

# *liberator*



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Cover Picture - Richard Younger-Ross

# COMMENTARY

## “WE CAN LOSE EVERYWHERE”

There is not much disguising that the local elections in England were a poor performance for the Liberal Democrats.

Results in Scotland and Wales are analysed elsewhere in this issue. In England, however, despite the caveat about vote share falling only slightly, the inescapable fact is that the Lib Dems lost heavily to the Tories in the south, and were massacred in some places the party had controlled for years, while not making gains in the north from Labour in remotely comparable quantities.

Explanations for local factors in play range from dustbins (Bournemouth), to planning (Waverley) and internal splits (Torbay and Leicester).

It is true that the party's vote share looked acceptable by historical comparisons, but the haemorrhage of seats has turned a floodlight on fundamental problems.

There will also be those who blame Menzies Campbell's low-profile leadership.

The party's main problem is not dustbins or disunity (though neither helped), or its leader's inability to inspire the party or connect with voters (though that did not help either).

It is that the party has no strategy beyond an assumption that local activism will keep the show on the road through incremental growth by tapping into transient grievances.

This worked for 20 years or so, but if the party has no idea of its target audience and no clear image, other than on the fading issues of Iraq and tuition fees, it cannot hope to grow.

Despite this, the party refuses to take clear stances for fear of causing offence to anyone who might vote for it. 'We can win everywhere' becomes 'we can lose everywhere' if the Lib Dems continue to have minimal core support and must win most of their voters' allegiance afresh at each election.

The party needs three or four policy issues as clear and controversial as Iraq to make a serious impact on public opinion, yet its response to the local elections appears to be 'business as usual'.

Hoping that gains from Labour will balance losses to the Tories, and that the reverse might happen under a failing Tory government somewhere down the line, might sustain the party forever, but will not move it forward.

It ought to be obvious where the party's core vote should come from: youngish, better-educated, professional people who are liberal on social issues, concerned about the environment, open to the world and diversity, and hostile to both Labour's police state and to what lurks in the Tories behind David Cameron's grinning façade.

Such people voted Lib Dem at the last general and Euro elections in proportionately greater numbers than any other

demographic group, yet nothing is being said or done to cement their allegiance.

Of course, anyone is welcome to vote for the Lib Dems and the party needs to talk to other groups.

Yet its persistence in seeking never to take a stand for fear of giving someone offence prevents the party from securing long-term growth.

Campbell has simply continued the policy of drift that he inherited. Where he has made a decisive stand, his efforts have been directed against internal opponents and not directed outwards at the public.

He has replaced a simple and easily-understood taxation policy with one of such complexity that it is incapable of being explained on the doorsteps, or indeed anywhere else. He has thus allowed the Tories to steal the 'green tax' mantle without the public being aware that the Lib Dems ever wore it in the first place.

On defence, he used up reserves of credibility and capital to make it clear that the Lib Dems oppose one half of Britain's Trident capability but not the other, a position likely to convince no one.

Barring some unforeseen catastrophe, the party would look stupid were it to ditch two leaders in as many years, and in any case Campbell is a symptom and not the cause of the party's lack of political clarity and strategic grip.

The Lib Dems cannot rely for success on one of the other parties happening to be out of action at any given moment.

Neither party is truly out of action now, and the Lib Dems need that core vote to sustain them, which they cannot gain by ducking controversy.

## FORTY YEARS ON

It is 40 years since the Six Day War brought about a division in the Middle East that has remained obstinately in place ever since.

Articles in this issue by Michael Meadowcroft, among other things a former EU special adviser in Jerusalem, and by Matthew Harris, secretary of the Liberal Democrat Friends of Israel, illustrate the gulf in perceptions even between those of similar political outlook on most other matters.

This is one of the pre-eminent foreign policy issues and it is a crucial influence on everything from regional instability to international terrorism.

Yet neither the Liberal Democrats nor, so far as anyone can remember, the party's two predecessors, has seen fit to debate Israel, Palestine and their futures at a conference.

Contributions to, and the outcome of, such a debate, might very well give offence to supporters of both sides, but that is not a reason to avoid saying what the party's view is on this vital topic. This is another controversy that should not be ducked.

# RADICAL BULLETIN

## MADE TO BE BROKEN

A rash of accusations and backstabbing has marked the selection contest for the Lib Dems' London Assembly candidates.

It is hard to see why any serious politician would wish to be a member of the assembly, the ultimate powerless talking shop, although the money and perks are quite good. Nonetheless, 23 hopefuls entered the fray for the 11-strong regional list for next year's elections.

London party members have been deluged with e-mails and phone calls from candidates, and returning officer Judith Ost has been deluged with complaints from candidates about each other.

The problem is neither Ost's ability nor candidates' nefariousness. It is that the selection rules are over-detailed, unintelligible, open to genuinely different interpretations and are inconsistently enforced.

Even so, Ost's final missive to the 23 candidates is likely to go down as one of the more extraordinary official party communications ever sent.

The proximate cause was Dee Doocey's use of statements by various famous people from outside the party that she was a Good Thing.

Endorsements from party figures are banned, as are endorsements given for the elections, but these were past statements given in other contexts.

Ost first permitted these in Doocey's e-mail message, then rescinded that permission after complaints from rival candidate Duncan Borrowman. But this was merely the straw that broke the camel's back.

Ost wrote to candidates that "this lot is worrying me sick as there is far more stuff coming through than I can realistically engage with even if I give it all my waking hours. The rules are a nitpickers nightmare."

If even the returning officer thinks that, how are candidates supposed to navigate the minefield?

Ost said Doocey's quotes "were not obtained with a view to selection but are simply quotes collected.

"In my view endorsement needs to be a conscious act. I have no idea if there are precedents on this one, I have certainly had a large number of complaints about it from within your own number and elsewhere including several ROs, each of whom has taken the opportunity to pick fault in other things too.

"If you want to push it to the wire feel free. I cannot answer for the likely outcome at appeal except to say that all my correspondents so far have indicated that they read it as endorsement."

Just in case some candidates were getting enthusiastic and imagined their campaigns had engaged members' interest, Ost acerbically noted: "The chances that any of what is exercising you all makes a hoot of difference to the outcome doesn't strike me as high.

"Anyone with a modicum of know how will long since have defined you as spam and autodeleted."

There had also been disputes about candidates' campaign websites and whether they met rules on unauthorised external links.

Only links to the main party site, webmasters, designers or require software downloads are allowed.

Ost said permitted links to the party site did not include "various links to bits and pieces buried within it or to news feeds whatever they are.

"You can remove them or leave them as suits you, I am not risking my candidacy on something that makes not a hoot of difference to voting intentions, you are.

"If it is technically difficult that is your problem not mine. Quoting precedents from other selections is all very fine and dandy but I don't have access to that information to be able to assess its validity, the SRO has disappeared from the airwaves."

One candidate whose presence on the list raised some eyebrows was Rajonuddin Jalal, whose elections address noted he was a councillor in Tower Hamlets in 1990/98 and deputy council leader.

Ah, but who for? Jalal was a Labour councillor in Tower Hamlets, a fact he somehow forgot to mention. Liberal Democrats in that borough who remembered him were considerably underwhelmed in 2004 by the news that he intended to join the Lib Dems.

## FINGERING THE DYKE

Greg Dyke's surreal attempt to become a joint Conservative and Liberal Democrat candidate for London mayor was doomed from the outset.

It is inconceivable that the membership of either party would have stood for such an imposition and, even if they had, it was equally inconceivable that such blatant opportunism would have beaten Ken Livingstone.

Dyke switched his support to the Lib Dems from Labour after the Hutton report debacle and gave a substantial donation at the last general election. Inconclusive discussions had occurred about him becoming mayoral candidate.

Dyke can, presumably, do the maths as well as anyone else and work out that the Lib Dems are weak in almost half the capital's boroughs.

But stand for two parties and victory might be possible. The idea of a joint candidate, or jointly-supported independent, came from Dyke – not the Tories – and he floated the idea with Lord Clement-Jones.

He in turn told party president Simon Hughes, who said he would raise the idea with Menzies Campbell.

But Hughes saw no pressing urgency to do this, given the mayoral campaign is more than a year away and Campbell was enmeshed in this May's elections.

Thus, Dyke gained the impression from Clement-Jones that Hughes had told Campbell, while Hughes had simply undertaken to raise it with Campbell, and at the point the story broke had seen no need to.

This confusion accounts for Dyke's subsequent claim that Campbell knew about the joint candidacy idea.

The first Campbell knew was when the office of Tory leader David Cameron asked for a meeting but, before the purpose of this became known, the idea of the joint candidacy had leaked, significantly to the Spectator.

Since it is highly unlikely that any Lib Dem would leak to that organ, it is almost certain that the leak came from Tory right-wingers horrified at the idea of their party doing anything jointly with the Lib Dems.

With the matter public, the Tories tried to extract some advantage by saying that they had sought to 'break the mould' but Campbell had refused.

Working with the Lib Dems might have done the Tories some good, by signalling to Lib Dem voters elsewhere that it was 'safe' to support the Tories, but the Lib Dems could never have gained anything since they would have lost soft Labour votes, and not just in London.

This pantomime still leaves the Lib Dems with no obvious mayoral candidate.

The original trawl yielded John Stevens, former leader of the Pro-Euro Conservative Party; Federal Policy Committee vice-chair Jeremy Hargreaves; Greenwich activist Chris le Breton; and Chamali Fernando, London Liberal Democrat Youth and Students' head of events.

Whatever their individual merits, the regional party decided to reopen nominations, and Baroness Hamwee is expected to throw her hat into the ring.

## AGENT ORANGE

Does Iraq war supporter Gavin Grant any longer head the Liberal Democrat Shadow Communications Agency?

Several parliamentarians have claimed that his services have been dispensed with, after the 'put the zing into Ming' campaign was judged surplus to requirements, having served only to make the leader appear undignified.

Grant originally supported Mark Oaten's leadership bid but, following Oaten's downfall, quickly switched his affections to Campbell and suggested the agency's creation.

Campbell announced on 8 June last year: "We will set up a Liberal Democrat Communications Agency consisting of some of our many supporters in the field of communications who will assist us with their advice." The party set up a webpage inviting suitably-qualified volunteers.

Many of those with relevant expertise who duly offered their services, including two members of the Liberator collective, did not receive even the courtesy of a reply. Instead, the agency's membership appeared to have been chosen by Grant.

Ed Davey, who looks after the agency, insists it is simply a technical resource and that it is not allowed to make decisions on party campaigns and certainly not on their political content.

Grant, originally titled the 'convenor' of the agency, is now described merely as 'a member', but it surely cannot be long before he tries to place himself at the centre of things once more.

And one can speculate how the agency's other members will react to any attempt by Davey to inject fresh blood.

## FRANKENSTEIN IN THE DALES

When John Clark arrived in Ryedale, he intended to do nothing but work his smallholding.

He had been a Liberal Party councillor in Slough, one of few places where that party has maintained a council presence, and got drawn into activity in Ryedale only through a school governorship, where the local Lib Dems talent spotted him.

He explained that he was a Liberal and that, if he stood, the Lib Dems would have an extra political party operating independently in the area. Despite this, the Lib Dems accepted and gave him a clear run in 2003.

Since then, matters have deteriorated, with Clark claiming that the Lib Dems voted in favour of the American 'star wars' presence at nearby Fylingdales, and opposed their own party's national policy by supporting the dualling of the A64 road.

