

# liberator

## New LibDem slogan shock!



change that offends no one

BUILDING A BLANDER BRITAIN

*"I can't  
tell them  
apart!"*

### In This Issue

- 💣 **Plague of the zombies – Simon Titley**
- 💣 **Sudan's flawed election – Becky Tinsley**
- 💣 **20 years of Lord Bonkers – Jonathan Calder**

# CONTENTS

## SUBSCRIBE!

Liberator magazine is published seven/eight times per year. Subscribe for only £25 (£30 overseas) per year.

You can subscribe or renew online using PayPal at our website: [www.liberator.org.uk](http://www.liberator.org.uk)

Or send a cheque (UK banks only), payable to "Liberator Publications", together with your name and full postal address, to:

Liberator Publications  
Flat 1, 24 Alexandra Grove  
London N4 2LF  
England

## THE LIBERATOR COLLECTIVE

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

Liberator is printed by Lithosphere  
Studio 1, 146 Seven Sisters Road, LONDON N7 7PL

## LIBERATOR

- was founded in 1970 and is produced by a voluntary editorial collective
- acts as a forum for debate among radical liberals in all parties and none
- welcomes written contributions on relevant topics, up to 1800 words.

We reserve the right to shorten, alter or omit any material.

## DATA PROTECTION

Liberator is registered under the Data Protection Act and subscribes to the data protection principles therein.

## YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS BY EMAIL

We accept your Liberator contributions by email to [collective@liberator.org.uk](mailto:collective@liberator.org.uk)

Please read our copy deadlines and style guidelines on the liberator website. Photos and adverts as JPG only.

## INTERNET

Email: [collective@liberator.org.uk](mailto:collective@liberator.org.uk)  
Website: <http://www.liberator.org.uk>

Facebook group:  
[www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=6806343091](http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=6806343091)

**Commentary** ..... 3

**Radical Bulletin**..... 4..6

**SPAM ALL ROUND**..... 7  
Do the Liberal Democrats now only have one thing on their menu, asks Adrian Sanders

**THE PLAGUE OF THE ZOMBIES** ..... 8..10  
The Liberal Democrats are in the ideological grip of the living dead. It's time to smack the zombies across the head with a shovel, says Simon Titley

**CULTURE VULTURED** ..... 11  
Chris Green wonders how the Lib Dem 'Quality of Life' policy paper managed to omit culture

**TWENTYYEARS OF LORD BONKERS** ..... 12..13  
Jonathan Calder commemorates the history of a renowned Liberal peer and English eccentric

**BLOOD ON THE BALLOT PAPERS**..... 14..15  
An election is due in Sudan in April that is set to plunge that country into fresh conflict, says Becky Tinsley

**IT SHOULD BE CHILD'S PLAY**..... 16..17  
The government's play strategy will not restore children's right to play freely outdoors, says Rob Wheway

**EUROPE IS A VOTE WINNER**..... 18..19  
Liberal Democrats in Hammersmith defied conventional wisdom by successfully including European issues in their normal campaign strategy, reports Jon Burden

**SMALL FRY** ..... 19  
Steve Yolland reminds us of an incident during the last Tory government

**Letters** ..... 20

**Reviews** ..... 20..23

**Lord Bonkers Diary**..... 24

Cover Picture - Christy Lawrance



# COMMENTARY

## SLOGANS THAT WORK FOR WHO?

Liberator hopes it is wrong. Maybe the coming general election campaign will be a stonking success. No-one knows what will happen, but the new Lib Dem campaign slogan, as satirised on this issue's cover, bodes ill.

The Tories are using the slogan "year for change". Labour has said it will use "A Future Fair For All." The Lib Dems' "Change That Works For You, Building A Fairer Britain" combines both the other main parties' meaningless clichés into a new one that means equally little.

Its physical appearance hardly helps. The predominant colour is blue (when did you last hear someone say "look at that aqua-coloured" anything?), making it easily mistaken for a Conservative poster, since the slogan could perfectly well have come from the Tories.

These ludicrous failings are compounded by the absence of the party name or any identifier except a small yellow bird of liberty on a white background, a combination of colours that infant school children learn cannot easily be seen.

However, even if this slogan had been in bright yellow on black with 'Liberal Democrats' in letters three feet high, it would still embody everything we fear is going wrong with the party's positioning.

With Labour and the Tories fighting largely on the same ground, the Lib Dems are doing precious little to distinguish themselves from this in the public mind. All the post-2005 efforts to find 'a narrative' have come to nothing as the party retreats into bland slogans.

Who, anyway, is 'you' in this context? Change that 'works' for one group of people almost inevitably does not 'work' for another, if only because they will be expected to pay for it. The whole approach reeks of 'we can win everywhere', of the party's longstanding fear of inspiring any group of voters in case this offends another, and of its preference for opportunist gains over building a solid political base.

The slogan is better than the infamous 'One More Heave' of October 1974, but that is all that can be said for it.

What of the campaign that it fronts? That at least shows more promise, if it can be heard.

Nick Clegg has been absolutely right to close down speculation about a hung parliament as far as he can. General elections from 1979 to 1992 prove that you cannot ask people to vote for a hung parliament and that merely raising the possibility may frighten a large number of voters who believe it will lead to instability.

Thus when Clegg says he will not consider a coalition but would look to do deals on four key policies, he has given himself an escape route from the morass that engulfed his predecessors when faced with incessant media questioning about preferred coalition partners.

Of these four policies, taking four million people out of tax liability, and political reform to the voting system and parliament, will both be uncontroversial in the party and widely supported.

The third, "rebalancing of the economy to put less emphasis on centralised banking and more on a new greener economy", sounds good but may come apart under probing since it is unclear why the second part depends on the first, but again is likely to prove popular.

"Investing extra funds in education through a pupil premium for disadvantaged children", the fourth, is the odd one out, a very specific policy amid three general aims. It is easy to see why it was chosen ("the polls show we'd better do something for families") and it's arguable that civil liberty, otherwise unmentioned, is subsumed in 'political reform' but it means that the pupil premium will be in the campaign foreground.

But as Jonathan Calder pointed out in *Liberator* 336: "If the pupil premium does no more than redistribute children between the existing good and bad ones, it is hard to see that it will be popular with voters or begin to justify the claims Nick routinely makes for it." Let's hope this flagship does not leak copiously under the sort of examination the party has decided to court for it.

The coming election promises to be an unusual one – the first since 1992 that will not be a foregone conclusion – and not least because it is due to see the first televised debates between the three main party leaders.

These will give Clegg valuable equal time and status with the other parties, but also present a challenge to the 'bland is good' approach that the party is taking to the campaign.

It will be the first election since the expenses scandal destroyed public respect for MPs in general. If Clegg comes across as sensible, reasonable, but just another member of the political class and not particularly distinct from Brown and Cameron, the debates will not just have been a wasted opportunity but will actually do harm since they will make the Lib Dems look like just another establishment party.

Clegg can be bold and convincing when he wants to be. Will those responsible for 'change that works for you' allow him to be?

# RADICAL BULLETIN

## CLEGGSTHE BAKERS

The introduction of 'aqua' as an official Liberal Democrat colour (RB 337) has gone down like a lead balloon among the party's campaigners. Many object to the use of a colour traditionally associated with the Conservatives, while some have likened the party's new corporate image to that of Greggs the Bakers.

The Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors was quick to respond to the grassroots revolt. In an e-mail to its members on 29 January, it adapted the party's new 'style guidelines' to produce design templates for local Focus leaflets. These were offered in black and orange, and in black and white, but not aqua.

To make matters worse, on 16 February the party launched the artwork for its campaign logo to widespread derision. This artwork features the anodyne slogan "Change that works for you – building a fairer Britain." That slogan could have come from any party and could mean almost anything. Worse even than this exercise in blandness was the omission of the party name – indeed the omission of any identifier except a discreet bird of liberty.

Although the use of symbols rather than party names is a feature of elections in countries with high levels of illiteracy, no-one has hitherto thought this a necessary step in the UK.

Either the party's name was omitted in error, in which case those responsible shouldn't be working on the general election campaign, or it was omitted deliberately, in which case they also should not be.

So how did these dreadful slogans and colours come about? Liberator understands that Cowley Street retains the services of a small polling company, but there has been concern in certain quarters over the small size of the polling samples used. It has also been alleged that the party's General Election Team picks and chooses polling data that fits its prejudices.

Do not therefore be surprised if you hear those in charge make the dubious claim that the term 'Liberal Democrat' and the traditional gold colour have both been dropped because they received a thumbs down in the party's private opinion polls.

## DELINQUENT YOUTH

Liberal Youth is not a happy ship. A year ago it had a divisive and highly personalised battle for chair, in which Elaine Bagshaw defeated Sara Scarlett only after the latter disrupted the Lib Dem conference rally. Bagshaw triumphed by 148 votes to 92, which hardly suggested an organisation with a large membership (Liberator 333).

Now Bagshaw is gone, despite leading what by all accounts was a successful freshers' week campaign, after almost the whole of her executive expressed no confidence in her. There was a spate of resignations, many from people who resented what they felt was Bagshaw's micro-management of their portfolios.

At the start of this year, Alex Royden quit as vice-chair for campaigns and triggered an avalanche of intended resignations among executive members. It then dawned on them that the alternative was to get Bagshaw to resign.

Seven of the 13 remaining executive members sent a letter that called on her to go and two others indicated support. Party president Ros Scott was approached but decided that, since LY was acting within its constitution, it would be wrong for her to get involved.

Bagshaw duly went, which then triggered the resignations of her supporters James Shaddock and James Harrison. That left ten incumbents out of a theoretically 16-strong executive and rather a lot of co-options have followed.

Alan Belmore, the only vice-chair left in office after this carnage, is acting chair, but when he stands for the permanent position is likely to be challenged by Sam Potts, a Milton Keynes councillor who was active in Liberal Youth in the early 2000s. A Facebook group, 'Sam Potts for Liberal Youth Chair', boasts among its members one Elaine Bagshaw.

## SOUND OF SILENCE

The disgrace that is the Liberal Democrat group on Aberdeenshire Council has been at it again.

Not content with having driven their critics out of the party, they have now done their best to muzzle all opposition.

This story has been covered in numerous editions of Liberator since November 2008, when the council's infrastructure committee rejected, on the casting vote of its Lib Dem chair Martin Ford, an application by American billionaire Donald Trump to build a golf resort partly on a site of special scientific interest.

Leading Liberal Democrats, who run the council in coalition with the Tories, then got Ford ejected from his post. He and three other councillors who shared his view were hounded out of the party for criticising the council's pro-Trump stance. Two of them now sit as Democratic independents but the other two, Ford and Debra Storr, are both now Greens, despite decades of previous Lib Dem membership.

The latest twist has been that Aberdeenshire's standing orders have been changed by the administration to hamper the dissidents' ability to raise issues at full council.

According to Ford, the council has introduced "a series of obstacles to block Notices of Motion from



individual councillors. You now have to provide written evidence of having tried all other avenues before a motion will be accepted – and of course you can't prove there is nothing you haven't thought of; you have to show there is no alternative; once a motion is disallowed, it or one in 'broadly similar terms' can never be submitted again".

These antics have angered Lord Greaves, a Lib Dem local government spokesman in the House of Lords and not a person with whom most people would lightly dispute council procedures.

He comments: "This is really bad stuff. Giving planning permission to Donald Trump was highly undesirable in my view, but arguable. Kicking out the 'rebels' in the group was stupid, really bad management, and pretty illiberal – but you can put it down to clashes between individuals if you want to.

