

liberator



In this issue

- 💣 No room for complacency - Simon Hughes
- 💣 I'm still a grassroot - Chris Rennard
- 💣 A war on terror led by donkeys - David Boyle
- 💣 Why aren't our councils liberal? - Richard Kemp

CONTENTS

SUBSCRIBE!

Only £23 per year
Send a cheque payable to
Liberator Publications
Flat 1
24 Alexandra Grove
London N4 2LF

INTERNATIONAL SUBSCRIPTIONS

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

- * Amount: GB pounds sterling 28
- * Destination account name: Liberator Publications
- * Destination bank: National Westminster Bank (Chorlton-cum-Hardy branch) Manchester M21 0BR UK
- * BIC (SWIFT code): NWBKGB2L
- * IBAN (account number): GB15NWBK01019704631935
- * Communication: "Annual subscription from [your name and postal address]"

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

THE LIBERATOR COLLECTIVE

Ralph Bancroft, Jonathan Calder, Richard Clein, Howard Cohen, Gareth Epps, Catherine Furlong, Sally Hannon, Peter Johnson, Wendy Kyrle-Pope, Tim McNally, Stewart Rayment, Kiron Reid, Harriet Sherlock, Mark Smulian, Simon Tittle, William Tranby, Alex Wilcock, Nick Winch

Liberator is printed by
Lithosphere 90 Queensland Road N7 7AS

LIBERATOR

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

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

DATA PROTECTION

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

YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS BY EMAIL

We accept your Liberator contributions by email to collective@liberator.org.uk

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

INTERNET

Email: collective@liberator.org.uk
Website: <http://www.liberator.org.uk>

Commentary 3

☀ Radical Bulletin 4..5

BEST WHEN WE'RE BOLDEST 6..7
Despite solid progress by the Liberal Democrats, there remains much to do, says Simon Hughes

IS HE STILL ONE OF US? 8..9
Chris Rennard tells his critics that he is still a grassroots and runs an effective headquarters

LIONS LED BY DONKEYS 10..11
What if we lost the War on Terror? David Boyle looks at the failures of Blair and Bush and why victory is now so vital

WE'LL ALL GO TOGETHER WHEN WE GO 12..13
The Liberal Democrats are reviewing their policy on Britain's nuclear weapons. David Grace argues that the party should widen its debate without fear of the consequences

LETTING GO OF AMERICA 14..15
Will the Liberal Democrats support the reorientation of British foreign and defence policy away from Washington and towards a common EU policy, asks Andrew Duff

WHY DO WE DO IT? 16..17
Too many Liberal Democrats work for years to take control of their council, but then have no idea what they want to do. Richard Kemp wonders why they bother

CONGO HOVERS ON THE BRINK 18..19
Michael Meadowcroft reports on the precarious situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where a tenuous peace holds before a second round of voting

MONEY DOWN AFRICA'S DRAINS 20..21
Why do the Liberal Democrats support an aid programme that lines the pockets of Africa's corrupt elites at the expense of its people, asks Becky Tinsley

LABOUR'S SPIT AND HAIR COLLECTION 22..23
Lynne Featherstone urges support for the Liberal Democrat campaign against the government's retention of DNA samples from innocent people

I'M TAKING THE PRIME MINISTER TO COURT 24..25
Do MPs have a right to information when they ask for it? John Hemming reports on a judicial review intended to establish this right

IT'S NOT A ZERO SUM GAME 26
Liberal Democrats should not ape the rhetorical 'toughness' of their opponents, argues Nick Clegg

Letters 27..28

Reviews 29..31

Lord Benkers' Diary 32

Cover picture by Alex Folkes

COMMENTARY

AFRAID TO MEET THE CHALLENGE?

This September's Liberal Democrat conference offers the party a rare chance to turn a corner. Has it the courage to do so?

It is less a question of overcoming the embarrassments of the past year, more about overcoming the inhibitions of the past thirty.

Bluntly, the party has been afraid to promote its values for fear of causing offence. The *Meeting the Challenge* policy review, due to conclude at conference, ought to draw a line under that era.

This review was intended to create the coherent 'narrative' missing from the party's policies. But assuming it succeeds, what happens next? It will need considerable courage to take this process to its logical conclusion.

Adopting a coherent, ideologically based platform does not end with a vote at conference. It represents a strategic gearshift with profound implications for the party's policy-making and campaigning.

It will mean saying bold things that attract some voters but repel others, an uncomfortable position from which the party has tended to shy away in recent years.

This timidity is why the party has failed to consolidate a loyal base but instead has to campaign for its votes afresh at each election. Hence the plate-spinning to hold seats and incrementalist tactics to gain them, which at the present rate would take 200 years to achieve a parliamentary majority.

Such conclusions are the basis of a collection of controversial essays published at conference titled *Liberalism – something to shout about*, edited by Graham Watson MEP and Simon Titley (see advert on page 25).

The essays' authors come from the right, left and centre of the party but agree on one thing: the party has lost the plot.

It claims to be green, then runs a petition against VAT on heating fuel. It claims to be pro-European, then runs a Euro election campaign that avoids mentioning Europe. It claims to support civil liberties, then backs ASBOs and hedges its position on migration.

It runs populist local election campaigns in which policy is reduced to a tactical afterthought, leading the party to say one thing in one part of the country and something else in another.

When the party wins power locally, it often fails in its Liberal duty to empower people. Instead, it becomes absorbed into the establishment, wallowing in what Dostoevsky called 'administrative ecstasy'.

Why did the party lose sight of its values? It is partly due to political trends that have affected all mainstream parties, not just the Liberal Democrats.

Politicians tend nowadays to follow rather than lead public opinion. The end of communism removed the defining division in post war politics and led many to assume 'the end of

history'. Meanwhile, globalisation has limited politicians' freedom of manoeuvre and capacity to deliver.

In Britain, politicians are petrified by fear of the press and obey a tabloid-led agenda. The range of ideas has narrowed considerably, and mainstream political argument is confined to a debate about nuances or replaced by personality issues.

Instead of setting out their ideological stalls, politicians use polls and focus groups to try and find out what people are thinking. Instead of engaging in ideological argument with one another, politicians compete to agree with perceived public opinion.

This is the potent cocktail behind the 'sameness' of political parties, where the debate is about 'efficient management' rather than moral choices.

But the Liberal Democrats have made their predicament far worse by adding some ingredients of their own.

Following the merger, ideology was placed firmly out of bounds for fear the new party might unravel. And until the wheels came off the 'project', all the talk was of pacts and deals. Rarely did the party argue on its own merits.

'Community politics' also played its part. What started out as a noble strategy rapidly degenerated into 'mindless activism'. Campaigning became an end in itself and campaigns avoided ideologically contentious issues. When did you last read a proposition in any Focus leaflet with which any reasonable person could disagree?

But the main reason Liberals avoid ideology is that they are too nice. They naively believe the party potentially appeals to all of the people all of the time. They cannot accept that a substantial body of opinion loathes everything Liberals stand for and will never vote for them.

David Steel always used to bang on about how the electorate hated 'yah boo' politics. He could not have been more wrong.

It's not the argument between politicians that puts people off; it's the sameness. When parties try to be all things to all men, they disaffect their core support and benefit only the fringe. No wonder most voters are bored or disillusioned. If politicians offered people a real choice by standing up for what they believe in, we might see a renewal of democratic engagement.

Despite this, some argue that the party should abandon its core values and join the rush to appeal to the mythical 'Middle England' vote. The sheer lunacy of such a strategy cannot be overstated. The party's resulting loss of integrity would be obvious a mile off.

The party will never really enthuse its base or make any great leap forward if it is forever pulling its punches for fear of causing offence. Its campaign priority should be to mobilise its supporters, not appease its opponents. And that means taking the big but uncomfortable step of accepting that attracting some voters entails repelling others.

RADICAL BULLETIN

CLOWN DERBY

Montgomeryshire MP Lembit Öpik has become embroiled in a row with Derby Liberal Democrats after he wrote to – of all people – Jack Straw to denounce their local election campaign tactics.

The trouble began when Öpik visited Derby to support their campaign earlier this year, and joined local candidate Deirdre Mitchell in a protest against the Labour council's planned closure of after school clubs.

According to local party officer Michael Mullaney, the campaign was clearly about after school clubs, not school closures, and Öpik was shown a draft press release at the local party office before setting out. He was then photographed outside one endangered centre with Mitchell, holding up a petition in support of the centre.

But when Labour protested that the Lib Dems had raised scares about school closures, Öpik wrote an extraordinary letter to Straw, copied to Derby Lib Dems.

Öpik wrote: "I've tracked down the press release and yes those words have indeed been attributed to me. I must therefore offer an unequivocal apology, as I'm in no position to pass comment on these matters, since I simply don't know the local circumstances."

He continued: "I simply don't subscribe to this sort of negative campaigning by proxy in any party including my own. So please do accept my apologies for this."

Öpik concluded by saying that he would be "very keen" for Straw to share his letters with "any local activists or Labour councillors who may have been affected," and added "the last thing I want is to sour our good cross-party working relationship with an opportunistic press release".

Not unnaturally, Straw did indeed share this political gift. In a letter to local residents, the Labour council leader Chris Williamson said Öpik had "issued an unreserved apology," even though it was received after the elections.

"I share Mr Öpik's concern about these deplorable Lib Dem tactics," Williamson wrote. "I ask you to consider that if they are prepared to [misattribute statements] to one of their own MPs can you really trust anything else they say or do?"

This brought forth a blistering response from Mullaney to Öpik: "To say that Derby Liberal Democrats are disappointed is to put it mildly. Your letter to Jack Straw contained numerous inaccuracies. You start in your letter by claiming that we had referred to school closures in Derby, we had not.

"We referred to the closure of 'after school clubs' or junior activity centres. Subsequently a number of these have been closed.

"The press release was shown to you in the Derby office. You were aware of our campaign as we took you to Reg's, one of the activity centres which faced closure, and where staff have now been given their redundancy notices.

"You were photographed outside Reg's with our candidate for that ward Dr Deirdre Mitchell. Both of you were holding a huge petition calling on it to be saved. We also brought copies of the press release with your quotes to give out to journalists though in the end none came.

"For you to claim you knew nothing of the campaign or quotes is therefore not credible. I can only assume you were exhausted from the campaign and could not remember this."

Mullaney went on to protest over Öpik's invitation to Straw to share his apology with Labour activists.

"You could have been forgiven if the politician you apologised to in such a grovelling manner was a man of saintly integrity," Mullaney wrote.

"But to not side with your colleagues but to instead side with Jack Straw, the foreign secretary whose lies over the Iraq war led to the death of tens of thousands and who then had the cheek to come to Derby to call the Lib Dems liars is staggering.

"Your decision to believe Straw over your own colleagues is beyond belief."

Öpik is a regular guest at constituency functions around the country and perhaps those planning to invite him might care to check with Derby Lib Dems before extending an invitation.

It remains unclear what 'good cross-party working relationship' Öpik supposes he enjoys with Straw.

His letter was sent while Straw was foreign secretary, not leader of the Commons, and so cannot refer to parliamentary reform.

Straw has always been notoriously hostile to Lib Dems, and a rigid opponent of electoral reform. He is also, Blair apart, the most culpable person for having lied to the country about weapons of mass destruction to drag Britain into the blood-drenched morass of Iraq. Perhaps Öpik does not consider this important.

Öpik's efforts to help Labour in Derby appeared to have had a suitable response when 37 of that party's members in the city defected to the Lib Dems a few weeks later.

Is Öpik's letter to Straw another instance of the judgement that led him to become the only MP to want Mark Oaten as leader?

If his antics in Derby damage his standing in the party, Öpik could always follow his fortunes in light entertainment.

He is the only MP, of any party, to appear on the website of something called Seamus Lyte Management.

It says this company, "represents some of the best award winning presenters on television today, in the UK, Eire and the USA, as well as nurturing the 'stars' of tomorrow's top programmes".

What is more, Seamus Lyte Management "works as consultant to E! Networks, helping to advise and access the highest standard of talent available, for the E! Entertainment Television channel".

FORKED TONGUE

This summer has seen a steady stream of press briefings about the merits of the party's proposed new tax policy.

Local parties have been encouraged to publicise it even before it has been approved by conference. Indeed, Chris Huhne launched a 'Green Tax Switch' campaign website on 24 August, a month before the scheduled debate.

Provocative press stories have been planted (presumably by the sort of nutters seeking to contrive a 'Clause Four Moment') to the effect that the tax debate will be a trial of strength between Ming Campbell and the conference.

But in a more emollient message to party members, Campbell wrote: "Politics is about substance. It's about putting your values and principles into practice with credible policies. That is what our party conference in September will be about.

"The Liberal Democrat conference is unique among the major parties. The Liberal Democrat conference makes policy. Its debates are meaningful, and its decisions binding.

"It means that as the leader of the party and chair of the Federal Policy Committee, I don't just announce proposals and expect you to go along with them like the Conservative and Labour party leaders. I need to win your approval for the platform on which we will fight the next general election."

Three cheers to that. Or is this a further bit of pressure on conference to go along with the new policy, with the added bonus that, if approved, it will enable Campbell to claim the party has been convinced rather than bludgeoned?

FORM A QUEUE

Mark Oaten's belated decision to stand down from parliament at the next election has caused a great stir among approved Lib Dem parliamentary candidates, who will get not one but two chances to succeed him.

It might be thought that the chances are pretty slim of defending a seat where the sitting MP has been disgraced and the council lost to the Tories.

But wait. Boundary changes make Winchester a largely urban seat that looks promising, and the rest of it will join bits of East Hampshire to form the new Meon Valley constituency, a lesser prospect but still an inviting one.

Wannabe MPs are circling like wasps round a jam jar. Presumably, unusually special care will be taken to weed out those with any skeletons in their closets.

LOCAL DIFFICULTY

The Brighton conference looks set for a rare attempt to have a policy paper thrown out, and by people of some serious weight in the party.

Dissatisfaction with the local government policy paper *Your Community, Your Choice* has been rumbling among councillors since its completion.

Liverpool's Richard Kemp, who also leads the Lib Dem group at the Local Government Association, has argued that, while the paper contains nothing objectionable, it is quite inadequate as a basis for what the party's councillors now need to be doing.

"It would have been quite radical in 1986, and acceptable in 1996, but not now," he says, complaining that whole new areas of local government work are missing, such as community leadership and 'place shaping'.

Kemp will be going in to bat for the party in negotiations between councillors and the government over the forthcoming local government white paper, and says he would prefer to

have no new policy as the basis for this than be forced to defend *Your Community, Your Choice*.

The paper was produced by a working group led by former Plymouth Devonport candidate Judith Jolly who, whatever her other merits, does not list service as a councillor in her party biography.

Pendle's Tony Greaves and Aylesbury Vale's Alan Sherwell are well-known councillors who served on the group, as did Cheadle MP Mark Hunter, who was leader of Stockport Council until last year.

Even so, Kemp argues that the group was light on people with current senior local government experience.

His attempt to amend the motion on the paper was thwarted by Federal Conference Committee, which deemed it a negating amendment and threw it out.

Kemp wants the paper referred back, or failing that defeated.

Meanwhile, local government spokesman Andrew Stunell argues that, if Kemp finds nothing objectionable in the paper, he should not oppose it.

Policy papers are normally rubber-stamped by conference delegates, who have neither read nor understood them, then are ignored ever after. Indeed, for all the nonsense peddled about the conference being an anarchic rabble (*Liberator* 302), not once since the merger has it had the nerve to reject a policy paper outright.

This one may prove different, and promises a real debate about a subject that large numbers of those present know a lot about.

THEY'RE AT IT AGAIN

A successor to the *Orange Book* is due out at conference and, while review copies were not available at the time *Liberator* went to press, it has been possible to get a flavour of its intentions.

The Tangerine Book, Satsuma Book or whatever it ends up being nicknamed, sounds as though it is cut from the same cloth as its predecessor, according to Hornsey and Wood Green MP Lynne Featherstone.

She wrote on her website (8 August) about the rather weak measures in the Charities Bill to tinker with the charitable status enjoyed by independent schools.

This amounts to a vaguely worded obligation on them to act in the 'public interest'.

Featherstone wrote: "My solution is more radical, and as I submitted it in my draft chapter for the next so-called Orange Book – which isn't an Orange Book – and is to be called Britain after Blair.

"However, the editors so far have rejected my solutions as being too interventionist."

