

liberator



Flat-lining: is this the best the Lib Dems can do?

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- 💣 Bring back ideology – Graham Watson***
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COMMENTARY

PUSHING AT THE LIMITS

The Liberal Democrats made progress at the May local elections – just.

Unlike at the low points of previous Labour governments, the party was not massacred along with Labour, even in Tory areas. It clearly has a separate identity in voters' minds that allows it, to an extent, to stand or fall on its own merits and record.

We said in *Liberator* 309, "Count no chickens, but it could all still be OK for May's local elections."

An overall gain of one council and two councillors is better than losses and counts as some achievement, given the party's woes last January. But how does it make a move forward?

Seats in the south won at the depths of the Tories' unpopularity were lost, while seats were won from Labour in the cities.

In London, for the fourth set of elections running, the party's vote share stayed between 15-16% and the number of councillors is not greatly different from 12 years ago, with gains in some boroughs balanced by losses in others.

The Lib Dems could probably keep this up for ever. Win a load of seats off Labour next year, take a few more parliamentary seats on the back of that to roughly balance any lost to a reviving Tory party, and then if there is ever another Tory government, repeat the process against them.

The party has reached the limits of how far it can grow by shoving out leaflets, taking up local grievances, winning seats and then losing them when other parties learn how to shove out paper and pay attention to residents' concerns.

This approach has delivered many benefits, but you don't have to be a Liberal Democrat to want cleaner streets, or timely housing repairs, and it does little to build long-term loyalty to the party. A party that boasts that it can win everywhere is also one that can lose everywhere, because its support is transient and shallow.

Tony Greaves, one of the architects of community politics, argued in *Liberator* 309 "we will not make a dramatic breakthrough on the basis of incremental electoral advance by means that are tightly controlled from the centre... 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".

The party rarely campaigns for, or even against, anything, whether climate change action or ID cards. Its local election campaigns are mainly tactical.

It offers little with which supporters can engage emotionally, to enthuse its base and make that grow.

Matthew Taylor argued in *Liberator* 308 that the party needs to develop a clear idea of its target audience and accept that it can't appeal to all of the people all of the time.

But the Lib Dems are reluctant to project a strong image because that would both attract and repel, so they end up always pulling their punches for fear of causing offence.

The party has to get beyond the point where it resembles a bath with the taps on and the plug out, even if the retained water level has become higher of late.

As Taylor argued, "being a credible alternative government needs more than target seats, focused campaigns, and appealing policies. It revolves around the perceived strength of character of political parties."

That strength cannot come from forever taking up someone else's slack.

BROWN STUDY

Labour under Tony Blair has become a mortal enemy of liberty. Whether it is the eviction of peaceful protest from Parliament Square, manhandling of an 82-year-old heckler at Labour's conference, executive interference in the judicial system or, worst of all, his government's vile assault on freedom through identity cards.

Given its record, who would trust Labour not to abuse the information that will be held on these cards for its own political advantage?

From the Liberal Democrat standpoint though, the longer Blair remains Labour leader the better, since that party's position is irrecoverable so long as it is led by man who lied to the country because he wanted to start a war.

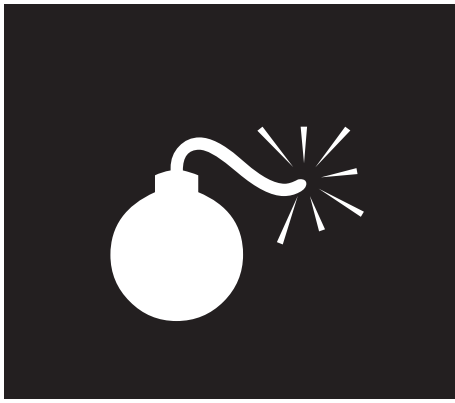
Although Labour's internal disputes are over personalities not principles, and although there is little reason to think that Gordon Brown would be any less illiberal, sooner or later Brown is almost certain to be prime minister.

This change alone after a decade of Blair will probably allow Labour to carry off the trick of presenting the new leader as a change of government, just as John Major was able to 16 years ago.

Labour may be hollowed out and demoralised in large parts of the country, but Blair's departure will at least temporarily re-energise it.

Is the thinking and planning being done for what this development might do to Lib Dem assumptions about winning seats in cities and industrial areas?

Brown might change little, but he will look new and that is enough to upset any strategy based mainly on exploitation of Labour's deep and deserved unpopularity.



RADICAL BULLETIN

YOUNG CARDINALS, OLD POPES

It was noticeable during the leadership election that all the younger MPs with even faint designs on the leadership loudly supported Ming Campbell, in the expectation he would stick around for only one election, leaving them more time in which to establish themselves.

Now the same thing has happened with the deputy leadership, in which shadow chancellor Vince Cable beat Matthew Taylor by only two votes, after third-placed candidate David Heath was eliminated.

The voting was Taylor 25, Cable 21, Heath 17; and on the second round Cable 31 and Taylor 29.

Taylor had let it be known that he hoped to use the post to tour the country meeting local parties, which instantly raised suspicions that he would use the position to raise his profile with the grassroots for a future leadership bid.

Cable turned in an impressive hustings performance, but the result means that the party's two main figureheads are both men in their sixties and that an opportunity has been missed to promote a further personality in public, since Cable's shadow chancellor role means he is already well-known and often in the media.

TAKING THE WHIP

Paul Burstow duly won the election among MPs for chief whip, a feat no doubt helped by Ming Campbell having announced in advance that he wanted him in the post (Liberator 309).

But Burstow gained only 38 votes against 19 for Richard Younger-Ross, who had served as a whip under Kennedy but was not widely considered as a possible chief whip.

This suggests that roughly one-third of the parliamentary party is composed of mavericks unwilling to toe an 'official' line, a thoroughly welcome outcome.

ORANGE IS NOT THE ONLY COLOUR

The *Orange Book* has gained a certain influence, if only as newspaper shorthand for the party's economic liberals, despite the fiasco of its launch (Liberator 298).

MPs on the social liberal side of this debate have been criticised, with some justice, for being quick to attack but slow to come forward with alternatives.

But we hear that a rival book is in preparation, whether or not to be named after a fruit, intended for publication at the spring conference next year.

Meanwhile moves are also afoot to try to turn the Beveridge Group into a more serious proposition.

The group was formed in 2002 as a counterweight to the Thatcherite Liberal Future operation (Liberator 281). After some initial success in at least forcing Charles Kennedy to steer a course between the two, it lapsed into inactivity.

It is looking for resources to conduct research and publication, but one thing it could do for almost nothing would be to counter effectively the economic liberals' perennial destabilising of the party through anonymous briefing of tame journalists.

PEERS APPEAR

Members of the least secret list yet of Lib Dem peers were duly ennobled in April, six months after the names appeared in *Liberator* 307, when rows about its composition first surfaced.

The list was Charles Kennedy's doing and was crammed with former parliamentarians.

Apart from the universally popular Celia Thomas, who for many years ran the Lords whips' office, there was a former MEP (Robin Teverson), two former MPs (John Burnett and Brian Cotter) and the former Tory minister John Lee, who joined the Lib Dems in 2001.

Lee was the most curious nomination since his own autobiography says that he no longer plays any active role in the party (Liberator 307).

Nominating former MPs was a way around taking names from the elected peers list, even though this mechanism was endorsed by the 2004 Southport spring conference, in the face of Navnit Dholakia's ludicrous attempt to replace it with a list whose composition and content would have been secret.

LORD A-LEAPING

One of Archy Kirkwood's first tasks as Ming Campbell's consigliere was to sack the party's deputy treasurer Edward Lord. Lord says he was told that he was considered "insufficiently pro-Ming", despite having written the party's fundraising strategy.

Others to whom *Liberator* spoke suggested we should rearrange the words 'bull' 'china' and 'shop' into a well known phrase, conduct that included a dispute over whether the party should pay for Lord to have a conference hotel suite.

Lord joined the Lib Dems from the Tories in 2003 and is a member of the City of London Corporation, where he has commendably ended the fiction of a non-political council by registering as a Lib Dem.

His declaration of interests there include membership of some rather eyebrow-raising bodies for a Lib Dem, such as

the Adam Smith Institute, the Countryside Alliance and the Institute of Economic Affairs.

The post of deputy treasurer is unknown to the party constitution and was an invention of treasurer Tim Clement-Jones, who was elected to the post last year by the Federal Executive in preference to Robert Woodthorpe-Browne (*Liberator* 306).

And who should be the new deputy treasurer? Why, none other than Robert Woodthorpe-Browne.

MARSHALL AID

The low profile Centre for Reform think tank was reborn last year as CentreForum (or Centre for Um, as it is known among cynics), thanks to a £1m donation by hedge fund magnate Paul Marshall.

Marshall was described in a Sunday Telegraph profile (5 March) as the Liberal Democrats' 'sugar daddy'. The Electoral Commission website shows that his various donations to the party (as distinct from CentreForum) over the past four years total £41,235, generous but hardly 'Sugar Daddy' status.

There was also a donation of £8,791.96, being the notional interest on a loan unpaid by the party (which, unlike certain other parties, has at least declared it).

Marshall, SDP candidate in Fulham in 1987, seems to prefer involvement in informal structures such as the Liberal Democrat Business Forum (which he chairs) and its Business Policy Group (*Liberator* 296 and 299) and now CentreForum, which has been the subject of claims that its revamp was intended to position it to spread the economic liberal gospel and change party policy on long-term care and student fees.

Some evidence for his stance could be adduced from an article he wrote for Liberal Democrat News in April, in which he called for a higher profile for education policy.

This contained the startling assertion that Marshall was not arguing for a tax and spend approach to financing education, since "tax and spend damages credibility".

At what level? Does he want no taxes? Some taxes? Different taxes? Taxes kept at the level they are now because changing them is too much political aggravation?

Marshall argued instead for 'save and spend', which appeared to involve seeking savings from other areas of public services paid for by, er, taxes.

In his Telegraph profile, Marshall was quoted as saying that he did not wish to use his wealth to buy influence:

"Money is a major disadvantage in British politics," he said. "Both having it and giving it. By having it, it's what people then associate you with. I just want to participate in a political process, a battle of ideas, in a one-member, one-vote party."

All good stuff, though when one is the main donor to the only think tank associated with the party, one's ideas tend to become influential.

Meanwhile, CentreForum must surely now be at least rich enough to print some more promotional cards.

A baffled audience at Paddy Ashdown's talk on his experiences in Bosnia found a CentreForum card on each seat, which bore a sticker: "Continue the national building discussion at www.freethink.org"

It was unclear whether this meant Britain or Bosnia, but the sticker proved to be removable. Beneath it was one inviting readers to "join our new discussion on Ming's first

100 days", or if that did not appeal those on "localism, nuclear and education reforms" (presumably not all at once). That sticker was also peelable and the one below suggested debates on "leadership and what can the state afford?"

That one was peelable too, but there was nothing beneath.

PAPER CANDIDATE

Simon Hughes revels in his role as party president, so will he stand again for a second two-year term this summer? Despite some peculiar interventions like his creation of seven extra-constitutional vice-presidents, he has at least done the job with enthusiasm.

On the day that Charles Kennedy resigned in January, Lembit Öpik announced on live television that he intended to contest the presidency and then the leadership at the subsequent opportunity (*Liberator* 308).

Given his 70-30% beating by Hughes in the last presidential election, and his isolated position as the only MP who thought Mark Oaten a suitable person to lead the party, Öpik's chances of securing the presidency look remote, never mind the leadership. Will he carry out his intention?

COCK OF THE WALK

One of the most enthusiastic supporters of Mark Oaten's leadership campaign was former Lambeth councillor Charles Anglin, who lost his seat to Labour by a large margin.