"What is totally unacceptable from Liberal Democrats is this clamping down on the rights of minority groups in the council, and reducing the rights of residents/citizens to get involved in Council decisions – and all in the Blairite cause of 'modernising the council' and 'effective delivery of its business'.

"This is truly appalling. The Scottish party ought to be seriously investigating these so-called Liberal Democrats who are repudiating everything we stand for in local government. But of course they won't."

## 'SILLY' BUT SUCCESSFUL

When he ran the Liberal Party's by-election campaigns in the 1980s, Peter Chegwyn got in and out of several scrapes. Now he has taken on and beaten in the High Court the sledgehammer-and-nut bureaucracy that is the local government disciplinary machine.

Chegwyn vanished from the national scene after the merger but involved himself in politics in his native Gosport, where he also developed a business as a music promoter running, among other events, the Stokes Bay Festival in Gosport.

Relations between him and the local Tories are poisonous so it was no great surprise when they reported him to the Standards Board for England for voting in such a way that a motion to increase the rent for the festival site was not debated.

The Adjudication Panel for England, which heard the board's case last summer, judged Chegwyn has committed "breaches of such a serious nature, in that the Respondent had deliberately sought to misuse his position and had deliberately failed to abide by the Code [of conduct] it was considered that the most severe of sanctions, being disqualification was appropriate and proportionate here".

It disqualified him from both Gosport and Hampshire County Council for two years. The court though felt a mere two-month suspension from Gosport only was sufficient punishment for what the judge called: "A gross error of judgment by Mr Chegwyn and it was a serious matter but in my view it did not merit disqualification."

He called Chegwyn "a very silly man" but said he voted not out of self-interest but concern for the effects on local business, were the festival to be cancelled.

## HOW WELL HUNG?

Liberator is advised that bookmaker Paddy Power is offering evens on Lib Dem leader Nick Clegg backing nobody in the event of a hung parliament.

Thus if there is a hung parliament and he does not deal, punters would double their money. If there isn't a hung parliament, the bet would be void and the stake returned.

Since a hung parliament would have seen Labour rejected, and a deal with the Tories would split the Lib Dems, it is indeed hard to see what deal Clegg could do except to announce that the only party he supports is his own, which in effect is what he did with his 'four tests' announcement (15 February). However, that approach may ultimately involve the Lib Dems in deciding not to vote against someone's Queen's Speech and so in effect coming down on one side or the other.

Chief whip Paul Burstow thinks he has found a neat formulation to help candidates deal with the inevitable question about a hung parliament: "If this happens there will be a special meeting of Lib Dem MPs and just say that you want to be there to decide!" Er, where to start on that one?

## TALKING IN TONGES

Not for the first time, Jenny Tonge has got herself sacked as a Lib Dem spokesperson for incautious remarks about the Middle East.

Tonge is a strong supporter of the Palestinians and a *bête noire* for supporters of the Israeli government.

This time, she was asked by the *Jewish Chronicle* to comment on allegations published by the *Palestine Telegraph*, of which she is a patron, that members of the Israel Defence Forces sold organs from corpses in Haiti, where they are assisting with humanitarian relief after the earthquake.

Tonge, who presumably had no first-hand knowledge of this matter, replied: "To prevent allegations such as these – which have already been posted on You Tube – going any further, the IDF and the Israeli Medical Association should establish an independent inquiry immediately to clear the names of the team in Haiti."

She might have been better advised to say something like: "On the face of it, these allegations require investigation but until I know the facts I would not wish to comment further." But in calling for an investigation, she did not claim the allegations were true. Nor did she initiate the statement; the *Jewish Chronicle* did when it asked Tonge for a comment.

This is the newspaper whose editor, Stephen Pollard, contributed an article to *The Guardian* (9 October 2009) in which he defended David Cameron's decision to make common cause with extreme right-wingers from Eastern Europe, some of whom have been accused of anti-Semitism, and also referred to "my view of Gordon Brown as being unfit to occupy 10 Downing Street".

He said nothing then directly about the Lib Dems, but his stance on Cameron's choice of allies suggests his sympathies. This episode looks like the setting-up of a trap for Tonge into which she unwisely walked.

In sacking Tonge, Nick Clegg called her comments "wrong, distasteful and provocative and I recognise the deep and understandable distress they have caused to the Jewish community", though he recognised that she was not anti-Semitic or racist.

Tonge's comments may have upset supporters of Israel, but that is not the same thing as 'the Jewish community'.

## THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD

A fascinating Chard Group document comes our way (and that is not a phrase you will often read in *Liberator*).

Long before its present preoccupation with running conference raffles, the Chard Group was set up and run by Richard Denton-White to support Paddy Ashdown's objective, set out in his 1992 speech in Chard, of working more closely with Labour.

The September 1995 issue of the group's *Campaigner* newsletter says its new vice-chair is Mark Littlewood, who "is now the youth president of the European Movement".

Someone called Mark Littlewood was the Lib Dems' head of media until his unfortunate spot of bother with Ming Campbell's inaugural conference speech as leader in March 2006, and later ran the lunatic-fringe libertarian right Liberal Vision, before departing the Lib Dems last year to become director of the Thatcherite Institute of Economic Affairs.

That Mark Littlewood was, by an extraordinary coincidence, described as a former youth officer of the European Movement in a 2004 interview in *PR Week* to mark his appointment as Lib Dem press officer.

So did Littlewood really make the strange political journey from Denton-White's pro-Labour body to the wilder shores of the libertarian right – and, if so, where might he next be found?

## CULTURE VULTURED

A Lib Dem policy paper on the 'quality of life' was always liable to be so wide ranging as to mean little, but it was not expected to contrive to omit entirely any mention of the creative arts.

This has not unnaturally angered and baffled those in the party who take an interest in the arts, not least shadow culture, media and sport secretary Don Foster. He is understood to have backed efforts by Chris Green, who once chaired the Liberal Party's arts advisory panel, to get this omission remedied (see page 11).

However the paper, which was due to go to the spring conference in Birmingham, has now been deferred by a full eighteen months to autumn 2011, which will presumably be time enough to correct such deficiencies. Once it's complete, perhaps they can put it on a lectern at conference and claim it is an installation.

## PICK UP THE PHONE!

Plenty of people wondered whether Mark Oaten was in the right party during his wretched spell as shadow home secretary, when he advanced a preposterous and inexplicable concept called 'tough liberalism'.

Now we know. He has given an interview to Peter Henley, the BBC's south of England political reporter, in which he says: "I had a difficult relationship with the party, they were suspicious of me, and there was a time when I was frustrated by their lack of ambition. I was frustrated that what I was arguing for, as a Liberal, was just not coming through.

"I saw what I perceived to be a change in the way that the Conservatives were developing and yes, I was tempted to think; was I in the right party? "Should I be picking up the phone to David Cameron and switching? It would have hit a few headlines at the time but was it the right thing? No it wasn't. It took a few people around me talking about the party and what I really cared about to make me realise."

Presumably Oaten's preferred leisure activities would have been unacceptable even to the Tories.

## BUCKINGHAM OVER

John Stevens, the former Tory MEP turned leader of the Pro-European Conservative Party, now a Liberal Democrat, is planning to contest Buckingham as an independent at this year's general election.

He has already launched a campaign website under the banner 'Buckinghamshire Campaign For Democracy' ([www.bucksfirst.co.uk](http://www.bucksfirst.co.uk)).

Since Buckingham is the seat of speaker John Bercow, and the local Lib Dems have decided not to oppose him, Stevens will not run foul of the rule against opposing official party candidates.

It may be, though, that his real target is not Bercow but former UKIP leader Nigel Farage, who will be fighting the same seat.

Stevens's campaign claims to have already issued 30,000 mail shots in the seat, though whether he has taken the precaution of commissioning an opinion poll is unknown.

## PLYMOUTH HO HUM

What on earth is happening in Plymouth, where Cowley Street has taken over the local party after a bout of infighting that, given its size, brings to mind an old saying about bald men and combs?

Plymouth's local party has been dysfunctional for years and never really recovered from the era of having been the UK's only stronghold of the post-merger Owenite SDP.

In a bizarre episode, its own chair called on the Electoral Commission to investigate the local party, which found nothing wrong, but the regional party was so concerned about disputes between local party officers and one of the city's PPCs that it felt forced to intervene.

## WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE?

Collective member Kiron Reid speculated in *Liberator* 336 that the Electoral Reform Society must be rolling in money, yet seemed to have been strangely quiet throughout the controversy on MPs' expenses.

So what will it do about Labour's promise of a referendum, on introducing the alterative vote in Westminster elections?

The issue has left the ERS deeply split over whether or not to support a referendum on AV, pitting supporters of the single transferable vote, who see themselves as upholders of the principle of proportional representation, against those who see themselves as pragmatists and think AV is better than nothing. If this referendum is ever actually held, the ERS will have to decide what to do, but which voting system would it use to do that?

# SPAM ALL ROUND

## Do the Liberal Democrats now only have one thing on their menu, asks Adrian Sanders

Some opponents of the Lib Dems argue that the party has no policies. Others know the reality that the party has often had too many policies with more published detail about them than all the other parties put together, making us an easy target to attack.

The truth is that campaigns win votes while policies tend to lose them. The decline of the SDP from recording over 50% in opinion polls can be traced to the publication of its first policy paper.

However, without policies you cannot campaign and win votes. It's about balance and having the right mix.

We seem to have moved a long way from the gastronomic policy feast we used to lay on for the electorate to the other extreme of having only spam, or that £10,000 tax free pledge, to campaign on.

Don't get me wrong. Spam with everything can be good, especially if you are writing a Monty Python sketch, and so too is the promise to allow people to earn up to £10,000 before they start to pay tax on their earnings. But is it enough?

### FRESH THING

In the days of the Liberal-SDP Alliance, we had a poster campaign claiming we were 'The Only Fresh Thing on the Menu'. Is it now 'We Have Only One Fresh Thing on the Menu'?

I've never fully understood why, as Liberals, Social Democrats or now as Liberal Democrats, we have always worried so much about not being able to deliver our detailed policies in government. No party can guarantee to deliver its manifesto in full until it has access to the reins of government, all the paperwork and the expertise of the civil service and those experts Whitehall and the Treasury employ.

I've just spent the past thirteen years listening to front bench colleagues arguing that we know less about our national budget-making process and how the Treasury operates than any opposition councillor knows about the finances of their town hall. And it's true!

I've seen the lack of scrutiny available to MPs to find out what's in the books and, while a little more has been published in recent years, it is still not possible to know what we can or cannot afford unless you are the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

We owe it to those who vote Liberal Democrat to try to deliver as many Liberal Democrat policies as we can and, while my preference will be a majority Lib Dem government, the fact is our voting system may deliver a hung parliament. In that event, the more policies we have, the more we have to negotiate with.

Were I a leader holding the balance of power, I would give the other parties a copy of my election manifesto in priority order and ask them to return it to me within 24 hours having ticked the policies they agree with, crossed out those they disagree with, and placed a question mark next to those they will talk to us about.

Given that no-one can ever be said to have a mandate under our first-past-the-post voting system, and let's be frank no party that loses seats and votes will ever be accepted as having won, there's a real danger that our position could be misrepresented as meaning we can only support the Conservatives after the election.

That's not our position as I understand it and there is little point placing ourselves in the situation of determining who has a mandate if we don't accept the electoral system in the first place.

### WHO WOULD WORK WITH US?

The question isn't who we would work with but, given our policy priorities, who would work with us.

