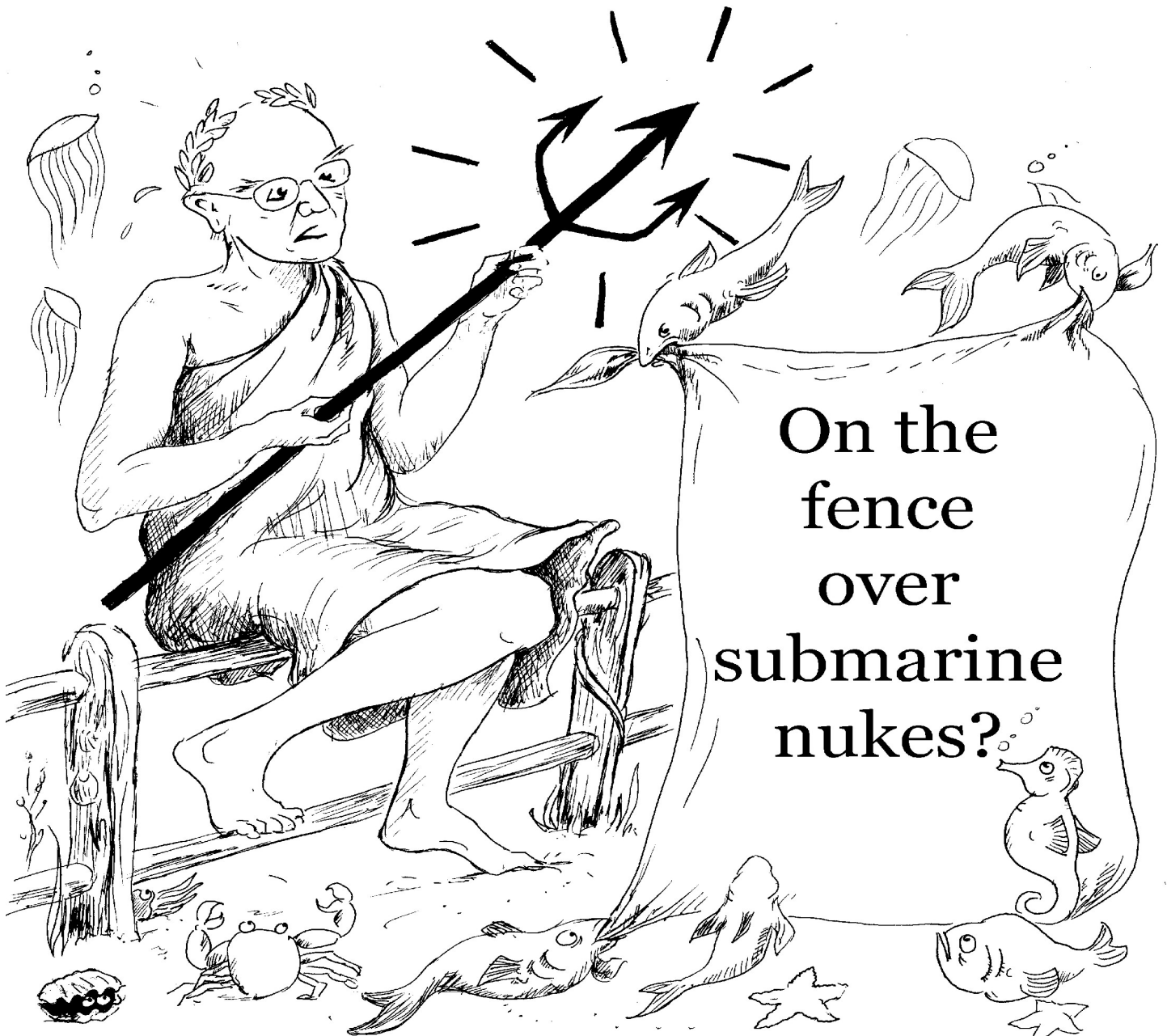


liberator



On the
fence
over
submarine
nukes?

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COMMENTARY

IT'S HOW YOU DO IT, TOO

The Liberal Democrats' debate on Trident will evoke uncomfortable memories for some Liberator readers of the way debates on disarmament were conducted 20 years ago, with opponents of nuclear weapons being depicted by the party leadership as sandal-wearing loonies who would destroy the Alliance's standing with voters.

This culminated in the mendacious assault on the credibility of the party conference by David Steel and David Alton in Eastbourne in 1986, the effects of which can still be seen, for example in Charles Kennedy's casual insults about 'activists' after the last general election.

Let's hope that, whatever else is said and done in the run-up and during this debate, two things can be avoided – imputations by the party leader that a large proportion of his followers are mad, and a myopic obsession with how the media will interpret whatever is decided.

The reason to avoid the first is simply that attempts at short-term damage limitation by blaming 'activists' when anything goes wrong at conference invariably leads to long-term damage for the leader who makes the allegation.

In public, it would simply appear that the Lib Dem leader thought a substantial part of his own party was a rabble in the grip of irresponsible delusions. Once ideas like that take hold, they cannot easily be shifted by MPs going on television to state that most of the party is sane.

The damage will be done not if the issue is debated robustly, but if it is conducted in terms of one side trying to destroy the other.

Good debates about serious issues can engage the public's attention and interest, whatever their outcome and any individual opinion. In an age when neither Labour nor the Tories encourage open discussion of anything much, it is possible that people interested in politics but deterred by the way it is conducted would find a Lib Dem debate impressive.

The legacy of the then leadership's reaction to Eastbourne has hung over the party ever since, with a perpetual need to justify democratic policy making.

Menzies Campbell will no doubt gain in public standing if he wins the Trident debate but, if he allows a fair debate to be held without recriminations, he could also gain were he to lose it.

That means he should make it clear to his aides and spin doctors that he will immediately sack any of them who briefs to the effect that the conference lacks credibility, that those who attend it are irresponsible fanatics or that 'activists' need to be muzzled and controlled.

The main reason for the damaging fall-out from past defence debates was the question that is never far from the lips of politicians: "What will the media think?"

Nowadays, that depends in part on what one means by 'the media'. Most people get their news from television and radio, which has some obligation towards balanced coverage.

The circulation of right-wing newspapers is, with the exception of the Daily Mail, in precipitous decline, and there is not much point in the Lib Dems trying to fish for votes among Mail readers.

It is easy to overstate how much news is disseminated from websites and blogs, but news and comment sources are wider than in the past and becoming more so.

It is also easy to overstate the importance of newspapers written by, and aimed at, people who are unlikely to vote Lib Dem other than perhaps tactically.

Even if the party could appeal to the mindset that concurs with the Mail, Telegraph and Express, it should not.

Whether on defence or anything else, there is no point in the Lib Dems ending up in that ground where New Labour and Cameron's Conservatives shift around interchangeably.

It is wrong in principle for the Lib Dems to compete in the authoritarian populist stakes with Blair and Cameron.

But it is also wrong pragmatically. What is the point of voting Lib Dem when you can get the same from the other two parties, if that is what you want?

Conversely, why vote Lib Dem if you don't like the other two parties and the Lib Dems offer you nothing different?

The party can succeed only by applying its principles to stake out its own turf and use a consistent message to attract like-minded people.

In the 1980s, the Alliance tried being everything to everyone and it ended in failure.

In the 2000s, the Lib Dems should recognise that some people genuinely oppose the party, will never vote for it and should not have any effort wasted on courting them – especially not at the cost of alienating those who might vote for it. The former already have two parties to vote for.

The Lib Dems can actually manage this feat when they choose to – over Iraq and civil liberty, the party has ploughed a lonely furrow and been proved right.

But on those issues, there was little internal disagreement. The outcome of the Trident debate is important, but the way it is conducted could be even more so, as could the way its aftermath is handled.

RADICAL BULLETIN

OH LORD, GIVE ME DISARMAMENT, BUT NOT YET

The Liberal Democrats' debate on tax last September was marked by a summer's rubbishing of all who disagreed with shadow chancellor Vince Cable, the promotion of a 'leadership' position and, just to make certain, the flagrant abuse of using party staff to dish out an entirely one-sided 'tax focus' to delegates (Liberator 314).

Will the same happen with the Trident debate due at Harrogate in March?

The peculiar genesis of the motion tabled by the Federal Policy Committee, and the attitudes shown towards those who oppose it, do not bode well.

A working group on Trident was set up last May, partly to forestall any debate in September.

It was not a normal policy group and it had an ambiguous remit to, on the one hand, produce "a paper that will make proposals for Liberal Democrat policy on the future of the Trident system" and, on the other hand, "a consultation paper and a background paper to discuss technical issues".

The group did not begin by discussing policy at all and the consultation paper was technical. It raised questions but did not take a position.

A consultation session at Brighton saw 14 people speak against Trident renewal, six in favour, two support a Eurobomb (who clearly cannot remember the horrors this idea caused 20 years ago) and five who were unclear. Written submissions divided in a roughly similar way.

The working group met almost weekly during the autumn and, until November, it appeared to members that they were writing a background paper. They heard from a series of mainly retired diplomats, generals and academics on Chatham House terms. Only one of these august witnesses advocated keeping Trident.

In November, lords Garden and Roper presented to the MPs the position later announced by Ming Campbell of a 50% cut now and a delay in a decision on renewal.

Campbell's announcement, as with tax, has the effect of policy being made before conference has debated it, with the effect of pressurising conference to 'support Ming'.

Soon after, the working group debated two alternative motions and the Campbell position won by 6-3 against one that called for Trident to be scrapped.

The losing trio then drafted a minority report, which went to FPC with the majority position.

They urged it to present both sides to conference on the basis that article 5.4 of the party constitution says: "The FPC ...may undertake commissioning, preparation, publication, circulation and submission to conference of policy papers,

including options in cases where consultation has shown there to be substantial disagreement within the party."

Few issues spark more 'substantial disagreement' than Trident, but the FPC argued that the working group's effort was not a policy paper – merely a paper recommending policy – and anyway it had discretion on the matter, and so it supported Campbell while refusing to put options to conference.

This meant that the main motion and working group paper would be circulated well in advance but any alternative would have to wait on amendments that would not be chosen until 2 March, the day conference convenes.

Perhaps fearing that allegations of unfairness would overshadow the debate, Campbell told party staff to circulate monitory conclusions, but they refused to accept more than two pages, even on such a complex issue.

There is nothing quite like a full and frank debate in which one side can monopolise the transmission of opinions and information to voters.

DIVERSE COMPLAINTS

Money is sufficiently scarce in the Liberal Democrats that, whenever some is flashed around, everyone wants some of it, knows how it ought to be spent and resents being left out.

So it has proved with the £200,000 donated by the Joseph Rowntree Trust to promote female, ethnic minority or disabled candidates in winnable seats.

Ming Campbell appointed former Islington council leader Steve Hitchens as his 'diversity czar' last summer, with a brief to help deliver a more diverse parliamentary party.

The appointment of a middle aged white man to this post was not quite as perverse as it sounds, since Hitchens had talent spotted and nurtured what was by some distance the country's most diverse ruling council group by gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and age.

But the idea soon gained currency that Hitchens was, metaphorically, perambulating the country with a sack of loot offering portions of it to constituencies willing to adopt 'diverse' candidates.

Whatever he was actually doing, the party's official ethnic minority bodies felt insufficiently involved and began to complain.

There is perhaps an element of rivalry between those who hope to promote more minority MPs and those whose priority is more female ones, since it all comes from the same pot of money.

Hitchens maintains that he has merely made known the fund's existence and purpose, and has stuck to the brief Campbell gave him to encourage diversity.

