

# liberator



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# COMMENTARY

## A FAILURE OF LEADERSHIP

The debacle over tuition fees at least means that the public will in future be spared vacuous slogans about how the Liberal Democrats are different from the other parties. No other good can come from this fiasco, one that calls into question Nick Clegg's ability to manage awkward political situations even when they are clearly foreseen.

A leader who had spent decades working his way up in politics would have been less likely to blunder into this elephant trap than one who emerged more or less from nowhere to become an MEP. After one term in Brussels he became an MP and, after another two and half years, leader, then 18 months later deputy prime minister.

Clegg's inexperience was little remarked upon during the leadership campaign, not least because the same charge applied only slightly less to Chris Huhne, but it is showing now.

In the run-up to the general election, it was not exactly impossible to foresee a hung parliament, yet Lib Dem MPs were not merely left free to sign the NUS tuition fees pledge but, according to reports, ordered to do so if they were reluctant. Clegg himself signed.

Come the coalition talks, it was obvious this would be a problem. Why then did the negotiators tie the party's fate to Lord Browne's review, the outcome of which they had no control over?

The Tories were desperate for a coalition; would they really not have moved further towards the Lib Dem position? Perhaps they were never pushed, since the negotiators were drawn from among those MPs who had done their best to ditch the policy before the election.

But the coalition agreement said Lib Dem MPs could abstain on the issue. It did not say that Lib Dem ministers and parliamentary secretaries could not.

Mass abstention was promoted by Clegg at one point so why, 24 hours before, was it suddenly decided that ministers had to vote with the government, a move that served to make the party look ludicrous as well as dishonest?

The reason this has been so toxic is that it was not just a broken manifesto promise – though that would have been bad enough – but a personal pledge freely given by professional politicians. This turned a question of policy into a question of trust.

Breaking a pledge blows a hole in any argument that Lib Dems keep their promises as a matter of course. It also blows a hole in the constituency the party had successfully cultivated among students and well-

educated young adults, with consequences that those MPs who voted with the government may one day rue.

What other unforeseen traps may open up between now and 2015 in which Clegg will prove similarly wanting at leading the party through?

He has allowed the party to be positioned where it, not the Conservatives, is blamed for everything the government does while getting little credit for positive measures. Can't, for example, Danny Alexander be told to stop his wooden television performances and let George Osborne take the flak for once?

The only way the party will survive the coalition alive is if it gains policy objectives, moderates the worst of some Conservative ones and is clearly, loudly and unambiguously seen to have done so. Instead, it has behaved as though the coalition were a single party government. It isn't, and the pretence that the Lib Dems support every aspect of government policy does the reverse double of being both wrong and unpopular.

A month or so before the tuition fees vote, Lib Dem stomachs will have turned at the spectacle of Clegg patting Osborne's back as he finished delivering a spending review larded with gratuitous acts of meanness against poor people. If Lib Dem hands pat Tory backs just as the Tories show their worst side, why should anyone wonder that voters blame the Lib Dems for the reckless gamble the government has embarked on in trying to cut the deficit so fast?

We predicted in *Liberator* 340 that a party used to being either ignored or quite liked would have to get used to being robustly hated by some sections of society when in power. That has come true quicker and deeper than anyone could have conceived. As the spending cuts bite, it is unlikely to become any less true.

If the party is to survive what has been (and will be) thrown at it, it needs a leader who can see how to push its freedom of action and separate identity within the coalition to the maximum, and who always looks to how the party will eventually extricate itself and have a credible platform on which to fight future elections.

Can Nick Clegg do that? Let's be fair, he is on a learning curve too and it is essential he does learn from the tuition fees debacle. But with the country echoing to the sound of Lib Dem membership cards being torn up and the party's poll rating heading down towards 'others', he had better learn very fast.

At least this exact problem will not recur. Who now would ask a Lib Dem to pledge their vote on anything?

# RADICAL BULLETIN

## SEXING UP

“Where is our Alistair Campbell?” alarmed members of the Liberal Democrat campaigns department asked Nick Clegg at a meeting.

As well they might. The coalition’s story is being told in public with varying degrees of success. The party’s story is not.

Indeed, it is so little heard that the Lib Dems seem to have no existence separate from that of the government, which might not matter were they a majority government but in a coalition means the party is being drowned out.

Clegg’s incomprehension at this question said a lot. He does not see a problem, in his capacity as deputy prime minister, in the government telling its story, and does not appear to recognise that he is still leader of a party that needs to tell its own story if it is to survive the next election.

Part of the problem is that the way the coalition agreement was formed gave the Tories the lion’s share of paid adviser bums on Whitehall seats. This was compounded by the failure to secure enough of the ‘Short money’ the party had enjoyed in opposition, which led to carnage among its paid staff (Liberator 341).

Some of the party’s communications are handled by Clegg’s £85,000-a-year adviser Richard Reeves, who believes “social liberals should join the Labour party” (Liberator 340) and is understood to have been responsible for some of the messages sent out to try to win support for the coalition’s stance on tuition fees, which largely had the reverse effect,

Much communications work, though, is no longer done by anyone, and the longer it remains undone, the less chance the Lib Dems will have of maintaining a separate identity.

## FEES WHAT A SCORCHER

It’s not just Liberal Democrats who have a problem with the government’s policy on tuition fees. One Lib Dem minister was complaining to a Tory acquaintance that he had been given the job of calling round party members in his region to try to sell the new tuition fees policy.

“I wish you luck,” said the Tory. “I can’t sell it to any of my members.” Quite.

## LAW OF THE JUNGLE

Liberator 342 speculated that the inadvertent year’s delay in choosing a Lib Dem candidate for London mayor might allow Lembit Öpik time to do something so outrageous that he could easily be rejected.

And so it came to pass, quicker than anyone could have thought. The man to whom the word ‘dignity’ is a stranger chose to appear on ITV’s *I’m A Celebrity*,

*Get Me Out of Here*, cavorting in the jungle with other Z-listers.

In a bizarre posting on Liberal Democrat Voice (November 12), he announced that, in the remote event of his being selected as candidate, his campaign could be summarised as “libertarianism, localism and Labour (not the Party! I mean the workers who keep this city going)”. Sorry? Where was Liberal democracy in that? Lost in the jungle, perhaps.

Öpik added that he could not get a message across unless the public were interested in him and “for this reason, I’ve decided to appear on the reality television show *I’m a Celebrity – Get Me Out Of Here*. It’s a great opportunity to get direct to the viewing public, and show, in what I believe to be a generally fair programme, how I operate in a team, under pressure and in a competitive environment.”

Oh yeah? Öpik cannot keep away from a camera, cannot pass up any media coverage, however demeaning, and has learned nothing either from having chucked away one of the party’s safest seats last May or from having been soundly thrashed in contests for party president in 2004 and 2008.

A year ought to give time enough for someone else to come forward to contest the nomination. Unless that someone were simultaneously caught in bed with several children and animals, they would no doubt defeat Öpik with humiliating ease. But he probably still won’t learn.

Even the audience of *I’m A Celebrity* seemed deeply unimpressed, dumping him off the show as the second celebrity (sic) to be voted out.

Meanwhile, Paddy Streeter, whose decision to take legal action over the mayoralty selection inadvertently led to the delay (Liberator 342), is to appeal against his failure to be approved. His grounds are understood to include that applicants were assessed to be Westminster candidates, not mayoral candidates, that the assessment day was badly conducted and that tests used were ambiguous. You could sell tickets for it.

## A BAG OF ORANGES

An alarming story has appeared in several media including the Guardian, which reported (November 1) that the Lib Dems were to “intensify efforts to maintain their political identity with a radical policy rethink next year that will form the basis for a manifesto and policy approach in the second half of this parliament”.

Nothing wrong in principle with that. “The policy work is being overseen by Norman Lamb MP, chairman of the federal policy committee and one of Nick Clegg’s closest political allies”, it continued. Nothing wrong in principle with that either.

But who is involved? Not the Federal Policy Committee. Instead it is Chris Huhne, David Laws,



Julian Astle (director of Centre For Um), Paul Marshall, (hedge-fund millionaire and Centre For Um's main backer) and Tim Leunig, a self-described 'classical liberal' academic.

It would be hard to think, with the exception of Huhne, of a bunch of figures less representative of mainstream party opinion, all of them coming from the further reaches of its free market fringe. Is this just Centre For Um trying to inflate its own importance, despite new chief executive Chris Nicholson's insistence that it is not the creature of right-wing conspirators (Liberator 340)? If policy development is really being entrusted to this lot, how long will the party survive?

This team will also be working together with the Tories in an initiative known internally as 'Coalition 2.0', which the Spectator (2 November) reported "has the blessing and encouragement of both Cameron and Clegg". Its purpose is to plan for the period 2012-2015, between the completion of the current programme for government and the next general election.

The Mail on Sunday (31 October) reported that membership of Coalition 2.0 "has been drawn up to reflect the delicate internal political balances of the two parties." Really? The Mail added, "It is hoped that this will guarantee that the policies it comes up with are acceptable to both wings of the Coalition – giving them an excellent chance of being enacted."

