liberator

In this issue

- ***Do we know how to campaign? – Tony Greaves***
- ***Mother knew best – Vincent Cable***
- ***The US from Rwanda – Becky Tinsley and John Bosco Gasangwa***
- ***Palestine up against the wall – Josephine Siedlecka***

Issue 309 April 2006 **£ 2.50**

Issue 309 April 2006

SUBSCRIBE!
Only £20 per year
Send a cheque payable to
Liberator Publications
Flat 1
24 Alexandra Grove
London N4 2LF

INTERNATIONAL SUBSCRIPTIONS
Overseas readers may subscribe by international bank transfer (but you must pay any bank charges). Please give the following information to your bank:

* Amount: GB pounds sterling 25
* Destination account name: Liberator Publications
* Destination bank: National Westminster Bank (Chorlton-cum-Hardy branch) Manchester M21 0BR UK
* BIC (SWIFT code): NWBKGB2L
* IBAN (account number): GB15NWBK01019704631935
* Communication: "Annual subscription from [your name and postal address]"

Please also notify us by email with your full name and postal address to *collective@liberator.org.uk*.

Liberator is printed by
Lithosphere 90 Queensland Road N7 7AS

LIBERATOR
* was founded in 1970 and is produced by a voluntary editorial collective
* acts as a forum for debate among radical liberals in all parties and none
* welcomes written contributions on relevant topics, up to 1800 words.

We reserve the right to shorten, alter or omit any material.

DATA PROTECTION
Liberator is registered under the Data Protection Act and subscribes to the data protection principles therein.

YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS BY EMAIL
We accept your Liberator contributions by email to *collective@liberator.org.uk*

Please read our copy deadlines and style guidelines on the liberator website. Photos and adverts as JPG only.

INTERNET
Email: *collective@liberator.org.uk*
Website: http://www.liberator.org.uk

CONTENTS

Cover photograph by David Radcliffe

COMMENTARY

A MANDATE FOR WHAT?

Few would have believed it possible in January, but it looks as if the Liberal Democrats have survived the past few months' multiple scandals relatively unscathed.

The by-election gain in Dunfermline West took most people (at least outside Scotland) by surprise and must have prompted some to wonder what the party could achieve were it to be leaderless more often.

Opinion polls and local by-elections have shown a steady return to the support levels of last autumn. Count no chickens, but it could all still be OK for May's local elections.

One reason is that the various scandals that affected Charles Kennedy, Mark Oaten and, to a lesser extent, Simon Hughes obviously arose from personal conduct and not from something endemic to the party.

They did not signal that Liberal Democrats in general could be found amid male prostitutes and empty whisky bottles in the way that, for example, bribes and bungs appeared part and parcel of being a Tory a decade ago.

But the main reason for the party's rapid recovery is that the support it secured at last year's general election is still there.

This was won for a combination of more progressive taxation, defence of civil liberty, opposition to illegal wars, ending tuition fees, and better environmental protection, which the party has since tried to gather under the banner of 'fairness'. Only the first of these is internally contentious, because it is tied up with economic policy, where fault lines have emerged.

Menzies Campbell's speech at Harrogate included a plain attempt to lay the ground for scrapping the policy of a 50p tax rate for those who earn more than £100,000 a year.

It will be hard for the party to promote 'fairness' as a mantra if it were at the same time to surrender to ludicrous arguments that expecting the rich to pay more tax constitutes 'stifling aspiration'.

Ditching this policy would make the party sound as though it were more concerned about the very rich than about those on average incomes, never mind the poor.

Was this a sign of that the Orange Book crowd have been offered some recompense for having supported Campbell's leadership campaign?

His campaign, like those of his rivals, failed to address questions about the party's ideology, direction or strategy.

The contest degenerated into one wholly focussed on personalities, a situation exemplified by the presence of people from every corner of the party in all three campaigns and by the bland uniformity of what each contender offered.

The result is that, while Campbell won, he did not seek, never mind secure, any mandate for dramatic departures. If he wants to carry any through, he will need to win arguments at conference.

He will be better placed if support at conference is genuinely won, and does not result from his spin doctors declaring motions to be issues of confidence in the leader, as happened with the Post Office motion at Harrogate.

To be fair, Campbell's shadow cabinet appointments have reflected the breadth of views in the parliamentary party and show no discernable favouritism to any wing. But things may be out of Campbell's hands, even with the authority of a new leader.

Anonymous briefings of newspapers by those with personal agendas have plagued the party for at least two years. The culprits have largely been extreme economic liberals who, rather than seek common ground, sought to paint the entire mainstream of party opinion as comprising backward-looking 'traditionalists'.

As Vincent Cable argues in this issue, the differences may not be that great, but the 'modernisers' did great damage by fanning speculation about splits when in fact they comprised only a small and loudmouthed clique. Campbell must get a grip on them.

LABOUR HEADS FOR THE INEVITABLE

A Labour prime minister having to rely on Conservative votes to drive through his ill-conceived education bill, and the unearthing of the 'cash for ermine' affair, were clear signs that the game is up for 'new' Labour.

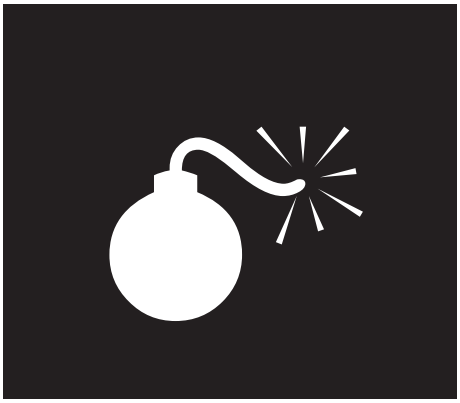
This was always going to happen sooner or later, since the entire Blair 'project' depended on persuading Labour to disown everything it had ever believed and devote itself to opportunism.

This won elections, but was never any basis for a coherent party, as its internal warfare, plummeting membership and lack of any guiding principles now show.

Before Blair, Labour, however misguided, at least had clear principles and objectives. Under Blair, Labour has lost any moral compass. It is now the party that supports an illegal war and an assault on civil liberty – in particular through ID cards – on a scale undreamed of by any previous government, Thatcher not excepted.

Something new began this decade and gained momentum in the general election – firm Lib Dem inroads into Labour areas.

At least as long as Blair remains, this will continue. Has the party planned for how to secure the long-term support of former Labour supporters, campaign effectively in places that tend to consume more resources than do suburbs, and make sure this is a permanent change and not a transitory protest vote?



RADICAL BULLETIN

WHEN THE MUSIC STOPS

The shadow cabinet reshuffle carried out by Ming Campbell immediately after the Harrogate conference was modestly encouraging, not least because there seemed to be no attempt to settle scores.

There were important jobs for his defeated rivals Chris Huhne and Simon Hughes, at environment and constitutional affairs respectively, and, significantly, Hughes's aide Tim Farron was given the key job of Campbell's parliamentary private secretary.

In a new departure, the chief of staff role went to an MP, Norman Lamb. This is, in effect, the job done by Lord Razzall under Charles Kennedy and by Alan Leaman in most of Paddy Ashdown's time.

Neither was an MP, and their power was always resented by MPs who saw them as gatekeepers who kept the leader closeted in a bunker.

It remains to be seen whether Lamb will be more acceptable to MPs as one of their own, but the idea behind his appointment is sensible in that it makes the workings of the leader's inner circle more transparent.

But can Campbell restrain himself when necessary? Perplexed Lib Dem peers were told by him that the next chief whip would be Paul Burstow – isn't that a post that the MPs elect?

THE POSTMAN ALWAYS VOTES TWICE

Ming Campbell chose as one of first acts as leader to urge the Harrogate spring conference to support the motion to partly sell-off the Royal Mail.

In his main speech to the conference, he rather startlingly urged party members to "sell this policy on the doorsteps".

The obsession of the shadow cabinet with this motion is baffling on two counts.

First, Campbell's intervention sounded like a reversion to the bad old days of David Steel, when policy making consisted of the leader spinning heavily prior to conference that some particular motion would be an issue of confidence and a test of the party's discipline.

The inevitable result was either that delegates rebelled and Steel looked silly, or he got his way amid arm-twisting and resentments that cumulatively damaged his standing.

Second, why the fuss anyway? The postal service is important, but is it really of such totemic significance that it could make or break a party leader?

This motion was presented to the autumn conference in Blackpool by the then trade and industry spokesman Norman Lamb and referred back on the intervention of Birmingham Yardley MP John Hemming, who successfully argued that it proposed something both unpopular and unworkable.

The motion that came back, again proposed by Lamb, was little changed. Yet the entire might of the party establishment lined up behind it, with media spinning to the effect that its passage would be a test of the party's faith in its new leader and a sign of it 'modernising'.

Since the mechanism proposed for ownership of the Royal Mail (to be spread among the government, staff and private investors) is too complex to explain on any doorstep, the party is almost certain to gain nothing from this motion while having accusations of 'privatising' the Post Office hung round its neck by opponents.

Just try explaining the distinctions between the Post Office and Royal Mail, and between a staff trust and staff shareholders, while canvassing on a cold night.

Such was the obsession with getting it passed that Cowley Street's policy department officer Jonathan Wallace was detached from his normal work, it is unclear by whom, to lobby for the motion.

Wallace wrote to members of the devolution and local government working group, which he services, on 16 February to say: "In preparation for the election of the new leader I have temporarily been moved off all existing duties and onto one single task which the party regards as being an urgent priority until conference. As a result, I have had to cancel the working group meeting due for Wednesday 22 February."

He then argued at Federal Conference Committee that the only amendment on the substantive issue should not be taken.

When the matter of a staff member acting in such a political way was raised at the Federal Policy Committee, party president Simon Hughes said complaints had already been taken up.

Campbell has been at pains to banish the words 'hung parliament' from use. He might usefully also banish 'modernise'.

It means nothing and, insofar as any meaning is implied, it is that the party intends to be more like both Labour and the Tories.

Still, with the motion having been passed, we should hear less from the party's spinners about the conference being a nest of irresponsible activists. Some hope.

THREE'S A CROWD

Chris Huhne's surprise bid for the leadership drew a good deal on people whose answer to a potential Campbell v Hughes v Oaten contest was "none of the above".

But how was Huhne to carve out a platform distinct from his rivals? Those present at the leadership hustings in East Grinstead found out when Lord Oakeshott, appearing on Huhne's behalf, for some reason chose to announce his campaign secrets from the platform.

He said a group of backers had looked for "wedge issues" that would get the relatively unknown Huhne noticed.

They lighted on withdrawal of troops from Iraq, not renewing Trident and a greater environmental emphasis as areas on which they could challenge Campbell and, presumably, win some supporters over from Hughes.

Oakeshott did not say that these issues were particularly dear to Huhne, merely that they were chosen for their ability to attract attention.

The Huhne campaign's other innovation was to try to make a media story out of the bookies' odds.

