liberator

liberator 300 special issue
where have Liberal politics been and where will they go next?

Issue 300 December 2004

£ 2.50

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* BIC (SWIFT code): NWBKGB2L
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* Communication: "Annual subscription from [your name and postal address]"

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Liberator is printed by
Lithosphere 90 Queensland Road N7 7AS

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* acts as a forum for debate among radical liberals in all parties and none
* welcomes written contributions on relevant topics, up to 1800 words.

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Thanks to Richard Younger-Ross for the historical photographs used in this issue.

COMMENTARY

TWO DEBATES NEEDED

In the space of one week, two quite unconnected events happened. They will force Liberals Democrats to re-examine what have for most of them been unquestioned givens in politics.

These events were the American presidential election result, and the defeat of the regional assembly proposal in north east England.

Throughout most of Britain, there has been incredulity that any civilised country could elect George W Bush to lead its government. His toxic cocktail of opposition to gays, gun control, abortion, international cooperation and peaceful dispute resolution is so alien to the entire discourse of politics in this country that even most Conservatives would decline to follow it.

It is up to Americans to choose their president, and they delivered a clear if narrow verdict. But it is for Britain to think about what sort of relationship it should have with America.

The support accorded there to reactionary 'family values' issues and to warmongering threw into relief the differences between Britain and America – differences that have probably been there for decades but which were masked by the common interests of the cold war.

That froze relations between America and Britain into a shape that became familiar, although Britain has never had the influence over America that its status as an equal partner gives it in the EU.

But is it any longer sensible to have Britain's entire foreign and defence policies tied to the vagaries of the political system of a foreign country, over which it has no influence, never knowing whether it is next going to throw up broadly sympathetic figures like Clinton and Carter, neutral ones likes Bush senior and Ford, or alarming aggressors like Reagan and Dubya who speak a political language hardly anyone in Britain shares?

This raises fundamental questions about whether NATO any longer serves any sensible purpose, and how Britain should involve itself with the rest of Europe on defence, security and foreign policy.

Bush's second victory is one of the strongest arguments around for Britain to end its fantasy of the special relationship and move closer to Europe. That relationship is special to no-one in American politics, but only to those in Britain who cling to the imaginary status it confers on them.

Only the Liberal Democrats can initiate this debate, since Labour is tied blindly to America, and any Conservative challenge to the status quo will involve only isolationism.

This is a debate the country needs to have and which will be widely welcomed, and the party should not be afraid of it.

The debate that may be less welcome to Liberal Democrats is the one caused by the wreckage of regional devolution, an article of faith for Liberals for more than 30 years.

Embarrassingly, a fair amount of the party's policy on public service reform rests on a devolution to regions that is now unlikely to happen unless it were to be simply imposed, a rather difficult proposition for liberals to argue.

If it is impossible to get a vote for regionalism in the relatively small and homogenous north east, it is impossible anywhere else in England.

There is some truth in the argument advanced by Liberal Democrats that voters rejected the assembly offered because it lacked sufficient power but, if there were a popular head of steam behind devolution, voters would have taken what was offered on the assumption that its powers could be extended later.

It is surely time for the Liberal Democrats to look at tearing up the entire map of local and regional government in England and starting again.

The further south one goes, the more ludicrous the present regional boundaries look from the point of view of manageable units of government with which inhabitants identify.

Counties and major cities are the units to which most people feel a sense of belonging. In both the 1974 and 1996 local government reorganisations, unsuccessful ideas were floated for recasting the system around city region governments, taking in their rural hinterlands and with local councils below them.

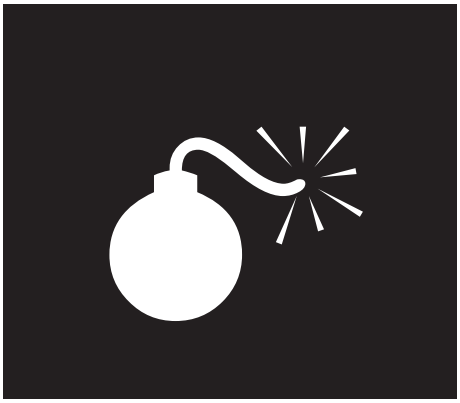
This may not be the best, and is certainly not the only, way to go. But it is worth a look if a radical devolution can be linked to it, because we have reached the end of the road with the present regions.

300 NOT OUT

When Liberator was launched, 300 issues ago, Edward Heath had unexpectedly become prime minister, the oil price shock and three day week lay three years in the future, the Liberal Party had six MPs and controlled no councils, the post-war settlement looked unshakeable and Charles Kennedy would have been at primary school.

An awful lot has changed since 1970 and Liberator has been through several very different incarnations in that time, offering a platform for Liberals to read, discuss, think, and enjoy some light being shone into dark corners of their party.

Contributors to this special issue reflect on how politics has changed in that time and how it might change in the future, and we hope to be here for many years yet as part of that process.



RADICAL BULLETIN

PREPARED FOR GOVERNMENT?

Visionaries among leading Liberal Democrats, who bang on about their 'breakthrough' in the 2009 general election, might be better off paying more attention to the one in 2005.

The next general election will almost certainly be on 5 May. With less than four months to go before the date that election would be called, the Liberal Democrats appear nowhere near ready enough.

At the time of going to press, the list of PPCs on the party's official website revealed that only 255 have been selected (including MPs who are re-standing), out of 628 constituencies in England, Scotland and Wales (taking into account the boundary changes in Scotland).

That leaves 373 seats to fill, nearly 60% of the total needed.

The party can hardly claim to be a contender for power when it has candidates for only 40% of the seats. The situation is particularly dire in the East Midlands and Yorkshire & Humber regions, each of which has selected only nine candidates.

The same party webpage also reveals how many local parties have websites. Setting up a basic website is a relatively simple and inexpensive thing to do, and therefore a reasonable indication of signs of life. Only 242 (47%) of 517 local parties have their own website.

The worst region by far for websites is Scotland. The party's national website gives the false impression that every Scottish local party has a website, but most of the links take you to the website of the Scottish party. In fact, just two out of 55 local parties have their own site (or three if you count Aberdeen South, whose web address has been hijacked by pornographers).

Meanwhile, the selection processes in the remaining seats are being slowed down by a sudden surge of enthusiasm among those convinced the Liberal Democrats are going to do quite well next time and really well the time after.

Returning officers in hopeless seats who had expected a quiet life with an unopposed selection have to their amazement had to preside over contests where no-one can remember this happening before.

It used to be that the Conservatives and Labour would run a promising candidate somewhere awful them move them to a winnable seats if they performed well. It has never quite worked like that in the Lib Dems, with winning candidates tending to be home-grown.

Who knows whether these aspirants will get lucky? Meanwhile, some of them may need to be restrained from putting the mockers on the targeting strategy by getting 'candidateitis' and throwing huge efforts into hopeless seats while target neighbours run short of workers.

JOB CREATION

There are now two deputy leaders of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords. This is not because anyone proposed the creation of a new post and the group changed its rules accordingly, but because of a tied vote.

Navnit Dholakia and William Wallace, both of whom had been mentioned when the leadership was vacant (Liberator 299), stood and each got 31 votes.

This must have been anticipated through some careful headcounting. For the preceding week, chief whip John Roper had been asking chief executive Lord Rennard what to do in the event of a tie, but there was no clear procedure.

Rather oddly, one peer bothered to turn up and cast a blank vote and, had that been used, someone would have won by one vote.

Whatever the motive for this eccentric spoilt ballot, the two contestants went off into a huddle with John Roper and emerged to tell Lords leader Tom McNally that he henceforth had an extra deputy.

Quite what the staid Lords authorities will make of this remains to be seen. Another election will be needed after the general election, so will Wallace and Dholakia stand as a job share?

GIFT HORSE OR TROJAN HORSE?

Questions need to be asked about LDiPR (Liberal Democrats in Public Relations and Public Affairs), ostensibly an association for party members employed as PR consultants.

Its only public activities appear to be plugging the Liberal Democrat Business Forum (RB, Liberator 296, 297, 299) and hosting a reception three times a year.

It is theoretically possible to pay a membership fee and become a paid-up-member, but this seems to confer no benefits. LDiPR makes little apparent effort to sign-up members and just about any Lib Dem professionally employed in PR gets an invite to LDiPR's receptions, regardless of whether they've paid up.

It remains a mystery what else LDiPR does besides hosting receptions. There is no website, and since there appears to be no formal membership structure it is not obvious to whom its accounts or reports are presented or how its officers are elected.

The disturbing feature of LDiPR is the remarkable overlap between its leading figures and the key players in

three right-wing organisations in the party, Liberal Future, the Peel Group and the Liberal Democrat Business Forum.

Both Liberal Future and the Peel Group were set up with support from right-wing MP Mark Oaten. Some of his like-minded habitués of LDiPR receptions talk as though they are staking their political careers on Oaten's leadership ambitions.

LDiPR's principle value to the party is to supply a pool of volunteer PR experts who can help Cowley Street during election campaigns. But if LDiPR has a hidden agenda, this presents a serious risk of a Trojan horse inside party HQ.

The danger is that partisan volunteers could take control of the party's media operation and, if so minded, award plum media opportunities to MPs considered 'sound', and freeze out other MPs they don't like.

This is one gift horse that Chris Rennard should definitely look in the mouth.

Meanwhile, readers may be interested to note the American branch of the Official Monster Raving Loony Party, whose website is replete with tributes to the late Screaming Lord Sutch. It has just a handful of links to other websites, one of which is Liberal Future's.

BEWARE FALLING ROCCO

The row over the appointment of Italian right-winger Rocco Buttiglione as a European commissioner generated more favourable publicity for the European Parliament than it has enjoyed for years.

Buttiglione's anti-women and anti-gay views made him unacceptable in a post dealing with home affairs, according to a majority of MEPs, who threatened to vote down the whole proposed commission rather than accept him. They can only vote 'all or nothing' for this purpose, not for or against individual commission nominees.

The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe was prominent in this, with its leader Graham Watson and UK group leader Chris Davies getting in the media.

However, while Davies opposed the appointment from the outset, Watson tried to convince ALDE to go along with it as he thought he had an acceptable deal with commission president-designate Barrosso and so felt the parliament should not interfere.

When the ALDE group would not stand for this, Watson joined the anti-Buttiglione camp.

ROBING ROOM

There will be 30 Liberal Democrats rushing off to their tailors for preliminary measurements for robes following the announcement of the results of the peers' panel ballot.

The most notable thing about this ballot was that it took place at all. After the original panel was elected in 1999, leader Charles Kennedy followed the rules and at each opportunity appointed from it, plus one nominee of his choice as allowed.

But he decided last year to ignore the whole process and simply appointed a list of his choices to the upper house (Liberator 295).

Navnit Dholakia, then party president, tried to set up a new process under which people who wanted to be peers would apply in secret to a secret body that would decide in secret who would be elevated.

This ludicrous idea was thrown out by the Spring conference, which insisted on a second ballot to create a new list.

As ever, famous party notables dominated, with former MEP Robin Teverson heading the list. Second was Ramesh Dewan, who seems to have been seeking a peerage for a long time, a situation that puzzles those who wonder what factor could impede this step.

Dewan's generosity to the party is well known, as is the amount he donates by inviting guests to the annual ball and other fund raising events, though he might not be in line for a peerage if judged solely on his attendance at Federal Conference Committee last year.

In a nice touch, the list included Celia Thomas, who seems to hold the post of life whips office manager in the Lords. There are also, encouragingly, some people there who are prominent councillors but hold no national role.

One person not elected was Paul Marshall, famous only as the sponsor of David Laws' disastrous Orange Book (Liberator 299).

STRAITS NEAR DOVER

Little attention has been paid within the Liberal Democrats to the extraordinary situation in Shepway, the constituency of Tory leader Michael Howard.

It is not every day that a Liberal Democrat group with substantial majority control of a council splits in half and hands control to a minority Tory administration. But that is what happened in Shepway in the summer, without any subsequent resolution.

A substantial cause of the dispute is, rather improbably, public lavatories, which the incoming Lib Dem administration in 2003 decided to shut throughout the area as an economy measure.

It then proposed to impose a 39% council tax rise on Shepway's cross-legged residents, only to be capped by the government.

Backbenchers took fright at the low standing of the council with public opinion, and removed leader Linda Cufley.

She then formed an Independent Liberal Democrat group of 12 councillors, which is narrowly outnumbered by the 13-strong official Liberal Democrat group. With neither able to form an administration, the Tories took over again.

According to those at Shepway's 'beat Howard' stall at conference, none of this was of much consequence for the general election campaign, which they confidently expected would oust the Tory leader. 'Clench your buttocks with the Liberal Democrats' may not be the most appealing slogan, though.

Season's greetings and a Liberal new year to all Liberator readers.

The next Liberator will appear at the Liberal Democrat Spring conference.

THEY'RE ON GOD'S SIDE

Religious fundamentalists have a grip on American politics that has helped to drive liberalism off the political map, warns Dennis Graf

Dismal. Dark. Damp. Bone chilling cold. No, that's not the weather here in Minnesota, but the feelings of most Democrats in their post election depression.

There are all sorts of conspiracy theories afoot, spread now on the Internet. The new electronic voting machines have in many cases been deliberately designed to bar outside inspection and we have to take on faith the honesty of the people who make and control them. Before the election, a number of computer experts claimed that fraud was possible, though most Democrats are apparently accepting the results as valid.

What most depresses the Democrats is the feeling that, no matter how hard they work, it will never be enough. The Democrats were reasonably well organized and well financed, with a large corps of enthusiastic volunteers. Kerry was not a strong candidate, but Bush was arguably worse. Less than half the voting public said that they approved of Bush's record, but enough people thought that Kerry was even more of a risk. Bush had the tremendous advantages of a compliant media, unlimited funds and a vast core of enthusiastic right wing Christians.

The Republicans were able to put forward a man who, his opponents said, was incompetent, a radical risk taker, provincial, impulsive, gullible, dishonest, intellectually shallow, fiscally irresponsible, an untreated alcoholic and someone hated by millions of people throughout the world. He won easily.

The Democrats have a problem. They either can't get their message across or, if they do, not enough people like it. It appears they can succeed only with a charismatic leader like Clinton or if the opposition overreaches and self destructs. The message of the sophisticated right wing corporate media is that the Republicans are confident, tough, united, moral and competent. The Democrats are made to appear indecisive, elitist, divided, weak, unimaginative and incompetent; unfortunately, there is probably some truth in this caricature.

The Democrats spoke of economic self interest, of making modest changes to our costly and confusing health care system, of the need for international law and cooperation, of fiscal conservatism, and they lost. The Republicans spoke of 'values' and of 'resolve'. Values and resolve won.

America is unique among major Western nations in having a large group who consider themselves seriously religious; many attend churches unfamiliar to the British. They felt that Bush understood their faith, as well as their fear of another major terrorist attack. Americans support the social welfare legislation available to everyone, medical care for the aged and state guaranteed pensions, but most voters didn't know of the changes that Bush has proposed in these areas.

There is an enormous amount of ignorance. Fully 75% of the Bush voters believe that Iraq was somehow involved in the 9/11 events. Half the population is unaware of the widespread dislike of Bush throughout most of the world. Very few people know of the decline of the dollar and they don't see much connection between levels of taxation and government borrowing. The American public has been convinced that governmental action is unwise, except, of course, in foreign military ventures. There is an almost religious faith in the market system and, while this might seem to be in potential conflict with the teachings of Christianity, the Christian right does not see any problem.

A key event was the US Supreme Court decision in 1972 establishing the right to have a legal abortion. This almost certainly marked the start of political action by the fundamentalists; before that, the Christian churches were essentially disengaged from politics. Americans are highly ambivalent about this right and they've allowed, without much protest, some very stringent restrictions. Still, though, polls show that most people, including Republicans, do not want abortion to become entirely illegal. John Kerry, a tepid supporter of abortion rights, did not seem able to use this issue effectively.

Republicans believe that massive military force is effective in the international theatre and the word 'diplomacy', like the term 'liberal', is one of those dirty words seldom used in political discourse. They say Arabs "only respect power" and still believe that, once we bring order to Iraq, Arabs will embrace a friendly democracy.

There is an unusual apocalyptic strain in American history that has found its way into the thinking of many ordinary people. The dominant strain in right wing Christianity, Bush's voting base, has an entire publishing industry promoting books about the 'last days', the 'coming of Christ', and the role of the Middle East in Biblical teaching. Religious television networks also teach this. Of course, if Jesus were to return soon, environmental concerns are irrelevant, as is government debt. People question how much Bush believes this personally, but millions assume that he's one of them.

These right wing Christians - fundamentalists as I'll call them since they have counterparts in Islam and Judaism -

are not of one mind, but they tend to agree on certain things. They believe that God is active in history and that He wants a personal connection with each individual. They reject relativism and secularism, and they're impatient with complexity, reflection and inaction.

There is a widespread belief that God has chosen the United States as his vehicle to lead mankind and that He has also selected George W Bush as his agent. As such, Bush is someone who must be obeyed. God will allow bad things to happen if we reject this message. They believe that God will bless America if Americans accept His plans for them.

People who reject this are not merely ill informed, but wilful sinners. Fundamentalists like Tony Blair and believe he also is God's vessel though, being British, probably somewhat less reliable. God, they allege, allowed the 9/11 tragedy to happen as punishment for our unholy activities, principally legal abortions (before 1972, they didn't seem to be concerned with illegal abortions). Gay marriage was a rallying cry in the election, and a catalyst for voter turnout, but it was more of a flagrant symbolic offence than an imminent danger. Most fundamentalists are actually rather kindly folks, and they are perfectly willing to let gays live unmolested as long as they stay in the closet. They believe, too, that homosexuality is a choice, a sinful choice, and that, like alcoholism, it can, through God's help, be overcome.

For them, sexuality is the central concern of morality, and this may be why Bill Clinton was so hated. They're outraged, as are a lot of other people, including the Islamic fundamentalists, by the sexual content and cheap violence of modern entertainment The Christian right feels that the family structure in America is breaking down and that Democrats are largely responsible. States with the highest divorce rates tend to be the states with the lowest incomes, but they reject any connection between economic security and family disintegration. Divorce is less common in America than it once was and, surprisingly, the state with the lowest rate is Massachusetts. A state with one of the highest is Texas. Fundamentalists dislike women working; the suggestion is that mothers should stay at home and raise children. They believe that more modest lifestyle choices would allow this.

Secularism, they say, has been the downfall of Europe (they want to believe that Europe is very near collapse, especially France). They are suspicious of science, reject evolution, believe in angels and in Heaven, are less sure of Hell, and abhor moral relativism and pluralism. The fundamentalists are not necessarily stupid, ill-educated or poor - most of them aren't - but they have willingly bought into an alternative and parallel intellectual universe.

Islam, they say, has declared itself to be the enemy of America, and, hence, Christianity, and it must be fought literally and brought under control. Saddam, being an enemy of Israel, was by extension, an enemy of ours and Israel - the first 'chosen people' is thought to be the key to God's plan for the end of history. Fundamentalists believe that God has authorised the use of force and they try to deny that we're in trouble in Iraq. "God will sort everything out," I've heard some say. Not all right wing Christians, of course, accept all of what I've said, but there are very large numbers that do. These people do not direct the Republican party, though there are some with real influence.

It is now clear that Bush wishes to destroy the social contract begun during the 1930s and replace it with a system requiring individual responsibility. He doesn't proclaim this directly, of course - he says essential changes have to be made to 'protect' these social programmes.

Wealth has been slowly diverted from the working classes to the very rich and, during the second Bush administration, this should rapidly accelerate. Bush is borrowing vast sums of money to pay the bills but this, surprisingly, was not a major campaign issue. A number of very expensive spending programmes were passed during the last term, supported by both parties, each attempting to buy votes. The Bush side is intent on radical change. The opposition, mostly conservative, values continuity and tries to maintain a sense of community. Compromise would seem impossible.

