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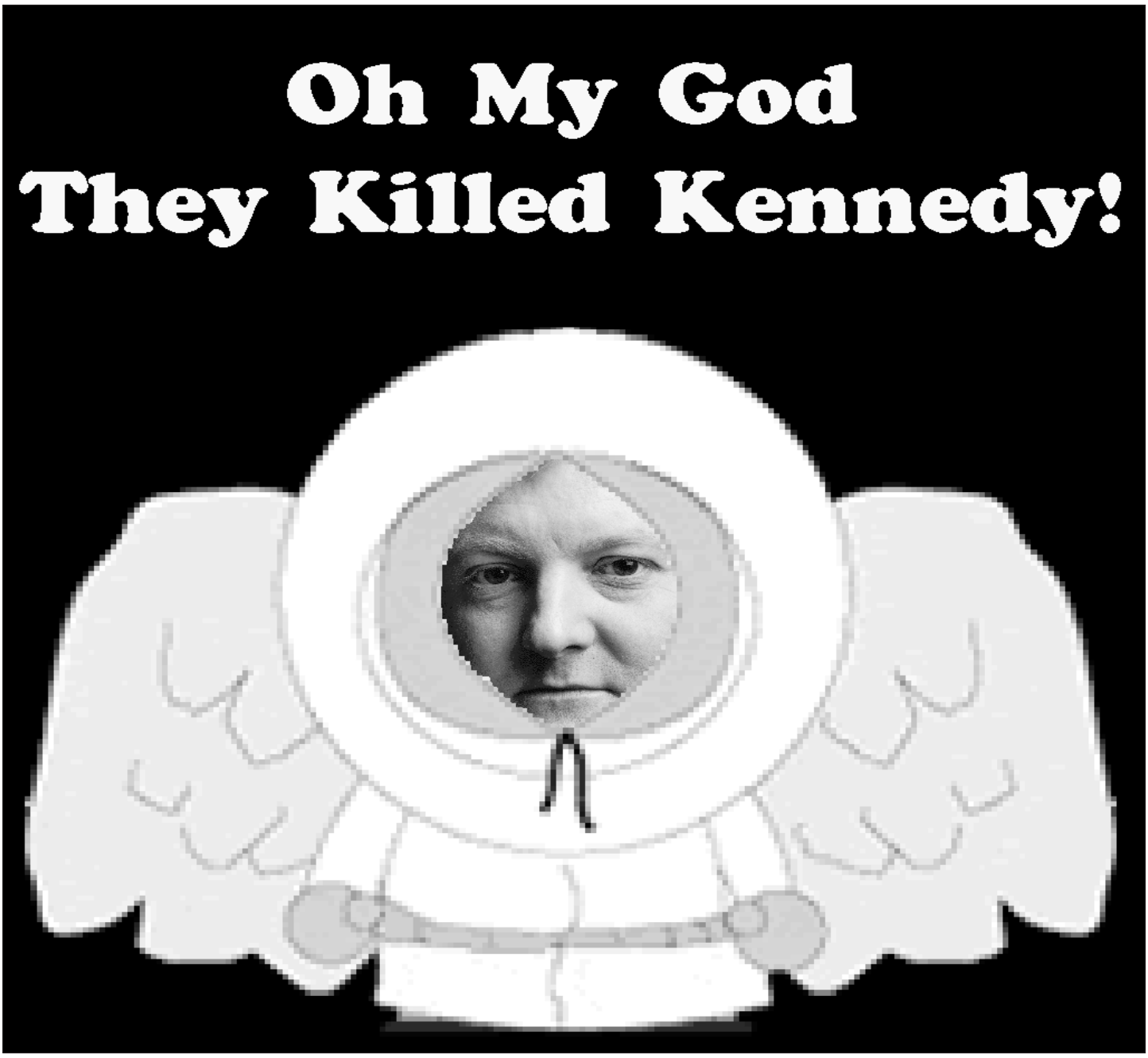

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- *Be bold about liberalism - Matthew Taylor*
- *Speak out on the economy - Lynne Featherstone*

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COMMENTARY

MAKE UP YOUR MIND TIME

Liberator is not endorsing any candidate in the Liberal Democrat leadership race.

This is because there are supporters of all three among the collective and, more importantly, we think it is up to readers to form their own judgement.

The result of our questionnaires to candidates on pages 15-18 will, we hope, help in this.

As of late January, no candidate offered either a way forward of such promise that the party should grab it, or proposed some initiative so obviously disastrous that they should be opposed.

The strange circumstances of this election probably mean that there is no good outcome, and that whoever wins will have to devote a lot of effort to steadying the ship and trying to re-establish the party's credibility.

In an ideal world, such a figure might combine Menzies Campbell's air of authority, Simon Hughes's ability to inspire people and Chris Huhne's mastery of policy detail.

An un-ideal combination would be Campbell's blank record on domestic policy, Hughes's famed disorganisation and Huhne's wafer-thin majority.

Since the campaign began, Campbell has suffered ridicule at prime minister's questions, Huhne has struggled against anonymity, and Hughes has suffered accusations that he lied over his sexuality – though he dissembled in answer to questions he could quite well have refused to answer, since they concerned a single person's private life.

It is disappointing that the early campaign has concentrated almost wholly on personalities, because the party had important policy issues to resolve even before the leadership crisis began.

The election will be a wasted opportunity unless it allows these debates, in particular on the role of the state and economic liberalism, to be aired.

What matters is not a contender's position on every dot and comma of policy, but how safe members judge the party would be in their hands.

That is not just about how they appear on television. It means deciding whether their record is good enough and their principles held sufficiently strongly that they would be unlikely to damage the party in some ill-conceived adventure.

Voters should also look at the record of candidate's engagement with the party. Are they likely to insist that all power and wisdom rests in the few hundred yards between Westminster and Cowley Street (a highly dubious proposition in view of recent events)? Or, are they at ease with the Liberal Democrats as a living political party rather than a fan club?

They should also ask how in tune each contender is with the changing political landscape.

Those who persisted in voting Tory in the last three elections are unlikely to change now, and the greatest room for Liberal Democrat expansion is among Labour voters. Whoever wins will have to be able to communicate with them.

Labour's trajectory under Blair brought it close to the Tories under Howard, never mind Cameron, and that means that a huge political space has been vacated.

Labour and the Tories will sound very similar at the next election as they scrap over the 'centre'.

If the Liberal Democrats are also pitched in this illusory 'centre', they will be crushed as an irrelevance and will have failed to provide a political outlet for anyone who falls outside the Labour/Tory consensus.

The history of the last 30 years suggests the 'centre' is a trap defined by the other two parties.

Avoiding that trap means choosing a leader who can see it, and has the political nous and convictions to avoid it. It is up to you to choose.

THE KENNEDY YEARS

Everyone will wish Charles Kennedy well in fighting the illness that led to his downfall as Liberal Democrat leader.

It will be a while before history judges the Kennedy era, but there is unlikely to be a clear-cut verdict.

On the plus side, the party turned in its best performances for 80 years at general elections, held its ground against the Tories and made hitherto unimagined inroads into Labour urban areas.

Kennedy's achievement in quietly burying his predecessor's ruinous dalliance with Labour should not be underestimated.

The minus side with Kennedy comprises mainly things he did not do and which did not happen.

It was widely thought the results of both his general elections should have been better. Policy development drifted aimlessly, and his presence in the public eye was infuriatingly hit-or-miss.

His fundamental problem was that, in 1999, it was unclear why he wanted to be leader and, in 2006, that still remains a mystery. He drifted into the job without any obvious identification with causes, ideas or policies. Once there, none really developed.

Kennedy, though, had one crucial thing going for him, which whoever comes next would do well to remember.

The Liberal Democrats' purposes appeared secure under Kennedy. He might have pursued them patchily and inadequately but, unlike Paddy Ashdown and David Steel, he never seemed about to destroy his party.

Kennedy did not lead the Liberal Democrats to power, but at least he was not under the delusion that one of the other parties would offer him a short cut.

RADICAL BULLETIN

WE NAME THE ASSASSIN

There was only one person in the end who forced Charles Kennedy out of the Liberal Democrat leadership – and that was Charles Kennedy himself.

He spurned repeated pleas from other MPs to get his alcohol problems under control, and more recently spurned offers that would have allowed him to withdraw from the leadership quietly and with dignity.

Kennedy's public admission of alcoholism was certainly a brave act, and the whole party will wish him well in overcoming this problem.

The circumstances, though, meant that it appeared in public as an admission wrung in desperation from a cornered politician. Worse, the media were immediately able to contrast it with repeated statements in which Kennedy had made categorical denials that he either had a problem or that it affected his work.

The week after his resignation, media trade magazine *Press Gazette* led with a splash headed "Now are you going to say sorry for lying to us" above a picture of Kennedy.

The story recounted repeated flat denials from Kennedy and his staff about his drinking, backed by threats of legal action. It is this, rather than the fact of Kennedy's illness, that may prove the worse long-term damage because other MPs and party officers are seen as complicit in a cover-up.

Those MPs that finally nerved themselves to tell Kennedy the game was up deserve the party's gratitude rather than opprobrium. Things could not have continued as they were, with MPs vainly hoping that Kennedy's failings would not be noticed and could somehow be overcome.

It had gone on a long time. One need not have been a 'Westminster insider' to have realised that all was not well.

Jokes about Kennedy's fondness for a 'wee dram' were rife back in the 1980s and the rumours finally became public after the infamous Jeremy Paxman interview of July 2002, when Kennedy denied he had a drink problem. The Paxman interview was something of a watershed and, since then, media references have been frequent if guarded.

Kennedy's bouts of alternating activity and inactivity led senior MPs and party officers to complain discreetly to him, and for a while he would improve, then eventually relapse.

The most dramatic such occasion was in March 2004, when Kennedy suddenly failed to turn up for the budget debate in the Commons and, at the subsequent party conference in Southport, looked distinctly unwell (Liberator 295).

Plans were well advanced for Menzies Campbell to take over as caretaker leader, possibly with Simon Hughes as his deputy, but Kennedy perked up in time for the local and European election campaign and the contingency plan was shelved.

Matters came to a head in mid-November last year when Kennedy appeared to have trouble in following the discussion at a 10.30am shadow cabinet meeting, and was later accompanied by Falmouth and Camborne MP Julia Goldsworthy to a make speech at the London School of Economics, where he was less than coherent and unable to take questions.

The following day, he boarded a train to Newcastle but returned without completing his engagements.

Politically, the party's aimless drift since May was being blamed on Kennedy's lack of leadership, but as with most of his real or imagined shortcomings, it was a matter of what he had not done rather than what he had, and so was hard to pin down. Nor, as became important later, were the problems obvious to most people.

These events all happened independently of David Cameron's election as Tory leader, which served to focus some MPs' thoughts but was not as significant a factor in their unease as the press suggested.

When push came to shove, it could all have been quite different.

The first inkling Liberator had that renewed moves might be made against Kennedy came in late November, when we heard indirectly from a source close to shadow home affairs spokesman Mark Oaten that a delegation of 'men in grey suits' was going tell Kennedy the game was up.

The message was somewhat confused and there was no known reason why a coup might be pending, so our initial efforts to check it out came to nothing and it appeared the information was mistaken.

The MPs who wanted Kennedy to go hoped, as late as the first week of December, that he might be persuaded to

Kennedy dimite como líder del partido liberal británico

EFE, Londres

Charles Kennedy, de 47 años, cedió ayer a las presiones de su formación y dimitió como líder del Partido Liberal Demócrata británico dos días después de admitir públicamente y por primera vez sus problemas con el alcohol. En una declaración en la sede de su partido, en el barrio londinense de Westminster, Kennedy dijo que dejaba el liderazgo liberal de-crata con "efecto inmediato", llegar a la conclusión de que o mejor para su organiza-lítica. "En todo esto, los de nuestro partido tie-dad. Es ahí donde es-rsonales, políti-ales", su ó

Kennedy, cuyo partido fue el que más criticó y más se opuso a la invasión aliada en Irak de 2003.

Según indicó Kennedy, su sucesor, al que prometió su total respaldo, debería ser elegido lo antes posible para concentrarse en los comicios locales que se celebrarán el próximo mes de mayo. El nuevo *número uno*, añadió, heredará un partido con la mayor representación parlamentaria en 80 años, 62 diputados. "Creo que la unidad es aún fundamental para conseguir mayores avances y é s", puntu ó

Según u form ha cont el tidism labori

ahora el Reino Unido tiene tres importantes formaciones políticas. "Creo que es una buena herencia y una gran oportunidad", añadió.

Veinticinco de los 62 parlamentarios liberal-demócratas querían que Kennedy dimitiera y se negaban a trabajar con él después de que hubiera reconocido que se sometió en los últimos 18 meses a un tratamiento para superar el p ema con el ol.

do lo suficiente en todo el grupo parlamentario".

El ahora ex líder liberal-demócrata hizo hincapié en que guirá trabajando en p ra defender las libert el derecho interna Reino Unido vis del b Tras su nuev

depart quietly, citing a lifestyle choice as a new father who had already had a long career in politics.

They had intended that this would remain secret, with Kennedy given the Christmas recess to decide.

Far from briefing against Kennedy, these MPs had an interest in keeping the matter under wraps, because their greatest chance of persuading him to go lay in keeping things private and dignified.

But not every MP wanted him to go. Various people had an interest in keeping Kennedy in place, whether from personal loyalty or the belief that they, or those they supported, would be more likely to succeed were the leadership contest held later rather than earlier.

In public, matters still proceeded through unattributable briefings.

The first sign of trouble was a Guardian leader on 6 December, deploring the party's silence and invisibility. Two days later, the Radio 4 *Today* programme reported discontent within the parliamentary party. Later that evening, Andrew Neil claimed on his BBC1 *This Week* programme that he had it on "good authority" that Kennedy would step down at the March party conference, a claim that Kennedy quickly denied.

All hell broke loose, and the second week of December must have seen Liberals Democrats the length of the country phoning each other to ask "what's going on" as the media filled with reports that Kennedy would be forced out.

That the story was serious was shown by it having made the third item on the BBC1 10 O'clock News. While some newspapers might take a flier on such a story, there is no way that the BBC would have reported that a senior politician was for the chop merely on the basis of speculation.

It was obvious that the BBC and the newspapers were being briefed from within the parliamentary party and other senior party sources.

Shadow cabinet members who thought Kennedy had to go decided to compose a letter to him saying so, and they hoped this would be delivered by chief whip Andrew Stunell or some other eminent figure.

However, they were careless about which of their colleagues they canvassed and word rapidly reached Kennedy loyalists, who reported back to him.

At the 13 December shadow cabinet meeting, Kennedy resolved on a show of force. He said that those unhappy with his leadership should come to his office by 2pm to be sacked, and that their replacements would be named the next day.

The majority present objected, and asked for consultation by Stunell so that Kennedy could have a more informed reading of how people felt than he would have gained from people under the threat of immediate dismissal.

Stunell's consultation made little headway, but Kennedy invited shadow cabinet members for face-to-face meetings, at which around six told him he should go, although more perhaps felt unable to say so directly.

When it became evident that there were too many to sack, he backed down, getting the worst of both worlds by having been neither decisive nor conciliatory.

Meanwhile, the media reported that Kennedy had demanded discipline and that the campaign against him should stop. It was fairly obvious that only those who supported him would have had an interest in leaking in these terms.

The most likely version is that senior Kennedy supporters hoped for a groundswell of grassroots support that would discredit his opponents, but overplayed their hand.

Once this was all out in the open, both sides, predictably, lost control of the story as the media took control.

When the parliamentary party assembled for its weekly meeting on 14 December, the situation was fraught.

Most of the newer MPs were as much in the dark as were the public. Kennedy was rarely in the company of his MPs and consequently few outside the shadow cabinet had seen him when he was unable carry out his duties.

From what can established from that meeting, Ed Davey, later to emerge as shop steward of the MPs who told Kennedy to go, raised concerns about alcohol, as did Goldsworthy and Lynne Featherstone. Nick Harvey, never a Kennedy fan, made a coded attack on media briefings by Kennedy supporters, but in too much code to be picked up. John Hemming, later briefly a leadership contender, announced that he had never supported Kennedy.

It was this meeting that allowed Kennedy to cite "supportive speech after supportive speech" from MPs. This

was true. With most MPs still ignorant of the problems, they rallied behind their leader.