It looks as though *Britain After Blair* is in the hands of the economic liberal lunatic fringe, as was the original *Orange Book*, and so will advocate something that will sound oddly like Britain before Blair.

CALLED TO THE BAA

The Guardian's conference fringe meeting on the theme 'what next, squeezed again?' bills someone called 'Normal Lamb MP'.

This must mean that delegates will not have to listen to Abnormal Lamb, who presumably makes speeches of an entirely different kind to those of the MP for North Norfolk.

BEST WHEN WE'RE BOLDEST

Despite solid progress by the Liberal Democrats, there remains much to do, says Simon Hughes

The past year has been one of transition, success and progress for the Liberal Democrats. A new leader, another even greater number of Liberal Democrat MPs in Westminster following victory in the February by-election (and a very close second in another previously safe non-Liberal seat), and equal to the record highest ever percentage share of councillors in Great Britain in our party's history.

Much convergence between the Labour and the Conservative parties (rather surprisingly commended by Tony Blair as necessary political cross-dressing) provides Liberal Democrats with a new great opportunity to build on these successes and forge an increasingly distinctive position, as we set out our vision for a fairer, freer and greener world.

We owe much to the *Meeting the Challenge* working group, which over the past few months has consulted widely over the future direction of the party, as it presents its final report to representatives. Just over a year after the previous general election is a very good time to set a course for the future direction of the party.

But above all we need to excite people again with the appeal and importance of liberal democracy. It can be a very exciting time to help to mould our party to be fit for the purposes of the new decade and the new century.

Ming Campbell's election clearly marked the most significant change for the party since our last September conference. Without doubt, veteran conference temperature takers will have an interesting time analysing the platform contributions from Ming (merciful or merciless?), Charles (free of party responsibility, but for how long?), new Commons deputy Vince, this year's runner up Chris, the 'rising stars' – and the party president!

It will be interesting to see whether conference gives the best reception ever so far to a Tory peer (have we now forgiven him for being an erstwhile opponent?). And we should listen carefully to our Russian guest, filling the new slot of speakers from a sister or allied party, as he shares his insight into the not very happy democracy of another of the G8 powers.

In Willie Rennie's election and in Ben Abbotts's very near election, we saw two excellent parliamentary candidates do the party proud. May all our by-election teams be so well led. But we cannot be complacent, for Bromley and Chiselhurst could have been won. And we mustn't be complacent, because gender balance and ethnic diversity in our parliamentary parties is still a mile away from where it should be.

English local elections this year were self-evidently a mixed bag. Richmond-upon-Thames and St Albans regained were great victories. South Lakeland gained for the first time, even greater. And don't forget the regained West Lindsey, which

slipped back into our fold a couple of weeks later. Islington was reduced but not lost and in Milton Keynes we are the largest party still.

I have been rebuked for not saluting Richmond and St Albans enough. But, seriously, in many ways the even greater successes were where we gained seats having previously been in overall, minority, or joint control. The power of incumbency is hugely valued in the United States and powerful here. But this May's local elections saw increasing discrimination by the local electorate against incumbents and in favour of oppositions – almost whatever the success of the incumbent administration.

The lesson is clear. Doing well is not enough. Saying you've done well is not enough. We need to do well, show how we've done well but still work in a way that allows us to be seen as the campaigners and not the establishment. And too often, the taking of power, by the very demands of the job, means that the basics can suffer.

As we mark 30 years since the beginning of community politics liberal style, and although we need to develop it and modernize it, good policies, good literature, good and regular communication, and successful work for those who elect us is still as important as anything in the political world.

When community politics was born, we had 4% of Great Britain's councillors compared with Labour's 32%, the Conservatives' 43%, and 21% 'others'. The figures this year are Conservatives 39%, Labour 28%, Liberal Democrats 22%, and 12% 'others'. The Tories have been up to 50% (1978) and down to 19% (in 1996). Labour has been up to 48% (in 1996 and 1997) but only once below where they are today – in 1978, when they were on 26%. We passed the 10% mark in 1985 and have never slipped back. We passed the 20% mark for the first time in 1995 and again have never slipped back. And this year is the fourth year since then when we have been on 22%. 'Others' were always above 13% before 1995 and have never been above 13% since.

Next year's local government challenge in England and Scotland is as important as the national elections in Scotland and Wales, but nobody can argue that we are not moving consistently and solidly in the right direction. We now have a base across Britain the like of which we have never had before.

I am very conscious that this conference marks for me the end of two years as federal president. I have not yet achieved all I wanted to do. The first nine months were, understandably and almost entirely, focused on the forthcoming general election. Collectively the team did well, although I have said that I believe we did not do well enough. That is not attributing blame to others. I was as much part of the

collective leadership of that election from September 2004 as the rest of them.

From the general election until the 'turbulence' of January this year, my principal concern was to build the party's base to all parts of the community and in all places. The outward and visible sign of our success in this ambition is of course votes, but members and supporters too, and the gender, social, ethnic and belief mix of our party. Only this year, for the first time and at last, will we be organised to have the information that allows us to see what our membership fully looks like, what our councillor profile is, and how much our pool of prospective parliamentary candidates reflects the modern Britain we live in. We will not deserve to continue to grow if at all levels we are not representative and seen to be representative. Sitting on traditional liberal principles that mean we never countenance positive discrimination and often wince collectively at brave positive action may not be enough.

Given Labour's domestic and foreign policies, many individuals and communities who have traditionally voted Labour or have never voted at all should more than ever be ready to join us now. The transfer of allegiance of the 'Derby 37' should be an encouragement to all of us. I'm not just talking about recruitment of Muslims. Fellow residents from other European Union countries, from Eastern Europe, members of our growing African and Afro-Caribbean communities, and of many and various communities from different countries across Asia and Latin America should be natural supporters of pluralist, internationalist, social welfare liberalism.

I shall be announcing some initiatives at this conference to reach out better and further in these communities. And if, at the end of the year, with all the facts and figures before us, those chosen by the party to seek public office are not better reflecting the variety of Britain, then I will have no hesitation in bringing new proposals to conference next year to correct our excessive conservatism.

People say that all political parties must now struggle to recruit and retain members. This is obviously another challenge, and we're not moving forward as fast as we should be. There is no logical reason why our membership figures should not be approaching the same levels as those of the Conservatives and Labour.

We have a bigger base than ever of elected Liberal Democrats to get the message across. The Labour government may have over three thousand press officers and spin doctors. But the public are ever more wary of spin. What they want above all is to see and hear and experience that their leaders and representatives talk sense, and act sensitively, honestly, efficiently and boldly.

There may well be arguments for developing and formally recognising a second category of supporter, who is happy to be recorded as just that but does not formally want to be, as it were, on the party payroll as a member. At this conference, we must start the debate as to how to do better at turning voters into supporters, supporters into activists, and increase our membership base in the process.

But there is one other crucial element necessary for our success. Yes, a lot of politics is personality driven and depends



on charisma. But many people want their politicians to be bold and to be brave. Being bold and brave is not the equivalent of being foolish. Liberal Democrats have in recent years often been bolder than the other main parties in foreign policy; we should be equally bold on domestic policy too.

Take just two examples. This country, like many others, still suffers from endemic drug problems, of recreation that becomes addiction, and addiction that becomes social breakdown and crime. Our party has adopted clear and radical drugs policies. The policies of Conservatives and Labour in power have in many ways been hugely unsuccessful. If we believe what we vote for and agree to, then what harm can there be in going on the attack and promoting alternative ways of trying to take the supply of illegal

drugs out of the hands of the pushers and the criminals.

The other example is Britain's inequality. I write this before the outcome of the party debate on our tax commission's proposals is known. In a democratic party, it is right that we collectively debate and decide these things, and I like others will be bound by the result. But from my Southwark experience, as much as all that I have seen in many other rural and urban constituencies alike, we have seriously failed to correct the widening gulf between so many haves and so many have-nots. Unless we build enough housing at costs people can afford and in ways which strengthen all our communities; unless we give people the skills to be economically self-sufficient and prosperous, and unless we are willing to argue publicly that those who do well (whether by their own efforts or those of others) should contribute more so that others may prosper like them, then we will fail in our historic mission.

The three themes for *Meeting the Challenge* are fair, free and green. And as the conference slogan makes clear, for us the greatest of these is fair. When the retired white Christian, Jewish or atheist pensioner, the struggling agnostic mixed race single parent, and the young black or brown Muslim, Hindu, Sikh or Buddhist Briton really believes that we are the party of fairness at home and abroad in everything from civil liberties to pay and pensions, then they will be likely to vote and join and be part of our movement for social and political change.

In this summer's latest assessment, Lloyd George may not have been scored as the most successful prime minister of the twentieth century. But he never failed the tests of boldness, commitment and energy. As we continue the campaigning traditions of as diverse a party family as James Ashley and Harriet Smith, as Patsy Calton and Kishwer Falkner, as Charles Anglin and Roger Roberts, we must look back only for encouragement and inspiration. We must go forward with determination, radicalism and passion. Liberal democracy was not built on unclear compromises of timid souls.

Simon Hughes is Federal President of the Liberal Democrats and MP for North Southwark & Bermondsey

IS HE STILL ONE OF US?

Chris Rennard tells his critics that he is still a grassroots and runs an effective headquarters

In 1983, I returned a form to Liberal Party headquarters in the sort of colourful language more commonly associated with people like John Prescott.

I had spent the ten months since graduating in 1982 as the Liberal Party's professional agent in the Liverpool Mossley Hill constituency. In the general election of 1983, we achieved a swing of 14%. This was from third place and against the Tories at the height of Thatcher's popularity. In this period, I also increased the number of people actively helping our campaign from under 100 to over 600.

But as a constituency agent, I received no help, no training, no advice and no financial support from headquarters for the campaign. All we got were policy briefings posted out too late to be of any use. So the post general election survey form asking "what I thought of the party's support for our campaign" gave me the opportunity to reply with a few choice words.

It was not then my intention to carry on working as a party professional. But a revolution took place at headquarters. A new secretary-general recognised the failure of the organisation to provide any tangible support towards winning constituencies. He urged me to work for the national party by helping to run by-elections and spread the sort of campaigning and organisation techniques that had been so successful in Liverpool.

I had grown up organising winning election campaigns at every level. We ran Liverpool City Council and I ran many of the ward campaigns. I worked full-time in the 1979 Edge Hill by-election, when we achieved a 28% swing against Labour. When the Boundary Commission abolished the Edge Hill constituency, I organised the campaign to win a new constituency. We achieved the biggest swing to us anywhere in the country.

By the time I was 22, I had been a successful agent many times and also held many other party posts.

I mention all this because I still consider myself to be a "grassroots person trying to make a national HQ more effective in serving the party" than the sort of autocrat portrayed by James Graham in *Liberator* 312.

I agree with many of the aims and objectives that James supports in his article. But his views on various issues are inevitably at least as subjective as mine. I think that he should recognise that some of his arguments simply failed to win over those elected to serve with him on various party committees.

FAILURE TO UNDERSTAND

I think James fails to understand some of the reasons why the party's Federal Finance and Administration Committee and Federal Executive did not always agree with his views on where "additional funding" could be spent, or perhaps more importantly that it did not exist.

The party's mainstream budget has been under severe pressure in recent years. A major reason for this is the deficit on the historic staff pension fund.

This is an expensive scheme providing a final salary pension to certain party and parliamentary staff (but not covering any present party staff). I can imagine the furore if we did not meet our legal obligations to our pension fund.

It is very frustrating to be squeezed by these sort of pressures and be attacked by people making bids for funds

who do so without any examination whatsoever of the available funds or competing pressures to meet all the party's objectives.

There are always dilemmas about directing scarce resources. But I am happy to point to my record in helping to increase our number of MPs from below 20 to 63, win so many parliamentary by-elections and elect so many councillors.

This suggests to me that we direct resources much more successfully than we did when I began working for the Liberal Party.

In those days, the party made no significant effort to target resources. Today, we do more than ever to back our successful campaigners at grassroots level and I am very proud of that.

Our local government base has been a key factor in our survival during difficult times, an essential ingredient in our major advances at parliamentary level and an important way in which we gain an opportunity (not always taken) to put our principles into practice.

I am strongly committed to developing it. In the 1980s, I wrote many of the Association of Liberal Councillors' publications, was a very active accredited trainer for them and served on its standing committee. In the 1990s, I devised the 'G8' mechanism to get various devolved parts of the party working together to deliver funds directly to campaigners in many key wards and key councils.

This year, the FFAC and FE approved an inflation-only increase for ALDC and James has attacked this. He will not be aware that I have been able to persuade some of our major donors to do more to finance some of our local election campaigns directly. This helped us in May and will be much

"We direct resources much more successfully than we did when I began working for the Liberal Party"

more significant next year. The party also now pays for local government research support previously financed by Unison. There are, of course, also other sources of support for local government that did not exist 20 years ago.

I recognise as much as anyone the importance of improving very significantly gender and ethnic balance in the party. In 1997, we gained 28 seats but only two with women candidates, and at the same time we unexpectedly lost the seats of two women MPs making things look even worse. Having been in overall charge of the target seat campaign (which more than doubled our number of MPs), I accept my share of responsibility for the poor gender balance in that result.

But in 2001 we made six net gains (four with women candidates) and in 2005 we made 11 net gains (five with women candidates). Three of the five women who gained seats for us in 2005 were in seats that would not have been targeted at all but for the fact that they had strong women candidates.

WE SHOULD HAVE DONE BETTER

I believe that we should have done better. We failed to win five other seats with women candidates by less than 1,500 votes. We also failed to retain our one ethnic minority MP after the hard won by-election gain. I believe that more targeted support (not less) is part of the answer and this is the highest immediate financial priority for me.

But the issue is not just about finance. Our biggest failure has been in improving diversity in the seats where sitting MPs have stood down. We have also failed so far (despite some effort and considerable resources) to affect the balance among candidates selected. In 2001, we had 141 women candidates across Great Britain. In 2005, we had just 145.

We also have to look at better ways of involving young people in our party. We outpolled the Conservatives among the under 25s at the last two general elections. We made very significant progress in university towns.

But James is not right to imply that lack of funding has held back LDYS in recent times. As well as free facilities at Cowley Street, LDYS gets a grant of nearly £30,000 a year and receives the subscription income from members under 26 (about £18,000). One problem in the last year was the cost of paying back the loss of over £17,000 on a single over-ambitious 'fundraising' event at the Royal Festival Hall.

James has his priorities for party spending, but did not persuade the FFAC or FE of them – and these are the bodies closest to the details and charged by the conference representatives and members (who elect them) with assessing the competing demands made upon them.

I will argue that the devolution of party resources to target seats (at both parliamentary and council level) has been absolutely crucial to our political survival. That is also why most of our donors have wanted to fund election campaigns directly rather than the administrative costs of either Cowley Street or internal party organisations.

I accept entirely that there were problems with the costs of running the Liberty Network in its first two years. I was strongly critical of these costs and have been able to address them with the help of a new treasurer, the very small staff

team working on major fundraising, and the director of membership, marketing and fundraising. We have established proper management and financial control of this scheme.

Even before this, however, the Liberty Network was making a useful profit for the party. James is not logical in suggesting that we should not have invested in fundraising

and spent money elsewhere instead. That would have left us with even less money to spend on whatever priorities we agree.

As well as targets seats (aiming to improve diversity significantly), my priorities will continue to include the effective fighting of parliamentary by-elections. Independent academic research has shown that most of our significant

opinion poll boosts have come as a result of by-election successes. The Eastbourne by-election in 1990 saved the party. Investment in by-elections such as Newbury, Romsey, Brent East, Leicester South, Dunfermline and Bromley has paid big dividends for the party.

We have major challenges ahead in May 2007. We have to demonstrate the effectiveness of our role in the government of Scotland, show why we should again be part of the government of Wales and defend over half of our council seats across England and Scotland. These election campaigns must be our pre-general election priorities and they will be mine.

Of course, for all these elections (and for the general election whenever it comes), I will be responsible to the party. Unlike any previous chair of a general election campaign, my lines of accountability are actually in my job description.

Since I started working for the party, I have experienced high hopes and bitter disappointments. At times, I was not sure of our survival as much more than a debating society with a handful of seats on elected bodies. But I think that I am justified in feeling some pride in my achievements in relation to the local government successes, parliamentary by-elections and more than threefold increase in our number of MPs.

The party HQ is also stable financially, better organised and managed in a more sensible structure, and has an excellent staff team. I do not get many letters of the sort that I sent to Liberal HQ in 1983, although some criticism must go with the role of chief executive.

