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COMMENTARY

A NOT QUITE BLANK CANVAS

The startlingly close result in the leadership contest between Nick Clegg and Chris Huhne, after campaigns marked by a lack of substantive disagreement on issues and a low turnout, suggests the Liberal Democrats think either would have made a good leader, but were not greatly enthused since neither candidate said much that might enthuse anyone.

Both sold themselves as communicators, though neither gave much idea about what they wished to communicate, and in consequence neither sought a mandate for any particular political direction.

Clegg will have received a deluge of unsolicited advice since his victory, and Liberator would not want to be left out of this.

He has already become the first leader in 20 years to make repeated and unabashed use of the word 'liberal', something most Liberator readers will welcome. Clegg will do a service if he can reclaim this word from both Tory privatisation headbangers and from Blairite 'liberal interventionists' in Iraq.

As we have argued, the Lib Dems' prospects will never really improve by continuing to seek incremental growth through the exploitation of passing grievances, or by seeking to hold onto every last transient vote by never offending anyone.

Both Clegg's family and political backgrounds ought to make him an instinctive 'drawbridge down' politician who does not see the world as a threat and who will not pander to those who do because there might be a few votes in it. It should also mean he is unapologetically pro-European, stops hedging the party's position behind offers of fatuous referenda, and instead presents Europe as the country's escape route from its subservient role to the USA.

The Lib Dems have lacked a clear constituency among voters and in most places must win every vote from scratch. It is only through a consistent message that the party can move substantially forward of where it is.

That in turns means clarity and stepping outside the consensus that now embraces the Conservative and Labour parties on almost every issue.

Vince Cable's brief tenure gave a taste of how effective it can be to take clear stands, connect with voters' emotions and communicate ideas simply. Can Clegg build on that?

With no great internal issue having been at stake in the leadership contest, Clegg should focus outwards, not on internal battles. He should remember that leaders can almost always get 90% of want they want. It is when they push for the other 10% that the trouble starts.

Most of the party will follow where Clegg goes, and he has nothing to gain by picking fights over fringe issues (as in Ming Campbell's eccentric trial of strength over Post Office finance at his first conference) or indeed by picking unnecessary fights at all.

Proof abounds that the public dislike parties that are riven by acrimony. Those who advise Clegg that he needs a 'clause 4 moment' in which he 'attacks' his party and 'wins' are without exception mad and have neither his nor the party's interests at heart.

The key to policy innovations is convincing argument. The point is simple – if a leader is going to convince voters of something, he or she must first convince their party. If those who are, presumably, best disposed towards them cannot be convinced, what chance is there that anyone else will be?

Thus if Clegg does want major policy changes – having said little in his campaign – he needs to win by the power of argument and not by forcing through changes accepted with, at best, sullen resignation by the party. There is, after all, a rather obvious person around whom dissidents could rally.

He should also jettison those who chose his campaign's political strategy. They almost lost for him what started as a near-certainty. What more does he need to know?

Public services is one area where Clegg has indicated he wants changes. He should first get to know those Lib Dems who lead councils and find out what they do and why. They, after all, have more powers to affect people's lives, and control over larger sums of public money, than he has ever had. His two predecessors were the poorer for having no interest in local government and, lacking any personal experience of it, Clegg should be willing to learn.

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

It's now 20 years since the blood-soaked merger of the Liberal and Social Democratic parties.

Lib Dem members not then around may wonder what all the fuss was about; those who can remember it probably wish they could not.

The bitterness of that period concerned all sorts of things, some symbolic, some of substance, but above all was about what sort of party would emerge from the merger, and whether it would be democratic and decentralised or authoritarian and centralised.

It is now a long time since any debate within the Lib Dems divided on obviously liberal versus social democrat lines, and our four 20th anniversary contributors – some then at daggers drawn – now find a degree of common ground impossible to foresee at the time.

RADICAL BULLETIN

DOUBLE TROUBLE

The 41,465 votes cast in the Liberal Democrat leadership – split 20,988 for Nick Clegg and 20,477 for Chris Huhne – should be a source of worry for party president Simon Hughes.

This is because the 64% turnout came from only 64,727 ballot papers distributed. That represented a 10% drop since the 2006 leadership election, when 72,064 papers were sent out, and a whopping 21% drop from the 82,827 distributed in the 1999 leadership election, let alone the 100,000-odd membership figure widely assumed at the merger.

Hughes became party president in 2004 and made an incautious campaign pledge to double party membership during his term.

To get the membership total even back up to its 1999 level would require Hughes to find an extra 2,011 members each month of his remaining term of office until September.

Doubling the present membership would need 7,191 per month, a feat surely beyond even Hughes's noted energy.

FROM DINGY CHAMBERS

Liberator's spies were out and about in the leadership campaign, in which both contenders occupied scruffy suites of offices near Victoria Street in Westminster.

Nick Clegg's nerve centre looked rather like an old-fashioned primary school, with desks pushed close together.

Clegg's campaign manager (and former MP) Richard Allen soon left for America on business, leaving things to Ed Fordham, who could not be there full-time and left it in turn to Tim Snowball, who works in Clegg's parliamentary office.

As the closeness of the result reflected, the Huhne campaign started well behind but was faster on its feet. It was headed by Eddie Finch, who used to work for Charles Kennedy's office.

Our spy reports that the agent for one of the party's most winnable seats asked for 300 words from each contender to appear in a newsletter. He got what was needed from Huhne but nothing from Clegg and so had to resort to a website account of a campaign speech – which looked pale in comparison, not least as Huhne's littered his copy with plenty of councillors' names, to infer local knowledge.

Finch got out three mailings in a campaign that did not appear to lack money, while Clegg's second mailing reposed in a Sheffield sorting office to the annoyance of Inverness MP Danny Alexander, who arrived late to stiffen the campaign's resolve and discovered no-one had asked whether the sacks could be dispatched from elsewhere.

INNER SANCTUM, OUTER DARKNESS

Nick Clegg's rapid reshuffle sought to reward supporters, find Chris Huhne a suitably important job – he got home affairs – and keep Vince Cable as shadow chancellor after his much admired turn as acting leader.

Those looking for bias to right or left, or economic or social liberal, will no doubt find what they want to find, but Clegg had such a wide coalition behind him in the leadership election that there are bound to be people disappointed both by their positions and, in future, his political stances.

There are though some rather odd choices. Sacking Paul Holmes, a prominent Huhne supporter who held the housing portfolio, looked needlessly vindictive, and replacing him with Lembit Öpik looks bizarre. Holmes actually understands housing and, unusually for a Lib Dem, has effective links with tenants' organisations. Öpik's disporting in celebrity magazines means his appointment will be taken to mean that the party does not treat housing seriously.

Odder yet is the appointment of Willie Rennie as something called 'chair of parliamentary campaigns team'. This is separate from chair of campaigns and communications, which Ed Davey has kept in addition to becoming shadow foreign secretary. What Rennie will chair, and to what end, remains obscure.

David Laws has been put in charge of public services, though his Orange Book tendencies will be boxed in by the responses Clegg had to give to Huhne's accusations on this subject during the campaign.

Julia Goldsworthy, with no known background in local government, has replaced Andrew Stunell, who knows it forwards and backwards but who may yet be resurrected in a role overseeing local election campaigns.

Giving Charles Kennedy a roving brief to campaign in public on European issues was a smart move given that he can communicate messages effectively and the party has ducked and dodged rather than campaigned boldly on this for years.

Cable's new deputy is Taunton MP Jeremy Browne. Does this elevated position mean he will deem it incompatible to maintain his role on the advisory board of the Reform think-tank, three of whose four directors were advisers to the last Tory government and in whose ranks he is the only Lib Dem?

REASONS TO JOIN

The defection of north-west MEP Saj Karim to the Tories, just a few days after he secured second place on the Lib Dem regional slate, has awoken further controversy about recruitment in parts of that region.

Karim's supporters are understood to have conducted a perfectly legitimate recruitment drive in 2006 among voters of Asian origin, who they may have assumed would be likely to give him first preference in the European candidate selection.

Karim was elected in ninth place out of nine north-west MEPs in 2004 and, with the region due to lose one of its seats in 2009, his re-election was uncertain unless he were to secure first place on the party list.

But that place was occupied by Chris Davies, a prominent party figure for 30 years, a former MP, and an MEP of eight years' standing.

Karim was popular in the Lib Dems before his defection and it was unlikely, though possible, that he could have beaten the better-known Davies in an all-member ballot - given the latter's tendency to court controversy - but also unlikely that, as an incumbent, Karim could have fallen to third place.

The party made two important changes that affected matters. The first was that - in response to complaints that some contenders for selection in the 2005 general election had conducted mass enrolments of those presumed to be sympathetic to them - it was decided that only those who have been members for a year and who have also renewed their membership may vote in candidate selections.

The other change was that the date for the European selections was brought forward to allow candidates more time to make themselves known to voters.

Though the stated motives for these changes were unconnected to the north-west selection, their combined effect meant many of those recruited by Karim's supporters were ineligible to vote whether they renewed their membership or not, which caused some resentment.

After Karim defected, Rabi Martins, a prominent member of Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats, made a posting on the Liberal Democrat Voice website (26 November).

He wrote: "I suspect one of the contributory factors to Saj coming second in the Euro selections - which would have led at least in part to his decision - is that the local party will have lost many of the ethnic minority members who helped him last time."

In a related posting, Martins wrote: "As I recall, Saj only succeeded last time because he was able to recruit significant number of ethnic minority members. If the only way we get ethnic minority members on board is by getting ethnic minority supporters to vote him or her in then surely that is a sad state of affairs - and should be unacceptable to all Liberal Democrats."

But things were awry in Oldham, though it is not known whether this was something that went wrong in part of the drive by Karim's supporters, or was the result of some separate initiative concerning local matters.

Concerns have been raised by the Oldham local party about large numbers of people joining through Cowley Street as the result of recruitment conducted without its knowledge. There were also some concerns raised in Bolton.

When Oldham investigated the 120-plus new members it had suddenly acquired, accompanied by relevant interpreters, it found among them those who said they were Labour supporters, those who said they had no interest in the party and others who could not be traced.

This situation alarmed local officers as the party operates on the assumption that individual members join because they wish to support its principles and objectives.

The Oldham local party has earlier expressed its concern about what happened, concerns that have wider implications for the operation of the membership system, since Cowley Street took two months to notify it of these recruits, two weeks beyond the six-week period during which a local party may object to a new member.

Having not had an answer, Oldham's chair Alan Roughley wrote to party chief executive Chris Rennard on 3 December: "It is not rocket science to deduce that 120+ new members in one borough at the same time is not (unfortunately) a likely occurrence. If your staff are not willing or able to alert local parties about possible infiltration, then the present system of new member registration has to be improved."

Roughley also discussed the effects in general on local parties and voting of 'clan' politics - where members of a particular group are enrolled in a party to try to influence a decision - citing, rather surprisingly, a paper from Oldham Labour Party that voiced similar worries.

Mass recruitment of members presumed favourable to a position or person is not of course confined to ethnic minority communities. There were, for example, disputes as long ago as the early 1980s about the takeover of the Deptford local party by a religious organisation, and of Hackney North by associates of one individual.

Karim said after his defection that he had been considering this move for some time, which makes it strange that he stood in the Lib Dem selection at all.

