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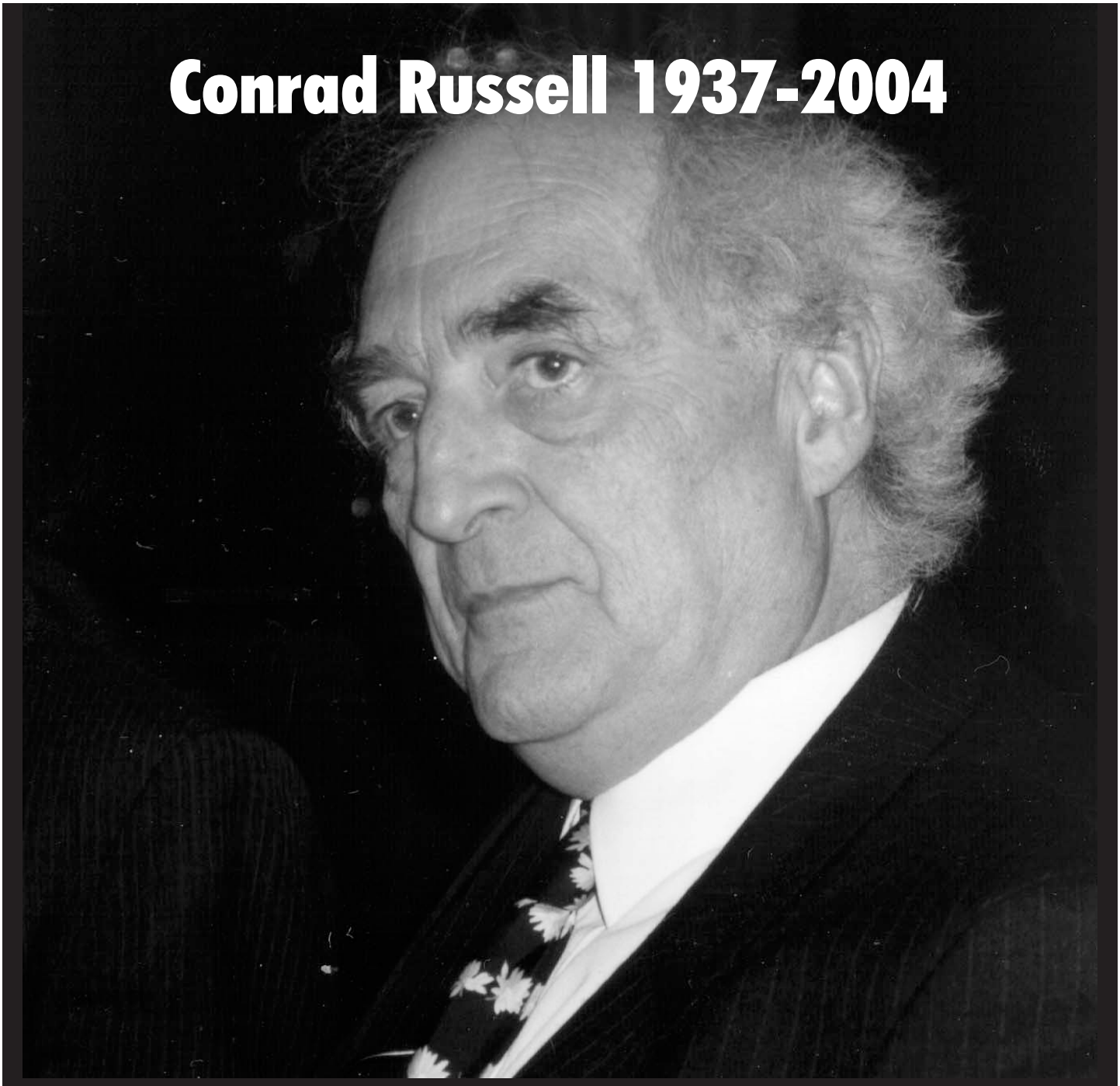

Conrad Russell 1937-2004

In this issue

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CONTENTS

COMMENTARY

TORIES AND TACTICALS

Liberal Democrats, of all people, ought to know not to read too much into one by-election result. Reading things from four by-election results is rather more useful, and the four in the past year have seen a consistent pattern emerge.

In Brent East, Leicester South, Birmingham Hodge Hill and Hartlepool, the Liberal Democrats started a bad third in a Labour seat where the Conservatives were the main challengers. Only in Leicester was there a strong local government organisation to draw on.

Yet the tally has been two gains and two near misses, with the Tories consigned to third place and the humiliation of coming fourth behind the vile UKIP in Hartlepool.

With the exception of Leicester, the Tories adopted the unusual strategy of giving up before they had started.

This is something new. For what still claims to be the main opposition to scarcely bother fighting by-elections against an unpopular government, suggests either that the Tories have some bizarre secret strategy or more likely that they lack the will and people to fight a decent campaign.

Despite the Tories' 12 years in the doldrums, there was always among their opponents a general assumption that they would recover as voters tired of New Labour.

We now have to consider the possibility that this will not happen and that the Tories will be stuck long-term with the predominantly ageing 30 per cent or so of people who will vote for them come what may, but be unable to break out beyond this.

That could see a reshaping of the political landscape as fundamental as that which began with the fracturing and fading of the Liberal Party in the 1920s. The Tories are not remotely likely to disappear but, if they cannot reach beyond their core support, they will not be back into serious contention.

For years, the Tories have been absent from most major urban areas, and are now mainly a party of the rural south. Much more of this trend and the Tories will cease to be a national party, even in England.

If that happens, one consequence ought to be that Labour, and to a lesser extent the Liberal Democrats, stop feeling the need to pander to Conservative voters and values.

Ever since Tony Blair became its leader, Labour has been co-opting Tory policy so as to drive the Tories further to the right. This has led to where we are now – the Tories are down but the process has so corrupted Labour that many will wonder if there is any point in killing off the Tories as a going concern if New Labour is the alternative.

Liberal Democrats who imagine that the way to appeal to Tory voters is to sound like Tories may be wasting their breath in addition to being simply wrong, if voters conclude that a Tory vote is a wasted one, and all but the hard core of Tories are willing to reconsider their vote.

Tactical voting always assumed that the Tories were the bigger enemy to both Labour and Liberal Democrat voters than either was to each other.

A Tory collapse may make voters less willing to vote tactically at all, as the need to do so appears to recede.

But Iraq and New Labour's mindless authoritarianism make a difference too.

Put simply, Labour voters who want better public services, a sane foreign policy and the preservation of civil liberty – all things many of them support wholeheartedly – can get what they want by voting Liberal Democrat. But Liberal Democrats can get little of what they want by voting for the Blair government's savage assault on civil liberty, the worst by any government in modern times, the Thatcher one not excepted.

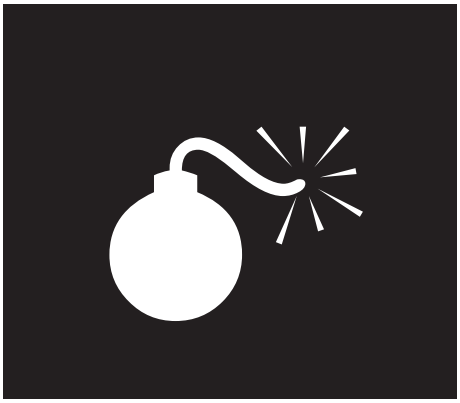
Above all this looms Iraq, the shadow that will not lift, no matter what Blair does. And it is quite right that it does not lift.

UN general secretary Kofi Annan, no less, has now declared the war illegal. No weapons of mass destruction have been found, and we now know from the Iraq Survey Group that they never existed. Blair, typically, caught out in one lie, has resorted to another: that the war was really fought to effect regime change.

That was not what was said at time. However revolting the Saddam regime was, international relations cannot be run on the basis of one government overthrowing another because it disapproves of its internal policy, without the world falling into armed anarchy.

Blair really went to war because George W Bush told him to, because he was too weak to stand up him (Harold Wilson, a figure of towering rectitude and principle compared with Blair, kept Britain out of Vietnam in similar circumstances) and because it fitted with Blair's perpetual battle against Labour's past to be seen alongside an American president drawn from the Republicans' extreme right.

Liberal Democrats minded to cast tactical votes at the next general election should look long and hard at the record of individual Labour candidates on Iraq and on civil liberty before supporting a party led by a man whose only rightful place in history is ignominy.



RADICAL BULLETIN

LAWS AND ORDER

David Laws, Liberal Democrat shadow treasury chief secretary, was in fact present at September's party's conference in Bournemouth, though attendees would have been hard placed to notice.

Not for him the big speech slots given to other shadow cabinet members. Instead, thanks to his ill-judged launch of the Orange Book (Liberator 298), Laws slunk around the place keeping his head down and his mouth shut.

His problem was not that he published the Orange Book; any endeavour to stir debate on policy is welcome. It was that he did so just before an expected general election and in a way that ensured his eccentric views on health finance overshadowed the party's own health policy launch, its intended general message to voters and the writings of his fellow contributors.

Had Laws waited a year, the book would no doubt have been welcomed as a useful contribution to the debate about what the party should be saying during the next parliament.

Instead, press coverage in the run-up to conference was filled with Laws, as usual with the party's right-wingers seeking to co-opt the language of 'modernism', shouting the odds about the virtues of private health insurance.

This left an exasperated shadow health secretary Paul Burstow seeking to disentangle his policy launch from the row generated by Laws.

Not the least of the annoyance caused by Laws was his espousing of a policy that had been specifically rejected in 2002 by the party's Huhne policy commission on public services. Its leading members cannot recall Laws having been present when the commission debated this issue, by which he now sets such store.

A third strand of anger arose among the party's backbench MPs. They have all been on their best behaviour in the election run-up and have become increasingly annoyed at seeing Laws and other shadow members, in particular shadow chancellor Vincent Cable, mouthing off in public to create new policy off the top of their heads.

As one told Liberator: "How many parties have their backbenchers all acting disciplined, and members of their shadow cabinet all over the place?"

When the parliamentary party met just before Bournemouth, Laws was greeted with chants of "Laws out", led by Orkney and Shetland MP Alistair Carmichael.

Another MP asked Laws to formally apologise to the parliamentary party for the trouble caused.

Party leader Charles Kennedy was also ensnared in the row because he had written a rather anodyne foreword to the Orange Book, the content of which suggested he had not read it, or else that the trouble Laws would cause had not struck him.

On a question and answer session on the BBC website, Kennedy was asked: "The 'Orange Book' talks about breaking up the NHS, and portrays members of the Lib Dem as right-wing marketeers. How much influence would these people hold in a Lib Dem government? Is it fair of the Lib Dems to portray themselves as to the left of Labour to those of us disillusioned with Tony?"

His answer would never lead one to guess that he had written the foreword to the thing:

"The Orange Book is not any official party publication, it has no status whatsoever, and the views expressed in it are the views of the contributors.

"David Laws says in his own essay that this is not the policy of the party. He has signed up for our health policy like everybody else. Now he thinks, with a view to the future, this is an issue that will need to be returned to - whether you have a private insurance-based system help funding the NHS

"He is perfectly entitled to flag up that, in his opinion, this is something that the party will need to return to. It has been considered and specifically rejected by the health working party who drew up the policy, by the Federal Committee who endorses and moves the policy forward, by the parliamentary party and by myself. And he knows that to be the case.

