

liberator



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COMMENTARY

THE TROUBLE WITH CLEGGISM

What is Cleggism? It was difficult to discern when Nick Clegg first became Liberal Democrat leader. Two years on, a clear pattern has emerged and it is not a pretty sight.

During the 2007 leadership election, Liberator asked the two candidates, “Would you regard your election as a mandate to take party policy in a particular direction and, if so, which way?” (Liberator 322).

Clegg replied, “I want to take the party forward. The old politics of left and right simply doesn’t offer the answers to the challenges of the 21st century, so it would be a complete mistake for us to lurch in one direction or the other. Trying to split the party into ‘left’ and ‘right’, ‘economic’ or ‘social’ liberal, makes no sense to me.”

Despite this claim, Clegg subsequently showed a marked preference for the old politics of the right. This identifies the first element of Cleggism – a predilection for neoliberalism, the dominant ideology of the past thirty years, which has now been thoroughly discredited by the financial crisis.

The evidence is clear. Last year’s tax cutting proposals and this year’s ‘tough’ line on public spending fly in the face of Keynesian wisdom, by demanding a premature end to the fiscal and monetary stimulus. In August, Clegg wasted no time attacking Adair Turner’s call for a ‘Tobin tax’ but remained silent about Boris Johnson’s trip to Brussels to lobby for the City’s hedge funds.

Clegg seems wedded to the idea of ‘TINA’ (There Is No Alternative) – possibly a function of his age. He was only 12 when Margaret Thatcher came to power. Having spent his entire political life under the orthodoxy of classical economics, perhaps he cannot imagine anything else.

Hence Clegg is failing to make an imaginative leap and articulate an alternative model of capitalism – an economics based on morality rather than greed, which does not lead to social atomisation or environmental damage.

However, none of Clegg’s right-wing economic proposals has ever amounted to a rigorous policy. They exist only in the form of a sentence in a press release or a pre-manifesto, which is then spun to the media.

This brings us to the second element of Cleggism – a tendency to put the public relations cart before the political horse, based on a belief in the primacy of marketing over political substance and positioning over policy.

This is evident in the party’s two pre-manifestos, last year’s *Make it Happen* and this year’s *A Fresh Start for Britain*, both characterised by vacuous marketing slogans and a reluctance to say anything honest or bold for fear of

causing offence. It is also evident in the knee-jerk populism of Clegg’s recent ‘Don’t Short Change Our Troops’ campaign.

Such proposals collapse under scrutiny because they have simply not been thought through. Instead of a serious process of policy development, initiatives are cobbled together by the marketing men in the leader’s bunker. Their overriding aim is to ‘position’ Clegg, based on a short-sighted obsession with how things will play in the next day’s press.

The third element of Cleggism is a preference for the *faux* democracy of superficial consultation over genuine empowerment or deliberation. This is evident in the fatuous ‘Million Doors’ campaign or the fight picked with the party’s councillors on the issue of elected health boards.

The fourth element of Cleggism is an antipathy towards party democracy and a preference for top-down party management. This is evident in the centralising proposals of the Bones Commission, the underhand tactics used to change tax policy last year, and the obvious setting-up of tuition fees policy for a ‘Clause 4 Moment’ at this month’s party conference.

Cleggism’s four key elements make an unappealing combination. From time to time, we get a glimmer of something better – the odd statement supporting civil liberties or opposing Trident. But with so many initiatives and ‘campaigns’ being launched, some are bound to hit the mark.

It could be argued that, however much one disagrees with Clegg, as elected leader he has a mandate. Yes, but a mandate for what? None of the four key elements of Cleggism figured in his leadership election platform. If a leader can’t persuade his own party, how does he expect to convince the electorate?

It is too early to claim that Clegg has ‘failed’ as party leader. It is right, however, to identify what needs doing to avoid failure, because the Liberal Democrats are haemorrhaging members and money and, as things stand, they face a net loss of seats at the next general election and are likely to produce another mediocre performance in next May’s local elections.

Whether you agree with Clegg or not, what is missing is a distinctive vision of the ‘good society’. This is a prerequisite for any successful political strategy. And it is imperative at an historic turning point such as now.

The empty slogans in *A Fresh Start for Britain* just don’t make the grade. Without a clear idea of the kind of society the Liberal Democrats wish to build, the party will continue to lack a coherent strategy or the means to inspire voters.

RADICAL BULLETIN

99% ASPIRATION

When will the Federal Policy Committee be renamed the Federal Aspirations Committee?

It might as well be, judged by what went on ahead of the launch of *A Fresh Start for Britain* in July.

This document, which rather unfortunately shares a title with the founding statement of the Liberal/SDP Alliance (whatever happened to that?), stated that the Liberal Democrats in power would focus on the creation of a sustainable economy, building a fairer society and cleaning up politics. It also said that no extra spending commitment would be made without an equivalent cut elsewhere.

The phrase ‘tuition fees’ occurs nowhere in it. Indeed, the only reference to higher education is the observation that “while we need to make admissions fairer, we do not believe that the arbitrary target of expansion to 50% of young people going to university is achievable or affordable”.

So why was the document, issued with exquisite mis-timing on the eve of the Norwich North by-election, spun heavily in public as signalling the abandonment of the party’s policy to scrap tuition fees?

Since it did not mention these fees, it is rather unlikely that any media commentator would have leapt to the conclusion that the policy had been ditched unless the party had briefed them that that was the case.

The spring conference reaffirmed opposition to tuition fees by a large majority and, with a number of MPs in university seats, any attempt to ditch this policy would be politically suicidal.

Leader Nick Clegg responded that the three goals set out in *A Fresh Start* were all the party could commit to and other policies were ‘aspirations’.

This introduced an entirely new concept into party policy making. Those policies the leader approves of are deemed ‘policies’; those he doesn’t are mere ‘aspirations’ and exist in some sort of limbo.

Lengthy discussions in what is still the FPC (not FAC) left the committee very clear that it wished neither to ditch any policies nor to have some arbitrary number agreed as ‘definite’ and the rest not.

The committee felt that, since public spending cannot be guaranteed, all policies should serve as examples of what the party would wish to do in power.

“It’s a remarkable coincidence that the way [A Fresh Start] was presented in public was the same as the leadership’s original line to FPC and what we are left with matches the leader’s private view,” one FPC member told *Liberator*.

FPC had been presented with a costings document that contained a large hole, which by a most remarkable coincidence was equivalent to the cost of scrapping tuition fees. The committee was then told it could keep

the commitment to scrap tuition fees only if it agreed equivalent cuts to the NHS, but it declined to play that game.

So why would Clegg wish to do something as politically suicidal as dropping opposition to tuition fees? “I think these are people who don’t have a problem with charging for public services because their own education was paid for privately,” *Liberator*’s source opines, adding, “it comes from Nick Clegg, Danny Alexander and the Orange Book lot.”

This ‘lot’ dislike the social liberal majority on the FPC. Thus the abolition of tuition fees remains policy, but if conference passes the woefully anodyne *Fresh Start for Britain*, Clegg and his sidekick Alexander may be able to claim the policy has gone since the document does not mention it.

HOW THE WEST WAS LOST

The Liberal Democrat Campaigns & Communications Committee had a rather mixed bag of results to mull over when it met after the 4 June elections. There were some decent gains in county councils and the capture of Bristol, but against that was the disaster in the south west, with the loss of Somerset, Devon and Cornwall county councils.

Devon, members heard, had suffered from the classic mistakes of those defending, in being resistant to the use of ‘attack messages’.

The committee might have added, but didn’t, that it had also suffered from being in limbo over unitary reorganisation.

While Cornwall went unitary and Somerset did not, the matter remains unresolved in Devon. This pitted county councillors, who support unitary status, against district councillors who in general do not. If a county councillor tried to campaign before the elections, he or she risked being seen as a threat by district colleagues, who feared county councillors were campaigning so as to manoeuvre themselves into seats in any future county unitary. The result was that too little happened in advance.

The MP expenses issue was a factor in particular in St Ives and Camborne, where Julia Goldsworthy’s purchases have caused some disquiet, but the new St Austell and Newquay seat area did well without any intervention from outside.

The European campaign was swamped by the MP expenses row, though the committee heard that, in hindsight, a seat could have been won in Wales had it been worked harder.

The CCC decided the party should develop European messages and market them earlier, that the ‘Stronger Together’ theme should be sustained and that rigorous

respect by all MEPs for the new code of conduct on expenses would be vital. Did they all hear that?

GOOD RIDDANCE

Chandila Fernando, the libertarian lunatic fringe's joke candidate for party president last year, showed his commitment to the party over which he wished to preside by defecting back to the Tories a mere nine months later. This came soon after his sister Chamali, a contender for Lib Dem London mayoral candidate last year, did likewise.

This no doubt embarrassed the libertarian's blog Liberal Vision, which Chandila Fernando had helped to run. On 16 July, it reported his defection by saying, "liberalism is best served with the Liberal Democrats and David Cameron's party will severely disappoint anyone expecting a liberal agenda". It added, "Chandila Fernando resigned from the Liberal Democrats many months ago. In doing so he automatically gave up his ties with Liberal Vision and has not been involved in our work this year".

Chandila Fernando said on his own website while running for party president that he left the Tories after his first period of membership "mainly because of their position on race and immigration. As the son of an immigrant myself, I am appalled by the way the Right often takes an extreme, populist and dangerous stance on these sensitive and explosive issues". So he has, er, re-joined the Tories.

At least the Fernandos, unlike the other right-wing libertarians, have had the honesty to join the party in which they really belong.

HANNAN AROUND

Tory MEP Dan Hannan not only sits on that party's outer right wing fringe but is also a rabid Eurosceptic, which would seem to make him an odd bedfellow for Mark Littlewood, late of the Pro-European Conservative Party and now a Lib Dem and presiding spirit of Liberal Vision.

After Hannan attacked the NHS in an American interview, while opposing President Obama's healthcare plans, a Facebook page appeared that argued against the NHS. On it was the logo of Progressive Vision, the mysterious body of which Littlewood's Liberal Vision is a subsidiary.

And who should be listed as administering this page? Littlewood himself for one, someone called Helen Evans, who lists Ronald Reagan and Milton Friedman among those of whom she is a 'fan', and one Shane Frith, listed as a 'fan' of Hannan.

Grandly listed as 'creator' is Sara Scarlett. This is perhaps the same Sara Scarlett who wrecked her own campaign for chair of Liberal Youth with her tantrum during the rally at Harrogate (Liberator 333).



IT'S HOW YOU SAY IT

There's a rare foreign trip in store for the Mitcham And Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet. It will be boarding a Eurostar for Brussels, where the local party wins the toilet for the submission of the worst motion to this year's conference.

There was nothing actually wrong with the motion's subject, transparency in public sector expenses, nor with its objectives of bringing pay and expenses in quangos under public scrutiny.

It was the relentless imprecision that makes it a winner. Instead of actual examples, we learn that conference should note, "the indications that public bodies in the executive branch – notably local government and quangos – suffer from a similar laxity [to MPs] in controlling the use of public funds".

Which indications exactly? Well, "several regional development agencies have recently been criticised for their lavish travel expenditure". Which ones, for what and by whom?

It cites only some research by the Sunday Times on "large sums of public money spent on hospitality and dining out with other public officials".

What should be done? Standards of professional conduct should, the motion concludes, "be set suitably high".

The toilet has a worthy winner for its silver jubilee.

DUFF DUFFED UP

It was something of a surprise that Andrew Duff was abruptly deposed as leader of the Lib Dem MEPs in July, in favour of Fiona Hall, by seven votes to four.

The reason was that a majority of the group felt Duff was too close to Guy Verhofstadt, the former Belgian prime minister who is the new leader of the Liberal group in the parliament, and so would not represent the UK delegation effectively. Duff is also a strong federalist, a stance that does not make him popular with Westminster colleagues.

He may also have offended his colleagues by campaigning strongly for Verhofstadt even while one of the British Lib Dems, Diana Wallis, was in the running for the leadership, before eventually withdrawing.

BASKING SHARKEY

Chris Rennard's departure left a gap not only for chief executive but also for chair of the general election campaign. The post has gone to Nick Clegg's advertising guru John Sharkey who, whatever his professional skills, is not a politician, which is presumably why Andrew Stunell has been installed as his deputy.

One close to the process described Sharkey as having been given a grand title, but not real power, in a ‘company chairman’ role. Clegg described him as having “extensive experience managing major communications businesses”.

Indeed he has, but not on behalf of the Liberal Democrats. Sharkey ran the Conservatives’ general election campaign in 1987 while working at Saatchi and Saatchi.

EMPTYING OUT

The financial report to conference shows the party had 58,810 members at the end of 2008, down from 65,400 a year before that. The 2006 leadership elections saw 72,064 ballot papers sent out to members, and in the 1999 leadership election there were 82,827 distributed.

Thus the party has in slightly less than a decade shed almost 30% of its members.

Apart from making Simon Hughes’s 2004 commitment to double the membership look a bit silly, this slump ought to be cause for alarm.

For one thing, fewer members mean less subscription income, not good when the accounts show the accumulated deficit rose from £386,677 to £670,665, mainly due to losses on the party pension fund.

Among the notable features of the accounts is the income of the treasurer’s unit. Despite the name, this does not ‘treasure’ in the conventional sense – the Federal Finance and Administration Committee plays that role – instead it fund-raises. In 2007 it brought in £113,991 but in 2008 a mere £51,721, which seems a large gap, given that the recession did not really kick in until the autumn of that year.

If the federal party needs money, it could always take a trip to Blandford Forum where, extraordinarily, the North Dorset local party is listed as owing Cowley Street £10,000, equivalent to slightly less than 10% of what is owed by the entire English party and only £6,000 short of what the vastly larger London region owes.

Perhaps the party should look more vigorously for donors. Or perhaps not. A section headed ‘contingent liabilities’ notes that an attempt to recover £632,000 from the party by an aggrieved lender to Michael Brown’s 5th Avenue Partners was stayed indefinitely by a court in November 2008.

“The party’s lawyers have advised that it is very unlikely that this claim, or any claims in respect of these donations, would be successful, therefore no provision has been made in the party’s financial statements for the repayment of such sums,” the accounts say. With the Electoral Commission potentially revisiting the troublesome Brown donation, here’s hoping no repayment is needed from the dwindling membership.

20-11 VISION

A rare outbreak of good sense in the Scottish Liberal Democrats has seen the second attempt to expel Paul Johnston – one the ‘Aberdeenshire 4’ – fail by 20 votes to 11 (a majority for his expulsion but not the required two-thirds).

The Scottish party’s first attempt at expelling Johnston ended in farce when ballot papers were issued to the wrong people.

Johnston, along with Martin Ford, Debra Storr and Sam Coull, had opposed billionaire developer Donald Trump’s planned golf resort, to be built partly on a site of special scientific interest (Liberator 334 and innumerable others).

The four have for their pains been persecuted by the Lib Dem group on Aberdeenshire Council, which slavishly supports Trump.

They had decades of service to the Lib Dems between them but Ford is now in the Green party, Storr and Coull have left and sit as independents, and Johnston is in limbo until the powers that be in Scotland can contrive way to throw him out too.

THROUGH THE SQUARE WINDOW

This year’s conference rally features an unusual guest speaker alongside the usual party luminaries; former *Play School* presenter Floella Benjamin. No doubt delegates will find out what Big Ted and Little Ted think of *A Fresh Start for Britain*. The rally starts when the little hand is on the six and the big hand is also on the six.

Join the Liberator Facebook group!

www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=6806343091

STOP, SEARCH, LISTEN

Duwayne Brooks favours stop and search powers, but asks why policing still targets black people

There is this notion that black people want the police to apologise for their use of Stop and Search because of its continued negative impact on our teenagers. This is so not true. Organisations that lobby on behalf of black victims of police brutality are not asking for an apology for the use of Stop and Search; the complaint has always been the manner under which this discriminatory power is used.

We are told constantly that the Metropolitan Police want to work with all communities to combat crime, yet they fail to listen to the most basic of suggestions. For the last 30 years, the Met has apparently been listening to us and doing its best to work with us, yet the situation on the ground hasn't changed.

I'm in favour of Stop and Search. It's a police tool that must never cease to be used on the streets of London. Everyone who wants their child to travel across our city safely will agree. At a time when violent crime seems to be everywhere, Stop and Search is a real deterrent to anyone thinking about carrying a weapon. People live in fear of being stabbed, but it's the people who are carrying knives who should live in fear of being caught. If this means we need more Stop and Search, so be it.

But I'm also in favour of Stop and Search that is non-discriminatory, respectful and intelligence-led. And too often it's not. Too often it appears unfair, abusive and apparently random. All this does is compound the problems we already have on our streets. It drives a deeper wedge between young people and the police, and ultimately makes our city less, not more safe.

I should know. I have been battered and bruised by the police on a number of occasions. I have been the victim of false accusations and attempted character assassination, and I have been stopped and searched more times than I can remember. Each experience gave me an increasingly negative view of the Met.

If Stop and Search is to work, we need three things in place. First, better training for the Met. After the MacPherson Inquiry, the Met has constantly reminded the public about the amounts of training individual officers are receiving "to make sure they understand what they are doing," so why isn't this evident on our streets?

Instead of reminding us about the amount of time officers spend training, sanctions must be given to those officers who continue to abuse their power by being aggressive, intimidating and violent during a 'stop'. Training, re-training and more training cannot account for those who continue to "do it badly"; punishment is the only answer.

Secondly, Stop and Search must be intelligence-led, and currently it's not. Across south east London, during the first six months of this year, for every 1,000 stops, on average only 6% were arrested in Lewisham, 9% in Lambeth, 6.5% in Greenwich and 8.5% in Southwark (not including Sections 44 and 60 cases). With such a low rate of arrest, you have to wonder whether the Met's intelligence is based on what you look like or what car you are driving or how big the group is you are walking in.

Thirdly, we need a Stop and Search that is respectful and non-discriminatory. Why is there still a disproportionately large number of young black men who are stopped. And why are 25% of black children on the DNA database? And why are there still stories of abuse and even violence associated with Stop and Search? We all know people from all backgrounds who just hate being stopped by the police and may exhibit a hostile attitude, but this is not a reason for a police officer to lose his composure and forget to be professional.

For many young people, their first experience of the police is when they are stopped. If the only relationship they have with the police is during a Stop and Search, their only relationship will be a negative one.

