

# liberator



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# COMMENTARY

## HEAT FROM COPENHAGEN

Those who expected the Copenhagen summit to deliver something that would determinedly roll back climate change were always likely to be disappointed.

The chance of 193 heads of government agreeing to anything substantial was slim, and not just because of Chinese intransigence or President Obama's predicament in the US senate.

Politicians, even unelected ones, have a shrewd suspicion of what their populations will put up with and know, even if they cannot say it in public, that protestations of concern about climate change run far ahead of people's willingness to change their lifestyles, jobs or homes for what they perceive to be the worse.

In the UK, all three main parties make the right noises on climate change but not ones that are too loud in case the public takes fright at what might be demanded of it.

The party that goes beyond that takes a risk that it will be painted as the one that wants voters to live in unheated homes, never travel abroad and eat only what they can grow.

Consider climate change for a moment purely politically, rather than in terms of science or its affects on the developing world.

The Liberal Democrats turned out their largest contingent on a demonstration since the Iraq march with 'the wave' in December and have to an extent carved out a place as the party determined to tackle climate change without the sort of authoritarianism associated with the Green Party.

There is certainly an audience for that – people who want to act locally to make a change globally. There is also a serious case to be made for investment in 'green' industries, so that climate action is not associated with mass unemployment as old industries close.

But to make that case in the face of the worst recession for decades, and in the face of the party's inept posturing as 'tough' on public spending cuts, will be hard indeed.

The Lib Dems can hardly promise 'savage' spending cuts coupled with restrictions, in the name of climate change, on things people like doing or consuming, without ending up with the support only of a small minority of paragons of altruism.

Tory leader David Cameron was half right when he argued that presenting climate change as a matter of doom, disaster and joylessness would alienate the public from the action needed.

His party is of course in thrall to business interests that want to do no more than tinker, and has a large contingent of climate change deniers with which to contend.

Liberal Democrats cannot leave it to the Tories to present climate change adjustment in attractive terms.

The party has a selling point here, which it should never throw away by yielding to the temptation to frighten rather than encourage.

## THE THIRD HORSE

A flurry of speculation has arisen this winter about whether the polls point to a hung parliament and what the Liberal Democrats could or should do, were this to come about.

This has in turn led to a flurry of speculation about what the Lib Dems might 'demand' as kingmakers,

Be careful what you wish for. Past experience suggests that one cannot successfully campaign for a hung parliament because voters are afraid of the prospect.

The party cannot dodge the perfectly reasonable question of how it would respond, though it can and should avoid being foxed by interviewers into coming down in favour of either Labour or the Tories.

Either course would be politically suicidal ahead of an election, and so it has been right to say that it would wait to see which party had won the greatest support – though that could mean seats or votes.

The coming general election is shaping up to be only the second in recent times that was not a foregone conclusion, and the experience of 1992 is not one the Lib Dems would wish to repeat.

They suffered a crushing setback, squeezed as voters realised they had a genuine choice of alternative governments, a situation not helped when the party started to talk of hung parliaments and electoral reform in the campaign's final week, raising a spectre of instability.

Plenty of MPs will admit they have been helped by the racing certainty that Labour would win the last three general elections – telling wavering supporters that there would be no purpose in their voting Tory to 'get Blair out' since the polls made it clear Blair would not be 'got out', and therefore they could safely continue to vote Lib Dem.

If the general election appears nationally to be the two-horse race – a concept beloved of Lib Dem propaganda in other circumstances – the Lib Dems will be the third horse. And if another party established an unassailable lead, the Lib Dems may do better, but have no influence since there will not be a hung parliament.

The closer Labour and the Tories get to each other, the more likely there will be a hung parliament, but also the more likely the Lib Dems will suffer a squeeze.

# RADICAL BULLETIN

## HAIRY SHIRTS

How will the Liberal Democrats present arguments about cutting public spending at the general election? This is a conundrum being wrested with, since sounding too gung-ho about cuts does the reverse double of making the party sound indistinguishable from the Tories while offering the electorate no cause for optimism (blood, sweat and tears only works in wartime as a political platform).

Nick Clegg's 'savage cuts' line was hastily and rightly junked at conference (*Liberator* 336), but what will replace it?

Attendees at the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors' Kickstart weekend in Birmingham in late November were startled by polling evidence presented by campaigns director Hilary Stephenson, which appeared to some to argue that voters wanted change, the Tories represented 'change', therefore the Lib Dems should not attack the Tories. If this were what she meant, it would be a bit awkward for Lib Dem MPs facing challenges from Tories.

But shadow chancellor Vince Cable has sometimes sounded tough on cuts and at other times argued that the Tories want to go too far too fast, so how will he square this circle, in particular without sounding close to the politically toxic dump that is the Labour Party?

One MP told *Liberator*: "Vince is attacking the Tories on the ground that they are proposing to cut public spending too early and will restart the recession – but the emerging line is also to attack them on the ground that their cuts will be unfair, that they will favour the very wealthy and kick those who depend on public services in the teeth.

"There is understandable anxiety about being seen to have anything to do with Labour, because the stink of rotting flesh will attach to anyone who gets anywhere near it, but that does not mean that we will restrain ourselves in attacking the Tories."

Another said there was "some feeling that we are being too hair shirt in going further than the other two parties in specifying exactly where cuts could fall. The electorate say they accept the need for cuts – but not once they realise that it could affect them.

"Even at its highest, the debt-to-GDP ratio will reach about 70 to 80%, which is actually 'normal' for many leading European countries such as Germany."

Perhaps the MPs' awayday in mid-December could have provided an opportunity to thrash all this out and avoid the confusion over policy seen at Bournemouth.

However, one who attended opined that the late Lord Holme himself (fixer to Messrs Ashdown and Steel) would have been proud of the way in which MPs there "were denied a discussion of anything we wanted

to talk about".

As *Liberator* went to press, Clegg announced (11 January) that he would "shelve cherished party pledges", including a six-year delay to the end of tuition fees. The party's Federal Policy Committee rolled over and accepted this on the grounds that it would make the party look "credible". But as one MP remarked, 'credible' is "an adjective often applied to the performance of the losing team."

## WHO IS THE FAT CONTROLLER?

Liberal Vision, the umbrella group for loony right-wing libertarians, explains on its website that it is "a wholly-owned subsidiary of the classical liberal think tank, Progressive Vision, and [we] describe ourselves as an 'affiliate'.

"We share Progressive Vision's aims and values but Liberal Vision is not obliged to support all or any of Progressive Vision's specific policies – and neither are Liberal Vision's members or supporters."

Do they support this aim? Another venture by Progressive Vision is something called Keep London Moving ([www.keeplondonmoving.org](http://www.keeplondonmoving.org)), an organisation whose publicity material will take readers with long memories straight back to the mid-1970s when mad retired colonels tried to raise brigades of volunteer citizens to break strikes.

It asks whether readers are fed up with strikes on London Underground perpetrated by "extreme left-wing trade unionists" and whether they would "volunteer to work on the Tube one day a week during strikes?" Volunteer to do what exactly? Why, to drive trains. And for those who prefer to have their trains driven by people trained and qualified to do so, rather than by libertarian ideologues, Progressive Vision has a reassuring answer: "Let's face it, how much training can be required to drive a Tube train or work at a ticket counter? Driving a Tube train will be easier than driving a bus and station work is hardly rocket science."

Liberal Vision's Chandila Fernando and Mark Littlewood are now gone from the Lib Dems (*Liberator* 336) and its driving force Charlotte Gore may follow, having removed her online drivellings from Lib Dem Blogs in mid-December after she got the hump over the party promising to use public spending to combat the recession. She said: "I'm not sure when my membership of the party itself is due to expire but I'll make the decision to renew when that time comes". Three down; how long before they all go where they belong?

By the way, Progressive Vision says it hangs out at the impressive-sounding 'Suite 111, 95 Wilton Road' in central London. The prestigiousness of this address may be judged by picture opposite.

## OH, DO THE HOKEY-COKEY

In out, in out? As is usual with Liberal Democrat policy on anything to do with Europe, a further mess has been caused by the party's tortuous efforts to say nothing that might offend either the most devoted friend of the EU or the most rabid septic.

The trouble began when Ming Campbell found himself lumbered with the 2005 election promise of a referendum on the EU constitution, just as that morphed into the Lisbon Treaty.

He called instead for a referendum on continued membership or not of the EU. This must have seemed like brilliant politics at the time – pro-Europeans would believe this was the one referendum they could win, while Europhobes, predominantly in the south west, could believe they could vote Lib Dem in the expectation of a chance to leave the EU.

This was of course always brilliant politics until the Lib Dems actually had to take a stance for or against something, and thus in the early weeks of Nick Clegg's leadership the Lisbon Treaty imbroglio landed in his lap. The party's response on that was, fortunately, too tortuous for most voters to follow.

Now that Lisbon has been settled with, and the great majority of voters not giving a toss one way or the other, the Lib Dems might have let the whole issue drop. Since no-one is likely to hold any referendum in the foreseeable future, there was little need to have a policy on one.

Unfortunately, a proclamation went out on the subject from Jonny Oates, director of election communications, that succeeded only in infuriating the party's MEPs, who believe that someone – exactly who remains unclear – reneged on a compromise agreed with them.

It read: "Although a referendum is no longer an immediate prospect following the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, the Liberal Democrats are committed to an in/out referendum when any proposals are put forward by the EU for a significant new constitutional change that takes power away from the British Parliament."

Oates helpfully elaborated: "This line allows MPs and candidates to use variants of the lines below.

"I am proud to be a member of the only party that has argued consistently to give the public a say on major changes to the EU. We were the first party to call for a referendum on the Euro and campaigned for a referendum on every major treaty change since 1992. On each occasion our proposal has been blocked by the Conservatives or Labour."

The row was over the omission from Oates's statement of the words "in this parliament", which would have had the effect of time-limiting the commitment.

European Parliament group leader Fiona Hall told her colleagues that she had understood this comprise to have been accepted and, "I was therefore not a little annoyed to discover that the agreed line circulated later had removed this reference and now states that



we are 'calling for' an in/out referendum.

"I have expressed my strong disappointment about these changes – which apparently took place without Ed [Davey]'s knowledge – and asked that they be reversed.

"Please be aware that there is no initiative or policy launch accompanying this change in policy, but the line has already been distributed to MPs and it – or a variant of it – will be used by PPCs, and will likely feature in the 2010 Westminster manifesto."

Of the other MEPs, Chris Davies opposes referendums on principle; Diana Wallis supports them but told colleagues "I do not appreciate the manner in which this has been dealt with, which from Fiona's description sounds to have been completely lacking in any transparency or accountability to the wider party"; while Andrew Duff said he would campaign publicly against the new position, and Sarah Ludford complained: "There has been salami-slicing on this, with people like us and FPC giving an inch and Westminster (MPs, not peers) taking a mile."

Thus the party has a wholly unnecessary row going on about something that isn't going to happen and, in the remote event that it did, would finally be forced off the fence on which it has carefully seated itself.

## OUT OF THE BROWN STUFF

The Electoral Commission's decision in November that the Liberal Democrats acted within the law in accepting a £2.5m donation from subsequently convicted fraudster Michael Brown no doubt caused loud sighs of relief around the party, which would have had a hard time repaying it.

In its ruling, the Commission decided that Brown's company 5th Avenue Partners met the requirement that donations must come from a concern that does business in the UK.

Its chair Jenny Watson said: "Having considered all the evidence in this case, we have concluded that 5th Avenue Partners Limited met the requirements to be a permissible donor. The Electoral Commission will be taking no further action in this case."

This still leaves it no clearer as to who in the Lib Dems decided to accept this money. Reg Clark resigned as party treasurer shortly before the money was accepted and no replacement was in office at that time.

