

# liberator



## LAST ORDERS!

### In this issue

- 💣 What's happened to our pubs? — Greg Mulholland
- 💣 Can there be a liberal South Africa? — Helen Zille
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# COMMENTARY

## POOR CLIMATE FOR GREENERY

The best that can be said about the Crewe and Nantwich by-election result is that the Liberal Democrat vote did not collapse in the face of someone else's two-party squeeze, which was probably the realistic limit of party hopes.

Crewe came soon after the local elections, in which, slightly to its surprise, the party recorded a small net gain in seats.

Both results, though, illustrated that the Lib Dems remain stuck. The core vote, as shown at Crewe, is small; the net increase in councillors was just 33 and the number of councils controlled remained just below 30, as it has for some five years.

Opinion polls tell the same story. The Lib Dems hover around the late teens – better than it might be in a time of Tory recovery but hardly the stuff of breakthroughs as Labour unravels.

The Lib Dems need some new tunes, as Iraq and tuition fees fade from the public's mind. On those issues, the party surprised itself by how successful it could be by being bold. Can it achieve that on other fronts?

Nick Clegg had a go in May by trying to position the Lib Dems as the party of tax cuts. He was at pains to stress that he meant cuts for those on middle and lower incomes, paid for by a switch to green taxation and by closing loopholes for the wealthy.

He spoiled it with the startling assertion: "When the government takes your money, they choose what they spend it on. Your power is diminished." Something people can do in a democracy is decide to combine their resources with others through tax to secure things they could not afford even if income tax were zero. Few can buy their own school, hospital or police force, and Clegg should avoid simplistic statements of this kind.

Clegg may, though, be on to something if he can exploit the growing conviction that the current economic problems result from the super-rich having been allowed to run riot in a financial system that was not regulated properly because of Labour's cultural cringe before wealth.

Vince Cable has made some headway with calls for tighter regulation, and only politicians with a death wish would now make the case for less market regulation, as the public contemplates the resulting wreckage.

Clegg's other big idea is green taxes, and here the Lib Dems have some thinking to do.

Everyone is in favour of green taxes on things they themselves do not buy or use – and in economic good times it is easy enough to argue for them.

In bad times, it is less easy to, say, call for higher taxes on fossil fuel when the oil price has risen to hitherto unknown levels and the green tax hits everyone regardless of ability to pay.

The party makes great play of wishing to replace council tax with a tax based on ability to pay. Yet it wishes to replace income tax – which is based on ability to pay – partly with green taxes, which are not.

The Lib Dems must be honest about green taxes not being 'fair' in the sense of a relationship to income, and being instead a means to encourage sometimes painful, if necessary, behavioural changes.

Anything less than openness will cause the public to smell a rat and become sceptical towards everything the party says.

## BOOZERS AND LOSERS

Greg Mulholland MP calls in this issue of *Liberator* for action to save traditional pubs from their present decline.

Perhaps one reason for their plight is Labour's obsession with young people's drinking. Until recently, anyone who looked roughly 18 could get served in pubs and so began their drinking life on premises that were, for the most part, safe and well-run and surrounded by others of all ages, the great majority of whom would drink in moderation.

Now, not merely are publicans told to demand proof of age – on pain of losing their licences – but the ludicrous position has arisen of people well over the legal drinking age having to prove that they are 21 or even 25.

Labour is meanwhile able to gain the tabloid headlines that matter to it so much, by launching repeated 'crackdowns'. These demonise an entire generation and have the effect of forcing teenagers who want to drink (and most will want to try it) into parks and other public places where trouble is more likely to arise than in a pub.

A live-and-let-live approach that relied on the good sense of publicans has been replaced by nanny state nonsense that is endemic to Labour.

This starts with legitimate concern about alcohol abuse and ends with idiotic spectacles such as that where a Women's Institute picnic was admonished for drinking wine in a park.

Meanwhile, alcohol is available ever more cheaply from supermarkets for consumption behind closed doors. But taking them on would mean confronting well-funded business lobbies, rather than putting excess responsibility on publicans and excoriating young people as jobs.

In Labour's world, it will surely not be long before under-18s require police permission to leave their homes after school hours.



# RADICAL BULLETIN

## MAKING ALLOWANCES

It looks as if leader Nick Clegg may have to intervene to ensure that Lib Dem MEPs agree to a code on their expenses that is as transparent as those now used at Westminster.

Clegg may yet make a formal offer to other parties to agree a code for all UK MEPs, but will all of his own party be enthusiastic?

One option put before the British Lib Dem MEPs would see them required to declare whether they are members of the parliament's voluntary pension scheme, and whether they employ or otherwise pay any family members.

They would also be required to declare all expenses and have these independently audited each year, and publish how much they claim in daily allowances. Stringent declarations would also be needed on secretarial and travel allowances.

An alternative version put forward is similar but subtly sprinkled with 'mays' and 'shoulds' through which a coach and horses could be driven by those thus inclined.

In the spirit of openness that prevails at Westminster, with Clegg having made unprompted expense declarations, the leader will surely wish to see the party's MEPs be at least as open, and know which options for transparency they sought to reject, and why.

## DON'T LET'S BE BEASTLY TO THE GERMAN

In a retirement worthy of Frank Sinatra, Mike German is finally to stand down as leader of the Welsh Assembly Lib Dem group in the autumn. He has been leader since 1999 and faced criticism after last year's campaign, when the assembly group remained yet again stuck on six seats.

He averted a challenge to his leadership in October 2007 by giving an assurance to the group and to the Welsh party conference that he would stand down as soon as possible after the local elections.

German then told his amazed group in May that he had been asked to stay on (by whom is unclear) until after a constitutional review concluded in October and that he proposed to address the autumn Welsh Lib Dem conference as leader, during which speech he would resign.

Consternation seized the group when it discovered that he had asked in February for a conference speaking slot, and other members are wondering if he will indeed quit.

Assuming he does, the likely contenders as successor are Kirsty Williams and Jenny Randerson, as Peter Law and Mick Bates have ruled themselves out and Eleanor Burnham's chances are rated as slim.

## FORE!

Will the Scottish Liberal Democrats do anything about the disgraceful events in the Aberdeenshire Council group that followed a dispute about a planning application from American billionaire Donald Trump to build a golf and leisure resort?

A public inquiry on the project has just started. Views differed over the environmental impact of the project – part of which would be on an SSSI – versus the substantial investment that it promised for the local economy.

The application came before the hung council's infrastructure services committee in December, where the vote was a dead heat and Lib Dem chair Martin Ford used his casting vote against the project.

Legally that was the end of the matter, since the council could not overturn a vote taken by the committee under its delegated powers.

All hell then broke loose, with strong feelings being expressed on both sides. The SNP-run Scottish government intervened to call-in the application so that the matter would be decided at the inquiry.

Ford, who insists he was merely applying the council's stated planning and environmental policies, was vilified by supporters of the Trump project, not least those who sit on the Lib Dem benches.

A few days after his vote, Lib Dem council leader Anne Robertson welcomed the Scottish government call-in, saying: "What is important in all this is securing the economic future of the north-east of Scotland.

"If the decision of ministers to call this application in keeps it alive, then we welcome this intervention."

A Lib Dem leader welcoming an intervention by the SNP to overturn the vote of a Lib Dem committee chair was unusual enough.

But one week later, Aberdeenshire issued a press release headed "Council shows support for Trump application", after a full council vote to support Trump's application. This was despite it being legally unable to overturn the earlier committee vote, and the council thus took the curious stance of supporting a planning application when the legal position was that it was opposed.

Worse was to come. The same meeting saw a motion of no confidence tabled in Ford by an independent councillor.

This could easily have been defeated had the Lib Dem and Tory administration backed him, but Ford was removed by a 26-10 vote with 29 abstentions – most of them Lib Dems who refused to support their own committee chair in the face of an SNP and independent attack on him for having followed council policy.

Even that was not the end of the matter. An attempt was then made to kick Ford out of the Lib Dem group, though sanity prevailed and he remained.

Ford, who has turned down approaches to join the Green Party, has shown a good deal more loyalty to the party than Robertson's group has shown to him.

## **DEAL OR NO DEAL**

Liberal Democrat promises to 'keep in touch' look a bit hollow in London, where the surviving three London Assembly members did an immediate deal with the Greens and Labour to share out the top jobs.

It is true that this is a technical arrangement to keep the mayor's party out of the chairs, and that Labour was similarly ejected after the previous election.

What has rankled with local parties is not so much the nature of the deal as the lack of consultation over it, with even senior figures in London learning of it from the news.

One said: "It illustrates what we've been saying for years. The previous five assembly members never used their positions to campaign for us in London, nor shown any leadership in developing a Lib Dem London team (as the Greens have successfully done). They will, as their predecessors did, simply disappear into the committees."

Meanwhile, in the fall-out from the disappointing mayoral election, candidate Brian Paddick chose to publish his campaign diary in, of all places, the Mail on Sunday (11 May). He included a variety of rude comments about the competence of an unnamed press officer, who was not in any position to reply.

The person concerned was Emily Walch, who was senior press officer for the party's GLA group until joining Paddick's campaign last autumn, and whose professionalism has been defended by those who worked with her in her earlier job.

There has been a fair amount of muttering about how reluctant Paddick was to take advice even though, despite his other experience, he was a novice candidate.

Still, the party needed a celebrity candidate for the mayoralty. Can Lord Paddick be far behind?

## **EAST SIDE STORY**

One of the more eye-catching appointments by London's new Tory mayor Boris Johnson was that of Ray Lewis, as deputy mayor for young people.

Lewis is a former prison governor and director of the Eastside Young Leaders' Academy, which works with young black men, and could once have been a political catch for the Liberal Democrats.

Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats spotted Lewis's work three years ago and suggested it would be a good idea for Charles Kennedy to meet him. This fell on deaf ears. They tried again with Ming Campbell, and got the same non-response, leaving Lewis open to a, no doubt rather flattering, approach from the Tories.

## **BLAST FROM THE PAST**

Anyone wondering why the Lib Dems came within an ace of losing control of Liverpool Council in May need look little further than the in-fighting that has consumed the council group for the past year.

Leader Warren Bradley, about whom there tend to be strong views both for and against, kept his job after the elections. He had faced challenges to his position from both

Paul Clein, who resigned from the cabinet in March, and Richard Kemp, a long-standing Liverpool councillor who leads the Lib Dem group on the Local Government Association.

Kemp may not have helped himself by saying that he wished to retain this post even if he won, but clearly those who did not want him to win were taking no chances.

Back in 2002 Kemp resigned as cabinet member for housing after a complex regeneration scheme that he had led got into difficulties. Just in case any councillor had forgotten the events of six years ago, copies of the relevant documentation were thoughtfully and anonymously provided to them prior to the vote. (See article on pages 14-15).

## **NOW YOU SEE HIM...**

Charles Kennedy's mysterious absence from Radio 4's Any Questions during the Crewe by-election was widely remarked upon, not least the heavy irony used on the programme when it was announced he had "missed a train". Soon afterwards he missed something lower profile, but even more embarrassing for the party.