Rabi Martins, chair of the Ethnic Minority Election Task Force, wrote to Campbell in December: "We are concerned about the Diversity Campaign, and the failure of Steve Hitchens to discuss its direction with us.

"We expected a significant part of the fund would help elect ethnic minority MPs in the next general election.

"However, we now understand that Steve Hitchens does not agree with funds being used for this purpose, and intends to offer extra funds to those constituencies he thinks will win if additional resources are made available.

"We are told such funds will be allocated by Chris Rennard on the back of his target seat strategy."

It is not entirely clear that Hitchens and Martins mean different things, since Hitchens wrote to Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats: "The donations that we are receiving are exclusively for winning Westminster seats at the next general election and that the MPs thus elected as Liberal Democrats are more diverse.

"We can encourage the selection of more diverse candidates by letting it be known that there are certain seats which will only be target seats if they select diverse candidates because the existence of the fund means they may get additional campaigning resources. But it doesn't mean hopeless seats will overnight become target seats by virtue of who gets selected."

Campbell's reply said: "I continue to be satisfied that the funds will make a real difference to increasing diversity in the party and will be allocated for this purpose.

"Steve Hitchens has my full confidence and his plan approved in August has my support."

The letter reiterates Campbell's commitment to diversity and goes on to make two intriguing points.

"I am persuaded that writing again to local parties may be counter-productive," he says, presumably in reference to the idea of influencing their candidate selections. This appears to mean that Campbell has been on the receiving end of resentment in constituencies that feel pressured into adopting candidates they don't necessarily want.

He continued: "The conference rightly or wrongly has rejected a number of proposals for positive action.

"I remain convinced that the fund and the current course we are pursuing is working even if progress is slower than we all would prefer."

THE DEE-GEES

A coup at the January Federal Executive meeting overthrew Federal Finance and Administration Committee chair David Griffiths and most of the previous FFAC membership.

Griffiths had antagonised a number of people by refusing to divert money earmarked for a Cowley Street diversity and equality officer to the Gender Balance Group, since creating the officer was a conference decision, and by disputes with Federal Conference Committee over its budget.

Being in charge of the party's budget-setting is, inevitably, a prime position from which to make enemies.

But what swung a 16-11 vote against Griffiths was the perception that, by supporting his rival Duncan Greenland, members could simultaneously please party leader Ming Campbell and rein-in chief executive Chris Rennard.

Rennard and Griffiths have worked closely together and, despite the high esteem in which Rennard is generally held, one cannot be chief executive without making enemies either.

While Greenland's motive seems to have been solely that he wanted to do the job – and no-one disputes that he is capable of doing it – others felt that removing Griffiths would dilute Rennard's influence over the party's finances.

Campbell's involvement came about because Greenland was active in his leadership campaign last year and was able to call in favours from his consilieri Archy Kirkwood.

Canvassing was organised, whether or not with Greenland's knowledge, that presented him as the leader's favoured candidate. Griffiths's prominent support of Chris Huhne's leadership bid probably did not endear him to Kirkwood.

Greenland says he will offer a more collegiate style than Griffiths and be more in tune with the leadership. One of his first tasks will be to grapple with the Electoral Commission over the Michael Brown affair, where Griffiths had held off the worst threats to the party.

Maybe even the amiable Greenland will find that you cannot win friends as FFAC chair.

DICK WHITTINGTON WANTED

"Person sought for unwinnable contest. Must be prepared to work hard over a huge geographical area and make themselves known to millions of people for a year, with a view to coming third. Applications to Cowley Street."

Who can the Liberal Democrats get to contest the London mayoralty? Susan Kramer used her candidacy in 2000 to build her profile towards becoming an MP and managed a creditable result in the peculiar circumstances of Ken Livingstone's independent campaign.

Simon Hughes's oddly unfocussed campaign in 2004 will surely have put London's most famous Lib Dem off the idea of repeating the experience.

It is pretty well impossible to become known across London on the strength of leaflets, canvassing and personal visits, not least since the party has no machine in large parts of the capital.

Then there is the problem that the Lib Dem vote in London has plateaued, having scored 15-16% and 300 or so councillors in every set of London borough elections since 1994.

So the ideal candidate will be someone with some existing public profile who can use the media to enthuse voters.

Some have talked about Brian Paddick, soon to retire from his controversial career as a Metropolitan police commander, but it's not clear whether Paddick is interested or available.

One novel suggestion is former BBC director general Greg Dyke, who donated £10,000 to the party and endorsed it at the 2005 general election.

John Stevens, former leader of the defunct Pro-Euro Conservative Party, has been working quietly towards the nomination, and has the selling point that he can pay for a large part of the campaign.

A similar qualification applies to CentreForum's wealthy financial backer Paul Marshall. London activists may feel, though, that white, male millionaires are not quite the appropriate image for the party.

Another possibility is London MEP Sarah Ludford, if she stands down from the European Parliament. Don't all rush.

SPINNING A WEBB

The unexpected Lib Dem shadow cabinet reshuffle in December had an equally unexpected cause.

Steve Webb was given the task by Ming Campbell of coordinating preparation of the next general election manifesto, and decided that he could not also carry out the health portfolio.

This appears to have surprised Campbell, but Webb was insistent. His resignation coincided with a feeling among MPs

that Norman Lamb was wasted as a sort of glorified office manager for Campbell and ought to be given health.

Campbell then decided that, since Ed Davey was already campaigns and communications chair, he might as well be chief of staff too and give up shadowing the DTI. The rest of the reshuffle was consequent on these moves.

It makes Davey a very powerful figure – gatekeeper to the leader and in charge of campaigns.

HELLO CHEEKY

The termination of Lembit Öpik's relationship with Sian Lloyd in favour of a Cheeky Girl would normally be a wholly private matter between the several hundred thousand readers of Hello! magazine.

But those who choose to live in the glare of celebrity must be aware that such fame may reach even to, purely for argument's sake, sober and god-fearing chapel goers in rural Wales.

As leader, Öpik remains the public face of Welsh liberal democracy, despite the 90 minutes battering he got from colleagues about his lack of judgement over publicity for his private life at the Welsh Liberal Democrat parliamentarians' awayday in January.

AND THESE PEOPLE WANT TO RUN THE COUNTRY...

The final meeting of the old Federal Executive in December was, by all accounts, an appalling shambles, not that most other meetings had been much better.

Halfway through the budget debate, Simon Hughes, who chairs it as party president, suddenly circulated a paper proposing an alternative budget that closely resembled the one that had already been rejected by the Federal Finance and Administration Committee, throwing the meeting into a series of confused disputes.

Since Hughes is party president, the FE cannot remove him from its chair, but it can try to get a grip on its own proceedings.

A few members of the old FE had sought to do this. As far back as last July, FE member Mike Simpson circulated a paper that made it sound like a badly run parish council.

He wrote: "I expected FE to be a strategic body with a long-term view of where our organisation should be going. I expected a work programme reflecting consideration of the priority measures needed to get there.

"If there is a long-term view, I've not seen it. What I have seen is excessive consideration of short-term operational issues which could be dealt with elsewhere.

"The backgrounds and interests of FE members are diverse – this is great – but I've not seen a cohesive approach or commonality of purpose at FE level to drive the party forward."

This approach has been taken up by former MEP Robin Teverson, who successfully proposed to the new FE that, in its now two-year life, it would "focus above all other issues on the need for the party to be in government at Westminster following the next general election, and to be the government at Westminster in the subsequent parliament".

Teverson said it should expect "not just to receive progress reports towards these goals, but to consider, agree, monitor, or reject plans and targets from party officers, its subcommittees, and the party's political leaders to achieve

this," a situation that will come as a distressing shock to some should it happen.

Campbell made what he called "a heartfelt plea" to the new FE to focus on political opponents and not on "getting one over the leadership".

He seemed surprised to be told that the FE considered itself part of the leadership.

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

Conference goes of many years' standing struggle to remember when the Liberal Democrats, or even their predecessors, last debated the Middle East.

Fears of offending sensitivities, or of disorder, have inhibited the party from debating one of the world's principal causes of tension.

The Federal Conference Committee rejected a motion proposed for Harrogate by the new Liberal Democrat Friends of Palestine, frankly admitting that its presence on the agenda would probably hijack the entire event.

But the FCC has recognised that it is reasonable that a political party should debate the Middle East and wants this to take place soon, though it has not said when.

The agenda at Harrogate has meanwhile been filled with worthy matters, but sadly nothing that merits the award of the Mitcham and Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet.

Submissions included dull motions, obscure motions and pointless motions, but none so outstandingly bad as to rouse the toilet from its winter slumber. It will remain in its closet until September.

NO RETURN

Chris Davies resigned as leader of the Liberal Democrats in the European Parliament last year after making some intemperate comments to a constituent about the Middle East.

But with his successor Diana Wallis moving up to become a parliamentary vice-president, the post became vacant and he stood again (Liberator 315). Perhaps his pick-a-fight style does not go down well with all his colleagues. Andrew Duff won by 8 votes to 4 and only Graham Watson, Liz Lynne and Fiona Hall are thought to have supported Davies.

How Westminster MPs will receive news of Duff's elevation to the post remains to be seen, as his Euro-enthusiasm knows few bounds.

CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK?

Matthew Taylor's decision to stand down at the next election is not entirely a surprise given that, although he is only 44, he has been an MP for 20 years and, if he wants to do something else, it's now or never.

His departure will surely sharpen the selection battles in Cornwall, which gains an extra seat under boundary changes.

Taylor's Truro constituency divides between two new seats, Truro & Falmouth and St Austell & Newquay.

Some thought that Taylor should fight the former, since his high profile would help to hold it, while a new candidate would fight the latter. His departure leaves two good seats up for grabs.

One possibility is that Matthew Penhaligon, son of the area's late MP David, will stand. He entered the political fray by contesting the elected mayoralty in Hackney last May.

SECULAR FAITH

Secular fundamentalists are wrong to think that human rights are self-evident, says John Pugh

One interesting feature of Liberal Democracy is that it attracts people of strong religious conviction and also people who have a missionary zeal for a secular agenda.

I have found that us liberals one way or another have a bit of a thing about 'religion' and, when it comes to issues like faith schools, medical ethics or lifestyle issues, it tends to pop up.

Now I am far too cautious to want to open up these sores, exciting the inevitable set of reactions. I want to make a simpler point about how these sensitive arguments are conducted.

In the House of Commons last month, I listened to Evan Harris arguing with evident conviction that teaching a child about a religion without the child's obvious assent would be a breach of the child's human rights. A few days later I received a very attractive pamphlet from Chris Davies stating categorically that we all had the human right to expect doctors to assist and accelerate our death.

One envies such confidence and certainty and perhaps reproaches oneself for being too given to scepticism. Listening to Evan quote so eloquently from human rights legislation, I was struck by the obvious but not unkind comparison with the religious fundamentalist who tries to settle arguments by quoting scripture. Both believe in a source of authority neither ambiguous nor unclear.

I mean to disparage neither the secular nor the religious fundamentalist. I am just tracing a similarity of method and style of argument. However, I have the same difficulty with secular fundamentalism as with religious fundamentalism.

To start with, not every 'believer' must be a fundamentalist; nor need every 'non-believer'. Nietzsche, for example, argued that the concept of 'human rights' was a nonsense. Lenin thought they were a matter of social or class preference and, though neither individual would be at home in the Liberal Democrats, it is fair to observe that atheists are not logically compelled to believe in human rights at all.

The more normal atheist reading of human rights, however, sees them as attractive aspects of human life, which many but not all have agreed are desirable and which many but not all have agreed to try to implement. We should though never forget that there is a view of 'rights' that suggests that rights are simply what an actual law says and the concept of a stock of 'rights' that exist 'out there' to be incorporated or not in real laws of states is just a pleasing fantasy. On this view, we cannot say that people have rights as they have noses, hands and toes.

