyone, in only the gap between two general elections.

There is no such single thing as 'what voters want' on any subject. Some people will never vote Liberal Democrat and indeed ought not to, and it is entirely pointless to try to court them. This category includes, among many others, supporters of state socialism, europhobes, racists, believers in unrestrained capitalism, the 'lock them up and throw the key away' brigade, advocates of capital punishment and those who wish to demonise asylum seekers.

Some of that list is there merely to show the range of opinions that exist among voters and the futility of trying to appeal to 'all voters'. Others, such as noises about 'tough liberalism' and 'more euroscepticism', have been mentioned by prominent Liberal Democrats in pretty naked attempts at populism.

This leads straight into the other problem associated with trying to appeal to everyone at once - you alienate those who supported you in the first place.

Despite the media onslaught of lies and paranoia, about one-third of voters continue to be enthusiasts for Europe. They ought to be among the party's staunchest supporters and are hardly likely to be enthused by eurosceptic noises.

Those who believe that the deterrence of crime and rehabilitation of offenders both involve something a bit more sophisticated than the mindless authoritarianism of the government, ought also to be natural Liberal Democrats. Again, they are scarcely likely to be inspired by mindless populist ranting about 'toughness'.

There are several core constituencies to which the Liberal Democrats do appeal, and others to which they should appeal.

But it is folly to chase after some common denominator of 'what voters want'. There are already two conservative parties in this country, both of which call for almost interchangeable things in similar language. If what they say appeals to some voters, such voters will choose one of those parties and it is utter folly for what is still a third party to try to sing from the same hymn sheet.

ORANGES AND LEMONS

The first thing to say about the Orange Book is to congratulate its contributors for producing the thing at all. Although some MPs have penned the odd pamphlet, it is a long time since any have addressed the party's whole intellectual direction, rather than comment on individual policies.

Liberator has long argued that the lack of debate about ideas in the party has been a serious failing, and that technical aspects of campaigning – the 'how' of politics – have superseded the 'why' of politics in importance, and not to the party's long-term advantage.

The second thing to note is the silence of those MPs who have made it clear that they dislike the economic liberal direction of the Orange Book.

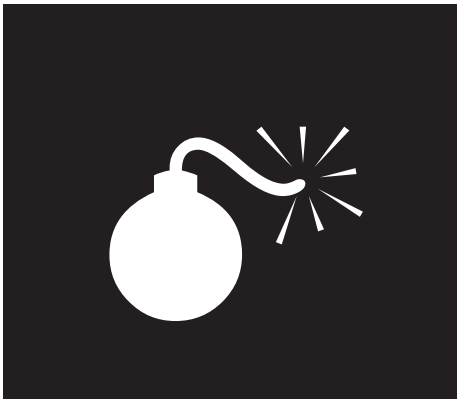
They formed themselves into the Beveridge Group in 2002 to try to roll back this onslaught, with some initial success. Since then, with almost the sole exception of Alastair Carmichael, they appear to have taken a collective vow of silence. Debates can take place only if two or more sides are active in them, or the case goes by default.

There is plenty to argue over in the Orange Book, as contributions to this issue of Liberator show, and there will be plenty in it that many Liberator readers will find objectionable. Fine, that is what it is there for, so argue over it.

Few of the issues raised are likely to result in decisive change this side of a general election, but there will be major debates afterwards on its direction.

However, there is a problem with the way some Orange Book contributors have gone about making their case, which is the rash of briefings to the press to the effect that their personal opinions in fact represent shifts in agreed party policy.

They don't, as even Menzies Campbell has been moved to point out, and this sort of policy-making by press release should stop, otherwise the resentment caused will blow up in the faces of those involved.



RADICAL BULLETIN

OPEN SECRET

The all-postal ballots in northern England on 10 June were quite rightly the object of anger among Liberal Democrats for, among other failings, the lack of guaranteed secrecy of the vote.

Closer to home, it seems enthusiasm for secret ballots is not so great.

Party members who received ballot papers for the party presidential election were asked to return donations to help meet the cost of the election in the same envelopes as their ballot paper.

Short of sending cash, there was no way in which such a donation could be made anonymously.

Former Rochdale MP Cyril Smith complained about this clear breach of ballot secrecy and received a bland response in Liberal Democrat News to the effect, firstly, that presidential elections had always been conducted this way and, secondly, that the cheques were removed from envelopes before the ballot papers, and therefore it didn't matter.

The first of these arguments is worthless and the second absurd. Imagine the uproar from the Liberal Democrats if the government required voters to put something by which they could be identified in the same envelope as their ballot paper – not merely an attached declaration but actually in the ballot envelope.

It is just as well that the Electoral Commission came down against all-postal ballots before anyone in the government could point out that the conduct of internal Liberal Democrat elections was actually less secret than the 10 June votes.

No-one has suggested that any impropriety took place in the presidential count but, as with the local and European elections, it was the principle that mattered.

Simon Hughes made much in his campaign for the party presidency of the need to increase Liberal Democrat membership and indeed called for membership to be tripled to overtake Labour.

He does not seem to have taken this admirable approach in his own constituency of North Southwark and Bermondsey, unless it started from a very low base.

Figures supplied to Liberator in July showed a grand total of 260 members, even though Hughes has a majority of 10,000 and the party won every seat at the last council elections.

Fortunately for Hughes, he did not have to rely on local support alone, as his defeat of Lembit Opik by the huge margin of 24,333 to 10,002 showed.

Opik was said to be trying to emulate Charles Kennedy – get elected president, then go on loads of comedy shows to give yourself a popular image, then become leader.

Unfortunately for Opik, this strategy depends on having at least some political weight, rather than acting like an all-purpose minor celebrity.

Given the turnout figure, the ballot shows that party membership stands at 72,868, a rather far cry from the 100,000 claimed by the Liberal Party alone at the time of the merger.

TURKS AND CAKEHOLES

It says something when deputy leader Menzies Campbell speaks out to defend the right of party conference to make policy, but he did so in August with a warning shot against the 'young turks' behind the Orange Book.

Said turks, mainly David Laws and Mark Oaten, have been mouthing off for months about wanting to shift the party towards an economic liberal agenda in Laws' case and to something like right-wing populism in Oaten's. The public scepticism of such an establishment figure as Campbell must signal concern on high that the young turks have been allowed to get out of control.

The authors say the book has been published to encourage debate, a point that seems to have eluded Charles Kennedy, who sent a pager message urging MPs not to comment on it.

Oaten (and indeed shadow chancellor Vincent Cable) have favoured the approach to policy making of selective briefing to the newspapers, and signalling supposed shifts in party policy by means of personal pronouncements rather than winning arguments.

Campbell said: "If this book is a contribution to fresh thinking then it will be an extremely useful thing indeed... remembering always, of course, that the nature of our party and the way we establish policy is done through the party conference.

"The so-called young turks, some of whom are a bit thin on top, may be setting out a stall and I will be reading it with interest.

"But the fact that they have set out a stall will not mean that what they say is automatically accepted.

"They will have to argue it through the party, just as a political party has to argue its case through the country."

Quite so. The policy making process has many faults but, even so, nothing in the constitution says that party policy will be whatever Cable, Laws or Oaten announce it is at any given moment.

Their contribution to debate is welcome (and in marked contrast to the silence emanating for the past 18 months from their Beveridge group rivals), but there should be a debate and not a shoulder-shrugging acceptance of what people say simply because they are MPs.

The book also attracted a magisterial put-down from Tony Greaves, who described the trio as "pseudo-Blairites with little following in the wider party".

He continued: "This is part and parcel of the party strategy to go after Tory seats rather than going hard after the Labour party."

Incidentally, bookselling website Amazon.co.uk lists some rather puzzling reading by purchasers of the Orange Book.

Its customers' other chosen volumes included: The Whole Hog, Exploring the Extraordinary Potential of Pigs; The Life and Death of Smallpox; and Heloise and Abelard.

DOG AND LINE

A late contender has emerged for the Mitcham and Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet, awarded for the worst motion submitted to each conference. We declared a winner in Liberator 297 so Delga will have to be content with the silver thunderbox.

This is awarded for the following: "Conference welcomes the government's 'Registered Partnerships' bill as a step on the road to a free and open society for all but believes that 'registering' the joining together of two people as you might a dog or a fishing rod remains discriminatory to gay and lesbian couples."

Those wondering how one goes about joining together two dogs, or surrealists who wish to see dogs on fishing lines, can no doubt seek enlightenment at the Delga stall.

ARSE NUMBING

While on the subject of conference motions, readers of the previous RB (Liberator 297) will recall news of a new award for the most boring motion actually to appear on the agenda.

We are pleased to announce the first winner of the Blackpool Commemorative Beige Haemorrhoid Cushion. And the winner is... the Federal Policy Committee. Its motion on international trade, 'Wealth for the World', beat off stiff competition to clinch the title. The judges were impressed not only by the general tedium but also by the motion's sheer length, arcane detail and lack of passion.

The plotters behind the Orange Book have got it wrong. Why go to the trouble of bouncing the party into new policy positions, when you can simply bore the conference rigid?

SPAM, SPAM, SPAM, SPAM, HUGHES, OPIK AND SPAM

Mystery surrounds one aspect of the recent ballot for the presidency of the Liberal Democrats - the source of the lists of e-mail addresses used by both candidates for unsolicited campaign e-mails.

In late July, numerous complaints surfaced about spam sent on behalf of Lembit Opik's campaign. Similar complaints were also made about spam from the Simon Hughes campaign - although at least the Hughes e-mails included an opportunity to opt out of future mailings.

There are conflicting reports about whether party HQ in Cowley Street supplied the candidates with a list of party members' e-mail addresses. If these were supplied officially, it would appear that no effective guidelines were issued about the use and abuse of the list. In any event, this does not explain how some party members received more than one copy of the same e-mail while others received none, and how some non-members were also spammed.

A more likely explanation for the spam is that campaign workers were indulging in a mixture of viral mailing and scouring various sources for lists. However, the correct 'netiquette' is to ask people to opt-in to lists rather than send unsolicited messages.

Meanwhile, calls are mounting for a change in the rules to forbid spamming by candidates in any future internal elections.

POLICE STATE

A blog about the Hartlepool by-election, entitled http://guacamoleville.blogspot.com/ in honour of the constituency's former MP, reports that Chris Maines, Liberal Democrat PPC for Orpington, was detained by the local rozzers for the curious offence of "driving around in a car registered in Kent". This will surely send a chill down the spine of all those who thought that even David Blunkett had refrained from making this activity illegal.

While the police were worrying about the presence of cars from southern England (are they really that rare in Hartlepool?), they could not be on hand to spare Oxford West and Abingdon MP Evan Harris the indignity of drunks mooning at him through the window of a Chinese restaurant.

As a medical man, though, Harris is surely unmoved by the sight of bare bottoms.

PEERS TO BE PROBED?

Donnachadh McCarthy may have resigned from the Federal Executive but it seems he has not gone away.

He has complained to Sir Philip Mawer, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, over Charles Kennedy's decision to ignore the elected peers' panel when he chose eight working peers earlier this year (Liberator 295 and others).

It will be remembered that Kennedy told the FE he would adhere to the rules laid down at the 1999 conference but then nominated eight people of his choice.

Whether Mawer has any power to investigate an alleged breach of a mere internal party rule is unclear, but any letter of justification from Kennedy ought to make entertaining reading.

OUT OF AFRICA

There was a wasted, and presumably very expensive, journey for party treasurer Reg Clark when he sought the nomination for the Hartlepool by-election.

Clark, who fought the seat in 1997, was contacted by Cowley Street and told of an opportunity to appear before the 'star chamber' – the body that decides who goes forward to by-election shortlists – and troubled to fly back from holiday in South Africa to attend.

Despite local connections, he was not chosen and local members were given a choice only of 2001 candidate Nigel Boddy or Jody Dunn, who was selected.

NO NEED TO FEAR LIBERALISM

The Liberal Democrats must reclaim all of their liberal heritage and the Orange Book points the way, says David Laws

Political commentators and party hacks alike agree that the Liberal Democrats now have our biggest political opportunity for many years.

We have a rare combination of a government which is no longer either popular or greatly trusted, a Tory party which neither inspires nor commands the respect of the electorate, and a Liberal Democrat party which is increasingly electorally strong, growing in credibility, and distinctive in important areas of policy.

We are able to win parliamentary and local government seats off both Labour and the Tories, and could find ourselves after the next general election with our best share of the vote for at least 20 years and our highest number of parliamentary seats since the 1920s.

On issues as diverse as Iraq and council tax reform, we have become the real opposition to the present government.

So why have nine Liberal Democrat MPs and PPCs written a book, which has stirred up some controversy inside and outside the party over where the party should be heading in terms of policy development?

Perhaps I can start by dismissing one of the superficially attractive media explanations for what will be seen as an attempt to re-position the party - that it is merely an attempt to appeal to Tory voters in marginal seats in southern England.

This theory is doubly wrong. Wrong because it assumes that the Orange Book authors are so ambitious for electoral success and power that they might be persuaded to change policies just to buy a few Tory votes – no sensible person would join the Liberal Democrats simply as a ruthless short-cut to national power and influence. People join the Liberal Democrats because they believe in and share the values and philosophy of the party.

Wrong again because, after Brent East, Leicester South and Birmingham Hodge Hill, there can be precious little doubt that the only rational strategy for the Liberal Democrats at the next general election will be to target both Tory and Labour seats. If the strategy is successful, there will be even greater prizes to win against Labour in 2009.

I am also genuinely convinced that the old arguments about left and right are increasingly irrelevant to a less ideological electorate. On Iraq and scrapping council tax, there are as many Conservative voters in my constituency who welcome the positions which we have taken as a party, as there are Labour voters.

And take, for example, pensions policy, where the Labour government is pursuing the policy of mass means-testing and the Tories want to re-link the state pension to earnings and then encourage more private provision. Please could someone tell me which of these approaches is left wing and which is right wing?

The authors of the Orange Book wrote their individual essays (the book is not a joint manifesto) because they believe in the principles and policies that they have argued for.

The challenge has been to revisit traditional liberal principles and values and to ask whether existing party policies are consistent with these, and how party policy might develop in the future.

Some people will argue that six months before a general election is not a perfect time to be seen to be discussing and debating big policy issues. In truth, there is never a perfect time for such debates. I would argue that, properly conducted, this is a very good time for a mature debate based on the party's values and principles.

There can be little doubt that across our country there is a strong tide of disillusion and distrust running against the government and against the Conservative Party. Many electors have been attracted by the clear and principled positions we have taken over Iraq and council tax, and they like our leader.

But people want to know more about our party's values and policies, and they need convincing that we have a coherent agenda, not only on issues such as the environment, but on economic policy, crime and Europe (areas where our ratings have not always been impressive).

I hope that people will find time to read the Orange Book, and not just rely on what is predictably rather over-colourful press coverage (I have no economic interest in the sales figures!). I believe that the contributors have produced an impressive range of work on a wide range of issues. No serious reader could possibly brand Nick Clegg as a eurosceptic, or Vince Cable as disinterested in social justice, or Ed Davey as being a closet Blairite. The agenda is distinctively liberal, not Blairite.

I hope that many Liberator readers will welcome the emphasis on our party's commitment to personal liberalism – and the warning about the temptations of developing a nanny state liberalism. Our activist base and our party conference has got many of the big decisions on these tough and unpopular civil liberties issues right. We must be careful to continue to resist the temptations to tell people what to eat, breathe, or do in their own time. Liberalism includes the freedom to make mistakes and to be different.

I also believe that many liberals and Liberal Democrats will recognise the truth of Nick Clegg's warning that our policy on Europe must be firmly based on a vision of a decentralised and genuinely liberal European Union. This means some existing EU powers (agriculture, social policy and regional policy) being devolved back to nation states, while we expand the role of the EU in genuinely international issues.

But perhaps the most controversial chapters of the book are the chapters by Vince Cable on Liberal Economics and Social Justice, and my chapter on UK Health Services: An Agenda for Reform.

I have heard people inside and outside the Liberal Democrats refer to Vince and to me as 'economic liberals' or 'Gladstonian liberals'. If this means merely turning the clock back to 1880, to a liberalism of free trade, a moralist foreign policy and freedom from state interference, then this is not what I stand for or what I understand Vince to stand for. Keynes, as I recall it, referred to such an agenda, even in the 1920s, as "as cold as last week's mutton".