By this time, the matter was all over the front pages amid speculation that Kennedy would be the victim of a coup by 'modernisers' or 'economic liberals'.

This was true only in the sense that some people may have thought a different leader would be more sympathetic to their arguments. Although it was to emerge that the economic liberal shadow chancellor Vince Cable was a prime mover behind dumping Kennedy, ultimately those who wanted him out were a range of MPs so wide as to be impossible to align with any particular policy position.

In the run-up to Christmas, the story increasingly turned to an anticipated leadership contest. Of the contenders repeatedly mentioned by the media, two were obvious - Campbell and Hughes.

The third, Oaten, was not obvious. His following in the party was a tiny right-wing fringe and he had not distinguished himself above others in the 1997 intake of MPs spoken of as potential leaders.

Oaten, however, was assiduous in paying attention to the media and perhaps his many acquaintances there simply got the idea that he intended to run.

Guardian columnist Martin Kettle wrote on 17 December, "Oaten even had his leadership campaign team organised, and a regional tour planned, in readiness for Kennedy to quit this week. By Wednesday evening, though, Oaten and [his supporter Lembit] Öpik were loyalists again."

It is not evident from the Guardian that Oaten denied Kettle's claim, and indeed his campaign team swung quickly into action when Kennedy eventually resigned.

Entirely by coincidence, the thousands of party members who get Cowley Street's regular e-mails received a rare missive from Oaten on 13 December setting out his activities on home affairs.

Things quietened down, at least in public, over the Christmas break, but then burst into the open again faster than most people expected.

On 1 January, Hughes, who had kept a low profile during these events, told the Observer: "It really isn't acceptable for the complainers to keep complaining when the water was tested before Christmas and the majority view was that Charles should stay on."

There wasn't much else he could say, although things were to remain in limbo for barely another 48 hours.

Cable had departed on holiday to Sri Lanka while leaving in his safe a letter signed by almost half the shadow cabinet, and other MPs, telling Kennedy to go.

As the nation returned to work, the rebellion finally burst out into the open as a succession of leading Lib Dems began to give media interviews.

Lord McNally told first the Times and then Radio 4 *Today* of the need for "radical, rapid and sustained change in style and substance" of Kennedy's leadership.

Campbell said Kennedy should stay if he would "operate at the top level of the full range of his abilities".

Susan Kramer called for a quick leadership election, Channel 4 News said that just one out of 18 MPs contacted wanted Kennedy to stay, and Alistair Carmichael called for a vote of confidence at the MPs' next scheduled meeting on 11 January. But things could not wait until then.

One crumb of comfort for Kennedy was, surely, the unanimous support of the executive of the Association of Liberal Democrat Trade Unionists.


Show war as it really is

Martin Bell on why 'good taste' censorship makes it easier for politicians to be warmongers, page 13

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NATIONAL PRESS EXCLUSIVE

"Now say you're sorry for lying to us"

By Dominic Ponsford and Caitlin Pike

Times journalists believe they are owed an apology from Charles Kennedy's office after being misled over the Liberal Democrat leader's drinking.

The paper was forced to run a clarification in October 2004 after columnist Mary Ann Sieghart suggested he had "drunk too much" to attend the Commons on the morning of the Chancellor's budget speech.

Times political editor Philip Webster told *Press Gazette*: "The view in my office is that we pretty well deserve an apology, retraction or clarification because they weren't straight.

"Voters weren't told the truth before the election and some of those are going to feel let down, not only by the Lib Dems but probably by the press as well."

But Webster and other lobby reporters have denied the suggestion that there was a cover-up from journalists over Kennedy's apparently long-standing drink problem.

He said: "Because of the way the Kennedy office played this it was very difficult for journalists to write it in a definite manner without incurring a writ because it was denied outright when it was put to the Kennedy camp straight.

"As a journalist you really have to see the man in the gutter to say with certainty that this man has a problem. If he's denying it and his office is denying it, it's very hard to do.

"I don't think it's fair to say that journalists covered it up — if they'd been able to report it they would have."

Webster added that it was unusual in his experience for political spin-doctors to be so apparently dishonest on a personal story.

He said: "You never trust a denial on a policy story because you generally find out it's almost certain to be true. But a personal story like this, when you've got something fair and square, they will not normally steer you away from it because they've got to deal with you for the rest of their careers. If they've lied to you once, you never trust them again."

Guardian assistant editor and former political editor Michael White also denied that lobby journalists covered up Kennedy's drinking.

He said: "No journalist was aware of the full facts as we now know them. There were plenty of rumours about Mr Kennedy's drinking, but I never saw him the worse for wear in 20 years, nothing more incriminating than drinking a can of Coca Cola in mid

As late as 4 January, Kennedy was telling the Radio 4 *Today* programme that a leadership election would be "a self-inflicted distraction" but that, if there were one, he would fight it.

However, on 5 January, Kennedy was told that ITV News intended to broadcast a story that he had been treated for alcoholism, in contradiction to his previous statements.

He made his confessional statement 15 minutes before the story was due to break, called for a leadership election and announced he would stand, in the expectation that he would be re-elected unopposed, or at least unopposed by anyone serious.

The existence of the Cable letter, and the names of the 25 MPs who had signed it, then became public. It is widely thought that it was made public not by Cable, but by Kennedy's circle, which had decided to get all the bad news out in one go.

Kennedy's statement that he would contest a leadership election was too much even for some who had been closest to him and previously kept their silence.

Norman Lamb and Andrew George, both former parliamentary private secretaries to Kennedy who had seen him up close, announced they could no longer serve under him. Oaten was the only former holder of the post who did not share this view.

The bandwagon became unstoppable. Meanwhile, Kennedy was more or less incommunicado. Even Shirley Williams was reported to be unable to contact him personally.

Media reaction was incredulous. How could a leader who had lost the confidence of nearly half his MPs, including half his shadow cabinet, conceivably remain in office?

By this stage, Lib Dem parliamentarians were queuing up to offer their views.

Jenny Tonge, perhaps still smarting from her 2004 sacking over comments on terrorism, likened Kennedy to a one legged man seeking to audition as Tarzan. MEPs leader Chris Davies described him as a "dead man walking".

Matthew Taylor, who ran Kennedy's leadership campaign in 1999, urged him to go, while Harvey wrote in the Independent that Kennedy had "never been a team captain" and denounced his plans for an unopposed re-election as a farce.

The end was near. No leader could have withstood that barrage, and the mood of the grassroots party had started to shift decisively as the nature of Kennedy's problem and the lies told to cover it up became evident. Within hours, Kennedy was gone and the leadership up for grabs.

WHO, WHO?

Once Charles Kennedy announced his departure as leader there was a brief moment in which it looked as though Menzies Campbell might get an unopposed coronation. This was undoubtedly Campbell's preferred option.

The first alternative candidate to offer himself was, rather surprisingly, Birmingham Yardley's John Hemming, a new MP not often spoken of as a potential leader.

Hemming said subsequently that he merely wanted to force a contest and later withdrew, offering to nominate anyone who asked him, to ensure a wide choice of candidates.

Suggestions of varying degrees of improbability filled the newspapers – Susan Kramer, Lynne Featherstone, Phil Willis, Ed Davey and Nick Clegg.

Next off the starting block was Mark Oaten. His slick operation suggested advance planning.

This image, though, was rather undermined by his campaign launch, which took place in a chilly hotel car park surrounded by Lembit Öpik and half a dozen people no-one had ever heard of, and was derided in the press.

Would Simon Hughes run? A good deal of behind the scenes soundings did take place, not least among people horrified by the idea of a choice of only Campbell and Oaten.

What took the time though was Hughes' assembling of a respectable campaign team that would put up a better show than did his late and ill-organised 1999 effort. As it was, commentators were pleasantly surprised by his efficient launch.

Last, and not spotted earlier by many, was former MEP Chris Huhne, who entered parliament only in May and has a majority of just 583 in Eastleigh.

The nomination process was complicated by a curious gap in the constitution.

This requires a minimum of seven MPs for a valid nomination, but is silent on how many candidates each MP may nominate.

Common sense might have suggested that MPs could nominate as many people as they had votes – one. But Cowley Street ruled that each MP could nominate as many others as they pleased.

Sex scandal hits Lib Dems

Mark Oaten quits after admitting newspaper claims of affair with male prostitute

I apologise to my wife, my family and my party, says former leadership candidate

By Marie Woolf

former PR executive is ported to have had s of liaisons" boy over

There consequently emerged the 'nomination tarts' – MPs who said they would nominate anyone who asked them, to widen the contest.

There had also been a ruling that all nominations would be published, and thus it would be evident if any candidate depended on nomination tarts rather than genuine supporters. This provision was about to become crucial.

NOW YOU SEE HIM...

Mark Oaten's leadership bid lasted barely one week, and yet he was the best prepared contender, except in two vital respects.

The first was that he had failed to secure in advance enough MPs prepared to nominate him.

The second, as readers of the News of the World were to discover on 22 January, was a series of lurid allegations that he had had sex with male prostitutes, including asking them, as the paper delicately put it, to perform "an unspeakable act of degradation".

Perhaps he had asked them to sign his nomination papers, or to join Liberal Future? Oaten had only recently invited television cameras to film him at home with his family. He speedily resigned as home affairs spokesman.

Since most people would not commit unspeakable acts with anyone without being aware of it, it seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that Oaten offered himself as leader knowing that he had this enormous skeleton in his closet.

What would have been the party's position had he been elected leader only for these revelations to emerge later?

The Oaten campaign had hit problems even before this episode. His organisation of a campaign team had long been an open secret at Westminster.

Around the time of Kennedy's departure, many predicted Oaten would not stand because he could never find seven nominations.

This was puzzling since Oaten was well-prepared and was the second contender to enter the race.

Surely he could not be going to all that trouble so publicly unless certain he could get nominated?

It then emerged that his campaign could only get seven names courtesy of the 'nomination tarts' and that, while six of them were willing to nominate him solely to ensure a wider contest, only Öpik actually intended to vote for him.

When this became public, it made Oaten look ridiculous. If only one of the other 61 MPs would back him, how could he be leader? Even Kennedy on the day he quit had more support than that.

Oaten's campaign team included many public affairs professionals, so how come they did not see this problem coming?

Some say that prominent supporters had somehow convinced Oaten that he had more support among MPs than was the case.

When he abandoned his campaign on 19 January, Oaten said that not enough MPs supported the direction in which he wished to take the party.

Since Oaten's main campaign speech – at the Meeting the Challenge conference on 14 January – gave no discernable sign of where this direction led beyond empty slogans like "a 21st century party", "new ideas" and "fresh liberal solutions", a more likely explanation is that few other MPs considered him leadership material.

The end of his campaign came amid a further bizarre twist, the 'Oatengate' affair.

On 18 January, the Independent ran a story that Kennedy had been secretly campaigning for Oaten in an effort to take revenge on Campbell, Hughes and others he blamed for his downfall.

Given that Kennedy had said in public that he would not back any candidate, this would have been highly damaging to him were it true.

The paper printed an e-mail from Kennedy's loyal aide Anna Werrin to Oaten, which said that MPs Paul Keetch, Mike Hancock and Bob Russell would nominate him, but not David Heath.

Later that day, the Guardian website claimed that Oaten had called in the police over the leak.

Werrin then blamed the leak on Oaten's own campaign team, opining that "some hotheads" therein had leaked the e-mails in the belief that Oaten would benefit from appearing to have Kennedy's support.

In a widely circulated e-mail, Werrin said: "Mark sought – and was refused – Charles's endorsement ... it was made emphatically clear to Mark's campaign that Charles would not be endorsing any of the candidates and wished to remain neutral."

In a further twist of the knife, Werrin said Kennedy had agreed to help Oaten find nominations only because he was "struggling" to get them.

On 19 January he withdrew. Other contenders, no doubt wishing to appear magnanimous, suggested he would have a front-bench future.

That was before they read the News of the World.

ADVANCE WARNING

When Charles Kennedy made his resignation statement, there lurked outside Cowley Street, ready for any TV camera pointed their way, were Mark Oaten and Lembit Öpik.

Apart from Simon Hughes, who as president was inside the building and only emerged later for a few non-committal words, other MPs took longer to show up on television.

All MPs, MEPs, and peers were paged at 2pm, an hour before Kennedy's statement, yet most did not feel the need to rush to Cowley Street.

Asked if he would stand for leader, Öpik announced on live television that he intended to stand for president when Hughes's term ends this year, and then stand for leader next time.

Is this by any chance the same Öpik who was comprehensively beaten by 70-30% by Hughes for the presidency, and who would no doubt incite an 'anyone but' campaign among MPs tired of his endless self-promotion?

BATTERING RAMM

Liberal Democrats no doubt needed some light relief during the trauma of Charles Kennedy's protracted departure from the party leadership, and it was thoughtfully supplied by Ben Ramm, editor of *The Liberal*, who managed one of the fastest transformations ever from unknown to laughing stock.

Ramm set up a website petition calling for Kennedy's departure. It was soon discovered that this could be filled in by Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck or (on *Newsnight*, by journalist Michael Crick) as 'David Cameron, South Oxfordshire'.

On the strength of this ludicrous stunt, and with most serious politicians on holiday, Ramm appeared all over the media to claim his petition had attracted 3,000 signatures, but when challenged was unable to answer convincingly as to how he could authenticate them.

However, he was taken seriously by the Observer's Ned Temko.

Ramm sent an e-mail to councillors, which read: "Thank you for putting your name to the Kennedy Must Go petition, and for supporting our campaign to encourage a wide-ranging and open debate about the party's future.

"Ned Temko, the Observer's chief political correspondent, intends to cover the leadership story in detail for this Sunday's edition.

"At Ned's request, I am writing to ask you to contact him independently, as he is looking for councillors to state on the record that they have signed and urge Charles to step aside (you will, I imagine, also be given the opportunity to state the reason/s)."

Temko wrote a story on 1 January that mentioned Ramm's petition but was bereft of comments from anyone who claimed to have signed it.

Perhaps Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck were still away for the festive season?

WRONG AND WRONGER

One of the most baffling pronouncements during the leadership race came from Emma Nicholson, who told a bemused interviewer that Britain's increasing multiculturalism made it desirable that the next leader of the Lib Dems should be a Muslim.

The interviewer helpfully pointed out that none of the party's 62 MPs were known to be adherents of that faith, at which Nicholson suggested that Navnit Dholakia might do.

Dholakia is not merely a member of the House of Lords, he is also a prominent Hindu.

THROUGH THESE DOORS

The National Liberal Club offers incoming party leaders free membership and holds various bashes in their honour. A curious tale suggests this may be a bit awkward if Menzies Campbell becomes leader.

We hear that, for 14 years, he has refused to set foot in the place because the NLC sent a donation to his Liberal Party opponent David Senior when Campbell defended his Fife North East seat for the first time in 1992.

It was then the NLC's custom to send a donation to any member fighting a general election and thus Senior, who was killed in Prague in 1995 (Liberator 229), qualified for the money. Campbell won easily. Will he relent after all this time?

THEY'VE STARTED

As soon as Tony Blair became Labour leader, a steady trickle back to Labour began among people who had defected to the Social Democrats. It would hardly be a surprise if David Cameron's attempt to give the Tories a human face did not provoke a similar reverse flight among former Tories.

Among those who stay, another historical parallel can be expected. Just as former Labour members were in the vanguard of those urging the Liberal Democrats to strike deals with Labour in 1990s, so former Tories will urge deals with Cameron.

This process has started earlier than might have been expected, in a motion proposed by former Pro European Conservative Party leader John Stevens for the Lib Dems' spring conference in Harrogate.

This is headed 'Reclaiming the Centre Ground for Liberalism', a statement that itself begs a variety of questions.

After 'noting' the not entirely uncontroversial observation that "the Liberal Democrat tradition spans the moderate centre ground of British politics", Stevens asserts, "the new Conservative leader is attempting to move his party back to the centre and has indicated a preference for social and economic liberal positions that are consistent with many of our principles".

Even Stevens concedes that Europe would remain a point of difference, but says "if such a realignment is achieved by Cameron there will be clear areas for both constructive opposition and consensual support with the new Conservative leader as appropriate".

This motion was proposed when Cameron had been in office for less than two months and when he had done no more than some eye-catching bits of image building.

Maybe Stevens and his mates have not been around the Lib Dems for long enough to realise that the vast bulk of its members live in southern England, where the Tories are an historic and hated enemy.

