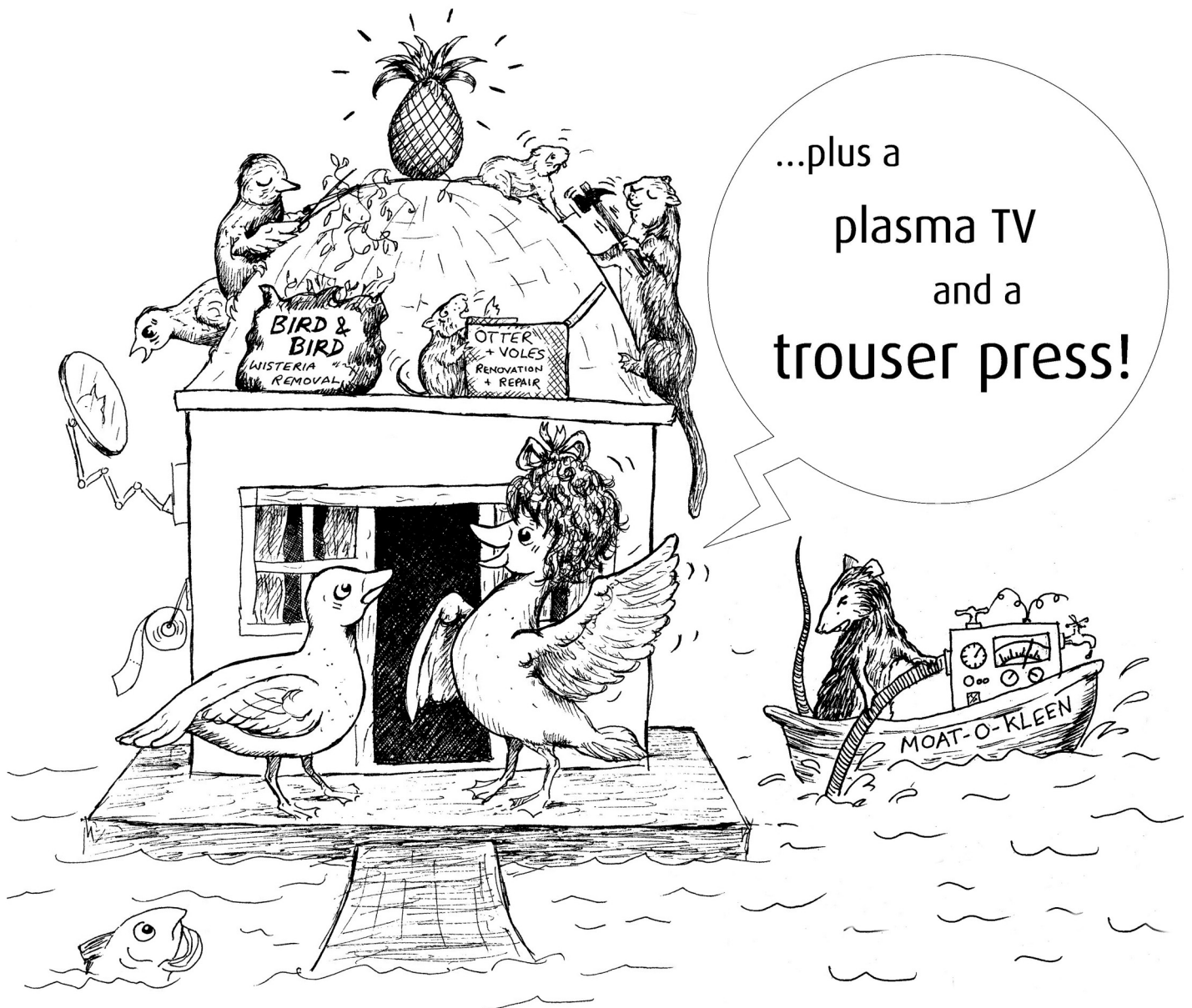


liberator



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Ralph Bancroft, Jonathan Calder, Richard Clein, Howard Cohen, Gareth Epps, Catherine Furlong, Peter Johnson, Wendy Kyrle-Pope, Tim McNally, Stewart Rayment, Kiron Reid, Harriet Sherlock, Mark Smulian, Simon Titley, William Tranby, Claire Wiggins, Nick Winch

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GIVE ME PR, BUT NOT YET

Should Liberal Democrat MPs have behaved worse than they did over expense claims?

That is only a semi-serious question – one difficulty the party had, as the expenses furore swept everything before it, was that it was not untainted but its MPs had done nothing so appalling that Nick Clegg could make examples of them, as David Cameron did with his moat and duck house owners.

The result was evident in the elections. The Lib Dems trod water with a slight fall in the European vote, a quite good increase against a Tory surge in the English shires – and a poll rating that varied little.

There was a time when the pre-merger Liberal Party would have exploited such a sudden loss of faith in the main parties without mercy.

Nowadays, Liberal Democrats are one of the main parties and were tarred with the same brush. The protest vote went instead to the Greens, UKIP, independents, the SNP, Plaid Cymru and, alarmingly, the BNP.

Get used to it. Lib Dems have never ceased to complain about the dominance of the two main parties while being entirely relaxed about the dominance of the three main ones. Any of the variants of voting reform being canvassed will see a further flourishing of smaller parties.

Public revulsion over expenses suddenly led to an unprecedented surge of interest in political and electoral reform. That leads to another semi-serious question – when will the Lib Dems mount a robust defence of first-past-the-post?

This is, after all, the system under which the party does best. Its record in fighting PR elections is awful – fewer councillors in Scotland under STV than under the old system, a wash-out in last year's London elections and yet another under-performance in the European vote.

The Liberal Democrats cannot fight PR elections properly because their targeting strategy has gone too far and hollowed out the party in non-target areas, where it lacks presence and so has to rely on its patchy ability to be heard in national media.

Be careful what you wish for. A new voting system is essential, but the Lib Dems are in poor shape to exploit AV-plus fully, never mind STV in multi-member seats.

Yet they have to get into that shape because – changed voting system or not – the party cannot rely on chasing a diminishing pool of target seats and ought not to find such poor performances in PR elections acceptable.

That, as Liberator has long argued, means coming off the fence, taking risks and presenting a programme that might grab at least some people's imagination and allegiance.

The timid approach of *Make it Happen* is now redundant. It might be only nine months old but that

manifesto belongs to a vanished world in which market economics were unquestioned, most people were happy and the party did not wish to disturb them unduly.

Some encouragement can be drawn. The European campaign, had anyone heard it above the expenses din, was actually pro-European. 'Stronger Together' would have been a serviceable theme in normal times and far better than 2004's cowardly effort, which treated the party's support for the European Union as an embarrassment.

There has since been Nick Clegg's change of mind on Trident and the increasingly successful efforts to engage the public with Labour's menace to civil liberty, not to mention Vince Cable's continuing stature on the recession.

It is no time for timidity because, once the expense issue dies down, the recession, climate change, authoritarianism and isolationism will all still be with us, and will be the subjects on which the party needs to be heard.

Before that, the public will want answers on cleaning up parliament. Gordon Brown's National Council for Democratic Renewal, which sounds like the creation of some African coup leader, seems destined to fiddle with parliamentary procedure, which may be welcome but will not calm angry voters.

The only way to do that is thorough reform of the political, voting and expenses systems, of the kind the Lib Dems have a better claim to have supported than any other party.

Public anger over expenses is understandable because, while the money was small in terms of overall public spending (probably less than the notoriously profligate Ministry of Defence wastes most weeks), it looked as if MPs had awarded themselves a licence to print banknotes.

Nobody though died because of expenses, only a few backbenchers will lose their jobs, nobody's liberty was reduced and nowhere was rendered uninhabitable.

The really serious mistakes made by politicians – the Iraq war, lax banking regulation, ID cards and inactivity on climate change – did not rouse public anger as have expense claims.

Can the Lib Dems make the case that these errors, along with misbehaviour over expenses, are all products of the same decayed and unaccountable political system and that they have the ideas and will to reform it? If not, someone else will.

The greatest danger of the expenses scandal is that it will destroy respect for all mainstream parties, allowing undesirables on the far right to grow. Any Lib Dem MP who claimed for something questionable should be ashamed for contributing to this atmosphere.

RADICAL BULLETIN

DROPPING THE PILOT

Chris Rennard's almost mystical status and general popularity in the party made his decision to announce his resignation as Liberal Democrat chief executive in the middle of the local and European election campaign a shock.

His departure is effective in September, and his announcement came at such an inopportune time because of the twin factors of his deteriorating health and controversy over his expenses claims for a 'main residence' in Eastbourne when he also has a home in London.

The expenses issue raised genuine concern, but his friends say the health issue was not a polite fictional cover for his resignation. Rennard is known to be seriously unwell with diabetes and his workaholic lifestyle was not helping. He would almost certainly have quit after an autumn 2007 general election, had it been called then as was expected.

Nick Clegg made a highly supportive statement: "It is impossible to exaggerate Chris's immense contribution to the Liberal Democrats over the years." Clegg had wanted him to stay on, though the combination of health and expenses problems made this impossible.

There are those with nothing against Rennard personally but who think 'Rennardism' – the 'we can win anywhere' approach – has had its day and who will welcome his departure, though not its circumstances.

But anyone doing the chief executive's job for six years, and the campaigns director's for many years before, would accumulate a fair number of personal enemies.

This led to the expenses issue being fanned by variously motivated ill-wishers, many of whom appeared not to have troubled to make any enquires about Rennard's health before publicly implying he had lied about it.

Chief whips in both houses were due to report in late June on the expenses status of their flocks.

A Federal Executive statement (22 May) left two rather large gaps. It said: "Federal Executive was reassured that any Liberal Democrat MP found to be guilty of serious wrongdoing would have the whip withdrawn leading to deselection."

No mention there of errant peers, who cannot of course be deselected, nor of how anyone proposes to arrive at a watertight definition of 'serious wrongdoing'.

SITUATION VACANT

Rennard's departure leaves a gaping hole in the general election team, of which he was chair. Its deputy chair is nominally Clegg's advertising industry

mate John Sharkey but it is thought unlikely that he would take over as chair.

It is unclear whether the chair necessarily has to be chief executive too. Communications director Chris Fox has become temporary chief executive until soon after the next general election, a situation that party president Ros Scott said "provides an opportunity to look afresh at the role of chief executive".

Indeed it does. The post in its current form was created for Rennard. This was because problems had previously arisen with some chief executives appointed from administrative backgrounds who then decided it was far more fun to try to run the campaigns department than to run the party bureaucracy, with the result that neither was effective.

Fox once chaired the advisory board of Mark Oaten's right-wing lunatic fringe Liberal Future group (Liberator 331). He scarcely seems a unifying figure.

TRIDENT TESTED

You read it here first. Liberator 332 predicted that Nick Clegg would revisit party policy on replacing Trident, and now he has. Clegg put forward two reasons – Trident's cost, and that the world has changed since the days when Britain felt the need to immolate Moscow at will.

The Liberal Democrats last debated Trident at Harrogate in 2007 and ended up with an uneasy and complicated compromise that satisfied few and proved impossible to explain in public.

So it was bit strange that Clegg appointed Sir Menzies Campbell, the main supporter of that compromise, to lead a group that will examine how Britain could operate a scaled-down deterrent. What if he concludes that he was right in 2007 and still is?

It is worth noting that Clegg did not call for nuclear disarmament but for some sort of lesser nuke, or at least the ability to create one.

Clegg's change of mind on Trident is likely to be welcomed in the party, both in its own right and for equipping activists with a popular and distinctive campaign message.

Will he follow it to its logical conclusion and tell the country that Britain's diminished finances mean it must finally grow out of its pretensions to still be a world power, and the spending commitments that go with that?

MIRROR, MIRROR

It was misguided of Teignbridge MP Richard Younger-Ross to buy a £725 mirror on expenses for his London flat and to purchase a quaintly-named 'Don Juan' bookcase (the Don was surely famous for activities other than reading?). Even so, it appeared

pretty trivial judged against duck houses, moats and tax evasion by MPs who ‘flipped’ their second homes.

One might have concluded otherwise from reading the thoughts of Alix Mortimer, one of six editors of the Liberal Democrat Voice website, the other five of whom are invariably fair-minded. Sadly for Younger-Ross, news about the Daily Telegraph’s coverage of his household accoutrements disturbed Mortimer’s enjoyment of TV series *The Wire*. That sealed his fate.

She wrote: “I’m feeling mean because this sorry tale has interrupted my Wire viewing pleasure. My first instinct, to be honest, was that he should walk the plank. His majority in Teignbridge/Newton Abbot has been lopped from 6,300 to 4,500 on the new constituency map anyway and the Tories are going to be throwing everything they’ve got at the south-west. It’s got to be worth a thought. I don’t know whether incumbency will be proof against this sort of stuff. Maybe I’m being harsh.” (Lib Dem Voice, 15 May).

Mortimer thus used her position to urge a Lib Dem MP to resign on the word of that noted liberal organ the Daily Telegraph, and before Younger-Ross could make any defence known.

Warning to all Lib Dem politicians. If you’re going to be accused of something in the press, just make sure it doesn’t break while Mortimer is engrossed in a crime drama.

The Telegraph’s excoriation of Lib Dem MP Alan Read, who claimed for hotel stays in his constituency because it is Argyll and Bute and he cannot get to outlying islands and back in day, was an early wake-up call that not all the paper’s stories fair and accurate. Indeed, LDV’s editor-at-large Stephen Tall conceded after Read’s situation became apparent: “My first instinct now, when I hear of the latest MP of whichever party to be ‘named and shamed’, is ‘I wonder if the Telegraph’s got its facts right this time?’” (Lib Dem Voice, 16 May).

Not that Mortimer had shown any such caution. She took it upon herself to award five-star ‘piggy’ ratings to Lib Dem MPs accused early on in the Telegraph’s disclosures (Lib Dem Voice, 13 May). St Ives MP Andrew George was given 4/5, which she had to hastily scale back to 1/5 when he made a robust defence of the circumstances in which his daughter resides part-time in his London flat.

Having taken the Telegraph’s allegations at face value, Mortimer then had the gall to demand (Lib Dem Voice, 14 May) that the paper apologise to George, even though she had rated him as four-fifths of a pig only the day before.

FRIENDLY FIRE

The Aberdeenshire 4 saga has ended with all four rebel councillors, who collectively have 105 years service to the Liberal Democrats, outside the party, and the one on whom the dispute centred, Martin Ford, in the Greens.

This has been the culmination of the Aberdeenshire Lib Dem group’s baffling behaviour over the 20 months since Ford’s casting vote led to the rejection of a planning application by billionaire Donald Trump to build a golf resort partly on a site of special scientific interest (Liberator 333 and earlier issues).

It is true that the group did make some efforts to conciliate the four, but this came only after party president Ros Scott sent Hertfordshire councillor Chris White there as a mediator in March, by which time the ill-feeling ran high.

Ford insists he cast his vote in line with council policy and that anyway as chair of a committee exercising

quasi-judicial planning powers he could vote without a party whip.