Liberator understands that a detailed report was produced for Ming Campbell, who became leader after the row began over Brown's donation, in which names are named. The few who have seen it may know if it states whether basic checks, such as a Companies House search, were run on Brown by the party.

We also understand that Charles Kennedy, who was leader at the time of the donation and would thus travel on an aircraft paid for by Brown, was sufficiently concerned about Brown's bona fides that he consulted the police, who at that time turned up no objection.

## WAY OUT WEST

Why would a Conservative MP whose website appears to show him being frogmarched by two policemen, and who blogs in the guise of domestic cat, choose to intervene in a dispute within the Liberal Democrats?

Iain Liddell-Grainger, the Tory MP for Bridgwater, energetically took up the cause of Paul Buchanan, the

former Lib Dem deputy leader of Somerset County Council, though his motive is a matter for conjecture.

Buchanan was deselected by the Lib Dems as PPC for East Devon in November after the Adjudication Panel (which rules on cases brought by the Standards Board) in July judged him "unfitted to be a councillor" and banned him from office for two years, although by that time he had stood down.

A party statement said this disqualification had led the English party's candidates committee to review his status: "This review investigated whether the circumstances relating to the standards board judgment had led him to break the Liberal Democrat candidates' code of conduct. In this case, he was found to have done so, and he has therefore been removed from the list of approved candidates and deselected as the Lib Dem PPC for East Devon."

Behind all this lies a complex tale, the essence of which is that Buchanan and Somerset's then chief executive Alan Jones fell out over both policy and personal matters.

Jones made a large number of complaints about Buchanan to the Standards Board. Buchanan lost the deputy leadership and eventually opted to sit as a Lib Dem but not as a group member.

Most of Jones's complaints were not accepted, but the panel did find Buchanan 'unfitted' because of letters he wrote to professional bodies that made accusations about Jones's personal conduct, which the panel did not accept.

Into the middle of these disputes strode Liddell-Grainger, whose eccentric website kept up a barrage of propaganda in support of Buchanan, most of it ostensibly from the MP's cat, and ran a range of insulting films and articles about Jones and the then Lib Dem leadership of Somerset.

Things became so bad that Richard Kemp, leader of the Lib Dem Local Government Association group, at one point protested to Tory leader David Cameron about his MP's attacks on an officer.

The row may have been only peripheral to the Lib Dems' loss of Somerset at last June's elections, though it can hardly have helped. But this story has many ramifications, as those who care to look for Liddell-Grainger's numerous adjournment debates in Hansard on the subject will discover.

## REDBRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER

Resignations, selection disputes, a leak to Liberator, complaints about the regional party... it's all go in the London Borough of Redbridge.

The trouble began (Liberator 331) when the small Ilford North party tried to select a candidate and found itself admonished by returning officer Darren Briddock for failing to advertise among its members for a selection committee balanced by ethnic, gender and geographical diversity.

The constituency argued that, since it had few active members, a trawl would turn up only those who served on the executive anyway, and so would be a waste of everyone's time. Ilford North did later trawl its members and found just one volunteer, but in any case had a panel that was diverse by age, gender and geography.

Matters became heated and the selection was suspended while the London regional party

investigated both what was happening in Ilford North and various allegations of irregularities in Ilford South.

There was much waving of arms about the Ilford North row being leaked to Liberator, though no-one has asked Liberator who did the leaking, and would not have got an answer had they done so (but, hey guys, it's usually unwise to conclude that any particular leak has finite sources).

London region opened an inquiry last February, which did nothing until the autumn, when it asked Monica Whyte to take this over.

Whyte reported in October, and gave Ilford North a largely clean bill of health, concluding that the falling out with Briddock was a personality dispute in which both sides shared some blame. One prominent member has left the party, though, having had no apology over allegations that he was rude, a matter still disputed.

Ilford South is more complex, and the disputes include the content of imprints, who knew what and when about candidate selection timetables, and how the executive was run. There has been a complaint that London region breached its own regulations for conducting local party inquiries and a further probe may impend. Meanwhile, the region's failure to do anything to progress the inquiry between February and October last year means that neither seat as yet has a PPC.

## TOP OF THE POPES

Malcolm Bruce came up with a fine anecdote about the late Russell Johnston, at Liberal International British Group's appropriately alcohol-fuelled commemoration of the late Inverness MP.

Johnston had risen to be president of the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe, a position in which he often called on the great and good.

The occasion came when Johnston, not an especially pious man, had to meet Pope John Paul II. Johnston later confided to Bruce that as he met his holiness, "a think bubble formed over my head saying 'what the fuck am I doing here?'"

## GREAT UNMANSIONABLE

The shambles of the mansion tax has been more or less resolved, with shadow chancellor Vince Cable saying that it would be levied only on homes worth more than £2m, twice the number he first thought of.

As an illustration of how not to make policy, and how not to win friends, this episode takes some beating. Cable, having not thought through the political effects, surprised the party, and not least other MPs, by announcing the policy at Bournemouth.

When the barrage of objections arose, Cable and the whole party were made to look silly in the middle of the conference.

One of the main objectors was his parliamentary neighbour Susan Kramer, whose Richmond Park constituency is among the country's most affluent and where £1m homes are not uncommon.

The £2m figure preserves the policy but limits its effect to hitting a few very wealthy voters, which is what it should have been in the first place.

Remember when we were all told the Liberal Democrats needed an elaborate policy-making process because the old Liberal Party "made policy on the hoof"? That would never do.

## WE'VE GOT THE BLUES

Which cretin decided to use 'aqua' as an official Lib Dem colour alongside yellow?

The 'aqua' is almost identical to the colour used by the Conservatives, as is plainly obvious to all except those with the misfortune to suffer colour blindness.

This is either a piece of subversion by those who want the Liberal Democrats to support the Tories after the next election, or a piece of idiocy by style-obsessed fools who cannot see the political implications of using blue. Either way, whoever approved it is a liability who should not be allowed within a million miles of the general election campaign.

Thankfully, there is already grassroots campaign against 'aqua' and a growing refusal to use it locally.

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# WHAT ROUTE LEADS FROM COPENHAGEN?

Chris Davies spent a week watching the confusion and self-interest on display at the UN Climate Change Conference, and wonders what comes next

The optimists have been doing their best; the Copenhagen Accord is a significant step forward, they claim. For the first time the world's two greatest emitters of global warming gases, China and the USA, have publicly agreed that average temperatures worldwide should not be allowed to increase by more than two degrees celsius. But the good news stops there. Measured against the hopes invested in it, COP 15 was a disaster.

The final report of the European Commission's chief climate change negotiator, Artur Runge-Metzger, was written in the immediate aftermath of the close of proceedings. Marked 'Not for distribution outside the Commission', the hastily written summary hardly reflected the strong emotions and rampant confusion that prevailed at the closing plenary session of exhausted government negotiators. They had been forced to consider not a document that drew strength from their collective work of years but one that had been cobbled together just hours beforehand by a handful of key players. President Obama had quickly proclaimed that it would bring 'Peace in our Time,' before jumping on to Airforce One and flying away.

It said: "As the discussions continued into the morning... support for the Accord was growing among Parties and many made strong pleas to accept the Accord, including the African Group, the African Union and most small island states... Opponents of the Accord continued to resist that a document negotiated in a closed group in which not all Parties took part was put before the COP for adoption. Rather than formally adopting the Accord, the conference, in the late morning Saturday, agreed to 'take note' of the Accord. (This)... may prevent the establishment of a number of institutions that were foreseen in the accord, including the Copenhagen Green Climate Fund. Following the agreement on taking note of the Accord, many questions were raised on what the Accord actually means. The COP spent around 3-4 hours simply with discussions and questions on the Accord. After agreeing to extend both the mandate of the Kyoto Track and the mandate of the Convention Track to COP16 in November 2010 in Mexico City, the conference finally closed at 16.00 hrs on Saturday afternoon."

## LIMPED TO A CLOSE

So the conference limped to a close with government negotiators confused over both the status and the meaning of the Accord. That it could have been even worse is demonstrated by the summary in the EU report of the last session of the 'Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-Term Cooperative Action,' which had

previously discussed possible wording to describe a 'shared vision': "In the last day of negotiations, there was a last attempt to produce a text that could be discussed by the ministers and heads of state, based on a draft produced by the facilitator. This contained a long preamble with various references to international law. The discussion undid most of the work done by the facilitator, adding text and brackets on all the controversial issues (historical responsibility, share in atmospheric space, right to development, continuation of the Kyoto Protocol, low carbon society). On more operative paragraphs, radical differences of views remain between developed and developing countries. Views range from a shared vision as a guidance for long term action to one as simple implementation of the Bali Action Plan. Discussion on the actual goals (temperature benchmarks, emission reduction targets, peaking) was notably absent as everything relevant was in brackets. Saudi Arabia withdrew from the discussion and shortly after the facilitator recognised the futility of the exercise and concluded that it could not produce a paper fit for consideration by the political level."

It is 17 years since reducing the problem of global warming was recognised as an imperative in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Conferences of the Parties (COPs) to the Convention have been held annually since 1995 to consider the evidence, develop equitable mechanisms to curb emissions, and to try to agree targets for implementation. The Copenhagen Conference was foreseen as The Big One, the occasion when the bits of the jigsaw would be brought together and shaped into a whole. The European Union's goals for COP15 were repeatedly spelt out to MEPs prior to the opening of the conference. They were to secure a binding agreement in principle to adopt measures necessary to prevent a two-degree rise in temperature, to ensure that it had the support of all the world's major emitters of greenhouse gases, and to put in place a mechanism for continual review and updating of the targets and implementation measures. What in fact emerged was a piece of paper that is binding on no-one, includes no specific targets, and provides no roadmap to the future.

Who was to blame? These conferences have come to combine meetings of government negotiators (dozens of them taking place at the same time), an exchange of information between experts (I counted 87 fringe meetings listed in the agenda on one day alone), and all the fun of the fair, with a big presence of mainly European and American environmental activists competing for media attention inside and outside the conference centre. The Danish Government



has been criticised for its organisational arrangements, and quite why more than 35,000 people were accredited to attend a conference at a complex that has a maximum capacity of 15,000 requires explanation, but the anarchic nature of the event probably did not detract from the actual work of the negotiators which mostly took place behind doors permitting only restricted access.

Copenhagen was the fifteenth Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC, but it was also the fifth Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol, the eighth Meeting of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long Term Cooperative Action, the tenth Meeting of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Further Commitments for Annex I Parties under the Kyoto Protocol, the thirty-first Meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Implementation, and also of the Meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific and Technological Advice. The various meetings and sub-meetings of these bodies, with their different objectives and memberships, took place in succession and in parallel. It didn't help that brusque Danish environment minister Connie Hedegaard was unexpectedly replaced as conference president for the concluding sessions by her prime minister, who then lost his grip and retired exhausted, but could anyone be expected to get order out of proceedings like this? It might just have been possible to direct the chaos towards a positive outcome if all involved shared common goals, but in truth they did not. With the UN process requiring that decisions be reached by 'consensus' it was not difficult for progress to be frustrated.

The conference became the world's greatest-ever gathering of heads of government. In this respect it more than met the hopes of people like me who argued that the top decision-makers would have to be present if an ambitious agreement was to be secured. But self-interest prevailed, and the crudeness of the politics was revealed in full. The limits of China's willingness to address the issues were exposed when that country forced the abandonment not only of the global target to cut emissions by 50% by 2050, but also of the requirement that developed countries should reduce their emissions by 80% by 2050. Some had argued that it would be better to have no agreement than a weak agreement, and with hindsight maybe they were right. It is arguable that the EU should have blocked the measure rather than let China strip it of substance.

