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COMMENTARY

WHAT SHOULD GO LOCAL?

Whatever proves to have happened in this May's local elections, there will almost certainly be fresh wailing and gnashing of teeth over voter turnout, despite the reasons for its depressingly low level being self-evident to anyone who cares to look.

It is true that the Labour government has recognised the turnout problem. But Labour's remedies have been without exception disastrous for democracy and devolution, while obstinately avoiding the root cause of the problem – local government has too few powers over too few things, so that it makes little difference to most people who wields those powers.

Labour's 'cures' can be easily discarded. Postal voting on demand has served only to foster personation and corruption – something that will come as no surprise to anyone who has ever tangled with the Labour Party in its urban heartlands – leading at best to marginal increases in turnout while undermining the very legitimacy of the ballot.

Elected mayors, a concept that will doubtless enjoy a renewed profile following this year's London election, are objectionable for a different reason. Liberals believe in the dispersal of power, and mayoralties concentrate power in the hands of one person, with minimal accountability for their actions except for a four-yearly election.

It does not matter that some mayors may have used their powers well. It is the principle of the concentration of power that is wrong.

The fact that councillors in mayoral areas have even less power than backbenchers elsewhere have over cabinets (and London Assembly members no powers at all) makes things worse. It will surely lead to fewer people wishing to be councillors in such situations. Turnout at mayoral elections has shown no significant difference from turnout at any other.

Tempting though it might be for some to grasp at such 'solutions' in the face of local apathy, they are wrong. Indeed, the emphasis on 'strong leaders' who can 'take action' and cut through the awkward compromises required by representative democracy, can make proponents of elected mayors sound faintly fascistic.

The problem of the atrophy of local democracy remains real, however, and it will be solved only by giving local government sufficient powers for it to matter to residents who runs it, and then for local government to devolve further whatever is appropriate to its area.

Voter engagement is hardly likely to be assisted by the government's current approach of giving some more powers to councils but only though partnerships that cannot easily be held accountable, and which are buried in a barely intelligible alphabet soup of acronyms and concepts like 'multi area agreements' and 'local strategic partnerships'.

The vote at the Liverpool spring conference on whether the NHS should be devolved to councils or local health boards turned on whether the party's councillors believed the public held councils in sufficient esteem to take over health commissioning.

They decided, so as to avoid a public row with Clegg over his pet idea for local elected health boards, that they did not. That may be true, but hardly makes a compelling argument for the devolution of anything else.

This approach (if health why not transport, schools or indeed allotments?) risks having multiple bodies with poor turnouts run by people who were arm-twisted to be candidates instead of only one such body, which scarcely seems an improvement.

Clegg has stressed that he thinks powers should be devolved to local government but that as many as practicable should then be devolved further – something that most politically switched-on Lib Dem councils have done.

The party must decide what powers it thinks should be capable of being devolved from national to local level and, before any further devolution is possible, whether that local level should be to a council, or to councils, health boards and whatever else that compete for power, influence, resources and the public's attention in each area.

BRITAIN'S VIETNAM

The Lib Dems still wring some political mileage out of their opposition to the Iraq war, yet have accepted without much thought that the party supports the war in Afghanistan.

When that was launched, it was sold by the government as a short intervention. It has already ceased to be that, and may yet become a very long one, in a country in which Britain has had a history of catastrophic attempts to influence governance stretching back to the 19th century.

The Karzai government is certainly better than its Taliban predecessors, who are also likely to return were it to fall. Yet its writ barely runs outside Kabul, and where it does relies on the whims of local chieftains.

This is essentially yet another American war in which Britain has been dragged along to help, and there is little sign that its planning, or even the definition of its objectives, has been any better than in the debacle in Iraq.

If the Lib Dems are to continue to ask voters to support this war, the party must at the very least question how well it is being conducted and what realistic prospect there is of success.

RADICAL BULLETIN

BURIED BONES

The Bones Commission was set up by Nick Clegg to advise him on the reforms the party organisation needed to be able to deliver his target of 150 MPs by the election after next.

The Commission has boasted of receiving 190 submissions, not a great many in a party of 64,000 members, and predictably a high proportion have been from malcontents, single-issue obsessives and people with personal grievances.

But it has begun to grapple slowly with thorny issues around the power of headquarters, and relations between the centre and local parties. Indeed, Chris Bones, the management consultant who heads the commission, has asked for an extra month from his original May deadline to report.

One group of submissions has come from centralisers, who want all the party's resources controlled by those who 'know' how best to use them, with the English party and regions reduced to ciphers and local parties to the equivalent of outposts of a chain store. This has raised howls of rage from the regions.

At the other extreme are those who want more power devolved to the regions, indeed to local parties, and who believe the party ought to practice what it preaches.

Further controversy centres on the influence of the campaigns department on the party's policy and strategy, which feeds into a wider dispute about targeting.

One school of thought holds that a strategy that has delivered 63 MPs but few second places and an immense number of thirds, is self-limiting – it will eventually run out of new targets and find other seats have been irretrievably neglected.

The other thinks that targeting has pulled the party forward from the 'all the MPs in one taxi' days and that to abandon it would be a huge risk when there are few resources to fight effectively on a wider front.

There are also mutterings about the role of the revered chief executive Chris Rennard. He was promoted to the post from campaigns director not least because some past chief executives had found it more interesting to interfere in campaigns than to run the headquarters, with the result that neither could be done effectively. He has, inevitably in such a post, accumulated some enemies.

Bones's review is supposed to be organisational, not constitutional. Yet the two are interlinked and, whatever the commission recommends, an almighty row is likely over any constitutional changes that anyone perceives as threatening to their position or to the autonomy of local parties.

Indeed, there have been many submissions on the disregard shown for volunteers by party employees and senior figures, and volunteers' lack of influence.

How conference, and the wider party, will react is unclear. The Federal Executive has already had to veto a bizarre proposal from Simon Hughes to accommodate the commission with a holding constitutional amendment for the Bournemouth conference – which would in effect have said, "conference wishes to amend the constitution but doesn't yet know which bits".

Passage of the commission's recommendations is unlikely to be helped by the perception that they have come from an unelected management consultant little known in the party.

Bones was an SDP founder and speechwriter for David Owen. He joined the Lib Dems in 1993, leading some to wonder whether he was an Owenite in the interim.

The other commission members are Federal Finance and Administration Committee chair Duncan Greenland, who was a donor to Clegg's leadership campaign; Kate Parminter, a former voluntary sector chief executive married to Neil Sherlock (who was also a donor to Clegg's leadership campaign and is a contributor to the leader's office costs); and chief whip Paul Burstow.

All estimable people, but can they, indeed should they, in effect be entrusted with deciding the party's organisational shape and political strategy?

PHYSICIAN, HEAL THYSELF

Nick Clegg's entry in the Register of Members' Interests lists three donors – Neil Sherlock, Ian Wright (Liberator 324) and Michael Young – who make monthly contributions to the running costs of his office.

That all sounds fairly modest, but plans are understood to be afoot for something more elaborate – to create a large fund not under the direct control of the party.

Can it be that, 30 years on, everyone has forgotten the controversies generated by Jeremy Thorpe's control of mysterious funds, and in the present climate is such a move wise?

Nowadays everything must be declared but, even so, nothing but trouble has resulted when the party has got involved with money at arm's-length from its direct oversight, the Michael Brown affair being the worst example (Liberator 306 and 314).

There is also the still unexplained instruction issued by the Lib Dem Lords whip's office to the party's peers not to comment on the 'cash for peerages' scandal when it broke in November 2006 (Liberator 315). Surely the party has nothing to hide about any donation from any peer?

At Prime Minister's Questions on 12 March, Clegg demanded that, "we get big money out of British politics."

Quite. It would be perfectly legitimate to raise funds for the cost of running the leader's office. But such efforts should never extend to creating any sort of fund for expenditure elsewhere.

TURN OVER YOUR PAPER AND BEGIN

Once upon a time, drinkers in the National Liberal Club bar who were too slow to think of a prior commitment could find themselves dragged off to make up the numbers on Liberal Party candidate approval panels.

The Lib Dems have instead had an elaborately formal system, but it is about to undergo radical changes, some of which those responsible admit will be risks but are necessary to get enough people of sufficient quality approved to fill selection vacancies in due time.

Out goes the policy interview, following complaints that too many interviewers rode personal hobbyhorses or pretended they were Jeremy Paxman. Instead, applicants will have to write down answers to questions on policy, what they understand it to mean and how they interpret it.

Out also goes role play, following complaints of rather questionable substance that women were less good at it than were men.

Out too goes the system by which people could be told to take further training before being approved and then join the list simply by attending the training concerned, with no further test as to whether they had benefited from or absorbed it.

Instead, there will be simple pass/fail based on six core skills. The problem, confessed one close to the process, is that "quite a lot of duff people got onto the list". When pressed, they would name no names.

I KNOW WHO YOU ARE

Never judge by outward appearances. Shirley Williams was on a train to the spring conference in Liverpool in which most of the rest of her carriage was occupied by loud, obstreperous and foul-mouthed football fans.

The largest of these made his way to her seat and demanded, "are you Baroness Williams?" She nervously confessed.

"I just wanted to say how much I admired your performance on Question Time," he told a startled Williams. "It was about time someone put the pro-European case."