And when things do go wrong, I want to see immediate action. Investigations into complaints should last no more than 28 days, with the officer in question banned from talking to any other officer implicated in the complaint. If a serious complaint is made, officers should be suspended, pending investigation, as would be the case in other jobs.

A person employed as a police officer has a unique position in life. The police are our servants and therefore cannot police effectively without our help. So let's start doing things differently. Work with us by showing the respect we are all due and we will work with you to keep our schools, streets and estates crime-free. Show us that Stop and Search is non-discriminatory, respectful and intelligence-led, and you will have our support.

Duwayne Brooks is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Lewisham and author of *Steve and Me: My Friendship with Stephen Lawrence and the Search for Justice*.

VILLAGE IDIOTS

The Liberal Democrats' new pre-manifesto, *A Fresh Start for Britain*, reveals a gulf between the Westminster Village elite and the Rest of the Country, argues Bill le Breton

Yes, when the history of 2009 is written, the expenses and allowances scandal will not rate as the most important error made by the Westminster Village elite this summer. The far graver error will have been seen to be its failure to appreciate the depth of the depression, its timidity in fiscal and monetary policy and its dereliction in providing leadership for the country.

Our Mr Cable is to be applauded for being a lone Westminster Village voice warning of the dangers of excessive borrowing based on inflated property values. Yet, by this time last year, most individuals and most firms in (what I shall call) 'the Rest of the Country' were aware of the impending crisis and were cutting back on expenditure, stocking, investment and borrowing – the recipe for a major economic blizzard.

Removed from the Rest of the Country, the Westminster Village elite failed to see this, failed to comprehend the depth of the oncoming tragedy, failed to cut interest rates in time and failed to adjust its fiscal strategies to the new reality until recession had been deepened and lengthened into slump.

Nor can we exclude our own leader from this criticism, especially where fiscal policy is concerned. Remember that just a year ago, obsessed with not being to the left of the Conservatives, he chose the last Bournemouth conference to major on £20 billion of public expenditure "adjustments", vainly described as efficiency savings that would provide tax cuts for the poor and middle class, but labelled *for all time* by opponents as "£20 billion of service cuts".

For a short period in the early part of this year, adopting the tactics of the Grand Old Duke of York, our leader reversed his position and marched his army back down the hill, unconvincingly following the government, offering begrudging support for large scale government projects and the necessary increase in public sector debt.

GRAND OLD DUKE OF CLEGG

But with the 2009 conference season nearly on us, the Grand Old Duke of York is seeking to march us back up the hill of fiscal restraint again to the tune "We're on our way to Bournemouth – de-de-de-der" and "Never get to the left of the Conservatives".

However counter intuitive it feels to those with experience of household economics, public sector borrowing and other means of creating money by governments are not a problem but a priority. (The recently announced and worrying continuing fall in money supply as measured by M4 is the reason for the unexpected £50 billion increase in quantitative easing). Expansionary monetary and fiscal policy remains essential.

Reducing the public sector borrowing requirement reduces the money supply and is directly at odds with policies like quantitative easing. Being tough on government spending before we are through the slump, as Japan's long years of stagnation can bear witness, is wrong economically as well as being political suicide.

Yet this is exactly what The Grand Old Duke of York, his staff and the usual suspects are doing in *A Fresh Start for Britain* as they swivel round again to march us uphill, drunk on a cocktail of self flagellation (the hair shirted economics of the balanced budget) and political marketing.

For the leadership, for those briefing the press, for the public website and for our opponents, *A Fresh Start* is a declaration of intent to rein in government spending: "cuts will be necessary to deliver any priorities" ... "any new spending will be paid for by a specific cut made elsewhere" ... "We will only include policies in our programme for government once we are certain the necessary resources are available".

Are Liberal Democrats in the Rest of the Country willing to forego the chance to campaign against the closure of a hospital in the constituency or a care home, or a youth initiative, or a training course or a job protection scheme or a reduction in government grant to our council?

A Fresh Start is being used by the Grand Old Duke of York to 'position' himself as 'tough'; tough on debt, tough on spending and, most important of all, tough on his wayward party. His troops, giddy and footsore, are assured it is alright because these "hard choices made by Liberal Democrats will be firmly guided by our values" – defined, confined and trivialised as "Fairer, Greener, Safer, Stronger".

The trouble with using advertising executives in politics is that you end up with your values described in the same words they use in their day jobs to sell toilet disinfectant, mobile phones and car insurance. And don't tell me that the Rest of the Country doesn't see that and switch off.

The Rest of the Country is fully aware that calls for "fairness" by politicians are too often a cloak that hides policies that will inhibit rather than free them, their families and their neighbourhoods. It may be counter to the correct Westminster view of things but, to those on the bus, train, school gate and shop corner, the efforts of politicians and bureaucrats to increase fairness nearly always reduce rather than increase their opportunities. There is a real aggression in the Rest of the Country against this "fairness" because, outside Westminster, it is understood as the exact and Orwellian opposite of justice.

Likewise, to the Rest of the Country, green policies smack of another abuse of power by the Westminster Village, in which people's liberty is curtailed for the so-called greater good. Besides which the ad-folk have

been at it again. Even the most polluting multinational now claims in another example of doublespeak to be “green”. That is why greenery is counterproductive of the long-term good, the long-term environment and the long-term freedoms of this and future generations. Liberal Democrats must use the different vocabulary of farsightedness, of neighbourliness, of responsibility that brings the consequences of actions much closer to the actions themselves.

The Rest of the Country also knows full well that it is in a challenging world that liberty is most highly valued. When the Westminster Village endeavours to remove risk it diminishes liberty. We see a love of and a respect for liberty expressed with extreme bravery in the toughest, most challenging and dangerous circumstances in Iran whilst here basic freedoms are removed and new restraints imposed without a whimper.

Jonathan Calder expresses the views of the Rest of the Country in his Liberal England blog* when he points out that, in pursuit of a safer world, governments interfere at the micro level with family life but cannot prevent appalling cases of brutality to children; impose more and more restrictive laws but cannot bring truly violent and organised criminals to justice, and remove hard won liberties only to increase the potential for acts of terror.

VIETNAM MOMENT

Finally, I don't think the Rest of the Country wants Britain to be stronger. There is a great deal of compassion for the families of dead soldiers and for troops risking their lives without the right equipment, but there is a Vietnam moment coming at speed towards us. It will be felt in the Rest of the Country as this: “We cannot be a force for peace and reconciliation with guns in our hands; make peace not war. While we go to war in distant countries, China builds infrastructure.”

New people will be brought into political activism on this rising tide. Out in the Rest of the Country our activists will be organising. People will demand the promised peace dividend. The Westminster Village will be the last to feel or see it. The usual suspects defiant. The ad execs the last to detect a bandwagon. And the Grand Old Duke of York... quo vadis?

What is wrong with these values: neighbourly, responsible, trusting, peace loving and truthful? You will not see these in adverts or hear them from the mouths of the Westminster Village elite as sound bites on the ten o'clock news. But do we not believe in being the good neighbour and in thinking that the best decisions are made by and alongside those who have some knowledge of each other and the way their neighbourhood works? Do we not believe in taking responsibility, in not leaving it to someone else, in not depending on other people, in not conforming, but in determining to live a good life? Do we not think it best to

“The trouble with using advertising executives in politics is that you end up with your values described in the same words they use in their day jobs to sell toilet disinfectant”

trust others, as Gladstone reminded us, and that distrust is the first step before trying to remove power and liberty from others? Do we not want to campaign for peace and reconciliation? Do we not endeavour always to tell the truth?

I have deliberately made much of the disjunction between the Village and the Rest of the Country. It was expressed over expenses and allowances where not only MPs and peers but the rest of the Village simply didn't get it. But it goes far deeper. There is a gulf between what matters to people in the Rest of the Country and the Village's convictions of what matters to them. No amount of polling and focus groups will bridge that gap. Employing ad-men will make it worse. Either you

sense and ‘get it’ because you live among it, or you fail to ‘get it’ because you are merely an onlooker from afar with your view mediated by inauthenticity, deception and ambition.

The Westminster Village is the Kingdom of the Blind. Reform will not come out of that Village. As HG Wells vividly illustrated in the Country of the Blind, the One-Eyed Man can never be king. The movement for reform can come only from the Rest of the Country. This is a chance in a hundred years, this is a Chartist moment, a post world war moment. It is a time for a radical and authentic movement to sweep away in a tide of reform a remote and ineffective ruling class.

Bill le Breton is a former chair and president of the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors

* The blog post mentioned can be found at: <http://liberalengland.blogspot.com/2009/07/house-points-calders-second-law-of.html>

KEEP THE ASPIRATION FLYING

Nick Clegg's decision to downgrade policies such as tuition fees to 'aspirations' will damage him and his party, says Linda Jack

In my career as a youth worker, I saw at first hand the impact poorly conceived and shortsighted public policy has on young people and their families.

Like youth workers everywhere, I did what I could to make a difference to their lives but was always hugely aware of the need to have a policy framework, supported by investment and political will, which would help rather than hinder their development.

My membership of the Liberal Democrats therefore is and always has been based on a belief that we are the only party with the policies, underpinned by our shared values, that can really make a difference to the lives of those the rest of modern politics has neglected.

Three years ago, I was delighted to be elected to Federal Policy Committee on a radical social liberal platform. Since then I have, I believe, been consistent in arguing my case, even when I have been in a minority of one.

I am thrilled that, as a party, we are prepared to invest where it counts, to make a difference to the life chances of our children and young people through the pupil premium and our innovative childcare policies. Our approach to criminal justice is not only enlightened; it has the potential to change lives for the benefit of the whole community. On the environment, we are acknowledged to have the best policies, and our radical proposals for the reform of politics go way beyond anything the other parties would dare to propose. And now we are at last also proposing to scrap Trident.

The development of our latest pre-manifesto *A Fresh Start for Britain* has on occasions been a rather a rocky road. As members of FPC, we have sat through many meetings, one even extending to nearly five hours, to iron out our differences. There have been sticking points and issues on which many of us have been reluctant to budge, one of which was the downgrading of current policy commitments to 'aspirations'.

TRULY ASTOUNDED

So, I was truly astounded to read the *Independent* article (22 July) in which Nick Clegg is quoted as saying: "Our shopping list of commitments will be far, far, far, far, far shorter.

"We will have to ask ourselves some immensely difficult questions about what we as a party can afford. A

lot of cherished Lib Dem policies will have to go on the back burner. They will remain our aspirations. They will remain our policies. But we are not going to kid the British people into thinking we could deliver the full list of commitments we have put to them at the last three or four elections."

And in response to a question about whether he was watering down pledges on tuition fees, personal care and pensions, he replied:

"Some of these might be retained as policies that we could not honestly place at the forefront of our manifesto because we could not honestly claim they could be delivered in the first few years of the next parliament.

"I hope people will understand these are aspirations we will maintain but that, in these completely different circumstances, you can't carry on promising the same menu of goodies. It is just not plausible."

Then going on to insist that he hadn't drawn up a hit list: "The blunt truth is that everything is vulnerable. All the aspirations remain. We are setting out the criteria by which the Lib Dems will pick and choose from that menu."

Now, there is nothing wrong with aspirations – they are a jolly good thing, but what's that saying "the road to hell is paved with good intentions"? If we want to see the transformation of our society we all so desperately seek, it will not be easy, or necessarily popular. We are unlikely to make much progress if we demote most of our policies to little more than a wish list, or as Nick has it, a shopping list.

So I have a few problems with the notion of a 'shopping list' and policies being described as 'goodies'. Personally I have never seen our policies as being a shopping list of 'nice to haves'. To take the metaphor further, it is as if we have set off to Tesco with a list of essential items we need, prudently selecting these items from the Tesco 'Value' list. In fact, there is not a single Tesco's 'Finest' item in our basket. Since when have free care for the elderly, or winter fuel payments for the disabled been 'goodies'? It is rather like leaving the milk and bread off the list as to include them would be regarded as an extravagance.

LOST POTENCY

A Fresh Start for Britain has much to commend it – who could disagree with commitments to get rid of Trident, to invest in the green economy, social housing, education,

welfare, health... but as soon as such commitments are reduced to 'aspirations' they totally lose their potency. It's a bit like going off to Tesco with said shopping list and only coming back with half the items – what was the point in putting them on the list in the first place?

We all aspire to a better society. I am sure even the Tories would aspire to a society where everyone had a decent home, a job, excellent health care and happiness, so long as it didn't mean them having to give up their moat or duck house to provide it. The real challenge is what we are prepared to do to achieve it? The Labour party has had a laudable aspiration to cut child poverty – but has then gone on to ignore plenty of recommendations, not least from the Child Poverty Action Group, that would have really begun to tackle the problem. In the week that we heard there are now two million workless households, this is surely an issue we neglect at our peril.

One of the policies included in *A Fresh Start for Britain* that is a candidate for the back burner is tuition fees. It argues, "These days, people are graduating from university in mountains of debt. This is crazy – it's hard enough for people to get on the housing ladder, save for the future, and even make ends meet."

But this is now a policy that has been relegated to an aspiration, this when recent projections suggesting that young people entering university this year will graduate with an average debt of £23,000. As someone who works in the field of financial capability, it is of enormous concern that, particularly in the current financial climate, we are creating a generation of young people who think debt is the norm. For those of us who not only got our education free but with a grant to boot, this level of debt is unthinkable. In countries that are far more equal than ours, like Denmark, free education is sacrosanct, something that no doubt is one of the contributory factors to their success and wellbeing.

So, let's consider the consequences of demoting tuition fees from firm policy to 'aspiration'. Suppose I am a student supporting the Lib Dems because of our policy commitment. What am I to make of the demotion? Or suppose I am a local campaigner planning a stall during Freshers' Week. How will I explain our position? Does the electorate vote for us because we might do something or because we have said "we will"? It's a little like rewriting the marriage vows to downgrade "I will" to "I might" – if the circumstances allow.

On FPC, our debates about the pre-manifesto were in the context of warnings that the current economic climate is rather like being stuck on a mountain in the clouds with steep cliffs, not knowing which way to go, but needing to be careful we don't fall down the cliff – therefore the need to limit spending. My response? If I were stuck on a mountain in the clouds, I think I would stay exactly where I was!

And therein lies the dilemma. The reality is that no one is really sure about where we are heading economically. As a party, we have argued that we should be looking to spend our way out of recession – to learn the lessons of the great

“There are times when it feels as if our policies have to pass through an invisible Daily Mail filter.”

New Deal investment programme of President Roosevelt in the Great Depression.

Frankly, I fully support that approach. More than ever, we need to invest now to be sure to save in the future. So now is not the time to move on any of our policies – as yet we have no idea how long the recession will last, or where we will be when we emerge from it.

I have been concerned for a long time that, as a party, in our understandable desire to be seen as serious contenders to the 'big boys', there is a danger of becoming far less risky and far less radical. There are times when it feels as if our policies have to pass through an invisible *Daily Mail* filter. We should use our ability to take risks and be radical to offer a real alternative to the already crowded centre right ground – to water down our policy commitments to ethereal aspirations can only dull that ability.

On the doorstep, I am always happy to challenge anyone who dares throw at me the charge "you are all the same". My response is, "if we were all the same what on earth would I be doing in the Lib Dems?" And it is for that reason that I will continue to fight within the party for us to preserve our risky, radical and progressive edge.

Having strongly backed Nick for leader, despite our political differences, I welcomed his promise to be "risky and radical" and in so many areas that is exactly what he has been. His bravery and willingness to put his head above the parapet on Gaza was exceptional. I know that he is someone who will always stick to his principles and is a man of great integrity – in murky political mire he truly stands out.

But on this issue I am convinced he is wrong, and that is personally disappointing. Far better to abandon policies completely and give the electorate a clear choice based on real commitments than to lay ourselves open to a charge of watering down those cherished policies. If this is to be our position why not aspire to all sorts of things? Free public transport for all, radical tax cuts, a massive expansion of social housing?

If we settle for mediocrity and compromise, we will end up with a mediocre and uninspiring result.

If Nick can remember this and respect those of us who freely devote our time and energy to the party because we believe it can be the harbinger of a better society, that we can truly offer *A Fresh Start for Britain*, he will surely consolidate and enhance his growing stature.

If he cannot, he will be in danger of weakening the rock on which he stands.

Linda Jack is a member of the Liberal Democrats' Federal Policy Committee and was a European Parliamentary candidate in the East of England

BACK TO THE PAVEMENTS

No amount of clever national marketing will win elections if the party neglects the proper practice of community politics, says Adrian Sanders

Bill le Breton's timely appeal (Liberator 334) to rekindle grass-roots campaign activity through a devolved campaigns department demands serious consideration in the light of June's council and recent parliamentary by-election gains by the Conservative Party.

He understands that all politics is local, and all an elector's vote does is to choose a person to represent them on the council or in parliament. If we want more liberals in local government and the House of Commons, then we have to relearn how to win elections under first-past-the-post.

His disdain for the Party's marketeers is no doubt borne out of years working with the most authentic way of communicating with the electorate: community politics, and learning through the experiences of hundreds of campaigners in the field.

They learnt the hard way that, for Lib Dems, credibility and trustworthiness are everything. People won't vote for us unless they trust us and think we can win.

When we are visible and campaign on the issues that matter to the electorate, they begin both to trust us and to think we can win. When we communicate with people about how they can be involved in the decisions that affect their lives and demonstrate action with them. When we concentrate our stretched resources where they can best help the electorate recognise that a Liberal Democrat vote is one that counts.

The local election results in the far South West were a foretaste of what happened in Norwich North and owed everything to the first-past-the-post electoral system. In Devon and Somerset a majority of electors did not choose the Conservatives to run their local councils and start the cuts to services that people's lives depend upon.

We didn't have local elections in my constituency but the first act of the newly appointed Tory majority on the fire authority we share with Plymouth, Devon and Somerset was to approve a reduction in fire cover for my constituents. If that leads to a loss of property, or even a life, it will be first-past-the-post that was to blame. It is an electoral system than favours the largest minority against the wishes of the majority.

WAKE UP CALL

The results should be a wake up call. The largest minority could easily sweep the board at the next election if we can't rebuild trust with the electorate and remind them how to make their votes count.

Most Liberator readers will fear a Tory government for what it is likely to do to public services that protect us all, and in particular those services that the less able rely on. I think it was someone in 'The West Wing' who said, "Government can be a place where people come together and where no one gets left behind." Well the Tories are rarely interested in the people who can't keep up, or in what government can do for the common good.