This may have been connected with the front page of the South London Press (31 March), which revealed that he had posed naked on a website "handling his private parts" and revealing his tastes for wrestling and "a little sweaty rough and tumble".

Anglin's defence in the newspaper was: "It is my private life. I am a libertarian. I don't see what the fuss is about. I am a gay man and I've always been open about my sexuality."

Fair enough, but when one voluntarily enters public life there are some constraints. Imagine the uproar if a heterosexual councillor had similarly displayed himself with the message "come and get it girls".

Meanwhile, Oaten regaled readers of the Sunday Times (7 May) with an explanation of his antics (*Liberator* 308), attributing his conduct to the onset of baldness.

These revelations hardly do the party much good. A period of silence from him would be welcome.

PUT A SOCK IN IT

The loss of 12 seats in Islington can best be attributed to over-reach, an attempt to make gains when defence might have been wiser, since marginal wards were held but 'safe' ones from which activists were moved were lost.

When something like this happens, there is usually a complex explanation, a point that eluded education spokesperson Sarah Teather on an election night broadcast.

She blamed the losses on poor local leadership, a description that infuriated Islington members.

The leadership was the same one that helped her win an Islington council seat in 2002, her first elected office, which she vacated a year later on winning Brent East. There's gratitude for you.

BRING BACK IDEOLOGY

Is there a role for ideology in government in today's world or are we seeing 'the end of history', asks Graham Watson

A look at Western Europe suggests that ideology in politics has gone out of fashion. On the left, parties that still believe in socialism – in France or Greece, for example – seem unlikely to secure electoral success. On the right, ideological conservatives such as those in the UK or Hungary, or Christian Democrats in Spain or Italy, are far from power.

Those parties of left or right that are in government appear to have abandoned their ideological roots in favour of pragmatism. There is little to distinguish German Christian Democrats from British Labour or Scandinavian Social Democrats. Ideological leadership is absent, reflected in the dearth of books penned by (or even for) today's politicians explaining to the public their beliefs.

If ideology has gone out of fashion, with politicians not wanting to outline their beliefs for fear of alienating some voters, leadership appears to have been replaced by followership. Campaign strategists from the EU's main political parties have visited the USA and talked to their counterparts in the Republican or Democratic parties. They've returned convinced that success stems from reading the opinion polls, running 'focus groups', identifying what people believe (and what words or expressions they find most appealing or least threatening) and then repeating to the voters their own prejudices – in attractive language – to win elections.

This approach appears to work, at least when the economy is running well (the levers of decision-making having been sacrificed by politicians to central bankers and market mechanisms). But it manifestly fails to work when difficult strategic decisions of a longer-term nature need to be taken for which public support is required, such as entry into the euro or ratification of a constitutional treaty.

What of the Liberal or Liberal Democrat governments in Western Europe? Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland and Romania currently have Liberal-led coalitions. Of Estonia and Romania, it can be said that both have a clear ideological agenda of economic Liberalism. Belgium is more social Liberal; indeed, Belgian prime minister Guy Verhofstadt is by far the most prolific thinker and writer among Europe's prime ministers, irrespective of party. Anders Fogh-Rasmussen of Denmark and Matti Vanhanen of Finland have perhaps less ideological freedom of manoeuvre, given the nature of the coalitions they lead; but each is nonetheless identifiably Liberal and unafraid to say so publicly, as Fogh-Rasmussen demonstrated recently by his defence of freedom of expression in the 'Danish cartoons' affair. Romano Prodi, the new prime minister of Italy, will face difficulty steering domestic and especially economic policy due to the nature of his coalition, but we can reasonably

expect to see a clearly liberal democratic federalist and internationalist approach to foreign policy.

Across the EU, Liberals are stronger than we have been for many years: six prime ministers, seven EU Commissioners, our largest ever group of MEPs and growing strength in most national parliaments. So why should Liberalism stand out as an ideology, proudly proclaimed by Liberal politicians and welcomed by the voter, when those on the left and right are abandoning theirs? Much of the answer to this lies in the nature of Liberal thought.

One of Liberalism's strengths is that it is a supranational ideology. Unlike Socialism, Liberalism was never a blueprint intended to be applied universally. Rather it is a formula: if we call the formula x and apply it to country y , the policies it prescribes will not necessarily be the same as those which would emerge if the same formula were applied to country z . To take a simple example, Liberalism applied to a country like the UK might prescribe increasing the tax burden to pay for much needed investment in schools, hospitals or public transport infrastructure. In Sweden, by contrast, with its expensive and overweening welfare state, Liberalism might seek to shift the balance of responsibility for provision of some services from the state to the individual.

Socialism's failure to meet the challenges of the modern world was summed up some years ago by the British Labour luminary Richard Crossman when he recorded ruefully, "Socialism lost its way not only because it lacks maps of the new country which it is crossing, but because it thinks maps are unnecessary for experienced travellers".

As a supranational and outward looking ideology, Liberalism is better equipped to deal with the challenges of the early years of the twenty-first century than the national or religious-based ideologies of the right. The big challenges faced by humankind at present are global, such as a rapidly growing world population, climate change, and internationally organised crime.

Citizens recognise increasingly that the eighteenth and nineteenth century concept of the military-industrial nation state has been neutered by developments in travel and communications technology and that nationalist ideologies provide few answers to supranational challenges, which require supranational institutions of government to offer people the security, prosperity and opportunities in life which they expect government to provide. Liberalism prescribes them. For example, Liberals were at the forefront of the moves to establish the Kyoto Convention and the permanent international criminal court. The nationalists who opposed these moves were (probably unwittingly) promoting global anarchy in the name of preserving national sovereignty.

The challenge of peaceful coexistence between those of different religious faith is a particularly thorny and ubiquitous problem. Those defining themselves as Christian Democrats distinguish themselves by definition from those of Islamic faith, for example, even if the latter are democrats. Indeed, the greatest danger to world peace is found where the three great monotheistic faiths – Islam, Christianity and Judaism – meet in the Middle East. Here, the politics of Rome, Jerusalem or Mecca are inimical to peaceful settlement of human differences. By contrast, Liberalism's belief in a free church within a secular state allows it to appeal to those of all faiths and none. It permits Liberals to envisage, for example, a democratic, secular (and of course reformed!) Turkish state within the EU, sending a powerful diplomatic signal that the EU is not an exclusively Christian club.

If Liberalism is more suited to the challenges of our age than other streams of political thought in western Europe, how can Liberals – marginalised politically for much of the latter half of the twentieth century – profit from the political opportunities available? Part of the answer must lie in the recognition and exploitation of Liberalism's universal appeal. Liberals are the only political force to have an active federation of parties across Asia, for example. The rapid spread of democracy, respect for human rights and other Liberal ideas which accompanied the spread of free trade at the end of the twentieth century was abruptly halted by the tragic terrorist attacks of September 2001 and the equally tragic response, leading to the US-led invasion of Iraq.

Relations between countries that are predominantly Islamic and those predominantly Christian or Jewish are at a low point. The Danish prime minister's robust response to attacks on press freedom after publication of the controversial cartoons was absolutely right and has been welcomed by many moderate Muslims. But measures are urgently needed to bring together moderates from both communities in a reaffirmation of the guarantee of freedom to practice the religion one chooses in return for a guarantee of secular public institutions. Changing people's minds through conversation rather than conversion is a prime requirement of the Liberal approach.

Another challenge is to maximise the appeal of Liberalism by recognising and bringing together the three major strands of Liberal ideology: classical liberalism, with its emphasis on individual freedom and individual responsibility as the guarantors of dignity; economic liberalism, with its belief that the market is generally the best mechanism for promoting prosperity and happiness; and social liberalism, which recognises that markets sometimes fail and that there is a role for government in protecting the weak and securing a level playing field for the entrepreneurial. Liberal parties in western Europe that have embraced all three have secured 15% or more of the popular vote: those embracing just one of the three strands have seen their support hover around 5%, which is the threshold below which they fail to secure parliamentary representation in some countries.

Economic Liberalism was much in vogue in the western world for a few years, when the ideas of Hayek and Friedman inspired Liberals (and some others) to put an unhealthy emphasis on free markets. Despite the warnings of Galbraith, Sen, Dahrendorf and others, a Liberal triumphalism emerged behind the so-called 'Washington consensus' in global policy and a 'get rich quick' attitude to the management of personal savings in domestic politics. The weakness of such an approach – based purely on quantitative measures of

economic growth – is that it ignores other types of 'good', such as that provided by safer, more fuel efficient cars. Moreover it exchanges social cohesion and a broad-based middle class for economic dynamism and personal economic freedom, abandoning what we used to call 'the common good' rather than seeking a new social contract to improve social health and economic vitality contemporaneously. Liberal parties that adopted this approach generally saw their public support wither. In southern Europe, it allowed the opponents of Liberalism to render the denomination 'Liberal' unacceptable as a political label.

Surprisingly, however, governments of Social- and Christian Democrat denominations have in many cases fallen into the same trap. They have sought to embrace market ideology, not recognising that it tricks people into confusing buying power with voting power, thereby robbing them of the civic freedom by which society controls the social consequences of aggregate private choices. A rounded Liberal approach would prescribe that regulation is needed where the gains from remedying market failure – for consumers, the environment or employees, for example – outweigh the cost of government intervention.

Liberals must not fall into the trap of exchanging one illusion for another. The social Liberalism of the 1970s welfare state was shown not to work because, as Netherlands Liberal leader and former European Commissioner Frits Bolkestein so aptly put it, "the trouble with a social safety net is that too many people use it as a hammock". But neither will economic Liberal prescriptions work unleavened by a fuller recipe. They do not work electorally because the number of beneficiaries of the corporate western European democratic state outnumbers the marginalised. And they do not work socially because they do not provide for instances of market failure or the need for humankind to factor longer term considerations into policy making, for example in environmental or world development policy.

The area in which social Liberalism and economic Liberalism can be stitched together is perhaps most easily identified in a re-assessment of what classical Liberalism means in the modern world, in which the term 'global village' must lie at the heart of our thinking. How can we offer dignity to our fellow citizens when one sixth of humankind lives in a condition of great prosperity and at least one-third in a condition of terminal misery? Where is responsible stewardship of our inheritance when the power structures of our world are gradually but inexorably overfeeding the rich, depriving the poor of food and water and destroying the planet? How can we realise equality of opportunity when the poor, deprived by trade policy from selling their goods on our markets, decide to vote with their feet only to find that our immigration policy has, in the words of the English poet John Gray, "shut the gates of mercy on mankind"?

We live in an age replete with political opportunity. Liberalism's great virtue is its applicability to the situation of humankind at the beginning of the third millennium. The success or otherwise of politicians claiming to be its interpreters (for any other ideology one might say 'disciples') will lie in their capacity to appreciate the opportunities open to them and in their ability to apply Liberal ideas in their full scope.

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THE PARTY THAT NEVER WAS

Political parties need more than coherent ideas. To survive and prosper, they must also appeal to people's interests, argues Simon Titley

Have you ever stopped to consider the political parties that in theory could exist but in practice do not? We are familiar with Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats – but look around Europe or back in history, and you'll find ideologies not represented in today's British political system.

For example, there is no Gaullist party in Britain – not the specifically French form of Gaullism but *dirigisme*, the ideology that is conservative but believes in a strong state; the strand of thought that runs from David Owen's brand of social democracy through to Mussolini-style (rather than Nazi-style) fascism.

Gaullism continues to thrive in France because it suits the interests of the technocratic elite of 'énarques' (graduates of the *École nationale d'administration*) that has a virtual monopoly of the top positions in the French civil service, politics and business (and can move freely between these three worlds). It also thrives in a political system built around powerful egos, where parties are little more than transient fan clubs for dominant individuals.

It was David Owen's tragedy not to be born French – he would have prospered in such a system. It could be argued that 'New Labour' has become Gaullist, except that no true Gaullist would ever willingly accept American *hyperpuissance*.

