

liberator



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- * Destination account name: *Liberator Publications*
- * Destination bank: National Westminster Bank (Chorlton-cum-Hardy branch) Manchester M21 0BR UK
- * BIC (SWIFT code): NWBKGB2L
- * IBAN (account number): GB15NWBK01019704631935
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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
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Cover Credit - Tim Nichols

COMMENTARY

PERILS OF THE SCORE DRAW

The Liberal Democrats meet in Blackpool in a situation without precedent for a post-election conference.

It is usually obvious whether an election result has proved a success (2001, 1997) or not (1992, 1987).

The consequences are not always what one might expect, since the triumph of 1997 led to the fiasco of the Lib-Lab project, while the catastrophe of 1970 led to the success of community politics, but it is usually obvious what has happened and why.

This time is different. The 2005 general election was a score draw for all three main parties. Labour won but with a slashed majority; the Tories got up off the floor, but not very far; and the Lib Dems advanced but not very much.

Clear-cut success strengthens a leader and induces a 'steady as she goes' approach, while defeat sees heads rolling and fundamental rethinks.

This time, Charles Kennedy has been neither strengthened nor weakened by the result but a surprisingly strong consensus has arisen that holding steady will not do.

The reactions of the leader's inner circle since May resemble blind panic, and older readers of this magazine may recognise similarities to the Steel era.

This time, the uncontrolled leaking is echoed by the agendas of certain senior MPs, who have been taking the failed 'year zero' policy approach as an excuse to brief the press that policies such as the 50p tax rate were to be ditched – a blatant, dishonest attempt to pre-empt the policy review process.

Despite the fact that most of these individuals are clearly identified with the 'sound more Tory' strategy, which resulted in net losses against the Tories in May, this agenda has thrived in a vacuum.

With many Liberal Democrats recuperating after the election or involved in internal reviews, the atmosphere in Blackpool – even for those who should be celebrating some amazing results against Labour – may be muted.

The party is determined to raise its game, even if it is unsure how, and there is a subtext that Kennedy will be in danger if he cannot raise his game consistently too.

So far, two themes have emerged – that the party needs 'a narrative' and that it cannot any longer treat general election campaigns as a series of giant by-elections.

A third party living on its wits can and probably must try to get away with different messages to different target audiences. Now there is feeling that this approach is not merely unbecoming a serious party, but also gets in the way of what it should be doing.

This brings us back to narrative. If the party wants a clear set of values that are understood by the public and from which its policies clearly flow, it cannot have a 'beads without

string' approach to policy. This is something that is, incidentally, fostered by a policy process that allows cabals of self-appointed experts to go away and do their own thing ready for conference to rubber-stamp the results.

This process is also, inevitably, coming under pressure from the vastly increased resources in parliament, whose members comfortably have the wherewithal to research and launch a new policy without reference to the old structures.

Where the thirst for a narrative gets dangerous is when people start to think that any old narrative would do, so long as it seems to conform to what opinion polls suggest is popular at any given moment.

The party should avoid looking for what is popular and then trying to twist its principles to accommodate that.

More importantly, it should avoid the assumption, which too many members make, that everyone is really a Lib Dem at heart and would support the party if only its policies were explained more loudly and clearly.

This is simply untrue. There are Labour and Tory supporters every bit as serious about their affiliation as anyone in Blackpool is about being a Lib Dem. Attempts to make the party appeal to everyone will leave it winning the loyalty of no-one. It needs to look and sound clearly rooted in liberal principles and, if that turns off some voters, so be it.

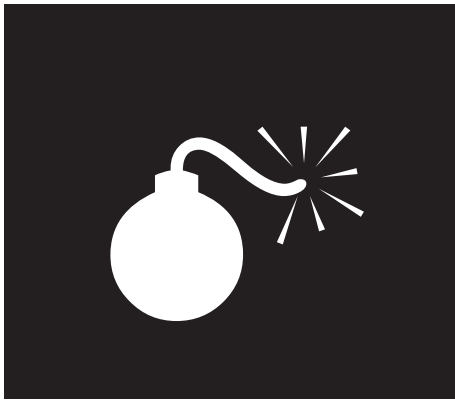
NEVER LET HIM OFF

Iraq has faded rather from British politics. But even so, the Liberal Democrats should keep hammering Labour over its role in the greatest foreign policy disaster of modern times.

Charles Kennedy was absolutely right to highlight the links between the bloodshed and mayhem that Britain has visited upon Iraq and the London tube bombings.

Even if he was denounced by the Labour and Conservative establishment, he simply said what a majority of the public well knew – that Blair's folly in following America's orders had made the world in general and Britain in particular a more dangerous place. Kennedy's fault was that he did not keep pressing this point.

The Liberal Democrats should allow Blair no quarter over Iraq. Britain is demeaned every day that it continues to have a government led by a man whose only rightful 'place in history' is the disgrace and ignominy that should follow responsibility for thousands of unnecessary deaths.



RADICAL BULLETIN

THE ROUTE TO POWER

Whenever a confidential Liberal Democrat document ends up in a national newspaper, readers can be pretty certain that it got there courtesy of a Liberal Democrat who either thought they were doing the party a favour, or was pursuing some agenda of their own.

Readers of the *Times* (29 August) learned about plans by Charles Kennedy's top adviser Lord Razzall to boost the leader's profile.

Federal Executive members, who might have preferred to see this general election report before it was shared with *Times* reporters, were not amused to learn that it "was written with a view to securing some coverage".

Razzall thinks Kennedy needs to plan a series of lectures to enhance his status, and to make himself more of an expert on international affairs.

The latter point is presumably to cope with the fact that Ming Campbell will not be in parliament forever.

According to the *Times*, Razzall said: "We need to spend the next four years building you up as a future prime minister. You get extremely good ratings on honesty, trust, in touch with the needs of ordinary people."

It is unclear who 'we' are, except for the implication that Razzall takes it as read that he will be at Kennedy's side for the next four years.

He continued: "We need to boost the leadership questions – which I suspect must be done by a combination of big speeches, well trailed in the media, and the development of an international expertise commensurate with a potential prime minister."

Rather more intriguing than these statements of the obvious are Razzall's reports of the findings of polling by the party pollster Julian Ingram (who was a Union of Liberal Students activist in the 1970s).

This research found that the party was not seen as strong enough across the whole country to be capable of a national challenge and that "there was an uncomfortable question of leadership which hovered in the background".

Ingram also suggested that the party blundered by targeting pensioners with promises of free long-term care and a citizen's pension. Although over-65s are the group most likely to vote, they were also the group least likely to vote Lib Dem, since throughout their lifetimes the party has not been a serious contender. Popularity was highest in the under-30 age group.

The polling also found that party policies had higher recognition than in previous elections and that the 50p top rate of income tax was "extremely popular".

That may come as news to shadow chancellor Vince Cable, who is understood to want to drop the idea as part

of his crusade for a tax policy that favours the wealthy, including his toying with flat rates.

1% OF WHAT?

The Liberal Democrat conference in Blackpool appeared, as *Liberator* went to press, to be in line for the rare treat of public scrap between parliamentarians over a policy issue.

Controversial debates at conference are a rarity, and those with parliamentarians on opposite sides even more so, but that was what was expected over the motion on Europe proposed by the Federal Policy Committee.

This would commit the party, at the behest of the Eurosceptic shadow chancellor Vincent Cable, to "maintenance of the cap of 1% on the EU budget until radical reforms in the budget have been achieved".

It is unclear what this means – the total EU budget, the UK contribution, 1% of member state GDPs or something else entirely.

But according to the leader of the Lib Dem group in the European Parliament, Chris Davies, who might be expected to know a little of the subject, there is no '1% cap' and therefore nothing to maintain.

Davies suspects that Cable has erected some sort of ill-worded façade around the idea that the EU budget should be limited to 1% of national GDPs, and that unspecified 'radical' reforms are needed, and was squaring up for a fight at conference.

He believes the motion ignores the EU's expansion to 25 members, with two more due to join, and says limiting the budget to 1% of national GNP's would mean deep cuts in research programmes, measures to combat terrorism and overseas aid.

The original draft of the motion came from Christian Moon, head of the policy unit at Cowley Street, and was then amended by the Treasury team to include the '1% cap' at Cable's insistence.

Moon's deputy Helen Banks e-mailed a consultation to the MEPs, which according to Davies arrived immediately before the relevant Federal Policy Committee meeting, leaving them no time to respond.

The MEPs were not the only ones by-passed. The FPC adopted the motion even though Sheffield Hallam MP Nick Clegg, a former MEP and a shadow foreign affairs spokesperson, had not been consulted either.

A separate motion from Davies was rejected by the Federal Conference Committee, which had been 'advised' to take the Treasury team motion, although there was a contested vote on this.

The Lib Dem treasury team at Westminster increasingly resembles a separate political party.

It seeks to meddle in areas of policy that are none of its concern, pursues a partisan economic agenda unendorsed by the party and goes out of its way to cause public squabbling and dissent.

There is more. Shadow trade and industry secretary Norman Lamb startled colleagues by tabling a motion calling for part-privatisation of the Royal Mail.

This will no doubt cause alarm among all those Lib Dems who have run campaigns against post office closures, should the party decide it favours some sort of Railtrack of the letterboxes.

However, it may be that Lamb is right. The Royal Mail has scarcely been a shining example of public service and perhaps some private sector involvement would improve it.

No sensible person could object to the idea being debated, to see if it has merit and would improve services while being consistent with party policy.

This, though, is clearly not the way that someone (whether Lamb or not) has chosen to spin the motion in public. No, we are back to the days of David Laws's catastrophic launch of the *Orange Book* (Liberator 298).

Readers of the *Guardian* (4 August) will have read: "If passed by the Liberal Democrats in Blackpool, the policy would signal a significant victory for the Orange Book economically liberal tendency on the right of the party."

Well, who could possibly have given the *Guardian* that idea? The Orange Bookers and the Treasury team have long been obsessed with the idea that the Lib Dems need a 'clause 4 moment', when some historic attachment of the party would be taken out and publicly shot to 'prove' the Lib Dems are 'modern'.

At least Lamb has had the courage to put a motion to conference, rather than try to change policy by spin, anonymous briefings and pronouncements, which is the Orange Bookers preferred style.

When is Charles Kennedy going to get a grip on these cuckoos in his nest?

10% OF WHAT?

There are few more widely liked figures in the Lib Dems than former Berwickshire MP Archy Kirkwood. Get him on your side and you are well on the way to winning.

Which must have been the thinking of whoever devised the constitutional amendment in Blackpool, which stands in Kirkwood's name, to require future leadership candidates to secure nominations from 10% of MPs.

This would change things from the present requirement only for a proposer and seconder. Some might see this as a sensible change for a larger parliamentary party. Others, though, have seen it as an attempt to make it more difficult for anyone else to stand against Charles Kennedy.

The 'anyone' in question appears to be Simon Hughes who, despite running Kennedy a close second in 1999, struggled to get even the two nominations needed from his fellow MPs.

Another 'someone' affected might be Mark Oaten, who does not have anything like the following among MPs that his persistent self publicity would imply. Who then does Kirkwood support?

GENDER BENDER TASK FORCE

The Gender Balance Task Force's report to conference includes the curious observation that "at close of

nominations, 24% of new women candidates were women, an increase on last time – more than either other main party". So, what were the other 76% of new women candidates?

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL

The conference handbook contains details of the stall run by the Liberal Democrat Friends of Kashmir.

Most stall entries are accompanied by a logo, but this one features a colour photograph of ex-Manchester councillor Qassim Afzal outside a helicopter on, presumably, one of his two 'Liberal Democrat peace delegations' to the place.

Sadly, Kashmir's inhabitants do not yet seem to have heard Afzal's distinctive message.

THE FUTURE IS PAST

Who now remembers Liberal Future, the cutting edge of the ambitious right-wing that set up possibly the world's only website to allow communication from it but not to it?

Has it simply served some purpose of Mark Oaten's and now been quietly put away, like the Peel Group?

We only ask because its website has not been updated for ages and, for the first time since its foundation in 2000, it has no fringe meeting at conference.

Or are its backers still coming to terms with the trauma of the general election result, which comprehensively trashed their theory that the Lib Dems face mainly Tory opponents, and so had to "sound more like the Tories".

DON'T YOU KNOW THERE'S A WAR ON?

We may be doing Blackpool a terrible injustice. It may that Lib Dem conference delegates gather in a well-appointed conference centre, walk in balmy sunshine to eat wholesome food, attend fringe meetings in spacious rooms and then retire to comfortable hotels.

Perhaps. There are good reasons why the conference has not set foot in Blackpool since 1990, quite apart from the arctic weather that is common in September.

On that occasion, the Liberal Democrats were obliged to share public billing outside the Winter Gardens with the Krankies, who were performing evenings in the same venue.

Conference highlights of yesteryear have included: a delegate handed a crowbar by her hotel reception with the injunction, "You'll need this to open your door open, love"; a hotel light that turned on by means of pulling a cord with a broken bottle top on the end; a fire alarm that persistently went off at 6am due to 'spiders'; and a custodian on the door at (of all things) the Young Liberal hotel, who objected to couples with different surnames sharing the same room even though, in one case, they were married.

It was claimed that a conference organiser once completed business with a Blackpool hotel and was then offered dinner on the house and a bed for the night in which he could enjoy the use of one of the chambermaids.

The party has returned to this 1950s theme park because its usual haunts are unavailable. Blackpool has lost all the party conferences over the last five years and is so desperate to lure them back that the party secured a most advantageous deal. Let's see if Blackpool has changed its spots.

IRAQ: A YEAR TO GO

The prospects for Iraq are gloomy. Tim Garden says foreign forces have not improved matters and a phased withdrawal over a year is needed

It becomes increasingly difficult to remain objective about Iraq. The mishandling of British foreign policy over the past three years has been without parallel in over half a century.

It is worse than Suez in 1956. It is too easy to become angry about the unnecessary deaths, the instability to the region, the continuing good news spin and the adverse effect on our own long term security. We must remain objective, and look at the situation as it is, if we are to provide sound policy for a way forward.

Iraq policy has been a litmus test for Liberal Democrat foreign and defence policy. We have spoken out at every stage of the conflict and chaos. Time and time again, we have proved to be better judges of the best way forward.

Iraq has been causing its people, its neighbours and the rest of the world problems since its birth. Like so many conflict areas, the history of its people, who have suffered betrayal, abuse and murder, shapes the modern day political scene. The international community has a very mixed record in its handling of recent events. After years of covertly supporting the despotic regime of Saddam Hussein, the west turned against the monster that it had created, when he invaded Kuwait in 1990. Now 15 years later, Iraq is still a source of danger to itself, its neighbours and the world beyond. This is a failure of the international system of historic scale.

For much of the 1990s, the international grand strategy was one of containment. With the benefit of hindsight, we now know that this approach worked better than anyone had believed. Not a single chemical, biological or nuclear weapon remained, and the long range missiles were also destroyed. The policy of containment was abandoned by the US administration in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Indeed, it seems likely that President Bush had come into office with a new agenda for Iraq.

What we now know for certain is that the change to an interventionist strategy was mature by early 2002; and a good insight comes from the now infamous Downing Street Memo of 23 July 2002. The head of MI6, always known as 'C', reported that Bush wanted to remove Saddam through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. He said that the intelligence reports "were being fixed

around the policy". Geoff Hoon, the defence secretary, reported that "spikes of activity" had already begun to put pressure on the regime. Under the prime minister's chairmanship, the meeting concluded that they should work on the assumption that the UK would take part in any military action. The die was cast before the involvement of parliament or congress. Everything that followed was tactics to support the political strategy to intervene in Iraq and change the regime.

