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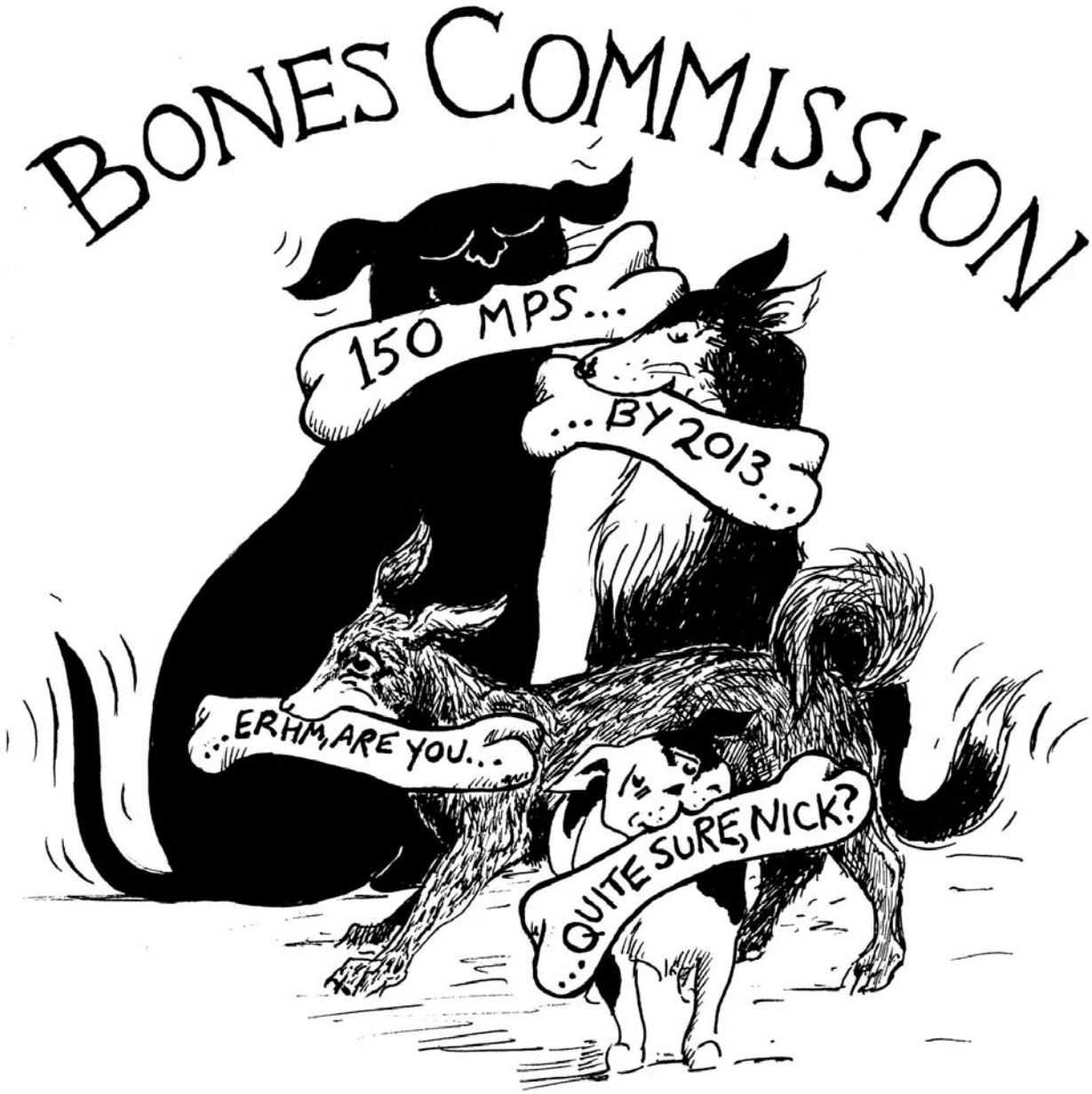

HAS IT BITTEN OFF MORE THAN IT CAN CHEW?

In this issue

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Cover illustration - Christy Lawrence

COMMENTARY

JOURNEY WITHOUT MAPS

There is no-one in the Liberal Democrats who knows for certain how to respond to a failing Labour government.

It is easy for the party to respond to a failing Tory one – it does what comes naturally and targets a slew of seats where it has a comfortable second place anyway and a substantial local base.

But there has never before been a Labour government on the ropes without the Liberals having been in an even worse state – think post-war meltdown (1951), a collapse into irrelevance (1970) and the backwash of the unpopular Lib-Lab pact and Thorpe scandal (1979).

For most of this year, the Lib Dem poll rating has hovered around 18%, a level that would, at this stage in a parliament, be no great cause for concern were the Tory and Labour ratings closer together.

But they aren't. Labour is in such straits that its rating is not far above the Lib Dem one, while the Tories enjoy a huge lead.

That might mean that the Lib Dems stand to pick up a substantial number of Labour seats at the next general election – but at the same time lose many to the Tories if the relative positions of the parties stay where they are.

Two questions flow from that. Are there a sufficient number of winnable Labour seats? And can they be won while safeguarding existing seats from the Tories?

Again, the reverse situation gives little guide. In 1997, the Lib Dems had only a handful of seats vulnerable to Labour and could freely pillage from the Tories. Come 2010, there could be a handful of gains from Labour and large losses to the Tories.

Some will argue that the solution is to adopt poses that will appeal to Tory voters. But where do they think the Tory surge has come from? The Lib Dem poll rating has been more or less static, while the Tories have progressed as Labour has slumped.

Voters fed up with Labour are crossing over to the Tories because they do not see or hear anything that impresses them from the Lib Dems. Starting to appeal to these disillusioned Labour voters would seem not just the most straightforward way of both winning Labour seats and stemming the Tory poll lead but also politically a lot easier than courting hardened Tories.

Nick Clegg's announcements in July on tax policy could be part of such an appeal, but only if he is careful about how this message is presented.

The party is trying to pitch its case as tax cuts for low and middle income earnings at the expense of the super rich and those who pollute.

One problem is presentational – the old policy of a higher tax rate for those who earn more than £100,000 a year was both simple to grasp and sent an easily understood signal about the party's attitudes to fairness.

Regardless of its merits, the new tax policy is far more complex, and any proposition is liable to fail if grasping it depends on voters' willingness to peruse abstruse financial detail.

The second problem is that the Lib Dems were successful a decade ago in convincing voters that more public spending raised from taxation was needed, in particular for schools.

That argument was won then and, unless Clegg stresses that he believes his new policy will help those on lower incomes and improve social justice, it is likely to be heard simply as 'tax cuts'. Thanks in part to earlier Lib Dem campaigning successes, many voters will simply interpret that as meaning poorer public services.

A rather less awkward area in which the party can pitch its appeal is civil liberty.

This used to be a subject that obsessed liberals and bored everyone else – a bit like electoral reform. Not so now; alarm about Labour's wish to turn Britain into a police state has now permeated the public.

Curiously, it was civil service carelessness with personal data that gave this issue salience and made voters think about why the government had the data in the first place and the uses to which it might be put.

There has been a visible shift in the public mood against ID cards, and the row over 42 days detention has contributed to a mood that questions Labour's simplistic claim that those doing no wrong have nothing to fear.

Labour already has an out-of-control DNA database. It now proposes to snoop on every phone call, e-mail and internet search made by anyone in the country, a stance one would once only have expected from a dictatorship.

This all moves civil liberty from a theoretical debate to one that can be couched as 'are you happy with the government knowing everything about you?', 'are you happy with the way that information might be used/lost?' and 'what about your privacy – who is watching you?'

The Lib Dems ought to be able to be both right and popular in being identified with civil liberty.

RADICAL BULLETIN

LEADING FROM THE CENTRE

Nick Clegg has set himself up as the scourge of central control, arguing that, in particular in the National Health Service, it is both wrong and ineffective.

This admirable stance does not though apply to his own party, in which Clegg has just effected a power grab courtesy of the hand-picked Bones Commission (Liberator 325).

It was chaired by management consultant Chris Bones, and other members included chief whip Paul Burstow, who runs the Parliamentary Office of the Liberal Democrats – the vehicle through which funding for parliamentary activity is handled – and Duncan Greenland, chair of the Federal Finance and Administration Committee.

Unsurprisingly, it concluded that Messrs Clegg, Burstow and Greenland should all become far more powerful.

Its central idea is that a Chief Officers Group (COG) should take over the running of the party's finances and management.

Its members would be Clegg, president Simon Hughes, leaders in Scotland and Wales, English party chair Brian Orrell, Burstow, Greenland, the leaders in the Lords and Europe, the conference and campaigns committee chairs, the leader's chief of staff, the treasurer, a council group leader and chief executive Chris Rennard.

Its formal role would be to set strategic objectives for the party, prepare for elections, supervise media relations, run budgets and administration, and oversee Rennard.

Alert readers will have spotted the fatal flaw that has eluded Bones for all his expertise – any body top heavy with parliamentarians will perennially suffer from most of them not turning up and being primarily exercised about their own hobbyhorses when they do.

Even more alert ones will wonder what has happened to the Federal Executive, a body partly elected by conference and enshrined in the constitution.

It still exists but was persuaded to cede its powers to COG for an, allegedly, experimental period until the next general election.

The FE is reduced to the 'oversight' status of a council scrutiny committee, which means it will be become completely, as opposed to almost completely, pointless.

FE members were of course presented with copies of the full Bones reports, but only after they had voted for the COG. Before that they had only summaries.

In the final vote, only Erlend Watson opposed COG, though former MP David Rendel and a few others abstained.

This result was, though, achieved only after former MEP Robin Teverson had successfully moved an amendment to set up an FE working party, which can in theory negotiate changes in relations and responsibilities with the COG. The group comprises Teverson, James Gurling, Meral Ece, Jonathan Davies and Roy Thompson.

Davies and others had proposed an amendment that nothing should happen until all the bodies affected by the creation of COG had debated the matter, a move that brought Clegg to near apoplexy and was defeated.

As Liberator went to press, there was the prospect of a row at the English party executive, which may prove less supine than the FE about surrendering, in particular, its budget powers.

Much of Bones is sensible. Its central thrust seeks to deliver Clegg's incautious commitment to get 150 MPs by the election after next. Its warning that resources need to be poured into a second tier of 200-odd winnable seats will be widely welcomed, in particular by critics of the current targeting strategy.

It also, at least in theory, calls for a substantially greater role for the English regions and has resisted pressure to either abolish the English party or strip local parties of their powers.

However, the way in which Bones has so far been implemented does not bode well. Not even FE members were trusted with copies until it was too late, and the first most party members knew about it was a story in the Times that posited a rift between Clegg and Rennard, an unlikely eventuality given that Rennard is treated as semi-divine by most party members.

Next time they hear Clegg inveigh against secrecy and centralisation, they may though be less inclined to believe his sincerity.

IN NEED OF TUITION

An expected debate on student finance has been postponed from the autumn conference until next spring for fear that an enormous row would grab the headlines.

Opposition to tuition fees was one of the defining Lib Dem polices of the last parliament, and was important in the 2005 general election in winning seats in which large numbers of students live.