IFS AND BUTT

Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats is now a properly functioning organisation after a number of false starts, which included a national conference in 2002 attended by just 20 delegates (Liberator 285).

Its former chair Nasser Butt has now set up his own organisation, the Liberal Democrat Muslim Forum.

This does not seem to have had any greater luck with its events than did his old one.

It planned an annual conference in Rochdale, but local Lib Dem MP Paul Rowen withdrew the invitation to use Rochdale Liberal Club after protests by local Muslim party members, and it was moved to a venue nearby.

This proved ample to accommodate the nine people who attended, plus a bemused parliamentary party chair Paul Holmes.

Rowen has suggested that LDMF should merge with EMLD, but the personalities involved seem to preclude that.

Butt's attempt at the last general election to issue a Lib Dem Muslim Manifesto with significant differences from party policy may not have helped.

DO IT BY HALVES

Liberal Democrats do not have to appeal to everyone, only to those already half won-over, and this is done by bold liberalism, says Matthew Taylor

The future direction of the Liberal Democrats is clearly attracting more and more interest in the media. If we are to believe what we read in the Times or the Guardian, there is a concerted effort among the party's 'young Turks' to shift it to the right.

In reaction, others are reportedly fighting a rearguard campaign to keep us 'left', 'radical' and 'progressive' – or perhaps these are three different campaigns?

This media interest is at least an improvement on the old "which party will you support in a hung Parliament?", since it suggests we do have some policies at least.

But is still defines us in terms of the other two – and I believe it is absolutely the wrong question. Our policies of course need constant updating and re-thinking – but our philosophy should not.

We are a Liberal Party, born out of the progressive liberal tradition. That has to guide our policymaking, not a polls-led attempt to lurch after voters who genuinely prefer the Labour or Conservative view.

I do believe we are at a turning point. Not about left or right, but about credibility. People now believe more than ever that their votes can turn into more Lib Dem MPs – and that could give us real influence in government.

But the difference between the 22% who voted for us, and the 30% or so genuinely interested, was I believe those who liked us, but wondered if we were capable of effectively exercising power.

This is the question I came up against on doorsteps among those sympathetic to us, but who finally voted for someone else. Could they imagine Charles Kennedy as PM? Could they see Liberal Democrats at the cabinet table sorting out a crisis? The question behind all this was 'Are the Lib Dems an effective alternative government?' – and we need to show them the answer.

For over a decade, we have been a middle-ground party. Undoubtedly, for some, a party of principles – most notably on the environment and civil liberties – but for many a party that says 'none of the others', and characterised as the 'protest party'.

I wonder if we are being complacent and self-deceiving to think that our future growth will come from just using more of the old campaign techniques. Target seats, focused campaigns, and appealing policies all play a part, but being a credible alternative government needs more than that. It revolves around the perceived strength of character of political parties.

When electing a government, most voters know little more than the occasional big policy. In the past, there certainly was a sense of 'left or right' – which in large measure meant which party (and which philosophy) was for (or against) 'people like me'.

Arguably, the Conservatives' success was built on being the coalition against socialism, at a time when that still meant nationalisation of business and penal taxes for the better off. But now socialism is effectively dead in the Labour Party, that Conservative coalition has unwound, and people do not feel that any party is necessarily 'theirs'. Politics has become more of a market place, and why shop in the same store every election, or every kind of election?

Instead, people place more importance on competence. When Bill Clinton said, "It's the economy stupid", he was talking about Republican economic incompetence, not left or right policies. When the Conservatives looked incompetent, the electorate deserted them because New Labour offered a competent looking alternative.

That was the New Labour project, and Tony Blair saw it clearly. Yet arguably Margaret Thatcher was even better at it.

Remember her? I do. First, she understood that she only needed 40% or so to win. If 60% hated her, no matter – in fact, it was a positive. The more battles she fought, the more her potential supporters saw her as 'effective', 'strong', a 'leader'. Over and over I met people who admitted to believing many of her policies were unfair and extreme – but that they had voted for her because they admired her "courage" and "leadership".

Tony Blair has often replicated this. When he gets tough on yobs or the EU or terror, he knows the core of Labour members often are repelled – but believes they have nowhere else to go. His determination is to fight tough battles that appeal to wavering Lab/Con voters – those voters actually up for grabs.

He picks policies that are often of appeal to this group, but the way he projects his battles is all about showing strength. He revels in seeing off revolts on his own side. Even an occasional defeat can reinforce the thought that he battles for what he believes in, even against all odds.

Perhaps "the prime minister as a strong leader determined to fight for what he believes" is not how you see New Labour? Probably, but then Liberator readers are not his target.

But a crucial group of swing voters continue to see New Labour as competent, the PM as determined, the government as capable of leadership, even when that means setting aside its own instincts or traditions. These impressions are not an accident – they are what Labour has been trying to create as its public image ever since Kinnock took on the Militant Tendency.

So how does all this impact on the way forward for the Liberal Democrats? Well, not by fighting of our own 'extremists'. Our political positioning is already reassuring to voters - that is one battle we don't need to fight.

No, the battle for us is to make a party in third place, with Liberal instincts and democratic values, look strong enough to govern. Hard? You bet. But much less impossible than many seem to believe

First, remember that we are not after every voter. Probably half the population are diehards for the other parties. Unwelcome news maybe – but true. And once understood, it can be turned into a strength.

We need to hold what we have – and reach out for more. But the 'more' are the people who already like what they see, but who did not quite bring themselves to tick our box. To persuade them, we need to be more than just appealing – they need to see that we will fight for what they believe, in a way no one else will.

So the very things that these voters love, but other voters dislike, are vital to our armoury. Where are these battles found? In the areas the others neglect but we are strong: fairer taxes, local choices, the environment, civil liberties, internationalism. But these are all 'soft' issues unless we take a stand when they get difficult and fight the battles. We have done this at least twice, to great effect.

First, 1p on income tax for education. These days, most people remember it as our most successful policy stand – our opponents described it eventually as rank populism. Yet it started as bold, controversial, and (crucially) brave.

Brave because it looked like it could lose us votes and seats. When first proposed in 1990, it ran against the most important political certainty that Thatcher had introduced – that raising taxes was suicidal, especially income tax. We said it because we believed it was right, and would appeal to those who agreed with us about the importance of education.

People took sides – and it won us supporters despite opponents labelling us tax-raisers. It was the most popular policy of both the 1992 and 1997 elections. It was only as the need for tax rises to pay for public service improvement became an accepted fact that it lost its power.

The second example was Iraq. The key to understanding why this won us friends and votes is not that it was a popular policy, but that it was a brave one.

We were hugely attacked for it, and we took the stand at a time when it was far from obviously the right political call. Had the war been successfully translated into peace, and crucially had any weapons of mass destruction been found, we could have looked utterly wrong. Precisely because of this, it showed real leadership and strength of conviction. It made enemies – but it won friends and supporters. People made up their mind not just to sympathise with us, but to vote for us.

We need to pick our stands carefully. They must matter. They must epitomise what we believe in, the strength of our convictions. They succeed because they are brave, even controversial, and so show leadership, not simply because they are popular.

So what does this mean in practice? Let me give an example.

I think we missed a huge opportunity in failing to lead the battle against the Terror Bill and ID cards last summer. We sought to show voters we understood the pressures on police and government, and the difficulty of the choices.

The government knew that the terror legislation held opportunities as well as risks for all parties – the invitation into the Blair 'big tent' to negotiate was to protect New Labour, not help us.

Do we really think they suggested cross-party discussion for "the sake of the country" on issues they see as electoral winners for them? What we should have done, I think, was to be far more blunt about our opposition to the erosion of basic liberties and the rule of law.

We should have forcefully condemned the changes made to the police 'shoot-to-kill' policy that led to the death of Jean Charles de Menezes. We should have set out to lead opinion, asking people to see us as champions of fundamental British liberties.

Of course, much of the press would have attacked us. But for those who share our concerns, and even some who don't, they would see politicians of clear conviction and principle standing up for what they believe.

We could have added our calls for more police, better intelligence, and more effective prosecution rules to show we are just as anti-terror as any. But showing leadership on the fundamentals gathers friends as well as making enemies. Of course, in the votes we did the right thing – but can we hand-on-heart say we led the battle charge? Sadly not.

There are new challenges facing us. Are we prepared to make enemies by fighting the battle on climate change with real integrity?

In a country in which the poorest slip ever further behind, are we prepared to take on the case for tax reform – not saddling ourselves with tax rises just as a gesture, but genuinely seeking to distribute the costs of government more fairly. What kind of values do we want in the education system? What kind of old age pension? What kind of world? These are the questions Liberal Democrats join the party to address – we should show we have the courage and resolution to deliver solutions, that we are credible leaders. That, not a shift left or right.

It is the key to winning over those nervous sympathisers who can't quite yet bring themselves to trust us with government.

Matthew Taylor is Liberal Democrat MP for Truro and St Austell

THE MONEY IS MISSING

Misinterpreted polls have left the Liberal Democrats with nothing to say on economics, argues Lynne Featherstone

Labour lead over the Lib Dems in my constituency in 1997: 25,998. Lib Dem lead over Labour in 2005: 2,395. So as you can imagine – I'm quite a fan of the party's campaigning techniques. One of the curiosities of the result, though, occurred afterwards – the number of constituents who came up to me (quite genuinely) to say, "I didn't vote for you, but I'm really glad you won."

This wasn't a burst of over-eager politeness, but rather reflected that many people liked the Lib Dem message locally but wanted more convincing about the full range of the Lib Dem offering. And that – in my view – is in large part because we concentrated on a fairly narrow range of popular policies.

The justification for this is fairly straightforward. For a third party, you have to boil down the number of things you are talking about on the national stage to a minimum, to have a chance of getting any message across. And the policies were on the right issues. Indeed, one of the major shifts in the Liberal Democrats' approach to campaigning in the mid-1990s was a switch to concentrating our efforts on the issues which people say are most important to them at (Westminster) general election time.

The result is that 'health, education and crime' have become a bit of a holy trinity, though we often don't say nearly enough on crime (see my article in Liberator 304 and available on my website at http://snipurl.com/l301).

There was quite a widespread agreement in the party that, looking forward to the next general election, one thing to work on is to have a clearer theme / narrative / big picture / ideology / call it what you will, so that the popular policies fit into a more coherent overall story. The Meeting the Challenge policy review is in part about that. And with a leadership election going on as I write this, that process too will concentrate people's minds on these issues.

But to have a successful story, you need the right constituent parts. Look again at that holy trinity of health, education and crime. Intriguingly missing from this list is the economy. Why 'intriguingly'?

Well, the trinity is based on both public and private polling – but if you ask one of the political chattering classes (and there are quite a few of them in my constituency), they'll most likely say that the economy is crucial to shaping the result of general elections, probably accompanied with yet another retelling of the story about Clinton, 1992 and James Carville's 'the economy, stupid' sign. Or as Philip Gould wrote to Tony Blair on 17 April, that he should: "drive the election to the point where it came down to one central question: 'Who do you trust with the future of the economy?'" But the economy doesn't feature in the trinity.

So where's the economy hiding? I think the answer is in the details of how the polls are done. Don't worry – you don't need to be a statistical geek to follow this, as the basic point doesn't even need any decimal places.

Polling companies like MORI ask people which issue is more important to them and give answers for 'health', 'education', 'crime' etc. But economic issues get split between a range of categories, such as economy, taxation and unemployment. So for 'health' the MORI definition is "National Health Service / hospitals" and for crime it's the even more omnibus "crime/ law and order/ violence/ vandalism". The judicial system, the crime rate, policing issues – they are all put together into the one heading.

However, for the economy we have separate categories for 'economy/ economic situation', 'inflation/ prices' 'pound/ exchange rate/ value of pound', 'taxation', 'unemployment/ factory closure/ lack of industry' and more.

You could argue how many of these should be gathered together under the 'economy' umbrella but think of the contrast with the broad health, crime and education categories, where all different schooling up to 18 and beyond is lumped into one category, including too the different issues of resources, buildings and curriculum.

Does all this matter? Yes it does – for example, if you look at the MORI poll figures for November 2005 for "the most important issue facing Britain today", the economy rates behind education and health – but leapfrogs over them if you add in unemployment and taxation. Yes, there are margins of error to watch out for – but it is a consistent pattern looking at the longer-term trends and not just amongst MORI's polls: the economy moves up the list sharply if you define it more broadly.

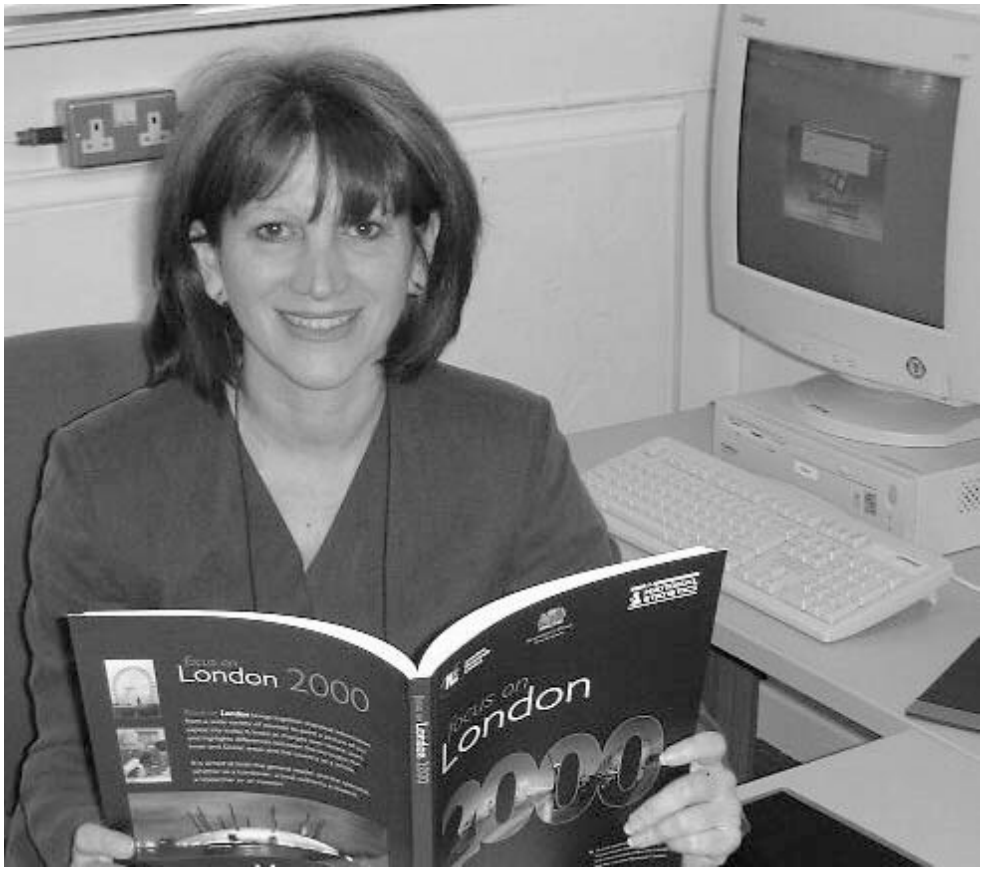
Even on the narrow definition, there are some polls in which the economy comes through strongly. To whit – YouGov's polling by 5 May 2005 had the economy as the third most important issue, after health and education, in answer to "which … issues will be most important to you in deciding which party to support" and this was even excluding taxation.

It's true that economic news attracts much less media coverage than it did in the 1990s and earlier. Look how little coverage the latest inflation or unemployment figures get, and as for balance of payments figures – they used to be everywhere and are now harder to find than a smiling Gordon Brown. And where we used to talk about our economic policies in terms of European monetary polices and independence for the Bank of England, both have largely been overtaken by events.

Instead our economic offering in 2005 was all about what to do with the fruits of prosperity – changing spending priorities, taxing a bit more those who can pay a bit more in order to fund necessary extra spending elsewhere and so on.

Therefore there is a double risk for Liberal Democrats at the next general election. First, without the economy joining the health, crime and education gang, any narrative or theme won't work, as it won't have the necessary key components.

Second, if the economic outlook deteriorates further by the next election, policies about distributing bounty in the good times run the risk of being very dated and seeming irrelevant. It has happened to progressive parties in many countries on many occasions – when the economy takes a downturn, they are left behind if their policies don't match the times. Just look at the struggles the Australian Labor party has had.



