

# liberator



## **'Savage cuts' - overwhelming vote**

### **In This Issue**

- Why equal societies do better – Richard Wilkinson
- The route from Afghanistan – Paul Reynolds
- The dangers of Vince Cable – Ed Randall

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# COMMENTARY

## BLOOD AND MONEY

Gordon Brown managed a moment of dignity in parliament when he read the names of British troops killed in Afghanistan during the summer.

With public support for the war sliding, and even the habitually pro-Tory and pro-American Times newspaper saying, “our troops cannot continue to die to defend a corrupt regime”, it cannot be long before Afghanistan becomes a general election issue.

The Liberal Democrats at least now have a policy, as eloquently set out by its author, Professor Paul Reynolds, in this issue of Liberator.

This policy would be an entirely sensible approach were the party taking a position on a conflict in which Britain was involved only diplomatically. Reynolds is surely right that Afghanistan is a regional problem that will not be contained without a wider settlement of the multiple tensions in southern Asia.

But Britain is up to its neck in Afghanistan, and this makes it as much a matter of domestic politics as of foreign policy.

As Reynolds notes: “The absence of any major UK party calling for immediate withdrawal looks odd – especially given majority public opinion against the war.”

Quite. While Lib Dem policy does not look as odd as it did before conference, it must look unsatisfactory to the large segment of public opinion that thinks British lives and money should no longer be thrown into the gaping pit that is Afghanistan unless there is a clear objective and some convincing path towards securing it.

The problem is not that party policy is wrong in itself – far from it – but that it was not designed to help the party do the political job it will sooner or later face of telling the public whether the Lib Dems wish to continue this war or not.

A war with no discernable strategy – other than counter-productive ones – and no real goal beyond a desire to bottle the Taliban up in mountains where they can do limited harm, is hardly likely to command public support, and particularly not with the almost nightly parade of dead soldiers on television.

Labour’s assertion that we are fighting to keep Britain’s streets safe has become an insult to the public’s intelligence. When lethal bomb plots can be hatched in Leeds, Afghanistan hardly has much bearing on British streets other than in the sense that the war may be a provocation to some Muslims.

So if Britain is not fighting in Afghanistan to keep its own streets safe, what is it fighting for?

Not for what most people would consider as democracy, given President Karzai had to be strong-armed by influential foreigners to re-run his monstrously corrupted election.

Are we fighting for secularism and women’s rights? The last Afghan government to take an interest in such matters was the communist one overthrown by fundamentalist militias armed by the west. It is hard to see any real commitment by the Karzai government to these laudable objectives.

Are we fighting because, having started, America cannot, even under as well-intentioned a leader as President Obama, see a way to stop without being humiliated, and so will fight on hoping that something or other turns up to get it off the hook, with its British ally in tow along the way?

Britain cannot long fight for a corrupt government of questionable legitimacy, dependent for its survival on foreign armies and dubious warlords, without public opinion turning hostile, just as American public opinion eventually ended the Vietnam war.

If the Lib Dems’ new policy stance were to come to fruition (not something the party has any real influence over), it would undoubtedly be good for that part of the world and for the UK.

But with a general election looming and an angry public wanting to know why recession-hit Britain is pouring blood and treasure into Helmand, the party will, barring some unforeseen change in Afghanistan, have to say whether it wants to stay or go.

It is hard to see any political reward in ‘stay’, but it is easy to see further voter disenchantment if all three main parties continue to say nothing clear about the war.

## OH NO, NOT HIM

The ability to win public hearts and minds is not among the strong points of pro-Europeans. If it were, they would long ago have sidelined irrational Europhobia.

So unless the European Union really wants to shoot itself in the foot by antagonising Britain’s notoriously sceptic voters, its governments should not award the new presidency to Tony Blair.

Blair’s record as a lying, blood-soaked, war criminal on Iraq ought alone to rule him out from holding any public post again.

But in this case, so too should his European record. His decade in office was spent cynically stirring against the EU to appease the Daily Mail. When he could have used his huge majority and popularity in 1997 to lead public opinion away from the EU-hating of the Major years, he instead stoked it for his own short-term ends. No pro-European should want to see Blair anywhere near power in the EU.

# RADICAL BULLETIN

## THE HALO SLIPS

For many months it seemed that shadow chancellor Vince Cable could do no wrong. The Lib Dem who foresaw the recession and the need for bank nationalisation had been proved right about enough things that his standing among the public was sky high, and easily exceeded that of leader Nick Clegg.

By the end of conference that stature was somewhat diminished, partly due to Cable's over-confidence and partly due to people around Clegg leaping to the erroneous conclusion that, if less was heard of Cable in public, correspondingly more would be heard of Clegg.

Cable had spent the summer trying to find budget cuts that the Lib Dems could present as the way in which they would cut public spending while still achieving virtuous ends.

This did not of course go down well with those shadow cabinet members who aspire to run spending ministries, and few were prepared to volunteer much for Cable's axe.

Children, families and schools shadow secretary David Laws went so far as to declare in public that Cable had assured him his budget would be safe, in an attempt to bounce Cable into accepting this.

In other cases, the process worked in reverse, with an exasperated Cable announcing initiatives in areas overseen by recalcitrant shadow ministers in an attempt to bounce them.

The first uproar produced by this occurred when Cable proposed to scrap the £13bn St Athan military training academy in Wales.

This did not go down well with the Welsh Liberal Democrats, who first heard about this proposal from the media and were further offended by an apology in which Cable's office told them he was unaware the project was in Wales.

Next came the 'mansion tax', which was news to shadow local government secretary Julia Goldsworthy when she too first heard of this from the media even though, as something related to council tax, it plainly fell within her brief.

Cable's idea was that a higher tax would be levied on homes worth more than £1m. Whatever one's view on local taxation, there is no rational reason to keep the present upper threshold on council tax, which means quite prosperous people pay the same rate as plutocrats.

However, Cable's decision simply to announce this was a further attempted bounce that caused offence.

As one long-serving MP noted: "The pre-general election conference is a dry run for the general election campaign, when we will all be off campaigning and out of touch with each other, and there has to be a degree of trust that candidates will not be surprised

or embarrassed by announcements." Instead, surprise and embarrassment abounded.

Anger at this erupted at a parliamentary party meeting in Bournemouth, which was overheard by a journalist who adopted the simple expedient of sitting outside the room next to an entrance at the far end from that used by the MPs. With Clegg absent, the assembled MPs went for Cable, on the grounds that they disagreed with him or objected to policy making by pronouncements, or both.

Cable still made a well-received conference speech and probably did himself some favours by resisting a demand from Clegg's inner circle that he should lace it with references along the lines of "under the leadership of Nick Clegg". Cable refused all but one of these weird and clunky insertions.

Don't Clegg's minders realise that it's only in North Korea that every speech must contain references to "the wise guidance of our supreme leader"?

## WHERE POWER LIES

The row over tuition fees that began when *A Fresh Start for Britain* was published in July (*Liberator* 335) is inexplicable.

Either Nick Clegg wishes to ditch the party's most popular and recognisable policy, and so risk losing several seats in which the student vote is pivotal, or he does not but is incapable of making this clear.

All summer, the mystery grew of whether the abolition of tuition fees was party policy, or merely an aspiration, with every statement from the party serving merely to muddy the issue.

Since ditching this policy would be politically suicidal, the Federal Policy Committee not unnaturally rallied to its defence and said it had not changed, not least since it was endorsed by a thumping majority at the Harrogate spring conference.

The 'Fresh Start' debate thus saw a succession of the great and good come to the rostrum to assure conference that the policy had not changed, while Danny Alexander's somnolent proposing speech left it unclear whether it had or not.

Such was the alarm generated by leadership spinning against the tuition fees policy that the FPC ended up in the peculiar position of amending its own motion on 'Fresh Start' to say: "Despite reports, the document neither abandons nor downgrades any existing policy commitments, and that the process of prioritising policy commitments will only be carried out in the preparation of the general election manifesto,"

The next day (23 September), a letter appeared in the *Guardian* signed by 18 FPC members, which stated: "Our party makes policy in an open and democratic way and those policies cannot be changed

merely by assertion to the contrary. Scrapping tuition fees is our policy – reaffirmed at our conference this March – and the conference has not voted to change it.”

This went on to say the general election manifesto “will shortly be produced by the 29-strong federal policy committee, after an open and vigorous debate about the priority we attach to different spending commitments balanced against the savings we have identified to pay for them”.

It added that the 18 “predict that our commitment to scrap tuition fees, as part of our plans to create a fairer society, will indeed be included in the manifesto and that the party will be united in strongly campaigning on this in the run-up to and at next year’s general election”

Since 18 out of 29 is a majority, it is hard to see how Clegg might shift them. But not as hard as it is to see why he and Alexander even want to try.

## HELP, I’VE BEEN SERIOUS

Nick Clegg’s jaw-droppingly misconceived sound bite about offering voters “savage cuts” in public spending proved to have a short shelf-life before itself being savagely cut.

He used this vote-losing phrase in a Guardian interview as conference began, but it had vanished by the time he addressed the conference rally that evening. The published version of his speech said ‘savage’ but at the rally he spoke instead of “serious cuts”.

Challenged by the assembled media the next morning on where the distinction lay, Clegg’s bag carrier Danny Alexander tried to claim there wasn’t one and that the two words meant the same. One hack gleefully pointed out that no-one had ever been ‘serious’ by a mad dog.

Clegg’s curious attempt to offer the public more misery than the Tories yet without a ray of optimism duly vanished, and any Lib Dem seeking election must hope it never returns.

## STAY OR GO?

Anyone who listened to the first stages of Nick Clegg’s conference speech must have thought that he was building up to a dramatic announcement on Afghanistan.

He said that one “cannot win a war on half horse power,” that the country owed it to its troops “to give them all the political leadership and all the resources they need to do the job,” but that, unless the prime minister changed course, “there will be no choice but to withdraw”. Clegg said he wanted the troops, “to come home, mission successfully completed, with their heads held high”. At which point he stopped abruptly and switched to unrelated subjects.

Something similar happened when he told the BBC Politics Show on 18 October that the party’s support for the war was “not unconditional”.

Clegg seems to be smoothing the path to at some point calling for the troops to come home. But what if the changed strategy for which he has called were to come about?

## EMPTY SEAT

Liberal Democrats who remember the Henley by-election may be surprised to see not merely

that Stephen Kearney no longer appears to be the seat’s PPC but also that no-one else is.

The seat had a PPC when the by-election was called, local councillor Sue Cooper, but she was shoved aside and the English Candidates Committee put only two outsiders to party members, one of whom was Kearney, a good and credible candidate but who resided in the noted Oxfordshire town of Plymouth.

So enraged are local Lib Dem members by outside interference in the by-election that the seat has so far refused to select a PPC for the coming general election, taking the view that if it was sidelined for the by-election, the federal party can run the general election campaign too.

## UP YOU GET

To those not versed in the finer points of Scotland’s internal politics, the Scottish Liberal Democrats’ stance on whether to hold a referendum on independence looks baffling.

Since the Lib Dems are opposed to independence, their logical move would appear to be to support a rapid referendum in which they would campaign in favour of Scotland remaining in the UK. Since that position that would almost certainly win, the referendum would bury the whole issue for many years. Instead, the Scottish Lib Dems have staunchly opposed holding such a referendum without being able to explain clearly why.

These tensions spilled over at the Bournemouth conference, when Edinburgh North and Leith PPC Kevin Lang put in a card to speak in the devolution debate in support of an independence referendum, though against independence itself.

Senior Scottish figures tried to prevent him speaking, and he was able to address conference only because the Federal Conference Committee declined to be bullied over its choice of speaker. Lang was supported by George Lyon, Scotland’s new Lib Dem MEP and so hardly a fringe figure.

Scottish party leader Tavish Scott instigated a review of the referendum policy, which was debated at the Scottish party conference on 31 October. The conference agreed a motion rejecting the SNP’s referendum bill on the grounds that it was a “rigged question”. Its view of an unrigged one is anybody’s guess.