Despite a few attempts by right-wing headbangers to ditch the policy, it has stayed until now. However, the higher education spokesman Stephen Williams wants to drop it in favour of a package that would double grants for students in receipt of them, with loan paybacks starting when a graduate earns £25K rather than £15K.

On the opposing side is David Howarth, MP for the quintessential student seat of Cambridge, who argues that

tuition fees should continue to be opposed because education should be free as matter of principle.

Howarth also reckons he has identified a pot of money from the little-used 'train to gain' fund that could be used to abolish fees for part-time and further education students.

A working group has deliberated for two years, at the end of which it produced only a 4-3 split in favour of Williams's position.

The issue has also has divided the shadow cabinet, parliamentary party and the Federal Policy Committee and enraged Liberal Youth, which supports the current policy.

One sensible approach would be to put both options before conference and let it decide, but that might be too much like leaving things to chance for some people.

Quite apart from the detail of the policy, those who support continued opposition to tuition fees believe they have sound politics on their side.

It is an easily understood position, while one that sets up a complex mechanism of grants and repayments is not.

LOCAL DIFFICULTY

What accounts for Nick Clegg's tin ear on local government? Not 15 minutes into his first speech as leader, he angered the party's councillors by proposing that primary care trusts should be replaced by local health boards, elected separately from councils (Liberator 324).

Quite who would stand for these boards given the general shortage of council candidates was not explained, though a messy compromise was reached at the spring conference under which councils would get to nominate part of their membership. Several council leaders pointed out that, if enough separate local bodies were created, something would eventually be needed to coordinate them, possibly called a council.

At June's Local Government Association conference, council group leaders got wind of Clegg's draft speech and were horrified to discover that he intended to announce support for separately elected police boards.

The same argument applied, and this proposal was equally ill-thought out. Police board elections would descend into a bidding war over who could be the 'toughest' on crime, regardless of the effectiveness of solutions, and yet more of local government would be split into uncoordinated pieces.

Fast lobbying got this reference removed from Clegg's speech. Clegg is supposed to be forming a sounding aboard of council leaders to advise him. It looks as if this can't come a moment too soon. Unlike all but a few ex-councillor Lib Dem MPs, these people have experience of exercising power in the real world.

THE COMPANY HE KEEPS

Michael Meadowcroft's decision last autumn to join the Liberal Democrats heavily dented any remaining credibility enjoyed by the independent Liberal Party. Will reports of speaking engagements by its president, Liverpool councillor Steve Radford, alter this?

According to a UKIP website, during the Henley by-election Radford spoke for that party's candidate on a platform with its leader Nigel Farage.

Also listed is a UKIP meeting that Radford graced last winter at Bootle cricket club, speaking alongside a representative of the far-right Freedom Association. He is also listed among speakers on 17 November 2007 at a meeting of the Bruges Group alongside the right-wing Tory former minister John Redwood. Nothing on the Liberal Party website contradicts these statements by UKIP. It does though carry an announcement that the former UKIP vice-chair in Southampton has joined the Liberal Party.

It is true that UKIP opposes ID cards, but on pretty much everything else it is robustly socially conservative.

The Liberal Party does of course claim to be the living embodiment of the original Liberal Party, which was the first in this country to advocate unwaveringly Common Market entry.

ALL THEIR OWN WORK

The Liberal Democrats would have struggled to win a by-election in Henley even at the depths of Tory unpopularity, since the seat is one of the bluest places in the country.

Its efforts were unlikely to have been helped by the choice of a candidate from 200 miles away in Plymouth. Whatever Stephen Kearney's qualities, local roots were not among them, and the Tories had made sure that they had a local candidate.

The incumbent Lib Dem PPC when the by-election was called was Susan Cooper, a respected local councillor, yet she was dropped.

Some claimed to detect the hand of chief executive Chris Rennard or even Nick Clegg in this, thinking that a local woman had been jettisoned unfairly.

In fact the local party failed to shortlist Cooper as a result of applying the wrong selection criteria. It looked at the best candidate to fight a general election and went for Kearney's undoubted qualities, not pausing to think that 'localness' might count for a lot in a by-election, in which a candidate from Plymouth would have three weeks, rather than three years, to make themselves known.

The campaigns team was not entirely pleased to be deprived of the ability to use its 'local candidate' mantra.

DINNER FOR 51

The National Liberal Club's dining room contains a statue of what appears to be William Ewart Gladstone about to dance.

Perhaps this has inspired Lynne Featherstone to use the name 'Gladstone Group' for "a new grouping being formed to discuss some of the major strategic and policy questions facing the Liberal Democrats".

This is not of course to be confused with the, possibly now defunct, Gladstone Club, which used to meet in the NLC to discuss land reform.

The new group will proceed by way of dinners in parliament, the first being a discussion on "Who are the next 10% of the electorate that the Lib Dems should be chasing?" led by Matthew Taylor, and the next, "Are the Liberal Democrats a high tax or a low tax party?" by Richard Grayson.

Any event that promotes policy discussion in the party is to be welcomed but it is hard to see that there is any particular ideological driver behind this group.

The 51-strong invitation list includes everyone from Jeremy Browne to Paul Holmes. This will no doubt make for an interesting discussion, but will it lead to anything coherent?

NARRATIVES NOT SLOGANS

The Liberal Democrats' desire to sound like a party of government has also made them sound indistinguishable, says Ros Scott

The question of narrative has been discussed in Liberator and in the Lib Dem blogosphere for some time now, with the likes of David Boyle, Simon Titley and Neil Stockley the leading proponents. Our party isn't alone in this pre-occupation – the fact is that none of the three main political parties has a strong narrative, unlike the Nationalists, Greens, UKIP and the BNP. It is a sign of how political debate has, by and large, failed to keep up with the way the world has changed. None of us has found a narrative to replace the old left/right, class and economic based political themes.

There is now a political convergence which espouses the benefits of a market economy and the right to choose, territory where Liberal Democrats should be at home. And yet, a discordant note is being sounded, whereby too many politicians, some of our own included, advocate interference in the private realm (where they have no place to be) and laissez faire in the markets (where public interest demands intervention). It is an ideological debate, little of which comes close to dealing with the concerns which preoccupy people in their daily lives, and leaves the political class open to accusations of being out-of-touch, in-it-for-themselves and so on. As a result, when politicians do respond to public concerns, they are often seen as jumping on a fashionable bandwagon, rather than leading the debate.

ARE YOU LOCAL?

Politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum and into the hole where ideology used to reside has poured negativity and the cult of personality. Not being Party A or simply opposing whatever Party B does has become the mainstay of political dialogue, along with the inevitable "how local is your candidate" discussion. For us, this has brought certain short-term electoral advantages but in the long run it works more effectively for the two larger parties, whose greater reach and deeper pockets enable them to take advantage of the way the Westminster electoral pendulum inevitably swings.

For us, this is problematic. We have traditionally performed well in parliamentary by-elections but are making modest progress in general elections. Ruthless targeting means that there are fewer 'second-tier' seats where we can take advantage of a national swing towards us. We gain control of councils but, in some cases, struggle to hold on. Most ironically, especially for a party with such an intellectual attachment to proportional representation, we are poor at fighting list elections and consistently underperform in them relative to our opinion poll ratings.

NEGATIVE MESSAGES

These last two weaknesses can, in part, be put down to an over-reliance on negative messages. Locally, we don't hold on to councils because we are unused to sending out positive messages and so don't adequately defend our record. We often lack sophistication in crafting our message towards the voters that we want to reach. In list elections, 'two-horse race' tactics are used but can't work, while we fail to provide positive reasons for the public to support us.

But worse than all this, political parties are alienating an increasing number of people, who feel that politics has nothing to offer. The three main parties are all fighting for a share of a shrinking voter base, and we seldom talk seriously about how we re-engage those people who have given up on all of us. And please, let's not talk about voter apathy – many people are not apathetic, they just see politicians as part of the problem rather than the solution and aren't prepared to dignify any of us with a vote. Solutions don't lie in postal voting, ballot boxes kept at the local Tesco or dishing out raffle prizes to voters – these are just more New Labour froth.

The recent local elections and the by-elections in Henley and Crewe showed a marked increase in support for minor parties and independents. A few weeks ago, I canvassed a lady in Henley who said she'd vote either for us or the BNP. I didn't stop to give a lecture on the differences between our two parties; I just left it up to her and thought about what she'd said. On reflection, it's not as strange as it sounds as, to her, in Tory-dominated Henley, it was a rational "none of the usual suspects" choice. The trouble is, in a lot of places, we are one of the usual suspects.

The strategy based on "sounding like a party of government" has rebounded on us. We have yet to convince the public that we are a party of government but we often sound just like the others. There is an over-reliance on managerialism – a cursory look at conference motions and policy documents will reveal a raft of targets and regulation peppered with the odd commission, independent review and re-organisation. All too often you hear our spokespeople sounding competent and authoritative, but half an hour later you can't remember what they said!

The fact is, we get noticed and respected when we say things that are out of the ordinary amongst the political classes but which chime absolutely with what the public is thinking, for example, on Iraq, and Vince Cable on the economy. While the line between radical and just plain daft is a fine one, it can be drawn. Like a rapidly growing company, we have reached a stage where we are too big to be small and too small to be big – it's an uncomfortable place to be, but we need to work out how to make our strengths work for us within a largely hostile media environment.

"The strategy based on sounding like a party of government has rebounded on us"

Internally, there are those who still try to frame debate within an old left/right dialogue, which has little meaning to the public. People are looking for a narrative that encompasses new thinking on public services and moves on from an increasingly sterile 'public versus private' debate.

Our only way forward is to explore new political dialogue that appeals not just to our core vote and those disillusioned with other parties, but to those who are currently not voting at all. This is the illusive narrative and must be based on messages of hope for change. This is what gave Barack Obama's campaign for the nomination of the Democratic Party so much power. We need to find our own way of talking about how life can be better, that people need not be at the mercy of over-interfering governments or profit-obsessed business. It's a dialogue about how people regain some control over their own lives and are not passive victims of the system regardless of whether the source of their frustration is private or public. Democracy is the key to that – how we can harness the power of the vote as a force for change.

We need to focus more on the future and learn how to preach the politics of change, highlighting how the others are alike and that the choice between Labour and Conservative is pretty much just about changing the names of the people in charge. More than that, though, we need to link our message to our philosophical beliefs.

SOUNDING TRITE

It's not an easy way to go. There is a danger of sounding trite, or as though we don't understand the scale of the problems faced by some people, but we do need to change the way we talk to each other and to voters. Lists of policies don't appeal but then neither do lists of values when taken in isolation. There is a need to frame concepts in terms which mean something to people, using examples from people's lives. Taking localism as an example, what does it mean in practice? How would local decision making improve life where you live? What are the real consequences of centralised decision making?

We should be humanising our public sector so that people, either as users or as workers within it, don't feel alienated, a point captured perfectly by David Boyle in his recent article (Liberator 325). Contract cleaners in hospitals or rail maintenance workers who no longer feel a loyalty to or pride in their organisation are a classic result of over-reliance on market driven thinking.