"People should not give weight to a single view expressed by a single person in a publication that has no formal status whatsoever."

At the September conference, Laws cancelled a formal launch of the book, and copies did not seem to be exactly flying off the bookshop opposite the Liberator stall.

Both the conference and policy committees enthusiastically agreed to take an amendment from Donnachadh McCarthy and Tony Greaves to the motion on the pre-manifesto, which reiterated the official health policy as "a decentralised and locally accountable NHS, free at the point of use and funded by taxation". It was passed by acclaim.

This for some reason became known among cynics as the amendment which said, "conference believes David Laws has made an arse of himself".

Nor could Laws count on much backing from his fellow contributors, several of whom said they did not see Laws' piece before publication, in breach of an agreement between contributors.

Laws' discomfiture will have brought smiles to the faces others who fancy themselves as party leader in future. A piece in the Observer referred in flattering terms to shadow home secretary Mark Oaten while describing Laws as "bright but politically naïve". Whoever could have given that briefing?

And what has motivated another potential contender to refer to the "group of highly unpleasant people around Mark Oaten". Whoever can he mean?

ONE HAND CLAPPING

Anyone who doubted the truth of the warning given by Jeremy Hargreaves (Liberator 297), that the Liberal Democrats' policy making process is in danger of destroying conference as a political event, should simply have stepped into the hall at Bournemouth on a few sample occasions.

The education debate, one of the more contentious and on a subject of supposedly wide interest, attracted an embarrassing turnout, proved when a (very rare) counted vote showed that fewer than 250 people were present. There are fringe meetings that get more than that.

The tourism debate saw fewer than 150 people in the hall, and other debates ran out of speakers or had to be spun out with announcements.

Some of the uncontentious debates appeared to have been staged solely to allow PPCs to speak and then get a few minutes on their local radio station to record that they had done so.

Conference attendance will begin to suffer if the event continues to be built around enormously long motions where everything has been fixed in advance by a policy working group, or matters that are uncontentious.

The agenda is close to becoming an excuse for everyone to gather for fringe meetings, training, social events and set piece speeches, rather than having much purpose in itself.

In the days when the Liberal Party was allowed to debate contentious issues in unpredictable conference sessions, the party establishment used to fret that the media would say the party was divided.

How much more embarrassing if the media notices that not even the party's own conference representatives are interested in its policies.

LORDS A LEAPING

Shirley Williams stood down as leader of the Liberal Democrat peers in September, which sparked speculation about who would take over. However, interest in the post was so high that there was only one candidate, and so the prize goes to Tom McNally.

He stood in 2001 against Williams, when he lost through a combination of opposing an icon being still identified with Paddy Ashdown's unpopular Lib-Lab conspiracies.

Those peers who were less than happy with the post going to the fourth successive ex-social democrat to hold it were rather stuck for a candidate.

William Wallace was reported to be interested, but wasn't; immediate past president Navnit Dholakia might have been interested but had had a row with Williams about the conduct of the home affairs portfolio; and John Alderdice, who in effect now has no Northern Ireland Assembly over which to preside, may have ambitions in Liberal International.

The Lords leadership requires seniority, the upper house being much concerned about whether someone is suitable to hold a high office by reason of age and experience.

It also needs someone who can afford to do the job, an almost full time one, which effectively rules out those peers who also work for a living.

STEP THIS WAY

The badge collection area at September's Liberal Democrat conference appeared to have been designed by someone who had never been to conference, or to the Bournemouth International Centre, or possibly both.

Even on the Saturday, when few delegates are present, queues built up as two people struggled to issue badges to all the attendees.

There were no separate queues for representatives, media, guests, technicians and so on, as is normal. Even worse, there was no special queue for people disputing their entitlement to vote, which left those who simply wanted to collect a badge stranded behind those who wished to engage in lengthy arguments about whether their constituency secretary had notified Cowley Street of their existence.

Yet more irrationally, the area used was a cul-de-sac, requiring those who had received badges to fight their way back down the queue. Since the area was at the top of an escalator, it bordered on unsafe at times as queues mounted up.

Even by the Tuesday, at least one party member queuing for a day visitor badge was kept waiting 90 minutes through confusing queues and technical malfunctions.

Meanwhile, the large area immediately inside the main doors, where registration is normally done, was completely empty. Madness.

This obtuse approach to planning spilled over into the catering arrangements.

The main catering outlet was in the middle of the stalls area, with fewer than a dozen minute tables adjacent. Meanwhile, the Tregonwell Hall, the usual catering outlet, was completely empty except for six computer terminals used by the net café. It had lots of tables but was too far away for anyone to carry hot food safely from the catering area.

Take a tip; whoever is planning the layout at Blackpool ought to visit the venue first.

DOING THE BUSINESS

The Liberal Democrat Business Forum, the party's latest fund-raising wheeze (sorry, important platform for high level exchanges of views on matters of vital interest to corporate Britain) invited members to an entire corporate day at conference in Bournemouth, culminating in a 'gala dinner', with tickets at a mere £400.

This price included a free copy of Who's Who in the Liberal Democrats.

Once again (Liberator 296), the Forum repeated the mantra that it exists to "provide an opportunity for members of the business and industrial community and trades unions to meet and exchange views with leading members of the Liberal Democrat party".

Oh no it doesn't. The attached corporate day programme included among 20 speakers no-one with even the slightest connection to any trades union, though it did manage to include a representative of the Adam Smith Institute.

The reference to trades unions is clearly there to give the illusion that the forum, and by implication the party, is as interested in representatives of ordinary employees as it is in their bosses.

But then most ordinary employees don't have sackfuls of loot available for donations, or even for gala dinners.

WHAT THE FOX IS HAPPENING IN WALES

An extraordinary slanging match broke out just before conference, which may end in a challenge to Lembit Opik's position as leader of the Welsh Liberal Democrats.

The cause is hunting, a favoured pastime in Opik's Montgomery constituency. Opik has long championed the Middle Way group, often satirised as a campaign to half kill foxes.

Peter Black, a Welsh assembly member from Swansea, opposes hunting and was horrified to see a report in the Western Mail in which Opik warned that "young men would resort to violence if the only way of life they know is criminalised while others would risk imprisonment or heavy fines to defy the ban".

Opik added that he condemned violence and illegal acts but warned that civil unrest and even targeted violence would follow a ban because there was nothing left to hold it in check.

Black responded on his weblog that he thought Opik's comments were "a disgrace and he should withdraw them".

He continued: "Although Lembit condemns violence and illegal acts, his warning that civil unrest and even targeted violence will follow a ban on hunting with hounds effectively amounts to an explicit threat on behalf of the fox-killers. It is not a position that any responsible politician should take."

Black said he did not believe people would take to violence if hunting were banned but "in saying that he believes that such a thing could happen, Lembit has got off the fence and effectively issued a call to arms. He is not speaking on behalf of the Welsh Liberal Democrats or me on this issue".

Opik responded that he was not advocating violence, simply predicting that it might happen, and complained that Black had not contacted him. Black said he had, but had received no response.

The Welsh party leadership is open to AMs as well as MPs, and the increasingly large membership from urban south Wales, where few care much about hunting, might rally behind a rival candidate, Black's supporters predict.

ANYTHING YOU DESIRE

Two MPs came away from Bournemouth with rather unusual possessions for persons in their position. Phil Willis now owns an inflatable woman and Sandra Gidley an inflatable sheep.

This was all in a good cause though, as these artefacts were auctioned at the Glee Club by Paul Keetch in aid of the Red Cross Beslan appeal.

How these items came to be at the Glee Club is another story.

The Liberal Revue included a sketch in which Ralph Bancroft appeared as Gladstone. The late prime minister was well-known for saving fallen women and, since it was unlikely that a real fallen woman would consent to take part, an inflatable was the next best thing. Peter Johnson appeared later in the same sketch as Lembit Opik, so the team decided to acquire an inflatable sheep too in honour of the alleged pastime of some of his constituents.

But how to buy them in a strange town? One can hardly walk into the tourist office and enquire the location of a sex shop.

This was solved with an approach to one of the local police officers at the conference. "Chez l'Amour will meet all your needs," Dorset's finest advised.

SQUATTERS' WRONGS

Another rather obvious Liberal Democrat web address has been allowed to fall into unauthorised hands because the party has not registered all the permutations.

Click on www.charleskennedy.co.uk and you will be taken to the very hostile if sometimes quite funny site Liberal Democrat Watch, which is believed to be trade union backed.

As we reported in Liberator 294, www.liberaldemocrats.org.uk is registered to someone called SN Pepin, who has largely filled the site with abuse about David Blunkett.

Kennedy must hope that these unauthorised sites do not come up too high on Google when people making bona fide enquiries search.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Collective member and West Berkshire councillor Sally Hannon has been inspired to start a list of the most exotic excuses used by Liberal Democrats for missing meetings.

She thought her own "I am in the middle of an armed siege", was quite a good one for getting out of a group meeting, though it turned out to be three armed response vehicles, a police helicopter and a dog attending an incident.

Former Newbury mayor Ray Beales' announcement "I have to leave now, I have my Esperanto oral", was also a strong contender.

So far the best one, because only a Liberal Democrat would possibly use it, comes from her fellow councillor Tony Vickers: "My apologies for absence, I shall be in Vilnius learning how the Baltic States are implementing modern land administration and property tax systems."

ANYTHING ON TELLY?

If you want to know something, go to the top. That seems to have been the stance of man who sat through an entire fringe meeting at which shadow culture media and sport secretary Don Foster and Caroline Thompson, number three in the BBC hierarchy, debated broadcasting policy.

As the end he approached Thompson thus: "The picture on my television's not very good, I thought you'd know what I should do about it."

NEXT MONTH...

Liberator 300!

Does anyone out there still possess a copy of the very first issue from 1970?

If so, please email us at collective@liberator.org.uk

REFERENDUM ROLE

The Liberal Democrats must lead the 'yes' case for the EU constitution because no other party can do so, say Marie-Louise Rossi and Nick Lowe

Whether we believe it or not, Tony Blair has committed the country to a referendum on the EU Constitutional Treaty. The only thing that could stop the process now would be a 'No' vote from the electorate of one of the other member states, similarly committed to a plebiscite.

The campaign in the UK will be tough. For many, many years, the people have been subjected to a barrage of anti-EU sentiment from the media. Yet we must win: the consequences of losing would be dire.

Were we to lose, the UK would be perceived as the wrecker. It would be the first step down a road that might take us out of the European Union. The consequences of leaving would be so bad for our trade and influence in the world, that even Michael Howard (in his more lucid moments) does not wish to contemplate them.

The Liberal Democrat party must not sit on the fence. The dangers to the future prosperity of our country are too great. Our party should also be consistent in maintaining its longstanding, though reflective and critical, support of the EU. Liberal Democrats need to win the referendum and will need to work alongside all the respectable allies we can find, even New Labour itself.

What, then, should we Lib Dems be doing in the run-up to the probable general election of next year?

Europe may not be an issue on which the major parties wish to fight the election, but UKIP will make it one. UKIP's technique is to spread seemingly plausible half-truths, rooted in the abundant mythology about Brussels, that the UK press has been cultivating so long in its pages. Liberal Democrats must be ready to respond with quick, positive statements about Europe. High-quality rebuttal material will be made available to spokespersons and party-workers, if not directly by the party, then by all-party groups such as the European Movement. Liberal Democrats also need to be preparing for the referendum campaign. To start just six months before the referendum would give us an unreasonably uphill task. We must, as of now, as the European Movement already is, be formulating strategies, forging national and local alliances and preparing materials to counter the spinning from the myth-factories of the sceptics. We must also challenge the assumptions of journalists and try to fill the information gaps that currently allow them to print or broadcast absurd stories as fact.