It has always been a lack of confidence in ourselves that has prevented us from reaching our full potential as a political force for progressive policies. We need to instil the same belief Barak Obama communicated to a sceptical electorate in America.

Yes, we can deliver a programme for government. Yes, we can start to do all the things we have talked about doing through decades of waiting, debating, planning and calculating. Yes, we can introduce the reforms this country needs and the fairness we have patiently waited for. But we cannot guarantee to do anything until we have seen the books.

That final caveat would be easily accepted by the electorate while our campaigners in the field would remain free to choose from a range of policies those which are most important to the people they wish to represent.

Giving hope to students that tuition fees will be scrapped, hope to pensioners that the link with earnings will be restored, hope to those in fear of having to sell their home to pay for care, hope that the Liberal Democrats really are different and offer change we can believe in.

---

Adrian Sanders is Liberal Democrat MP for Torbay



# THE PLAGUE OF THE ZOMBIES

The Liberal Democrats are in the ideological grip of the living dead. It's time to smack the zombies across the head with a shovel, says Simon Titley

Zombies are the reanimated dead. But the zombies of popular culture are imaginary. The ones in politics are real. And right now, there are a lot of them about.

We live in a time of zombie ideology. Neoliberalism has been the dominant creed of the past thirty years, since Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan came to power. Such was the belief in this ideology that, when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, people talked of the 'end of history'. The big ideological questions were assumed settled and politics was reduced to an argument about who could manage the system better.

Then came the financial crisis and neoliberalism died. To be precise, it died on 15 September 2008, the day Lehman Brothers collapsed. Conrad Russell, in his article 'The Ring of Slack Water' (*Liberator* 275, July 2001), remarked that apathy and hostility to politicians had historically always been a feature of periods in which there was no clear ideological conflict. He predicted that this moment of 'slack water' would not last and that new issues would arise.

The usual legacy of a major crisis is a political house clearance; dominant policies are delegitimised and new ideological divisions form. You might think that, by now, the main parties would have abandoned a dead ideology, rejected consensus politics and resumed competing on ideological grounds. They have not yet done so. Neoliberalism is dead but, like a zombie, it keeps walking. It walks because the political and financial elites assume that, after this little hiccup, it will be back to business as usual.

## IDEOLOGICAL FAD

Redundant political orthodoxies take a long time to die. Remember Butskellite social democracy? It died during the 1973 oil crisis. But the ideological zombies stalked the land for another ten years, nationalising British Leyland and surviving even the winter of discontent. This zombie ideology was not destroyed until 1983, when Thatcher's landslide delivered a fatal smack across the head with a shovel. Now it's the turn of neoliberalism. This ideological fad has run its course and will be superseded by something else, though by what is not yet clear.

What does 'neoliberalism' mean? It is classical liberalism redefined as market fundamentalism, developed by 'Chicago School' economists and the 'Washington Consensus', which sought to roll back state intervention in the economy.

Although neoliberal policy seemed to increase prosperity in Britain, it was really just a giant 'Ponzi scheme' and couldn't last. The economy became over-reliant on casino banking, inflated property values and

consumer spending fuelled by easy credit. Earning a living by making and doing things seemed outmoded, and certainly less profitable than cashing in on the housing market. Inequality and indebtedness grew and the international financial system became increasingly unstable. This eventually led to the banking crisis of 2008, which brought us to the brink of disaster, averted only by massive state intervention of the sort that neoliberals had traditionally disparaged.

Neoliberal economic theory proved a calamitous failure and has been intellectually discredited. The once-fashionable concepts of 'efficient markets' and 'rational actors' have been abandoned by all but the most die-hard Chicago School economists. The *coup de grâce* was delivered by Adair Turner, chairman of the Financial Services Authority, who described the financial crisis as "a fairly complete train wreck of a predominant theory of economics and finance".

Critics of this view argue that the past thirty years have not really been neoliberal. Despite Mrs Thatcher and her wholesale privatisations, the state did not shrink and government expenditure (as a percentage of GDP) stayed more or less the same. But while the state may not have shrunk, it was transformed by various forms of marketisation such as internal markets, target culture, contracting out, PFIs and PPPs.

## INSIDIOUS EFFECT

In any case, this is to ignore a more insidious effect. Neoliberalism's triumph was to change the way we see the world by making anti-social values all-pervasive. The market had previously been regarded simply as a useful mechanism for exchanging goods and services. Now, the market became an object of religious devotion, valued for itself, a metaphor for everything, an ethic that could guide all human action and replace previously existing ethical beliefs. Ethics was reduced to calculations of wealth and productivity. Values like morality, justice, fairness, empathy, nobility and love were either abandoned or redefined in market terms.

Thatcher's infamous quote, "there is no such thing as society" symbolised the neoliberal ethic. It represented a conscious rejection of the social nature of human beings and their capacity for empathy and reciprocity. People tried to fill the void in their lives by using consumer goods as a measure of their adequacy and importance as human beings. But they weren't any happier because this road led to social atomisation, insecurity and disaffection. In short, neoliberalism has bankrupted us not only financially but also morally.

For Liberals, the key political question is the distribution of power, specifically 'agency', the



ability to make meaningful choices about our lives and to influence the world around us. Some Liberal Democrats were tempted by the neoliberal argument that markets could deliver agency more effectively than democratic politics. But with the best will in the world, the capacity of markets to do this is limited. So people find a bewildering array of choice when they shop online or visit a large supermarket, but find they have less control over the neighbourhoods where they live. For all the 'choice' on offer, people feel that nothing they say or do makes any difference.

Given neoliberalism's destructive effects on the economy and society, why do some people still believe this zombie will carry on forever? Margaret Thatcher once declared "There is no alternative" ("TINA"), to which Peter Mandelson later added, "We are all Thatcherites now." Thatcher and Mandelson can at least claim they were speaking before the great crash. Now there is no excuse. But the neoliberal zombies march on.

Here's David Goodhart, impeccably centrist editor of Prospect magazine, in a recent editorial (October 2009): "Amid the din of the party conference season it is easy to forget the dirty little secret of British politics: that the underlying differences in philosophy and even policy between the three main parties remain narrower than at any time in the modern age... This is no cause for regret. An intelligent, unideological, technocratic politics is what is required to solve the many serious problems facing Britain and the world."

No cause for regret? When we bet everything on the financial sector and ran down our other industries? When we've run up more consumer debt than the rest of Europe combined? When we expect to retire on mis-sold pensions? When governments caved into lobbyists and wasted billions on weapons systems we'll never use and IT systems that don't work? When we spend more on subsidising private landlords and private railway operators than we did on building council houses or running a state-owned railway? When we celebrate a dog-eat-dog culture and make heroes of bullies like Alan Sugar or Gordon Ramsay? The answer to such problems is not the oxymoron of "unideological, technocratic politics" but some stark moral choices.

## PROFOUND CONSEQUENCES

At this point, I can hear many Liberal Democrats saying, "Yes, but no-one mentions 'neoliberalism' on the doorstep. These ideological questions aren't relevant to ordinary people." But they are.

If you accept neoliberal orthodoxy, if you believe the basic ideological questions have been settled for good, this has profound consequences that everybody notices. They may not see it in ideological terms but they can still see the problem.

Politics implies the existence of alternatives. But if you assume the big questions have been settled, you are reduced to emphasising your competence rather than your beliefs. Politics is replaced by managerialism, with its talk of 'efficiency', 'targets' and 'delivery'.

And then because you have no great causes to fight for or any distinguishing ideas to set you apart, you resort to followership rather than leadership. Instead of engaging in ideological argument with the other parties, you compete to agree with public opinion.

And then to achieve followership, you rely on focus groups and opinion polls to determine policy, which often amounts to little more than superficial 'initiatives' contrived to capture the next day's headlines.

And then because you dare not risk communicating uncomfortable information to the public because it might be rejected, you try to tell the public what you think they want to hear. You are paralysed by caution because your overriding objective is to avoid causing offence. ("The temptation is to get rid of anything that anyone might criticise, and become politically neutral: provoking neither hatred nor enthusiasm," said Fraser Nelson, editor of The Spectator. He was actually criticising Cameron's Tories but might as well have been talking about the Lib Dems).

And then everyone complains about the political culture of 'spin', even though it's simply a logical outcome of your belief that all communication must sound attractive. And because it all looks like a cynical game, the media focus on the process of politics rather than the substance.

And then because you've reduced democratic politics to a matter of consumer choice, you hire ad men to run your campaigns and sell you like a brand of soap powder. And then you wonder why journalists ask you about your sex life or your favourite biscuit.

And then because you've emptied politics of all meaning, you no longer stand up for what you believe in but offer a litany of sanitised and banal slogans.

And then because you're using the same stock phrases, cliché-by-numbers and mix'n'match soundbites as the other main parties, your empty slogans about "change" and "fairness" sound interchangeable.

And then because you've converged on the same narrow territory as the other mainstream parties, the voters think you all sound the same and increasingly abstain or vote for fringe parties. At the same time, you no longer enthuse your base and your members drift away.

And then you're part of the establishment. In the Liberal Democrats' case, you enjoy all the disadvantages of the establishment (popular opprobrium) with none of the advantages (power). Because let's face it, if the most exciting thing you can say about yourself is that you're "credible" or "prepared for government", you won't exactly be rousing the masses.

This degeneration of politics is not a conscious conspiracy. It is rather a process in which the main players are largely unconscious of what they are doing, until you point it out to them. Even then the truth can be hard to take and breaking away from orthodoxy hard to do. Because to break free, you have to take risks in a risk-averse culture. You have to state publicly, "This system really is a load of old bollocks, isn't it?" – but no-one with serious ambitions wants to be the first to say it.

One could be charitable to Nick Clegg and assume that he refuses to repudiate the neoliberal consensus because of these risks. He talks about "this rotten system" but the malaise is deeper than he is willing to admit. Far from criticising neoliberalism, Clegg seems to buy the Tory narrative that we are living through a crisis of the state rather than a crisis of the market, so he can't offer a trenchant critique of the crisis, which

in turn prevents him sounding distinct.

A good example of this is Clegg's attitude to the MPs' expenses scandal. He believes this scandal caused public mistrust; therefore fixing the expenses system (plus electoral reform) will fix the problem. But the expenses scandal didn't cause public mistrust; it *crystallised* it. Trust had been undermined over many years by the tendency of neoliberalism to remove meaningful political choice and encourage people to retreat into their private spheres.

## KITCHEN CABINET

There is another possible explanation for the continued presence of ideological zombies in the party. Nick Clegg might actually believe in neoliberalism. The composition of his kitchen cabinet suggests so. If one were to draw up a list of the key people involved in right-wing plotting over the past ten years and compare it with his closest advisers, the overlap is remarkable.

There's Chris Fox, appointed by Clegg as interim chief executive last year following the resignation of Chris Rennard. Fox was chairman of the advisory board of right-wing ginger group Liberal Future, founded by Mark Oaten in 2001. Until his appointment to the party's staff, Fox also chaired Liberal Democrats in Public Relations, a right-wing front organisation.

There's Paul Marshall, a hedge fund millionaire who describes himself as an adviser to Clegg. Marshall has been at the centre of right-wing intrigues, having sponsored and co-edited the *Orange Book*, helped found the ill-fated Liberal Democrat Business Forum and Liberty Network, and bought the think tank CentreForum and moved it rightwards.

There's Ian Wright, a major donor to Clegg's office. Wright founded Liberal Democrats in Public Relations and has regularly hosted right-wing caucus meetings. And there's Neil Sherlock, also a major donor to Clegg's office and a speech writer to successive Lib Dem leaders. Sherlock regularly hosts dinners under the codename 'Santa Fe', which are part fundraising event and part right-wing salon.