## GOOD RIDDANCE

The Lib Dems’ right-wing lunatic fringe has lost its leader as Mark Littlewood is off to head the Thatcherite think tank, the Institute of Economic Affairs. He has resigned from the Liberal Democrats, as the IEA professes to be non-party.

Liberal Vision’s other leading member Chandila Fernando has already left for the Tories (Liberator 335), so now both have followed their convictions out of the party. How long before the rest of these cuckoos leave this nest?

In an IEA press release announcing his appointment, Littlewood said he would ensure “the case for free markets is made loudly and clearly at this challenging time, when politicians of all parties show an alarming tendency to place trust in increasing regulation and statist solutions to cure many of society’s ills”. Better there than here.

# HAPPIER, HEALTHIER... WHY EQUALITY MATTERS

The more equal societies are, the fewer their social problems and the better their chance of tackling carbon emissions, says Professor Richard Wilkinson

Attitudes to inequality have traditionally differed sharply from one side of the political spectrum to the other. While some regard it as divisive and socially corrosive, others think it is a stimulus to effort, innovation and creativity. Arguments usually reflect little more than personal opinion. But in recent years it has become possible to compare how unequal incomes are in different countries and see what effect it really has. The results are dramatic.

In societies where income differences between rich and poor are smaller, the statistics show that community life is stronger, people feel they can trust others and there is less violence. Both physical and mental health tends to be better and life expectancy is higher. In fact almost all the problems related to relative deprivation are reduced: prison populations are smaller, teenage birth rates are lower, kids tend to do better at school (as judged by maths and literacy scores), and there is less obesity.

That is a lot to attribute to inequality, but all these relationships have been demonstrated in at least two independent settings: among the richest developed countries, and among the 50 states of the USA. In both cases, places with smaller income differences do much better. Some of these relationships have been shown in large numbers of studies – there are around 200 looking at the tendency for health to be better in more equal societies and about 40 looking at the relation between violence and inequality.

## IMPORTANT EXPLANATION

As you might expect, inequality makes a larger contribution to some problems than others, and it is of course far from being the only cause of social ills. But it does look as if the scale of inequality is the most important single explanation of why so many health and social problems are many times as common in some societies as in others.

You might think that these patterns must arise simply because more unequal societies must just have more poor people among whom these problems tend to concentrate. But that is only a small part of the explanation. Much more important is that greater inequality seems to produce worse outcomes across the vast majority of the population. In more unequal societies, even middle class people on good incomes are likely to be less healthy, less likely to be involved in community life, more likely to be obese, and more likely to be victims of violence. Similarly, their children are likely to do less well at school, are more likely to use drugs and more likely to become teenage parents.

Although economic growth remains important in

poorer countries, among the richest 25 or 30 countries, there is no tendency whatsoever for health or happiness to be better among the most affluent rather than the least affluent of these rich countries.

The same is also true of measures of wellbeing – including child wellbeing, of levels of violence, teenage pregnancy rates, literacy and maths scores among school children, and even of obesity rates. However, within each country, ill health and social problems are closely associated with income. The more deprived areas in our societies have more of most problems.

So what does it mean if the differences in income within rich societies matter, but income differences between them do not?

It tells us that what matters is where we stand in relation to others in our own society. The issue is social status and relative income. So for example, why the USA has the highest homicide rates, the highest teenage pregnancy rates, the highest rates of imprisonment, and comes about 28th in the international league table of life expectancy, is because it also has the biggest income differences. In contrast, countries like Japan, Sweden and Norway, although not as rich as the US, all have smaller income differences and do well on all these measures.

But why are we so sensitive to inequality? Why does it affect us so much?

Foremost among the psychosocial risk factors for poor health are three intensely social factors: low social status, weak friendship networks, and poor quality of early childhood experience.

Friendship, sense of control, and good early childhood experience are all highly protective of health, while things like hostility, anxiety, and major difficulties, are damaging. The key is the biology of long-term stress: it has such widespread effects – including damage to the immune and cardiovascular systems – that it has been likened to more rapid ageing.

This links back to inequality because inequality is socially divisive: it damages the quality of social relations. In the most unequal of the 50 states of the USA, 35 or 40% of the population feel they cannot trust others. That compares with perhaps only 10% in the more equal states. The international differences are at least as large.

Measures of the extent to which people are involved in local community life also confirm the socially corrosive effects of inequality. And, as if to prove the point, murder rates are consistently higher in more unequal societies. Bigger income differences give rise to bigger social distances and make social position and status competition more important.

Social status, friendship and early childhood come up in health research because they are pointers to underlying social anxieties, which are perhaps the most common sources of chronic stress in affluent societies. The insecurities and feelings of not being valued, which we may carry with us from a difficult early childhood, have much in common with the effects of low social status, and they can amplify or offset each other. Friendship fits into this picture because friends provide positive feedback: they enjoy your company, laugh at your jokes, seek your advice: you feel valued. In contrast, not having friends, feeling excluded, people choosing not to sit next to you, fills most of us with self-doubt. We worry about being unattractive, boring, unintelligent, socially inept, and so on.

There is now a large body of experimental evidence, which shows that the kinds of stress that have the greatest effect on people's levels of stress hormones are 'social evaluative threats' – threats to self-esteem or social status, in any situation in which others can negatively judge performance.

It seems then that the most widespread and potent kind of stress in modern societies centre on our anxieties about how others see us, on our self-doubts and social insecurities. As social beings, we monitor how others respond to us, so much so that it is sometimes as if we experienced ourselves through each other's eyes.

Shame and embarrassment have been called the social emotions: they shape our behaviour so that we conform to acceptable norms and spare us from the stomach-tightening we feel when we have made fools of ourselves in front of others. Several of the great sociological thinkers have suggested that this is the gateway through which we are socialised, and it now looks as if it is also how society gets under the skin to affect health.

Given that the social class hierarchy is seen as a hierarchy from the most valued at the top, to the least valued at the bottom, it is easy to see how bigger status differences increase the evaluative threat and add to status competition and status insecurity.

This perspective also explains why violence increases with greater inequality. The literature on violence points out how often issues of respect, loss of face, and humiliation, are the triggers to violence. Violence is more common where there is more inequality not only because inequality increases status competition, but also because people deprived of the markers of status (incomes, jobs, houses, cars, etc.) become particularly sensitive to how they are seen. What hurts about having second rate possessions is being seen as a second rate person.

Increased social hierarchy and inequality raise the stakes – and also the anxieties – about personal worth throughout society. We all want to feel valued and appreciated, but a society which makes large numbers of people feel they are looked down on, regarded as inferior, stupid and failures, causes suffering, resentment and wastes human resources.

## QUALITY OF LIFE

For thousands of years the best way of improving the quality of human life has been to raise material living standards. We are the first generation to have got to the end of that process. No longer does economic growth improve health, happiness, or wellbeing. If we

are to improve the real quality of life further, we have to direct our attention to the social environment and the quality of social relations.

What the evidence we have seen shows is that the quality of social relations is substantially determined by the scale of the material inequalities between us. Rather than continuing to tackle each problem separately – by spending more on medical care, more on police, social workers and drug rehabilitation units – we now know that by reducing material inequality it is possible to improve the psychosocial wellbeing and social functioning of whole societies.

During the next few decades, politics is likely to be dominated by the necessity of reducing carbon emissions. Greater equality has a crucial role to play in that process. First, consumerism is perhaps the most important obstacle facing policy to reduce carbon emissions. The good news is that reducing inequality decreases the pressure to consume because it reduces status competition. Greater equality starts to turn status competition into more cohesive community relationships.

Second, effective action on the environment depends, like never before, on people being concerned with the common good. There is, however, clear evidence that people in more equal societies are more public spirited and less out for themselves. More equal countries give more in foreign aid; they recycle a higher proportion of waste materials; they score better on the Global Peace index, and surveys show that business leaders in more equal countries think it more important that their governments abide by international environmental agreements.

But, even when people accept that greater equality has social and environmental benefits, they sometimes have a residual worry that creativeness and innovation – progress itself – depends on individual financial incentives and greater inequality. But if you take the number of patents granted per head of population as a reasonable measure of a society's creativeness and innovation, then rest assured, more equal countries do better here too.

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Richard Wilkinson is emeritus professor of social epidemiology, University of Nottingham Medical School. His latest book, written with Kate Pickett, is: *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, published by Allen Lane in 2009, price £20

# AFGHANISTAN THE WAR NOBODY WANTS

There will be no solution to the Afghanistan war without a regional peace deal, says Paul Reynolds, who moved the motion on this at conference

The Liberal Democrat conference in September voted for a new policy on Afghanistan, which avoided the stale ‘should I stay or should I go’ polemics.

Instead it called for a regional peace deal among the key countries concerned in the region (especially India and Pakistan), under the sponsorship of the US and NATO powers – and key constitutional changes in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The UK press, with only superficial understanding of the conflict, was perplexed. Surely, they asked, the question was about staying and leaving, and if staying, whether there should be more UK forces to accompany US troop increases – and to encourage other NATO countries to pitch in more.

It did not take the new Lib Dem policy seriously, and assumed that the policy was a ‘typical fudge’ in order to avoid having a choice of either staying or leaving as a policy. How could it be possible that Lib Dem foreign policy experts could say something useful and informed, when all the UK government and Conservative opposition can do is avoid any serious questions – and mouth robotic mantras about staying the course?

However, the absence of any major UK party calling for immediate withdrawal looks odd – especially given majority public opinion against the war, and the withdrawal of several other allied countries. The reasons for this are nevertheless instructive.

Much to the delight of China, Iran and Russia, the US and its loyal UK ally have managed to back themselves so successfully into a corner over Afghanistan that getting out now looks impossible without a serious loss of military face.

America’s rivals therefore feel they can comfortably sit back and watch the US as it piles bad decision on bad decision, and loses military and economic influence in the region, in its attempt to patch up some kind of ‘victory’ that can be spun back home.

They know that the US and its allies don’t have the backbone to face the truths of the conflict, and negotiate a way out. But the UK cannot easily move without US approval, and a summary withdrawal would have other consequences. One concerns NATO.

NATO in Afghanistan was a Chapter 5 intervention, under the Treaty, after September 2001. This meant that NATO members were obliged to come to the aid of the US.

The UK is the leading NATO ally of the US, and so a UK withdrawal would not only provide a welcome excuse for all other allies to leave, it could easily spell the end of NATO itself. In addition, if the UK summarily left, it would suffer retaliation from the US in many ways. US forces would probably take over in

Helmand, and the war would escalate further.

More importantly for the UK, it would be leaving Afghanistan as one of the poorest nations on earth, at war now for 30 years, and would be blamed for a rise in deaths and poverty. As the fight extends further into Pakistan, the UK would face problems with its Pakistani-origin populations across the country.

For these reasons, the ‘in or out’ debate in the UK government will almost always come down on the side of ‘in’, and hence one can see why this framing of the policy options is advantageous to those who want to continue the war.

## WORSE THAN FAILURE

But ‘staying in’ is not a war aim or political objective on its own. The UK government, in contrast to the US, has settled on a bit of spin about protecting the UK from internationalized terrorism based in Afghanistan, despite the fact that US General Jones admits that there are less than 100 internationalised fighters scattered around Afghanistan today, and that the vast majority of Afghan territory is insurgent-controlled. NATO forces in Afghanistan have made the countryside more permissive of potential terrorist bases, not less, compared with 2001. It is worse than failure.

A policy that goes beyond this must look at the motives for the conflict on all sides. As UK forces on the ground are at pains to point out, they are fighting for territory against a well-funded, well-equipped salaried army, whose sophisticated attacks show knowledge of military history. Sometimes the UK government accepts this, when eliciting empathy for soldiers. At other times, laughably, the UK government spin is that they are fighting a rag tag bunch of quarrelling militias, many of which can be won over with the UK’s traditional colonial skills and Northern Ireland experience.