The Democrats, essentially a conservative party, face a dilemma. Almost everyone with national legislative experience is automatically disqualified from being president, since anyone who has served in Congress will, of necessity, have cast votes that can be caricatured and misinterpreted by the opposition. This is comparable to reserving the post of prime minister only to those who had never served in the House of Commons.

The Republican party has become a radical party. The southern and south western states contain the largest numbers of poor people and one would expect that they would vote Democratic, but they don't.

The Democrats tend, privately at least, to consider these voters 'dumb' for not voting their self interest and the Republicans offer this as 'proof' that the Democrats are out of touch and condescending. Actually, the educational level of the Bush states does tend to be lower than that of the Kerry states. It is a commonplace observation in America that the closer one is to the Canadian border, the brighter the students. Standardized tests bear this out.

Names of Democrats being tossed about as potential presidential candidates include 'boyish' John Edwards, Kerry's running mate, Hilary Clinton, wife of Bill Clinton and a woman wildly unpopular in much of America, Bill Richardson, a former governor of New Mexico, attractive because of his Mexican ancestry and a few assorted governors of smaller states. All the major states seem to have Republican governors now. Movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger has enthusiastic Republican support and, if chosen, would be a formidable opponent.

None of the Democrats would be considered liberal in the British sense, though the opposition tries to portray them as such. In reality, there really aren't all that many old fashioned liberals left here anymore. Even the word 'liberal' is considered something of an insult, a bit like being called a fascist in Britain. For a political party to use the word liberal in its name would be the kiss of death in the US. This was an early success of the great Republican machine.

Its difficult to describe the deep division and even hatred within the United States. Marriages have been strained, friendships ruptured and communities have been split. Four years is an eternity in American politics and its impossible to predict the future, but we can assume that Bush will try to make changes now that he has a mandate to do so and that the Democrats, dispirited and disorganised as usual, will try to stop him. Britain will remain a friend as long as Blair sends troops to Iraq.

Dennis Graf is a political activist in Minnesota

TOUGHNESS ISN'T EVERYTHING

Liberal Democrat spokesmen do the party a disservice if they stress only how 'tough' their policies are on crime, says Jonathan Marks

A liberal approach to home affairs is never going to be a populist approach. The populist approach is that of the tabloids and, traditionally, of the Tories – harsh and ill-informed on crime, retributionist on punishment, xenophobic and isolationist on asylum and immigration. One of the great disappointments of New Labour has been the way in which it has abandoned a long liberal tradition in relation to home affairs and has followed the populist path from election in 1997 to date. Only the passing of the Human Rights Act relieved the trend.

Thus Tony Blair's pledge to be "tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime" has been met only by tough rhetoric on crime and little attention to addressing the causes of crime. His policy on punishment has had the effect of increasing the use of imprisonment and worsening reconviction rates. His policy on asylum has been addressed to the false issue of weeding out so-called 'bogus' asylum seekers, without focussing on the pressing need to ensure that the immigration service and tribunal system are responsive, efficient, fair and sensitive. The whole approach has been presided over by two of the most illiberal Home Secretaries in modern times, Jack Straw and David Blunkett.

The Liberal Democrat approach to the principles that should govern policy on crime, policing and the penal system were well expressed in the 2002 policy paper, 'Justice and the Community', and bear repeating:

- "Addressing the underlying social causes of crime through a coherent set of policies embracing community regeneration, education, youth work, housing, drug and alcohol strategies, health and childcare.
- "Empowering local communities to reduce crime in their own areas, including through locally accountable and responsive policing, local authority crime prevention and lay participation in juries, magistrates' courts and restorative justice programmes.
- "Basing the penal system on the key objectives of rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders into the community, imposing custodial sentences only as a last resort."

It is important that, as we approach a general election, we do not allow ourselves to dwell on a small number of easily-explained policies in this field, without emphasising the importance of the rounded approach set out in 'Justice and the Community' to the complex issues involved. The failure of the Blair government has been that it has become carried away with its rhetoric on toughness, while failing in practice to address the underlying causes of crime in any meaningful way. The Queen's speech, with its several references to the areas of criminality which the Government proposes to "tackle" by legislation, does not look likely to lead to a more informed approach.

In a wide-ranging review of policy on crime in a speech at the National Liberal Club on 15 November, Charles Kennedy emphasised that action to stop reoffending was essential if we are to bring crime rates down. He also addressed the issues surrounding anti-social behaviour and anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs). He said: "Labour likes to reduce this complex social problem to a tabloid crusade against yobs. We hear little of the other side of the coin; little about our culture of long working hours and weak parenting, where young people are increasingly drawn to their playstation rather than the playground."

He pointed out that ASBOs were effective only as a sticking plaster and carried a 36% failure rate (where offenders end up being punished for the original offence because they do not abide by the terms of the ASBO); this was because ASBOs focussed on exclusion (for example, from particular areas) and punishment, and contained no effective measures to change behaviour. Kennedy advocated the introduction of an ASBO Plus, which would combine an ASBO with intervention by other agencies, youth workers, social workers, drugs workers, to help tackle the underlying causes of an offender's behaviour.

In the same speech, he explained the use of acceptable behaviour contracts between local authorities and offenders, as pioneered by Islington Council, and emphasised the role of local communities in reducing anti-social behaviour. He developed the idea that community justice panels, comprising local volunteers and, significantly, victims, might have a role to play as an alternative to courts in reducing low-grade crime. In suitable cases, offenders would be given the option of appearing before such a panel instead of facing charges before a court. If they opted to appear before the panel, they would be expected to explain and apologise for their behaviour to their victims and to agree a programme of work or reparation to make amends for the harm caused.

All these are very good ideas, fully expressed in Kennedy's speech and persuasive in the context of the comprehensive approach to policy on crime reduction and the penal system which he then explored.

But our spokesmen should not be tempted in the election to concentrate exclusively on these ideas, without recognising

that in policy on crime, whether low-grade crime, anti-social behaviour or more serious crime, there are no quick fixes.

The reduction of crime depends on a long-term approach to rebuilding community life, improving education and combating social exclusion, poverty, poor housing, unemployment, drug addiction and alcohol abuse, far more than it does on improving policing or methods of handling the small proportion of offenders who are caught.

Our spokesmen have rightly emphasised the need to raise the visibility of the police presence in the community, largely in an attempt to combat the fear of crime, which adversely affects the quality of people's lives, particularly among the elderly and vulnerable, even more than crime itself.

We have highlighted the degree to which officers are tied up with paperwork and therefore unable to be on the streets. That is certainly true and presents a problem which must be addressed, but, as Kennedy pointed out, without compromising on the requirement for thorough record-keeping. We have also called for the increased use of technology by police officers. Again, technology has a valuable part to play in helping officers to manage their workload and could help in reducing the time spent on deskwork. However, we must emphasize that the central task is to continue work on the long-term process of rebuilding trust in the police and re-engaging the police with the communities they serve.

This alone will equip the police with the intelligence they need to improve the prevention and detection of crime. Furthermore, we have to make the case that sufficient resources must be made available to the police. In an increasingly difficult environment, measures to enhance security in the face of the terrorist threat cannot be financed from the resources available for policing the community.

On prisons, we have repeatedly drawn attention to the need to reduce reoffending rates following release from prison. The prison population has risen and overcrowding with it. Despite lip-service by successive governments to a rehabilitative regime within prisons, the constraints imposed by overcrowding in particular have made significant improvement unachievable.

We are absolutely right to be emphasising the need for education and training within prisons. There is good evidence that this is effective in reducing reoffending rates.

But the overwhelming necessity is for prison to be used as a sentence of last resort, as the Lord Chief Justice has repeatedly said. While it may not be popular to say so, the fact is that prison has never been very successful in reducing reoffending, for the obvious reasons that removal from the community at large and constant exposure to other offenders are a poor preparation for a law-abiding life on release. We therefore have an obligation to put far more effort into making non-custodial sentences effective and to improving arrangements for assistance to prisoners on release. An approach to the penal system that does not have the reduction of the prison population and the provision of effective alternatives to prison as its highest priorities misses the point.

A good example of the Government's concern to be seen to be doing something about crime and the terrorist threat is the proposal to introduce compulsory identity cards. Labour has placed this at the heart of its legislative programme for the pre-election programme.

Yet there really is no hard evidence that ID cards will cut crime, facilitate its detection or reduce reoffending. There is no more than a hunch that they will assist in combating terrorism. Terrorists from abroad generally arrive with passports. Terrorists who are resident here will have identity cards but will not thereby be deterred from terrorism.

There are, however, obvious and serious implications for civil liberties. The amount and universality of information held by government about citizens will be massively increased. Though the government now denies it, it is likely that, at some stage, citizens will be required to carry their ID cards; even before then there is bound to be a procedure whereby we may be required to produce our ID cards at a police station; police will be entitled to ask to see ID cards on the streets or to give notice to produce them if they are not immediately available.

There will be a general increase in the perception - and the reality - that citizens are under constant surveillance. All this is exacerbated by a technology which enables information to be processed and shared effectively by all branches of government.

This aspect of the proposal was trumpeted as one of its merits by Tony Blair and David Blunkett following the Queen's Speech. Quite rightly, the Liberal Democrats are committed to opposing the introduction of identity cards. Yet in recent months, we seem to have been addressing this issue not primarily on the basis of a principled opposition, which in my view is widely shared and understood, but on the basis that the massive cost of the system could be better spent elsewhere. While that is true, it would be a shame to let the main arguments against ID cards take second place.

Democracy is about respecting the will of the people - and it is certainly the case that, in our democracy, the will of the people receives more attention in the run-up to a general election than at other times in the parliamentary calendar. Our liberal principles do not always sit comfortably with the will of the people, certainly as that will is perceived by the tabloid press.

Yet it is important that we resist the temptation to stress only those of our ideas and policies which seem to marry well with the view that all policy in the area of crime reduction and the penal system has to be obviously "tough on crime". A considered approach is required, one that fully recognises the complexity and intransigence of the problems we face. It is the approach of Liberal Democrat policy. It is certainly a liberal approach.

We may also find that it is an approach that largely appeals to an electorate that is more intelligent than the tabloid press would have us believe and increasingly sceptical of packaged election promises.

Jonathan Marks QC is chair of the Liberal Democrat Lawyers Association and a member of the Federal Policy Committee.

A LONG STRANGE TRIP

Mark Smulian looks back over 300 Liberators

One Spring evening in 1982, Peter Johnson and I sat in the old National Liberal Club bar looking with mounting horror at what passed for Liberator's accounts.

I remember thinking that we could expect to take in a decent amount of money at that autumn's conference in Bournemouth, but its debts made it look unlikely the magazine could survive that long.

The Liberator Collective already existed at that point but, as has always been the case, some were able or willing to do more than others, and Roger Cowe and Christine Asbury, who had run the magazine for two years, were both determined to give up.

Those of us who remained had to get things under control and find some new people to help.

From this moment of crisis, the current Liberator was born. We cut it down to 24 pages every six weeks, from its previous larger monthly version, and gave up any pretensions that it could be either a commercially viable title with newstrade distribution or sold in the streets by enthusiasts out to rival Socialist Worker.

The magazine began in 1970 as the successor to Gunfire, which had been owned by the Young Liberals, and had collapsed with debts. Liberator was to be financially independent, associated with but not owned by the YLs.

The earliest copy I have, not the first but fairly typical of the time, comes from April 1971. It spoke to a now-lost world where the annual YL conference could attract nearly 1,000 delegates and would decide "will we drop back into the rut of conventional politics, or will we set the tone for a creation of as mass radical movement campaigning at community level for a participatory democracy?"

The 12-page magazine included an analysis by Simon Hebditch on the need to move from an era of mass demonstrations to one of "the far more valuable field of genuine community action". Other articles covered the common market, fighting racism, South Africa and an entire page on the candidates for posts on the YL executive.

This format continued until September 1976 when, in keeping with the zeitgeist, Liberator went tabloid and punk to try to reach a wider audience on the left in those times of high youth unemployment, industrial unrest and a tottering Labour government.

Liberator was at this point produced in Manchester, and this was the first time that the term 'collective' was used.

South Africa remained a concern and women's issues acquired increasing prominence, but the most startling difference any modern reader would note is the space devoted to industrial issues and trade unions.

After a couple of rather odd issues with tabloid front pages folded round an A4 magazine, Liberator morphed yet again when collective members Paul Hannon and Roger Cowe moved to London in 1978, took Liberator with them, and turned it into a magazine complete with use of colour and which intended "to have copy typeset for future issues."

This was the end of Liberator as an organ of the rapidly declining YLs; from now on it became a magazine for all radical liberals.

Admitting this was a financial gamble, the editorial said: "We believe that a serious progressive political party should have a journal which discusses ideas and campaigns in greater depth than a newspaper can."

That still holds true. The amount of publishing undertaken by the Liberal Democrats and their predecessors has been minuscule.

Apart from Liberator, the party's official weekly has been the only regular publication, and the number of pamphlets, books and journals has been tiny.

Everyone involved in politics is busy, but it has never ceased to startle how little Liberals read and write beyond the confines of official policy papers and election leaflets. We claim to have important things to say, but rarely say them.

Liberator began to carry campaign news from around the left in general, ran glossy covers and big interviews and probably looked the most like a conventional political magazine that it ever did.

The first issue in this format covered rent control, civil liberties, detailed accounts of fledgling Liberal campaigns in inner cities and an assessment of punk by Leighton Andrews, now a Labour AM in Wales.

It was the slow motion financial fallout from the high production values and over optimistic print runs of this era that led to the crisis of 1982.

The economies made then, and the forbearance of Lithosphere, then as now our printer, kept the show on the road but taxed the ingenuity of the collective.

Newspapers were just starting to use direct inputting of copy by journalists, bypassing traditional typesetting, and we evolved a primitive version of this by requiring contributors to present their copy typed in 9cms galleys so we could paste it straight down.

This resulted in a bizarre mixture of fonts, aided by job lots of some Italian Letraset-like product mysteriously acquired by Stewart Rayment, and illustrations pillaged from whatever other publications were to hand.

While the technical and financial sides of Liberator were being salvaged, political circumstances conspired to give the magazine a new role.

These were the early days of the Alliance, and Liberator had fought a lonely battle the previous year as a vehement opponent of that strategy when the rest of the party was

gripped by hysterical enthusiasm. Despite the huge vote in favour of forming the Alliance, it was obvious that many on the left of the Liberal Party opposed the whole thing and their numbers grew as the injustice of the seat share out and malign influence on policy grew.

Here was a ready made readership, and the magazine became a voice for anti-alliance Liberals and a component of the opposition to David Steel, centred on the Association of Liberal Councillors and London Liberal Party.

This got us in touch with LLP's chair Colin Darracott, whose generosity with his money, the use of his home for production days and of his memory storage electric typewriter, at that time the last word in home typographic technology, secured us a means of producing the magazine.

Another boost came when Radical Bulletin, then a separate publication, merged with Liberator bringing some new subscribers and a title for what became our news section.

One of the last independent RBs had been denounced from the rostrum of assembly by Clare Brooks as a "foul and loathsome document", which was an endorsement of sorts. The mixture of scurrilous gossip, humour and disclosure made it one of the most popular parts of Liberator.

The 1983 general election result saw the Alliance stagger on under the joint leadership of David Steel and David Owen, and it became increasingly obvious that the idea that these two could work together to deliver a functioning government was going to be among the more fictitious propositions ever put to British voters.

We again kept Liberator at the centre of the battle being waged in the Liberal Party to stop Steel repeatedly giving in to every demand Owen made.

This made Liberator plenty of enemies, including the leader himself, who greatly resented the 'runners and riders' feature in 1984 in which we said it was time for Steel to go and gave the likely form on his successors.

Releasing this on the first day of the conference grabbed the headlines from Steel and infuriated his entourage, leading to his quote that Liberator was "a trashy rag run off on a duplicator", an endorsement we used for years on our subscription forms.

With the merger looming, many readers expected Liberator to oppose it on any terms, but we didn't. In retrospect this may have been a mistake, since the Liberal merger-sceptics went along with trying to secure the right deal until the last minute, giving too little time to organise a 'no' campaign with any prospect of success.

Liberator instead issued the flyer at the 1987 Harrogate conference aimed, largely successfully, at securing a strong team of elected negotiators on the Liberal side. We weren't to know that, as Geoffrey Howe later said of Margaret Thatcher, the captain would go round breaking the negotiators' stumps.

In the winter of 1987/88, emergency editions were rushed out and frantic efforts made to keep up with the plotting.

After the merger, it looked as if many on the 'anti' side would leave politics. Ironically, it was the extraordinary degree of hostility displayed towards the new party's Liberal heritage that kept most us both involved in Liberator and the party.

Things were so bad that enough Liberals who might have drifted off wanted to fight back using fire against fire, and we were flattered and rather humbled that so many readers kept telling us that Liberator was a vital rallying point; more than a few said the magazine was all that kept them involved.

After the bloody aftermath of the 1989 European elections and the change of name to 'Liberal Democrats' things calmed down, though we made a point of also covering Michael Meadwocroft's continuing Liberal Party.

Unlike the situation with Steel, Liberator had always had quite a cordial relationship with Paddy Ashdown, who had been an occasional contributor, and he recognised that dissenting voices were a sign of political health rather than a threat.

No doubt he would have preferred a bit less dissent, but Liberator became more a forum for debate rather than the voice of one side of an argument at this time. Ashdown set a different style and there was a generally good relationship between leader and led until Lib-Labbery reared its head.

Some light relief arrived at this time when Jonathan Calder tentatively suggested that he had written a satirical column in the style of an Edwardian Liberal, and would we try it out? This was how the initially anonymous Lord Bonkers' Diary was born, and became the thing many subscribers tell us they turn to first.

It was a curious experience by the late 1990s for long-term Liberator people to find themselves involved in a campaign against the leader's strategy but also on the majority side, when the magazine again publicised what was happening with Lib-Labbery and rallied those opposed to it.

Throughout it all, Liberator has been kept going by a small band of volunteers, many of whom have now been involved for more than 20 years, using begged and borrowed resources and supplemented by the Songbook, Liberal Revue, the satirical publications sometimes produced at conference, and various stunts that have included sweepstakes on the leader's standing ovation, the sale of onions in 1989 so delegates could have instant crocodile tears at the pathetic excuses offered by party managers for its financial mess, and even once a cut of the party's financial appeal in return for helping to organise it.

Although some collective members are or have been councillors or parliamentary candidates, for most of us Liberator has been our main political activity, which is probably why it still exists while the past three decades are littered with the corpses of magazines - Radical Press, Alliance, New Democrat, Radical Quarterly and the original version of Reformer - run by others with wider political ambitions.

Liberator has had several different formats, but a common thread of believing that liberalism needs to be talked and read about and needs an independent party as its vehicle.

Finally, is this really the 300th issue? Liberator was not numbered until 1978, when for some reason it adopted 'volume 9, number 1'. Four issues later, 'Liberator 95' appeared. It is issue 300 if we say it is.

Mark Smulian is a member of the Liberator Collective.

THE YEAR THINGS BEGAN TO CHANGE

1970 was the year Liberator began, and a turning point for the Liberal Party, recalls Tony Greaves

For Liberals, 1970 was a significant year. For the mainstream party it was a time of low achievement and low morale. Only the Young Liberals were buoyant, partly on the bounce from the successful Stop the Seventies Tour, in which YLs played a prominent role.

At the general election in June, the Liberals fell back to six seats, equal to our all-time lows in the 1950s. With two seats in the south west, Emlyn Hooson in Montgomery, two on the Scottish mainland and Jo Grimond holding the only safe seat of the six in the northern isles, the Liberal Party was relegated to the Celtic fringe for the first time ever.

The 332 Liberal candidates polled just over 2.1 million votes, only 7.5% of the total. We all felt battered and bruised and watching the results come in was a dispiriting experience. A succession of bad years for by-elections and council elections was only slightly leavened by the election of the suspiciously populist Wallace Lawler at the Birmingham Ladywood by-election in 1969. Many of the new generation of activists who Jo Grimond had enthused in the Liberal revival in the early 1960s were seriously wondering whether to find other things to do with their time and energies. Many now did just that.

