# liberator


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**Cover Picture - Alex Folkes**

**Page 23 - picture courtesy of Liberal Democrat News**

# COMMENTARY

## A MATTER OF HONESTY

"We must ensure the timing is right. If spending is cut too soon, it would undermine the much-needed recovery and cost jobs. We will base the timing of cuts on an objective assessment of economic conditions, not political dogma. Our working assumption is that the economy will be in a stable enough condition to bear cuts from the beginning of 2011–12."

That is what the Lib Dem general election manifesto said. When Nick Clegg invited activists at conference to imagine what they would be able to say on doorsteps at the next general election, it is unlikely that "sorry, we got the whole economy wrong", was among the phrases he had in mind.

The whole tenor of the general election campaign last May was about making cuts when prudent, but in the coalition the Lib Dems have put their name to a colossal gamble with the economy which, however it is dressed up, will hit the poor hardest because they use more public services.

If the gamble of cutting deep and fast fails, the party will face massacre at the polls.

But even if it works, there needs to be a vision, sorely lacking at present, of why the cuts are being made. The coalition line seems to be that it hopes something will turn up so that the economy does not look quite as appalling in 2015 as it will in 2011.

The government has plenty to say about cuts but very little about what it will do to help the economy grow, beyond hoping the economy manages this of its own accord.

If this succeeds, there needs to be some noticeable improvement for all sections of society by the end of it. If it fails, the coalition will be accused not merely of having visited needless deprivations on the electorate but also of having lied to it.

Which brings us to the row over tuition fees. There is room for interpretation in what the manifesto said about cuts. There is none whatever in what it said about tuition fees: "We will scrap unfair university tuition fees so everyone has the chance to get a degree, regardless of their parents' income."

It must all have looked so easy last spring, when the National Union of Students asked candidates to sign its pledge to vote against "any increase in fees in the next parliament and to pressure the government to introduce a fairer alternative".

Now think of a phrase involving the words 'petard' and 'hoist', and the party has a problem not really about tuition fees but about trust.

Something will no doubt be cobbled together that allows partial face-saving on fees, but this has become a matter of political honesty.

Some will argue that being in government requires a hard-headed ability to adapt to events, whatever one said at an election.

But as the Lib Dems never tire of saying, their manifesto spending plans were "carefully costed", so either the tuition fees policy was not properly costed, or those costings have become void.

Everyone knows the coalition had a grim economic inheritance from Labour, but has anything really made it so significantly worse since May that the Lib Dems have to lose their reputation?

The Lib Dems risk looking like just any other party that casually issues pledges to voters at election times only to do something different when in power.

To avoid that unwelcome reputation, the party must ultimately be willing to vote against the government and also to use some of its leverage in the coalition.

It has been pretty poor at fighting its corner so far, but the Tories now really need the Lib Dems, since they could not contemplate a second general election now that the spending review's content is known.

David Cameron should know that his staying in power depends on the Lib Dems' willingness to keep him there, and that they cannot do that indefinitely if they are continually forced to eat their words.

This won't be the last issue where the coalition line embarrasses the party, but too many embarrassments will prove electorally dangerous and the party has more clout in the coalition that some seem to think.

The Federal Policy Committee considered a harder hitting statement on tuition fees than it eventually issued, and some people tried to collect signatures to force a special conference on the issue.

That was misguided, as the party cannot hold special conferences on every coalition dispute and, if any serious attempt were made to censure a leader (as nearly happened to Paddy Ashdown over his dalliance with the Blair government in late 1998), those calling it would need to be pretty certain of victory or they would look fools.

However, it will be impossible to keep a lid on Lib Dem discontent indefinitely, especially after the AV referendum (whatever the result).

There are tensions among Lib Dems in parliament. There are a number of groups and factions, including those overlooked for ministerial office and those who never liked the coalition anyway.

The real troublemakers, though, are those MPs who don't distinguish between Conservative policies that were in the coalition agreement and those that were not.

# RADICAL BULLETIN

## TURN AGAIN, DICK WHITTINGTON

Connoisseurs of political car crashes may have another performance next year after London Liberal Democrats decided to defer their quest for a candidate for the capital's mayoralty.

This means a candidate will now be selected about six months before the May 2012 election, which is what should have happened in the first place unless the party had been planning to sustain a serious, well-funded and organised campaign for 18 months, which it couldn't.

London political luminaries stayed away in droves from this opportunity to slog away for that long, only to come third. But Lembit Öpik, former Montgomeryshire MP, asteroid diverter, escorter of young ladies in the tabloids, fixture in celebrity magazines, self-styled stand-up comic and presenter for a TV channel owned by the Iranian government, quickly threw his hat in the ring.

Faced with the prospect of having this exhibitionist as its standard bearer, the party cast around for alternatives, and kept on casting. There being few people willing to put their lives on hold for 18 months for an unattainable prize, eventually there were just four other applicants.

The party was keen to find an ethnic minority contender and two duly came forward: former Richmond councillor Shas Sheehan – who fought Wimbledon at the general election – and Duwayne Brooks, a young Lewisham councillor best known for having been a friend Stephen Lawrence, who was murdered in 1993 in a case that still causes controversy. The other contenders were Jeremy Ambache, a regional party officer, and Paddy Streeter, a councillor in Tower Hamlets during the period of Lib Dem control 20 years ago.

Notably absent from this list were London Assembly members Mike Tuffrey and Caroline Pidgeon, both of whom would have made a more credible candidate but were not enticed by the prospect of the campaign.

Then came the selection process. The first hurdle was to be approved as a Westminster candidate, which both Brooks and Streeter failed, though Brooks was invited to re-apply within a year having gained wider experience. Streeter took High Court action against the party over what he considered to be an unreasonably short period to lodge an appeal.

Here the story becomes blurred. Streeter says he was awarded a temporary injunction to halt the process and gained a verbal undertaking in court from deputy chief executive Ben Stoneham that the party would allow him sufficient time. But Cowley Street said the 'halt' was only a judge deferring the case from a Friday to the following Monday, and that Stoneham promised only that the party would stick to its rules, which it said Streeter had misunderstood.

Rather than put to members a shortlist of Öpik, Sheehan and Ambache, the latter two being little known whatever their other merits, the party ditched the whole thing.

A year's pause may tempt Tuffrey into the field, or give Öpik long enough to do something so outrageous that the party can safely turn him down.

## SCOTT FREE

It is quite understandable that Ros Scott might have felt that the demands on her time, money and energy of being Lib Dem party president meant she did not want to stand for a second term this year.

What has been less easy to understand is why she delayed an announcement that she would not re-stand until early September, after nominations for the post had opened, giving little time to other candidates to organise.

Someone close to Scott's campaign for president in 2008 says the reason was that she had hoped to the end to secure better access to Nick Clegg.

Scott was getting only brief monthly meetings with Clegg and so was hard put to carry out her role of representing the party to the leader. An offer of the role of Clegg's parliamentary private secretary in the Lords – the lowest rung of job in parliament – did not improve matters.

According to sources, Clegg would have been happy for Scott to remain but did not want to, or possibly failed to see the need to, resolve the access problem.

For Liberator's presidential hustings, see pages 12-14.

## GIZZA JOB

If Brian Paddick had stood up during Nick Clegg's conference question time and waved aloft a 50-foot banner saying, "I'd like a peerage", he could hardly have been less subtle.

Whereas other questioners (apart from an incomprehensible one about the Pope) were polite but sceptical, Paddick asked if Clegg would mind letting everyone know how Labour had betrayed the electorate's interests.

The Liberal Democrats will get 15 new peers this autumn (along with 30 Tory and 10 Labour nominees), though this has been delayed while Labour elected its new leader and his choices undergo the vetting process.

Names of the Lib Dem nominees are, naturally, a closely guarded secret, so here are Liberator's tips for runners and riders: Paddick (2008 London mayoral candidate); Sal Brinton (candidate in Watford in 2005 and 2010); Dee Doocey (2006 interim peers panel;

retiring from the London Assembly); Judith Jolly (West Country party stalwart); Susan Kramer (ex-MP for Richmond Park); Jonathan Marks (2008 interim peers panel; legal expert); Monroe Palmer (2008 interim peers panel; chair of Liberal Democrat Friends of Israel); Julie Smith (2008 interim peers panel; chair of Liberal International British Group), Neil Sherlock (big donor to Clegg's office); Ian Wright (likewise).

Whether the new peers will be keen to vote for their replacement by a 'wholly or mainly' elected house remains to be seen. Meanwhile in these hard times, at least ermine suppliers will be pleased with the coalition.

## PLEASE, SIR!

The Lib Dem conference debate on free schools and academies was chiefly notable for someone having forgotten to tell Baroness Walmsley and Dan Rogerson what was going on.

The original motion expressed "concern" about the effects of both, and called on Liberal Democrats to "urge people not to take up" these options.

Walmsley and Rogerson's amendment was like a parody of Lib Dem fence sitting. Instead of 'concern', it divined only 'potential risks'; instead of calling for a boycott, it called for, well nothing really.

It didn't actually say "conference believes the whole thing can be resolved by our coalition ministers sitting round a table and talking in calm and measured tones," but you get the drift. This might have won support had conference thought the original motion would cause some ugly public dispute.

Instead, education minister Sarah Teather made a speech that made it hard to tell whether she had any strong feelings on the motion, and it became clear that the leadership had decided that, since it probably could not win this debate, it would not make an issue of it.

This showed considerably more wisdom than, say, David Steel, who would have spent the summer having his acolytes up the stakes in the press about a 'leadership humiliation'.

And now everyone is happy: conference got to fire its warning shot at the Tories, Nick Clegg can point (if he finds it useful) to a functioning party democracy he must placate, the movers of the motion can launch their campaign, and Teather can do whatever she would have done anyway.

The exception to this post-debate harmony was a seething Joan Walmsley. But that is what happens when the party leadership decides it has no dirty work that needs to be done. It might have been nice to tell her, though.

## DUTCH AUCTION

The protracted coalition negotiations in the Netherlands have caused an embarrassing problem for Liberal Intentional.

The right-wing liberal VVD party has formed a coalition with the Christian Democrats, with support in parliament from the far-right, anti-Islamic party PVV. Although the PVV will have no cabinet seats, the coalition agreement has accepted several parts of its programme.

This matters in Britain on two grounds. Firstly, the Liberal Democrats are allied with the VVD via both LI and ELDR, something that ought to be embarrassing given the criticisms made of the Tories last year over their links with extreme right-wingers elsewhere in Europe. More importantly, LI's president Hans van Baalen comes from the VVD. Given his party's link with the PVV, how can he possibly carry out his presidential duties in Islamic countries, in which LI has recently been making considerable progress, in particular in North Africa?

The coalition has caused other ructions. Gijs de Vries, once the EU anti-terrorism coordinator and a figure well known in Liberal youth politics 30 years ago, has left the VVD for its social liberal rival D66.

## RULE OF THIRDS

Who was the third coalition sceptic? Lib Dem MP John Leech told a fringe meeting at the Labour conference that he had abstained on the vote to form the coalition, along with Charles Kennedy and a third MP.

Leech did not name this MP, but said it was neither Bob Russell nor Mike Hancock.

