

liberator



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COMMENTARY

WRONG APPROACH, WRONG TIME

Who would have thought that the Liberal Democrats would be worth more than Lehman Brothers, that banks could be taken into effective public ownership to a chorus of approval from the Conservative Party, or that Gordon Brown, a month after being widely considered politically dead, would find himself acclaimed the saviour of the world's financial system?

A week is truly a long time in politics and, as of mid-October, the financial turmoil has revived Labour, damaged the Tories and left the Lib Dems undisturbed on an unimpressive poll rating.

That might seem unfair given that the party's shadow chancellor Vince Cable was the only politician of any note to warn that debt levels had reached unsustainable levels. Politics, though, rarely gives rewards for being proved right after the event; it gives rewards for implementing, or at least offering, solutions.

It is true that the party got out a rapid economic recovery plan of measures to tackle the worst short-term problems, but it has so far failed to convince the public that its ability to spot the danger has led to any insights into how to prevent it happening again.

One hears a good deal less nowadays about the Lib Dems pioneering the idea of an independent Bank of England, an institution that hardly distinguished itself by keeping lending rates high as the credit system came crashing down around it.

With that economic flagship listing badly, does the party have anything with which to replace it?

Not really, and it is easy to see why. As the banking crisis has exposed the limits of the markets, and the need for government intervention to rescue them from their own folly, so a climate of opinion has been created quite at odds with the Lib Dem direction of travel.

For the past few years, the party has belatedly embraced the 1980s baggage of faith in markets, 'light touch' (for which read 'ineffective') regulation of them, lower public spending and an uncritical view of the private sector. Those who espoused these views – and even more so the fringe of libertarians who have lately attached themselves to the party – have been left looking both foolish and irresponsible.

It is governments to which people look for protection when things get bad because only governments can act on the scale required.

There has been a three-party consensus on the role and regulation of business for the past decade, which has allowed the practices to develop that have led to the present fiasco. The Conservatives genuinely believed in a 'light touch' and in leaving the private sector to its own

devices, Labour was told to believe in it and the Lib Dems went along with this because everyone else did.

If ever a situation cried out for the party to say, "we knew it would all end in tears, and this is how to prevent it happening again", it is now.

Can the party do a handbrake turn away from an approach rendered redundant by events and call instead for tight regulation of banks and for a mindset that looks sceptically at the claims of the spivs and chancers who have successfully bullied politicians into seeing their way for too long?

There may not be too long in which to do this. The Conservatives will eventually revert to type and to a Thatcherite approach to markets and regulation, while Labour may decide it is onto something at present and issue plans for effective regulation to a receptive public.

Remember what happened to the Lib Dems last time there was a general election in which the other parties were both viable, competitive and offered clear alternatives? It was called 1992.

A LESS SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

By the time you read this *Liberator*, the result of the US presidential election may be known. Liberal International British Group's forum on the subject in October saw Lib Dem chief executive Chris Rennard and Democrats Abroad chair Bill Barnard both cautiously optimistic about Barack Obama's chances.

An Obama win will neutralise much of the anti-American feeling in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, stoked by the widely-hated incumbent. In general, this country likes Democrat presidents and mistrusts the Republican party's warmongering religious fanatics. The latter have been exemplified by Sarah Palin, whose views would disqualify her from serious office in most of Europe.

There is not much to be done about the self-styled 'leader of the free world' being elected without most of the free world voting on the matter. But things can be done about the cringing before America that led to British participation in the Iraq war.

We cannot influence their choice of president, but we can influence Britain and Europe's relationship with America. Every post-war political leader of every party in Britain, with the exception of Harold Wilson (on Vietnam) and Edward Heath (on Europe), has blindly followed whatever line comes from Washington.

The friendlier climate that will prevail should Obama win may allow space in which a less craven relationship can be developed.

RADICAL BULLETIN

SORRY, WRONG NUMBERS

There was disaster written all over the exercise that saw Nick Clegg ‘phone’ 250,000 people (who had never done him any harm) during the middle of two key football matches, *Coronation Street* and most people’s dinner times.

Indeed, one of the stranger aspects of this saga is why the party chose to make a huge public point about doing this, rather than carry it out quietly. If the intention was to send the message “we have so many donors that we can throw money around on this,” it only make things worse, as the resulting publicity was uniformly appalling.

The party knew full well what it was getting into as it had campaigned at the last general election against the Labour and Conservative parties’ cold-calling of people by phone, and indeed had more recently complained about the SNP’s use of this technique.

It is hard to believe that whoever devised the Lib Dem nuisance calls was unaware of the SNP having been served with an order from the Information Commissioner to cease the practice.

As night follows day, the commissioner turned his attention to the Lib Dems, issuing a similar enforcement notice that carries an unlimited fine should the offence be repeated.

Things did not start well when Clegg’s parliamentary aide Danny Alexander told a conference press briefing the day before Clegg’s speech that the phoning would take place a few hours after he spoke.

One hack predictably asked whether Alexander was signed up to the Telephone Preference Service to prevent such calls. Alexander admitted he was. Another asked, equally foreseeably, whether Clegg was similarly signed-up. Alexander refused to answer, claiming this was ‘privileged information’, at which point the briefing ended in disorder with press hostility made certain.

The exercise worked by voters receiving an unsolicited call with a recorded message from Clegg that invited them to press different numbers to learn more about Lib Dem policies.

Most people dislike such calls, whether they are about double-glazing, get rich quick schemes, Nick Clegg or, indeed, anything else.

As one MP told *Liberator*: “I had a letter a few days earlier telling me that 10,000 such calls would be made to my seat.

“My heart sank, as ‘live’ phoning from London has lost us plenty of members in the past. In the event, we have only had about a dozen or so complaints, and I’m told some ‘data’ is coming our way.

“But the whole thing seems to me a waste of money and distracted from Clegg’s speech being reasonably well received.”

So who was responsible for this fiasco? Although chief executive Chris Rennard fronted responses in the media, does the blame lie elsewhere, with a certain person who has embedded himself in Clegg’s entourage?

As another MP told *Liberator* on the last night of conference, “Gavin Grant’s politics may be mad, but he’s doing a lot of good PR things for us, he’s arranged for Nick to phone a quarter of a million people tomorrow night.”

Iraq war supporter Grant claims to have Clegg’s ear. How long this will last remains to be seen if he continues to be observed applauding Liberal Vision (see below) at its fringe meetings and carelessly boasting that he is grooming Julia Goldsworthy as the next leader. The last person anointed by Grant as a future leader was Mark Oaten. Whatever happened to him?

THE LIB DEM ALWAYS RINGS ONE MILLION TIMES

Not content with disturbing people by phone, the Lib Dems also embarked on a post-conference attempt to call on a million doors.

If activists wondered what they were supposed to do once a door was answered, they would have searched without success in the material issued by the party.

One perplexed party officer received the draft of an e-mail from Clegg to party members that combined news of conference and the ‘million door challenge’, only to notice that it offered no advice on what members were expected to say.

Back came a note from Clegg’s office that members were “expected to sell the Make It Happen agenda”. Even if one leaves aside disputes about this document’s value, which parts were they supposed to sell, and how? The guidance from the campaigns department was of little help. “The best way to engage with people is to go and talk to them,” it read.

The stated goals were to:

- get in touch with people across Britain by knocking on one million doors across the country,
- to listen and engage with them about issues that matter to them in their everyday life,
- to show that the Liberal Democrats are the only party that is in touch with real life in Britain today, to take action on the issues raised with us,
- to put canvassing back on the map as a vital part of local campaigning,
- to get a new generation of activists out on doorsteps engaging with residents in their own community.

Why? Points one and two use activists as human grumble sheets rather than encourage them to propound any

message about what the party thinks/seeks/wishes to do; point three is an assertion; and points four and five concern the party's internal training rather than the public.

To aid this endeavour, local parties were promised "200 full colour residents' surveys (presumably the surveys, not the residents), a campaign delivery bag, 100 stickers, a CD of template literature and Nick Clegg photos, recruitment leaflets".

Nothing about why the party was calling, what to say or, most importantly, why anyone called on should give the Lib Dems their support. Is it any wonder voters complain that they do not know what the party stands for?

A BLOW FOR FREEDOM

The most surprising thing about the much-reported conference fisticuffs between Torbay MP Adrian Sanders and Liberal Vision's chairman Mark Littlewood was that there was not a queue of aggrieved MPs waiting behind Sanders to do the same to the public face of the libertarian fringe.

Trouble followed Littlewood's publication of a two-part report, *The Cameron Effect*. The first part contained a dry statistical analysis of the vulnerability of Lib Dem seats to the Tories. The second lurched off into the unsupported assertion that the only way to defeat Cameron was for the Lib Dems to offer huge tax cuts to everyone, including the super-rich.

It is no news to anyone that Sanders's seat is marginal – it always has been. However, he was unamused to read in his local newspaper, "A resurgent Tory party under David Cameron poses a high risk of unseating Torbay's sitting Lib Dem MP, according to one of the party's own campaign groups.

"Research by Liberal Vision, which is pressing for a shift to the right by the Lib Dems, warns that two-thirds of the party's MPs, including the Bay's Adrian Sanders, face losing their seats unless it pledges 'substantial' tax cuts, including for the wealthy."

Sanders should not have assaulted Littlewood, and quite properly apologised. But other MPs were equally angry to see their ability to hold their seats put in public question by an internal group with such an eccentric agenda.

This no doubt prompted some to investigate further. They would have learned from Liberal Vision's website that it is "run as a benign dictatorship".

It explains: "If you expect internal democratic elections, AGMs, committee meetings and minute taking, this may not be the organisation for you. That said, Liberal Vision's chairman and director wish to involve and engage as many supporters as possible."

Very good of them. Though that leaves open to question who exactly chose Littlewood as chair. The site then admits to being "a wholly-owned subsidiary of the classical liberal think tank, Progressive Vision," an organisation well out on the Thatcherite lunatic fringe.

Literature distributed by Liberal Vision at conference showed that it was associated with something called the Free Society.

What might that be? Its website states: "The Free Society (TFS) has been launched by the smokers' lobby group Forest to give a voice to those who want less not more government interference in their daily lives."

Littlewood was campaigns manager of the Pro-European Conservative Party, one of the least successful parties in British electoral history. Most of its members have settled

well into the Lib Dems, though the party gratefully saw the 'pro-European' bit of their name but not the, in some cases rather more significant, 'Conservative' part.

He was later employed as chief Lib Dem press officer, leaving soon after the regrettable business of his briefing about Ming Campbell's speech in March 2007.

Littlewood's Liberal Vision sidekick Chandila Fernando, who left the Conservative Party even more recently, is now running for Lib Dem president.

THE ENGLISH PATIENCE

The English party executive's refusal to be browbeaten over the Bones Commission (Liberator 328) has yielded some important concessions on the composition and powers of the Chief Officers Group (COG).

This ought to make the Federal Executive wonder what it might have achieved had it not behaved like the animal in *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* that asks to be eaten.

Faced with the English party's refusal to surrender its powers over money or candidates, the COG's composition will now be limited to party leaders and budget holders – and will not be overrun with superfluous parliamentarians – and the FE will keep final powers over budgets with the net effect that the creation of the COG, centrepiece of Bones's labours, will not change much.