By the end of the nineteenth century the 'Gladstonian Liberal' cupboard was indeed looking decidedly bare, having little to offer both in relation to expanding political liberalism and to the emerging strand of social liberalism.

By social liberalism, I mean the insight that freedom from oppression is not by itself enough to deliver any meaningful sense of liberty. I mean the increasing conviction among Liberals at the turn of the 19th century into the 20th that access to high quality education, housing, pensions and health provision is as important – perhaps far more important to many citizens – than freedom from religious oppression or meddling home secretaries.

I am not interested in returning to some dry economic liberalism in which free markets, free trade and competition are the only objectives of state policy. Nor am I remotely interested in dumping Liberal principles to buy or borrow Tory votes.

The challenge, it seems to me, is how to apply our heritage of economic liberalism to the social liberal problems which are centre stage in British politics today.

My argument is that, over the last 100 or so years, we have progressively watered down our commitment to economic liberalism for a variety of reasons – culminating in Margaret Thatcher's capture of much of the language, if not all of the substance, of economic liberalism in the 1980s.

Thatcher made choice, free trade and competition sound like mechanisms only for delivering Tory policies and Tory values – the opt-out society in which those who can't pay don't get. That isn't remotely the vision of any modern or even traditional Liberal Democrat.

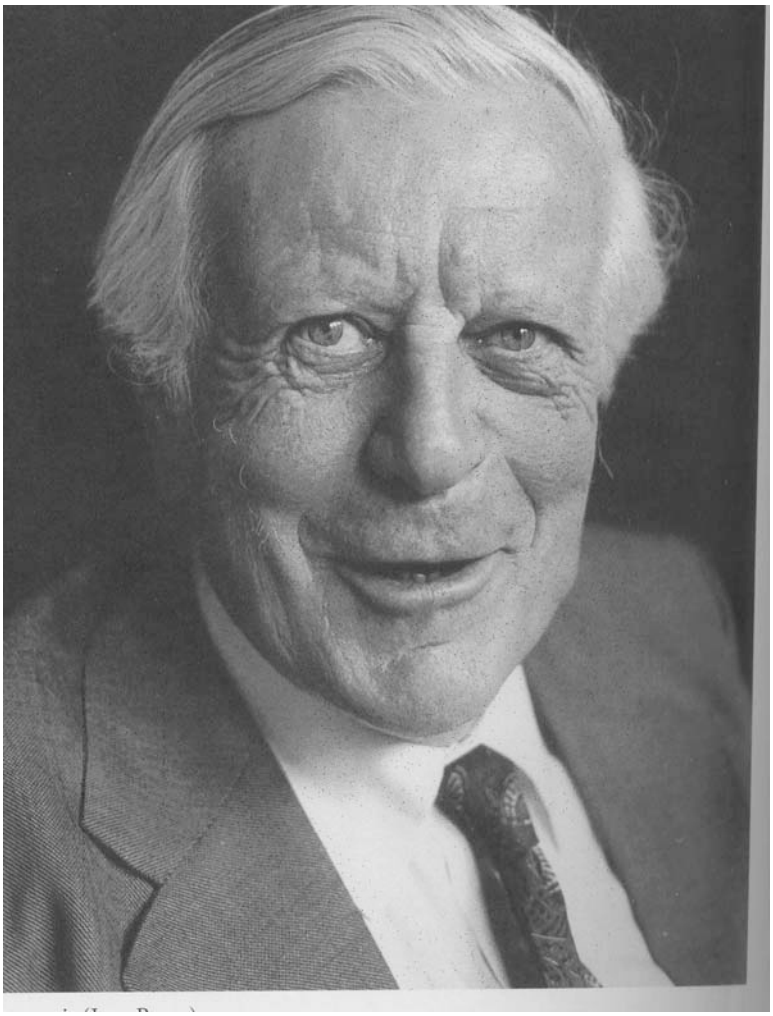
Jo Grimond, in one of his last major speeches, warned in 1980 – provocatively – that "The state owned monopolies are among the greatest millstones round the neck of the economy… Liberals must stress at all times the virtues of the market, not only for efficiency but to enable the widest possible choice… Much of what Mrs Thatcher and Sir Keith Joseph say and do is in the mainstream of liberal philosophy." (Jo Grimond, 'The Future of Liberalism', October 1980.)

Part of the Grimond warning was a challenge to us to think about the right role of the state in the economy. Are there any Liberals left who now believe that British Airways, British Steel or a host of other enterprises would have been better off left in state ownership?

Another part of the challenge was to warn about how market interference can lead not only to inefficiency but to social injustice – as Third World countries struggling to overcome EU and US trade barriers have found out.

But there is an existing, big, challenge for Liberal Democrats. Can we apply our commitment both to economic liberalism and to social liberalism to reform of the public services, and free them from what is all too often an unresponsive second rate state monopoly which only the rich can afford to opt out of?

My anger about and desire for reform of services such as the NHS comes not from reading dusty economics textbooks, but from dealing weekly with elderly constituents waiting six months, a year or even two years to access services on the NHS – services available immediately in the private sector.



Jo Grimond - claimed as an inspiration for economic liberalism

These individuals are too often powerless in the face of monopoly and uniformity – any liberal should recognise the risks endemic in monopoly provision.

If in other countries, such as on the European Continent, people can manage to combine social justice and economic liberalism, why can't we do this in Britain? Must we only confront people with the stark choice of unresponsive state monopoly or expensive private sector opt-out for a minority?

That is one of the biggest challenges for the party to confront. Our electoral success needs to be underpinned not only by populist responses to Government policy, but by a serious alternative built on Liberal values and principles.

We must not become the most 'small c' conservative party in Britain.

Liberal Democrats have nothing to fear from liberalism – personal, political, social and economic.

We have a huge amount to gain by reclaiming all of the elements of our liberal heritage. This can only help us in our battle to gain power. More importantly, it will help us – in time - to exercise power with purpose, principle and effect.

David Laws is Liberal Democrat MP for Yeovil and co-editor of the Orange Book, published by Profile Books.

YOUNG TURKS OR YOUNG BERKS?

The newly published Orange Book promises to reclaim Liberalism but lacks a human spirit, says Simon Titley

Hold on to your hats. A group of leading Liberal Democrats has written a book with no pictures in it. And it may spark a serious debate. I have long bemoaned the lack of intellectual life in the party and yearned for it to publish something a tad weightier than a yellow baseball cap. Is this the answer to our prayers?

The Orange Book has attracted interest for two reasons. Controversially, it advocates a return to 'economic liberalism'. And the authors include most of the likely contenders to succeed Charles Kennedy as party leader, with the notable exception of Lembit Öpik – presumably his article about asteroids was omitted for reasons of space.

The title 'Orange Book' invites comparisons with the famous 1928 Yellow Book, written by such luminaries as Keynes and Beveridge. This is a bold intellectual claim and a high standard to match. It's one thing to write a collection of essays on policy, quite another to claim, in effect, that one's book is a seminal work. And the book's subtitle 'Reclaiming Liberalism' begs the question: reclaim what from whom?

The Orange Book should be judged not merely as an intellectual work, but also as an exercise in power. The Liberal Democrats are in the middle of an attempted putsch, of which the book is an integral part. The curious thing about this right wing plotting is that it enjoys little or no grassroots support in the party, and has not attempted to win any. It is an elite project focused on the parliamentary party and its strategy is top-down.

The title of a fringe meeting at this month's party conference, organised by right-wing ginger group Liberal Future, gives a flavour; 'What the Lib Dems need is more discipline and less diversity'. Provoke a civil war and then accuse your opponents of 'rocking the boat' – now where have we seen that tactic?

Despite David Laws's claims that the Orange Book is not a manifesto, Liberal Future's website is already brandishing it as some sort of holy text. Given the recent intrigue and testosterone-fuelled ambition, the book should be seen not so much as an invitation to debate, more a statement of intent.

An ideological row within the Liberal Democrats was inevitable. There are essentially three competing strands of thought – left libertarians, social democrats and economic liberals. But the intellectual contradictions of the 1988 merger were never satisfactorily resolved – indeed, debate was actively discouraged, leaving an ideological vacuum.

Just what is Liberalism? The starting point for all liberals is that liberty is the norm. The onus is on those who wish to govern or regulate to justify it. But the mistake economic liberals make is therefore to assume that liberty is defined solely by an absence of government and regulation.

It was this deficiency that social liberalism addressed. Social liberals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries developed a philosophy that rejected the atomistic individualism and empiricist assumptions of classical liberalism. They saw that civilization is based on a complex web of shared agreements about how we behave toward each other. They argued the case for a positive view of freedom, which recognised that people need access to such public goods as education and healthcare if they are to enjoy genuine liberty.

More recently, Bernard Greaves and Gordon Lishman, in 'The Theory & Practice Of Community Politics' (1980), refreshed this definition of Liberalism:

"Our starting point is the individual. We want to find ways of enabling and encouraging each person to fulfil his or her own potential. We believe that men and women have an immense, largely unrealised capacity for self-direction, self-cultivation, self-understanding and creativity. The ultimate obscenity is to reduce people to the status of objects: to be led, manipulated, directed, discarded.

"Our goal transcends political theory: it is an idea of human independence in which each, individually precious, human being has the liberty and the opportunity to experiment, to experience, to learn and to influence his or her surroundings. This is the libertarian, rationalist, participative tradition of liberalism.

"This kind of liberty is not egotistic individualism. It is not about having one's own way: it is about having a way that is one's own. A society based upon liberty is also based upon responsibility and inter-dependence. It requires a framework which guarantees liberty and supports inter-dependence. It is in community that mutual and individual responsibility operates. It is in interaction with others, in community with others, that the framework is fashioned and the guarantees freely agreed."

At the heart of this Liberal philosophy is recognition of the innate human need for 'agency', the ability to influence and change the world in which one lives. Liberty is threatened when powerful people monopolise agency for their own benefit and force less powerful people to fit in with their selfish purposes and arrangements.

The issue is not whether power resides in the public or private sector; rather, how any excessive concentration of power should be broken up and made accountable. Liberals believe that things should serve people rather than people serve things. More than this, Liberals value the human spirit and believe there is higher purpose to life than economic activity.

The lack of human spirit is the biggest failing of the Orange Book. Its (mostly male) authors see people primarily as economic actors, approaching life in terms of desiccated financial calculations. Have they never experienced the joy to be alive?

The book begins with an enthusiastic foreword by Charles Kennedy, yet it is doubtful he actually read it. On the eve of publication, he must have had second thoughts because he paged his MPs instructing them not to comment to the press.

The introductory essays by the editors, Paul Marshall and David Laws, set the tone. At the heart of their thesis is an idea of 'the fall'. At some point (variously described as either 50 or

100 years ago), Liberals diverged from the path of true righteousness. They moved away from 'economic liberalism' – and this is what the authors wish to reclaim.

But there is confusion about whom to blame. The editors seem anxious to reassure their readers that they have not abandoned social liberalism and, in places, quote Green, Hobhouse, Keynes and Beveridge with approval. Elsewhere, however, these thinkers are singled out as the culprits.

Another alleged culprit is the 'nanny state Liberal'. I am no fan of nannying measures about, for example, smoking or obesity. Yet Laws has an odd concept of what constitutes the 'nanny state', at one point disparaging environmental concerns about cars and cheap flights. Given the potentially calamitous effects of global warming, it is facile to identify unlimited driving or flying as a fundamental human right.

The editors' blind spot is the threat to individual liberty posed by corporate power. They see the state as the only real danger. Yet we live in an age when, of the 100 largest economies in the world, over half are private corporations rather than geographical sovereign states. And the Orange Book was published in the same week that Conrad Black was accused of 'corporate kleptocracy'.

The remaining essays are a mixed bag. They begin with Ed Davey's argument for 'localism'. The principle of devolution is fine but many of Davey's proposals for reinvigorating local government are half-baked or excessively managerial. What is missing is a practical vision of how civic society can be revitalised in fragmented communities.

Nick Clegg's essay on Europe has been unfairly travestied as 'Eurosceptic'. His premise is that, in the UK, there is a war between two extremes, Eurosceptics versus uncritical pro-Europeans. To win back public trust, Liberals must locate a middle ground of critical pro-Europeanism. Though Clegg's suggestions for EU reform are sound, I don't buy his premise that there has been a cacophony of uncritical pro-Europeanism. Eurosceptics have had it their own way while Europhiles have been timid and apologetic. As I argued in Liberator 296, Euroscepticism is a manifestation of a deeper psychosis, which EU reform proposals, however worthy, do not address.

Chris Huhne's essay is the best in the book. He is the one author to address the threat to liberty posed by corporate power and the dominance of the USA. His analysis of the future of multilateralism is perceptive and his suggestions for reform are appealing. The one serious weakness is that he does not explore the international political dynamic necessary to deliver the reforms he advocates, so one is left with mere wishful thinking.

Vincent Cable's essay on deregulation and public services is the least orthodox in Liberal Democrat terms, and the most controversial. Cable is not against regulation per se but he clearly wants a lot less of it. He acknowledges that regulations address many legitimate public concerns, from racial discrimination to fire safety and data protection. To reconcile these concerns with his goal of less regulation, he proposes replacing highly prescriptive regulation with a simpler 'general duty'. The drawback of this approach is that it would lead to a considerable rise in litigation, as the courts are asked to rule on what a 'general duty' entails.

Cable's suggestions for dealing with EU over-regulation are plain silly. At no stage does he explain how he would build an alliance within the EU. Instead, all he has to offer as a political strategy is some table-thumping "UK obduracy".

Susan Kramer's essay on environmental regulation implies she favours replacing regulation with market forces. However, it turns out that Kramer isn't really against regulation at all. Rather, she is looking for the most effective psychological tricks that will encourage people to comply, and her model is the London congestion charge.

David Laws returns with a controversial essay proposing the replacement of the NHS with a system of social insurance. Unlike most Liberal Democrats, I think Laws is basically right. I have experienced the public health systems in Belgium and France, both of which are superior in quality and based on a system of social insurance. But there are barriers Laws does not recognise. You can provide meaningful choice only if you increase spending to create sufficient surplus capacity. The Belgian system of 'mutuelles' is rooted in a Catholic culture of social solidarity, which does not exist in Britain. And you need a strong degree of local control. None of these things is impossible but all would require a fundamental culture change, a long period of gestation and a lot more money. I have no idea how Laws proposes to get from here to there.

Mark Oaten's essay on crime starts well but goes rapidly downhill. He begins with the view that criminal and anti-social activities diminish the liberty of individuals. This is a refreshing and distinctly Liberal take on crime. But then he spoils it with a set of proposals for prison reform, which, amongst other things, advocate denying release to any prisoner who has not learned to read and write. This has not been properly thought through.

Oaten has a thing about appearing 'tough'. Is he afraid David Blunkett will kick sand in his face? The consequence is that he focuses on prisons and fails to consider the wider context of why crime occurs in the first place. Also, in identifying the serious problem of the fear of crime, he fails to deal with the role of the media in stoking up fears unnecessarily.

Given the hostility of the two editors to the 'nanny state', the most startling essay in this volume is Steve Webb's. He addresses the moral panic about poor parenting with a proposed slew of heavy-handed state interventions. Instead of meddling in family life, Webb might be better advised to challenge his 'economic liberal' friends about the laissez-faire policies that cause social dislocation in the first place.

The final essay is a piece by Paul Marshall on pensions. He correctly identifies the problem of the demographic shift, which is making traditional state pension systems unsustainable. However, he fails to answer the basic problem of how you persuade the middle classes to spend less on consumer goods and instead save for their old age.

What is the problem with the Orange Book? It is inadequate to criticise it simply on the grounds of being 'right wing'. Its basic fault is that it is suffused with spiritual poverty and a grim economistic approach to life. Despite the focus on economics and the claim to be 'radical', it does not challenge the prevailing orthodoxy that we must work and consume ever more, even though current patterns of work and consumption are unsustainable. Nor does it acknowledge the ruinous worldwide effects of unregulated western consumerism. In its analysis of threats to liberty, it routinely favours business interests over those of the individual citizen.