Both Huhne and Campbell supporters exchanged accusations on the Political Betting website that the other side was indulging in 'ramping' and trying to rig the odds to cast their candidate in a better light.

Such accusations are difficult to prove and, in a relatively small betting market, quite small and innocently-placed bets can anyway affect the prices. However, there were clear signs that someone with deep pockets intervened heavily in the spread betting market to prevent the prices moving against Huhne on 17 February, when *Newsnight* journalist Michael Crick did a rather damp squib exposé about an ALDE-funded article in one of Huhne's Focus newspapers.

UP THE POLLS

It was almost impossible for normal opinion pollsters to test the water during the leadership race as the party refused to release its membership lists to them.

This meant they could not reach any reliable sample. It was thus left to the internet polling operation YouGov, which relies on participants merely declaring themselves to be Lib Dems, to fill the gap.

There were two privately-commissioned polls, in both cases of about 400 party members. YouGov charges some £5,000 for such exercises.

The first, conducted over the weekend of 4/5 February (just before ballot papers were mailed out), was commissioned by a wealthy Campbell supporter, a big donor to the party. The name (or possibly names) is being kept a closely-guarded secret.

Whoever it was refused to publish the results because, although these showed Campbell in the lead, they also showed a clear momentum behind Huhne, a perception the Campbell campaign did not wish to encourage.

The second was conducted on 7-9 February and was commissioned by Huhne backer John Stevens. It was published but was wildly wrong. It showed Huhne 38%, Campbell 34%, and Hughes 27%, against an eventual result of 32%, 45% and 23% respectively.

THE 64th MP

Ming Campbell has felt the need to bring to his flock's attention the fact that Times political correspondent Greg Hurst is "not a member of the parliamentary party".

The misapprehension that he was perhaps arose from his ability to write such in-depth reports on the ousting of Charles Kennedy (Liberator 308).

Since Neil Sherlock is merely a confidante of Campbell's, and not an MP, it was presumably quite alright for him to be seen talking to Hurst for about an hour in the bar of the Harrogate conference hotel.

BLAST FROM THE PAST

Speculation that Ming Campbell intends to pull the party to the right is wrong, according to former Liberal leader David Steel, who has known him for decades.

Steel told Radio 4's *Today* programme (4 March): "I heard on your news bulletin the proposition that he [Ming] was going to pull the party to the right. Anyone who's known Ming Campbell for as long as I have knows that that is complete hogwash. He is a root and branch radical liberal of the social liberal school and there's no question at all that he's going to pull it to the right."

Eyebrows might rise at Steel's implicit praise for radical liberalism, but why should anyone think Campbell is a closet right-winger? Was this because of the presence of prominent Orange Book contributors in his campaign team, who will no doubt be seeking their quid pro quo?

If Steel is right, Campbell will have to get a firm grip before their spinning does him real damage.

NO FUTURE

The abrupt hara-kiri by Thatcherite pressure group Liberal Future last September (Liberator 306) seemed puzzling.

It had appeared to be the vehicle by which Mark Oaten intended to project himself for the leadership before his indiscretions and lack of support rendered that impossible.

So why fold up just before that bid was launched? It turns out that LF executive members had become fed up with Oaten using the organisation, and wound it up rather than have this continue.

Strangely enough, despite Oaten's strongest support being on the party's right-wing fringe, his campaign team scattered all over the place when he withdrew. For example, Ben Rich and Jon Sacker turned up as supporters of left-wing favourite Simon Hughes, while Gavin Grant, a key player in the campaign, transferred his support to Campbell.

At least those who supported Oaten, unlike their candidate, merely have egg on their faces.

For the benefit of newer readers, Grant was prominent on the Liberal Party's right-wing in the 1980s, and invariably aroused strong feelings, especially given his aggressive support for the party leadership during the Alliance and the merger. Grant now resides in Wiltshire, perennially an area of Lib Dem hopes. Does he harbour any there?

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

Conference will never return to Blackpool short of the nuclear obliteration of every other conference centre in the country.

That, we paraphrase a little, was the conclusion of Federal Conference Committee, after receiving "a much worse rating… than is normal for a venue" in feedback.

There was also a serious loss of income, with conference £93,000 short of its budgeted £295,668 income, partly because many party members and outside organisations refused to go near such a tawdry place (Liberator 306).

WHO KNOWS HOW TO CAMPAIGN?

The Liberal Democrats have reached the limit of incremental advance through elections. To make a breakthrough, they must learn how to campaign on issues, says Tony Greaves

Ming Campbell has appointed Ed Davey to lead a review of Liberal Democrat campaigning techniques.

Ed is quoted as saying, "I'm hugely excited to take on this major task. Menzies is determined to deploy the most professional campaigning and fundraising techniques throughout the party and to ensure that we remain the most innovative campaigners in British politics."

That's okay as far as it goes, but what does it mean? Efficient, effective, best use of resources?

But as far as our campaigning goes, we need to look not just at what may work for other people and other organisations but what will work for us. What, even, fits in with our ideology.

When it comes to political change, the old Marshall McLuhan adage is often right and the medium is at least part of the message. And, since ours is not a revolutionary ideology in the sense of being apocalyptic (there is no new Liberal dawn, just a lot of little bulbs lighting up the journey), we can never say that the means justify the ends.

We can only seek to move in a Liberal direction. The means – in this context the things we do in order to achieve change, or what we call campaigning – are themselves the way we achieve incremental change. They are therefore in themselves deeply ideological.

We also have to remember that, in spite of the creation of previously unimagined numbers of jobs in and around the party in recent years, most Liberal Democrat activists will always be volunteers.

This means that our campaigning techniques must not just be 'professional', however defined. They must also be enjoyable, democratic, visionary and productive. If our legions of activists do not enjoy what they are doing, they will give up. Many of the activists (and indeed councillors and other elected representatives) will become jaded if they have no input into the process – this is not a party where top-down techniques will work for long.

Women and men join our party and get heavily involved in campaigning because they believe in things, If we do not campaign for what we stand for (but only for a very limited subset of those things, determined by focus groups and pollsters), we will alienate many of our workers.

And if we expect people to change their lifestyles and their life patterns over many years on behalf of our movement, we have to be able to offer success. Success means both winning elections and changing things (which I take to include both moving things in a more Liberal direction and fighting against illiberal change that is being forced upon us).

No-one can deny that Liberal Democrat activists do lots of campaigning. Yet I suggest that, as a party, we do not have a coherent campaign structure and we do not have much of a campaigning culture. Most of all, we do not focus on genuine campaigning objectives.

Let me be very clear what I mean by 'campaign' and 'campaigning'. I am not fundamentally writing here about fighting and winning elections. That is important, indeed it is essential to our survival and growth as a party and as a campaigning movement. I have spent a large amount of my life fighting (and sometimes winning) elections and I intend to go on doing so for a bit longer yet.

But a campaign in the sense I am using the word is something that has as its objective the achievement of some tangible goal. It is not an election campaign, though that may form part of it. Scrapping or replacing Trident, building or stopping a by-pass, clearing up the old allotments, stopping ID cards, introducing STV, building a new youth club…

So how do you do it? It is useful to go back to the old community politics concept of the dual approach to politics set out in the Liberal Party's 1970 Eastbourne resolution, working both within and outside the elected institutions. Except that nowadays it's rather more complicated than that, with New Labour's plethora of quangos and partnerships at national, regional and local level, and the co-option of many campaigning charities to the status of service-providers and New Labour 'stakeholders'.

It is still the case that, for a campaigning radical party, the purpose of getting elected is to help to achieve campaign objectives, and the job of elected representatives (and even of unelected ones whether in the Lords or on quangos) is to help in those campaigns. It is to work closely with the campaigners outside and, crucially, to maintain a campaigning approach on the inside – even if you are leader of the council with a group in control! At the very least, it is to remember why you are there and avoid being absorbed into the cosy world of administration rather than political achievements.

There's another old distinction, that between platform politics and campaigning politics. It's the difference between saying, "vote for me because these are my policies and I will deliver" and "let's win the election as just a useful part of getting these things done together".

The fascinating new Rowntree study into local governance in Burnley and Harrogate *Whose town is it anyway?* shows that the party system in the Lancashire town is kept afloat by just 100 people. Yet people flock to join both single-issue and

broader campaign groups such as Stop the Local Bypass or FoE.

If Liberal Democrats want to recruit more committed campaigners, we will have to turn ourselves into an organisation where they will feel at home. At present, the party does not have either a campaign culture or a campaigning structure.

The Cowley Street campaigns department and its branches around the country make up a (rather good) election campaign organisation, but not a campaigns department. Insofar as it promotes and supports issue-based campaigning, it's on a narrow band of issues that have been chosen because they work when it comes to the single-minded task of getting votes.

The party website is a platform not a campaign. The few campaign issues, welcome as they are, fall into the same narrow band. *Liberal Democrat News* is a house newspaper without any pretensions to be a campaigning paper, more so now than for many years. The party uses other modern techniques such as email in a very top-down way to promote messages and drum up troops for by-elections and the like.

'Integrated campaigning' used to be all the rage as, led by ALC/ALDC, we tried to integrate national issues and parliamentary initiatives with the local Focus campaign. The methods chosen were those available given the state of technology – regular mailings, artwork sheets for scissors and cow gum, campaign bulletins, training sessions at conferences.

No-one nowadays risks asphyxiation from cow gum but in truth not much has changed from the world as it was 20 years ago. Where are the open, facts-and-ideas-packed campaign websites in and around the party? Where is the use of new technology for campaigning?

For a time, the Liberal Democrat conferences on 'cix' were an answer. Open to all members, they provided easy access to information, campaign resources and ideas, discussion and feedback. Cix communication is top down, bottom up, peer-to-peer and (too often perhaps) round in circles.

Numbers subscribing to cix are in decline as technology has moved on. Its text-based interface seems dated, and most activists find free internet access elsewhere. For the moment, it survives thanks to addicts like me and its inherent usefulness.

But the principles behind it – the ones that stimulated the dramatic growth of the Association of Liberal Councillors and our local government base in the late 1970s and 1980s – must be right. There is too much control freakery in the party and it means we achieve less than we could in campaigning terms – in getting things done. And it loses us influence and support where we should be flourishing.

Just think about ID cards – within the political establishment (Westminster) we have led the way. So why have Liberal Democrats not been in the forefront of the campaign in the country? And then of course there was the campaign against the invasion of Iraq.

There is a real sense in which the Liberal Democrats are seen to cherry pick campaigns such as these, to do just enough to be seen to be involved and then to milk that involvement for purely electoral purposes. The result is that a lot of people who are natural Liberals and potential allies and activists see the party as being cynical political manipulators and keep their distance.

This brings us back to the link between our ideology and campaign methods. There was an interesting recent discussion on LD cix about the purpose of residents' surveys. Are they just a cheap and easy alternative to canvassing? Or are they a genuine attempt to find out what people think about issues, from the global to the very local?

