

liberator



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COMMENTARY

FORTUNES OF WAR

Just before the Iraq invasion began, *Liberator* (Commentary 284) predicted that Blair's illegal war would become his Suez. We were not entirely right; it has become worse than that.

With no coherent plan for post-invasion Iraq, and possessing no influence over President Bush, Labour has created a quagmire that has cost tens of thousands of lives, damaged the reputation of Britain and its armed forces, created a sort of giant adventure playground for terrorists and made this country more vulnerable to terrorism.

Meanwhile, Iraq is splintering, British and American forces flail around to little effect and Britain's most senior soldier – astonishingly – is driven by despair to publicly denounce the government's approach.

Blair's foreign policy lies in ruins, and with it his reputation. His 'place in history' will be that of a blood-soaked failure.

Sooner or later, probably sooner, Britain and America will find some impressive-sounding excuse to leave Iraq, which will be used to cover up a retreat forced by an inability to contain local insurgents. From Britain's Suez to Britain's Vietnam.

Yet if Labour was bent on following America into Iraq, it might at least have given the armed forces a chance of accomplishing their task at the lowest risk to both themselves and Iraqi civilians.

There is another political scandal creeping out of Iraq to hit the government.

Liberal Democrats with large numbers of military constituents, or with links to the armed forces, are full of anecdotal tales of units bereft of basic supplies. Early in the war, there were reports of shortages of uniforms, protective gear and even weapons, which could conceivably have been put down to the demands of the moment. But it still appears to be going on.

The Ministry of Defence's irresponsible profligacy with public money on major procurements is a long running scandal. Yet it appears incapable of ensuring that troops are properly equipped.

An inevitable result is that more of them get wounded. One of the less noticed of General Dannatt's complaints was the poor and slow medical treatment offered to soldiers wounded in Iraq.

Having embroiled troops in an illegal war, and then failed to equip them to fight it, Labour is now routinely dissembling about the number of casualties and then failing to provide them with adequate treatment.

Liberal Democrats have not historically been close to the military, or enthusiastic about it, Paddy Ashdown being an obvious exception.

Two unprecedented things have happened as a result of Labour's deceptions and incompetence in Iraq.

For the first time, military families have organised protests about the effect on their relatives – whether serving, wounded or dead – of government policy. A section of the community normally politically invisible has been driven to speak out by what is happening, and may do the government serious damage if it chooses to adopt a higher profile.

The other was Dannatt's outburst. He should not have said what he did. There is a separation of the military and politics for a good reason, and Liberal Democrats should support it; we do not want soldiers intervening in politics just because on this occasion we agree with them.

The effect of his remarks was to reinforce a public suspicion that Blair has abused the armed forces' professionalism at the behest of a foreign government and, in doing so, had abjectly shown up the puny limits of Britain's 'independent' foreign policy.

Two avenues will open to the Liberal Democrats from this fresh concern about Iraq.

The first is that the climate of opinion towards Europe could be made more favourable.

Paranoid rantings about Britain being 'ruled from Brussels' look petty silly when events since 2002 show it far more effectively 'ruled' from Washington. While Britain has a voice and vote in Brussels, it has neither in the American capital.

The second concerns the looming debate on Trident replacement. There is a sound argument that this debate is bogus, since the military hardware will be 'good' for decades hence.

Blair has raised the issue to win a few cheap headlines in the right wing press and to distance himself from the ghosts of 1980s Labour. He no doubt hopes to paint anyone who opposes Trident renewal as unpatriotic.

Trident is grossly expensive. It is neither British, nor independent, nor a deterrent, and the idea of renewing it while conventional forces go without proactive gear is grotesque.

Blair may very well try to paint the Liberal Democrats as unpatriotic if they oppose Trident renewal.

Let him. There is no difficulty in throwing that change back at a prime minister (and his probable successor) who takes orders from a foreign government, and there is no political mileage whatever in the party ending up taking the same position as Labour and the Tories.

That would leave those who oppose Trident with no-one to vote for, and those who support it with no reason to desert the other parties.

Blair sees politics as though it were still the mid-1980s. That is no reason for the Lib Dems to remain there.

RADICAL BULLETIN

WE KNOW BEST

The session for key seats representatives at September's Liberal Democrat conference was proceeding uneventfully until the party's campaigns director Paul Ringer told them that, to retain this status, a constituency must have a candidate in place by December.

Angry protests followed, to the effect that constituencies would be happy to select a candidate were the English Candidates Committee to make this possible (it seems a lesser issue in Scotland and Wales).

Hardly anyone agrees on what has caused the inordinate delay in selections. It is perhaps just as well that the idea of a snap general election appears to be a figment of party fundraisers' imagination.

From the campaigns side, and from approved candidates, come complaints that the candidates committee sees the approval and selection bureaucracy as an end in itself. There are also complaints that, on top of the long-standing and tortuous complications involved, rules aimed at securing diversity have served only to ensure that no-one, of any colour or gender, has been selected for most seats.

Tales abound of constituencies that have received only one application but have been barred from adopting the candidate concerned, of regions with too few returning officers having to borrow them from elsewhere in a beggar-my-neighbour process, and of too few selection committee members having completed the obligatory training because there is no-one to train them.

From the candidates committee side comes the response that conference told it to rewrite the rules and it had to wait until after the general election to do that, and that if the party wants greater diversity in its candidates the processes must be in place.

Its members also dispute claims that returning officers and trainers are thin on the ground, and are confident that candidates will be in place in good time.

The Parliamentary Candidates Association, which represents approved candidates, thinks it has a solution to this impasse, but it is one likely to infuriate most party members.

Its chair Gary Lawson wrote in July to Menzies Campbell to say that only 18 English PPCs had at that point been selected (a number which has since presumably risen) and that the average selection was taking 88 days.

The PCA's solution was to suggest that Campbell should "personally appoint a small central team to identify out 40 to 60 most winnable constituencies and manage the selection process in these seats".

In those seats, the normal selection process would be set aside and replaced by the method used for parliamentary by-elections, where a very short list is approved centrally for local members' decision.

The central team would 'resolve' any appeals, while Campbell himself would have the pleasure of writing to all party members to explain the reason for ditching the normal process.

PCA executive members "debated the pros and cons" of identifying a top tier of candidates, similar to the Tories so-called A list, but decided that "the appointment of a central team to manage selections in these winnable seats, as with by-elections, will allow both highly qualified local candidates to apply and enable shortlists to be drafted that clearly demonstrate the party's commitment to candidate diversity".

How that might be done solely from among candidates already approved was unclear.

The 'accelerated' process has caused rows in local parties at by-elections, where candidates with strong local support have been excluded. The application of this process to all winnable seats would be certain to cause uproar among aggrieved applicants and their supporters, particularly if local party members were effectively presented with only one option.

Even more startlingly, the PCA believes "in the longer term... there is a case for 'headhunting' of suitable candidates within and outside the party, e.g. among students at universities and colleges."

Yes, you read that right. The body that represents the party's parliamentary candidates believes that people who do not belong to the party should be approached to stand as candidates for it in general elections.

The PCA said it looked forward to Campbell's comments. But, since no change has been made to the selection rules, they were presumably unfavourable.

Perhaps Campbell feels that people who wish to be Lib Dem candidates should at least first take the trouble to join the party.

NOT THE CAT'S PYJAMAS

It is a rare Liberal Democrat conference that sees representatives invited to consign a policy paper to "the cat litter tray of history" and do just that. But that is what happened to the local government policy paper at Brighton in September.

Policy papers are normally accorded semi-divine status and passed on the nod largely unread, but this one dealt with a subject on which many members have strong and informed feelings.

The problem with this paper was that it appeared to have been produced for its own sake. It broke little ground, addressed few hot current topics and, as Hertfordshire councillor Chris White put it, "gave no idea of what a good Lib Dem council would do and look like".

Richard Kemp, leader of the party's Local Government Association group, had little trouble in getting the paper

referred to the moggies' convenience and spokesman Andrew Stunell put up little fight for the paper.

One member of the working group that produced it said it had been "quite good until the parliamentary party got hold of it".

WIELDING THE STAFF

The new 'green' tax policy was passed by a substantial margin at conference, no doubt helped by an abuse that saw paid party staff campaigning in favour of the motion.

People in staff badges were handing out copies of a 'tax focus' to representatives before the debate. This was a document that consisted solely of statements in support of the motion.

Who sanctioned this abuse? Staff are paid by all party members, whichever way they vote on a motion and should not be given the task of distributing propaganda on one side of a debate.

Were those who supported the new tax policy really so afraid they might lose that they had to stoop to the blatant misuse of party resources?

IN THE LOBBY

We gather that Ben Ramm, editor of *The Liberal*, thinks someone from *Liberator* told the media that his magazine had folded.

None of us remember making such a remark, though it was a bit odd that *The Liberal* had no stall at conference and no issues visible there.

There was, however, a large pile of the things freely available during conference week in the Holiday Inn, Bloomsbury, a spy tells us, which seems an unusual choice of distribution method for Mr Ramm's organ.

IT'S HIM AGAIN

Simon Hughes has, to no-one's great surprise, been elected unopposed for a second term as Liberal Democrat president.

No other candidate came forward, not even Lembit Öpik, whom Hughes soundly beat in 2004 and who announced on TV the day Charles Kennedy resigned that he intended to contest the post (*Liberator* 308). Maybe it's hard to gain votes when you've supported Mark Oaten for party leader.

HUNG BY THE NECK

Security is a tiresome necessity at party conference, made yet more so by the bizarre rules on 'lanyards' (the cords worn around the neck on which photo-badges are worn).

This year, the lanyards simply carried a party slogan because a buyer for the advertising space had not been found.

Yet stewards were under instructions not to admit representatives who had recycled a lanyard from any previous year, or who had brought any other means of hanging their badge round their neck.

The lanyards could not plausibly be called part of the security system since they were distributed separately from the badges and piles of them were freely available in the registration area.

What does it matter what delegates have round their necks so long as they are clearly displaying their badge? And, if it does matter, why not distribute the lanyards with the badges?

Conference delegates put up uncomplainingly with queues and searches. This sort of officious idiocy should not pointlessly test their patience.

IN THE BROWN STUFF

Party benefactor Michael Brown is now in prison for two years for perjury and passport deception.

These offences were not connected to the Liberal Democrats and attempts to pursue the party to repay Brown's £2.4m donation have, it seems, come to nothing.

The episode has nonetheless been highly embarrassing for the party and it should make sure that unknown donors who come forward in future are checked thoroughly, however tempting such a vast sum might be during a general election.

It is still unclear who accepted Brown's money. Reg Clark had resigned as treasurer by that point, Tim Clement-Jones had not yet taken up the post, and Federal Finance and Administration Committee chair David Griffiths, who was left to clear up the mess, was not involved. So who was?

BACKGROUND NOISE

Persistent heckling from supporters of the Israeli government, who seemed unable to accept that anyone might have a viewpoint different from their own, marred Liberal International British Group's conference fringe meeting on the Middle East.

As Palestinian and Lebanese speakers addressed the meeting, there were numerous interruptions, culminating in Beth Graham bellowing that the meeting should be terminated because she disliked what was being said.

There was also heckling about the absence of an Israeli speaker for balance.

Chair Tim Garden explained that the meeting was itself a 'balancing' one for that held by LIBG jointly with the Liberal Democrat Friends of Israel in London, which had been addressed by the Israeli ambassador.