The group first disgraced itself when the majority of members sat on their hands so allowing the opposition move to oust Ford as chair of the infrastructure services committee. It then in effect kicked out Debra Storr for having defended another Lib Dem councillor, Paul Johnston, whom it had reported to Scotland’s Standards Commission for having the temerity to question the planning gain secured from Trump once he was given permission. A fourth councillor Sam Coull left the group in disgust and joined the other three in the Democratic Independent Group.

Had the Lib Dem group not been so obsessed by the Trump project, it could perhaps have found a way to resolve these differences without tearing itself apart, but eccentrically chose not to.

Some thought a resolution might have been in the offing in May, but it was too late and Coull and Storr left the party and a despairing Ford joined the Greens.

It may be that some actions by the four councillors were unhelpful, but the blame lies overwhelmingly with the vindictiveness of the Aberdeenshire group.

WHY HIM?

Which Lib Dem blogger best represents the party? On election night (4 June), when the government’s implosion was on the cards, BBC2’s Newsnight decided to unveil its ‘General Election Countdown’ team of pundits. This included a panel of three political bloggers representing each of the main parties, who will appear regularly between now and the general election.

The Liberal Democrat blogger turned out to be Mark Littlewood, one-time party press spokesman (Liberator 317) and now leader of the miniscule libertarian faction Liberal Vision (Liberator 329), which at last September’s conference boasted of its links with the tobacco industry-funded ‘Free Society’.

Littlewood’s qualifications for this role are unclear. His Liberal Vision blog was launched only in March and there are numerous articulate Lib Dem bloggers with a much longer pedigree. More to the point, Littlewood’s position on the outer right-wing fringe of the party makes him hardly suitable to represent the Lib Dems in the media.

It seems that Littlewood was chosen not by the party but by the BBC, under the misapprehension that he is a typical Lib Dem blogger. So what sort of protest will the party make?

GOING TO EXTREMES

A surprise awaited those who cared to look at the ‘Say No To EU’ list in the north west European elections, not that many people did.

There amid this hard left group, led by RMT general secretary Bob Crow, nestled the name of Steve Radford, until this year the president of the Liberal Party.

Could this by any remote chance be the same Liberal Party president Steve Radford who spoke with UKIP’s leader Nigel Farage on that party’s platform at a public meeting during the Henley by-election (Liberator 327)?

CONSIDERING THE BEAM

The Liberal Democrats should scrap their centralised campaigns department in favour of a return to grassroots activity, says Bill le Breton

King James Version

Matthew 7

1: Judge not, that ye be not judged.

2: For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.

3: And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

4: Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?

5: Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.

13.7% of 34% is a very small number. The local and European elections revealed abject performances by Conservatives (27.7%), Labour (15.7%) and Liberal Democrats (13.7%). That's the fact. We stand convicted of being part of a system of deception. Verily, we need to cast out the beam out of our own eyes.

A few years ago, I received an email asking me whether I would speak at a seminar on marketing and politics as the Liberal Democrat in a panel from the three main parties. I said I'd contribute but only from the point of view that marketing with its foundation in deception (the hidden persuaders) is the enemy of the people, the bane of politics and should have no place in campaigning.

The invitation was not pressed, but I suspect that some more compliant Liberal Democrat was found to take my place because there are an awful lot of highly influential Liberal Democrats who adopt and advocate the practices of modern marketing.

The moment we begin to modify our actions, our beliefs, our campaigns to meet the perceived needs, preferences and prejudices of others we lose our integrity, we surrender the leadership that conviction offers in our communities, we join the deceivers, we seek to limit freedom.

I guess that the party's high profile marketers remain key advisers to the party's leadership and that political marketing remains the principle ethos of the Campaigns Department.

In the Westminster Village, everyone huddles round the same opinion polls, marketing strategies, target audiences and policies. It is difficult to distinguish a Liberal Democrat from any other politician. The difference in manifestos, attitudes, accents, vocabulary, suits and even

expense dodges are minimal. We look and sound no different. Our policies provide no distinction. Our relationship with the world outside that Village is the same. In essence it is this: you can't fool all the people all the time but we agree that the winner is the one who can fool the most people, more of the time than the others. Game on.

Modern political practice seeks to deceive, deprive, abuse, control and subjugate. It is an attack on the liberty of the people.

ROUTES TO FREEDOM

Truth, candour, conviction, self expression, authenticity, a willingness to take a position based on belief and to campaign to enlist support for that position are routes to freedom. Knowledge, experience and energy in our community placed at the disposal of our neighbours in a way that would help them take and use their power for personal and common good is the way to increasing liberty. Exposing and combating the forces that seek to take power from people by deception, deprivation, abuse, control and subjugation are the tasks for Liberals.

Following the dismal European Election results in 1989, when I was acting general secretary of Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors, I called the staff of the Association together for a crisis meeting at which we agreed that what activists wanted to do was to campaign in their communities on the issues that mattered. I argued then as I do now that it is wrong to choose what those campaigns should be from 'the centre' but that we should provide campaigning material on every conceivable issue and to make these available to all.

To the Birchfield Centre we invited every campaigner we could identify in the party to a weekend to devise those campaigns. They came from every nation, from every region, from every type of community – even from the Whip's Office! The resulting ten booklets, each containing diverse campaigning material, were published under the banner of the People First campaign.

They sold and were used by members of ALDC that summer. At the Brighton conference they completely sold out. I remember watching the mail increase at Hebdon Bridge as the examples of their use began to be returned to the Association. The stream turned into a torrent as activists set to campaign. It was a huge turning point. The fulcrum was powered by the grassroots.

It is time to see if the party today is capable of doing something similar.

The key difference to the situation now was that we were not campaigning on the same issues in every place at the same time. The campaigns that struck a chord in whatever community would be used by the activists on the spot. Some might be used first, others later. The choice lay with the local activists. In fact, the choice lay with the communities in which those activists lived and breathed.

Nor were the issues obviously popular. The Environmental Pack was sizeable and used heavily, but the environment was still a Cinderella of an issue at that time. They were the 'right' issues because they were the issues that the individual campaigners believed in and had probably been campaigning away at in isolation.

Not for one minute did any of us involved in producing the material or mounting the campaign locally ask, "How will this go down with the electorate?" It was hundreds of individual acts of authenticity, of personal conviction, of connection with others in their community. It was joyously uncontrolled. It was great fun. It stimulated action for good, provided leadership for change and helped people take and use their power in their community.

As I write this, I realise that I am not simply advocating another festival of campaigning to be held spontaneously in the dormitories of the Birchfield Centre with the publication of scores of campaigning material for every conceivable issue on which a Liberal wishes to make a stand in their community. No, beyond that, I am advocating that the party leader and the Federal Executive seize the opportunity of Chris Rennard's departure to disband the centralised, Westminster-based 'Campaigns Department'.

Instead they should encourage and resource ALDC to take up its old mantle as the campaigning arm of the party. This would also free the ALDC of its perceived need to shadow the Local Government Association and the Improvement and Development Agency. Then, they should throw out the tired, if once useful, General Election Planning system and place in its stead an organisation that will react to the campaigning zeal and activity at the grassroots.

By doing this, they would be practicing good Liberal Democracy. We should be communicating and campaigning in our communities, and our national politicians should be reflecting and reinforcing the actions of local campaigners. I have tremendous faith in these activists, but I do not underestimate the erosion to individual, authentic and improvised campaigning that years of dependency on the Campaigns Department with its

"I do not underestimate the erosion to individual, authentic and improvised campaigning that years of dependency on the Campaigns Department with its power over the flow of funds and target designation may have produced"

power over the flow of funds and target designation may have produced. Let a thousand flowers bloom – well, six hundred and something of them.

To those thinking that this is the time to reform the entire political system, what I suggest may seem a trivial bureaucratic change, but I believe it would begin to transform the party and our relationship with the people. It would turn us from being part of the system of deception and domination into a Liberal Party that exposes, campaigns and assists liberation. At the moment we are part of the problem. The first task is to reform ourselves.

People are rejecting professional politicians. This reaction catches all, including local politicians regardless of their merits. However, people do not reject their fellow citizen down the road who wants to do something about the state of that community;

about the conditions of those who live there; about the opportunities that exist there for people to take and use power; who is energetic, inspirational, proficient; who involves and informs them and who is part of a wider movement of similar people in similar communities; and who has characteristically similar friends to call on for help and solidarity who happen to be in parliament. People will not reject a movement that is built on local action and a local record of action, which expresses similar values and mounts similar campaigns, which seeks to represent their communities at Westminster.

I hope I see a little clearer now; surely it remains the old saw: "Campaign and they shall come."

Bill le Breton is a former chair and president of ALDC and was its acting general secretary at the time of the 1989 European Elections at which the new party's support dropped to 5%

NOW WE CAN

The Liberal Democrats can profit from the political crisis only if they understand its true causes, says Simon Titley

The MPs' expenses scandal abruptly changed the prism through which we view politics. The previous issue of *Liberator* (no.333) went to press just before the scandal broke. By the time the magazine hit the streets, it was offering readers a window on a lost world of G20 demonstrations, academies and women's rights – the big topics we used to debate in a dim and distant past.

The scandal is having an extraordinarily cathartic effect on British politics yet we need to be careful interpreting what it represents. The political crisis is about much more than MPs' expenses. Taken in isolation, the expenses are petty by any global standard of political corruption. No-one has got rich through these abuses and no political favours have been bought. So we must ask why this scandal has touched such a raw nerve.

The scandal has manifested a deep public hostility towards politicians but it is not as if they have suddenly fallen from grace. Polly Toynbee (*Guardian*, 22 May) reminded us that "Britain has always held its politicians in low esteem" and noted: "In the summer of 1944, during the Normandy invasion, surely the nation was proud of its leaders? Not really. Gallup had the effrontery to ask what voters thought of their politicians, and even then only 36% thought them to be acting for the good of the country, while 57% thought they acted only for their own or their party's interest."

The financial crisis has given the expenses scandal added traction. People whose jobs and homes are on the line are less likely to forgive the use of public funds to clean moats or buy trouser presses. Yet curiously, it is the fripperies costing a few quid that seem to have generated greater public anger than the five-figure sums spent on second homes.

NO PANACEA

This is certainly a political crisis but it is not necessarily a constitutional crisis. There are constitutional aspects; for example, abuses of the expenses system have been more prevalent among MPs with safe seats. But electoral reform, though desirable, is not a panacea. Countries with PR electoral systems, such as Belgium and Israel, have recently suffered political crises every bit as acute as Britain's. The crisis is an opportunity for constitutional reform – which the Liberal Democrats should seize with both hands – but this will not supply a complete solution. The more limited suggestion that procedural reforms of parliament are the answer is an even less adequate or imaginative response.

The call for constitutional or procedural reform begs the question: what problem are you trying to solve? Without a clear idea of the purpose of democratic politics and some clear political objectives, such reforms will amount to little more than reorganisation for its own sake. Cleanliness and

transparency are necessary and laudable aims but should be seen as a secondary practical matter, not the be-all and end-all of politics. The real issue with parliament is why it so rarely engages in genuine and vital debate but instead has degenerated into a legislative sausage machine.

The worst response of all, though, is the self-abasement being indulged in by some politicians. "My hair shirt is hairier than yours," they claim in an attempt to ride mob sentiment. This undignified behaviour loses rather than wins respect because it presumes untrustworthiness on the part of politicians. It risks reinforcing the public perception that politics itself is no longer worthwhile. It plays into the hands of the anti-democratic forces seeking to diminish the powers of our elected bodies.

CRISIS OF LEADERSHIP

Rather than assist those trying to demonise politics, the way to gain public trust is to reinvigorate the moral authority of our democratic process. Because, at heart, this is a crisis of leadership. The underlying problem is that most of our politicians no longer stand for anything. As columnist Mick Hume pointed out (*Spiked*, 12 May), "MPs today are not gangsters. But they are not great leaders either. Many of them are pretty useless jobsworths. Statesmen of standing have survived far more dangerous scandals because people still believed in them and what they stood for. By contrast, the authority of today's politicians can be destroyed by a scandal over the petty cash, because in the absence of any great cause or fight for the Good Society, many can see them only as parasites and placemen."

Our political life has been hollowed out. People complain "they're all the same" because politicians no longer engage in the sort of debate that would make them distinguishable. The resulting vacuum is filled by personality issues or fringe parties.

The loss of public trust has been intensified by the increasing isolation of politicians from the people they are meant to represent. Political scientist Peter Mair observed (*New Left Review*, issue 42, Nov/Dec 2006): "Citizens retreat into private life or more specialised and often ad hoc forms of representation, while party leaderships retreat into institutions, drawing their terms of reference ever more readily from their roles as governors or public-office holders. The traditional world of party democracy – as a zone of engagement in which citizens interacted with their political leaders – is being evacuated. Citizens turn from being participants into spectators, while the elites gain more space in which to pursue their own shared interests."

Politicians are no longer willing to offer leadership but are nevertheless eager to appease the public via the mass media to win re-election. Unable to distinguish between being a representative and a suck-up, they resort to 'spin', which is what happens when all communication must

sound attractive. The replacement of authentic with contrived language was satirised brilliantly in the TV sitcom *The Thick Of It*. A jaded shadow minister complains to the trendy spin doctor giving him a makeover that he is unsure whether his party still plans to lock up yobbos. “Maybe I missed a memo from you. Maybe I should understand yobbos now, not even call them ‘yobbos’, call them ‘young men with issues around stabbing’.”

Winning back the public’s trust requires purpose and clarity. But where is the leadership when you need it? Mick Hume (Spiked, 6 May) asked: “Whatever happened to the old saying ‘Cometh the Hour, Cometh the Man’? Our hour of need certainly seems to have arrived – indeed we appear to have been frozen in it through these past months of capitalist crisis. Yet the Man, Woman or party who might have a clue how to lead us out of it is still notable by their absence.” He added an important caveat: “Not leadership in the shape of some ‘strong man’, but a political vision of where we want to be heading and how we might try to get there.”

So the Liberal Democrat response to the crisis should be to do what the party always should have done: stand for something by offering a clear, distinctive and resolute political vision. Assorted naysayers made constant excuses why the party couldn’t do this, but all the timid and conservative assumptions that constrained the party have been swept away. What were these obstacles to the party having the courage of its convictions?

Obstacle no.1 was the assumption that deep political reform – always high on the Liberal wish-list – was ‘boring’ or ‘only for political obsessives’. The order went out from Cowley Street to stick to bread-and-butter issues. People don’t care about politics, we were told, only the chattering classes do. Whatever the case in the past, people certainly care about it now.

Obstacle no.2 was the assumption that the Thatcherite economic consensus was here to stay. Following the ‘end of history’, there was no longer any point engaging in ideological debate. Rising house prices and easy credit made people feel rich, so criticising the system would be an assault on their ‘aspirations’. Now neoliberalism is finished (and a useful by-product is that the party’s right-wing is on the ropes), so the field is clear for a real debate.

