

liberator



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In this issue

- 💣 Social Liberal Forum: way ahead, or wrong turn? — Matthew Sowemimo and David Boyle
- 💣 Fighting the counties - Chris White and Susan Gaszczak
- 💣 Politics of board-games — Simon Titley

CONTENTS

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Commentary 3

☀ Radical Bulletin 4..5

RECONNECTING WITH OUR RADICAL HERITAGE 6..7

Matthew Sowemimo explains why the Social Liberal Forum has been created and why it has been launched now

SAVE US FROM FABIANISM..... 8..9

David Boyle makes a plea to the Social Liberal Forum to be critical and ambitious, and reject technocratic delusions

BROWNIAN BANKS 10

Where was 'prudence with a purpose' when the banks went on a spree, asks Ed Randall

HEAD FOR THE BLACK HOLES 11

The BNP won a seat in Sevenoaks and the local Liberal Democrats refused to stand, a move condemned by ALDC. Now comes the fight back, says Alan Bullion

COME ON BABY FIGHT MY SHIRE..... 12..13

It's hard to get party members excited about June's county council elections, but Hertfordshire has found some novel ways say Chris White and Susan Gaszczak

STRANGERS ON THE RIGHT..... 14..15

Right-wing libertarians belong outside the Liberal Democrats' traditions, aims and objectives, argues Matthew Huntbach

REACHING FOR THE SUMMIT 16..17

It's time for politicians to support calls for an Earth Summit to chart a path for sustainable development, says Felix Dodds

FREE EDUCATION IS STILL WORTH FIGHTING FOR..... 18

The party was right to stay opposed to tuition fees, says Elaine Bagshaw

THREE TIERS FOR OUR SCHOOLS 19

The education system fails to inspire students and schools are too large, says Roger Harcourt

BEYOND MONOPOLY..... 20..22

A new wave of board-games from Germany provides some pointers for social cohesion and online politics, says Simon Titley. And a group of Liberal Democrats road-tests some politically-themed games

REVIEWS 23

Lord Bonkers' Diary 24

Cover & Clegg (p6) pictures - Alex Folkes/Fishnik Photography

COMMENTARY

NOTHING TO DO WITH US

Can the Tories honestly escape any blame for the financial crisis? It was the Tories under Margaret Thatcher who – along with Ronald Reagan in America – originally championed the market fundamentalism that ultimately led to the present crisis.

David Cameron's apology for not anticipating the crisis was therefore sheer effrontery. His speech on 13 March was obviously intended to distance the Tories from the Labour government. As an apology it seemed synthetic but, if sincere, it was a bit late coming.

Presumably Cameron hadn't noticed Vince Cable, who was warning for several years that the growing levels of debt were unsustainable. Cable was not alone. Other respected commentators were also raising the alarm.

Not that New Labour is innocent. It shares responsibility for this crisis because it reinforced the policies that allowed corporate and personal debt to spin out of control. Gordon Brown is wrong to claim that the British economy was fundamentally sound until it was hit by a calamity from abroad.

Cameron at least conceded that there had been a 'cosy economic consensus' between the main parties, but the thinking behind this consensus goes back further than he cares to admit. An honest critique is not possible without repudiating the neoliberal economic dogma that has dominated British politics for the past thirty years. Cameron has not recanted, so why should anyone trust him to manage the economy?

The Tories' lead in the polls is the product of New Labour's exhaustion rather than any new thinking. Since Cameron became leader, his party has failed to produce any serious big ideas. You would have thought this is an urgent requirement when the main pillars of Tory policy have just been demolished.

The global financial crisis has thoroughly discredited neoliberal 'turbo capitalism'. Neoconservative foreign policy lies in ruins in Iraq. Atlanticism looks even less credible as an alternative to Europe, after the offhand gift by President Obama to Gordon Brown of some bargain bin DVDs. And Labour's policies on crime continually outflank the Tories to the right.

What does that leave the Tories with? Their answer to the crisis, insofar as one can make it out, would turn a recession into a slump. One wonders how much longer they can keep a lead in the polls if they continue to be all spin and no substance.

The Tories' dilemma is that they want to maintain the support of both their traditional ageing supporters and a younger, more progressive constituency. At some point between now and the next general election, they will have to make some hard policy choices, which will inevitably alienate one group or the other.

Tory poll ratings are high for now because voters are tired of Labour and want a change. As the main opposition party, the Tories are naturally perceived as 'the alternative'. But this default position cannot last indefinitely without some credible policies.

The lack of credible policies is the Tories' Achilles' heel, but choosing such policies will open up splits among Tory supporters. The Liberal Democrats should exploit this weakness for all it's worth.

A CLEAN BREAK

An enduring puzzle of the financial crisis is why the Liberal Democrats seem reluctant to repudiate openly the neoliberal dogma that led to this crisis. If they genuinely wish to offer the voters a distinct alternative, what better way to make a clean break with the 'cosy economic consensus'?

Most Liberal Democrats have never been fans of neoliberal economics but an influential minority continues to believe in this nonsense. There was no tradition of neoliberalism in the party until the start of this decade, when people such as Paul Marshall and Mark Oaten, and organisations such as Liberal Future and later Liberal Vision, began to lobby for it.

Dutch writer Paul Treanor defines neoliberalism as "a philosophy in which the existence and operation of a market are valued in themselves, separately from any previous relationship with the production of goods and services... and where the operation of a market or market-like structure is seen as an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all human action, and substituting for all previously existing ethical beliefs."

In the neoliberal universe, markets are treated more as an object of religious devotion than merely as a useful mechanism. Ethics is reduced to calculations of wealth and productivity. Values like morality, justice, fairness, empathy, nobility and love are either abandoned or redefined in market terms.

This always was a bleak, heartless and illiberal belief system. And now it's a busted flush. No wonder its adherents have failed to convert the party. But their continuing influence inhibits the Liberal Democrats from making trenchant criticisms of the ideology underlying the crisis. And this in turn prevents the party from sounding distinctive, which stunts its growth.

Nick Clegg has been making increasingly bold statements recently. If he wants to distance his party from the Con-Lab consensus, he should make another. He should declare that neoliberalism is a shop-soiled idea that has no place in the party, and that we should instead support a more human form of capitalism. And if a handful of zealots can't handle this rejection, too bad.

RADICAL BULLETIN

GLOWER OF SCOTLAND

The internal row in Aberdeenshire took a turn for the worse in late February and promptly spread to England, when the Scottish Liberal Democrat executive lined up solidly behind the council group, and moved to expel four long-serving councillors.

This saga began in November 2007 (see RB in *Liberator* 326 and 331, and the article in *Liberator* 328), when the council considered a planning application from American billionaire Donald Trump to build a golf resort partly on a site of special scientific interest.

At the relevant committee meeting, the project was rejected on the casting vote of Lib Dem chair Martin Ford, which should have been the end of the matter.

Instead, the majority of the Lib Dem group backed Trump and sought to overturn the committee's decision.

Most Lib Dem councillors then sat on their hands while the opposition voted to remove Ford from his chairmanship. A few months later, Lib Dem Paul Johnston criticised the planning gain negotiated by the council and found himself referred by members of his own group to Scotland's Standards Commission, which eventually exonerated him.

Faced with opposition attacks on Johnston, another Lib Dem councillor, Debra Storr, moved in line with group policy that a council meeting should take no action against Johnston as the Commission was at that point still considering his case. She was expelled from the Lib Dem group for her pains.

On 28 February, the Scottish executive voted to suspend Storr, Johnston and another councillor, Sam Coull, Ford having left the party the previous month, and to initiate expulsion proceedings against them. Storr then also left the party.

Ford and Storr are both well known among activists in England, having been members for more than 20 years, and their plight was publicised at the Harrogate conference. (To declare an interest, Ford's wife Gina is a former *Liberator* Collective member).

At the Harrogate conference, a leaflet headed 'I Support the Aberdeenshire 3' was circulated by the 'Campaign for Liberal Democracy in Aberdeenshire', which stated: "A number of Liberal Democrats from Scotland and elsewhere in the United Kingdom are appalled at the illiberal and undemocratic treatment of these committed Liberal Democrats by the leadership of the Aberdeenshire group."

In an effort to halt the damage, party president Ros Scott sent Hertfordshire councillor Chris White to mediate.

He reported back to Scottish leader Tavish Scott that there should be some changes to the Aberdeenshire group's standing orders and some external support for it

"in the hope that those who had left it would feel able to return in a spirit of reconciliation".

White's recommendations were accepted by the group, but as *Liberator* went to press it remained unclear whether Ford, Storr, Coull and Johnston, now constituted as the Democratic Independent Group, considered these moves sufficient or, in the cases of at least the first two, had had any official communication of them.

It says much about the Scottish party's mishandling of this affair that White was able to turn up from Hertfordshire and accomplish more towards a solution in three weeks than anyone else had in the preceding 16 months.

The whole thing began over an honest difference of opinion – whether the prospect of Trump's financial investment in the locality outweighed planning considerations.

This would have caused inflamed feelings anyway, but these would probably have healed had the group not failed to support Ford as committee chair, and then persecuted Johnston and Storr.

Things should never have been allowed to reach this point. Groups elsewhere are able to have strong disagreements without these leading to people losing positions, facing standards investigations or being suspended, never mind expelled.

Ford has published the letter he sent to Scott setting out his resignation from the party.

In extracts, he states: "There is no single reason why I have decided to leave. Rather, it is the cumulative effect of the poor behaviour of some prominent Liberal Democrats, the failure of the party to address this and the disparity between the party's proclaimed policies and the decisions of its elected councillors and parliamentary representatives.

"I voted against a planning application – a quasi-judicial matter. There was no question of any incompetence or wrong doing on my part. Yet, because the majority of the group wanted the planning application granted, it was made clear to me I should have voted differently.

"In effect, though I did not know it at the time, I did not have the free vote all councillors are supposed to have on planning applications."

Ford complains that group leader Anne Robertson later removed him from other positions without his knowledge, and that Storr was expelled from the group on a show of hands.

"This catalogue of illiberal and undemocratic actions has led to some deeply unpleasant group meetings where... I have been shouted at and prevented from speaking," Ford wrote.

He also said that the group's stance on the Trump application was so at variance with the party's claimed

concerns for the environment as to bring its credibility into question.

This row should have been mediated long ago. Whether or not White's intervention leads to a resolution, both the Aberdeenshire leadership and the Scottish party have some serious questions to answer, about the conduct of the former, and the failure of the latter to get a grip earlier.

IT'S THAT MISSILE AGAIN

One of the few memorable things about Ming Campbell's brief tenure as Lib Dem leader was the 2007 spring conference debate on Trident. That ended with a mere 454-414 victory for him in a debate on replacing the current system, the conference endorsing a compromise that pleased no-one and saddled the party with a policy so tortuous as to defy easy public explanation.

Is Nick Clegg going to revisit this issue? Some speculate he will. At 42, Clegg does not carry the cold war baggage of Campbell's generation and may think that moving the party away from any pro-Trident position would allow him to be distinctive, popular and identified with something that would save a vast sum of public money.

YOUTHFUL ENTHUSIASM

Liberal Youth might have a rather select membership, but that has not dampened their ardour for campaigning – against each other.

The election for LY chair was played out in public view at Harrogate when incumbent Elaine Bagshaw was given a speaking slot at the conference rally.

