liberator

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Cover Picture - Mark Smulian

COMMENTARY

CLOUDS IN THE CRYSTAL BALLS

Not even historians now pay much attention to the National Liberals, the group that joined a Conservative-dominated coalition in 1931 and lingered on until 1968, though during the post-war period with only a name to distinguish them from the Tories.

That is one fate that could meet the Liberal Democrats after concluding the coalition, but the deal made was probably inevitable given the outcome of the election.

In a strange way, the country got what it voted for – it wanted Labour out, did not fully believe the Tories had changed from the bad old days and sought a Tory-lite government.

However much Lib Dems might wish that the parliamentary arithmetic was otherwise, it isn't, and it can't be. The proposed deal with Labour was barely tenable, and not at all after Labour started to fall apart over the idea.

Given Labour's record, its claim to be a progressive party is surreal and that record is the reason why Labour is now less a natural ally for the Lib Dems than it may have been in the past. What liberal after all, if forced to choose, wouldn't rather have Ken Clarke than Jack Straw as justice secretary?

There is a serious argument to be made that the Lib Dems should have let a Tory minority government take office and not embroiled themselves in government. But it is hard to see how the Lib Dems could then have avoided taking the blame for whatever the Tories did while gaining none of the potential advantages of the coalition. It is even harder to see how the party could have survived a quick second general election.

The coalition agreement contains things that will both please and infuriate Liberal Democrats, which is inevitable in such a negotiation. Of the concessions the Lib Dems made, only one is instantly contentious, which is early public spending cuts. Having spent the campaign arguing about the dangers of cutting too far and too fast, the party is now complicit in doing just that.

When the promised further and deeper cuts really bite, the party will find itself in a novel role, for which it must be ready. For the past several decades, its main complaint has been being ignored by the public. The Lib Dems are instead likely to become robustly hated, in particular in those parts of the country that depend heavily on public sector jobs.

That could open up fissures in the party as Labour seeks to recapture these areas. More widely, all governments become unpopular, so what will happen to those who want to vote against the coalition in Tory areas where Labour now hardly exists? If the Lib Dems cannot continue to attract this vote by arguing that their presence stops worse excesses, a vacuum will open for the full chamber of horrors of UKIP, the BNP and local populists of various kinds.

It may be that the coalition delivers political benefits to the Lib Dems but, since it is now easier to see the pitfalls, it would be as well for the party to plan for these.

The party must not only remain independent and make its own policy, but also its leaders must encourage this. Sooner or later, it will need a platform on which to fight another election. Saying, "We're a bit like the Tories but not quite as much," will not do.

Essential too will be tolerance within the party. A lot of people don't like the coalition and will blame it for local losses. If coalition supporters try to drive their opponents out, neither side will have a party before long.

It will also be essential to be clear what the party is for. It exists to advance liberalism, not to tone down someone else's philosophy. It hopes one day, aided by reformed voting perhaps, to lead a government, but it will not be able to do either of these things if it has been ruined by in-fighting, become an appendage of the Tories, or both.

Only a fool would make firm predictions now about the outcome of the next general election, but the many pitfalls and opportunities are obvious.

The pessimistic scenario would see the Lib Dem ministers slowly morph into the coalition's representatives within the Lib Dems, rather than the reverse, with the party detached from and resentful of the government, split, ineffective, and facing a massacre, alterative vote or not.

The optimistic scenario is that the referendum on AV is won, the pain of spending cuts is gone through long before any election, the public is impressed by the Lib Dems in government and uses its newly-powerful votes to keep them there. Local parties discover that defending the party's national record is not so hard and Labour departs for a bout of internecine warfare over why, post-Blair, it exists.

The 1930s coalition was almost wholly Tory. The wartime government was all-party. There are no precedents for what we have now. From Nick Clegg to the local Focus editor, quite literally no-one knows what they are doing.

RADICAL BULLETIN

I'VE GOT A LITTLE LIST

Who promised what to whom during the coalition negotiations will be pored over by historians for decades to come. But the least clear part involves not the discussions between the Lib Dems and the Tories but what went on, or didn't, between the Lib Dems and Labour.

One of the few predictions that can safely be made is that Labour will spend the period until the next general election claiming that it offered the Lib Dems the Earth but they preferred a deal with the Tories.

So, did they? No-one Liberator has spoken to says that a formal offer from Labour ever existed. There were certainly talks (during which some offers were made) and reports back from these, but the 'Labour offer' seems to be the Loch Ness Monster of politics – everyone knows what they think it looks like but there have been no firm sightings.

Labour's mouthpiece in the *Guardian* Polly Toynbee claimed to have "The authenticated list of what Labour offered the Lib Dems: a new levy on banking, the mansion tax on high-priced property, raising personal allowances to the Lib Dems to £10,000 (at the same pace as the Tories' offer), no ID cards, the DNA database cut, fixed-term parliaments, an alternative vote referendum Labour would campaign for (the Tories won't), the Wright plans for Commons reform and fair party funding, no third runway at Heathrow, new freedom of information laws."

Leaving aside the question 'authenticated by whom?' why did such an apparent scoop get buried in Toynbee's column rather then run as a news story? The best guess is because it wasn't the list the Lib Dems understood they were offered.

When Lib Dem MPs met on the Saturday morning following the election, the prevailing mood was to avoid all deals, but that mood changed as they contemplated the awful possibility of a second election later this year, which could well wipe out most of them.

By the Monday, many of them had been agreeably surprised at the deal being offered by the Tories, but wanted both to hear, and be seen to hear, what Labour had to offer. Discreet soundings had been taken with Labour, but the MPs wanted this out in the open for fear of accusations of secret dealings.

The peers and the Federal Executive endorsed this, and lines were opened to Labour to say the Lib Dems wanted an offer that must include electoral reform, which at that point the Tories had neither offered nor seemed likely to.

Paddy Ashdown used his connections to make it plain to Labour that Gordon Brown would have to go for any deal to be saleable in public. He sought advice from former Lib Dem chief executive Chris Rennard on whether the numbers would work for a Labour/ Lib Dem coalition – which would have been tricky, but possible if Labour held together.

The potential route to electoral reform suggested was for Labour to legislate for AV forthwith and then hold a referendum on STV at the same time as the next general election, which would have been fixed for a four-yearly interval.

But Lib Dem negotiators found Labour's teams telling them they could not deliver even on an AV referendum, although it had been in the Labour manifesto, because too many Labour MPs opposed it.

Brown's departure had been intended to make a Lib Dem/Lab coalition easier, but instead made it more difficult as Labour figures' attention switched to their forthcoming leadership election.

A deal with the Tories would still have fallen through if David Cameron had not suddenly conceded the AV referendum. Even David Laws, a figure normally thought better disposed then most towards the Tories, is understood to have said he could not have recommended it otherwise.

The combination of Brown's resignation and the mere fact of Lib Dems talking to Labour did however put great pressure on Cameron to concede the AV referendum and, by the Monday night, it appeared to MPs that the Tory deal was both acceptable and probably the only one on offer.

Lib Dems MPs did not noticeably divide in their opinions on this between those who have the Tories and Labour as the main local opponents.

By the time Labour's authoritarian thug tendency (David Blunkett, John Reid, etc.) began to denounce any Lib Dem deal in public the following day, it was obvious that no alternative would work because Labour would not hold together.

The SNP had not been an integral part of the coalition but the assumption had been that it would support electoral reform and find it hard to vote with the Tories. Douglas Alexander's announcement that Labour would never work with the SNP was another nail in the coffin.

When Lib Dem MPs, peers and FE members met on the Tuesday night, the only dissent from the Tory deal came from former MP David Rendel, who wanted something stronger on electoral reform for the long term than the AV referendum, which he feared might be lost.

WHERE'S THE CASH?

The coalition has said that it will make heavy cuts in public spending, with the implication that this will cause unemployment. But has the process started closer to home?

Some Lib Dem staff were quickly appointed to special adviser or civil service jobs, but many others paid by the Short or Cranborne monies, provided to opposition parties to support their work in the Commons and

Lords respectively, have been left in limbo.

Are the Lib Dems still an opposition party? If not, they can hardly claim opposition funding, but do they get anything as junior coalition partners?

In Scotland, the equivalent of Short money is paid to junior coalition partners in proportion to the places that they take up in government. This deal may be struck for Westminster, but even this could cost the Lib Dems some £2m a year.

WHAT A BUNCH OF LEADERS

Whatever one thinks of the wisdom of the Lib Dems entering a coalition with the Conservatives, it is plain that the negotiators were able to secure a noticeable number of Lib Dem objectives in the agreement.

This makes the noises off from past leaders rather uncalled for. It's true that Paddy Ashdown conducted fruitful negotiations with Tony Blair before 1997, but that later went off the rails to the extent that his diaries recorded "anger is reverberating from every corner of the party" by the autumn of 1998, when he tried to put domestic policy to the Joint Cabinet Committee.

Of the others, the less heard the better. If Charles Kennedy dislikes the coalition, he might reflect on why he is no longer leader and so not in a position to stop it.

Ming Campbell, who took three days to realise that Gordon Brown's offer in summer 2007 of government jobs for Lib Dems was a political trap (Liberator 320), when it took the rest of the world about three minutes, might also reflect on his skills in dealing with other parties. And what of David Steel, the leader who signed the Lib-Lab pact and got nothing in return, and whose negligent conduct of the Alliance and merger negotiations conceded every demand to the SDP? Clearly when this particular authority on negotiation speaks, Nick Clegg should listen carefully, and do the opposite.

VICTIMS OF MANIA

The Liberal Democrats would hold another ten seats had they got fewer than 1,000 more votes in each, which would have taken them to 67 seats, roughly the figure most sensible predictions pointed to before the outbreak of Cleggmania.

This mania looked like an unalloyed blessing but proved to be a mixed one, not least because the party was as taken by surprise as everyone else.

The first problem was that, as soon as the opinion poll ratings for the party suddenly soared after the first televised leaders' debate, a dreadful outbreak of candidateitis occurred, if anecdotal evidence is to be believed. Candidates and local parties in seats that were not really winnable – and which certainly had not been the day before the debate – suddenly decided to try to win and so withdrew resources from target seats, as did people higher up the party food chain.

This didn't affect everywhere; good support from around Wiltshire helped to secure the victory in Chippenham but, for example, Meon Valley got a paid-for mailshot when neighbouring Winchester was vulnerable.

The second problem was an influx of new members and supporters, which some local parties were poorly placed to handle, being in the middle of a campaign and unable to service so many newcomers or get them working.

Third was the inability of the national campaign to react to what had happened, except in one respect.

The most immediate consequence of Cleggmania was the disappearance of Vince Cable from the media. It may be that the media preferred Clegg after that, but Cable is a popular and respected figure in his own right, and could and should have been used.

There have been those around Clegg who disliked Cable's media profile and assumed that, in a simple equation, the less the country heard from Cable the more it would hear from Clegg. Little could be done if the media chose not to cover Cable much but, if he was deliberately pulled out of the party's 'air war', that was a shocking error on someone's part.

Otherwise, the campaign seemed unsure what to make of Cleggmania, and was static in the period between the final leaders' debate and polling day.

Simply stating that the party wanted 'change' was not a strong enough message for the final week, and back came the old error of 1992 – talking about hung parliaments, and what the Lib Dems would with who, rather than talking about the purposes for which they wished to use any power they secured.

AMNESTY UNINTENTIONAL

Why was Nick Clegg left so ill-prepared on the Lib Dems' proposed immigration amnesty in the final televised leaders' debate?

It is true this was not a policy the party would normally have highlighted but, given it had been controversial in the second debate, and that the right-wing tabloids were stirring it, it was obvious that it would play an important role in the third debate.

Clegg appeared uneasy and had trouble explaining the policy, which undermined the reputation he gained for his confident earlier performances.

WHO GRABBED ALL THE MONEY?

The coalition's share out of jobs in the House of Lords attracted less attention than that of the Commons, which is a pity because otherwise it would have been noted how comprehensively the Lib Dems have been shafted here.

They have secured only two unpaid government whip posts, for William Wallace and Lindsay Northover, while the Tories grabbed all the paid posts. Thus among the Lords whips there are five paid and one unpaid Tories and only these two Lib Dems.

As one Lib Dem lord put it: "The whips in the Lords actually do a lot of the spade work on legislation, so for us to get nobody employed to this is very bad news in the process of the Lords."

Another described this aspect of the coalition deal as: "a public humiliation for the Lib Dem group in the Lords, and the Tories and Labour have already privately let us know that they know it".

Beyond the Lords' whips office, apart from Tom McNally, David Shutt and Jim Wallace, all the ministers in the Lords are Tories, even at the junior levels.

To this fund of animosity can be added the awkward debates that will come over House of Lords reform. This is in the coalition agreement – that it will be changed in composition and elected by PR.

The problem is that existing lords have to vote for reform and the turkeys-and-Christmas argument comes into play. Labour trades unionists believe in no compulsory redundancies, even for peers, and few Tories want any reform. Even the Lib Dems are split, with David Steel and a few others arguing against an elected chamber.

REVOLUTION NUMBER 9

The hurriedly arranged Lib Dem special conference called in Birmingham on 16 May to rubber stamp (sorry, to endorse) the coalition deal saw a record nine amendments debated, all of which were accepted by the movers.

Some concerned specific policy areas, such as sexual orientation, the digital economy and proportional representation for local government. Others were statements of wider themes, that the party remained independent and should continue to develop its own policy without looking over its shoulder at the Tories, and that it should seek to reduce inequality over the course of this parliament.

One, though, has the potential to cause trouble. This came from Liberal Youth and concerned tuition fees.

The coalition agreement commits the two parties to await the outcome of a review on student finance with a provision that Lib Dem MPs can abstain on the resulting government policy if they dislike it.

However, almost all Lib Dem MPs signed up to the National Union of Students' 'vote for students' pledge against any real terms rise in the tuition fee cap.

This must have seemed an easy promise to make during the campaign, but the NUS pledge did not call on signatories to abstain on the issue but to vote against it.

Lib Dem MPs will be hoping that Lord Browne's review comes up with something they can live with, or at least fudge, or bang go all those votes in university seats and among new graduate voters.

The ninth amendment, from David Rendel, the only coalition dissident on the FE, was emasculated. It regretted that it had not been possible to introduce PR for Westminster elections and reaffirmed the party's long-standing commitment to this.

So far, so uncontroversial. But the original amendment went on to say: "It shall be a requirement of any future coalition negotiations that a system of PR be a prerequisite of any agreement".

The Federal Conference Committee deemed that sentence far too risky. In its absence, Rendel sought to withdraw the whole amendment but was told he could not, so had to be content with referring to the missing part in his speech even though the conference could not vote on it. Not a good start.

SHOVE IT THROUGH A LETTERBOX

When one MP, defending a marginal seat, was asked by his regional party to have his election address complete in early March to meet the deadline for a party bulk print deal with Media Group, his response included a well-known phrase concerning sex and travel. He reasoned that this would be far too early to sign off his main message to voters and was proved right, since he won.

At the other end of the target seat scale, Thurrock found itself with no election address following a dispute over whether or not the artwork had been cleared with the Royal Mail.

It is clear that, in the great majority of cases, the deal with Media Group, a large and well-established printer, worked well and was useful to local parties, in particular to those that were not targets of any kind and for whom an early March deadline posed few issues.

However, Liberator has seen several complaints about this deal, mainly from London. In an election, a leaflet that appears too late or not at all is difficult to recover from. Parts of this correspondence imply that Media Group in turn felt that some local parties failed to meet deadlines, or sent unusable material.

Media Group was to print and send election addresses to the Royal Mail for the freepost delivery.

This was a national framework contract, although some regions had other arrangements. The idea was that local parties would benefit from a bulk deal negotiated by the party, could use a uniform template on a website for leaflet design and that they would then have leaflets printed for them and passed direct to the Royal Mail.

However, the correspondence that Liberator has seen shows that fundamental misunderstandings exist in the party over how this deal worked and indeed whether there was any contract to underpin it.

Complainants from constituencies say that they were told there was no contract. Others have said that there was, contained in exchanges of e-mails between a Cowley Street official and the company, but that the contents of these were not known to constituencies.

Cowley Street insists that its framework contract with Media Group required local parties to have a direct contract with the printer, not one through headquarters. How clearly this was communicated by Cowley Street is a matter of debate.

Whatever the status of this contract, there appears not to have been a written specification known to all involved setting out expectations.

This is a flavour of the complaints. It is important to stress that the fault may in each case have lain with the Royal Mail.

Kensington's Robin Meltzer told London region: "My own election communication was prepared in advance of the first deadline, and yet was delivered really very late by Royal Mail – after postal ballots had gone out."

He said he found the templates difficult to use and the deadlines "were badly publicised and arbitrary," though it is not clear who failed to publicise them.

Camberwell and Peckham chair Derek Partridge told the region that his seat, being close to many targets, sent helpers elsewhere and so was dependent on the Royal Mail to communicate with voters.

He described as "manna from heaven" the party's offer that Media Group would provide "the delivery of two high-quality pieces of literature into every home in the constituency".

Partridge said that his constituency met the 8 March deadline, but that its main leaflet was not delivered until 29 April and its letter not until 4 May.

Jonathan Price, chair of Dulwich and West Norwood, said its leaflets arrived with voters only on 3 May and both arrived together, so lessening their impact.

Veteran regional official Margaret Joachim

opined: "Words now fail me utterly – who on earth could reasonably expect lots of local parties to spend thousands of pounds each on something for which there was no written contract? And we're in government! Heaven help the country." This drew a stern rebuke from regional campaigns officer Pete Dollimore about using the regional e-mail list for "emotional outbursts".

A response sent to these complaints by Victoria Marsom, deputy director of campaigns for London, South East and East of England, stated: "It is down to individual constituencies to negotiate with Media Group." She said that the Campaigns Department would collate feedback and try to press for recompense where appropriate.

One prominent party figure in another region noted: "These contracts, regional and national, really need a good look. They are really brokerage arrangements, and once the local party has signed up they have an individual contract with the printer. I am not sure this is effective (or that local parties understand).

"The regional/federal party tends to wash its hands once the arrangement is in place and many local parties don't even have the capacity to get the artwork right. Getting data to the printer in the right format is also beyond some local parties. It surely must make more sense for someone to be employed to do all this stuff for local parties who are then only asked to provide a photo, one local story and to check the final version."

Cowley Street's response to Liberator was that it has tried to enable all candidates, who would not otherwise have the capacity, to send a full addressed election communication. "To do this, we arranged for Media Group to offer candidates a discounted deal on the printing, addressing and delivery of a part templated election communication," it said.

"This was not something we had attempted previously on this scale, and not something that the party has the resource to take on directly. In most cases this worked well, with both addressed and unaddressed literature being delivered on time and to a high quality. Unfortunately, in some cases addressed mailings were delivered late."

Its response added that this facility was clearly offered to seats as "a deal directly with Media Group, not through the party," and representatives had met the company after the election to discuss problems.

With the confusion over contracts, and the lack of capacity in some smaller local parties added to the Byzantine requirements of the Royal Mail for the freepost delivery, it is perhaps unsurprising that some problems arose.