The ambassador was heard politely in silence, despite delivering observations that offended some listeners.

Garden said that, had both sides been present at the same meeting, it would have quickly descended into a shambolic slanging match and that LIBG needed to present, and hear from, the two sides separately.

Judging by the behaviour of some present, he was right.

SILENCE IS GOLDEN

What lay behind the decision to allow Charles Kennedy a set-piece speech at Brighton? It led, inevitably, to a summer of media speculation about whether he would use this as a platform for a comeback, whether he would challenge Menzies Campbell, or even the potential consequences of receiving a longer ovation than his successor's.

It must have been obvious to anyone with the slightest experience of the media that this sort of speculation would push most of the rest of the party's messages aside during the summer and the conference, as duly happened.

It is true that Paddy Ashdown spoke at the first conference after his resignation, but that was a specific speech on globalisation. It can hardly be interpreted as meaning that an unbreakable tradition has been established.

As it turned out, Kennedy had nothing much to say. His unremarkable address was calmly received and quickly forgotten. So what was the point of incurring all the flak over the summer?

TECHNOCRAT OR IDEOLOGUE? THAT IS THE QUESTION

David Boyle compares three recently published books of essays produced by Liberal Democrats and looks for signs of a struggle with ideas

During one of his many attempts at the Conservative Party leadership, Michael Portillo let slip something unexpectedly interesting. Oppositions become governments, he said, when they create a ferment of new ideas around them.

That is not, I accept, the path chosen by the Liberal Democrats in recent decades, but it does mean that the current publishing frenzy in the party is a rather hopeful sign. Hardly any organisation in and around the fringes of the party seems to feel quite complete this autumn unless it is publishing a book.

Inexplicably, none of the editors of the three books reviewed here have asked me to contribute a chapter, but I willingly put aside my disappointment at this, safe in the knowledge that it allows me to review all three with equal bias.

And before I do so, let me just put that bias clearly on the table. My gut feeling is that, to be both interesting and useful to the party at the moment, a collection of Liberal Democrat essays needs to show some signs of struggle.

Not necessarily with each other, but with ideas. We are probably two years until a general election. Being seen to be engaged with new ideas is more important than obsessively playing safe. I also believe that we move ideas forward by engaging precisely with what are, for us, the most uncomfortable questions of policy.

My second piece of bias is that it is probably more useful for these books to look more closely at, drawing from our history and tradition, policy questions where we have a unique view.

COMMUNITY POLITICS TODAY

As its subtitle says, *Community Politics Today* is “a collection of essays” edited by the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors (ALDC).

Now, it is extremely welcome that ALDC is doing its thinking in public, partly because it has been ALDC’s particular style over the past few decades that has – arguably – taken the place of old-fashioned thinking. But it is a style built on one big idea itself, that of community politics circa 1970.

And here, to demonstrate the idea, they reprint Gordon Lishman and Bernard Greaves’s classic *Theory and Practice of Community Politics*.

One senses that this is more than just nostalgia. ALDC is worried (and who can blame them?) that the ideals behind community politics have become lost in a rather technocratic virtual version. So many party campaigners now use this version, which – because it has no ideological baggage – is all too easily adopted by the other parties.

That concern is reflected in all the essays in the book and, because the authors are genuinely struggling with the question of how to reinvent those ideological roots, it makes the book absolutely riveting.

James Graham is one of only three people with chapters in two of these volumes, and his essay here, *Be wolves not bees*, (though I don’t quite understand the title) is particularly arresting.

I thought John Smithson’s question was fascinating, whether community politics had been based on prevailing ideas from the USA, and therefore did not take root here quite as planned.

He may well be right, but it opens an opportunity. Because that tradition stayed alive in the United States, in asset-based community development and the work of John McKnight and others, it might provide the inspiration to kick-start it again back here.

Because there is no doubt that, despite the rhetoric, Liberal Democrats at all levels have lost a sense of the ideological core of community politics, either because they have become part of the local establishment, or because they have been seduced by more technocratic values.

This matters very much, because it corrodes our distinctiveness and undermines our ability to provide good government. And for setting those questions more clearly, and struggling with the answers, I rate *Community Politics Today* very highly and I hope it is widely read.

LIBERALISM: SOMETHING TO SHOUT ABOUT

The next volume is *Liberalism: something to shout about*, a slightly uneasy co-production between the Liberal group in the European Parliament and *Liberator* magazine, with editors (Graham Watson and Simon Titley) drawn from both extremes.

It has as its *raison d'être* a related issue to struggle with – the loss of Liberal Democrat ideology and the urgent need to reassert it. “If ...our definition of success,” writes Graham Watson in the introduction, “is not only about winning elections but also changing things, we will recruit more committed campaigners and present an organisation in which they feel at home.”

If the unspoken enemy behind the previous volume was the party's campaigns department, the unspoken enemy behind this one is the parliamentary party, rightly or wrongly. But what this volume doesn't quite manage to do is to provide a coherent message itself, ranging widely via ageing, climate change and Europe.

One wonders whether the fact that the book has quite so many titles – the subtitle manages to conflate at least three – is a symptom of the problem.

That said, it includes a chapter that, for me, beats all the others in any of the books: Jonathan Calder's brilliant essay about policy towards children, in which he asks why it is that, the more children's rights are asserted, the less rights children seem to have.

BRITAIN AFTER BLAIR

Since the parliamentary party are the fall guys of the previous volume, it is interesting to compare with a book that is largely written by them. *Britain After Blair* is published by the team behind *The Orange Book* and is deliberately intended as a follow-up volume, according to the foreword by co-editor Paul Marshall.

I do not share the abuse heaped on the authors of *The Orange Book*, who said then and say again here that they were attempting to “reclaim the heritage” of the party. In their own ways, all three of these books are about this.

In the sense that it allows some of the party's key spokespeople space to think through their positions on the issues of the day, *Britain After Blair* helps this process along. There is an excellent essay on the structure of policing by Jeremy Browne. But what this isn't, except in a few asides, is new thinking – or much struggling with ideas.

The exception is an excellent chapter about quality of life by Jo Swinson, but even here I found myself urging her to go further and talk about other implications this had for public policy.

The long section at the front by CentreForum staff about Blair's legacy in figures was useful to have, and somebody should be doing it. The problem with discussing progress in terms of statistics is that it allows little leeway or imagination to set out how policy might be conducted differently, how our institutions might be re-built to achieve what we actually need.

WHAT DO WE WANT TO BE?

This argument seems to me to lie behind all three books. How much do we want to be technocrats and how much do we want to be ideologues? The ambition of all three volumes, as set out by their editors, implies that they believe we desperately need to recover some of the latter. Yet technocracy keeps rearing its head, in the way we communicate, and in the solutions we offer.

You felt that some of the authors of *Britain After Blair* could do with a dose of Jonathan Calder's radicalism. If the rights of children have been co-opted by professionals and self-appointed representatives in this area, how much more is the same process going on elsewhere?

The three books also differed in their interpretation of the enemy. *Britain After Blair* betrays less signs of intellectual

struggle. You felt it had happened somewhere, but maybe offstage where nobody was looking.

Perhaps it is also too simple to blame party institutions as the other volumes do. It is our joint responsibility, and must be a joint endeavour, to apply our heritage to the world we have inherited and imagine it differently.

One last question. If these books represent a map of the party's thinking as it stands, there is one massive area missing. Why do we seem to have so little to say about the corporate world?

We live in a decade where some people wonder whether governments have any levers to pull at all to tackle the issues before us, compared with the immediate might of corporations – where more than a third of all the money we spend on groceries goes to one massive, subsidised, feather-bedded, semi-monopoly, which is driving out its competitors and suppliers alike.

We live in neighbourhoods that are about to lose what little powers they have to shape their own streets to big companies.

You would think that twenty-first century Liberalism might have something to say about that.

David Boyle is the author of *Blondel's Song* (Penguin).
Wwww.david-boyle.co.uk

Community Politics Today: A collection of essays including the original 'Theory and Practice of Community Politics' (ed.) John Bridges/ALDC, ALDC, £12.

Liberalism: something to shout about: Beyond incrementalism: can the Liberal Democrats 'meet the challenge'? (ed.) Graham Watson and Simon Titley, Bagehot Publishing, £5.

Britain After Blair: A Liberal Agenda (ed.) Astle, Laws, Marshall and Murray, Profile, £9.99.

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THE RISE AND FALL OF CHARLES KENNEDY

A new biography of Charles Kennedy is rich in gossip but does little to aid our understanding, says Simon Titley

Proper hardback books about the Liberal Democrats are not that commonplace. It is not often that the party is thought worthy of serious analysis. So one must begin by considering not only whether Greg Hurst's new biography of Charles Kennedy is a serious analysis but also why it was published at all.

Hurst is a lobby correspondent for the Times with a specific brief to cover the Liberal Democrats. It is significant that his employers have chosen to devote far more resources to covering the party's affairs than any other broadsheet. Indeed, the Times has run a series of exposés in recent years, suggesting an executive decision by the Murdoch press to damage the party as much as it can.

Given the evident hostility of the paper to the party, it is remarkable that Hurst managed to get so many parliamentarians and party officers to speak so freely, almost as if this were an official biography. Indeed, as Radical Bulletin reported in April (Liberator 309), such collaboration was so widespread that the newly elected leader Ming Campbell had to warn his MPs that Hurst was "not a member of the parliamentary party".

It is all the more remarkable that most of these senior figures emerge from this tale with their dignity largely intact. MPs feared the worst before publication but most of them get off lightly, considering the circumstances.

I approached Hurst's book with a great deal of prejudice, expecting – at best – an entertaining compendium of gossip or – at worst – some third-rate hack writing pieced together from the clippings library. It turns out to be better than I had feared.

Hurst was planning this biography well before Charles Kennedy's downfall, and it shows. The first chapter gives a breathless, blow-by-blow account of the events between November 2005 and January 2006. This journalistic account has been bolted on to the remainder of the book, which is a more considered and generally well-paced account of Kennedy's life and career.

THE UNANSWERED QUESTION

Yet this is a deeply dissatisfying account. The really big question is one that Hurst hints at but cannot answer: what was Charles Kennedy for? What was his political purpose?

Kennedy emerges as an essentially decent but private man, a loner with selective social skills, capable of surface bonhomie but lacking close human bonds, preferring an informal style of leadership, relying on his instincts rather than his intellect.

The heart of the book takes us through some interesting times: the foundation of the SDP, the merger, the 'project', and not least Kennedy's leadership – both in good times (the brave decision on the Iraq war in 2003) and bad (the alcohol-induced crisis early in 2004 around the time of the Southport conference).

Kennedy is very much the career politician with undoubted skills, but at no stage does Hurst really explain why Kennedy chose this path or what his goals were.

Throughout his career, Kennedy lacked application or direction. Decisions, when they were made at all, were left till the last minute after much agonising. When Kennedy finally won the leadership (for which many assumed he was destined, although no-one seemed to know quite why), it was clear that he was unhappy in the role.

Kennedy comes across as someone temperamentally uncomfortable with the exercise of power. Why therefore engage in politics at all? We are left with the vague conclusion that Kennedy merely enjoyed some of the trappings of politics, particularly debating and broadcasting, but not the endgame.

Hurst never gets to the heart of Kennedy's motivation perhaps because Kennedy never had any. Instead, Kennedy's career appears as some strange process of osmosis, and the fact that the party indulged him suggests deeper weaknesses in the party itself, in terms of its basic values and direction.