The party in 1970 was not in good nick. Only about half the constituencies sent an affiliation fee to headquarters. Many of the others had little or no Liberal presence. Liberalism was weak in most of the big cities, with just a foothold on the council in Leeds (Michael Meadowcroft) and Liverpool (Cyril Carr) plus Lawler's people in Birmingham.

There were no councillors in most of London. In most regional centres - places like Norwich, Leicester, Newcastle and Portsmouth - Liberalism was remarkably weak. There was a scattering of councillors around the country but most were in small councils such as urban districts.

A wave of young activists had joined the YLs around the mid-sixties, attracted by the so-called Red Guard image of idealistic young people, willing to challenge the established structures and nostrums even of their own party. At the peak, the YL 1967 conference in Scarborough attracted almost 800 delegates.

In many ways, this was part of the 'youth revolt' at its height in 1968 around the issues of student democracy and Vietnam. By late 1968, the 'revolt' was falling back but the YLs, uniquely, gained a fresh lease of life from Stop The Seventy Tour, not least from the prominence of Peter Hain whose YL branding was well known.

But the old YL leadership that had made such an impact in the mid-60s was now experiencing an ideological crisis. On one side of the developing split were people such as George Kiloh, Terry Lacey, Louis Eaks, Hilary Wainwright and Tony Bunyan, who saw their allegiance as fundamentally to a left-based student and youth movement and began to call themselves socialists and distance themselves from the 'senior party', which they saw as being both ineffective and right wing. Tactically, they increasingly called for direct action rather than electoral politics.

On the other side were those of us who were clear that we were radical Liberals and for whom any future in politics had to lie with the Liberal Party, however much we despaired of its electoral failures and its seeming inability to campaign effectively or at all! Such people around the old YL leadership included Michael Steed, Bernard Greaves, Gareth Wilson and Simon Hebditch, with a new generation of YL leaders emerging alongside Peter Hain and people like Gordon Lishman and Lawry Freedman spanning the two groups.

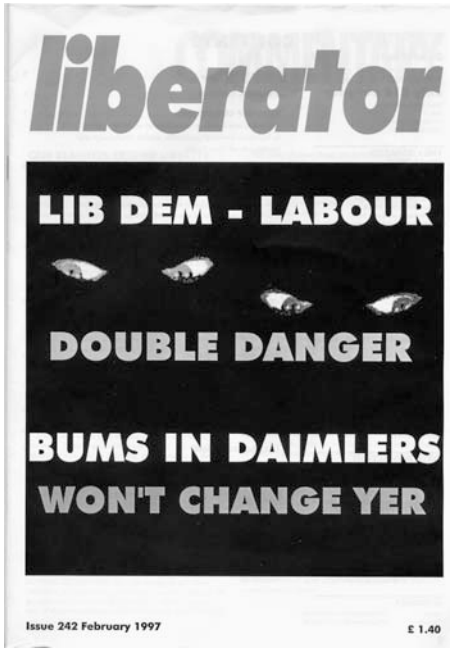
It would be wrong to say there were two clear and organised camps. Most were making up their minds as individuals and people left in dribs and drabs. But for the rest of us, if we were going to stay with the Liberal Party, things had to change. If not, we were wasting our time.

The invention of the term community politics is often attributed to a late night discussion between Freedman and Lishman in a Manchester student flat. What is certainly true is that the 1970 election debacle motivated leading YLs to accelerate their thinking on how to use some of the ideas and campaigning techniques of the extra-parliamentary movements of the late 1960s and incorporate them into the Liberal mainstream.

The result was 'Liberal community politics'. The concept was set out in a number of papers circulated within the YLs and in the 1970 assembly amendment. What was on offer was fairly revolutionary by Liberal standards: a "dual approach to politics, acting both inside and outside the institutions of the political establishment" at a time when the Liberal Party was by and large doing neither.

The radical challenge "to help organise people in their communities to take and use power" went alongside a more conventional belief that we could "capture people's imagination as a credible political movement, with local roots and local success". Even this offended some traditional Liberals, who believed only in some miracle that would restore past parliamentary glories.

A prescient part of the motion was the call for Liberals to build a "power-base in the major cities of this country."



Another section, significantly added by another amendment from John Spiller and John Pardoe in North Cornwall, one of the few seats that held on in 1970, called for Liberals to fight every seat in order to present a nationwide challenge.

The YL amendment was passed by 348 to 236. For some it was a new act of faith, for others a desperate gesture. Opponents said it was the death-knell for classical (parliamentary) Liberalism. Because some of us behind the move were sufficiently determined to see it through over the coming years, it was a turning point in Liberal politics.

The burgeoning of debate around both ideas and action in the YLs in 1970 led to a minor spate of new publications, including one that lasted - Liberator! One other publication was launched that year which helped to change the course of the party, and that was Radical Bulletin.

Some of the ageing Young Liberals were looking for a different kind of base in the party from that of the age-linked YLs. At the same time, a few party radicals were looking for ways of linking up with the youth movement, which seemed to be almost the only source of vitality in the party.

Two such people were John Smithson and Brian Milton. A meeting in Milton's flat including a group of senior YLs (in both senses) decided to launch a monthly newsletter to be funded by subscription (£2 a year) and sent out by post. Milton soon lost interest but Smithson acted as both editor and treasurer (and crucially sub chaser) for the first half of the 1970s, during which time RB played a vital and increasingly influential role in pushing the Liberal Party to a more radical and activist stance.

RB's masthead proclaimed its aim "to foster communication and promote thought among radicals." It carried pieces on policy and ideas. It carried lots of news of goings on in the party that were not published elsewhere ("a sort of Liberal Party Private Eye" as one Guardian journalist described it), a role that the RB section of Liberator continues today. But its main role was to rally radical and activist Liberals, spreading community campaigning ideas, holding conferences, plotting action at party councils and assemblies, pushing candidates in party elections, encouraging people to go to by-elections, spreading news of local campaigns.

The spate of by-election wins in 1972 and 1973 energised the party and (notably with YL Graham Tope's win at Sutton and Cheam) introduced to the wider party the rather more populist local campaigning style and Focus newsletters developed by Trevor Jones and his colleagues in Liverpool. The synthesis of YL community politics with Trevor's barnstorming style set the pattern for the steady development of Liberal and Liberal Democrat campaigning as we know it today.

In 1977 the new chairman of ALC (the other Trevor Jones, of Dorchester, who had been persuaded to do the job while giving a lift south to Lishman following an ALC conference) negotiated funding from the Rowntree Trust to set up a new Liberal local government and campaigning base in Hebden Bridge. ALC's mailings and networks took over much of RB's work, Smithson handed over the editorship to less committed people, and RB lost its verve and slowly fizzled out. In the end, the title, the scandal sheet and inside information role was handed over to Liberator, which is where it flourishes today. Meanwhile ALC took over the task of building the local base. In 1977 there were some 750 Liberal Councillors. By 1985 that figure had risen to more than 2,500 and it peaked in the early 1990s at more than 5000.

More to the point, it was the Liberal local government and campaigning base more than anything else that gave the party the strength and confidence to work with the SDP as a more than equal partner during the Alliance years between 1981 and 1987. It was the extraordinary resilience of the local government base that kept the new merged party alive in the first two or three years after the merger in 1988, when the Westminster-based pundits were predicting collapse and annihilation.

It is probably the single biggest reason why the Liberal Democrats are now a force in large swathes of the country rather than the few pockets of Liberal strength in 1970, and why so many of the major and lesser regional centres have changed from being Liberal deserts to real centres of strength. Finally, it has hugely influenced the character of the party and it is one of the main reasons why the Liberal Democrats, contrary to the real fears of many of us 15 years ago, are now recognised inside and outside the party as the Liberal party of British politics today.

In those dark days immediately after the merger, there were two things that kept me firmly in the party. One was my active involvement in running a Liberal (Democrat) majority council. The other was Liberator plopping through the door each month. The Liberal world did not start in 1970, but what happened then was fairly important.

Tony Greaves was chairman of the National League of Young Liberals in 1970 and moved the community politics amendment at the Liberal Assembly that year. He was a member of the Radical Bulletin editorial group in the 1970s and set up the ALC operation at Hebden Bridge in 1977, running it until 1985. He is now a Liberal Democrat councillor and peer.

WHY PROPERTY IS NOT THEFT AFTER ALL

David Boyle reflects on the strange rebirth of Liberal ownership policy

Nearly 80 years ago, a group of inexperienced political campaigners – outraged at the monopolistic behaviour of the London General bus company – took the unprecedented step of launching their own pirate bus service.

They leased a series of ancient omnibuses, painted them in rainbow colours and called them 'Morris', 'Ruskin' and names with similar radical echoes – and took on the giant bus company on its most lucrative routes.

The campaign failed. London General swept all before it, including the small bus operators the campaigners were defending, only of course to be nationalised under the auspices of the London Passenger Transport Board.

Their views on this latter nationalisation are unrecorded, but they would not have approved. For the Distributists – for that is the slightly unworldly group of campaigners I refer to – giant state-run enterprise was indistinguishable from giant corporate enterprise. The problem was one of size and ultimate power.

Distributism is almost forgotten as a political creed now. Its leaders, Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton, both dusty figures from a bygone age, their greatest works unread and their reputations – like many political figures of the 1920s and 30s, right and left – a little tarnished by a note of anti-semitism (though in their defence, it has to be said that they were among the first to warn of the true meaning of Hitler).

But there are some signs of a revival of interest, especially now that corporate power and the size of institutions – thanks primarily to Naomi Klein – are back at the forefront of the wider political agenda.

Distributism dated back primarily to Belloc's 1913 book 'The Servile State', written just after the end of his period as a Liberal MP, which set out the basic premise: that free market corporatism and socialism both ended in much the same place – centralisation and a kind of slavery.

He and Chesterton argued for solutions based on small-scale ownership – the very opposite of Fabian socialism at the time – as the only guarantee of freedom against the corporate giants. If you owned your home, a vegetable patch, maybe a small business, you could never be cajoled in quite the way that you could if you were simply at the beck and call of Big Manager or Big Bureaucrat.

Quite how this distribution would be achieved was never quite spelled out. A combination of land reform and anti-trust legislation was set out in no detail whatever in Chesterton's 1926 Distributist 'manifesto', 'The Outline of Sanity'.

Why might this still be of interest to Liberal Democrats? One reason is that the founders and many of the foot soldiers of the movement were former Liberals, and many of the themes were echoes of Liberal-style decentralisation.

But there is a more fundamental reason of philosophy. Belloc's writings were, for many Liberals between the wars, a vital intellectual bastion against the Fabianism they regarded as so authoritarian – Beatrice and Sidney Webb were by then fervent admirers of Stalin and all his works.

It was one reason why, once the Liberal Party leapt into its post-war period of policy-making and renewal that culminated in the revival of the Grimond Years, issues of ownership and how to spread it more widely were near the top of their agenda.

The chair of the party's commission on ownership in 1953 was the former private secretary to Herbert Samuel, Elliott Dodds. In the final report, he even paid this fulsome tribute to the Distributists: "Tribute must be paid to the work of Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton who, though they fell foul of the Liberal Party, were such doughty fighters for Liberal values, and whose 'distributist' crusade inspired so many (including the present writer) with the ideal of ownership for all."

There was by then something of a rapprochement between the two philosophies, chaired by Dodds, when Liberal Party officials met the remaining dignitaries of Distributism at a meeting in Covent Garden. But there were no moves to heal the rift entirely: both Belloc and Chesterton were dead and Distibutism seemed part of another age.

The policy the party outlined, under Dodd's chairmanship both in 1938 and 1953, was a mixture of land tax and profit-sharing, and measures to tackle monopoly and inherited wealth.

By the time Liberator first appeared in 1970, ownership was still high on the party's agenda, but not so much how to spread ownership through society, but how to give people an ownership stake at their workplace.

Grimond had a personal fascination for industrial common ownership. Profit-sharing, co-ownership, co-operatives were high on the party's list of ideals under his years of inspiration. It was industrial democracy – a stake at your workplace and the spread of co-operatives – that the party campaigned on through the 1970s.

During the Lib-Lab Pact years of 1977-8, it was the legislation that paved the way for employee share ownership and the Industrial Common Ownership Fund ICOF – so critical in the development of social enterprises, and other new kinds of common ownership – that stands out as one of the few permanent achievements.

But this was 'common ownership' and, important as this was as a new development of new kinds of property stakeholding stakes, it was not quite the original Distributist ideal.

It was left to the Thatcher government to wrong-foot Liberals by introducing one of the clearest examples of Distributist legislation in a century: selling council houses to their tenants at a heavy discount.

Conservative Party ideologues did not understand the limits to right to buy, extending it to the point where public housing became almost impossible. But this was still an elegantly radical Liberal solution, liberating tenants from the patronising and incompetent rule of Labour's big city bosses.

Since then, the ghost of Thatcherism has become so powerful that Liberal Democrats have been nervous about revisiting the agenda of giantism and ownership.

This has had costs. E. F. Schumacher's 1973 classic 'Small is Beautiful' was one of the main inspirations behind the disappearance of another faction of the Liberal Party to form the Ecology Party, now the Greens.

When, in 1992, I drew the attention of a senior party figure to the extraordinary parallels between the constituencies with Liberal Democrat MPs and constituencies with the highest rates of self-employment in the UK – there was and is a bizarrely close comparison – he was less than staggered.

"You want to be a little careful not to sound too Poujardist," he said, a reference to half-forgotten uprising of small shopkeepers.

I believe he was wrong, and that there is a significant psychological link between self-employment, a sense of independence and voting Liberal Democrat.

But apart from the studious efforts of Weston-super-Mare MP Brian Cotter with the small business portfolio in recent years, this link has been left unexploited.

You can dismiss the Distributists as dreamers kicking against the inevitable changes of the modern world – though this is harder now the great corporate philosophies of the 20th century have been defeated – but I believe it is time we exhumed some of the themes they made their own.

I do so for three reasons:

Giantism is the dog in British politics that doesn't bark: it is critically significant to people's lives, now that they are increasingly the subject of factory schools and hospitals managed by means of targets from Whitehall – giant machines for the throughput of patients where you never see the same doctor twice, giant manufacturies for youth where the size of classes matters but the size of schools apparently doesn't.

The Liberal Democrat emphasis on decentralisation is insufficient unless it broadens to find other ways of giving people more independence in their lives. There is no point in giving them an unlimited say on local committees, if the real power over them is economic, controlled by boardrooms on another continent. Giantism in economics is anti-competitive and limits choice, and has already all but ruined British agriculture thanks to the retail monopolists.

There is a deep-seated sense in British society that genuine self-determination is only possible by owning your own home. That far the Thatcherites were undoubtedly correct. The irony is that the means they organised to achieve it has created terrifying house price inflation – the average UK house costs 20 times what it did when Liberator was first published. As a result, both partners are forced into a soul-destroying dependence on earnings, at great cost to family life and well-being. This kind of indentured semi-servitude to which we willingly sell ourselves is precisely the kind of nightmare Belloc warned about.

The answers may not be obvious, but the questions are becoming ever clearer.

How can we spread ownership – both in the traditional way and through new forms of ownership like limited liability partnerships and community land trusts – when wealth is increasingly concentrated: the world's 200 richest people now own as much wealth as the combined annual incomes of the poorest 2.5 billion people?

How can we go beyond the decentralisation of decision-making – which by itself is simply the generous distribution of bureaucracy – so that people really believe they have a stake and a genuine sense of ownership about the public services they use?

How can we prevent the increasing power of monopolistic semi-cartels, while still encouraging UK business to be competitive in the world market?

Those are the questions. The answers are going to include new forms of taxation, new kinds of personal financial stakes in assets like North Sea Oil.

They are going to include the break-up of the factory institutions, forcing consultants and specialist teachers to organise more peripatetic schedules.

They are undoubtedly going to include new kinds of anti-trust legislation, and an extension of the legal concept of monopoly so that it prevents retailers – for example – having an effective stranglehold over a local or regional economy.

But above all it is going to spread a genuine stake in institutions and more than a stake – a place to own – down through society. That is self-determination and Liberalism radical enough for Liberator to be proud of.

In the meantime, we have to defend those signs of independence and self-determination against the advocates of giantism, both public and private corporatism, rather as Chesterton did all that time ago.

"Do anything, however small," urged Chesterton in 1926. "Save one out of a hundred shops. Save one croft out of a hundred crofts. Keep one door open out of a hundred doors; for so long as one door is open, we are not in prison."

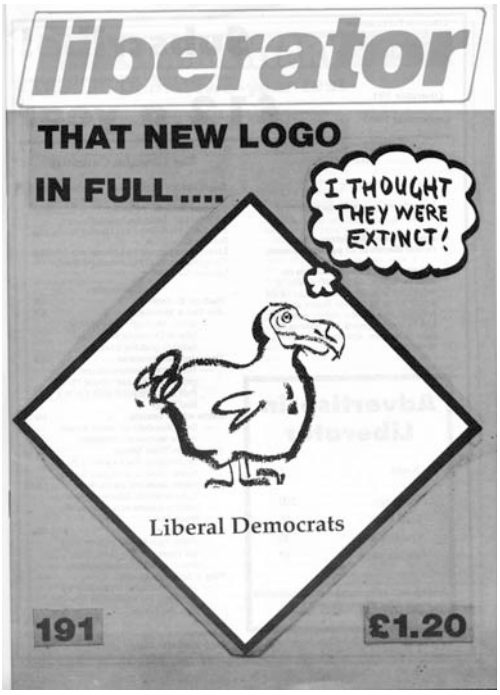
David Boyle is a former editor of Liberal Democrat News and author of Authenticity: Brands, Fakes, Spin and the Lust for Real Life, published by Harper Perennial at £8.99. Website: www.david-boyle.co.uk

FROM VIETNAM TO IRAQ

In 1970, the Americans were bogged down in Vietnam. Now, they are bogged down in Iraq. This time, the British are there too. Liberal Democrats must highlight the follies of the neo-imperialist approach to foreign policy, argues Jonathan Fryer

There is only one lesson we learn from history, and that is that we learn nothing from history. The older one gets, the more one becomes convinced by those oriental philosophies that argue that life is like a wheel. At the ripe middle age of 54, I'm definitely seeing things come round again.

I belong to the generation that went into the streets over Vietnam, only I walked further than most of my Young Liberal colleagues did, ending up in Saigon. There I began my journalistic career, under the benign patronage of Brian Redhead, who was then editor of the Manchester Evening News. I was 18 when I set off, a YMCA bag over my shoulder, containing a borrowed camera.



No-one at either the Vietnamese or American press accreditation centres in Saigon seemed fazed by such a fresh-faced cub reporter turning up on their doorsteps, and within minutes I had a US Department of Defense pass which would tell any Viet Cong who captured me that I should be treated like a US army major. As I imagined that probably would mean having sharpened bamboo slithers pushed under my fingernails if I were taken prisoner, I made sure that I never had the card on me when I was walking about.

But that card did enable me to hitch a ride on any US military aircraft or helicopter flying out of Saigon's airport. We hacks might hear a rumour that something big was going on down in the Mekong Delta; getting there was child's play. And when we arrived at the trouble spot, the US forces showed us everything. And I mean everything. I saw civilians being fired on, villages set on fire, napalm being dropped, as US soldiers and airmen whooped "Hey, gooks! See what we've got for you today!"

On the ground, the poor bloody American infantry were terrified. Many were even younger than I was, came from some hole in the Mid West, and seemed to be stoned half the time. They weren't quite sure where they were, or what exactly they were meant to do, but they knew they were right. They were going to get those Commie bastards, and import democracy from the land of free.