I do not consider all that I have done to be the work of 'God' – just doing my job.

“I do not consider all that I have done to be the work of ‘God’ — just doing my job”

Chris Rennard is a Liberal Democrat peer and has been party chief executive since 2003.

LIONS LED BY DONKEYS

What if we lost the War on Terror? David Boyle looks at the failures of Blair and Bush and why victory is now so vital

“These are times on which those who love freedom should use all imaginable caution to love it wisely,” wrote Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the *Morning Post* in the final month of the eighteenth century. “Good men should now close ranks.”

He was arguing that the brutal authoritarianism of Pitt’s administration – including the suspension of Habeas Corpus – and the violent revolutionary agenda of his Jacobin opponents were somehow buttressing each other. It was time, he said, for a new body of liberal opinion to make this symbiotic relationship clear.

He did not mean there was a moral equivalence between the bloody revolutionaries in France and the desperate and unimaginative British government, who so feared the hidden supporters of revolutionary France in their own cities. But he did mean that they were locked together in a relationship that was helping to shape each other.

You might wonder how much we are in a similar situation now, as the terror threat ratchets up around the world, and how much liberals in all sections of society can band together to articulate this.

Nor is this just a neat historical parallel. There is a deeper, even a metaphysical sense, in which this dangerous relationship is becoming apparent.

I first ran across the works of the French philosopher Jacques Ellul at university. He’s dead now – since 1994 – but his theory that, when you fight, you get like your opponent, is suddenly startlingly relevant.

You can see what he means: we were horrified by the Zeppelin raids on London in the First World War, shocked at the Nazi attack on Guernica in 1936. But within a decade we were doing worse to German cities, in the mistaken belief that we were damaging morale.

When, during the Iraq invasion, I heard on the news that the Americans had flattened a neighbourhood in Baghdad – including all its inhabitants – because they believed Saddam Hussein was eating in a restaurant in the vicinity, I thought of Ellul. The recent destruction of Lebanon, and the ferocious the assault on Falluja, reminded me again.

Apparently, if you live near a terrorist these days, you are fair game. We are learning to fight the War on Terror with terror, and the implications are absolutely disastrous – because that is precisely what the terrorists need us to do.

Again, the bombing of the London underground and the napalm bombing of Falluja are not morally equivalent, but it is

a difference in degree – the achievement of an end by a devastating means – not in kind.

Never in the history of human conflict, Churchill might have said, did one side fall so much for the tactics of so few opponents.

Blair’s ‘Arc of Extremism’ speech seems to recognise some of this. Too late, he sees that fighting a war with terror is a recipe for driving moderate opinion into the arms of the extremists, and that is a recipe for ultimate defeat.

Liberals have treated the whole concept of a War on Terror with some suspicion, and rightly so. But now that Bush and Blair have framed the reality in that way, we should consider for a moment the consequences of losing – and it is now all too easy to see how it could be lost and what the consequences would be.

All the enemies of liberalism need to do is so terrify our governments that they suppress the freedoms that they are supposed to be defending.

Worse, they only need one act of nuclear or biological horror to blow away three centuries of tolerance and reform and civilisation. I don’t claim this is inevitable; I do say that it *matters* that we have governments capable of ‘winning’ the war. And that our government is not, and must be bundled out of office to make way for one that is.

For some reason, the UK opposition has not been able to articulate this case – that Blair is losing the war – partly through fear of the language of defeatism, partly through a sense of inadequacy: they have yet to find a political language that can articulate this message in a way the tabloid newspapers can understand.

Partly, perhaps, because they regard the whole concept of the War on Terror with suspicion. We sometimes describe Iraq as if it were a procedural error, just a failure of democratic will, rather than what it really is: a massive opportunity for al-Qaeda and a looming defeat in the War on Terror.

So we fall too often into the trap of campaigning without content. We become mere purveyors of newspaper headlines, rather than doing what oppositions need to do: acting in such a way that key stories stay in the newspapers day after day.

In that way, we allowed the scandal of the bomb flights – colluding in the supply of weaponry that was raining down on Beirut – to slip out of the news, though it encapsulated everything we argued about the appeasement of illegality and violence by Labour.

“We allowed the scandal of the bomb flights to slip out of the news”

Two centuries ago, Coleridge bemoaned the fact that it was left to wild revolutionaries like Hunt to speak for those sections of British society who were livid with Pitt and his cronies.

Now, we have to ask, apart from us and a few tentative Labour backbenchers, why is it left to violent rabble-rousers like George Galloway to express the fury that so many people feel with Blair and his foreign policy idiocies?

I say apart from us, but even Liberal Democrats do so not nearly broadly, not nearly consistently, and not nearly angrily enough. The issue is the threat of defeat for the forces of liberalism in the world by those who are opposed to everything about it, because of the incompetence of those who do not understand it. That's enough to get Gladstone out of bed in the mornings.

THE WORST EVER PM?

There has been an impassioned discussion on American political websites about the identity of the worst US president in history, now we are living through the final years of the presidency of one of the prime candidates.

It made me wonder: who is the worst ever Prime Minister – Lord North, Neville Chamberlain? Is it a title you earn by general hopelessness or by one massive miscalculation?

Blair may not be in quite the same category as Bush – he is able to string sentences together – but you have to wonder whether any prime minister before has presided over such unprecedented damage to our national security.

In previous eras, politicians responsible for military disasters did the decent thing and left the stage. Churchill resigned over the Dardanelles debacle. Chamberlain was forced out over the Norwegian campaign.

They left because the repercussions of defeat were momentous. And because, unless the system could see the mistakes clearly, and tell the truth about them, it was impossible to rescue the situation.

Blair stays, and exactly why will have to wait for historians, who are likely to pick over the details of who did what in these momentous years. But it may be down to the corrupting control that any prime minister – and especially this one – holds over the British establishment.

It may be simply his personal ability to charm individuals. Paddy Ashdown famously warned that Blair's fatal weakness was his over-reliance on his own charm.

It may be, again, that opposition politicians have failed to find the language to express the enormity of the destruction that is being wrought – the calamitous nature of the mistakes.

Even the UK Independence Party can see the controversial recent Act of Parliament to extradite suspects to the USA is spelled using American English, and was clearly dictated by them, and says not a word.

Whatever it is, it's time to see our predicament clearly, fatally chained to the disastrous foreign policy of a rogue American regime.

HEARTS AND MINDS

When Churchill became prime minister in 1940, he set out his policy as simply to “wage war by land, sea and air”. How might we now state a policy capable of defeating terror, freelance and state-sponsored, with similar simplicity?

There is going to be military capability somewhere in the equation. There is also going to be security – but not simply the half-hearted equations of security staff and profiling software, but a policy that genuinely sets out to increase the safety of British citizens.

A renewed nuclear programme, with its concomitant transport and storage of tons of plutonium, is clearly not compatible. Decentralised energy is both safer and less vulnerable to attack.

But the main thrust any victory policy is going to need is what they call ‘hearts and minds’, to win the battle for those moderates in the Middle East who are now looking to Hezbollah and al-Qaeda for their defence.

This is hardly a revolutionary idea. The whole basis for defeating terror in Ireland was isolating those committed to violence in their own communities. It cannot be beyond the wit of a society so sophisticated in its communications to forge a strategy for long-term victory.

But of course spin or stories are never going to win the war alone, when the glaring contradictions in our prosecution of it are so obvious. And not just there, but at the heart of the society and values we are defending.

And that's the challenge. The War on Terror was announced by two leaders who never understood it, and by announcing it – and waging it – set it in motion in ways they never grasped, facing risks beyond their comprehension.

We will only win it if we can become what we claim to be. If we genuinely let the people of Palestine and Cuba vote for the governments they want. If we face up to the reality underpinning our society – that most of the business to which we have handed so much power is actively corroding our families, neighbourhoods, health and values.

If we can face up to the pathetic dependence of so many of our people, and the miserable emptiness of our democratic institutions.

And if we can do something about it, and revolutionise our own lives, institutions and spiritual emptiness, just as we are asking the Muslim world to do, then maybe we can win the War on Terror.

Blair can't do it. He now dimly seems to understand the hideous mistakes he has made, but we need to be able to look at them clearly and put together an uncorrupted policy for victory. We can't do so with him still at the helm.

It would be like asking Neville Chamberlain, the prime minister he most resembles, to preside over Britain's defence against invasion.

It is much easier to see what kinds of policy will not win: anything called shock and awe; bombing innocent civilians, even by mistake; virtual war from the air in the wholly mistaken belief that it destroys morale (why does it always destroy *their* morale and never ours?).

How do we fight the terrorists when they lurk hidden in communities? That is the challenge, and it is far easier to assert than to achieve. What is horribly obvious is the effects of our failure to do that on the Middle East.

But look at the current tactics from the perspective of history, and you see what Blair only hints at. That he and Bush are like First World War generals: presiding over disastrous, destructive and counter-productive tactics that brought their nations to the brink of defeat.

Watching our ill-equipped troops in Iraq and Afghanistan now, they seem like modern lions led by donkeys. We desperately need new tactics or we will lose this war, with appalling results for everything we believe in.

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

WE'LL ALL GO TOGETHER WHEN WE GO

The Liberal Democrats are reviewing their policy on Britain's nuclear weapons. David Grace argues that the party should widen its debate without fear of the consequences

The lack of debate on nuclear weapons since the collapse of the Soviet Union is one of the great mysteries of British politics. During the cold war, the electorate was sometimes offered the choice between parties supporting and parties opposing nuclear weapons (see extracts from our manifestos below). Since the demise of the enemy that we were supposed to deter, debate has almost ceased.

Tony Blair is only following tradition in seeking to commit the UK to a further generation of nuclear weapons after Trident, without time for public or parliamentary debate. Britain's original nuclear weapons programme in the 1950s, the purchase of Polaris and the subsequent adoption of Trident were all decided without effective scrutiny or decision in parliament.

Blair originally announced that a decision on the future of our nuclear arsenal would have to be made by the end of this parliament and then, without adducing any reason, by the end of this year. Between his two announcements, the Liberal Democrats' Federal Policy Committee set up a panel ineptly charged with discussing 'The future of Trident', which would seem to beg the question.

The panel has laboured to produce a consultative document for discussion at the 2006 autumn conference, with the aim of producing a draft policy for approval at the 2007 spring conference, i.e. after the government has announced its decision and allowed a limited debate in parliament.

Defence spokesman Nick Harvey has repeatedly attacked the government's unnecessary haste and called for time for a real public debate. When Jack Straw promised a vote, Nick responded, "The Government must clarify if the vote will be on the substantive question of whether or not the UK retains a nuclear deterrent. A vote solely on options for a nuclear deterrent would be wholly inadequate."

Blair's motive is to pre-empt debate in the Labour Party, something to which that group of invertebrates are no longer accustomed, but of course his timing also prevents debate in the Liberal Democrats, where it has not died out entirely. There may be some in the party who, unlike Nick Harvey, are relieved that there will not be time for debate. They are perhaps haunted by the ghost of the 1986 Liberal Assembly in Eastbourne, where the delegates rejected the absurd Anglo-French Euro-bomb with which the two Davids tried to

polyfill the yawning gap between Liberals and Social Democrats on nuclear weapons.

As a candidate in the 1987 election, I was relieved that I did not have to campaign on a policy which could have been blown out of the water at any moment by President Mitterrand or prime minister Chirac, who were not in the least interested in the idea. The mythology that surrounds that debacle suggests the Alliance fared badly because we were seen as weak on defence, whereas our failure to advance was really due to the rows between the two Davids, who managed to focus public attention not on the 47 agreed points of defence policy but on the one point of discord.

I fear that we may be facing yet another failure of presentation if we carry on with our current work on Trident without the context of the UK's overall stance on foreign policy and our overall defence needs. If we treat Trident as an isolated question, we will fall into the stagnant dialogue of the deaf between the idealists who reject nuclear weapons on ethical grounds and the pragmatists who fear what the *Daily Telegraph* will say (as one parliamentarian did recently) and how it will affect us in an election against a resurgent Tory party. We risk therefore either rejecting nuclear weapons at our electoral peril or accepting that some nuclear weapons are all right (like the housemaid's very small baby in *Punch*) as long as we don't actually use them.

By reducing the discussion to these sterile alternatives, we may fail to consider the two most important arguments about nuclear weapons. Firstly, does the UK-USA co-operation, which makes it possible (technically and financially) for us to pretend to have an independent nuclear deterrent, actually drive British governments into ever-closer dependence on the USA and ever-closer co-operation with American foreign policy? Does the 'special relationship' strengthen or weaken our ability to pursue policies that differ from whatever the American administration that happens to be in power wants?

The UK really cannot afford to maintain a nuclear weapons system with global scope without the hidden subsidy of Anglo-American co-operation. Incidentally, this fact undermines Blair's pretended urgency of decision, as the Americans will not be deciding on their next generation for some years yet and those who want the UK to maintain a strategic deterrent must await the Americans' decision.

Secondly, we should address the question: what do we want nuclear weapons for? What are our country's real defence needs and does the cost of our nuclear deterrent prevent us

from addressing them? If, as more and more analysts agree, the real threats to our national security come from terrorism and global warming, what is the point of a nuclear weapon? Where is the target? When would it be useful?

It is difficult to assess the likely cost of a replacement for Trident but the best guess at present is £15-20bn over 20 years. Assuming that we don't decide to build 100-130 new hospitals instead (for example), could we not devote some of that money to solving the problems of overstretch and poor equipment in the armed services (see Tim Garden, *Liberator* 312)? The opportunity costs of replacing Trident are a vital consideration in deciding whether to do it in the first place.

Given that our current policy process means that conference will adopt a policy at least three months too late, why don't we stop pretending that a policy on Trident in isolation is either useful or even pragmatic? If instead we conduct a wide-ranging defence review, we can take into account the political, strategic and financial arguments. At the end of that process, we could produce a comprehensive defence policy that would impress an electorate tired of following George Bush around the world and tired of British politicians who don't tell them the truth. We could even (whisper it carefully) demonstrate that you can be serious about defence without needing to threaten annihilation. I'm only asking that we decide policy on the basis of what we believe and what we know rather than what we fear.

EXTRACTS FROM LIBERAL AND LIB DEM MANIFESTOS

1955: 'Crisis unresolved'

Liberals will work towards complete disarmament in all weapons, in all countries, under a system of international control which shall permanently ensure the free world and our children against aggression and the infinite horrors of warfare.

1959: 'People count'

On Defence, the issue for years has been "Does Britain need to make its own A-Bombs." On this Tories and Labour have been united in saying 'yes'. Only recently (and possibly too late) has Labour begun to see that if every country makes its own bombs the risk of war is increased. Liberals for years have been saying that the H-bomb ought to be held in trust for all the free peoples and we should all make a contribution to its production.

1964: 'Think for yourself'

The attempt to maintain an independent British range of nuclear weapons has encouraged the proliferation of nuclear weapons, weakened our economy, and deprived our conventional forces of resources they desperately need. Collective control of nuclear weapons within NATO could be an important step towards disarmament. We must also take the initiative in the disarmament discussions by pressing for a freeze on the development of nuclear strategic weapons.

1966: 'For all the people: the Liberal Plan of 1966'

The Deterrent. Events have proved that only the Liberals were sincerely opposed to Britain's possession of an independent nuclear deterrent. Labour in office, despite all they said in Opposition, have in fact committed us to a nuclear role for the next 10 years. Thereby Labour have made their task of reducing the arms bill more difficult and encouraged the spread of nuclear weapons. However, as we still have certain nuclear weapons under our control, steps must be taken to place these weapons under international control within the Western Alliance.

Disarmament. We must call for a freeze in the development of nuclear weapons, work to establish nuclear free zones; and press for the admission of China to the UN and disarmament discussions.

1970: 'What a life!'; February 1974: 'Change the face of Britain'; October 1974: 'Why Britain Needs Liberal Government'; 1979: 'The real fight is for Britain'

No mention of nuclear weapons.

1983: 'Working Together for Britain'

Trident should be cancelled to avoid a new and provocative contribution to the nuclear arms race and demonstrate our commitment to arms control; *Polaris* should be included in the merged START and INF talks as a further contribution to the prospects of multilateral disarmament.

1987: 'Britain United: The Time Has Come'

In government we would maintain, with whatever necessary modernisation, our minimum nuclear deterrent until it can be negotiated away, as part of a global arms negotiation process, in return for worthwhile concessions by the USSR which would enhance British and European security. In any such modernisation we would maintain our capability in the sense of freezing our capacity at a level no greater than that of the *Polaris* system. We would cancel *Trident* because of its excessive number of warheads and megatonnage, high cost and continued dependence on US technology.