Graduates of the leadership academy will be able to draw attention to this status when they apply for a seat, but it will not be a prerequisite for an applicant for any seat, winnable or not. This keeps powers over candidate selection in the hands of local parties rather than those of whoever controls academy admissions.

There remains an unresolved row over the commission's call to improve candidate diversity by means of a £10,000 premium that would be paid to winnable seats that selected candidates from ethnic minorities.

This is not merely contrary to party rules but probably unlawful, since the premium would be paid on the basis of race.

One school of thought believes it could be permitted only if all candidates were allowed to say how much they would donate to their own campaign, a step that would turn selections into auctions.

Some innocent souls still wanted to know at conference why the FE had been asked to vote in favour of Bones's recommendations without having seen the full report, persisting in the quaint notion that people should be told what they are being asked to vote on.

Simon Hughes claimed in the conference question session that the FE had been asked to approve Bones only for consultation, a claim so starkly at variance with the known facts that it led to an altercation outside the hall with English treasurer Jonathan Davies, who accused him of misleading the conference.

NORTH WEST PASSAGE

The fall out from Saj Karim's defection to the Tories led to an inquiry by the Lib Dems' diversity adviser Issan Ghazni on how the party could improve its engagement with ethnic minorities while avoiding some of the problems highlighted by the Karim affair.

Karim quit after coming second in the regional list for MEPs behind Chris Davies, a former MP who had served

as an MEP for longer than Karim had and was far better known.

This ordering seemed entirely predictable, but Karim assumed he would not get re-elected without being in first place and defected.

During this campaign, evidence emerged (Liberator 323) of what appeared to be an attempt to help Karim, instigated by persons unknown, by the mass recruitment of voters of Asian origin in membership drives conducted in Oldham and elsewhere without the knowledge of the local parties concerned.

Local investigation turned up supposed Lib Dem members who were Labour supporters, or were unaware they had joined the party.

Small local parties are vulnerable to organised infiltration, whatever its motive, and the ensuing row in the north west led to a request for Ghazni's advice on how to engage with ethnic minorities while avoiding the problems that can arise when an organised group – whether with religion, ethnicity, personal association or some other factor as its common interest – joins a local party in such numbers as to become the majority, as happened in Oldham West.

Ghazni's report is eminently sensible, and his essential point is that cultural misunderstandings, if left alone, can fester into unwarranted suspicion. He argues that it is both morally and electorally imperative for the party to grasp why members of ethnic minorities may feel isolated within it or, conversely, resent being viewed merely as deliverers of the votes of their community at elections.

A RUSH OF BLOOD

It is rare for Lib Dem shadow chancellor Vince Cable to advocate mass law breaking, but that is what he did with a bizarre proposal at conference.

Cable called for all public sector employees paid more than £100,000 a year to be required to re-apply for their jobs and, if reappointed, to take a pay and pension cut.

A fine populist flourish, when coupled to his search for public spending savings.

Just one problem. Such people have contracts of employment and to tear them up in this fashion would put a Lib Dem government on the wrong end of many thousands of constructive dismissal or breach of contract actions.

What provoked this outburst? Had Cable executed some particularly complex ballroom dancing manoeuvre and landed on his head?

THE PARTY OF LOCALISM

Once might be misfortune, twice is carelessness. Nick Clegg sparked a row with Lib Dem councillors with his first speech as leader, when he called for the health service to be devolved to local boards elected separately from councils (Liberator 324).

It seems councillors would have been no better off under the other leadership contender Chris Huhne, who successfully called at conference for separately elected police authorities in most of the country.

This angered councillors on two counts. The first is a question of making localism work. If there are multiple elected bodies with competing mandates for police, health, local government or any other gimmick that has taken the shadow cabinet's fancy in any area, the result is likely to be chaos, duplication and waste.

There is also the small matter of who would stand for police authorities and the danger of overt politicisation of policing.

The second count was that Huhne, like Clegg, failed to consult anyone with any experience of local government before launching this fundamental change in policy in a briefing paper released only just prior to conference and which had been through none of the party's policy making processes.

As Richmond councillor David Williams reminded him during the debate, Liberal Democrat councillors control some £100bn worth of public spending "and that's £100bn more than anyone in the parliamentary party does".

The party's local government wing has been a consistent success. Apart from a few places in Scotland and Wales, a strong local government base almost invariably underpins the party's parliamentary success.

So why won't Clegg and Huhne consult it and learn from it, instead of coming up with impractical wheezes on the hoof?

MIXED MOTIVES

There has been some anger about why only one woman – Liberal Youth chair Elaine Bagshaw – was among the 16 persons who spoke in the debate on *Make It Happen* at conference.

The reason is not hard to find. Both sides in the debate on the taxation amendment would have lobbied to ensure their most famous names were called. Indeed, the only speaker who was not a parliamentarian, prominent candidate or office holder was Leeds West delegate Mick Taylor, an economics lecturer.

Rather more intriguing is why some people spoke as they did in favour of Nick Clegg's position of seeking further tax cuts as a priority over public services funding.

What arms were twisted, favours called in or prizes offered? Tom McNally spoke on Clegg's side not a week before he wrote an article in *Liberal Democrat News* that urged the party to appeal to disenchanted social democrats in the Labour Party.

Graham Watson, leader of the Association of Liberal and Democrats in Europe, spoke in favour of *Make It Happen* even though its sole reference to Europe is a piece of opportunist pandering to Euroscepticism in the shape of an in/out referendum.

Tim Farron used his speech to signal that he would not be supporting the leadership in a debate on tuition fees due at spring conference, suggesting he expected to come under pressure over that too, and was getting his retaliation in first.

CHANGE YOU CAN BELIEVE IN

The Conservatives are at heart just a reactionary preservation society that can never offer voters a better future, says Jeremy Browne

The Labour government is over. Its ministers will continue on autopilot, outwardly displaying the characteristics of office holders, but there is no prospect of salvation. They know it; everyone knows it. The decay is terminal.

The debate within the Labour party is between those who are passively resigned to their fate and those who are determined to try something – anything – to avoid the inevitable. Both routes lead to the same destination. Gordon Brown is not capable of being an effective prime minister, but removing him will not spare his party from the wrath of the electorate.

Labour's longer-term prospects are no less bleak. After Brown, the party is looking into a vacuum. It neither understands Blairism nor wishes to reawaken it. Yet there is no other ideological route-map for the party that offers any destination other than defeat and humiliation.

Britain has moved on. The world has moved on. The circumstances that gave birth to socialism, and which gave rise to the creation and growth of the Labour party, have changed – fundamentally and irreversibly. Yet it seems that Tony Blair was the only Labour politician who really understood this.

So the next general election will bring change. That much we know. What we do not yet know – what the British people have not yet decided – is what kind of change that election will bring?

Until people begin to focus on that question, the Conservatives will continue to do very well. They have a young leader with an inoffensive presentational style. And they have the great virtue, in the current circumstances, of not being the Labour Party. But that alone should not be sufficient to win a general election; it is certainly insufficient to provide the yearned for period of national renewal.

So can the Conservatives really deliver the change the British people want?

The question goes much deeper than the current state of the opinion polls or the competence of Gordon Brown. Conservatism, as the name overtly states, is about resisting change. Conservatism is the belief that the past was better than the present and a more comforting destination than the future.

Liberalism, by contrast, embraces change, because it is an inherently progressive ideology. Not all change is good, but human development is achieved through progress. Liberals believe that, while we can learn from history, our best days are yet to come, and that we all have a

responsibility to help achieve that potential. Conservatives believe our best days have already passed. That is why liberalism is an optimistic ideology, whereas conservatism is inherently pessimistic.

At every level, the Conservatives cling to the past. At council and constituency level, the Conservatives are typically a preservation society masquerading as a political party. There is little ideological thread or heartbeat; just a reactionary resistance force.

At national level, the Conservatives instinctively display the same reactionary instincts. They talk about extending opportunity and boosting social mobility, but are constrained by their existing supporter base, which wishes to resist any disturbance to the established social order. Continuity and social stagnation suits many Conservative politicians and members; change is a threat. This is evident in the greater enthusiasm at Conservative conference for inheritance tax cuts than for reducing the tax burden on hard-working low and middle income families.

And it is evident in their backward-looking social attitudes. The Conservative Party has initially resisted every progressive social measure in recent decades. Conservatism in this sphere is about only reluctantly embracing change when the electoral downsides of turning-back-the-clock outweigh their instinctive desire to do so.

So when the next general election comes, people should ask themselves not whether they wish to see change, but what kind of change they wish to see.

Labour will pass from office, but that does not qualify the Conservatives to occupy it. The party of entrenchment, inherited privilege and heritage cannot offer plausible change.

The Liberal Democrats will stand on the promise of change. But that promise will not be a product of re-branding or an attempt to chime with the national mood. It will be more instinctive, ambitious and heartfelt. Unlike the Conservatives, it will be, to coin a topical phrase, 'Change you can believe in'.

Jeremy Browne is the Liberal Democrat shadow chief secretary and MP for Taunton

DON'T SELL OUT ON TUITION FEES

David Howarth wonders why the Lib Dems are trying to drop all their popular policies

The party's constitution calls for a society in which "no one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity". Many of the party's policies are aimed at one or two of the three, but very few are related to all three.

Eliminating student fees, however, is one of them. It reduces student debt, and thus addresses poverty, promotes education, and thus combats ignorance, and reduces the pressure on students to take conventional career-related courses and subsequently to become office-fodder, and so it tends to undermine conformity.

That is why extending free education has been the party's policy since the nineteenth century. It is also an immensely popular policy that won us many votes at the last election, not just from students but also from their parents and grandparents.

But it now seems that moves are afoot to abandon the policy. A policy working group was split on the issue, and the parliamentary party kicked its proposals into touch, but the group has been asked to carry on working with a view to bringing a motion to the Spring 2009 conference. The shadow universities secretary Stephen Williams has already attempted to pre-empt the discussion by giving an interview to Times Higher Education in which he claimed that the present policy was unsustainable.

After abandoning a host of other popular policies, and with the Iraq War factor lower than it was, campaigners might be forgiven for thinking that the party is taking leave of its senses in even thinking about abandoning a policy that is popular, easy to understand and fundamentally right.

That would be all the more so had the policy changed to an incomprehensible plan of accepting top-up fees, thus approving of rising levels of debt in the middle of a credit crunch, but attempting to soften the blow by fiddling with repayment schedules, and increasing grants by an amount insufficient to compensate for the increase in fees. The headline message, that we were abandoning opposition to fees, would have devastated our support, but we would not have had any money to promise to spend on anything else.

WITHOUT MERIT

Three arguments are put forward for abandoning the present policy, all of them entirely without merit.

The first argument is that there is no longer much of a problem with charging fees, because students no longer pay fees 'upfront'. Their fees, albeit three times higher than before – and no longer discounted for those from lower income families – are paid for by creating debt that students pay back after they have left university and once their income has reached a threshold level.