The Tory half of Coalition 2.0 will be led by junior minister Greg Clark and also includes cabinet members Michael Gove and Owen Paterson, plus Tim Montgomerie (who runs the Conservative Home blog) and Danny Finkelstein (of The Times).

Conservative Home reported (31 October) that Coalition 2.0 "is meeting under the auspices of the Centre Forum think tank".

## SLATE QUARRIED

Whatever is happening in the government, the Lib Dem internal elections suggest there is little need to worry about where the rest of the party's head and heart are.

In the Federal Executive elections, former MPs Evan Harris and David Rendel led the field by a mile. Harris's platform included the statement that the Lib Dems must be "seen as entirely independent of other parties at the next general election (and in elections in the interim)" and "distance ourselves from Conservative policies that have been imposed on our ministers and our party by virtue of the coalition".

Rendel is well known as the only FE member to vote against forming the coalition. The remaining members give little cause to fear they will roll over in the face of the leadership.

The Federal Policy Committee was even better. The full list includes nobody who could reasonably be called either a leadership stooge or a mindless loyalist and the same would appear to go for Federal Conference Committee.

Whether or not the Social Liberal Forum really ran a slate, it quickly claimed victory. It also successfully organised to get Harris elected as one of the FPC's non-MP vice-chairs – the other being Jeremy Hargreaves – while for the MP vice-chair post, Cambridge's Julian Huppert beat Treasury chief secretary Danny Alexander by such a large margin that the actual figures were not announced.

## GRASPING OUR MEMBERS

The relative closeness of the result for party president, in which Tim Farron defeated Susan Kramer by 14,593 votes to 12,950, suggests Kramer might have won with a better campaign.

Liberator sent a questionnaire to both candidates (Liberator 342). Farron's answers came back by the requested time. Kramer's were returned late only after prolonged pestering, which delayed printing of the whole issue until it was almost too late to reach readers before the polls closed. If the rest of her campaign was also run like that, it's no wonder she lost.

Our apologies for what must have seemed a baffling print schedule, though we must add that a few days' delay was also caused by a problem with printing our address labels.

Still, Farron is young enough to have a long future in politics. As one Lib Dem peer put it: "I voted for Farron because I don't want Danny Alexander to be the next leader." Since neither is exactly backward in putting themselves forward, could this be the shape of the post-Clegg contest?

And what does the voting tell us about the much-trumpeted increase in party membership? There was a 41.9% turnout and 65,861 ballot papers were issued. If there were 65,861 party members as of September (the cut-off date for entitlement to vote), that represents a 12% increase since 31 December 2009, but still a 9.5% fall since the leadership ballot in 2006.

## LETTERS PATENTLY STUPID

Most voters are intelligent enough to realise that, if they raise a topic of general public concern with an MP, they are likely to get a standard response, possibly with some personalised amendments.

What they would not ordinarily expect is to get the same standard response from MPs in different parties, but that is what they will receive, rather embarrassingly, under a protocol issued at the time of the spending review by Lib Dem head of policy Christian Moon.

He wrote to MPs: "As a one-off exercise, in recognition of the likely weight of incoming mail about the Spending Review, the Correspondence Team has jointly produced with the Conservatives' Parliamentary Resources Unit a set of standard letters on the Spending Review."

After some technical details about how the standard letter system works, Moon noted that letters would "contain both Coalition Government and Liberal Democrat element if appropriate [with] initial sign off by relevant Parliamentary Co-Chair, with particular focus on the Liberal Democrat policy element."

There you have it. In the spirit of coalition, the Tories are writing Lib Dem MPs' correspondence.

# HOW NOT TO LEAD A WINNING PARTY

Nick Clegg and those around him have been doing their best to alienate the key core voting groups of students and young people who once rallied to the party. Gareth Epps wonders why

A very well-written article on the Internet – yes, such things do exist – sets out that Nick Clegg has made no fewer than ten mistakes in his handling of the self-inflicted mess over student finance and the Browne report.

But it's the magnitude, not the quantity, of the errors of political judgment on this issue that has led to mass protests and local party after local party – several English regions too – calling for every Liberal Democrat MP to stand up not to the coalition agreement but the pledge they signed on student funding before May.

At the time of writing, it is too early to assess quite how much damage has been done to the party, but it is clear that this has caused resignations and will result in an ebbing of activity from others (most immediately affecting the party's chances of success in Oldham East and Saddleworth).

How did the Liberal Democrats end up in such a mess? The answer probably lies in the dogged determination of a handful of senior MPs to rid the party of a policy that had become one of the few which was distinctive, simple to explain and popular. The seeds were sown before the general election in a Federal Policy Committee (FPC) working group, which at one stage allowed itself to become convinced that the policy was unaffordable. A spokesperson was found in the form of Bristol West MP Stephen Williams who was sceptical about the policy, despite having been more reliant on student votes for his election than any other MP.

In autumn 2008, a large number of candidates for election to the FPC referenced the need to retain a strong commitment to scrap fees. Then a majority of FPC members, backed by the Social Liberal Forum, wrote to the Guardian during the autumn 2009 federal conference to reaffirm their commitment to scrapping fees being in the manifesto.

Despite attempts by Williams and others to block it at every stage, a fully costed plan was eventually agreed to phase out fees over six years. There is no evidence to suggest that this plan would not have been deliverable and it is striking that, in the current debate, nobody has done so. That plan – which FPC has reiterated is still Liberal Democrat policy – was undoubtedly a key part of our 2010 election success.

In some ways, the centrality of the student vote to the success of Lib Dems in parliament goes back much further. Campaigners and strategists began understanding in the early 1990s that young people and students were the party's future. A

disproportionate number of the seats that were targeted or became winnable from 1992-2005 had significant concentrations of people in higher education. With the exception of the careless loss of Evan Harris's Oxford West and Abingdon seat this year and Guildford in 2005, all these seats have been held – until now.

All of which makes the sheer hard-nosed determination to lose this core vote all the more baffling; for there is nothing those Lib Dems in government have done to endear themselves to that sizeable electorate. Not only that, but it has been very easy for many people – including many student Liberal Democrat members – to see a narrative that Nick Clegg and the coalition negotiators set this up as an elaborate confidence trick, at the same time that their election campaign said, effectively, "We're not like the other two; we're honest, open, consistent and principled. We won't ditch the things we care about if you vote us in." The combination of the two was the very essence of Cleggmania, epitomised by the now-notorious "no more broken promises" election broadcast.

## MISLEAD AND DECEIVE

While I don't for a moment believe that there was a deliberate intent to mislead and deceive, I await evidence that Danny Alexander and colleagues did not deliberately set out to ensure the tuition fees pledge was not carried out in government; that it was not made a 'red line' unlike most other Liberal Democrat spending commitments; and that this was another way to get rid of a pledge they could not dispose of by other means.

Recent revelations about the priorities laid down in coalition negotiations say a lot more about the individuals involved in them than the party. The manifesto was based on a limited number of costed pledges (including tuition fees). The negotiating stance, however, was drafted by MPs who all formed part of the move to ditch the fees pledge; and hence the manifesto was used only selectively to inform the coalition negotiations. According to reports of David Laws's account of the coalition negotiations, this was not seen as a major issue – a massive misjudgement of the views of the membership and constituency of the Liberal Democrats.

What is truly astonishing is that nobody – apart from perhaps David Rendel – recognised the extent to which the coalition agreement departed from that commitment and the candidates' pledge until after

the parliamentary parties and Federal Executive signed it off. The failure of this aspect of the coalition agreement to be addressed in the debate at the special conference is one key reason why the party at large doesn't consider itself to have 'bought into' the position of the government.

It's a serious situation indeed that arguably leaves the party facing a constitutional crisis it has never faced since merger (although it came close in 1998, before the decision of Paddy Ashdown to stand down as leader effectively killed off close co-operation with Labour).

The truth of what happened, as far as I know, is that at least two amendments to the motion at special conference were submitted and then rejected without explanation, but presumably because they represented a post facto attempt to rewrite one aspect of the coalition agreement.

One came from me and the other from Liberal Youth. Mine called explicitly for the right to be acknowledged of Liberal Democrat MPs who signed pledges to the electorate to be able to honour that pledge. I have only seen an early draft of the Liberal Youth amendment, which was drastically rewritten by the Federal Conference Committee. The following sections were omitted from the amendment put to conference:

"Conference expresses its concern that Liberal Democrat MPs who signed the 'vote for students' pledge may be unable to uphold this pledge under the abstention agreement on the Lord Browne report in the 'Higher Education' section of the agreement for a coalition government and urges Liberal Democrat MPs to vote against any rise in the cap on tuition fees which isn't index linked.

"Conference also affirms that any vote on tuition fees should not be held as a vote of confidence in the government."

Had these sections been debated, rather than being swept aside in an act of ill-judged political management, the party would at least have taken a view. It would have reduced the disconnection between Liberal Democrat members and MPs in government.