This is not a debate in which positions are argued, but rather one intended to induce a feelgood factor among party members who like that kind of thing.

As Bagshaw embarked on a list of LY's activities, she was interrupted by a shout of "you've done nothing" from her opponent Sara Scarlett, an act so startlingly ill-considered in the circumstances that the latter's support melted rather rapidly during conference.

Bagshaw has been accused of sailing too close to the leadership, notably by speaking on Nick Clegg's side during the tax debate last September, while Scarlett's supporters say she would be more radical.

The election has been marked by leaked e-mails, an abusive video, a withdrawn apology from Scarlett over her heckle and statements from prominent members that LY might usefully be closed down barely a year after its launch out of the old LDYS.

Meanwhile, the LY website, as of mid-March, carried candidate names, manifestos and ballot details, but from the 2008 elections, not the current ones. Nor did it list executive members or give much indication of what LY does or why.

Note to both contenders: acting as the leader's echo tends not to be helpful in youth politics, and political heckling is acceptable only with wit.

ROUGH SLEEPING

News that the Liberal Democrat conference is to go to Birmingham next spring, and Liverpool in autumn 2010, has caused concern among those who need somewhere to stay.

The problem is not an absolute shortage of hotel rooms, but rather of the right price range. Most conference

delegates probably aim for the middle, which tends to be abundant in seaside resorts but almost non-existent in cities, where accommodation is split between the extremes of costly business hotels and dubious backstreet establishments.

The Liverpool conference in March 2008 demonstrated this problem, and the spring conference attracts nothing like the attendance of an autumn conference.

Will this be addressed, or will the party make a loss, despite whatever presumably ultra-cheap deal has been done with these venues, because people cannot afford to attend?

The other runner was Nick Clegg's choice of Sheffield, which had the disadvantage of possessing no suitable venue.

THOSE IN GLASS HOUSES

When the Christian Voice group threatened to disrupt a reading by poet Patrick Jones in a Cardiff bookshop on the grounds that his verses were blasphemous, Lib Dem AM Peter Black arranged instead for him to read them in the Welsh Assembly building.

Black says his concern was not the poems' content but the free speech issues involved. His stance brought some flak from religious organisations, though not from the Liberal Democrat Christian Group, which was supportive.

He was thus stunned to receive a letter from Montgomeryshire MP Lembit Öpik saying that, while Öpik had supported the staging of the similarly controversial *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, he felt a poetry reading was "a step too far".

Was this by any chance the same Lembit Öpik who writes for the Daily Sport (RB, Liberator 331) and who recently advocated the presumably impious concept of sending topless women to ride around the country on Segways to "spread happiness".

HISTORY MAN

Anyone who thinks that things must be right if they are published on Wikipedia is referred to the entry for the National League of Young Liberals.

This notes its foundation in 1903, after which nothing seems to have happened until it supported Lloyd George over the Yellow Book in 1934. A further period of apparent inactivity followed until the 'Red Guard' era of the 1960s, which ends abruptly in 1974.

After a further six years of rather suspect silence, the entry then records, at half its entire length, something called the 'Green Guard', which allegedly led NLYL from the early 1980s until the merger in 1988.

This section dwells almost entirely on the activities of Felix Dodds (chair of NLYL, 1985-87); indeed, some might leap to the conclusion that he wrote it.

It claims that the 'Green Guard' (a term used by neither Dodds's supporters nor his opponents at the time) was more or less responsible for the entire anti-alliance wing of the Liberals, which will come as news to many of those involved.

RECONNECTING WITH OUR RADICAL HERITAGE

Matthew Sowemimo explains why the Social Liberal Forum has been created and why it has been launched now

Social Liberalism is the mainstream philosophy of the Liberal Democrats and has been so since the Grimond era. Social liberalism recognises that an individual's material and personal circumstances can act as a constraint on them realising freedom. How meaningful is freedom if you don't have a house or a pension? This core Social Liberal analysis is as relevant to today's world as it was to the Edwardian era.

While political freedoms such as freedom of speech are crucial, poverty, inherited disadvantage and in today's world, climate change, can curtail freedom. Lloyd George preceded his challenge to the landed aristocracy with the damning phrase that "a nation that ruled the waves could not even flush its own sewers." Liberals have used state action to challenge disadvantages that prevent individuals realising their full potential. As Nick Clegg has said, "freedom and liberty mean nothing unless the barriers to progress and opportunity are removed."

Beveridge provided the intellectual underpinnings for a welfare state that brought about significant improvements in life expectancy and quality of life for many Britons. The call for state intervention to give disabled people full civil rights in the high street and the workplace did not come from some Fabian elite but from the grassroots. It came from people who had been dismissed from

employment and who could not cross the threshold of the local supermarket.

The state can play a role as an enabler and can break up concentrations of power and wealth essential for expanding life chances. But a call for renewed state action does not mean an embrace of the forms of intervention favoured by Crosland, Brown and Blunkett. The state of 2009 is centralist, insensitive and unresponsive.

Despite record funding, our public services remain stubbornly unresponsive. All the consultation documents in the world do not amount to a genuine voice for citizens in the planning of key services like health care. Liberal Democrats need to refashion and reinvent the state and not simply through decentralisation.



Nick Clegg: "Freedom and liberty mean nothing unless the barriers to progress and opportunity are removed."

For example, will citizens have a stronger voice in shaping decisions about schools and hospitals if they are given social and economic rights, enshrined in a written constitution? Campaigners used South Africa's constitutional entitlement of 'the right to health' to force Thabo Mbeki to overturn his ban on the funding of HIV drugs. Defining clear rights in these areas should also be part of the debate.

But why the Forum and why now?

Social Liberalism speaks powerfully to the needs of our times. This is an age when we survey the ruins of insolvent financial institutions bequeathed to us by the abdication of regulation. Across the world, existing divisions over ethnicity, religion or caste are being intensified by poverty and the advance of climate change. Equality is now not just a moral imperative but is essential for the quality of life of people across the social spectrum.

Economies like South Africa and Brazil are the real growth engines for the world economy in the future but they are being held back by the inequalities within their borders.

I am diminished if the child down the road is underachieving at school and leaves school with inadequate qualifications. If a woman in Salford is paid less for her work than a male colleague doing the same job, our taxes will end up paying for her retirement. How can we compete in the world economy when working class children born at the millennium are already falling behind their less academically able middle class peers?

Richard Wilkinson's new publication, *The Spirit Level*, has provided powerful evidence that unequal societies like Britain diminish the quality of life available to people across the social spectrum. For example, Wilkinson found that even in an area that is closely associated with working class disadvantage – achievement at school – more equal societies see higher levels of literacy among the children even of better educated families. He demonstrates how inequality hits the quality of life across the whole community in areas ranging from trust in your neighbours to homicide. Wilkinson's findings should chasten those who believe that the affluent can insulate themselves from the consequences of deprivation elsewhere in our society.

So while there is a compelling case for a reinvigorated national and international effort to achieve equality, can Liberal Democrats generate the electoral support to make this possible? Some people have suggested that we have now reached the limits of public support for redistribution of wealth and opportunity. I disagree. When voters are shown the impact that successful anti-poverty policies can have, they rally in support of equality.

The banking crisis represents a major strategic moment for the centre left. Margaret Thatcher exploited the IMF crisis and the Winter of Discontent to press her case for free market policies and possessive individualism. The banking crisis demonstrates that free markets do not inherently serve the public interest. In this recession, both middle and working class people share economic insecurity and will

“Social liberalism recognises that an individual's material and personal circumstances can act as a constraint on them realising freedom”

look to the state to provide them with social protection. President Obama is taking advantage of this climate in the United States to push forward with the biggest expansion of the federal government since the New Deal.

And Social Liberalism is indispensable for our electoral coalition. Labour voters put us over the top in a series of seats won from the Conservatives in 1997 and 2001. We now represent a swathe of seats in university towns where middle class Labour voters were won over by our policy on tuition fees and our uncompromising

internationalism on Iraq.

The Social Liberal Forum was formed in order to generate debate within the party and beyond. Our title is not accidental. We don't exist simply to promote some pre-defined policy agenda. We want to engage with party members across the country. That's why we have started the Ideas Factory on our website. A liberal party needs open debate.

There are some really big questions for our party to consider as we formulate our manifesto and beyond:

- Can we break the cycle of inherited disadvantage by investing in education alone? Will an emphasis on education be distinctive enough to counter David Cameron's Conservatives?
- If we are serious about hitting the 2002 child poverty target, and we reject means-testing, what does that mean for child benefit?
- Who are the poorest in our society and what are the policy interventions that will help them?
- While worklessness is a key driver of poverty, free marketers should recognise that work that delivers low pay and limited progression can also entrench poverty, particularly for women.
- How can we develop a framework where business meets its social and environmental obligations and maintain competitiveness?

One hundred years on from the People's Budget, the inequalities in life chances in today's Britain demand that we reconnect with our radical heritage. Throughout our party's history – whether it be honouring moral obligations to the Hong Kong Chinese; Kosovo; or upholding international law on Iraq – where we have shown leadership and moral clarity, we have been rewarded.

Dr Matthew Sowemimo is Director of the Social Liberal Forum. Website: <http://socialliberal.net>

SAVE US FROM FABIANISM

David Boyle makes a plea to the Social Liberal Forum to be critical and ambitious, and reject technocratic delusions

We have a new Liberal Democrat think-tank. And when there has been little or no thinking around the party for two decades, that has to be a good thing. So why am I uneasy about the appearance of the Social Liberal Forum?

It isn't that I am suspicious of social liberalism. Heaven knows, I was even a contributor to the excellent essay collection *Reinventing the State*.

Nor am I a closet 'market liberal' – if there is such a thing – dedicated to handing over health and education to faceless American corporates.

No, this is an argument inside social liberalism, but it is an urgent one. Because there is more than one kind of social liberalism, and we can't afford for the backward-looking Fabian variety to dominate again.

When the electorate demands something progressive, it would be disastrous for us to exhume the soulless old language of the 1970s and argue that we just never tried Fabianism hard enough.

This article is me asserting my right to try to claw back a genuinely Liberal social liberalism from the jaws of the Fabian beast.

It is a kind of open letter to Matthew Sowemimo, Richard Grayson, Duncan Brack, and all the others involved in the Forum, to look forwards – to look for the real reasons why Britain is becoming so unequal. To be Liberals, which means, I believe, rejecting the Fabian idea that everything can be solved by tax and spending.

CEREBRAL KNEES-UP

The inspiration for writing this was the fringe meeting at this year's Liberal Democrat annual cerebral knees-up at the LSE, under the title 'Reclaiming the State', an attempt to push the issue of equality higher up the agenda. Fair enough. We are social Liberals: that is what we are for.

But here we come to the crux of the matter. Measure equality broadly and design policies that can genuinely understand the complexity of it, and maybe we can move forward. Measure it narrowly, and assume that tweaking the bottom line is all the government needs to do – that it is only a question of how much money the state spends – and we find ourselves back where we started, somewhere around 1977.

The heart of the fringe meeting was a presentation by a personable young man from the Institute of Fiscal Studies. Listening to him made it horribly clear why narrow technocratic Fabianism failed to shift equality in Britain before.

Because defining equality in terms of *income* is all very well, but it misses the real question as we pore over the graphs: why is such inequality so persistent?