The problem with this argument is that, even under the old system, many students borrowed the money to pay the fees up front. The main difference in the new system is the enormous extra debt it has created by massively increasing fee levels. It is true that the extra debt carries low non-commercial rates of interest, at least for the moment, but the idea that the change from 'upfront' fees to delayed fees has made a fundamental difference for the better for students is ludicrous.

The second argument is that research has shown that the main problem in widening access to universities is the quality of education earlier in the system.

Universities are right when they say that they admit students according to their level of qualification, not according to their socio-economic background. The reason so few students appear from poorer backgrounds is that they lack the right qualifications. The pro-fees faction seizes on these findings and says they show that money should be transferred from higher education to schools.

But that step is fallacious. To begin with, even if prior qualification is the leading problem, the prospect of future debt is also a problem for access (to say nothing of distorting students' choice of course towards the conforming and the safe). Just because the prospect of future debt is less of a problem than prior qualifications does not mean we should make the problem of debt worse. Moreover, lack of qualifications might itself be caused by fear of future debt, through the 'that's-not-for-the-likes-of-us' syndrome that I remember well from my own childhood. The prospect of debt might lower expectations of future social mobility, which in turn lowers educational aspirations, as people attempt to reduce the risk of disappointment by trying less hard in the first place. Even if that is not the case, it is far from clear that simply pumping more money into schools would work. Some schools are better at lifting aspirations and achievement already on the same resources, and there is growing evidence that the problem is principally one of attitudes (including teacher attitudes). And even if more money would help to some extent, the obvious question is, why take that money from students? If schools should have more money, and education is a good thing, why raid another part of education and make it more expensive and less accessible?

BIZARRE STRAIN

Part of the problem is the way the party makes policy. We have become more departmental than the government. We appoint shadow ministers as if we were a government in waiting, but then fail to set up any equivalent of the

government's machinery – inadequate as it is – for cross-government working. We ask these shadow ministers to propose savings in 'their' departments with a view to allocating the money back to favoured departments for their shadow ministers' pet projects. Any other projects have to be funded by further savings within that department. The result is a mess. We end up with policy being made as if departmental boundaries were sacrosanct. Departmentalism is bad enough in government. It is bizarre to have contracted an even more virulent strain in opposition.

The third argument for abandoning existing policy fails on the same grounds as the second, but also on some grounds of its own. It is that our existing policy failed to help particular groups of students, especially part-time students, and we should move to correct that imbalance.

Fair enough. But it is extraordinary to propose that, because we failed last time fully to live up to our principle that education should be free, we should now abandon the principle itself.

The way to equalise full-time and part-time students is to improve the lot of part-timers, not make the lot of full-timers worse. If more resources are required, the question is not whether there are any lower priorities within Labour's Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (though there might be some in unjustified employer subsidies), but whether there are any lower priorities right across government.

But as we debate the policy, I hope that we will remember what it is really about in a wider context of policy about public services. Student fees, for many New Labour politicians, are not important in themselves but are merely a stalking horse for the idea of co-payment in the public services. Student fees were chosen for this role because students are a relatively soft target. There are not many of them at any one time and they tend not to vote in great numbers. Moreover, higher education is always seen by some Labour politicians as suspiciously 'elitist' and therefore a low priority.

The idea behind co-payment is that, because public services benefit individuals as well as the rest of society, individuals should pay for their 'individual' benefit, leaving the state to pick up the bill only for the 'societal' element. That is the central argument New Labour advances in favour of student fees, but it is important to see that it applies equally to a vast range of public services, including the rest of education and health care. Recovering from an illness or an injury increases one's earning power and is just as much a 'private' benefit to the individual as increasing one's earning power from gaining a degree.

The reason New Labour became obsessed with co-payment was explained by Charles Clarke in a speech to the LSE last year. He called co-payment (or 'co-funding' in his new euphemism for a euphemism) "the only way out of the dilemma" that people demand better and better public services, but do not want to pay for them in taxation. Clarke called for co-payment to become the norm in the National Health Service, not just in the few cases in which excessive demand might otherwise be a problem, and not just in

*“Campaigners
might be forgiven
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leave of its senses”*

exceptional cases, such as patients offering to pay for courses of new or experimental drugs, but in the core of the service – primary and secondary care.

The trouble with co-payment as a strategy for core funding in the public services is that it either favours the better off or leads to a vastly complicated system of differential payments whose outcome would be much more conveniently and honestly

produced using income tax.

If co-payments are set at standard levels, without regard to the income of the recipient or to the size of the benefit received, they deter people on lower incomes from using the service more than people on higher incomes. If the system is adjusted by giving those on lower incomes a discount, but keeping a standard, though higher, maximum charge for everyone else, the effect is to deter those in the middle of the income range more than those at the top, and thus amounts to a transfer to the rich from the middle class. If the system is further adjusted to take more from those on higher incomes, the effect is to create a secondary income tax.

DETERRING THE POOR

That, in essence, is the problem with student fees. If treated as a straight charge, they will inevitably deter the poor more than the rich. If modified so that the poor pay less, they discriminate against the middle in favour of the rich. If further changed to make the rich pay more, they amount to a crudely designed income tax that will fool nobody into thinking that they are getting both better public services and lower taxes.

What then of Clarke's dilemma? If we really do think that public services should be better funded but that tax should not increase (and we now are saying that, if anything, the tax burden, at least on lower and middle incomes, should come down), how do we do it?

There is only one honest way, which avoids the pitfalls of turning over core services to co-payment. That is to spend less on other things. That requires real political choices, but we should be confident where our values as a party would take us in those choices. It is not just a matter of waste (though there is extraordinary waste in some parts of government, such as funding one set of regional organisations to undermine the efforts of a different set of regional organisations in economic development). It is a matter of knowing what we stand for, and what we are against, and setting our spending commitments accordingly.

We do not believe in the politics of fear, of control and of aggression. That means that we should not be agreeing to spend on titan prisons, mass surveillance technologies and fighting wars of choice. But we do believe, still, in fighting poverty, ignorance and conformity, and that means that we should still commit ourselves to free education.

David Howarth is Liberal Democrat shadow solicitor general and MP for Cambridge, where he is a fellow of Clare College

WHO SOLD YOU THIS, THEN?

A grave economic crisis calls for moral clarity, not superficial positioning, says Simon Titley

So you think the Liberal Democrats have a new tax policy? September's party conference, in rejecting an amendment opposing tax cuts, implicitly endorsed Nick Clegg's broad aspiration to cut tax. What the conference failed to do was elaborate on this policy in any formal sense beyond the single sentence in the pre-manifesto *Make it Happen*.

The party has consequently acquired a pig in a poke. The policy is contingent on there being "money to spare". From where? Nick Clegg simply said that he had asked Vince Cable to look for savings. Would it not have been more sensible to identify the savings before promising the cuts? Regardless, a definitive list of these elusive savings has yet to be published.

The party also has £16 billion-worth of additional spending commitments. Does this come out of the promised £20 billion savings? And who will benefit from the tax cuts? At various points, we have been told it will be those "most in need", or the low-paid, or people on "low and middle incomes", or 90% of Britain's families, or "struggling families", or "hard-pressed families", or "ordinary families" (whatever they are).

As the conference approached and the questions mounted, Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander were forced into a series of 'clarifications' that rarely clarified anything and sometimes contradicted one another. In media interviews, Clegg criticised questions being asked by various Liberal Democrat bloggers as "nit-picking" and "mere details".

What no-one seemed to realise is that Clegg and his critics were arguing at cross-purposes. The whole debate ignored a central fact. The tax cutting proposal was conceived as an act of positioning, not of policy-making; symbolism rather than substance. Hence Clegg's irritable reactions to persistent demands for elaboration and his questioners' frustration at being unable to pin down what this new policy actually meant.

Proper policy formulation is when one examines an issue from a moral standpoint, arrives at a coherent and practical position, and *then* uses effective communication to articulate one's proposals to a wider audience. Positioning puts the cart before the horse. It starts with some short-term PR imperative or gratuitous posture and treats detailed policy as an afterthought. Take Tory environmental policy, for example. David Cameron sledging across Norway behind a pack of huskies is positioning, not policy. We are meant to 'feel' Cameron's greenness without bothering to ask what the Tories might actually do once in power.

To understand this distinction in terms of the Liberal Democrat tax debate, one only has to ask how the task of changing the party's policy on tax – a question that is both ideologically profound and technically complex – would have been tackled had this been a sincere exercise in policy formulation rather than positioning. There would have been prior, wide consultation and debate. Savings would have been identified before cuts were tallied or promised. The proposal would have been run through a computer model (regardless of one's ideological sympathies, all tax proposals must 'work'). It would also have been translated into practical campaigning terms. A rigorous green paper or motion would have been drafted that spelt out the policy in unambiguous terms.

Had these steps been taken, Clegg would probably still have won the conference vote but he would have left Bournemouth with a robust policy under his belt and no bitter taste in anyone's mouth or confusion about where the party stood. None of these steps were taken and we had to rely on an amendment tabled by opponents of the proposal to get any debate at all.

As it turned out, by tabling an amendment, Clegg's opponents enabled him to claim victory anyway. But it will prove a pyrrhic victory. The proposal has not been thought through, looks opportunistic and lacks authenticity. Assuming the £16 billion in spending commitments is coming out of the £20 billion in proposed savings, that leaves £4 billion, equivalent to less than 1% of annual government spending, which does not justify the hype about "vast" tax cuts. The proposal is difficult to sell on the doorstep, since – given the ill-defined nature of both the beneficiaries and the savings – it cannot be reduced to a simple slogan campaigners can use (akin to the "1p on tax to pay for education").

In any case, this debate has been overtaken by events, rendering the party's new policy dead on arrival. Opponents of tax cuts have not necessarily been vindicated either. A deep recession means that neither the supporters nor the opponents of this policy would be able to implement their alternatives. As the recession bites, tax receipts will fall while spending on unemployment benefits will rise. Huge government borrowing will place a burden on public spending for years to come.

Supporters of tax cuts would be unwise to cut public expenditure while the economy is in recession, given the deflationary effects. But opponents would find little scope for spending on their pet projects when the time came to pay off the government's debts. Both groups would be faced with a stark choice between slashing spending on core public services and raising taxes.

If you think this problem will blow over once the recession ends, think again. Most of the ‘baby boom’ generation will retire during the next twenty years. The ratio of people over 65 to the working-age population will almost double to about 50% in thirty years’ time. The needs of retired people already account for a big chunk of public expenditure (when one aggregates pensions, healthcare, nursing care, social services and so forth). The bill for public sector pensions (which is paid out of current income and not supported by any capital fund) will become simply staggering. If the government remains the dominant provider of pensions and healthcare, taxes and public spending will have to rise continuously. Retired baby boomers will have no qualms about using their voting clout to see to that.

Still, let’s look on the bright side. One by-product of this economic crisis is that it has killed the *Orange Book* project stone dead. Who now can credibly argue the case for continuing obeisance to the City and the ‘invisible hand’ of untrammelled market forces? What possible electoral advantage can there be in helping to prop-up the old Thatcherite consensus?

Fortunately the Liberal Democrats have an alternative. The ALDC’s new publication *The Theory and Practice of Community Economics* proposes a more human form of capitalism in place of economism: “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 mechanism for achieving them.”