It would be nice to think that this book, however much one may disagree with it, will provoke some overdue debate within the Liberal Democrats. But if its editors' purpose is simply to fire a broadside in their fraternal war within the parliamentary party, it will only perplex and disillusion the membership.

In the early sixties, Jo Grimond was once a guest at the White House. JFK showed him a copy of the 1928 Yellow Book, the margins annotated in Franklin D. Roosevelt's handwriting. It had helped inspire the 'New Deal' programme. Somehow, I can't see the Orange Book having the same influence.

Orange? I'd say it's more of a lemon.

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective.

ORANGE BLOSSOM

Were Liberals hijacked by socialists, asks Jonathan Calder

Smelling faintly of brimstone, The Orange Book: Reclaiming Liberalism has arrived. If you get past the ugly front cover, you will find that The Orange Book consists of ten essays by prominent Liberal Democrats and a carefully worded foreword by Charles Kennedy: "Not all of the ideas … are existing party policy, but all are compatible with our Liberal heritage."

That heritage is the concern of the first contribution as David Laws looks at the various strands of liberalism: personal, political, economic and social. He is particularly interested in economic liberalism and the way that modern liberals seem embarrassed by it. The reason, I would argue, is that for most of the twentieth century liberalism was in decline and socialism was seen as the ideology of the future. It was not surprising that some liberals concluded that the way to prove that liberalism was still relevant was to show that it had anticipated socialism or was really a form of socialism too. So it was that we never mentioned free trade but missed no opportunity to refer to Keynes and Beveridge. The Conservatives' discovery of free-market economics in the 1970s only encouraged this trend.

Laws looks at the party's economic thinking, concluding that "economic liberalism has waxed and waned within the party over the past fifty years, reflecting on the whole the state of contemporary political debate, rather than long-held and cherished Liberal convictions". He is particularly good on the Alliance years: "Liberals and Social Democrats were merely left arguing lamely that the boundary between the public and private sectors should be left undisturbed, wherever it happened to be at the time."

Laws applies his enthusiasm for economic liberalism in a later essay on health, calling for the replacement of the National Health Service by a national health insurance scheme. He envisages a combination of public, private and voluntary providers, with people either choosing to use a state insurance scheme funded by a health tax on their income or joining an independent scheme. Such is the status of the NHS that any criticism of it is seen as near blasphemous, yet the ideas Laws puts forward operate in many western European states, which are every bit as civilised as Britain and which enjoy better health than we do. Nor is it ridiculous to ask whether the NHS can continue indefinitely as it is presently constituted, if scientific innovation continues but people remain no keener to pay higher taxes to fund the resulting increased costs.

Other essays in The Orange Book will not raise the reader's temperature so much. Among them, Paul Marshall writes on pensions, Susan Kramer on using market mechanisms to achieve environmental goals and Chris Huhne on global governance. In what is in many ways the most impressive piece in the book, Huhne concludes that globalisation promises great benefits but that international institutions must be reformed to allow them to operate effectively in a changed political and economic landscape.

Nick Clegg will alarm some readers by calling for powers over social and agricultural policy to be taken from European institutions and restored to national governments, but in reality his essay marks an advance in the party's thinking on Europe. Throughout those long years when people made unkind jokes about telephone boxes and bar stools, the argument that Liberal members deployed to show that their party was still relevant was that it had been the first to advocate British membership of the Common Market. And in many ways we are still refighting the 1975 referendum campaign. We are happier defending that membership than we are recognising that we have been 'in Europe' for more than 30 years (and are going to remain there) and then moving on to examine our views about how the European project should be developing.

Clegg argues that EU powers have developed in a lopsided way. He asks why the EU possesses detailed legislation on the design of buses, the use of seatbelts in cars and noise levels in the workplace yet "remains invisible as an entity in the UN, ineffective in promoting peace in the Middle East, toothless in tackling international crime and terrorism." Being in favour of Europe is no longer enough: we have to decide what sort of Europe we want. Clegg's formulation is compelling: "the EU must only act if there is a clear cross-border issue at stake, or when collective EU action brings obvious benefits to all member states that they would not be able to secure on their own."

Vince Cable also has things to say about Europe, notably that "the CAP is an economic, environmental and moral disaster". In arguing this he is, of course, quite correct. It is, though, worth pointing out that British farmers were being subsidised 30 years before we signed up to the Common Agricultural Policy. Advocating free trade in agriculture would mean taking on this powerful interest group whether we were in the EU or not. In any case, Cable's contribution is not an anti-Europe rant but an appealing exploration of the tensions between free trade and social justice. He comes to the conclusion that government intervention often does more harm than good, making trade barriers seem something akin to the old nuclear arms race – they impoverish us all nations but they do not trust one another sufficiently to do away with them.

Which brings us to Mark Oaten. His almost tangible ambition gives him an unrivalled ability to get up the noses of people in the party, but successful political parties are full of ambitious young men, so we had better get used to the breed. In any case, though he is a little too eager to be thought "tough", his essay here is sensible, calling for a stronger emphasis on education in prison and revealing that 95 per cent of prisoners need help with basic literacy. This surely suggests there is something seriously wrong with our schools if young people can emerge unable to read or write after 11 years of compulsory schooling, and also emphasises the missing chapter in The Orange Book – one on education.

Ed Davey's essay is easier to disagree with. He calls for liberals to embrace localism, yet his vision of local government is not attractive. He puts much emphasis on people's lack of respect for councils yet, where this exists, it can be put down to badly run bodies or ones run by the left of the Labour Party, and in both cases people are showing an increasing willingness to vote those responsible out. Davey wants to see fewer local councillors and to have them paid a salary, yet he does not consider the danger that this will distance local politicians from the people they represent and worsen the problem he sets out to solve.

Though there is little about it here, Davey is an enthusiast for regional government, even to the extent of backing John Prescott's version of it. This has little to do with local accountability – members of the new London authority have larger constituencies than MPs do – and much more to do with forcing through large-scale public projects like housing schemes and motorways. Local government should be more diverse, more spiky and more local than that.

And then there is Steve Webb. Webb argues that liberals should not take a laissez-faire approach to the family, yet his views are not as ground-breaking as he seems to think. With the exception of a pamphlet I published last year, I cannot recall any Liberal Democrat questioning the move, rapidly accelerated under this government, towards more state intervention in family life. Certainly, none of the 64 references in his essay point the reader towards a dissident view.

Webb offers an apocalyptic view: our children are suffering more mental health problems than ever before, they are starting school unable to talk or listen, they are turning to drink. What is strange is that this view is supported only by references to surveys and magazine articles. As an MP, Webb must regularly meet all sorts of people who work for children, yet nowhere does he mention them. Basing his arguments on their testimony would have made for a more interesting essay – and quite possibly a very different one too. As it is, his work reads like a collection of press cuttings; it may be no coincidence that Webb is the only person in the book to make his research assistant the joint author of his paper.

The answer to our predicament, Webb argues, lies in massive state intervention, delivered through the voluntary sector. He lists a number of schemes with approval, but it is hard to judge them because we have no direct knowledge of them. What is more worrying is that there is no sign that Webb has direct knowledge of them either. Again, he relies upon published references and gives no sign that he has met the people whose work he is praising. And, while liberals will favour government support for the voluntary sector, its essence lies in the personal qualities of those who work in it and its local nature. Any attempt to roll out a scheme nationally will inevitably tend to reduce it to a trite formula that fails to reproduce the unique characteristics that made the original model work.

Somewhere in Webb's essay is the ghost of a more interesting, more personal contribution. One senses that he really sees our salvation as lying in a revival of marriage – he spends a couple of pages convincing himself that welfare benefits do not encourage young women to have babies out of marriage – and a greater role for religion. It is a shame that Webb did not write that other essay, because it might have offered the beginnings of an interesting critique of free-market economics. The traditional criticism of it is the Marxist one that capitalism will impoverish the workers, but we know by now that this is not true. A more subtle critique is the conservative, communitarian one which sees the free market as hollowing out important social institutions and acting as more of a destructive than a creative force.

Webb's essay as it stands, however, turns our idea of what constitutes virtue on its head. A healthy society sees it as residing locally – in the family and friendship and in strong local communities – and is distrustful of national government because it is distant and anonymous. To Webb, however, virtue resides in the state and in the professionals and volunteers whom it licenses, while families and individuals are weak and morally suspect.

The best thing about liberal economics is that it trusts the individual citizens. Socialists see them as dupes of advertisers and victims of rapacious bosses, but liberals take a more confident view. Webb risks sneaking this patronising view back into the picture under the label of 'social liberalism'. He lends The Orange Book an authoritarian tone that may remind the reader of Larry Elliott's observation, that the Thatcher years set capital free but left people more constrained than before.

So there you have The Orange Book or The Orange Part. Criticise it by all means but, if you do so from a 'radical' position, do please use arguments that go beyond warmed up labourism.

Jonathan Calder is a member of the Liberator Collective

CHOICE SOLUTION

Choice matters in public services, because people matter, says Tim Leunig

We know that people want good public services. And we know that choice is one of the most reliable ways of improving products and processes in the private sector.

And to liberals (if not necessarily to social democrats), choice is a fundamental part of what we stand for. So you would think that liberals would support choice in public services almost without exception.

And yet, despite the work done by Chris Huhne and the public services commission two years ago, which led to the policy paper Quality, Innovation and Choice, the party is wavering. Charles Kennedy has said, in a well publicised speech, that "When it comes to the public services, choice is just one element in the debate."

All liberals should regret such wavering. Quality, Innovation and Choice argued not only that choice is a valuable liberal principle, but that it is one of the most reliable ways in which we can improve quality. I want to look at two areas, one in health and one in education, in which choice can and should play a greater role, before going on to look at some of the hard to measure, but very real, benefits of choice.

There are parts of healthcare – such as accident and emergency units – for which choice will never be appropriate. But as liberals we should be more confident in allowing people to choose wherever possible. I have met a lot of doctors over the past two years. Some I have found very easy to talk to - others less so. That is not always their fault by any means, because as in all areas, some people 'click' better with others. But in health – at least as much as in other areas – it matters whether you feel at ease with your doctor. It matters whether you can communicate well with them, and they with you. If you can, your problems are more likely to be diagnosed correctly, you are more likely to understand the treatment, and more likely to feel able to return if things are not going well. In short, you are more likely to get better.

It is hard to think of any parts of education for which choice will never be appropriate, but the case for restrictions on choice is weakest at university level.

Yet we live in a world in which central government dictates to universities how many people they are allowed to accept, and, to a large extent, what subjects they are allowed to study. I am undergraduate tutor for admissions at the London School of Economics. I receive around 10 applicants for every place, many of them of very high standard. Why does the government ban the London School of Economics from taking more than our current number of students if we wish to do so?

Of course, if the government limits the number of students that it will fund, as it surely must, then allowing the LSE to expand will mean that another university will shrink, or even disappear altogether. No doubt both the university employers organisation and our trade unions would be horrified at such an idea. But why should society listen to such vested interests? If the LSE wants to take more students, and more students want to come here, how can a liberal say that this must not happen?

Allowing people to choose consultants that they are happy with, or universities that they really want to go to, may not increase the number of operations, or the number of degrees awarded. But that misses the point. The number of operations and degrees are outputs. These are easy to measure, and beloved by our current target-obsessed government. But what people themselves are interested in is not outputs but outcomes. The question is not whether I have seen a doctor, or whether I have had an operation, it is whether I feel well again. Choice may not increase outputs, but it will improve outcomes. Similarly, students don't just want to get a degree, they want to get a degree in a subject that they want, from the place of their choosing.

Targets elevate the government to greater importance, whereas choice elevates the individual. Targets mean that providers concentrate on measured outputs, whereas choice means that providers have to concentrate on the holistic experience of individuals. It is hard to see how anyone can prefer targets to choice, but it is particularly hard to understand how liberals can do anything but support choice as the default option against which all other proposals must be measured.

Dr Tim Leunig is lecturer in economic history at the London School of Economics, and a member of Kingston Borough Liberal Democrats. He served on Quality, Innovation, Choice policy working group.

Liberator 300!

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INSURANCE FRAUD

David Laws is wrong to call for health social insurance, which the Liberal Democrats have rejected for good reasons, says Chris Huhne

Continental-style social insurance schemes, recently advocated with some differences by David Laws in the Orange Book, were carefully considered by the public services policy commission in 2001/02. After exhaustive discussion, and a paper put forward by two members advocating their advantages, the option was overwhelmingly rejected. Only two participants voted in favour. Why did we instead prefer the option of radical decentralisation of a tax-funded National Health Service, the option subsequently endorsed by conference and that, thankfully, remains party policy?

True, continental social insurance schemes have one great advantage: because the patient has to claim for many treatments, he or she is able to understand the full costs of health care and is therefore a little more responsible, perhaps, about setting up appointments with GPs and then missing them. But that advantage is bought at the cost of three key disadvantages.

The first is that insurance schemes usually insist on co-payment. Thus patients pay nearly a third of primary care themselves in France, and in Germany the sick pay charges for the first period they spend in hospital, rather like an insurance excess in this country. The result is inevitably to exclude some of the poor. These schemes do not ensure universal access to health care when and where people need it.

The second problem is that social insurance schemes are surprisingly bureaucratic. Far from abolishing NHS administration, insurance schemes require more paperwork by both GPs and hospitals, so that they can ensure proper reimbursement of insured costs, but no more. This is the flip side of the patient knowing how much operations cost, but is itself costly and time-consuming for the health professionals.

The third difficulty is that they also involve a separate and often expensive premium collection system, and even supposedly universal schemes based around employment suffer holes. Although much more comprehensive than the United States' reliance on private health insurance – where some 45 million people currently have no health insurance at all – the safety net is not universal.

Moreover, if people are allowed to top up either spending or insurance payments, there can be the rapid development of a two-tier service. There would be choice and quality for the well-off, but a rump service for the rest - effectively what the Tories are proposing.

Laws' proposal deals with this third objection by agreeing with the policy commission that the Government should pay everyone's basic healthcare charge through a National Health Insurance Tax. The main difference is that our commission wanted the tax devolved to national parliaments and regional assemblies (where they exist), which would also take on the role of the strategic health authorities.

The principal difference comes in how the money would be spent: Laws suggests that people could opt in to a range of different providers rather like US-style Health Maintenance Organisation. Quality would be ensured by competition: if someone was dissatisfied with their HMO at the end of the year, they could switch to another.

This is certainly a health model that a region could try out if it wanted to. No Liberal Democrat should be against choice. But US experience suggests that choice between HMOs is not greatly empowering to patients, as they are having to buy a whole package of health care some of which may be good, and some awful.

The alternative model is patient choice based on the advice of their GPs, where this is possible, combined with a much more open attitude towards health providers (including mutuals). Even so, there are limits to the extent that choice can act as a stimulus to quality in health.

First, only those in urban areas are likely to have a real choice of hospitals, for example. And those who need emergency services are hardly likely to perk up as the ambulance takes them away, and insist that they are taken to a different and distant casualty department.

That is why, ultimately, health decisions cannot merely be delegated even to a carefully rigged marketplace. The biggest single problem of the NHS is that the only politician who is responsible is the Secretary of State. How can one person sitting in Whitehall possibly know local circumstances or judge the success of local delivery in a system that employs a million people? If we are to save the idea of a high level of public provision from its Conservative enemies, we have to insist on decision-making on a human scale.

The most successful health system in Europe – as measured by patient satisfaction – is Denmark's NHS. Like ours, it is funded from taxation. Unlike ours, it has been properly funded. Also unlike ours, it is decentralised to 14 counties and two cities each with their own decision-making responsibilities, even though the population is only just over five million. Now that the funding battle has been won, the big issue in health care is democratic local control, not phoney markets.

Chris Huhne is a Liberal Democrat MEP for South East England and chaired the party's public services policy commission.

A DECEITFUL ILLUSION

Choice in schools is a second order issue to be addressed only when quality is guaranteed, says Phil Willis

The Liberal Democrats have always had clearly defined ideas about education. Indeed one of the core principles of our party is that education is the key that unlocks personal freedom. For us, education is not simply a utilitarian requirement, a means to an end, but a comprehensive ideal that gives both the individual and society the tools to prosper in a civilised world.