It is even more strange that, after Karim's departure, anti-Tory statements remained for a while on his website, such as: "Whilst Cameron attempts to paint a glossy image of a gay-friendly party in the UK, he is also desperately trying to get into bed, at European level, with Poland's openly homophobic Law and Justice party. I just hope the British public see Chameleon Cameron for who he really is!!!"

There must be sitting and aspirant Tory MEPs who would want high places on their north-west regional list, and it remains to be seen whether Karim gains anything by his defection.

HUGHES DUFFED UP

Chris Davies has upset party president Simon Hughes, who is a prominent campaigner for diversity, by raising concerns about recruitment issues in the north-west.

In a letter to European Parliament group leader Andrew Duff, Hughes asked him to consider expelling Davies for bringing the party into disrepute for distributing to Tory MEPs and the press, "an internal party document which was private and confidential," which gave Davies's view of issues around the European selection.

Duff replied that, since Davies had written the document concerned, it was not for Hughes to decide whether it was confidential.

He said that Lib Dem MEPs accepted Davies may have been unwise but added, "A large majority of the [MEPs]

nevertheless accepted the substance of Chris's defence of his action" which was that he sought to embarrass the Tories, not the Lib Dems.

Duff said the MEPs shared Davies's concerns. They also acknowledged, "how hard Chris fought to get Saj elected in the first place".

He concluded: "We resolved, in the light of this discussion, to take no further action against Chris Davies in relation to this matter."

Hughes has not said why he thinks Davies's report could bring the party into disrepute, and Davies has challenged Hughes to explain in what way his actions could have caused this.

He suggested that disrepute would be more likely to flow from those who "turned a blind eye", over events in Oldham.

SECRET BALLOT

As universally expected, former Metropolitan Police commander Brian Paddick was selected as Lib Dem candidate for London mayor, gaining a massive 73% of the vote.

But who came second? His two rivals were Haringey councillor Fiyaz Mughal and LDYS officer Chamali Fernando, neither of whom ought to have expected to be able to do much more than raise their profile for another occasion.

They were up against one of the most famous public figures in London for the mayoral nomination and, with little chance for a new candidate to become known right across the capital, it is pretty much essential that the Lib Dem mayoral nominee is already a celebrity.

But in a move that gave a new and undesirable meaning to the phrase 'secret ballot', the voting figures were not published.

In fact, Fernando took 19% of the vote and Mughal 8%. Both are in politics and must know that there are some contests you cannot win. Fernando has made herself well known by her energetic campaign and will surely secure some good nomination in future. Mughal is a respected figure and will have raised his profile. So what was the problem with publication?

GIRLS NOT ALLOWED

An offer came from Lembit Öpik's paramour and her sister, who comprise the Cheeky Girls, to perform for free at the Liberal Democrat ball, an annual black tie fundraiser for those who can afford such things.

The girls offered their services for free, but organisers then found this vetoed by Cowley Street on the grounds that female MPs would be offended.

"But they were in fact pretty keen," said one organiser. "Who is the prude? Think of the missed publicity!"

A JOB FOR LIFE

Selections for Liberal Democrat European Parliament candidates were, apart from the uproar in the north-west, notable mainly for all the incumbents being reselected by margins that might make the leaders of North Korea blush.

The only incumbent to be re-selected with less than 60% of the vote was Sarah Ludford in London, and that was only because second place went to Jonathan Fryer, a well-known party figure who ran a vigorous campaign and who had only just missed out on election last time.

The most startlingly one-sided result was in the north-east, where incumbent Fiona Hall received 85% of the vote, ten times as many as second-placed Chris Foote-Wood.

Even Robin Teverson, a former south-west MEP, was unable to garner more than 9.27% of the vote for the region's second place, with incumbent Graham Watson taking 69.73%.

A number of incumbents were no doubt helped by being able to circulate glossy leaflets to party members just before the rules on campaign spending took effect, but what these results illustrate above all is the value of name recognition in a ballot held across a large area.

It used to be argued that women were at a disadvantage in Euro-selections. Now it seems that everyone is, unless they have been elected before.

IT'S IN THE POST

It was no Liberal Democrat's fault that the postal ballot for the European Parliament selections coincided with a postal strike. It might, however, be someone's fault that no contingency plan was in place to deal with the resulting disenfranchisement.

Liberator Collective member Tim McNally reported, for example, that hardly any ballots were received by Southwark members before the deadline.

The worst problems occurred in the fraught selection in the north-west, in particular in Liverpool, where the postal dispute dragged on after it had been settled elsewhere.

Two votes separated Stockport councillor Helen Foster-Grime and Liverpool's Flo Clucas for third and fourth places, and Clucas felt she would have been ahead had all Merseyside members had votes.

Clucas withdrew in protest but then found that, after Saj Karim's defection, the votes were to be recounted and she stood a chance of coming second.

She nevertheless told local members: "I said that my withdrawal from the ballot was to protest against the shabby way hundreds of our members were being treated.

"If I now ask for my name to be reinstated, it will seem to condone what has happened. There is a principle here that is, for me, paramount."

The English Candidates Committee has said that it could not have extended the deadline since the ballot papers bore the 7 November deadline date and it had no means of telling members of an extension other then by email, which was not available for all members.

CHINA'S PATH

China's communist government has made hesitant moves to democratise its party, but lack of freedom will hamper the country's growth, says Fang-yi Lo

The 17th national congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) concluded in October, during which President Hu Jintao delivered a lengthy keynote speech that will guide the party's policy for the next five years. President Hu mentioned 'democracy' more than 60 times in one of his speeches and people's democracy was highlighted. However, does he aim to bring a democracy for the people of China or create a slightly more democratic system for the party?

The CPC is the largest political party in the world, with more than 70 million members. In other words, China's ruling elite of the communist party accounts for only 5% of its total population of 1.3 billion. Its highest policy making body, the standing committee of the political bureau, comprises the nine members who control the direction of the party and China's future.

President Hu indicated that the CPC would adopt an intra-party democratic approach, in which it will require the political bureau to report regularly to the larger central committee. At a local level, the standing committees do likewise to local party committees and accept their oversight. This system aims to reform the intra-party electoral system and improve the system for nominating candidates and electoral methods.

Within this structure, the CPC's members may attain a higher level of transparency among party policies and a certain limit of freedom of speech. However, this structure applies to only 5% of China's population.

Hence, the central question is freedom of speech for the people outside of this communist structure. Will ordinary citizens be free from restrictions on the freedom of speech? Will the media be free from state censorship?

The answers remain pessimistic and uncertain. Intra-party democracy is a way for the CPC to consolidate its structure at a local and national level. The power of the political elites comes from the regional factions, which are based on local support.

If the local party is decentralised, it will seriously affect the CPC's power in that region, and decentralisation is always the last thing the CPC wishes to happen. Hence, the intra-party system should be seen as a strategy for the CPC to lure the cooperation of the local committees. Even the CPC may regard this system as a first step to encourage its people to get involved in political affairs.

Following the congress, there have been no moves on the freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, protection of property and the right to free election. These freedoms have not been heard of in any of President Hu's speeches.

Another side of the story during the CPC's congress is that the People's Daily newspaper has deleted bloggers' comments concerning the congress on its website. Li Rui, a 92-year-old party member and the former secretary general of Mao Tse-tung, had published an article criticising the party and demanding immediate freedom of speech, the end of censorship and a democratic constitution. His article was deleted by China's army of web censors.

With regard to the right of assembly, one of founding members of the Chinese Democratic Party, Mao Ching xian, was released this year after eight years' imprisonment. His imprisonment was for sedition, the government claimed. The crimes of subversion, sedition, and releasing state secrets are often used against the ordinary citizens to prevent any political movement.

One of the most serious human rights problems is government officials' grabbing land in exchange for benefits from developers. This appears a grave concern across the country. As these are typically schemes where local government and business developers act in concert, they can take the lands away as cheaply as possible.

In south-western China, thousands of people protested for days against land seizures in Yanjia in the Chongqing municipality. The peasants were protesting against land grabs to expand an industrial park and what they said was unfair compensation.

Farmers' property rights were seriously abused under the flag of government plans to reduce the income gap, and it has led to unrest in rural areas. China is grappling with popular unrest as official corruption, pollution and miscarriages of justice, or even seemingly minor issues, serve as flashpoints for protests and riots.

China has become the world's fourth-largest economy, enjoying over two-digit growth over the past ten years, lifting 220 million people out of poverty. Economically, President Hu promised to accelerate the separation of the function of the government from those of enterprises, state assets and reduce government intervention in microeconomic operations while the state still ultimately has control.

The heated stock market encouraged people to borrow money from the bank to invest. Inflation has risen 6% in 2007, the highest officially acknowledged rate in the past eleven years.

The CPC may struggle to create a system where it controls everything from a bureau of nine people, as flashpoints grow across an ever more centralised, globally-aware China. Without freedom, it may be that China will not have the room it needs to grow.

Fang-yi Lo is human rights officer of Liberal International

DOWN UNDER TURNS LEFT

Climate change and Iraq doomed Australia's mis-named Liberals in the country's general election, says Steve Yolland

Looked at from afar, the forces of the left have wrought the near-impossible: turfing out the mis-named 'Liberal' Howard government after eleven years of continual economic growth, with unprecedented prosperity in virtually all walks of life, and gaining power from the almost impossible position of needing 16 net gains to win a bare majority, yet garnering a comfortable 18-seat majority (based on latest counting) in a parliament of just 150.

All this in a country that likes to change its governments… well, not at all really; the inertia inherent in the Australian political system is legendary.

Never mind that opinion polls had been predicting the result for at least a year that John Howard was a fixture. Around the whole country on election night, the population watched transfixed while minister after minister succumbed to the swing (delightfully, on one commercial channel, with their photographs being placed in a virtual shredder), until finally, in a denouement that could barely have been scripted, the prime minister himself lost his seat to an attractive and articulate ex TV journo – only the second sitting prime minister in Australian history ever to do so.

"Party allegiances were originally class based, but now cross the demographic divide in startling ways"

In some quarters, they are calling it the Ruddslide, after the new leader of the Labor Party, a Mandarin-speaking ex-diplomat by the name of Kevin Rudd.

But behind the inevitable hyperbole hides a rather different picture. And an interesting one.

A SORT OF USA-LITE

During the last 20 years or so, far from being a vibrant democracy energised by the clash of ideas, Australia resembles a sort of USA-lite, where the differences between the major parties are of nuance and presentation, rather than substance.

There was no stock market slide in the days after Rudd's election, just a continuation of the steady, unspectacular gains that have typified the market for a generation. Business people grumbled into their Cabernet Sauvignon and tucked into excellent (and cheap) steaks, muttering darkly about the number of ex-union stalwarts on the new front bench but, by the time the second bottle was open, talk moved comfortably back to the favourite Aussie topics of conversation; sport, sex and whether it will ever rain again.

This was best exemplified during the election, when the conservative side announced massive tax cuts totalling over A$30bn. Without batting a collective eyelid, the Labor party promptly matched them. The fact that Australia still lacks basic infrastructure (for example, the means to get water from parts of the country where there is too much to parts where there isn't any) seemed to bother hardly anyone.

And looked at closely, Rudd's incoming government really shouldn't frighten the horses. In his major policy launch, he lambasted Howard for being fiscally irresponsible, declared himself an 'economic conservative', and proudly announced that the wanton spending of the incumbents "had to stop". Even more astonishingly, his audience applauded enthusiastically. That said, with their leader uncharacteristically and comfortably ahead in the polls, he could probably have said just about anything and been embraced. Being out of government for a generation is a chastening experience for any party.