There are in fact significant lists of declared rights to be endorsed or not by states, individuals and law makers – the most notable of which is the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

A brief inspection of any list normally shows two things.

First that in real life there is the potential for listed rights to conflict and secondly that in real life it not always clear how rights should be implemented or qualified. Does for example my 'right to work' in the UN declaration mean someone or some state has to offer me a job?

It is certainly by no means obvious, as Chris Davies seems to suggest, that a right to euthanasia can just be slapped on as an obvious addition to the list or follows as an inevitable consequence of some less questionable human right.

The reality is that we can't as Liberals get away without a discussion about both the nature and the implementation of human rights any more than we can get away without discussing the nature and implementation of the teaching of the Koran, Bible or Torah.

I can understand even the most fearless of Liberals wanting to postpone the discussion, for we are all, in some sense supporters, of 'human rights' and united.

Our difficulty is that, in considering how to interpret, qualify and implement human rights, we will do so in the light of our varying views of how a good society should do that. That

way dissension lies.

Whereas all Liberals will nod assent to the same set of 'human rights', can we be sure that all Liberals will agree about how such a set of rights are to be embodied in everyday life?

Do all Liberals indeed have the identical view of what constitutes a good society?

When I argue against euthanasia by suggesting that a society in which a commodity view of life prevails is a less happy society, I am no better answered by Chris telling me that euthanasia is a human right than he would be by someone citing the Fifth Commandment. For I want to discuss what a world implementing such a potential right looks like.

Debates on human rights are profoundly interesting and important, and possibly not to be left to either the Daily Mail columnists or the secular fundamentalists.

John Pugh is Liberal Democrat MP for Southport

“Do all Liberals indeed have the identical view of what constitutes a good society?”

AN ALTERNATIVE NEW YEAR LETTER

Did Ming Campbell's New Year Message fire you with enthusiasm? If not, Simon Titley provides an alternative version designed to put lead in your pencil

Be honest. When the e-mail from Ming Campbell titled 'New Year Message' arrived in your inbox on Boxing Day, did it inspire you for the coming year? Or did it feel more like leftover turkey?

When Ming first became leader, heckles from Labour MPs in the Commons chamber compared him to 'Compo' (the character from the long-running TV sitcom, *Last of the Summer Wine*).

When I opened Ming's e-mail on Boxing Day, another sitcom character sprang to mind: Sergeant Wilson from *Dad's Army*. The message seemed to say, "Would you awfully mind taking part in this, er, campaign about crime, if it's not too much trouble?"

If it's not too much trouble, may I humbly suggest this alternative New Year Message?

“DEAR MEMBER,

Happy New Year to each and every one of you.

For me, 2006 has been a year unlike any other. To coin a phrase, it has been my *annus horribilis* (no jokes, please).

It began with my predecessor found in the gutter (metaphorically speaking), followed in short order by another colleague indulging in practices relatively unknown in East Fife. If we hadn't won the Dunfermline by-election, our party would have been up the brown tributary without a means of propulsion.

Rumour mongers accused me of being Charles Kennedy's 'assassin'. If only that were true. I might have shortened the party's agony.

I inherited a party that was shell-shocked and seeking stability. In retrospect, I was too keen to mollify opinion and avoid any further upsets. I ended up sounding like the boxer who, in the words of the song, was "afraid to throw a punch that might land."

The statement I made on 1st December about the future of Trident typified that approach. It was mealy-mouthed, unconvincing and a flabby compromise, and I regret issuing it.

I've reflected and decided to make some changes. The result will be that life may not be as comfortable as some of you had hoped. But we will never become a party of government if our motto remains 'safety first'.

A CLEAR BRAND

If I manage to achieve only one thing during my tenure as leader, it will be to give the party a clear brand image. The

problem at the moment isn't that the party has the wrong brand. It is that the party has no brand at all.

Until now, the party has deliberately avoided creating one. It has believed that any and all voters are potential supporters, and that to create a clear image might put some people off.

No wonder we issue so many Focus leaflets. It's because we have such little bedrock of loyal support and must therefore campaign for all our votes afresh at each election.

No wonder the number of Lib Dem councillors hasn't increased significantly since 1995. We're treading water and we must raise our game.

The clear image we need isn't difficult to find. It's pretty obvious when you think about it. It's a theme around which the party can unite. And it's something that will resonate with large sections of the population.

At its simplest, it's about giving people what social scientists call 'agency', control over their lives. This aim will be at the centre of our campaigns.

Our enemy is 'giantism', a problem as bad in the private sector as it is in the public sector. People are sick of cloned High Streets, impersonal call centres, factory hospitals and remote bureaucracy.

Giving people control over their lives and communities should inform all our domestic policies. And it should also inform our campaigning style.

I'll be working with the ALDC to revitalise community politics. Instead of our local activists knocking on doors and saying "we'll do it for you", I want to see our local activists empowering people to do things for themselves.

TRIDENT

The announcement I made on 1st December to the effect that no decision need be made about Trident until 2014 may have been strictly true. But it was also a cop-out.

And the suggestion that we should halve the number of warheads in the meantime is a complete irrelevance.

Everybody knows that the only reason Trident has become an issue now is because Tony Blair wants to leave a 'legacy' before he resigns as prime minister.

No one seriously believes that our country any longer needs Trident or anything remotely resembling it. I know that. If you are honest, so do you.

There is no conceivable circumstance in which such a weapon would ever be used. It is not 'British', it is not 'independent' and it is not a 'deterrent'.

There was a time when such weapons had a military logic. During the cold war, when our country faced a nuclear threat from the Soviet Union, I reluctantly accepted the need for a deterrent of our own. In those days, I believed that, were we to get rid of our nuclear weapons, it should be through multilateral rather than unilateral disarmament.

But the Cold War ended 16 years ago. It is no longer a question of 'multilateral' versus 'unilateral'.

I am not so naïve as to believe that the end of the Cold War has delivered a 'peace dividend'. Far from it. Our country and its allies face real threats to their security. But Trident provides no defence against any of these threats, while our armed forces go short of vital equipment. My aim is not a cut in defence spending but a better bang for our bucks.

If we really do need a nuclear deterrent in the future, there are far cheaper delivery systems than submarines costing billions of pounds each. For example, we could strap a thermonuclear device to the roof of one of my old Jaguars – probably about as effective and a damn sight cheaper.

I want military value for money, not useless and expensive status symbols. That is why I shall be the first party leader to break cover and declare against the replacement of Trident. Let's see David Cameron cap that.

WE CAN CUT CRIME

One of the worst things about the Blair government is the way it tailors its policies to the prejudices of the tabloid press. Of course, the Daily Mail won't like my stand against Trident. That's really the only reason some of our MPs daren't say in public what they really feel about the issue. So if you think opposing Trident is daring, wait till you hear my next proposal.

Our party should campaign for the decriminalisation of drugs. Yes, you heard right.

I'm supporting this policy not on libertarian grounds but on pragmatic grounds. Because it's the one thing that will do more than any other to reduce crime. And it will also go a long way to defeating the Taliban.

The so-called 'war on drugs', launched by Richard Nixon over 35 years ago, has not just failed. It has actually made the situation far worse. Politicians have unwittingly created a multi-million dollar criminal industry.

Much of the surge in crime we have experienced in recent years has been caused by people stealing to pay for their expensive drugs habits.

The problem is essentially an economic phenomenon, so that's how we should deal with it. Drugs should be decriminalised rather than legalised – I have no wish to see crack cocaine as part of a 'buy one get one free' offer in Boots.

Instead, I shall propose that drugs be made available to registered addicts under medical supervision. Addicts would gain access to a supply cheaper and purer than they can buy in the pub car park, and the drug pushing industry would collapse. By registering addicts in this way, we can begin to offer long-term treatment to wean them off drugs altogether.

A nutty idea? No, most chief police officers and many professionals in the field already support a similar policy as the best way of tackling the drugs problem and reducing associated crime.

And there's more. I mentioned the Taliban. Most of the heroin that enters Britain originates in Afghanistan. NATO's policy of attempting to destroy opium poppies is also pushing Afghan farmers into the arms of the Taliban. No wonder. This crop is the only way many of them can make a living.

At the same time, the world's pharmaceutical industry is desperately short of therapeutic morphine. So I propose that, instead of destroying the poppies, we create a legitimate market by enabling Afghan farmers to sell their crops to the pharmaceutical industry (fair trade and organic, of course).

Every previous attempt to pacify the Afghan people by force of arms has failed. Creating a thriving economy might just do the trick.

THE ENEMY WITHIN

Since I became leader, I have been repeatedly advised that the best way to cement my leadership is to stage a 'Clause Four Moment' at the party conference. The idea is that I should emulate Neil Kinnock by taking on and defeating some of our party's members.

At first, I was hesitant to go along with this strategy of manufactured rows. But I have come to realise that it might have some value. Our party does need a 'Clause Four Moment'. And the people I intend to take on and publicly defeat are those who keep banging on about the need for a 'Clause Four Moment'.

Do you know the basic problem with these people? They are angry about the wrong things.

There are more than enough things about which to feel genuinely angry. I am angry about the deceit that led to the Iraq war. I am angry about global warming. I am angry about the looming pensions crisis. I am angry about third world poverty.

But I cannot for the life of me get angry about the fact that there are people within our party with differing views who enjoy healthy democratic debate. And I have no desire to see our party poisoned by witch-hunts and purges.

Stamping out dissent is not what our party is about. Indeed, our party needs more democracy, not less. The biggest internal mess I have had to sort out since I became leader is the assortment of scandals and dubious practices in our party's fundraising. We got into this mess because power was removed from elected committees and handed to unaccountable bodies and individuals.

I shall therefore ensure that all our party's financial affairs are subject to proper scrutiny by our democratic structures. We regularly prescribe greater democracy and openness for the country. Well, physician, heal thyself.

With every best wish for the year ahead.

Yours sincerely

”

Sir Menzies Campbell

Now, don't you feel better already?

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective

COMPETITIVE EDGE

Europe's relative prosperity faces long-term decline, says Jeremy Browne

Economically advanced European nations do not appear to fully grasp the rapidly emerging threat to our relative prosperity.

Political leaders often behave as if Western Europe has a divine right to enjoy some of the highest living standards in the world. The reality is alarmingly different and the response is often complacent and sometimes even exacerbates the problem.

The statistics are stark. In 1980 the current EU nations produced 26% of global output. By 2003 this had fallen to 22%. In 2015 the IMF forecasts that it will be just 17%. By the middle of the century some economic predictions put the EU share at around 10%.

We know that China and India are experiencing rapid economic growth, so it is no surprise that their share of global prosperity is sharply rising. Wealth generation is not a zero-sum business and billions of people will benefit from rising Asian prosperity.

But what is particularly striking is the relative performance of Europe and the United States. As two of the most highly economically developed areas of the world, it would be reasonable to expect that the effect of Chinese and Indian growth would impact on both equally.

But that is emphatically not the case. By 2050 the United States will no longer enjoy unchallenged economic supremacy but, despite the surging growth in Asia, it is predicted to enjoy a marginally greater share of world output than it has today.

The part of the world that is heading for freefall is Europe. Our economies may still grow, but far less than those of the rest of the world, including the United States. This relative decline will be keenly felt in the most advanced European economies, which have the greatest advantage to lose.

This should be a major public policy challenge for Europe, and the Lisbon Agenda was a recognition of the problem, but the urgency of the response does not start to reflect the scale of the task. The European social model – with restrictions on the working week and labour market inflexibility – is an economic policy from politicians in a state of denial.