But reminding people of the Tory record is not of itself going to persuade voters to switch their support. I think we should refrain from attacking the Tories on what we claim they will do, because in my experience the public aren't that interested. We are politicians, and politicians are hardly likely to tell the truth about their opponents.

Instead we should build our credibility at a local level and concentrate on exposing the Conservative Party and its leadership on what they have failed to do. Reveal the spin behind the façade and expose the opportunism, deceit and dissembling, and then ask whether anyone should trust them.

Take the Conservative's removal of the whip from Derek Conway who started the expenses scandal chain of events. Removal of the whip should mean that advice and assistance is withdrawn from the MP you wish to disassociate your party from. Yet time and again I've witnessed the Tory whips communicating with and ushering Mr Conway into the division lobbies.

Then there's the Conservative Party's inquiry into MP expenses that was concluded in record time, having promised a thorough examination of each MP's claims. Within hours of announcing its completion, a Tory MP was exposed for having claimed £12,000 for an au pair!

But the biggest con trick of all is Cameron's refusal to consider any change to the electoral system while claiming to be on the side of change. He ignores the link between the safe seats that first-past-the-post creates and some of the worst examples of expense claims.

It's clear to me that the Tories want to change only the snouts, not the trough. That's perhaps the message we have so far failed to get across.

SPIN DOCTORS

No number of press officers or spin doctors is going to get that across if the media aren't interested in us and what we have to say. It is when we win elections that the media starts to take notice, and that's the cycle of credibility we have to break into.

That means using our own media to win elections and there are two great slogans that ought to appear again and again in all of our literature in the run up to the general election.

The first – Liberal Democrats work all year round, not just at election time – to distinguish ourselves from the Westminster-based parties. The second – “Don’t believe what they say; believe what they do” – to reinforce the community politics example of Lib Dems taking action, while others simply talk.

There are two others to use at election time to reinforce the credibility built up through all year round engagement with the community, and that’s for our candidates to describe themselves as “A worker and A Winner”, and/or as having “A Record of Action, A Promise of More”.

They might be old slogans, but have the centralised marketeers, spin doctors and advertising men ever come up with even one that matches their simplicity and effectiveness?

There are some who argue that literature campaigns are less effective than they used to be, that we produce too many leaflets and that we should abandon this style of electioneering, or at the very least do less in order to do more through other media.

We certainly need to be communicating through new media and across different platforms; after all they contain many different communities in which we should be involved and practicing community politics.

But I do not accept that we deliver too many leaflets. The Tories and Labour still have a Focus newsletter that comes out every day called the Daily Mail/Telegraph/Mirror, etc. We abandon regular Focus newsletters, target mailings and our own newspapers at our peril.

FORGOTTEN TECHNIQUE

The problem as I see it is that we have forgotten how to practice the theory of community politics in favour of its techniques that other parties have learnt to copy.

We need to return to proper engagement with the community, building trust and relationships. Restoring faith in politics by enabling people to take and use power over their own lives.

In the theory of community politics, a community is a group of individuals with something in common: nationality, neighbourhood, religion, work, workplace, school, hobbies, are a few obvious examples. It is not just an electoral division.

Consequently community politics is no short cut to power but a long hard slog of incremental advances that distribute power and decision making to the people.

Bill le Breton’s message is that it is what we do locally that is the best test of what works, and that the role of the national leadership should be to reinforce and compliment this activity. In effect it is the proper practice of community politics that leads to authentic policy, rather than policy leading to inauthentic campaigning.

It is policies unrelated or opposed to what is working locally that lose votes, while campaigns that strike a chord with and engage people that win hearts, minds and elections.

I think Bill has recognised that we have become heavily reliant on policy as tested in focus (sic) groups and polling: We have become policy heavy and campaign light, something a major dose of devolution to our grass roots can start to put right and position the party back on its winning ways.

Adrian Sanders has worked for the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors and is now Liberal Democrat deputy chief whip and MP for Torbay

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PPCs - WE'RE ONLY HUMAN

There is rising concern in the Liberal Democrats about resignations by prospective parliamentary candidates. Sally Morgan says after her experience that it is no wonder

About a year ago, I read on Duncan Borrowman's blog a description of the scenario that can lead Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidates to resign. It was horribly familiar.

Sal Jarvis, the English Candidates Committee chair, recently commissioned a report that looked into why so many PPCs have resigned. I've now become one of those statistics and I'd like to describe some of the issues that I faced and try to be as constructive as possible.

The training I received from the Campaign for Gender Balance was exemplary. The practical training and support from the party in respect of getting approved and ultimately selected for Central Devon was excellent.

Training is one thing that the party does very well indeed.

My problems all came after I was selected, and started almost immediately and largely because I was not on the original shortlist of three. Another candidate and I both made successful appeals and were reinstated, as there had been a technical breach of the rules. I went on to be selected with a substantial majority, but some panel members were unable to come to terms with this outcome. They felt they had been overruled and did not really understand why.

If their needs in understanding the process had been met, it might have relieved some of the pressure and reconciled some of the problems. However, some were never going to be won over. I later learned from one panel member that they had decided who their favourite was, and it wasn't me.

I was in what was implied to be a winnable seat (that is, until the party decided to target Labour marginals instead of Tory ones but that's another article entirely – we are mere passengers on the red/blue swing).

I knew the pressure was on to perform, a lot was expected and I was given a list as long as my arm that had come directly from the campaigns department telling me how many thousand leaflets, target letters and tens of thousands of pounds I had to raise in the space of a few months. It was completely unrealistic and sadly paid no heed to the make up, nature and specific needs of the seat.

We were a brand new constituency made up of the scraggy ends of five existing ones and we didn't even have an EARS programme. The campaigns department seemed to have little understanding of bringing two constituencies together let alone five! I spent the Monday after I was selected chasing the respective EARS officers of the five contributing constituencies. It took weeks and weeks to sort out. It would have been extremely helpful if the

regional organisation had set the ball rolling as far as EARS was concerned, thus freeing me up to campaign more effectively and unencumbered by administration issues.

What would also have really helped me would have been if I had been able to sit down with a campaigns officer and go through the specific needs for my constituency. It would have been better to have set challenging but realistic targets that would have really helped the constituency and the party, instead of having to grasp at what was basically a demoralising, one-size-fits-all wish list that my critics would beat me with when I failed to achieve.

The local party had over-high expectations so, when the party changed its tactics in favour of Labour marginal seats over Tory ones, it was ammunition for the critics. The chairman Douglas Lomax and I received a letter from a regional campaigns officer implying target status was withdrawn (as did another nearby seat) although technically it was a seat without status. It suggested that the seat was no longer considered winnable but did not explain why. This caused me huge difficulties as, no matter how hard I had worked or continued to work, it had happened while I was PPC and therefore I must be to blame.

The local party critics were a major problem. There are some terribly illiberal people in our party who sometimes find their way onto selection panels, executives and positions of responsibility. Because of our desperate need for any (perceived) help, we quite often let these people and their behaviour go unchallenged for fear of being called illiberal ourselves and losing helpers.

It was some of these people in my local party who made my life so difficult for the two years that I was a candidate, because I was not their preferred candidate despite being selected by a substantial majority. While I was working my socks off campaigning, putting out press releases and visiting members for donations and support, there were efforts to get me deselected. Mr Lomax failed to secure a vote of no confidence in me, which someone leaked to the press.

The regional chair, campaigns officer and a neighbouring MP attended one executive meeting to try to get matters back on track. Less than 24 hours later some of the contents of that meeting were leaked to a political website, as were the contents of the following meeting. None of these leaks were investigated by the party despite

being very obvious attempts to undermine both the party and me.

I also received a letter from Mr Lomax in which he wrote that concerns had been raised by party members that my “other commitments (councillor post and mother) are simply too much”.

BLATANT DISCRIMINATION

It is ironic that I had never faced such blatant discrimination and attempts to undermine me before I joined the Liberal Democrats.

I found this incredibly difficult to deal with and so, it seemed, did the rest of the party. I made a formal complaint at the time, had many discussions with very sympathetic and senior party colleagues but in the end the only option I was given was to stick it out and try to get a different chair elected.

Loyal colleagues (and there were many) all knew that this was unacceptable and were angered by what was going on but never challenged it. I’m all for fighting my own battles but I really needed some heavyweight back-up on that one.

Other ex-PPCs I have spoken to cite problems with members of their local party as their reason for resigning. In many cases, what goes on is nothing short of bullying. It made me miserable and contributed to depression and I have no doubt contributed to me finally ‘flipping’ and sending that infamous leaked e-mail that went thrice round the internet and back again. Three MPs have made formal requests to the party for that leak to be investigated. To date, nothing has been done.

Being a PPC should not have to be a test of endurance, where if you survive the ravages of your local party then you are worthy of being elected. PPCs who resign should not be regarded as collateral damage – we can’t afford, as an organisation, to keep losing good people.

We desperately need a more diverse representation in parliament as it is sorely lacking at the moment.

I’m in my mid-to-late thirties, I have a child still in school, am an experienced primary school teacher and local councillor but I am under-represented. There are very few women with young children in parliament, none in our party, and I can see why. I am not playing the gender card but there are huge differences in expectations and attitudes from the general public and, yes, even our own party.

UNIMAGINABLY DIFFICULT

I have realised that this is very much a live issue and that it is harder for our MPs to get themselves elected than in other parties. You have to be 100% committed and it completely takes over your life – it is all consuming. The more responsibilities you have outside of this goal, the harder it is. Parenthood is one of those responsibilities, motherhood more so and being a single parent unimaginably difficult. When you add to that the financial commitment (in my case, £10,000 over two years), it is no wonder our parliament is so unbalanced and unrepresentative.

If we are serious about tackling this imbalance, then we need to be more realistic and tailor some of our expectations about our candidates and seats.

“I have not walked away from the party although, I admit, I was sorely tempted”

That doesn’t mean lowering our expectations, quite the opposite. Generic targets don’t work. We are Liberal Democrats; we know that one-size-does-not-fit-all out there in the real world, why should our candidates be any different? We also need to accept that, when a candidate has problems or struggles and needs help, it does not mean that he or she is a bad candidate – they are simply human. Many are dissuaded

from asking for help for fear of being branded ‘not up to it’.

We also need support. The training and organised networking sessions shouldn’t stop after selection and should also be available outside of conference. The virtually non-existent ‘mentoring’ system needs an overhaul. Being a PPC can be lonely at times and, unless you have someone to talk to who knows what it’s like, you can feel very isolated.

Local party members also need to be a little more compassionate and, dare I say it, liberal! We all like to feel appreciated and you may feel you do a lot for your local party, but no-one does more than the poor bloody PPC. Tell them “well done and thank you” once in a while!

I have not walked away from the party although, I admit, I was sorely tempted. I still want to try and help and am currently working with neighbouring sitting Lib Dem MPs towards the general election.

I have learned a great deal from my two years as a candidate both about myself and other people. I hope that the party and others can also learn lessons so that we lose fewer candidates in the future.

Sally Morgan was Liberal Democrat PPC for Central Devon

ALL OVER THE PLACE

Analysis of the 4 June elections shows the two-party mould breaking – but with results that should worry Liberal Democrats, says Michael Steed

Sadly, political history may recall the 2009 Euro-elections as the year of the BNP's breakthrough. Already, Conservatives are claiming that proportional representation was responsible (see below: this is fascinatingly false). None of us concerned about the health of the British body politic can ignore the danger signal. Yet there are signs of deeper changes at work in the detail of how people voted in June.

No party really came out well, and only Labour came out really badly. Yet there was a clear swing – to fragmentation. The British party system, once seen variously as a two-party system, a three-party system, one rooted in tribal voter identities (the 'mould' of SDP-launch days), essentially a class conflict or moving towards consumer or presidential choice, increasingly fits none of these models. More and more, it is a kaleidoscope of local patterns, of parties with particular bases, and of contingent voting. Level of government, the electoral system or local circumstances make for dual loyalties and complex choices.

We need to analyse the BNP performance within this context. Very clearly, the far right and the Euro-phobics (overlapping but not identical categories) did well. If we combine the votes for the BNP, UKIP, the English Democrats (whose scarcely noticed advance to 2% puts them at double the level of BNP support 10 years ago) along with miscellaneous anti-Europe lists, we get a formidable vote of 26.5%. Of course, if we are going to do that, we can try other combinations. The following table does so for the five sizeable parties (Labour, Lib Dem, Green, two Nationalist) who share an anti-Tory ideological tradition, within which each has a distinctive position: call it "established centre-left":

Established Centre-Left:	40.9%
Conservative Party:	27.7%
Anti-European/Far Right:	26.5%

CONSERVATIVE WEAKNESS

I calculated this table only half in jest. It captures the Tory dilemma very well. Though coming top in June, and now well entrenched in the media mind as the favourite to win the next Westminster election, the Conservatives are fundamentally in a weak position. If anti-Tory feeling coalesces tactically around the strongest anti-Tory candidate locally, the Tories are poorly placed to win a seat unless they can squeeze the anti-European and far right

votes, and of course the more they do that, the more they may encourage the centre-left vote to come together. Ideologically, they are the party facing a squeeze. They win because both other blocks are fragmented.

If the Euro-votes cast in June are put together in 69 British Euro-constituencies, I calculate that the Tory 27.7% would have taken about 50 of them! First-past-the-post would have suited them well. However, if using that system produced a reflex of switching to the strongest anti-Tory, they would have won many fewer.

Is it fair to put the BNP and UKIP vote together like this? Certainly it is so far as their election campaigns were concerned. The BNP played down its racism and denounced 'European dictatorship'; UKIP highlighted 'unlimited immigration' as its key EU negative. Their leaflets delivered through my door were interchangeable bar the candidates' names. Both were littered with Second World War imagery: UKIP borrowing Churchill and the 'V' sign; the BNP claiming to fight "The *new* Battle for Britain", with a Spitfire in sight, and a line "Trafalgar – the Somme – Dunkirk – D-Day – Falklands".

MILITARISATION

One lesson to reflect on is just how the militarisation of English (*sic*, that rather than British) political culture in recent decades has provided a fertile field for this sort of propaganda. The Murdoch press, Blairite adventurism and the military-history book industry have all prepared the way.

Looked at psephologically, BNP and UKIP are clearly distinct, echoing the class divide within society. But allowing for that, the similarities in their electorates are strong. Both appeal to older voters, and to less educated ones. Interestingly, both do particularly well in the lower Thames estuary area, especially on the Essex side, with its distant echoes of Mosleyite fascism, as well its 1974 National Front vote and the strongest surge to Thatcherism in 1979. There is a native far right tradition here, spread out from London's East End, which can be traced back to the reaction against Jewish immigration over a century ago.

The significant difference between them lies in the level of their support. At the Euro-elections, UKIP out-pollled the BNP by more than 2.5 to one. This is in total contrast to the previous year's local by-election results. Between May and December 2008, the BNP fighting 44 by-elections had a mean vote of 13.2% to UKIP's 5.5% in 23 seats; where the two competed, the BNP invariably

came ahead, on a 3:1 ratio. During January to May 2009, the far right advanced – the BNP’s average (30 seats fought) to 15.7%, and UKIP (17) to 9.3%. Only once (in Hartlepool) did UKIP beat the BNP, and the ratio in the BNP’s favour was 2:1.

UKIP and the BNP fought a local by-election on the same day as the Euro elections in 20 districts. UKIP support was clearly lifted by the European context to come narrowly ahead of the BNP; but comparing their support with the Euro-vote in those 20 districts shows UKIP some 5% higher and the BNP around 5% lower in the PR election. This all leads inescapably to the conclusion that a significant part of those currently choosing BNP in local by-elections chose UKIP for the European Parliament.

Should that be a surprise? Only perhaps to those who see these parties in rather purely defined ideological terms. Not only must their electorate overlap significantly, its intelligence should not be underestimated; it is realistic about which party to vote for according to circumstance.

The role of proportional representation is misunderstood: like the Liberal Democrats, the BNP has discovered how to play a ward or constituency-based system to its advantage. It can continue to win local seats at its current level of support by targeting efficiently. Paradoxically, PR for Europe may well have held down the BNP vote a bit, as some of its supporters realised UKIP was better placed to win seats.

Contrary to what Liberal electoral reformers would like, the single transferable vote might suit the BNP better than party list. The overlap of electorate means that its “more respectable” candidates (no risk with STV of your vote being used to elect a detestable thug) could pull in lower preference votes from UKIP, or odds and ends like the English Democrats.

Partly because of PR, the BNP did not do quite so well in June 2009. But don’t underestimate its potential: taken together, the far right did extremely well. The fragmentation of party politics has unleashed some nasty demons.

COMPLEX FRAGMENTATION

How did the other parties fare in this complex fragmentation? The Tory quarter of the vote remains nearest to an old-style, reliable tribal vote, with not so much variation in its level compared with 2004 (Europe) or 2005 (Westminster). The party’s appeal in Scotland or the northern English cities remains extremely limited. The best news for them was a bit of an advance in Wales and parts of the Midlands, regions adjacent to their area of dominance in the south.

Although the county council elections showed the Conservatives triumphantly dominant across the shire counties of the south, the Euro elections show that this is no advance on previous support. Nationally, their vote rose by 1.2 percentage points between 2004 and 2009. In the South East it dropped by 0.4; in the South West by 1.3. Detail suggests some more rural Lib Dem held seats are vulnerable to them; but many fewer than national projections from opinion polls indicate.

Liberal Democrat performance is as usual more varied. In past Euro-elections, it has been possible to discern some general pattern to this, which proved an interesting predictor of what was to happen at the subsequent Westminster election. Thus, the last plurality Euro-election in 1994 indicated the pattern of tactical voting in 1997;

2004 showed a swing to the Liberal Democrats among the better educated, the Muslim electorate and students, which usefully predicted the less expected Lib Dem gains of 2005.

It is more difficult this time. Liberal Democrats only sometimes built on the previously consistent advance in big cities (with their ethnically diverse and younger populations). Coming top in Newcastle, and Sheffield turning in the best advance in Yorkshire, fits that pattern. But Liverpool and Bristol had among the worst results in their regions, while Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester slipped back. As for the student vote, five years ago Oxford and Cambridge swung Lib Dem in tandem. This year saw a further advance in Cambridge, but a marked retreat in Oxford (to the benefit of the Greens).