Hurst does not even begin to analyse this context, because – despite his day job following the Liberal Democrats – he has little grasp of the party's history and culture outside the immediacy of Westminster.

OLD CHESTNUTS

The other major failing of Hurst's book is its irredeemably Westminster village feel. This is only to be expected in a lobby correspondent but limits the usefulness of the book.

Hurst's view of politics is pretty typical of lobby snobbery; one where anything of any importance happens in the Palace of Westminster, where events are mostly about clashing personalities and where interventions by the hoi polloi are distinctly unwelcome.

This arrogance leads to a number of tendentious statements and factual inaccuracies, particularly where the wider party is concerned.

During the tortuous merger negotiations, we are told that the Liberal Party "tried to preserve... a voice for party councillors and other activists who were used to wielding power through monthly meetings of the unrepresentative Liberal council". The party council met quarterly, not monthly, and Hurst does not attempt to justify why he thinks this body was "unrepresentative".

When participation in the ‘Stop the War’ march in February 2003 was first mooted, we are told that “grassroots activists within [Kennedy’s] party tried to force his hand” and that the federal executive “effectively sought to bounce their leader into attending”.

Of Blackpool in September 2005, we are told, “from the beginning, the conference was a disaster”. Hurst is not referring to Blackpool’s notorious hotels or food (if he were, I would concur) but to the leadership’s loss of two votes on the EU and on post offices, which it thoroughly deserved to lose through poor preparation and weak argument.

Hurst also trots out the old chestnut about “some of the dottier Lib Dem policies foisted on [Kennedy] by his free-spirited activists”, based on allegations that Kennedy made immediately after the 2005 general election. For a comprehensive rebuttal of this deluded version of events, refer to both RB and my article in *Liberator* 302.

Most amusing for the *Liberator* collective is a description of *Liberator* itself, in an account of the creation of the pro-project *Reformer* magazine (with which Kennedy was closely associated). Here, we learn that this august organ is “the publication of the unreconstructed Liberal left run by a self-styled collective”.

We will, of course, be using this endorsement in our future advertising, to add to David Steel’s remark that *Liberator* is “a trashy rag run off on a photocopier”.

JUICY GOSSIP

What many readers will want is not any deep analysis but some juicy gossip, and Hurst does not fail to disappoint. The first chapter, focusing on Kennedy’s downfall, contains little that is new for insiders and corroborates much of what *Liberator* heard and reported at the time. It is a good read, all the same.

Once can relish once more the account of Philip Goldenberg’s misdirected phone call, which inadvertently alerted Mark Oaten to the beginnings of the plotting.

One can thrill to the allegations that Mark Oaten was behind leaks to the *Guardian* suggesting that several frontbenchers wanted to discuss a deal with David Cameron.

And one can only admire Sandra Gidley’s sure grip throughout the crisis, where she displayed some considerable balls in confronting Kennedy where lesser mortals might have kept their counsel. In particular, at the key meeting of the shadow cabinet last December, Gidley was the first MP to dare to speak out, despite being heckled by Mark Oaten and Lembit Öpik.

Only one major component is missing. That is the story that Kennedy confided his treatment for alcoholism to the shadow cabinet last November, and the allegation that a front bench spokesman then lit the blue touch paper by passing on this story to ITN, whose subsequent threat to reveal all on 5 January triggered Kennedy’s momentous press conference the same day.

Hurst seems keen to depict Kennedy’s downfall as the “Orange Revolution” (the title of the first chapter), suggesting a co-ordinated assault by the authors of the *Orange Book*. Increasing dissatisfaction with Kennedy’s leadership was by no means confined to this group but included MPs of all shades of opinion.

In the longer-term account, some interesting new stories emerge. Hurst goes to some lengths to demonstrate that, despite Kennedy’s latter-day reputation as an opponent of the ‘project’, he was for a long time one of its staunchest supporters, particularly around the time of Paddy Ashdown’s ‘Chard’ speech.

We also learn of extensive secret collaboration between the Lib Dems and Labour during the 2001 general election campaign, intended to avoid mutual attacks and concentrate fire on the Tories.

The revelation that Kennedy came within an inch of announcing his alcoholism to a press conference in 2003, which was aborted at the last minute, was reported in an

extract in the *Times* in September, but nevertheless remains an interesting ‘what if’ story.

Discussing the furore surrounding the publication of the *Orange Book*, Hurst claims that Mark Oaten “originally conceived the idea [of the book] after meeting Paul Marshall through his centre-right pressure group Liberal Future.”

There is also an interesting account of the genesis of Michael Brown’s involvement as a big donor to

the party, in which certain party figures appear not as innocent as they might claim.

HISTORY’S VERDICT

Hurst’s concluding chapter, which summarises Kennedy’s strengths and weaknesses, is generally fair. Kennedy’s lack was “a clear set of principal policy ideas that conveyed the party’s vision and sense of purpose”.

He “failed to define adequately what actually it meant to be a Liberal Democrat, both in philosophical terms and particularly in his policy programme.”

“Ultimately, and tragically, Charles Kennedy himself was the architect of his own downfall, having failed to heed repeated pleas and warnings from colleagues that he must stop drinking.”

But Hurst does not consider the broader context. What we have in this book is essentially an account of how ordinary mortals cope (or, rather, fail to cope) with the pressures of office and power.

One only has to look at the way in which New Labour is visibly coming apart at the seams to see that this is a general problem in democratic politics. Politicians are only human and find the pressure and intense media scrutiny difficult to bear. They make their predicament worse through blind arrogance or wishful thinking.

There is a more general book to be written about how we can reconcile our political arrangements with human fallibility. Such a book might conclude with a warning to all politicians to nurture what Denis Healey called a ‘hinterland’ – in other words, to get a life and not spend so much time in Westminster gossiping with the likes of Greg Hurst.

Simon Titley is a member of the *Liberator* Collective

Charles Kennedy: A Tragic Flaw by Greg Hurst
Politico’s £18.99

DEATH OF A MONEY SPINNER?

Liberal Democrats are suspicious of wealthy donors, but why of Liberty Network, which has successfully cultivated them, asks Reg Clark

For many Liberal Democrats, particularly the conference-attending activist 'tail', which due to our constitution tends to wag the party dog, the advent of full state funding of political parties can't come soon enough. The sooner we can do away with the tacky business of asking wealthy people to fund our activities, the better. I have some sympathy with this view.

Nevertheless, in the absence of such legislation, which may well given current controversies be on its way sooner rather than later, we must continue to grapple with this thorny issue.

Things are undoubtedly moving in the right direction. The Political Parties Elections and Referendums Act of 2000 was a massive step forward in this respect and, in the midst of the loans for honours scandal, we must not lose sight of the paradox that the issue is only current due to the fact that we now have this level of transparency in terms of funding of political parties in this country.

This legislation will, I believe, in time come to be seen as critical in moving us away from a US-style money-dominated political culture. In the meantime, we can only wonder, for example, what activities and promises lay behind the \$27-28m which Labour and the Tories are reputed to have spent in the 1997 general election. We will probably never know.

And yet it doesn't necessarily have to be tacky. One of the disappointing things about the current controversies over funding of political parties, including our very own Michael Brown affair, is that the not inconsiderable number of people who give significant donations to parties including our own, with no thought of personal preferment or recognition, become tarred with this brush.

The question is often asked as to how the party sets about raising money from high net worth donors. The simple answer is that, by and large, we wait for them to come to us.

Unlike the major charities, we do not systematically trawl the 'rich lists' and pro-actively make approaches. When I was federal treasurer from January 2000 to February 2005, I received no more than half a dozen individual donations of £100,000 and never more than that sum. If there is a typical donor profile in this respect, it is usually someone who was active politically in their youth, in the Young Liberals or

whatever, who became wealthy due to a sale of a business in later life and decides to "give something back". No question of seeking a quid pro quo – all very healthy and proper.

SUSPICION OF LIBERTY NETWORK

Nothing has stirred more suspicion or debate within the party over fundraising than the creation of Liberty Network as the party's high net worth donor club in 2003, for which I was responsible.

The bare facts, however, leave one wondering what the fuss is all about. As a relatively small and financially challenged party, we are continually faced with many challenges to fund our activities. We are always aware of the advantages of our rival parties in this respect and of their more systemised and 'professional' fundraising techniques.

The dilemma was and is the degree to which we can speculate in terms of spending on fundraising structures, in order to accumulate high net worth donations, as opposed to our traditional system of 'gentlemanly amateurism'.

After a few false starts, in 2003 we engaged Tree, a fundraising and

consumer behaviour analysis consultancy, which had previously run high net worth donor schemes for the Tory party, to establish a similar project for the Liberal Democrats, the result of which was Liberty Network.

Has Liberty Network succeeded? This is not easy answer and perhaps the jury is still out. Originally established as a company limited by guarantee with an eclectic board of party members with considerable experience of fundraising, and answerable directly to the Federal Finance and Administration Committee and Federal Executive, Liberty Network has to date submitted donation reports to the Electoral Commission every quarter, in addition to filing accounts with Companies House and HMRC.

Despite this commendable degree of transparency, there has been a perhaps predictable degree of hysterical and unfounded rumour mongering to the effect that Liberty Network has been a loss-making failure.

It most certainly has not. Liberty Network quickly achieved a membership in the 150 region, and has continuously forwarded not insignificant sums to the party's general

“A failing project rescued by the intervention of the chief executive! Complete bollocks.”

election fund derived from the 'profits' of its donations and events.

Even more significant, and there is a subjective element to this, are the effects of the organisation as a cultivator of donors. I speak from experience when I say that very significant sums were given by individual members of Liberty Network directly to the 2005 general election fund, which probably would not have happened had the individuals in question not had a meaningful sense of engagement with the party via Liberty Network. And no, I am not talking about Michael Brown.

How does Liberty Network operate? There is a minimum annual membership fee of £1,000. Members can expect to be invited to quarterly political discussions and presentations, usually followed by a dinner, and an annual drinks party. The staff in Cowley Street responsible for running the organisation seek to ensure that members are aware of, and support, events such as the annual ball and other fundraising events, and make members, not all of whom necessarily are party members, feel welcome and looked after if they attend, for example, a party conference.

Political discussions usually involve senior figures in the party and events that are often attended by the leader. The idea, sometimes mooted, that these events constitute wealthy people exercising an undue influence over the party, I find extraordinary and reflects a deep rooted vein of thought within the party that anything to do with fundraising from wealthy individuals is tantamount to supping with the devil.

My response would be that this is all transparent and accountable and rightly so, and until such a time as complete state funding of political parties is instituted, we must embrace these fundraising techniques or fail effectively to contest politically.

The Liberal Democrats can currently no more survive on subscriptions, membership appeals and other basic fundraising activities, than the Tory party could survive by blue rinse ladies selling home made jam at garden parties or the Labour party on union donations alone.

These are the facts, and we can console ourselves that, due to the PPERA, which could in time be seen as the most important piece of legislation this Labour administration has introduced, we at least now have accountability and transparency in these matters.

HANGING IN THE BALANCE

Whither Liberty Network? It is my view that the success and the prospects of this project hang in the balance. I believe we dismissed with the services of Tree far too early due largely to internal political wrangling.

The membership is stalled at the level it achieved within three months of establishment, effectively at stage two of a 10 point progression plan. That plan, indeed the big picture logic of the original project, has been forgotten or rejected.