Hancock has been causing some headaches to the party's whips with both his occasional votes against coalition policy and media disclosures about alleged inappropriate conduct towards a female constituent.

"Bob's not a problem, I know where he is coming from, but I never know where Hancock is coming from or why," one whip was heard to complain.

The whip was, though, quite unconcerned about rumours that Hancock might defect to Labour. "On no, Mike hates the Labour Party!"

## THE COMPANY THEY KEEP

Is Ming Campbell still associated with something called the UK National Defence Association?

If so, he should not be, but it is possible he has been included in error in the list of officers on its website, given that this list also includes as president Winston Churchill junior, who is dead. It also includes Lord Owen, who is merely politically dead.

The organisation's name is redolent of the private armies that mad retried colonels tried to set up in the 1970s to 'fight' trade unions, and its views are stuck in the cold war too.

While claiming to champion members of the armed forces, it zealously supports the British 'independent' nuclear 'deterrent' and sees no case for any cuts in defence spending.

Campbell's credibility will suffer if he has voluntarily associated himself with this bunch of buffoons gearing up to fight the last war.

## WE GOT THE BLUES

Who approved the repellent design of the stage set used at the Lib Dem conference in Liverpool? The dreaded 'aqua' stuck again and, while its proponents have claimed that it sets off the party's yellow colour well, this time there was no yellow except for the party name.

The stage was the colour worn by the sort of people who don inappropriate shorts and then intrude into other people's holiday pictures. On television, it looked like a mass of blue, indistinguishable from a Conservative event. Aesthetically vile, politically damaging. Bin it.

# THE ONLY REALIGNMENT THAT'S LEFT

## The failure of socialism has left Labour believing only in political expediency, so politics should be realigned around liberalism, not 'the left', says Gordon Lishman

Purist! Tribalist! Those epithets have been thrown at me during more than 30 years – at the time of the Lib-Lab pact, the formation of the Alliance and the following merger, and the shadowy discussions with Blair and friends in the mid to late 1990s.

Now, it seems that the purists and tribalists are those who were using the epithets themselves: former party leaders and their acolytes. It's just that their tribe turns out to have been some amorphous entity called 'the left'.

There was talk about re-alignment from David Steel and Paddy Ashdown and, less coherently, from Jo Grimond. But they also sold their plans in other ways: as the necessary outcome of PR, as a way of creating a new politics, as a set of choices for an independent party.

Even when Ashdown sold the 'end of equidistance' to the party, he used the argument that Liberal Democrats could not prop up the unpopular fag-end of a failing Tory government, rather than saying that there was only one political choice. In fact, the argument about propping up a failed and unpopular government applied as much in 2010 as in 1997.

I meant what I said all along: a deal between parties would be necessary at some stage, but the deal had to be right. It had to maintain an independent political party with a distinctive liberal identity; it had to achieve distinctively liberal results through government; and it had to have a reasonable chance of enabling the party to emerge stronger.

I may turn out to be wrong in my support for the current coalition agreement, particularly on the third of my criteria. But at least I applied the same tests at each stage. Most Liberal Democrats did the same, to the considerable discomfiture of the journalists who predicted a backlash by 'purists' against the coalition.

The purists and tribalists now are those for whom the only acceptable deal seems to be an agreement with the Labour Party. It shows the hollowness of their argument that you have to be willing to do a deal at some stage because that's the logic of the electoral system. The argument is correct – but not if you only apply it to one sort of deal with one party. It was always likely that the parliamentary and electoral arithmetic would limit the deals possible at any one time.

It turns out that former leaders – and not many others in recent years – really saw the argument for alliances as a stalking horse for the realignment of the left, meaning a coming together of Labour and liberal forces which were seen as unnecessarily splitting apart in the early twentieth century. It is time to take a hard look at that idea.

The political re-organisations of the early twentieth century were not just a matter of wings of the same party splitting away from each other with the possibility of coming back together later. They took place in the context of a particular political idea: socialism. In most countries, that idea was associated with labourism: the growth of organised labour and the power of the working-class, collectively organised into a collectivist political party with a collectivist ideology. Recognition of the right of workers to organise, particularly at that time, was rightly a liberal commitment; socialism and collectivism were not.

### PERNICIOUS EFFECTS

As a basis for government and the wider organisation of society, socialism failed. Its failure was directly associated with some of the worst events of the twentieth century and its effects have been amongst the most pernicious of any set of political beliefs.

The core of socialism was a set of pretty specific ideas, both analysis and prescription. Firstly, it was about economics in the context of the way in which economic activity developed in the late nineteenth and the first half-century of the twentieth century. At its heart, it saw the leading role for the state in the organisation, planning and management of industry and markets.

It turned out to be wrong. It didn't work. While it lasted, the idea was beguiling to many people and even had some resonance with liberals, who disliked much of the paraphernalia of state control but recognised an underlying commitment to justice and generosity.

But it didn't deliver. It failed not only the liberal tests of liberty, democracy and justice, but also its own tests of economic efficiency and fair distribution. On its first big idea, socialism unequivocally failed! Of course, there is a major role for states and for the international institutions which keep markets free, regulate excess and manage broader economic policy in the interests of all citizens, but there are few mainstream political parties in any democracy which would disagree.

Secondly, socialism was a big sociological idea about classes: the belief that society was divided into a number of distinct groups, which recognised and pursued their own interest to the detriment of the others. Again, it was an idea which had some resonance in the industrial structure of its time, but it is very difficult in the twenty-first century to see the clear-cut dividing lines between self-regarding classes. That is why all leading British politicians see their future in an amorphous 'middle England' of 'ordinary working people', who are certainly not clearly divided

into an industrial working class and a rapacious bourgeoisie.

John Maynard Keynes, when setting out *Why I am a Liberal* in the 1930s, argued that the logical result of socialism was class war and "if it comes to class war, I am on the side of my own class: the educated bourgeoisie". I also agree with his underlying thought: that good education liberates. In doing so, it undermines simplistic views of class.

*"The purists and tribalists now are those for whom the only acceptable deal seems to be an agreement with the Labour Party"*

It is also true that there is nothing intrinsically democratic about socialist ideas. Sometimes they have been pursued by committed democrats; in the larger number of countries, the advocates of socialism have not been constrained by the ideals of individual freedom and pluralist democracy.

So, what's left – in both senses – when you take away the big ideas of socialism and you are left with labourism? Social democrats – no longer 'democratic socialists' – claim a ragbag of political territory from both left and right, based on old loyalties and political expediency. It is difficult to see what is distinctive in any ideological or philosophical sense. And, of course, it varies. In areas where labourism has never been near power (say, in such places as south Somerset, the Scottish Borders and Highlands, much of the Home Counties), many labourists retain a broad if unspecific commitment to civil liberties, internationalism and pluralist democracy. That is not our experience of Labour in government, locally and nationally.

The Attlee government implemented major reforms (building on earlier Liberal reforms), which made a substantial improvement to the lives of most of the population. So did governments of both right and left throughout Europe and North America, with support across the political spectrum for the broad direction of travel.

In the UK, the Labour Party has succeeded against the evidence in claiming all the credit for broad changes that were supported by Adenauer and Eisenhower, by Macmillan and de Gaulle. The Labour Party did, however, define the details of the British approach, which is why many of those institutions are too bureaucratic and increasingly ossified.

Would anyone seriously argue that the last Labour government was more internationalist, more committed to personal liberty and the open society, more devolving, more community-minded, more tolerant, particular of ethnic minorities, than is the case with the coalition government?

For me and others, one of the defining moments of our view of the Labour Party was their reneging on the promise of sanctuary to East African Asians in the late 1960s. I hear similar resonances in the leading London Labour MP who talked recently about the need to appeal to "White Britain" to keep out the BNP. Make no mistake: that was not an appeal for tolerance, respect and community; it was a naked appeal to nationalist self-interest; competition with the BNP not rejection.

The Labour Party is nowadays more pro-European than the Tories. I hope it continues. To apply the comment about Churchill's commitment to liberal politics, I have been in favour of the European Union for longer than the Labour Party, but not as often!

## INCHOATE COMMITMENT

There is an inchoate but strongly felt commitment to a form of egalitarianism, although it is difficult to see where the substance lies. Partly, it comes across as angry envy, almost as unappealing as the Conservatives' opposite commitment to the defence of property. In fact, liberals are likely to be in favour of less inequality and certainly in favour of helping people to improve their lives. That is about levelling up rather than levelling down. Labourists are hampered by their unconvincing belief that issues of equality are best addressed by the state. In reality, where greater equality is achieved (for instance, in Scandinavia or the 1950s US, with the glaring exception of racial inequality), it is more cultural than state-imposed. And it is often against the interests of organised trade unions looking after their members.

My favourite recent example of this thinking is the emphasis on health inequalities. The obvious way to reduce inequality in life expectancy is to persuade more middle-class women to smoke, to take less exercise and to eat less healthy food!

The point is that we want not greater equality for its own sake. What we want is to address health poverty, the fact that the social determinants of health create greater mortality and illness amongst some groups. Reforms in the benefits system should also achieve less inequality, not by taking from the better-off to give to the non-working poor but by enabling people to create better lives for themselves.

It is difficult to see where the coherent heart of Labour beliefs now lies other than with political expediency and a liking for office. There are many decent people in the ranks and in the leadership of that party, but their decency is undermined by the lack of any coherence of political analysis or prescription.

The job of the Liberal Democrats is to create a party of government that is the real alternative to the old enemy: conservatism. There are many people in the Labour Party who can respond to our message and find a natural home in modern liberalism. There are some in the Conservative Party who would prefer liberalism once the false option of socialism is discredited and out of the way.

The idea of 'the left' is tainted by socialism and its relics. Liberalism always was the real alternative to the ungenerous, defensive and nationalist right. Any re-alignment in the future must be around liberalism.

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Gordon Lishman wrote the 'Party Strategy and Priorities' consultation paper debated at the 2010 Liberal Democrat conference

# ANOTHER TIGER TO RIDE?

## Simon Hebditch wonders whether Ed Miliband's election as Labour leader opens an alternative to the coalition for Liberal Democrats

The election of Ed Miliband as Labour leader is being hailed in some of the press as the first step on the road to recovery for the Labour Party. The coalition is facing a huge set of crises over the next few months and the possibility that local elections in May next year will lead to significant losses for the Lib Dems.

So, apart from that great shibboleth, "the national interest", the crucial questions for Lib Dems now revolve around the impact of the cuts, the potential for either economic resurgence or a double dip recession and the identification of the party with the Tories as holding responsibility for the privations of the next few years.

Of course, we can all blame Labour for leaving the Treasury coffers virtually empty, but by 2015 such a historical approach will not work with the electorate. The Tories and the Lib Dems will be jointly responsible for either the perceived success or failure of the coalition. We cannot simply choose to point to the Lib Dem policies which have been adopted and hope that the electorate rewards us. We will stand or fall together depending entirely on the state of the economy, the degree of unemployment and the extent to which British voters feel comfortable with their own position in society.

As many have argued cogently, we are now possibly in an era when the politics of coalition will be the norm rather than the exception – especially if the electoral system is changed as a result of the AV referendum. One caveat to that statement; AV is not a proportional system and cannot be guaranteed to reflect the diversity of political traditions on a fair basis.