The time is ripe for such a radical alternative. This crisis is a time for the British to take a good, long hard look at themselves. What have we become? Why have we allowed our social relationships to disintegrate while obsessing ever more with our houses and cars? Do we care only about finding ‘cash in the attic’?

What is happening to the economy is not a narrow matter of faulty regulation. It is a moral question, the fundamental issue of how we create and share wealth, and how we define ‘value’. This crisis has shown what happens when the economy is based on the exaltation of greed rather than consideration for others. In recent weeks, the only major public figures to make this point have been the Archbishops of Canterbury and York. I had almost despaired of any senior politician making a similar observation until I heard Shirley Williams on Radio 4’s *Any Questions* (10 October):

“I think that the government has simply failed to recognise the scale of anger out there. And the reason for the scale of anger – let me give an example of a civil servant I was talking to earlier this week who’s been told firmly they can’t have an increase even equal to inflation, who then hear on the radio that the heads of Barclays and Lloyds and other banks are carrying back several million pounds for failed management, in the same year that these public service workers are once again being told for the sake of the country you’ve got to curb your ambitions and your greed.

“We look at the example of extraordinary greed. I agree that it’s only a minority but it’s a very, very controlling minority and I think so far the reaction has not been sufficient.

“What would I do? I would have a public figure, a kind of ombudsman figure, on every remuneration committee of every major company. Because what is already plain is that shareholder control is almost completely inadequate. It has never actually judged whether people have been good for

their companies or bad for their companies. It’s largely dominated by what directors say.

“What we’ve seen in Britain is a steady rise in inequality. And we’re looking at a country which is becoming more and more divided, less and less capable of having a sense of the common wealth in the best sense of the word. What we have to do if we possibly can is to root out the concept that greed should be the driving force of society. It’s one hell of a concept, it’s destructive of children’s relationships with their parents, destructive of elder people’s relationships with young people, and it’s gone too far, and we have to say that those bankers and others who’ve taken part in this must be regulated much more firmly than they have been up to now.

“I think this is actually an acid test for capitalism. We’ve seen capitalism work very well in some territories; we’ve seen it work disastrously in a country like Russia where it turned out to be jungle capitalism, which destroyed the rule of law. We have to think much more deeply about the whole future of the system than has been happening so far in the relatively narrow political responses.”

Another Liberal Democrat peer has displayed similar moral fibre. Matthew Oakeshott, speaking in the House of Lords (16 October), remarked: “Is it not time that the Stock Exchange got back to its real purpose, which is to raise money for companies so that they can invest, employ and serve their customers? Frankly, short selling is a wart on the face of capitalism.”

Why does Nick Clegg not “think much more deeply about the whole future of the system”? Why does he not openly repudiate New Labour’s and the Tories’ dogged belief in TINA (‘There Is No Alternative’)? Why is he responding with positioning rather than policy?

The problem is Clegg’s PR-driven approach to leadership. In my discussions about this problem with many senior Liberal Democrats, the finger of blame keeps pointing in the same direction: the kitchen cabinet. Clegg has surrounded himself with advisors who have an inappropriate skill set (PR tacticians rather than political strategists), inappropriate beliefs (free-market fundamentalism) or both. Hardly surprising if he receives inappropriate advice. He should pay less attention to the likes of John Sharkey, Neil Sherlock, Ian Wright, Gavin Grant and especially Paul Marshall (millionaire boss of hedge fund Marshall Wace, recently required by the FSA to disclose that it had handled large ‘short’ positions against both HBOS and Bradford & Bingley). Clegg represents Sheffield, a city noted for its cutlery. He must know that there isn’t a cutler alive who could manufacture a spoon long enough for him to sup politically with some of these people.

Britain is about to enter a deep recession, lasting probably two to three years. It will be a severe test of all our political leaders. Nick Clegg can and should rise to this challenge, display some moral leadership and stop taking his cue from those who believe the answer is merely some technocratic regulatory tweaking or a succession of flatulent PR initiatives.

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective

THE X FACTOR

The three candidates in this year's election for president of the Liberal Democrats answer Liberator's questionnaire

INTRODUCTION

It is customary on these occasions for Liberator to introduce such election questionnaires with the phrase, "It is customary on these occasions..." Except that, when it comes to elections for the Liberal Democrat presidency, such occasions are far from customary.

Constitutionally, this election is supposed to take place every two years. However, in recent years the post has not been contested. The previous presidential election was four years ago in 2004, when Simon Hughes defeated Lembit Öpik. One must then go back to 1994 for the previous contest, when Bob Maclennan won a three-cornered fight against Don Foster and Martin Thomas.

The names of the incumbent presidents provide a clue to the problem. With the exception of Ian Wrigglesworth, the party's first president (1988-90), every president has been an MP or peer. The president is chosen by a postal ballot of all the members. Turnouts have usually been low but, even so, the majority of those voting are 'armchair' members and so the contest has been won more on name recognition than any other factor. If a strong candidate emerges from the Commons or Lords, anyone else interested in the post usually decides that the election is not worth the bother.

This year's contest provides us with something of a novelty. Three candidates; one MP, one peer and one who is neither. Whoever wins will preside over a period in which there will be a Euro election and a general election. It will also be a period when the controversial proposals of the Bones Commission are bedded down. The choice is therefore important and this is no time to treat the election as a beauty contest or to chuck the ballot paper in the bin.

THE ANSWERS

We asked all three candidates the same six questions. Here are their answers.

QUESTION 1 – What relevant experience will you bring to the presidency?

Fernando: My commercial experience includes running organizations, building teams, bidding for contracts, negotiating with financial institutions and helping companies to increase market share, specifically in adverse conditions. These transferable skills will engender a fresh and dynamic approach to current party operations.

The president should concentrate on getting things done and keeping in touch with the grassroots. This is best suited to someone who is not a full-time professional parliamentarian.

Öpik: I believe I've unmatched experience for the presidency. I've been on the Federal Executive – which the president chairs – for 17 years. As vice-chair, I'm number 2 to Simon Hughes, which means I already chair the Executive when he's away. I've travelled UK-wide for almost two decades, campaigning, canvassing, fundraising and training to build our success. As leader of the Welsh Liberal Democrats from 2001-2007, I learned how to run a party. Indeed, thanks to the team effort at that time, we gained two more parliamentary constituencies in Wales in 2005. I've also developed a national profile, through regular appearances on Any Questions and Question Time

and in the wider media. I was a high profile councillor in Newcastle, a Euro candidate in the North East and I've won my parliamentary seat three times. Over the last ten years, I've also seen at first hand the pressures involved in dealing with other parties, thanks to the fact no party had an overall majority in Wales after the assembly elections. This is priceless experience given the current political circumstances in the UK – and what could happen at the next general election. All in all, I've been right in there as an activist on the political frontline, and a long-term contributor to the internal party structures – the structures for which the president is responsible.

Scott: 20 years as an activist and campaigner. Experience at council, regional and European levels as well as in the House of Lords. Served on FE and FFAC. Organisational experience as a council group leader in joint control, non-executive director in three private sector companies and on the board of the Audit Commission. Regular dealings with the media, business community and interest groups, internationally and with communities.

QUESTION 2 – The presidency has three functions that do not necessarily sit well together – representing the party to the leadership, acting as a figurehead at functions, and chairing the Federal Executive. Which of these will you be best at, and which worst?

Fernando: As a non-parliamentarian, the risk for conflict is dramatically reduced. I am keen to invite people to submit their ideas regularly; one of my particular skills is championing ideas and developing and maintaining good working relationships with a variety of people.

I get a buzz out of inspiring and motivating people and would welcome the opportunity to do this as a figurehead at functions.

Chairing meetings can be done efficiently but what I will be worst at is simply this: anyone who is concerned with only their opinion and has no room to listen to someone else's will find that once is enough.

Öpik: Actually, I'd have said the three key functions are: to get the committee system to exercise 'governance' of the party; to build internal structures so we're robust enough for government; and to motivate and inspire the organisation to achieve goals set by the leader. However, in the spirit of your question of the three options you give, I'm best at representing the party to the leadership because I'll be a president FOR the membership, not the leadership. The president must display this independence, without which the role simply melts into the central command. I guess the one I'm 'worst' at is being a 'figurehead'. For me, it's an active management role, not a decorative one.

Scott: If I didn't think I could do all three well, then I wouldn't be running for election. They are not incompatible; indeed, I would argue that an effective president needs to be all three.

If you split the job, as Lembit proposed at spring conference, then the person with the mandate (the president) has no power and the person with the power (chair of FE) has no mandate.

So, the party needs someone who will devote time to listen to the members; who has the power to reflect members' views; who possesses the respect of the wider party and beyond in order to sound credible and persuasive.

Finally, the president should be sufficiently independent to stand their ground. Not being in the House of Commons is a huge advantage – I am not beholden to the leader or Cowley Street in any way. It also means that I can concentrate on the job of being party president without having to juggle the competing interests of defending a seat and fighting a general election.



CHANDILA FERNANDO

Campaign website: www.chandila.com

Chandila comes from a political family. His father was the first Sri Lankan to contest a parliamentary seat in 1983 for the SDP. His sister, Chamali, entered the history books as the youngest woman shortlisted by a mainstream political party for the London mayoralty. He is a seasoned campaigner over successive elections at local and national level. He holds memberships of the following groups within the party; Connect, Harborough Lib Dems, Liberty Network, Liberal Youth; and is a Director of Liberal Vision. Chandila is passionate about liberal values and sees television as the new power in politics.

QUESTION 3 – Will COG (the Chief Officers Group proposed by the Bones Commission) make the party run more smoothly or will it create a democratic deficit?

Fernando: Potentially both! Bones admits that hierarchy decisions currently lack transparency and accountability. The COG is an extra tier of bureaucracy theoretically designed to coordinate operations. The party must become responsive and accountable to our members and supporters. There is an acute need to help those in charge by lifting the current paralysis of red tape and bureaucracy that surrounds our decision making process. The Bones Commission has started to address these issues – but only in a tentative and rather delicate way. I want to be more direct.

I will seek to change the constitution to streamline and modernize the party. The buck should stop with a single federal committee acting as a board of trustees. Modernization means reflecting the fact that only 1 in 100 of our voters are party members. We need to do more to enfranchise the 99% of Lib

Dem supporters who are not party members and focus a bit less on the plethora of committees and party positions controlled by the 1% who are. Hence, I favour moving away from an organizational model based on card-carrying membership and towards a system that can accommodate registered supporters.

Öpik: In reality, the 'COG' has existed for many years in one form or another. Its formalisation makes things more transparent. Its existence CAN make the party run more smoothly. Yes, this makes us less 'democratic', but that's OK because it's a 'management' function. By contrast, the committees are responsible for 'governance', to oversee the values and strategic targets. The fact we now admit COG's existence is a big step forward. As president, I'll ensure the Federal Executive keeps tabs on COG's work in line with these values and targets. In the past, the Executive has had a tendency to micromanage things. I'd nurture a discipline so we trust each committee more, and respect the relative jobs each has to do. When we're in government, the split between 'governance' and

'management' is crucial. It's right to get these processes working effectively now, rather than later.