By being one step removed, their employer having no direct stake in the service being supplied, their sense of personal responsibility withers, as does their pride in the job. The effects of the lack of human contact are ignored by the government as it continues with its polyclinic thinking – severing the personal link between individuals and the person serving them.

Just sometimes, we could stop treating everyone as victims, and occasionally we need to talk about how we can all work together to change things. Nick Clegg spoke along these lines in his address to the Green Alliance, when he called for a 'Charter for Climate Change', a covenant between government, industry and individuals affirming the right each of us has to enjoy a clean and secure environment and where every agency, company and person must do their bit. I am hopeful that we can move along these lines. Nick Clegg's instincts are sound – for example, when he talks about the pupil premium putting emphasis on creating incentives to deal with individual pupils.

People would, I believe, give a good deal of thought to a party that "tells it like it is" and doesn't collude in the fiction perpetrated by all parties that everyone can have everything they want, all the time, at no cost. You can't just give people what they want and say what they want to hear. The result of that is that people feel that certain things are theirs by right and that they have no responsibility for developing the society we live in. When governments and councils fail to live up to what they've promised, the whole political system falls into disrepute.

Labour's fall from power is inevitable – not just because of Gordon Brown's manifest failings but because Labour has been unable to balance its old instinct to help the disadvantaged with its new-found love of markets. Without that ideological rudder, Labour has ended up pleasing no-one. The issue for the Conservatives is of a similar ilk; their instinct is for continuity and tradition, yet their strategy is to preach the politics of change. That's why there is an opportunity for us if we have the courage to take it. It won't be easy, and it might not always be comfortable, but failing to grasp this nettle now could have serious consequences for our party and our democracy.

The recent publication of *Make it Happen* strikes much of the right tone but narratives need time to develop. They should emerge organically from across the party so that we can successfully get them across to the public. That means holding our nerve and, above all, it requires the courage to let go of some of the familiar ways of doing things.

Baroness Scott of Needham Market is Liberal Democrat Lords spokesperson for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Local Government Association

THE ECONOMICS HAS BEEN MISSING

Until now, community politics has lacked a coherent economic dimension. Bernard Greaves and David Boyle have addressed that need with their major new publication 'The Theory and Practice of Community Economics'

After one of the worst general election results in its history, the Liberal Party, at its 1970 Assembly in Eastbourne, responded by adopting the community politics strategy.

It proved a powerful idea that motivated a growing body of activists at grassroots level who, mobilised by the Association of Liberal Councillors under the inspired leadership of Tony Greaves, helped transform the party into an effective campaigning force. Such was their success that the party came close to breakthrough in the February 1974 general election.

Yet the 1979 general election was a major disappointment. It is significant that Liberal candidates did appreciably better in the local elections held on the same day than they did in the parliamentary elections.

A contributory factor to that was that the parliamentary leadership, under both Thorpe and Steel, had neither embraced nor understood the community politics strategy. They sincerely believed that community politics was marginal to success on the national stage.

They viewed it as a rather dubious form of local populism, a misguided romantic attachment to historic neighbourhoods of little relevance to the modern world, and at best a successful technique for fighting parliamentary by-elections. The saw it as putting an undue emphasis on the local and parochial at the expense of the serious matter of national politics conducted at Westminster.

Indeed, it was true that many local activists saw community politics as essentially a campaigning technique, based upon addressing local concerns and grievances through 'Focus' newsletters, to secure the election of Liberals who could sort out the issues once in power.

They failed to grasp that community politics was really about mobilizing and enabling local communities to take control of their own destinies rather than remaining the supine recipients of largesse handed out by elected politicians.

As a result, ALC commissioned Gordon Lishman and Bernard Greaves to write *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, launched in 1980. Designed to set out for the first time in easily accessible form the ideological basis of community politics, it became a very influential document that has since attained near iconic status.

In the ensuing years, community politics became an integral part of the ethos of the party. Within the Liberal Democrats today, the central political message that communities should take control over their own affairs complements and reinforces the party's commitment to restoring the powers and financial independence of local authorities and increasing choice for individuals in their access to public services.

Likewise, the party's campaigning strategy, ably led by Chris Rennard, recognises the crucial importance that a strong local government base has in winning and holding parliamentary seats. That has translated into practice. Our growth in elected MPs has repeatedly been built on success in local government.

So it could be plausibly argued that the case for community politics has been won within the party and that in practice we are delivering it on the ground. Indeed, our opponents are now deploying a rhetoric of neighbourhood empowerment and localism and copying our campaign techniques.

The reality of course is very different. 'New' Labour, under Blair and Brown, is every bit as authoritarian as old Labour, imposing a degree of central control unparalleled in our democratic history, in the process emasculating local government.

Even so, the theory of community politics has an important weakness: it has always lacked a coherent economic dimension. The importance of that can be seen in both Britain and around the world. Inequalities of wealth are increasing. Many now live in communities characterised by multiple deprivation; communities where incomes are low, the number of people dependant on state benefits is higher, educational attainment is poor, ill-health and low life expectancy are more prevalent, housing conditions are worse, and facilities for recreation, sport and social interaction are fewer.

The Theory and Practice of Community Economics seeks to analyse why this is the case and what we as Liberals can do to stimulate the transformation in society that can change it.

We do not argue that politicians, whether Liberal Democrats or not, can impose solutions to create a just and equal society. The record of the Labour Party in trying to impose social justice by central dictat, irrespective of local needs or circumstances and enforced by a battery of targets, sanctions and controls, is an object lesson in failure that in the process has been devastating in destroying local enterprise and initiative. Nor do we argue for strict

equality, a concept at odds both with the central liberal values of diversity and choice and with just reward for enterprise and effort.

Our starting point is to challenge the widespread consensus among politicians, shared by many but not all economists, that social progress depends upon, and is the product of, economic growth. In other words, economic growth is the prime objective of politics; social progress is consequential upon it: the "economy stupid" of Clinton. Our view is unequivocally the reverse. In a democratic society, the role of politics is to enable its citizens to determine their political, social, environmental and cultural objectives; economics is the means for achieving them.

Accordingly, we have set out first why coherent and integrated local communities embracing a full range of human activity are so important in providing the strong personal bonds and social support that individuals and families require for a fulfilling and happy existence. We point to the consequences of such communities ceasing to exist, leaving individuals and their immediate families unable to cope with the pressures they face in an amorphous impersonal society in which they feel powerless, alone and insignificant in dealing with large remote organisations and faceless bureaucracies with their baffling processes and procedures.

We recognise that traditional historic communities cannot and will not return; and nor would we want to recreate some of their less desirable characteristics. But we recognise the potential in the modern world for people to see themselves belonging to a network of communities, not all geographically based, differing in size, function and significance in their lives, within which they can express different aspects of their personality and satisfy different needs. That represents a potential for diversity and choice that is profoundly liberating, the hallmark of a genuinely liberal and democratic society.

Secondly, we address the manner in which unrestricted year-on-year percentage growth is currently stripping the planet of irreplaceable natural resources. We point out that exponential growth within a finite system will always inevitably come to an end, very often catastrophically.

Yet we do not accept the concept of zero growth advocated by some elements of the green movement. We recognise that energy drawn directly from solar sources, whether through photovoltaic conversion or abstracted from the motions of wind or tide, can in practical terms be regarded as limitless. Likewise, the limit of information is the limit of the universe itself.

Our only limitation is our ability to capture the former and to convert the latter into useable knowledge. Present and evolving technology will enable us to mobilise both, to drive continuous sustainable economic growth.

Thirdly, we show how regeneration programmes in Britain and development programmes in the third world have so often failed. We highlight three main reasons that apply in different ways to both.

First, those programmes have too often sought to address poverty and deprivation through the injection of external subsidy rather than the stimulation of indigenous wealth creation. Second, they too often inject external capital investment and skills and take out again what they yield, whether that is in the pay of outside staff brought in, profits generated, natural resources extracted, or primary crops harvested in the third world to feed the markets of the developed world. Third, developed economies use deprived communities as a pool to supplement their own labour and skills shortages.

The result has been in both Britain and the third world the creation of subsidised and dependent communities where any wealth they create, and in some cases it can be minimal, is channelled out into already prosperous societies rather than retained within, a process that makes sure that the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen.

Derived from this analysis, we propose a model of Community Economics that draws on ideas and experience from a range of sources but whose synthesis is our own. Its elements include:

- Developing and releasing the talents, skills, creativity, self belief and confidence of people in communities characterised by poverty and multiple deprivation, to tackle the problems and determine the future direction of their communities.
- Stimulating the formation of local businesses and enterprises, markets and trading, the adoption of local employment and procurement policies and the development of community development trusts to own local assets and run local buildings and facilities to run a range of services and generate income for the benefit of the local community. All these strengthen the local economy by encouraging money to stay and recirculate within the local community rather than flowing out into outside businesses and providers.
- Promoting an economy that prioritises long-life durable products, conservation, renovation, maintenance, repair and recycling rather than short-life throwaway goods discarded as waste.
- Stimulating widespread local power generation, coinciding with the economics of solar energy use in particular, providing economic assets that are owned and controlled locally, and encouraging energy conservation and efficiency.

This is not an agenda that can be imposed by legislation, although some is clearly necessary to facilitate it, nor by central government control. It requires action at all levels from the local to the global, working both inside and outside the structures of government.

It requires people to take control over their own communities and determine their destinies themselves. Everyone can contribute wherever they are, whether it be within the community in which they live or the business, public or voluntary organisation to which they belong.

It is the same message as that of community politics: people taking and using power. Community Economics adds an extra dimension to community politics.

Bernard Greaves co-wrote *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics* in 1980. David Boyle is a fellow of the New Economics Foundation. ALDC will launch *The Theory and Practice of Community Economics* at the Liberal Democrat Conference in Bournemouth in September 2008. The authors are grateful to the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust for financing the writing of this publication and to ALDC for undertaking to print, market and distribute it

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BARE BONES

The Bones Commission has recommended changes to party management, but internal structures are the least of the Liberal Democrats' worries, says Simon Titley

"We trained hard, but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams, we would be reorganised. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganising, and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralisation."

This quotation, often falsely attributed to the ancient Roman satirist Petronius, probably has more recent origins yet it will provoke a weary sense of recognition among anyone who has endured an internal reorganisation.

Not that reorganisation is necessarily bad. Internal structures are not sacrosanct and reform is sometimes required. Circumstances alter, different needs arise and, even without external change, there is a tendency in the long run for systems to ossify and activity to become ritualised.

Even so, reorganisation should be approached with caution. There is always a temptation to tinker and, unless any changes have demonstrable benefits, the practical result risks becoming the waste of scarce time and resources.

Managerialism limits the imagination. The Liberal Democrats' management structure, the current focus of reform proposals, is by no means perfect and could undoubtedly be improved, but it is not a primary barrier to the party's electoral success and its reform will not in itself guarantee such success.

The fundamental problems of the party are political and strategic. To be fair to Chris Bones's Reform Commission, it had a limited remit to review the party's organisational effectiveness and it has commendably stuck to that remit. Had Bones strayed into more fundamental areas of party strategy, the outcome could have been incendiary.

The trouble is the premise underlying the decision to set up the Bones Commission. The assumption seemed to be that the solutions to the party's problems are essentially managerial. Bones was asked to devise a structure for implementing a strategy without there being an obvious political strategy in the first place. The stated target of winning 150 seats is just that; a target, not a strategy.