But don't assume that such people hold deep ideological convictions. Most are ideological shapeshifters, having been cheerleaders for social democracy in the eighties and the Blairite 'project' in the nineties. Their belief in the neoliberal consensus springs less from a moral commitment, more from groupthink, specifically a belief in the prevailing orthodoxy as the route to power. Yet they always latch onto the previous decade's political fashion and are perpetually behind the curve. And then they have the sheer nerve to call themselves 'modernisers'!

Just how "serious about power" are these people? They are convinced that conventional wisdom is the key to political credibility but look where it has got us. It has produced the dreary clichés in the Liberal Democrats' two recent pre-manifestos; the steaming pile of blandness that is the party's new election slogan; a succession of bleak messages from the leader that emphasise the stick rather than the carrot; and policies that seek to mitigate the crisis rather than tackle the root causes.

Is this the best we can do? Does the present crisis inspire no ideals or vision? Will our soundtrack remain the thud-thud-thud of zombies marching down the street?

This crisis should be a catalyst for radical thinking; such opportunities come along only once every thirty years and should not be wasted. So the goal should be to choose the future. The future is something we decide – nothing is inevitable (not even neoliberalism – it was chosen). The choice is between promoting our idea of the future and allowing someone else's future to happen to us. But whatever the choice, the past is not an option; even though zombies are still walking, they are still dead.

## REALM OF BIG IDEAS

To define their idea of the future, the Liberal Democrats must enter the realm of big ideas. And there are plenty of debates they should join: for example, the recent ALDC booklet *The Theory and Practice of Community Economics*; the New Economics Foundation's work on building a sustainable economy; David Boyle's critique of giantism; the debates started by Matthew Taylor of the RSA on citizenship and decentralisation; the post-Copenhagen debate within the environmental movement on recasting the green cause in more positive and less doom-laden terms. The party could also rediscover its forgotten policies on mutuals and worker co-operatives.

The party needs to draw its thinking together around an idea of 'the good life well lived'. We used to know how. A Liberal Party report in 1974 said: "Once the basic needs of food and shelter are met, the individual's greatest satisfactions are to be found in love, trust and friendship, in beauty, art and music, and in learning, none of which are served by the mythology of growth for its own sake. It is because no-one else, and no other party, represents or advocates this crucial belief that the Liberal Party continues to exist as an independent and dedicated political party." We could do a lot worse than revive a similar vision.

This is not about adopting a rigid dogma but taking up causes that excite and enthuse people. And the party should campaign as an insurgency and cease pretending to be a 'party of government'. Let's stop calling our spokespeople 'shadow secretary of state' and put away the dressing-up box, shall we?

Until Liberal Democrats join the battle of ideas, they cannot blame the zombies, who will take their chances wherever they can find them. Members have only themselves to blame for allowing their party to be hollowed out ideologically and reduced to a 'leaflet delivery cult', to the extent that zombies could cut through it like a hot knife through butter.

Whether the Tories or Labour take power in this year's general election, it will not be a break with the past but a coda to the past thirty years. In the election after that, the zombies will be swept away. And if the Liberal Democrats persist in sticking with the old consensus, they will not be the ones holding the brush.

---

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective

# CULTURE VULTURED

## Chris Green wonders how the Lib Dem ‘Quality of Life’ policy paper managed to omit culture

As good Liberal Democrats, how can we but warmly welcome the Federal Policy Committee’s initiative in developing new party policy on ‘quality of life’?

It is always exhilarating to take the high road in politics, to move from the purely pragmatic to the philosophical. As the party of ‘pavement politics’, it is especially important for us to look beyond the uncollected dustbin, call for a new pedestrian crossing or hole in the road to the greater physical and spiritual needs of mankind.

There is much that we should welcome in the *Quality of Life Consultation Paper*, not least the noble sentiments expressed in the introduction: “As Liberal Democrats, we approach this issue committed to building and safeguarding a fair, free and open society, in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community, and in which no-one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity.”

I have spent the last thirty years of my life working within the creative industries. In the early 1980s, I chaired the Liberal Party’s Advisory Panel on the Arts, which produced the first arts manifesto to come out of a political party, and have subsequently worked closely with Don Foster and others helping to try to keep the arts debate alive within the party. So, you can imagine how pleased I was to encounter such phrases in the paper’s introduction as “to develop their talents to the full” and “to foster diversity and to nurture creativity”.

Had the party at last chosen to acknowledge the significance of creativity as an active force within our communities? Was there about to be something positive and encouraging that we, as a political party, had to say to our nation’s many thousands of people working in creative industries?

Were we about to recognise that artists, even more than politicians, help us to see that which we cannot readily see on our own?

### NOT A SINGLE REFERENCE

Well, I am sorry to disappoint those of you who may not yet have read the full paper. But, however worthy it may be and however well it may have begun to address such important matters as ‘Work and Work-life Balance’, ‘Unemployment’, ‘Communities and Activities’, ‘Mental Health’, ‘Relationships and Families’, ‘The Environment’, ‘Media and Advertising – Consumer Society’ and even ‘Religion, Psychology and Values’, there is not a single further reference to culture, cultural values, art, artists, creators, creativity, even the buzz phrase ‘the creative industries’.

I have to say this is an extraordinary omission, one you simply wouldn’t find in a similar paper being produced in almost any other part of Europe. Yes, it is very English and thoroughly philistine. I am not sure that there has ever been a time when a British government has truly understood or valued the social and economic importance of creativity both as the springboard for invention and production and as the source of that essential social commentary on what we do and what we are.

The creative industries are the second largest employer in the UK, contribute many billions of pounds to the economy and make a massive contribution to our quality of life. What sort of world would we live in if it wasn’t for good quality architecture, fashion design, literature, music, art, poetry? How little would we know about the world if it wasn’t for good quality broadcasting and newspaper journalism?

As Matthew Arnold wrote: “Culture is to know the best that has been said and thought in the world.” And, when we look back in time, how many politicians do we remember compared with the great artists who have shaped our thinking and provide us with a continuing source of inspiration?

### DANGEROUS AND NARROW

There is a very dangerous and narrow view held by far too many people in positions of political responsibility, including within this party, at both national and local level; that culture, the arts and artists should be bracketed together under the heading ‘leisure and recreation’, that they are solely to do with ‘entertainment’. What I am arguing is that culture is the expression of who we all are at this and any moment in time. It is the backdrop to the whole of our lives. Artists help us to see who we are and the creative process is there to be developed within every one of us to show us the way towards greater personal fulfilment. It was Francis Bacon who aptly described art as “man added to nature”.

So, fellow Liberal Democrats, when the ‘Quality of Life’ Consultation Paper is up for discussion at Spring Conference in Birmingham, I hope that you will be there in your droves to demand a substantial rewrite of the document, placing it within a proper cultural framework to provide more than just a token nod in the direction of the creative community of which, to a greater or lesser extent, we are all a part. I close with the words of TS Eliot: “Culture may even be described simply as that which makes life worth living.”

---

Chris Green is a former Lib Dem parliamentary candidate and director of the Poetry Society. He is now an arts consultant





# TWENTY YEARS OF LORD BONKERS

## Jonathan Calder commemorates the history of a renowned Liberal peer and English eccentric

Growing up in Market Harborough, it was hard to ignore Lord Bonkers. If you climbed any of the hills that ringed the town, then the slender spire of St Asquith's, the gaunt pinnacles of the Home for Well-Behaved Orphans and, most impressive of all, the towers, domes and follies of Bonkers Hall and its grounds, would dominate the view to the North.

Lord Bonkers himself was rarely seen in town, though his longevity – he had ceased to be Liberal MP for Rutland South-West as long ago as 1910, people said wonderingly – and his generosity to local charities was often spoken of.

That said, his incursion into the Market Harborough North Ward by-election of 1982 – and the subsequent court case – kept us in gossip for months.

As a teenager, armed with a water bottle and Ordnance Survey map, I cycled out to find Bonkers Hall many times, only to return defeated on every occasion. Those towers and domes seemed clear enough from a distance, but when you neared them strange things began to happen.

### ROUND THE BEND

Rounding the final bend that would surely bring you face to face with the Hall, you found that it was not there after all but somewhere over your shoulder instead. Turn your bike round to complete the pursuit and the same thing would happen. The harder you pedalled towards the place, the more quickly it seemed to retreat.

I went away to university and to jobs in Birmingham and London, but always felt a nagging sense of incompleteness. So, years later, when my job brought me back to Market Harborough, I took up the quest.

And once again Bonkers Hall proved an elusive quarry. Until one thundery day when, exhausted by the search, I sat down under a tree at the side of the road and took out a copy of *Liberator* from my rucksack.

I must have fallen asleep.

When I awoke, I found myself on a village green and there – beyond the stocks and the duck pond – was a thatched building with an unmistakable sign: The Bonkers' Arms.

Waiting only for a hay cart drawn by a shire horse to pass, I crossed the road and stooped to enter the pub.

As my eyes had got used to the darkness, I began to make out the names on the beer taps and the buxom barmaid (whom I now know to be called Hazel Grove).

"I'll have a pint of Dahrendorf lag..."

"Don't have that," came a commanding voice from the corner. "I tried it once and I was going off like a pop gun all night."

I looked over to see a brisk, ruddy figure in tweeds. Something about him was familiar. Was it from that cavalry raid on the Conservative committee room?

Got it! This was Lord Bonkers.

"Give the chap a pint of Smithson & Greaves instead," he said, "and pull me another while you are at it, my dear."

I sat down opposite him and we fell into conversation. In truth, it was more a monologue than a conversation and over the next two hours, punctuated by regular trips to the bar, I heard his views on Free Trade, Paddy Ashplant ("Sound, apart from Chinese Labour"), the decline of leg spin, the lily-livered attitude of the modern editor to threatened libel actions and the imminent return of the Liberal Party to power. Then he saw my magazine.

"*Liberator*? I used to write for them in the old days, you know. They gave me the back page and I did a spoof diary in the guise of a jolly old Whig whose heart was in the right place but hadn't quite got to grips with the modern world."

"Bakelite and so forth," he added in explanation.

After that I pumped him for information on the early days of the magazine.

"Have you heard about our 'schoolkids' *Liberator*?" he asked. "Looking back, it was pretty radical stuff. A ban on Gregory powder, long trousers at 12, a Royal Commission on bedtime."

Perhaps it was the Smithson & Greaves, but I found myself asking Lord Bonkers whether he would like to write for us again.

### OFFERED A POSITION

We got on famously after that. I was asked back to the Hall for dinner, we retired to the smoking room and a bottle of that most prized of Highland malts, Auld Johnston, appeared. Eventually, I was offered a position as his lordship's literary secretary.

I awoke the next morning in a leather armchair with an awful hangover and a rough horse blanket thrown over me. For the sake of completeness I have to record that, when he came down to breakfast, Lord Bonkers had no idea who I was and saw me off the premises with his twelve bore.

Nevertheless, a letter bearing a Rutland stamp and confirming the job offer arrived a couple of days later...



It didn't happen quite like that, but as I have been writing Lord Bonkers' Diary for twenty years – a fact that shocks me if not its readers – I thought it might be worth describing where the old brute really comes from.

Lord Bonkers has two kinds of roots: literary ones and historical ones. His most important literary forebears are two characters who were prominent in the years immediately before I started writing about him in 1990: Peter Tinniswood's Brigadier and Stephen Fry's Professor Trefusis.