Defining it in terms of *consumption*, as he preferred to do, is an interesting intellectual exercise but compounds the error. It assumes that Lord Scrooge is poor because he spends as little as he can, but that a single mother is rich when she has five children and juggles the same number of credit cards.

This is the Fabian approach to policy. It reduces everything to a handful of technocratic metrics, chosen largely because it thinks the government can make a difference to them, but which ignores the basic problems.

NOT JUST MONEY

It pretends that the whole problem is about money, when people outside the policy bubble know perfectly well that it isn't. It certainly is partly about money, but it is just as much about power, class, education and culture and much else besides.

And it implies that the whole solution to the problem is welfare. That poor people should be supplicants to government redistributors, when we know that won't be nearly enough.

This is the original Fabian sin. It reeks of elitism, and ineffectual elitism too, rooted as it is in an organisation that was originally dedicated to moving very slowly and that – thanks to George Bernard Shaw – ridiculed anything that did not reduce any problem to money alone.

None of that is to pretend money is irrelevant. Of course it isn't. But what the narrow obsession with poverty graphs is emphatically not is Liberalism, with its broader understanding of the problems of power, its human sympathy, and its understanding of the limitations of the central state.

Of course, Liberalism learned from the Fabians, especially in the days of the Newcastle programme. It learned, for one thing, to trust the state so far – that no other institution was available. But it always understood that human beings come before bureaucracies and that bureaucracies are not nearly as effective as politicians imagine they are.

Even if the occasional Liberal policy paper imbibed some of the technocratic language (it made them sound serious, after all), Liberals never followed the fearsome Beatrice and Sidney Webb in their rejection of people power.

"Some old ladies fall in love with their chauffeurs," said Beatrice Webb just before she died, at the height of the

Stalin's purges. "I have fallen in love with Soviet communism." Liberals never followed her that far.

Nor did they follow the Fabians where all this led to: the punishment of impoverished communities that failed to respond in the way the theory prescribed, to the destruction of their neighbourhoods and the theft of what power they had to the centre.

"We are dealing with people who have no initiative or civic pride," said Newcastle's chief planner in 1963. "The task surely is to break up such groupings, even though people seem to be satisfied with their miserable environment and seem to enjoy an extrovert social life in their own locality." That was the logical consequence of technocratic Fabianism.

None of this suggests that equality is unimportant. Of course it is. But the Fabian idea that you can measure it simply and solve it just by increasing public spending dangerously misses the point – and leaves people just as unequal, but a little more cynical. The real problem is much more insidious than that.

Sixty years after the Beveridge Report, which identified the Five Giants that blighted mankind and predicted their progressive destruction, the Giants are still with us.

Beveridge didn't slay them, and neither did the Fabians with all their graphs. Neither did Gordon Brown over the past decade when he doubled the money going into the NHS and increased the national budget from just below £4 billion to nearly £6 billion.

So tell me, Fabians. Is it possible that some other factors are involved which meant that the money wasn't spent as effectively as it could have been? Or is the question really only how much?

Should we, as an effective opposition, articulate the real reasons why Britain doesn't work for everyone? Or should we just confine ourselves to the old tried and failed metrics and the sheer dullness of the political promise of specific amounts of money?

Here is a handful of Liberal explanations of why such inequality is still with us:

- **Centralisation:** this plays a major role in increasing isolation and sense of powerlessness, as institutions get ever more distant from people – geographically and politically – and as frontline staff become ever more enmeshed in the target culture and ever less effective in helping those they are supposed to help.
- **Education:** generations of people in Britain have inherited a suspicion of schools and universities, and it is a suspicion that is reciprocated – how else can we explain why successive governments believe it acceptable that we shove teenagers into monstrous factories of 2,000 pupils or more?
- **Snobbery:** there are structural reasons why our public services are geared to treat some people differently from others, and to treat poorer people with deep and authoritarian suspicion. Why else is my local shiny new Children's Centre absolutely empty of punters? Because those it is aimed at believe it isn't on their side – and they are correct.
- **Passivity:** we have structured our public services in such a way that they prefer the poorest and most dependent to be passive supplicants rather than authors of their own destiny.

This last one is an insidious legacy of Fabianism; creating public services that are ruled by technocrats, and which waste the energy and imagination of the people who go so passively through the system. It is precisely what Beveridge warned against in his less famous second report on the urgency of people power.

The truth is – a Liberal insight this one – that none of our huge social problems are going to be tackled sustainably and effectively without a huge injection of voluntary effort by ordinary people on an unprecedented scale, bringing to bear their human skills, and to do so via our public service institutions.

Will that require more money? Of course it will, at least to start with. But is this primarily about money? It isn't that simple.

So this is my challenge to the Social Liberal Forum. Will you dare to grapple with these broader structural issues – or will you turn back to the old Fabian delusions, handing down percentages and targets from on high to an electorate that has long since ceased to believe in numbers?

Will you hammer out a non-market social Liberalism that trusts people to take charge of their lives – or will you remain suspicious that this implies somehow that they need no support from government, central or local?

Will you develop a critique of the combination of state and corporate power, the new reality – or will you just re-hash the tired old assumptions of tax and spend?

The danger is that social liberalism becomes what the media tells us it is – torpedoing outdated market reforms to public services, without suggesting any real changes instead. A symbolic gesture, with money attached, here and there perhaps. No articulation of the basic problem. No ambition. No faith in people.

The real battle seems to me to be a tussle inside social liberalism for the soul of the party – not to accept or reject the state, but to decide between the old technocratic abstractions versus human solutions.

People can see the wreckage of Westminster solutions all around them. They want a political force that can see that too, but which doesn't respond by consigning them into the arms of American corporations ringed all around by 'commercial confidentiality'.

I still believe the Liberal Democrats will be that force. Not until they have excised the fantasies of Fabianism, they won't be.

In the end, the people who can do that most convincingly are the new Social Liberal Forum. This is a small plea from a potential recruit: give us a lead into the future.

David Boyle is a member of the Liberal Democrats' Federal Policy Committee and a fellow of the New Economics Foundation

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BROWNIAN BANKS

Where was ‘prudence with a purpose’ when the banks went on a spree, asks Ed Randall

There can be little doubt about where we are headed after years of Brownian economic policy. Economic commentators distinguish between a V-shaped recession followed by recovery, a U-shaped recession followed, rather more slowly, by recovery, and an L-shaped recession; the latter is a recession from which it takes years rather than months to recover. Just now recovery is not in sight.

Japan is said to have suffered a lost decade in the 1990s when its economy went into recession and stagnated – it provides the best modern example of an L-shaped recession. Japan’s financial institutions seized up and ceased to provide the credit that its economy needed; even massive domestic spending by the Japanese government and monetary initiatives failed to bring about a revival. Now in 2009 the entire world faces similar economic woes. And, unlike Japan, international demand cannot be expected to come to the rescue and help reflate a national economy, unless there is concerted international reflation and restoration of credit.

Japanese policy-makers were simply unwilling to clean up their country’s banking system – a necessary (though not a sufficient) condition for economic revival. Even under new leadership, the US appears reluctant to clean its Augean banking stables. And, when Gordon Brown recently visited the US and gave an interview to National Public Radio’s Steve Inskeep, he exhibited all the signs and symptoms of a national leader unwilling to address the insolvency of Britain’s major banks.

Inskeep asked Brown whether, during ten years in charge of Britain’s economic policy, he had been worried about consumer and corporate indebtedness. The prime minister’s answer was to deny that corporate borrowers in the UK had borrowed too much. He steered clear of consumer debt and the regulatory failures, which had permitted personal debt in Britain to spiral out of control. As the architect of New Labour’s financial regulation (which embraced a great deal of the market fundamentalism that had gone before), he pursued an economic strategy that was premised on leaving the financial sector well alone. Perhaps that is why his silence on the greatest failure of his time in charge should come as no surprise.

Simon Johnson – co-founder of Baseline Scenario and economic counsellor and director of the research department at the IMF from March 2007-August 2008 – had no hesitation, having listened to the Brown-Inskeep interview, in pronouncing: “Britain had an unassisted, unsustainable property and financial sector bubble”. He could have added that any halfway competent and responsible national treasurer, with years at the helm and the best financial intelligence that the British Treasury could supply, should have recognised the property and

financial sector bubbles as they were building; and should have taken measures to manage them and limit their economic impact.

Where was – we are surely entitled to ask – prudence with a purpose then?

Perhaps Inskeep, before framing his questions, had run a Google search. Were there any revealing questions or examples of economic policy advice to the former chancellor that he could have called upon?

One questioner, Vince Cable, had asked Brown, on 13 November 2003: “[whether] growth of the British economy is sustained by consumer spending pinned against record levels of personal debt... secured, if at all, against house prices that the Bank of England describes as well above equilibrium level?” Brown swatted the question away. He told Cable: “[You’ve] been writing articles in the newspapers... that spread alarm, without substance, about the state of the British economy.” Brown finished his answer by petulantly asserting that “we’ve been right... and you’ve been wrong”.

The prime minister is incapable of admitting just how wrong he has been. And he and his successor at the Treasury, Alastair Darling, are now busy compounding past misdeeds. And, once again, Cable can be found asking searching questions. Why is the British government so determined to help British banks socialise massive losses in mortgage markets and credit derivatives? Why is the UK government committing UK taxpayers to meet 90% of losses British banks are likely to sustain on toxic assets that should never have been taken onto their books? The Treasury’s approach to banking failures and insolvency is, in Cable’s words, a “fraud at the taxpayer’s expense”.

Liberal Democrats have a better policy. When taxpayer’s money is used in an attempt to rescue banks and on the scale the UK government proposes, it must be on condition that taxpayers have effective control and, in the case of the banks, can restructure them so that, in future, they cannot plausibly claim to be ‘too big to fail’. It must only be on condition that taxpayer guarantees aid recovery throughout the economy, rather than simply supplying the means to refloat the banking system. It must be on condition that what banks pay their directors and managers matches performance over many years. And it must be on condition that taxpayers are in a position to benefit from any revival of the banking system they will have helped salvage when, eventually, the British economy recovers from a decade of Brownian motion and its aftermath.

Ed Randall was a Liberal Democrat councillor in Greenwich for 16 years and jointly edited *The Dictionary of Liberal Thought*.

HEAD FOR THE BLACK HOLES

The BNP won a seat in Sevenoaks and the local Liberal Democrats refused to stand, a move condemned by ALDC. Now comes the fight back, says Alan Bullion

The Lib Dems, Labour and the Tories both locally in Kent and nationally received a wake-up call from the 76 vote majority achieved in Swanley St Mary's on 19 February by BNP candidate Paul Golding.

For the Lib Dems, there are many lessons to be learned. The local party in Sevenoaks was highly complacent about the by-election, even though the BNP had announced it was now active in the area. Golding boldly told the local press that the BNP would stand across seats in Sevenoaks, a threat that was taken all too lightly among the both the Lib Dem councillors and a largely ageing membership.

We had identified a potential candidate, but concerns were raised as to whether he could get ten signatures, something the BNP evidently managed to achieve. However, rather than carping and criticising a local party for its weakness, perhaps ALDC and Cowley Street ought to offer more constructive help to weak local parties, where the membership is mainly elderly and not yet attuned to the unsubtle nuances of the BNP threat.