What's more, when he did announce major initiatives, they were so patently sensible that few could complain. A commitment to install faster broadband all over the country. Laptop computers for schoolkids. And most of all, a promise to one day… someday… roll back the previous government's industrial relations laws (called, erroneously, WorkChoices), which had offended the Australian psyche's basic preference for fair play, by stripping people of some of the nicer aspects of their pay and conditions – like overtime. The fact that this could so easily be presented as making the kids of middle-class families work harder for less in their Saturday jobs was a stupid political miscalculation that Labor jumped all over.

So if the boil-over wasn't the result of a fundamental disagreement on economic policies, with economic self-interest usually the core of any election campaign, once characterised by former Labor prime minister Paul Keating as "the hip pocket nerve" … then what *did* happen in Australia in November? Are there any conclusions of any significance to draw from the result that would point the way to future results in, say, the UK and the USA?

I have often commented in Liberator and elsewhere that 'professional' politicians underestimate and fundamentally misunderstand the level of understanding of the 'average' voter. I have argued that while the population's level of political *sophistication* may be low, its political antennae are nevertheless well tuned. Ordinary people tire of esoteric discussions of the intricacies of policy long before political animals, but that doesn't mean, in short, that they don't know what they think.

Eleven and a half years is a very long time for any government to be in power. People tire of the same old faces, especially with many of them looking distinctly world-worn (John Howard is 68) and, after a while, they come to idly wonder why they have to listen dutifully to the same old stuff year after year, and whether or not the other lot might have some good ideas after all.

In this regard, the contrast between bookish, earnest, unexciting but *younger* Kevin Rudd and the slightly deaf, pugnacious and seemingly inexorable John Howard undoubtedly played a part in the electorate's decision. Similarly, Howard's refusal to hand over the reins to his younger deputy Peter Costello looked curmudgeonly and selfish, while Rudd's figurative embrace of his new female deputy, the more left-wing and charming Julia Gillard, looked modern and unforced. Not for nothing was Rudd once heard to utter the term 'new leadership' more than 30 times in one speech.

A QUICK LAP DANCE

Sometimes in politics, 'new' is enough. Even a 'scandal' that broke when it was revealed that the overtly Christian Rudd had once had too much to drink and (allegedly, inadvertently) visited a strip club in New York actually played to his advantage. Whatever else one might think of him, no one could possibly imagine John Howard ever popping in somewhere darkened for a quick lap dance, even accidentally.

But in all probability, more than 'Buggin's Turn' was at play here, and the very closeness of the election reveals this. A careful analysis of the results shows that – far from being a 'Ruddslide' – the election result was actually a knife-edge thing. Certainly the Labor Party won the popular vote (on a two-party-preferred basis by 52% to 48%) but much of that lead came in Labor marginals where its result held up creditably, and in safe Labor seats, where it piled up votes but to no good purpose.

The seats won from the Liberal-National coalition, which delivered Labor victory, were close run things. There are nine seats – enough to return the conservatives to power – that could swing back again in 2009 or 2010 with a uniform swing of just 2.92% or less and, as Labor's vote this time around was nudging historic highs, such a result can certainly not be discounted. And in Western Australia, in the heart of the mining resources boom which largely underpins Australia's remarkable run of economic good fortune, Labor actually went backwards.

So if it wasn't economics, and it also wasn't mere turn-and-turn about, then what occurred?

Standing on a polling booth in a key marginal Liberal-held seat handing out 'How To Vote' cards for the Labor Party (a unique experience for me, born of desperation to get rid of the government before all other considerations) was an educative experience.

Instead of the customary condescending verbal pats on the head that I had grown used to when handing out material for the Australian Democrats (an inoffensive and useful little party, predictably and sadly wiped out at this election), I was leaping into the heart of the fray for once. For all that it is viewed with suspicion, politics here is deeply felt at an unconscious tribal level. Party allegiances were originally class based, but now cross the demographic divide in startling ways. Labor stalwarts are as likely to be millionaires as they are to be suburban battlers. Similarly, don't be surprised when on polling day a tramp with the arse hanging out of his trousers gives you an articulate mouthful of right-wing diatribe. So it was with some trepidation that I grabbed my poster of Kevin Rudd (looking unsettlingly like the Milky Bar Kid with less hair) and my leaflets and proceeded to approach people with my groovy 'yourights@work' T-shirt pulled uncomfortably over my middle-aged paunch.

I needn't have worried. Obvious Liberal voters scurried by, looking somewhat embarrassed. Labor Party supporters grabbed my leaflets with undisguised glee. After a brief while, one of the Liberal Party workers wandered over to me. "I hope you lot win," she said, quietly. "I'm only doing this because our local chap is such a nice bloke. You know, I've already voted Labor in my constituency." She put a finger to her lips, cautioning me to silence. "Why?" I asked, intrigued. "We should have signed the Kyoto Protocol," she muttered. "Who gives a shit about tax cuts when the arctic ice caps are melting?"

As the afternoon progressed, I cautiously engaged the other non-Labor people, Liberals, Greens, even a Christian fundamentalist, in conversation. One by one, they named two issues with which they were deeply dissatisfied. Universally, they were distressed about climate change, and the fact that Australia was the only country, besides the US, still to sign the protocol. "Makes us look stupid," one said. "What am I supposed to say to my kids?" And secondly, in hushed tones, less they appeared disloyal, they repeated some variation on a theme that went rather like this.

"We should never have been in Iraq. It's disgusting. A disgrace. They lied to us."

It was clear talking to these earnest, friendly people, that this, for once, was an election about more than who holds the government's benches, and who was handing out the biggest jar of lollies.

I pondered many conversations I had had over the last year with people from all walks of life. A consistent theme was an understanding that the need to tackle climate change was an issue that transcended other priorities, and that whysoever we went into Iraq in the first place, we sure as hell shouldn't still be there.

And Kevin Rudd had said he was going to sign the Kyoto protocol. (He duly did; it was his government's first official act).

And with some associated waffle, he said he would pull Aussie combat troops out of Iraq. In short, some ideas were at play here, after all. Just enough to make a difference.

At the close of the polls, I wandered to a mate's house, where the barbecue was already sizzling in the sunshine. Popping open a coldie, I clapped him on the shoulder. "Relax, mate," I said. "This one's in the bag."

Steve Yolland was a Liberal activist in Southampton, and has lived in Australia for 20 years

CAMPAIGNING IN A CAFÉ CULTURE

Anyone can meet a future president in the small towns of Iowa, and those that shine there might just make the White House, says Dennis Graf

Americans agree that we are about to have a very volatile election. We're uneasy and nearly three-quarters of us feel that "the United States is headed in the wrong direction."

There are a number of very contentious issues. Iraq and national security, illegal immigration, the outsourcing of jobs, the restructuring of the economy and the fear of paying for health care. These are extraordinarily difficult problems and most of the candidates are imprecise on the details but heavy on the soaring rhetoric.

Most Republicans support Bush on Iraq and, indeed, some sound even more bellicose. Most Democrats want to "bring the troops home," but they can't agree on how or when.

Contrary to popular misconceptions, the Democrats have been able to put their members in the positions of leadership in Congress, but they don't have the power to really challenge Bush. To do that, they would need 60 votes; they currently have only 50, and there's usually a stalemate.

Illegal immigration seems to be out of control. We do not have a national identity system and the documents we use are easily forged. The Democrats have a natural interest in encouraging immigration since most of these people will eventually become citizens and probably vote Democrat.

UNDOCUMENTED ALIENS

The Republicans are reluctant to penalise employers and the well-off voters who profit from cheap labour. They also eye the growing Hispanic vote and are afraid to offend it. The big problem is what to do with these 'undocumented' aliens. There are about 12 million of them here illegally – maybe more – and everyone realises that you can't deport 12 million people.

Healthcare insurance is unavailable for many Americans, and medical costs are astronomical and getting worse. We spend 17% of our GNP on health care – far more than in Britain or France.

All eyes are currently turned on two rather small and unrepresentative states – Iowa and New Hampshire. The Iowa caucuses on 3 January were the first real demonstration of the relative strength of the various presidential candidates. Most candidates spent a great amount of time and money in Iowa. Organisation is very important here; almost every village has its quota of political operatives.

The New Hampshire primary has the first secret ballot election and, unlike Iowa, permits voters to 'cross over' to another party. It's certainly possible to win the presidency without winning or, at least, doing very well in either Iowa or New Hampshire, but it's unlikely.

Iowa's victor will probably get strong momentum as he or she heads into New Hampshire. Historically, several people usually drop out of the race after a poor showing in Iowa.

At an Iowa caucus, registered voters will go to one of 1,780 local meetings to select delegates to what will be a serious of conventions, which will eventually select the delegates to the national convention. Most caucuses are held in schools and libraries, but some are in homes. In the Iowa town in which we lived, our local caucus was held in a grand house which could well have been in Hampstead.

Precincts are quite small and a town of 5,000 people would probably have four or five. People will publicly cast their vote for their first choice by standing with a group with like-minded people. You're likely to know most of the people there. There will be Hillary Clinton supporters. Senator Obama will have a group. Former vice-presidential candidate John Edwards will have another. There will be a number of minor candidates who might, or might not, have people staking out their position. Some of these candidates will not reach the minimum necessary to stay viable in the caucus and people will move to their second choice. In most cases, the electability of the candidate is of paramount interest.

Most Iowa caucus-goers are ordinary people, but in Iowa, ordinary people can be quite politically savvy. When I lived in Iowa, I met most of the candidates. Anyone can walk up to them.

Iowa is small enough so that politics can truly be 'retail'. Many of the places where the candidates come to meet people are places like small cafés. When Jimmy Carter in 1975 came to Algona, the town where I lived, he had scheduled a 7am stop at a local restaurant. No one bothered to come and meet him – he was a total unknown there. I could have gone and had a long two hour discussion with a future American president, but I didn't.

Iowa is important because of the vast amount of publicity the winners receive afterwards. It is a swing state with a lot of independents. Most people in Iowa are relatively centrist and Iowa politicians tend not to be colourful. Voters there have though never voted for a woman for statewide office. That's unusual.

There is considerable national irritation at the wildly disproportionate attention and influence that this very small number of Iowa voters can have on the selection of the president, but no one can agree on a better alternative. Most people think that the Iowa caucuses are valuable in that they allow candidates without vast sums of money and without major name recognition to show strength and maybe even prevail.

"I could have gone and had a long two hour discussion with a future American president"

The two Democratic candidates, both senators, who in Britain or almost any other country would be the clear favourites, are on the fringe here. These are Chris Dodd, a silver-haired patrician, and Joe Biden, a longtime specialist in foreign affairs and famous for his verbosity. He even jokes about it. There are a number of other minor candidates. Bill Richardson, a Mexican- American and a former diplomat, has some serious supporters, but is ranked low in the polls. A favourite of the left-wing crowd, and someone who says what most Democrats actually believe, is Congressman Dennis Kucinich. Kucinich is an elfish little man who is married to a young Englishwoman with a pierced tongue.

Actually, two of the leading Republican contenders have wives who we simply can't imagine as first ladies. The current Mrs Guiliani is widely disliked. Rudy Guiliani used to take cell phone calls from her in the midst of serious speechmaking. Fred Thompson's much younger wife appears more like a granddaughter.