Obstacle no.3 was incrementalism, the electoral strategy championed by Chris Rennard. This approach subordinated policy to short-term tactical considerations. The belief that ‘we can win everywhere’ prevented the party saying anything controversial for fear that someone somewhere might be offended. Now, Rennard’s imminent departure as Chief Executive has opened up the possibility of a culture change in the party.

With these obstacles removed, how should the party proceed? It could start by consigning last year’s pre-manifesto *Make it Happen* to the shredder (see my article in *Liberator* 328). This shameful document was drafted with an overriding concern to avoid giving offence. Its apologetic and conciliatory tone betrayed a failure of moral leadership. It was intended to appease a ‘middle ground’ but, now that ground has disappeared, the document has lost any point it might have had.

“*A crisis is a terrible thing to waste*”

Economist Paul Romer famously said, “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.” This crisis is a time for a revival of real politics, which means fighting a battle of ideas over competing visions of how

to organise society (so giving voters a real choice), not trying to converge on the same ground as our opponents. This is no time for caution and restraint or a loss of nerve. It is not the time for ponderous, 80-page green papers or risk-averse, wishy-washy proposals. It is not the time for vacuous ‘spin’ or hackneyed references to ‘struggling families’. The Liberal Democrats need to go into the next general election with a passionate, hard-hitting, uncompromising, radical manifesto. And the party could build such a platform by making this September’s party conference a showcase for radical policies.

The Liberal Democrats should be offering moral leadership by providing bold and inspirational answers to the big questions. Whereas Barack Obama’s message of hope was “Yes we can”, ours should be “Now we can”.

We were afraid to propose deep political reforms in case we were seen as irrelevant obsessives. With the political system discredited – now we can.

We were afraid to propose radical alternatives to Thatcherism in case we were seen as opposing people’s aspirations. With the economic system discredited – now we can.

We were afraid to propose strong civil liberties in case we were seen as ‘soft on terrorism’. With New Labour’s avalanche of laws and ID cards discredited – now we can.

Now can Nick Clegg? Last November, he was interviewed for *Total Politics* magazine by Shelagh Fogarty. She reported: “I’m pleased when he offers me a biscuit from an endearingly old-fashioned biscuit barrel. My heart sinks when I see what’s inside. Rich Tea. Very disappointing and austere. I’d have expected at least a Bourbon from the debonair Mr Clegg. A man’s choice of biscuit says a lot about him. He takes it in good humour when I declare ‘Grim biscuits!’ But he fights back. ‘Austere? No way. They’re a vintage, a classic.’ ”

That really is taking the biscuit. Politically speaking, we’ve had too much bland Rich Tea from Mr Clegg. But at the time of writing, Nick has opened his biscuit barrel to reveal the Jammie Dodger of opposition to Trident. In May he hinted he might have some Amaretti biscuits of pro-Europeanism. Now we need to see the Custard Cream of social cohesion, the HobNob of thriving local economies, the Fig Roll of fighting poverty, the Ginger Nut of tackling climate change, the Garibaldi of civil liberties and the Wagon Wheel of giving power to the people.

“Carpe the f***ing diem” was the terse message from blogger Felix Cohen in his recent ‘open letter to the Lib Dems’ (<http://openlettertothelibdems.net>).

Now we f***ing can.

Simon Titley is a member of the *Liberator* Collective

A CONVENIENT DISTRACTION

The row over MPs' expenses gave right-wingers the excuse to divert public attention from the failings of the economic elite. But it also masked a crisis for the political left, says Matthew Huntbach

The crisis of confidence in electoral politics exposed by the MPs' expenses scandals has resulted in calls for various constitutional reforms, but this misses the point. The crisis is not about concern over unbalanced party representation in parliament, nor about the Lords lacking an elected mandate, nor about parliament having insufficient control over the executive. Reform of all these things is valuable, but it doesn't address what has happened this year.

The crisis is one of the political left. The political right holds that power in society has been ordained in some way, whether divinely, or because the strongest get to the top so should be there because they are the best, or because it has evolved that way and it is best not to change what works. The political left holds that an unequal distribution of power is inherently wrong, and that power should ideally be distributed evenly among all people – any uneven distribution of power is accepted only because it is universally beneficial and with the proviso that ultimately it could be taken away should it turn out not to be so.

DEPUTING POWER

Even distribution of power is managed by politics with the universal franchise. Accepting that it is not practical for all of us to be engaged in drawing up the details of how society works, we depute that power to representatives. Lacking time, we may ourselves not be fully aware of what would be the best decision we would make on the basis of all relevant information. Therefore we give the power to someone we can trust to act on our behalf. The finest way of doing that is to have a system where there is an assembly of representatives; we divide the population by the number who sit in the assembly to get a quota, and to sit in there it is required to have the agreed support of that quota of people – individual voter to individual candidate, no restrictions on choice.

Electoral politics arranges this. Some electoral systems approach the ideal described above closer than others, practicality may require some compromise. The question now is how can I know who is available and best suited to represent me, and arrange so that a sufficient number of other people agree with my choice. Political parties take on the task of identifying and proposing suitable people, a voluntary role not a state role.

The traditional right opposition to the democratic ideal has almost vanished. The new right opposition to it is strong and growing. It distrusts the idea of deputing power. It says that anyone who seeks to become a deputy in this way is untrustworthy, probably a bad person because only bad people seek to exercise power over others. It proposes that any such elected power in this form should be minimised. Instead it holds that free exchange between individuals is the way to run society, equal power being guaranteed by all individuals acting under the same rules which exist to enforce guarantee of any promises made in that exchange.

The nonsense behind this is that it does not take account of unequal distribution of resources, and the compulsion this entails. The new right defends unequal distribution on the grounds resources should only be transferred through voluntary agreement from their owners, and it does not question where that ownership came from. According to this idea, a starving woman who sells her body, because it is all she has, into degrading prostitution, has made a free exchange in which both sides benefit: she gets to carry on living, her client gets the enjoyment of degrading her. We can see that 'libertarianism', while sometimes claiming to be of the left, is really of the right, since in effect it says that the distribution of wealth and hence power is ordained and should not be challenged.

The current crisis stems from the rise of this new right. Sometimes the ideology has been adopted by those who are really of the old right, seeking a new justification for their privileges, now the old religious and aristocratic ones are held by almost no-one. Sometimes it has been taken up by those who really are liberal minded but whose life experience or gullibility has blinded them to the liberal arguments against. Often it is a mixture of the two.

In order for this new right to succeed, it has to denounce the democratic left approach to organising society, and in this it has had an easy job. In part, the new right is correct – power does corrupt, those entrusted with it as temporary representatives get to enjoy it, use their temporary power to organise things so in effect it becomes permanent, suppose themselves to be particularly enlightened, and therefore not really needing the continual democratic endorsement. Before completely accepting the new right case, we should recall this is similar to the way that those with wealth often suppose that wealth is solely due to their good work and forget the extent to which it is built as a co-operative effort

of society whose continuing well-being is necessary for that wealth to continue having value.

The acceptance that political power and wealth have to be distributed and that a correct balance involves neither minimal government (the ‘libertarian’ model) nor overbearing government (the model of some forms of socialism) is what true liberalism is about, and it is explicitly what the Liberal Democrats declare in our constitution as what we are about.

Something else we are about, however, is democratic renewal. This stems to some extent as an accident, from our position as a relic party (a weak survivor of something that was once strong), which successfully built a revival. Democratic mechanisms often become weak through under-use. If we are habitually used to having a decision and making it one way, it is easy to forget we have that decision. The Liberal Party was kept alive by people who so loved democracy that they kept its mechanisms working even when it seemed absurd to suppose it would ever lead to power, the satisfaction was only from seeing it remain. It was revived by those who so loved democracy that they were willing to put in the huge amount of effort required to make the party once again a realistic choice and so expand what was available. Its revival has involved reminding the electorate that they do have a choice, and getting people to challenge assumptions they had made in the past about democratic choice.

We can see that the establishment left, represented in Britain by the Labour Party after it had replaced the Liberal Party in this role, has been a major cause of the collapse in confidence in electoral politics. It is the job of the left to remind the people that they are in control through democracy, as we still sing “Why should we be beggars with the ballot in our hands?” The right will not do this because ultimately the right does not want the people to be in control, it wants wealth and privilege to be in control.

Labour lost the democratic will because in many parts of the country it was not challenged, it assumed the votes would always come in for it, that it had those votes by right. Those of us who have challenged that assumed right where it was strong know the nastiness of the response we get from Labour when we do so, that nastiness aimed at those who have the temerity to use and revive rusting democratic machinery shows the loss of what ultimately is the left’s justification.

COLD AND UNLOVABLE

When Labour was challenged electorally, it developed something that was successful in elections but was cold and unlovable in terms of retaining long-term support and democratic renewal. New Labour was sold as a brand, not as a mechanism for ordinary people to take control of their lives through use of the democratic machinery. We may all have favourite brands, but few of us would voluntarily work as a salesperson for one of them. Without this active participation, a political party has lost its purpose. Who now thinks of Labour as it was thought of even just a few years ago – the party of the people because it is made up of ordinary people?

“It turns out we were governed, both by those with elected power and those with financial power, by fools”

The assumptions of the new right were challenged deeply by the economic crash of which people became aware in 2008. It was a crash of the sort that regularly happens; only a fool would work on the basis that such would never happen again. It turns out we were governed, both by those with elected power and those with financial power, by fools. What we were told about the growing disparity in wealth being a necessary part of our

prosperity turned out to be questionable. Those who claimed huge amounts on the grounds they were clever people and their cleverness was generating wealth turned out to be little of the sort. Their cleverness amounted just to being in the right place at the right time, their personal wealth to nothing more than sitting on the pipes where money is transmitted and taking a feed.

ABJECT MISERY

I have heard many tales of abject misery as a result of this crash. People who have worked hard, set up their own business, bought a nice house, done everything the new right assures them will result in reward, have lost the lot. Those at the top, more responsible for what went wrong and the atmosphere that led those lower down to get caught, have done well, have kept their big houses and their big pensions.

If ever there was a time for the left to say “we told you so”, it is now. When headlines appear in the Daily Mail one would previously have expected to see in the Socialist Worker, how convenient it was to have the distraction of the MPs’ expenses issue. As we knew with our community politics, concrete examples work better than the abstract, till receipts listing the individual items bought on expenses attract anger far more than much bigger money figures for the amount the truly wealthy are secreting in tax havens.

The left could not fight back, not only because its more moderate elements bought into the new right assumptions but also because it has failed to put across the message of active democracy. We are not entirely innocent of that. Politicians sold as consumer brands by public relations consultants in Westminster offices are easily dismissed as “all the same”. The idea that we should inform people as well as just tout for their votes has been lost. People are lashing out at the wrong targets because there is no-one telling them what the right targets are. There is much to be done to respond to this, but for us it should start by us reconsidering how our party works and presents itself.

Matthew Huntbach is a former Liberal Democrat councillor in Lewisham

TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

The Liberal Democrat European election campaign was an improvement but not strong enough to be overwhelmed by the expenses scandal, says Andrew Duff

The Barclay Brothers, who own the Daily Telegraph, have done a blinder. For Europhobes, their timing was perfect. The European dimension of the European parliamentary election campaign was almost entirely blown away by the scandalising at Westminster. The party that profited most from this was the Conservative Party, whose European policy is the worst. The party that suffered most from this was the Liberal Democrats, whose European policy is the best.

The preparation of the Lib Dem campaign was fairly long-winded. The manifesto, which was the product of long negotiations between the Westminster and European parliamentary parties, was the most positive ever produced. Yet thanks to the emergence of the duck-house, the manifesto never got the rigorous political scrutiny by the media or by our opponents that it was designed to withstand. As far as I know, no Lib Dem MP was obliged to explain or defend the manifesto in ways that would have offended the sensibilities of the MEPs (or vice versa).

In future, however, a method will have to be found to tighten the grip of the European parliamentary party on the manifesto process. In addition, we should invent ways of keeping the Westminster party and staff more fully and regularly briefed about the direction of the policy and legislative performance of our members of the European Parliament so that ignorance is dispelled, shocks avoided and the five-yearly manifesto drafting made less irksome.

The message 'Stronger Together' was the single most important and successful feature of the campaign, winning plaudits from the Guardian and Observer. It should now be sustained by the whole party as the quarrel over the Lisbon treaty surfaces again.

Our choice of topics – the economy, environment and crime – might have played well, given half a chance. At least we fought off the paedophile vote. But there were more serious issues at stake.

David Cameron does not toy with euroscepticism. He would have us drift off to the mid-Atlantic. He is negligent of the national interest, and would damage European unity. So the attempt by the Lib Dems and Labour to play down the importance of the Lisbon treaty is fundamentally wrong. We should be proud and outspoken about what (all being well) stands as a very great liberal democratic achievement for the European Union. The Liberal Democrat role in political reform in Europe is at least as credible (and in practice rather more successful) as our comparable record at Westminster.

The fact that the campaign itself was devoid of opportunities to advance our messages does not detract from the simplicity and clarity of what we intended to do. The pattern should be repeated next time, not least because the approach seems to have been understood eventually – but perhaps too late – by party activists around the country. A more concerted effort should be made in future to inform the party membership in time about the shape, style and focus of the European campaign.

The greater difficulties of the 2009 campaign lay not so much at the national level but within the regional parties. Much effort was made to establish properly integrated campaigns between the European and the local elections. This effort was only partly successful. A much bigger effort must be made by MEPs and MPs to build up the credibility and resources of the English regional parties.

Britain was not the only place in which the conduct and results of this election gives rise to alarm. Across Europe the elections were dominated by national issues, the rise of populism and falling turnout. The so-called European political parties once again failed to deliver a European campaign about issues, ideology or personalities.

The newly dynamic ALDE group should take the lead in advancing European solutions to Europe's common problems. We are entering into political talks with the President of the European Commission, Mr José Manuel Barroso, who has been nominated for a second term by the heads of government. Before giving him its approval, the European Parliament should take stock of the result of the elections and draw appropriate democratic conclusions.

The EU certainly needs a strong political Commission with a broadly-based programme that addresses economic recovery, immigration and climate change as its top priorities. All three challenges require action plans at the European level.

The EU institutions should re-examine the style and scope of their information and communications policies. And the European Parliament should press ahead with its plans for electoral reform, which include the creation of a transnational list from which a small proportion of deputies will be elected in five years time.

In these ways, the new parliament will prove itself to be of real value to those European citizens who still have to be convinced of the added value of European unity.

Andrew Duff is MEP for the East of England and leader of the UK Liberal Democrat MEPs. www.andrewduff.eu

CORK ON THE OCEAN

Chris Davies reflects on the frustrations of the European election campaign

As a parliamentary candidate, I've experienced the best and the worst. The high point was 1995 and the Littleborough and Saddleworth by-election: ten years of local campaigning culminating in four weeks of exhilarating combat at morning press conferences, set piece platform speeches to well-packed halls, huge numbers of leaflets, intensive doorstep canvassing by hundreds of helpers, and the special sight of Labour campaign manager Peter Mandelson looking less than happy at the count. Then there was the 2009 European election 'campaign'.

