

# *liberator*



## **The Liberal Democrats, Autumn 2007**

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- 💣 Vote for me — Nick Clegg and Chris Huhne answer Liberator's questions
- 💣 Why I've joined the Lib Dems — Michael Meadowcroft
- 💣 Burma's tragedy — Malcolm Bruce

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# COMMENTARY

## PEAS IN A POD

So much for Liberator's call for Ming Campbell's critics to lay off the sniping and give him a chance.

When we, possibly for the first time, call for the party leader to be given some space, he goes and resigns. This is obviously a tactic Liberator must deploy in future.

As usual, Liberator will not endorse either candidate for the Liberal Democrat leadership, and we hope the answers given to our questionnaire to the two contenders will help readers to choose between them.

This sort of detail may play an unusually important role since, as of early November, it has been hard to discern any important political difference between Nick Clegg and Chris Huhne, other than on Trident – an important issue but only the make-or-break one for a minority.

Nor has it been possible to tell much about the pair's politics from their declared backers. While all the economic liberal extremists are supporting Clegg, most of those who support him do not fall into this category.

Indeed, Simon Hughes, in effect the candidate of the left last time, has declared for Clegg as have most of the MPs who supported him. Huhne's declared supporters likewise straddle the spectrum of opinion in the party.

This suggests that, for the first time, the party will have a leadership election decided almost wholly on personal factors – how well each man comes across, their likely appeal to voters and the way they have conducted themselves in the party to date.

In one sense, such a contest bodes well, since with few substantial political issues at stake no group within the party is likely to feel that it has 'lost' (or if it does, it should have found additional candidates).

But the dangers of an election based on personalities are also clear. If those associated with the loser are carved out of influential positions, then resentments will fester, and personal dislikes and malice can be powerful drivers of instability.

Whoever gets the job has a mountain to climb. The Lib Dems were spared a problematic autumn election by, ironically, a Conservative resurgence that may pose even worse problems in the long term should it persist.

The two big issues on which the party connected enough with the public to get a decent result in 2005 – Iraq and tuition fees – are fading through, respectively, public boredom and resignation, and nothing has replaced them.

They showed, though, what the party could do when it dared to claim its own ground and stepped outside the consensus that now spans Labour and all but the most diehard Thatcherite Tories.

On neither Iraq nor tuition fees did the Lib Dems manage to integrate their objections to these policies into a wider message that might have kept new supporters firmly on board once the initial issue faded.

The party did not succeed, nor even really try, in arguing that the Iraq war was a consequence of a 60-year cringe before the USA, which should end, or that tuition fees were a barrier in the way of those who would benefit from higher education and so their abolition was a matter of fairness.

Last year's 'Meeting the Challenge' initiative was an attempt to give the party a 'narrative' into which its policies could fit within an overall framework that would give it a clearer identity among voters.

It was only a partial success, since neither of the past two leaders were much interested, and it withered in the face of day-to-day political positioning and the parallel universe that is the party's formal policy making process.

The next leader could do worse than revisit the ideas and arguments in and behind that exercise. As Liberator has repeatedly argued, the Lib Dems will get nowhere so long as the party lacks established constituencies of voters and has to win every vote afresh by exploiting whatever local grievances present themselves.

Few things better illustrate this than the mess into which the party has got itself into over the referendum on the Lisbon treaty, something that will rapidly land in the new leader's lap.

The party called for a referendum on the European constitution in 2005, not because it believed that a referendum was desirable but as a device to allow it to continue to face both ways on Europe. The referendum promise meant the party could wriggle out of questions from 'drawbridge up' Eurosceptics in (mainly) rural areas, while not alienating its traditional pro-European supporters, while also saying nothing much one way or the other on the whole subject.

Ming Campbell got the party partly off the hook on which it had impaled itself by proposing a referendum on continued EU membership (the only referendum worth having, since that is a 'yes/no' question). But the larger point is that the party cannot prosper so long as it avoids saying anything definite – never mind contentious – in case someone somewhere might take offence.

'We can win anywhere' has gone from being a catchy slogan to a dangerous justification for fudge. The next leader should break the party from this mindset. Both contenders claim they want to. Let's see.

# RADICAL BULLETIN

## WRITING ON THE WALL

The Liberal Democrats owe Ming Campbell a debt of gratitude for resigning as leader quickly and with dignity once it became obvious the game was up, rather than having to be dragged out feet first screaming defiance as was his predecessor.

The most intriguing question is why the game was 'up' less than one month after his opinion poll rating had exceeded David Cameron's and when the party's polls, while disappointing, were not vastly out of line with similar points in previous parliaments?

One MP told *Liberator* that he had been at Westminster less than a day after the recess before five other MPs had approached him to support an attempt to persuade Campbell to go.

Leaks to the press were becoming louder, to the effect that MPs did not see how Campbell could hang on once it became known the general election would be in 2009/10 rather than this autumn.

Campbell would by then be nearly 70, would have endured another two years of sniping about his age, and would have had to present himself as a prospective prime minister who would be 74 by the subsequent election.

People close to Campbell are understood to have advised him that he faced a miserable two years of constant age-related criticism, which would get in the way of campaigning and hamper the party's efforts.

Others felt the Lib Dems had become inert under Campbell. Not that he did anything particularly objectionable politically, rather that the party appeared to be sliding into irrelevance and that he showed little idea of how to reverse this.

"I didn't vote for him, but he obviously would only have one general election so I really expected him to hit the ground running, instead of which nothing much happened," one MP told *Liberator*.

Another speculated that the problem was not Campbell's age as such, rather that he appeared elderly with it, both in appearance and in his cultural reference points, such as his habit of talking about 'the wireless'.

Yet others were protagonists of one of his would-be successors and thought it would helpful to their man were Campbell given a shove towards the exit by means of anonymous briefings.

An MP close to Campbell said chief whip Paul Burstow took soundings over the weekend before the resignation and believed "MPs got what they wanted".

Whether any MP told Campbell to his face to go remains unclear, but this appears unlikely given the speed with which events moved once the press briefings and coverage became cacophonous.

Two interventions sealed things in the 36 hours before the resignation. Whatever party president Simon Hughes

meant to achieve by his remarks in a television interview about the leader "raising his game", or deputy leader Vince Cable by his observation that Campbell's position was "under discussion", the effect was to make it appear that his colleagues were deserting.

One senior figure summed it up thus: "When the election was not called, and it became obvious it could go to 2009 or 2010, I don't think Ming felt he would be able to carry on with constant criticism and should stand down.

"He saw Monday's papers and Simon Hughes's and Vince Cable's comments, and decided he would go with dignity, unlike Kennedy.

"I don't think he lost the total confidence of MPs. Those close to him thought he should go because he would have had a miserable two years facing the same criticisms."

## CUT OFF FROM THE WORLD

Whatever the reason for Ming Campbell's departure, the timing took all concerned by surprise.

Less than two hours before the resignation on 15 October, an MP closely associated with one of his potential successors told *Liberator*: "Not long ago Ming had passed Cameron in the approval ratings and we were at 20%.

"Brown commits the biggest own goal in recent political history so Cameron gets a boost and we all panic. Hold your nerve, everyone."

Everyone didn't, and the panic about polls showing the party at 11% or 14% must have been apparent to Campbell.

By a helpful coincidence, a Federal Executive meeting was scheduled for the day he chose to resign. This may have prompted his decision because the FE sets the timetable for a leadership election, and this meeting was the last opportunity to get a result before Christmas.

The FE meeting began as scheduled at 6pm, with only a handful present knowing that Campbell would quit at 6.30pm.

As messages about the impending resignation began to be texted, executive members found themselves in the ludicrous position of being the only people in the party to whom no-one would relate what was becoming common knowledge.

Discussion about the party's recent performance would normally have been an early agenda item. Instead the FE was asked to question Lord Clement Jones on fundraising on the pretext that he had to leave early.

In the middle of this session, party president Simon Hughes said he had to leave to address the media, but did not say why. Eventually, chief executive Chris Rennard told the FE what was happening one minute before the formal announcement, thus being able to say that the it had been informed in advance of the media.

“There was obviously something going on. It was a farce, awful, we are the executive and we were not trusted,” one member said.

So little trusted indeed that the resignation statements sent to the media that evening were sent to FE members at only 10.52 the following morning.

## **RUNNERS AND RIDERS**

It was striking that Nick Clegg secured endorsements from almost three times as many MPs as did Chris Huhne, despite Huhne having had two years to build on his campaign in the previous leadership election, in which he came from nowhere to run a strong second.

It seems as though Clegg’s strategy is to appear as the broad-based candidate and avoid being seen to represent any faction, while Huhne’s strategy is to force Clegg off the fence.

With little dividing the two contenders politically, choices have inevitably turned on personal factors.

People close to Ming Campbell still deeply resent Huhne’s 2006 candidacy – though not Simon Hughes’s – because they believe Huhne pledged to support Campbell but then stood against him, something Huhne disputes.

Manifesto draughtsman, at least for now, Steve Webb, was widely expected to stand and had no trouble in securing the seven signatures needed from MPs as proposers. He withdrew and threw his support behind Clegg, apparently feeling he lacked sufficient support in the party and might have struggled to raise the money needed to fight.

John Hemming’s candidacy was more improbable and came to nothing. This was possibly because he baffled fellow MPs with a 1,000-word letter, which included the insight: “A third dimension in which we can create a distinction between our approach and that of the other parties is that of deontology vs consequentialism.”

## **COVER BOY**

It is said that one cannot judge a book by its cover, a point the publishers of *Reinventing the State* were particularly keen to make at Brighton.

The volume of essays on the party’s direction (Liberator 321) was printed, without the knowledge of its editors and to their embarrassment, with an enormous picture of Chris Huhne on the cover. Behind him lurked Hornsey and Wood Green MP Lynne Featherstone, and behind them assorted unidentifiable people.

Huhne and Featherstone were both chapter authors, but so were a dozen or so other people, including Huhne’s rival in the leadership contest Nick Clegg.

The story goes that the picture was chosen by the publisher to show Lib Dems on a (presumably not widely attended) protest march in support of green taxes. The designer, who had no idea who Huhne was, then cropped and blew-up the photograph to make an eye-catching cover. On such chances turn conspiracy theories.

## **WHO ASKED THEM?**

With most MPs, peers and party officers deciding for once to remain sensibly circumspect about the leadership issue, the media was forced to look elsewhere for comment when Ming Campbell resigned.

Newsnight interviewed Mark Littlewood, who resigned as the party’s head of press soon after he briefed that

Campbell’s speech at Harrogate was an attempt to set Gordon Brown five tests as condition of a deal in a hung parliament in which proportional representation would not be a deal breaker (Liberator 317).