The result of these disputes was that the Lib Dems found someone else called Clark to stand in Clark's ward, although he managed to hold off a Tory challenge.

Lib Dem group leader Howard Keal says the A64 is "a constant focus of concern over the number of fatalities and level of congestion" and that he "would need my mind to be refreshed on how and exactly when the Liberal Democrat group has voted in favour of anything that could be regarded as supportive of Bush".

He also says Clark voted with the Tories to oppose a local sports centre plan.

The Lib Dems cannot it seems claim that Clark did not warn them he would run a separate party.

## A TRIP TO BYZANTIUM

When is a member not a member? When the Lib Dems apply the shambles that passes for the party's selection rules.

Local councillor Alex Feakes won the Lewisham West and Penge selection by drawing lots against Jo Christie-Smith.

Lewisham is a borough party, so members from across the borough were allowed to vote, as were members from three Bromley wards that make up the 'Penge' bit.

But when Lewisham East selected the estimable Chris Maines as its candidate, only members resident in that constituency could vote.

The explanation is an English council ruling that only members resident in a constituency could vote in selections before constituencies reorganised on new boundaries, but all members of borough parties could vote after this change had occurred. And these people want to change the country's voting system.

## HOLD THE FRONT PAGE

The latest issue of our rival organ 'The Liberal' hit the streets on 6 May, the day of the final round of the French presidential election, with a somewhat redundant 'French Election Special'.

The article predicting a victory for Ségolène Royal, by French psychoanalyst and linguist Julia Kristeva, offers this wisdom:

"She's inevitable, at this point in history, and so tuned in to public opinion. First, because she demonstrates that Woman does not exist, only women." Quite.

# BLOOD ON THEIR HANDS

Richard Younger-Ross was horrified by the damage he saw Hezbollah had inflicted on Haifa, but the damage he saw in Lebanon after last summer's war was worse

Last August, shortly after fighting ceased in the Lebanon, I visited Israel and the Occupied Territories to meet peace activists and politicians (Liberator 315).

I had seen bomb damage in Haifa, partially destroyed houses over half a mile apart. I had seen the rage of Haifa's deputy mayor because the Katushka rockets had ball bearings in their war heads, a device designed to cause the maximum human injury.

Sadly, at that time it was impossible to get into Lebanon to see the other side of this conflict.

Media coverage clearly showed a massive Israeli response to the kidnappings and to the intermittent rocket attacks. The majority of the west condemned these as disproportionate. This was a word our usually articulate prime minister seemed to have difficulty in pronouncing.

In March, I finally had the opportunity to see for myself the consequences of the Israeli bombardment as I visited the region with the Foreign Affairs Select Committee.

The committee split, half travelling to Egypt, Israel and Gaza, the rest of us, including Lib Dem MP Paul Keetch, going to Syria and the Lebanon.

Our visit will be reported in due course. Nothing I write here should be interpreted as the views of the committee. These are just some of my personal thoughts after the visit.

We drove from Damascus to Beirut, a journey of less than two and a half hours. We became aware that we were nearing the border as, nearing the crest of a hill, we started passing long queues of lorries, hundreds of them waiting for consent to enter Lebanon. They queue here for days. At the border we see our first signs of Hezbollah – posters in the Syrian border control office below a picture of their own President.

From this point, we begin to cross the central band of the Bekaa Valley. This green and beautiful area is also the heartland of Hezbollah but, as we drive through, not all the women are fully veiled; there is clearly some tolerance here.

The first signs of Israel's attack are visible minutes from the border. The empty shell of a milk factory stands at the side of the road. We are north of Beirut and on the Syrian border. It seems an unlikely Hezbollah military base

although it is possible that smuggled Katushka rockets were hidden here before being transported south. The bombing appears however to be more symbolic than strategic.

As we climb a steep winding road we are diverted onto the old road. Here, just east of Beirut, a new motorway bridge high over the valley is badly damaged from an attack by Israeli aircraft. It is the first of many such bombed bridges we will see.

I won't say that Beirut is a beautiful city, for it is not. It is a typical unplanned sprawl of largely modern buildings, some that still show the bullet and shell marks of the civil war.

But the descent into the city is dramatic; Lebanese cedars are silhouetted against the pale blue sky on ridges as the road winds down into the town. The sun glistens off the azure blue sea before us and some of the city's charm becomes more apparent. From my hotel bedroom, I have fine views of this, only disturbed

by the wreckage of the hotel in front of ours, the site above which president Rafik Hariri was assassinated by a massive car bomb.

We had several meetings that first afternoon. The tension in the air was palpable, but this had nothing to do with Israel, but with the country's other neighbour, Syria.

The Lebanese government needed its parliament to vote for an inquiry into the assassination of its former president, and in particular whether this was instigated or sanctioned by the Syrians. If true, it's a chilling thought that, in the previous two days, we may have sat and talked to the person who instigated it.

However, their speaker would not recall parliament to debate this. The country is deeply divided and pro-Syrian factions oppose the inquiry.

Downtown Beirut is usually full of life; bars and restaurants teeming with tourists and locals, but it is quiet now. A massive protest has closed the city centre down for weeks. A large tented village spills out in front of the UN building, into the squares and parks and under the overpasses.

At first, I thought this protest was purely an Islamic pro-Syrian demonstration. This was not the case. The

*“Why, I ask myself at the sight of reinforcing bars sticking out from shattered concrete”*

tented village contains this faction certainly, but also a second faction of Christian Maronites. The two communities occupy different areas as they do in their home communities. They are however united in their cause.

Around the tents, Lebanese soldiers sit wearily, perhaps nervously, by their armoured vehicles; it is a city on the edge.

In the hotel bar later, there is no sign of this as young Lebanese eat and drink and talk and laugh. No sign of tension, of the tented protestors or the military guards scattered between the tall hotels, mosques and churches.

Driving south out of Beirut, we passed a Palestinian refugee camp, one of several in the country. Unlike the camp I saw earlier in Bethlehem, this camp is fenced in, separating it from the surrounding suburbs, for many the Palestinians are not welcome visitors. Lebanon does not want them to stay.

The drive south should have been fast but there are frequent detours around flyovers and bridges destroyed by the Israelis. "Why", I ask myself at the sight of reinforcing bars sticking out from shattered concrete.

Our first stop is in the small village on Arnoun. We were briefed on the work of the Mine Advisory Group, but it is not mines they are clearing here but unexploded cluster bombs. We were taken on a tour of the minefield and showed how they looked for them. Dozens of yellow posts mark the spot of each shell found. These bomblets are small, just a bit bigger than my thumb. At first, many would have been easily visible but rain has covered them in mud and encouraged the vegetation to grow. The grass is now waist high and the cluster bomblets impossible to see with the naked eye.

The mine clearance teams have had no help from the Israelis, no information on how many shells were fired or where they were targeted. An estimated one million unexploded cluster bombs lie in southern Lebanon.

During the shelling, no one was hurt by them but, since then, farmers and children have been maimed and some even killed by these tiny shells. Crops lay uncollected because farmers cannot access their fields. In our village, they have cleared 7,600 bomblets. There are 56 such teams, but money permitting, their work should be completed by next year.

The question is why did the Israelis use cluster munitions? Around 30% of standard bomblets fail to explode on landing and even 10% of the so called 'smart' bomblets fail to detonate. But 90% of the Israeli cluster bomb attacks took place in the last 72 hours before the ceasefire and after the agreement in the UN. Cluster bombs are not classified as mines and their use is therefore legal –



however there appears to be a clear intent by the Israeli government here to use them as an anti-personnel mine against a civilian population.

That in my view has to be in contravention of the Ottawa Convention and could possibly therefore be a war crime.

Later that day, we drove down to the Fatima Gate on the Israel-Lebanon border. White UN armoured vehicles patrol the border, Israeli army guards observe us through the fencing. A disused Hezbollah souvenir shop makes a strange backdrop.

Our final stop is at the village of Cana. The mayor greets us and provides us with an Italian book "proving" that this Cana is the village of Jesus's first miracle. The Cana on the Sea of Galilee probably has a better claim even though this Cana has ancient rock carvings that resemble Christ.

This is my first real comparison with Haifa. Here you do not have to drive from site to site to see the damaged houses for they are now being cleared into piles of rubble, in neat rows just as the houses once were. In this village, 164 houses are no more, completely destroyed by Israeli attacks. More than 250 villagers are now disabled, we were told because of the fighting.

"We had no Hezbollah rockets here," the mayor tells us. I'm not sure I believe him but I cannot doubt the graves of 29 children, five women and three men who died in the bombardment.

I left Israel angry at the mindlessness of Hezbollah rocket attacks. I left Lebanon angry and ashamed at what I saw.

There's blood on the hands of Hezbollah but the disproportionate retaliation and disgraceful use of cluster bombs leaves, for me, blood on the hands of the Israelis and all their allies who said nothing against their disproportionate retaliation.

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Richard Younger-Ross is Liberal Democrat MP for Teignbridge and a member of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee

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# ITS OWN WORST ENEMY

Israel's strategy towards the Palestinians will prove a disaster for both peoples, says Michael Meadowcroft

It is hard to imagine a more disastrous strategy for the future of Israel than that which it has pursued for the past 40 years. It has destroyed the Palestinians' social, political and economic structures, it has behaved in a callous and arrogant manner towards a whole people, it has alienated a considerable number of former supporters and, perhaps worst of all, it has provoked a revitalisation of anti-Semitism.

Those of us who have marched the streets in protest at the treatment of Soviet Jewry and who have consistently fought the fascists, despair at Israel's wholly counter-productive treatment of the Palestinian people.

What is more, we are baffled and grieved by those many Jewish friends who are rational and liberal on every subject except Israel.

To push the standard Jewish line on Israel requires a rejection of the political judgement of otherwise trusted colleagues and, for this single issue, a reversal of Liberal beliefs on how security and peace can be achieved.

It is plainly disastrous to be the only ones in step. Newton's Third Law applies equally to politics: "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." The history of the past 40 years in Palestine is vivid: force breeds force; extremism creates extremism.

To hint, let alone assert, that rejection of Israel's policies stems from some deep anti-Semitic sentiment is deeply insulting to those who have stood shoulder to shoulder in innumerable campaigns against the far right.

The religious uniqueness of the state of Israel and the grotesque sin of the holocaust do not provide reasons for setting aside the rights of the Palestinian people or for the illegal treatment and ghettoisation of the West Bank and Gaza. It is a simple fact that there will be no secure and peaceful future for Israel without a secure and peaceful Palestine.

Those of us who argue against its present policies are Israel's best friends. It is vital that Israel's Jewish supporters outside the country accept that their support of the state of Israel requires the exercise of the same reason

and judgement in relation to its policies as they routinely apply to Iraq and other countries where occupying forces try vainly to impose peace through force.

An objective assessment of the situation in the Middle East draws one inexorably to the conclusion that Israel does not want any just resolution of the Palestinian 'problem' ever.

From the outset, and particularly since 1967, its permanent policy has been to settle Palestine, to subdue the Palestinian people and to impose a reign of terror with impunity, being aware that no major power will intervene

to prevent it. Facts on the ground are all that matter and the Israeli attitude of superiority towards, and contempt for, the Palestinian people is apparently sufficient justification for their actions. Once a people is demonised and pilloried as one's innate enemy, history shows that it is a very easy progression to communal punishment, deprivation of property, ghettoisation, imprisonment without trial and summary execution – all of which are happening today in Gaza and on the West Bank.