Any business that continued to pay its staff more but required them to work less would be vulnerable to being overtaken by competitors who were more hungry for success. That is what some European politicians, despite global challenges, are keen to force on their businesses and still sell to their people as a viable long-term prospect.

The British government has wisely avoided the worst delusions of the social model. It has come to the obvious conclusion that a faltering domestic economy is not going to be socially beneficial to many people, least of all the poorest.

But, despite more than a decade of economic growth, Britain is still inadequately equipped to address the enormity of the challenge that we face.

Our government has increased the science budget and state support for research and development. But the number of science graduates has fallen alarmingly.

Between 1996/97 and 2004/05 the proportion of British graduates in chemistry fell by 28% to 2,710, and in physics by 8% to 2,235.

Yet the total number of graduates rose in that period by 20% to 306,365. Graduate scientists are vital to drive forward economic growth, but the failings in Britain's educational output are also evident at lower skill levels.

In 2006, 264,300 pupils left school with fewer than 5 A-C grades at GCSE, 40% of the total. There were 301,000 who failed to get a C-grade in maths, 47% of the total, and 435,000 failed to get a C-grade in a modern foreign language, 67% of the total. Some 129,000 pupils failed to get a C-grade in any subject, 20% of the total. This is a national emergency.

The problem is not just that lower-skilled jobs are being exported to China and India. Employers also often prefer to hire staff from new-entrant EU countries to do the jobs that remain

in Britain. Many British citizens do not have sufficient skills to compete effectively on our own terrain, let alone globally.

Meanwhile Britain is spending more on non-pension welfare payments than it is on education. A state apparatus has been created which is alarmingly inefficient, centralised and bureaucratic. Around 650,000 more people are employed in the public sector in Britain than in 1997. Many are doing valuable jobs – teachers, doctors, police officers – but many others have inflated the already excessive numbers of auditors and inspectors.

Just when the economy needs to be lean and efficient to encourage greater wealth-creation in an increasingly competitive global climate, Britain is increasing business costs and regulations.

The forecast for 2050 is much worse, and the direction of travel is clear. The people of Europe are facing a huge reduction in their relative prosperity. Europe is heading for economic marginalisation, and with that will come a severely diminished level of political and cultural influence. After climate change, this situation is the pressing challenge of our time.

“Britain is spending more on non-pension welfare payments than on education”

Jeremy Browne is Liberal Democrat MP for Taunton.

THERE'S STILL TIME

Halving Trident warheads now could deliver a safer world, says Nick Harvey

Tony Blair's announcement on Trident replacement was hurried and bundled out some weeks before it was expected. The White Paper was considered in cabinet at 12 noon and presented on the floor of the Commons at 3.30 pm. It had obviously been printed before the cabinet discussed it.

Consequently, the Liberal Democrat policy also had to be unveiled hastily. Luckily our policy working group debates had concluded, but it should be acknowledged in hindsight that we'd not rehearsed our public lines to word-perfection. It didn't come across as well as it might and some saw us as "sitting on the fence."

Our principal and immediate proposal is to reduce Britain's nuclear capacity by half now to reinvigorate multilateral disarmament processes and re-energise negotiations.

Currently, Britain retains approximately 200 warheads, with each submarine carrying up to 48. We say Britain should retain no more than 100. This would still provide a credible minimum deterrent, but demonstrate Britain's determination to bring down the size of our arsenal and fulfil our Non-Proliferation Treaty commitments.

Working towards global elimination of nuclear weapons is a central principle of our international and defence policy. The 2005 election manifesto set out our commitment to press for a new round of multilateral arms reduction talks, but to retain the UK's minimum deterrent until sufficient progress has been made towards global elimination of such weapons.

Nuclear weapons have terrifying power. A single British warhead has a destructive power six times greater than that dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. Nuclear weapons are rightly considered a class apart from any other weapons.

But we must recognise the danger over the next decade in states such as Iran and North Korea developing nuclear weapons, and the pressure this will place on their neighbours to acquire nuclear weapons. Such proliferation could lead in the longer term to one or more such states possibly posing a threat to Britain, its neighbours or allies.

So disarming completely now – just as the security situation looks more potentially alarming than for many years, and when we have an effective deterrent with many years life left in it – would be perverse.

We do not however support the government's proposal to decide very prematurely to procure a new generation of submarines to carry nuclear weapons.

Tony Blair has jumped the gun on this because he wants the decision made while he is still prime minister. Blair is actually presenting initial planning decisions as a final 'in principle' decision – mainly for his 'legacy' but also perhaps hoping to close off parliamentary debate later. Starting preliminary research and design for a replacement and looking at all the options is unobjectionable, but no final decision is needed for years – and then following a genuine debate.

We endorse the view of the House of Commons Defence Committee that no binding decision is needed until well into the next decade.

Richard Garwin, the award-winning former chairman of the US President's Science Advisory Committee and the US Naval Warfare Panel, and three other eminent Americans told the committee that there is no practical or scientific obstacle to Britain extending the life of its Trident submarines – for as much as 15 years. Garwin strongly recommended this course, to allow much more to be done re-energising disarmament processes before arriving at a final view.

In planning and costing a Liberal Democrat manifesto for a 2009/14 parliament, there is an expensive choice needing funds diverted in, and a cheaper one freeing funds for other things. The Treasury's programme will be for replacement, but nuclear disarmament would initially cost even more in decommissioning. By contrast, committing to take no final decision on replacement during that parliament potentially frees up spending for other manifesto commitments.

The minority report from the party's working group proposes – illogically – entirely ruling out replacement (thus signalling our intention to quit the nuclear arena and so completely undermining the deterrent value of our system) yet continuing to operate it for another 24 years. "I am going to stop beating my wife, but not yet." No. If we decide on principle to get out of the business, then we should do it straight away.

By contrast, scheduling the final decision for a more realistic date in the next decade would give Britain several years to try to create the circumstances in which replacing Trident would prove strategically unnecessary.

If Britain used all its influence to spearhead a renewed drive towards disarmament, expressing a sincere willingness to give up the other half of our weapons if progress is made, and hopefully with a better American administration post-Bush, we could encourage other countries considering nuclear development to discuss a non-nuclear future.

And the NPT review conferences in 2010 and 2015 could make progress again after the failure in 2005. Not so fanciful: let us remember the 2000 conference encouragingly agreed 13 practical steps towards disarmament, with Britain a positive influence in this achievement. The Bush-Blair axis prevented progress in 2005, but both will be gone soon.

By keeping Britain's options open, we can make a final assessment of how we insure against an uncertain future with the advantage of being somewhat closer to it and better able to judge.

Nick Harvey is the Liberal Democrat shadow defence secretary and MP for North Devon.

GET RID OF IT NOW

Arguments for delay in abandoning Trident are based on fear of the unlikely abroad and fear of the media at home, says David Grace

What, you may ask, are the arguments for replacing Trident? It's a question I have been asking since last June when I joined the Liberal Democrats' Future of Trident Working Group. Over six months, I have not heard any convincing arguments, but I have heard some absolutely batty ones.

"The future is uncertain and in particular we need Trident or its successor to deal with the conflicts arising from climate change."

No, seriously, you will find this one in the background paper for the Liberal Democrat spring conference, approved by the majority of the working group and the Federal Policy Committee.

"Decommissioning Trident would be very expensive." – Lord Roper and other peers.

"We need nuclear missiles to shoot down asteroids." – No, surprisingly not Lembik Öpik but Andrew Sosin in the consultation session in Brighton last September.

"Renouncing Trident would not automatically promote alternatives." – Neil Stockley, FPC member.

"The French have got one." – Quoted without approval by Sir Michael Quinlan.

If these arguments seem a trifle thin, not to say flaky, the arguments for not making up our minds for another few years have all the strength of Tesco's value toilet roll.

"We shouldn't take decisions on big principles when there's no need to do so." – Geoff Payne, FPC member.

"[This is an]... opportunity to keep our options open and keep the party together." – Julie Smith, FPC member.

"I am a member of CND but I don't accept that CND is unilateralist." – Baroness Ludford.

What then are the arguments for not replacing Trident and saying so now?

THE ETHICAL ARGUMENT

There can be no ethical basis for the use of nuclear weapons, which would kill millions of innocent civilians. The only ethical argument for keeping such weapons is the belief that their existence would deter others from using theirs. Even those who wish to keep Trident say we should not use it. The argument for keeping nuclear weapons depends upon a radical contradiction that we would never use them but they would work as a deterrent because our enemies would believe that we might.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL ARGUMENT

The party prides itself upon its green policies and its commitment to incorporate the environmental dimension into all policies. No-one has shown how nuclear weapons could possibly contribute to dealing with climate change, but it is certain that the use of nuclear weapons would have disastrous and persistent consequences for the environment.

THE NON-PROLIFERATION ARGUMENT

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is a bargain between nuclear-weapon states like the UK and non-nuclear weapon states. The latter promise not to develop nukes and the former promise to negotiate in good faith to get rid of theirs.

Hans Blix recently criticised nuclear-weapon states, including the UK, for failing to live up to their obligations under the NPT.

Kofi Annan has warned: "By clinging to and modernising their own arsenals, even when there is no obvious threat to their national security which nuclear weapons could deter, nuclear-weapon states encourage others – particularly those that do face real threats in their own region – to regard nuclear weapons as essential, both to their security and to their status."

"Waiting to decide for a few more years is not a neutral strategy – it risks encouraging proliferation"

By not replacing Trident, the UK would join states committed to non-proliferation and we would end the hypocritical stance, "Do as I say, not as I do". But waiting to decide for a few more years, as FPC recommends, is not a neutral strategy – it risks encouraging proliferation.

THE MILITARY/STRATEGIC ARGUMENT

The Trident system cannot be used for war-fighting and no strategic purpose can be served by retaining, replacing or extending the life of the Trident system.

The UK's possession of nuclear weapons has not kept the UK and its territories free from attack nor has the lack of nuclear weapons exposed other European countries to attack. The working group received evidence from respected diplomatic, military and academic experts of whom only one saw a case for retaining Trident.

Every other witness argued against, a retired general describing Trident as "useless, expensive and dangerous".

THE INDEPENDENCE ARGUMENT

Although people talk about an independent nuclear deterrent, in practice Trident is dependent on US co-operation; the US provides us with nuclear weapon designs and the missiles are stored and serviced in the US. The UK's dependence has been a major factor in the willingness of UK governments to adhere to American foreign policy to the detriment of our country's true interests. The UK is a permanent supplicant to the US. Many Britons would like us to exercise a more independent foreign policy. Not replacing Trident would allow the UK a foreign policy which improves our relations with the rest of Europe, the Middle East and developing countries.

THE INSURANCE ARGUMENT

Britain is more secure from any direct threat from foreign states than in any period of its history. It is unlikely that direct threats to Britain alone will re-emerge within the foreseeable future. If Trident is insurance against unanticipated threats to national survival, we are paying a high premium against a highly unlikely risk. That the future is always uncertain can be used to justify the development of any weapons system (nuclear, biological, chemical or anything else) by any country.

Likelier threats to insure against, such as state collapse outside Europe spilling over, or of local conflicts spreading across frontiers to disrupt friendly and stable states, require conventional responses to contain them – infantry battalions, and tactical and long-range air and naval transport. Trident contributes nothing to meeting these needs. Replacing Trident would cost even more. Funding Britain's overstretched conventional capabilities is a more rational use of scarce resources to insure against future threat.

You don't pay the highest premium to insure against the unknown and the unlikely. You insure against the likely and you commit your best minds and greatest resources to preventing it. In the case of global peace and security, this means building global institutions and international law, supporting international development and social justice, and fighting "poverty, ignorance and conformity". It does not mean continuing the politics of fear and adding to the balance of terror.