He then returned to join his loud fellow fans and launched an erudite discussion on the formation of the SDP and a word perfect re-enactment of the Spitting Image sketch in which David Owen told David Steel: "We'll take two words from our name, 'social' and 'democratic', and two words from your name, 'the' and 'party'."

GISSA JOB

Spring conference voted to keep the post of party president intact (despite a decade's worth of advice to the contrary from Liberator), thus perpetuating it as an awkward hybrid of chair of the Federal Executive and a figurehead who peregrinates around constituency dinners.

One of the declared contestants, Ros Scott, wanted to keep the job as it is, but felt it more becoming to have her supporters argue this.

The other contender, Lembit Öpik, wanted the job split, possibly because most think he might be a perfectly good figurehead but cannot imagine him as a credible FE chair.

Öpik spoke on the losing side of the debate in favour of the split. Does this mean he still intends to stand next summer for a post of which he has just called for the abolition in its present form?

STICK IT UP FOR BRIAN

London mayoral candidate Brian Paddick is well known for his openness about being gay, though needless to say this is being exploited by those who wish him harm.

For example, the rabidly Tory Evening Standard headlined an interview with him in such a way that one page bore his picture under the heading 'Puff to run London', ostensibly a reference to his marathon running.

So which genius decided to sell campaign umbrellas at the London region conference that bore the slogan, "I'm coming out for Brian Paddick"?

UNWANTED LEGACIES

The debacle over the Lisbon Treaty vote in parliament did not get Nick Clegg's leadership off to good start, yet only a little of the blame attaches to him. He told MPs to abstain on the treaty referendum vote, though 14 rebelled, having rejected the option of a free vote on the grounds that the party would scatter all over the place. It did anyway.

Clegg was in this predicament because of the misguided promise made in 2005 to support a referendum on the then EU constitution. This sprang not from a sudden commitment to referendums, nor from a genuine objection to the constitution, but from an attempt to hang onto the votes of (mainly) eurosceptics who resent everything that has happened since roughly 1952, while also hanging onto a pro-European vote that had nowhere else to go.

Party policy on Europe had not changed, and the referendum call was simply a rather crude attempt to have it both ways.

So was the MPs' rebellion in March, which, with a few honourable exceptions, sprang not from principled opposition to the treaty but from an assumption that a referendum was popular and would help keep the votes of the sort of people who think that 'Brussels' will compel them to dine only on octagonal turnips.

In fact, despite the Tory tabloids foaming at their mouths, few causes have ever aroused more public indifference than the Lisbon Treaty referendum, and Lib Dem MPs admitted that constituency correspondence on the issue was rare.

Ming Campbell inherited the unwanted referendum commitment from Charles Kennedy and tried to bury it by proposing a referendum on EU membership itself. That would at least have had the merit of being a substantive issue susceptible to a yes/no outcome.

But why did Clegg flog this dead horse with such vigour? Is this yet another attempt to help MPs, and canvassers, duck the question with anti-European voters by saying "we think you should decide"?

A HUMAN AGENDA FOR PUBLIC SERVICES

David Boyle welcomes the first signs of an intellectual thaw within the Liberal Democrats

Spring is here. The winter that has frozen the intellectual veins of UK liberalism is beginning to thaw at last.

The first swallow came in the form of the *Reinventing the State* book. There were a few voles glimpsed during the Lib Dem leadership election. But finally we have green shoots: at long last, a real debate about Liberalism and public services – and it's really thanks to Liberator.

For goodness know how long, we have been iced into a stale debate – if it can be called that – between those who feared too much market influence and those who feared too little. It never amounted to much more than that. Dipping into it provided a genuine whiff of the 1970s, as redolent as flared trousers: it was more like a debate between Starsky and Hutch.

But we are moving at last towards a genuine Liberal critique, and about time too. Most general elections are dominated by debate about public services and – since we have only managed to contribute a handful of bright ideas on this in the past decade – it is hardly surprising that voters say they don't know what we are for.

What carried that real whiff of spring was the 'Commentary' *Agora or Argos?* in Liberator 324. This said that the real division in the party was now about what it means to be human. "Are we primarily partners, parents and relatives; friends, neighbours and colleagues?" it asked. "Or do we define ourselves more in terms of the things we buy?... Do the Liberal Democrats envisage a society of active citizens or supplicant consumers?"

That is exactly the right question (though I might quibble with the use of New Labour-speak like 'active citizens'). My only criticism was that this was an editorial fired in the direction of only one camp in the debate between Starsky and Hutch.

It was intended as a critique of the market position, and it was a good one. But it implied no similar critique of their opponents: those who believe that all people's needs can be met by the old professional institutions of local government, or their equivalent.

The same critique wasn't applied to those who believe that, as long as people are elected to run our public services, nothing else needs to change.

It identified the wrong-headed wing of the debate with those who subsume these human relationships within economic relationships, with the idea that people are individual consumers faced with a series of passive choices.

That is right, but it missed out the other side of the argument. Because that reduction of people into dependent supplicants is not confined to those can see no further than narrow consumer choices in public services; it is alive and well among those who don't believe in choice at all – who are quite happy that people should be grateful but passive recipients of services defined by the local state.

Because, in practice, the wrong-headed idea that we oppose is not confined to either the private or the public sector. It is an insidious combination of them both – the idea that people are defined narrowly by their needs, and should be administered by giant agencies part-public, part-private, by huge databases and remote call centres.

This is the new centralised supplicant state, and the Commentary was absolutely right that it is the heart of a new Lib Dem critique of public services. Not because the supplicant state is too public sector, or too private sector – it borrows from the worst of both – but because it is deeply alienating, deeply inefficient and deeply ineffective.

The point is that there is a more fundamental problem about our public services, which has nothing to do either with investing more or selling them off: they are grinding to a halt.

They are doing so because of the massive inefficiencies of centralisation, the disempowering targets and the externalities of giant organisations. They are doing so because centralisation causes sclerotic bureaucracy that tries to exclude the vital human element – the very element that actually makes things happen in schools and hospitals. And they are doing so because they refuse to share responsibility with their clients, preferring them passive and silent.

This is the real story of public services under Gordon Brown, and you can see it everywhere:

- The patients of factory hospitals who never see the same doctor twice, one in ten of whom will suffer real harm from hospital mistakes or viruses.
- The new claimants who have to hold on so long at the call centre on their pay-as-you-go mobile phones just to make a claim that it costs them £35.

- The probation officers with 600 clients each, who wonder how they can possibly build transformative relationships with any of their ex-offenders.
- The A&E nurses who know what the patients in front of them need so urgently, but who have to go through more than 20 pages on their IT system before they can help each of them.
- The public service managers who struggle to manipulate their expensive recruitment IT systems just to make sure the people they know would be best get interviewed.
- The teachers who know what they need to say in their pupils' reports, but have to choose from a series of approved phrases in their approved report-writing system.

Politicians see these problems of course, but it is up to us as Liberals to stitch them together, articulate them as one problem – because that's what they are, exactly as the Commentary said: because they are all the result of inefficient centralised systems downgrading human skills.

What we need to do next is to put the important implications of all this into words, in such a way that it is political, and at the heart of the Lib Dem message:

- **FACELESS BRITAIN** – It means the central problem of public services is no longer how they should be paid for. It is centralisation, giantism, bureaucracy and the deliberate excision of human skills from frontline services – all of which are common to public and private alike.
- **SOCIAL EXCLUSION** – It means we have an explanation why, despite all the money spent on services in more than six decades since the Beveridge Report, the five giants he set out to tackle – Ignorance, Squalor, Disease, Want, Idleness – are still alive and well. Because those key relationships between doctors and patients, teachers and pupils, probation officers and clients, are what actually make things change. Without them, everything grinds to a halt in a flurry of output targets that make it appear that progress is being made.
- **DEMOCRACY** – It means that the problem of public services is certainly about the absence of democracy. But this is democracy in its broadest sense – not just because they are run by appointed boards rather than elected ones. Lib Dems have been slow to understand the breadth of the agenda of localism because they are fixated on elections. These are important, of course, but they are only part of the battle. There remains a question of how services are organised once those directors are elected, whether they are sharing responsibility, bringing in volunteers, making change possible and permanent.
- **MONOPOLY** – It means that the same critique can be applied to private corporations, as our monopoly watchdogs doze on the job, allowing our communities to be captured by increasingly monopolistic supermarkets (presided over by intrusive IT systems and security guards watching you from platforms by the door). That is why there are only a couple of remaining waste contractors who are expected to fulfil nearly every local government contract, removing all the leverage that competition used to give to councillors and local people trying to squeeze a better and more efficient deal.
- **COST** – It means that there are enormous implications for the costs of public services. Institutions that don't work, or only deal with symptoms and ignore causes, or which cause massive externalities because they try to remove human contact, are vastly more expensive to run than they should be. The issue is no longer how to raise more money to make public services work, but how much more could be done if they were local, human and effective.

This last point is the most important, because it indicates a political way out of the current impasse, which forces us to get embroiled in arguments about raising taxes just to demonstrate political commitment to education and health.

Instead we have the outlines of a new, coherent critique that public services cost vastly more than they should, and achieve far less than they should. Because centralised bureaucratic services don't work, they lead to Teflon education and training, health spending that keeps people unhealthy, regeneration spending that leaves people exactly where they were before.