Readers of the same issue will recall Littlewood’s involvement, along with the disgraced Mark Oaten, in something called the Transatlantic Institute, whose website noted its annual release of white balloons to mark the fall of the Berlin Wall.

It seems this is not the only obscure organisation that Littlewood favours with his time. He was billed on BBC1’s Politics Show website as ‘communications director of the classical liberal think tank Progressive Vision’.

This hitherto-unknown body is also supported by members of the Institute of Economic Affairs, and its website links page reads like a Who’s Who of the libertarian right lunatic fringe, far removed from any important current of Lib Dem opinion.

Also actively mouthing off in the media has been Ben Ramm, editor of *The Liberal*. It is unclear why the editor of a magazine largely devoted to poetry should be invited onto TV to pontificate on the need for Campbell to go.

Ramm’s outbursts prompted a Mr James Wilson to write to *Liberal Democrat News* in September to say that *The Liberal* made *Liberator* look by comparison a “beacon of good sense and responsibility”.

That’s quite the nicest thing anyone has said about *Liberator* in LDN for many years.

## **GERMAN DISUNITY**

Mike German has clung on to the leadership of Welsh Liberal Democrats in the Welsh Assembly, but only until next summer. This curious move, which will doubtless serve only to produce a protracted leadership campaign, came about because, although many want him to step down, there is no obvious successor (Liberator 321).

Matters have been complicated by Lembit Öpik standing down as leader of the Welsh party (a post that can be held by an MEP, MP or AM) preparatory to his expected second go at the party presidency.

The same person could fill both posts, but who? Peter Black is yet to marshal his support, Eleanor Burnham’s candidacy seems improbable, none of the other Welsh MPs seem keen and Kirsty Williams is thought by some to be “not ready”, being young and female.

Some think German is staying on until next summer to try to secure the succession for AM Jenny Randerson. Once the Welsh party sorts itself out, it will have plenty of rethinking to do following its indifferent showing in May’s elections (Liberator 319).

## **NONE OF THEIR BUSINESS**

The Liberal Democrat Business Forum was formed to put the party in touch with the business world, allow captains of industry to meet shadow cabinet members and, no doubt, shell out the readies from their bulging wallets when asked.

It linked business with the Lib Dems, but was not an organisation for Lib Dems who happen to be in business.

Former Uxbridge Lib Dem candidate Steve Carey and Mid-Sussex activist Paul Lucraft felt there should be such a body, and between them have a range of relevant

contacts. Not wishing to cut across any other work, they tried to make contact with the business forum.

Fruitless attempts to contact it via the party website, by telephone, letter and everything short of carrier pigeon elicited no response, until one day a human voice answered the line at Cowley Street.

"It doesn't exist," the voice disclosed. "It was losing money so it was shut down."

Why the party has a non-existent body on its website, and how something at least partly designed to raise funds can lose them, are matters for conjecture.

Carey and Lucraft have access to the dormant bank account of City Liberal Democrats, which functioned in the late 1990s, and intend to revive this as a basis for Liberal Democrats in Business, which they hope will be a body that can offer advice to parliamentarians on business matters without the need for costly gala dinners.

## **CAMPAIGN ALL YEAR ROUND**

It has long been drummed into Lib Dems that they must work all year, not just in the run-up to an election – a message that seems to have been taken to heart by Baroness Scott, whose 'I'm 4 Ros' badges adorned many delegates at Brighton.

Given her likely opponent in next summer's party presidential election is Lembit Öpik, this might look a bit belt-and-braces, since she can expect more or less every significant player in the party to support her in such a contest, as happened when Öpik stood against Simon Hughes for the job in 2004.

But will there be a wild card? A few 'John Smithson for President' badges appeared, promoting the so far undeclared candidature of the Sage of Huddersfield.

These were produced with the knowledge, though possibly not consent, of Smithson, who perked up considerably at the suggestion that a losing candidate who put up a decent show in the presidential election might be in line for a consolatory peerage.

## **FEEDING OF THE 500**

It is northern Europe's turn to hold the next Liberal International congress, which should take place around May 2008. LI president Lord Alderdice would like this to be held in Belfast to round off his presidency, with some insights into conflict resolution from local speakers.

The problem is that hardly any direct flights link Belfast to the rest of the world, which would present considerable difficulty and expense, in particular to LI's growing contingents in Africa and Asia.

Edinburgh was then suggested as an alternative, but only if the Scottish Liberal Democrats and Liberal International British Group could organise the event and stump up the requisite cash in time. The greatest expenses are venue hire and the need to feed and water several hundred delegates over three nights.

Talks at conference suggested that SLD and LIBG could do this, but LI's ruling bureau also met in Brighton to discuss the matter.

With only three bureau members present, and consequently an inquorate meeting, Alderdice took the opportunity to announce that the congress would be in Belfast.

It remains to be seen how valid this decision is, and how the small Alliance Party of Northern Ireland proposes to pay for something that would stretch the resources of the Lib Dems.

Sweden's Folkspartiet has also offered to run the event, and may yet get everyone off this hook.

## **ALL IN ONE TAXI**

That used to be the joke about Liberal MPs, and now it looks as though that description could apply to the entire membership of the SDP.

The SDP website, which features a logo of an elephant with a knot tied in its trunk, lists: "Important dates for your diary... nothing for the moment."

As for its meetings, these are held at "the community centre, Victoria Road", although the website does not say in which town.

That information is presumably considered redundant, since the party now appears to exist only in Bridlington apart, inexplicably, from one person in Sidcup, and three councillors in Neath Port Talbot who do not merit individual entries on the website.

From breaking the mould of British politics to building social democracy in one resort in only 26 years.

## **LAMB'S TALES**

A row erupted between shadow health secretary Norman Lamb and the party's councillors when it became known that he intended to propose that social care should be detached from local government.

He wanted it to be handed to the health service, which would in turn come under the control of directly-elected local health boards, which would be separate from councils.

Alarmed at the potential for the atomisation of local government with separate boards for every service, the Local Government Association Lib Dem group protested that Lamb's idea was a) stupid, and b) not party policy.

Back came the reply "I know it's not party policy, I'm just saying it's my idea."

The councillors protested that, if the shadow health secretary says something about health, the rest of the world not unnaturally assumes that it is party policy. A deal was eventually done under which Lamb dropped this idea.

But the episode will raise a wry smile among those who remember that the party had its present cumbersome policy-making process inflicted on it at merger to prevent policy being 'made on the hoof'.

## **WHAT'S MY LINE?**

The southern counties stall at Brighton conference offered a 'silent raffle' in which punters could write down bids for prizes, one of which was 'an hour of Philip Goldenberg's legal advice'.

This explanation was perhaps just as well, since last year the stall had offered an hour of eminent solicitor Goldenberg's time without stating his profession.

"I've been telling everyone he's a chiroprapist," the stallholder announced.

# CRITICAL FRIENDS

Craig Murray, the ambassador sacked by Labour for opposing human rights abuses in Uzbekistan, spoke at Liberator's conference fringe meeting. Geoff Payne was there

Some of you will probably be aware of the internet site, Lib Dem Voice, and you may have seen the article I wrote on 'My conference awards'. I was hoping it would be provocative and stimulate a response, but none was forthcoming and I assumed it would disappear and be forgotten.

Then out of the blue I was contacted by Liberator to write more. No doubt they were pleased that they won the 'best fringe meeting' award. It was thoroughly deserved, by the way, even if it was an award decided solely by myself.

The subject was the Unwinnable War on Terror and the speaker was Craig Murray, the former British ambassador to Uzbekistan. He was dismissed from his job after revealing the appalling human rights record of that country, and in doing so was perceived as putting at risk British economic interests and British/US relations. Craig stood against Jack Straw MP as an Independent at the last general election, when Straw went to great lengths to avoid even sharing a platform with him during the campaign.

Craig wrote a book on it, which has had excellent reviews, called *Murder in Samarkand - A British Ambassador's Controversial Defiance of Tyranny in the War on Terror*. At times the fringe meeting (and the book) was very funny. But at other times it was very serious, and had important implications.

Uzbekistan is a large country with a small population, a former Soviet republic located in central Asia. It is an 'ally' in the 'war against terror' and an important strategic country for the mining and transportation of natural resources. It is also a totalitarian state with an appalling human rights record that easily compares to Iraq under Saddam Hussein or North Korea.

Craig spoke of how the government there claims that the opposition is part of Al-Qaeda. The government uses torture to force alleged opponents to admit they know a list of people they have never heard of before, and this 'intelligence' is used by western intelligence agencies to 'prove' that Al Qaeda is operating in Uzbekistan, and hence we support the government there. The intelligence services even know this is the case – because Craig told them – but they still use this intelligence because they prefer the narrative to the truth.

This preference for narrative over truth has become an important theme with New Labour's foreign policy. Clearly this was the case with Saddam Hussein's non-existent weapons of mass destruction.

Today it continues under Brown's leadership, where the narrative is that British forces are handing over Iraqi territories to the Iraqi security forces because the security there has improved. The government gets away with that narrative (to some extent) because, paradoxically according

to the Independent's reporter Alex Cockburn, no journalists go there to report because it is too dangerous.

Lynne Featherstone MP and others have been running a campaign to allow Iraqis who have worked with the British to come and settle here, rather than face death from insurgents in their own country. This has cross party support including from those who supported the war in Iraq – and therefore may be successful.

But for now, the Brown government is opposed to doing this. It has recently made some concessions to try and head off a rebellion, but is determined not to let the narrative on the successful handover of power in Iraq be tainted by reality.

Bear in mind that many of the local Iraqi people who have worked for the British have actually helped save British lives in very dangerous circumstances. The human cost of this decision is appalling.

One improvement that could have been made for the fringe meeting. The Lib Dem position of Anglo-US relations is that we should be a critical friend. It would have been an interesting test of the Lib Dems' foreign affairs team, in a debate with Craig, if they could indicate that, on matters of human rights, to what extent they would be critical and to what extent they would be friendly.

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Geoff Payne is secretary of Hackney Liberal Democrats.  
Craig Murray's book was reviewed in Liberator 320

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# DEAD CENTRE

The words ‘centre’ and ‘middle’ should be banished from the Liberal Democrat lexicon, argues Simon Titley

One benefit of the recent crisis within the Liberal Democrats is that it is finally dawning on the party that it has been generally hopeless at communicating its values and policies to the wider world. As I argued in the previous issue (*Liberator* 321), it is no use making Ming Campbell a scapegoat for this failure or expecting a change of leader to be the sole remedy.