Many parallels are drawn between the situation in the Middle East and elsewhere. Last January, in a well-documented and referenced paper to the Human Rights Council of the United Nations, its special rapporteur, Professor John Dugard of South Africa, considered the application of the International

Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid to the occupied Palestinian territory. He lists the actions of the Israeli government and of its forces and asks: "Can it seriously be denied that the purpose of such action is to establish and maintain domination by one racial group (Jews) over another racial group (Palestinians) and systematically oppressing them?"

An even more accurate parallel would be the establishment and behaviour of the United States and its genocide of some two million 'native' Americans. With superior weapons, the colonists systematically moved across the continent, settling the good sites and forcing those living there off their tribal lands and into

*“The wall currently being constructed forces the Palestinians into huge ghettos that can be sealed off. History teaches that those in ghettos never accept their confinement and eventually revolt”*



reservations, killing them whenever deemed necessary, usually on the grounds that the natives were threatening their survival.

Agreements were made and later reneged on. Eventually, the whole of the USA was under the control of the colonists and the facts on the ground became accepted. How many people today – in or out of the USA – stop to ponder, or are even aware of, how the USA came into existence? The parallels with the Israelis and the Palestinians today are all too clear. It is perhaps significant that it is the USA that provides the major financial and military sustenance of Israel.

I first went to Palestine with a Liberal International delegation in 1988 at the time of the first intifada. We went to Gaza and to many towns and villages in the West Bank, and we spoke to a wide cross section of people. Their conditions were often very difficult, with curfews and road blocks, but they spoke generously of their willingness to share the land on an equal basis. I listened intently as the Palestinians carefully used three different words to differentiate their counterparts: Israeli, Jew and Zionist.

Only the last were then regarded as enemies. Today one hears only the one word, 'Jew'. I recall vividly a dignified elderly man in a Gazan refugee camp who reached up to a shelf to take down a plastic folder in which were the deeds of his house in Haifa in north Israel. And at that time it was still just about possible for Jew and Muslim to visit together the historic tombs of Abraham and Isaac in Hebron, as we also did. Baruch Goldstein ended that when he killed 30 Palestinians at prayer there in 1994.

We had heard of Hamas and we asked about them. In 1998 they did not exist at all in the West Bank and there were no more than a handful of adherents in Gaza.

Hamas is a militant organisation that exists as a direct response to Israeli actions which enables them to recruit day by day more and more extremists. If the moderate elected president of Palestine, Mahmoud Abbas, cannot bring about a Palestinian state, then it is, alas, unsurprising that the voters turn to those who offer very different methods of achieving it. Despite the logistical problems, Palestine is a functioning democracy and its electors voted freely for a Hamas majority. The issue of formal recognition of Israel's right to exist is, curiously, a political totem pole. Israel plainly exists, will exist and no major power will permit it to be destroyed. The issue is post-1967 Palestine.

I went back to Palestine for an extended period ending with the Palestinian elections in January 1996. I was latterly the EU special advisor in Jerusalem.

## RABIN ASSASSINATION

This was in the aftermath of the assassination of Itzhak Rabin by a Jewish fundamentalist and they were days of great hope following the Oslo accords. Palestinian leaders spoke of allowing settlers to remain – if they were prepared to accept Palestinian citizenship. There was an acceptance, however reluctantly, of the reality of the state of Israel.

Wherever one went, even in West Jerusalem, or at roadblocks, Israelis smiled and wished us well. But then,



just after the elections, the Israeli secret service killed a Hamas extremist in Gaza, nicknamed 'the engineer', via his mobile telephone. Hamas retaliated by killing Israelis in Tel Aviv, and the Israeli electorate's reaction was to elect the right wing Likud leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, as prime minister. Whether Mossad deliberately killed 'the engineer' to influence the elections, I know not, but it was certainly effective. I believe that the present situation

is the continuing consequence of that one Israeli action. Mossad at least did not want a resolution to the situation.

Professor Dugard's UN report is worth reading in full. Israel makes much of its withdrawal from Gaza but Dugard points out that (as also in Ehud Barak's proposal in 2000) Israel retained control of Gaza's air space, sea space, external borders and the two key border crossings. Dugard regards the siege of Gaza as a form of collective punishment in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention. He states that the "indiscriminate use of military power against civilians and civilian targets has resulted in serious war crimes".

The wall currently being constructed forces the Palestinians into huge ghettos that can be sealed off. History teaches that those in ghettos never accept their confinement and eventually revolt. Dugard points out that "80% of the wall is built within Palestinian territory itself and, in order to incorporate the Ariel settlement block, it extends some 22km into the West Bank. The closed zone includes many of the West Bank's most valuable water resources".

There are currently 260,000 illegal settlers in the West Bank and around a further 200,000 in East Jerusalem. There are some 9,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli gaols charged with or convicted of 'security offences'; the figure includes some 400 children and more than 100 women. In addition, there are more than 700 individuals held without charge or trial.

One can go on with more and more figures demonstrating the appalling consequences of Israel's occupation of the West Bank but they will be excused and explained by its sympathisers as a necessary response to Palestinian attacks.

Unless and until these colleagues ask why the Palestinians have been forced into extremism, nothing will change. If Israeli organisations such as B'Tselem, HaMoked and the IDF refuseniks can bravely expose Israeli crimes, why cannot our and their Jewish colleagues in the UK do likewise?

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Michael Meadowcroft was a member of the EU's electoral assistance mission for the 1997 Palestinian Presidency and National Assembly elections, based initially in Jericho and later in Jerusalem. He was Liberal MP for Leeds West 1983/87

The Dugard report is available at :  
<http://www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/4session/A.HRC.4.17.pdf>

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# DISPUTED, NOT OCCUPIED

The West Bank and Gaza were never part of a Palestinian state but could have become so had the Arab states talked to Israel, argues Matthew Harris

If history really was written by the side that wins, then Israel would have written the history of the Six Day War. But Israel's narrative on the events of 1967 does not dominate the debate on what happened, least of all on the liberal left that includes our party.

An Israeli narrative on the Six Day War can be expressed in these 59 words: "in 1967, no Arab country recognised Israel's existence.

"With its neighbours poised to launch a war in which they were pledged to Israel's destruction, Israel launched a pre-emptive strike and won the war in six days. Israel gained control of certain disputed territories in this war, which it has repeatedly pledged to return if the Arabs will make peace."

The liberal left's narrative on the Six Day War can be summarised in these, different 59 words: "Israel started a war against its neighbours and occupied the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights, killing and displacing many people in the process.

"Motivated by a desire for territorial expansion, Israel has since planted settlers in these occupied territories and refuses to give them up, with the original Arab inhabitants having suffered immensely."

It is a fair bet that the second narrative would chime more strongly with most Liberator readers than would the first.

Liberals tend to believe that, if Israel gave up the 'occupied Palestinian territories' acquired in the Six Day War, there would be peace and an end to terrorist attacks against Israel.

Indeed, many believe that 'the occupation' is the root cause of the conflict between Israel and the Arabs.

This belief is based on several misconceptions. Firstly, none of the disputed territories was Palestinian before Israel gained it in the Six Day War. The UN assigned most of the West Bank to a new Arab state in its proposed partition of Palestine in 1947, but Jordan annexed it instead in 1948.

Jordan also annexed East Jerusalem, intended by the UN to be "corpus separatum" under international control. Jews were expelled from the old city's Jewish quarter, which was bulldozed, including the destruction of many synagogues. Jordan denied Jews access to Jerusalem's Jewish holy sites.

The Gaza Strip, allocated like the West Bank to the proposed new Arab state in partitioned Palestine, was taken by Egypt in 1948. Between 1948 and 1967, neither Jordan nor Egypt showed the slightest desire to create a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip – indeed, they were brutal in suppressing the slightest stirrings of Palestinian national aspirations.

Since these territories were all assigned either to a non-existent new Arab state or to international control, it is wrong to say that their status was fixed before the Six Day War, or that they were somehow under Palestinian control until the Israelis arrived in 1967.

Israel is right to call these not 'occupied territories', but 'disputed territories', since the previous Jordanian and Egyptian

control of them was neither legal nor permanent. As for Israel's taking of the Golan Heights from Syria, it was in 1923 that most of the Golan was transferred from Britain's Palestine Mandate to France's Syria Mandate (with a bit of Syria being moved to Palestine in return in 1924).

In other words, most boundaries in the Middle East were created arbitrarily by Britain and France in the 1920s, so it is nonsensical to assume that the Golan Heights were somehow part of Syria since time immemorial.

We talk of 'Palestine', as if to mean the territory ruled by Britain under League of Nations Mandate from 1920 until 1948, but the British hived off 77% of Mandate Palestine in 1923 to create Transjordan, which became today's Kingdom of Jordan.

So the 'Palestine' of today, in terms of Israel, East Jerusalem and the territories administered by the Palestinian Authority, is a mere 23% of the 'Palestine' that the League of Nations handed to Britain in 1920.

*"Israel's holding of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem is not the root cause of the Arab/Israeli conflict"*

Israel's holding of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem is not the root cause of the Arab/Israeli conflict – a conflict that went on long before the so-called root cause even existed. There were wars and terrorist attacks against Israel long before 1967, obviously not sparked by Israel's occupation of land that it did not yet occupy.

Rather, they were caused by the Arab world's total refusal to accept the existence of Israel. Even though the territory at issue in 1947 was only 23% of Mandate Palestine (the Arabs already had the other 77%, in the form of Jordan), the Arabs refused to consider partitioning that 23% into Jewish and Arab states, with an international zone in Jerusalem. Extremists on their own side often murdered those moderate Arabs who did wish to consider partition.

This tragic Arab failure to accept partition (which would have created a Palestinian state) led to Israel's war of independence, in which the Arabs attacked Israel in the hope of destroying it and creating an Arab state in all of the remaining 23% of Mandate Palestine.

Israel's victory in that war, in which it won not only the territory allocated to it by the UN, but also West Jerusalem and some of the territory allocated by the UN to the Arabs, left the Palestinian Arabs with nothing.

All of the territory allocated to their proposed new state was by then held by Jordan, Egypt and Israel. Hundreds of thousands of Arabs had left the territory that had become Israel, and were kept in refugee camps throughout the Arab world, pending an illusory conquest of Israel that never came. Their fate was matched by that of the several hundred thousand Jews who fled Arab lands after 1948, most of whom found refuge in Israel.

The Arab states ignored requests from Israel to discuss the Palestinian refugees in the 1950s, refusing even to recognise that Israel existed under international law. Arab states sponsored terrorist incursions into Israel and boycotted her economy, remaining officially at war with Israel. Syria used the Golan Heights to bombard the kibbutzim below, well within Israel's 1948 borders. After the Suez War of 1956, UN peacekeepers separated the Israelis and Egyptians and maintained Israel's right to send its merchant shipping down the Straits of Tiran, before Egypt expelled the peacekeepers in 1967.

It was always clearly understood that Egypt's closure of the straits to Israeli shipping would be an act of war. It was precisely such a closure, in 1967, which sparked the Six Day War, at a time when Egypt and other Arab states were publicly committed to the destruction of Israel. By 'destruction', we have to be clear that what is meant is the end of Israel's existence as a sovereign state, with its Jewish inhabitants either slaughtered or subjugated by invading armies. That is how the Arabs understood it, and that is how the Israelis understood it as well – and this, only 22 years after a third of the Jewish people had been genocidally butchered in the Holocaust.