This is one of the frustrating aspects of politics – due to changes of regime and individual office holders, we seem destined to reinvent the wheel every political cycle. One aspect of projects such as Liberty Network in the high net worth donor fundraising field is that you either do things in a quality, slick and, yes, expensive way, or don't do them at all. I do not feel this is antipathetic to the culture and ethos of our party; others may disagree.

The FFAC has recently decided to change the structure of Liberty Network from a company limited by guarantee with an independent board to an unincorporated members organisation within the party.

I believe this is a mistake. The taxation reasons given for this are spurious and do not stand up to rigorous analysis. Accountability is reduced rather than enhanced and the decision is all to do with internal political control considerations, rather than what works best.

I BECAME A SCAPEGOAT

What's the surprise? This is politics after all. I make no excuses for the personal bitterness I feel that, after five years of scandal-free and successful fundraising as federal treasurer, I was skilfully played as a scapegoat in the Michael Brown affair by those responsible for accepting and spending his money, and equally I am distraught at seeing what I believe could have been a significant and lasting contribution to the party's fortunes, Liberty Network, stalled and potentially fucked up as a project for reasons of personal control.

In *Liberator* 313, I wrote a letter defending Liberty Network, which was unfairly, in my opinion, maligned in an article in the previous issue.

Also in *Liberator* 313, Chris Rennard, in defending his actions as chief executive wrote: "I accept 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"

A failing project rescued by the intervention of the chief executive? Complete bollocks, and totally contrary to the facts shown in the Liberty Network management accounts, which, start up costs apart, show constant overhead levels and declining income.

Liberty Network got off to a flying start and, under the guidance of Emma Sanderson-Nash, was poised to become a significant factor in the party's financial fortunes. The events were smart and successful – from a high yielding presentation and drinks party at the Roman Baths in Bath to the acclaimed Liberty Night, at the SEone nightclub owned and donated by LN member Peter Yeldon, on local election night in 2004.

I was proud of it and still believe that, if we can revert to the original game plan, if anyone involved can even remember it, Liberty Network can break out of its current slump in membership and activity levels. Transparent, accountable and independent high net worth donor member clubs ought to be a perfectly acceptable feature of a modern and ambitious political party. Liberty Network is in this respect, I still believe, the way forward for our party in the area of big ticket fundraising.

Let's see how it goes under new management – my recent experiences lead me to fear, however, that in politics spin as often as not triumphs over substance, and the 'winners' write the history.

Under the new organisational structure, in fact, we may never be able to make an objective judgement on the matter. Liberty Network will in due course be declared a success or a failure depending on what suits the powers that be, irrespective of the 'facts'.

Reg Clark was Liberal Democrat federal treasurer 2000/05 and fought Hartlepool in 1997

TAXES FOR THE 'US' GENERATION

Wendy Kyrle-Pope assesses the Liberal Democrats' attempts to make their tax policy fairer, simpler and greener

The adoption by conference of the *Fairer, Simpler, Greener* policy paper for tax reform heralds the arrival of a new more mature, pragmatic and informed approach to the party's attitude to all things fiscal. The zeitgeist is with us, especially in the area of green taxes.

The average punter in the polling booth, regardless of background or political allegiance, is becoming more concerned about global warming, the environment, and inequality. The 'me' generation is gradually, albeit reluctantly, becoming the 'us' generation, a welcome spin-off from increasing globalisation, which, for all its sins, has at least raised awareness of the problems all the world faces.

As a party, we must be bold and seize this opportunity, and not be afraid of being unelectable because of tough tax policies. The tougher they are, the more distinctive, but tough need not mean unfair.

The debate was dominated by Amendment 3, which sought to keep a 50% tax rate for those with a tax liability of over £150,000. This amendment, despite its splendidly impassioned advocates, fell. The 50% tax rate for the rich was one of our distinctive policies, it was argued, the one which, more than any other, made the party stand out from the others.

Shadow chancellor Vince Cable sees the nature of the debate within the party changing; from higher to fairer tax policies. Most importantly, he knows how powerful a weapon tax can be as an instrument of progress, whether for individuals, small businesses, or the environment.

The *Fairer, Simpler, Greener* paper covers five areas of taxation: personal, land, property and wealth, local, and environmental and business, although some (land, property, wealth, inheritance, domicile and residence) will be examined in future papers.

Much in this paper is excellent and reforming, but some opportunities to go further with the green and the fair have been missed, as well as potentially useful connections between the different areas of taxation. How does this affect our punter in the polling booth, and how much further we could go? And what about the idea of choice in the tax implications for investment and environmental issues, both 'dirty' and clean?

The personal tax section contains some interesting ideas, and certainly the aim to remove another two million people from tax is admirable on many levels; redressing inequality, simple fairness and administrative ease. The specific proposals to increase the personal allowance to £7,185, and reduce the basic rate to 20% are right, but the abolition of the 10% rate band could harm those on the threshold of paying tax, especially the old.

The paper does not mention whether it intends to increase the age allowances (currently £7,220 for those over 65, and £7,420 for the over-75s, with a £20,000 income ceiling). Provided these allowances are raised incrementally with the increased ordinary personal allowance, we can soldier on without the small 10% band.

BOGGED DOWN IN COMPLEXITY

One of the biggest changes proposed is to raise the threshold for the higher rate of 40% to £50,000, another excellent idea to help those on middle incomes. But the upper threshold for paying Class 1 National Insurance (the employees' NI) is raised to £50,000 from £33,540.

National Insurance is becoming increasingly unsatisfactory, riven with unfairness, bogged down in complexity, and a burden on both employee and employer.

The paper hints at possible reform, when the proposal for the citizens' pension removes a large part of the rationale for the contributory principle. A more robust declaration of a definite intention to reform or remove it from the statutes books completely would have both braver and in line with the desire for simpler. The Paper does redresses a glaring example of unfairness in the current National Insurance contribution regime; seasonal workers cannot spread their NI Class 1 liability over a whole tax year, something the self-employed are allowed to do.

Under this policy, employees would be able to pay on their total, annual earnings. The Paper also states that the starting rate for NIC is not the same as the starting rate for tax, whereas this is only true for the self-employed, Class 2 payers.

With two million more now outside the realm of tax, and less taxes being paid by the relatively low earning, the paper looks at how the revenue lost can be clawed back. Two proposals attack that old enemy of the people (and, judging by the hisses and boos heard during the debate, of the party too), the Evil Rich.

It proposes to end tax relief for personal pension contributions at the higher rate of tax; only basic rate relief would be allowable. This is fair and just; the system where the more you earn, the more disposable income you have to put into a pension, the more tax relief you get, is not. And it saves the exchequer a whopping £4.3bn. Poor 1, Rich 0.

A LONG TERM OWN GOAL

But the second proposal regarding the reform of capital gains tax may prove something of an own goal in the long term. The abolition of taper relief on gains (put simply, the longer you hold an asset, the less tax you pay) would save £4.5bn.

But without that carrot as an inducement to hold onto assets, the volume of trading in shares and property could increase, giving rise to wild swings in the market, fuelling instability in the housing and stock markets. Would any government be prepared to take that risk?

The party now also wants to reduce the annual personal capital gains exemption from £8,800 this year to only £1,000, saving a further £1.7bn, which again risks an all-out gallop after fast, short term gains, rather than a more sustained, more sedate self-limiting stroll

towards longer term profits. The party should consider only one of these two CGT options, as the two together could profoundly change the pattern of investment in this country.

No political party can dismiss the hopes and aspirations of the rich out of hand, though who they are exactly the paper does not specify.

“Rich peoples, nice peoples”, as Erica Jong’s Russian doorman described them in *Fear Of Flying*, as he stroked their fancy cars, before taking a hefty tip from them. It is he whom we should be emulating; stroke ‘em then soak ‘em. This approach would also provide some useful crossover taxes.

For example, the business/corporation tax section of the paper discusses the idea that “the single largest cost to the exchequer is ... the research and development tax credit”.

While the party agrees government ought to continue to allow this for scientific and medical research, the system is flawed as it benefits commercial R&D far more.

Why not withdraw this relief for R&D for all but scientific progress, and replace it with a scheme in the personal tax section, which allows tax relief on investment in companies’ R&D at the moment of that investment, but claws back any profits (and the original tax relief) when profits are made?

It is a retread of the 1980s Thatcher government’s Business Expansion Scheme, designed to encourage investment in specific new companies. This sort of crossover in tax relief gives people choice and makes companies more competitive, continuing to stimulate the economy and employment, saving the exchequer more than it has to shell out by effectively taxing potential R&D commercial profits twice (no corporation tax relief, clawed back capital gains tax).

One area that the paper did not address is the glaring inequality between those who earn income by the sweat of their brow, and those who live off investment income.

Under the personal tax proposals, someone earning, say, £40,000 per annum pays 20% tax *and* 11% on income over £7,185. Someone with a similar unearned income pays just 40% on the same amount.

A reintroduction of the Investment Income Surcharge of a matching, graduated 5%-11% of investment income over a certain amount, say £10,000 for those under pensionable age and £20,000 for those over it, would redress this, and increase revenues.

Decentralisation, and the move to give greater revenue raising powers to local authorities through local income tax and other local taxes is one of the most important tenets of the party.

“The ‘me’ generation is gradually, albeit reluctantly, becoming the ‘us’ generation, a welcome spin-off from increasing globalisation”

However, the paper could have attempted to establish much more of a tie in between these and the excellent environmental tax proposals. Surely LIT would be one of the most powerful weapons in the battle to reduce carbon emissions from homes, businesses and, especially, motorcars?

It would be effective because it would be tailor made for the local circumstances of its tax payers – punitive taxes on ‘dirty’ and second or third cars in urban areas, but not so in rural, (thus banishing

4x4s back to the hill farms where they belong), rewarding the greening of older properties with grants, legislating on such greening for all new builds, encouraging the use of deposits on bottles to encourage recycling – the list is endless.

UNLOCK BOND POWER

Another local power which is ripe for a comeback is to allow councils to issue stock bonds to raise capital for local infrastructure investment in schools, roads, transport systems, new sewers and whatever else is needed.

This is how the great Victorian cities raised their finance, and there is even a schedule of the Taxes Act for it.

Long term, secure, relatively low interest bonds attracted millions of investors in the past, and would do so in the future. People like investments with a local connection, and institutions rely on such stocks in their long-term portfolios. Health authorities could do likewise to raise the capital for new or improved hospitals.

There are good proposals on fuel duty, climate change levy, and making use one of the simplest tools, the zero rate of VAT on energy saving materials – why not extend this to bicycles and other low emission vehicles?

‘Greener is cheaper’ should be the abiding message. The criticism of these environmental behaviour taxes, as being a non-sustainable means of raising revenue, is unfair on two counts.

We need to use any means possible to save this planet, and, cynically, how long will it take until green behaviour is the norm, and the need for green taxes to disappear completely?

Fairer, Simpler, Greener is a good start, at least on the ‘fairer’ and ‘greener’ part. Tax is never simple, and that is one of the main problems facing any government and any party.

We are merely tinkering with what already exists, loading complexity on complexity. What Liberal Democrats ought to propose now is the total revision of the unwieldy tax laws of this country, to move towards a Year Zero, when a brand new Taxes Act, incorporating benefits and pensions, replaces all the previous legislation, to streamline and simplify the system, to start again. That is radical. And distinctive.