Traditionally, the South West has had the highest Liberal vote in England; this year, astonishingly, it was overtaken by the North East, which used to be one of the party’s weakest regions. That wasn’t a general phenomenon across the north: the worst regional performance was next door, in Yorkshire.

ALL OVER THE PLACE

London was all over the place, to no evident social or geographical pattern. Overall, our share dropped 1.6 points, but in a quarter of the boroughs it dropped by more than twice that level; several were inner, more working class ones but one of the worst (despite Ben Abbotts’ splendid by-election result) was Bromley, one of the outermost and wealthiest. In another quarter, our share of the vote actually rose. These better borough results are scattered across London, including several with Liberal Democrat MPs. Here may be a clue: the party vote rose on average 2.4 points in the six London boroughs which have a Lib Dem MP. Party control at borough level, on the other hand, doesn’t seem to explain things so well.

So did having a Liberal Democrat Westminster MP make for a better European vote this time, in contrast to the lack of such carryover in previous European elections? It must have in South Lakeland, where an extraordinary rise in support suggests that Tim Farron may have created one of the party’s safest seats. Other district results that suggest a positive MP-effect include Stockport (5.0 better than the regional change), North Norfolk (4.3), Taunton Deane (4.3), Colchester (3.5), Lewes (3.5), South Somerset (3.5) and Cheltenham (2.9). However, other local results go in the opposite direction (I won’t list them), but note that due to changes in counting areas, results in Scotland, Wales and Cornwall are more difficult to compare.

So looking ahead, expect a Liberal Democrat performance at the general election next year in which constituency outcomes will not be easy to predict. Fragmentation appears in our case to have raised the importance of local campaigning and individual MP standing. A strongly felt national issue or unexpected crisis might override that; otherwise, anticipate pundits having difficulty in projecting the number of Lib Dem seats from the national vote, and some rather unexpected winners.

Michael Steed is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Canterbury and an honorary lecturer in politics

WOULD YOU TRUST THEM WITH YOUR CHILDREN?

As army recruitment soars because of the recession, Simon Molloy asks whether the Deepcut scandal makes the Ministry of Defence fit to employ young people



A Major rode his bicycle through the Royal Way Gate of Deepcut Barracks in Surrey at about 0815 hours on a winter morning, Monday 27 November 1995. The gate was then staffed by a female guard, Private Cheryl James, an 18-year old recruit from Llangollen in Denbighshire.

A Staff Sergeant, a Regimental Sergeant Major and a Captain were all let in at the gate by Cheryl over the next ten minutes. Then it was reported that she had left the guardpost.

A Lance Corporal went to investigate and found no sign of Cheryl. Thinking she may have gone to the toilet, he took over the guard duty. Then he became aware of a combat jacket by a tree. He flagged down another Lance Corporal to assist him, and together they found Cheryl James.

She was lying with her head pointing down the slope towards the road. There was a large wound to the front of her head and an SA80 combat weapon lying by her side. She was found to be dead. Her parents want to know what happened. And so should we.

Fourteen years later, Des and Doreen James are still trying to get the Ministry of Defence and the Surrey Police to come clean on how Cheryl – and three other young recruits – came to be shot dead in four separate incidents at an army barracks in leafy southern England.

On 9 June 1995, 20-year-old Private Sean Benton of Hastings was found dead with five bullet wounds to his chest. On 17 September 2001, Private Geoff Gray, 17, from Hackney, was found dead with two gunshot wounds to his head. On 23 March 2002, Private James Collinson, also 17, from Perth, was found dead with a single gunshot wound upwards through his chin.

There were police investigations, of course, but they were so slipshod that Surrey Police had to be investigated

by the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary. The full reports of these investigations are locked away.

But we do know, as examples, that Sean Benton's bloodstained shirt was laundered before it could be forensically examined; that the bullet that killed Cheryl James was lost during the investigation; that the record of guns issued on the night Geoff Gray died was destroyed; that no fingerprints were taken from the gun that killed James Collinson.

Forensic scientist Frank Swann says he has evidence that the victims could not have died in the ways claimed by the army and the police. But the police say they will only hear his evidence behind closed doors. He fears it will be manipulated so he insists on waiting for a public inquiry.

There were inquests, of course. A verdict of 'suicide' was recorded in the first case – the death of Sean Benton. 'Open' verdicts were recorded in the other three cases.

Under pressure from the parents and the press, the government was forced to commission Nicholas Blake QC to review the evidence surrounding the deaths. His review reported in March 2006 and concluded, despite the inquest verdicts, that each of the recruits had most probably committed suicide. He seems to have based this conclusion on the fact that no one had proved beyond doubt that they hadn't killed themselves.

Mark Lawson, writing about the case in *The Guardian* last year, said: "Either a serial killer was on the loose for seven years in the army, or the base was so out of control that a succession of situations – fuelled by lust, drunkenness or bullying – ended with soldiers shooting colleagues."

A female Lance Corporal from the Surrey barracks told a BBC Panorama programme: "The bullying at Deepcut was rife, the reason I say that is because straight away as soon as I was there it was evident that certain sergeants, certain corporals, were abusing their power."

Another told the BBC: “You could see physical marks on the soldiers that could tell me that something was going on. Soldiers were that scared that they would never tell you what happened.”

And a friend of Sean Benton said: “If every bullying incident was reported you’d have something along the lines of the Britannica volume. But you can’t report it. You could be reporting it to the person who was actually doing it.”

On 22 June 2002, Private David Shipley died at a regimental fete in Germany, drowning in 18 inches of water in a children’s pool. He had been part of the guard force with James Collinson on the night James died.

The inquest into his death three years later recorded another open verdict. The coroner said that the evidence did not fully disclose how Shipley’s death arose. “We have our suspicions,” he said. “We don’t really have any fact to go on.”

The Deepcut story is a sordid tale of cringing and cover-up involving numerous attempted suicides, bullying, sexual abuse, flouting of rules, police incompetence and government evasion – and death.

Lembit Öpik is the James’s MP. He has been fighting a long battle within parliament to get at the truth behind the Deepcut deaths. He now believes the four recruits were most probably murdered.

He told a House of Commons adjournment debate: “Crucial forensic and ballistics evidence was destroyed because of the army’s assumption of suicide, yet the army continues to maintain that the investigation into Cheryl’s death was thorough.”

But the government doesn’t seem to be interested in truth. It doesn’t even acknowledge the important questions left by its handling of this issue. In a letter dated 6 August this year, the Ministry of Defence is still trotting out the line: “The deaths at the Princess Royal Barracks, Deepcut have been subjected to proper investigation and resolution by the appropriate authorities.”

The government, the army and the police have refused continuously to publish full details of their enquiries into these events, to demonstrate that any problems are being faced and to assure the public that solutions have been found.

This continuous refusal suggests that the problems are not being faced, that solutions have not been found – and that the British Army is a brutish, incompetent and dangerous employer. As Nicholas Blake might conclude – no one has proved they’re not.

In fact, ugly stories continue to seep from our army camps. Earlier this year, two young soldiers were reported to have absconded because of bullying, others have been traumatised or killed by ‘beasting’.

GET AWAY WITH MURDER?

If these things were happening in a bakery or on a building site, the whole operation would be shut down while a new management was put in place that could guarantee to run the business responsibly. The old management would probably find itself charged before a public court. But the army, it appears, can get away with murder.

On 13 August, *The Times* published a letter from Des James pointing out that the Secretary of State for Defence had set up a public inquiry into the death of Baha Mousa, an Iraqi civilian who died in Iraq in September 2003.

“He described that death as a disturbing incident,” Des wrote, “not just because a man died in the care of the

British Army, but because an investigation by the Royal Military Police and a subsequent court martial highlighted further important questions that needed to be answered.

“Whilst I readily recognise the absolute justification for such an inquiry, should we not be able to expect a similar inquiry into the deaths of the four young recruits who died at Deepcut army barracks?”

“These deaths could also be described as disturbing incidents: not just because four young people died in the care of the British Army, but also because an investigation by the Royal Military Police, a subsequent civil police investigation and a review by Sir Nicholas Blake QC, all highlighted further important questions that need to be answered.”

One of Baha Mousa’s lawyers, Sapna Malik, has responded to the letter in *The Times*:

“I wholeheartedly agree with Des James. That there has not yet been a public inquiry into the dubious circumstances surrounding the deaths at Deepcut army barracks remains deeply disturbing and only serves to raise more doubts than to dispel concerns.

“With public inquiries now established to examine the UK’s involvement in Iraq, including the use of banned interrogation techniques, the time is now ripe to publicly examine how military recruits who may end up on the frontline are treated and trained and to understand how four young lives were tragically lost on home ground.”

The public interest lies in having armed services that can face up to their responsibilities – that have the guts to admit when things go wrong and to be open about putting them right. The army and police reports on Deepcut should be opened so that we can see what went wrong and what is being done to put things right.

You can help. Please write to your MP asking for all the reports relating to the Deepcut deaths to be published in full so that we can see whether a public enquiry is needed and whether proper measures have been taken – and are being effectively monitored – to address the issues raised by these cases. Please do that today.

And when they write back to you saying “The deaths at the Princess Royal Barracks, Deepcut have been subjected to proper investigation and resolution by the appropriate authorities,” write back to them and point out the holes in their “proper resolution” claim. Ask your MP if s/he is satisfied with the MoD response.

Britain needs an army. It needs to recruit and train fit young people for our defence. And the Deepcut families are very clear on that point – they are not anti-army.

Britain also needs to respect its army recruits from the outset, as Sapna Malik suggests. Not just when their coffins are driven home through Wootton Bassett.

For the time being, anyone thinking of joining the army should be warned. As long as the Ministry of Defence is too arrogant or terrified to face up to its past, to deal decently with British children and their families, they do not deserve recruits. Parents should think twice before they sign their 16 and 17 year-olds away to the ‘care’ of these people.

Simon Molloy is secretary of Hackney Liberal Democrats. He is playing Nicholas Blake QC in the play *Deep Cut*, which is on a national tour, and is active in the parents’ campaign

AN UGLY SHADE OF BLUE

They are the Ca-morons – the bizarre collection of racists, sexists, homophobes, climate change deniers and anti-Semites with whom the Conservatives have joined in the European Parliament, says Dirk Hazell

The Tories in the European Parliament have made a tragic choice: spurning dynamic leadership in the EU's mainstream, they have deliberately chosen embittered marginalisation.

This is partly because the deed rather than word of David Cameron's regime is, whatever the cost, to concentrate unprecedented power with a very small number of white men in Westminster. These men carped when their MEP colleagues performed responsible roles in the European Parliament, so Cameron has now cynically and deliberately marginalised his MEPs.

Negotiations the Tories started in 2002 – even before Poland joined the EU – with an inappropriate Polish party have now resulted in a poisonous, unstable and essentially irrelevant new group in the European Parliament, here for convenience called the Ca-morons.

This group contains no representation from a major EU economy outside the UK and, in contrast with Cameron's "optimistic" verbiage, is of the embittered right. The Tories' shadow Europe minister Mark Francois may have greeted the new grouping with the simpering gush, "We are very excited about this important new development in European politics," but the reality is that the Tories' bedfellows are motley bigots:

- **Sexist**

Of the group's non-Tory MEPs, all are white and only one is a woman. In the European elections, the Dutch Ca-morons were allied with a party that had banned women from being candidates and some of whom believe women should not vote.

- **Homophobic**

The Polish Ca-moron party has called homosexuals "abnormal, asocial and abject" and their leader has stated homosexuals "should not be school teachers, for example".

- **Racist**

One failed Tory MEP candidate boasts close links with Flemish Ca-morons, Lijst Dedecker, which campaigned this year with depictions of a gorilla and whose leader was photographed with one of his candidates who said, "I have not forgotten my roots... have you?" adding highly offensive verbiage about the risks presented by Africans.

- **Anti-Semitic**

Kaminski, now the Ca-morons' leader in the EP,

belonged as a youth to a Polish party now in the European National Front, whose manifesto proclaims, "Jews will be removed from Poland, and their possessions will be confiscated". Kaminski dismisses this youthful connection but has more recently asserted that Poland should not apologise for the wartime massacre of hundreds of Jews by Polish men from Jedwabne. The US Anti-Defamation League reports both that Kaminski mobilised the local population against commemoration of the pogrom and that he recently supported the 'Poland for the Polish' slogan associated with Poland's inter-war anti-Semitism.

- **Anti Islamic**

Demonstrating some even-handedness in bigotry, however, a Flemish Ca-moron MEP asserted on his blog "the world is suffering from cancer and it looks like its name is Islam. We urgently need global chemotherapy against Islam to save civilisation".

- **Climate change denial**

The most famous climate change denier in the Ca-moron family is perhaps Vaclav Klaus, but many Ca-morons share his views. These include Polish MEP Miroslaw Piotrowski, Czech MEP Hynek Fajmon (who said the European Parliament's Florenz Report on climate change was worse than Mao-Tse-Tung's Cultural Revolution) and the Czech group vice-chair. Another Czech Ca-moron, Miroslav Ouzky, proved an unworthy successor to two EPP-ED MEPs, Caroline Jackson and Karl-Heinz Florenz, as chairman of the Environment Committee. Nor is this bigotry confined to east and central Europe: the prejudices of Derk-Jan Eppink, the Belgian Ca-moron Bureau Member, apparently include a 'libertarian' line on car emissions.

- **Hitting the poor**

Lijst Dedecker supports the flat tax, which can bear heavily on the poor and, at a time of global recession, Belgian Ca-morons also propose time-limited unemployment benefit. However, they offer some hope for the unemployable: they want Flemish neo-Nazis to be eligible to serve in government.

- **Human rights lapses**

As justice minister in the Polish Government, Zbigniew Ziobro – now a Polish Ca-moron MEP – asserted that a man was guilty immediately after he had been arrested. And in 1999 Kaminski came to

London to give Augusto Pinochet a present, gushing to the BBC that this “was the most important meeting of my whole life”.

- **Waffen SS commemoration**

The Tories’ Latvian ally party has been involved in rallies to commemorate SS veterans, which Roberts Zile, Latvian bureau member of the Ca-moron group, has described as “just some meetings of former soldiers, it is nothing to do with the SS”.

Under Cameron’s leadership, the Tories have spurned Europe’s political mainstream – by far the most powerful group in the European Parliament representing the overwhelming majority of the EU’s economy – for bitter and marginal fanatics.

As Tories are hard-wired to cling as close as possible to power within institutions, this is profoundly un-Tory conduct that can only signal a deep desire for Europe to fail, a treacherous betrayal of Britain’s post-imperial national interest.

The contrast with a more substantial and earlier generation of Tories is stark: for example, Tories helped to incorporate Spain into democratic Europe by encouraging the Partido Popular within Europe’s centre-right mainstream. Cameron’s Tories instead enabled the first east European to lead an EP political group to be someone who was proud to crawl to Pinochet and whose bitter views are at odds with the 80% of Poles, who are upbeat about their post-Communist future in Europe.

The Tories had bemoaned the federalism of the EPP-ED group but this was a red herring. When, in 1999, William Hague signed the EPP-ED agreement declaring, “I simply cannot afford to have my political opponents in the House of Commons suggesting that I am isolated from the mainstream Conservative parties on the continent of Europe,” the Tories had the best of both worlds: leverage afforded by strong membership within a powerful and relevant group combined with the right to pursue independent policies.

The nastiness of the Ca-morons is not balanced by any guarantee of comfort to the Tories on the Lisbon treaty. Czech Ca-morons are split on Lisbon while Kaminski favours both Lisbon and the Common Agricultural Policy.

The Tories were warned. Chris Huhne warned them when Cameron became leader and Ed Davey warned them in May this year.

In May, Chancellor Merkel said, “We refuse to extend our hand to those who reject the Lisbon treaty... and who at the same time speak of enlargement,” while President Sarkozy reportedly said to Cameron, “We want the Conservatives to stay with us. It is important politically. If not, we won’t work with you, even on a bilateral level”. The Tories have blown a unique chance to work to strengthen Europe’s economy and democracy both in Europe and in the wider world, with the most Atlanticist leaderships France and Germany have seen.

The Tories have not even been joined by the centre right parties of Denmark or Sweden. The historic roots of the Swedish Moderates are what Tories call “sound” but the Moderate prime minister wanted Cameron to stay with the EPP-ED.

When so much law is now agreed at the EU level – through qualified majority voting and co-decision – this amounts to bad news for British business, which had relied on Tory MEPs to secure relevant leverage, particularly with

German Christian Democrats. The sort of trade-offs made within the EPP-ED grouping since 1979 will no longer be possible and the British Chambers of Commerce and the Engineering Employers Federation are among the many British business organisations expressing grave concern.

Two examples show how this matters. First, the British economy has a paramount interest in regulation of financial services. Probably there will be an EU system of financial supervision, and negotiating the right detail is vital to the City and UK. It is good news that the relevant committee has a British chair, the Lib Dem MEP Sharon Bowles, but the Tory membership of this committee is both inexperienced and also now unable to engage with the centre-right MEPs representing most of the EU’s economy.

At least, with a fair electoral wind this month, Liberal Democrats may have good access to the new German Government but Britain’s national interest also required the Tories to engage the Christian Democrats.

Another example is the environment, an area where Cameron’s commitment could most politely be described as intermittent. With so many EU environmental laws already enacted, the focus needs to turn on their proper implementation across the EU and, in this matter as in so many others, the UK shares an interest with the other main parts of the EU’s economy. On the environment, the Tories have allied themselves with parties disinclined or unable to offer support.

Ken Clarke had said: “My colleagues have assured me that they are not going to ally themselves with any fascists, no nuts.” This is further evidence that a Cameron government might make some effort to look and talk moderate but would act far right.

In creating the new Ca-moron group, the ability to act far right was supported by the compulsory oaths of personal loyalty to Cameron that Tory MEPs had been required to sign. Tory NHS bashing pin-up Dan Hannan has purported to spot Nazi tendencies in others: I have spotted no such utterances on any possible Hitlerian characteristics in this oath.

Britain cannot afford to be governed by a party rejecting a lead role in the first division for bittered impotence with the renegades, or talking soft but acting further right than ever.

Only Liberal Democrats have a viable formula: to re-energise politics by restoring accountability, always placing political power at the level of government as close as possible to people, with transparent and federal division of responsibility and shared commitment to the European project.

