

# liberator



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# COMMENTARY

## TROUBLE AT THE TOP

Readers sometimes ask why Liberator has not called on Charles Kennedy to resign, and it is a question usually asked in a tone of exasperation over what Kennedy has failed to do rather than anger at what he has done.

The general election result might have been thought good enough to quell mutterings about the leadership.

But these reignited at Blackpool, in large part due to Kennedy's peculiar decision to agree with the assessment of former aide Richard Grayson that he was more a chairman than a leader.

Questions about Kennedy's ability to do the job and enthusiasm for it formed a grumbling undercurrent to the entire proceedings at conference.

Simon Hughes felt moved to tell the media that he had assured Kennedy last summer that he would not stand against him for the leadership in the formal post-general election ballot.

Kennedy then felt moved to tell the media that he could not recall Hughes having said any such thing.

It all began to sound horribly reminiscent of the last days of Iain Duncan Smith in the same conference hall two years earlier.

Kennedy does not have a problem in the sense of credible successors breathing down his neck. An early leadership election would benefit only Hughes or Mark Oaten, since other potential contenders need time to establish themselves.

That duel would be welcomed only by diehard supporters of one or the other of these MPs, and most of the rest of the party would, rather than entertain such a contest, keep Kennedy in place even if he removed himself full time to a highland pub.

The problem is the old one. Kennedy was a sort of heir apparent who gathered the support in 1999 of people who lacked confidence in the other candidates. It was clear that Kennedy wanted to be leader, but not why.

Since then, there have been some successes – the burial of Lib-Labbery, the sound liberal response to the Labour government's assaults on freedom and the (if slightly belated) opposition to the Iraq war.

But those minuses keep coming back. Periods of silence, a lack of communication with other MPs, a lack of obvious direction and strategy, and the sense that more should have been made of the collapse of public trust in the prime minister.

Kennedy inserted a passage into his Blackpool speech that was not in the copy distributed earlier to the media.

In it, he referred to leadership being a matter of "knowing when is the right time to listen as well... four months after a general election is a time for a leader to listen to you and

then come back with the correct course and [then] move forward in unity".

That is an admirable approach and, if Kennedy's self-description of 'chairman' applied only to his conduct during such a process, no-one would object. His problem is not whether he knows when to switch from listening to action mode but whether he will switch from listening to masterly inactivity.

Kennedy does not scare any part of the party through his activities, which may still be a relief after the later Ashdown era, but his inactivity is starting to scare people who want to hold or gain seats.

The luck of having no obvious successor waiting in the wings will not last forever.

## AN EASY ANSWER

After a gap of several years, our old friend the hung parliament has reappeared as a topic of media speculation. Since no sane person imagined that either of the last two general elections would result in a hung parliament, the subject did not then arise. After the 2005 result, it is back.

Although holding the balance of power sounds like a desirable situation for the Liberal Democrats, it is by no means easy, as most council groups that have been in this position will testify.

The crucial factor is that, to be able to exploit it, the party that holds the balance has to have more than one realistic option.

However, so seductive is the lure of the balance of power that the Alliance spent the 1980s testing to destruction the idea that the public could be persuaded to vote for a hung parliament.

It cannot. It dislikes the idea. Hung parliaments arise by chance.

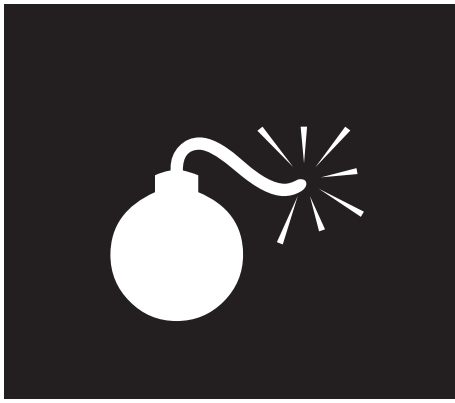
If chance were to create one in 2009, it would clearly be difficult for the Liberal Democrats to reinstate a Labour government that had just been beaten, but it would be equally difficult to install the repository of hatred, selfishness and authoritarianism that is the Conservative party.

Since coalitions are supposed to be formed between parties of like mind, the solution is obvious.

In the event of a hung parliament, there should be a Labour/Conservative grand coalition – since the differences between them are pretty trivial.

The Liberal Democrats, whose differences with both of them are massive, could only profit from becoming the official opposition to such a government.

Liberator offers this 'German' scenario to the party leadership as a way of shutting down this tedious speculation by repeating this idea whenever the subject is raised.



# RADICAL BULLETIN

## THE THOUGHTS OF CHAIRMAN CHARLES

Whatever Charles Kennedy meant to say when challenged by interviewers with Richard Grayson's proposition that he was more a chairman than a leader, it came out sounding for all the world as though the leader did not think he was much of a leader.

Grayson, a former Kennedy confidant, may have meant to imply that Kennedy's style had become excessively laid back. Kennedy's response was possibly meant to suggest that he prided himself on a consensual style.

Either way, it came across badly in public and set enough hares running about a leadership challenge for Simon Hughes to make it known that he had assured Kennedy that he would not challenge him for the job.

Despite Kennedy's lack of profile since the election and his odd self-assessment at September's party conference in Blackpool, any challenge remains remote.

The reason is that only Hughes and Mark Oaten have any interest in an early leadership contest (with the possible exception of Lembit Öpik).

Other potential leaders need time to establish themselves, make themselves known and give the party something on which to judge them.

Apart from hard-core Oaten and Hughes supporters, everyone else has an interest in keeping Kennedy in place.

As we said in *Liberator* 301, it's a case of "Always keep a hold of nurse, for fear of finding something worse". But that cannot last indefinitely.

## IT'S GOOD TO TALK

Straight after the general election, *Liberator* predicted that 62 MPs would prove a difficult number to manage – too many for the collegiate system used before 1997, but too few for the shadow cabinet and backbench model used by the Labour and Conservative parties (*Liberator* 302).

We were not the only people to notice this and, after his accidental sacking as education spokesman, Phil Willis was given the chair of something called the Commission to Review Internal Working of the Parliamentary Party in a bid to mollify him.

This body has now reported, and confirms all the worst fears of those who thought that the key problem at Westminster was an absence of communication between leader Charles Kennedy and the other MPs.

Willis's report spoke of "a disconnection" between the leader's office and many MPs and said that Kennedy's most urgent priority should be to put this right.

It urged the appointment of a parliamentary private secretary (a post that has lapsed) to handle relations with the parliamentary party.

In a clear swipe at both the existence and composition of Kennedy's kitchen cabinet, the report accepted that a leader should have access to advisory teams but urged that their membership should be "transparent", not least so that other MPs knew whom to lobby.

One idea that may surprise non-parliamentarians is the suggestion that Kennedy should answer questions from MPs at the parliamentary party's meetings, surprising since the implication is that he does not normally do this.

One of the report's most controversial suggestions is a more formal appointment process to the shadow cabinet.

The report did not call for this body to be elected, and supported retention of the leader's power to appoint members. But it said that the current opaque process "created tension" and that there should be consistent criteria applied for appointments.

In a further curious aside, the report said that shadow cabinet appointments should be communicated to MPs before they were sent to the media, which implies that this has not been the case.

The list of concerns raised by MPs is lengthy, and it should concern party members generally that such a degree of unhappiness exists in Westminster with the way in which the parliamentary party is run.

Even smaller issues have caused anger, such as the tendency of the weekly parliamentary party gathering to turn into something more resembling a public meeting with all manner of party staff, officers and others turning up in unclear capacities.

Matters were no better when the report turned to relations between the parliamentary party and the party at large. It found a "worrying lack of understanding" between MPs and the federal party "bordering on the dismissive".

Willis also questioned whether Kennedy should belong to or chair so many party committees and said that other MPs should be allowed to share these duties, to integrate them better with the party.

It must have been pretty obvious to anyone who spoke to a few MPs at Blackpool that there is a lot of unhappiness about the way things have been run.

The defeat of Kennedy's close supporter Matthew Taylor by Paul Holmes for parliamentary party chair in June (*Liberator* 303) was not so much a straw in the wind as an entire bale of hay.

Will Kennedy act on the report's recommendations? The consequences may be serious if he refuses.

## WAGES OF SPIN

Those who fail to learn from history are, it is said, condemned to repeat it. That was the fate of those responsible for the wholly unnecessary provocation that was the Europe motion at the Blackpool party conference.

David Steel and, to a lesser extent, Paddy Ashdown used to spend their summers sending their spin doctors about among the media to brief that some motion or other at that autumn's conference was vital to them, a test of their leadership, and that any rejection by unruly grassroots would be seen as an appalling humiliation.

They then reacted with pained surprise when the media duly reported that they had been appallingly humiliated after they lost because they had spent a summer spinning and threatening rather than making a convincing argument.

So it was with the Europe motion at Blackpool, even if this time it was shadow chancellor Vincent Cable and his acolytes rather than the leader doing the spinning.

This embarrassing row boiled down to a dispute over a tiny part of UK's contribution to the EU budget.

Cable wanted a 1% limit on the budget included in the motion, to allow the party to strike a 'tough' posture towards the EU (Liberator 305).

But Chris Davies, the party's leader in the European Parliament, argued that this was cheap anti-Europeanism, was unwarranted support for Labour's own negotiating position, and would damage the EU's ability to fund regional programmes in Britain were it implemented.

European spokesman Nick Clegg, to his great annoyance, was dragged in to propose the motion for the Federal Policy Committee after it had been written and without having been fully consulted on its content.

He spent much of conference pointing out in exasperation that a satisfactory compromise would have easily been found had Cable, the Cowley Street policy department, Davies, and anyone else interested consulted fully in the early summer.

Sarah Ludford, the MEP on the FPC, appears to have played little part in proceedings at the crucial stage.

As it was, Cable's spinners had talked up the 1% cap to the media as 'modern', 'tough', 'realistic' and all the other half-witted slogans of the party's right wing.

Davies had instead talked to people who can actually vote at the conference, and defeated the '1% limit' clause with considerable ease.

Cable had been so partisan on the matter that the FPC held an unprecedented vote on whether to sack him as its summator in the debate, since he was incapable of a balanced summary. It voted only narrowly to keep him.

After the debate, history was again ignored. The David Alton Commemorative Mouth-Before-Brain Award goes to Sarah Teather, whose reaction to the debate suggests she is out of her depth on the front bench.

Instead of damping down press speculation about humiliations visited on the leadership, she stoked them up.

Teather even told the media that she was "particularly ashamed" of her European colleagues, and added that the debate had been "about demonstrating responsibility".

No it had not. It had been about people getting into entrenched positions when they need not have done so, spinning to the press unnecessarily, and neglecting to bother to argue their case.

Teather's words might not have been quite on a par with Alton's famously deranged reaction to the anti-nuclear

victory in the Eastbourne defence debate in 1986 (Liberator 166), but it was pretty stupid for an MP to imply in public that the party's leader in the European Parliament is some sort of irresponsible extremist.

## POSTAL DISORDER

Fresh from the Europe debate, the spinners received another rebuff from conference the following day, when a motion to part-privatise the Post Office was referred back by a large majority on the intervention of Birmingham Yardley MP John Hemming.

The story was much the same as the Europe debate. Party spinners talked this up all summer as 'modern', 'bold' and all the rest of the right's clichés, only to see it kicked out by a large majority.

Trade and Industry spokesman Norman Lamb, who moved the motion, was, immediately afterwards, overheard privately likening some fellow MPs to certain parts of the human anatomy.

But the next day Lamb's public reaction was quite different to Teather's. He wrote a piece for the *Guardian*, admitting that those who want to change policy in the direction of economic liberalism had failed to make their case in the party, had not been convincing, and had a great deal of thinking, debating and persuading to do if they did want to shift the party's position.

Quite so. It is unclear whether Lamb spun at all over the summer or merely found his motion set up as a totem without his consent.