In November 2006, Kennedy became a member of the Liberal International bureau – its main decision-making body – despite being the only bureau candidate absent from the Marrakech congress (Liberator 315).

There were misgivings among British delegates about him taking this post, but some arm-twisting about "Ming wants this" got him elected. Since then, Kennedy has missed almost all the bureau meetings, to the annoyance of other member parties.

It was suggested discreetly that he might stand down at the LI congress in Belfast in May, but he insisted on standing again. Party leaders make all bureau nominations, and Nick Clegg could hardly refuse to propose him, though it was emphasised to Kennedy that it was important that he did the job properly.

Come congress, there was no Kennedy. This deeply embarrassed the British delegates, some of whom decided they would refuse to support him for the bureau elections though, in the event, these were unexpectedly uncontested so Kennedy kept his job.

Kennedy did not appear the whole weekend and did not return phone calls, and LI officials said they received no messages from him. Yet he was in Belfast, or very recently had been.

On the evening of 15 May, he appeared on Let's Talk, the BBC Ulster equivalent of Question Time, which goes out almost live. Yet for the next two days, he was not seen or heard of at the congress, held in same city, of an organisation on whose top body he still sits.

## **ANYTHING YOU CAN DO**

Nick Clegg's embarrassment over his '30 women' interview with Piers Morgan in May's GQ magazine has not deterred one MP.

The Western Mail reports that Morgan has conducted a toe-curling interview with Lembit Öpik, at the latter's request.

It said Morgan was bemused by this and wondered whether the Lib Dems possessed a political death wish. And Öpik wants to be party president.

# STRUGGLE FOR A LIBERAL SOUTH AFRICA

The ceiling on liberal progress will remain low in unequal societies until they find out how to address poverty, says Helen Zille

The topic of an inclusive society goes to the heart of the challenge that my party, the Democratic Alliance, faces in South Africa. We define our mission as: “the open, opportunity-driven society for all,” which is the way we describe the ‘inclusive society’. We have to achieve this in the context of a deeply divided society, in which ethnic and cultural differences are far more complex than simplistic racial categories suggest, but which still largely coincide with the contours of poverty and wealth.

Since my election as leader of the Democratic Alliance a year ago, I have reached the central conclusion that, unless liberals in a plural and unequal society such as ours can find credible ways of accommodating diversity and addressing poverty, the ceiling on our growth will remain very low.

The need to deal with poverty and diversity requires addressing majority aspirations and minority fears. These often seem contradictory imperatives, but they must be attained simultaneously for democracy in a divided society to succeed.

The term ‘liberal’ is widely misunderstood and actually used pejoratively by many in South Africa. That is why I do not generally use the term. It confuses more than it clarifies. Rather than spending time salvaging a label, I prefer to build the values, which is why we refer to the open, opportunity society.

Is it possible to transcend the legacy of division and dispossession in South Africa and the rest of the continent? Can liberals succeed where others have failed?

I believe that if we are to do so, we must accept that identity politics is a powerful force that cannot be ignored. In fact, it must be embraced within the open, opportunity society project.

If liberals wish to be less misunderstood and more accepted, they must find ways of identifying with a range of groups who are easily alienated by what they perceive as the liberal culture of superiority.

Liberals love the rhetoric of openness, but in divided societies often set themselves apart as a rational, analytical and dispassionate elite that has little contact with the trials and tribulations of ordinary people

In order to move out of this trap, liberals in divided societies must live their values beyond the confines of a cosy club of like-minded people who think, speak and look much the same. They must build genuine bonds of friendship, care and common interest with people across all communities. This involves immersing oneself in situations that liberals often find difficult and culturally confusing. This is one of the ways in deeply divided societies that we can start a process of value convergence on the things that matter to all human beings.

At the political level, this process is reflected in coalition building, which is in its infancy in South Africa. The six-party coalition in Cape Town spans racial, ethnic and religious differences rather than ideological divisions. In this context, it has proved possible to propose policy options rooted in the values of an open, opportunity society, and get broad-based support for them from across the coalition spectrum. This has been a particularly important case study in finding a platform for shared values that transcend race and ethnic interests.

This process has proved particularly challenging for many liberal stalwarts, who often perceive every adaptation as a dilution of principle. But if the choice is between building a broad-based opposition to challenge a hegemonic elite or remaining a small, overwhelmingly white and ideologically pure liberal party, I generally choose the first option. Conversely, however, it is pointless to abandon our core values and principles merely to attain power. Without policies rooted in principles and values, power is worthless.

It is a matter of complex judgment where to draw the line, and it is far easier to do so in theory than it is in the complexity of daily practice where compromises are necessary to build and sustain fragile coalitions between parties who may be unfamiliar with liberal tenets.

## LEGACY OF RACIAL INEQUALITY

In societies shaped by centuries of racial nationalism, this is a particular challenge. If liberals in divided societies wish to grow in numbers, they have to convince racial nationalists that the open, opportunity society offers a better alternative. But liberals also have to accept that this



is a difficult transition involving significant adaptations to political culture on all sides.

In building this base of common values and policies, we have to confront many tough issues that cause deep controversy. One of the most complex is how South Africa should deal with the centuries-old legacy of racial inequality.

The African National Congress's answer to racial inequality is to drive race quotas in a policy known as representivity, which appears, at first glance, beguilingly fair. But it requires the reintroduction of covert racial classification, which is anathema to liberals, not least because it has become a fig-leaf for political cronyism and has nothing to do with empowering the dispossessed majority. It also entrenches the view that people who don't share the same racial background are fundamentally different, and that only like can represent like.

Ironically, in criticising these policies we have been accused of being anti-change and of protecting white privilege, when precisely the opposite is true.

Our alternative approach recognises the importance and value of diversity. But we seek to achieve this by extending opportunities, not manipulating outcomes by methods that quickly degenerate into political patronage. In practical terms, an example is the University of Cape Town, which pioneered methods of measuring the potential to succeed in capable students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and offered them access to university on this basis rather than the conventional matriculation route.

We have applied the same principle to the awarding of contracts in the City of Cape Town. Through extending opportunity, rather than manipulating outcomes, the percentage of contracts awarded to black entrepreneurs went up by ten per cent in one year over what the ANC achieved, despite the fact that we scrapped the punitive quota system. In my own party, we are running a series of programmes, based on this principle, to develop a diverse new generation of leadership.

An even greater challenge for liberals is tackling poverty and economic inequality that run along racial lines. Traditional liberal policy approaches to the promotion of economic growth and expanding opportunities have been shown to be the only way out of poverty in the long term. But they have little immediate impact when great numbers of people do not have the education or skills needed to use the emerging opportunities.

## **IMPATIENCE AND DEMAGOGUERY**

This is why few developing democracies adopt policies that achieve these dual objectives. Impatience leads people and their representatives to believe the demagoguery of leaders promising an escape from poverty through blaming and punishing the middle class, rather than retaining and harnessing their capital and skills for the benefit of society as a whole. The result is short-term populist solutions, most often implemented with disastrous results.

*“If liberals wish to be less misunderstood and more accepted, they must find ways of identifying with a range of groups who are easily alienated by what they perceive as the liberal culture of superiority”*

Many emerging democracies succumb to the fallacious belief that curtailing economic freedom and increasing restrictive state intervention is a quicker route to narrowing inequality. To limit the need for the wrong kind of state intervention, liberals must propose a credible role for the state in growing the economy and assisting people who cannot find a foothold in the economy on their own.

The question is how to do so in a way that maximises opportunity, self-reliance and personal responsibility rather than creating permanent dependence on a state that does not have the capacity to deliver. Some of the options that my party is investigating in its own policy research include:

- Distributing education vouchers to parents, who then have the freedom to choose a school for their children and the added capacity to pay. This incentivises schools to improve standards to attract these students.
- Bursaries for pupils who show promise after the foundation phase of schooling. This also creates an incentive for good performance.
- Opportunity vouchers to the poor and the unemployed to subsidise further training costs or start a business.
- Free basic services (water, sanitation, electricity and refuse removal), which we already provide in Cape Town.
- A basic income grant to protect people from extreme poverty.
- Tax breaks for companies that create new jobs, to encourage labour-intensive industry.
- Transferring, at greatly reduced or at no cost, state land and housing to people who then have a foothold on the first rung of a market economy.
- Prosperity zones where small employers are freed from labour market constraints.
- Cutting the red tape that hinders the start up of small business.
- Increasing and enhancing competition in the banking sector, to ensure that capital provision occurs at all income levels.

Liberal philosophies must become concrete and practical if they are to win support from ordinary people with real fears about their personal security, be these based on perceived threats to their identity, safety or their material circumstances. This is a great challenge, but one that liberal parties in both the developing and developed world must face. South African liberals today are playing a pioneering role in this quest.

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This article was edited from the speech given by Helen Zille, leader of South Africa's Democratic Alliance and mayor of Cape Town, at the Liberal International Congress in Belfast in May

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# LAST ORDERS?

Local pubs are disappearing and must be defended as a vital community hub, says Greg Mulholland

People may have noticed that I have spent quite a lot of time going on about pubs recently. No surprise there, would say some of my friends. There has, however, been a serious and critical point to my recent activities. Quite simply, the future of the British pub as a central part of our communities is at stake.

There has been a long association of Liberals with bearded, sandal-wearing, real ale drinking, pub-goers. Although I certainly confess to the last two parts of that description, I could not yet, at least, be associated with the other two. But I am very proud, as a Liberal, to be leading the fight in parliament to save the British pub.

The latest figure from the trade is that 27 pubs a week are closing up and down the country. Some are bulldozed; others are converted to residential or other uses. So why does it matter? Does it matter than increasing beer prices and the smoking ban are putting people off going to the pub? Does it matter than more and more people are buying cheap supermarket booze? Does it matter that more and more people are choosing to stay at home with a bottle of foreign wine rather than going to the pub for a pint of British beer?

Well it matters, of course, to those people who go to the pub and find it is no longer there. The trouble is that too many people who don't go to the pub don't seem to think it matters if the pub closes. It does.

It matters because of what the pub is, and this is something that we seem to have forgotten. The British 'public house' (a particularly English concept, but not exclusively so) is unique. Not a bar, though it serves drink, or a restaurant, though it may serve food. The tradition was that these were indeed a private house made public for the provision of beer and conversation to others in the community. The British 'inn' was a pub that also offered accommodation to weary travellers. And who could possibly say that they prefer to stay in the modern version, the budget travel motels that have popped up by every motorway junction and retail park. As a nation, and as a society, we are losing our soul.

## PUBS AND COMMUNITY

But the real concern to a Liberal has to be the loss to the community. In many communities, and I am talking about urban and suburban neighbourhoods as well as rural villages, the local pub is the only truly community focused building open to all.

The British pub is part of the fabric of British society. Now I am no Luddite. The internet is a great thing, SMS a great way of arranging what time to meet in the pub and I have even been persuaded to join this Facebook thing. But where do I socialise? In the pub, of course. If people retreat into their lounges to drink (and perhaps now to smoke) and socialise via cyberspace, when do they meet their neighbours? Traditionally at work, at church, or in the pub. Well not many people proportionately go to church any more. And more people work in smaller companies or at home. And pubs are closing. And if there is no pub in a community, there really aren't the same opportunities to meet, get to know each other and socialise. So a community that loses its pub is less of a community. And a society that loses its pubs is less of a society.