Nationally, Hillary Clinton is far in the lead, but she is widely distrusted. She has broad support, though, among women and also among blacks, a major component of the Democrat party. Her husband, Bill Clinton, is still widely popular among black people.

There is a black man running behind Hillary. Barack Obama is a charismatic figure who somehow hopes to be cut in the mould of Bobby Kennedy, a Democratic patron saint. Obama was raised in white and Asian communities and seems non-threatening to whites. The other candidate with a chance of winning Iowa is the former vice-presidential candidate, John Edwards, a multi-millionaire southern trial lawyer.

KISS OF DEATH

Clinton claims inevitability, continuity and experience, though she's not clear what she means by that. Obama promises 'change' and Americans say that they do want change. He has charm and a bit of the scholarly flavour of the law professor he once was. He is thought to be an intellectual, something that usually is the kiss of death in American politics. Edwards says that he is most electable and, sadly, this might be the case, since he is neither a woman nor a black man.

All of the likely potential candidates in both parties have slender resumés, but this is not a big problem in America and, indeed, is often touted as an advantage. People in both parties tend to 'run against' the government in Washington, any government.

The Republican national front runner, Rudy Guiliani, former mayor of New York City, did not seriously contest Iowa – a dangerous gamble, people feel. He's vulnerable – his friend and right-hand man, Bernie Kerik, is tied to the Mafia and is under indictment. Kerik has had a colourful career; he started out as Guliani's chauffeur and in the end finished as his police commissioner. Guiliani then touted him for head of Homeland Security, a massive government bureaucracy of dubious reputation.

Giuliani also has an odd personal life – many marriages and liaisons. For a time, he lived with a male homosexual couple. There are a number of photographs of him wearing a dress. "At parties," he says. He was once married to his cousin. His children say that they will not vote for him.

In Iowa, he is running third, behind Mitt Romney – a former Mormon missionary who became a Boston billionaire financier – and Mike Huckabee, a relaxed and witty Southern Baptist preacher. Fred Thompson, an elderly actor with a reputation for being lazy, is probably in fourth place. A one-time front runner, John McCain, a Vietnam War hero, is not doing well since he, among other things, has been able to work well with Democrats. One would think this would be an advantage; it is not.

I'm telling you. American politics is bizarre.

Dennis Graf lives in Minnesota and is Liberator's American correspondent

A LIBERAL BATON TO PASS ON

It was not certain that liberalism would survive in the merged party but it has flourished, says Tony Greaves

Thinking about the merger is still fairly personal, though time takes away much of the pain. I've not written much since 1989 when Rachael Pitchford and I set out a detailed account of the negotiations from the viewpoint of two dissident Liberals in our little book *Merger – the Inside Story* (I still have a box of them, if anyone is interested, £5 each including postage!).

Another account, written from an SDP viewpoint, is in the later chapters of *SDP – the birth, life and death of the Social Democratic Party* by Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, the rather slanted academic history of the party that "showed early promise but died young". (In suggesting this bias, I should reveal that they describe me as "the heaviest cross that every modern Liberal leader has had to bear!").

Along with their conclusion 'The SDP – A Study in Failure', these chapters are worth reading as an analysis of what went wrong written by the two political scientists who provided the SDP with much optimistic polling analysis in the early days.

Looking back on the merger process, the striking thing is how the most fundamental question has been resolved. The ever-present tension in the negotiations was between a set of views and attitudes – a framework – that was seen to be 'Social Democrat' and another set that were seen to be 'Liberal'.

On both sides, some of us wanted the new party to be firmly grounded within one framework or the other. There was also a widespread view across both parties that what we were seeking was something new, a synthesis of social democracy and liberalism that would be a new approach, the impossible dream of a new philosophy or even ideology.

In the early days of the new party, the outcome was far from certain. The final chapter of *Merger* (contrary to general belief, this chapter was written by Rachael, not me) noted:

"For many Liberals the merger was a chance to put Liberalism into practice and for the philosophies of the two parties to develop together and grow. For many in the SDP it was a chance to emulate the launch of the SDP with a new different message, although they didn't know what that would be.

"Thus we have ended up in a position where the roots and traditions of liberalism have been denied, where the party appears to have no underlying message or idea of what it stands for…"

AWFUL NAME

The low point was reached when Paddy Ashdown tried to lumber his party with the awful name The Democrats to replace the awkward compromise of Social and Liberal Democrats, which was being lampooned as the 'Salads'.

But hope came fairly quickly when members, desperate to recover something at a time when the polls were sinking towards zero, voted clearly for Liberal Democrats. People outside the party often shorten this to 'the Liberals', and why should we care?

Our subsequent evolution into what we are now – certainly the Liberal party of British politics – means that this debate is now over. We are what we are, for better or for worse. The debate has moved on.

Nothing showed this more than the recent leadership contest. For the first time, the question of which predecessor party the candidates belonged to was not an issue. Both promoted themselves as the best carrier of the Liberal flame. Ex-SDP Chris Huhne's call was as heir to the social liberalism of Grimond and Steel. It is reported that Nick Clegg was in the Liberal Party. But his political career is distinctly 'new party post-merger' and again he stressed his Liberal faith.

The debate is no longer between social democracy and liberalism – it's about what it means to be the carrier of the British Liberal tradition in the twenty-first century. We are all Liberals now! It's been a joy to hear people like Shirley Williams, Bob Maclennan, and Charles Kennedy as party leader, describe themselves as Liberals and democrats.

But should the merger have happened at all? To answer this question, we need to look further back to 1981 to the formation of the SDP and, following its launch, the inevitable Alliance with the Liberals. I hope people will not think I'm fighting old battles when I say, with the benefit of hindsight; it really wasn't worth the huge traumas and wasted energy.

There were upsides. We gained some excellent new colleagues who are still with us, most of whom would not have followed Roy Jenkins into the Liberal Party. At first, the Alliance won extra votes and seats, though that effect largely went with the Falklands war and there are compelling arguments that the Alliance did no better in the 1980s than we'd have done alone as Liberals. Perhaps worse.

No-one in their right mind would want to go back to the endless negotiations over seat allocations (national and local), over policy, over joint events from rallies to jumble sales.

No-one would want to have two lots of candidate approval systems, two parallel sets of local parties

(covering different areas), two lots of national publications operations, two designs (and names) for Shuttleworths, two colours for several years, two lots of spokespeople in parliament.

The list was endless and crazy, plus all the opportunities for national media mischief over policies. Plus two elections with two leaders (in one of which the ranking was changed in mid-stream).

FOOLISH ENCOURAGEMENT

But once the SDP had been formed, with the enthusiastic but foolish encouragement of David Steel, none of these things could be avoided. And without the Falklands, who knows what electoral success might have come our way in 1983? It's 'what if' history with a vengeance, but 60 or 100 seats and the balance of power might have delivered electoral reform and a political environment in which two parties could amicably compete. Possibly! With a parliament split between Thatcher's Tories and Michael Foot's state socialist new economic programmers, it's probably a pipedream even in the 'what if' fantasies of old men.

After further disappointments at the 1987 election, merger was inevitable. Along with Rachael, Michael Meadowcroft and Peter Knowlson, I walked out of the last meeting of the negotiating teams, and I spoke and voted against the merger at the awful Special Liberal Assembly at the Norbreck Castle in Blackpool. In my case, this was partly a direct result of what had happened in the negotiations. But in retrospect, the 'Yes But' brigade were right: there really was no other practical option. The tragedy was that 'Yes But' amounted to little more than resigned acceptance when what was needed was a clear 'Yes But' programme for the new party.

The first years were dreadful, with the infamous nadir at the 1989 European Parliament elections when we polled 6.4% and fell behind the Greens. In the one really winnable by-election, against William Hague at Richmond (Yorkshire), we were beaten by David Owen's continuing 'SDP Tick'.

But again there was hope. Paddy's energetic leadership combined with the astonishing resilience of our council base, and the People First grass-roots campaigns developed by Andrew Stunell at ALDC, to save the new party from a return to the phone box jibes of the 1960s. And with a little help from Screaming Lord Sutch at the first Bootle by-election in 1990, we finally saw off The Doctor.

I don't want to sound triumphalist, not least because what happened over the decade was not a triumph at all. It was a time of continuing difficulties for Liberalism when damage limitation was the order of most days. But we came out of it with most of the SDP colleagues we wanted, and the rest disappeared.

And I do feel for colleagues who may still, in waking moments in the early hours, feel pangs of grief for the death of the party which had given them hope and excitement and belonging, and which they believed was poised to transform the old political system.

What of the Liberal Democrats now? Crewe and King writing in 1995 suggested that one of the few enduring results of the SDP was the Liberal Democrats' constitution based on that of the SDP. This is partly true in the lack of autonomy of local parties, the policy-making system (thought it's more convoluted and bureaucratic than even that of the SDP), the national membership system, and the disastrous lack of a proper party council.

But in other respects, it's more like the Liberal Party. The conference is much closer to a Liberal Assembly than to the Council for Social Democracy (which is no doubt why some people have suggested trimming its powers). The English regional parties and Scottish and Welsh Parties are quite unlike the SDP. As for the English Party, neither the SDP nor the Liberals would have put up with such a shambolic mess.

Rachael set out some unresolved issues, which included those constitutional questions. The belief that merger led to an efficient, well-run headquarters took some time to come about and, whatever the value of the national membership system (it would have had to happen in the Liberal Party, David Penhaligon's seedcake members notwithstanding), it certainly has not resulted in the promised large increase in membership.

Rachael wrote that the federal system was "an unhappy mess, rather like the Liberal Party was, but more so". Eighteen years on, Scotland and Wales may be happy but I suspect that few people in England are.

She was perceptive in her comments on the "bureaucratic and cumbersome" policy-making process. "Turgid policies written by committee have failed to capture the imagination of the public or the party" nor, one could add, of conference representatives who rarely read them. As a result, "leading members of the party will take it upon themselves to decide for the party rather than waiting for the message to evolve via the much-vaunted 'democratic and deliberative policy making process'." This was long before the appearance of spokesperson's papers press-released as new policy.

The failure of the party in the early years to campaign has slowly been turned round, partly through the use of the internet, though there is still a very long way to go. Other crunch issues – notably the party name and the constitutional commitment to NATO membership – were resolved early on. But accountability in the party remains poor, and the mechanisms for discussion of policy and organisation are still depauperate (if improving a bit via the internet).

But let's celebrate the successes. Our 63 MPs, continuing strength in local government, high quality presences on the new parliaments and assemblies, and in Europe. This party is the strongest Liberal force in British politics for 90 years. Most of all, we have survived to pass on the baton of Liberalism and that, as we would be firmly told by forebears like Ramsay Muir and Elliott Dodds, or Donald Wade and Richard Wainwright, is our prime duty.

For a time that outcome was far from certain.

Tony Greaves is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords. He was a member of the Liberal Party's merger negotiation team in 1987

WHAT HAPPENED TO SOCIAL DEMOCRACY?

Social Democracy may be low profile but it's a vital part of the Liberal Democrats, says Tom McNally

I was invited to make this contribution to Liberator's '20 years since the merger' feature, which may be an indication of how far we have travelled.

I am, let it be remembered, one of those social democrats who came from the Labour Party with a certain contempt for the self-styled 'activists' of the old Liberal Party.