There is no obvious path forward. The Kyoto Protocol remains in force but is time limited and excludes key players. The Copenhagen Accord is weak, unclear, and not legally binding; the clause requiring it to be reviewed before the end of 2015 offers little comfort. Under UN auspices the government negotiators will meet again twice this year, respectively in Bonn and in Mexico City, but who knows what will be on their agenda? If there is no

*“We are lost in a maze, unable to lift our heads over the hedge to see the whole and with every turn appearing to lead to a dead end”*

forward momentum, there is a real risk that we will slide backwards. In the absence of an international agreement, it may prove impossible to persuade the EU to raise its sights and commit itself to a 30% reduction in emissions by 2020. The argument that such a policy would impose additional costs upon European industry for no good purpose – “exporting CO2 and importing unemployment,” as the refrain goes – will be hard to resist.

Expect new emphasis behind President Sarkozy's call for the EU to introduce trade restrictions on goods from countries that are playing no part in reducing CO2 emissions. Europe has a responsibility to lead by example because of our high emissions over many decades and their continuing high level per capita, but let's not beat ourselves up too much. For a long while, we didn't know that burning fossil fuels could bring about climate change. China does know it, and that knowledge introduces a new factor into the equation. The blame game won't save lives.

## **SEVERELY BRUISED**

In his report, the European Commission's chief negotiator admits that the UN climate change process has been “severely bruised” but does his best to remain positive. He points out that countries are supposed to announce their policies for emissions reductions by 1 February 2010, and suggests that this could provide the nucleus for a new international policy initiative. He proposes that the Major Economies Forum, the body detested by many environmentalists because it was created by George W Bush in a bid to circumvent the Kyoto process, could play an important role in “the necessary international reflection process,” effectively circumventing the inadequate UN process. The arrival of a European Commissioner (Connie Hedegaard) dedicated to climate action will strengthen the international role of the Commission, he hopes. Coordinated action between a limited number of countries “with a shared outlook” is likely to take on greater importance than the securing of a worldwide agreement.

These are straws in the wind, and there is no certainty that any of them will develop into the building blocks of a new policy. At a time when the world needs to develop some effective instruments of global governance we are lost in a maze, unable to lift our heads over the hedge to see the whole and with every turn appearing to lead to a dead end.

Maybe world leaders will recognise the need to act selflessly and will raise their ambitions, or maybe not. The plain fact is that our failure at Copenhagen has left us with no idea where to go from here. We shall just have to take advantage of whatever opportunities come our way.

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Chris Davies MEP has been the Liberal Democrat environment spokesman in the European Parliament since 1999

# HOW WELL HUNG SHOULD A PARLIAMENT BE?

No overall control is a statistically likely result at the next general election and the Liberal Democrats should be positive about it, says Michael Steed

The insular British political vocabulary is the quandary. In the 1980s, the Liberal-SDP Alliance tried to replace the well worn 'Hung Parliament' epithet by talking of a 'Balanced Parliament' or 'People's Parliament'. It failed. Short and sour, 'Hung Parliament' stuck in politicians' and journalists' lexicon. Like a hung jury, it implies the failure of an attempt to get a decision; the expense and delay of a retrial, and therefore a problem to be avoided.

Does it have to be like that? Particularly at the 1987 election, the Alliance's awkward double-headed leadership was put on the rack on the issue of a hung parliament (one David fancied Neil; the other David had a crush on Margaret) and so saw the issue as a problem. Subsequent leaders were warned and tended to avoid it.

On that basis, the May 2005 outcome, when Labour secured a clear overall working majority for just 35.2% of the vote, was good for the Lib Dems. Problem avoided. Really? Jim Callaghan polled 37.9% in 1979 and lost firmly to Margaret Thatcher. With results like that, how can we lecture the Afghans, Iranians and Zimbabweans about the conduct of voting?

Surely, that outrageous award of an artificial majority to Tony Blair, defying the wishes of 64.8% of those who voted, was the problem. Liberals believe in a fairer voting system, so we should have no problem in identifying that as the issue. Yet we still hesitate about the necessary corollary, a House of Commons which better reflects the popular view by not having one party government with a contrived majority.

## OVERWEENING POWER

There are two better, more democratic forms of government than the contrived majority. One is genuine majority government, where the governing party or, more likely parties, do(es) have majority popular support. The other is minority government, where the party (or it could be parties) in power lack(s) a majority in parliament, reflecting minority status in votes.

In the latter case, the overweening power of the executive is limited by the need to find a majority in parliament on an ad hoc basis. That is the current position with the SNP government in Scotland, just as Scotland previously had genuine majority government through a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition.

If Liberal Democrats believe in more democratic government, and want to get the best out of a no-overall majority situation next May, they should start arguing that case. That will attract attention, and stands a good chance of swinging the argument on to

better ground than the hung parliament outcome.

It will be easy to get that argument going. Although there is no experience of no-overall majority parliaments since 1979, there were three separate experiences in the 1970s – the February 1974 outcome; the Lib-Lab pact 1977-78; and the Callaghan minority government of 1978-9. There have been other very narrow results (1950 and 1964, which led to brief parliaments; and 1992, where John Major's majority of 21 had disappeared by the end of the parliament). The statistical likelihood of an election outcome with no majority is now relatively high. This due to the large number bound to be not Tory or Labour MPs – 18 from Northern Ireland; up to a dozen or so nationalists from Scotland and Wales and plenty of Liberal Democrats. The precise Tory lead required to give David Cameron an overall majority depends on the geographic distribution of his party's vote (most media predictions miss that, assuming an identical distribution to 2005). There is plenty of uncertainty.

Recent opinion polls, too, have helped. Even if the Tory lead is back up in double figures, the media will be looking for a story of possible change and will want to talk about whether or not Cameron will really get an overall majority.

So far so easy. What will not be easy is to put the argument in the face of the myth and memory of leading British and Tory politicians. The experience of the 1970s is already being called on to maintain that overall majority, one party government is good; anything else bad.

There are some good broad arguments to play. Has Britain really benefited from the massive majority that Tony Blair won? Was Margaret Thatcher's ability to push the disastrous poll tax through parliament a good thing? Why are Eurozone countries, mostly with coalition governments, pulling out of the recession faster than Britain? There is also the Scottish and Welsh experience to demonstrate that coalitions and minority governments can operate effectively and with stability – are the English so backward that a Westminster no-overall majority parliament could not work as well as those in Edinburgh or Cardiff?

Yet we must expect elderly Tory and Labour spokesmen (and younger politicians or journalists with no direct experience) to claim that things went badly between 1974 and 1979; that British experience from the period underlines the value of strong, one-party government. A lot has changed in society since the 1970s, not least some parts of the British constitution, but memory sticks, including those of the 'winter of discontent' and rampant inflation.

## UTTERLY IRRESPONSIBLE

So it is worth looking for lessons from the seventies. February 1974 was followed by seven months of utterly irresponsible government as Harold Wilson focused only on the short-term, and the timing of a repeat general election. If Britain had had fixed-term parliaments, so that re-running the election had not been an option, we should have had far more responsible government.

But we must recall the political context. No party had anticipated the no overall majority result (Liberals in particular dodged any discussion of the issue). As the results flowed in, the notion that there was going to be another election later that year was at once fixed in the mind of politicians and the commentariat. There are myths about possible coalitions that could have been formed, but there was no serious effort on the part of any party in that direction. Everyone expected a repeat run, so a repeat run there was going to be. That made for irresponsible government, stoking up inflation and avoiding taking necessary unpopular decisions. The lesson from that experience is that all parties should be prepared to make a parliament in which the people have not produced a one-party majority work properly.

As it happens, Wilson only scraped home in October 1974 with an overall majority of three. Yet so stuck in the groove of majority government was the commentariat, that that was no public discussion in the next couple of years about what would happen when, as was almost inevitable, that majority disappeared through by-election defeat (aided as it happened by defection). Callaghan replaced Wilson in early 1976, and duly lost a majority in the House of Commons at the autumn 1976 by-elections. Yet in the following six months, there was still no real discussion about what that meant; the strange parliamentary manoeuvres in March 1977 that led to the Lib-Lab pact were unanticipated. David Steel had only a weekend to decide, with some but necessarily limited consultation with his party, to do the deal that saved the Callaghan government. In the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that there were flaws in the parliamentary agreement between him and Jim Callaghan.

As the pact proved electorally disastrous for Liberals, especially in local government, in the short term, and failed to produce the goods in the form of a sensible, fair system to the European elections, it became very unpopular within the Liberal Party and was ended in the summer of 1978. That 'failure' is only part of the story. What the pact gave Britain was a period of stability, when the sillier left-wing excesses of the 1974 Labour manifesto were vetoed, and when on economic performance Britain did rather better than either the 1974-76 majority Labour period, or the subsequent Tory majority from 1979 onwards. Liberal spokesmen at the time tried hard to claim direct credit

*“All politicians are tired out at the end of an election campaign, and not in the best state to make difficult decisions in the 48 hours following the declaration of results”*

for those achievements. Actually, they could have been achieved by the stability of a fixed-term parliament; minority government could have exercised the veto. What the pact period really demonstrated was the fallacy that one-party majority is better.

However, it is doubtful that harking back to the 1970s will sway much argument. It is more important, if Liberal Democrats in 2010 are to advance the

advantages of a no-overall majority outcome, that they can talk positively about what would happen in those circumstances. There are plenty of lessons, from Scotland and Wales and from other European democracies as to how things should proceed.

First of all, there is no need to hurry. One of the most ridiculous features of British politics is the notion that the day after a general election has to see a change of government. The United States waits some ten weeks before a newly elected president is inaugurated. That eighteenth century time interval is rather long, but ten days or a fortnight is quite normal in parliamentary democracies that function better than Britain. All politicians are tired out at the end of an election campaign, and not in the best state to make difficult decisions in the 48 hours following the declaration of results.

Next, the choice of government must reflect how people voted. If there is a party that has won both in votes and seats, then that party must have the first opportunity to form a government. If it refuses to talk sensibly about compromising with smaller parties, whether in coalition or in forming a minority government, then it may be legitimate for a combination of parties to refuse to allow it to take office. But it must have the first go. Some constitutional experts argue there is a convention that the incumbent prime minister has first go; that should be denounced as undemocratic.

Journalists will press Liberal Democrats to answer the question: Brown or Cameron. They should answer with the principle just enunciated (“we should respect the popular verdict”), stressing the need for proper processes. Liberal Democrats can say that they hope to be the biggest party, but are setting out the right way of doing things regardless of which party comes top. The message will get muddled up, especially by some of the print media, to try to predict and report how Nick Clegg is leaning. That is inevitable, but the more the party stresses the need for democratic process and principle, the better the chance of switching the debate away from that dangerous ground.

Of course, what happens if one party comes top in votes and another in seats? Well, Liberals have the real answer to that one, don't they?

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Michael Steed was President of the Liberal Party 1978-79 and has written extensively on constitutional and electoral matters; he is now a Liberal Democrat councillor in Canterbury



# THINGS CAN ONLY GET BETTER?

Simon Titley looks back at the 2010 general election and the years that followed

As the general election of 2019 approached and commentators looked back on the preceding ten years, no-one could agree what to call the decade (was it the ‘teenies’, ‘tenties’ or ‘twenty-tens’?). But everyone agreed it was the general election of 2014 that marked the real sea change in British politics, not those of 2010.

The May 2010 election had not turned out quite as expected. Liberal Democrat strategists confidently asserted the ‘iron law’ that their support would inevitably rise as the party gained greater media exposure during the campaign. However, the participation of Nick Clegg in the televised leaders’ debates proved a mixed blessing. It generated more exposure but reinforced the perception that the Lib Dems were part of the old establishment.

The Lib Dems’ decision to target Labour-held seats had been implemented too late to have much effect. That – and the unfortunate line about “savage cuts”, which came back to haunt Clegg – meant that losses to the Tories were not matched by sufficient gains from Labour. Lib Dem support was also depressed by endless media speculation about a hung parliament, which repelled many tactical voters worried that a vote for the Lib Dems might inadvertently produce the result they least wanted. In the event, the Lib Dems won 54 seats and 19.7% of the vote, better than pessimists had feared but worse than in 2005, and the sort of result that could be (and was) interpreted any way you chose.