Are they a real effort to involve people and recruit helpers, not just to the party but to the campaign issues themselves? Are they a way of involving people in the community politics vision (Eastbourne 1970 again) of "taking and using power"? Or just promoting the local Liberal Democrat as the best of a pretty crummy bunch of local fix-it politicians?

Let me be very clear. I am not arguing against fighting and winning elections. I wrote the first ever ALC booklet on the subject and, unlike many of my contemporaries in other parties, I don't seem to change my views much over the years. I am certainly not arguing against efficiency, effectiveness or even 'professionalism' though I do draw the line at 'modernity'.

I have no problems with the party setting up a shadow cabinet, or even of personally playing a minor role as an occasional spokesperson in the Lords. Making speeches on the Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies Order and the like can actually be fun.

My case here is threefold. First, that as a third party and a Liberal party, we will not make a dramatic breakthrough on the basis of incremental electoral advance by means that are tightly controlled from the centre (though incremental advance may continue). Second, that if we were to take a much more overtly campaigning approach from parliament to the back streets, villages and estates, and develop the structures to go with it, we would achieve far more in real tangible results.

And third, and possibly most important, by practising what we preach, we would bring that real electoral breakthrough into government much closer. What we would and should do if that came about is, of course, a matter for another day.

Tony Greaves is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords, a councillor in Pendle and was organising secretary of the Association of Liberal Councillors 1977/85.

MOTHER KNEW BEST

Vincent Cable argues that differences within the Liberal Democrats over economic liberalism are small, the party is a 'growth stock' and it may need to collaborate with others

What Are the Liberal Democrats Really For? This is a question I have been trying to answer for almost half a century. It has acquired added relevance with the debate over the party's leadership and direction.

The issue was first posed to me when my mother made a tearful confession to her teenage son. I thought, at first, that she had killed someone. The less dramatic truth was that she had voted Liberal in the 1959 election, defying my father's strict instructions to vote Conservative.

I promptly adopted this new cause. This earned me much ridicule among my more political associates who had learnt to parrot "wasted vote". My working class friends, whose fathers were employed in the railway carriage works in York, were Labour (or Communist); the rest were Conservative.

The next step was university. I found the Cambridge Conservatives repulsive: over confident, too well scrubbed and sycophantic towards every visiting MP, however lowly. The clever ones – Howard, Gummer, Lamont, Clarke – were already on a conveyer belt to the Cabinet.

To be accepted into the Labour Club required a plausible CV in the class struggle and a working knowledge of the works of Rosa Luxemburg, neither of which I had.

By contrast, the Liberal Club was sensible, moderate, welcoming and buoyed up by the Orpington by-election. Being small, it also elevated me quickly to the presidency, following Alan (now Lord) Watson and Chris Mason (now leader of Strathclyde Lib Dems). The post was not a sinecure since the Liberals had more factions than members.

The Liberalism of the Grimond era had clear, distinctive values that resonate today. It gave a political voice to concerns about civil liberties then being trampled on by a Neanderthal Tory home secretary called Henry Brooke. The first edition of the Liberal Club magazine, which I edited, had pieces on capital punishment, racial equality, abortion and homosexual law reform, reflecting the pioneering stance of the party.

The party was unambiguously internationalist, with Labour on decolonisation and fighting apartheid but not on Europe where we were aligned with progressive Tories against a deeply conservative Labour party nostalgic for '1,000 years of British history'.

Another strong strand was economic liberalism. Labour was the party of state ownership and control. Even the social democratic Jenkins tendency argued for nationalising steel and other 'commanding heights'. The Tories were not very liberal either and happily indulged in 'planning' or other state intervention when it helped their business supporters in industry and agriculture. The Liberals took the side of consumer against producer interests, competition rather than controls. Academic Liberals, like Professor Alan Peacock, advanced ideas, which still make the Orange Book look quite tame.

Social liberalism found expression in attempts to bridge the gap between capital and organised labour with ingenious schemes for worker ownership and participation. The world has moved on, though mutuality and shareholder democracy have antecedents here.

The Liberals, in short, had good leaders, attractive values and sensible policies in profusion. But they lacked power. With a derisory number of MPs (nine) and councillors, there was no obvious way past the two party logjam.

Endless papers advocating variants of PR filled the reality vacuum. There were visionaries, like Bernard Greaves, who advocated a long march through grass roots, community politics. But with the impatience and reckless conceit of youth, I resolved to tackle the problem single handedly. I opened negotiations to seek a merger or alliance with the student wing of the Campaign for Democratic Socialism, which was essentially a front for a new breed of young Labour MPs like Dick Taverne, Bill Rodgers and Shirley Williams. The approach was contemptuously dismissed. My fellow Liberals were outraged. No-one recalls if I was pushed or jumped.

But there was someone waiting to scoop up unloved political orphans. Harold Wilson was blazing a trail, which Blair has followed and Cameron now aspires to: the language of modernity (who is against the future?); slogans stripped of tribalism and ideological sectarianism; classlessness; homespun homilies and simple commonsense inflated to sound like a new political philosophy. In my case, this led to a 15-year detour as Labour activist, councillor and parliamentary candidate.

These were by no means politically wasted years. Representing some of Britain's poorest people in Glasgow tenements and council estates, and working alongside Clydeside machine politicians and militant unionists, opened up the world of big city government which Liberals had not – then – penetrated.

There was common ground on issues like racism with young Liberals (led by Peter Hain). Gordon Brown's book, the *Red Papers for Scotland*, to which I contributed, was one of the first airings of practical ideas about devolution on the left.

After almost 25 years back in the fold, I see a party that is now much stronger at all levels, notably parliament.

But the same fundamental questions remain. Our vote and number of seats consistently lags behind what they would be if the electorate thought we could win. We are still the third party in a system designed for two. Historians will continue to argue about whether an opportunity to break this mould was wasted in 1983 and again in 2005, though the truth, in

both cases, is that there is still an entrenched residual 'tribal' vote for Labour and the Conservatives that will not surrender easily.

We now face, as we did in the mid-1960s (and mid-1990s), a new opposition leader bidding for the 'centre ground', using the language of modernity and youth to camouflage the encrusted, old prejudices beneath the surface. We have a leadership contest of our own. What lessons can be learnt from experience?

The first is the virtue of patience and a long term view (this from someone whose impatience once proved overwhelming). The Lib Dems and the antecedent liberals have been remarkably resilient. Crises do damage, but not fatally. After the disasters and humiliations of the Thorpe leadership crisis, parliamentary representation fell from 13 to 11. Three years after the near-death experience of SDP merger and schism, the number of MPs fell from 22 to 20, though by 1997 we were up to 46. These experiences are warnings of self inflicted damage. But the voting system, which is frustrating at times of advance, is a shield in adverse circumstances for MPs (and councillors) who exploit the advantages of targeting and incumbency and develop a strong sense of local identity and community service.

Moreover, the slow but steady detribalisation of the electorate and growing identification with the values of the Lib Dems are both positive structural factors. If I were still in the business world, I would see the Lib Dems as a stock with limited downside risk and large growth potential: so, buy!

A second key lesson is the need to be both realistic and open minded about collaboration in government with other parties. Activists in local or regional government are already conscious of the opportunities and exploit them. Splendid isolation; minority rule; tacit support for minority administrations; coalition: all have their role in particular tactical situations. At Westminster, the prospect of some form of cross-party collaboration may well present itself after the next election. It would be as foolish to reject the opportunities by ruling out collaboration in principle, as to ignore the threats presented by an unseemly scramble to get into ministerial cars.

Past experience is limited but not discouraging. The Liberals' tacit support for Callaghan's deeply unpopular, minority Labour Government did not seem very bright at the time but the relationships formed contributed substantially to the subsequent split in the Labour Party. As someone who worked for a Labour cabinet minister at the time (John Smith), I was witness to the respect which the – then very small – band of Liberals commanded by virtue of their leverage over government. And while the Blair-Ashdown 'big tent' is now often decried, it is unlikely that, without it, there would have been the limited moves to PR in regional, European (and now, in Scotland, local) elections.

While it is important that our relationships with other parties are not allowed to dominate political discourse, the issue is important and will become more so. Those who are wise will keep an open mind about whether, how, when and with whom.

The third lesson relates to policy and philosophy. Although much emotional and intellectual energy is channelled into these debates, it seems to me that the basic framework set out in the Grimond era (and earlier) is well adapted to today's political world: civil liberties, internationalism, localism, and economic liberalism tempered by a concern for social justice.

The only major new intellectual breakthrough since that time has been environmentalism and that happens to dovetail excellently both with international values and with economic liberalism as evidenced by the burgeoning interest in the environmental movement in ecological taxes and traded permits.

As someone who is sometimes portrayed as the High Priest of economic liberalism in the party, I remain at a loss to understand what alternative (socialist?) mechanism of economic organisation is being proposed by critics. I suspect that we are often beating each other up over the same difference. Certainly, the gap between us is far smaller than my mother crossed almost half a century ago when she decided that it was no longer necessary to vote for one of two traditional major parties as decreed by her husband and parents.

Vincent Cable is Liberal Democrat shadow chancellor and MP for Twickenham.

PUTTING YOU IN CONTROL

Jeremy Hargreaves thinks he has solved the Liberal Democrats' search for a political narrative – it is one of putting people in control of their lives

Meeting the Challenge (the Liberal Democrats' policy review) grew out of a desire to set out a coherent and planned programme for the party's policy development over the next few years. It is not a re-examining of the philosophical underpinnings of what we believe (we did that excellently in the last parliament, with *It's About Freedom*, which remains the philosophical basis for the current exercise); it is certainly not a line-by-line review of existing policy or a comprehensive list.

It should come up with a narrative that is an attempt to draw together the things we believe in, at both a detailed and a philosophical level, into a simple statement of our overall pitch to the electorate.

Call it what you will: it should be the simple statement of what the Liberal Democrats believe, what we would do, and why people should vote for us.

We (by and large) know what we believe: we are going to remain fully committed to, for example, all of the six themes which we set out in the Meeting the Challenge consultation paper (freedom, fairness, localism, internationalism, prosperity and sustainability).

The narrative should be the "thread that joins the beads", which explains to the electorate our overall view, which would allow them to work out the approach we would be likely to take to something, even without knowing our specific policies. It should be firmly rooted in our principles, and with a clear link to our specific policies. It should help people instinctively know what the Liberal Democrats would think about something.

During the Meeting the Challenge consultations, two other examples of political parties with clear narratives have been well used: the Labour government's in 1945, and Margaret Thatcher's in 1979.

In 1945, Labour was clearly all about creating a welfare state. Even if you hadn't read the specific section of their manifesto about, say, dentistry, you could have a pretty good idea of the approach they would be likely to take.

In 1979, Thatcher was about taking on the trades unions, and giving the country an economic cold shower. Even if you hadn't read the section of her manifesto about the electricity industry, say, you could have a pretty good idea of the sort of approach she wanted to take.

Our narrative, or story, needs to tell an equally simple and clear story.