Wendy Kyrle-Pope was a tax practitioner for more than 30 years, and is a member of the Liberator Collective.

CAN LIBERALISM THRIVE IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

A recent conference in Cairo saw the birth of a regional liberal network in unpromising circumstances, reports Jonathan Fryer

At the end of July, with sponsorship from the Liberal International and the German Liberal foundation, the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, liberal parties, institutions and individuals from across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) came together in Cairo to see if it was desirable and feasible to establish a regional liberal network. Such networks already exist in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America and they have been instrumental in giving Liberal International a truly global reach, even if the organisation has not as yet achieved the renown of its Socialist International counterpart.

The participation at the Cairo event was extraordinarily diverse, ranging from a government minister from Morocco to two ladies who had stood unsuccessfully for parliament in Kuwait, plus a handful of businessmen and journalists, not least from the host country, Egypt. Only in a very few countries in MENA are there already political parties that could truly be described as liberal or reformist, and some of those are so small that they have not yet managed to elect any MPs. But others are in the process of forming or are seeking registration. The latter is a complex business in some countries of the region, as governments try to manipulate the democratic process while telling the Western world that they have adopted a multi-party system.

The timing of the conference was in some ways unfortunate, as it coincided with the beginning of the Israeli military action against Lebanon, which meant that a group of Lebanese MPs was unable to travel to be with us. Nor were there any Israelis at the gathering, as the LI partner party in Israel, Shinui, was effectively wiped out at the last general election. This is bad news for the forces of moderation within Israel. But perhaps it was as well that there were no Israelis present on this occasion, as the conflict would otherwise have dominated proceedings even more than it did.

In the event, a declaration was passed about recent events that was more or less acceptable to everyone, so participants could then move on to consider the central question of

whether liberalism has any relevance to the region. The answer to that question proved not to be as straightforward as one might think, not just because of the legacy of top-down authority that permeates so many MENA societies, but even because of the terminology.

The word 'liberal', for example, has unacceptable connotations in many Islamic societies, being perceived more as 'libertine', in other words permissive in all sorts of personal areas (including sex outside marriage, drugs and alcohol)

which are forbidden to devout Muslims. Similarly, the word 'secular' is problematic, especially in the Gulf, where even relatively freethinking Muslims would reject the idea that religion should be divorced from public as well as private life.

In fact, one thing that came over very clearly, in contributions from several

participants from countries such as Egypt and Jordan, was that, whereas secularism continues its advance in much of the Western world (with the interesting exception of the mid-West and southern United States), the opposite is happening in the Middle East. This is not just because of the activities of groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood or Hizbullah, but also as a conscious decision by individuals. In the case of many women who have adopted the *hejab* or modest Islamic dress, for example, this is often as much of a political as a religious statement: rejecting Western customs and values.

However much Tony Blair and his loyalist ministers may argue to the contrary, this resurgence in Islamic consciousness and growing militancy among the young, in particular, is partly attributable to US and British foreign policy. Even those people who loathed Saddam Hussein and his barbarous dictatorship condemn the US-led invasion of Iraq and the ongoing presence of Western troops there. Despite the fact that much of the violence in Iraq is now between Shia and Sunni factions, the carnage is still largely seen as Washington and London's 'fault'.

Similarly, the disproportionate Israeli reaction to the kidnapping of two of its soldiers by Hizbullah provoked outrage right across the Arab world. While some British

“The word ‘liberal’, has unacceptable connotations in many Islamic societies, being perceived more as ‘libertine’.”

Liberal Democrats might not see things in such black and white terms, the vast majority of Arabs perceived the Israeli assault as a totally unjustifiable collective punishment for the Lebanese people. This has helped engender a deep



Presidential election posters in the Mauritanian desert in 2003

sense of solidarity across the Arab

world – Christian as well as Muslim – as well as anger at the United States and to a lesser extent Europe (notably Britain and Germany) for allegedly giving the Israelis a green light. Moreover, pictures of civilian casualties – especially of children – whether Iraqi, Lebanese or Palestinian, provoke a profoundly personal reaction from most Arabs, almost as if a member of their own family were involved.

Hizbullah has emerged from the Lebanon affair with its reputation significantly enhanced, so far as most Arabs are concerned. For many of them, the Hizbullah leader Nasrullah has become a hero, for standing up to the Israelis and, as they perceive it, winning. Similarly, Hamas has attracted growing support across the Arab world as the legitimately elected representatives of the Palestinian people. The West's refusal to acknowledge that legitimacy is seen as rank hypocrisy and yet another case of 'double standards' in the Israeli/ Palestinian conflict.

Within such a context, it is not surprising that the forces of so-called moderation are weak in much of the Arab world, though that does not mean that they do not exist. One thing that came over very clearly from the Cairo gathering was that, in general, they are to be found among the intellectual elite, rather than in the mass of the population. For those of us who have grown used to community politics, and to achieving political power from the grassroots up, it is a somewhat uncomfortable idea that liberalism should depend heavily on the educated, urban elite, but several participants at the conference argued that this was the only way possible in their countries.

Hence the involvement of some of them in the media, especially newspapers, either as proprietors or as journalists. These newspapers, they believe, can promote a liberal dialogue and rally more intellectuals to the liberal cause, perhaps within political parties, new or already established. In some countries, such as Egypt, the newspaper-reading public is very small because of high levels of illiteracy and the expense of

newspapers for people on a very low income. But it can offer a base.

The serious challenge, then, is convert the population at large to liberal thinking. Great interest was expressed at the conference in the campaigning techniques of the British Liberal Democrats, among others. But the point was also made that lessons could be learnt from the techniques of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, or from Hizbullah in Lebanon. These techniques centre on providing basic services that meet local people's needs, especially at the village level, thereby filling a lacuna left by the government. As we ourselves know from 'pavement politics', solving what may from outside seem like minor practical problems is a far better way of winning the hearts and minds and political loyalty of ordinary people than beautifully crafted articles in newspapers.

Despite the constraints under which liberal forces have to operate in much of the Middle East and North Africa, the Cairo conference did decide that a MENA liberal network should be set up, to exchange information and ideas, and to cooperate with Liberal International. By coincidence, the next LI Congress – this November – will be held in Marrakesh, Morocco, which will offer an ideal opportunity for a follow-up MENA fringe. A working relationship with European Liberal parties is also aspired to, in the belief that the European Union and MENA have much to offer each other, and that it is in Europe's interest to see a stable and moderate Arab world on its southern flank.

Jonathan Fryer is a Vice-President of the British Group of Liberal International and a specialist writer and lecturer on Middle East affairs.

3,023 NEW CRIMES AND COUNTING

The Blair government is suffering from legislative incontinence and Liberals must resist similar temptations, argues Alex Wilcock

It takes a lot to shock me, particularly from Tony Blair, but when he announced at the end of August that he will clamp down on ‘problem children’ “pre-birth even”, my mouth dropped.

With Mr Blair’s government having made over three thousand activities newly illegal since 1997, it was only a matter of time before officers were told to cut out the messy business of waiting for criminal activity to be committed and wait with a pair of dinky little cuffs after the midwife gives the newborn a slap. They won’t have to wait for teenagers to protest, “I didn’t ask to be born!” “Ignorance of the law is no excuse, sonny.” Has Mr Blair finally gone quite mad?

In an interview reminiscent of the film ‘Minority Report’, in which people are locked up for crimes they haven’t yet committed but which the authorities – it turns out unreliably (gasp) – believe they will, Mr Blair told the BBC that parents who refuse to take “advice” about children who will grow up to be a “menace to society” will face sanctions. A new meaning of the word ‘advice’ there, invented because “there are children that are going to grow up in families that we know perfectly well are completely dysfunctional, and the kids a few years down the line are going to be a menace to society and actually a threat to themselves”.

I wish I had such a perfect and personalised knowledge of the future as Mr Blair. Perhaps it comes directly from God, as it’s certainly not come from any government department or intelligence service under him with a predictive or investigative role. Mr Blair’s blithely absolute faith in the ability of his government to predict every aspect of people’s lives and then direct them better than people can do themselves is gobsmacking. Even aside from the libertarian arguments – Charles Anglin memorably summarised Mr Blair’s agenda as a return to eugenics – all the practical evidence is that the state has an abysmal record in running people’s lives, not least those of children and the most vulnerable in society, and that’s without even looking at the Mr Blair’s own disastrous but incompetent authoritarian record.

Mr Blair’s government has newly made over three thousand activities illegal since it came to power. The figure was officially 3,023 on the 18th of August, but it’s no doubt higher by now. That’s nearly one a day, with two-thirds by

unscrutinised ministerial order rather than parliamentary debate, and exposed by Lib Dem home affairs spokesperson Nick Clegg as “a frenzied approach to law-making... an obsession with controlling the minutiae of everyday life. The result? A country less free than before, and a marked erosion of the trust which should exist between the government and the governed.” The process is accelerating, too, with the number of new offences rising from 160 in 1998 to 346 in 2000 and 527 in 2005. There is no way even to count the astounding number of new and random ‘crimes’ invented under the ASBO, for which the burden of proof has been set at ‘gossip’. To put it all in perspective, even a news story in the *Daily Mail* (16 August)

“It was actually a relief to find myself on the same side as Lib Dem MPs.”

thought the government’s unthinking law factory was barking. Announcing that people are a “menace to society” before they are born is, I suppose, the logical end to the process.

Norman Lamb, Ming Campbell’s chief of staff, has said of the Prime Minister’s latest swivel-eyed control freakery that “Empty threats to pregnant mothers will do little to restore confidence in a government that has failed to tackle poverty, crime and social exclusion for the last nine years.” Before I sound too much like the Liberal Democrats are unerringly right on these issues, though, it was actually a relief to find myself on the same side as Lib Dem MPs when I read Norman’s statement, as debate on the Lib Dem blogosphere had centred in the last days of August on the debate around the ban on ‘violent pornography’. Bloggers had come down firmly on one side, MPs on the other.

Lib Dem MP Sandra Gidley entirely understandably took the well-meaning position that the first response to anything nasty should be to ban it, because surely no-one could really like nasty things and imposing nice things instead is really only for their own good. I don’t take that line, in part because I just don’t like banning things and in part because I don’t think it will do any good, but almost certainly will do great harm. I found myself nodding instead with blogger Gavin Whenman’s response to Sandra, a man who’d actually interviewed Liz Longhurst, the mother of the murdered woman at the centre of the calls for the ban, but who still thought it an awful crime followed by an awful law. ‘Femme de Resistance’ on the Forceful and Moderate blog had then introduced the key issue of consent. Informed consent is

absolutely crucial to this debate, and it is why child porn is always wrong but even 'extremely unpleasant' adult porn is altogether different.

All of these were more eloquent than the Home Office junior minister whose name I missed and who gave an eminently missable interview on the subject on Radio 4's *The World At One* (30 August), advocating a ban while denying all responsibility. However many times he was pressed, he couldn't say that he agreed with a single argument behind the ban, instead constantly saying that Parliament had settled its view in 1959 – 1959! – and that they were acting on the results of consultation, in which most people had predictably said they didn't like that sort of thing. Why did he not just say "the Daily Mail told me to do it, guv" and have done with it? For goodness's sake, they need to take some responsibility when making a decision about such a desperately difficult, tragic subject; surely responsibility is the crux of the issue.