The BBC has documented the role of the Soviet Union in engineering the Six Day War, to draw the Americans into a conflict that would drain her resources as she also fought in Vietnam.

False information about non-existent Israeli troop movements was fed to Arab states by Moscow, in a bid to make more likely an Arab attack on Israel. In this



inflammatory atmosphere, in which Israel was facing destruction, its decision to attack pre-emptively (destroying the Egyptian Air Force on the ground before the war had even begun) is entirely understandable. Equally understandable is the joy felt by Israel, a tiny country the size of Wales, at so quickly beating off a war of destruction waged by Arab forces of overwhelming numeric superiority.

Jerusalem, the divided city, was reunited, with Jews, Muslims and Christians granted equal access to their holy places. The Golan Heights, from which Syria rained death on Israeli civilians, was removed from Syrian control. Palestinian territory seized by Jordan and Egypt in 1948 was taken now by Israel, after a war sought not by Israel, but by the Arab states. The joy felt by Israelis and their supporters worldwide was enormous: Israel had proved that it could defend itself, and that the Arab option of force was not a real option.

In such an atmosphere of joy and triumph, it is understandable that Israel believed that the Arabs would accept the reality of its existence and make peace. Israel therefore immediately offered to negotiate on the return of its newly acquired territories, in return for peace and normal relations with the Arab world. The immediate Arab response, issued in the Khartoum Resolution of 1967, was the 'three nos': no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with Israel.

And still, despite all of this history, there are those who believe that "the occupation is the root cause of the Arab/Israeli conflict".

What greater calumny can there be than this gross historical misconception? This is not to deny the suffering of Palestinians since the Six Day War – suffering which surely could have been avoided if the Arab world had negotiated with Israel from the outset in 1967, or even in 1948, or before?

Nor is it to deny that the Israeli policy of building settlements in the territories acquired in 1967 is as misguided as so many Israeli liberals believe it to be.

But the liberal left's reading of the history of the Six Day War is a misreading, and this fortieth anniversary is an opportunity for liberals to reassess the foundations of their beliefs about this conflict.

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# NO OVERALL CONTROL ANYWHERE

Scotland's parliament is hung in complex ways and STV has destroyed single party control on almost all its councils. What next, asks Bernard Salmon

Chaos and confusion were the words that sprang to mind when looking at the Scottish elections.

That applies not just to the disgraceful way in which the elections were conducted and counted, but also to the results themselves and what they mean for Scotland's future.

Firstly, the problems with the elections' conduct. These started with delays in the despatch of postal ballots, which have resulted in an unknown number of people being denied a vote.

That would be serious enough in itself, but it was compounded by the way in which the votes were counted. Electronic counting was introduced for the first time, and in many cases did not work quite as it should, which resulted in significant delays to some election counts.

However, the biggest problem was the number of ballot papers that were declared as spoiled – as many as 100,000, or about 10% of the total number of ballots cast.

To some extent, this was due to voter stupidity. There were numerous articles in the media and in election literature telling people how to vote, and instructions at the top of the ballot papers, yet still a significant number of people filled in their ballot papers incorrectly.

However, the design of the ballot papers and the wisdom of holding elections to both Holyrood and local councils on the same day, using two different systems and requiring people to cast three votes (two for Holyrood and one for councils) have also been cited as significant factors.

An inquiry will rightly take place into the reasons for this confusion, and both the Labour Party and the Greens have made some noises about the possibility of taking legal action over the results.

But what of the results? What happened to make the SNP the largest party at Holyrood? And what will happen as a result of the election?

In broad terms, it is important to note that this was not a massive rejection of an unpopular Scottish government.

Although the SNP gained 20 seats to end up with 47 seats and be the largest party ahead of Labour, Labour lost just four seats to finish on 46, while the Lib Dems were down one to 16.

In both cases, their votes held up fairly well. What happened to propel the SNP into first place was that votes that in 2003 had splintered to an assortment of smaller parties this time united behind the SNP. The various Socialist factions were wiped out following the aftermath of the Tommy Sheridan libel case, the Greens dropped from seven seats to just two and sundry independents retired or lost their seats, leaving Margo MacDonald as the only one to get back.

This point is reinforced by looking at the issues that formed the backdrop to the election. On matters like health or education,

according to opinion polls, most voters thought the Scottish Executive has been doing a fairly good job. Health service reorganisation was probably a factor in a few parts of the country, but by no means all. Council tax was an issue, as all the parties found it necessary to put forward plans to reform it or replace it with an income-based alternative, but whether it shifted many votes is debatable.

The issues which made this a difficult election for Labour in particular were all Westminster ones – Iraq, the cash for peerages affair, Tony Blair's long drawn out departure and Trident replacement.

And neither is it the case that the SNP surge represents a real desire for independence. Opinion polls during the election indicated a drop in support for independence from 25% to 20%. This means that a significant number of people must have voted for the SNP despite disagreeing with its main reason for existence. It wasn't even the case that people were voting for them simply to get a referendum on independence, even if they disagreed with separatism. Although a referendum is in theory supported by a majority of the electorate, a survey at the start of the campaign by the BBC showed that a referendum on independence featured precisely nowhere in voters' list of

*“Neither is it the case that the SNP surge represents a real desire for independence”*

priorities. The SNP therefore benefited from being the main opposition party at a time when there was a general feeling of discontent with the people in charge, but without that discontent being prompted by any particular issue and despite a lack of support for the main thing the SNP wants to achieve, independence.

But whatever the reasons for the results, all the parties will now have to work to make the best of the situation. This means, at the time of writing, that serious consideration has to be given as to whether some sort of coalition is put together to run the Scottish Executive, or whether Scotland now enters the uncharted territory of minority government.

The options for a coalition are fairly limited. No two parties together have an overall majority, which means that any coalition would have to gain the support of at least three parties.

The Tories have ruled themselves out of any coalition government, while, as I write, the Lib Dems have ruled out taking part in a new coalition with Labour or the SNP. That means there is no realistic combination that could gain an overall majority.

This is despite there being a significant degree of policy agreement between the Lib Dems, SNP and Greens, as all are in favour of replacing council tax by an income-based alternative (details differ, but the principle is the same), all wish to see more powers for the Scottish Parliament, all want to see more investment in renewable energy and are opposed to new nuclear power stations.

However, there are also a number of areas of disagreement, not the least of which is the referendum on independence. I wrote in *Liberator* 317 that the Lib Dems had consistently opposed a referendum and were right to do so, as there is no concrete proposal for independence on the agenda.

But SNP leader Alex Salmond has shown some flexibility on the issue, indicating that a multi-option referendum which included the preferred Lib Dem option of federalism could be a possibility. Also, there has been some speculation in the Scottish press that the whole issue could be kicked into the long grass by means of both parties signing up to a new constitutional convention which would consider options for giving more powers to the Scottish Parliament, thereby allowing both sides to enter into a coalition with their existing views on a referendum intact.

Firstly, I think a three-party coalition would have been vastly less stable than one which just featured two parties, and it will be a judgement call as to whether that instability would be better or worse than what a minority government would face. Given that such an alliance would have an overall majority of only one, that increases the potential instability.

Secondly, would taking the Greens into government run the risk of giving them added credibility, and allow the Green tail to wag the coalition dog? Thirdly, would Lib Dem supporters and activists (and indeed the MSPs) be happy with such a deal? An awful lot of Scottish Lib Dem members have a great suspicion of the SNP and that might be a significant factor to overcome.

Fourthly, would the Lib Dems be slaughtered next time round by Labour and the Tories for helping prop up an SNP administration even from outside? And finally, given that the Lib Dems have been in coalition with Labour for the last eight years, it could have given the impression that all we're interested in is the ministerial limos and perks we can

get from office – rather than being a principled party which gets things done – had we entered an SNP-led coalition.

In my view, and I suspect that of many Lib Dem members across Scotland, these factors were of sufficient importance to say that the party should not enter into any new coalition.

I believe the Lib Dems should be prepared to return to opposition and vote on any legislation put forward by a minority government on its merits. It should also play its part in ensuring such a minority government can be put in place. There is a deadline of 28 days in which the Scottish Parliament has to elect a new first minister, otherwise a new election must be called.

The Lib Dem MSPs will have to decide whether they prefer a minority Labour or minority SNP administration and vote accordingly for either Salmond or Labour leader Jack McConnell as first minister. My preference would be for Salmond, as I think the gloss will soon come off the SNP when it has to face the realities of government and actually has to make some choices rather than have a never-ending wish list.

Whatever the eventual make-up of the Scottish Executive, it's quite clear that Scotland faces a period of political uncertainty in the near future, a situation which also applies to local government. As expected, Labour was swept from overall control of many of its local fiefdoms due to the introduction of STV for council elections, although it managed to retain North Lanarkshire and, more surprisingly, Glasgow.

There will be many different coalitions put in place across the country, and some local authorities will face real debate and opposition for the first time. The number of Lib Dem councillors remained roughly constant, with gains in the central belt being balanced by losses in some areas where the party was over-represented under first past the post. But they are now the largest political party in Edinburgh, Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and Highland, and also have a significant presence in both Fife and the Borders.

That council performance will go some way to making up for what was a disappointing night nationally across Scotland. The loss of effective and hard-working MSPs such as George Lyon, Nora Radcliffe and Euan Robson was a bitter pill to take – albeit with the latter two being compensated by corresponding gains from the regional list. It was especially disappointing when you consider that several Tory and Labour MSPs with a good record of hard work managed to resist the SNP surge in their constituencies.

It was also a significant step backwards compared with the high hopes raised by the exceptional Lib Dem performance in Scotland in the 2005 general election, when the party finished second in both votes and seats for the first time ever.

However, I believe that a period of constructive opposition to a minority SNP government will help to get the party back on track and it will come back refreshed both in the next Westminster election and in the Holyrood poll in 2009. Although there may be chaos and confusion, there is also reason for hope.

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Bernard Salmon is a former Liberal Democrat councillor in Inverness

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# GROUNDHOG DAY FOR THE CARDIFF SIX

Wales's election returned the same six Liberal Democrats to the assembly who have been there since its inception. Can the party move forward there, asks Russell Deacon

The Welsh Liberal Democrats have now thrown their third six in a row in the electoral game of Welsh Assembly politics. The same six members who were elected in 2003, and whom were all also elected in 1999 are back once again.

This is the good news, no losses. This is also bad news in that again no other Welsh Liberal Democrat will be joining them. It is this bad news that is travelling around the Welsh Party. Bad news also sells newspapers and, since these Welsh results came in on 4 May, the party has had the kind of media coverage it so lacked in the actual campaign.

The Welsh election was a tremendous shock for the party. It had genuinely expected three or four gains across Wales, injecting some fresh blood.

Yet it was stuck on six. The Conservatives, Labour and Plaid Cymru have seen wholesale changes in their assembly members over this same period.

Therefore 2007 was going to be the Welsh Liberal Democrats' turn to have a few more members. After all, 2004 had seen them break through into Welsh local government for the first time, leading the coalitions in Bridgend, Cardiff, Swansea and Wrexham. The general election result of 2005 saw four Welsh MPs (two gains), the highest number since 1951. Therefore the Welsh Party and its leadership can't be blamed for feeling the party was on a bit of an electoral role and that 2007 would see this continue once more.