We now need an achievable political programme that could achieve a credible switch from sclerosis to genuine change.

We could then believably embrace the traditional Liberal campaign slogan of thrift, which allows us to explain this massive seizing up – and combines it with a wider critique of Brown government.

Look at the record so far, just on the headline white elephants. Nuclear clean-up (£73bn, just for existing waste), Iraq (£5-7bn so far), NHS computer project (£12bn so far), replacing Trident (£20-70bn), ID cards (up to £18bn).

Just add that up and work out how we could change people's lives – if we had face-to-face public services, run by human beings who ware employed because they had initiative and leadership skills, and could use IT systems without being ruled by them.

David Boyle is a fellow of the New Economics Foundation. His new book *Towards the Setting Sun* is published by Bloomsbury USA in June

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IN NEED OF A SLAP

An off-the-cuff remark revealed far more about the state of British politics than one conference delegate probably realised, says Simon Titley

You know how it is. You're watching the telly when suddenly you hear someone say something so stupid that you want to reach through the screen and give the offending person a good slap. That's how I felt watching a voxpop of Liberal Democrat delegates leaving the conference hall in Liverpool after Nick Clegg's speech.

Asked what she thought, one delegate replied, "Well I think we should just ask people what they want and then give it to them." Sadly, she is not unique. Her view is now commonplace across the political spectrum, demonstrating how far the rot has gone in British politics. But, hang on (as our Dear Leader is wont to say); what is wrong with asking people what they want and then giving it to them?

It first begs the question, which people? "The people" are individuals, remember? They comprise an infinite variety of subjective values and objective interests. This creates continual conflict about what is right and wrong, how scarce resources should be allocated and which direction society should take. Politics is the means by which we resolve those conflicts peacefully; indeed, it is the whole point of politics.

To complicate matters, conflict exists not only between people but also within them. Most people are a mass of contradictions. They want more and better public services but to pay less tax. They want somebody to do something about climate change but have no intention of driving or flying less. They want more prisons but don't want them built anywhere near where they live.

You can "ask the people" all you want. It will reveal a range of opinions and interests, and the process of consultation may create a superficial sense of involvement. But inviting people to "get it off your chest" will not settle the conflicts even within one person, never mind between all the people. It will not obviate the need to have arguments or to take decisions.

To govern is to choose. Sometimes you can resolve conflicts by arriving at a consensus, but eventually politicians must make choices. And invariably, a choice that benefits one group of people will disadvantage another. One cannot please all the people all the time and it is hopeless to try.

Paradoxically, trying to make everybody happy only earns people's contempt. In our daily lives, we all know individuals who want to be liked by everybody. The more such people attempt to ingratiate themselves with everyone, the more they come across as insincere and untrustworthy. Well that's how the electorate feels about politicians who won't come down off the fence.

At the micro level of local ward politics, you can get away with purely consensus positions. Everyone wants the dog shit cleaned up and the drains unblocked. Once you move to a more macro level, it's no longer much use asking people to fill in a grumble sheet.

Ducking moral choices is only part of the problem. Reliance on "asking people what they want" also reduces politics to a matter of narrow consumer choice. It reduces participation to the level of "press the red button now". It isn't empowering because it fails to give people genuine agency (the ability to influence and change the world in which one lives). Instead, it turns the electorate into dependent supplicants. And we can see how people respond to this treatment through changed attitudes towards public services.

Take policing, for example. Until recently, most people understood that tackling crime was a duty that all of us had as members of society. Now the prevailing attitude seems to be, "I pay my taxes. If there's crime in my neighbourhood, that's the police's job. Nothing to do with me, guv." Instead of confronting the real problem – a loss of social solidarity – politicians of all parties respond by recruiting record numbers of police officers and then wonder why crime doesn't go down.

This change has taken place in the context of a social revolution. As I described in my essay in *Reinventing the State*, since the 1960s society has undergone a process of infantilisation. People have lost the adult capacity for deferred gratification. The childish desire for instant gratification has led to a political culture that is devoted to satisfying and sanctifying that desire.

Yet no matter how hard politicians try, it is simply impossible to satisfy millions of self-centred wants simultaneously. There is neither the time nor the resources and, even if there were, people's individualised wants are often mutually incompatible. Voters perceive this inability as impotence or dishonesty, and a vicious cycle of disillusionment and alienation sets in.

In a society based on instant gratification, politicians dare not risk communicating uncomfortable information to the public because they fear it will be rejected. So they try to tell the public what they think the public wants to hear. It is fashionable to knock 'spin' but the political culture of spin is simply a logical outcome of the belief that all communication must be attractive.

The desire for instant gratification has combined with other factors to move politicians from leadership to followership. Globalisation has reduced politicians' freedom of manoeuvre. The alleged 'end of ideology' has reduced the range of ideas. Cultural relativism says there are no enduring values anyway. And the culture of 'cool', affecting an air of ironic detachment, pokes fun at anyone who begs to differ.

As a result, politicians have lost their way. They lack a moral compass or the imagination to develop new ideas. The political process has been emptied of meaning and instead we get a litany of banal, robotic, message-tested slogans. Politics, which implies the existence of alternatives, has been replaced by managerialism, with its talk of 'targets' and 'delivery'. The argument within the political mainstream is confined to a debate about nuances or replaced by personality issues.

Lacking any moral clarity or moral courage, and with no ideas of their own, it is little wonder that politicians resort in desperation to asking people what they want. Most politicians fatalistically assume that public opinion is fixed and have lost confidence in their ability to persuade people to change their minds. They have stopped engaging in ideological argument with one another and instead compete to agree with public opinion. To this end, they have borrowed the technique of focus groups from the world of marketing. But it never seems to occur to most politicians that each party's focus groups will tell them more or less the same thing.

This is why the public thinks that all politicians sound the same. Just as most modern cars look the same because every car manufacturer's wind tunnel tests produce the same results, so politicians sound the same when they derive their policies from artificial forms of interaction such as opinion polls and focus groups.

Trying to please everyone is also a strategy that comes back to bite you. It is why the Liberal Democrats are in such a mess over the issue of a referendum on the EU Lisbon Treaty. The original commitment to hold a referendum was conceived primarily as a device to enable the party to face both ways on Europe. It allowed MPs in more urban, cosmopolitan seats to sound pro-European while permitting MPs in the south-west to pacify local eurosceptic opinion.

"There is no such thing as 'voter apathy'"

For a while, this fudge worked but it has unravelled horribly (in a way that only fudge can). Nick Clegg was criticised for his decision to enforce an abstention, but his party's short-sighted commitment limited him to a choice of unpalatable options. The basic problem is that the party is afraid to come out of the pro-European closet and say what it really believes.

Many Lib Dem MPs will come to regret their cowardice on Europe. Lord Ashcroft's money is being used to put them on the spot and, torn between their liberal and populist instincts, some of them will be lucky to hold their seats.

But if you think this pusillanimity on Europe is bad, consider the ideological vacuum surrounding the looming recession, identified recently by Matthew Parris (The Times, 22 March 2008):

"Who knows what's happening? Perhaps nothing, after all. Perhaps this will all blow over. But what unsettles me goes deeper than a sense of mystery about the future. At most junctures in history there arises the feeling of a lull before a possible storm. Heck, we were in a worse state in 1945, or 1979. Danger was more imminent in the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 posited bigger unknowns for the future. But at these crossroads the air was full of ideas: strong ideas, competing ideas, confident philosophies, angry dissent. People had policies. Ideologies clashed. Politicians and thinkers jostled to present their plans. Leaders led.

"But what distinguishes this hiatus in 2008 from those earlier forks in the road is the impassivity of our politics, and the idleness of political debate, as we wait. There is a sense of vacuum.

"There was not in 1979, as there is now, this curious hollowness in the air. Where today is the bold advocacy, the impatience to persuade, the urgency of argument? Where are the shouts of "Here's how!"? It is as though the stage were set for some kind of theatrical climax, but peopled only with stage hands and the rattle and murmur of the scene-shift. Where are the leading actors, the big voices, the great thoughts?"

Where indeed? A few politicians have provided a hint of what is possible. Vince Cable's moral clarity on the debt mountain, the housing bubble and Northern Rock is an example his parliamentary colleagues could follow, if only they had the balls. Ken Livingstone's dogged pursuit of his congestion charge policy, despite the unpopularity and criticism it attracted, ultimately paid dividends and won widespread respect. Or consider the 2007 presidential election in France. For once, the mainstream parties offered people a real choice and the turnout soared to 85 per cent, while the vote for fringe parties dropped.

There is no such thing as 'voter apathy'. If you want to increase the turnout, forget gimmicks like postal ballots, e-voting or relocating the polling booths to Tesco's. The answer is to treat people as adults and give them real and meaningful choices. You achieve that by standing up for what you believe in, not by offering voters small and insignificant choices analogous to those faced by consumers in the supermarket, between differently branded packages of the same bland product.

My scepticism about "asking the people what they want" is not contempt for democracy. Far from it. I believe that political leaders should be elected by the people, accountable to the people and removable by the people. More than that, I want to see those choices made in the context of a healthy civil society, in which people are genuinely empowered.