The people behind those two examples also had something else in common. They had a clear idea of the historical problem they were trying to solve – and their narrative was their answer to it. In retrospect, we can all now see why Thatcher thought that radical change to Britain's economy was needed after the 1970s. And we can all now see why Attlee and his government thought they had to do something to correct the complete lack of support which people had had from their government before the war.

What now is the historical problem to which we are trying to put forward the answer? What will people look back at in 60 years' time and be unable to believe was true about Britain in 2009, because that problem has since been solved and forgotten? Any narrative we come up with needs to answer this question too.

So our narrative should be founded on fundamental principles, be the common thread through policies – and crucially, it must be clear, simple and appealing to the electorate. That means something extremely basic, and something that resonates with the feelings that the public already has about the government.

I believe the answer arises out of our commitment to the individual; to giving freedom to individuals, to actively empowering them to have as much control over their own lives as possible, and to putting them in the driving seat, not only of their own lives, but of our shared society as a whole. And as a result, it makes other things – governmental institutions, for example, but also private organisations and other elements of society – subservient and accountable to individuals.

I believe our narrative should be: It's About You; putting you in control of your own life (and actively equipping you to be so), and making our shared institutions accountable to you.

This is because this narrative arises clearly out of our central belief. Liberalism is surely nothing if not about giving power to the individual, making them free and empowering them. We believe – as we often say but we don't always take to its conclusion – in devolving power to the lowest possible level: the individual.

And it links to many of our most important beliefs and policies about the nature of government.

Promoting and protecting the individual is clearly an important principle behind everything we are saying about the government's authoritarian attitude towards civil liberties.

We believe strongly in localism, in making those things that are run by local government (like education), as well as those that aren't (like health), more directly accountable to local people. In the terms of this narrative, we want to put individuals in control.

We believe passionately in internationalism, in making what happens on the world stage more accountable. And that doesn't just mean how we decide whether or not to invade Iraq. The thing that makes many informed people feel it's not worth getting involved is the almost complete lack of control or accountability of the process of globalisation.

In the same way that we want what happens in our locality to be subject to a rule of law under a democratically-accountable government, we want the activities of global organisations subject to, firstly, any effective control at all, and then for that control to be accountable to us.

We believe passionately – though thank goodness we've stopped saying so quite so constantly – in a fair and sensible constitutional settlement for the UK, whether that's having a national parliament and government that reflects the numbers of votes actually cast, or ending the appointed second chamber.

That too can be summed up as putting you, the individual, in greater control.

That narrative links to our economic approach. We want individuals to have the greatest freedom we can engineer, to get the jobs they want. That means equipping them with the education and training they need. Our emphasis on the individual doesn't mean simply abandoning them to their own devices, it means actively supporting the individual, and as an individual, to exercise their own maximum freedom.

It means ensuring that, when they apply for a job, their chances are not limited by any prejudice.

And it means giving power to the individual to pursue the career they want, whether they want to take the decision to re-skill and get a different job, and whether they want to spend their money on, say, children or their own pension.

It links too to what we say about the big questions for public services – whether that is the more individualised approach to education for teenagers proposed by Tomlinson; or the greater control that we want patients to have over their treatment.

This narrative lies behind our approach in a whole range of other policy areas too, from international development, where we are surely about doing what works best to put citizens in developing countries in control of their own lives, to reform of agricultural policy, where we want to give individual farmers and others, in the context of diminishing public financial support, the greatest control over what they do next.

This narrative: giving power over their own lives and over our shared institutions, back to individuals, underpins our policies across the spectrum, and is founded on our fundamental liberal principles.

To which historical problem is it the answer? It's the problem of industrial-scale systems in both the private and public sectors serving us all up the same thing they want to give us, rather than what we individually want to receive.

For all that the government and globalised big business talk of having put power into the consumer's hands, the services on offer are incredibly uniform – whether at a public hospital or state school, or the films that the privately-owned cinema offers on a Saturday night. 'Choice', where it exists at all, means you can choose A or B, and if you fancy a bit of M, or wouldn't mind trying a touch of Z with a twist of Q, you can forget it.

Social democratic capitalism is too often in danger of destroying individuality. An electoral system in which most votes cast have no realistic prospect of affecting the outcome reinforces this.

Our focus on the individual counters this: with the individual properly in control, 'choice' means something more real, and promotes also greater diversity (another important liberal principle).

We should be about reclaiming all this, about allowing people to be individuals, and giving them the opportunity to challenge the power of large organisations in the private as well as public sectors: not destroying them, but putting individuals back in the driving seat.

Our narrative also needs to be the short and simple message.

Putting you, the individual, in control, performs well here too. People want to be in control of their own lives.

The appeal to put them back in their own driving seat is a powerful one: more powerful than some other, probably nobler, appeals to their nature. Whatever we might like to think, people really care, in the final analysis, about their own interest. Giving power genuinely to the individual means doing many of the things that we sometimes think of as coming under the heading of 'fairness', but in the end 'putting you in control' has a much stronger appeal.

So the party's narrative or story is: giving power to you, the individual.

What does that mean in practice?

It means this is the core of expressing what we stand for. We need, as Chris Rennard said at the Meeting the Challenge conference in January, to refine it as a message and as a story and be able to express it in three words, in 30 words, in 300 words, and 30 pages.

We then need to repeat it, so that ordinary voters instinctively associate it with the Liberal Democrats, and know what we stand for. Every press backdrop and every leaflet should carry it.

And we then need to use it as the political approach and context in which we put all our other policies, and our policy development for the rest of this Parliament.

That means expressing them in terms that flow from this story – and using it as the basic approach to the areas where we develop new policy.

'Giving you control' has the wide appeal, the simplicity of purpose, that links both to our detailed policies and our fundamental principles – and above all the resonance with the voters – to be that narrative.

It says what we think the problem is that we are trying to solve, and outlines our answer. It meets the challenge of being a powerful and attractive Liberal Democrat narrative in 2006/09 to stand alongside the Conservative narrative in 1979, and the Labour narrative in 1945.

Jeremy Hargreaves is a member of the Liberal Democrats' Meeting the Challenge policy working group, Vice Chair of Federal Policy Committee and a member of Federal Conference Committee. Website: www.jeremyhargreaves.org

More information about the Meeting the Challenge exercise can be found at: www.meetingthechallenge.net

UP AGAINST THE WALL

Josephine Siedlecka reports on the disruption to daily life for Palestinians caused by Israel's partition wall

Azar, his wife Najia and five family members, are proud of their new home. It's the first they've ever owned and they are partly building it themselves. Their airy Middle-Eastern style three bedroomed flat is in a low-lying cluster of white buildings, nestling on a hillside in Beit Sahour, near the Shepherds' Field in Bethlehem - once the most popular destination in the Palestinian Territory for Christian pilgrims.

From the windows, the family can see their small vegetable plot, children's play area and olive groves in the distant hills.

They live on the Greek Orthodox Housing project, set up in 1996 to provide homes for 160 of the poorest families from the area. The church advertised in the local paper for people to join the scheme. There were hundreds of applicants. Priority was given to the most needy. Azar's family qualified because they had been living in two small rooms in Bethlehem.

There were high hopes when the first stone was laid by Patriarch Theorodos in 1996.

Najia said: "We were so happy. It felt like a miracle. When we moved in, it was just a concrete shell. We have been building it and decorating little by little. Buying furniture bit by bit."

Life is still difficult for the family, as they have had little work since the Intifada began and the tourist trade crashed. One son earns 100 shekels (about £12) a day working as a builder. Najia makes olive wood souvenirs, although she sells few now. Most gift shops in Bethlehem have closed. The tired-looking postcards and t-shirts on sale all carry the date 2000.

But earning a living is the least of Azar and Najia's problems.

On 25 October 2002, the families woke up one morning to find Israeli solders, armed with automatic rifles, slapping posters on the doors of each building. They took a photograph of every one, and then drove away. The notices said that the houses were due for demolition, as they were in the path of a planned road.

Azar said: "They told us to contact the Israeli authorities on the other side of the border. We told them 'we already have building permits for our homes from the Palestinians. We don't know why we have to deal with you.'

"We got lawyers. They helped us. The Israeli court issued a decision to stop the demolition. We felt so relieved. But then, on 25 October 2003, again the solders came with the notices. And they came on the same date in 2004. Last year they didn't come, but night after night, convoys of soldiers cruise around here. We are afraid to go out after dark. They have come and taken our building materials several times. We are afraid to confront them. We would end up in jail if we tried."

"The problem is, nothing is clear. We have won the case but why do the solders keep coming?"

On the hillside opposite the housing project, where an ancient olive grove once stood, there is a new military post. Cranes and bulldozers have started building a large illegal settlement, and a new road is beginning to snake its way towards the housing project ahead of the Partition Wall, which, the surveyor's marks seem to indicate, will loop around the houses, leaving the 160 families totally cut off from their jobs, schools and families in the Palestinian territory. Or they could all become homeless.

Najia said: "It looks like we will be swallowed up. It is so stressful. There are many children here. All we can do is keep trying to live normally and hope for the best."

The story of Azar and Najia is being replicated everywhere along the boundary between Israel and the Palestinian territories. Ancient olive terraces are being bulldozed to make room for further illegal settlements.

Meanwhile the construction of the Partition Wall - which, at 11 metres is twice the height of the Berlin Wall and three times higher than the Warsaw Ghetto Wall - is destroying everything in its path.

Schools, a kindergarten, a nursing home, and dozens of businesses have all been demolished or rendered unusable. The Israelis say the wall is being built as a security measure to protect Israelis from terrorist attacks. The Palestinians say they understand this, but want to know why it cannot be built along the border. They ask why the Wall has eaten into more than 70 per cent of the land surrounding Bethlehem.

A short drive from Najia and Azar's home, the final section of the wall separating Bethlehem from Jerusalem is likely to be completed in a matter of days.

This wall, around Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem, will not only sever the connection between the region's most holy Christian sites, but will also herald the creation of a new 'fact on the ground' – an illegal Jewish settlement which will be home to some of Israel's most extremist religious groups.

The ultra-orthodox Kever Rahel Fund announced last year that it intended to build about 400 apartments at the site. In February their work began. Settlers will move into houses around the tomb as soon as the wall is completed.

Bethlehem's population fears that the town will become another Hebron, where Jewish extremists have expelled Palestinians from their homes and, with support from the Israeli army, intimidate and harass the local population. Hebron once had the busiest shopping centre in the West Bank. It is now a ghost town.

A former member of the Israeli parliament, Hanan Porat, was quoted recently in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz saying: "With the help of God we are progressing toward maintaining a permanent Jewish presence and a fixed yeshiva in Rachel's Tomb, as Rabbi Kook a [religious Zionist fundamentalist] urged, and bringing Israelis back to where they belong."

The mayor of Bethlehem, Dr Victor Batarseh, a Palestinian Christian, said: "The recent land confiscation and works around Rachel's Tomb are illegal and have no security basis. This is an act of land expropriation. It is a serious threat to the economic and social life of the town.