I returned to Saigon in 1971, to cover the Vietnamese presidential election, which was trumpeted as a triumph for freedom. There were meetings and speeches, and I interviewed the victorious Nguyen Van Thieu on the steps of the parliament building. He expressed delight at his win, but it was hardly a surprise; he was the only candidate. When Saigon was about to fall, four years later, he was airlifted out and went to live in Surrey.

Flash forward to the early 1980s, and I'm in Central America, making a radio documentary for Radio 4. I'm crouching in the cathedral in San Salvador, among a group of crying but defiant women who are hoping that the thuggish security forces in the square outside will not violate the sanctuary, and start firing through the Cathedral doors. The women's 'crime' was to demonstrate, protesting against the disappearance of their sons; in some cases, the youths' bodies had later turned up on rubbish dumps in the city, badly mutilated. The women had little confidence regarding their own security; after all, the country's Roman Catholic primate, Archbishop Oscar Romero, had been shot dead while celebrating mass.

But the Salvadorean military and the freelance death squads were on the right side, as far as Washington was concerned, because they were fighting against leftist guerrillas, just as the rebel Contras in neighbouring Nicaragua were getting covert US assistance in their often murderous campaign to try to topple the Sandinistas.

It was a similar story across the region. One day, when I interviewed the US ambassador to Honduras, John Negroponte, in the fortress US embassy in Tegucigalpa, I asked him what he thought about rightwing death squads

there. He replied that irresponsible journalists like me exaggerated their significance and, besides, didn't I realise that the West had to stand up for freedom?

It was singularly depressing to find that same John Negroponte appointed US ambassador to the United Nations by president George W Bush in 2001. He had the self-satisfied smirk of a man who had watched the collapse of the Soviet Union and cried out 'Gotcha!'

The Evil Empire had been vanquished, and America reigned supreme. But it was only a matter of months before those hijacked planes slammed into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. A new enemy had arrived: terror and militant Islam. America was once more at war. First it was Afghanistan, then Iraq. Mr Negroponte, significantly, is now the US Ambassador in Baghdad.

When I was first in Vietnam, Harold Wilson was the British prime minister, and he succeeded in keeping Britain out of the war, though the foreign secretary, Michael Stewart, was sometimes sickening fulsome in his praise of what the Americans were doing on all our behalf. This time round, of course, with Iraq, Tony Blair was like an eager dog rushing through its American master's legs, impatient to get in, while it was the ex-foreign secretary, Robin Cook, who sounded caution.

A bigger change, though, was that in 1970, there had been just a tiny band of Liberal MPs – one of whom, Peter Bessell, was an apologist for the American presence in Vietnam – whereas this time, there was a sturdy group of over 50 Liberal Democrat MPs, every one of whom voted against the Iraq War.

Charles Kennedy, in particular, got mauled in the House of Commons by both Blairite loyalists and some Tories, who effectively accused him of being a lily-livered traitor. But as a party, we can be proud of the position we took. Once more, along with thousands of fellow Liberal Democrat activists, I went into the streets and demonstrated.

But there are other changes since 1970 that I see from my professional standpoint that are not so welcome. As I have mentioned, in Vietnam, western journalists could see what they wanted and report fairly openly. Indeed, the fact that horrendous film footage and still photographs of what was happening in Vietnam then appeared around the world, not least in America itself, undoubtedly helped hasten the end to the war, as more and more Americans decided that they did not want to endorse it.

Today, the US military controls what the media sees of war, and is as adept at spinning – some might say lying – as Number 10 Downing Street was under Alastair Campbell's direction. They don't want another Vietnam-style public relations debacle. Cameras are kept well away when the body-bags are brought home, and information is restricted.

Things have improved somewhat since the First Gulf War, in the wake of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. I was part of the BBC World Service's 24-hour news coverage of the Gulf War, trying to make sensible packages out of material sent back by reporters in the field. But usually they were allowed to see nothing of the action, and had to rely on bland press conferences in the Saudi capital, Riyadh.

This time, of course, selected correspondents were 'embedded' with American forces, as they stormed into Iraq. I made myself very unpopular with some colleagues by constantly referring to this as 'being in bed with' the US military. I stopped watching CNN, as I couldn't bear the way that journalists had effectively become partisan propagandists to reassure the folks back home that 'our boys' were really laying into the towel-heads. Fox was even worse.

Once more, as in Vietnam, the sacred cow of democracy has been used to justify iron-fist tactics, such as the recent assault on Falluja. And just as the half a million US troops in Vietnam were meant to be saving the country from the communist threat, so now a new generation is meant to be saving Iraq from Islamic fundamentalism. The fact that the ghastly tyrant Saddam Hussein had effectively done that himself is conveniently ignored. Moreover, just as the brutal tactics used in Vietnam engendered a new generation of anti-western Vietnamese, so too the tactics in Iraq are sending countless young men into the arms of militant groups. I hope to goodness the final casualty list in Iraq is nowhere near as long as it was in Vietnam, but logic dictates that the longer allied forces are there, the higher the number of deaths and injuries will be, predominantly, of course, Iraqis.

So far, there is no great groundswell of anti-war feeling in the United States, though that will certainly come if things don't get noticeably better after the elections planned for the end of January. A high proportion of Americans supports the war, and really believes that God is on their side. Unfortunately, the Iraqi 'insurgents' also believe God is on their side, which could make the conflict even more protracted.

Therein lies a crucial difference in the contemporary American and British psyches. As far as I can tell, a majority of Britons, whatever their political persuasion, would rubbish the idea that God is on one side or the other in the Iraqi conflict – though many British Muslims would argue that wherever He is, it is not alongside Uncle Sam.

Britain is a more secular state than it was in 1970; attendance at most Christian churches has plummeted. In America, that is not the case. Indeed, I would argue that, despite the superficial Americanisation of British society and tastes as a consequence of globalisation, Britain and the United States are far further apart today than they were three decades ago.

Given the re-election of George W Bush, I think that is a good and healthy thing. Apart from language, we have far more in common with our European neighbours than we do with our so-called American cousins. We need to stand back and judge objectively and critically the realities of US foreign policy. As I have seen for myself over the past three decades, Bush and Iraq are unfortunately not an aberration; they are part of a pattern.

Only the Americans themselves can break that pattern, though we can give friendly encouragement from the side. After all, we were an imperialistic power ourselves a century ago, before being made to realise the error of our ways. Early in the last century, the United States actively lobbied Britain to abandon its imperial pretensions and strategies. Mr Blair is not likely to return that favour, so it is up to the Liberal Democrats to do so.

Jonathan Fryer is a writer and broadcaster who currently divides his time between London and Kuwait. In June, he narrowly failed to become London's second Liberal Democrat MEP.

WHERE DID THE HOPE GO?

There was a Liberal-shaped hole in politics when Liberator started in 1970, and it is still there waiting to be filled, says Michael Meadowcroft

The Liberator 300 span a political chasm. From the Heath government of 1970 to the re-election of George W Bush – which will come to be seen as the most disastrous election result in the world for seventy years.

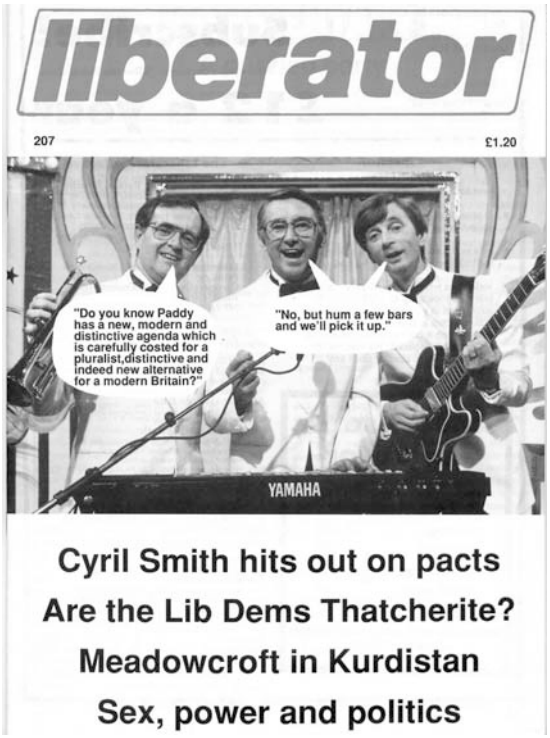
It is some measure of the shift in political orientation that, in 1970, Edward Heath, later the progressive Conservative scourge of Thatcher, was perceived as a philosophical right-winger. He took his cabinet to the Selsdon Park Hotel in Croydon to formulate a free enterprise, anti lame ducks, ideology. And then one of his first actions as Prime Minister was to take Rolls Royce into public ownership to prevent it going into liquidation!

The past thirty years also mark the virtual passing from the political scene of the last generation that could look forward to a better quality of life. The failure of my generation to come to terms with ecological imperatives has fatally undermined the future. Its inability to balance the avarice of capitalism with the needs of society has grievously damaged urban communities.

The actuarial implication of the decline of the number of men and women in employment compared with the number of pensionable age is progressively undermining the ability to keep pensions in line with the increase in wage levels. The myopic obsession with the nation state has made western countries vulnerable to a stateless but pervasive terrorism. All this stems from an innate selfishness on the part of the developed world and an apparent failure of democracy to cope with a decline in wealth, even in the cause of survival.

The American author Francis Fukuyama wrote his naive but influential book 'The End of History' in 1992 to celebrate the end of the cold war and fall of communism. Events in the brief time since then have instead vividly demonstrated the failure of conservatism. Economic conditions in Russia are now worse than they were during the communist era and it says much for Russian attachment to democracy that there have been no significant attempts to abandon it, even though, as in a number of former Warsaw Pact states, communist candidates have successfully contested free elections.

It has taken George Soros, one of the world's most successful capitalists, to act as a global Robin Hood and to establish Open Society organisations across central and eastern Europe. He has written: "I now fear that the untrammelled intensification of laissez-faire capitalism and the spread of market values into all areas of our life is endangering our open and democratic society. The main enemy of the open society, I believe, is no longer the communist but the capitalist threat."



Here we have the great political paradox of modern times: that both communism and conservatism have failed and yet liberalism is still feeble almost everywhere. The evidence of the past thirty years is that economic determinism – basing political movements on economic ideology – has failed, just as Liberals always predicted it would.

The problem has been that the appeal of such parties is much more simplistically attractive than that of liberalism, based as the latter is on the primacy of human values together with a pragmatic view of economics as a vital support of those values, and, indeed, on whose success liberalism is to a significant extent dependent. That pragmatism finds its expression in the phrase, the market where possible, the state where necessary.

It may not be a coincidence that the dumbing down of politics has advanced at just about the same pace as economic determinist parties have been failing. Increasingly desperate to gain or to retain power in economic conditions that are inexorably adverse – and which produce increasing inequalities – they have resorted to focus groups to ascertain what voters want and then to give it to them, however damaging such policies are.

Populist policies are rarely beneficial and, instead of politicians making an analysis of problems, determining solutions according to their basic political philosophies, and

then campaigning to persuade the public to support them, we are witnessing a cynical competition between Conservative and Labour parties to outdo each other in harsh, outrageous and unprofitable responses to genuine law and order problems, without any reference to basic beliefs. The media scarcely troubles to challenge this right-wing consensus and so we have a vicious circle in which the players and the reviewers conspire to maintain the status quo.

In this unhealthy political situation, Liberals have both a problem and an opportunity. The problem is that for Liberals to succeed electorally, on any scale but that of municipal wards won and held by incessant and eventually debilitating local activity, requires the electorate to abandon the present mindset of economic priorities and to be open to a very different approach. This requires at least a modicum of intellectual commitment, at a time when any intellectual political content is at a premium.

The opportunity is that, perhaps perversely but certainly interestingly, the electorate is actually not enamoured of populist policies and is increasingly disenchanted with all mainstream politics. In theory there is a huge vacuum, which could be filled by powerful advocacy of an alternative philosophy.

My frustration with Liberal colleagues for much of the period covered by Liberator's 300 issues, and my complaint about the Alliance and merger periods, was the widespread lack of confidence in Liberalism. From my numerous articles over these years, Liberator readers will recognise a hobbyhorse fast approaching. The lack of intellectual rigour on the part of Liberal members and Liberal activists, and even of many Liberal candidates, was wholly unnecessary and, to me, inexplicable.

Over a period of a few years from 1980, following the party's publication of my 'Liberalism for a New Decade', Liberator commissioned a series of three booklets from me examining social democracy, 'The Left', and 'The Right', from a Liberal perspective. I frankly admit that I wrote these booklets to develop and clarify my own perception of Liberalism, but I hoped that they would be useful to others. They proved, alas, somewhat ephemeral. Liberals diluted their Liberalism at the precise time that it was becoming more acceptable and relevant.

Today there is a third economic determinist party that is attempting to fill the Liberal shaped vacuum. The Green party is yet another false prophet, but a far more seductive one. It espouses a vital truth about global society and appears to offer a productive route to achieving crucial aims. Unfortunately, however accurate the analysis might be, a party that puts the achievement of an economic system above the primacy of human values falls into the selfsame illiberal trap as Labour and Conservative alternatives.

The fallacy is to appropriate to a single party a crucial and, I believe, incontrovertible imperative. The survival of the planet is a 'given' of such massive proportion as to require it to be central to all political parties. The existence of a single party claiming enlightenment on the issue both excuses other parties from embracing it fully, and puts off the wide acceptance of the ecological imperative by arguing that it requires the election of one particular party.

Furthermore, to carry the public in support of difficult policies requires persuasion rather than diktat. If, by chance, a Green party ever came into power, the implementation of ecological policies for the health service, and particularly on medical and surgical intervention, would be draconian. One hesitates even to contemplate its policies on population control. It would also face the inevitable difficulty of accepting alternance with any other – by definition anti-ecological – party.

By 1974, the Liberal Party had become a firmly ecological party with a well-developed awareness of the deleterious effects of economic growth and of the necessity of integrating 'green' policies with a Liberal view of the community and of culture. So successful was this at the time that the Ecology party – the forerunner of the Green party – actually debated at its 1979 conference whether it should disband and join the Liberal Party.

The situation thirty years later is worse not better. Liberalism lacks a united sharp focus. Its cutting edge is blunted by its dilution. A number, admittedly not particularly numerous, who continue their commitment to the Liberal Party, endeavour to maintain a radical Liberal presence within today's deeply illiberal political atmosphere.

Despite the deep disillusion with New Labour on the traditional left, the Liberal Democrats have failed to attract significant numbers of former Labour activists, even though many of them have liberal sympathies on civil liberties and on internationalist policies. In the 1970s, we demonstrated in Leeds that it was perfectly possible to draw such people into the Liberal Party and to weld them into a council group that represented both the inner city and the leafy suburbs. It does not help today to have a vocal group within the Liberal Democrats who espouse economic views that would tilt the party dangerously towards an outdated economic liberal position.

It is ironic that key aspects of traditional Liberal thinking are back in vogue. I well recall the party being derided thirty and more years ago by Tory and Labour alike for being tied to aged and totemic policies, such as Site Value Rating and the Single Transferable Vote. Both of these are currently on the march, particularly the former. What is striking is that, with the taxation of the annual value of land being promoted – accurately – as the sensible and progressive solution to an alleged shortage of building land and to the exploitation of planning permission, neither the articles in the broadsheets nor in recent editions of the New Statesman deigned to mention that this has been consistent Liberal policy for a hundred years. Perhaps there are few of us still around who realise it.

The thirty plus years of Liberator have spanned a period of Wilsonian manipulation and Thatcherite dogmatism; of devolution to Scotland and Wales and the continued destruction of local government; of hope and of disillusion; of political involvement and political disengagement; of intellectual debate and of trite sloganising. Throughout, it has been an important vehicle for a brand of radicalism that identifies and embraces all Liberals. It adds a vital seasoning of irreverence, which appeals to the incipient anarchist in us all! Its next 300 issues will be equally important if we are to be challenged and kept alert.

Michael Meadowcroft has led, or been a member of, forty-seven missions to thirty-one different countries, assisting in the transition to multi-party democracy. He was Liberal MP for Leeds West, 1983-87.
Website: http://www.bramley.demon.co.uk/

THE RISE OF ANTI-POLITICS

Despite electoral progress since 1970, Liberals have failed to meet the challenges they set themselves, says Matthew Huntbach

The Liberal Party in the early 1970s resembled a preserved railway, not perhaps serving a useful purpose, but lovingly kept in working order by enthusiasts. Reflecting on developments since then, we can see much success. The parliamentary party is no longer a small collection of semi-independents from the more remote parts of the country. It is big enough to perform a proper opposition role, at which it is doing better than the larger opposition party. The party has an established role in local government. A Liberal Democrat councillor is part of mundane reality nearly everywhere, not an exotic specimen.

A more recent and welcome development is a firming up of support, with a growing core of voters who understand what the party is trying to do and vote for it on that basis. As recently as 10 years ago, in an opinion poll asking about support on almost any policy, our voters would fall midway between Labour and Conservative voters. They now frequently fall to one side, and that is the liberal side. It is no longer credible to say that the party exists mainly as a repository for protest votes and those drifting between the other two.

It might therefore seem odd to say we have failed. Nevertheless, I feel that, in the big challenge we set ourselves in the 1970s, and in the motivating factor for the revival of the Liberal Party led by its radical wing, we have failed. Our aim then was to encourage people to "take power for themselves". We would re-engage people in politics by showing them it wasn't just about remote people doing remote things in Westminster. We would show them that voting can change things, and that voting is a matter of choice not a statement of loyalty. We would show them that voting was not all there was in politics; there were many other ways ordinary people could get involved more directly to change things.

Yet now there seems to be more disengagement from politics than ever. A common view of politicians is that they are an alien class which is forced on us and about which we can do nothing. Politicians are assumed to be "only in it for themselves," or to be a malignant force bent on enforcing their own weird ideas on the people, contradicting all common sense. Party politics is something that no sane or well-intentioned person would get involved with. Canvassers are often faced with "I never vote" stated proudly as a mark of honour rather than said apologetically.

It is a mark of our electoral success that Liberal Democrats now have no exemption from being seen as part of this despised class of politicians. A vote for us is no longer seen as a vote against the system; we are part of the system.

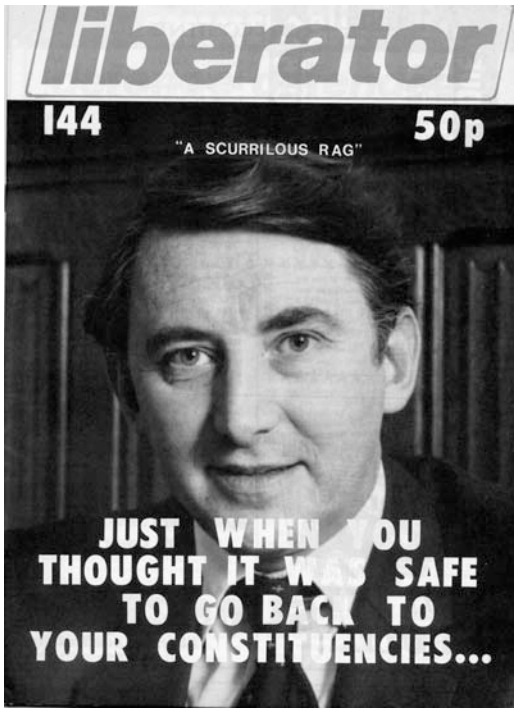
Was this an inevitable price of our success? I am not sure. I believe there is more our party could have done to present itself as something different from the conventional model of a political party, to emphasise participation and to reject the pressure to base its image on its leader and to sell it using techniques borrowed from consumer product advertising.

The one thing our party has shown more than anything else since 1970 is how much ordinary people can make a difference. Those of us who have been around for some time know how very often our local success has depended on a small handful of people who have had the time and energy to get things up and going. There are many parts of the country where our party is dominant, where we can name those individuals responsible. There are some places where our party was strong but is now weak, where we can name the individuals who tried but dropped out or burned out. There are still many places where our party could make an impact if only it had that core of activists who could start it. In those same places there are dozens of people who could do it if only they realised how easy it was to do.