To make matters worse, the Commission's terms of reference were larded with hideous management jargon straight out of the FT's Martin Lukes or the Dilbert cartoon strip. The exercise was to be "future focussed" and talked of "stretch goals" and "step change". Anyone who writes that sort of language without irony should be taken out and shot.

What sort of 'step change' can we expect from Bones? The party has not been told. The Times (16 July) leaked a few of the conclusions, but in terms that suggested the existing party constitution is hamstrung by its old Liberal inheritance and would be improved by being remodelled on the SDP's more centralised system. This tendentious claptrap at least provides a clue to the source of the leak. Otherwise, party members are none the wiser and the Bones report has yet to be released to them.

Perhaps prompted by the leak to the Times, Nick Clegg wrote a short piece on the Liberal Democrat Voice blog extolling the virtues of the proposals but without telling readers what any of these reforms actually were. The secrecy extended even to the party's Federal Executive, which was asked to approve the key Bones proposals at its meeting on 14 July without prior sight of the report. This cloak- and-dagger business suggests a chronic lack of trust.

Elsewhere in this issue, RB provides more details of the actual Bones proposals and, as one would expect of such an exercise, they are a mixed bag. But the most striking feature is an obvious dissonance between the centralising prescriptions of Bones and the party's basic political critique, that power is too concentrated.

I was reminded of Michael Cockerell's recent TV documentary series, *Blair: the Inside Story*, in which it emerged that Tony Blair could not understand why the cabinet should have any say over major government decisions. His 'command and control' style reduced the cabinet to a cipher because he believed that consultation was an obstacle to getting things done.

Likewise, Bones implies an impatience with democracy and consultation, presumably on the assumption that fast decisions are necessarily better decisions. But if the Liberal Democrats believe that centralisation leads to wasteful, inefficient, bureaucratic and remote government, what makes anyone imagine that the outcome will be any different inside the party?

The answer is, of course, the self-interest of the people who 'know'. The template was created thirty years ago with the relationship between David Steel and Richard Holme. Since that time, a changing cast of self-appointed *nomenklatura* has hovered around successive leaders, claiming to know what is best while treating ordinary party members and internal democracy with contempt.

It is an arrogance that leads inevitably to the idiotic theory that the leader must establish his 'strong' credentials by taking on and defeating his own members, hence the succession of stage-managed 'back me or sack me' debates at party conference. Assuming Bones is debated at this September's conference, one fears the same old, same old.

This elite's finest hour was undoubtedly the failed attempt to persuade Charles Kennedy to drop the party's opposition to the Iraq war. The people who 'know' have

proved time and again to be a wet blanket. And this leads us to the party's basic problem, excessive caution.

The biggest danger the Liberal Democrats face at the next general election is of being blanded out. You would have thought that Iraq would have taught the party that there are electoral dividends from taking bold and distinct stances. But no, conventional wisdom dictates that the strategy must be to try and finesse New Labour and the Tories in 'triangulating' on the same Daily Mail-reading voters.

"The biggest danger is of being blanded out"

Bones is largely beside the point. The party's deficiency is less organisational than testicular; it is not policy per se but the lack of vigour with which it is expressed. The party is risk-averse. It is all too fond of adopting policies, only to express them in mealy-mouthed terms. As a result, the party neither enthuses its base nor challenges its opponents.

The recent launch of *Make it Happen*, an opportunity to sound more courageous, illustrated what is wrong. The language is a clue. The platitudes that accompanied the launch of this document simply won't wash. Simon Hoggart (Guardian, 18 July) reminded readers that "if the direct opposite of something is clearly ludicrous, there is little point saying it in the first place" and helpfully provided some examples.

"'We want to make Britain fairer!' (We want to make Britain more unjust). 'We need a tax system that offers transparency, clarity and a level playing field!' (We need a fiscal system that is obfuscatory, incomprehensible and biased towards the rich). 'You've got to be clear about taking the tough choices!' (We are hunting for easy, short-term options). 'The Liberal Democrats will put people first!' (We will value people less than the big corporations)."

And the emphasis in the tax cut proposals was wrong. Jonathan Calder put it well on his *Liberal England* blog: "My worry is that he [Clegg] is wrong in announcing his headline figures before he knows what spending cuts he wants to make. He has got it, as our American cousins might put it, backasswards.

"What he should have done was to emphasise the Lib Dem war on surveillance, centralisation and state control – in short, large chunks of the New Labour project. Then he could have said something like: 'Look, if we scrap ID cards and all these quangos and databases, we will save billions of pounds and be able to cut your taxes.'

"That, I think, would have proved popular. By announcing the tax cuts first and then saying we shall hunt for spending cuts to fund them, he makes it easier for our Labour opponents to paint us as a hard-faced party that wants to run down public services."

Or consider Europe. This has been the classic example of the Liberal Democrats lacking the courage of their convictions. The party's 2004 Euro election campaign was a disgrace, with members instructed not to mention Europe but to focus on local issues, resulting in a dismal fourth place behind UKIP. The party's Campaigns and Communications Committee, meeting on 16 July, decided to run a less parochial campaign in 2009 but how courageous will this campaign prove to be?

Make it Happen mentions Europe but focuses on the promise of a referendum, a sop to Eurosceptic opinion. It doesn't confront people with the key question: who do you want to lead the world? Should it be Europe with its federal system, independent countries and voting safeguards to prevent any group taking too much power? Or will we be nothing more than followers of the USA, taking our orders from Washington?

Or consider civil liberties. The party has opposed 42 days detention without trial for terrorist suspects, but would it have the balls to express a gutsy civil liberties campaign with a similar tone and content to that of the online magazine Spiked's action plan 'Slash 42 days to 24 hours' (www.spiked-online.com/index.php?/site/article/5359)?

The Liberal Democrats need reforming but internal structures are a second order issue. The priority is a culture change, which boils down to these six elements:

- **Narrative** – A clear narrative that explains what the party is for (see David Boyle's articles in Liberator 319 and 325) – a politics rooted in human values and meeting people's need for agency.
- **Moral clarity** – The forthright expression of the party's values, not inhibited by the brutal fact that one cannot attract without also repelling.
- **Difference** – Politics implies the existence of alternatives. The party must provide voters with a real choice, by standing up for what it believes in rather than joining in the Lab-Con consensus.
- **Change** – The goal is to change society for the better, not trim according to the latest poll or focus group. The aim is to change public opinion, not accept it as a given.
- **Targets** – A national campaign that cements the allegiance of those demographic groups most likely to support the party (principally the younger, better-educated, more cosmopolitan). We cannot win everywhere.
- **Involvement** – Steps to arrest and reverse the decline in party membership, based on a recognition of how people have changed and what enthuses them. Respect not contempt for the members the party still has.

The party can 'streamline' its organisation all it wants. But any revamp that is purely organisational can be overwhelmed by the tide of nationwide opinion trends. If the party enters the next general election campaign with its current poll ratings (around 18%), it will do well to retain its current tally of seats. Only if a strong national profile has propelled the party into the mid-20s are significant gains on the cards. But if the party is polling in the low teens (as it was last autumn), a haemorrhage of seats is inevitable, regardless of who sits on what committee or how many candidates have been put through an 'academy'.

The most reliable guide to the number of seats the party can expect at the next election is the spread betting market. These shrewd punters currently anticipate around 48 seats, a net loss of 15. It will take a good deal more than the restructuring of committees to change that outlook.

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective

TROUBLE AMONG THEIR FOLLOWERS

Both John McCain and Barack Obama face problems in holding their parties together as they vie for the American presidency, says Dennis Graf

Two very different men are vying for the US presidency, but they share at least one similarity – both are currently having trouble solidifying support within their own party.

John McCain is liked, or at least respected, by many independent voters, but he is widely distrusted by other Republicans. He's been an abrasive and often angry man in the senate – historically a collegial sort of place. During his long career, he has taken some positions unpopular with the Republican establishment. Many believe his immigration bill provides 'amnesty'. McCain is also identified with campaign fundraising limitation, which many Republicans consider a limitation on political speech, but he has changed his position on this and a number of other issues.

Barack Obama, the young junior senator from Illinois, has finally reached the delegate count needed for his nomination. He ran strongly among blacks, young people, university-educated Democrats and independents. His opponent, Hilary Clinton, was passionately supported by the traditional Democratic base – working-class people, ethnic voters and women, especially lower income single women. Obama must bring these two groups together and he needs the Clintons to help him.

When the political season opened about a year ago, Clinton was thought almost certain to receive the Democratic nomination. There were no political heavyweights claiming the role. She was not especially popular, but many Democrats look back upon the eight Clinton years with nostalgia. The dollar was strong – there had been not only a balanced budget, but a surplus, something almost unheard of in Washington. We were at peace, employment was high, inflation low and petrol, the symbol of American well-being, was cheaper than bottled water.

In recent decades, Democrats have usually won the non-Southern coastal states as well as the industrial region in the upper Midwest. The Republicans have taken almost everything else. This time both McCain and Obama believe they can entice dissatisfied voters from the opposing parties. Both men must modify their positions, or at least restate them with an artful imprecision, to form a winning coalition.

McCain is more popular than his party and Obama is less so than his. People know McCain as a war hero, probably the only one that we have right now. His political record is actually very right wing, but most people are not yet aware of that. McCain also has the affection of the national media; for many years he's been courting working reporters.

> *"McCain is more popular than his party and Obama is less so than his"*

A MYSTERY TO MOST PEOPLE

New on the scene, Obama is still a mystery to most people. This is, of course, both a strength and a weakness. He doesn't come with much baggage or negative history, so he must quickly develop a public image before his opponents do so for him.

He's obviously a very gifted, even charismatic politician. He's a black man in a country which still struggles with racism. Obama seems culturally 'white'. That's understandable; he grew up in Asia with his white mother and then lived as a teenager with his white grandparents in Hawaii, our most racially diverse state. He has to appear non-threatening, even to the point of being 'cool'. McCain can display a temper and even rage; Obama dare not do so. Obama is a surprisingly good writer and he can be a mesmerizing public speaker. McCain is usually a rather dull public performer, but in smaller groups and town meetings he can be convincing.

McCain started out with the reputation of being a maverick and a probable loser, but he was fortunate in not having any really strong opposition. To get the nomination, though, he's had to change many of his formerly reformist positions. The Democrats are trying, with some success, to paint him as a 'flip flopper' and a clone of the now despised George W Bush. McCain is valiantly trying to bring together the main strands of his party – a group that the economist Paul Krugman has described as the party of the "preachers and the plutocrats".

The Christian fundamentalists, people who happily voted for Bush, are not pleased. Their signature position – further restrictions on abortion – he agrees with. But McCain is clearly not a religious man and this is a serious handicap in American political life. Obama is a devout Christian, though his opponents whisper that he's a secret Muslim, the only group that many Americans still allow themselves to hate.

In his younger days, McCain had the reputation of being something of a playboy. He divorced his first wife after she suffered permanent injuries in a car crash and then quickly married a very rich and much younger blonde – what Americans call a trophy wife. The second Mrs McCain is an attractive woman who has worked for good causes; she also suffered from drug addiction at one time. All of this baggage would quickly bring down Obama, the black man, but not McCain – he's forgiven by an adoring national media.