Pubs are the focal point for friends and neighbours to meet, for local sports teams, community projects and local events. If we, as liberals, believe in communities, we must understand and believe in pubs as important to – and a focal point for – those communities. So we must fight for them and we must do so now at a time when the government is standing by and doing nothing while pub after pub closes.

There is hope, however. I am very pleased to have been involved in a David v Goliath struggle of small, urban community against rich and unscrupulous property developers in the campaign to save The Summercross pub in Otley. Despite having only determination, nous and passion, the 'Save our Summercross' campaign managed to rally support and ensure that the planning applications to demolish the pub and build housing were thrown out (see the website at [www.sosotley.org.uk](http://www.sosotley.org.uk)). The fight to actually reopen the pub continues, but we won round one and the developers have been forced to go away and think again, tails between their legs. We hope that, now they know the strength of feeling, they will realise they made a mistake and will instead sell it to someone who wants to run the Summercross as a pub again, serving the local community the way it has for 140 years.

If you want to see what really can be done by a community faced with pub closure, which understands how important the pub is to its community, then go and visit the The Old Crown in Hesket Newmarket in Cumbria. It is the first and, so far as I am aware, the country's only community-owned pub. Bought by the community, for the community, and run as a co-op. They also have a small brewery at the back making excellent beer. Is that not a

*“In many communities, the local pub is the only truly community focused building open to all”*



living, brewing example of everything community focused, enterprise supporting liberals believe in?

## BINGE DRINKING

Of course, this is an interesting time to be leading on the need to support pubs, particularly so as a health spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats. At a time when everyone acknowledges that binge drinking and the alcohol-fuelled disorder it creates that blights our towns and cities is a real problem.

Yes, this makes it even more important to raise the issue of the demise of pubs. For as well as the effect on communities, the other part of this situation that the government just doesn't get is that pubs are actually part of the solution to binge drinking in this country. We have had ministers telling us that we need to move towards some kind of 'café culture' in this country to drink sensibly. There are none so blind as those who will not see. What we need is to return to more of a genuine pub culture, where people go to meet and socialise and drink responsibly. It is this culture that has been eroded, especially by greedy pub companies and breweries, keen to maximise profit by creating identikit 'bars', following whatever trend is currently in vogue, and invariably trying to create more 'vertical drinking' room (in other words, taking away the seats) and an emphasis on PPLs and PPSs (that's bottles of lager and alcopops to you or me) instead of locally-brewed, British real ale. We are now reaping what they sowed in their quest for ever bigger profits at the expense of real pubs.

Community pubs have always focused on socialising and on attracting people of all ages and classes, making them almost unique in our historically class-based society. As community pubs close in even greater numbers, people are deprived of places to meet, drink responsibly and build community spirit. Choice is decreased, with ever more people facing two options; of overcrowded and noisy bars clustered in city and town centres, or sitting at home with underpriced supermarket booze.

## SO WHAT HAVE I DONE?

I am proud to say, as a Liberal Democrat MP, I have taken a lead on this issue. Yes, because I love pubs, but also because I believe in communities. I have just called together all the main organisations for the beer and pub trade to see if they can come together and campaign together to save the British pub. It is time for everyone who cares about the pub to fight for its future.

So what needs to change? The first main enemy is the government, which, to quote one of my publicans in Leeds North West, has been "as helpful to the pub industry as



Margaret Thatcher was to the mining industry". The second is the big supermarkets, which continue to sell alcohol at less than responsible prices, with which the now highly regulated on-trade simply can't compete. There needs to be more of a level playing field.

But the power of the big pub companies also needs to be addressed. The 1989 Beer Orders were supposed to break up the complex monopoly of the big breweries and increase choice for the consumer. Before then, they owned around 20,000 pubs. But instead, what happened is that the breweries sold their pubs to stand-alone pub companies and the big PubCos now own about 20,000 pubs. Liberals don't like monopolies, simple or complex, and the power of

these huge companies, which have to put share value ahead of the future of any individual pub, however important to the local community it serves. If it isn't making enough money, or if the PubCo could make more by selling it for housing, then that is the logic. Plus in the case of this business model, 'the tie' is now making life difficult and in some cases impossible for licensees. So this legislation must now be looked at again. Tim Farron and I have been trying to get this back on the agenda. Finally, I am also pushing to change planning legislation, to truly enshrine the British pub in law, so that it becomes much harder to demolish or convert to housing and cannot be substituted for a 'bar', a café or a restaurant.

There is a lot to do to address the potential demise of the British pub. But I, for one, am not prepared to stand by without doing whatever I can to save it.

So let me ask the question again. Does it matter if pubs close? My view is that, as a society, we have a choice and, as a liberal, I am all for choice. But what people need to realise is that the choice of whether a pub is open or not is a choice about the kind of community we live in. Indeed the kind of society we want.

So I have been putting my money where my mouth is. I have been campaigning to support and save the British pub and hope you will too. And I have been ensuring that I go to the pub, at least one pub, every week and I hope all good liberals will respond to this clarion call. So if you want to stand up for your community, for a better Britain, do your duty to your community, go to the pub.

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Greg Mulholland is MP for Leeds North West, a Lib Dem spokesperson on health, and a campaigner on beer and pub issues

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# THE RIGHT STUFF

## When is it right for the Liberal Democrats to expel members for their views, asks Simon Titley

What are the ideological criteria for membership of the Liberal Democrats? The preamble to the party's constitution sets out a broad credo, but when do a member's beliefs move beyond the pale and justify expulsion?

Stoke Lib Dems think they know the answer. They recently suspended local councillor Gavin Webb for his libertarian views, which include, for example, a belief that drink driving should not be an offence unless a driver has actually killed or injured someone.

Without getting into the rights and wrongs of that particular case, the fundamental issue – the basic values of the party – is too important to be resolved by one local association. If the party is to declare right-wing libertarianism incompatible with its aims and purpose, it is a decision that should be applied consistently.

A political party needs a clear set of guiding principles otherwise it has no point. But the necessary criteria require fine judgement. They should be broad enough for the party to be electable, but not so broad as to be meaningless. They should be precise enough to supply definition and direction, but not so narrow that they turn the party into a small and impotent sect.

A common core of beliefs provides a party with more than a community of interest. Ideological coherence supplies an intellectual rigour to guard against superficiality. But this safeguard was drastically weakened in the 1990s. The 'end of ideology' assumed the basic political questions were settled and all there was left to argue about was efficient management. The Liberal Democrats made things even worse for themselves. They made ideological debate taboo, for fear the merger might unravel. Meanwhile, community politics had degenerated into an obsession with electoral tactics, based on a conviction that the party could advance solely by exploiting local grievances. So the Liberal Democrats have avoided creating a sharp image. They cannot make the hard choices necessary to create one because, for every strategic option, there will always be an MP or councillor who can claim, "It won't work on my patch".

Given the Liberal Democrats' fuzzy image, it is hardly surprising that all manner of people imagine the party supplies a blank canvass onto which they can project whatever beliefs they wish. Around 1999/2000 in particular, there was good reason to assume an ideological vacuum. The wheels had fallen off 'the project' and Charles Kennedy had become party leader, inaugurating a period of drift. The emergence at that time of a new right wing was due less to an outbreak of intellectual endeavour, more to the party seeming as though it were up for grabs.

The upshot was the publication of the *Orange Book* in 2004. Instead of establishing a new intellectual hegemony, however, it provoked a resurgence of social liberal thought,

notably last year's *Reinventing the State*. The *Orange Book* effectively ended the party's moratorium on ideological debate, something only the right could have done (on the 'Nixon to China' principle), though one suspects this outcome was not what the book's editors had in mind.

The party's right wing is not monolithic but comprises three competing strands; libertarians, authoritarians and economic liberals. They range from serious thinkers who are worth listening to, even though you may not agree with them, to boorish willy-wavers who revel in juvenile intrigue. But which would pass the Stoke test?

Since the late nineteenth century, the major ideological schism among those claiming to be 'liberal' has been between classical liberals and social liberals. The fundamental disagreement is over what constitutes freedom. Classical liberals emphasise negative rights, believing that the only real freedom is freedom from coercion. Social liberals support not only negative rights (freedom to) but also positive rights (freedom from). They believe that real freedom can exist only when citizens are healthy, educated and free from dire poverty.

The Liberal Democrats belong firmly to the social liberal tradition. If in doubt, consult the preamble to the party's constitution, which includes an unambiguous statement of positive rights ("no-one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity") and an explicit acknowledgement of an active role for the state in enabling citizens to attain freedom. To belong, it is not enough simply to lay claim to the word 'liberal'. A common purpose is more than a label; it is a shared sense of what individuals and societies should live for and die for. Which of the three ideological strands on the Liberal Democrat right share the values expressed in the preamble?

Right-wing libertarians are clearly incompatible. They condemn any attempt to address social injustice through political means as 'coercion'. They believe people may act on society only through individual acts of buying or selling. They believe the only threat to freedom comes from the state. They measure freedom in terms of isolation from other people.

The curious thing about libertarians is that, like imaginary characters in a computer game, they are abundant in cyberspace yet scarcely exist in real life. They are predominantly young single men who have withdrawn from society and lock themselves away in their rooms with their computers. The political blogosphere is plagued with libertarian 'trolls' posting comments at all hours, with an intensity possible only for Billy no-mates who spend most of their time online. The anti-social values of libertarianism clearly appeal to those with no social or family life.

Was the Stoke decision correct? Up to a point. Libertarians do not belong in the Liberal Democrats but are



not worth the trouble of expelling. Despite all the noise they make in cyberspace, there are few of them in the party and none exercise any serious influence. Better that they recognise the logic of their position and leave voluntarily. Better still, they should switch off their computers now and again, get out more often and learn something about (non-virtual) society.

As for the second category of right-wingers, authoritarianism is the antithesis of liberalism. The variety on offer here is not a coherent ideology but a series of temperamental spasms on the theme of ‘toughness for the sake of toughness’, like a political equivalent of Tourette’s syndrome. No wonder it has never caught on in the party.

This grouping would probably not exist were it not for Gavin Grant, one-time Svengali to Mark Oaten. Back in the 1980s, he nicknamed his clique the ‘Phalange’ and his politics have not moved leftwards since. Most people who are out of sorts with their party would seek a more congenial political home but Grant seems to think the party is out of sorts with him. The Oaten camp’s repeated demands for a ‘Clause 4 Moment’ and the oxymoron of ‘tough liberalism’ should be understood in this context.

Quite apart from any moral or philosophical objections, authoritarianism makes no strategic sense, since it would repel the party’s core support while appealing most strongly to the older, uneducated white working class, the demographic group least likely to vote Lib Dem. And

herein lies a clue. The most congenial home for Grant’s politics would be the right-wing of the Labour Party, specifically the sort of labourism represented by David Blunkett and John Reid, characterised by a visceral disgust for ‘namby pamby’ and ‘airy-fairy’ liberals. But how would the authoritarians fare in the Stoke test?