Likewise, there is no tradition of Christian Democracy in Britain. The mainstream conservative parties in many Catholic countries in Europe are 'Christian Democrat' precisely because of Catholicism. They derive from the nineteenth-century political struggle between the church and liberals in much of continental Europe (which is why, incidentally, there is also a strong tradition of anti-clericalism among continental liberals).

Consider another example – extreme libertarianism, once characterised as "freedom in the boardroom and freedom in the bedroom". There was a possibility Michael Portillo might have attempted to take the Tories in that direction had not his leadership ambitions been thwarted in 2001.

Curiously, this form of libertarianism flourishes in only one place in British politics – among right-wing bloggers – but can be found almost nowhere else. It is not hard to see why. Most adherents of laissez-faire economics are also socially conservative, as authoritarian in the personal sphere as they are libertarian in the economic sphere. They are hostile to cosmopolitan culture and what they see as sexual deviance (although this public intolerance often masks hypocrisy in their private lives). Conversely, libertarians in the personal and sexual sphere tend to adhere to

communitarian values and are repelled by the 'dog eat dog' ethos of laissez-faire economics.

Consider another example – 'One Nation' Toryism. Here we have an example of a once-dominant ideology that has gone out of fashion. It developed in the immediate post-war era, as the Conservatives accommodated to the Attlee government's creation of the welfare state. It was displaced in the Thatcher era, as the party's grandees, who had been brought up to believe in a certain sense of *noblesse oblige*, were supplanted by a new breed of Poujadist Tory MPs, who were happy to kick away the ladder beneath them.

Some might argue that 'Dave' Cameron is restoring One Nation Toryism, yet, aside from some window dressing in the form of gestures towards women candidates and Norwegian glaciers, there is nothing to suggest any fundamental changes are being made. Indeed, Cameron was the author of the unreconstructed Tory election manifesto only a year ago.

One Nation was not the only casualty of the end of the Butskellite consensus. Traditional social democracy died with the end of the post-war era, as did the old Labourism rooted in the traditions of the smokestack industry trades unions.

What does this absence or decline of political traditions tell us? All of these traditions have (or had) a coherent idea. In the current parlance, all possess a 'narrative'. The question one must ask is not whether there is a gap in the market but whether there is a market in the gap.

The reason these traditions either don't exist or have died out is that they have no interest base. To prosper in politics, it is not enough to have a coherent ideological proposition; one must also have the support of socio-economic groups whose interests align with one's values and policies.

Most Liberals do not like to hear this. But why do they imagine the Liberal Party spent the fifty years after 1920 in the wilderness? The party lost its socio-economic base. No matter how virtuous Liberal ideals and policies were in that period, the party was not widely perceived to represent anyone's interests. British politics in those wilderness years was dominated by class-based parties and voting behaviour. This reflected a real division in society and the strong class identities people then held.

Undaunted, Liberals tried to make a virtue of their lack of an interest base. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Liberal Party would regularly boast that, unlike its rivals, it was not a class-based party.

It is no accident that the recent rise in Liberal fortunes should coincide with the decline in traditional class-based

voting. From the 1970s onwards, increasing numbers of former working class people benefited from growing affluence and, crucially, became homeowners. Thatcher's Tories were the first to benefit from this change, as blue-collar workers deserted their traditional Labour allegiances. Later, New Labour was able to win by realigning its appeal towards middle class families.

But the underlying social transformation has not played out and socio-economic interests remain in a state of flux. In this uncertain situation, the overwhelming impression is of politicians in all parties struggling to make sense of what is going on.

While the Lib Dems have achieved a partial comeback, their response to social change has been no more perspicacious than that of their rivals. The party's objective is world domination – one ward at a time. Its strategy of 'incrementalism', for all its short-term electoral dividends, does not build any lasting body of loyal support but is an attempt to sidestep the issue of socio-economic interests altogether.

When you think about it, have you ever read a policy proposition in any Focus leaflet with which any reasonable person could disagree? Is there any individual or group that has an interest in letting fires burn, keeping the drains blocked or leaving the dog shit in place?

This May's local elections, where the party merely marked time despite collapsing support for Labour, suggest that incrementalism has reached the limits of what it can deliver. The party's approach to electioneering resembles one of those old variety show plate-spinning acts, hugely demanding of activists' time and energy – and this in an era when membership of all parties is in steep decline. It is apolitical – adopting populist stances on local issues and focusing on unpaid social work. It is essentially tactical and oppositionist – and when it delivers power, creates ruling groups of councillors offering little that is distinctive beyond running things slightly more efficiently.

The party has got into this mess because it naively believes that Liberalism could appeal to anyone and everyone. It steadfastly refuses to identify and target those groups that are more amendable to a Liberal message, the groups whose interests align with Liberal values and policies.

In my previous article (*Generation Game*, *Liberator* 308), I suggested who those target groups are (younger, better educated and cosmopolitan) and explained why. The party must build and consolidate this natural constituency. And this means it must make the big but uncomfortable step of accepting that, to attract, it must also repel. It cannot advance much further by trying to appeal to all of the people all of the time. It will never really enthuse its base if it is forever pulling its punches for fear of causing offence.

This misguided attempt to appeal to everyone relates back to the question of the non-existent parties. Ideologies such as Gaullism, Christian Democracy, right-wing libertarianism or avuncular social democracy either lack or have lost their socio-economic base and with it their political 'market'. But these ideologies retain a few adherents. What do these lost souls do? Where do they go?

By and large, they join the Lib Dems. And who can blame them? The party has stubbornly avoided creating a sharp image. No wonder it seems like an empty vessel into which assorted waifs and strays can pour their hopes and dreams.

It is significant that many of these converts are wealthy businessmen. This is a symptom of a broader problem for

business. Like the parties that don't exist, business has, politically, lost its socio-economic base.

I work in public affairs, a trade that (along with its more brutish cousin, lobbying) barely existed in Britain until about 25 years ago. The reason it used not to exist is that there was little need for it. Most businesses, even large companies, were rooted in local communities. Business leaders played an active role in local affairs – often as a Tory councillor, admittedly, but it meant they were plugged in. They knew their local MP and councillors, and they were alive to the interests of their local community.

Nowadays, most business leaders lack these roots. Large companies, often multinational, are no longer loyal to any geographical place. Globalisation has meant that senior managers rarely settle in one place for long, and neither does the work they oversee. Further, a shift from manufacturing to service industries means that much work is of an amorphous nature and rarely dependent on a sense of place.

So business leaders develop political views independent of any community interest. With no community behind them, they hire lobbyists to substitute for public opinion. And while their political ideologies may align with their narrow business interests, they lack any popular base.

This is why such converts have often been a force for instability in the Liberal Democrats. Imagine it. You are wealthy and successful. You have strong political views although no roots. Neither of the other two big parties seems to represent your interests. So you join the Liberal Democrats because the party looks like a blank slate.

Imagine the shock when you arrive to find that this party already has values and policies and opinionated members – and not all of these are to your taste. So you stigmatise the party's members as wild-eyed lunatics and call for the abolition of party conference. You demand 'Year Zero' for all party policies. Impatient with the party's constitutional procedures, you set up ginger groups and parallel structures to press for a more bespoke party.

There are important lessons, both for such political mavericks and for the party as a whole. The Liberal Democrats are a broad church, embracing a variety of strands of Liberalism. If they became a purist sect, they would never achieve political success. Most members could probably find some policies with which they disagree. But, whether a recent convert or a long-standing member, if you are so out of sorts with your party that you believe most of its members and policies should be purged, has it ever occurred that the problem is not the party but instead might be you?

If on the other hand you are in the mainstream of the party but are squeamish of being too bold about Liberal values, in case it repels some voters, you need to get a grip on reality. Perhaps a third of voters share our values, another third might be persuaded to vote for us and a further third hate our guts. The party's priority is to mobilise its natural base, not appease its enemies. If it has no solid interest base, it will become another non-existent party.

Simon Tittle is a member of the *Liberator* Collective.
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HEARTS AND MINDS

Politics is due for a once-in-a-generation change in communicating with voters. David Boyle asks if the Liberal Democrats are ready to lead that change

I had an unnerving experience during the local elections – which probably meant I wasn't working as hard as I should have been. I suddenly saw them as the voters saw them, and it was rather unedifying.

Just follow me on this for a moment: put aside the heady smell of fresh printing, the thrill of the creaking garden gate and the letterbox draught-excluder, and look at the whole business of local campaigning from a non-political point of view.

Because we have all been on the receiving end of leaflets as well as delivering them. We know what they're like: the unpleasant accusations about 'lying'. The claims – by all parties – that they 'work all the year round'. The patronising excision of anything approaching a coherent idea.

And let's face it, I'm not just talking about Labour and Conservative leaflets here.

Such is the state of community politics 35 years on, and it isn't a pretty sight. It meant a breakthrough for the BNP, of all people – only partly thanks to the efforts of Margaret Hodge. It meant the ejection of hard-working councillors simply because voters had no understanding of local issues.

It's a problem because, although there are exceptions to this rule, most voters make their decision on the basis of who they hate the most at national level. There are decreasing rewards for good administration.

But, make no mistake about this, it will change. How do I know? Because, every generation or so, a new way of doing politics emerges – new techniques of getting alongside voters – and everyone has to follow suit.

The real question for Liberal Democrats is what that shift is likely to be – and I know that Ed Davey is in charge of seeking out an answer to this – because historically it is usually Liberals who develop it. And if it isn't Liberal Democrats this time, because we cling too closely to the outward forms of habit, then we will be in trouble.

Luckily, I can save Ed the effort. Because, when you think about it, only one direction is possible. In the indeterminate future, political parties will:

DEVELOP A DIFFERENT TONE OF VOICE

Political discourse in the UK now falls strictly into three categories. There is campaigning language: superficial, vacuous, patronising. There is journalistic language: focused entirely on personalities and Westminster gossip. And there is policy language, which occasionally escapes into politicians' speeches, and which is

overwhelmingly technocratic.

It is packed with statistics, but is almost entirely empty of passion or emotion. It assumes that people are small cogs in

giant machines where the levers are in Whitehall, despite all the evidence to the contrary – the real message of decentralisation is that central management tends to fail. And it is staggeringly off-putting.

All the parties – except possibly the Greens – communicate mainly in this policy language, betraying the vapid reality behind the campaigning. But unfortunately, one of the few politicians in Europe who has identified and named the problem is a monster.

Jean-Marie Le Pen in France describes himself as the only opponent of what he called the 'technocratic elite'. It would be a disaster if the only people who opposed this kind of technocracy were the Fascists.

Politicians will eventually follow modern advertising into developing a language that finds the heart in policy, which can genuinely inspire and communicate. It is possible, and we have to do it first.

MAKE TRAINING THE CENTRAL PURPOSE OF POLITICS

Yes, the central purpose of politics is to take over the levers of power. But the beginnings of the realisation – that the central activity of political parties should be training – has already begun to happen as well. Professional training in the Liberal Democrats has grown out of all proportion over the past decade, and will do so even more.

Nor are we the only party to realise that training our own people in the basic skills of politics is an absolutely central task. But that is only part of it: we will see a massive expansion in both the range of what they train and the people they train.

If a major obstacle to sustainable local administrations is the failure of councillors to work effectively with each other – the constant irritation of personalities – then that is what they will design training to tackle.

The slow realisation that Westminster and Whitehall are almost powerless to bring about real change has implications here. It means that somebody has to train the tens of thousands of local representatives and activists who are going to make things happen, change public services, at local level.

This is a political activity – no amount of New Labour utilitarianism can pretend otherwise – so it makes sense for political parties to be involved.