If the politics of partnership is the way ahead then we must be prepared to compromise on some of our immediate policy objectives – whether such an alliance is with the Tories or Labour. The issue we have to resolve is – how do we identify the policy positions which are negotiable in comparison with those which, if negotiated away, make fundamental existence of a radical Liberal movement impossible? Much hard work needs to be done over the next period to identify those red lines.

### ERUPTING BILE

In the future, it may be that a resurgent Labour Party offers an improved partnership over the existing configuration, and so it will be important to the Lib Dems to keep open channels of communication and not to worry overmuch about the bile that still erupts from some hackneyed Labour mouths. That propensity is already declining, although we will find many attempts by Labour to either entice us away from the current coalition or embarrass our parliamentarians with carefully calibrated amendments to future legislation.

For example, if I were a Labour MP I would be far more interested in putting forward an amendment to the voting reform bill to either offer a group of proportional alternatives in the referendum or to substitute AV for at least AV+. How would Lib Dem MPs vote if the government, through Nick Clegg, is offering only AV but a Labour amendment would offer AV+? Would our doughty members loyally support the coalition position or go for a clearly better, transitional system?

All of this means that the development of the Labour Party over the next year will be of great importance. So, does the election of Ed Miliband as party leader and his new shadow cabinet presage change or reinforce stagnation?

Ed Miliband is bright and personable and he is able to ask the right questions of advisers and policy makers. Having engaged with him over a two-year period when I was chief executive of a voluntary sector funding agency, I can attest to his sharpness and personal interest in solving problems and devising programmes.

He will also try to attract the left while actually holding to a fairly central position in terms of placing the Labour Party politically in the centre. The appointment of Alan Johnson to the Treasury was a clear sign that he was not going to pursue the Ed Balls line that a much slower programme of deficit reduction would be better for the country. Interestingly, Balls probably had the 'best' campaign during the Labour leadership contest – shedding his bruiser image for one of expertise and thoughtfulness on the growth of the economy.

Some of the leadership campaigning during the summer also pointed up the difficulty of marrying together a politician's departmental responsibilities with their role in a collective cabinet. It was galling to see Ed Miliband slag off much of Labour's manifesto and general election campaign – the manifesto for which he bore responsibility as the author! There is still a tendency to assume that cabinet ministers should not speak on issues outside their direct responsibility.

This can appear sensible if you are Alistair Campbell or Andy Coulson as they wish to control a government's media approach, but it doesn't lead to a feeling that the cabinet as a whole can both debate issues and resolve them collectively. Too many people hide behind their departmental portfolios. Regular readers of the New Statesman will remember that one of its columnists, Peter Wilby, constantly wondered in print when a principled resignation would come from Ed Miliband. It never came because, presumably, things that were fundamentally wrong about the last government's policies were not his individual responsibility.

At the time of writing, the furore is beginning on the future of university funding and the Lib Dems will have to spend the next few weeks trying to square the circle between the pledges made at the general election and the coalition's new policies. That will be a painful exercise and it is to be hoped that a significant number of Lib Dem MPs will be prepared to vote against these so-called reforms.

But the Labour Party is in a mess as well. Ed Miliband has one policy, in favour of a graduate tax, and his newly appointed shadow chancellor takes the opposite point of view. This episode highlights one of the major issues now facing us in terms of macroeconomic policy and analysis. It is now fairly universally accepted, apparently, that there is no alternative approach to the need for drastic deficit reduction policies. This steadfast belief allows politicians of all colours to simply declare that the economic situation has changed so dramatically since May that all previous commitments, pledges, policy statements etc can simply be jettisoned.

*"The issue we have to resolve is – how do we identify the policy positions which are negotiable in comparison with those which, if negotiated away, make fundamental existence of a radical Liberal movement impossible?"*

It is not clear to me that the crisis is that huge, or all encompassing. Levels of debt in relation to GDP have exceeded our present position at other times and we still managed to surmount those challenges. The view that it is vital to invest in public works precisely at a time of recession and financial difficulty has not gone away and we can all see the results of reducing the financial deficit too fast by a simple observation of the present travails of Ireland.

It is vital that campaigning work around the cuts in public provision contains not only graphic stories about their impact across the country but an economic analysis as to whether the medicine being prescribed is likely to work or make us even more feeble. There is considerable potential now for the creation of a new alliance containing radicals from a variety of political traditions alongside those working in civil society organisations, community groups and local communities where the impact of the government's policies will be experienced most strongly.

Although many Lib Dems might not like the idea, this means building strong alliances with a range of Labour movement people both at a local and national level. Of course, that will not always be easy. There are swathes of the country where tribal Labour administrations have been the enemy not a potential partner. But the same is true of those Lib Dem parties and activists who have been fighting the Tories for years. We have no alternative now. We must identify a broader movement with which to work to expose the impact of the cuts across the country and articulate a different financial and economic policy.

In this context, the Greens will also be a very important element of any such alliance and the detailed economic and environmental analyses they can offer – and potential solutions which are based on a different approach to growth and sustainability – and strong Lib Dem/Green contacts must be built as a result.

Some of us have always argued for a realignment of political forces in this country. I have always favoured the concept that a realignment of the left – encompassing radical Lib Dems, a dynamic and forward thinking Labour movement and a vibrant Green party – needs to be put together to contest the reactionaries and the zealots of the right. Now, the need is even more pressing. And we need to add into such an alliance the range of single issue groups, civil society organisations and community based activists that can bring a whole new perspective to effective campaigning.

If the political system is to change through a gradual move towards a more proportional voting arrangement, and if the politics of coalition and alliance then become the norm rather than the exception, we could begin to see the possibility of new alliances and linkages which stand a chance of radically changing this country for the better.

## ELECTION PANIC

We had better start preparing for this eventuality and build those links now rather than in a panic as we approach the next election in 2015. Politics is conducted on a daily basis and is not just exercised around elections. Our duty surely is to create that free flowing political movement now both because it is needed and to set the scene for further co-operation later.

All of this sounds as though I am opposed to the current coalition government. Well, to be honest, I am increasingly convinced that the Lib Dems are marching down the wrong road and the time will have to come fairly soon when the radicals within the Lib Dems will have to move into opposition rather than continue to ride the tiger. I thought the moral involved in 'riding the tiger' was that, unless you were very careful, you ended up inside her.

Simon Hebditch is an active Liberal Democrat committed to realignment of the left and works in the voluntary and community sector. He was among Liberator's founders

# DEATH BY NEGLECT

## There are five years to go, but the Liberal Democrats must think now about how to end the coalition, says Tony Greaves

As I arrived at the Liberal Democrat conference in Liverpool, there was a big yellow bus next to the conference centre. I assumed it was the shuttle service to the hotels. But when I got closer and read the destination indicator on the front, it said "Magical Mystery Tour". Right first time.

*"Roll up to make a reservation, roll up for the mystery tour. The magical mystery tour is waiting to take you away, Waiting to take you away."*

The problem is, who's driving? And when and where can we get off? I start from the assumption, which seems reasonable to most people outside the Labour Party, that the coalition will last the course and the next general election will take place in May 2015. I also assume that Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives will contest that election as independent parties and that both parties will contest all the seats.

The first assumption is subject to Harold Macmillan's reflection on "events, dear boy, events" but, short of the Tories deciding to launch an attack on Iran, it's hard to see what might cause the Liberal Democrats to pull out. The Tory right-wing headbangers might be a problem but surely not enough to dent the coalition's majority. They've nowhere else to go.

There will be occasional flurries of hothouse speculation, often on dead news days, about a pending deal to protect coalition seats at the next election. A full-scale electoral pact is clearly out of the question but a limited deal to protect the seats of cabinet ministers or some other select group could happen (that is to say it's technically possible), though it would be a clear signal that the two parties intend to continue the Lib-Con coalition in the event of another balanced parliament – or anyway.

### SERIOUSLY SPLIT

But the more it's talked about, the more it will be denied and the more impossible it will become. It's hardly compatible with fighting the Tories in council elections and in London, Scotland and Wales and it would in any case seriously split the Liberal Democrats and seriously pig off grassroots Tories in seats where they had to withdraw.

So the question is – how are we going to disengage, and when? Will it be a gradual process or one that all happens in a rush at the end? How does it tie into the concentrated build-up of pressure in target and held seats, which as we well know takes months if not years?

At Liverpool, Nick Clegg said yet again that as deputy prime minister he would stand by and promote the policy and actions of the coalition. But on the conference floor and outside (what the media call 'in the bars' because that's where they are), there was repeated talk about the need for Liberal Democrats to be and remain distinctive. As I wrote in Liberator 341, "if we are not distinctive there will simply be no reasons for voting Liberal Democrat".

It is just not credible for our leadership to talk the strict coalition line for four years and 48 weeks, then switch overnight on 1 April 2015 to saying quite different things. Imagine the scene in the studio. "That's very interesting Mr Clegg but only a week ago you said the opposite. Were you lying then or are you lying now?"

Getting into a coalition is like sending in the troops. Not exactly easy but quick, fired up and intensive. Then you're in, there's a sense of euphoria, and there are lots of immediate things to be done that take up all your time and energy and more. But before long, you have to look around and work out what you are there for, reach working arrangements and *modi vivendi*, and manage the situation you are in.

And then, sooner or later, you start to scratch your head and wonder how on earth you are going to get out. The press at Liverpool reported that, whenever they asked ministers about this, they were met with glazed stares and a shake of the head. The problem is that what the party does during the next four years, and how we get out at the end, are closely related matters. And the closer we get to the end, the more the endgame will matter.

So what must we do? The short answer and the long answer is "I don't know" and I don't think anyone in the party has a clear map of the road ahead. So let's start from some basic requirements.

By the beginning of April 2015, we must be in a position to fight a strong campaign as an independent party with a distinctive policy and in good heart, able to hold off all opponents in the seats we hold and fight credible campaigns to gain more seats and win more votes overall. At best, we should aim to challenge to be the leading party in government. At worst, we must be able to hold on.

All this is obvious, but it has far-reaching implications. It's vital that we don't get too close to the Tories, and that we develop clear Liberal Democrat policies for post-coalition politics, and for politics now. And that these policies are rooted in the principles we stand for. It will mean more discussion and understanding of these principles – the progressive Liberal ideology that underpins our existence as a party.

A lot of people seem to realise this, if the election for the Federal Policy Committee is anything to go by. Not only are there 63 candidates but also in their election addresses more than half of them stress being distinctive or independent or the importance of Liberal Democrat values. Indeed, the word "distinct/ive" alone appears 33 times!

So there is plenty of support for the FPC becoming more assertive, developing policy for the party rather than the government. How this might be done is less clear – or at least how the policy can be promoted once

it's developed is not clear at all. There is also the more difficult question of how Liberal Democrats in parliament can distinguish between party policy and government policy, a problem acutely highlighted with tuition fees.