THE FINANCIAL ARGUMENT

Tony Blair has announced that his new submarines will cost \$20bn. Even he doesn't believe this. We know the total cost – capital and running costs – will be in the region of \$75bn. If we only kept this money in the defence budget, we could strengthen our overstretched forces and equip them properly. But other policies also contribute to global and national security. The greatest cost of an unused weapon system is the opportunity cost, the lost opportunities to commit ourselves to a serious struggle against famine, disease, poverty and environmental disaster. The bizarre argument that we cannot afford to renounce Trident, because it might cost \$9bn, scrapes the barrel. Just compare that to the costs of keeping or replacing it.

MAKE YOUR MIND UP TIME

None of these arguments will change if we wait until 2010/14. The conference motion suggests that a decision on Trident should be delayed until 2014 to allow "a clearer picture to develop concerning the proliferation of states that possess nuclear weapons and their ability to directly threaten Britain, its neighbours and allies".

This is disingenuous. The future 40 years ahead will be just as uncertain in 2014 as they are now.

So why on earth have our parliamentary party and FPC decided to wait?

Firstly, it is true that the UK doesn't need to decide for a few more years. Tony Blair's rush to decide is, as Matthew Parris wrote in the Times, "about cutting a dash as he departs and sucking up to an arms industry at present in a state of hyperventilation."

However, given that the government is deciding and parliament is debating the issue, the time has come for the Liberal Democrats to make their minds up.

Secondly, some of our parliamentary tacticians hoped to vote with the Tories and Labour rebels to defeat the government on an amendment to delay the decision. This horse will not leave the paddock. David Cameron has joined Tony Blair in an orgy of macho posturing, agreeing that the UK must decide now to replace its Trident submarines.

Thirdly, we have within the Liberal Democrats, and more particularly on the green and red leather benches of both houses, members who want to keep a nuclear deterrent and members who don't.

The traditional method of resolving this, taking a vote and accepting the decision of the majority, has been rejected in favour of a so-called compromise to preserve party unity. This school of politics favours postponing difficult decisions and hiding differences. But the differences won't go away. Postponing a decision is not a compromise; it is a transparent evasion.

Fourthly there is, among our brightest and bravest, a fear of the media, particularly the Daily Telegraph and the Daily Mail, and a fear of What The Other Parties Will Say.

The idea is widespread that wanting nuclear weapons is rational and not wanting them is emotional, and that Liberal Democrats should prefer head over heart. This is of course nonsense. The case for not replacing Trident is rational, although it does require some heart, in the form of courage, to say so.

Deciding policy on the basis of fear of What Others Will Say won't work. Already, the Commons and the newspapers are ridiculing the "wait and see and cut a bit" policy our spokesmen are promoting. On the day Blair's white paper was issued, the chamber echoed to cries of "typical Liberal fudge" as Ming explained the position. Well, other parties will always attack us but we don't have to hand them the ammunition.

The case for retaining Trident is based upon fear, fear of the unknown and the unlikely. The case for not making up our minds now is based upon fear, fear of attack by our political opponents and their supporters.

A few years ago, Liberal Democrats were brave enough to stand against the accepted wisdom of the establishment in going to war with Iraq. We were proved right and the public recognised it. Now it's time to do it again.

Campaign website: www.nonewtrident.org.uk

David Grace is chair of Liberal Democrats for Peace and Security and a former parliamentary candidate.

ENTENTE NUCLEAIRE

Look to Europe on defence, says John Stevens

The bomb is back. Just when deterrence had all but disappeared from the national debate, the Prime Minister (ably assisted, admittedly, by Iran's President Ahmadinejad) has returned it to centre stage. Blair chose the start of Advent to publish a White Paper effectively initiating the renewal of Britain's strategic nuclear weapons relationship with the United States for at least a further forty years.

His initiative has certainly meant Christmas coming early for those Cold War veterans who have remained masters of the arcana of Armageddon and thus sadly sometimes devalue the tragedy and waste of that grim era by seeming to lament the passing of a more comfortable world, one of principle and certainty, of stable geopolitics and conviction politicians.

I fear it is this seductive spell of the old thermonuclear freemasonry, which has caused our party's response to be so muted. Specifically, the government's proposals are to:

- immediately reduce the stockpile of warheads by 20%;
- participate in the American life extension programme of the Trident missile;
- take a decision on the future of our nuclear deterrent in the next parliament (which could run to 2015);
- immediately begin the procurement of a new class of submarine to replace Vanguard, extending the life of the present vessels if necessary, but deciding the exact number of new vessels in the next parliament.

Our working group on Trident's proposals are to:

- immediately reduce the stockpile of warheads by 50%;
- participate in the American life extension programme of the Trident missile;
- take a decision on the future of our nuclear deterrent in 2014;
- reduce the Vanguard fleet from four to three vessels, extend their life and take a decision on whether to replace them in 2014.

In other words, differences of degree, but not of substance. Of course, we can say we are animated by a very different spirit from that of the government. No one seriously doubts that, for all the talk of waiting until the next parliament, Blair, and Brown, are set on acquiring a new generation of submarines and missiles with the Americans, whereas we are obviously sincere in keeping all options, including completely abandoning our arsenal, open, so as to make our engagement

in disarmament negotiations honest and effective. But fine words butter no parsnips.

It appears to me that our mistake has been failing to recognise that the Cold War is over. I do not mean in a technical sense: failing to consider whether we still need even 50% of our present stockpile of warheads and missiles, whether they could be air launched rather than fired from submarines, or even whether nuclear weapons are effective against the new threats of rogue states and trans-national terrorism.

I mean in a strategic sense. When the West was toe to toe with the Evil Empire, it was reasonable for Britain to have a nuclear system that was substantially technically controlled

by the US, with the political dependency which that entailed. It was also not wholly unreasonable to argue that we did not need our own nuclear system at all, because we would still be protected by the American nuclear umbrella, like the other NATO members, again with the, substantially greater, political dependency which that would have entailed.

But the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact are gone. NATO, desperately in search of a new role, is being shaken apart in Afghanistan. The American nuclear umbrella may or may not still be open, or could now come at too high a price. Who would deny that Blair's decision to join President Bush in the invasion of Iraq, in the face, we now know, of massive misgivings in the Foreign Office, the intelligence services and the Ministry of Defence, was not finally determined by the unwritten Whitehall law that, however much you protest, you can never, in the end, go against what Washington really wants? The law of the Cold War laid down at that lasting legacy of Suez: the Nassau deal on Polaris.

Iraq is merely the latest in a dismal line of distortions to our national foreign policy since 1989 that have been driven by our remaining in the mind-set of political dependency upon America. Think of the massive missed opportunities there have been in Europe: the failure to engage with democratisation in Russia, above all the failure to develop a unified, dynamic and politically and economically efficient strategy towards EU widening and deepening. The collapse of Communism put the world at our feet, far more than in 1945, but we did not have the autonomous vision and ambition to seize the opportunities afforded to us. Now the overwhelming probability is that our future will ultimately be determined by Asia, with everything that might mean for the liberal values that we cherish most strongly.

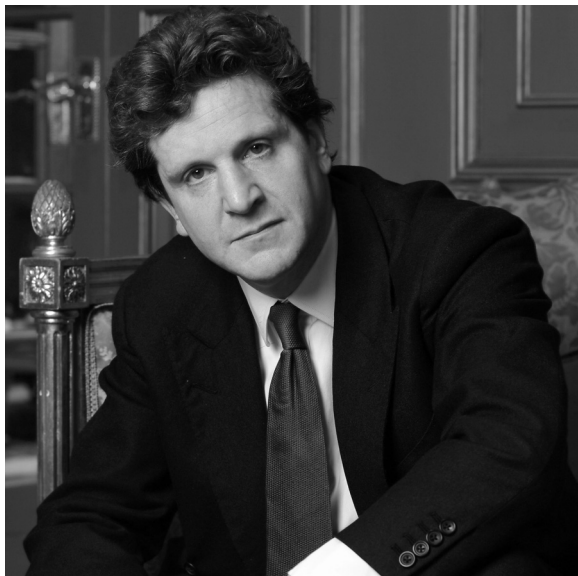
“Our mistake has been failing to recognise that the Cold War is over”

Looking back, I remember how the relentless rise of Conservative anti-Europeanism came from those who had only supported the EU as the economic underpinning of NATO in the confrontation with the Soviet Union, and who subsequently eagerly embraced the false Neo-Con analysis of Europe as a rival to US hegemony. Looking forward, I see ominous hostages to fortune looming in Anglo-American nuclear policy, whether with regard to Iran and proliferation in other countries of the Middle East, or with Pakistan over Afghanistan. But I also see the historic chance of facing up to the end of the Cold War, of reversing the legacy of Suez and, even at this late hour, putting Britain back at the heart of the European project, which is still the only serious experiment in international democracy and the rule of law on the planet, and, I am convinced, the last, best hope for addressing the terrible challenges of climate change and peace.

The Labour and Conservative parties, and those members of our own working group, who are ready to renew our nuclear weapons special relationship with the US, must explain to the British people why, in the light of such considerations, they wish to remain so politically dependent upon America. In doing so, they must be prepared to admit that Britain's so-called 'independent deterrent' is a lie. That it could not have been designed, built, tested, or deployed, nor can it be maintained, fully mobilized in a crisis, or fired accurately, without American approval. However, neither the government, nor the official opposition, are ready to do so. There is a huge political opportunity for us in exposing such reticence. More important, because of Iraq, this is the issue of the hour for the national interest. But equally, those unilateralists who believe that we could abandon our nuclear arsenal while still relying, in the last resort, on the US deterrent, must explain why they would be prepared now to increase our political dependence on America.

Defence and security policy is, along with the governance of the Eurozone, the new front line in the battle to re-animate European integration since the crisis caused by the collapse of the European Constitution. The British people will not be persuadable on the Euro for some good while yet. They have no desire to engage in a debate about process in the Brussels bureaucracy, except if it can be shown to deliver tangible benefits in such areas as achieving lower carbon emissions. But they might come to relish a leading role in EU defence, especially if the costs could be carried, in part, by others. The pinnacle of defence policy, for the time being, is nuclear forces. Thus, to have a true European defence policy, one must first have an accord between Europe's two nuclear powers, Britain and France.

Now the French timetable for the renewal of their deterrent (which is, of course, truly independent) is not that different from our own (2017, rather than 2014, being the year by which a decision must be made). They are due to have a comprehensive defence review beginning directly after their elections this June. I believe that were we to make it our policy to abandon Britain's special nuclear weapons relationship with the US, that would have a decisive impact on their thinking. It



could open up the possibility of the deepest Anglo-French co-operation, both in multilateral disarmament negotiations and, if need be, in developing together a new generation of deterrent.

France has long wished such an outcome, but has never believed we would turn our backs on the Americans. However, they have followed with interest the dramatic deterioration, over the past few years, in British public opinion of the US, which has been led, in part, by the principled Liberal Democrat opposition to the Iraq war. They have not taken co-operation in conventional armaments with Britain seriously

without an accord also on nuclear forces. So the initiative must come from us. But having taken it, I am sure the French would not be slow to react. A new president in Paris, and a new prime minister in London, anxious to draw a line under Blair's subservience to Bush and vulnerable to losing an overall majority at the next election, would be a new world. We have it in our hands to make an historic shift in our country's international alignment.