Scott: My starting point is that our internal party democracy is not particularly effective now. We have a lot of elections but there is a lack of transparency about who makes decisions and how – this lack of accountability neuters the democracy. If properly managed, the new structures should speed up decision making and introduce more clarity; if they fail to do either of these, then we have to re-think.

The various elected bodies have tended to operate in silos, and have sometimes counteracted each other. The FE should be the body tasked with creating an overall party business plan to which all other bodies, including the COG, pay regard.

QUESTION 4 – The party is in a poor financial state and its fund-raising activities have been neither transparent nor scandal-free. What will you do to improve the situation?

Fernando: On donations and fundraising, we should amalgamate our budget lines at federal level. It is absurd that the parliamentary party, Cowley Street and – to some extent – the leader's office are running discrete budgets and therefore separate operations. The entire budget should come under the control of a single federal committee and they should be legally and organizationally responsible for its dispersal.

I do not want to get into the moral or legal issues on accepting Michael Brown's £2m donation, but I am worried that I cannot easily discover who accepted the cheque or with what authority.

A streamlined and clear structure is vital. Donations in excess of £5,000 should only be accepted upon express approval of the democratically elected board, the members of which would bear the legal, political and public consequences of their decisions. Donations of less than this amount should be left to a senior staff member who reports regularly and is answerable to this board.

Running around the country now just to secure an election is not sufficient. One of my main pledges, if elected, is to visit local parties and help them fundraise.



LEMBIT ÖPIK

Campaign website: www.lembit4president.co.uk

Since 1997, Lembit Öpik has been MP for Montgomeryshire, after being a Newcastle councillor and European candidate in the North East. In 2005, he achieved the largest majority since 1962! He's been spokesperson on Young People, Wales, Business & Enterprise, Housing and Northern Ireland, playing a major role in the peace-process. While he was Welsh Lib Dem leader, the party doubled its MPs in Wales. A Federal Executive member for 17 years, Lembit is now vice-chair to Simon Hughes. Externally, he's been President of the Motor Neurone Disease Association. Lembit is one of the four most recognised Lib Dems.

Öpik: I'll find donors who will support our collective goals. The party must never be 'bought', but we need to recognise the benefit of funding from organisations that back our existing goals. Still, the biggest fundraising opportunity is building membership by 2010 – one of my goals. I've done it before and I'll do it again. Transparency insures us against throwing principles out the window if the cheque's big! I also feel I offer an energy and inspiration that draws support from a wider community. That's why my high UK profile is very valuable.

Scott: All political parties are struggling to raise money; taking short cuts because they need cash is unacceptable. The Party Reform Commission proposes an independent audit committee to look at internal finances – I would propose extending that to include a look at major donations. I support the proposal to 'tithe' councillors, provided there are exceptions for those in genuine need, but believe we should consider doing the same for all remunerated elected positions. Strengthening regions and concentrating on building up local parties, along with some sort of associate membership, should also help to improve the financial situation.

QUESTION 5 – The next major election campaign will be the 2009 European election but the party is divided over strategy. Some argue that the party should campaign like it did in 2004 (i.e. focus on local target wards and not mention European issues). Others argue that the party should fight on a pro-European platform to avoid coming fourth behind UKIP again. They cannot both be right. Which strategy do you prefer?

Fernando: I have a preference but it is a private opinion. The election strategy has to be set by the party leader and not the president. If elected, I will take the widest possible soundings from local parties, activists, party members and candidates and represent these views forcibly, directly and in a totally unalloyed fashion to the party leader and other

key campaign individuals, but I will do so behind closed doors. This is emphatically NOT an election for an electoral strategist or a policy wonk and so I am not going to run as one.

Öpik: We've got to fight on European issues in a European election. The public needs to see us showing courage to express our pro-European credentials. That won't please ALL electors, but we're not going for 100% of the vote! Enough people support our position to significantly increase our vote precisely BECAUSE of our European stance. Campaigning primarily on local non-European issues in a European election is not, in my view, the best thing to do.

Scott: We need to consider both our message and our campaigning. In terms of message, with the world economy in meltdown as a result of following American neo-conservative economic policy, just as the situation in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Caucasus results from following their foreign policy, there has never been a better time for a pro-European argument. It is obvious to everyone but the most die-hard UKIP supporter that nations are inextricably linked and that there is a glaring absence of strong international institutions to deal with current challenges in security, economy and environment.

The ground war is more problematic; conventionally, the target Westminster constituencies fight hard because they see them as a dry run for the general election; there has been less incentive for the weaker local parties to campaign. There is also a question of capacity; targeting Westminster seats over the last 15 years has paid off in terms of delivering MPs but has left many non targets quite weak. We've tended to see this as a Euro-election issue, but our underperformance in list elections in Scotland, Wales and London suggests that it is the list strategy that needs to be re-visited.

It's perfectly possible to fight on major strategic issues and local ones – they are often linked.



ROS SCOTT

Campaign website: www.im4ros.com

I joined the party in 1990 because someone knocked on my door and asked me! Elected to the District Council 1991 and to Suffolk County Council 1993, where we were in joint control until 2005; I was deputy and group leader for six years, until I went to the Lords. I was Lib Dem transport spokesman in the LGA, delegate to the EU Committee of the Regions, and No.2 on the East of England list in the 1999 European elections. Appointed to the Lords in 2000, I have been front bench spokesman on transport and local government, and deputy chief whip.

my commitment to build membership, train activists and nurture great candidates. Also, I believe my character and determination can have a very positive effect on the levels of motivation felt within the party. Getting things to happen – and people to believe in what we can do – is something I've always loved doing. It lies at the heart of how I as president could help write the next chapter in the story of our success.

Scott: In ideological terms, yes, there aren't any no go areas for us. With constituencies in the former mining communities of South Wales switching to us, and stockbroker belt seats like Kingston in the third term with a Lib Dem MP, it is true that we can win everywhere depending on the tide and resources. The question of capacity is the key issue – it takes a huge amount of hard work and resources to win these seats and that's not easy. That's why I propose strengthening regional parties, with an increased focus on working with smaller local parties.

QUESTION 6 – “We can win everywhere.” Really?

Fernando: No, of course not. However, we can win *anywhere*. The distinction is crucial. Look at some of the seats we won for the first time in 2005 or where we are really well placed to win next time. Very often these are constituencies where we were virtually nowhere ten or fifteen years ago. Similarly, there are seats that looked promising in the 1980s or 1990s, but are – to be honest – distant long-shots now. Therefore, targeting is crucial. It should also be clear to the local parties and candidates involved what the basis of federal party assistance or financial support is. Such assistance should also be made transparent to the appropriate federal party committee so that the successes and failures of targeting can be clearly measured and corrected.

Öpik: Well, we “can win everywhere”... in theory. But in the real world *our own targeting approach* is based on the recognition we can't win everywhere all at once. We do best when we focus. My challenge as president would be to increase the number of target seats – which means more members and activists. Hence

ZIMBABWE - THE TANGLED WEB

Neighbouring states might just broker a settlement but Britain should avoid ill-considered interventions, says Michael Meadowcroft

In the early 1970s, I carried out a number of delicate missions assisting African liberation movements, including those within Zimbabwe. At the time, Robert Mugabe was in prison and Rev Ndabaningi Sithole led the ZANU party. ZAPU was led by Joshua Nkomo. It was said then that ZANU was a party without a leader and Nkomo was a leader without a party.

There were always Africans “semi hitch hiking” as they walked between village and city and some would guardedly accept a lift from this white man. I would ask whom they thought should lead the new Zimbabwe and the invariable response, from those who would answer at all, was “Mugabe”.

It was inevitable that Mugabe and other nationalist leaders would be released from prison in 1974 to enable them to take part in settlement talks and Mugabe immediately set about gaining control of the ZANU party. In 1976, the Patriotic Front was formed as an alliance of the two parties but, with the weakness of ZAPU, the united party became dominant under the name ZANU-PF. After independence in 1980, Nkomo was further weakened by being sacked from the government and by a campaign of serious government violence carried out in his Matabeleland stronghold. Nkomo died in July 1999.

Under the Lancaster House Agreement of December 1979, 20% of seats in the independence parliament were reserved for the white minority. This provision was abolished in August 1987. Robert Mugabe signed the agreement but Russell Johnston reported, in 1980, that Mugabe had said to him: “I accepted a pluralist solution at Lancaster House, and I will stand by it. But I must say to you that I believe that one-party states are just as democratic and often more democratic than pluralist ones. Tanzania is more democratic than Britain.” There were eleven amendments to the constitution in its first ten years, most of them designed to entrench the president’s authority.

Bit by bit, Zimbabwe became an increasingly autocratic state, underpinned by Mugabe’s recourse to the running sore of land reform. This is not an academic issue. At the time of independence, the white farmers, who made up around 1% of the population, owned some 70% of arable land, including all the best parcels. Under Lancaster House there was a provision for the British government to compensate farmers who gave up their land over the decade following the agreement. Inevitably this only covered a small part of the farms and Mugabe was able to exploit the lack of transfer of farms to indigenous

Zimbabweans. The issue became more and more violent and white farmers were thrown off their land by force.

ECONOMIC COLLAPSE

This was bad enough in itself, but those who took over the farms proved incapable of working them efficiently and production levels declined steeply. Arguably the white farmers should have done much more to prepare their workers for the inevitable changes, but what became all too obvious was that, to remain in power, Mugabe was prepared to cut off the country’s nose to spite its collective face. Zimbabwe rapidly became a one-party state, with manipulated elections, and a collapsing economy. What food was produced was sequestered by the state and distributed to ZANU-PF party members in order to maintain their loyalty in the face of widespread antagonism to the regime.

From 1992 to 1999, increasing efforts were made to pressurise the white farmers off their land. These were largely unsuccessful but Mugabe’s attempt in 2000 to change the constitution to permit land acquisition without compensation was heavily defeated in a referendum. This was the signal for the regime to embark upon a systematic campaign of violent repression of dissident opinion and of attacks on white farmers.

By 1999 a formidable opposition to Mugabe had at last appeared. The Movement for Democratic Change was formed, largely out of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, to contest the 2000 constitutional referendum and, following its striking success, it continued under the leadership of Morgan Tsvangirai as a political party to contest the rigged elections of 2002 and 2005. Despite occasional tactical errors, no-one can doubt the courage of MDC leaders and activists in the face of politically motivated violence and personal attacks. The MDC split and splintered but Tsvangirai doggedly continued to oppose the Mugabe regime.

In the face of catastrophic inflation and widespread poverty, appeals were made to other southern African presidents to intervene and to broker a settlement that would ensure legitimate elections to take place towards a transfer of power. Thabo Mbeki was invested with the role of mediator but no changes were visible as the 2008 elections arrived. Amid the criticism of Thabo Mbeki and other southern African leaders for their failure to prise power from the hands of Robert Mugabe, there is one shining light from the region and that is the Southern Africa Development Community.