We were the hard-headed realists who had quit the shambles of old Labour in order to break the mould of British politics. We did not find as natural bedfellows the woolly liberals with their woolly hats, open-toed sandals and obsession with delivering Focus leaflets. We were the men and women who had experienced government, sat at the cabinet table and had to make hard choices in the real world. We thought that the Liberator Collective and its ilk were trapped in a time warp of late sixties and early seventies direct action politics. They seemed to exist in a comfortable bubble of internal party committees where embarrassing the leadership became an end in itself.

"Social liberalism certainly comes very close to social democracy"

The question I am most often asked, 20 years on, is whether I regret missing out on New Labour. Hand on heart, I can say no. I honestly believe that the bringing together of social democrats, the pavement politicians of the Liberal revival and the deeper rooted liberalism, which never did die out completely, provided the synthesis for the relevance of the Liberal Democrats in the twenty-first century.

Our approach to contemporary problems draws on both the liberal and social democratic traditions. It does not surprise me to find that in some of our philosophical and ideological debates, former social democrats and liberals line up shoulder to shoulder on either side of the argument There was always a good deal of philosophical and ideological overlap. Jo Grimond's shrewd observation that David Steel was one of life's social democrats whilst Roy Jenkins was a natural Asquithian Liberal had more than a grain of truth in it.

My old mentor, Jim Callaghan, called his autobiography *Time and Chance*. In the case of the Liberal Democrats, the collapse of the old Soviet Empire and the onset of globalisation brought to an end the great battle between capitalism and socialism that had dominated the twentieth century and seemed to push liberalism to the margins.

George Dangerfield's *Strange Death of Liberal England* seemed to be the ultimate obituary for an idea whose time had come and gone. During the 1950s and 1960s, the battle inside the Labour Party was between the Clause Four socialists personified by Aneurin Bevan and the revisionists of whom Hugh Gaitskell was the embodiment. It was the perhaps underestimated leadership skills of Harold Wilson that kept the two factions together in such a way that Labour held power for eleven years between 1964 and 1979. But in Wilson's own graphic phrase, "I waded through shit to keep this party together."

As it was, as the party took a sharp turn left after the 1979 election, it was a sizable rump of its social democratic wing that followed Roy Jenkins, Bill Rogers, David Owen and Shirley Williams in to the newly formed SDP.

TOO ELITIST

Looking back, it is clear that the experiences of the struggle in the Labour Party made the SDP far too elitist and top-down. It did however bring into politics a number of political virgins whose wisdom and experience we benefit from to this day. Looking back on merger, I am now amazed how successful it was. It was only subsequently that I fully understood and appreciated how difficult organisational merger is whether it be a business, a school or a government department and that whole text books have been written about reaching solutions we achieved by mutual trust.

Neither was the background to achieving mutual trust exactly conducive. The best remembered clip from the satirical puppet show *Spitting Image* showed an urbane and confident David Owen with a weak and puny David Steel in his pocket. When they discuss the name of the new party, they agree to take two words from each of their existing names. In negotiations Steel accepts 'the' and 'party' as the contribution of the Liberal Party, while Owen negotiates 'Social' and 'Democratic' as the SDP contribution.

Merger - 20 Years On

It was no surprise that, even with Owen long gone, the Liberals were suspicious of re-naming their party. The indecision about what to call ourselves (Democrats had support even among some senior Liberals) and the short-lived compromise of Social and Liberal Democrats (or 'Salads' as the Glee Club cheerfully dubbed us) reinforced a sense of drift combined with the impression that the arrogant social democrats were determined to supply the organisational cutting edge whilst the liberals were invited to supply the poor bloody infantry.

That image did disservice to the negotiators on both sides. We were able to come through some very tough negotiations with very few casualties. We have, in the last 20 years at times, as Paddy Ashdown likes to remind us with some relish, almost disappeared off the statistical graph so low did we go in the polls. But we have also hit a 70-year high in parliamentary representation and built a formidable presence at every level in local government, in Scotland and Wales, and play a key role in the European Parliament.

Those achievements are the achievements not of social democrats or liberals; but of Liberal Democrats. Many thousands of our members have never been a member of any other party. Many millions, particularly young people, have never voted for any other party. Today the Liberal Democrats, and even more so the Lib Dems, has a name recognition and brand values which should make those who hanker after a return to calling us simply 'the Liberal Party' pause for thought.

For today's voters, the Lib Dems seem to represent an approach to the multi-faceted challenges of globalisation, migration and climate change with a confidence that we mean what we say on the tin. In contrast, Labour has to stick a 'New' on the front in the style of the old washing powder ads, while Mr Cameron goes even further and tries to rebrand himself as a 'liberal' Conservative.

MILL REDISCOVERED

It is no accident that the intellectual icon of British liberalism, John Stuart Mill, has been rediscovered by a whole new generation. At our recent party conference, he was easily voted the greatest ever liberal and his views are increasingly called in aid against the authoritarian and over-centralised nature of the modern state.

So we have the philosophy and the positioning in the big debates of our day to feel confidence about who we are and what we fight for. We have a party liberal enough for Michael Meadowcroft to rejoin. Is it time to jettison the old social democrats like the first stage booster rocket – or at least leave them peacefully to graze in their retirement paddock, the House of Lords?

Before Liberator readers give a resounding a "hear, hear" to that, let them have pause for thought. Liberal Democracy has, to my mind, three deep tap roots. We hold firm to the concepts of individual liberty embodied by Mill. A second tap root goes to the work of the 1906 Liberal Government in giving birth to the welfare state, the economics of Keynes and the 'cradle to the grave' commitment of Beveridge.

Combined, those traditions say that individual freedom is not enough and that we should exercise our personal freedom to give all our citizens a certain quality of life. We believe that there is such a thing as society and, for much of the twentieth century, it was the social democrats who took up that banner as social liberalism faltered.

Social liberalism certainly comes very close to social democracy. I certainly do not have blind faith in the market to solve our problems – there is far too much empirical evidence to the contrary, so I am not willing to replace Keynes by the Orange Book just yet. Nor am I willing to water down or obfuscate the other great battle-honour the social democrats and liberals share, our commitment to Europe. I pay tribute to the 50-year commitment of the old Liberal Party to Britain's role in Europe. In recent years, however, it is the old social democrats who have most consistently kept the European flag flying.

Individual freedom, social commitment, European based internationalism, localism, environmentalism, a healthy scepticism about the unfailing wisdom of market forces seem to me to be a potent cocktail brewed from the best of liberalism and social democracy.

I do a lot of speaking to sixth-forms and university groups, and I find they are young people who are comfortable with what we have achieved. For them, the traumas of the eighties and nineties are history, interesting history, but history nevertheless. They are looking for a party that responds to the challenges of their century. With a few bruises and the odd wrong turns, I believe the Liberal Democrats answer that need.

The challenge for our new leader is to draw on all the strengths inherent in our liberal and social democratic past. In a recent review of the new biography of John Stuart Mill by Richard Reeves, David Marquand wrote "Mill thought advancing liberalism had won the battle against the despotic states of past centuries. Twenty-first century liberals should be prepared to fight it all over again."

He might have added that the help of a few old social democrats might be essential to the success of that battle. But our appeal must go broader than being the political wing of Liberty. Martin Kettle spelt out the opportunity that lies before us recently in the Guardian if we can appeal to "that broad centrist majority of British voters who want to combine economic efficiency with social justice, individual liberty with internationalism. All three parties will be striving to speak for them. In the face of Labour's record and the Conservative history, though, this ought to be the Liberal Democrat decade".

I feel it in my bones that Martin is right; but, to fulfil that destiny, Liberal Democrats will need to draw on both their Liberal and Social Democratic tap roots in responding to the challenge.

Lord McNally is Liberal Democrat leader in the House of Lords. He was a member of the SDP's merger negotiation team in 1987

BAD COURTSHIP, HAPPY MARRIAGE

Most of the disputes around the merger are long since resolved but some, like nuclear power, may break out afresh, says Willie Goodhart

August 1987. Bill and Silvia Rodgers were staying with Celia and I in our beach house on a Greek island when the news came through that 60 per cent of voters in the SDP referendum had supported merger with the Liberal Party, and David Owen had opted to form a continuing SDP.

There were no mobile phones in those days. Communication by landline from the island was hard enough to Athens, and it was all but impossible to make contact with foreign countries. The telephone lines had not yet reached our house, so poor Bill spent many hours at the telephone office in our local small town trying to reach Roy in Tuscany, Shirley on a ranch in Wyoming, and Bob Maclennan somewhere in Turkey. This inauspicious start was followed a few weeks later by a bitter and divisive party conference at Portsmouth, when the Unionists (if I can call ourselves that) and the Owenites parted company.

DEAD PARROT

This was followed by three months of negotiations, leading to eventual agreement on the terms of the constitution of the merged party – and immediately afterwards to the ghastly 'dead parrot' episode, when a memorandum on party policy agreed by Bob Maclennan and David Steel was instantly rejected by the Liberal MPs (who had not been consulted on it). Only some quick footwork saved the merger from collapsing at this point.

The merger was approved by a Liberal special conference in the unattractive surroundings of the Norbreck Castle in Blackpool a few weeks later. It came into force in April 1988, thus merging the seven-year-old SDP with the Liberals, whose origins can be traced back to the informal merger of the Whigs, the Peelites and the radicals in the mid-nineteenth century.

Twenty years on, what is the outcome of the merger? Did the traditions of the SDP and the Liberals flow side by side but separately, like the White Nile and the Blue Nile below Khartoum? And when they merged, which side prevailed?

It is best to divide this into two sections – first, party structure and constitution, and second, party policy. The constitution that emerged from the negotiations (and was drafted, on instructions from the negotiating teams, by Philip Goldenberg and me) has stood the test of time well, though it has of course had a number of amendments. The SDP constitution had a major flaw, which was that far too much power was left in the hands of its leaders and MPs. The Social Democratic Party was not, in its internal arrangements, very democratic – a consequence initially of the Gang of Four's concern that the party might be taken over by undesirable entryists. The SDP negotiating team recognised that the more democratic Liberal structure, giving party members a much greater say in both administration and policy, should be accepted. There were, however, in the view of the SDP, some serious defects in the Liberal structure. One was the absence of any reliable central membership register – whereas the SDP had been the first party to put its membership register onto a computer. Another was the dependence of the central party machine on donations from the local parties to fund its activities.

A more contentious issue arose over party conferences. The SDP had been concerned that voting at conferences (or Councils as we called them) should be representative of the party as a whole. Voting membership of Councils was therefore limited to about 250, and members had to be elected by their local parties. The Liberals had allowed all party members to attend and vote at their Assemblies, which made for a larger attendance but meant that organisations such as the Young Liberals and members living near the Assembly location had a disproportionate voice in Assembly decisions. The SDP team persuaded the Liberal team to accept the principle that local parties should elect the voting representatives to the conference, the number being based on the number of members of the local party. The number of voting representatives was larger than the SDP team would have liked, with the result that in most local parties elections for voting members of Conference are uncontested. However, there is no evidence that decisions of Conference do not broadly represent the views of party members.

VERGING ON THE CHAOTIC

I attended a number of Liberal Assemblies, including an enjoyable Assembly in Dundee in 1985 and the disastrous Eastbourne Assembly in 1986. They were more fun than the SDP Council meetings – livelier, with lots of points of order and ambush votes, but verging on the chaotic.