Instead, in our search for the culprit, might I draw your attention to Exhibit A, the frequent use of phrases such as ‘centre ground’, ‘middle way’ or ‘middle of the road’. There is no greater symptom of the Liberal Democrats’ lack of self-confidence; and few utterances more nauseating. As Stephen Fry once remarked, sometimes there is just not enough vomit in the world.

The first problem with such phrases is that they assume a positioning on the left-right political scale, a conceptual framework that does not do Liberalism justice. For those of you who have not yet tried it, I would strongly recommend that – before you read any further – you go to your computer and take the ‘Political Compass’ test (at [www.politicalcompass.org](http://www.politicalcompass.org)).

## DEFINING ISSUES

For Liberals – and in terms of the Political Compass model – the defining issues are on the vertical ‘authoritarian-libertarian’ axis rather than the horizontal ‘left-right’ axis. As David Howarth points out in *Reinventing the State*, “It is an oddity of British political debate that so much emotional energy is expended on a question that almost certainly has no general or stable answer, namely whether public services should be organised using market or administrative mechanisms... The fact is that British politics – largely because of a party structure that originally organised itself around the ‘sides’ of industry – elevated issues of personnel and resource management into matters of fundamental principle, while paying very little attention to issues that really are fundamental, such as political freedom, the development of democracy and the effects of gross inequalities of wealth and power.”

Given that Liberals are not dogmatically predisposed to specific economic mechanisms, a likely outcome of our policies might be defined as a ‘mixed economy’, but that would be a consequence, not the point, of liberalism. Calling ourselves ‘centrists’ implies a dogmatic adherence to a specific economic mix, which is misleading and obscures our true political purpose.

More pathetic is the widespread assumption that it is the function of Liberals to split the difference between Labour and the Conservatives. Whatever each of them says, we are somewhere in the middle.

Even when there were sharp ideological differences between those two parties, this view was flawed, since it assumed a completely passive role for Liberals. We would

wait for the other parties to define themselves, and thereby allow them to define us, a damaging narrative for a party wanting to “step outside the cosy consensus”.

To adopt such a view today is even more ridiculous. In this age of political cross-dressing, it is scarcely possible to squeeze a cigarette paper between Labour and the Conservatives. Any Liberal Democrats claiming the ‘centre ground’ are in effect saying, “We want to be that cigarette paper!”

Labour and the Tories have converged because politicians nowadays, instead of engaging in ideological argument with one another, compete to agree with public opinion. Politicians once took an active role and sought to change and lead opinion, but now they are passive and tend to accept public opinion as a given.

Policies are rarely based on deeply held principles or solid programmes, but instead are conceived as superficial ‘initiatives’ contrived to capture the next day’s headlines. In this moral vacuum, the personal characteristics of party leaders are deemed far more important than fundamental political factors.

## ATTEMPTS TO PANDER

Paradoxically, politicians’ attempts to pander to the electorate lose popular respect and turn off the voters. The convergence on some mythical ‘middle ground’ makes the parties seem indistinguishable. As I explained in my chapter in *Reinventing the State*, “This is why the public thinks that all politicians sound the same. Just as most modern cars look the same because every car manufacturer’s wind tunnel tests produce the same results, so politicians sound the same when they derive their policies from opinion polls and focus groups.”

In any case, public opinion is not monolithic. The average is not necessarily typical or normal; the ‘average voter’ has one breast and one testicle. In reality, public opinion varies considerably and it isn’t possible to please everyone. Liberals, being such nice people, find it difficult to accept that one cannot attract without also repelling. But as I pointed out in *Reinventing the State*, “The Liberal Democrats’ biggest handicap is their fear of causing offence. They would be much better off being true to themselves and not trying to please everyone. Their policies on, for example, Europe or civil liberties are deeply unpopular in some quarters. The party should learn to accept this and recognise that, as the brave stand taken against the Iraq War in 2003 demonstrated, there is more to gain by building support among those who share its values than by trying to appease those who don’t.”

This is all very well, you may say, but shouldn’t we face the fact that elections are won or lost on the ‘centre ground’? Under our first-past-the-post voting system, the battleground in a general election is the swing voters in



Con-Lab marginal constituencies, effectively less than 100,000 voters.

This territory is where Labour and the Conservatives determine who comes out on top. It may be their 'centre ground' but it is not our battleground. With the exception of a few three-way marginals, in most of these seats the Liberal Democrats are squeezed and come a poor third. It would be absurd for the party to focus its resources on competing with the other two parties for such a 'centre ground'.

The Liberal Democrat battleground is different but, to understand where it is, one must identify the Liberal core constituency. This is something the Liberal Democrats are reluctant to do, instead believing the mantra "we can win everywhere". The problem with this belief is that, to attract any and every demographic group, the party says different things in different places, fudges its messages so that they lose impact, or self-censors its policies altogether.

The consequence is shallow and transient support that must be won afresh at each election. The situation is so bad that Sir Bob Worcester of MORI reports that roughly half of those who voted Liberal Democrat at the last general election cannot correctly remember which way they voted.

Yet a core vote exists, at least potentially. The Liberal Democrats' natural support can be found primarily among people who are younger, better educated and more cosmopolitan. And there is substantial evidence for this view:

- At the 2005 general election, the Liberal Democrats performed best among voters aged 18-35 and worst among those aged over 65. Indeed, the Lib Dems captured a higher percentage of voters aged under 35 than the Tories. Many of the seats gained in the 2005 election had a younger and better-educated population than average, with a university in or near the constituency (for example Cambridge, Bristol West and Manchester Withington).
- In the 2004 European election, the trend was even more marked. Michael Steed analysed the results in an article in *Liberator* 201 (March 2005). In Greater London, he found that the Liberal Democrats performed best in the central and western boroughs where the population is younger, better educated and more cosmopolitan than average. They did worst in Barking and Dagenham, the borough with the least educated and third oldest population. Steed went so far as to say that the Lib Dem result could have been predicted on the basis of data from the 2001 census and that local campaigning appeared to have made little difference.
- The annual British Social Attitudes Survey shows a direct correlation between higher education and (small 'l') liberal attitudes. As an increasing proportion of the population experiences university, liberal attitudes gain ground. A tipping point was reached recently, when a YouGov poll conducted for the *Daily Telegraph* (3 January 2005) showed that support for the restoration of the death penalty had fallen below 50% for the first time since its abolition 40 years previously. Young people were much less in favour of restoring capital punishment than their elders. Significantly, support for restoration was lowest among Lib Dem voters, at 35%.

*"The average voter has one breast and one testicle"*

- Broadly liberal culture and policies provide economic benefits to the younger, better educated and more cosmopolitan demographic. Richard Florida (see his book *The Rise of the Creative Class* and website at [www.creativeclass.org](http://www.creativeclass.org)) demonstrated a strong correlation between having a

liberal and tolerant culture and enjoying economic success. He studied 100 American cities and found that those that are welcoming places for creative and bohemian people, ethnic minorities and gays are tending to thrive, whereas cities with a conservative and intolerant culture are tending to fail. Similar research is being done elsewhere in the western world (including Europe) and the findings are the same.

- During the 2005 general election campaign, the polling company YouGov revealed where a new fault line was opening up in public opinion. Its director Stephan Shakespeare suggested (*Observer*, 17 April 2005) that voters "no longer range along a left-right axis, but are divided by 'drawbridge issues'. We are either 'drawbridge up' or 'drawbridge down'. Are you someone who feels your life is being encroached upon by criminals, gypsies, spongers, asylum seekers, Brussels bureaucrats? Do you think the bad things will all go away if we lock the doors? Or do you think it's a big beautiful world out there, full of good people, if only we could all open our arms and embrace each other?" 'Drawbridge down' is clearly where the Liberal Democrats belong. No other party properly represents such people, so why compete with the Conservatives, Labour and UKIP for the bigoted 'drawbridge up' vote?

Regular readers may recognise that many of the above arguments have appeared in previous articles. I make no apology for recycling these valuable resources. As long as there are wets and fools banging on about how the Liberal Democrats must cynically vector in on the 'centre/middle ground', I shall keep banging on about why they are completely wrong.

And while we're about it, I'll recycle one more of my arguments from *Reinventing the State*: "It would be healthier for all political parties, not just the Liberal Democrats, to be clear what they stand for and to fight for coherent positions with integrity. It is a myth that people don't like political arguments. Argument is what differentiates parties and provides people with a real choice. What people actually don't like is when all the mainstream parties look and sound the same."

If the Liberal Democrats have the courage of their convictions, they have no need to seek refuge in the centre or the middle. The way forward for the party is to build and energise its natural constituency – a substantial and growing demographic – rather than mollify illiberal opinion. Trying to compete with the other parties for the same ground is a sure-fire recipe for oblivion.

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Simon Titley is a member of the *Liberator* Collective

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# STRICTLY COME VOTING

As is customary on these occasions, Liberator asked the two Liberal Democrat leadership contenders a series of questions and here are their answers

## Introduction

This is the election no-one expected so soon. Following the 2006 contest, it was fairly obvious that Nick Clegg and Chris Huhne would be the leading contenders to succeed Ming Campbell, but it was assumed such a contest would not occur until after the next general election.

Gordon Brown's decision not to hold an election this autumn – having played the tease over the summer – transformed the political situation unexpectedly and dramatically. It damaged Brown, threw David Cameron a lifeline and precipitated a sharp drop in Liberal Democrat poll ratings.

The volatility of British politics and the tendency of Liberal Democrat MPs to panic are topics for another article. In the meantime, we are where we are, and party members must choose a new leader for the second time during this parliament.

To help you make your choice, we have as usual asked the candidates a series of questions. We saw little point in posing straightforward policy questions. Everyone else is asking them and it would have enabled the candidates simply to cut-and-paste stock responses from their election literature.

In our previous issue (Liberator 321), we argued strongly that Ming Campbell should not be made the scapegoat for the more fundamental strategic failings of the party. Now that Ming has gone, it remains the case that a new leader may be a necessary condition for the party's revival but it is not a sufficient one.

For this reason, our questionnaire focuses on the strategic issues that will determine whether either candidate is capable of putting the party back on the rails.

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## THE ANSWERS

We asked both candidates the same six questions. Here are their answers:

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### QUESTION 1 – If this leadership election is more than a beauty contest between rival personalities, what is it about?

**Clegg:** It's about our ambition for the party. It's about seizing the opportunity to be an outward facing party again, and talking to the British people. I want to broaden the appeal of our party so we can take our message into every home, every family, every community.

There are millions of people in this country who share our liberal values, but do not yet vote for us, or even vote at all. Those are the people that I am determined to talk to both during this campaign and in the future, as leader of the party.

We need to focus not on the issues that divide us, but the vision that unites us. A vision of a more liberal Britain.