Election day initially did raise the heartbeat of Welsh Liberal Democrats. Throughout the night, rumours spread across Wales of the party winning – Newport East, Ceredigion, Swansea West and even Pontypridd (where the party has just two councillors). Yet as the night drew on, it became apparent that these were all going to be good second places.

What then of the list seats? Surely the proportional top up list would provide the party with one or two extra seats?

No – the cruel mechanics of the system meant that this was not to be. Before the last result was declared in South Wales Central, the party was 98.5% confident that John Dixon would be its first Welsh Liberal Democrat list member there. The strong Conservative showing, however, in the Vale of Glamorgan, where they almost won the seat,

was transferred to the list and Dixon lost out by 836 votes. In South Wales East, Veronica Watkins, wife of the Welsh Assembly leader Mike German, failed to join him on the list by some 2,000 votes. The nightmare had come true for the Welsh Liberal Democrats. They had stayed still. Neither up nor down. They were stuck on their 1999 result.

The Welsh election, like the British general election of 2001, on the surface showed remarkably little change. Labour had avoided meltdown mainly by the luck of being on the winning side of some now very new marginal constituencies.

Five Labour seats have majorities of less than 1,000. By gaining two list seats in Mid and West Wales to compensate for its three lost constituencies there, Labour was only three seats worse off than when the Assembly dissolved the month before. It had gone down from 29 to 26 seats. Labour even made one constituency gain in North Wales, Wrexham from the independent John Marek.

Wrexham was also a Liberal Democrat hope. The party's candidate Bruce Roberts did get 16.7% there but this put him fourth behind Labour, Marek and the Tory. Distressingly for the Welsh party, this was its best result in North Wales, where on the list the party with just 7.4% of the vote narrowly escaped being beaten by the BNP on 5.08%.

Thus Labour had avoided the predicted meltdown, despite its vote having drastically shrunk across Wales. The opposition vote was spread, meaning that Labour retained many seats by being the largest of the minority

*“With the failure to elect new AMs, however, it is hard to see who in the existing group would be a better leader”*

votes. Only in the Cynon Valley, Rhondda and Ogmore did it gain more than 50% of the vote.

Plaid Cymru also managed this in three seats, the Welsh Liberal Democrats in two (Cardiff Central and Brecon & Radnor) and the Conservatives in Monmouth. Trish Law, the only Independent to win, also gained over half of the vote (54.09 %). Therefore, in the other 30 constituencies in Wales, the vote was spread widely.

Plaid Cymru had a good night, vote wise and seat wise, winning seven constituencies and eight list seats (three more than 2003). This figure, however, remains less than half of what it needs to form a government in its own right. Plaid also produced Wales's first ethnic minority assembly member – Mohammad Asghar (South Wales East). The Welsh Liberal Democrats didn't even have an ethnic minority candidate, let alone one who could win a seat.

Plaid also held onto Ceredigion, despite a massive challenge by the Welsh Liberal Democrat John Davies. It retained a majority 3,955 votes. Davies's failure to get elected was a further tragedy for the Welsh Liberal Democrats as he is an effective political speaker in Welsh, something the party currently lacks in the assembly. Plaid took three new constituencies from Labour, leaving the latter with no constituency in Mid and West Wales for the first time since 1918.

The Conservatives stormed ahead in many constituencies across Wales. They now hold five constituency seats, having held only one between 1999-2007. Overall they gained only one new seat but their vote rose substantially. As their gain of Welsh constituencies rose, their list seat total decreased. The side effects of this swap around has meant that the Tories have lost their two female AMs and gained one new one. This makes them an even more male dominated party than they were before. Something perhaps for the UK electorate to remember in future, that this is the reality of Cameron's new Conservative gender policies in action. But we should also note that, of the Welsh Liberal Democrats' possible six gains at the election, only one would have been female – Veronica Watkins.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats are now fixed in some kind of continual Groundhog Day. No matter what they do before the election to widen the assembly members' base, it merely results in the same six members being re-elected once more.

This fact will cause a great deal of soul searching within the party. Initially the 'guns of frustration' have been pointing at the Welsh Assembly leader Michael German. Yet it would be hard to accuse German, an experienced campaigner and workaholic politician, of not putting his very heart and soul into the campaign.

There have been calls for 'his head', most prominently from South Wales West AM Peter Black. With the failure to elect new AMs, however, it is hard to see who in the existing group would be a better leader. It is also has to be remembered that German is not an autocratic monarch; it is also the wider party that must share much of the blame. Nevertheless the party has some real issues to address.

What does it mean to be a Welsh Liberal Democrat? As I wrote in *Liberator* 317, the Welsh party has developed a policy agenda which is often numbingly dull and devoid of electoral appeal. It is hard to campaign for votes when you lack the radical edge so evident in the success of the Welsh party's Liberal forbears. The party needs to find some radical and appealing policies, which its own members and voting public support, but also to distinguish itself from the

other parties. In an assembly that is dominated by welfarism and centre left politics, there needs to be a different ideology to make at least one party clearly electorally distinct.

The party has little general appeal across Wales. It doesn't gain much from the electoral appeal of the federal party as do the Conservatives and Labour. Ming's radiance does not project itself into Wales, unlike Cameron's. During the campaign, I did some media work at the BBC. They had a discussion panel with the central topic being: 'Was the Welsh Assembly election just a series of local elections or one national campaign?'

For the Liberal Democrats, it became a series of local elections. Where they worked hard or where they had a well known local candidate, they did well. Where they relied on just the party label, with an unknown candidate, they rarely got more than 10% of the vote and, more often than not, struggled to keep their deposit. In these new winnable seats, the party's regional list members, with the exception of North Wales, must now realise that gains here will mean the loss of their own seats unless they can get a much greater list vote. PR in the AMS system has very mixed blessings for the Welsh Liberal Democrats, at present specifically Black and German.

Coalition or pact? The Lab-Lib coalition in Wales between 2000/03 had little impact on the Liberal fortunes. Neither did the opposition period of 2003/07. Is another coalition therefore in the party's interests with the local government elections coming up?

Not only does the party have to consider whether it should go into Assembly coalition with another party or parties, it also needs to think whether it should go into an electoral pact with another party. A join pact with the Greens, for instance, with their combined vote, would have given the party the possibility of four more constituencies and two more list seats. Such a pact boosted Plaid Cymru's vote substantially in the 1990s. Should the Welsh party do this too?

The next test for the Welsh party is next year's local authority elections. If the party is to make gains here, it needs to sort itself out over the next few months. It needs to get itself prepared for the long term as well as the short term if it is to move forward from Groundhog Day.

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# AFRICA'S LEADERS SAINTS TO THUGS?

The west is outraged over Robert Mugabe's oppression in Zimbabwe but it keeps backing African leaders who turn tyrant, says Becky Tinsley

Once more, Africa's leaders have declined to give Robert Mugabe his marching orders. The conventional wisdom is that they are reluctant to castigate an anti-colonialist stalwart of the liberation struggle. But does 'solidarity forever' explain it, or is it part of a pattern?

Only Julius Nyerere of Tanzania denounced Idi Amin, hardly a guerrilla leader of the Mugabe 'long march' pedigree, for slaughtering 300,000 of his fellow Ugandans.

The continent's rulers averted their eyes during the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and the carve-up of the Democratic Republic of Congo where, the Lancet calculates, four million people have died since 1998. There was no unified condemnation throughout 25 years of slaughter in southern Sudan (an estimated 2-4 million dead). Nor does the Africa Union demand that the racist Arab junta ruling Sudan stop killing black Africans in Darfur (200,000-400,000 dead since 2004).

Frustrated by Africa's repeated failure to hold its own to account, the west rails at Mugabe, leaving African intellectuals asking where was the uproar when Mugabe 20,000 killed in Matabeleland in the 1980s.

(And, by the same token, if Tony Blair cared so much about the Iraq, why didn't he sign the parliamentary early day motions when Saddam gassed the Kurds in 1988?)

## BRUTAL AUTOCRAT

Zimbabwe's octogenarian dictator is without argument a brutal autocrat who has murdered thousands and plunged his country into economic chaos. His indifference to his peoples' suffering is shocking, even by the standards of the privileged African elites running many of the continent's 53 countries.

However, given the roll call of recent murder and mayhem in DRC, Sudan and Rwanda, some Africans wonder why Mugabe is being singled out.

They reel off the names of monsters like Mobutu in Zaire and Bokassa in the Central African Republic, who were propped up by Washington and London during the cold war. Bokassa, lest we forget, spent a third of his poverty-wracked nation's revenues on his own coronation, a Busby Berkeley-style event attended by world leaders who happily accepted Bokassa's champagne despite the starving masses beyond the palace gates.

So, is it the fate of white Zimbabweans that concentrates our minds on Mugabe? Our selective fury and equally our

wide-eyed optimism when we find new heroes bemuses African commentators.

Both Blair and George Bush have made a great show of hailing African paragons who will redeem the continent, turning the page on decades during which the elites have stolen the wealth of their nations and oppressed their wretched citizens.

So keen are we to appoint saints, that we cannot face the central point about power and government in Africa: most members of the small ruling class care nothing for their illiterate and downtrodden masses. They are quietly amused by our desire to provide schools, hospitals and roads to people they hardly consider human. No wonder they help themselves to the aid money that we naively hand over.

Consider this comment from a Cameroonian lawyer, and a member of her country's elite. Driving through the Liberian jungle, monitoring the 2005 poll, she objected to soliciting voters' views about the election process. Pointing at a line of ragged, thin, shoeless women carrying water jugs on their heads along a seemingly endless road, she grumbled in the style of Jane Austen's Lady Catherine de Burgh, "They are stupid and they smell. Look how black they are! Disgusting!"

As Kofi Annan told a meeting of the now defunct Organisation of African Unity in 2000, "We have mismanaged our affairs for decades, and we are suffering the accumulated effects."

Well, Kofi, not so much 'we' as 'they': the children of below average height in rural areas who have to walk 10 miles if they want education; the one in five babies who die before they reach 12 months of age because of simple and preventable diseases; the one in 12 women who die in childbirth; the one million dying of malaria each year.

Despite evidence to the contrary, we persist in shutting our eyes to the grim reality about Africa's ruling classes. After meeting Nigeria's President Obasanjo, Blair giddily announced that "There is a new generation of African leaders" committed to reforming the troubled continent. Certainly Obasanjo is an improvement on what came before.

However, Human Rights Watch found that, in one Nigerian state alone, the man in charge took a daily travel allowance of \$90,000. Of Nigeria's 35 state governors, 31 are being investigated by the economic and financial crimes commission. When an anti-corruption minister gets his teeth into rooting out the most flagrant kleptomaniacs in Nigeria, he tends to be sacked or promoted elsewhere.



The Carter Center did not bother to monitor the April 2007 vote because it was a foregone conclusion that there would be massive fraud. This may become monotonous, but perhaps our lack of outrage is connected to Nigeria's oil.

Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia was one of Blair's 'new generation' in 2002, leaving us to wonder about his judgement or the advice he receives from the Foreign Office.

A former US State Department Africa boffin recalled that, within five minutes of meeting Zenawi ten years ago, he knew he was in the presence of a murderous thug. Still, Blair elevated Zenawi to the pantheon of worthies, praising his "enlightened approach to the continent's problems".