Unlike most of the economic liberals, he has seen that major policy changes cannot be carried through simply by trying to frighten the conference with threats of adverse media coverage.

Lamb's admirable attitude to debating issues could start nearer home. Among the reasons for the reference back was resentment among MPs, many of whom have run campaigns on post office closures, that his motion was railroaded through the parliamentary party without much discussion.

## "I'M AFRAID HE'S TIED UP"

Tim Razzall's blueprint for making Charles Kennedy appear more prime ministerial (Liberator 305) was accidentally on purpose leaked to the *Times* (29 August).

It contained the suggestion that Kennedy should more often be seen in the company of foreign leaders and dignitaries, to convey the impression that he regularly moved in these exalted circles.

Evidently no-one had suggested this earlier in the summer, when Kennedy was unable to find time to meet Wolfgang Gerhardt. Whatever one thinks of Germany's rather right-wing FDP, it is a Liberal International member and Gerhardt at that time appeared odds-on to be Germany's next foreign minister.

Kennedy, however, pleaded a constituency engagement and the party neglected to arrange for Gerhardt to see anyone else.

This is not the first time Kennedy has snubbed a prominent foreign Liberal. Regular readers of RB may recall how Belgian prime minister Guy Verhofstadt made a special trip to the party conference in Bournemouth in September 2000, only to be stood up by Kennedy (Liberator 270).

## THE COLOUR OF MONEY

The row over the £2.4m donation from millionaire Michael Brown, who had no known previous link to the party, threw unaccustomed light on the party's fund raising.

An investigation by the Electoral Commission concluded that the party need not repay the donation (an awful lot of jumble sales would have been needed had it ruled the other way) but that it should tighten up its procedures for accepting donations.

Donations are the responsibility, rather confusingly, of the party treasurer. The person who does the job that would conventionally be described as 'treasurer' is instead called the chair of the Federal Finance and Administration Committee.

In the run-up to the general election, the treasurer's post was vacant, Reg Clark having resigned in February.

The Brown donation is understood to have been accepted by Lord Razzall as campaigns chair and informal grey eminence to Charles Kennedy.

How the party came into contact with Brown, and what it then did to antagonise him, remain mysterious.

The treasurership was not filled until July, when the Federal Executive elected Tim Clement-Jones to the post in preference to Robert Woodthorpe Browne.

Since both are well-known senior figures, one might have thought Kennedy would be happy with either.

However, even though he is distantly related to Woodthorpe Browne, Kennedy deployed his staff to phone FE members to say that he regarded a Clement-Jones victory as not merely desirable but a matter of confidence. Erstwhile Woodthorpe Browne supporters duly melted away.

Kennedy might prefer Clement-Jones, but on what possible grounds was this a matter of confidence?

## SMOKING GUNS

Crestfallen LDYS members reported that their legalise cannabis leaflets had been banned from their conference stall by party officials, as a dotted line allowed the leaflets to be amusingly folded into a certain appliance used for dope smoking.

The officials' concern was not that cannabis might waft through the Winter Gardens' non-existent air conditioning but, horror of horrors, that the media might see the leaflets.

Liberator's advice to LDYS was to tell said officials to get stuffed. This robust stance produced evasive remarks from LDYS about it "not being as simple as that".

The reason is that LDYS needs bailing out to the tune of some £15,000, an immense sum for an organisation of its size, because of a cock-up in the arrangements for its annual Westminster Day.

This is an event that LDYS has organised for many years, at which schools pay to send pupils for meetings with politicians of all parties, tours of Westminster and so forth.

Its usual venue, Westminster Central Hall, costs some £4,000 but, with this venue unavailable, the expensive option of the Royal Festival Hall was taken before the present executive took office.

Not only would this not have made a profit, even if all tickets had been sold, but tickets were put on sale to schools very late, giving the event a very poor attendance.

Prices were also driven so high to cover the costs that schools stayed away in droves, leaving LDYS at the financial mercy of the party.

On the other hand, who is at whose mercy? The party would look pretty foolish if it ceased to have a youth wing because of bankruptcy.

## ON THE CHEAP

Understandably enough, conference refused to increase the party's minimum subscription level from £5 to £12, a rate of inflation that would have raised eyebrows in the Weimar Republic.

It opted instead for £6, despite pleas from Federal Finance and Administration Committee chair David Griffiths that it cost £15 to service each member and that the cross-subsidy for minimum payers had become excessive.

Surely the sensible solution would have been an increase to, say, £8, then an annual rise linked to some index. That would avoid the problem of continually leaving the fee static for years after which it needs a huge hike to catch up.

There was also a subtext to the request for a large increase. It was felt that, at £12 rather than £5, it would be less easy for would-be parliamentary candidates to buy a selection contest by signing up huge numbers of people for the sole purpose of voting at party hustings.

There have been allegations that a small number of constituencies were affected by this sort of conduct at the last general election, the truth of which is difficult to establish.

The candidates committee has proposed an ingenious measure to put a stop to any such stuffing of hustings. In future, it suggests, anyone who wants to vote in a selection contest must not merely have been a member for a year but must also have renewed their membership.

## STOP PRESS

The Liberal Democrats never tire of complaining about the media coverage that they receive, on the grounds that they have been either attacked or, more usually, ignored.

Just possibly, this has something to do with the way the party treats the press. Press registrations at the Blackpool conference were not in the Winter Gardens but several hundred yards away round a corner, through an unmarked door above a bedding shop.

Those members of the media who chanced to find this place were in some cases confronted with non-existent badges. As late as the Saturday evening, as conference began, crews from 5 Live and other parts of the BBC still had no badges, even though the cut-off date for ordering free ones had been 26 July.

Producers could be heard complaining that they could not broadcast the conference if their technicians had no access.

Meanwhile, print journalists were perplexed to discover that there were no functioning internet links in the press office, even where these had been ordered in advance. By the Monday, some dial-up links were provided, which different newspapers had to share.

They were not the only ones disconnected from cyberspace. The Liberal Democrats pride themselves on being the most e-connected party, yet the internet links at Blackpool were a shambles the entire week. The internet café connections hardly ever worked, parliamentary researchers found themselves webless, and Lib Dems Online was off-line, except when members used their own phone connections.

## **BROWNE FIG LEAF**

It is said that one can tell a man by the company he keeps, so let's have a look at the company kept by Jeremy Browne, the new Liberal Democrat MP for Taunton.

He is a member of the advisory board of Reform, an organisation that was dishing out 40-page glossy magazines free to delegates at Blackpool. This is not to be confused with the Centre for Reform.

Reform's directors include a former head of the political section of the Conservative research department, and a former special adviser to Norman Lamont. Its founder was the Tory MP Nick Herbert.

Among its advisors, apart from Browne, are: Jonathan Hill, former political secretary to John Major; Steve Robson, the genius behind rail privatisation when he was a Treasury mandarin; Robert Balchin, former chair of the Grant Maintained Schools Foundation; Thatcherite economists Tim Congdon and Patrick Minford; Ruth Lea, the hard line rightist who used to run the Institute of Directors; and swivel-eyed former chief schools inspector Chris Woodhead.

There are also two Labour figures there, but that is Labour's business.

Can't Browne see that he was invited onto Reform's advisory board merely to impart fictional all-party status to a think-tank run by Conservatives?

Perhaps chief whip Andrew Stunell might have a word.

## **TRAVEL GUIDANCE**

For the first time, the party made use of professional security staff at the conference, and some of them were about as happy to be in Blackpool as were most delegates.

Still, there were the diversions on offer of cheap drinks, cheap prostitutes and £1-a-time lap dancers, one guard told a startled delegate.

How had he come by this information?

"We were told it at the briefing by the head bloke", he said. Whoever can he have meant?

## **A SENSE OF PROPORTION**

Some things can be depended on in a changing world. Former Liberal candidate Becky Tinsley attended her first conference for almost 20 years at Blackpool, in her new role as director of the charity Waging Peace.

The contents of her exhibition stand largely concerned genocide in Darfur. She was therefore surprised to be asked by one delegate what position she held on the single transferable vote.

When she replied that mass murder seemed a rather more important matter than electoral reform, the affronted delegate claimed that the reverse was the case.

Despite the passage of one merger, two decades, three leaders, and four general elections, it is reassuringly all too possible to be cornered at conference by STV obsessives.

## **GOOD RIDDANCE**

We asked in Liberator 305 if Liberal Future had shut up shop, given its lack of activity. Sure enough, we learned at Blackpool that this mutual therapy group for right-wing, prematurely aged, young men in suits had become defunct. There were suited youths calling for a flat tax strategically deployed around the taxation consultation to create the bogus impression of wide support for this piece of idiocy.

However, the breed stood out so clearly from the rest of conference that this subterfuge was quickly rumbled.

## **DASH FOR VICTORY**

The conference financial appeal session featured treasurer Tim Clement-Jones introducing new MPs Jo Swinson and Julia Goldsworthy as bucket-wielders among the audience.

The proceedings included a short video of victorious MPs and press cuttings.

Swinson's picture was, rather unfortunately, accompanied by a newspaper cutting that read: "Lib Dem's Winning Streak". So that's how she won Dunbartonshire East.

## **NEVER AGAIN**

Conference was in Blackpool this year because of problems with bookings elsewhere. The conference committee should never again inflict this tawdry town on the party until it starts to offer the facilities, and equally important, the service, expected of somewhere that aspires to be a major conference venue. Almost every delegate seemed to have a horror story.

One prominent party member, staying in a large hotel, found one bed in her room stank of urine and the other was stained with excrement. She eventually accepted the third room offered.

In the same hotel, another delegate found it impossible to lock her room. On complaining, she was offered a chair to jam under the door handle.

In another hotel, former Guildford MP Sue Doughty was followed into her room by the landlady and told, "you needn't think you're bringing anyone back here. We've got CCTV in the corridors to keep an eye on you".

One delegate found no towels in his room and was told they were never provided in case they were stolen.

Some Liberator Collective members were perplexed to be greeted with notices in their rooms that listed charges for laundry occasioned by bed-wetting and stern reminders not to remove the 'undetachable mattress protector', always assuming they could detect it.

At yet another hotel, delegates found themselves abused as "southerners who don't know good food" for asking for their cheese sandwiches to be toasted.

Blackpool now depends for its tourist trade on two types of visitor. The first is people taking advantage of cheap drink promotions, the results of which prompted one Liverpool councillor to note that Blackpool on a weekend night made the roughest bars on Merseyside look refined.

The other is that part of the wartime generation that never noticed the end of rationing and is prepared to put up with low standards and poor service because they "mustn't grumble".

There are parts of Brighton, next year's venue, as deprived as any in Blackpool. The crucial difference is that Blackpool's whole approach is rule-bound, hidebound, archaic and imbued with an attitude that it is doing visitors a favour.

It has pretensions to reviving itself by means of a mega-casino. Richmond Park MP Susan Kramer was discussing this project with a taxi driver, and was told: "Of course, if Blackpool's ever going to compete with Las Vegas and Monte Carlo, council's got to sort out parking". That and much else.

# LABELS DESIGNED TO CONFUSE

Caricatures built around political labels will stifle a vital debate on public services in the Liberal Democrats, says Nick Clegg

Labels have great power in politics. They create identity, summarise ideologies, pigeonhole opponents, and can foster both unity and division. They are also invariably inaccurate, unjust or downright false.

When labels are attached to other parties by their opponents, the intention is precisely to create a false impression of what those parties stand for. Blair has been the most cynical and ruthless dispenser of labels, happily branding his opponents as extreme (in the case of the Tories) or naïve (in the case of the Lib Dems), so falsely portraying himself as the voice of reason and reality. In politics, those who coin the labels usually win the contest.

The press is also a great dispenser of labels. It is perhaps forgivable for journalists to attach simplistic labels to individual politicians and parties when trying to make arcane political distinctions understood to their readers.