This ward is truly a black hole for the Lib Dems. We have not stood there for several years, with the formerly dominant Labour Party slugging it out with the Tories. We have no members or known activists there, and have no canvass data or list of supporters to speak of.

It is a mainly white-working class ward, with the highest unemployment level in the Sevenoaks constituency and huge pockets of social deprivation. With the economy fast going down the pan, it was ripe for the BNP to pick up on growing local discontent about jobs and houses. This was at the expense both of the dominant Labour group, who run Swanley town council, and the Tories, who thought they would pick up the seat with ease, using a former councillor from an adjacent rural ward who defected from the Lib Dems to the Tories after he lost his district council seat in 2007.

One Lib Dem councillor later told me: "I was talking to Labour members of the town council and they expressed a grudging admiration for the way the BNP conducted a very professional campaign.

"They brought in 20-30 activists every day from as far away as Slough and Hemel Hempstead. They targeted young males, the skilled and unskilled building workers who are now unemployed and who don't normally vote.

"Their campaign was on national issues, immigration, asylum seekers and alleged preferential housing for these groups. This played well with their target audience given the shortage of social and affordable housing in the ward.

"Clearly they would not have the resources to repeat this level of effort across the district but that does not mean any of the major parties can be complacent."

I think that says it all really. The BNP, as the Tories and Labour have done in recent years, have picked up Lib Dem techniques of door-knocking, surveys, grumble sheets and good old pavement politics.

The street lights aren't working, the pavements are broken, and the roads have potholes. So who actually cares about the plight of people in Swanley? Evidently not Labour or the Tories. But then we as Lib Dems haven't really either.

Since the by-election, I have taken many brickbats from Swanley citizens, the media and Lib Dem activists and bloggers up and down the land for our failure to stand in Swanley. It is very easy for someone in the comfort of Hebdon Bridge to chant the mantra, "Always stand a candidate."

As PPC, I can recommend and cajole, but not compel. I do not live in the seat and have a full-time job besides being PPC. However, I am standing in the county seat in June, as I live elsewhere in Kent, or will at least ensure we do have a candidate, to address the damage done.

We have already started to campaign there. There are parts of the Swanley seat such as Hextable that have great Lib Dem potential, but haven't been worked on for several years, so we have already done a survey.

The local party executive was truly divided and weak on Swanley. Some didn't want us to stand at all, arguing we would split the vote. We were also profoundly affected by the defection of the former councillor who stood for the Tories, something that ALDC chose to ignore in its own spin and snide comments, despite being told, as this didn't fit its story. I found the ALDC condemnation of my local party over the top, to say the least. It is only now that it has offered help.

The BNP can win in Kent if we don't stop them, and it will now use this foothold to target Lib Dem-held wards in Sevenoaks, so I have called for a local by-election hit squad to be formed to start the fight back now. We have all been warned.

Alan Bullion is Liberal Democrat PPC for Sevenoaks

COME ON BABY FIGHT MY SHIRE

It's hard to get party members excited about June's county council elections, but Hertfordshire has found some novel ways say Chris White and Susan Gaszczak

In 1993, the last time county council elections were held without being overshadowed by a general election on the same day, Paddy Ashdown joyfully celebrated the results in his conference speech.

It was like Shakespeare, he said: "What news of Essex? How fares Somerset?"

The Tories lost everything except Buckinghamshire and true Tory areas like Surrey suddenly found themselves in the hands of what we still like to call balanced administrations. In some places, we gained outright control.

It was tempting then to think that a sea change had occurred: that the Tory grip on the shires, in some places for over a century, had come to an end forever and that there would be Liberal Democrats in charge of real money operating real services, right across the country.

Reality kicked in fairly quickly. The Tories, ostensibly as part of their plans to reduce the effects of the disastrous poll tax, only recently morphed into council tax, were anxious to save money (they said) and wanted therefore to bring an end to the two-tier system.

The reality, of course, was that their shire power base had just been undermined and they no longer loved it. Many Liberal Democrats played along and there was a smattering of reorganisations: many (like Herefordshire and Worcestershire) were eminently sensible. Others were more questionable and had the effect of rolling back Liberal Democrat influence.

The 1993 elections were of course the first real sign that the effects of the financial crisis of 1992 (a poor relation of the much improved financial crisis we enjoy today) had finally persuaded the electorate that the Tories deserved a kicking. By 1997, the electorate delivered one of its biggest ever kicks. The general election of that year rejoiced in Peter Snow's 'landslidometer' and saw a happy increase in Liberal Democrat representation in Westminster. But it also saw a Tory resurgence in the shires.

While Lib-Lab administrations continued in places like Hertfordshire and Suffolk, the Liberal dawn in, for instance Essex, was shorter lived. Hertfordshire fell in 1999 and by

2005 many of the last vestiges of country-wide Liberal Democrat involvement in the shires had disappeared.

The glorious exceptions in that year were in the west, with Cornwall, Devon and Somerset seeing Liberal Democrat administrations.

County councils have not gone away, despite the predictions of so many in the nineties. Recent reorganisations have been aimed at getting rid of districts rather than counties. And in many areas, reorganisation is less on the cards than at any time since the 1973 restructuring of local government.

So these elections matter, even if they remain a mystery to Londoners and those in metropolitan areas. They also matter because they are the last major test of public opinion (other than the Euros, which are always an unreliable pointer) before the general election of 2010.

We are probably not as ready as we should be. There are a number of county councillors from the class of 1993 who are now retiring. Some are doing so because their divisions have been hollowed out by the advance of the Tories, especially in rural areas. Some Liberal Democrat county councillors no longer have Liberal Democrat district

colleagues: it requires a big personality for a county councillor to project himself or herself across an electorate of up to 12,000 when there are no colleagues to help with publicity, casework and campaigning.

It is remarkable how few counties have a co-ordinating committee or even a countywide approach to the campaign. It is always true that campaigning is on the ground and that activists operate within wards and local parties rather than within

divisions and county areas. But a lack of co-ordination in the age of the web, Facebook and Twitter, when media footprints are shared across local party boundaries, invites underperformance at best and disaster at worst.

In Hertfordshire we have tried something altogether different. We have long had a co-ordinating committee (nicknamed HC3) which has had the function of holding the county council group to account, fund-raising for elections (mainly out of county councillor allowances), training in election techniques, developing and

"Any good rock group is aware of the need to perform and to supply merchandise"

co-ordinating policy including the manifesto and providing mutual support in elections.

This has been preparing for the county council elections since last summer, cajoling 11 local parties to get on with candidate approval and selection, and developing a manifesto.

Many readers are naturally cynical about the value of manifestos. Indeed creating something coherent in Hertfordshire was a struggle because of the diversity of geography (urban areas like Watford and Stevenage versus the deeply rural north and east) and the need to be inclusive of 11 constituencies, 10 council groups and various parliamentary candidates, including a target seat. And we even had to involve the county council group!

By the time we had reached ALDC's Kickstart weekend, we had managed a 12-page epic which was beginning to bore us. Then Simon Hughes came along and spoke of a Southwark campaign entitled 'Six to Fix'.

It was a light bulb moment and the six quickly wrote themselves:

- **Fix 1** is to mend our roads and pavements: on every doorstep and survey, this is always residents' biggest concern;
- **Fix 2** is to provide more school places where there are clear shortages; parents across the county who have been through the school application process know this is an issue;
- **Fix 3** is to sort out the failing home care contracts and ensure that people who need help get what help they need, when they need it;
- **Fix 4** is to give young people something to do: they don't want to hang around on street corners, they want somewhere to hang out;
- **Fix 5** is to protect vulnerable children, we have one of the worst child protection services in the country;
- **Fix 6** is to take a serious look at county hall and see where there is duplication, where too much is spent on publications and where services could be provided at lower cost, we would freeze council tax next year.

So we had six slogans backed by real experience of discontent on the ground. What about libraries? And the fire service? There is still a full blown county manifesto. But it is available in virtual form as reference material for candidates and those who are keen to examine every jot and tittle. It is not a campaigning document.

Any good rock group is aware of the need to perform and to supply merchandise. We have been giving presentations about the campaign around the county but have also started providing badges, car stickers and even mugs.

The point of this is to fire people up for something which is frankly unfamiliar: a county council election campaign. It is also to provide a proper tease campaign for the outside world who can look with puzzlement at our logo and say: "What is that?" The technique was used in the Ros Scott presidential campaign and has been used from the creation of Central TV to some of the more enigmatic perfume ads today.

The themes can also ensure that campaigning remains focused on those issues of importance to the public.

Libraries are important but only become campaigning issues when there are plans to close one: the Tories have no such plan as far as we can tell and so there is no campaigning issue.

So campaign articles, press releases and Twitter tweets are all labelled with the Fix number, to ram home the consistency of the message both to the press and to the activist base which is copied in.

One of the problems of political parties is that they can become set in their ways. Just as community politics was a breakthrough in contrast to the other two parties two or three decades ago, so now we need to tap into new media to keep ahead of the game.

Some of this is of uncertain value: does a Facebook group really help in a local election? Are we merely providing a morale boost to our own side or are we reaching out to voters and – more importantly – those who have stopped being voters? Is Twitter more of the same or are we reaching new audiences? Interestingly on Twitter we are being followed by a local radio show and our first follower was 10 Downing Street – thrilling and disturbing at the same time.

Websites are familiar tools, although many users fail to define their purpose. We are trying to make the Six to Fix interactive and use it to harvest the email addresses of supporters. Here again, some local parties evidently have got ahead of the game while others have stayed rather sleepy: one of the most active local parties in Hertfordshire was able to supply 1,700 email addresses of supporters. Its equally active neighbour managed only 50.

Buy-in is always a problem. A certain degree of evangelism has been necessary to interest people in these elections and to persuade people to fight the election in this way. And there are still those who stand in blank incomprehension at the idea that a press release on county council matters might need to be cleared with the county council group in the middle of a county council election campaign.

At this stage, it is difficult to tell if this will work. Journalists are clearly tickled by the idea of a Six to Fix and the webcam snippets on our website (including the county councillor who provided a rap message). Most party activists appreciate the need to be tightly disciplined and focussed.

Labour is falling through the floor and anticipates losing control of all its remaining county councils. This does not mean, however, that its vote will come to us or will come to us in a useful fashion: in many places, Labour is already in fourth place or not putting up candidates at all.

But the Tories are gaining in popularity despite their self-evident weaknesses. For those of us in the shires, they often form the crucial enemy. And the party's air war over the next few weeks, not least Vince Cable and Nick Clegg, will be crucial in holding back the tide. Those of us on the ground can only do our best: where we have worked, we will win.

Chris White is group leader of Hertfordshire County Council Liberal Democrats and vice-chair of HC3. Susan Gaszczak is Hertfordshire county co-ordinator.



STRANGERS ON THE RIGHT

Right-wing libertarians belong outside the Liberal Democrats' traditions, aims and objectives, argues Matthew Huntbach

The Commentary in *Liberator* 331 entitled 'Blues Under the Bed' has attracted much attention in Liberal Democrat internet discussion, much of it hostile. Yet it seems to me to be expressing a fact – our party is not one that sees its prime aim as lowering taxation and minimising the role of the state against the power of private wealth. Rather, it sees the state as something that can be used to counter the effect of unequal distribution of wealth leading to liberty for some at the cost of lack of liberty for others.