HARI-KIRI

History will record Lembit Öpik as a man of great political gifts but a near-total lack of judgement.

Although most of the rest of the world can see the reasons for his loss of Montgomeryshire (only the second loss for the party there in 130 years), it seems he cannot, talking about it being impossible to be 'a character' and an MP. What is actually impossible is choosing to turn yourself into a figure of public fun and then expecting the public to take you seriously.

Öpik's decisions to conduct his private life in public and to write a column for the Daily Sport would have caused peril to a politician anywhere, but especially in rural and traditional mid-Wales.

He survived attempts to oust him last year. Other Welsh party figures feared not only that Öpik would lose his seat, but that he would take the other three Welsh MPs down with him. As a result of this alarm, Cowley Street commissioned a poll in the constituency, which found Öpik would secure 70% of the vote.

After that, nothing more was heard about de-selection, although some members of Montgomeryshire Lib Dems had seriously debated this, but concluded that the ensuing uproar would fatally damage the chances of any alternative candidate.

Öpik now intends to try his hand at stand-up comedy. So, no change there, then?

LAWS AND DISORDER

David Laws's abrupt departure from the cabinet was inevitable given the public atmosphere over any breach by MPs of the expenses rules, or indeed the appearance of such a breach.

His private life is his own, but he chose to enter public life and must, after last summer's furore over expenses, have known that this particular skeleton was likely to start rattling sooner or later and was certain to do so once he achieved such a prominent post as Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

Laws's departure is sad for him, and a loss to the coalition, but it was quite unrealistic to have thought that his expense claims would somehow not be scrutinised when he had so closely identified himself with public spending cuts. Did he make Nick Clegg aware of the situation before accepting the chief secretary post?

His departure made way for the continuing rapid ascent of Danny Alexander, an MP for only five years yet who in quick succession became Clegg's principal bag carrier, a coalition negotiator and a cabinet minister. Such progress by one so close to the leader has, not unexpectedly, fuelled resentment among Lib Dem MPs who think they should have got a government job of some kind, but whose talents were overlooked.

WHO ATE ALL THE PEERS?

A quick reading of the coalition agreement implied that dozens of Lib Dem peers would soon be created in an effort to make the existing House of Lords roughly proportional to votes cast, ahead of its eventual reform.

The former MPs and other party notables given peerages in May were not obviously controversial, but those with their eyes on ermine are lobbying furiously against the day when lots of peerages are created. Whenever two people on the interim peers panel meet, the excited chatter of which titles they would take and their relative chances is almost the sole topic of conversation.

Liberator once proposed to Paddy Ashdown that we should be given a collective peerage, which each member who use for a proportion of the year. Surely with the coalition's 'new politics' the time for such radical steps has arrived?

EACH TO THEIR OWN

A Cowley Street briefing for one all-party TV election debate comprises the three participants' names in unfortunate juxtaposition: "Davey Pickles Balls."

WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

The coalition is a product of strengths and weaknesses but the Lib Dems must learn which are which, says Simon Titley

"Go back to your constituencies and prepare for government." How they laughed. But 29 years after David Steel's famous declaration, the Liberal Democrats suddenly find themselves in government. Whether they prepared for it is another matter.

The party seems surprised to find itself in coalition but it was bound to happen sooner or later. The combined Conservative-plus-Labour share of the vote has been declining steadily, from a post-war peak of 97% in 1951 to a post-war low of 65% this year. Even with first-past-the-post, hung parliaments are increasingly likely. With proportional representation, they are inevitable.

Coalitions have been the norm in Scotland and Wales since devolution, while hung councils have been commonplace since the 1980s. As a result, during the past 25 years, hundreds if not thousands of Lib Dems have served in coalitions of one kind or another. The media don't get this; they depicted the Lib Dems as 'political virgins' ill-prepared for coalition. None of them realised the significance of Andrew Stunell's place in the Lib Dem negotiating team.

I have little sympathy with party members who regard coalition with the Tories as necessarily some sort of 'sell out'. Such objections might have been valid if the parliamentary arithmetic were different, if a better alternative had been realistically available, or if the party's negotiators had come away with a poor deal. But it isn't, there wasn't and they didn't. You can't object on principle to coalitions if you believe in PR. You can't object on principle to compromises if you accept coalitions.

Likewise, I have little sympathy for any Lib Dem voters who feel cheated. As Armando Iannucci put it (Independent, 15 May), "I get frustrated when Liberal Democrat voters shout that they never voted for Cameron. No, they didn't. But they knew there'd most probably be a hung parliament. What on earth were they expecting? A coalition with Esther Rantzen? Some would argue they were doing it expecting a pact with Labour, but alas, democracy doesn't yet provide us with a system where we can vote for one party while influencing how many people vote for another."

Most Lib Dem members are best described as 'critical friends' of the coalition, at least for now. They are naturally queasy about collaborating with the old enemy but nevertheless gratified to see many of their policies included in the coalition agreement and the Queen's Speech.

The success of the Lib Dem negotiators demonstrates the robustness of the party's democratic processes and demolishes several right-wing myths. The 'triple lock' (the policy governing deals with other parties, passed at the 1998 spring conference) came in for a lot of mockery from the media and disdain from party right-wingers. When this policy was rediscovered earlier this year, it was depicted as an unwarranted encumbrance on the leader and evidence that the party wasn't serious, since the 'beards and sandals' had the power to block the good governance of the country.

In the event, the triple lock proved a considerable asset. Throughout the negotiations, the Lib Dems' MPs and Federal Executive were kept informed at regular meetings. This in turn enabled assurances to be fed down to party activists. Since both the parliamentary party and the FE voted by more than the required 75%, the special conference on 16 May was not strictly necessary but it ensured the buy-in of party members (the only pity is that the media were excluded from the event). In contrast, senior figures in both the Conservative and Labour parties complained of their exclusion from the process.

The success of the negotiations also demonstrated the robustness of the Lib Dems' policy and policy-making machinery. These provided the party's negotiators with a strong bargaining position and a need to hold a line on certain issues, whereas the Tory negotiators could pretty much give up anything they liked.

There have been suggestions from the Lib Dem right-wing that the coalition renders the party's democratic policy-making redundant, because the conference cannot mandate the government and might embarrass it. But this is a coalition, not a merger, and the party is not the same thing as the government. The negotiations demonstrate the need for the Lib Dems to maintain democratic policy-making to ensure the party's strength and independence at the next election.

But don't assume the coalition is mainly the product of Lib Dem negotiating skills. Look at it from the Tories' point of view. As the largest party, they could have formed a minority government, with or without a 'confidence and supply' agreement with the Lib Dems. Then, with the power to decide the timing of the next general election, they could have called a second election in the autumn. They have plenty of money left in their war chest and would probably have won an overall majority. What's not to like?

The Tories paradoxically opted for a coalition rather than minority government because of David Cameron's overriding desire to rebrand his party. A deal with the Lib Dems enabled him to pull off what he had been unable to achieve in over four years of leadership – the detoxifying of the Tory brand and the marginalisation of his party's right-wing.

Cameron's strategy is a mixed blessing for the Lib Dems. It has given them a role in government for the first time in 65 years. By rolling over and accepting more negotiating demands than the Lib Dems had any right to expect, Cameron made sure that the Lib Dems have a powerful incentive to make the coalition work. Yet this situation will make it harder for the Lib Dems to retain their distinctiveness and more likely that, by the time of the next election, voters will wonder what the Lib Dems are for.

That election is five years away, assuming the fixed-term parliament can be made to stick. A lot can change in that time. Speculation about how the coalition might come unstuck has focused on the main areas of policy difference such as fiscal policy, electoral reform and Europe. Yet these seem to be the flashpoints more for Tory dissent – there is far more disgruntlement in the Tory backwoods and backbenches than there is among the Lib Dems.

Lib Dem disillusionment is more likely to arise from experience on the doorsteps. In England (unlike Scotland and Wales), the Lib Dems have no experience of campaigning while in government. Local Focus teams who have relied on a vocabulary of opposition will find themselves bereft. The scale of the cuts means that Lib Dem activists are likely to experience popular anger, which could translate into poor results in next May's elections.

Recall what Mervyn King, Governor of the Bank of England, said before this year's election; that whoever won would be out of power for a whole generation because of how tough the fiscal austerity will have to be. This is obviously the crude calculation behind the Labour Party's embrace of opposition.

IDEOLOGICAL WEAKNESSES

The three greatest weaknesses of the coalition are not policy splits but ideological similarities. Each is the product of a stunted concept of empowering the individual, which typifies the economism shared by the Tories and the *Orange Book* tendency in the Liberal Democrats.

The first weakness is a refusal to accept that neoliberal economic ideology, which has dominated political thinking for the past thirty years, is now a busted flush (see my previous article in Liberator 338). An insistence on keeping the neoliberal show on the road will lead to a succession of worse and worse crises. But there is no appetite within the coalition for radically refashioning the economy along more socially just and sustainable lines, just a belief that a bit of regulatory tinkering will restore business as usual.

The second weakness is the constitutional reform agenda. It is the greatest Lib Dem achievement of the coalition negotiations and contains many things Liberals can cheer. But it appears more concerned with procedures than outcomes. It emphasises the value of legal, formal freedoms while overlooking real, felt freedom. There seems no linkage to an idea of social justice or a realisation that constitutional rights are more difficult to exploit for people lacking economic or social power.

The third weakness is the assumption that Lib Dem 'community politics' and the Tory 'Big Society' are the same thing. A quick comparison of *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics* with Phillip Blond's *Red Tory* would soon disabuse anyone of that notion. Blond (Cameron's guru and the brains behind the 'Big Society') is strongly anti-liberal. He believes liberalism is essentially anti-social, dislikes the idea of individual autonomy and concludes that "a vision of the good life cannot come from liberal principles."

Blond's 'Big Society' is rooted in nostalgia for an idealised, pre-industrial, rural community; but most British people live in cities. And just as the Lib Dems have tended to reduce 'community politics' to election techniques, so the Tories will soon reduce the 'Big Society' to a means of saving money by dumping social services on the voluntary sector.

CAMPAIGN FAILURE

The coalition is so momentous that it has obscured the failure of the Lib Dem election campaign. The party is in government despite its campaign rather than because of it. The centrally-run campaign was fundamentally misconceived. There was no synergy between the centrally-run 'air war' and the 'ground war' being fought in target constituencies. Cowley Street instructed local parties to play down the local elections and had no concept of running integrated campaigns.

When the 'surge' came following the first TV leader's debate, the party failed to capitalise on it. Instead, Cowley Street decided to put all its eggs in the 'Cleggmania' basket. The level of stupidity can be gauged by the fact that, the day after the first TV debate, Vince Cable was unceremoniously dumped. All his joint appearances with Clegg were cancelled and his portrait was removed from the party's website homepage.

As Lib Dem opinion poll ratings soared, one cheerleader for the right-wing cabal running the campaign wrote on Facebook: "So... 26-34% in the polls, almost all the boost down to media skills and leadership not leaflets and target seats... I've got to ask... anyone missing Rennard...?" The complete collapse of the 'surge' to 23% on polling day, just 1% more than the party won in 2005, suggests there was no basis for such conceit.

Cowley Street assumed the second and third TV debates would automatically lead to further gains in support. It focused the 'air war' on Clegg's personality and did nothing to develop the party's messages. The 'ground war' was just as bad. Local parties were relying on cliché-laden leaflets with little to say beyond the usual bar charts and negative messages. And after the surge, the target seat strategy was effectively abandoned and a dozen seats were lost by fewer than 900 votes.

What the campaign revealed above all was the Lib Dems' long-standing failure to consolidate a core vote. The mantra "we can win everywhere" symbolises a reluctance to enthuse the party's natural base and an overriding fear of causing offence. No wonder Lib Dem support in this election was unusually soft. An eve-of-election opinion poll conducted by Ipsos MORI showed that, whereas 28% of Labour voters and 17% of Conservatives said they might change their mind, 40% of Lib Dems said they might. And they did.

What will be the fate of this coalition? It will end in tears – political projects always do. In the meantime, the Lib Dems should exploit the situation for all it's worth and not feel inhibited about maintaining or developing an independent identity. The party should shun any grandiose idea of a 'centre-right realignment' or, worse, a coupon election. Instead, they will need an exit strategy.

However the coalition ends, it will likely be due to the unpredictable force Harold Macmillan most feared: "Events, dear boy, events."

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective

COCK-EYED OPTIMISTS

The coalition deal takes care of the next five years, but will its errors condemn the party for the next 50, asks David Rendel

We Brits are proud to live in a democracy. Only we don't. We are proud to have passed on our system of democracy to many other countries. Only we haven't.

Instead we have given them systems that are not like ours, but which are at least democratic.

Democracy means rule by the people. But no one born after the Second World War and living in the UK has ever been governed by a government supported by a majority of the people. Minority rule rules.

Until now. For the first time in 65 years, we have a government that had at the election the support of well over half the voters. So why on earth should a democrat not welcome the coalition agreement with its promise of at least five years of democratic government?

Well, there's the rub. 'At least five years.' As one of my Newbury members wrote to me before the agreement was concluded, "It's not the next five years we have to worry about. It's the next 50."

In all likelihood, the next general election will result in a parliament in which either the Labour Party or the Conservative Party has an overall majority in the House of Commons, but does not have the support of a majority of the electorate.

Whichever it is, the government will then be free to reverse all the Liberal Democrat changes introduced between now and 2015. We made a great fuss over the triple lock, which constrained the actions of our own leaders in the recent negotiations. But sadly the coalition agreement does not include any sort of lock on the long-term continuation of the very many (and very welcome) Liberal Democrat policies that are in the agreement. The introduction of a PR system of election would have been such a lock.

WHY GIVE WAY?

So why did our negotiators give way on what I suspect most Liberal Democrats thought would be an absolute requirement of our joining a coalition with any other party? Presumably because they realised that making PR a requirement would lead to the immediate breakdown of any negotiations.

Of course, it is true that the other two parties will fight to the end to preserve the First Past the Post system (with or without the addition of Alternative Voting). It is the only system that allows them to continue to win absolute power (a majority of MPs) on the basis of a minority of the votes.

For that reason, it has always been likely that it would take at least two balanced parliaments before we were able to break their resistance. So I share the view of the supporters of the agreement that an insistence on PR would have led to an immediate breakdown in negotiations with the Conservatives, and no chance thereafter of a successful negotiation with Labour. And I share their view also that that would have meant another general election in the autumn, following a short period of minority Conservative government.

Sadly, I also share the view that an autumn general election would probably have been a disaster for us, and would have delivered a massive majority for the Conservatives. But I fear you have to be a considerable optimist to believe that our fate in an autumn general election would have been any worse than our fate in five years' time is likely to be as the junior party in the coalition, after a parliament in which cuts to public services are blamed mainly on us. On the contrary, I believe that, if we had turned down the prospect of short-term power and cabinet seats in favour of a principled stand for real democracy and an electoral system that polls show is favoured by the majority of the electorate, we would have been seen as having rather more integrity than the other two parties when they formed a short-term Lab/Con pact.

Moreover, we would have laid down a firm marker to both the other parties. Whenever we next succeeded in forcing a balanced parliament, they need not pick up the telephone unless PR was part of the menu on offer.

MAXIMUM ADVANTAGE

But it is no use crying over spilt milk. What is done is done. From here on, we must make the coalition work as best we can, to gain maximum advantage from our newfound strength for our country and for as long as possible.

Meanwhile, I fear that we have sacrificed our long-term strategy for short-term tactical gains. In doing so, we may have delayed the inevitable change to a PR system of election by several decades.

But there is one way in which we can still minimise the damage from our missed opportunity to put down that marker. We will need to make it clear as soon as possible that PR will be a pre-condition for any future coalition negotiations.

We cannot now change what is past. But we can make sure we never make the same mistake again in future.

David Rendel was Liberal Democrat MP for Newbury 1993-2005

BREAKING BARRIERS

Flexible working at Westminster is the way to get more female Lib Dem MPs, not all-women shortlists, says Dinti Batstone

One of the biggest disappointments of this election was our failure to tackle the diversity deficit in our parliamentary party. We still have no ethnic minority MPs and the proportion of women has fallen to just 12% – lower than the Tories.

Coupled with widespread dismay at the gender gap in the new cabinet (17% women, none of whom are Liberal Democrats), we could soon hear renewed calls for all-women shortlists (AWS). But while AWS may seem like the easy path to gender balance, they are problematic both philosophically and practically.

First, labelling discrimination as 'positive' does not change the fact that it is discrimination. Is it really right to exclude a man who passionately wants to represent his local area from a selection process merely because he is a man? As the old saying goes, two wrongs don't make a right.

Second, AWS open women up to the accusation that they have achieved their position on the basis of gender rather than merit. This undermines women's confidence and often results in a distracting focus on how they got into the job rather than what they are doing in it.

Third, while AWS have undoubtedly boosted the numbers of women in Parliament, they have done nothing to make politics more woman-friendly – Ruth Kelly, Julia Drown and many other female Labour MPs who have stood down. So AWS are at best a short-term fix which treats the symptoms without addressing the underlying causes.

Fourth, if we look at what happened on 6 May, it's clear that AWS would not have made a difference to the Liberal Democrats. Half our retiring MPs were replaced with women candidates, and a third of our most winnable seats had female PPCs. Despite that, we have just one new woman MP – Tessa Munt.

It's a cruel irony that, having at last selected so many talented women in winnable seats, the erratic swings in this election worked disproportionately against them. The hard truth is that, unlike Labour and the Tories, we do not have the luxury of safe seats into which women and ethnic minority candidates can be selected.

But rejecting AWS must not mean complacency. There is a damaging perception among journalists like Jackie Ashley of The Guardian and campaigners like Ceri Goddard of the Fawcett Society that our party is not committed to electing more women. We must redouble our efforts to prove them wrong.

So if not AWS, what? Any sustainable solution needs to start by understanding the drivers of female under-representation. Campaign for Gender Balance has identified the key issue as insufficient numbers of women coming forward for approval and selection. Related to this is the problem of female attrition – too many experienced female candidates drop out just at the point when male contemporaries get elected.

Put another way, not enough women want to be an MP. The reasons for this are complex, but can loosely be classed into 'psychological' and 'structural' barriers.

Psychological barriers include lack of confidence, absence of role models, and an aversion to the 'Punch and Judy' style of Westminster politics. It is revealing that Lib Dem women are very well represented in proportional legislatures with a more collaborative working style, for example the European Parliament and London Assembly. The good news is that many of the psychological barriers can be overcome through talent-spotting, mentoring and training of the type offered by CGB.

Structural barriers stem from Westminster working in a way that is hard to reconcile with caring responsibilities. Since in the vast majority of families it is still women who have primary caring responsibility for children and the elderly, the political work/life juggle is inherently stacked against women.

To see the impact of these structural barriers, consider the women in our parliamentary party. Most were first elected in their 20s or their 50s – before having children or after they had grown up. Not one of our female MPs was first elected while raising young children. Yet the men in our parliamentary party were overwhelmingly first elected in their 30s and 40s, many as fathers of young children.