But does it matter? The dual approach to politics that powered us in the 1970s said there was more to it than electoral success. Election of a Liberal to a seat which was previously safe for another party was meant to be a demonstration of people power, not the end.

It has been suggested that the flourishing of pressure groups indicates that political participation is alive and well, just not placed where it used to be. I disagree with that. Pressure groups are parasitical on electoral politics. They are based on the assumption that we cannot change the people in power; we can only beg them to listen to us. Pressure group politics is also a cop-out. It is easy to take a principled stand on some issue if you do not have to place it in a wider context. Political parties have to take a global view, to balance diverse and often contradicting pressures. There is, of course, a place in our society for interest groups pursuing particular policies in detail, but as a supplement not a replacement for electoral politics.

Politics is needed because we live in a constrained world. The nature of those constraints has become more apparent in the past few decades and will become much more so in the coming century. In 1970 the environmental crisis was still something that was going to happen in the future if we did not act, now it is something that is happening because we have not acted.



We can see the role of resources like water and oil in world conflict. It is becoming increasingly difficult to dismiss global warming as just a theory. On a more local front, perhaps the biggest but largely unspoken issue in British politics is the allocation of land for housing. The damage to society caused by expensive housing is apparent, yet the political pressure against building more housing in green sites is strong, and any financial measures to lead to a more efficient use of our existing housing are considered unthinkable.

Choices on these difficult matters can be made only by government. Only government can be trusted to act on behalf of the welfare of the people as a whole. Yet government can act effectively only if it has the trust of the people. Even in Britain, where politics is largely honest, and most people involved in it seem, in my experience, to be motivated by a desire to defend and improve the lot of their fellow human beings, there has been a slump in the trust given to politics and politicians.

The housing crisis is not resolved in Britain because, while politicians may be branded as 'evil' for doing nothing about homelessness, still more they are branded as 'evil' for enforcing new building on reluctant communities, and one can only imagine how the right-wing press would denounce as evil any effective means to ensure land is better used, such as land value taxation.

In the absence of strong democratic politics, weak democratic politics will always ensure the rich and powerful have their voices heard, and the poor are unheard. Indeed, in the absence of a political culture that informs them of ways their poverty may be alleviated, the poor will have no voice to be heard.

The anti-politics movement has been the biggest political movement in Britain since 1970. It has turned politics around from being oriented towards socialism, to being oriented towards extreme free market politics. Up to the 1970s, the left-right spectrum was essentially a measure of how socialist you were. Some Liberals supposed they might be 'libertarian socialists', and even the Conservative Party had to concede to the social democratic consensus.

Now some Liberal Democrats suppose they might be 'liberal free marketeers' and the Labour Party has conceded to the free market consensus. The wild-eyed Trots, for whom every failure of socialism could be excused by the argument that it was not socialist enough, have been replaced by wild-eyed 'libertarians' (USA-style), for whom every failure of the free market can be blamed on it not being sufficiently free of state restriction. Socialism, even of a democratic form, is now a fringe political ideology because there is no escaping from the fact that it requires active politicians and a political culture.

Liberals can be pragmatic about the free market as we were pragmatic about socialism. We can recognise that the basic urge behind the free market, the freedom to trade, is a liberal one, just as the basic urge behind socialism, freedom from poverty, is a liberal one. Failure comes from pursuing one liberal urge with insufficient regard to the others. Socialism too was burdened by the socialist concept of political party as a device that expected complete loyalty from its members and supporters, which laid down a strict party line, and which sought complete dominance of the political process. This model of party still dominates the popular view of what a political party might be like and serves to create wariness about getting involved and about those already involved.

To some extent, radical Liberals have been part of the anti-politics movement. Our community politics started with attacks on the 'political establishment', both the cosy consensus of two-party politics in Westminster, and local establishments in parts of the country where local politics was dominated by one of those parties. We may have imagined radical community groups arising to take power for themselves, though we seldom considered that the places with the strongest community feelings could be those that are most illiberal.

As our dreams have faded to more practical reality, we may still be tempted, in a tight campaign, to lob a few attacks at our electoral opponents that are in reality attacks on the political process. How often when we are in opposition do we find it easy to suggest some difficult decision made by whoever is in power was made through evil intent rather than through good though perhaps mistaken intentions, or made because when considering all factors any alternative was worse? If we are too ready to suggest that everyone else in politics is rotten, should we be surprised that many others suppose all politics is rotten, ours included?

The main beneficiaries of the anti-politics movement have been the big businesses. Their power and influence over our lives is now immense and barely contested. Those who persist in seeing politicians as the foremost power that must be challenged are fighting yesterday's battle. We must defend the democracy of having a ballot – and a Focus – in our hands, against those who suppose having a pound in our hands (when others have a million) is enough.

Matthew Huntbach joined the Liberal Party in 1978 and is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Lewisham

DID WE GET THE 1980s' MESSAGE?

Twenty years on from the miners' strike, Liberal Democrats are still all too ready to reach for statist solutions, says Iain Sharpe

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the miners' strike, which was probably the defining British political event for my generation (I achieved voting age in 1984). In many ways, the defeat of the miners marked the point when it became clear that Thatcherism was not a passing fad but was here to stay.

The miners' strike had a powerful effect on many of my contemporaries – friends who had been hitherto apolitical suddenly took to wearing 'Coal not Dole' badges and attending Billy Bragg miners' benefit concerts. But if it radicalised many, the strike de-radicalised me.

At 17, in so far as I had a political outlook, it was quite left-wing. Both my parents worked in the public sector and were adversely affected by Thatcher's policies. I disliked the Conservatives, because they seemed only concerned with the winners in society. I hated the way that, in Denis Healey's phrase, they seemed to 'glory in slaughter' during the Falklands War. I remember being incredulous and angry when they won the 1983 general election.

The miners' strike was a rude awakening. It showed that the left had an ugly side too. Its contempt for democracy was demonstrated by the refusal to hold a ballot and the violence and intimidation on the picket line. It seemed not so much an industrial dispute as an attempt to overthrow an elected government. And Arthur Scargill's apparent belief that no pit should ever close as long as there was coal in it, no matter how expensive it was to extract, was obviously nonsense. Naively, I expected the Labour leadership to denounce Scargillism and stand up for democracy. The closing of ranks by Kinnock et al. behind an unconstitutional strike seemed a betrayal of all that should make the left different and better.

I started to think that, however repellent and heartless the Conservative government might be, the Scargillite alternative was worse. It seemed obvious that there had to be some limit to public expenditure and that writing a blank cheque for the miners would mean a worse deal for someone else – nurses and teachers, for example.

These reminiscences were triggered by a Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting at the Bournemouth conference in September to celebrate the life Roy Jenkins. Peter Riddell, of the Times, in an otherwise sympathetic speech, was critical of Jenkins' role in the Alliance. He said that, unlike David Owen, Roy Jenkins never really 'got' the 1980s and didn't understand Thatcherism. That's why Owen came across as a major political force and Jenkins appeared as yesterday's man.

The miners' strike was my moment of 'getting' the 1980s. If it didn't quite send me scurrying to the right, it did leave me with uncertain political loyalties. I hated what the Tories stood for but reluctantly agreed that some of their policies – particularly around trade union reform – were necessary. I emotionally identified with the left, but was out of sympathy with the Labour movement.

I was rescued from this political no-man's land by reading Jo Grimond's journalism. Grimond had understood what was happening under Margaret Thatcher. He now argued that the free market was the best engine of wealth creation, but it delivered great inequality. The challenge for Liberals should be to embrace free enterprise with enthusiasm, but to find ways of harnessing it to deliver better outcomes for the poor. For example, he argued that privatisation was not wrong in itself, but that the Conservatives should have provided for greater worker control of the newly privatised industries, not just engage in crude sell-offs.

Grimond gave me hope that there was an alternative to Thatcherism. I was also impressed by David Owen's attempt to move the SDP in the direction of economic realism, combined with a social conscience. I decided to join the Liberal Party, expecting to find a vigorous debate going on among Liberals along the lines suggested by Grimond. Instead, I found that, although Grimond was viewed with great affection, it was of the kind that might be afforded a favourite uncle who had become a bit dotty in old age and was now rather an embarrassment. And many in the Alliance were hostile to what they saw as Owen's crypto-Thatcherism.

Although there was plenty of intellectual activity going on in the Alliance, little of it filtered through to official policy. The 1983 manifesto was famously dismissed by Ralf Dahrendorf as promising 'a better yesterday' – seeking a return to the failed post-war consensus, rather than offering new policies for the 1980s. While I found enough kindred spirits in the Alliance to keep me involved and active, its policies were safe and tame rather than radical or exciting. No doubt this was at least in part why the Alliance project failed.

It was not until Tony Blair won the Labour leadership in 1994 that there was a serious attempt to re-cast centre-left politics in the light of the years of Tory hegemony. Blair had to face up to reality. His party was the main opposition and had lost four elections in a row. The relatively small Conservative parliamentary majority in 1992 masked the clear seven per cent gap between the two parties in share of the popular vote.

And the collapse of the Soviet Union seemed to discredit all socialism – even its western-style democratic form. Under Blair's leadership Labour transformed itself more profoundly than any party has done in British history. It embraced much of the Tory agenda of the 1980s – the free market, financial discipline, support for private enterprise, together with toughness on crime and a fairly traditional approach to education.

With New Labour dominating the political centre, the Liberal Democrats were unsure how to react. Paddy Ashdown complained that Blair had occupied the same position on the political spectrum that he wanted the Liberal Democrats to claim. So what to do? Should we try to outflank Labour on the left, championing higher taxation and public spending? Or continue trying to occupy the narrow ground between Labour and the Conservatives? Or strike out in a different direction altogether?

Although in the last two general elections the Liberal Democrats have won more parliamentary seats than ever before, this has come about more by effective local campaigning than through a distinctive national appeal. The party has not gone through the kind of painful re-appraisal that Labour did in the mid-1990s. And in a sense, why should it? It is socialism not liberalism that has been discredited. But I can't help feeling that there are too many Liberal Democrats who are still unreconciled to the changes of the 1980s and 1990s. While they are not quite unreconstructed Keynsians, if presented with a political problem they would always choose the solution that involved higher public spending, greater state involvement and the least possible role for the private sector.

This is why the Orange Book has generated such a hostile reception. Many Liberal Democrats who should have known better were very quick to dismiss it as 'right wing' without even considering the authors' arguments. I have no doubt that a straw poll of delegates at the recent Liberal Democrat conference would have revealed far more hostility to than support for its publication.

Yet from my perspective, as one who has been involved in fighting Labour locally, much of what Messrs Cable and Laws are saying is perfectly consistent with the way Liberal Democrats have approached power in local authorities.

In Liverpool, the Lib Dems won control of the council by supporting the provision of refuse collection by a private contractor. In Islington the Lib Dem administration has made keeping down council tax levels a top priority. We have taken a similar approach in Watford where I am a councillor. Across the country, Liberal Democrats in local government have championed thrift and efficiency, flexibility in service provision, making streets and neighbourhoods safer – all without apparent embarrassment to the party's activists.

But try taking a similar approach to national policy and such things are considered dangerously right-wing. I recently heard one senior Lib Dem local government figure dismiss the Orange Book as 'that ghastly thing' before outlining a set of policies his local authority was pursuing on anti-social behaviour that made Mark Oaten sound wishy-washy.

Whatever its shortcomings, the Orange Book is at least a serious attempt to update liberalism and equip the Liberal Democrats with practical policies for a changed political landscape. It recognises that simply advocating higher spending and hankering after a mythical post-war golden age would lead the party up a political cul-de-sac. The problem is not that it is right wing, but that it lacks radical fervour. There is a real danger that, at the next election, Labour, Lib Dems and Conservatives alike will be offering essentially the same product with slightly different branding.

To be distinctive, we have to identify liberal causes for the twenty-first century. I don't pretend to be a policy wonk, but let me conclude by suggesting a few ideas.

One thing that should unite liberals is a belief in the accountability of institutions to the people they are supposed to serve. So, if capitalism is here to stay, how about addressing issues around industrial democracy and giving employees a greater voice in the workplace? We have to look at greater democratic control for the numerous quangos set up by both Labour and Conservative governments. And we should see democratic local government as part of the solution not part of the problem in delivering public services. The party should resist the nannyish tendencies of New Labour and remember that the state is there to serve the citizens not to run their lives for them. In our eagerness not to be seen as soft on crime, we must avoid entering a bidding war with Labour and the Conservatives as to who can make the most blood-curdling noises. We must also make sure that we are seen as the most environmentally-aware of the major parties.

Most of all, though, we need to think about what it means to be radical and liberal today. For much of the nineteenth century, radicals favoured lower public spending, because much state expenditure seemed to favour the rich and powerful. In the twentieth century the reverse was true, with the left championing greater state spending, so long as it went on the poor and disadvantaged. Things may now change again. If we are a party of the left, we have to re-think what it means to be left-of-centre. For the Liberal Democrats to succeed and become a party of government, we have to find a radical voice that offers a better tomorrow not a better yesterday.

Iain Sharpe is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford.

RETHINKING THE REGIONS

England's regional divide has changed but remained since the 1970s but, after the vote in the North East, the present Liberal Democrat policy is not enough, says Julian Cummins

In November 2004, proposals for regional government in England came to a shattering halt. The vote against a regional assembly in the North East was four to one. The government's proposals were seen as unnecessary and expensive. The sole beneficiaries were seen to be second-rank politicians maximising their own income. From the perspective of many politicians, the proposals were ill-considered and irrelevant to the issues facing them in the forthcoming general election.

In the immediate aftermath, I had some difficult work to do as vice-chair of Yes4Yorkshire. It evidently ruled out the prospect of a vote in our region. The Tories interpreted the vote as grounds for dismantling regional development agencies and regional assemblies. One Liberal Democrat MP privately suggested that the vote undermined the regional element in current LibDem policy. Perhaps the North East vote required us to return to the classic structures of local and national government.

These reactions were clearly overstated. Whatever the North East decided, we retained important regional structures. The government office, regional development agency and regional assembly could continue to do a good job. After a short-term wobble, confidence returned. In each of the northern regions, there is work to be done on business, housing, transport and a host of other practical issues. We could continue this work without John Prescott's meagre proposals that had so clearly failed to secure public support.

The question now is where we go with regional government. There is a golden picture in the north. Scotland failed to achieve regional government in 1978. The Welsh had voted even more strongly against it than the North West. Both regions came out strongly in favour of regional assemblies 20 years later. Perhaps we would need to begin this process in autumn 2005. Perhaps the north of England could follow their example of moving to a 'yes' vote.

A 'yes' vote in 20 years time! For many people, the idea is absurd. It is hard enough to plan political structures for five years. Thinking about the state of the world in 2025 is a challenging task. As I finished the immediate response to the North East vote, it seemed to me that long-term questions were coming to the surface. A reflection for Liberator 300 connects well with the long-term issues we face in the structure of government for the north.

In 1986, a party organisation published 'Turning the Tide of Decline'. It was subtitled 'an Alliance plan for economic regeneration in Yorkshire & Humberside'. It covered over 20 pages. I wrote it with three colleagues in the party who offered an impressive range of business and management experience. Its leading proposals read as follows: "Establishing an elected regional government is the central political measure in a long-term programme to restore economic, industrial and political power in the region. In the short term, a single powerful development agency is required to focus action to achieve the region's economic regeneration."

We came to write this report because there was a yawning gap between north and south England in the mid 1980s. Our unemployment stood at over 14%, well above 9% in the south east. Our industries were declining, and there was no overall focus to build new and competitive international firms.

If we look at the situation today, some things have changed enormously. Unemployment is well down (though the change in measurement means that the reduction is not as great as the current figures imply). There is much greater state emphasis on schools improving educational attainment. And our 1986 report focused on a proposal that Labour shared and followed 12 years later. The creation of a 'powerful development agency' came into effect in 1998. It is a fine example of shared values that Labour called it a Regional Development Agency.

I have long been interested in the divide between north and south. It has a role in my early connection with Liberator. I was at Cambridge University in 1975. That was the year in which I was asked by Peter Hain to succeed him as editor of Liberator. Just a year later, I was looking for a job in business. The year before I graduated, I secured a trainee management job at Procter & Gamble in Newcastle. A few years later, I worked in marketing at Terry's of York. It was this that made me aware of the enormous divide between north and south.

The companies were good places to work. They both attracted people from all over England. Procter & Gamble recruited a dozen or more bright undergraduates. They formed a selective group of friends. Many lived in one of the few rich areas of Newcastle. There was a massive division in income, training and culture between the graduates and the factory workers. It was as if we had been taken by an overseas investor to a poor country. It was hardly surprising that all our advertising agencies were in London. Our first class train trips to London were a profound element in our culture as gilded young graduates in the north.

I moved soon after to York to work for Terry's and then to Leeds. I created my own business in 1982, a marketing and public relations company. I became a councillor in Leeds soon after, and candidate for Pudsey. At the time, it was a seat with considerable Liberal potential.

My time in Newcastle was short but hugely significant. I learnt something about business, about what makes people tick at work. I learnt overwhelmingly how divided we were as a country. We were divided between social classes in a way that I had never seen as possible in the south. In the north, we were poorer than in the south. We had less management, less prospects and less opportunity.

This perspective led me to the policy belief that initiated the writing of 'Turning the Tide' in 1986. Similar thoughts motivated people in all the political parties and in a number of business circles. John Prescott in the Labour Party originated much of their thinking on regional development. In its different ways, it influenced those in the business community who saw the need for better regional government, and whose enthusiasm led to the creation of RDAs.

The breadth of thinking has been deep and broad. It was evident from 1995 that the Conservatives would not be re-elected. This made the broad outline of Labour thinking significant to those who focused on the future of government. I served at the time as member of the regional Confederation of British Industry. It was one of the places where discussion about regional development productively took place. There was also a parallel development within the Conservatives. John Gummer, at the time a minister, had taken the view that regions needed a more open source of administration. That is why he established the Government Offices in 1994. At first only a handful of ministries took part. Today, every single Whitehall ministry is involved.

The developments in the mid-1990s were thus based on a broad and substantial analysis of the needs of northern England. The analysis crossed political parties, and was deeply rooted. It is why I supported the creation of Yorkshire Forward in 1997. I was delighted to become a board member for the first four years of its business. It is why I became involved with the creation of the Yorkshire and the Humber Regional Assembly, and have chaired its Quality of Life Commission for the last two years. It is why I took the initiative to create Yes4Yorkshire in 1998. It is also why I initiated the creation of the Churches Regional Commission, which has brought together all the Christian churches in the region and formed the basis for deep engagement with other faiths.

So where are we now? Three perspectives seem to me to be possible. The first is to accept that a particular commitment has had its day. The issues that matter to people are health, education and jobs. These are the services that affect their lives. There is minimal interest in the place and level of government. On this perspective the party has to recognise when a policy is out of date. We did this with our earlier commitment to tightly controlled pay levels and closing independent schools.

The second is to stick to the proposal we have had for years. Those who dislike the international freedom of the present world fall into a category like this. The world changes, but their perspectives do not. There was a time that the Liberal Party sounded like this. Labour certainly did so in the face of the business changes of the 1980s. So there is a case to stick to the proposal to maintain councils as they stand and MPs as they stand and add regional government on as well.

The third option is very different. It is to explore deeply what regional government is trying to deliver. It is to ask what it means for core values that matter in terms of human lives. It is to consider quite different solutions that might achieve those results. These solutions might be very different from the ones that I have promoted for more than 20 years. That is a hard challenge. It is the way forward for people who take seriously the persistence of core values and the validity of new thinking.

It is evident that we cannot evade the significance of regions. The European Union uses regions as the primary unit for assessing the different needs of local areas. There is clear evidence that public services work when they are joined up. If they are run for 50m people, the units are simply too big for collaboration to work. Run them for 5m people, the size of Yorkshire and the Humber, and there is a real chance of achieving effective collaboration. This is one of the central benefits of regional government.