This was so in the great reforming Liberal government that laid the foundation of the welfare state at the beginning of the twentieth century. It remained true when the Liberal Party merged with the SDP at the end of the twentieth century. It is clearly written into the preamble of our party's constitution stating its aims and objectives.

There was a natural home for those who wanted to lower taxation and cut state services on the grounds this would best foster 'wealth creation'; that was the Conservative Party. Indeed, that party had benefited from a long process where groups split from the Liberal Party and joined the Conservatives.

That is why the party system in Britain was different from much of the rest of Europe. The old aristocratic party, the counterparts of which had largely disappeared elsewhere in Europe, survived and prospered by absorbing what elsewhere in Europe became pro-business Liberal parties. Britain did not develop the equivalent of the populist and fairly social democratic Christian Democrats. The Liberal Party survived as a historical relic but began a revival as a home for discontented radicals.

The dispute in the merger with the SDP was not, as some of those misled by the rewriting of history by our party's new right wing sometimes suppose, a contest between 'classical liberals' in the Liberal Party and social democrats in the SDP. Rather, it reflected a contest within the Liberal Party as to what the purpose of that party was.

What might loosely be called the right wing of the party held that it was to be a moderating force, holding the balance between the Labour Party and the Conservative Party, stopping either of those parties drifting too far to the extremes because there was the possibility of the Liberal Party taking its more moderate supporters who were not willing to cross to the other major party.

The left wing of the Liberal Party was more interested in the growing disillusionment of the people of the country with its political system (something that has become much worse since those days). It wished to explore new ways of spreading power and re-engaging people with the political

process. The breaking of the duopoly of power held by the two big political parties was part of this, but the party's left wing did not want to do this merely to create a 'centre party'.

From this, it can be seen that the SDP and the right wing of the Liberal Party had much in common. The SDP was a party oriented around a group of Westminster politicians who felt that the Labour Party had become too extreme. Although it absorbed some of the constitutional reform ideas that the Liberal Party had long championed, it essentially wanted to keep the Westminster model of politics.

Scarred by their experience of Labour Party activists who wished to push the party in a more radical socialist direction, the SDP's leaders were keen to keep a strong controlling hand on the party. They wished it to have a constitution and a way of presenting itself that was very much about those with wisdom, parliamentary experience and links with the metropolitan establishment passing that down and using its membership to promote those leaders and their wisdom.

This model of politics was just what the left wing of the Liberal Party opposed. As a result, much of the argument between members of the Liberal Party and the SDP during their Alliance and leading up to the merger was about the party constitution and promotional strategy rather than policy.

The essence of liberalism that the left wing of the Liberal Party as it approached merger most wished to capture was its concern for spreading power. But it was pragmatic on whether the state would be an ally or enemy in this respect. There was certainly a recognition that the accumulation of power in big private corporations was undesirable, and therefore something liberals by instinct should oppose.

One might note that this is an older definition of left-right than the now predominant one measured by intervention or lack of intervention by the state in the economy. In the older definition, the left is defined by opposition to concentration of power wherever that may be. If it is in large corporations and the state may be used to break them up, then the left will use the state. Crucially, the power of large corporations to control the lives of people who rely on them for their livelihood was recognised. The welfare state, by making provisions for people so that they could survive without having to do what is required by corporations to obtain employment, was thus an empowering factor against the power of those corporations, against their power to turn people into wage slaves.

There is no notion here of opposition to the state and a wish to cut down on its taxation and provision of services as being in any way central to liberalism, let alone its main aim, as those who now describe themselves as ‘classical liberals’ or ‘libertarians’ suggest. The fact that the party declared itself opposed to “enslavement by poverty, ignorance or conformity” established that it saw there were restrictions to freedom other than those imposed by state legislation. The restriction on freedom that a rich man feels when he pays taxation was not considered a major one.

So the idea that those in our party who now refer to themselves as ‘libertarians’, holding to the principle that essentially the state is the only barrier that exists to true freedom, represent some long-term wing of the party is false. Such people simply did not exist in our party until very recently.

I do not know how many of such people exist in our party now, although I note that a significant proportion of people who express attachment to our party in internet discussions either fully hold to this position, or are sympathetic to it. This is a new development, and I feel *Liberator* is justified in suggesting that such people are so far removed from our party’s traditions and stated aims and objectives that the term ‘entryist’ is appropriate for them. They are people joining our party not out of any great sympathy for what it stands for, but rather because they see it as something that can be taken over and used to promote their own ideology.

Saying this does not mean I wish to have a witch-hunt or to engage in expulsions. But it is to warn that, if we become tied up in arguments over these issues, the party will be damaged. Our party relies more than the others on enthusiastic activists to keep it going, and if they start dropping out because they see it changed from the party they joined to one that is unsympathetic to that party’s aims and objectives, they will leave and the party will dwindle.

I do not see in this country any great band of voters who are looking for a party even more extreme free market than the Conservative Party has been, particularly since the days of Margaret Thatcher, and the Labour Party became under Tony Blair. How incredible it is that such views seem to be growing in our party at the very time when the failures of the free market policies promoted by British governments since 1979 have become obvious, and the anger in this country at where these policies have taken us has become palpable. Moving our party towards an extreme free market position now would surely be to destroy its prospects at the very time when they could be so bright.

Yet it does not seem quite so incredible when I think of these ‘libertarians’ in terms of the Trotskyists with whom in the past I had many fruitless arguments. They too grew as the failings of the socialist ideology they promoted became

“They are people joining our party not out of any great sympathy for what it stands for, but rather because they see it as something that can be taken over and used to promote their own ideology”

evident when it was practised. They too had a get-out clause to any argument that their policies didn’t work as they said they would, which was that any example you cared to give them wasn’t a true example. There was always some reason as to why the latest socialist failure was really ‘state capitalism’. There was always some vague hand-wavy argument as to why, if they had their way, it would turn out to be the complete opposite of what the politics of the previous generation of people who used the same lines led to. True socialism always lay just around the corner, and all it needed was more extreme versions of that which had failed to get there in the past.

I think what was happening here was that these Trotskyists had grown up in an age when socialism was naturally

assumed to be the politics an intelligent person would pick, or rather in an age just after that one. Thus they had absorbed socialist assumptions as they grew up, and so encountering the failure of those ideas naturally jumped to thinking it just needed a purer and more extreme form. Calling oneself a ‘socialist’ was a way of looking clever; it was to follow the zeitgeist. It had simple answers to every question, yet absorbing its ideology and taking on its jargon and following it through to its conclusions involved some intellectual effort, so could be used to impress. So it is today with those growing up in the post-Thatcher/Reagan world and with the dominant ideology of that world.

I feel too that there is an interaction with the USA, whence much of this ideology came. There it is often (though rarely admitted) a nostalgia movement for the days when there was a western frontier beyond which true stateless freedom could be grasped, or even a cargo cult which imagines that setting up the consequences of such a society will revive it. No-one need be concerned about being squeezed out of freedom by not owning property when free property was there to grab. It is hardly surprising that, when power is seeping from the USA, such a nostalgia movement should grow. Other declining great powers have seen similar.

The origin in the special situation of the USA seems to me to be a better explanation of ‘libertarian’ ideology than holding it to be a natural development either from our party’s twentieth-century development or from nineteenth-century liberalism. It will require another article to explain more fully why I feel not only is this ideology not ‘Liberal’, it is also not ‘liberal’.

Matthew Huntbach is a former Liberal Democrat councillor in Lewisham

REACHING FOR THE SUMMIT

It's time for politicians to support calls for an Earth Summit to chart a path for sustainable development, says Felix Dodds

“To address the emerging challenges, UN agencies, national governments, civil society stakeholders and the general public need to engage in a new partnership for sustainable development – a blueprint for sustainable development to 2030.”

On 4 November, the day of the US election, the Group of 77 developing countries (in fact more than 134 countries now) and China tabled a motion in the United Nations General Assembly calling for a new Earth Summit in 2012 and for Brazil to host the event.

The response of the European Union countries informally and formally was not very enthusiastic. This made me to wonder why. Is the world in a great shape? Are the serious challenges facing us being faced?

It is true that climate change has captured the imagination of politicians and the media and it is a serious challenge, possibly the greatest we will face in this generation, because it affects the way we live on this planet.

But what climate change has done is to focus us predominantly on reducing greenhouse gases, while masking everything else that is going in the wrong direction as well. What is clear to those who are focussing on a more holistic approach is that what climate change will do is make things even worse, but believe me they are really bad anyway.

In the past two years, crises in food availability and energy security have emerged almost unanticipated, and affected both developed and developing countries. We have seen the collapse of glaciers, ice caps and polar ice shelves that have stood intact for centuries. Such phenomena have occurred at an accelerated pace and beyond the worst-case scenarios of the IPCC. We have seen the emergence of a growing middle class in countries like India and China who want the lifestyle that they see in the west.

In October 2007, the United Nations Environment programme produced its Global Environmental Outlook 4 report with input from thousands of scientists. It took as its baseline the Brundtland report of 1987 and pointed out that, since then, the world's human population had increased by 34%. This increased population needs land to live on and food to eat, water to drink, energy to use. It has

been estimated, for example, that three-quarters of marine fisheries are exploited up to or beyond their maximum capacity. All this has caused more deforestation and impact on nature. Species are becoming extinct at a hundred times faster than the rate shown in the fossil record. Of the major vertebrate groups that have been assessed comprehensively, more than 30% of amphibians, 23% of mammals and 12% of birds are threatened.

A review at the UN in September 2008 found progress towards the Millennium Development Goals is not good. Halving the number of people living on less than \$1 a day by 2015 is even less likely to be met, as the financial crisis has focussed governments on their domestic needs in developed countries. But if the MDGs were met, it would have meant doubling food production by 2050. Fresh water is declining: by 2025, water use is predicted to have risen by 50% in developing countries and by 18% in the

developed world. GEO-4 says: “The escalating burden of water demand will become intolerable in water-scarce countries. Water quality is declining too, polluted by microbial pathogens and excessive nutrients. Globally, contaminated water remains the greatest single cause of human disease and death.”

What the MDGs failed to address was our consumption patterns and that other countries as they develop will want to have similar ones to us.

Today, the international financial emergency threatens the stability of every nation's economic system. The crisis

reveals the risks posed by uncontrolled economic globalisation, and the potential harmful impacts on environment and development goals. It also illustrates the results of a total failure to integrate environmental, social and development priorities into global economic policy. The financial crisis may have emerged from the unregulated market but it was a house of cards waiting to be blown over.

I found a wonderful quote from Mahatma Gandhi from 1928 that clearly warned us: “God forbid that India should ever take to industrialisation after the manner of the West.

“The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (the UK) is today keeping the world in chains. If

“The financial crisis may have emerged from the unregulated market but it was a house of cards waiting to be blown over”

an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.”

These new challenges will substantially increase the threat to international peace and security and our survival on the planet. They affect the world’s ability to implement present agreements, and undermine its ability to achieve new ones. To address the emerging challenges, UN agencies, national governments, civil society stakeholders and the general public need to engage in a new partnership for sustainable development – a blueprint for sustainable development to 2030.