The Brigadier was the hero of a series of books, beginning with *Tales from a Long Room*. These were written out of a deep love of English cricket and approached it with wonderfully creative humour. So the Brigadier lived in a village whose neighbouring landmarks included Botham's Gut and Cowdrey's Bottom, and he frequently mentions such eminent figures as E.W. 'Gloria' Swanton and such literary works as Sean O'Casey's 'Juno and the Pocock'.

I came across these stories while I was a student at York through Robin Bailey's readings on Radio 4 and immediately loved them. One day, I thought, it would be good to write something along those lines, but using the Liberal Party rather than cricket. This is what Lord Bonkers' Diary was intended to be; indeed, when I read my early columns now, I am embarrassed by just how much they owe to Tinniswood.

Professor Trefusis featured in Stephen Fry's early appearances on Ned Sherrin's radio programme *Loose Ends* and is quite arguably the best thing he has done. Through the character of an eccentric academic, Fry made telling points and radical points about modern politics and society. One piece in particular, Trefusis's talk on education, made a tremendous impact and has been mentioned to me by several people over the years. I hoped I could do something similar by using the persona of an Edwardian landowner.

There are other literary roots beyond these two. I had read very little P.G. Wodehouse when I started writing Lord Bonkers, though I was to read a lot of him in later years, but I was certainly aware of the world of Jeeves and Wooster. Equally, I did not see Viv Stanshall's film *Sir Henry at Rawlinson End* until a few days before writing this article, yet I know all about its hero and felt vaguely plagiarised when the Rutland brewer Ruddles started using him in its television commercials.

Other forebears are even more obscure. I loved the Uncle books by the Revd J.P. Martin when I was a boy and only recently did I notice that their hero, who lived in a castle, had lots of friends and adventures and was given to very public acts of philanthropy, bears a remarkable resemblance to a certain Rutland peer. And I recently discovered that Lord Bonkers' habit of giving Important Concepts initial capitals comes straight from A.A. Milne and Winnie the Pooh.

So those are the character's literary roots, but he has political ones too. When I started writing Lord Bonkers' Diary early in 1990, I had been working in Leicester for eighteen months and had gained access to the county record office and the university library.

Between them they greatly increased my knowledge of the political history of Leicestershire and Rutland and of my own constituency in particular. I learned that Harborough had remained Liberal from 1891 to 1918.

The dominant personality in this history was J.W. 'Paddy' Logan, a prosperous railway contractor who was a thoroughgoing Radical and Harborough's MP from 1891 to 1904 and from 1910 to 1916. He is best remembered for starting a fight on the floor of the Commons and also ran a cottage home in the village of East Langton for the children of men who had been killed at his works. I am also certain that I discovered this after I had invented the Bonkers Home for Well-Behaved Orphans.

## NEVILL HOLT

This unearthing of inspirations for Lord Bonkers after the event continued when I came across Sir Bache Cunard. He lived at Nevill Holt, the house I have come to regard as the model for Bonkers Hall, in the Edwardian era and devoted himself to hunting and decorative metalwork. His daughter Nancy was to scandalise later decades with her literary dalliances and left-wing sympathies: I expect she got it from the first Lady Bonkers.

Then there was Colonel Hignett, the Tory who had bought Logan's estate on his death in 1922 and was, incredibly, still active locally when I became a councillor in the 1980s. I came across him several times and he had an unnerving habit of starting telephone calls with "Now, look here...." Fortunately, this was generally followed with "...if I can be any help, you let me know." When the church roof at Church Langton needed repairing and the estimate from the builders proved too high ("They could put that where the monkey put the nuts."), he organised the locals to do the job themselves and was filmed by local television as he directed operations up on the roof at the age of 90.

Incidentally, the story above about Lord Bonkers not recognising me the morning after an evening of generous and alcoholic hospitality is true. It's just that it involved Colonel Hignett and the older brother of one of my school friends when he was working for local radio.

A recent discovery is Evelyn Cheesman who began as a governess at Gumley Hall (another large house near Market Harborough, which was demolished in 1964) and ended life as a famous naturalist who was most at home amongst the cannibal islands of the South Pacific. I feel sure that his lordship knew her well.

The historical roots of Lord Bonkers are really in the Harborough constituency in Leicestershire rather than Rutland (South West or anywhere else) but, the more I write about him, the more I am convinced that he is not my invention so much as my discovery.

One day I really will reach the village and drink in the Bonkers' Arms.

---

Jonathan Calder is a member of the Liberator Collective

# BLOOD ON THE BALLOT PAPERS

## An election is due in Sudan in April that is set to plunge that country into fresh conflict, says Becky Tinsley

In the early years of the Bush administration, elections in the world's troubled regions were declared "a good thing", because the Americans rather optimistically assumed moderates would triumph. It seems no one in Washington DC imagined that Palestinians, sick of Fatah's corruption and incompetence, might vote for Hamas. Nor that voters across Latin America, impoverished by the IMF and World Bank's voodoo economics, might lean to the left.

Thereafter, the US lost its enthusiasm for democratic ballots, but by then it was too late, because more elections in volatile states were in the pipeline, largely funded by the USA and the European Union. Some, like Liberia, are thought to have gone well, while others, like the Democratic Republic of Congo, don't seem to have changed the already dire status quo. The 2009 Afghan elections confirmed the pointlessness of holding a ballot in an insecure and corrupt environment.

Yet in April 2010, there will be elections in similar circumstances in Sudan. Already, before a single ballot has been cast, the legitimacy of the Sudanese poll is in question, prompting predictions of a repeat of Afghanistan's problems.

Sudan will vote because the US insisted that elections be included in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between north and south Sudan, theoretically ending two decades of bloodshed. Both parties to the CPA went along with it to keep the Americans happy, knowing they held the purse strings. Of greater importance to the Sudanese was the highly contentious referendum on southern secession promised by 2011.

### TRIGGERING BLOODSHED

Now, only weeks away from the presidential and parliamentary poll, donor nations realise the election may trigger bloodshed, instability and even more suspicion between the north and south. For months, election monitors and human rights groups have warned that Sudan's vote will not meet the benchmark of free and fair elections. Given the Khartoum regime's track record, it would be surprising if it did. Freedom House gives Sudan its worst grade for both political rights and civil liberties, declaring it 'not free.' Transparency International ranks Sudan as the fourth most corrupt nation in the world.

The National Islamic Front, re-branded as the National Congress Party, has been in power since a coup in 1989. Its rule has been marked by long-running and bloody conflicts between its power base in the capital and the marginalised regions, particularly Darfur and the south.

Politicians and faith leaders in the mainly black

African south cite several reasons why the election will not be transparent and peaceful. Their doubts are rooted in distrust of the mainly Arab regime they believe has oppressed them, cheated them of oil revenues, and ethnically cleansed them for two decades. Their fears are exacerbated by a recent comment by Dr Nafi Ali Nafi, a senior advisor to the President of Sudan: "This government is not going to be changed by peaceful means or otherwise."

Journalists who stray from the official line live in fear of arrest, torture and worse. Public gatherings are broken up, and civil society groups are hounded by the ubiquitous 'security'. The Carter Center and the International Crisis Group are among those questioning how opposition candidates will get their message across to voters under these circumstances.

### ANOTHER STUMBLING BLOCK

Another stumbling block is the highly flawed population census determining the size of constituencies. Southern politicians claim that, if boundaries are based on an inaccurate census, it will vastly over-represent mainly Arab northerners and under-represent mainly black African southerners.

The same applies in Darfur. The census director in West Darfur conceded there had been no census in the camps where half the population lives because they were "not accessible." Since Darfuris make up 17% of the Sudanese population, their exclusion has repercussions for the legitimacy of the election, and the credibility of any future peace negotiations. Quite how the international community imagines an election can take place in a war zone remains to be seen.

Voter registration took place in November 2009 but, with 80% male and 92% female illiteracy in the south, it was hard to mobilise the population. It did not help that the regime's officials put 'unexploded mine' tape around registration centres to frighten people away.

Why didn't the donor nations intervene at an earlier stage? One possible answer is that there are insufficient international election law 'wonks' there to spot potential problems. Instead of bringing the dubious census process to a halt early on, the international community looked the other way, desperate to get Sudan off its plate.

More puzzling is why southern Sudanese politicians were not more engaged in the 'process' issues. Observers suggest the election is of little interest to them when the prize is the referendum on secession. The semi-autonomous Government of Southern Sudan is willing to allow the northern junta to claim legitimacy because it isn't planning to be part of Sudan anyway, so the argument goes. Such confidence is based on informal polling showing that 90% of southerners wish to split from Khartoum.

## FLAWED POLL

However, if the current regime claims victory after a flawed poll, it will be in a stronger position to delay or sabotage the referendum. Unity is in Khartoum's interest, not least because it wants the oil beneath southern Sudan. Disrupting the vote on secession would be easy enough for a regime that has used tribal proxies to cause mayhem for decades.

Bizarrely, the southern Sudanese leadership has allowed the Khartoum regime to impose rules making it almost impossible for the south to split from Sudan. They acquiesced to Khartoum's demand that no referendum on secession would be valid unless 60% of registered voters participated, of whom 51% would have to vote for secession. This will be challenging in a vast region without paved roads or public transport.

Khartoum is also pressing for a complicated form of wording on the ballot. There is an international precedent that should be of concern: in Quebec in 1995, the secession referendum was narrowly lost after a long-winded and confusing proposition. It is safe to assume the literacy rate in Quebec is somewhat above southern Sudan's.

There are other potentially inflammatory questions, akin to the mother of all divorce battles, if the north and south separate. Yet the parties to this hornet's nest have not even worked out where the border is. Instead, both sides are rearming as fast as they can, violence has escalated dramatically and, as usual, African civilians will pay the price.

The role of the international community should be to guarantee a free and fair vote, and the security to allow people to participate. Otherwise, why bother?

The voters of Sudan will not be fooled into accepting the illegitimate as legitimate. Just because people are illiterate, it does not mean they are stupid. Sooner or later, there will be a price to pay for simply going through the democratic motions. And paradoxically, an election that was supposed to cement a peace deal already on life support, will probably precipitate a return to war.

---

Becky Tinsley is director of the charity Waging Peace ([www.wagingpeace.info](http://www.wagingpeace.info)) and has observed general elections in Mozambique and Liberia

# LIBERATOR SONGBOOK

The new 20th edition  
is available now.

Don't miss your copy!

Order by post (£4.00 including postage) from  
Liberator Publications,

Flat 1, 24 Alexandra Grove, London N4 2LF

or buy online at [www.liberator.org.uk](http://www.liberator.org.uk)



# IT SHOULD BE CHILD'S PLAY

## The government's play strategy will not restore children's right to play freely outdoors, says Rob Whewey

Children's play is often taken for granted or regarded as merely an occasional activity. It is, however, the way children learn social and organisational skills and the way they develop both physically and mentally.

Their freedom to play has been under attack, primarily by the motor car, for many years. The increase in obesity is a clear indication that this has happened. Children also appear to be losing the skills to organise themselves and therefore develop the ability to play their part in neighbourhood or community organisation.

'Play' is an everyday activity for children and not a therapy, treatment or curriculum-based activity. There is also a failure to differentiate between play, defined as "freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated" and other organised activities.

To realise how far children have been restricted, we need to look back to the early 1960s and for generations before then. The vast majority of children lived in houses in side roads and were free to play in the street outside their own house. They played unsupervised but with the security of knowing that they could run home if they felt threatened.

Both then and now, parents and children liked play to be within sight and sound of their front door or within sight and sound of a friend's front door. Then as now, they preferred to play out and be part of the community rather than restricted to their own back garden. The space therefore they had for play would approximate to half the size of a football pitch (half an acre).