One might think that, with such momentous stakes, to talk about money not only lowers the tone but utterly misses the point. Not, however, it seems, those members of the working group who believe in continuing our nuclear ties to the Americans simply on the grounds that it would be cheaper, either than an independent national system (which could be true) or any plausible Anglo-French deterrent (which is certainly false). France has already declared she would be prepared to extend to all EU member states a guarantee comparable to the old Cold War nuclear umbrella afforded by the US to NATO members. In this context, she is actively exploring the possibility of some of these states contributing to the costs of the non-warhead elements of the system, satellites, submarines, aircraft and the like.

This would not be a breach of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. It would significantly enhance the credibility of the guarantee. It would constitute the core of a serious European defence identity. If Afghanistan proves as lethal for NATO as now most commentators expect, such deals would certainly be struck. There is no reason why Britain, having detached herself from the US, could not participate fully in such arrangements. With the Americans, because of the terms the 1958 Mutual Defence Co-operation Treaty, it would be impossible.

The government, and our working group, are right to say that no immediate decision need be taken on whether or not we should adopt a new generation of nuclear weapons.

But whether one favours a European nuclear defence or believes Europe should eventually abandon nuclear weapons, the crucial first step now must be to end our unacceptable technical and political dependency in nuclear weapons upon the US. That is what will appeal to our target voters. That is what is in the national interest. That is what it is our party's duty, given our place in British politics, to do.

John Stevens is a former MEP

DIVERSITY AND TRANSPARENCY

The opportunity to do something about under-representation of women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities among Liberal Democrat MPs should not be lost in a row over money, says Meral Ece

In years to come, when the Big Brother racism episodes are discussed, we will all remember where we were when Jade Goody was evicted.

You couldn't make it up. It has taken the now discredited Channel 4 series to hold a mirror up to British society, and show the underlying covert and casual racism that is part of everyday life for members of ethnic minorities in our society.

The bullying and racist behaviour of Jade Goody and others towards Shilpa Shetty, a Bollywood star, in the BB house led to questions in parliament, and even Gordon Brown, who on a visit to India apparently described himself as a disciple of Mahatma Ghandi, was forced to condemn the actions.

Of course there have been cries that it was 'only' bullying, and that it's a class thing. Jade Goody is just an uneducated working class girl after all. It seems she has become the scapegoat (or as Jade describes it – an escape goat) for the supine attitude Channel 4 bosses displayed towards the blatant exhibition of racism presented as entertainment on our TV screens.

Many ethnic minority commentators have welcomed the opportunity to bring this whole issue out in the open and have a debate about our society. Newspaper columns have been filled with the subject of racism, class, and how our multi-cultural society sits with these and other recent events, such as Blair's foreign policy, rising levels of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, which are all seen to have contributed to creating more divisions, rather than promoting tolerance and integration.

No wonder there are growing divisions in modern Britain after a decade of Blair's Labour government, which has pandered to and bred greater intolerance and bigotry, by fostering myths that Britain is a 'soft touch' for immigrants, instead of celebrating and highlighting the enormous contribution immigration has made to this country over the last century.

Inequalities in health, education and employment are far wider today than they were under the Tories.

As a mainstream political party, it is important that the Liberal Democrats contribute to this debate and highlight

what our principles, beliefs and aspirations are for British society.

The Britain of today has moved and changed. There are greater divisions within society.

Those of us who are from an ethnic minority background will recognise and be familiar with levels of racism in the UK. It is far subtler than, say, in France and Germany, but it still exists.

As a teenager, I was always told by the darker members of my family that, as I wasn't visibly different, I didn't have to put up with the racism they did. That is true to an extent, but my own experience was that, once people knew you were a 'foreigner', the subtle changes in their behaviour were evident.

I have experienced racism at school and in the workplace. A woman in my children's local school told me: "You're not like the other Turks round here, you're more educated".

I've even experienced it in the Liberal Democrats. A senior party official once demanded to know why I was interested in standing for the Greater London Authority, what did I hope to contribute? And did I know I'd be up against X? (a white man)

I guess this could be explained away as 'only' bullying behaviour. Yet I found myself wondering if I was white and a man, would I be asked to explain myself?

Since my election as chair of the Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats last year, I have spoken to many ethnic minority members, supporters, local parties, and would-be members. I have taken part in live radio phone-ins with representatives from the other political parties, and been taken to task as to why we have no ethnic minority MPs.

Despite this, the majority of our supporters feel we are the party that most represents their beliefs, principles and aspirations, but many are concerned at how little effort has been made to reach out and engage with diverse communities, particularly the inner cities.

I'm encouraged that a growing number of local parties are now conscious that their membership does not reflect their borough or constituency, and some are making greater efforts. We have never been the natural party of choice for ethnic minorities.

“Little effort has been made to reach out and engage with diverse communities”

Many first generation ethnic minorities traditionally joined the Labour Party through the trade union route and, despite their lack of support for Blair, many are still loyal supporters. At the same time, growing numbers feel disillusioned with Labour (particularly in the aftermath of Iraq) and are supporting us. We would never have won seats with large ethnic minorities like Brent East, and Hornsey & Wood Green, without their support.

But it is too often left to those of us from an ethnic minority background to engage with diverse communities, and for women to go out and attract more women.

We are all too willing to quote from the preamble to the party's constitution, particularly the sentence: "...in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community and in which no-one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity".

But what are we actually doing to promote equality? Are we highlighting the unacceptable levels of poverty, which inevitably leads to higher levels of ignorance?

Are we highlighting the pressure on ethnic minorities to conform and assimilate, rather than retain their own cultural identity and integrate?

We should be in the vanguard of condemning racism and intolerance within our multicultural, multifaith society. We should also lead by example, and get our own house in order.

I have sensed a reluctance by our politicians to get involved in these sensitive debates, perhaps because we have so few ethnic minority parliamentarians and therefore fewer people who have direct experience of racism.

I do however believe that Ming Campbell, since his election as leader, has demonstrated that he understands the importance of changing the face of the Liberal Democrats, and shown a commitment to ensure a greater level of representation.

We have had numerous debates as to how we can promote greater equality, by reflecting the people we seek to represent, while retaining our Liberal values.

It is clear to all that women and ethnic minorities are under-represented among our MPs, peers and councillors. How can we aspire to true representation and even government, without addressing this democratic deficit?

During last year's leadership election, Ming Campbell was asked what he would do to help more ethnic minorities get elected to parliament.

DIVERSITY FUND PLEDGED

He pledged that, if he were elected leader, he would establish a Diversity Fund to support women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities, to put themselves forward for parliamentary seats. To his credit, this has happened, with the announcement at last autumn's federal conference that the Joseph Rowntree Trust had donated £200,000 specifically to support women and ethnic minorities, and other underrepresented groups, to become MPs.

The announcement was well received by the CRE, the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Fawcett Society and others, though within the party reactions have been mixed.

It stole a march on the Tories so-called 'A' List. It is not an enormous sum of money, but it is a start.

Unfortunately, the administration of the fund, and how it will actually work, has been more controversial.

The apparent lack of transparency has sent Lib Dem bloggers into overdrive, speculating where the money will go, and who will decide who gets what. EMLD and the Campaign for Gender Balance have been proactive in ensuring that

maximum accountability is exercised in making this project work.

We have asked that a Reference Group be established to ensure guidance in the way the funds are administered. It is a relatively small amount of funding that, if it is going to make a difference, will have to be used smartly. Funds will go to the constituency not the individual. Decisions will have to be made as to which constituency, once a woman or ethnic minority has been selected, will be deemed 'winnable' enough to receive this dowry.

The ultimate aim has to be to maximise the number of MPs elected at the next general election.

BOGGED DOWN IN THE PROCESS

This is all very positive but, instead of focussing on what we want to achieve, as ever, we have got bogged down with the process. Yes, I know we are Liberal Democrats, and spend an inordinate amount of time debating process, but let us keep our eye on the big picture.

Let's be ambitious. This money has been donated by a charitable trust to support the efforts of a mainstream political party in the UK to achieve greater equality and representation

Those involved in administering the fund will need to be conscious that we are also accountable, and will be judged by our successes and failures.

The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust is an independent progressive organisation "committed to funding radical change towards a better world".

It gives grants to projects "seeking the creation of a peaceful world, political equality and social justice". Its programmes include those promoting peace, racial justice, and power and responsibility.

We should be proud that our party has secured funding from an organisation that recognises that we are working towards these important themes.

It is equally important that those who are responsible for administering these scarce funds do not lose sight of what we are trying to achieve, and ensure transparency, as the party will be accountable for ensuring these funds are used effectively.

It is not so important who does this, rather that we get a result and, ultimately, to answer our critics, achieve more plural and representative parliamentarians, who reflect the modern UK, and are able to engage confidently in important debates and discussions, to enable a more tolerant and equal society. That is, after all, what the Liberal Democrats are for.

Meral Ece is chair of the Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats and a councillor in Islington.

FLAWS COMPROMISE AID DELIVERY

The row over the Serious Fraud Office and allegations of bribery by British companies highlighted that too much overseas aid falls prey to foreign policy considerations, says Malcolm Bruce

It is a bizarre fact that international development is the only policy area that is still driven by inputs rather than outcomes. In other words, it is based on how much we intend to spend rather than what we expect to achieve.

That is as true of the Liberal Democrats as other parties. We are all committed to spending more and to achieving the UN target of 0.7%. We claim that we will get there quicker than other parties but, in terms of the headlines, that doesn't put much between us.

On the face of it, Labour appears to have a credible aid and development policy.

Labour can justifiably claim credit for the International Development Act, which makes poverty reduction the overriding strategy and requires ninety per cent of our aid to go to the world's poorest countries.

Setting up the Department for International Development also ensures that aid and development are removed from foreign policy considerations.

Gordon Brown's initiative to secure international agreement to write off 100% of the debt of the poorest countries in Africa has been widely welcomed.

However, closer examination shows that this proud record is seriously tarnished in a number of respects.

Robin Cook was almost certainly sincere when he set out the case for an ethical foreign policy. He probably underrated the pretensions of his boss, the prime minister.

The first casualty was the arms trade, where dubious exports were sanctioned, bribery and corruption went unchallenged and unchecked. Indeed, as we have just discovered, the first serious attempt to investigate allegations of bribery involving British arms exports has been pulled after pressure from the Saudi government.

The Serious Fraud Office is now investigating allegations of bribery in connection with the highly controversial Tanzanian

air traffic control contract, which does not look like much of a poverty reduction project on first glance.

British companies have also been identified directly or indirectly as being prepared to deal in conflict resources, which are often illegally acquired and used to fund the activities of warlords and promote and prolong civil wars.

Yet the British government has done nothing to pursue these companies or even to promote guidelines and standards – notwithstanding being asked to do so by the UN and OECD.

Debt relief has been hailed as Gordon Brown's triumph. He does deserve credit for persistence in progressing the issue and persuading other governments to support it.

The reality, in many cases, is that the debts were not being paid in any case so the write-offs did not yield

extra money. Debt relief has also been used to inflate the UK's aid budget and present our progress towards the UN target in the most favourable light.

In fact, if debt relief is removed from the equation, UK aid expenditure actually fell last year.

At the very least, there should be an objective analysis of what debt relief resources earmarked for development have actually been released in beneficiary countries and what has effectively become lost-cause money whose write off made no material difference.

But it is in Iraq and Afghanistan that the principles of aid and development being targeted towards poverty reduction have been most seriously compromised.

Iraq is a devastated country, but it is not a poor country. Nearly £1bn of historic UK export debt has been written off. It is clear that aid projects in the country are more to try to win hearts and minds and, because of the security situation, are disproportionately expensive to deliver.

Yet again, because of the International Development Act, diverting extra resources to Iraq could only be achieved by

“British companies have been identified directly or indirectly as being prepared to deal in conflict resources”

taking it away from other middle income countries – mainly in Latin America.