McCain has taken over much of Bush's programme. He wants 'victory' in Iraq and thinks that it's possible but it is not clear what he means. He's made his share of gaffes – usually defined as when a politician has accidentally told the truth. He stated that we might be in Iraq for 100 years; a phrase pulled out of context by his opponents. Still, most people don't want to stay in Iraq much longer and the McCain-Bush position is probably hurting the Republicans.

He has also changed his position on Bush's tax cuts, a policy that requires us to borrow vast sums abroad to pay the government's bills. Originally McCain was not in favour of these tax cuts, but now he is. He says that we can bridge the gap by cutting unnecessary spending, something that would have been done long ago were it possible. He no longer seems to agree with the bill that carries his name and which was an attempt to rein in excessive campaign contributions ("Legalized bribery," people call it). He's fudged his positions on torture and on immigration, too. These changes are all necessary, but they hurt his image as a straight talker.

Obama is more difficult to label as a 'flip flopper' since he's been on the national scene for such a short time and his record is thin. His choice of advisors suggests that on economic, trade and foreign policy issues he will probably side with the moderates in his party. Most expect a more traditional foreign policy, seeking international cooperation and negotiation rather than unilateralism and the use of military force. Both men suggest an almost unlimited support of Israel. Iraq is a major problem and neither man has a convincing alternative. The rhetoric on each side is strong and sometimes confrontational, but in actual practice, they might not differ all that much. McCain is not a neo conservative and neither is Obama.

It's a big question and a hidden one, but race will clearly play a role in the coming election. We still have racists in the United States, but it's likely that most would vote against any Democrat. National polls currently show Obama in the lead, though one must take account of what we call the Bradley effect (Bradley was a black man who ran for governor of California and ended well ahead in the polls, but losing the election; common wisdom is that 6-7% say they will vote for a black, but will not).

Many of the American states are reliably Democratic or traditionally Republican and candidates tend to spend little time there. They go to the swing states, where elections are really won or lost. Some of these are fairly large – Ohio is the classic swing state. Messages are often tailored to voters in these states and there's often grumbling about their disproportionate influence. This election might change the electoral map, though. Once every generation or so, there is a realignment. This might be one of those years.

Currently there is much speculation as to their choices of running mates as vice-president. The nominees get to choose. Hillary Clinton is now thought to be an unlikely pick and most people think that Obama will try to find someone who is more experienced in foreign or military affairs. McCain will need someone who understands economics – he's admitted that he knows nothing about it. A good running mate probably doesn't help much, but a poor choice can be a handicap.

More than 80% of Americans believe that "we are headed in the wrong direction" but people tend to blame both parties and Obama may not profit much from this. Right now, the big issues relate to the economic downturn and the housing crisis. Unemployment is slowly rising and the stock market is shaky.

A badly needed reform of the health care system is something that no one wants to tackle, though it's likely that there will be a lot of discussion and maybe even some minor signs of progress. The public is demanding action, but no one has the slightest idea of what to do.

BUSH'S WAR

Iraq is an unpopular war, with more than two-thirds of the public wanting to leave, even though the media sees improvement. We are also in a war in Afghanistan and Obama is recommending that we refocus our attention there rather than in Iraq – "Bush's war". A third war, with Iran, seems possible, although too horrible to contemplate.

Obama's strength is thought to be his base in the now resurgent Democratic party, his ability to raise vast sums of money, much of it from ordinary people and his superb organisation.

What's working against him is his race, a feeling of his being an outsider, and the traditional rightward tilt of the national media. Many liberals or progressives in the Democratic party are upset by Obama's not unexpected edging toward the centre.

McCain has the severe handicap of being a Republican during a year in which his party is blamed for America's woes. He's trying to distance himself from Bush, but he needs to keep the hard-core Bush supporters while at the same time convincing a substantial number of independents to vote for him. He is popular with journalists and has been for many years. He has the reputation of being a straight talker, an image carefully cultivated but now somewhat tattered, but he is a white man, someone ordinary voters think they understand. In the Senate, he has specialized in military affairs, something in which Obama is weak. His image is that of a war hero who withstood torture and that's something people admire.

Still, McCain has real problems. He is the oldest person ever to run for the presidency and if he exudes a certain gravitas that many people find comforting, he also looks and moves like a man much older than his 71 years. He can be flippant and vulgar at times and there is probably much video from decades of public office which could be used to embarrass him. His personal life might contain some things difficult to explain.

Traditionally, Americans become seriously interested in national elections in early September, two months before the election. By that time, we will know much more.

Dennis Graf is Liberator's American correspondent

ONLY HARMING OURSELVES

The Liberal Democrats have been unable to turn words into action on diversity, which means the party will struggle in many Labour-held seats, says Reuben Thompson

The recent London elections made it very clear that, if the Liberal Democrats are to avoid becoming the victims of a mighty squeeze at the next general election, we are going to have to do more to engage with disenfranchised Labour supporters, and worry less about trying to take seats off the resurgent Tories.

Although we have scored notable successes against Labour in recent years (Hornsey, Brent East, Manchester Withington), they have not been of the number or scale of our victories over the Tories in the latter part of the 1990s.

This means that we need to adopt a new set of strategies to engage with the voters in the predominantly urban areas held by Labour. Many of these areas, including my own (Hackney) and its neighbours, contain large and diverse black and minority ethnic populations, whose support for Labour has been key to the party's retention of those parliamentary seats. Although this is by no means the only factor in turning over Labour support, it is going to be a vital slice of the pie.

"Even the Tories have stolen a march on us, with effort rewarding them with a crop of solid ethnic minority candidates, councillors and indeed MPs"

Back when Ming Campbell was leader, he talked about how important it was that we resemble the communities we represent. He then appointed a white, middle-class male as his diversity advisor. This is typical of the way that the diversity agenda has been treated within our party. We talk the talk, but seem to walk a strange kind of shuffling gait when it comes to actually putting these things into practice.

Don't get me wrong – I believe wholeheartedly that the inclusionist policies of our party best serve ethnic minorities, and indeed the wider population. It's just that we are failing miserably to engage with the people who need to hear them.

In reality, that means making sure that in an area with a 30% Turkish population (for example), a representative proportion of our councillors come from that community. It means making sure that we have black and Asian voices in parliament. And it means making sure that we continue to engage with those members of those communities who are elected, and put them at the heart of the party.

Last year's London Assembly selection was a case in point. Every winnable position was taken by a middle-class Anglo Saxon from south of the river. In a city where a quarter of the population comes from minority communities, that sends a strong message that we are not serious about equality. Although there was some debate in the aftermath, there was an awful lot of navel gazing and claims from certain circles that the lack of ethnic minority representation was the fault of those candidates who did put themselves forward not 'working the system' sufficiently well.

We must face the reality that there is not a level playing field. Ethnic minority communities have been politically excluded for much of their time in the UK, are likely relatively new to the party and may well lack the contacts and knowledge of 'the system' of some of their colleagues. It's ourselves that we are hurting by perpetuating this situation – we need the best candidates, not the best-connected candidates, and we are excluding good people.

Even the Tories have stolen a march on us, with effort rewarding them with a crop of solid ethnic minority candidates, councillors and indeed MPs. I hear the same arguments within the party that we used to hear about women candidates – "This area won't vote for a woman" has become "This area's not ready for a black MP". If Windsor is ready, everywhere is ready, and I somehow don't think I need to draw the obvious parallel from the other side of the Atlantic.

We need to consult on a proper national diversity strategy, modelled on the party's efforts to increase the number of women MPs. We need to ensure that the 'networking gap' is closed through regular meetings for ethnic minority councillors and campaigners with senior party officials and shadow ministers, also helping us to retain those we have already had elected.

RESIGNATIONS AND DEFECTIONS

Indeed, engaging with those already elected is a specific challenge for us. It's hard not to notice the high percentage of the resignations and defections in north London that have been from ethnic minority councillors over the last year or so. And Sajjad Karim's defection in the north-west has to be a serious warning to us all. We all know that being in a small council group is difficult and can be dispiriting for councillors; being in a tiny fraction of ethnic minority councillors within a large group can be just as isolating if no effort is made to engage.

We need to build knowledge and skills on engaging with our communities – communicating in other languages where appropriate, and engaging with relevant community organisations. We need to reach out to electors who may not understand Focus and who may not feel welcome at traditional surgeries. And we need every local party to have to account for how it is engaging with the whole community.

I am well aware that in many areas we are doing all of this. There are, however, plenty of local parties who are doing little but believe they are making every effort. There has been a lot of talking from many quarters that has turned into little action – initiatives have been raised and then sunk without trace.

There is, however, strong cause for hope. The party has finally created a national diversity position, held by the extremely able Issan Ghazni; he is however but one man swimming against a tide of thousands, and it's going to take him an extraordinarily long time to achieve what he needs to if the party doesn't start to flow with him.

Addressing the campaigning side of the equation, I would suggest that tentative moves towards establishing a translation bank are properly realised as soon as possible. In my area, we make a real effort to communicate in Turkish, but it's just the most prevalent of the 100 or so non-English languages spoken in the area. We've also begun to make initial efforts in Yiddish and Urdu, but are limited to those languages where we have activist speakers. It would be very helpful if we had recourse to translators of other languages, even if it were only to make basic information available on our website.

TRANSLATION BANK

The establishment of a national translation bank would also send a strong message that communicating with all our communities is the expected norm, and not something that only a few crazy local parties in London and the north-west need bother to do. It would also be a spur to those local parties who have wanted to try this but have lacked the motivation or skills.

It is also important that we learn as a party the cultural sensitivities of different communities – a colleague of mine pointed out to me recently how insulted her community would be if they were addressed in a language other than English. Where we gain knowledge, we should have a facility for sharing it, perhaps through the extranet.

I am extremely glad to hear that the phenomenal success of Chinese Liberal Democrats is to be replicated within the Turkish community, and I hope that similar groups within the Polish and other growing communities will be along shortly. Extending the work of Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats into more specific groups and giving them status within the party is an excellent way of not only demonstrating our interest in those communities, but also provides a valuable secondary level of support for those on the frontline.

As a party, we are proud of our commitment to social justice. I firmly believe that making sure we are engaging with as many of the populace as possible, listening to their opinions and problems and doing what we can to address them is an essential part of this.

Although we are beginning to make progress, we now need to take a decisive step forward and put serious action towards equality at the heart of all that we do, not simply the preamble to our constitution. If we fail to do this, we are failing ourselves, our communities and our principles.

Reuben Thompson is chair of Hackney Liberal Democrats

GIVING CITIZENS A VOICE

Is constitutional reform only for the geeks? A motion at this September's Liberal Democrat conference aims to prove otherwise, says James Graham

One of the strange paradoxes of modern politics is that the public feels more alienated from the political establishment than ever before and yet, at least conventional wisdom asserts, they are completely uninterested in constitutional reform. This is a particular challenge for Liberal Democrats, a greater than average proportion of whom care passionately about the state of our democracy.