It is not worth the bother because this faction is essentially a one-man band.

What of the third strand, the economic liberals? As David Howarth usefully points out in *Reinventing the State*, differences have been exaggerated because of a confusion between ends and means. Most economic liberals within the party actually tend to the social liberal rather than the classical liberal tradition because they share the goal of social justice. This implies redistribution, something a true classical liberal would not accept. The difference is that economic liberals express a preference for market mechanisms as a means of achieving social justice. In so doing, they have sometimes provided a helpful corrective to the social democratic reflexes bequeathed to the party by David Steel.

Whether economic liberals belong in the party is not the issue. The problem is an attachment to outmoded fads. For nearly thirty years, British politics has been governed by the ‘Thatcher settlement’. Most of the basic policies implemented by the Tories in the 1980s were accepted by New Labour. Before Thatcherism, there was Butskellism, in which most of the Attlee government’s settlement was accepted by subsequent Tory administrations. That consensus also lasted about thirty years.

Both doctrines were the product of prevailing social and economic conditions. Butskellism arose from the hardships of depression and war, while Thatcherism arose from changing material aspirations. There is a risk here of

historical determinism. Neither Butskellism nor Thatcherism was inevitable but both successfully captured the *Zeitgeist*. But despite their dominance, neither consensus has ever represented a definitive political wisdom or an eternal verity.

Butskellism’s symbolic end was 1979’s winter of discontent. Thatcherism is likewise reaching the end of the road, as a rampant financial sector creates its own winter of discontent. The ‘credit crunch’ and ensuing recession have left people feeling angry and increasingly insecure. For the first time in living memory, a younger generation faces the prospect of a lower standard of living than that enjoyed by its parents.

Given that British politics is about to undergo a sea change, it would be a tragedy if the Liberal Democrat right were to wed the party to a dying ideology. Advocating a blind faith in markets was never a smart idea – markets should be seen as a tool, not an object of religious devotion – but it would be a disastrous course of action now, because it prevents the party communicating righteous anger about the way people’s dreams are being turned to ashes. When even Vince Cable is calling for tighter regulation, the game’s up.

Clinging on to the Thatcher settlement resembles the mistake made by the Liberal-SDP Alliance in the 1980s, when it tried to resuscitate Butskellism. Back then, David Steel and the Gang of Four were doing the political

equivalent of asking us to dance to their Alma Cogan records. Now, it would seem that Jeremy Browne and his ilk are demanding we groove to Spandau Ballet.

Thatcherism is over. The Liberal Democrats must decide whether they want to influence what replaces it. Nothing is certain about what will come next. As the recession deepens,

politics might coalesce around right-wing populism; a diet of protectionism, anti-Europeanism and persecution of minorities. Or concerns about social breakdown might generate a consensus around a compulsory communitarianism, economically leftist but highly conservative on social issues.

Or it could be something else entirely. It could be us. In *Liberator 325*, David Boyle sketched out what this new vision might be. It would mean placing human values at the centre of our politics and opposing giantism in both the state and private sectors. This is a distinctive vision that only the Liberal Democrats can offer. It could command widespread support, and would act as an antidote to the alienation so many people now feel.

We are at a pivotal moment in our politics that comes along barely once in a generation. The danger is that the Liberal Democrats miss the bus because right-wing ideologues want to turn the clock back twenty years, while many other members continue to insist that the answer to every problem is to deliver more leaflets. The party should focus on addressing that danger rather than follow Stoke in expelling misfits. If the party were to establish a clearer identity, any misfits would be less likely to join it in the first place.

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Simon Titley is a member of the *Liberator* Collective

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# LET'S PUT OUT THE MAYORAL FIRE

Elected mayors are bad for democracy, bad for participation, good only for exhibitionists and celebrities. It's time for Liberal Democrats to oppose the emerging consensus that favours them, says Matthew Huntbach

The 2008 election for the mayor of London is likely to be taken by many as a vindication of the directly elected mayor system. There was undoubtedly an excitement about the election, which generated a turnout that was high for local government.

But the election also demonstrates many of the dangers of the system, and much of the passion aroused came from the flawed nature of the leading candidates.

A big issue is that most people have only a vague idea of what the post is for. Local government is always plagued by the fact that many ordinary people seem to assume it has unlimited executive power, and then get angry with it because it does not seem to be using that power.

As we know, it has fairly limited power, and that is even more so with the London mayor. It is largely a technical role concerned with running London's transport system, a less hands-on role overseeing London's police, a little general planning and co-ordination, and a public relations 'voice for London'. The question of whether these separate roles form a coherent whole, or whether they would be best separated out, needs to be asked.

The mayoral election did not seem a good way of sorting out who was the best person to perform these roles. The sort of transport or policing technician who is perhaps ideal for those aspects of the role (and whom the Liberal Democrats do seem to have tried to run as candidates) seems unlikely to be able to break through in a competition that revolves around personality.

I have already seen suggestions that, next time round, the Liberal Democrats should run some more entertaining person as candidate. We seem to have forgotten that we ran Brian Paddick precisely because he was a minor celebrity, whom people would remember as "that gay copper from Brixton who went easy on cannabis".

## GIMMICK IMAGE

It is clear that climbing through the ranks of police, or the transport industry, or London local government, or business, is not going to push one into the mayoralty. What is required is a celebrity gimmick image.

The strange thing is that Ken Livingstone himself most likely would never have made it as mayor of London had he not already made it to fame through the standard local government system as leader of the former Greater London Council. What chance would an obscure London councillor with a nasal accent have of making it to mayor of London if he were starting out today?

The successful candidate reminds us just what an advantage it is to be a former public schoolboy if one wants to impress in public life in Britain today.

Recent research has shown that public media commentary is more than ever dominated by the products of exclusive private education, passing through

Oxford and Cambridge. These people, in discerning what they suppose to be 'good leadership' qualities, inevitably seem to gravitate to 'people like us'. And once they have labelled one of their own as 'the best leadership candidate', a momentum builds and it's very difficult for anyone else to get a breakthrough.

The London election was unusual among mayoral contests in attracting national media attention. No such attention has been given to mayoral contests in other authorities, resulting in many cases in the person who became mayor being the person who most likely would have become leader of the council under the old system.

Nevertheless, the power of the press in influencing the result must be an issue of concern, perhaps more so in other authorities where there is just one local paper, than in London where the Evening Standard's championing of Boris Johnson had some balance from some of the national press.

*"What if if a charismatic and wealthy chancer were to come along in an election year when the main parties had less personable candidates?"*

In fact, while some of the Standard's coverage was distorted, much of it was a genuine exposition of the way in which the placing of powers into a single pair of hands does open up the scope for cronyism and poor judgment. It is unfortunate that the conclusion drawn was to elect someone else rather than to scrap the system.

The case for putting the powers of the mayor of London, or of any other local authority, into the hands of one person rather than under the ultimate control of a representative assembly of councillors has simply not been made.

The only case for it seems to be that catch-all one that an all powerful mayor is 'modern' and hence must be good. It fits in with the current obsession with strong personality and celebrity, which seems to be such a dominant feature in our culture. Anyone who has pushed themselves forward by virtue of a strong personality, a loud voice, and a gimmicky way of personal presentation is regarded as a good thing.

Quiet expertise, decision making by consensus and rational consideration is regarded as a bad thing, old fashioned and fuddy-duddy. The case for executive mayors has often been made by bad-mouthing councillors as old, grey, anonymous people, most of all bad because they are 'politicians' who, by definition, are bad people.

## AGAINST PARTICIPATIVE DEMOCRACY

So the case for mayors is to a large extent the case against participative democracy, and the sort of politics where ordinary people, who yes, may be a bit 'grey', are actively involved. Rather, it is to demote the role of ordinary people to a passive choice between celebrities. This reflects the way more generally in society in which we are encouraged to become passive consumers rather than active participants.

Saying this does not mean I disregard the case for good leadership. But British local government shows us many cases of good strong leaders emerging through the council system (and many not so good as well). So many of our best local government leaders have come through by demonstrating their ability in interaction with their peers in the council chamber and committee room. To lose this career progression and replace it by one whose main requirement is the ability to impress a direct electorate will not enhance local government.

A good leader should not be afraid of the need to argue his or her case to get majority support from a representative committee. Taking away this requirement, as the executive mayor system does, is a recipe for bad, and yes, weak leadership, leadership that is afraid to put forward its case and ask for support. In fact, many of the cases where local government has failed in Britain have been where the first-past-the-post electoral system has delivered almost one-party local states and where over-powerful party leaders have been given an easy ride in pushing through dubious policies.

The London congestion charge has been put forward as a policy that demonstrates the case for an executive mayor. I find the argument that this policy would not have got through a representative committee unconvincing. The inadequate checks on grant proposals (handled by an appointed crony), and on planning decisions (made at Livingstone's personal whim) demonstrate cases where more shared decision making would have been better.

For all his faults, Ken Livingstone has been skilled enough not to bring the mayor system into such disrepute

that there was a mass reaction against it, and I suspect Boris Johnson will do the same. The real danger remains the potential for harm if it were to fall into the hands of someone who really was more dangerous.

I suspect this could happen in London if a charismatic and wealthy chancer were to come along in an election year when the main parties had less personable candidates than in 2008.

But while the national media attention in London might hold the danger at bay, this is less likely to be the case in another authority. It is not beyond possibility that, at some time soon, a borough will elect a BNP executive mayor, and an executive mayor in a London borough or a unitary authority has far more power over the lives of people in that authority than the mayor of London has over Londoners.

The clamour for directly elected executive mayors has come from a variety of sources: leading politicians in all political parties, academics who study local government, media commentators. So united has been the consensus amongst the great and good that they are the obvious way to invigorate local government, that the case for the idea is often taken for granted, and the case against rarely heard.

To bring things back to the London election, mayors are rather like bendy buses were a few years ago: different, what they have in some other countries, and an easy thing to propose as an instant fix which makes you look clever when you advocate it.

So, are those of us who oppose them really like the champions of the Routemaster: advocating out of nostalgia something which worked in the past but is unsuited to the modern world?

The election of a BNP mayor, or some other major mayoral-related scandal, may be our equivalent of a bendy bus catching fire.

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Matthew Huntbach is a former Liberal Democrat councillor in Lewisham, which has an elected mayor

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# MISERY ON THE MERSEY

Liverpool has been the Liberal Democrats' flagship council, but it nearly sank in May. Kiron Reid explains why

Liverpool was our flagship council for a decade. This year the Liberal Democrats lost five seats, nearly losing overall control.

The party lost ground in Liverpool for four reasons. It appeared out of touch with what needed doing in the city, being concerned mainly with town hall matters. It did not accept it was making mistakes that needed correcting. It had been in power for ten years and the public wanted change. Finally, people believed Labour's mantra that everything good in the city was down to the government and everything bad was the fault of the council, ignoring huge improvements facilitated by the council rather than Labour MPs, in all areas of the city.