So – how to tackle this? We don't make nearly enough of our economic policies. For example, consistently election after election, it is the Liberal Democrats who have the most credible policies in terms of having a fully costed manifesto. The costings pass the scrutiny of the pundits but, aside from a few brief mentions on *Newsnight* and the like, what benefits do we accrue from this? With the honourable exception of the party's website (www.libdems.org.uk) – which had, and still does, "our policies are fully costed" logos and links to details on most pages – these plus points about us are barely mentioned or publicised. My own leaflets during the election were exceptions too of course – but according to the New Politics Network / Joseph Rowntree study of content of election leaflets, only 9% of Lib Dem ones mentioned the economy.

We also need to develop a clear and simple story about what our economic policies are, which goes beyond "the sums add up" and "fair and sensible reallocation of resources". Both are desirable – and to be repeated – but they are not distinctively liberal.

I think our distinctive ideological approach is to be found in our suspicion of big government. Far too much of government – especially that within the paws of Gordon Brown, master of the complicated innovation and baffling regulation – is riven with complexity, confusion and bureaucratic waste.

Brown is highly vulnerable on this I believe – the complexity of tax credit forms, the profusion of paperwork families need to fill out and the plethora of new rules and regulations may not attract much mainstream press coverage at the moment (a few glaring scandals aside), but ask any low-income mum sitting down to try to work out how to claim what she needs to keep her kids fed and clothed – and they'll most certainly know what a bureaucratic mess Gordon Brown has made of so much of the financial system.

Waste, inefficiency and piles and piles of extra paperwork aren't just economic issues, as they increasingly bedevil so many other areas of public services too. Take just one example from the transport field – it cost £455m in fees for lawyers, accountants and consultants to bring about the part-privatisation of the London tube.

Instead that could have bought around 35 new trains, 65 kilometres of renewed track, 50 replacement escalators, 37 more escalators fully renewed and with enough money left over after all that to also have a comprehensive program of new lifts and other measures to make the tube more accessible.

Take another example, one that was rather topical over the festive season – the rules over what shops can claim in their sales advertising. Far too often they get away with grandiose claims. Being on the side of the individual is about making them a bit more honest – which brings greater clarify, more competition and more economic efficiency. Giving individuals accurate and timely information, and making economic systems simpler where possible so they can deal with them, will bring with it benefits of increased competition, productivity and in turn wealth.

Big, pondering bureaucratic government should be the natural enemy for liberals – and in the current environment, our opposition to it can be honed into an effective economic policy that is about putting individuals first. Carville's 'the economy, stupid' sign has entered political folklore. But people tend to forget what Carville wrote before that on his sign – "Change vs more of the same". Reducing complexity in the taxation system; improving competition by having more openness; judging benefits systems by people's ability to claim what they are due; reducing central bureaucracy through local delivery of services and more in that vein – that would be the real change.

Lynne Featherstone is Liberal Democrat MP for Hornsey and Wood Green.

PATRIOT GAMES

Liberal Democrats should argue for civil liberty in the language of the tabloids, says Robert Earl

Suggest defending civil liberties down my local, and the usual response is a roar of derision. Start talking about defending fundamental British values, on the other hand, and the response is exactly the opposite.

The irony is that both of these terms apply equally to Liberal Democrat policy. A good example of this is our opposition to the government's plan of locking people up despite the fact that they've committed no crime.

We could have fought this campaign by fuelling people's pride in being free citizens in a free country. We could have reminded everybody that better men than the PLP fought a war to preserve these freedoms. We could even have suggested that, if Blair wants to live in a banana republic so much, he's free to go and live in Argentina.

Basically, if we had consistently rephrased the debate in these sorts of emotive and patriotic terms, we could have made our position both popular and tabloid friendly.

Instead of this, we ended up banging on about civil liberties. Of course, talk of civil liberties is more appealing to Guardian-reading Liberal Democrats than talk of fundamental British values, but so what? Guardian-reading Liberal Democrats support us anyway. The people we have to reach are the majority who don't.

ID cards are the next big fight and we're already making the same mistake. The Kennedy line is that we oppose ID cards because they are a threat to civil liberties. This is absolutely correct but, by speaking in these terms, he weakens our position.

We should be talking about a Briton's right to walk down the street without having to buy a licence to do so (this being one of the things that makes this country great). We should constantly refer to the fact that America, despite having suffered 9/11, wants nothing to do with ID cards whereas less popular countries are all for them. And, as always, we should talk about the men and women who fought said less popular countries to preserve the freedoms that the government now seeks to destroy.

Again, we are looking at emotive terms and arguments. But I favour such language for the same reason that the Daily Mail does. It gets people on your side. It makes them feel good about agreeing with you. And, best of all, the ring of self confidence it gives puts your opponents on the back foot.

Another reason we should be aggressively and constantly connecting to this sort of patriotic sentiment is that we are the only ones that can. Just as Labour was the only party that could have introduced privatisation into the NHS, so we are perhaps the only party who can talk about patriotism without looking like idiots.

Take the Tories, for example. With their new leadership, and with their old reputation, flag waving is an absolute minefield for them. Not only does it run counter to their attempt to rebrand themselves, but it is also evocative of the sort of bigotry that many people associate with the Conservatives.

We, on the other hand, face no such difficulties. When a Liberal Democrat talks about fundamental British values, people immediately understand that we are expressing pride in a modern, multicultural liberal democracy. But if a Tory uses the same language, a fair assumption would be that he is just regurgitating the usual 'Little Englander' nonsense (or sense, from the Tories' own point of view).

Labour is different. Its tradition means that its attempts to claim the flag don't appear so immediately suspect. Even so, the combination of its attacks on civil liberties . . . sorry, fundamental British values . . . at home and its slavish obedience to the Americans abroad means that we can take this territory from them very easily.

I think that both Labour and the Tories know this. Look at the scenes in the run up to the Iraq war. Would they have shrieked 'Charlie Chamberlain' with quite such desperation if, deep down, they weren't afraid of the only leader in parliament who was fighting for an independent British foreign policy?

The best thing is, we can claim this territory without changing a single paragraph of a single policy. Dropping the language of the human rights court and adopting the language of the tabloids won't affect the content or the nature of our policies one little bit. Why should it? Our policies are already based on fundamental British values. We just need to repackage them in a way that lets people know this. A way that connects to the way the man in the pub thinks.

If we don't make this change, then the majority will continue to regard talk of civil liberties as the irrelevant waffling of an ivory tower elite.

But if we do, we will have gained something even greater than the popularisation of individual policies. We will have found that elusive narrative thread, the grail, which we have been seeking for so long.

It's been there all along, of course. We just haven't been able to see the wood for the trees.

Robert Earl is a member of Wirral West Liberal Democrats.

DECISION TIME

As is customary on these occasions, Liberator asked the three Liberal Democrat leadership contenders a series of questions and here are their answers

Introduction

This is the election no-one really wanted. Charles Kennedy remained genuinely popular among party members, who were for the most part blissfully unaware of the long-running problems that had undermined the confidence of so many MPs.

Even those MPs who despaired of Kennedy were reluctant to force him out. The main reason was the lack of an obvious successor. Only three potential contenders – Ming Campbell, Simon Hughes and Mark Oaten – stood to gain from a leadership contest this side of the next general election. None was regarded as ideal and most MPs hoped that, despite Kennedy's failings, the show could somehow be kept on the road until after the next general election, when the younger generation of MPs would be sufficiently mature to succeed.

There was another factor inhibiting MPs from acting against Kennedy. None of them wanted to be cast as the Lib Dems' 'Heseltine' figure - the 'assassin' who would remove Kennedy but destroy his own leadership hopes in the process.

The palace coup against Charles Kennedy (catalogued in RB – see page 4), when it eventually happened, left the party in a state of shock because most members could not at first understand why mutiny had broken out.

Anxious to heal the wounds and move on as quickly as possible, many MPs would have preferred an uncontested 'coronation' of Ming Campbell as leader. However, it rapidly became clear that the party was in no mood for such a coup and wanted an opportunity to express its view democratically.

There was another reason for staging an election, a widespread belief that a leadership contest would have the same tonic effect on the party that the Tories enjoyed with their leadership election last year. The assumption that the media would focus on policy issues turned out to be wishful thinking.

Just as the party embarked on its search for a replacement for Kennedy, the Oaten scandal exploded and overshadowed everything. The subsequent exposé of Simon Hughes made it clear, in case anyone was still in any doubt, that the Murdoch press had embarked on a feeding frenzy. The whole election risked turning into a damaging farce.

In such circumstances, it is easy to forget that the party is midway through making some fundamental choices about its future direction. The 'Meeting the Challenge' exercise (due to conclude at this September's party conference) aims to supply a coherent narrative thread, while a tax commission is reassessing the party's attitude to tax and spend issues.

There are some major ideological and strategic arguments within the party but the choice between the three contenders is not straightforward in this context. Despite the best efforts of the media, none of the candidates can easily be pigeon-holed as 'left-wing' or 'right-wing'. Support for each candidate cuts across ideological lines – indeed, Liberator Collective members can be found among supporters of all three.

To help ourselves as much as anybody else, we posed some questions to explore where each candidate stands.

The five questions

Q.1 – If elected, what would be the most distinctive thing about (a) you and (b) the party?

Q.2 – Do you believe the party should (a) fight as an independent party and be prepared to enter a coalition only after an election and if the conditions are right, or (b) aim for a pre-election deal or pact? What is the basic reason for your preference?

Q.3 – What do you think are the Liberal Democrats' greatest strength and greatest weakness?

Q.4 – Do you think the party's decision to oppose the invasion of Iraq was right and how do you propose to move this policy forward?

Q.5 – Do you feel that the principle of progressive taxation has had its day? Would you be willing to look at new and more radical tax policies, or even a major overhaul of the whole system?

More details of the leadership election, including deadlines and hustings meetings, can be found at:
http://www.libdems.org.uk/party/lib-dem-leadership-election.html

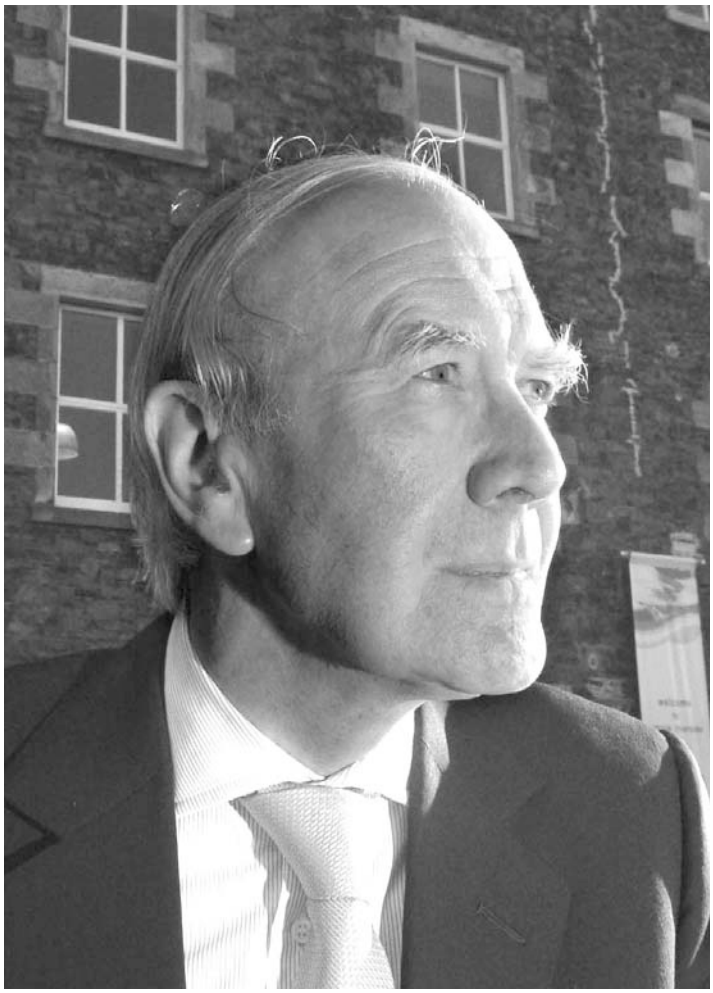
Sir Menzies Campbell MP

Campaign website – www.campbellcampaign.org
Biography – Ming grew up in Glasgow, was educated at Glasgow University and from student days has successfully combined athletics, law and politics. In 1975 he became Chairman of the Scottish Liberal Party. In 1979 and 1983 Ming worked the constituency of North East Fife, for decades a safe Conservative seat. Each time he reduced the Tory majority finally winning in 1987. Since then the majority has grown to over 12,500. In parliament he has served primarily as a defence and foreign affairs spokesman, becoming Shadow Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in 1997 and Deputy Leader in 2003.
Q.1 – (a) I think I combine a strong, instinctive liberalism with an ability to communicate that liberalism with authority and credibility. From the moment I was inspired by Jo Grimond to join the party, I have been excited by the radicalism and reformism which runs through our Liberal beliefs. But I have learnt from experience that politics is also about making radical ideas acceptable to the widest possible audience.

(b) I want us to be distinctive in bringing values back to the centre stage of British politics – to underscore our principled and radical message. Our individual policies are important, of course, but I sometimes think we lose sight of the fact that voters do not vote because of a shopping list of policies, they want to know what our values are, what makes us tick. Blair and Cameron preside over managerial parties. I want us to emphasise freedom and social justice.
Q.2 – We must fight as an independent party – it is nonsense to campaign for a hung parliament. In 1983 and 1987 we were distracted from putting across our policies, principles and positions by constant speculation and we suffered as a consequence. I would simply refuse to entertain such debate and would use all our resources to put across our distinctive and independent message.

However, as we demonstrate in local councils and in Scotland, there are times in the interest of stable and successful government and liberal democrat policies where it makes sense to seek agreements. But no agreement is possible without electoral reform – anything else would be a betrayal of our principles and values.
Q.3 – I think we showed in the last parliament that, when our MPs stand together and work with the party in the country, we are a very powerful political force. The best example for me was the clear opposition to the Iraq war and the tremendous campaigning activity in the country, not least the attendance at the anti-war march. We have also led the opposition on ID cards and terrorism, only to be let down by supine Tories. It is this sense of unity and purpose, of integrated campaigning that we now need to show increasingly on domestic questions such as civil liberties, education and health. At Westminster we must learn from the successful campaigning of our council colleagues and ensure we work much better together.

I think that our greatest weakness was that we have not been as successful as we should have been – given the terrific campaigners in our ranks – at pulling together a coherent political message. We need a sharp, consistent political message, which can only come from all sections of the party being brought together more obviously than they are today. In addition, I'm afraid in the light of recent sad events we have to face up to the need to quickly unite, restore



credibility and focus on the important electoral tests in May and beyond. We should do that by restating our core beliefs and working effectively to support colleagues in council elections. This is an opportunity to show the lack of credibility of Cameron's Tories and the mistrust of New Labour. We must not miss it.
Q.4 – Yes, I strongly believe that our opposition to the invasion of Iraq was right, and all subsequent events have borne out the wisdom of that judgement. The predictions we made at the time – that the evidence in support of the invasion was weak, that it would increase instability in the region and beyond, the radicalising effect it would have in the Muslim world – all have come about.

The next step is to advance the case for a phased military withdrawal from Iraq. Iraq will find it hard enough to develop a culture of political stability, but that task will be nigh impossible whilst it is under military occupation. The other wider task is to ensure that the world reacts with greater unity in the face of other security threats than it did towards Iraq. Iran's nuclear programme is an imminent test case for the international community.
Q.5 – There is a major review of tax policies underway which any leader must allow the party to debate. However, I do think it is just wrong that people on low incomes pay to the state such a high proportion of tax. Our tax system must be progressive in the sense of lifting the poorest out of tax. However, my overall view is that the tax system needs reform. It must be seen as 'fair' and that we can do much more to discourage environmentally 'bad' activity and encourage environmentally 'good' activity. It is also right for local councils, elected under a reformed voting system, to have the power to raise far more money from local people for local priorities than under the current centralised system.