It was SADC that brought about the crucial changes at the first round of the last election. The election of a majority of anti-Mugabe MPs, the placing of Morgan Tsvangirai at the top of the presidential poll and, perhaps most surprising of all, the confirmation by the electoral commission of the 23 disputed results, came about only because SADC insisted that the results of the voting in every polling district be published at each polling station. This ensured that parties and observers alike were able to tally the figures for themselves rather than having to rely on the government's manipulated results. On this basis, Tsvangirai clearly led on the first round and a majority of MDC MPs were elected. It is this latter fact that has underpinned Tsvangirai's negotiating position. Without the evident solidarity of the MDC MPs – including those from a breakaway faction – Mugabe would simply have ignored all approaches.

Those of us who are often called upon to assist young democracies, and to advise electoral commissions, are well aware that the publication of the voting figures in each polling station is a vital tool of transparency without which the whole electoral process can be subverted at the behest of the power brokers.

SADC's role is vital in the Zimbabwe situation. It is a federation of 14 southern African countries, formed in 1980. Comprising neighbouring states, and with representatives nominated by African governments, its legitimacy cannot be denied. However, not even SADC could ensure a fair second round. Faced with the ferocious violence meted out to MDC activists, Tsvangirai had an impossible choice to make and, with the protection of his followers in mind, eventually pulled out of the race.

ILLEGITIMATE AND UNTENABLE

Then, a bare month after the farcical unopposed second round of elections, Mbeki appeared to have persuaded Mugabe that his position as president was illegitimate and untenable. Talks commenced on power sharing but there still appears to be no agreed sustainable outcome. Mugabe initially tried to do deals with small factions within the MDC to buy time, possibly preparing for even more intensive violence against his opponents – as happened after talks with Nkomo in 1987. Mbeki's preferred solution of a figurehead Mugabe presidency and an executive Tsvangirai premiership, was clearly rejected by Mugabe, and Tsvangirai was heaved into a power sharing deal giving him as Prime Minister insufficient authority to deal with Mugabe's congenital authoritarianism.

At the time of writing, Mugabe has unilaterally appointed ZANU-PF loyalists to all key ministries involved in the control of the security forces, together with two acolytes as deputy presidents, thus threatening the whole agreement. Tsvangirai continues to maintain a very difficult balancing act between losing support through apparent weakness or insisting on too much power and prolonging the suffering of the Zimbabwe people.

“Despite occasional tactical errors, no-one can doubt the courage of MDC leaders and activists”

It is quite possible that the content of any deal is now out of Mugabe's hands. Whereas on sheer pragmatic grounds there could be a case for granting Mugabe himself indemnity and permitting him to go into exile, similar terms could hardly extend to his military high command and other top officials who have been responsible for horrific beatings and murders. Fearing the probability of being put on trial – or even being transported to The Hague to face war crime indictments – these

powerful acolytes may well decide to sink or swim with Mugabe, in which case they will not permit him to escape justice on his own.

So the nightmare continues for the Zimbabwean people. It is estimated that around 3.5m have already fled the country, many of them to South Africa. In addition there are large numbers of internal migrants, often forced out of their homes to prevent them voting in the elections. The cash economy has collapsed and poverty levels are shockingly high and increasing.

Meanwhile the MDC bravely sticks to its task, managing to hold its MPs together to elect an MDC speaker of the parliament and refusing to endorse Mugabe's attempted impositions.

Mbeki's impending forced exit from office in South Africa weakens his authority but it is still up to him and to SADC and its constituent countries to bring structural change. The 20-year-old 'trade union' of liberation leaders just doesn't have any further legitimacy in the face of such cynical exploitation for the sake of personal power. SADC is not like Britain, whose interventions can be painted by the Zimbabwe regime as the utterances of neo-colonialists who want still to control them. The situation in Zimbabwe is so abysmal that such allegations are now wearing very thin but the British government would be wise to avoid statements that are so provocative as to be counter-productive.

Michael Meadowcroft has led, or been a member of, 47 missions to 31 different countries, assisting in the transition to multi-party democracy. He was Liberal MP for Leeds West, 1983-87.

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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Lots, if it means that your country is locked in a perpetual dispute with a neighbour, Kiron Reid reports from Macedonia

Early summer is an ideal time to visit Macedonia, the part of former Yugoslavia next to Greece.

There is great sunny weather, hovering about hot. Outside of the ramshackle and mainly rebuilt capital Skopje, the hedgerows are bursting with colour, there are storks nesting on each telephone pole, chickens play in the road and there is activity in the countryside.

It is an unlikely place for an international incident. It is a picture redolent of scenes from Britain between the wars or of Spain 30 years ago. One hopes the 'new Europe' will be a place for people to visit and learn more about our continent. Instead, if some politicians and public have their way, nationalistic disputes will impede development in this corner of the Balkans or, worse still, set it back.

It may seem astounding that a general election could be fought over a dispute with Greece about the name of the country and Greece's objections to Macedonia joining NATO. But that is what happened in May.

Although the Macedonian (rather than Albanian) political parties fought the election partly on the name dispute, we were never told of any constructive suggestions that the political parties were seriously considering to resolve it.

INTENT ON PROVOCATION

In Greece, some politicians and people seem intent on provoking more trouble in the region. Added to that a population which is 25% Albanian in a country next to both Kosovo and Albania, and you wonder at the wisdom of the western backed declaration of independence in the former.

The Greeks insist that there is no such country as Macedonia; no people called Macedonians; and that Macedonia is only a region of Greece and that the country next door should not have that name. They object bitterly that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia claims Alexander the Great as its son. Indeed, Macedonia has certainly inflamed this dispute by calling Skopje airport (the size of big regional budget airline airport) Alexander the Great airport. Greece appears to fear Macedonian territorial claims, given that Macedonia historically had included much of northern Greece. The Greeks claim that the current occupants are 'just' Slavs like the other people in former Yugoslavia, and that Macedonia is historically simply part of the Greek culture and Greek empire.

As the writer Misha Glenny has pointed out, it appears rather improbable that the smallest country of former Yugoslavia could threaten large and powerful Greece. I have not spoken to anyone in Macedonia who harbours territorial ambitions but Macedonians feel cheated of their

state. Michael Palin, in his 'New Europe' series, talks about meeting young Macedonians with a keen sense of their history but a wider European outlook rather than narrow resurgent Balkan nationalism. I have met young nationalists, but most young people I have met in the Balkans have had a keen sense of history and want to be a part of modern Europe – as likely to be into religion or jazz as rock music or 1980s music.

A word about history though. We all know that Alexander's father was Phillip of Macedon. Alexander spoke Macedonian, probably a dialect of Greek. I didn't know that Macedonia is mentioned in the bible (St. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians of course). There has been a country called Macedonia at various points in history. Does this mean that there should be such a country today?

It is certainly ludicrous to suggest that Greek civilisation and conquest was actually Macedonian. It is also true that the language today is similar to Bulgarian. It seems ludicrous equally to deny that large parts of south east Bulgaria had a Macedonian population and that Thesalonika and the surrounding area had a large Macedonian population until expelled by the Greeks after World War 2 (Greece officially denies any minority populations today, which appears implausible and must challenge EU commitments to equality).

This proves only that there are people in recent times who believe they are a nationality called Macedonian. Their belief has to be recognised.

CLAIMING HEROES

This does not mean that they are the same people as the ancient Macedonians as both they and the Greeks in Macedonia claim to be. At the same time, people in the region do have a tendency to claim heroes as their own and, while Macedonians will assert they are not Bulgarian or Albanian, they are quite happy to claim Bulgarian and Albanian national figures as theirs.

What of the political troubles inside Macedonia? This is significant as they could have implications for the stability of a wider area. The country appears entirely stable now but the fighting with ethnic Albanian rebels in February 2001 was a lot more serious than I realised at the time.

Tetovo and Kumanovo have remained volatile areas, partly due to cross border criminal activity involving Kosovan gangs (Albania itself appears committed to stability in the region). The majority claim the fighting in 2001 was either gangsterism or an attempt at secession dressed up as a campaign for civil rights. As in Croatia, some Macedonians feel that leaders who defended their country are being put on trial only to give the appearance

of fairness for political reasons at the International Criminal Tribunal.

It is a concern that politics in the country is entirely divided along ethnic lines with groups voting for only their own ethnic parties – in the majority community, these parties mirror the major political divisions. The quality media gave the 1 June election a lot of coverage, which seems astounding until you realise it was all because of reports of violence, shootings, kidnappings and trouble. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe report gave the impression that the election verged on being unacceptable due to violence, intimidation and interference. In certain areas they were right but this was far from the experience of the large majority of those involved in the election.

In our municipality next to the town of Veles, the countryside area was one-third Albanian with three Albanian villages. These were remote from the rest of the area in the hills and the majority population seemed oblivious of the Albanians and other ethnic communities who had their own villages (Bosniaks and Turkmen).

I had a peaceful election and an almost entirely professional one in the countryside. There was illegality – the men voting for the women in a couple of Albanian villages in the mountains. The election officials did not stop this, it was simply accepted; when challenged by my Spanish lawyer partner (she and our female interpreter were outraged), the excuse was that the women were illiterate but this was only true of the older women who did wait for their husbands to show them what to do.

Paradoxically, many of the Albanian men had more experience of working in other countries more than did the Macedonians, but in their own village all sat at the cafe while the women all worked in the fields by hand in the heat of the middle of the day.

This was not the case in the other areas. More positively, many women were involved in running polling day and there were many female candidates (though the OSCE didn't appear to consider how many were in winnable positions on party lists).

The election generally was very quiet. The young female socialist leader, Radmila Sekerinska, ran an energetic campaign but people preferred the smart younger Cameron-like centre right prime minister, Nikola Gruevski, an economist who had been in office only two years and was given an improved share of seats. Their policy differences appeared minimal, with both claiming to be the most pro-EU, neither apparently having a solution to the dispute with Greece and both claiming to be better on the economy.

What of the Liberals? There are two rival Liberal parties who joined together at one point and then split again. My friends are in the smaller Liberal Party, which seems similar to British Liberal Democrats, though so too does the Liberal Democratic Party. Both have seen their support fall and have together a handful of MPs from the places they are given on coalition lists with the large parties.

The problems were all in the Albanian areas of the country in the north and west and on the edge of Skopje; it

“There are two rival Liberal parties, who joined together at one point and then split again”

was nearly all professional everywhere else. The rights of minority communities to participate in free and fair elections have to be protected; the OSCE is right that it predicted trouble and the government should have expected it.

Internal and external observers are, though, short on solutions. The Macedonian politicians seemed to think (not unfairly) that Albanian parties should sort out their disputes themselves without violence.

The OSCE and some observers and election officials seemed to think that there should be a huge police presence in the flashpoints to prevent any trouble. Thinking of Northern Ireland, it is possible to see how swamping minority areas with outside police could have increased tension. However, given that the re-run election in the areas troubled by irregularities was largely peaceful (still not entirely), maybe this strategy did work. It is not a long term substitute, though, for people settling disputes peacefully according to the law.

The DUI, the party of the former insurgent National Liberation Army, gained most ground in the Albanian areas and appeared to have run a much better and more modern election campaign. Turnout overall in the election was a fairly low 58%. The OSCE has some ways of doing things that strike me as wasting public money including paying very high fees and allowances locally that distort local economies. It pays for good staff, though, and its work has an effect.