Whatever happens next year, the Tories’ best is behind them. Cameron could have had his Clause Four moment by mainstreaming his party on Europe but he deliberately led his party in the opposite direction to a place of great danger. Liberal Democrats now have a very heavy responsibility to ensure Britain pays the smallest possible price for this Tory tragedy.

Dirk Hazell joined the Liberal Democrats last year. He previously chaired the Conservative Party’s London Region and Foreign Affairs Forum

CLOSING TIME

Community pubs are under threat as the ‘pubcos’ exploit their property portfolios. It’s time to act before communities lose their focal point, says Gareth Epps

Across the country, the pub that has helped bind communities together for decades – the backstreet local – is under threat as never before. This comes despite the choice available to real ale drinkers having grown massively since Progressive Beer Duty (a measure which – after a policy passed at conference in 2000 – Liberal Democrats can proudly say we led the way to adopt).

This decline does not affect the town centre bars, those havens of ‘vertical drinking’ responsible for so many problems and promoted by Labour in spite of their posturing on crime. It affects the traditional local pub, in the outer urban and suburban communities such as Newtown.

Newtown is a lively part of Reading that reflects the mix and the contradictions of the town well; the proportionately largest Muslim population mixing with a bohemian element, the Victorian terraces side by side with the municipal socialism of a 30-year-old estate with inbuilt design flaws, and a very mixed community as a result. The area had 13 pubs within living memory and six only two decades ago. Now there is but one, and that is not so much a community pub (despite the best efforts of the current landlord).

Newtown has received a lot of publicity this summer due to what has happened with the Jolly Anglers – a small Victorian community pub on the Kennet, and the only regular stockist of Harvey’s ales in Reading. The Jolly had an unfortunate run of short-stay landlords, for a variety of reasons which were not connected with the viability of the pub. Then John turned up. I got word in Easter that the Jolly was back to its old self, and an Easter beer festival confirmed it; friendly atmosphere and excellent quality beer.



On 16 June I got a message: “I understand that John at the Jolly Anglers has just been told that the pub has been sold for housing and tonight is his last night. Beer will be £1 a pint.”

I went down at teatime, partly to ensure that John was not going to need help getting housed. Bert and one or two others from the sheltered housing complex nearby were still there – they were finishing their lunch when the men from Enterprise showed up at 2.30pm and told John, in front of his customers, that “tonight is the last night this place is open. And we’re coming for the keys on Friday”. Word spread quickly and there was no problem at all in finishing up the pub’s supplies as the mood turned into one of calm if not exactly sober defiance.

It was like watching a community gel together. Without any obvious community association, and with the meeting place – the pub – boarded up as the first of many demonstrations took place on the Friday after the pub was closed, the community came together and formed an action group. Meetings were held (in a pub, of course), events planned and actions taken. The first meeting was filmed by BBC TV News and featured an internet chat link to a local resident in France!

Gradually the realisation came to the community that the pub had been sold by Enterprise Inns, at the knockdown price of £230,000 for the pub and adjoining terraced house (terraces alone have gone for similar figures in Reading). Worse, it had been sold with a restrictive covenant forbidding the pub being used as a pub. The covenant was imposed (according to a conversation with the buyer’s property agent) as an Enterprise standard condition, despite the fact that the nearest pubs are owned by Enterprise’s competitors.

“Local communities and councils have precious little ability to protect pubs”

TERRIBLE MISMANAGEMENT

This is a Liberal issue. The terrible mismanagement of the pub trade by the pubcos, which has included a raft of anti-competitive practices, has worsened alarmingly in recent years. For the successful publican, that success is rewarded negatively by upwards-only rent reviews which penalise good management. Over the summer, I have been running a survey of Reading East publicans, and have just published the report. One Enterprise Inns lessee – who has created a very successful and expanding business – has told me of other ways that success is punished. A rent increase of 35% (on premises that are incapable of being expanded) is only half the story.

The model of rigid control Enterprise runs is particularly ruthless when it comes to beer prices under the tie. My recent survey found pubco tenants reporting being charged between 30 and 50% more for product that they had to buy through Enterprise than they could get if free of tie. Part of the extra cost is to pay for the cellar monitoring equipment that the pubcos forcibly install to try and penalise anyone trying to buy beer at the open market price for their beer.

I now have a spreadsheet which details exactly how Enterprise works. It shows that Enterprise's price uplift goes up to a staggering 60 and even 70 per cent on some kinds of bottled beer, compared to an open market cost. This is despite all of the economies of scale that we know Enterprise is able to extract (and does from smaller brewers via the much-vaunted SIBA regional small brewers' scheme).

Five days after the Jolly Anglers closed, Enterprise Inns released to the pub trade press a set of weasel words in a 13-point 'charter' to improve its reputation in the trade and to try and stave off government intervention and reform of the tie. It included a commitment to end the imposition of restrictive covenants (not, it should be noted, to be examined retrospectively), as well as a seeming commitment to end upward-only rent reviews. It contained so many caveats that none of the Enterprise lessees I have spoken to think the promises will ever be implemented.

Enterprise and their fellow pubcos are set up on a model of venture capital debt. Formed after the 1988 Beer Orders broke up the brewers' monopoly on the pub trade, the companies are often trading with billions of pounds of debt on estates of barely viable value. I understand Enterprise Inns has an annual outlay of over £700m on debt repayments alone. Hence the fire sale of Newtown's community pub may have bought off Enterprise's American lenders for barely an hour or two.

Despite the noise around the Sustainable Communities Act – a campaign which is in danger of being looked at as an end in itself – local communities and councils have precious little ability to protect pubs. Yes, of course campaigners such as CAMRA along with communities can object to change of use. Liberal Democrat councillors can ensure their council's planning policies on change of use are as robust as can be. But even on planning use classes, the pub has no meaningful protection. That, and everything else that can practically help to save the pub, is in the dead hand of Whitehall.

The Tories have been running a 'Save the Pub' campaign that is facile and insults the intelligence. It includes a 'how to save your local pub' guide, which could have been written by an intern in two minutes. The reason the Tory campaign is facile and insulting is precisely because it fails even to acknowledge the pubco problem.



Gareth Epps (right) and Liberal Democrat MP Greg Mulholland fight the closures

That is why it is vitally important that the Liberal Democrat policymakers and front bench seize the opportunity. Pub closures are a localist issue. They are a very real example of where social liberals can campaign for free trade. They involve challenging unacceptable monopolies for the common good. And if we don't, then the Tories will skew the agenda to the benefit of nobody but themselves.

Gareth Epps is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Reading and a member of the Liberator Collective

FAILING SOCIETY

The Liberal Democrats had better define their idea of community before someone else does it for them, warns Simon Titley in a review of a new Rowntree study

What do the Liberal Democrats mean by ‘community’? It is a term they are fond of using but it is hard to discern any real meaning beyond a vague nostalgia for a time when people nipped in and out of each other’s houses to borrow a cup of sugar.

This is not an academic question. ‘Community’ defines the ways in which people bond, not just in neighbourhoods but also on other shared ground such as their work, education or pastimes. Human beings are social animals and, to thrive, they need a degree of solidarity and mutuality.

Yet our sense of community has weakened significantly over the past forty years or so. The pillars of society on which most people relied are disappearing. Extended families have scattered; we are scarcely on nodding acquaintance terms with our neighbours; local pubs and clubs are closing down; people are retreating into their private spaces; and social relationships are being replaced by economic ones.

Of course, traditional communities have their disadvantages. They can be oppressive, intrusive or censorious, limiting people’s freedom and opportunities. But as individualism has flourished, it seems we have thrown out the baby with the bathwater. As a result, people feel increasingly isolated, face common problems alone and are made to feel that these problems are their own individual fault.

It has not helped that the term ‘community’ has been debased, ‘care in the community’ being a particularly egregious example. And if we’re honest, ‘community politics’ rarely means what it says. A couple of years ago when I was writing a chapter for the book *Reinventing the State*, I coined the term ‘the banjo playing community’ to satirise this abuse. Life imitates art. I looked up the term on Google only to find more than 200 websites where it was being used for real.

DILEMMA FOR LIBERALS

The question of community presents liberals with a dilemma. Liberals believe in the primacy of the individual and the value of human autonomy. But we still value communities and do not wish to lose them in the process. This leaves liberals exposed to criticism.

Across the political spectrum, the disintegration of society is perceived to be a real problem demanding a response. Communitarians of both left and right aim to fix a ‘broken society’. But in their desire to revive some form of solidarity, they could threaten our individuality and autonomy. And they are blaming liberals for social breakdown.

Critics attack liberals in two ways. They blame the social revolution of the 1960s – with its emphasis on personal liberation – for many of the social ills of today, in particular the breakdown of the family. Or they conflate liberalism with the neoliberalism that has been the dominant ideology for the past thirty years. Neoliberalism has been the main engine of social atomisation, encouraging people to redefine their identity and human worth in terms of consumerism.

Understandably, the most common criticism currently levelled at neoliberalism is that it has been the bad idea behind the financial crisis. The economic theories of efficient markets and rational actors, once regarded as sacred truths, are now intellectually discredited. The moral critique of neoliberalism, meanwhile, has focused on the individual greed of bankers.

But it is also the case that neoliberalism has been a socially corrosive force. It elevated markets, merely an economic mechanism, into an ethical paradigm for all human behaviour. The values on which a healthy society depends – such as morality, love, justice, empathy, neighbourliness – were either abandoned or redefined in market terms.

SIDELINED

The Liberal Democrats are being sidelined in the debate about society because they have developed neither a coherent critique of social atomisation nor a compelling vision of the kind of society they would like to foster.

Most people are acutely aware of the problem. They experience it less in spectacular acts of ‘anti-social behaviour’ than in low-level, day-to-day uncivil behaviour, a coarsening of relationships between strangers in which common courtesies have been forgotten. They experience it in the myriad of third marriages and step-grandparents that characterises modern family life. They experience it in anonymous retail chains and cloned High Streets. Older people, in particular, are aware of the loneliness – for example, there are in Britain today more than a million men over 65 living alone and if any of them wants to make friends, the chances are that their local pub has been taken over by a pubco, turned into a trendy bar for teenagers or shut completely.

So there is fertile ground for any political party offering a convincing remedy for these problems. The Conservatives will be offering a return to ‘family values’ (but they won’t warn voters that anyone not in a cosy nuclear family will miss out on the tax breaks). The Labour Party will be offering a form of communitarianism promising a friendly arm round your shoulder (but only if you belong to a ‘community’ defined by Labour).

What have the Liberal Democrats to offer? A knock on a million doors and, er, “why not tell us what you think?” They haven’t a clue.

The party used to know, before *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics* was buried under a mound of leaflets. And it occasionally nibbles at the edges of the problem, whether it is Greg Mulholland’s excellent campaign against pub closures or Jo Swinson highlighting the misery caused by the promotion of unrealistic body images in advertising. But someone needs to join the dots.

DISTINCTIVE POSITION

The Liberal Democrats have the potentially distinctive position of recognising that community and individuality are not incompatible; that it is not a paradox that most people’s individuality can flourish only with the support of other people; that the healthiest communities are ones that individuals enter into voluntarily.

That seems like a sound liberal principle and so it is hard to understand why such a straightforward proposition is not being articulated more forcefully by the Liberal Democrats. The field cannot be left clear to communitarians who insist that our individuality must be smothered for the good of society.

To see what that field looks like, there is no better starting point than the new book *Contemporary Social Evils* produced by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The JRF initiated a major consultation among leaders, thinkers, activists and commentators – as well as the wider public via a web survey – to explore which underlying problems pose the greatest threat to British society in the twenty-first century.

The results in this book are drawn from across the political spectrum so there is not necessarily a consensus. There are certainly no quick fixes on offer. But there is considerable agreement on the nature and scope of the problem and it is refreshing to see this topic granted serious study.

Instead of a modish discussion of ‘issues’, the Rowntree book begins with a definition of terms because social evils have always been with us but their nature changes. Here, the web survey of more than 3,500 members of the public is particularly illuminating. While people recognise a corrosion of society, there is no widespread hankering after the past. People embrace modernity and freedom but feel that something may have been lost in the process.

ME, ME, ME SOCIETY

A central theme is the growth of individual greed. A major difference between contemporary social evils and those of the past is that, while some people have been excluded from prosperity, a more significant problem is the nature of that prosperity itself, which has in some respects corroded interpersonal and communal ties. The web survey revealed a widespread feeling that we live in a “me, me, me society” and that human bonds have consequently weakened.

One survey participant hit the nail on the head: “We are in danger of losing sight of what is important in life, like kindness, playfulness, generosity and friendship. The immaterial things that can’t be bought or sold.”

Consumerist individualism and declining community are widely perceived as the greatest social evil. But six other major problems recurred in the survey results: the misuse of drugs and alcohol; declining values (a blurring or loss of moral boundaries); declining social virtues (such as

tolerance, honesty and respect); family breakdown and poor parenting; inequality and poverty; and the failure of democratic institutions and the sense of powerlessness.

Cutting across these and other concerns expressed in the survey is an overarching sense of unease about the pace of social change. It is not that people do not want change or do not appreciate its benefits. Rather, they fear the inadvertent loss of valuable things along the way, and feel like hostages to change rather than its controllers.

There is one Liberal Democrat contribution to the Rowntree book; Baroness (and rabbi) Julia Neuberger, with a chapter titled ‘Unkind, risk averse and untrusting: if this is today’s society, can we change it?’ Were she cruder, she could have titled her chapter ‘Why people should get off their arses instead of expecting someone else to do everything’.

Her chapter is a frank assessment of the degree to which overblown panics about such issues as the risks faced to children by predatory paedophiles have warped the human instinct of kindness, while “risk aversion has increased a natural human reluctance to get involved”. Neuberger is particularly scathing about therapy culture. “Fear of others has turned us inwards,” and the rightful place of psychotherapy “is in the clinical setting and not in the everyday encounter with self-examination that, at worst, leads to an inability to act.”

Many liberals will find Rowntree’s book uncomfortable reading because it not only expresses firm moral judgements but also insists that we make them too. Those with an inclination to moral relativism or an ‘anything goes’ definition of personal liberty may recoil from such demands.

But politics demands that we make clear moral choices. What kind of moral values should society uphold? There is an urgent need for such a discussion and the Liberal Democrats aren’t having it, because it is outside their comfort zone. They would rather have technocratic debates about service delivery and budget setting; tactical debates about local campaigning techniques; or trendy therapeutic debates that view social problems in terms of individual failure.

If the Liberal Democrats want to be relevant, they need to develop a coherent world view about the nature and function of society and its problems and solutions. There needs to be joined-up thinking rather than a disparate series of green papers examining problems in isolation. Only then can campaign messages be developed that might have some impact.

If the Liberal Democrats do not address people’s central concerns about social disintegration, rival parties surely will. And because these parties are not liberal parties, they will point to human autonomy as a curse and attempt to roll back many hard-won freedoms in the name of social cohesion.

If the present economic crisis does not improve, popular resentments will build up and the ground will become more fertile for authoritarians who offer the security people seek at a price we cannot afford.

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective

Contemporary Social Evils by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation is published by the Policy Press, price £17.99

PUBLIC SPACE OR PRIVATE CONTROL?

Public spaces in our cities are being lost to corporate control in the name of ‘regeneration’. David Boyle reviews a new book analysing this disturbing trend

A man who walked backwards into oncoming traffic to prove the value of ‘shared space’ on roads is the unlikely hero of an important new book about the places we live in, the failures of regeneration and the speedy erosion of our basic liberties.

Hans Monderman was a Dutch engineer whose walking backwards stunt put his ‘shared space’ on the planning map, at least in continental Europe – the idea that ambiguous road junctions are a good deal safer than places that are cluttered with signs telling everyone what to do.

His thinking has had little impact in the UK so far, with the possible exception of Conservative controlled Kensington and Chelsea, but Anna Minton believes his ideas have deeper implications for other spaces in the city, whether it is shared space or ‘loose space’, roads or pavements.

Anna Minton is a former *Financial Times* journalist, and books about planning by journalists are normally easier to read than those written by planners (with the exception of those by the *éminence grise* of the planning profession, Sir Peter Hall, who writes like an angel). This is no exception.

She has made the growth of gated communities, private police and privatised city space her own issue in recent years, and her new book *Ground Control: Fear and happiness in the 21st century city* draws some of these important themes together.

But at the heart of it, she also identifies something of a paradox – though she doesn’t put it like that – which applies to cities as much as roads. Loosen the regulatory grip, and you hand cities over to corporate control; increase the regulatory grip, and you re-assert control by bureaucracy. Neither option gives much control to ordinary people.

That is the basic problem, and we can see all around us the results of both approaches. She particularly highlights the obscure corporate regulations that now control many new shopping centres, some of them big enough – like Westfield or Liverpool One – to dominate whole neighbourhoods, controlled by private police to maximise access to wealthy shoppers and minimise it for everyone else.

“These are areas where the Englishman is allowed as a privilege, not as a right,” one City planning lawyer told her. They include shopping areas, riverside walks, parks and housing estates, even financial areas of cities like Canary Wharf.

The rules are known as ‘estate management strategies’ and are hard to discover. They are subject to commercial

confidentiality and Anna Minton came up against a brick wall when she asked Grosvenor Estates about those governing Liverpool One.

Most of them forbid political activity – that is the situation in private areas like Canary Wharf or parts of London’s South Bank. Some forbid filming, some even forbid eating in public. We aren’t told.

They are dominated by CCTV cameras, which are managed by the same private police, and – after the Olympics – probably augmented by unmanned intelligence drones flying overhead.

They are part of the disastrous wave of redevelopment under the rubric of ‘regeneration’, which has given us bland identikit places (Paddington Waterside is a “personality free zone” according to Anna Minton, and she’s right), increasing numbers of gated communities, and – as a result, she argues – a population increasingly fearful of crime.

Worse, they are more fearful of crime the further they are from it. The less crime they face, the more it terrifies them. No wonder government crime statistics cause so much confusion, as the crime rate plummets but our fear of it rises.

David Blunkett is one of the key villains of the book, for deliberately encouraging the growth of private police and security. So is the American planning theorist Oscar Newman (who coined the term ‘defensible space’) and the ubiquitous Broken Window theory of policing.

I’m not sure, if I had been writing the book, whether I would have come to quite these conclusions. Defensible space and the Broken Window theory are important, even if they have been taken way beyond the point where they could be useful. There is something about policy-makers these days, on both sides of the Atlantic, which means that – when an idea works – it is pushed beyond its logical conclusions.