But our political leaders have to stand for something, not blow with the wind. Their job is to lead, not follow; to persuade, not accept public opinion as a given. This does not mean adopting an arrogant posture. Politicians should engage in debate and connect with people's concerns. But they can do this effectively only if they have a clear sense of right and wrong, and they should not be afraid to communicate that moral clarity to the electorate. The people have the right to elect or reject them on that basis. But any politician who has no idea of what he stands for and instead can only ask "you tell me" is unfit for office.

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective

KREMLIN SCRIPT-WRITERS AND A TWISTED PLOT

Experience suggests the liberal language of Russia's new leader should be treated with scepticism, says Edward Lucas

Imagine that the Third Reich had not been defeated on the battlefield in 1945, but that it had survived for decades, with Hitler succeeded on his death in the early 1950s by a series of lacklustre party hacks who more or less disowned his 'excesses'.

Imagine then a 'reform Nazi' (call him Michael Gorbach) coming to power in the 1980s and dismantling the National Socialist system, only to fall from power as the Third Reich collapsed in political and economic chaos, with countries such as the Netherlands and Denmark regaining a precarious independence.

Imagine then a shrunken 'German Federation' suffering ten years of upheaval, before an SS officer (call him Waldemar Puschnik) came to power, first as prime minister and then as president. Under eight years of rule by Puschnik, Germany regains economic stability, largely thanks to a sky-high coal price, but the country seems to be run by former Gestapo and SS officers. They develop a nasty habit of glorifying Nazi history and bullying the former satellite states and occupied territories, while cracking down on the opposition. After two terms in office, Puschnik steps down as president, but returns to his old job as prime minister. He is succeeded in an all-but-uncontested election by a close associate, who spouts liberal rhetoric about freedom, the rule of law and fighting corruption.

It is in that framework that we should analyse what is happening in the Russian Federation, as Vladimir Putin, a man whose biography resembles the fictional Waldemar Puschnik, hands over the presidency to his hand-picked successor, Dmitry Medvedev. The ghosts of imperialism and secret-police terror are scary and unsettling, even when they are backstage rather than at the centre of events.

LEGAL NIHILISM

The new president has rightly highlighted some of Russia's worst problems: lack of political and economic freedom, huge corruption, what he calls 'legal nihilism' and excessive state interference in the economy. He has explicitly distanced himself from the pseudo-ideology of 'sovereign democracy' that has sprouted from the Kremlin in the past years.

Whereas Putin's main themes are stability and security, Medvedev says economic and political freedom will be the cornerstone of his approach. He also talks of '4 Is' – institutions, infrastructure, innovation and investment". That contrasts implicitly with Putin's record: an assault on public institutions, dismally slow improvement in infrastructure, a still-backward economy and investment that goes more into glitzy shopping malls than urgently needed new gas fields.

All that certainly contrasts sharply with Putin's own assessment of his legacy, that he has made "no serious mistakes" in the past eight years. But liberal rhetoric is cheap. Guess who said this in January 2000?

"In regulating the economy, the state should primarily guarantee the market's streamlined functioning in a stable environment." Or this? "It is our duty to bring a feeling of stability and peace back to our people. This can be done only by making Russia strong. However, a really strong state is a state in which personal rights and freedoms are upheld, where everyone is equal before the law and everyone complies with the law. It is our imperative and our duty to build such a state."

Or this, when asked about Andrei Sakharov, the best-known Soviet-era human rights campaigner?

"They provided a fundamental impact to Russian history. At certain periods of time in the life of any nation, there will be people who turn on the light and show a road for the nation to follow. And no doubt Andrei Sakharov was one of those people…a visionary, who was able to not only see the future, but to express his thoughts, and do that without any fear."

All those quotes – and many more in similar vein – came from none other than Putin, in his first years in office. No mention there of crushing the independent media, rigging the political system against his political opponents, introducing an extremism law that criminalizes dissent, legalising assassination against the regime's opponents, or the xenophobic hounding of foreign-financed organisations – including, sadly, the Sakharov Museum in Moscow.

It may be that Putin really believed what he was saying then but became corrupted by power. He may (more likely in my view) have been putting on a liberal mask to disguise the way in which he and his ex-KGB colleagues have seized political and economic power in Russia.

But whatever is true of Putin, it is vital not to read too much into Medvedev's words at this stage. It is much more important to look back at the last eight years – during which he has not only run Gazprom but also been one of

the most important people in the Russian government – and draw what conclusions we can.

NEW AUTHORITARIANISM

The first clear trend is towards authoritarianism. It has been dressed up in the language of Russian exceptionalism. The political system, argues Vyacheslav Nikonov, a Kremlin spindoctor, is an "immature democracy". Russians, in other words, are not ready for real political choice; indeed many of them tell opinion pollsters that they do not want it. Much better to have stability under a strong, competent leader.

True, up to a point. Certainly Russians flinch when they think of the chaotic and humiliating 1990s, when their country was led by an embarrassing drunk, whose family and cronies carved up its assets. Putin and his allies have exploited that memory, adding the potent if misleading twist that Russia's misfortunes were part of a Western plot. Now the country has recovered not only stability but pride.

The assault on political freedom in Russia in the past eight years has certainly not recreated the Soviet Union. The system is at least in theory a multi-party democracy. Though television is heavily controlled by the Kremlin, a handful of newspapers and a radio station are still more or less free. The use of conscription into the military (for young men) and psychiatric incarceration (for anybody) make it scary to be an opposition activist. But the vast majority of the population live with what by Russia's dismal standards looks like an exceptional level of prosperity and freedom.

What that really shows is that soft authoritarianism is more durable and effective than the hard version. The ex-KGB tycoons who run Russia have learnt important lessons from the past. One is that 80% control is more effective than 100%. Safety valves prevent the system blowing up. Dissidents in the Soviet Union were imprisoned behind the Iron Curtain. If you don't like Russia, you can simply leave.

The second trend is towards xenophobia. Putin compared America to the Third Reich in his Munich speech in January 2007. Employees of the British Council, a bland and blameless cultural organisation, were dragged from their beds for midnight interrogation amid a manufactured row about bureaucratic registration. Andrei Lugovoi, the prime suspect in the murder of the British citizen and Russian émigré Aleksandr Litvinenko, was elected to parliament by a pro-Kremlin party. Putin said British officials wanting his extradition "needed their brains examined".

That is mild compared to the tactics used against the former captive nations of eastern Europe: trade embargoes against Poland. Artificial interruptions of oil supplies to Latvia and Lithuania. Sudden increases in gas tariffs for Moldova and Ukraine (ruthlessly exploiting Russia's legacy as the monopoly supplier to much of the former Soviet Union). The hidden tactics – buying political parties, politicians, institutions or (in the case of Montenegro) whole countries – are even more alarming.

As head of Gazprom, Medvedev has been intimately involved in the use of gas as a weapon of foreign policy.

Towards western countries, the Kremlin's approach has been more subtle, using a mixture of propaganda and business ties to shape politics and diplomacy. This has been most striking in Germany. The left-wing parties fawn on Putin because their anti-Americanism leads them to see Russia as a counterweight to the United States. The CDU and CSU are influenced by a business lobby that sees Russia as a source of high profits and cheap gas.

The most alarming trend of all is the sanitisation of Stalinism. It would be quite wrong to blame modern Russians for Stalin-era crimes.

Putin has claimed that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was legal and says that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the "greatest geo-political catastrophe" of the last century. Imagine how we would feel if the former SS Colonel Waldemar Puschnik, the Chancellor of the German Federation, said that about the Third Reich. Not only the Dutch would feel nervous.

But the Russian media is going further. In the past six months, no fewer than four mainstream outlets have revived the outrageous falsehood that it was the Nazis, not the Soviets, who murdered 20,000 captured Polish officers at Katyn in 1940. That Stalin-era lie, enforced at gunpoint in post-war Poland, viciously aggravated the original crime. It was buried in 1990, with solemn Kremlin support.

So what may Medvedev do about all this? Unlike all his predecessors in the Kremlin, he has no history in the Communist Party. Unlike almost all his colleagues, he was not in the KGB. His career has been as a loyal and shadowy sidekick to Mr Putin. He has never – except in those recent remarks – publicly displayed independence of mind.

The problem is that Russia's political system is not only closed to real competition; it is also all but impenetrable to outsiders. We are back to the era of Kremlinology, when analysts of Soviet politics would scrutinise every nuance in Pravda for faint reflections of the power struggles in the Communist Party's Politburo. For all its faults, Russia's political system under Boris Yeltsin was both open and unpredictable. Would the president be impeached? An energetic and well-connected journalist had plenty of chances to find out – for example by phoning a top politician or tycoon.

Now things are different. Kremlinology, which only a few years ago seemed to be an archaic skill, is back. Russians and outsiders alike are reduced to reading the tea-leaves. Is Medvedev sincere? If so, will Putin let him act on his words? One way to tell will be to look at the symbols. Whose picture will hang in Russian public buildings? Who will receive whom when the two men meet. Russian television journalists, used to carefully staged meetings displaying the top man's status, are waiting impatiently for instructions.

We are told that Medvedev is a pro-western liberal, on the grounds that he likes rock music and the internet. Maybe he is. Or maybe he is the preferred candidate of the ex-KGB people who seized power in Russia in 1999, who want to put a presentable face on a system that has made them multi-billionaires.