Most telling was the council being pilloried by the press and Labour for exactly the things for which we had once destroyed Labour, but the group and cabinet seemed unable to admit anything needed changing.

Major blunders, financial mismanagement, the worst council in the country (awarded one star by the Audit Commission), splits, deselections and defections, being out of touch.

## SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY OF DEFEAT

Most of this was not true, but the perception nearly became a self-fulfilling prophecy of defeat. Disaster was only averted by a very good election campaign with lots of support from the national party and high quality literature, though this couldn't turn the tide against a Labour onslaught with huge national and regional resources and a backlash if our councillors had been lazy.

The Lib Dems were never likely to lose Liverpool this year but probably will at the elections in 2010 without change in the interim. In fact, they kept a majority with the last-minute recruitment of a former Labour councillor, Nadia Stewart, a perfectly pleasant woman who was victimised by Labour for being friendly to Lib Dems and working with her Lib Dem ward colleague on local issues. However, she is a socialist not a liberal, and the council position is very precarious unless the Lib Dems stick together.

I retired as a councillor in May 2007, when my Anfield seat was successfully held. At the party spring conference in Liverpool, I spent most of my time talking to representatives from around the country about the Liverpool situation, what was going wrong, and giving straight answers.

The council was resting on its laurels – lauding its achievements in turning the city round, but failing to

acknowledge that only half of the big projects and schemes were going right. The Lib Dem group appeared to believe that any criticism was made up by the Labour Party or the media; half of it was untrue, but half of it was fair.

Had the administration accepted that and made plain it would correct the problems, the public might have had more confidence. The lack of interaction outside Liverpool meant many councillors continued believing Liverpool was the best at what it was doing when best practice had moved on, leaving us behind. The environment was the weakest area, but there were plenty of other examples too; only after Warren Bradley became leader was anyone from ALDC asked to come and speak to the group.

During my time as a councillor, far too few of my colleagues ever batted for their side, putting the case for the administration or council policy.

Councils are about local politics, but the lack of wider political interest and the parochial nature of Liverpool politics was a disappointment to me as someone who got into politics because I was interested in big political issues.

Sometimes this led to strategic mistakes. When Condoleeza Rice was invited to the north-west by Jack Straw, she stayed in Liverpool. Liverpool Lib Dems should have led the opposition to this visit. Bradley declined to meet Rice and a letter of protest was delivered on his behalf. However, some senior Lib Dems, including Flo Clucas, did meet Rice. They made their opposition to the Iraq War clear but enabled Straw to present the visit as an all-party visit – a PR and political blunder for us. I turned down my invitation and made clear I would join the crowds protesting outside instead. Most Lib Dems stayed away but only six of a group of about 60 supported the actual protest. The chance to have political leadership in a city where we were supposed to be the political leaders was lost.

A fanatical band of sickeningly New Labour councillors came along invigorating Labour's methods – more work and more dirty elections – often to the dismay of decent older Labour figures or those who wanted to keep their local power bases for themselves.

Labour also set about changing its image, acknowledging its mistakes of the past locally. It has never looked ready to form an administration, having neither sufficient talent nor the programme. But elections began to swing against the administration, and key contests in 2007 showed this.

The first was a by-election in Speke, a council estate on the southern edge of the city, which has had substantial investment in the last ten years. The trends in Labour times, when working class areas had streets full of litter,



many empty houses and no recycling, have been largely reversed.

Despite this, the people of Speke complained that nothing was ever done and kicked us out. Labour's false mantra of "LDs only invest in the city centre" still got its vote out. Speke was followed by losses in May 2007, including a former safe ward to a Green candidate who was a former Lib Dem.

A large factor in the losses was the continued fall out from former leader Mike Storey's resignation after his dispute with former chief executive Sir David Henshaw.

Their partnership was the strongest in local government until Mike plotted to force him out. There was always a time when Henshaw would have to go; he was a hard man who was not the right administrative head for calmer times – but this was not the way to do it.

Removing a chief executive is expensive and leaders obviously can't move against them publicly. But in this kind of plot, you can't afford to fail. Henshaw had cut the tax burden in the city and attracted investment; Mike personally set the aim of restoring Liverpool to a premier European City; the bid for European Capital of Culture 2008 was entirely his idea. Mike accelerated the regeneration of Liverpool. We underestimated the impact of this scandal; the appearance of infighting rather than getting on with the job led to voter disillusionment.

In 2007, Bradley had his own crisis. The Matthew Street festival is one of the biggest free pop music festivals in Europe and grew out of Liverpool's Beatles festival. This was a private event but had grown and gained increasing council support.

Weeks before the 2007 festival, the Culture Company cancelled the free council-supported outdoor stages on health and safety grounds due to the extent of the building work in the city centre. Heads should have rolled straight away but watertight contracts meant nothing could happen. A by-election in Warbreck ward soon after was a foregone conclusion. This had been a safe Lib Dem ward but selecting the candidate who had lost it in May was the wrong choice. Matthew Street was raised on nearly every doorstep but when Labour won the seat the Lib Dem group ignored the obvious and no work was done to find out in detail why our voters had deserted us, and how to turn it around.

## MALCONTENTENTS

The claim of infighting was untrue – there were a few malcontents but generally the group stuck together, though more should have backed the leader. The press were able to claim splits because of selections.

Beatrice Fraenkel was deselected and replaced by hardworking Paula Keaveney. Beatrice was very good on committees and quangos but did nothing to help the group and has now defected to Labour, and won and holds a safe seat. Just before this May's elections, Kevin Firth was de-selected in Old Swan ward. He had criticised Bradley and was replaced by an ally of his. I thought his criticism was misplaced but the appearance is of a critic deselected by the leader's supporters. Another longstanding councillor lost re-selection after personality clashes in the West Derby

constituency and defected to Steve Radford's Liberal party. This allowed Labour and the local media to present the party as split. Education executive member Paul Clein resigned in protest at Firth's deselection. At that point, it certainly looked like an administration in free fall and it was only a strong election campaign that averted disaster. Resigning weeks before the elections, he must have known the damage this would do.

Labour ran the most appalling Nimby campaigns against students, the homeless, and any kind of outsider – the New Labour councillors were the worst. The public simply complained that we were Capital of Culture but major projects were behind schedule or failing and were only in the city centre, ignoring evidence to the contrary. More big projects were successful than not, and are there for all to see.

Finances were a more significant problem. Although the government gave Liverpool an unfairly low settlement and the Audit Commission increased the targets for council reserves, the Council should have increased efficiencies further and raised council tax more. Liverpool had the lowest council tax increase in England over ten years. In retrospect, we should have put the council tax up a little more over the previous few years to improve the finances. The money was spent doing things and was largely wisely spent; Liverpool has assets to show for its borrowing and investment.

*"Where there were failures, there was no dialogue with electors over putting it right"*

Where there were failures, there was no dialogue with electors over putting it right. Bradley showed a refreshing approach to dealing with business but in political literature the Lib Dems never admitted making mistakes. The flack for the council was partly bad luck, partly a reaction to ten years in power and Labour's negative

attacks; but the failings in our group and campaign lent support to the "It's time for a change" message of our opponents.

Paradoxically, Labour is gaining ground in Liverpool just as the investments made by the Lib Dem administration are starting to pay off and will bring long-term financial benefits. Would the opposition actually be able to run the city? It might have been best had they taken control this year because in two years they would have messed things up and been turfed out again.

Unless the party re-engages with the public, corrects mistakes and has a new vision for the city, it will lose control to Labour in two years' time. This must include a genuine dialogue rather than just political campaigning. The Lib Dems have to put Liverpool first, not party politics. There have been several years of political instability – that is unsettling for the good officers trying to do their jobs and improve the city. Good leadership and an end to political infighting are needed to help that process. Bradley was re-elected leader in May and has promised to increase teamwork and learn from mistakes; this is clearly the way forward.

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Kiron Reid is a member of the Liberator collective and was a Liverpool Liberal Democrat councillor 1998-2007

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# WELSH RARE BITS

Just two Welsh councils now lack Liberal Democrat members since the party made its best showing in 90 years last month, but its performance remains patchy, says Russell Deacon

As I write, it was uncertain who was in control of most Welsh local authorities because no one party had gained a majority of the seats. This is unusual in Wales, as traditionally Labour is firmly in control of most of Wales's 22 authorities. What is also unusual is that the Welsh Liberal Democrats could now end up in the council cabinets of up to a dozen. This would give the party's councillors more local government power than since David Lloyd George led the party.

Before the 1 May elections, Welsh Liberal Democrat fortunes across most of Wales had been almost continually on the rise. The party was leading the coalition arrangements in Bridgend, Cardiff, Swansea and Wrexham, and had been in the council cabinets in Conwy, Ceredigion and Powys. The 2007 Welsh Assembly elections, however, saw the wheels come off the Welsh Liberal Democrat bandwagon when the party failed to gain more than six assembly seats for the second time (Liberator 318). There was therefore some trepidation about the 2008 council elections. Would the party stall once more, leaving Plaid Cymru and the Conservatives to gain from Labour electoral woes?

By the end of 2 May, the political map of Welsh local government looked very similar to Scotland's after the introduction of STV. Only four out of 22 councils are controlled by just one party. There were 11 before the elections.

This represents a departure for Welsh politics. Never before have so many Welsh local authorities both been NOC and had so many different potential coalitions to run them. Traditionally, Labour has controlled the majority of Welsh councils, with the Independents controlling five or six more, and the Conservatives and Plaid Cymru controlling a few councils apiece. The Welsh Liberal Democrats have never controlled a council outright since their establishment in 1966.

If there was one clear winner, it would appear to be the Conservatives. In 1995, the party was virtually wiped out electorally at a local government level in Wales. It held just 3% of the seats and was reduced to a rump. It now has 14% of Welsh councillors. Not only have the Tories consolidated their hold on Monmouthshire County Council, where they hold 65% of the seats, but they have gained control of the Vale of Glamorgan for the first time since it was established in 1994.

It was the Tory advances on other authorities, however, that were the most impressive. On Powys, until recently a Liberal Democrat bastion, the Tories went from no seats to nine. On both Cardiff and Newport councils, they gained five seats apiece to put them on 17, making them the second largest group on both. In Denbighshire, they gained 12 seats and in Conwy they gained seven to make them the largest party on both authorities. The Conservatives are now back in the Welsh local government game in a way they haven't been since the mid 1980s.

Because Plaid Cymru lost control of Gwynedd County Council, mainly due to a party opposed to local school closures called Llais Gwynedd taking 12 of Plaid's seats, it got a bad press on election night. Plaid Cymru also lost some prominent figures, including its president Dafydd Iwan. Overall, however, it was a good night for the party, with a net gain of 32 councillors, reinforcing its position as the second party of Welsh local government behind Labour. Plaid Cymru is now the largest political group in Ceredigion, Gwynedd and Carmarthenshire, and equal first with Labour (32 seats each) on Caerphilly. It is the second party in Conwy, Denbighshire, Neath Port Talbot, Pembrokeshire and Rhondda Cynon Taff.