The former is much closer to the truth. Would a rag tag bunch of militias really be able to defeat the largest and most sophisticated military forces on the planet? But if so, then where does all the money and kit come from?

The answer is that they come through Pakistan, mostly, with the support of some factions within the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment, and with some of the financial support channelled from other countries in the region, including allies of the US and UK. Such funding and support cannot, and never will, be official Pakistani policy.

To understand this, it is necessary to see the world as seen from Islamabad and Delhi.

Pakistani government officials see their country as new, fragile, vulnerable and under existential threat. They fear the consequences of an Indian-influenced



Afghan government, with Russia and Iranian support. The Afghan-Pakistan border runs through the Pashtun lands – a common language and culture spans the border. A unified Pashtunistan under Kabul control would decimate Pakistan, and have a major effect on the Kashmir conflict. Officials in Islamabad talk of little else these days.

The Indian government is concerned about the opposite – a unified Pashtunistan under Pakistani control, which could cut off its influence in Afghanistan, and give Pakistan an advantage over Kashmir. Other countries in the region see advantages in encouraging one side or the other. Iran, Russia, China, the Gulf States, all have an interest in the outcomes of these wars. It should be remembered that some countries did officially recognize (and help finance) the Taliban regime before October 2001 – Pakistan and Saudi Arabia for example.

However, if the US and NATO invasion has ‘refuelled’ a proxy war between India and Pakistan, with their troops stuck in the middle, then why all the talk of ‘preventing terrorism’. Why is NATO still there?

One cannot be completely sure, is the best answer. But clearly the US is concerned about global resources and oil supplies. The new head of US forces and NATO, General McCrystal has a senior adviser, Anthony Cordesman, who has been a senior member of past US administrations.

He stated emphatically only a few weeks ago that the Afghan conflict was never about Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda, but about US influence in Central Asia, and resources. He made it clear that the real reason for the US presence was simply to be there, above all, and ensure that the US shared fully in the resources of the region. The sheer size of US bases in Afghanistan, and their related massive construction programmes, seems to support the Cordesman exposition.

So this implies that there are two ‘separate but linked’ sets of conflicts being played over the same territory in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

It may well be the case that the UK as a government, somewhat under the wing of the US, cannot do anything about this conflict. Given the precarious role of NATO and our role in it, the ‘let them get on with it’ strategy of withdrawal may be impossible for us too.

## **ROUTES TO PEACE**

However, if we make the (perhaps risky) assumption that the new US administration, facing the loss of the dollar as a world currency, a second recession, unmet expectations of healthcare reform, and many other problems, wants out of this war, then there are routes to peace.

In this the UK could play a major role, due to its relations with India and Pakistan, and its presence in the region militarily. A switch to a UK political aim of ending 30 years of war in Afghanistan could have

***“It is necessary not only to stop the flow of funding and weapons, but to tackle the reason why that funding and kit is supplied in the first place”***

global advantages for the UK, if successful.

This requires a regional peace agreement. Pakistan, India and the Gulf States are likely to be willing to enter a negotiation process, if the topics for discussion are clear at the outset. The Pakistanis would be asked to extend their constitution to the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, and allow the

rule of law and political parties to prevail. The Afghan government would be asked to reverse the absurd corruption-inducing centralisation of their political structures post-2001, and return to decentralised government – economically as well as politically. There are trade issues too.

Both India and Pakistan would require security assurances and maybe guarantees. While the Kashmir conflict is too complex to include in the process, there could be an understanding that peace in Afghanistan would be followed by a Kashmir process.

It is certainly true that insurgencies are often won by stemming the flow of funds to them. (A collapse in IRA funding from the US contributed to peace in Northern Ireland). To address the conflict within Afghanistan, it is necessary not only to stop the flow of funding and weapons, but to tackle the reason why that funding and kit is supplied in the first place.

So while negotiating with the more amenable militant groups in Afghanistan is a beneficial thing to do, it is necessary to face the stark real-world fact that the war will not end without stemming the funding – and to do that it is necessary to negotiate over the fears that cause the funding to be provided in the first place.

The UK government is weak, however, and clearly on its last legs. The Conservatives are terrified of upsetting the apple cart and will not take any policy risks before the election. It should also be remembered that many leading Conservatives have close links with the UK military. So only the Liberal Democrats can promote truth and proper analysis of the UK position.

By putting forward a clear analysis and proposing a regional peace agreement – and what might be included in it – the UK Lib Dems can help open up the debate and stop the policy silliness and laughable spin.

We may be challenged by ill-informed journalists to say whether we support immediate withdrawal or.... what? Staying in Afghanistan in perpetuity? If not in perpetuity, then exactly how is the victory defined that would allow a withdrawal? And who would say if we have achieved a victory? How many Afghan and allied lives would be lost in the meantime?

What we need is a regionally-negotiated political victory, to end 30 years of war in Afghanistan. That, thankfully, is now Lib Dem policy.

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# MAN OF THE MOMENT

## Nick Clegg's new pamphlet suggests he is less ordinary than his advisors would like you to think, says Jonathan Calder

Nick Clegg became leader of the Liberal Democrats without most of us knowing very much about him or his politics. He was the favourite when he entered the leadership contest with Chris Huhne and fought a favourite's campaign by declining to become involved in detailed policy discussions.

Before that he had served a term as MEP for the East Midlands and then inherited what is probably the nearest thing to a safe seat that the Lib Dems possess. He did speak at a Liberator fringe meeting while still an MEP, advocating what he termed "crunchy" liberalism and attacking over-regulation, but he was careful to confine himself to matters that were the concern of the European Parliament and not to trespass on the concerns of his Westminster colleagues.

Even since he became leader, it has been hard, despite such apparently guileless outbursts as "our shopping list of commitments will be far, far, far, far shorter", to say what Cleggism is or even which causes are closest to his heart. So the appearance of *The Liberal Moment* is welcome. Published by the think tank Demos, it is billed as being about the future of "progressive" politics.

Nick argues that "progressives are to avoid being marginalised by an ideologically barren Conservative party, bereft of any discernible convictions other than a sense of entitlement that it is now their turn to govern, then the progressive forces in British politics must regroup under a new banner. I believe that liberalism offers the rallying point for a resurgent progressive movement in Britain."

The argument that there is a free-floating progressive spirit at work in British society that has sometimes alighted upon the Labour Party and sometimes upon the Liberal Party or the Liberal Democrats never convinces, but in the course of the pamphlet we do discover more about our leader and his political views.

### PROGRESSIVISM

Perhaps because he is writing for Demos and aiming his words principally at a socialist audience, Nick is at pains to argue that Labour and the Liberal Democrats are essentially on the same side or at least face a common enemy. So he draws a distinction between progressives and conservatives:

"At the core of progressive thought is the idea that we are on a journey forward to a better, and especially more socially just, society; it's a political ideology that stems from a restless, optimistic ambition for change and transformation. At the core of conservative thought is a determination to preserve, protect and defend. Conservatives are primarily governed by caution about the unintended consequences of change, reluctant to change the status quo, especially to alter the social pecking order in society. Conservatives tend

to believe we are at risk of decline if we don't protect things as they are; progressives tend to believe we are capable of more, and better, if only we change the way things are."

This sounds inspiring and probably reflects the way that most Liberal Democrats would differentiate themselves from the Conservatives if asked, but there are several problems with it.

The first is that much Liberal Democrat campaigning is precisely concerned with preserving, protecting and defending, whether it is saving local post offices, opposing new housing development or standing up for village schools. The second is that an awareness of the unintended consequences of change is not confined to conservatives, because it is precisely what differentiates liberals from socialists; certainly, Nick is very aware of these consequences in this critique of Labour later in this pamphlet. The third problem is that the conservatives' support of the free market often leads them to adopt policies that undermine society's pecking order, but it would be unfair to expect anyone to unravel the contradictions of conservatism in a single pamphlet – you would be struggling if you had a whole library to do it.

Nick also offers an historical argument to support the idea of progressivism as a force in British politics. He adopts Roy Jenkins' idea that there was a tragic split on the left around the time of the First World War and cites Peter Clarke's book *Liberals and Social Democrats* as evidence of this. This is a work that was often referred to in the Alliance years, but it is questionable whether those who referred to it had read more than the title. Certainly, it was something of a Rorschach test: those who supported the Alliance project saw it as evidence that liberals and social democrats used to be the same thing, whereas those who thought themselves radical liberals were thrilled by Clarke's rediscovery of a forgotten ideology quite separate from social democracy.

As Nick tells it, the progressive spirit – which functions here as a sort of anti-conservative Holy Ghost – alighted upon the Labour Party after World War I, with the Liberal Party lost in a new collectivist world. This is an odd argument: this collectivist world was as much Lloyd George's creation as anyone else's, and Lloyd George had a better grasp of collectivist remedies in the inter-war economic crisis. Besides, it is clear from this pamphlet that Nick is an instinctive anti-collectivist, so it is not clear why he is so keen on Labour's adoption of this approach. The problem must lie with the whole idea of 'progressivism', but there is something wonderfully eccentric about a party leader writing (or at least putting his name to) a pamphlet that discusses the Liberal Party's performance in the 1923 general election in some detail.

## NICK'S VIEWS

Even if we reject the idea that is intermittently presented as its key, there is much to be learned from *The Liberal Moment* particularly about Nick Clegg. The thinker that emerges from these pages is instinctively in favour of liberty and local control, optimistic and at ease with policy development from Europe.

Take the chapter on green issues. Although it is titled 'The Environmental Crisis', it is free from the "We're all doomed" rhetoric that dominates discussion in this field. Nick deals principally with the problem of meeting Britain's future power generation needs without increasing CO2 emissions. He does not want to see an expansion of coal or nuclear generation: instead he sees microgeneration as the answer, with local opposition to developments like wind farms being overcome by giving communities as stake in them:

"...it was the people, not the government, who did most of the hard work, putting up much of the capital and making the commitments necessary: by 2001 over 100,000 families belonged to wind turbine cooperatives, which had installed 86 per cent of all the wind turbines in Denmark. By 2004 over 150,000 were either members or owned turbines, and about 5,500 turbines had been installed."

You cannot fault Nick for his liberalism here, even if you doubt that wind power will fill the whole of this new generation gap or that it will be so easy to accept people to accept what would amount to a vast industrialisation of the countryside.

When he turns to the economy, Nick is more conventional and there is little here that we have not heard from Vince Cable over recent months. He attacks Labour for pushing for the deregulation of financial markets and doing nothing to curb spiralling levels of debt in the British economy. He goes on to criticise the centralisation of power in the inner circle of government, which is relevant here because, in a neat formulation, "winner-takes-all politics produces winner-takes-all economies". Then Nick calls for a reinvention of the banking system, dispersing power within the sector: "regulation must match the scope of financial institutions and operate across borders where necessary, recognising that no one nation state can adequately control multinational businesses". And there must be a limit to the size of banks too – those that are too big to fail are too big.

Add a name check for the Glass-Steagall Act and you will probably conclude that, while this is all good stuff, it is nothing we have not heard before. So it is good to see Nick finish his economic chapter by rediscovering the lost Liberal cause of employee ownership of companies. In the old Liberal Party, this policy appealed to both Victorian individualists and 1960s syndicalists. But in the SDP years, it was allowed to dwindle into the belief that if people had a few shares in the company they worked for they were less likely to go on strike.

There is the inevitable chapter on constitutional reform: there are too many quangos; Britain is too centralised; we need a written constitution; donations to political parties must be capped; and we need electoral reform. All of it true and worth repeating.

'Progressivism' makes a return in the chapter on "the social crisis", where we are told that there is "one principle that pierces right to the heart of everything

progressives stand for: fairness". The concept of fairness is popular with focus groups, but that is because we all believe our views are fair. It is not that Conservatives oppose fairness; it is just that they have a different conception of it from other people. This makes it hard to believe that fairness can penetrate to the heart of anything.