Afghanistan meanwhile is a poor country and, therefore, its aid programme can come out of the allocation for low income countries. Nevertheless, the security situation once again makes costs disproportionately high.

The lack of troops means that they are engaged to a degree in “going after the Taliban” rather than creating a secure environment for development.

In addition, the attraction to poor farmers of growing opium poppies makes Afghanistan the hub of the world’s heroin supply. In a poor country where other crops deliver only a fraction of the value of poppies, it is difficult to secure support for measures that reduce incomes unless adequate alternatives are on offer.

The suggestion of the Senlis Council that the international community should buy the poppies and use them for manufacturing therapeutic morphine has been resisted by the Afghan and British Governments but that seems mostly because the Americans do not approve.

SECURITY SAPS EFFECTIVENESS

Any activity that involved British troops conniving at the destruction of growing poppy crops would undermine the credibility we were bringing to development. Once again, security saps the effectiveness of aid projects.

Back in the Middle East, more and more of our aid resources are being diverted to compensating for the destruction of the infrastructure (much of which we paid for in the first place) and offsetting the consequences of boycotting the Palestinian Authority following the election of Hamas.

In Lebanon, the bombardment of roads and bridges devastated the economy as well as costing the lives of hundreds of innocent Lebanese civilians. The Department for International Development has diverted £21.5m to repair the damage, which we had previously paid for after the destructive civil war. This figure also includes emergency relief.

In nearby Gaza, the destruction of the power station increased poverty and hardship there for which further aid was required.

The decision of Israel and the international community to refuse to deal with Hamas has led to the loss of over \$1bn of revenue that was previously allocated to paying Palestinian civil servants and the costs of providing services. This gap has been filled by the Temporary International Mechanism administered by the European Union and by international relief funds targeted through a number of agencies.

The net effect, however, has been a massive increase in poverty necessitating a corresponding increase in aid, again diverting funds away from other poor countries. The occupied territories of Israel now receive the highest per capita aid budget in the world.

The current situation is unsustainable, with Hamas and the quartet (EU, UN, the USA and Russia) in a stand-off waiting to see who will blink first, while the Occupied Territories undergo economic collapse or de-development, and the aid inflows soar.

Another way of giving aid in recent years has been through budget support. This is giving money direct to governments in developing countries for them to spend according to their own priorities.

The rationale is that it helps to build capacity while allowing a close relationship between donors and recipients and greater transparency. It only works where there is good

governance and works better where international donors co-ordinate their engagement.

This aid is untied and allows those governments in receipt of it to build up their civil service and delivery capacity. However, it becomes strained when it appears the money is being misused or when the political situation deteriorates.

This happened in Uganda in the run up to the elections, when the Department for International Development cut budget support to the Ugandan government because of harassment of the opposition and concerns over corruption.

The money was recycled within Uganda to international agencies in the north engaged in supporting people in camps who are internally displaced by the activities of the Lord’s Resistance Army.

ACCUSATIONS OF SERIOUS CRIMES

In Ethiopia, the government similarly cut budget support because of the arrest together with accusations of serious crimes against leading opposition candidates.

Nevertheless, although budget support has not been reinstated, Ethiopia is in receipt of more UK development aid than any other African country.

Some of these issues arise because of foreign policy considerations, in spite of the benign effects of the International Development Act. Others may be due to the pressure on the Department for International Development to deliver more aid with reduced staffing.

Liberal Democrats always want public spending to be delivered cost effectively but, if the Department for International Development is putting more money through consultants, NGOs, charities and international agencies such as the European Commission and the World Bank, it should be because that is the best way to do it, not because it does not have the capacity and expertise in-house.

The Department for International Development is widely respected internationally and operates in ways that have won admiration and respect.

Nevertheless, there are flaws, as I have demonstrated and we – that is the Liberal Democrats, parliament and the public who support the rising development commitment by the UK – need to be on our guard that these commitments do not spread to the point where they undermine the effectiveness of our aid spending or the confidence of electors in our ability to deliver.

Supporting overseas development has not always been popular (and in many countries still is not). At a time when important domestic budgets such as health and education are coming under squeeze or are perceived to have been misspent, any sign that aid money is not delivering (or worse is being misappropriated) could break the cross-party consensus and lead to a change in public opinion.

Liberal Democrats must maintain our campaign to deliver on the UN aid target but it is more important than ever that we focus not just on inputs but on outcomes in the form of the quality of our aid and its effectiveness in reducing poverty.

Malcolm Bruce is Liberal Democrat MP for Gordon and chairs the House of Commons International Development Select Committee

IS THIS THE TORY THIRD WAY?

The ‘compassionate conservatism’ case sounds plausible, but Stewart Rayment cannot see any Conservative government treating the ideas involved seriously

Despite the uncertainties, the media wants to love David Cameron, their love affair with New Labour getting past its use-by date.

Cameron makes for some pretty vacuous headlines, which seem to be about a Compassionate Conservatism. The Liberal Democrats under-performed against the Tories at the last general election; how vulnerable are many of their seats at the next?

Oracles like the results column of Liberal Democrat News still make it hard to predict, but general elections are fought on other plains. So what is ‘compassionate conservatism’ and how do we deal with it? Work your arses off and pray.

The Policy Exchange is the main exponent of this ideology. It is a centre-right think tank (I believe they’ve held joint events with the Centre for Um) that was founded in 2002 by Nick Boles and Michael Gove – both mates of David Cameron – part of the Notting Hill Set.

Jesse Norman is executive director of Policy Exchange and teaches at UCL; he has written on Oakeshott.

Janan Ganesh did time in the Labour Party as a student at Warwick before seeing a light of sorts. He has a flair for controversy in his writing. He once described Blair as walking in Gladstone’s footsteps. The Grand Old Man suffers a lot of abuse.

Conservatism is a political philosophy, even if conservatives tend to be suspicious of that fact. It tends to be reactive rather than proactive and British conservatism contains many mirrors of the Liberalism that it essentially interacts with (albeit imperfectly over much of the last century).

The primary problem in this comes when, for example, Margaret Thatcher espouses a version of economic Liberalism this is tainted with a Conservative political thinking. When she says that there is no such thing as society only individuals, our response does not disagree, but concludes that society is the sum total of those individuals.

The authors see Thatcher as a “throwback to Gladstonian liberalism” in their peculiarly selective way. They argue that society is organic (common to a Whig/Tory thinker like Burke) but it is “not official: it cannot be established by law... but evolves through time and practice. Above all it is delicate. An invasive state disrupts the voluntary bonds between people.” This is the problem of the conservatism of New Labour.

British conservatism, we are reminded, has two traditions, “a liberal or libertarian conservatism concerned with free markets, localism and private property and a paternalist conservatism that has prioritised community social stability”. The authors forget to highlight hierarchy in this, and indeed throughout the book. However they do admit to the prominence of paternalism above all other competing ideas that make up conservatism. In some ways, they are looking for another strand of conservatism.

After a romp through Hobbes and Oakeshott, we are told that “We need to specify what a society would be like if organised horizontally, not vertically.”

Surely the answer to that is ‘not conservative’. Can you see the members of your local Conservative association swallowing that? They go on, “In a society the individuals are associates... who collectively belong and recognise each other.” I have to disagree with the assumption that this is “an association free of class, hierarchy or any other inherited structure or institution that might

constrain the freedom of individuals”; it simply isn’t in the nature of the beast, even in their most extreme neoliberal moments, which one would presume something called compassionate conservatism was trying to move on from.

“Power must be diffused; must be shared and counterbalanced for society to exist at all.” We’re pleased to hear it, let’s see the policies, but remember Conservatives in power have done the opposite.

The authors then come up with the phrase ‘the connected society’, which goes beyond narrow legal definitions and “recognises how institutions... give shape and meaning to human ideas”.

A Cameron government would thus seek reform “that goes with the grain of institutions.” They talk about the balances of powers in the American constitution but, as I said above, Conservatives in power have done just the opposite and eroded local government both directly and indirectly. The regressive control of local education authorities began not under Labour but under the Tories, and they have the gall to say that stateism takes paternalism too far.

The connected society “discourages the concentration of power in any particular organisation or person, public or private. It is self-aware and modest in its expectations for

“Conservatism is a political philosophy, even if conservatives tend to be suspicious of that fact”

government. It understands the need for economic growth but... not as the only source of well being. It does not favour any particular group in society except those in poverty: whether through lack of cash, experience or opportunity”.

Can one seriously see a future Conservative government behaving in this way?

Incidentally, this Compassionate Conservatism is not to be mistaken for that of George W Bush, which we are told went out of the White House windows with John DiIulio in 2001. It also distances itself from the communitarism of New Labour (a perfectly good conservatism) by placing more emphasis on the individual.

So we find the third strand of ‘conservatism’, since this compassion belongs to neither the paternalist nor individualist traditions “the distinct and long-ignored ‘Old Whig’ tradition with its roots in Adam Smith and Edmund Burke and its modern flourishing in Oakeshott and Hayek”.

I can understand why David Cameron, wanting to be a career politician, might opt for the Conservative or Labour parties rather than the Liberal Democrats, but the changes of mindset required of your average Tory to achieve all this are far greater than those required of the rank and file ‘tanky’ by Blair.

British Conservatism has developed mainly in interaction with British Liberalism. Apart from obvious intellectual sources like Burke and Smith (of whom conservatives have been notoriously selective in their reading), the successive waves of Whigs into the Tory party in the late nineteenth century and of right wing Liberals after the First World War gave a strong liberal flavour to the Conservative party. Thatcher’s embrace of Hayek (a Liberal more popular in Europe than Britain, though his thinking is clearly of the tradition of say Spencer and Belloc) is another source. Interestingly, the authors are less keen on Friedman and the Chicago School.

We are told to expect three guidelines to future Conservative policy – freedom (chiefly from coercive state intervention), decentralisation and accountability. We will see a risk-based audit of government activity and scepticism of state monopolies (but what of private ones?).

There are older, paternalist Tories of whom I could believe parts of this if spouted from their mouths, but the post-Thatcher Conservative party is of the used-car salesman and estate agent.

Let us assume that David Cameron survives as Tory leader to the next general election and that the media still loves him, at least more than whoever replaces Blair. It is likely that we still won’t have seen too much detail of what a Conservative government would do if elected, and almost certain that the European question will have been avoided completely (Blair should have held the referendum on the EU constitution to dish the Tories alone).

For example, George Osborne, the Tory shadow chancellor, has said that cuts in family taxation will be met from unspecified environmental taxes, while at the same time distancing himself from the report of his party’s tax reform commission. Osborne, incidentally, led Cameron’s leadership campaign.

So again, how do we deal with them? The Liberal Democrats are more advanced than the Tories in many areas of policy development, not least green taxes – indeed there is perhaps a danger that their policies are too detailed. There is the possibility that Cameron will do a Disraeli, nick those policies and, with the greater resources available to his party (not least

in the press), tweak them and say that he has a better costed alternative.

Furthermore, the Lib Dems lack what might be perceived as a big idea to attract the masses, even assuming that the press barons weren’t fatally opposed to us.

The party’s stance on civil liberties and foreign policy has a strong and potentially popular appeal. But there are already signs that the Tories might move in on those areas, especially as the mistakes of the government’s Iraq policy come home to roost.

While there is no shortage of development of ideas within the Lib Dems, their public airing has been used to highlight relatively minor divisions within the party, whereas those within the Tories, like Labour before 1997, are largely ignored.

Campbell should be capable of bringing these things together; his election as leader was non-contentious, he has the background, gravitas and intellect. Unaccustomed as it was over the previous year, the parliamentary party must behave itself.