Table 1: Welsh councils controlled in 2008 compared to 2004

Party	Councils	Change
Welsh Liberal Democrats	0	NC
Conservatives	2	+1
Labour	2	-6
Plaid Cymru	0	-1
Independent	4	+1
NOC	14	+5

Table 2: Number of councillors elected in 2008 compared to 2004

Party	Councillors	Change	Share of Seats
Welsh Liberal Democrats	162	+20	12.8%
Conservatives	174	+62	13.8%
Labour	341	-134	27.0%
Plaid Cymru	206	+32	16.3%
Independent Non aligned	368	+19	29.1%
Others	5	-7	0.4%
Vacant	8	+8	0.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1264</b>		

The Independents in their many guises also had a good night, controlling three authorities outright, more than any of the political parties, and making inroads against Labour in south Wales. They now comprise the largest group of councillors in Wales, above Labour for the first time.

For the Welsh Liberal Democrats, these were the best council elections for some 90 years. There are now Liberal Democrats on a record 20 of the 22 councils. The party is missing only from Caerphilly and Vale of Glamorgan. There are, importantly, Liberal Democrat groups of four or more councillors on 14 of these. In North Wales, the party made slight gains or losses. In Wrexham, where it led the authority before the elections, it lost two seats but was comforted by Labour losing nine seats, making the Lib Dems the largest political party on the authority. Among the biggest surprises of the night was the Lib Dems gaining six seats in Merthyr Tydfil, a place where the party had not held a council seat since 1900.

In Powys, 32 of the 73 single member wards saw councillors returned unopposed. The Liberal Democrats represented five of this number, the Conservatives one. The rest were Independents who, as before, control the county council. The Liberal Democrats, in what is their Welsh parliamentary stronghold (the seats of Roger Williams and Lembit Öpik are here), remained stuck on 15 seats, with some gains and some unfortunate losses.

## TARGETTING ÖPIK

The Powys Lib Dem group leader James Gibson-Watt lost his Hay-on-Wye seat to the Conservatives. Gibson-Watt had been the backbone of Liberal and then Liberal Democrat politics for almost three decades in Brecon and Radnor. His loss, together with of that another senior group member, David Peter, removed the head of the county's political group.

At the same time, the Conservatives, without a seat in the county before, gained nine seats. Six are in Lembit Öpik's Montgomeryshire constituency, which is being targeted with some vigour by the Conservatives at the next Westminster elections. The other Mid-Wales Liberal Democrat seat, Mark Williams's Ceredigion, saw the party gain one seat, going up to ten. Importantly for Williams, however, Plaid Cymru failed in its ambition to gain control of the county (it gained three seats and now has 19, needing three more to gain outright control). In addition, Williams's Plaid Cymru opponent at the next general election, Penri James, was beaten by the Liberal Democrat (and well known Europhile) Paul Hinge.

In the large urban authorities where the Liberal Democrats led the councils before the elections, there were mixed results. In Cardiff, the party, with 35 seats, remained three short of an overall majority, in an election which saw Labour almost reduced to the fourth party in a council it controlled with a large majority until 2004. Swansea saw three Lib Dem gains, taking the party to 23 seats, but only two Labour losses (30 seats). This puts the council once again under a Lib Dem-led coalition. The same is the likely result in Wrexham. In Bridgend, Labour gained five seats. Two of these gains were from Liberal Democrats, giving Labour 27 seats, which tied it with all the other parties on 27 each. Labour will probably take control with the Lib Dems losing out.

## PUB QUIZ QUESTION

In the south Wales parliamentary seats, the party consolidated its control in Cardiff Central, where it took all of the 20 council seats, making this the only constituency in Wales to be controlled by one party at council, assembly and parliamentary level. This is perhaps the only such Liberal Democrat seat in the United Kingdom (a pub quiz question if ever there was one).

The party also did well in Swansea West, taking the majority of wards. This makes it a highly probable win at the next Westminster election. Importantly here, the Conservatives did not make any gains, remaining on four seats, so the contest remains in the public's eyes one of Lib Dem versus Labour. In Newport, technically the party remained on six seats; the results, however, masked two elections suspended due to the deaths of candidates. One of these previously had three Liberal Democrat councillors. The ward is also the seat of Ed Townsend, the PPC who came within 875 votes of winning the Newport East assembly seat in 2007. Thus the final tally of election results from this council will provide an indication of Townsend's chances of winning at the next general election.

On the positive side, the Liberal Democrats are now doing better than they have done in Wales since the 1920s. They are the driving force on a number of large metropolitan authorities and are a recognisable force on more than half of Welsh councils. It's a positive note upon which the Welsh leader Michael German can step down.

On the negative side, they failed to outperform the other two opposition parties and therefore remain the smallest of the four main political parties on Welsh councils. On most Welsh authorities, their successes were marginal. They still control no Welsh council outright. There also remain some sizeable Welsh authorities where the party failed to gain from Labour woes and which remain virtual black holes in terms of the party's electoral penetration.

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Dr Russell Deacon is a reader in Welsh governance and politics at the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff

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# LONDON CALLING

A shadow mayor soon, or a token campaign in 2012? Either would be better than what just happened, says Mark Smulian

Who wants to be shadow mayor? Liberal Democrat candidate selections are normally leisurely, but can the party afford to take its time over the next London mayoral election?

Yes and no. This strange election, fought across the whole of London and with a premium on a candidate being well-known before they start, is very different from a conventional one.

A normal campaign – bung out the leaflets, bang on the doors, drag people out to vote – is impossible across a city where, since the present 32 boroughs were formed in 1964, the party has been represented fleetingly or never in six of them and has limited capacity in several others.

Since the Lib Dems cannot sustain a conventional ‘ground war’, the mayoral campaign forces the party into an ‘air war’ conducted through the media.

This raises two problems: the ability to get heard above the Tory and Labour campaigns, and the need to have something worth saying. A London-wide campaign (or indeed one across any other conurbation where the government to visit mayors upon them) needs simple readily-grasped messages.

Brian Paddick’s campaign, like Simon Hughes’s in 2004, had some worthwhile things to say but it never gelled into a consistent narrative or gave much impression of what ‘Paddick’s London’ would be like to live in. Fighting such a campaign properly would require considerable human and financial resources, and there is a perfectly respectable argument for saying that the party must pick its battles, and therefore a full-scale campaign for the London mayoralty is not sensible and a token campaign would suffice.

There is also a perfectly respectable argument for saying that this election is for an important post that is conducted on a (rather limited) system of proportional representation, which the party claims to support, and therefore it should be given a decent shot by selecting a candidate two or more years out and building him or her up as shadow mayor.

Either of these approaches would be preferable to falling again between these two stools, as happened in this campaign, with a late selection and even later attempts to motivate people to fight the unfightable.

Meanwhile, the election provided yet further illustration of how Lib Dem support in London is stuck.

Brian Paddick secured 9.8%, against 14.91% gained by Hughes’s oddly lacklustre campaign. The party list for the largely pointless assembly secured 11.41%, against 18.09% last time.

As the victim of the mother of two party squeezes, these votes were unsurprising. But taken with the 2006 borough council results, they suggest there are limits to traditional community politics campaigns and targeting.

According to the Greater London Authority statistical digest, in 1978 the Liberal Party had 30 councillors in London. Great leaps forward saw that total rise to 124 in 1982 and 249 in 1986.

In the subsequent 20 years, it has crept up to 309, and since 1994 the party’s share of the total London borough vote has been static at around 20%, according to the digest.

There’s consistency for you, but look at the individual boroughs and a wildly inconsistent picture is revealed.

The only boroughs to have sustained for 20 years council groups counted in double figures are the ‘golden triangle’ (Richmond, Sutton, Kingston), Southwark and, slightly surprisingly, Waltham Forest.

Elsewhere, with the partial exception of Lambeth, every big advance has so far been followed by a disaster (Tower Hamlets in 1986 and 1994, Hackney in 1998 and 2002, Islington in 2002 and 2006, Bromley in 1998 and 2006, Harrow in 1994 and 1998).

There is a pattern there. With the exception of Islington, which held onto power by a hair’s breadth in 2006, Lib Dems have been ejected after briefly holding or sharing power.

Did the party each time do something so appalling that voters chucked it out? It seems unlikely. Other parties can commit all manner of outrages and survive.

It’s the old problem. The Lib Dems rely on super-activists who devote their every waking hour to campaigning. Once they win and have to run a council, there is no-one left to support them because the second, third and fourth tiers of members were never recruited and brought into activities.

Even if they had been, the party has prospered on localist grievances rather than on a political message that attracts long-term support. Since the Lib Dems can hardly exploit grievances against themselves when in power, the party struggles to know what to say.

To be fair, the construction of a Lib Dem ‘narrative’ recognisable to the public cannot be done only in one area. But the results in 2006 and 2008 suggest a ceiling has been reached in London.

If this parliament goes its full term, the next general election will coincide with the 2010 London borough elections. Try making a traditional local campaign heard above that.

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Mark Smulian is a member of the Liberator collective

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# BROWN STUDY

An egalitarian and libertarian lurks within Gordon Brown, but the Blairite extremists will split Labour rather than allow that to emerge, says the prime minister's biographer Francis Beckett

There were a few glorious weeks in the summer of 2007 when I thought Gordon Brown might be about to fulfil what people had told me were my ludicrously unrealistic hopes of him.

For I'm in no doubt that there really is a radical somewhere deep inside Gordon Brown. There really is a man who went into politics to help make a better and fairer society, an egalitarian and a libertarian. This man is as real as the charming, witty conversationalist whom I met in 11 Downing Street just before he made the transition from chancellor to prime minister; as real as the quick-witted and lethal debater and public speaker whom the world knew before New Labour was born.

After Blair became leader, Brown had either to break with Blair, or imprison the libertarian radical in some dark part of his soul until Blair was out of the way.

When I saw him last year, Blair was still refusing to give him a date for his departure. Wasn't that hard to deal with, I asked? "It's where we are," said Brown grimly, and I could sense the inner struggle that had been going on for 13 years.

But at long last the waiting was over. Quickly, a nation that had grown sick of Blair's travelling salesman's smile and his flashy purple Catholicism, seemed to take to its heart this solemn Scot with his dark suits, understated Presbyterian morality and stately manners.

He talked of change. He cancelled the Manchester casino, so integral a part of the Blairite vision for Britain. Perhaps the moment he peaked was when he visited George Bush. We had never been so pleased to see our prime minister in a dark suit, white shirt and tie as when he walked with the president, polite and smiling as you should with an important foreign statesman, but his own man. We no longer had a prime minister who shamed us with his grovelling familiarity.

Brown had to break with the Blairite legacy, both because his own instincts told him to, and because the nation wanted no more of it. And at first, as I predicted in my biography published the day he became prime minister, he looked as though he was going to break with it.

So what has changed his mind? Why do we now see a prime minister who seems to lack the courage to be his own man? Why do we now hear of his inner circle telling the world that there is nothing for them to do but follow the Blairite agenda?