"As the mayor of Bethlehem, I share the concern of all Bethlehemites, Christians and Muslims alike, that this could be the first step towards building a new illegal Israeli settlement right in the heart of Bethlehem. That is how it all started in Hebron a few years ago."

In an appeal to the international community, he said: "We call on all religious and political leaders, to intervene and protect the lawful rights of the town of the nativity. The ghettoisation of Bethlehem is not only destroying ancient communities, but destroying the prospects of peace in the Middle East and the whole concept of international law."

Rapid construction of the final section of the wall separating Bethlehem and Jerusalem went ahead after the Israeli Supreme Court rejected the appeal of 18 Palestinian families and the Bethlehem and Beit Jala municipalities to re-route the wall at Rachel's Tomb.

As a result, the area will now be included within the borders of Jerusalem municipality, in direct violation of the Oslo agreements. The wall was declared illegal by the International Court of Justice in The Hague on 9 July 2004.

The Rachel's Tomb area, once a vibrant neighbourhood and a central artery between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, has seen 72 out of 80 businesses close in the last four years. The tomb itself, a major Bethlehem landmark and a shrine holy to three religions, is now barred to the city's inhabitants. The neighbourhood has been devastated to accommodate the expanding military base around the tomb, confiscating family homes and businesses and carving out a major landmark from the heart of Bethlehem. The wall pushes one and a half kilometres inside the city's boundaries and confiscates three sq km of land.

Mordechai Vanunu, freed in 2004 after 18 years in prison for revealing Israel's nuclear secrets, and now living under house arrest in Jerusalem, saw the Wall for the first time this Christmas when he made the 20-minute bus journey to Bethlehem in an attempt to attend a church service. (He was arrested and charged with trying to leave the country.)

Vanunu said: "When I saw it I was shocked. People should come and see for themselves how it violates the human rights of Palestinians on the West Bank. Then they should write to their MPs and ask them to intervene. It does not stop terror and does not even follow the Green Line. It is designed to grab land and make people's lives more difficult. The Israelis ignored the International Court of Justice, which has called it illegal. Perhaps if Tony Blair said something they would respect his views."

Leila Sansour, chief executive of the Open Bethlehem campaign, has appealed for disinvestment by any international companies involved in the demolitions or construction of illegal settlements.

She said: "It is very difficult for anyone to imagine the level of absurdity that governs our lives as Palestinians, both Christians and Muslims. No one in the 21st century, until they come here to see it with their own eyes, understands the struggle of a people against a military machine whose sole purpose is to eradicate them from this landscape.

"In the last five years alone Bethlehem has seen 188 homes completely demolished and 7,850 partially destroyed by the Israeli army to make way for new Jewish settlements built for people who come from various parts of the world to claim ownership of a land inhabited, cultivated and owned by another people. Our houses are demolished to build these settlements, to build new military bases, to build new roads that link these settlements and that we are barred from using.

"History is still being written by the powerful. Here in Bethlehem we feel it very acutely. Today we are racing against time to keep something of our culture that was able to celebrate diversity and openness between Moslem, Jew and Christian, for millennia.

"But we stand no chance unless the world engages with our situation. I would advise anyone in doubt about our plight to come and visit. Bethlehem is a very welcoming place and a very good doorway to understand a conflict that defines modern politics."

Josephine Siedlecka visited Israel and the Palestinian Territories in February. She is the editor of the Independent Catholic News (www.indcatholicnews.com)

THE STATE OF THE UNION

How does George W Bush's USA appear to a Rwandan genocide survivor? Becky Tinsley and John Bosco Gasangwa tried to find out

In his State of the Union address on 31 January, George W Bush assured his people that theirs is the most powerful country in the history of mankind. He painted a picture of a rugged but compassionate people, resolute in the face of war.

As he often does, he invoked the pioneer spirit that made America great. And because he is cleverer than we like to think, he told Americans exactly what they wanted to hear: that they are brave, generous, inventive, determined and hard working.

Yet their lifestyles are at odds with this admirable self-image. Ask the Mexican servants who clean up after them, or the Iranians who drive their cabs, or the Indians who write their computer programmes: they will tell you that Americans seem decadent, self-absorbed and pampered to the point of childishness.

A young Rwandan friend, John Bosco Gasangwa, asked me to describe the differences between America, where I live part of each year, and his nation, which I visit regularly. He wanted everyday examples he could relate to. After listening to Bush's speech, we exchanged emails. This is the essence of our observations:

Although Americans are deluged with information, they lack any global perspective, and still cannot begin to grasp the realities of life elsewhere. For instance, at a Human Rights Watch event in Los Angeles, in front of a well-informed and liberal audience, a researcher described the brutality of prison guards towards children incarcerated in vile conditions in sundry disagreeable developing countries. Without missing a beat a supporter asserted that California's prisons were still "the worst in the world", even though inmates have salad bars and free dental floss.

A persisting American myth is that, as a nation, they are a lean, mean, fighting machine. Hollywood's tales of homegrown heroism may entertain or exasperate the rest of us, but its films are the primary source of education and reinforcement for its own citizens.

Yet in truth, these modern warrior princes handle themselves like cut glass vases. They are terrified of risks that most Europeans, let alone Africans, cope with on a daily basis. For example, Americans let oranges rot on trees in their back yards because consuming unpasteurised juice is 'unhealthful'. They go to elaborate lengths to put safety first and to avoid exertion. At a shopping mall in California, in a state where people exercise more than anywhere else in the nation, children will stand about idly as they wait for the elevator to take them down one floor. Not surprisingly, even their pets now face a national obesity crisis.

Nowhere does myth collide with reality quite like at summer vacation time. Although Americans talk up a storm about their love of the great outdoors and extreme sports (thereby justifying buying SUVs), almost none of them camp without electricity and running water. Instead of studying the stars above them, while roasting freshly hunted meat over the fire, like their cowboy role models, now they watch their portable TVs and order pizzas delivered to their campsites.

Yet, Americans view Africans as the ones who are pathetically weak, thereby explaining why they are so poor. In Rwanda, where only 8% of rural households have access to safe running water (12% in towns), women and children walk miles a day in blistering heat with vast containers of water balanced on their heads, as elegant as supermodels on a catwalk. A farming family can work every day, all day, and expect to make $40 a year. Are they weaker than Americans who keep guns under their pillows, lock themselves in SUVs, and exit their gated communities with trepidation?

American commentators condemn the rest of the world's 'socialised' economies for lacking the USA's dynamism and creativity. They maintain that Americans are the hardest working, most stressed people on earth (not counting their Mexican servants, of course – or surgeons in Iraq).

Are the women who set up stalls on the side of the dusty road in Rwanda less entrepreneurial than the corporate executives who award themselves generous pension plans while excluding their shop floor workers from basic benefits?

Are kleptomaniac African officials and politicians worse than Wall Street's drones, or the senators who take money from every special interest group, leaving a trail of slime across the rotunda in Washington?

Perhaps one reason Americans tend to feel superior to Africans is that, thanks to their advanced technology, they can solve every problem simply by buying the correct product. Pharmaceutical companies spend $4bn a year advertising potions such as those that guarantee you can exercise your constitutional right to eat as many corn dogs as you like at midnight, and go straight to bed without suffering the 'disease' of 'acid reflux' (indigestion).

In lieu of having drug-crazed war lords arriving in their villages with machetes and stealing their children, Americans have to seek their drama in less hazardous ways. Why else would their commercials strike an oddly hysterical tone, be they for household disinfectant or medical remedies ("When I get a cold sore I just want to put my life on hold")?

The Africans are hopelessly behind in other areas too. Superior US know-how means you can spray muscle-definition on your flabby arms, thereby improving your self-esteem. Hopefully by feeling better about yourself, you are slightly less likely to take an Uzi into a post office and vent some of the anger simmering there due to the fact that your parents divorced when you were five.

Africa may have genocides aplenty, but American know-how means you can hold on to those you cherish. Millions of dollars are devoted to mastering dog-cloning, so Americans need never say goodbye to their beloved pets (see: www.SavingsandClone.com, www.perPETuate.net). And for $20,000 you can have the ashes of your favourite deceased human made into a gemstone and mounted on a ring. The good people at Life Gems (www.lifegem.com) take the carbon left after cremation and turn it into a piece of jewellery "because love lives on".

Elective surgery has also reached new frontiers. Lorraine Sheinburg of Feminist Majority in LA explains she is struggling to raise money to stop female genital mutilation in Africa and the Middle East. "While I'm trying to educate American women about the evils of this barbaric practice, they are spending $10,000 to have their vaginas surgically tightened."

How does all this strike John Bosco?

Without meaning to be rude, he says, Rwandans have different priorities. But technology is also playing its part: last year, Patricia, who lives in rural Butare province, got her first mosquito net (costing $6 and donated by a Danish manufacturer). When we met again she wept, overwhelmed because, for the first time in her life, she believes one of her babies may survive infancy – he hasn't had malaria since we gave her the net.

Another genocide widow, Gaudence, has just returned from South Africa where she had two operations to repair the brain damage she sustained in the 1994 genocide. Her four children died in the attack on her house, although she says she cannot remember it. She is slowly regaining the use of her arms, which were badly sliced by the Hutu militia.

Less successful is our friend Sandrine's surgery. Her face is scarred and mutilated like a leather chair that has been vandalised and patched. One eye bulges out and her lips are drawn back on one side to reveal her perfect, gleaming white teeth. During the genocide, the Hutu militia held her prisoner, beat her and raped her daily, and then left her for dead. She was nine at the time. And I doubt whether she puts her life on hold when she gets a cold sore.

John Bosco prefers to focus on the hopeful aspects of life in his country. In the capital, Kigali, a group of genocide survivors is building four-bedroom bungalows for $4,500. They house up to ten genocide orphans in each, thereby getting them off the street where they survive by begging and prostitution.

He and I did find one area of commonality. When the president addresses the nation, he is carried on all terrestrial television channels (six in the USA and two in Rwanda) without interruption or criticism, and with due respect.

John Bosco Gasangwa, 25, is a community worker in Rwanda. An orphan of the 1994 genocide, he runs projects offering teenage sex workers a safer way of generating an income, such as making greetings cards. He also gives genocide widows livestock and counsels street children, most of whom have been orphaned by AIDS.

Becky Tinsley is director of the charity Waging Peace (www.wagingpeace.info).

KEEP TURKEY ON ITS TOES

Progressive elements in Turkey need support from liberals abroad, as the Turkish government struggles to bring the country closer to Europe in the face of right-wing nationalist opposition, says Jonathan Fryer

Turkey has been inching towards membership of the European Union, though this could take 15 years to turn into reality. Many people both inside and outside Turkey hope it won't happen at all.

Despite being a secular state, in which, for example, women are not allowed to wear headscarves in educational establishments or at official functions, the idea that overwhelmingly Muslim Turkey should join Europe's club has been welcomed in countries such as Austria, France and Germany as enthusiastically as the threat of bird flu.