Nor is this as new as all that. People have been making much the same kind of criticisms about Canary Wharf and London Docklands ever since Michael Heseltine first descended on the area in the full flush of enthusiasm following the 1981 Brixton riots.

The literature from the USA has also covered similar phenomena, and the growth of private towns in particular, especially the business of living in a town that is owned, managed and regulated entirely by Disney, like Celebration in Florida (residents are given ‘a say’, which is New Labour-style *faux* democracy).

But then again, I wasn't writing this book – though I wish I had – and what Anna Minton has managed is a British version of the celebrated *Edge City* that planning journalist Joel Garreau wrote about the bizarre new private towns of the USA a generation ago.

It is an important book as well, and for Liberals in particular – not least because Liberal Democrat administrations are at the forefront of some of these trends, both the good and the bad. It seems to me that there are three very important lessons for us here.

NAME THE ENEMY

The first lesson is that we need to face up to, name and dedicate to fighting the two key mistakes that lie behind this slow erosion of our right to our own cities. Regeneration has funnelled huge sums over the past generation into run-down areas on the flawed idea that economic success will trickle down. It didn't and won't, but – although we know that perfectly well – the same mistakes keep being made.

The other mistake is that blandness is a recipe for economic success. It isn't. In fact, people invest in and want to live in places that are distinctive, which means that 'clone towns' are likely to be less economically successful in the medium term – even if they didn't leech local earnings out, making local economies more dependent, which they do.

That is less accepted by the policy community, but it is just as true.

THE WRONG KIND OF LIBERALISM

The second lesson of Anna Minton's book for Liberals is something she doesn't say, because she doesn't reach far enough back in her narrative, and it is uncomfortable. The growth of private police and private space is partly because Liberals took for granted for too long the low-level disorder, petty crime and mild unpleasantness that so many people live with whether they like it or not.

We – and it is, in some ways, us – failed to make finding a Liberal solution to this an absolute priority. We confused Liberalism with a kind of vapid licence for everybody to do what they liked, failing to understand that crime and disorder is, above all, an attack on liberty. We confused Liberalism with post-modern relativism. Some of us still do.

TACKLE MONOPOLY POWER

The third lesson is another failure to realise where the new assault on liberty is coming from, represented this time by growing corporate power.

The problem is that Liberal Democrats have been confused, for the past two decades, about privatisation. They have rightly drawn attention to the flaws in public-private partnerships, they have echoed Anna Minton's fears about private police, but they haven't really addressed the central problem – which is that private, corporate tyranny is as ferocious as state tyranny.

Actually, privatisation is all but irrelevant. What is important is the privileged collusion between Labour and

“David Blunkett is one of the key villains of the book”

Conservative governments and increasingly monopolistic corporate power. Perhaps, because the left of the Liberal Democrats remains stuck, in some ways, in Fabian welfarism, they just don't see monopoly as the tyranny it is.

As a result, we are ignoring in our analysis the consolidation of corporate power, especially in food. Six companies now control 75-80 per cent of the global pesticides market. DuPont and Monsanto together dominate the world seed markets for maize (65 per cent) and soya (44 per cent).

Monsanto controlled 91 per cent of the global genetically modified (GM) seed market in 2001. Two American companies control almost half the world trade in bananas. Four supermarket giants control three-quarters of the food sales in the UK. There are only a handful of UK companies now capable of delivering the huge local authority contracts for waste or call centres. Whatever else this is, it isn't free market competition.

The so-called 'ordo-liberals', the German economic liberals in revolt against Hitler in the 1930s, argued that free and open markets require not just competition, but also competitors – otherwise global competition becomes a narrow battle between a handful of giants, fighting over the heads of the majority of the world's population.

That principle has been ignored by UK governments over the past generation in the mistaken belief that somehow a handful of whales are more easily manipulated than a cacophony of minnows. The result is not just a tyrannical economy, but a sluggish one.

Half a century ago, tackling monopoly power was at the heart of Liberal economic policy, and – because we have allowed it to slip from our consciousness – the argument has gone by default.

Those corporate privileges are the result of collusion over a generation between corporate monopolists and public sector technocrats. Anna Minton's private spaces, and the control they demand over all of us in our own cities, are the direct result.

The more monopolistic we allow our corporations to be, the more they can dictate their own agenda, the less power we have in our dealings with them, as our so-called 'choice' dwindles to a handful of options that are identical, and identically bad.

David Boyle is a fellow of the New Economics Foundation and a member of Liberal Democrats' Federal Policy Committee. His new book *Money Matters* is published by Alastair Sawday.

Anna Minton's book *Ground Control* is published by Penguin at £9.99

CITY LIBBING

The Liberal Democrats now control most of England's major cities. John Shipley argues the party has a distinctive urban approach and its success is not just down to good management

Liberal Democrats have been in control of Newcastle upon Tyne for five years.

Elected to get high council tax rises under control and to promote a cleaner, greener, safer agenda, there are now 50 Liberal Democrat councillors to just 28 for Labour. At the European elections in June, Liberal Democrats topped the poll.

This success is reflected across many cities in Britain. The party no longer surrenders cities outside London to Labour (and sometimes to the Conservatives) as it once did. No longer are we just an occasional repository for a protest vote against Labour's local excesses. People actually like and want Liberal Democrats to run their local council.

We now lead outright in Bristol, Hull, Liverpool, Newcastle upon Tyne, Portsmouth, Rochdale, Sheffield and Stockport; and we jointly control Birmingham, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Leeds and Oldham. The days when we were just a party of rural areas and some suburban seats are long gone.

Our success is partly about timing. Labour's loss of public support after several years in government is part of the story. Its assumption that it could never lose power in its heartlands is another – people grew tired of them and wanted change. The Conservatives' invisibility in many of our cities and urban areas meant that organisationally they were unable to take advantage of Labour's weakness. They were also not trusted by the electorate after their experiences of the Thatcher and Major years.

There was thus an opportunity for experienced, campaigning Liberal Democrat activists to win the trust of their electorates after many years in opposition.

Some commentators have questioned whether the Liberal Democrats have a 'big vision' for the cities they control. Without doubt we do. However, most won power comparatively recently and inevitably have had to spend time ensuring they are better managed than they were under Labour. They all have the serious impact of the recession to cope with as well as major cuts in public spending to plan for over the next few years. It will not be easy.

RECONCILING DEMANDS

Running a city means reconciling competing demands because there is never enough money to do all the things you want to. Surveys tell us, perhaps not surprisingly, that residents want high quality services but prefer low council tax. That is because they want to be assured that waste and inefficiency have been eliminated before they get asked to

pay more. It is a reasonable expectation, which Labour found difficult to appreciate, which is why transformation of the way councils work and deliver their services is so important for Lib Dem controlled councils.

Costs must be reduced through efficiency gains if we are to deliver value for money as well as keep control of council tax levels. In Newcastle, we have seen savings of more than £20m a year through transformation of management structures and changes to procurement policy. Importantly, there has been no diminution in service delivery; many services have got better.

Councils have a basic duty to provide good quality services where people live. The suburbs cannot be ignored in the dash for big city centre capital projects, even though cities have to invest in their strategic role because that drives a sub-regional economy and produces jobs. It's all about getting the balance right between the suburbs and the city centre. Liberal Democrat councils seem to be doing this in a way Labour failed to.

Liberal Democrats in cities will continue to be successful electorally if they run day-to-day services well at a fair council tax level, deliver city-wide regeneration projects providing jobs and homes and lead democratic renewal through neighbourhood empowerment. They must also demonstrate civic leadership across the big agendas of greening the environment, social inclusion and child poverty.

At a city council by-election earlier this year, I knocked-up a declared Lib Dem supporter on polling day to be met with a torrent of abuse. He had changed his mind. He said the council was guilty of "letting in immigrants who take our jobs". Behind the rant I detected a fear of the possible loss of job and home because of the recession. This is dangerous for social cohesion. It means we have to work harder on jobs, training and affordable housing.

Liberal Democrat councils are certainly working very hard to mitigate the impact of the recession – increased capital investment through more borrowing, more apprenticeships, more training places, increased spending on infrastructure and more help for small businesses. We're trying to procure more contracts locally by dividing up contracts to enable more local companies to tender.

Our ambition for our economy in Newcastle and for the next generation of jobs is best demonstrated by our pushing forward Newcastle's cutting-edge role in new industries such as life sciences and renewable energy. Many new jobs are now on the way, particularly in the energy sector. We recently purchased the empty Northern

Rock Tower that has just been built to provide a home for another expanding Newcastle-based company. It is a good investment, which helps to underpin the city's property market.

It is vitally important to build affordable homes for rent in larger numbers. We are now able to build new council houses; over 500 directly in the next few years as well as promoting other sources of affordable housing.

Across all our cities, civic leadership flourishes. In Newcastle, we have built a new £40m library and made major investment in cultural buildings (with partners) of more than £50m in recent years. It has made an enormous difference to tourism levels and has made us a more attractive place for students to study in. The 37,000 full-time students who come to the city play a vital role in driving our economy.

The vote by businesses to pay extra rates to create a Business Improvement District for the city centre was won here in 2008 on the same day it was lost in Labour-held Glasgow. Civic leadership helped deliver this.

We now want more radical financial powers to borrow against future projected business rate income to forward fund large scale infrastructure development.

The current crisis in public confidence over Westminster politics provides a golden opportunity for Liberal Democrat councils to lead democratic renewal through a new localism agenda.

DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL

The starting point for any successful democracy must be an individual citizen's right to influence what happens at a neighbourhood level. At the heart of democratic renewal lies devolving power to residents.

In Newcastle, we are expanding the powers of the city's ward committees, with delegated functions and budgets, to support the delivery of local environmental improvements and to grant aid local voluntary organisations. We use prudential borrowing at a ward level for highway and footpath improvements with a minimum allocation of £100,000 per ward.

Each ward has a coordinator who works with other officers in housing, the police and other local services. Each also has an environmental forum, older and young people's engagement processes and a website. Each ward now has its own Neighbourhood Response Team, with several staff and two vehicles, able to deliver a range of services, including removal of graffiti and litter, fly-tipping, emptying litter bins and grounds maintenance.

We have introduced participatory budgeting which provides local people with an opportunity to get involved in shaping services where they live by giving them direct influence over how money is spent in their area. It was used to make decisions about recent applications to the Children's Fund. It is a long-term approach to decision-making, which has the potential to be applied widely across a range of public spending services, not just the council's.

The benefits include greater community cohesion, increased budget understanding, improvements in the relationships between councillors, officers and residents, more responsive services and improved resident satisfaction.

Our new Citizens' Assembly will provide a means through which people from different communities of place, identity and interest can come together to ensure people are

listened to and, where possible, action taken across all public agencies.

At the heart of deprivation and child poverty is the need to improve long-term educational aspiration and performance. Under Labour, our young people were not getting the start in life they deserved. We aimed to move attainment from being among the worst 5% up to the level of similar authorities. We set up an independent commission to help us understand the root problem.

One lesson was about the importance of basic listening and speaking skills in early years. We've invested in this. There was also a need to make more targeted use of resources overall.

The outcome has been consistently improving results – we're now one of the fastest improving authorities in the country. Last year, we reached a milestone when, for the first time, the percentage of pupils achieving 5 GCSEs at grades A to C was above the national average. Newcastle is now a beacon council for action on child poverty.

In 2004, Newcastle was right at the bottom of the rankings for recycling. We've almost quadrupled the rate to approaching 47%. We've invested in additional facilities, including extra wheelie bins for garden waste. We've brought recycling collection back in-house, to achieve synergies with weekly residual waste collection and to give us better control.

We've developed a climate change and sustainability plan based on clear priorities for mitigation of green house gases – carbon management programmes for buildings, transport, procurement and so on. But it also covers adaptation, so we can react better – for example to changing weather patterns.

Carbon footprints have been calculated for all council buildings and there are energy reduction targets and energy champions in place. We have photovoltaic schemes for council flats, solar thermal for swimming pools and new bungalows, and biomass boilers for the new schools and for high rise flats. We've got electric motorbikes powered by a wind turbine, as well as ten hybrid electric buses providing riverside services. We now have the lowest carbon emissions of any UK city.

Distinctive Liberal Democrat cities will be cities that grow, in which people want to live, work and spend leisure time. They will be inclusive, providing opportunities and choice in employment, learning and homes. They will be cities that understand the value of public and third sector spending.

Liberal Democrat cities will be greener and more sustainable. They will be places that balance investment in the city centre with investment in suburbs. They will be based on priorities arising from neighbourhood empowerment.

It is one thing to win power but another to keep it. Liberal Democrat councils will be assessed on their ability to offer a distinctive agenda in tune with people's concerns and priorities. That's partly about leadership and partly about doing the day-to-day things well at a reasonable cost.

Continue as we are and the electorates across many of our cities will continue to give us their trust.

John Shipley is Liberal Democrat leader of Newcastle City Council

A MORAL TALE FROM THATCHER

The Thatcher government used the Winter of Discontent as a ‘moral tale’ to advocate change. The Liberal Democrats should do the same with the City of London’s bonus culture to show how it has damaged the whole community, says Matthew Sowemimo

The most encouraging thing about the *A Fresh Start for Britain* document is that Nick Clegg introduces it by saying, “even in these most difficult times giving children the life chances they deserve will be my personal priority”. The document’s commitments are consistent with the leader’s pledge.

The mood music is very different from the *Make It Happen* paper that was so vigorously contested at last year’s conference. *Make It Happen* effectively subordinated a whole raft of the party’s spending ambitions to the overriding objective of reducing the overall burden of taxation.

Our current economic circumstances provide an illustration of why rolling back the frontiers of the state would have had considerably adverse effects. Applying such a policy would have eliminated any government’s ability to engage in countercyclical spending, such as funding infrastructure projects. The major dynamic of this recession – the withdrawal of credit, has again vindicated Keynes and his belief that when the private sector contracts the public sector has to expand.

SAFETY NETS

This recession has again highlighted the fact that people from both middle and working class backgrounds look to government to protect them in economic downturns. When former financial traders and corporate lawyers join the ranks of the unemployed, the constituency for the safety net expands. Government can ensure that social safety nets are robust and that the most vulnerable families do not see a dramatic deterioration in their position.

In the post-Thatcher era, we have lower safety nets than in a number of other northern European countries. Comparative research shows that British children fell more deeply into poverty in past recessions than their counterparts in Germany. This is due to the lower safety nets that prevail in Britain. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation published an analysis assessing the potential effects of the recession, *Ending Child Poverty In A Changing Economy*, arguing that more children may fall into severe poverty as a result of the rise in unemployment.

I also feel that the people in our party who emphasise the scale of the state rather miss the point.

For people in many parts of our community, those who despair at the police arriving on time to deal with thugs in their neighbourhood, or who feel bypassed by decisions made by local health commissioners, the issue is not the size of the state but its responsiveness.

I, and many others in the party, have worked at a community level to help build the confidence and skills of people to hold decision makers to account about the state of local services. I’ve argued before in these pages that serious consideration should be given to entrenching social rights in a written constitution that would strengthen the hand of people when they demand that service providers embrace rather than resist change.

Safety nets of course are designed to help families deal with economic shocks; they are not instruments to realise opportunity. In recent years, the party has put the emphasis on raising levels of educational attainment in deprived communities. However we have to pursue other policy approaches if we are, to quote Plowden, end the cycle of children being ‘born to fail.’

The Pupil Premium should help militate against the inherited disadvantages that have faced children from poor homes for decades. However, it will not of itself be able to transform the prospects for these children. The home environment can cast a long shadow over the aspirations and outlook of many disadvantaged children and it has to be addressed in its own right if we are to break the stubborn cycle of intergenerational disadvantage.

MENTAL ILLNESS

Long term unemployment has also been associated with high levels of mental illness in some parts of our community. These circumstances have been shown to impair a mother’s ability to develop the cognitive skills of their children before school. Overcrowded housing conditions and insecurity housing are strongly associated with poor health and antisocial behaviour.

This is why the commitments to expand the availability of more social housing for rent in *A Fresh Start for Britain* are so important. As a party we should be giving equal emphasis to housing as we have to educational inequalities. The home is part of the formative environment and is where some of the most crucial relationships take place that shape a child’s life.

We also have to invest to ensure that the recession's impact does not extract a long term price in terms of reducing our skills base. The return of youth unemployment, one of the greatest curses of the 1980s, not only threatens to bring social disharmony but could greatly reduce our growth potential as a country. This scenario means that we must not postpone investment because of fears over the mountainous budget deficit. If a generation of young people become detached from the labour market, this will itself generate costs and future public spending pressures.

LEFT TO ROT

The Conservatives of course see the fiscal situation as an opportunity to eliminate safety nets and restrict the forms of social spending where poor communities are the major beneficiary. The party that was content to let whole communities in former mining and shipbuilding areas rot should be challenged on its heritage at election time.

The Conservatives also show no signs of learning the lessons from successive periods of unsustainable property price bubbles and irresponsible financial speculation. Whereas Liberal Democrats recognise that monetary policy decisions have to be more alert to the overheating of key sectors and that we should be drawing upon wider macroeconomic tools to manage the economy.

How do we assemble the political coalition needed for a sustained effort to redistribute income? We have to begin by doing what the Labour Government failed to do during its three terms – be an advocate for change. We should never forget that Margaret Thatcher did not simply deregulate, reduce taxes and privatise industries. The Thatcher government accompanied these policies with robust and consistent public advocacy emphasising why it thought free markets generated positive outcomes for the whole community.

We need an equivalent public advocacy effort to make the case for why equality serves the wider community interest and not simply the interests of deprived communities. When large sections of the community do not realise their full potential, whether by being marooned in low paid/low status work or in long term unemployment, we all pay a price in lost taxes and lower productivity.

We also have to challenge the image of the poor that has been generated by years of right-wing propaganda. We have to demonstrate that in most cases poverty is a social and not an individual failing.

“We need to make the case for why equality serves the wider community interest and not simply the interests of deprived communities”

There is a continuing debate as to whether unequal societies like Britain and the United States also bring about a social burden that is carried by all social classes in areas that do not directly affect our competitiveness, such as in rates of mental illness. A future progressive government should also use the causes of the current recession, in the same way that the Thatcher Government used the Winter of Discontent, as a ‘moral tale’ as to how dynamics of inequality in the City of London’s bonus culture ultimately delivered dramatically bad outcomes for the whole community.