1992: 'Changing Britain for good'

Maintain a minimum nuclear deterrent. We believe that the UK needs to retain its independent nuclear deterrent, but that the escalation of firepower represented by the scale of the *Trident* replacement for *Polaris* is unnecessary and unhelpful. We will ensure that the total number of warheads on the four-boat *Trident* system is limited to no more than that currently deployed on the *Polaris* system, and our Defence Review will also examine the possibilities of future European cooperation in the provision of a deterrent force. We reject the Government's proposed replacement of British free-fall nuclear bombs with air-to-surface missiles.

1997: 'Make the difference'

Retain Britain's basic nuclear capability through the *Trident* submarine force until such time as international multilateral nuclear disarmament can be achieved. We will restrict the number of nuclear warheads on *Trident* to the same number as previously deployed on *Polaris*.

2001: 'Freedom, Justice, Honesty'

Work for the elimination worldwide of all nuclear weapons. We will press for a new round of multilateral arms reduction talks, but will retain the UK's minimum nuclear deterrent for the foreseeable future.

2005: 'The REAL alternative'

Work for the elimination of nuclear weapons and tackle the arms trade. We will press for a new round of multilateral arms reduction talks, retaining the UK's current minimum nuclear deterrent for the foreseeable future, until sufficient progress has been made towards the global elimination of such weapons.

David Grace is a member of the Liberal Democrats' Future of Trident policy panel.

LETTING GO OF AMERICA

Will the Liberal Democrats support the reorientation of British foreign and defence policy away from Washington and towards a common EU policy, asks Andrew Duff

Anglo-American policy has failed. Events this summer have exposed the futility of the uncritical coalition between the UK and the US. The 'road map' on Palestine is leading nowhere; support for Hamas and Hizbollah grows; Iran continues to build a nuclear capacity; the Taliban is undefeated in Afghanistan; and, not least, Iraq continues its descent into chaos.

At home, Muslim opinion, in particular, is disaffected by Israeli cruelty and Anglo-American incompetence. The government and the Labour party are divided. Abroad, Britain's European partners look on in amazement as Tony Blair parrots the neo-con certainties of George W. Bush. So tainted is Blair that even the US President has had to dissuade him from launching diplomatic initiatives.

As Menzies Campbell wrote in a trenchant *Observer* article (20 August 2006), "the British-American relationship needs to be rebalanced". Campbell's appeal was to "those in all parties who believe in a rules-based system of foreign relations, who recognise the unfulfilled possibilities of greater European cooperation, who reject a Milton-like struggle between good and evil". He continued: "Israel/Palestine should become not a cause but an obsession. If it redefines our relationship with the United States, so be it".

One may hope in Brighton to hear more from Sir Menzies about where such a redefinition of the UK's transatlantic partnership will take the country. In particular, the party leader would do well to spell out in some detail how he intends to end the UK's traditional standoffish approach to the development of European Union common foreign, security and defence policies.

Over the years, the British would have done well to follow the counsel of their EU partners. Only through deeper integration with Europe will it be possible to reorient British policy in the Middle East away from that of Washington and to acquire the assets and resources to be more effective on the ground. Full participation in EU common policy will also broaden the UK's vision of the wider world by placing more emphasis on the Mediterranean basin as a whole, on Africa and on Latin America, to say nothing of the pressure from the Baltic and Central European states to engage more critically with Russia.

The EU needs its member states to be both politically willing and militarily capable of acting autonomously from the USA. It is trying, through its constitution, to elevate Javier Solana into a true European Foreign Minister, doubling as Vice-President of the European Commission. There are already some small-scale operations, notably in the Congo, that even the BBC (bless her) describes quite normally as

being carried out by 'EU troops'. In Kosovo, a larger military operation, led by the EU, is settling in as a long-term peacekeeping force. The stalled constitution, indeed, would allow a core group of member states to integrate permanently their armed forces.

For these and other EU foreign policy initiatives to prosper, the wholehearted participation of the UK is required. A common EU foreign, security and defence policy that excludes Britain is hardly feasible. One of the reasons why it is so difficult to persuade EU countries to send infantry to Lebanon as part of the UN force is because the UK has ruled itself out of this mission for both political reasons – as the unacceptable face of Europe in the Middle East – as well as military expediency, because its armed forces are overstretched elsewhere.

So will the Lib Dems be the first British political party to really grasp the security dimension of European integration? Can the party articulate a European option for collective defence that ditches the conceit of the UK's 'independent' nuclear deterrent? Would Liberal Democrat ministers be willing to pool security intelligence and administrative resources with their EU colleagues?

In the past, many senior Westminster figures in the party have been too ready to pay lip service to 'European cooperation between nation states' while clinging on to the imperial American petticoat. Such equivocation will have to stop. There is no room now for nostalgia about NATO, an organisation that has signally failed to adapt strategically to the realities of the post Cold War world. NATO can still be a useful bridge between America and Europe, but it is not a substitute for organising the European Union's capacity to act independently on the world stage.

REACTIONARY HOUSE OF COMMONS

If the Lib Dems resolve to take the European route in the matter of foreign policy, they will get precious little support in the House of Commons. The Foreign Affairs Committee is the supposedly authoritative body whose duty is to track the behaviour of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, still Whitehall's lead department in EU matters. In July this year, the Committee published its first report since 2001 on the state of the European Union (6th Report, 2005-06). The Committee's choice of witnesses was small and narrow: three Foreign Office ministers (Jack Straw, Douglas Alexander and Margaret Beckett), plus two experts: Charles Grant, from the Blairite Centre for European Reform, and Ruth Lea, from the Thatcherite Centre for Policy Studies. No MEP or

Commissioner was invited to give evidence. Not a federalist or a foreigner in sight.

There can be no better illustration of the sorry state of UK European policy than this Report. There is scant regard for the efforts of the Union to develop a common foreign, security and defence policy. The EU's invaluable international activities are dismissed with faint praise. Although there "can be real value" in coordination of foreign policies "where the EU25 can agree and where they have a shared interest, ... foreign policy is and should remain primarily a matter for each nation state to decide for itself" [para. 106]. The MPs put the government under no pressure to review its American preference in favour of the European alliance. Instead, the Foreign Affairs Committee has a curious petty obsession about the (mis)use of the term 'EU Ambassador' for the Commission's external representatives, and their perks. (Did you know that Ambassador John Bruton's modest villa in Washington totals 891 sq metres of which only 354 sq metres are used for official business?).

The Committee, chaired by Labour's Mike Gapes and with a government majority, is in favour of the widening of the EU but against more political integration. Its treatment of the EU's recent budgetary crisis is couched solely in terms of the UK rebate, with no consideration of the common financial needs of the Union as a whole. Although the government now favours increased use of qualified majority voting to promote police, customs and judicial cooperation, the Committee is against. It harrumphs: "Historically, the UK has opposed moves towards greater use of QMV" [para. 43].

Worse, the Foreign Affairs Committee suddenly reverses, without explanation, the cautious welcome to the constitution that had been volunteered in 2005 by the (admittedly junior) European Scrutiny Committee (*Aspects of the European Union's Constitutional Treaty*, 14th Report, 2004-05). Making no effort to describe or assess the complex document, the new Report opines that the "draft [sic] Constitution failed to address ... properly" the institutional problems of the enlarged Union or the need for more democracy and transparency. The period of reflection – in which the Commons has not deemed to indulge itself – "has so far failed to produce workable proposals" [para. 63]. The Committee concludes that "although the Treaty is not dead, it is comatose and on life support. At some point, Europe's leaders are going to have to decide whether to switch it off. ... We recommend that the Government encourage its European counterparts to face up to this reality and explicitly to abandon the Treaty as a package, in the interest of making progress on some of the real and important issues which are at present caught up in the paralysis created by its rejection" [para. 64].

As Commons committees meet in secret, it is not possible to follow who voted which way, but as this rather silly and very negative opinion is directly contrary to party policy, one may be confident that the two Lib Dems on the Committee (Paul Keetch and Richard Younger-Ross) spoke up to defend the constitution and to argue that the UK should join in the gathering effort to rescue the project.

One will never know what the Commons as a whole thinks about the 2004 EU constitution. Both government and opposition will do what they can to avoid a substantive vote on this Report. Yet one cannot be hopeful that there is still a broad pro-European majority in the House of Commons when its principal committee evinces such negative views, grounded on an uncertain grasp of the facts, informed by a narrow range of opinion, and divorced, as it is, from mainstream European politics.

SHOCK THERAPY

Fortunately, events may force a change in the way EU affairs are scrutinised at Westminster and, eventually, in changing attitude. The European option is in the process of becoming better illuminated as the European Commission has agreed to send directly to national parliaments all its official documents and to 'duly consider' any comments received. The current Finnish presidency of the Council – under Liberal prime minister Matti Vanhanen – is determined to open up the proceedings of the Council to the public gaze. Energetic journalists, to say nothing of active Liberals, should

be goading the House of Commons into exploiting the opportunities created by open government in Brussels. The Commons can no longer plead the excuse of ignorance for failing to hold the national executive to account for its performance in the Council of Ministers or for neglecting to represent the public interest in respect of the European dimension. Those who wish to switch the direction of foreign policy away from the Anglo-American towards the European cannot afford to let the proper scrutiny of EU affairs go by the board at Westminster.

Unless something is done to change Westminster's hostility to European politics, there will be a big crisis when the government has to reintroduce to its corridors the matter of the constitutional treaty. This will happen no later than next spring when the German presidency of the Council will publish its soundings about how to salvage the project. Many in Whitehall as well as Westminster will be shocked to discover that it is not possible to deconstruct the constitutional package in order to reach agreement on a cheaper, minimalist model of institutional reform. The only way forward for the Union – as opposed, that is, to backwards – is for certain parts of the 2004 treaty to be subjected to judicious renegotiation with an eye to improvement. The mandate for renegotiation will be agreed in the second half of next year, with the exercise finally (and no doubt gloriously) concluded under the French presidency at the end of 2008. The modified text will then be put to the EU's parliaments and peoples for their approval.

It would be a pity if the Westminster parliament were not in a position to participate in such delicate, complex and important business. When the time comes, the House of Commons will find that one of the strongest arguments in favour of the constitution is that it will enable Europeans to stand up to the USA.

Andrew Duff is Liberal Democrat MEP for the East of England and spokesman on constitutional affairs for the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE).

WHY DO WE DO IT?

Too many Liberal Democrats work for years to take control of their council, but then have no idea what they want to do. Richard Kemp wonders why they bother

Wearing two hats, one as the leader of the Local Government Association Lib Dem group, the other as an Improvement and Development Agency worker supporting Lib Dem groups in the north of England, I have the opportunity to visit and work with groups who are about to, or have, taken control of their council.

Often this is a real pleasure. In Warrington, for example, faced with the possibility of taking control this May, the group thought through the implications some 15 months before.

They knew what the people's priorities were, what the group's priorities were (based on their political beliefs and their internal knowledge of the council), who would be able to do what in control, how they would run themselves and what their first steps should be to establish their difference.

However, too often that is not the case. Opposition groups know instinctively what they are against but find it far harder to articulate what they are for.

In one council this year, I spent time in a room with three leaders, all of whom were arguing about what they and their colleagues wanted to be, rather than what they wanted to do.

This lack of practical application of party policies can be seen in all parties. For the Liberal Democrats, it is more important that it does not happen than with our opponents. It is a long time since a Liberal government showed how to apply practically our beliefs. The only place that we can show that our principles and our policies can be turned into a better way of life for people is in our Lib Dem controlled or led councils.

I know only too well what the problems are with this. All councils are too subservient to central government and the plethora of targets and restrictions that it puts in place. There is a conservative inertia of officers to be faced, for whom the status quo is a Holy Grail. There are cultural difficulties within councils and within the partners of the council.

Above all, there is the fact that councils are held to be responsible for most things but actually control only 15% of the public sector spending within their area. Yet within these restrictions, some councils do much better than others in showcasing Liberal Democracy.

I believe that these successful councils are able to answer four simple to ask but complex to answer questions.

What is the long-term future of this area? Where do we want it to be in 20 years' time? No village, town, city or suburb is where it is, doing what it is, by chance. As old industries and realities change, areas need continually to reinvent themselves and provide new reasons why business should invest there, people should want to live there and people should want to visit and stay there.

What is the role of this council in getting there? Is it to be a provider of services or a strategic body championing the area

and marshalling all the public and private sector forces within it? (Of course, the real answer is to do both to some extent!).

Where are we now? What do we really know about the area that we control? Could we do a realistic SWOT analysis of our area and our council? What are the partners and the partnerships like that will help take us there?

How are we going to get from where we are now in the council and in the area, to where we want to be?

Of course, I cannot sit in the LGA or anywhere else and argue what those answers are. Each council group must ask these and other questions for itself and decide what its response is to the challenges it faces.

DEMAND BASIC LIBERALISM

I do not believe that the party should dictate outcomes to its elected representatives. I do believe, though, that the party should be more demanding in ensuring that some basic facets of liberalism should be considered and, where possible, implemented by those who have been elected.

There are five key elements to this:

Firstly, I believe that Lib Dem councils should be listening councils. Too many councils are still stuck in the producer mould, delivering what we and our workforces want delivered in ways that suit us and our workforce.

We need to reverse that and realise that our citizens (or our 'customers', to use a word that might signify well the relationship) are at the heart of what we do.

Lib Dems often interpret that as more consultation and more meetings of more committees. That is only one way to do it. Every day, 22,000 people contact Liverpool City Council. Each exchange gives us information that we can collect and use. Which books are they trying to order from the library, where are repairs not getting carried out, what difficulties they are having with some services, where do we get compliments so we know we are performing well? All this information is readily available to every council, yet very few use it to change their policies or practices.

Secondly, I believe that Lib Dem councils should be devolving councils. We simply cannot sit in our town halls and think we can decide everything for the many thousands of people we represent in the increasingly complex society in which we live.

We need to set up imaginative structures that can involve people in decision-making at the lowest possible level consistent with the delivery of particular services. Devolution, however, does not simply mean that politicians or our people have more power.

That is one way to achieve more localised input but it can simply replace one bureaucracy for another. We also need to devolve more power to our officers in the localities, to work together and devise local mechanisms and practices that meet localised needs. They need to report locally rather

through the council's silos, to change practices quickly and efficiently, and use money better.

Thirdly, we should be strong on environmental issues. Well done Sutton Council for so long being the trailblazer for the rest of us. Councils must do better in delivering basic services in a green way as well as being good on the public faces of 'green' such as recycling and reuse.

All our councils should be setting targets for carbon neutrality in what we do and thinking of carbon neutrality as we construct or neighbourhoods, communities and housing. We should maximise the use of green space for environmental purposes, having a green audit and outlook on all our actions.

Fourthly, we must be innovative. So many councils seem stuck in the 1950s and 1960s. Out there is a host of new delivery mechanisms and partners willing to play a key role in service delivery. Too often they get frozen out. In particular, there are major opportunities for greater involvement by the third sector.

I have spent a lot of time looking at the work of the social enterprise movement and am working with a number of companies in Liverpool, which, in addition to providing us with quality services, provide a triple bottom line: of environmental outputs in the way that they work; people care, by assisting with long-term unemployed and other people with employment difficulties; and financial soundness and probity.

Lastly, I believe we must have a strong emphasis on performance management. Too few cabinet members or opposition spokespersons I meet have a real grasp of the quantitative as distinct to the qualitative performance of the services they are responsible for.

In many ways, if you are not measuring it you are not doing it. Strong performance management means that your staff can quickly make minor changes to programmes and mechanisms

“I cannot for the life of me understand why so many politicians of all parties get into power and do not know what they want to do when they get there”

to improve delivery. It means that you have a full grasp over your outcomes and can be ready to initiate major changes in policy or delivery mechanism if performance is falling short of expectation.

A CHILLING FACT

I remember a chilling fact. In 1999, we had outright control of 32 councils. In 2002, we had outright control of 32 councils. Only 12

councils were on both lists. My gut

feeling is that those councils who stay in our control are good campaigners. But more importantly, it is the way that they control the council that gives them the stuff on which to mount their effective campaigns.

In councils like Three Rivers, Sutton, Vale of White Horse and (hopefully!) Liverpool, we can show that we have principles, we can convert them to localised policies, we can drive those policies through the council and our partnerships, and we can get them to work so that they make a real difference to people's lives. People, to date, have kept voting for us.