It has a number of other benefits. It enables consensus to be built across civil servants and businesses because people recognise the places affected. It makes it possible to establish measures that are realistic and visible, so there is a greater likelihood that benefits will be followed through. And it makes it easier to avoid the unintended consequences of policy innovation. When government action is regionally designed, it is most likely to miss the implications that it needs to avoid.

These are valuable justifications of regional structures. We do need to revisit the electoral structure. Maybe the solution is to fix a maximum price for politicians. We could halve our number of MPs at the time that we create a regional assembly. Maybe be should look in the same way at restructuring local government. A better deal at a fixed price is a fair offer. There needs to be fundamental thinking in the three northern regions. We cannot go back from regional administration. We cannot stay in the interim arrangements we have. So we need to think radically and originally, and that is a key task after the general election.

This brings to a head my reflection on 300 issues of commentary and analysis in the pages of Liberator. We are engaged in conversation together. We share values of freedom and inter-dependence, of mutual respect and instinctive trust. That is why we resist trivial controls in our society, and resist laws that limit people from living as they choose. It is why we value internationalism, and value the learning we have from each other. These are Liberal values, and it is why we celebrate Liberator as a Liberal journal.

There is another outcome. We will continue to work for the northern regions of England. Getting the structure right needs some tough thinking. That is a job we can do together. I enjoyed editing Liberator 25 years ago, and I enjoy reading it now. It is part of what we do together.

Julian Cummins was editor of Liberator 1975/76. He represents the Faith Communities seat on the Yorkshire and Humber Assembly, and is Vice-President of the Yorkshire & Humber Liberal Democrats.

UP FROM THE DRAINS

From the wreckage of 1970, the Liberal Party rebuilt from the grassroots but on the way it lost its willingness to discuss politics, says Alan Sherwell

Tony Greaves commented, in the Lib Dem News that I have just finished reading, that 1964 was considered to be a great success because we returned 9 MPs – it was the first time since 1929 that the number had gone up. 1966 was the second.

The return to six in 1970 was seen, at the time, as a disaster. Particularly since John Pardoe and David Steel only had three figure majorities. In a very real sense it was a disaster but that is an oversimplification. Our parliamentary representation had returned to close to rock bottom but the party had new, young members that it had found hard to recruit in the 50s, and was just beginning to build a local government base.

The disaster of 1970 spawned not only the now legendary 'Community Politics' debate but also an argument between Steel and Pardoe on whether we should fight on a narrow or broad front. As on much else, John Pardoe was basically right, we could never be a serious third force unless we had close to a full slate of candidates and, remarkably, by October 1974 that is essentially what we had.

What was not appreciated then was the crucial difference between fighting on a broad front and standing on a broad front. Although, to be fair, the principle of targeting only works if you have mobile forces and directable finances, and the party had little of either at that time.

I am not a great advocate of claiming to occupy the centre ground – not least because that allows your opponents to define your position (centre of what?) – but it is clear now, even if it wasn't then, that the Conservative Party occupied a deal of what is conventionally defined as the centre.

We thought that Ted Heath was right wing then but now he is on the far left of the current Tory Party. Add to that that, in the public mind, the Liberal Party had no identity and that it could not derive one through policy making, since no one cared what its polices were. It is not surprising that it was difficult to make headway.

Nevertheless, headway was made. It is easy for those who want to develop national policy or a coherent philosophical identity to dismiss work at a local level as drains, wheelie bins and unpaid social work. The reality is that it is what has built the strength, membership and vote base of the party and, without that, the policies are irrelevant and the philosophy a luxury.

We needed luck. Historians argue among themselves as to whether individuals are important in history or whether economics, social trends and geography explain all. It is arguable that individuals had little or no impact on the fall of the Roman Empire but the regeneration of the Liberal Party was another, rather smaller, matter.

Could we have won Sutton and Cheam without both Trevor Jones and the Tories waiting six months to call it? Would we have won Rochdale without the personality of Cyril Smith or the Isle of Ely without Clement Freud? Would we have won Berwick without those earlier wins? And, without all of that, could the relative success of the 1974 elections have been achieved?

Looking back over 30 years, that is the biggest difference. Nearly ten times the number of MPs and vastly more councillors gives us a base from which we can have confidence that we will survive the odd bad year and that luck and outstanding individuals may affect our rate of progress but are no longer necessary to the making of any progress. We can have a targeting strategy because we do now at least have resources to target.

The second dramatic difference is that we are no longer the smaller anti-Tory party, competing with Labour for progressive votes. We are a credible opposition to Labour in the majority of places where they replaced us in the decades after 1910. I do not think that anyone in 1970 would have thought it remotely possible that there would ever be a time when there were no Conservative councillors in Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle and Oxford.

The unpopularity of Labour in the late 1960s resulted in the Conservatives winning control of Hackney and Islington. Their unpopularity in the late seventies was not quite as dramatic but still led to massive Conservative gains at local and parliamentary elections. This time, there is no wild swing to the Tories. They pick up seats by superior organisation and more by their folk voting and Labour staying at home than by any conversion and we pick up as much as them.

Part of this has to be because Labour and Tory have both shifted their ground in a way that was not foreseeable 30 years ago. Socialism and Marxism are largely discredited. While I have some sympathy with the 'they have never been tried' argument, the reality seems to be that governments that are significantly left of centre either lose their idealism or dissolve into economic incompetence. The Labour Party looked as if it was going that way too but Thatcher threw it a lifeline by moving so far to the right that it was possible for Blair to occupy empty ground to the right of centre.

We could not have envisaged then that the Tory party would become so far out on right and politically disunited that many decent right of centre people actually don't want anything to do with it.

These people used to be terrified of Labour. They may not trust Blair as an individual and they may disagree with some (or even many) of his policies but they are no longer scared that Labour will damage their quality of life. Thus, along with their pragmatism and their internal cohesion, the Tories have lost their 'they might let Labour in' argument against us, because these folk are no longer worried about letting in Labour in the first place.

A negative effect of all this is that we have become more 'responsible'. I put that in inverted commas because the reality is that most folk always have been responsible but, nevertheless, the closer one is to power, locally or nationally, the more tempting it is to avoid risks. The change in the press does not help this – when any real debate is characterised as a split then there is an artificial premium on avoiding debate. At least Charles Kennedy, unlike some of his predecessors, is not scared of discussion, but there is a lot less of it than there used to be.

We have not developed mechanisms to cope with that. Liberator alone has been a vehicle for discussion within the party throughout that time. Nothing else has managed to stay around for any vaguely decent period. Indeed, the absence of any significant amount of genuine political discussion is one of the few ways in which our position is materially worse 30 years down the line.

A related factor is the deterioration of our national press. No doubt, 100 years ago, they were absurdly deferential to politicians but now things have swung too far in the other direction. Anybody who has served on a local council knows that the vast majority of people involved in politics are decent folk trying to do the best for their constituents – we may disagree about what that best is or on how to achieve it but we know that few of the opposition are corrupt or in it for their own ends. The press would seem to want us to believe differently and, as a result, a significant proportion of the public think that most politicians are on the make.

This diminution of the status of politicians has made the process of building a liberal society more difficult because it has become more difficult to get people to join and participate in the democratic process. It may have been a fault in 1970 that many local parties were little more than debating societies with the occasional coffee morning and jumble sale. Nowadays, they may be more successful but often they aren't even debating societies – their existence goes little beyond Focus delivery. OK, I want my Focus delivered too but that is not the heart of politics!

While the death of socialism has permitted significant political shifts, it has also left a real vacuum in terms of challenges to capitalism. The green agenda has the power to replace it in that light and so does the rather wider 'social responsibility' agenda which can and should develop a wider liberal agenda, which includes green issues but is not simply about the environment. No political system is stable (or, arguably, democratic) without checks and balances, and we need to develop a new set of these rather more quickly than over the next 34 years.

The other worrying development that is creeping out of the woodwork is fundamentalism. Six hundred years ago it was the Islamic world that was enlightened and at the forefront of science and the Christian world was in the Dark Ages. Now it is fashionable to say that the reverse is true.

That of course is overly simplistic. There are many enlightened Muslim people, even if the bigots get the press, and there are many bigoted (so called) Christians, even if, generally, in this country, they do not get the publicity.

Throughout the life of Liberator, we have been used to thinking of Ian Paisley as a religious nutcase who is the exception to the rule. However, if there was ever any doubt that he is but one example of a serious problem of religious fundamentalism, the recent US elections should have dispelled it. It is deeply ironic that George W Bush campaigned on a platform of taking out some deeply unpleasant Islamic head-bangers and required the votes of some deeply unpleasant Christian head-bangers to do it.

One's hopes for the future must be that the party continues to grow; that we find the right way to counterbalance the power of commerce in general and the multinationals in particular; that we develop a liberal and tolerant international order based on shared values; and that the religious bigots return to the closet where they belong.

Alan Sherwell is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Aylesbury and was chair of the National League of Young Liberals 1979/80.

RESTORING HOPE AND DEMOCRACY

One thing that has not changed since 1970 is the need to reconnect politics with people, says John Smithson

The General Election in 1970 was dreadful for the Liberals. I became (and still am) the only Liberal to lose a deposit in Richmond, Yorkshire, and our number of MPs fell back from 13 to 6 – just where we'd been 11 years previously.

There was dejection but perhaps surprisingly not despondency. At Eastbourne that September, the Assembly passed the now famous community politics motion; Radical Bulletin (now defunct!) was launched and so was Liberator.

Powerful remnants of the old YL Red Guard were still active and determined to steer the party into clearer, more people-orientated paths. They succeeded beyond many people's wildest dreams and inspired many others to become committed. We won five parliamentary by-elections and many more council seats – in much bigger wards due to the 1972 local government reforms – before the February 1974 general election, where we gained over six million votes.

But for the Thorpe Fiasco in 1976, it is quite possible (some would say probable) that by now we could well be, or have been, in government. As now, neither the Tories nor the Labour Party were particularly popular and the electorate was ready to try somebody new. Neither were there at that time any other seriously disruptive elements around to queer our pitch.

The restlessness in the electorate has remained, however, and at no time since then has there been any period where one party dominated the popular vote. Landslide victories for both Tory and Labour have been due solely to our bizarre electoral system.

The cause of this restlessness was probably the awakening realisation that things need not be as they were and that change was possible – and even desirable. Communications, even then, before the computer revolution, were developing rapidly; people had started travelling (even if it was mainly to the Costa del Sol for an 'English' holiday in the sun). Prosperity, despite the amazing period of massive inflation, had increased and local authorities could still raise, relatively speaking, loads of money.

In 1979, Thatcher came along to destroy all that. Her initial success had more to do with Labour's incompetence than her dynamic attraction. And her long reign was always reliant on Labour's continuing ineptitude, much the same as Blair's reign is due to Tory ineffectiveness.

What she did do was destroy all the myths and established norms. She succeeded because people were prepared for it; they wanted more from life but did not seem sure just what that meant. The outcome unleashed a massive wave of selfishness unparalleled in modern times. We are still reaping the dreadful harvest of encouraging man's worst instincts. The stiff upper lip and highly principled Britishness of fair play, cricket and all that was always more spurious than real but it did have meaning, particularly for those millions who had lived through the Second World War. It was fading anyway but Thatcher gleefully killed it virtually stone dead.

We became – and have remained – excessively selfish and uncaring and, in the end, this has lead to even greater dissatisfaction. This corrosive focus on self as an entity jars totally with the concept of community and the foundation of community politics. But even the Liberals fell foul of this epidemic; the eighties ushered in a period where, despite the best efforts of ALC's supremo, Tony Greaves, the name of the game became more focussed on simply winning than on promoting Liberalism.

The early eighties ushered in the Gang of Four, SPD Alliance and all that nonsense. David Steel saw it as the panacea for winning and sacrificed much of the principle and practice of long-standing dedicated Liberals. Despite the electoral successes of the time, it was an extremely bleak period for Liberalism when our very purpose and ideology were under serious threat.

Thankfully, and on reflection not surprisingly, it did not last. Owen, the most worthless and self-seeking of the Gang of Four, disappeared but the aftermath was painful, traumatic and long lasting. The whole merger debate and process, culminating in the infamous merger debate of January 1988, was just the start. Many long-serving and dedicated Liberals could not stand it and just faded away. The Liberal Movement sprang into being and, despite being relatively short lived, was an important medium for holding Liberals and even Liberalism together. I would have feared for my own future if I had not had the chance to say my piece at the merger debate itself and become involved in the Liberal Movement.

Conferences, as they are now called, were sharply different from the old Liberal Assemblies. The main energy and focus of the first few were no more than a battle for the soul of the new party. Gradually, if at times imperceptibly, Liberalism gained the upper hand but it was some time before anybody dare address the gathered masses as "fellow Liberals". The new name of Liberal Democrats has grown strong and there are now many more members who joined the party after the merger than were members of either the Liberals or the SDP.

The whole merger period lasting from 1987 to 1992 was a sad chapter for Liberalism. In 1976, the Thorpe Affair had done inestimable damage.

This was much worse and it is an amazing credit to the durability and pertinacity of a relatively few number of people that the new party emerged as a Liberal party. I feel sure that, had it not done so, it would have quickly disappeared as the ephemerality of social democracy was exposed. Blair and Blairism would in any case have swallowed it up without a murmur.

The last decade or so has seen an even more remarkable turn round in the fortunes of Liberalism. We used to dream of having 50 MPs, believing fervently that, once that halcyon day arrived, we would inevitably, if not automatically, be elevated not just to government but to far-seeing greatness of purpose and achievement. Now we know a bit better; it still requires the hard graft, commitment and determination to move forward.

Nevertheless, we are much better placed and we may be beginning to reap the benefit of the dissatisfaction with the two other main parties. Our struggle, though, is much more than that. The selfishness mentioned earlier has remained and festered. There is increasingly less satisfaction with life in general and politicians in particular. Potentially, we have become ungovernable with a rising belief that taxation is unnecessary, that waste and incompetence is endemic and that politicians cannot be trusted and are in the main just in it for themselves.

The fault for this, I am sure, is politicians themselves. We have all concentrated too much on beating the others and not enough on what we are there to achieve. I became involved in politics simply because I did not like or accept what was on offer. I wanted something better, whatever that meant, for my neighbours, my community and myself. I still do, and at heart I believe so do all of us, whatever our ideology and policies. The trouble is that, unless we are facing the extremes such as the BNP, politicians spend far too much time slagging off each other – both the parties and their personnel – rather than discussing and disseminating policies, let alone our ideological aims and aspirations.

This practice of negative campaigning is in the end self-defeating. It is little wonder that, generally, the inclination to vote is diminishing, that party loyalty is decreasing and that there is the rise of numerous other, usually extreme, parties or groupings. We are not satisfying the basic needs of people; we are not offering real leadership to resolve the big issues, but we do seek to pander to people. For example, can anyone tell me what 'tough Liberalism' actually means?

So what are these big issues? They are not in my view personal wealth (including even the impending pensions crisis) nor the economy nor even the international unrest. They are actually quite simple; people have become detached from government and from each other. They feel isolated, unwanted and unimportant and have lost trust and confidence in the systems and processes that are supposedly there to support them.

Our style and language has evolved to support us in this disconnected approach. We now talk of such high-flown subjects as 'social cohesion', 'stakeholders' and the like. Government has invented things such as 'local public service agreements', 'comprehensive assessment reviews' and 'best value performance indicators'. Local authorities now work through 'executives' or 'cabinets' and even 'backbench' councillors feel largely isolated. There are as well a whole host of local quangos, which neither represent people nor deliver their needs or desires. The whole set-up seems designed to confuse and befuddle everybody in a morass of bureaucracy and unjoined-up government that satisfies nobody (except perhaps some government flunky) and delivers increasingly less.

The prospects of avoiding further descent into this despondency are not optimistic. We have been on this path of self-indulgence for over 20 years now and we do not have leaders who seem remotely aware of the issue, let alone the imagination and commitment to change it. Blair in 1997 had a golden opportunity to change the direction. We as Liberals may not have liked what he might have done, but at least it would have been, in macro terms, a better direction. But he didn't and, in so doing, has demonstrated what a wimp he is and what hopefully will be his fate.

The Tories are not and never will be in this territory; it is alien to their fundamental reason for existing. Other groups that have emerged are even more divisive in encouraging increased selfishness, including racism.

Our only hope is Liberalism and one that is far more strident about the individual and contains much less trimming to perceived whims and fancies of the electorate. The environment is a crucial factor and Norman Baker has ensured we have sound policies to protect and preserve it. Our approach to the Iraqi war was excellent. We were the only mainstream party on the same wavelength as the people.

This is a great start but we must be aware that it is not enough. The other main issue on which we must campaign vigorously and forcefully is the simplification of life by removing all the confusing layers and pockets of authority, starting with recreating democratic local government to oversee all (or at least the great majority) of locally delivered services. We also need to have a resolute belief that society and community are good and necessary things, to promote this concept and to apply it rigorously to all our policies and practices. Only in these ways do I believe we can restore confidence and goodwill.

John Smithson is a Liberal Democrat councillor and deputy leader of Kirklees Metropolitan Council in West Yorkshire

DOES NOTHING EVER CHANGE?

The surfeit of international crises makes radical liberalism as relevant today as it was in 1970, says Simon Hebditch

Whilst contemplating writing this article, my mind wandered back to my childhood. I remember walking with my father (a regular Sunday afternoon occurrence) and complaining that there wouldn't be any exciting events to cope with in the future. When I grew up, the world was bound to be more boring and, therefore, unchallenging.

To me, the events in Suez or the Russian invasion of Hungary were unlikely to be matched in future! How wrong can one be? I got involved in Young Liberal activism in 1967, which, for those who don't go back that far, was the summer of hippie love – a time of protest and rebellion – which led on to the student movements of 1968/69. The world was in turmoil then. The Vietnam War was a focus of political protest, as was the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia.

The Young Liberals were the recognised radical youth movement of the day. Labour Party Young Socialists were virtually non-existent and the deeply divisive sectarianism of

Tony Greaves and the late David Penhaligon MP pictured at Liberal assembly

the left had not yet become a major phenomenon. Liberator itself was born out of this crucible of political activism. Internally, much effort was expended in trying to radicalise the respectable centre of the old Liberal Party and the tensions between different wings of the party were palpable.

In fact, Peter Hain was a leading Young Liberal activist on a range of issues, not just the campaign to stop the South African cricket tour of 1970. As my father would have said, we all get more conservative as we get older! But it is somewhat galling to compare the positions he took on

Peter Hain, Liberator editor 1973/75, addresses the Liberal Assembly while something else absorbs leader Jeremy Thorpe's interest. Hain joined Labour in 1977.

political controversies of the 1970s with his current stance on Iraq.

The end of the 1980s witnessed major revolutions in the old Warsaw Pact and a march towards more democratic norms by many of the old Soviet Union puppet states. Now we are faced internationally by the untrammelled growth of American hegemony and the increasing need to intervene on a global scale to try to avoid or mitigate man-made disasters.

I have to admit that I am still committed to the politics of realignment. I still believe that the realignment of the left (a definition which I still accept) is one of the fundamental requirements if we are to see real progress towards social justice in the UK and internationally. I hold up my hands. I was brought up on the political tracts of the American new left – the SDA in particular – which produced the seminal Port Huron Statement setting out the values that would be inherent in a libertarian society imbued with the principles of social justice.

I still believe that there is a radical wing of the Liberal Democrats, which has more in common with the libertarian left of Labour. The latter has been castrated by the march of New Labour, which has simply offered us a centrist agenda that is all about acting on the lowest common denominator rather than trying to find the highest common factor!

There are also nascent non-party political movements, which contain activists who could work together to try and influence the political agenda of the mainstream.

But what is altogether lacking is a common political voice and a philosophy and ideology that unites the democratic left rather than divides it. I do not mean that we should spend months trying to hammer out a vision and mission which ends up being all about motherhood (not that I have anything against mothers!) and is not concrete or tangible enough to make a difference.