The Liberal Democrat position was clear, consistent and sound throughout. We saw no cause for a rush to war. The international community, through the United Nations, had to be engaged. We now know that the Bush intended to intervene regardless of what the UN Security Council decided. Early 2003, in the run up to hostilities, was a time when great political courage was shown by Lib Dem politicians. Both the government and the Conservative opposition supported war, although each had dissidents on the back benches. It is easy to see how a quick war, the discovery of a few chemical shells and a rapid move to democracy in Iraq would have been spun by Bush and Blair to demolish the doubters and justify the illegal intervention retrospectively.

However Labour and Conservative rebels were insufficient in number to allow us to defeat the government in the first ever debate before going to war. There has been some media criticism that, after the vote, the Liberal Democrats appeared to switch to limited support of the intervention operation. As democrats, we had tried to stop the intervention through parliament. Once the vote was lost, support for our troops, risking their lives, on an operation authorised by parliament was the only option. At that time, the failures in intelligence were not known. If they had been, the vote might have been different.

The official war was remarkably brief and the casualties, although in the thousands, were fewer than might have been expected. On 1 May 2003, President Bush declared that the mission was accomplished, unaware that it was only just beginning. The Pentagon failed to hand over the post conflict reconstruction mission to the State Department, and most of the subsequent failings stem from that decision. We called for UN involvement in the development of the



fledgling new Iraqi democracy. The Pentagon had little interest in the UN, and failed to protect the UN representative from the bombers. The tactical failings of the occupying forces are well known. The abuse of power, leading to financial corruption, is now beginning to emerge.

Three things were needed in 2003, and are necessary today. These are a political path to a representative democracy; a viable economy providing employment for Iraqis; and finally adequate security to enforce the rule of law equally for all citizens.

The political path should have been defined rapidly after the intervention. Instead, it was left until the dying days of the Coalition Provisional Authority more than a year later. There has been little time to fashion a constitution. The elections of January this year were one bright spot in a very dark story. Yet, once elections were complete, the wrangling over representation in the transitional government was prolonged and acrimonious. This lack of consensus has been replicated in the development of the constitution. The major factions, Kurds, Shias and Sunnis, each seek advantage at the expense of the other. Up against the August deadline for agreement, the key issues of the role of Islam, the federal structure and the division of oil revenue remained problematic.

Given the lack of Sunni support for the draft, the plebiscite of mid-October is likely to be much more difficult. Sunnis are registering to vote in the referendum so that they can reject it. If it fails, then the whole process, including the election of an interim assembly, will need to be restarted, and democracy will be delayed for at least another year.

If the political path remains uncertain, then the development of the economy is also in trouble. Data is difficult to come by, as it is in the interests of both Iraqi government and multinational forces to pretend that everything is going well. Reporting is difficult, and already more journalists have died in Iraq than were killed in the whole of the Vietnam War.

The UNDP produced a comprehensive survey on living conditions, having interviewed more than 20,000 families across the country over a year up to May 2005. They found that only 15% of households had a stable electricity supply, and that this fell to 4% in Baghdad. In rural areas, only 43% had access to safe drinking water; this rose to 66% in urban areas. Malnutrition among children was widespread. The sewage system is reported to have suffered "a reverse development in quality". The report brings some objective numbers to the poor progress that there has been in making the quality of life of the ordinary Iraqi better. We have been repeatedly calling for regular objective data to be published so that resources can be targeted where they are needed.

The third major issue is that of providing the necessary security for all Iraqis to live in peace and be treated equally under the rule of law. The situation has not improved over the past year. We know how many of the multinational forces are killed each day, and this gives a coarse indicator of levels of violence. There have been a number of unofficial estimates of civilian casualties, given that neither the US nor the UK governments claim to keep records.

A *Lancet* survey used an interview sampling technique which produced a headline figure of 100,000 deaths. But this had a wide range of possible variation. An NGO, iraqbodycount.org, has been tracking media reports, and has produced a much more precise estimate of the minimum number of casualties (covering only those that are reported

by at least two reliable confirmed sources). Its estimate of almost 25,000 Iraqi civilian killings and 42,500 wounded in the two years since the intervention started, ties in reasonably well with UNDP data. The report also records how each person died. Here, the surprise is that only 9% of killings are attributed to insurgents, while post-invasion criminal violence accounts for 37% of deaths. Criminality is perhaps a greater threat to any emerging democracy than insurgency. The suicide bombers grab the headlines but, for most Iraqis, it is the local warlords and armed criminals who threaten their lives.

There are external pressures on both the US and the UK governments, which shape their actions in the coming months. The US wants to reduce the number of troops, not only for reasons of cost, but also because it wants the freedom to act elsewhere. It will, however, wish to retain some presence in Iraq for the indefinite future. The UK has a need to draw down, particularly given a significant commitment in Afghanistan next year. By the end of this year, when the election of a proper democratic government under a new agreed constitution is due, the economy and civil infrastructure is unlikely to have improved much. The security situation will be no better, given that the political process can do nothing to address the problem of criminality. If the political process is derailed, the insurgency may be much worse.

The future is therefore bleak, with the most that can be hoped for in the near term being a state not unlike Afghanistan today. A semblance of democracy, with regions operating semi-autonomously and serious crime continuing, may be the best on offer. The Kurdish north will strengthen its independence, particularly if it acquires an increasing share of the oil revenues. The Shia south, supported by Iran, will tighten its hold on the people through both religion and repression, but also look to profit from its oil. The central area including Baghdad will continue to be lawless and will lack investment.

What can we suggest now that the illegal intervention of March 2003, followed by an incompetent occupation, has resulted in such chaos? Of course, the political route to democracy must be encouraged. The infrastructure must be improved, and Iraqis must be employed in the rebuilding of their country. This will require targeted funds, and they in turn require objective data on a regular basis. Security will not be provided by foreign forces. Even if a more thoughtful counter-insurgency strategy were implemented, the widespread criminality and corruption needs curbing by the Iraqis themselves. The presence of the multinational forces over more than two years has not improved the situation. It is time to plan with the Iraqis a phased drawdown over a period of no more than twelve months. This must be accompanied by the resources to help them rebuild the country.

Finally, what lessons should Lib Dems take from our Iraq experience? First, we are better able than those in government to weigh the evidence, and make the best judgments. Second, a principled consistent stand gains public respect. Third, we can speak with one voice when the issues are dividing the other political parties.

Tim Garden is the Liberal Democrat defence spokesman in the House of Lords, and a former assistant chief of the defence staff.

LOOK OVER THERE

The Liberal Democrats have become obsessed by Europe and should develop a true internationalist perspective – starting with the United States, argues Paul Keetch

Charles Kennedy knew that I was happy to leave as shadow defence secretary after the general election because I wanted more time to think - as a front bencher, you are always responding to events, not considering policy.

I asked Charles if I could serve on the Foreign Affairs Select Committee as I wanted to try to re-establish an air of internationalism in the party. As we face this conference, the first after our best election results since 1929, we need to look beyond what has traditionally been our first foreign objective – Europe.

As I write this article, Hurricane Katrina is beginning to do its worst on the gulf coast of the southern US. It looks as if New Orleans may be facing ruin.

I have always loved the US. The first overseas visit I did as an MP was there – as a guest of the then US Administration. Eight MPs spent the summer of 1997 enjoying the hospitality of Washington DC, a weekend with a member of Congress and a week in a state capital – Oklahoma.

What I realised from this trip was that the US is not a country, but a vast continent. It is a continent that the Liberal Democrats, as true internationalists, need to understand. Washington DC is different from New York; San Francisco different from Miami; Chicago different from Oklahoma.

Anglo-American foreign policy has been through a turbulent time recently, not only over the invasion of Iraq but also with disagreement surfacing over relations with China and the possibility of a United States attack on Iran.

However, the US remains the UK's greatest ally in the wider world, the so-called 'special relationship' is still alive and well, yet many people in our party tend to dismiss this unique friendship. They see the US as an overbearing hegemony interested only in its own imperialistic ambitions. With Europe in a state of flux, it is time that the Liberal Democrats broadened our appeal and acted more internationalist and less Eurocentric.

The Liberal Democrats have always been seen as the most pro-European party. What is less well known are our policies to make the EU more effective and democratic. In truth, membership of the EU has been hugely important for British jobs, environmental protection and equality rights.

However, in recent years, it should also be accepted that the EU has turned into a bureaucratic quagmire. The failure of the French and the Dutch to ratify the treaty has rendered the European constitution virtually dead; the poor performance of the euro is hampering further economic integration and fundamental reform of the EU institutions is still well overdue. What can be in more need of reform than a parliament that meets in two places, moving its members, staff and offices between Brussels and Strasbourg?

Now, more than ever, the Liberal Democrats need to rediscover the internationalist tradition of Liberalism; to look

beyond Europe to other allies and partners overseas. Just as we at conference welcome guests from all over the world, it's time to convey ourselves to the electorate as being no longer 'obsessed' with Europe but to be portrayed as the true internationalist party. Central to this must be our attitude to the US – be 'anti Bush' by all means, but not 'anti Uncle Sam'.

Over the centuries, the UK has developed a strong relationship with the US and, to many, the two countries are viewed as "more alike than different". For example,

ever since the Pilgrim Fathers landed in Plymouth in 1620, there has existed a unique cultural link between Britain and what became known as the United States of America.

However, it was not until the twentieth century that the political and military institutions of the two countries shaped what we know as the 'special relationship' – a term coined by Winston Churchill in a speech to the Commons in 1945. This was born out of his close rapport with President Franklin Roosevelt. In fact, the personal relationships between president and prime minister have often been seen as playing a pivotal role in maintaining the political link between the



UK and the US. John Kennedy and Harold Macmillan, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were close confidantes and most recently George W Bush and Tony Blair enjoy a unique relationship. However, there have also been times when there has been a clash of personalities, as was the case with Harold Wilson and Lyndon Johnson, Ted Heath and Richard Nixon.

What is less known is that there are strong and significant lower level civil service ties – the ‘Washington Whitehall’ has representatives from almost all UK civil service departments. At military level, too, exchanges at all ranks between the US and UK are common, with our armed forces closer to the US than any European force.

Perhaps the most important and closest link stems from sharing intelligence. Former GCHQ officer Michael Herman has described the National Security Agency and the GCHQ relationship as operating on “almost – but not quite – as if they were separate national divisions of some large international conglomerate.”

The UK and the US have differed on many foreign policy initiatives; most notably the US was seen as anti-empire. The US, and indeed the Liberal Party, opposed Eden’s invasion of Suez – carried out with France and Israel, and Britain refused to send troops to Vietnam. Today, there is ongoing disagreement between the US and UK over the EU lifting Chinese export controls, and we continue to differ in our policies towards Israel/Palestine.

Perhaps because of our opposition to the war in Iraq, the Liberal Democrats have recently been painted as hostile to the USA. During the Iraq war, our quarrel as a party was with the neo-conservative administration of George W. Bush and his ill-fated policies in the Middle East – not with the American people.

It is apparent now that our opposition to the war in Iraq has been proved right; there were no weapons of mass destruction, there was no serious or current threat, and Britain must never again support any illegal military intervention. However, what many in our party tend to forget is that these beliefs resonated in many parts of the US before, during and continue to in the aftermath of the invasion. Many millions of Americans were appalled by President Bush’s complete disregard for the United Nations and his clear lack of diplomacy in the run up to the conflict.

Before the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington DC, US public opinion showed no interest in any foreign invasions. After the attack, however, 78% of Americans suspected that Saddam Hussain was involved and that he needed to be contained. Now, public opinion in the US shows a wavering in support for the Iraq war, with over 50% believing that war has not contributed to the safety of the US. With military casualties mounting every day, it is possible that President Bush will have to concede and admit that the invasion of Iraq was ill-conceived and that the UN should have been the best route. This was emphasised recently when a leading politician from Mr Bush’s party, Senator Chuck Hagel, made a public comparison between Iraq and Vietnam, claiming that, the longer the US troops stay in Iraq, the more problems they will have to face.

Other Republicans are deeply worried that opinion polls show the public is growing more sceptical about President Bush’s handling of the war, which could have detrimental effects on the Republican Party’s chances in the 2006 congressional elections. The war will inevitably haunt Mr Bush. Only recently, Cindy Sheehan, a mother whose son

was killed in Iraq, has started a protest outside his Texas ranch, demanding an opportunity to speak to him.

As a party, we were right to oppose the war in Iraq, but we cannot go on creating a gulf between our beliefs and US policy. The Anglo-American relationship is extremely important. If the Liberal Democrats are to be seen as a potential party of government, we need to understand the political importance of a solid relationship with the US. The Labour and Conservative parties have built up relationships with US politicians; now it’s time for the Liberal Democrats to foster better relations with members of Congress.

The Liberal Democrats have much in common with the US – we are the only UK party to understand and appreciate the importance of federal government. However, we fail to understand the real federal structure of the US. For example, the US administration is rightly criticised by us for not signing the Kyoto Treaty on climate change, yet Liberal Democrats fail to understand that jurisdictions over many environmental issues are legislated by state, not federal, government.

For example, California’s record on environmental protection is second to none - it was the first state in 1960 to pioneer policies to tackle the problems associated with car emissions. This environmental record applies to many state governments. In 1998, New Jersey was the first state to establish greenhouse gas reduction targets and it is estimated by the US Environmental Protection Agency that there are over 700 state policies to reduce greenhouse emissions. Environmental protection, a core theme in our policies, is surprisingly being tackled in the US – we, unlike the other parties, are in a unique position in that we understand how it is being done at a regional level.

Anglo-American relations do not end with foreign and security cooperation; trade and tourism are an integral part of the special relationship. The US is the UK’s biggest single trading partner – in 2004, the value of UK goods exported to the US totalled £28.45bn. Tourism has played a vital role in strengthening our special bond with the USA, a favourite destination for British nationals. Equally in 2003, residents of the USA made 3.3m visits to the UK and spent £2.3bn – more than visitors from any other country. At a cultural level, in the film, TV and entertainment industry, the relationship with the US is closer than any other nation.

The Liberal Democrats need to fashion a new connection with the US – the special relationship is here to stay and we need to be seen in favour of this by acting proactively.

Our party is seen as too Eurocentric, instead of portraying an internationalist appeal. We have become too obsessed with the European relationships. However, with the EU now changing, many of the new member states are Atlanticist in their thinking – old members are in retreat. In Germany, Angela Merkel is almost certain to sweep to power in the forthcoming elections and help to heal the rift between her country and the US. The French are in crisis; they even believe there was an Anglo-Saxon conspiracy to stitch up in the Olympics!

We in the Liberal Democrats need to understand that the UK/US relationship is good for Britain. In other words, the Liberal Democrats should not just look to Europe but beyond Europe too.

Paul Keetch is Liberal Democrat MP for Hereford and chair of the British Group of Liberal International.

DOUBLE STANDARDS

Tony Blair's fine words about Africa amount to nothing when faced with the persecution of civilians in Darfur – but then the White House has told him to keep quiet, says Becky Tinsley

In his 2001 party conference speech, Tony Blair declared that, if Rwanda were to happen again, Britain would have a duty to act. The United Nations now acknowledges that, in the last two years, 180,000 black Africans have died in the Darfur region of Sudan. The House of Commons International Development Committee, in line with several NGOs active in western Sudan, believes the figure is nearer 400,000, with two million people displaced because of ethnic cleansing.