The Constitutional Treaty may not be a beautifully written document: academic jurists with a free hand would undoubtedly have done better. Given, however, that it is intended as a basic rule book for co-operation across a continent of, in time, more than 25 countries, and 450 million people, it would be surprising if it were any easier to read. It is a compromise and that is its strength.

It does not create a super state, give the EU powers to tax, eliminate our army or eclipse NATO, nor hand over control of other aspects of policy, such as immigration, to others.

In fact, the existing EU structures are only marginally altered. The Treaty lays down a voting procedure that will be able to work for 25 countries, and consolidates and explains the powers of the Council of Ministers, all national parliaments and the European Parliament. Its major importance is, however, that it simplifies a previous mass of treaty provisions built up over time. They have been evolving for upwards of 50 years and there is a real need for this consolidation. With the welcome arrival of ten new member states and more to come, this need is yet more pressing.

So, there are good reasons for a new treaty and few real grounds for voting against.

Yet, Tony Blair's promised referendum will probably be fought on a different question. Whatever words the Labour Party may choose in putting the question, the chances are that the electorate will opt to answer a different one. People will vote on how they feel about Europe and the European project as a whole and what they believe they have been told.

Right to the end of the campaign, Liberal Democrats must argue forcefully and with confidence about the benefits of our existing and future Europe, for all our prosperity and security. We must project memorable positive images in the national and local media, and, as importantly, through all available grassroots networks. The European Union has contributed enormously to the wealth and prosperity of the UK and our continent as a whole. It has brought peace and contributed itself very substantially to the end of any prospect of future tyranny. It has been accused of protectionism, but is in reality one of the main leading forces in the world for free trade (as those who have been combating US protectionism well know). It is accused of burying European business under a mountain of regulation but, in reality, it harmonises masses of regulations that otherwise would have been introduced by individual member states to ensure, for example, good safety, worker protection, animal welfare, environmental clean-up and avoidance of pollution. As a mere example, the creation of the Single Market abolished some 3,000 laws, replacing them with some 300. We Liberal Democrats are now the only true pro-European party in this country. We know it makes sense. We have a duty to campaign.

Marie-Louise Rossi is the Deputy Chair of European Movement UK and Liberal Democrat Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for the Cities of London & Westminster. Nick Lowe is Chair of the Central London Europe Group

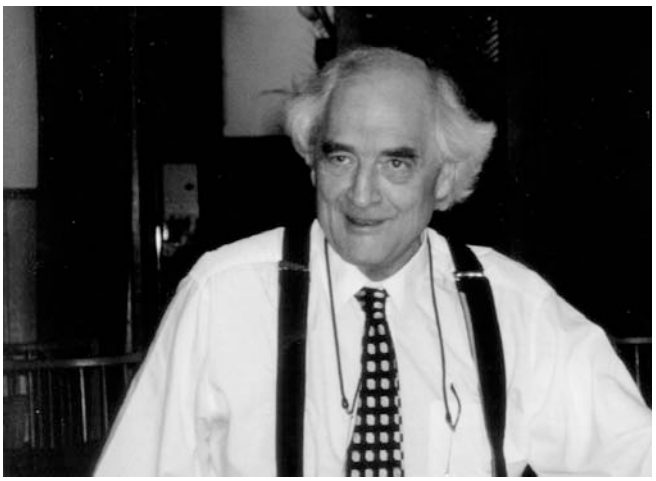
OBITUARY: CONRAD RUSSELL

Conrad Russell made many contributions to liberalism but perhaps the most crucial was his role in thwarting deals with Labour after the 1997 general election. Mark Smulian remembers a Liberator contributor who made sure the magazine was part of that battle

The first contact between Liberator and Conrad Russell occurred in the bar at the Spring conference in Nottingham in 1996, when he somewhat diffidently asked if he might write something for the magazine.

I knew of him but had never met him, and was rather flattered that this hereditary earl and eminent scholar had even heard of Liberator.

Fears that he might have somehow mistaken Liberator for an academic journal proved groundless, and over the next eight years words poured from his typewriter (and it was still a typewriter) into the magazine.



The son of the philosopher Bertrand Russell, he was a distinguished historian, lecturing in London and at Yale before becoming a professor at King's College, London, from 1990 until his retirement in 2003.

He succeeded to the title in 1987 and, although soon after he became the Liberal Democrat social security spokesman in the Lords, he was at that time still mainly occupied with his academic career and was not much known in the party.

That changed in the mid-1990s as he began to devote more time to politics, motivated, I think in part, by his loathing of New Labour.

In the run-up to the 1997 general election, Tony Blair was popular to a degree hard to imagine now, and many Liberal Democrats saw him as someone they wished to work with, indeed almost as one of their own.

Conrad was having none of it; he perhaps saw through New Labour to the populist authoritarianism that lay at its heart quicker than anyone else in the party.

His first article for Liberator deplored the loss of parliamentary control over the executive, inspired by his disgust at the Conservative's government's attacks on asylum seekers.

The second, in December 1996 (Liberator 241) was a lethal assault on Jack Straw, at that time Labour's shadow home secretary, who Conrad described as the only person in the country he would less like to see as home secretary than the then incumbent Michael Howard.

Howard was promoting a bill to impose longer prison sentences, and even ex-Tory cabinet ministers Kenneth Baker and Douglas Hogg had opposed it.

Conrad wrote: "This bill is too savage and reactionary for them, but not for Jack Straw. This is one of the occasions on which new Labour have cast grave doubt on whether they are an alternative to Toryism."

This, remember, was written near the high water mark of New Labour popularity, and Conrad was fearlessly going against the grain at a time when most Liberal Democrats were more interested in the deals they might cut with Labour over electoral reform.

From then on, Conrad became a fixture in Liberator, usually writing in the two conference issues each year. He would normally ask for a topic to be suggested, but this was difficult since he was at his best when he tackled whatever happened to fire him up at that moment and it would be an agreeable surprise to see what he had chosen to write about when it arrived.

His insights and elegant style even meant that collective members never complained about having to re-key his sheaves of typescript into computers.

Indeed, it was when discussing his ideas for articles that Conrad's erudition could be unleashed in full flood. One could be talking about some contemporary political issue only for Conrad to quote a figure from the seventeenth century (his specialist period) or from the classical world or from literature apparently with every expectation that everyone else would immediately know what he was referring to.

On one occasion, I was talking to him and Devon North MP Nick Harvey, when Conrad suddenly compared the matter at hand to some propositions that had been put

before bishops at an ecclesiastical conference in the twelfth century.

This led him to some brief quotations in Latin from the bishops' deliberations, at the end of which he laughed loudly. Not wanting to be thought fools, Nick and I laughed too, while not having the faintest idea what he had said.

I never discovered whether Conrad genuinely assumed that others were as knowledgeable as he was, or whether he knew he had a reputation for recondite asides and played up to this. Anyway, he always did it with a straight face.

Conrad's articles were not his only contribution to Liberator. Now he is dead, we can reveal that he was Liberator's prime source on what was going on during the worst of Paddy Ashdown's manoeuvrings with Blair in 1997/98.

Since he was around parliament with an ear to the ground, he was able to provide solid confirmation of what Liberator had suspected but not been certain of – that support for any deal with Labour beyond the original terms of the Joint Cabinet Committee was minimal within the parliamentary party and that a large group of MPs greatly wished to put a stop to 'the project'.

During that year, the phone would often ring late at night with Conrad calling to tip us off about the latest turn in what he saw as Ashdown's dangerous dealings with Blair.

There were plenty of other senior figures willing to talk to us, but Conrad's special value was his initiative; as soon as he discovered something, he would make a point of contacting Liberator and this ensured that we knew what to look for when we approached others.

Some of the things Conrad told us were on a 'not to be printed' basis, and still have not been, but served to give a rounded picture of the full horror of what was happening.

In his social security role, Conrad fought hard to make sure the JCC's remit was not extended by stealth from its original constitutional brief into other areas.

During the passage of the European Parliamentary Elections Bill, in which he saw acceptance of closed lists as a compromise too far, he was threatened with having the whip removed.

Most importantly, his incessant and not-quite-public pressure on Ashdown, culminating in November 1998 with the Federal Policy Committee meeting, where Ashdown's proposal to extend the remit of the JCC survived only by his own casting vote, probably put paid to the whole thing.

As things had worsened that autumn, Conrad in one phone call shook me by warning that, if things continued as they were, he doubted the Liberal Democrats would be able to fight the next general election as a united party.

He played a crucial role in rallying the anti-project forces and gave an invaluable intellectual clout to what might otherwise have been depicted as a bunch of radicals and malcontents uninterested in 'power'.

Many conference fringe meetings at this time, some under the Liberator banner, helped give Conrad something like folk hero status in parts of the party, though he would certainly have dismissed that description.

Such was his status that he could get a hearing and reach out to people who might not have been willing to listen to other opponents of Ashdown's strategy.

Anyone who is glad that the Liberal Democrats exist today as an independent party, able to oppose the government over Iraq, or indeed anything else, has Conrad to thank as much as anyone for the untiring work he put into destroying Lib-Labbery.

He did not, as some did, take this stance through attachment to an abstract party purity, but from a rigorous application of principle. Blair was not merely not a liberal, he was an active and dangerous opponent of liberalism and therefore, as Conrad saw it, no accommodation was possible.

Perhaps Charles Kennedy advised Conrad that he intended quietly to kill off Lib-Labbery. At any rate, Conrad was an early convert to the belief that Kennedy was a Good Thing, at a time when his background meant he was the object of suspicion among the left of the party. In the event though, Conrad backed Jackie Ballard's quixotic leadership bid.

After Kennedy became leader, Conrad mostly devoted himself to policy work, in particular on the Huhne commission on public services.

While he could out-think and out-argue all comers, he was neither aloof nor pompous. Capable of explaining liberalism to pretty well anyone, and willing to tackle even the most unpromising prospects, he was also willing to learn from others.

In 1999, he published 'An Intelligent Person's Guide To Liberalism', which, as an 'it does what it says on the tin' volume, is unlikely to be bettered for many years.

Despite his own intellectual eminence, he credited in its preface that he had learned from Liberator Collective members Kiron Reid and Alex Wilcock, both less than half his age, and from Ed Davey and Ruth Coleman among others.

By the September 2002 conference, it was obvious that Conrad was ill and, when Kennedy paused in his leader's speech to deliver an appreciation, many present feared that he must have been advised privately that the illness was serious.

A few months later, Conrad was stricken by the death of wife, though when unwittingly approached soon after to contribute to Liberator, said "don't apologise for disturbing me, I think it is time I was disturbed again".

He worked zealously in the by-election in his home constituency of Brent East. Last April, he was at the London region conference and, although clearly unwell, delivered a witty and devastating critique of the government.

Conrad's final article for Liberator was in the September 2003 conference issue (Liberator 290), an attack on the target culture in public services in which he observed in typical style: "Those who say Blair ought to tear his mind away from foreign affairs and give his mind to public services are no friends to public services. When Blair's mind is elsewhere, as he does no good, so he does no harm. That is a blessed state of affairs."