To resolve this conundrum, we need to look outside politics. Senior women in business and the professions have long faced similar barriers. Ironically, it is politicians who have empowered women of my generation to find a solution.

The right to request flexible working has quietly revolutionised many workplaces and enlightened employers have embraced the benefits of retaining talented women. Flexibility has allowed women to construct their own solution to the career/motherhood dilemma. Centre for Policy Studies recently found that, while a majority of mothers with children at home want to work, only 12% want to work full time. Yet while politicians have mandated flexible working for *other* people's workplaces, they have been loath to at Westminster.

With Nick Clegg now in charge of political reform, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to change the rules of the political game. We can at last – without discriminating against men – make politics fit women's lives.

Dinti Batstone is vice-chair of the Liberal Democrats' Campaign for Gender Balance

PAPER CHASE

Bombarding the public with repetitive and boring leaflets is a tactic with diminishing returns, says Steve Comer

The result of the general election was probably reasonable seen from the perspective of where the Liberal Democrats were around the turn of 2009/10, but there can be no doubt it was a big disappointment on the night.

Surely our vote would not have slipped back to 23% after the 'Cleggmania' surge? Surely the exit polls were underestimating our ability to hold our seats and gain some from Labour? Sadly the exit polls were all too accurate.

Recovering from an operation, I was restricted to telephone canvassing instead of pounding the streets. This meant I listened to and watched more election coverage on radio and TV than is probably healthy, and followed the campaign in newspapers and on the internet, as well as talking to a lot of people.

An interesting innovation in 2010 was the 'straight choice' website, which provided an opportunity to look at a lot of the election literature going out from all parties. Having seen many, I have to say too many Liberal Democrat leaflets were too formulaic and predictable. It almost seems as if we have tested the Romsey by-election format to destruction!

I've always followed the Campaigns Department mantra that "there is no such thing as too many leaflets". But this year in some seats, it got silly in the last couple of weeks, with the Lib Dems and Tories pushing more and more leaflets full of (contradictory) bar charts and quotes through letterboxes. When I was telephone canvassing in the last week, a lot of people were just fed up with the cacophony.

RECYCLED CONTENT

Leaflets with recycled content were producing diminishing returns, and so many we put out contained the old predictable photos – 'candidate with protesters', 'candidate cleaning graffiti', and that old favourite 'candidate in high-vis jacket'. Other parties are now putting out similar leaflets, so ours no longer look any different to those the Tories and Labour are shoving through letterboxes.

Worse still, we don't always adapt to local circumstances. For example, 'blue letters' are very effective when you first use them, the handwritten envelope and 'handwritten' letter is a novelty. Yet in Bristol with annual council elections, some wards have had blue letters four times in five years. Of course their effectiveness has been diminished.

After a slow first week, the 'air war' of this campaign was the best I'd ever known, yet I wonder if the 'ground war' was able to back it up and whether it was flexible enough to react and adapt to the mood on the streets. The boost that Liberal Democrats got from the TV debates sparked a lot of interest, yet we seemed unable to translate that goodwill into votes at the ballot box.

When I joined the Liberal Party, it saw itself in Jo Grimond's famous words as 'the party of the governed'. Community politics showed a very different approach, both to dealing with the structures of power, and in the way we engaged with people and worked with them on the issues they cared about.

We have gained respect and credibility for being the party that will defend local people and work with them against what appears to be a faceless and overbearing bureaucracy. We do this successfully because we simply start from a different political philosophy as outlined in the preamble to the party constitution and the original resolution on community politics.

This approach is successful for us because we believe in it, and the other parties don't. When I was re-elected to the council last year, people were still telling me they were voting Lib Dem because "you keep in touch all year round".

YET MORE BAR CHARTS

This year I heard local election candidates complaining that they couldn't get key issues in their wards covered in Focus in the run-up to a local election. I know candidates submitted relevant local stories only to find them ditched for yet more bar charts and bland 'three things to remember' statements.

Having lived through the 1974 and 1983 elections, when a strong national vote did not reflect itself in seats, I will always defend targeting, but there are downsides. It makes it difficult to sustain a viable local party when modest success means its key activists get elected as councillors. When there is a national upsurge in interest as there was this year, we lack the infrastructure to turn that interest and goodwill into helpers and activists.

We need a good hard look at what was unquestionably a very patchy set of elections at constituency and council level. This parliament is likely to run for a full term so we will have several rounds of local elections and a Euro election in that time. In looking at where to target for future growth, we should look less to old results and past near misses, and more to providing support and resources to help embed community politics and build for lasting success wherever we can, at whatever level we can achieve it.

Steve Comer is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Bristol who leads for the party on human resource issues in the Local Government Association

THE £30 RUBBER STAMP

The Birmingham special conference saw the Lib Dems take a leap in the dark, with heads and hearts nearly synchronised, Mark Smulian reports

Never mind the Cameron and Clegg love-in. You really know you are living in strange political times when Evan Harris and Tony Greaves speak in fulsome support of the leadership at a Lib Dem conference.

The party assembled in Birmingham at short notice to wield its rubber stamp on the coalition agreement, and there was never any serious likelihood of it voting 'no'.

It had been possible that the leadership would get its endorsement amid vocal recriminations, actual or threatened resignations and a mood of stolid foreboding.

After all, only those with the strongest feelings would fork out a £30 registration fee, plus their transport costs, to sit in one of the NEC's gloomy concrete boxes for four hours. Yet the huge majority in support of the coalition deal was achieved in a startlingly good atmosphere.

It was as if some unusually large residents' association had been told that it could have many things for which it had campaigned for years but, in return, would it put up with a few new sewage farms too?

Birmingham was light years away from the ghastly Blackpool special conference that sealed the Liberal/SDP merger, when there was a vicious triumphalism among those who wanted to drive opponents of merger out of the party.

Instead, it had the atmosphere a slightly earnest group of concerned citizens confronted with something unexpected – possibly good, possibly not – that they wished to think seriously about and hear the arguments, then bestow a blessing qualified by nine amendments.

The doubters may have thought that, if Harris and Greaves chose to speak in such unexpected ways, there must have been some underlying reason that at least merited examination by those who normally think as they do. Both were people to whom many conflicted Lib Dems would look for a lead.

Harris told the conference that Clegg had "played a blinder", that it would have been mad to seek a 'progressive alliance' with a Labour Party that was not progressive, and anyway the arithmetic made it impossible.

Significantly, while some speakers said they wished the parliamentary arithmetic had been different and allowed a deal with Labour, only two that I heard argued that the so-called 'rainbow coalition' of Labour, Lib Dems, nationalists and assorted Northern Irish parties would have been viable.

Greaves said that, since he stood on the brink of leaving after the merger, the Lib Dems had become a liberal party and that, if the party remained independent and respected different internal views, he was happy to see it in coalition and had found little hostility from his grassroots soundings.

As one who stood on that brink with him, I have to say that the atmosphere of Birmingham was encouraging for those who entertain doubts of whatever strength, as was much of the coalition agreement.

Also unlike 1988, nobody was trying to throw anyone out. Even the strongest supporters of the coalition deal stressed the need to keep the party together and listen to those who were, or became, unhappy. The only exception was an ill-judged remark from Andrew Stunell that he doubted the coalition agreement "would appeal to those that joined this party as a hobby". As he is no doubt perfectly well aware, it will lack appeal to some people who have given a lifetime to the party.

There was, though, one serious note of rebellion and it came from, of all people, Tom McNally. The new justice minister ended an otherwise unremarkable speech by telling the conference that "if the Human Rights Act is not in place at the end of this coalition, neither am I".

Chris Huhne, who followed him to the rostrum, chose, or felt obliged, to follow suit, and thus the coalition already has one issue on which its constituent parts do not agree and where two of its most senior Lib Dem ministers have announced in front of 1,600 people that they will walk if the act is scrapped.

There was a time when the party would have ceremonially burned its Risographs rather than do any deal with the Tories, and the underlying reason for its changed stance now lays, I think, in the experience of the past 13 years.

When a Labour government has fought an illegal war, approved the use of torture, widened inequality, wrecked the economy through funny money and constructed the most intrusive police state west of Belarus, it is hard for anyone to argue that Labour is either progressive or is the natural, never mind only, ally for Liberal Democrats.

As far as can be judged at a conference, delegates seemed to accept that the coalition is an almighty risk. The Lib Dems may prosper or collapse by its end; nobody knows. But the parliamentary numbers, Labour's record and the Tories' offer were enough to get the conference to endorse a previously unthinkable leap into the unknown in surprisingly good heart.

Nick Clegg called the 90% majority he secured "a bit North Korean". It's unlikely to be that large again, but the chances of him keeping the party together will be higher the more Birmingham's tolerant spirit is fostered.

Mark Smulian is a member of the Liberator Collective

X-FACTOR POLITICS

The three televised leaders' debates changed our politics permanently, even though 'Cleggmania' did not live up to its promise, says Jonathan Calder

The three leaders' debates during the general election campaign probably did not much affect the result of the election, but they may have altered the course of British politics after all.

For a while after the first debate, it seemed that the wildest hopes of those Liberal Democrats who had long argued for these debates had been exceeded.

As Jonathan Freedland wrote in the *Guardian* the following day: "From the start, Clegg asserted himself as the star of the show, anointed as such by a whopping 51 per cent of those surveyed by an instant Sun/YouGov poll. The first shot had him looking alarmingly young, boyish and eager, but he soon transcended that. More than his rivals, he demonstrated an instant understanding of the format. All his answers were delivered to the camera, since that was where the audience that mattered was to be found."

I AGREE WITH NICK

Such was the assurance of Clegg's performance, and their own comparative lack of preparation, that both Gordon Brown and David Cameron were reduced to frequent cries of "I agree with Nick".

In the days that followed that debate, we Liberal Democrats could hardly believe what we were seeing. We did not just rise in the polls: it reached a point where we were disappointed if we saw an opinion poll in which we were not in first place.

On the internet, reflecting the particular success of Clegg's performance in the first debate with younger voters, the position was just as encouraging. Unauthorised "I agree with Nick" merchandise sprouted everywhere, and a similarly independent Facebook group entitled "We got Rage Against the Machine to #1, we can get the Lib Dems into office!", which had less than 19,000 members after the launch of the Liberal Democrat manifesto, leapt to a membership of 115,000 in the wake of the first debate and was eventually to have more than 160,000 members.

It could not last. Though most judges and polls suggested that Clegg had shaded a generally lacklustre second debate, his performance inevitably lacked that extraordinary novelty factor the second time around. By now, the other two leaders had stopped agreeing with Nick, but they did not really get around to attacking him until the third debate. Though Clegg's performance in this third debate was in many ways more forceful than in the second, by now David Cameron had come to terms with the format and most polls awarded victory to him.

Such had been the impact of Nick Clegg's performance in the first debate, however, that most observers still expected a major Liberal Democrat advance on election night. When the broadcasters' exit poll appeared showing no advance at all, not even the most senior politicians believed what it said. Yet it proved to be correct, suggesting that four weeks of election campaigning – leaders' debates included – had ultimately had little effect on the way the nation had voted. Nor did the turnout show much sign of the young having been enthused to vote. It was up on the last two elections but, given that the 2010 election was so much more open than those two, not up by half as much as might have been expected.

So was Cleggmania all an illusion? The evidence of the opinion polls taken after the first debate suggest that it was not, though we should be more wary of online evidence – in the new social media in particular, there is a tendency for likeminded people to congregate and convince themselves that they represent a far larger slice of the population than is really the case. This can be valuable for raising activists' morale, but misleading when it comes to sensing the mood of the wider electorate.

Perhaps the best parallel for Cleggmania is one of those great by-election upsets in which the Liberal Democrats – and the Liberal Party and SDP before them – used to specialise in. They often produced a remarkable upsurge in the opinion polls; in the Alliance years they often led to polls suggesting that the two parties might well form the next government. But we never did form the next government, because that effect had long since worn off by the time that the general election came around. The polls always ask "How would you vote if there were a general election tomorrow?" but there rarely *is* an election tomorrow.

Looking back, it seems we also read too much into the polls asking voters who had won the debates. The assumption seemed to be that, if people said Nick Clegg had won the debate, they were bound to vote for him, but of course that was never the case. Think of The X-Factor – a parallel that suggested itself to many commentators at the time. Once people have decided on their favourite act, they will vote for him come what may, but they will be quite capable of admitting that he was not at his best this week and that someone else sang better. So it was quite possible that some of those who said that Nick Clegg had won the first two debates were confirmed Labour or Conservative voters who were fair-minded enough to be objective about what they had watched. That never meant they were going to vote Liberal Democrat.

The truth is probably not as clear cut as this, with people's reactions to the debates being partly based on an objective consideration of what they had watched and partly on pre-existent party loyalties. It was notable that, by the time of the third debate, the polls on who had won looked remarkably like the polls about voting intention: David Cameron was in the lead with

Nick Clegg and Gordon Brown level pegging a few percentage points behind him. By then, people's voting intentions were firming up and were more likely to colour their view of what they had seen in the debate.

One notable result of Nick Clegg's commanding performance in the first debate was that he and the Liberal Democrats became central to the later debates and the election campaign as a whole. This was a wonderful contrast with past elections, where we have often been desperate for attention, but the political wisdom that you are on the way to victory if the battle is fought on territory of your own choosing is only half right: you have to win that battle too. And we did not win enough of the important battles.

While not being like "the two old parties" was enough to win the first debate, by the time of the third debate there was much closer scrutiny of specific Liberal Democrat policies and they – or Nick Clegg – did not always stand up to it well. Our insistence on including the question of a replacement for Trident in the defence review, for instance, was made to seem a unilateralist position, when a stronger insistence that with the economy in such a state we should be very sure before we embark on a policy that will cost some £65bn.

Equally, our "earned route to citizenship" was painted as a simple amnesty that would encourage further illegal immigrants. The truth is that there will be illegal immigration as long as there is an enormous disparity in wealth between countries and easy intercontinental travel, but that point was never made and might not have been well received if it had been made. In the campaign more generally, Liberal Democrat shadow ministers had more trouble explaining how the policy of allowing people to settle in some regions and not others would be policed and it is probably as well that point was not raised in the debates.

Ultimately these two failings may not have been so damning: people wedded to nuclear weapons or immigration control are unlikely to vote Liberal Democrat anyway. More serious was the failure to get over the sense that the Liberal Democrats grasped that tax had been something that only the "little people" paid and were determined to do something about it. The policy of lifting people out of taxation was mentioned, but the thinking behind it was never made clear and it may have been less well remembered for that reason.

Despite the disappointing Liberal Democrat performance, Nick Clegg left the campaign in a much better position than he entered it, and that must surely be down to the debates. He is now known by every voter and seen, even by those who will never vote Liberal Democrat, as of equal standing with the leaders of the Conservative and Labour parties. That is a remarkable turnaround and could hardly have been achieved without the concentrated exposure that the debates gave.

"Will these debates become a permanent feature of British general elections? Do not bank on it"

It may well be Clegg's standing after the debates that encouraged David Cameron to make his offer when he failed to win an overall majority. For the Liberal Democrat leader was not just bringing his 57 MPs, he was bringing a sense of freshness and possibility that the government badly needed. So while the debates did not ultimately enthuse the young to take part in the political process or result in many more Liberal Democrat votes, they did change our politics permanently.

Will these debates become a permanent feature of British general elections? Do not bank on it. The 1960 debates between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon have entered political folklore on both sides of the Atlantic. What is less widely remembered is that there was not another presidential debate until 1976, when the unelected Gerald Ford was almost as little known as his challenger Jimmy Carter.

Since then, debates have become the norm in America, but they have never decided the election in the way that this folklore holds that they did in 1960. In fact they have often proved quite remarkably dull, with the Ford-Carter debates providing a particularly good example of this. Worse than that, Ford had obviously been told to try to smile and someone had told Carter not to grin so much; the result was that both spent the whole time with fixed half-smiles on their faces.

Fast forward to 1992 and the debate between the elder George Bush and Bill Clinton, when Bush was caught sneaking a look at his watch during one of their encounters. This was widely regarded as a gaffe and reinforced the idea that Clinton was much more in touch with the voters and their concerns. Yet when asked about it later, Bush said: "Was I glad when the damned thing was over? Yeah, and maybe that's why I was looking at my watch — only ten more minutes of this crap. Maybe if I'd have said that I'd have done better."

It will be hard for David Cameron not to agree to televised debates at the next general election – the media will howl in protest if he tries to get out of holding them – but if he is a long way ahead in the polls, do not be surprised if he tries.

Jonathan Calder is a member of the Liberator Collective

FROM THE JAWS OF VICTORY

Chris White says Cleggmania led to the collapse of the Lib Dem targeting strategy, but much of the target literature had little to say; now it must explain the coalition

"We all lost," a committed Labour voter said to me the other day. He is right, of course. The public did not vote for a hung parliament. Indeed a lot of them specifically voted against a hung parliament. And all the parties missed their targets.

We entered the campaign with some trepidation. Old hands said that everything would depend on the leaders' debate: if Nick triumphed then all bets were off; if he failed we would be on our uppers. We could be anywhere on a spectrum between 30 and 80 seats, said another. What none of us had anticipated was that Nick would triumph but his success would damage us.

Part of the problem was discipline. Much of my time as a regional party officer was spent on persuading parliamentary candidates that they were not going to leap from third to first place simply because the polls had jumped in our favour and three people had smiled at them that morning.

The Daily Mail gave you all the information you needed. "Is there anything British about this man?" it asked in their first onslaught on our suddenly popular leader.

The weaknesses in the manifesto inevitably came under close scrutiny: not the arcane ones I had fretted about (the culture section) but big issues like immigration, defence and the supposedly watertight tax and spending plans. The consequences of a hung parliament were predictably exaggerated and lied about.

In the end, people had their flirtation with the naughty new girl and then went home with the partner they arrived with.

TARGETS ABANDONED

This is what happened in 1992 to some extent. But while the heady days lasted, there was no persuading some people that the targeting strategy was the right one. As a result, the help to target seats or seats under pressure just did not materialise. I spent a quiet but busy polling day managing a Watford committee room. The councillors were there to help until they dropped. But almost no-one else came from outside the constituency.

There was more to our disappointment than a bursting bubble. My general election campaign took me from Hertfordshire to Herefordshire to London. Everywhere people were saying: "Too much paper." I am not convinced by this – because the logical solution to that complaint is to do less work, which can't be right.

But what actually concerned people was the repetitive (as opposed to repeated) messages – as well as untargeted messages. Most deliveries I did were to every household. Messages tended to be purely negative and in ways which were not convincing on the doorstep: "Vote for X because he or she has marginally more connections with the constituency than useless Y".

We seemed coy at defending our record in councils or in Westminster. And we relied on "Z can't win here" even in places where not only could Z win but actually did win.

The danger at this point is that we junk our entire strategy in a kneejerk panic. What we have to do instead is ask searching questions:

- Is there such a thing as too much paper?
- Has Focus had its day as a brand?
- Do we do anything like enough in terms of emailing and are the emails we send actually any good?
- Is it time to ditch the famous bar chart which seems now to confuse and irritate?
- Are tabloids as effective as they used to be?
- Why is EARS simultaneously too simplistic and too complex?
- Do we actually target or merely exclude those people who don't like us?