The ad hoc evolution of structures within the parliamentary parties continues. The backbench committees set up just before the summer recess to shadow government departments are gaining some form and functions and are now called Parliamentary Policy Committees (with the confusing initials PPC!), still with a co-chair from the Commons and one from the Lords. The Communities and Local Government committee seems to be leading the way. Co-chaired by Simon Hughes and Graham Tope, it has adopted a two-page set of objectives and means of operation.

*"It is just not credible for our leadership to talk the strict coalition line for four years and 48 weeks, then switch overnight on 1 April 2015 to saying quite different things"*

The impetus for setting up these committees was partly to give a voice to backbenchers in the Commons, with ministers or their (political) staff attending to provide information and a means of liaison. The change of name may reflect changing intentions (with ministers playing a more integral role) and a move away from the idea that they may adopt oppositional backbench stances.

There are now FPC reps on these PPCs, as well as people from bodies such as the Local Government Association (LGA) Liberal Democrat group, ALDC, and so on as appropriate. As well as feeding in Liberal Democrat views on new legislation and co-ordinating week by week activity in the Commons (and perhaps from time to time in the Lords), there is no doubt that these committees will have an important role in developing short-term party policy, which will tend to stretch to medium term and beyond.

Whether or not this is ideal in terms of party democracy is one thing. What is clear is that, where they work well (likely to be a variable feast), they are going to become powerhouses for policy development. How this tallies with an FPC based aim of developing policy that is distinctive is an interesting question.

If we are to fight constituencies hard and successfully (whether by Alternative Vote or as now makes no difference), the targeting operation needs to be got in gear again, and the earlier the better. The threatened redistribution of parliamentary seats, reduced in number to 600, is a potential minefield for Liberal Democrats and a coalition decision the party may come to rue. There are siren voices in the party saying that candidate selection should be postponed until we know the new seats. Since this may not be for three years or more, that is ludicrous. Candidate selection and targeting must start now in existing seats. Changes can be made as and when new boundaries emerge and are determined. But to wait would be madness and could only be suggested by people with little understanding of the real world on the ground. To what extent each candidate and constituency campaign would then promote the coalition line or the Liberal Democrat party line is another interesting question. I know what our ministers in government would like to see but our ministers in government may have to rethink a few things if we are going to survive.

All this is linked to the matter of party publicity. Insofar as we have an effective party publicity operation at Cowley Street, there is the same muddle as we saw when the Browne Report was announced. They churned out Vince Cable's line on higher education and student finance. They also announced the decision of the FPC that scrapping tuition fees remained party policy (though in a rather embarrassed and subdued manner, no doubt hoping that nobody noticed).

At local level, there is a lot of confusion. Is it the job of Liberal Democrats to promote the coalition? It's certainly their role to promote the work of Liberal Democrats in the coalition. But what happens when they, or the party generally, don't agree with things the coalition is doing? It would be nice to see the party sticking up for what we all really believe, but who will provide some co-ordination to that if it flies in the face of the coalition mantra? The danger is that we will see lots of local opinion – but all saying different things!

Some people say we can put off all of this until nearer the time. That would be stupid for several reasons. First, we have little local events coming along like the elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, and council elections in most of England outside London. And similar events each year and every year. The requirement to approach May 2015 "in good heart" means we have to fight all these elections successfully. There will also be parliamentary by-elections, which we cannot fight from third place or worse on a platform of agreeing with first or second placed Tory candidates.

*"The magical mystery tour is dying to take you away,*
*Dying to take you away."*

I don't think the party is thinking or talking about these things yet. It's time to decide where we are going, and get into the driving seat. If we don't, it's our party that will risk dying through neglect.

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Tony Greaves is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords

# KRAMER VS FARRON

## The Liberal Democrats' new president will play a crucial role now that the party is in government. To help readers decide how to vote, Liberator asked both candidates a series of questions

This year's Liberal Democrat presidential election was unexpected. The incumbent (Ros Scott) was widely assumed to be running for a second term. It seemed unlikely that Ros, a popular and successful president, would face a contest.

Then in early September, after nominations had opened, Ros suddenly announced she would not be re-standing. There was much speculation at party conference about why she had taken this decision – and why so late (see RB, page 4). There was also speculation about who would stand, given the difficulty for anyone of getting a campaign off the ground at such short notice.

Two potential candidates (Jennie Rigg and Jason Zadrozny) soon dropped out, leaving us with a choice between one MP and one ex-MP (the latter rumoured to be about to become a peer). And this is hardly surprising. With the exception of the Lib Dems' first president (Ian Wrigglesworth), every successful candidate has been a sitting MP or peer.

The electorate is the whole party membership, voting in a postal ballot. The turnout last time (2008) was 47.8%, the previous time (2004) 47.3%. Assuming 65,000 members, a similar turnout this year would produce about 31,000 votes. Given that activists comprise – at most – about 15,000 members, 'armchair' members would predominate even on this low turnout.

Ballot papers have already been sent out. The deadline for returning them is 10 November and the count will take place on 13 November. In the meantime, Liberator has asked both candidates a series of questions and here are their answers.

### Q1: What relevant experience will you bring to the presidency?

**Farron**: I joined the Liberals at 16. A Focus leaflet deliverer in Lancashire, then a student activist in Newcastle, a councillor in Lancashire, a couple of stints as a parliamentary candidate in unwinnable seats, then candidate for Westmorland – my home – and eventually success. We won Westmorland and Lonsdale from the Conservatives for the first time in 99 years in 2005 by a majority of just 267. This May we held the seat by 12,264.

**Kramer**: I joined the party expecting only to be an active grassroots member. Consequently, I have done many jobs from local branch chair to member of the Federal Executive. I still identify with the grassroots rather than with our elected politicians and I understand viscerally the frustration of a grassroots that lacks the means to be heard by the leadership.

My career has allowed me, however, to become savvy with the media and to retain a media profile which is useful as president. My business background has let me develop the managerial skills needed to support our staff, fundraise and organise.

### Q2: The presidency has three functions that do not necessarily sit well together – representing the party to the leadership, acting as a figurehead at functions, and chairing the Federal Executive. Which of these will you be best at, and which worst?

**Farron**: I would be best at representing the party to the leadership. I am a creature of the grassroots – an activist for 24 years, I have a strong sense of what our members and supporters want to see us do in government, and am determined to be a proactive, energetic and accessible President – I get on well with Nick, well enough to tell him candidly and in private when things are not as they should be. Maybe I'd be least good as chair of FE. I think I am a good chair, but others might not think so because I am intolerant of time-wasting or irrelevant discussions. I'm a democratic and collegiate chair, but folk who like the sound of their own voices will be bitterly disappointed (I have references if you'd like to talk to the Defra team in the last parliament!!).

**Kramer**: I am determined to travel the country listening to local parties and members and will then make sure they are heard by the leadership and get answers. Because I will be the voice of members not just representing my own views, I will be credible to the leadership and I can build on a reputation for common sense and good judgement which I believe I have earned. Diplomacy skills will similarly help me in the role of chairing the FE and other committees. I can do the 'figurehead role' and have done it for years in many different ways because it is necessary. Most people would not know that for me it is the least inviting part of any job and I am far happier promoting the party than myself.

### Q3: What would you do to retain and reinforce the party's separate identity while in a coalition government?

**Farron**: I'd be all over the media selling our distinctive message, promoting what we are achieving in government, getting across our policies and ideals. This is the key reason that I've decided to run to be president of the Liberal Democrats. As part of the coalition, our distinctive message has often got buried, what we stand for has got blurred and our ability to campaign is blunted and I am extremely frustrated

## TIM FARRON

www.timfarronforpresident.org.uk

Tim joined the Liberals aged 16. After leaving Newcastle University, he followed a Higher Education career. Tim won Westmorland and Lonsdale from the Conservatives in 2005 by 267 votes and held the seat this May by 12,264. Tim was parliamentary candidate for North West Durham (1992) and South Ribble (1997). He served as a councillor in both Lancashire and Cumbria. Tim has been Youth spokesperson, Parliamentary Private Secretary to Ming Campbell as Leader, and Shadow Secretary of State for Environment and Rural Affairs. He is married with four children, is a Blackburn Rovers fanatic and a pop music anorak.

about that. Ministers will present the coalition government's arguments, but I will present the Liberal Democrats separate identity. I would explain what we stand for and what the Lib Dems are achieving in power. I would also spell out those negative things that we have stopped the Tories doing.

I want to be the person you see and hear in the media making the Liberal Democrat voice heard loud and clear. I would be a critical friend of the coalition who passionately promotes Liberal Democrat principles, who inspires our supporters and reassures our voters – and gives convincing reasons for people to vote Liberal Democrat.

**Kramer**: Our distinctive voice is key and the president must get across to the public our message that our party sets the policy but this is not incompatible with compromise by members of a coalition government. This will become yet more complex as the Westminster government moves beyond the initial coalition agreement and if in Scotland and Wales we end up as participants in different coalitions. The president will need to 'hold the ring' for the party to remain strong and unified.

I want the party to move onto the front foot in developing serious policies for the future, some of which may end up on the agenda of future coalition agreements but others on which we may well have to stand alone. Engagement and consultation are vital.

## SUSAN KRAMER

www.susan-kramer.info

Susan first became 'political' in the 1970s when campaigning for the environment in the USA with husband John. Returning home to the UK, she joined the Liberal Democrats in 1993, becoming a school governor and local activist campaigning on issues like Heathrow airport. Susan has been a strong supporter of the party as a local party vice-chair, a regional vice-chair, an activist in Women Liberal Democrats and a member of the Federal Executive at the time of the Iraq war. She is best known for the 2000 London Mayor campaign and her time as MP for Richmond Park.

**Q4: What would you do to help to keep the party's leadership and government ministers accountable to the membership?**

**Farron**: I will work with FCC to make sure that party members get the opportunity to question ministers more at conference; I will work to ensure that we can use regional conferences for this too. I'll be in ministers' offices regularly, I will ensure that they know what members are thinking and will also work to get them to approach their ministerial work in a campaigns-focussed way. I'll seek ways to get feedback and suggestions from members, including organising regular round table events for councillors and activists with government ministers. I will actively encourage ministers to say 'no' to their civil servants, to create space in their diaries and to get out and knock on doors and campaign. This is the best way for ministers to keep in touch.

**Kramer**: We must take two-way communication seriously. I have put out a survey as part of my presidential campaign and we have been inundated by responses from members on everything from the coalition to campaigning and specific policies. The president's role must be to make sure that this is a real conversation not a superficial exercise. I would like to explore mechanisms like online Question Times and regular exchanges. It must not be 'us and them'. Ministers can only gain by building their relationships with members and making sure that the membership understands what they are achieving and what issues they face from the party rather than a biased media.

**Q5: How will you ensure that you gain regular and meaningful access to the party leader?**

**Farron**: He won't be able to get rid of me. Being an MP gives me direct access to the media to get our message across and it also gives me close access to Nick. I'll be a critical friend to the coalition and a candid friend to Nick. As President, I would carry a mandate from the members to ensure that the leadership keeps closely to our core principles and our manifesto promises – I would do everything in my power to head off situations such as the current tuition fees issue, so that our members feel that their party is standing by those positions that matter to them the most.