The Tories emerged from May’s election as the largest party but 15 seats short of an overall majority. Speculation about a deal with the Liberal Democrats quickly ended, however. As David Cameron entered 10 Downing Street, the new prime minister quashed all notion of a coalition by making it clear that he intended to lead a Conservative minority government “in the best interests of the country”. If the other parties obstructed his government, they would be undermining the national interest, he declared.

The Tory strategy soon became a clear. The government provoked the opposition parties with a series of controversial proposals. After several defeats in the Commons, in September Cameron announced that, since the other parties were “holding back Britain’s recovery”, he had no choice but to ask for a dissolution. The October 2010 general election gave Cameron an overall majority but, at 22 seats, not as large as he had hoped.

The second general election of 2010 turned out to be disastrous for all three main parties. As in May, UKIP, the BNP and the surge of independent candidates failed to gain any seats, mainly because voters disgusted by the expenses scandal tended to abstain rather than back any mavericks. But that did little to help the main parties.

Labour, already virtually bankrupt by the time of the May election, had little money to fight a second campaign. The low morale of its remaining members had been made worse by the post-election recriminations and a bruising leadership contest between David Miliband and Ed Balls, narrowly won by Miliband. The consequent disarray meant more losses to the Tories.

The Liberal Democrats fared worse than in May, falling from 54 to 43 seats. They too had suffered from infighting. The weekend after the May election, a ‘communications committee’ of right-wing PR people launched a long-planned pre-emptive strike. They blamed the party’s poor performance on “grassroots activists” and “unrepresentative delegates” who had saddled the party with “embarrassing policies”. The party needed a “Clause 4 Moment” to break the power of its “unruly members”.

The media largely bought this narrative and, as the row went on through the summer, it looked as though the right-wingers might succeed in forcing through a series of constitutional amendments designed to strip the membership of its powers. But then the right suffered a setback when that September’s party conference was truncated to a weekend event as the October election was called, leaving no time to debate any of their proposals. However, worse was to come with a mass defection to the Tories.

The party had been plagued by right-wing plotting since the 2001 general election, principally because a number of wealthy businessmen despaired of the Conservatives ever winning again. Their plan was to take over the Liberal Democrats and turn it into a right-wing pro-business vehicle. This plot lost its main *raison d’être* when the election of David Cameron as Conservative leader made the Tories electable again. But a subsidiary goal remained: to ensure that, in the event of a hung parliament, the Lib Dems would put the Tories in office and not drag the Tories leftwards.

The Tory majority in October 2010 rendered the previous decade’s plotting redundant. Shortly after polling day, a dozen prominent right-wing Liberal Democrats, including hedge fund millionaire Paul Marshall and former MP Jeremy Browne (who had lost his Taunton seat in May), announced they were joining the Conservatives. While some Liberal Democrat activists quietly celebrated this exodus, it caused huge embarrassment to the party and the loss of much of the income that had funded the leader’s office.

Lib Dem right-wingers remaining in the party found some solace in the loss of Chris Huhne’s Eastleigh seat in the October election, which removed any immediate threat to Nick Clegg’s leadership. However, Huhne was to return to parliament the following year in the Richmond by-election. Zac Goldsmith, despite his tax embarrassments, had captured the seat from the Lib

Dems in May 2010 but eventually resigned from the Tories in disgust as his party refused to do anything serious about climate change. He forced a by-election in October 2011, running as an independent 'Green Conservative', but split the Tory vote and allowed Huhne to win by a landslide.

Although the Tories had emerged triumphant in October 2010, the celebrations did not last long. Their economic policies followed the old orthodoxy; that the government deficit had to be cut sharply to "restore confidence". But as Keynesians had warned, this policy reduced aggregate demand, pushed the economy into a deeper slump, and further undermined confidence.

The Tory government had already raised VAT to 20% in its first budget. House prices, which had recovered towards the end of 2009, began to fall sharply. Large lay-offs in the public sector made unemployment even worse. By 2011, Britain was into the second part of a double-dip recession and Tory poll ratings were plummeting. Margaret Thatcher had been able to revive her party's fortunes in the early 1980s with the windfalls of North Sea oil revenues and the Falklands War. Cameron had no such luck. His situation was made worse by damaging splits within his parliamentary party, as the narrow Tory majority emboldened Eurosceptics and climate change sceptics to rebel.

Contrary to expectations, the general elections of 2010 had not cleared the air regarding MPs' expenses. There had been a substantial turnover of MPs but the fresh electoral mandate had been devalued by the low turnout in both elections and the unseemly rows both between and within the parties. The Kelly Report's recommendations were now being enforced in full. But the systematic humiliation of MPs continued, as the press indulged in a 'triumph of the spectacle' and encouraged a mob mentality, while pressure groups such as '38 Degrees' harried MPs over their taking holidays. Even many new MPs who had played no part in the expenses scandal found themselves on the receiving end of abusive phone calls and bricks through the window.

As the Cameron government struggled from crisis to crisis, historical comparisons were being drawn not with Margaret Thatcher (as Cameron had hoped) but with Ted Heath. A series of public sector strikes broke out in response to deep cuts in public services. In 2011, there was a run on the pound, which opened a damaging Tory split over joining the euro. In 2012, a surge in world commodity prices caused food prices to soar and made everyone nervous about the security of Britain's food supply. The same year in London, the Tottenham Court Road tube disaster struck, in which a fire on a rush hour train and the ensuing panic and stampede killed 148 people. This event called into question the Tory policy of cutting back on infrastructure investment and the fire services, and led to Boris Johnson's defeat by Ken Livingstone in that year's London mayoral election.

Despite a modest recovery in local elections, neither Labour nor the Liberal Democrats were able to capitalise fully on Tory failures. Both parties had failed to repudiate the neoliberal ideology and the managerialism of the previous thirty years – or indeed to articulate any bold moral values – and so were unable to sound distinctive. But there was a widespread if incoherent yearning for radical change

and someone else captured the zeitgeist.

The fear among the chattering classes had been of a surge in support for the far right, via either the BNP or a British equivalent of Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn. But trends led to something different. In retrospect, these trends had been evident since the 1990s if not earlier. People had been gradually losing trust in all institutions and authority figures, not just politicians, but the 2009 expenses scandal had served to accelerate this trend. A hollowing out of political life caused by the loss of ideological differences had generated widespread indifference to politics, because it was no longer perceived to matter. This created fertile ground for an anti-politics movement.

In 2013, this movement found its expression in a 58-year old office supervisor from Droitwich (for the sake of giving her a name, let's call her Doreen Henderson), who exploded onto the British political scene with a populist movement called 'What We Feel'. You've probably already met her. She was the Daily Mail-reading bully who enforced 'emotional correctness' in your workplace after Princess Diana's death. She always ostentatiously wears a ribbon or wristband for some cause or other. She added flowers and a teddy bear to a roadside shrine to Baby P. She encourages her daughter to keep her two small children cooped up indoors for fear of paedophiles. She supports 'our boys' and takes her husband on regular trips to Wootton Bassett. She takes vicarious pleasure in the malice of celebrity gossip magazines. She watches *Strictly* and *X Factor* and treated herself to the Susan Boyle CD. She likes the BBC1 'News at Six' because its habit of padding out every news item with meaningless voxpops meets her need for anecdotal rather than conceptual reportage. She voted Tory in 2010 mainly because of an instinctive reaction against Gordon Brown's inability to 'emote'. Whenever her opinion is challenged, she dismisses all rational argument on the grounds that her view is "what I feel".

In 2014, David Cameron called a general election on a 'Who Governs Britain?' platform. Doreen Henderson and her emotional army swept to power. Among her government's first steps were cuts in spending on scientific research ("we know enough things already") and museums ("they're just full of useless clutter").

The demagoguery and unreason rampant after 2014 encouraged Britain's elites to disengage from politics in despair. A rearguard of rationalist politicians (led by Lord Howarth, the former Lib Dem MP for Cambridge, and Rory Stewart, the Tory MP and foreign affairs expert) made a last ditch appeal for evidence-based policy. Doreen responded by offering a debate on Sky1 compèred by Noel Edmonds, in which her opponents would sit under a gunge tank.

It seemed that, after a 300-year run, the enlightenment had finally come to an end. But where was the liberal party that stood up for enlightenment values? Where was the party to defend the interests of educated and rational people? It was too busy concocting empty marketing slogans or delivering leaflets to realise what had happened.

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# RIDDLE OF THE SPHINX

It is not a proper democracy, but it's got three liberal parties. Mark Smulian reports from Egypt on Liberal International's Cairo congress

Why Liberal International came to hold its latest congress in Cairo is a matter almost as inscrutable as the Sphinx. Egypt is not a democracy, though it is not entirely a dictatorship either, and so it seems a curious home for the every-18-months coming together of liberals from around the globe.

Our host, the Democratic Front Party, turned out to be a relatively new and small organisation yet it was able to stage the congress in a five-star hotel and have delegates addressed by a government minister on behalf of President Mubarak, who, whatever else he is, would probably not claim to be a liberal.

'Liberal' means different things in different places, but all the same LI pitching up in Cairo seemed curious, especially as no-one could hold an international political congress in Egypt without government consent.

The nearest I got to an explanation from one of the DFP delegates was that the government had indeed given permission for the event and saw it as a way of improving its democratic credentials in the eyes of the world, while knowing that little would occur that was likely to cause any political upset within Egypt.

## SECULAR OPPOSITION

I had wondered whether the event was part of some manoeuvre by the government to bolster the secular opposition at the expense of the Islamist one, so creating a safety valve for discontent.

Not so, according to my DFP acquaintance. He told me that, if anything, more latitude was allowed to Islamist opposition parties than secular ones, since the government could then point to Islamist activity as a threat and impress the world with its zeal in tackling it.

He also explained the mystery of the three liberal parties. The New Wafd is a successor of the Wafd, an upper-class liberal party formed during the British protectorate and, so he said, seen as irredeemably establishment by voters.

The second, Al-Grad, he described as a personal party for its founder Ayman Nour, who has suffered imprisonment for his political activity. Nour, who has just been released from three years' detention, was at the congress, but could not address it as he is banned from speaking in Egypt. It is not a democracy yet.

Thus the DFP was formed to be a liberal party that was neither elitist nor a personal vehicle, I was informed.

The government licences political parties and opposition ones are allowed to function within limits. And indeed there is some common interest between the government and the secular parties. Egyptian liberals have told me before that, if forced to choose between

the Mubarak government and the Islamists, they would unhesitatingly support the former any day.

Egypt is mainly Muslim, though it has a Christian minority and, at least in Cairo, it does not obviously adhere to any strict interpretation of religion.

Women appear in public in anything from burkas to normal western dress, there are off-licences openly selling alcohol and the call to prayer did not seem very widely observed.

The three Egyptian parties are part of a slow awakening of liberalism in the Middle East and North Africa, the location of LI's latest 'local' network of member parties, of which the largest is from Morocco.

The congress saw the launch of a book of classic liberal texts in Arabic, paid for by Germany's Friedrich Naumann Foundation. The idea was to allow Arabic speakers to read these in their own language and so spread them more widely. One Moroccan speaker though reminded the congress that 'classic texts' were unlikely to gain a mass readership in any language and would need to be adapted before the average voter would gain much from them. Another noted that many classic liberal texts existed in Arabic that had never been translated into European languages.

Like no other corner of the globe, the Middle East can be counted on to cause a row at LI congresses, but this time it came from an unexpected direction.

The DFP was due at congress to move from observer to full membership but this drew an objection from Sweden's Centre Party, which said that claims had been made in an American newspaper that a DFP vice-president was an anti-Semite and holocaust denier.