I have no right to grumble. With eight seats on offer, I was re-elected comfortably to a job that gives me a great deal more influence than I ever had at Westminster. Our European Parliamentary Party included 11 members before the election and has 11 members after it. Given that the total number of MEPs representing the UK was reduced from 78 to 72, we can argue that we had our best ever result – though with a national vote of only 13.7 per cent putting us in fourth place behind UKIP, it doesn't feel like it.

FRUSTRATING

Anyone who has won a council seat against the odds knows what a 'real' election campaign feels like: the message is crucial; one extra leaflet can make the difference; every door matters; getting the vote out on the day is vital. The European election campaign wasn't like that! Candidates everywhere will have found it unsatisfactory; I found it frustrating in the extreme, having as much control over the forces around me as a cork on the ocean. Such public debate as there was extended little beyond knockabout calls for Britain to leave the EU for reasons that were never subjected to serious scrutiny. While national papers in Ireland rarely had less than two pages devoted daily to the election campaign, major papers here made virtually no mention of it. Turnout at public meetings was derisory. I don't remember ever being asked about the work I actually do in the European Parliament, and I doubt if the campaign allowed a single person to gain a better understanding of how the EU works.

I'd like to find someone to criticise for not making the Liberal Democrat effort more effective, but there would be no justice in it. We MEPs did not seize the initiative. When Dunfermline MP Willie Rennie was asked to take the reins and came up with the 'Stronger Together, Weaker Apart' campaign theme, everyone felt comfortable with it. There was no significant disagreement with the idea of focusing on the key themes of strengthening the economy, combating cross-border crime, and protecting our

environment. Ideas intended to promote discussion about EU institutional reform were pushed to one side, but Chris Fox developed some aggressive 'attack' messages that might have highlighted differences between the parties had there been the chance to communicate them. Nick Clegg gave a spirited defence of the value of the European Union when he had the chance to do it.

All was swept aside by the tsunami of MPs' expenses. The launch of our European election manifesto became just another opportunity to quote Nick on the need for House of Commons reform. When an attempt was made to turn the debate onto crime and the European Arrest Warrant, no journalists turned up to our press conference. It didn't get better. Quite why a Westminster MP ended up representing the party on the BBC Question Time European Special is a mystery to me, but our MEPs appear blacklisted so it was no surprise.

NATIONAL MESSAGE

I've long argued that the national message is much more important than local campaigning in the vast European regional constituencies. But with national communication made impossible, I am grateful for the work that was done to get as much addressed literature as possible delivered by the Royal Mail to homes in well-organised constituencies. My region did better than most. Analysis of the returns suggests that good use of the freepost helped sustain a Liberal Democrat vote that sometimes collapsed in constituencies where no special effort could be made.

The North West includes 75 Westminster constituencies and, while we have pockets of strength, there was no local activity at all in the great majority of them. Our literature was good so far as it went, but it is repetition of strong themes expressed by candidates able to establish their personality that has the best track record of success, and this was impossible. We could have done more to agree campaign strategies with active local parties, but a huge part of the region would still have been untouched by a Liberal Democrat presence.

It's easy enough to explain why our arrows didn't hit their targets. I would be happy to throw away the quiver if someone would pass me a gun loaded with silver bullets...

Chris Davies is Liberal Democrat MEP for the North West of England. www.chrisdaviesmep.org.uk

HOW WAS IT FOR YOU?

Jonathan Fryer asks why a more proficient Euro election campaign did not improve the Liberal Democrat vote

On the basis of the results of the recent European elections, it is tempting to give the following summary judgement: no change. We went into them with 11 seats and we came out of them with 11 seats, though with two fresh faces to grace the parliament in Strasbourg and Brussels: Catherine Bearder (replacing Emma Nicholson in the South East of England) and George Lyon (replacing Elspeth Attwooll in Scotland).

Because the total number of UK MEPs was reduced, from 78 to 72, the Lib Dems were cited in the media as having made a 'notional' gain of one seat (as we would have been expected to lose one in the East Midlands). But this notional gain served only to confuse all but the real Euro-election geeks. In a nutshell, we stood still.

Of course, the picture is more complex than that. If canvassing returns were anything to go by, up until about three weeks before polling day, we were in with a real chance of genuinely gaining a seat in London, which was the most 'marginal' of all the UK regions in that sense. We missed that second seat by a whisker in 2004 and we got close again this time.

But the fallout from the Westminster MPs' scandals hit the Lib Dems – unfairly, really – as it did the other two major parties. There was a detectable haemorrhaging of support from us towards the Greens and other smaller parties as the campaign went on. Other people simply stayed at home, turned off the whole breed of politicians.

DERAILED

This was a pity in many ways, not just because it means that I personally will have to wait a few more years before I get another chance at trying for the one job in the world that really interests me. The expenses scandal derailed the whole European campaign as such, at least as far as most of the media was concerned. Journalists and broadcasters who had been lined up to treat these elections more seriously than ever before got sidetracked into writing about home-flipping, duck houses and moat cleaning instead.

It's true that both the Guardian and the Observer did us proud, arguing strongly that voters should back the Lib Dems in the Euro vote. The fact that they didn't only goes to show that neither of these publications is as influential as some of us devoted readers would like to believe. Of course, their modest sales figures should make that obvious.

At least this time there was a Lib Dem Euro campaign, which talked about Europe – something that Charles Kennedy was not able (or allowed) to do in 2004. From the time of his election as party leader, Nick Clegg – a former

MEP himself, of course – said that he would be clear in promoting an essentially pro-European message, in the sense that it would emphasize how Britain benefits from being a member of the EU and how we need closer European cooperation in areas such as overcoming the economic recession, combating climate change and other environmental challenges, and tackling cross-border crime such as drug-trafficking, people-trafficking and terrorism, but without compromising our civil liberties. All sound stuff, though at times this came over rather 'soft' in the face of much 'harder' arguments from the other side, such as 'Let's get out of Europe!' (UKIP) and 'We need a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty!' (Conservatives). Our slogan 'Stronger together, poorer apart' was very worthy, but it was never likely to get people flocking to the polls.

POST-MORTEM

In conducting a post-mortem on the Euro poll, I can only pass judgement on what happened in London, as I stayed rooted in the capital for obvious reasons. There were several positive things about what took place in London that are worthy of note. London region Lib Dems engaged in the campaign much more forcefully than has been the case on previous occasions and, although the regional campaign fund kitty was essentially empty when we kicked off, local parties (as well as many individuals) responded generously to the Euro election appeal. This meant that we were able to get printed a rather attractive and well-constructed full-colour generic election address, designed to be sent out to every household in all but our held and target seats, courtesy of the Royal Mail. The region could not afford for these generic election addresses to be labelled, however, and it is clear that many households did not in fact receive them, though this seems to have been less of a problem than in 2004, when there was strong evidence that some postmen or even sorting offices just binned them by the thousands.

Held and target seats were encouraged to do much more than cough up for the generic leaflet, and they did. Material featuring their MPs and PPCs alongside the sitting MEP Sarah Ludford (and in most cases me) were produced. And in many key areas these were supplemented with tabloids, A3 leaflets, target letters and Focuses (though a depressing number of wards during the election campaign were putting out Focuses that did not mention the European election and our related policies at all). Canvassing went on in many parts of London – by no means only the held and target seats – as local parties took to heart the message of using these elections not only to try to get a second MEP elected, but also in preparation for both the general and

all-out local elections to come (which may well be on the same day in London next May or June). A lot of useful data was gained in that way. There was also a concerted telephone knocking-up exercise in our key seats relating to those D&Ps (definites and probables) who had signed up for postal votes. The response was good, and indeed what feedback we had from postal vote openings suggested that we did well in an operation at which the Tories are usually far more efficient.

One new initiative this time, overseen by London's number 3 Euro-candidate, Dinti Batstone, involved contacting EU citizens in boroughs where they are numerous, (a) to persuade them to vote here, rather than in their home country, and (b) to get them to vote for us. The theory was that in principle these EU voters would be more positive about the EU and therefore better disposed towards the Liberal Democrats; often true, but by no means always the case. Though it is impossible to know exactly how effective this EU voters initiative proved to be, undoubtedly we did win or consolidate support among many EU citizens and, in particular, a vibrant Liberal Democrat Friends of Poland was launched.

Similarly, for the first time this year, I had a team of keen young volunteers who signed up to the 'Make It 2!' campaign and worked amazingly hard leafleting tube stations and festivals, delivering and manning a phone bank at Cowley Street, as well as knocking up on polling day, under the vigorous guidance of my Campaign PA, James Lillis. I am sure both of these innovations were valuable and that they boosted our vote; unfortunately, some of the rest of our support was dropping off the other end. Part of the post-election consultation process needs to be an investigation as to how and why that happened.

In the event, in London we polled 40,000 fewer votes than we did in 2004, though we ran a much better campaign. This cannot be explained entirely by the lower turnout, or the defection of some of our natural supporters to single-issue candidates or independents, such as the Tamil lady who garnered more than 50,000 votes largely as a protest against what has been happening in Sri Lanka.

HOSTILE OR INDIFFERENT

Some constituencies – not very many – ran a full polling-day operation on 4 June; others said they found it difficult to persuade many of their usual tellers to sit on polling stations because it was a Euro-election. It is a fact that a proportion – not huge, but nonetheless significant – of Lib Dem activists are as hostile or at least indifferent to the European Union as is the general public, which may mean that in future Euro elections we should try to involve some pro-Europeans who are not normally in our Lib Dem teams. Turnout was certainly higher in areas where we did make such an effort: the highest was 42% in the borough of Richmond (still pathetic when compared with a general election).

Hopes that we might benefit from differential turnout were unrealised, however. Many of our supporters seemed just as determined to stay at home as the other parties'. Nonetheless, when the votes were counted, we did much

“Many of our supporters seemed just as determined to stay at home as the other parties”

better in areas where we had worked hard, coming a very close second to the Tories in the boroughs of Richmond, Kingston and Sutton – much better than in 2004, in fact, which bodes well for South West London's five Lib Dem MPs.

Some other results were less reassuring. In Islington (a Lib Dem-controlled council, just), the Greens pushed the Lib Dems down into third place, while Labour was

comfortably out in front. Indeed, one of the most striking things about the London Euro results as a whole was that the Labour vote did not collapse in the way that it did elsewhere. In fact, it held up rather well. In contrast, UKIP slumped to fifth place behind the Greens over the city as a whole (though still retaining their one MEP). The BNP, I'm pleased to say, got nowhere near winning a seat in London, faring less well than it did in last year's Greater London Assembly (GLA) poll.

Until about three weeks before election day, it seemed highly likely that the Green MEP, Jean Lambert, would lose her seat, though in the event she got back easily. As in 1989, the Greens were a natural repository for protest votes on the day. But we need to acknowledge that the Green Party is good at getting a simple message – indeed, its brand image – over effectively. Much more than we manage to do. Even so, the Greens made no gains, merely holding their two existing seats nationwide. Nonetheless, in contrast to Lib Dems, they do better in list elections than they do in first-past-the-post contests and some serious work needs to be done analysing exactly why that is and how we can learn from it. We also need to package our environmental message in a way which makes the average punter understand that the Liberal Democrats are the truly environmentally – as well as economically – responsible party in Britain.

Another challenge that London region – and I suspect several other regions as well – must confront is what do about 'black holes': areas where we have no councillors, weak or non-existent local parties and almost no visibility in the local press. Lib Dems have made great strides in London over the past decade or so, increasing the number of MPs we have and the councils we control. This has largely been a result of deliberate targeting, sometimes spectacularly successful. But in PR elections, we see the downside of the strategy. Our very strong performance in a limited number of boroughs gets undermined by the very poor performance in many others. Hence the extremely disappointing GLA result last year. And our still only retuning one London MEP now.

Jonathan Fryer was the number two Liberal Democrat candidate for London in the recent European election and is chair of the Liberal International British Group

SHOOT - THE GOAL'S WIDE OPEN

Why do Liberals and Liberal Democrats become more timid when voters agree with them, instead of exploiting obvious opportunities, wonders Michael Meadowcroft

It's an open goal. We have the ball at our feet. And we fuff about, frightened to shoot. Some players are left-footed, some right-footed, and they twist and turn trying to get the perfect angle. We've had the build up from deep defence. We've dominated the midfield. So just shoot.

It is a very curious phenomenon with Liberals and Liberal Democrats that the more the electorate agrees with them, and the more that events prove them right, the more frightened they are. The one trait that has characterised the party over my 50 years in it is the lack of confidence Liberals – and now Liberal Democrats – have in their own beliefs. It is quite perverse, when time after time events have demonstrated that the unpopular policies we espoused and the difficult stances we took up were justified by events, we become terrified to bang the drum.

Over the long years, I have written booklet after booklet and made speech after speech aimed at demonstrating to colleagues why Liberalism is the only answer to the problems of the day and why there is no reason to have any inferiority complex. And still colleagues are frightened to come over the parapet.

So, let's try a different tactic. Time has marched on and there is even more evidence of the rightness of Liberal and Liberal Democrat philosophy and policy. For decades I have fought against all appeals to try and sum up Liberalism in a single trite slogan. Politics is far too important to be reduced to a handful of easy words. But now there is a mantra that, if all of us repeat it at every opportunity, and in respect of every issue, will sink in with the electorate and show huge results at the polls.

It's very simple: "Why vote for the parties that get it wrong, when you can vote for the party that gets it right?" It has to be repeated in these exact words in every interview, and put on every leaflet, and applied to every issue, so that everyone is fed up of it – but it will have sunk in.

Let's take it issue by issue, all of which can easily be fleshed out, and added to, in a longer article:

- **The economy:** Vince Cable was warning parliament in 2003 that banking regulation wasn't working, and called for the nationalisation of Northern Rock long before anyone else realised how serious the situation was.
- **MPs' expenses:** The Liberal Democrats called in parliament for complete disclosure of MPs' expenses but were voted down by both main parties.

- **Iraq:** Only the Liberal Democrats opposed the war from the beginning.
- **Identity cards:** The Liberal Democrats have consistently opposed the introduction of ID cards, and it was a Liberal activist who in 1952 singlehandedly forced the abolition of the wartime ID cards.
- **Europe:** In its 1955 manifesto, the Liberal Party called for full British membership of the key European institutions. To have been in at the beginning would have enabled Britain to influence the crucial direction of European Union development.
- **Green issues:** The Liberals were the first party to accept ecological truths and to base their policies on sustainability. (Its 1974 report is quoted below).
- **Electoral reform:** For more than 80 years, the Liberals, and Liberal Democrats, have supported the key change to the Single Transferable Vote, which will help to revive our failing democracy.

ELECTORS' WRATH

Apparently everyone and every party now supports 'proportional representation' as part of a constitutional package to try to rescue parliament and politics from the wrath of the electorate over the expenses scandal.