The last thing I read in the papers on Cameron’s thought was an attempt to convince the faithful that he was a ‘traditional Tory’... ho hum... So as I said – work your arses off and pray; there is no substitute.

Compassionate Conservatism, what is it, why we need it, by Jesse Norman & Janan Ganesh; Policy Exchange 2006

Stewart Rayment is a member of the Liberator Collective

SEE LIBERATOR IN HARROGATE

Liberator will have a stall in the exhibition area at the Liberal Democrat spring conference in Harrogate, where you can buy the magazine, pay your subscription, get one of the new Liberator songbooks and browse our booklets.

Don’t forget the Glee Club is on Saturday 3 March at 10pm.

REAL WORLD POLICY

The Liberal Democrat policy process does not deliver useable policy to party members who already exercise power, says Richard Kemp

In her highly inaccurate and selective article about the way that the local government policy paper and resolution were handled (*Liberator* 315), Judith Jolly made four cardinal errors.

As chair of the working group, she should accept some responsibility for the debacle. This was the biggest defeat for a platform resolution in living memory. Councillors present voted for the reference back by 4 to 1. Conference as a whole voted for it by 3 to 1.

Secondly, she grossly overestimates the standing and oratorical powers of those that spoke against the resolution. I would love to think that our 4,500 councillors wait on my every word and then rush out to put the thoughts of Leader Kemp into action. Regrettably that is not the case!

She also grossly underestimates the intelligence of conference-goers. Our average conference attendee is well informed, understand the issues and makes their decision on how to vote in a rational and thoughtful way.

But most importantly of all, she fails to understand what happened, why it happened and is likely to happen again.

Our policy making process fails to be timely, inclusive and relevant to policy makers, and most important of all, to policy deliverers, which this party now has in abundance. We need to think again.

As Jolly says, policy papers are meant to be what an incoming Lib Dem secretary of state can give to civil servants and say 'deliver this'.

But in the real world, many of us can deliver today. Local government is the best example of this. We control or lead 85 councils in Britain and have real influence on about 40 more. These have budgets of more than £20bn.

All over the country, we have Lib Dems who chair housing associations and health bodies, Connexions or LSC Boards and regional organisations, who can put forward Lib Dem policies.

We ignore that hard-won influence and power at our peril. By concentrating on tomorrow rather than today, we may ensure that a Lib Dem tomorrow never happens.

The process takes too long. Typically there is at least a year between the Federal Policy Committee assembling a policy group and conference voting on a finished product. The world can change considerably in that time.

In the case of the local government paper, the Lyons review almost came and went, the government department responsible changed and a white paper went through several changes before a Bill was published. How did the group's remit change during all this? It didn't. The result was a document that lacked life, interest or context.

It is difficult to fully engage people in the process. When I chaired a housing policy group, it had 20 members, five of whom never made a meeting and three did not even respond to documents. We never had more than seven present at a substantive meeting. This is hardly surprising when meetings are largely held in the evening in London to suit parliamentary business. I understand from its members that the local government group suffered similarly.

Lastly, there is no mechanism for policy making in the achingly long period between policy papers. The world can change so much in that time leaving a vacuum where policy is made up on the hoof using policy papers as a loose guide.

So here are my four suggested improvements.

We need standing groups of parliamentarians and others with recognised knowledge who can get to know each other and react quickly on behalf of the party to the needs of rapid fire policy making. They should be able to react on the hoof if necessary but also put forward 'resolutions' to the FPC to make minor changes in policy dictated by events and legislation.

These positions should of course be advertised and filled properly and there should still be the consultative and formal session at conference for signing off major policy changes. The group's remit should be altered if necessary during the process so that it reflects the political environment against which it will be delivered and not that in which it was established.

A facilitated residential session in which the group can really 'write the document' together is far more effective than a series of poorly attended two-hour meetings. We found a sponsor for our housing awayday and I believe we could find such sponsorship for most of our discussions.

We should keep our policy papers brief and wherever possible also produce a good practice guide, which would enable our policy deliverers to move into action quickly and which becomes a campaigner's manual.

Policy without delivery is useless. Policy translated into campaigning is what our conferences should be about.

Over the last decade, the world has moved much faster. If we are to advance we have to change our ways. The local government debate showed that our policy making is long, tedious and provides a finished product that might be worthy but is usually not implementable by those with power. Changes are needed.

Richard Kemp is the Leader of the Liberal Democrats at the LGA and a councillor in Liverpool

ALREADY LEVEL

Dear *Liberator*,

Nick Turner's review of *The case for Council Housing in Twenty-First Century Britain – Defend Council Housing* (Liberator 315) is generally sound and perceptive. However, his unquestioning acceptance of DCH's claim that tenants are denied a level playing field because the government forbids councils to borrow money to finance essential improvements is wrong.

It has to be said that he is not alone in this. At a fringe meeting in Brighton, the party's shadow to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister also showed his ignorance of current local government financial arrangements on this precise point.

As I understand it, under prudential borrowing, local councils can borrow money without external constraint, provided that they can demonstrate that they have an income stream to fund that borrowing.


In the case of council housing, as the housing revenue account is ring-fenced, the key determinants are the amount of money required to bring tenants' homes up to standard, the amount of income being generated by rents and charges and other spending commitments, including the need to repay existing debt and to fund negative subsidy from housing benefit payments.

The incentive to transfer to housing associations lies in the fact that the government will pay off existing debt, thus releasing a large amount of income to fund future borrowing, and also in the fact that housing benefit rules for associations are different, so that they have no requirement to subsidise rent rebates from other tenants' rents, as do councils. In these circumstances, the determining factor in any council's decision to ballot for stock transfer is not whether it can borrow, but whether it can borrow enough to meet its obligations.

In these circumstances, the party's championing of a 'fourth option' and a 'level playing field' is superfluous. A number of councils are now in a position to retain their stock because its condition is manageable or because they have low levels of historic debt.

If we are going to argue for equality of treatment, we should be pressing for all councils' housing debt to be written off by the Treasury (as happens if they transfer) and for changes to housing benefit financing rules. Once we get

LETTERS



into that game, we are competing with other government spending priorities and setting precedents that may also apply to health service debt as well. I hope that those costing our manifesto have taken note.

I have no problem with having that debate. What I do object to is politicians and campaigners pretending that there are easy solutions when there are none, and failing to acknowledge the real dilemmas that any government faces in meeting the challenge of modernising our housing stock.

At that same party fringe, Shelter made a compelling case for massive government investment in new social housing. The reality is that ministers have only one pot of money. Given the choice between using that cash to build new affordable homes for rent or, purely for the sake of ideological purity, to renovate existing homes when money can be found elsewhere for that purpose, I would pick the former any day.

Peter Black AM
National Assembly of Wales

SORTING THE SEATS

Dear *Liberator*,

Mark Valladeres (Liberator 315) calls for ideas to simplify the party's PPC selection process. Here is one suggestion.

Permit all development seats to take a leaf out of the procedure for re-selection of MPs. At any time after six months following a general election, the executive committee of any development seat would be permitted to ask their previous PPC if they are willing to stand again.

If the answer is 'yes', then the region would appoint a returning officer with the job of supervising the re-selection process. The first step would be to place an advertisement, saying that the previous PPC is willing to stand again but inviting interest from any other candidates.

If another candidate came forward, the normal procedure would apply. If not, a general meeting would be called, after minimum three weeks notice, at which local party members could vote either to re-select the previous PPC or re-open nominations. The latter choice would mean starting the full selection procedure.

Note that this idea would not apply to 'moving forward' or 'priority' seats, which would still have the full procedure applied. There is a need for full competition for such seats.

As a returning officer of many years standing, I have seen development seats going through the whole rigmarole, only to find the previous PPC selected – in one case recently by a unanimous vote of local members. The placing of an advertisement means that 'new blood' can enter the arena if it wishes.

Allowing a week for replies plus three weeks for the notice of meeting could allow the whole procedure to take 5-6 weeks instead of the 10 or more involved in the full Monty.

A very real advantage, over and above speed and simplification, could be that this procedure would encourage those PPCs who wish to stay the course and fight a seat several times in order to make it winnable.

John Thomson
Devizes

Get it off your chest!

Liberator welcomes readers' letters. Please send them, maximum 500 words to: collective@liberator.org.uk
We reserve the right to edit or omit anything long, boring or defamatory

February

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

May

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

July

In recent days there has been a great deal of ill-informed comment about our Deputy Prime Minister’s penchant for the game of croquet; he has suffered obloquy and had contumely poured over him – and dried contumely is a devil to brush off one’s jacket. The charge seems to be that by indulging in this pastime Prescott is betraying his proletarian roots. What rot! Have these people never been to Kingston upon Hull? If they did so they would see games of croquet taking place on every street corner, allotment and piece of waste ground. After a hard day’s trawling, there is nothing the doughty citizen of that historic city enjoys more than tying his whippet to a hoop and wielding the mallet in his shirtsleeves. Granted the game is a little rougher than that one encounters in the Home Counties – and features a more prominent role for dried fish – but to dismiss it as the preserve of the aristocracy betrays the most dreadful ignorance.

Lord Bonkers’ Diary

August

There can be fewer sadder tales than that of Mark Oaten – or Rising Star as I still think of him. This innocent Red Indian brave, through a strange concatenation of circumstances, found himself elected Member for the historic city of Winchester. It must have been a shock to someone more used to hunting buffalo or putting arrows through the hats of passing stagecoach drivers, but at first he made a good fist of things and was re-elected a couple of times with a juicy majority. However, as is so often

the case, fame turned his head and he began to get ideas above his station (which is Waterloo for Winchester, incidentally). In rapid succession he had himself made Kennedy’s Parliamentary Private Secretary (“Rising Star carry heap big firewater,” as he once remarked to me), Chairman of the Parliamentary Party and Shadow Home Secretary, jettisoning his moccasins and acquiring a suit along the way. In this last post he hit upon the idea of making prisoners study. (Locked up and made to learn Latin verbs? It sounds just like public school and I am sure the European Court would step in). Then hubris took hold of him and he stood for the leadership of our party. I need not recount here the distasteful details of his fall here (they may be purchased separately from the Bonkers Head Press under a plain brown wrapper), but that was the end of poor Rising Star. Now he is attempting to make a living in show business. I cannot see it working for him, but when he calls today I use my good offices to find him a part in a keep-fit video being made in Jamaica by a friend. Its name? Pilates of the Caribbean.

December

Perhaps because of my efforts to combat global warming, the day dawns cold and blustery; I therefore resolve to spend it in my Library amongst my papers. I soon turn up an old issue of the Radio Times carrying an article on the programme “I am Rather Well Known. May I Leave Now Please?” Though long forgotten, this was quite the thing in its day and frequently challenged “What’s My Line” and “Muffin the Mule” for pride of place in the ratings. IARWKMILNP (as it was popularly known) featured a number of celebrities of the day staying in a country house and suffering various indignities – an unsuitable choice of wine with the fish course, being obliged to go for a country walk when they would have been quite happy with the newspaper – to the amusement of the viewing millions. It was quite a coup when I was able to arrange for Clement Davies, then Liberal leader, to take part in the programme. That year the other contestants included such luminaries as Sherpa Tensing, Pat Smythe the show jumper, Gilbert Harding, Dame Anna Neagle and Wally Hammond. Unfortunately, poor Clement was voted out in the first round when the viewers’ postcards were counted; I have always suspected low dealing from Muffin the Mule’s agent, as he had hoped that his client would take part. Nevertheless, our victory in the Torrington by-election came shortly after IARWKMILNP was shown, and I flatter myself that the show played no small part in it.

Lord Bonkers is unwell, but sends readers a selection of bon mots from his 2006 columns.