Simon Hughes MP

Campaign website – www.simonhughesforleader.com
Biography – Simon Hughes is the Member of Parliament for North Southwark & Bermondsey, current Federal President of the Liberal Democrats and Liberal Democrat Shadow Attorney General. Since his first election in 1983, Simon has been one of the most high profile and widely respected Liberal and Liberal Democrat MPs. He has held key portfolio responsibilities for the Liberals and the Liberal Democrats throughout his parliamentary career. These have included Environment (1983-88); Education Science & Training (1988-90); Environment, Natural Resources & Food (1990-94); Urban Affairs & Community Relations (1994-95); Health (1995-99) and Home Affairs (1999-2003).

Q.1 – Actually the most distinctive thing about my leadership would be being distinctive!

Our party must be willing to do things differently from the Blair/Cameron consensus.

For me that means basing our policies on our principles, practicality and on popularity – in that order. We must proclaim what we believe on civil liberties, public services, social justice and international issues. Even where a principled stand appears non-populist, we must be prepared to lead public opinion. I have been willing to trail-blaze for unfashionable policies – such as on the environment and international relations. And that those stances now attract some degree of consensus is to our enduring credit.

The leader must set a direction for the party but has to go with the grain of what our party believes in. That means being in tune with the membership and our democratic policy-making machinery. As someone who has – over the course of twenty years – defeated the platform from the conference floor, and has been defeated by the conference, I understand how the party ticks. There will always be a healthy tension between the leadership and the party but the relationship must be based on mutual respect and understanding.

Q.2 – We ARE an independent party and must fight all elections on that basis. This is something that Charles Kennedy really got right, and we reaped the dividends in the ballot box. The media were forced to cover our policies, not our positioning.

In the event of there being a balanced parliament after the next election (which is NOT something we will be campaigning for), other political parties will need to know that we will not be drawn into any deal, without electoral reform – and the rest of the constitutional agenda – being properly delivered.

We have always said that we will support policies we agree with and oppose those we do not. Frankly I see less in the Blair Brown agenda to support than the Tories do! Perhaps the press should be asking Messrs Cameron and Brown about possible coalitions instead!

Q.3 – Our greatest strength is our people – the activists and the members who stay loyal and work hard year in and year out. The sort of folk I meet every week of the year when I go round the country. While it is the leadership, our policies, our by-election breakthroughs and the brilliance of our campaigns department that has helped secure our recent high poll ratings, it is our local government and activist base that has made that support increasingly solid.

In Southwark, we have defeated Labour in seven general elections and driven the Tories nearly out of existence. That is not just about Simon Hughes (no, really, it isn't!), it is about a strong organisation, a clear strategy, hard work and good people.

Our weakness is our failure to get the national media coverage that our poll position and our policies deserve. That is not just about bias – though that does not help – it is about our having a distinctive message and not trying to look like or act like the other parties. Getting fair and positive coverage nationally and regionally is my number one priority.

Q.4 – Not only were we right, we can be proud of how united we were. What is not realised now is what a political risk it was seen to be at the time – to oppose a war in which British troops were said to be fighting for democracy. The party worked together on it – from the leader, the spokesperson (and all credit to Ming for that), I as President, and the members who were prepared to march proudly with Lib Dem banners against the Bush/Blair Iraq project.

There is still more work to be done to expose the role of the Prime Minister in misleading of the British people. As a party we must make sure that we follow through our interest in the region by playing a constructive and critical role over Iraqi reconstruction, and accepting no compromise when it comes to the scandals of Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and extraordinary rendition.

Q.5 – The principle of progressive taxation has certainly not had its day. Our tax policies must be balanced between potentially regressive environmental taxation (which I have supported for 30 years) and those taxes that are seen to be fair. I support local income tax and reject a flat tax.

We are sadly a society that is increasingly unequal and increasingly unfair. One where the poor pay a greater share of their income in tax than the richest. We cannot be serious about tackling this if we rule out using the fairest tax – income tax – to help do it. Given that we could use the resources from a higher rate of income tax (where our current policy of 50% on incomes over £100,000 or a variation of this) to reduce tax on the poor and/or to fund free access to higher education or to long-term care, it is wrong to rule out ever using this approach. Some right wing commentators might not like it. Tough.

Chris Huhne MP

Campaign website – www.chris2win.org

Biography – Chris Huhne has been shadow chief secretary to the Treasury since his election in Eastleigh last year. This follows six years in the European Parliament as the economic spokesman of the pan-European Liberal group during which he introduced the first 'sunset clauses' on commission powers into EU law. Chris also has a track record of campaigning and of pulling together the party on policy, such as his work on public services. Chris was formerly a leading journalist on the Guardian and the Independent and was then a city economist specialising in developing countries.

Q.1 – (a) Clarity, punch, energy and commitment. I would not be a bridge to the future, but would aim to win now. I also have the ability to take on the other parties – particularly Labour – on the economy. More generally, I would hope to bring to the leadership a sense of the world outside the Westminster bubble. My 19 years on Fleet Street enable me to express complex ideas simply. My years managing journalists and then founding and building up the largest team of economists in the private sector equips me to build the team we need to win. And my experience in party policy making – for example on public services – shows that I respect and can pull together all important shades of party opinion.

(b) As for the party, we are already distinctive on civil liberties and foreign policy, but we need to defend our distinctiveness and our claim to leadership on domestic policy – health and schools – and on global warming. We will only expose the shallowness of rival parties' claims by adopting the same language (and policy reality) of tough choices that served us so well when we campaigned for big increases in public spending together with the corollary rise in income tax. That battle has been won, but the tactic of setting out the cost of pursuing an agenda in detail remains valid. We must unite around the need for a greener, fairer and more democratic Britain.

Q.2 – For me, a pre-election pact with another party is out of the question. We must fight as an independent party. If there is no overall majority after an election, we must look for the best way to advance our cause while maintaining our identity and independence. This may even mean going into opposition while the Conservatives and Labour form a German-style grand coalition. It may mean dealing with issues as they arise, which is the experience I had in the European Parliament. Any other strategy risks muting the liberal voice when it is most needed.

Q.3 – The party has the great strength of an ideology in tune with the modern world: of not just protecting the individual from oppression, but enabling the individual to flourish in opportunity and adversity. The party's other great strength is the commitment of its activists and workers on the ground. Nothing increases our chances of winning a seat more than our campaigning.

Our greatest weakness is still poverty of ambition. We underestimate ourselves. We need to take on the other parties on some of the central issues that generate trust in a party that seeks to govern, such as economic policy. We need to think through what is right for Britain, and we need to raise the funding so that our campaigners have all the tools – phone banks, analyses of target voters, the most advanced direct mail – to compete head on with the other parties.

Q.4 – I was proud to go on the march against the war. It was crucial not just to oppose the war, but to be seen visibly to oppose it. We must now make clear that there is a timetable with an end date – perhaps at the end of this year – for the continued presence of British troops in Iraq. Iraqi capabilities have grown, and the continued presence of our troops is a daily reminder of the invasion.

The central thrust of our foreign policy should be the commitment to the United Nations, internationalism and the international rule of law. We need to reshape our defence capabilities to recognise the contribution that we should make to UN and EU peace-making and peacekeeping efforts, and we should therefore be leading the charge against the government's implicit policy of replacing the Trident nuclear missile system with a similarly advanced and expensive system. Any deterrent should reflect the substantial reduction in the strategic threat that has occurred since the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989.

Q.5 – Certainly not. The tax system as a whole should redistribute wealth and income. It is an outrage that, at present, the most well-off are paying less tax as a proportion of their income than the least well-off. At the same time, British governments have lost their nerve over environmental taxes – especially on fuel tax, household fuel bills, and the taxation of aviation. I am proposing that we do something about both social fairness and global warming by increasing environmental taxes and using the revenue to help the low paid. We must also continue to propose higher taxation for the better-off either by retaining the 50 pence rate or by restricting tax relief on pension contributions.

WHOA THERE

Liberal Democrats need to rethink how fast the European Union should develop, says Wendy Kyrle-Pope

This piece started life as a review of Andrew Duff's excellent and accessible book *The Struggle for Europe's Constitution*, published by the Federal Trust.

However, given the changes occurring in our own party, coupled with the revival the Eurosceptic Conservative party is enjoying, and the growing feeling that the EU train has crossed a bridge too far, it is also worth examining whether changes in our European policy may be necessary.

If we are to have a distinct, clear and bold pro-European voice, we must be prepared to revise our position and our policy, and Duff provides a handbook on the EU that familiarises readers with the constitution and the workings of Europe.

By understanding the constitution, it is easier to understand the EU, and thus to extol and explain it. As the future of the constitution and of Europe are inextricably connected, so must be our attitude towards and policies on Europe.

Duff believes that we should use the period of reflection, after the French and Dutch 'no' votes, "to prepare for a judicious renegotiating of the constitution". It "is very good, but it is not perfect".

The latter is a very good description of the EU itself. The trouble with this constitution is that it did not pay much attention to public relations. This was a serious misjudgement, because it gave the impression that it had been created in a vacuum, with no reference to the 'real' world. And it was launched in the middle of an economic downturn with an unpopular war rumbling away in the background.

Voters in France and Holland did not reject the constitution's content so much as the concept. Suddenly it was all too much, too soon.

It is, nevertheless, a remarkable document, once you know your way around it. Talleyrand said that the secret of a good constitution is that it ought to be short and obscure. This one is certainly not obscure, or, at 448 articles, short.

Despite its merits, the constitution's adoption is stalled. There are 14 nations that have voted 'yes' or are about to, and others have an extension until mid-2007.

Duff writes that abandonment of the constitution would be "effectively saying farewell to further enlargement, the charter, and all the promise of the constitution on terms of improved democracy, capacity and efficacy. This would be seen, at home and abroad, as an admission of failure by this generation of Europe's leaders".

Renegotiation is, for Duff, the only option.

A 'yes' vote to the same version opens the gates to further expansion. And expansion frightens voters more than anything else. Most, even the British, accept the need for closer trading ties, and open borders for trade, goods and services. Most will accept the need to be competitive in the EU and globally and understand economic cycles. Most are in love with Polish plumbers.

But why should the EU get any bigger? Are we not big enough? And where does Europe end, geographically, culturally and spiritually?

Those countries that would be accepted without a murmur, Norway, Switzerland and Iceland, are unlikely to apply. Romania and Bulgaria are nearly there, but there is resentment because of their comparative poverty. However, at least they are physically in Europe, with a predominately European culture and heritage. Leaving aside former Yugoslavia (apart from Croatia, none are near candidate status) and Albania, who next? Turkey.

Straddling Europe and Asia, it is so rich in talent and energy, but so poor economic and social terms. Although membership negotiations have started, there is still huge opposition throughout Europe to its entry, because it is not European. Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan have not applied but, providing they meet the criteria, could be considered.

So what should our policy be? Carry on gung-ho in favour of everything, constitution, euro, expansion as before?

This did not win us many friends in Britain, and not that many seats, even if it is the right thing to do. Liberals are rightly concerned with the 'right thing', but we must be very clear about our policy on Europe, because neither of the other two parties are.

It is a delicate balance. The key to a successful, sustainable, cohesive Europe lies in the speed at which reforms (and expansion) take place. Slow down a little if necessary.

We must continue to support and work for EU progress, but we must take our own countrymen with us.

Europe may be a juggernaut, but it must be driven with the delicacy usually reserved for thoroughbred horses. The constitution should be re-negotiated, not just re-presented, and the institutions reformed, no matter how long it takes.

Consider carefully which countries are ready – and which are not – for membership, and monitor their progress – this is so important, the party ought to organise its own panel of observers – paying close attention to every chapter and verse of the Copenhagen admission criteria.

Liberals never shy away from radical ideas, but we need to cultivate more of the cunning of that arch survivor Talleyrand to win the hearts and minds of voters and help our colleagues in Europe do the same.

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

DON'T MENTION THE WAR

Europe will not recover its self-confidence until its citizens celebrate how they made peace instead of war, says Brendan Harre

Europe is in crisis. It has a rejected constitution, a currency whose future is in doubt and a budget that no one can agree on. This boils down to a crisis of identity and direction.

Promoters of the constitution argued it was needed for an enlarged EU to function. But in effect the constitutional referendum asked, 'what is the EU good for'?

The French and Dutch referendums demonstrated that the public could no longer be convinced by the argument that 'ever closer union' is necessary to prevent the rise in nationalism, which would inevitably lead to another Hitler.

This indicates the end of the post-war period where peace and security were Europeans' chief concern. Because there was no new argument to signal what the EU's purpose is, the constitution was rejected from many different angles.

I believe that the purpose of the European project is to maintain the dynamism of the nation state system that has characterised Europe since the Middle Ages, while avoiding the destructive wars that also plagued Europe's history.

Once Europe has stabilised the nation state system, then there is no need for 'ever closer union'. But resolving this broad objective with the specific problems of the euro and the EU budget will not be easy and may cause fundamental change.

The euro problem has no consensus on which theory matches reality. The Bundesbank's pre-euro theory, based on historical evidence, was that for a currency union to survive there needs to be a political union. At the euro's creation the joining countries rejected this theory believing the current EU institutions, including the growth and stability pact, were all that was necessary.

Currency unions have drawbacks. Participating countries must accept a one-size-fits-all monetary policy.

They cannot devalue their national currency to regain export competitiveness, or have a national interest rate policy that maximises economic growth by maintaining price stability.

Instead the European Central Bank sets interest rates for the whole euro-zone, so these may be higher or lower than what would be best for individual countries.

Of course, currency unions have benefits too; they eliminate exchange rate uncertainty, decrease transaction costs and increase price transparency, therefore increasing trade within the union. It is hard to know if the benefits outweigh the costs.

It has been speculated that the euro's one-size-fits-all problem is causing low growth, loss in competitiveness and rising unemployment.

Some of the general public believe this, and the poor economic performance of the Netherlands since converting to the euro was one reason for the Dutch to reject the constitution.

It is arguable, though, that the euro zone's problems are caused by unrelated factors, such as Italy's wage increases not being matched by productivity growth. While in Germany, rigid labour and retail markets, a mishandled unification and frightened consumers could be causing the stagnation. And Dutch economic problems could be caused by a housing boom that went bust.

So euro zone weakness may be caused by some euro nations not facing up to structural problems and avoiding the domestic political fallout by blaming the euro. If this true, politicians like Berlusconi, who criticise the euro to score political points, are prolonging their countries' economic stagnation.

But if the euro is causing economic stagnation then the solution is either to return to national currencies or centralise fiscal policy.

Returning to national currencies could be done, but might be painful; financial uncertainty would skyrocket, countries like Italy with high debts would struggle. Centralising fiscal policy, as the Bundesbank predicted, would mean something like a euro zone finance minister, deciding what all the euro nations' taxation contributions and expenditure receipts should be.

The political tensions of a euro-government would be impossibly high. It is unlikely all the euro nations would agree to replace their finance ministers with one euro zone minister, especially when you consider the problems of one central body having to merge all the different social and economic models of the euro zone together.

A euro-government would split Europe into one centralised euro-government country surrounded by independently minded non-euro countries. It could create a divide as significant as the 16th century religious reformation.

Yet the euro-government option has powerful supporters as a means to renew the European project and the Franco-German alliance.

The French prime minister has written, "I propose a dialogue between the eurogroup and the European Central Bank to define, while respecting the ECB's independence, a genuine European economic government for eurozone countries", (Dominique De Villepin, *Financial Times*, 29 June).

The stagnation of the euro zone is being caused by a lack of agreement on where responsibility lies for resolving this

problem. The signal for a euro zone recovery will be when all the euro nations agree on a common approach to solving economic weakness.

Superficially, the EU budget debate is about who pays for the union's expansion. The new members are poor so they contribute little, while their entitlement for EU funds is high.

Unfortunately, the budget debate has to be negotiated within the context of existing agreements. A major restriction on negotiations is that, in 2002, agricultural subsidies were set for a further 10 years.

At a deeper level, the issue is about whether Europe should be open or closed to the rest of the world.

France wants a closed Europe, which has limited trade with the outside world and uses selective industry support to mange the economy. Britain wants an open Europe, trading fairly with the outside world, using innovation and highly skilled citizens to succeed.

But to further complicate the issue, the debate is about whether the Franco-German alliance will continue to provide Europe's leadership. The driving force behind this alliance is the desire to create a culture of peace and cooperation between Europe's two main warring nations.

But they are not equal partners. Germany has collective war guilt, while France after the war was afraid of a German nationalistic revival.

This makes France the dominant partner in the alliance. France rejected the 1950s European military agreement and replaced it with cooperation at the industrial level. Thus the European Coal and Steel Board was formed, which has evolved into the current European Union. French dominance within the alliance continues to the present day.