Confusion followed, in which the vice-president indignantly denied that she was either, but did so in a mixture of English and Arabic that played havoc with the simultaneous translation. The UK's Jonathan Fryer spoke in support of the DFP, with which he has worked in the Middle East LI network. The clincher was the news that the Israeli Group of LI wanted the DFP admitted to full membership.

The Israelis though were not present, through choice and not because the Egyptian authorities refused to admit them to the country. It's an unfortunate conjunction of events that liberalism in Israel is in poor shape just as its health in the Arab world is improving and relations could have been forged.

LI's Israeli Group comprises handful of individuals, but there has been no affiliated party since the collapse of Shinui two years ago, when it spectacularly failed to win any seats even in a country where 2% of the popular vote secures parliamentary representation.

A number of other parties were admitted, and their presentations were reminders that plenty of people have to run the most serious personal risks to promote

liberalism.

The leader of the National Justice Party of Peru – not a country one especially associates with repression – said he had suffered repeated arrest and solitary confinement during Alberto Fujimori's dictatorship in the 1990s.

One of the parties facing greatest difficulty is the National League for Democracy (Liberated Areas) of Burma, which was admitted but unable to be represented, but an inspiring tale came from Mongolia's Civil Will Party, which has been able to work within that country's quiet democratisation to get a functioning and recognisable liberal party into being.

A re-admission that will be greeted warmly by British liberals with long memories was Italy's Radical Party. This was the party that many here preferred in the 1980s to the Liberal Party's official allies, the now-defunct Liberal and Republican parties, both of which were part of the eternally shifting five-party coalitions that ruled Italy from 1945 until a 1990s corruption scandal swept it all away.

Some parties are expelled at each congress. This happens either because they have ceased to exist (a feat managed by two Swiss parties at once) or because they have failed to pay the affiliation fee. The latter sadly removed Paraguay's splendidly named Authentic Radical Liberal Party.

Most striking among the guest speakers was Sam Rainsy. He leads Cambodia's Sam Rainsy Party, which is named not from personal vanity but because other parties he founded promptly had fake namesakes founded by the Cambodian government to cause confusion. Using his own name was the only solution.

He is a former winner of the LI Prize for Freedom and has won many other awards, but reminded us that he would happily never have won any had he "not had to attend so many unnecessary funerals" of murdered supporters.

There was even some encouraging news from Zimbabwe, where the adoption of the US dollar as the currency has stemmed hyperinflation and the joint government between the MDC and ZANU-PF is uneasy but still in being. It is, I heard, becoming easier for the MDC to organise openly without its members being assaulted or murdered, but the moment of truth will come when Robert Mugabe, a relative pragmatist in ZANU-PF terms, eventually dies. Since little else holds ZANU-PF together, it could splinter between military hardliners and civilian pragmatists with messy and unpredictable results.

Meeting other liberals from around the world is the main purpose of the congress in practice and provides the greatest interest. But according to the agenda, the main business is the formal proceedings. This divides into speeches from leading figures in various parties, presentations on specific issues and debates on motions.

Congress has two kinds of motion – conventional ones and 'The World Today'. Both are slightly unreal

*“He would happily never have won any awards had he ‘not had to attend so many unnecessary funerals’ of murdered supporters”*

as they are debated and negotiated upon as though the rest of the world were hanging upon LI's pronouncements, when in fact hardly anyone is, even in member parties.

'The World Today' is a portmanteau of observations on the situation in various countries, in which the British delegation's most notable achievement was to ditch some one-sided wording on Honduras, which was favourable to the coup plotters. We

failed though to remove an endorsement of Georgia's application to join NATO, something LI had supported at its previous congress before the war in South Ossetia changed NATO's perceptions of the likelihood of Georgian membership embroiling it in a war with Russia.

## TOO EURO-CENTRIC

As a federation of parties, LI tried to proceed by consensus rather than contested votes and so wordings are negotiated at working sessions to seek compromise. This proved impossible in the case of a motion proposed by the British delegation on action on climate change, which was modelled closely on that passed by the Liberal Democrats in Bournemouth.

This ran into a barrage of opposition for being applicable only to industrialised countries with functioning local governments and so being largely relevant only to Europe rather than of worldwide application. Facing obvious defeat, the motion was withdrawn. British embarrassment was not helped by it having been the right-wing Dutch liberal party, the VVD, that first raised the objection that the motion was Euro-centric.

The Netherlands has two liberal parties and the other one, the social liberal party D66, is the natural bedfellow of the Liberal Democrats. Relations with the VVD can be uneasy and being lectured by it on euro-centricity will have hurt.

VVD member Hans van Baalen succeeded Lord Alderdice as LI president at this congress. Also now off the governing bureau is Charles Kennedy, after he failed to attend almost all its meetings during two terms of office, including the May 2008 congress in Belfast even when he was in that city (Liberator 326). He wisely chose not to stand again.

Unlike some parties, the Liberal Democrats cannot pay any expenses for LI congress delegates, which means attendees tend to be a self-selecting group of those with the time, money and inclination to attend. For those who can, it is worth going to these events to see the range of liberal activity around the world, and learn about the risks taken by at least some of our political colleagues.

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Mark Smulian is a member of the Liberator Collective and of the executive of Liberal International British Group

# COMING INTO FOCUS

## A groundbreaking study of the Liberal Party's post-war survival is reviewed by Michael Meadowcroft

Mark Egan's new book *Coming into Focus* has considerable significance for Liberal history. It deals with the survival of the Liberal Party from 1945 to 1964, not by reference to its leadership or its national party organisation but, uniquely, by concentrating on its local membership and its local council representation. It encompasses a vast amount of research in local archives and a remarkable list of interviewees. The latter were conducted between 1995 and 1997, which is so long ago that I had forgotten that I had been interviewed and spent a lot of time reading the book and muttering as to why I hadn't been asked about important events of the time, only to discover later on that I had been!

Egan's painstaking trawl of local and regional records, plus his interviews, elicit evidence of a dogged determination to battle on, even if it was based more on a surrealistic belief that victory was around the corner than on electoral arithmetic. He is particularly good on the arrangements for electoral pacts at local level – of which I have many painful remembrances – most of which, but not all, were entered into as anti-socialist fronts or as a means of preserving some Liberal representation. He skilfully examines the relationship between party headquarters and local associations, particularly to determine the impact of central directives and policy initiatives.

His exposure of the operations of the 'special seats' fund, and particularly of Ted Wheeler's idiosyncratic reports on constituencies and their candidates, are a genuine 'first' and they recall many happy hours at staff meetings at party headquarters with Ted's abusive accounts of his meetings the evening before. Pratap Chitnis, then the head of the Liberal Party Organisation, commented to me at the time that one could always tell someone with a small mind – they invariably recounted where they had been the previous evening. Ever since then I've religiously avoided all mentions of any recent peregrinations.

Egan notes the establishment of the Local Government Department at party headquarters in 1961 – financed personally by Richard Wainwright when the party refused to do so – and, on my watch, the later formation of the Association of Liberal Councillors. He also looks in detail, and sympathetically, on the role of the Young Liberals of the time who were often more intellectually aware and therefore more politically productive than their seniors. Finally, Egan considers the role of the different 'ginger groups' in considerable detail and assesses their influence.

Without detracting from the importance of this study, there are a number of rather telling criticisms. First, stylistically it is all too obviously a PhD thesis. Egan commendably makes this clear and I am conscious of the fact that it has taken him nine years

to publish it in this form, rather than many more years to rewrite. Nevertheless the book would have been more accessible if some of the more arcane tables and analyses so beloved of academic supervisors had been omitted.

Second, and more importantly, the time span examined, 1945 to 1964, is not sufficiently homogenous for such a study. The party's post-war history has a number of distinctive phases, the first of which extends to the 1959 election when Jo Grimond's leadership began to show its effects. The second phase arguably runs from 1959 to 1967 and the election of Jeremy Thorpe as leader. There may well be an argument as to the precise delineation but the state of the party from 1945 to 1959 (or, perhaps, more precisely the late 1958 by-elections) was very different to its later ruder health, rendering direct comparisons across the years somewhat esoteric.

It is difficult to argue that there is any direct correlation of the grass roots organisation in the period 1945-58 when the party's poll rating hovered around the 10% mark with that of the later period when it reached 25% and was generally around 15%, quite apart from the palpable difference in the state of mind of the party in the two periods. Egan's detailed tables and analyses should therefore be read with this in mind.

My precocious involvement with the Liberal Party ensures that I have a great deal of 'colour' to add to Egan's academic anaemia.

He refers to a 1958 list of seven seats that the North West Liberal Federation wanted fought at the forthcoming general election and remarks that of them only Rossendale was in fact contested. Not so. Southport was also fought, and in very unusual circumstances. At the time, the Southport Liberal Association had taken a lease on expensive new offices in the centre of the town and therefore decided that it could not afford to fight the general election. (This only served to illustrate the myopic local primacy of municipal elections at the time).

However, a highly respected local Liberal councillor, Sam Goldberg, had always said that if no-one was going to fight the seat, he would do so. This was not taken seriously but on nomination day I got a frantic phone call at the bank where I was working to say that "Sam Goldberg's got himself nominated" and that there would be an emergency meeting that evening. It was a bizarre meeting. The purists, backed by the regional party agent, argued that Sam could not be an official candidate as he was not on the approved list and, in any case, the association had formally agreed not to put forward a candidate. The niceties of this argument were batted to and fro until a senior – and very practical – councillor, Andy Hughes, said "Why are we wasting good canvassing time? Sam is a Liberal councillor and cannot be disavowed. We ought to get out and campaign for him now." This rallying call was



carried by acclamation and out we immediately went! With a bare ten-day campaign, Sam Goldberg took a good second place, polling over 11,000 votes.

Egan details the curious events of the early 1960s and the unofficial Liberal candidates in three London seats, but he does not make sufficient distinction between the eccentric and undisciplined, but essentially Liberal, Simon Knott in Baron's Court and the far right and racist Alan Lomas in Islington East. Lomas figured in a 1970s book on the far right which made the point that Lomas cleverly latched on to the generous benefits of the 'Liberal' description while propagating wholly illiberal views. Lomas was eventually expelled from the party but carried his acolytes into an Islington East 'New Liberal' Association. At the subsequent Liberal Assembly, he managed to sneak into the conference hall during the lunch break. Party officials, including Frank Byers, fearful of a public scene, were all for leaving him there but, as Chief Steward, I was having none of it, being sure that he would try and intervene in the proceedings. I went over to where he was sitting and said firmly, "You – out, now!" To my surprise, and relief, he complied immediately and we heard no more of him.

The book mentions Jo Grimond's ability to recruit distinguished academic experts as policy advisors, whether or not party members, but he fails to mention the series of well researched and written policy papers that resulted from their collaboration. He ought also to have mentioned Harry Cowie's monthly high quality briefings, 'Current Topics', produced with his research assistants John Blake and Michael O'Hara and, occasionally, myself.

Egan's account of the initial work of Pratap Chitnis as Local Government Officer mentions the problem of compiling a comprehensive list of Liberal representatives but isn't able to detail the trials and tribulations this involved. I arrived as Pratap's assistant in January 1962. He had already been designated as the agent for the Orpington by-election and he took me to three routine meetings in London to show me the ropes and then said, "Cheerio – I'm off to Orpington." Amongst a myriad of other duties, I carried on the search and rescue operation and found elderly Liberal aldermen popping up all over the place: Alderman Bowman in Stamford, for instance, and two more, Lee and McManus, in Manchester.