We approached him in July, when he was out of hospital, and he expressed interest in writing for this year's autumn conference issue on the internal debate about choice and markets. Sadly, it was not to be, as illness again took hold.

It is a cliché to say when someone dies that we will not see their like again, but in this case it is true.

Mark Smulian is a member of the Liberator Collective. Material for this obituary was also contributed by Gareth Epps.

THE LORDS' VOICE FOR THE POOR

Liz Barker recalls Conrad Russell's use of the House of Lords to promote justice, liberty and scholarship

Most obituaries focused, rightly, upon Conrad as an outstanding historian. Others sought explain him as a product of an illustrious, troubled family. To describe Conrad as a colleague in the Lords is difficult because, to do so, one has to understand the effect of those key influences upon him, but also consider what he chose to do with the position he inherited.

Unsurprisingly, Conrad was at home in a parliament, on which he was an academic expert, and in a building rebuilt by his ancestor Lord John Russell after the great fire of 1834.

Just over 150 years later, when Conrad joined, he started a challenge to the power of the state over the lives of individuals. He did so in is own eccentric style.

Conrad cared about three things above all; justice, liberty and scholarship. The theme which runs right through all his work in the house was the extent to which poverty compromised those three essential elements of life. His understanding of, and ability to convey, the indignity to which people are subjected because they are poor, made him an outstanding spokesperson on social security.

His command of detail on subjects such as the Child Support Agency, treatment of asylum seekers and student hardship meant that he was a feared opponent whom ministers respected, and a champion whom lobby groups loved. He never missed the chance to ask the government what happened to people who were refused benefits. It is a question some us will continue to put until answers come.

Conrad often said: "It was Nancy Seear who taught me my craft in this place". She did an excellent job. As a colleague, Conrad could be brilliant and frustrating. He was unfailingly generous with time and support, especially for those who came in after him. Yet he wasn't a team player.

Conrad knew that he could not only command the attention of the House but often turn a debate; not surprising given his unparalleled wealth of historical anecdote, eloquence and unfailingly polite delivery of even the sharpest barb. His knowledge of procedure added to his ability to perform. He outwitted the whole house, including the clerks, when, during a fiery debate, he invoked a standing order adopted in 1624 to call for a prayer of asperity – the seventeenth century equivalent of saying "leave it out both of you, it's not worth it".

He could not remain silent during a big debate, yet sometimes he misjudged tactics badly. His longstanding opposition to Section 28 had won him admiration from supporters and contempt from the Christian right in equal measure. When the issue was last debated he would not be persuaded that an intervention from him would be counterproductive, and sadly, it was.

Dominic Addington, whose instinct for the mood in the Lords is second to none, once said that sitting on the bench with Conrad was a bit like being in a side with the most flamboyant bowler of a generation. "You never know whether he is going to rip the stumps out of the ground, or get thumped over the boundary for six, but in either case you won't forget that you were there."

Like others, he agonised long and hard over the whipped vote on tuition fees in return for PR in the European elections. As a lifelong supporter of students and president of the Electoral Reform Society who found closed lists repugnant, his loyalty to the party and colleagues stretched to the limit. Nevertheless, he found an intellectual loophole and got through it.

Conrad was an inveterate gossip, and loved nothing better than a good plot, however implausible it might be. A late night phone call which began with a cough and the phrase "Conrad here" was always a treat, not least because of his extraordinary knowledge of people in all parties. Moreover, the dozen of us who shared an office struggled to concentrate on our work as responses to Conrad's huge, wide ranging correspondence were elegantly dictated to the ever patient Suzette Palmer. Eurosceptics were seen off with historical precedents, students encouraged with advice on sources, invitations to constituencies gracefully declined.

Anyone who has read Conrad's academic work will know that he wrote the best footnotes in the business and always worked from the best available sources. So to appreciate Conrad as a working peer, look through Hansard. Read his second reading speech on the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum bill, when he likened the Blair government's treatment of terrorist suspects to the political excesses of Charles I. Then you will understand why colleagues would go into the chamber, intending only to stay for five minutes in order to have one's presence registered, and find ourselves riveted and unable to leave.

The Lords is a place of privilege, but titles and robes are nothing compared to the opportunity to work with someone as learned, stylish and marvellously bonkers as Conrad. We won't just miss him; we'll talk about him for a long time to come.

Liz Barker is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords and former chair of the Federal Conference Committee.

THE BEST OF CONRAD RUSSELL

Conrad Russell contributed nearly 20 articles to Liberator from 1996 until 2003. Here, we present some extracts...

On New Labour's welfare policies (Liberator 246, September 1997):

"The New Labour approach rests on the fundamental misapprehension of believing that the situation can be tackled by measures designed to change the poor, rather than measures designed to change the economy which is not giving them work."

On the prospect of deals with New Labour (Liberator 247, November 1997):

"I have no objection to supping with the devil. That is day-to-day politics. What I do object to is having to call him an angel because I want my dinner."

On the prospect of a deal with New Labour to get PR (Liberator 250, March 1998):

"… to say we want PR very badly indeed is not to say we want it any price. The trouble with wanting anything at any price is, that is the price you will end up paying. The other trouble is that if you want something at any price, you will probably not get it at all."

"We cannot go on being a centre party dedicated to moderating Labour's left-wing excesses when their excesses are all in the other direction; that is a certain recipe for extinction. We must be daily establishing that we are an alternative to Blair because he is illiberal."

On Blair's attempt to blame the welfare state for poverty (Liberator 254, September 1998):

"There is no doubt that we have been failing in the task of creating a fairer and more prosperous society. That failure has not been taking place in the Department of Social Security. To allege that is like blaming the Red Cross for the casualties it brings into a war zone. Those are failures of economic policy, of the global market, and of prevailing management theory. When I hear someone blaming the DSS for these failures, I hope his errors can be explained by stupidity."

On the rules to observe when doing deals (Liberator 256, December 1998):

"It is absolutely fatal to attempt to negotiate by appeasement. You cannot persuade people to do things for you merely by being nice to them. If you do what they want without real hard concessions in return, they lose all incentive to give you anything you want. Never trade hard substance for a promise: it destroys any incentive to keep a promise when it is made."

On New Labour's public spending plans (Liberator 258, March 1999):

"Are voters so determined to keep their taxes down that they are willing to be robbed in their homes or burnt in heir beds to save their pence? If so, in a democratic country, that is their right… Yet it is a fraud to tell them they can have adequate public services at the same time."

On the essays in 'Passports to Liberty' no.3 (Liberator 259, May 1999):

"We must all face it that we cannot enjoy [protection] unless we accord it to others. It is in this common need for safety against murderous assault that the principles of community and individuality meet. Because we all want to get it, we must give it."

On drugs (Liberator 261, September 1999):

"I have only found one reference to a teetotaller in seventeenth century England, and the fact was advanced as casting doubt on her sanity. We are clearly not going to abolish the use of artificial stimulants."

On populism (Liberator 269, September 2000):

"… the politician who offers to do everything the voters want is offering to pay them in a devalued currency. They have no idea what it will purchase."

On the powers of the state (Liberator 272, January 2001):

"Perhaps the most important reason for limiting the state's power to decide everything is the effect on its citizens. Mill was quite right that we need to develop a country of active citizens; that is one of the justifications of trial by jury. In the Blairite world where rights match responsibilities, Blair is going to define all the responsibilities. If citizens never have to decide what their responsibilities are, what sort of citizens will we have?"

On voter apathy (Liberator 275, July 2001):

"The biggest problem is that voters do not now recognise what parties stand for. This lack of perception of core belief increases the readiness to perceive sleaze and self-interest, and to dismiss all politicians as knaves."

On public services (Liberator 280, March 2002):

"… public servants are voting with their feet and leaving the service in droves… Some of us get very tired of being denounced as 'producer interests'. We went into our jobs because we believed we are producing something people wanted. If they do not, why shouldn't we do something else instead?"

On New Labour's asylum policy (Liberator 286, March 2003):

"The objective of reducing the number of applications is shared by the Labour and Conservative parties. Since they are bound to fail in it, each failure will be used to justify useless severity. It is a failure of intelligence as much as a failure of humanity."

Liberal Revue 2004

Janice Turner
and Peter Johnson in
A Song For The Tories

The Vicar of Gidley, from left:
Nick Winch,
Harriet Smith,
Harriet Sherlock,
Paul Seddon,
Gareth Epps,
Peter Johnson,
David Grace

Ralph Bancroft
and Melissa

These pictures are taken from 'Does My Majority Look Big In This', which played at the Pavilion Theatre in Bournemouth on the Tuesday night at conference to discerning delegates. The pictures were kindly supplied by Alex Folkes.

Paul Seddon as Sir Menzies Campbell with jugband accompaniment

Peter Johnson and woolly friend

Climb Every Staircase, the revue's finale, from left: Catherine Furlong, Harriet Smith, Harriet Sherlock, Peter Johnson, Gareth Epps, David Grace, Paul Seddon, Nick Winch

IT'S NOT PERSONAL, IT'S BUSINESS

Why are some Liberal Democrat policy makers so obsessed with deregulation, asks Simon Titley

What are the biggest global problems that society and therefore politicians must confront? Poverty, war, disease, environmental damage and excessive concentrations of power are the things that, probably more than any other factors, harm people's lives and liberty.

Within Britain, which problems should be top of any politician's agenda? Besides the local variants of global problems, the list might include the mountain of consumer debt, the house price bubble, the collapse of our manufacturing industry and the widespread effects of social dislocation.

Now ask yourself what are the causes of all these problems. They are basically the same as they have been throughout human history – some permutation or other of human greed, human arrogance and human stupidity.

At least that is the case on the planet on which I live. But there is a parallel universe, another world inhabited by the Liberal Democrat Treasury Team and the right-wing nutcases in Liberal Future. On that planet, the main problem confronting society, and therefore the top political priority, is that there is too much regulation of business.

The tendentious title of the policy paper 'Setting Business Free', adopted by the Liberal Democrats last year, set the tone. The 'Orange Book', published this year, was largely based on a similar assumption.

This is not to say that there are no problems with business regulation. There are many examples of regulation being excessive or counter-productive. But an undue focus on business regulation has distorted Liberal Democrat policy making and carries with it numerous risks.

The first of these is the danger of skewing the party's priorities. Regulation is not even the main problem for business or the economy, never mind politics or society as a whole. The biggest problems for British business remain what they have been for many years; bad management, low productivity and under-investment. None of these is a product of over-regulation.

Regulation is not a serious problem for most areas of British business. Recent regulation has tended to focus on two areas of public concern, consumer safety and environmental protection. Consequently, the main impact of new regulation has been on sectors such as the chemical and energy industries. Most other business sectors do not experience anything like the same degree of regulatory pressure.

The second danger is the moral issue of double standards. You may remember Michael Corleone's famous phrase in 'The Godfather', "It's not personal, Sonny. It's strictly business." Conservatives share Corleone's fallacious belief that the ritual incantation of the word 'business' provides an exemption from any moral obligation to behave decently.

The trouble with the party's anti-regulatory rhetoric is that it bolsters this absurd notion, that business inhabits some sort of moral bubble and should not be subject to the same rules or morality as the rest of society.

The third danger for the party is of creating a political narrative to which most voters do not relate. The stereotypical image of the struggling small-business person, burdened under a weight of 'red tape', is doubtless one that goes down well at your average rotary club dinner-dance, or in gin-sodden gatherings at the 19th hole. But most British people do not run businesses. They earn their money via salaries and wages, or live on pensions and benefits.