Nick goes on to make his familiar point that "a child born today in the poorest neighbourhood in Sheffield will die on average fourteen years before a child born in the most affluent neighbourhood a few miles away." If I read that once more, I shall be tempted to ask why he got himself selected as PPC for that affluent neighbourhood.

Familiar too is Nick's remedy: the pupil premium scheme whereby schools will be funded more generously if they accept children from poorer backgrounds. Universities' enthusiasm for foreign students suggests that educational establishments will be keen to accept students who bring a higher income, but I have never seen Nick explain how he would sell this policy to middle-class parents who would be simultaneously paying for this scheme and seeing their children excluded from the best schools because of it. Everyone agrees we need more good schools, but if the pupil premium does no more than redistribute children between the existing good and bad ones, it is hard to see that it will be popular with voters or begin to justify the claims Nick routinely makes for it.

## WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

Nick Clegg faces a problem in that the public does not know him well; and that those who do recognise him probably imagine he is very like David Cameron. Team Clegg is obviously aware of this and tried to counter the impression in Nick's speech at Bournemouth with a weak joke about Brad Pitt.

*The Liberal Moment* suggests that what makes Nick Clegg different is his European background and that the roots of his liberalism can be found there too.

In the age of Alastair Campbell and *The Thick of It*, the conventional wisdom is that politicians must at all costs appear ordinary, but maybe the real Nick Clegg is more interesting than he has been allowed to appear so far? He might go down better with the public if they were allowed to see more of this side of him.

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*The Liberal Moment* by Nick Clegg was published by Demos in September 2009 and can be downloaded here: <http://tinyurl.com/yhooyo9>



# TACKLING VINCE

## A new pamphlet by Vince Cable is fiscally conservative to a dangerous degree, warns Ed Randall

First, imagine that you have been offered an opportunity to take part in a pub quiz. Secondly, suppose that you have been told you will have a leading British political personality as your team captain. And, thirdly – keeping in mind what you have been told about the quiz questions (most of them will be on economics and the economy) – decide who you want as your team captain.

You'd have no hesitation would you? "Vince Cable's our man." You wouldn't simply choose the MP for Twickenham because he's a member of the same political party or because he is intellectually head and shoulders above his Labour and Conservative counterparts. Vince is, as Robert Peston of the BBC and Matthew Parris of The Times will both vouchsafe (you'll find their endorsements on the back of Vince's *The Storm*), a true heavyweight.

The BBC's Business Editor and The Times's columnist aren't alone in expressing their admiration for Vince's sterling qualities. He is the one British politician who is knowledgeable, trustworthy and capable of communicating economic notions to the rest of us. Robert Chote, of the Institute of Fiscal Studies, the closest thing we have to an impartial umpire in party jousts about fiscal facts and policy choices, shares their high regard for Vince. Indeed, Chote welcomed the Liberal Democrat shadow chancellor's contribution to public debate about fiscal choices, when he joined him in a panel discussion about priority setting for public services, at the party's conference a few weeks ago. Chote had prepared carefully for the panel discussion. The Institute had just published *Britain's fiscal squeeze: the choices ahead* and made Vince Cable's Reform pamphlet, *Tackling the fiscal crisis: A recovery plan for the UK* (itself published two days earlier) the subject of a detailed analysis. Something, you might say, that was only right and proper, since Vince had gone further and faster than any of his political rivals in spelling out how he would cut in government.

Vince Cable had not only given the IFS more to chew on than any of his political rivals. He had done what no other leading British politician had. He had presented his proposals for Liberal Democrat fiscal responsibility as part of a closely argued discussion about the economics of the credit crunch and public sector reform. Vince's pamphlet exhibits a mastery of economic argument. A mastery his admirers in the media consider sets him apart from the rest of the Westminster crowd.

### UNSHAKEABLE CONFIDENCE

Emboldened, perhaps, by such admiration and his own unshakeable confidence in his economic and political judgements, Vince Cable was quick to label George Osborne's less rigorous (and very much less detailed) presentation of Tory cuts a few weeks later *Lib Dem Lite*. A description of Lib Dem plans, compared with

Tory ones, which seems to cut both ways; slicing into Tory inadequacies and posturing, on the one hand, and the Liberal Democrat insistence on deep (should that be 'savage') cuts, on the other. The trouble with Osborne's Tory budget making, in Vince's view, was that: "The sum total amounts to nothing more than a drop in the ocean and will not deal with the structural deficit."

In his Reform pamphlet, Vince explains, far more clearly than either of Britain's less rigorous and more conservative parties could hope to do, why Liberal Democrat cuts would be bigger (than Labour's) and take longer to implement (than the Tories). The growing (and structural) government deficit, which Vince identifies, isn't simply the manifestation of a self-healing gap between public sector income and expenditure. The gap will not be closed painlessly in the course of an economic recovery, whenever it arrives.

Vince Cable insists the UK faces a great public deficit because of New Labour's approach to budgeting. Chancellor Brown relied on: (i) far too optimistic a view of the economy's capacity to generate revenues, so that he could justify an "extraordinary growth in the share of public spending" in GDP; and (ii) failed to take sensible account of the extent to which GDP growth had incorporated fool's gold; an economic expansion created out of an "unstable 'bubble'" economy, which supplied buoyant tax revenues, for a while, alongside a great house price inflation. Lest anyone doubted it, Vince wasn't simply being wise after the event. He had, famously, warned the Prime Minister in 2003, about "record levels of personal debt [and] house prices... well above equilibrium level."

Such prescience may seem to be the mark of an economic sage, able to advocate a new style of economic leadership and preach a wiser course. Vince's wiser course entails substantial – and he insists well-managed – cuts in public spending. Cuts which, as he explains in *Tackling the fiscal crisis*, necessitate a freeze in the public sector pay bill, a radical rethink of public sector pensions, better use of resources in the NHS and education system, and an unprecedented interrogation of public spending, communicated by a commitment to 'zero based budgeting'.

### DUTCH AUCTION

Regrettably, Vince Cable's public authority – as the party's economic spokesman – may have been ventured for a mess of pottage. It has been deployed in an effort to build an electoral platform that Liberal Democrats can use to pronounce themselves simultaneously champions of fiscal rectitude and of the public services. While the electoral prize, which party managers believe is tied to owning the fiscal responsibility brand, is likely to prove elusive, there is a more substantial problem for the party. The economic arguments Vince employs in his Reform pamphlet are not as strong as

he would have us believe. Liberal Democrats should think hard before continuing with a Dutch auction over public spending. The auction is one in which party leaders begin by swearing that they will maintain excellent public services and then go on to make claim after claim about their party's special ability to supply good public services at least cost. It will almost certainly prove self-defeating and politically debilitating.

In *Tackling the fiscal crisis*, Vince Cable appears to have convinced himself that "data emerging in recent weeks suggests that [the UK economy]... is no longer in a downward spiral." Tellingly, at the beginning of his Reform pamphlet, he dispenses with the title of his book on the world economic crisis, *The Storm*, and entitles the first part *After the storm*.

## PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

Most thoughtful and well informed Keynesian/New Keynesian economists reject the economic optimism that has led unreconstructed market enthusiasts, of whom there are many among Britain's economic commentariat, to regularly and excitedly report signs of economic recovery: green shoots and light at the end of various tunnels. Many of those Keynesian economists, including Paul Krugman, Thomas Palley, James Galbraith, Nouriel Roubini and, most importantly, Richard Koo, provide an account of the economic damage done by the credit crunch that should give economic policy makers, especially those in the UK and the US, pause for thought.

Even though Vince informs readers that he approaches the UK's fiscal deficit from a broadly Keynesian perspective, he does not appear to be aware of the depth of the anxieties that leading Keynesians have expressed about the weakness of alleged recoveries in the UK and US. Krugman, Koo, Palley, Galbraith and Roubini unite in questioning the efficacy of monetary policy and in emphasising the policy relevance of liquidity and debt traps, especially in the light of what they know about Japan's long recession.

Richard Koo has been responsible for key developments in macroeconomic theory that extend and refine Keynes's foundational macroeconomics. Koo, who currently works as the chief economist at Nomura Research Institute, was an economic adviser to the Japanese government in the 1990s, an economist with the Federal Reserve Bank of New York (1981-84) and, before that, a Doctoral Fellow of the Board of Governors of the US Federal Reserve System (1979-81). His knowledge of economic and banking crises and of their management by public authorities is second to none.

He is responsible for the notion of a *balance-sheet recession* and a fierce critic of explanations of systemic economic crises, including Latin America's deflationary crises in the 1980s, Japan's 'lost decade' and our credit crunch, which treat them as phenomena readily manageable by monetary means or by policies we expect to counteract conventional recessions. Koo argues, convincingly, that *balance-sheet recessions* are exacerbated rather than moderated by policy makers who focus on public sector deficit reduction and treat it as, in Vince's words, the central issue. Koo's advice is clear: countries threatened by powerful deflationary forces should reject calls, however strongly supported by Friedman's spawn, for small 'c' fiscal conservatism

in the face of a *balance-sheet recession*.

Koo is particularly concerned about the nature of the deflationary forces that have been unleashed in the US and the UK. They are poorly understood by his profession. Koo's experience – in managing Latin American debt – led him to advocate forms of fiscal intervention in Japan that have indisputably prevented the implosion of the Japanese economy. While many of Koo's policy recommendations may appear counterintuitive and are readily rejected as applicable only to Japan, they are in fact based on an understanding of the pro-cyclical nature of economic behaviour in households, firms and banks. Behaviour which amplifies the booms and busts that Gordon Brown claimed had been done away with.

Not so long ago, Charles Prince, former CEO of Citigroup, explained irresponsible and otherwise inexplicable behaviour on Wall Street by commenting that: "As long as the music is playing, you've got to get up and dance." Borrowing his imagery, one could say that, in the UK, the music has stopped and getting it started again, without blowing yet more bubbles, is likely to be hellishly difficult in the absence of determined and substantial fiscal intervention by government.

To all those, and that appears to include Vince Cable, who cry out that UK public sector debt will become unmanageable and unsaleable, it is necessary to point out, as Koo does, that as long as debt minimisation dominates the thoughts and behaviour of millions of economic actors (households, firms and financial institutions), the historically low cost of servicing public debt will continue to make it possible for government to borrow and to support economic activity. It is essential that government does so as long as the alternative is mounting deflationary pressure. Koo's analyses and remedies should be studied very carefully by anyone who is tempted by the siren voices of fiscal conservatism.

Vince Cable opens *Tackling the fiscal crisis* with the assertion that the crisis is the central issue in UK politics and predicts that it will dominate both economic and social policy for a decade. He insists it calls for a very special effort and will define an extended period of austerity. I do not doubt that the next decade will be extraordinarily painful for many Britons and exceptionally demanding for Liberal Democrats. But, without minimising the challenge presented by the fiscal crisis, I advise Liberal Democrats to focus their attention on political and economic problems that are of an altogether greater magnitude. They are (i) tackling environmental degradation and climate change; (ii) tackling entrenched inequalities in life chances; and, (iii) tackling the pervasive weakness of the institutions needed to help nation states resolve their conflicts, agree common goals and pursue them together.

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*Tackling the fiscal crisis* by Vince Cable can be downloaded at: <http://tinyurl.com/r6s5gt>

# NOW WASH YOUR HANDS

## Mark Oaten's autobiography 'Screwing Up' is neither one thing nor the other, finds Simon Titley

There's no accounting for taste. In a branch of Waterstone's last year, I was startled to discover a bookshelf labelled 'Painful Lives'. Though vaguely aware of the phenomenon of misery memoirs, I had no idea they were popular enough to warrant a whole shelf. Some literary agents were once discussing this genre and set themselves a competition to invent the ultimate 'mis lit' book title. The winning suggestion was, 'Not in my face, Granddad'.