Edward Lucas was a member of the Liberator collective in the mid-1980s and is author of *The New Cold War*, published by Bloomsbury

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Declining oil and gas supplies will force society to relearn lost skills and habits, says Lucy Care

When I returned from the Liberal Democrat spring conference, the Guardian was lying unopened on the kitchen table. Inside, the financial headlines reported that oil prices had reached an all-time high. The following week, another new high was reached.

I was not greatly surprised. It was predicted ten or more years ago that the period 2005-10 would see big increases in oil prices. This prediction was made not by economists, but by geologists.

> *"Food production will need to return to traditional practices to maintain fertility"*

When I first read about 'peak oil' in the mid-1990s, it was hard to believe. How could geologists like retired oil-man Colin Campbell really know how much oil was left? There were just so many variables. But I read more and was convinced.

It helped that I knew two people in Derby who had also worked on oil exploration, and they confirmed Colin's view. Global oil supplies would peak maybe as soon as 2005 and, as demand exceeded supply, market forces would push prices up.

Oil is used in almost every aspect of modern life; it powers nearly all our transport, is a raw material for everything from clothing to road building, and it helps fuel our agriculture and industry. In the western world, our use of oil has been likened to each of us having dozens of unfed slaves working for us full time. As oil prices rose, people sought alternatives, so the price of gas too rose, and now coal is following.

The Liverpool conference had considered an urgent issue about fuel prices, concentrating on the impact of high prices on domestic consumers. But this isn't a short term problem, it is a whole new world.

Back in 2005 I introduced the first conference 'urgent issue', also on fuel, specifically oil. Then prices were just beginning to increase, and I tried to put this into the context of 'peak oil' and how we as a party should be anticipating this trend, and adapting our policies accordingly.

Many of our policies are already right. Many of the actions we need to take to cut fossil fuel use to combat climate change are the same as those that will be forced on us as oil supplies become tighter. The increasing cost of fuel also provides a stronger incentive to cut fuel use or invest in alternatives. This could work in the favour of timely action.

But this will be much more likely if people understand what is happening.

More and more oil companies understand the situation. They are merging to share their remaining reserves, investing in renewables, even buying back their own shares. And at last some national governments are beginning to recognise the situation. In the UK, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Peak Oil and Gas was formed last year, chaired by Liberal Democrat John Hemming MP.

GAS SUPPLIES PEAK

As the group title says, the problem is not just oil. Global gas supplies will probably peak in the next ten years or so. And recent research from Germany suggests that global peak coal may be as soon as 2025.

Clearly we need to adapt, and adapt urgently. It would have been easier starting ten years ago. But at least starting now is better than delaying even longer.

One of the big challenges of peak fossil fuels is that, just when we finally realise we must invest seriously in fuel efficiency and new technologies, oil gets even more expensive and the price for manufactured goods goes up, making this harder. This is the most important reason why we must think ahead and plan how to build a society which works for everyone, despite diminishing supplies of fossil fuels.

The increasing oil price is the major reason behind the collapsing world economy and imminent recession. More expensive goods mean a reduction in spending, less manufacturing and fewer jobs – causing a downward spiral. As recession bites, oil demand will also reduce. Energy prices may then stabilise or even fall and the economy start to recover – only to be hit again as demand again outstrips falling supply.

For the world economy, the best way forward would be to moderate global oil demand to match the available supply. This will not be easy, as countries and economies are set in firm patterns of energy consumption. Competition for energy – and other resources – between

countries is a major cause of armed conflict, which needs to be avoided at all cost.

We need to have stability in the world markets to be able to plan the transition to a lower energy world, fuelled from renewable resources. Negotiating for acceptance of an annual, and reducing, cap on each country's use of fossil fuels should be a priority to achieve this stability. Then each country can address its own priorities for change.

So what are the UK's pressure points and what might we need to do? For me, the key word is localism; local services, local jobs, local schools, local food. These will help us to reduce energy demand, which is a higher priority than converting to renewables – though we will clearly also need to do this.

Food is crucial. The linkage between food prices and energy prices is already being seen. Action on the latter must be mindful of the impact on the former. Cutting food transport to a minimum is clearly a sensible step – and should help improve food security too; so growing one's own food is good. Last century's pattern of towns surrounded by nursery gardens may need to return.

Food production will need to return to traditional practices to maintain fertility, as making nitrogen fertilisers is both energy intensive and uses natural gas as a raw material – another reason why food prices have been rising with energy prices. This doesn't necessarily mean going all the way to organic – though this might be the best policy to start with to help drive change.

Expensive energy and unpredictable supplies will also mean that semi- and unskilled labour becomes more competitive again. A wider range of skills and abilities will become valuable, not just academic prowess, and full employment may be achievable. In particular, this will affect agriculture, with localising and intensifying horticulture – and therefore we'll need more people living in rural areas.

The time when people have most energy is generally when they are young, say those aged 14–24. At present, people this age are being encouraged to sit and learn – and play a little sport. They have energy to spare, and changing expectations so that book learning goes alongside practical skills and activity could provide a vital boost to society's well-being. Embracing the Tomlinson Report will be a useful first step.

The value of material waste will increase, both in terms of its energy content and as a source of raw materials. At present, lots of the materials we recycle go overseas to be processed. This extra transport will become less viable, and we will need to build our own factories in each region, or larger urban area. For particularly energy intensive industries, it may make more sense to locate factories close to renewable energy sources.

Better than recycling are repair and reuse. We'll need to relearn skills from the post-war austerity years. There will be more jobs in this area, to refurbish and refresh a wide range of goods and second-hand markets will flourish. Legislation to require equipment to be designed for repair may be needed to push this along.

The water industry is a big energy user – as well as water supplies becoming less predictable with climate change. If electricity supplies become a problem (brownouts), then to have one's own water supply will become attractive, and not just a water butt, but for washing and possibly drinking too. This may need support and advice.

Home energy efficiency is already an issue that has had a fair amount of attention. But more will need to be given, in particular to renovating buildings. The embodied energy in bricks and mortar mean that the lower costs for reusing buildings will become a more attractive prospect than demolition and rebuild. Equalising VAT rates will be a useful prod in the right direction here.

A more local economy will be boosted by local currencies and other social structures that encourage co-operation and interaction with neighbours. If we are not able to strengthen this side of society, I have real concern about growing levels of civil unrest, crime and violence.

Having restructured ourselves to be a more local and resilient society, we need to remember we are also a twenty-first century society and this is about going forwards, not backwards. For transport, we need to electrify the whole of our rail network, powered, of course from renewable electricity. Good information and communication technology will reduce the need for unnecessary travel.

FUEL FROM WASTES

Liquid fuel for cars and aeroplanes can be made from organic wastes by pyrolysis and similar processes. It will be expensive compared to today's oil, but overseas holidays and visits to distant family will still be possible.

Health will probably be improved with the reduction in use of oil-based chemicals and industrial pollutants, and enhanced with fresh local food and stronger local communities. A transition from the current illness-oriented NHS to one promoting health would seem a practical reality in this new paradigm.

We do need to apply some changes of direction quite urgently to ease the transition. For me, the biggest is to realise that new homes need to be built in rural areas, as this is where most new jobs will be needed. We need to stop building our cities and making large urban areas bigger. If suburbs are more than walking/cycling distance from the centre, towns are too big.

Growing hamlets and villages larger, so that they support their own primary school, corner shop, bakery and butcher will be fine. Thus the idea of 'Ecotowns' is acceptable, provided that they are jobs led, not satellite towns full of commuters.

More and more people are realising that high energy prices aren't just a short-term aberration. We are entering a new phase of civilisation, one not fuelled by growth, but one of consolidation and contraction. The financial sector in particular will have to have a major rethink about how it should operate in this environment.

I believe the Liberal Democrats are the party best placed to lead the country to this brave new, truly sustainable, world. It is very different to the energy-intensive, high-tech future most people have been given to expect. But this, I believe, is a future which is practical, realistic and attainable.

The party must have the courage and vision to develop the policies that will take the country forward safely. Then we must explain clearly why the economy is really crashing and offer the voters a credible route out of the deepening mire.

Cllr Lucy Care is Liberal Democrat PPC for Derby North

BASED IN BRUSSELS, RUN FROM WASHINGTON?

It's not the shape of cucumbers or bananas, or the standardisation of weights and measures that's got Europe into trouble, argues Tim Pascall, but rather the 'Anglo-Saxon' direction its economy is being forced to follow

Yes, Berlin – it's what one lady told me – "I don't like the way we're being ruled from Berlin!" I think she meant Frankfurt, seat of the Central European Bank, home of the euro, which Britain isn't even part of. It shows quite nicely how ignorant many of the opponents of the European dream can be.

When the Dutch rejected the constitution three years ago (I lived there at the time and spoke Dutch fluently, so knew what was going on), it was not, needless to say, a rejection of its finer points of constitutional law. It had probably been read by less than 1% of those who voted. But we were all given, rather belatedly, a summary of the main points.

'Belatedly' had been one of the problems. After initial enthusiasm for the idea of a referendum, a principle on the whole still alien to the Dutch political system, there was little enthusiasm to be found among any politicians to actually argue the case. And few had realised the extent to which discontent about some aspects of the European Union had built up.