New Labour's reaction has been to deny the scale and cause of the suffering in Darfur, to portray it as a humanitarian rather than a political problem, and to cast both 'sides' as equally guilty. In other words, apart from sending food to refugees, British policy in the face of mass murder and ethnic cleansing is not to confront the perpetrators. Readers might recognise these Foreign Office responses: they were used during the Bosnian war to justify inaction. Evidently the spirit of appeasement lives on.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that what has occurred in Darfur is genocide, as defined by the 1948 Convention. The Arabist National Islamic Front military junta in Khartoum has deliberately targeted the black Africans of Darfur because it wants their land for its largely Arab supporters. The regime has burned and bombed 90% of black villages in Darfur, and it has paid and armed Arab militias known as the Janjaweed to sweep across this vast, dry, remote region, killing, raping and looting as they go.

When I interviewed dozens of women survivors in refugee camps in Darfur, they told me remarkably consistent stories about aerial attacks by Sudanese airforce Antonovs and helicopters, followed by waves of Janjaweed on horse and camel. The Janjaweed killed the men and boys, raped the women, stole cattle, torched homes and threw babies onto fires. The women walked for days to the camps, built shelters from twigs, and now face daily attack whenever they venture out for firewood.

Of the women I met, all had been attacked or raped within the previous two weeks. They told me the Janjaweed screamed racial abuse at them as they raped them. The racism did not surprise them, however, because it is standard practice for Sudanese Arabs to openly refer to black Africans as 'slaves', believing them to be inferior.

Despite Blair's commitment to prevent another Rwanda, and his professed concern about Africa, his government has no intention of pressuring the Sudanese regime. In off-the-record briefings, ministers warn that the tiny Darfur rebels are equally as responsible as the mighty Sudanese armed forces working in concert with their Janjaweed proxies. The subtext is that these savage people are all as bad as each other, and that we will only provoke an Islamic jihad if we intervene against the junta in Khartoum. (Evidently the

same concern about attracting militants from around the world did not inform their thinking over Iraq). Even the Commons International Development Committee recently condemned ministers for deliberately downplaying events in Darfur and for misrepresenting the genocide there as a humanitarian disaster and as "ancient ethnic tribal hatreds", rather as they did in Bosnia.

In 2004, at the height of the slaughter in Darfur, officials at the British embassy in Khartoum made it clear to me that Darfur was an irritating side show, and that their priority was Sudan's north-south peace deal. In saying this, they revealed who was driving British foreign policy: the White House.

Since it took power, the Bush administration has been under pressure from highly organised American Christian groups to stop Islamist Khartoum from killing southern Sudan's black Africans, many of whom happen to be Christians. Coincidentally, there are vast oil reserves under the blood-soaked earth of southern Sudan, and everyone is keen to establish a stable economic environment there.

In an impressive display of tough, focused diplomacy, the State Department's John Danforth forced the Sudanese regime to come to a power-sharing agreement with southern rebels, led by General John Garang. Danforth's unrelenting pressure on Khartoum was a textbook example of how to use the threat of military and economic action to achieve your aims without firing a shot. Britain obediently assisted Danforth in south Sudan, and the Foreign Office is now determined to make sure the comprehensive peace treaty sticks, despite the death of Garang in a helicopter crash last month. They believe this entails not upsetting the generals in Khartoum, rather than using other possible tactics such as the prospect of economic aid as an incentive to stop the killing in Darfur.

There has been a brief period when Britain was at odds with the Bush administration. The same Christians, in coalition with black church groups, pushed the White House to get tough with Khartoum over Darfur. In September 2004, Colin Powell, then the secretary of state, determined that genocide was happening in Darfur, and the government of Sudan was to blame. Cynics might suggest that the November 2004 presidential elections might have had some bearing on Powell's announcement.

Nevertheless, his view was echoed by President Bush, and the governments of Germany and Canada. Unfortunately, it seems that recognising the existence of genocide no longer triggers any duty to act. Nevertheless, the Americans were at least applying pressure to the authors of the genocide in Khartoum.

In sharp contrast, in April 2004, during one of the deadliest periods in Darfur, the then British ambassador, William Patey, boasted to an audience in Khartoum that

British trade with Sudan was up 25%. “We are and shall remain good friends with Sudan,” he assured them.

Seasoned Sudan-watchers credit the generals in Khartoum with fine diplomatic skills, pointing to the way they have run rings around westerners for years. The junta quickly responded to American pressure on Darfur by offering to share their intelligence on al-Qaeda with Washington. Osama bin Laden lived in Khartoum for five years during the 1990s and, in 1998, the Clinton administration sent several cruise missiles to destroy a factory producing chemical weapons near Khartoum.

In April 2005, the CIA sent a private jet to collect the head of Sudanese intelligence, himself wanted for war crimes in Darfur, and ferried him to its Langley, Virginia, headquarters for debriefing on bin Laden. At the same time, Bush and his cronies stopped describing the events in Darfur as genocide or even mentioning the issue. It is also said that the name of the head of Sudanese intelligence has been removed from the secret list of those 51 individuals accused of war crimes in Darfur. In the war against terror, it would seem that anything is negotiable.

The British excuse for remaining cosy with the junta is that we do not want to pressure the Khartoum regime in case it reneges on the north-south deal. Underlying this is a favourite Foreign Office mantra: we must work with the big powers in any region, whatever our reservations about their human rights record, because the worst possible outcome is instability. Our foreign policy establishment lives in fear of someone redrawing maps according to the wishes of the inhabitants of the nations created in an arbitrary fashion by colonial powers.

British ministers warn that a much worse gang of thugs might replace the current mass murderers, were they to be overthrown. When questioned about his relationship with Khartoum, Chris Mullin, then Africa minister, said in November 2004, “In diplomacy sometimes you have to work with people with whom you might not see eye to eye on everything.”

At the risk of being picky, we might not see “eye to eye on everything” with a junta that allows no elections and no free press; tortures hundreds of political prisoners in prison; has encouraged and facilitated institutional racism towards its black African citizens in all walks of life for decades; has killed two million of its citizens in south Sudan and another 400,000 in Darfur; imposes extreme Sharia law; and allows virtually every eight year-old girl to be forcibly mutilated.

Darfur is not the sole example of Britain’s current double standards. For instance, we are still training the Uzbek army in the wake of the slaughter of what Human Rights Watch says were 500 hundred unarmed civilians in May. We embrace unsavoury dictatorships like Pakistan, but castigate Iran, where elections are freer than most in the Middle East. Similarly it is acceptable for Pakistan to have nuclear weapons but not Iran. To protect our commercial interests in Saudi Arabia, the British government hushed up the arrest and torture of British citizens there. We supported, financed and armed Saddam Hussein when he was gassing his own citizens and hapless Iranian soldiers, during the 1980s. And



Suleia Girl’s School - Three burned corpses

we are content to act as midwives to a repressive, primitive, constitutional theocracy in ‘liberated’ Iraq.

Anyone demanding consistency from our diplomats does not appreciate the subtle arts of ‘realpolitik’. As explained to me by sundry Foreign Office and DFID officials and ministers, those of us outside the system simply don’t understand the complexity of Sudan. We should be grateful that Britain is sending humanitarian supplies. “There is no military solution,” Hilary Benn, the international development secretary, contends, although he believes military intervention was the appropriate response to Saddam’s Iraq.

The future looks bleak for Darfur. The genocide and ethnic cleansing has succeeded. Now the priority is to protect the survivors in refugee camps. Throughout the recent Make Poverty History/Commission For Africa events, Tony Blair advocated “African solutions to African problems”. Sadly, both the African Union and the Arab League have chosen not to condemn Sudan. The African Union has a mere 2,700 soldiers ‘monitoring’ an area the size of France with only a handful of paved roads.

Human Rights Watch believes that the Janjaweed is joining the army and police, and MSF catalogues its systematic rape of Darfur’s women. The BBC dutifully reports that the Sudanese government is investigating reports of attacks on women, as if it were not the architect and paymaster of the whole wretched disaster.

Apart from putting pressure on the British Government, Waging Peace is working with local groups in Darfur to provide rape therapists and counsellors, and art therapists to help the survivors deal with their experiences.

We are also helping the London-based Darfur Centre for Human Rights, made up of Sudanese in exile, to equip women with personal supplies that the big aid agencies do not view as priorities. If you can help us, please visit our website: www.wagingpeace.org.uk

Becky Tinsley is director of Waging Peace and was the Liberal parliamentary candidate in East Hampshire in 1983 and Stamford and Spalding in 1987.

LOSING A WINNER - WHERE ARE THE LIB DEMS NOW?

The Liberal Democrats had the courage to oppose the Iraq war, so why are they silent in the face of the unfolding scandal of bloodshed and disorder that Blair and Bush have brought to that country, asks Michael Meadowcroft

How did it happen that the Liberal Democrats took the brave decision to oppose the invasion of Iraq before it took place, in the absence of concrete evidence, but thereafter virtually abandoned the issue when the evidence was palpably obvious?

Iraq is the greatest political moral issue of our generation, and Bush and Blair are getting away with murder – literally.

There has been nothing like it since Suez in 1956 – and that was a small, short-lived scandal by comparison. Every day of every week, Iraqis are being killed by militants who refuse to accept an occupation policed and enforced by American troops, supported by the British military and a smattering of forces from other ‘allied’ countries.

Since the war began, 1,879 American troops have been killed – all but 137 since Bush declared, “mission accomplished” on 19 March 2003. By comparison, a minimum of 23,654 Iraqi civilians have been killed in the same period. And it continues without any let up.

In addition to the deteriorating situation within Iraq, there are still thousands of individuals held at Guantanamo Bay and in other prisons around the world without trial or, in most cases, even without charge.

The British government has long since abandoned the arguments for invading Iraq on which it based its case in the crucial House of Commons debate on 26 February 2003.

In the absence of any evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Blair, Straw and Reid now continually resort to regime change as a justification for the invasion, even though it was accepted at the time that this did not provide a legal basis for military action.

Since then, there has been a stream of incriminating leaks of cabinet papers, and of legal and intelligence advice. And yet, apart from George Galloway and a few brave individual MPs – including the late lamented Robin Cook – the House of Commons is supine. It now appears that Kenneth Clarke’s bid for the Conservative leadership will make use of his principled objection to the war.

Every anticipated staging post on the path towards a ‘new’ Iraq has failed to produce stability. First, it was the nonsense spouted by the ‘allies’ on how the troops would be received with open arms. Then, when that didn’t happen, the view

was that, once there was an Iraqi administration in place, peace would reign. When the lawlessness and the killings continued, it was the holding of elections that would stop it. That didn’t work, so the next vain hope was that an Iraqi government would have the legitimacy to bring peace. Now the latest chimera is the adoption of a constitution – whenever.

I cannot believe that Tony Blair is the only person who, in JK Galbraith’s phrase, refuses to confront the obvious – that the invasion of Iraq was a grave error, that the situation in the country is appalling and that to blunder blindly on with the same policies will never resolve the problems.

Indeed, I knew immediately I saw the Lord Chancellor, Lord Falconer’s appeal on 6 August last that “It is vital the country remained united behind the prime minister,” that the government had lost all confidence in the arguments for the continued occupation of Iraq. The point was then conveniently driven home by Blair’s invitation to opposition leaders to join him in promoting even more futile, illiberal and oppressive legislation – a trap into which Howard and Kennedy promptly leapt.

The situation in Iraq today is worse than ever. The car bombs, the suicide bombers and the terrorism are increasing not decreasing, and there is no initiative whatever being put forward by Bush or Blair. They have no idea of a solution and, amazingly, there is no parliamentary – and little popular – harassment of a prime minister and of a government that has made the most colossal and lethal blunder of the past 50 years. In the midst of daily killings and an ‘allied’ occupation of Iraq that has been shown to be both illegal and ill-founded, parliament has gone on its long recess as if nothing had happened.

Why is this? Why in particular is the Liberal Democrat parliamentary party so docile and quiescent on the key political issue of our time when it was the sole major party to oppose the war in advance and on which it thus occupies the moral high ground and on which it could capture the mood of the country?

The problems of the party’s leadership have been well rehearsed – Tory MP David Curry wrote in the Yorkshire Post on 31 August that Charles Kennedy’s failure to “force

his way into the void” might make him the one person to have saved the Tories – but with 62 MPs the Liberal Democrats have enough representation to bring parliament to a standstill if they were dedicated and brazen enough.

The Iraq situation is so awful, and its justification so entirely lacking, that it cries out for such action. The Liberal Democrats were right in February 2003 and should be shouting from the rooftops that only an end to the occupation has a hope of inhibiting the chaos and the killings in Iraq.

Every piece of evidence needed to expose the government is available. The leaked evidence from cabinet papers, the lies over WMDs and the abandonment of any argument based on them, the illegality of the invasion, the illegitimacy of the regime change argument, the indefinite internment without trial of thousands of detainees, the abuse of prisoners, and, above all, the facts on the ground, hand the Lib Dems, and particularly to the party’s MPs, the responsibility to force parliament to take action and the opportunity to lead public opinion.

If they funk such a clear and legitimate challenge, it is hard to see what its aim and purpose is as a party. What is the point of a political party fearful of the consequences of its earlier moral courage?

Those of us who set out in advance the case against going to war knew full well that military action would be disastrous and would be a recruiting agent for terrorism. In the crucial

parliamentary debate, Ken Clarke spelt it out clearly: “The next time a bomb explodes in a western city, or an Arab or Muslim regime topples and is replaced by extremists, the Government must consider the extent to which the policy contributed to it.”

A call for an early phased withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq is necessary for Iraqis and is legitimate in its own terms. It would owe nothing to the appalling London bombings, even if it could add to Britain’s future security. The immediate result of withdrawal is likely to be increased terrorism in Iraq but it provides the only basis for longer term security. There is no solution to the allied-caused problem whilst the occupation continues. When, as in Irbil, car bombs can kill scores of people in Iraqi Kurdistan, where autonomy and shrewd intelligence hitherto prevented terrorism, nowhere and no-one is safe.

The poor Iraqi people. Exploited and terrorised by a vicious regime and now plunged into capricious insecurity, apparently with no hope of it ending. They deserve better. Will the Liberal Democrats speak for them?

Michael Meadowcroft has led, or been a member of, 47 missions to 31 different countries, assisting in the transition to multi-party democracy. He was Liberal MP for Leeds West, 1983-87. Website: www.bramley.demon.co.uk

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WALK ON TWO LEGS

The Liberal Democrats' current soul searching risks ignoring the obvious: after years of pavement politics, they need a reassertion of internationalism, argues Jonathan Fryer

The nineteenth century Liberal Party took a deep and not always exploitative interest in the wider world.

When Gladstone found time from rescuing fallen women in the environs of Piccadilly Circus, he looked at the state of humanity from Afghanistan to the Zambezi, and cared.

Where is that spirit today? Tony Blair would like to think the sun never sets on his international enterprises, but it is obvious even to the readers of the Sun that he doesn't have a clue. His whole attitude to the wider world is wrong: at best, it is a sort of patronising philanthropy (for example, talking about 'Africa', as if such a vast and diverse continent could be 'healed' with one recipe of Dr Tony's medicine); at worst, a formulaic crusade along the lines of "now if only you became like us, everything would be all right".

Not that Her Majesty's loyal opposition is any better. The Conservative Party today, as so often in the past, is the respectable face of xenophobia.