Lib Dem conferences have become much more sober than the old Liberal assemblies – partly, no doubt, because the success of the Liberal Democrats in local government means that a high proportion of voting representatives (*not* 'delegates', please) are members of local authorities, and often in control of their council. Points of order are now rare.

Merger - 20 Years On

Another change in style is the policy-making system. The creation of a separate Policy Committee, with power to set up working parties, write policy papers and submit them to conference for approval, was something for which the SDP team pressed strongly, though it is of course not the only method of forming policy. The Liberal practice of setting up a 'Commission' to meet and formulate policy during the course of an Assembly was a method guaranteed to come up with inadequate proposals. I was surprised to see an article in the previous issue (Liberator 322) arguing that 17 weeks – four months – was too long a period for the formulation of policy. It is difficult to see that policy on most major issues could be formulated in less, though of course some issues, such as the invasion of Iraq, require a swifter response.

The present structure of the Liberal Democrats contains elements of both its predecessors but perhaps owes more to the SDP than to the Liberals. There are certainly Liberal elements, such as a federal structure with district parties in Wales, Scotland and England as opposed to the unitary structure of the SDP, and a Conference with considerable powers going beyond policy-making. SDP influence can be seen, however, in matters such as more centralised control of party finance, membership and candidate selection, limitation of voting rights at Conference to members elected by their local parties, and a strong Policy Committee.

Party policy, however, probably owes more to the Liberals than to the SDP. As the dead parrot incident showed, the views of the two parties on a number of issues such as membership of NATO and nuclear energy differed very strongly. The SDP was passionately supportive of NATO, to an extent that led to its insistence on including a commitment to NATO in the preamble to the Liberal Democrat constitution. The Liberal Party never adopted withdrawal from NATO as party policy but its membership included a significant number of unilateralists, so the party's support for NATO was less than whole-hearted. Fortunately, the end of the cold war less than two years after the merger reduced the importance of NATO and its divisive effect on the Liberal Democrat Party, so the reference to NATO was quietly removed from the constitution.

Another issue continues to be divisive, though in a rather different context. This issue is nuclear power. The Liberal Party – not surprisingly, only two years after the Chernobyl disaster – was strongly opposed to any new nuclear power stations and was, indeed, calling for the early closure of those in existence. Most members of the SDP were not opposed to nuclear power. While this division dropped below the horizon for some years for economic reasons, it has re-emerged recently in the context of global warming – an issue which had hardly reached public attention in 1988. Many of us from an SDP background (including myself) believe that nuclear power is, in the medium term, a valuable method of reducing carbon emissions and we are unhappy with the party's absolute rejection of new nuclear power stations. The equally absolute rejection of GM foods has a rather similar effect on us.

> *"Perhaps, the SDP were pragmatists and the Liberals were idealists"*

The difference between the parties was, perhaps, that the SDP were pragmatists and the Liberals were idealists. The SDP was not born out of any great ideological belief but because the Labour Party was being taken over the loony left. The Liberal ideology – being a belief in individualism rather than collectivism – was far more attractive to SDP members than that of the Labour left, and in many cases (such as human rights) was more or less identical with views of SDP members. However, on the issues such as nuclear power that have divided us, it is the Liberals who have prevailed. My conclusion is that the courtship was painful but the marriage has been happy.

Lord Goodhart is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords and was the party's shadow Lord Chancellor until December 2006. He was a member of the SDP's merger negotiation team in 1987

FROM DEAD PARROT TO RISING PHOENIX?

Nick Clegg is the first leader to owe nothing to either predecessor party, so have the Liberal Democrats finally come of age, asks Graham Watson

The Liberal Democrats' new leader, Nick Clegg, owes little to either Liberals or Social Democrats. Does this mean that the merger of the two parties twenty years ago is now complete?

Perhaps the nadir of embarrassment from all the tragic and farcical goings-on at the time of the merger was the billboard advertisement by a chocolate manufacturer that showed four versions of an Easter egg, each with a different proposal for the new party's name on it and the slogan, "You decide on a name and we'll put it on an egg for you."

But the Social and Liberal Democrats eventually became the Liberal Democrats and the party has managed to build the name into a strong brand with a remarkably well recognised logo of a bird which has puffed out its feathers somewhat since its first release from captivity into the political jungle.

Three leaders have come and gone, two from the Liberal Party component and one from the Social Democrats. Their policies have not differed notably: indeed, it might even be said that Charles Kennedy was the most Liberal in the terms of the parties which the Liberal Democrats succeeded. With an avuncular nature reminiscent of Sir Henry Campbell- Bannerman, his appeal stretched well beyond the ranks of the party. His success in general elections reflected this, bringing us almost (but not quite) to the share of the popular vote achieved under Steel and Jenkins in 1983, which the party under Ashdown never came near.

The reference to NATO in the party's constitution, much fought over at the time, has been expunged. And the concept of a single leader but with an enhanced role for the party's president has worked considerably better than the dual leadership of the Alliance days. In any event, the party's leader in the House of Lords – the chamber where Liberal Democrats exert most influence in UK government – has been drawn from the ranks of former Social Democrats.

Though representation at all levels of government has progressed, membership has declined over the years since the formation of the new party, commensurate with declining membership of all political parties in the UK.

Of those who remained with David Owen's Continuing SDP during its brief life, many subsequently joined the Liberal Democrats. The same holds true for those who continued in the Liberal Party, a legal, but effectively no longer a political, entity. One or two medium-profile defections to Labour as it entered office in 1997 did no discernible damage: conversely, many disillusioned Labour and Tory party members, including two Conservative MEPs (James Moorhouse and Bill Newton Dunn) and five MPs (Emma Nicholson, Hugh Dykes, Peter Thurnham, Paul Marsden, Brian Sedgemore) have shown the new party's inherited ability to attract others to its ranks.

Roy Jenkins once likened the difference between Social Democrats and Liberals to that between Mastercard and Visa – the labels are different but they serve an identical purpose. It cannot be held with any convincing evidence that on the issues of the day – devolution of power, opposition to the invasion of Iraq, anti-terror provisions, identity cards – the policies of the Liberal Democrats would alienate supporters of either predecessor party. Indeed, a policy-making process

inherited from the Social Democrats, which has been comprehensive to the point of being unwieldy, has ensured a remarkable degree of harmony, if also a certain blandness.

The most significant change to the party's appeal has perhaps been its strategy of concentrating its limited resources on a number of target seats at the risk of being, in some areas, no longer a truly national party. The consensus for such a limited appeal has recently begun to crumble (see Liberator's pamphlet *Liberalism - something to shout about*, 2006). Yet none could deny that the party has become contemporaneously more professional in its presentation of policy alternatives at Westminster and its campaigning on issues that matter to the electorate, nor that its appeal to young people has grown to the point where it is fashionable among students to support the Liberal Democrats.

The merged party has been a success where electoral systems have been just. In Scotland and Wales, the Liberal Democrats have been and will be again a party of government. In the European Parliament, a merger inspired by the 1980s UK experience has seen a doubling of our ranks.

At Westminster, the test is yet to come. There may be an irony in the emergence – as candidates for the leadership of a parliamentary party with a greater array of talent than ever before – of two candidates who have served a shorter time in the House of Commons than most of their contemporaries.

Chris Huhne and Nick Clegg, with barely two years each at Westminster (though over five years each in the European Parliament), are among the most able and articulate of our party's MPs.

Yet while Chris was firmly rooted in one of the predecessor parties, Nick is a true child of the now adult Liberal Democrats. He comes without the psychological baggage of either parent but with the ideological inheritance of both.

Though his victory was narrow, it was nonetheless the victory of a candidate whose campaign was uninfluenced by either predecessor party; while Chris Huhne's campaign bore the heavy musk of the former SDP.

Can it be said that the merger 'worked'? The stem cell technology of today would have made it easier than the grafting process of the late 1980s, but the proof of success or failure will depend on the next general election. Born during a Conservative hegemony, nurtured through a period of Labour domination, the Liberal Democrats have come of age and must now show their mettle.

But straws in the wind – not least the return of Michael Meadowcroft – suggest we are on the right course.

Graham Watson is Liberal Democrat MEP for South-West England and is leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe group in the European Parliament. He was an aide to Liberal leader David Steel in the 1980s

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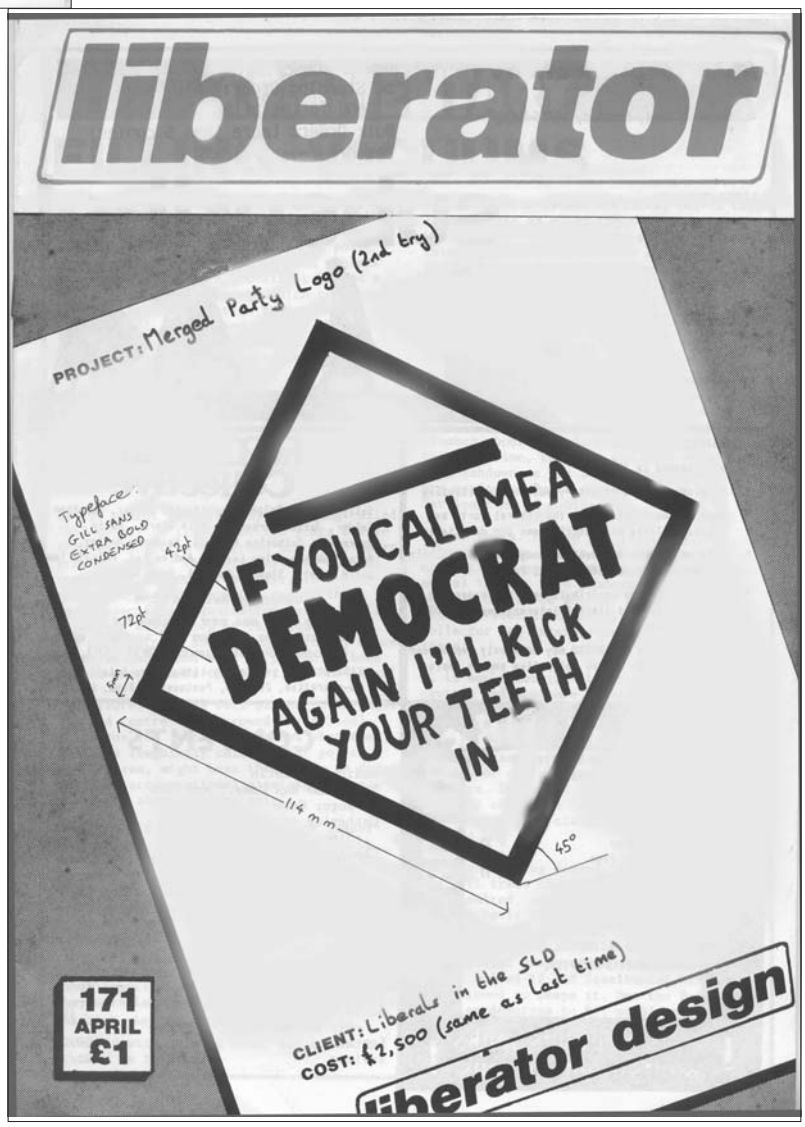


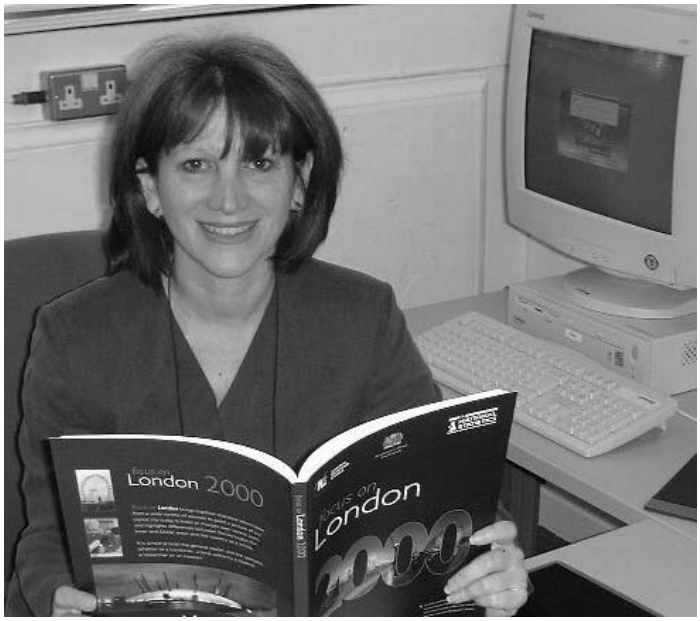
FIX THAT TERM

This autumn's on-off general election makes the case for fixed term parliaments, says Lynne Featherstone

It's 80 minutes into an Arsenal-Tottenham football derby. Tottenham leads 1-0. Arsenal is piling on the pressure. The Tottenham manager shouts at the ref, "OK, that's it – can we have the final score now please?" The ref agrees, all the players troop off the pitch ten minutes early and Tottenham gets the three points.