NUS, meanwhile, somehow managed to play a tactical blinder. Its pledge was drawn up in the summer of 2009, a time when a balanced parliament looked unlikely. In the autumn, NUS organised a series of 'Town Hall Takeover' debates, asking candidates to sign the pledge. I did so without hesitation or seeking advice, partly because the pledge was a watered-down version of Lib Dem policy, partly because the issue is one on which my constituents would have come before any party whip. At the time, NUS was coming under fire from Labour and the Tories alike for handing a campaign gift to the Lib Dems. Asked why he wouldn't sign, my Tory opponent in Reading East cringed as he came across as dishonest or worse.

I've had plenty of dealings with NUS since my student days and it remains an ossified, inefficient body incapable of doing anything other than being used as a mouthpiece for aspiring Labour hacks, and Aaron Porter (although an 'Official Independent' – yes, there is a faction within NUS devoted to New Labour

*"The sheer hard-nosed determination to lose this core vote is baffling"*

hacks who prefer the pretence of independence to the Labour banner) exemplifies this. When he and (former president, now Labour councillor) Wes Streeting took this to the Reading debate, they let slip how they were being accused by Labour and the Tories alike of giving the

Liberal Democrats a huge campaigning opportunity in the form of the pledge.

The other feature about the fees debacle has been the lack of organisation of the Lib Dem 'rebels'. The Social Liberal Forum did not position itself at the heart of this battle. More bizarrely, neither did Liberal Youth. It made noises and its chair Martin Shapland was very visible in the media, but its influence was oddly becalmed. MPs – with other issues weighing on their minds – were put under particular pressure by whips. This left the rebels without an obvious leader, which was why a 19-year-old new member called Craig Bichard was able to get straight into the national press by getting over 100 candidates to sign that open letter to Nick Clegg. Had he had the information to contact all former PPCs, the number signing that letter would have more than doubled.

## **CLEGG'S CRASS MESSAGE**

It is too early to be able to be sure of the aftermath of all this. Immediately, many of us will be fielding queries from members wanting to quit. An incredibly crass e-mail sent out in Nick Clegg's name while the London riots still raged will not have helped that. In the longer term, though, our policy goals need to be better linked up to clear campaigning themes – something we in particular have been very bad at as a party. Scrapping fees was a very simple pledge, and therefore sellable in a way that many of our policies weren't. There is a universally-held view that the party urgently needs to develop structures that can handle concern among the membership with coalition acts that are unpalatable to Liberal Democrats, especially as those will increasingly start to fall outside the coalition agreement.

Most significantly, the 27 MPs who voted to treble tuition fees despite signing the pledge now face a stark personal choice. Their credibility and integrity have taken a battering, and for some of them it will be impossible to recover. For many members, it will be impossible to forgive them.

From my limited encounters, it is clear that some of the 27 are oblivious to what they have just done. That is a matter for them. The party will need to move on; but it needs to do so in a way that emphasises the will of the Liberal Democrats, not of a minority in its upper echelons who need to eat significant amounts of humble pie. Maybe a couple of town hall meetings would help the healing process on that front.

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Gareth Epps is a member of the Liberator Collective and fought Reading East at the general election. He is a Reading councillor and a member of the Federal Policy Committee and of the backbench Treasury and BIS committees.



# HAVE A GO AT ERIC PICKLES

## Being in power doesn't feel so good when a hopeless secretary of state is trashing local government, says Chris White

My party membership goes back thirty years. I remember being an oddball at university. There was one other Liberal in my college and I also met a Liberal woman at a freshers' disco (I did not know before then that Liberals came in female form).

The objective was to avoid ridicule and perhaps get back to the heady days of 1974 when we had 15 seats. I still remember the excited talk of coalition as Edward Heath negotiated with Jeremy Thorpe in the aftermath of the February election.

It was not to be and the Lib-Lab pact later in the 1970s proved a disappointment in terms both of outcomes and voter support.

The decisive Thatcher victory in the 1979 general election appeared to show that Liberal ambitions had been a flash in the pan. But the arrival of the SDP two years later gave fresh hope (and some anxiety), suggesting that SDP and Liberal MPs would occupy the green benches in serious numbers. Not for the last time, however, high opinion poll ratings dissipated before they could be turned into real votes in ballot boxes.

But we still dreamed of power – certainly at council level and possibly one day, when we were old and grey, at national level too.

Like many in 2010, I was certain that there would be a hung parliament and that the Liberal Democrats would have a key role in selecting policy and even selecting a government. We would ensure the Tory or Labour minority government would survive no confidence votes and be able to pass a budget. But beyond that we would remain an opposition party. There was, I said with enormous authority, “no chance” of a Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition.

So the days of early May were a shock and many of us woke up (and still wake up) pinching ourselves that there are Liberal Democrats cabinet ministers, in the ways we sort of dreamed of for all those years.

But it does not feel great. True: power was never going to be easy (ask any councillor who has been in charge of a portfolio) and the criticism from your own side tends to be at least as vigorous as that from other political parties or the public.

It is also true that there are many wins from the coalition: it started with the cancellation of ID cards and runs through a now already lengthy list: Trident, the increase in tax allowances, the ending of child detention, the prospect of an AV referendum, the green energy deal and many more.

So, why do we feel bad? Tuition fees? Of course: a pledge is a pledge and MPs who signed it cannot then go and vote to double the basic fee level, even if the package is better than what we inherited from Labour. This is doing some political damage even if only to

morale. But the impact on the public at large is not as great as you might think: membership numbers have not faltered, not least because of general disapproval of the demonstrations organised by the Labour-led National Union of Students.

On top of the potentially corrosive issue of tuition fees are the anxieties and disappointments over schools and local government.

Michael Gove's academies are just grant-maintained schools. His free schools are potentially an enormous threat both to existing schools and to communities, should they be set up by fanatics or incompetents. And the whole atomisation of education is anyway likely to lead to poor outcomes and even greater financial inefficiency in a sector that already operates at the wrong end of the efficiency spectrum, both in terms of cash spending and the use of assets.

Gove also looks just plain ignorant: he claims that he is liberating schools from local authority control, something that has not existed for a couple of decades. Disappointingly, Nick Clegg has repeated this phrase.

The pupil premium mitigates all this a little, but there are now doubts as to how much of the premium is new money.

If education is dear to our hearts, local government is our favourite child. We experienced our renaissance in local government and have delivered Liberalism through many of the councils we control (not all, sadly).

I had flagged up before the election that Eric Pickles was a centraliser and no friend of councils and so was disappointed to see him get this portfolio instead of Caroline Spelman.

He has told people that he has three priorities: localism, localism, localism, echoing drearily Tony Blair's equally bogus “education, education, education”.

And we have our own minister, Andrew Stunell, who says that he has a fourth priority: ‘localism’. So far so good.

But the proof of the pudding is in the eating. One council leader has told me sarcastically that he looks forward to Friday afternoons to see what will be this week's means by which Pickles gets himself into the Sunday papers: issues range across fortnightly bin collections, pay levels of staff, having stalls at party conferences or anything else that will grab a headline. A chief executive (and the rating of Pickles by chief executives is approaching minus 100%) told me that Pickles doesn't govern so much as comment.

These are irritations for the most part and not much different from the stream of centralist nonsense coming out of his Labour predecessors. Some in fact originates in the sheer lack of ability in the staff within the Department of Communities and Local Government itself.



Far more serious, however, is the grant settlement. Cuts in local government grant reach a giddy 28%, compared with the 19% in other 'unprotected' departments (those departments other than education and health). Local communities will also see 20% cuts in police funding and 25% cuts in fire and rescue, although there is some limited mitigation from the NHS.

## **BITE SEVERELY**

But the key issue is that the cuts are front-loaded; they will bite more severely next year than in later years. In fact, by 2013 (the year in which the Tory shires are all up for election), the impact will be relatively muted. The Local Government Association anticipated a funding gap in year 1 of £4.5bn. The outturn was (at least at the time of writing) a staggering £6.5bn.

The LGA commented: "There is a real risk that to be able to cut their budgets by this much this quickly, local authorities will have no choice but to take decisions that would have an impact on local services and not provide value for money."

On the ground, it could anyway be much worse than the average so far published, because as far as we can tell from the way ring-fencing is removed and grants are pared back, some local authorities will fare far better than others.

According to the metropolitan councils organisation within the LGA (Sigoma), the best off are the London Borough of Richmond (-1.9% decrease in grant), Surrey (-2.2%), Wokingham (-2.3%), West Sussex (-2.6%) and Buckinghamshire (-2.7%).

By contrast, Hull and Knowsley are hit with -11.7%, Blackburn with -11.8%, South Tyneside with -12.2% and Liverpool with -12.3%.

The north-south, Tory-Labour divide is pretty clear. And more importantly, the cuts obviously impact on areas of deprivation more than on prosperous ones.

There is a further divide when you look at districts,

*"District councils in some parts of the country will simply cease to be viable entities"*

with some councils (Hastings, Barrow-in-Furness, Bolsover and Great Yarmouth) losing more than 20%. District councils in some parts of the country will simply cease to be viable entities.

Meanwhile, London Councils (the cross-party association covering London Boroughs) reckons that social care spend could face

a real terms cut of £1.8bn.