This is an area where the EU and US can really help. The US actually has a good reputation, even if NATO's bombing of Serbia was not popular. Skopje has a brilliant free wireless broadband network paid for by US Aid.

Norway has paid for water pumps in many villages, the UK and Netherlands have also given a lot. Trade and tourism are greatly needed and this is best done in cooperation with neighbouring countries. The EU and US have to knock heads together, metaphorically, and the message has to be got through to the people in Greece as otherwise politicians there will feel unable to act.

A conciliatory gesture by Macedonia on a name (perhaps Northern Macedonia or New Macedonia) will have to be presented as a minor concession by them and as a victory by the Greeks. Putting aside the rhetoric, if Macedonia, Greece, Albania, Bulgaria and Serbia all cooperate on tourism, the economy of the southern Balkans will be strengthened to the benefit of each country and to the benefit of the stability of the rest of Europe.

Kiron Reid is a member of the Liberator Collective and was an OSCE election observer in Macedonia

LET'S BAN IT

Confronted with any 'abnormal' sexual behaviour, Labour's first instinct is to criminalise it, says John Ozimek

If you liked Monty Python's *Meaning of Life*, you probably liked Mr Blackitt. Who? He's the bluff northerner who reduced the entire protestant religion to just one simple issue: according to Mr Blackitt, the main significance of Martin Luther's protest in 1517 was that four hundred years later "I can wear whatever I want on my John Thomas".

Not only! His long-suffering wife is amazed to learn that this religious dispensation extended to French ticklers too.

There's a lesson here for politicians: one I was reminded of recently when talking to a long-term gay activist. He acknowledged that Labour in office had done many positive things for the gay community. "All the same", he added ruefully, "they don't really want to know. Talk to them about gay rights in terms of sex and sexuality and they get very nervous."

"They are happiest thinking of homosexuals as a bunch of victims, discriminated against on social and economic grounds for an accident of birth. Mention the mechanics of the act: juxtapose words like 'cock' and 'bum', and they suddenly become very deaf indeed."

It's a plaint one hears of the disabled community too. Politicians like to pontificate in abstracts: 'rights', 'support', and 'discrimination'. They grow all queasy when asked to consider basic practical questions such as how should the NHS react to someone who will spend their life in some sort of institution, and whose disability means they are incapable even of touching themselves sexually.

It's the sort of issue that makes the activists angry because, too often, decision-makers just pretend the issue isn't there. If they ignore it, it will go away.

What, too, to make of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, which is happiest defending the rights of those who are discriminated against for things that are not of their choosing?

OUTER DARKNESS

It's a sloppy argument – and one that brings us back to gay rights – so long as homosexuals can maintain they are who they are through some accident of birth, they will have the full weight of the EHRC behind them. Which begs the awkward question of what happens if, at some point in our exploration of genes, it transpires that most homosexuality is a matter of choice – or at least, social conditioning. Will the EHRC suddenly disown them and cast them back into the outer darkness? Or will gay rights by then be so entrenched that they will allow the philosophical inconsistency to stand?

The point of this long and slightly scatter-gun introduction is to suggest that sex and sexuality continues to be a problem for politicians. There is an ingrained tendency in some places, particularly within New Labour, to pigeonhole and categorise – to talk about what people

'are' – and to legislate on that basis, rather than to focus on what they 'do', and whether their actions really cause any harm.

Just listen to Lord Hunt, winding up for the government, in the debate earlier this year on extreme pornography. The images in question "frighten" him. They are "disgusting", "revolting". Frightening enough, apparently, to ram through legislation that will require the Home Office to opt out from human rights law to enforce.

In an attempt to achieve some sort of everyman status, he argues that it is "plain common sense" that looking at certain images has an impact on ... behaviour". Moreover, in linking the debate back to the impact of violence on television, he adds: "I know that some research has shown that it has no impact at all. That is obviously baloney; absolute nonsense."

Pardon? Lets rewind that proposition a moment. Research shows no effect whatsoever on the viewer? We'll return to the substance of that argument later. But the noble Lord just 'knows' this research to be baloney. As the basis for an argument down the pub on a Friday night, this is good stuff. For a minister in a government that supposedly legislates on the basis of evidence, this is actually quite shocking.

Because the proposition before the House when Lord Hunt made these remarks was that individuals should be criminalised for the possession of certain types of material that the government and some groups found grossly offensive. Possession. Not production or publication. Not even for the commission of the acts depicted. But simple possession.

That is a big step and, although the government claimed it was closing down a loophole, the only other category of material for which such a blanket ban has been imposed is child porn. (For example, there is no such thing as 'terrorist material' in the abstract; an offence is committed in terms of possession of material combined with an individual's intent in respect of that material).

Let's start with the case against the material in question (extreme porn), and ask whether such a ban can possibly be compatible with Liberal values.

Readers should be aware that a spirited rearguard action against this legislation was led in the Lords by Liberal Democrat home affairs spokesperson Baroness Miller, who took the eminently Millian position that, while she found much of the material under debate abhorrent, she could not bring herself to argue for the criminalisation of people who possessed certain images.

Other organisations to join the fray range from the traditional, such as Liberty, to the more recently formed Consenting Adults Action Network.

I digress. The proximate cause for this particular legislation was a particularly gruesome murder that hit the headlines in 2004. Graham Coultts had an interest in sexual

practices that included erotic asphyxiation. This surfaced in his relationship with teacher Jane Longhurst, and her subsequent death at his hands was held to be murder. It was reported that he had viewed material that mirrored his interests on the internet – and in early 2004, a campaign began to build up a fair head of steam behind demands to ‘do something’ about this stuff.

The two obvious drivers for this campaign – religion and feminism – were both present, as too was a very Christian home secretary, David Blunkett.

There followed consultation, draft legislation and, this year, criminalisation. One small difficulty for the government was the lack of evidence. As opposition to the bill grew, and demands for evidence grew louder, so the government turned to three wise feminist academics, who turned in a widely criticised piece of ‘research’ (a ‘rapid evidence assessment’), which suggested that “in some cases”, some porn might have some harmful effects.

Of course, it does depend on what you mean by harm. The argument over harm takes many forms, from the obvious direct harm – people hurt in the production of material, or possibly hurt through direct copycatting, to the more esoteric definitions of harm thrown up by some feminists. Pornography itself may be harmful because it belittles and boxes women in, so reducing their perceived worth in society.

The difficulty with this argument and its extension is that it very quickly, very easily can become an argument against free expression, since words themselves can be harmful.

But back to the evidence assessment. The main difficulty for those who would ban is that, in the past, the arguments against porn and/or violent material have been asymmetric. There may not have been evidence of direct harm. But campaigners against always had up their sleeves the loaded question “what if you discovered, many years hence, that harm had been caused?” The presumption of course is that harm is there, whatever the evidence says, and it is only a matter of time before science ‘proves’ it.

SYMMETRY RESTORED

The difficulty with this argument is that symmetry may now have been restored. Without delving into detail, the emerging picture seems to be that short term studies (putting various stimuli in front of people and measuring arousal levels before and after) show that sex or violence do indeed lead to short term arousal.

However, long-term population studies are showing the exact opposite: that societies in which there is free availability of a range of erotic fantasy material have lower incidences of sexual violence. The mirror question now becomes: “Lord Hunt: what if you discover, many years hence, that your clampdown led to more people being killed or injured?”

You won’t find many willing to answer that. Because, at base, what has shone through the last decade has been Labour’s distaste for anything but ordinary ‘normal’ sexuality. That, rather than religion, rather than feminism, is what lies at the base of a wholesale re-engineering of UK law on sex.

In 1995, the Law Commission reported that criminalisation of sado-masochistic sex was counter-productive: it led to blackmail, unsafe practices, and alienation from the police. No matter. On taking office, Labour binned this report and set up its own working group on sex.

This came up with such gems as a new law on necrophilia on the grounds that, despite a complete lack of evidence that it ever happened, it was so disgusting a concept that there ought to be a law against it. Thus, in 2003, Labour passed one.

Or take images of 16 and 17 year olds engaged in sex. The activity is legal. It may well be that some of us would feel slightly queasy at the idea of a 40-year-old perusing such pictures and being aroused by them. But being aroused by the activities of biologically mature humans is fairly ‘normal’. Whatever else such behaviour merits, it does not deserve to be classed as paedophilic: nor should individuals possessing such pictures be criminalised and placed on the Sex Offenders’ Register.

And so it goes on. In fact, the worst legislation to date on the sexual front is the Safeguarding and Vetting Bill 2006. This regulates about half the jobs in the UK, and allows a government-backed quango to bar from work people it considers unsuitable. In its original drafting, it included a clause that suggested that possession of child porn might be grounds for barring an individual from working with children. Not unreasonable.

A week or so before the Bill’s final reading in the Commons, the government introduced 250 amendments. This moved the goalposts significantly. You may now be barred from all manner of work (including plumbing, taxi-driving and working for a local authority) on the simple grounds that you possess material that is sexual and violent.

This sweeping measure, lacking even the supposed safeguards written into legislation on extreme porn, received no debate. It was nodded through the Commons at a time when the official government position was that there was no evidence for harm from pornography. It is already being used by employment agencies to inquisit interviewees and to weed out individuals on the basis of their sexual preferences.

And for what? Of course, Labour is good at coming up with rationalisations for its prudery. But I am old enough to remember the 1970s, the days when Young Liberals – and some Liberals too – believed passionately in the connection between politics and our personal lives; and when a source of never-ending amusement was stories of the sheer mind-numbing priggishness that afflicted Labour Party get-togethers.

How we laughed! Too bad that those same puritans are now firmly ensconced in power, and leading a campaign that has nothing to do with evidence, harm or morality – and everything to do with their own personal hang-ups.

John Ozimek was a member of the National League of Young Liberals executive in the late 1970s and is now a writer on sexual and political liberty. He is working on a book, *New Labour – New Puritanism?*

A LOO FOR EUROPE

Dear Liberator,

May I take strong exception to your award of the Mitcham and Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet to Bury St Edmunds. And I'm not from there but from the Island of Hayling, and until recently from Amsterdam – a true European, you could say.

The European venture is in trouble. Does anyone really doubt it? Does anyone seriously believe that the majority of voters in the EU would have accepted the Lisbon treaty if they had been allowed to vote on it, let alone if they had actually seen it? It isn't a constitution at all, but an amendment of an amendment of a series of amended treaties, and does nothing to establish the ground rules of the union – or community of nations as it really is.

Bury St Edmunds may not have done very well in defining its terms, but the heart of the motion certainly lies in the right place. What Europe now needs (although it will now have to wait until 'Lisbon' is ratified, otherwise the union as it is cannot function properly) is for its parliament to set up a commission to formulate a constitution – the ground rules of the community – with the express intention of putting it to the people of Europe in a referendum. That in itself would concentrate minds. It would enable them to curtail some of the excesses of the EU institutions, and establish, in clear and understandable terms, where the values of the union lie, and where they need to be kept at national or local level.

The governments of the EU, as represented in the Council of Ministers, meeting in secret, and too often with their own national, personal or political interests taking priority over the common good, will never achieve it, and nor will a civil service that is far too full of its own importance and blinded to the realities of the outside world of ordinary citizens.