Sounds absurd, doesn't it (and I don't just mean the idea of Tottenham beating Arsenal)?

But that's what passes for normal in the world of Palace of Westminster politics when it comes to general election dates. The prime minister – and the prime minister alone – gets to choose the date. Now in theory parliaments last for five years and the monarch has to agree to any earlier election, but in practice the PM always gets his or her way.



FIXING AN ELECTION

Yet why should the PM get to choose the election date? We all know how PMs have chosen – they choose a date when they think they have a decent chance of winning. Fixing part of an election system just so you can maximise your own chances of winning – isn't that normally called fixing an election?

You might think that is a rather drastic charge, but what other part of choosing the terms and conditions of an election could be left to the prime minister to choose just on the basis of what maximises his or her chance of re-election?

Imagine the outrage if a prime minister got up and said, "You know, I think we won't let the over-85s vote this time round." The power to set the date of an election is an extremely powerful tool to influence its outcome – and so one that shouldn't be wielded for partisan advantage.

After all, democracy is for all of us – it's for the public to control who runs things, not for those in power to manipulate the public into re-electing them.

And that's why the case for fixed-term parliaments is so persuasive. Don't let prime ministers fiddle the system to suit themselves – instead fix the date of election.

I'd prefer scope for two variations on this – an automatic general election on the appointment of a new prime minister because, although we don't have a presidential system, in practice many voters do cast their votes based on who the leaders are; and the possibility of cross-party agreement for a general election at other times to cover unusual circumstances of crises. But both of these are only elaborations of the core point – elections are for the public's, not the PM's, convenience.

GRAND OLD DUKE OF YORK

There is a glimmer of hope after the Grand Old Duke of York farce of Gordon Brown's nearly-but-not-quite calling of a general election after the Labour Party conference, when he marched all his troops up to the top of the hill ready for an election, and then marched them all back down again. Such blatant posturing poured particular discredit on the exercise of the power to fix the election date.

It also highlighted the significant costs and inconvenience to others – such as the staff who have to organise the running of elections – when they are messed around with weeks of "will he? won't he?" stories rather than having a clear date and timetable to work to.

We now have the best opportunity since the early 1990s to see fixed-term parliaments introduced. Back then, the Labour Party – including Brown – supported them in its 1992 general election manifesto. Shame that, when Labour got its hands on power, those views never saw the light of day again – convenient, hey?

But after the Grand Old Duke of York saga, even some in the Labour Party are muttering about the need to change the rules. The same too is true of the Conservatives – not a party traditionally warm to such ideas, but having nearly been on the receiving end of such an abuse of power, there is hope there too.

Of course, the Liberal Democrats have consistently argued for fixed-term parliaments. But with signs of movement in the other parties too, we now face the real prospect of being able to secure change.

You can help bring about this change by backing the cross-party campaign at www.fixedterm.org.uk

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

REVIEWS

Mission Accomplished! by Matthew Parris & Phil Mason JR Books 2007 £12.99

Politicians sometimes say the daftest things. American presidents seem particularly disaster-prone when they open their mouths. George W Bush and Ronald Reagan are, not surprisingly, well represented in this enjoyable collection of things politicians wish they hadn't said. But none of the recent incumbents escape. Gerald Ford, for example, maintained, "I'm a great fan of baseball. I watch a lot of games on the radio."

Scrupulously fair, the editors have chosen quotes from all three main British political parties. But inevitably, readers of this journal will home in on the Liberals/Liberal Democrats. Such as Asquith declaring, "if you imposed the decimal coinage in this country, you would have a revolution in a week". Or Charles Kennedy, opening his acceptance speech on becoming party leader with, "from now on it's downhill all the way".

Politicos are really heading for trouble when they try to say something profound. How about Malcolm Rifkind's "The future is not what it used to be"? Or Michael Heseltine's, "the essence of being a prime minister is to have large ears".

Double entendres tend to illicit the biggest guffaws. The longest period of sustained laughter recorded in the House of Commons came following John Wakeham's explanation to Neil Kinnock that Mrs Thatcher would not be at PMQs because she had "made herself available to Mr Gorbachev".

Even the Speakers have not been immune. Betty Boothroyd caused much amusement when she announced gravely, "I can have no objections to instruments that merely vibrate."

Like most anthologies, this is a book to be dipped into rather than read at a stretch. Perfect for one's loo library.

Jonathan Fryer

Sir Robert Peel: a biography by Douglas Hurd Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2007 £25.00

Lord Rosebery's elegant memoir of Peel begins with Sir Robert entering the bedroom of Cardwell, then his private secretary, pacing up and down, then saying "Never destroy a letter" and going on "No public man who respects himself should ever destroy a letter".

In these disposable days, this is something for all of us to bear in mind. Rosebery, from memory, never goes on to disclose the letter that finds Peel so agitated. He mentions this purely as an introduction to the wealth of public papers Peel left behind him. Hurd, though he hasn't risen to the ultimate rank that Peel and Rosebery achieved, combines his experience of public office in an enjoyable, if distinctly Tory, biography.

The letter Rosebery referred to was almost certainly from, or concerning, Benjamin Disraeli; the young upstart (who had probably not yet finally opted for a career as a novelist or a politician) had written to Peel seeking preferment at the outset of one of his governments. Disraeli was among the many disappointed.

Early in the book, Hurd makes the comment that Tory leaders invariably lean to the right, in order to gain office and then control their unruly backbenchers, while holding to the centre in politics. Just as 'Orange' Peel had been the cheerleader of the right early in his career, so Disraeli would attack him for his change of heart on the Corn Laws while recalling the earlier issue of Catholic Emancipation – Peel the changeling. Politics is, of course, the art of the possible; problems and solutions have their time, another arises as the latest subsides.

So how do we account for these dramatic policy shifts? Wellington, Peel's effective partner over the best part of 30 years, thought he was characterised with weakness and indecision. Hurd argues for a man who absorbed the facts of a situation where after Necessitas must have her play.

In many respects, this characterized nineteenth-century Tory reform to a tee. In an age when party politics were less formalised, there was probably a moderate majority in the House, at least after the Great Reform Act if not before. Disraeli's reforms would in turn be carried by Liberal

votes. Hurd's argument is that Peel was a thorough Conservative, making such change as was necessary to preserve the rest from being swept away by a more radical approach. This incidentally is where New Labour, an otherwise perfectly respectable Conservative party, fails.

Contrasting Peel's reluctant radicalism with the only other radical Tory, Margaret Thatcher, Hurd surprisingly says that "she did not change the fundamental instincts of the party". I find this odd, for the revolt of the lower middle classes which she embodied made a profound difference to the party – no longer the gentleman's club of Peel and Hurd. The post-Thatcher Tory party is somewhat nastier than even the bluest sections of its predecessor; quite what the Cameron game is, apart from the desperation that brought us New Labour, is anyone's guess.

In summing up Peel, I find, notwithstanding John Major's under-credited role in the peace process, Hurd's assessment of the Conservative party's meddling in Irish politics disingenuous. Had senior Tories not aided and encouraged militant Unionists – Sir Edward Carson, et al – the union might have been preserved.

Peel is particularly interesting to Liberals, as his faction – the Grand Old Man not least, was one of the groups that formed what became the Liberal Party. Gladstone's apprenticeship under Peel comes through clearly in this book.

Hurd is less than generous however to John Russell – the day to day problems of running a nascent party might be excused in Peel, but not in his rivals. Russell did, of course, force Peel's hand on the Corn Laws, confirming the Liberal ascendancy of the rest of the century.

Hurd acknowledges his debt to Gash; rightly so, bringing us a thoughtful but popular account of Peel. The interplay between Peel and Hurd's own experience; both of them were in the Home Office and in Ireland, is the best aspect of the book. Underneath does one sense 'Douglas Hurd, the prime minister we never had, as a true successor of Peel?' I suspect we'd have been a better country for it.

Stewart Rayment

Campaigning Face To Face by Sir Hugh Jones Book Guild Publishing 2007 £17.99

This is the second volume of Sir Hugh's memoirs (and his final volume he assures us). If you're wondering what the relevance is for Liberals, Hugh was secretary-general of the Liberal Party from 1977-84 and party treasurer 1984-87. At this point, I should declare an interest; during his time as secretary-general, I worked as his PA on two occasions. Naturally on obtaining the book, I immediately turned to the index; I merit one mention in which I'm described as "a godsend".

This volume charts Hugh's post-RAF/diplomatic/civil service career and his activities in retirement, kicking off with his stint as director of the English Speaking Union. What he encountered there stood him in good stead when he became secretary-general of the Liberal Party (or LPO as party HQ was known).

Hugh was certainly at the helm of the party's organisational division during interesting times; the Lib/Lab Pact; the terrible run of by-election results (including coming fourth to the National Front on more than one occasion); the Thorpe trial; the 1979 general election; the first Euro-election; the birth of the SDP and creation of the SDP/Liberal Alliance; the tortuous seats negotiations; and the 1983 general election.

I know from my time working as his PA that Hugh kept a daily record of events so it's no surprise that the book contains a comprehensive record of the events of the time, albeit with superficial political analysis.

Unfortunately, despite the comprehensive records, I noticed a couple of mistakes – the most obvious one being the incorrect year of David Penhaligon's tragic car accident (Hugh records this as 1982 when in fact it was 1986).

Hugh has an engaging writing style which makes the book easy to read. You wouldn't necessarily want to find it in your Christmas stocking, but it will act as a good resource for those who want to undertake a rigorous intellectual political examination of the politics of this period.

Catherine Furlong

The Road to Southend Pier by Ross Clark Harriman House 2007 £9.99

When I worked on Southend seafront in the mid-1970s, anyone who wished could visit it from anywhere else in the country and, if they chose, tell no-one they had been there.

An elderly eccentric with whom I worked on the deckchairs could and did, for example, fish sweets out of drains with the aid of candyfloss sticks and eat them, without the state seeing fit to know or intervene.