Why do we now hear only of a prime minister who wants to attack civil liberties further by allowing the authorities to keep someone in prison for 90 days? A prime minister who is so attached to the Blairite project of stripping democracy out of our education and health systems that he has even

made it easier for churches and businesses to control the new academies?

The moment he changed was the moment he cancelled the general election, which, it had been widely rumoured, he was about to call. But the mistake was not, as most commentators imagine, that of not holding the election. The mistake was to give any serious thought to the idea of holding an election.

An election would have been the sort of cheap, meretricious stunt we expected of Tony Blair. Brown – apart from anything else, a man with a PhD for a thesis on the Scottish Labour Party in the 1920s – knows there would have been not the smallest constitutional justification for it. It would have been no more than a piece of dishonest opportunism. The Brown we thought we had come to know would have scotched all talk of it, the moment it started.

Why did that event change the man? Because it made him, suddenly, look weak. And sitting near him, like vultures, are the glowering remains of the Blairites – Alan Milburn, Charles Clarke, perhaps Jack Straw. They waited with ill-disguised impatience for Brown to look weak, and then they turned on him for abandoning the pure flame of unadulterated Blairism. And Brown knows they will not shy away from splitting the Labour Party in order to damage him.

Brown has a very short time – I would say until his party conference in autumn – to rescue his premiership and his government. He needs to be his own man, to spell out a new and radical agenda, and to implement it. If he does that, he may yet win the next election. If he does not, he will certainly lose it, and he will deserve to. The rest of us will not deserve the harsh, repressive, unfair, Conservative government we are likely to get in Brown's stead. But that is the way of politics. The people pay the price for the failures of their leaders.

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Francis Beckett is a journalist, historian and playwright, and author of *Gordon Brown – Past Present and Future*, published in 2007 by Haus Publishing (£10.99)

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# THE CHILDREN THE SYSTEM FAILS

The case of Khyra Ishaq has highlighted deep cultural problems in child protection, says John Hemming

With the sad death of Khyra Ishaq, we add one more name to the list of children our society has failed. The full details of how she died won't surface for some time yet and there are criminal proceedings that prevent much discussion. The case, however, does raise a number of questions. It would be wrong merely to have an inquiry into this case in isolation.

A mistake was made following the death of Victoria Climbié in having an inquiry which concentrated on the one case. This inquiry produced proposals for a major reorganisation of child protection in the hope that this would prevent cases like Khyra Ishaq, Tahla Ikram, Balthous Galtricia, Neo Craig and Leticia Wright.

At the same time, there are other concerns relating to the child protection system and I know of a number of cases that have been on the receiving end of what appear to be random miscarriages of justice.

We also have the question about the treatment of children in care and questions as to how many children from the mainland were sent to Jersey without any records as to where they went afterwards. One local authority did not know where 61 children that had left care had gone in one year.

The Care Leavers Association is calling for an inquiry into the issue of the treatment of children in care. I would also wish to look at why we lose so many children who are in care, with the authorities not knowing where they have gone.

## FORCED TO REMAIN IN CARE

A further question is why children are forced to remain in care. Research shows that 70% of children leaving care return to their parents. I know of three cases (nationally) of teenagers basically being harassed by the authorities. One county council sent the police to arrest a 16-year old who was doing his school exams because he wanted to live at his girlfriend's house and not the foster carer's house. The police turned up at the school and sensibly decided not to act.

It seems clear to me that the system is going wrong in a large number of areas. External scrutiny is vigorously resisted by those people who earn money from the system. Doctors in one case are trying to resist being named in court. I ask what they are frightened of.

A number of MPs are very concerned about the way in which the system maltreats people. What the cases of Khyra Ishaq and the others demonstrate is that having an over aggressive system of 'child protection' doesn't

actually protect children. It does not do what it says on the box.

The Association for Improvement in Maternity Services recently argued that the aggressive nature of the system is damaging to public health as parents become frightened of the overreaction of the authorities.

It has said: "Women with postnatal depression who are at risk of suicide conceal their illness – for fear of losing their children; women who are being beaten up by their partners don't report it – for fear of social workers taking their children; women in need of support whose pregnancies were the result of rape conceal it from midwives at antenatal clinic – for fear of social workers being called in; parents are afraid to take sick children to A&E – for fear paediatricians will have them taken away; and health visitors, once valuable supporters, are no longer welcomed since they became 'the health police'."

The question is whether we can protect children only by becoming more and more aggressive and removing more and more children from their families. I don't think so.

The system in England and Wales is orientated towards 'the hammer'. Interestingly, not so far away in Scotland, there is a more supportive system. I asked Gordon Brown why in England two-thirds of children under five taken into care are adopted, while in Scotland more than 60% of young children return to their parents. His answer was differences in social work practice. However, I don't see evidence of more child deaths in Scotland and I thought the system was supposed to work to keep families together.

In Birmingham, there is a shortage of social workers. The council managed to persuade 14 social workers in the USA to come to Birmingham. However, General Social Care Council bureaucracy prevented nine from doing so. The shortage of social workers clearly causes difficulties.

We have also completely reorganised the system following the report into Victoria Climbié's death. Whereas there used to be social services and education, we now have children's services and adult (and communities) services. One other aspect is the abolition of the Child Protection Register and the bringing in of a massively intrusive database which requires the police, for example, to ask children whether they eat too many chips. I cannot see how this has helped Khyra Ishaq.

The question, however, is whether the system has now turned more into a box-ticking exercise, with all the effort going into a paper chase rather than looking after children and families.

We need to ask why people don't want to work in social work any more. I am told that there is a bullying management style in many local authorities and that the



social workers find themselves in confrontation with parents. This should not be the case. In dealing with Swedish social services for one case, I found that they were far more willing to work with parents than is the case in England and Wales.

Time after time the wrong decisions are made. However, it is very difficult for people who don't work in children's social services to find out exactly why decisions are made. A psychologist said in Birmingham last week that she was bewildered as to why children are removed at times. Phil Thompson, a great-grandfather who has lost three great grandchildren and for whom a parliamentary petition was presented in May, was also unable to find out why this happened.

## **COURT SECRECY**

The problem is that many of the decisions are hidden away in the secrecy of the family courts. This excuse is used by social workers to prevent others from checking the way that they work. This results in a system which does not have proper checks and balances.

Shocking abuses of human rights occur in the secret family courts. One of my greatest procedural concerns is the misuse of the Official Solicitor. What happens is that a psychologist part-paid by the local authority says that the parent (normally a mother) is too stupid to 'instruct a solicitor'. Then someone comes in to act on the parent's behalf – the Official Solicitor.

The parent has then completely lost control of the case. In one case, in which I was heavily criticised by the Court of Appeal, the Official Solicitor simply read the local authority's case and decided to concede the case.

What has happened in this case is that there has not actually been a trial. The parent 'RP' has had her daughter put up for adoption, on the basis of the local authority's case that her daughter is too ill for her to care for her because she is too stupid. RP has not had an opportunity to put her own side of the case.

This undermines one of the basic principles of natural justice in that people should be given an opportunity to be heard. The Court of Appeal found this lawful. I have lodged papers to give the House of Lords an opportunity to judicially review this abuse of human rights.

It is difficult to find a worse abuse of human rights than preventing someone from being able to argue their case in the courts. The Official Solicitor is appointed between 100 and 200 times a year in adoption cases.

What I also find interesting is how difficult it is for parents to get copies of their own paperwork from their own solicitors. A whistle blowing ex-social worker actually told me how he worked with some of the parents' solicitors to work out how to undermine the parents' own cases. What I find surprising is that the authorities do not see anything wrong with solicitors being paid both regularly by the local authority and also working for parents. The relationship with the local authority is obviously massively more important than that with the legal aid funded parents.

*"Has the system has now turned more into a box-ticking exercise, with all the effort going into a paper chase rather than looking after children and families?"*

When the parents conclude that their own solicitors are working against them, they then find it very difficult to get even a copy of their own file. Not all of the parents' solicitors work like this, but there clearly is a substantial minority that I warn parents to be aware of.

The issue of the operation of public family law is far too important to be left to the people who earn money from child protection. We need to

understand why things happen and look at how the system should be changed so that needless deaths don't occur and at the same time innocent parents and their children don't suffer.

This has to start in the family courts, as it is there that the secrecy is anchored. The most important watchdog of all is public debate in the media. This watchdog, however, is systematically muzzled by court secrecy.

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John Hemming is Liberal Democrat MP for Birmingham Yardley

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## CHOICE ONLY FOR THE RICH

Dear Liberator,

Paul Holmes's article on 'The Choice Agenda' and Free Schools (Liberator 324) should be a real wake-up call to the party.

'Choice' sounds so seductive, yet in practice it can easily turn out to be the denial of choice for all but the pushy and articulate. Only 8% of London's population go to church on an average Sunday. Yet, often justified on the grounds of 'choice', more than 20% – and rising – of London's secondary school places are in religious schools.

That many of them are oversubscribed testifies to their popularity with those who can get their children into the over-subscribed ones – effectively private schools on the rates. Yet some religious schools, such as those in special measures, are not popular, suggesting that it is *good* schools, rather than 'faith', that are the magnet. Numerous polls show that the public heavily opposes segregation of children in schools on grounds of faith.

Religious schools produce above-average results, but it's vital to ask why. LSE and Sheffield Hallam University studies confirm that they cherry-pick the best pupils. This is thanks to privileged admissions criteria denied to community schools. Should parents be forced to feign belief and to attend church (one school even requires attendance at church 48 times a year) to get into the best state-funded facility?

This brings me to academies, so popular with religious organisations and/or evangelical Christians, perhaps because two-thirds of teenagers do not define themselves as religious.

Could the breathtakingly generous academy deal, bordering on profligacy, have been designed to facilitate such missions while serving as a vehicle for a few commercial organisations wishing to curry favour? Any accountant will confirm that the present value/cost of an academy's running expenses for the next 50 years is massive. Why should the state be paying such huge sums, providing spanking new schools and giving a *carte blanche* to almost anyone able to stump up a paltry £2m to promote their ideologies, while starving community schools of cash?

Every privilege has its victims. And for choice/free schools, where the children of the financially, socially or educationally advantaged are more likely to gain admission, the victims are community schools.

'Choice' facilitates the best pupils being creamed off from already beleaguered comprehensives and so is contributory to many of them becoming 'bog standard'. It all too often pushes these schools past the fateful tipping point where less talented and disruptive pupils drag school performance down, rather

# LETTERS



than the more able inspiring their peers to greater heights.

And don't the party's favoured 'free schools' combine the downsides of choice with the absurd generosity of academies – and the exchequer doesn't even benefit from that £2m contribution?

I urge the party to grasp the best-in-a-generation opportunity to differentiate itself from the other main parties by making a stand for genuine equality and justice in education.

What parents want is *good* schools, rather than faith or other 'choice' schools. All maintained schools should have a majority of local education authority-appointed governors and be open to all, without discrimination on grounds of faith or none.

K Wood  
London

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## LADIES, PLEASE

Dear Liberator,

I mourn Claire Brooks's passing and am grateful for Peter Johnson's obituary (Liberator 325).