The parliament, provided it has the intention of putting it to the people as its goal, would, with its wide political and national representation, achieve what everyone who cares about the European project really wants – an institution which at last has its citizens behind it, which is far from the case today.

So it's surely worth a little more than a 'Gold Toilet'! It could even

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become part of our European campaign next year – *for* Europe, but a reformed Europe. That would catch Labour and the Tories on the hop.

Tim Pascall
Hayling Island

DEADLINE DATES

Dear Liberator,

May I question your choice of date of the conference editions of *Liberator*?

If your contributors hope to influence policies that are about to be debated, *Liberator* should be published and distributed at least two weeks before conferences.

I have just read Simon Tittle's contribution 'Nuanced to death' (*Liberator* 328), a very good article that would have made many representatives think again about *Make It Happen*, question it, even vote against it.

Chris Davies wrote a very important and thought-provoking article about the forthcoming European Parliament elections. Had readers been able to read and digest it before conference, there would have been opportunities at Bournemouth for people to discuss its implications, and even make their concerns known to Nick Clegg, policy committee members and others.

Mike Pictor
Cheltenham

LESS TRAVELLED ROADS

Dear Liberator,

I read with interest your Commentary 'Hidden Depths' (*Liberator* 328) and the articles on the issue of spending on public services that preceded the crucial debate on *Make it Happen*.

There is, however, another reason for rejecting plans to cut public spending overall and that is the question of providing the electorate

with a genuine choice at the next election.

David Cameron appears to be backtracking on his support for maintaining current levels of public expenditure. If the three major parties all give priority to keeping taxation low, the public is denied the choices of voting for a party committed to Keynesian tax and spend policies apart from possibly the SNP in Scotland.

There is growing disenchantment with party politics; the trade unions are increasingly questioning their support for a Labour Party where business donors have more influence on government policy. Labour's business friends, however, have realised that Labour is a sinking ship and are deserting like rats, but there is no reason why the unions should bail out a Labour Party that bears no relation to the party the unions founded more than 100 years ago. There are moves to create a new working class party but they are a front for the doctrinaire Socialist Party and not a practical radical alternative.

In another debate, conference rejected another amendment that would have given us a distinct policy of bringing the rail operating companies under public ownership. This is a policy that would have had large scale support from a public sick of fares rip-offs that put the exploits of Frank and Jesse James to shame.

Robert Frost's poem 'The Road Not Taken' sums up the choice at Bournemouth. "Two roads diverged in a wood and I took the one less travelled by. It has made all the difference." Sadly we didn't. Had we taken it, not only would it have provided an alternative for the electorate, but also it would have given us a distinct set of policies that would make the difference.

Andrew Hudson
Leyton

**A View from
the North
by Alan Beith
Northumbria
University Press 2008
£18.99**

If Alan Beith had chosen a different role for himself, he would now be the Liberal Democrats' magisterial elder statesman, drawing on his 35 years as an MP (a post-war record for the party, I think) and his status as the only sitting MP from before the Alliance and one of only nine from before 1997.

Instead, he has always been a bit low profile, even while deputy leader, and now concentrates on chairing the justice select committee and on being a member of the committee that scrutinises Britain's security services.

The chapter on this latter role in his autobiography is fascinating, but it is perhaps significant that it is the only section of the book likely to contain new political information for most readers.

Beith has opted for an autobiography that covers all aspects of his life, including his education, family, religion, interest in historic buildings and love of northern England.

The problem is that the only reason most people would wish to read a book about Beith is because he has had a ringside seat for 35 years through the Thorpe scandal, the pact, alliance, merger, Lib-Labbery and much else.

Yet all this occupies only about a fifth of the book and, while interesting, offers little in the way of new information or insights.

The best part of the book is where he explains the need for a Liberal party and what it should stand for, which, summarised, is a robust reassertion of Mill's 'harm' principle and of the need to defend the rights of those with whom one disagrees. One particularly good passage comprehensively rips apart Labour's 'rights and responsibilities' approach, pointing out that people's rights are not dependent on how well they conduct themselves.

Beith's religious convictions are well known and, unlike some politicians in this category, he has not been one to seek to tell others



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how to live their lives. He explains how these beliefs have informed his politics, but refutes the idea that any 'Christian Party' is needed, since the diversity of views among the religion's adherents is too wide for any such venture to be coherent.

Has Beith got another book in him? I hope so. He must surely have far more that he could tell us about three decades of upheavals in the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats than he has given here.

Mark Smulian

**Film, media and
popular culture in
Ireland
by Martin McLoone
Irish Academic Press
2008**

McLoone's book was commended to me for reinforcing arguments made elsewhere on the demise of the Roman Church in Ireland – particularly assaults against the cinema. The Irish film industry is young – the third world status that Eamonn de Valera condemned the country to stymied the early growth of the industry. Works such as Ford's *The Quiet Man*, which features heavily in McLoone's wider analysis, while breaking from a studio bound Hollywood in one respect, remain a patronising American view of the country, which typified Ireland on film prior to the Celtic Tiger era.

It is interesting to reflect on the clash between Maureen O'Hara's struggles with tradition and the more 'liberal' approach of John Wayne (an arch-conservative on and off the screen usually) in the light of the moral dilemmas we seem to be faced with today - was this the thin end of the wedge? Community is ultimately reconciled, home and hearth restored, but all somewhat vacantly.

Of course, the unity within Inishfree portrayed by Ford was wishful thinking. Fifty years or more up the road, Ireland has come through much. The republican side generally comes off better on film than the unionist. McLoone charts unionist disquiet about film and television – suspicions of a 'liberal' mafia in BBC ganging up on them. Film and television lend themselves to simplistic analysis, alas.

I regret that I haven't seen all of the films he covers, but I'm surprised at the absence of *Father Ted*. My wife says she cringed when she first saw this; it was truer to life than anyone dared imagine. Of course it had to be made in England by Channel 4, then buying it at tremendous expense. However it does have its roots in Dermot Morgan's other persona Father Trendy from the television show of the early 1980s.

On music, one could say much of Van Morrison or Pogue Mahone (they had a rawer edge than The Pogues). Regarding the Northern Irish punk scene, I'm surprised that no mention is made of the Radiators From Space. McLoone will probably object that they were a Dublin band, however this wasn't clear at the time, certainly so far as England was concerned. They were promoted in England in early in 1977 as a Northern Ireland band; one of their posters read "From the ruins of Belfast" – it wasn't until I came to write this review that I bothered to question this. McLoone's comment that Stiff Little Fingers was an Irish band groomed to what an English audience wanted to hear is underlined here. Anyway, the Radiators were high-energy rock'n'roll for now people, far more guts to my mind than U2 and all the poseurs that followed.

Stewart Rayment

Monday

A gentleman learns not to interfere in the management of his own household; in particular, if I try to tell Cook how to run my kitchens, I risk not being allowed to lick out her wooden spoon and mixing bowl. Yet I shall have to pluck up my courage and mention to her the good value that J. Sainsbury offers these days. A couple of weeks ago Clegg was telling me that he and his wife are shopping at that company's supermarkets rather than having them delivered by those clever little Ocado vans: now he is talking about educating his sons privately. Why, he must have saved a fortune!

Tuesday

I was never tempted to invest my money in Iceland, despite all those advertisements on the moving television featuring that jolly young lady and all her party food. You see, hereabout memories of the Cod War are still raw. In 1975 Icelandic trawlers appeared on Rutland Water and began to harvest our fish with the intention of taking them back to Reykjavik to be salted, dried or whatever Johnny Iceland does with *les fruits de mer*. Well, we simply weren't having it. The Rutland Navy put to sea with your diarist, as a Rear Admiral, to the fore, and the impertinent trawlers were driven back whence they came. Not surprisingly, feeling ran high locally: I recall a High Leicestershire Radical front page of the time with the headline "STICK IT UP YOUR GEYSER".

Incidentally, in my experience this 'offshore banking' is never a good idea. There is a filthy old hermit who lives on one of the tiny islands in Rutland Water and he is always offering to look after people's savings for them. I did row out to him once, but decided against investing with him. My money remains in the Bank of Rutland and the Rutland Rock Building Society.

Wednesday

The telephone is brought to me and the voice at the other end says: "Hello, this is Nick Clegg. I am ringing to tell you about the Liberal Democrats' exciting policies." "I know it's you, man," I reply, "and we were talking about party policy only this morning. I was about to call you myself to ask if you had had time to think about my idea of extorting money from the Estonian Government by threatening to send back..." Clegg, however, talks over me in the most boorish fashion and our conversation ends with my bidding him a brisk good day and replacing the receiver. If Clegg thinks he is going to win people's votes by behaving in this fashion, he will, I fear, be gravely disappointed.

Thursday

How quickly reputations can change in politics! For years, I have joshed the Member for Twickenham by referring to him affectionately as Vince 'Low Voltage' Cable, but no one would call him that today. It happens that I am invited to hear him speak this evening and, though I arrive at the

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Hall in good time after the customary stiffener, I find queues snaking around the building. Cable arrives and is hustled into the building by a protective phalanx of policemen as the crowds try to rip off a piece of his clothing. Unfortunately, it is hard to hear his speech because the young ladies at the front of the audience insist upon screaming all the way through it. The result is that his observations on the finer points of the marginal propensity to consume and so forth are quite lost. Having been present at this event, I shall in future refer to him as 'High Voltage Cable'.

Friday

When John McCain first announced his choice of Vice Presidential running mate, I was contemptuous. Sarah Palin's politics are rebarbative and her religious beliefs simply ludicrous. Yet there is something about the way she fells a moose (they abound in the frozen North of Rutland) that puts me in mind of the first Lady Bonkers. I spend the day looking up flights to Anchorage.

Saturday

Soon it will be Bonfire Night again, and here at the Hall we pride ourselves on having the best blaze for miles around. For weeks I have been having my men collect fallen trees and the roof timbers of evicted cottagers and the resultant pile of wood has not grown to quite dizzying proportions; nor should the efforts on the Well-Behaved Orphans in collecting kindling be overlooked. A supply of rockets, Catherine Furlong wheels and the like has been laid in, and Meadowcroft has provided us with a sack of potatoes to bake in the embers.

Only one detail remains to be settled: whom shall we burn in effigy upon the top of the thing? Recent Bonfire Nights have seen such unpopular figures as Mr Anthony 'Tony' Blair, President Bush and Steve McClaren play a starring role; this year prominent candidates include young Gideon 'George' Osborne, the Lord High Mandelson and the contestants and judges from the moving television's 'X Factor'. I am able to announce, however, that a straw tableau depicting bankers quaffing champagne upon a yacht will be set ablaze atop the Bonkers Hall bonfire this year.

Sunday

To St Asquith's for Divine Service. The Revd Hughes preaches a long sermon that touches upon our economic travails, and we sing 'Whatever shall we do, O Lord?' which happens to be a favourite of Meadowcroft and his former comrades in the Wee Free Liberals.

In the evening I go for a walk along the shore of Rutland Water, reaching the treacherous Rutlandbach Falls. I tread carefully: a chap could slip.

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