Unfortunately, the level of illiteracy on the subject is palpable – including among some Liberal Democrats. In the current atmosphere, it is unimaginable to advocate any electoral system that gives even more powers into the hands of the political party hierarchies, but this is precisely what all list systems do. It is equally untenable to suggest an electoral system that will make it more difficult for the electorate to vote against individual recalcitrant MPs, which is precisely what the 1998 Jenkins Commission's proposed system of 'Alternative Vote Plus' would do. And yet it is the latter system that is most often suggested as the one to be put up against First-Past-the-Post in any referendum.

What electors want, as expressed clearly by one of Julie Kirkbride's constituents on television, is to be able to vote against their MP without having to vote against their party. Only the Single Transferable Vote, in which electors rank candidates in order of preference, permits that. Is it not remarkably perceptive of the Liberal Party, and latterly the Liberal Democrats, to have consistently supported STV as the best system? Now the political circumstances are perfect for STV and we can promote it enthusiastically, without any reservation. So why aren't we?

AV+ was defective from the beginning – it would produce two classes of MP, those with constituencies and those without, and it enables losers in the constituency ballot to be elected from the list, which, even with the possibility of an elector showing his or her preferences from the list, is bound to thwart constituency opinion. In the present atmosphere, this latter flaw will probably render it unwinnable in a referendum, whereas STV is far more likely to succeed.

Recession brings considerable economic and political problems but it also brings a great opportunity for Liberal Democrats. After decades in which the overriding drive of society, fed by successive governments, has been individualism and the accumulation of money and possessions, there is now a renewed need for community solidarity and for human values. This is a Lib Dem shaped gap into which the party can drive with passion and with confidence in its values and beliefs.

When the economy appears to hold out the possibility of becoming rich, it is more difficult to convince the electors that only a liberal society, with its awareness of a very different kind of society in which individuals exercise their wider talents and skills rather than being cogs in an economic machine, is ultimately satisfying. When the economy is in decline people inevitably seek other satisfactions than the illusory offerings of consumerism. Interestingly, for instance, museums and art galleries are already reporting increasing attendances.

Liberals have never been myopic about economic policy. Even when producing the Keynesian plan *We Can Conquer Unemployment* in 1928 in response to an even deeper recession, the party made it clear that: “The measures we advocate in relation to all these things spring from one clear purpose. We believe with a passionate faith that the end of all political and economic action is not the perfecting or perpetuation of this or that piece of mechanism or organisation, but that individual men and women may have life and that they have it more abundantly.”

CONFIDENCE IN BELIEFS

Liberal Democrats today need to have the same confidence in their beliefs and to grasp the immediate opportunity. If we do not do so, the chance will pass. We have to succeed politically as well as electorally if we are to be able to hold seats, locally and nationally, without such a phenomenally high level of perpetual motion that it eventually produces burn out and inhibits the development of new seats.

Membership of all parties is on the decline but it does not have to be so. Liberalism and Liberal Democrat values have the capacity to inspire if only they are passionately and expertly expounded. The problem is that all too often those values are not well enough embedded in party

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activists who do not always have the confidence and support to promote them more widely.

Politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum and if we do not promote liberalism in the current economic recession others will do so. Already there are siren voices from radical think tanks such as Compass, urging policies on Labour that are in the mainstream of Liberal Democratic thinking. Similarly ten Guardian columnists recently produced their ideas for Labour’s next manifesto, almost all of which are rooted in Liberal or, now, Liberal Democrat values.

Even more dangerously, if we are not equipped to take on their divisive

fallacies, the BNP will inevitably seduce voters who find their simplistic “plague on all their houses” line seductive.

Of course employment is crucial, and Liberal thinking has always seen the possibility of developing co-operatives, of individuals creating their own employment without necessarily being oppressed by fiscal policies that inhibit initiative, and job creation policies that cost less than unemployment benefits but produce assets within the community. In addition, while unemployed, volunteering opportunities assist valuable services and promote self esteem. The voluntary sector is geared up to find alternative solutions to a struggling financial market.

This is a time to promote the arts, to get interested in local history, to take up a language course, to encourage individuals to be involved in local community initiatives, or any number of other ideas and opportunities. It is also a time to promote our politics as the way to draw society together in the face of economic adversity and cultural opportunity. The Liberal faith was summed up vividly in a report on the environment in 1974:

“Once the basic needs of food and shelter are met, man’s greatest satisfactions are to be found in love, trust and friendship, in beauty, art and music and in learning, none of which are served by the mythology of growth for its own sake.”

We have a powerful and timely message. “Why vote for the parties that get it wrong when you can vote for the party that gets it right.” It’s the moment to promote it. Shoot!

Michael Meadowcroft was Liberal MP for Leeds West, 1983-1987. www.bramley.demon.co.uk

SURVIVING A PERFECT STORM

The county and European election results do not add up to a crisis for the Liberal Democrats, but the party cannot go on like this, says Chris White

At times this year, two hours away from the news media meant that you were hopelessly out of date with political developments. It is rare to watch any political party publicly destroy itself on a daily basis (although the early 1980s Labour Party attempted this feat) and rarer still to have this happen during an election campaign.

Labour suffered miserably at the hands of the Daily Telegraph's revelations on MP expenses. The Tories were also in the frame but the level of sheer cynicism and greed (especially over 'flipping') landed mainly on Labour's doorstep – perhaps unfairly. Somehow Cameron succeeded in rescuing the Tories from the court of public perception so that we were inclined to remember the semi-humorous moats and duck islands rather than the more questionable declarations as to what was really a second home.

Labour by contrast managed to magnify the scandal. Dying governments will always stumble more than rising opposition parties but there were unforced errors: Speaker Martin, a Labour nominee to a post which required skills well beyond him, rendered his own position untenable by clumsy handling of critics. Hazel Blears delivered a well timed upper cut which leaves her now repenting at leisure.

TROUSER PRESS

For Nick Clegg this campaign may have been the making of him. Liberal leaders normally need the glare of a general election to demonstrate their worth: Clegg played a blinder, reinforced no doubt by the fact that the peccadilloes of the Liberal Democrat cohort were essentially trivial. One can forgive a trouser press.

This did not stop the odd door being slammed in our face. But clearly more doors were being slammed – and harder – in the face of the other two main parties. The attempt by one Labour councillor in Hertfordshire to persuade the group leaders to issue a joint statement that councillors were clean where MPs were not shows how rough things were on the doorstep. I declined the kind invitation to associate my party with the mire of others and continued to find a largely friendly, if deeply shocked, reception.

No doubt someone, somewhere will be writing prematurely about the strange death of Labour England. In truth the English shires have always been tricky ground for Labour. Labour is a largely urban party and has had difficulty in fielding full slates of candidates for some time. Labour colleagues in Hertfordshire were anticipating their own demise many months before the expenses scandal burst upon them and us.

Inevitably Labour county councillors were going to be more vulnerable than four years previously. In 2005 they were shielded to some degree by the simultaneous general election in which the Tories were still led by the ludicrous Michael Howard. The failure of Tory county councils to deliver did not figure as strongly as the desire of the electorate to punish Brown's wobbly leadership and economic mismanagement.

Our own expectations were modest. There was a real risk that the progress of 1993 would be entirely reversed as we faced a Tory onslaught from a population desperate for national change. Some county council groups were likely to be entirely eliminated. Others might get still smaller.

The reality was more mixed. There was good progress in some shire areas: there were net gains – from the Conservatives and Labour – in many counties, including Cumbria, Dorset, East Sussex, the Isle of Wight, Kent, Lancashire, Leicestershire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, West Sussex and Worcestershire. In Norfolk, where we did not field a full slate of candidates, there were serious and problematic gains for the Greens.

In my own county, Hertfordshire, we gained four seats off the Tories, though we also lost one. St Albans saw the remarkable eradication of the Tories from county council seats just four years after we had similarly defenestrated Labour. Overall, Labour's county seats fell from 16 to three. There were similarly good results in Essex but serious setbacks in the south west where we lost our three flagship county councils.

Every local battle has its own particularities: but Liberal Democrat administrations were always likely to fare badly when their main opponents – the Tories – were on the march. The best result, of course, was Bristol, where we were facing Labour.

EURO OPTIMISM

In the European elections, there had initially been cause for optimism. It seemed inevitable that UKIP, without Kilroy-Silk, and itself mired in scandal, would retreat. There were worries that this retreat would benefit the BNP but nevertheless hope that the Liberal Democrats, no longer saddled with the prospects of referendums on the euro or the constitution, might be able to attract a reasonable level of support from pro-Europeans concerned about the environment and geo-political issues.

This was of course naïve. In an election where people believe that their vote does not really matter and where they are not electing a local representative, voters can have

some fun. Parties with strong simple messages (Get Out of Europe, Save the Planet, Stop Immigration) will do well. Those with complex or vague messages (Stronger Together, for instance) were likely to be lost in the clamour.

The European manifesto was issued far too late to have any impact. It was far too long and had little to help with campaigning. It was accompanied eventually by an internal document detailing the achievements of MEPs, which arrived at local and regional parties after most of the literature suite had been sent to the printers.

It is dismaying that the BNP has made a breakthrough. It is easy to exaggerate this – after all, it fared no better than the Greens and far worse than we did. Equally, we need to challenge our liberal attitudes when dealing with the BNP's representatives at European or council level. They were elected. But so was Hitler. Liberals can have no truck with racists or holocaust deniers.

The BNP broke through because mainstream parties either let the electorate down or were simply talking a language which made no sense in depressed and neglected housing estates. The answer is better policies and better campaigning.

In Hertfordshire we used the slogan 'Six to Fix' (Liberator 333). The election results leave the party with six problems to attend to:

- County results were too patchy. ALDC frequently warns 'Where we work we win' and that remains true to a huge extent. The variations in effort were alarming, with too many sitting councillors not helping their county colleagues. Many campaigns didn't get under way until the end of April. This alone cost us seats. And we need to manage succession better. Our one loss in Hertfordshire came where a sitting councillor retired, in a seat we had held for over 30 years.
- There was too little cross-county co-ordination: seats which were clearly winnable from a county perspective were de-targeted at local level because of a perceived lack of resources (which would have been rectified in many cases had the campaigns started earlier). Nor was there much mutual aid across county or constituency borders.
- Quality was also an issue. In Hertfordshire the literature of St Albans or Watford or Hemel Hempstead was not replicated across the county. One area took the simple messages of Six to Fix and bizarrely changed them (we did not win this seat). In another area, I had a friendly argument with a colleague about whether an attachment we were sent was a first draft or a final leaflet. I was adamant that it could only be a draft, because it had no party logo – or imprint for that matter. Sadly I was wrong. Councillors will need increasingly to fund professional help if they are to retain their seats in four years time and especially if they are to expand into new

“The European manifesto was issued far too late to have any impact. It was far too long and had little to help with campaigning”

areas. Local parties should work with county-wide materials, not reject or ignore them.

- The European campaign needs to be redesigned. Manifesto and campaign materials need to be ready twelve months before polling day. It is in particular not our job to sell the virtues of the European Union any more than it is our job to sell the virtues of county government. We need to talk about reforming the EU and changing what people don't like about it. This can be done without violating our European credentials.

- We still have no idea what to

do with our European candidates – one task might be to sell the idea of campaigning to local parties and to ensure that integrated campaigning starts on time: too many leaflets went out without any reference to Europe.

- We have to retool our communications. We should start with 'three reasons to' or 'Six to Fix' and then work from there to something more detailed to satisfy the anoraks and a few Westminster journalists. This will require a fundamental reworking of the way the Federal Policy Committee operates. And it will require MEPs to think "What shall I write this week for Focus?" rather than be immersed in the more fascinating geo-political issues which confront them at Strasbourg. MEPs – like county councillors – can too often forget that most voters are concerned about what's closest to home.

Lessons from a complex UK wide campaign coupled with English elections are at this stage not easy to draw. I hope that there will be proper post mortems at local and regional level, as well as nationally.

From my viewpoint, it was a missed opportunity. We could have done better in both local fights and in national campaigns. A general election fought like this will not deliver the results we want and that the country needs.

There is as yet no crisis. But we cannot go on like this.

Chris White is a Liberal Democrat county councillor in Hertfordshire

NOW IS THE TIME TO BE BOLD AND LOCAL!

Richard Kemp has never seen a time when the public mood of opposition to the centralised state is so close to the Liberal Democrat position, he tells leader Nick Clegg in an open letter

Dear Nick

Over the past few weeks, I have met hundreds of our councillors as they campaigned in the local elections and supporting our European Parliament candidates. Like me, most of our councillors believe that the current problems within parliament are an opportunity to advance our cause in a way that we have been unable to for many years.

I am fascinated by the differences between our share of the vote in those elections. In the locals we got 28% and in the Euros we got 14%. I know that the elections were complicated by the fact that there were different election methods and in many places different election candidates. But that was some difference. What was constant was the fact that in one we beat Labour by 5% and in the other were only just behind them. The gap between us is narrower than it's ever been in my political lifetime.

I know that you believe that now is the time to strike against Labour. I feel that we have already overtaken them as the social conscience of this country. In fact I believe we did this when New Labour took over the soul of the Labour Party. Over the past few years, we have been consistently right over key issues like the economy, Iraq, the environment and the reform of Parliament.

LOCALISM

But those issues do not seem by themselves to have sufficient grip on the minds of electors to enable us to make the substantial push forward that we need to translate latent support into real votes cast for us. I believe that the core of the new idea that will take us forward is localism. A belief that we have always held although have expressed in different forms and in different ways such as devolution, community politics and regionalism.

I have been held to the flame of liberalism like a moth to a candle (sometimes no bigger than a birthday cake candle) by beliefs in localism; by the inherent belief of liberalism that people can run their own lives if empowered to do so; by the concept of fairness, believing that we are all entitled to benefit from the richness of one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

Never have I seen a time in all those 42 years when public opinion about the need to take power away from

Westminster was in a place where it is so closely allied to our own. True we come from different places. Our belief that the powers of Westminster should be massively reduced stems from the belief that only enhanced localism will deliver real change. The public believe that all MPs are corrupt and not to be trusted, and would support anything that reduces the power of Westminster and Whitehall and puts power where it can be sent and where it can be accounted for.

I believe that this puts us in a unique place to respond to public opinion at the next general election. Only we of the major parties actually believe in localism. Alone amongst the political parties we want to devolve and have the knowledge and experience to deliver new and more vibrant, connected services.

The Local Government Association Liberal Democrats have articulated the opportunities available to us through our 'Local Council – Local Parliament' campaign. We will present our ideas in a detailed report to a fringe meeting at party conference in September. In our document we will propose fundamental changes in the way that this country is run.

We can save billions of pounds by stripping away useless layers of bureaucracy in Whitehall, regional offices and almost uncountable quangos. We can provide enhanced value for money by meeting real needs of people and communities, not needs perceived by remote boards and bodies.

COUNCILS AT THE HEART

We will suggest that democratically elected and accountable councils should be at the heart of the decision-making process when local priorities are set for service delivery. Many quangos would not get approval for annual spending plans and priorities from the government or regional offices but would get them from the council, which would sit at the centre of activity. Priorities would be decided locally by people who know the area, rather than in remote government offices in the region or even more remote national offices in Whitehall.