**Kramer**: Ministers and their special advisors are beginning to understand the need for communication. I want to make this easy for them by setting up regular but well run meetings in which we exchange information and make sure it gets back to the membership. I believe that the trust and reputation for judgement that I have earned will make this process easier. I have no personal axe to grind. If there is resistance, I am well known for not taking "no" for an answer and being quite prepared to doorstep.

**Q6: "Stick it on a piece of paper and shove it through a letterbox." Has that approach to campaigning had its day?**

**Farron**: Definitely not. I use Facebook, Twitter and email newsletters to great effect in Westmorland and am doing so in this presidential campaign. Electronic campaigning is just another way of getting your message across. E-campaigning is very effective – but it is the icing on the cake. There is no substitute for community politics – Focus leaflets, residents' surveys and knocking on doors. The chances are that this will remain the main way to get our message out. The key to campaigning successfully is: being passionate about what you believe in, inspiring others to follow you and communicating your message via a mixture of obsessive 'carpet bombing' and plenty of targeted stuff.

So... if you've got something to say, stick it on absolutely everything – which will usually (though not exclusively) mean using a piece of paper with 'Focus' on the masthead! David Penhaligon's words stand true 30 years on; they will stand true in another 30 years.

**Kramer**: We must move into the 21st century when it comes to campaigning. There is no substitute for the physical presence on the doorstep and we need to revive such campaigning. Leaflets have a crucial place but so do direct mail and many forms of e-campaigning from social networks to twitter and email. We throw much too much of a burden onto local parties to develop new campaigning techniques. We need to face up to the fundraising necessary to develop techniques centrally which can then be provided in an easy to use form to local parties.

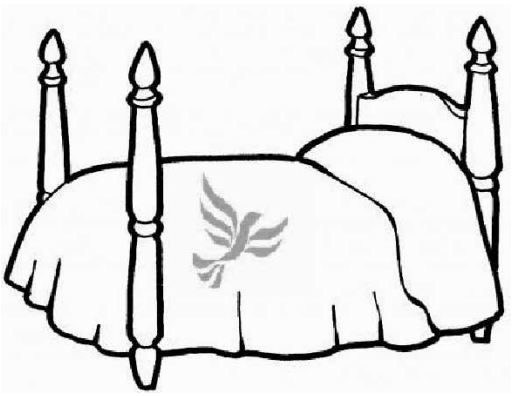
We could also learn far more than we do by listening in detail to local parties to work out what works and what needs changing. We have little idea how to campaign in PR and AV elections and we should be leaning from parties overseas. We should not be ashamed of raising the money to get top-flight advice. Our campaigns staff, like our other staff, need recognition and career opportunities to make sure we are constantly strengthening our skill base and keep expertise.

# SEPARATE BEDS

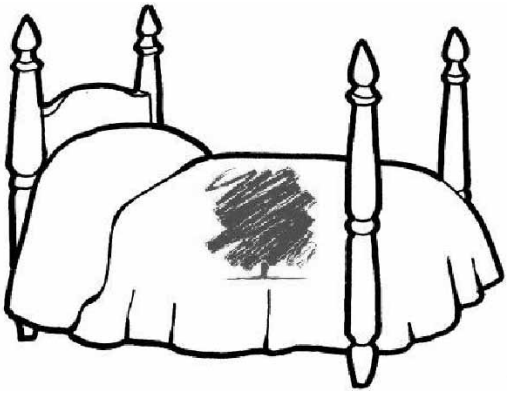
## The Liberal Democrats must be seen to be independent of the government, says David Grace

So Britain has new politics. The coalition is a great experiment in grown-up government for Britain. I can believe it but we cannot take the risk that it will also be the swansong of British Liberalism.

Radio 4's *The Long View* (12 October) compared our current economic dilemma with the Geddes cuts of Lloyd George's Conservative/Liberal coalition in 1921. Roy Hattersley predicted the Liberal Democrats would suffer the same fate as Liberals in the 1920s. He argued that at the next general election we would either fight as coalition partners, which would be the end of the party, or separately in which case our pitch would be that the coalition got things wrong. How can we avoid that fate and make the coalition a launch pad for Liberalism, not a slippery slide into decline?



We must maintain our identity, and develop, promote, deliver and proclaim Liberal Democrat policies, or the media will scorn and the electorate desert us. I don't advocate the deliberate seeking out of disagreements with our Conservative bedfellows. There are enough differences to be resolved without undue exertion. I don't propose fighting over the duvet, but perhaps two duvets or even "Not one bed, two beds" as Shirley Williams told the Guardian when asked "So what is it like to end up in bed with the Tories?"



The Birmingham special conference declared that Liberal Democrats remain an independent political party and that nothing in the agreement prevents the party from developing new policy through its democratic processes.

We must remain a separate party, unafraid to propose ideas that Conservatives oppose or the coalition agreement ignores. Our conferences should be a hotbed of new ideas, not a coalition rally. The conference in Liverpool showed refreshing independence over education and Trident but didn't break new ground. We need the self-confidence to come up with ideas to implement in government or put before the electorate next time as needing more Liberal Democrat MPs to be put into effect. I would like to see new proposals for industrial democracy.

Coalition must involve negotiation and continuous compromise but there is real danger that the public doesn't see the bargaining, only the result, mistaking it for Liberal Democrat policy. The enthusiasm with which Nick Clegg and Vince Cable have defended government policy supports this misapprehension. Voters need to see that we have a clear vision and that we argue before agreement is reached.

This is not the tradition of British cabinet government and civil servants will have advised ministers against it – "Not in front of the children".

This is not a traditional government and we must stop infantilising the electorate. Otherwise Liberal Democrat ministers defending government policies that we have always opposed will appear dishonest and weak. They have to demonstrate tough negotiation. Ask yourself; is that how the settlement on university tuition fees looks? Doesn't it just look like another set of politicians breaking their promises?

Liberal Democrats in the government cannot implement all our policies but they must deliver some and be seen to do so. We hear lists of achievements from MPs, but not enough to convince a cynical voter that we have done the right thing. People will compare the coalition with the ideal government they want, not with the real alternative – a Conservative minority government followed by a Conservative majority. We must have real value for the voters and shout our achievements from the rooftops, just as Labour and the Tory press will bellow out our failures. We are not in coalition at all levels. We have to win local elections every year and European elections in 2014 on the Liberal Democrat record and Liberal Democrat policies. In five years' time, we have to fight a general election as Liberal Democrats and emerge stronger.

There is an old political joke. A Conservative woman and a Liberal man marry. On their wedding night they quarrel over politics and turn away from each other in fury. After a while the woman relents and says, "If the Liberal member would stand now, I think he would get in easily." The man rolls over and replies, "He's already stood as an independent and lost his deposit." Let's keep two beds and lose no deposits in 2015.

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David Grace is chair of Liberal Democrats for Peace and Security and has launched the Two Beds campaign

# CALL A DOCTOR

## Local health services will need intensive care if the coalition's White Paper proposals go ahead unchanged, says John Bryant

I attended the special conference of the Liberal Democrats that endorsed the coalition agreement with an overwhelming majority. I was supportive of the principle of democratising primary care trusts, and pleased that this featured in the agreement.

It specifically mentioned stopping "top-down reorganisations of the NHS" and also promised "We will ensure that there is a stronger voice for patients locally through directly elected individuals on the boards of their local primary care trust. The remainder of the PCTs board will be appointed by the relevant local authority or authorities." That appeared to follow the spirit of the manifesto on which we fought the general election, so hats off to the negotiating team. The Conservatives had made much of maintaining funding for the NHS above the rate of inflation whatever else happened to public spending, so bringing these two promises together made sense.

Two months later and the Health White Paper describes one of the biggest structural changes that the NHS has ever faced in its history, at a time of constrained local government budgets (affecting social care) and imposed cuts of 'management costs' of up to 54% in some London PCTs.

So, who then decided that the Health White Paper should propose top-down reorganisation, including the creation of an NHS Commissioning Board, which will take decisions on the allocation of funding to GP practices, a centralisation of a power currently exercised by PCTs locally; and who decided that within two months of the coalition agreement that PCTs should be abolished?

Local authorities were given the welcome leadership role in conducting joint strategic needs assessments (JSNAs), but the majority of decisions on commissioning services will be undertaken by GP consortia. There is no proposal as yet to require GP consortia to comply with the JSNAs when they commission services.

I made this point forcibly to health minister Paul Burstow when I met him at the Liverpool conference, and this has been included in the official consultation response of Camden Council to the white paper, but will those drafting the consequential Health Bill take any notice?

### DANGEROUS MISMATCH

The needs identified through a JSNA in an authority like Camden would rightly consider the health needs of the many thousands of people who are not registered with GPs because of their transience within the area or because of their uncertain status in the community. These are the people who will attend A&E departments for treatment when necessary, but will not be part of the registered patient lists for which GP consortia will be commissioning. So there could be a dangerous mismatch between what the council believes is necessary and what is actually commissioned by GPs.

The white paper talks about public accountability, but proposes to absorb the functions of overview and scrutiny committees into the Health and Wellbeing Boards. This new hybrid animal appears to have a mix of roles, which in my view are not compatible with each other.

It will have strategic decision-making functions with regard to JSNAs, will be a body to promote 'joined-up thinking' between health and social care, and have scrutiny functions too. Who scrutinises the boards is left dangling in the latest consultation paper (Local Democratic Legitimacy in Health) for in paragraph 50 it states: "A formal health scrutiny function will continue to be important within the local authority, and the local authority will need to assure itself that it has a process in place to adequately scrutinise the functioning of the health and wellbeing board and health improvement policy decisions."

So scrutiny committees are at first disbanded and their functions transferred to the new Health and Wellbeing Boards. They are then recreated to scrutinise the boards that have taken over their functions. That does not look very joined-up or logical to me, and blurs executive and scrutiny roles.

Creating GP consortia to undertake commissioning on behalf of patients may have its virtues but there is no evidence that GPs have the inclination or the expertise to undertake the role successfully without themselves delegating many of the commissioning tasks to a range of unaccountable bodies from the voluntary or private sectors.

I am not clear how this squares with the coalition agreement's declaration that "We will significantly cut the number of health quangos". We might need to redefine what a quango is in this context but if something looks like a duck and quacks like one it will be seen as another class of body that spends public money but is unaccountable to the local community.

The recent example in north London of CAMIDOC, a GP co-operative that ran out-of-hours services across four boroughs, going into liquidation is not a great example of GPs' financial competence. General practitioners are the only part of the NHS that cannot be required under current legislation to attend health scrutiny meetings. So if the commissioning of a large part of the NHS is to be transferred to GP consortia then their public accountability should be through a rigorous scrutiny process conducted by local councils.

Retaining health overview and scrutiny committees distinct from any decision-making bodies within councils charged with carrying out public health functions is essential, and any subsequent legislation that flows from the White Paper should therefore retain and enhance these committees.

Unless there are changes when the White Paper

is converted into legislation, GP consortia are to become compulsory insofar as every GP will have to belong to one to secure a new contract. The existing PCTs are expected to ease the transition to the new structure at a time when they have been told to reduce management costs by an average of a third and in NHS Camden's case by 45%. No stress there then.