I cannot for the life of me understand why so many politicians of all parties get into power and do not know what they want to do when they get there.

Life is too complicated. Go and read a book, make love, earn money, have the best garden in the street. That would be more useful than struggling for power and not taking full advantage when you have got it to promote your principles and improve the lot of your constituents.

Richard Kemp is a member of Liverpool City Council and leader of the Liberal Democrat group at the Local Government Association

Get the new 2006 edition of

THE LIBERATOR SONGBOOK

Now with 76 - yes folks, count 'em - 76 songs!

Only £3 plus 50p postage (make cheques payable to "Liberator Publications") from: Liberator, Flat 1, 24 Alexandra Grove, London N4 2LS

**17th edition
New and Improved! Biggest Ever!**



LIBERATOR SONG BOOK

With a foreword by Lord Bonkers

This edition of the songbook is dedicated to the memory of Harriet Smith

£3.00

CONGO HOVERS ON THE BRINK

Michael Meadowcroft reports on the precarious situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where a tenuous peace holds before a second round of voting

Two years ago, I wrote in *Liberator* 298 that the election timetable for the first democratic elections for 40 years in the Democratic Republic of the Congo had fallen far behind but that there were “glimmers in the dark”, which could indicate that reasonable elections might well take place.

Those glimmers struggled against considerable odds to avoid extinction and, on 30 July, 18 million electors went to the polls in Congo's fifty thousand polling stations, guarded by 17,500 UN and 2,000 EU soldiers. Thirty-three candidates contested the presidential election but most were paper candidates.

The top five candidates took 87% of the vote, with Joseph Kabila, the head of the transitional government for the past four years, topping the poll with 45% and Jean-Pierre Bemba, one of the four transitional vice-presidents, coming second with 20%. These two candidates will contest the second round on 29 October.

Nine thousand candidates also contested the five hundred seats in the federal parliament and these results are imminent. National and international observers noted a number of irregularities but declared the elections generally acceptable.

POST-ELECTION VIOLENCE

Although there was some violence, and a number of deaths during the campaign period, polling day passed off peacefully, as is usually the case. The problems came immediately afterwards, with militia loyal to Bemba and Kabila's presidential guard involved in several lethal clashes in Kinshasa, the capital, which cost at least 23 lives. It took a special UN force of Spanish and Uruguayan soldiers to rescue a group of western ambassadors who were in a meeting at Bemba's home, which had come under attack from Kabila's forces.

The situation is certainly serious but does not – yet – necessarily threaten the second round of voting. In recent years, the DR Congo has shown a remarkable talent for pressing on inexorably towards its electoral goals in the midst of chaos. However, even if the short-term prospects for its democratic path are good, the long-term future is far from assured.

Elections are not the means of democracy but the result of democracy. There is far too much reliance on elections as a kind of magic bullet that can solve all the problems of a dysfunctional country. Unless a country has sufficient of the ‘marks’ of democracy, its long-term democratic stability is extremely fragile.

A VAST COUNTRY WITH NO INFRASTRUCTURE

DR Congo lacks many of those requirements and the electoral process on its own is not powerful enough to transcend the gaps. Its very size and location make it vulnerable to internal instability and outside interference. It is the size of Western Europe and its 10,000 kilometre border fronts on to nine other countries, many of which, such as Rwanda, Congo-Brazzaville, Sudan, the Central African Republic, Uganda and Angola, have themselves been unstable and have been the cause of violent incursions and of hundreds of thousands of refugees.

The United Nations peacekeeping force (MONUC) is currently the largest UN peacekeeping mission in the world, with 17,000 soldiers and a one billion dollar annual budget, but is far from capable of policing such a vast and diverse country in which there are a number of warlords with their own private militias.

In addition to this heavy peacekeeping bill, the donor community has provided a further \$450 million to pay for the election itself. This huge sum – by far the largest ever provided by the donors – is needed to overcome the immense logistical problems in a vast country, which lacks the basic infrastructure of roads, postal services, telephone land lines and just about everything else.

NO UNIFICATION OF MILITARY FORCES

One crucial clause of the transitional agreement, which introduced a tenuous peace and which led to the electoral process, was the unification of all militias into a single official army. The stated intention, to which all the various combatants signed up, was to accomplish this unification by polling day. The clear purpose for this timetable was to inhibit the losing candidates taking their militias back into the bush and continuing the armed struggle for domination of mineral rich territory.

It failed. Despite every effort of MONUC, and of the political ‘Steering Committee’ that underpinned the UN mission, only some 20,000 militia members had been incorporated into the official army by polling day. This was a fraction of the whole number and it was clear that warlords, aka party leaders, were hedging their bets in regard to the election.

The violence that erupted in Kinshasa between Kabila's presidential guard and Bemba's militia once the results were known demonstrated the failure of the integration policy. However, the other two vice-presidents who contested the

election, Azarias Ruberwa and Arthur Ngoma, polled so abysmally, even in their supposed fiefs, that it may well inhibit any idea of continuing the armed struggle.

The efforts to draw militia members into the official forces was not helped by a decision of the electoral commission to make members of the army and of the police ineligible to register and to vote. Unable to recognise the difference between the civic duty to vote and political involvement through membership of a party, the electoral commission thus placed a further obstacle in the path of peace.

Which party leader, having, perhaps, a private army of four thousand partisans, was going to be enthusiastic to give them up to the national army – Commander-in-Chief the declared election candidate President Kabila – when that would deprive them, and each leader, of their votes? I argued strongly but in vain against this perverse rule.

REGISTRATION PROBLEMS AND THE BOYCOTT

Considerable efforts were made to register all electors but circumstantial evidence suggests that up to three million are missing from the registers. Hard evidence is difficult to come by, not least because there has been no census in DR Congo since 1984. The estimated population is around 62 million, of which approximately 60% are under eighteen years of age. Thus around 28 million Congolese are eligible, compared with the 25 million actually registered.

Some of the missing electors may be supporters of veteran Congolese politician, Etienne Tshesekedi. The 74-year old Tshesekedi was three times prime minister of Zaïre – as dictator Mobutu Sese Seko christened the country. Originally a colleague of Mobutu, he later fell out with him and was active in the external opposition.

Tshesekedi returned to DR Congo in 2005 to a rapturous reception. In subsequent opinion polls, he and his party were the most popular party in the capital Kinshasa and other urban centres. However, neither he nor his party were participants in the transitional government and he regularly stated that he regarded the transition as ending at midnight on 30 July 2005, i.e. the precise two-year term originally agreed. The inference was that he, Tshesekedi, should assume office thereafter. He organised two large marches in Kinshasa, both of which resulted in serious violence. Ambassadors, plus UN and European Union chiefs, beat a track to his Kinshasa home to persuade him to abandon his disruptive tactics and to accept the two six-month extensions previewed in the transitional agreement in case of need.

The most they achieved was a grudging and tacit acceptance but, when electoral registration began, Tshesekedi called on his supporters to boycott the process – hardly a winsome argument to men and women who had been denied a democratic vote for over forty years. When belatedly he realised that many of his supporters were, in fact, registering he called off his boycott, registered himself and declared that he would be a candidate.

However, when the 30 July 2006 polling day was announced, Tshesekedi demanded that voter registration be reopened to accommodate those of his followers who had followed his instructions and refused to register. Unsurprisingly, the independent electoral commission turned this down, whereupon he reverted to his previous position of boycotting the election.

In the weeks leading up to polling day, Tshesekedi's activists attempted to undermine the election, not least by destroying election posters and banners in Kinshasa and other cities. This was unsuccessful but there is still the simmering problem of an electoral process continuing for at least two more months without an individual who is arguably the most popular individual politician in the country. Tshesekedi could still play a wrecking role after polling day.

SECOND ROUND – 29 OCTOBER

Joseph Kabila, the young soldier son of Laurent Désir Kabila who ousted Mobutu before being assassinated by a bodyguard, is expected to win the second round run-off comfortably. He is an interesting man and an unlikely African politician. He is quiet and self-effacing, uncomfortable at having to deliver a speech and distinctly uncharismatic. Despite this background, he has survived as president against the odds for over five years and the relative calm of those years following the long civil war has clearly endeared him to most of the electorate.

Although officially he ran as an independent candidate, the experienced Congolese politicians who have carefully maintained Kabila's government and promoted his image formed and fostered a political party for his support. It is likely that this party, 'Parti du Peuple pour la Reconstruction et la Démocratie' (PPRD), will become the largest party in the federal parliament.

Kabila's second round opponent is a complete contrast. The 44-year old Jean-Pierre Bemba is a rebel leader turned politician and as such was brought into the transitional government as one of the four vice-presidents. He is reckoned to be one of the richest men in DR Congo and his electoral strength is in the west of the country, including Kinshasa.

This vast and precarious country now faces a further period of election campaigning. Accusations of corruption will be flung by both camps and there will be sporadic outbreaks of violence but the country will stagger on to a second relatively calm polling day. Kabila will win a decisive victory, which will provide sufficient momentum, with MONUC's continuing assistance and massive aid from the donor community, to run the country for a year or so. Whether his administration can sustain a government thereafter, particularly in the rural areas, will depend on his success on delivering basic necessities, combating corruption, and building successful relationships with parliament and provincial administrations.

One thing is certain: after the long years of civil war, poverty and exploitation, the Congolese people deserve the opportunity to build their own destiny in peace and tranquillity.

Michael Meadowcroft was an advisor to the independent electoral commission in DR Congo from June 2004 to August 2005. The articles referred to above – together with much other material – can be found on the website www.bramley.demon.co.uk

MONEY DOWN AFRICA'S DRAINS

Why do the Liberal Democrats support an aid programme that lines the pockets of Africa's corrupt elites at the expense of its people, asks Becky Tinsley

Why have no mosquito nets or anti-malaria pills reached many rural villages in Africa, despite millions of British taxpayers' pounds being thrown at African health ministries?

Why won't African departments of education produce schoolbooks in local languages, while Coke has bottles in local script in the most obscure places?

Why, in one central African nation, are there 70 children to a classroom, straining to see the blackboard in near darkness, while a new ministry of defence building leaves the lights burning day and night in all 1,500 rooms?

The answer is 'budget support', the most recent in a long line of initiatives, reaching back to the 1950s, aimed at 'building capacity', or enabling governments in developing countries to run themselves more efficiently and openly.

Perhaps only politicians and civil servants seriously believe we can make poverty history by handing cash to their opposite numbers in developing countries. As the development economist William Easterly asks, "What are the chances these billions are going to reach poor people?"

A comprehensive survey of 17 countries receiving budget support from Britain's Department for International Development (DfID), conducted by Birmingham University, finds: "...over-optimistic assumptions about the ability of international partners to influence matters that are deeply rooted in partner countries' political systems." Budget support, "...does not transform underlying political realities."

Attempts to improve efficiency according to "agreed performance targets and conditions," are always "more significant in the eyes of the donors than in those of the partner governments".

Even DfID's former governance advisor, Sue Unsworth, admits budget support hasn't worked. Nevertheless the Labour government, and the Liberal Democrats, remain committed to it in principle.

Meanwhile, the people in developing countries who need schools, clinics, wells and roads wonder why Western donors lecture them about democracy and transparency, and then bolster their thieving or wasteful rulers who have no regard for their citizens.

Put bluntly, budget support leads to more jobs for civil servants. In Rwanda, our annual £45m budget support, aimed at building bureaucratic capacity, means that civil servants in the new layer of government are paid three times what high school teachers are.

SEND MORE BUREAUCRATS

It is estimated that 80% of teachers were killed in the 1994 genocide, and classes are massively overcrowded. Yet, our bureaucrats, working with their bureaucrats, have decided that Rwanda needs more bureaucrats.

Budget support is a return to the days when politicians thought the state could achieve anything with a big enough purse. An estimated \$2.3bn of aid has gone to Africa since 1945 with no apparent effect on levels of poverty, development or economic growth, and no one held accountable for the miserable results.

The World Bank reluctantly concludes that higher aid leads to worse bureaucracy, more corruption, and more violations of law.

Not surprisingly, we share the blame for the lamentable state of Africa's leadership. At independence, we handed power to a small elite in each country, without making sure home-grown interest groups could adequately counter the private use of public power and resources, or military force used to terrorise citizens.

We salve our conscience by sending large blank cheques and issuing press releases, while closing our eyes to how much goes on fleets of Mercedes. Never mind that our aid rarely leaves the doors of the government bureaucracy we support. Of course, wise foreign 'clients' are careful to spend some of the budget support hiring British consultants, many of whom once worked for DfID.

Savvy recipient countries also know that if they endure marathon meetings with DfID officials, drawing up consultation papers outlining how capacity is to be built, they can simply agree to what is being prescribed, and carry on as normal.

In extreme cases, a country's budget support is partly or completely suspended (the famously corrupt Cameroon, as well as Malawi, Ethiopia, and Uganda). Why were some of the more notorious recipients ever given budget support: don't the people at DfID read *Africa Confidential* with its gripping coverage of the latest corruption scandals?

In addition, we neither follow up nor measure success. In countries where people have neither aspirin nor underpants, how likely is it they can accurately measure the effect of aid trickling down from a remote central bureaucracy to village level?

Nevertheless, some governments grasp exactly what donors such as the British want to hear, readily agreeing to 'capacity building' programmes emphasising increased accountability, and the donor's currently fashionable objectives. For whose

benefit are signs, in English, in Ethiopia proclaiming, “Support girls’ education”?

The corrupt African elite also understands our white liberal guilt because many of them studied psychology and sociology at British universities in the 1970s and 1980s. They know what buttons elicit a response from well-meaning people who are terrified of seeming colonialist or imperialist.

BEMUSED AND ANGRY

Meanwhile, Africans at village level are bemused and angry when they find out that the West is giving cash to their corrupt and out of touch rulers.

Here is what an aid worker in Kenya found last month: “Outside the top government officials, UN workers and senior journalists, none of the 35 million Kenyans have ever heard of DfID or ‘budget support’ or ‘anti-corruption initiatives’.

“Outside of the privileged urban areas, people are not aware that their government receives any aid from overseas. In fact, I have great difficulty communicating this concept. When you and those around you live on a dollar a day, someone claiming that a far away nation is dishing out millions of dollars, apparently with no strings, brings wonderful smiles, the sort of ‘who is this crazy white man?’ smile. The educated ones just shrug at the idea of their government stealing DfID money: that is the inevitable, repetitive curse of their lives.”

DfID gave Kenya \$35m in budget support last year, despite a tidal wave of financial scandals engulfing the government of president Mwai Kibaki, who was elected on an anti-corruption platform, naturally.

So strangled are we by our fear of appearing insensitive, that we refuse to call corruption and racism by their names when non-white people are responsible. The uncomfortable truth is that, in many African countries, officials and politicians gear the system to serve their tribe, race, region or group.

It is obvious to anyone who has visited the Tigrayan area of Ethiopia that the region that produced many members of the current government has benefited disproportionately from spending on public services.

Tony Blair lauded the Ethiopian leader, Meles Zenawi, as one of the “new generation of African leaders” until Meles started shooting people who disapproved of him stealing the election last year. Ethiopians have a different view of Meles’s rule: that only the well connected get jobs and that officials are at liberty to levy invented taxes on struggling business people.

Tribal greed is also in evidence in Nigeria, where vast oil wealth has not helped the desperately poor region where it is produced. Oddly, the West has not yet registered the Nigerians’ impressive track record, because we are still giving their politicians aid (DfID gave \$47m last year) and loans.

Between 1960 and 1977, Nigeria’s leaders stole \$212bn, which is roughly the total of Western aid received in that period. We seem untroubled that Nigeria spends more on football stadia than on health and education combined. We should have listened to the late Nigerian singer Fela Kuti, who described his leaders as VIPs (Vagabonds In Power).

For decades, African intellectuals have been warning us their elites rip off every penny they can without losing a moment’s sleep, untroubled by the hunger of their people, while laughing openly about the gullibility of Westerners who hand over vast sums of money.

As Chinua Achebe wrote of his native country: “The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders

to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership.”

Easterly found that, in Cameroon, Tanzania, Guinea and Uganda, between 30% and 70% of AIDS drugs given to governments were going missing before they reached patients. As he says, Western governments and institutions “coddle awful gangsters who just call themselves governments”.

No wonder they have an expression in West Africa, “As stupid as a white man”. We are willingly fooled by shrewd ‘Wabenzies’, Swahili for the class of African politicians and officials who favour the Series 500 Mercedes.