The last question takes me back to my roots. In the eighties, we were confronted by the arrival of the poll tax. A veteran councillor suggested that we produce a leaflet headed 'Community Charge' on blue paper and send it to every address with three or more voters warning them that this new tax would be expensive for multiple households. The exercise was quite hard in the days before EARS filters and risos but we got it out and the effect was electric.

At about the same time, we were in danger of falling through the floor because of the merger and were defending a council seat in the city centre. Laborious use of a photocopier and a litho printing press meant that we could target to individual groups of streets on one side of a leaflet and to particular categories of voting intention on the other.

Our candidate had recently married in the local Catholic Church. There was a group of nuns living in a convent. One of these said she was thinking of voting Green.

So she received a leaflet which on one side emphasised Paul's recent nuptials and on the other side gave the message (as we said to all Green inclined

people that year) that the only way of getting a green councillor was to vote for the Lib Dems.

Naturally she was the only elector to receive this leaflet. We cannot say whether it influenced her vote. But we won this particular ward in a difficult year using material closely targeted geographically and politically. To this day some of us refer to the 'Green Nun' episode.

With modern technology it is easier to do close (even unique) targeting and yet we too often send material to a target group but without a targeted message. If we are writing to (say) Turkish speakers then we need to say not only that our candidate has lived in Little Gidding all his or her life but also that Andrew Duff MEP works tirelessly to secure the admission of Turkey to the European Community. This really matters to this community. Likewise our stance towards Pakistan and Kashmir matters deeply to our supporters and potential supporters of Asian origin.

In the cold light of day on 7 May, it became apparent that the exit poll the night before had not been a rogue and that we had had a poor night. Obvious wins like Islington South had not happened and we incredibly lost Oxford West and Abingdon.

FULL HORROR

The full horror of the London council results were not yet in.

By 8.30 am (when the Watford result was declared), I was essentially unsurprised. The box counts in Watford revealed an extraordinary number of ballot papers where voters had voted Lib Dem and then changed their mind in the polling station. Yet again we were not the contenders we had thought we were.

But the rollercoaster had still not reached its destination. Later that day, the coalition talks began and we now (pinch me) find ourselves very much contenders at Westminster and Whitehall. This may help us at the next election but a quick glance at the Daily Express shows that the papers can ignore us even when we are in government. The Guardian too talks of George Osborne's spending cuts when they were in fact announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury David Laws. But perhaps that's just as well.

The issue now is to keep the coalition going, win the referendum and keep the party on side.

In 1995, I formed a full coalition with the Labour Party in Hertfordshire. This worked until 1999 when Labour lost a vital seat. These are the lessons I learned:

- Transparency with the public – The coalition has rightly begun with a public policy document jointly agreed by the two sides. This makes it easier to refute allegations that we were only in it for ourselves. It will need to be refreshed annually.
- Keeping the party on side – The party made a flying start with the inspired decision to have a special conference alongside email updates and the very obvious meetings of the Federal Executive. It would have helped if the special conference had not excluded the press. If, as is rumoured, this was a 'decision' made by the media team, someone needs to remind them of who is actually in charge of this party. As times get more difficult, there will need to be report back mechanisms to the party: it is unlikely that the Federal Executive will be sufficient for this, given the secretive nature of federal bodies. A wider forum (e.g. additional conference sessions) may be needed. Members of the party will also need frequent updates as to what has actually been achieved by the government.
- Keeping the backbenchers on side – One of the most debilitating aspects of the current cabinet and scrutiny system forced on local government is the disaffection of the backbenchers, especially those who thought that they should have had a job. Successful leaders communicate constantly with their backbenchers and give them a feeling of ownership. There must be genuine opportunities for the parliamentary parties in both houses to feel that they can influence the government and understand when the government seems to fail to do what they think it should. It will not always be sufficient for the party leader to send a representative to parliamentary party meetings. Time will need to be put on one side so that the leader and deputy leader can reconnect with the groups whence they came. The muddle in DCMS, Defra and DFID where there is neither a minister nor even a Liberal Democrat spokesperson needs to be sorted out. We were assured there would be a minister in every department.
- Maintaining confidence with coalition partners – Squalls happen, probably at least daily. These are best defused at source as a result of trust between ministers. Personal relationships become vital here: if the Conservative team meets separately and then delivers a position to the Liberal Democrat minister, it is unlikely that trust will be built up. Trust needs to be built up in every department and will require constant communication. Liberal Democrat ministers will also need to have an intimate understanding of the pressures faced by the other side. Conservatives tell me they are envious of the level of party democracy we experience compared with what happens in the Conservative Party. This betrays the weakness of Cameron's position.
- Being leader and minister – Being deputy prime minister does not leave much time for party activities. The roles once performed by leader and deputy in the parliamentary party and in the party as a whole are backfilled by others trusted by both the leadership and by MPs and members. MPs will need their own champion – otherwise the leadership will end up with an arrangement imposed upon it like the 1922 Committee (an organ that David Cameron clearly finds troublesome).
- End game – In the end, the party may have to walk away. The leadership needs to have an idea as to what sort of occasions might lead to the end of the coalition. Sometimes you have to head towards the door just to prove you mean it.

Chris White is a Liberal Democrat county councillor in Hertfordshire

DON'T MIX THE MESSAGES

The Lib Dem general election campaign tried to marginalise the local elections but integrated campaigning is vital to success, says Roger Hayes

Some of us in the party, many hundreds by now, have experience of the challenges of coalition administrations. They have come in all sorts of shapes and sizes: with us as junior or senior partner; sometimes with Labour; sometimes involving more than one partner; but very frequently with the Conservatives.

Some of those administrations (too many maybe?) lost their way by blurring the party lines with their partners and forgetting what it was they were trying to do in the first place – power for its own sake is never an excuse. But then 'joining the club' is a frequent mistake made by our elected representatives regardless of whether they are in or out of power.

As the country tries to come to terms with its new-style government, I think the party at large can learn three important things from our result in Kingston: 1) stand up for what you believe in, not what others think might be popular or expedient; 2) integrate your campaigning – there isn't one set of Lib Dem truths suitable for a general election and a different (less convenient) set to be ignored or played down locally; and 3) being in power is what we aim to achieve and retain, even when it's difficult; when money's tight and we realise there is no magic wand – coalition is therefore an opportunity not to be given up lightly.

AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH

For too long, the party has been used to being the second party of opposition nationally while locally we run dozens of council, including many cities, and are in coalition in many more. Yet when it came to the general election, some in the national party expected real power in local government to take a back seat in case Lib Dems making real decisions may be unpopular. We couldn't have local government control standing in the way of the party's real purpose: to consolidate its position as the also-rans of British politics.

There was much talk in the party, starting last autumn and going into the early months of this year, about the importance of Lib Dem councils up for election this year achieving zero percentage rises in council tax. The siren voices were adamant that not only would the council suffer without a zero increase, be "slaughtered" I was told, but that it would drag the MP down with it. Many boroughs were talked into political apartheid – separating out the national campaign from the local and convinced to set zero percent council tax rises, when responsible, liberal judgement would have called for modest increases. Now, I am sure that there are areas where we want to keep quiet about the dubious exploits of a Lib Dem run council, but to adopt this as a national strategy?!

Whatever happened to our distinctive message? Our ability to campaign? What chance the new politics if the instinct is to shrink from responsibility and difficult choices? I wonder what the reaction next year might be if council colleagues around the country and MSPs and Welsh Assembly members find the campaign temperature raised because of unpopular coalition decisions?

Of course, the real problems arose when the party was taken by surprise by the 'surge' after the first TV debate and was unable to respond or capitalise on the party's new found success.

I was agent in Kingston and Surbiton, both for Ed Davey and the 36 council candidates in the constituency (the other 12 on Kingston Council are in the Richmond Park constituency). For anyone unsure of the result, Ed held his seat with a 7,500 majority. We retained control of the council, gaining two extra seats and finally wiped out Labour into the bargain. Oh, and we did that after increasing the council tax by 2% (zero was a non starter if we were to preserve services) and with the highest council tax in London.

DON'T MENTION THE C WORD

We know that 'council tax' is a toxic term. It's deeply unfair to Kingston; we have to pay for over 70% of all council expenditure through council tax; we are an efficient, low-spending council; we would sweep the iniquities of council tax away given the chance, blah, blah. But of course, none of that matters in an election. We wanted power, we knew the rules, we have to make decisions. So no mention of council tax in literature or on the door step – instead, we campaigned for services that local people need and like. By contrast, we showed where the Tories would have to make cuts in order to hit their ridiculous commitment to freeze council tax for two years. And intelligent people chose.

Here, the national party was right – the main and sustained thrust of the Tory campaign was to attack us on the level of council tax local people pay. As ever, Tories know the price of everything and the value of nothing. And it was hard going, mentioned again and again on the door step; we had to ensure candidates and canvassers were well briefed.

From the outset, we were determined to run a fully integrated campaign – our Lib Dem MP and the Lib Dem run council; ALL the Focus Team campaigners working together with the community. Both Ed and the council group produced separate annual reports but, apart from that, all campaigning has been interwoven for many months. Our material and integrated teamwork ran across all 12 wards. It was undoubtedly the right decision if not always the most convenient: on polling day we had 23 different knock up slips.

As always, there were many campaign messages both in the run up and during the election, but we had three

main integrated issues that we mentioned again, and again, and again.

First, save Kingston Hospital A&E and maternity units. Helped by two visits from Nick Clegg, whose youngest son was born there, we raised well over 15,000 signatures on our petition jointly with Richmond Park. We linked it to our concern for health issues throughout the borough and the work done on care for the elderly by the council, together with other local campaigns with the PCT to preserve and enhance health and care services.

"The real problems arose when the party was taken by surprise by the 'surge' after the first TV debate"

Second, re-zone Surbiton and Kingston stations. This integrated our campaign with London Assembly members and local activists to place our two main stations more reasonably in fare zone 5. Boris Johnson backed this campaign when he was running for London Mayor but has mysteriously done nothing about it since being elected two years ago.

Third, new schools. This is another long running campaign to win money from government to build new schools and extend and refurbish existing ones. This has been hugely successful and has already delivered new buildings, with more to come. It provides Kingston with the opportunity to take its already exceptional education achievements to the next level.

And the result? As well as Ed back, we have 26 of the 36 councillors in the constituency and representation in 10 of the 12 wards. With another councillor coming from the north wards in Richmond Park constituency, there are 27 Lib Dems on Kingston Council and we are embarking on our third term in overall control.

TAKING TOUGH DECISIONS

I strongly believe that our strength through integrated campaigning and a tenacious determination to stand by our local manifesto provides important lessons for coalition. We stand to win power at all levels, to put policy into action and build a more liberal society. And we choose to do that at every opportunity, not just when it might be easy, convenient or popular.

But, and it is potentially a big 'but', the party must not permit a rift to open between our role in the shiny new national coalition and our substantial and long standing representation in Scotland and Wales and throughout local government. The negotiations undoubtedly benefitted from Andrew Stunell's years of experience – I hope that good sense is carried through now into the way the parliamentary party deals with its own party, how it deals with its Conservative partners in coalition, and how that coalition government deals with devolved and local government.

Running a council (maybe like being in government) is a coalition even when you're not sharing power with another party. Government calls most of the shots even when it doesn't give most of the money – no real advances can be made without partnership working, sponsorship, community action, voluntary sector support, etc. It's just not possible to do everything you want, as soon as you would like, or in exactly the way you would choose. But is liberal compromise better than nothing at all? Hell yes!

This is one of my favourite political quotes. It was delivered almost exactly 100 years ago, but is just as true and inspiring today. And despite being said by a Republican, it sums up why I am an activist:

"It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself for a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat." (Theodore Roosevelt, from his speech, 'Citizenship in a Republic', given at the Sorbonne, 23 April, 1910).

For Liberals in the local, and now national, arena it's about taking tough decisions and not being afraid to stand up for what we believe. As democratic pluralists, I hope we will continue to build campaigns and coalitions in and out of parliament for the reforms we have for so long cherished. I am sure the wiser heads realise that we will rarely get everything we want, even with outright control, but we won't get anything unless we are prepared to step into the arena and make our case – preferably with one unified voice.

Roger Hayes was agent in this year's parliamentary and council elections in Kingston-upon-Thames and is a former councillor in Kingston and the Isle of Wight

REALIGNMENT OF THE RIGHT

Why should anyone vote in future for the Liberal Democrat monkey when they could choose the Conservative organ grinder, asks Jeremy Sanders

On the evening of 6 May, I doubt that the average reader of Liberator would have regarded an outcome of the election which resulted in David Cameron becoming prime minister, George Osborne chancellor, Theresa May home secretary and William Hague foreign secretary as a success.

Most of us had spent weeks, if not months or years, attempting to prevent exactly that. Yet, only five days later we saw Nick Clegg holding a joint press conference with David Cameron, at which precisely this was being put forward as not just an unavoidable necessity, but some sort of great new dawn for British politics.

Even more remarkably, within a further few days, a special conference of the party was backing our participation in a Conservative-led and overwhelmingly Conservative dominated coalition, and doing so with no more than 20 or 30 representatives, out of well over 1,500, voting against.

So how did this happen? The first point that needs to be made is that the whole thing was pushed through with very great haste. The agreement was presented to the parliamentary party and the Federal Executive for an immediate decision, without it even being seen in advance. A special conference was then called with four days' notice. While no-one is claiming that there was any intention to stifle debate deliberately, what this meant in practice was that there was no opportunity for the opponents of the deal to put the case across, or for there to be any serious debate within the party as a whole.

UNTRUE CLAIM

One of the main arguments for the coalition has been that "there is no alternative" and that anyone opposing it doesn't understand that it's sometimes necessary to compromise. This is simply untrue. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the election, it seemed to most people, including most political commentators , that the idea of the Liberal Democrats joining a formal Cameron-led coalition government was a very unlikely outcome.

In reality, the idea of a 'Rainbow Coalition' with Labour, and the support of the nationalists and the SDLP, was probably never a practical option. The numbers simply didn't add up. Neither should radicals look at the idea too much through rose-coloured spectacles.

Liberator readers will not need reminding of the fundamentally illiberal nature of much of what the Labour government has done over the last 13 years. Any coalition with other 'progressive' parties would have involved serious compromises with people and policies that many of us would regard as very unprogressive indeed.

There was, however, another option, and one which initially seemed to be the most likely outcome. Sadly, it seems that there was probably no alternative to some form of Cameron government – ultimately, someone has to run the country – but there is absolutely no reason why the Liberal Democrats could not have allowed a minority Conservative government to take office, in a similar way to the SNP government in Scotland. All this would have involved would have been abstaining on votes of confidence, allowing the budget to pass, and voting on an issue-by-issue basis on everything else.

Of course, this wouldn't have been an option without risks. We wouldn't have got many of the concessions achieved as part of the coalition deal, and there would always have been a danger of the Conservatives calling a further election. It would, however, have allowed us to remain an independent opposition party, free to pursue our own policies. It seems rather worrying to me that so many people in the party do not seem to understand the fundamental difference between reluctantly accepting that a Conservative government may unavoidable, and joining it.

Much has been made of the fact that, as supporters of PR, we must accept that under a PR system coalition would probably be inevitable. This is, of course, true, however the important words here are "under a PR system". If we were to have PR (something David Cameron has completely ruled out), then all parties would be clear that they would be unlikely ever to achieve an overall majority, and would very quickly realise that they had to act accordingly. The situation is completely different under a first past the post (or indeed AV) system. The huge bias in the system towards the Conservative and Labour parties means that any coalition is likely to be seen by the 'major' party as simply a temporary measure to keep them in power until such time as the normal one-party majority government is restored at the next election, at which point any commitment to coalition would immediately disappear and the minority party would immediately be dropped.

So what of the coalition itself? To start with, it is difficult to see why we should believe that the Conservative Party today is any different from the Conservative Party as it was a few months ago. For all that David Cameron may have suddenly started to talk about 'new politics', neither he nor his party had any sort of dramatic conversion in the days following 6 May. It is not necessary to be particularly cynical to realise that the sole reason that the Liberal Democrats

are in coalition now is the fact that the Tories didn't get enough votes to win the election on their own.

Much has been made of the idea that the negotiators got "a good deal". In many ways, that may well be true, though it's probably also true that a number of the things in the deal that Liberals would support (for example, scrapping ID cards) were already Conservative policy. It also true that a number of the other Tory 'concessions', for example proposals relating to cutting income tax for the low paid, were probably things that many, more populist, Tories would probably have some sympathy with anyway, even though they weren't Conservative policy. Nevertheless, it certainly is the case that the Tories have made many significant concessions on policy issues. The problem is the price that the party has to pay for this.

"There is absolutely no reason why the Liberal Democrats could not have allowed a minority Conservative government to take office"

For the last 20 years (and for those of us who were members of the Liberal Party previously, longer), we have been campaigning as a progressive, radical and democratic alternative to the Labour Party. The party has never liked the terms 'left' and 'right' but, to quote Jo Grimond, what we have been aiming for has been "a realignment of the left". For many party members, that is the only logical position that the party can occupy while remaining a radical liberal party. It is very difficult, however, to see how we can be taken seriously as that, and also be willing to act as a minority partner, keeping an overwhelmingly Conservative government in power.

CREDIBILITY DESTROYED

If we spend the next five years as part of a Conservative-led coalition, not just allowing David Cameron to remain as prime minister but actively supporting him and the other senior Tory ministers, our credibility as any sort of progressive, radical, reforming force in British politics will be destroyed, not just temporarily, but for a generation. To coin a phrase, do we really want to move from realigning the left to propping up the right? Because we can't do both.

This is not simply an abstract argument about political philosophy. However disappointing the general election result may have been, nearly a quarter of voters voted Liberal Democrat. Why they voted for us probably varied from place to place, but a very large proportion of those voted for us specifically as vote against the Conservatives. It is difficult to see how those people will understand us voting to put David Cameron into 10 Downing Street, and equally difficult to see why they would support us in future.

Neither is this simply a problem with our existing voters. As Charles Kennedy has suggested, there is real danger in the longer term to the party of participating in this coalition. However much its supporters may try to claim otherwise, most of the senior posts and the overwhelming majority of cabinet places are held by the Conservatives.

Even Nick Clegg's position as deputy prime minister carries real dangers. Whether we like it or not, one of the major roles of a deputy prime minister must be to support and defend the prime minister in his absence. As such, it is certainly possible that Clegg could fairly quickly end up being seen by the public as first and foremost Cameron's deputy rather than the leader of a separate party.

In other areas, we are already seeing this. Would anyone who has seen David Laws on TV since joining the government really think there were any significant political difference between him and George Osborne? In that situation, there seems a real danger that, as time goes on, 'coalition', 'Conservative-led coalition' and 'Conservative' will start to be seen as interchangeable by both the press and voters.