Yet who can argue with the polling evidence trotted out every few years that consistently shows that the big issues on the proverbial doorstep are crime, health and education, with 'proportional representation' right at the bottom of the list.

Of course, these opinion polls are a bit of a con. The first rule of marketing is to talk about 'benefits' not 'features'. Everyone understands the benefits of keeping crime down and education standards up. Similarly, while electoral systems themselves will always be a minority interest, their effects – political parties that ignore 90% of the electorate, a zero-sum rush to the centre ground, an emphasis on personality politics and unrelenting negativity – are things that the public care deeply about.

> *"We can't begin to rebuild trust until we are prepared to disperse power more widely"*

Yet during the 2005 general election, 'trust' was the dog that failed to bark. Everyone recognised that it was a massive issue, yet all the parties – including the Lib Dems – conspired to avoid tackling it head-on during the election. The closest we came to addressing the deep concern that our political system is no longer accountable to the very public it is supposed to represent was Charles Kennedy questioning Tony Blair's personal judgement while Michael Howard called the Prime Minister an outright liar. No one was prepared to take the system head-on. It was a squandered opportunity, allowing us to be perceived as just another establishment party, and one that we are still paying a heavy price for.

Nevertheless, that has begun to change. To a greater extent than any party leader since Paddy Ashdown, Nick Clegg has sought to regain the initiative on democratic renewal. Back in January, it was the theme of his New Year message. He made it a central theme of his speech at the Liverpool conference and it is one of the main themes of the new *Make it Happen* 'visions and values' document. It is clear that Clegg sees this not merely as a way of keeping the awkward squad on board but as part of a broader agenda to reach out to people who feel disaffected by the political status quo.

It is this encouraging new mood music that has prompted a number of us to seek a debate this autumn about more radical ways in which we might want to re-engage the people with parliament. Our motion, Giving Citizens A Voice In Parliament, is currently on the conference's preliminary agenda. As well as restating existing policy on improving petitioning, establishing a constitutional convention and (of course) electoral reform, it moves party policy on in two important ways.

Firstly, it proposes a system of 'People's Bills'. Similar to the existing practice of Ballot Bills, in which a small number of MPs are given the opportunity to table a private member's bill each year, which is guaranteed a second reading debate, under these proposals the six People's Bills that received the most petition signatures in a given year would be guaranteed a hearing as well. MPs would not be required to support these bills or even required to attend the debate but, as they are ultimately accountable at the ballot box, they would have to be able justify their actions.

(The idea of People's Bills, incidentally, is not original – I will happily admit to having taken this idea from Direct Democracy, a ginger group that is on the right of the Conservative Party. While Liberal Democrats will have a problem with a lot of what Direct Democracy has to say, particularly its Euroscepticism, it is a fascinating group that is genuinely enthusiastic about democratic reform in a way that most of the Conservative Party is most definitely not).

Secondly, the motion proposes a 'People's Veto'. Proposed by Chris Huhne as part of his leadership bid last year and in keeping with the practice of a number of countries around the world, this system would require the government to hold a referendum on any piece of legislation if one million people petitioned for one within sixty days of the law clearing parliament. If the referendum were passed, the legislation would fall. There would be

nothing to stop parliament from going back and re-passing the law, but there would almost certainly be a public outcry about this. Once again, the ultimate arbiter would be the ballot box.

It is this proposal that, I suspect, will cause conference representatives the most difficulty. Would it apply to the Lisbon Treaty? Yes it would, but Eurosceptics would have to do a rather better job at enthusing the public than they do at present. To give you an idea of the scale of their task, the iwantareferendum.com campaign currently boasts around 45,000 supporters on its website – this following a year-long campaign that has cost millions of pounds. The level of Euroscepticism in the UK is often greatly exaggerated (sadly, often by Europhiles who have lost faith in their own arguments). Even in the Irish referendum, the successful 'no' campaign built its message around the public's lack of enthusiasm at being expected to have an opinion on such a complex document rather than any profound opposition to the EU.

Would it apply to money bills? There is an interesting debate to be had on that but my own view is that it should be. The budget is approved retrospectively in parliament in any case and, even if a budget were voted down in a referendum, the lights wouldn't go out. The Treasury would simply have to redo its sums, as we have just seen it do over the 10p tax rate. People wouldn't be able to cherry-pick specific clauses (scrap tax cut X but keep spending commitment Y) – this would be a 'take it or leave it' deal. It is rare for a budget itself to cause much public outrage. People are normally quite happy to leave balancing the books to the government but, on the odd occasion when it gets things catastrophically wrong (such as the proposal to increase the basic state pension by 75p in 2000), it is only right that the public should have a say. We should not have to hope that a convenient by-election will come along to inspire the prime minister of the day to have second thoughts.

Would it lead to dozens of referendums on all sorts of issues? No. Many people grossly overestimate the ability to raise petitions. If some of the fantasies that have been put to me about how easy it is to raise a million signatures via things like Facebook were true, campaign organisations such as Friends of the Earth and Unlock Democracy would be dramatically more successful than they are. Even the Number 10 Downing Street e-petition system, which is extremely insecure (a secure system of voter registration would have to be set up first and each petition would have to be subject to the same level of checks as a candidate nomination process to prevent abuse), has had only one petition with more than a million signatures since it was set up.

In Switzerland, a referendum can be called if 50,000 people (roughly 1% of the population) call for it within a hundred days. Our proposal is for proportionately two-and-a-half times as many signatures to be collected in just sixty days. Add to that the practical difficulties of collecting that many signatures in a much larger country, and it is clear that suggestions of a deluge are wide of the mark. It should also be pointed out that, again in Switzerland, only around 25-30% of referendums are actually successful.

There is simply no easy way to raise a million petition signatures in two months. Referendums will be restricted to issues that rouse strong public interest and where there is a real possibility that parliament has profoundly misjudged the public mood. Of course, having a more responsive electoral system would dramatically increase parliament's chances of getting it right in the first place.

What this motion most definitely does not call for is a California-style system of citizens' initiatives, in which members of the public can force a referendum on literally anything. I have to admit to being tempted by such a system, but for it to work there would have to be strong safeguards. Without a written constitution and an entrenched bill of rights, there is a real danger such a system would be open to abuse. These dangers are often overstated (Swiss and US citizens frequently vote through liberal legislation; the Irish banned the death penalty by referendum; there is evidence in the US that states with citizens' initiative systems are actually less likely to adopt the death penalty than those without), but on consideration I would humbly suggest that it is a step too far at this stage.

Unlike a full initiative and referendum system, the proposals in our motion are embedded in parliament itself. They are all designed to make parliament more responsive and, while electoral reform is necessary to achieve that, it is not of itself sufficient. The reality of representative democracy rarely lives up to the theoretical idea about electorates judging voting on the basis of party manifestoes. Major issues that have eaten up huge amounts of parliamentary time over the last couple of years such as nuclear power, replacing Trident and of course extending pre-charge detention, were simply not discussed in the last election. This will always be the case, regardless of what electoral system we have. What our proposals call for are mechanisms that allow the public to place issues on the agenda that politicians would prefer to ignore, and allow them to scrutinise major issues where parliament is seriously out of step. But the power to legislate remains with parliament itself.

Conrad Russell defined liberalism as being concerned with the use and dispersal of power. The alienation of the public from politics is not rooted in apathy but a sense of powerlessness. This is a dangerous phenomenon as it ultimately risks social cohesion itself. As Richard Layard wrote in his book *Happiness*, this is ultimately a quality of life issue. Yet as it currently stands, the claim that "politicians never listen" is an unprovable hypothesis. We can't begin to rebuild trust until we are prepared to disperse power more widely. This shouldn't just be a bullet point to appear in the Lib Dem manifesto – it is what we are ultimately about.

James Graham writes Quaequam Blog! (http://theliberati.net/quaequamblog) and is the Campaigns and Communications Manager of Unlock Democracy. He writes in a personal capacity

OBITUARY: TIM BEAUMONT

Jonathan Fryer pays tribute to the Liberal Democrat-turned Green peer Tim Beaumont

Timothy Wentworth Beaumont – Tim to all and sundry – who died in St Thomas's Hospital, London, on 8 April at the age of 79, was a much-loved though sometimes mocked figure within the Liberal and later Liberal Democrat parties, and a good friend to many publications (including Liberator) and endeavours related to the Liberal cause.

With his voluminous beard and, sometimes, lurid dress sense, Tim in later life took on the air of a somewhat bewildered Old Testament prophet. The message that he brought down from the mountain was firmly ecological.

He was green long before the environment was embraced by the Notting Hill set, so it was not entirely a surprise when he defected from the Liberal benches in the House of Lords in November 1999, to become the Green Party's one and only representative in parliament. He claimed the reason for the break was the Lib Dems' belief in free trade, though he had never felt as comfortable in the party as he had in the pre-merger Liberals.

Tim came from a highly political, rather grand family. His father, Major Michael Beaumont, was the right-wing Conservative MP for Aylesbury, and his paternal grandfather, Hubert (later Lord Allendale), was the Radical MP for Eastbourne. His maternal grandfather, Jack Pease, was chief whip in Herbert Asquith's Liberal government, before being ennobled as Lord Gainford and becoming chairman of the BBC.

Jack Pease was a Quaker who later became an Anglo-Catholic, and his legacy may have influenced Tim's religious vocation, which was sincere but vacillating. Tim became an Anglican priest, twice – resigning for a period in between, on the grounds that his lifestyle was incompatible with Holy Orders.

He enjoyed the good things in life and was a most generous host. Having inherited a considerable fortune from his late mother's American relatives, he went about spending it, on beautiful houses, modern art and what some might consider hopeless causes. Many charities and individuals were the beneficiaries of his munificence. In gratitude for the large sums of money Tim channelled into the Liberal Party, in 1967 Jeremy Thorpe made him a life peer, for which he adopted the title Lord Beaumont of Whitley.

Tim was always something of a misfit and an individualist. He only survived one year at his first boarding school, Eton, recalling to the parliamentary commentator Andrew Roth that he "was a nasty little boy, pinching things and being a layabout". He was switched to the more rigorous Gordonstoun in Scotland, whence he moved effortlessly to Christ Church, Oxford. Unsure what he wanted to do in life, he studied agricultural sciences but put little effort into his work, scraping by with a Third. Instead, he socialised, running the Bullingdon Club, the exclusive Oxford dining club noted for the wealth of its members and their destructive activities in restaurants. He also founded the Wagers Club, devoted to restoring 'the devil-may-care atmosphere of the Regency Bucks'.

A degree of stability was brought to his life by his marriage to the art historian Mary Rose Wauchope and his ordination. His first religious post was as assistant chaplain at St John's Cathedral in Hong Kong, though he was dismissed after a couple of years. Back in London, now flush with money, he set his family up in Mayfair, drove a Rolls Royce and started or took over various publishing enterprises, some Christian, others political, including the formerly significant periodical Time and Tide. Among the most overtly Liberal of these sometimes short-lived periodicals was New Outlook.

Tim was attracted to the Liberal Party by Jo Grimond who, he claimed, was the only man worthy of the title 'party leader'. The party benefited from Tim's time as well as from his money. He was joint treasurer for a while, then later chairman, until Jeremy Thorpe sacked him from the latter post following Tim's criticisms of Thorpe's extra-parliamentary behaviour. Three months later, Liberal Party members elected Tim as party president. In the contest to replace Thorpe as leader, he ran John Pardoe's unsuccessful campaign.