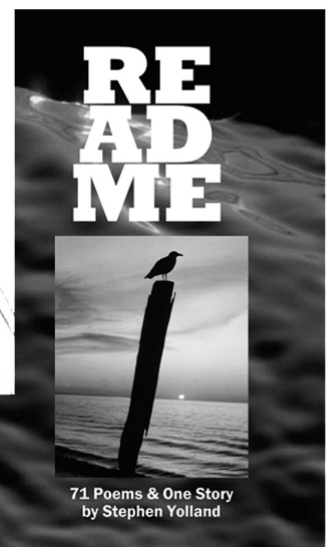
Advocacy, while a necessary precondition for a renewed drive for equality, is insufficient. We have to broaden the political movement that will champion change against the ferocious counter-assault that would come from the right-wing press. We also have to find new ways to campaign that help overcome the influence of the opponents of equality. This is a subject to which the Social Liberal Forum will return to in the months to come.

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

"About Bloody Time."



22 years after leaving Britain for Australia to write a book of poetry - after a few adventures - Liberal stalwart Steve "Yolly" Yolland has finally got his act together.



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THE FINE MIND THE PARTY IGNORED

Ralf Dahrendorf pointed out paths that could have saved British Liberals from blind alleys if only they had listened, says Michael Meadowcroft in an appreciation of the late political thinker

Liberalism was hugely fortunate in having such an articulate and original thinker and advocate as Ralf Dahrendorf, who died in June aged 80. British Liberalism was unfortunate in that he was already 45 before he came to London in 1974 – as director of the London School of Economics. One can only speculate as to the difference he might have made to Liberal Party politics here had his influence been significant 20 or even 15 years earlier.

As it was, his political career began in his native Germany in 1968 when the Free Democrat Party, under Walter Scheel, was a much more radical Liberal animal than its later incarnation under Graf von Lambsdorff.

Ralf's original discipline was sociology, but although sociology certainly continued to underpin and inform his writing, politics and applied political theory were his consistent forte. His background in sociology ensured that his political ideas had a secure foundation in rigorous analysis, and his ability to see clearly the flaws in opposing arguments, and particularly in 'received' thinking, was often startling in that once he had pointed out what the Liberal position should be, it tended to be blindingly obvious. I doubt that I was alone in being jealous of Ralf's clarity of mind and intellectual self-confidence.

A PARTY TO END ALL PARTIES

Take, for instance, his description of the Greens in *The Modern Social Conflict* (1988) as "a party to end all parties," based on his view that "in most cases the Greens are merely the translation of a social movement into a political organisation. The social movement responds to one of the disparities in people's social position, the threats to the environment of life. Since these threats affect everybody, a 'party' to represent them is a contradiction in terms." Given the Liberals' and Liberal Democrats' consistent espousal of sustainable economics from Mill onwards, why are we not shouting Dahrendorf's analysis of the Green Party at every opportunity?

Following Ralf's appointment at the LSE, the BBC invited him to give the 1974 Reith Lectures. Entitled 'The New Liberty – Survival and Justice in a Changing World', the six lectures set out for his audience of movers and shakers a thoroughly Liberal analysis and prescription, clothed in a flimsy non-partisan sheen for the sake of the

BBC's reputation. Once again the party failed to appreciate the intellectual asset available to it at a crucial political moment.

One was always struck by Ralf Dahrendorf's remarkable prescience. The Reith lectures, and his even more focussed political follow up, *Life Chances* (1979), were the Liberal answer to Thatcherism even before its embodiment in government.

His emphasis on the liberating power of the individual's ability to grasp personal opportunities, underpinned by an enabling state, provided Liberals, had they but seen it, with both the case against Thatcherism and the reason for distancing themselves from an outworn social democracy. By November 1980 Ralf was already convinced by what he saw of Thatcher to write: "The Conservatives are trying their hardest to turn back the pages of history and will finally be crushed by their weight, but not before they crush others. The experiment is an expensive one."

Given Ralf Dahrendorf's visceral opposition to conservatism, his intellectual critique of authoritarian socialism and his early social democratic background, one might have expected him to be sympathetic to the SDP.

Far from it. His most famous quote is probably that the SDP was "promising a better yesterday". The direct quote is today elusive, and Ralf himself, while certainly not resiling from its sentiment, could not recall its first usage. It probably comes from a somewhat similar comment in his June 1982 *New Statesman* review of Susan Crosland's biography of Tony Crosland.

SCATHING PAPER

In fact, he was scathing about social democracy, and his Unsersville State Paper of March 1980, *After Social Democracy*, is a brilliant analysis of the impending challenge that would shortly come from the SDP. I drew a great deal from it for my own booklet a year later, *Social Democracy - Barrier or Bridge?* Neither of us were heeded at the time and the SDP was accorded a deference that it did not deserve, despite Ralf Dahrendorf's sharp comment that "the social democratic approach to the economic, social, cultural and political problems of the day has exhausted its strength. More than that, it has begun to produce as many problems as it solves... social democracy in general has ceased to be a subject of political thought, it is almost as if all the imaginative minds had emigrated to opposition groups".

His conclusion was typically prescient: "... there are no signs at all that a centre party based on the present right wing of the Labour Party will be any more forward-looking than the ruling social democratic parties on the Continent. The issue today is not how to be social democratic, much as this may agitate the victims of adversary politics. The issue is what comes after social democracy. If this is not to be a Blue, Red or Green aberration, it will have to be an imaginative, unorthodox and distinctive liberalism which combines the common ground of social-democratic achievements with the new horizons of the future of liberty".

Later in 1980 he wrote: "Increasingly it has become evident that the social democratic consensus which has enveloped the politics of the industrial world in recent decades is in itself an oppressive force which gives rise to protests and new demands."

When one turns to Ralf Dahrendorf's writing on Liberalism generally and on other key subjects such as Europe or equality, the problem is what to leave out. One is always struck by his sensitive use of language and his vivid analogies. (There ought perhaps be a law against foreigners writing and speaking such beautiful English!). Read for instance the whole of his superb essay on freedom in *The Dictionary of Liberal Thought* (2007), and take this passage from his Reith lectures:

"Improvement is about quality. This begins with small things which are nevertheless not to be discounted, because they improve the quality of our lives. The recovery of cities for people is one example: precincts for pedestrians, underpasses for cars rather than for human beings, restored old buildings rather than slums. The way people live, the space and the comforts of their homes, provides many other examples. So do the arts, the opportunities for recreation and play, sports, and whatever contributes to beauty and to pleasure.

"All this, I repeat, is important for an improving society, but improvement means more. It is more than a butterfly which adds a touch of colour to an otherwise drab and hopeless world, but goes to the core of this world, that is, the social construction of human lives."

Ralf was never frightened of tackling the dilemmas that have always beset Liberal thinkers. In 1988 he gave a remarkable speech to the Liberal International Congress in Pisa, in which he addressed the issue of collective rights:

"For the liberal, there are no collective rights, because all collectivities need representation, and all representatives are temptable by the arrogance of power, and thus liable to take away rights rather than give them protection. Rights are settlements of individuals, and more often than not they serve to protect persons against self-appointed or self-anointed 'representatives' including those who claim to speak for whole peoples."

"He provided Liberals, had they but seen it, with both the case against Thatcherism and the reason for distancing themselves from an outworn social democracy"

He went on to tackle issues of sustainability and liberalism: "The surprising and worrying discovery of the 1980s is that economic growth does not by itself solve all problems. It is, at least in practical terms, not even true to say that we must have growth first and then think about redistribution; most of those who argue this way never get to the second step. The decade of wild, often thoughtless, always greedy growth has in fact raised the issue of citizenship rights for all anew. The long term poor and persistently unemployed are disenfranchised in the sense that they are not a full part of economic life, have little say in political affairs, and live at the margin of society. Liberty is indivisible. Those who accept the exclusion of some have betrayed the principle and will

end in a world of privilege and oligarchy."

For me an additional gain was Ralf Dahrendorf's wide reading which, when cited in his writings, encouraged me to delve further into the authors in question. Who but Ralf would have quoted Albert Camus on the key role of art in political change?

In 1988, at the time of the merger between the Liberal party and the SDP, Ralf told me that my analysis was correct and that he agreed with it, but that he believed that I was wrong not to join the new party. He believed that there was no alternative to the merged party. His contribution to the 1996 book *Why I am a Liberal* emphasised the same point: "If one is active in public life, one needs a party. Being a cross-bencher may be a commendable state of mind, but it is not an effective way of taking part in debate. The party which comes closest to my beliefs and intentions is that of the Liberal Democrats. Why? Because I am a Liberal as well as a liberal." It was the ultimate irony that he apparently never joined the Liberal Democrats and that in 2004 he resigned the Liberal Democrat whip in the House of Lords to move to the cross-benches.

For the Liberal Democrats he had in 1996 chaired the Commission on Wealth Creation and Social Cohesion, which had a debate in the House of Lords but not much other exposure. The truth was that, although he tackled both, Ralf Dahrendorf was more a Liberal philosopher than a policy writer. A broad brush man rather than one for detailed points, his confidence in the relevance of Liberalism should be a lesson for all of us today. As he wrote to me: "It really is my view that the only chance of a political theory for the future which is not a re-writing of the past, is the Liberal chance."

Michael Meadowcroft was Liberal MP for Leeds West 1983-87

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

But are the Liberal Democrats listening? Reform of parliament, a simple EU constitution and a ring-fenced unemployment fund would all be imaginative ways to respond to public concerns, says Tim Pascall

There was a brief moment – as old Speaker Martin was being dismissed – when there was real talk of parliamentary reform: a new speaker who could command the respect and have the enthusiastic support of all sides of the House of Commons; who might dare to refuse a minister's request to make a policy statement to the House when he had done so already on the *Today* programme; and who would stand up for the rights of the members of the House over and above the demands of the executive – the government of the day with its ruling party and its whips; a speaker who could introduce real and meaningful change to the outdated practices of the Commons.

Gordon Brown even had, for once, a few true and sensible words calling for the House of Commons to transform itself from a nineteenth century gentlemen's club into a modern parliament fit for the twenty-first.

But it was only a brief few moments. When it came to the decision to choose a new speaker, the only aspect that was new was that the ballot was secret. The whips were out in force. Labour wanted its candidate and the Conservatives wanted theirs. When Labour saw it couldn't win, it voted instead for the Conservative the Conservatives didn't want – straight back into the yah-boo politics of the nineteenth century! Nothing's been learned.

And once elected, what did John Bercow do? He got rid of the funny clothes that don't even belong to the nineteenth century but to the seventeenth. He might just as well have gone back to true ancient Britain – and sat there on a stool in a loin-cloth. And will he challenge a minister? It's been made perfectly clear that, if he makes life difficult for the present incumbents of the government benches, then his party will see to it that his role as speaker won't survive beyond the next election. So no change there either.

CONFUSED NATION

But Britain as a nation is rather confused. It desperately wants change, but then doesn't. It wants its parliament to be modern, but rather likes all its quaintness. It doesn't like the outdated practices, but wants to keep its traditions. But it can't have it both ways. Either we move into the twenty-first century or hang back somewhere in our dim and distant past.

The House of Commons – in its practices, in its shape, in the way it does its business, in its yah-boo politics has had its day. It's finished. It cannot survive in its semi-ancient form and satisfy the demands of a modern democracy. That's why you won't see anything like it anywhere else in the world.

We need to grab this opportunity to say clearly and loudly that the days of the House of Commons as it's now constituted are finished, in both how it works and where it works.

The old chamber needs to be turned into the museum piece that it is, and a new chamber built in Portcullis House just across the road. It was built to house new offices for the members of the House of Commons, but has at its heart a large, open, well lit and aired atrium which could easily house a modern semi-circular parliamentary debating chamber.

That would – by its very nature – kill off the yah-boo politics we've become so used to, but which is now doing so much damage to the whole democratic process.

A parliament where the speaker sits in the centre facing the members, the government to one side, facing the chamber to which it is supposed to give account of itself – not only to the opposition members, but also to the members of its own party; to the other side of the speaker the main rostrum from which members make their formal speeches. A modern parliamentary chamber with a seat for every member, interruption microphones so that every member gets a fair chance to challenge, and a voting system that takes seconds not hours. A chamber that you see working in any other democracy in the world – even in America (for those who seem unable to look in any other direction but that).

The Dutch had a lower house quite similar to our House of Commons until the mid-1990s and accepted it was a thing of the past, so moved to a new, dramatically modern chamber. Germany has put a bright modern chamber into the shell of the old Reichstag. Scotland and Wales now have their own modern parliaments. Westminster has to catch up. Start with the chamber – and the rest will follow on. Someone has to say it. We should be saying it.

TURNING AGAINST EUROPE

The European 'project' is in trouble. At the recent election for the Parliament, turnout seldom exceeded 40%, even in countries that had only recently joined with huge hopes

and expectations. And it was 'won' by the centre-right, the extreme right, and the fringe parties. Why was that in a Europe that is on the whole pretty 'soft socialist'? The reason has to be that the ordinary working people of Europe – which includes its 'professionals' – who could be expected to vote for centre or centre-left parties just stayed at home. At best they've lost interest in Europe, and are even beginning to turn against it.

The fact that none of the political groupings really gave any clear message didn't help. I'm sure that I'm not the only UK voter who saw the choice (if voting at all) as between the parties that more or less want us out of Europe, the one that doesn't give a damn (Labour – in case it isn't clear) or the one that at least wants to get stuck in, the Liberal Democrats.

But does anyone actually know what each party – let alone political grouping – wants to achieve in Europe or what its policies are for Europe? We're lost. And if we don't find ourselves soon, the whole project could die.

The European Union needs to reconnect to the people of Europe, and what better way than to give them what they've been calling for – a vote on a constitution, but one that has some chance of winning. And that's not a vote on an amendment of an amendment of a series of amended treaties that the Lisbon Treaty is.

Europe needs a new constitution that the people can understand and that gives some meaning to the European Union – a constitution, along the American lines, that amounts to no more than a half a dozen pages laying out the basic principles that govern the Union.

We should be calling for the European Parliament to set up a commission to formulate a constitution, the ground rules of the community, with the express intention of putting it to the people of Europe in a referendum. That in itself would concentrate minds. It would enable them to curtail some of the excesses of the EU institutions, and establish in clear and understandable terms where the values of the union lie, and where they should be kept at national or local level.

With its wide political and national representation, the Parliament could achieve what everyone who cares about the European project really wants – an institution which at last has its citizens behind it, which is far from the case today, a constitution for the people.

BANKING MESS

The banks have made a mess of things, so once again we're in a recession. But what makes it so much worse is the fact that when people inevitably lose their jobs, they lose almost all their income too.

The government then loses out, as it gets less tax from those who are no longer working and on the other hand it has to pay out much more in unemployment support and other subsistence benefits.

“We need to grab this opportunity to say clearly and loudly that the days of the House of Commons as it's now constituted are finished, in both how it works and where it works”

The economy loses out too, as so many people, the unemployed, have so little to spend. We already know that it happens in whole districts as major industries close down, but haven't accepted that it happens at national level too – perhaps because those lucky enough not to have been hit too hard by previous recessions didn't really care.

But now we're all being hit, and if anything it's worse where it was better before.

We could do something about it, as other nations have. Put a much more substantial amount into a separate 'unemployment pot' in the good times, so that you can pay out decent rates of unemployment cover in bad times. In Holland, I had to pay roughly 1% of my income into national unemployment

insurance, and I think my employer paid about the same. When I lost my job at 48, I got the equivalent (at the exchange rate of the time) of £1,000 a month net. Basically it was 70% of my previous pay, although capped, so I was on about 65%. And on it I paid all the usual 'stoppages' too.

I was entitled to it because I had lost my job through no fault of my own, and for a period that ranged from a minimum of six months for a 22-year-old to four years for someone who becomes unemployed at 58. So I was able to spend. All I lost was the extras and luxuries like new cars and holidays abroad. My mortgage was safe, and so was any loan that I had.

We should be calling for a proper national unemployment insurance scheme, with pay-outs geared to a person's income and age, so that the loss of a job isn't the disaster it is now – to the person concerned, to his or her family, to the mortgage provider, the credit card company, local stores and businesses, the government and the entire economy.

But the secret of it is that it's a separate pot that's filled in the good times to cover the bad times. It's national and compulsory – but not the government's to play with. That way it wouldn't cost a too much. But it would save an awful lot of misery – and reduce the effects of a recession.

Three bold ideas to catch the imagination of a people that isn't quite sure where it's going.

Tim Pascall was a Liberal Democrat based in Holland for many years, where he wrote extensively on AIDS and was a contributor to *Liberator*. He moved to Hayling Island last year and submitted this article shortly before his sad death in a road accident in August

BEYOND BORDERS

Julie Smith describes the work of Liberal International as Lord Avebury receives its annual prize for freedom

Party members at Bournemouth might wonder why Eric Avebury will take the platform to receive the Liberal International Prize for Freedom, and indeed what the Liberal International is and does.

The annual prize is awarded to an individual who has made an outstanding contribution to freedom and human rights. Previous winners have included Benazir Bhutto, Aung San Suu Kyi, Cory Aquino and Vaclav Havel, people committed to liberal and democratic values in their own countries even if they are not all Liberal in their political philosophy.

In Lord Avebury's case, the contribution to promoting freedom and human rights is perhaps less well-known in the UK than elsewhere in the world – while Liberals may still remember the Orpington by-election, people across the globe, whether in Turkey, Tibet or Bangladesh, have cause to thank his long-standing commitment to human rights.

Support for human rights as well as democracy and the rule of law are the guiding principles of the Liberal International. Established in the wake of the Second World War as a way of fostering links between Liberals and combating the twin threats of fascism and communism (and indeed intolerance in all its guises), LI's focus was initially quite Euro-centric, albeit with Canadian participation.

Its approach was to strengthen cooperation among parties and peoples so that conflict would be averted. With the creation of the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party in the 1970s, however, LI shifted its attention to the global level. In recent years it has expanded to Asia, Africa and Latin America, though not to the United States in any meaningful way. It brings together liberals in support of shared values including individual freedom, social justice and toleration.

LI's work happens in many ways, notably via its Human Rights Committee and also through active support for Liberals in emerging democracies. Its most high-profile activity – and most enjoyable – is Congress, which takes place every 18 months. The last one, held in Belfast in 2008, was attended by Morgan Tsvangirai, then opposition leader in Zimbabwe; the next is due to be held in Cairo at the end of October. Congresses, and the six-monthly executive meetings that take place in between, give members the chance to catch up on political developments in many parts of the world, and to create friendships and contacts with Liberals from many countries.