SPREAD POLITICAL SKILLS AS BROADLY AS POSSIBLE

But this training will also blur the distinction between people in the party and people outside it – just as community politics deliberately blurred the same distinctions.

It will also blur the boundaries between politics, administration and personal development.

Local parties will be training organisations that set out to provide people with the skills and experience they need to transform their neighbourhoods and their own lives.

There is a limit, after all, to the number of people who will flock to political parties for door-stepping. It has to be broader than that: it has to be about the business of change.

Change is, after all, the central issue of our time – is it possible, personally or politically, can we avoid the bizarre paradoxes that leave you back where you started, can we find a grammar of change that makes it happen?

That is why political parties will find themselves providing people with the skills they need to take power for themselves – not just politically, but personally as well. They will become training organisations that help people get what they want – a skill sadly excluded from national curriculums of all kinds.

That is the future shape of local parties. The first party to develop a module along those lines, and roll it out to members and then beyond, and cascade it as widely as possible, is going to find itself at an enormous political advantage.

The problem with the model of campaigning we have now is that it is often highly professional, but it is hollow – and obviously hollow to everyone outside. It is focused exclusively on getting votes.

It will succeed in doing that, briefly, but because everyone knows it has no depth – people feel that the leaflets they receive are written with that objective only – it lacks the authenticity it needs to convince heart and mind. In the long run – however professional the product – it is alienating.

I'm not suggesting that political parties of the future will somehow eschew elections or campaigning. Far from it.

But because they will find a new moral core – both a new kind of unpatronising language, and a central purpose that matches it – they carry more conviction and more loyalty. They will genuinely be organisations that very large numbers of people might conceivably join again.

Let's face it, when national political parties manage to attract only the same number of members as a modest women's magazine can attract readers, something is wrong with the model.

I am not pleading for something different, I'm predicting what I believe is inevitable. And when it happens, we might genuinely and with conviction put on our leaflets: if we win, you win.

David Boyle is a member of the Liberal Democrats' Federal Policy Committee and the author of *Blondel's Song* (Penguin). Website: www.david-boyle.co.uk

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POWER TO THE POWERHOUSE

The Liberal Democrats' new leader should encourage the party to become an intellectual powerhouse, capable of working out how to reach potential new support, says Bernard Salmon

Ming Campbell's election as Lib Dem leader was in the end relatively clear-cut. But there are a number of challenges and issues which he and the wider leadership have to confront if there is to be any prospect of real progress for the party.

Perhaps the most important task facing him will be to show that the policies which the party has are based on sound liberal principles and to communicate those values clearly to potential voters.

Such an approach will require the party to become something which it hasn't been for some years – an intellectual powerhouse committed to developing new ideas, as well as revisiting some traditional liberal ideas and adapting them for current circumstances.

That will require a real cultural change within the party, as it will mean that intellectual development will have to be seen as at least as important as campaigning techniques. And such a cultural change can be prodded forward by a leader who shows that he is willing to engage in real debate about the party's values and the policy direction which stems from those values.

The leader should encourage party spokespeople to look up from the immediate political battle once in a while and spend time thinking about where they want the party to go, whether on a particular issue or more generally. I would even suggest that any spokesperson who doesn't come up with a pamphlet, book chapter or even a whole book every so often is not doing their job correctly. I would also say that every spokesperson should be trying to ensure that they write at least one article every month on matters of policy or principle – for the mass market papers and media if possible, not just the *Indy* or the *Grauniad*.

And it should go without saying that party spokespeople (and the leader himself on occasion) should contribute to organs like *Liberator* as often as possible and generally try to improve communication between the parliamentary parties and the grassroots.

But such a cultural change is only likely to have a real impact if it involves the wider membership of the party. Local parties and individual members should be encouraged to get involved in the policy process as much as possible.

Currently only a handful take the trouble to submit motions to the party's conference. And very few of those are selected for debate, mainly because much of the agenda is devoted to long and turgid motions based on policy papers, which practically no-one reads, which have been drawn up by

working groups stuffed with so-called experts, which often produce lowest common denominator mush. Indeed, the papers are probably most avidly read by our political opponents, looking for the sentence which can be taken out of context and twisted to prove that the Lib Dems are a bunch of dangerous lunatics.

It is difficult to think of a process less designed to produce intellectual debate and clarity over the party's values. The party leadership (not just Campbell) should recognise that the party's policy-making system needs a radical overhaul.

I would favour moving to a system based more on a select committee model, with a handful of standing committees covering, for instance, justice and civil liberties, economic and environmental affairs, public services (including health, education and social security), and international affairs.

Such committees could have half their membership elected each year, so that there is some continuity with these two-year terms but not so much that they become stultified. Relevant party spokespeople should also be members of such committees automatically and be expected to run any major policy announcements past the committee in advance where possible. The committees would be able to determine their own methods of working, taking evidence from experts as required, but ensuring that those 'experts' do not dominate matters as much as they do in the policy working groups, leaving space for people with a more generalist approach. The Federal Policy Committee could continue as a loose co-ordinating body.

But it's not just the party's values and policy-making process which the party's leadership has to be concerned about. There is also the question of what groups and individuals the party needs to reach out to in order to continue its progress and how it actually does this.

Part of this must include action to address the party's still woeful record on the issue of ensuring that there are adequate numbers of women and members of ethnic minorities among our elected representatives. Campbell and the party's Federal Executive should set some challenging but achievable targets for members of both groups in terms of being selected as candidates for winnable seats, in all kinds of elections.

I also hope that the leader will try to ensure that nominations to the House of Lords also contain significant numbers of both groups. However, the party should try and

avoid going down the blind alley of promoting positive discrimination (as opposed to positive action), as that is wrong both in principle and in practice.

But this issue also extends to other groups in society. Politics is generally a fairly middle-class activity dominated by lawyers, journalists, teachers and administrators, and the Lib Dems are no different (indeed, both Ming Campbell and his defeated leadership rival Simon Hughes are former lawyers, while Chris Huhne is a journalist and businessman).

I think we should at least be asking where all the Lib Dem refuse collectors, bar staff, posties and call centre workers are. Does the way in which politics now operates mean that the interests of a woman holding down a couple of cleaning jobs to survive are not really taken into account?

If so, what do we as a party do about it? I offer no easy solutions, but I think it's something the party does have to think about if it is serious about social justice. Indeed, the issue of how we get more people involved in the political process should be a key one for the new leadership. With so many people not even bothering to vote, any party that can tap into that reservoir of potential support is likely to see big dividends.

The leadership should also consider what groups and individuals might be particularly receptive to the liberal message we have. This should not be a matter of selecting a group and tailoring a particular message to suit them, but rather engaging in real dialogue and showing what we have done for people in that group. In no particular order, groups of people that I think could be a good source of support, members and activists if we continue to develop links with

them include peace campaigners, small businesses, trades unionists, public sector workers, environmentalists and civil liberties campaigners.

I would also like to see Campbell and the party as a whole loudly proclaim the benefits of a multicultural society, while at the same time tackling head on the extremism found in some groups, which in its various forms includes those who want to teach creationist idiocy in schools, the thugs of the BNP and those who blaspheme against Allah by setting off bombs in his name.

All this raises the issue of whether the party's campaigning techniques are adequate for the job in hand. Lib Dems have become pretty good at campaigning on a constituency level, although there are always improvements to be made.

However, it is possible to argue that the party is less good at issue-based campaigning as well as more general 'hearts and minds' stuff and that is something the new leader has to address. And, despite the valiant efforts of some MEPs, there needs to be a great improvement in more regional-based campaigning. If the Lib Dems are to reach out to new people and make progress, there will have to be a concerted effort to develop so-called 'black holes', not to mention some which are a rather dark shade of grey.

In short, Campbell and the rest of the party's leadership have a lot of work in front of them if the party is to progress further. It should be an interesting ride.

Bernard Salmon is a freelance journalist and a former Liberal Democrat member of Highland Council

OBITUARY: GWYNETH PRITCHARD

Harry Lewis pays tribute to a Liberator book reviewer and Tower Hamlets activist

Though she was well-known and respected in medical and social work circles, Gwyneth Pritchard's contributions to Liberalism are less heralded.

Gwyneth was a regular contributor to the review pages of *Liberator*. Some of her reviews attained notoriety. *Liberator* once received a book on the achievements of a disabled person in the Bristol area. Gwyneth knew of the case and tore the book to shreds for failing to acknowledge the enormous support that had made the undoubted achievement possible. This was typical of the even-handedness of her approach.

I met 'Mr.Blue' at a No Exit Christmas party a few years ago. (No Exit was a small independent crime publisher, which for some reason sent *Liberator* its books, and Gwyneth loved crime fiction).

Mr.Blue had been lionised by the hip media for his childhood rebellion (which put him in and out of borstals and prison). His mother had left his father when young, and his father had then struggled to bring up his son whilst holding down the necessary employment in 1950s America. Gwyneth exposed the selfishness of the child and his egotistical life. The author told me that Gwyneth was the only reviewer who had taken him to task and said he admitted, perhaps for the first time, that what she wrote was true.

Gwyneth, who died in February aged 88, was a long-time supporter and benefactor of the Liberal Democrats in Tower Hamlets.

She held a degree in social work and originally came to Tower Hamlets to work with the London Hospital. Later, she joined the civil service as a social work adviser and will be remembered for her helpfulness and support towards charities, especially those working with the homeless in Tower Hamlets.

She joined the then Liberal Party in the borough when it helped her with a housing problem. She was a loyal and supportive member in the period when the Liberals planned for and took control of the borough, and served as their nominee on the Community Health Council.

Despite disability, her previous experience made her invaluable in logistical back-up, analysing the extensive surveying carried out by the Focus Team. She was often generous with financial help at election times and during the court case that threatened seven Tower Hamlets councillors with being debarred.

Despite having mobility problems and being housebound in the latter years of her life, Gwyneth had a lively interest in community affairs and supported many local organisations, especially the complementary health charity Pathways. Her deep knowledge of the National Health Service revealed to her its many shortcomings, which her colleagues hope to tackle, ranging from likely scams with taxis through to blatant racism in the workforce.

SUCKED INTO THE SYSTEM

The Lib Dems' mixed bag of results in London showed what happens when they get sucked into town halls from the streets, says Stewart Rayment

London produced some very mixed results for the Liberal Democrats on 4 May. On the one hand, they won Richmond and held Kingston and Sutton with losses. They became the largest party in Brent and Camden and made progress in Haringey and Lewisham.

On the other hand they lost Lambeth, lost overall control in Islington, trod water in Southwark and made heavy losses in Tower Hamlets. So what went wrong?

High profile casualties included group leaders Steve Carey in Hillingdon, Steve Hitchins in Islington, Jeremy Baker in Lambeth and Janet Ludlow in Tower Hamlets.

Whatever the problems faced by Labour nationally, it is clear that their workers are capable of being motivated to go out and campaign. Old Labour supporters who are not much enamoured with their government are none the less putting in the leg work – in Lambeth for example, for some months, and also in Tower Hamlets where telephone canvassing of known Lib Dem supporters with the Respect scare started early in the New Year.

There were however many faults of the Lib Dems' own. Complacency. In Islington, little work was done in the core southern wards deemed safe, while an attempt was made to drive Labour out of the northern wards. A similar strategy accounts in part for our failure to take Islington South in the general election last year – lessons were clearly not learnt. There may have been an anti-incumbency vote, given the party did well the same night in neighbouring Camden and Haringey, while in Southwark there was little change and the party failed to gain the expected overall control.

The debacle in Islington was I think an instructive lesson in taking safe seats for granted and political greed. The 2002 election result was 38 LD and 10 Labour. One might have thought that, apart from trying to win 39-9 by picking up the split ward, LD support was at an obvious high water mark and it was time to defend. Instead they poured resources out of Islington South – on the assumption that since we held every seat it was all safe – into the north with the object of more or less wiping Labour off the council.