In these circumstances, it is difficult to see how we can attract new voters. For those voters who support David Cameron's government, the obvious party to vote for would be David Cameron's party. Equally, opponents of the government are hardly likely to vote for a party which is an integral part of it. However much some party members may wish otherwise, no amount of Focus leaflets and local campaigning is going to alter those basic facts.

Supporters of coalition have claimed that it will not prevent the Liberal Democrats developing policies separate or opposed to the Conservatives, on which we can campaign.

Strictly speaking this is, of course, correct. There is nothing that will prevent conference or the Federal Policy Committee developing independent policies. In practice, though, this ignores the realities of a coalition government. True, the party will be able to develop its own policies different from those of the government, but how exactly are we going to run any sort of credible campaign as a party on policies that our own leadership is going to be required to speak and vote against?

So what happens now? For better or worse, the coalition has been agreed. Of course these concerns might prove unfounded. It might be possible for the party to retain some sort of independent profile separate from the Conservatives in the government, but 'might' is a very risky basis on which to rest the future of the party.

At the very least, those of us who are deeply sceptical need to remain within the party and continue the debate. Many in the leadership will try to imply that the party has agreed to this for the next five years, and that the issue is now closed. As time goes on, and the political situation changes, it needs to be made clear that it is not.

Jeremy Sanders is a member of Huddersfield Liberal Democrats

A NEW TRIDENT CAN'T BE BUILT

The industrial infrastructure to build a Trident replacement no longer exists here or in the USA, says John Wright

The history of nuclear weapons in the UK starts in 1940. Rudolf Peierls and his co-workers showed that a nuclear weapon was possible and gave an initial estimate of the critical mass for uranium 235. The British effort was blended into the Manhattan Project, which we now know was highly successful.

However, the US McMahon Act of 1946 put an end to any co-operation or information sharing, such that even the information produced by British scientists was no longer available; much of it had to be done all over again, and as a result Britain became the third nation to test a nuclear weapon.

A considerable infrastructure was created, a whole new government laboratory for development work, a gaseous diffusion plant for producing enriched uranium and the two 'piles' for producing plutonium, one of which famously caught fire in 1957. It has also long been considered that weapons grade plutonium could be got from the Magnox reactors, indeed the first eight (four at Calder Hall and four at Chapelcross) were largely used for producing plutonium until 1994.

Britain designed and constructed fission and fusion weapons from 1946 to 1958, when the last test of a UK designed fusion weapon showed that the UK had a handle on the technology. After this, the UK and the US agreed that information would flow once again. It was always said that both sides gained information from this arrangement. This signalled a major change in the way nuclear weapons were arranged in the UK.

Under the 1962 Nassau Agreement, the UK arranged for Polaris missiles for its submarines, in service from 1968 onwards. The missiles were derived from the US Polaris A3 type, which carried the W58 warhead, its claim to fame being that it had the first non-spherical fission trigger.

Originally the W58 used a primary fission trigger called Kinglet, later modified by the UK as part of the Chevaline program under the code name Harriet, which is said to be a hardened version of Kinglet. Suspicion argues the British warheads to be derivative of the W58, but this is a matter of conjecture.

The other thrust of Chevaline was to provide a system of ABM avoidance. This involved replacement of one or two of the three warheads by the decoy system. Another aspect of this was to extend the lives of the Polaris system. The US had replaced its Polaris missiles by 1984 but the UK ones were in service until 2000 when the last Vanguard submarine carrying Trident was commissioned.

The UK Trident almost certainly carries variations on the American W76 or W88 warheads. There are though some design differences.

Either way, these warheads were designed in the 1970s and built in the 1990s, and are around 20 years old. The US is currently concerned that its nuclear weapons may no longer work, thanks to deterioration of some of the non-nuclear components. Since our nuclear weapons are based on the American ones, they may well have the same issues.

The Americans have been agonizing over what they call the Reliable Replacement Warhead for some time – but this is currently unfunded by the Obama administration. The money that Labour and the Conservatives want to spend is on a system that may not work. We can't verify that, even if it was desirable, since testing is no longer allowed and Britain publishes no information on its nuclear weapons. What is clear is that to possess and hold nuclear weapons, one needs a large industrial infrastructure to underpin it. It is questionable in a situation where the UK has been so dependent on America for this that we have it on our own.

No doubt someone would say that Trident weapons are designed and built by AWE, but bear in mind AWE has not tested any weapon since 1992 and British weapons have had close links to American ones since 1958.

No one in the US has built a nuclear weapon since 1992 and the infrastructure it created has largely been abolished – Hanford, Rocky Flats, Pantex, Savannah River. Look these up and the word 'was' is quite common. Many of the processes used to make nuclear weapons can now no longer be done and we have closed many of the factories where components were made (like AWE Cardiff). Simple health and safety may prevent others being done as well.

It is perhaps relevant in this context was that one reason British Airways wanted to abandon Concorde was that many of the parts needed could either no longer be got or would cost several times what they cost originally. This is not really the issue with the existing weapons, however in US eyes the reason they may not work is the non-nuclear components.

John Wright is a physicist and engineer. He was a Liberal candidate at Leicester University and for Leicestershire County Council in the mid-1970s

A STEP TOWARDS STV

Keith Sharp argues that electoral reformers must win the referendum on AV whatever its failings

Under post-2010 election coalition government, hopes for electoral reform are diminished but, for once, not dashed. The situation is paradoxical – a proportional system for the House of Commons is off the agenda, despite Liberal Democrats being in government; and yet there are serious constitutional reforms on the agenda, despite Conservatives being in power.

For electoral reformists, the supposed big prize is a referendum on the alternative vote to replace first past the post. Encouragingly, it does come amid other Liberal Democrat constitutional reforms (an elected second chamber, fixed term parliaments) – and it was prised out of the Conservatives in five days of negotiations, compared with 13 years of delay from Labour. The political reform section of the coalition government statement has no less than 27 policy bullet points, many of which fit straight into any liberal/civil society agenda, so complaining may seem churlish.

An AV referendum is, however, just about the thinnest gruel possible for the electoral reform movement – and for Liberal Democrats who are anxious about the party's electoral prospects at the next, post-coalition, election. The junior coalition partner will be vulnerable to the mother of all squeezes at the next election. The only real safety net is to get a proportional system in place. And we do not have that.

It seems the Lib Dem coalition negotiators grabbed at the AV referendum offer rather than proportional single transferable vote as sufficient reform to satisfy party members. Even accepting that Cameron could not have persuaded Tory hard-liners to agree to a full PR referendum, there were surely other possibilities.

What happened to the original Tory offer of a Speakers' Conference on electoral systems? The Lib Dems should have pushed for the referendum as well as, not instead of, a Speakers' Conference, perhaps redesigned and oriented towards being a Citizens Assembly-style convention – surely in line with the citizen empowerment theme of the new government.

And what has happened to English local government? We have some wacky Tory noises about local democracy – many of which, such as parent-powered schools (whatever happened to parent governors?) amount to bypassing locally-elected politicians – but the electoral system has been ignored, despite the fact that the single transferable vote is already in place for Scottish local government. We are rightly addressing the issues of the second chamber, so why has local democracy been ignored – especially as the Tories now claim to be born-again localists?

There are, though, some positive signs. The coalition negotiations went smoothly and coherently, with due process and governance, due in no small part, one hears, to the good support and guidance of the civil service. This has surely scuppered the ludicrous notion that we must have the single-party government that FPTP usually delivers, to avoid back door, closed door deals, shenanigans and general undemocratic paralysis and weak government – and all the other excoriating plagues that many politicians disgracefully scaremongered about (notably, er… Cameron) as the likelihood of a minority parliament grew closer. We now have a clear precedent for post-election constructive cooperation leading to government formation, dismantling one so-called argument of anti-reformists.

There is, beyond the Westminster bubble, greater public pressure and support – and even media coverage – for reform than ever before. It seems increasingly understood that FPTP suppresses third and other parties; and that unlike the 1950s when 95% of the electorate voted either Labour or Tory, that combined vote is down to little more than 60% of all votes cast; and the link has been made, intuitively or otherwise, between the great MPs' expenses scandal of 2009, and the way in which we elect our MPs.

Against this background, the crucial battle is to win the coming referendum on AV. Make no mistake; whatever AV's shortcomings, the referendum must be won.

Recent columns of Liberator have questioned the position and campaigning strategy of the Electoral Reform Society, particularly towards AV. The Society is rightly an unshakeable advocate of STV but, following a membership consultation in late 2009, is throwing its weight and resources fully into the AV campaign.

There are a number of reasons for this. Society members are seemingly pragmatic as well as ideal and don't want the perfect to be the enemy of the good; AV, for all its disproportionality, does remove the need for negative (misnamed tactical) voting. It is also a step towards STV (AV in multi-member constituencies amounts to STV, after all); and its adoption would break the stranglehold of the current pernicious system, showing change is possible.

Since mid-2009, the Society has run its public campaigning through Vote for a Change (hence the Society itself has not been fully visible in the media) and now has 60,000 email contacts and potential campaigners. The Society is also refreshing its campaigning team for the battles ahead. Finally, there will doubtless be an umbrella 'Yes' referendum campaign and the Society is pledged to work with other reform organizations, such as Unlock Democracy and Power 2010, to win the referendum when the time comes.

Keith Sharp is a member of Islington Liberal Democrats and vice chair of the Electoral Reform Society

FEET TO THE FIRE

A coalition with the Conservatives was bound to come one day under three-party politics, but the national interest is not served by diminishing liberalism, says Michael Meadowcroft

Without the good fortune of our capricious electoral system failing to produce a majority for any party, the missed opportunity of the 2010 general election would be far more visible.

It certainly produced the most inexplicable outcome of any of the 14 elections with which I have been involved. Ostensibly there was no evidence 'on the doorstep' right up to polling day of the 4% overnight shift away from the Liberal Democrats' final opinion poll rating. Curiously – and this may be a quirk of the pollsters' problems in identifying support for minor parties – the shift did not go to either major party but to 'others'. I hope that significant research is being done, whether independently or for the party, to try and understand why we could win Burnley and Redcar but lose seats in Cornwall.

There are, however, a number of anecdotal points to make from experience in Leeds. First, despite all the media hype, there was no indication that there would be a very high poll. There was still a great deal of antagonism evident towards all politicians and the eventual turnout figure of 65% is still disturbingly low. Second, although there was evidence of a shift towards us, it was not as evident or as enthusiastic as the media and the polls suggested – apart, perhaps, among students. Third, and most significant, there were a great many 'undecided'. Being a long term cynic, I usually assume these are supporters of other parties who don't wish to offend the canvasser but, on this occasion, it was all too accurate, and apparently largely made up of electors pondering whether to vote Liberal Democrat who didn't go through with it when faced with the actual ballot paper.

What of the election campaign? Nick Clegg clearly did a superb job out in front and transformed the party and its leadership from a half-known, partially rated, third party to a contender for government, wooed by all. However, I will risk the heresy of essaying a couple of critical comments. I accept that Nick had to avoid sounding either ridiculous or triumphalist, but when his brilliantly judged performance in the first television debate added an average of 9% to our poll ratings, it was the moment to state firmly that the momentum was with the Liberal Democrats and that we were eminently capable of leading the government. After all, if one is at 30% or more in half the opinion polls in the fortnight after that first debate – including six of them in which we led – that is what the voters are saying.

LACK OF CONFIDENCE

The credible aim of 'winning' the election never impinged itself on the campaign, even if it was tentatively essayed on a couple of occasions. In fact, in his very last Radio 4 interview, Nick was asked by Eddie Mair on the PM programme, "to imagine for a minute being in Number 10." After a short pause, Nick responded that he couldn't imagine it. Sensitivity and humility are winsome traits in political leaders but this was a moment to state his, and the party's, readiness for office. I have a feeling that some at least of the Liberal Democrat leaning 'undecideds' wanted their decision to vote for us to be responded to more confidently.

My other, linked, concern is that the burden of Nick's later direct appeals, both in the third television debate and in the final election broadcast, was unduly negative. The "don't let them tell you..." line was, of course, relevant, not least given the vicious right-wing media attacks, but it sounded as if we lacked enough confidence to win. I was reminded of the different approach to the same message in the 1964 general election when the slogan was, "If you think like a Liberal, vote like a Liberal." The final television broadcast was anchored by Ludovic Kennedy on the theme that "you, the voter, have to have the courage to vote Liberal," and his final – live – appeal to camera ended with the statement that "if you do think like a Liberal but don't vote Liberal, you don't have much courage, do you?" It had a powerful effect in strengthening wavering Liberal voters.

In retrospect, it seemed that the party managers did not know what to do with the immediate surge in support following Nick's success in the first debate. Certainly we didn't know what to do locally! There seemed to be a sudden millennial belief in miracles and that, with two more debates to come, Nick's charisma plus the usual surge would carry us inexorably upwards. It was not to be and the polls peaked even before the second debate. The scandalous media attack dogs bit deeply and this may have had some effect, although the evidence for media influence on voting habits generally is pretty feeble. We do, however, pay a very high price for press freedom.

TARGETING OBSESSION

I have a sense that the obsession with targeting was a factor in our inability to clinch the surge in support. Heretical it may be, but I am less and less enamoured with the principle of targeting. It may be justified in the final dash to the tape but in the weeks and months beforehand it is a substitute for building up self-supporting organisations and, by laying waste to every other seat in the vicinity, it ensures that there is no broad party campaign able to respond to and to utilise those many individuals who turn to us, as they did in large numbers after the first television debate. There is a veritable Liberal Democrat desert around target seats, which greatly exacerbates the intense difficulty of trying to focus on target municipal seats in non-target constituencies in the midst of a parliamentary

election.

There is no substitute for building up a committed and motivated membership. Unless there were thousands of recruits during this election campaign, the party still has fewer members than the Plymouth Brethren and exhortations to work even harder were increasingly cries of wolf to a frankly tiny membership worn down by the tyranny of Focus and 'Action Days' that had no visible gap between them. We have to develop an emphasis on liberal values and on a liberal vision that captures and inspires those of like mind. It can be done as was evident in the determination of Liberals to survive and to challenge the establishment parties against huge odds in the 1950s.

"In retrospect, it seemed that the party managers did not know what to do with the immediate surge in support following Nick's success in the first debate"

There are those – a minority no doubt – who are liberal by nature and by instinct who can be drawn into membership and who, with sufficient intellectual and organisational support, will be prepared to try and persuade the voters. We have to "win the winners". By and large, the electorate does not vote for its prejudices but, like a jury in a rather large public court, for what it perceives to be 'right'. Nick did a great job in arguing for an amnesty for long-stay illegal immigrants but the ground for liberal measures generally had not been sufficiently prepared over the years. The test of whether being in government, particularly with even the merest measure of electoral reform, transforms the political scene will be seen in whether we can build a broader-based party capable of taking the political argument to the voters in literature and on the doorstep.

Post-election, our negotiators did a remarkable job. With the hand they were given, they probably got the best deal possible. It is no use having the visceral feeling, as I have, that being a radical progressive party precludes a coalition with the Conservatives when all one's experience in an industrial city like Leeds is of a politically corrupt and opportunist Labour Party. I have been fighting conservatism for fifty-two years now, but it has been as much a conservatism of the left as of the right. Labour's inability to deliver its part of any putative coalition is endemic with its tribal conservatism. It was bad enough having David Blunkett and John Reid attacking any potential deal from the outside, but the killer blow was landed from within by Douglas Alexander when he said that he could not in any way work with the SNP. That one public utterance destroyed a parliamentary arithmetic that was already teetering on the brink.

The logic of three-party politics is that there will at some point be a coalition with the Conservatives, otherwise there is the risk of an unchallenged partnership becoming moribund and of one's negotiating strength being dissipated. We have got it much earlier than once imagined partly as a consequence of the sheer arithmetic and partly because of the political reality that a Labour Party in government for thirteen years had lost the election and ought not to be put back into office by any deal other than one which could sustain genuine electoral reform and an unlikely reversal of Labour's lousy record on civil rights.

And those who might be tempted by the 'purity' option of allowing the Conservatives to have a minority administration were certainly not around in 1966 or in 1974 when, in similar situations, Harold Wilson held early 'second' elections, blamed the Liberals for the need for them, and set back our progress by eight and nine years respectively.

I am much taken by having a leadership and a parliamentary party prepared to act in the national interest, even at great political risk, but the national interest is never served by diminishing liberalism. The best test of Liberal Democrat participation in this government will be to see by how much liberal influence in the country is increased.

The party is certainly in some danger, at least in the short term, and I am anxious to see how far the new recruits from the election campaign remain active and whether we can recruit more. We may well have to work harder to explain and cajole. Ours can be a remarkably mature party, as witnessed by the special assembly a mere ten days after polling day. After a lifetime of party conferences, I'm usually unaffected by the hype and the 'fixing' but I was genuinely moved by the event, not least by the awareness that neither other party would have dared to hold a full party conference in such circumstances.

As a party, we have a very difficult dual role to play. We have to be supportive to our parliamentary colleagues whilst maintaining the party's independent role in campaigning for its aims, even when they are at odds with the coalition policy. The problem in parliament will come when the individual measures in the coalition agreement come to the floor of the House. It is one thing to support a package, whether the agreement or the Queen's Speech, but quite another formally to go through the lobbies for measures to which the individual MP, peer and the party are opposed. In this context, Tony Greaves's curiously cryptic letter (Guardian, 21 May) appeared to suggest that Liberal Democrat peers will treat the coalition in the same way as it treated previous administrations.

The crucial point to keep on stating is that, as a party, the Liberal Democrats are no less liberal and no less independent than they were on 6 May.

Michael Meadowcroft was Liberal MP for Leeds West 1983-87

STUMBLING ONTO THE RIGHT PATH

Even the road markings around the Birmingham special conference echoed the complex options the Liberal Democrats faced on forming the coalition, says David Grace

Liberals do meet in strange places when they have important decisions to make. In 1988, we packed out the soulless hangar that was the Norbreck Castle in Blackpool, at a special conference to vote on merger with the Social Democrats.

This year we gathered in the soulless hangar that is Exhibition Hall 3 at the National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham, for a special conference to vote on coalition with the Conservatives.

Both conferences produced huge majorities in favour of the leader's recommendations, the former to merge and the latter to coalesce. I found myself in the minority in Blackpool (and still have my lapel badge saying "I am 1 of 385") and in the majority in Birmingham, a majority that Nick Clegg described as North Korean, as less than a few dozen hands went up against the motion approving the agreement.

In 1988, I began by supporting merger in principle but ended by opposing the terms agreed by our poorly-led, weak and divided negotiators. In 2010, I began by opposing coalition with the Tories in principle but ended by supporting the terms agreed by our well-led, skilful and surprisingly united negotiators. I suspect I was not alone in that journey.

The route between the Ramada Encore Inn and the NEC's exhibition halls is a bizarre industrial wasteland, a space not so much designed as left over between the spaces that the architects did design. They have sought to cheer it up by the addition of colourful markings on the tarmac. As I walked this strange path to the conference, I noted the double red lines around the buildings which seemed to declare, "You might want to stop here but you can't, no you can't."