There followed the usual sad revelations about corruption, nepotism and human rights abuses, including shooting peacefully protesting students, and mass arrests of those who dare voice their opposition to his rule. During my visit last year, there were nine bombs in public places that virtually every man and woman in the street assumed had been set by the government itself, Putin-style.

## **BLATANT CORRUPTION**

Zenawi's corruption is blatantly obvious. Anyone who bothered to open their eyes would notice that the region from which he and his government ministers hail receives a massively disproportionate slice of public spending for schools, hospitals and infrastructure. Nevertheless, the UK Department for International Development is increasing its aid to Ethiopia from £60m in 2004 to £130m this year.

Uganda's Museveni was another golden boy until he started locking up opposition leaders, and changing the constitution to get a third term. "Only I have sufficient vision to lead this country, and that's that," he declared.

Ghana's John Kufuor is currently enduring the same simplistic adoration. As a British parliamentarian familiar with Africa remarked, "I'm worried for poor John because they'll set him up as a saint and then tear him down again when it turns out he is human. They don't judge him as a politician but as an African, a special category immune from the normal rules. It is fundamentally racist."

Apart from racism, perhaps economic self-interest plays its part in our value-system. Why, for instance, do we not heap abuse on Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, the leader of Equatorial Guinea? Savvy Africans know the answer: Equatorial Guinea has the third largest oil reserves in sub-Saharan Africa.

According to a US Senate report, Obiang and his family have stolen at least \$700m of oil revenues. Global Witness and other human rights groups rank it among the 10 most appalling regimes in the world. The US State Department concedes that Obiang treats the nation's oil as his personal property, while his people live and die short lives in extreme poverty (121 out of 177 countries on the UN Human Development Index). He rigs elections and spends 10% of the GNP on the military. Nevertheless, the State Department insists, Obiang is better than his predecessor (his uncle, whom he had shot).

But surely the Pol Pot award for killing the highest percentage of one's own people must go to Field Marshall Omar al-Bashir of Sudan. His can claim credit for an estimated 2-4 million in the south, and between 200,000-400,000 in Darfur.

Sudan has no free press or freedom of speech, and it imposes Sharia law on everyone, irrespective of their religion. Africans despise Bashir: just listen to phone-ins on

the BBC World Service. Why doesn't the west pour scorn upon him, Mugabe-style? Happily for the repressive junta ruling Khartoum, Sudan has oil, and the regime is now our partner in the war on terror, having once given Osama Bin Laden shelter for five years.

A Kenyan opposition MP wrote recently, "Like chiefs, emperors, kings and other slave dealers of old, our presidents and prime ministers preside over a system of power that continues to make our peoples 'hewers of wood and drawers of water'."

They allow the continent's natural riches to be siphoned off, "so long as their grotesque and gratuitous lifestyles, and those of their families and hangers-on, can be guaranteed."

While the UK's DfID boasts about promoting good governance, transparency, sustainable development and building capacity, Africans not in limousines tend to be either mystified or angered by our actions. Many poor Africans refuse to believe we give away millions of pounds: they never see any sign of it. Others ask, why are you propping up the people who steal from us and oppress us?

Mike Sansom at African Initiatives goes from one Tanzanian village to the next, explaining how much aid has been earmarked for local schools. He provokes formerly timid villagers to demand answers from their local and regional rulers. If we wanted to promote good governance, we would be supporting groups like African Initiatives, or One World Action, which trains illiterate Bangladeshi women to stand for local councils and agitate for change.

Will a Conservative government take a more cynical view of "Africa's new generation of leaders"? David Cameron is leading a group of Tories to Rwanda this summer to work on community projects, explicitly supporting President Paul Kagame. (Some might ask if the Rwandan people have not suffered enough already).

Cameron and Andrew Mitchell, who shadows DfID, are fulsome in their boyish enthusiasm for the guerrilla-turned-father-of-the-nation. There is not a whiff of corruption about Kagame, and he has far-sighted plans to lift his people out of poverty.

However, any future DfID secretary would be well advised to read Human Rights Watch's scrupulously researched reports about any country he intends to support, a notion Mitchell dismissed because he has "met the man several times and had dinner with him".

Meanwhile, we are confounded when Africa's big men close ranks around Mugabe. Abdelatif Ismail of the Darfur Centre for Human Rights suggests it has nothing to do with solidarity with a fellow anti-colonialist. "It is about not setting a precedent. No one wants the spotlight turned on them."

The tragedy of Africa is its leaders, and its salvation will be its people, once they are given a voice.

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Becky Tinsley is director of Waging Peace, which campaigns for Darfur

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# REDUCING WHOSE TAX BURDEN?

The Liberal Democrats' Tax Commission is about to commit the political error of making the party both wrong and unpopular, say Tony Vickers and Andrew Duffield

Seasoned Liberal Democrat conference-goers agree that the tax debate at Brighton in 2006 was one of the best since the party was formed.

The motion was passed by a clear majority, rejecting a 50% top rate of income tax and embracing a 'green tax switch' from productivity to pollution, with a call for "further policies on land taxation to be developed, including consideration of the Lyons Review when it is published". Note that it did not merely ask for existing policy to be further developed.

The Federal Policy Committee moved fast and, before Christmas, re-convened the Tax Commission that had brought us *Fairer, Simpler, Greener*, with a new chair, to address outstanding issues.

The December 2006 FPC agenda acknowledged, "by far the most controversial aspect [of the commission's work] will be the land tax question".

Some commission members saw this as an opportunity to replace our commitment to local income tax with a form of land taxation, not necessarily just – or even at all – at local level.

The party group Action for Land Taxation and Economic Reform has long made clear that it doesn't object to LIT – or 'localised income tax', as we prefer to call it – so long as a domestic property tax is retained at national level.

As *Fairer, Simpler, Greener* noted, replacing council tax with LIT "will leave the UK in a unique position internationally of having no direct taxation of property at all".

Under Mike Williams's chairmanship in 2006, the Tax Commission accepted this would be a very bad idea, confirming in the same paper "there is good reason in principle why taxation of property should be retained".

Development had already begun on an alternative proposal from Vince Cable for a national 'progressive [domestic] property tax' to ensure the green tax switch wouldn't be seen as a sham.

As it stands (thanks to LIT), our tax policy actually increases the burden on wealth creating wage earners by around 3% – despite conference asserting that it "supports the principle of using taxes on resource usage to help cut

taxes on wealth creation" by endorsing *Fairer, Simpler, Greener*.

The Brighton debate and outcome showed that conference understands that "ability to pay" can relate to income or wealth or both", and that it wants tax policies which tap into wealth. And the most important untapped and rapidly growing source of wealth in Britain today is the land under our houses.

Regrettably, it has become ingrained in the minds of the party's economically illiterate that 'Axe The Tax' means 'no more domestic property tax'.

Even senior figures have been convinced by their own unsubstantiated propaganda that abolishing council tax while introducing a national land value tax would be an electoral disaster.

This claim is made without any polling evidence. All the party has ever done is compare LIT with council tax. No poll has asked voters if they might prefer a 'fairer property tax' to LIT. The limited real evidence we do have, from residents' surveys conducted in Newbury over the past nine months, clearly indicates that an overall majority of voters would prefer a fairer property tax to all other options, with twice as many supporting this as LIT. "Interesting", said Chris Rennard on hearing this.

*Reducing the Burden* is the title of the draft policy paper now emerging from a seemingly semi-detached commission under its new chair Dick

Newby.

It is highly doubtful whether it meets conference's wish to develop new land tax policies, and it will be interesting to see what the FPC does about that.

The draft paper does at least offer a solution to the duplicity of a 2p green tax switch and a 4.5p LIT rate, which currently raises the overall burden on jobs. Let's hope both FPC and conference approve of that anyway. But it is the absence of any coherent policy on taxing the unearned wealth accruing to the owners of landed property that continues to confound any Liberal Democrat claims to care about the young and economically excluded.

Despite acknowledging in *Fairer, Simpler, Greener* that "tax reform should take account of inter-generational

*"Our tax policy actually increases the burden on wealth creating wage earners by around 3%"*

[wealth] issues”, there was nothing in that policy paper – and there remains nothing in *Reducing the Burden* – that actually does anything to address this.

The arbitrary and widely trailed £1m property tax is there, but it is a sorry shadow of what might have been achieved – without compromising LIT.

It smacks of gesture politics and has already been dubbed an ‘envy tax’. The problem remains that, when council tax is axed to make way for LIT, the vast majority of homes will be untaxed. Average house prices would rise by over £20,000 and this party would have further exacerbated the growing generational crisis in affordable housing.

There are two other key policy papers in production that will be debated by conference this autumn; on poverty and inequality, and on climate change.

Although both will no doubt contain worthy attempts at reversing the rich-poor divide and rising global warming, the opportunity for the concurrent tax paper to lead the way with a coherent fiscal thread now seems certain to be lost.

Tax reform is fundamental to tackling wealth inequity and the efficient use of finite resources. Taxing land values is a critical part of the solution. While all three papers may nod in the right direction, none seem able or willing to commit.

Who cares? The young do for a start. By a majority of 10 to 1, the 2007 LDYS spring conference passed a motion calling for land value tax and not LIT to replace council tax.

The next generation has a vested interest in shifting tax to a sustainable base – economically and environmentally.

There are also many Green Lib Dems who will be unhappy to see no further developments on land value tax – arguably the greenest tax of all. Every other eco-tax will erode its own yield. They must do, or they aren’t changing unsustainable behaviour.

Just before the commission was re-convened, no less an authority than UN-HABITAT asserted that “LVT is the appropriate instrument for the urgent fight against global inequality and poverty... Without land tax there is a vast amount of land speculation which is pushing the price of land sky high, making it unaffordable for the poor in cities.”

This was part of a contract to develop an on-line Global Land Tool to help public officials understand and implement LVT. It should be ready by August, the product of collaborative work by 30 experts in more than a dozen countries, led by an American Green Party activist.

Yet we have a tax policy that will remain unsustainable and unfair to millions, despite two years of discussion and *Fairer, Simpler, Greener* highlighting the shortcomings, as well as the solution.

A century ago, the great reforming Liberal Budget of 1909 was inspired by Henry George’s seminal work *Progress and Poverty* – in its very title encapsulating the essential truth: that wealth arising from economic progress which accrues, untaxed, to the ‘owners’ of land or natural resources will inexorably lead to inequality, inefficiency and growing injustice.

Average house prices have been rising by an amount equivalent to twice the average annual take-home wage. No wonder gambling attracts the poor and families in rented housing despair: social exclusion is largely the product of a failure to tax land values.

Two hundred years after parliament ended slavery, will Liberal Democrats wilfully flinch from ending the enslavement by poverty that failing to recover ‘economic rent’ inflicts on asset-poor workers?

The commission was directed by conference and FPC to deal with the “practical issues which would have to be resolved to make a property tax workable”. Yet when it came to the scheduled commission meeting on domestic land and property tax, the chair immediately called for and won a vote to stop ALTER’s detailed paper on the subject even being discussed.

Apart from the aforementioned high value property tax, which may or may not be billed in the paper as a step towards land value tax, the commission has really only developed our existing policy to replace business rates with site value rating, the local form of LVT. It remains the case that no “further policies on land tax” are in the new tax paper at all.