In the Liberal Democrats, we do need a revival of radical thinking, a coherent ideology, a precise programme of aims and objectives that will transform the world and not just fiddle at the edges. The party has the best chance for decades of having a lasting impact on the electorate but we should not be coy about our political positions. Take the European Union as an example. Of course, there are things wrong with the institutions at the moment. But we will not gain anything by simply joining in the sceptical questioning that you can guarantee will dominate the Conservative referendum campaign and the ambiguity that will emanate from the government.

John Commons (left), now a Manchester councillor, Becky Bryan and unidentified Young Liberal, demonstrate in favour of legalising cannabis at the YL conference in Weston-super-Mare in 1977.

Gordon Lishman, Liberator editor 1972/73 speaks at Liberal Assembly.

The Young Liberal banner prepared for a demo against some forgotten iniquity of the early 1980s, From left: John Ozimek, unknown in rear view, Catherine Furlong, John Leston, Jane Merritt, Sue Younger-Ross.

Liberal Democrats must unequivocally back the principles ands values of the European project – the desire to forge ever closer political and economic ties that might well lead, dare I say it, to an eventual United States of Europe.

On Iraq, the party has taken a principled and progressive position. There was little justification for direct military invasion, especially without the direct authority of the United Nations, and the ensuing carnage simply illustrates the problem that you cannot act unilaterally and then expect everyone to back you thereafter in the difficult task of reconstruction.

But the events in Iraq are not an argument against intervention in principle. The international community has an obligation to intervene when genocide is being committed. The old idea that you didn't interfere in the internal activities of sovereign, independent states cannot no longer be sustained. Universal human rights must stand above the interests of individual governments. Ten years ago we should have intervened in Rwanda. Today, we should be taking action in Sudan.

The United Nations is the only institution that can exercise the authority of the international community to take such dramatic steps. The UN therefore must be enabled to act quickly where necessary, and a reformed Security Council must have the courage to act on behalf of the peoples of the world, not their sovereign governments.

In this article, I have concentrated on the international field. I believe that the Liberal Democrats must take the lead in working with like-minded people and parties internationally to build a responsive and inclusive democratic community. To my mind, such initiatives reflect the political positions of the radical left in this country. The challenge is to push forward the agenda of the party while genuinely trying to build a wider consensus amongst the libertarian left. Let's not assume that such a political constituency does not exist. It is out there and waiting to be mobilised.

Simon Hebditch was one of the founding editors of Liberator in 1970.

Young Liberals at a demonstration in Manchester in the early 1980s. Banner held by David Senior (left) and Ralph Bancroft (right)

THE POWER OF INCUMBENCY

Australia's ruling party might be called 'Liberal', but the country's general election left real liberals there facing a bleak future, says Steve Yolland

Australia is not a happy hunting ground for liberals of the 'small l' variety at the moment.

The recent federal election saw the return of the right-wing Howard government (for an astonishing fourth term), with the social democrat Australian Labor Party recording its lowest primary vote for 70 years. Howard leads a Liberal-National Party coalition, of course, but the Australian Liberals are vastly different from their British namesakes, pursuing a quasi-Thatcherite agenda with great enthusiasm.

A predicted surge in support for the Greens didn't really materialise, and the Australian Democrats, for a long time the party in Australia that British Liberals have identified most easily with, were decimated, losing all their senators who were up for re-election, and reduced to four seats in the upper chamber, one seat below that required for official 'party status'.

This is potentially disastrous for the Democrats, who (unless the Howard Government is uncharacteristically generous) will almost certainly lose key staff and funds as a result.

At the same time, their abysmal showing in the election means that they will receive virtually no funding from the government under the scheme where anyone receiving more than 4% of the vote gets a hand out for every vote cast. Traditionally, this money has effectively propped up the minority party's activities.

Within a short space of time, the party's leader fell on his sword and was replaced by Senator Lyn Allison, a very determined and capable senator, but one without a high national profile, and with a relatively quiet manner.

The future will be hard work indeed for the party that has held the balance of power in Australia for much of the last 25 years. So what went wrong?

The first thing to be said is that the re-election of the Howard Government is testament to two enduring features of Australian politics.

Firstly, Australian voters are traditionally very loath to toss governments out of office, as demonstrated by the longevity of both the Menzies-era Liberal governments, and the Hawke/Keating era for Labor.

Even when governments are sitting on small majorities they tend to survive, unless they are very near the end of a long electoral cycle, or regarded as incompetent as economic managers (as was the case with the glorious but swiftly rejected Whitlam Government of the early 1970s, which was notoriously 'dismissed' by the governor-general).

This stability is generally considered to be a result of Australians' famously laconic attitude to life, where "she'll be right, mate" (which also translates effectively into the immortal Australian response to any query, "no worries") is both a boon and a curse for this exceptionally stable and peaceful society.

And, of course, the Australian economy is still enjoying a period of sustained economic growth, ironically, largely as a result of the long-term settings put in place by the former reformist Labor government.

Put simply, the sun is shining, food and wine is cheap (and very good), the streets are clean and safe, and millions of Australians (who have always enjoyed a high level of home ownership by world standards) are suddenly finding themselves sitting on capital gains that have turned many of them, from blue collar workers upwards, into paper millionaires.

Secondly, Australians are currently suffering from the same level of innate insecurity with which much of the western world is afflicted, as a result of the upsurge in terrorist activities.

The dramatic effect on the public consciousness of the Bali bombings can hardly be under-estimated.

Suddenly, Australia seems just as vulnerable as any country in the world to those who are ruthless or lunatic enough to exact such a terrible price for their beliefs, and this has been a huge shock for many, as Australians contemplate their vast and difficult-to-police ocean border, and the relaxed, laissez-faire mood of the country, which was always such an attraction, but which now seems to be something of a liability during a period of heightened tension.

So, just as was seen recently with the re-election of George W Bush, Australians appear to be simultaneously capable of holding a robust (and at times agonised) debate over the legality, morality, and prosecution of the Iraqi and Afghani conflicts, while supporting, or at least acquiescing to, the uncompromising "all the way with GWB" stance taken by their leaders.

This same somewhat confused response can be seen in the treatment of asylum seekers, where many Australians are deeply concerned over the country's use of mandatory detention (especially for women and children) and yet seem unwilling seriously to consider alternatives.

But other factors were also at play. The Labor Party failed to convince the electorate that it had either the economic smarts, or the talent base, to offer a viable alternative to Howard.

And, since the election, the party has duly descended into a bleak and grumpy contemplation of its own navel, with the result that its poll ratings have slipped even lower.

It wasn't that the ALP didn't have ideas – in fact, some have argued that they actually had too many, and leapfrogged an uncertain electorate's ability to comprehend what they were saying – but where it undoubtedly singularly failed was in communicating its ability to put those ideas into practice.

The ALP campaign was lacklustre, over-complicated, over-earnest, and relied too heavily on trying to construct a coalition of interested single-issue groups. Just like the criticisms that many have levelled at the Kerry campaign, in fact.

In short, both here and across the Pacific, it looks like the left was out-campaigned by governments that have become highly sophisticated in their presentation, especially when crafting negative messages. Above all, the government in Australia correctly calculated that the ALP could not do anything else but seek to present itself as offering vigorous policy innovations, but that this very stance must also increase voter concerns about its 'untried and untested' qualities.

With the impending demise of the Democrats, many of the left held high hopes for the Greens, not only because of their impeccable environmental credentials, but also because of their exceptionally principled and capable national leadership, who have frequently taken the fight up to the government more powerfully than a tame and confused official opposition.

But the Greens were undone by a radical drugs policy which was ripped to shreds by the Murdoch press, conservative politicians and 'shock-jocks' alike (rather unfairly, if you stopped to read the detail of the policy, which of course no-one did), stripping them of vital votes at the last minute.

In retrospect, it was a classic error of judgement, but one that the Greens will also find difficult to avoid in the future, with their tediously and exhaustively inclusive party management process, mitigating against even sensible levels of centralised policy control and projection.

Last but by no means least, the recent election has seen a wider emergence in Australia of the kind of 'family friendly' (so long as your family isn't gay, of course) ultra-conservative evangelical Christian activists who have long pottered around the edges of Australian politics, but who have now entered the mainstream by standing a variety of candidates.

Despite some early successes, it is too early to say if they are likely to be an enduring part of the landscape, but they certainly delivered preferences away from Labor, the Greens and the Democrats to the government, and while Liberal-National strategists may be nervous of grasping this particular tiger by the tail, they certainly won't look a gift-horse in the mouth either.

In short, there are slim pickings for radicals in the land of the long white lunchtime at the moment. Incumbency really does look to be a very powerful position, even for governments that electors in their heart-of-hearts are less than enthusiastic about, which has obvious implications for the UK, too. It won't be ever thus, but it's hard to see why it will change much in the short term.

"Cold tinnie, anyone? And do you want sauce with that sausage?"

Steve Yolland was a Liberal activist in Southampton and since moving to Australia has worked informally with the Democrats.

CHANGING WORLDS

Liberal Democrats are in politics to let people change their worlds, not to change the world, says Simon Goldie

Right now, everyone is saying power needs to be handed down to people. The Tories want to roll back the state and make "the individual big and the state small." While this might sound like a Tory commitment to obesity, apparently it is more about decentralising power via the market. Labour has embraced what it has lovingly called, New Localism. Once again, it is turning the English language into something unwieldy, embracing a concept that has been argued for by liberals for decades, claiming it for your own by putting 'new' in front of the word and then lecturing others on how power should be given away.

Decentralisation is part of Liberal Democrat political culture. We have spent a long time developing polices to implement it and that means we are far more likely to be to make decentralisation and 'bottom-up' politics work. The problem is we are not looking that distinctive because the other two are campaigning on our ground. Of course, in the spirit of non-party political generosity, we should welcome this. But in reality we need to find another way of explaining to the voters that what we are suggesting is different, meaningful and would actually have an impact.

In this age of channel hopping, sound-bites and constant need for change, we need to dust off the way we talk to the voters and find a better way to tell them about what we would do in government. When we talk about decentralisation, the enabling state and 'bottom-up' politics, it comes across as a bit old fashioned. After all, words that are over-used lose their meaning.

I know I am setting myself up for a fall by suggesting another way of describing giving power away but, if I didn't suggest it, then it would make this article pointless. The point is I want to get people thinking. If they like the ideas then they should use them. If they don't, maybe they will be inspired to come up with something else.

In an argument with a Labour Party supporter who just couldn't understand what liberalism is all about and why I was involved in politics, I was told: "Surely you went into politics to change the world?" I was confused by that question. I had to think about it. I knew the assumption was wrong but I couldn't formulate a response. Then it struck me. I am in politics so that people have the opportunity to change their own worlds.

Sure, I want to change mine. Sure, I want a society that cares for the underdog. Sure, I want a fair society. I wouldn't be in the Liberal Democrats if it wasn't a party that had a conscience and wanted reform. But, above all, I have always believed people should have as much control over their lives as possible. Sometimes the market can do that, other times it is social co-operation or a bit of government legislation. Whatever it takes, that is the outcome I am after.

And, of course, people have to be free not to want to take responsibility, however tough that is to accept. Accepting failure is perhaps the biggest hurdle for society. Everything is about success and reaching utopia. Society needs to take a mature attitude about realising that things don't always work. That way, we all learn from our mistakes and maybe get something right.

And this is another big thing about liberalism. There is no prescriptive utopia. We don't have solutions in the way that the other lot does. As individuals or in our community, we might have but, as a government, we want individuals and communities to find the right solutions for them. Of course we have a view and lots of polices, perhaps too many policies, on setting up the right ways to do this and making sure people don't fall through the safety net to poverty and despair. But, in the end, we know we are not taking people to a promised land of PR milk and local income tax honey. The legislation a Liberal Democrat government would pass is all about giving people the opportunity to change their own world. Who knows what will happen after that?

Simon Goldie is membership and communications secretary of the Islington Liberal Democrats.

LETTERS

WORKING WITH WHAT WE HAVE

Dear Liberator,

You are right to draw attention to the declining number of conference representatives taking part in debates and votes (Liberator 299). But to blame it all on the party's policy-making process is simplistic twaddle.

The article mentions the education debate, on which only 250 representatives voted. Although the motion was submitted by the Federal Policy Committee, it was not based on one of the policy papers that Liberator has criticised so much in recent months, and was not produced by a policy working group which had 'fixed everything in advance'. It was a stand-alone motion, of the sort that I thought Liberator wanted us to have more of.

Secondly, the article implicitly accuses the Conference Committee of filling the agenda with uncontentious motions in order to avoid controversy. While it's certainly true to say that we tend not to table deeply controversial motions at conferences just before general elections, this is not general behaviour by FCC - I don't remember Liberator complaining about the Southport conference agenda. More to the point, we didn't turn down any controversial motions for Bournemouth - the fact is, no one submitted any.

Liberator is doing the party a service by drawing attention to the flaws in our current policy and conference procedures, and I hope it will continue to discuss possible reforms.

But to blame everything on the FPC's policy paper process is simply lazy thinking, hitting out at an easy target without addressing what I think may be a rather deeper problem.

Duncan Brack - Federal Conference Committee Chair

SEX CHANGE

Dear Liberator,

Following my review in Liberator 299 of 'The No-nonsense guide to Islam' by Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, Laurence Fullick has kindly corrected my misapprehension over Ziauddin Sardar, to whom I apologise for mistaking his sex. I hope no offence was taken.

I arrived at my conclusion by assuming that the women on the cover were the authors and by previous Zia's of my acquaintance being of that sex… never make assumptions with less familiar names - even if they seem familiar.

Stewart Rayment
Tower Hamlets

MEMBERS FOR THE FUTURE

Dear Liberator,

Following the Leicester South by-election, a number of media outlets carried a story originating from Lord Rennard suggesting that we, the Liberal Democrats, could be the next party of power. The concept being that, when Labour finally loses power, in perhaps a decade or so, we will be the party that replaces them in Downing Street. With our continued success at Labour's expense and the Tories in disarray, this seems a realistic possibility.

The opportunity is simple. We have never had such a set of circumstances. Since 1945, British politics has been a classic two party system. As the government has become unpopular, the opposition has taken advantage. Now, without most political commentators noticing, we have a three party system. There are now many areas where Labour and the Tories have no organisation or electoral chance. While the Tories are all but deceased in cities such as Liverpool and Newcastle, Labour has nothing to gain in seats like Newbury or Winchester.

The best bit about this good news is we know what to do - Focus for England! We have Liberal Democrats all over the country learning and acquiring the skills needed to win seats over the next decade we never dreamed of holding. New members are joining and new activists coming forward all the time.

When New Labour was born, it set about recruiting a huge number of new members, and it was very successful.

But its techniques were simplistic. I have heard tales of people being stopped in the street and asked if they wanted the Tories out of office. When they received the obvious answer the response was to ask for a donation, which somewhat predictably became the membership subscription. Now, as Labour becomes more and more rudderless and unpopular, its membership is plummeting, and indications are that, just as Margaret Thatcher ripped the heart out of the Conservatives, Blair is doing the same to Labour.

Many of our MPs and PPCs are long standing party members who have been through the hard times and understand the opportunity we have before us. However, there are also a number of newer members who are being fast tracked and we must ensure that these people, many who have many talents, are true to what we stand for.

Cllr Colin Eldridge
Liverpool

SPIN DOCTOR

Dear Liberator,

Lord Bonkers condemns Phil Tufnell for being on some reality TV show (Liberator 296) on the grounds that "orthodox left-arm spinners from earlier generations" wouldn't have done it, and then cites Derek Underwood as an example.

Hmph. If Underwood was an example of orthodoxy, then the Margate resolution on community politics simply reaffirmed the efficacy of time-honoured practice.

Whilst m'Lord's cricketing analogies often illuminate his abstruse technical discussions of contemporary politics, I fear this one can only have confused.

Mike Holmans
Westminster

REVIEWS

What if America: Eminent Historians Imagine what might have been
Edited by Robert Cowley
Macmillan 2004 £18.99

Another compilation of counterfactual essays by historians, edited by Robert Cowley, who has previously tackled major military watersheds and political events. This time, the essays deal with events in American history, starting with speculation from Caleb Carr about the consequences of the Pilgrim Fathers not sailing or landing further south. The initial essays largely argue how events could have been different, including an account of how the American War of Independence could have been avoided and another essay suggesting the outcome was close run. Later essays tend to be written in the format of an account of events having taken a different course from an alternative future as in Robert L O' Connell's 'The Cuban Missile Crisis: Second Holocaust' and John Lukacs's 'No Pearl Harbour: FDR Delays the War'.

Some take the approach of the Butterfly theory, with the individual playing an important role in the course of history such as Tom Wicker's 'His Accidency John Tyler', the title of which lead to my reaction, John who? until I read the essay, which demonstrates how the first person to succeed to the presidency through the death of the incumbent annexed Texas as a slave state, thus avoiding the need for a two-thirds majority in both houses and resulting in a chain of events that resulted in civil war. Jay Winks's 'Beyond the wildest dreams of John Wilkes Booth' follows the butterfly theory by suggesting the consequences of the plotters assassinating the Vice President and Secretary of State as well. Others follow the ripple theory, as in John Lukacs's essay on the consequences of negotiations in 1941 buying peace with Japan but merely delaying the outbreak of war, while Britain and the Soviet Union fight on against Nazi Germany with American aid. However, chance plays a major role in both essays with the inference that a considerable number of wars could have been avoided by a slightly different run of events. Curiously, although the American War of Independence and Civil War are included, no one deals with the Anglo-American war of 1812-14.

One essay by Victor Davis Hanson covers the consequences of communications blunders in the American Civil War, which resulted in Lew Wallace writing the blockbuster Ben Hur instead of becoming a military hero and having a major political career. Two essays cover largely forgotten aspects of American history. Thomas Fleming's 'Northwest Conspiracy' shows how close certain western states were to their own succession from the Union in the civil war, following the strong arm tactics used by Republicans against Copperhead Democrats with Confederate sympathies, but concludes that it was as well Lincoln triumphed. Cecelia Holland shows how a wave of industrial unrest in 1877 nearly resulted in another type of civil war, which was fortunately averted by President Rutherford Hayes making the distinction between strikers with industrial demands and rioting. I am not clear what Ted Morgan is trying to prove in 'Joe McCarthy's secret life' unless it is intended as satire.

Overall, the essays are thought provoking, largely plausible and easy to read, possibly because several of the essayist are writers of fiction. They are certainly a lot easier to read than Newt Gingrich's latest novel 'Gettysburg' in which the Confederacy wins, which contains an extremely detailed account of military manoeuvres that only military history anoraks would enjoy. James Macpherson's 'If the lost order hadn't been lost: Robert E Lee Humbles the Union' deals with a similar theme in 14 pages.

Andrew Hudson

AIDS in Africa: How Did It Ever Happen?
by Frank Ham
Kachere 2004 £11.95

Tim Pascall, alias Frank Ham, is an Amsterdam-based Liberal Democrat who has for several years carried on a one-man crusade to bring the problem of AIDS in Africa to the attention of the party, the European Union and the wider world.

It is largely through his pressure that the issue has been much debated at LibDem Conferences. But the party receives its share of criticism from him – along with the EU, the United Nations and African governments – for not taking sufficient action to help bring the catastrophe under control.

The reproach is contained within a book-length polemic that strongly reflects two strands in Tim's own background: as a gay man who was diagnosed as HIV positive 20 years ago, and as a former trainee Catholic priest, who had intended to devote himself to missionary work. As part of his concern for educating public opinion about AIDS in Africa, he has made several visits to Malawi, where he launched this book in August.

Though AIDS has often been associated with homosexuality in the West (for a while it was popularly known as the 'gay plague'), in Africa most cases are transmitted through unprotected sex between men and women; husbands often pass the virus on to their wives after a little extra-marital dalliance. The death toll runs into millions, with a whole generation of young adults at risk.