In the event, we held seven of the eight dodgy seats in the far north, came nowhere remotely near gains from Labour, and went down by 30-150 vote margins in four previously 'safe' wards – losing 12 seats including leader Steve Hitchins's own. The Labour majorities were on a small enough scale that some more canvassing and some knock-up would probably have held these seats.

Larger Tory and Green votes than normal emerged in third or fourth place everywhere we lost, which canvassing

would have picked up and allowed some counter measures to be taken.

Southwark, where the Lib Dems were simply the largest party, had more of an excuse for trying to break through in new wards. Both Livesey and East Walworth wards were thus a casualty but we held on by taking East Dulwich from Labour and entering formal coalition with the Tories. Simon Hughes is great in his own manor, but is reckoned to lack enthusiasm for expansion beyond – campaigners in Dulwich complained about this and I've heard it many times before.

What went wrong in Tower Hamlets? Since I was more involved in that campaign, I'll look at it in more detail. I suspect that the problems can be applied elsewhere, alas. After showing reasonable signs of recovery in 2002 (from 7 to 16 seats), most people anticipated the Lib Dems being back in power, albeit in a no overall control situation. Labour faced attack from Respect and the Conservatives as well as the Lib Dems, who instead now have only six councillors.

Labour is known to have targeted Janet Ludlow's ward. Expecting losses to Respect, its strategy was clearly to hold on by picking up Lib Dem seats. Janet was undoubtedly the only member of the surviving group in 1994 capable of being leader, and has continued so over the last twelve years. She was successively joined by many capable individuals, though lacking the fight of the old Focus Team.

There is a fatal tendency in many Liberals to want to make the most of a situation, and this has, to my mind, bedevilled the group over the last decade. As a result of this you get sucked into the system rather than fighting it – and under what passes for local government in Blair's cabinet committees, those who are supposed to provide the checks and balances never get access to the information they need (and should be entitled to). Sucked into the administration, you have less of a presence on the streets – Focus, once monthly, becomes quarterly if you're lucky; you fall back on the familiar while the world changes (I reckon that 1 in 10 people on the 2006 electoral register was there in 1990).

One of those changes which hits inner city Lib Dems heavily is Labour's progressive privatisation of council housing. Councillors have less locus with the new 'social landlords' and that calls for a rethink of strategy.

Furthermore, Janet never really got the support she needed in forming the political direction of the party. Aside from defending her own seat from a known Labour attack, she was effectively running the whole campaign across the borough.

Readers of *Liberator* are no doubt aware that the Tower Hamlets local party (which had won the award for the largest growth in 2004/05) is suspended. This factor will not have helped the election campaign. The suspension, whatever reasons were officially given, related to the rapid growth of the party in the run-up to the 2005 general election and its impact on the selection of candidates.

Between 2002/04, a number of younger, more fundamentalist Muslims became members and dominated the executive. Since then, the local party has been dominated by the manoeuvrings of various Bangla factions, leaving white activists and councillors largely marginalised.

London region wasn't happy with the general election selection process, but took a long time to do anything about it – probably because of the new found favour of the Lib Dems among Muslim voters. Simon Hughes weakly justified the problem saying a lot of parties have surges in recruitment when it comes to selecting candidates – his head is firmly in the sand, because he knows the nature of the problem in Tower Hamlets. However, it is not enough to recruit new members; those members need to be active on the streets and not just in their own communities.

Standing against George Galloway in Bethnal Green and Bow would have been difficult for any candidate; the Lib Dems were bound to be marginalised in the fight between Respect and the singularly useless Oona King (good riddance). If the Lib Dems hold together, it will still be easier to win the parliamentary seat off Gorgeous George than from Labour.

A total lack of work was done in the Poplar and Canning Town constituency and the activist membership of the party largely camped in Islington South for the general election. With hindsight, this was a mistake. With the local elections a year away, that was the time to start to make good the shortcomings of campaigning up to that point, but activists frequently vote with their feet when they are unhappy at the way a selection has gone.

At the St Dunstan's ward by-election in June 2004, Respect had won its first council seat and the Lib Dems came a close second – the older Banglas voted for them in the wake of the Iraq War, the younger ones for Respect. I think there was overconfidence that this pattern would be repeated. The Lib Dems generally have to look to how they retain the Muslim vote as Iraq subsides as an issue, especially where they are not the only party competing against Labour for that vote.

Winning the Bangla vote doesn't happen by magic. Rule one – nobody can outbid the Labour Party when it comes to electoral bribes; the rumours of promises across the borough are rife and Labour can deliver. They've done it before.

I reckoned that if more than 15% of the electorate were Banglas, Labour could take more or less any ward on a low turnout because they happen to be a disciplined vote, while the other voters are fickle and stay in watching *Eastenders* or the like.

This is probably what happened in Bow, given the scale of the Lib Dem defeat by a Labour majority of more than 300. Only where the Lib Dem vote was embedded in a Bangla community – Abdul Motin in Weavers ward (and it is a tribute to Jeremy Shaw that the power base he built up there survives) – were they able to resist this.

The other problems are that cross-party deals are struck between Bangla candidates and that there is a not unnatural tendency for Bangla voters to prefer Bangla candidates unless one has demonstrated a clear commitment over time. These problems were rife, as a close look at who got elected irrespective of party shows; split wards are now the norm.

Respect worked as the Lib Dems had worked in the past, not quite as effectively to my mind, but 11 councillors is a good start. The Tories also worked hard on the Isle of Dogs and might have done better had they concentrated their resources more.

Where will Respect be in four years' time? On the face of it, Galloway is consolidating his support, but as this election shows, a massive Labour fight back is under way. As I said, a disciplined Lib Dem attack could sail through the middle and take the seat. There are lessons to be learnt from all of this, across London and beyond. Learn them and apply them.

Stewart Rayment is a member of the *Liberator* Collective and was a Tower Hamlets Lib Dem councillor 1986-94

£9 MILLION NIGHTCLUB RAP

Why did Southwark's Liberal Democrat administration get on the wrong side of a dispute with a black community organisation, asks Jonathan Hunt

When planning committee members of Southwark Council granted permission for Raymond Stevenson's nightclub, minutes after midnight on a hot, sweaty July evening in 2002, they wondered why he continued to protest in a loud and impassioned tone.

He'd got what he came for, hadn't he? Even though it was six years late. The consent he was so animated about had been given more recently, without his knowledge. To keep him quiet, I promised to visit Imperial Gardens and find out more.

Since then, the club has found far-reaching fame – and fortune may soon follow. Imperial Gardens is becoming a legend in local government. It was the subject of a district auditor's public interest report, and is on target to feature in a £9 million court case.

Indeed, if the lawsuit is successful, it could put up Southwark council tax by more than 10 per cent next year. For AIG, the council's indemnity insurers, has refused to meet the claim.

Imperial Gardens opened in 1995 when Raymond Stevenson, a black RSC-trained actor, dancer and events promoter, leased a series of railway arches in Camberwell New Road, with business partner Lucia Hinton.

He was realising a lifelong dream, nurtured in the Lambeth council children's homes where he grew up. For he envisaged much more than a licensed late-night disco.

Imperial Gardens boasted a social ethos. It was a youth club and talent factory as well. Singing stars, musicians and writers of note emerged from the daytime classes subsidised by the nightclub. With few close neighbours and no complaints, it was hard to understand why Southwark planning would only give temporary consent, renewed grudgingly.

For without planning permission, Stevenson and Hinton found it hard to invest more in developing the business.

Unknown to Stevenson, the area was the favoured site for a new railway station, with much of the land bought by Sainsbury's to ensure it could build the designated new store.

The land to the west housed a second-hand car lot. The first Stevenson and Hinton knew that 49 flats were to be built by a developer was when builders arrived to erect a steel fence – just 3m from their emergency exit.

I made some inquiries. It was an unlikely site for housing, zoned for commercial and employment purposes. Because change-of-use consent was required to build homes, documents had to be copied to the government office for London.

GoL held papers that were not replicated in Southwark planning files. Others had been replaced on versions of council headed paper printed after the dates the letters bore. Documents confirmed that senior planners must have known of the existence of Imperial Gardens, which was not consulted about the development application. Nor had two other black organisations nearby.

In August, I called for an independent public investigation. We got an internal inquiry. It was easily shown to be flawed. So, in November, council bosses reluctantly called in the District Auditor.

I must confess to having waxed lyrical. "This is the start of cleaning out Labour's Aegean stables," I said in local papers. There was also evidence to link a senior Labour councillor.

It is doubtful if the auditor's team would have found all its evidence had it not been for hours of diligent work by Lucia and Raymond. They went through hundreds of council and Network Rail files with ever perceptive forensic skills, bringing me some papers for analysis and interpretation. Some turned out to be revealing. Others not.

They also became resourceful political campaigners, bringing deputations and supporters to full council assemblies. Meetings reverberated to the sound of African drums. The natives were obviously restive.

The local and ethnic press reported the issues fully and fairly. Black radio stations like Peckham-based Galaxy called out people in their hundreds. Exchanges with senior officers became fraught. The police were called to council offices, to little purpose. Every time they said no problem. Stevenson created noise and disturbance, but was well within the law.

No problem, said police called to meetings.

Imperial Gardens closed in 2003. Much of its income came from promoters of events. When they saw flats rising so close to the club, they thought residents would complain. So they cancelled their bookings, making the club unviable.

Other black victims of planning approached Raymond or me, leading to the Black Awareness Group being set up to campaign on their behalf.

The district auditor reported in February 2004, finding in favour of Imperial Gardens. Stevenson and Hinton were due compensation. The auditor condemned the way Southwark Council had dealt with Imperial Gardens, finding "serious deficiencies" in the planning process. Procedures, he said, were not followed and "statutory requirements were not observed".

He also believed that “the conduct of some officers and some members has not met the standards expected of public servants”. Evidence from a senior officer was rejected as “wholly unreliable”. Together with “weak procedures and poor record keeping”, it left the council “unable to conclusively rebut allegations of corrupt and improper practices”.

My personal reaction was: “that’s it. I’ve done my bit and its time to move on. Let the victims negotiate how much with the council.”

Nick Stanton, the Lib Dem leader with whom I had liased, generously gave me several paragraphs on the council press release. Two council planning mangers were suspended.

So it was time to sign up Raymond and Lucia as Liberal Democrat members, as agreed, and help the excellent work done by Colin Hunte, the black local Lib Dem chair, helping the party win huge, representative support among the black community in Camberwell and Peckham.

Then it all started going wrong. No easy negotiations with the council. Legal barriers all the way. Unsuccessful legal excuse after unsuccessful legal excuses were put advanced as a reason against paying compensation.

“The company can’t bring a claim because it is in liquidation... Shareholders can’t make a claim...”. Stevenson’s lawyers show they can. The council says it has no power to pay compensation even if it wanted to. It calls in top West End lawyers... “Well, yes they can, actually... but we can’t pay out because the company declared a loss in 2001...” “so what, lots of firms declare losses...”

Why is the council procrastinating? Is it trying to starve them out, so they run out of money and energy before they can make a claim?

Argument continued to rage over how much the council should advance to pay a lawyer to draw up a formal legal claim. “Only £3,000 and no more”, says the council. “No, they need £35,000,” says Harriet Harman, local MP and also solicitor-general. In January 2005, the council advanced £25,000.

And the attitude of the Lib Dem leadership changes drastically. Stevenson is increasingly demonised by Lib Dem councillors. Meanwhile, the old Labour guard is losing out. Smart young New Labour lawyer Peter John drags nine Labour members along to a meeting of the Black Awareness Group, to face down the mixed-race Tory leader and me. John is taking over... now he’s leader, presenting a fresh young anti-racist image.