## **STAR CHAMBER**

So how did we get to this point? It is well known that Pickles was very pleased to have reached a settlement with the Treasury earlier than most. This allowed him to take a seat in the 'Star Chamber', examining the cases of departments that were still arguing.

Bluntly, it looks as though he made a mess of it. There are rumours that he has been back to the Treasury and asked for more money and that ministers are desperately redoing the calculations to try and make things better – but the envelope is already too small and too quickly emptied. It is, at this stage, very unlikely to be crammed with any extra money.

Can the Government at this late hour turn a corner and deliver fairness? Is there any chance that Pickles will realise that you can't have localism while councils collapse under budget cuts? This I doubt – because there is no evidence he was ever a localist anyway.

One Labour leader has gleefully told me that we'll have to bring the troops back from Afghanistan to deal with the unrest.

His joy at the government's discomfort is cynical given that Labour created the mess, and intended swingeing spending cuts on re-election.

But the coalition must avoid handing the Labour Party fresh ammunition: a cack-handed local government spending round is just what Labour needs for its election campaign in 2011.

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Chris White is a Liberal Democrat county councillor in Hertfordshire

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# BACK TO THE FUTURE FOR COUNCILS

The scrutiny system is a pointless waste of councillors' time, and local authorities should seize the opportunity given by the coalition to ditch it, says Eleanor Griffiths

I can seldom be bothered to get involved in any activity that has no practical use or realistic purpose. Despite this, I managed to work in the civil service for many years, and am in my second period as a councillor in a London borough.

So you can see that I have often been able to compromise successfully with my detestation of unproductive work. However, the 'scrutiny' system, which was introduced to local authorities in the years between my terms of office, overwhelms even this well-developed tolerance. I can't think of a bigger waste of time.

But let's look at the pros and cons. Does it do any good in practice? Should it all be swept away?

I served as a councillor in an inner London Borough for eight years in the late 1980s/early 1990s, and have recently returned to local politics in the outer London borough where I now live. I knew that there had been many changes in my 16 years' absence from local government, the most fundamental of which had been the introduction of the cabinet system and scrutiny committees. I didn't like the look of these arrangements from the outside, and nothing I have seen in my first seven months has reconciled me to them.

As part of new councillors' induction, I was required to watch a video illustrating the merits of the scrutiny system. The video, however, had the opposite effect from that which was obviously intended; all the new councillors – and some of the old ones who had come along for the show – said "the emperor has no clothes" or words to that effect.

The case study featured an enquiry carried out by Bath and North East Somerset Council into the fiasco of the construction of the health spa in Bath. Even the most naïve new councillor could not avoid asking, "Would it not have been more effective to have had a committee or management structure that could have prevented this problem in the first place?" or indeed, "It is easy to hold any kind of retrospective inquiry into a cock-up like this, so why particularly is the scrutiny system seen as uniquely qualified to do so?" It would then follow that one would ask, "If this is the best example of 'scrutiny' that the DCLG can come up with for its video, it's not very impressive".

We were told: "The cabinet has accepted over 90% of scrutiny recommendations". "What happened to the other 10%?" we asked. How did you package up the recommendations into percentages? What if the 10% not adopted were the most important ones? Reply there was none.

## CRITICISM AND EMBARRASSMENT

None of the propaganda for the scrutiny system can answer the 'emperor's clothes' point, which is that fundamentally there is no point or purpose in making 'recommendations' that have no clout. Where there is no leverage on the executive (cabinet), other than possibly public criticism and embarrassment, there is no way to compel it to act upon scrutiny recommendations. And in my observation, most council cabinets are pretty well resistant to criticism and embarrassment.

An argument often advanced for the scrutiny system is that it facilitates cross-party agreement on scrutiny reports, thus lending them strength. This may be true (but of course it is easier to reach a compromise on something that does not have the force of a decision). Equally, however, I have seen already that it can lead to a compromise agreement based on the 'lowest common denominator'.

Would I be the only person to feel it isn't worth arguing a point in a report that has no practical effect? On a more sinister note, having seen some of the propaganda for the system from the previous government, I sensed that the exhortations on local authority members to work together like nice children was actually an effort by New Labour and Whitehall to emasculate local government by watering down the levels of political controversy so that 'strong leadership' – dictatorial rule by a leader or mayor – would be easier.

Having seen the British government system from the inside, I never understood why it was thought to be so successful that it should be replicated at local government level. Indeed, I always felt there were many aspects of local government, not least the levels of access to the executive for opposition members, that national government ought to replicate.

In particular, the argument that the select committee system in parliament is so successful that it should be copied at local level is hollow. For one thing, parliament arrived at it from a different direction than did local government. MPs started from the point that too many of them had too little to do, so putting them on select committees was a positive move towards making them more involved in the business of government. For local councillors, on the other hand, the demise of the subject committees was a retrograde step, as it led to the majority of them having less influence on decision-making than before. Even MPs still have some opportunity, if they sit on bill committees or debate legislation in the House, to influence actual decision-making. There is no parallel

to this in local authorities other than on the very rare occasions when an item may be requisitioned to full council.

And how much influence do select committees have? Perhaps the major ones have some, and they usually get publicity, especially if the chair is a well-known media-friendly figure. After all, a select committee

report critical of the government is an easy story for the press to report. But the publicity masks the fact that many of these reports are neither insightful nor effective. I know from personal experience that they are very often regarded with contempt by senior Whitehall officials and are accordingly ignored.

I am currently part of two scrutiny investigations in my council, which have been interesting and seem likely to produce intelligent and practical reports. Even so, it remains to be seen how many of their recommendations are taken up; much depends how far they reflect the views already held by key cabinet members. The process has been educational for me and has given me an insight into important issues, but how much opportunity will I have in future to put my knowledge to good effect?

I remain to be convinced that members generally have the time, knowledge or the skills to carry out proper independent research for a scrutiny report. I also doubt that many of them have the resources or the guts to challenge seriously the line taken by their own officers.

## **SMALL CABAL**

The truth about the scrutiny system is, of course, that it is the sop – the ‘make-weight’ – in the deal that gave unprecedented executive power to a small cabal of councillors via the cabinet system. The powers of patronage given to the leader in my own borough are immense. So many aspects of this are the antithesis of what Liberal Democrats are in politics to achieve.

Under the cabinet/scrutiny system, there is a serious lack of expert, multi-party (even if confrontational) challenge to decisions that in my experience more often took place in a subject committee. My council may or may not be typical but I understand that many cabinet members are incapable of understanding or cannot be bothered to understand others’ subject areas, so most items on cabinet agendas go through on the nod. It is certainly my view, shared even by members of the ruling group, that cabinet members are more likely to be ‘prisoners’ of the officers in their subject areas, without the pressure of a subject committee to check officers’ influence.

This centralisation of decision-making has led to a marginalisation of all non-cabinet members, leaving many of them with not enough to do except attend minor local events and do casework. Important though some of that activity is, I believe we should be made to work harder – especially as we are now paid, which we weren’t 16 years ago!

*“This centralisation of decision-making has led to a marginalisation of all non-cabinet members”*

Subject committees gave members an incentive to take a detailed practical interest in their subject. The rigour of making actual decisions concentrated minds on the realities. The presence of an opposition forced the majority party to marshal its arguments and yet also gave an opportunity for other parties to offer persuasive and practical

alternatives to the actions proposed. I found when I used to chair such a committee that the most rigorous test of a proposed committee recommendation was whether my own party colleagues would support it, let alone the ‘scrutiny’ of the opposition councillors and the public.

A senior local government official told me recently how much she regrets the passing of the subject committee system because, through it, she got to know the views and characteristics of the councillors she worked for, and the process of decision-making was transparent – to her as much as to the general public. As much as anyone else, she found the secretiveness of the cabinet system unhealthy and ultimately it made her job harder.

What is most depressing is that the ‘scrutiny’ system, in true New Labour fashion, has had a whole culture of spin and waffle created around it. Not content with putting the thing on tablets of stone, it has had an ark built to hold it and a temple to hold the ark and a whole religion to justify the temple. It was drawn to my attention recently that there is a Centre for Public Scrutiny – a registered charity, linked to other local government bodies, 23 advisory board members from the ranks of the great and good, annual awards, guidance, networks, consultancy, and so on (is this charity?). Rather desperately in the face of the changes proposed by the new government, the chair of this organisation says “scrutiny will continue to be required”. Yes, no doubt it will, just as it was required before the introduction of the ‘scrutiny system’ – and then, it was a great deal easier to do.

Therefore if local authorities are given the freedom to determine their own committee structure, would I unhesitatingly opt for a return to the subject-based arrangements?

On the whole, yes (actually I would prefer to adopt the neighbourhood-based committee structure introduced by Tower Hamlets in 1986, but that’s another story). Not all aspects of scrutiny should be jettisoned; there is a place for a longer-term, in-depth review of specific issues or developing policy by members, which did not often take place in the ‘old days’. But local authorities can and should arrange such enquiries for themselves.