So G77 was perhaps right to be calling for a new summit as the agenda that needs to be addressed is very broad. The kinds of areas it will need to look at include:

- Outlining how we are going to reduce consumption patterns and change lifestyle in a relatively short time.
- Identifying what a global green new deal might look like.
- Adopting an agreement on how to address energy, water, food, biodiversity and financial security issues.
- Where there are solutions, how those might be replicated quickly and effectively.
- Reforming the international institutional architecture.

The financial crisis allows a real opportunity to reform the Bretton Woods institutions around the promotion of sustainable development. A reformed International Monetary Fund could become an International Sustainable Development Fund (ISDF) and a reformed World Bank a World Sustainable Development Bank, which would help to ensure a sustainable approach to development.

The lack of transparency and accountability of multinational companies has been exposed by the financial crisis. In this context, the adoption at the summit of a Convention on Corporate Social and Environmental Responsibility concerning companies listed on the stock markets could provide a milestone. Such an initiative might also be strengthened by incorporating the Global Reporting Initiative and the Global Compact Principles as mandatory, or the OECD Guidelines on corporate social responsibility.

A 2012 Earth Summit could look forward to 2030 – a significant date in the IPCC Report [2007] on stabilising greenhouse gas emissions. This might also become the target for the next set of Millennium Development Goals, for 2015-2030, which will need to incorporate sustainable development principles. A summit in 2012 could help to ensure that this agenda is achievable through the creation of a new and compelling vision of sustainable development for the twenty-first century. Such a summit should address the impact that uncontrolled globalisation is having on the ability of all people to live sustainably on our planet. It should be the occasion for endorsing new binding agreements on key issues, undertaking new financial commitments, underpinning this with a Green New Deal and reshaping global governance arrangements for sustainable development.

What role could the Liberal Democrats play here in the UK and across Europe?

The parliamentary party and the European parliament groups could both, as appropriate consider:

- Ensuring the UK government plays a positive role in supporting the summit call
- Tabling an EDM supporting the summit
- Initiating parliamentary debates on human, economic and environmental security to enable parliament to start to understand the challenges ahead
- Call for the UN to set up a World Commission on a Green New Deal to report to the preparatory process for 2012
- Request the industry secretary to report to the Commons on how much fossil fuel is sitting on the balance sheets of listed companies in the City of London. Then call for legislation for the City of London to disclose of the quantum of fossil fuels sitting as reserves on the balance sheets of listed companies. A similar request could be made at European level.

Local Liberal Democrat council groups could consider:

- Calling for the Local Government Association to support the setting up of a campaign on Local Agenda 2030
- If they are members, to call on the International Campaign on Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) to support the call for a summit and an international campaign for a Local Agenda 2030
- Collecting together their good practice to share with others
- A global meeting in 2011 of Liberal councils across the world to input to a summit process.

The confluence of recent events represents an unusual turning point for the future of sustainable development. The promise of a summit does not represent the magic bullet to all the challenges facing our world today, but it does offer an opportunity to focus our energies, apply a wealth of new knowledge and to think big.

The organisation I run, Stakeholder Forum, has launched a website in preparation for the Earth Summit 2012 (www.earthsummit2012.org). On this site you can find the outcome document of the workshop held last November in San Sebastian, Spain, the *Donostia Declaration*.

Felix Dodds was chair of the National League of Young Liberals from 1985-87. He is executive director of Stakeholder Forum, a global stakeholder organisation working on sustainable development around the UN. His next book *Climate and Energy Insecurity* is due to be published by Earthscan in June 2009. His previous book *Human and Environmental Security* was nominated for the best environmental book of the year in 2006

FREE EDUCATION IS STILL WORTH FIGHTING FOR

The party was right to stay opposed to tuition fees, says Elaine Bagshaw

The Bill which saw the introduction of tuition fees in England was won in parliament by only five votes. Nearly a million students marched in London against this tax on education. The NUS lobbied against it, it was denounced as unfair, and our own party promised to abolish it. The policy was seen as an unforgivable assault on free education that, to begin with, was questioned at every opportunity.

Fast forward a few years, and the landscape of the debate is much changed. NUS has dropped its commitment to free education (an indication of how close the union has become to the Labour leadership), campaigning from students is almost silent, report after report claims fees have had no effect on accessibility and, at Harrogate, our party debated higher education and its commitment to the abolition of fees.

Thankfully we reaffirmed and extended our commitment to the abolition of fees, but the pro-fees lobby was strong and had gained support, and it was a tough, uphill battle to ensure the policy paper at Harrogate extended our commitment rather than reversing it.

When everyone runs onto the same ground, it's easy to think you should follow. The voices in favour of free education have dwindled, and we are often referred to as 'loony lefties' who back a regressive policy that is only a middle class subsidy from the taxpayer. The majority of those involved in this debate seem to have accepted that fees are here to stay and that, if you want to enter higher education, you had better be prepared to take on the minimum £9,000 debt that comes with it.

The idea that crippling young people with huge debts is acceptable and something that should be seen as an investment, especially in the current economic climate, is an absurdity. Graduate debt is the first and last solution of other parties' higher education funding schemes. This is not fair or progressive. As the recession takes hold, it is the under-25 age bracket that is making up the lion's share of redundancies.

People will argue that it is a debt that no-one chases you for, and you only pay it back once you're working, but it is still a debt and it still accrues interest. I have £14,500 of student debt to repay. This is accruing £60 of interest every month. If I were made redundant tomorrow, this interest would still be added onto the overall debt. And if the economy doesn't recover for two years (the minimum that's expected), that's another £1,440 added on.

But there's more to it than just student debt: since the introduction of tuition fees, we've seen a market creep into higher education that is damaging the sector. We are being forced to think only about how to get a job after university that will allow us to repay massive student debts. Lecturers are being forced to teach to the mark-sheet and find it harder and harder to explore, with students, their knowledge or their potential – a phenomenon that is beginning to reach all our universities. This isn't the fault of students or lecturers, but of yet another failed 'Labour' policy.

Research clearly demonstrates that poorer students are more likely to choose a university that is close to home, meaning that these students miss out on all the extra skills and experiences the rest of us get from university. Social skills, independence, involvement in student activities and much more: all missed out on simply because the structure of the system means they just can't afford it. Higher education remains inaccessible to poorer students and the best universities continue to be implicitly reserved for the most privileged, rather than the most capable.

Dropping an illiberal and artificial 50% target for the proportion of people going to university – seemingly plucked out of thin air – coupled with a system of progressive taxation and sensible budgeting from a government, would provide well-funded, accessible higher education. It would develop all forms of diversity, free up access teams to do their job, and push the reputation of British universities even higher.

Free education is not regressive. Means-tested grants, loans and fees are regressive because they mean that, at the age of 18 (or older if you take a gap year), you are still tied to your parents. Every other section of the law views you as an independent adult at 18, and yet the tuition fees system ties a financial commitment to you that your parents are expected to keep, but on the government's terms.

The fight for free education is still worth it because free education is something that should not be compromised. Education is a liberating, developing force and can free us from any background we are born into. What matters is that the principle of free education is still strong and its benefits worthwhile. This is something the Liberal Democrats have always stood for, and I hope always will.

Elaine Bagshaw is chair of Liberal Youth.

THREE TIERS FOR OUR SCHOOLS

The education system fails to inspire students and schools are too large, says Roger Harcourt

Confusion at the spring conference. Whatever the merits of the policy paper on schools, the motion put was a dog's breakfast, with the issue of faith schools still not resolved – though in today's climate, only bad-lippers would condemn the party for that... but there is more to consider.

Let's start with exams. Those our children sit are being changed. Frequently. Many doubt their reliability – of exams that is, not the children.

The government has reluctantly got rid of Key Stage Three, since it was badly administered, expensive and there weren't enough good examiners. It might even have acknowledged that the exams themselves were flawed, but we don't know what those responsible really think. They haven't told us.

That Key Stage Three is history is good news. It was unnecessary. Public schools never bothered with it as there was no need to examine students to death, in their view. They take things more quietly.

Remember this: the products of public schools regularly provide us with our political and financial leaders. They flood the top levels of the Liberal Democrats. Students at public schools normally experience a three-tier age structure: 5-9; 9-13; 13-18. They are examined less. Why should children going to state schools be subjected to more frequent examinations than those going to public schools? Is there something wrong with them? Are they genetically more imperfect?

A purer philosophy of education and learning would understand that young people have similar needs.

Because Key Stage Three is in the dustbin, state schools will be able to breathe a little and do their own thing – if their teachers possess the nous, that is. If you're a high-flying teacher – with genuine knowledge – you'll be able to pursue your own agenda rather more. Surely that's what we want of our teachers. They should be people who have found things out, want to keep exploring, and are fired up with something to say. Not like some of the unsuccessful probationers I interviewed for posts in my last years as a head.

At the close of such interviews, I would ask: have you any questions for us? I was hoping for: Will I be able to teach A-level maths as a probationary teacher, or: Will you let me produce Macbeth? Drummed into such supplicants by their tutors, no doubt, the repeated question became – what support do I get from the school? Nothing about the special thing they had to offer. What kind of confident glad morning was that? Where was the lustre of youthful appeal that knew what it could contribute, and understood where it might play a part?

I move to the issue of school size. The bigger the school, the less the cost. That is the mantra. It excludes other considerations, such as what is education truly about? What must we do to bring out the best in our students and how should we do it?

School discipline is deteriorating and increasing numbers of students are expelled. The cry is: Send in 'superheads' who might run two or three schools simultaneously. Crass. Successful heads need to know their patch, dedicate themselves to it – and love it. So-called superheads spread their wings too widely. Money becomes their driving force; in part, alas, money for themselves.

The way to achieve order in a school is to appoint a head who will naturally command respect. How will he or she succeed? The head will be about the place. Students need to learn values and parameters: they learn those as the head talks in assembly, teaches in the classroom and patrols the corridors, even referees a rugby match, as often happens in our public schools.

Another thing that public schools have got right is size. Because their intake starts usually at 13, their mass is reduced immediately by some 300 children. Numbers become manageable.

The head can talk to those for whom (s)he is responsible all at the same time and can meet them as one community. Students can be inspired to believe they're batting on the same side, that they work for each other and belong to each other, because they meet together.

Forty years ago, Joan Plowden advocated the introduction of the three-tier system within the state sector.

A number of shire counties took up her recommendation. Smaller secondary schools arrived. Recently, because of government top-down initiatives and local uncertainty, the three-tier solution has been thought inappropriate by some. It does not fit snugly into the flawed pattern of key-stage examinations. In some areas, it has already been abandoned; in others, it is under threat. As I write, parents in Suffolk are taking the local authority to court because it has decided to do away with the three-tier system. How short-sighted. Smaller is more beautiful. Those Suffolk parents understand that. Why is the three-tier system not perceived as the bright way forward for everyone, not just those privileged to attend public schools?

Roger Harcourt is a Liberal Democrat and was a head teacher in Buntingford for 29 years until his retirement in 2004

BEYOND MONOPOLY

A new wave of board-games from Germany provides some pointers for social cohesion and online politics, says Simon Titley. And a group of Liberal Democrats road-tests some politically-themed games

How was your family Christmas? It's a fair bet that, at some point during the holiday, in a time-honoured ritual, a battered copy of Monopoly, Risk or Cluedo was brought down from the top of the wardrobe and a thoroughly miserable time was had by all.