Why write such books? For the money, obviously; misery memoirs accounted for two million paperback sales in the UK in 2006. But what is the artistic defence? Some authors claim they write these books to come to terms with their traumatic memories and to help readers do the same. A more likely explanation is that they appeal to readers' prurience and voyeurism.

More serious biographies and autobiographies provide an altogether different justification for soul-baring. When the subject is a significant artist or statesman, details of their personal lives illuminate the subject's character and provide a deeper understanding of their work and achievements.

Now that disgraced Liberal Democrat MP Mark Oaten has written an autobiography of sorts, one must first ask which category he is aiming at. Is his book simply intended to titillate a voyeuristic readership? Or is it a serious political autobiography, providing an insight into his career? The problem is that it is neither.

### BIZARRE SEX ACT

Let's deal with the voyeuristic option first. If you were hoping for further and better particulars of Oaten's notorious encounter with two rent boys, especially details of what was described by the News of the World (22 January 2006) as "a bizarre sex act too revolting to describe" and "an unspeakable act of degradation", you will search in vain.

It is not a serious autobiography either, and there's the pity. Because Oaten potentially has one good book in him. This would be an exposé of assorted right-wing plotting, subversion and entryism in the Liberal Democrats, with which he was intimately involved during the past decade. By spilling the beans, he would have helped arrest the damage being done to the party and redeemed something of his reputation into the bargain.

Oaten could have begun by telling us about his time as Charles Kennedy's parliamentary private secretary, following Kennedy's election as party leader in 1999. During this period, a series of reports appeared in the Guardian under the byline of lobby correspondent Tania Branigan, which questioned the competence of a succession Liberal Democrat MPs, while praising Oaten as a 'rising star'. Who planted these stories?

Oaten could have told us more about his founding of the Peel Group in early 2002. He writes that he was

"asked by Charles Kennedy to set up a group aimed at supporting former Conservatives that were joining the party," but adds: "It had absolutely nothing to do with policy, nor was it a secret body with a right-wing plot." This assertion contrasts with an interview Oaten gave just before the Peel Group was launched (BBC News website, 2 November 2001), in which he argued for the Liberal Democrats to move rightwards, saying his party "must start sounding more Tory rather than like a left-wing party". He added, "We haven't got a Clause Four, Militants or rot at the core of the party. Oddly enough, if we did it might be helpful because we could then make a big demonstration of tackling them and the public could then engage in what [the party's review of its public services policy] was about."

Oaten could have told us more about his founding of the free-market ginger group Liberal Future in 2001, from which time he dates party activists' mistrust of him: "Things went downhill when the small band of idiots that run the Liberator magazine decided to write nasty pieces about me. Their main reason for hate was a group I'd helped establish called Liberal Future." He describes LF as comprising "a dozen or so bright party members, many of whom worked in public relations," but names none of them, despite name-checking many other people throughout his book. For example, Chris Fox, now the Lib Dems' interim chief executive, was chairman of LF's advisory board – does Oaten not consider this worth a mention?

Oaten could have told us about the curious circumstances of Liberal Future's dissolution in 2005. One LF person confessed to me that it had been wound up because its members were fed up with Oaten using it as a vehicle for his leadership ambitions. Oaten fails to mention this dispute but writes that, immediately following Charles Kennedy's resignation as party leader on Saturday 7 January 2006 (i.e. several months after LF's demise), "I quickly drew on my old colleagues in Liberal Future and sought out views from this team. We met in my Westminster office on Monday and Tuesday to look at the options." Oaten claims this team comprised "some of the best corporate strategists and communications advisors you could hope for," yet he names none of these prestigious figures, despite his penchant for namedropping elsewhere in the book.

Oaten could have told us about hedge fund millionaire Paul Marshall, who inexplicably receives no mention in the book despite being a key backer of Oaten's right-wing projects. For example, Greg Hurst's biography of Charles Kennedy says that Oaten "originally conceived the idea [of the *Orange Book*] after meeting Paul Marshall through his centre-right pressure group Liberal Future." And talking of the *Orange Book*, Oaten does not mention that either. He could have explained why, when the book was launched in controversial circumstances during the September 2004 party conference, he publicly

disowned his chapter, claiming it had been written by a research assistant and that he had never even read it.

Oaten could have told us about Gavin Grant. There is not a single mention of Grant in the book, despite him playing a significant role in Oaten's career, becoming Oaten's Svengali in 2003, then manager of his leadership campaign, finally organising Oaten's comeback PR campaign in the months following the rent boy scandal.

Oaten could have told us about the series of 'get to know you' dinners organised by Grant, intended to recruit leading Lib Dem right wingers to Oaten's leadership campaign. These gatherings backfired, convincing many of the guests that Oaten was not up to the job. What was Oaten's impression of these meetings? Did he realise they were a failure?

## UNACCEPTABLE AND INEXCUSABLE

Oaten could have told us about the preparations for his leadership bid in the months before Kennedy's resignation. Greg Hurst's book notes that, "On Friday 9 December [2005], the Guardian published a story reporting pressure on Charles Kennedy to quit; it said some members of his shadow cabinet favoured a different strategy to Kennedy's of working with David Cameron... in the event of a hung parliament. Advocates of such an approach wanted to begin informal talks with the Tories in the New Year, it reported. Many Lib Dems suspected the chief source to be Mark Oaten: indeed, Oaten disclosed subsequently that he had had lunch two days earlier with one of the story's authors, Julian Glover... The article added to the febrile atmosphere among senior Lib Dems and heightened suspicions that Mark Oaten was professing public loyalty to Charles Kennedy while privately undermining his position. Rumours circulated that Oaten had a leadership campaign team ready, was preparing a regional tour, had asked staff to obtain directories of local Lib Dem officers and candidates, and had approached potential donors."

Hurst adds that, immediately following Kennedy's resignation, Simon Hughes "attacked as 'unacceptable and inexcusable' Mark Oaten's behaviour in having a leadership campaign already in place." Oaten says nothing about such events but implies that he remained loyal to Kennedy until the latter's resignation, and only then assembled a leadership campaign. Nor does he mention the self-promoting e-mail he sent to party members on 13 December 2005, the same day that the party's shadow cabinet revolted against Kennedy.

Oaten could have told us how and why the wheels fell off his leadership campaign so soon after it was publicly launched. If there was as much goodwill as Oaten claims, why did his campaign attract only one other MP (Lembit Öpik) and one peer and MEP (Sarah Ludford)? Oaten's suggestion that Chris Huhne's unexpected candidature took away his parliamentary support won't wash. Oaten claims that "Charles [Kennedy] urged me to stand for the leadership," but fails to explain that the only reason Kennedy's team wanted Oaten to run was to ensure a contest and prevent a Ming 'coronation'.

All these significant factual omissions are not the only problem; Oaten's account of key political

events offers no real insight. He seems petulant and self-centred, incapable of understanding that the political positions he adopted or the ginger groups he set up would attract legitimate criticism. Instead, he interprets the opposition he faced as a purely personal attack, writing "I feel sad at the small group of activists that made things so rough for me with the party," and (of the September 2005 party conference) "I just felt that the party delegates were out to get me and dismiss whatever I said, as if I was some sort of right-wing maniac."

Oaten also appears to have no fundamental political values but merely jumps from one bandwagon to another. In the 1980s, he joined the SDP but can justify his choice only in terms of it not being Labour or Conservative. In the 1990s, he was an über-champion of the Blairite 'Project' but can justify this only in terms of admiring Paddy Ashdown's leadership. In the 2000s, he became defender of the classical liberal flame when he founded Liberal Future and the Peel Group, but can justify this only in terms of opposing the 'nanny state' (having presumably taken the opposite view in the SDP). In a Guardian interview on 8 January 2005, he admitted "I only really got a philosophical belief about three years ago" (i.e. nearly five years after being elected as a Liberal Democrat MP). But his book suggests he has some limits: "Liberals in Germany are often to the right of Attila the Hun, even a bit too much for my liking."

## SIMPLY ADOLESCENT

What are we left with? Oaten's book is simply adolescent. He casts himself as "just a boy from Watford", spellbound by the famous names he meets and the foreign trips he takes. He presents his inability to grasp complex issues and his "failure to understand clever lawyers" as some sort of common touch. Imagine a backbench MP giving a talk to his local WI on 'my weekly surgeries are a funny old world' and you have caught the book's homespun tone.

Oaten also comes across as remarkably self-absorbed and highly strung. He talks endlessly of the stresses and strains of being an MP, turning 40 and going bald; confesses to hypochondria and frequent resort to beta blockers and anti-depressants; and tries to implicate the reader by suggesting that his traumatic reactions are commonplace. As one slogs through this interminable whining, a question recurs: "Why is it always about you?"

In the end, Oaten was brought down not by his peccadilloes but by his mediocrity. He was promoted beyond his ability and was completely out of his depth. He was exploited by people smarter than him, without realising he was being used. Once he was no longer any use to his fickle allies, he was hung out to dry.

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Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective

*Screwing Up* by Mark Oaten was published by Biteback in 2009, price £18.99

# WELFARE WITHOUT THE STATE

We should replace a centralised welfare state with the spirit of the nineteenth century co-operative movement, says Sara Scarlett

I believe that for Liberal Democrats to distinguish themselves, they should embrace the Labour movement. And by that I meant the labour movement circa the 1870s: a golden era of working class political organisation – the inception of co-operatives, mutuals and friendly societies. An unimpeded free market is the best and only moral form of economic organisation.

Indeed, the labour movement became a powerful mass movement in the nineteenth century largely as a result of it aiding the material and conditional liberation of working people in such areas as health and welfare. By attempting to keep government control and elite politics out of people's lives, friendly societies, mutuals and co-operatives all promoted the means by which people could own, control and develop their own healthcare and welfare institutions.

Furthermore, the inception of the welfare state ripped the soul out of this self-organised working class movement and is now used to justify a level of state intervention in our lives that no liberal should find acceptable. ID cards for benefits, for example, or the Tory proposals of giving privileged access to 'public services' to people who comply with their health programmes. Despite the welfare state's good intentions, it has replaced a plethora of organic, voluntary, localised and democratic organisations with a single involuntary, centralised and bureaucratic entity enforced by a political elite, and designed to satisfy their own prejudices.

## MONUMENTALLY FRUSTRATED

As Liberator quite rightly pointed out (Liberator 335), I started a Facebook group entitled 'A Better way of funding Universal Healthcare (#No2NHS)'. I was monumentally frustrated by the fact that the healthcare debate essentially boiled down to "Whose shit smells sweeter? Ours or the USA's?" A debate consisting of comparing two fundamentally flawed healthcare systems. Instead of looking west, we should be looking east. The Netherlands, Singapore and Japan consistently wipe the floor with Canada, the

USA and the UK in healthcare league tables of all kinds and their healthcare systems deliver universal care available to everyone regardless of the size of their pay packet.

There is no such thing as "reforming the NHS" – it is what it is. All the problems the NHS faces are the problems all wholly state-run industries face. If throwing money at it isn't making it better, nothing will. There are better healthcare solutions out there and the people of the United Kingdom will never know them if we do not cease our wholly emotional attachment to an appendage of the state.

Even more vile than ID Cards and general health nannying are the lines the political class likes to draw between the welfare state and immigration. The loudest voices shouting down immigration often include the narrative that "immigrants are a burden on the welfare state." This is, essentially, the crux of the BNP's argument (although not uniquely theirs, they just say it with the most bile). The Tories' and Labour's immigration plans are also framed in economic terms. As we have become one of the richest countries in the world on the back of free trade – the free flow of goods,

services and capital – why do we then subscribe to the view that the free flow of labour is unacceptable? If it is a choice between the welfare state and immigration, any individual who chooses the latter is no liberal. People consume resources, but they also create wealth. The welfare state perpetuates the myth that people are primarily concerned by the former, and are thus a burden that must be controlled by the state, and restricted especially when they originate from the world's poorest areas.