As a Liberal peer – at which he also had two stints, standing aside for a while to work for the Green Alliance – Tim held a number of portfolios, including education, the arts and Northern Ireland, before homing in on the environment. But he also increasingly adopted what the media considered to be marginal issues, reinforcing his reputation within the Westminster village of being distinctly dotty. For example, he championed the rights of transsexuals and tried to get piped music banned in the public areas of hospitals.

A modern Don Quixote, he often tilted at windmills, but he will be remembered with huge affection.

Jonathan Fryer is a writer and broadcaster, chairman of the Liberal International British Group, and an elected member of the ELDR Council and the Liberal Democrats' International Relations Committee

DON'T PUT YOUR CANDIDATE ON THE STAGE, MRS SHUTTLEWORTH

The Liberal Revue makes a welcome return to the stage at this September's Liberal Democrat conference. Nobby Shuttleworth fondly recalls the Revue's chequered history

Liberals have always enjoyed a good laugh. My theory is that it's gallows humour. Our party's often been at death's door and you've got a choice. You can either deliver another leaflet or you can tell a mucky joke.

Of course, nowadays, everyone's out delivering bloody Focus leaflets but I'm glad to see there are still some members who'd rather spend their time getting a few cheap laughs. Yes, the Liberal Revue is back next conference and I'll be doing my usual turn. Something old, not much new, much of it borrowed and nearly all blue. Well, it beats sitting through another training session.

But how did the Liberal Revue start, I hear you ask? To find out, you have to go back to the days before the war. Back then, there was no conference fringe and things were more formal. Under the Liberal Assembly's standing orders, only the party president was allowed to tell jokes, which he delivered intermittently from the platform between debates. To be honest, it was not an occasion for much mirth, not until 1934 when Ramsay Muir got his hand caught in the tombola and Sir Herbert Samuel laughed so hard he shat his pants.

During the war, German U-boats restricted the amount of humour shipped in from abroad and jokes were rationed. Two George Formby coupons had to last you the whole week. It was during those dark days that people learned to make their own entertainment. As a young lad, I well remember Churchill's "Crack a joke for victory" campaign. In London, they even dug up Hyde Park to make a temporary working men's club and melted down iron railings to make ukuleles.

After the war, Liberal activists were demobbed and returned to what they knew best: losing elections. The Revue became a regular fixture again at the Liberal Assembly. In those days, everyone mucked in and you might see a young Jo Grimond folding balloons, Clement Davies doing his famous farmyard impressions or Frank Byers playing the spoons.

Sadly, the Liberal Revue failed to capitalise on the early 60s 'satire boom' and by the end of the decade it could no longer compete with the more popular Glee Club. Things started to look up in the 1970s, however. Together with Tony Greaves, we applied to the Rowntree Trust for some money and were able to re-open the Hebden Bridge Wheeltappers' and Liberal Canvassers' Social Club.

My own career in stand-up comedy started in Hebden Bridge back in them days. To be frank, my unique blend of Nonconformist Liberalism and lavatory humour had a limited appeal beyond the Pennines. Even so, I became a regular on the popular TV show *The Comedians* and made a few bob on the side lending my name to Millets' popular range of army-surplus frilly shirts.

Then came the 1980s and my career took a nosedive. A devastating combination of 'alternative' comedy and 'community' politics drove my brand of humour right out of fashion. I was on my uppers and, like many a showbiz star fallen on hard times, took to drink and drugs. One night, I mistook some curry powder for cocaine and spent three weeks in a korma.

Luckily, the Liberal Revue team came to the rescue. I was sitting on the bog one day minding my own business when the director Simon Titley rang up. He said, "We've given up on intelligent satire and decided it's easier just to write knob gags. Would you like a job?" Since then, I've never looked back.

Anyway, here's a good 'un to round things off. Young lad in my constituency, fresh out of school, only 16, gets a job working in the local mortuary. One day he sees the naked corpse of a young woman lying on the slab. He goes up to the boss and says, "Ay up, boss, you see that young woman lying on the slab back there? She's got a prawn on her fanny." The boss takes a look and says, "Give over, yer daft bugger! That's not a prawn, it's a clitoris!" "Funny," replies the young lad, "tastes like a prawn."

Nobby Shuttleworth is a Liberal stand-up comedian from somewhere Up North. He is available for weddings, bar mitzvahs and constituency bring-and-buy sales. He will be appearing at the Liberal Revue on 15th September in Bournemouth

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BOOKING FORM OVERLEAF

LIBERAL REVUE – BOOK NOW!

Book now for the Liberal Revue at this September's Liberal Democrat conference in Bournemouth – seats are limited!

The Liberal Revue takes place at 10.30pm on Monday 15th September. The venue is the De Vere Suite in the Royal Bath Hotel, Bournemouth.

Entry is by ticket only and seats are limited. We strongly advise advance booking to ensure a place. Tickets cost £10 per person.

There will be no reserved seats but if you need any form of disabled access, please advise us in advance.

You can book tickets by post (use the form below or a photocopy, and enclose a cheque), or you can book online using a credit card via PayPal at our website (www.liberator.org.uk).

Tickets will also be sold at the Liberator stall in Bournemouth (subject to availability).

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I would like to buy _____ [number] tickets for the Liberal Revue on Monday 15th September 2008.

Tickets cost £10 per person.

Please enclose a cheque (made payable to'Liberator Publications') and send your completed form to:

Liberator (revue tickets), Flat 1, 24 Alexandra Grove, LONDON N4 2LF

Please fill in your name and address using BLOCK CAPITALS

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LETTERS

WELSH WRONGS

Dear Liberator,

Reading through Liberator 326, I wondered if perhaps you were planning to rename the magazine 'The Grauniad' there were so many basic errors in it. Perhaps you will allow me to put them right.

In the article in Radical Bulletin on the Welsh Liberal Democrat leadership, you state that "Peter Law and Mick Bates have ruled themselves out". The late Peter Law was a Labour and then Independent assembly member and MP for Blaenau Gwent. If he were still alive, he would not have been eligible to stand for the position.

Russell Deacon's article on the Welsh local elections also contained some basic errors. Welsh Liberal Democrats are in fact helping to run 13 of Wales's 22 councils, not the dozen referred to. We gained four seats on Swansea council not three, while in Wrexham, far from losing two seats, we went from a group of 10 to 12. Although we fell three short of a majority in Cardiff, this was still an advance of three seats on our previous total.

Welsh Liberal Democrats now have more councillors than at any time since the party was formed. The results of the last set of elections have put us firmly back on the electoral map as a force in Welsh politics.

Peter Black AM
Swansea

POWER CONCENTRATED

Dear Liberator,

In his article on directly elected mayors (Liberator 326), Matthew Huntbach warns against them although he gives little evidence of practical examples. While arguably Ken Livingstone didn't bring the mayoral system into disrepute, his tenure of office vindicated his previous opposition to directly elected mayors. Even the much vaunted improvements in the bus service have been largely in central London.

Having at times waited more than an hour for a service advertised by posters with the label 'Mayor of London' as running every 15 minutes, I am not impressed by Mr Livingstone's tenure, and the limited power of the London Assembly leaves me wondering what it is for other than a salaried career structure for politicians who can't make it to Westminster.

I don't know what pluralistic Lewisham's experience with mayor Steve Bullock is but, as Matthew Huntbach correctly points out, directly elected mayors concentrate too much power in the hands of a single individual whereas a collectively reached decision is more likely to be sound.

Certainly any lobbying group would prefer not to deal with a directly elected mayor. The ideal situation here is one of no overall control in which the responses of different parties can be played off against each other. The cabinet system isn't a lot better in that it has created a two-tier system of councillors, with a core of professional politicians and the rest of the councillors having very little input. However, it does avoid the pitfalls of concentrating too much power in one person.

Directly elected mayors were proposed in the hope that American-style celebrity campaigns would increase turnout in local elections. Initially they may but, once the glamour wears off and the buses still fail to run to timetable, the public lavatories are closed and other services don't improve, the novelty will wear off. Unfortunately, it may be too late to amend the situation quickly whereas under the old system there were regular elections.

Andrew Hudson
Leyton

LIBERATOR 328

Copies of Liberator 328 will be distributed to subscribers present at the Liberal Democrat conference in Bournemouth in September, and posted to others in the following week. Please visit our stall to collect your copy and renew your subscription

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REVIEWS

Miami and the Siege of Chicago by Norman Mailer New York Review of Books 2008 £7.61

As the US political convention season for 2008 approaches, it is not surprising if minds return to another season exactly 40 years ago – to Miami for the Republicans and to Chicago for the Democrats.

With the re-publication of recently deceased Mailer's distinctive brand of fictionalised journalism (first published in 1968), we are taken into the dark heart of American politics. Anyone who came into youthful political awareness during the mid and late 1960s will recall the unique blend of despair and optimism that was a feature of the times. Scarred by deep divisions over the Vietnam War and over race, haunted by the recent assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, who seemed to offer an alternative to the dominant militaristic and materialistic ethos of the period, there was, nevertheless, a conviction that protest could bring change – a conviction that remains alive among certain groups and people today.

The America of 2008 is certainly a very different country to the America of 1968 – in spite of some uncanny parallels between two unpopular conflicts – one in the Far East and the other in the Middle East. Yet Mailer's highly personal and powerfully graphic recreation and dissection of political ambition, rivalry and rhetoric still resonates, reviving distant memories for the baby-boom generation of times long ago.

Within the "leaden sweat" of Florida's humid air, which "entered the lungs like a hand slipping into a rubber glove," Mailer gives us a sickly-sweet taste of American power – presenting with visceral sharpness an ungainly parade of politicians, party professionals and delegates. Rockefeller, for example, has an "honest voice... a near-perfect voice for a campaigner; it was just a question of whether it was entirely his own". First there is Mailer's wise-eyed observation, and then the punchline.

Nixon, whose reputation has never recovered from Watergate, is also a major character in the book. Yet in 1968, he seems a reformed character, possessing a new modesty and trying to do justice to the complexity of the political issues that he addresses. We wonder for a moment if we've got it wrong about Tricky Dicky or that Mailer is going soft. However, then the reporter's eye homes in on the smile as he "flashed his teeth in a painful kind of joyous grimace which spoke of some shrinkage in the liver, or the gut, which he would have to repair afterward by other medicine than good fellowship" (by winning the Presidency, perhaps). So we move from the political to the physical in one short sentence – from the face of power to its rotting entrails.

American party conventions are also, of course, about the delegates and supporters, who crowd the hotels and convention floor. While Reagan attracts the "corporate and social power of America" to his reception, those who attend Nixon's equivalent event are less wealthy – more small-town than big city. Composed of shop-owners, lawyers and minor executives, they form an orderly line so that each one can shake their adored leader's hand personally – so that "they can feel the moves of his hands upon them". Bewildered by the events of the previous four years, these Wasps were now a chastened crew, with a more "modest" – a favourite Mailer word – sense of their own and of America's power.