So, that leaves the Liberal Democrats, who really ought to be the voice of true internationalism in Britain. And when we think foreign affairs, we think of Menzies Campbell.

I have a huge respect for Ming, but two things worry me. The first is that there is a tendency in the party to think that the internationalist dimension is somehow covered by Ming. I would maintain that, just as the Liberal Democrats have accepted that there is an environmental aspect to almost every policy issue we discuss, so there is an international angle to most. This needs to be recognised and acted upon.

Secondly, there is the disturbing practice in the party to ghettoise or render exclusive foreign affairs issues. The most blatant example of this is the Liberal Democrat Middle East Council. Since my first trip to Iraq and Syria in 1969, I have worked and travelled in every Arab country and, for 10 years, I was Honorary Consul of Mauritania in Britain.

But several requests to be put on a Lib Dem Middle East Council mailing list, and kept briefed with what the party is thinking about the world's most volatile region, have met with total silence or rebuff. I write this not in a fit of personal pique but out of genuine amazement that the party cares so little for its influence in and understanding of various regions of the world that it excludes people who may have something to offer. The Liberal Democrat Friends of Israel, incidentally, is far more assiduous in cultivating internationally-minded party activists. I shall watch with interest to see how the Lib Dem 'Friends of India' and 'Friends of Pakistan' develop.

Of course, the rise of single-interest groups on international affairs within the party is itself problematic. An essential element of Liberalism is compassionate objectivity. In other words, one cares about injustice, and wishes to do something about it, but one also recognises that few international issues are black and white.

That is one reason why I am an active member of the British Group of Liberal International, which not only ensures a hefty British presence at international Liberal gatherings, but also organises events to ensure that international issues do not drop off the party's agenda. But it is depressing that fewer than 0.5% of the party's membership belongs to LIBG.

This is, of course, partly a result of the party's concentration on localism over the past three decades. Hats off to ALDC and local campaigners for countless victories.

But as that vicious old fraud, but astute political strategist, Mao Zedong, once said, one needs to walk on two legs if one is to advance. I believe in the Lib Dem context, 'walking on two legs' means embracing both localism and internationalism. The Greens, thought weak and often misguided, have understood that. Why haven't we?

I fear part of the problem rests with Cowley Street, and the Campaigns Department. Despite Iraq (an opportunity we failed fully to capitalise on from the moral high ground), the focus of Liberal Democrat politics is quite astoundingly parochial. The number of councillors we get is viewed as tremendously important, and we are told that successful MPs are those who are on top of their local issues.

Well, yes, up to a point. But when one is trying to move from being a minority party of protest and local activism to becoming a serious contender for national power, then the focus has to be broader. We have to prove that we could actually make Britain a force for good on the world stage.

Some, such as Vince Cable, have demonstrated their international credentials, and the new 2005 intake includes some big hitters like Nick Clegg, Chris Huhne and Susan Kramer, who have real experience and vision beyond Britain's shores.

Charles Kennedy, a fine European, and a man of true compassion, has not yet come across as a man of global vision.

This is not entirely his fault. One gets the impression that he has been consistently advised that the outside world is peripheral: Britain (and at a push, the EU) is what is important. For a political party aspiring to power in the twenty-first century, such narrow-mindedness could prove to be fatal.

Jonathan Fryer is a lecturer and broadcaster, and a vice-president of Liberal International British Group.

IN THE BALANCE

Gender balance improved a little in May, but it will be a long haul, says Hannah Hedges

Sometimes it's hard to be a woman. In Hitchin and Harpenden constituency, I was the Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate. I worked hard, shook hands with people, leafleted, pounded streets and ended up with a good result; but bruised and exhausted feet.

We may think we have equality, but I was still the one wearing the high heels and getting the blisters! In the aftermath of a gripping general election, one other thing stands; the number of women (and heels) in parliament has increased, but not significantly.

As yet, we do not see a gender balance across the Commons floor. Now with nine women parliamentarians, out of 62, the Lib Dems are a step closer to a more diverse range of MPs who will better represent the population as a whole. But the race is not yet won. Our party still has a long way to go in its plan to encourage more women to get involved in politics.

The Liberal Democrat Gender Balance Task Force recognises this. Since its birth in 2001, it has been finding women to enter politics, and training and supporting them through the approval and selection processes. I am certain that the campaign for gender balance has had a significant effect in improving the number of women PPCs and MPs. Party figures show that, in our top 50 target seats, 32% of candidates selected were women, and 33% of our new MPs are women.

However, to continue doing its job, the GBTF requires greater support from all levels of the party structure. The Liberal Democrat leadership clearly recognises the need for more women in politics, and that there are problems that need to be addressed. Earlier this year, Charles Kennedy signed the Democrat Institution's *Win With Woman Global Action Plan*, a document outlining practical recommendations that will help political parties broaden their appeal by becoming more inclusive and representative. Another step forward. But to pick up the pace, we need to see the gender balance campaign recognised as just that: a campaign. Proper funding and support is required.

People tell me that it is not enough for our party just to establish women's quotas, or place women on 'all-women' shortlists; we must also develop real avenues for women's leadership. All-women shortlists used by the Labour party have had a negligible effect on increasing their number of female MPs. Labour went backwards in terms of female representation in 2001 after their use was declared illegal.

The subsequent change in legislation has certainly helped them move back to their 1997 position, but they have failed to move forward significantly. Moreover, the party hierarchy has manipulated these shortlists, exploiting them as a form of control. They are used to exclude troublemakers like Peter Law.

Labour's lacklustre approach to gender balance is based on paper, not people. It seeks to score points by looking good on the scoresheet, but ignores the tokenism and subsequent resentment these methods bring.

The Conservatives have a particularly hard challenge to reach gender balance. Despite praise by the Fawcett Society for Teresa May's reforms on candidate selection, the Conservatives have only increased their proportion of women MPs by 1%. This brings a grand total of 9%. At this slow rate of change, the Tories will not see gender balance in my lifetime.

In contrast, the Liberal Democrat campaign for gender balance has proven its worth. Unlike Labour, we've been supporting people, not paper, across a wide range of constituencies, many of whom are now prominent parliamentarians.

I have received fantastic mentoring from the GBTF, not only during my approval process, which I applied for at the age of 19, but also excellent training during my first selection campaign and subsequent candidature.

Encouragement was only a phone call away, and many of my mentors have now become good friends. It was tough work campaigning as the youngest parliamentary candidate in the country. The GBTF made my job easier, providing critical assistance and guidance when I needed it most. Colleagues in other parties are amazed at the levels of support I received; campaigning for gender balance is an alien concept to them. This philosophy is one of which our party should be proud.

And the race goes on. We must not forget that gender balance is a campaign and adequate funds are essential. The GBTF must be supported effectively. I believe the conference motion goes some way to enshrining these issues in policy.

However, the race does not stop at the GBTF; rather it is a responsibility we all must undertake. Addressing this culture of discrimination requires a long-term investment by the party; and, because of our grassroots organisation, change requires action from all. Achieving gender balance must be viewed as a marathon, not a sprint, and one where everyone is prepared to enter the race.

Hannah Hedges is 21 and was Liberal Democrat candidate in Hitchin and Harpenden at the May 2005 general election.

IT'S NOT POLICIES, IT'S PEOPLE!

Chris Davies says the Liberal Democrats must recruit more dynamic activists, and soon, if they are to make a breakthrough at the next general election

There is more than a touch of irrelevance about the Liberal Democrats' post-election policy review. Some say that we got it wrong by advocating a fairer system of local taxation, calling for the abolition of tuition fees, and demanding that the wealthy make a larger contribution towards the needs of society. To increase our electoral appeal, it is argued, we must be prepared to ditch those demands that attracted most criticism from opponents and which - perhaps - lost us votes in some target constituencies where we challenged the Tories.

All of this misses the point. It avoids the real reason why the party failed to make more significant gains in the general election. This had very little to do with our policies, which resonated well with the majority of likely Liberal Democrat voters. In any case, the details of policies matter a great deal less than the overall impression a party creates. Governments once in office make up policies on the hoof and are eventually judged by their overall performance. Liberal Democrats have in recent election campaigns spent far too much time trying to balance the columns of a petty cash book. Costing our minimalist programme may provide a small shield against criticism, and allow us to lay claim to 'responsibility', but it is hardly inspiring for political parties to spend so much time contesting the various ways in which they would spend what amounts to less than 2% of GNP. Parties elsewhere in Europe don't follow this nitpicking approach. Instead of trying to account for every penny in advance, we would do better to proclaim our core beliefs while giving a strong indication of the direction we will take and the principles we will adopt once in power.

It was not our policies that cost Liberal Democrats the chance of making an election breakthrough but the fact that we didn't have the people on the ground to sell them. Thirty years since the 'Liberal revival' of the early 1970s, we have still not overcome the damage inflicted by party division during the First World War. The consequence of that was the virtual disappearance of Liberals as a political force. In more than half the country, we still have yet to recover. The party simply does not exist in a credible election-winning form across vast swathes of the country. It is not all gloom, of course. Our parliamentary representation is now the greatest it has been since that time of internal conflict. Our local government representation is significant, and impressive advances have been made in the great cities. While we have made inroads into fresh territory, the Tory presence has been completely removed from many metropolitan areas and there

is no sign of that trend being reversed. Even so, we have a very, very long way to go.

Take my own North West region, for instance. With a population of nearly seven million, it is bigger than ten EU member states. It includes 76 Westminster parliamentary constituencies. I reckon that Liberal Democrats mounted winnable campaigns last May in just a dozen of them. In those places, enough work was done on the ground to convince local people that we were credible challengers. With a better wind behind us, and a bigger slice of luck, all those seats might have been won. But if every realistic hope had been fulfilled, there would still have been 64 constituencies in the region left without Liberal Democrat representation. In those seats, the activists that did exist knew from the start that they hadn't the resources to mount a credible parliamentary campaign and few made more than a token effort. Those with council elections on the same day concentrated their limited resources on achieving success where they could. They were right to do so.

Yet the North West region is a Liberal Democrat success story! We doubled our parliamentary representation at the election, winning six of the twelve contests we fought seriously. The shame is that a huge potential remains untapped. Liberal Democrats have proved successful in seats as different as Manchester Withington and Cheadle, let alone Rochdale and Westmorland & Lonsdale. On paper at least, there are more than 40 other constituencies across the North West with a socio-economic profile that suggests they could be just as likely to return Liberal Democrat MPs. Compare these seats also with similar places in the East and West Midlands, Yorkshire & the Humber, and the North East. Half the population of England lives in these regions. Their Liberal Democrat representation at Westminster may be minimal but the opportunity they present is obvious. The party is not held back by our policies but by the lack of members and activists to mount serious campaigns.

A couple of hundred individuals in the right places could make a huge difference. But these would have to be not just any individuals. There are plenty of Liberal Democrat members who would make perfectly good MPs but what we need are people who can make it happen. We need parliamentary candidates who can inspire others, build and lead a team, acquire then practise campaigning and communications skills, transform a constituency into a sea of Liberal Democrat councillors, move house and home - and risk never being elected themselves! We need, in the words of new MP Tim Farron, people who are prepared to make

‘unreasonable’ demands of themselves, their families and their careers, who are prepared to place ‘unreasonable’ expectations upon their key workers and supporters, and who will make ‘unreasonable’ requests for money from potential donors. It’s a tall order.

Such people exist. Lynne Featherstone won just 11% of the vote when she stood in Hornsey and Wood Green back in 1997. Last May, she was elected as MP with 43% of the vote. It was “nothing special”, she says, “just a textbook campaign”! My own inspiration came from David Alton, who now sits on the crossbenches in the House of Lords and is sadly no longer a party member. In fighting to win Liverpool Edge Hill during the 1970s, he combined drive, determination and ambition with passion, inspiration and vision, mixing these assets with touches of ruthlessness and recklessness - all the characteristics needed by a candidate to turn a hopeless cause into a winnable seat. He was, and indeed is, a formidable campaigner. We may have won Edge Hill in a by-election the day after Jim Callaghan called the 1979 general election, but David would have gained it on his own three weeks later.

The question is, how do we find more such individuals? In the past, we have relied upon them finding us, but they are few in number and the burn-out rate is high. Surely we should be trying to develop strategies to find and nurture them? Simon Hughes has suggested that we advertise publicly for parliamentary candidates and I don’t dismiss the idea, despite all the problems attached to it. The party president is right to say that we must tap fresh blood, although I fear that the enthusiasm of new arrivals would quickly dissipate once the size of the task was appreciated. Perhaps the most we can do in reality is to open the eyes of some of our existing members and activists to opportunities they might be able to exploit.

In the North West, we launched our ‘breakthrough’ campaign immediately after the general election. I wrote to every candidate and councillor, and e-mailed the party members whose addresses we have on file. I asked those who would really like to become Liberal Democrat MPs to put their names forward - no time wasters please! More than 70 responded. Since then, we have held a meeting to explain the harsh realities and a social event to avoid them. We want to build a sense of esprit de corps and provide individuals with support and advice. Some have already made clear that they cannot give the commitment requirement. We have advised the rest to consider steps they should be taking now if their ambitions are serious. For example, we have told them to:



– Look at the figures and do the homework. Identify constituencies with potential and to which a total personal commitment could be made. Virgin territory may have lots to recommend it.

– Start selling themselves now. There is nothing in the party’s rules to prevent aspiring candidates from introducing themselves to local members before a selection contest can be called. They are right to want to know more about a constituency before putting their name forward.

– Get on the list of approved candidates.

– Challenge complacent incumbents. Past candidates start with a huge advantage in any selection contest but if they haven’t already taken the party forward it is unlikely that they ever will. If they are not prepared to give their all, they should move aside for someone who will do so.

– Recognise the need that

winning comes from helping others to win, and make it happen. The party’s credibility is established by people getting use to the idea that voting Lib Dem gets Lib Dems elected. As a rule of thumb, we will need to hold two-thirds of the council seats in a constituency by the time of the next parliamentary election if we are to have a chance of winning. The PPC may have to find the candidates and run the campaigns until local experience develops.

So acquire the skills. Take advantage of training opportunities available within the party.

Seek advice; it’s there to be had. Reinventing the wheel is not necessary. Liberal Democrats have created some very fine election-winning wheels and they only need to be hitched up to the right engine and adapted to local circumstances.

It’s easy to preach about what should be done; it takes very strongly motivated individuals to make it happen. If a dozen of the North West’s 70 ‘breakthrough’ respondents survive the course and end up building the next generation of target seats, I will be delighted. If other regions were to follow suit, the party’s prospects nationally would be given a very significant boost.

It’s not easy to answer the question of how do we find such people. My worry is that too few strategists in the party seem even to be asking it. To transform a constituency and turn it into a viable Liberal Democrat prospect takes time. Time before the next general election is already running out.

Chris Davies MEP represents the North West of England and is leader of the British Liberal Democrat MEPs

THE MAOISTS AND THE TROTSKYISTS

The Liberal Democrats' ideological vacuum has provided a breeding ground for fanatical cultures, warns Simon Titley

Observing the Liberal Democrats with increasingly morbid curiosity, I have finally identified the problem. A vague sense of being assailed by wild-eyed evangelicals eventually crystallised and triggered a Proustian memory rush. The party resembles the Marxist factions of student politics circa 1978.

What we find among Lib Dems today, however, is not Marxist policy but its style. This is about fanaticism and a quasi-religious political culture. It is about the reduction of politics to a personal quest for purity; of campaigning to a moral purgative; and of policy-making to a fundamentalist search for the ur-ideology. I shall call the guilty parties the 'Maoists' and the 'Trotskyists'.