Councils don't want to do a power grab and take over the running of every quango and partner. Far from it – that

would make us bureaucratic, stodgy and slow. We want to have a greater leadership and coordination role to ensure that there is synergy between all the agencies and that we provide greater value for money by meeting real needs and not perceived needs.

We suggest that there needs to be double devolution. A Liberal Democrat council is one that finds ways of giving power away to local organisations and communities that want to work with the grain of the strategies set by the council with its clear local mandate. It's not only councillors that need to be liberated and empowered but communities and partners as well.

To win a substantial number of seats at the next general election, we need to:

- Clearly differentiate ourselves from Westminster and the other two parties;
- Have an idea that is big, bold, brassy and meets the instincts of the people of the country.

I am convinced that idea is localism. That is not how 99% of the people would express it, but it is nonetheless what they want. But it is not just about localism. It is also about the other things that people hate about the Westminster elite. Most people instinctively agree with us about the

problems of a centralised state, about the naivety of identity cards, about Trident – about all the things that ‘them in London’ want. They believe in seeing something needing doing, in asking for help; and in seeing something happen as a result of that ask.

In the context of the circumstances in which we will fight the next election, our currently carefully crafted manifesto is next to useless. I invite you to be bold and to scrap it. I invite you to call for the biggest transfer of power away from MPs and the establishment in London to the regions, councils and through them to the communities of the UK.

Our message should be clear and simple, whenever the election is called. We do hear what the people are saying about ‘London’ and we will respond.

Yours,

Richard

Richard Kemp is a councillor in Liverpool and Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the Local Government Association

BACK ISSUES

Liberator has available around 100 back issues mainly dating from the mid-1990s and the early part of this decade, although few are much older

They are available free to any library, organisation or individual who would like them, and is preferably able to collect them in north London.

Please contact: mark.smulian@virgin.net



BRISTOL STOMP

One bright spot for Liberal Democrats in the local elections was winning overall control of Bristol. Steve Comer explains how it was done even while the rest of the south west declined

Bristol has now joined Liverpool, Newcastle and Sheffield as a 'core city' with a Lib Dem majority administration, having 36 seats, against 17 Conservatives, 16 Labour and a solitary Green.

The result was no fluke, but the product of years of effort and dedication. The Liberal Party had gone into rapid decline after the First World War. Liberal organisation collapsed, and the city became a Labour fiefdom but with a strong Conservative presence in a number of wards. Despite a modest revival of the party in 1960s, it was 1973 before Liberals were elected to the council again, and for ten years they held just the Cabot ward in the city centre. In the 1980s there were gains from Labour in the east of the city but, by the poll tax election of 1990, the party was down to four seats. Modest gains continued as the Tories collapsed in the Major years; the party became the official opposition and by 1997 had 12 seats.

Bristol has election by thirds, in common with many other cities, but is unusual in that it has two-seat wards. This leads to the odd pattern where one seat in two-thirds of Bristol is up every local election. This helped the Lib Dems to target the attacks on other parties, and by 2003 the group had grown to 28 seats and deprived Labour of the overall majority it had since had with a brief interruption since 1972.

UNHAPPY EXPERIENCE

Labour refused to take minority control and tried to force the Lib Dems into a coalition with the Conservatives. Despite the prize of shared power, Lib Dems were determined they would not fall into that trap, and several weeks of stalemate ensued, after which a three-party shared administration took office. This was not a happy experience and, after 18 months, Labour found a pretext to table a vote of no confidence and withdraw from the arrangement. This time Labour did take minority control but soon wished it hadn't! Social Services spending had spiralled out of control and Labour was planning big cuts, day centre closures, and the axing of meals on wheels.

At the subsequent election in 2005, the Lib Dems emerged with 32 seats and became the largest party. A Lib Dem cabinet took over and some progress was made in tackling educational under-achievement, and the go-ahead was given to rebuild several secondary schools. Meals on wheels were saved from the axe, and the council kept within its budget. The biggest achievement was in waste, where the Lib Dems forced through a radical change in waste collection with a weekly doorstep collection of

recyclable items and kitchen waste, and fortnightly residual collections. This increased domestic recycling in the city from 12% to just under 40% in a few months.

The council bid for 'European green capital' and it encouraged wind turbines in the Avonmouth industrial area.

The Lib Dem administration did face difficulties that in the end led to its downfall. There was an established officer core that paid lip service to the cabinet's demands for a one-council approach, but in reality the council still operated like a federation of autonomous departments and central co-ordination was weak. The Labour and Tory Groups in Bristol increasingly worked together to frustrate progress, and used scrutiny and full council to make life as difficult as they could.

At the same time, Liberal Democrats found being in charge was not always popular with the electorate, and many of the party's anti-establishment voters started to switch to the Green Party, which elected a councillor in 2006. The group hit something of an electoral plateau; in 2006 it missed two target seats by majorities of less than 50, and in 2007 lost two seats to Labour. This was against the backdrop of a decision to outsource 75% of the home care service. This was opposed by the trade unions, which mounted a strong public campaign, supported by Labour councillors. The Conservative group, sensing a Lib Dem Achilles' heel, also jumped on the bandwagon and joined this 'anti-privatisation campaign' as if the 1980s had never happened. At the annual council that year, the Labour Party put itself forward for cabinet, and took office with Tory support.

LABOUR-TORY PACT

We relentlessly hammered the fact that the 'Labour and Tory parties stick together in Bristol' in our leaflets, and even invented a new bar chart to illustrate the point. We know this point sank in with the voters, and caused much concern in Tory ranks. Although 2008 was a year without elections, predictably the Tories announced in the local paper that they would not be supporting Labour for a second year, and once again were attempting to play kingmaker. After a lengthy internal debate, the Lib Dem group decided not to be tempted by office, but to concentrate on campaigning in the city and on the council with a view to getting an overall majority in 2009. At the annual meeting, we denounced Tory opportunism and game playing, and abstained to let Labour stay in minority control.

Liberal Democrats in Bristol had set up a Citywide Campaign Group comprising representatives from the local parties, the council group and Stephen Williams MP.

This met regularly and critically reviewed the level of activity in the wards we needed to hold and win. It met monthly until March and then weekly during the election campaign. We looked at all the leaflet activity, and canvass returns in details, and revised the campaign in the light of what we were hearing on the doorstep.

At the same time, there was a revamp of the election manifesto, and a decision to highlight key 'six to fix' policies as successfully used in Newcastle. These were revealed in a pre-election A3 leaflet with one common side in full colour, and we repeated the key messages throughout the campaign proper.

At the start of 2009, everything was geared towards taking the city in the June elections, but events moved quickly and the Lib Dem group found itself running the administration before a vote was cast.

Labour was pursuing a PFI bid for a mass burn incinerator for residual waste in partnership with two neighbouring councils. Bristol and Bath Lib Dems had always opposed this on environmental grounds, and advocated alternative technologies being developed locally. Conservatives had been divided on the issue, but went along with the plan, but with increasing unease. Liberal Democrats used every means we could to prevent this plan, including call-ins on three separate decisions relating to the bid, but to no avail.

At the budget meeting, we proposed to remove the appropriation for the development phase of the incinerator project, the Tories came off the fence and supported our line. Labour said it would not continue in office having lost a key policy and so resigned. After a brief adjournment, a Lib Dem cabinet was back in place.

MAIN PRIZE

Wisely, the new cabinet behaved as an interim administration, and didn't let being in office distract for the main prize, winning an overall majority. This meant a couple of more difficult decisions in the pipeline had to be delayed until July.

In most of our target wards, candidates were in place in good time, and the literature campaigns had been strong. Our campaign themes were popular, especially our concentration on local issues like bringing back park keepers and cracking down on fly tippers. All the time we promoted ourselves as the party that could end Labour's lacklustre rule and neglect of Bristol. Labour had always been keen on big plans and grand designs, many of which failed to come to fruition. We denounced this as 'visionary escapism' and homed in on local issues that local people felt were being ignored, such as better street cleaning, more police on the streets and park improvements.

Bristol Lib Dems went for an ambitious strategy in seeking control; we targeted not just the obvious seats but also two other Labour-held seats where we had come third last time. These seats each contained a large council estate,

“There is a determination not to let short-term crises or officer agendas blow the group off course”

but also areas that had a similar demographic to other seats we held. In the event, we won these two secondary targets, but failed (by nine and 90 votes) to pick up two Labour held seats in wards where we hold the other seat. This is a lesson for other campaigns; the opposition will often be harder to beat in marginal seats than in some of their safer seats. We called this the 'Manchester Withington effect'.

We now have our 36 seats and will take majority control for the first time ever. The experience of 2005-07 is fresh in the mind, and there is a determination not to let short-term crises or officer agendas blow the group off course. Steps are also being taken to improve communication between the cabinet and the wider group. There is a determination to deliver our agenda, and the opposition will find it more difficult to throw spanners in the works.

ATYPICAL OF THE SOUTH WEST

Many people have asked me why Liberal Democrats gained seats in Bristol but lost them elsewhere in the south west. As I was immersed in a Bristol campaign, it is difficult to comment, but the key point is that Bristol is atypical of the rest of the region. Like Liverpool or Manchester, it is a compact city and has a large working population that lives in surrounding areas. Conservatives have never been particularly strong in Bristol, and have not had an overall majority on the council since Harold Wilson's time. Labour has been the dominant force for decades, and this was a good year to be fighting Labour. While Bristol Lib Dems did not want to be thrown out of office in 2007, it probably helped us win this year. The temptation to cling to or seek office can be strong, but resisting it was the right thing to do for Bristol.

Being in control does give you the opportunity to implement your programme. But it can also sap energy and, if you are not careful, you can end up just looking like the political establishment. Sometimes portfolio holders can 'go native' and start behaving like amateur officers. I'm not saying any of that happened in other south west councils, but in my two years as a cabinet member the danger was always present.

Ultimately, the challenge for Bristol's Liberal Democrat Leaders will be to deliver real radical change in office, to get this recognised, and to keep up high activity levels in the majority of the city's wards. Next year's elections will be tough, especially as they are likely to coincide with a general election, and in Bristol terms that usually means a higher turnout of traditional Labour voters.

Steve Comer is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Bristol and a former leader of the council group

WHAT SORT OF STATE?

The political and financial crises are a good time to ask what sort of state we want, says Keith Sharp

The collapse of the banking system and consequent banking bailouts and nationalization in many countries have led to an assumption of a renewed greater role for the state. Many commentators have therefore puzzled over the fact that the so-called 'left' – pro-state intervention – fell back in the June 2009 European elections against the advances of the 'right' – presumably pro-market capitalist parties.

There were of course multiple causes of the European election results; but one is surely that disaffection with the banking system does not lead automatically to an embracing of the state as the answer to our problems.

A key question for, among others, liberals, then arises: if the state is to be more interventionist in economic affairs, what sort of state do we want and need? This is a much more significant question than the usual one – what do we want the state to do? – since what the state can do is determined by what it is. The state as constituted, certainly in the UK, is partly the cause of the current problems; so it is little wonder electorates are reluctant to support pro-state parties. Indeed, the current economic and political debacle – driven by exposure of greed, irresponsibility and fraud in firstly the banking classes (Goodwin's pension, etc.); and then the political classes (MPs' expenses, etc.) – has a common cause. Intra and inter-state power structures elevate corporate and political leaders (and nowadays also media barons and celebrities) into elites beyond the clutches of social responsibility or accountability. The structure operates power, and wealth accretes to a self-contained ruling centre. This elite stops needing to lead and serve; the allure of control and wealth without limit or accountability takes grip. Conclusion: the greed of corporates and politicians is a symptom of the same disease.

'Twas probably ever thus – the difference now being that we can see the evidence, due to the implosion of major banking corporations and the Freedom of Information Act, which the politicians mistakenly assumed would not be applied to them.

We shouldn't be surprised here, since the purpose of the modern state is control – or sovereignty – of the people by an elite. The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 established strong states as the way to end territorial wars. States were accorded internal and external sovereignty; the sole right to raise armies and militia/police (in other words, legitimized violence); to raise taxation; the creation of state administrative institutions (civil service). The centralized state's first role was to control, not serve or care for, its population. The sovereign state has endured. It has been

sustained by capitalism and industrialization – an economic system that engineers social control.

You might expect the growth of democracy, the welfare state and civil rights to ameliorate the controlling central state. But as we now see everywhere, their impact is minimal. State sovereignty was made a foundation of the UN Charter in 1948, superseding human rights.

The solution seems familiar enough but now has new relevance and urgency – the start-point is to place power in the hands of the individual; and of that individual within her/his social context, whether that be family, neighbourhood or community. Any other discussion of 'devolution' or 'localism' is quickly reduced to superficial blandishment – and Mr Cameron is doing that pretty well. By the next election, the Lib Dems must update what is meant, and what is different, when they advocate localism.

Clearly 'family' today is not the 1950s image of husband, wife and 2.4 children; is community any longer a predominantly geographic concept (the village) or has online social networking changed this (the global village)?

Individual and community power means renewed local government. Yet we have a jumble of town/parish councils; district and metropolitan/county councils; the growth of unitary authorities; RDAs and other unelected quangos; with powers centrally held and dealt incoherently across them. Local government must have defined authority and be financially independent; the Lib Dems need to confirm policy on achieving this.

We then need to look at the relations between elected local politicians and community activity – as a community charity trustee in north London, I am constantly encouraged to see what can be done, through the likes of time banks and credit unions. The principles and practices of community politics and community economics (see the relevant ALDC publications) need to be supported.

National arrangements should stem from this basis. Fixed-term parliaments and introducing the single transferable vote for local and national elections will further assure the power of the individual voter over the elected politician. In parliament, complete openness and a diminution of the stranglehold of party whips at the expense of the individual MP are also needed.

If we are to redefine the role of the state, we need to re-configure what the state should be. Especially in the present crisis, liberalism is best placed to lead that crucial change – and now, with these issues high on the public agenda – is the time to do it.

Keith Sharp is a member of Islington Liberal Democrats

FIRST ABOVE EQUALS

The political crisis calls for a separation of powers and a presidential system, argues John Hemming

There is always a challenge for the third political party to get attention in a system with a drive towards bipolar politics.

Nick Clegg has, however, managed to create considerable impact during the recent changes in the House of Commons. Starting with the Ghurkhas, and more recently with the challenge to the Speaker, he has taken part in setting the agenda rather than having to respond to an agenda set by others.

There is now clearly an appetite for change. The UK political system is particularly broken and this can be clearly seen in the way prime minister's question time operates. The two sides of the house vie to shout down their opponents while their opponents attempt to avoid all rational argument and try to pin something on the other party. This arises from the fact that the government gets away with refusing to give factual answers if anything is at all politically difficult.

What is, however, fully recognised now is that our political system fails because the executive (government) controls the legislature. It may be that our party should take the radical step of calling for a presidential system of government, where the prime minister and potentially deputy prime minister are directly elected, combined with electoral reform in the legislature (and a substantially elected second chamber).