It was not a 'vote against Europe', in this one of the most euro-centric countries of the community (I use the word intentionally). Nor was it, as it was to some extent in France, a vote against the sitting government as such, although it had become quite unpopular.

It was a vote on Europe; on the direction the Dutch saw the European Union as taking – increasing 'competition', which they were beginning to see as a threat to their fairly egalitarian and, until quite recently, remarkably contented society, and just going too fast, particularly in its eastwards expansion. And it's not just Turkey (the objections to its accession are largely though not wholly racist or anti-Islamic), but also what was perceived as too rapid an expansion, with no time to take stock.

Recent Dutch society has evolved in fairly slow steps, thanks largely to its system of proportional representation (the national open party list, which I don't like) and the inevitable coalitions that result. Holland is used to taking stock; it's evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Even its most 'revolutionary' laws, like those on drugs, gay marriage, prostitution and voluntary euthanasia, all evolved over quite a long period of time, and notably over several different governments. And then they survive well – the present Christian Democrat-dominated government has no intention of undoing any of them.

It seemed, though, that Europe wasn't getting a chance to take stock, and that too many things were running out of control, and in ways the Dutch very definitely didn't like.

One example was in Amsterdam. In a local referendum – held this time on the day of a general election, so for once with a respectable 78% turnout – the people voted by about 65% to 35% against what was seen as the first steps towards privatising the public transport system. We were told that very night that the result would make no difference since European competition rules would force the issue anyhow. And indeed – two years later – those first steps were taken, directly contradicting the expressed wishes of the people.

PRIVATISATION – A DIRTY WORD

Privatisation had become pretty much a dirty word in Holland anyhow, as it was here in the early years (remember not just the success story of BT, but also the disaster of rail privatisation, and the failure of the privatised utilities in the 1980s to invest, while making millions in profits – an aspect that many have now forgotten). The Dutch were sick of it, and rightly or wrongly it was being blamed on Europe's competition rules.

Holland was also seeing many of its proud companies being taken over in ways that no-one there seemed to want, but which European rules apparently make much easier. They are rules to which the Dutch government agreed in the Council of Ministers, and which were ratified by the Dutch parliament, and some of the political parties may

well be happy with them anyhow. But the Dutch people are nothing like as sure.

Holland has a long and proud tradition of 'not-for-profit' organisations, like hospitals, care-homes and housing corporations, whose origins lie in charitable institutions, but also many of the semi-state and employers' organisations that handle pensions, disability and unemployment support. It has one of the highest proportions in Europe. They used to be highly respected, until people started hearing that senior managers were being paid twice as much as the prime minister (seen there as a yard-stick for high salaries), while they could no longer afford enough staff to carry out their basic tasks, like giving the elderly in care homes more than one shower a week.

"It seemed though that Europe wasn't getting a chance to take stock"

But those high salaries were needed, we were told, because of 'international competition'. And then we'd hear one of these new managers at a press conference, talking English with an English or an American accent. They see their footballers going abroad too for the same reason. It's money, and money alone, that seems to count and, while the Dutch are well known for being careful with their money, they do not see it as the most important thing in life.

Holland's large family companies, of which there are quite a few (C&A being the best known here), are struggling to compete in salaries with the new stock market companies, most of whose managers now come from abroad – on 'internationally competitive salaries'. They complain too of the new accountancy rules, which require reporting of quarterly accounting and quarterly profit. "Family businesses," my employer wrote, "think not in terms of quarters, or even years, but of generations."

But new laws, which seem to be geared mainly to the large stock market companies, make that impossible. It's the quick buck that counts, rather than steady long-term investment and good staff relations, leading to steady long-term profit and growth, which is seen widely as the basis of little Holland's huge economic success.

The latest silly row, which must be causing palpitations to euro-enthusiasts, concerns the manifesto commitment of two of the parties in the current coalition to make school textbooks free of charge. That means that the schools, the government or the education authorities would be buying them, so it becomes subject to Europe's public procurement rules. But that means that individual teachers would no longer be able to decide which textbook they want for their pupils, as the buying authority would have to accept the best bid, which usually means lowest one – on that very British principle that cheapest must be best.

ANGLO-SAXONISATION

It suits big business in the form of the big publishers well, but the teachers are furious, and as a result the plan has been delayed for a year. In the meantime, parents will be given a cash payment to cover part of the costs, since buying the books individually from bookshops is obviously more expensive than the schools buying them in bulk.

Is Europe really to blame for these new rules and conditions? That is usually far from clear, and there, as here, anything that might be unpopular is quickly blamed on Europe. But there's no doubt that what the Dutch are now calling – in Dutch – the 'Anglo-Saxon' ways of doing things are being forced on it in one way or another. And they don't like it at all.

What clearly comes from 'Brussels' in the way of Europe-wide standards may often be irritating and occasionally even mad, and what 'came from Frankfurt', the euro, is widely blamed for a lot of perceived inflation (in fact quite low since its introduction). But on the whole, most Dutch do now see the long term benefits of both, or their necessity in the case of European anti-pollution rules.

What they don't like is what seems to be coming at them beyond anyone's control, the 'Anglo-Saxonisation' of business practice and the uncontrolled expansion of the union to the east, surely 'Anglo-Saxon' too – American keenness to pull the former communist block countries away from Russian influence, and to keep NATO member Turkey 'on board'. I don't say that these countries didn't want to join the European Union, but that the speed at which it happened was more to do with American, and so British, pressure to get them out of Russia's grasp, than good, sensible, economic politics.

So wasn't de Gaulle right after all? Is Britain not being used by America as a doorway into Europe? If so, then it's London – not Brussels, Frankfurt or Berlin – that's ruling Europe, pushed from over the water by Washington. Isn't that where the European dream is going wrong?

Now if we were to say more 'yes' to the social chapter and more 'no' to the competition rules, and a little breathing space between changes, we might again get a Europe that Europe wants. But would it be welcome in the US?

Tim Pascall is a Liberal Democrat in Hampshire who lived in the Netherlands for many years

OBITUARY: CLAIRE BROOKS

Peter Johnson pays tribute to the Yorkshire Liberal firebrand

Claire Brooks, who died recently aged 76, will be forever remembered at a Liberal Party Assembly exploding at the rostrum with the cry, "this is a foul and loathsome document". This was her reacting in the way she always did to any attack on the party leadership.

At that time, the leader was David Steel and the document in question, published by Liberator, heavily satirised Steel and his fellow bunker dwellers. Most people found the contents hilarious but Claire most certainly did not. She was a passionate follower of Thorpe and Steel and Ashdown. She was, though, a passionate Liberal, and would regularly, breathlessly shout at them if they got it wrong, which of course they so often did.

It was her wonderful "foul and loathsome document" epithet that stuck and has been used ever since to describe Liberator's occasional conference satirical booklets.

Claire was a larger-than-life Liberal, a forceful character in the days when you needed to be to get elected, as she very nearly did. Standing for her beloved Skipton, she polled 17,185 to the Tory MP's 19,301 in February 1974 and in the following election that October came within 600 votes of winning.

She stood again in 1979 and, responding to a call, I spent a week in the Yorkshire Dales campaigning for her. She was a well known local councillor and I remember turning up to a packed public meeting, as if from another age, to hear her bang the rostrum inspiring her audience to vote Liberal and wash the Tories out of the Skipton constituency. All very stirring stuff.

She had the towns sewn up, but the villages were a different matter. There was a shortage of help, not enough to help carry over her brilliant 1974 performance. In the end, we repaired to her sister Beth's house to watch the results and to groan as Thatcher won the election. The pain only tempered by, amongst other things, their mother's delicious Yorkshire pudding.

Claire went on to fight the new seat of Skipton and Ripon in 1983, Lancaster in 1987 and North Yorkshire at the first European election in 1989, but she never came as close as in her October 1974 result.

In 1975, she set up her solicitor's practice and combined this with her election onto Craven District Council the following year. She held her seat for 23 years. Tony Greaves, in his appreciation of Claire (Liberal Democrat News, 2 March 2008), quoted the Bradford Telegraph and Argus describing her quick-fire delivery and passionate rhetoric during her time as chair of the council.

That quick-fire delivery and rhetoric were something that characterised Claire's assembly and conference appearances down the years. Her oratory could raise the roof to the delight of delegates. Her performances always presented a huge challenge for session chairs of the day. I readily recall the likes of Geoff Tordoff, with the old red light flashing, attempting to stem her flow without resorting to turning the mike off.

There were some at the time I remember who felt she "exploded at the rostrum" all too often. It was true she did. But politics is about ideology and emotion, the emotion to move audiences the right way, and I know what I would rather have. Give me a bit of emotion any day. Today's conferences could certainly be enlivened with some emotive oratory.

Away from the conference floor, Claire made an impression on the fringe. Despite Liberator's connection with the foul and loathsome document, she was as loyal to Liberator as she was to the party's leaders. She subscribed continuously to the magazine from the era when it was a Young Liberal publication. She brought a songbook every year and sang her heart out, another expression of her liberalism. She would buy every pamphlet we ever produced (foul and loathsomes excluded!!) and would eagerly queue for a Liberal Revue ticket and report back about how she cried with laughter.

I met Beth, who survives her, a year or so back at a conference in Brighton. She had nursed Claire through her long illness until she had to go into a nursing home. She showed me some pictures of Claire and I could still recognise that rostrum-pounder. Beth was also always active in liberal politics.