The New Labour government has presented us with very different challenges. The last seven years have been characterised by a laudable reforming zeal, and a generous funding injection, but also by an unwillingness to consult, or take on the products of consultation; an inflexibility of thought and silo mentality towards provision.

Despite these caveats, I am still not without hope that the Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners will be a starting point for discussing the future of our education services - not a prescription. The current debate over quality, choice and localism should be viewed as complementary not competing principles.

The choice mantra is dominating the thoughts of parliamentarians and political apparatchiks. Ostensibly, choice may have an alluring appeal but in the real world many see it for what it is - a deceitful illusion. No government could guarantee choice because to do so would require unrealistic levels of investment even if such a proposal were workable. We have had the illusion of parental choice or 'preference' for the past 20 years yet despite the best efforts of all concerned many parents still face rejection when they seek a school for their children.

Perversely, both Conservative and Labour plans would make matters worse. The new five-year strategy creates not more choice for parents but greater choice for schools. Allowing every secondary school in the country to select up to 10% of their pupils by aptitude definitively diminishes choice for parents. The creation of 200 Academies (state funded private schools as they should be called), though laudable in their intentions, which can select a proportion of pupils by any means determined by a wealthy sponsor, hardly increases choice. Add to these voluntary-aided schools, which can choose pupils largely on the basis of their parents' faith, and some 160 grammar schools, and the idea that parents will have greater choice under Labour's proposals is simply not true.

The Education Select Committee report on admissions, conveniently delayed until the last day of the parliamentary year to avoid embarrassment to government, confirms the inherent contradictions of government policy. Charles Clarke told the committee of his desire "that parents should be encouraged to send their children to their local school," yet produces a five-year plan designed to do exactly the opposite. The report forms the compelling, one might say obvious, conclusion that "All parents want a good school for their child."

But it goes on to say: "The evidence to this inquiry has supported our earlier findings: the language of choice, as opposed to the right to express a preference, in the context of school admissions is inappropriate."

It is not the first time that the Department for Education and Skills has demonstrated such wilful and blind oblivion to explicitly stated problems with policy. During the formation and consultation phases of recent higher education policy, the government was repeatedly confronted with its own research which stated, similarly explicitly, that the top-up fees policy would have the reverse effect to that intended and deter students from lower income backgrounds from aspiring to university. It went ahead anyway.

But what of the official opposition? I consider Conservative policy to be nothing more than a populist illusion. Plans to abolish catchment areas and allow successful schools to expand beyond the optimum level ignore that, while we celebrate success and diversity, no school should be allowed to fall behind to a condition which makes it an unacceptable option. Choice seems attractive when minimum quality standards are constantly missed, and this is what has to be rectified before there is even room for a discussion of choice. Removing the appeals system for exclusions and admissions would open schools up to expensive court cases – something the Tories have only this summer condemned in their targeting of the compensation culture – and would give schools, not parents, more right to choose. Typically, Tory thinking is muddled, without foundation and without much distinction from government policy.

However, every opposition party should be ready to give the government credit as well as criticism. So I say without prejudice that some of the government's Five Year Strategy is to be welcomed.

Pledges to ensure that every child and young person in difficult circumstances should get extra support without stigma; the extended schools programme and measures to instil healthy living and environmental awareness into the curriculum are well overdue, as are the moves to revitalise apprenticeships for adults; the provision of new Adult Learning Grants and putting employers at the heart of the skills strategy.

But there are significant practical issues that remain unresolved. Greater institutional variety, with a widening plethora of admission systems begs significant questions as to how the system will work on the ground. How do ministers expect co-operation between competing institutions to work? Where is the right of a young person to 'choose' their learning path enshrined in the plan? How, for example, will the independent academies be obliged to engage with schools or colleges to offer appropriate vocational courses? And how will the independent, centrally imposed financial systems proposed by the DfES allow such co-operation to take place?

I think it's important to state that choice as a concept is not the bugbear of the Liberal Democrats. Indeed in some areas it is the basis of our thinking too - for example in extending choice

to young people as their needs grow – offering them a choice of learning providers, a diverse curriculum, a flexible learning programme - and the government would be right to concentrate its attention here, as is Tomlinson in recommending a broad based diploma. Our point is, however, that until the basics are solidly in place, choice is a second order issue; and the Five Year Plan threatens to strangle this embryonic diversity at birth.

Of course, the desire to provide high quality schools locally should not deny parents the right to express a preference to have their child educated elsewhere; a right they have had for nearly 25 years. What it should do is remove what many parents see as the necessity to do so.

But what would we as Liberal Democrats do? We have a Five Point Pupil Guarantee. This is a promise to every child for quality education. We are putting young people at the centre of our thinking. Five simple promises; first class teachers, a personalised curriculum for teenagers, smaller classes for primary children, fewer tests but better monitoring so parents and pupils can see how they are doing, and state of the art facilities all come together to provide the simple things that parents ask us for time and time again.

We are sure we are on the right track. Not only have I been contacted by numerous parents backing our "quality delivered locally" agenda, but teachers have also rejected moves by both the government and the Tories to put parental choice at the heart of the state education system. The moderate Professional Association of Teachers has declared the government's proposals a "risible and unworkable soundbite" and has said explicitly that the policy cuts across the need to give all children access to excellent schools.

Quality local schools would remove so many difficulties and obstacles (transport being just one, hitherto neglected, area). It also has the benefit of being feasible, and as our policy becomes further known, it gains more ground with those it could affect.

For the Liberal Democrats, that is our central policy objective – to guarantee every child a high quality education delivered locally. Thereafter 'choice' takes its rightful place as a second order issue. Parents in Brixton who support the Nelson Mandela School Foundation do not want a choice of secondary schools an hour's travel time away – they want a school in their community and they want it to be of high quality. Parents in rural North Yorkshire or Cornwall don't want the choice of a 'specialist' school at the other end of the county. They want excellence delivered locally. For tens of thousands of parents across the country, choice acts as a cloak to deny them that basic right.

The Liberal Democrats favour diversity - but within a framework - and are opposed to schools that receive state funding being outside any framework. The role of the state is to provide quality education for all.

The local education authority must play a key role between the education secretary and the community - ensuring local priorities are acted on. The LEA must be responsible to the community for planning and to the secretary of state for advising and would - with the Learning and Skills Council - have a statutory responsibility for maintaining school standards and for planning admissions at each of the key stages in co-operation with its community schools and other partner providers.

Schools in receipt of state funding should not be able to select pupils on the grounds of academic ability or for social reasons. They should not operate outside a national framework - because to do so would make it impossible to guarantee a child the education it deserves. The LEA should co-ordinate a one-stop admissions system and provide appropriate appeals

mechanisms for parents wishing to challenge allocations by schools.

The LEA would work with schools to agree local curriculum priorities and plan vocational programmes as part of the 14-19 curriculum offer. The LEA would also continue to allocate resources to schools and would be expected to encourage a diversity of provision. Do we want to return to the days when LEAs ran the nation's schools? Absolutely not – few within our party would advocate such an action. Equally we do not favour a free-for-all, where wealthy individuals can, with as little as a £2m down payment, receive a multi-million pound handout from the taxpayer and have free rein over the education of thousands of young people. We welcome a diverse education system and we welcome new providers that seek to meet the needs of the nation's children, but not at any price. When the taxpayers fund 100% of running costs, then local communities should retain at least a simple majority on the governing body and a significant say in admissions.

The essential difference between the Liberal Democrats and both Labour and Tories in this area is that we believe young people should be at the heart of our schools system, not institutions or political dogma.

'Choice' - wrongly implemented - is a way to mask failure. It's a mechanism to avoid addressing the real issues in education – namely finding the appropriate balance between the state, children and their parents and the providers of education and the provision of enough first class teachers.

That is why we Liberal Democrats are putting young people at the centre of our thinking and why we begin our policy debate with the Pupil's Guarantee - a series of promises to every parent and every child that they will receive a quality education close to home.

Phil Willis is Liberal Democrat shadow secretary of state for education and skills, and MP for Harrogate

BUSH GETS DIRTY

Can John Kerry save the world from George W Bush? Not if he continues to campaign in his present style, says Dennis Graf

The American political season traditionally starts in early September soon after Labor Day, the unofficial close of summer, but this year it's different. Both sides long ago descended into serious mudslinging, reflecting the profound division within the country. The relative strength of the two sides can change from week to week but, at the present, it is generally believed that their chances are roughly equal, though most observers believe that Bush is slowly pulling ahead.

Bush's basic claim is that he is able to protect us from Islamic terrorism and that Kerry can't.

Kerry must somehow present himself as a preferable alternative and he is finding this a difficult task. For many voters, the more obvious problems - the lack of health care for an increasing number of people, the crumbling educational system, the massive government borrowing and spending, the war in Iraq which Bush doesn't seem to be able to explain and the increasing rate of poverty - these take second place to fringe issues such as the possibility of homosexual 'marriages' and the almost unrestricted sale of firearms.

Everyone is waiting for the 'October Surprise', the defining event which the party in office can use to manipulate the electorate.

Speculation is rampant; some feel that Bush will 'find' weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Others feel that he'll trot out a handcuffed Osama bin Ladin, the very symbol of evil. Iraq should be a heavy burden for Bush, but his opponent, Kerry, has declared himself in favour of the war, too.

John Kerry has, as of now, not laid out a detailed plan for the future. He says that he will restore the higher tax on the very rich that Bush removed, that he will start an incremental health care plan based on the system which Federal employees have and that he will strengthen the laughable state of Homeland Security, already a joke for comedians. He promises a traditionally conservative administration, more in the image of the first George Bush and of Bill Clinton.

John Kerry and George W. Bush, the two contenders for the United States presidency this year, have, on the surface, much in common. Both come from prominent New England families, both attended expensive private schools, both studied at Yale within a few years of each other and both are Bonesmen, members of a tiny, secretive and exceedingly influential fraternity of current and former Yale students.

Kerry's early background was European. His father was a diplomat and the young Kerry was educated in Switzerland where he had the political misfortune to learn French. In America, it's considered rather useful to have a certain minimal familiarity with spoken Spanish, but anyone in public life who speaks French must keep it well hidden. Kerry has, indeed, even been accused by the radical right wing talk show hosts of "looking French," but his people have been quick to point out that his forebears came from, among other places, what is now the Czech Republic. These are thought to be rather plucky sort of folk and, unlike the French or the British, not the sort to look down upon Americans.

Bush is still a rather mysterious sort of man who has allied himself with the increasingly powerful Christian Fundamentalist movement, a group that is not really familiar to most people in the United Kingdom, where Ian Paisley would probably be its best known name.

Bush has claimed to receive personally direct guidance from God and many of his followers fervently believe that he was chosen by God to save America and to save Christianity and, indeed, Western civilisation itself. Bush also believes that God wants us to restrict greatly, if not prohibit, legal abortions, stem cell scientific research and the medical use of marijuana.

He has even suggested that he does not accept the theory of evolution and he's very sceptical of the idea of global warming. Unlike most elections, there is now obviously a very clear choice facing the American people.

Most Democrats that I know are somewhat disappointed with Kerry's performance in the campaign so far. He seems somewhat vague, even a bit disconnected and his 'positive' message is faltering. Bush has been successfully presented as a nice guy, honest and tough, and the media has suggested that Kerry is not very likeable, is indecisive, evasive and unreliable.

Bush's social background is far more patrician than that of Kerry, but they've painted Kerry as a sort of foppish aristocrat. Bush, by contrast, is viewed by the average American voter as a down to earth religious guy just like most of them. It's bizarre and, if you think the voters should be politically informed, depressing.

Kerry can't suggest that he was misled on Iraq. The kiss of death in American politics is to give the impression that you were fooled. George Romney, who had been the front runner for the Republican nomination back in the late sixties, was brought down by one word. He said that he had been 'brainwashed' by the generals. This is probably why Bush is afraid to admit substantial errors of judgment whatsoever in the case of Iraq.

This is going to be a very strange election. I think it very likely that Bush will win - I won't say re-elected. It's Bush's election to lose, and he might if the economic picture looks bleak enough to people. I can't imagine anything happening in Iraq that would hurt Bush since so many people have an emotional interest in continuing the war. Bush is popular as a personality and Kerry will have a difficult time attacking him. I don't think the personal affability of the head man is terribly important in most countries, but in America, it is. Americans want a 'friend' as president.

The economist Paul Krugman has suggested that the modern Republican party, now the dominant party in the United States, has two mismatched pillars - the 'preachers' and the 'plutocrats.' By preachers, he means this large unstable mass of devout religious folk and their leaders. By plutocrats, he is thinking of the business, media and financial establishment, much of which

is now multinational. The voting base of the Republican party is said to be white voters in the Sunbelt, the states in the South and Southwest as well as the increasingly important suburban population ringing the large cities.

The states which are reliably Democratic tend to face the Pacific Ocean in the west and the upper part of the Atlantic region in the East. This includes California and New York as well as New Jersey, Massachusetts and Connecticut. Republicans have made inroads there, though, and the governors of California, New York and Massachusetts are now relatively centrist Republicans. The reasons for this decline of the Democratic Party and the rise of the Republican is a matter of much controversy.

Kerry is of a type familiar to people in the Old World. He's cosmopolitan, well travelled, trained in the law, an internationalist by temperament, a believer in multilateral cooperation and, in general, and a conservative centrist by most Western standards. Kerry was widely remembered for being an activist against the continuation of the Vietnam War, a war in which he had fought and had been later decorated for bravery. Later, he and Republican Senator John McCain were primarily responsible for the closing of the books on the Vietnam chapter and, as a result, we now have normal diplomatic and business relations with Vietnam.

He was in the news, too, at one time for his attacks on the Reagan scandal, the trading of arms for hostages with Iran. In general, though Kerry has been a quiet and reliably 'liberal' backbencher representing Massachusetts. Massachusetts, for reasons no one has really explained, is a state that people tend to dislike and distrust. John Kennedy, a man who was much better received abroad than he was at home - maybe a bit like Churchill - was from Massachusetts and this was held against him.

Bush is suggesting that Kerry's Massachusetts background somehow disqualifies him from seeking the presidency (he can do this since the Republicans have no chance of capturing the state). Political people from Massachusetts are thought to be a bit 'British' in their thinking; prone to seeing problems as being complex rather than simple. As a result, they are thought to be indecisive. Bush prides himself on being decisive, though opponents suggest that he's really stubborn and impulsive in the face of contradictory evidence. Bush feels that his divine guidance enables him to cut through the apparent complexities of policy. His fundamentalist base applauds this, but his opponents find it frightening but also difficult to contradict.

Kerry seems to be responding rather weakly to the widespread and vicious attacks on him by the powerful Republican machine. A lot of people are saying things like "if Kerry is too weak to stand up to Bush, he's certainly too weak to defend us against the terrorist network." We've been to various pro-Kerry meetings, and it's true - most people, even supporters, are disappointed. The most optimistic say, "he always starts slowly, then picks up speed."

There are a small number of 'swing' states, states that can go either for or against Bush - Minnesota is one - and Bush is pouring money into radio and television commercials attacking Kerry as an indecisive and weak, a waffler and a 'flip flopper', they say, and also someone who falsified his war record.

Republican senator John McCain, probably the most popular politician in the country, and a reluctant Bush supporter, was outraged by this Bush-sanctioned attack on Kerry's military service, but even his voice has been drowned out. The opponents call Kerry a "tax and spend liberal" but they don't admit that Bush has been a profligate "borrow and spend radical."

This charge isn't very effective since Americans tend to believe that, if the government borrows money to pay its bills, some other people many years from now will have to pay it back. As vice president Cheney put it, "deficits don't matter."

There is widespread suspicion on the left that, if there is a major terrorist attack here in the United States before the election, a belief which Bush seems to be encouraging, Bush might try to delay the event or even declare some sort of martial law. What is rather strange and sad is the feeling among many people on the left that, if worse came to worse, the honour of the America military might be their last, best hope.

Bush has been able to divide the country into two groups who almost completely distrust and misunderstand each other. Friendships have been strained, families broken up, and like America in the years before the Civil War, there is no middle ground. I think it is clear that some very powerful and deep forces in American society, some ancient strains of irrationality and fear, have been released by Bush.