Sadly, Lib Dem leaders do anything but present such an image. Unfortunate things are said; an unnecessary hard line is taken against deputations and protestors; attitudes and body language are misinterpreted. Stanton asks “what did the Stephen Lawrence inquiry achieve?” This did not go down well.

This piece should not be about me, but occasionally I get caught in the spotlight. I was warned to stop taking up these cases of discrimination and corruption. They were “embarrassing the council”, and made it difficult to win awards.

I told the leader and chief whip I could not and would not accede to their wishes. Justice and the truth mattered more than gold stars. I explained I would never be able to look black friends in the eye again, let alone my family, if I betrayed people who trusted me.

In retrospect, the issue for other groups is, when does a council that has changed political control cease to “belong”

to the previous regime, and become the property of the new rulers?

I believed my duty to individuals wronged by the old council outweighed any feelings of loyalty to the Lib Dem one, if a choice had to be made. So I knew I was in trouble, and suspected that retribution would follow soon. In May 2004, my group nominated me for two posts: re-election as vice-chair of planning and chair of my community council.

Immediately before the annual council meeting, I learned officers had made unspecified (so irrefutable) complaints against me. I was forced to withdraw my nominations.

But many in the black community saw it as an attempt to silence a champion of their rights, as media coverage attested. Within weeks later, charges were made, such as alleging institutional racism and ‘winding-up’ Raymond Stevenson. It took until October 2005 for the Standards Board to clear me of all these false allegations.

From early summer 2004, the temperature began to rise. The council decided to head off the CRE with its own inquiry, conducted by Lord Ouseley, an independent peer, and former CRE chair.

Many of my ‘victims’ gave evidence to Herman Ouseley, including people who, he said, “had their lives destroyed by Southwark council”. According to Private Eye magazine, the first four versions of his report were sent back, and his annexe had some 40 per cent of its text blacked out.

Some months later, Ouseley wrote in an Evening Standard article how he was “betrayed by the white hierarchy that runs the town hall”. More recently, he declared that victims “have been treated unreasonably, unfairly, differentially and detrimentally, which adds up to inferred discriminatory treatment”.

Last summer, more excitement when Stevenson’s lawyers sent Southwark a claim for £9.1m. It was drawn up by Andrew Arden QC, a leading expert in local government law, and in October was served as a writ.

Its main components were loss of profits from the business, based on similar businesses and extrapolated to date, plus compensation, elements for human rights infringements and for not according a service of an equal value. Stevenson, Hinton and a third partner would have settled for a fraction of that sum two years ago when I tried to broker a deal. The council’s insurer, AIG, has yet to say if the council is covered by its policy. So the cost to the council-tax payer is still unknown. But it won’t be on the election year bill.

However, the district auditor is under pressure to re-open his investigation as the council failed to hand over all the relevant documents. Some were allegedly found under the desk of a chief officer of the council, and never given to the DA.

If the council is found to have deliberately withheld crucial evidence, it opens up new areas of responsibility and blame. Unfortunately, this and unjustified charges of racism could have reflected on Lib Dem candidates in May, many of whom have had nothing to do with this sorry case.

The lesson for councillors winning control of other boroughs this May is to beware of taking responsibility for other parties’ cock-ups, and getting too close to the officers they inherit.

Jonathan Hunt was a Liberal Democrat councillor (suspended) in Southwark

GROWING PAINS

Threats to the environment mean that Liberal Democrats must completely rethink their economic approach, argues Tony Beamish

Iain Sharpe suggested in *Liberator* 305 that someone might “revive the kind of ecological ‘zero-growth’ mumbo-jumbo that did the rounds... in the 1980s”, and I intend to do something like that; but first I would like to comment on the term ‘mumbo-jumbo’.

He may regard a complex notion, of which he apparently disapproves, as some sort of witchcraft; but there is a possibility that there may be something significant behind it.

When there is a serious threat to the conventional wisdom, rational argument often gets overlaid by ignorance or prejudice. TH Huxley wrote: “It is the customary fate of new truths to begin as heresies and to end as superstitions”; and I suggest that to question the absolute necessity of economic growth is neither heresy nor mumbo-jumbo, but in fact is ‘new truth’.

By contrast, a quarter of a century ago, President Reagan’s ultra-growthist and monetarist policies were described as ‘voodoo economics’, and I think that there was then real justification for the ‘witchcraft’ label. In fact, many people still regard Reaganomics as superstition, and much else of conventional economic thinking besides.

In 1979, the old Liberal Party passed a motion that included, as part of its preamble, the statement “economic growth, as conventionally measured, is neither achievable nor desirable”. The motion was passed, but not without strong opposition from members of the party who disputed part or all of that statement.

It was about then that the term zero-growth began to be heard. It was not used by sensible ecologists or green activists, but was a smear put about by growthists in order to justify unlimited and undifferentiated growth. At the same time, the distinguished American economist Kenneth Boulding wrote: “anyone who believes exponential growth can go on forever in a finite world is either a madman or an economist”!

As so often, the devil is in the detail. The phrase “as conventionally measured” leaves a lot unsaid. The party now argues, rightly, that the use of Gross Domestic Product as the sole measure of economic progress is ridiculous, since it includes, as positive, ‘bads’ as well as ‘goods’, and excludes many ‘goods’ which are not easily measurable in money terms but are obviously positive.

So when we say ‘economic growth’, what are we really talking about? Growth of what, where, at whose expense and for whose benefit? It is becoming clear that it is a portmanteau term, commonly used in the sense of “increase in GDP as measured in money terms”; this meaning is perfectly valid – with the provisos just mentioned. But unfortunately there are many (including some economists, who should know better) who appear to mean “increase in the production, trade, and consumption of material goods” –

or else they think that such increases in GDP “as conventionally measured” are a near enough approximation for practical purposes. I am sure there are not many readers of *Liberator* who would go along with that now!

To sum up, what I want to stress is that growth of GDP and growth of our impact on the physical world (now called our ecological footprint) are not the same thing; and that there are real limits to the growth of the latter, most of which have already been surpassed. The question of limits to the growth of the money economy is another matter, which we can discuss at another time; that is concerned with the nature of capitalism itself.

The case for accepting limits to physical growth was made 30 years ago in the book of that name prepared by the Club of Rome; a second book *Beyond the Limits* appeared in 1992, and *Limits to Growth – the Thirty-year Update* has recently been published by Earthscan in the UK. I strongly urge readers to get hold of a copy. It brings the facts up-to-date and refutes the criticisms of the original book, which was not understood properly, or perhaps was deliberately misunderstood by those who did not like its conclusions.

The central argument of these books is that the modern industrial socio-economic system is prone to overshoot the natural limits of the real world. In the authors’ view, we as a species will only achieve true sustainability if we change the system. Matthew Huntbach, in a recent letter to *Liberal Democrat News*, put his finger on this vital point – which is that a fundamental rethink of our economic ideas is now necessary.

Actually, such a rethink is now in progress; it amounts to a revolution in thought comparable to the agricultural and industrial revolutions. The authors of *Limits to Growth – The Thirty-year Update* call this the sustainability revolution; and they are divided as to whether the new thinking will become generally accepted in time to avoid the collapse that will inevitably result if we go on as we are. The crucial question is, “How quickly can the sustainability revolution take over in people’s hearts and minds?”

Those like myself who agree that there are limits to growth are usually talking about one of two concepts, often both – first, the growing demands that the industrialised world is putting on the planet’s finite resources; and second, the growing dysfunctionality of economics and the societies we live in.

We do not say “everyone must put on hair shirts and freeze in the dark”, as some contrarians argue: we say “if we pretend that the physical, social, and psychological limits to economic expansion do not exist, or can be avoided by technical fixes, then we are doomed to pay the price. We would be much more likely to increase our prosperity – and, indeed our happiness – by changing our priorities.”

But almost all politicians and journalists, and even many conventional economists, are unable to conceive of any route to increased prosperity that does not involve increasing the rate of extraction of matter and/or energy from the natural world, its conversion into ‘goods’, and the resulting over-exploitation of resources (including the natural sinks into which we pour our wastes). For them, it is more important to grow than to sustain.

What is more, if the costs of doing all this (including the cost of disposing of the goods after they have served their purpose) can be concealed, then the price of the goods produced can be kept below the real cost; and the market, to which we pay so much attention, is distorted. It is now often considered cheaper, and therefore better, to replace domestic capital goods and vehicles than to repair them. There are also many instances of perverse subsidies, which have the same effect.

And of course, the pressure on people to conform to the conventional wisdom also leads to social and psychological breakdown. Yet even so, for most people, the idea that this whole expansionary process should be reduced, or even halted, is indeed ‘mumbo-jumbo’.

The media, in general, seem to judge any and all economic policy proposals by only one criterion: “What will be the effect of this proposal on the prospects for growth?” – and although by this they ostensibly mean “growth of GDP”, they mostly think that such growth depends on physical growth, to which they see no end.

Unfortunately many Lib Dems are trying to have it both ways: while they are very conscious of the costs referred to above, and share the belief that the expansionist ‘voodoo’ system is, in the long run, “neither achievable nor desirable”, they are reluctant to advocate concrete proposals intended to make a difference.

For example, we claim to have a ‘green’ component to all our major policy strands, and make much of our emphasis on themes such as waste and recycling, public transport, and better home insulation for the elderly.

But we have not bitten the bullet and admitted bluntly that if people in the rich nations do not make major changes to their way of life – by accepting the unpalatable truth that they are pushing against, and in some ways exceeding, the physical limits to growth – then their grandchildren and probably their children will be forced to accept much more drastic changes by Mother Nature. The longer we delay making the changes ourselves, the harder it will be to make them later.

In fact, for people like myself who describe themselves as ‘deep green’, what is commonly called environmentalism is not enough. Thus it was with pleasurable anticipation that I read Lynne Featherstone’s piece *The Money is Missing* in

Liberator 308. But, although I agreed in principle with her thesis that we need to make our ideas on economics better understood by the voters, I was disappointed that she appeared to believe that our ideas on economics did not need improvement, and she did not mention the vital links between voters’ own behaviour and the general deterioration of the global, national and local environments.

Perhaps we have no idea how to put such an iconoclastic idea across to the voters, or even to the press; it would certainly be difficult, but we should not flinch from it. I would draw readers’ attention to Professor J K Galbraith’s dictum: “Politics is not the art of the possible; it consists of choosing between the disastrous and the unpalatable”. In my view, the economic policies currently practised by the rich nations, however bravely they may try to introduce green palliatives, are disastrous; and to make a big enough difference, we are going to have to choose what seems at first sight quite unpalatable.

However, in Liberator 308 were also two pieces, *Generational Theft – or Equality* by Ed Vickers and *Generation Game* by Simon Titley, that do seem to indicate one way to square the circle. We must appeal to the youth vote, for it is young people, and their children, who will suffer most from the present generation’s unthinking selfishness.

I also strongly support Matthew Taylor’s argument (Liberator 308) that, whatever we do about voters who have recently voted for us but might be drawn back to the Tories or to ‘New’ Labour, we should make a strong appeal to those who, while sympathising with us, have voted for other parties but who up to now have not seen us as plausible.

While that rather amorphous group probably includes some people who think we are ‘woolly’ (i.e. not conservative enough) about economic matters; I am convinced that there are also many who, realising that the present system is not doing the job claimed for it, do not see in any of the major political parties may desire to change it – and would therefore be happy to support a party that “tells it like it is”.

Tony Beamish co-founded in 1977 the Liberal Ecology Group (now the Green Liberal Democrats). In 1979 he helped get the famous Margate Liberal Assembly motion on conventional economic growth passed. He has written several short papers on ecological economics and the booklet *No Free Lunch*.

TORBAY DISPUTE

Dear Liberator,

Officers and members in the Torbay and Totnes parliamentary constituencies are used to certain Torbay councillors living in denial about the damage they have caused to the party's reputation in south Devon.