There was also the curious case of Buckley UDC in North Wales. In 1962 it was listed as having fifteen independent councillors but in 1963 it suddenly appeared in the Municipal Year Book as having

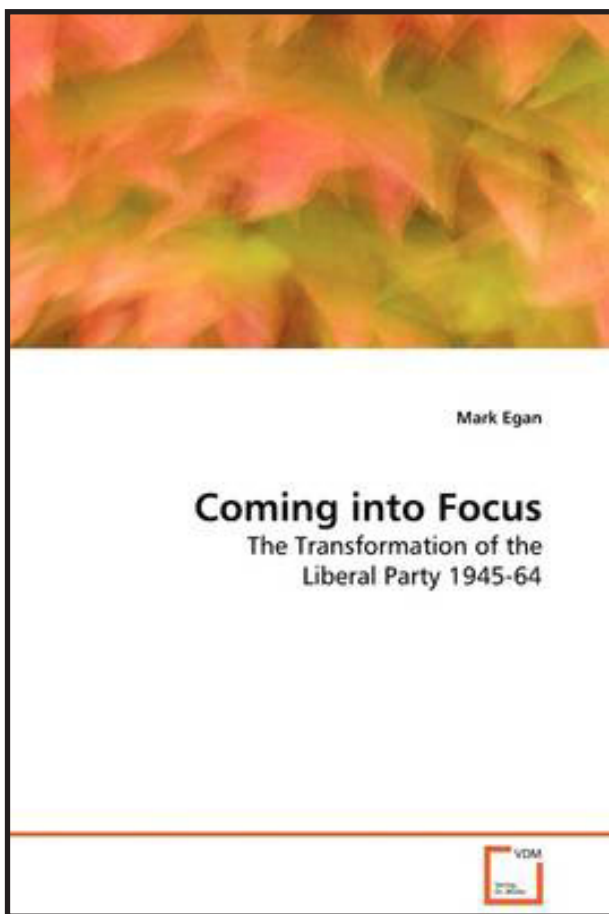
seven Liberal, five Labour and three Conservative councillors! Apparently they had simply decided to reveal their true colours. Even more challenging were the reported victories of unrecorded Liberal candidates. In 1963 there was a press note of a Liberal gain on the Hoylake UDC in the Wirral constituency. We at HQ were unaware that we had any candidates there so we set out on the search for this elusive hero. No local party sources were contactable so, assuming the face saving guise of a fictitious Municipal Research Centre, I eventually called the local West Kirby News. The local reporter went off to check for me and returned to the phone to say that he had been unable to find any information and suggested that I called Liberal headquarters in London as they were sure to know!

Egan's research prompts a long held idea of mine for a further thesis: what happened to the Liberal councillors elected in May 1962 in the aftermath of the Orpington by-election victory. All over the country, out of nowhere, Liberal candidates found themselves elected. At the time, there were hardly any vetting procedures for local candidates and, although many became solid Liberal representatives, quite a number defected or resigned before their terms were completed. My memory may now be playing tricks but I recall that four Liberals elected to the Kingston Borough Council all joined the Conservatives. It would be an interesting academic study of political allegiance and capriciousness to research this unusual phenomenon.

Mark Egan has done historians a great favour by publishing his thesis. In the way of such publications these days, it is obscenely expensive. Most Liberals follow Meadowcroft's Law: why buy clothes when you can books, but if economics are

still a significant consideration, get your local library to buy this tome and then borrow it.

As for me, I reckon I could have saved Mark a considerable amount of work. I once asked George Allen why he and others of the era had kept the party going in the dark days of the early 1950s when it must have seemed a lost cause. George, who had fought Abingdon in 1953 and 1955, and Bath in 1959, pondered this deep philosophical question for but an instant and replied, "Well, we couldn't stand the Tories and we didn't trust the state." It still seems a pretty good summary to me!



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Michael Meadowcroft was Liberal MP for Leeds West 1983-87

*Coming into Focus: The Transformation of the Liberal Party 1945-64* by Mark Egan was published in 2009 by VDM Verlag Dr Müller, price £70

# TURKEY'S 'DEMOCRATIC INITIATIVE'

As EU leaders discuss Turkey's readiness to join the European Union, a heated debate is going on inside Turkey itself about what sort of society it should be, reports Jonathan Fryer

The Ottoman Empire was an extraordinarily diverse entity, encompassing many ethnicities and many religions. But after the 'sick man of Europe' collapsed at the end of the First World War, an entirely different nation state of Turkey emerged from the ruins. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk – still regarded as a secular deity by many Turks – inspired and unified (by force, where necessary) the country and promulgated the notion of 'one nation, one people, one language'.

Minority groups were suppressed, expelled or assimilated in this great nationalist enterprise, whose aim was to make Turkey a strong and successful, modern, European nation. The largest minority, the Kurds – who some estimates put at around a quarter of the total population – had their identity denied. The Kemalist line was that Kurds don't exist; they are 'mountain Turks'. Their language was banned from parliament, schools and most public places. Politicians, journalists and academics who dared speak out against this – or indeed, speak in Kurdish in 'inappropriate' places – often found themselves being sent to jail.

Of course, this is not the only instance of such cultural homogenisation in Europe's history. General Franco followed a very similar policy in Spain. But with Franco's death and the establishment of democracy in Spain, the Catalans, the Basques and other ethnic or linguistic minorities were rightly given a large degree of both cultural and political rights.

This is what may be now happening, slowly, in Turkey, though the final outcome is far from sure. To the horror of many Turkish nationalists, the ruling Development and Justice Party (AKP) has made some concessions to minority communities. A state Kurdish-language TV station has opened (though most Kurds prefer to watch Kurdish satellite channels from abroad), there are discussions about encouraging Armenian-language media and one hears languages other than Turkish spoken more often in the streets of Ankara or Istanbul.

This is all part of what Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan calls his 'democratic initiative'. He tried hard to defeat Kurdish parties in eastern Anatolia in the local elections at the end of March, but failed spectacularly. So now the idea is that they should, to a certain extent, be embraced, be invited into a metaphorical big tent to discuss how Turkey can redefine its multicultural destiny. This was even stated openly by the Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, at a recent international strategy forum at Bled in Slovenia. "Western civilisations must prepare and also accept multiculturalism," he said.

There are, however, two black clouds that threaten to blot out this rosy new dawn in Turkey. The first is the legacy of many years of bitter armed conflict between Turkish security forces and Kurdish guerrillas, notably from the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK). As many as 40,000 people have been killed in these troubles, many of them civilians. Over 3,000 Kurdish villages were demolished and their inhabitants dispersed.

The Turkish authorities (maybe with CIA help) kidnapped the PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, in Kenya ten years ago and he still sits in solitary confinement in a prison on an island in the Sea of Marmara. As far as even Mr Erdogan's government is concerned, he is completely beyond the pale: a terrorist, with whom no discussions can be held. This is a problem, as anyone familiar with what happened in Northern Ireland will recognise, not least because many Kurds regard him as a hero.

The second difficulty is more complex and maybe even more difficult to overcome. Even though the government has launched its democratic initiative, the judiciary still keeps prosecuting people for 'crimes' such as using the letters 'X' and 'W' (which exist in Kurdish, but not in Turkish) or allegedly sympathising with the PKK. Even parliamentarians, mayors and local councillors are not immune. At the beginning of October, I attended an extraordinary congress in Ankara of the largest Kurdish-dominated party, the Democratic Society Party (DTP), which was called to elect new members of the party's governing council, as 55 out of the 80 members elected at the last congress are now in jail.

It's not surprising that many Turkish Kurds question Prime Minister Erdogan's sincerity. When it comes to the democratic initiative and related measures, it does often seem to be a case of 'two steps forward, one step back'. The courts are constantly hearing cases that are in direct contradiction to the government's declared aims.

The only logical solution seems to be a radical overhaul not just of Turkey's laws but of its constitution as well. That will have Atatürk spinning in his grave. But it is a necessary step if Turkey is to join the modern world, let alone the European Union.

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The writer and broadcaster Jonathan Fryer is chair of London Liberal Democrats and PPC for Poplar and Limehouse

# NO POTHoles HERE

## Chris Ballard has used her early experience in the Liberal Democrats to set up a development charity in Senegal

Abene Karantaa is a small community development charity, started this year, which works with local people in three rural villages in Senegal to provide opportunity and a way out of poverty. Abene is the village where the project started, and Karantaa means 'learning place' in Mandinka, a local tribal language.

It all started with a holiday at Christmas 2008. I had applied to teach English somewhere in Africa with VSO but, before the application process ended, I went on holiday to the Abene music festival, my first trip to Sub-Saharan Africa. I was shocked by the poverty and the real lack of basic opportunities. I saw that few adults were able to read and write – something I had taken for granted myself. Children were almost begging for help with their education. I felt compelled, as many before me have done, to do something.

Having already set up a charity in Spain while living there a few years ago, I was now looking for a new challenge, to learn a new language and experience another culture. I started thinking about going back to Senegal to build a school in Abene to put my skills as a qualified teacher to good use.

### FUNDAMENTAL BELIEF

What inspired me to take action was my fundamental belief that opportunity to realise your full potential should not be limited by where you live or how much money you have. This belief is part of my DNA – growing up a liberal, thanks to my mother's influence (Jackie Ballard, Liberal Democrat MP for Taunton 1997-2001) and the second family I had in my friends at Liberal Democrat conferences during my early teens.

But I first really felt this when I was in Marrakesh a few years ago and was driven around by a multilingual graduate taxi driver. I believe it is a great injustice that some of us have more opportunities in life than others, usually because of an accident of where we were born.

After the holiday ended, I put together a charity in the UK to support the school I planned to build and run in Senegal. I created the Abene Karantaa website and recruited friends as trustees.

I arranged to see Afrikids, in London, who work with children in Ghana. They all spoke of the importance of putting local people first and responding to their need for sustainable development that will last. Putting local people first meant doing a participatory needs assessment. So I bought a book on it (*Partners in Planning: Information, Participation and Empowerment*), which I used as a kind of bible, in the way Lonely Planet guides can be for backpackers. I soon realised that my initial idea of building a school might not be the best, and that existing structures such as the local primary schools might provide a more sustainable answer.

I went back to Abene in March and stayed until June last year on a massive learning curve of highs and lows living in the local community, without basic amenities. It was such a culture shock, which I blogged about over the three months and have just published with lots of beautiful photographs as a book.

I stayed in the same house as before, and got to know people in the village, and the two nearest villages, Albadar and Diannah. Working with local people and village chiefs was a fascinating and humbling experience. My team and I developed costed plans for various projects. Sadly I didn't spend nearly as much time as I had imagined on the glorious beaches.

### LITERARY CLASSES

One of the projects will provide literacy classes for women, many of whom have never been to school. When I asked local women what difference it would make to their lives, being able to read and write, I was expecting to hear a response along the lines of empowerment and greater access to information.

But Fatou, a mother in Abene, told me that she worried she could be a danger to her children's health. She didn't know what medicines she was giving her children, because she couldn't read the label on the box. I hadn't thought about the simple fact that lack of literacy could have a fatal impact on someone's health, or on their family's.

Since I returned, I've set up a charity in the UK and put together a great team of trustees and specialist advisors. I've raised £3,000 in a few months, set up an organisation with a strategy and returned to Abene in December, where I will stay until June. We're starting our first year projects of adult literacy, English for children and women's horticultural co-operatives.

It's really exciting and has become something much bigger than I had originally anticipated. It's hard work but I know it will be very rewarding. I am confident that Abene Karantaa will make a real difference with local people in the driving seat. This is the community politics I grew up with, except here potholes would be progress.

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Christina Ballard is the founder of Abene Karantaa.