Big government has been a disaster for the poor. After 12 years of a Labour government, social mobility is worse despite an increase from an equivalent of £42.9bn in 1997 to an equivalent of £67.4bn in 2009 thrown at state education. The quality of our healthcare has increased only slightly despite heavy investment (from an equivalent of £46.9bn in 1997 to an equivalent of £93.1bn in 2009), with the head of the Euro Health Consumer Index stating: "It seems

*"How can we be free to take responsibility for our own healthcare and pensions when the government takes almost 50% of our wages?"*



that management of the behemoth NHS organisation is difficult to do under a centralised paradigm.” And to add insult to injury, Gordon Brown raided your pensions for £75bn to pay for it all.

In spite of descending from the same bright beginnings, New Labour is perversely a supporter of the welfare state – the natural enemy of co-operatives and friendly societies. In London, there were far more hospitals before the NHS forcefully took them all over and replaced them with big, centralised ones. When asked how he got doctors to support his plans, Nye Bevan declared that he had “stuffed their mouths with gold.” Which is why I find New Labour and the Co-operativists strange bedfellows.

The natural home of the co-operative movement shouldn't be with a party that has scuppered and continues to disincentivise co-ops and friendly societies. How can we be free to take responsibility for our own healthcare and pensions when the government takes almost 50% of our wages? It should be with us: the party of lower and middle-income households, the free market, small government and localism. If the Lib Dems were truly to embrace the co-operative movement, it would send a strong signal that we are serious about cutting centralised bureaucracy and trusting individuals to plan for their own futures.

## SMASHING THE MONOPOLY

Smashing the state's monopoly on welfare provision would lead to individuals managing welfare rather than faceless bureaucrats, based remotely from its beneficiaries; instead those in charge would be directly democratically accountable co-owners of the organisation they serve with a vested interest in managing that organisation's funds responsibly.

Co-operative and friendly organisations could even work alongside government welfare schemes, where universal state funding was considered necessary. For example, everyone would have a universal

health savings accounts that could involve a friendly society or co-operative bank of your choice, providing insurance for 'catastrophic' health set-backs and using the savings account for predictable and low cost ailments – hence maintaining a health system that would always be treat-first-settle-payment later without the risk of bankruptcy or debt, yet with more choice and less rationing.

National welfare organised this way would encourage different welfare providers to compete and deliver better service. The indignity of the dole would be a thing of the past with every adult of working age having the option of appropriate payment protection cover. Tuition fees would not be an issue with child trusts available from birth or the option of student friendly schemes. More importantly, our pensions would no longer be at the mercy of spendthrift chancellors.

If I were Nick Clegg, I would certainly approach the Co-operative Party, asking it to split with the Labour Party and join a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. We would be set to gain 29 MPs, 12 peers and nine MSPs. Although one of those is Ed Balls ... you can't have your cake and eat it... Nonetheless, we have to think imaginatively about how to change proactively the political landscape rather than simply being at the mercy of it.

Nevertheless, if the Co-operativists cannot overcome their Stockholm syndrome then let's embrace the wisdom of the left of a century ago. A truly free market is the true foundation of social power, and the evidence of history that state intervention tends to distort that for the benefit of the few rather than the many. We can take the best of free market capitalism and the best of socialism, removing the ills of the state in the process. It's moral, it's just, it is Liberalism.

Sara Scarlett is director of development for Liberal Vision

# Remembering Conrad

A fundraising dinner to celebrate of the life of Conrad Russell

7.30pm, Friday, 27th November at  
The National Liberal Club  
£50 per head (Advance bookings only)

Guest speakers: David Starkey CBE, FSA,  
Baroness Sally Hamwee and  
Councillor John Russell.

This dinner has been organised by Cllr. John Russell to celebrate the life of his father, Conrad, who passed away five years ago.

The price of the ticket includes reception and dinner. Bookings in advance only. Formal dress (jacket and tie for gentlemen). Any profits will go towards campaign funds for Lewisham Liberal Democrats.



15th April 1937 - 14th October 2004

Tickets available from Cllr. John Russell, 22 Thorpewood Avenue, London SE26 4BX. Tel: 07951 024588  
Cllr\_John.Russell@lewisham.gov.uk. Please make cheques payable to "Lewisham Liberal Democrats"

# MAJORITY RULE?

## President Obama's preference for persuasion over leadership explains why his reforms are bogged down, says Dennis Graf

It is now nearly one year since Barack Obama won the US presidential election by a healthy margin of about 6%. This alone came as a relief after the 'cliff-hangers' of 2000 and 2004. He also has, at least for another year, a Democratic majority in Congress.

When Obama took office last January, he was faced with an unusual number of exceedingly difficult problems. Many believed that we could well fall into another Great Depression. Major banking houses were failing. Wall Street was thought close to a 'meltdown'. The outgoing Bush administration had been forced to act in ways unthinkable a year earlier and Obama basically followed its path.

Obama may want to lead, but it's not clear that the American public wants to follow. In theory, everyone thinks change is needed; in practice, we can't agree.

The Republican Party decided not to be the 'loyal opposition' but set out to discredit Obama in every possible way, so he, as Clinton before him, was attacked even before he took office. The most influential voice of the Republican Party, radio talker Rush Limbaugh, said from the beginning "I want Obama to fail." More disturbing was that very few on the right were willing to rebuke him publicly. Even the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Obama has been twisted by the right into something shameful. Obama has found it impossible to compromise with the other side, something he vowed to do and which he initially thought possible.

The President has publically been called 'un-American', a Fascist, a would-be dictator, a racist, a tyrant, a hater of white people, a communist, a Nazi, a socialist, a Muslim, a personal friend of terrorists, an illegal immigrant and, in private, obscenities far worse. A southern Republican congressman yelled out "liar" during Obama's speech to Congress, something almost without precedent. But, overall, the Obamas, this young and elegant political couple, seem to glide through Washington almost untouched by such charges.

### DISAPPOINTMENT

Obama, by American standards, is a mildly liberal pragmatist, certainly not an inflexible left winger. Though his overall public approval rating is healthy – he's personally well liked – he's been a disappointment to impatient members of the Democratic Party.

Leftist Democrats (and some Republicans) don't like the war in Afghanistan, an effort Obama feels is necessary. They also feel that he has "sold out" to the financial interests and not shown enough sympathy to the urban poor, especially those who are losing their homes. They feel that he has been too willing to capitulate to the Republicans on health care and has not demanded the minimum needed for effective reform.

Democrats to the right of Obama come mainly from conservative (and poorer) states and believe that their seats are less safe, but Obama needs their votes and he often does not get them.

Obama came into office saying that he was going to attempt big changes. His choice of advisors – none were prominent liberals – was generally well received, even by many Republicans. He kept several of Bush's best people, notably Robert Gates at Defense and Ben Bernanke at the Federal Reserve. (The chairman of the Fed is the key economic person; the Fed sets interest rates). The curious appointment of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State now seems to have been shrewd.

Obama still has the support of most Democrats, even those who feel that he's betrayed the liberal cause, but it's clear that he's lost a goodly number of the independent voters. Most of these folk don't pay much attention to politics and say that they "vote for the man, not the party." Their opinions are formed by the corporate-owned mass media and especially the loudest voices on the lunatic fringe. There are only a few left-wing people on radio and television, and their reach is limited.

The Southern states are the centre of this anti-Obama sentiment. It's a question as to how much of this is racist. Most people say "some, but not all."

Bill Clinton also had to face this and he is a son of the South. Surveys suggest that half of the white Southern voters believe it likely that Obama was not born in the United States and is thus not a legitimate President or even a citizen. There's possibly a certain amount of anti-Semitism at play here, too. Obama is not Jewish, of course, but many of his key advisors are. Obama also is the first President in many years to come from a large city.

The Republicans are tightly disciplined and even their few remaining 'moderates' are reluctant to criticize the outrageous extremists in their party. Democrats are hoping that people on this far right fringe will define the Republican Party for years to come. A recent poll revealed that only 20% of the public consider themselves Republicans, but American attitudes can be volatile and this could well change.

A serious reform of Wall Street and the reregulation of the financial sector are clearly needed, but this will prove very difficult. The economy is still shaky but it appears to be much better than it was a year ago. As I write this, the Dow index is hovering around the 10,000 mark, a highly symbolic point, but Obama doesn't seem to be getting much credit for this since our rate of unemployment is still high.

Unlike most other rich countries, the United States does not have a decent support system for those who lose their jobs. The official unemployment figure is hovering around 10% and the actual might well be close to 20%. (We don't count the millions in prison, for example, people who work only part time, those

who have given up looking for work or those in the military). We simply don't know how to create enough well paying jobs for ordinary people.

We have many of the same problems as Britain – a lack of confidence in the future, a weakening of the middle class, a loss of manufacturing jobs and a consequent crumbling of the working class, a worrying crime rate and an inadequate education system. We, too, have had a blind faith in the wisdom of the market and we overestimated the ability of the financial sector to bring economic growth.

## **OPPOSITION TO REFORM**

Much of the recent opposition to Obama has risen because of his proposals to reform our health care system. All segments of the health industry are pouring vast sums of money – legalized bribery – into Congress to defeat reform. It's widely recognized that our health care delivery system is inefficient, unfair, sometimes immoral, horribly costly and ultimately unsustainable. In America, health care decisions, even questions of life and death, are often made by huge insurance companies who make their money by denying claims. Most Americans have coverage through their work but, for the others, applicants are routinely rejected for 'pre existing conditions' and they have no recourse. If they do have coverage, they can be dropped at will.

It is now clear that, from the beginning, the Republicans were going to obstruct health care reform. The past few months have been ugly, especially August, the month when Congress is not in session. Many of the elected officials went back home and held 'town meetings', where ordinary citizens could speak their mind. A surprisingly large number did. These frightened folk had been whipped up to frenzy by the far right media people and organized by sophisticated public relations firms employed by the health care industry.

The lies and distortions of the right wingers sounded ludicrous at first, but they had an effect and Obama's poll numbers dropped significantly. Sarah Palin, McCain's running mate, said that Obama was devising "death panels," – medical juries supposedly to decide which old people would live and which would die. It was untrue, of course. A senior key Republican Senator, Charles Grassley, repeated something similar all summer.

These people point to Britain as an example of a country cursed with "socialized medicine", a place where care is severely "rationed", and people routinely and heartlessly die from lack of care. In fact, nothing like the NHS has ever been proposed and no politician would dare suggest even looking at it. This strange belief in American 'exceptionalism' means that we don't think that we can learn from anyone else.

Obama is clearly a different type of president. While conceding that he's a gifted politician, many Democrats feel that he's not leading, but rather trying to persuade. This is most clearly seen in these health care changes being debated. Obama is allowing Congress (the Senate and the House) to develop the final bill and this means that we're not going to have any radical changes. The powerful private insurance companies will be still powerful. The question is whether they will have to compete with a government insurance option, something a bit like Medicare, the highly popular

public program we now have for old people.

In general, most people, especially those who are young and healthy, like their medical care and, at its best, the treatment can be superb. It's expensive, though, roughly double the cost elsewhere and, aside from the insurance companies, who profit from denying treatment, no-one has any particular incentive to contain costs. Many millions of people lack sufficient coverage and many other millions more have justifiable fear of losing their insurance. Except for the rich, people who go without insurance and need some serious health care – because of cancer or a heart attack, for example – face bankruptcy. Everyone knows of such people.

There are other big problems for Obama. Our public education system is poor in many places and even our great research universities, some of America's crown jewels, are in trouble. We're spending vast sums of money, much of it borrowed, on prisons. It is also clear that we need to take leadership roles in global climate change, something many Americans still question. Illegal immigration is out of control and the public demands some sort of action.

We are still in two wars – one of which, Iraq, has offered glimmers of hope and the other, Afghanistan, which has had few. Iranian nuclear intentions are troubling. Israel and Pakistan already have the bomb. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict seems to have no solution.