We would do better to fund reliable British non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in partnership on achievable, smaller scale projects with local civil society groups, thus bypassing the state. In addition, we should fund NGO schemes to educate women and give them micro-loans, since women add a disproportionately large boost to economic growth and social well-being once they are empowered. Decades of big world-changing plans have failed: let’s foster baby steps that actually improve the lives of real people in tangible ways.

Perhaps we should listen to a different set of Africans: the Nigerian academic Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe suggests aid has never been an instrument of large-scale transformation, and more useful would be banning Western arms sales to African countries.

Richard Dowden, director of the Royal Africa Society, writes: “If aid were the solution to Africa’s problems it would be a rich continent by now. ... Its ruling class has failed to create viable states that provide health, education and economic opportunity for their people... until the politics come right, huge amounts of aid would make things worse.”

Dowden suggests fair trade could do more for Africans. That means scrapping agricultural subsidies, and stopping dumping our surpluses on their markets.

Moeletsi Mbeki, of the South African Institute of International Affairs, says, “Throughout Africa strengthening the state has led to more oppression, less accountability and greater underdevelopment. Since independence political elites have suppressed or prevented the development of civic institutions that strengthen society and provide a balance to the power of leaders.”

Mbeki points out that too much aid makes governments even less accountable to their people because they do not need their taxes or their consent.

History suggests economic growth may be a better way out of poverty: South Korea was at the same level as most African countries in 1945. Perhaps we should encourage and support NGOs giving loans and skills to entrepreneurs wishing to start medium-size businesses.

Trade also broadens and deepens peoples’ quality of life by exposing them to ideas and products beyond their village. Women in particular benefit from escaping from the brutal drudgery of life on the farm.

Until we stop feeding the bloated African fat cats, we are damning the hardworking, honest people of Africa who wonder why we support corrupt, undemocratic or tyrannical leaders. We help keep these bloodsuckers in power, when we could be doing their people a favour by bypassing those with such a sense of entitlement.

Becky Tinsley is director of Waging Peace and a former Liberal candidate. She is building a girls’ boarding school in Rwanda. www.RwandaGirlsSchool.org

LABOUR'S SPIT AND HAIR COLLECTION

Lynne Featherstone urges support for the Liberal Democrat campaign against the government's retention of DNA samples from innocent people

The arrival of DNA on the scene – or more literally, on the crime scene – has been the most significant advance in crime detection since the fingerprint.

No-one can deny its credentials in terms of securing identification, confirming guilt and successfully aiding not only thousands of current convictions, but also in solving a number of cold cases including 37 murders, 16 attempted murders and 90 rapes. But, just because there are many good and worthy things that can be done with DNA, that does not mean that anything and everything is OK.

It's just the same as with jailing people. Jailing someone is often good and right, but we still need rules to control who can be jailed, how and for what reasons.

What Labour has decided is that DNA samples can be taken from anyone arrested. They need not be charged. They need not be cautioned. They are simply those members of society the police take to a police station on arrest.

Two samples are taken on arrest. This can be saliva swabs or hair. The police are permitted to take non-intimate samples without the individual's consent. The Forensic Science Service analyses one sample and stores the other – which is retained until the individual would be 100.

WHY IT'S WRONG

So what's wrong with keeping innocent people's DNA on record? Why are the Liberal Democrats campaigning for innocent DNA records to be destroyed upon request?

As with most much-hailed, cure-all solutions, the gritty reality is that there are concerns and dangers. Some are issues of principle around civil liberties and equalities. Some are issues of a more practical nature: of fallibility, of misuse and abuse, of security and lack of safeguard, and of possible commercial use and abuse of DNA information.

My own interest in DNA started during my five-year stint on the Metropolitan Police Authority and has continued in my parliamentary role as shadow minister for police, crime and disorder.

This is a difficult climate in which to campaign on such issues. Civil liberties are out of fashion as this Labour government – a government that believes the answer lies in ever more surveillance, incarceration and headlines, rather than dealing with root causes – tries to wrap up every repressive measure in the 'tough on terrorism' language.

Liberal Democrats need to speak out and campaign for an end to the indefinite retention of DNA of innocent members of society. And make no mistake – the Big Brother database is here.

THE BIG BROTHER DATABASE

The national DNA database now holds more than three million records, of which more than 125,000 belong to people who were neither cautioned nor charged. And among them are records of 24,000 juveniles.

Additionally, one third of the black population of England and Wales is on the database – a number far out of proportion to their share of the overall population. Of course, the racists of the BNP just mutter, "oh well, blacks cause lots of crime so it's no wonder there are so many of them in the database".

This does not stand up to examination. What the figures show clearly are that the police are disproportionately arresting black and ethnic minorities.

They also show that disproportionately more innocent DNA is taken from black and ethnic minorities than from other communities – that is, they are arresting not only disproportionately but also wrongly.

For example, in London, 57% of all innocent DNA is from black people. I have asked Sir Ian Blair, Metropolitan Police commissioner, to investigate the cause of such worrying statistics and this investigation is being undertaken.

So if there are other problems with DNA records, then people from black and ethnic minorities will suffer disproportionately. And there most certainly are other problems.

MISUSE OF THE RECORDS

There is already evidence of DNA records being misused. The system set up by Labour is being run in a way that increases rather than minimises this risk.

The DNA *profile* on the database is unlikely to contain personal genetic information. It can be used to pursue relatives through genetic connection but not information about health or other characteristics. But the original DNA *samples* (from which the profiles are derived) contain full genetic information and are not necessary for police purposes – but can benefit the companies paid to store them.

The Human Genetics Commission, which advises the government on these issues, has said that the samples should be destroyed once the DNA profiles (the string of numbers

used for identification purposes) have been obtained from them.

We now know that's not happening. In fact, *The Observer* (16 July 2006) revealed that a private firm has been secretly keeping the full DNA samples along with highly personal demographic details of the individuals, including their names, ages, skin colour and addresses.

Moreover, it has emerged that the Home Office has given permission for a controversial genetic study to be undertaken using these DNA samples to see if it is possible to predict a suspect's ethnic background or skin colour from them.

Permission has also been granted for the DNA being collected on the police database to be used in 20 research studies. The DNA information being collected is not, as the government would have us believe, being used solely to link suspects to crimes.

Add to this nightmarish mix the government's proposed privatisation of the British Forensic Service – currently regarded as one of the finest in the world. Private companies try to make profits – that's a large part of their reason for being. Presented with a large pile of data that could be misused for private profit, how can we be sure every person and every firm will resist temptation?

SECURE? INFALLIBLE?

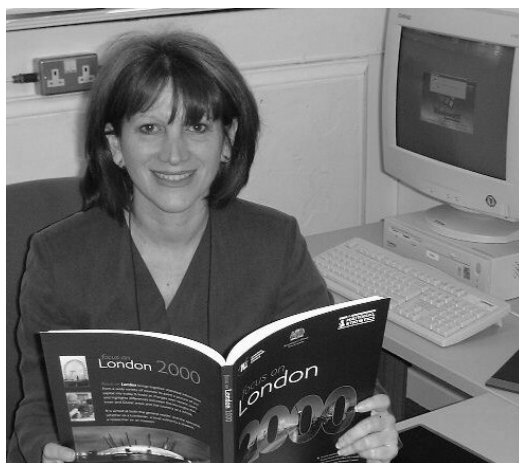
The security of, access to and ownership of databases are a real problem. In the real world, data ends up being misused and the only sure protection is not to have the data. That is another reason why destroying the data of innocent people is the right principle.

When someone says, "but an innocent person has nothing to fear," you have to add, "... if the data is not misused." How sure can we be about that caveat? It might be deliberate, it might be accidental, but misuse happens. In the US, for example, highly personal details about all the country's military veterans were carelessly put on a laptop, taken home by a member of staff – and then stolen.

The risks are not only within the UK. At the moment, DNA information is available to other countries only on particular request from that country. However, coming down the line are rule changes that would make the data available as a matter of course to all the countries in the EU.

The problem with this – as with so many other IT based issues – is security. How can we be sure that such information won't find its way to unsuitable recipients with commercial or worse intent in any of the many countries in the EU with – inevitably across a large area – very varied standards of security? Will there be a day when an employment form from an EU country to work as a pilot or in a bank has a question simply asking if your DNA is on the database? Will people think: no smoke without fire?

Even worse, DNA is not infallible. Mistakes have and will be made. The actual technique used by British police, according to the director of the Forensic Institute in Edinburgh, is very vulnerable to contamination. We are the only country in the world that uses the highly sensitive LCN technique (low copy number), which allows crime scene investigators to detect invisible amounts of DNA – just a single cell – where a suspect has brushed against something or even just breathed on it.



This methodology is so sensitive that it can detect the DNA of people who have never even visited the scene of the crime themselves – let alone been in any way involved. As a politician, I shake hands with many people – so my DNA will be in each of their houses or offices. Get the picture?

Of course, DNA is meant to corroborate other evidence. But as investment goes in, a commercial imperative is involved. As DNA increases its aura of infallibility, will the police (or the public, when the information is 'conveniently' leaked) believe those who say they weren't at

the crime scene even though their DNA was? And how long before corroborative evidence becomes less necessary?

LACK OF SAFEGUARDS

The government remains adamant that the DNA database has adequate safeguards. I am not so sure. A phenomenal police tool in the confirmation of guilt can so easily become a nightmare scenario. Ultimately, it will be misused, whether by this government, the next, or one in the future, by private companies or by thieves.

We are gradually creating a genetic profile of the entire country, regardless of a person's criminal history. Our past experiences must tell us that a temptation that big will eventually prove too much. Who can predict for what ends it might be used? Or to put it more simply: we need to tackle not just crime but the causes of crime.

It's not just a matter of saying, "people won't be able to do X or Y with the data". We need to remove the underlying cause that gives people the opportunity and incentive to misuse the data. That means not having a massive national database of innocent people's records.

But this isn't just a pragmatic issue; it is also a principled one. Information about me belongs to me unless I choose to trade it for a purpose or my right to it is removed because of my behaviour.

If I want to go abroad, I accept I need a passport and therefore I must give certain information to obtain it. But it is my choice in return for something I want. If I want to drive a car, I need a license and must give certain information and pass a test to obtain one.

If I commit a crime, I understand that my right to privacy – in this case, genetic privacy – has been sublimated to the rights of wider society to protection from me because I have transgressed.

However, if I am arrested wrongfully, then I expect to be able to choose whether my DNA can be retained on the database or not. As long as I harm no-one, then no-one has a right to take and keep information about me. It's my DNA!

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

www.lynnfeatherstone.org/blog.htm

DNA campaign website at
<http://campaigns.libdems.org.uk/dna>

I'M TAKING THE PRIME MINISTER TO COURT

Do MPs have a right to information when they ask for it? John Hemming reports on a judicial review intended to establish this right

As a political party, the Liberal Democrats are committed to the rule of law. Very frequently, however, we spend little time considering what this actually means and a lot of time looking at what exactly we would change in terms of local, national or international policy.

In fact, even though many MPs are lawyers (I am a physicist by training and entrepreneur by career), the focus once elected is on the political process rather than the legal process.

An analysis of current British politics sees the government moving away from the concept of the Rule of Law and moving instead toward the Rule of Person.

The rule of law was defined by Albert Venn Dicey in his *Law of the Constitution* in 1895:

“... every official, from the Prime Minister down to a constable or a collector of taxes, is under the same responsibility for every act done without legal justification as any other citizen. The Reports abound with cases in which officials have been brought before the courts, and made, in their personal capacity, liable to punishment, or to the payment of damages, for acts done in their official character but in excess of their lawful authority. [Appointed government officials and politicians, alike] ... and all subordinates, though carrying out the commands of their official superiors, are as responsible for any act which the law does not authorise as is any private and unofficial person.” (*Law of the Constitution*, 9th edition, 1950).

This principle gives rise to the aspect of law known as administrative or public law. For someone to force the government to act lawfully, they need to raise a legal action known as a judicial review. These are what are known as ‘prerogative orders’. Strictly, they are cases between the monarch and the government requiring the government (or any other public authority such as the BBC or Takeover Panel) to act lawfully.

The first time I started looking at administrative law was when I wanted answers from Birmingham City Council as group leader of the Lib Dem group in opposition. It has taken me some time to get a reasonable understanding of this. That has involved raising a number of judicial reviews, one of which (*R v The Prime Minister ex parte John Hemming MP*) I will go into later on.

NEED TO KNOW

It turns out that there have been a number of legal cases relating to what rights of access councillors have to information held by their council. In fact, these are much wider than appears to be the case. If you are a councillor and ask an officer for any information where you have a defined ‘need to know’, the officer must provide it. For example, if you are on the housing scrutiny committee, you have a right to any information held within the housing department even if it is confidential. If it is confidential, you must keep it confidential, however.

If officers refuse to provide the information, you can raise a judicial review to force them to provide that information. At one stage, I threatened seven simultaneous judicial reviews against Birmingham City Council, which got the Chief Executive to come and ask me to call the dogs off.

What about the costs? Well actually if you do the paperwork yourself, the court fee is £50. The problem comes if you lose. My most well known judicial review was the one that failed during the 2005 general election. It was “stop the general election, the election system is too easy to fiddle”. In essence, this was part of my campaign to try to tighten up on electoral law. To that extent, with the more recent changes, I succeeded. I did, however, have to pay £4,000 in costs to the government. It is not, therefore, something that can be done on a tiny budget.

There is now a new system of protective costs orders. There remains, however, a risk of around £5,000 if you get nowhere with a judicial review.

That brings me to *R v The Prime Minister ex parte John Hemming MP* with an interested party of The Speaker of the House of Commons.

I took a strategic decision on being elected as an MP that I did not want to be a spokesman (although I wouldn’t mind being leader), but that I wanted to concentrate my efforts on campaigning issues. This means that I look for areas in which to campaign and do so. I am quite pleased with my progress at the moment in doing that, having been part of a number of changes of policy.

Part of the process of campaigning is to find out what is actually happening. That is not as easy as it sounds as the government at the centre can think one thing, but the reality can be quite different.

One route is to ask the civil service and/or ask a written or even oral parliamentary question. You can tell when you are asking a really good question because the civil service (or is it the special advisors?) simply refuses to answer the question in some way or other.

MPS' RIGHTS

That set me thinking. The question was whether or not MPs have any rights to information in the same way that councillors have. Clearly they should. It would be an absurdity were MPs actually to have a lesser right to information than citizens have through the Freedom of Information Act.

I therefore started rummaging around the constitution. There are a number of key constitutional statutes. The Bill of Rights Act 1688 and the York Statute 1322 are an important element of this. Other legislation such as the 1840 Parliamentary Papers Act is also important.

Clearly the mechanism for forcing the government to answer questions would be through public or administrative law. In other words, an application for judicial review.

Being aware of this, I wrote a final letter on the basis of an appeal against refusal to answer questions to Tony Blair on 8 May. Oddly enough, he didn't actually answer the letter.

I then started the judicial review pre-action protocol. That is basically a warning letter saying respond to me or else I issue proceedings. Oddly enough, the government didn't respond to this either.

Then in June, I took my paperwork to the Administrative Court office in the Royal Courts of Justice at the Strand.

Finally, I received a response from the government. The government's response was that the case is not 'justiciable'. It doesn't argue about whether or not it has answered the questions; it simply says that the courts cannot force it to answer questions.

That was always going to be the key debate. This will happen at what is called the 'permission stage' of judicial review. There are two steps to judicial review. The first is getting permission. That is when the argument is about whether or not the applicant has a cat in hell's chance of making his arguments stick.

It is at this point that the case is likely to end up going through the Court of Appeal and potentially to the Judicial Committee of the House of Lords. The first part of the permission stage is when a judge looks at the papers. The real problem is that you can only appeal against a refusal. If permission is given, the defendant cannot appeal.

It was, therefore, to be expected that the case would be refused on paper. I, therefore, have applied for a court hearing. The hearing date has now been set for 30 October.

This is where the debates about whether or not it is possible to enforce the Ministerial Code and/or Cabinet Office guidance on responding to letters will be first properly considered.

I feel reasonably confident that my case is solid. What is clear from the House Authorities is that no-one else has tried this before. As with most campaigns, this campaign to improve democratic accountability will only succeed if I keep on grinding away.

So far, the government's failure to respond to the early letters shows me that it is worried about the case. However, the show will not be over until the fat lady sings.