Liberals have a tradition of applying Maoist labels, with the Young Liberal 'Red Guard' and the SDP's 'Gang of Four'. Today's 'Maoists' are another kettle of fish. These Lib Dem activists borrow from Maoism the cult of physical effort, personal sacrifice and anti-intellectualism. Just as 'revolution' became an end in itself for the original Maoists, today 'campaigning' has become the end rather than a means.

A recent incident brought this home. I met an old acquaintance who had been a party member in the past and had just moved to a new constituency. She decided to seek out the local Lib Dems with a view to rejoining. But she and her husband were not welcome – because they were not prepared to dedicate every evening and weekend to the cause. She would have been happy to help out now and again but unfortunately she possessed something that disqualified her from membership – a life.

The exaltation of physical effort above all else infests the party. Candidates are prized for their brawn rather than their brain. Handling the biggest casework load is regarded as the benchmark of personal worth. Besides this Maoist worker-heroism, one detects an old religious idea: the redemption of the human soul through suffering.

There is a corresponding disdain for thinking and ideas, regarded at best as a luxury, at worst as a sign of bourgeois dilettantism. How many local parties still host formal political debates? Not many, I'd wager. Instead, a relentless and crushing parochialism is the norm.

The Maoist flavour is carried through in the party's *Focus* leaflets. The headlines (which haven't changed in 25 years) are redolent of the clichéd slogans exhorting the workers on to ever-greater efforts. The stilted photos and corny artwork recall those socialist realism posters depicting stern-faced heroes of the revolution fulfilling their quotas.

All that is missing is the dreary Maoist propaganda songs. But it can only be a matter of time before someone at the ALDC composes Focus Team equivalents of those golden

oldies, *Generations Remember Chairman Mao's Kindness* and *How I Love To Carry My Dung Up The Mountain For The Commune*.

No-one disputes that campaigning is needed to win elections, and this requires a lot of effort, especially at election times. But something has gone wrong when tactics replace strategy, when activity becomes a substitute for ideas, and when campaigning becomes an end in itself.

Little wonder that, when the Lib Dems win elections, we get councils whose only distinctive policy is to run things a little more efficiently, and MPs who are 'super-councillors' but incapable of grasping the bigger picture.

A harsh judgement? Yes, but revisit the 1980 ALC booklet *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics* and judge for yourself the extent to which 'community politics' has been drained of its political content. The original idea was to empower people; delivering leaflets all year round was simply a means to that end. Without the empowerment dimension, community politics is a busted flush. When opponents discover how to target (as the Tories finally did in this year's general election), the Lib Dems have no real answer.

Local campaigning is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for achieving Liberalism. Not because it's the wrong strategy but because it's not a strategy at all. How many leaflets we deliver is less important than what we say in them. Winning control of councils has little point without some coherent idea of our purpose.

I laugh when I hear the party's self-styled 'economic liberals' talk as if there were, on the left of the party, some sort of coherent statist position. In reality, there is no organised thinking. Whenever some Lib Dem MP offers uncritical support to the public sector unions, this is no more than a reflex action by people who haven't had a fresh idea since David Steel's call for a national incomes policy. Such Lib Dems are ideologically drained and running on empty. And do you know why? It's because they're too busy carrying their dung up the mountain for the commune.

But if you're running on empty, that's no reason to fill your tank with snake oil.

A comparison of the Liberal Democrats' 'economic liberal' wing to Trotskyists might not seem immediately obvious. But they share a similar approach and some similar assumptions.

The really big problem with the 'economic liberals', the false assumption they share with socialist and conservative ideologues, the blunder that renders what they say so dangerous, is that they adopt an economic approach to politics. This is a narrow idea of progress, based on the premise that life is fundamentally about producing and consuming.

Economism assumes not only that economics is of paramount importance but also that every decision we make in our lives is governed principally by economic criteria; that all our choices are akin to selecting a brand of washing powder. It is a cold, bleak take on life.

As Liberals, and indeed as human beings, we should take a contrary view. The things that make life worth living, which enable us to fulfil our potential, which make us free, are not ultimately economic. They are about the human spirit. They are to do with family and community, love and friendship, sharing and learning, nature and art. Economics is simply a means to an end; it is there to produce the goods and services we need and nothing more. It should never be elevated to the status of a religion.

It follows that we should not make a fetish of the market. For Liberals, the market is not a 'value' in the same way a state-controlled economy is for a socialist. The market can advance individual freedom and choice – and more often than not does – but it can also threaten them. It should be judged pragmatically on its outcomes.

But the 'economic liberals' do make a fetish of the market and that is their second big problem – the mixing of religion with politics. For them, the market is God-given and therefore sacrosanct. It is the 'natural order of things' so any attempt to modify it represents 'interference'. In reality, the market is a man-made system of exchange and, when it fails, we can and should do something about it.

Despite this, the 'Liberal Future' group claims on its website that Liberalism "is the belief that the market is the best guarantor of personal choice and freedom". Really? Every time? Tell me, do you judge your political freedom by the number and variety of yoghurts available on the supermarket shelf?

People have won their political freedoms by acting politically. But not in Liberal Future's view. They claim, "Liberalism is not collectivism. Collectivism is a group of people acting towards a common goal. Interest groups are a form of collectivism, whether they be Trade Unions, the CBI and even environmental groups."

So you want to join with like-minded people to achieve a common goal? Sorry mate, that's not on. The only choice you're allowed is that of an atomised individual consumer. On Day One of Mark Oaten's premiership, expect the reintroduction of the Combination Act.

The third big problem with the 'economic liberals', again one that they share with Trotskyists, is a belief that hidden away somewhere is the ur-ideology; in this case, a pure form of Liberalism, which must be unearthed and adhered to. This was evident in the writings of David Laws and Paul Marshall in their introduction to the *Orange Book*, which were based on a quasi-religious notion of the 'fall', the fallacy that we had once been pure Liberals but then deviated from the true path.

But 'pure Liberalism' has never existed. There is no original source for any would-be Liberal fundamentalist: no 'Bible', no 'Koran', no 'Das Kapital'. Liberalism has always been a dynamic philosophy. To suggest that we should return to, say, Cobden's worldview of the 1840s would be as absurdly ritualistic (and anachronistic) as the adherence of the Pennsylvania Amish to eighteenth-century clothes and technology.

On the outer fringes of the party is a small group of 'economic liberals' who indulge in just such rituals on their weblogs. It makes for depressing reading. If you or I were to

explore our basic values, we would search in our hearts. They look in the dictionary. For them, politics is about refining the purest possible semantic definition. Their 'Liberalism' is an austere abstraction, unconcerned with the practical consequences for people's quality of life. Never mind that people might, in the words of the preamble to the Liberal Democrat constitution, "be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity." The important question for them is, how many angels can dance on a pinhead?

The fourth big problem with the 'economic liberals' – very Trotskyist this – is their underhand methods. They have, as regular readers of *Radical Bulletin* know, indulged in such tactics as character assassination through anonymous briefings to the press; issuing partisan press releases that are spun as a 'change in party policy'; and picking fights then accusing their opponents of making trouble.

But their most pernicious tactic is an attempt to frame the debate. They play Orwellian word games, co-opting the words 'Liberal', 'Orange', 'new' and 'modern', while forbidding their opponents to use terms against them such as 'conservative' or 'right-wing'. They claim that their rather antiquated standpoint equals 'new thinking' and that anyone who disagrees is a 1945-vintage social democrat – no other option exists. This attempt to monopolise discourse by excluding any other possibility is misrepresenting the issues and inhibiting real debate.

As far as these slick games go, I suppose that's politics. But so is the backlash of exposure, criticism and counter-attacks. The 'economic liberals' should stop acting so shocked when anyone dares to challenge them. They like to dish it out, but obviously don't like it up 'em.

A major reason I am a Liberal is an awareness of the ruination of millions of people's lives over the past century caused by the extreme pursuit of abstract principles. I therefore find the purist and economic views of the so-called 'economic liberals' immoral, delusional and insulting to the human spirit. They cannot tell the difference between liberty and licence. Their concept of liberty is of free-floating rights divorced from any sense of responsibility to others.

The merger created the conditions in which it was possible to say nothing or anything. It is now sufficiently long ago for the party to lose its intellectual and ideological inhibitions.

The Liberal Democrats need to rediscover their belief in empowerment. The challenge is 'giantism', both of the state and corporate variety, and the alienation and insecurity this creates. The stale 'private good, public bad' dogma of the 'economic liberals' is irrelevant, as are the lazy social democratic reflexes of the ritual campaigners.

It is desperately sad that, instead of working to achieve genuine empowerment, there is one group of party members whose only response to fundamental political problems is to apply the sticking-plaster of casework; and another whose answer is effectively to let rip the power of big business and allow the weak to go to the wall.

We can do better.

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AFRAID OF BEING RIGHT?

Iain Sharpe wonders whether Liberals have the courage of their convictions

Over the years, I have often bemoaned the gap between the Liberal Democrats' avowed philosophical principles and the policies it in practice adopts. In particular, I have fretted about the contradictions in the party's attitudes towards issues such as personal freedom and decentralisation of public services.

A document such as *It's About Freedom* gets a near unanimous welcome from conference, but it is not used to inform subsequent policy. One year later, after much deliberation, the party agrees to make the theme of its approach to public services, 'quality, innovation, choice'. Not long afterwards, the party's education spokesman, with the support of party conference, makes opposition to choice ('not choice for the few') a cornerstone of Liberal Democrat education policy.

So it is good news that the party has recognised the problem and is addressing it through the *Meeting the Challenge* working group. The idea is to give a clearer sense of the party's narrative and themes, and how the policies are connected by values. I don't flatter myself that someone has been listening to me and taking notice, but it is good to know I am not alone in my concern.

In *Liberator* 303, Duncan Brack outlined how *Meeting the Challenge* would work. He rightly pointed out that often there are connections between our policies and our philosophy, but these are not always clearly spelled out.

For example, many people supported local income tax because it was fair and knew it was Liberal Democrat policy, but didn't connect the two. Presumably, they assumed that we had accidentally stumbled upon such a fair-minded policy. So in this case, it's a simple matter of communicating to the electorate that our policies are driven by a commitment to fairness, by which we mean giving priority to the needs of the poor and marginalised over the rich and powerful.

So far, so good, but I don't think it's always going to be quite so easy. Another theme the Liberal Democrats often stress is decentralisation. I notice that this is being much discussed at present. Over the summer, the *Daily Telegraph* published a series of articles on localism by leading Conservative politicians. Localism is also being taken up as a theme by some members of the Labour government, notably David Miliband at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Two of the more serious media pundits, Simon Jenkins and Polly Toynbee, have also had something to say on this theme. Jenkins has published a pamphlet arguing for what he calls 'big bang localism', meaning a significant devolution of powers from central to local government. In a series of talks for BBC Radio 4's *The Westminster Hour* entitled 'Mad as Hell', he argues that the centralism of Thatcher, Major and

Blair has led to unprecedented dissatisfaction with our public services and that we need "breakneck devolution to all existing units of local government". He points out that Britain has the most centralised system in Europe for delivering public services.

Contrast this approach with that doyen of *Guardian* columnists, Polly Toynbee. Writing recently about the government's SureStart programme, which provides nursery care for the under-5s, she lamented the government's failure to ringfence the money given to local authorities for this purpose.

She laments that local authorities will be able to spend the money "as they please, on projects they prefer" and that "councils will get free use of the under-5s' cash". So it's champagne and strawberries all-round for councillors, while toddlers starve!

It never occurs to Toynbee that councillors and councils have their own electoral mandate, that often they know the needs of their communities better than officials in Whitehall, that they too may care about the wellbeing of the under-5s. If they choose to spend money on 'projects they prefer', it may be because such projects actually help the wellbeing of their constituents better than simply following the diktat of central government.

Which of these two approaches would Liberal Democrats prefer? Since the party proclaims its commitment to decentralisation, one would imagine that its activists would like Jenkins's radical devolution better than Toynbee's Blairite dirigisme.

I wish I could be quite so sure. For a start, Jenkins makes no mention of regionalism – that great Liberal shibboleth with which so few ordinary citizens identify. Secondly, he supports directly-elected mayors, which Liberals instinctively oppose. And he argues for multi-layered local government with real power given to quite small units. This would conflict with the views of many Lib Dem councillors who demonstrate their commitment to local government by trying to get rid of county councils and create large unitary authorities that will be more remote from the people they serve.

There are other ways in which many Lib Dems would feel more comfortable with Toynbee rather than Jenkins. What if powerful local authorities decided to opt-out of nationwide bans on smoking in public places or wanted to allow fairgrounds to give out goldfish as prizes in their areas? Worse still, they might decide to make parental choice the cornerstone of their secondary transfer policy, contrary to the wishes of Lib Dem conference and parliamentary spokespersons.

But, most importantly, Jenkins has a suspect past. He supported many of Thatcher's early reforms. Even now, his primary criticism of her concerns the failure to really get government off people's backs. He even supported Steve Norris against Ken Livingstone in the London mayoral election. By contrast, Toynbee, despite a brief flirtation with Owenism in the late 1980s, is unequivocally a figure of the left – a Labour supporter who constantly demands more intervention in people's lives and who is proud to champion the 'nanny state'.

For many of those in the Lib Dems who consider themselves radicals, the core belief or 'golden thread' is not about decentralisation, individual freedom, environmentalism or whatever; it's about not being right-wing.

That's why the party has never truly been able to set out what it means by a radical non-socialist alternative to conservatism (to use Jo Grimond's phrase of 40 or more years ago).

It's why much of the work of the Unservile State group in the 1960s was cherry-picked by the Conservatives for their own ends but abandoned by Liberals. It's why we first thought of popular policies such as selling council houses, but opposed them when they were actually implemented. It's why the Alliance failed to understand the phenomenon of Thatcherism and published manifestos that even a sympathetic critic described as promising "a better yesterday".

Avoiding any taint of 'being right-wing' also explains the way the *Orange Book* was trashed by some Lib Dems as neo-Thatcherite without any attempt to engage with its arguments. It is why there was not a serious debate about its contents, but a ritual round of name-calling. Maybe *Orange Book* apologists were guilty of spinning it as an attempt to move the party to the right, but its opponents within the Lib Dems did just as much damage. For too many in the party, all that is necessary to damn a policy is to describe something as 'right-wing'. No further argument is needed.

This is a pity, because it more or less rules out any practical new thinking within the party or any kind of sensible debate about the economy or public services.

Maybe someone working for a think tank is about to have a 'eureka' moment and discover the secret of making socialist planning work. Or maybe someone could revive the kind of ecological 'zero-growth' mumbo jumbo that did the rounds in some progressive circles in the 1980s. But most likely, for the foreseeable future the key debates will involve trying to promote a healthy private and a healthy public sector. Any serious forward thinking is going to have to take on board the experience and lessons of Thatcherism and Blairism. If the only policies that are acceptable to a significant proportion of Liberal Democrats are ones that see a greater role for the state and a lesser one for business, we are heading up an intellectual cul-de-sac.

Or perhaps we could become a nostalgia party, winning support from those who yearn for those halcyon days of the Lib-Lab pact and the Callaghan government, before privatisation was heard of and when public services were just wonderful.

My concern is that, if the Liberal Democrats do outline their ideological framework, then many people in the party won't like it if our leaders then apply it to real situations. It is far more comfortable to retreat into soggy social democracy when confronted by difficult issues.