Less well-known in Europe is that within Turkey itself, there is a solid core of right-wing nationalists who are determined to scupper the government's attempts to make Turkey acceptable to the EU. Paradoxically, they trace some of their ideas back to Kemal Ataturk, who in the 1920s forced his countrymen to drop many of their Oriental ways, and to look westwards to Europe instead. But the Kemalists of today are no enthusiasts for the European ideal. As far as they are concerned, Turkey is best, Turks are the greatest, and Europe should keep its nose out of Turkey's affairs.

This situation was brought home to me forcibly when I attended a series of trials of writers and publishers in Istanbul during the second week of February. On the day of the first trial, of five journalists, it was snowing heavily, and the courthouse was surrounded by hundreds of riot police, some wearing gas masks or handling Alsatian dogs. This did not deter nationalist demonstrators who were standing outside bearing placards, and who loudly booed the small group of European trial observers, including myself, as we arrived.

Inside the court there was pandemonium. More than 100 people were crammed into the small courtroom, pressed against each other as we stood for the two-and-a-half hours of the proceedings.

The charges against the journalists – who had written articles criticising another court's decision to ban a conference on the fate of Turkey's Armenian minority at the tail-end of the Ottoman Empire – had been laid by a dozen right-wing nationalist lawyers, who screamed and shouted at the judge, demanding to know why 'colonialist Europeans' had been allowed into the court, taking places that could otherwise been occupied by healthy Turks. The fact that an Austrian diplomat (representing the EU presidency) and the Dutch MEP Joost Lagendijk (co-chair of the Turkey-EU Joint Parliamentary Committee) were in our group particularly made their blood boil.

In scenes reminiscent of Nazi Germany, these lawyers tried to intimidate the judge and court officials, not to mention us, shouting the judge down when he tried to impose order. Eventually he was forced to call in a squad of riot police to evict the most vociferous of the complainants, whose robes were torn as scuffles ensued, and kicks and punches were thrown. All five defendants, when they finally got a chance to speak, pleaded not guilty to the charge of insulting Turkey by criticising the earlier court's decision. Murat Belge, the best-known of the five, declared that, as far as he was concerned, the legal process to which they were being subjected was invalid. The judge adjourned the case until April so the prosecution could study this argument.

This was just one of dozens of freedom of expression case that are currently going on in Turkey, as writers, journalists and publishers face continued harassment, especially if they write or publish anything which questions the Kemalists' doctrine that there is just one ethnic group in Turkey: the Turks.

On the second day of my visit, choosing from the 13 cases going on, I sat in on the trial of a young Kurdish publisher, Fatih Tas, who has published 80 books so far, 27 of which have been the subject of legal proceedings. Such a situation not only puts such people under psychological pressure – and sometimes lands them in jail – but can also ruin them financially. The stocks of books in contention are often confiscated, and sometimes kept in such poor conditions that they are worthless if later returned. Another publisher, Ragip Zarakolu, told me that the police lost a stock of one of his titles that was seized; when the case against the book was dropped, the police said, 'Don't worry! We have lots of other books we can give you instead!'

When one of Turkey's most famous contemporary writers, Orhan Pamuk, was put on trial recently, the world's governments and media sat up and took notice. And the charges against him were dropped in the face of all the negative international attention. The downside of that is that there is little interest in Europe now about the fate of the dozens of far less well-known writers and publishers, who continue to be persecuted.

One great irony of all this is that for once it is not a brave judiciary that is standing up against a repressive government, as happens in places such as Zimbabwe. On the contrary, in Turkey it is the judiciary – and in particular right-wing lawyers and judges close to the military – who are repeatedly

thwarting the government's attempts to bring the country's record on freedom of expression closer to the European norm. The irony is all the greater when one realises that the government has its roots in the Islamist movement – the prime minister's wife always wears a headscarf, which means she is excluded from attending official functions – while the secularist nationalists are the forces of reaction.

The government in Ankara therefore finds itself in the bizarre position of on the one hand trying to keep latent militant Islam at bay, while also struggling to avoid any swing back to undue political influence for the far right or the army. In this they need not just encouragement from EU member states such as Britain, but also a sense of solidarity.

Despite the rumpus over the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad, we enjoy a high degree of freedom of expression in most countries of Europe. Turks categorically do not.

It is no exaggeration to say that, behind the façade of a tourist-friendly country that is enjoying a period of steady economic growth, Turkey is still a land in which there is a permanent, low-level sense of fear amongst liberal intellectuals, as well as amongst Kurds and other minorities. People don't just find themselves in court on what to outside observers often seem like trumped up charges. They sometimes literally disappear.

British Liberal Democrats should not turn a blind eye to this situation. But they must equally avoid falling into the trap that has caught some continental colleagues whose reaction is, "You see! The Turks are completely unsuitable as potential EU citizens." One doesn't need to know much about European history to realise how important Constantinople/Istanbul was in our continent's development, or how far the Ottoman influence spread. The challenge now is to work with progressive elements inside Turkey to face up to the forces of darkness.

Jonathan Fryer is a broadcaster on international affairs, a vice-president of the British Group of Liberal International, and lectures at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies.

BENIGN BENIN

The presidential election in the west African state of Benin is an encouraging sign in a continent starved of consistent electoral politics and 'alternance', reports Michael Meadowcroft

After a year in the Wild West atmosphere of Kinshasa, life in Cotonou is definitely Sleepy Hollow. It would be difficult to imagine two more different south of the Sahara countries than the Democratic Republic of Congo and Benin.

Congo is vast, Benin is tiny; Congo is lawless and volatile, Benin is peaceful and relaxed; Congo is struggling towards its first democratic election in forty years, Benin has a decade of decent elections under its belt.

Why then should this roving reporter for Liberator find himself in a former French colony, tucked into the eponymous Bight of Benin, and quietly sunning itself in between Togo and Nigeria?

It is because Benin's 2006 presidential election is genuinely a landmark moment in the country's democratic history. Mathieu Kerekou, the retiring president, had run the country for all but five of the past thirty-three years and now, under the country's constitution, is barred from standing again.

Rumours abounded that his *ancien régime* would so inhibit the electoral process that it would, by default, remain in power. Every obstacle put in the path of the electoral commission was interpreted as a presidential ploy. Once the idea of presidential manipulation was embedded in the minds of the movers and shakers, it was easy to see the unseen hand behind every development.

It was, perhaps, not surprising. After all, Kerekou had been a remarkable survivor, moving effortlessly between military coup, Marxist-Leninism (I was amused the other day to come across the 'Place Lénine', as yet unrenamed), passionate privatiser and, finally, democratically elected President. However, now in his mid 70s, he appears to have little energy for a final fling at power.

The end of the Kerekou regime threw the election wide open. Ministers, former ministers and party fixers rushed to stake their places in the lists, so much so that twenty-six candidates eventually drew lots for places on an A3 ballot paper, which contained full colour pictures of each one and of his or her logo.

The first list had been even longer, but four candidates were ruled out after the medical examination required by the constitution! The four accepted the doctors' verdict without demur. More significantly, two other candidates withdrew once they knew that a particular independent candidate had been nominated.

This candidate, Yayi Boni, is an interesting character. Born and brought up in the rural north of Benin, he shone as a student and entered the world of finance, eventually becoming the head of the Bank of African Development – a post he had to resign to stand in the presidential election.

Not a member of a political party, Boni was nominated and supported by a coalition of civil society organisations. In British terms, he's a sort of evangelical Gavin Davies, standing for the top political job as the nominee of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations. Having been talked about for months as a possible leader, his nomination was greeted with enthusiasm by a wide swathe of public opinion.

Curiously, given that expats have long been aware of Boni's electoral appeal, Benin's political class seemed blind to the dangers he posed to their hegemony. The shock to the system of Boni's first-round lead was palpable, so much so that Kerekou summoned foreign ambassadors to his palace to tell them that he would never hand over power to "that amateur Boni", thus feeding the rumour machine with a banquet.

Boni was the only candidate to top one million votes, equivalent to 35% of the votes cast. His nearest rival – a four-time presidential election failure – was over 10% behind.

From where I sat, leading UNDP's electoral assistance team on behalf of the donor community, I had three major political concerns, each of which proved to be unfounded. First, with twenty-six candidates in the field, it was quite possible for a candidate to top the first-round poll with twenty per cent of the vote or even less.

Second, given that only the first two candidates went into the second round, it would also have been possible for the second and third placed candidates to have been extremely close, thus giving rise to a series of debilitating legal challenges to the admittedly rickety electoral administration.

Third, it was also possible that neither second-round candidate would have any support in one or more regions of Benin, leaving whole areas feeling unrepresented and unenthused even to vote at all. In the event, although the four leading political candidates polled heavily in their fiefs and often nowhere else, Boni had significant first round support across most of the country.

Despite numerous logistical failings, the first round conformed to African electoral tradition – chaos in the morning and tranquillity in the afternoon, producing a turnout of around 80% of a greatly inflated electoral register. The latter contained some four million electors from a population of just over seven million, 46% of whom are under 15 years of age. One can do the basic arithmetic.

I am always impressed by the political sophistication of apparently unsophisticated voters. Despite the complexity of the ballot paper, the number of spoilt papers was remarkably low – and, if pushed, the court would have allowed many of those officiously rejected for very minor infringements. Nor did there appear to be any votes by mistake. The top five candidates secured 85% of the total vote and the remaining twenty-one managed a mere 15% between them.

The other curious thing to us electoral junkies is the relaxed attitude to the count. Even the unofficial result of the first round was not declared until a full week after polling day – and no-one seemed concerned at the delay! What is more, the 2am declaration having been carried live on only one of the three local TV channels, that and the others then reverted to their interminable music videos. No analysis, no commentary, no predictions, nothing all day, and very little all week!

In the two weeks between the first and second rounds of voting, the two second-round contenders set out their stall for securing the endorsement of the key losing candidates. Amongst them was the current Minister of Planning and Development, Bruno Amassou, who won his home area massively but did badly everywhere else. His home vote of 250,000 would, if delivered to Yayi Boni's opponent, have just about bridged the gap between him and his second round opponent.

The problem of such a closing of ranks amongst the political class to keep out the independent was that it would have flown in the face of a massive desire on the part of the Benin people to break away from 'the ancien regime'. Not surprisingly, therefore, the key power brokers have been dancing on eggshells to try and find a way of squaring the circle of political loyalty and political reality. In the end, as so often in politics, momentum is the most precious commodity going and Boni's expected electoral success will be greeted with satisfaction just about everywhere.

The obvious question not quite on everyone's lips is, "does what happens in Benin matter at all?" Curiously, it does. Benin may be a small west African francophone backwater but the continent is so starved of consistent electoral politics and of 'alternance' that this crossroads election can be added to the short list of Botswana, Senegal and South Africa, as a country that respects its constitution, has an independent electoral commission, and a countrywide electorate well able to select its preferred head of state.

The task now for those of us on the international circuit is to persuade the donor community to invest in the follow up to the election. The weeks after polling day are more important than the weeks before it, but most European countries breathe a sigh of immense relief after a 'good' polling day and abandon the field.