*"The Health White Paper fails on the twin tests of increasing localism and democratic decision-making"*

Another feature of the top-down restructure clearly proposed by the White Paper (although rigorously denied by the coalition agreement) is the creation of the NHS Commissioning Board, which will carry out the function of commissioning specialist services.

In London, the re-commissioning of stroke and major trauma services across the capital, which has led to four identified major trauma centres and eight Hyper-Acute Stroke Units (HASUs), followed a rigorous scrutiny of the plans by a pan-London joint health overview and scrutiny committee (JHOSC) on which I served. The resultant report highlighted a number of issues that the commissioners needed to take account of when proceeding to implement their proposals.

The reported health outcomes after the first few months of the HASU's being in place show a significant improvement in survival rates. So how under the new system of commissioning would the important role of scrutiny be undertaken to examine regional or sub-regional proposals for change? Without existing scrutiny committees in place to come together to form JHOSCs, how would such proposals be examined in public?

The title of the consultation document (Liberating the NHS: Local Democratic Legitimacy in Health) suggests that there might be a real democratisation of health functions at local level. Sadly, the proposals fall far short of this.

The document openly admits the following: "The Coalition programme proposed directly elected individuals on the primary care trusts board as a mechanism for doing this. However, because of the proposed transfer of commissioning functions to the NHS Commissioning Board and GP consortia, the Government has concluded that PCTs should be abolished."

## BLURRED ROLES

I have already commented on the blurred roles undertaken by Health and Wellbeing Boards but their composition cannot be described as an advance in local democratic decision-making. Like the previous government, which created the separate roles for children's trusts and safeguarding boards, in which the membership is overwhelmingly made up of appointed officials rather than elected representatives, the coalition government has fallen into the same trap. The boards will have some elected councillors but they will be joined by a range of appointed officials. Very New Labour. We should have no truck with this.

The consultation document states, "the boards would bring together local elected representatives including the leader or the directly elected mayor, social care, NHS commissioners, local government and patient champions around one table. The directors of public health, within the local authority, would also play a critical role. The elected members of the local authority would decide who chaired the board. The board would include both the relevant GP consortia and representation from the NHS Commissioning Board (where relevant issues are being discussed)."

Later it states, "For the board to function well, it will undoubtedly require input from the relevant local authority directors, on social care, public health and children's services. We also propose a local representative from HealthWatch will have a seat on the board, so that it has influence and responsibility in the local decision-making process. We recognise the novelty of arrangements bringing together elected members and officials in this way and would welcome views as to how local authorities can make this work most effectively."

Novelty indeed. This hybrid arrangement has little to do with democracy. If it was ever proposed that key decisions of the national government's cabinet would be undertaken by a cabinet sub-committee with a mix of ministers, and a built-in majority of senior civil servants who had equal voting rights, it would be deemed unacceptable by democratically accountable MPs and rightly so.

I have no problem with key service directors having the duty to attend board meetings to provide proposals and advice but democratic decision-making should mean that only elected councillors should have voting powers on boards.

Finally, the transformation of LINKs into HealthWatch bodies with changed powers (another top-down reorganisation proposal) is not accompanied by any detail on how these bodies can be seen to be truly representative of patients. Presently, those who want to be registered as members of LINKs can do so and local committees are largely self-appointed because of the lack of widespread membership.

The White Paper suggests a HealthWatch representative would get a seat on Health and Wellbeing Boards. Most members of Camden's Health Scrutiny Committee had to convince over 2,000 constituents to vote for them to get elected to the council for an opportunity to serve on the committee or become a member of the cabinet. How many votes would a HealthWatch representative need?

This White Paper fails the twin tests of increasing localism and democratic decision-making. It is a top-down reorganisation that will create more quangos than it abolishes, and it proposes that decision-making powers should be concentrated in the hands of GP consortia that will not be publicly accountable or subject to the priorities established by councils' JSNAs.

Without significant changes, this will be a great opportunity missed, and the first example of a government department specifically ignoring the coalition agreement.

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John Bryant has been a member of the Liberator Collective as 'William Tranby' since 1990. He is a Camden councillor and chairs its Health Scrutiny Committee

# UNIVERSITY CHALLENGE

## Students see the Liberal Democrats as traitors over tuition fees, but the party could still recapture their trust, says Toby Bakare

It's Freshers' Week 2007 at Southampton University and I am in the giant sports hall perusing the university societies' stalls. Making my way to the back, I find myself in the politics section. The Model UN club to the left, the Labour Party to the right. The flow of traffic to this part is steady if unspectacular, that is until I notice the yellow corner. While all the others had a sprinkling of interest, the Lib Dem stand was heaving. Curious, I move in to see why. The stand has a petition for students to sign: "Oppose Student Top-Up Fees Now!" Everyone was keen to sign, including me.

Opposition to tuition fees has in the past been a core issue for the Liberal Democrats, which has helped it gain widespread support among students. Along with opposition to Trident and the Iraq War, it is an issue which defined the party, neatly, as distinct from and slightly to the left of the Labour Party. The opposition to Labour's policy of charging up to £3,250 to study for an undergraduate degree was relentless and consistent. The 2004 tuition fees bill, which introduced the inflation-adjusted £3,000 cap, was opposed by the Lib Dems. In the election just gone, opposition to fees was again a central theme. The party's manifesto said its aim was to phase out tuition fees over six years. All the MPs signed a National Union of Students pledge to "vote against any increase in fees". Photos were taken of Nick Clegg smiling for the cameras, signed pledge in hand (pictures which must now be haunting him in his sleep). Students at Southampton University almost universally voted Lib Dem in the general election, enticed by Clegg's ascendance through the TV debates, and convinced by the flagship education policy.

### TOUGH QUESTIONS

The reality now is completely different. The Lib Dems have to answer the tough questions that universities are asking. Namely, if we are to maintain our status as world class research universities and have a high proportion of the population attend university, where will the money for this come from?

The Browne Review will likely be seen as a seminal document, much like how the Beveridge report is seen today. Browne's findings mean an end to the prospect of a graduate tax; the alternative that would have been equitable but unfortunately unworkable. The idea of tuition fees has gone from being heresy to orthodoxy in twenty years. Steve Smith, Chancellor of Exeter University and head of Universities UK, believes that we are at a defining moment, which will see "a major transfer of the cost of education... onto the student".

The question is: will students ever again trust the Lib Dems to be on their side and fighting their corner? Among my peers, all of whom are leaving with debt in the tens of thousands of pounds, there is deep-seated resentment. "Well, they've sold out, haven't they?" came a rebuke from a friend of mine as we discussed the issue. The question was a rhetorical one.

An issue that could do irreparable damage needn't smack of hypocrisy, though. What has arisen out of the Browne Review will change the premise of the debate, but this is only the start. The fight to a more equal system will begin with the report and end with the legislation; the road between the two is a long one full of compromises and hard battles to be won. The likely result will be what the media are already labelling as 'Browne plus', which will accept the need for tuition fees to rise but will include concessions to help keep access to higher education as open as possible.

Vince Cable has led from the front on this point, openly saying that he no longer believes a graduate tax to be a workable solution. Cable was the first to break ranks to risk openly being called a traitor, as he came out in support of Browne's recommendation, stating in his statement to the House of Commons that, "the report is on the right lines." Now he has to get his party and eventually students nationwide to support this new status quo.

How can ministers in the coalition defend turning their backs on what was, as recently as the last general election, a key, defining issue? On what principles should the concessions, which the party is going to fight so hard to obtain, be based? In essence how do the Lib Dems reconcile what seems irreconcilable?

Firstly, the party can still argue to students that it was right in 2004 to oppose tuition fees while accepting the need for them in 2010. One of the central arguments against a graduate tax has been that it will not bring in the necessary revenue quickly enough to help with the nation's current financial predicament. If the tax had been brought in earlier, as was advocated by the party, then the graduate tax would be significantly closer to paying dividends and pleasing the deficit hawks. Instead, the Labour Party prevaricated and brought forward half-measures, and now a graduate tax is unrealistic.

No one, either students or universities, is happy with the current system and, more importantly, Labour did not achieve its aim of 50% of students going to university. The Lib Dem policy was the right one in 2004, when public finances would have allowed a highly progressive system to be brought in, but no one listened. It was a ticking time bomb that the Labour Party did not have the foresight to deal with. And now the Lib Dems must fix it with a policy that is right now, that being increased tuition fees.

## CONSISTENT NARRATIVE

There is scope in the Browne report for a consistent Lib Dem narrative. The Lib Dems must keep the debate as much as possible to 2004 and reiterate what has been the party line on economic policy: that the Labour Party was irresponsible and has sold future generations down the river with its policy. Browne talks of how, in future, the money will follow the students, bringing an end to block grants for higher education institutions. The idea of money following the student was being advocated by the Lib Dems at the election in the form of a pupil premium – the Browne proposals can become an extension of, and not a contradiction of previously held Lib Dem policy. That's presentation, but what of the nuts and bolts? What should be the guiding principles that help win back student trust?

*"The question is: will students ever again trust the Lib Dems to be on their side and fighting their corner?"*

The party must convince the students that a result of the reforms will be to continue to give students from poorer backgrounds more leeway to access education. If any future bursary system awards only on the basis of grade merit, then the rich will benefit more than the poor. This is the case in the United States where, in 2007-08, half of bursaries awarded went to those whose families earned more than $70,000. The poorest got just 13% of bursaries. Any system in the future cannot just take simple grades into account, but other factors. Parental income, whether you are from a single parent home, whether or not your parents went to university, even how much work you have done in your local community; all of these factors should be used to decide on financial assistance, whether from the government or universities directly. The detail of the reforms must still leave the door of higher education open to the poorest and must recognise the obvious disparities in backgrounds. This may seem like means testing, but the term doesn't carry so much of a stigma among the young these days and won't necessarily lead to resentment.

## PLAINLY UNACCEPTABLE

Thirdly, in the area of repaying the loans especially, the reforms must be as progressive as possible. Some reports have suggested that graduates earning £60,000 will end up paying more than a graduate on £100,000. The higher earner will pay the same interest but over a shorter amount of time. This is plainly unacceptable. Any interest must rise in accordance with wages. If a graduate earning £100,000 a year pays an interest rate of 9%, then a graduate on £50,000 should pay a rate of 4.5%. The higher you earn, the more you pay. This seems a rather obvious point but interest on a loan is sure to become a bone of contention within the coalition government as the Tories will see higher interest for high earners as a tax on success. A progressive rate of taxation is far more sustainable and equitable than a 'one size fits all' policy and, what's more, any system that does not have a graduated form of interest will end up hurting more those who decide to go into the public sector, where wages are traditionally lower. Having a differentiated interest rate will send the message that government is more sympathetic to nurses than it is to high earning bankers.

Anyone who has ever been to university knows the value of an education. This is why progressives are keen to make it as open to all as possible. It is also why going to university is now universally recognised as being an expensive endeavour. It is also a worthwhile endeavour and students can be persuaded of this if they believe that ultimately out of the Browne Review will emerge a system for funding higher education that is sustainable (unlike previous systems), progressive, fair and costly but ultimately worthwhile.

I cannot say that I wouldn't baulk at the fees, or that I wasn't in favour of a graduate tax, but free education guarantees nothing. In Germany, where 96% of students attend a public university, no student pays more than £870 in tuition fees, yet only 25% of school leavers go on to higher education.