These periodic moral panics about porn, film or television are a desperate need to find an excuse 'out there' for terrible acts, whether it's smut, society or Satan, but it's not smut, society or Satan that commit the crimes. Banning porn defined – however imperfectly it ends up being defined – as 'violent' is made to sound like it's closing a 'loophole', but if someone is tortured or murdered, including if it should ever happen during the making of pornography, that's very much against the law. Will a new law against people looking at their computers stop such terrible tragedies? Unlike Mr Blair in his delusional world, I don't know with certainty, but there's no evidence that it will. Will it result in completely innocent and consenting people having their lives destroyed by being branded and imprisoned? It has before. As soon as I heard this, I thought of the 1990s consenting S&M trial of 'Operation Spanner' and wondered why the government was going down the same road, the same expense, the same broken lives, the same cruel stupidity all over again.

The terrible crimes are already crimes; the consenting acts simply shouldn't be. Mr Blair and every person in his government, who have all colluded with creating thousands of new crimes in an attempt to look tough but making no-one feel safer, should consider what they're doing. Their actions, unlike many they have legislated against, are not victimless. When, as many of these 'crimes' do, they criminalise people for something for which all concerned have given their informed consent and which is no-one's business but their own, the harm is not done by the 'criminal' but by Labour's perverse, wicked and thoughtless laws.

Alex Wilcock is a former Vice-Chair of the Liberal Democrat Federal Policy Committee and writes the blog *Love and Liberty* (<http://loveandliberty.blogspot.com>), where a different version of this article appeared on 1st September 2006



Thanks to everyone who visited the Liberator stall at Brighton to collect their copy of the magazine, take out a new subscription or renew an old one.

Pictured from left: Catherine Furlong, Simon Titley, Nick Winch, Ralph Bancroft.

IT'S CRIMINAL

High-profile crimes steal the headlines but small-scale crime afflicts us more, argues Alan Sherwell

Duncan Brack raised in *Liberal Democrat News* a while ago the suggestion that the general response to 'overseas nationals' disappearing on release from our jails was essentially racist. He was certainly right that the way the story has been covered in the press has been racially biased at best and inflammatory at worst. It is also true that the likelihood of these people re-offending is probably not significantly different from that of UK citizens released at the end of their sentence for similar crimes.

Personally, I don't have a problem with this country saying to people that, if they are here as guests (which non-citizens are) and they breach the rules, then they should cease being our guests. However, I think that the pretty nasty press coverage of the problem was masking the real issues.

Firstly, what sort of prison service is it that so loses track of its own prisoners that it doesn't manage to follow properly (or, it seems, at all) standard procedures on their release? And secondly, why are re-offending rates so high?

Subsequently, also in *Liberal Democrat News*, David Boyle talked of a probation officer with a caseload of 600 individuals, which perhaps confirms the first problem and partially explains the second. What it certainly does is throw into stark relief the fact that so much of the national debate on Law & Order/Justice & Security is simply about the wrong issues.

Everything seems to revolve around mega cases like the Soham murders, the London bombings, the Brinks Mat robbery and the like. Individually, these are very significant. Understandably, they caught the public's attention and, rightly, demanded a rapid and effective police response. They raise legitimate questions about police intelligence and operations, but they are not the crimes that affect most people on a day-to-day basis.

It is well known that the majority of assaults (physical or sexual) on children are from friends or members of their family and not random paedophiles. The robberies that affect most people are burglaries, pick pocketing and, to a lesser extent, mugging. The crimes that affect most businesses aren't the mega frauds or multi-million pound heists; they are shoplifting, pilfering and casual break-ins. At one time, BT was losing a million pounds a week from theft from phone boxes – that is serious money, even to such a large corporation, but it wasn't the Great Train Robbers; it was individuals or small groups of individuals.

The vast majority of crime, by numbers of incidents rather than value, is small-scale acquisitive crime – people stealing

money or goods that can readily be exchanged for money. Preventing Soham or the London bombers would have saved the lives of some and improved the existence of many more, and I am not arguing that that doesn't matter – it is vitally important – but, statistically, substantially reducing acquisitive crime would deeply affect the well being of many more people and it doesn't get the level of attention that it deserves.

Intellectually, it is easier to understand why someone might become a great train robber than why they might lift a pensioner's handbag, but the reality is that we are generally dealing with different groups of criminals. The decision to become involved with a large theft like Brinks Mat or the Great Train Robbery has, in part, to be a balance of the risk of being caught against the benefits of success. Potentially, you can live on the proceeds for the rest of your life. Nicking a handbag is not the same thing at all; the risk is surely much higher than the potential reward.

So why is low-level acquisitive crime so prevalent and why do people see it as worth the risk? To a considerable extent, the answer has to be because it is a source of ready cash. Many of the criminals concerned are addicted to alcohol or illegal drugs and the need for the fix overcomes any sense of risk.

The traditional liberal view has been that the deprivation of liberty is punishment of itself and that appropriate sentences and, most importantly, the likelihood of getting caught are the best deterrent. But there are two groups of people who cannot be prevented from committing crimes by that approach. One is people with certain types of mental health problems, the other is addicts who are in need of a 'fix' or who know that they will soon become so and have no money to obtain it. Neither group can be deterred since neither is effectively capable of making what the wider community would consider a rational decision.

Both of these groups tend to be serial offenders, so that brings us back to the question: what sort of prison service is it that leads to this level of re-offending? The reality is that it is an overstretched one with poor political management, treated as a Cinderella because "there are no votes in prisons and prisoners".

Well, actually, I believe that there are quite a lot of votes in effective ways of tackling the low level crime that affects the electorate most. It is not about stiffer sentences or even better policing (desirable though that may be) but about rehabilitation and re-education. Nor is it about pampering prisoners and giving them an easy life or even about spending lots more money. It is about spending the right money in the right place to treat the right problem.

“What sort of prison service is it that leads to this level of re-offending?”

Firstly, get all the people with real mental health problems that contribute to their offending out of jails and treat or control their mental condition. There was a very sad case reported recently of a potentially violent paedophile, released at the end of a sentence, who deliberately assaulted a ten-year old and then gave himself up to the police because he felt that he needed to be in custody, as he knew that his uncontrollable urges would lead to murder in the end. This man needs to be in secure accommodation until and unless his condition can be treated but he does not need to be in a prison, where he is almost certainly at risk from other inmates and where the staff have neither the time nor the expertise to deal with his case properly.

'Care in the Community' is all very well but cannot be the answer if the person being cared for shouldn't be in the community in the first place or if there is insufficient care or it is of the wrong type. People with mental illnesses need to be treated by specialists, whether they are in secure accommodation, institutional accommodation or in the wider community. Getting them out of prisons would reduce overcrowding and make the prison officer's job easier. It would also create a much better chance of providing these people, who aren't criminals in any meaningful sense, with the treatment that they desperately need.

Similarly, these people should not be handled by the conventional probation service. If those with a history of mental illness that led to them being confined in a secure institution are to be released, then their aftercare needs to be handled by the health service (and others who are specialists in dealing with such problems and their aftermath), and separated from the care of those who do not have mental health problems.

The second, parallel, priority is tackling addiction. It is generally accepted that drug abusers or alcoholics commit the majority of acquisitive crime, yet I have seen estimates that indicate that more prisoners are addicted to drugs on release than on admission, which, if true, is utterly horrendous.

I accept that there is a wider debate to be had on drug legislation and the way that our society tackles the issue of drugs but, in the context of the world as it is now, what sort of prison system is it that enables inmates to continue to take heroin? Perhaps it is an overcrowded one where prisoners are easier to control if they can get their drugs – I don't know. What I do know is that it is wrong.

This government is obsessed by targets, so what about one that says that 99% of prisoners on release from a sentence of three months or more will be addiction free, together with active treatment for addiction, and an effective and rigorously enforced zero tolerance policy of drugs in prisons?

So 'detox' must be a priority for the prison system and if that means allowing a prisoner access to the same drugs during part of that programme, which is under proper medical supervision, then fine. However, perhaps remission should not be available unless a detox programme has been followed. Smuggling drugs into prison must be treated as a very serious offence, as must dealing within prison. Any prison officer who colludes with drug smuggling must face a long sentence the other side of the bars and there must be regular checks for drugs within all our prisons.

I accept that an ex-addict can relapse at any time and that the prison service cannot be responsible for what happens once the prisoner leaves its premises. However, the authorities must make sure that prisoners have at least some sort of a start when they are released and are supported in the immediate aftermath.

If ex-prisoners are jobless, penniless and of no fixed abode, then they are more likely to revert to crime than if they have a reasonable degree of security. For the ex-addict, this is doubly so. Investing resource in supporting the ex-prisoner is not being 'soft on crime', it is a positive step to tackling crime levels and will save society both money and misery in the long run.

Providing good quality support to ex-addicts to help them resist a return to drugs might well be the single most important thing that we could do to reduce the volume of burglary, pick pocketing and shoplifting. Whether that is through the standard probation service or through specialist officers is open to debate, but what matters is that real support has to be there. That means trying to ensure that the individual concerned has as stable an environment as possible after release, as well as dealing with drug issues directly.

Inevitably, some non-liberal people will argue that such a programme is 'feather bedding' criminals but it is not. It is about three things – justice, prevention and cost.

Anyone with even a minimal sense of justice must recognize that it is not just to treat a person who has limited control over his or her behaviour (because of mental illness or addiction) in the same way as one would treat a person who makes a deliberate and 'rational' choice of committing a crime.

The prevention argument almost speaks for itself. Removing from the streets the small number of released prisoners who are so mentally ill that they are a serious risk to others may not reduce crime a great deal, but reducing the large (relatively speaking) numbers of people who steal to feed a habit would benefit society greatly.

At a time when the government is releasing prisoners early because there is not enough room in jail, then the cost argument is pretty self-evident too. Proportionately, we have one of the largest prison populations in Europe and we face a choice – build more prisons and hire more prison officers, or reduce the number of people in prison. Of course, the latter could be achieved by changing sentencing policy – and there is an argument for that in some cases – but that is a separate debate. It can certainly be achieved by reducing the number of offences committed.

Proper secure institutions for what used to be called the criminally insane, detox programmes and sufficient, proper, trained support for ex-addicts on leaving prison will cost money. It may even cost more than the otherwise necessary additional prisons. But the economic equation should be more than balanced by the direct cost of not having so many re-offenders inside, and by the indirect benefit to individuals and society as a whole of the consequent reduction in acquisitive crime.

Alan Sherwell is leader of the Liberal Democrat group on Aylesbury Vale District Council.

TORBAY DISPUTE

Dear Liberator,

I am sure even such an important and major figure in British politics as Cllr Richard Kemp (Liberator 313) would accept that the purpose of gaining political power is both to exercise it and to retain it.

My colleagues on Torbay Council can claim many notable achievements while they were able to exercise political power after taking over from a discredited Conservative administration in May 2003. Ticking New Labour's corporate performance assessment boxes was the least of many I happily and repeatedly propagate to anyone who will listen.

But the reason political power was taken from them by the electorate in the mayoral election in October 2005 was uncannily similar to the reasons why the Tories lost in 2003.

A Tory administration that put up councillors allowances while cutting services was an easy target for the high circulation local daily newspaper that historically has been hostile to the local council, and party politics in local government. The impression was that the Conservatives were only interested in themselves and were no longer on the side of the people. The Lib Dems were rewarded with a landslide win when the voters got a chance to have their say.


You would think that this lesson in how not to run Torbay would have been taken into account when an independent review recommended an even larger rise in allowances at a time when councillors were having to look at expenditure cuts as a consequence of the legacy the Tories had left them.