Elections are the result of democracy not the cause of it, and the gentle development of democratic structures is vital if the values we took for granted in pre-Thatcher and pre-Blair days are to be entrenched in a country like Benin.

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

LETTERS

DON'T BLAME US

Dear Liberator,

Your article on events in Torbay (Bay Watch, RB, Liberator 307) contained some major factual inaccuracies, and painted an unfair picture of the Liberal Democrat council group. Your article in effect rewrites history.

The article suggested that the council group did not accept an agreement brokered by Nick Harvey (and Gerald Vernon-Jackson). That is factually wrong. A deal was agreed between the council group and the local party, which resulted in the council group reducing the allowances increase.

To avoid sparking the issue off again, I will not go over events since then. All I will say is that the council group stuck to its part of the deal – anyone looking for people to blame for the ongoing situation should look elsewhere.

It would have been useful if someone from your magazine had spoken to someone on the council group before writing the article, to ensure a more balanced article.

Gordon Jennings
Liberal Democrat council group leader, Torbay

ENGAGE THE MPs

Dear Liberator,

Tim Leunig is right that it is crazy not to use the expertise of some of our MPs in making our policies (Liberator 308). But the solution is not for the party to withdraw from making policy and just leave it to the MPs to do it for us, but for the MPs to engage with us in our party's policy-making together.

He calls for the relevant spokespeople to be put on policy working groups. They invariably are, but in many cases rarely or never attend, and essentially simply do not make use of working groups. This feeds through, and means the groups are not as useful as they should be – which in turn contributes to the problems with their composition.

Members of the shadow cabinet should take advantage of having a new leader and a re-energised system to approach working groups differently. They should make use of them and encourage those whom they anyway consult outside formal structures to be part of them, and use their discussions to produce policy papers that don't just a fill a slot for debate at conference and help keep the party quiet, but are actually useful both to them in parliament and to us in the party.

As Tim rightly says, when Steve Webb as spokesman did this with the pensions group in the last parliament, the group was composed of high-calibre people and produced a paper which was both high quality and politically useful to us. If other spokespeople do the same, we will avoid wasting the time of those who sit on working groups, avoid many of the differences between parliamentary spokespeople and party groups, and produce papers which are much more use to us as a party. The solution is having one party policy-making process, not two.

Jeremy Hargreaves
Vice-chair, Federal Policy Committee

FAITH IN FAITH SCHOOLS

Dear Liberator,

In his article (Liberator 307), Simon Titley attacks both state funding of faith schools as "perverse and illiberal" and support for this by Liberal Democrats as "shabby populism".

He approves of pluralism yet condemns any role for churches in the state sector of education, accusing them of seeking "to impose by force" such involvement.

A measure of financial support towards the contribution of religious bodies in education when numbers warrant this has long been accepted by Liberals, hence it is reasonable for Muslims to claim treatment comparable to that available to Christian churches.

In Scotland, denominational schools are open to pupils of all religious backgrounds, many of whose parents appreciate their ethos. There is no question of enforced segregation. To suggest that such schools select "the brightest middle class children and reject the less intelligent, less motivated and poorer children" is a false assertion and insulting to the staff of these schools.

There are as many ways for political parties to lose support as to gain it. While school attendance is law, the UK remains basically a Christian society and over 70% describe themselves as Christian.

Liberals have always upheld policies designed to express tolerance and respect for those of differing backgrounds. Much state expenditure supports purposes of which many people disapprove.

To adopt a policy, which Simon Titley deems "popular, distinctive and right" – an arrogant assumption – would be harmful and deeply offensive to large numbers of Liberal Democrat voters and others. The comments of Charles Kennedy and Phil Willis are in keeping with Liberal values and merit support.

RI Elder
Dunbar

WAITING AT THE CHURCH

Dear Liberator

Matthew Huntbach's defence of 'faith schools' (Liberator 308) will not do.

Can any Liberal seriously be content with a situation in which, in many parts of Britain, parents must now obtain a certificate of church attendance from a priest before their children may qualify for a place in the local state school?

Simon Titley
Brussels

REVIEWS

Bloody Foreigners; The Story of Immigration to Britain by Robert Winder Abacus 2005 £8.99

This book is an account of immigration into the United Kingdom from Norman times onwards. It explains that there is no such thing as an English or British race and that even the Celts were not the original inhabitants of these islands.

Immigration, rather than invasion, began in the Norman era when the monasteries began to replace subsistence agriculture with commercial wool production, creating prosperity and a demand for skilled labour. A demand for finance coupled with restriction on usury by the church resulted in the growth of a Jewish community that was not bound by the restriction.

However, reactions against immigration and new communities followed with virulent anti-Semitic campaigns and restrictions on Jews by Edward I, which lasted until Cromwell invited the Jews back.

The history of immigration is of various waves of economic migrants and asylum seekers, some being welcomed fairly early on, others receiving a stronger reaction.

Reactions to newcomers varied from quick acceptance, in the case of the Huguenots, to hostility in the case of Irish immigration and recent asylum seekers. The first restrictions were proposed by Tories in the eighteenth century. It was a Conservative government that brought in the 1905 Aliens Act and generally it has been the right that has sought to restrict immigration.

There were also people ready to come to the defence of migrants, sometimes not noticeably liberal figures such as GK Chesterton.

The India Office was opposed to applying the Aliens Act to Indians, as it was trying to establish that India was British, and the Colonial Office was concerned that the reaction towards black migrants would turn future leaders of independent countries against Britain, while at a later stage the Treasury was concerned about the supply of migrant labour drying up.

Many myths are put to rest in the book. Contrary to popular assumptions, during a large part of history there were more people emigrating and economic migrants rarely arrive during a recession as they are seeking work.

According to the author, 1.4 million Indian troops served in the British Armed Forces in the First World War, including 12 who were awarded the Victoria Cross, and there were large numbers of West Indian and African servicemen. There was also a large number of Lascar and Somali seamen who sailed in the merchant navy.

In the aftermath of the war, the contribution was soon forgotten and migrants were accused of taking the jobs of people who had been away fighting the war. The hostility reached a peak in riots in some ports against Lascar and Somali seamen.

A similar process took place after the Second World War, where ex-servicemen from the Caribbean who had received a warm welcome during the war faced hostility when they arrived seeking work.

All of this should demonstrate that xenophobia has nothing to do with patriotism, as a true patriot would feel a sense of shame about the lack of gratitude to ex-servicemen and one of pride that people of a different origin were prepared to fight for this country.

Winder points out that there have always been people ready to defend migrants, sometimes the majority of the population. He does not try to canonise asylum seekers, acknowledging that there have been individuals who have been gangsters or have themselves preyed on other asylum seekers, but he does point out that, in many cases, asylum seekers have made a positive contribution.

The public are not labelled as bigots. Attitudes are shown to be varied depending on the group, and in some cases to have changed attitudes with groups such as the Irish, who aroused hostility but were eventually accepted.

In other cases, an earlier group once established is shown to have a degree of unease towards later arrivals, as with established Jewish people towards more recent Eastern European arrivals in the nineteenth century.

The author tends to portray the Tories as being in favour of restricting immigration and the Whigs/Liberals in favour of immigration but he acknowledges that there was unease among some Tory cabinet ministers over the 1962 Immigration Act and its affect on the supply of labour.

Andrew Hudson

Lawyer's Latin by John Gray Robert Hale 2004 £9.99

Long Live Latin by John Gray Canis Press 2004 £12.99

When I was chairing education on Tower Hamlets Council, the latest controversial cash problem came up in conversation with Martin Elengorn, who represented Richmond, at one of the London-wide bodies on which we both sat.

I think the Tories were abolishing Section 11 funding, of which we were the largest recipient, for supporting children whose first language wasn't English in our schools (possibly up to 66%). "Good God" he cried, "the only controversy of that kind we have is whether to continue teaching Latin or not!" I think we both concurred that they should.

John Locke dismissed the use of unintelligible words as "the covers of ignorance, and hindrance of true knowledge". Frederick Forsyth, writing in the preface to *Long Live Latin*, found

the use of French words in English often to be pretentious (forgetting that we have several thousand words common to both tongues). Latin presumably confers some deeper learning. Lord Deedes found that a Latin phrase (or any other) often gave meaning more succinctly than its long-winded English equivalent.

If it is not contradictory, I concur with both Deedes and Locke. The point is to make words intelligible, and we do that through a liberal education. We are all of the same blood and gene-stock, but separated through language.

The Blair government and its lackeys seek the abolition of Legal Latin; they are mealy-mouthed. Given the smattering of two-letter words widely used in English, eg: ie, qv, etc, their chances of success are slim – after all, a few phrases of Law French (under which proceedings were held prior to the Commonwealth) are still with us.

I didn't have the benefit of Latin in myself; it probably shows, but enough informed opinion has convinced me of its value as a basis for any language education, were there enough people capable of teaching any language in our schools. Meanwhile, I hope that English will go on enriching itself with borrowings from any language which adds greater clarity to its meaning.

Stewart Rayment

Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell by Susanna Clarke Bloomsbury 2004 £7.99

The magical profession is a dangerous one. There is no other which so lays a man open to the perils of vanity. Politics and law are harmless by comparison. Yet Mr Norrell and his student Jonathan Strange are set upon the restoration of English magic, which apparently had fallen into decline. They bring it to the rescue of governments beleaguered by the Napoleonic wars.

Clarke is deeply imbued in Jane Austen, and Walter Scott echoes back to me. I am reasonably convinced of the period setting of her book, the best I've come across since the late lamented John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which took the English historical novel on a stride. Of course it jars a little for one schooled on Byron and Shelley to find the likes of Lord Liverpool spoken of with deference, but a few lines of poetry cannot say everything.

The essence of good fantasy or science fiction is that it must be plausible. Terry Pratchett achieved this in his *Discworld* series; too often, the map says "here be dragons" but doesn't go on to explain them. Clarke does not present us with this problem; we are talking about English magic, which is an altogether more moderate affair and wholly plausible, even when it crosses over to Faery.

Clarke uses footnotes extensively to expand the story. How many of these are made up, how many borrowed?

Enjoy this book on its own merits irrespective of genre, but if you know someone in their teens who has lately taken to reading – inspired by books or films around magic, perhaps – this is a good choice to deepen the habit.

Stewart Rayment

Bushit! by Jack Huberman Granta 2006 £8.99

It is a long time since *A Book at Bogtime* made an appearance in Liberator, and Jack Huberman has a fine contender – full of short, pithy pieces about Dubya and his cronies.

Huberman probably isn't that well known over here; I think he writes mainly for *Nation*. His *The Bush-Hater's Handbook* sold very well in the States. There's an entire industry out there with hundreds of anti-Bush books – his are some of the better known ones.

I don't think that he's done much original work – someone like Greg Palast with his analysis of the 2004 Florida election comes to mind – but he's compiled a great list of Bush's problems. Other big sellers have been books by Molly Ivins and Joe Conason. And, of course, the films of Michael Moore.