The first practical issue is the registration and valuation of all land sites. If we embark on LVT/SVR for commercial land only, we multiply the problems for valuers and tax administrators. Far simpler to assess all commercial and domestic land from the outset, leading to a single unified property tax system with no artificial boundaries between residential and non-residential land.

Since Labour came to power, the market value of the nation’s housing stock has tripled to more than £3.5 trillion. There has been only a 5% increase in housing stock, so almost the entire rise in value has been due to land – not bricks and mortar. By levying a mere 0.5% annually of the increase in value under Labour (about £1,000 on a £300,000 house) and assuming a £100,000 tax-free ‘homestead allowance’, we could raise more than £10 billion in revenue, allowing that sum to be cut from income tax and other economically damaging imposts.

It would ensure a ‘soft landing’ when the house price bubble eventually bursts and we could aim to maintain house prices thereafter in line with inflation.

We can sell LVT as just, sustainable and economically sound: it needs to be introduced carefully but it is far more important to introduce it now. It would be contemptibly foolish if we allowed our only property tax, however regressive, to be abolished without a progressive replacement. We will have betrayed posterity – economically and ecologically – as well as our Liberal past.

Unless we join up our thinking with LVT, the ‘reduced burden’ of taxes to which the commission’s draft policy paper refers will be enjoyed not by the poor, the young or tomorrow’s entrepreneurs, but by the asset rich, the comfortable and their unproductive tax advisers. And the climate can go to hell too.

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## TEACHING RELIGION

*Dear Liberator,*

Evan Harris is reported by John Pugh in *Liberator* 316 as having said in the House of Commons that teaching a child about a religion without that child's assent breached human rights.

To tell a child that the supposed facts (beliefs) or a religion are true is indeed such a breach – doing so with supposed facts based on similarly non-evidenced ideas about non-religious topics is called brainwashing.

But not to teach a child about a religion whose adherents they may meet in their own society is a failure of education – and all children have the right to an education.

As Richard Dawkins says in *The God Delusion*, we do not refer to the children of Conservative and Labour supporters as 'Conservative children' and 'Labour children'. It is similarly unacceptable to refer to 'Christian children' or 'Moslem children'.

Charmian Hopkins  
Ascot

## TWO CHEERS FOR OUR FOREIGN POLICY?

*Dear Liberator,*

Last September saw the launch at conference of a foreign policy document that was informative, not so much by what it said, but by what it didn't say. Iraq featured highly, as did global corporate responsibility. But were there missing components?

How clear is, for example, the party's position on Lebanon, Iran, and that 'burning coal', as Paddy Ashdown recently put it, of the Israel/Palestine problem? I'd be struggling, if challenged, to come up with the key messages on the Middle East outside of Iraq. So what?

Well, the issues of freedom of speech, freedom of movement and freedom to dissent – bedrock principles of any liberal democracy – matter. These core pillars are not just issues relevant to Iraq.

Supporting these liberal democratic principles must surely be the guiding direction across the board – an à la carte approach might be criticised as failing the peoples of Palestine, the Lebanon and the other Middle East nations, nearly all of whom are

# LETTERS



sovereign states, if we major solely on Iraq alone.

Revitalising the hitherto quiescent Lib Dem Middle East Committee may go some way to stimulating policy debate within the party, because of the potential to help broaden the foreign policy debate such a forum could present. And this debate could help call the government to account for its patent double-standards in its shambolic and half-baked approach of its own foreign policy towards the Middle East.

For example, Israel's disregard for humanitarian law and international norms in its approach to security is a matter of record, as witnessed by countless Israeli and external NGOs, EU and UK official monitoring.

But what is also a matter of equally lamentable record is the blind eye and deaf ear of the government's approach.

Margaret Beckett persistently refuses to consider sanctions against Israel (for instance, through a possible suspension of the EU Association Trade Agreement with Israel) because, her department maintains, we must keep dialogue open – sanctions would only antagonise and worsen relations. Couldn't agree more.

So why on earth did the government, apparently so unwilling to embrace sanctions against arms customer Israel, swiftly and speedily apply hugely crippling sanctions against a neighbour of Israel's already on its economic knees, rather than pursue the route of dialogue? This is a glaring and shameful policy inconsistency that beggars belief, and is one we should have (and still could) exploit.

June 2007 marks 40 years of military, municipal and monetary Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories. The party has an opportunity with this approaching anniversary to call the government to account on its biased double-standard policy approach to the Middle East, through parliamentary questions and could ride a Lib Dem coach and horses through this government's deeply flawed foreign policy.

But we can only do so if our own foreign policy itself is robust, evidence-based, and above all, totally inclusive of all the issues in the Middle East, not just Iraq.

Kerry Hutchinson  
Vale of York

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**The Great City  
Academy Fraud  
by Francis Beckett  
Continuum 2007 £16.99**

This is possibly the first time I have read a factual book which included acknowledgements to two people whom I know well. Liberator's very own Mark Smulian gets a mention, along with Hank Roberts who I have known as a leading light in the Brent NUT for nearly 20 years.

Bearing in mind that the author has depended (perhaps uncritically) on the testimony of NUT officials for a large part of the background research, one needs to be cautious in accepting the principal arguments that the book advances.

Both Francis Beckett and the NUT are opposed to the idea of academies because they are elitist and independent institutions that sit outside the legal framework that governs most publicly funded secondary schools in England.

Much is said in the book about how the DfES, in favouring academies, distorts the capital spending programmes for schools. Not a lot is said to defend the idea that the poorest schools in the poorest neighbourhoods should perhaps get a higher level of investment.

Nevertheless, the main criticisms are potent. This is a failed project because the two central ideas behind academies are preposterous.

We do not have hundreds of rich philanthropists who want to give huge sums to create schools to help students from poor neighbourhoods. And there is no implicit business expertise available which adds value to the education on offer in these academies.

Indeed, the reverse is true. Very few of the sponsors have actually paid up the full £2m (and after tax breaks this works out at £1.2m) and there is a shortage of such sponsors; and many of the new academy buildings have been completed at inflated cost and have designs that have proved unworkable as teaching spaces.

Some of the sponsors have been motivated to establish institutions to promote their religious beliefs and, given that academy schools do not have to teach the national curriculum, there are serious

concerns about what is being actually taught in some of these.

Because New Labour has failed to attract enough of the benevolent sponsors who might have been more acceptable, local authorities have been bullied into accepting academies as part of the educational landscape in their areas.

Both Newcastle and Islington councils are cited as victims of this approach, because both were threatened by the DfES that their plans for their 'Building Schools for the Future' programmes would be in jeopardy without them accepting an academy or two.

Andrew Adonis is the government minister who is the principal architect of the academies programme and, as the book was being sent to the publishers, he was announcing plans to increase the Government's target for establishing academies to 400.

However, we now have the prospect of local authorities being the sponsor of academies in their own areas, which means that local authorities have an opportunity for levering in cash to build new schools (without PFI), with a funding agreement that can mirror the regulations that relate to community schools.

But we live in changing times. Adonis is not likely to hang on to his minister's job once Brown becomes prime minister and we don't know what Brown thinks of the academy programme, which is a peculiarity of the English.

So while Beckett's book is timely, it may have a limited life on the bookshelf as a definitive work.

One more for future educational historians, methinks.

William Tranby



# REVIEWS

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**Faith and Freedom: The  
Christian Challenge for the  
World**

**by Jimmy Carter  
Duckworth 2006 £12.99**

Jimmy Carter was a singularly unfortunate US president, his reputation irrevocably tarnished by the Iran hostage affair. His promotion of human rights, especially in Latin America, attracted the derision of hardline conservatives and his Christian soul-searching struck many foreign commentators as being slightly pathetic.

But unlike some of his fellow ex-presidents, Carter has gone on to make a significant contribution to global affairs, not least through the Carter Foundation, which notably does sterling work with peasant farmers in Africa and in combating debilitating diseases. Moreover, he has penned a number of books that give much food for thought.

This latest is both timely and fascinating, as from his own, deeply-held faith perspective, Carter does a devastating hatchet job on America's religious right and the fundamentalism that motivates many in the Bush administration and those who voted for it.

Carter gave up on the Southern Baptists, to which he used to belong, as he felt they had drifted beyond the pale. But his evangelical fervour is unbounded, now channelled at castigating the current US government for its appalling record on the Iraq war, climate change and overseas development.

It's the sort of indictment one might expect from one of the usual suspects, such as Noam Chomsky. But coming from Carter, it is all more the more effective, and it is gratifying to know that this book ran high in the New York Times bestseller list.

Jonathan Fryer

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**A Different Kind of War –  
The UN Sanctions Regime  
in Iraq  
by Count Hans-Christoph  
von Sponeck  
Berghahn Books 2006  
£22.95**

Many Lib Dems will remember the talk given by von Sponeck at the National Liberal Club last June on his experiences in Iraq and the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq. This book fleshes out the whole sorry saga from 1991 to the beginning of the illegal attack on Iraq.

Von Sponeck, in a book praised by both Noam Chomsky and John Pilger as “essential reading” and “immensely sad”, chronicles how the sanctions regime was a bureaucratic botch, whose effect was to wreck the Iraqi infrastructure, notably health, education and agriculture, just as effectively as armed conflict would have done.

The trouble is that it was the non-combatants, Saddam’s victims, who bore the brunt.

Von Sponeck does not excuse the monster that was Saddam Hussein, but nor does he think that non-co-operation with the humanitarian programme was significant. Rather, there were constant delays in sending food and medicine, paid for by Iraqi oil revenues, because the British and Americans had to check everything umpteen times for fear of dual use, and at times over half of the supplies ordered were held back.

The Iraqis also paid the huge costs of the UN operations in both Baghdad and Geneva out of these same oil monies – some 30% of revenues.

He criticises the Security Council on many counts. For its wilful ignorance of what was going on; for the deliberate lack of co-ordination between different UN bodies on the ground; and for their failure to stand up to the unholy alliance of Americans and Brits who clearly had their own agenda – regime change.

After addressing a peace meeting in Sedgefield in 2005, he told me the story of a factory accused of making chemical weapons. He visited it on one of his tours, and found the place abandoned years ago with rats everywhere. He reported this to a German general who refused point-blank to relay it to NATO HQ:

“That is not what Washington wants to hear!”

The Americans and Brits demanded his sacking by Kofi Annan, who responded by calling von Sponeck in and renewing his contract. He resigned six months later, in his own time.

The moral of the book is that, however evil a regime, sanctions must be targeted. From being the best educated in the Arab world, the Iraqi youth has missed out on schooling. Child deaths and general mortality soared to third world levels. And Saddam had lots of palaces.

The Iraqi people, not Saddam and his cronies, were the victims of this different kind of war, waged by the UN at the behest of the Americans and ourselves.

Robert Woodthorpe Browne

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**A Rich and Colourful Story  
by Jill Mountford, Kevin  
Graal and others  
Artzero New Cross Gate  
NDC & Talking Tales 2007**

Besson Street Garden is an island in the middle of a one-way traffic system in the New Cross Gate area of south east London. It has bamboo and banana trees, as it seeks to reflect the diversity of the community that has come to live around it.

In the summer of 2006, the New Cross Gate New Deal for Communities’ family learning project funded a project between the community arts organisation Artzero and storyteller Kevin Graal.

The project produced a book of recipes that the people living in the area had brought with them from ‘home’ which ranges from Eritrea to Lancashire.