The radical Republican machine can't sell Bush as an inspiring leader – even his followers aren't sure about his competence, but they are able to destroy his opponent, and they're in the process of doing that. The result will be even more cynicism among the American public, but this may be what the Republicans want.

Dennis Graf is a political activist in Minnesota

FRIENDS IN NEED

America's liberal and democrats need support as they try to turn back an onslaught of religious fundamentalism, unbridled capitalism and extreme conservatism, says Ed Randall

Democracy is under threat in America and that means that it is threatened everywhere. Liberals and democrats across the globe need to understand why the world's wealthiest and militarily mightiest society has been losing its grip on democracy and suborning democratic values at home as well as abroad.

Even though there are liberals and democrats aplenty in America, they appear to have been battling unsuccessfully against deeply reactionary and unscrupulous forces. They underestimated their opponents. Paul Krugman (in The Great Unravelling), Will Hutton (in The World We're In), John Dean - of Watergate notoriety (in Worse Than Watergate), Al Franken (in Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them), Paul O'Neill - with the help from Ron Suskind (in The Price of Loyalty) and Michael Moore - theirs not ours - have all helped to focus the attention of liberals (and not just liberals) on how unscrupulous and illiberal the Bushes and their fellow travellers, inside and outside America, really are.

Liberals needed to educate one another about America's most powerful conservatives - about 'world-class mendacity'. But it is not enough to put American conservatism under the microscope, liberals must also work to build world class Liberalism.

The prospects of doing either will be damaged if Europe's liberals and democrats allow themselves to be alienated from America's liberal Democrats. Timothy Garton Ash (author of Free World) is right about that. But the chances of defending and promoting liberal values across the globe will also be damaged if liberals fail to explain why political Liberalism must go before economic Liberalism.

Understanding America and making sense of Europe's relations with America is a vital task for British Liberals. Whether we like it or not, the weight of the US in the world economy and in the institutions required to nurture a liberal international community is so great that Europe's liberals and democrats must always stand ready to support their American soulmates.

Despite the domination of the conservatives in Washington, America remains best placed, materially and intellectually, to serve as the keystone for liberal democracy. The intellectual qualities of America's leading liberal thinkers and the force of the case they make against American conservatism – especially its most unscrupulous proponents - should be a constant reminder that America isn't the enemy; rather it is those American conservatives who show fewest scruples in their pursuit of wealth and office.

The greatest living academic authority on democracy, the American Robert Dahl - now close to his ninetieth birthday - in a marvellously readable (and short) book, 'On Democracy', commends five criteria for assessing democracies. Dahl describes and assesses the sinews of a democratic society; the essential musculature of the democratic body politic. He defines democracy in terms of the range and quality of opportunities citizens have to shape public policy.

Societies that reduce the opportunities for effective participation or distribute those opportunities unequally imperil democracy. Democratic societies are societies that strive to give the same weight to each citizen's vote. They do all they can to motivate citizens to use the vote. Any choice of voting system or redrawing of electoral boundaries that makes some citizens' votes more powerful than the rest is anti-democratic and illiberal. A democratic society needs to be equipped to promote 'enlightened understanding'. Democracies foster enlightened understanding by making substantial and, so far as practicable, equal investments in the opportunities that all citizens have to learn and acquire the skills they need to decide for themselves and communicate their own beliefs.

Public spaces for promoting and presenting information and ideas should therefore be judged not only according to the quality of what is communicated but also by the access afforded to the whole of the citizenry. Inequities in educational opportunity and imbalances in access to places where ideas can be exchanged and information imparted are identified, by Dahl, as serious threats to the well being of democracy. Indeed he identifies the universal availability of opportunities to shape social and political agendas as the fulcrum for truly democratic process.

Dahl's love of democracy is evident to any reader of 'On Democracy'. But his marvellous account of the rise of democracy in the twentieth century is tempered by an appreciation of the strength and persistence of what he calls 'antidemocratic beliefs'. These beliefs he associates with 'fanatical nationalism [and] religious fundamentalism'. But, great American that he is, Dahl has acknowledged another and potentially greater foe for democracy. A force at work within democratic societies, not least in America, that can weaken and may even threaten the survival of democracy. He labels that force 'market capitalism' and directs our attention to 'the adverse impact that market capitalism can have' on democratic processes and democratic institutions. Capitalism is a paradoxical force in democratic societies. It has an awkward relationship with democracy. It generally thrives when democracy thrives but it also leads, as its most successful exponents become wealthier and more powerful, to concentrations of economic power and displays of arrogance that stretch and threaten to break the sinews of democratic society.

Capitalism is viewed by Dahl as - by turns - a welcome and constructive and an unruly and threatening partner in democratic society. Capitalism engenders consumerism, fosters economic inequality and entrenches unequal access to representative institutions. But Dahl's anxieties about the extent to which democracy was threatened by capitalism, appeared to

have been contained or at least heavily qualified, for most of his long academic career, by the thought that democracy's greatest ideological foe had been soundly beaten. Fascism and Nazism and other (more ancient) reactionary and oppressive creeds had, in Dahl's view, been overwhelmed and discredited and dispatched by the mid century. And, the course of the Cold War had seemed, to use Dahl's phrase, to confirm 'the triumph of democracy'. But Dahl's assessment is far too comforting.

Liberals should be aware that America faces a triple assault on its democracy. The American constitution has ceased to operate as a bulwark against injustice and inhumanity. It no longer defends free speech, though most Americans still appear to believe that it does. American democracy is under fierce and sustained assault. That assault is extraordinarily powerful because it has three components that interact and reinforce one another. While Dahl has worried about the impact of market capitalism and fundamentalism (religious and nationalist) on democracy, it has become increasingly clear that some of America's most eminent and powerful citizens have found a new God. They are driven by a great ambition: American supremacy; an ambition far too important to be left to the judgement of American voters, most especially African-American voters.

I believe that Dahl is one of those who have consistently underestimated the threat to democratic America, represented by an aggressively and increasingly ideological American conservatism. It is the interaction of market capitalism, nationalism and religious fundamentalism (at home and abroad) and an intensely and aggressively ideological American conservatism that now represents the greatest threat to American democracy and, by extension, liberal democratic society throughout the world.

There has always been an uneasy relationship between capitalism and liberal democracy. But market capitalism has been woven into the fabric of American politics in ways that should alarm liberals everywhere. The US is exceptional for the degree to which its democratic processes have come to rely on business. Americans, John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton (authors of Toxic Sludge Is Good For You), provide one of the most authoritative indictments of the ways in which commercial interests suborn politics. They provide a detailed and deeply disturbing account of the work of public relations companies: corporate America's hired hands, operating from the shadows whenever they can. The methods developed by America's most successful public relations firms have been adopted and adapted by America's party managers and they have come to disfigure and devalue American political life. And the most radical conservatives make the most effective use of such techniques in the electoral arena.

America's conservatives have also been hard at work mobilising electoral support by appealing to nationalist and religious sentiment. Fear of Islamic fundamentalism, fanned to assist the passage of the Patriot Act through the US Congress, is accompanied by strident appeals to religious fundamentalism and nationalist sentiment at home. The American constitution may require a separation of church and state but electoral strategy is designed to mobilise and consolidate electoral support amongst the religious and ethnic constituencies most likely to vote. In America, religious conviction and ethnicity have become key party identifiers. And this has happened despite a common recognition that party competition, which perpetuates and exacerbates ethnic and religious divisions, is inimical to the health of democracy.

Hutton (in The World We're In) describes the aggressively ideological character of modern American conservatism and documents the way in which the American dream – of opportunity for all - has been turned upon its head. America, he finds, is the most 'unequal society in the industrialised world'; but the statistics carry surprisingly little weight with American voters. Robert Baer (Sleeping with the Devil) and Craig Unger (House of Bush House of Saud) provide an extra twist to claims that the American political system is in thrall to a small minority of Americans. They describe a society in which a privileged minority makes its own rules and answers to no one.

Dahl asserts that an implausible idea, that democracies would prove stronger than authoritarian states in war, triumphed. The allies defeated Nazi Germany as well as imperial Japan. The democratic west survived and prospered while the communist east failed economical and fractured politically. A return to authoritarianism is unthinkable.

But things change and democracy remains an infant. One of the most percipient of Americans, Paul Krugman, has argued that America is in the grip of revolutionary ideologues; ideologues who have little time for democratic niceties. An intellectual inspiration to those ideologues, Henry Kissinger, has never disguised his disdain for morality in affairs of state. He has been an outrider for a new world order, a world order that appeals to some very powerful Americans. He is an outrider for an America set on transforming the world. He appears to believe that America must be prepared to transform itself if it is to change the world.

For those who are absolutely certain about what is good for the world, not just America, democracy may well be a secondary consideration. Kissinger himself asserted that 'nothing can reassure a revolutionary power': 'only absolute security – the neutralization of the opponent – is considered a sufficient guarantee'. Let no one mistake the intentions of those who are at the helm in modern America. American liberals and democrats need all the help and support they can get in the battle for American democracy.

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HITLER, CROMWELL AND THE MORAL CASE FOR EUROPE

The case for Europe is not about Brussels bureaucrats, it is about preventing war, says David Boyle

Nearly seven decades ago, my great aunt was lying on the grass near the frontier between Czechoslovakia and Germany on a warm summer's day, trying to read The Idiot.

An attractive-looking young man came and sat down and told her: "England is finished; France is going under. Jews, Christianity and Communism are the three united enemies of Europe. The German race only … must rule."

This fearsome living memory of a former Europe was in a letter she wrote at the time, and was read out at her memorial service in Oxford during the summer.

Shiela Grant Duff, as she was at the time, was then a foreign correspondent in Prague in the run-up to the Munich Agreement. She was writing to her friend Adam von Trott, later executed for his part in the July plot to kill Hitler.

But that isn't the kind of Europe I believe in, she told von Trott. Actually the Europe of Jews, Christianity and Communism was the one she wanted – communism with a small 'c', of course.

Listening to that exchange – only one lifetime ago – a little after the Euro-elections, which brought such prominence for the UK Independence Party, reminded me of the moral case for Europe.

It is easy to forget that there is one, when the European Union is reported in the way that it is – partly of course the fault of the people who currently run it – but there is. And it is very important.

What is more, it is going to be vital when the showdown with the oily UKIP finally arrives, as it will all too soon, maybe even in Hartlepool.

A few years after this letter, during the war, Shiela Grant Duff became Czech editor at the BBC European Service, then the biggest broadcasting operation in the world, operating on three networks for 36 hours a day in more than 20 languages.

In fact she later married its director, Noel Newsome, who fought Cockermouth for the Liberals at the 1945 general election.

It was he who put a moral vision of Europe at the heart of broadcasting from London during the Second World War, and he whose thoroughly modern – but generally forgotten – concept of propaganda meant always raising the issues onto a higher moral plane.

"So far we have merely scratched about on the surface, repeating arguments based on unprincipled and superficial ideas about the political, social and economic likes and dislikes of our audiences; scoring facile but impermanent victories," he wrote in his propaganda plan in 1940.

"If our propaganda remains superficial, unprincipled and opportunist it cannot, however clever or cunning, contribute anything towards shortening the war, still less towards laying the foundations of a post war world fit for anyone to live in."

Those are wise words. The BBC embraced the idea of European civilisation – there was no fatuous ban on Beethoven in this war – and promoted a vision of a new Europe emerging to reclaim it.

Half a century later, we can still try to win superficial points in the European debate, while the moral case for the European Union goes by default. Yet it is still unanswerable – even for the most passionate devotee of Mr Robert Kilroy-Silk. It is about the prevention of war.

The scars of two European wars are still so obvious in this country, the memories so sharp, that nobody can deny the vital importance of some process to make sure it never happens here again.

In two wars in the last century, my great aunt lost her father, her only brother and three of her uncles. Many other families could say the same.

The very fact that war in western Europe now seems so unlikely is a tribute to the moral vision and success of the European Union. However infuriating its regulations, however corrupt its officials, it is the guarantee that parents will not again send their children off to fight in Flanders and that bombers will not again pound the great cities of European civilisation from the air.

That is the ground where we have to fight the sleazy characters of UKIP.

We may well point out that their interpretation of sovereignty just doesn't add up – that it misses out the threat to our self-determination from the USA, or the myriad ways in which it has already been undermined by multinational corporations.

We might argue that Kilroy-Silk and his ilk would be happy to sell off the country to Murdoch or Wal-mart, or package it up in a cruise missile for Bush, as long as it has nothing to do with the continent. But that is just a minor debate compared to the one about war.

Because history shows that only when the British engage with the great civilisation of which it is part – when they feel a shared responsibility for it – can we guarantee our own stability.

And in 1815 or 1945, when it was a British vision that put Europe back together again, the issue simply never arose.

As many as 15 million Germans listened to the BBC during the Second World War, when the penalty was death if they were

caught. UKIP presumably would deplore this kind of engagement with continentals.

Of course, some things never change. When Shiela Grant Duff asked the Observer foreign editor, just months before Munich partitioned the country, what kind of stories he was looking for from Czechoslovakia, he said: "Oh, cows with five legs – that sort of thing."

And there are other things that never change that we need to beware of in this moral debate. Because we should not underestimate the strand of Englishness – and it is primarily Englishness – that UKIP aspires to address, because it also goes deep into our history.

Brussels seems to have slipped into the role in our national psyche that Rome once did – the source of petty regulations, of interfering foreign officials, of the distant reek of the corruption of power.

The emergence of UKIP threaten us with a new Thomas Cromwell, a new dissolution of what safety nets exist for the poor – just like in the 16th century – a capitulation to extreme capitalism, a break-up of our common institutions and their sale to the friends of the new regime. It is a threatened re-run of Henry VIII and his destruction of England's 'commonwealth'.

The trouble is that actually the Protestant tradition in this country was largely correct about the excesses of Rome, and probably right to cut itself free from the despotic authority of the Pope.

Catholic or Protestant, Christian or Muslim, that sense of Whiggish national relief at our escape still runs deep in our national consciousness – just as it does in the Liberal Democrats.

In other words, we must not forget the excesses of Brussels: the outrageous secrecy, the depressingly technocratic approach to ordinary people and communities, the vast democratic deficit, the habit of covering Europe in concrete motorway ribbons to the great detriment of local economies. We must not pretend they are not there.

Don't let's defend them. But let's remember and explain whenever the subject comes up what the European Union is for.

It is the guarantee of peace for the great civilisation of which we are part. Our task as Liberals is to reform the institution, fling out the technocrats, but defend its existence, and with it our right to European peace.

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EASTERN APPROACHES

The new European Union members in eastern Europe have such a different history to the west that the union's original members must adjust their foreign policy thinking, says Wendy Kyrle-Pope

The accession of the 10 new member states will radically alter the way the European Union sees itself and its neighbours, shifting its spiritual centre back to its traditional central European heart, and its connections further east and south.

This enlargement also raises again the question; what is Europe geographically? Where does it end? The Atlantic Ocean is a handy and fixed boundary to the west; there is nothing much above Sweden and Finland to the north (unless Iceland wants to join or Norway changes its mind); the Mediterranean, for the time being at any rate, marks the southern border; but where are the eastern and south-eastern boundaries, and what should they be? The latter is one of the most vitally important questions for Europe today, and one which will have to be settled sooner rather than later. It involves understanding old alliances, empires and connections which have determined the direction a country faces, which has shaped its political outlook, just as the wind shapes the rocks, or the sea a coastline.

Alexander's Empire went to the gateway of India. The Romans went all over the place. The Ottomans to the gates of Vienna, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire traced their (the Ottomans') steps backwards, virtually to the Black Sea. In the 15th and 16th centuries, the dual realm of the Jagiellonian (Hungarian/Polish/Lithuanian) rule stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea, from Silesia to within 300 miles of Moscow, comprising Hungarians, Poles, Czechs, Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians (the latter two once conjoined as Inflanty or Livonia), (Lutheran) Prussians, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, Tartars, Karaites (who practised unique mixture of Judaism and Islam), and Jews, to name but the main groups. These are but a handful of examples, as all of Europe is a shape-shifting patchwork of empires and alliances, massacres and marriages, all of which have left indelible marks on the psyche of its peoples. The concept of Europe depends on your perspective and your starting point. And that is what has now changed, the starting point.