Clark has attempted this journey in Labour' surveillance society to see if he could get from his home in East Anglia to the world's longest – if sadly seriously fire-damaged – pleasure pier without leaving a trace.

That means not appearing on credit card transactions, speed cameras, CCTV, swipe cards or any of the other paraphernalia used to track our movements.

His point is not that he particularly wished to see Southend pier, but to see whether Britain's status under Labour as the world's most spied-upon country made anyone any safer.

In general, no. The mass of information the state now sees fit to record obscures the information that might be useful in preventing crime and detecting criminals, he concludes, while CCTV and speed cameras have been used as an inferior substitute for human police officers.

Clark concludes that not only does Labour's surveillance society infringe liberty but it also does not work in its terms, failing to prevent crime, while generating new offences of forging identity documents and phishing for personal details.

He wrote before the scandal about the lost child benefit disks became public. That may have destroyed public confidence in Labour's worst proposed assault on liberty – the identity card. But if it does go ahead, their issue to the whole population would, he notes, take 905 person-years, by which time there would surely be another government.

Mark Smulian

On Angel Wings by Michael Morpurgo illustrated by Quentin Blake Egmont 2006 £4.99

What a team, Quentin Blake and Michael Morpurgo. Morpurgo is at his best on the fringes of myth to my mind, and in this case, behold the man. Morpurgo's retelling of the nativity story gives it a totally human perspective – best angel since Barbarella (Rose Finn-Kelcey's more abstract job not withstanding).

Blake is probably our most outstanding children's book illustrator, and he really does a good Christmas as the illustrations on this page show. Here he has a freer style than one usually encounters with Dahl, sketched over a wash of watercolour with a great command of light – tremendous spontaneity. Just right to get them off to bed on Christmas Eve.

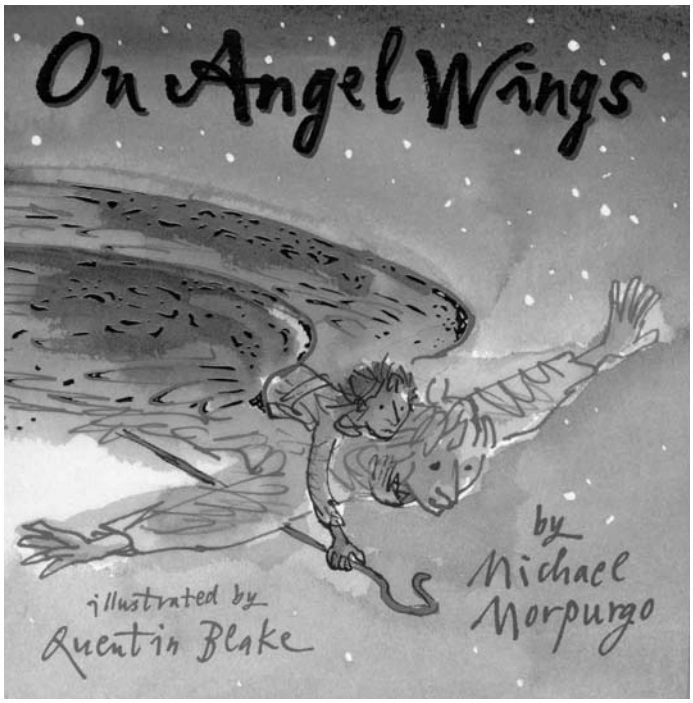
Stewart Rayment

Alexander the Great & the Hellenistic Age by Peter Green Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2007 £16.99

So what happened between the death of Alexander and the Roman invasion of Britain? Not much, so far as the national myth goes, though of course those feet, in ancient times, would have walked on England's green and pleasant land. But between the Battle of Marathon and Caesar's invasion, most of what we have is in the mythological realm of history and we concern ourselves less with the rest of the world.

But of course, the rest of the world did not stand still. Rome must have risen, Hannibal crossed the Alps and all the rest. We forget about Alexander's legacy, unless it provides an exotic soap-opera for television – which happens to be precisely what it does.

The most significant thing in the Greek world from the Liberal perspective is the development of man as an individual – the idiotes, rather than as a creature of the polis, which was subverted by the



Macedonian monarchies. Maligned from the first, this element of the political philosophy of the day is as much part of our legacy as the Athenian democracy – perhaps more so.

Green gives us a romp through the last 40 years or so research on the Hellenistic Age in all its glorious scandals… clearly a period warranting further consideration, not least as archæologists extend the cultural area of this cradle of European civilisation.

Stewart Rayment

Arts in Society edited by Paul Barker Five Leaves 2006 £9.99

New Society was an essential read in the 1960s and 1970s, and part of its spark was its arts coverage. It was a tragedy when it was subsumed into the New Statesman. About a decade or so ago, Paul Barker's anthology from the arts criticism of New Society was pretty much the standard text on art criticism. Its outlook on the arts was eclectic. Apart from Barker, the contributors include Angela Carter, John Berger and Dennis Potter.

When Five Leaves first sent this through my letterbox, my first thought was "isn't there any new art criticism that ought to excite"? Probably not, the thought crept back to me. So for students of the subject, why not learn from masters and mistresses. For the rest of us, just enjoy the nostalgia of reviews of, say, the Beach Boys or T.Rex.

I won't argue with any specific review except to expand on one – the Half Moon Theatre, which was in Alie Street at the time of the article. The funding of the Half Moon is an issue that well-heeled lefties frequently raised against the radical Liberal administration in Tower Hamlets.

Let's be clear in the face of socialist lies. We did not stop grant funding to the Half Moon Children's Theatre. Grant funding to the Half Moon itself was actually stopped by the Arts Council. Faced with Thatcher's government, rate-capping and the lot, there were cuts in arts funding in general and we did not step into the gap. The Half Moon was not the theatre it had been when Albert Hunt wrote of it in 1973; *Pal Joey* transferring to the West End was long in the past. By the late 1980s, it offered a rather stale transitional programme of socialist theatre, and cosy middle class liberals failed to grasp that there was a class war going out there (there still is).

Anyway, councillors Janet Ludlow and Jonathan Mathews met the Arts Council and persuaded them to continue funding the Half Moon for the time being. It was during this time that the Children's Theatre moved on because it felt it was being screwed by the main theatre. We continued to provide funding because it was a good thing to get children into a theatre, and a better thing to educate them properly so they would see through the Trot dross and other bourgeois pretensions. The Half Moon Children's Theatre survives to this day, to packed and enthusiastic crowds. If you're in London with children, check out its programme but be sure to book.

Stewart Rayment

Lord Bonkers' Diary

Tuesday

I hurry to Westminster to offer my heartfelt congratulations to young Nicholas Clegg on his election to the leadership of the Liberal Democrats. How different his victory was to that of his predecessor, poor Menzies Campbell. In that contest, Ming was the favoured candidate of most of our MPs, of the Manchester Guardian's leader writers and of the party's Great and Good – notably the charming Dame Shirley Williams. Despite being comprehensively out-campaigned by Chris Huhne, he won the election, but never looked like cutting the mustard as Liberal Democrat Leader. By contrast, Clegg was the favoured candidate of most of our MPs, of the Manchester Guardian's leader writers and of the party's Great and Good – notably the charming Dame Shirley Williams. Despite being comprehensively out-campaigned by Chris Huhne, he won the election, and I feel sure that he will prove a splendid success.

Wednesday

I am called to Cowley Street to give our new leader the benefit of my long experience of dealing with the media. I begin by asking Clegg what he will do if he is challenged in the House on a ticklish policy point – perhaps involving schools. "That's easy," he replies brightly. "I shall throw up my hands and then issue a formal complaint." And when he is confronted by one of the nation's leading political interviewers? "I've got a soundbite I am rather fond of; it went down very well with Nick Robinson. It goes like this: 'Yes, er well no, hang on, er, sorry'." Clegg is an engaging fellow with much of the wholesome appeal of a Labrador puppy, but he would do well to sign up for the Extended Bonkers Media Course (easy terms available).

Thursday

Each year we hold a talent show where the little mites at the village school can do a turn, and each year the Reverend Hughes volunteers to act as Chairman of the judging panel. I have to say that I have some doubts as to his impartiality. As the children variously sing, tap-dance or recite from the works of T. H. Green, he boos them, attempts to start a slow handclap or throws bottles. One poor girl is led away in tears before she is two verses into "The Ballad of Geraint Howells". Only when the Revd Hughes's favoured candidate mounts the stage does his manner change. "This is the one!" he cries, and "Vote for this boy. Do we have to hear all those others?" I fear I shall be obliged to take the Chair myself next year to ensure fair dealing as Hughes is almost as bad as the present Commons Speaker.

Friday

My dinner guest at the Hall this evening is none other than the noted popular musician Mr Shane McGowan. Do you know him? He is an Old Boy of Westminster and his stage act involves his playing a drunken Irish folk musician. He goes to great lengths to make this impersonation convincing, dressing in a tramp's clothes and even blacking his teeth. Away from the concert hall he is a very different character: after dinner, he eschews my proffered Auld Johnston (that most prized of all Scottish malts) and asks instead for a pot of Orange Pekoe. In an attempt to widen our new leader's circle of acquaintance, I also invite Clegg along. Despite the fact that they attended the same school, it soon becomes clear that Clegg has no idea who McGowan is. Does the Old School tie count for nothing these days?

Saturday

Recent reports have suggested that the traditional nativity play is under threat, so it is with some trepidation that I arrive at the village school this evening. Fortunately, my fears prove unfounded and all the familiar elements are there: the carols, the shepherds wearing tea towels on their heads, the wise men with their gifts wrapped in bright foil and the lecture of the benefits of site value rating when there turns out to be no room at the inn. Even the Revd Hughes keeps his heckling to a minimum.

Sunday

It seems that my fears of yesterday were unfounded: Clegg has turned out to be very well connected in the world of popular music. This morning it is announced that he has asked Mr Brian Eno – stalwart member of "The Roxy Music" and heir to the fruit salts fortune – to advise him on the nation's youth. Aged only 59, Eno is surely the ideal person to play this important role. Not only that: it soon becomes clear that he is but one among a veritable galaxy of musical stars from an earlier era who have been recruited to help the Liberal Democrats win the support of the young. There is Clodagh Rodgers, Hurricane Smith, the Sutherland Brothers (though not Quiver), Acker Bilk, The Captain & Tenille, Mary Hopkin, Brian and Michael, Barry Blue, Flintlock, England Dan and John Ford Coley, the Incredible String Band, Gilbert O'Sulivan, Kathy Kirby and St Winifred's School Choir. I just hope that Clegg will be able to find room for Chris Huhne in his Shadow Cabinet.

Christmas Eve

And so Christmas comes again to Rutland. One of the peculiarities of the climate hereabouts is that one can always rely upon snow in the days before the holiday, with the result that it lies deep, crisp and, indeed, even in the village as carol singers with lanterns make their way from door to door. "It could be a Christmas card," as a fellow traveller remarked to me as we took the stagecoach into Market Harborough for some last-minute shopping. Beneath the Christian festival, the older pagan traditions still flourish: it is, for instance, customary to feed a tot of brandy to each tree in the orchard to ensure a good crop the following autumn – or so Meadowcroft assures me as he helps himself to my finest Armagnac each year.

Compliments of the season to all my readers and I wish you winnable by-elections in 2008.

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