What is more alarming is the explicit propagandising in much of the written press, which has led to the proliferation of an array of deliberately false labels to promote the particular prejudices of editors and proprietors.

The perversion of the public debate on the EU by much of the British media – in which a complex issue requiring nuanced judgements and subtle distinctions has been reduced to a cartoon strip of falsehoods and misrepresentations – is the most notorious recent example.

So labels have a destructive power. If used intelligently, they can have a devastating effect on your opponents. Like verbal grenades, they can also blow up in your face.

That is why particular care should be taken when handling labels in internal party debates. The misuse of labels can soon transform legitimate differences of internal party opinion into great pitched battles in which there is all heat and no light, polemic and no discussion, division and no solution. In view of the internal debates at our recent conference in Blackpool, there is now a clear risk that we may topple into such a state of polarised labels in which two falsely drawn opposites are camped irreconcilably against each other.

As someone who has been labelled as a ‘moderniser’, ‘right wing’, ‘free marketer’, I’m aware as anyone of the destructive potential of such labels. They distort and ossify debate.

I have found myself being accused of being ‘conservative’ in arguing for democratic and institutional reforms in the EU, for a Dutch-style secondary education system, or for mayoral politics in England. All three assertions might be completely daft, but ‘conservative’ they most surely are not.

The same distorted logic allowed those critics of the motion on the EU at Blackpool conference to claim that it was part of an economically liberal, ‘right wing’ agenda.

There were perfectly good arguments against the provision which proposed to limit the EU budget to 1% of the EU GDP – arguments which in the end won the day – but to suggest that a proposal supported by six EU countries of different political persuasions was somehow ‘right wing’ or ‘economically liberal’ was intellectually dishonest, if politically convenient.

Writing during the middle of the Blackpool conference, Tony Greaves claimed the conference needed to be understood as a battle against the “advances of... well connected right-wingers”.

Bizarrely, having correctly railed against the mischievous meddling of the press in our internal debates, Tony went on to quote uncritically an article from Jackie Ashley, an in-house Labour *Guardian* columnist known for her derision of the Liberal Democrats, as evidence for his thesis that the party was being forcibly pushed in a right wing direction. I am a great fan of Tony’s liberal radicalism, but to endorse the deliberate distortions put about by our opponents in the press is not wise.

The reaction to Norman Lamb’s proposals for reform of the Post Office exposed similar oversimplifications. The debate at conference itself was on the whole of a very high quality, with advocates and critics setting out in clear terms the issues at stake.

Again, however, the labelling of those for and against as ‘right wing economic liberals’ versus the ‘left wing sandal wearing brigade’ was a travesty of the nuances at stake.

It is as preposterous to claim that those who harbour sincere doubts about the political tactics or economics of a partial privatisation of the post office are unthinking left wingers as it is to claim that Norman Lamb’s John Lewis-style ownership proposal is neo-Thatcherite.

There is now a very real risk that the exercise of policy review and renewal launched by Charles Kennedy, *Meeting the Challenge*, will be paralysed by the stultifying effect of such stereotypes and labels.

As someone who passionately believes that the synthesis of social and economic liberalism is one of the cornerstones of our party’s identity, I neither want to see Tony Greaves et al branded as statist lefties nor Norman Lamb et al condemned as right wing ideologues. Neither label does justice to the liberalism of either individual, and neither label



helps me or other party members to decide on proposals such as the reform of the post office.

There are two more important reasons why we must shun these polarised labels. First, they represent a deeply introverted use of political language. I can get as agitated as any other liberal about our theological debates concerning different strands and traditions of liberalism, but such discourse is complete gobbledegook to voters.

We are a political party, not a precious think tank or intellectually pristine sect. Our purpose is to advocate liberalism, win elections, and reform and improve our society according to our political principles. But the voters are our audience, not each other.

It is a nice luxury, immediately after a general election when most of the electorate is happy to ignore politicians, to have a lively internal debate about our future policy direction. But we must not allow it to become an addictive debate since we will appear exotic, strange and utterly irrelevant to voters if we allow ourselves to talk in terms which are only understood by a miniscule fraction of the electorate.

Second, it is impossible to talk with any intellectual sophistication about the future of our public services, the core battleground of domestic politics, if the debate accommodates only two stereotypical extremes, left-wing statism and right-wing privatisation.

The truth, of course, is immeasurably more complex. We already have a mixed economy in the provision of public services and utilities in this country. Regulated private sector operators do a good job in previously state-owned utilities such as telecomms, but have a disastrous record in other areas such as rail transport.

The key difference here seems to be one between sectors (like telecomms) where meaningful competition between regulated private sector operators is possible, and others (like rail) where natural monopolies exist and competition cannot operate.

In Britain, we have the bizarre situation of having some of the most deregulated public services, especially in transport, anywhere in Europe combined with some of the most state-centred, top-down public service provision in health and education. It is as if we have over liberalised in some areas, while remaining more statist than any other developed country in others.

My own view, for what it's worth, is that this mixed picture presents two particular political challenges: what to do about the existence of abusive private sector monopolies in the public sphere (readers are welcome to try the privately owned bus monopoly in Sheffield as a good example); and what to do about the persistent over-centralisation and gigantism in the education and, especially, health sectors. These are two completely unrelated challenges, neither of which fit into a sterile right-left debate.



I believe that as Liberals we have a good story to tell on both – insisting on an aggressive assault against monopoly gigantism in both the private and public sectors – but we will not be able to do so as long as we fossilise our own internal debate with crude labels.

Liberalism deserves better than to be imprisoned by illiberal labels.

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# FAILURE OF THE LIB DEM LEFT

The party's left wing complains about the economic liberals, so why does the left not think, speak and debate, asks Iain Sharpe

It is sad but true that the main battles within British political parties during my lifetime have been won by the right.

During the 1980s, the Conservative wets proved ineffectual in the face of Thatcherism. They were left either serving in minor posts in the government or complaining from the sidelines while for the most part loyally voting with the government whip. It says something that Kenneth Clarke, who served in senior positions in Thatcher's administrations, is now seen as a standard bearer for one-nation Conservatism.

Likewise, the Bennites failed to gain control of the Labour Party in the 1980s and, after the debacle of the 1983 election, were permanently on the retreat. Kinnock guided the party towards the centre and Blair took it beyond that, turning Labour into a kind of European Christian Democrat party.

While the problem with the Tory wets was that they were too wet to fight their corner, the Labour left proved intransigent and unable to update its agenda to a changing political situation. Some Bennites became Blairites, while the rest became political anachronisms.

The Liberal Democrats have during this time avoided any ideological reckoning or Clause 4 moment. The divisive battles were about tactics and structure. Differing views on alliance, merger, relations with Labour and so forth never boiled down to a simple left versus right split and the same is true of leadership elections. But, since the demise of the Blair-Ashdown project, internal debate within the party has focused on policy and philosophy, which is no bad thing.

With 22 per cent of the popular vote and 62 MPs, the Liberal Democrats can no longer afford the luxury of simply harvesting protest votes from disillusioned supporters of unpopular governments. The crowding of the political centre means we can no longer rely on being seen as a centre-party and picking up the votes of those of moderate views.

The possibility of having to make the step up to being a party of government no longer seems remote. The recent election saw our policies under more scrutiny than ever before and this is unlikely to diminish next time. The Liberal Democrats will have to work hard to win more seats at the next election. It's not just a case of more leaflets and canvassing, but of offering a clear and forward-looking philosophy and set of policies.

Some Liberal Democrats have recognised this and are trying to set out what they believe Liberalism should be about in the twenty-first century. But new thinking is coming almost exclusively from one section of the party. Even the non-Tory media is identifying David Laws, Nick Clegg,

Vincent Cable, Chris Huhne and Mark Oaten as the brightest and best of the Lib Dem MPs.

And they are talking about responsible financial management, working with the market and avoiding the taint of woolly-mindedness on issues like crime, taxation and Europe. Through the publication of the *Orange Book* last year, the establishment of groups such as Liberal Future, appearances at fringe meetings, press articles and pamphlets, this loosely-knit group is addressing the issues the Liberal Democrats will have to face in order to make the jump from party of protest to party of government.

The controversial debates at conference this year, on Europe and on the Post Office, suggest that so far they have not won the hearts or minds of Liberal Democrat activists. Many in the party still caricature them as being part of a right-wing plot.

What is depressing, though, is the abject failure of those who see themselves as being on the Liberal Democrat left to put forward any alternative vision of how they want to see the party develop.

Traditionally, the media has portrayed the key division in the Liberal Democrats as between a besuited and moderate leadership and radical activists.

In recent years, the torch-bearer for the latter tendency has been Donnachadh McCarthy, who has now resigned from the Liberal Democrats. Despite his transparent sincerity, Donnachadh's apparent obsession with internal party disputes and fringe issues meant that he and his New Radicalism organisation were never going to become a focus for regenerating the Lib Dems.

In leaving the party, he mentioned two key issues – Charles Kennedy not being quite whole-hearted enough in opposing the Iraq war and the failure of the party to stop its peers working as lobbyists. With the best will in the world, one of these is a transient issue and the other extremely marginal, even to the party let alone the electorate. Obsession with such issues does not represent the future for the Lib Dems. As far as I can tell, with Donnachadh's departure from the Lib Dems, New Radicalism is no more. It is harsh but fair to say that this represents an opting out from the challenge of actually seeking power. There is little prospect of new thinking from this tradition within the Liberal Democrats.

The one remaining organisation on the left of the Liberal Democrats is the Beveridge Group. It was set up in 2002 to promote the message of 'civic responsibility and public accountability in public services'. According to its website,

the group boasts seven Lib Dem MPs among its membership. However, although it was talked about originally as a counterweight to Liberal Future and the Laws/Oaten tendency, it is striking how little it has to say about current thinking on public services. There has been no Beveridge Group alternative to the *Orange Book*. There are just a handful of articles included on its website, all at least a year old and two of them by Chris Huhne who is not a group member and indeed was an *Orange Book* contributor.

In an apparent attempt at humour, the group published something called 'Public Services – a Guide for the Perplexed', which reads as if it were written by a public sector union official in the early 1980s. It shows no recognition that public services can sometimes be inefficient and unresponsive or that the interests of those who use public services are not always identical with those who work in the public sector. Public sector good, private sector bad and anyone who says otherwise is a foul right-winger seems to be the message.

I heard Paul Holmes, Beveridge Group member and now chair of the Lib Dem parliamentary party, speak at a fringe meeting at the recent Blackpool conference. In truth, it was hard to spot much difference between his position and that of David Laws or Mark Oaten who were speaking at the same meeting. Holmes said he was not against private sector delivery of some public services – indeed his own Lib Dem-run local council had successfully outsourced its refuse collection – but for some reason this should never apply to the NHS or education services.

His subsequent article in *Liberal Democrat News*, however, had another go at the *Orange Book* crowd; it appeared to suggest that Lib Dem policy should be dictated by the need to appease Labour leaflet writers, and crowed at the defeat of the Europe and post office motions.

Nowhere is there any suggestion of how the Beveridge Group thinks European spending should be made more accountable or reversal of the post office closure programme might be funded.

These two conference debates illustrated the poverty of thinking on the left of the party.

Particularly disappointing was the contribution of the party's local government wing, which one would have thought ought to know a thing or two about financial discipline and the need for hard choices between competing priorities. It was noticeable that, in each of the two controversial debates, there was a speaker from Liverpool, where the Lib Dem administration won power on a promise to maintain outsourcing of refuse collection and which has made a virtue of keeping council tax levels down. But one Liverpool delegate argued against a cap on European spending in case it threatened cuts in European funding for Liverpool, while the other said we should reject the motion on post offices in case Labour attacked us for it.