I had always expected that a deal with Labour was going to be difficult if, as was inevitable, it lost the election. The Liberal Democrats would be blamed for putting a defeated government back into power and hadn't we spent the last thirteen years attacking the authoritarian policies of New Labour? In practice, although many of us wanted the so-called progressive coalition, the truth was that it wasn't really on offer.

TWO TO TANGO

Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs together did not form a majority. How progressive would you say John Reid, Jack Straw and David Blunkett were? It takes two to tango and they didn't want to dance anyway. Gordon Brown, Peter Mandelson and Lord Adonis might have wanted to pirouette in a deadly *pas de deux* with the Liberal Democrats but Labour's clumping *corps de ballet* just couldn't rise up on tiptoe and join the dance.

For those, like me, lost in that urban wilderness on the edge of Birmingham, the unlikely path to the NEC was marked out on the ground by a broken blue line, which kept changing direction. How prophetic of the local highway authority! Birmingham City Council was, after all, a Liberal Democrat/Conservative coalition, as it happened.

The terms of the coalition agreement seem unbelievable and we must hope that they do not turn out to be incredible. At present, there is a genuine convergence of view between the partners on civil liberties, a dislike of bureaucracy and a preference for decentralised decision-making (albeit newfound in the Conservative Party). There has always been more agreement between politicians than an adversarial, binary parliamentary system and media hungry for conflict would leave us to believe.

I do not share the starry-eyed view of those who echo Wordsworth's "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive" but I cannot help a little thrill of pleasure to see Clegg, Laws, Cable, Heath and the others at the government dispatch box. I do know one or two people who have left the party in despair as deep as Browning's "Never glad confident morning again," which he wrote in the poem *The Lost Leader* lamenting the loss of Wordsworth to the conservative cause. Perhaps some believe that their leader has also become a Conservative, but I cannot agree.

The main issues on which we have given way are tuition fees, Trident and nuclear power, but have we actually given anything away?

There is a parliamentary majority of Conservative and Labour MPs who will vote anyway to keep tuition fees and even allow the Russell Group of universities to increase them. We can't stop them in government but we couldn't have stopped them in opposition. The same applies to the replacement of Trident. I had hoped it would at least be included in the Strategic Defence Review but now when we express our arguments against the replacement, we do it from within government. The same applies to the development of new nuclear power stations, which Conservatives and Labour both favour. Chris Huhne may have effectively prevented a new generation by ensuring that there will be no public subsidy.

We can now, of course, confidently expect the Labour opposition to denounce measures and cuts they either did support in government or would propose if still in office, but I doubt them capable of the obvious hypocrisy of reversing themselves on these issues. The same may also apply to the bill on a referendum on the Alternative Vote. Tories will be whipped (some enjoy

that) and although some may rebel, how can Labour vote against what they proposed themselves so very recently?

MAJOR SPLIT

Of course, we have different values and different instincts from most Tories, as we do from most Labour politicians. The difference between coalition and traditional politics is that we don't have to pretend to agree about everything and we shouldn't try to. The press will seize on every slight difference of opinion as a major split and the beginning of the end, just as they seized upon the rows between Blair and Brown. We will need to have grown-up rows in public instead of tantrums behind closed doors.

"The main issues on which we have given way are tuition fees, Trident and nuclear power, but have we actually given anything away?"

When I have doubts about the coalition, they are stilled by the sight of those who oppose it. The fury of Melanie Phillips and Mehdi Hasan, Caroline Flint and Douglas Murray, Alistair Campbell and Piers Morgan on Question Time was balm to my soul. With these scorpions, bigots and charlatans of left and right against us, we must be doing something right.

We have also accepted the Conservative timing for deficit reduction, which we opposed during the election. Samuel Brittan has written that the deficit is not such a great crisis as most people believe but he has also written that the difference between the parties on the timing and size of cuts is not very significant in its economic consequences.

As so often happens in politics, the rhetorical divide is several orders of magnitude greater than the actual divide. At David Laws's celebration party for the Yeovil constituency, I told him that as Chief Secretary to the Treasury he stood a very good chance of becoming the most unpopular politician in Britain. I also gave him a present. I did not give him a knife because I did not want to encourage more and deeper cuts. I gave him a knife-sharpener with an orange Liberal Democrat rosette to remind him to make fine cuts in tune with our principles.

I suspect that the first package of £6.2bn is designed to have a greater psychological impact upon senior civil servants, public sector managers and the international financial markets than its actual impact upon the economy. That is the reason for its unseemly haste.

We got lost driving to the NEC in a maze of roundabouts, following poorly signed roads that led nowhere. There were two other options canvassed for Liberal Democrats after the election of a hung parliament. One was that we should reach a 'supply and confidence' deal with Conservatives to let them stay in government. I could see no advantage in this at all. We would get the blame and none of the credit. We would have no influence on policy and administration and would lose seats as soon as David Cameron called an early election.

The other suggestion was that we should go into opposition with Labour. The same objections apply. The very wonderful Camden councillor Flick Rea (the Liberal Revue's Mrs Thatcher), faced with disappointed helpers who disliked the idea of co-operation with the Tories, recalled the dilemma of Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* when her father says, "An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr Collins and I will never see you again if you do." For an Austen hero, unlike Jane herself, there could only be one worse fate – not to marry anyone. If Labour had refused the Liberal Democrats and the Liberal Democrats had refused the Conservatives, the voters might be forgiven for saying, "What's the point of them?" and refused the Liberal Democrats themselves at the next opportunity – an early election.

The other colour in the environs of the NEC is yellow, the hatched yellow boxes, which mean, "Do not enter this space unless your exit is clear". It is a truth universally acknowledged that the minority partner in a coalition will suffer most when it ends. In a selfish way, perhaps we could hope that Cameron, Hague and Liam Fox decide in a few years' time to do something really stupid like invade Iran so that we can leave the coalition for a good and popular reason and, assuming that the Labour opposition isn't equally stupid, our defection would actually stop an invasion.

However, a coalition is more likely to end with a whimper than a bang. That is why it is vital that, while our parliamentary party accepts the constraints of coalition politics, collective responsibility and parliamentary whips, the party itself remains independent. MEPs, MSPs, AMs and councillors are not in coalition and must not be constrained by it. No-one from Nick Clegg downward should ever come to the party conference and speak against a policy motion "because the government wouldn't like it".

Liberal Democrats must accept that their leadership in government cannot deliver everything we want, but the leaders must also accept that the party is free to shape its policy preferences for the future, so that we fight the next election as an independent party and not as a government faction. It's been fun my political life, 36 years in opposition, but now I find myself in a strange and unexpected place and I say with Longfellow, "Life is real and life is earnest."

David Grace is a member of Yeovil Liberal Democrats

CONFIDENCE IN THE COALITION

What Liberal Democrat councillors have achieved locally, the party's ministers can now do nationally, says John Shipley

Don't underestimate the pride that so many committed Liberal Democrat voters feel about being in government and having helped to bring about such a dramatic change in our party's fortunes.

At the end of May, I went to a community centre in the west end of Newcastle to be greeted by some long-standing party supporters I'd not seen for a while. They were overjoyed by our success and felt their patience in waiting for power had been amply rewarded. Forgotten was the fact that our result nationally and locally had not been quite what we were expecting. Forgotten too was the fact that we were in coalition with the Conservatives.

As someone who has spent a political lifetime opposing Conservatives as well as Labour, it is an odd position to be in. Here in Newcastle, the Conservatives haven't won a council seat for 18 years. They contest every ward but nearly always finish third.

Now we share government with them. And I welcome that fact because it gives stability to our economy and makes taking difficult decisions a bit easier because two parties are taking responsibility in partnership.

On 7 May, I assumed that we'd end up forming a progressive alliance with Labour. Three factors made this impossible.

First, Labour lost nearly a hundred seats. That's hardly a vote of confidence from the electorate so it is hard to see in retrospect how they could have stayed in government.

Secondly, too many of their leading MPs saw going into opposition as an opportunity in the hope that the inevitable budget cuts would rebound on the coalition. They knew the government could not go on borrowing a quarter of its spending and they preferred someone else to get the blame for making cuts they themselves would have made.

And thirdly, many of the reforms the country wants concern problems Labour had caused. They eroded civil liberties, created a quango state, centralised decision making and led our economy into a deep recession. A coalition with Labour would not have worked.

WE BELIEVED THE POLLS

It was the longest and hardest election campaign I can recall. Fighting three parliamentary seats (one 'target', one 'moving forward', one 'paper' campaign), as well as defending 16 council wards and trying to gain another, took a lot of forward planning, time, money and sheer effort by a lot of people over many months.

We had very high hopes of finally winning a parliamentary seat in Newcastle to complement our control of the city council. Like everyone else, we believed the opinion polls. Those of us who could remember previous elections where our vote dropped in the last 48 hours nevertheless felt that this time things were different.

Nick Clegg's leadership had shone through in the campaign and, even though there was the odd policy wobble in the last few days, we thought we were fair set for a very good set of results on around a 28% share of the vote. The late registrations of lots of young people – particularly students – augured well for our success and on 28% we would gain at least two Newcastle parliamentary seats.

As things turned out, we polled a very similar vote to 2005 in the general election and managed to keep control of the council, even though we lost six seats as a result of the higher turnout generated by both national and local elections being held on the same day.

So, we re-learned what in truth we already knew – that people who vote only at general elections tend not to be our supporters where we are in power locally. In the context of fixed-term parliaments,

NEWCASTLE'S ACHIEVEMENTS

- Adult social care service has a top three star rating.
- ALMO Your Homes Newcastle also has the top three stars.
- A beacon council for addressing child poverty.
- One of two councils singled out by the Audit Commission for our work to mitigate the impact of the recession.
- Nominated the UK's most sustainable city by Forum for the Future with the lowest carbon emissions of any UK city and a recycling rate quadrupled to 47%.
- Creation of the 'Newcastle Futures' company, providing support to the, help long-term unemployed people back into work.
- The award-winning City Library and large sums invested in improving schools and social housing.
- Focus on support to families, and tackling health inequalities with a free leisure offer for young people.
- Building affordable homes for rent in larger numbers and devolving power, resources and responsibilities to local people.

holding national and local elections on the same day will become a regular event. We will have to do far more to persuade those voters to give us their support.

In the end, it seems too many people in Newcastle were fearful of a Conservative victory and voted Labour to try to prevent it. Across the UK, it was the same story as we lost more council seats than we had expected.

"It seems too many people in Newcastle were fearful of a Conservative victory and voted Labour to try to prevent it"

Today, Newcastle is still Lib Dem locally and we have an eight seat cushion over Labour (42-34). We'll hold our ground next year since we won't have to run a national campaign in which the local elections end up being secondary.

We were advised that we must run our general election campaign on by-election lines, deliver masses of leaflets, win the parliamentary seat and see the local candidates elected on the back of that national success.

What happened was the worst of both worlds. We lost the national campaigns and lost some ground locally too. We lost some excellent councillors in the process, as did many other places across the country and today we find ourselves one of only 25 councils in Lib Dem control. Still, we polled 38% of local votes – as did Labour – and some 9,000 people voted for us locally when they didn't nationally.

That's because we have a good reputation locally. But it wasn't quite enough, even though we'd held council tax under inflation for six years through transformation of internal structures and smarter procurement. Indeed, many services have got better under Lib Dem leadership (see box) and this reflects liberal democracy in action. If we can do this locally, the prize for being able to do the same in government is well worth entering a coalition to achieve.

MASSIVE OPPORTUNITY

For Liberal Democrats, being in continuous opposition nationally did not permit us to lead change so I want the opportunities now open to us to be grasped.

For the Conservatives, entering coalition means sharing power in a government with Liberal Democrat colleagues who have many similar instincts on the environment, civil liberties and constitutional reform. I suspect many senior Conservatives may find it easier working with Liberal Democrats than their own right wing.

So now we find ourselves actually running Whitehall departments. For a council leader, this matters. I've ministers I can talk to. I can see Lib Dem priorities becoming realities. I can see local government being freed from its over-centralisation. I can see constitutional change.

I find it refreshing that two parties can work side-by-side in the national interest to implement a programme of reform. Politicians still have a poor reputation. The coalition can now restore public confidence in parliament as an institution.

I am much encouraged by the Queen's Speech. No, I don't like elected police commissioners and nor do I want an elected mayor in our city. Both run counter to our wish to devolve and decentralise so I find it odd that the government thinks that concentrating power in a single person would enhance democracy.

But elsewhere there is much for councils to cheer such as: a power of general competence; a more local planning system; new powers to prevent the closure of neighbourhood facilities and services; and reductions in the scale of local government inspections.

I don't yet see AV (at least) proposed for local elections but now I can do something about that. It's a strong position for us to be in and I welcome the confidence with which our party took the plunge into coalition.

During the final days of the election campaign, Paddy Ashdown came to Newcastle and spoke at Grey's Monument, which celebrates the Great Reform Act of 1832. He called for sweeping reform of the governance of our country once again to great applause from hundreds of people. Through the coalition we can deliver just that.

John Shipley is Liberal Democrat leader of Newcastle City Council

WE BROKE THE GLASS CEILING

Public disbelief in the Liberal Democrats' ability to govern held the party back. Now it can take the lead on fairness and environmental policy, says Ed Randall

Throughout my lifetime, there's been a hold on Liberal/Liberal Democrat aspiration – a political glass ceiling. The party has faced a credibility problem it has been unable to surmount.

The problem is enshrined in first past the post. It is our very own, very British, version of Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*. British electors have simply refused to believe Liberals/Liberal Democrats can win a general election on their own. The electorate's fear of the consequences of electing either of the Liberal Democrats' two larger adversaries, the 'old' parties they grew up with, leaving them to rule on their own, has meant, much as electors might wish it otherwise, that this is precisely what their votes have delivered. They have refused to believe that British politics can be anything other than the politics of second or third best, and that is precisely what they have been given.

Simple plurality balloting permits minorities to take and hold absolute power. With a minority of the votes, one or other of the 'old' parties inherited dictatorial powers. The elective dictatorship is entrenched by parliamentary and constitutional conventions, which reserve a key decision, when to call a new election, to the party leader. The leader and his/her party stand to benefit mightily from the electoral advantage of having had the most strategically placed pluralities at the previous election. Of course, the leader can make a hash of it, as Gordon Brown did, and 'go to the country' at 'the wrong time'. But the leader, and his/her party, have good reason to expect that the parcel they dropped – untrammelled power at Westminster – will be handed back to them in the not too distant future.

PUBLIC DISGUST

Even as levels of public disgust with duopolistic politics have grown, voting for a third party, in a system built upon discredited duopolistic politics, has remained too much like a leap in the dark to attract and grip more than a third of the electorate. Nevertheless, in this May's general election the mechanism for translating the largest minority of votes into a majority of Westminster seats broke down. The 'winning' party, the Conservatives, could not, as they had expected to, take all. None could count themselves unqualified winners, all of the parties, save for the Greens and the Alliance, lost.

Most of us expected the 2010 general election to produce a variant of the debilitating parliamentary arithmetic, which Liberal Democrats have resigned themselves to in the past. There were few who expected that the parliamentary party would be taken out of its (or our) comfort zone. We didn't expect an outright winner, when it came to the popular vote; we did anticipate a Westminster winner. While none of the general elections held since 1945 have produced an outright winner – some have come close – the parcel has usually been passed smoothly from Lab to Con and back again.

But something extraordinary happened in early May 2010; a result that has been an agony for many Liberal Democrats; an agony nevertheless pregnant with possibilities. What was different about the result of the general election of 2010 was that it not only invited political parties at Westminster to consider cooperating with one another, it also made possible a genuine partnership in government, one that went beyond 'confidence and supply', that challenged the seeming verities of British political life, and that could last for the whole of a parliamentary term.

Many of the Liberal Democrats' most experienced parliamentarians wanted a partnership with the Labour Party; what some have called a 'progressive alliance'. But, with only one genuinely progressive party at Westminster, the Liberal Democrats, a progressive alliance could not be formed. The Labour Party, the Labour tribe, lacked the numbers and, much more importantly, the will to share power. It did not want to be a partner in government, either in the short or, more to the point, the long term.

THE PARTY'S BÊTE NOIRE

The serious offer of a partnership in government came from the Liberal Democrats' traditional enemy – the party's bête noire. A party whose embrace many of those who study British political history, most especially the career of Joseph Chamberlain, view as a Liberal's nemesis. And it is undeniable that sharing power, with parties small and large, has been hazardous for Liberals. But sharing power is what Liberals say they believe in and believe to be good for democratic society.

Of course, it is not sharing power that is the real issue for Liberal Democrats. They accept that partnership politics is an inevitable accompaniment of fair votes. It is what Liberal Democrats are able to do with any political partnership that is the real issue. Will partnership help the party to fulfil its mission, to make the United Kingdom fairer, freer and more responsible? Let's take each member of this trio in turn, and attempt to answer two questions that every Liberal Democrat should be asking them self and posing to other Liberal Democrats.

How should Liberal Democrats campaign for what they believe in, when they have a share in government? What should Liberal Democrats, inside and outside government, do to develop and

promote party policy, when the party's best known representatives are committed to a coalition?

We have some experience of how to answer these questions. Liberal Democrats have been in power and in coalition in Wales and in Scotland. Liberal Democrats have been in power and in coalition in towns and cities up and down the land. We know that membership of a coalition ought not to – does not need to, should not be allowed to – stand in the way of fighting hard for the things we espouse. Compromise, in a coalition, does not mandate silence. Collective responsibility undoubtedly influences the conduct of debates, but it should not put an end to debate. Disagreements needn't be fatal, in a robust and genuine political partnership. Honest disagreement is a good thing, a necessary thing in a representative democracy. It is a necessary condition for the mutual respect that must exist between members of a durable coalition.

We know that thoughtful and well argued differences strengthen rather than weaken co-operators. They make co-operation better informed and help to build constructive and productive partnerships. We also know that, when it comes to the business of government, disagreements have to be resolved; resolved between parties and within them. Some will win and others will lose; and, much of the time, almost all can gain.

Losing is much easier when you know why you have lost and are able to accept the good faith of those to whom you lost. All those who believe in partnership politics accept that intelligent disagreement aids rather than threatens good government. It is that understanding, not efforts to project sham agreement that is the key ingredient in a coalition with staying power.

Daniel Dorling, the author of *Injustice: Why Social Inequalities Persist*, has made one of the most persuasive arguments I have ever read in favour of arresting and reversing rising social and economic inequality. His is an exceptionally powerful argument in favour of fairness. And his book is a remarkable example of the power of reasoned argument. His ideas and the evidence he marshals represent a challenge to Liberal Democrats and Conservatives alike. The case he makes for social and economic justice is one that the members of David Cameron's 'open and generous coalition' cannot – should not – be allowed to ignore. To make the best arguments in support of greater fairness, in tax and education policy, is not only an obligation for Liberal Democrats; it is the best way of showing that British political culture is undergoing a change for the better.