For details of the charity and her book *3 months, 2 languages, 1 project*, see [www.abenekarantaa.org](http://www.abenekarantaa.org)

# THE CASE FOR A NEW PEOPLE'S BUDGET

It's time that the people who sing 'The Land' embraced the case for land value taxation, says Margaret Godden

Every year at conference, Liberal Democrats crowd into the Glee Club and sing *The Land*. Yet those same people show no appetite for seeing the policy it celebrates actually included in our manifesto. In 1909, Lloyd George did mighty battle with the House of Lords to get land value taxes into his budget. The Land song was part of that campaign. The peers were understandably reluctant to start paying for having annexed the land of Britain and this led to Lloyd George's attempt to reform the House of Lords. A hundred years later, that battle is still not won but at least Liberal Democrats are clear where they stand on the issue. Sadly we are far from clear about the land question.

This is particularly unfortunate because Land Value Taxation (LVT), having been largely ignored for decades, is now being taken up by other people and parties. It is Green Party policy and the Fianna Fail/Green coalition in Ireland has just committed to introducing LVT. It is being promoted by Labour's left-wing Compass Group. Glasgow City Council has proposed that LVT should be part of a replacement for Council Tax. Trade unions were recommending 'a form of property/land value tax' to the London Mayor in 2002.

Respected financial commentators are backing it, such as Samuel Brittan, Martin Wolf of the Financial Times and Ashley Seager of the Guardian. Polly Toynbee is a supporter. It looks as though LVT's time has come. And the Liberal Democrats look as though they are going to miss the boat.

ALTER (Action for Land Taxation and Economic Reform) has Chris Huhne as its President and both Nick Clegg and Vince Cable as Vice-presidents. One might think that would give the policy some respectability in the party. Vince included a reference to LVT in his Conference speech, "switching taxation ... onto land values instead of penalising productive investment", but probably only ALTER members noticed. His proposed 'mansion tax' is at least a tax on property rather than income, but it is not the right sort of property tax. In 2006 the party voted to replace business rates with LVT and instructed the Federal Policy Committee to develop proposals for introducing LVT as a replacement for existing national taxes. So far the FPC has taken little action on this.

## LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

LVT is an annual property tax based on the value of land alone, taking no account of the buildings on it. The value of land arises in part from its natural advantages, such as fertility and mineral deposits.

Mainly, however, it relates to its location. Residential land values reflect the character of the neighbourhood, its shops and schools and crime levels. Commercial sites take account of such things as transport links, supporting services and the available workforce.

None of these were produced by the current landowner. They are either part of the natural universe or they were created by the surrounding community, sometimes over many generations. It is reasonable that whoever claims exclusive use of a site should pay a 'rent' for the benefit he receives.

LVT does not penalise a landowner for making good use of the site. Whatever he can produce through work and efficiency is his to keep. On the other hand, an owner who allows a site to stand unused will still have to pay the appropriate tax. Owners will be under pressure to find tenants for underused sites or to sell them on to someone who can use them. More land will become available for housing or new businesses. The phenomenon of 'land banks', where companies hold large quantities of land out of use at no cost to themselves, would end.

It is important to remember that LVT would replace other taxes. As it is introduced, taxes such as income tax or VAT would be cut. The overall tax burden would not increase but would shift away from earnings and onto wealth. It is a powerful tax and would need to be introduced gradually.

The ability of LVT to pay for public works should be particularly attractive to local councillors. Whether it is improving a school or subsidising a bus service, if public money is well spent land values will rise. Over time, the increased LVT receipt pays for the cost of the development. The Jubilee Line extension, for instance, cost £3.4 billion to build and added an estimated £13 billion to land values in the area, all going straight into the landowners' pockets. It has been calculated that LVT could have paid off the initial cost in ten years.

There is no need to identify the beneficiaries and extract a contribution from them; the operation of the market in land does the work for you. Helpfully, if your public works create problems for the neighbours, a sewage farm or a noisy motorway for example, then nearby sites will lose value and the owners will get a compensating tax reduction.

The south-east, with London at its heart and mainland Europe across the Channel, has the advantage in the UK of prime location, where profitability comes most easily. It pays no tax for this. Tax is applied uniformly across the country. This looks fair at first glance, but it is no such thing. It is unreasonable to extract the same level of income tax, VAT or corporation tax from the Welsh hill farm as from the Kent orchard, or from derelict mining

communities as from the IT honey pot in the Thames Valley. By shifting tax away from the remoter areas of the country, we would re-invigorate their economies and take the pressure for more development off the south-east.

Houses are cheap where there are few jobs and impossibly expensive where the work is. The south-east is being pressured to build more and more on its remaining green spaces while streets are being boarded-up in the north. This situation cannot be resolved until economic balance is restored.

At the more local level, LVT encourages the best use of available housing land. At present, if houseowners extend their house the council tax goes up. LVT would not change. However, if you enjoy a large garden that could well be used for additional housing, you might find the high rate of LVT encouraged you to get on with the development.

This all depends on the planning regime. If the planning authority wanted to see houses built wherever possible, houseowners would be propelled into sacrificing their gardens. On the other hand, if the planners wanted to protect green space, the gardens would attract little or no LVT and the houseowner would be under no pressure to build.

At present, there are no rates levied on agricultural land. Policy in this area has always been directed at keeping farms in production, without allowing for the enormous range of productivity in different areas. So taxes and subsidies have been geared to the needs of the poorest farmers, greatly to the benefit of the most profitable. More recently, the Common Agricultural Policy has restricted production to keep prices high. Add to this the insidious influence of the mega supermarkets, and it is understandable that farmers are giving up in ever increasing numbers.

There is no reason why agricultural land should not pay LVT. Farmers would be paying less on other taxes such as income tax on workers' wages. Those on the poorest land and location would pay no LVT and would end up better off and there would be more opportunities for would-be farmers to get started. LVT would favour small-scale enterprises, both the farms themselves and the shops they supply, and lead to more people finding work on the land.

## **WAGES ARE TOO LOW**

Wages in this country are simply too low. We are rightly concerned about people in obvious poverty and fail to notice that most of us are poor. We cannot afford to educate our children or provide for our old age and most of us have no significant reassuring capital sum in the bank. The minimum wage is too small to live on but still it is taxed.

*“The split between ‘social’ and ‘economic’ Liberals is a false one. All Liberals want people to be in control of their own lives, with minimum dependence on the state”*

Wage levels are determined by what a person could earn working independently. LVT creates opportunities for new enterprises. It would have a major effect on raising wages.

The split between ‘social’ and ‘economic’ Liberals is a false one. All Liberals want people to be in control of their own lives, with minimum dependence on the state. However, that can only happen if the economy offers them a fair opportunity to live a good life. It cannot happen while the wealth they create is routinely siphoned off into the pockets of a few individuals or

corporations. That injustice must be corrected before we can have a society of self-reliant citizens, with generous support for the minority who need it.

Questions are often raised about the effect of LVT on householders with restricted incomes, especially the old lady who cannot afford to go on living in the family home. It is part of the case for LVT that it discourages people from occupying land they cannot fully use, so LVT might indeed lead to a boom in providing more suitable homes for such individuals to move into.

Alternatively, people who really don't want to move, or sublet part of their house, could delay payment of the tax until the property was sold, usually on death. The unpaid tax would then be a charge on the estate. This would deal with the old lady's problem. It might not be equally acceptable to her heirs.

Most taxes have no ethical basis. They have been imposed on ‘good’ things, like windows, theatre tickets, or family homes, and equally on ‘bad’ things, like tobacco and alcohol. Above all, they are imposed on activities you cannot reasonably avoid – earning a living, buying a house, going shopping.

LVT is different. It is a benign tax. It takes only what already belongs to the community, it encourages economic activity, it does not penalise those who work hard and it reduces the gap between rich and poor. It is cheap to assess and impossible to avoid.

What's not to like about that? Why can't the party get behind it?

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Margaret Godden is a committee member of Action for Land Taxation and Economic Reform (ALTER)

*The Case for a New People's Budget* (a collection of essays on aspects of Land Value Taxation), published by ALTER, is available from Catherine Hodgkinson, 51 Demesne Furze, Oxford, OX3 7XG. Price (including postage) £5.50 (cheques payable to ALTER)

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## The Dying Light by Henry Porter Orion 2009 £12.99

Most thrillers entertain because there is an essential element of disbelief in the premise of the plot. This is fiction, an exaggeration or dystopian vision of the world we live in, comfort factor built in. One sincerely hopes this is true of Henry Porter's very readable *The Dying Light*

His inspiration came partly from the Civil Contingencies Act of 2004, which allows a government to suspend or dismantle the rule of law and democracy overnight on the mere conviction that an emergency is about to take place.

He is also disturbed by the fact that Britain has the most CCTV, the most people on DNA registers, and that a government could, were it to get its act together, track all aspects of our lives through our health, tax, car, and bank records, our online dealings and our telephone calls; in short, were it efficient, it would know more about its citizens than the Stasi in its heyday.

The novel is set a few years into the future, and the plot revolves around these fears. It cracks along at a lively pace, set in interesting and well-drawn locations (Colombia, Shropshire, London). The characters could do with being filled out a bit, but nevertheless they draw you along with them in their game of hide and seek with the government (bad) and grasping global giants (worse), supported by the brave and eccentric British people (good).

What sets *The Dying Light* apart from other thrillers is that it is well written, and Porter asks two very important questions: are we allowing the building of the most advanced system of surveillance ever seen because we are so sure of our democratic values, and our respect for free speech and legality, or is this attitude potentially fatal? Have a look at the Civil Contingencies Act of 2004, and decide for yourself.

An excellent Christmas present for the imaginative liberal.

Wendy Kyrle-Pope

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## Last Chance: The Middle East in the Balance by David Gardner IB Tauris 2009 £18.99

The actions and inactions of the real axis of evil – George Bush Jnr and Tony Blair – mean that the sands of time are running out for a solution to



# REVIEWS

the problems of the Middle East, which have been allowed to attain global proportions. Three are of paramount concern: a just solution to the Palestinian problem, a rapprochement with Iran (the sole beneficiary of the Iraq debacle), and the preference for tyranny over democracy in Western policy, democracy having put down roots if not flourished in practically every other quarter of the world.

Regular readers of the *Financial Times* will be aware of Gardner's arguments but they are usefully collected here, along with an overview of the region since the Second World War. Since these articles have been studiously ignored by HM Government over the last decade, one can only hope that the book does end up in the hand baggage of Obama's negotiators.

President Obama's Cairo speech was certainly encouraging, more so than much past American rhetoric. But as one US diplomat puts it, judge us on what we do rather than what we say. America is culturally enmeshed with Israel, way beyond the holocaust guilt of other western powers, and the strength of the religious right in American politics stymies reality from getting into the debate. Left to its own devices, Israel may yet provoke the Armageddon that ends us all; not quite the second coming the Bible Belt looks forward to, I suspect.

Returning to the rhetoric – we invade Iraq to bring democracy (as a model for the region) then we dislike the Shia electoral majority that this inevitably produces – ditto Hamas in Palestine, and election results in Egypt, Iran, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia (within their various limitations). Yet it is western support of tyrants who suppress civic and democratic institutions that leaves liberals and other opponents of these regimes with no other rallying

points than the mosques.

From the Iranian revolution onwards, America has distrusted Iran, damaged pride not least. This has been a misreading of Iran to say the least, and has projected itself into a naive assumption that all Shia movements are an arm of Iran. Tyrants have used this to their own ends, persuading America that they are the only bulwarks against the Shia. Thus democracy goes nowhere in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and diplomacy is wasted in vacillation over Syria to the sacrifice of Lebanon.

Iran is the sole beneficiary of the invasion of Iraq. It has legitimate security interests (in the face of America mostly) and the west has no monopoly of the technology it has brought about (morally or practically). Paradoxically, perhaps it may be the best bet for returning stability to the region, but both sides would have to open their minds and forget a lot of history.

Pakistan? Well we backed the wrong horse there, didn't we, and took it out on the poor old Afghans instead. Turkey meanwhile provides a beacon of hope with the prospect of an Islamic party developing into something like a Christian Democratic party – not all commentators share Gardner's optimism, but his arguments are good.