All this is deeply disappointing, because there needs to be a constructive debate within the Liberal Democrats about how we fund, deliver and improve public services. We can't afford to have just one element of the party putting forward new ideas for debate, while others simply denounce them as right-wingers.

The left of the party needs to shake itself out of its torpor and find something to say.

The Liberal Democrats will be heading up a dead end if they try to be the last bastion of Butskellism – always demanding higher taxes, higher public spending, defending

the public sector and opposing the private sector. We should not become defenders of old-Labourism. It is perhaps worth remembering that the Wilson and Callaghan administrations were hardly models of how we would like progressive government to be.

In the wake of the Lib Dem conference, the political correspondent of the *New Statesman* commented, "The coming generation, represented by Nick Clegg, Chris Huhne and David Laws, will eventually succeed in wresting the party back to its Liberal roots."

He is probably right, but it will hardly make for electoral success if this happens while a significant section of the party is seen as sullenly trying to block change, then reluctantly accepting the inevitable.

The *Orange Book* crowd should not have the field of Lib Dem thinking completely to themselves.

Their agenda can sometimes appear unnecessarily iconoclastic within the party (even if some Lib Dems do need to have their sacred cows slaughtered). While their views should not automatically be dismissed as right-wing, one can't help suspecting that they are complicit in encouraging the press to speculate about moving the party to the right. They have their blind spots too. For example, the Liberal Future ginger group often appeared suspicious of councillors and overly-keen that decentralisation of services should by-pass local authorities.

There was a lack of awareness that most councils have moved on since the 1980s, many are better-run than other parts of the public sector and they do at least have democratic mandates.

Most of all, when I hear David Laws or Vince Cable speak, I am often left with the impression that they are keener to talk about liberal economics than the social justice they want it to deliver. They sound too managerial and lacking in idealism or radical fervour.

Those who consider themselves on the left of the party therefore have an important role making sure that the Liberal Democrats remain a party that is clearly on the side of the underdog, the poor and the excluded and that economic liberal methods deliver social liberal outcomes.

But to do that they have to engage in the debate and put forward ideas of their own, not just engage in oppositionism, while muttering darkly about right-wing conspiracies.

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# NO MORE MINDLESS ACTIVISM

## Social liberals have no cause to feel smug after the Blackpool conference debates, says Simon Titley

Most delegates left the recent Liberal Democrat conference in Blackpool with a spring in their step – and not just because they were leaving Blackpool. For the first time since the merger, most debates were real rather than anodyne.

Contrary to press reports (and the hysterical claims of one or two MPs), there were no ‘defeats for the leadership’, no ‘embarrassments’ and no ‘irresponsibility’. Instead, the two controversial debates, on Europe and the Post Office, proved to be mature and articulate – and the party is all the healthier for it.

‘Social liberal’ delegates had an especial spring in their step after Blackpool, because these debates suggested that the ‘economic liberals’ enjoy no broad support. Whether or not the right was attempting to stage a ‘Clause 4 moment’, the left won every vote comfortably.

So, all the boxes ticked, back to the routine of *Focus* deliveries, is it? If that is the complacent response of social liberals, they are in for a rude shock. They must have something positive to say. Simply opposing is not adequate. If social liberalism is to shine through in the policy review, to form the basis of party policy or to be articulated in the party’s campaigns, social liberals must pull their fingers out.

One thing every Liberal Democrat now seems to agree is that the party needs direction and coherence – commodities that can be supplied only by serious thought. If social liberals opt just to carry on leafleting, others will make the decisions. If they fail to articulate their views, others will determine the narrative – the media will continue stigmatising them as a liability, old-fashioned ‘fringe activists’ who are a barrier to ‘modernisation’ and an obstacle to ‘tough decisions’.

One version of the party’s recent history has it that the right has been doing all the thinking while the left has done none. In fact, the pitifully small overall amount of intelligent thought accomplished since the merger is a record of which no wing of the party can be proud. Indeed, the only outlet for political thought that has been open for business throughout the period since 1988 is the magazine you are holding in your hands.

In *Liberator* 272 (back in January 2001, long before ideology became fashionable again), I catalogued the sorry history that had inhibited thinking in the Liberal Democrats. While some factors are common to all the major British political parties (the ‘end of ideology’ and a consequent resort to followership; and a paranoid fear of the press), others are unique to the Liberal Democrats (a fear the merger might unravel; a strategic focus on pacts and deals; and an obsession with the mechanics of local campaigning).

In this intellectual desert, it takes little effort to establish a reputation for serious thinking. The right’s repute rests

largely on the publication of just one book (last year’s *Orange Book*). However, that is one more than the left has published lately – a situation I understand will be remedied next year. Even then, a one-all draw is not exactly the level of goalmouth action the party needs.

Social liberals should be doing more, much more, to refresh and articulate their values. As an intellectual tonic, I suggest they follow this five-point plan:

### 1 – Think

If you have nothing of substance to say in your leaflets and no idea why you are running for election, why bother? What is the point?

For once, set aside the leaflet deliveries and raise your sights above the parochial. Think hard about your political purpose and blow away your mental cobwebs. Organise political discussions in your local association. Take part in one of the party’s online forums. Respond to the *Meeting the Challenge* consultation. Read this magazine. Go on, try it.

### 2 – Take pride

Taking pride in one’s Liberalism ought to be obvious yet so few do it. There is a remarkably low level of ideological self-esteem among Liberal Democrats. They must stop apologising – if they don’t express their confidence, why should anyone else have any confidence in them?

Most active members are engaged in a form of local campaigning in which policy is made subservient to tactical considerations. Meanwhile, some on the party’s right seem to have concluded that the ‘liberal voter’ is an extinct species – since no one is really a Liberal, they reason, the party’s task is to accommodate conservatism and worry about how to target Tory voters.

Social liberals could put 40,000 volts through the party if they simply wore their values with pride. This means expressing a healthy combination of passion and philosophical confidence. And, quite apart from the tonic effect on the party and themselves, there is another important reason: the party needs to build a liberal constituency, instead of having to win all its votes afresh at each election.

The ‘liberal vote’ exists – but it needs energising and consolidating. This natural support base is the increasing proportion of the population that is better educated; the annual British Social Attitudes survey has shown a direct correlation between higher education and liberal (with a small ‘l’) values.

The electoral evidence for this social trend can already be seen in the Liberal Democrats' exceptional performance in many university seats. So a big 'thank you' to Ken Clarke for expanding higher education – now go out and exploit it.

### 3 – Celebrate life

Life is for living. The Liberal belief in liberty is not an abstraction – its purpose is to enable each person to lead a fulfilling life, what Ralf Dahrendorf called 'life chances'.

Liberals believe people are more important than things. Rival political philosophies say the opposite; they declare people must subordinate their lives to the 'thing' – the state, economy, market, society or whatever. Liberals believe these things should be subservient to people.

So, social liberals must make an explicit rejection of economism, the narrow idea that life is all about production and consumption, a view held by people who know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

They must also reject utilitarian and instrumentalist justifications for policy, such as the idea that education is chiefly about 'equipping young people for the world of work' or that the main benefit of the arts is their contribution to the economy.

And they must throw out the dour talk of 'toughness', 'shaping up' and having to fit in. That was the main problem with the *Orange Book* – most of its authors sounded so bloody miserable. They should leave the Calvinism to Gordon Brown – he's much better at it.

To counter the economic tendency in the party, social liberals must reassert that the Liberal Democrats are 'value' people not 'price' people. They should argue for education, the arts and other policies less on narrow economic grounds, more because of the power of such things to liberate people and enrich their lives.

It is in this context of humanity that social liberals should argue strongly for greener policies. This planet is, on the whole, a beautiful place to live, appealing to all our senses. Its destruction would impair our liberty (amongst other things). David Laws's narrow view in the *Orange Book*, that environmentally inspired restrictions on driving and flying are an affront to individual liberty, must be challenged. The scale of the threats to our planet suggests we need a Liberalism with a greater imaginative scope.

### 4 – Small is beautiful

The reason most people are unhappy with life in general and politics in particular is their growing sense of alienation and insecurity. 'Giantism' in both the public and private sectors is a major cause. While the public sector offers factory hospitals, factory schools and a centrally imposed target culture, the private sector gives us cloned town centres, and the anonymity and frustrations of call centres.

Meanwhile, the things that once made people feel secure, and gave them a sense of belonging and solidarity with others – such as neighbourhood communities, extended families or various local amenities – are threatened or gone. People find their social relationships replaced by economic ones.

Giantism diminishes our humanity; people not only feel more isolated but also feel they are treated merely as producing and consuming objects. They work longer hours in more insecure jobs and seek solace in materialism, becoming trapped in an ever more frantic round of work and

consumption. But we all know in our hearts that this sort of existence expresses a spiritual void and is ultimately unsustainable – not just environmentally but also socially, economically and psychologically.

People lack power over their lives. Social liberals must argue the fundamental importance of empowering local communities (as advocated by David Boyle and Jonathan Calder in their recent *Passports to Liberty* essay) – trusting people to work together to run their own lives and accepting that this may lead to different outcomes in different places.

Giantism is both illiberal and inefficient. Social liberals must oppose giantism *wherever it comes from*. Economic liberals are right to criticise the monolithic public sector but are too ready to indulge the monolithic private sector because they have made a fetish of the 'free market'.

Social liberals must not make the equivalent error of making a fetish of public sector institutions. They must stop defending monolithic public services and instead argue for a radical devolution of power to make these services more responsive to the needs of their users. The distinctive role for social liberals is to argue that this responsiveness can be achieved without necessarily resorting to privatisation or competition.

### 5 – Drawbridge down

During the general election, the polling company YouGov revealed some fascinating opinion research. Its director Stephan Shakespeare suggested (*Observer*, 17 April) that voters "no longer range along a left-right axis, but are divided by 'drawbridge issues'.

"We are either 'drawbridge up' or 'drawbridge down'. Are you someone who feels your life is being encroached upon by criminals, gypsies, spongers, asylum seekers, Brussels bureaucrats? Do you think the bad things will all go away if we lock the doors? Or do you think it's a big beautiful world out there, full of good people, if only we could all open our arms and embrace each other?"

"... while the Tories have clearly identified themselves as those who will slam up the drawbridge, Labour have been terrified to oppose them with an expansive, positive, alternative vision, in case it loses votes."

He didn't mention that this terror has spread to the Liberal Democrats. The party's 2004 Euro election campaign was a disgraceful bid to mollify 'drawbridge up' opinion. The economic liberals wish to go a step further, attempting to push the party in a more Eurosceptic direction.

Social liberals must argue that the Liberal Democrats should be an emphatic 'drawbridge down' party. Let the Tories and Labour fight over the bigoted 'drawbridge up' vote – the party's natural liberal constituency, educated and cosmopolitan, is 'drawbridge down' and is there for the taking.

Real ideological divisions are opening up and 'drawbridge issues' are the new political battleground. If you believe that political thought gets in the way of winning elections, you are wrong. You can no longer win without political ideas.

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# DISRAELI GEARS

## Blair uses old Labour methods to pursue right-wing ends and the Liberal Democrats should avoid both, says John Stevens

Disraeli famously summed up his revivification of the Conservative party as “Tory men, Whig measures.”

By this he meant, I think, something much more than simply “stealing the Liberals clothes whilst they were bathing”, remaking his political tradition through the wholesale adoption of his opponents’ agenda in the manner, one might say, of Tony Blair forming New Labour by merely mimicking the programme of John Major.

For all his cynicism, Disraeli saw politics as far more than just winning the next election. He sincerely believed that his objective, his highly emotional, historical vision for Britain, of the Tory ‘One Nation’, could in fact best be achieved by employing the methods of Liberalism.

And he was right. Through getting onto the bandwagon of extending the franchise and of implementing the Factory Acts, by continuing the classical Palmerstonian formula of free trade bolstered by bravura, so it became the romance of empire, he created a truly proletarian patriotism.