DEMEANING AND DESTRUCTIVE

The more cogently and frequently Liberal Democrats present reasoned arguments in favour of fairness, the more they will demonstrate that they are capable of rising above the demeaning and destructive representations of political life that have come to fill the pages of our daily newspapers. It isn't only what we debate but how we debate it that matters. Politicians who are genuinely engaged by one another's opinions are much more likely to inform and engage the electorate. Politicians who endlessly snipe and sneer at one another's motives encourage the electorate to do the same.

The commitment to protect and enhance individual freedom, so powerfully expressed in the first iteration of the Liberal Democrat and Conservative coalition agreement, exemplifies the kind of language and the sense of common purpose that is desperately needed to convince a sceptical British electorate that Britain's political culture can be remade by partnership politics. When coalition partners are able to fashion a strong agreement then it is in their interests to express beliefs they share as frequently and persuasively as they can. Coalitions are strengthened by intelligent and principled agreements, as well as by differences that are honestly acknowledged and vigorously debated. And political arguments, honestly and respectfully expressed, can invigorate and strengthen political partnerships. For thoughtful Liberal Democrats and Conservatives, members of the coalition who are bound to wrestle with the compatibility (or otherwise) of liberty and equality, there is another impressive publication they can add to their coalition reading list: *Are Liberty and Equality Compatible?* by Jan Narveson and James P. Sterba.

The most difficult and demanding subjects, which members of the Liberal Democrat and Conservative coalition have to address, concern the great environmental challenges of our age.

David Cameron leads a parliamentary party that contains many members who have set their face against the findings of scientists about climate change, loss of biodiversity and environmental sustainability. Liberal Democrats, and some, though a worryingly small number of Conservative parliamentarians, have a critical role to play, within government and outside it, in shifting the centre of gravity of public debate about the need for ecologically responsible policy-making.

The coalition, despite the many risks and great uncertainties of power sharing, is rich in political opportunities for those who want to make the case for environmentally aware and responsible policy. Liberal Democrats, led by Chris Huhne, have an unrivalled opportunity to place themselves at the cutting edge of the coalition. They have an unparalleled opportunity to show up the hollowness of New Labour's environmentalism and make the coalition the champion of environmental responsibility.

Liberal environmentalism will be the rallying point for a new generation of Liberal Democrat campaigners; people who not only want to join a radical and environmentally aware party, but who will not be satisfied until they have helped make it an effective party of government. Liberal Democrats who understand this, but who are understandably nervous about how well the coalition will work (and how long it will last), should add Neil Carter's *The Politics of the Environment: Ideas, Activism and Policy*, to their coalition reading list.

Ed Randall is a senior lecturer in politics and social policy at Goldsmiths University of London. He is the author of Food, Risk and Politics (MUP, 2009) and was a Liberal Democrat councillor in Greenwich from 1982 to 1998

THE COST OF CENTRALISATION

There is huge scope for cutting public expenditure in a benevolent way if we get rid of centralisation and bigness, says David Boyle

Is there such a thing as Lib Dem cost-cutting? Or is it what the ancient Greeks used to call a *via negativa* – that you can only tell that a Lib Dem cost-cutter has been at work by what they *don't* cut?

One problem about being catapulted into government is that we never really developed a distinctively Liberal philosophy of thrift. The danger is that we may be simply overwhelmed by more conventional versions.

The localism dog barely barked in the general election, because it remained so undeveloped – on all sides – that it wasn't connected to any other area of policy. Why decentralise? Because it's more democratic? Because it's nicer?

We still haven't progressed much further than that. But a major reason for localising power, as long as you interpret that broadly, is that it is more effective.

And here is the clue for the Lib Dem cost-cutters, which I hope we will act on. Radical localism works better, so it is going to be less expensive. In fact, the huge New Labour tentacles of central control were, in some ways, an explanation why public services have ballooned in cost.

> *"The huge New Labour tentacles of central control were an explanation why public services have ballooned in cost"*

This has happened because of ever more intricate systems of central targets, standards, regulation and auditing. It has constrained local management, allowing no flexibility to meet local problems and needs, setting wasteful processes in concrete with expensive and unnecessary IT systems.

It has constrained and wasted the experience and imagination of frontline staff. It has damaged our ability to tackle urgent problems like child abuse by creating ineffective systems that frustrate the ability of professionals to use their judgement. But what does it cost and what can we save?

Let's start with the cost of the audit infrastructure.

The major auditing quangos, which enforce these standards, cost £600m in 2002 and now cost considerably more (Dan Corry, *New Local Government Network* (2002), quoted in Simon Jenkins, *Big Bang Localism: A rescue plan for British democracy*, Policy Exchange, London, 2004). We also know that every local authority spends an average of £1.8m just preparing the figures they need for these inspections (Pricewaterhouse Coopers, *Mapping the local government performance reporting landscape*, DCLG, London, July 2006).

These costs apply also to every other area of public services, which brings the total to around £4-5bn. There will be a continuing need for inspection, but a large chunk of that money can be saved just by junking the huge target and specification quangos.

The control regime costs way beyond this, because every target has staff attached in every local authority and PCT. The huge increase in bureaucracy in public services to provide this has never been quantified.

Evidence from American public services a decade ago, when they were structured very much like our own, was that somewhere between one in five and one in three public service staff were there to control the others (David Osborne and Peter Hutchinson, *The Price of Government: Getting the results we need in an age of permanent fiscal crisis*, New York, Basic Books, 2004). That would put the cost of public service management and control at around £50bn.

Of course, we need public service management for it to be effective – if only to manage the budgets and recruit the right people.

Even so, some of that can undoubtedly be saved by encouraging face-to-face relationships between professionals and clients, and replacing iron central control of every aspect of delivery with a supportive regime of mentoring front line staff.

We can't save this money without unravelling those control tentacles. But, if we have the nerve to do that, other savings should follow:

- The costs of central bureaucracy – The Local Government Association has calculated that its 'Delivering more for less' programme would deliver savings of £4.5bn from central government efficiencies, though much of this is already counted in the £4-5bn that the auditing infrastructure costs.
- The cost of bigness for its own sake – We know that bigger hospitals cost more to run per patient than smaller hospitals. Evidence from the USA suggests that hospital mergers raise costs by up to 58 per cent, both for profits and non-profits (Martin Gaynor and Carol Proper, 'Competition in Health Care: Lessons from the United States', *Bulletin of the Centre for Market and Public Organisation*, Bristol, spring 2004). We also know that smaller police forces are more effective than bigger ones (Dale Bassett et al,

A New Force, London, Reform, 2009). There is consistent evidence, stretching back four decades, that smaller schools are more effective, have better results, better behaviour, less truancy and vandalism, and better relationships than bigger schools (Kathleen Cotton, *New Small Learning Communities: Findings from Recent Literature*, Portland, Oregon, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2001).

- The cost of mistakes – We know that systems of centralised control drive up drug-related errors in hospitals (Naresh Khatri, Jonathon R.B. Halbesleben, Gregory F. Peroski and Wilbert Meyer, 'The relationship between management philosophy and clinical outcomes', *Health Care Management Review* 32 (2), April/June 2007). One person in ten who is admitted to a UK hospital now ends up suffering 'measurable harm', whether it is from mistakes, bugs, faulty equipment or drug side-effects. Longer hospital stays as a result cost £2-3 billion a year. This is also an explanation for the vast cock-ups of Labour's public service regime, like the NHS IT project (£12bn).
- The cost of inappropriate IT systems – The systems thinker John Seddon has estimated that the proportion of calls to public service call centres which shouldn't be coming in at all – because they are the result of failures elsewhere in the system – may be as high as 80 per cent. In local authorities and police forces, as much as 80 or 90 per cent of contacts are avoidable and unnecessary. But how much does all this cost? Seddon suggests that 20 to 40 per cent savings might be possible in planning and road repairs, 20 to 30 per cent in the administration of housing benefits and 30 to 40 per cent in care services. "The bureaucracy is cemented with information technology," he wrote (John Seddon, *Systems Thinking in the Public Sector*, Axminster, Triarchy Press, 2007). "All of which has been designed from the point of view of electronic data management and reporting, not solving people's problems … the result is the consumption of resources to feed the reporting machine instead of doing the value work."
- The cost of inappropriate processes – A report by the Health Service Ombudsman in 2007 said that the number of formal complaints was so high in the NHS (138,000) because managers were often unable to behave in a human way. They said "a bit of courage and common sense" could have resolved most of the complaints before they reached that stage. Given that the NHS paid out £800m in 2008 in damages (not including legal costs), that has cost implications across the public sector.
- The cost of service duplication – When services are joined up to suit the needs of Whitehall departments and quangos, rather than the people they are supposed to serve, the costs are vastly higher than they need to be. A 20-year-old leaving prison has to rely on 12 different people from nine different organisations to keep them out of prison (80 per cent go back). Older people can be visited by six different people from four different organisations.
- The cost of demoralisation – Social workers now have to spend 80 per cent of their time operating the Integrated Children's System (ICS) database, which controls professionals and encourages them to refer cases, leading to huge numbers of referrals, and enormous administrative burdens, rather than using their experience to tackle problems on the frontline (Sue White, Chris Hall and Sue Peckover, 'The descriptive tyranny of the common assessment framework', *British Journal of Social Work*, 16 April 2008).
- The costs passed onto ordinary people – Centralising services has hugely increased the travel costs on service users, which often have to be paid for in increased support. Closing benefits offices has passed costs onto the voluntary sector, who then apply for government grants. One advice centre found that 94 per cent of its cases were about mix-ups caused by the DWP (Advice UK, *It's the System Stupid: Radically re-thinking advice*, London, 2008).

OTHER SAVINGS

These are more difficult to calculate. There is no doubt that centralising procurement raises costs by reducing the number of companies big enough to bid, and by narrowing the wider environmental and social aspects of service delivery.

Costs are also much higher because Labour's sclerotic service systems are not flexible or innovative enough to reach out into the surrounding neighbourhood to prevent problems before they become expensive.

But the real issue here is about economies of scale. There clearly are such things. Very small schools will inevitably cost more to run per pupil than bigger ones, and the same goes for most public service institutions. But it is nonsense to suggest that this means bigger must always be cheaper.

There is increasing scepticism anyway about economies of scale among leading economists and accountants (Robert Dahl, *After the Revolution*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1970). If they exist at all, they depend on using a public service model based on manufacturing.

Actually, public services are most effective as human-scale facilitators of change, where everyone requires something different – the very opposite of the assembly line model that has dominated New Labour thinking.

The truth is that the kind of externalities that undermine cost savings – and can mean huge cost increases – begin to creep in as soon as those frontline service relationships are undermined by systems and processes, and Labour's public service 'modernisation' has consistently centralised control and put processes above the interests of people.

The evidence is that the bigger and more sclerotic the institution, and the more distant its management is from staff and beneficiaries, the bigger the scale of the waste. Can Lib Dems in government articulate this and tackle it? I hope so.

David Boyle is a fellow of the New Economics Foundation and co-author of Public Services Inside Out (nef/NESTA)

DISRAELI GEARS

Strange political alignments may have produced the best chance for long-term reform, says Bill le Breton

"Toryism is worn out & I cannot condescend to be a Whig." So wrote the Radical candidate for High Wycombe in the first general election following the 1832 Reform Bill.

By 1837, Disraeli the Radical had become Disraeli the Tory MP for that constituency. But to use a more modern descriptor, he would never be accepted as 'one of us' and he would have to use all his stealth and guile to rise in and to influence the Tory Party.

His future career in politics is the story, therefore, of a man who captures control of a party that never really trusted him but was prepared to do the Faustian deal in order to win power.

On his part, Disraeli remained sympathetic to the demands of the Chartists and argued for an alliance between the old landed interest and the new working classes against the emerging power of merchants and new industrialists. For twenty years up until the Second Reform Bill, he sought a Tory/Radical alliance.

In his book *Disraeli*, the historian Robert Blake writes, "The process whereby the 1867 Reform Bill was launched constitutes one of the oddest histories of confusion, cross-purposes and muddle in British political history…" which he then describes from page 456 onwards. The Tories start by opposing and end by supporting electoral reform and go on to be major beneficiaries.

These thoughts rushed through my mind at some point during the election, when Bill Cash reappeared on our screens and brought back memories of Maastricht and the era of John Major's cabinet 'bastards'.

All political parties are coalitions and their extreme wings often exert considerable influence that is disproportionate to their numbers. By strapping on 50 or 60 extra votes from a party adjacent to the opposite wing, a leader can restore things to an equilibrium nearer his own position. He can free himself from the tyranny of his own internal minority.

CHICKENED OUT

Tony Blair understood this when he flirted with the Liberal Democrats in the run up to the 1997 election. But on the Wednesday before polling day, he chickened out. This turned out to be a decision that influenced his power of manoeuvre, even with a landslide majority. Blair's retreat also saved the Liberal Democrats from a very difficult decision on the Friday afternoon after polling.

Cameron has not flinched from a similar course. Cash and the usual discontents will rumble and receive some coverage but they have no leverage and will soon be seen to have none by the media.

The election we have just come through showed that Labour still has a core vote that can be summoned by the old Tory scare dog whistle. From 1992 to 2005, where its core voters and newly won supporters of New Labour had votes in seats that the Liberal Democrats could take from the Conservatives, Labour left them to vote tactically.

Many of those attracted by Blair and repelled by 18 years of Toryism have now drifted away and Labour's core was in danger of mutiny. So as a general recalls his troops in battle, so that licence for the core to vote tactically was removed with the return of the shrill cry, 'Vote Liberal Democrat and get Tory'. This process was variable. Certain Liberal Democrat incumbents were more able to stem the exodus but many, many Labour supporters, hearing the old refrain, returned loyal to the tribal voting pattern.

Paradoxically, had Labour not panicked but continued to encourage or permit tactical voting, the Conservative number of seats would have been twenty or thirty fewer. The post-election calculus would have been very different. Again Labour lacked the courage to take a risk.

BUGGINS'S TURN

Few inside Labour will have many regrets. The process removed Brown, gave them hope of a period in which to regroup, and reiterated the belief that "some day the Empire will go down because it is Buggins's turn".

Despite their token words, Labour representatives have an abhorrence of all forms of plurality. As the last 13 years have shown over and over again, in sphere after sphere of public life, they are control freaks.

The Labour generation that escaped working class life could never accept that people need to be free to make mistakes. They felt the moral obligation of the saved to save others. They could never see the very real difference between campaigning against exclusion and using their power to deliver inclusion. This was the vector behind their obsession with management, which has nearly destroyed the reputation of public work and all but exhausted the motivation of those who serve publicly.

'Buggins's Turn' is not a straightforward game of ping-pong in a system that usually produces majority government (and AV is said also to be such a system). This is because there is a Buggins's Turn process that goes on within parties.

When the High Tory leaderships of Harold Macmillan and Alec Douglas-Home ended in 1964, it was the turn of a new leader to move the party from One Nation conservatism to the Selsdon Man convictions of early Ted Heath. When Ted Heath lost in 1974, having done his mid-term U-turn back to One Nation Butskellism, Margaret Thatcher took her turn as a conviction politician. She in turn laid the ground for Tony Buggins. There is a dispiriting thirty-year cycle at work that surely would have begun to crank round again had Camborne economics resulted from the recent election. Even now, Labour is preparing for its turn.

Our strategic imperative therefore is to kill off Buggins once and for all. This has to be done by

increasing significantly the proportionality of our electoral system. This does not mean that there will always be conservative-leaning governments or a permanent 'progressive' force. The centre of gravity will fluctuate because of circumstances and because of individuals working in the system. However, in a more proportional system, change will be cumulative rather than reactive.

We shall get very little support from Labour for such reforms and at present we shall have few allies among the Conservatives. But interesting things are happening.

There is a Brideshead relationship developing between the Prime and Deputy Prime Ministers that will be fascinating to watch develop. We have good people in positions with great potential to reinforce the new and more accurate image that people have of us and the ability of politicians to work together.

We have already helped expose as a lie the assertion that coalition formation is undemocratic, unaccountable and against the interests of the electorate.

We have a special opportunity to expose the accusation that coalitions are bad, are unable to take good political decisions and lead to instability. Camborne economics will be replaced by more than a little Cable Craft. And the public importantly should have a period of government in which they are trusted by their elected leaders.

'Freedom, Fairness and Responsibility' is a good banner to work beneath. Under it, we could build a quiet, responsible, persuasive and welcoming movement for change.

Let us hope that the new Prime Minister has his copy of *Disraeli* by his bedside, that the right people are reading it and the wrong people aren't. If so, we may be entering another of those 'oddest histories of confusion, cross-purposes and muddle in British political history,' which in our countries may be the only way of achieving reform.

"Had Labour not panicked but continued to encourage or permit tactical voting, the Conservative number of seats would have been twenty or thirty fewer"

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

ARM'S-LENGTH PARTNERS

Liberal Democrat MPs can learn from the coalition that ran Camden for four years, says William Tranby

With the formation of the coalition government, many Liberal Democrats may be worrying about the consequences for the party. Some of us have firsthand experience of working with Tories in local government and there are lessons to be learnt which might prove helpful to our fresh-faced ministers more used to very occasional successes as members of a third-party opposition group.

In Camden in 2006, the Liberal Democrats broke out of the wards in the extreme north west of the borough to become the largest party on the council. We jumped from 7 seats to 20 in one go, removing Labour's 35-year stranglehold on the borough as they fell from 36 seats to 18. The Tories came in with 14 seats and the Greens with two.

Labour went into opposition and forced the Lib Dems and Tories to form a partnership administration, with six Lib Dems and four Tories taking executive posts. A hastily negotiated partnership agreement setting out key priorities was published.

Half the Lib Dems on the executive were new councillors. Those concerned were highly skilled and soon eased into their roles, demonstrating that you do not need decades of experience in an institution to make an impact. In fact, some early assertive action from all new members of the executive took the officers by surprise and they quickly had to regroup to allow our partnership agreement to drive the functions of the council.

ASSERT ONE'S AUTHORITY

The best time to assert one's authority over local government officers, and I suspect civil servants, is right at the beginning when you are an unknown force. Be clear, and be direct. One of the issues I wrestled with alongside my Tory colleagues was the need to create the first new secondary school for 35 years. The previous Labour administration had started work on a bid for the Building Schools for the Future programme, which planned only to expand existing schools rather than start with at least one new one.

The officers were at pains to explain why it was easier to expand existing institutions. We were adamant that we needed to build a new school in the north west of the borough where there was the biggest shortage of secondary school places. In about three weeks, the officers had identified a site and the best way of securing a new school – by going down the academies route. If we had not been so clear in our early discussions, we might not now be waiting on the coalition government to approve our preferred bidder to start the work on site.

It came as no surprise that the Tories were enthusiastic supporters of the partnership agreement in Camden. And I think the real reason is because the Tories' first objective is to secure power.

It is more important to them than keeping to their principles or for achieving policy goals, which explains why David Cameron was so enthusiastic about offering the Lib Dems a coalition, and why the Tory negotiating team soon forgot its most popular policy with the Tory conference – the cut in inheritance tax – to secure an agreement.

Some of my council colleagues were incredulous that I of all people could become friends with Tories. But in fact I didn't. I once described my relationship with my Tory counterpart, who shared the children, schools and families department with me, as a working colleague. He would not be on my list to invite to the pub but he was someone with whom I could exchange pleasantries between meetings, and negotiate details of substance with in a constructive manner.