I want to put forward radical ideas that inspire people. That's why I announced that I would never register for an Identity Card, and am willing to face the consequences.

I've been overwhelmed by the messages of support I've received. Vince Cable's refusal to attend the banquet in honour of King Abdullah inspired a similar response.

We need to find a way to strike chords like that on issues outside our comfort zone: crime, health, education. We need to make it clear that we are on the side of the people, against the establishment, against the old stale politics of left and right, against the faceless bureaucracies of public and private sectors alike.

We are a political party. Not a sect, or a policy think tank. So we must always start where the British people are, not where we think they should be – and then lead them in a liberal direction.

This contest might be decided by party members – but the country is listening. That is a precious opportunity for us, which we must not squander by turning in on ourselves.

Instead, we can re-engage people in our politics with energy and self-confidence. That is what I want my leadership to deliver.

**Huhne:** It's a choice between different skills, but also different visions. The leader does not set party policy but he or she has huge power to emphasise particular ideas or values.

Three differences: first, Trident. I cannot conceive of circumstances in 2010 after the non-proliferation treaty review in which we would want to renew the existing powerful and invulnerable Trident system, designed for the world before the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. Secondly, Liberal Democracy must be about equality as well as opportunity, because no amount of education spending compensates for the reduction in life chances for one of the 3.8 million children in poverty. We need a fair start in life, as well as an open road. Thirdly, our reform of public services must stress giving local people power over local decision-takers, not imposing market based solutions from London like school vouchers or health insurance.

In two recent articles, journalists who were very sympathetic to Nick – including Lib Dem Jasper Gerard of the Observer – came away with the impression that Nick wants a school voucher scheme. If this is not the case, Nick should correct the impression. In Arizona, three quarters of the school voucher money went to children already in private schools.

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**QUESTION 2 – Politicians nowadays tend to regard core values, core constituencies and competing ideologies as old hat. They accept public opinion as a given. Their task is to divine this opinion through polls, focus groups and the popular press, then compete with other politicians to agree with this 'middle ground'. Do you agree with this approach?**

**Clegg:** No. I've spoken out against this sort of 'sat-nav' politics. Turn this way to shore up the core vote, that way for the floating vote. Go left for the approval of the Mirror, right for the Sun. This is the politics of cynics for whom tactical 'positioning' is all – a hollow, gutless politics stripped of all meaning.

I'm in politics because I believe there is another way. My ambition is to inspire people to vote Liberal Democrat, not to modify the principles of the party to fit with the populist mood of the day. I will always stand up for what I believe to be right, and try to win the argument.



I believe if we trust our instincts and promote our liberal values, we can attract more people to the liberal cause. Because Britain is, by instinct and by tradition, a liberal nation. Look back at our history and you can trace a golden thread of liberal thought, and a great tradition of people's movements, dissent and rebellion from which we as Liberal Democrats can draw.

**Huhne:** No, no, no; a thousand times no! I left business for politics to promote liberal policies, not to be a slick salesman for whatever product the pollsters say is in vogue. The public are tiring of headline-chasing politicians like Blair and Cameron who aim to mirror the perceived mood.

You can see in any shop that the public are re-discovering the value of authenticity. I agree that there are few entrenched class interests, but that makes the need for consistent values even more appealing to the electorate.

We are entering an era of identity, attitude and ideas, not class interests. I know what my principles are and I want to convince the public we're right.

The battle for hearts and minds will be tough. But we shouldn't retreat from that fight and appease our enemies; we should throw ourselves into the fray – and win. Half the electorate describe themselves as liberals. Our task is to make the Liberal Democrats the vehicle for their ambition to change society.

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**QUESTION 3 – At the next general election, the leader will face relentless questioning from the media on one topic above all others: "If there is a hung parliament, would you support Labour or the Conservatives?" How would you handle this question?**

**Clegg:** I would say I have no intention of defining the Liberal Democrats by who we might or might not do deals with in the future.

We have learnt the hard way that talking about coalitions, setting out the terms of deals we might make before an election achieves two things. First, it sets a cap on our ambition, making it clear that we aim to be merely the junior partner in someone else's government. And second, it distracts from our core message that liberalism is a distinct political philosophy that offers distinct solutions not captured by left and right.

Under my leadership, the Liberal Democrats would be clearly focused on the next 10 or 15 years – the challenges that face our country over those years and how the Liberal Democrats can deliver for the British people. I don't believe that third place is good enough.

**Huhne:** First, I have not been in our politics since 1981 – and I would not have lost three elections before I started winning – if I did not believe in Liberal Democrat politics first. I am not a second-best Tory or second-best Labour.

Moreover, anybody proposing partnership politics has to understand that our existing system victimises it. Tiny shifts in the vote in middle England marginals translate into massive shifts in seats, while the Prime Minister can call an election at any point of maximum disadvantage to a coalition party. So fair votes is not so much a pre-condition, as a litmus test of whether other party leaders understand the consequences of our constitution. Without that understanding, we cannot enter into partnership politics.

We could support a minority government measure by measure if they accorded with our manifesto. Otherwise, we would see either minority governments or a coalition between Labour and the Tories, who have so much in common. We would go into Opposition – but we would not be in Opposition for long!

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#### QUESTION 4 – Would you regard your election as a mandate to take party policy in a particular direction and, if so, which way?

**Clegg:** I want to take the party forward. The old politics of left and right simply doesn't offer the answers to the challenges of the 21st century, so it would be a complete mistake for us to lurch in one direction or the other. Trying to split the party into 'left' and 'right', 'economic' or 'social' liberal, makes no sense to me. There is far more that unites us than divides us.

Why use the divisive language that our opponents wish to impose on us? I, for one, am not interested in doing the spadework of our opponents for them.

My ambition is to use that unity to reach beyond party politics and appeal to the British people. It is no good waiting for a general election for our poll ratings to rise: we need to sell our message right now.

**Huhne:** No. Party policy is set by conference following proposals from the federal policy committee and working groups. But it would be idle



to pretend that leaders have no influence or cannot attempt to set the agenda.

A key priority for me would be to flesh out the proposals in the public services reform commission that I chaired before the last election. We need clear agreement on how to decentralise, including fiscal powers. Despite what the media say about the similarities between Nick and me, there is a very clear distinction on public services.

If the Liberal Democrats are to win new voters, we need to offer as strong and principled a vision on other issues as we do on civil liberties, the environment and foreign policy.

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#### QUESTION 5 – What do you think are the Liberal Democrats' greatest strength and greatest weakness?

**Clegg:** I've always been proud of the fact that our policies are invariably based on deeply felt principle and well considered evidence in equal measure. A balance of passion and reason.

I think our weakness is that sometimes we believe that all we need to do is throw together a shopping list of unrelated policies and – hey presto! – the British people will flock to our cause.

Winning the policy argument is important. But we also need to win the political argument if we are to grow as a party. That means looking for new and inspiring ways to sell our vision, rather than focusing solely on fine-tuning our policies to the very last detail.

**Huhne:** I'd point to our current campaigning as both our greatest strength and greatest weakness. In our party – from Chris Rennard through the Campaigns Department to local party activists – we have some of the best campaigners in the world. Our by-election record, our ruthless targeting and our best practice on the ground have stood us in good stead. That's a huge practical asset in our armoury.

But we've failed to deploy successfully, at a national level, the biggest potential weapon of all. That's a sense of what liberal values actually are. Our next leader has one very clear task: make sure voters know instinctively what our party's about, in the same way they understand Labour and the Tories' gut instincts.

We need to answer the sceptic "what is the point of the Liberal Democrats?" No Liberal Democrat leader has thus far backed up our practical campaigning strength by giving a national profile to the answer.

For me, our party is about an equal start in life, opportunity throughout and control over your fate. It's about putting individuals in charge of their own lives.

**QUESTION 6 – What will the Liberal Democrats under your leadership offer that the other parties can't steal or destroy?**

**Clegg:** The Liberal Democrats are the only truly liberal party in British politics. The other parties are attempting to encroach on our ground because they are dimly aware that the politics of the 21st century will increasingly be played out on liberal territory.

But *we* will have home advantage. Our liberalism is instinctive. It cannot be faked.

Empowering individuals, extending opportunity, balancing security and liberty, protecting the environment, engaging with the world – these are causes which we have espoused for years, but which we must now champion in new ways, with renewed leadership and vigour.

**Huhne:** It would be a huge mistake to join Labour and the Tories fighting over the same callow, conservative and crass political turf. It would not only be unprincipled but unsuccessful for a third party to mimic the two larger ones. Our party must stand or fall by its own distinctive and radical ideas. There is no

room for another conservative party in British politics. We already have two.

Now, whenever we get a popular message and start to win on it, our opponents (chameleons as they are) will try and steal it. They can only manage that so often. Every time we have stood alone and been proved right (over a penny on income tax for education; over a serious environment policy; over the Iraq war), our opponents have tried to steal the policy.

Yet we have made electoral gains before they realised we were winning the argument, and the public doesn't forget who was right. People prefer an original to a copy. An issue like Iraq shows why we need to exist – and the public won't quickly forget the brave position we took.

We give up before we've started if we pitch ourselves as a similar party scrabbling for the centre ground. I would lead us to the sound of gunfire, not enlist in our enemies' ranks. Being good at communicating that we are radical and different – by being liberals up against two faddish illiberal parties – is the best thing I can offer the party. The thing they can never consistently steal from us, or destroy, is this: I am a Liberal Democrat and I believe in liberalism.

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## **NICK CLEGG MP**

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Campaign website: [www.nickclegg.com](http://www.nickclegg.com)

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Nick Clegg is the Liberal Democrat shadow Home Secretary. He grew up in Oxfordshire and worked as a journalist in the US and Europe before moving to manage aid budgets at the European Commission. He then led the EU negotiating team on China and Russia's accession to the WTO. He was elected as an MEP in 1999, and MP for Sheffield Hallam in 2005 – having starred in the local panto during the campaign. In Europe, he focused on business and industry, and campaigned against illegal logging and testing cosmetics on animals. In Westminster, he has led the battle against Identity Cards and run a campaign to cut crime.

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## **CHRIS HUHNE MP**

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Campaign website: [www.chris2win.org](http://www.chris2win.org)

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Chris Huhne MP is shadow environment secretary, runner-up in the last leadership contest, and a former City economist and journalist for the Guardian and the Independent and Independent on Sunday. He was the economics spokesman for the European liberal group in the European Parliament 1999 to 2006, and shadow chief secretary to the Treasury from his election as MP for Eastleigh in 2005 to 2006. He lost three elections before election as an MEP in 1999, and has chaired several policy groups including the commission on public services reform.