The key point is that councils’ decision-making should be transparent, involve all members to the maximum extent, and keep a firm grip on the actions of officers. ‘Scrutiny’ is an attempt to give a veneer of respectability to a system of local government that achieves none of the above.



# TEA AND FRUITCAKES

## Dennis Graf reports on the extent to which far-right ideologues have captured America's Republican Party

No one was surprised that the Democratic Party was crushed during the US mid-term election in early November. The only question during the campaign leading up to it was "how bad?"

The answer: very bad, but it could have been worse. Still, the vote was more a repudiation of the Democrats than an expression of confidence in the Republicans. The latter will have a large majority in the House but Democrats will still control the Senate, at least nominally. Americans are angry and afraid and, just as they reacted two years ago with Obama, they again voted out the people in power.

The most-watched contest was between the unpopular Democratic Senate leader, Harry Reid, and Sharron Angle, a silly woman with extreme right-wing views. Angle managed to offend Nevada's rapidly-growing Hispanic population and this may have cost her the election. The Democrats did win the governorships of our two largest states, New York and California, but they lost Florida to a Republican who had headed up a company that massively defrauded the US government. He will now be the governor of our fourth largest state.

The leading leftist in the Senate, Russ Feingold, was defeated by a political novice who paid for his own multimillion-dollar campaign, and refused to discuss 'details.' "Unimportant," he said. Even Obama's old Senate seat in Illinois fell to a man who had been caught lying about his past.

In general, the House Democrats who lost were on the party's right wing. These right-of-centre Democrats, the 'Blue Dogs', closely resemble the few remaining Republican centrists. Liberal Republicans vanished long ago. The next Congress will have fewer centrists than before. The new Republican majority will be more extreme, promising us an even more divided government.

Republicans have been crowing about their victories and even among Democrats it's hard to hear a good word for Obama. The President, like Bill Clinton before him, has had to fight against a constant and vicious campaign of character assassination. He has not been able to counter the vast amount of disinformation about him or to explain to the public his accomplishments. To the average American, he now appears somewhat aloof, 'different', 'mysterious', 'intellectual' and 'elite'. These ideas, hammered into our consciousness daily for years by the right-wing media, have taken hold.

### DEEPEST FEAR

The American public's deepest fear is unemployment. Large sections of the industrial north are virtual wastelands. Workers blame businesses for outsourcing their jobs to Third World countries, especially China and India. The right wing blames the unions and, under their breath, the greedy seniors and the undeserving poor. The right says taxes are too high;

the left says that public spending for jobs is too low.

Almost everyone hates the Wall Street financial wizards and the titans of big business but, since most politicians are bought and paid for by these people, nothing will change. Some wildly rich people have run for and won public office.

We have even had a number of billionaires (that's a thousand million dollars here) running for office. Some, like Michael Bloomberg, the mayor of New York and the richest man in the city, have succeeded and apparently governed well. Others, like Meg Whitman, the former chief executive of eBay, have run and failed. She spent \$150M of her own money in a bid to become governor of California. Most Americans see no problem with that.

The Tea Party movement is the driving force in the ascending Republican Party right now. Its best-known leader is Sarah Palin, a former beauty queen. She's undeniably attractive, charismatic, a populist rabble-rouser and thinly educated. Palin is deeply distrusted by traditional Republican leaders. The Tea Party movement is diverse, but all agree that they hate Obama. It's not clear how much racism is in this movement, but there's undoubtedly some.

Most Tea Party voters want to slash taxes and dramatically cut the size of the government, but they still want to maintain the popular social security pensions and the Medicare programme of free medical care for the elderly. Most want to keep the present military. Finally, they demand a balanced budget. This is all impossible, of course, and the Tea Party leaders are willing to cut only unidentified government programmes. "Waste, fraud and abuse," they reply if pressed. This invites demagoguery and the Tea talkers are masters of it. Traditional Republican leaders will have to find a way to work with them.

Virtually all Republican officeholders say that they will not compromise and most Republican voters agree. One of the first tests of the Tea people will be a vote to raise the federal debt limit and allow the government to continue to function. Obama will try to compromise but many Americans think this is a sign of "weakness".

The new leader of the House of Representatives will be John Boehner, a dull narcissist who is widely mocked because of his artificially induced suntan. The Senate will be in Democratic hands and Harry Reid might well be the leader again. Mitch McConnell, a southerner known for being the champion of Big Tobacco, is the minority leader. Unfortunately for him, he has a weak-chinned face that reminds people of a turtle – not good for television. Nancy Pelosi, an elegant and accomplished left-wing 70-year old from San Francisco, will continue as minority leader. The powerful Republican media has demonized her for years and, according to a recent poll, only 8 % of the crucial independent voters like her.

In November 2010, the swing to the Republicans was dramatic. A majority of white people, women too

this time, voted for them, even though both parties seemed equally disliked. I've always felt that, on issues, most Americans are actually Democrats who vote Republican, but Republicanism has become the default position. Polls show a bare majority against 'Obamacare', though few can tell you much about it and what they do say is usually wrong. On other polls, voters repeatedly disagree with Republican positions – on taxes, on provisions of the health care bill, on climate change, even on government spending. The Republicans are energized, enthusiastic, angry and sure of themselves. The Democrats are divided, disorganized, unsure. Democrats see complexity; Republicans see simplicity and, in America, simplicity usually wins.

*“Democrats see complexity; Republicans see simplicity and, in America, simplicity usually wins”*

The average person sees little difference between Democrats and Republicans, except that the Democrats are less likely to “keep us safe” and they’re more likely to raise taxes. There are also suspicions that Democrats will take people’s money and give it to the poor, especially to poor black people. In reality, of

course, the money has been drifting upwards to those already rich and we now have the kind of income disparity usually seen only in Third World countries.

Republicans stand together in total opposition to anything that Obama wants, even programmes that they themselves have suggested. Actually, a good many of Obama’s proposals were originally Republican ideas. ‘Obamacare’ is quite close, for example, to Republican Mitt Romney’s Massachusetts health care plan. Even Sarah Palin’s ‘death panels’ were first suggested by a Republican. Obama’s energy bill, ‘cap and trade’, was originally pushed by John McCain.

Republicans believe – and with much justification – that, if nothing gets done, if there is gridlock, the public will be angry and will blame Obama. The few remaining moderate Republicans are afraid of being challenged in the next primary so they’re moving to the right. The far right can do this because it controls most of the media – the Murdoch press, the slick, first-place cable news Fox Network, the radio talk show hosts, the Republican think tanks, the enthusiasts of the Tea Party movement. Rush Limbaugh, the extreme right wing radio host, is one of the most influential men in the country. No one in the Republican Party dares to disagree with him publicly. One almost has to admire what has probably become the most effective propaganda machine since Goebbels.

How will the traditional Republican leadership mesh with the new members of the Tea Party movement? Most think that these new people will eventually capitulate to the present corrupt system. Some elders in the Republican establishment foresee chaos – one of them, former Senator Alan Simpson, predicts a “bloodbath next April”.

Dennis Graf is Liberator’s American correspondent

## REPUBLICAN MYTH

Government spending, the trade deficit, the national debt, the budget deficit and the desire for lower taxes, these are all tied to the old idea (best articulated by Reagan) that government itself is bad. The Republican myth is that getting government out of the way will allow the free market to usher in a better society. Republicans trust businessmen more than the government and believe that lowering taxes will allow businesses to grow and to hire more workers, that a lower tax rate will actually raise more money. This policy has been tried during the George W Bush administration, resulting in a doubling of the debt and weak job growth.

Republicans excel at creating and endlessly repeating easy-to-remember three- or four-word slogans. The Democrats are “tax and spend liberals”, withdrawing troops is a “cut and run” foreign policy, and Obama’s health care plan is “pulling the plug on Grandma” and a “government takeover of health care.” For years, they’ve told voters that the present tax rates are immoral and that “it’s your money, not the government’s.” Democrats have trouble framing a simple message to counter this. Republican policies are not usually mentioned – they’re unpopular – but people vote for them because of these slogans.

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# BIG SOCIETY OR BS?

Is the 'Big Society' just another term for Liberalism or community politics? Simon Titley has examined the source – Phillip Blond's book 'Red Tory' – and discovered the truth

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all."

Was Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty referring to the 'Big Society'? It would appear so. The Big Society is something everyone claims to support, yet few know what it actually means.

According to some leading Liberal Democrats, it is indistinguishable from Liberalism. Here's Paddy Ashdown, in a speech during the 2010 general election campaign: "David Cameron's big idea for a big society has been something the Liberal Democrats have been talking about for years – in many ways, it is at the bedrock of our beliefs."

Meanwhile Nick Clegg, in an interview in the Times on May 19 (just after he became deputy prime minister), said: "The interesting thing I have discovered over the last week is that we have been using different words but we mean similar things. What I call liberalism David Cameron calls the Big Society."

Not to be outdone, Andrew Stunell is now the government minister responsible for the implementation of the Big Society. In an article he wrote for Liberal Democrat Voice (1 October), Stunell said that the Big Society "is a phrase Liberal Democrats need to get used to and take ownership of. Like you, I hadn't used it at all pre-election. But during the coalition negotiations, it quickly became apparent from talking to Oliver Letwin that what they call the Big Society was a very close match to the 'Community Politics' ideas Liberals have been promoting since the '70s."