Germany's manufacturers pay to support French farmers, not vice versa. And Germany agreed with France that agricultural subsidies should be fixed until 2013.

Germany agreed to the French plan of creating a European currency against the advice of its own central bank. And now France wants Germany to agree to a European government.

Security wise, the European project has been a huge success. It completely ended the pre-World War Two system of competing nation states locked into a multi-member arms race, desperately trying to keep peace by various balance of power treaties, which periodically broke down, leading to increasingly destructive wars.

It should be noted that European industrial cooperation led by the Franco-German alliance stopped the European arms race, maybe more effectively than military cooperation would have.

Europeans feel safe like never before. No one thinks any European Union country will invade another. An indication of how effective the European Union is in keeping the peace, is the widespread belief that the only lasting solution to hostilities between former Yugoslavian countries is for them to join it. In a sense, the EU is a victim of its own success. The public feel safe (from other EU nations) so guilt and fear can no longer drive 'ever closer union'.

The problem is that the EU gets little credit for achieving peace in Europe. It is seen as an economic and political institution, not a military one.

Militarily, Europe is weak and disorganised, as seen in Bosnia 10 years ago. This reflects the problem of Europeans not coming to terms with developments since World War Two.

Europeans feel safe but do not know why. Germans still feel guilty about Nazism, not proud of being part of a project that has brought peace to Europe. There are elaborate ceremonies to remember World War Two, but Europeans do not celebrate the peace they created after the war. Recently a *Der Spiegel* journalist based in England wrote an article about his son who was chased and called a 'Nazi'. He said the English should be more civilised like the Germans and admit their past misdeeds.

This is a pathetic situation. Europeans in the 21st century have a lot to be proud of in the way they relate to each other. Guilt and remembrance of past horrors are not enough to secure peace.

World War Two could not be stopped by remembering how bad World War One was. Europe would be a better place if it remembered how it created peace not war.

Europe's lack of direction not only prevents economic recovery, it also creates an ideological vacuum. This makes Europe vulnerable to extremism; both internal (the rise in violent nationalist populist movements) and external (religious militants who believe their violent tactics can alter Europe). If Europe celebrated the peace it has achieved, then it would provide some ideological certainty to combat extremism.

I believe Europe will achieve a new sense of direction if Germany allows itself and is allowed by others to feel proud not guilty.

German and European leaders need to move on from the Franco-German ideology of guilt and fear. On one level, this will be easy because the general public is already headed that way, but on another level it is incredibly hard because many old certainties need to be challenged. This means changing the focus from war memorials to peace celebrations.

It means creating a more explicit European Union security policy while evicting the US forces based in Europe that are no longer necessary to guarantee peace, and providing the public with an education process that details how peace was brought to Europe. Britain in particular will need to engage in this process if it wants a more Anglo orientated Europe. Alternatively, if the French goal of creating a centralised euro government within the core of Europe occurs, then the non-euro countries like Britain will fear the new country (imagine what the British newspapers will say about a country that is a combination of France and Germany) and demand that the US forces remain to guarantee their independence.

Britain will feel more reliant on their 'special relationship' with the US. Europe's influence in the world will be permanently fractured.

Brendon Harré is a New Zealander who has lived in England, Finland and now the Channel Islands, where he is a registered mental health nurse.

GENERATIONAL THEFT – OR EQUITY?

Young people's prospects are being mortgaged to the interests of older generations, says Ed Vickers

At the *Meeting the Challenge* conference, I was among the speakers at Liberator's workshop on 'Generational Theft?'

By choosing this title, we meant to suggest that the prospects of British youth are being mortgaged – literally and figuratively – by policies designed to serve the interests of older people. The use of the term 'theft', and the assertion that Britain had become a 'gerontocracy', raised the hackles of some among our predominantly middle-aged and elderly audience. However, such provocative language may prove necessary if we are to galvanise young people themselves to demand action over the alarming threats to their future.

What are these threats? Perhaps the most fundamental encompasses environmental degradation, global warming and energy supply – which will confront future generations with incalculable costs.

Second, the structure of our tax system means that the burden of funding pensions, benefits and health care for our ageing population falls disproportionately on today's youth, while the long-term sustainability of welfare provision remains doubtful. Meanwhile, the ability of young people to gain a stake in the property market or to save for the future is jeopardised by absurd property prices, the high cost of private rented accommodation, and a skewed and inequitable tax system.

These issues have so far aroused only desultory interest among most politicians and commentators. In part, this may be because little if any attention has been paid to the theme that unites problems with the environment, pensions, taxation and the property market – that is, the particular impact that all of these have (or will have) on younger people. And this, in turn, undoubtedly owes much to the ageing of the electorate, coupled with catastrophically low voter turnout among the young.

In highlighting this generational dimension, we are not seeking to bully poor, defenceless grandmothers into handing over their savings, as one speaker at our session alleged. However, we are insisting that continued inaction on the part of our middle-aged, middle-class establishment amounts to a gross betrayal of our young people.

The issue of generational justice is currently almost virgin political territory, but it is territory that the Liberal Democrats should be ideally placed to occupy – without necessarily surrendering support among older voters.

More and more older people realise the difficulties that their children and grandchildren face when it comes to getting on the property ladder or saving for the future, not to mention the manifold dangers to our environment.

The response of those attending our session reflected this growing awareness. But none of our leading politicians – with one or two exceptions – has so far had the courage or imagination to articulate a vision encompassing radical solutions to all of these problems. Instead, we fought the last election on a fragmented and incoherent platform that on the one hand pandered to the narrowest interests of the elderly (replacing the council tax with a local income tax), while throwing a sop to the young by (irresponsibly, in my view) proposing the abolition of university tuition fees.

Our policies on the environment were one proud exception in this regard – but they did not receive the publicity they deserved. Developments since the election – natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, growing concerns over energy security, and increasing awareness of the implications of Chinese and Indian industrialisation – have pushed such issues up the political agenda.

This gives us the opportunity to take the battle to the government. We should be attacking New Labour's shameful record on carbon emissions, their favouring of road over rail in transport policy, and their failure to discourage environmentally damaging behaviour, such as the persistent fashion for gas-guzzling SUVs.

A large part of the solution to these problems lies in reforming the tax system so that it reflects the true long-term costs of environmental damage, and encourages efficient use of resources, for example by imposing heavier taxes on fuel-inefficient vehicles. At the same time, we need to think globally on the environment. The global dangers posed by the industrialisation of India, China and Indonesia require us to put the case for a European contribution towards the bill for controlling Asian pollution.

If the balance of public opinion on the environment appears to be moving at last towards established Liberal Democrat views, on taxation and housing we appear to have abandoned long-held positions just as they are becoming fashionable. Recent months have witnessed growing press and Whitehall interest in the potential of taxes on land values to fund infrastructure improvements, encourage development of under-utilised land, and fund local government.

It will thus have struck some as odd that Chris Rennard began the conference's closing session with a flippant sideswipe against site value rating (a longstanding Liberal policy), expressing relief that the idea had been "buried". Nothing better represents how out of touch with the interests of younger people some of our party's leading figures have become.

Consider the situation of a 30-something woman, a London resident, who spoke at our panel. She earned a reasonable salary, but home ownership remained far beyond

her reach. Instead, so much of her income disappeared each month in rent that she was unable to save. However, no one on a seemingly respectable income like hers would even be considered for a council house. At the last election, our proposal for local income tax would have done nothing for young earners such as her. By contrast, a pensioner on a fixed income but living in a property worth hundreds of thousands of pounds would have benefited hugely – something we were all encouraged to hammer home to the grey vote on the doorstep.

In January, the economist Martin Wolf – hardly a sandal-wearing eccentric – used his column in the Financial Times to call for a tax on land values. "Housing supply, planning, local authority finance and land use taxation" ought, he wrote, to be examined together.

Site value taxation would "automatically encourage planning authorities to promote development, and developers to undertake it," thus boosting both local government revenue and housing supply. It would also enable society to recover the value bestowed on land through planning gain – where, "with the stroke of a pen", change in designated use from agricultural to residential can at present reward the landowner with a massive unearned increment. And, crucially, the burden of a tax on land value would fall on those who actually own landed property – overwhelmingly the middle-aged and elderly – rather than on young earners living in rented shoeboxes.

If our abandonment of site value rating at the last election sold young people down the river, our position on pensions and benefits was more respectable. Our call for a citizens' pension, coupled with Chris Hulne's recent insistence that the basic tax allowance be raised to the level of the minimum wage, form the basis for a coherent and principled platform. The problem, though – as always – is how to finance these worthy objectives, and ensure that they can be funded not just for the life of a parliament, but into the long term.

Here again, potential answers were recently on offer in the pages of the Financial Times, this time from Ros Altmann, a governor of the London School of Economics.

Altmann pointed out that many of the benefits currently directed at pensioners – pension tax relief, winter fuel allowances, free television licences and other "universal pensioner giveaways" – were politically popular but "cost more than £3bn a year, money which is not targeted at all". A longer term solution to the funding of pensions could, she argued, involve the abolition of the upper earnings limit cap on National Insurance contributions. At present, this means that "NI contributions take 9.2% of salary from someone earning £30,000 a year, but just 3.7% from someone earning £100,000 and only 1.3% from someone earning £1m". Meanwhile, anyone "earning £1m from property or investments pays nothing".

These measures – the abolition of many wasteful, untargeted benefits, the raising of the basic tax threshold to minimum wage level, a fundamental overhaul of National Insurance, the institution of a decent citizen's pension, and the introduction of a tax on land values – would render our hideously complex tax and benefits system both simpler and more equitable.

Our embrace of the Turner Commission findings is a step in the right direction on pensions, but these policies would take us further towards ensuring the sustainability of the whole system. Turner, of course, recommended a raising of the retirement age, but we should also be championing the right to work of many elderly people who find themselves unwillingly excluded from the workforce – an issue raised by one or two of the more elderly participants at our session. Generational equity cuts both ways.

The sweeping reform to the tax, pensions and benefits systems suggested here is not only more equitable, but is far more likely to yield the necessary revenue than our flagship manifesto pledge of a surtax on incomes over £100,000, given the propensity of high earners to employ creative tax accountants.

Land tax and NI contributions are far more difficult (and in the former case almost impossible) to evade. The question of how we can most equitably distribute this revenue among our spending priorities is also crucial: at the election, we were promising that much would be used to pay for the abolition of tuition fees. This pledge should be abandoned. The most serious problems with our education system do not involve thousands of school-leavers foregoing a university education due to financial worries – they involve millions of youngsters never attaining the school-leaving qualifications they would need to have the option of applying for university in the first place.

We cannot afford mass higher education purely at public expense, and there is no compelling economic or social reason why we should try to. Public resources ought to be focused primarily on raising standards and aspirations among primary and secondary school students – since it is at this early stage that educational inequalities tend to become ingrained.

These issues – the environment, the property market, taxation, pensions and education – were the principal ones discussed, in the context of redressing the inequitable distribution of social costs and benefits among the generations.

It is attention to this context that has so far been largely absent from debate on these matters, not only within our party, but across the political spectrum. The alienation of young people from our political processes is something that should particularly concern us as Liberals – but we can hardly find it surprising, given the way in which policies pursued by successive governments have led to the impoverishment and exploitation of the young.

It is up to us to champion their cause by appealing not just to young people themselves, but to everyone who cares about the long-term future of our country.

Ed Vickers runs the campaign Out With The Old – www.outwiththeold.org.uk

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GENERATION GAME

Generational equity may become the defining issue in British politics over the next twenty years. Simon Titley looks at the implications for Liberal Democrat strategy, in particular the sort of voters the party should target

Call me a troublemaker, but it was my fault that there was a controversial debate at January's *Meeting the Challenge* conference. Yes, I confess, it was my idea to stage a policy workshop provocatively titled 'Generational Theft?'

Elsewhere in this edition (see p.22), Ed Vickers explores this issue in more detail. But why is generational equity – more specifically, the growing sense of injustice felt by the younger generation – likely to become so important?

The key factor is demographics. In common with most of the developed world, the birth rate in Britain boomed between the Second World War and the early 1960s. This 'baby boomer' generation is starting to retire. The birth rate fell sharply from the mid-60s, as women gained access to the contraceptive pill and economic independence. Meanwhile, people have been retiring earlier and living longer.

The consequence is that a smaller working population will be expected to support a larger retired population. When the 1906 Liberal government introduced state pensions, there were 22 people of working age in Britain for every retired person. In 2024 there will be less than three.

This problem is likely to dominate British politics. Pensions, healthcare and other services for the over-60s already account for almost half of all public expenditure. Given the demographic change, if all the pension and health benefits promised to current and future retired people continue to be paid out of general taxation, it will place a huge fiscal burden on younger generations.

In the meantime, the 'baby boomers' (those aged between 45 and 60, of whom there are about 11 million in Britain) already own 70% of the nation's wealth. In 20 years' time, this generation could own 85-90% of disposable income in the UK. The younger generation, already priced out of the housing market, will be expected to subsidise the baby boomers' affluent lifestyles. Young workers may not begrudge support for the elderly poor, but might question why the two-thirds of retired people who are relatively wealthy, sitting on billions' worth of untaxed property or receiving generous final salary-linked pensions, should be such an obvious target of charity.

This is not just an important policy issue. The growing sense of injustice is, potentially, politically incendiary. 'Grey power' risks freezing younger people and their concerns out of mainstream politics altogether, making it more likely that younger people will resort to extra-parliamentary means to raise their grievances.

But the Liberal Democrats have yet to face up to this issue seriously. Indeed, the party's 2005 general election manifesto seemed skewed to the interests of older generations, with its promises of more generous pensions and healthcare, plus free personal care.

Despite this largesse, older voters remained resolutely ungrateful. According to an ICM poll conducted in polling week last May, the Liberal Democrats (who won 23% of the vote in Great Britain) secured the votes of only 18% of the over-65s, compared with 22% of those aged 35-64, 26% of those aged 25-34, and 26% of those aged 18-24.

There has also been a growing realisation that the Liberal Democrats have failed to develop an effective 'air war' strategy to complement the 'ground war' of local campaigning tactics. The party has lacked a coherent narrative (although *Meeting the Challenge* is intended to remedy this) and cannot agree who its target voters should be.

Encouraged by unimaginative national press commentators, a stale debate has dragged on about whether the party should aim to the left or right of Labour, and whether it should target Labour or Conservative voters. Nowhere in these discussions does anyone seem to consider targeting *Liberal* voters.

As a result of these failings, the Liberal Democrats face a perennial problem of lacking a stable hardcore of loyal voters. Although such partisan attachments are generally in decline, the Tories and Labour can each nevertheless rely on a loyal hardcore of at least 25% of voters to support them through thick and thin. In contrast, the Liberal Democrat hardcore vote is around 10%. The party's vote is softer than that of its rivals, which means it must win a higher proportion of its votes afresh at each election.

Yet a natural Liberal constituency exists. The Liberal Democrats need to identify, target and consolidate that constituency and use it as a base from which to target other voters. Chasing Tory or Labour votes is secondary to this consideration.

What is this 'natural' Liberal vote? As we have seen, it is more likely to be under 35 than over 65. It is also likely to be better educated. There is a notable correlation between higher education (both students and graduates) and voting Liberal Democrat. This has been demonstrated recently, in the British Election Study data on the 2005 election, and in Michael Steed's study of the 2004 Euro elections (see Liberator 301). Steed's study showed that the party did best where the population was younger, better educated and more cosmopolitan.

In a similar vein, the annual British Social Attitudes survey shows a strong correlation between higher education and (small 'l') liberal attitudes. Younger people tend to have more liberal attitudes (for example, tolerance of homosexuality or opposition to the death penalty) while older people tend to

be more illiberal. For a long while, the correlation was assumed to be simply one of age but the BSA survey shows that education is the key determinant. Older people are less likely to have liberal attitudes not because they're old, but because fewer of their generation went to university.

With the growth in education, an important tipping point in the advance of liberal attitudes has just been reached. A YouGov poll published recently in the *Daily Telegraph* (3 January 2006) showed that support for the restoration of the death penalty has fallen below 50% for the first time since its abolition 40 years ago.

The Telegraph's report noted, "The young are much less in favour of restoring capital punishment than their elders. Among YouGov's older respondents, 59% would like to see the death penalty brought back for those who kill police officers. The corresponding figure among the young is 31%." It added that support for restoration was lowest among Lib Dem voters, at 35%.