It was easier in the day of the original 15 members of the EU; north, south and west were fixed by clear geographical boundaries and political certainties. The eastern perimeter was marked by the solid and seemingly impenetrable Iron Curtain, across which little forays of trade and goodwill were made, but it was an alien political (and economic) bloc, ruled from the east by a stern and dangerous despot. Even so, old connections kept alive the hope of something better; West Germany waited for its other half; Austria yearned for Hungary; Scandinavia played a distant godmother to the Baltic states.

Over the past year, I have spent time with representatives from the Polish, Czech, Hungarian and Latvian Embassies, discussing their aspirations not only for their own country, but for the European Union as a whole. Although they had varying views on such things as Burden Sharing (that is, how best to secure the borders of the new EU), what was most marked were the differences these accession countries have in their outlook and attitude to those beyond the eastern border from the traditional westerly-facing original 15, and how this will profoundly affect the future shape of the EU. It should also be remembered that many of the original 15 had empires overseas, and the legacy of these dominions still informs their (separate) foreign policies today. None of the new 10 did; their empires extended eastward, thus informing their (more united) vision of foreign policy.

Hungary's emerged from 45 years of communism and took ten hard years to transform itself from a command economy to a true market economy. Culturally, Hungarians feel most at home in the EU. They are at the geographical heart of Europe, for good or ill as their history has shown, and are keen adherents of the New Neighbourhood policy (the relations the EU has with its non-member nations). Because of its place in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire and its forerunners, Hungarian interests and connections run through eastern Europe and the Balkans to the Ukraine. This is partly because 3.5 million Hungarians live in other countries - 1.6 million in Romania, 600,000 in Slovakia, 350,000 in Serbia, 50,000 in Croatia - but mostly because they see the prospect of future membership of the EU as a stabilising factor, and one which will prevent the incidents of ethnic cleansing, with which the Hungarians outside Hungary have been too familiar.

The Hungarians see Croatia as a likely future member, but think it will take longer for countries like Serbia, Kosovo and Albania, where extreme nationalism still holds sway. It is the Ukraine which exercises the Hungarians most; not a country we, at the western end of the Union, think about very much in terms of candidate membership. Whereas the Balkan states are likely, eventually, to join the EU, by virtue of their geographical position in and cultural connections to Europe, the Ukraine is poised on a knife-edge. The Hungarians feel it is of utmost importance to keep the door open to the Ukraine, to ensure it continues on the path to democracy and is economically healthy. The thinking behind this stems from the great desire not to create new Iron Curtains in Europe, something the original 15 never suffered, but Hungary knows what it is to be forced to dwell behind one.

The Czech people had been looking forward to membership of the EU, principally because they have always been at the heart of Europe, so they feel they are merely taking their rightful

place again. Although the Czech Republic will have no external borders with those countries outside the EU, it will support and take part in the "burden sharing" of securing these borders. It is keen to relax border restrictions, especially with its old partner Slovakia, as soon as possible, but technical, computer problems (rather than political unwillingness) are delaying this. The Czechs see this enlargement as only the beginning for Europe, for much the same reasons as the Hungarians.

The countries of central Europe, although speaking different languages, have always shared the same political, historical, literary and cultural references (Mozart used to put his operas on in Prague before Vienna because the Czechs were more open to the new), and this has shaped their attitude to the countries lying outside the current borders. Polish officials I spoke to echoed this, as it is just as true in recent history; if the misery endured in the yoke of the Russian Bear has done nothing else, it has given those countries from the former communist bloc a unity of purpose and a common political outlook on the future. Add to this the labyrinthine alliances of history, and one begins to see the direction in which the future Europe is moving.

Preparation for celebrations for Hungary joining the European Union in Szentendre

An attempt to count the number of times the border of Poland has changed in the last thousand years was abandoned after about the fifteenth, and the stable border of today is greatly prized by Poles today. Few countries have been trampled over more than theirs, and they are determined it shall never happen again. This is reflected in their attitude to burden sharing; they do not want (unlike many smaller countries) to have any troops guarding their borders other than Polish ones.

Poland was the first country to recognise the independence of the Ukraine after the implosion of the Soviet Union. It is in the forefront of nations trying to stimulate trade with the Ukraine, and stabilise its national identity. Poland is also deeply concerned for Belarus, a totalitarian state whose heavy industries have been abandoned, leaving pollution, poverty and potentially explosive political instability in their wake (as well as an eastern neighbour who would not take kindly to the latter, and might intervene). Poles feel very protective to Belarus, partly because there is a small Polish minority living there, but mostly to ensure future stability for the region. Poland's support takes the form of encouraging opposition parties, some trade and as much help and support it can give to build a civil society. Latvia (with 30% of its population still Russian) also has a special concern for Belarus, and a desire to help both it and the Ukraine.

Whether the eventual aim is to enable these countries to join the EU, or merely to secure them, in all senses of the word, only time will tell, a very long time indeed. But it is indicative of the new influences and ideas that the new members states are bringing to the EU, and one which its original 15 must recognise, consider and, one day, embrace.

It is not just the continental states that raise membership and accession issues; look at Cyprus and the whole question of Turkey. The political and economic problems are too vast to be discussed here, but there are also the questions of simple geography and demography. Turkey really is the bridge between Europe and Asia; between old Christendom (which, effectively, the EU, in the European sense, is now) and the Islamic countries.

Turkey stretches across the top of Syria, Iraq and Iran, and borders Georgia and Armenia to the east. Turkey uses the Black Sea as its northern border. In terms of trade with its immediate neighbours, this vast reach may bring great benefits. But in terms of the thousands of extra miles of an expanded external border, it would be a nightmare to guard, in military terms, and, more importantly, in human terms. With Turkey as its south-eastern flank, the EU could effectively open a huge new corridor for potential immigrants and asylum seekers. Whilst the Union must keep its doors open for those genuinely in need of asylum, the weight of numbers which could come in (legally or not) might break the already overstrained system financially, politically and psychologically.

One ideal the continental accession members share is that, although they will guard the borders of the Union, they desire to protect that border not only with military force and walls, but by building bridges of trade, aid and understanding, spreading the democratic principles of the EU ever eastwards to ensure peace and stability across the continent. The original 15 had better start reading their history books, for in Europe's past lies the key to its future. The continent of Europe is indeed wide, and its new members want it to be united inch by inch, mile by mile, man by man to its end, wherever that may be.

Wendy Kyrle-Pope is former chair of the Outer London Europe Group and a member of the Liberator Collective.

DEVIL AND THE DETAIL

Policy detail and political clout are not mutually exclusive, says Richard Grayson

Jeremy Hargreaves made a useful contribution to the debate on policy in Liberator 297. I very much agree with him that policy should be focused on politically salient points and deliver a distinctive idea of how a Liberal Democrat government would be different. I hope that all who believe this might reflect on the main 'products' of the policy process over recent years: a general election manifesto in 2001 which was well received in the party as being something which, for once, helped rather than hindered campaigning; a European manifesto in 2004 which set out a clear pro-European vision; and a pre-manifesto for this September which, I am convinced, will be well received by active campaigners again.

There is also then the example of It's about Freedom, which restated our party's principles in a way which should, with imagination, help us to explain our approach members of the public. At the same time, we had the public services policy review which set out a bold decentralist agenda, and can hardly be described as having been uncontroversial within the party.

The problem I have with Jeremy's argument is that it is simplistic, and surprisingly so for someone who as a member of FPC has had every opportunity to put forward good ideas. At the heart of Jeremy's approach is the view that there is a choice between policy being 'political' and 'detailed'. I believe that is a false choice, for two reasons. First, there is absolutely nothing stopping people from coming up with both. So long as the policy-making process remains properly resourced, there are enough capable people around in the party to do both. If we haven't been 'political' enough in recent years (and I would point to recent manifestos as evidence that we have been), it is not because somebody told Jeremy or anyone else that they can't come up with good campaigning ideas in motions.

For example, nothing stopped Jeremy arguing at party conference in favour of giving the EU a role in taxation. Those proposing it felt to be the kind of distinctive position the party should take. Of course, the policy wasn't accepted, but only because conference rejected it, not because panels of experts decided it was a bad idea.

The second reason that I think politics versus detail is a false choice is that it fails to appreciate the fundamentally political nature of using detail to persuade people that we are credible. When I became Director of Policy in 1999, I was alarmed to find that, for most of our policies, there was no background briefing whatsoever. We had certainly costed our policies, but in 1999 there was little to explain how they would work. No doubt this information existed somewhere in someone's head, and was used during the 1997 election. But it wasn't written down anywhere easily accessible to campaigners, and that led people to characterise the Liberal Democrats as a party that could say what it liked, without worrying about the details of implementation.

In a political environment where there is so much scrutiny of our policy, we need detail more than ever. One of the virtues of producing detail is that you can explain to anyone how a policy will work. As someone who has spent much time persuading journalists that our policies are credible, I would urge everyone to consider the risks of not being able to answer questions about how exactly a policy will work.

A journalist can write off a policy as being flawed in seconds, but the resultant effect on the public can last years. To get a journalist to say the opposite takes time and hard work, and, yes, sometimes, panels of experts to help us make sure that everything stacks up.

Every campaigner gains from the party having credible policies. Imagine campaigning in an environment where every time you knocked on a door you were told that our policies didn't add up. People now readily recognise that we have credible alternative policies to Labour. That reputation for credibility is not something that we should scoff at.

Jeremy says that as an opposition party we need to worry about how to persuade people we would be different. That's right. And that's why so many people have spent so much time on coming up with a pre-manifesto that will communicate that different message to people.

But we must also think beyond being an opposition party – unless we want to remain in opposition forever. I want the Liberal Democrats to be a party of government. For that, credibility is necessary. We have to be trusted, and people have to be able to imagine us is power. An important part of that is making sure that we have detailed policies in place to persuade people that we are serious.

I do not believe we need a huge debate on process. That's too comforting a refuge in which to hide. Instead, I think the challenges for us now are clear. First, keep our policy credible. Second, if you think our policies aren't interesting enough, stop talking about process, and start coming up with some good ideas.

Dr Richard Grayson was the Liberal Democrats' director of policy from 1999-2004

BAN IT!

Liberal Democrats are supposed to believe in freedom, so why are they so ready to impose restrictions, asks Iain Sharpe

"Running the poor is their hobby", said an Edwardian Liberal MP dismissively of leading Fabians Sidney and Beatrice Webb a century ago. Although I came across this quote only recently, something of its spirit sums up why I chose to join the then Liberal Party rather than Labour nearly 20 years ago.

There always seemed something authoritarian about British socialism. Labour's link with the trade unions put them on the side of the big battalions of organised labour rather than the plucky individual. They became the party of the bureaucrat rather than the citizen.

The Liberals seemed different. While still progressive and sometimes radical, they were more concerned with listening to people and communities, involving them in democracy and supporting local decision-making. The party had a spirit of open-mindedness and being receptive to new ideas. It was free from socialism's rigid certainties.

Over the past two decades, some of the gaps between the Liberal Democrats and Labour have closed up. Of course, we still disagree about important individual issues like the Iraq war. But Labour has abandoned faith in socialist planning and adopted the 'touchy-feely' rhetoric of consulting and listening to the users of public services, rather than assuming that the professionals and experts always know best.

Where Labour has not abandoned its paternalism, though, is in their approach to a wide array of smaller social issues. Labour's authoritarian streak also comes through in its relentless creation of new criminal offences, many of which never result in prosecutions, but give Labour ministers the comfort of feeling that they are doing something about whatever social ills are hitting the headlines that week.

It would be nice to think that the Liberal Democrats were immune from this tendency – that there could be a gap in the political market for a party that was clearly on the centre-left but which exuded a spirit of live and let live rather than nanny knows best.

There could easily be a place for a party that wanted to free people from poverty, ignorance and conformity so that they could get on with their lives, not be told what to do by the Government.

Over the past couple of years the Liberal Democrats have outlined their philosophy in a document called 'It's about freedom', which championed personal liberty as our guiding principle and was passed by conference. At last year's autumn conference Matthew Taylor, as co-ordinator of the general election manifesto, said our key message would be getting rid of Whitehall red tape.

I attended a fringe meeting where prominent Liberal Democrats enthused about this agenda, saying the party had to champion it, even if it meant accepting that sometimes there would be a 'postcode lottery' in the provision of local services.

All good stuff, of course, at a philosophical level but it breaks down when the party has to vote on the specific rather than the general. Last year the Lib Dem conference showed its commitment to freedom and local decision-making by voting for: tougher restrictions on GM crops; a lower drink-driving limit; preventing under-16s buying pets; introducing compulsory microchipping of dogs; forbidding parents from smacking their children and making it compulsory for schools to provide sex education to students at Key Stage 2 and preventing parents from removing their children from these classes. For good measure, Spring conference voted to ban smoking in public places. This builds on our being the strongest advocates among the main parties of a fox hunting ban; and the prime movers on getting tobacco advertising banned.

Of course there is a liberal case for any of these policies individually. The same arguments are put every time: "as Liberals we are reluctant to ban things… but on this occasion… we have to think of the freedom to breathe clean air/not be smacked by your parents/allow animals to live without cruelty" or whatever.

Such policies are not necessarily ignoble or even illiberal of themselves. But taken together they suggest a party that wants to impose the values of the Guardian reader on the whole of society rather than defend freedom or oppose conformity.

It would matter less if we were seen as reluctantly acquiescing in restrictive legislation, where to do otherwise would seem obtuse and eccentric. But one would hope that we would be the most sceptical of the three parties about each new campaign for something-or-other to be banned. Unfortunately, we are often to be found the in the vanguard of advocating legislation that restricts freedom. You could adapt an old ALDC slogan and say 'If you want something banning, it's the Liberal Democrats who'll ban it.'

This is a pity, because I fervently believe that the left does not always have to be bossy – that it can fight injustice, work for a fairer society and defend public services, while accepting that individuals and families are the best judges of how they should live their lives, not officials and bureaucrats. I don't believe that 'libertarian' should be a dirty word for liberals and or that being politically progressive means having to be a social puritan.

Iain Sharpe is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford

GLIMMERS IN THE DARK

The introduction of democracy to the DR Congo is a particularly tough challenge. But it is worthwhile if it can end oppression, says Michael Meadowcroft, veteran of a kidnap bid

Every couple of years or so, those of us on the 'new democracies circuit' used to be asked if we were interested in a project in Zaïre and, if so, would we please stand by. We have indeed been standing by for years but now it might just happen.

Elections in the now re-named DR Congo are scheduled for 2005 and all the international machinery is creaking into place. If the elections do take place on time, they will be the first multiparty elections in the country for exactly 40 years.

The fraught history of this country is a classic example of the malign experience of colonialism, the nonsense of national boundaries and the unsustainability of the concept of the nation state.

In purely narrative terms, the history is simple enough. Towards the back end of the nineteenth century, King Leopold of Belgium wanted an empire. The British had one, the French had one, the Portuguese had one, and even the Spanish had a bit of one. So why shouldn't Belgium?

Leopold commissioned the English explorer Henry Stanley to find him a tract of Africa for his own colony. Stanley did just that and in due course the Belgian Congo appeared on the maps. It is huge area of central Africa – equivalent to a quarter of the USA – with two appendages: an eastern piece, Katanga, where the copper deposits were divided with the Brits of Zambia, and a south-western bit designed to give the country a tiny outlet to the Atlantic ocean.

The Belgians ran the place with the usual colonial mixture of stick and carrot but with rather more of the former than their colonial neighbours, with the result that, by the time the end of colonial rule became inevitable, there were even fewer educated and trained administrators than elsewhere in Africa.

In 1960, the Belgians, under pressure from the charismatic left wing leader, Patrice Lumumba, upped sticks and left. Lumumba was certainly no gradualist, but the lack of an African leadership ready to step into key posts ensured an increasingly chaotic administration. Lumumba was murdered in suspicious circumstances, possibly with the connivance if not the assistance of Belgian mercenaries, and after a few hopeful but false starts, Mobutu became President and lasted in office for almost 40 years.