I wasn't fully aware of some of the depths of western and Israeli policy, particularly pre-1967, which underlines the point that we have here a thorough review of Middle East-Western political dialogue over the last 50 to 60 years, possibly unorthodox in its outlook, but one which chimes as common sense to one who has followed events with some experience of the area.

Stewart Rayment

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## Mary Magdalene: The Woman Whom Jesus Loved

by Robin Griffith-Jones  
Canterbury Press 2008  
£12.99

I was coming up the slope from Pooh Sticks Bridge and happened to get into conversation with another walker, as one does. It turned out that he was showing some Spanish novices the sites of England and said that he was a member of Opus Dei. Somewhere along the line, *The Da Vinci Code* was mentioned and my companion said that he thought Griffith-Jones had been very fair to Opus Dei in his riposte to the book. Quite why anyone would want to be fair to Opus Dei I'm not sure, but it is a measure of the man.

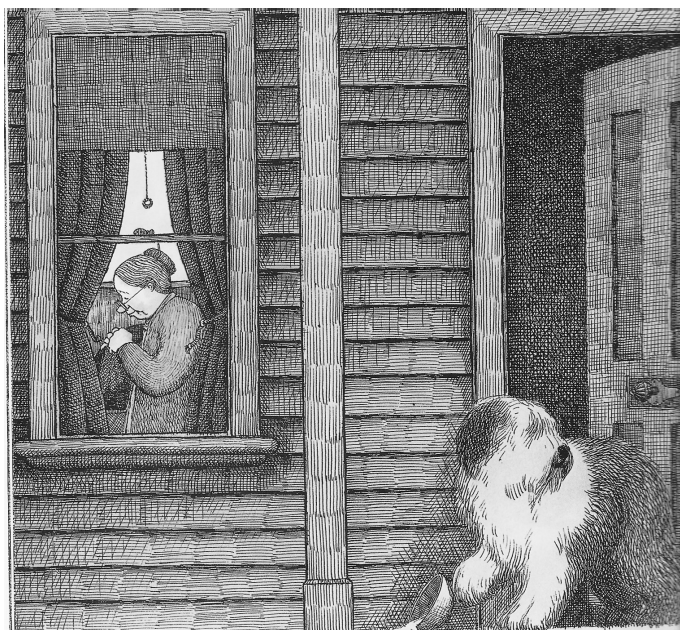
*The Da Vinci Code* is probably the starting point of this text. Robin Griffith-Jones is Master of The Temple, which is the old church of the Knights Templar that serves two of the Inns of Court in London. The man in the street would probably call him 'vicar'. Griffith-Jones's previous book sought to correct some of the illusions of that publisher's scam, and he gives lunchtime talks on the subject regularly. A book on Mary Magdalene would obviously follow.

Griffith-Jones is an urbane 'liberal' clergyman. I don't accept the view that the liberal wing of the Church of England is in decline. The dodgy evangos and conservatives would say that. More to the point, you could say it has found itself and is willing to explore difficult, perhaps uncomfortable questions and seek solutions, without ramming them down your throat. Griffith-Jones seems to me a prime example of the practice of that.

Forget the irrelevance of whether priests are homos or not. The great advance of the Anglican Church has been the ordination of women priests; soon no doubt to be bishops (not that I'm at all sure why such a hierarchy is needed). The "Gnostic Mary serves our modern agenda very well," writes Griffith-Jones but he adds the caution that this

must not be taken too literally. "The voices of Gnostic women were opposed at the time and have been silenced for centuries since. Heard again... they seem to be modern voices; the battles those women had to fight are the battles women are still fighting today."

Reading the New Testament, one cannot help but be struck by the radical agenda of the Gospels but, by the time you get to the Letters, it becomes obvious that some control freaks are in place whose main aim is standardisation of the brand – a much harder task when distances were much greater in time and there were no mass communications. In the process of selecting this New Testament, other Gospels were rejected, probably for a variety of reasons, but asserting the patriarchy seems



likely to have been one of them.

The transfiguration of the Virgin Mary to Artemis of Ephesus only partly compensates for this. Notwithstanding her prime role at Easter, Mary Magdalene gets lost, even castigated as a prostitute (surely a noble profession which should be given its respect as a valuable social service). By contrast, certain Gnostic Christians transfigure Magdalene to Pallas Athena, metaphorically at least insofar as the embodiment of Wisdom.

In reclaiming Mary, Griffith-Jones also seeks to recover Peter and Paul from the errors of organised patriarchal religion. One gets a little lost trying to find one's way among the Gnostic sects; they struggle towards the

oneness of the universe, but cannot quite relinquish the patriarchal principal. Centuries of suppression and our conditioning through the Paul/Constantine procrustean text do not help. Clement castigates the Gnostics as believers in sexual love as a mystical union. It is. The trouble with the patriarchs is that they weren't getting enough, a problem that confronts Christian churches to this day. That they think they can circumvent the female principal by abstention is a load of bollocks.

Gnostic arguments would be easier to follow if one had access to the full texts of the Gospels of Philip, Thomas and Mary Magdalene at least. They are not particularly long and might easily have formed appendices, but there may have been copyright problems.

Stewart Rayment

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## John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat

by Jenny Wagner  
Catnip 2009 £6.99

In the days of Cow Gum and scissors, when Liberator was put to bed at a real 'paste-up', there was always a battle between the Cattist and Doggist factions of the Collective over children's books to illustrate the review pages. Jenny Wagner has perhaps come up with a title to resolve the conflict,

though it has to be said one that (naturally) leaves the Cattists feeling smug.

A simple story, beautifully illustrated by Ron Brooks – I'm reminded of Sendak. It won the Picture Book of the Year Award of the Children's Book Council of Australia. He has worked with Jenny Wagner before, although he doesn't particularly see himself as an illustrator, seeking those books which 'touch the heart' and 'offer universal truths and universal values'.

Stewart Rayment

## Monday

Snow falls upon Rutland in fat flakes, carol singers with lanterns progress from door to door and a poor man has just come in sight (he appears to be gathering winter fuel). How happy I am to be home!

You see, a few weeks ago I decided to recharge the batteries by treating myself to a winter cruise to the Canaries. All went well – indeed I was in a deckchair sipping a G and T – until the identity of our lecturer was announced: “Mr Limpet Opec will speak on ‘Westminster: It’s a Funny Old World!’” Limpet Opec? I knew who the fellow meant at once. I did go along to his talk with my hat pulled well down, in the hope that Opik had brought those jolly Cheeky Girls along, but it turned out not to be the case. When his talk turned to “Why I was right to claim those wigs on expenses” I could stand no more. Taking with me only a cabin boy to eat in case of emergency (as is, I believe, conventional), I took to a lifeboat and cast myself adrift.

## Tuesday

By a great stroke of luck, I spied land after only a few hours at sea. By an even greater stroke of luck, it turned out to be the By-election Islands – discovered and named by my very own great great grandfather. (He made landfall at a time when the natives were involved in a ceremony involving a box with a slot in the top and pieces of bark marked using an X by burnt sticks, and put two and two together). The British Consul turned out to be a decent sort and I soon find myself returning home on a flying boat via Gibraltar, La Rochelle and Staines Reservoir.

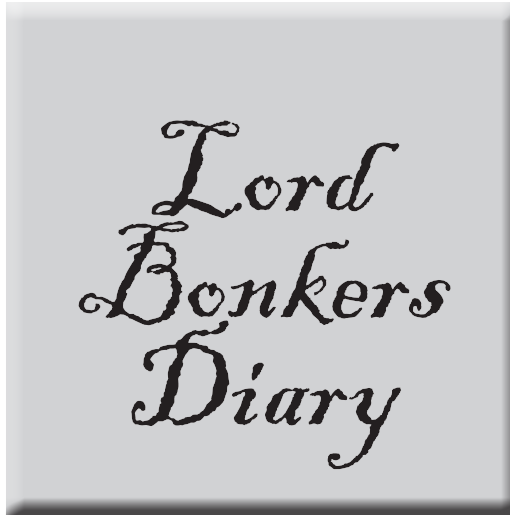
## Christmas Eve

Walking on the frost-rimed grass this morning, I reflect on the folly that has led to this tiresome “credit crunch”. Money was lent without security to finance what in many cases were no more than vanity projects – anyone who has visited Dubai will know what I am talking about. Fortunately the Bank of Rutland commissioned the necessary research and concluded that, although Abu Dhabi has a lot of wealth from oil and Dubai has a similar name to Abu Dhabi, Dubai itself has no oil.

Later I call in at the Estate Office with some of Cook’s mince pies to discuss progress with my plans for the Bonkers Tower and an island on Rutland Water in the shape of John Stuart Mill’s profile. Later still, I let myself down the chimney at the Home for Well-Behaved Orphans to deliver their presents and enjoy a splendid amontillado.

## Christmas Day

I look around my table at the guests assembled for lunch at the Hall – Paddy Ashplant, Menzies Campbell and the formidable Elspeth, the Reverend Hughes, Knuckles Oakeshott, Hazel Grove (such a brave choice of dress in this cold weather!), Bob Russell (we miss his brother Conrad – though not the latter’s Big Band – on such occasions), Tavish Scott in his horned helmet, Susan J. Kramer (though not the Dakotas, who tend to eat rather a lot), some amusing young people from the Liberator “collective”, PC Heath, Philip “Whoopi” Goldenberg and several of the Elves of Rockingham Forest (strictly speaking they were not invited, but I find it is best to keep on the right side of these fellows) – and reflect how lucky I am to have so many fine friends and colleagues.



## Saturday

When I heard that Liberal Youth (as the Young Liberals insist upon calling themselves nowadays) were planning to hold a boot camp, I was more than happy to lend a hand. As I have long insisted, we shall not be able to build a society in which none shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity without a bit of discipline. Thus it was that I turned up on the first day with the Regimental Sergeant Major of the Queen’s Own Rutland Highlanders – I happen to be their Colonel in Chief. He certainly wasted no time in licking them into shape: “I want to see my face in that ethically sourced jute Focus delivery bag, you ‘orrible little man” and so forth. The

Young Liberals all seemed to enjoy themselves immensely and the day was voted a success by all. For the sake of completeness, I must add that I first tried to institute such a camp in the late 1960s and received rather short shrift (though they did later appreciate the training in guerrilla warfare that I provided here on the Bonkers Hall Estate).

## Sunday

My diaries, as I am aware, enjoy a wide readership everywhere from the clerk’s desk to what that fine fast bowler John Snow termed “the corridors of power”. I must therefore ask all my readers to keep what follows under their hats lest in fall into the wrong hands. We are informed by the government that our troops must continue to occupy and be killed in Afghanistan because if we were to withdraw then al-Qaida would return to that country and reopen their terrorist training camps. However, a terrible thought hit me whilst I was in the bath this morning: what happens if al-Qaida hits upon the plan of Going Somewhere Else? I reflected, as I retrieved my loofah, that this would render our forces’ presence in Afghanistan otiose. We must hope that these al-Qaida fellows do not take many baths, because if they do our goose may be cooked. As I said, keep this under your hat.

## Monday

We stand upon the verge of a new political year (informed sources tell me to expect a general election, probably on a Thursday in the first five months). I foresee that global warming will continue to be a major concern of the world’s parliamentarians – what a blessing it was that everyone got home from Copenhagen before the snow set in! Oh, and do not expect preparations for the London Olympics to be complete for at least another two years.

Nearer to home, my bell tower is in need of renovation and repair, but I assure you I shall not be seeking public monies to fund the work. My maze is also in need of some attention; I shall tell Meadowcroft to undertake a little replanting and shall ask the people at the Department of Hard Sums, University of Rutland at Belvoir, to simplify their design a little. Tongues wag in the village if too many people fail to emerge from the thing.

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