When I first joined the party in the middle 1980s, many Liberals seemed nervous of proclaiming their commitment to individual liberty, because the concept had been appropriated by self-styled libertarians in the Conservative Party and had the taint of Thatcherism about it. In the same way, I fear that enough Telegraph editorials, speeches by Conservative MPs and pamphlets by the likes of Simon Jenkins about localism will make many Liberal Democrats decide that decentralisation is a dangerous, right-wing notion that we should repudiate.

The recent election probably revealed the limits of what can be achieved by Rennardist local campaigning alone. The Liberal Democrats now have to try to create an intellectual climate that wins hearts and minds. The next challenge is to persuade people not just to vote for us this time, but to say 'I am a Liberal Democrat'. Our view of the world needs to be consistent and coherent.

As it happens, I think that decentralisation is an idea whose time has come, and that the past few years have shown that public services cannot be improved simply by a succession of targets set from the centre. But we need to accept some hard facts: that regional government is now a dead duck; that there really will be different levels of service in different parts of the country; and that we may find ourselves being closer to liberal Conservatives than to nannyish New Labourites. In short, we need to have the courage of our convictions and say it is more important to be liberal than to be 'left'.

There is a tremendous opportunity now available for the Liberal Democrats to aim at a distinctive gap in the political market that ties in very closely with our professed principles. For a party that is against big government, for personal freedom and local solutions, but which is responsible enough to support a thriving private sector and continued growth.

It's perhaps worth remembering that perceptions of what is 'right' and what is 'left' can change. For much of the twentieth century, low public spending, free trade and free markets were seen as 'right-wing' ideas. In the nineteenth century, they were bitterly opposed by Conservatives and endorsed by radicals as a way of expanding opportunity for everyone and opposing entrenched privilege. Perhaps this will change again during the twenty-first century.

The important thing is that as liberals we should define ourselves not by our position on the political spectrum relative to other parties but by confidently articulating how our principles are relevant to the problems of our age. Will we have the confidence to do so?

Iain Sharpe is Liberal Democrat group leader and a cabinet member on Watford Borough Council.

FIRST HOMES FIRST

The freedom to buy a second home may conflict with people's freedom to continue to live in their own community. Tim Farron argues that affordable housing is the more important consideration for Liberals

It took 99 years for Westmorland and Lonsdale to return to the Liberal fold following our only previous victory in the constituency back in 1906 (bringing new hope to the local party in Rutland South-West!)

The constituency had been in Tory hands ever since. It contains places like Windermere, Hawkshead, Kendal, Grasmere and Grange-over-Sands. You would probably assume that ours is an affluent area and that all in the garden is rosy, but you would be wrong.

The average annual income in south Cumbria is roughly £16,000, whereas average house prices are a little over £200,000. Home ownership is beyond the means of most people who are not already on the property ladder – and, as the party's new youth affairs spokesperson, I am bound to say that this affects young people most of all.

Worse still, the availability of decent social rented accommodation is pitifully low, with the majority of the local council's housing stock now sold off. To add insult to injury, I have seen former council properties – built with the intention of housing the working people of the Lake District – fetching £300,000+ on the open market, often becoming second homes.

Our situation is made worse by the inflexibility of the larger of our two national parks (the Lake District) when it comes to proposals to create new affordable housing for rent or purchase; and the ever increasing proportion of local properties that are second homes.

The right to buy a second home is a right that I recognise. But as every good social Liberal knows, when different liberties compete, we are called to make a progressive value judgement and curtail the liberty of one in order to protect the liberty of the other.

To give you a live example (one of many I could employ), there are around 200 properties in Satterthwaite, a village nestling in between the lakes Windermere and Coniston. Around half of the houses in Satterthwaite are second homes that are lived in for (at most) just a few weeks a year. The people who own those second homes are nice folks, they love the village and many of them will make Satterthwaite their first home when they retire.

Of course, no one from those houses attends a local school, rarely does anyone from those houses make use of local businesses or use local transport links.

Consequently, Satterthwaite primary school closed down this year, the local post office closed a year or two back and the local bus service to Coniston was stopped due to lack of demand.

All of these things happened because the community which had supported those services was allowed to flicker on

the edge of viability as a result of the relentless whims of the free market. Stereotypically, solicitors from Manchester want second homes and they are able to outbid local people in order to buy them. At the same time as they take properties that might otherwise have provided decent homes for local people, they also inflate the price of property. This then puts other houses out of the reach of the local population, especially the young.

Although not every community in my constituency suffers Satterthwaite's level of excessive second home ownership, the entire area is detrimentally affected. Across my patch, one in seven properties is a second home, with some areas struggling even more than Satterthwaite (70% of Troutbeck's properties are second homes).

Some 27% of young people in Westmorland and Lonsdale leave the area and never return, largely because they simply can't afford to live here and because rented accommodation is not available to them.

From the youth affairs perspective, I am extremely concerned about the availability of affordable housing for young people nationwide and see this as a huge issue on which the Liberal Democrats ought to be able to campaign with integrity, success and significant popularity. But if we are to do this, then we need not to be squeamish about the stark necessity to override the market in order to create real freedom.

Among the many crimes against civilisation perpetrated by the Thatcher government was the dogmatic and reckless mass sale of council housing without those properties being replaced in the social sector. Those properties have now leaked into the open market and are beyond the reach of the overwhelming majority of young people – or indeed anyone – at least in my constituency. The loss of council properties under 'right to buy' is still going on, and no one dares to call a halt to this madness (indeed the Tories propose the extension of 'right to buy' to housing association tenants). But this is another example of competing liberties: does your right to buy eclipse my right to rent when I have no other alternative? Surely any right-minded Liberal will answer 'no'.

In rural areas such as mine, the right to buy a second home leads directly to the complete absence of affordable homes for local people (especially young people). That unfettered right to buy a second home leads to the slow but certain death of communities and the miserable isolation of the elderly and others who cling on in moribund three-quarters-empty villages which have been stripped of their basic services (pubs, shops, post offices, schools) due to the absence of demand from their rarely-resident new neighbours.

A freedom in theory that is not a freedom in practice is no freedom at all.

The freedom of the average local twenty-something to have a home (rented or owned) in Westmorland is a freedom in theory but not a freedom in practice. The freedom of the Manchester solicitor (sincere apologies to all of that ilk – nothing personal you know. Some of my best friends...) to a buy a second home is indeed a freedom in practice, but it is a freedom which contributes to the negation of the freedom of the aforementioned Westmerian twenty-something.

Although it is a value judgement to say that the right to have a decent first home is a more important liberty than the right to own a second home, it is surely a no-brainer for any civilised human being (and easier still for a Liberal Democrat!).

The problem we face now is that this government is proposing to make things significantly worse.

In a staggeringly gutless and short-termist response to the pensions crisis, the government is proposing to create deliberate incentives for the relatively affluent to replace or supplement their uncertain savings and stock market based pension schemes with the relative security of a pension based on investment in property.

The likely outcome of this is the concentration of residential property in the hands of the relatively-well-off at the expense of the not-so-well-off, who will see the availability of housing for that old fashioned purpose of 'living in it' (how quaint) dwindle while prices spiral up. This is a problem that will affect rural and urban alike, as those who can afford to buy additional properties will do so not just in idyllic settings, but in any location where their investment is likely to accrue in value.

At this point, we must be absolutely clear that this initiative (and Mrs T's great council housing sell-off) is just as much an intervention in the economy as are those we might suggest to limit second home ownership. So let's not get reticent about sticking our oar in here if the outcome is

promotion of greater liberty. We can make a significant difference, for example, if we were to make the purchase of a property for use as a second home count as a 'change of use' in planning terms (and to restrict that practice), by levying significant additional taxation on the owners of under-occupied properties and by providing councils with effective powers to enforce an expanded use of local occupancy clauses.

In all of this, I am extremely sensitive to the charge that I might sound like one of the fictional residents of Royston Vasey ("are you local?").

I have no desire to allow the pursuit of extremes and, just as I am horrified at the extreme situation where entire villages become weekday ghost towns, so I am equally opposed to any extreme proposal to eliminate second home ownership, especially when the purchase of that second home could be the precursor to the owners eventually moving to the area on a permanent basis. Even if not, there is some evidence that a relatively modest level of second home ownership is of value to local tourism. Even ignoring this, as liberals we simply have to tolerate a level of second home ownership irrespective of whether or not it is advantageous in any way.

In the end, this is a question of balance, but as things stand the situation is anything but balanced and only bold (but sensitive) intervention can correct that imbalance. Doing nothing – especially in the face of the government's new proposals encouraging property-based 'pensions' – is not an option for any social Liberal.

Doing nothing will result in the death of communities, the isolation of the few remaining (mostly elderly) full-time residents, and the removal of any practical right to a home for young people and the less well off throughout the UK, especially in areas like mine.

Tim Farron is Liberal Democrat MP for Westmorland and Lonsdale, and the party's youth affairs spokesperson.

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YOU ALWAYS UPSET SOMEONE

Any policy worth having will offend someone, and any leader's style will turn off others. It is useless to try to tailor the Liberal Democrats' appeal to supporters of other parties, argues Alan Sherwell

I think that it is always wise to hold off commenting on general election results - what went right and what went wrong and what we do now - until a few months have passed, because gut reactions are dangerous and often wrong. Things are better considered in the cold light of day.

One issue that is emerging (although it is not new) is the "should we target Labour or Conservative seats/votes" one.

Debating this is by and large futile. Firstly, because we should develop a policy programme that we believe to be right and then market it as best we can to anyone likely to be attracted to it.

Secondly, because, to gain a seat, we need the leading party to lose enough votes to be beatable and the other to provide us with enough votes to overtake them. Thus an over-appeal to party A's supporters that alienates party B's will be self-defeating except in landslide years.

In passing, it is worth knocking on the head the idea that there is an irreducible 30% Conservative vote. Experience on the ground indicates that the fact that the total Tory vote has been consistent for the last three elections has masked a significant shift in and out of their camp. For instance, in this election we had traditional Tories deserting them because of their quasi-racist approach and traditional Labour voters moving to them for the same reason.

More importantly, polls that ask people whether they consider themselves to be a party loyalist indicate that progressively fewer people identify strongly with the party that they support. This has the counter-intuitive result that, while the Tory vote has shrunk over the last two decades, the percentage of that residual vote that would describe themselves as Conservative has shrunk even more. Only about one-fifth of the population describes itself as 'Conservative'. So, it is not true that the rump vote is irreducible. That is not to say that we should make unbalanced efforts to reduce it, only that we should not assume that it cannot happen.

The next question is why, when our vote went up and the Tory vote was static, did we lose seats to the Tories? Part of that is that there were genuine regional differences in this election, but more importantly the Tories are beginning to understand the old cliché, 'where we work, we win'.

The tactics of community politics are inflationary. The more you do, the more the bad guys do. Where once four leaflets a year between elections sufficed, we have now got to the stage where, when Andrew Stunell's new Risograph

broke down after five months, the engineer apologised and said, "You do realize that you have printed over a million copies don't you?"

In Ludlow, the Tories reputedly spent more than £150,000. If this carries on, we will have an ever increasing level of activist and helper burn out and we will end up sending a personalised target *Focus* to every elector each week!

Of course, while the tactics are inflationary, the principles aren't. We need to remember that *Focus* is vital but it is the means, not the end. We are doing our best at local level to demonstrate our principles in action and it is vital that we remember that that is the point of the exercise and work harder to ensure that we have a holistic, principled and logical approach to what we are doing, so that we are not simply 'those nice people who get the drains unblocked'.

It is also worth noting that the original principle behind *Focus* largely seems to have been forgotten. It has become, above all else, a means of getting people elected.

The original thrust of community politics was far more about empowering people. Making the 'ordinary citizen' realise that they could influence their own destiny if only they worked and campaigned together with like-minded people in their area. This is not the place to debate how the empowerment side of community politics seems to have disappeared nor what should be done about that. However, it is, perhaps, not coincidental that the absence of this key element of our message coincides with the greatest disillusion with politics and politicians ever recorded.

A further reason why arguing about whether we are trying to take votes from A or B is silly, is that the willingness of people to switch from their traditional allegiance depends not just on what we are doing but also on how their other preference is performing.

We may guess that Labour will be further down in four years time and, therefore, that Labour votes will be ripe for the picking but we don't know that. A strategy based on guesswork and wish fulfilment is not a recipe for success. We must be sufficiently flexible that we can take advantage of whatever situation pertains between the other two. We cannot determine their strengths with respect to each other but we can be ready to take advantage of it. Indeed, one unequivocally good effect of the last election is that, for the first time, there are a significant number of Labour seats that are realistic targets.

Furthermore, many of them are real Labour seats (like Brent East and Rochdale) and not traditional Tory ones (like Bristol West), which got a Labour MP because of the state of the Tory party rather than the strength of Labour.

We then have the argument that this or that policy lost us votes. Well, excuse me, we used to complain that no-one knew what our policies were – now they do, we complain that they don't like them.

The reality is that any distinctive position on any issue is going to lose votes as well as win them. It is not appropriate to debate local income tax here but, if the burden of local taxation needs to be shifted – and it does – then any policy devised to ease the burden in some area inevitably disadvantages someone else. It is legitimate to ask whether we need a manifesto commitment in some areas but, assuming that we do (and council tax was and is certainly an area where that is the case), then the question is – is this the right policy? And, if it is, how do we best explain it to those who gain from it and how do we justify it to those who lose from it?

In all of this, it is necessary to remember the blindingly obvious, which is that a proportion of people who say they won't vote Lib Dem because of policy X actually won't vote Lib Dem because they actively identify with another party and have no intention of ever doing so.

Like the elector who said that he would not vote for us because he was against the 50% tax band and local income tax, and who, when asked if he thought that it was right that he was being subsidised by pensioners and people on low incomes, said that that was fine as far as he was concerned, that was their problem.

Then there is the question of the leader. There is a temptation to say that leading Liberal Democrats is like trying to herd cats. The party is not necessarily very good at being led, and that might not be a bad thing. Locally, it was my view that we should do everything democratically until the campaign opens – after which the democratically selected agent/campaign team is a dictatorship answerable to the local party after the event. Nationally, there is a question of whether there is sufficient democracy within the campaign structure between elections, and that is seriously worth addressing but, once the campaign starts, we have to act as if the right people are in place but be prepared to raise questions afterwards.

So, was Charles the right person? Well, we can play 'what ifs' but it seems to me that there were three issues on which criticism might be based. Firstly, the messed up local income tax press conference – the press and, to some extent our opponents, tried to make hay out of this but, basically, they failed.

Charles had a newborn son and people's sympathy was with him. I imagine that not a few mums and dads were saying, "I couldn't have dreamt of tackling anything serious so soon after mine was born." It is not a mistake that we can afford to repeat but I see no evidence that it damaged us this time.

Secondly, Charles' laid-back style. Certainly, some electors did not like this, wanting a presidential and authoritative figure. Others clearly saw the difference as very positive and liked the warmer, more inclusive style. The whole thing is the same as the policy issue. If our person is visibly different than the others, then that will lose us votes as well as win them. Charles was elected leader because he is Charles and the party knew that when he was elected. It is not reasonable to then wish he were Paddy or (God forbid) David Owen. Anyway, shouldn't we welcome the fact that the Liberal Democrat leader has a Liberal style?

Thirdly, there is the criticism that we didn't always emphasise the right issues. This implies that we had the power to choose the emphasis. The reality is that you can hold a press conference on what you like and the press can ask questions on what they like – so if (say) Iraq is the story, then it is the story.