The book is illustrated beautifully by children from three local primary schools.

Mumtaz Meeran backed this up with nutritional and healthy eating information, and Kevin Graal spun well-known stories like Finn and the Salmon of Knowledge, around it. It is a nicely produced book and deserves to go further.

Finn would have accompanied his salmon with the Colcannon, to be sure, but here instead is Verna’s recipe for Poulet Basquaise.

- 4 pieces of cooked chicken
- 1 green pepper

- 1 onion
- 1 tin of chopped tomatoes
- garlic

Chop pepper, onions and garlic. Melt butter and add chopped vegetables. Add pieces of chicken and tomatoes. Season well with salt and black pepper. Simmer in a covered frying pan for 30 minutes. Serve with plain boiled rice. A generous measure of patxarana would go nicely with it (like a sloe gin, from Navarra).

I’m not a great lover of local government funding by beauty contest, but that is how the Labour Party plays it for reasons best known to itself.

If your local authority is the ‘beneficiary’ of one such scheme and you’re looking for projects try this one – it is easy to adapt to any area.

Artzero can be contacted through its website [www.artzero.org](http://www.artzero.org); Kevin Graal through [www.talkingtales.org](http://www.talkingtales.org); and New Cross Gate NDC at [www.newcrossgatenc.org.uk](http://www.newcrossgatenc.org.uk)

Stewart Rayment

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**Never Had It So Good  
by Dominic Sandbrook  
Abacus 2006 £9.99**

The emotions stirred by the debate on Trident replacement make it worth looking back at how Britain came to possess nuclear missiles that were never independent or British.

For quite different reasons, the Fighting Forties and the Swinging Sixties still loom large in the media and public awareness, even among those not then born.

But the period in between has lacked a good publicist and its image is one of grey conformity, austerity and dullness.

Unlike most historians of the era from Suez to the Beatles (the book’s subtitle) Sandbrook cannot remember any of it, having been born in 1974, and so cannot be accused of viewing matters through some dope-fuelled sixties haze; this is an historian’s look at an era within living memory

As one with only fragmentary infant memories of the late 1950s, I enjoyed reading his portrait an era I lived in but did not know, and Sandbrook ranges widely.

Much of the book is rather outside the scope of Liberator – there being little directly concerned with politics in new wave literature, early

commercial television, British rock 'n roll, or the rise of spy novels, fascinating though these topics are.

It is when he turns to politics that Sandbrook comprehensively deflates an abiding myth.

Inevitably, the story of British political history in this era is largely the story of Harold Macmillan, one of few politicians who lived long enough to see himself rehabilitated and whose image has if anything become increasingly favourable with the passage of time.

It is to Macmillan's administration that Tories still hark back when they wish to present themselves as neither sleazy incompetents nor heartless Thatcherites.

This was the time of one-nation Toryism – a moderate government that presided over a startling rise in affluence while more or less peacefully dissolving an empire.

Sandbrook argues that affluence increased despite, and not because of, an appalling record of economic mismanagement by Macmillan's government that led to wild lurches from 'go' to 'stop', a complete failure to modernise industry and an irresponsible stoking of demand for electoral reasons that was bound to end in tears.

His picture of a government dominated by a tiny traditional elite, unable to grasp the changes happening around them, is a quite different one from the benign image usually now accorded it.

And what about Trident? Macmillan resigned 44 years ago, yet we still live with the consequences of his deal with President Kennedy to buy Polaris, which was motivated solely by a desire to sustain the fiction that Britain remained an independent superpower.

Polaris was bought to shore up the prestige of an unpopular government by fostering this illusion, and nearly 50 years later no politician will admit to what Macmillan knew privately, that the whole thing was a charade.

Mark Smulian

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## **The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization** by Bryan Ward-Perkins OUP 2006 £8.99

In Europe during the 19th and early 20th centuries, there was a general consensus, that empires (or at least

European empires) were a Good Thing. And the precursor to all civilised European empires was of course Rome. Therefore, the fall of the Roman Empire in western Europe during the 5th century was generally regarded as a Bad Thing. A civilisation that produced proper drains and nice literature was destroyed by gangs of nasty, dirty, illiterate barbarians.

During the 20th century, European and American historians' attitudes to the fall of Rome underwent a profound change, in part due to a loss of confidence in the civilising value of contemporary European empires.

The societies of Africa, Asia, and South America, and in consequence those of 'barbarian' Europe, were no longer regarded as being inherently 'backward', at best the preserve of noble savages.

The Nuer of Sudan, and the ancient Goths and Anglo-Saxons, were seen to lead complex and valuable social and cultural lives, even if they did not fit the pattern of 'civilised' Europe.

After all, perhaps the 20th century was not such a comprehensive triumph for western civilisation.

For historians, the end of Rome came to be seen as a slow transformation, rather than a sudden fall. The empire gradually changed into the different, but not necessarily worse, kingdoms of medieval Europe.

In this book, the Oxford historian and archaeologist Bryan Ward-Perkins challenges this recent thinking.

It's not that he glosses over the cruelty and inequality of the Roman system, far from it, he's no sort of imperialist.

But he does undermine that notion that the end of the empire caused no suffering except for a few self-important senators. He takes the term 'civilisation' to refer to large-scale city-based societies with complex social and economic systems, but does not use it as a moral judgement.

So it was not just that, after the empire, aristocrats no longer quoted Cicero or enjoyed central heating. The end of the Roman civilisation meant that the material existence of the overwhelming majority of western Europeans declined dramatically, in a process that in many areas lasted no more than two generations. Standards of living did not reach comparable levels for another 1,000 years.

This book is not just a welcome example of serious history so well-written that anyone can enjoy it. In addition to the inherent interest of the story, it has another message.

Our own world is like the Roman model, but more so. The Roman economy produced an enormous amount of waste (one archaeological site in Rome alone is estimated to contain 53m items of mass-produced pottery). It was ultimately very fragile, because it relied on centralised, specialised production centres, and the movement of goods over hundreds of miles.

The parallels are clear. As Ward-Perkins concludes: "I also think there is a real danger for the present day in a vision of the past that deliberately sets out to eliminate all crisis and all decline.

"The end of the Roman West witnessed horrors and dislocation of a kind I sincerely hope never to live through... Romans before the fall were as certain as we are today that their world would continue for ever substantially unchanged. They were wrong. We would be wise not to repeat their complacency."

Bernard Gowers

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## **A Day with Wilbur Robinson** by William Joyce Harper Collins 2007 £5.99

The Robinsons, in case you haven't met them, are a sort of sci-fi Addams Family. The Disney film was launched at the end of March, so they'll probably be known to you by the time you open this Liberator.

Harper Collins has thus wisely reissued the stories which hark back to the early 1990s (though seemingly stuck in that sci-fi fantasy timewarp when J Edgar Hoover was forever president of the United States).

Since Grandfather Robinson's mates include 'King' Louie and the Duke, I hope Disney will come up with a soundtrack like those when Walt's hand was still on the tiller.

Stewart Rayment

## Monday

Bowling along the lanes of Montgomeryshire in the Bentley, I come upon a caravan that has toppled into the ditch. Some poor fellow is trying to haul it out while being shouted at by an unruly band of Romanians who have stayed aboard the van drinking beer – “Hey, Mr Lembit you push harder OK?”. I stop to lend a hand and discover that the unfortunate motorist is none other than our own Lembit Öpik. He stops to wipe his hands on an oily rag and to adjust the little dots over his name, which have been knocked askew. “Have you met Gabriela?” he asks. “And this is Monica, her sister. And this is their mother Margit. This is Margit’s cousin Florian. And this is Florian’s great uncle Dmitri and some of his sons. And their families. And I am not sure who those others are.” I put my shoulder to the wheel and we soon have the van out of the ditch. As it drives away, I hear a voice calling “Hey, Mr Lembit, when you take me to meet Madonna? You get me more beer now.” I do hope the poor fellow has chosen his bride wisely.

## Tuesday

I am resting at the Hall when a young lady from the local social services department (the workhouse de nos jours) is shown in. “I’ve come to fit you with your tag, Lord Bonkers,” she says. “What’s that?” I reply, turning my ear trumpet to 11. It turns out that the powers that be want to fit me with some new-fangled electric chip that will allow me to be tracked by satellites if I “wander off”. Well, I give her pretty short shrift, as you can imagine – though no gentleman ever fires so as to *hit* a lady. After she has left, I fall to thinking. Wandering off? It happens all the time at Westminster: there is an important division on the Fish Bill and half your fellows are nowhere to be seen. I telephone the Commons and have myself put through to our Chief Whip. “Burstow,” I say, “I may just have found the answer to your prayers.”

## Wednesday

Bonkers House stands in Belgrave Square and I often stay there when on business in London. Thus I take a keen interest in the affairs of the capital and particularly in the Mayoral election. Who is to be the Liberal Democrat standard-bearer this time? Many names have been put forward (some of them have even been members of the party), yet we seem no nearer to finding a candidate. I suggest to the Revd Hughes that he has another go, but he replies that he has so much to do at St Asquith’s in the village that you will seldom find him at St Tatchell’s, Bermondsey, these days. My duty is clear: this morning I have myself measured for a pearly suit then settle down in my Library with *Teach Yourself Cockney Rhyming Slang*.

# Lord Bonkers’ Diary

## Thursday

Polling day in the Bonkers Hall Ward. I am gratified to be returned again, with the result that I have now served the same patch for well over a hundred years – I believe that this to be something of a record. The odd thing is that in all that time I have never been opposed. There was a young firebrand who announced his intention to put up once, but unfortunately he was devoured by a lion from my short-lived safari park before he was able to get his

nomination papers in. One benefit of this lack of competition is that I am able to help the party in other seats, and I spend the day strafing Conservative positions in Hinckley and Bosworth.

## Friday

Down at Westminster I bump into Lembit Öpik again; he is rather distractedly fingering a sore place on his neck. I have a look at it for him and am seized with a strange dread. “Did you say Gabriela came from Transylvania?” I ask. “Don’t take this the wrong way, old man, but I didn’t like the look of great uncle Dmitri’s teeth. If I were you, I would ask the Revd Hughes for a crucifix and keep a clove of garlic to hand while that old gentleman is about.”

## Saturday

The results for the local elections are in. Ming puts a brave face on things, describing them on the electric television as a “mixed bag”. In private I try to persuade him to embrace a more pessimistic analysis, mentioning Waverley, Babergh, Restormel, Wychavon – my sorrow in no way lessened by the fact that I do not have the foggiest ideas where any of these places are. (What happened to sensible names like Market Harborough Rural District Council?) Yet Ming is adamant: he fixes me with an eagle eye and says: “What you are forgetting, Bonkers, is that we won Eastbourne. Elspeth is very fond of Eastbourne.”

## Sunday

If, in these parts, one remarks to a woman upon her beautiful “Rutland”, one means that she has a lovely daughter (Rutland Water, daughter); but if one says her son is an Uppingham, one is being less complimentary (Uppingham School, fool). Equally, when I was in London the other day, I enjoyed the blue pork (pork pie, sky) and, if I were not fortunate enough to own Bonkers House, might have stayed at the mature (mature Stilton, Hilton). You see how it works? Remarkably, it seems that they use a similar rhyming slang in London, or so my new book informs me. I am beginning to think that my being the Liberal Democrats’ candidate for Mayor of London would be a Terribly Good Idea.

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

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