Because of poverty and a lack of sufficient government and international funding, the sort of effective drugs now routinely available to Europeans or North Americans are usually lacking in Africa, leading to almost certain death. But Tim argues that prevention is an even more urgent priority than treatment, which means that teenagers need to be targeted – with condoms, sex education and even the notion that abstinence can be cool.

He does not claim to be a specialist, but he has done considerable research, and there are plenty of alarming statistics. But above all, this is an angry book, which will leave many who read it feeling uncomfortable.

Jonathan Fryer

This book is obtainable from orders@africanbookscollective.com tel. 01865-726686.

Rebel City, Larkin, Connolly and the Dublin Labour Movement by John Newsinger Merlin 2004 £14.95

Histories of the Labour Movement have an enthusiastic charm about them; they race along like the best of thrillers and, even when they end in a crushing defeat, there is still somewhere a new dawn on the horizon.

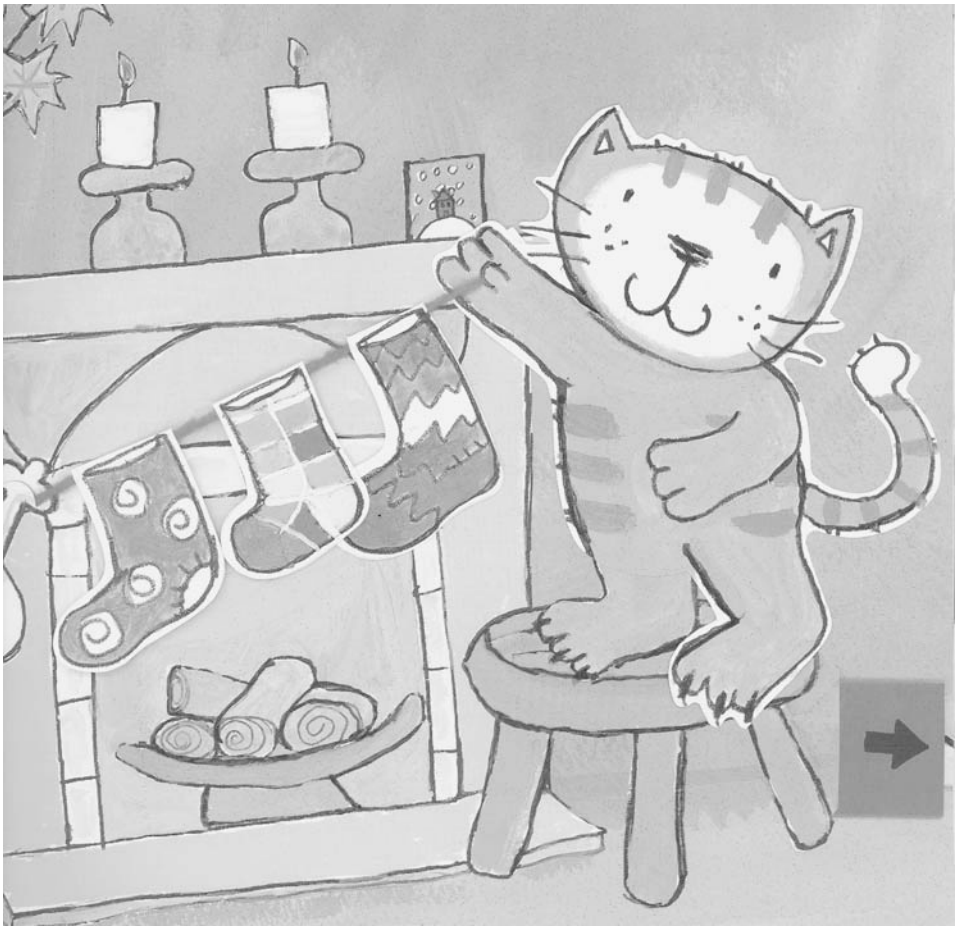
John Newsinger, a British Marxist academic, provides us with two stories here, the story of Jim Larkin and the Dublin lockout of 1913, and of James Connolly and the Easter Rising.

Through these, we get a picture of some of the weaknesses that still pervade Irish politics, notably the absence of a strong trades union movement. Apart from Larkin and Connolly, the main protagonist in this is William Martin Murphy, maverick Healyite Home Rule MP, entrepreneur and slum landlord.

Newsinger begins with a picture of the slums of Dublin at the beginning of the twentieth century, which he portrays as some of the bleakest in Europe. Dublin's particular problem is the absence of a strong manufacturing base, with the associated problems of the casualisation of labour.

Larkin's first achievement was combining both Protestant and Catholic workers in the Belfast dock strike of 1907. The outcome of the strike was invariably a compromise, wherein Larkin saw paid trades union organisers of a different hue to himself selling out the workers. The duplicity of the like, together with the Trades Union Congress and British Labour Party, recurs throughout the book (nothing new there). Moving on to Dublin, Larkin proposed a general unionism and formed the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. James Connolly's arrival from America in 1910 brought stronger socialist syndicalist thinking into the movement. At this point in his career, Connolly was rejecting Fenianism, rightly recognising the need for revolution to be grounded in a community for it to succeed.

The Dublin Lockout of 1913/14 was an attempt to crush the growing militancy of the ITGWU. It was a violent affair on both sides, with troops deployed against locked-out workers. It received considerable financial support



from Britain but, when secondary actions spread, the TUC panicked and voted against sympathetic action.

Murphy was certainly one of the few Dublin entrepreneurs who had the resources to challenge the ITGWU. At odds with the leadership of the Irish Party, he had at his disposal Ireland's first mass newspaper. Espousing his own brand of nationalism, he saw the flaws in the 1914 Home Rule Bill, paradoxically along very similar lines to the objections of Connolly and Larkin (that financial control remained in London). He was able to draw the middle class republicanism and the Catholic Church into the fray against the ITGWU.

One of the paradoxes is that Larkin and his colleagues didn't see the shortcomings of the Catholic Church. Without adequate support from the TUC, the ITGWU was defeated, Larkin went to America, but Irish syndicalism continued to be a force for much of the next decade.

The First World War broke out and Irish nationalists divided on how to respond to it. Connolly set off on the road to the Easter Rising. Newsinger is clear that he should have known better. In the absence of a rejection of an imperialist war by the working classes, Connolly took a pro-German stance, which moved him into league with those romantic nationalists who sought an uprising back by a German invasion of Ireland. With British naval supremacy, this was fantasy of course. As we all know. Connolly was executed after the Easter Rising.

Connolly's potential contribution was very much lost in this aftermath. The leadership of the Irish trades unions fell to men of a more social

democratic bent, who choose not to challenge the then middle class Catholic republicanism of Sinn Féin and, despite the importance of industrial action in the final independence struggle, organised labour was a place at the negotiating table. The Free State was to prove possibly more hostile to trades unions than the British before them.

Larkin was elected to the Dáil as a Communist, though not allowed to take his seat. Newsinger's book travels that road and is a good read.

Stewart Rayment

Nice cup of tea and a sit down by Nicey and Wifey Time Warner £9.99

Fascinating Aida urged us to sew on a sequin when life got you down. I often find, like most of us I suspect, that I don't have a sequin to hand, so instead I log on to www.nicecupofteaandasitdown.com.

For those of you who still lack the latest in information technology, the people behind the website, Nicey & Wifey, aka Stuart and Jenny Payne, have produced a handy (large) pocket size book that you can dip into when you're feeling low.

But it's not just about tea, oh no. The authors describe it as 'a book about having a sit down, a biscuit and a nice cup of tea'; precisely the sort of thing that put the 'Great' in Great Britain.

The first section, A Nice Cup of Tea, tackles the burning issues of tea bags, teapots, work tea making and mugs.

The second section, naturally enough, looks at biscuits. This book isn't afraid to tackle the 'big issues' in the world of biscuits. The authors look at the class struggle of biscuits: entry-level biscuits, mid-range biscuits and luxury. This section also has a very useful Venn Diagram, which shows biscuits at the centre of the diagram and their relationship to bread, crackers, chocolate bars and cake.

Biscuits are covered in quite some depth: plain biscuits; digestives; shortcake; gingernuts; oats; sandwich; jam; marshmallow sort of things (again tackling another 'big issue' – has the Wagon Wheel got smaller?); fruity; icing (I was very pleased to see mention of Iced Gems); wafers; chocolate covered and foreign, e.g. Tim Tams. Tim Tams also get a mention in the section on Dunking.

There then follows a much shorter section on cakes. Again, the authors are not afraid to tackle thorny issues, such as 'Are Jaffa Cakes biscuits or cakes?'

The authors are unequivocal: they are clearly cakes, otherwise they would be called Jaffa Biscuits, wouldn't they? Apparently, it's a VAT thing – cakes aren't taxed, biscuits are, so the government has a vested interested in keeping the controversy going.

Finally, the book looks at the 'sitting down' aspect of having a nice cup of tea. An aspect that the authors consider has not been given attention.

If you're looking for a stocking filler for the tea lover in your life, then this book fits the bill. If you're a tea and biscuit lover yourself, make sure the people who love you know that it's on your list.

Catherine Furlong

Paris by Bistro, a guide to eating well by Christine & Dennis Graf Arris 2004 £9.99

Lunch in Paris, for those of us in the south east at least, is a very pleasant option, the only problem being where to dine when you get there amid a wealth of choice. 'Paris by Bistro' helps solve that problem. The Grafs have a flair for sniffing out the aspirant young chefs out to make names for themselves. For many years, they have escaped Iowa as soon as the summer vacation cut in, and fled to a garret across the road from the Marais (the now fashionable third arrondissement). From there, they have built up a network, some French, some expatriate Americans, who will point them in the right directions.

I'd anticipated a new edition of Christine Graf's 'Cafés of Paris' when first receiving this book. What is the difference between a bistro and a café à Paris after all? In the UK, we know what a caff is, and are slightly perturbed about what a bistro pretends to be.

Whatever its past, a bistro is now "thought of as a small, individually owned restaurant, often run by a family and patronized by regulars."

A brasserie, of which there are many in this book, is "larger, noisier and less formal" and many still bear the hallmark of Alsatian refugees after the

Franco-Prussian war. What follows from this is that some bistros will be visited for their sense of place, their interior décor - Brasserie Lipp, to state the obvious; others for their food.

The 'Cafés of Paris' was a serviceable enough book; it went to two editions in the States but was murdered here by uninspired presentation - one asks, did Constable seriously want to sell it? New publisher Arris answers this question affirmatively - a snappy, modern production, spiced by Dennis Graf's underarm camera. In 'Cafés', the American bias was unmistakeable and possibly not a strong buying point in the UK. In 'Bistro', this has largely been overcome, though some of the references to some minor literati will be obscure.

What is much more successful is the way in which the spirit of an area has been caught; the relationship of a bistro to a particular site, and so on. For example, Altitude 95 within the Eiffel Tower; I may even be tempted to visit it next time I'm in Paris. A few more years' research and the relationship between Maigret and his bistros is much clearer - now there's an excuse for a long weekend's dining in Paris.

I asked the Grafs for their hot tip to dine in Paris. It is L'Ardoise (28 rue du Mont Thabor; Métro: Tuileries) - a small establishment run by Pierre Jay, formerly of La Tour d'Argent of whose qualities I can vouch. The chap reading over my shoulder on the tube concurred with their view of La Fontaine de Mars (129 rue St-Dominique; Métro: École Militaire), though he thought the service a bit slow; but who's in a hurry in these places? I share their views on Aux Charpentiers (10 rue Mabillon; Métro: Odéon) and apparently so do George and Barbara Bush (perhaps the only thing the Grafs and myself share with the Bushes).

Stewart Rayment

Screened Out by Jean Baudrillard Verso 2002 £14.00

I was lucky enough to pass through university before the bunch of French philosophers, of whom Baudrillard is as good an example as any, came into vogue. 'Screened Out' is journalism rather than philosophy per se and, as such, screams out at you rather than makes reasoned arguments.

Consider the chapter 'We are all Transsexuals Now'. Are we? I suppose if one were to reflect on narrow areas of fashion and culture alone, one might be tempted to form that conclusion. Presumably written about the time of her election, Baudrillard picks on our fraternal Italian MP, Ilona Staller - La Cicciolina, as an example. For those unfamiliar with her work as an actress, Baudrillard describes her as a 'porn-star'. He goes on to say, "if La Cicciolina can be elected to the Italian parliament now, that is precisely because the transsexual and the transpolitical meet in the same ironic indifference... attests to the fact that it is not just sexual culture, but the whole of the political culture that has gone over to transvestism." You will understand why one wrestles with such texts.

I think Staller's election was a result of the Italian Radicals including her near the top of their list in the PR elections then running in that country. In this, they certainly sought to affront the hypocrisy of the Italian establishment, not least the Catholic Church, and rightly so. But they also recognised Ms Staller's other talents - she has been a very good MP, especially on environmental and personal liberties matters, which secured her re-election.

Stewart Rayment

Poppy Cat's Christmas by Lara Jones Campbell Books 2004 £14.99

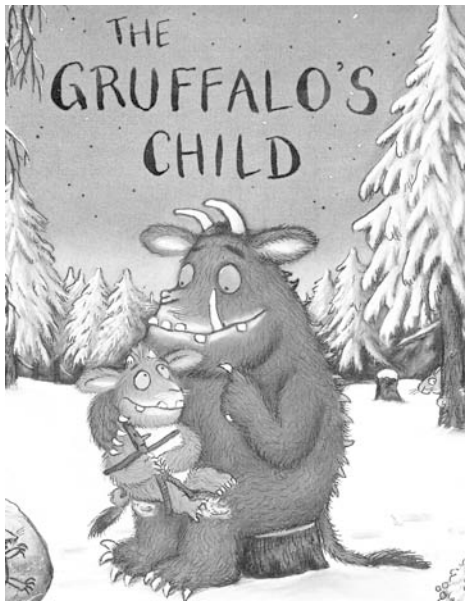
An ideal introduction to the less spiritual side of Christmas, Poppy Cat is aimed at the youngest readers. Being a pop-up book (plus), this probably cuts in around three years. That said, the Christmas Tree (which plays Silent Night - so sing along) aside, it should be pretty durable - there's not too much fancy paperwork to grab hold of. Jo Lodge, who designed that side of the book, clearly knows what she's doing.

Stewart Rayment

The Gruffalo's Child by Julia Donaldson, illustrated by Alex Scheffler MacMillan 2004 £10.99

I was a late convert to the Gruffalo (surprisingly only its fifth year); it seemed derivative of Maurice Sendak's Wild Things and the verse wasn't quite right. I've changed my mind and the advent of The Gruffalo's Child is a wonder just before Christmas… and with a rather more surprising ending than I'd have guessed.

Stewart Rayment



Lord Bonkers' Diary

Saturday

As the last week of the '06 election campaign hoves into view, I tear myself away from Rutland for the evening to have dinner with the great and the good of the Liberal Party. Simply everyone who matters is there: Campbell-Bannerman, Asquith, his sons Oc and Beb, Lloyd George (an old acquaintance of my father, it transpires), Bluetooth Baker, Viscount Morley, Hilaire Belloc, Venetia Stanley and her monkey Pluto, Bongie Bonham Carter and me. The Master of Elibank is present too. I take the opportunity of having a few words with C-B, emphasising the shortsightedness of his policy on Chinese Labour and the danger that it may lose us valuable votes in important marginal constituencies in the south and west of Rutland. I also allude to the fact that the owners of said paddy fields have been having a hard time of it lately. I am afraid C-B quite fails to grasp the force of my arguments and turns to talk to the Master of Elibank instead.

Sunday

After Divine Service at St Asquith's, I ride to the shores of Rutland Water to inspect my paddy fields. Finding all well there, I return to the Hall to write an article for this new Liberator magazine everyone is talking about. More in sadness than in anger, I point out that Campbell-Bannerman's leadership has set back the prospects of a Radical Liberal advance by decades. He must go at once, and this ridiculous "Newcastle Programme" must go with him – I suggest an Uppingham Programme of my own devising to replace it.

Monday

Despite the hurly, and frequently burly, of the election campaign I have not slacked on the charitable front. Each Monday I have myself run over to the almshouses in the village, where I read improving poetry to the toothless inmates. Because I wish them to be at their ease, I have taken to wearing a tea chest over my head and shoulders, with a hole cut in the front for my face and slots cut in the sides where the ends of my moustache protrude. This afternoon I am halfway through Tennyson's Charge of the Light Brigade – "Cannon to right of them, Cannon to left of them, Cannon in front of them" and so forth – when the ungrateful retch to whom I am reciting it lays a cloth over the top of the chest, quite covering my face, and remarks "It's a pity you can't turn it over and watch something else on the other side." Let them scoff! I prophesy that one day everyone will have a specially adapted tea chest in his living room and the whole nation will spend its evenings listening to chaps reciting verse.

Tuesday

During this campaign I have come up with an idea that I think might with profit be adopted by my fellow Liberals up and down this great country of ours – as I have taken to calling it on public platforms. As I have gone around this part of Rutland shaking hands with the voters, patting babies and kissing dogs, my agent has made note of the things that are amiss in each hamlet or village. I am not talking about grand matters like Free Trade or the Entente Cordiale, but things like gates that are poorly hung or field drains that need to be cleaned out; they may sound like paltry concerns to some, but they can make a chap pretty cross. What I then do is have said agent produce a newsletter listing all these problems and telling the voters that they will be evicted if they not been put right before their rents fall due next Lady Day. The only problem we had was what to call it. My agent suggested "Focus", but after some discussion we preferred my "A Newsletter Informing You of Matters That Need to be Put Right in Your Immediate Neighbourhood".

Wednesday

I spare a morning from my energetic canvassing to attend to business on the old demesne. For some years I have foreseen that a collection of ne'erdowells, Anarchists and other malcontents may one day question a free-born Englishman's right to kill any animal he chooses and cause fox hunting to be banned. With this danger in mind I have been superintending the construction of an electrified narrow-gauge railway across the Bonkers Hall Estate; as it traverses all the roughest country, it is liberally supplied with tunnels, embankments and cuttings. My intention is to mount stuffed foxes on bogies and run them on the rails, thus providing cruelty-free sport for my friends and neighbours. There have been teething problems, in that any hound who catches the fox and gives it a bite is liable to receive a nasty electric shock. Today we experiment with giving all the dogs rubber galoshes; while they provide splendid insulation, it does make the chase rather a slow affair.

Thursday

Polling day in Rutland South-West dawns bright, and when I have my bedroom curtains drawn I see the queues of people waiting to collect their special "Good Morning" edition of "A Newsletter Informing You of Matters That Need to be Put Right in Your Immediate Neighbourhood". Quite a brainwave that, if I say it myself. The really clever thing is that each newsletter includes a form that the voter can complete when he has put things right in his immediate vicinity, and there will be special boxes left with our tellers at the polling stations where they can hand them in. I divide the day between riding about the constituency and sitting in the Bonkers Arms, where vouchers printed in the Good Morning issue of "A Newsletter Informing You of Matters That Need to be Put Right in Your Immediate Neighbourhood" may be redeemed for foaming pints of Smithson & Greaves' Northern Bitter. I think this Good Morning idea may catch on too.

Friday

Early this morning I achieve a famous victory. Tar barrels are lit and rolled down the hill; champagne was drunk and fireworks light the Rutland sky; and there is extra gruel for breakfast at the Bonkers Home for Well-Behaved Orphans this morning. When all the celebrations are over I find myself too elated to sleep, and instead write a new article for Liberator. In it I extol the sagacity, leadership and sheer pluck of dear old Campbell-Bannerman, counsel him to hold staunchly to the Newcastle Programme and urge him to waste no time in bringing the brightest young talents into his Cabinet. I only hoped I had it telegraphed to London in time.

Lord Bonkers, the newly elected Liberal MP for Rutland South-West, opened his diary to Jonathan Calder.

www.bonkers.hall.btinternet.co.uk