As someone who did not vote for Charles, I must say that I find what appears to be briefing against him rather distasteful. He is who he is, and has done a significantly better job than I expected. I do wonder if some of this is not the despairing cries of some of a generation of MPs who fear that they have missed the chance of leading the party because there are now two generations below them who are collectively significantly more talented.

One thing that we did not do well was to recognise where a local campaign was going down the tubes and move what moveable resources we had accordingly.

I understand that EARS showed us winning Orpington and Guildford and that this was not simply crap canvassing – the Richmond formula is under review. We must improve our intelligence and be prepared to accept that the orthodoxy 18 months out is not necessarily right 18 days out. Of course we will never predict the Nottingham Easts of this world but we can do better. All the signs are that dramatic progress is possible if we learn the lessons and go for it.

Alan Sherwell is leader of the Liberal Democrat group on Aylesbury Vale Council, and a former chair of the Federal Conference Committee.

FAIRNESS AND TAX

Liberals agree that all taxes should be 'fair' but they should not assume that the only equitable source is earned income, argues Tony Vickers

Most Liberal Democrats equate 'fairness' in taxation with 'ability to pay' and then exclusively with income tax. As a lifelong Liberal, I find this an extraordinary perversion of economics, of the meaning of 'fair' and of the party's history.

My dictionary offers 24 meanings of the adjective 'fair', one of which is "apparently good or valuable, but really false". Income tax is, I agree, that kind of 'fair'. You may prefer 'equal shares or treatment', as in 'fair do's'. Or the vague 'correctly', which doesn't help at all. Ed Davey, perhaps the champion of the 'Axed The Tax' campaign, speaking at the same time of the electoral cycle in a Liberal Summer School in late 2001 on *Can Taxation be Fair and Popular?*, said: "Fairness in tax debates tends to be linked almost exclusively with distributional issues," and "The classic fair tax is income tax, since it is directly linked to ability to pay."

The Lib Dems' Tax Commission's consultation paper echoes this in its section on principles: "Fairness reflects the presumption that tax raised should relate to the taxpayer's ability to pay" (calling this 'vertical equity') but then reminding us that "'Ability to pay' can relate to income or wealth or both," which we often forget.

There are different kinds of income and wealth, and there is not necessarily synonymy between 'fairness' and 'equity'. The latter, as a noun, can be defined as 'the quality of being impartial or reasonable' or, in legal terminology 'a system founded on principles of natural justice or fair conduct'.

Income from labour or capital is 'earned' and arguably belongs to the recipient equitably, whereas income from what economists call 'rent' does not. All income becomes wealth and it is hard to distinguish which portion of a person's wealth is earned in accordance with natural justice – fairly or equitably – and which is not.

For most people, their home is their main form of wealth. Its value generally continues to grow effortlessly with little risk by comparison with other forms of wealth. A home is in the classical economic sense partly capital (the 'bricks and mortar', which require maintenance) but largely land, which is the passive factor in all production without which no human activity or wealth is possible.

Traditionally, Whigs and Liberals opposed income tax and favoured the taxation of property. When Adam Smith propounded his first maxim of taxation to be that it should be 'equal or equitable' – that taxpayers "ought to contribute to the support of the government... in proportion to the revenues which they respectively enjoy" – income tax had not been invented. Income is fundamentally a 'good': mainly the fruits of work. By taxing it, we make work more expensive, just as by taxing profits we reduce the store of capital that can be applied by entrepreneurs to help labour

work more effectively. Taxes on income and profits help drive labour and enterprise out of work. Is that fair?

I maintain it to be a crucial principle of 'natural justice' that, so long as society fails to tax economic rent to the fullest extent that can be obtained under the current social and political system, it is wholly unfair to tax income and capital so much. I am not so naïve as to expect a sudden axing of all such taxes. However, every pound raised by taxes on rent, such as land value taxation (LVT), allows abatement of a pound in taxes on work. I say we should seek as much reduction of taxes on 'goods' and as much revenue from 'common wealth' as we can. Our title deeds give us the right to exclusive use of our property but should not 'enclose' all future rental value, which derives from the sustained prosperity of our communities. I don't see why homes should be a wholly tax-free zone.

By all means scrap council tax, which is an unloved bastard. But replacing it all with local income tax (LIT), while introducing site value rating (SVR) only for non-domestic land, makes it far harder to introduce any domestic site value based tax in future. It is far easier to administer LVT/SVR on residential land than commercial land, easier still to have no distinction between any types of land. I don't think it is a good idea to scrap the only tax there is on most peoples' wealth, without replacing it – at least in part – with another tax on domestic site values. Would the electoral sky fall on a serious political party if it were to suggest this? Based on my experience as a doorstep politician and six years of research on these matters, I think not.

My proposal builds on the three-party (Labour, Lib Dem & Green) Oxfordshire LVT Study, which reported in February 2005, and also on a 2004 paper by Professor John Muellbauer of Nuffield College Oxford, a Treasury Adviser. All land would be liable for LVT (except land covered by the EU's CAP regime, which is another story!) but domestic owner-occupied sites would have a Homestead Allowance, with the first, say, £80,000 of site value initially tax-free. Tenants would pay no LVT, which would be levied on owners. (This would encourage larger landlords to sell part of the equity to tenants, thereby transferring wealth to them to make them 'owners'). If we accept that a tax-free income allowance is fair, why not a tax-free wealth allowance for 'living space'?

The revenue from LVT would be shared between central and local government, so that geographic inequalities in wealth (house/land values) between local authority areas would be largely equalised; the north would pay less LVT than the south. The central government take from LVT would roughly equate to the sum now handed out (through an incredibly complex grants system) to local authorities, and would be matched by an equivalent reduction in other

national taxes. Local government take would match that from non-domestic rates plus the shortfall from replacing council tax with LIT.

The reform would have to be synchronised with revaluation work and might need to take several years but would result in a property tax that was cheaper to administer, with 'rolling revaluation' of all site values. Most modern property taxes undergo far more frequent revaluations. The failure to revalue council tax, as with the old rates before it, was a major cause of unfairness.

Both LIT and LVT would be administered by the Inland Revenue. Local governments' share of LVT, from all kinds of land, would be set by councils themselves annually – as with LIT – and adjusted through the income tax system in the way that 'Schedule A' (notional 'revenue enjoyed' by owners on their main residence) used to be administered until it was abandoned in the 1950s. Councils would precept on Inland Revenue, as has been suggested for LIT.

Each land site has its own 'ability to pay' rent or tax, given to its owner by a combination of natural locational advantage and the investment and labour of the wider community. This applies to all categories of land, according to the use to which the planning system allows sites to be put. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, current use would be assumed as the basis for valuation. There is sufficient private rented housing nowadays in most areas to allow domestic rental value to be assessed. With a Homestead Allowance discount, few income-poor owners would pay more than under council tax and the balance of funding local government – which the Tax Commission admits is actually made worse by our current LIT proposals taken on their own – would be significantly improved across all land uses.

It is nonsense to claim that 'asset-rich income-poor' homeowners couldn't pay LVT. Cruise liners and furniture stores are full of the Saga generation who, having paid off their mortgage, can look forward to a life of luxury – thanks to the value of their home and equity release financial products. As a baby boomer myself, I can identify with Gareth Epps's contrast (*Liberator* 304) between life for my generation and what my sons and grandson can expect. As middling-earners with no mortgage, my wife and I could afford to buy another flat to let – as an investment for our sons to share. Nearly a third of new flats are being snapped up locally by people doing the same; renting to people who are often on a higher income than either of us yet come nowhere near being able to get a mortgage. We have a housing market that only those who don't need to enter can afford to do so! And our party proposes a policy (LIT) that will add to house prices and further disadvantage tenants and favour property owners. In most of the south east, homes have recently gained more in value each day – and their owners more in wealth unearned – than the take-home pay of the average worker. Is it fair to propose an increase in tax on income and scrap the only tax on domestic wealth?

A fair society, in liberal terms, should not tolerate a situation where the only members of its younger generation able to acquire wealth through property are those with rich and generous parents. As Andy Mayer put it in *Free Radical* recently, "Defence of the right of intergenerational transfer is a Tory not a liberal principle." Whether we see it happen by careful probate planning (avoiding inheritance tax) or by parents helping children onto the property ladder, it is surely unfair. Yet the sad truth is that Lib Dem policy condones the

widening division in society between home-owning 'have' families and renting 'have-nots'.

If we are to be true to our heritage, we should see to it that a hundred years after the greatest Liberal Budget in history set out to usher in a welfare state financed from land values, we recognise that the unfair taxes which their Lordships forced on our forebears then must start to be reduced. What Smith called "the species of revenue which can best bear to have a peculiar tax imposed" (land rents) remains the fairest tax of all. Tuck it inside a residual income tax, which local government can then share, and you might actually have a Fair Tax after all.

Tony Vickers is a West Berkshire councillor, land policy researcher and Chair of ALTER (www.libdemsalter.org.uk). He is a member of the Liberal Democrat Tax Commission. His paper *Tax Shift Now: Regaining our Common Wealth* was published as an online discussion document by the Centre for Reform in September 2005 (www.cfr.org.uk).

Copies of the report *The Oxfordshire Land Value Taxation Study* can be obtained from Andy Crick, Lib Dem Group Office, Vale of White Horse District Council, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 3JE (email: Andy.Crick@whitehorsedc.gov.uk).

John Muellbauer's paper *Property and Land, Taxation and the Economy after the Barker Review* is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/eBooks/1859352618.pdf).

BOG STANDARD

Closed public lavatories are a health hazard, not a laughing matter, says Andrew Hudson

Around 20 years ago, Mitcham and Morden Liberals achieved a degree of everlasting fame when they submitted an unsuccessful conference motion on public lavatories, and their name was used for an award given annually by this magazine for the worst motion submitted to conference.

However, inadequate provision of public lavatories is a serious issue. One of the initial reasons for the development of local government in the nineteenth century was to tackle public health and the provision of clean water. Cholera, typhus and dysentery were rife; the provision of clean water and sanitation lead to a dramatic reduction in the mortality rate.

These functions have largely been removed from local authorities, with water supply and drainage being firstly nationalised then sold off to private companies, which effectively have the power to raise taxes through the water rate. This is possibly the only case of taxation without representation in the UK, as no one is obliged to have gas and in theory it is possible to live without being connected to an electricity supplier but water is essential.

Public lavatories, however, remain a local authority function although they are not a statutory one and they are increasingly being closed, locked at night or being replaced by automatic public conveniences where there is a charge.

I suspect many Liberator readers are old enough to remember the rhyme, “Here am I broken hearted, paid a penny and only farted,” which dates from the era of charges for sitting down. Women were penalised by this fee until the sex discrimination act came into force

Current provision is increasingly being done through ‘partnership’ with private enterprise, often in shopping centres or chain stores. This may well work during normal office hours but commercial provision ends when the premises close.

Public lavatories are usually nowadays locked at night, with three reasons being given: vandalism, assault and misuse. Provision for public transport is, if anything, worse. Most station facilities are locked at night and a lot of short-distance trains have no facilities, while at main line termini there is usually a charge; they are also often closed for long periods because they are ‘out of order’.

The impression is given that it is either a hidden economy measure or that no-one can be bothered to clean them.

It is interesting to listen to councillors suggesting the use of automatic public conveniences as a solution to health problems. These, however, slow up the procedure and charge a fee and this argument shows how out of touch many councillors are with reality.

What do they think happens when pubs start to turn out? That people head for the nearest automatic toilet and queue in an orderly manner? The net result is public health problems and stinking alleys and shop doorways. 24-hour drinking will only make matters worse, as opponents of late

licenses invariably complain about their gardens being used as toilets.

The net result is that a necessary, albeit non-statutory, service is not being adequately provided and elected representatives don’t appear to be in the slightest bit concerned or to ‘give a shit’.

Are toilets a campaigning issue? They may be but only as a general one. The location of a convenience can be controversial, as in Gabriel Chevalier’s novel *Clochemerle*, in which the church objects to a urinal being erected next door. People rarely want a convenience on their back because they are unlikely to require one near to home.

The two main forms of misuse that are usually quoted are cottaging and drug abuse.

However the solution to these problems lies in policing and not closing down conveniences at night, penalising law abiding members of society and then criminalising them for committing a nuisance if there are no public conveniences nearby.

If councillors are more concerned about the actions of the police than they are about providing a necessary service, then their priorities are wrong. Campaigning for more and accessible public lavatories in general is a sounder issue than getting involved in any arguments about specific conveniences.

Public lavatories are akin to broken paving stones and dog dirt as a campaigning issue; a down-to-earth issue that people are concerned about. However, I have yet to see broken paving stones or dog dirt as the substance of a conference motion; they would make the most dedicated land value taxation anorak’s motion seem positively interesting.

It is the same with public conveniences, so conference committee was maybe right about the famous 1983 motion. However, it is something that Liberal Democrat councillors should be doing something about, as the apparent total incomprehension by councillors that toilets are an issue is one of the reasons why the public is becoming increasingly pissed off with politicians.

Andrew Hudson is member of Leyton and Wanstead Liberal Democrats

PRISONS PICK OUR POCKETS

Dear Liberator,

Lynne Featherstone's article (Liberator 304) raises important points about our party's campaigning style and throws into focus the twitchiness of some of our Westminster colleagues who attempt to disown policies when a newspaper or opponent criticises.

If we are to be taken seriously as a party of power, we need to be able to defend our policies and sell them to the electorate, not retreat at the sound of gunfire, every time.

For example, on the subject of overpopulated prisons and attempts by the other parties to outbid each other by being 'tougher on crime', we should say, "prison costs the taxpayer £600 per person, per week (or whatever the figure is now).

"How much of your money do you think we should spend in this way? Could we find a better way of using the money to create more fulfilled individuals who don't turn to crime in the first place?"

Camilla Batman-Ghelidja works with disaffected youths through her organisation Kids Company. She has suggested that social workers attached to schools should be able to support struggling families when their children are four, not wait until they are fourteen, when it is too late.

I have spoken to head teachers who have said they can identify future criminals before they reach key stage 1. This is where we should be spending the money and we should not be afraid of saying so. Prison should be reserved for the dangerous. The merely pathetic should be dealt with in other ways.

**Nigel Scott
Haringey**

A SATISFIED SUBSCRIBER WRITES...

Dear Liberator,

What an informative *Radical Bulletin* Liberator 304 contained! You report that a candidate found a questionnaire asking why he'd not stood in the 1997 and 2001 elections less than helpful.

Like your correspondent, I received this questionnaire, and like him I spotted a couple of small flaws. While RB records that there was no space for the recipient's name or address, I noticed that there was also no return

LETTERS

address (nor return-by date), leaving open the possibility that it might have come from a region or from the Federal Candidates' office, or as an outside chance even one of the university research projects that occasionally have their questionnaires forwarded by the party. It also asked recipients to fill in one set of answers by ticking a non-existent set of tick boxes. I've only stood in two general elections, and these were the two for which the form asked me to justify my non-candidacy. I may not have made the most enormous impression as a candidate, but that seemed a little harsh.

One colleague who's received the same form has confessed to me the thoroughly selfish and lazy reason he didn't stand in 1997: he was 14. A related reason explains his not having stood in 2001. He tells me he's since received a red form which does at least ask questions about this year's election, but I've yet to see one.