Children got healthy exercise virtually every day. Half the days in the year (holidays and weekends), children could spend most of the time playing outside and on school days there was time to play outside. This would average out to somewhere between two and four hours per school day over the year.

Not only were they getting healthy exercise but they were also developing their social and imaginative abilities.

Any game requires children to learn to

take turns, for each one to play a part and to admit unselfishly when you are out. Games also require children to develop basic skills of organisation and rule making, a vital part of their development into healthy adults.

All these benefits are without adult supervision or coaching. Children learn them naturally through their play.

What my research has shown is that, even nowadays where the road traffic is very slow, such as in short cul-de-sacs, children still play out and also interestingly the parents talk about the friendliness between neighbours and how they "keep an eye out for each other's children" (known as social capital).

The lack of traffic also benefited older members of the community, who could walk and talk in their road with their friends without fear of being mown down. It is the children and the elderly who, in many ways, bind the community together and it is the domination of the car that is preventing both from fulfilling that role.

Unless we change the whole status of residential side roads from priority for the car to priority for pedestrians, children will continue to be worse off than children were up to the early 1960s.

There is no way that the provision of play areas can anywhere near approach the space to play that children previously had. Even if the government or local councils were to insist that two or three houses

were knocked down in every street to provide a play area, the children would still not be able to use them as the traffic would still be too fast for parents to allow them to play out. My research shows that 20mph is still too fast.

Again, if we go back to the early 1960s and before that to the introduction of compulsory schooling, the usual practice was for children to walk to school unaccompanied.

Typically, a parent would take a five-year-old to school for the first few times but after that they would go unaccompanied or perhaps with a sibling or friend. By the age of eight, children would go

### MY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 The government should aim within ten years to enable 80% of school-age children to be able to play out in their own street in safety.
- 2 Within ten years, at least 50% of 5-year-olds should be able to travel to school unaccompanied, as should at least 80% of primary school age children.
- 3 The government should include children's walking/cycling around their neighbourhood as part of its policy and calculations on transport.
- 4 Surveys to discover children's play opportunities should find out what proportion of children can play out happily in front of, or within sight of, their own houses.
- 5 The government changes its focus from one of provision of play facilities to one that gives priority to the child's right to play.



unaccompanied to their local church or community building to attend a uniformed organisation or to a local library or other facility. They would also undertake errands to the local shops.

A high proportion of primary school children from five years upwards also came home at lunchtime unaccompanied. They were, therefore, making four unaccompanied journeys per day.

The walking to school is clearly not play. However, it is a reasonable assumption that if children were allowed to walk to school

on their own then they would also be allowed to play out in their own street and probably go into the next street if a friend lived there.

There is, therefore, almost certainly a very strong correlation between children's ability to walk to school unaccompanied and their freedom to play out within their own neighbourhood.

Observing children coming out of a primary school now, it is usual that almost all are accompanied. It is, therefore, almost certain that very few have the freedom to play out now that their parents or (great) grand-parents would have enjoyed.

There is no reason for this other than the speed of traffic on residential roads, which has made it less safe for children to travel unaccompanied. There has been *no* increase in 'stranger danger'. What happens is that children travel round their neighbourhood less, therefore everybody knows each other less and so the fear of 'stranger danger' increases – but it is the fear rather than reality. This can clearly be seen when children on the same estate play out on quiet roads but not on busy roads. If the fear of strangers were the thing that prevented children playing out, the level of playing out would be constant across the whole estate.

I believe that children's freedom to travel to school unaccompanied is a reasonable proxy indicator of whether or not they can play out. It has the advantage that it would be very simple to collect the data as it would take a school class a few minutes to indicate, probably by show of hands.

It is also the fact that successive governments have not recognised children's walking around their own area as part of 'transport', yet where they can play out children make thousands of short journeys each year.

Local authorities are encouraged to use National Indicator 199 to gauge children's satisfaction with local parks and play areas, but this will not give the sort of information required as it concentrates on the output of the number and quality of playgrounds rather than the outcome of children's freedom to play.

A child who is taken to an excellent play area by their parents once a fortnight is likely to give that playground a high satisfaction rating but they might

*“Unless we change the whole status of residential side roads from priority for the car to priority for pedestrians, children will continue to be worse off than children were up to the early 1960s”*

be confined indoors for the rest of the time.

Conversely, a child who can play happily on the green verge or between the garages in their estate as part of daily play may not have a playground within reasonable distance and the nearest may actually be a poor playground.

The former child will be counted as having good play opportunities, which would be completely untrue, and the latter child will be deemed to have poor play opportunities, which would be equally untrue.

This is therefore a poorly thought-out concept and should be abandoned

except where a local authority is looking at specific improvements at individual playgrounds.

The government has a Play Strategy which is funding “at least 3,500 free play areas and 30 fully staffed adventure playgrounds or parks”. It is a most welcome development and is more than any recent government has allocated. However, it is unlikely to improve the everyday play of more than 1% of the children of this country.

Some will argue that it is a much higher number. However, for children, their right to play is paramount rather than their right to an occasional visit when a parent has the time to take them. While the destination playgrounds are important family facilities, they do not cater for everyday children's play.

In fact the Play Strategy will increase children's freedom to play by much less than the 1% indicated above. At many places, what it will do is improve the opportunities available at existing playgrounds rather than provide new opportunities for children who previously could not play out. If children do not have the freedom to play out in an area, the mere provision of a playground, however exciting, will not increase that freedom.

Play strategies need to emphasise the child's right to play, not the child's right to an occasional visit with a parent, when the parent has time, nor the child's right to have fun activities at school premises.

The key question is: “Are children free and able to play out within sight and sound of their own front door” If the answer is no then they have almost certainly lost the right to play.

For fifty years, children's play has been increasingly restricted. We should be committed to drastically reversing that trend.

---

Rob Wheway is a leading children's play consultant and a former Liberal candidate. This article is based on his observational and consultation research for many local authorities. His Joseph Rowntree Foundation study *Child's Play: Facilitating play on housing estates* is available free at: <http://bit.ly/9GIXj5>

# EUROPE IS A VOTE WINNER

## Liberal Democrats in Hammersmith defied conventional wisdom by successfully including European issues in their normal campaign strategy, reports Jon Burden

Three years ago, Hammersmith and Fulham Liberal Democrats committed to having at least one article dedicated to a European issue in all its Focus and campaign leaflets. Pan-European issues like air quality, carbon storage and recycling were given a local slant. This was sometimes easy – air quality resonates with residents up in arms about a third runway at Heathrow – and sometimes more challenging. But inspiration, facts and figures were all readily available from campaigning Lib Dem MEPs like Chris Davies.

A further boost to our European efforts came when Dinti Batstone was selected as No.3 European List Candidate for London. She is an energetic campaigner living in our borough. We decided early on to sign her up to our campaign to elect Lib Dem Councillors in 2010 (in 2006 we had missed by only 29 votes). To this end, we asked Dinti to “do something European” that would fit into our target ward campaign plan.

Dinti developed a European Survey with a set of European – as opposed to local – questions. She also came up with a ‘Euro-quiz’ designed to challenge, in a fun way, whether residents can tell “Euro-myth from Euro-fact”. The questions were grounded in Lib Dem policy, but designed to counter the scare-stories so often seen in our anti-European press. For example, a question about immigration highlighted the fact that there are actually more British citizens living in the Costa del Sol than Polish citizens living in London.

To identify pro-Europeans that we could target to vote Lib Dem in the European election, the survey included a direct question: “Do you consider yourself: Very Pro-European, Pro-European, Indifferent, Anti-European”.

At first, we were a bit hesitant about using the survey. We have strictly followed standard Lib Dem campaign advice by keeping our literature local, and this seemed like heresy. However, several local activists are strongly motivated by Europe, which helped get everyone behind the idea. So we agreed



to try out Dinti’s survey over a couple of weekends. Our campaign team was very surprised to find that the Euro-survey was just as well received as our standard, very local, resident surveys. The return rate was just as high, the questions answered just as thoroughly, and offers of help proffered just as often. In fact, we even managed to get a donation from a pro-European Labour supporter!

Overall, about half of respondents said they are pro-European, a much higher percentage than identified themselves as Lib Dem. Respondents were generally more forthcoming about feelings towards Europe than party affiliation. The quiz seems to have been taken seriously and confirmed how misinformed about Europe many people are.

At least one-third of respondents had three out of eight answers wrong.

As Heathrow is such an important local issue, we included a question about using EU air quality rules to stop the third runway. The vast majority of respondents favoured using EU regulations to stop expansion – an issue on which our London MEP Sarah Ludford has campaigned, and a policy position which differentiates us from both Labour and the Tories.

The Euro-survey proved to be win-win for everyone: our local team identified more supporters and deliverers, while Dinti identified pro-Europeans of all parties and none. The responses were very useful in helping us to ‘segment’ our electorate and tailor our target letters accordingly (pro-Europeans got pro-European target letters, while anti-Europeans got local

messages). The experiment also worked at the ballot box. Although we did not get official ward-by-ward breakdowns, careful observation at the verification and count confirmed that the areas where we conducted the Euro-Survey and included European articles in our campaign literature had by far the highest Lib Dem vote in the borough. Moreover, our vote at the European elections was significantly up on our vote in the London Assembly and Mayoral elections in 2008.

We believe this experiment shows that, if properly deployed, our pro-European policies can be an asset to local campaigning, helping us bring on board new voters for whom Europe is a positive and galvanizing issue. This may be especially true in cosmopolitan

areas like Hammersmith and Fulham, which has a very high proportion of non-British born residents, many of whom are registered to vote. In fact, Dinti also ran a London-wide initiative to target non-British EU citizens and found that 42% of canvassed 'EU voters' across London said they would definitely or probably vote Liberal Democrat in the European election. So Europe really can be a vote winner!

---

Jon Burden is a member of Hammersmith and Fulham Liberal Democrats. If you would like a copy of the Euro-survey and follow-up target letters, please contact Jon Burden at [jonburden@cix.co.uk](mailto:jonburden@cix.co.uk)

---

# SMALL FRY

## Steve Yolland reminds us of an incident during the last Tory government

Alice Sewell, 89, got closer and closer to her dining room fire in Finsbury Park, London, until her clothes caught fire. There was nobody in the house to save her. (Melbourne Age, Monday 19th January, 1987)

What were you thinking of, Alice,  
to cause all this bloody fuss?  
Around since eighteen ninety eight,  
and still don't know  
to keep clear of the grate?

What were you thinking of, Alice,  
as you inched nearer the treacherous heat?  
All you needed was to wear a hat,  
or failing that,  
an extra pair of socks on aching feet.

Didn't you remember, Alice,  
how if you fill in leaflet two four nine  
a nice young social worker calls all the time?  
And I have it here in black and white:  
Benefit for the Avoidance of Setting Oneself Alight.  
So not claiming is simple laziness, Alice. Right?

I'd just like to point out, Alice,  
the rafts of statistical evidence  
of the meritorious effect of the Government's  
providence.  
Cold related deaths in the Greater London area  
(with the assistance, Alice, of senior citizens somewhat  
warier)  
are down some 15 per cent.  
Plus benefits for food, and rent.

So while we're deeply sorry, Alice,  
please don't pin this one on us.  
You get forgotten quickly, please,  
with a good old British minimum of fuss.  
Just finish the job at the Crematorium  
with a couple of hymns and an In Memoriam.  
Ok, Alice? All done? Thank you.