John Hemming is Liberal Democrat MP for Birmingham Yardley. Weblog: <http://johnhemming.blogspot.com/>

Liberalism – something to shout about

A collection of controversial essays by leading Liberal thinkers, who ask whether the Liberal Democrats have the nerve to 'meet the challenge'

Edited by Graham Watson MEP and Simon Titley

Only £5 plus 50p postage (make cheques payable to "Liberator Publications") from: Liberator, Flat 1, 24 Alexandra Grove, London N4 2LS

Liberalism - something to shout about

Beyond incrementalism: Can the Liberal Democrats 'meet the challenge'?

*Simon Bryceson
Jonathan Calder
James Graham
Ros Scott
Simon Titley
Graham Watson
Chris White*

Edited by Graham Watson MEP and Simon Titley

£5.00 / €7.50

IT'S NOT A ZERO SUM GAME

Liberal Democrats should not ape the rhetorical 'toughness' of their opponents, argues Nick Clegg

The recent implosion of the government's credibility in the field of home affairs presents, in my view, an important opportunity for liberals everywhere.

For so long, debates about our criminal justice system, about immigration, about anti-social behaviour, have been disfigured by Blair's successful, if infantile, assertion that 'tough' is good, and 'soft' is bad. By reducing everything to a 'tough versus soft' contest, coherent policy debate about a range of complex issues was rendered impossible.

Now that Blair's 'tough' talk has given way to an awareness of the government's astonishing institutional incompetence in home affairs, new space has opened up for liberal alternatives. Where once the headline grabbing populism of a succession of Labour (and, earlier, Conservative) home secretaries made it difficult for Liberal Democrats to get a hearing on home affairs issues, now there is a greater appetite for different voices and views.

We should remain trenchant in our condemnation of the illiberal excesses of this government, of the permanent whiff of authoritarianism, the indifference to enshrined rights, the mania for layer upon layer of new legislation, the craven desire to secure headlines rather than results.

A government that is now making at least one new activity illegal per day. A government happy to grant the Home Secretary, not judges, the right to curtail the freedom of British citizens. A government keen to give the police the powers to detain individuals without charge for up to three months, with little evidence for the need for such a draconian power. A government prepared to spend millions foisting an unwieldy and intrusive identity database on an unsuspecting British public.

LIBERTY VS. SECURITY?

On all these issues, and many others, we must both retain and strengthen our reputation as the leading party of civil liberties. We should be emphatic in asserting that a defence of these liberties is not incompatible with a pursuit of greater security. There is no 'zero sum game' between liberty and security.

We should point to those measures which we believe really do make a difference to the nation's security – such as our support for the new offence of acts preparatory to terrorism – and to additional measures that we continue to urge the government to adopt, such as the admission of intercept evidence in courts. The notion that our party's commitment to the fight against fundamentalism and terrorism should be judged solely according to the arbitrary test of our reaction to a few hair brained government proposals is absurd.

But if our commitment to civil liberties should remain unwavering, a new emphasis on competence and effectiveness

is equally necessary. In the wake of the revelations that have rocked the government's management of the Home Office, public confidence in our criminal justice system has been badly shaken. This, in turn, has exacerbated public fear about crime, about anti-social behaviour, about threats to our national security. And fear is inimical to a liberal society.

LIBERALISM IN PRACTICE

So we must prove that our principles also lead to a sense of greater solidarity, safety and mutual trust in our communities. Liberal principles must be seen to work in practice, as well as in theory. The great test for liberalism at a time of public anxiety is to provide reassurance as well as liberty, security as well as emancipation.

That is why I hope, as a party, we will do all we can to advertise our record as pragmatic innovators, implementing measures that restore public confidence in our criminal justice system: from the Acceptable Behaviour Contracts pioneered by Liberal Democrats in Islington as a means to deal with anti-social behaviour, to the record of Lib Dem controlled Liverpool Council in cutting rates of domestic burglary; from an outstanding experiment in community based, restorative justice panels in Chard, to a highly successful drive to reduce alcohol related violence in Newcastle; from our suggestion that the sprawling Home Office should be broken up into more manageable parts, to our support for an integrated border police; from our recent proposals to reorganise the sentencing regime to make it more comprehensible to the public, to our strategy to reduce re-offending, which now stands at the highest level in the western world; from our policy to provide treatment, rather than passive incarceration, to the thousands of prisoners suffering serious mental health conditions, to our belief in rigorous, visible community sentences as a more effective alternative to prison.

Voters know we are staunch advocates of civil liberties, vociferous opponents of an increasingly wayward and illiberal government. We must now make sure they also know we have practical answers to their concerns. This is not a time to ape artificially the rhetorical 'toughness' of our opponents, or to withdraw from our vocation as the party of liberty in British politics. But it is an opportunity to show that liberalism works in practice as well as principle, that it can be firm as well as fair, promote security as well as liberty, tackle fear as well as defend freedom.

Nick Clegg is Liberal Democrat Shadow Home Secretary and MP for Sheffield Hallam. www.nickclegg.org.uk

CULTIVATING DONORS

Dear Liberator,

In his article (Liberator 312), James Graham makes statements concerning Liberty Network that are mistaken and misleading. As the person responsible for its inception, I would like to correct them.

Based on extensive research by Tree, one of the leading consultancies in this field, Liberty Network was, from its inception, conceived as a self-funding members' organisation designed to nurture and cultivate donors to the party. Statements such as "this high net worth donor scheme was flooded with cash from central funds" and "that means £100,000 of party funds was tied up for three years until LN was eventually declared a failure" are completely factually incorrect.

Liberty Network has not been a drain on the party's funds at all, quite the opposite. It needs moreover to be judged not only on the funds it forwards to the Federal Party from its subscriptions and profits from events, but also the not inconsiderable sums donated by members directly to the last general election campaign, who in all likelihood would not have done so without LN's existence.


Whilst there is an element of subjectivity in the latter judgement, I am in no doubt whatsoever that LN made a considerable contribution to the party's fundraising efforts in the lead up to the 2005 general election, the funding of which was largely completed at the time of my resignation as Federal Treasurer in February that year.

In the wake of the subsequent Michael Brown affair, there is an understandable tendency to regard all the party's past and current high net worth donor activity with suspicion, and it is clear that there are many in the party who wish to use this opportunity to wind LN up as a project or continue it on a completely different template to that originally conceived.

Until complete state funding of political parties comes along, we simply cannot compete without significant donors, and proper and appropriate structures independent of control by individuals and regimes, to cultivate those donors, are needed. Winding up, or emasculating Liberty Network as is currently being proposed, would in my opinion be a great mistake.

Reg Clark
Hartlepool

LETTERS



STATUS SYMBOLS

Dear Liberator,

The inaccuracies in your report (RB, Liberator 312) about the FE's review of SAOs are eclipsed only by the shoddy proofreading. Aldes is not a lesbian and gay group for scientists as your first paragraph implies, and I think you will find that Aldes and ALDTU were rejected for having fewer than 250 members, not words. Delga hasn't actually been demoted, as a quick perusal of the conference agenda reveals.

For the record, the FE did not put the review off until after the general election. The review was completed in 2003 and overwhelmingly approved by conference that autumn. Part of that review resulted in a change to the constitution, which established the rule that SAO status for all organisations must be reviewed after each general election. All SAOs and AOs were informed of this in both 2003 and 2004 (I have the letters somewhere that I was sent as Vice Chair of the Green Lib Dems), so they all knew perfectly well what to expect and in particular the 250-member requirement.

Before getting too excited about SAO status, we should, perhaps, consider what it actually means for an organisation. The only rights it affords are the right to be consulted about the party accounts each year (which is about as meaningless as it gets) and the right to submit motions to conference (which any ten voting conference reps have). In return, any organisation listed as an SAO is treated as an accounting unit of the party under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 and thus must report all donations and submit an annual statement of accounts. This means extra time for the organisation to spend on admin, and extra staff time at Cowley Street to support them (SAOs are notoriously bad at fulfilling their PPERA requirements).

In short, SAO status is not a privilege but a burden to any small, struggling

organisation. The fact that many are so fixated with it suggests a seriously skewed sense of priorities. For instance, it would appear that Aldes has been obsessed with it to the exclusion of almost everything else for the last decade. The Green Lib Dems by contrast have been content with AO status and have instead concentrated on promoting their agenda. Which organisation has been more successful? Rather than worry about what the voters might think about us declassifying Delga, shouldn't we be rather more concerned about the fact that Delga has been moribund for so long?

Having sat on the working group which developed the current system, it was my opinion then, and is my opinion now, that we ideally should abolish the system entirely and just have a single category of AOs (with the exception of LDYS, which, as the constitution recognises, is a special case). It would be administratively far simpler and we wouldn't be forced continually to have this pointless row.

But the feedback we received showed that large numbers of party activists believe this existing system is absolutely crucial and the system we came up with reflects this. If we are to have this system of organisational willy-waving, it is surely only reasonable to have minimum criteria?

James Graham
London

GOLDEN GREENS

Dear Liberator,

Thomas Papworth puts forward a very conservative riposte (Liberator 312) to my piece in Liberator 310; may I make a few comments, which may help to clarify his thinking?

First, sensible Greens (of whom there are many) do not "look back to some Arcadian golden age...". We are very much concerned about the way things are going at present, and look forward to a brighter future, based on a

better understanding of what is actually happening.

On the contrary, it is he, and others like him, who are trying to preserve the golden age of 'liberal' economics, which is now seen to be destructive of the environment and of social cohesion – as most Liberals would agree.

It is indubitably the image of liberal economics that makes so many people vote Green where they have a chance of electing a Green candidate, instead of voting for us (however 'green' our candidate may claim to be).

His extraordinary remarks about relieving Third World poverty really need an article to refute. I will merely point out that the most important contributory factor to that poverty is the selfishness and lack of imagination on the part of the rich countries; and that no-one in the Green movement would "demand that the Third World slows its economic growth".

The argument is quite the opposite. What we demand is that the First World should slow, and preferably reverse, its cancerous form of growth, so that the Third World may stand a chance of achieving genuine growth of welfare and indeed living standards.

Our western obsession with growth in consumption not only leads to environmental degradation, but also makes sure that the terms of trade are loaded against the poor countries.

Even when a reluctant commitment to help is made at some summit or other, nothing happens unless the rich countries can make something out of it. Nothing can be allowed to interfere with our 'economic growth'.

Finally, on population, to say the world needs fewer people is hardly illiberal – it is plain common sense.

If Papworth thinks we can eliminate poverty, expecting our fragile and already overloaded world to support nine billion humans by 2050 at the level which rich countries enjoy at present, he has another think coming.

Tony Beamish
Littlehampton

TORBAY DISPUTE

Dear Liberator,

I was appalled at the letter you published (Liberator 310) from the MP for Torbay and others about the actions of Liberal Democrats on Torbay Council.

Firstly, let me put on record how well Torbay has done under Lib Dem control. They took one of the worst councils in

the country under Tory control and have transformed its work, its outputs and its efficiency.

They have done this in the face of a campaign that led to the election of a Tory mayor, which was instigated by some Lib Dems, and intransigent hostility from the local MP who used to earn his living helping councillors!

Secondly, there is an important constitutional issue here. Mr Sanders complains that the councillors did not vote in accordance with the resolution of two constituency parties. Since when have Liberal Democrats at any level been instructed as to how they vote in the chamber to which they have been elected? Our candidates are chosen on the basis of their ability and their commitment to Liberal Democracy. We then expect them to exercise their judgment as members. We do not and never have then issued instructions to our elected members on how to vote.

If the Torbay constituency party instructed Mr Sanders how to vote, he would be aggrieved – quite rightly too – but what applies to one level of government must also apply to others.

Lastly, there is the principle of payment. Being the leader of a unitary council – particularly a failing one which has been turned round – takes more time and commitment, and has more power than Mr Sanders has ever had in his life as a minor MP.

Our MPs should not sit on their very reasonable salaries and fat cat pensions and then complain when councillors, on the advice of an independent review, vote to give themselves some pretence of a living wage.

Richard Kemp
Leader, LGA Liberal Democrats

LOST LAYER

Dear Liberator,

I was fascinated to read James Graham's account of the problems in the central governance of the Liberal Democrats (Liberator 312).

It was full of echoes of arguments and difficulties that I recall from the period during the 1970s when I played a central role in the direction of the Liberal Party.

Apart from the names of personalities and titles of committees, there are two differences today.

First, we are electorally much more successful. The main reasons for that are political context and social change, but some credit must be given to the

role of Chris Rennard, and surely respect for his achievements hinders understanding of the problems that James Graham describes.

The other is what James calls 'the culture of indifference' in the party. Twenty or thirty years ago, that would not have been said. There was much more awareness and discussion then about how the party was being managed.

Why has that changed? Could it be the structural change to the party at the time of the merger?

It is difficult for conference representatives to know what is going on. Conference meets too infrequently, is too big, is too much in the public eye and too full of more interesting things to do, for it to exercise its constitutional role in holding the committees that it elects effectively to account.

Prior to the merger, we also had a smaller, more frequently meeting body – the Liberal Party Council (the SDP had a somewhat similar Council for Social Democracy). Are we paying for the loss of such an intermediate tier of governance?

Michael Steed
Canterbury

SWITCH OFF

Dear Liberator,

You award Cardiff Central, South and Penarth the silver toilet for its motion calling for all electrical goods to switch off rather than to standby, with a new tax on those that do not comply (Liberator 312). You write, "Did someone mention the nanny state?" But few people have any idea how much electrical goods cost to run (a cordless phone £10, and a pond pump as much as \$500 a year, for example).

Fridges used to be very inefficient, but no more: regulation, in the form of the nanny state setting minimum efficiency standards has cut our energy bills and made us all better off. The free movement of goods within Europe means that the UK government cannot set energy efficiency standards, but we can have a £100 tax on them if we wish.

Do you have a better idea on how to combat climate change? If so, turn up to the FPC Climate Change consultation session at conference, or send your ideas to Christian Moon at the policy office. And if you don't, don't mock those wrestling with a serious issue.

Tim Leunig
London School of Economics

The Suicide Factory – Abu Hamza and the Finsbury Park Mosque
by Sean O’Neill
and Daniel McGrory
Harper Perennial 2006
£7.99

At a civic function in Islington, a man once introduced himself to me as from “the sane mosque in Finsbury Park”.

The Moslem community is a good deal more complex than some of the lurid media coverage of terrorist plots would suggest, and Finsbury Park’s other mosque went peaceably about its business while Hamza turned its better known counterpart over the road into a centre for extremists.

This book is strong on telling the tale like a thriller, but is almost entirely narrative with little analysis.

We learn how Hamza took over the mosque, what his followers did and said there, and the consequences in violent acts here and abroad, notably Afghanistan to which Hamza dispatched his followers.

What we don’t get is why Hamza was able to carry on his activities more or less openly for several years without the British authorities showing much interest.

The book asks indignantly at several points why the police, MI5, or anyone else, failed to act on what appear as obvious opportunities to deal with Hamza, but it never really explores why this happened.

One reason, and the one that does the security services most credit, is that in the late 1990s they were still absorbed in tackling the remnants of Irish terrorism and so paid little attention to loud demands from France that something be done about people who were already fomenting violence there.

There are allusions to an informal understanding that the Islamic radicals would be tolerated in Britain so long as no disturbances occurred here, but no insight into why the British government might have concluded such an arrangement.

There are also accounts of Hamza holding apparently cordial meetings with security service representatives, though again it remains unclear why.

What is clear is that Moslems who opposed Hamza and wished to curtail his activities got no support from the state, which casts a fresh light on the government’s admonishments this

REVIEWS

summer to moderate Moslems to do more to counter the violent extremists.

This is a readable straightforward account of what happened, but we will presumably have to wait, possibly decades for records to be declassified, to find out whether the security services’ initially casual attitude towards Hamza was cock-up or conspiracy.

Mark Smulian

Unspeakable Love
by Brian Whitaker
Saqi 2006 £14.99

A century ago, the young poet Lord Alfred Douglas – Oscar Wilde’s ‘Golden Boy’ – wrote of same-sex passion as “the love that dare not speak its name”. Yet today, in Britain, it is proudly vaunted by myriad TV stars and respectfully intoned at civil partnership ceremonies in town halls up and down the land.

So it is salutary to be reminded that, in some parts of the world, homosexuality is a capital crime, the justification for such extreme legislation being a particularly narrow interpretation of Islam. Indeed, one of the most interesting parts of Whitaker’s book on Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East (his subtitle) is the way he demonstrates on what shaky ground some theological objections are based.