There is a group of MPs, unhappily called 'parliament first', that has particularly recognised the damage that is done by the whips controlling the appointment to select committees and the business of the house. This group, however, has suddenly found an appetite in government for change.

This could even include the creation of a business management committee and the establishment of inquiries by parliament as well as the normal inquiries operated by the government. Within this we might have the hope that legislative changes would be stimulated other than through Whitehall.

Before I was elected, I was not a supporter of a presidential system. What we have in the UK, however, is effectively a presidential election combined with a situation where the president controls parliament. This is clearly the worst of all worlds.

Another lesson from 'scandalot' is the importance of freedom of information. It demonstrates the strength of information that it is only when the detail of MPs' claims for 'second home' expenses were revealed that there was a public demand for heads to roll.

I have for some time been trying to improve the process whereby scrutiny in the House of Commons works. As it

currently stands, a written parliamentary question has a lesser power to obtain embarrassing information than a freedom of information request. I have already made some progress in getting this recognised and I hope to have a formal process for enforcing the answer of questions relatively soon.

The party's proposals for recall, if and only if the Standards and Privileges Committee decides that a member has broken the rules, are also positive. This would avoid continual petitions for recall, but would allow the proper accountability of MPs to occur. That accountability is to the electorate.

With the experience of the local government code of conduct, which has resulted in councillors being sacked or suspended for all sorts of non offences such as walking through the wrong door, being rude or videoing a falling down building, the idea of a code of conduct for MPs causes me some concerns. The question, of course, is how this gets enforced. My view is that MPs are accountable to those people who elect them. Yes they should fill in honest expense claims, but I would not want MPs to be worried about what they say beyond the traditional requirements of not misleading the House and following the law.

The opportunity has arisen for the party to be at the forefront of pressing for change. Personally I support STV as the best electoral system and I joined the party because of its commitment to electoral reform. AV will tend to go against the party that is in power. The idea of AV with a top-up system, however, is something I would not necessarily be opposed to. What matters most is to ensure that there is not a majority in parliament for a party that does not have a majority in the country.

The situation, therefore, gives the party an interesting challenge. We need to be at the forefront of pressing for change. We need to be clear what the changes are that we wish to see and why those changes should be seen. This needs to include greater transparency and more effective accountability as well as electoral reform. I think we should add to the list a truly presidential system where the prime minister is directly elected by the British people. This would allow the true separation of the estates of the constitution so that they function properly, and should improve the decisions that are made.

John Hemming is Liberal Democrat MP for Birmingham Yardley

OBITUARY: SIR CLEMENT FREUD

Michael Meadowcroft pays tribute to the former Liberal MP for Isle of Ely, Beaujolais Nouveau race inventor, dog food promoter and passionate anti-smoker

Clay Freud's obituaries have understandably been replete with material on his careers in the media, in horse racing, in gambling, in the arts, in clubland, as a writer and in cuisine but there was no mention of him inventing the Beaujolais Nouveau race, hardly any mention of his passionate anti-smoking stance and only very oblique references to his womanising. But above all, the references to his Liberalism and to his political career have been very shallow.

Prior to the vacancy occurring in the Isle of Ely constituency in May 1973, Freud had been a supporter of, and a donor to, the Liberal Party but not by any means a party activist. He described himself politically as "an anti-conservative who couldn't join a Clause 4 Labour Party, and I hugely admired Jo Grimond." In a speech at the Edinburgh Festival in 2000, he described in hilarious fashion how he came to contest the by-election. He told of writing direct to the chair of the Isle of Ely Liberal Association, which begs the question of how he got the name and address – my recollection is that the contact came via Jeremy Thorpe. He won the nomination by 13 votes to eight – a total vote hardly evidence for a massive association membership, particularly as he stated that the 13 were residents of a care home across the road, drafted in to make the numbers look more respectable!

Much has been made of the lack of previous Liberal support in the Isle of Ely and of it being a safe Conservative seat. Certainly there had been no Liberal candidate in the 1970 general election and the late Sir Harry Legge-Bourke had held it since 1945, but there was a fairly recent Liberal tradition there and James de Rothschild had been the Liberal MP from 1929 to 1945. East Anglia as a whole has a radical background and at the time it had, in the Eastern Daily Press, a Liberal daily newspaper.

His by-election campaign mainly consisted of public meetings in each town and village. Not surprisingly, given his media fame, they were well attended and came to be regarded as almost show business occasions. In the town of March there was a large railway goods depot and locomotive shed; Clay told his audience that his grandfather had been a railwayman – "... you have heard, I hope, of Signalman Freud." Virtuoso performances like this, plus solid Liberal campaigning and recent by-election victories in Rochdale and in Sutton and Cheam, provided a good springboard for another success, but the news of Freud's success – and of David Austick's in Ripon – at

midday on Friday, 27 July, was still a pleasant surprise and a considerable boost. The party's opinion poll rating leapt 11 points to 28%.

Freud was far more of a party stalwart and loyal MP than he has been given credit for. He took on thankless party tasks such as chair of the Finance and Administration Board and personally secured guarantees in order to increase the party's overdraft which enabled it to fight the February 1974 general election on a more formidable basis, polling the highest Liberal vote for 45 years. He also chaired the party's By-election Unit, which ensured that potential by-elections had effective financial and organisational resources. Later, during the 1983 parliament, he was an assiduous chair of the party's Standing Committee, charged with the formulation of party policy between assemblies. He and I worked closely and harmoniously and we were both astonished that in a contested election among MPs he was ousted by Stephen Ross, a dedicated Liberal colleague but one whose attention to and capacity for policy detail had not hitherto been exceptionally marked.

Clay Freud was commendably direct. In July 1985, David Steel did a reshuffle of parliamentary positions. Alan Beith moved on from his long service as chief whip. Having been Alan's deputy, I wanted to succeed him and I appeared to have the support of parliamentary colleagues. Clay, however, sought me out to tell me that Steel had wanted to appoint me "but the Welsh won't have it." Constituency boundary changes in 1983 made his seat more marginal but he held on, only to lose in 1987. He commented casually, and without any rancour, to me after the 1986 Eastbourne defence debate episode that, "you have lost me my seat." He was very loyal to his friends and he was the only member of the parliamentary party to offer to come to Leeds West to help me in the 1987 campaign. He was a great hit and even put up, albeit with a deep sigh, with the many repetitions of the same question, "where's your dog?" At the time there was only one sit down restaurant in Leeds West. This was a very modest but good curry house. To make a private room, the proprietors cleared a space in their storeroom and set up a table for eight. Clay enjoyed the meal and, to everyone's astonishment, had the main course twice!

On this visit we had a failed example of his famed reputation as a womaniser. The daughter of two of his constituency officers was a student at Bradford University and he had invited her to join us for the evening meal, obviously as an opening gambit. No one then had mobile

phones and he had arranged for her to telephone him at my house at precisely 6pm. All day he was obsessed by the possibility of being late back at the house. He took the call and she duly arrived at the restaurant. Clay paid great attention to her and made various suggestions as to places that one could go on to after a meal. The young lady was delightfully innocent and completely failed to take the hint. As midnight approached I felt it was time to intervene and I offered to take her back to Bradford. Clay was clearly very put out.

Given the range of other interests, one might have imagined that Clay was a part-time MP. All I can say is that this never appeared to be the case and he was an effective parliamentary spokesman, particularly on education, often with an unusual technique. At one parliamentary question time he had tabled a question on student grants; the minister gave a rambling response and sat down to await the supplementary question. Clay rose and simply asked, "Why?" Lacking any time to compose a reply, the minister simply spluttered! Clay remarked to me, "I thought that would get him!"

On one occasion in the House he managed to link an effective intervention with his complete opposition to smoking. A discussion was underway on the existence of the Royal Warrant on cigarette packets. The politically correct view appeared to be that cigarette manufacturers should not be allowed to benefit from displaying the Royal Warrant. Clay disagreed and suggested that the wording should remain but should read: "By appointment to Edward VII, George V and George VI, all of whom it killed."

He carried out as much as possible of his constituency casework by telephone and it must have quite impressive for constituents to receive a call direct from Freud after he had resolved their case. He would also follow up names mentioned in his local newspapers. If he couldn't make contact by phone, he would regularly handwrite a note to the constituent.

One illiberal trait that always disturbed me was his occasional and often sudden rudeness to someone subordinate, often a hotel employee or a waiter who was not in a position to respond. It could be both capricious and callous. If it was in my presence I would gently remonstrate with him but there was never a response, only perhaps a lifted eyebrow before he walked off. I had the feeling that he was wary of demonstrating real depth in relationships and that his broad range of activities were his way of avoiding any single interest producing deeper demands than he was prepared to accept.

His loyalty to a colleague ensured that he stood by Jeremy Thorpe to the very end and, then when it was clearly disastrous for the party for Thorpe to continue as leader, it was Freud who personally persuaded him to resign. Jo Grimond made a cryptic comment on Freud: "... a clever man as you might expect but also a well organised one and a staunch colleague. A horse no doubt only suitable for certain courses but on those a strong performer of whom the party hardly made adequate use". David Steel called him "one of nature's Liberals." I liked him and felt that he was a more serious and capable politician than he was given credit for.

LIBERATOR SONGBOOK

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FLYING SOLO

Stewart Rayment looks at a new book that tries to explain the rise of non-aligned councillors and parliamentary candidates

Several factors have combined to draw attention to independent politicians in recent years, though the phenomenon is not as unusual as commentators often claim. Richard Berry's recent book, *Independent: The Rise of the Non-Aligned Politician*, is an example of this.

In 1997, the arrogance of the Tory party brought Martin Bell to Westminster; in 2009, the arrogance of the Labour party threatens to provoke a similar response. In particular, the row over MPs' expenses may spread the damage to all the mainstream parties. The constitutional changes brought in by the Blair government heralded new potentials for independent politicians – most notably in the post of elected mayor, which has proved less popular than expected.

Yet independents have been a regular feature of local government for as long as I can remember; sometimes more, sometimes less. Until quite recently, they were usually the majority on Cornwall County Council. I recall in the late 1970s the Tories in Maldon District writing to all of the independent councillors urging them to show their true colours as Conservatives.

The response was lukewarm to say the least. Indeed, one Tory, George Barber, chose to stand as an Independent Conservative in riposte. The fact was that while some, but not all, of the Independents voted Tory at general elections, and may even have been members, they did not see the need for party politics at the local level. Eventually (around 1984), the combined strength of independents, Liberals and Tory rebels ousted the Conservatives as ruling group on the council. But here is another telling point about independents per se – the council's programme was then largely driven by the Liberal group for want of other input.

TOWEL THROWN IN

Under the spell of Martin Bell, Berry forgets the admirable David Robertson, Independent Unionist MP for Caithness & Sutherland from 1959 to 1964. True, Robertson had been a Unionist (that's Scottish for Tory) from 1950 to 1959 and the Tories threw in the towel and didn't oppose him in the 1959 general election, but there was a man who put his constituency first. Despite the wrath of Harold MacMillan, he secured cross-party support to sit on the select committee for the Sea Fish Industry Bill, setting a precedent for future membership of such committees. On his retirement, John Young failed to take the seat as an Independent Unionist and the equally admirable Liberal George Mackie replaced Robertson.

What is an Independent politician? There's a good one. Like Robertson, many are simply estranged from their natural party – Red Ken is a prime example. Gorgeous George barely gets a mention; perhaps because, like Sir Oswald Mosley, he went on to form a party with ostensibly

national ambitions. What of People's Voice out of Blaenau Gwent? A tiff with the Tafia that could spread. According to Berry, Dai Davies 'licenses out' the People's Voice name but the links between the groups in other constituencies are only informal. It was a mystery how many voters in Blaenau Gwent would desert Labour. The truth is that Labour has systematically shat upon working class voters for generations and when an alternative shows that it means business, these voters will leave Labour in droves. Does one make an independent and two a party?

Martin Bell was ostensibly independent of party, but his machine was the combined weight of Labour and the Lib Dems, and a fair few Tories as well. One of the downsides of Berry's book is the lack of a bibliography (a few footnotes aside). Berry doesn't seem to have read Bill le Breton's essay on Bell in *Passports to Liberty* (no.1, 1997). He not unreasonably ignores *The Little Book of Bell* on the website www.guardianlies.com, if he was aware of it (unfortunately unattributed, which doesn't help its arguments).

Richard Taylor is probably a better example of an Independent per se. There is a clear issue that he nails his colours to, health, specifically opposing the local hospital closure. Taylor is backed by nine councillors under the Health Concern banner in Wyre Forest, and at least one in Bridgend. Wyre Forest has had an idiosyncratic politics since it was created in 1974; I think I'm right in saying balanced councils have been the norm, though there is currently a Conservative majority. Split wards are common, suggesting that personal allegiance may be greater than that of party when selecting a representative. Websites for the parish or town councils within Wyre Forest unfortunately don't give us much information. In Bewdley parish we find six Conservatives, four Health Concern, one Independent and one Labour; each ward being split two or three ways.

Taylor's exemplary record on MPs' expenses certainly contributed to a surge in Health Concern support on 4 June, enabling it to take both of the county council seats for Stourport-on-Severn. Otherwise the surge in its support was among the factors contributing to a poor night for Liberals and Liberal Democrats in Wyre Forest

Berry is informative on the Independent elected mayors and how they have performed. H'angus (Stuart Drummond) has now been returned for a third term in Hartlepool, so must be doing something right. He is the only elected mayor to achieve this. His vote was considerably down on 2005 and he was one of eight independent candidates. Labour came third behind another independent, with alarmingly high BNP and UKIP votes (combined they would have trashed Labour). Hartlepool seems to have re-established an independent tradition in its politics. Otherwise Mansfield and Middlesbrough retain Independent elected mayors. Stoke went long ago and

Labour-turned-independent Martin Winter lost Doncaster to the English Democrats on 4 June. There are campaigns for the abolition of elected mayors in Doncaster, Hartlepool and Lewisham. Stoke-on-Trent voted the post out in 2008.

Berry's book provides useful insights on certain independent politicians, but I don't see a new wave breaking through.

Westminster politicians dealt themselves a body blow over their expenses. The Conservatives were every bit as flagrant as Labour yet were the main beneficiary. How did Independents perform?

As I said, the MPs' expenses issue clouded public judgement in the county and European elections. There were nine independent candidates in the Euro elections, five of them in London, and only Jan Jananayagam performed strongly. To a certain extent, this highlights the matter 'why political parties?' – the cost and organisation necessary to seriously contest a London-wide election. I only received election literature from two candidates – Jananayagam and Haroon Saad. Jananayagam came eighth with 50,014 votes – around 1,000 less than the Christian party. Saad came last with 1,603 votes – closer to the norm for London independents. Jananayagam's literature was broadly Liberal in its tone; she also used her website and Facebook effectively. However her main focus was the Tamils against Genocide campaign, which she felt appealed to a wider range of ethnic minorities, and she believes she picked up an anti-BNP vote.