By any measure it was a more ‘left wing’ outcome, in terms of social inclusivity, and much else besides, than that then promoted by the Liberals. Even if it also allowed the Conservatives to win over the erstwhile radical industrial entrepreneurs and professional bourgeoisie, grown cautious by the spectre of socialism, thereby ensuring that they, and not the Liberals, survived into the age of class politics.

Are there, perhaps, lessons for us in this now? At our party conference, the media seemed to be transfixed by the question of whether we were moving to the left or to the right. We were seen as split between the advocates of what was described as the new, ‘Tory moderniser’ ideas for the private delivery of health or education, and those who remain committed to the maintenance of the so-called traditional ‘Old Labour’ state structures of such services.

Among the many confusions is that between ends and means. What would be wrong, one might ask, of embracing, in the same spirit as Disraeli, “Liberal men and Conservative measures”, especially if it were to have the comparable effect of eclipsing the Tories in the new age of post class globalisation politics?

After all, for a start it would force us actually to define the ends of our policies, something, I believe, we have hitherto failed adequately to do. We would have to set out our vision for what our country should be like. We would be able to give free reign to our emotions and to our sense of history. Any such exercise must place us in terms of goals emphatically to the left of this government.

That I, a former Conservative, and one time ardent Thatcherite, can say this, is not merely a measure of how far to the right New Labour has travelled.

It is not just a revulsion against their shameful tolerance of great and growing economic, social and cultural inequality, their exploitative, dehumanising consumerism, their egregious Atlanticism, their wholesale assault upon our most

ancient liberties, the remorseless centralisation of power, their arrogant contempt for parliament, for the judiciary, for democracy and truth.

It should also reassure anyone in our party that those who have been Liberal Democrats all their political careers, and have supported initiatives like the *Orange Book*, subscribed to such a critique of contemporary Britain even more sincerely, and yearn for a Liberal culture of equality, of compassion and of creativity, even more passionately.

But means are a different matter. Here, we are not in the realm of the heart, but of the head.

Who can deny that New Labour has not just sold its soul but also taken leave of its senses? Where is the real return, the good value, the actual quality of outcome, derived from the vast sums that have been dispersed in recent years, over every field, from education through to transport via health and social security?

Is not their lamentable record indicative not only of a looming financial bankruptcy but of an intellectual bankruptcy too? In some cases, to be sure, their fraying of the frontier between public service and private business should encourage our determination to restore a clear delineation but in many others there is every reason to look for a wholesale retreat by the centralised state from the delivery of, as opposed to determining the demand for, provision.

If we have had a problem with the distinction between process and outcome, that of the government is vastly greater. However, in as much as Blair has discerned it, ‘the project’ has, in fact, been about far more than making New Labour look like the Conservatives.

It has sought to be the real Tory modernisers, without class, in both senses of the word, committed to the pursuit of Conservative, right wing goals, while still employing basically stateist left wing methods.

Liberal Democrats should aspire to the exact opposite. If we did so, then I am confident that the Conservative party would be prostrate and divided, and we would be in power, at long last able to actually deliver on our dreams.

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John Stevens was a Conservative MEP and founder of the Pro-European Conservative Party before joining the Liberal Democrats, for whom he stood in the 2004 European election.

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# LEGITIMACY CRISIS

## Who will hold the supranational institutions and NGOs to account, asks Graham Watson

The 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century military-industrial concept of the nation state developed in response to a particular set of challenges. It presents us with three particular problems. The first is that many of today's challenges are supranational and require a supranational response, which the nation state is ill-suited to providing.

The second is that the nation state denies representation to those left out of the process of state building such as the Kurds, the Kosovars, the Tibetans and the Palestinians, or those nations divided, such as the Koreans.

And the third, as China and America show, is that, the larger the nation, the less legitimate the government.

In the history of humankind's democratic development, the move from direct democracy at the level of the tribe to indirect democracy through elected parliaments (to legitimise the nation state) was an essential step, even if rightly questioned by many Liberals.

The next step – development of democratic structures to legitimise supranational government – is no less essential. Liberal supranationalists are needed.

There are too few of them in the Liberal Democrats. One need look no further than the way our Westminster foreign affairs team too often fails to understand the EU. Or the way Liberal community politics can lead to nimbyism, as the participation of some of our councillors and MPs in movements opposing wind turbines demonstrates.

There are problems with the legitimacy of supranational institutions such as the EU, the World Bank/IMF and the WTO. We need to find ways to make them more legitimate.

Take the EU, for example. There is no doubt that elections to the European Parliament are seen by voters as second order elections. Turnout is sometimes even lower than in local elections. My experience with a weekly blog to constituents and a frantic weekly round of Friday and Saturday meetings with the institutions of civic society in South West England is that maintaining democratic legitimacy is possible, albeit exhausting. Representation in the supranational institutions I know best could certainly be improved, perhaps with the use of public participation primaries to choose parties' candidates, direct election of European Commissioners, greater transparency in European Council proceedings and the kind of involvement of national parliaments foreseen in the EU's constitutional treaty.

Liberals must insist that the democratic process is the only legitimate process of decision-taking and that election by universal suffrage must be the basis of that process. The EU, for all its faults, has a parliament that exercises real power in many areas of policy. The international Parliamentary Network on the World Bank has no formal status and needs one. I'm involved too in an initiative to establish a global e-parliament open to democratically elected legislators worldwide.

Liberals do not question the value of social entrepreneurs or NGOs. They make a huge contribution to democracy. But they cannot replace government by democracy.

The annual meetings of the World Economic Forum (Davos) and the World Social Forum (Porto Alegre) are important, but they are not endowed with the same legitimacy as the UN or any other intergovernmental institution. However weak the legitimacy of such institutions, however much in need of improvement, they are the best we can do short of rethinking fundamentally democratic legitimacy.

My challenge to the leaders of NGOs is not 'Who Elects You?' but 'Who Turfs You Out?' Participation in democratic elections may be low, but the opportunity to participate is what counts.

The second problem with NGOs is one of balanced government. Bravo to those who persuaded the G8 to concentrate on poverty in Africa. But nearly half of the world's poor live in Asia. Three cheers for those advocating more spending to combat domestic violence. But who advocates the greater spending we need on our prisons?

For all its imperfections, democracy involves choices in which conflicting interests must be balanced. It is the worst form of government, as Churchill said, except when you compare it to all others.

There is no doubt that traditional forms of political participation fail to attract many men and women of energy. But if they have given up on elected politics, they have given up on democracy. What message does that send to the many still struggling for democracy in the developing world?

Why are the men and women of energy not in politics, reforming it? It is not incapable of reform. Is it too much like hard work? Does it not pay enough? Do they fear ideologically-based allegiance? (If so, New Labour is always an option!) Are they afraid of prurient press intrusion on their privacy?

The deeper currents of history are cultural and ethical, not political or economic. Societies are defined by what people value. Europeans claim to value democracy, so the big challenge of our age is democratising the supranational institutions that govern our lives. And the problem for those too intelligent to go into politics to achieve this is that they pay the price of being governed by those more stupid.

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# FROM THE BULLY PULPIT

**There is no longer any possibility of a progressive consensus between Liberal Democrats and New Labour authoritarians. It is time to look for a wider progressive consensus in society, says Lynne Featherstone**

After my election in May, several people came up to me to say, "I'm so glad you won. It's great that you are now my MP ... but I didn't vote for you, I stuck with Labour." Thankfully, plenty of others did switch.

The combination for many people of liking what the Liberal Democrats are doing along with a tradition of backing Labour is part of the reason why the idea of a left-of-centre progressive consensus is coming back into fashion, at least in Labour circles. It naturally raises questions about the position of the Liberal Democrats – should we aim to be part of a near-permanent non-Conservative political majority in this country?

As the Independent's fringe meeting asked at our Blackpool conference: can the Liberal Democrats be part of a new progressive consensus? My answer – they could, but it depends which progressive consensus. Gordon Brown's? I don't think so!

I think Gordon is a cowardly, cowardly, custard, who keeps his head below the parapet when the going gets tough, votes a straight New Labour ticket, takes credit for and dines out on the one and only truly progressive policy Labour has delivered – giving independence to the Bank of England (a long-time Lib Dem policy) – and silently waits for Tony's tide to go out.

For all his talk about prudence and responsibility, he pushed through the massively expensive part-privatisation of London's tube system – racking up huge bills for lawyers, accountants and bureaucrats, but not improving the service. Prudence didn't get a look in when he signed the huge cheques for military intervention in Iraq. (If only he had been willing to show the same financial generosity closer to home!).

In fact, look at all the issues that most motivated Labour supporters to switch to the Liberal Democrats and were plastered all over Focus leaflet after Focus leaflet. They are all ones like top-up fees and (lack of) free care for the elderly, which have Gordon Brown's fingerprints all over them.

It says something about the desperation of so many in Labour that they see as their saviour the very man deeply immersed in the policies which have driven millions of voters and tens of thousands of activists away.

My own long-held, genuine belief in a left-of-centre, progressive consensus that would consign the Tories to the dustbins of history – something I longed for and would have fought for – appears now as dust. Labour has squandered its

parliamentary majorities with timidity. It has been too busy instead alternating running for office and running for cover.

I don't trust Labour any longer, and I don't believe it is capable of true consensus. Brown's 'progressive consensus' means OK so long as you agree with him.

Now, I could spend a long time writing about the other parties and whether there might be common ground – but guessing where either of those treacherous buggers are going next is so easy to get wrong. And quite frankly if you want views on where Labour will go after Blair, you'd be better off reading a piece by a Labour MP in *Prospect*.

So instead, I want to address the question of whether the Lib Dems can tap into a larger progressive consensus – in society. The question of our beliefs and policies is under our control – and focusing on them is rather more productive than trying to fix our position relative to the ever-shifting other parties.

It's another take on the question that's been knocking around the party since May about what the thread is which could draw together our individually popular key policies.

Call it vision, narrative, theme, pitch or message – whatever – what should it be?

We face an apparently paradoxical general public view – people increasingly feeling powerless yet also highly suspicious of those collective ways of asserting power and control over your own life – using the tools of democracy and government.

It's these conflicting pulls on the party that are reflected in some of our internal debates. At least we still have internal debates.

That's why you have those keener on big government, spending money and regulating against bad things – as the way to tackle immediately some of the issues that give rise to anxiousness and powerlessness.

And on the other hand, you have the classic small government liberals, responding to the other pull and wanting to cut back on central government to give people more direct control.

To me, this is a false dilemma as we can be smarter about the tools of government. Government can ban, can price it or can use its powers of publicity. One example – we can outlaw high fat foods, or slap an extra tax on them or put Jamie Oliver on the telly every night telling us to eat different. Far too much of the political debate within the Liberal Democrats is about the first two options only.



Take the similar example of the amount of quick buck seeking, third-rate diet advice out there, feeding on fears of obesity. The old big government answer would be to ban and regulate. But do we really want to get into regulating the details of diet books – having Whitehall decide who can say what in their books?

The modern, nimble answer is to use the prestige of the NHS to have the best-seller lists taken over by the NHS diet book and the NHS healthy eating book. (It's done elsewhere – have a look at one of the best-selling diet advice books in Australia at the moment).

Making laws and banning things has the appeal of being in your direct control – a few votes in parliament and bish, bang, bong – issue done and dusted, next up, let's move along. It's quick – and sometimes effective. It's politics of the West Wing variety, with the belief that no problem is so difficult that you can't think up a wheeze to solve it before the next advert break. If only life were that easy.