The letter in Liberator 309 from Cllr Gordon Jennings demonstrates the extent of the fantasy world some of them are living in.

Following the refusal of the council group, after two special general meetings in the Torbay and Totnes parliamentary constituencies, to row back a 65% increase in allowances, a last ditch attempt at a deal resulted in agreement between the then leader of the council group and Cllr Jennings, with the then Torbay party president and a senior councillor representing the two local parties.

It was agreed that the council group would cut allowances by £112,000, issue a public apology and fulfil a number of obligations laid out in a councillors' contract.

The details were explained to local party officers from the two constituencies and they endorsed the deal. At a simultaneous meeting, the then leader and Cllr Jennings presented the 'deal' they had just negotiated to the rest of the council group who promptly cut the saving in half, rejected the apology and amended the contract. This, Cllr Jennings believes, is the council group sticking to its part of the deal.

Andrew Douglas-Dunbar
chair Torbay Liberal Democrats

John Stevens
chair Totnes Liberal Democrats

Adrian Sanders
Liberal Democrat MP for Torbay

Mike Treleaven
LibDem candidate Totnes 2005

LETTERS

UNINTELLIGENT DESIGNS

Dear Liberator,

Faith schools are an appalling development. It is a basic tenet of liberalism that state and church remain separate.

Church of England schools are in an anomalous position as long as the church remains established – a position, by the way, that compromises the church's ability to argue for values not being upheld by any current government.

No state education system should give any support to a particular faith. Hurrah for the Revd Chris Wilson, who pointed this out at the conference of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers in April.

Particularly alarming is the news that 42 of the first 100 academies have religious sponsors and that they have some power to influence the curriculum. It is crucial that children are taught the agreed national curriculum regardless of their gender, ethnicity or religious faith. How else are we to build a multicultural society with mutual respect and understanding?

'Intelligent design' is an especially regressive notion promoted by those who are either unaware of the basis of scientific thought or are unwilling to tolerate its intellectual demands.

If 'intelligent design' is to be mentioned at all, it should certainly not appear in science classes. Perhaps along with myths recorded in the Golden Bough?

Elizabeth Sidney
Islington

SAY ONE THING, DO ANOTHER

Dear Liberator,

The choice of Ming Campbell as leader was a very easy one to make after all the turbulence of recent

months, but it was clearly the wrong choice.

Certainly we wanted to believe him when he claimed to be of the centre-left and so it was an easy mistake to make.

We all have to trust someone sometime, and so many of us were aware too that the media wouldn't leave Simon Hughes alone again after his admissions of having lied about his personal life. For some this must have seemed final.

But both the Tories and Labour are laughing at what we have done in choosing what we thought was the safe, non-controversial option.

Tory voters tend to be much older than supporters of the other parties.

Tories know they must capture the middle-ground, undecided, younger voter to wrench power back from Labour.

Their leader is attractive, fairly young, on the ball with green issues, charismatic, calm, English, well-equipped in the skills and arts of street-speak.

Ours is much older, lofty, Scottish and far less warm. The Tories have a far stronger organisational base in the southern towns than we do, and began to win back seats from us across the south at the last general election. Now they will sweep back across.

Yet, at the same time, in the worst of all possible worlds, Labour is rejoicing too, having long breathed a sigh of relief that Kennedy wouldn't or couldn't recognise the huge opportunity Blair had presented to him of mopping up his traditional vote.

Labour briefly held its breath after Kennedy had gone, in case this party could genuinely get its act together.

Now, a moment's concern is over as Campbell begins to set out his stall in favour of economic liberalism, supporting almost at once the part-privatisation of the Post Office, a reduction in benefits for single parents – two issues to inflame working people.

REVIEWS

He has elevated the Orange Group to the top jobs in the shadow cabinet, from where they will pursue their euphemisms of 'liberal reform', 'fairness' and a 'crusade against poverty' with all the sanctimony of men and women whose maximum exposure to suffering and hardship is being unable to find the right bottle of claret in the local supermarket.

Labour knows that it won't be long before the Liberal Democrats' deeper push into the overcrowded centre leaves its traditional vote unthreatened.

The Tories love the gift-horse we have presented to them.

When our nation cries out for fairness and truth, we offer a series of deceptions and postures in their name, sickening even for the murky, rotten world of politics we said we came to change.

**Bill Haymes
Dudley**

FAITH IN EDUCATION

Dear Liberator,

I must take issue with Matthew Huntbach (Issue 308) when he says that older faith schools (i.e. not the new academies) generally promote a liberal version of Christianity. This is not my experience.

Within the past 20 years, I attended a Roman Catholic secondary school in Burnley, Lancashire, and was taught that homosexuality is unnatural, that women could never become priests, and (at the height of public concern about AIDS) that condoms are immoral. I was also humiliated by a teacher in front of a class for refusing to sign an anti-abortion petition.

While I accept that this may have been down to over-zealous individual teachers rather than school policy, it is easy to see how bigotry can be spread. Thankfully, most (but not all) of my peers were too bright to be taken in and eventually rejected such nonsense.

Also, in this racially mixed town, many parents sent their children to that particular school for entirely the wrong reasons, i.e. it was the one without Pakistani children.

All faith schools have the potential to cause massive social division.

**Richard Ormerod
Durham**

Postwar: a History of Europe Since 1945

by Tony Judt

Heinemann 2005 £25

The subtitle gives it away. This is a very large swathe of history to fit into one book, even one that runs to 831 pages, and there is inevitably some skating over of details, but Judt has a large ambition to fulfil.

His central argument is that Europe was divided into east and west for decades – not just by the Iron Curtain but by differing speeds of political, institutional and economic development – and that now that its two halves are slowing converging, it needs the European Union to stop it lapsing back into its bad old ways of nationalism and war.

Judt's story is of how Europe was divided at the end of World War Two largely by accidents of where armies stopped and where politicians feared rivals might go.

The west, despite the physical and human devastation, suffered far less than the east during the war and rapidly recovered after being buoyed by Marshall Aid to become a place that was, rather unexpectedly, willing to forget old dreams of national glory and rivalry in the interests of getting rich.

The east, laid waste and taken over by the Red Army and its local agents, slowly improved its economic lot, but was held back by irrational communist obsessions with heavy industry and its people burdened by the oppression of one-party states.

Yet in 1989 the two halves suddenly rediscovered each other and, within a few years, most countries across the continent were in the EU and NATO, or about to be.

Hovering over this story is one of the most important people in modern history, a man who is still alive yet already almost forgotten.

Mikhail Gorbachev was an example, if there ever was one, of the person demanded by the hour coming forward.

Judt has no time for the myth beloved in right-wing western circles that Reagan and Thatcher won the cold war by dragging the Soviet Union into an unwinnable arms race.

The Soviet Union, he points out, had no need to 'win' it. The old men in the Kremlin were perfectly well aware that not even Reagan seriously intended to attack them, and so needed to engage in an arms race only to the extent that it suited them to protect their power and status.

With no public opinion to mollify and no internal dissidents of any importance to worry about, the communists could have kept their command economies on a footing to fight an arms race for as long as they chose. Indeed, even if they had abandoned the arms race, nothing internal would have threatened their positions as a result.

It took an insider to dismantle communism, though Gorbachev never had the least intention of doing what he did until he relaxed the repression enough to lose control of the process.

Gorbachev was to discover that one cannot have half a democracy nor a market economy directed by the state. Communism was not 'reformable'; it existed or it did not and, once the communist system began to unravel, there was no stopping it.

But as Judt says: "The Soviet system could only ever have been dismantled from inside and by the initiative coming from above."

What Gorbachev had sought was a reformed, efficient, communism in the Soviet Union and an end to the drain on his country caused by controlling recalcitrant east European satellites. He ended up with a dismembered Soviet Union and eviction from eastern Europe, but neither was planned.

The story of Europe since 1945 is the story of the spread of democracy and liberal capitalism from the continent's north west (plus Italy) to almost every corner.

It is a story with its heroes (Havel, Walesa, King Juan Carlos) and villains (Honecker, Ceaucescu, Papadopoulos); great events (which include the creation and fall of the Berlin Wall, the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the revolution in Portugal and Yeltsin facing down tanks in Moscow); and a vast cast of characters and occasions make appearances.

In the shattered continent of 1945, almost no-one would have predicted what it would become today, just as no-one predicted that the Warsaw Pact would collapse without a shot fired.

And few would have predicted that the first grudging steps towards the European Coal and Steel Community would lead to today's EU, a body that allows Europe's regions and minorities to have an identity as part of a larger whole without seeking to tear nation states apart, and which makes war between those states unthinkable.

The EU has at times been bureaucratic, slothful and corrupt, but Judt argues that it is a benign institution whose existence underpins the peaceful prosperous Europe that has, quite unexpectedly, replaced the quagmire of war, threat of war, instability and poverty that existed from 1914-1945.

Mark Smulian

Neither Left Nor Right? The Liberal Democrats and the Electorate by Andrew Russell and Edward Fieldhouse Manchester University Press 2005 £14.99

Neither left nor right, but forward' – a slogan coined by the Lib Dems, and uttered by their leader in the general election, to avoid being defined only by reference to the places on the political spectrum occupied by the other two main parties.

This book illustrates how and why the Lib Dems have arrived at this position. It is an academic study of the basis of the Lib Dems' support among the electorate and the party's strategies

for maintaining and enhancing that support.

Apparently the Lib Dems are 'under researched' and, if that is so, this book is a thorough and credible contribution to academic knowledge. The authors have examined the patterns of Lib Dem electoral support through extensive statistical analyses and interviews with key figures, including MPs, councillors and activists.

It will be an important point of reference for anyone unfamiliar with the party. However, it contains little that will come as a surprise to any reasonably well-informed Lib Dem activist – for example, where the areas of traditional support are, and that Lib Dem voters currently have more views in common with Labour than with Tory voters.

Neither does it contain any startling new insights into how the Lib Dems could achieve the breakthrough that is said to have eluded them again in 2005.

The answer appears to be just more hard slog and steady incremental gains. To be successful in parliamentary elections, the authors argue that the Lib Dems crucially have to overcome the 'credibility gap', usually by showing that they can win elections at local level. It also makes targeting a pre-requisite. Issue-based mobilisation is not sufficient by itself to attract high levels of support.

The book demonstrates that merely having popular policies – even the most popular policies – is not enough. The central underlying difficulty is, surprise, the British electoral system, which acts to reinforce a third party's disadvantageous position. Only a combination of popular (national or local) policies, credibility, targeting and to some extent tradition can deliver success.

My main criticism is that this book concentrates too much on the ramifications of the Ashdown project and arguments about the Lib Dems' equidistance between Labour and the Tories. Perhaps this reflects recently paramount concerns at the time the research was conducted (1999-2002). At present, and with the continual rightwards march of Labour and the Tories, this issue seems less relevant.

Being an academic work, it is also often irritatingly tentative and long-winded in the tone of its conclusions, even when stating the blindingly obvious – such as "if existing supports were clustered around an

identity of the Lib Dems as 'liberal', it might go some way to explain the determination of the Lib Dems not to react to Labour's move to the centre by realigning themselves [between Labour and Conservatives]".

However, overall this is a worthy volume, which at least provides a valuable antidote to the more fanciful visions of an imminent Lib Dem breakthrough. There are no short cuts.

Harry Lewis

The Secret History of al-Qa'ida by Abdel Bari Atwan Saqi 2006 £16.99

I would rather consider myself an informed observer of the Middle East than an expert, yet much of what Abdel Bari Atwan says in this book makes sense. His account of al-Qa'ida tells me what I assumed in the wake of 9/11. Everything the United States and Tony Blair did in the wake of that event played into the hands of the perpetrators; Atwan's revelation is the extent to which this was bin Laden's deliberate intent, rather than serendipity.