This is politics as a form of religion and Nixon wins because he is able to recognise and manage Middle America's need for a saviour to "cleanse the gangrenous wounds" of a great country. Possibly, there are anticipations here of what Obama represents in the USA of 2008, for what Mailer grasps, in a way that few political analysts do, is the mythic and spiritual dimension of politics, particularly at key moments of transition and democratic choice.

In Chicago, however, characterised by the bloody carnage of its slaughterhouses, there is little evidence of the spiritual. Power is here represented by the police force and National Guard, seeking to confront and control the demonstrations and marches on the city's streets and the hysteria provoked by the assassinations and riots of previous weeks.

What goes on in the convention hall seems peripheral. Only Lyndon Johnson and Mayor Daley possess real force. The former may have remained in Washington but his presence at the convention is "felt more as a brain the size of a dirigible floating above the delegates in the smoke-filled air"– an image that is both sinister and strangely comforting at the same time. And the notorious latter figure "has the very face of Chicago... with nostrils open wide to the stench and power". It is they who direct the real battle for America and give the Democratic Party the bad name, from which it hasn't entirely escaped.

Mailer certainly records some of the vicious details of this battle but his main interest is arguably less in what is happening on the streets than in what is happening in his own head. We move from highly personal reportage to what seems a highly personal form of psychoanalytic confession – a self-reflective examination of what it means for the observing writer to be caught up in a world that demands commitment and involvement. Against his will, filled with shame, Mailer starts to suffer the "anguish of the European intellectual in the Thirties". Or, in other words, liberal guilt.

Leaving the terrifying evocation of the sounds and tear-gas smells of the police charges to other journalists, who he quotes at length, Mailer focuses on his own uncertainties about whether he should stay with the

radicals and Yippies or retreat. This is the New Journalism at its most self-absorbed and most extreme. He feels the "bird of fear beginning to nest in his throat" and understands "how Mussolini's son-in-law had once been able to find the bombs he dropped from his airplane, beautiful as they burst". Retreating, he wonders if he is ready to give up the relatively comfortable and safe lifestyle he enjoys. First, the answer is no. And then, things begin to change.

Mailer, the reporter, becomes Mailer, the participant. Not only does he make a rousing speech to the demonstrators but he twice aggressively 'inspects' a line of National Guard soldiers, taking notes of a threatening-looking Jeep, with a rectangle of barbed wire on its front. His subsequent arrest, which he seems almost to demand to compensate for his previous detachment, becomes symbolic of his final choice – to join the revolution rather than remain a spectator. When someone close by calls the demonstrators "cocksuckers," his reply, "Don't call them cocksuckers... They're my troops and they're great," says it all.

A strong element of self-dramatisation is undeniable – Mailer ends his narrative as hero. But his initial willingness to record his own cowardice and selfishness, and to turn his own vulnerabilities into narrative, are nevertheless redeeming qualities. To set against the hypocrisies and different forms of brutality that marked the politics and conventions of 1968, there is a kind of integrity.

The book may not have the obvious topicality it did 40 years ago but it continues to be relevant for artists, intellectuals and politicians, who remain undecided between the guilty pleasures of detachment and the messy and dangerous life of action.

Mike Peters

The Athenian Option by Anthony Barnett and Peter Carty Imprint Academic 2008 £25.00

The Athenian Option: radical reform of the House of Lords, to give it its full title first, appeared as a Demos pamphlet in 1998; it now appears in a revised second edition as "an idea whose time is coming". I'm not sure if Liberator reviewed it at the time. *Marxism Today*, the Zeus from which Demos emerged fully formed, had been respected in Liberator circles. By 1998 however, if not from the outset, Demos was a hopelessly New Labour body. Whatever influence Demos may have had on Tony Blair, Barnett and Carty were less successful in their arguments.

I recall the late Conrad Russell saying that the next government after New Labour would have to embark on a major round of constitutional reform to put right the mess that Blair & co's half-baked ideas were in the process of creating. Instead of starting with the superficially easy House of Lords reform, as Labour did, this should be left till last, not least because, with thorough reform, the Lords might not be needed at all. Barnett and Carty no doubt scent change in the air and consider it a good time to float their ideas again.

This new edition adds to the original volume the deliberations thereon of the Royal Commission on the Reform of the House of Lords and the reaction in the press. The letters are the best bit but they are from people who are not necessarily politicians. In some respects, the book might be seen as a preface to a series of books from Imprint Academic on the question of parliamentary reform and 'Sortition' in particular.

Essentially, the authors' argument is that membership of the upper house should be by lottery. In this, it adopts a core idea of the Athenian Democracy. The Council of 500 was the executive of the Athenian Democracy, and was chosen by lot. Citizens' names were scratched on a broken piece of pottery and drawn from a pot (Aristotle doesn't go into the precise mechanics in *The Athenian Constitution* – a right riveting read). Membership was shared equally rather than proportionally among the 10 tribes of Athens and members were paid for their service. Any citizen over 30, high or low, might be called upon to serve, though we know that somehow the leading figures of Athenian politics usually managed to scrape home. It seems likely that citizens actually volunteered for their names to be put in the lot rather than the theoretical 'all citizens', and most contemporary authors – Plato in *Apology of Socrates*, for example – suggests that membership was not especially associated with a political career.

Since New Labour was a machine for electing career politicians par excellence, it is hardly surprising that, the late John Smith's words notwithstanding, any idea with half a whiff of taking power out of the hands of politicians would be given short shrift by them. The words of Gladstone as one enters the National Liberal Club ("The principle of Toryism is mistrust of the people qualified by fear. The principle of Liberalism is trust in the people qualified by prudence") must be borne in mind by any politician serious about reform, and that includes the mealy-mouthed career-seekers in the Liberal Democrats.

Why stop at the House of Lords; why not seek a genuinely participatory democracy at all levels? The objection that the people are not capable of it cries out from the objections to our author's modest proposal, but I echo the Whig Robert Lowe in the wake of the second Reform Act: "Now we must educate our masters". Some 140 years have passed since Lowe said that; despite promising beginnings, isn't it about time we got on with the job? A truly radical solution to the demise of British politics that was inevitable, given New Labour's methods, requires truly radical means.

Stewart Rayment

Lord Bonkers' Diary

Monday

As ever, high summer will find me residing at the Hotel Splendide, Antibes. Having spent more holidays at this fine establishment than I care to remember, I have naturally become a part of the life of the town. In particular, it is the only resort on the Riviera that has a regular Focus delivered to every door. I write it myself – whether dictating it over dinner at the Hotel or sending it by electric telegraph from Rutland. Because the temperamental French refuse to make the slightest effort to learn English, I am obliged to have the entire newsletter PRINTED IN BLOCK CAPITALS (like so, what?) so that they can understand it.

Tuesday

It is cook's evening off, so I send out for haddock and chips. I am saddened to learn from the wrappings – our national dish tastes so much better eaten from the paper, don't you think? – that poor Lembit has been given the bum's rush by those spirited Cheeky Girls. I always feared that their love was too urgent, too ardent, and might one day burn itself out. I am reminded of the Esquimaux couple I met while working as a fur trapper on Baffin Island: they made passionate love throughout the long Arctic night, but in the end she broke it off.

Wednesday

The morning's newspapers foresee choppy economic seas ahead; we shall all have to tighten our belts, batten down the hatches and so forth. It makes me glad that I had the wisdom to lay down a good cellar of Stilton many years ago and also that I went in for this self-sufficiency business at the same time – one can only save so much by watering the Orphans' gruel. I was inspired by watching The Good Life on the moving television – that amusing programme starring the delightful Felicity Kendall. Catching sight of it upon my set once, Meadowcroft described her bottom as resembling "two mommets a-canoodling". Be that as it may, she inspired me to live entirely on the produce of the Bonkers Hall Estate: bread made from flour ground from our own wheat; fish caught by my trawlers on Rutland Water; pineapples from my hothouses; and so on. Rather proud of my achievement, I once invited that well-known environmentalist Malachy Dromgoogle to visit. I showed him all around the Estate and he then asked "But is it sustainable?" "Well, it certainly sustains me," I replied.

Thursday

One thing the aforementioned Dromgoogle was particularly keen on was wind power. I showed him the windmill on the Estate – it sits atop the highest hill, next to the Triumphal Arch celebrating Wallace Lawler's victory in the Birmingham Ladywood by-election of 1969 – but he was not satisfied; wind turbines, he insisted, were the latest thing. Well I had them installed and a fat lot of use they turned out to be. They cost a fortune to run – I hate to think what my electricity bill would have been if it were not for my treadmill and my hydro-electric plant – and I am not convinced that they made the wind a single jot stronger. I had the thing demolished and Dobbin insisted on towing it to the nearest scrapyard (after he had finished writing a letter in praise of our then Leader to Liberal Democrat News).

Friday

In Westminster to settle some business before I leave for France, I come across Clegg in expansive mood. "All those party committees. What is the point of them? When I decide it is a good idea to tell everyone how many sexual partners I have had, I don't want a load of people in anoraks questioning my judgement. And what about David Heath? When I made up my mind to sack him for not abstaining on a referendum on the Nice Treaty because we wanted one on Britain's membership of the European Union – albeit that we voted against one when someone else proposed it in the Lords – I just went ahead and did it. I didn't want a lot of women with badges on telling me I was wrong." It is always a sign of danger when leaders get like this – and all do eventually, though it took even little Steel a few years. I recommend giving Clegg both volumes of *The Open Society and its Enemies* by my old friend Sir Karl Popper (he was Terribly Clever) to read. And if that does not work we can always try hitting him over the head with them.

Saturday

I was sorry to read of the death of the comic actor Hugh Lloyd: he was one of the Liberal Party's celebrity supporters in the days when such creatures were indeed in short supply. What is now forgotten was that he had his own radio comedy – Mind My Majority! – in which he played a hard-pressed agent. Many young thespians – Maggie Smith, Albert Finney, Basil Brush, Rodney Bewes – first came to public notice in the show and, in its day, Lloyd's catchphrases "Eeh! I could write a shuttleworth!" and "You'll have the Acting Returning Officer to answer to!" were on the lips of every schoolchild.

Sunday

The tractor has made only slight inroads here on the Bonkers Hall Estate; for the most part I prefer to use shire horses to haul my agricultural machinery. One beast in particular has my undying admiration: after a full day's ploughing, it enjoys nothing more than delivering Focus around the neighbouring villages. I will sometimes call by its stable in the evening for a word about the current political scene. Why, I asked Dobbin, was Clegg not putting up a candidate in Haltemprice and Howden? If one of your chief opponents gets a rush of blood to the head and resigns from the House, you are under no obligation to smooth his passage back. Yes, we agree with him on 42 days and so forth, but then we agree with all sorts of people on all sorts of things. It does not stop us standing against them come election time.

Dobbin listened to all this with his head inclined and then replied: "Mr Clegg is a very clever man and I am sure he will decide what is best for the Liberal Democrats. All I know is that I must work harder for the party. Never mind Haltemprice and Howden . Tomorrow I shall be going to Henley to deliver lots more leaflets." It shows a wonderful spirit, of course, but I am not sure I shall give Dobbin my first preference this time if he decides to stand for the Federal Executive again.

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