The Congo basin itself is divided between the Republic of Congo, capital Brazzaville – named after an Italian born but passionate French colonialist – and the rather euphemistically named, formerly Belgian, Democratic Republic of Congo.

Paradoxically, it is the Congo's misfortune to be potentially rich. It contains a lot of extremely valuable minerals, some of which are unique to the country. And it has diamonds. If it had neither there would not be quite the same incentive for the get-rich-quick merchants to recruit private armies and to install themselves into power by force of arms, or even to get into power more or less democratically and then to abolish elections. Its long-term dictator, Mobutu Sesi Seko, famously did the latter and salted billions away in foreign bank accounts.

Mobutu's successor, Laurent Désir Kabila, had been a prominent dissident and a long time exile. He arrived in Kinshasa with an army and with a new broom with which he immediately began to lay about him, not necessarily for the better. In January 2002, a bodyguard (sic) assassinated him and Kabila's young son Joseph replaced him. Joseph has proved both progressive and resilient and is the somewhat unlikely military leader and catalyst of the present political process.

There is a transitional government with a transitional senate and a transitional lower house – all of whose members are appointed from the ranks of the various main parties. The process of negotiating the key laws to take the country into democratic elections is painfully slow, and the reliability and the discipline of the army and the police are somewhat precarious.

The country's vice-president is currently in Bukuvu and Goma, embroiled in trying to broker an agreement with dissident members of the security forces in the eastern provinces of North and South Kivu, where the instability is great and where militias regularly infiltrate across the border from Rwanda. We recently held a workshop in Goma on the electoral process and, early on our very first morning, a young man was shot dead by the army in the grounds of our hotel.

In the east of the country, the UN has a substantial military mission endeavouring to keep the peace. On my first week in Kinshasa, I had to cope with a serious attempt by four men who claimed to be plain clothes police – fake or freelance it was not quite clear – to kidnap me on the main street in broad daylight. Unlike other African cities in which I have worked, people seem nervous or subdued and only a minority catch one's eye and smile. It is a tough city.

The inter-party agreements provide for presidential, parliamentary and local elections to be held by August 2005, with the possibility of two agreed extensions of six months each. Frankly, it will be touch and go if even the latest possible deadline can be met. The logistical problems are immense. There has been no census for 20 years and no-one is quite sure how many Congolese there are. It is thought that there are around 54 million, half of whom will be eligible to vote.

...continued on page 31

OF POETS AND POLITICS

Its time for a Liberal Democrat aesthetic to emerge, says John Stevens

I hesitate to mention a potentially rival publication in the pages of Liberator, but it must be of general interest to Liberal Democrats that a number of young, principally ex-Cambridge, activists are presently planning to revive The Liberal, a magazine founded by Lord Byron, to promote the invariably powerfully explosive combination of politics and poetry. This reminder of the links between High Whiggery and Romanticism got me thinking of their possible relevance to our current search for a 'Big Idea'.

Our tradition now finds itself in a most singular situation. The end of the Cold War and of class politics has restored to us the central place stolen by the ascendancy, throughout the 'Short 20th Century' of 1914 to 1989, of the twin aberrations of socialism and nationalism. But when asked what Liberalism now stands for, we seem to find it hard to progress much beyond a bland re-iteration of the oft-rehearsed principles of the alliance of social and economic freedom.

Can we deny that there is something bloodless about our plans for re-making the state, through federalism, or proportional representation, something cold about our prescriptions for a caring society through enhanced choice, or fiscal reform, something prim about our insistence that we are the party of disinterested honesty, or of anti-establishment protest, as we yearn to become a party of government? Do we not, in the darkness of the night, know that it is only the weakness, vacuousness and viciousness of our opponents, which gives us our present, serious prospect of power, rather than our own strengths, our own intrinsic appeal, above all, our own emotional appeal?

If ever a beneficent cultural evolution consisted of the triumph of head over heart, it was the Enlightenment. But what could be chillier than the calm smile on Houdon's bust of Voltaire? The smile of reason, certainly. But also the smile of effortless intellectual superiority, that commanded release from the cares of ordinary mortals, the smile of the enlightened despot.

The rise of Romanticism was not simply about the awfulness, in its truest sense, of raw nature, but also the awfulness, in its contemporary sense, of dark Satanic mills, and of the lot of those who laboured in them, not least because such servitude was, in the deepest sense, unnatural.

Byron, Shelley, Coleridge, the younger Wordsworth, were consciously seeking to clothe their broadly liberal political and social principles in a new aesthetic, to give to common sense and established rationalism an uncommon sensibility and a new warmth and humanity, from which alone, they believed, the real will to progress, could be derived.

'The Liberal' appeared in a time very similar to our own. The end of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars had left an ideological exhaustion, and illusions of the end of history, entirely comparable to the legacy of the Cold War. It opened up, at the same time, all Europe, to the new economy of the industrial revolution, much as American supremacy is now spreading their particular brand of globalisation. So do the radical poets have something to teach us too?

Is it possible to imagine, alongside the reams of our party's policy, the emergence of a new, Liberal Democrat aesthetic? Something infinitely more profound and all pervasive than New Labour's emetically ludicrous Cool Britannia (not, one might think, a difficult achievement).

The elements for this are readily to hand. The intense commitment and knowledge of our green and rural issue campaigners, the shocked rage of so many of our activists coming to campaign in Hodge Hill, on discovering a constituency in Blair's Britain where the principal doorstep issue was infestation by rats. The patient rage of so many of our councillors across the country, wrestling day in and day out, with the almost unbelievable ugliness of so much of contemporary living. The great love of regional history and identity of those of us who promote devolution. The compassion and vision of the advocates of international law and democracy, whether in the European Union or the United Nations. The deep sense of justice and individual autonomy that is derived from the religious roots of our tradition. Our celebration of non-conformity, that, far more than Iraq, has persuaded the immigrant communities that we alone see the beauty, and not just the necessity, of the diversity and complexity of the modern world.

But why do so many flames, that burn so strongly separately, still seem to burn so low together, upon our national platform? Why are we not a brighter beacon to the imagination, as well as to the intellect, of the electorate? Byron was a rogue, but he would surely be right in urging us, in our planning for the general election, to take more poetry with our psephology.

John Stevens was a Conservative MEP and founder of the Pro-European Conservative Party before joining the Liberal Democrats.

REVIEWS

Mr Blair's Poodle Goes to War: The House of Commons, Congress and Iraq by Andrew Tyrie MP Centre for Policy Studies. £7.50

Reforming the UK constitution is one cause that has dropped off the Liberal Democrats' radar in recent years. The logic has been that, down at the Dog and Duck, people don't talk about select committees and the powers of the prime minister.

In the last 18 months, people have certainly debated the war in Iraq and the fact that Britain joined the so-called 'coalition' on a false prospectus. The House of Commons debated the issue at length and approved the government's action. But the MPs were hoodwinked. The big issue – Iraq – and the old liberal cause, the constitution, have come together in the worst way imaginable. In the aftermath of the conflict, people in their thousands ask how and why it happened. Who is accountable? How can we can stop it from happening again? We need safeguards and surely parliament is the place to start. At the time of writing, there is even a move to impeach Tony Blair for misleading the commons on such a fundamental matter as committing British troops to armed conflict.

In this important pamphlet, the Conservative MP Andrew Tyrie examines how well parliament scrutinised the actions of the executive over Iraq. He finds that, before hostilities began, MPs seemed to get a clear explanation of its policy from the government. Indeed, what Tony Blair and his colleagues chose to say at that time was the source of many of their subsequent difficulties. But Tyrie finds that, after the fall of Baghdad, the executive (in reality, Number 10) was able to shut the parliamentary debate down. He seems to accept that it is hard for debates on the floor of the Commons to obtain a detailed picture of the government's rationale for going to war.

So Tyrie looks in more detail at the work of the select committees. His conclusions make grim reading. In July 2003, the Liaison Committee, made up of select committee chairs, failed to get much useful out of Tony Blair, as a result of too much deference and too little advance organisation. Post-war inquiries by the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee were "thwarted by the executive at almost every turn". Tyrie argues convincingly that they lacked the will, the powers and the moral authority to get the information they needed. Other inquiries did a little better in obtaining information. These were the Intelligence and Security Committee - a creature of statute appointed by the PM - and the Hutton and Butler inquiries, whose remits were set by the PM. None of them could examine the most important question: why did Britain go to war? Moreover, some of the evidence they heard does not stack up.

The end result has been a further loss of trust in politicians and reduced respect for parliament. As a result, the UK's security has been weakened because the public may not trust its elected leaders to make the right decisions about going to war. As for how to stop it happening again, Tyrie puts his faith in strengthening the select committee system. He wants committee chairs to be elected by a secret ballot of all MPs, rather than appointed de facto by the party whips. Similarly, he would take the whips out of the process for appointing committee members. He argues that the work of committees should have a much more important place on the Commons' agenda. Most importantly, Tyrie wants them to have access to much more official information, subject to appropriate safeguards. All good, worthy stuff. The modern role and status of the intelligence services and the extent to which they can be scrutinised by parliament is one of the tough questions coming out of the war that has scarcely begun to be debated in any depth.

However, Tyrie's suggested reforms would surely smash straight into two harsh realities of politics. The way MPs see their role and work needs to change, so that they aspire to become investigators as well as ministers. But their mindset also needs to change. The despicable behaviour of some Labour members of the Foreign Affairs Committee during the hounding of Dr David Kelly last year shows that the power of the executive and party politics are the twin enemies of a strong commons. The key to that must be to make the executive smaller (fewer ministers) and to ensure that the Commons is less politically compliant (fair votes).

The second theme – that Iraq has brought home yet again - is the amount of power in the hands of the prime minister - and not just the present incumbent. Even the inquiries referred to above were hand-picked by Tony Blair and he was forced by external events to put Hutton and Butler to work. All of this needs to be addressed and doing so could raise some tough challenges that do not lend themselves to speedy solutions. One solution currently doing the rounds is that legislation should be enacted requiring a formal Commons motion to formally authorise the use of force before it is deployed. That certainly would not guarantee 'no more Iraqs' but Tyrie is too quick to dismiss it. An American-style War Powers Act would at least require a parliamentary debate and mandate before British troops were committed to taking part in armed conflict. It would be useful too if the Commons was automatically entitled to receive advice from the Attorney General and the Foreign Office on the legal efficacy of proposed military actions.

The idea of formally separating the legislature (MPs) from the executive (ministers) has also resurfaced in some media. This is, of course, the basis of the American system and the hope is that parliament and executive would become equal partners. But Tyrie shows the limitations of this suggestion by looking at how well the US Congress has fared in uncovering the truth on Iraq. On the one hand, the reports of congressional committees are better researched and carry more weight. Tyrie shows they did better at getting hold of official documents. But partisanship inevitability raised its head and frustrated the work of Congress. Whatever the system, you can't get politics out of war.

So, even if some of the solutions leave some important questions unanswered, this is an extremely valuable and thought-provoking pamphlet. Tyrie deserves credit for showing how our constitutional arrangements fail when it comes to the crunch. But how odd that this study came from a Conservative MP who voted for the war. It is disappointing that, so far, no Liberal Democrat parliamentarian has taken the chance to comprehensively put the case for our constitutional reform agenda in the context of Iraq, the worst failure of British foreign policy since Suez, and the biggest public controversy for many years.

Neil Stockley

Pretty Straight Guys by Nick Cohen Faber and Faber £7.99 2004

Readers of the New Statesman or the Observer will be familiar with Nick Cohen's work. Over the past few years, he has been one of the most powerful left-wing critics of the New Labour project and Tony Blair's government. His combination of cool rational analysis and genuine anger at Blair's hijacking of the Labour Party made his journalism all the more effective.

This book might easily have become a handbook for the anti-Blair left – as popular and celebrated as Michael Moore's Stupid White Men. But there's a catch – Cohen supported the war in Iraq. So on the one issue that at last united a wide spectrum of opinion against Tony Blair, he found himself defending the government that he had spent the previous six years excoriating. At the conclusion of a Postscript written for the paperback edition, he writes: "[Blair] will go sooner rather than later and in his retirement he can reflect with justifiable bemusement on a British centre-left that forgave him everything except his part in the downfall of a fascist regime."

So, despite his devastating critique of New Labour and all its ways, Nick Cohen is destined not to become as famous as Michael Moore. Which is a pity, because I think everyone who considers themselves to be on the left or centre-left has something to learn from Pretty Straight Guys.

Cohen shows how Blair moved Labour to the right of the Conservatives on issues like crime and asylum, something that continues to give the official opposition little room for manoeuvre on ground that they once occupied unopposed. He is devastating both on subjects that readers will already be familiar with – the Millennium Dome and the Hindujas scandal – as well as lesser-known episodes, such as New Labour's unhealthy relationship with Arthur Andersen and the Mittal affair. Cohen explains the collapse of the dot.com bubble and the Enron scandal with admirable clarity.

It is in the sections on the war, in Iraq, however that Cohen's writing is at its most powerful – as is often the case when a writer is arguing against the grain of his readers' opinions. Those who have read and nodded with approval at the chapters on New Labour will wince and scowl at his dissection of the British left's attitude to the war. He supported the invasion of Iraq because it meant getting rid of Saddam Hussein. He points out the inconsistency of those many on the left such as Jeremy Corbyn who, "after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait… went from calling for sanctions on the 'fascist regime in Iraq' to be imposed to calling for sanctions on the fascist regime in Iraq to be lifted." He is scathing about the "gormlessness of well-intentioned marchers who allowed themselves to be organised by the godless communists and Islamic fundamentalists who ran the Stop the War coalition."

Although Cohen didn't shake my belief that the war was wrong, he certainly did make me sit up and think. I agree with much of his criticism of the anti-war movement – the mindless opposition to everything America does regardless of the merits of the case; the constant use of the Palestinian question as an obstacle to any kind of progress in the Middle East; the indulgence towards Saddam Hussein and the failure to support democratic and progressive forces in Iraq.

But it is much easier to set out the case against Saddam and celebrate his overthrow than to create a progressive, democratic and fair society through foreign invasion – especially in a country racked by ethnic and religious tensions and with no strong tradition of democracy, and in a region where Western intervention is widely regarded with suspicion if not hostility. The resultant anarchy can be worse than tyranny and lead to more deaths and suffering. This, I fear, is what is happening in Iraq now.

Few readers will find themselves agreeing with every word in this book, left-wing supporters of the Iraqi war being few in number. But precisely for this reason, it deserves to be widely read by those on the left and centre-left. Good political journalism should challenge cosy assumptions and received wisdom and Cohen certainly does that with a vengeance.

Iain Sharpe

Wasted Resources: an essay on the policymaking process of the Liberal Democrats by Jeremy Hargreaves

This booklet, published presumably at the author's own expense (Liberator 297), skewers the failings of the party's policy making process in a mere 30 pages.

If anything, Hargreaves is rather generous to its creators and cautious in his solutions, but the latter are broadly on the right lines and are similar to what Liberator has advocated for some time.

He suggests that policy working groups should compromise mainly those who are politically, rather than professionally, interested in the subject concerned, and should then take evidence from experts and test it against political demands. The result would be an end to policy papers driven by interests of the prevailing professional consensus.

Hargreaves also nails the malign effects the present arrangement has on the party's ability to react politically to public concerns: no topic may be debated if a working group is sitting – a process that takes years - and nor may the subject be revisited for several years after it has reported.

The result is agendas filled with either issues that are important but uncontentious, or which are trivial.

Hargreaves does not go into the history of the policy making process, so let's give opprobrium where it is due.

It was invented by social democrats who, after laving the Labour party, so mistrusted grassroots members of any party that they resolved to prevent them having any serious role in shaping policy. This was then incorporated in the merged party after horse trading in the merger negotiations.

In 2004, the Liberal Democrats are saddled with an unworkable and counterproductive policy process that was designed to address events that happened in the Labour party nearly three decades ago. It is time to move on.

Mark Smulian

Blair by Anthony Seldon The Free Press £9.99 2004

One reads a contemporary political biography for many reasons; admiration of the subject; connection with the subject (spot your friends); the desire to understand why what happened when it did happen; or to uncover the essence of the subject, and discover what magic ingredients made him.