The Institute of Fiscal studies has described the Browne Report as "more progressive than the current system." This is before the Lib Dems have begun haggling. That should surely give all Lib Dems some heart. In the eyes of students, however, the road back to credibility will be a longer, tougher one. Every university in England will be marching on 10 November in opposition to any lifting of the cap on tuition fees. They will be unhappy at the Tory-led proposals but will be directing their ire at the Lib Dems, who are now seen as betrayers of the cause. The Lib Dems have rightly accepted the premise of Browne, but now they must work within it for the good of students of every class.

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Toby Bakare graduated from Southampton University this summer and campaigned for the Liberal Democrats in the general election

# BACK TO THE POOR HOUSE

## Government proposals to scrap secure social housing tenancies would lead to a bureaucratic nightmare and solve nothing, says Rachel Smith

One of the latest policies to come from the coalition kiln is to end secure tenancies for new tenants in social housing. It is a seriously bad idea, though it tries to deal with a real problem.

Before 'right to buy' in 1980, council housing was not means tested. It was thought that people would self-select themselves out of social housing when they could afford to do so – and some did, but not enough of them.

So Mrs Thatcher thought she would break the link between being a council tenant and voting Labour by offering right to buy at hugely discounted prices. It was popular, except with local authorities, who found their best stock was bought up and the proceeds of the sale going to central government, instead of being available to build more of what was needed.

Some went on very necessary repairs to the remaining stock but new building was transferred to housing associations, who could build more for less because they could borrow in the private market to augment grant from central government. This reduced the public sector borrowing requirement (PSBR) but did nothing for the local authorities' ability to house those in need. Gradually, means-testing became the norm to ration scarce council housing rather than a requirement restricted to charitable housing associations.

Housing associations were ideologically less offensive to the Thatcher government because the link between council votes and low rents was broken. Simultaneously, business rates went to central government, taking away the temptation for councils to make them higher. More greatness was thrust upon housing associations by stock transfer from councils.

Although they started idealistically and comparatively efficiently, they changed from filling the gaps in provision by councils (as most were in the 1970s and early 1980s) to being the primary provider of new social housing. And because of the overall shortage of housing, they were required to give 100% of their new lets to the homeless or those in priority need via their local councils.

### MOST VULNERABLE

Very soon, the problems that had afflicted some big council estates before right to buy became even worse in housing association estates because of the concentrations there of the poorest and most vulnerable, who were the only people getting new tenancies, unless they were mixed tenure estates, with some home ownership or shared ownership as well as rented properties. This led indirectly to the introduction of ASBOs to deal with bad behaviour not directly connected with the tenancy itself.

Many housing associations have become vast, sprawling housing companies, often without the strong local roots they used to have and, crucially, without local accountability. Some are now in financial trouble. But the one thing they do still offer, in common with councils, is an assured tenancy, the equivalent of the councils' secure tenancy. They sometimes also have useful intermediate products like shared ownership. Some have tried 'introductory' or 'probationary' tenancies to encourage good behaviour at the start – especially for very young tenants – but without the carrot of permanent accommodation at the end of the trial period, it is hard to see how these would have the desired effect.

So what would happen with five-year tenancies? Presumably the idea is to free up a scarce resource for those in greatest need. So good behaviour would not help to ensure renewal.

Let us imagine that the tenant has to reapply at some point before the expiry of the tenancy, say six months. The council or housing association's housing officer is required to assess the household. Is it still in a priority category of need? Has the tenancy been well conducted in terms of rent payment and no neighbour nuisance, and is the household's income and/or savings such that it cannot access private housing?

Households in priority need would have stay, whatever their conduct, for want of anywhere else to put them, unless a return to hostels, the equivalent of the Elizabethan 'poor house', is advocated? Older people 'under-occupying' would be at risk of losing their tenancy, as would those could 'afford' to buy. How far afield would they be required to look? Most households grow and shrink, especially when teenagers become young adults and move in and out of education, employment and relationships. Tenants who aspire to owner-occupation have to weigh up the risk of taking on a mortgage when their employment may be uncertain or seasonal. Better a roof over your head than being out in the cold when hard times come.

However, there is a case for capping social rent entitlement in relation to local rent levels and size of household. It is unreasonable for the public purse to pay thousands of pounds a month of rent for some, while others no better off scrimp and save to pay their own rent or mortgage because they are not in 'priority need'; and I suspect that in some areas the availability of buy to rent mortgages is keeping out first time buyers and keeping up rent levels for private sector landlords letting to tenants on housing benefit. But if the issue is actually households with several breadwinners clogging up council housing, there would be some merit in going for the German system of rents set according to household income (though it would be very bureaucratic to monitor variations in income and clawbacks would have to be done retrospectively).

A better idea would be to revive the various incentive

schemes – the Tenant Incentive Scheme (TIS) and HOTCHA (the equivalent for tenants of charitable housing associations). Right to Buy (RTB) itself was a hugely expensive incentive scheme, which acknowledged the surplus to councils from a lifetime of paying rent. But the discounts were too big and the proceeds confiscated by central government. If the proceeds had been used to build more council housing, we would not be reaping the current whirlwind. TIS and HOTCHA got people into the private sector for a lot less – £10,000–£20,000 twenty years ago, compared with the current average RTB discount (2009/10) of £26,660. Even if it were now to be £30,000-£40,000, it would be half the subsidy involved in building another social home. If it were weighted to promote filling empty homes, it would do even more good.

*"Providing adequate housing for all cannot be left entirely to the private market"*

I have been looking at the figures for Right to Buy Sales for the last ten years in England from returns made by local authorities. They have brought in about £16bn to the exchequer in the decade 1998-2008 but have tailed off dramatically since then. Sales rose from about 40,000 in 1998/99 to a high of about 70,000 in 2003/04, since when they have fallen to a mere 2,880 in 2008/09, bringing in only £171m. The discount rate fell from an average of 50% in 1998/99 to around 25% in the last few years, and the dramatic drop from about 12,000 to less than 3,000 since 2008 reflects the effect of the credit crunch on mortgage availability. The latter would bedevil any new incentive schemes too, unless the government can take firmer action to make banks lend: Shared ownership should also play its part, since there is increasing evidence that it is no more risky than any other first time buyer mortgage. So RTB is a busted flush and should give way to incentive schemes to move people rather than dwellings from the social sector to the private sector.

## NIGHTMARE

So, having reached that conclusion, why not do it by abolishing secure tenancies? One reason is that the review process every five years would be a nightmare. If you found yourself threatened with the loss of your home, wouldn't you make sure your household was at its biggest and poorest at the moment of review?

I think of my local village, where less than 10% of the housing is 'social'. I think of the council tenants I know – a pensioner with a husband who has not been able to speak following a stroke during heart surgery ten years ago but has an occupational pension: they were in tied accommodation in the annexe of a big house but the wife's ability to put in the hours in place of rent diminished as her husband required more and more care.

She would have been terrified that she would be told to move on after five years, especially if he were to die. I think of the little old lady who moved into a council house thirty years ago from a tied house when her father retired, together with her parents and husband, but is now alone and widowed, therefore 'under-occupying'. Unless a flat or bungalow becomes vacant, where would she go next? Then there is Mike, who built up a window-cleaning business from the day he left school and chooses to stay in his council house. He has just bought the local greengrocery shop. He is a part-time fireman and a parish councillor. Why is it so frowned on for him not to speculate in housing but rather put his money into a local business?

Under-occupation is perhaps less defensible than security of tenure. I think there is scope for reducing housing benefit for anyone under-occupying, thereby encouraging them to take in a lodger if they are unable to earn money outside the home. But I do not think having one more room than is slept in should be counted as under-occupation. In Shetland, you could apply for a property with one more bedroom than you needed if you were of 'childbearing age' (deemed to be females up to 40 years old). It might need revision, but it was more humane than the requirement of a live birth before couples can apply for a two-bedroom house, which is the way it is in England and Wales and leads to huge waiting lists for one-bedroom properties coupled with very high refusal rates when they become vacant.

In fact, I would make all publicly subsidised properties have two rooms to be used as sleeping or studying areas, other than the living/eating/kitchen area, or all one-bedroom properties easily divisible into two at a later date. I would even go as far as to support abolishing the right to succeed to a tenancy for the next generation, and limit same generation automatic transfers to surviving long-term partners. But there will always need to be a safety net for the poorest households by way of subsidised provision.

The proposal to abolish secure tenancies is not sensible: "All that glisters is not gold". But with a bit more thought, strategies to move people on from scarce social housing to less subsidised tenures could be developed. It is clear that providing adequate housing for all cannot be left entirely to the private market, but carrots could do more than sticks and cost less, both in terms of human misery and public money.

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Rachel Smith worked in the social housing sector for twenty years and currently chairs a small rural housing association. She is married to the Business Secretary, Vince Cable

# WHO RUNS THIS COUNTRY?

## Only a judicial inquiry can get to the truth of the phone hacking scandal, says Adrian Sanders

Two people working for the most powerful media corporation on the planet were jailed for the illegal hacking of phones belonging to members of the Royal Family.

But suspicions remain that more people were involved in illegal information gathering and that hundreds of celebrities, sports people, and politicians were victims, that people who knew about this were paid off to keep quiet, that the Metropolitan Police were either complacent, incompetent or complicit, and one of the key players who may know the secrets unearthed by the hackers now works alongside the prime minister enjoying his protection.

Meanwhile, a small group of MPs, some of whom have been subjected to defamatory remarks while pursuing the truth, continue to ask questions, but can they persuade the one person who could instigate a proper enquiry to do so, in order to draw a line under the issue?

It sounds like the synopsis for a novel, but the story is real and is being played out as we speak.

I'm a Liberal because of our historic mission to hold to account those who exercise power and influence over our lives. The 'phone hacking scandal' is an example of the misuse of power by News International that the convictions of two people should have brought to an end. Unfortunately, questions remain about the involvement of others.

The Culture Media and Sport Select Committee took evidence last year from the Metropolitan Police, News International staff past and present, and others, as part of our investigation into press standards, privacy and libel. The allegations of illegal information gathering by the News of the World became a major part of our enquiry. I would recommend the report to anyone interested in how one part of Rupert Murdoch's empire has obtained stories that enabled it to continue its claim to be the world's biggest selling Sunday newspaper.

The report was a consequence of the longest and most detailed enquiry I have known in thirteen years as an MP, and among its conclusions were:

* Throughout we have repeatedly encountered an unwillingness to provide the detailed information that we sought, claims of ignorance or lack of recall, and deliberate obfuscation.

* We strongly condemn this behaviour which reinforces the widely held impression that the press generally regard themselves as unaccountable and that News International in particular has sought to conceal the truth about what really occurred.

If that isn't enough to suggest this matter needs further investigation then there are the people whose lives have been directly affected. Many questions remain unanswered.

Why did the Metropolitan Police end their investigations with the hacking of phones of members of the Royal Family, despite evidence that the practice was widespread and involved hundreds other public, and not so public, figures?

How did the person in charge of those investigations end up on the payroll of News International?