The correlation between liberalism and higher education should not surprise Liberals. Education, if it does its job properly, liberates the individual and helps people to think for themselves. But also, crucially, higher education takes children away from the parental home during their politically most formative years, the late teens and early twenties. Graduates are therefore less likely to inherit the prejudices and voting habits of their parents.

The correlation between higher education and voting Liberal Democrat is not just a theory. The evidence can already be seen in the party's exceptional performance in many university seats – and in most of Britain's big cities.

This urban dimension is important. Big cities are naturally more liberal places because they offer a more cosmopolitan and tolerant environment. They attract liberal people and for this reason are more successful economically.

Richard Florida (see his book *The Rise of the Creative Class* and website www.creativeclass.org) showed there is a strong correlation between having a liberal and tolerant culture and enjoying economic success. He studied 100 American cities and found that those that are welcoming places for creative and bohemian people, ethnic minorities and gays are tending to thrive, whereas cities with a conservative and intolerant culture are tending to fail. Similar research is being done elsewhere in the western world (including Europe) and the findings are the same.

Despite all this evidence, what makes some Liberal Democrats still think there is more profit to be had in the countryside? Christina Odone (*Observer*, 10 October 2004) described rural Britain in cruel but accurate terms; "... the suffocating yearning for respectability, the curtain-twitching curiosity about what the neighbour's up to, the tedium of a social life whose high point is a WI coffee morning. Worst of all, bigotry thrives in a landscape almost wholly bereft of blacks, Asians and gays."

There is one other significant piece of research that points the way forward. During last year's general election, the polling company YouGov revealed where a new fault line was opening up in public opinion. Its director Stephan Shakespeare suggested (*Observer*, 17 April 2005) 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?"

'Drawbridge down' is clearly where the Liberal Democrats belong and the party would be foolish to compete with the Conservatives and Labour for the bigoted 'drawbridge up' vote. This type of voter is the group least likely to vote Liberal Democrat – older, uneducated, and they "won't eat that foreign muck" – the demographic that in practice is torn between voting for the Tories or UKIP. Some of these people might vote Liberal Democrat but there is no logical reason for the party to target them.

What does all this add up to? The Liberal Democrats' future prospects will tend to be in constituencies that are younger, better educated and cosmopolitan. As it happens, most of these seats are Labour-held (or were until the Lib Dems captured them in 2005), but that isn't the point. It's the demographic fit that matters. After all, many of these seats were Tory-held before 1997.

It is clear what sort of people the party needs to target. Ed Vickers, in his article in this issue, suggests some specific policies to address young people's grievances with regard to generational equity. To attract its natural constituency, the party must ally these policies to the right narrative and tone. If the Liberal Democrats want to engage and energise younger voters, they must express a sense of passion and conviction. There is much about which to feel angry – the party won't impress younger voters with mealy-mouthed equivocations.

The party can also distinguish itself by avoiding addressing younger voters in homogeneous terms. We are all familiar with similar terms intended to attract older voters, such as 'hard-working families' or the 'moral majority'. Using such slogans makes politicians sound like comedian Al Murray's 'Pub Landlord' character ("decent honest hard-working normal tax-paying law-abiding ordinary people who don't want to pay their speeding fines").

Younger generations, enabled by higher education, more tolerant social values, wider consumer choice, a proliferation of media outlets and the Internet, are more diverse than ever. The party should openly celebrate that diversity instead of patronising young people as if they were one uniform group.

The Liberal Democrats must recognise and address the issue of generational equity instead of pretending they can carry on promising ever-greater public expenditure on pensions and healthcare. They must recognise the real threat to the perceived legitimacy of the political system if young people's sense of grievance is not addressed. They must recognise where their most promising territory is – younger, educated, urban and cosmopolitan.

The Liberal Democrats need to stop thinking of their future strategy in terms of steering to the left or right of Labour, or about targeting Labour or Tory voters. They need instead to think in terms of their own values and policies, and focus on the demographic groups that are most in tune with them. They need to win and consolidate these people's support – and if that means simultaneously alienating other groups, well that's tough.

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective. Weblog at http://liberaldissenter.blogspot.com

THEY KNOW BEST

With 62 MPs who have a wealth of talent, Liberal Democrat policy making should be led from Westminster, not by working groups comprising whoever feels like serving on them, says Tim Leunig

The Liberal Democrats won 62 seats in the election, the highest number since Asquith. 22 in every 100 voted for us, 20% more than did so four years ago. Since the election, a major policy review *Meeting the Challenge* has been launched.

Charles Kennedy asked immediately after the election "whether it should be possible to commit the party to specific and controversial policies on the basis of a brief, desultory debate in a largely empty hall".

It was the wrong question. During this election, our opponents made much of "Lib Dem policy" to allow 16 year olds to drink alcohol and to give all prisoners the vote – policies that did not appear in our manifesto, and on which we have never campaigned.

Policy is currently formally decided by conference. Motions are brought before conference, and voted on. Although motions are submitted by local parties and by party organisations such as LDYS, the majority come from Federal Policy Committee's policy-making process.

Working groups, set up by Federal Policy Committee (FPC), spend 18 months producing a paper from which a conference motion is drawn. These motions are, almost invariably, passed without significant amendment. I have recently served on eight working groups. The "specific and controversial policies" came out of that policy making process, not from a few random activists in an empty hall.

Jeremy Hargreaves, one of three FPC vice-chairs, has criticised the process in his pamphlet *Wasted Rainforests* (Liberator 297).

He argued that it is too slow, and produces long papers which are rarely read by delegates or those outside the party, and which have low political salience. This is generally true.

The current policy making system, based on outside volunteers, was needed when we had a small parliamentary party and little money, but we can do better now, primarily because we have real talent in parliament.

Let me show this in the case of economics, the policy area I know best. Our shadow chancellor, Vince Cable, has a PhD in economics and was chief economist at Shell. Annette Brooke used to be a teach economics at university level. Then we have four people with Oxbridge firsts in economics – Edward Davey, Chris Huhne, David Laws and Steve Webb. Davey also has a masters' degree in economics, Huhne used to be economics editor for the Independent, Laws was a city economist and Webb a professor of social policy.

Yet despite this expertise within the parliamentary party, FPC created a working group on macroeconomics a couple of years ago. Like many working groups, everyone who applied was made a member of the group. So we had the bizarre situation in which a party with six professional economists in parliament decided that anyone who wanted to set macroeconomic policy – including people with no training or experience in economics at all – should do so. That is simply daft.

In fact, the paper – under some heavy direction from me as chair, and with strong support from two economically literate parliamentarians and other sensible people on the group – was coherent, sensible, and approved by conference. But producing it was a waste of time. Any of our parliamentary economists could have written a very similar paper, and done so far more quickly than could a committee that met once a month or so. I do not believe that we gained a single vote at the recent general election as a result of our working group.

In 1945, Harold Laski, chair of the parliamentary Labour party, and like me, an LSE faculty member, asked Clement Attlee not to form a new government without input from Labour's National Executive Committee. Attlee replied that "a period of silence from you would be welcome".

Attlee knew that he and the parliamentary party had the skills and experience to make the decisions that needed making. And he knew that it was he, not Laski, who had the democratic mandate from the people of Britain. With 62 members of parliament, people of real calibre, we have reached the point in our history where our parliamentarians need to follow Attlee's example, and tell FPC, myself, and other policy wonks that it is they, not us, who have the democratic mandate, and the ability to make that mandate work.

That is not to say that parliamentarians should be left to their own devices. A second – or given the number of economists we have in parliament, a seventh – opinion is often worth having, and no-one should think that our parliamentary party has a monopoly on wisdom.

But the way forward needs to be based much more closely around them. It is our parliamentarians, not members of FPC or working parties, who have to fight elections on our policies, who have to face voters who have read Tory leaflets saying that it is official Lib Dem party policy to abolish mandatory life sentences for all murderers. They are at the sharp end, and they should be given much more control of what sort of motions reach conference.

Two recent examples show that this can be done without destroying what is good in the current system: the pre-manifesto, and the recent pensions working group. The pre-manifesto was a three-handed affair – produced by Matthew Taylor as chair of the parliamentary party, Richard Grayson as director of policy, and FPC. Like all working

party reports, it then went to conference, which had at least as good a discussion as on any other motion, and which, in fact, voted to amend it in a good and democratic manner.

The recent pensions group showed how to make more detailed policy successfully. It was well chaired by Ben Stoneham, and included Steve Webb and Matthew Oakeshott, respectively our commons and lords shadow pensions' team. The quality of people on the working group was the best of any that I have served on, and included a large number of people knowledgeable about different aspects of pensions, from actuaries to pension trustees.

It had expertise that even Steve and Matthew lack. But above all, the group worked because all members knew that a consensus that did not include Steve and Matthew was not a consensus. At the end of the day, they held a de facto, if not a de jure, veto over our deliberations.

Since they were as expert as anyone else, and since they were also much more political than anyone else on the committee, that meant that we produced a report that was effective in terms of both pensions and the politics of pensions. The principal policy prescription – £25 a week extra and no means testing for the over 75s – both played an important part in the election campaign, and would make substantial inroads into the problems of pensioner poverty were it enacted.

Neither the pre-manifesto, nor the pensions policy, bypassed conference's democratic processes, of which our party is rightly proud. But both were much stronger as a result of stronger involvement from the parliamentary party. To build on these successes, I suggest the following.

The parliamentary party needs a much bigger say in deciding what topics need to be addressed by the policy making process. Our MPs know, better than any of the rest of us, what our weak points are. They know it from constituency casework, they know it from journalists they talk to.

Second, that our Commons and Lords teams should always be included in working parties, and working group chairs should acknowledge their particular roles. We cannot go around making policy that the person who has to defend it on television does not believe is good.

Third, that our parliamentary party needs a greater say in vetting papers and motions prior to their going to conference.

This can ensure two things. First, that papers do not contradict each other. Two years ago we passed a macroeconomics paper that committed us unequivocally to an expansion of free trade. A year later we passed a trade paper that committed us to accepting an expansion of free trade under only the most onerous and unlikely set of conditions. Did conference realise that it was reversing the previous year's decision? Did FPC?

The parliamentary party is also more likely to spot the electoral hostages to fortune about which our parliamentary candidates can be held hostage. It may be that we do want to allow 16 years olds the right to take part in hard core porn films, to give prisoners the vote, and to abolish mandatory life sentences for murderers. But we need to ask what we achieve by passing policy at conference that will never make it into the manifesto, never be mentioned by any of our MPs, but that will cost us votes and seats by allowing our opponents to attack us time and time again on issues that are at best marginal to what we stand for.

The parliamentary party is now a large body, and asking a committee of 62 to read each working paper will never work. I suggest therefore that these additional responsibilities should be given to the chair of the parliamentary party, perhaps assisted by a small committee of MPs. The chair of the parliamentary party is an elected post, reinforcing the democratic basis of our party. The policy unit would report both to FPC and to the chair of the parliamentary party, who would be obliged to work closely together.

Tim Leunig is a lecturer in economic history at the London School of Economics and has served on eight Liberal Democrat policy working groups.

KEEP FAITH WHERE IT CAN BE SEEN

Ending state support for faith schools would lead to religion being taught where it cannot be seen by outsiders and cause more community division, says Matthew Huntbach

Commentary in Liberator 307 noted there were rights most people take for granted until they need them. Sometimes it requires a sharp feeling for these rights to see where they are being eroded, sometimes the erosion is so subtle that to point it out leads to accusations of being ridiculously far-fetched.

Those of us who have defended the traditional paper-based polling station election on the grounds of the safeguards to liberty that it provides have had to stand firm against charges that we are simply old-fashioned, or are suggesting possibilities inconceivable in modern Britain.

The right not to have your children taken by the state and force-fed an official state doctrine is fundamental liberalism.

It may seem absurd to suggest that the abolition of state faith schools, as proposed by Simon Titley (Liberator 307), is a step in this direction, but Simon's suggestion that such abolition is fundamentally liberal deserves a liberal response that it is not, and I shall attempt one.

The Catholic school system in England was founded at a time when what the state regarded as a 'neutral' was actually Protestantism. Teaching of religion mainly as scripture may have seemed neutral to those denominations whose basis was that religion must derive from scripture alone, but that is where Protestantism differs from Catholicism.

Catholicism insists on the central role of ceremony and tradition, which may not have a direct scriptural basis. Far from 'establishing' religion, as Simon claims, the acceptance into the state system of schools that dissented from the state's official line in religion was a step away from the state exclusively supporting one religion.

The point of the above is not to give a theology lesson, but to question whether any of us can be truly neutral. What we may believe to be entirely unbiased teaching which shows no favour to any belief may by others be regarded as biased. We may feel we now live in a more liberal age in which it is possible for experts to produce school curricula that fairly present all religions, the case for and the case against.

I would permit the right to dissent from that, and if there is sufficient support, the right of dissenters to set up their own schools. It is not sufficient to say that dissenters may set up their own private schools: the right to dissent must be open to all, not just the wealthy.

Having said this, there is a clear distinction between a school set up on the basis of certain beliefs and practices because there are sufficient parents in the area who want to send their children to that sort of school, and a school set up by a wealthy individual to promote certain beliefs and practices to children who attend that school for other reasons.

I therefore support the existence of the traditional faith school where there is a true faith community which wants it, while opposing the idea of an 'academy' which promotes evangelical Christianity (or any other religion) while primarily catering for pupils whose parents have no particular religious beliefs but are tempted by the extra money the millionaire backer of the academy can provide.

The new city academies have been much used by opponents of faith schools, the subtle sliding of one into the other in Simon's article being a typical example. The vast majority of faith schools in England do not teach creationism, a point of view that is outside mainstream Christianity in England, and are not city academies independent of local authorities.

To attack, and wish to close down, the standard Catholic or Church of England school, which generally promotes a liberal version of Christianity, by citing an entirely atypical school, which promotes a more extreme version, is disingenuous.

In practical terms, faith schools in England (I am deliberately excluding other parts of the UK from the argument) have promoted neither extremism nor division, and the readiness with which their opponents view and portray religion in its more extreme form serves only to betray those opponents' own dogmatic bias.

How can those same people be trusted when they claim to be able to determine what is a neutral teaching of religion? If Catholic schools teach a 'one true way' approach to faith which encourages hatred of those of other faiths, why is it that there is often a demand for places for their children in them from parents of Muslim and other backgrounds, who feel that a school which has such a faith background is more in accord with their own beliefs and practices than a school with no faith background?

Why is it that opponents of faith schools always raise Northern Ireland in objection, but never the Netherlands where the faith basis not only of schools but of many other organisations has not stopped, indeed may have been a part in helping, the development of a liberal pluralistic society?

I do not mean by this that we should entirely disregard the arguments against faith schools which Simon and others put, but I do put in a plea for a more balanced argument which is based on informed knowledge of what actually goes on in mainstream faith school, rather than supposition and prejudice. It does seem to be the case that as fewer people in

this country have even a folk memory of Christian practice, there is a growing tendency for the vocal extremist fringe of the religion to be viewed and perhaps believed to be the mainstream.

There is sometimes a hypocrisy in which the same liberals who warn against judging Islam by loud voiced but unrepresentative extreme elements do precisely that with regards to Christianity.

That Catholicism has a chequered past and the potential to be a fearsome authoritarian movement is undoubtedly true. Tribute needs to be paid to liberal critics both within and outside the church who have pulled it away from this. My own feeling is that Catholic schools in England have been part of this liberalisation. The religion is taught in schools which come under the supervision of local education authorities by qualified teachers doing it as just part of a general teaching job and put in the context as part of a wider liberal education.

Is it an accident that illiberal religious extremism is found more among evangelical Christians in the USA where state religious teaching is banned? Does the atmosphere in which Islam is passed on in England, in private by religious teachers often imported from abroad and outside the context of general life and education make it more or less likely to encourage the sort of extreme attitudes which led to the July 7 bombings?

There is a difficult area here which liberals need to examine. I have put the issue in terms of parents choosing how they wish their children to be brought up. Is it right to "pin religious labels on children" as Simon puts it?

I think it is a central part of human nature that one does try to bring one's own children up with one's own values and culture. Which of us would not try to bring our children up to share our own liberal values? While we would mostly respect our children's rights to differ from us, I suspect few of us would sit back and regard it as entirely our children's decision whether to be racists or fascists or not.