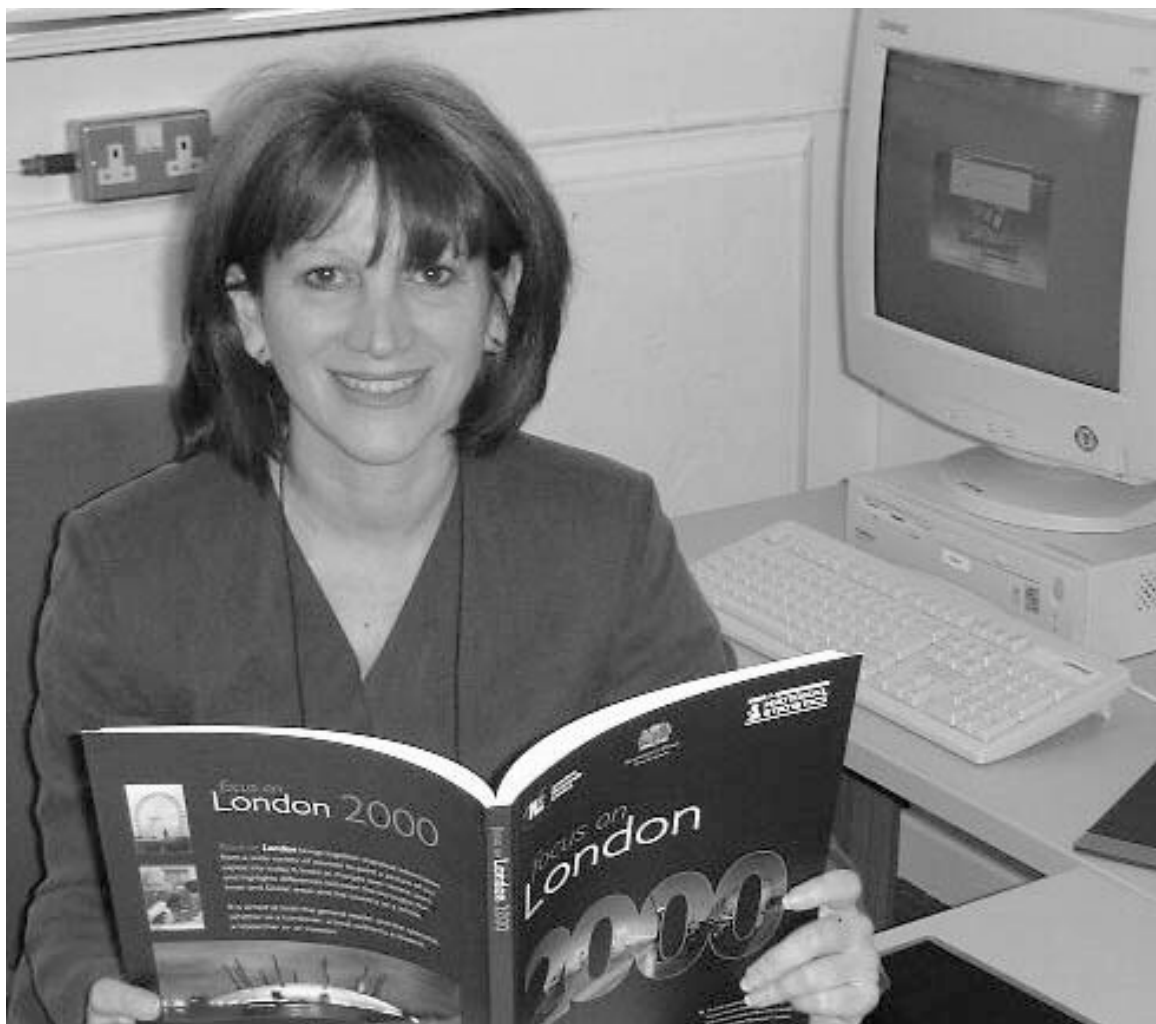
But at the other end, using government as a publicity bully pulpit is more tolerant, not so much big brother as nagging nanny. And for those who know me – you will know how highly I rate nagging – particularly as it is a middle-aged woman's life skill!

That's where our real search for a progressive consensus should be made – an active, inventive and innovatory approach that recognises there is much government can do, but that it doesn't always have to be via rules and regulations or indeed legislation, legislation, legislation.

Up against the big economic forces, multi-nationals and Mother Nature, we need a government to work with people. Sometimes that means tax and spend. Sometimes it means regulation. But there are alternatives – alternatives that are much more in tune with the rough and ready consensus out there in society.

Take a local example so beloved of our campaigns – graffiti is often left untouched on commercial property. Yes, we need councils with money to remove it, but we should also expect companies to take more responsibility for the state of their own property.

So what should we do about – to give one example – some of the shops along Stroud Green Road in my constituency, which have had a pretty poor record at cleaning up themselves over the last year?



Is the answer to send out inspectors dishing out tickets and fining firms who don't clean up quick enough? Of course not, though it might distract from all the complaints about traffic wardens.

But why shouldn't government (be it council or central) be naming and shaming such firms and putting pressure on them? Expecting companies to care more about their communities – that's what you hear demands for in so many different ways from the public.

Government as a nimble lobbyist, and collective voice for the public, is an approach that would fit well with our beliefs in decentralisation, as that is what's needed for the necessary flexibility and responsiveness. It is also the way to getting things changed without hanging around waiting for the arrival of a Liberal Democrat government. Shaming a supermarket into better practices brings quicker rewards than promising one day when Charles is prime minister to change a law.

It was the American president Theodore Roosevelt who coined the phrase 'bully pulpit' to describe the White House. He used the platform it gave him to speak up and thereby lead and shape events. It's a lesson we could learn from – and you don't have to be in the White House to learn it.

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Lynne Featherstone is Liberal Democrat MP for Hornsey and Wood Green. Website: [www.lynnfeatherstone.org](http://www.lynnfeatherstone.org)

# LIVING WITH THE THATCHER LEGACY

The Thatcher era put greed at the centre of politics and eventually corroded trust in politicians. The Liberal Democrats can put that right, says David Rendel

It may seem a strange reaction to losing a parliamentary seat. But one of the most difficult aspects of being an MP is the lack of time to think about, and write about, the fundamental beliefs from which your political ideas have grown. If the opportunity arises, I hope to return to the Commons as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, the sleepless nights and 18-hour days, 7 days a week, 50 weeks a year (yes, I did always make sure I got away for at least two weeks in the summer) are for the moment behind me.

My first thought was to write about how we fought the election on a series of clever, attractive, well-thought-out policies. Our only failure was that we had not explained clearly enough why these were Liberal Democrat policies. Individually, the flowers were attractive. But it was not obvious why they were in that particular flowerbed.

Then it was tactfully pointed out that everyone in the party, or at least every Liberator reader, was already saying that. David Boyle's excellent article about the importance of narrative (*Liberator* 304) covered that theme.

So let me try to take the analysis a little further.

We could all try to live separate lives purely for our own benefit. But (with the exception of Baroness Thatcher) we know that we are more likely to get what we want out of life by co-existing in a society – or even in lots of co-existing societies – in which most of what we do has benefits for the other members of our society (-ies), more even perhaps than for ourselves.

The more that members of that society can be persuaded to act altruistically, the greater the benefits that each individual member of that society is likely to gain from being a part of it. Politics is then the art of co-ordinating what the individual members of a society do (and maximising the extent to which they act altruistically) to maximise the benefits that society brings to all its members.

I believe that a very profound change took place in British politics during the Thatcher years, which in the long term has proved far more important than changes to trade union law, income tax levels or any of the other more obvious changes.

There have always been some voters – there probably always will be – who have asked candidates, “What are you going to do for me?” But Thatcher made everyone see it that way. The more obvious changes were merely evidence that that was what politics was all about.

The politics of greed and selfishness drove out of power anyone who suggested that caring for those less fortunate

than ourselves was a crucial – perhaps even the most crucial – aspect of a well-run society.

Ever since Thatcher, even those of us who understood the importance of individuals co-operating for the benefit of all found ourselves emphasising in our campaigns what it was about our policies that would benefit the individuals we were addressing.

“Free care for the elderly will save them from having to sell off their homes and allow their sons and daughters a higher standard of living after their parents had died” instead of “Asking the taxpayer to pay for elderly care is good for our society because it encourages saving and investment and (like the NHS) spreads the cost of care more evenly between those who are fortunate enough never to need it and those who unfortunate enough to need a lot of it”.

“Free university education will save students from debt and save their parents from subsidizing them even after they are adults” instead of “The higher the general level of education in our society, the more tolerant it is, the greater the level of appreciation for the arts there is, the less crime there is and the more we can open up opportunities for all our citizens.”

I believe this new emphasis on selfish materialism as the basis for all political discussion has played a major part in the growing distaste for politicians and politics in general. People instinctively feel that politicians who concentrate solely on trying to satisfy the selfish greed of others are probably in it mainly to satisfy their own selfish greed.

They feel that such politicians can never be trusted to do what is really best for their parish/district/country/continent because the satisfaction of the materialistic needs of their supporters can only be achieved at the expense of other citizens who do not support them. The gap in the political scene that is crying out to be filled is for a party that is brave enough to espouse a more idealistic view of life.

We are ideally suited to fill this gap. Why? Because we already have a reputation for many of the essential ingredients of such a party.

First, we have a growing and justified reputation for honesty. Policies such as an opposition to mandatory life sentences for murder have allowed our opponents to mislead the electorate about our intentions. But by openly stating that we support such policies in the face of our opponents attacks, bit by bit we gain credit for taking serious positions on serious issues, while the other parties merely sloganise.

Often, the initially difficult positions we have taken on difficult issues have demonstrated that we are honest enough

to say what we believe even when we know that that will open us up to cheap and misleading attacks from our opponents.

Drugs and Iraq spring to mind as obvious examples, where Charles in particular has proved that honesty is the best policy.

As I know to my personal cost, such honesty can sometimes make it easier in the short term for our opponents to seduce our supporters away from us. But if our growing reputation for honesty continues to win us increasing numbers of new supporters, the net gains will be well worth the occasional loss.

Moreover, those of us at least who have been in the party a long time can hardly be accused of holding the policies we support without really believing in them, merely as a way of gaining political power. You don't join a party of six MPs standing at 6% in the polls as a quick route to political office.

Secondly, we are not a class party. We have no particular section of the electorate that we regard as our own and no incentive therefore to slant our policies in favour of any subsection of society. We can credibly claim to be working for the benefit of the whole of our society, and we are the only party that can do so.

Thirdly, we are democrats, with a firm conviction that a proper democracy, for all its difficulties, is the best system for running a society. We accept that the electorate is made up of voters of many different persuasions. To us it is important that all the different voices are heard, even when they fundamentally disagree with us. That is why a voting system that gives a proper hearing to minority viewpoints is so important.

Fourthly, there is our attitude to the public sector. It is clear that we understand that 'goods' provided out of taxation can be shared among the members of our society more fairly according to need. Moreover, they can often be provided more cheaply (both because the main alternative way of providing expensive 'goods' such as health and education is via private insurance, with all the extra overhead costs that that entails, and because of the economies of scale).

Finally, there is our attitude to politics itself. In his *Observer* column recently, Nick Cohen described Tony Blair as being someone who had learnt the lesson "that winning office is the alpha and omega of politics".

Sadly – and it is part of the modern disillusionment with politics and politicians in general – many people see politics this way. But I believe, and I believe most Liberal Democrats believe, that the politician's aim is to change the way our society works, to increase the benefits of that society for all its members. That is done partly by persuading others of what are the best and most important changes to make and partly by using political office to put those changes into legislation.

As John Major famously discovered, being in office does not necessarily entail being in power. And even if you are in power, it is not always possible to use it as you would like to. The current ruling parliamentary party is not the first to have discovered that winning power by promoting policies that are not really those you wish to introduce often leaves you without the power to introduce the policies you do wish to.

How many Labour supporters (and even MPs) are pleased to have won the power to reduce disability benefits, to introduce student tuition, and now top-up, fees, to privatise National Air Traffic Services and reprivatise Railtrack, and to go to war in Iraq?