(PS, Alice: I just thought your end should be  
remembered  
ahead of the English cricket team by India  
dismembered,  
and the collapsing pound, and Paul Simon's latest  
sound,  
which all got longer on the evening news.  
Ah well. I guess we pick and choose.)

---

Steve Yolland lives in Melbourne, Australia. This poem is taken from his book *Read Me – 71 Poems & One Story*, published in 2009 and available in download or paperback form from [lulu.com](http://lulu.com) at <http://bit.ly/dywt2Q>



## RETURNING PROBLEM

*Dear Liberator,*

I was sorry to read about the travails going on in Redbridge (Liberator 337). It may be a small local party but, until recently, it had a lot of momentum in local elections and real prospects of progress at the next general election. I hope it still has.

I had a sense that the Radical Bulletin report was trying to stir things up, but I cannot for the life of me think why. One person who is mentioned by name is Darren Briddock.

I cannot comment on his performance in Redbridge, but I would like to put on the record as the chair of the PPC selection committee in Hackney that, as far as we are concerned, we think he did an excellent job as our returning officer and I hope he will continue in this role in the future. He would be very welcome to be our returning officer again.

What we found during this parliament is that there is a serious shortage of returning officers within the party, at least in London. In fact, in Darren's case, he actually lived in Hastings at the time and it shows a great deal of dedication on his part that he agreed to do the job for us.

It took us years to get a returning officer for our selection process. Now we have got our PPCs in place, we are making terrific progress here in Hackney, but how much better it would have been if they had got started a couple of years earlier?

We need to appreciate what returning officers do for the party. They are volunteers who give up their time to pursue a job to make sure we follow the rules and the policies of the party in our selection process. Often that means telling local parties things they do not want to hear. Understandably, local parties just want to get on with it and not have to jump through all of the hoops to get the job done. However, there is no point having rules, particularly on female and ethnic minority representation, unless we follow them.

Whenever things go wrong, there are lessons to be learnt. In politics there will always be personality clashes and people storming off. But the big issue picture that needs to be tackled here is how do we get more people within the party to volunteer to be returning officers so we can select our PPCs more quickly in the future? I would rather Liberator commissioned articles to investigate that, rather than publish stories that are more likely to discourage people from volunteering to be returning officers in the first place.

Geoff Payne  
Hackney

## Inside Out: my story of betrayal and cowardice at the heart of New Labour by Peter Watt Biteback 2010 £16.99

*Inside Out* is a fairly unique book. The vast majority of published political memoirs are written from the perspective of senior politicians, typically MPs whose main arena was parliament. Peter Watt by contrast spent his entire political career in the back room, albeit ultimately at the highest level. As such, he gives us a unique insight into how machinery of the Labour Party works.

At the book's heart is Watt's barely concealed fury at what he regards as Gordon Brown's betrayal of him. Watt resigned as general secretary of the Labour Party at the height of the scandal involving money donated to Labour and Harriet Harman which ultimately came from millionaire David Abrahams, but which was donated in the names of a number of his employees and associates. Watt repeatedly rails that Gordon Brown branded him a criminal and used him as a fall guy. But while Brown does not exactly come across well in the book, I'm not entirely convinced that he deserves quite the amount of opprobrium that Watt heaps on him.

The important thing to remember is that the Labour Party general secretary is not a member of staff as such but rather an elected official. I found the book's chapter on Watt's campaign to get elected to this post by far the most illuminating as it opened a window on a world that, as a former member of the Lib Dems' Federal Executive, I found both uncomfortably familiar and alien at the same time. It was widely reported in the media at the time that Peter Watt's opponent Ray Collins was Tony Blair's preferred candidate and that Watt's election marked a victory for the 'grassroots alliance' sitting on the National Executive Committee. On reading Watt's own account, it becomes clear that the truth was somewhat different.

Collins certainly was the candidate that Blair was officially backing but it is clear from Watt's account that he was encouraged to stand by Downing Street director of government relations Ruth Turner. At no point is it spelt out but the chapter leaves one with the impression that Watt was a pawn in the ongoing power struggle between Blair and Brown, with Blair feeling he had to be seen to be supporting the union's choice (Collins) while doing all he could behind the scenes to help Watt, who the book reveals is a Blairite ultra.

In fighting this battle, Watt politicised the role of general secretary in such a way that makes his later assertion that Gordon Brown should have treated him more as part of the team ring somewhat hollow. He openly admits to deceiving the NEC by presenting himself as the anti-



establishment candidate, a fib that can only have undermined his own authority.

Watt's tenure as general secretary was beset with donations scandals and financial crises, starting with the 'cash for honours' controversy. Watt likes to present himself as someone who inherited these problems from his predecessors, but that doesn't exactly ring true either. Before taking on the top job, Watt was the party's compliance officer during the 2005 general election. That post's role is to ensure that all donations to the party have been legally submitted. Despite this, he reveals in the book that he was only told of the secret loans brokered by Lord Levy by the then general secretary Matt Carter two weeks before polling day, and that Carter had gone behind Watt's back in consulting a member of his own staff.

Watt's response to having his authority undermined in this way? He states that he was "surprised" and "curious" but that he "didn't feel it was the time to press for more detail or have a hissy fit at being left out of the loop". All in all, he doesn't exactly give you the impression that he took his crucial role in keeping the party within the law at all seriously until it was far too late. Indeed, so unalarmed was Watt that, despite his inkling that the party was in monetary difficulties and not having a background in accountancy, he leapt at the offer of being made Labour's director of finance.

Watt's account of his eventual downfall is not wholly convincing. In this version of events, he was quite convinced that he was legally in the clear regarding the Abrahams donations until the night before his resignation, when Labour's solicitor Gerald Shamash called him with alarming news about an "obscure clause regarding so-called 'agency arrangements'". "Obscure clause"? I looked it up; there's nothing obscure about it. It is in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, in the section which defines what a permissible donor is. As a former agent, I was certainly never under the illusion that donors could give money via other people and have their identity obscured. You do have to wonder why the general secretary of the Labour Party relies

on a lawyer to point out that he may have broken the law, rather than reading the law for himself.

There is also the question of whether Brown branded Watt a criminal. Despite asserting this, Watt's account of the actual events doesn't back this up. All Brown stated was that a criminal offence had been committed – something that the legal advice at the time did suggest – and that the money would be forfeited. After reading the rose-tinted accounts of Blair in other chapters, it is hard to escape from the impression that Brown's greatest offence in Watt's eyes was to not be Blair.

This isn't to deny Peter Watt his many achievements in office. His account of how he got the party on a more sound financial footing in the face of extraordinary adversity is impressive; he also deserves credit for managing the transition period between Blair and Brown extremely well. Some of his charges against Brown do stick, especially the damning account of his dithering over the 2007 'phoney election'.

It is hard to escape from the impression, however, that Watt ultimately bears far more responsibility for his downfall than he is comfortable admitting. And in many ways, Blair comes out of it far worse than Brown. It is clear that Watt was greatly influenced by Blair's care-free, bloke-ish leadership style and that this never-mind-the-details approach percolated throughout the party machine at every level, from sexed-up dossiers on Iraq to stretching its own party funding laws to breaking point. However much fun it may have been to be a part of for people like Watt, it is a culture which has done more to destroy trust in British politics than anything else.

Overall then, and possibly for different reasons than the authors intended, I found *Inside Out* to be an extremely insightful and entertaining read. I doubt you will find a better account of how not to run a political party.

James Graham

---

## Alan Clark: The Biography by Ion Trewin Weidenfeld & Nicholson 2009 £25

When I reviewed Alan Clark's last Diaries a few years ago, as a former private secretary on his civil service staff, I said he did not always do justice to himself in his diaries. He (or his editors) favoured the sensational over the insightful. So I was curious to see whether this, Clark's 'official' biography, redressed the balance.

The answer is yes, to a considerable extent, not that you would think so from reading many of the reviews in the press. Most of those again concentrated on the (allegedly) sensational and on what they thought of Clark as a person – whether or not they actually knew him – rather than what they thought of the book.

Much of the confusion arises from many (intellectually lazy) people's natural inclination to file a person under easy headings – clever/stupid, hard-working/lazy, faithful/unfaithful, right wing/left wing, good/bad. Alan Clark, more than most people, defied such categorisation.

The book draws back from a profound psychological analysis of Clark's character, maybe because of the sensitivities of his close family still living. Perhaps it does say enough to lend weight to the conclusion I reached a long time ago that much of his more juvenile conduct – showing off and deliberately bad behaviour – stemmed from the fact that he felt that he never had as much attention from his parents as he should have. I recall him saying to me when the ministerial car passed the house in Russell Square where the Clark family lived in his childhood: "Horrible place. One never saw one's parents." He always seemed to be shouting: "Look at me! Look at me!" But I believe he always had a very good idea of the difference between right and wrong, choosing the wrong quite often of course.

The particular strength of the book is in charting Clark's early life, which has not been covered by any of the Diaries and which very fully describes his education and development as a writer. The

bulk of Ion Trewin's five years of research has obviously been spent in delving into this period and as such it is fascinating (although the bone-grinding detail of Clark's dealings with his editors and publishers should have been abbreviated). As has been remarked, the biography deals much more briefly with Clark's political career, and it is in this contrast that Trewin's background as a literary editor rather than a political writer is a weakness.

Whether because of lack of time, lack of familiarity with the political world or a belief that the Diaries themselves cover the period sufficiently, relatively little is said in the biography about Clark's time in government beyond the well-known stories such as the 'was he drunk at the dispatch box?' episode, the fur trade issue, Thatcher's dethronement and the Matrix Churchill case.

A reader with an interest in politics would wish for a deeper reflection of what Clark's political philosophy and motivations really were – many of his views defied easy left/right categorisation, but I know also that he had a great knack for telling individuals what they would like to hear. For example, when he told me once that he had been to South Africa, I asked him what he thought of the place (in the apartheid era of course). He told me the following story:

He had flown there, hired a car at the airport and driven off to his destination. Soon he got lost and, seeing a group of black workers walking along the road, he stopped, got out of the car and approached them to ask for directions. Seeing a white man coming towards them, the black men were obviously terrified even though he was one and they were many. When they discovered that all he wanted was directions, their relief was overwhelming. Clark said to me: "I thought that I simply couldn't live in a country where ordinary people were so pathetically scared of such a simple action as someone asking the way." So what should we conclude from this? That Clark was opposed to apartheid? Maybe. That he would have supported sanctions against South Africa? I doubt it. But that he selected the aspect of it that struck him, that would appeal to me – a known Liberal –

undoubtedly.

I am bound to say that the political era in Clark's life could have been better illuminated by reference to a wider range of people than just the 'usual suspects' in the Tory party and a few journalists. That wider group would include the staff in his private offices – all of us could have provided some fresh and shocking anecdotes! – and his government drivers and constituency secretaries.

Perhaps we are beneath consideration, but there are others too in the Tory party and elsewhere who could have added to the story. For example, Clark's view that he achieved nothing worthwhile in his time in the Employment Department should not be taken at face value; at the very least, he learned how to be a minister, without which not even Mrs Thatcher's support might have been enough to get him promotion to the DTI and MoD.

So, certainly read the book, avoid easy categorisations of Alan Clark, but await still the definitive political biography.

Gwyneth Deakins

---

## **Blood, Iron and Gold: How the Railways Transformed the World by Christian Wolmar Atlantic Books 2009 £25**

"Predictably, it is the two bastions of privately built railways, the United States and the UK, where the state has least involvement, that have missed out on the high speed [rail] revolution," Wolmar concludes.