I could think of very good reasons for going to war against Iraq; Saddam Hussein had been rated high in my top ten enemies of humanity long before George Bush or Tony Blair woke up to the fact and Gulf War One should have been brought to a proper conclusion.

The best reason for Britain's military involvement in Gulf War Three (we tend to forget there was a hot phase in the intervening battle of attrition) is that we are dependent on the USA for our own defence and, so long as we choose to be, it is not unreasonable for their fight to be our fight – this also applies to France and Germany.

But that was not given as a reason for our involvement. Grabbing oil featured publicly in the statements of US policy makers, at least as early as when weapons of mass destruction were being sought, and Saddam had been supported by the west, prior to Kuwait, because of a somewhat irrational fear of Iran.

I do not doubt that Saddam had WMD at one time; we know he used some of them against his own peoples, but as Atwan points out, inter-war Iraq lacked the infrastructure to maintain them. Why are these things obvious to me but not to those advising Blair and

Bush? Will Atwan's book influence their future decisions for the good? I doubt it.

Atwan is one of the most respected and free-thinking people in the Arab media and is editor of the newspaper *al-Quds al-Arabi* (probably the best London based Arabic newspaper). He met Osama bin Laden in 1996 and reveals him as an astute user of the media (we know that now). Bin Laden respected Atwan and *al-Quds al-Arabi* as an independent Arab voice. Atwan tells the meeting as the adventure it undoubtedly was, and this has enjoyed some coverage in the British press. It sets the picture of bin Laden as a serious man, who has made a fortune and has turned it to what he (and he is not alone in this) sees as a common good. So we could applaud bin Laden when he is liberating Afghanistan from Russian Communist imperialism, but did not pause to think about what else might be on his mind.

To say that most, if not all, of the regimes in the Middle East leave something to desired is an understatement. Greed and tyranny are rife. I can understand why certain left socialists might be attracted to Ba'Ath, but Liberals cannot – the human rights issues are too strong. Most of the monarchies make the Ancien Régime look like a pussy cat. They are ripe to fall, and this is bin Laden's point precisely. There are two main channels of opposition – a westernising liberal influence, heavily academic and frequently in exile, and that of radical Islam. The latter is more likely to be home-based.

Radical Islam is in many respects more conservative than the regimes it would seek to overthrow – one of those rare cases of a revolutionary conservatism. It is a perfectly predictable response to western imperialism. One could see it coming in Iran a mile off and, had we chosen not to demonise that state, would probably have stayed there to a greater or lesser degree. They had enough problems of their own and still do.

Atwan sets out how the Wahhabist brand of Islam dominant in Saudi Arabia – itself an eighteenth century call for a reversion to an earlier, purer Islam, feeds into criticism of the state, stimulating opposition to the dynasty it seeks to underpin. In short, the House of Saud is deemed by bin Laden and like minds to have corrupted Islam. A cardinal sin is to have brought

American forces to the Land of the Two Mosques, initially for the liberation of Kuwait, whereafter they have stayed. The 'Great Satan' defends the House of Saud (and their oil one should add) against their own people.

To an extent, we might say to bin Laden, look, we liberated Kuwait, we backed you in Afghanistan (half of the cost), we've fought for Moslems in Bosnia and Kosovo, and abortively in Somali where Americans went in to help (if their policies over the previous two decades or more called something into question).

Unfortunately, bin Laden doesn't seem to want our help, though it may be the only practical solution to ending those problems relatively quickly. It isn't just the military presence, it is also that the Pepsi Cola imperialism that goes with it, around it, is all pervasive. Bin Laden knew he could not beat the Americans on their own ground, and the collateral damage of Moslems lead to a decline in support for al-Qa'ida amongst Saudis, so the trick was to get them to fight on his ground, hence 9/11, Afghanistan and Iraq – in the hub of the Arab world.

Prior to the invasion of Iraq, I would have argued that a link between Saddam Hussein and al-Qa'ida was improbable. Ideologically they are at opposing ends of Arab/Islamic politics. I was wrong, but not by much. With the fall of the Taliban as a government, militant Islamists needed another home. Saddam provided one, on the understanding that they would do nothing against Ba'Ath. There were already parts of Iraq effectively under the control of such people and they moved there.

Furthermore, Saddam realised that he could not win a conventional war against the US, diversified the army and Ba'Ath forces for a guerrilla struggle, and linked them up with seasoned Afghan Arabs; we see the results everyday. Iraq has become the focus of attraction for disaffected Moslems who do not see martyrdom in the spurious light that we tend to view it and will willingly die in the belief that they will go to heaven.

We are thus bogged down in a war of attrition that we will eventually lose, possibly with the same consequences as Afghanistan had for Russia – that is al-Qa'ida's strategy. The only hope I see in this is that if there is one thing every ideologue hates more than those who do not share their ideology, it is

those who don't share quite the same ideology (cue *Life of Brian*). Al Zarqawi, emir of al-Qa'ida in the Land of the Two Rivers, regards all Shi'ites as heretics and, as such, is perfectly happy to foment civil war in Iraq. Initially opposed, bin Laden appears to have gone along with this, but stuck on the run in Afghanistan/ Pakistan there probably was not much he could do about it. How the Bush/Blair coalition gets us out of that one requires rather more creativity and sensitivity than has been shown to date – a major rethink on Iran at the very least.

There are accounts of suicide bombers, in a far scarier sense than one gleaned from Palestine, and of the cyber-jihad. There is also an account of oil and why Iraqi oil is more attractive than that from most other parts of the globe, because it is cheaper to extract. Anybody wanting to get a grip on the Middle East should read this book.

Stewart Rayment

Ballot Box to Jury Box by John Baker Waterside Press 2006 £20

John Baker was one of those whose enthusiasm kept the Liberal Party alive in the 1950s and 1960s.

His picture of the activities of party politics in those days is something less recognisable to us today; the matter was treated much more seriously for a start. It is in books like this that one picks up snippets that elude the standard texts. Working in Nigeria on the autonomy of the Benin region, he found resentment of colonial brutality that had festered for over 50 years. A punitive raid in 1897 after the massacre of a party of Europeans who had intruded on local protocol following the death of the Oba (chief) was still a source of grudge in 1957. The Nigeria we have come to love: Chief Omo Osage says at a political rally, "I have been in public life since 1929 and, by now, I am almost – I repeat – almost incorruptible" (he was number two at the Ministry of Finance).

Such are the gems that make this book worthwhile. From 1971 Baker's career as a judge precluded the political activity of his youth, but he remains a familiar at the NLC.

Stewart Rayment

Monday

A particularly full day. I enjoy a little rough shooting before breakfast: since hunting with hounds was banned, the Estate has been overrun with hippogriffs (as I predicted it would be in the House) and one has to keep the numbers down somehow. Then it is off to the cricket, for this afternoon sees the traditional season-opener between Lord Bonkers' XI and the Elves of Rockingham Forest. It is as keenly contested as ever, and this year there is an unfortunate dispute over our opponents' use of reverse swing (they attribute it to "high elven magic" and I to the surreptitious use of a bottle top). However, Malcolm Bruce and Lynsey De Paul see us home, and in any case it is prudent not to fall out with these fellows. After dinner, the village bobby PC Heath (splendid fellow: no delinquent ear goes unclipped and one need only think of crossing the village high street to have the traffic stopped for one) drops by to tell me that he intends to stand for the deputy leadership of the Liberal Democrats.

Tuesday

Matthew Taylor calls to see me and confesses that he is at something of a loose end these days. He holds no shadow portfolio and was defeated for the chairmanship of the parliamentary party by a schoolmaster from Chesterfield. I gently inform him that things often run this way with former child stars: Freddie Bartholomew's career was never the same after he started shaving and Charlotte Church was booed when she came on against Ireland at Lansdowne Road. Just as I am remarking that Roddy McDowall enjoyed some renewed success when he took to going round in a gorilla costume, Taylor confesses his own plan to me: he is to stand for the deputy leadership of the Liberal Democrats.

Wednesday

I discuss our sudden *embarras de richesses* when it comes to candidates for the deputy leadership with Ming Campbell, who is still staying at the Hall and indeed shows no signs of leaving, and he reveals that he has a favoured candidate of his own. It is none other than my old friend Vince "Low Voltage" Cable. I ask the reason for his choice, and Ming explains that Low Voltage looks so like him that he will be able to take his place at many functions – up to and including Prime Minister's Questions. "But what about the accent?" I ask. "This is the clever bit," replies Ming, "Low Voltage spent years in Glasgow and he can do it almost as well as me." I suppose Ming's idea is that this will leave him free to stay at the Hall drinking my Auld Johnston and polishing his Jag (which is currently residing in my stables) whilst Elspeth imagines him hard at work in Westminster.

Thursday

To Richmond Park to meet a delegation of Bushmen and discuss their plans for returning the area to the wild. I know this scheme has caused some controversy in the newspapers, with the men of Richmond defending their traditional way of life – senior management positions at the BBC, owning West End galleries, merchant banking – but what about the women of Richmond? I should imagine they find prospect of hunting wildebeest from Ham to Mortlake, clad only in loincloths made from recycled Focus leaflets, infinitely more exciting – certainly, a spot of fresh air is just what their pallid, muesli-fed children need. We call

Lord Bonkers' Diary

upon Jenny Tonge in Kew to solicit her support for our campaign but she is out – even though I could swear I hear the wireless playing. Instead, after treating the Bushmen to tea and crumpets at the Maids of Honour, I visit Kew Gardens and take a few cuttings for Meadowcroft.

Friday

Over breakfast, Ming mentions that he has put Harvey in charge of our defence policy. "I expect that he is on manoeuvres right now," the eminent man of Fife adds. I hardly have time to remonstrate with him before leaping

into the Bentley and heading for the gunnery ranges on Salisbury Plain at top speed. I arrive not a moment too soon. Some fellow with a promising moustache is showing Harvey over the army's new pride and joy. "You just set the computer coordinates here," he says, "load the gun and – Bam! – you can blow up anywhere you like." "What, say, just for instance, Battersea Dogs' Home?" Harvey asks with that dangerous gleam in his eye. "Of course," replies the promising moustache. "Let me see. Battersea. TFG755634/98. There you are. We are pointing at the place now." Just as Harvey is pressing the red firing button, I throw myself upon the console and give the computer dial a wrench. There is a loud explosion and the shell heads for the English Channel. I later learn that I winged some wretched little foreign fishing boat, but in all modesty I can claim to have saved the day.

Saturday

It is time again for me to do my Focus round here in the Bonkers Hall Ward. I stand on the village green and have soon assembled a crowd of children – rather like that chap in Hamelin who did such sterling work with the rats. One by one the little mites collect their bundles of leaflets, giving me a sweet in return for the honour of being allowed to deliver them. When they have gone, I examine my trawl: an acid drop, three mint imperials, two jelly babies, four squares of chocolate (milk), a gobstopper, several boiled sweets of assorted flavours and – joy of joys! – a treacle toffee. Later I have yet another delightful dinner with Ming Campbell but decide that, even so, it is time I made a telephone call to a certain number in Morningside.

Sunday

To St Asquith's for Divine Service, where the Reverend Hughes is operating off his long run: "What sort of man should a leader be? Should he be an elderly Scotsman whose sole claim to fame is that, forty years ago, he used to run around the track in singlet and shorts while being chased by Jeffrey Archer? Or should he be some complete newcomer with a German name, a flash car and 27 houses? Or should he perhaps just possibly be a respected clergyman who has rendered faithful service both to this parish and to St Tatchell's, Bermondsey for more years than most of you can remember?" Later, back at the Hall, I see the delightful Elspeth Campbell arriving at the front by taxi and Ming disappearing from the back through the kitchen garden.

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