It could be worse. One lucky recipient in your family might have received a new game for Christmas. Well, not so much new, more mutton dressed as lamb. Anyone fancy a game of the Spongebob Squarepants edition of Monopoly?

Despite such grim experiences, many of us enjoy games. But these days, interest has shifted to video games, whether played on a computer, TV or hand-held device. It is a huge industry; when the video game *Grand Theft Auto IV* was launched last year, it earned \$500 million in its first week, selling 6 million copies globally, 3.6 million of them on the first day alone.

In 2006, worldwide revenue from the online game market was estimated at \$4.5 billion. By 2012, this is expected to exceed \$13 billion. The largest 'massively multiplayer online role-playing game' *World of Warcraft* has more than 11.5 million monthly subscribers worldwide; in the USA, there are twice as many players (4 million) as there are farmers (2 million).

But the growth of video games means that more people are playing alone or with their imaginary friends. The need for human contact may help explain why board-games – the unplugged sort where players meet face to face – are enjoying a renaissance.

Board-games have a long history. The earliest known game is Senet, devised in Ancient Egypt around 3,500 BC. Themed board-games began to appear in the mid-nineteenth century although did not really take off until the arrival of Monopoly (the American version, set in Atlantic City, was first published in 1935; the British version set in London came a year later).

Monopoly holds a particular interest for Liberals. The game was originally created in 1904 by Elizabeth J Magie and called 'The Landlord's Game'. Magie was a supporter of Henry George, the leading proponent of land value taxation. The game was designed to show how this tax would work – players could choose to play under regular rules or alternative 'Single Tax' rules. Parker Brothers bought out Magie's patents for \$500 in 1935, the year the company launched Monopoly (stripped of Magie's political message).

It is a safe bet that this modest investment has been recouped many times over, as Monopoly remains the best-selling board-game to this day. It is now produced by Hasbro, the world's second largest toy manufacturer. Monopoly may be a seminal game but it is showing its age. Rather than retire it gracefully, Hasbro is pumping life into the Monopoly brand, not through any innovations in game play but simply by endless re-theming. Among the hundreds of variants on the market (besides the aforementioned Spongebob Squarepants version) are Coronation Street, Scooby Doo and a bi-lingual Welsh edition.

Fortunately, there is a new wave of board-games offering a more satisfying gaming experience. Unfortunately, you wouldn't know it judging by what is available in most British shops. Besides old warhorses such as Monopoly and Cluedo (and their numerous retreads), the choice is mostly confined to shoddy TV tie-ins like *Deal or No Deal* and *Top Gear*. Such games are virtually unplayable because they have been slapped together by cynical marketing men rather than devised by proper game designers. Playability doesn't matter to the manufacturers, since these games are aimed at the gift market – unwanted gifts, coming to a car boot sale near you.

To find the new wave of board-games in Britain, you must visit a specialist shop or online retailer (links for finding these are at the end of this article). The story is different in many parts of Europe and North America, where these games are entering the mainstream. The most popular titles, such as *The Settlers of Catan*, *Carcassonne* and *Ticket to Ride*, have sold by the million.

These new board-games are known generically among gamers as 'Eurogames' or 'German-style board-games', even though they are not necessarily German nor is there necessarily a board. What makes them different? The best way to explain is by comparison with older games. Just as video games today are vast improvements on those available in the 1980s such as *Pac-Man* or *Super Mario Bros*, so Eurogames are better in every respect than games such as Monopoly (1935), Cluedo (1948) or Risk (1959). And here's why:

- **More skill than luck** – Older board-games depend too much on the roll of dice. Eurogames provide interesting choices and tough decisions, giving players control over their own fate. There is often an element

of chance, but not enough to dominate or skew the game.

- **Short and simple rules** – Many older games feature complicated or badly-written rules. Most Eurogames can easily be learned on the first play, regardless of the game’s depth. The skill lies in picking the best strategy, not memorising the rules.
- **No player elimination** – In Monopoly, players are gradually knocked out and must sit on the sidelines while the game grinds on for the surviving players. In Eurogames, social interaction between players is an important design consideration so all the players are included until the end of the game. Designs usually prevent there being a runaway leader, so every player has an incentive to play till the end.
- **Short duration** – How long will a game of Monopoly last? Three hours? Four? Who knows? But Eurogames typically last only about an hour, rarely more than 90 minutes. This makes it possible to fit in more than one game in a session. And the duration is printed on the side of the box, so you know in advance.
- **Named authors** – Do you know who invented Risk or Cluedo? With Eurogames, the name of the designer is printed on the box, just as an author’s name would be found on the cover of a book. As with books, if you like a particular author’s style, you can find other titles you might enjoy.
- **Attractive components** – Monopoly has drab, dated graphics, cheap plastic bits and paper money. Most Eurogames are attractively designed with durable wooden or heavy card pieces.
- **Constructive not destructive themes** – Older board-games tend to emphasise conflict and require players to beat the crap out of each other. In Eurogames, you are more likely to be trading coffee beans, constructing a Victorian railway network or building a medieval cathedral. So much so that some American gamers who prefer to beat the crap out of each other have started an anti-Eurogame backlash in favour of more aggressive ‘Ameritrash’ board-games.

Monopoly still has its defenders, who usually justify playing it on the grounds that “everybody knows the rules”. Except that they don’t. Most players don’t know about the auction or mortgage options, for example. Worse, many adopt idiosyncratic house rules, such as allowing players who land on the ‘free parking’ space to scoop up all the money paid in fines. This pumps money into a game that relies on scarcity, serving only to prolong the agony. If you must play Monopoly, start by reading the rules then play it as a ruthless game of elimination.

DON’T MENTION THE WAR

The Eurogame phenomenon began in Germany, where a revolution in board-gaming has been taking place. This trend can be traced to the aftermath of World War II, when wargames or other games featuring harsh conflict became taboo. It is notable that one German term for board-games is *Gesellschaftsspiele* (‘society games’), emphasising not only the social interaction between players but also game themes about the normal operation of civilised society rather than violence and disorder.

Board-games are played regularly in German homes, not just at Christmas. The idea of sitting in front of a computer screen to play alone is frowned upon as anti-social. This creates a large domestic market for board-games (accounting for about 20% of the German toy and game market), which provides fertile ground for designers, publishers and retailers.

Two developments in Germany gave a boost to the board-game industry. The first was the creation in 1978 of an annual critics’ prize, the *Spiel des Jahres* (‘game of the year’), intended to reward excellence in game design and promote top-quality games in the German market. The second was the start in 1983 of the annual trade fair *Spiel*, held each October in Essen. It is open to the public and is the largest such event in the world, attracting over 750 exhibitors and 150,000 visitors annually.

The combination of an annual prize and fair had the desired effect, with the quality and sales of games improving year by year. A watershed was reached in 1995 with the publication of *Die Siedler von Catan* (‘The Settlers of Catan’), the first German game to succeed in the American market. This turned German-style games into an international phenomenon, with designers and publishers starting up businesses in other countries.

Many German games are now translated into other languages and published abroad under licence. Unfortunately for British purchasers, the rights to republish in English are held by American publishers, making the games more expensive here. Since most games have little or no German text printed on the components, savvy British gamers save money by ordering the original versions online from Germany and printing-off English-language rules from the ‘BoardGameGeek’ website.

Eurogames remain a niche market in the UK, due to the dominance of the games market by a small number of large manufacturers and retailers who feel they can make more money selling yet another retread of Monopoly. Despite this, the British board-game scene continues to grow, with the start in 2007 of a major annual convention (the ‘UK Games Expo’), held in Birmingham each June, and a growing number of local clubs and smaller conventions.

Liberal Democrats should look kindly on this development. In an era of social atomisation, when community cohesion is a rising political concern, any growth in a pastime that brings people together for social interaction is to be welcomed. In a recession, any pastime that can bring friends and family together at a relatively low cost is a practical necessity. Above all, these games are fun to play, with none of the glum reverential silence associated with sessions of chess, bridge or poker.

Liberal Democrats would also profit by studying how the board-game scene is developing online. The BoardGameGeek website, in particular, offers a model of an online community. It provides an extensive database of more than 40,000 board-games but is also an active worldwide community of users who discuss, argue, buy, sell, trade and play these games.

Finally, Liberal Democrats do not spend enough time socialising with one another. If your local party is looking for a change from a diet of leaflet folding, why not organise an evening of political board-games? But which games should you choose...?

GAMES TESTED

A group of Liberal Democrat gamers met in London in February to try out some politically-themed games. Here are their recommendations:

- **1960: THE MAKING OF THE PRESIDENT** (designed by Christian Leonhard & Jason Matthews; published by Z-Man Games in 2007; 2 players only; minimum age 12; playing time 90 minutes) – This board-game closely mirrors the actual election campaign of 1960, with one player representing Kennedy and the other Nixon. It was a big hit with our group, who felt it really captured the theme and required political instincts to play well. Of course, being Liberals, our two players arrived at a final result only after a third recount. Verdict: 8.5/10.
- **DRUNTER & DRÜBER** (designed by Klaus Teuber; published by Hans im Glück in 1991; 2-4 players (best with 3); minimum age 9; playing time 60 minutes) – This family board-game won the *Spiel des Jahres* prize in 1991 and has remained a perennial favourite in Germany, although it has never been republished abroad. One might describe the theme as town planning gone mad. Players compete to build city walls, rivers and roads, which necessitates demolishing civic buildings. Whenever the destruction of a public lavatory is proposed, however, players must vote whether to allow demolition to proceed. Our group felt this game was fun and easy to play, with wide appeal. Verdict: 7.5/10.
- **MUNICIPIUM** (designed by Reiner Knizia; published by Valley Games in 2008; 2-4 players (best with 4); minimum age 10; playing time 60 minutes) – This board-game is set in an Ancient Roman town and players represent rival families competing for influence in key civic institutions. Our group felt that the theme worked well. It took a little while to get the hang of things but was then highly rewarding, with lots of replay value for gamers or political people but perhaps not for more casual players. Verdict: 8/10.
- **SLUSH FUND** (designed by Steve Finn; published by Dr Finn's Card Company in 2008; 2-4 players (best with 3 or 4); minimum age 12; playing time 20 minutes) – A card game in which players represent wealthy CEOs seeking to bribe American politicians. The game is currently out of print. Our group felt this game was only so-so. The political theme, though suitably cynical, seemed pasted on. Verdict: 6/10.

The following games were not tested by our group but come highly recommended:

- **COLD WAR: CIA VS. KGB** (designed by David Rakoto & Sebastien Gigaudaut; published by Fantasy Flight Games in 2007; 2 players only; minimum age 12; playing time 30 minutes) – Card game, borrowing the '21 or bust' mechanism from blackjack, in which players represent rival Cold War spymasters.
- **IDEOLOGY: THE WAR OF IDEAS** (designed by Andrew Parks; published by Z-Man Games in 2003; 3-5 players (best with 5); minimum age 12; playing time 90 minutes) – Board-game in which players represent one of five ideologies (Capitalism,

Communism, Fascism, Imperialism and Islamic Fundamentalism) competing for world domination. Out of print but a second edition will be published later this year.