Anthony Seldon's book on Blair attempts to answer that final question and succeeds no better than any of the other in uncovering the secret, but does provide some useful pointers. Although a massive tome at 700 pages, it is well worth reading.

The author does not pretend this is an authorised biography; rather he admits it is unauthorised, and his focus is Tony Blair "what he thought, what he did, and why he did it." The book shows that he is actually keen to discover whose influences moulded Blair, and comes down, on the political side at any rate, on Margaret Thatcher rather than any Labour or Liberal mentors and friends.

The book is divided into 40 chapters; 20 about actual key events in Blair's life, and 20 on people. It does chop about a bit, but once you become used to this style, it hangs together well enough.

The people chapters cover his parents, Cherie (of whom Sheldon writes, in a rather ungentlemanly fashion, that Blair "could have married any one of a number of very pretty... girls... Instead, he chose one of the most formidable legal intellects of her generation," Kinnock, Gould, Mandelson, Irvine, Jenkins, Campbell, Clinton, Bush, Prescott, Thatcher, and Brown, plus others. There is also a chapter on God, who, unlike the others, has little to say about Blair, however much Blair has to say about Him.

Seldon tries to get close to what exactly is the bond between Mandelson and Blair; why Blair would not let him go. He goes over the history of their relationship, and concludes that Blair (and, in the beginning, Brown too), in a quote from an intimate, found Mandelson "like Merlin, with this incredible ability to see into the future, and Tony was King Arthur." As to the reason Blair never ceased to have daily contact with Mandelson, even in times of deep disgrace, he can only surmise that "Mandelson has a love for Blair, and it is reciprocated. Blair's love explains his blindness to the despair many feel about the relationship... Blair will not, cannot, let him go."

The chapter on Brown, interestingly the final one in the book, summarises his life to date, and stresses the many, profound differences between them, not least Brown's lifelong obsession with and commitment to the Labour Party. Blair did not discover politics until his 20s.

Their hitherto tight bond and mission to rebuild the Labour Party was shattered by Blair's leadership-seeking behaviour at the time of John Smith's death in 1994. "Gordon Brown spent the first nine years of his relationship with Tony Blair helping him build himself up, and the next 12 years wishing he had not."

It would make fascinating reading if Seldon were ever to write a book about Alistair Campbell, the vet's son, who slugged a fellow journalist for making jokes about the death of his then employer, the monster Robert Maxwell. He deals with this subject fairly, giving him the credit for insight, intelligence, fierce loyalty and an uncanny ability to feel the zeitgeist, a gift which has made Blair's premiership.

The principal events covered in this book are his father's illness, the death of his mother, Oxford, Sedgefield first time round, the 1992, 1997 and 2001 elections, Diana's death, 9/11 and its aftermath, Kosovo, and Iraq. His almost single-handed rescue of the monarchy in the days after Diana's death shows the man's political and populist genius, as does the chapter on Kosovo his courage, humanity and foresight. Much is made of the fact, not just by Seldon, that Blair soaks up his mentors then discards them, but one of his strangest and most incomprehensible relationships is with George W Bush. Seldon believes that, although "Clinton's effect on Blair as prime minister, rich in rhetoric and promise, had not fulfilled itself as it might in policy" (sound familiar?). It was "Bush, in contrast, (who) affected Blair's premiership very profoundly. While Blair and Clinton were the more compatible personalities... Blair and Bush had a greater identity of interest overseas, and share a similar moral and religious view of the world that would have been alien to Clinton."

As with all biographies and autobiographies, it is the subject's childhood and youth that are always he most fascinating part. Here, Seldon the schoolmaster comes into his own, making an extremely informed guess at how Blair's personality, talent and nature were formed. Blair was the beneficiary of an extraordinary rags to riches story.

His father Leo, the illegitimate son of music hall artists, was fostered by the Blairs and brought up in a Glasgow tenement during the Depression, later taking their name. His foster mother was a member of the Communist Party, and Leo began working for the party at 15. However, the war changed him and his political allegiance; he entered as a private but ended with a commission. By the time Tony Blair was born in 1953, Leo was working in an Edinburgh tax office, studied for a law degree at night, and went on to become not only a barrister in Newcastle but also a law lecturer at Durham University, and chairman of the local Conservative Association. A very driven, ambitious man, it is hardly surprising that he suffered a major stroke when Tony was 11. Leo's character appears to be a synthesis of Margaret Thatcher's and her father's, and it is no wonder that Blair identifies with her so strongly.

Blair and his brother and sister went to a private prep school in Durham, where Blair was very happy. Initially, his father's terrible illness (and the subsequent loss of earnings) made little impact on his sunny nature, "... not happiness punctured; it was happiness punctuated." At 13 he went to Fettes (with a scholarship), the apogee of his father's ambition for the family. And it is in this part of the book that Seldon, as a schoolmaster, comes into his own. He charts the change in Blair through his teenage school years, finding in them the root of the man Blair would eventually become.

"Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth" was how one master described Blair on arrival at Fetes. He was "...an extremely cheery, dandy young boy, grinning away like mad... very popular from the word go, because he was so likeable and enthusiastic." But "Tony was on the school fast track until about the age of 15. Then he fell off the Establishment ladder. He continued to climb, but on a different ladder, the anti-Establishment one" (The Third Way?).

Why? His father had recovered well by this time, so life at home should have been easier. Was Blair like most of us, especially in the late 1960s, merely pushing against the establishment as part of the growing up process? He gave up playing rugby and cricket for the school, a heresy, and preferred football and basketball, and captained the latter. He started acting. "He would constantly probe and challenge the system." He did not lead any anti-authoritarian revolt, but "He would stir up problems... and then blend into the crowd to see what happened."

"He was a manipulator, operating in the background, creating trouble," and "loved being the centre of attention, having a following." Yet despite this, he was not unpopular with most of the masters as he was not destructive, and was usually charming, and was seen more as a 'prat'. "A lasting impression of Blair at Fettes is of his contrariness... a rebel without a cause; an outsider who wanted to come inside."

Seldon, in a conclusion which sometimes sounds like an end of school report (but none the worse for that), likens Blair to a tragic hero, a good man who does his best. "But his character flaws, above all his hubristic belief in his own powers of persuasion and rightness... damaged him greatly." He believed he could use his personal magnetism and self belief to change

people's minds, even world leaders like Bush and Chirac, but failed. To balance his weakness in policy making and managing skills, he surrounded himself with a strong team, but chose, as his 'star performer', not a political or policy making guru, but a communications one, Campbell.

There is much to enjoy, discover and disagree with in 'Blair', and it will be interesting to reread it in, say, 10 years, to see how his portrait has stood the test of time.

Wendy Kyrle-Pope

The Missing Modernisation: The Case for PR in Local Government Elections. Make Votes Count Edited by Alan Pike Electoral Reform Society, £5

This is an interesting little booklet and a good contribution to the debate, but will it have any impact on the Labour government, which will decide the issue? I don't know, but more ammunition making the case is always useful. The Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust obviously thought so, as it helped fund the publication.

The booklet comprises 11 short essays by 12 contributors. Printed in infuriatingly small type, this does mean that a lot is packed into the 46 pages. For those like myself always suspicious of Make Votes Count (being an STV purist), the collaboration with the ERS is useful (now that the split in that organisation has been amicably resolved). There are interesting contributions by Alan Whitehead MP and Fiona Mactaggart MP as well as our own Paul Tyler.

Tyler reviews recent political history to support his case with some good examples and starts with a brilliant quote from Lord Rooker, of all people. Mactaggart's piece is not as intellectual as I expected but is partly playing to a home Labour audience by tackling head on the argument that PR will help extremists like the BNP. The analysis accords with much of that of ALDC. Ken Ritchie and Nina Temple set out their organisations' common stall. Alan Pike stresses the importance still of local factors despite the media suggesting otherwise.

One of the best essays is by my friend and political opponent, prominent Liverpool Labour councillor, Steve Munby. He is a well-known supporter of consensus politics, the environment, fair votes and the non-Conservative century type progressive alliance of the kind favoured by Philip Gould and at times Paddy Ashdown (when I see the state of the once great Conservative Party I am at times sympathetic to it myself).

This puts Steve (like one or two other members) often at odds with the adversarial politics of Liverpool City Council, and open to the 'accusation' that his views are more like Liberal Democrat ones. Steve argues the familiar case for restored power for local government but he also argues for the principle of local sovereignty as well as parliamentary. Further, he points to an important need to reconnect local politics with people.

"The rich and powerful don't need to exert their influence through democratic politics. Money, markets, the media and lobbyists can all be used to pursue their goals. The majority of people, who work for a living and don't enjoy great wealth or power, need democratic politics to redress the balance in their favour." Steve Bullock – the (rare Labour) directly elected mayor – talks about the experience in Lewisham, and Andrew Burns about the progress in Scotland.

Some of the best essays are the statistical ones. My favourite piece in the book is by Lewis Baston (information and research officer for the ERS). It's a topical chapter, with his review of the local elections in 2004, so will appeal to anoraks but does also include some longer term and deeper analysis. Chris Game shows the limits of the Conservative advance (the rural South, just as we thought).

Pike and Dan Corry, like Whitehead, argue for new localism but against the proliferation of either local quangos or fractionalisation of service delivery into lots of little directly elected bodies.

Kiron Reid

GLIMMERS IN THE DARK

...Continued from Page 26...

But how does one define nationality? The borders are artificial and the people have the same languages, and often the same tribal background on either side of most of the inevitably porous borders. The term 'Congolese' is itself artificial, simply denoting those living within the boundaries of that particular colony. In addition, as a result of decades of civil war, there are some four million internal refugees, or 'displaced persons'.

There is hardly any infrastructure left, with few roads and no fixed line telephone network. Even without the political problems, the logistics of electoral registration and of polling are, to put it mildly, rather challenging. On the plus side is the fact that there is no dominant tribe, with the largest only forming around 17% of the population, so that the possibility of tribally based political parties being able to legitimise power through the ballot box is highly unlikely.

Most difficult of all is the lack of an institutional memory of elections. There is no-one around who has ever run an election. Even in one party states there was an electoral process, but in the Congo the electoral commission has the massive task of starting from scratch. It is difficult to conceptualise what is involved, quite apart from the problem of drawing up a detailed diary of operations, and keeping to it. It is, perhaps, no wonder that the timetable is falling seriously behind.

The role of the international community is often criticised, sometimes rightly so but, when it comes to a situation such as in the Congo, when a long awaited opportunity to help an oppressed people arrives, it can act swiftly and expensively. The current budget for the whole electoral processes comes to $300m, almost all of which will come from the EU and from individual countries.

It is a considerable sum, but it will be well worth spending if the people of this vast country, who have been exploited for more than 40 years, at last have the opportunity to live their lives in security and can reap the benefits of the wealth that has gone into the pockets of the selfish few for far too long.

Michael Meadowcroft was Liberal MP for Leeds West 1983/87 and has since worked in many countries on projects to introduce democratic government.

Lord Bonkers' Diary

Monday

I travel again to the banks of the Severn for a meeting of the Shropshire Literary and Philosophical Society – you may remember that I am a country member (one pays less but gets just as many biscuits with one's coffee). My journey to Shrewsbury is occasioned by the prospect of a reading by that celebrated poet Paul Marsden, who also happens to be MP for the town. He seems at first in a defensive mood, "High the vanes of Shrewsbury gleam,/I'm not as fickle as I seem," but soon displays a refreshing honesty: "On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble,/And I am leaving at the double." Warming to his theme, he continues: "I am leaving at a gallop,/It's farewell Shrewsbury, goodbye Salop." He finishes with a couplet which exhibits a nice understanding of his situation: "The Lib Dems are a fine, broad church/And I have left them in the lurch."

Tuesday

After breakfast I call at the Vicarage to enquire how the Revd Hughes' Presidential campaign is faring. I find him correcting the proofs of his advertisement in Liberal Democrat News, and he asks me to look at it too. I find it to consist almost entirely of a catalogue of his more distinguished supporters, and an impressive list they make: Mike Storey, Sarah Teather, Kirsty Williams, Keith House, Hatfield House, Random House, J. K. Rowling, J. K. Lever, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Fanny Blankers-Coen, Gwen ffrancon Davis, Colin Ingleby-Mackenzie, the Maharajah of Cooch Behar, Bubble from Big Brother, the Very Revd Gonville ffrench-Beytagh, John Shirley-Quirk, Miss Peggy Inverarity and her Pipe Majorettes, Sir Arthur Comyns Carr, Queen Salote of Tonga and Armitage the Musical Seal. I ask the Revd if he intends to mention his recent performance in the London Mayoral election. He replies that, on the whole, he thinks he will not.

Wednesday

A morning's canoeing with my old friend Rising Star, the Red Indian brave and Member of Parliament for Winchester. The upper reaches of the Welland provide waters to test even the most experienced paddle and, while we navigate the rapids, my companion tells me the sad tale of an ancestor his who felt the cold most awfully and fitted a stove to his craft to keep him warm whilst he was on hunting expeditions. All went well until one day when he arrived in a desolate country where there was no wood to gather as fuel. He began to break pieces off his own canoe to feed the blaze until, inevitably, he went too far. As he disappeared beneath the waves, he realised the truth of the old Sioux proverb: You can't have your kayak and heat it.

Thursday

Emboldened by yesterday's venture, and perhaps a little foolishly, I take to the river alone. Pondering the Bulgar Question, I fail to notice that I have entered upon a particularly treacherous stretch of water. Just as I fear I shall suffer the fate of Rising Star's valetudinarian forebear, I am snatched to safety by a burly and strangely familiar figure. My saviour then takes up his field telephone and reports himself as follows: "Tony, it's John. I've rescued a peer in the canoodling and I'm going to give him artificial perspiration." Having ended this conversation, the wretched man attempts to kiss me. I have none of it and, taking up a duck egg which fortuitously comes to hand, I bean him, whereupon we fall to fisticuffs.

Friday

Papers released today, the Manchester Guardian reports, show that in 1973 Edward Heath's government considered prosecuting Peter Hain for criminal libel over a report that appeared in these very pages. I remember the incident well as, though my diaries were still appearing in the High Leicestershire Radical in those days, I would occasionally occupy the editorial chair of Liberator if Hain wished to go on a demonstration or something of the sort. That month someone had written a story about goings on between Conservative ministers and ladies of the night. Having long been a believer in freedom of information, I naturally filled in some of the fruitier details that our correspondent had skated over and printed the name of Geoffrey Rippon. All hell broke lose, but it is to Hain's credit that he insisted upon taking full responsibility for the matter himself – with the happy result that I was able to release him from the cellars at Bonkers Hall almost at once.

Saturday

Do you know Oakham Pier? I would liken it to the West Pier at Brighton, though it has to be admitted that the relentless tides of Rutland Water have left it in a worse state of repair than its cousin on the South Coast. Yet I can remember the days when the music hall at its far end was simply the place to be seen. The management prided itself on importing the best acts from every corner of the British Empire. Who could forget Jan Christian Smuts and his hilarious song "When father papered the impala"? Why, I myself could sometimes be prevailed upon to give a performance of "So I gave her a taste of me old Rutland sausage" or "Please Mr Gladsone, save a fallen woman for me" if it was a particularly riotous house! Incidentally, the young Dame Vera Lynn – later to succeed Gracie Fields as MP for Rochdale – made her debut treading the boards here. She was picked up by the Oakham lifeboat.

Sunday

To Hyde Park to view the newly reopened Princess Diana Memorial Fountain. I find it to be surrounded by a barbed-wire fence and patrolled by uniformed wardens who serve Anti-Social Behaviour Orders on any child who tries to paddle in the stream and offer counselling to any waterfowl who have been disturbed. The fountain's chief architect tells me that she designed it to represent the princess's life: "There are all sorts of fun things in the fountain that are turbulent and cascading down, and champagne bubbles, and total calm, and playful. There are many things about her personality that it hopes to acknowledge and memorialise," as she puts it. I reply that I made a similar attempt to capture the unique character of the first Lady Bonkers when erecting a fountain in her memory: the water shot hundeds of feet into the air and there were alligators in the surrounding lake.

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

www.bonkers.hall.btinternet.co.uk