Most of us who have some sort of minority culture would make some attempt to encourage our children to respect that culture, even if we accept they may ultimately reject it.

Would a Welsh-speaker regard it as a completely unfair imposition to encourage his children to speak Welsh? Or a musician not make some effort to get her children to make music?

Should Jewish parents be banned from encouraging their children to observe Jewish family rituals? The extreme end of Simon's argument is that we should all have our children snatched away from us at birth for fear that we may bring them up with some sort of bias. I would hope that religion is taught in a way which enables children to see the depths of their parents' culture, perhaps appreciated only by practice of its rituals and customs, while avoiding unfair pressure to continue with these into adulthood.

If this teaching and practice is done in schools which are open and part of the state system, it seems to me we can have far more guarantee that it is done appropriately than if it is done in private.

Just as opponents of faith schools have convinced us that they are dreadful authoritarian institutions whose task is to brainwash children into unthinking acceptance of some hate-filled dogma, they switch tack and tell us a completely different story. Now the faith is just a ruse to hide the real story: class-based selection. The mark of debaters whose real motivation is prejudice is the readiness to use diametrically opposed arguments for their case. Think of those racists who simultaneously argue that immigrants are coming here to sponge off our welfare system and to take our jobs.

My own experience of faith schools (declaring an interest, I have had friends and family who have been involved with them as governors and as clergy providing the statement on religious practice used for admission) is that most see their prime purpose as serving their religious community, and that this factor dominates admissions decisions.

The Civitas report Simon references can be found on the web (www.civitas.org.uk/pdf/cs14.pdf) and I could find nothing in it which supported Simon's suggestion (followed up by snide comments) that church schools habitually select on class and academic grounds rather than faith practice. I'm not saying it never happens, but I am suggesting the allegations that it is standard throughout the sector are another example of people seeing what their prejudice wants them to see.

I have focused here on Catholic schools because they tend to have a more overt faith practice than Church of England schools (as the Civitas report notes) and because that is where my personal knowledge and experience lies. The era of Catholic expansion involving church and school building is over; it reflected a church largely based on Irish immigrants in the big cities following their children as they moved to the suburbs.

Inner city Catholicism is increasingly becoming the domain of more recent immigrant groups; to suggest that Catholic schools must necessarily be white enclaves is again to argue based on outdated stereotypes.

On the liberal argument I have used, I could not oppose state Muslim schools if there were a demand for them. As I have noted, the teaching and practice of Islam in such schools may encourage a more rounded appreciation of that religion than the current situation where young adherents are too likely to get their information on it from unrepresentative and extreme sources.

There are strong arguments against, of course, but I suggest if these arguments were made in a way that rehearsed routine prejudices and stereotypes of the sort party members feel free to use when knocking Catholic schools, there would be resounding cries of "Islamophobia".

Matthew Huntbach is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Lewisham.

REVIEWS

Super-State: The New Europe and its Challenge to America by Stephen Haseler IB Tauris 2004 £19.95

Stephen Haseler is a supreme Euro-optimist.

This book, published before the project for a EU constitution ran into trouble, puts forward a powerful narrative. Up to the fall of the Berlin Wall, European unity had been a matter of Europeans turning their backs on warring amongst themselves plus achieving unprecedented prosperity through integration – but always within the cosy security umbrella of American ascendancy. That context changed dramatically during the final decade of the last century.

Europe continued to unite, enlarging en route, with a remarkable stride forward in the creation of a common currency. Across the Atlantic, a group of triumphalist right-wing ideologues (one of the best parts of the book is where Haseler delves into the origins of the neo-conservatives) came to power as a by-product of the Supreme Court's interference in the Florida recount. Europe found itself on a collision course with Washington. Disagreement over the unprovoked American attack on Iraq was the natural consequence.

His argument is bold, far reaching and simplified. He brushes aside problems, such as Europe's media (which he sees its Achilles heel), lack of a common language (he suggests that English is taking over this role) or sufficient common identity. Haseler sees Europe as having important common values, secular and social, which set it apart from the USA. His case is that the logic of integration, plus rivalry with the American superpower, will make Europeans more and more aware of their own collective superpower potential.

A superpower requires a superstate, with the defining characteristic of a common defence system. Haseler argues that such common defence, with the necessary post-NATO thinking, is already beginning to emerge. He sees the popular trans-national European opposition to Bush's war on Iraq as a step in that direction. Writing in 2004, he suggests the European superpower is on course to become such a superstate by 2020.

You may agree with Haseler, disagree with him or just think the world (and Europe in particular) is more complicated and confused than he allows. Whichever, his thesis is a timely challenge to the present limited and introverted British political debate about Europe's future.

Liberal Democrats in particular need to rethink whether the reasons why Liberals were easily Britain's most pro-European party in the second half the 20th century still hold good. Recalling them (as did many of the best, most passionate speeches in the debate on the EU budget at Blackpool last September) can sound defensive and backward-looking.

Is it time now for the party to adopt a newer, bolder argument for integrating Europe more effectively so that it can become politically and militarily capable of standing up to the American superpower? Haseler provides the case for such a radical shift of argument.

Michael Steed

Ukraine's Orange Revolution by Andrew Wilson Yale UP 2005 £18.95

This book is the sequel to the five year-old *The Ukrainians – a Surprising Nation.*

Wilson, who lectures at the School of Oriental and African Studies, takes the lid off the kleptocracy of the Kuchma and earlier years, where oligarchs and simple hoods made vast profits from skewed privatisations and monopoly concessions. Many personal scores were settled by the gun.

Viktor Yushchenko, the not totally perfect former head of the National Bank who, as prime minister, straightened out the economy despite his president's worst efforts, is one of the few heroes, although the Pora Youth Movement was a major player in the Maidan, the demonstrations in the main square of Kiyiv.

Also, of course, the glamorous former oligarch Yulia Timoshenko, more extreme than Yushchenko, who was, for a time, prime minister in the post-revolution government.

Wilson charts the rise of prime minister and presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovich, a former Donetsk thug who was known in jail as 'kham' – which means a boorish villain! He was backed by the local elite who even founded a political party for him.

Wilson is particularly interesting in his description of the Russian-advised technical political strategies. These ranged from hacking into the computers of the Electoral Commission in such a way that results could be doctored on their way in; stuffing of ballot papers – some of which were easily recognisable by the poor Russian quality of the paper on which they were printed; multiple voting; bus and train-loads of 'voting tourists'; and the setting up of 'fake' parties, with non-serious candidates who would get disproportionate air-time and cream off votes from the real opposition.

Wilson cannot predict the long-term outcome. But this was a genuine movement, mainly in the west and central parts of the country, rejecting the 'controlled democracies' run by apparatchiks, promoted by President Putin and his men. Maybe it will be impossible to translate into democracy in the Central Asian republics, but the effects are already felt in other totalitarian nations, but sadly not in Belarus where the opposition lacks cohesion.

I recognised many of the names of companies and individuals in the book

– many of these have sought to translate themselves into respectable businessmen. Their pedigrees are, in many cases, quite shocking.

I recommend this book to anyone interested in Central and Eastern European politics. Ukraine is a great country, and has an educated populations and terrific prospects. They need to be promised entry into the European Union and NATO in the medium term to cement the work of this Revolution, which is just the start of Ukraine's democratic development.

Robert Woodthorpe Browne

The Bus We Loved: London's Affair with the Routemaster by Travis Elborough Granta 2005 £12

The Times announced on 1 February 1956 that a prototype of a new London bus called a Routemaster with a capacity for 64 passengers "will go into public service next Wednesday on Route 2 between Golders Green and Crystal Palace".

London Transport in 1952 reported that it was planning a bus built in Chiswick suitable for London roads and its people.

Incorporated would be the technology developed by the aircraft industry in the Second World War. A double decker bus of integral metal construction and light alloys with aircraft type brakes, with spring suspension and rear axle power assisted steering.

Painted bright red with the driver's cab fitted with a sliding door, the inside of the bus would have a cubby hole under the stairs for the conductor, quarter drop down winding windows, dark red and yellow tartan seats, slate green window surrounds, and a yellow ceiling. The buses would need overhauling every four years and repainting every seven years.

The Routemaster became part of the London scene with nearly three thousand buses built. By the 1990s, Routemasters had dwindled to 600. The last journey of a Routemaster in London was scheduled on the 159 route from Marble Arch to Streatham on 9 December. The conductors being replaced by Oyster Cards and 'Bendy' buses, which according to the London Assembly are "fully accessible".

Tourists have bought postcards of the red Routemaster buses, little boys have collected toy buses, films and art have portrayed London with the red Routemaster as their backcloth.

No more will we hear the ding, ding of the bell or hear the conductor shouting out "move along", "only eight standing", "room on top", cracking jokes with the passengers or serenading us with the latest pop song.

The author Travis Elborough has researched this book in great detail and will appeal to the bus enthusiasts as well as like me a passenger with very happy memories.

Doreen Kendall

I am Spartapuss by Robin Price Mogzilla 2004 £6.99

Feline fiction set against a backdrop of ancient Rome, but if you expect the pearls of Catallus or Tibullus, forget it, the puns fly faster than a flea leaps. This is Robin Price's first book; *Catligula* was published in 2005 and *Die Clawdius* is promised. His Latin is the best that a Didcot comprehensive can provide, but he has trawled through the likes of Suetonius, Tacitus and Cassius Dio.

Primarily aimed at boys in their early teens (Robin also works through schools), the diary form is suited to their attention span. As with so many books of this kind, one would like to see the plot develop further; the potential is clearly there. I think Ian McEwan has produced both adult and children's versions of one of his cat tales (*The Daydreamer* - reviewed yonks ago).

Stewart Rayment

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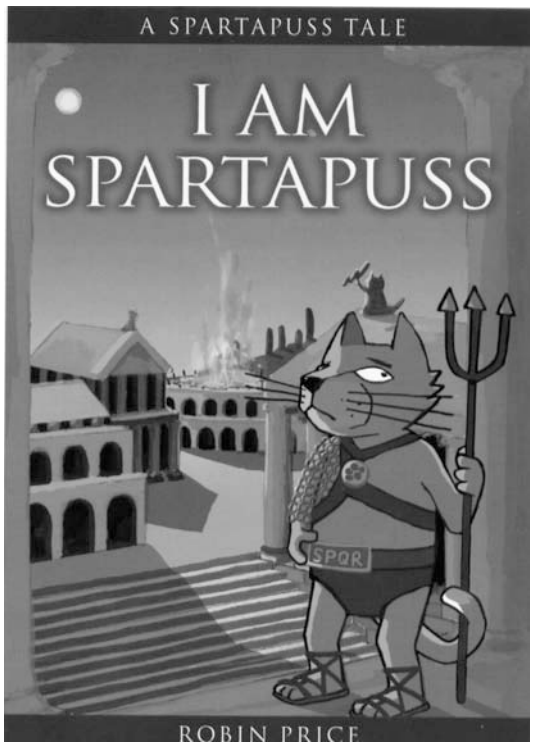

Lord Bonkers' Diary

Wednesday

Rutland in winter. Earth stands hard as iron and water like a stone; this morning I distinctly heard frosty wind make moan. Snow has fallen, snow on snow – and I shouldn't be surprised if it =fell snow on snow too. All in all, the fields are white as a newly scrubbed orphan. In my experience one can be certain of two things at this time of year: it will snow in Rutland and little will happen in the political world. Consequently, I have devoted myself to the affairs of my estate and the village. I have superintended the clearing of drainage ditches, overseen repairs to the fabric of St Asquith's and achieved much else besides. Tomorrow I shall take the train to St Pancras and return to the hurly, and indeed burly, of Westminster life.

Thursday

Good God! Merciful Heavens! I count myself a pretty broad-minded fellow – I went to Uppingham – but really! What has been going on? Kennedy! Rising Star!! The Reverend Hughes??? I shall not pretend I did not notice a certain froideur when I invited the larger part of the parliamentary party to Christmas luncheon at the Hall, but I never dreamed it would come to this. As I leaf through the cuttings in the press office at Cowley Street, a host of images swim before me: Kennedy sprawled on the pavement beneath his office window; Oaten announcing his candidature with Lembit Öpik at his side (Öpik, incidentally, is wearing that hat of his – the one with the radio antennae which link him to a number of satellites so that he can be made aware at once of approaching asteroids); the Reverend Hughes declaiming "My name is Simon Hughes and I am running for Bishop" from the pulpit of St Tatchell's, Bermondsey. Thank goodness I was in Rutland for all of it!

Friday

"Big chief drink heap firewater. Rising Star become um new chief," as Mark Oaten once remarked to me as we were stalking buffalo in Hampshire. From what I have been told this morning, he has little chance of becoming um leader now, but he did have a point. This afternoon I steal a few moments with my old friend Vince Cable and ask him exactly what went on with Kennedy. It transpires that his senior officers left him alone in the leader's office with a bottle of Auld Johnston and an old service revolver of Paddy Ashplant's that someone found at the back of a cupboard in Cowley Street. "What happened next?" I ask. "In essence," replies Low Voltage, "he drank the whisky and came out shooting." I place a consoling hand upon his arm and say that I quite understand why Kennedy had to be defenestrated with all due despatch.

Saturday

I must confess that I am sorely confused. For the past year or more everyone has been praising a fellow called Clegg to me. "You must meet Clegg," they say. "Clegg is terribly good;" "It's time Clegg was promoted." Now I am constantly being told: "You must meet Huhne," "Huhne is terribly good" and "It's time Huhne was leader." Indeed, for all I know, they may be one and the same person: as far as one can ascertain, for instance, both are Belgians. Be that as it may, Clegg was last seen bearing off poor Ming Campbell with the support of a posse of the younger Liberal Democrat MPs, including Danny Alexander, Sarah Teather, Jeremy Browne, Julia Goldsworthy and the lovely Jo Swinson (or it may have been Jo Swinson and the equally lovely Julia Goldsworthy).

Sunday

A hastily scribbled note is brought to me at Bonkers House in Belgrave Square, where I am staying for the week, by a friendly pigeon. It reads: "Help! Clegg and Teather are holding me prisoner. I am being pumped full of monkey glands and they have made me sell the Jag. Ming." Poor Campbell. As I once observed to him, "the thenzies, Menzies, you are easily led". You will recall that he fell in readily with Ashcan's absurd plan to merge us with Blair's New Party, and for years his beloved Elspeth has worn the trews in their household. She tells him "Menzies, we are not leaving Morningside" or "Menzies, you are to be leader," as the mood takes her. Guided by the pigeon, and accompanied by a few stout retainers armed with orchard doughties, I locate the garret where Campbell is being held and batter down the door to free him.

Monday

As we drive back to Rutland, Menzies Campbell, hidden under a travelling rug, describes the Meeting the Challenge hustings to me. When he reaches Mark Oaten's speech – with its talk of being a "twentieth-first century Liberal" – a mystery is solved. For a few weeks before Christmas, Oaten came to the Hall and asked if he could work in my Library; after he had left I found that a page had been torn from my Collected Speeches 1904-7. It contained my address to the hustings that was held here in Rutland South-West in '06. How well I remember that speech! After a few jocular remarks about how I owned the homes of so many of the audience (and a reminder that their rents fell due on Lady Day), I gave it both barrels: "I believe I am a 20th century Liberal and I am determined to lead a 20th century Liberal party." Perhaps I was overegging it a bit by mentioning the leadership before I had quite reached the Commons, but I was tolerably proud of it nonetheless. Talking to Campbell, I discover that Oaten had cribbed it word for word – but for the ingenious device of substituting "21st century" for my "20th century". A chap who has the immortal rind to do that deserves all that befalls him, a fair-mined judge will conclude.

Tuesday

Rutland in winter. In my absence, snow has indeed fallen snow on snow, snow on snow, and I cannot pretend that the water is any the softer, but we have roaring fires here at the Hall and Campbell and I are soon installed in front of one with a bottle of Auld Johnston between us. Will my old friend become our next leader? Or will it be Huhne, now that he appears not to be Clegg after all? Or will the Reverend Hughes prove that, despite what one's housemaster said, people are no longer bothered about That Sort Of Thing? I think I shall stay here in Rutland, putting up with the less than cheerful noise of frosty winds, until the contest is safely over.

Lord Bonkers, who was Liberal MP for Rutland South-West 1906-10, disclosed his leadership ambitions to Jonathan Calder.