My advice to anyone else at a loss with this form would be, rather than cross out all the inaccurate questions and then attempt to fill in detailed answers in minuscule writing where no space has been supplied, just type all your answers on a separate sheet and print at the top that it's replying to the yellow one. It's the only sensible response I could think of, and enabled me to combine the answers for questions 2 to 6 into one - 'Why didn't you stand in the elections in which you did in fact stand' - and glide over my inability to remember the date and venue of every regional conference since 1997, which judging by the space provided was considered three times as important as whether there are any party policies with which I fundamentally disagree.

Continuing with candidates' issues, Simon Hughes's idea, reported in the same RB, that Liberal Democrat candidates should not be Liberal Democrats or committed to or

informed about the party is a fresh and exciting one.

Clearly what we needed at the general election was not more attention to policy detail under enemy scrutiny, but colourful characters who would just say whatever came into their heads (completely unlike the current parliamentary party, no doubt). And so well-timed; I read this within just a week of Robert Kilroy-Silk announcing his resignation as leader of Veritas, so presumably he's now available. And didn't UKIP's use of Simon's approach in candidate selection work so very well for them?

And finally, what did Charles Kennedy actually say in his appearance in *British Naturism* magazine? I'm agog. I trust he took a good Liberal line against the government's intermittent attempts to criminalise all nudists and enabled the Lib Dems to take some naturist coverage (as it were) from a well-known Conservative.

**Alex Wilcock
Tower Hamlets**

A CONFUSED SUBSCRIBER WRITES...

Dear Liberator,

Twenty years ago, Liberals were told by their party's more gung-ho merger enthusiasts that liberalism and social democracy were the same thing. We were encouraged to embrace social democracy with open arms; anyone who disagreed was dismissed as a 'purist'.

Today, I find these very same enthusiasts, together with some former SDP members (whom I had naively assumed to be in favour of social democracy), accusing other Liberal Democrats of being 'social democrats' as if it were a sin. They are also demanding a return to a 'pure' form of liberalism.

Have I missed something?

**Len Possett
Dollis Hill
29**

Young, Free and Liberal: A Young Person's Guide to Liberal Democracy
Various Authors
Liberal Democrat
Youth and Students
2005

As the Liberal Democrats move from being a localised guerrilla force into the national liberal movement required to propel us to power, we must promote the values we would bring to government.

While voters noticed one or two key policies from the campaign as being 'ours', this is a castle built on sand: issues change from parliament to parliament and voters will switch allegiance if they don't understand the liberal values that underpin them. As members join, it is important to ensure that they agree with our wider values, and not just because of one popular stand on an issue. Just because you are against our Iraq misadventure, does not mean that you are a liberal.

It is in this context that LDYS's booklet on liberalism is very welcome. While the central tenets of Thatcherism were amplified by her time in power, and the anti-war movement has brought cranks like Noam Chomsky back to wider prominence, liberalism has always been nuanced and lacked the invigorating glare of media publicity. The growth of liberal websites, blogs and campaigns – and new publications like this – have started to go some way to aid the 'un-awakened' = liberal.

The first thing to notice about this pamphlet is its heroine – the illustrations of 'Liberty Belle' adorn every section. As young liberals pontificate on markets, the environment and the deficiencies of centralised planning, Liberty Belle adopts apt poses: sometimes revelling in the natural beauty of the environment, other times posing with the scales of justice. Liberty Belle succeeds in taking the edge off quite a serious undertaking. The occasional acerbic aside does not detract from the aim of the project; instead, it serves to give it the character that takes a booklet like this from the 'useful' to the 'enjoyable'.

REVIEWS

Chapters include a short history of the Lib Dems and our predecessor parties; economic, social and political liberalism; liberalism and the world; and a chapter devoted to the environment and Europe. A helpful 'further reading' section at the back points the reader to more in-depth looks at the ideas in each chapter. The chapters are clearly written, thorough and never patronising, in contrast to many books designed to be readable by a younger audience.

Of course, no liberal will read it without wishing there were not further qualifications or additional points, but the vast majority of Lib Dems will recognise the ideological underpinnings that inform their own politics.

For example, while the authors of the chapter on economics praise the value of functioning markets while pointing to their limits, they might have added something on government failure as an equal menace to market failure. The international section might have asked whether we should value 'diversity' in the international sphere above promoting liberal democracies, albeit by less leaden means than those neo-cons. The urge to be comprehensive is the common failing of any approachable introduction. Its biggest failing is incidentally its biggest achievement.

But the perfect should not be the enemy of the very good, and every party body, local party and freshers' fayre should be thrusting this pamphlet into the hands of young political neophytes if the Lib Dems are to act strategically rather than just tactically for the benefit of years to come.

Simon Radford

The Edwardians
by Roy Hattersley
Little Brown 2004

Into the crowded arena of analysis of

the Edwardian era jumps Roy Hattersley, though 'jump' isn't a word you'd normally associate with the Tub. The diaries of Victor Cavendish MP notwithstanding, the book adds little to our understanding of the era, not least because Hattersley's perspectives are of the present rather than those of a historian. He doesn't like Liberals, so portrays their short-comings with all the warts and is ungracious of their achievements. His own experience of the horse-trading at Westminster should have served him better. The backwards projection of political correctness just does not work.

It does perhaps reveal something of Hattersley however. I recall a conversation overheard, of some SDP grandee, saying that Hattersley was expected to join them imminently along with some 60 other Labour MPs. This must have been around 1982-83. I was sceptical. It didn't happen. Hattersley reputedly didn't think much of those who joined the SDP; perhaps here we see an antipathy for Liberals as well?

The book is otherwise a readable aide-memoire to the period, though one of many.

Stewart Rayment

A Death in Brazil
by Peter Robb
Bloomsbury £8.99 2005

I read this while in Brazil and was thus in the position of this book illuminating my visit and my visit making the book come to life.

The death in the title is that of PC Farias, a shady financier – allegedly murdered by his brother – who was able to accumulate unimaginable wealth as a result of his position as fixer to Fernando Collor, a president chased from office in 1992 for corruption on a monumental scale.

Brazil is a major industrial power

and a sleeping giant of international politics – a vast country with cities where one could be in southern Europe, yet also tracts of rain forest that are thought to still harbour uncontacted indigenous tribes. It also has one of the world's most unequal distributions of wealth.

Robb uses the tale of Collor's dubious manipulations to defeat left-winger Lula in 1989 (Lula was to become president in 2002) and his kleptocratic rule to illuminate how misgovernment has held Brazil back.

He interweaves this with history stretching back to the nineteenth century imperial era and with tales of the lives of his fellow regular habitués of a Recife bar.

The book highlights hopeful signs amid the violence, incompetence and corruption that long characterised the country's politics.

Brazil's army took power in 1964 after a decade in which a president committed suicide in office, another who bankrupted the country to build Brasilia and a third resigned citing 'hidden forces'.

Although nothing like as brutal as their counterparts in Chile and Argentina, the generals stayed for 20 years of repression, boom and bust.

When they gave up, they were succeeded by a man who died before he could take office and then by his inexperienced vice-president, followed by Collor's mayhem. Only since 1992 has something like conventional politics and economic stability taken root.

Robb stitches all this together in a readable account, which switches between the past, present and personal. Not a lot is known about Brazil in Britain, the tragic shooting at Stockwell notwithstanding, but the country's resources may yet enable to play a larger role on the world stage.

Mark Smulian

Trafalgar, an eye-witness account Edited by Tom Pocock Folio Society 2005

Trafalgar, whose bi-centenary we celebrate this year, was one of the significant battles of history. It checked the ambitions of the tyrant Napoleon in our direction and left us substantially unchallenged as a sea-power for the next hundred years. Pocock provides

us with a brief background to the event and a series of personal recollections that can only be described as awe-inspiring.

Stewart Rayment

A Different Country Now (Passports to Liberty no.6) by Adrian Sanders, David Boyle and Jonathan Calder Liberator 2005 £3.00

This series of essays, though somewhat sporadic of late, is never less than interesting. This month, the sixth edition appears (to order a copy, see the advert on page 23).

The first of the two essays included here, *Spin* by Adrian Sanders (Liberal Democrat MP for Torbay), is a *cri de coeur* against a prevailing media culture that makes it difficult, if not impossible, for politicians to be honest with their electors.

There are many interesting observations but the whole is less than coherent, and there are a number of factual errors; Sanders claims that British ministers can veto any proposal in the EU's Council of Ministers (they can't); calls for the European Commission to be abolished and replaced with a civil service appointed by competitive examination (which, effectively, it already is); and insists that votes on motions at the party conference have no standing (not true).

Sanders does not quite stray into 'why oh why oh why' territory but his essay would have benefited, I suspect, if he had slept on it for one night. However, he is courageous to express in print what many other politicians think but rarely dare to say. I share with him completely his sense that the relationship between the media and politicians has become utterly corrosive and that things can't go on like this.

For all its faults, there is much in this essay with which any politician could sympathise, and plenty to think about, which is the main thing.

The second essay, *Cohesive Communities* by David Boyle and Jonathan Calder, is a significant piece of work, pointing out the fundamental importance of empowering communities, not only to the Liberal vision of localism, but also to almost every political issue.

This essay has an interesting history. It was originally drafted for the Liberal Democrats' Federal Policy Committee (FPC) to fill a perceived gap in the party's formal policy about cohesive communities. Although some Liberal Democrat-controlled local authorities have pioneered policies designed to deliver this, there had been no official policy from the federal party for some years.

The draft was agreed by the FPC in January 2004, but never published or debated by the party conference because of 'other priorities' in the run-up to the general election. Given how fundamental healthy communities are to other policies, and how refreshing an approach this essay is, it would be interesting to know why the party considered other issues a more important priority, but there you go.

Back to the essay. Besides outlining the problem – basically 'giantism' as the enemy of local communities – the authors suggest a number of practical steps to achieve their vision. This is precisely the sort of thinking needed to put flesh on the bones of the Liberal Democrats' *Meeting the Challenge* policy review.

While the authors are good on the problem of state giantism, the other elephant in the room is the power of big corporations, about which the authors have less to say. Perhaps this is because some of the steps needed to tackle this form of giantism may need to be taken at a somewhat higher tier of government than the local neighbourhood.

The authors acknowledge that, given the essay's genesis, the text already looks a little out of date. There is not much emphasis, for example, on the increasing takeover by government targets of the work of charities and the voluntary sector.

Given the fundamental importance of cohesive communities to major public concerns such as the delivery of public services and fighting crime, however, this thinking deserves to become a cornerstone of Liberal Democrat policy.

Simon Titley

Monday

A number of people have come to me in recent days with their concerns about the Reverend Hughes. It seems that he has taken to wearing white pyjamas during the day, issuing blood-curdling screams and breaking perfectly innocent planks of wood in half with his hands and feet. When I summon him to the Hall this evening to have it out with him, he brings with him a book entitled *Jujitsu for Vicars*. "The trouble is," he says nursing a pulled muscle in his shoulder, "I think I turned over two pages at once last night." It transpires that the padre has taken it into his head that he should be the next leader of our party, and as a result wishes to appear "tough". This toughness, indeed, is all the rage: I had dinner with Oaten the other evening and he insisted on drinking mineral water throughout the meal. The wine waiter came up to ask "Still or sparkling?" I gave Oaten an appraising look and replied: "Still, I am afraid."

Tuesday

"What is it that we Liberal Democrats all believe?" I asked whilst in philosophic mood at a recent meeting of the parliamentary party. "I know the answer to that one," Kennedy replied at once, "We don't believe in anything." I was rather taken aback by this, and said so in no uncertain terms. In response, our leader unfolded his doctrine of "the clean slate". As he sees it, and I hope this is a fair précis, as soon as the general election is over Liberal Democrats discard all their beliefs. The result is that, all around the country, people who believe in nothing come together to form local Liberal Democrat branches. Then, by exhibiting our lack of beliefs to the voters, we begin to win parliamentary by-elections and to take control of county and district councils. All seems set fair for the next general election until, as one of the Young Turks in the Commons put it, "we go and spoil everything by starting to believe in things again". I returned to the Hall that evening to write a paper on the reform of education.

Wednesday

I was sorry to hear that the New Party is threatening to expel Lord Haskin for funding the campaign of our own Danny Alexander: if a chap is fighting Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch *and* Strathspey then he needs every penny he can get. Besides there is an honourable tradition of politicians funding candidates from opposing parties, if they are strapped for cash themselves, to ensure a fair, democratic contest. I myself had a lot of innocent fun in the 1920s by putting up the deposit for a number of Socialist candidates in rural seats and then encouraging the local urchinry to pelt them with rotten vegetables, dead rats and so forth. It will be a sad day indeed when such public-spiritedness is driven out of British politics.

Thursday

Who will the leader of the Conservative party be? As I understand it, the candidates are as follows. A Dr Fox who used to appear on the panel of television talent shows but was later replaced by a Mrs Osborne. A young fellow named Cameron – despite my best endeavours, I have been unable to discover anything about him. (This might make him the Tories' best choice). A fellow called Davis who has a broken nose and is very popular with the Conservative rank and file. (This undoubtedly makes him their worst choice). Lastly, Kenneth Clarke, the noted jazzman and cigarette salesman, who traditionally loses to a lesser candidate. Given what tradition

Lord Bonkers' Diary

means to the Conservative side of the House, I have no doubt that he will do so again.

Friday

The death of Jack Slipper, the constable whose dogged pursuit of Ronnie Biggs and the other Great Train Robbers won the admiration of the entire nation, has put me in mind of our own Liberal detective Donald "Nipper" Wade – or "Flying Wade of the Yard", as he was popularly known. He made it his personal business to bring to justice the notorious East End gangster Violent Bonham-Carter. I need not repeat here the

story of how he tracked her down to a teashop in Budleigh Salterton where she was playing incognito in a string trio; nor need I retail the tortuous extradition proceedings which ensued. Nevertheless, I hope that by recalling this narrative to mind I have gone some way to convincing Messrs Hughes and Oaten that this "tough liberalism" of theirs is nothing new.

Saturday

It would be churlish of me not to mark the passing of two of the New Party's more appealing figures. First, Marjorie "Mo" Mowlam, whose tea-making was widely held to have been instrumental in bringing about the acceptance of the Good Friday Agreement by the people of Northern Ireland. Her style did rather grate upon the Unionists: while one has to salute her courage in kissing the Reverend Ian Paisley, she really should have been told that Ulstermen do not care for That Sort Of Thing. Widely admired though she was, I never managed to form a clear idea of what it was La Mowlam stood for. Then there is the late Robin Cook, who had the mien of a garden gnome who is listened to with respect at Chatham House. He rather blotted his copybook by abandoning his wife at the airport and jetting off to meet his mistress. As I remarked at the time, if I had treated the First Lady Bonkers in such a fashion, she would have commandeered a De Havilland and come after me. Even so, I judge that the New Party will find they miss him more than they had expected.

Sunday

Autumn has come to Rutland. Flocks of hamwees sit in the rowens and flocks of wheways sit in the horwoods (or it may be the other way round – I was never top in Nature Study), girding their feathery loins for the long flight south. One problem these plucky birds face is the willingness of Johnny Frenchman to take a pot shot at anything that moves (unless it be an invading German soldier). For myself, much as I enjoy a good tian of hamwee or parfait of wheway, I cannot regard this as cricket as it smacks too much of letting fly at fish in a barrel. Nor even does pheasant shooting, where each man arrives with a small army of loaders, valets and cartridge boys, appeal to me. No, give me the Rutland partridge: shoot at this fellow and he will take cover and fire back. *That's* what I call good sport.

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