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# GOODBYE PURITY

Threats to liberty, ecology and European unity have drawn Michael Meadowcroft into the Liberal Democrats after almost 20 years

I must confess to feeling slightly baffled by the sudden turn of events. I make what must be, in national terms, the wholly minor decision to join the Liberal Democrats and days later both the party leader and my local city council group leader resign!

Well, as one who has always tried to stress the primacy of ideas over image, so be it, but I do agree with Paddy Ashdown's comment that Ming Campbell's resignation says more about the nature of politics today than it does about Ming. Age brings wisdom, and wisdom brings judgement, and politics can ill afford to diminish either.

On the Monday evening following Ming's resignation, a couple of friends were at my home indulging in some elegant wine tasting and some even more elegant discussion. Neither are Liberals though both have liberal instincts.

Their question was simple: "What is the point of the Lib Dems? Do they have a purpose?" In return I asked them, without the Lib Dems, and, in effect, without a Liberal political force in today's politics, who was going to make the judgement that going to war against Iraq was bound to bring catastrophe to the Iraqi people? It required an awareness of the historical background to the region, and a realisation that people have to get rid of their own tyrants, to say no to the Bush-Blair adventurism.

In politics it is no use taking the Hillary Clinton position: "If I had known then what I know now, I would have voted against the Iraq invasion." Politics is about taking key decisions on the basis of one's judgement on the spot, at the time.

Second, without a powerful Liberal force, who is going to make the case that today's overweening surveillance society is hugely dangerous? Anyone who has seen the recent film *Other People's Lives*, or even the earlier thriller *Enemy of the State*, should never support any extension of the state's power to amass and control information on individuals' lives. The government's determination to use identity cards as the main means to create a massive database on every citizen is a huge threat to our privacy and to our essential civil liberties.

Perhaps, with ample doses of optimism and good will, you might trust the present home secretary with the control of this database, but can you trust the next home secretary, or the one after that? The Conservatives' belated opposition to ID cards is welcome but all too much based on cost rather than principle.

Third, without the Liberal Democrats there is no political force in parliament that is enthusiastic about European unity. There are individuals in other parties who are genuinely committed but their parties are at best lukewarm. The bright vision of a united Europe is under

serious threat from xenophobes and conservatives of right and left who believe that somehow the British Isles can be floated off into the Atlantic in contradiction and defiance of their geographical location and their European heritage.

The European case is potentially very powerful. History is on its side: the cause of peace in Europe, a continent for so long fractured and bloodied by war, has been upheld by a union that from its inception realised that the social, political and cultural integration of former enemies was the only way to diminish hostility and to prevent hostilities.

The cause of identity is on its side: within a federal Europe, regions whose language and whose sense of community had previously been stifled by fearful nation states can now express themselves with confidence. Catalans, Basques, even the Welsh and the Scots have large measures of autonomy and, should those now termed Belgian so decide, the Walloons and the Flemings can separate without threat to each other or to their neighbours.

The cause of democracy is on its side: not only in encompassing former Soviet Union and Yugoslav states, but also in the example of Spain, Portugal and Greece who were in the hands of fascist dictators or a military junta only 30 short years ago. The history of the Balkans next door demonstrates vividly what can happen when a federal structure disappears and the individual states resort to war.

The case from issues and from culture can be added to the argument, and my two colleagues, perhaps wishing they had never asked the question, took the point – if only to grasp the opportunity to replenish their glasses.

It is however true, alas, that we live in an increasingly illiberal world. In the name of fighting terrorism, an ever-increasing list of constraints and restrictions is forced upon us. From the tracking of our Oyster card journeys in London, the recording of our mobile telephone calls and the CCTV cameras in our streets, to the ubiquitous ID card database, we are watched and followed more than ever before. Any aircraft journey today is fraught with frustration and delay. It seems that everyone is trying to catch the last terrorist, not the next. For politicians, the key question is 'why?' If we cannot discover why the terrorist seeks to regard the innocent as the guilty it is unlikely we can ever live without fear.

The fourth issue of our day, the ecological imperative to which, in its potential for global disaster, all else is subsumed, is, I sense, won. There remain huge questions as to methodology and political courage, but I believe that the public is ready for challenges forthrightly put.

This agenda is not in itself particularly new, so why at this point join the Liberal Democrats? I have two political reasons and one personal.

First, the superficiality of politics in the twenty-first century is a mockery of the intellectual rigour and commitment that is required if society is to grasp hold of these challenges that threaten its survival. I have been active in politics for almost 50 years and I still hold fast to the belief that politics is an innately honourable calling and that in the ability of men and women to work together in political organisations lies the power to create a secure and sustainable environment within which their life chances can be enhanced. We will not achieve this aim without a far better quality of politics than is doled out to us from the two major parties today.

My disillusion with the Blair leadership is immense. I never expected to agree with much of a Labour agenda nor with its methods of delivery, but I genuinely expected to see a government whose instinctive response to helping the poor, to understanding the developing world, to being considerate to the needs of refugees, to defending civil rights, to building houses to let and to espousing comprehensive education, would issue from a political position on the left of the spectrum.

But all its historical sensitivity has evaporated and the pragmatic dissection of its honourable history has not lead to a new expression of idealism but instead to a conclusion that nothing is too illiberal or too harsh for New Labour. To ditch Clause Four is one thing. but to replace it with the focus group and a reliance on spin is quite another.

The public disillusion with what it rightly identifies as politics without principle, expressed most clearly in the tumbling electoral turnouts and in the declining adherence to political parties, is extremely dangerous. More than ever it is up to all who see that danger to seek the most effective ways of reversing it.

My second reason follows directly from my first. The issues we face today, as outlined above, are complex and threatening. There was arguably far more of a case 20 years ago to try and promote an untarnished Liberalism, but today it is no use watching from a position of the utmost political purity as the vehicle of public survival trundles inexorably towards the precipice. It is instead a time to make a slightly higher compromise than hitherto in the effort to turn the car around.

Inevitably one's decisions are affected by one's background. I was fortunate to discover very early on that I

was a Liberal by instinct, but, as with all those similarly enlightened, the discovery meant that one acquired a permanent Liberal millstone of commitment and struggle. After a brief few years as a bank clerk it became clear that I needed to find jobs that would keep me in politics. Over the 30 years from then to the merger I reckon to have done just about every task within the 'backroom' and on the 'frontline', and, in addition – thanks largely to William Wallace and to the importunate Liberator magazine – to have written on just about every subject. The archive is there on my website. Faced with those who lacked confidence in the potential of their Liberal beliefs, the task was to furnish them with the material to support them in debate and on the hustings.

One of the consequences of being in print is that, to remain consistent, it is difficult to turn against the opinions expressed. That, plus having spent 15 years dislodging Labour hacks in Leeds and in achieving the election of a Liberal in Leeds West in place of a social democrat, made it seem rather perverse in 1988 then to join them.

But that was almost 20 years ago, and one has to examine anew the abject state of politics and to decide how best one can have any influence in reversing the trend and in persuading the electors that it is in Liberal solutions alone that the transformation of society lies. I am much encouraged by the apparently universal self-description of those in the Lib Dems as 'Liberals' and by the recent heavyweight book of essays, *Reinventing the State*.

The personal reason is that, having spent most of the past 17 years in international politics, assisting new and emerging democracies, I now have the luxury of being able to spend much more time in the UK. It is high time I got stuck into domestic politics again. Some of my friends in the Liberal party are, I know, hurt by my decision, but they will no doubt continue to fight for the purity of the message locally. The national scene is somewhat different and, though I have no great sense of personal importance, I feel it is now imperative to be in the mainstream of politics. I have therefore joined the Liberal Democrats.

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Michael Meadowcroft was Liberal MP for Leeds West 1983/87 and was the first president of the post-merger Liberal Party

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# IN THE ASSEMBLY, NO-ONE CAN HEAR YOU

Welsh Liberal Democrats have suffered from mistaking their work in the Welsh Assembly for political campaigning, says Peter Black

The outcome of the 2007 assembly elections was both frustrating and disappointing for the Welsh Liberal Democrats. Despite increasing our vote share in the constituencies, and despite fighting a very professional all-Wales campaign, we failed for the second time to increase the size of our assembly group past six.

I have no desire to re-open the debate that the party entered into following the election. The outcome of those discussions was that we voted to go into a rainbow coalition with Plaid Cymru and the Tories only to see the nationalists walk away and sign up to a deal with Labour.

Our problem last May was our failure to connect with voters. We failed to make it clear to them what it means to be a Welsh Liberal Democrat. We went into the election with a detailed manifesto containing hundreds of radical policies, many of which we shared with the other parties.

Although we pulled out three particular policy areas to major on in the election, these issues were not presented clearly or effectively and they turned out to be the same issues that the other parties were promoting as well.

We failed to make them relevant or unique to us because we did not relate our positions to the day-to-day experience of ordinary voters. In other words, we did not use our manifesto as a campaigning tool.

One reason for that omission was that we have spent too long mistaking our activity in the hallowed corridors of the assembly for campaigning. While the work we do in the assembly is important, for a political party it can never be a substitute for honest groundwork and visible local community involvement. In many cases we did not get out into communities to deliver our message to voters. That has not been universal because, in those areas where we did work and where we did have a localised message that resonated with people, our vote not only held up but in some cases dramatically increased. It was the rest of Wales, the vast majority of communities, where that did not happen.

## LEARNING FROM PLAID CYMRU

In this respect we could learn a lot from Plaid Cymru. Our elected parliamentarians and assembly members should be

taking a lead, getting out onto the streets with other activists to talk and listen to people about their concerns and ideas. We should be using the real experience of our constituents and framing our policies in a way that they can identify with. In other words, we need to put into practice on a national level what is at the heart of Welsh Liberal Democrat philosophy; devolution, localisation, community empowerment, and real, genuine interaction with communities.

At a UK level, we have a distinctive agenda based on civil liberties, freedom and the environment. Although we have tried to carry that agenda over into a Welsh context, as yet we have failed to make an impact.

## DODGES IMPORTANT ISSUES

As a party, we have to recognise the opportunities that now present themselves to us and make the most of them. The red-green coalition that has taken the reins of power in Cardiff Bay is based on a *One Wales* document that is vague in many parts and uncosted in others. It dodges important issues, such as the future of nuclear power, for the sake of political expediency.

According to *One Wales*, all the answers to Wales's problems lie with the government, not with the people who keep Wales going. It fails to address key policy matters such as class sizes for 7-to-11 year olds and the higher education funding gap between England and Wales. It relies shamelessly on gimmicks such as grants for first time homeowners and free laptops for kids, which do not deal with the problems they are intended for, while squandering vital resources.