Sadly, the leadership of the group, as was their right, set themselves against the cautions of three former group leaders, experienced councillors within the group, local party members from two constituencies, a PPC who was on target to become an MP, and, as Richard Kemp so thoughtfully put it, a minor MP.

Understandably, being the highly significant and busy man that he is, Cllr Kemp might not have been able to find the time in his schedule to be able to speak to anyone locally who could have explained the party's aim was to retain political control of the council and not to throw it away.

Had he been able, he would have learnt that advice had been sought and given by ALDC that the group should, and could, phase in the increases, but

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the leadership chose to misinform the group that they had to accept the recommendation in full, or not at all.

It was this dishonesty that led one of our most senior and capable councillors to resign his portfolio in disgust at the way the leadership had bounced the group into a quick and ill-considered decision.

Cllr Kemp should find the time to talk to him and get an insider's view of what went on and why we could, had the leadership considered the context in which they were operating, still be in control of local affairs, with properly remunerated councillors, and a real prospect of retaining political power next May.

Adrian Sanders MP
Torbay

DODGING THE TRUTH

Dear Liberator,

Why do Liberal Democrats follow the herd in regarding taxation as a burden? Surely to liberals it is a privilege to be able to contribute to the building of a better society. I am delighted to have, and have had all my working life, an income sufficient to require me to pay tax on it. I much prefer that to being indigent, and I suspect most of the indigent would feel the same.

Second, why are the party's proposals 'tax neutral' overall? The tax take in Britain is approximately 42% of GDP, compared with 48% in, say, France, where I have just had the privilege of studying for a year. It is clear that the French get good value for their money. With well maintained roads, marvellous trains and public transport system, clean streets (apart for the dog droppings), tidy parks with park keepers, clean public lavatories with caretakers, a health service with spare capacity, and lavish support of the arts, the difference in the quality of civic society palpable.

Most Liberator readers will be able to compile their own lists of public services and facilities in Britain that

could be greatly improved if only the funds were available. My own wish list would start with the prison education service, the probation service and drug rehabilitation.

A trawl through Polly Toynbee's Guardian articles over the past two years will provide many other examples. Services and facilities essential for a civilised society will remain starved of funds unless we challenge the monetarist myth that the UK has somehow reached its taxable capacity. True, "throwing money at the problems" is not the whole solution, and Gordon Brown has done us no favours by seeming to have showered the NHS with money to little perceived effect on front line services. But in most cases, the lack of money makes improvements difficult if not impossible.

Thirdly, however laudable green taxes may be, producers will try to pass them on to consumers by raising prices. These higher prices will, like indirect taxes, have a greater impact on the poor than on the rich. The fairest taxes are progressive direct taxes based on ability to pay.

Which brings me to the 50% marginal income tax rate. Frankly, those of us nearer the bottom of the income range would regard it as untold luxury to have the taxable income above £100,000 (how did it become £150,000?) required to pay this rate.

I should be quite happy to campaign for it to kick in at £50,000 a year. To claim that such a rate is a 'disincentive' is eyewash. It is a convenient myth that enables the well-heeled to continue feathering their nests while avoiding paying their just contribution to the maintenance of the society which enables them to prosper.

Now that the Liberal Democrats have adopted this new policy, there is no party in Britain prepared to tell the electorate the truth: that if we want a civilised and decent society, we have to be prepared to pay for it.

The grossly misnamed Adam Smith Institute and its ilk have made all the

running for too long. In my view, there is now an urgent need for an independent pressure group to press on all the parties the virtues of taxation for a better society. Anybody interested?

Peter Wrigley
Batley and Spen

PHILOSOPHERS' SONG

Dear Liberator,

In his reply letter in *Liberator* 312, Syaad Rahman claims:

"German Liberalism was never as intellectually rigorous as that of its neighbours. Humboldt, admired by Mill, is only an exception to this in parts; Kant and Hegel? Kant maybe, but way off in the realms of metaphysics whereas British Liberalism, via Utilitarianism, is firmly rooted in common sense."

On the contrary, Kant is an essential, if indirect, source for British Liberalism, through the succeeding generation of German philosophers who develop, elucidate and elaborate his work, particularly Schlegel, Fichte, Schiller and Schelling. The filtering of this German Idealist philosophy through the extraordinary imagination of Coleridge provides the spark that enables Mill to transform the dreary Utilitarianism familiar to him from his youth into a radical and positive Liberalism.

Without his exposure and conversion to 'Germano-Coleridgean' ideas, as he called them, Mill would have remained another plodding Benthamite, rather than the preeminent British philosopher of the nineteenth century and beyond.

Bernie Hughes
East Kilbride

VEILED THREAT

Dear Liberator,

We are once again being made to believe that the multicultural experiment in Britain has failed. The blame has been laid at the feet of Muslims in general and veiled Muslim women in particular. The Church of England too has spoken. It believes that this failed experiment has stripped Britain of its essential Christian character.

In a paper on 'Cohesion and Integration', leaked to the press, the Church of England criticises the government's 'privileged attention' to the Muslim community. Such policies, it says, have backfired and further caused

a separation in the society. The paper further prophesises that the commission on cohesion and integration formed by the communities secretary is sure to be doomed. The church is suspicious of the government's moves to make the country a multi-faith society, and accuses it of sidelining the church.

This report comes close on the heels of Jack Straw's strikingly polite 'appeal' to Muslim women to shed their veils because it is an obvious statement of separation. This, he is concerned, strains the relationship between the two communities. He has been asking women to remove their veil when they come to his surgery for a meeting. It is quite acceptable that Straw feels uncomfortable talking to someone with a veil because he cannot see the person's mouth and nose. However, this is but an entirely personal discomfort. He fails to explain how this personal uneasiness is translated into separation between the communities and it is far-fetched to say that it, as shared by other reticent people, is the reason for straining relations.

By one estimate, only two percent of the women don the veil, a small percentage to affect inter-community relations. But even if this were a larger or growing percentage, the practice itself should be taken as a proof of a healthy multicultural society's diversity rather than an element of separation or intimidation, as Phil Woolas, (ironically) the minister for race and equality, describes it.

Supporting Straw, he says "Muslim women have every right to do so... but they must realise that other people who don't understand the culture can find it frightening and intimidating." While Straw is not one of those who do not understand the culture, as his constituency is 26 percent Muslim, it is interesting that Woolas points out the

lack of understanding as the reason behind people's uneasiness to a veil.

Enter John Prescott, the deputy prime minister. He says, and rightly so, that it is important to have a debate on this issue. Indeed, a discussion on why women wear it in the first place and whether it makes others uncomfortable will bring openness to the issue and for starting one we should be thankful to Straw.

But where Straw's concern is misplaced is that the veil does not help cohesion in the society. There is a distinction between integration and assimilation, the former being a prerequisite for a cohesive society. While veiled women can be perfectly integrated into a society and be its active members, a fact manifested by them coming to his office with problems, it is wrong to ask them in the name of society's cohesion to forgo what they choose for themselves.

A truly multicultural society needs to be diverse, with its members practising whatever their individual culture requires them to while being able to live harmoniously, without infringing upon the freedoms of the other members.

However, the stern reaction by some Muslims in Britain to Straw's remarks and the reported hate crime and mails, one in which a young man snatched the veil off a woman's face in Liverpool, are unhelpful and show distrust on both sides.

A debate on the issue, as was intended by Straw, is a perfectly fine idea. But if incidents like these and the condemnation by Muslim groups are to follow, then there can be no cohesion and it shows that perhaps British society really isn't ready for such a debate.

Amna Saadat
Lahore, Pakistan

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**We reserve the right to edit or omit anything
long, boring or defamatory**

**Leading the Localities:
Executive Mayors in
English Local Governance
by Colin Copus
Manchester UP 2006 £55**

While posing as a sober academic analysis, this book is really a one-sided polemic in favour of directly-elected executive mayors, full of the sort of unsupported assertions and misrepresentations to which the pro-mayor camp always seems to resort.

In the very first paragraph, we have the line that introducing an executive mayor is just a switch from an indirectly elected leader “elected by councilors” to a directly-elected one “elected by voters”. If this were tried at a national level, the introduction of an elected president in whom executive power was entrusted, would we regard the abolition of voting in parliament and the reduction of MPs to a mere commentating role so insignificant as to be not worth mentioning?

Throughout the book, the assumption that a decision made by one directly elected person will be better and more widely accepted than one made collectively by a representative assembly is relied upon for further arguments, but never questioned. There is no analysis of where good ideas in local government really come from. My feeling is that they are more likely to bubble upwards from intelligent officers interacting with keen elected members who know their patch. The ‘big man’ politics of all-powerful charismatic leaders dictating downwards is more likely to be a source of bad policy.

Having sat, in opposition, on a council (London Borough of Lewisham) that pioneered the switch to an executive mayor system, I’ve seen the great gulf between the official council publicity on the system, and the reality at the level of service delivery. My council became the darling of the local government circuit, frequently cited for good practice by pro-mayor advocates (including Nick Clegg in his CentreForum piece on the subject), on the basis of press releases which were really just wishful thinking and would cause hollow guffaws to those who used its services. Much of this book seems to be based on conversations with mayors and

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accounts of what their councils are doing from their publicity departments. All sounds wonderful if you only speak to the people at the top, and those paid to spread (or make up) good news.

The book mixes the cheerful but turgid language of the council press release with a little political theory, which ends up looking rather silly. Those of us who have long experience trying to stir up apathy on the subject know that people in England tend to have little interest in either local government or constitutions, so certainly aren’t going to be interested in the intersection of the two. Dr Copus’s notion of mass public involvement and enthusiasm for drafting the council’s constitution suggests a lack of touch with reality.

Indeed, my fear over the whole elected mayor issue was that we would sleep-walk into it, with the ‘great and good’ pushing it, no-one much opposing it, and most ordinary people unbothered by the technicalities, but agreeing on the sloppy anti-politics arguments used to sell it. I was perhaps too pessimistic – the best bit of this book for me is the table showing just how many referendums to introduce an executive mayor gave a ‘no’ result.

Matthew Huntbach

**President Gore... and other things that never happened
ed Duncan Brack
Politico’s 2006 £14.99**

President Gore’s predecessor, *Prime Minister Portillo*, a collection of speculations in counterfactual political history, was an immense pleasure (albeit in some parts a guilty one – Iain Dale’s cheery wish-fulfilment title piece must have amused, in different ways, Tories and non-Tories alike). President Gore’s 19 ‘what if?’ fantasies are just as entertaining and thought-provoking, and often both at once.

The pull of counterfactual history

should be compelling for Liberal Democrats. Most agonisingly, couldn’t the decline of the 1920s have been much more contingent and less inevitable than a class-conflict analysis implies?

Moreover, the range of content here will have a particular appeal to Liberal Democrats. Editor Duncan Brack, stalwart of Lib Dem conference committee, has contributed an excellent piece in its own right (What if the Alliance had not quarrelled publicly over defence in 1986?), which brings across the urgent frustration of someone who was there. He has also commissioned a set of writers around half of whom have a connection to the party, or at least a special interest in its history.

Several authors explore this and other junctures where the parties might have aligned differently. We see how the moderate and radical forces of Victorian left and right could have permuted into parties other than the ones we got; the possibility of Joseph Chamberlain sticking (or returning) to the Liberal fold; and Labour as a twentieth-century fringe party rendered irrelevant by a broad Liberal party of the centre-left. All of this is plausibly done.