Our refusal to bend our policies for the sake of quick popularity may have meant that it has taken us a long time to win the power we crave. But it also means that, when we do achieve power, we will be able to use it to implement the policies we believe in.

So we should not be afraid to make clear our commitment to a society which is altruistic, unselfish, generous and caring – sympathetic to the needs of those less fortunate than ourselves.

If some scoff that that will never get us anywhere in the cynical world of modern politics, let us remember that we have often been at our most successful when we have defied conventional wisdom. After all, the electorate is crying out for a new form of politics. I believe it will respond well to a call for a new idealism.

We need not just to persuade people to vote for us, but to inspire people to vote for us. They need to feel that it is not just the sensible thing to do, but also the right thing to do.

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David Rendel was Liberal Democrat MP for Newbury 1993-2005.

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## AUNT SALLY FORTH

*Dear Liberator,*

Iain Sharpe starts by calling for a more sensible debate on economics and public services (*Liberator* 305). Fair enough, we should not automatically reject as ‘right wing’ all solutions that involve markets.

However, he later lets his own indulgences get the better of him. In his school-yard, all the Aunt Sallies have come out to play. Meet ‘a better yesterday’, ‘soggy social democracy’, and that old Tory favourite, the ‘nanny state’.

Some of them do not even exist in the present-day Liberal Democrats. I do not know of anyone in the party theorising on how to make central planning work, or advocating zero growth. Aren’t these rhetorical devices also attempts to close off debate, and to dismiss some parts of the party as ‘left wing’ and ‘old fashioned’?

I am quite prepared to concede that the market has solved the problem of quantity, and we are all the better for it. But what we need to address now are the issues of quality – of our working conditions and work/life balance, of the environment, and of tackling the socially damaging problem of gross inequality.

In an age of apparent hyper-abundance, we really do not need to be whipped into ever greater frenzies of production, consumption and competitiveness. And we should not automatically dismiss solutions that do not involve markets.

By all means have a debate. But let’s have a grown-up one, and put away the Aunt Sallies on both sides.

**Andrew Toye**  
Exmouth

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## TROTting ALONG

*Dear Liberator,*

I read Simon Titley’s article ‘The Maoists and the Trotskyists’ (*Liberator* 305) with interest, having noted both types of person in the party. The problem with the Maoists is that they are incapable of seeing beyond delivering the next Focus and the means has become the end. Effectively they are a machine.

Two years ago, there were a couple of council by-elections in the borough where I live. We share the cabinet with Labour but are in the minority. The

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election seemed to be largely a case of knocking up as many of our voters as possible to the extent of harassment.

As we were in the cabinet and largely fighting the Labour party, it was difficult to see exactly what would be changed by the election, which had become more akin to rival factions trying to gain an extra seat on the committee of a social club.

If our policies are not clear to the electorate, that would explain in part the low turnouts in local elections.

The government is to some extent to blame as it has increasingly turned local government into local administration, which will have the exact opposite effect on turnout that it claims to want, in that people will increasingly ask whether voting changes anything.

Of the Trotskyists, Simon appears to miss the point, in that there appears to be a confusion between consumer interests and the interests of commerce that the economic liberals ignore. There is a distinction between what the commerce faction wants and the interests of the consumer.

As multinationals increasingly dominate markets and public service providers wipe out competitors, it is not the consumer who benefits. The interests of large concerns are not synonymous with those of the consumer. One of the results of competition among utility providers has been unsolicited door-to-door salesmen claiming to sell a cheaper product and in some cases signing up customers without their consent, call centres trying to sell insurance products and endless delays caused by road works. Exactly how individuals benefit from this I have yet to understand.

Privatisation of public services and utilities has added shareholders to the list of stakeholders and in a lot of cases the interests of the shareholders are not those of the consumer, so that the service of utility is accountable largely to the shareholder, who is as much a

producer interest as an employee but without a public service ethos.

The main problem with public services has been their management. Replacing public services that are badly managed by people who largely have some public service ethos with services that are badly managed by people without that ethos will not provide better services.

Collectivism should not be confused with state socialism. Collective organisations can be voluntary ones, such as tenants’ or residents’ associations, or trade unions or farmers’ cooperatives.

Any free market economy relies on some form of regulation to prevent free monopolies and cartels from developing, not to mention the protection of employees, who do not have any collective bargaining strength, and of the environment.

The challenge presented by globalisation is how to regulate globally. I therefore concur with Simon Titley’s conclusions in his final paragraph.

**Andrew Hudson**  
Leyton

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## CLIENT STATE

*Dear Liberator,*

I read Paul Keetch’s article with incredulity (*Liberator* 305). Does he really believe that this country should deepen even further its already client relationship with the United States? Does he honestly believe that it would be anything like an equal one?

He cites all sort of contacts with the US: tourism, where there is a net deficit; entertainment, where slavish imitation of America has meant the almost complete destruction of indigenous popular culture; American ‘colonisation’ of the armed forces; and rather sinister talk of the ‘Washington Whitehall’.

Elsewhere in *Liberator* 305, there is valid criticism of overweening American influence on British foreign

policy in Iraq and Sudan. It is clear that Paul Keetch has “always loved the US”.

Personally, I can't empathise with this at all, but even if I did I would not expect this 'love' to be virtually unconditional.

Mr Keetch states that some people believe that “the US is an overbearing hegemony interested in its own imperialistic ambitions”. The trouble is that this analysis is a close approximation of the truth.

Incidentally, would it be cheap to suggest that Hurricane Katrina was nature's way of telling the Americans that they should have warned the world about the Boxing Day tsunami when they detected it hours before it struck Asian coastlines?

**Roger Jenking  
Oxford**

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## THE LAND

*Dear Liberator,*

It was a tonic to read Tony Vickers's article on land value taxation (*Liberator* 305), after all the uncritical pieces on local income tax.

One of the main principles that attracted me into the Liberal Party was its belief that the community had the right to collect profits from land values (together with the principle that power should be shared equitably through devolution, PR and workers owning the businesses in which they were employed).

Even if you are not persuaded by the moral arguments, at least consider some of the practical results of abolishing the council tax and not replacing it with any other property tax.

Average house prices would rise overnight by about £10,000 – a straightforward gift from the have-nots to the haves.

It would become even more attractive to invest in property rather than in anything productive, as property prices rose faster than share prices – still more unoccupied second homes and under-occupied homes.

Wealth would be redistributed even further in favour of people living in 'desirable' areas, and their offspring.

The house for which I paid £14,000 is probably worth £200,000 today, and that is in a region where property prices have risen by a lot less than the national average. 1% of this increase might be due to the installation of central heating or to my occasional

activities with a paintbrush, but 99% is due to the community's greater demand for housing. Do I, or eventually my children, really have the right to siphon off the £184,140 profit?

Of course, land value taxation, like any other tax, may produce cases of individual hardship – people like Tim Farron's low-paid workers in the Lake District whose houses rise in value as Manchester solicitors looking for holiday homes enter the market (*Liberator* 305). But that doesn't invalidate the general principle. Individual cases of hardship could be dealt with by deferring payment until sale or inheritance.

Wouldn't it be better to put the ball back in the court of the opponents of LVT?

If they believe it is right for people to make enormous windfall gains without contributing anything to society or the economy, the onus is on such critics to argue their case.

Andrew Hudson (*Liberator* 305) reckoned that a conference motion on LVT would be even more interesting than a debate on dog dirt. Perhaps a motion defending private profit from land values would raise the level of excitement even more. If you believe that God gave the land to the property speculators, come out and argue your case.

**Bob Pinkney  
Whitley Bay**

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## WHY I'LL MISS McCARTHY

*Dear Liberator,*

One of the huge strengths Donnachadh McCarthy brought to Liberal Democracy was his courage in recognising his right to sometimes ask the membership to consider certain very serious home truths about itself and what Liberal Democracy actually means and stands for.

Such people, who risk abuse and misrepresentation at every level, are precious, even if we don't always agree with their views or their reasons for asking a particular question. They are precious in any group or organisation which is not actually dying.

Should the voice of dissent, of challenge, or of caution be seen as disruptive or as grandstanding, and

should the party fail to recognise not only its right to be heard as an upholder of democracy and as a vital check on self-interest, then atrophy will have set in, and real roads to effective change will have been blocked by ambition and by pride, the way ahead withering on the vine of uncertainty and populism.

And so it was that, despite the final demand he made for self-examination, the good old conference rolled on again this year, possibly even greyer, more conformist and less relevant than ever, the same old stale routines, the unchallenged accepted wisdoms, the absence of a clear message.

This is a party desperate to find a real self-confidence beyond the opinion polls, a brand even, but which can't, dare not, lift its head above the parameters of Thatcherism, where, despite its protestations, the party continues to wish to lie down like an exhausted gatecrasher, a party urgently in need of an inclusive vision to fuse and enthuse its many disparate parts and offer a new direction for people.

Millions see us as entirely the same as the other lot, but the party can applaud such nonsense as those who claim there is no contradiction between markets and social justice.

Unless Liberal Democracy challenges the kernel of Thatcherism to enable a flowering of political thought and involvement from grassroots up in every dimension, it has the narrowest of futures, even if Blair were to invade the entire Arab world on his own.

**Bill Haymes  
Dudley**



**“Come on, its less than the price of a decent malt” - Peter Johnson tries to interest Charles Kennedy in a Liberator subscription.**

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**Spoken Here**  
**by Mark Abley**  
**Arrow Books 2005**  
**£7.99**

Fair numbers of people once spoke Yuchi, Boro, Murrinh-Patha, Mati Ke and Mohawk, as they once did rather better known languages like Manx and Yiddish.

Now, some 90% of the world's tongues are under threat from the onward march of the main international languages.

Decades of colonisation, tourism, popular culture and now the internet have reduced some languages to oddities spoken by a handful of elderly people, and others have already been lost.

Sometimes, enthusiasts working in a favourable political climate manage to stage a revival, as has happened to Welsh and to a lesser extent Cornish and Provençal.

But most minority languages are fighting a losing battle against both the international spread of English and against whatever is the dominant language spoken around them.

Abley's argument is that this matters. When a language dies, we lose not just something of cultural interest but also a different way of looking at the world.

Mohawk, for example, emphasises actions rather than objects. 'There was a table on the rug' would translate as 'what you eat food on stands on the hemp material in the past.'

The Brazilian jungle boasts Hixkaryana, the world's only known language to use the object-verb-subject order of sentence construction.

Ubykh, with its 48 consonants, is gone, as is the Marlda Kangka silent sign language of aboriginals near Australia's Gulf of Carpentaria.

One can see this effect closer to home too. Anyone who has travelled in Europe will have been struck by the absorption of English words into various national languages.

While French is obviously in no danger of disappearance, it is fighting for its status as an international language. It must be rarer than it once was for speakers with no common language to use French rather than English (or possibly now Spanish) and the northern and eastern

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enlargement of the EU has raised the importance of English over French.

No-one can be forced to speak and use a language, though they can perhaps be forced to learn it in schools.

But Abley argues that a language cannot survive merely as part of the school curriculum; it has to be in everyday use to be a living tongue and that can only be brought about by the determination of speakers to keep it alive.

Mark Smulian

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**Room Full of Mirrors: A Biography of Jimi Hendrix**  
**by Charles R Cross**  
**Sceptre 2005 £18.99**

A quick look on the internet will yield any number of opportunities to buy a print of a photograph of Jimi Hendrix with then Liberal leader Jeremy Thorpe backstage at the Royal Festival Hall in February 1967.

What I could not find on the web was an explanation of why the meeting took place, since loud psychedelic blues-rock was unlikely to be Thorpe's taste in music.

One explanation is that, at that point, just about anyone who was anyone wanted to meet Hendrix. He had arrived in London five months earlier almost wholly unknown and had become an instant celebrity for his unprecedented abilities as a guitarist.