He sets out to tell the story of the development of railways around the world and to remind readers of what radical changes they wrought. When he describes them as the largest construction project since the pyramids and as "the most important invention of the second millennium," Wolmar might be accused of a train fan's hyperbole were he not able to point to the dramatic transformation they brought to so many aspects of life in the nineteenth century.

Railways enabled fresh food to be delivered daily to cities, hastening their growth. They moved exports, allowed ordinary people to travel beyond their own village for

the first time, knitted countries together – notably the USA and India – and, less laudably, enabled the rapid movements of troops to suppress rebellion and wage war. Indeed, the First World War could not have been fought as it was had the railways not been there to facilitate troop movements.

In Britain and America, governments adopted a hands-off approach, which led initially to a profusion of routes serving even the most obscure towns, but eventually to wasteful duplication and an inability to afford to maintain these networks without government intervention.

Elsewhere, governments for the most part planned the rail networks and avoided having rival lines pointlessly connecting the same towns.

Britain has now ended up with the worst of both worlds, one might argue; a government that will not invest in new lines, and rapacious operators who all too often still fail and have to be replaced by state intervention (the east coast main line being the latest example).

Wolmar explains how, having created their extensive networks from nothing, the railway companies around the world were curiously unable to get their heads round the idea that anything might challenge their supremacy, and so were slow to respond to competition from air and road.

By the post-war decades, the railways appeared to be in terminal decline, at least in the western world. Their tentative recent renaissance, fuelled in part by concern about aircraft emissions, might yet be stifled by the same faults and narrow vision that undid their predecessors.

Wolmar is an author and commentator on public transport in all its forms, and a knowledgeable enthusiast who is able to bring the story to life where others might have allowed it to be swamped by technical or financial detail.

Just don't hold your breath for High Speed 2.

Mark Smulian

---

**Belfast Boys**  
by Richard S Grayson  
Continuum 2009 £25

Liberal Democrat Federal Policy Committee member Richard Grayson claims to break new ground in writing history in his use of local and regional newspaper materials that have frequently been ignored by historians in the past. One of the great difficulties in writing history, particularly of more recent times, is not the shortage of material but the volume of it.

Subtitled 'How Unionists and Nationalists fought and died together in the First World War', the application of this method to west Belfast – the Catholic Falls and Protestant Shankhill and their hinterland – reveals a shared experience, which is at odds with some interpretations of the war (particularly republican).

Ireland was on the brink of achieving Home Rule at the outbreak of war. It has been a costly mistake that this was deferred and not carried through. It was a further mistake that loyalist paramilitaries were allowed to form their own army units, but nationalists were not, though they might typically be recruited into a small band of regiments with particular regional associations.

Like much writing on the war, it is a grim liturgy of death, but nonetheless an important one for we are dealing with the lives of individuals. Somewhere during the run up to Poppy Day, I read that the act of remembrance was one of forgetting. This is not the case for many families and individuals.

One aspect of the book, which I urge Liberal politicians to redouble their efforts on because the problem is still with us, is the appalling treatment of many veterans and families of the casualties after the war. Indeed, although the generation is largely departed, this is a black mark against Liberals, for Lloyd George's 'Homes fit for heroes' did not happen and, while the Wizard was by no means leading a Liberal government by that time, the mud stuck.

I thoroughly commend this book, not only to those interested in its subject matter, but to those engaged in similar histories as an example of how it is to be done.

Stewart Rayment

---

**Rights of Man and Common Sense**  
by Thomas Paine  
Verso 2009 £7.99

I believe it was one of the scions of the Bonkers family who spent a week in the Tower of London after his favourable review of Paine's *Common Sense* in 'The Liberator'. Verso is publishing an interesting series of 'texts by key figures that took centre stage during a period of insurrection'. Many of these are not commonly available, but that can't be said of Paine.

In his introduction, Peter Linebaugh states the importance of Paine's agrarian justice in the formulation of his ideas, and this text is included in the book. As Liberals, we all know that God gave the Land to the People, and this is Paine's starting point from which he goes on argue for an inheritance tax to fund pensions and to "compensate in part [every person] for the loss of his or her natural inheritance, by the introduction of the system of landed property". Paine had great humanity and it is good to revisit his ideas from time to time.

Stewart Rayment

---

**Blood & Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain**  
by Ronald Hutton  
Yale UP 2009 £30

Hutton continues his quest to demystify the cherished notions of our folk history.

Nothing or little that is reliable is known about the druids, some sort of priesthood in the Celtic realms of the Iron Age, so while Hutton serves up what is there, this is not really the subject of this book. So far as their worshipping in groves goes, I would point Hutton to the excavations of Standon Drew, which revealed a substantial 'Woodhenge' (visit it with an open mind, you'll die laughing) like structure on the site as well as the stones; this of course says nothing of druids per se.

Rather the book is about Druids – various social, fraternal and religious societies that spread throughout Britain from the eighteenth century, and the popular perception of druids and druidry in the wake of these. We

find these groups on the radical cusps of society and it is not surprising to find a few Whigs in their midst.

Charles James Fox may not have had wholly honourable motives, but 'Big Ben' Hall, his wife Augusta and John Guest and his wife Charlotte made notable contributions. The Romantic era was particularly rich in its forgeries and Iolo Morganwg is not exceptional in this, or in being a difficult individual to get on with (something endemic in druidry).

Hutton frequently poses the question 'where does true belief begin and play-acting end' in the minds of these people. I'm inclined to grant their seriousness on the basis of what was known at the time, certainly with regards to the aforementioned ladies.

The real problems begin as the state and all its apparatus gets more organised. Archaeologists, anxious to assert their profession, take an avid dislike to druids (going back to Lubbock, but with more venom since the war) and as Stonehenge in particular passes into public hands, eventually they will be excluded from the site at the Summer Solstice. What a grey world we live in.

Stewart Rayment

---

**Astral Bodies**  
by Jay Merill  
Salt 2007 £8.99

Back in the halcyon days of British punk, the writing on the wall said "Sign the Banshees"; along with Adam Ant, they waited a long time for a recording contract, overtaken by several lesser bands. There has been a similar wait for Jay Merill to burst into print. She used to run poetry thrashes at the Tiger Café in Highgate (one of many such legendary venues that has now disappeared – I can't quiet imagine such bohemia in a Costa or Starbucks) and her writing appeared in the samizdat of small art or literary festivals. Anyway here at last it is.

Alienation, detachment, as one might guess from the title of this collection, and the attempt to cope with these; very edgy. Her subjects from the apparent flotsam and jetsam of society; you'll have met them. Errico Malatesta would have been proud of her.

Stewart Rayment



## Monday

As a responsible landlord here on the Bonkers' Hall Estate, I never cease to be appalled by the low standards that pertain in the public sector. Yesterday evening, I watched a documentary on the electric television about a family with six children living in a tower block in Barking, and watched it with manly tears in my eyes because those poor people had to contend with poverty, damp and a violent neighbourhood. Worse than that, they had Mark Oaten living with them! This morning, I call the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham and demand to speak to its Chief Executive. I am told he is "in a meeting", whereupon I suggest with some force to the young lady at the other end of the line that he leaves this meeting and speaks to me forthwith. When he comes to the phone, I demand that he send out the borough rat-catcher and have Oaten removed. As I write these lines, confirmation arrives from my spies in East London that this has indeed happened.

## Tuesday

To Westminster: whom should I come across but Sarah Teather? She is considering which measure to promote should she secure a favoured place in the next ballot for private members' bills. "I am thinking of taking up the problem of people slipping on carelessly discarded banana skins," she tells me. "I think we should give local authorities a duty to pick them up." "What, the people?" I ask with (I like to think) a twinkle. "No," she replies, "not the people but the banana skins." "What about people who are hit in the face with custard pies?" I return. "Yes, that is a problem too," she says. "I am planning to call for the introduction of ASCRBOs – Anti-Social Custard-Related Behaviour Orders." I am about to say that I know of more than one restaurant that should be served with one of these – not enough custard with one's pudding, do you see? – when a civil servant bursts out of a hitherto overlooked wardrobe in the room. As he rushes to the door, his trousers fall down, revealing a splendid pair of polka-dot boxer shorts. I double up with laughter, but the delightful Sarah says: "Isn't it terrible that there are people without trousers in Britain in the twenty-first century?"

## Wednesday

Sprits run high at today's Future Fair – an event I have organised for many years now to interest the young people of Rutland in science and technology. This time, I have arranged a varied programme: Alan Beith gives a talk on Bakelite; the principles of robotics are demonstrated by Sandra Gidley (wrapped from head to foot in silver baking foil for the purpose); and there is a display of chemical reactions by a fellow with wild hair and a white coat from the University of Rutland at Belvoir. (I should like to thank the men of Uppingham Fire Brigade for their prompt response). Later this afternoon, as I walk my spaniels and look out on the oil wells on Rutland Water, I can only congratulate myself on my foresight in acting as the patron of this worthwhile event.

## Thursday

The Manchester Guardian arrives, and what does its front page tell me that Labour's policy will be at the general election? "A Future Fair for all," that's what! I spend the day at my solicitor's arranging to sue Gordon Brown, Alistair Darling and any other socialist I can lay my hands on. I shall go for *Habeas Corpus, Non Compos*

*Mentis* and quite possibly a touch of *De Heretico Comburend* too.

## Friday

I have fond memories of Eastleigh; it was here at the Southern Railway works that I received help in building the prototype of the Bonkers Patent Shuttleworth Press – an invention that was to revolutionise committee room practice in the years before the Second World War. So when the town's MP, our own Chris Huhne, invited me to tour his constituency, I was happy to accept. As we drive through the Hampshire countryside this morning, he is full of the virtues of his Toyota Prius (apparently no polar bears are

harmed in its manufacture) but, as we near a crossroads, he begins to panic: "It's the brakes, your lordship, they just aren't..." At this point I am obliged to lean across and take command of the steering. As I explain after I have brought us to a halt by using a ploughed field with an appreciable slope, it is a peculiarity of the Rutland Highway Code that the landowner has right of way at any junction. Thus I am well used to driving without brakes.

On the train home, I read that Ernest Shackleton's whisky has been retrieved from Antarctica. This brings home to me that we tend to take the comfort of today's modern living rather for granted. Just imagine what Shackleton must have suffered: forced to have ice in his whisky!

## Saturday

One can always tell when a general election is approaching: on Saturdays, a long queue of prospective candidates trails past my lodge gates, around St Asquith's churchyard with its stately yews (and, indeed, stately ewes) and up the long drive to the Bonkers Home for Well-Behaved Orphans. You see, every candidate needs a fetching family photograph for his election address, but not every candidate has children of his own and, even if he does, then they may not be quite what his agent requires. For this reason, the Home has long derived a useful income from making the prettiest orphans available to be photographed. This year, however, I have insisted that Matron tighten up her administration: I was not a little embarrassed at the last election when the same little girl appeared on leaflets in three neighbouring Lancashire marginals and one boy was pictured with both the Conservative and Socialist candidate in a seat in the Welsh Valleys.

## Sunday

An enjoyable breakfast – kedgeree, devilled kidneys, eggs and b – quite up to Cook's usual high standards. She does well to produce it, I later learn, because a leopard has escaped from my private menagerie and invaded her kitchen, with the result that she is forced to beat it off with a ladle from time to time. As she later remarks to me, "Cooking doesn't get any tougher than this."

Then to St Asquith's where the Revd Hughes preaches a sermon on the text: "In 1945 Sir Archibald Sinclair defended Caithness and Sutherland and, lo, he was defeated by 61 votes and beaten even unto third place." I think there is a lesson there for us all.

---

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