For pure enjoyment, essays which focus on individual personalities win out. David Boyle ingeniously has Beatrice Potter marrying not Sidney Webb but Joseph Chamberlain, though the piece moves a little too smoothly towards a present as Boyle would wish it to be. And Labour maverick R.J. Briand ventriloquises Neil Kinnock as a likeably candid survivor of a hellish and brief 1991 premiership.

Where the scope moves overseas, we are on less certain shores. In perhaps the best essay here (What if Czechoslovakia had fought in 1938?), Helen Szamuely’s careful analysis of historical fact does not hold her back from exploring the alternatives. York Membery, however, reflecting on Franz

Ferdinand's escape from assassination, gets little further than the platitude that "the Europe of the 1920s and 1930s would almost certainly have been a happier, more prosperous place". John Nichols, in the title piece, is right that Gore would have been better off attacking the disenfranchisement of black voters in Florida rather than the technicalities of the count, but overestimates the Republicans' sense of shame and readiness to concede.

A brief whinge is in order about the quality of copy-editing, with a few outright howlers appearing. Daniel O'Connell becomes 'O'Connor'; Andrew Bonar Law is rechristened 'Arthur'; and Mao's imagined flight from Africa to Brazil carries him over the Pacific. These ought at least to be corrected for the paperback.

Nonetheless, President Gore is warmly recommended. It will leave readers stimulated and, perhaps, optimistic that the future is out there to be changed.

Phil Grant

Barcelona **by Michael Eaude** **Five Leaves 2006 £9.99**

A hard book to pin down. It is not a tourist guide, though anyone visiting Barcelona would surely find its descriptions of the city's sights, neighbourhoods and ambience interesting.

Nor is it a conventional history, though it briefly explains the events that have shaped the last couple of centuries.

The main interest for most people who not planning a trip to the Catalonian capital is Eaude's cautionary tale of what happened to Barcelona in the run-up to the 1992 Olympic Games and subsequently.

Supporters of the London bid for 2012 stressed the regeneration legacy they expected, much as did Barcelona's civic politicians in their time.

Barcelona did indeed get modern sports facilities, a lot of money flowing in – however temporarily – a face lift, and a higher international profile.

But it also got a city designed mostly around cars, new homes for the rich but nothing done for the low-income areas and a speculative property boom.

More than a decade after its Olympics, few of the claimed benefits are very evident to most of the city's inhabitants, Eaude suggests.

Mark Smulian

Mourning Becomes... **by Liz Stanley** **Manchester UP 2006 £55**

Governments come to power for many and diverse reasons, but among those that brought about the Liberal landslide victory of 1906 was Campbell Bannerman's 'methods of barbarism' speech on the British conduct of the second Anglo-Boer War.

Campbell Bannerman drew much of his evidence from the work of Emily Hobhouse, including the scorched earth policy of the British army and the internment of non-combatant Boers and Africans in concentration camps.

Stanley's book is subtitled 'Post/memory and commemoration of the concentration camps of the South African War 1899-1902'. It sets about demythologising its subject.

More than 26,000 Boer men, women and children (more than 22,000 being children) died in these concentration camps. African men, women and children also died in their camps. The Nazis gleefully chose this name for their own camps, and this now colours our perception of them.

After an early conventional phase, the war took on a guerrilla phase, to which the British responded with a scorched earth policy. The concentration camps were probably well-intended – house the displaced and afford safety in a time of war, as much as applying pressure to the continuing Boer resistance.

However, this was a time of war and the military was ill-prepared to cope with the role of managing the camps, especially when large numbers might suddenly arrive, and some officers and men might have been ill-disposed to people they perceived as the enemy. The machine simply wasn't up to the task.

As a result, food and other basics were often in short supply and camp conditions bad. Malnutrition was an obvious outcome and when measles and other diseases swept into the camps they achieved epidemic proportions (such as the uncertainties over the MMR vaccine might promote in a school today).

Nevertheless, people did come to the camps voluntarily as well as under compulsion and some were able to move in and out of them and communicate with those outside.

In October 1899, Leonard Courtney, the Liberal MP for Liskeard/Bodmin, invited Hobhouse to become secretary

of the women's branch of the South African Conciliation Committee, which raised money for relief work and sent her to the Cape to distribute this and report back.

Her reports were couched in moderate and balanced terms and she was shocked by the response in the gutter press that they were anti-British. From the outset, she was concerned with Anglo-Boer and African relations after the war.

The aftermath is very much Stanley's concern, chiefly how nationalist politics advanced on the back of a selective remembrance of the tribulations of the concentration camps. By selective, it is the women who are 'remembered', although as I show above, the children's' deaths were far greater. White men should not be in the camps at all in this myth, they should be commandoes; and the black camps had to wait for the fall of the Apartheid system for remembrance. The war becomes a trial sent by God to test and unite the Afrikaner people.

A sub-plot in this is that Afro-Boer relations were harmonious (if hierarchical) before the war, and that the British elevation of the Black and denigration of the Boer was the cause of strife and ultimately Apartheid itself. Stanley seeks to set the record straight.

None of this exonerates the British; the Anglo-Boer wars were fought for imperialist greed, the methods used in pursuit of the war abominations. The concentration camp system was part of this. As Stanley points out, class and race biases proliferated in the treatment of inmates, prisoners or otherwise, and the military or civil administration wasn't there to cope with the problems concentration brought – most tragically when disease struck, as it would.

In her introduction to *The Brunt of the War*, Emily Hobhouse wrote: 'None of us can claim to be wholly civilised till we have drawn the line above war itself and established universal arbitration in place of universal armaments. The deaths of the Boer children will not have been in vain if their blood shall prove the seed of this higher rule of nations.'

Stewart Rayment

Monday

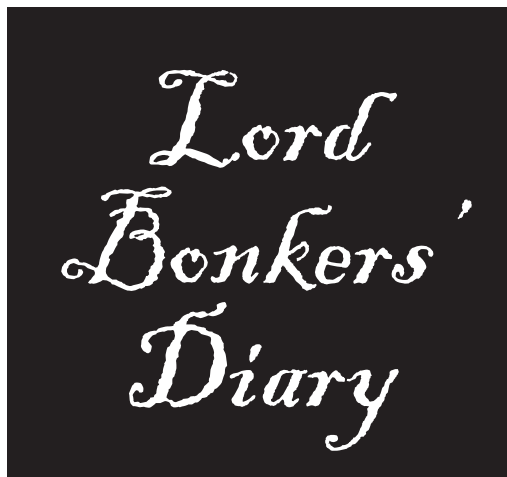
The morning's newspapers are full of reports that the authorities once feared that militant Suffragettes were plotting to assassinate Asquith. The first Lady Bonkers, I am proud to say, was a great supporter of 'Votes for Women' and never slow to take action to further her cause – an observer once remarked that, had she thrown herself under the King's horse, the beast would have been stopped in its tracks, if not shunted back several yards. She was also, it has to be admitted, a crack shot, able to bring down a passing widgeon with a single barrel, who would often borrow my gentleman's collapsible travelling rifle range if she was staying in Town. Yet I have no hesitation in maintaining that she was never involved in any scheme to bump off the Prime Minister: the unfortunate injuries suffered by the Master of Elibank here at the Hall one winter's morning were agreed by all impartial observers to be entirely his own fault.

Tuesday

To York to conduct some delicate negotiations with the Joseph Rowntree Trust. You may recall that, during the recent Liberal Democrat Conference in Brighton, Sir Menzies Campbell (as his friends call him) announced the establishment of a fund to help women and other minority candidates, the first £200,000 of which was to be provided by the aforementioned charity. Ever anxious to do my bit on behalf of the fairer sex, I asked some of our lady candidates what the greatest problem they face is; the general view was that having to look after children is a fearful bind when there is a constituency newspaper to distribute to one's deliverers or an interview to be given to one's local radio station. I have therefore reserved a number of places at the Bonkers' Home for Well-Behaved Orphans for the sole use of the children of female Liberal Democrat candidates in target seats. I wish to emphasise what an attractive offer this is: Here at the Home we offer what may fairly be called "wrap-around" care – particularly since the new wall was erected. We have also taken on board today's concern about child obesity, as anyone who studies the diet we offer will see. The purpose of today's negotiations in York was to ensure that the £200,000 was paid directly to me: the last thing we wish to see is this fund wasted in paying for red tape and pen-pushers.

Wednesday

Should one worry at reports that North Korea has tested its first atomic bomb? I think not. It happens that I visited Pyongyang recently and am therefore able to reveal that the people in that unfortunate land are poor as church mice. From my observations it is simply unthinkable that they could afford all the uranium – or whatever the boffins at the Ministry put in the wretched things – needed to make an A bomb. Nevertheless, one should not underestimate the ingenuity that smaller nations can display when planning their own defence: here in Rutland we were making good progress with a weapon employing extra mature Stilton (though it was eventually ruled illegal under Article IV of the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention). Some will ask what explains the seismograph activity detected in Korea at the time of the supposed explosion: has it not occurred to them that one million peasants dressed in identical boiler suits and all shouting "Bang!" at the same time will have a tolerably large effect?



Thursday

My own breakfast television station has enjoyed a chequered history – and one time it had to be rescued by a glove puppet named Rutland Rat – but these days it is on a firm footing. Watching the news I am shocked by the scenes it portrays: people without shelter, without food or drink, without hope. Yes, the people queuing to get into the Conservative Conference – simple-minded folk who ask no more than a chance to call for the return of the birch or applaud Ian Smith's regime in Rhodesia – are in terrible straits. My duty is clear: I have

the Bentley loaded with luncheon baskets and set off for Bournemouth. I arrive to find a shadow minister pleading with the doorman: "But don't you know who I am?" The doorman ponders a moment and replies "No."

Friday

I have given strict instructions that should that swarthy little Maradonna fellow turn up at the Home he should be shown the door – and quite possibly the rough end of an orchard doughy too. He has a record of using illicit substances and some of us have not yet forgiven a certain handball yet either. All in all, he is not a suitable person to be a parent, as these "children's rights campaigners" one hears quoted everywhere would no doubt agree. Incidentally, it is pleasing that these campaigners are devoting their efforts to keeping children *in* orphanages: at one time they used to try to spring them.

Saturday

Passing through Winchester I feel suddenly peckish and – "any port in a storm" and all that – enter a McDonald's restaurant. The table service proves disappointingly slow, but I am able to attract the manager's attention eventually. The minion he dispatches to take my order is strangely familiar and when he asks "Um large or um regular?" I am able to put a name to a face. "Rising Star!!" I exclaim, "What the devil are you doing here?" "Examining career opportunities after I leave Parliament" he says in his best Westminster voice, before lapsing into broad Cherokee: "Rising Star find new job. Um squaw make heap big trouble."

Sunday

To St Asquith's where, I am happy to report, after poor Kennedy's recent "difficulties with the script," the Reverend Hughes is word perfect. His reading is taken from one of the gospels and I think there is a lot in what it has to say. Later I am informed that my negotiations with the Rowntree Trust have borne fruit to such an extent that that august institution has donated two million pounds to the Liberal Democrats – no doubt there is something about my share to be found in the small print. After our experience with Mr Michael Brown, I hope that the party will exercise due diligence and ensure that Rowntree's is a bona fide company. No doubt there will be volunteers to test its products.

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