The only other independent to poll well was Duncan Robertson in Scotland (10,189 votes and tenth), but I am not alone in complaining of the difficulty in finding out anything about him or Peter Rigby in the East of England (9,916). The Jury Team, ostensibly a platform for independents, took 78,569 (0.5%) nationwide. Reputedly its candidates were selected by text and email votes. Sir Paul Judge, a former Tory donor, established the 'party' but it has no policies, each of its candidates having their own platform on particular issues. Its website purports that it seeks to make politics more accessible, politicians more accountable and political institutions more transparent. The website also has a dozen proposals broadly on the nuts and bolts of political administration – rather like the Great Charter, the political establishment might do well to consider them.

MINOR CELEBRITY

Katie Hopkins took 8,971 votes in the South West & Gibraltar, finishing thirteenth. A minor 'celebrity' (whatever that means these days), she told the Bournemouth Daily Echo: "What we all need right now is a bit of common sense. Party politics no longer really exists. They all look the same, sound the same and share the same middle ground." If that is the case, no one is more to blame than Westminster politicians, especially those of New Labour, who consistently devalued politics in their drive to unseat the Tories and can hardly be surprised when the gutter press continues to use those tactics against them.

“It would be arrogant of the Liberal Democrats not to look closely at what these people and parties have to say”

Paradoxically Sir Alan Sugar, Hopkins's old sparring partner, now finds himself in government without election.

Wai D, or YD (Your Democracy), also stood in the West Country and has only one policy – the creation of a website, at the elected representative's own expense, whereby citizens could propose laws, express opinions, etc. If they gained a majority for their views, it would be the representative's duty to promote these, without further comment themselves. A bit like an Orson Scott Card sci-fi scenario, one

can see its pros and cons – not thought through enough. They came last with 789 votes.

However, given a performance that at best could be described as not quite treading water, it would be arrogant of the Liberal Democrats not to look closely at what these people and parties have to say and see where they match their aspirations for reform of the body politic.

In the county elections, Independents took 97 seats (+6) with the Residents Association another nine in Surrey (+2) where Tories lost seats; seven in Bedford, a hung council where the Lib Dems are the largest party; 32 out of 123 in Cornwall (hung); five in Cumbria (+2, NOC); seven on the Isle of Wight (+3); 11 in North Yorkshire (+4), where the Liberal party also gained a seat, unopposed by the Lib Dems who lost five; and seven in Wiltshire. From the information available, it is not possible to go into the whys and wherefores. Elsewhere, independents held, won or lost seats in smaller numbers. One might be tempted to see similarities in the counties where independent representation is strong, but that can only be superficial. The reasons why political parties came into being are well rehearsed; they are not necessary at all levels of government and should not be encouraged as such. But they are necessary in forming a coherent programme and party discipline is necessary in executing that programme, with the proviso that exceptions of conscience will always be there.

There is also the matter of organisation and cost necessary to fight an election, which technology has not yet breached. If I want to get elected against a corrupt Labour machine, I must work my arse off and communicate the fact at considerable cost – even one ward requires a sizable team over a long period of time, say 18 months. Once elected, I still need all this to maintain momentum. Suddenly I see a party coming along. Elected mayors aside, this is much the case with most of the groups Berry discusses. The ice isn't melting but, as Sorel wrote, a dominant ideology doesn't see the force that arises to replace it. The Westminster dinosaurs would do well to wake up and learn.

Independent: The Rise of the Non-Aligned Politician by Richard Berry was published in 2008 by Imprint Academic, price £8.95

Stewart Rayment is a member of the Liberator Collective and a former Liberal Democrat councillor in Tower Hamlets

In The Loop [film]
Dir Armando
Iannucci
2009

Satire, unlike revenge, is best served hot, something with which the writers of the Liberal Revue would concur. This is doable for a production such as that, but for a feature film?

It is of course down to good fortune and luck, something Armando Iannucci had in spades when his feature film *In The Loop* (a spin-off of his TV sitcom *The Thick Of It*) was released. The broadcast interviews congratulated the film maker on his timing, which managed an early swipe at MPs' expenses just as the home secretary's husband was being caught claiming for the hire of porno films on his wife's expenses.

In the film, Tim Hollander plays the hapless minister who at one point is shown in a hotel room in Washington watching a tedious film about undersea creatures, and who turns to his equally hapless adviser to say he couldn't possibly rent out a porno video as knowing his luck it would turn up on his expenses.

Hollander's well played performance gives new meaning to the term hapless. He and his political adviser are permanently persecuted by the spin doctor, an Alistair Campbell character thinly disguised as a Scotsman played with high energy by Peter Capaldi. He is wonderfully abusive from start to finish, his rage fuelled throughout by the action of the hapless minister, who you know he is doomed when he utters: "I came into politics to make a difference."

He is a government minister with a spark of ideology crushed by the spin doctor intent on a course of toadying to Washington, on his prime minister's orders. A prime minister utterly unchecked by parliament or, come to think of it, even by Whitehall. An elected dictator like Thatcher before him.

All this action occurs as the film charts the course of the run-up to an Iraq-like war on both sides of the Atlantic. Iannucci provides with precision vindication if more were needed for Liberal Democrats for their stance on the wretched Iraq war in contrast to the Blair government and the Tories.



REVIEWS

centre. Anyone hoping for an assault on the south written by a proud northerner will be disappointed.

He visits a rather random list of places including Gloucester, the Cotswolds, Grantham, Buxton, Harpenden, Hergist Ridge, Bath, Aylesbury, Oxford and Burton-on-Trent. Apart from a foray to Surbiton, he avoids the 'deep south' and indeed the West Country and East Anglia.

It's a pleasantly entraining read that does not really try to argue any point beyond that there is a lot more to Middle England than caricatures of privet-hedged respectability and conformity.

A live-and-let-live attitude and harmless eccentricity abound beside a curious obsession with blood-soaked detective dramas of the Midsomer Murders variety.

Maconie concludes: "When I think of Middle England I think of tolerance and kindness. So it irks me that the phrase has become a byword for sour prejudice and insularity."

It's more nuanced than that, he says, socially liberal if fiscally conservative and a good deal more tolerant than it is usually given credit for.

Middle England, he says, is a state of mind rather than a place. And it sounds a fairly open state of mind.

Mark Smulian

The hapless minister desperately tries to avert the inevitable. In Washington, he is asked if he is against the war and, with the stalking spin doctor about to pounce, he proffers the immortal line, which should be used by any minister caught between a rock and a hard place, "easy peasy lemon squeezy".

In Washington, he is not without allies including a US Army general played by James Gandilfino whose hilarious line sums up his take on the impending Bush/Blair project: "War is like France, once you have been there you never want to go there again".

In the Loop presses all the right buttons to hit all the right targets while making you laugh out loud. Eventually 'Hapless' is replaced by a short, red-headed woman. We all know what happened to her.

Peter Johnson

Adventures on the
High Teas
by Stuart Maconie
Ebury Press 2009
£11.99

The subtitle says 'In Search of Middle England', a phrase that conjures up spluttering bigots reading the Daily Mail in shire and suburb.

In fact Maconie's book, a follow-up to his volume on the north titled *Pies and Prejudice*, is essentially villages and small cities around England's geographical

A Dream Within A
Dream: The Life of
Edgar Allan Poe
by Nigel Barnes
Peter Owen 2009
£14.99

Tales of Mystery & Imagination, The Murders in the Rue Morgue, The Pit & the Pendulum, The Fall of the House of Usher... memories of mis-spent youth, B movies in late

night cinemas full of motor-cyclists. Curious, one takes up the book and finds Poe the progenitor of Modern though writing between 1827 and 1849. Poe saw it as his task to raise up American literature; he did it for the world.

Poor Poe, he worked hard for a living on Grub Street, and *The Raven* notwithstanding (sold to the publisher for \$9 I believe) never really gained the recognition nor financial reward he craved. This and the seeming constant loss of loved ones left Poe an angry man (one might get an insight from this as to why journos appear to hate or envy politicians so much).

Yet as Barnes shows us, Poe also had his positive qualities; first and foremost must be his sense of humour. Some of his hoaxes were legendary – a first crossing of the Atlantic by balloon, hypnotizing a victim to the point of death – *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar* – first published in the Whig paper *American Review* in 1845 and even gaining a following in this country. The *Tory Morning Post* went on to be taken in by *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, so perhaps Poe set a precedent. The *American Review* by contrast would also publish Poe's poem *Ulalume* amongst other writings.

If Poe's life were not difficult enough, the paradox of his making a wolf in sheep's clothing his literary

executor makes the aftermath (and much of his reputation immediately after death) bizarre. Much of this is now forgotten and we bask in the genius of creativity, but Barnes provides us with a scholarly and sympathetic though not uncritical reassessment of the man and his work, which also commemorates the 200th

anniversary of Poe's birth. Those who flung the mud; curs, pedagogue vampires, as Baudelaire put it, were small men, forgotten if Barnes had not recorded their brief encounter with genius.

Stewart Rayment

CORRECTION

A paragraph was inadvertently omitted from Michael Meadowcroft's article on the BNP ('We know what doesn't work') in *Liberator* 333. It read:

"We need to diminish the belief in nationalism rather than enhancing it. Even taking England rather than Britain, the idea that there is some sort of mystical unity which brings together individuals in Wigan and Woking or in Barrow and Bideford simply because they are in the same country is nonsense. The sense of a common community is much more narrow, Merseyside or Manchester, or the West Riding, for interest. Beyond that 'local' identity we are talking far more about administrative entities or a common European culture than about national characteristics. Similarly any definition of 'our jobs' is artificial. Bradford people taking Leeds's jobs is hardly much different from Welsh people taking English jobs, or, for that matter, Calais citizens taking Dover jobs, or vice versa. Where one draws the line is practical rather than principled and Liberal Democrats, with their internationalism, need to point this out."

Michael adds: "Liberals, more than any others, need to point out the logical and ideological flaws in the concept of sovereignty."

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Monday

We Bonkers have never been flippers – though in the Roaring Twenties my daughters were certainly flappers. You will not find me claiming that some wretched basement flat in Pimlico is my principal residence so that I may charge the upkeep of Bonkers Hall to the hard-pressed taxpayer. I do not claim for cleaning out my moat: I clean it out myself. (Or, to be precise, the Well-Behaved Orphans clean it out – the Rutland alligator is not as dangerous as the books make out). Nor do I call upon public funds to house my ducks: they (or at least those who have escaped the attentions of the alligators) are buying their own homes through a thoroughly Liberal housing co-operative. At times like this, I remember the wise words of my old friend Lord Hazlerigg, Lord Lieutenant of Leicestershire, when someone proposed paying allowances to county councillors: “If a man hasn’t the brains to earn his own fare once or twice a month into his county town, I don’t think he’d be much help in administering the spending of a million of money.”

Tuesday

Here in Rutland we always had our own currency, but the idea has been slow to catch on elsewhere despite the spirited advocacy of our own David Boyle. A few months ago, finding him rather depressed at this slow progress, I suggested to Boyle that he should go on the electric television to spread the word; I recall handing him a cutting about a new show called *Britain’s Got Talent*. The rest, gentle reader, is history. Though the studio audience was at first hostile, Boyle won them over with his oratory. Then the cinematograph film of his appearance became an overnight sensation and was widely viewed (I am informed) upon the Moving Internet in America. He was invited on to all the television shows there and, though (much to the bookies’ delight) he was defeated in the final by a group of dancers in woolly hats, he is now a celebrity across the world. It can now be but a matter of time before every village prints its own money.

Wednesday

I shall not pretend that I was delighted back in the 1930s when a steel works was built beside the pretty little Northamptonshire village of Corby: I had Meadowcroft (or perhaps it was his grandfather?) plant a spinney lest it spoil the view from the South Terrace here at Bonkers Hall. My foresight was rewarded over the following decades as Corby grew into a large town of quite preternatural ugliness. Nevertheless, when the works closed in the 1980s I did what I could to help the town’s inhabitants by encouraging the establishment of new industries. I struck gold with the Corby trouser press. This ingenious device allows one to crease one’s trousers smartly if one is away from home and one’s valet, and can also be used to keep the eggs and b warm if one is having breakfast in bed. I have always urged my Liberal Democrat colleagues at Westminster to buy the things; thus I fear I must shoulder some of the blame for Huhne getting into hot water after claiming for one on his expenses.

Thursday

Rutland’s ink industry has long been the foundation of its prosperity. I am fortunate enough to own several ink wells myself – some supplying blue ink and some black – as well as a plant where the two varieties are mixed to form blue-black ink. In recent weeks, we have been shipping countless barrels

Lord Bonkers’ Diary

of Rutland Extra Black to Westminster and today I discover why. The Commons publishes its members’ expense returns and they are simply dripping with the stuff. “Redacting” they call it. If I had covered my work with that amount of ink, my schoolmasters would have called it something very different and impressed their opinion upon me in no uncertain manner. Ink extraction, incidentally, is not without its dangers and we live in fear of one of the men falling in. We keep to hand a supply of industrial strength blotting paper for such emergencies, as that is the only thing that could save him.

Friday

Clegg, I read in the *Manchester Guardian*, has declared that a Liberal Democrat government (and it can be only a matter of months before we have one) will not renew Trident. Good for him. I have long believed that Britain simply cannot afford an independent nuclear deterrent; it costs so much that we may as well drop flaming bales of £50 notes upon our enemies. Here in Rutland we have, of course, never had nuclear weapons (we did try splitting atoms but found them terribly fiddly), but have on occasion found it useful to give the impression that we do. At times of international crisis, the Rutland Water Monster is asked to wear a cardboard conning tower so that she resembles a submarine. The effect is strikingly realistic and quite enough to fool any passing Zeppelin.

Saturday

Do you remember Phil Willis’s delightful daughter? She was the young lady in the advertisement who had the internet projected on to her white dress. I thought that was a splendid idea and am sorry that it subsequently lost ground to the flat plasma screen. Anyway, I learn today that Willis is in the soup for claiming for a flat where the young lady lived. I fear he is the author of his own misfortune as I put a perfectly serviceable solution to him some years ago. “Willis,” I said, “why don’t you get bunk beds? That way, your daughter can sleep in the lower bunk when she is there alone but move to the upper bunk when you are in Westminster on parliamentary business.” Willis replied rather sniffily that it would be wrong to offer his daughter a two-tier service.

Sunday

In Leicester this afternoon I come upon a party of disconsolate young men sporting hats with corks dangling from the brim. They turn out to be the Australian cricket team, at a loose end after being ejected from that dreadful “Twenty20” cricket tournament. I point them to the library and art gallery and, when those suggestions fail to please, suggest they come back to the Hall for a cup of tea and some practice. I am unable to raise an XI at such short notice, but am happy to have Meadowcroft erect some nets for them. It happens that the Queen’s Own Rutland Highlanders are training with live ammunition in the field next door and that the Rutland alligators are in playful mood. The last I see of the Australian captain, he is running into the distance with two of them gripping the seat of his trousers in their jaws.

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