Plaid Cymru has sold its soul to the Labour Party. Since signing up for government, it has voted down motions that would have reiterated its previous opposition to new nuclear power stations and to replace the council tax with a tax based on people's ability to pay. It has also abandoned policies that would have given us fair votes for councils, renewable electricity energy targets for Wales, extra police officers on our streets and measures to deal with student debt.

We are in opposition, but we are far from insignificant. With six out of the 19 opposition assembly members, we will have far more opportunities to scrutinise and to set the agenda both in the assembly and in the press. We also lead



four major councils with a population of about one million people and are delivering improved services and better governance to them. That is a strong record to defend next May.

In May, Labour recorded its worst result since 1918, and will be defending its record in government both in Cardiff and at Westminster, and Plaid Cymru will be tied into that.

The Tories might have embraced the Welsh consensus but at heart they remain committed to a right-wing, market-led agenda, which is out-of-touch with the vast majority of the Welsh electorate. That is evident in their support for foundation schools and hospitals, and their championing of PFI as a catch-all solution to public service delivery irrespective of the evidence to the contrary. It is also the case that Tory proposals for tax cuts at a UK level could well lead to less money being available for services in Wales.

Welsh Liberal Democrats are not ideologically opposed to public/private partnerships but we need to evaluate each contract on a case-by-case basis to ensure that we get value for money for the taxpayer, are able to protect the rights of workers and deliver top quality services.

## **DYNAMIC RADICAL MESSAGE**

This is our chance to refine a distinctive, dynamic and radical message that will have wide appeal in future Welsh elections. At the heart of that message are the Liberal Democrat principles of fairness, honesty and justice. We are committed to tackling poverty and inequality, to taking the hard decisions that will improve our environment and our quality of life, that will remove barriers and offer people the educational and employment opportunities to better their lives, and which will open up government and make it more transparent and accountable.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats are a party that believes in strengthening communities by giving people the power, the knowledge and the confidence to improve their own lives. Our distinctiveness lies in our liberalism, our messages reflect our principles.

We need to play to our strengths as champions of freedom, civil liberties and individual empowerment. Not so easy in an entirely Welsh context but certainly there are issues about ID cards and whether they will be used to access services, the way we are policed, the DNA database and the management of personal information by government and its agencies which can be used as the basis for campaigns.

We need to make the most of what is left of European funding to create a knowledge-based economy in which we have a proper science policy, in which investment in research leads to the creation of high quality jobs, encouragement for the growth of indigenous small businesses, and where we take the green agenda and offer greater support for businesses that are developing environmental technologies, particularly renewable energy. We should also look at how we are developing recycling and ensure that there are mainstream markets for recycled products as well as facilities here in Wales to carry out that process.

In the area of social justice, we should concentrate on removing the barriers that prevent people fulfilling their potential, including inaccessible health care, bad housing conditions, a poor environment, inadequate educational achievement and lack of training. We need to create opportunities for those individuals by putting in place a

support structure that will enable them to grow. This will include better child care, preventative health measures and the ability to access education and training without a punitive financial burden being imposed on them.

Safer communities are also a major issue. We need to provide the resources so that neighbourhoods can be adequately policed but also we need to tackle anti-social behaviour directly by working with young people and providing facilities for them so as to assist the police in encouraging them to vacate the streets.

Finally, we need to empower communities and the individuals that live in them by opening up government, making it more transparent and accountable and giving people a greater say in the decisions that affect their lives and that of their family.

In particular, we need to work with communities to maintain vital local services such as the local post office that helps to provide cohesion and a focal point for community life. We also need to ensure that governance structures are fit for purpose, accountable, transparent and representative. That requires, as a minimum, fair voting for local government.

None of this is new, it is standard fare for a Liberal Democrat, but as I discovered when I first published my pamphlet this autumn, our positions on these matters are not commonly known.

I do not want to be trapped in the position of arguing that it is not our message but the way we are selling it, but it is clear that we are not telling people often enough or loud enough what we stand for. Nor do we always stand up on controversial issues and advocate the liberal position. Instead we opt for the safe middle ground in the hope of minimising the number of people we might alienate.

Despite not being in government, the Welsh Liberal Democrats have a major role in prosecuting a liberal agenda. It should form the basis of our campaigning and of our work in ensuring that the new coalition government is giving the best deal for the people of Wales. We may be able to agree with other parties on some common elements but taken as a whole this is a unique Welsh Liberal Democrat vision, which values the individual and the interlocking communities we live and work in. It is about empowering people, not dictating to them, about using the levers of government to remove barriers and create opportunity, not to run things from the centre. It is about working with local people to take on vested interests where that is necessary.

It is our strength as campaigners, enablers, environmentalists, civil libertarians, federalists, and social reformers that define what the Welsh Liberal Democrats are. Our time will come to implement these reforms as part of a left of centre assembly government but, in the meantime, we should use our position in local government to promote this agenda, while using our ideas and principles to redefine the role of the second opposition party in the assembly as the one that can best reflect the aspirations and needs of people in their communities.

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Peter Black is Welsh Liberal Democrat AM for South Wales West

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# BURMA'S TRAGEDY

The suffering of Burma will end only if the present regime falls, and before that the UK should increase humanitarian aid, says Malcolm Bruce

The people of Burma suffer under a brutal military regime that makes it one of the worst places on the planet, on a par with North Korea or worse.

For 45 years, the military has suppressed all human rights and imposed arbitrary violent rule with total disregard for or active destruction of the welfare of the people.

Most official development assistance to Burma ceased after the junta refused to recognise that the National League for Democracy won the last democratic elections in 1990.

The league's leader Aung San Suu Kyi has been under near permanent arrest and she is held in virtual isolation.

So concerned were members of the House of Commons International Development Select Committee, which I chair, at reports being received as to the scale of suffering being experienced that we decided to investigate further.

We considered making a visit directly to Burma but were advised that the Burmese government was unlikely to grant visas in a timely or unconditional fashion to the whole committee. We would be unable to travel freely and would be under the constant supervision and direction of members of the regime.

We therefore took evidence in London from people with knowledge and experience of the situation inside Burma and visited the Thai-Burmese border where we were able to see and hear the plight of the refugees and those who had fled and/or were providing cross border support to those who remained on the Burmese side.

The experience of the refugees to whom we spoke and the harrowing accounts we heard from those who were engaged in dangerous, undercover cross border activities were truly shocking.

Poverty is usually expressed in development terms as people living on less than one or two dollars a day – itself pretty incomprehensible to well-off westerners.

In Burma, the absence of statistics makes even this measure impossible. What we heard however were of people driven out of their villages in brutal circumstances and hiding on the very margins of survival in the jungle without access to food, medical care or education.

They were in constant fear of discovery and therefore continually on the move. They were terrorised not only by elements of the Burmese army but also rebel insurgents.

## FORCED LABOUR

Many people told us they were subjected to forced labour. This often involved preparing fields and planting crops, which they were subsequently forced to harvest and then hand over to their oppressors.

We heard of villagers being forced to kill members of their own families in front of the whole village on pain of being killed themselves. Women, especially young women and girls, were subjected to brutal and systematic rape and then thrown out into the jungle or brutally sexually and physically violated and then killed.

The motives for this forced internal displacement are varied. In some cases it is because they are from ethnic minorities. The regime faces insurgencies and harasses people to undermine the activities of rebel groups.

In other cases it is to make way for large scale infrastructure project such as hydro schemes or oil and gas development and the laying of pipelines.

A survey in 2006 concluded that more than 3,000 villages had been destroyed, relocated or abandoned and over one million people displaced in eastern Burma since 1996. This activity takes place across the whole of Burma but is particularly aggressive in the east, which is mostly populated by a variety of ethnic minorities.

Cross-border groups are bringing to these people the most basic of survival provisions, either in the form of money or food, basic medication and education support. Often they require armed protection from the Burmese authorities, making them inevitably compromised by some of the insurgent groups.

Thousands make their way across the border, especially into Thailand but also into Laos, China, India and Bangladesh.

We visited one refugee camp at Ban Mai Nai Soi, outside Mae Hong Son near Chiang Mai, which has been established for 20 years. Located in the jungle, refugees are able to grow some crops and also work for cash on neighbouring Thai farms. There is therefore a low level cash economy and some support for health, education and training, although there is a gender bias limiting the opportunities for women to low earning sectors.

Prospects of long term development are limited – partly because of concerns by the Thai government that this could increase the flow of refugees. Even so, unofficial statistics suggest there may be as many as two million Burmese refugees who have assimilated into the Thai economy.

Most UK Government aid is being directed through in-country work. The UK is one of only four countries to operate inside Burma (the others are Australia, Japan and South Korea).

This is aimed at reaching those internally displaced persons inside Burma who cannot be reached cross border and also in tackling AIDs, malaria and tuberculosis.

This requires a memorandum of understanding with the Burmese government but the Department for International Development is determined to ensure that none of the

funding gives any comfort to the regime and is channelled through local civic society groups that can deliver to the people in need.

Support for the refugee camps and the cross-border work is provided by a variety of agencies. The contribution of the British government is however small. Until earlier this year, the government would not countenance supporting cross-border work.

After a review, the government changed its policy but so far has not released any additional resources. When challenged on this, it offers two rather contradictory explanations.

Ministers suggest the work the government is doing inside Burma could be compromised if the cross-border activity were expanded. Most of the agencies we talked to reject this. They then also suggest that the capacity for funding of refugees and cross-border agencies is limited and that they cannot absorb much more. That was clearly not true, even to the eyes and ears of the committee on a short visit.

What really concerned us was to learn that the DfID is closing its Bangkok Office and transferring the entire Burma operation to Rangoon.

I cannot conceive how DFID can deliver the increased aid needed without staff inside Thailand. We were shocked to find that DFID officials rarely visited the refugee camps inside Thailand. The fact of our visit produced the first visit for some DFID staff.

Also many of the Burmese expatriate organisations operate out of Bangkok, necessitating regular contact and engagement. I do not see how this can be done by staff based in Rangoon.

Quite simply supporting the Burmese people in their distress does not involve an either/or decision about basing staff in Rangoon or Bangkok. It requires both. Refugee camps and expatriate and international organisations operating out of Thailand need more support.

By the same token, displaced people and others within Burma need support and as long as this can be delivered without any diversion to the military regime it should be. This lets people know they are not forgotten and enables them to develop essential coping mechanisms.

In recent weeks, many ordinary Burmese, monks and other bolder and not so ordinary campaigners have staged demonstrations inside Burma, which have shown the regime and the outside world that the whole population has not been cowed into submission.

While the crackdown has been widely condemned and the demonstrators have received encouragement, the role of the international community has not completely isolated the regime.