Instead of addressing that audience, the Liberal Democrats' Treasury Team gives too much weight to the views expressed in the party's Business Forum and Liberty Network (see RB, Liberator 296). The business lobbyists who pay to sit on these bodies do not donate money out of the goodness of their hearts. They are buying influence for their business interests, so naturally they will talk up the 'problem' of regulation. The party's policy makers are fools if they take this special pleading at face value.

If the Liberal Democrats wish to do well at the next general election, they must learn to express their policies in language to which most people can relate. Depicting the world through the prism of over-regulation is not a wise electoral strategy.

The fourth danger is a failure to understand the political dynamic that causes pressure for regulation in the first place. The 'economic liberals' in the Liberal Democrats like to depict regulation as 'nanny state' measures. While there are many illiberal politicians who do not trust people and wish to nanny them, the primary pressure for regulation does not originate with such politicians.

The main source of regulation is the growing weight of public expectation for social management. Over the past forty years, people have become better educated, more affluent, more individualised and more assertive. They have developed a series of ethical and emotional concerns about pollution, animal welfare, child labour and the like. They also have a heightened sensitivity to perceptions of risk (a phenomenon that would take another article to explore).

At the same time, business has demanded a different relationship with its consumers. Its equity has shifted from tangibles (bricks and mortar, plant and equipment) into intangibles (brand values and corporate reputation). Through the growth in importance of the brand, business is demanding a more emotional attachment from consumers,

rather than a rational assessment of the functional benefits of products. But, in its reliance on emotion, business has got more than it bargained for. It has become more vulnerable to criticism that has a popular emotional resonance.

Increasingly, citizens are holding companies responsible for their actions. As the economy has globalised and the power of national governments has declined, there has been a loss of public confidence in the capability of politicians, and a rise of pressure groups that know how to exploit the emotional side of popular concerns.

While Vincent Cable is busy fretting about how to reduce regulation, pressure groups are often bypassing altogether the slow and tedious process of lobbying government for regulation, and instead applying direct pressure on business corporations by threatening their brands and reputations. Companies are responding by adopting CSR (corporate social responsibility) policies, in an attempt to manage public expectations on a range of ethical issues and to pre-empt hostile pressure group activity.

Those Liberal Democrats who see regulation as a series of 'nanny state' demands are missing the point. As the stock of politicians and government sinks, people regard business, especially multinational corporations, as an alternative location of political power. Business is finding that, because it is perceived as a political actor, it needs popular consent to operate. The less business is perceived to be trustworthy, the more it will face public pressure to modify its behaviour.

It is all very well arguing about how many regulatory angels can dance on a pinhead, but the Liberal Democrats must evolve policies that recognise this fundamental social and economic change. If they aim simply to remove business regulation without addressing the public concerns that drive the political pressure, all that will happen is that these concerns may find a less palatable outlet.

Instead of arguing for the arbitrary removal of regulation, the Liberal Democrats need to start from a different standpoint. This should be based on an understanding of the proper role of the state. It should also be rooted in a moral sense of what matters, which is the liberty and dignity of the individual. Moreover, if we recognise that 'regulation' is just a fancy word for the law, it will help strip away much of the cant and hypocrisy that obscures this topic.

What, then, is the legitimate role of the state in regulating business? The first duty of government is to keep the peace. Just as we need laws to protect us from violence, theft and fraud committed by individuals, so we need protection from similar acts committed by business. There are enough recent examples of fake accounting, tax evasion, share option scams and the raiding of pension funds to show that this is a real concern. Protecting the citizen from industrial pollution, hazardous products or racial and sexual discrimination also fits into this category.

Second, government has a legitimate role in ensuring a level playing field, not only between competing businesses but also between business and the citizen. Business and individual citizens are not equal protagonists. People who run businesses are generally more powerful than the average citizen and we need to protect people from abuses of power. So, for example, it is perfectly proper for government to prevent monopolies and cartels, or to ensure accurate product labelling.

Third, we need laws to ensure that contracts are legally binding. Without such regulation, business and the economy cannot function.

In whichever category the state regulates, the overriding criterion for Liberals should be an outcome in which the liberty and dignity of individual citizens are protected and enhanced rather than diminished.

What has clouded this issue is the attempt by 'economic liberals' to position business as analogous to the individual citizen in terms of rights. They have achieved this by conflating personal freedom with 'free' markets. But business is an inanimate object; not only is it meaningless to talk of business having 'rights', it is also wrong to put the interests of things before those of people.

From this false premise, 'economic liberals' believe that only the state is capable of threatening individual liberty. While the state may have more power than anything or anyone else, this does not rule out the ability of other bodies to threaten our liberty. Business corporations are perfectly capable of abusing power and denying liberty – why can't the 'economic liberals' see this?

At the root of their obsession with regulation is that they have made a fetish of the market. Liberals should not make any economic mechanism a fundamental part of their philosophy. For Liberals, the market is not a 'value', any more than a state-controlled economy or any other economic mechanism. The market can often advance individual freedom and choice, but it can also threaten them. To the extent that Liberals support the market, it should be on pragmatic grounds.

An unhealthy obsession with the market has led 'economic liberals' to believe that Liberalism is essentially about less power for the state. But Liberalism is about minimum oppression, not minimum government. It is about more power for the individual and that means less power for all bullies, wherever they come from – the state, powerful individuals or, indeed, business.

And while we're about it, we should ask these 'economic liberals' why it is that they are so keen on more freedom for business, while at the same time advocating 'tougher' measures to police the individual. This mix of economic liberalism and social authoritarianism already has a good home but it is not in the Liberal Democrats.

Anyone in the Liberal Democrats who really believes that the 'free market' is a value rather than a mechanism, and that it supersedes all other considerations, should consider the logic of their position and join the Conservative Party.

It is right for Liberals to be vigilant and sceptical of regulation. It is not enough for the object of regulation to be just. Regulation is pointless if it does not achieve its purpose, so we need regulation that is proportionate and efficient, and to get rid of those that aren't.

But this policy needs a sense of proportion and a Liberal moral core. If the Liberal Democrats give the impression that their motive is to favour the interests of business over those of the individual citizen, they will be condemned as Thatcherites and deservedly so.

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective. Argue with him at his weblog: http://liberaldissenter.blogspot.com/

COBDEN - THE ORIGINAL LIBERAL?

Richard Cobden, an influential Liberal born 200 years ago, is a forgotten figure. Simon Morgan argues it is time to restore his reputation

Richard Cobden was once hailed as one of the founders of modern liberalism. No less a personage than Gladstone once described him as 'my master', and himself as a 'Peel-Cobden man'.

Yet Cobden's bicentenary this year has largely been ignored. In the media there has been almost silence, with the exception of an editorial in the Economist, which Cobden helped to found. Discussion of his legacy has mainly been restricted to a few libertarian websites and newsgroups, and to academic historians, who in July held an international conference at Cobden's former residence, Dunford House in Sussex, organised by the Letters of Richard Cobden Project, based at the University of East Anglia.

The conference in particular provided a timely reminder of the breadth of Cobden's interests, and the extent of his legacy both in Britain and abroad. As well as an ardent free-trader, Cobden was a peace campaigner, a financial reformer, a newspaper promoter, an opponent of imperialism, and an arch-critic of the traditional diplomacy of the 'Balance of Power', which threatened to involve Britain in every minor continental dispute and was arguably to lead to Britain's embroilment in the First World War (a possibility Cobden himself foresaw).

Moreover, these various activities were given cohesion by Cobden's global vision, reinforced by an almost unrivalled array of foreign correspondents among the liberal politicians and economists of Europe and the United States.

Ironically, Cobden's legacy is appreciated far more in some other countries than in his native land: this is made all the more inexplicable because many of his ideas, and the problems that he grappled with, continue to resonate in the modern world.

In Britain, Cobden is perhaps best remembered as the principal leader of the Anti-Corn Law League, arguably the most successful Victorian pressure group, which campaigned from 1839/46 for the repeal of import duties on agricultural produce. The success of the League helped to usher in the long era of free-trade dominance in British commercial policy that lasted until the return of protection during the inter-war years.

However, that very success may have obscured the significance of Cobden's wider vision, and could explain why Cobden himself has largely been forgotten. As Dr Frank Trentmann explained in his assessment of Cobden's posthumous reputation at the Bicentenary Conference, by the 1920s Cobden and Cobdenism were dirty words with the political left, who associated them with naked laissez-faire and unrestrained capitalism. Today, if thought about at all, they are likely to be linked unthinkingly with neo-conservative notions of the omnipotence of the free market.

However, this was and is a crude caricature. For Cobden, free trade was always about something nobler and grander than the mere profit motive. Instead, it was about the creation of a new world order of sovereign yet interdependent states, bound by ties of peaceful commercial intercourse into an international community where war was as unthinkable as it was impossible.

This explains the single-mindedness with which Cobden pursued those other pillars of nineteenth-century liberalism: peace and retrenchment. The two were inextricably linked at a time when the armed forces consumed an even bigger slice of government expenditure than today, and when strategic orthodoxy dictated that Britain should maintain a larger navy than the next two biggest maritime powers combined. Cobden believed that cutting down spending on armaments would free money for further tariff reforms, or allow reductions in taxation that would increase the capital available for peaceful commercial pursuits. A reduction in military spending would also reassure neighbouring powers such as France of Britain's pacific intentions, and encourage them to follow her lead in dismantling tariff barriers.

By the same token, Cobden invariably opposed those who used the extension of markets as an excuse for violence or injustice. Hence his criticism of those who feted Sir Henry Pottinger, who concluded the unequal peace treaty with China at the end of the first Opium War in 1842, and his opposition to Palmerstonian gunboat diplomacy in the Mediterranean and the East. Cobden also opposed imperialism and the acquisition of colonies as wasteful and antagonistic: free trade meant not just free from tariffs, but free from coercion too.

The picture of Cobden that emerges from his biographies and from the recent conference is one of a refreshingly principled and courageous politician. These traits were most in evidence during the Crimean War of 1854-56, when along with his political partner John Bright he ploughed a lonely furrow of opposition at the expense of his public popularity and political fortune.

They were in evidence again when he refused a place in Palmerston's cabinet in 1859, on the grounds that he could not possibly serve under a premier of whose policies he had been so constant a critic, unless those policies themselves underwent a dramatic reversal. The courage displayed on this

occasion was of a rather different character as, instead of the vituperation of his enemies, he had to contend with the disappointment and incomprehension of his friends and colleagues.

However, it is important to realise that Cobden was far from being a mere dreamer and utopian. Instead, he was very much a practical politician, who avoided too close an identification with the largely pacifist Peace Society during the 1850s in order to avoid being written off as a pure non-resister. He was also not afraid to withstand pressure for precipitate action from less practical friends. These included one of his most important mentors, the Edinburgh phrenologist George Combe, who castigated him for not doing enough to advance the cause of national education in Parliament at a time when to do so would have alienated the support of religious dissenters, many of whom opposed any national system of education as giving too much power to the church of England, but who by the same token would not countenance the introduction of secular education.