As the Middle East editor of *The Guardian*, who has worked widely throughout the region, Whitaker writes with both authority and clarity. But the most valuable passages in the book are often testimonies from local people themselves, notably from the three contrasting countries the author concentrates on: Egypt, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia.

There is no law banning homosexuality in Egypt, yet it is a country where there has been systematic harassment of gays in recent years, entrapment on the internet, show



trials and routine torture.

In Lebanon, homosexual acts are illegal, but there are gay discos and even a gay rights organisation. In Saudi Arabia, same sex relations are in principle punishable by death, but largely because of the enforced separation of the sexes, such activity is rampant.

Whitaker cleverly highlights some of the inconsistencies and hypocrisy involved in such situations without being judgemental. But he also acknowledges that the vast majority of men (in particular) who engage in same sex activity do not think of themselves as gay at all; most are married and would happily go with a girl. In some Middle Eastern/North African societies, being a ‘top’ in a sexual relationship with another man actually enhances one’s masculinity.

Whitaker wonders whether the Arab world will follow the Western model and develop a true ‘gay’ culture. My reaction on finishing this excellent little tome was that diversity is the spice of life, so if Middle Eastern men and women in same sex situations wish to see themselves differently from the restrictive Western stereotypes, good luck to them.

Jonathan Fryer

The Turbulent Decade by Sadako Ogata Norton 2005 £10.99

Sadako Ogata was the UN's High Commissioner for Refugees during the 1990s, the 'turbulent decade' as she describes it in her book, which is part memoir and part history. It is an ambitious project, which covers four great human tragedies that caused massive refugee flows: the African great lakes, Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Ogata took over as HCR just as the political stability afforded by the cold war was starting to fracture, resulting in large-scale migrations and internal displacements. The overwhelming perception that Ogata gives is of the ever-widening gap between the political and military decisions, and its impact on the humanitarian work that UNHCR was trying to do. Despite Ogata's clear and measured writing (whose use of description is well drawn and totally relevant), the sense of frustration and the lack of impact in the face of overwhelming human suffering comes screaming through the page; neither does she pull her punches about governments' inaction or inadequate responses.

Yet it is interesting to note that, during her tenure as HCR, criticism of the agency probably reached an all-time high. To blame Ogata would be deeply unfair, but there is no doubt the ambiguous and unresolved position of UNHCR as protector and repatriator is to blame, as is the way the UN plays politics with its own agencies.

Ogata has also had to manage the politics of a sector that now has a sizeable population of NGOs, which are competing for funds and media exposure.

There is no doubt that Ogata presided over several events that stretched the UNHCR resources to the limit (actually UNHCR was completely overwhelmed at times), including much of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, a war on Europe's doorstep. If it hadn't been for NGOs, life would have been a lot tougher for refugees than it already was.

As an actor in the NGO sector for the latter half of her tenure, there are parts of this book that are deeply frustrating to read – especially where there is a variance of views of historical events.

There are also parts of the 'turbulent decade' that are missing from this book. UNHCR's relationship with western governments in terms of their

protection role seemed to be in steep decline and, under her tenure, the protection of asylum seekers within EU countries diminished considerably and continues to do so. There are those of us who felt she should have told UNHCR to take a tougher stand with governments who were refusing to accept asylum seekers who were obviously in need of protection – especially from Afghanistan and the Balkans.

The publisher's blurb on the back cover describes the book as "essential reading for students of human rights and humanitarian affairs". Sadly, it is.

It demonstrates how humanitarian aid can be used as an excuse for governments to prevaricate or do nothing in the face of stunning human suffering. It also demonstrates that, when governments really do have the opportunity to protect the human rights of some of the most vulnerable people on the planet, they fail. Despite all Ogata's honesty, courage, sense of justice, and overwhelming desire to save lives and protect refugees, the final result is a depressing and tragic read.

Sue Simmonds

The New East End: Kinship, Race and Conflict by Geoff Dench, Kate Gavron and Michael Young Profile Books 2006 £15.99

Nearly 50 years after producing his classic sociological study, *Family and Kinship in East London*, Michael Young returned to produce this new study. Young had been head of Labour Party research in 1945 but had become increasingly unhappy with the centralism of the Attlee administration, and established the Institute of Community Studies in Bethnal Green in 1954. Both studies largely used anecdotal methods, as did predecessors such as Jack London in *People of the Abyss* and Henry Mayhew.

The east London referred to in the two studies is what is now the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. There have been great changes since 1957 and the world described in *Family and Kinship in East London* now exists only for a minority of the community; many of the old medium-sized and smaller firms have gone. Three main groupings are described: the old white working class, the Bengali community and the newer middle class yuppies who mostly arrived with the redevelopment of Docklands.

The old white working class was developing a laager mentality towards what it regarded as encroachment by Bengalis, and often saw the middle class newcomers as siding with them. Some had left through either social mobility or 'white flight'. The old, largely matriarchal society of the white working class, in which women dominated family life with extended families, was breaking down.

Ironically, its values exist in the Bengali community, where family ties and extended families are strong. The bulk of the Bengali community is from Syhlet (this was written long before the current arguments about Monica Ali's Brick Lane); it is not unusual to find Asian communities in localities here originating mostly from fairly localised districts. For example, the Pakistanis in Waltham Forest are mainly from the Send whilst the much smaller Indian community is from the Gujarat.

Initially, the migrants were predominantly male until immigration controls were tightened; some had been merchant seaman with a long record of sailing with lines such as P&O. The arrival of dependants made a big change. With bigger Bengali communities, there was less integration and fewer interracial marriages, and the extended family and mosque began to play a major role. Bengali boys began to form gangs, initially as a defensive measure but they started to develop a life of their own, to the extent that many Bengali restaurants are not happy to employ Brick Lane Boys. Education is valued in the Bengali community as a means of social mobility and this has helped improve school results.

However, the biggest change has been in housing. Changes in council housing allocation from a 'sons and daughters policy' to a needs based system has often meant that more recent arrivals have been given priority through overcrowding and other reasons, leading to allegations of queue jumping.

It is in this environment that the Liberals, later Liberal Democrats, won power in 1986 and, according to the authors, represented mainly the interests of the old white working class. Their neighbourhoods policy and approach to council housing is described by the authors as being evidence of this, although just how the policy of encouraging council house sales helped anyone, other than the people buying them, I am at a loss to understand.

There is a widely held perception by the old white working class of the Bengalis receiving preferential treatment. This is particularly felt regarding housing and benefits, and the authors are not prepared to dismiss it as mere racism. There is a feeling that it is unsafe to raise any of these issues for fear of being called 'racist' by middle class council officers. The housing situation has more logic in that, once public housing is in short supply and allocation is by need, larger families and other factors will tend to place recently arrived people at the head of the queue.

The benefits system is harder to substantiate although, with a needs rather than social insurance based system, certain people are more likely to qualify. The same feeling was also held by many older residents towards unmarried mothers, who were also perceived as jumping housing queues. Some of the benefit rules encourage separation. Benefits were initially regarded as 'haran' (unclean) by imams as they were not alms collected at the mosque, and it had to be explained that they were rights.

The more perceptive members of the old white working class tended to blame what they regarded as 'do gooders' rather than the Bengalis themselves, some suggesting that it was the council officers who were fuelling racism and some even thought that it was a version of the old imperial trick of 'divide and rule'.

The authors are good on analysis but not so good on solutions. They do not appear to have an answer to the feelings of preferential treatment of minority groups felt by the old white working class residents. They point out that, in the long run, the Bengali community will cease to be recent arrivals (there are now several generations). Newer arrivals, possibly Eastern Europeans, will be the newcomers, whose access to housing and benefits will be resented by the Bengalis, who in turn will begin to move to more affluent areas. Other Bengalis may develop some of the attitudes of the residual white population, including some of the more recent less desirable ones.

The authors claim that the arrival of the Bengalis was one of the most rapid settlements to have taken place in the East End but was it any greater than the Afro-Caribbean community in Hackney or people from Pakistan in Newham?

The account gives the background to the environment in which the Liberals ruled Tower Hamlets for nearly a decade. The 'sons and daughters policy' was nothing new but an old East End tradition that existed in privately rented housing and in the allocation of jobs before equal opportunities policies. It shows that we have neglected class as an issue. There is a slight element of the *Gangs of New York* in the study but it is well worth reading by anyone campaigning in an inner city environment.

Andrew Hudson

Londonstani by Gautam Malkani Fourth Estate 2006 £12.99

Gautam Malkani's debut is an extraordinary and, for the most part, successful attempt to describe the continually evolving British identities of third generation Desis (people from the Des, the Indian subcontinent), coming out of the shadow of the divergent cultures of their parents' generation.

Written in the distinct patois of Hounslow's streets, which is a mixture of gangsta rap and 'sarf lunnin', liberally sprinkled with words from the many languages spoken in India and Pakistan, not necessarily the protagonists' own, it is initially hard to read, but once the rhythm of the language asserts itself, it serves to transport the reader into their world. Think Irvine Welsh in Punjabi.

Seen through the eyes of 19-year old Jas from Hounslow, he and his Hindu and Sikh friends are spending a year retaking their A-levels – "We all fuckin' failed, despite our parents prayin' an payin' for private maths tuition."

They spend their time cruising round the streets of Hounslow in a souped-up Beemer (which of course belongs to someone's mum), and making money 'chirpsing' (changing the electronic fingerprint on stolen mobile phones, apparently).

They take part in prearranged duels over tribal issues, but always do their mothers' shopping on the way. They avoid the Feds (the police), beat up the odd Gora (white boy) and lust over beautiful Muslim girls.

Family dominates their lives. A wedding becomes a matter of almost impossible honour, fuelled by custom and inflamed by events in the latest soaps from India, viewed via the ubiquitous satellite dishes which blossom over Hounslow's skyline.

Jas does manage to pull one of the most beautiful Muslim girls, but their relationship has to remain a secret from everyone, even his friends. Her parents would be less likely to object than her three brothers "an dey well strict... Dey stricter bout keepin' their sister halal than my mum is bout keepin' her shit vegetarian." Samira, the beautiful girl in question, teases like a good Catholic girl of old, going so far, but keeping herself pure for her wedding.

Religion defines them all, but in Hounslow a blurring occurs. Describing one of his Sikh friend's homes, Jas notes that "...they kept their copy of Guru Granth Sahib on a table. They'd hung pictures of various Sikh Gurus on the landing... (but) they'd even got a couple a pictures of Hindu Gods too. Usually, you only get Hindus who'll blend their religion with Sikhism but Hardjit's mum an dad... blended back".

Jas and his friends are made to meet a so-called successful Desi, a merchant banker, supposedly a role model. However, he is not all he seems, and leads them into a more serious criminal world, but only after introducing them to the theory of Bling Economics.

Forget the basket of goods and services that constitutes the RPI. In Bling Economics, this basket should contain a pair of D&G jeans, proper bling jewellery, new Nikes, covers for China White (a club, for the uninitiated) and even the cost of a wedding reception at the Natural History Museum. This isn't about society becoming more affluent; this is about a subculture that worships affluence becoming mainstream.

Malkani's book is important because it describes the shifting patterns of cultural identity, integration then separation, not only in the Desi community, but in the indigenous population too.

There is an unusual twist in the tail at the end of the book, which made this reviewer gasp aloud. Language has always played such an important role in shaping Britain and defining who you are, and Londonstani captures this moment in south west London exactly.

Wendy Kyrle-Pope

Monday

Finding myself staying overnight in the Principality, I go to Welshpool International Airport to catch the morning flight back to Rutland. My curiosity is aroused when I see the name 'Air Lembit' on the side of the Government Surplus Sopwith Camel and, sure enough, I find a familiar figure at the controls when I board. As we weave in and out of the Stiperstones, narrowly avoid the Long Mynd and give Brown Clew a wide berth (despite my suggestion of a sharpener at the *Boyne Arms*), the MP for Montgomery describes his plans for his airline. The in-flight catering is limited – poor Öpik has trouble keeping a steady course whilst buttering the bread for the sandwiches – and neither is there a moving picture to enjoy. (My pilot offers to play his mouth organ, but I tell him that will not be necessary). It happens that we pass over the Bonkers Hall Estate on the approach to Oakham, so I save him the trouble of landing by parachuting out. When I alight, Meadowcroft takes me for a German paratrooper and pursues me with his pitchfork; the misunderstanding is soon sorted out.

Tuesday

The recommendation of a friend ("You knew Trueman, didn't you? There's a film about him that you really should see") sends me to the cinema, but I am sorely disappointed. For some unaccountable reason, the actor playing the great fast bowler – one 'Philip Seymour Hoffman', if you please – has chosen to give him an absurd, high-pitched, lisping American accent. Now, I am the first to agree that Fred could be a bit of a joker (particularly at the Scarborough Festival), but I never knew him to speak like that. Not since Meryl Streep starred in *Silverwood* have I been so disappointed by the portrayal of a Yorkshire and England opening bowler.

Wednesday

People sometimes ask me whether, from my long experience of public life, campaigning ever changes the Government's mind. Does the dreary round of petitions, letters to one's MP and press releases actually achieve anything? I always reply that there can be no guarantee that it will, but one does meet the most interesting people in the process. A case in point is my attempt to help the inhabitants of Pluto over the summer. When first they heard that their world was no longer to be a planet within the meaning of the Act, they were naturally concerned – not least because this would mean that they would cease to qualify for generous grants from the European Union. So the Plutonians (or Plutocrats or whatever the fellows call themselves) contacted me for advice, and I told them to write to all the newspapers and arranged a meeting with the minister: I still treasure the memory of them sitting in Central Lobby, waving their tentacles and laughing at the quaint dress of the Commons staff. As everyone now knows, their campaign failed, but at least I was able to introduce them to Lembit Öpik before they went home.

Thursday

Inspired by my friends from Pluto, I spend the evening in my observatory. The telescope is not powerful enough for me to see their distant home but, as I believe I have remarked before, on a clear night you can see Uranus. There are those who say that observing the heavens puts our Earthly troubles in perspective,

Lord Bonkers' Diary

but I beg to differ. One sees billions of stars, many of which will have their attendant planets; some of those planets will have life, and if that life has been around long enough it will have invented Liberalism and be engaged in democratic battles with its enemies. Thus, when I observe the night sky, I see an infinite number of closely fought by-elections – it is enough to overwhelm even our own Lord Rennard.

Friday

I notice from the *Manchester Guardian* that when Fidel Castro fell ill his brother

Raul stepped in as President of Cuba. Mention of these two reminds me of my own days in Hollywood, when I attempted to promote the Castro Brothers as comedians, somewhat along the lines of the Marx Brothers. (We did achieve some success with their first picture – *A Night in Havana* – but generally it was Rather Hard Work). Whilst there were similarities between Fidel Castro and Groucho Marx – the facial hair, the taste for fine cigars – there were also differences, which became all too apparent as Fidel's career developed. In particular, whilst Groucho specialised in witty retorts, Fidel's talents lay more in the direction of seven-hour denunciations of American imperialism and the iniquities of the capitalist system; these were a challenge to incorporate into a madcap comedy and as a result the Castro Brothers soon faded. Ironically, the biggest success amongst them was not really a Castro at all: 'Harpo Castro' was in reality a doctor by the name of Guevara, yet the poster of him with his harp and ridiculous wig of blonde curls can be found on students' bedroom walls to this day.

Saturday

It is hard not to sympathise with the New Party's MPs: Blair has clearly gone barking mad – his public protestations of love for a chimpanzee, all those foreign wars, his plans to send children to the Jack Straw Memorial Reform School, Dungeness, *before they are born* – but their constitution makes it impossible to get rid of him. We Liberal Democrats recently had leadership problems of our own, but Kennedy's fondness for drink never put the country in peril. Yes, he might fall asleep in meetings, sing raucous Highland ballads or try to kiss Alan Beith, but life was still more restful than under his predecessor, Paddy Ashplant, and – dash it all – I am rather fond of old Beith myself. A word of advice to the New Party: if you do succeed in tipping Blair out of the window, don't replace him with that dour Brown fellow. Try someone younger and fresher like Tony Benn's charming daughter Hilary or one of the Millipede brothers.

Sunday

A hectic weekend has seen one of my meadows quite turned upside down by the Time Team of moving television fame. It all went Terribly Well: they found a Roman villa, an Anglo-Saxon cemetery, the grave of a junior minister in Baldwin's first Government (that took some explaining, I can tell you) and, best of all, the keys to my Bentley, which I dropped when walking my setters there last summer. Between ourselves, gentle reader, I was rather hoping they would turn up.

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