For years, we have allowed all these problems to grow. The American political system does not encourage rapid action; it was designed for slow deliberation, compromise, conservatism and even obstructionism.

Obama still has a majority supporting him. He's lucky in his opposition: the other party seems splintered, angry, extreme and leaderless – a regional party with no plans and no program.

In the off year elections next year, the reigning party usually loses votes and Obama's party could conceivably lose control of Congress. This probably explains the ambitious schedule he has set for his first year.

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Dennis Graf lives in Minnesota and is Liberator's American correspondent

# GOLF OR HOMES?

## Gina Ford reports on the continuing row tearing Aberdeenshire Liberal Democrats apart over a controversial property development

The long-running saga of Donald Trump's plan to build 'the world's greatest golf course' on the Menie estate Site of Special Scientific Interest in Aberdeenshire, and the effect on local Liberal Democrats, rumbles on (Liberator 328 and numerous others).

The latest events, which again show the Liberal Democrat-led council in a shockingly poor light, stem from Mr Trump's aspiration to extend his property. The Trump Organisation has sought to buy several private residences and areas of land and requested that the council use compulsory purchase if property owners failed to sell. Donald Trump himself earlier stated that he would buy these homes if they were on offer at the right price but he could manage perfectly well without them.

Fearing that a move to use CPO was possible, although not knowing that the request had already been made, former Liberal Democrat and planning chair Martin Ford (ousted by lack of support from his party colleagues following his casting vote decision against Trump at the original planning committee) tabled a motion for the 1 October council meeting.

The wording was simply that Aberdeenshire Council would not use compulsory purchase to force Aberdeenshire residents from their own homes on, or adjacent to, the Menie estate.

The motion was well publicised and local campaign group Tripping Up Trump spent the summer collecting more than 11,000 petition signatures. David Milne, one of the home-owners affected by the proposals, addressed the council on behalf of the owners and their supporters packed the public seating.

All this was heavily featured in the press, along with reassurances from the Trump Organisation that their preference was to reach agreement with the owners. These rang pretty hollow given that the money being offered seemed to be nowhere near the cost of purchasing any equivalent property. The opportunity to purchase, at cost price, one of the several hundred properties on the new development seems also to have been unattractive to the owners of these currently scattered and secluded homes. It also became apparent that even people who were in favour of the golf and housing resort did not feel comfortable with the prospect of CPO being used to aid a private developer, rather than for the greater public good.

Despite the ample warning, it seems that the administration did not prepare its counter proposal until three days before the meeting, when it appeared to agree to make a clear public statement that the council would not entertain CPOs for Trump.

Some administration councillors relaxed and started replying to the hundreds of e-mails they had received from concerned members of the public, giving assurances that CPOs would be ruled out at

the council meeting. They briefed the press similarly, and prominent articles appeared to the effect that the council was looking certain to come out against CPOs.

But what actually happened when the council met was quite different. Councillors rejected Martin Ford's motion, but instead backed an amendment that appreciated the 'uncertainty and concerns' felt about the issue but said it would be inappropriate to make a decision without a detailed report – a deferral in all but name.

To quote the Aberdeen Press and Journal following the meeting: "administration councillors were poised to back an amendment – which is understood to have said the council would only be prepared to use CPO for public infrastructure projects. But the wording was changed shortly before the meeting after members received legal advice to say the amendment was 'not competent' because CPO is used for a number of purposes".

Essentially, in their determination to avoid agreeing with a motion tabled by their former colleague Martin Ford, the alternative concocted by the administration was so ill thought out as to be unusable.

And with the UK press camped outside and 100 protesters at the door, the administration simply did not have time to come up with a watertight proposal. A deferral was the only option. The administration's fig leaf, as put forward by Lib Dem councillor Martin Kitts-Hayes, was that it would be 'inappropriate' to make a decision without a detailed report. He is also reported to have said that voting for his amendment did not mean the council supported the use of CPOs on the Menie Estate and that he would be surprised if councillors agreed to CPO, before adding that, "We cannot make decisions on this council based on notices of motion".

During the debate, a succession of councillors from all parties spoke against the use of CPOs, but the motion was defeated by 55 votes to six. Unsurprisingly this provoked stunned and angry reaction, with Milne calling it "a decision based upon cowardice and a fudge that only prolongs the threat hanging over us". Trump has claimed the result as another victory.

This 'fudge' was the final straw for another former Liberal Democrat councillor, Debra Storr, who has now joined Martin Ford in the Scottish Green Party, and public confidence in the Lib Dem leadership of Aberdeenshire council has hit an all-time low. As the council's former convenor Colin Millar said, "What has happened to Liberal Democrat support for human rights? I was ashamed of my former councillor and Lib Dem colleagues."

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Gina Ford is a former member of the Liberator Collective and is married to Martin Ford

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## WHAT'S THE EMERGENCY?

*Dear Liberator,*

Following the BBC's announcement that the BNP is to appear on Question Time, and being irritated by the party's 'head in the sand and follow Labour' approach to the BNP (refusing to share platform), Haringey submitted an emergency motion to conference on the subject.

It included the phrase: "Conference acknowledges that a no-platform-sharing policy gives black and minority ethnic communities the impression that we have no answers to a BNP approach and that we are afraid to debate openly and win a reasoned argument with this unpleasant racist party."

It also said: "Conference notes the BBC's recent decision to provide airtime to BNP speakers and asks that Liberal Democrat politicians do not avoid public face-to face debate with BNP representatives."

The motion was turned down by the Federal Conference Committee. Its chair Duncan Brack's comment was: "The definition of 'emergency motion' in conference standing orders is that the motion must relate to events happening since the deadline for ordinary motions, which was 1 July."

"Although the BBC's decision to invite the BNP MEPs on to Question Time has been in the news recently, actually that became automatic once the MEPs were elected – it's standard BBC practice. And of course the election of the MEPs was before the deadline for motions, and the 'no platform' issue itself has been around for much longer."

This answer conveniently allowed Nick Clegg to reverse the 'no talk' policy without fear of criticism from the rank and file for instituting such a feeble approach in the first place.

The fact that the BBC's announcement and Labour and the Lib Dems' furious back-peddalling was a front page news story, and even made the cover of *Private Eye*, apparently did not make this an event that happened after the deadline for ordinary motions, according to Brack.

This is a bit like saying the invasion of Poland, which led to the UK declaring war on Germany, was not an emergency because we had signed a treaty with Poland so the declaration could have been predicted.

Conference and the FCC should not be afraid to take on the leadership when a decision is clearly wrong. A

# LETTERS



debate on our approach to the BNP would have sent a clear message to the electorate. The party's approach to tackling unpleasant opponents is of interest to all members and should not depend on the whim of the leader.

Nigel Scott  
Haringey

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## ROLLING IN IT?

*Dear Liberator,*

What has happened to the Electoral Reform Society? Since the scandal over MPs' expenses, the pressure from the constant release of stories from the *Daily Telegraph*, the public outrage and the initiative of campaigning organisations, everyone has been talking about electoral reform.

Electoral reform has been all over the media, not just the *Convention on Modern Liberty* types, not just the people making submissions to Gordon Brown's (to be fair ongoing since he came in) consultations on the constitution, not just the *Guardian* types who blow hot and cold, but lots of 'not the usual suspects' talking about real reform.

What has been entirely absent from this debate as far as I can tell as an ordinary punter is any evidence at all of the Electoral Reform Society. I know that their commercial wings are 'not for profit' but Electoral Reform Services must rake in a huge amount of cash. Right-wing conservative MP Daniel Kawczynski clearly thinks it is rich too: "The Electoral Reform Society is a well-funded, well-resourced and influential organisation." Well maybe this is just an Aunt Sally he can knock down so he can carry on speaking for everyone in Shrewsbury.

Just recently, Electoral Reform Services has acted as independent scrutineer for ballots including ones by Liberty, the UCU (the

lecturers' union), Amnesty, Chelsea Building Society, and I think both the Co-Operative and Lloyds-TSB. Plus its website shows ballots conducted for scores and scores of NHS Trusts, unions and local authorities.

Electoral Reform Services must be making a mint. So, even if just a small percentage of that goes to the parent company, the Electoral Reform Society, why isn't it the most prominent, successful, campaigning body in the country?

Kiron Reid  
Liverpool

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## PADDY'S WAY

*Dear Liberator,*

With the Tories riding high in the national polls back in February of this year, I was feeling rather sorry for myself, as Liberal Democrat agent, for the imminent county council elections in Somerset.

Paddy Ashdown got wind of my gloomy persona and summoned me to Vane Cottage for a pep talk. When discussing the elections, Paddy suggested I read 'The Winning of Yeovil' chapter of his impending autobiography and sent me away with it to read for inspiration.

The back-to-basics campaign tactics, tricks and humour of this chapter set my passion alight once more and I felt much better about the challenge ahead.

I have been fortunate enough to hear Paddy speak many times at Yeovil. Paddy writes with the same eloquence and enthusiasm as the delivery of his speaking performances. His passion and determination portrayed in this chapter to win Yeovil really comes across in his writing. This chapter should be required reading material for every Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate across the country.

Laura Gilmore  
former constituency organiser Yeovil

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**Pies and Prejudice: In Search of the North**  
by **Stuart Maconie**  
Ebury 2008 £7.99

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**Whose Town is it Anyway? The State of Local Democracy in Two Northern Towns**  
by **Stuart Wilks-Heeg and Steve Clayton**  
**Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, 2006**  
£15

Two very different books provide a snapshot of northern life at the peak of its renewal in the mid-00s: the comic travelogue *Pies and Prejudice*, and academic report *Whose Town is it Anyway?* on local democracy and community engagement, comparing Harrogate and Burnley.

I bought *Pies and Prejudice* because of the great title and the Doctor Who quote in the inside pages: “If you’re an alien, how come you sound like you come from the north?” says Billie Piper to Christopher Eccleston. I was nearly put off by Maconie’s endorsement of Greggs the bakers; not the worst northern bakery chain but a sad introduction that is a poor comparison to the great pie shops of Wigan and most towns in Lancashire.

Maconie does not hide that he is a successful journalist and broadcaster, unlike many ‘ordinary’ writers on debut books. He visits and writes about Crewe (a town I think is underrated but no one from there ever agrees). The late Gwyneth Dunwoody MP gets a mention, one of the few direct references to current politics in the north, although the text is littered with references to current events, including modern political figures. Maconie writes about history, industrial history and industry, about rugby, about football, about Warrington (both Roy Jenkins and Menzies Campbell get mentions) and about music – of course paying homage to Liverpool.

He accurately analyses how Boris Johnson got into such trouble for making serious points by describing Liverpool sentimentality in an insensitive and silly way.

*Pies and Prejudice* is a funny and perceptive book. His chapter on Liverpool an accurate portrait of the city in 2006 like, but more detailed



# REVIEWS

than, Bill Bryson’s a decade earlier and full of popular culture references. He affectionately captures the complexity and ambition of Manchester. I didn’t know about the origin of black pudding, or the fabulous delicatessen in Bury market. There are mistakes in the book but they are probably for artistic licence (ignoring the fact the north is full of Conservative Clubs and listing working men’s clubs as at an end). Political activists and local councillors will be upset that their efforts get no recognition at all. They can at least take a share of the credit for the revival of northern towns and cities (and villages) but they are largely invisible in this treatment.

Cumbria, Pennine Lancashire (invented by Tony Wilson), Oldham, Hebden Bridge, Durham all get mentions. Newcastle merits significant treatment but it should be more upbeat. Oldham and Burnley are portrayed in need of a lot more regeneration and their race problems are briefly explored. Harrogate is described as the Brighton of the north.