Why has the Met failed to investigate and communicate with people allegedly the victims of illegal information gathering?

One former senior police officer has felt the need to call for a judicial review of the Met's handling of the allegation that his phone had been hacked by newspapers when he was a serving police officer.

Imagine if personal information had been illegally taken from you. You would want to know what it was and knows it. You would worry about how it could be misinterpreted and how you could be misrepresented were it to be published at a later date.

It has taken a US newspaper, the New York Times, to bring this issue back into the spotlight with the publication of further allegations against News International employees and crucially, that key evidence was withheld from the Crown Prosecution Service.

Slowly journalists are coming out of the woodwork to give evidence, but the Met is insisting on interviewing them under caution, a practice likely to scare off other whistle-blowers.

As a committee, we failed to get to the truth, but then select committees do not have the powers of judicial bodies. For similar reasons, I don't expect the Committee on Standards and Privileges, which is having another look at this issue, will get much further than ourselves.

It is my belief that only a judicial inquiry conducted under oath and in public will uncover the extent of the wrong-doing, identify those responsible, and obtain justice for those who fear that details about their lives have been gathered and could be used to misrepresent them at a future date.

I have written to the deputy prime minister Nick Clegg and asked that he should instigate a judicial inquiry if his office allows, and if it doesn't whether he will be taking this up with the prime minister and urge him to set it up.

The reply might answer the question, who really runs this country?

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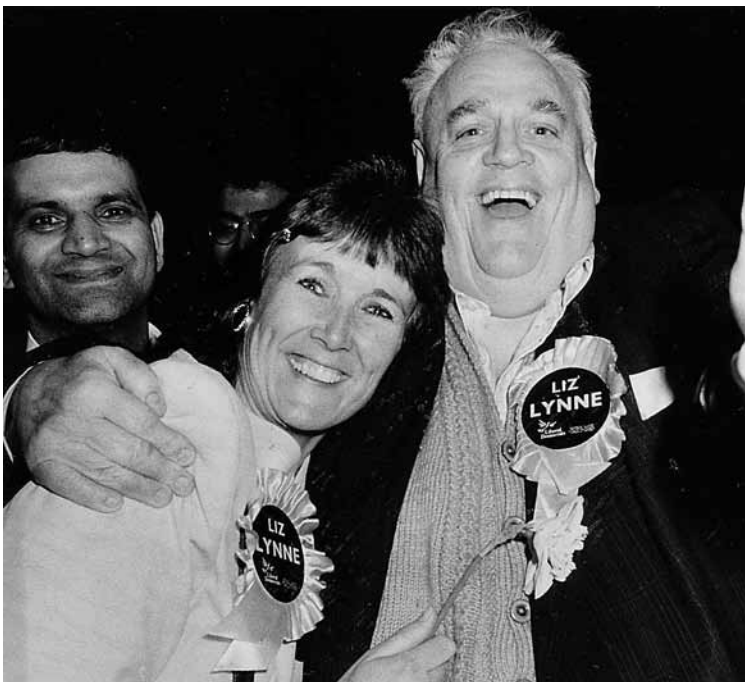
Adrian Sanders is Liberal Democrat MP for Torbay and a member of the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee

# OBITUARY: CYRIL SMITH

## Mark Hunter pays tribute to the former MP for Rochdale

Cyril Smith, in the eyes of many people, was a funny sort of a Liberal. Although not noted for his progressive views, he was nonetheless a stalwart of the party during some difficult times, particularly in the North West. As chief whip at the time of the Thorpe leadership scandal, and subsequently under David Steel's leadership, he could be a real handful, not to say an awkward so and so, but his overall contribution to the party should never be underrated.




Cyril was the genuine article. A real, larger than life character, always plain speaking to the point of bluntness and always at the ready to go into battle for the people he represented and the causes he believed in. He was always full of advice – whether it was wanted or not didn't trouble him – and truly a legend in his own lifetime.

A true son of the North West and someone proud to call the region his home, Cyril encouraged and mentored many of us as we started along the path that eventually – for some – led to elected office. I can remember with great affection campaigning with him. The reaction of the people in his presence had to be seen to be believed; he was treated almost like royalty and everybody wanted to shake hands with him.

My own first experience of Cyril's willingness to help and enthuse new younger candidates came in 1980 when I asked him to do a public meeting for me in Droylsden, where we were struggling to revive the local Liberal association. Much to my surprise, Cyril wrote back promptly and agreed to speak in support of my candidature. Imagine my disappointment when Cyril telephoned on the day of the meeting with the fateful words,"Can't do it my friend, three line whip I'm afraid". Sensing my dismay, he quickly asked what day our local market was held and he answered, "Tell you what, I'll get my brother Norman to drive me down and you and I will do a walkabout at the market. It'll do you far more good than any number of public meetings." As usual, he was right.

A grammar school lad from a humble background, Cyril was first elected to Rochdale Council in 1952 and served as a councillor and later mayor before becoming an alderman in 1966 – a position he held until the old Rochdale Council was disbanded in 1974. With the formation of the new Rochdale Metropolitan District Council, he was elected for a further period of office.

Cyril was elected to parliament at a by-election in October 1972 (with a majority of 5,000), first as a Liberal and then as a Liberal Democrat until he stepped down in 1992.

It's worth remembering that, back in 1972, Cyril was the only Liberal MP in England from outside the south west. His victory kick started the latest of the great 'Liberal revivals', without which many doubted that the party would have gone on to win the four subsequent parliamentary by-elections.

Always defiantly anti-establishment, Cyril enjoyed nothing more than campaigning for causes he believed in and he didn't care at all about what the 'powers that be' thought. A typical example was his attempt to persuade Jeremy Thorpe that he and his colleagues should chain themselves to the railings outside parliament wearing T-shirts demanding 'Electoral Reform Now!' Needless to say, Thorpe was not persuaded by the tactic, but it didn't stop Cyril from going it alone.

Despite his blunt professional northern exterior, Cyril was actually quite a sensitive man and though he could forgive those that crossed him, he rarely forgot. He didn't so much bear a grudge as get it out for a good polish now and again! Cyril was also inordinately proud of the MBE he received for his massive contribution to public life in 1966, and in 1988 was delighted to be awarded a knighthood.

Although he was never a particularly popular person with the metropolitan elite, and often referred to parliament itself as the "longest running farce in the west end", the people of Rochdale revered him. Surely there can be no finer tribute to any politician than to say his constituents were as proud of him as he was of them. Truly a one-off, the like of which we are unlikely to see again.

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Mark Hunter is Liberal Democrat MP for Cheadle

# Lord Bonkers' Diary

Autumn has come to Rutland. As I look out across the lawns from my Library windows, the skeletons of distant trees stand stark against the low skies. Nearer at hand stand piles of leaves – and from one of those comes muffled cursing and swearing. I fear that, in a surfeit of enthusiasm, one of the undergardeners has dumped them on top of Meadowcroft. But my thoughts are far away in the Welsh Marches...

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Last week, in my capacity as under-secretary at the Department for Outer Space, I travelled to a top secret location on the border between Shropshire and Montgomeryshire. There, amongst the spoil heaps of the Victorian lead-mining, a strange erection hoved into view.

Like all ministers in the Coalition government, I have had to wield my surgeon's scalpel in order to comply with the dictates of the Comprehensive Spending Review. Many of these cuts have been achieved by doing away with the sort of Labour nonsense we all familiar with: missions to suppress vice on Alpha Centauri, public education campaigns against sexism on Venus and so forth. I was also minded to do away with the warning signs about horse chestnut trees in the Crab Nebula until I discovered that they are so named because they can gallop at speed across rough country and are capable of giving a nasty bite if you let them sneak up behind you.

Other cuts I have made with a heavy heart. The British space programme, for instance, is no more and I am painfully aware this will lead to redundancies at Woomera. However, I am proud that I have been able to uphold the pledge made by so many Liberal Democrat candidates at the last election by continuing to train a full complement of British space cadets (a course of action enthusiastically urged upon me by our own Liberal Youth – when they are hiking through forests singing "I Love to Go A-Wandering" or sitting around camp fires). I realise they may be disappointed that there will be no spacecraft for them to crew, but feel that if they take up my suggested alternative – trampolining lessons – with sufficient vim and vigour then this need not prove an insuperable barrier to their career ambitions.

There was one spending item that I was determined not to cut and it was this that I travelled to the Welsh border to inspect. It is a model spacecraft. By this I do not mean the sort of model that the best sort of schoolboy spends his evening gluing together. No, I mean a rocket, crewed by fashion models and piloted by our own Lembit Öpik, which will be dispatched at the first hint of an asteroid that has the intention of colliding with Earth. (I am not exactly clear what Lembit will do when he reaches it, but I have every confidence in his ability to Use His Initiative).

There are those in the London chapter of the Liberal Democrats who are urging me to send him off on the thing this very afternoon. As a responsible minister, however, I am determined not to launch it until it is needed.

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So what are our Conservative friends like? It has been what the young people call "a steep learning curve" for me as, until recently, I generally saw Tories from the saddle as we hunted them across the fields of Leicestershire and Rutland. I recall a good run a county councillor gave us until he went to earth near Billesdon Coplow...

Anyway, in the spirit of cross-party co-operation, I here offer pen of a few of my new colleagues.

My older readers will recall that popular programme from the early days of the moving television, "Have a Go with Eric Pickles". With his catchphrases "Are yer courting?" and "Give him the money, Barney", Pickles soon became a household name. He disappeared from our screens amid persistent rumours that he had eaten one of the Dagenham Girl Pipers, but later resurfaced as MP for Brentwood and is now Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government.

George Osborne, a scion of the biscuit dynasty, made his first worker redundant at the age of 10. His parents must have been so proud.

A little bird told me that, had the Conservatives won an overall majority, then Nadine Dorries would have been prevailed upon to accept my Outer Space portfolio. I take it as a tribute to Nick Clegg's skill as a negotiator that he was able to win the post for a Liberal Democrat.

Iain Duncan Smith is known as "the quiet man". I am told that he intends to revolutionise the Social Security system in Britain, but am unable to hear a word he says.

In 1977, at the age of 8, William Hague brought the Conservative Conference to its feet with his peroration: "I hate Socialism and, besides, you lot will soon be dead anyway". Thirty-three years later, now aged 87, he is Foreign Secretary. Isn't it strange how things turn out?

"Do you know Theresa May?" a civil servant asked during one of my first visits to my new department. "No," I replied, "but I am grateful for the tip."

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In London yesterday I was astounded to bump into our own Dr Evan Harris. I had assumed that he perished when the locals, armed with pitchforks and flaming torches, finally succeeded in breaking into his laboratory in the surprisingly mountainous country between Oxford and Abingdon and flung his experiments into a passing mountain stream.

While in rude health, he turns out to be at something of a loose end and I am pleased to be able to offer him work on the British mission to Mars – albeit as a trampoline coach.

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Dusk has now fallen in Rutland, Meadowcroft has been retrieved and brushed down, and I am in my observatory on top of the West Tower scanning the heavens with my telescope. A bright speck near Andromeda draws my attention: I study it intently for a few moments, then wind my field telephone, lift the receiver and ask for a number in Shropshire...

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