Education was one area where Cobden was decidedly against the operation of the market. He saw that only the state had the resources to provide adequate education for all, despite the claims of the so-called Voluntaryists, lead by Edward Baines of Leeds, who believed that adequate school provision could be achieved by voluntary effort alone. Education was in turn essential to maintain the moral and material progress of the nation, and to allow for the continued extension of political rights to those lower down the social scale. To this end, Cobden also supported the removal of the so-called 'Taxes on Knowledge', particularly the Newspaper Stamp, which prevented the publication of cheap newspapers that could be afforded by working people. This campaign was eventually successful, leading Cobden and his associates to set up a daily penny newspaper in 1855 in order to challenge the monopoly of The Times over the daily press.

Cobden's practicality came into play once more when he negotiated the 1860 Anglo-French Commercial Treaty, also known as the Cobden-Chevalier treaty. This involved a reduction of the French duties on a huge range of British goods, as well as the reduction of remaining British duties on key articles such as French wine. Cobden came under some criticism from his erstwhile free-trade colleagues for his part in the treaty – many believed that Britain should lead by example alone and not enter into potentially onerous and exclusive written agreements with other powers, and that the theory of reciprocity meant that such formal agreements were unnecessary. However, Cobden argued that the treaty would give a practical boost to free trade, and that in any case it would lead to the further extension of free trade through the 'most favoured nation' clause, which ensured that subsequent treaties between either France or Britain with any third party would also extend the same benefits to trade with the other power. Through this clause, the treaty became the keystone of a system of other such agreements that created the nearest thing to a European free-trade area before the advent of the Common Market.

Assessing the relevance of any historical figure to the 'modern world' is always difficult, and historians traditionally shy away from the rather anachronistic activity of trying to think what a given personage 'would have said' in this or that contemporary situation. Moreover, much of Cobden's thought was based on a very Victorian belief in a divine providence that would ensure the fair distribution of the fruits of labour once artificial restraints had been swept away. To all but the most dyed-in-the-wool neo-conservative, this makes Cobden's faith in the benign nature of the free market seem hopelessly naïve. However, this does not make his ideas irrelevant, and in fact understanding the basis of his more optimistic views allows us to move beyond them to the basic morality that underpinned his thought.

For example, this author would not be the first to suggest that Cobden was one of the earliest exponents of a truly 'ethical' foreign policy in his opposition to arbitrary armed interventions, imperial expansion, and the use of coercion to open markets. The latter point is important: would the Cobden who criticised the shelling of Kagoshima and Henry Pottinger's 'Unequal Treaties' with China have approved of the World Bank and IMF's insistence on the dismantling of developing countries' tariff barriers as a condition for the reception of financial aid? Or the differential duties which allow unrefined coffee and sugar into the EU at cheap rates but exclude the refined article, preventing some of the world's poorest countries from breaking out of the cycle of poverty and keeping prices in Europe high? Would White House planners benefit from reading Cobden's critiques of British expansionism and imperial hubris? Similar questions are equally relevant in domestic British politics. For example, would modern politicians have been more cautious of introducing the concept of 'consumer choice' into education if they had realised that the supposed archetypal champion of laissez-faire believed that the market had no place in educating the masses?

Cobden's legacy, so strong and obvious to the Edwardians who celebrated his centenary in 1904, the more so perhaps because it was then under threat from protectionists and imperial tariff reformers, now seems diffuse and inchoate. To it we perhaps owe some of the spirit of post-war cooperation in Europe, with the aim of making another war impossible; successive Chancellors of the Exchequer have unconsciously defended it by refusing to levy VAT on basic foodstuffs – although agriculture itself is now subsidised through direct taxation via the Common Agricultural Policy; attempts to reintroduce the 'taxes on knowledge' through charging VAT on books have also been unsuccessful. The shadow of Cobdenite internationalism lay over Gordon Brown's recent speech to the British Council, which set out his optimistic view of twenty-first century 'Britishness' and was liberally peppered with historical allusion, but from which the name of Cobden himself was notably absent.

Surely the modern world can still learn something from Richard Cobden - or is it already too late to reclaim him from the libertarian fringes of modern politics, and to restore him to his rightful place in the mainstream of political thought?

Dr Simon Morgan is research officer with the Letters of Richard Cobden Project at the University of East Anglia, directed by Professor Anthony Howe. If readers have any information about letters from Cobden in private collections, contact s.j.morgan@uea.ac.uk

THIRD WORLD NEEDS TRADE, NOT AID

The campaign to secure 0.7% of GDP for overseas aid would do little to relieve poverty, says Keith Sharp

A centrepiece of the Lib Dem policy paper no. 64 'A World Free From Poverty' is that the UK should increase its international aid spending to 0.7% of its GDP. As in the past, the goal was assumed and accepted – the only debate, via an amendment at the party's Bournemouth September Conference, was how quickly a Liberal Democrat government would increase international aid spending to that level.

And yet evidence suggests that, even in the unlikely event of this target being achieved by the UK and other rich nations, it would make little impact on world poverty. What that Lib Dem debate did not look at is the argument that the very concept and current structure of aid spending itself, subject as it is to the political agendas of the nation states that donate it, is flawed. Even worse, development aid spending has turned out to be a form of prolonged colonial servitude.

We would do better to find ways of liberating individual and community enterprise and energy and recognise that, well-intentioned or otherwise, aid programmes are not the answer to freeing the world from poverty.

Some history: that UN 0.7% of GDP goal has been around a long time, since 1970 in fact. Back then, the world situation was very different to today. Most aid and development regimes had been in existence for little more than 20 years, and there was perhaps greater confidence then than now that spending alone could achieve needed improvements. Trade was far less globalised than it is today with, in particular, the now familiar phenomenon of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) being in its infancy. Would a present day UN commission, looking afresh at the global predicament, still propose 0.7% of GDP as a solution to the North-South, rich and poor worlds divide?

Let's look at the present day USA. Its own aid spending has bumped along at well below 0.7% of GNP irrespective of who's in charge — currently 0.1% and declining, according to George Monbiot (The Age of Consent: Harper, 2003). Monbiot goes on to quote an OECD report that, between 1992-2000, aid from the rich to the poor world decreased, in real terms, by $7.1 billions, or 12%. Whatever the talk, the political will in the rich world to make aid meaningful does not exist.

It is even more instructive to look at what the US does currently with its niggardly 0.1% aid budget. The poverty-stricken communities of Africa, Asia, the South? Well, not really, or not to any great extent. The two largest recipients of US aid spending are Egypt and Israel. Both receive around $2-3 billions per year. The merits or demerits of that policy are for a different discussion – but this surely shows that US aid spending is driven by political, rather than Millennium Development, goals. US aid spending feeds its own nation-state foreign policy objectives. Given this fact, we might conclude it's better the US does not increase its aid spending to 0.7%…

It gets worse. In categorising the world into rich and poor, developed and 'developing', the aid industry is perpetuating a global hierarchy of dependency rather than development; superiority and inferiority that reinforces the legacy of a European colonialist-led world order. Monbiot again: 'this [increased rich-poor aid] would merely trap the poor nations in patronage, dependency and blackmail.' (See also Escobar: Encountering Development: Princeton 1995).

If not aid, then what? What about world trade, often bitterly criticised by Liberal Democrats? Well, we know at least two key things about world trade 2004-style. Firstly, it is grossly distorted in favour of the rich nations at the expense of the poor. Secondly, it is an infinitely more potent mechanism for transferring and generating wealth around the world than nation-state dominated aid programmes will ever be.

The structural power distortions in world trade are grotesque: US and EU protectionist policies on agriculture and textiles; the obligation on poorer nations to open up markets and industries, however fledgling, and to surrender any exchange controls; IMF policies towards debt and economic management; corporate abuses; refusals to cancel debt – these are really no more than the tip of the iceberg, and are abhorrent and need to be resolved. The Lib Dem paper no 65 'Wealth for the World' makes important recommendations on how to tackle these power imbalances and trade abuse. It calls for measurable corporate accountability rather than fluffy PR-style 'CSR' programmes. When implemented, these policies will have far-reaching consequences in addressing power imbalances, giving societies and communities around the world greater control over the their own fate, access to economic opportunity and alleviating poverty.

Yet, even given these distortions, the freeing up of world trade, bringing down nation-state barriers to goods, services and capital has brought some wealth and opportunity to the

poorer nations. Some estimates suggest 'the poor world obtains thirty-two times as much revenue from exports as it receives from aid' (Monbiot again, quoting Oxfam). FDI into poorer countries by western corporations has transferred and created opportunity. Just think what will be achievable once the unfairnesses are removed.

My own experience, in Asia during the 80's and 90's (and more briefly in post-Gorbachev Russia in 1994-95), revealed numerous examples of this. One anecdote: I was staying at a then newly-opened joint-venture hotel in Shanghai in 1990. It was managed by the western partner, an international hotels corporation.

I asked the waiter – a smiling young man in at most his early 20's — who was serving me coffee (not Chinese tea it has to be admitted) why he worked there. To me, his crimped hair, over-starched clothes and assumed waiter behaviour seemed an obvious imposition of western attitudes and mores. But the waiter was happy and eager to talk. He explained how excited he was to work for a foreign company, adding how much competition there was for jobs at the hotel. Working conditions were excellent (I wondered, in contrast, what his home was like); there was real training and far better pay than with local firms. He told me everyone knew that Chinese firms were lousy employers, which was why he was so proud of his job. I was left nursing some residual western concerns (as I sipped my coffee), but what possible basis could there be to deny him choice?

Obviously, one chance exchange such as this does not make a conclusive case for global trade and FDI, but it should remind us of the potential of their potential as a powerful mechanism for wealth creation and spreading. This market and corporate mechanism is not an automatic good – and 'Wealth for the World' proposes new regulations and rules to govern global trading as well as addressing the distortions of current trading structures.

There is another liberalising dimension to the role of liberalised, regulated fair trade in meeting poverty alleviation goals — and that is the free movement of peoples. Despite an otherwise globalising world where movements of goods, services and capital have been freed up, immigration and asylum regimes immobilise people within the confines of their nation-state. Surely a genuinely liberal stance would allow more people to live and work away from their home state, generating wealth for family back home through remittances – ie sending money to family and relatives back home while working abroad. Just as international trade export revenues dwarf actual or potential aid donations from rich to poor nations, just so the redistributive and wealth-generating power of remittances can outstrip international aid, even if the 0.7% of GDP were magically to be met.

A criticism in principle of liberalising emigration/immigration is that it is cruelly disruptive to families and communities, obliging people to leave their families for economic advancement. It may well be an indictment of international aid over nearly 60 years that so many people seek to better their lives away from their natural home, with all the disruption that involves. However, it is better and more liberal to allow people to travel, work and generally improve their and their family's conditions and opportunities, rather than forcing them – as is pretty much the case now – to stay where they are, trapped in the area they happen to have been born in, whatever the opportunities or lack of them.

The consultative discussions on 'Wealth for the World' (at that time known as International Trade and Investment), held in Brighton in September 2003, in fact featured strongly the wealth-spreading potential of freeing up, in a planned, phased way, the movement of peoples (labour), alongside goods, services and capital. Given the huge and politically sensitive controversy over immigration and asylum policy in the UK and elsewhere, it's hardly a surprise that the issue was touched on only fleetingly – para 8.0.9 cites it as 'raising questions beyond the remit of this policy paper' (whose remit is it then?).

If we really believe in liberal solutions to global poverty, we should trust individuals rather than nation states and liberalise individual enterprise, and promote global trade under a fair rules regime to resolve the gross distortions of power and wealth in the modern world. The 0.7% GDP solution has had its day.