It's a fairly safe bet that none of these three gentlemen bothered to read the source material. If they had read Phillip Blond's book *Red Tory*, they would have realised that, while there is some common ground, there are also some fundamental differences. If the Liberal Democrats fail to realise this, they risk sleepwalking into endorsing some dubious policies.

To begin with, we need a clear understanding of what 'liberalism' and 'community' mean. The key element of liberalism is liberty in the sense of meeting the human need for agency. Life is the most important thing we possess. Each of us is on this planet for relatively few years and, in the short time available to us, we seek to lead a good life. But each of us has a unique personality and only we can decide what constitutes a 'good life'; it is not a choice others can make for us. Therefore we need the freedom to make meaningful choices about our lives and to be able to influence the world around us. That is what 'agency' is; not

just an absence of restraints but empowerment, the practical ability to exercise freedom. And crucially, since everyone else has the same rights, we must exercise our rights with mutual respect and not seek to monopolise agency or deny it to others.

An obvious criticism of this view is that it makes no mention of society or community. But these are implied rather than explicit. If we want each person to have the freedom to lead a good life, the thing most people will seek and prize above all is healthy human relationships. We flourish in the company of others and we like to belong. We could not even survive, let alone succeed in life, were it not for the solidarity and support of others. The 'self-made man' is a myth; in reality, no-one pulls themselves up entirely by their own bootstraps.

## FIT IN OR F\*\*\* OFF

But the point for Liberals is that, ultimately, society and communities are there to serve their members, not the other way round. What distinguishes Liberalism from other political philosophies is that all the others believe in 'the thing'. For the right, this thing might be the 'nation' or 'markets'; for the left, the 'state' or 'society'. But in every case, there is a big inanimate object to which individuals must be subservient. The message that every non-liberal ideology has is basically the same: fit in or fuck off.

The best communities, then, are ones in which people freely join together for friendship, companionship, mutual support, solidarity or the pursuit of shared causes. But let us be clear; Liberals are not communitarians. A community is not something we would have at any price. A community that oppresses or stifles its members isn't worth having. Our party constitution says that "no-one shall be enslaved by conformity" and we mean it.

After all, if 'community' were an overriding aim, we would seek to emulate the strongest communities of all, those that exist in traditional tribal societies throughout the third world. If you were a member of such a community, your sense of identity and belonging and purpose would be in no doubt. There would always be someone to take care of you. Loneliness or insecurity would be inconceivable.

Then again, your identity and your fate would be predetermined. You would have little or no choice about whether to marry or to whom, or what career to follow, or who would be your friends, or where you would live, or how you would dress, or which religion you would follow. If female, you would probably have even less choice.

## MESSY LIBERAL COMPROMISE

Liberals value community, but not if it destroys our freedom. We prize individual autonomy but not to the



extent that we want to see society atomised. And if this sounds like a messy liberal compromise, well that's how life is. Each of us is daily negotiating a compromise between conflicting needs for autonomy and belonging. Things are fine if we achieve a rough balance. It's when things get seriously out of kilter that the problems start.

Which brings us to Phillip Blond's thesis of the 'Big Society', embraced by David Cameron (though still considered suspect elsewhere in the Conservative Party). Blond gave up a career in academia to found the centre-right think tank ResPublica and he has been the main creative force behind the Big Society. His big opportunity came when the 2008 credit crisis forced a rethinking of Tory policy.

Although *Red Tory* was not published until April 2010, Blond's ideas first gained wide attention thanks to his article in the February 2009 edition of Prospect magazine titled 'Rise of the red Tories' (which, interestingly, nowhere mentions the term 'Big Society'). His ideas were highly influential on Oliver Letwin's drafting of the Tories' 2010 election manifesto.

There is much of the Blond/ResPublica agenda that Liberals can embrace. The debate about public services has traditionally been dominated by an argument between supporters of the monolithic state and free markets, and Blond is genuinely interested in creating an alternative in the form of a civic association-led democracy. The preamble to the Blond-inspired Tory manifesto asks, "How will we revitalise communities unless people stop asking 'who will fix this?' and start asking 'what can I do?'" So far, so community politics.

Furthermore, Blond is a stern critic of the neoliberal brand of capitalism, which he regards as destructive of traditional values, local communities and small-scale enterprise. He sees local and independent power as having been crushed by the twin evils of big business and a monolithic state, a sentiment with which most Liberals would concur. And notably for Liberals, Blond is attracted to the distributist ideas of Chesterton and Belloc.

But Blond is not a Liberal. You don't need to read his book to realise that. You merely need to look at the front cover, which declares in bold type: "We are witnessing the disaster of economic and cultural liberalism. We need an alternative."

Inside the book, it gets worse. A key chapter titled 'The Illiberal Legacy of Liberalism' is a travesty of liberal philosophy. Blond believes that the Liberal notion of freedom is inevitably materialist and that, in allowing individual freedom to flourish, we destroy any sense of shared values and traditions, inadvertently providing scope for an authoritarian state to fill the vacuum. This means that liberalism paradoxically leads to tyranny.

This is a questionable assumption, to put it mildly. And it begs the question: if individuals may not freely determine their lives, who can? His answer is basically to turn the clock back, to 'restore' a society in which tradition governs our lives. Hence, although Blond

## *"The Liberal Democrats risk sleepwalking into endorsing some dubious policies"*

is well-meaning, what he craves is essentially ridiculous: a return to an imagined, pre-industrial idyll.

He calls for the restoration of a society based on 'virtue' without satisfactorily explaining how agreement on what constitutes this virtue can be reached. It is hard to see how social homogeneity can be

achieved in a modern society, let alone maintained. Indeed, the radical redistribution of power Blond rightly advocates would be more likely to create greater diversity.

Apart from hostility to liberalism, another basic problem with Blond's thesis is his reference to a 'broken society'. 'Broken' is an unhelpful word because it suggests that society can exist in only one of two states; broken or fixed. It would be more accurate to speak of a corrosion of society than breakage.

There is no doubt there has been a decline in social capital and the institutions of civic society. We are all familiar with the symptoms; the loss of trust, the decline in civility and good manners, the growth in family breakdown, the closure of pubs and clubs, the increasing alienation in dealing with faceless institutions, and the decline in civic participation (the historical fall in political party membership being a good case in point). But "British culture has collapsed"? This sort of hyperbole, combined with a tendency to view the past through rose-tinted spectacles, calls Blond's judgement into question.

If we are going to create some semblance of social cohesion, returning to the past is not an option. We are where we are. However much Blond may wish it, the toothpaste of self-actualisation cannot be put back into the tube. The problem is not that people seek individual fulfilment but that they seek it too much through the acquisition of consumer goods and not enough through social bonds with other human beings.

Blond is right that we need a revival of social institutions such as local government, trades unions, voluntary organisations, mutual societies and co-operatives, to devolve power and enable people to exercise power. But social bonds will not be fostered by moralising from the Tories (or any other politicians for that matter). And it is hypocritical of the Tories to say that they want to restore traditional communities while lecturing the unemployed to move long distances to look for work.

No Liberal could endorse Blond's belief that "the corrosion of virtue through the dominance of liberalism was the deepest malaise of recent British culture, politics and economics." Despite this, there are still things to admire in Blond's thinking and, if he at least weans the political establishment off neoliberalism, he will have done us all a favour. But I would beg Liberal Democrat ministers to take the trouble to read *Red Tory* – and compare it with *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics* – before they carry on preaching about the Big Society.

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Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective. 'Red Tory' by Phillip Blond was published in 2010 by Faber & Faber, £12.99

# RECLAIMING THE BIG SOCIETY

Why is a Conservative leader advocating change in the balance of power between citizen and state while Liberal Democrat ministers are just defending spending cuts, asks  
Matthew Gibson

If you look closely enough, you will see the beginnings of a significant shift taking place in the way public services and, ultimately, government is run.

It is a distinctively liberal shift and one that will define politics and political parties, yet the natural party for liberal ideas is being eclipsed by the natural party of the status quo.

The debate has been going on for a while and resulted in the Conservative manifesto *Invitation to join the government of Britain* with its flagship policy of the Big Society.

David Cameron said in a speech in July: “The Big Society is about a huge culture change... It’s about liberation – the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street.”

The problem is not what he says but the fact that he is in the Conservative Party, as this is a premature debate for the Tories who have found the whole idea difficult to swallow, with some in the party going as far as to tell *The Guardian*, “the big society is bollocks”.

People have sensed change in the air and tried to get in on the act, leading the recent debate for reform of public services and government administration in many different directions: the ‘eascouncil’ in Barnet, the John Lewis-style council in Lambeth and now the ‘virtual’ council in Suffolk are examples.

## FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE

However, the politicians are a very long way behind what is already taking place and these initiatives only serve to show how the parties are not in a position to champion this fundamental change.

Governance and public administration have periodically gone through fundamental changes, from citizens being seen as subjects and government as rulers, to citizens as voters and government as trustees and, more recently, citizens as customers and government as managers.