A year earlier, he had been an obscure backing musician, though he had played with legends like the Isley Brothers and Little Richard. Within weeks of his arrival in London, everyone from the Beatles downwards was in awe of him.

By 1970, he was dead from an overdose, leaving an estate and record companies to carry on undignified squabbles over assets that continue to this day.

This book serves a large purpose and a small one. For Hendrix fans, it provides a complete biography that is probably as good as one could reasonably hope for.

While those uninterested in Hendrix would be unlikely to want to read the book for the smaller reason, it is still of interest.

Cross describes through Hendrix's associates a black musician's struggles with racism in America (even in the relatively enlightened north west) and of the impact an extravagantly dressed black hippy who could play guitar with his teeth had on the crumbling world of post-war England.

Mark Smulian

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**The Little Mermaid - adapted from the original by Hans Christian Andersen**  
**by Ian Beck**  
**Doubleday 2005 £10.99**

The bi-centenary of Hans Christian Andersen's birth has caused a flurry of interest, among the best of which is Ian Beck's adaption, a simpler retelling and illustration, of *The Little Mermaid*. As a child, an adult even, I didn't really like most of Andersen's stories. They have rather grim, sad endings and *The Little Mermaid* is no exception. Analysts have attributed Andersen's misanthropy to all sorts of causes. Life in nineteenth century Denmark was perhaps not as gay as Danny Kaye's presentation would have us believe.

*The Little Mermaid* sprang from the Melusine/Undine/Lorelei range of stories. It first appeared in 1837 in the third part of Andersen's *Eventyr fortalte for Born* (Fairy tales told for Children), along with the rather jollier *Emperor's New Clothes*. It was one of his first works translated into English, in 1846, struck a chord with the Victorians and has been part of the canon ever since.

It has attracted many great illustrators, such as Kay Nielsen (it is too bad that Walt Disney's earlier exploratory collaboration with the artist never got to the screen – and we have the slushy 1990s output of his studios instead).

Ian Beck has under his belt the cover of Elton John's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* and the highly successful *Five Little Ducks* (none of which seem to survive in my telling, but it does have an orange sauce). His work as an illustrator is thus varied. For *The Little Mermaid*, he recalls Honor Appleton's illustrations to *Hans Christian Andersen Fairy Tales* of 1922 to my mind, though with a more knowing and erotic charge. The storytelling loses much of the moralising – gone are the 300 years of good deeds to purchase a soul. Perhaps Beck thinks we can't take that kind of thing any more, yet it was reputedly an important part of the story's original success and distinguished it from the wider myth. Do we still have a soul in the twenty-first century?

Stewart Rayment

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## **The Last Days Of Henry VIII: Conspiracy, Treason and Heresy at the Court of the Dying Tyrant** **by Robert Hutchinson** **Weidenfeld & Nicholson 2005 £20**

This is a scholarly work about the last four years of a cruel, despotic ruler who is estimated to have executed 150,000 of his three million people, attempted to ethnically cleanse the Scots, bankrupted his treasury with another pointless French war, put two of his wives to the axe, but led the Reformation in England.

With a few delightful exceptions, Hutchinson does not bring any fresh evidence or new research to light on the years 1543-47, but his book's appeal lies in the erudite, entertaining and slightly eccentric way he writes of his subject. The real joy of this book is how partisan the author is; he makes no bones about whether he approves or disapproves of a character, which gives the book a very human, unacademic feel. Its chapters deal with his marriages, his only son, religion (the best chapters; the author is an expert on the impact of the Reformation), war with France, plots, heretics, his will and

the glorious (if somewhat unusual) final chapter on tombs (the author is also an expert on church architecture and monuments).

He does not care for the ageing Henry; "bloated, hideously obese, black-humoured old man" and the prologue starts with an almost gleeful description of his death "friendless and lonely" at 2am on 28 January 1547. There had been £26 12s 2d (about £6,600 in today's money) spent on "spurging, cleansing, bowelling, searing, embalming..." the already corrupted body. And the story of his coffin leaking putrid matter during the night, and dogs coming to lick the blood, in fulfilment of a sermon delivered by a friar in 1534 "that the dogs should lick his blood as they had done Ahab's" is retold with relish. No, Henry gets a very bad press throughout, deservedly so.

Katherine Howard, the fifth wife, is definitely not on the approved list either, and her every action and utterance is described in such a way as to elicit hisses and boos and cries of "you stupid girl, you'll get caught" (which, of course, she was) from the reader.

Katherine Parr, the last wife, is a paragon of virtue, good sense, kindness (except to Scottish people), kingship and humanity. She was loving to all three of Henry's children, and tried to create some kind of normal family life for them amidst the horror and treachery of Henry's court. The final chapters describe her first real love and marriage to Thomas Seymour, the Lord High Admiral, who was not very true to her (rumours abounded about his relationship with the teenage Elizabeth who lived with them). She bore him a child, Mary, and died, like Jane Seymour, of puerperal fever just 18 months after Henry.

The luckiest man of that time, when luck and happiness were indeed rare, was the third Duke of Norfolk, Thomas Howard, uncle of the two beheaded wives Anne Boleyn and Katherine Howard. After a long career, events finally caught up with him, and he was due to be executed on the day that Henry died. In the upheaval following the King's death and the establishment of a regency, no-one thought to sign his death sentence, so he languished in the Tower throughout Edward VI's reign, but was released, restored and rehabilitated when Mary I

came to the throne. He died in his own bed.

Hutchinson charts the course of the Reformation, and Henry's role in it, with great understanding. Early in his reign, he wrote *The Assertion of the Seven Sacraments*, a book so ardent in its support of the Catholic Church, the Pope declared him 'Defender of the Faith', a title he took more literally later. The book was an attack on the new Protestant beliefs of Luther. However, the problem with his divorce, or lack thereof, from Catherine of Aragon only 12 years later, drove him far from Rome, and led him to pass the Act of Supremacy which confirmed him head of the Church in England. However, all through his life, Henry never lost the attachment, the lifeline to the passionate Catholicism of his youth, and vacillated hither and back from the new Protestant ideals. He was excommunicated in 1538. When the Great Bible, printed in English in 1539, to be read by all, a woodcut of Henry was on its main title page a stamp of approval. However, three years later, the Act for the Advancement of True Religion withdrew that universal right to read the Bible in English, limiting it only to noblemen, gentlemen and merchants. And thus it continued to the end of his life.

The extraordinary final chapter on Tombs contains many a macabre revelation.

Did you know that, like an ill-assorted and hastily gathered line up for a Live Aid concert, Henry's body eventually ended up in a tomb with his Queen, Jane Seymour, Charles I, and an infant child (one of 17) of Queen Anne?

Or that, in 1782, Katherine Parr's tomb at Studley Castle was discovered, and her face "and particularly the eyes" were in a state of "perfect preservation"? Great stuff this. If you enjoy history and those who people it, Hutchinson's book is for you.

Wendy Kyrle-Pope

## Sunday

I once ventured the thought that the words “Welcome to Blackpool” are the most frightening in the English tongue (defeating “See me in my study after Prayers” and “The next commentator will be Christopher Martin-Jenkins” by a short head). I was therefore filled with the darkest forebodings as soon as it became clear that neither Brighton nor Bournemouth would be able to play host to our annual jamboree this year. I personally rang the town clerk of every alternative venue I could think of – Filey, Camber Sands, Llanwrtyd Wells – but had no joy.

Then inspiration dawned. Why not bring the Liberal Democrat Conference to Bonkers Hall? The Ballroom could comfortably house the debates – indeed I flatter myself that my organ is larger than Reginald Dixon’s – and there are any number of rooms for fringe meetings and training sessions (provided the livestock is moved where necessary). I could put up many of my old friends myself, the *Bonkers Arms* in the village does bed and breakfast, and the Home for Well-Behaved Orphans provides accommodation that can fairly be described as suitable for those on a limited budget. All in all, it would have been the perfect choice. Yet when I put my offer to the bigwigs at Cowley Street, it was spurned, and I was told we were bound for that dismal caravanserai on the Lancashire coast whether I liked it or not. Very well. Let them hold their conference there: I have more important fish to fry.

## Monday

I spend the morning worming my setters and supervising the unblocking of my drains, before sitting down to watch the afternoon film on BBC2 only to discover that it has been replaced by coverage of the Liberal Democrat Conference. I am a little grumpy at first, but am reconciled to this choice of viewing when I learn that I am to watch a debate on Europe and its regional policy. Besides, I am able to cheer myself up by throwing popcorn at the screen whenever Andrew Neil appears. The argument that wins the day in Blackpool is quite ingenious. Given that for every pound we send to Brussels a few pence come back to these shores in the form of regional aid, it follows that we become wealthier the more we pay. Conference acts to prevent a future Liberal Democrat government limiting our contribution to the doughty Belgians, thus ensuring Britain’s future prosperity. All in all, it is every bit as good as the movies.

## Tuesday

Watching the Conference on the electric television again, I find that the pundits are interested in our debate on the GPO and the possibility of a defeat for the platform. Lord Razzall reassures them that “The sun will still rise in the east and set in the west if this motion is not passed.” Then Norman Lamb comes to the rostrum – to my great pleasure as I so enjoyed him on *Children’s Hour* all those years ago. It transpires that he has changed somewhat in the interim; I suspect he has been talking to Laws and “Low-Voltage” Cable, as he has plans to sell off the Post Office. Mind you, he intends putting the shares in the hands of the nation’s postmistresses, and I am sure they would give short shrift to anyone who attempted to interfere with Her Majesty’s Mail. Nevertheless, Lamb goes to the slaughter as our chaps reject his plans, with my old friend Tony Greaves eloquent in support of the case for maintaining the status quo. I track him down to his hotel on the telephone and ask why he did not consult

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me before he wrote his speech. He replies that he sent me a letter about it, but can only assume that it got lost in the post. Soon after I put the telephone down from this call, it rings again. Who should it be but our own Lord Razzall?

## Wednesday

The small hours of the morning find me at that famous Rutland monument Stiltonhenge. As every antiquarian knows, its mighty stones were erected in the lost era before the Ancient Britons discovered the Focus leaflet and made the rise of civilisation possible. Lord Razzall has driven through

the night to be at my side, bringing with him a number of members of the Women’s Liberal Federation, clad in their simple Grecian tunics. Unable to find someone to play the ceremonial flute at such short notice, I am obliged to make do with Meadowcroft and his clarinet, but at least our numbers are swelled by the goats and virgins I have left over from the rain dance I organised during the third day of the final Ashes test. I perform the ancient rites, as set out in Erskine May, and sure enough the sun rises in the East and casts a beam upon the stone altar in the middle of the circle. “Thanks for that,” says Razzall, “I thought it best to make sure. I’ll see you all back here this evening”

## Thursday

Charles Kennedy is making his speech in Blackpool, but one should not spend all one’s time watching the moving television, should one?

## Friday

It was a great relief when we heard that the party was not going to be obliged to return the two and a half million pounds we were given in the last week of the general election campaign by that mysterious businessman. As soon as I heard the news I stood down my jumble collectors, as there will now be no need for us to hold an extra sale to help bridge what might have been rather an embarrassing lacuna in our finances. Mind you, as I remarked to Lord Rennard the other day, one should be wary of accepting money from eccentric figures if there are too many odd conditions attached to it. I met him whilst in London to present the Bonkers Award, made annually to the constituency party that has put on the best display of Morris dancing during the past parliamentary year.

## Saturday

Did you take part in that poll to find the nation’s favourite painting? Despite a late flurry of votes from here in Rutland for Van Geloven’s “Sunset Over Bonkers Hall”, the worthy winner was Turner’s “The Fighting Dromgoole”. Who can fail to shed a manly tear at that noble figure, an amendment to the Standing Order covering the use of recycled bin bags clutched in his hand, being towed off to the scrapyard by a chubby-faced Clyde puffer? I feel sure I can say without fear of contradiction that we shall not see his like again.

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

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