We mourn the passing of Claire Brooks, a radical Liberal, a passionate orator, and active supporter of the conference fringe and of course Liberator.

Peter Johnson is a member of the Liberator Collective

LETTERS

CONSUMERIST SCHOOLS

Dear Liberator,

I hope that readers will have made the link between two pieces in Liberator 324: Paul Holmes's critique of 'Free Schools' and the excellent Commentary, 'Agora or Argos?', which highlighted the dangers of a society in which people are consumers rather than active citizens.

For me, the 'Free Schools' proposal is a quasi-consumerist one as it focuses on parental self-interest rather than a desire to help out your child's school in a wider social and educational context.

Crucially, by reducing the role of the state by cutting schools adrift from local government, it would reduce the scope for the collective political action which David Howarth highlighted at January's manifesto conference. Surely that view of politically active citizens is more appropriate for a Liberal Democrat manifesto than Jeremy Browne's rather depressing economic determinism.

If people have the time and inclination to get involved in running a school, what is wrong with doing that through the many opportunities that are already involved in the state system? People can already take on the onerous role of governor and have a significant impact on how local schools perform, and it is hard to see how far it is the state's power that makes the role of governor unattractive. Indeed, it is quite the reverse – people find the role off-putting because of the responsibilities and the time it takes. As Paul Holmes said, why not instead have well-funded community schools, making the cheeky suggestion that they could even be called 'comprehensives'.

Unlike many people in Westminster, including many Liberal Democrat MPs, I actually went to a comprehensive. I consequently find it hard to accept the stigma attached to them that dominates public discourse, which so often seems to be driven by people with little direct experience of the state system.

Dr Richard Grayson
PPC, Hemel Hempstead

RUTHLESS DIGGERS

Dear Liberator,

Well done for your Commentary in Liberator 324 (backed up by the excellent article by Paul Holmes), which set out the very clear ideological divide that has opened up in the party in the past few years between the marketeers and the democrats. Between the provision of public services as just another set of consumer products, or as community resources and services.

Fifty years ago, there was a lot of debate about where the boundary should lie between the public and private sectors. What was not a matter for debate was that the public sector should be controlled and largely provided by democratically elected bodies rather than profit-making bodies controlled by market forces – though the extent of the bureaucratic centralisation that took place in many public bodies turned out to be a mistake.

In the past 30 years, we have seen a dreadful erosion of the ideals of the public sector, first under Mrs Thatcher's government driven by right-wing ideologues such as Keith Joseph and Nicholas Ridley, and more recently and much more insidiously by New Labour.

Fortunately the backlash has now started against the divisive notion of market-based consumer choice in areas such as education and health, and the wide range of services still provided by local councils, and all the related crap such as PFIs, the relentless outsourcing and associated devaluation and casualisation of the public services labour force, the rigidities and inefficiencies built into so many public-private 'partnerships', the ever-increasing inequalities forced by the 'choice' agenda in which the richer and more powerful get what they want and the rest are left with second-class US-style 'social' provision.

It is indeed all about the price of everything and the value of nothing. And sadly it's also about a group of people who have systematically dug themselves into positions of influence in the upper echelons of the Liberal Democrats and ruthlessly promoted their academic 'choice' based agenda. These are people who logically despise both democratic processes and Liberals who are immersed in them as members of local councils and grassroots issue campaigners.

As a party we have – to our real credit – resisted the right-wing agendas of Thatcherite and Blairite 'reform' for the best part of three decades.

How disappointing it is that, just as the public mood is moving against this dangerous and illiberal nonsense, it is for the first time making real inroads into important areas of Liberal Democrat policy.

Tony Greaves
House of Lords

Get it off your chest!

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

NO PLACE FOR HIM

Dear Liberator,

Your commentary (Liberator 324) on the debate between David Howarth and Jeremy Browne was interesting. However, the real question the party needs to ask about Mr Browne, now that he has been elevated to shadow chief secretary, is why he continues to keep company with objectionable elements of the Conservative Party.

He, along with Labour eccentric Frank Field, provides the window dressing that allows the Reform think-tank to claim to be non-party. Its other staff and advisor board members read like a list of prominent Thatcherites, including professors Tim Congdon and Patrick Minford, Ruth Lea, the director of the Tory-linked Centre for Policy Studies, the former Ofsted head Chris Woodhead, and the senior civil servant who notoriously devised rail privatisation.

Reform's website carries endorsements from such repugnant journalistic enemies of the Liberal Democrats as the Daily Mail's Melanie Phillips and the Sun's Trevor Kavanagh.

While Mr Browne was a back-bencher keeping this company may have been merely unusual. In his new role it is a deep embarrassment to our party that this odious organisation should be able to list him on its advisory board. No wonder many of his fellow MPs privately voice concerns about him.

Nick Turner - London

REMEMBERING BELINDA

Dear Liberator,

Many of those who worked as political assistants in Kingston, and many councillors and now parliamentarians, all owe a great debt of gratitude to Belinda Eyre-Brooke, who died earlier this year.

I would like to suggest we introduce a new award in her memory specifically for political assistants, which would be a fitting tribute to Belinda but also recognise a group of people with whom she was so closely involved and to whom she was an inspiration.

Richard Clein
Liverpool

REVIEWS

Delia's How to Cheat at Cooking by Delia Smith Ebury Press 2008 £20

Everything is political; every act, every thought, every purchase and, especially nowadays, every sliver of food we put in our mouths. We are, by now, well used to balancing political and environmental issues, animal welfare, sustainability etc., when we shop. The quandary over the sweet little Kenya beans (evil air miles versus support for a fragile economy) is familiar to many of us. In the old days, it was so easy; no need to scrutinise every packet or bottle for the list of political and health no-nos. If it came from South Africa or a similarly politically black sheep of a country, you simply did not buy it.

We have loads of food in the West, too much of it in fact. We throw away more than we eat. We obsess about it probably more than those with far less. In Victorian times, if you were on the stout side, it was a sign of affluence and health. Today, the rich are thin and the poor are fat, thanks to our obsession over the past 40 years with convenience, instant gratification and plenty.

Our thoughts are dominated by health, body image, fear that our children will tip the scales at 17 stone before they are nine, are we hurting the animals/the soil/the planet? should all branches of McDonald's should be stoned to death? Political correctness dictates the contents of our shopping baskets. Chefs rule the media and are as famous as premier league footballers (one even was one), and support for each is as partisan and passionate as it is for football clubs. Of course, their influence is not all bad; Jamie Oliver's attempt to make school children at least attempt to eat a more balanced diet was both brave and kind, if not wholly successful, yet.

Where there is obsession, there is fear. We all have to eat two or three times a day and do we really have the time, the self obsession and the temerity (given that most of the world does not have enough to eat) to carry on like this? Good sense seems to have gone out of the window; simple enjoyment of a meal is a thing of the past as we count the calories and the fat content, check the provenance and fret over every spoonful that passes our lips. So we spend a fortune in money, time and totally unnecessary emotion buying the 'right' (politically, ethically, healthy) ingredients, but then what do we do with them? How do we cook them? What if we can't cook? Meltdown!

There is a plethora of books, television programmes, articles in the media and the Internet to help us but, and this is a big 'but', what if we have neither the skill, the time, the patience or the money to follow them? It is all getting too much. So one person is calling a stop to all this, someone who (by her own admission) John Peel described as the most uncool person he had ever met, our Delia.

Delia Smith was a goddess long

before Nigella or any of the others, and with *How to Cheat* gives us her blessing to join her for an easier life, and put to rest the myth that cooking skills belong to a privileged few. Her recipes mix traditional fresh ingredients with short cuts, advising us to stock our larders and freezers with tins and ready prepared vegetables, pre-prepared spices, grated cheeses, Aunt Bessie's potatoes in their various frozen forms, bought mayonnaise, tinned and frozen fish and fruit. She proposes a wedding between the trendy and the traditional, the lovingly home cooked and the instant/quick supermarket solution and, for the most part, the marriage is a very happy one.

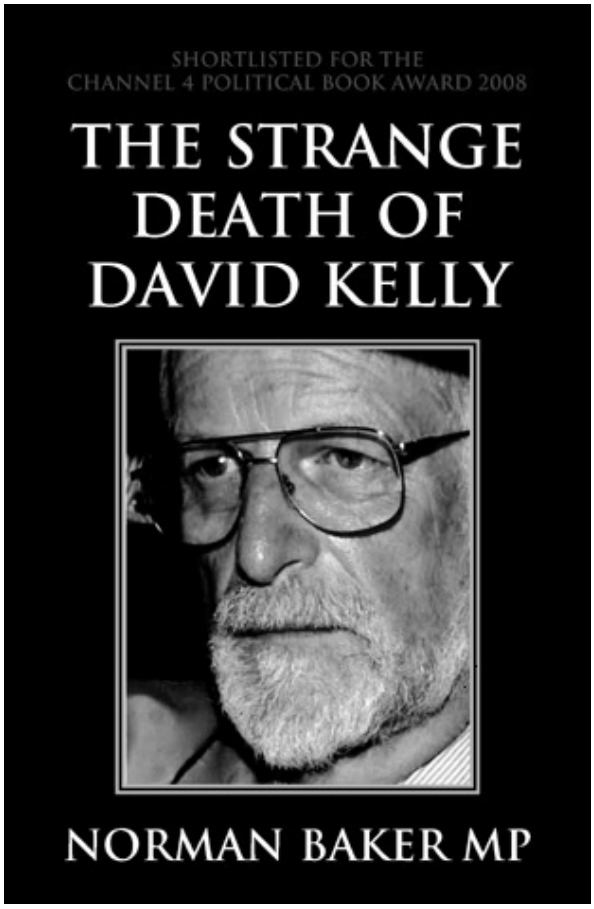
Her book is well laid out, with colourful but not too perfect illustrations, and most of the recipes work very well. Her Greek lamb with lemon and garlic is exceptional and so easy; her tarts with ready-made pastry all delicious and simple; the seafood linguine with frozen seafood, wild mushroom risotto, and Indonesian egg sambal all indistinguishable from the 'real' (fresh/home made) thing. Sometimes she goes too far in the cheat stakes – is it really necessary to use frozen parsnips in her curried parsnip recipe, when they take but a second to prepare or, similarly, frozen butternut squash and the humble aubergine?