Claire always had a marvellous turn of phrase. Long ago, in Mary Whitehouse's days, the WLF (Women's Liberal Federation, for the young) was faced at its annual conference with a resolution calling for tougher censorship.

Claire dealt with the problem. "Ladies, ladies," she called out, "I beg of you, remember the Areopagitica and do not lose your marbles." The resolution was lost.

Elizabeth Sidney  
Islington

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## LABOUR'S SOVIET MODEL

Dear Liberator,

In 'A Human Agenda for Public Services' (Liberator 325), David Boyle has correctly identified some of the reasons why what New Labour refers to as the 'reform of the public services' has failed, the biggest one being target culture. While priding itself on ending producer-led service delivery, it has replaced it not with consumer-led services but with administrator-led delivery, with the setting of targets becoming an end in itself.

Having completely abandoned any attempt to control the commanding heights of the economy, New Labour tries to micromanage, with performance indicators having the same significance that the production of hydroelectric power and tractors had in the former Soviet Union.

Boyle also acknowledges that outsourcing is largely no longer competitive tendering, owing to the development of monopoly public service providers. While in-house service provision is not always the best, Boyle fails to see that selling off services is part of the problem, in that a theoretically accountable public service monopoly has often been replaced by an unaccountable private sector monopoly.

There are other issues that he does not seem to regard as important. The biggest is the so-called customer service philosophy, which uses spin to avoid confronting the public with hard choices. Are residents of small communities being empowered when they are told that, as it is too expensive to run

services, they must provide them themselves?

There is also the increasing tendency to bring in generic job descriptions for public service workers on the grounds that it is transferable skills that matter. This effectively de-skills employees and turns them into robots. That bringing in people to manage services that they know little about might have some bearing on how well services are run is totally beyond the limited comprehension of the people bringing in these changes.

David Boyle doesn't mention the so-called third sector. While there are cases where the third sector has run public services successfully, there are dangers because they are less accountable than directly-run services and the voluntary organisation involved will cease to be voluntary.

The latter is already happening. Shelter is a charity that is finding it hard to adopt the adage 'charity begins at home' and is attempting to impose reductions in conditions of service on its employees so that it can meet the requirements for government contracts. Effectively, third sector provision is backdoor nationalisation of the voluntary sector.

However, perhaps the biggest problem is the huge salaries being paid to directors and chief executives for continuing to provide piss poor services, even if they do meet a few government targets.

Thirty years ago, local authorities were run by someone called a chief clerk. Agendas went out on time and were comprehensible to councillors, the refuse was collected on time, children left school reasonably literate and numerate, the police caught criminals and libraries provided books. Local authorities kept to their brief. Now we are told we need to pay world class salaries for remote services run by bureaucrats for bureaucrats, and councillors are paid salaries to comprehend incomprehensible agenda. Is it any wonder that turnout at local elections is low?

Andrew Hudson  
Leyton

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## UNIVERSAL PROFUNDITY

*Dear Liberator,*

A more total misreading of my book, *The Woman Racket*, it would be

hard to imagine than the idiocy written by Gwyneth Deakins in *Liberator* 324. She states in the review exactly my own anti-PC position: that it is "fundamentally wrong to treat individuals on the basis of a generalisation about the group to which they belong"; yet attributes to me the very opposite position!

She then blinds herself with this politics to the overwhelming scientific position (as outlined at great length in the book) that there is profound and universal sex difference; which necessitates our looking again at the notion of 'gender flexibility'.

What are now conclusively evident 'chalk and cheese' differences between *all* men and *all* women are anything but generalisations. Universal profound differences are not generalisations; they are universal profound differences. The upshot (for reasons too long to go into here) is that not women but (most) men constitute the major locus of disadvantage in every society. This does not mean that we must now *politically* treat men and women differently according to sex, but it does mean that we must stop over-privileging women, which is the entirely regressive politics that Labour – and the Lib Dems – proselytise.

It is Deakins's complete refusal even to consider the possibility that we have got men-women so utterly wrong that leads her to the absurd empty charge of "simple error of fact". She fails to cite even a single one. That would be because there aren't any. The book has been rigorously fact-checked and has been ten years in the researching.

There is ascribed to me another position nowhere stated or implied, that: "lower pay and other discrimination against them (women) in the workplace is justified". That is entirely in the imagination of this seriously intellectually challenged reviewer. Gwyneth Deakins evidently is incapable of objectivity of even the most simple kind. I can only conclude that she subscribes to the political correctness fascism that has turned politics into the regressive disaster it is currently, and which is why I now detest the Lib Dems despite having spent 20 years being an LD activist.

I was an LD activist so as to fight the PC fascism of Labour, only to discover that this obscenity was dictating policy in my own party. In time, the whole book will be placed

open access online, with voluminous supporting notes. The analysis will become mainstream in due course. So we shall see how long it is before the 'liberal' in 'Lib Dem' is seen to accord either with the actual definition of the word, or instead with the totalitarianism that the word has fast come to mean.

Steve Moxon  
Sheffield

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## PRESIDENTIAL MATERIAL

*Dear Liberator,*

The argument about the role of party president will rumble on, but one aspect of the choice of president seems to have been forgotten.

In the post-merger days, it seems to have been assumed that the president should be an MP or a peer. The only contenders so far mentioned this year are an MP (Lembit Öpik) and a peer (Ros Scott).

Should we not be looking for someone other than those whose parliamentary careers are decided by the leader? The relationship between parliamentary party and the party in the country should be one of healthy tension, with the president playing a key role in that relationship.

MPs already have two jobs – to represent their constituents and their shadow role. Peers often combine a major departmental brief with commercial work or public service. For whom is a parliamentarian president speaking at weekly meetings of the parliamentary party – his or her departmental interest or constituency or the party as a whole?

There used to be a tranche of able people who could reflect the needs of grassroots members, understood the role played by national and regional committees, could relate to the ALDC and council groups and to the various associated organisations, and work closely with head office staff. Many are now dead or handicapped by age or health, but where is the next generation of people like Joyce Rose, Adrian Slade, Michael Steed and others?

As the conscience as well as the irritant of the party, *Liberator* should be charged with the task of finding suitable candidates.

Viv Bingham  
Liberal Party President 1981/82  
Stockport



## Monday

There is something about the great European capitals that makes the heart beat a little faster. London. Paris. Oakham. The very sound of them is exciting. I have spent the past few days in another of those cities: Rome. While I am enjoying an *espresso* at a pavement café beside the Trevi Fountain, a familiar trio hoves into view: I hide myself behind the *Gazzetta dello Sport* and observe what ensues. Lembit Öpik, for it is he, has a Cheeky Girl on each arm – much as a condemned man has a warder on each arm. “Mr Lembit, you marry us now,” one Girl carols. When he does not reply, the other cries: “You get lucky coin for us now, Mr Lembit,” and between them they tip the poor fellow head first into the water. This goes on a few times until their engagement is announced. I can confirm the press reports that the Member for Montgomery is in tears when the episode is at an end.

## Tuesday

One of the most important elements in any political campaign is a rousing song and I flatter myself that I have a good ear for finding the right song for any particular candidate. It was I, for instance, who chose ‘See the Conquering Hero Comes’ for Paddy Ashplant at Yeovil in 1983. When urged to perform a similar service for Brian Paddick in the recent London Mayoral election, I naturally asked around to find out more about the fellow and was successful in gleaning two important pieces of information. The first was that he used to be a policeman – which is a definite plus for his campaign as our “boys in blue” are a fine body of men, even if they can be a little overenthusiastic in carrying out their duties (I recall Boat Race night one year...). The second was that he was gay, which is also promising – we can do with all the jolly politicians we can get! Putting these two pieces of gen together, I soon came up with the perfect song. So those of you who rode on an open-top bus with Paddick through Southall or along Brick Lane as the gramophone played ‘The Laughing Policeman’ now know whom to thank.

## Wednesday

*Boxing News* arrives and with it the sad news that Sugar Ray Michie has died. Anyone old enough to recall rising in the small hours to warm up the wireless and listen to one of her title fights live from Madison Square Gardens will be immensely moved. If, in all honesty, she took a couple more fights than was strictly good for her, the ‘boozier’ she took over when she eventually retired was immaculately run and widely considered to serve the finest pint of Smithson & Greaves north of the *Bonkers’ Arms*. Sugar Ray’s greatest virtue is that she was as honest as the day is long in the clear Argyll summer. At one time, The Mob took a close interest in rural Scottish politics and it was widely known that more than one by-election candidate had “taken a dive” after being threatened by powerful gambling interests. There can be no better epitaph for Sugar Ray than to say that not a breath of this scandal ever attached itself to her name.

## Thursday

Each spring, birdwatchers assemble on the shores of Rutland Water. As a whimbrel remarked to me the other

# Lord Bonkers’ Diary

day, it is remarkable how they find their way back to the same spot every year. Closer to the Hall, I have always done my bit with bird tables, nesting boxes and the like to encourage our feathered friends. The first Lady Bonkers always took a particular interest in this side of things. Someone as fair-minded as she can hardly be said to have had a favourite species, but it is fair to say that she always prided herself on her great tits.

## Friday

To the Bonkers Home for Well-Behaved Orphans, where the little mites plead to be taken to feed the Rutland Water Monster this afternoon. Call me an old sentimentalist, but I am in the mood for an outing myself and it has to be admitted that the modern chimney can be remarkably narrow. So on condition that they are All Good, I agree to return this afternoon with a few scraps for the old girl. After enjoying my own luncheon, I round up a couple of sheep, a bullock, two rambles who wandered off a public right of way last summer and a Tory council candidate whom I have had knocking about for some time. I drive them all to the orphanage and then take the little mites down to the Water’s edge. Ruttie is in fine form and thoroughly enjoys her repast – and how the little ones cheer as she swallows the Tory in one gulp! This evening, I read a book which speculates upon the mysterious disappearance of the Labour MP Victor Grayson in the 1920s. These author types don’t know the half of it, do they?

## Saturday

To Afghanistan with our new leader Clegg for a flying visit. We are there to visit the troops at an airbase, and young Clegg takes a keen interest in their welfare, asking if they find their equipment outdated. The fellow cleaning the harquebus replies that, while it would be nice to have more modern weapons, it is the Army’s way to make the best of things. All this is very commendable, but hellishly tame; what the accompanying journalists want is a bit of pizzazz, a bit of danger. I steal away from the crowd and into the Afghan foothills to call upon an old friend with whom I have enjoyed many a *loya jirga* and game of goat polo. I take tea in his tent and ask if he could possibly liven things up at the aerodrome. He obligingly has some of his young bucks launch a rocket or two in its general direction, with the result that Fleet Street’s finest will have some sparkling copy for tomorrow’s haddock sheets. Incidentally, this is not the first time I have had foreign insurgents fire at a Liberal leader, but on the last occasion it was little Steel and they missed.

## Sunday

To St Asquith’s for Divine Service. At my suggestion, the Revd Hughes leads us in prayers for the health of the Duke of Rutland and his ministers, for the return to robust health of Freddie Flintoff, and for Mark Oaten to remain as MP for Winchester until the next general election.

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

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