As citizens are increasingly seen as customers of services managed by government agencies, the debate has been around how to make these services more responsive to the needs of the people.

Government has therefore sought inspiration from business management practices to provide government agencies with better tools for policy implementation and tried to move decision making closer to the service recipients. This has resulted in the choice agenda, to which all political parties are signed up.

Services based on choice provide people with the

essential power of ‘exit’ where we, as citizens, are able to move from one service to another. The criticism of this has been that this restricts and discourages the productive political voices of the people as they use the passive power of ‘exit’ rather than the progressive power of their ‘voice’ to improve services. This approach therefore ignores citizens as active individuals with an important role to play in the community.

This was neatly put by the Cabinet Office when it said, “user choice is an effective instrument for promoting quality, responsiveness, efficiency and equity in public services. It is in many cases more effective than alternatives, such as voice mechanisms” (*The Case for User Choice in Public Services*, May 2007). But the exercise of our voice, the need to be heard in a more fundamental way, is exactly what people are beginning to want.

We are formal owners of the state by all democratic and business criteria. Yet we are told by service providers what we are entitled to and in what way. We, as citizens, may be unwilling and even incapable of becoming practical owners of the state, yet people are waking up to the idea that they no longer want to continue to be treated as simple voters or customers.

The political leadership has been slow to respond to this change; however, it has not stopped attempts at creating it. Citizen’s Contracts have been drawn up, Citizen’s Conventions have been held, and Crowdsourcing projects have been set up in attempts to give people a voice. Wikis have been used to draft laws, websites have been used to collect user feedback, and Time Banking has been developed to harness the public’s will to contribute to its community. Companies have been developed that specialise in citizen involvement, public funds have been given to service users to spend how they see fit and public services are being co-created by government agencies and citizens together.

This is a fundamental difference to how citizens are considered by the state. They are no longer customers but partners who have a wealth of ideas, experience and knowledge that can improve services; they are partners who can contribute to the running, monitoring and development of services; they are partners who are essential to how the community works for each other.

The new paradigm will be collaboration between government agencies and citizens as well as other social players important in the development of services such as non-governmental organisations. The new

paradigm provides choice and voice as important mechanisms where the Cabinet Office does not question whether voice was a good idea, but sees it as the most important element because citizens are equal partners.

And this is where the Conservative Party manifesto comes in. It is the right message at the right time but this debate for the Conservative Party is embryonic. This is why the Tories have a council advocating an 'easycouncil', which is about as far from a collaborative way of working as you can possibly get, as a virtual council potentially removes meaningful partnership because services are one step further removed from those with power. There is little in conservative thought that guides the Conservative Party towards collaboration and so David Cameron says unapologetically in his July speech "you can call it liberalism... I call it the Big Society", yet the rest of his party is still in the old paradigm looking at more 'responsive' services for 'customers'.

## VALLEY OF NOBODY KNOWS

Labour's authoritarianism left a wide gap for the Tories to become the party of collective social action and it prevented them from producing any meaningful policies that would create collaboration with citizens. The Tories have a flagship policy of collective action where collaboration is a large element, yet only some of the party believe it is the right approach and others have said that the reason they don't have all the answers is because we are in the "valley of nobody knows".

Which leaves the Liberal Democrats. Nick Clegg has stated in a speech to Demos in July 2010: "what he calls the Big Society is what I would call the Liberal Society", and Paddy Ashdown has said "David Cameron's big idea for a big society has been something the Liberal Democrats have been talking about for years" (Royal British Legion speech, in April). The Liberal Democrats may have been talking about this for years but this movement is not aligned with the Lib Dems. If the Big Society is perceived by the public as benefiting the country, who do you think is going to benefit?

My issue with the Big Society is that, while I praise it as an initiative moving the relationship between state and citizen closer to partnership, it is not the same thing as a government collaborating with citizens, a full scale change in the way government operates and citizens are perceived, a reinvention of the state, which this movement demands.

Imagine if, on 20 October, instead of George Osborne telling the country what was going to happen with the finances, the people had told George Osborne. This was modelled in the USA in 2010, where 3,500 Americans came together across 57 cities to discuss the nation's finances. Liberals and conservatives, young and old, rich and poor, people of all races and ethnicities were linked using satellite and webcasts, where people

*"People are waking up to the idea that they no longer want to continue to be treated as simple voters or customers"*

were connected across the country to create an authentic, nationwide conversation. The process was facilitated so that participants were well informed and a plan for a reduction in the deficit was produced (see [www.americaspeaks.org](http://www.americaspeaks.org)).

Is it not strange that David Cameron is left almost as a sole voice for the Big Society in government advocating a change in the power relationship between state

and citizen, while Lib Dem ministers defend the policy on reducing the deficit?

Is it not strange that Phillip Blond is left to argue the need to reclaim the liberal legacy from Jo Grimond while Nick Clegg argues why the party of Jo Grimond has adopted Conservative Party policy? Surely we are not in the 'valley of nobody knows' as this is liberal territory, which should offer many answers, but we are not capitalising on this opportunity.

This change in governance is inevitable. Look at the Big Society; Obama's open government agenda, which has the aim of 'transparency, participation, and collaboration'; the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts' (NESTA) work on 'co-production' of public services or people-powered public services; or one of the many other social enterprises such as Involve's work on public engagement in public services. We should be building on NESTA's work, which shows that collaborative services could generate savings of up to six times the investment made in them. This is as an opportunity to show the world that we really are about reinventing the state, as a reduced size is necessary for effective governance with citizens as partners.

"Collaboration is right at the heart of everything Liberal Democrats believe in," Danny Alexander wrote in his 2010 book *Why Vote Liberal Democrat*, yet there was little in the manifesto about collaboration with citizens. What this movement is crying out for is a more coherent strategy and political leadership. With localism, collaboration and devolving power being the Liberal Democrats' home territory, it should feel right at home with us. This "is a revolution that is already under way, barely noticed by the mainstream," as David Boyle and colleagues put it in NESTA's report *Public services inside out* and it is time we moved our focus onto how we can align this movement with the Liberal Democrats by defining a collaborative governance policy.

The groundwork has already been done and the Lib Dems are much further along this debate than others. The party just needs to catch up and become a leader for this movement.

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# ONLY MAKING IT ALL WORSE

The UK's anti-drug laws have failed to stem drug use or improve the health of users. The Liberal Democrats can do better, says Ewan Hoyle

Have no doubt, drugs prohibition will fall.

The arguments in its favour cannot hold out forever against the evidence and logic that undermines it, or the obvious morality of the policy with evidence and logic on its side. And I put it to you that the Liberal Democrats have the power to accelerate prohibition's demise. We can cause the UK to take a lead on the issue that the international community can respect and then follow.

It did appear earlier in the year that California would be the first world state to fully legalise the market for one of the drugs prohibited in the UN drugs conventions. But the proposition 19 ballot to legalise marijuana did not receive majority support, and it may surprise you to hear that I, as founder of Liberal Democrats for Drug Policy Reform, was to an extent relieved at the news.

If prohibition is to be rapidly consigned to history, then the pioneering experiments in legalisation need to be able to demonstrate clearly the benefits that legalisation can deliver in massively reducing harm to individuals and communities.

Of all the wealthy, developed nations in the world, I'm afraid I trust the Americans least to deliver a well-regulated market when there are big bucks to be made and politicians all too ready to receive those bucks in reward for favour.

Proposition 19 also fell down in its failure to mention the serious harms that cannabis may inflict upon its users, stating: "Cannabis has fewer harmful effects than either alcohol or cigarettes, which are both legal for adult consumption. Cannabis is not physically addictive, does not have long-term toxic effects on the body, and does not cause its consumers to become violent."

"If cannabis is so harmless, then why bother regulating it?" is my interpretation of the attitude that would have been taken into the regulatory efforts of the administrators of the law. And I believe such an attitude would have been dangerous and misguided.

Cannabis consumption in youth is associated with an increased risk of schizophrenia, and the earlier you start and the more you smoke, the greater the observed risk. There are, of course, different ways to interpret these associations. There are some who consider causation to be the more likely explanation – cannabis use while the brain is developing causes biological changes, which increase risk of psychosis later in life – and plausible mechanisms for this action are being scientifically explored. There are others who consider that simple correlation is a more likely explanation, and that there may be other factors that predispose individuals to both the use of cannabis and

the development of psychosis.

## SCHIZOPHRENIA RISK

Both views are valid, but when one has to consider the appropriate policy with which to deal with the risks of cannabis, it is surely orders of magnitude better to be safe than to be sorry. I have observed at first hand the impact schizophrenia can have on an individual and a family. My brother didn't take drugs, and neither have I, but I would very much like to have grown up knowing that heavy cannabis use could have increased my risk of schizophrenia from 1 in 10 to 'heads or tails'.

So why, if I am so concerned about the harms of cannabis, am I passionately promoting its legalisation?