It is the contrasting towns of Harrogate and Burnley that are the subject for Wilks-Heeg and Clayton, both of the department of sociology, social policy and social work studies at the University of Liverpool, who undertook a research project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

Wilks-Heeg published recently about the growth of the BNP in local elections, before its European election successes. ALDC had been charting this for quite a few years and Liberal Democrats in the north are particularly effective in stopping them. For a while we had held back the BNP in Padiham on the outskirts of Burnley. A pleasant little town in need of investment, where resentment at decline (a phenomenon of the

1980s in most northern towns and cities) and lack of investment led to the usual blaming of ‘immigrants’ elsewhere getting the investment and hence to a protest vote for the BNP. Clearly the BNP has continued to capitalise on genuine discontent among some residents.

The proliferation of non-elected bodies and government targets isn’t news to local government activists, community activists or MPs, but it is useful that this is properly studied and recorded. The authors note: “The relationship between service providers and citizens at the local level now constitutes a complex mix of four distinct forms of local democracy: representative (voting), user (accountability of services to users), consultative (surveys, focus groups) and participatory (community involvement).”

They carried out an impressive series of interviews and did a great deal of spadework in mapping local democracy – in effect mapping civic activity in a broader sense. Key questions considered were ‘which agencies do what’, ‘how are they accountable’ and ‘how much of a say do local residents have in relation to these decisions?’ The details about the two towns will be of local interest, and the treatment of local government reform of most interest to political analysts and anoraks. However, they cover big questions such as the need for local autonomy and what the role is for elected representatives – councillors, MPs and parish councillors.

The report highlights truths well known to those concerned with local democracy but also some shocking statistics that may be new. All are worth reprising but I mention just some examples here.

“Only 5% of public spending

in Burnley and Harrogate is controlled by each of the district councils. Despite this, many people see 'the council' as the main local agency."

"Over 30 different organisations, many of them unelected 'quangos,' have some role in governing Burnley and Harrogate."

"The average district councillor spends up to 400 hours a year on constituency work."

The authors say that the "plethora of consultation and engagement processes is inherently flawed" because "citizens' expectations are raised, while the capacity of local agencies to respond is tightly restricted". Faith groups are highlighted in both towns, as "a core form of local civic activism".

It is probably no surprise that in affluent articulate Harrogate far more local residents feel able to influence decisions (although still only a quarter) – this may reflect having a Lib Dem council and MP. It will not be a surprise to city or rural activists that "The party system in Burnley and Harrogate is effectively kept going by just 100 people in each district." Councillors (at the time of the report certainly) in Burnley were paid a very low basic allowance compared with unitary metropolitan authorities.

Unlike a lot of reports by sociologists, this one is not wrapped up with pretending to be science or a blanket of political views dressed up as independent 'research'. The authors make obvious political points grounded in the urgent concerns of this decade, many of which will chime with Liberals. They highlight the limits to consumerist approaches to participation and some (though no doubt selective) comparisons with how things are done better in other European countries. The increased potential role for parish and town councils and the local press are key positive conclusions. So is engagement at neighbourhood level, pioneered by Liberal Democrats in Tower Hamlets, Sutton, Oldham and Liverpool and supported by the government in the last decade.

On the other hand, 'New' Labour's continuous reform from the centre is criticised. Readers can read the 11 recommendations themselves and will probably agree with most if not all.

I disagree with their idea

that public money should be found to "enhance the resources available to local parties to support campaigning." The recent media, Tory and Taxpayers' Alliance criticism of levies by parties on local councillors is entirely misplaced. Councillors are elected as candidates of parties because they stand with the support of those parties. They gain, usually, a significant amount of part time pay for a job where they are now better remunerated than ever before. The least they should do is put something back to support their party organisation. On the other hand, the idea of local public buildings as 'little icons' of revival in a community is a really interesting one. Will Alsop's Peckham library is mentioned, I would give the Anfield regeneration office in an old County Police Station in the shadow of LFC's ground as one and the community Anfield Breckside Community Council space in a nearby church crypt as an even more important example.

Maconie's book should be a welcome source for future sociologists and historians, as well as people who like to read funny books. The snapshot by Wilks-Heeg and Clayton is not a best seller, but hopefully it will chart local democracy and two towns moving into an era of greater success and prosperity rather than marking a temporary high point in northern life.

Kiron Reid

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## **Democracy – The Missing Element DAGGER 2009 £7**

This is an excellent contribution to the electoral reform debate, particularly at a time when there is a widespread but wholly erroneous view that there is a sort of gentle upward path from first-past-the-post to the nirvana of the Single Transferable Vote, with any of the stopping places en route being worthwhile.

Not so. There are three 'families' of voting systems – single member, list and preferential. However they are dressed up and spun, neither the first nor the second is worth having. Only a preferential system, such as STV, in which the voter creates his or her own list, can match accountability with

proportionality and resolve the democratic dilemma.

The present parliamentary crisis has led to panic measures on the part of the party leaders. Gordon Brown is said to favour a referendum on general election day with a choice between FPTP and 'Alternative Vote Plus', and David Cameron has espoused open primaries to select Conservative candidates.

The call from many voters is to be able to vote against their MPs but not against their parties; AV+ would make matters worse as it could well happen that an MP defeated in the constituency ballot was elected in the 'plus' section. David Cameron's veneer of openness makes party membership even less meaningful – and, of course, STV does the job better, enabling the voters to choose between a number of nominated party candidates.

This book contains pro-STV essays by 10 authors who each tackle a different aspect of the case. There is also a well-informed introduction by Charles Kennedy. Arguably the most interesting contribution is that from Donald Gorrie who tells in detail how Scotland ended up with an Additional Member System for its parliament but opted for STV for its local elections.

I need to end with a confession. I was asked to contribute to this book but declined to do so on the grounds that I believe that DAGGER has served its time as a pro-STV pressure group within the Liberal Democrats and needs to be replaced by a different and more broadly based body – which now exists.

I didn't like offending my very long time friend Joan Davies but, alas, in politics sometimes needs must. However, I'm delighted that she and John Holman have managed to produce this excellent set of essays without me!

Michael Meadowcroft

## Monday

Autumn has come to Rutland and the season of agricultural shows has drawn to a close for another year. While I always enjoy the opportunity to display my Longhorns, for me the highlight of these events is the sheepdog trials. It is, I hasten to add, many years since any dog was executed: these days they take place merely for entertainment. I fear, however, that the wider public has a wholly unrealistic picture of what a dog can accomplish because of the activities of Phil Drabble. 'One Man and his Dog', his moving television programme, enjoyed great popularity in the 1980s until it became embroiled in a notorious scandal. You see, the sheep on his show were not sheep at all, but out-of-work actors in woollen costumes. While this provided welcome employment to former cast members of 'Triangle' and 'Howards' Way', the public felt cheated when the practice was revealed and the programme was taken off the air under something of a cloud. Drabble, incidentally, later decided he was 'a woman trapped in a man's body' (which must, in all fairness, be Terribly Uncomfortable), had the operation and now enjoys some success as a novelist under the name Margaret.

## Tuesday

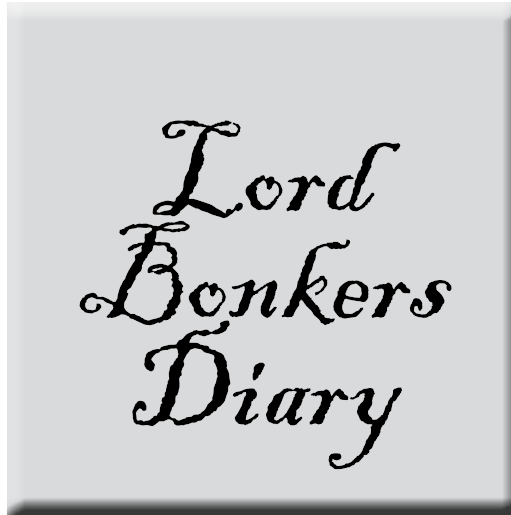
To Cowley Street for the first meeting of the 'Liberal Democrat Attack Unit' put together by Clegg to direct our fire upon the Tories. I happen to be the last to arrive and find an encouragingly ugly crew already present when I enter the room. In the chair is Chris 'Hard Man' Huhne, and around the table I recognise Knuckles Oakeshott, Norman 'Bite Yer Legs' Baker and Norman Lamb, who made a good living as a masked wrestler ('The Sheringham Strangler') before he entered Parliament. Having given my apologies, I waste no further time in handing out orchard doughties to all present and advising them to give their opponent one up the snoot when he is not expecting it. Huhne urges us to think up some new ways of attacking George Osborne, concentrating in particular upon his lack of experience. After some discussion, my plan of catching him in the dorm while Matron is having her nap, cramming him into a laundry basket and pushing it down the stairs is agreed by acclamation.

## Wednesday

An early start finds me enjoying breakfast at a transport café on the Great North Road. They do the finest bacon sandwich in Rutland here, and the tea is strong enough to go 15 rounds with Marciano. I spot a familiar face in the corner: we exchange smiles, but I do not compromise her privacy by speaking to her. My readers will recall that the Queen – for it is she – was a driver with the ATS during the War; what is less well known is that she has kept her hand in ever since. Indeed, she is never happier than when at the wheel of a pantechnicon, finding it a blessed relief from the pressures of reigning. Many are the motorists on the high roads of our nation who have been surprised by a shout of "Get on with it, Granddad! One could get a tank through that gap," followed by a distinctive wave from a hunched figure in a headscarf. I watch her fondly as she drains her tea and heads for Selby and the A19.

## Thursday

It is true what they say: Britain lacks enterprise these days. Perhaps you saw my recent appearance in the 'Dragons' Den'? I offered the assembled moguls the



chance of investing in a distinctly promising chimney-sweeping business (the labour costs were extremely low); not only did I not get a bean, but they threatened to call the police! If I had taken such an attitude back in the 1980s, Rutland would not today be at the forefront of the personal computer industry. Looking back on those days, the machines we sold seem terribly primitive. The first of them was large enough to hold a man standing upright – indeed, it did hide a man standing upright (the Professor of Hard Sums from the University of Rutland at Belvoir) when we won the inaugural British chess computer championships – but we believed in our ideas, and the result is the 'silicon shire' we

see today. Wiltshire, incidentally, is known as the 'silicone shire' because it leads the breast-replacement industry. Each to his own.

## Friday

A busy day on the old demesne supervising Meadowcroft as he sweeps up the fallen leaves and training my younger gun dogs. One puppy catches my eye in particular. While I cannot fault it for keenness, it is given to jumping up and pawing one and, when the guns go off, to barking wildly and rushing off in all directions. I have decided to call it Clegg.

## Saturday

Despite being much in demand to speak at fringe meetings, I was able to snatch a few minutes with Vince 'High Voltage' Cable at Bournemouth to discuss the party's economic policies for the next election. "It's very simple," he told me. "We are proposing savage spending cuts to please the voters in Southern seats where the Tories are challenging us and my new mansion tax to please voters in the North where we are trying to win seats from Labour." "That's all very well," I returned almost immediately, "but what happens if the voters in the South hear about the mansion tax and the ones in the North hear about the savage spending cuts?" He went rather quiet after that.

## Sunday

Walking beside Rutland Water this morning, I am pleased to discover that the pirate ships are again flourishing. Back in the 1960s there were dozens of them. The pirates would all gather on deck and play sea shanties Extremely Loudly to the crowds of young people that had gathered on the shore to listen. This greatly concerned by old friend Anthony Wedgwood Benn – or 'Viscount Stan' as he called himself in those days because he thought it more demotic – who would come over to Rutland to chide me about it. "These youngsters shouldn't be listening to the pirates," he fumed, "they should be doing traditional country dances and singing 'I Love to Carry Manure to the Top of the Mountain to the Benefit of my Comrades on the Collective Farm'." I did not take his advice, though I gather the pirates rather faded from view when my own Radio Rutland was set up (and this part of the Water was used for naval gunnery practice – I remain a Rear Admiral in the Royal Rutland Naval Reserve). I shall take great pleasure in telling Wedgwood Benn about the return of the pirates when next we have dinner.

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