China continues to invest in the country, which offers significant resources to meet the needs of eastern China. Nevertheless, we are advised the Chinese have questioned the stability of the regime and its ability to protect roads and pipelines.

## INDIA'S ROLE

India, by contrast, appears happy to trade unconditionally with Burma, including supplying military hardware such as helicopters. It is depressing that the world's largest democracy seems so unconcerned at the suppression of democracy and the extinction of human rights in its neighbour.

Russia, breathtakingly, has offered to build a nuclear power station for the regime. After all the pressure that has been brought to bear on North Korea, it seems reprehensible that the Russians should contemplate a move that flies so directly in the face of most civilised governments' attitude towards Burma.

The UK, to be fair, has sought to raise the matter of Burma at the Security Council but, in the committee's view, it is hesitant about stepping up aid.

It is shocking that Zimbabwe receives four times as much aid funding as Burma. Britain as a former colonial power has an obligation to the people of both countries and certainly should be doing more in Burma.

It does appear that the UK has some comparative advantage as one of very few countries operating inside Burma where all the evidence suggests it is doing a good job of reaching needy groups. It should increase this activity.

However, this should not be at the expense of support for refugees and out-of-country groups. Even with a large office in Bangkok, DfID officials have been less than visible in northern Thailand. If the office is closed altogether, it seems likely that this limited presence where it matters will disappear entirely.

In many difficult circumstances, UK aid and development activity continues in order to provide direct support to many of the world's poorest people. Yet in Burma, the government seems to be making excuses for not doing more.

The world needs to face up to the impact of a regime that brutalises people and denies them basic services such as health and education.

Public funding for health is the lowest in the world at 0.5% of GDP. 71% of the population is at risk of malaria. 60% of households have had no education and food is in short supply.

The suffering of the people of Burma cannot be ended by aid programmes. All we can do is deliver the maximum amount of aid in a combination of every means that is effective.

Ending the regime will be the only way to bring development to the country. World powers can engineer invasions of countries in the name of democracy when it suits their political agenda. Intervening on purely humanitarian grounds alone seems beyond them. That is the tragedy of Burma.

*“We heard of villagers being forced to kill members of their own families in front of the whole village on pain of being killed themselves”*

# HIGH SPEED LINE

## The Liberal Democrats' sclerotic process for writing policy papers could be cut to just 17 weeks, says Jeremy Hargreaves

Three years ago, I wrote a pamphlet, *Wasted Rainforests*, outlining some of the failings of the Liberal Democrat policy-making process and some proposals for changes. Since then, several aspects have changed – for example, the Federal Policy Committee does take much more ownership of its working groups, and working groups themselves are smaller and more effective, and with broader composition.

At conference we have introduced a new items, such as 'urgent issue' debates, presentations from council groups and Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish parliamentary teams, which have reduced the time for debating lots of minor and uncontroversial motions.

This process has been greatly helped by some other developments too – notably the arrival of Greg Simpson into the new post of head of policy and research, and the arrival of Ming Campbell as leader and FPC chair.

But one key area where we struggled to make changes was reducing the length of the time it takes to write a policy paper, get it agreed, and then taken to conference for final approval.

This is becoming an issue again, so I've come back to revisit it, and to suggest how the timetable for writing a policy paper could be radically shortened.

Shortening the process is not entirely straightforward, and there certainly would be some casualties in terms of elements of the process that we think are important. So at this stage these are just informed suggestions for further discussion rather than definite proposals.

I'll divide the existing period of something like 18 months for a policy paper going from initial FPC decision to set a working group, to debate at conference, into two phases: the 'FPC phase' and the 'pre-conference phase'.

The internet is central to my ideas for change. Bluntly, when the party was set up in 1988, the way you consulted people was by holding a physical meeting. In 2007, it is much more common to consult large numbers of people online.

Adjustment of our consultation processes to reflect this seems to me an entirely sensible updating – indeed we do it to some extent through each policy working group having its own webpage with opportunity for comment, at <http://consult.libdems.org.uk/>

It is often pointed out that using the internet for discussion excludes those without internet access. I think we should also remember that requiring people to spend up to £500 and take a week's holiday for an autumn conference is also a very significant barrier to participation. Depending on how exactly you define it, perhaps three-quarters of the British public now have internet access, which means that there is a very much

larger number of party members able to access the internet than come to conference every year.

So, here is an outline of how the first FPC phase of writing a policy paper could be done in 17 weeks:

- Week 1: Idea for new policy development is suggested
- Week 4: FPC decides to create and appoints a small working group
- Weeks 4-7: working group produces a consultation paper
- Weeks 7-13: consultation paper published on a website and members invited to comment on it
- Weeks 11-15: working group produces final paper
- Weeks 15-17: consultation on final paper, with MPs, Lords, MEPs and others
- Week 17: FPC approves (or not) the outcome.

Many elements are eye-wateringly tight, and could be lengthened if, for every change to shorten the process, there is a trade-off. Taking evidence from experts in the area concerned – one of the best parts of the current system – would also have to be fitted in.

Such a system would probably require a small working group that is highly available and able to give a lot of time to working very intensively. But in principle I think this is possible and it makes a different starting-point for discussion than the status quo.

An alternative would be to review the time devoted to consultation. If there were no specific time devoted to that, and no consultation paper, then a group could have from weeks four to 15 to work on the final paper. This approach would not be incompatible with consulting party members simultaneously while preparing the final paper. I think it's also fair to ask how many new ideas are normally generated or fed in during the consultation period.

The process above gets us only to approval by the FPC. Shortening the subsequent timetable for providing papers to conference representatives and allowing them to read and discuss it and submit amendments, is at least as difficult. Because of August, I don't think we could realistically shorten it much from the current timetable for the second deadline for motions for autumn conference.

So a possible process could be something like:

- Deadline for submission of policy papers by FPC to FCC: July 20
- FCC finalises agenda including papers: 31 July
- August: papers sent to conference reps
- First half of September: discussion by local parties

- Mid-September: deadline for all amendments, and conference.

Doing this would require changes to allow all policy papers to be 'late'; and also potentially require FPC to hold several meetings in July to approve several papers at the final stage (this need would be less acute if the process could for some papers operate a month or two before the absolute final timetable constraint).

This process could significantly reduce the timetable for a working group from first concept to conference floor, from up to 18 months to about six months. An idea for a policy paper in autumn could first be thought of around 20 March – after spring conference – and be debated on the conference floor on 20 September.

So that's what's on the table – but would such a change be desirable?

On the upside, such a timetable would obviously allow us to respond much more quickly with policy papers. This seems to meet the desire of lots of senior people in the party to do so. Deciding in spring 2007 what the major policy papers will be at a conference in a very different political context 18 months later does seem less than ideal.

But what would the downsides be? I am constantly reminded of a comment from someone centrally involved in the party's policy-making earlier in its history, that they spent a lot of time trying to lengthen the policy process – and they weren't doing this just to pursue tardiness and inefficiency.

I think their reasons were twofold: first to make sure that they really had thought through their proposals and investigated them properly. With the best will in the world, this does take some time – and there is some force in the argument that, if you're not going to do this, then why bother to write a paper at all (there are other mechanisms for making policy, after all). And the second is to ensure wide buy-in from different groups of people ranging from parliamentarians to ordinary members. This is something we do very well at the moment and we shouldn't take it for granted.

The 17-week FPC process allows much less time for gathering ideas, contemplating them and seeking alternative views. This would be a very significant change – and it would also require a very serious level of commitment and intensive work from those involved. It is difficult to see how it would not be likely to end up with a small group of people who are able to give a lot of time to it, and are based in central London, probably largely in parliament. This would clearly be a major drawback.

This timescale also simply won't allow groups to go into the level of detail and engagement with the issue which they do at present. However, I do think it is worth questioning whether we need working groups to do that. I am not sure how much bang for our buck we currently get for the level of detail we invest in – either in terms of additional votes, or even in terms of additional policy credibility.

I think there is a strong case for accepting a lower level of detail in papers in return for greater speed – and with several very capable people on a group spending two to three months discussing an area, many with a long history and understanding of the area concerned, the resulting papers are still not going to be exactly superficial.

This timetable would allow a reasonable time for people to give their views, but it does rely on them being ready to contribute fairly promptly. Conversely, I think a shorter process might generate some more excitement and dynamism, which would help MPs and others to engage more than they might in the current very long process.

The pre-conference phase would mean effectively taking all papers to the second current deadline for motions for autumn conference in mid-July, rather than most to the first deadline in mid-May. I don't think it is at all unreasonable to expect any conference representative or anyone else who wants to make a contribution, to have only a month for reading papers, between mid-August and mid-September. FPC members are expected to read them within about five days.

The real change is that amendments to papers would not be submitted and accepted or rejected for debate, until the very start of conference. It was mainly for this reason, I think, that FCC rejected this change when it discussed it in 2005. Among the consequences of changing this would be a very serious burden on policy staff and pre-conference processes. These currently work very efficiently but this might make the strain to beyond breaking point. But this balance could be assessed again.

A third constraint on FPC submitting all its papers at the very final stage is its need to discuss in some depth and approve up to six papers for each autumn conference, which it cannot realistically do at just one meeting. At present, these are spread over about four or five meetings in the run up to the second deadline. Changing this could mean shifting the timetable of FPC from regular monthly meetings to having a meeting every week in late June and the first two-thirds of July. This would be a significant challenge, but if it were to help towards a better process overall I think it should be considered.

So is this all feasible? We will only know if we try, perhaps with one or two papers initially, rather than try to change everything at once.

I'd welcome views from others about whether they think such changes would be desirable or feasible.

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Jeremy Hargreaves is a vice-chair of the Liberal Democrat Federal Policy Committee

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# OBITUARY: MARK TAVENER

Mark Tavener made thousands of liberals laugh at his songs and sketches and later had many broadcast successes.

Liz Barker pays tribute

*Bugger Basildon*, *I'm David Mellor's Chiropodist*, and *The William Rodgers Song* are wonderful comic inclusions in the *Liberator Songbook*, all penned by Mark Tavener who died in October.

Along with Harriet Smith, Mark was a researcher at Liberal Party HQ in 1978. One can only imagine what the conference that decided Jeremy Thorpe's fate would have been like if they, by their own admission the most outrageous researchers the party ever employed, had not been in charge of the speakers' lights.

Shortly afterwards, Mark went to work for the BBC secretariat. Writing speeches for Alistair Milne was not the broadcasting career of which he had dreamt, however he did have enjoyable secondments.

One night, in the radio newsroom, Mark picked up a teletypewriter message that said, "Tonight all Soviet news announcers are wearing black." Mark thought, "Good for them, tomorrow they'll be wearing pink polka dots", and chucked it in the bin. The midnight headline was that Brezhnev had died.