- **JUNTA** (designed by Vincent Tsao, Eric Goldberg & Ben Grossman; republished by West End Games in 2005 (originally published in 1978); 2-7 players (best with 7); minimum age 12; playing time 240 minutes) – Board-game in which players represent various office holders in a Latin American junta. They elect El Presidente, assassinate other players, stage coups, and hide money in a Swiss bank account. Good clean family fun.
- **LIBERTÉ** (designed by Martin Wallace; published by Warfrog in 2001; 3-6 players (best with 5); minimum age 12; playing time 120 minutes) – Board-game about the French Revolution, with players competing for the most influence in the parties in government and opposition after each election. Out of print but due to be republished by Valley Games.
- **DIE MACHER** (designed by Karl-Heinz Schmiel; republished by Valley Games in 2006; 3-5 players (best with 5); minimum age 14; playing time 240 minutes) – Much-praised heavyweight board-game in which players represent competing parties in German politics. Originally published in 1986 and covering only West Germany, the game was subsequently revised to take account of German reunification.
- **TWILIGHT STRUGGLE** (designed by Ananda Gupta & Jason Matthews; published by GMT Games in 2005; 2 players only; minimum age 13; playing time 180 minutes) – Board-game closely following real-life events in the Cold War, in which players represent the USA and USSR competing for world domination without triggering a nuclear war. From the same design stable as *1960: The Making of the President* (above).

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective.

Liberator would like to thank all participants in the game testing day, including Bernard Gowers, James Graham, Anthony Hook, Will Howells and Andy Mayer. If you would like to join Liberal Democrat gamers for an occasional gathering in London to play Eurogames, please e-mail Simon Titley c/o collective@liberator.org.uk

The BoardGameGeek website referred to in the article is at www.boardgamegeek.com and includes more details of all the games reviewed, plus a 'UK FAQ' listing British retailers, clubs and events (at www.boardgamegeek.com/wiki/page/UK_faq). Price comparisons between online board-game retailers in America, Britain, Germany and elsewhere are at www.boardgameprices.com

The Routine of War by Bethe Schoenfeld Devora 2007 £15.81

Oral history taken from the Kibbutz Geshar Haziv, just south of the Lebanese border, subtitled 'How one northern Israeli community coped during the Second Lebanon War'.

Second? I've lost count of them, but the author is referring to events in 2006 when Hezbollah carried out a raid into Israel and kidnapped two Israeli soldiers. Israel bombed the shit out of Lebanon and Hezbollah fired around 4,000 Katyusha rockets into Israel and won the propaganda war.

The Katyusha is a notoriously unreliable missile in terms of targeting. Most of those fired by Hezbollah in this round were reckoned to have been of Syrian origin.

Schoenfeld suggests that the international media's version of events was even more skewed against Israel than usual. I'm not sure what 'usual' means. The scale of the Israeli attack on Lebanon, ostensibly over the kidnap of two soldiers, was wholly unreasonable, and balanced by reports of the effects of the Katyushas on Israeli towns in the UK media at least.

One of the reasons why the Lebanese government can't control the country's various factions is that Israel (and Syria) have targeted the means by which they might do so since 1982.

While Hezbollah should be more selective in its targets, since Israel continues to occupy a part of Lebanon its war against Israel can be justified – Israel has to give Lebanon back less than five square miles, I believe, but prefers to argue that they were part of Syria. This land happens to contain important headwaters, but give it back to Lebanon and the rationale of Hezbollah's campaign against Israel is gone. Given the insularity of politics in the region it could just work. Perhaps with the notable exception of Hezbollah, Arabs outside Palestine are more likely to pay lip service to the Palestinians than to give active support.

However, another rant on the shortcomings of Middle Eastern politics wasn't my purpose in reviewing this book. What one is



REVIEWS

really looking for is something on the feeling on the ground inside Israel.

As expected, something like the blitz spirit prevails. Sometimes this might seem foolhardiness – Asher (Bethe's husband?) continues at work rather than going to a shelter as the war moves into its middle phase. Others don't go to work, preferring to stay around the (mostly deserted) kibbutz because that's where their families are. Bethe is concerned to feed the cats and dogs of the community, whose owners have left them.

The wider analysis in the aftermath is some how muted. There is empathy amongst some with the people of Beirut. Ishai says that the war was different this time "because it was more the civilians that fought and not the soldiers on both sides of the border... it was the civilians who suffered".

I wouldn't belittle the sentiment, but that has been the situation on the other side of the border in practically all of these conflicts. Generally speaking, there was little criticism of what the Israeli government was doing. It was held that the ceasefire would stick because Sayyed Nasrullah, the leader of Hezbollah, kept his word.

The word 'surreal' crops up many times in people's accounts to describe their experiences as a blitz spirit prevails. It is seen as bringing the community together more – which is good; the kibbutz movement is clearly under hard times for reasons other than war. One wonders at the lack of more traumatic accounts, but Geshar Haziv seems to have been relatively lucky. Greater fears are reported to have prevailed in more urban centres.

Bethe Schoenfeld is wrong. The Palestinians have not had a viable state or economy of their own at any point since 1947 and while they, not unreasonably, proffer their own solutions, not all of these call for the

total destruction of Israel, which is not a realistic scenario in any case.

Many can see 'two state' solutions. Some actively work towards that kind of end with their Israeli counterparts (and not as Quislings). But the progressive actions of the Israeli state consistently undermine such efforts. It is generally held that the 'Second Lebanon War' did undermine public confidence in the government, leading an early general election. One dreads to think what will happen since Tzipi Livni was not asked to form the new government.

Schoenfeld concludes: "There is enough war in our world; it is time to end it all." Amen to that.

Stewart Rayment

Sir Charlie Stinky Socks and the Really Big Adventure by Kristina Stephenson Egmont 2007 £5.99

Kristina Stephenson has been around as an illustrator for a while – chiefly children's Bibles and the like – but so far as I can recall this is her first book entirely of her own. And what a whopper it is! Sir Charlie Stinky Socks is a hero (somewhat in the post-modern vein of that other Charlie) who is likely to endure. He gallantly deals with monsters, dragons, witches, and most monstrous of all, princesses, with a calm reserve.

Left to her own devices, Stephenson seems to have a freer, more fluid style, which aids the pace of the book (also in a pop-up edition, of which the paperback bears the traces...).

Stewart Rayment

Monday

To Northumberland for a day's squirrel shooting with my old friend Rupert Redesdale. Do you know him? He is some sort of nephew of the Mitford gels (I seem to recall that one of them married Hitler; they were an absolute scream) and very Sound on preventing the incursion of the grey squirrel into the county. Whereas our native red likes cricket, morris dancing and good ale, and understands the principles of queuing, the brash American Grey chews gum, flashes its money about and demands good service in hotels. Clearly, it must be extirpated from these islands.

When I arrive, Redesdale has had word from his spies that a grey has been sighted in Kielder Forest, so we lose no time in taking off for that bosky locale in his family tank. The day provides meagre sport but, while we are waiting for the enemy to show itself, Redesdale explains that he hopes to win the contract from Walker's Crisps to provide their new squirrel flavour. By the sound of it, if successful he could be on to a Very Good Thing. Later, as I wait on Morpeth Station for the train south, a grey squirrel taunts me from an overhanging sycamore, making rude gestures and pelting me with its nuts.

Tuesday

One hears a great deal nowadays about people who are "offended" by television programmes. Well, here at the Hall I have an ingenious device attached to my set. It is called a "twelve-bore shotgun". If something comes on that I do not like, I simply take aim at the screen and fire one of the barrels (or, in the case of Jonathan Ross, both barrels) and off it goes. If modern viewers are such tender plants, I suggest that it be fitted to every set by the manufacturers.

Wednesday

Not having seen Clegg at Westminster for a good couple of weeks (really, he must buck his ideas up if he wants to become Prime Minister), I was more than a little surprised at his appearance when I came across him at Harrogate. I feared that his past delinquencies involving rare cacti and safety matches had caught up with him, as he was sporting just the sort of haircut the authorities favour at the Jack Straw Memorial Reform School, Dungeness. I was assured by his staff that he had not absconded from the aforementioned establishment but had "changed his image" because floppy hair did not fit well with the Credit Crunch.

Talking of Harrogate, I fear I somewhat blotted my copybook there. Introduced to a distinguished speaker from America, I inadvertently put the point of my shooting stick through his foot while emphasising a point about Free Trade. He let out the most ear-piercing scream.

Thursday

I have always believed that it behoves one to keep abreast of the latest technological developments. I was, for instance, the first person in Rutland to have the telephone. It did not ring for several years because no one else owned one, but you take my point. So I have signed up for this electric Twitter service – if you want to know what a number of prominent Liberal Democrat activists are having for breakfast it is quite the thing, and no doubt there is more to it than that. Funnily enough, in the 1950s I subscribed to a similar arrangement whereby one was sent a telegram every time Frankie Howerd told a new joke. It was called Titter.

Lord Bonkers' Diary

Friday

It is always pleasing when one can benefit the public weal whilst pursuing a private enthusiasm. As well as being an avid collector of paintings – I number several canvasses by Clement Freud's niece Lucien amongst my haul – I have long been an accomplished amateur artist myself. My "Sunset Over Bonkers Hall", for instance, may be found in the National Gallery in Oakham (of which I am a generous patron). Hearing this talk of "quantitative easing", I saw an opportunity to hit two birds with one fell swoop. I gave order that the Risograph I keep in the cellars here for the use of

passing Focus editors be given over to producing Bank of Rutland five pound notes. I am rather proud of my etching for this, even if I have given the Duke rather a bulbous nose and his monocle features a little prominently for some tastes.

Saturday

Ours has long been a party of powerful women. I think of John Stuart Mill's muse and collaborator Harriet Taylor and, of course, the first Lady Bonkers (Harlequins and England); of Margot Asquith, Megan Lloyd George and Nancy Seear; and, to bring the list up to the minute, of Liz Lynne, Jo Swinson and Hazel Grove. Thus it was no surprise to me to when my fellow peer Ros Scott was elected as our President.

Yet her victory was by no means a walkover, for she had for an opponent none other than Lembit Öpik. The Member for Montgomery had cannily hit upon the idea of basing his campaign upon replicating the popularity that Po, the noted TellyTubby, enjoyed some years ago. (Po's subsequent decline into a tabloid hell of drink and drugs need not concern us here, sad though it is). Thus it was that Öpik rode the country upon his scooter, waving to Liberal Democrat members as he passed. In the event, this strategy fell a little short of success.

Sunday

When word got around that the Reverend Hughes's sermon today would take the form of a mediation upon the life of St Vincent de Cable, it became the hottest ticket in town. The queue began to form at St Asquith's lych-gate yesterday evening and I did my best to make the time pass quickly for the would-be congregation by accompanying myself upon the banjolele whilst singing that old music hall standard, "So I Gave it a Whack With me Old Orchard Doughty". The Revd does not let us down and treats us to the complete story of my old friend "High Voltage" Cable: his humble birth in York, his feeding of Africa, his unfortunate "Glasgow Heresy", his discovery of oil beneath the North Sea, his election for Twickenham, his dancing, his forecast of seven lean years to follow seven fat ones and his talks with the bees. (I expect that is where the expression "a buzz of conversation" comes from). After that little lot, it is no surprise that the collection plate is positively overflowing and we shall be able to proceed with the restoration of the stained glass window depicting Mark Bonham-Carter's victory in the Great Torrington by-election.

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