They also enable participants to gain a deeper understanding of the political realities in the host state, as well as providing a fair amount of cultural interest. Who are Egypt's Liberals? What role can they play in the Egyptian system and what are their chances of bringing about reform? These questions will undoubtedly be up for discussion in Cairo.

Liberalism is far from uniform across the globe – the attitudes of LI members from Asia can be quite different from those of Africa or Europe, for example; indeed British Lib Dems often find themselves at odds with fellow European Liberals, whose commitment to free trade can sometimes make them seem rather more right-wing – but the core values of freedom are evident among all members of Liberal International.

The Lib Dems are full members of LI but the UK has a second body supporting liberalism internationally, the Liberal International British Group. LIBG was set up in the 1940s at a time when the Liberal Party in Britain was in electoral difficulty and unwilling to focus on international cooperation as fully as it might have done. While the party has undoubtedly espoused internationalism from Jo Grimond's leadership onwards, LIBG had continued to exist. It is also a full member of LI and while many members are paid-up Lib Dems, some are not. General support for liberal values is a prerequisite for membership – strict adherence to a party line is not. This is also reflected in the motions submitted to Congress: LIBG and the Lib Dems sometimes put in joint motions but LIBG has the freedom to propose motions that aren't in line with Lib Dem policy.

LIBG also offers the chance for members to debate international issues in the UK, with regular forums on matters of interest. The current series focuses on the rise of Brazil, Russia, India, China with other possible themes including Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. Recently, the work of LIBG has been augmented by a group of researchers in the House of Commons, who have set up the Liberal International Parliamentary Forum (LIPF), which meets monthly to discuss international issues of topical interest.

Many of us first got involved in politics because of a deep concern for international matters, whether in South Africa, the Middle East or Africa, yet such issues are often forgotten amid the routine that can characterise much political activity, especially the door-knocking and leafleting, which is often local if not parochial. LIBG offers an opportunity to take a step back and engage with the issues that brought many of us into politics.

Julie Smith is chair of the
Liberal International British Group (LIBG)

LIBG website: www.libg.org.uk

LI website: www.liberal-international.org

NO TO SURVEILLANCE

Islington Liberal Democrats have created a model of how to reject the surveillance state, says Terry Stacy

Liberal Democrat councillors need to play our part in rolling back New Labour's surveillance state. Councils need to take a stronger stand against the illiberal diktats handed down by central government.

The Liberal Democrats are now the dominant party of urban Britain, running either outright or in partnership the majority of big cities outside London. We control councils right across the country, and set the agenda even where we are in opposition. Liberal Democrats are serious about taking power and using that power to put liberalism into action.

The traditional liberal fight for civil liberties is a local issue.

Local authorities have been given powers under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) to spy on residents, even for trivial offences. CCTV cameras installed by local authorities contribute to Britain being the surveillance-camera capital of the world. Councils now have access to the big, mad government databases.

As liberals, it's in our DNA to be against the idea of the state spying on its citizens. National media coverage of the dodgier examples of RIPA surveillance operations showed that people share our unease. Yet under this appalling Labour government, we have become increasingly spied upon.

Islington's Liberal Democrat council affiliated to the No2ID campaign, and we have always said we would refuse to take part in any pilot scheme or feasibility work in relation to national identity cards or the identity register. We made it a policy of the council that national ID cards would never be required to access council services or benefits – unless the government changed the law to specifically require us to do so.

Now the Liberal Democrat administration in Islington has also made changes to how we use the surveillance powers granted by the government – to make it open, accountable, and transparent.

Under a new protocol in Islington, there will be regular, public oversight by elected councillors on all RIPA operations. The council's Overview Committee – the primary scrutiny committee, which in Islington is chaired by an independent councillor – will receive regular reports on operations.

If someone is found innocent, any data gathered and held by us will be destroyed.



We will use surveillance powers only where appropriate and proportionate, such as when there are serious issues of public protection in which there is no other way of collecting evidence. Council officers need to be reined in, and this starts with councillors being very clear with them about what is and isn't proportionate and appropriate. Councillors take the lead, which filters down through the organisation and brings about real cultural change on the front line.

Islington has used RIPA powers to tackle serious environmental health issues, fraud, and rogue traders selling knives to

children and dangerous fake booze. Sometimes surveillance will be necessary and proportionate to deal with serious crimes. But it needs to be a difficult decision to take. Each case needs to be carefully considered to make sure it's necessary – the last resort.

It can be a slippery slope, and we must not allow 'necessary and proportionate' use to turn into wide-ranging surveillance. The road to hell could well be paved with dog dirt and fly-tipped rubbish.

What's important is that, when local government uses these powers, it is accountable and transparent. The public needs to see what the council is doing – and know who is responsible. If we are using these powers only where they are absolutely needed, then I will not be afraid of justifying it to the Overview Committee, the media and the general public.

Liberal Democrat Shadow Home Secretary Chris Huhne said that, "until we can change the national law, Islington's checks and balances are a model of how councils can behave responsibly".

The Liberal Democrats have a thousand ideas of how we will change the national law, and I have no doubt that eventually we will fight our way into government. But we can use the power that we wield now.

A critical mass of Liberal Democrat councils taking a liberal stand can make real changes to our society in the face of an increasingly authoritarian New Labour government. It's time to take that stand and show people how important defending civil liberties and personal privacy are to Liberal Democrats at all levels of government.

Terry Stacy is the leader of Islington Borough Council

A Fortunate Life
by Paddy Ashdown
Aurum Press 2009 £20

Buy this book and read it. Buy one for a friend so that they can read it. A friend bought a copy for me and it has been one of the best gifts I have been given in a long time. It came to me from Bob Smith, a long time member of Newham Labour Party and maybe one day a convert to the Liberal cause, just as Paddy Ashdown himself was a convert to Liberalism.

Even if you know nothing of Paddy Ashdown, this book of his life story will interest and entertain you. It is candid, clear and often amusing. It is not in the standard rut of a politician's autobiography. Far from it. There is virtually nothing that smacks of self-justification. He makes no attempt to score points at other people's expense or to settle old scores. While full of praise for others, he is more often than not self-deprecating about his own efforts. He lets the facts speak for themselves, often pointing to alternative interpretations of the facts, which are not always entirely flattering to himself. It is a generous and enlightening record of his life.

JJD Ashdown was born in India, moved as a boy to Northern Ireland, and was sent away to boarding school in Bedford, where as a teenager he is left by the rest of his family when they move to Australia as £10 poms following the collapse of his father's business. He sees very little of his parents and siblings after this. There are elements of his early life, which might be said to be 'character forming'. His father took him on the first long trip to Bedford School but thereafter from the age of 11 the young Paddy takes the boat from Belfast to Liverpool and travels by various trains via Crewe to Bedford



REVIEWS

at the start and finish of every term. He reveals that he has suffered a fear of missing trains ever since and who could blame him. He is lucky to be alive after one such trip, when the next boat making the crossing sank in a storm and 133 lives were lost. Not the first time that Paddy Ashdown cheats death. It is remarkable given the number of scrapes and dangerous

When Clement Freud died recently, several newspapers carried his joke – "Paddy Ashdown was trained to kill, Margaret Thatcher was self-taught." Over the years, Paddy was trained to do all sorts from heavy weapons and demolition to the most elaborate SBS work with submarines, such as leaping out of aircraft in the dark into the sea in the hope that a submarine

would be there to collect. The training itself would have been enough to kill ordinary mortals.

It is no wonder that the attractions of taking time off to learn Chinese appealed to him. This chapter of his life in Hong Kong is fascinating. The nickname 'Big fat rice bucket' has not stuck in the same way as 'Paddy' has, which for his later political career was probably just as well. The hilarious incident with the Red Guards and the HSBC bank book is brilliant. On the serious



situations he gets through in his life that he has survived to tell the tale.

Jungle fighting in Indonesia, putting down a rebellion in Borneo; even when he is taking time off he often seems to have come close to death such as when re-enacting a chariot race from the film Ben Hur standing in the bucket seat of a friend's MG. (Don't try this at home).

side of this part of the 1960s, the matter of fact reference and photograph of teaching his wife how to fire a sub-machine gun shows that this was not a dull life.

Jane Ashdown is the real hero of this story. She must have the superhuman qualities of a saint, limitless patience, the ability to move

house from one side of the world to another at a moment's notice, the ability to put up with everyone from Liberal community activists to Bosnian rape victims filling up her family home and needing to be fed and comforted. I defy anyone to read this book and not be filled with admiration for Jane Ashdown.

Paddy is still subject to restrictions when it comes to writing about his time in what he describes as 'the shadows'. This starts with an approach in Hong Kong and winds up in Geneva. After a lifetime of apparently being short of money, the job in Geneva seemed to have finally provided the young Ashdowns with a decent home and car. So why on earth did he abandon all that to take on the no-hope seat of Yeovil for the Liberal Party in 1976 of all years?

The years building up 9 June 1983 (which he says was the best night of his life) will strike a chord with many readers of *Liberator* who were active at the time. Throughout the book, there are references to all sorts of friends and colleagues but it is refreshing that many of the usual great and good are not honoured with a name check. By way of contrast, many readers will be pleased to see a reference to such as the 'redoubtable and delightful Janet Russell' and even a note of the unsung efforts of Peter Grender.

If you are looking for a traditional politician's memoirs here, you will be disappointed – this book is so much better. I recommend to all Liberals the section that includes on page 246 the following – "They were right, and I had nearly wrecked the Party by becoming too attached to my own vision and ignoring the fact that political parties are, at root, human organisations and not machines." There are not many former political leaders who will be as honest or as direct.

Paddy Ashdown was no ordinary political leader. He has packed more into his life than a street full of ordinary leaders. In comparison, just think of the shallow and insubstantial figure of David Cameron – whose biography before becoming Tory leader would consist of little more than Eton, drink, drugs and a job with Norman Lamont.

It is a measure of the particular abilities of Paddy Ashdown that, when his time as party leader and MP came to an end, he simply moved on

to yet another series of dangerous challenges in the Balkans and in Bosnia in particular. This is another absorbing and fascinating part of his life, recorded in his characteristically matter of fact way. It includes some e-mails written by Jane at the time that add colour and context. It also brings out the essentially internationalist outlook of a man whose various jobs in life have taken him all over the world. Unlike others who might have been swept up into self-importance in doing this, he has not lost touch with ordinary people – quite the opposite. He makes it a key feature of his time in Bosnia to keep in contact with and be available to ordinary Bosniaks. His personal feelings about the individual suffering of many in Bosnia along with his personal determination to do something about it is to say the least admirable.

The book ends in 2008 with a picture of Afghanistan's president Karzai on the Ashdown fridge door. Paddy tells us that he is just pretending to be in retirement and Jane is just pretending to believe him when he says so.

But maybe there is one big job left. Perhaps his next project could be to do something about what he describes as the ridiculous robes, monarchist mumbo jumbo and pantomime costumes that are still a requirement in the second chamber of the UK Parliament, the so-called House of Lords. He would be cheered on by all thinking people if he could do something to get rid of these ridiculous hangovers from our medieval past.

John Tilley

***Il Divo* [film] Dir Paolo Sorrentino 2009**

If you think politics has become sleazy in this country, then *Il Divo* provides a salutary comparison. The current furore over MPs' expenses pales into the shade compared with the systemic corruption and organised crime endemic within the spider's web that is Italian politics.

Il Divo documents the career of Giulio Andreotti, Christian Democrat prime minister three times between the 1970s and the 1990s and consummate political survivor. The worlds of politics, religion, high finance, big business and crime are

portrayed as totally and inevitably intertwined.

To remind us of the context, the opening sequence includes the banker Roberti Calvi hanging from Blackfriars Bridge. The influence of the Mafia suffuses the rest of the film, which covers Andreotti's life from the early 1980s, just after the murder of Aldo Moro, to the 1990s where he is tried for, and subsequently acquitted of, links with the Mafia.

I found the film to be visually stunning and the soundtrack adds hugely to its mesmeric quality. Viewers are bombarded with external events and information, even though much of it is hard to make sense of even you have a detailed knowledge of the period. The film is highly stylised and mannered, with almost operatic qualities and a strong sense of the macabre, which made it more like a work of art than a standard political biopic.

The film portrays Andreotti almost as a political automaton, but as a man he remains a complete enigma. It did little to enlighten us on the real thinking and motivation going on behind the veneer, but in many ways that seemed part of the film's message. Andreotti, played superbly and with almost hypnotic qualities by Toni Servillo, comes across more like a waxwork effigy than a living, breathing person. With his hunched shoulders, glasses, tiny pigeon steps and hands clasped he cuts an extraordinary figure and there are only tiny glimpses of the man behind the facade. The viewer is also left none of wiser about his actual involvement in many of the violent acts that flash across the scene, but when Andreotti's conviction for ordering the murder of a journalist is overturned on appeal, one is left feeling that the corruption has triumphed again.

The film reminds us of how politics has been conducted in Italy for many years and prompts the question as to whether anything has really changed under his successor, Silvio Berlusconi, and indeed what manner of film will be made to chronicle his reign. What the ordinary person in Italy makes of this vipers' nest is not really addressed in the film nor its impact on the rest of Italian society.

Claire Wiggins

Monday

This summer has been dominated by talk of “swine flu”. The wireless news reports have come thick and, indeed, fast: a woman in Biggleswade has a sore throat; a schoolgirl in Kendal is feeling a bit under the weather; a man in Dingwall has stayed in bed and not gone to work, but hopes to get up later because there is a film on Channel 4 he would like to see. Physicians have advocated various cures or palliatives: some swear by this new Tamiflu; others cleave to the traditional standby of oinkment. One controversy has been the advisability or otherwise of “swine flu parties”. I am strongly in favour of them: this flu bug does not seem as terrible as all that and it has been very good for my pigs as they have got to meet many new people. Scrubbed to a gleaming pink, they have presented themselves at people’s houses and been entertained to a slap-up tea; in return, they have been able to display the fine table manners I have taught them and learned to engage in polite conversation. One advantage for the hostess is that she can be sure that every last morsel of food will be consumed.

Tuesday

Lunch at my club with my old friend Tinchy Stryder. Following his success in what my more hep acquaintances call “the hit parade”, he has more than once sought my advice on the investment of his new-found riches. I have, for instance, been able to point him in the direction of a Good Thing in Rutland Railway Consols. Today he informs me that he is determined to invest in a Liberal Democrat MP, but cannot make up his mind which. Whom would I recommend? We run through the possibilities: Alan Beith? “I fear you may not be quite His Sort of Thing.” Hazel Grove? A lovely girl, but perhaps a little too racy for the staid Tinchy. Mark Oaten? I have to explain certain delicate matters to an incredulous Stryder – several times. Eventually we hit upon the perfect answer: Norman Lamb. He has an agreeable manner, a most lovely constituency and, I am informed, a large majority. I shall have the papers sent over to Tinchy by fast bicycle tomorrow.

Wednesday

Enjoying a post-theatre drink at one of London’s more select nightspots with a couple of popsies, whom should I come across but our own Lembit Õpik? He has with him the delightful Katie Green, whom I recognise from the billboards. It transpires that they are hard at work on a “Say No to Size Zero” campaign so that those jolly girls who show off the latest designs on the catwalk can have three square meals a day and still find work. I am able to tell them that the first Lady Bonkers fronted – and I used the term advisedly – just such a campaign in the 1920s and succeeded in winning sponsorship from the Zeppelin airship company.

Thursday

At the opera house in Oakham for a gala to celebrate England’s Ashes victory. We are treated to an excerpt from *Swann Lake*, an opera about a promising young off spinner who overcomes his “bad boy” image and problems against short-pitched bowling to become a trusted member of the team – Carlos Acosta’s Peter Siddle is particularly moving.

Lord Bonkers’ Diary

Other items in the programme include a selection of Strauss waltzes and the international premiere of Bopara’s Duck Quintet. Jimmy Anderson’s “O Superman” (a tribute to Andrew Flintstone) is perhaps a little *avant-garde* for some tastes, but it behoves one, in these days of bakelite and reverse swing, to move with the times. The evening closes with the public stoning of the irritating umpire Billy Bowden, so we all leave in good spirits.

Friday

The names of every great Liberal are to be found in the Visitors Book here at the Hall. As a boy I was dandled upon the knee of Mr Gladstone (a first-rate dandler, as I recall) and had my hair ruffled by Sir Charles Dilke. I also spent an entire weekend hiding from Loulou Harcourt in the shrubbery, but this evening I shall pass over that without further comment. Later, when I came into man’s estate, I was able to entertain Campbell-Bannerman, Asquith and Lloyd George myself. Since then I have played host to every Liberal or Liberal Democrat leader at some time or another. Little Steel spent the weekend trying to persuade me to close the old place down and merge with the Duke of Rutland’s Belvoir Castle (the very idea!) whilst Kennedy was very taken with the *Bonkers Arms*. This evening the latest in this long line arrives in the shape of Nick Clegg. Over dinner I am able to give him the benefit of the wisdom acquired during a lifetime in public service, but I fear our pure Rutland air is too heady for him as he falls asleep over the cheese.

Saturday

Towards its Northern reaches, the Bonkers Hall Estate opens out on to wild moorland. It is a desolate landscape of bog and heather, the haunt of red grouse, curlews and hamwees. Young Clegg is determined to go hiking there and, after giving him a stern warning about keeping to well-trodden paths, I wave him on his way. Later, driving in the Bentley, I come upon him floundering in the mud. “I’ll send a man to pull you out,” I cry as I motor past and think no more of it. Later, as I am enjoying an Auld Johnston, that most prized of Highland malts, after dinner, a filthy figure staggers in through the French windows. “You said you’d send someone to help me,” he sobs. “Sorry, old man,” I return, “that was an aspiration, not a commitment.”

Sunday

Earlier this summer I was proud to join the candlelight vigil for the delightful Mollie Sugden: her touching concern for her pussy was a credit to her and did much to engender the renewed concern for the environment that one finds in so many young people these days. But then “Are You Being Served” – How I used to roar! – was always more than just a comedy: historians agree that it did much to keep the flame of Liberalism burning in the hostile atmosphere of the 1970s. In particular, I read John Inman’s repeated cry of “I’m free!” as a magnificent show of defiance in the face of tyrants everywhere.

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