In his business career, Keith Sharp has worked in Hong Kong and Russia. He stood for the Lib Dems at the last general election and is now a councillor in Islington, London. Keith was a member of the 'Wealth for the World' policy group. sharpkeith@aol.com

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REVIEWS

The 45 by Christopher Duffy Cassell £20 2003

Written by a professional historian who has been a lecturer at Sandhurst and a research professor in the history of war at De Montfort University. The author makes his sympathies for the Jacobite cause clear at the start, regarding it as having legality on its side. However, he has produced a well researched account of what was the last serious armed rebellion in mainland Britain. Duffy has endeavoured to avoid romanticisation and has attempted to demolish several myths.

Although he deals in detail with the background to the rising, including the politics, Duffy omits to mention the origin of the terms 'Whig' and 'Tory'. Both were initially terms of abuse; 'Whig' stems from the word Whiggamore and has nothing to do with hairpieces. The Whigs had been the dominant party for 30 years and supported the Hanoverian monarchy as it effectively let the government rule the country. The English Tories included Jacobite sympathisers in their ranks but they kept a low profile and largely sat on the fence during the rebellion

The progress of Bonnie Prince Charlie is described in detail, including the raising of support amongst the Scottish clans. Few people outside Scotland were prepared to give open support before the outcome was clear. Although Duffy makes his sympathies clear, he has given an objective account of the military campaign and leaves it to the reader to determine if the rebellion would have succeeded if the council hadn't voted to turn back at Derby. The road to London was open but Charlie would have had to face a roughly numerically equal although not as well trained force on Finchley Common. Had he defeated them, he would have faced the forces of Marshall Wade and the Duke of Cumberland, whose ranks included Hessian mercenaries, afterwards. Derby was followed by retreat and a few lost opportunities. The abandonment of ports on the Eastern coast of Scotland and effective blockading by the Royal Navy cut off supplies of funds, weapons and supporters from France. Defeat and pacification followed.

The government's refusal to acknowledge the Jacobites as lawful belligerents meant that prisoners were liable to summary execution, imprisonment or deportation to forced labour in the case of the ranks, and execution and forfeiture of property in the case of the leaders. Although the Jacobites took prisoners and paroled them, the paroled prisoners were expected to violate their parole. Duffy suggests that the lack of acknowledgment of belligerent status may have been instrumental in ensuring that few people in England gave active support to the Jacobites, particularly after the fate of landowners who supported the previous rising.

The harshness of the pacification, including the breaking of the ties between the clan chiefs and clansmen, hastened the Highland clearances and removed the power of chiefs to raise private armies

Duffy shows a gradual rapprochement between the Jacobites and the monarchy under George III, with the Tories being given encouragement. Many Jacobites who had been exiled or had emigrated to the Americas became Empire Loyalists during the War of Independence and one pardoned chief actively recruited clansmen to fight for the crown! Duffy doesn't however suggest that the removal of the Jacobite threat enabled the crown to ally itself with the less parliamentary orientated Tories.

Andrew Hudson

Colombia: A Brutal History by Geoff Simons Saqi Books £14.99 2004

To understand what is going in any foreign country, one must know something of its history, and the very lack of balance between past and present in this book left me feeling that, in that later chapters, I was drowning under Simons's undoubted expertise.

We get a mere 50 pages covering the period from the arrival of the Spanish in 1509 up to the 1980s, followed by around 300 pages covering events since.

This lopsidedness hardly makes this a book for the general reader, though those with a particular interest in modern Colombia will surely find it valuable.

The book is written from a perspective that lays the blame for Colombia's ills at the door of the United States on almost every page. It is undoubtedly true that American meddling has had a malign influence on Latin America and has seen every country except Costa Rica ruled by American-backed brutes at different times.

However, this does not explain why Colombia alone has never been able to shake off its violent civil strife and has seen the slaughter on a massive scale of civilians by both the security forces and private armies of every description going on for decades.

Venezuela and Ecuador are both neighbours of Colombia and were once part of it, yet neither has seen violence on anything remotely like the same scale, even though the US has been equally protective of its interests there. This suggests there must be something more than American mendacity behind Colombia's ills.

Mark Smulian

What Might Have Been, by Andrew Roberts, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004 £12.99

Andrew Roberts has edited a series of essays by well known historians and biographers on what might have happened if major events had gone differently. The essays as a whole appear to have less plausibility than those contained in Duncan Brack and Iain Dale's 'Prime Minister Portillo and other things that never happened'. While some of the essays in the latter contain a few flaws and Robert Taylor's essay on 'In Place of Strife' appeared to be wishful thinking, many of the entries in 'What Might Have Been' are unconvincing.

In his introduction, Roberts makes a distinction for fiction, allowing more leeway, yet he doesn't classify Harry Harrison's 'Stars and Stripes' trilogy or

Richard Dreyfuss's 'The Two Georges' in that category, despite their being written as such.

On the entries, those by professional historians are more plausible, particularly Robert Cowley's essay on Benedict Arnold and Hugh Sebag-Montifiore's speculation on the consequences of Stalin leaving Moscow in 1941.

Some are less plausible, such as Britain's entry into the America Civil War on the side of the Confederacy resulting in defeat for both Britain and the United States, or Napoleon recovering from the retreat from Moscow to defeat Russia. Other entries contain an element of wishful thinking, such as Conrad Black's assumption that the United States would have eventually joined the European war without Pearl Harbour.

Tendentiousness in the rewriting of history occurs in some, with authors writing history as they appear to have wanted it to have occurred, such as Antonia Fraser on the Gunpowder Plot and Simon Heffer's essay on the consequences of the Brighton Bomb killing Margaret Thatcher, which seems to be more an attack on the Heseltine wing of the Conservative Party.

The theatre of the absurd is however reached with David Frum's The Chads fall off in Florida, which seems more a satire on Al Gore than a serious counterfactual of how Gore might have reacted to the events of 9/11. Roberts himself presents a fairly plausible scenario of the consequences of Lenin being assassinated at the Finland Station. Roberts suggests there is a line between 'what if' scenarios and mere science fiction but, as a whole, the essays do not appear plausible scenarios and lack the entertainment value of fiction

Andrew Hudson

Motorcycle Diaries (film)

Here's a rarity; a general release film about a Marxist revolutionary that spends the bulk of its length among peasant communities in South America and is subtitled throughout.

Che Guevara's posthumous existence as an icon on posters and tee shirts has guaranteed an audience that might normally shy away from such subject matter, and the film helps to explain why.

It is, after all, hardly likely that a film about a failed revolutionary who was killed 37 years ago would grab the public's attention were it not for Guevara's enduring charisma.

The film opens with Guevara as a middle class medical student about to take off on a trip across South America with a friend on a crumbling motorcycle.

Their trip is ambitious and incident-strewn enough to make for an engrossing film even without Guevara's subsequent fame, and on one level is a tale of two young men travelling, drinking, chasing women, surviving being broke and hungry in order to explore their world before settling down to careers.

But although Guevara has no politics at the firm's outset, he already has a sense of duty and desire to be useful. This turns into a determination to do something more active to improve the lot of the poor as he travels among poverty stricken miners and peasants and spends a spell at a Peruvian leper colony.

His political awakening is signalled a trifle heavy handedly, at one point dismissing his friend's suggestion of organising the poor to vote with the words "whoever heard of a revolution without guns", and hinting at the end that he has reached important conclusions that have changed him as a person.

The film finishes in 1953, before Guevara fell in with Fidel Castro's revolution in Cuba, and long before the latter sent him to foment revolution abroad.

It therefore does not touch on how the socially concerned medical student ended up leading a tiny guerrilla band in a remote corner of Bolivia at the time of his murder. Nor do we learn whether the real Guevara became an ideological Marxist or remained motivated more by a straightforward desire to help the poor to improve their lot.

With fewer than 100 followers and unable to raise much local support, Guevara's revolutionary ambitions were easily crushed by the populist military president Rene Barrientos.

Time has now transformed Guevara from enemy of the state to Bolivia's newest tourist attraction, with the village where he died being put on the map as a place of secular pilgrimage.

Enough of the legend of him as the noble young idealist of the film has survived to explain his status today.

Mark Smulian

21st Century Asylums St Luke's Hospital Group Premium Publishing £9.99

Of course there never was such a thing as asylum for people herded into institutions in the 19th century. Inmates were experimented on in overcrowded conditions from the outset. Rape and assault were common. The extraordinary conditions rapidly turned kind hearted and generous staff into cynical gaolers with little else on their minds than how to get through the boring days. As an example of institutional death-making, the so-called asylum movement of 150 years ago is hard to beat.

We are told by the blurb on this slim volume's back cover that "Institutional care is essential for many people with learning disabilities and troubled minds." Essential to whom?

Certainly the book's sponsors, the private St Luke's Hospital Group, may have some vested interest. The introduction is written by three employees and is, in part, little more than a plug for St Luke's; a plug that includes the observation that people benefiting from their version of institutional life can enjoy "swimming, trampolining, horse-riding, rambling etc."

Is it churlish to argue with such sentiments? People incarcerated in NHS psychiatric and similar units get no such benefits. Most of us would enjoy this kind of recreation. But would we choose to do these things alongside other people who have been rejected by society or whose behaviour has been too much for their families? I doubt it.

21st Century Asylums starts with the wrong premise, that some people just cannot be helped to live outside of madhouses for their own sake or the safety of society at large. These people, we are told, have such a damaging impact on the rest of us that we would find any efforts to keep them in the community untenable. One wonders if the authors could apply their same argument to lawyers and politicians.

Craig Newnes
(Chair, British Psychological Society Psychotherapy Section)

Iraq and the International Oil System, Why America Went to War in the Gulf, by Stephen C. Pelletière, Merlin 2004

Stephen Pelletière was the Central Intelligence Agency's senior political analyst on Iraq throughout the Iran-Iraq War. If this is the analysis the Americans were receiving, it explains a lot of the short-comings of their policies in the Middle East, but is a lot less clear on the realities, past and present there. Virtually unreadable. Best to ignore.