What's probably more damaging to Bush are the frequent jokes by late-night television comics. When audiences feel like laughing at you, you have problems.

Stewart Graf

Fightback! by Dianne Hayter Manchester UP 2005 £14.99

The Liberal Democrats have had a crisis; a crisis brought on by the ambitions of some of the minnows who swim in the parliamentary party pond. Hayter's book concerns a much greater crisis in the Labour party in the late 70s and 80s; a crisis brought about by reasonable ideological differences within that party, and the modus operandi of the Labour right and trades unions (the St.Ermins Group) for dealing with that crisis. The problem for the Lib Dems is that they do not have the trades union movement to bail them out of their crises and have to rely on the gut reactions of ordinary Liberals.

The book ranges from the excitement of the cut and thrust of politics to the detail of behind the scenes manoeuvring (chiefly amongst unions). Its argument is that the forces to swing Labour from its infantile disorder (a view held by Italian Euro-Communists) was falling into place before the SDP split, but one feels that, had that split not taken place, the unions would have taken longer to form a united front, even in the face of Thatcher. Duffy's persuasion of the AEUW to move from left to right in wielding its block vote seems to have been crucial.

Hayter also shows what an inept lot the leadership of the Labour right – Callaghan, Healey, Hattersley – proved to be. The roles of Bill Rodgers, Ian Wrigglesworth and Tom McNally feature so long as they were in the Labour party are well documented; they

fought hard but concluded that the battle had to be fought elsewhere. They were right. Labour was unable to replace the Tories until 1997, and it is arguable whether they were replaced in critical policy fields. At least a decade of Thatcherism, during which it might be said to have become embedded, might have been avoided had more social democrats within Labour had the courage to jump. The central problem of British politics in the short twentieth century was the absence of Liberalism. As Gilbert & Sullivan put it, you're either one or the other, and, despite the presence of liberals in Labour and Tory administrations, the mainstream was one of authoritarianism.

One personally interesting detail concerns Peter Shore's constituency in Tower Hamlets. Shore had problems when the Boundary Commission replaced the Bethnal Green & Bow and Stepney & Poplar seats with Bethnal Green & Stepney and Bow & Poplar (which Ian Mikado took). The Trots who ran Tower Hamlets Labour were less happy with Shore; we didn't have much to say in his favour either. Since all but two wards in the old Bethnal Green & Bow seat were held by Liberal councillors, we assumed that the switch had been made to prevent the seat falling to us.

Hayter is part of Labour's quangocracy; she'll probably end up in their biggest quango of all someday – the 'reformed' House of Lords. Others mentioned in the book have been marginalised; one wonders how many of the players in this saga look back on the Blair governments and wonder if the struggle was worthwhile.

Stewart Rayment

Bears
by Ruth Krauss
illustrated by Maurice Sendak
Harper Collins 2005 £9.99

Max has been absent from Sendak's illustration for a long time, so welcome back… Sendak began his apprenticeship with Krauss in the 1950s. His early Brooklyn sketchbooks fitted well with her work, which ranged from snatches of children's conversation through to stream of consciousness rhymes. She was married to Crockett Johnson (of the Barnaby comic strip) and the interplay of the three of them developed Sendak's work. He goes so far as to attribute *Where the Wild Things Are* to their liberating intellectual stimulation and the acknowledgement of the bloodlust in the child.

Sendak illustrated many of Krauss's books through the 1950s and the fruits of this earlier collaboration can be found in his later, better known works. *I Want to Paint My Bathroom Blue* (1956) has premonitions of *In the Night Kitchen* (1970), and *Open House for Butterflies* (1960) reminds me of images in *Higglety Pigglety Pop* and *The Sign on Rosie's Door*.

Ruth Krauss wrote *Bears* in 1948, with Phyllis Rowand as illustrator. Sendak's work is thus a tribute to his friend and mentor, who died in 1993. For *Bears*, Sendak uses water-coloured drawings as with the hoodie bear in *Some Swell Pup* rather than the hatched line drawings of the *Little Bear* series. The work is bold and dynamic, and carries this through to Krauss's minimalist text.

We all know what happens when you step on the cracks in the pavement, so beware.

Stewart Rayment

Ancient Americans: Rewriting the History of the New World
by Charles C Mann
Granta 2005 £20.00

Anyone who has read *Musrum* knows that God didn't create the world in seven days, and that he subcontracted the Americas to Musrum, who was just putting the finishing touches to the west coast when Columbus landed on the east.

An accidental visitor to the Mayan ruins of Chichén Itzá in 1983, Mann became fascinated by the pre-Columbian cultures of America, and earlier versions of this book appeared in *Atlantic Monthly*. The received view, that mankind spread into the Americas via a land bridge where the Bering Straits now flow about 12,000 years ago has been challenged for many years now, but still holds orthodoxy. It is probable that peoples also arrived via Polynesia and that Thor Heyerdahl set sail in the wrong direction in his Kon Tiki.

Mann paints a picture of a much more populous and sophisticated pre-Columbian America, decimated largely by disease brought not so much by the conquistadors but by their livestock, which survived them, multiplied and transmitted their diseases. Drawing on a variety of sources, Mann suggests that even the Amazon rainforests may be the result of manmade ecological disaster.

Here, as I see it, is the danger of this book. In 2002, Mann wrote, "Guided by the pristine myth, mainstream environmentalists want to preserve as much of the world's land as possible in a putatively intact state." We know that little, if any, of the United Kingdom is "in a putatively intact state". It is likely that the same might apply to much of the globe; we know that the pre-Columbian Americans were great agriculturalists – Mann rates them among the most sophisticated we've known, bringing us all the chillies, potatoes and tomatoes to say the least. As an environmentalist, I do not see ecosystems as static, far from it, and in constant need of nurturing. What concerns me is what uses research of this kind might be put to in furtherance of the neoliberal economic agenda, or more crudely the consumerism ignited by its sparks, especially in the United States.

'Primitive' societies frequently lead lives more in tune with their environment than those of ourselves – essentially they are too small to make that much of an impact. But they have rights, and there are questions concerning our overall impact on the planet that have yet to be answered. Whilst I welcome the extension of the debate in an area of our collective history little studied stateside, and almost entirely ignored over here, I'm still inclined to read it with B. Traven's *March to Caobaland* close at hand.

Stewart Rayment

Lord Bonkers' Diary

Sunday

To Brig o'Dread, my Highland retreat. A cold coming I had of it – just the worst time of year for a journey – but a good fire soon takes the chill of the old place, and I sit writing this by the hearth in a panelled room decorated with the heads of stags and Conservative junior ministers. I have come North today because of the events of last week: for the first time that anyone can remember, I failed to win the Liberal Moustache of the Year Award, finishing second to John Thurso. How could this happen? I decided to visit the Highlands to find out.

Monday

Dawn breaks late in Caithness at this time of year; the icy sky is dotted with wheways flying north (or possibly with hamwees flying south). I am grateful for the warm glow of the Dounreay atom plant as I wait in the scrub on the hillside above it, observing the comings and goings through field glasses. As I take a nip of Auld Johnston from my hipflask, a familiar figure hoves into view – and no one, in my experience, can hove like the Liberal Democrat Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross. There is something different about him, however: on his upper lip he sports, not the effulgent growth that won the silver cup last week, but a wizened little thing that might have been worn by the amusing Blakey from *On the Buses* or the considerably less amusing Adolf Hitler. I capture Thurso's likeness in this state with my trusty Box Brownie, and snap him again when he emerges two hours later, warmly shaking the hand of the manager of the atom plant and once again wearing the moustache that beat me into second place. So now I know how he grows it: nuclear waste.

Tuesday

I take my photographs to the chemist's, and while they are being developed I watch what I now believe to be hamwees flying north (or perhaps they are wheways that have had a look at the Orkneys, thought better of them and decided to come south again). On the long drive south, I hear my Bentley's engine making a strange whistling sound. Eventually I stop in the upper Tyne Valley and lift the bonnet. What should I find underneath but a wheway and a hamwee (or possibly a hamwee and a wheway) hitching a lift. By the time I have loaded my twelve-bore they have flown clean away. In my opinion, Sir Peter Scott has a great deal to answer for.

Wednesday

Home again at Bonkers Hall, I telephone to Menzies Campbell to see what has been going on in my absence and to offer him my usual sage counsel. How refreshing it is to have someone of my own generation at the helm once again! You may recall that I had to rescue Ming from his more enthusiastic young supporters during the campaign and bring him back to Rutland for a little rest and recuperation. (I also rescued his Jaguar from a barn in the Borders, but that is another story). I advised him not to take part in any more of the hustings but rather to send Clegg instead, as he was so terribly keen. I am pleased to report that Ming took my advice, with the result that he won the contest comfortably. He invites me to dinner on Sunday, and says that if there is ever anything he can do to help me, I should not hesitate to mention it.

Thursday

Indulging myself after my chill sojourn in Scotland, I take coffee in my Orchid House. Reading the morning's papers, I find that poor Dick Cheney has shot a friend after mistaking him for a quail. Really, it could happen to anyone. I then spend the day browsing in the Library. One of the things I turn up is the notorious "Schoolkids" issue of *Liberator*; this caused quite a stir in its day, and reading it now I can quite see why. It is pretty radical stuff: a ban on Gregory Powder; long trousers at 12; a Royal Commission on bedtimes. I also hunt down something that I have had in mind ever since I began to read those stories about the Middle East being in flames over the publication of some cartoons in a Danish newspaper. Eventually I find it: the controversial Fred Bassett strip that caused riots across the South of England in 1962.

Friday

It seems like yesterday, but by my calculation it was 1906, when the first Labour members were returned to the House of Commons. Had Herbert Gladstone taken my advice, there would have been no pact with them and we should all have been a great deal better off, but let that pass. It happened that one evening, shortly after we had all been elected, I went back into the chamber to look for a lost spat, only to find all the Labour members having their photograph taken. That photo has become quite an historic document, and if you look carefully you can see me in it, asking Keir Hardie if he would kindly look under his seat. It happens that this afternoon I visit Westminster and take the opportunity to slip into the Commons chamber to gather more evidence against John Thurso and his unethical ways of improving his moustache. What should I find but all the Labour MPs having their likeness taken again? Funnily enough, I appear in this one too, asking a couple of the ladies if they can see somewhere for me to plug in my Geiger counter.

Saturday

Dinner with the Campbells – Ming and the redoubtable Elspeth, who was so memorably played by Sean Connery in *A Bridge Too Far*. Conversation turns to the composition of Ming's first Shadow Cabinet, and names are bandied back and forth across the table. When the name of John Thurso is raised, I find myself obliged to produce my photographs – the one of him entering Dounreay looking like a Belgian bank clerk and the one, taken two hours later, of him emerging with a moustache of Olympic class. Ming, being a gentleman, quite understands that this sort of thing Simply Isn't Done. It therefore comes as no surprise that, when I pick up tomorrow's first editions on the way home, they announce that there is no place for Thurso in his team of ministers.

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

---