In 1984, Mark was one of the founder members of the *Liberal Revue*. He shone as a writer, singer and performer. Playing the speechwriter adviser to David Steel who erupts with laughter at the line "Go back to your constituencies..." and offers the view, "Well, it'll get laughs", Mark showed his gift of allowing Liberals to laugh at themselves.

Conference representatives would walk round after performances smiling and singing snatches of songs such as version of *Piu Jesu* about Dee Doocey and Andy Ellis.

It's ironic that someone who never exhausted himself delivering leaflets wrote *Climb Every Staircase*. Mark was particularly pleased that, after one stinging satirical piece about David Alton, the Christian Forum felt moved to pray for the revue team. Arty type that he was, he was more pleased when he was featured on *Newsnight* doing a version of Don MacLean's song *Vincent*, about Vincent Hanna.

Mark left the BBC to pursue his writing and published the award winning novel *In The Red*, a satire on a mythical Reform Party. When it was televised, Nancy Banks-Smith wrote in the *Guardian*: "Mark Tavener was a speechwriter for the Liberal Party. He also worked in the Why Oh Why section of the BBC, answering listeners' and viewers' letters. His own correspondence at this time was chiefly from bank managers. The iron entered this man's soul from three separate, painful orifices."

With a hit under his belt, Mark went on to write *In the Chair* and *In the Balance* for Radio 4. So good were his

scripts that he attracted the best British actors including Stephen Fry, Michael Williams, Tamsin Greig and Richard Griffiths. He then wrote *Absolute Power*, and a murder mystery set in a Cambridge college called *High Table, Lower Orders*. He had a growing band of fans, from academics who loved his depiction of the politics of higher education, through to Radio 4 stalwarts who simply appreciated high-quality writing.

Mark and money were ever fleeting acquaintances, so he took a string of jobs from hospital porter to working for the charity ICAN. Although he enjoyed them to certain extent, they were simply sources of material that wound up in the shows.

Mark was a great comedy writer. However, what made him a great satirist was his anger. Poverty, injustice, greed and meanness inspired a rage that fuelled much of his great writing. As his BBC producers acknowledged recently, his prescience set him apart from other writers. He had a knack of knowing way in advance what would be topical. When the BBC threatened to censor a remark in one script about Tony Blair being a liar, Mark got on the phone to journalists and accused the BBC of being gutless. Writers up and down the land, and some BBC staff, were delighted that he took a stand.

Over the years, it was my privilege to spend evenings in the pub nattering about current affairs, sport, cooking and detective novels. It was a great joy to ring him up to relate a funny incident or something ludicrous I had seen on a menu and months afterwards hear what he had done with it in a script.

What I will treasure are the memories. Rooms full of Liberals laughing their heads off. People reading the *Liberator Songbook* for the first time, giggling at witty lyrics. People listening to Radio 4 lapping up great satire. Actors relishing the challenge of a demanding script. Those of us who knew the eccentric genius responsible for making so many people laugh and see the world differently were fortunate indeed.

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Baroness Barker is Liberal Democrat spokesperson on health in the House of Lords

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## STICK IT ON A JAM JAR

*Dear Liberator,*

I was in broad but unremarkable agreement with Simon Titley's article 'Leave Ming Alone' (Liberator 321) for the first three sections, and then I reached the bit headed 'Displacement Activity', whereupon I had a discovery-of-electricity moment.

There is someone else who suspects there may be no bloody point whatsoever in shovelling press releases out of the door. Even the commonly associated verbs 'shovelling', 'churning', give it away. It is bloody useless, especially when there are local papers involved.

I read everything in the universe, including the backs of jam jars I find in the street, and I don't read the local papers. The interface between politics and media is itself turning into a cosy consensus, in which the media and the parties know exactly what to expect from each other, and the whole point of political communication has been shrouded in fog.

It's amazing how many people, and of what quality, get lost. Sooner or later someone, some Alasdair Campbell-type bastard, will succeed in breaking the cycle – not in a gimmicky, YouTube way (though YouTube clearly has its place), but on the fundamental level you're talking about. And we'd just better hope they're our bastard.

Alix Mortimer  
Haringey

# LETTERS



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## TRAIN OR PLANE?

*Dear Liberator,*

Chris Huhne says, "high speed rail will kill domestic aviation stone dead" (Liberator 321). The evidence suggests otherwise.

First, 26 different cities in mainland Britain have domestic air connections, and it is impossible to imagine anyone building that many high speed lines: Bournemouth to Glasgow? Wick to Aberdeen? Exeter to Norwich? The list of low density routes, often served by just one small plane a day each way, is a long one, and those flights are bound to continue.

Second, high speed rail does not "kill domestic aviation stone dead" even when it is a direct competitor. There are 33 flights a day between London and Paris, despite the Eurostar. There are 12 flights a day between Paris and Lyon, the TGV's flagship route. And there are more than 50 flights a day between Tokyo and Osaka, the Japanese bullet train's fastest route.

There may be good reasons to build high speed rail lines, but they will not eliminate domestic aviation.

Tim Leunig  
London School of Economics

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## CHEERS!

*Dear Liberator,*

Andrew Hudson's article on alcohol consumption in Liberator 321 touches on several points of importance for liberals today.

Historically, temperance may be one reason for the decline of the Liberal Party in the twentieth century. Conversely, the existence of a network of Liberal clubs may have something to do with the liberal revival of modern times.

The truth is that drinking is a very popular pastime, people like to drink and they like to drink to excess.

Provided this does not impinge on other people, we should have no objections.

John Hooper  
Chester

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## Monday

It was when poor Ming launched his 'Community Canvass Week' that I knew the writing was on the wall for him. I heard all about it in the *Bonkers' Arms* one evening over a pint of Smithson & Greaves Northern Bitter. (The regular patrons of this excellent establishment learn to eschew the dreadful gassy Dahrendorf Lager). "I had that Mingis fellow of yours around this afternoon," said one of my fellow toppers. "He was asking me what I thought about the way the world was going and what the Government ought to do about it. It was strange," he added, after taking a reflective draw upon his pint, "I should have thought that if he wanted to be Prime Minister he would have had a pretty firm idea himself."

## Tuesday

The pride and joy of my gardener Meadowcroft is his collection of rare hairy cacti. He gathers them from the arid south of Rutland and tends them in the way that a particularly attentive she wolf looks after her whelps. I well remember his fury when a young whipper-snapper from Westminster School burnt down the glasshouse where he keeps them. My first reaction was to hand the lad over to the Proper Authorities, but learning that he was some sort of nephew of my (how shall I put it?) old friend Moura Budberg, I relented and dealt with the matter myself. I informed the errant youth that he would work for Meadowcroft until he had made full and proper restitution for the loss of the aforementioned prickly crop. Over the years, Nick Clegg (for it was he) has had himself elected to the European Parliament and the Commons, but he still comes to the Hall regularly to do odd jobs. (What with compound interest and the strength of the Rutland pound, debts can take a long time to pay off). This afternoon, Meadowcroft and I find Clegg perched on a garden seat writing a speech. "Never mind being a scholar," says my favourite horticulturalist, belabouring him with a broom, "get out and sweep up they leaves." "I think Clegg has just left his comfort zone," I observe as he rushes out to work in the garden.

## Wednesday

That Brown fellow certainly kept us on our toes, didn't he? All that speculation about an autumn poll had everyone rushing around. The last time I visited Cowley Street, I found Rennard ensconced in his War Room, together with a cardboard cut-out of the late Jack Hawkins and a bevy of WAAFS pushing little model canvassers backwards and forwards across a tabletop map of Great Britain. Brown made work for me here in Rutland too. Every candidate wants to be pictured with a wife and a couple of pretty children, but not all have them to hand. For that reason, my own Home for Well-Behaved Orphans does a good trade by hiring the little mites out to be photographed (fair-haired children always command a premium). I have to record, however, that there were some unfortunate occurrences during the 1974 October election campaign. The same little girl was pictured with the Conservative candidates in three neighbouring Lancashire marginals and one boy appeared on the election address of both the Labour and the Tory standard-bearer in a certain South Walian constituency. Ever since then I have kept a close eye on this side of the business.

# Lord Bonkers' Diary

## Thursday

Arriving in Oakham to visit the cattle market, I notice a long queue that winds around several street corners before doubling back upon itself. Upon enquiring the reason for such a lengthy crocodile, I am informed that it consists of investors in my own Rutland Rock Building Society. I take command of the situation by mounting a soapbox and addressing the throng through the collapsible megaphone that I always carry with me. I inform them that their savings are perfectly safe with the Society and that they should go home at once. To emphasise my point, I fire a

couple of barrels of buckshot over their heads and inform them that I shall be calling out the local Militia forthwith. After they have dispersed, I visit the Society myself and insist on entering the vault to satisfy myself that all is well. Whilst down there, I take the opportunity to collect a few valuables before paying an unannounced visit to my accountant to discuss a rebalancing of my finances.

## Friday

I am surprised this evening to find Meadowcroft at our weekly meeting of the Bonkers Hall Ward Branch of the Liberal Democrats. Ever since the Liberal Party merged with the 'SDP Party', he has spent Friday evenings in his potting shed with the Quivering Bretheren, amongst whom he is a leading light. There his fellow members read from the works of L.T. Hobhouse, sing 'The Land' and scourge themselves, before he entertains them with his clarinet. "I be ajoining the Liberal Democrats," Meadowcroft beams this evening, "and – look! – I've brought my sackbut." I give what I believe is known as a wry smile – I may even have attempted a hollow laugh – and turn my ear trumpet down a couple of notches.

## Saturday

One of the saddest things about the fall of my old friend Sir Menzies Campbell was the opprobrium that was heaped upon him for wearing sock suspenders. Our American cousins call them 'sock garters', but they are an altogether more substantial proposition than the garters worn by the best sort of Wolf Cub (and, incidentally, by Matthew Taylor when he first entered the Commons). It hardly need be said that I always sport sock suspenders myself. Not only is a gentleman not dressed without them: they can also be used to fire ink pellets to any part of the House if any of my fellow peers is Going On A Bit.

## Sunday

Whom should I meet at a café on the Great North Road but Huhne and Clegg? One is on his way to a television interview: the other is on his way home from a constituency dinner. I cannot recall which was to be interviewed and which had just dined, but then I often have trouble recalling which is Clegg and which is Huhne. Our conversation turns to the annoying way that both the Labour and the Conservative parties have been thieving our policies of late. "What we need, gentlemen," I say banging the formica-topped table to emphasise my point, "is policies that no other party will want to steal." I trust that my point is taken.

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

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