What is refreshing and made this irredeemably lazy slut of a reviewer cry "result" and "vindication" is when one's own cheats appear on the page – tinned rhubarb for many puddings, and ready-made meringues for the Eton Mess.

So why review a cookery book, especially by an author who doesn't need the plug, in a political magazine, especially this one? Because she really wants to remove the fear, the mystique, the competitiveness that spoils so many people's enjoyment of the simple, vital art of cooking, whether it be the fear of failure, or being judged, or just not being bright or adept enough to do it.

Becoming a serious cheat is very liberating, she writes in the introduction, but it is less to do with the cheating and more to do with an easing of the way to culinary competence for the shy, the lazy, the uncertain. If you can show people that you can make lovely food with easy stuff, it increases their confidence, their sense of adventure, and that is good. The uncool sometimes achieve coolness, and with this book, Delia is on the way to super coolness, as a liberator.

Wendy Kyrle-Pope



The Strange Death of David Kelly by Norman Baker Methuen 2007 £9.99

Conspiracy theories have got a bad name. This review is being written on the day that Mohamed al-Fayed's outlandish theories about the cause of Princess Diana's death were decisively rejected by a coroner's inquest. Meanwhile, the internet is still heaving with theories that the terrorist attacks of September 11 were a put-up job by the Bush administration.

Every tragedy seems to attract its own 'grassy knoll', and the mysterious death in 2003 of Dr David Kelly seems ripe for such delusions. Kelly was a government scientist and weapons inspector, who had been investigating whether Iraq was concealing weapons of mass destruction. When Kelly's name was leaked as the confidential source of a report by the BBC that Blair's 'dodgy dossier' had been "sexed up" on the orders of Alastair Campbell, Kelly was hung out to dry by the government.

Blair and Campbell extracted their revenge on the BBC through the device of the one-sided Hutton Inquiry, which exonerated the government while heaping blame on the BBC. Of course, we now know that Andrew Gilligan's report on the Radio 4 Today programme, which triggered the crisis, turns out to have been correct all along.

Despite the known political circumstances surrounding Kelly's death, it is easy to attract derision by writing a book like this, and any author doing so runs the risk of being dismissed as a crank. It is a risk of which Norman Baker is clearly well aware, and he carefully marshals his evidence without resort to hysteria or unsupported suppositions.

Baker, the Lib Dem MP for Lewes, was outraged at the travesty of the Hutton Inquiry and concerned about the many discrepancies in the official accounts. The evidence did not add up so, in 2006, Baker took a year's leave of absence from his duties as a front bench spokesman to focus on investigating the Kelly affair.

Hutton had concluded that Kelly's death was suicide. On closer examination, the forensic evidence suggests that suicide is a highly unlikely explanation. But if Kelly did not kill himself, who did? Here, Baker's account is subject to conjecture, but he concludes that Kelly was probably murdered by Iraqis, that the government is well aware of what happened and may even have colluded.

To reveal this ending is not a 'spoiler' – far from it. Reading Baker's detailed research is well worth the ride. And quite apart from Kelly's unfortunate death, what this book reveals above all is the extent of the mendacity of a government determined to go to war at all costs and quite ruthless in its treatment of anyone who got in its way.

Simon Titley

Lord Bonkers' Diary

Monday

Well, well, well. So the story has finally come out. I suppose it was inevitable.

The name "Percy Harris" will mean little to my younger readers, but he was quite the fellow in his day. Percy was elected in the Liberal interest at a by-election at Market Harborough during the Great War and was a frequent guest at the Hall in those dark days. The soundest of fellows, he stood by Asquith in 1918 and was thus denied the "coupon" by Lloyd George and his Tory allies, ensuring his defeat. He soon re-emerged as a Liberal MP in the East End and his strong following amongst the Pearly Kings and Queen (many of whom could drink more wine than he'd ever seen) ensured that he held that seat until 1945.

The point of my story is that Percy's granddaughter (a charming girl) fell pregnant during the louche days of the 1960s and a baby boy was born. Despite my strongest urgings, the family saw to it that he was adopted by a kindly scriptwriter and his wife and I assumed that was the last I would hear of the business.

A few years later, however, news reached me that a small boy had won the All Cornwall Primary Schools L.T. Hobhouse Recitation Contest at a preternaturally early age, and I soon guessed who the child was. It was thus no surprise when, upon the sad and untimely death of David Penhaligon, Master Taylor (for it was he) emerged as the Liberal Democrat candidate for Truro. He soon proved a useful addition to our front bench (bedtime permitting).

Now the tale is all over this morning's newspapers; I spend the day at the Home for Well-Behaved Orphans refreshing my memory on the pedigrees of our young residents.

Tuesday

To Windsor for a banquet in honour of the French President M. Sarkozy. In the past I have found our Gallic cousins Rather Hard Work – one got the impression that General De Gaulle could never quite forgive Britain for liberating France – but the present incumbent proves a jolly little fellow. I am particularly taken by his wife, whom I rescue from the Duke of Edinburgh as he is telling her (in more detail than is strictly necessary) the best way to disembowel a stag. We get on famously until the Prime Minister – a dour Scotsman by the name of Brown – muscles in on our conversation and tries to interest her in "post-neoclassical endogenous growth theory". I soon get my revenge: Brown asks me the way to the dining room and I send him off through the billiard room down the back stairs and out into the kitchen garden, before taking the delightful Mme Sarkozy into dinner on my arm. The Queen is amused.

Wednesday

I come across a magazine called *GQ* and, when I am told that the initials stand for Gentlemen's Quarterly, I purchase a copy as it sounds My Sort Of Thing. Imagine my delight when, upon perusing the contents page, I find that there is an interview with our new leader. I order a pot of Earl Grey and sit down to read it, but I am soon disconcerted. I find that Clegg makes light of the notorious incident in which he set fire to a priceless collection of rare cacti – I don't know if they sell *GQ* in Rutland, but if they do it is lucky for Clegg that Meadowcroft's choice of reading matter runs more to *The Horticulturalist's Journal*. Then – dear God! – Clegg goes on to boast of the number of women he has slept with, which is something no gentleman should ever do. I certainly should not have done it myself when there was talk of my leading the Liberal Party – particularly if I thought there were any chance of the magazine falling into the hands of the first Lady Bonkers.

Thursday

To Brick Lane for the launch of the Liberal Youth, and not without a little trepidation as the name conjours up visions of footer bags, hearty folk singing and long hikes through the forests of the East End. I am thus reassured, when I arrive, to find a party in full swing and not a pair of lederhosen in sight.

Friday

I settle beside my hearth for a long awaited treat; a tumbler of Auld Johnston – that most prized of Highland malts – is at my elbow and a hardback copy of my old friend Ming Campbell's memoirs is open on my lap. I begin reading and am fascinated to learn of Ming's schooldays in Glasgow and his exploits as an Olympic sprinter, and chuckle at his anecdotes of life at the Edinburgh Bar. Yet when he turns to our former leader, poor Charles Kennedy, and his struggle with the demon drink, I find my attention wandering. When he turns to Kennedy again I almost nod off. When he turns to him a third time… I awake to find that the fire has burned low and my setters have put themselves to bed. In short, it is a fascinating read, but why Ming's publishers insisted that he bore us all with constant talk of Kennedy I cannot imagine.

Saturday

To Rutland International Airport for the opening of its new terminal. Vast airships nuzzle the terminal tower having arrived from as far afield as Croydon, Königsberg, the Straits Settlements, Newfoundland and Bechuanaland; attentive footmen carry one's bags to one's Bentley; the Amy Johnson Bar dispenses pints of Smithson & Greaves Northern Bitter to all-comers. In short, it is everything a modern airport terminal should be. I hope the people at Heathrow will take notice.

Sunday

Lunch at the Hall with Matthew Taylor – so much more enjoyable now that he is able to take wine with his meal. I tell him all about his great-grandfather and the Harborough by-election of 1916. I am never to blow my own trumpet, as my readers will know, but I trust that I give a fair account of my part in getting the Liberal vote out in Cranoe, Glooston and Carlton Curlieu.

Later a caller arrives with tidings of a small girl who has won the North Wales Paraphrase T.H. Green Without Falling Asleep Award for the second time at the age of eight. Here we go again.

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