EATING AND DRINKING

One of the unique features of the Camden Lib Dem group is our ability to enjoy social times together, with much of our fundraising involving eating and drinking. I know this is not always the case elsewhere and it certainly wasn't the case with our local Tories.

I would not expect our Lib Dem ministers to develop a social life with their Tory counterparts, but I would expect them to develop working relationships, which hold the team together. In the end, they are rivals for power and, while it is shared for now, in the next general election we will be fighting the Tories again for a bigger slice of the action.

During 2006-10, we won six out of seven by-elections, three of them gains. We campaigned on local issues, on the quality of the local candidate, and our record in power. The people sometimes forgot that we did not have a majority and, because we were doing good things, gave us a positive vote. Labour used negative campaigning predominantly and this backfired on them.

So campaigning hard in local and parliamentary by-elections should still be pursued. Each seat fought and won adds value to our message and to our credibility. We must not lose our campaigning edge just because we have some seats in the cabinet.

William Tranby is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Camden and a member of the Liberator Collective

LETTERS

ANNUAL DEBATE

Dear Liberator,

Whatever people may feel about the coalition government, it would seem clear that we are unlikely to know for a number of months, if not longer, how this will work in practice. Equally, it is likely that the political situation will change over time, and that there may be issues arising in future which could raise important questions about the future direction of the coalition amongst some party members.

The special conference in Birmingham showed that there is overwhelming support among party activists for the coalition. However it was also clear that that support was not unconditional, and that there remain a range of issues about which members have concerns. We certainly do not believe that the intention of most members in voting 'yes' in Birmingham was to rule out any future discussion on the issue for the entire term of the current parliament, whatever may arise.

As a party which takes pride in its democratic structure, and real involvement of ordinary members in decision making, it would seem very strange if the party were able to discuss comparatively minor policy issues at the annual conference, but not the single biggest issue defining the political direction of the party as a whole.

We believe that it is vital, therefore, that members are given the opportunity of debating the progress and future of the coalition at the annual conference each year. This must be more than simply a report from the parliamentary party, but a full debate at which members will be able to fully express their views, and most importantly to vote to reaffirm (or otherwise) their support for the continuation of the coalition.

The whole idea of allowing the party conference to seriously discuss issues of this type is clearly something which would never be allowed within the Conservative (or indeed Labour) Party. Part of retaining a distinct identity within the coalition, however, must be showing that we are not "just like the others".

John Fraser, Croydon
Peter Ladanyi, Croydon
Phil Rimmer, Newham
Jeremy Sanders, Colne Valley

REVIEWS

Four Lions [film] directed by Chris Morris 2010

Four Lions is the story of a group of British Muslims determined to wage a jihad against... well, what exactly? But they are determined to wage it all the same as their halting journey heads towards the inevitable denouement. It is one of the funniest films I have seen for years; it's made in the great British comedic tradition, liberally laced with pure farce, though it needs a heavy dose of dark black humour to be fully appreciated.

Although, of course, the authors claim it is complete fiction, the film is based on very thorough research into the world of the extremists and on actual events. So there are many elements to the story that lend credibility. That would count for little, though, if the characters were not vibrant and sympathetic; there are strong performances from all the cast, giving the would-be jihadists a human dimension, perhaps by revealing the melancholy that lurks beneath the most successful comedy.

Indeed, although I laughed until I cried, at the end I almost cried for real; Four Lions' greatest success is that ultimately we do not lose sight of the fact that these idiots' fantasies do lead to real suffering for many innocent people. It doesn't let them off the moral hook. Five stars, you must see this film.

Gwyneth Deakins

Green Zone [film] directed by Paul Greengrass 2010

Were it not for its attempt to expose the lies that led to the Iraq war, *Green Zone* would be just a superior action thriller, with Matt Damon in one of his 'Carry On Bourne' roles as the hero chasing villains around Baghdad.

But the villains he chases are not all, or even mainly, Iraqi; he's a US Army chief warrant officer and his most dangerous foes are on his own side.

Damon's character eventually realises there is something wrong with the intelligence he is supplied when his unit raids one suspected WMD site after another and finds nothing more deadly than some old toilets.

His search for the reasons for these errors soon puts him in the middle of a conflict. This is between a CIA officer who realises, in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, that the only way to stop a bloodbath is to cut a deal with the Iraqi army and an official clearly modelled on the appalling Paul Bremer – America's first governor in Iraq – who thinks he can produce democracy at gunpoint.

As in real life, the intelligence turns out to have been fabricated in Washington by those who wanted an excuse for war, no matter many Iraqi, or indeed American, lives this cost.

Green Zone is short on deep analysis of the politics and long on shoot outs – it does, after all, star Damon. In the final shoot out, Damon is in a lone street battle in Baghdad with both Baathists and US special forces.

It's an enjoyable and well-made action film and its message is one still powerful despite now being well-known – that the world was deliberately lied to by leaders who wanted a war no matter what the cost. Thousands lost their lives. In the UK, those responsible have, at least, lost their reputations.

Mark Smulian

The Ghost [film] directed by Roman Polanski 2010

The Ghost, adapted with help from author Robert Harris from his own book of the same name,

received pretty mixed reviews but I decided to see it anyway because I had thoroughly enjoyed the book (a tense, easy to read thriller with plenty of pace and full of twists and turns) and wanted to see how it would be turned into a film. The book manages to strike an interesting balance between being extremely entertaining and hard to put down with but injected with just enough political nous to prevent it turning into a complete James Bond fantasy.

While it's strongly influenced both by Robert Harris's obvious disillusionment with Tony Blair, and his profound unhappiness with the conduct of the Iraq war and the extent to which it has sullied the country's international standing, it clearly wasn't intended as a serious political commentary.

For me, the film achieved about seven out of ten. The location scenery (a very windswept, out of season, Martha's Vineyard – an exclusive coastal holiday haunt) and the photography were excellent, conjuring up a great sense of bleak isolation and a foreboding mood. The best performance by far was that of Ewan McGregor playing the hapless ghost-writer to Britain's former prime minister, Adam Lang. He is hired to replace the previous incumbent who died in mysterious circumstances leaving an unusable first draft of the PM's memoirs, which he is instructed to resuscitate in double quick time.

The new ghost-writer quickly realises that all is not as it should be and starts to unravel damaging and carefully hidden secrets, which place him in real jeopardy. Unlike some of the critics, I found McGregor an eminently believable character and his performance was the glue that held the whole film together. That is a lot more than I can say for the Pierce Brosnan's performance as Adam Lang. Even if it was meant to be tongue in cheek casting by Polanski, Brosnan was spectacularly miscast. Even an entertaining political thriller needs some credible characters to give it some ballast and Brosnan simply couldn't or didn't want to provide that. Perhaps he thought it really was another James Bond film when he accepted the part, or was the casting done to flatter Tony Blair, who is reported to have said on hearing who was playing the role "Phew, I thought it might be Richard Wilson!"

Some of the plot was clearly ludicrous (such as accessing CIA secrets via Google) and hung together increasingly less well as the film progresses. The ending – which is extremely well handled in the book – is particularly disappointing. Nonetheless I found the film good entertainment value and a thoroughly enjoyable way of spending a Friday evening.

Claire Wiggins

The Cartoons that Shook the World by Jytte Klausen Yale UP 2009 £20

Oh, those cartoons – the ones of the Prophet Mohammed that appeared in some Danish newspaper some years ago (2005) and caused a bit of a flap. I couldn't swear that I've seen any of them; insignificantly Liberator didn't republish them, though we've been pretty blunt in the past about fundamentalists of any persuasion taking it on the chin like any other Joe, and the need to confront their absurdities with a bit of fundamentalist Liberalism.

So why didn't we publish them? First and foremost it did not occur to us – who cares about Denmark? – as is echoed throughout the book. If we had thought about it, then it is likely that enough members of the collective have enough experience of working with British Muslims to have thought better of it, but that aside we would probably have gone along with the European consensus on the matter (I don't think there was any major disclosure in the UK). Venstre, the Danish economic Liberal party, isn't exactly our cup of tea and, from what I've read of them and leader Anders Fogh Rasmussen, I might even start to doubt their credentials (Radical Venstre is much more fun).

There was one UK almost-publication that Klausen doesn't seem to be aware of. The Cardiff university student magazine *Gair Rhydd* printed them, but the newspaper was pulped by the university before it could be distributed. The editor, Tom Wellingham, and two journalists were temporarily suspended and forced to apologise in the next issue according to Barry Miles (*London Calling*, 2010). 'Gair Rhydd' means 'free speech' in the Welsh language.

So why read this book? It is a thorough investigation of the events around the cartoon crisis. We really are a global village and have to think responsibly about our possible actions. The global village has yet to acquire a global sense of humour. Muslim governments are likely to attach significance to things that seem trivial to the West partly because they can score points in the on-going tit-for-tat of their relationships with western governments, particularly those trying to impose their own objectives on them (such as democracy). Muslims living in the west, however, are hardly likely to want governments that they may be escaping from to claim to speak for them.

There are some useful insights into the workings and thinking of some members of immigrant communities; whether these are universal is open to debate, but it is always useful to have some clues. For example, the move to West has facilitated a broadening of religious debate and development, which would not be possible in their more theocratically controlled homelands.

Stewart Rayment

London Calling: A Countercultural History of London Since 1945 by Barry Miles Atlantic Books 2010 £25

Ah, chronicles of a well spent youth. Miles is at his best recounting the days of Flower Power (for want of a better term) – of Indica Books and International Times, etc., with which he was involved. That given, I'm sometimes surprised at what wasn't mentioned but, as is sometimes said, if you remember the Sixties you weren't there.

Elsewhere, are these Miles's personal recollections or just journalism? I grew progressively unsure as I made my way through the book (which the Groucho not withstanding) grinds to a halt rather well before the turn of the century. As Sorel might have put it, the counterculture doesn't see the

counterculture that replaces it.

And where did it all go wrong? One of the saddest sights of 1997 was Caroline Coon (normally a sensible sort of person) wheeled out as a Blair luvvie. Miles was always a bit that way, which may account for the silence on the last decade or so. He says: "The hippies… attacked Victorian prudery and British uptightness, leading to a situation where at least a substantial portion of British society now regards sex as a positive thing. If this was all they achieved, then it was worth it."

It was indeed, but more could and should have been achieved, and some has. Miles recounts some of the shortcomings of the 'scene' but does not really go into the political dimension or its absence. My American comrades of a certain age will, for example, discuss whether a person was part of the counterculture or not. The International Socialists were certainly instrumental in the factionalisation and breakdown of alternative politics in the 1970s, as the SDS stifled social libertarian thinking in the States.

It is worth restating Tom McGrath's editorial from International Times, after one of the many police busts (let's face it, with long hair and flamboyant dress, it was *de rigueur* to be picked up by the fuzz on an almost daily basis at one point).

"It can never be suppressed by force or law; you cannot imprison consciousness. No matter how many raids or arrests the police make, on whatever pretence – there can be no final bust because the revolution has taken place within the minds of the young.

"It is impossible to define this new attitude: you either have it or you don't. But you can notate some of its manifestations: Permissiveness – the individual should be free from hindrance by external law or internal guilt in his pursuit of pleasure so long as he does not impinge on others. The conflict between the importance of the individual's right to pleasure (orgasm) and his responsibilities towards other human beings may become the ultimate social problem…

"The new movement is slowly, carelessly constructing an alternative society. It is international, inter-racial, equisexual, with ease. It operates on different conceptions of space and time."

This is, of course, pure John Stuart Mill and many sections of the Young Liberal Movement would have identified with it. Sadly, I'm not sure if it made the transition over to the Liberal Democrats.

Stewart Rayment

Understanding the politics of heritage edited by Rodney Harrison Manchester UP 2010 £24.99

I've never been so naïve as to believe that small-scale voluntary sector organisations working primarily in the environmental and heritage sectors might be immune from politics but, through one of those with which I'm involved, I have come upon a raft of political problems, which will almost certainly continue. I thought this might prove an illuminating title. It is, primarily in opening up the range of assumptions that we operate in, and the extent to which these might be in conflict with equally valid viewpoints.

My issue is a disused Victorian cemetery, one of the Magnificent Seven, but of no particular national importance as yet discovered. It does, however, comprise 27 acres of London's inner-most woodland. Some while ago, a GLC hangover, the London Advisory Planning Committee, for want of anything better to do, produced a report on London's burial requirements. In a footnote it said that, if reopened and properly managed, the cemetery could cope with the sub-regional demand indefinitely. LPAC's methods have since been discredited, but its ideas resonate.

If they seriously thought about it, no local authorities that didn't run a burial facility, and didn't have to, would count their blessings. An emotional issue at the best of times, they are bad news. Suddenly in the wake of a bad by-election defeat, Labour proposes to reopen the disused cemetery as a Moslem burial ground, rapidly discovers that this would be *ultra vires* and proposes a secular alternative. The small voluntary body, which actually carries out practically all of the work in the cemetery park for the borough, finds itself inundated over a period of about six weeks with concerned phone calls, emails and letters. Naturally it expresses opposition to the proposal, which in the wake of the inevitable bad publicity is shelved, though lingers in the back of many minds. The small voluntary body loses mainstream grant funding from the council by some coincidence, though it still carries out most of the work and the council refers probably all of its genealogical enquiries to it.

This is small fry by comparison with some of the issues dealt with by the case studies in the book. There are chunky sections on Bath and Glasgow, which should be studied by those active in such places, if only to get a general background and a different take on the issues.

More controversial issues – the Parthenon Marbles, the destruction of Babri Masjid and the Hindu temple that preceded it, the Bamiyan Buddhas – are instructive; here we meet the cross-cultural divides. Remains of various indigenous peoples (and the Brutish Museum) aside, western imperialism and its assumptions are dealt with in the practices of Theraveda Buddhism and the Phra Sri Rattana (aka the Golden) Chedi in Bangkok.

A fascinating and useful book, which with its two companions is actually part of an Open University course 'Understanding Global Heritage'. Any member of a local authority dealing with issues of this kind could profitably dip into it.

Stewart Rayment

Lord Bonkers' Diary

Monday

Another early start in Whitehall. What? You've not heard? Why, I am the Minister for Outer Space in the new Coalition Government! The position had been earmarked for poor Lembit, but on election night everyone learned what I have long suspected: the people of Mid Wales do not care for That Sort of Thing. So here I am poring over my red boxes and undoing Socialist mischief by the hour. Already I have dispensed with the requirement for visitors from other galaxies to have identity cards and this morning I cancelled an expedition of North London social workers to Alpha Centauri designed to educate the inhabitants out of colonialist attitudes. Next week I shall be off to Woomera, whence Raymond Baxter blasted off in Coronation year to become the first Englishman in space, and then I shall be talking to David Chidgey, once the fearless pilot of the Liberal Democrats' own spacecraft the *Bird of Liberty*, about getting our party into space again. The old crate has been in a barn on the Bonkers Hall Estate for some years, but I am sure it can be put back into service once we have found somewhere else for the chickens to roost.

Tuesday

The coalition agreement, I will freely admit, came as something of a surprise. One day I was supervising the digging of elephant traps to catch the unwarier Tory canvasser: the next I was fishing my Conservative neighbours' lakes on the grounds that we were all on the same side now so they could not possibly complain. And splendidly fishy lakes they proved in those strange, sunny days during which the fate of our nation hung in the balance. I did have a nasty turn when I heard we were talking to Labour as well (and was faced with the prospect of having to put the fish back), but with a well-placed telephone call or two I was able to ensure that those talks came to nothing.

Wednesday

One of the new Conservative ministerial colleagues puts his head around my door: the poor fellow is in tears! "Can't you do anything about this Laws of yours?" he sobs. "He's cut my departmental budget to ribbons". I put a manly arm around his shoulders and pour him a snootful of Auld Johnson, because I know what the new Financial Secretary to the Treasury is like. Some years ago, I asked him to have a look at the finances of the Bonkers' Home for Well-Behaved Orphans and he produced a report urging me to sell the orphans and invest the money in start-up funds in the Far East. Needless to say, I did no such thing. (I had a word with a bigwig at the Bank of Rutland and he warned me off the Orient for the time being).

Thursday

Who will the next leader of the Labour Party be? The answer, it appears, is one of the Miliband brothers. As an old friend of their father, the Marxist historian Sir Ralph Millipede, I have known them since they were *so* high. I well remember them on the hearthrug in their pyjamas, putting together Airfix models of the dams that Comrade Stalin had built to divert the rivers of Central Asia and water the Uzbek cotton fields. I was always struck by how similar David and Edward were – indeed I am not convinced that even Lady Millipede could tell them apart. If I am honest, however, my favourite in those days was the third Miliband brother. He had a mop of golden curls and, though he had little to say for himself, was something of a virtuoso on the harp even at his young age. I often wonder what became of Harpo Miliband: the Labour Party could do worse than turn to him today.

Friday

What with the election campaign and the burdens of office, I have rather neglected the old demesne of late. So I put matters right by spending a day on Estate business having ditches cleared, hedges trimmed, orphans drilled and so forth. Meadowcroft, I fear, is not at his sunniest and is much given to complaining that the volcanic dust has "befangled his perennials". I stand him a pint of Smithson & Greaves in the *Bonkers' Arms* at lunchtime, which does much to restore his spirits. After lunch, I write a stiff letter to the Icelandic Ambassador on Meadowcroft's part. I also assure him that I am well aware that this 'Eyjafjallajökull' volcano of theirs is really called Dave and that they are not justified in playing such a cruel trick upon our newsreaders just because they still feel sore about the Cod War.

Saturday

I am often surprised at our tabloid press. After an enjoyable day watching my own XI defeat the Scottish Nationalists, I repair to the Library to read tomorrows newspapers – I have them brought to the Hall by fast bicycle as soon as they are published in Fleet Street. The News of the World splashes (as I believe the word is) on the intelligence that the erstwhile Duchess of York taken money in return for promising to introduce a journalist to her former husband. But her willingness to do this has been an open secret for years! I have myself given her money more than once to ensure that the Duke of York does not attend a function I am organising. Interestingly, my great-grandfather once had the front of the Hall painted green when George IV was in the area in hope that he would fail to see the old pile against the surrounding fields and ride past.

Sunday

After every general election, it behoves us to remember those among our colleagues who fell in action: we say a prayer for them at St Asquith's this morning. In the ensuing silence – and before the enthusiastic rendering of 'The Last Post' by a member of the Rutland Army Cadet Force – I think of Richard Younger-Ross and Julia Goldsworthy, victims both of unfortunate misunderstandings over household furnishings, of Paul Rowen in Rochdale and of Sandra Gidley in Romsey. Some of our chaps, of course, stood down of their own volition. Notable amongst them was that scourge of the "two-tier service", Phil Willis. Willis, you may recall, had been a headmaster before entering Parliament and, when asked what he most regretted in life, was wont to reply that it was using the cane in that earlier career. This always won applause from the audience, but it struck me as trying to have your cake and eat it.

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