Jean-Paul Cale

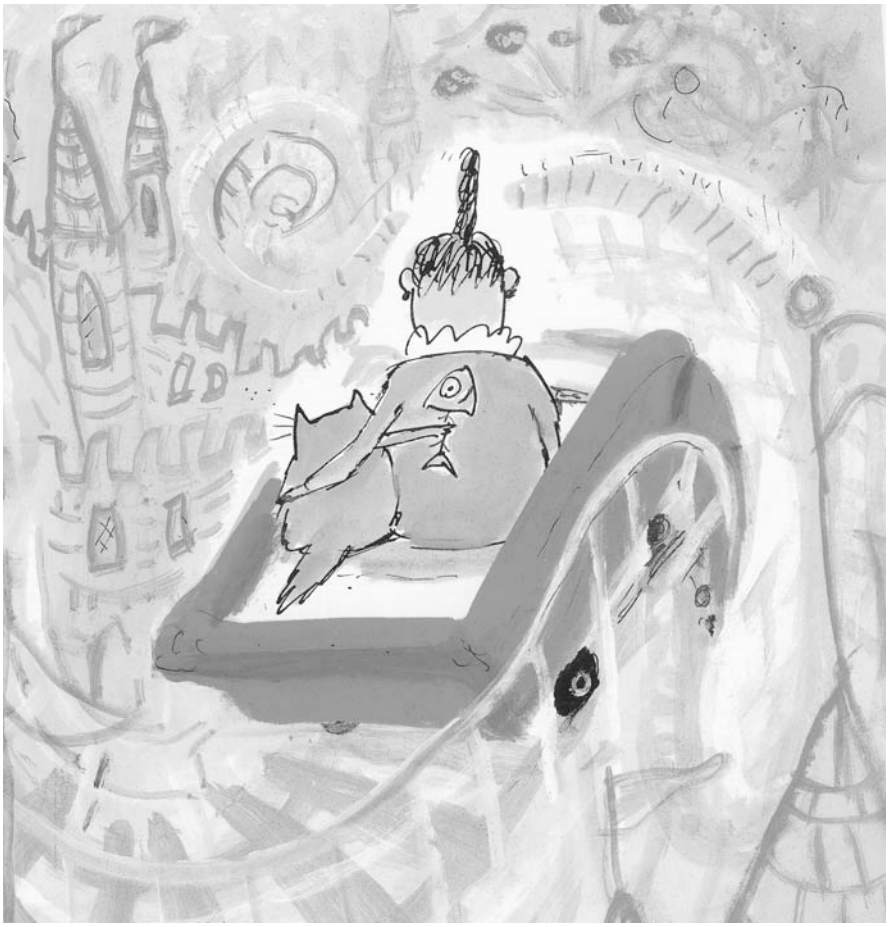
No-Nonsense Guide to Islam by Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies Verso 2004 £7.00

About three-quarters of the way through this book, I started to get annoyed. There is, it seems, a peaches and cream Islam, essentially deriving from a 'golden age', which undoubtedly comprised all of the best elements of modern living, yet somehow doesn't quite square with my day-to-day experiences. These experiences are largely drawn from living alongside and interacting with large Moslem communities over two decades in this country and in Palestine, as well as through study and the media.

There is an element of cunning in the book. It is written by women, one of them presumably a western convert to Islam, which, for all the fine words in the Koran, is an oppressive patriarchy. The authors will no doubt dismiss this as my western prejudices coming to the fore. Why do I not see the light?

Many Trots (I'm not sure if Verso is among them) hold that the dynamic of revolution has transferred from Marxism to militant Islam. The theory of most ethical systems is somewhat superior to the practice; we only have to look at ourselves as Liberals to know that. The authors are aware of the problems of contemporary Islam, including those that make headlines in the west; I'm not so sure how they are tackling them.

There is, for example, a tendency within Islam to blame the West for all its ills. The authors go along with this to a large degree. They assume a superiority of Islamic expansionism to that of the West, rather than seeing them as variants of the same beast, each moulding the conquered lands after their own self image. The problems that we see all along the Moslem faultline are very much the legacy of attempts to cement that



expansion, or to hold it against rival expansions.

Far from peaches and cream, different Islamic sects have been eager to persecute each other throughout history, not just Sunni against Shi'ite against Sufi, but Shi'ite against Shi'ite, etc. As to tolerance of other faiths, what of the Ba'hais, whose revelation has the misfortune to post-date Mohammed and were persecuted throughout their history mostly by Moslems.

I do not seek to defend the impacts of Western colonialism and then imperialism. Our trade ideology forced the growth of cotton in Bengal and led disastrously to famine, for example. Such mistakes should be acknowledged and learnt from. Part of that lesson is that the conquest of India by Britain was as much a matter of Indian politics as deliberate intent by the East India Company – the lesson being never to use outsiders trading in your country as mercenaries; they may just gain the upper hand.

Part of the battle for Liberalism has been the separation of church and state. As a politico-religious system from its outset, it is obvious that this is a difficult position for Islam. Moslems living in the West are often confused by this, making contributions to a society that they might expect reciprocally to cater for their spiritual needs. Councillors representing communities with a large Islamic presence will have encountered this.

Looking at the Church of England, it is perhaps easy to point to the progressive separation of church and state as contributory to its decline, yet from the spiritual angle it has probably been a source of strength.

Returning to the tendency to blame the West, the authors plainly misconceive democracy. This may be a general problem. Democracy is elevated to the status of an ideology, when it is simply a tool or a system. There are many democracies. Western 'liberal' democracy is not the only blueprint, though better than socialist democracy. There are African democracies, some of which interface with the Islamic world – in Darfar and elsewhere in Sudan for example. And indeed, there are countries that are Moslem or with large Moslem populations where democratic changes of government take place – Senegal and Bangladesh to name two. Democracy has developed over time; we now scarcely recognise our government of 200 years ago as democratic, yet at the time it was aspired to by those trying to overthrow the autocracies across Europe. Surely within the mind-frames of our authors, there is scope for an Islamic democracy?

Fundamentalism is recognised among the problems of Islam; we read the soothing reassurance that these are bad men who pervert the faith to their own misguided ends… well we know that. It is like giving buzzwords like Sharia and madrassa their literal meanings rather than those that our media pick up on. I'm not entirely convinced.

The purpose of this book is probably to give one a basic knowledge of Islam; this it does, not withstanding my reservations. I doubt it will make many converts but, if it does, good luck to them, provided they go back to the Islam that seems to inspire the authors. They may then discover that the mystics of all religions have more in common with each other than the masses of their own faith.

Stewart Rayment

Sleep Tight Ginger Kitten by Adèle Geras illustrated by Catherine Walters Little Tiger Press 2004 £4.99

An attractive little book for younger children, the storyline somewhat along the lines of Humphry's Room - the kitten manages to find all of the places we wouldn't want him to sleep. The kitten himself is a touch sentimental, but the springtime in which the story is set is well observed. You don't see many Yellowhammers these days.

Stewart Rayment

Old Tom's Holiday by Leigh Hobbs Little Hare 2002 £9.99

Does Ginger Kitten grow up to be Old Tom… now there's a question? No sentimentality here; well not in Old Tom at least. Leigh Hobbs is an Aussie illustrator and the book got short-listed for their Children's Book of the Year Picture Book in 2003. Old Tom has the dark quality that is familiar in his work (Horrible Harriet et al). Paradoxically, he doesn't like cats - except when they bring home the bacon I expect.

Stewart Rayment

Lord Bonkers' Diary

Friday

The morning finds me in a melancholy humour. In part, it is the autumn mists, mellow fruitfulness and so forth; in part, my argument with Meadowcroft. I should have thought that a chap sweeping up leaves would be grateful if his employer pointed out that he had missed one, but it seems I was wrong. Instead, the old fellow went stomping off to his potting shed, muttering something about the French Revolution. The chief cause of my sadness, however, is the loss of that great Liberal Earl Russell. Here was a man whose father was dandled on John Stuart Mill's knee; whose great-grandfather was the Whig Prime Minister Lord John Russell (who strangely neglected to appoint my own great-grandfather to his Cabinet, but this is not a day to mention such matters); whose ancestors must have been on hand when Joseph of Arimathea brought Liberalism to England. How we shall progress without his wise counsel, I cannot begin to imagine.

Saturday

For many, I know, the highlight of the Bournemouth Conference was the arrival of the Gurkhas and their bagpipes. How proud I was, as Colonel-in-Chief of the Queen's Own Rutland Highlanders, to march at their head! Besides, it is high time these doughty fighters were restored to their place at the centre of British politics. I can recall the days when I could not make a speech without some fellow from the back of the hall shouting "What about the Gurkhas?" Mind you, I never went quite as far as the more advanced Young Liberals of the 1960s, who wished to bring about Gurkhas' control of industry.

Sunday

To St Asquith's for a service of thanksgiving for the 2004 cricket season. And what a season it was! England won every test they played, and my own XI enjoyed a successful campaign too. While it is invidious to single out individuals, my leg breaks were particularly effective this summer. Mention should also be made of such stalwarts as Plum Duff, the delightful lady Liberal Democrat MP Hazel Grove and the novelist A. S. Byatt (who began her cricket career as a professional under the name Byatt, A. S.) Highlights of the summer included our victory over Plaid Cymru at Llanelli (helped by some controversial LLBW decisions) and the defeat of the touring West Indians. (The lock on the door of the visitors' dressing room has now been oiled and I am assured that it will be in perfect working order come next May.) I am delighted that the Revd Hughes is able to take time off from his Presidency of the party to preach the sermon on a text from the Book of Wayne Daniel.

Monday

Each city in Britain boasts its own unique character and the pulse of local patriotism often beats strongly. This can set traps for the unwary: here in Rutland it does not do to accuse a fellow from Oakham of coming from Uppingham. I recall the case of an ambitious young Labour politician cum journalist from Liverpool who went one year to report the Henley Regatta. I had gone along, though whether it was to cheer on our own David Rendel or to stroke the Rutland Eight I cannot now recall. Anyway, this journalist did not enjoy himself one little bit and filed some pretty strong copy. He referred (not without reason, it must be said) to "Pimms-sodden sentimentality" and accused those attending of being "rent junkies". When his article appeared it caused no end of a row and his party leaders sent him back to Henley to apologise, and he appeared on a distinctly sticky "phone-in" on the town's radio station. It did him no good: he was never heard from again as journalist or politician.

Tuesday

I settle down to read a new biography of the noted actor Sir Dirk Bogarde, but am disappointed to discover that it makes no mention of his many films about British politics. One thinks of Darling – a study of the Labour Secretary of State for Transport; Doctor in Disgrace – on the career of that awful fellow little Steel used to go around with; and a pair of movies about Conservative politicians – The Blue Lump (on Nicholas Soames) and A Bride Too Far (Steven Norris). Critical opinion, however, maintains that it is for his performance in Visconti's controversial Beith in Venice that he will be best remembered. Incidentally, I was once walking through the West End with my old friend Noel Coward when we came across a poster reading: "Dirk Bogarde, Michael Redgrave: The Sea Shall Not Have Them." "I don't see why not," remarked The Master, "everyone else has."

Wednesday

Put a policy – say, increased tax relief for the owners of historic houses – forward in the Liberal Democrats these days, and you will be told that the Treasury Team says we cannot afford it. Having heard this lately just about as often as a chap can stand, I decide to seek out this team. I locate it in an office in the bowels of Cowley Street, finding it to consist of my old friend Vince "Low-Voltage" Cable and a mustard keen young fellow called Laws or Rules. Whilst Low-Voltage practises his dance steps and makes a note of interesting anecdotes to tell his bees, Rules hunches over his electric computating machine and checks and rechecks columns of figures. "I was right!" he crows, "If we sell off the widows and then lease them back we can save a fortune on the Social Security budget." I am not sure if Low-Voltage hears him, as he is engaged in rehearsing a particular challenging step, but I put Rules in his place in no uncertain terms. (I do, however, ask him down to the Hall to give the finances of the Bonkers Home for Well-Behaved Orphans the once over. In these days of Purchase Tax and balance of payments deficits, it does to keep abreast of the latest financial developments.)

Thursday

On my way back from Westminster to St Pancras I hear a wailing and gnashing of teeth, combined with the discordant playing of trombones, clarinets and so forth. Investigating further, I come upon the Earl Russell's Big Band. Bereft of their leader and fearful of the future, they present a wretched spectacle. Despite my long-held chairmanship of Liberals Against Jazz, my duty is clear: I shall invite them to live in the almshouses in the village. I return to the Hall and set about organising the necessary evictions, and Meadowcroft is soon his old self. "I reckons we'll be a jamming every night in my potting shed," he beams, his face shining like a ripe red apple. I suspect I shall be using a smaller bore of ear trumpet in future.

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

www.bonkers.hall.btinternet.co.uk