Put simply, it is only in a legal market that we can enforce regulations minimising harm, and it is my hope that cannabis can be regulated in such a manner that everyone wishing to use it first receives education on potential harms including on the early warning signs of psychosis. Whether the relationship between cannabis and schizophrenia is causative or correlation, those using it are at greater risk than the general population and are therefore a very appropriate education target.

Regulation also allows us to better prevent cannabis use by children. Prohibiting sale to only the under-18s is likely to be far more effective because of better resource targeting and any dealers who try to serve the teenage market will face a greater degree of stigma, community intolerance, and potentially tougher sentencing than at present.

The Liberal Democrats already have a policy to legalise cannabis once international treaties have been renegotiated, but this and our permissive approaches to social supply and cultivation for personal use – like Proposition 19 – reflect a perception of minimal harm that is simply not appropriate.

It is with a new determination for harm reduction that we should revisit our attitudes towards the UN drugs conventions. Where a state might receive short shrift approaching international diplomats with the argument "Our citizens want to get high and we think you should let them", the argument "These drug conventions severely restrict our abilities to protect our citizens from harm" is one with weight and urgency that should fall on receptive ears.

Indeed, Anand Grover, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health, has recently requested consideration of reforms in the direction of legalisation on similar grounds.

Even Yury Fedotov, the executive director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), has stated: "I believe in placing a strong emphasis on

safeguarding health, human rights and justice.” What better way to demonstrate this than to respond in a mature and considerate manner towards a reasonable request to move drug policy in this direction?

Mr Grover has also advocated decriminalisation of drug possession for personal use.

Decriminalisation needs to be part of the next step in UK drugs policy reform. The Portuguese

experience has demonstrated its great usefulness in encouraging individuals into treatment without also encouraging greater rates of drug use. Criminalising drug possession is not a meaningful deterrent to use, and inappropriate criminal records impose damaging restrictions upon future employment. Decriminalisation can only be a temporary solution, however. While possession should not be criminalised, the continued payment of money to illegal drug dealers to obtain drugs is highly undesirable.

Any strictly regulated legal market in cannabis has to be monitored closely for unintended consequences. If outcomes are broadly positive, then it would be appropriate to incorporate gradually other controlled drugs into strictly regulated legal control, bearing in mind that it is essential to learn from mistakes and carefully consider evidence at every step of the way.

It is my hope that the only drug dealers operating in our communities in the future will possess degrees in pharmacy and will be selling to adults who have been fully educated on the financial, social and health risks they are taking before they commit to their purchase.

## FOOT SOLDIERS

By keeping drugs prohibited, we instead gift the market to criminal gangs whose foot-soldiers are always looking for vulnerable individuals to recruit into the ranks of the addicted.

It was the stories of five such vulnerable people as depicted in the Channel 4 documentary *Killer in a Small Town* that first stirred my anger at the failings of British drugs policy. All five were, or had been, heroin addicts who worked as street prostitutes in Ipswich and all five were murdered at the hands of Steven Wright. What angered me about the case was the impotence of government authorities in the face of the ongoing horror.

Feeble requests were issued by the police for the sex workers in the town to stay at home, but heroin dependency doesn't allow reason to guide life or death decision-making and so the murders continued.

Had the authorities been able to reach out to the vulnerable and offer them heroin maintenance treatment along with psychological and social support, lives could have been saved in Ipswich, in Bradford and in many other towns and cities where heroin addiction needlessly leads to an early death.

In Ipswich, it was left to a heroic intervention from the Iceni drugs project, which set about paying girls to stay off the streets, following a £10,000 donation, and subsequently managed to end street prostitution

“So why, if I am so concerned about the harms of cannabis, am I passionately promoting its legalisation?”

in Ipswich with help from the local police. Iceni has a hugely impressive 71% success rate relative to the Suffolk average of 37% through employing an inspirational holistic approach that sees drug users as friends not clients. Unfortunately, due to a deeply flawed council tendering process, Iceni is faced with possible closure in the spring.

With the cuts in local government spending that will need to be made, there is a real risk that other excellent drug services will be rendered unable to help drug users in the next few years.

We have the UNODC stating in its *World Drug Report 2010* that there are potential 13:1 savings-to-costs ratios to be had from evidence-based treatment services, yet we have the government discussing time-limited methadone and withdrawal of benefits from dependent users who refuse treatment.

Heroin-assisted treatment has the potential to be both attractive to dependent users and effective in turning their lives around. It has yielded great benefits for Switzerland and has been embraced by over 60% of the population there in a referendum on the policy.

Without such services and prudent faith in a spend-to-save policy of treatment expansion, we risk losing a generation of young unemployed people to heroin and crack addiction.

We know that every problem drug user costs between £50-60,000 to society, and mostly due to the crimes they commit to fund their habit. Rather than reduce demand for Home Office and Ministry of Justice expenditure while budgets are being slashed, badly judged cuts and the government drug strategy may be important contributing factors in these departments being overwhelmed.

It is for these reasons that I have drafted a motion on drugs policy for consideration for spring conference in Sheffield. The motion will call for decriminalisation following the Portuguese model, heroin maintenance treatment following the Swiss model, and a properly concerted domestic and international effort by the Liberal Democrats to pave the way for a strictly regulated legal cannabis market in the UK.

This is an unequivocally tough on drugs policy that we can defend with vigour from the intellectual and moral high ground. And if the drugs strategy that will be announced in December endangers the young people and communities of Britain as much as I suspect it will, it will be absolutely imperative that this motion passes. The Liberal Democrats cannot stand back and watch the Conservatives set a drug policy agenda which runs against everything we stand for. This issue offers us an opportunity to remind Britain of our principles, why they voted for us in May or why they should vote for us in the future.

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Ewan Hoyle is the founder and interim chair of Liberal Democrats for Drug Policy Reform (email: ewanhoyle@gmail.com)

# LETTERS



# REVIEWS



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## PARTY ELECTIONS

*Dear Liberator,*

I read Tony Greaves's article 'Death by Neglect' (Liberator 342) with interest and noted his comment that more than half of the FPC candidates stressed being distinctive, independent or the importance of liberal values. I was also interested in your query as to whether the new interim peers would be keen to vote for their replacement by a wholly or mainly elected house.

This year, I regarded the federal elections as being crucial and in the case of the FCC and FPC regarded the continued independence of the policy-making process and conference as being the key issue, and in the case of the interim peers, commitment to the replacement of the House of Lords by an elected second chamber.

Where candidates appeared to have failed to give their views of the relevant issues, I e-mailed where possible and asked where they stood.

After examining the list of the people elected, I found that more than 80% of the people elected to FCC were committed to retain the independence of the party, as were 75% of the people elected to FPC.

In the case of the interim peers, the figure was only 60%, which, given that reform of the House of Lords seemed to be imminent, is worrying. I certainly hope that the current expansion of the unelected House of Lords, while the elected Commons is being reduced, is a temporary phenomenon. Currently, the basic requirement for prospective peers should be for turkey's willing to vote for Christmas.

As someone who agrees with Tony Greaves's view of the long-term prospects of the coalition, the result of the votes for federal committees is encouraging and suggests that, when the coalition ends, the bulk of the party will remain intact, avoiding the splits that have bedevilled the Liberal Party in the past in similar situations

Andrew Hudson  
Leyton

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## Yes Prime Minster Gielgud Theatre, London Jonathan Lynn (director)

*Yes Prime Minister* is one of my family's favourite TV programmes, so we were delighted to see that it had been updated and turned into a play.

The great strength of the original was the broadly plausible scenarios that frequently illustrated actual or at least possible dilemmas of government. Having been involved professionally in a move of army personnel to Scotland and a survey on civil service pay, I know that the issues raised in the episodes on those topics were spot on.

The same cannot be said for the play, though, where the central dilemma is that, to get a lucrative and vital oil deal with a central Asian country, Prime Minister Hacker needs to supply its foreign minister with an under-age prostitute.

Leaving aside the fact that I would not have chosen to take my 14-year-old to a play with this theme, it simply doesn't work as a plot device. The play is set at Chequers and it never seems in any way credible that the PM would agree to this or have any chance of keeping it quiet if he did.

Dramatically, the play doesn't work very well either. All the action is set over one (very) long evening and it would have been far better to have recreated the structure of the original by having four half-hour acts spread over a number of days. It also suffers in the second half by becoming a farce and from an obvious 'filler' in the form of an attack (amusing but irrelevant) on the BBC.

The cast is competent enough although David Haig (Hacker)

appears to be channelling Basil Fawlty and at no point convinces he could actually become PM. Weakest character by far is the PM's SpAd, Clare, a sad contrast to the splendid Dorothy in the original who was effortlessly far more capable than any of the men.

There are some contemporary references bolted on – the coalition and Blackberries for example – and an amusing rant about global warming, but somehow they don't convince.

Having said all that, the play does have some excellent, funny lines and the audience seemed to enjoy it. But don't take your children.

Simon McGrath

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## The Wars of Rosie by Rose Dean-Davis Pennant 2009 £14.99

Rose Davis didn't deserve the lot that she got. Indeed, so far as George Davis was concerned, all of those who fought against his wrongful imprisonment in the 1970s in the 'George Davis is Innocent' campaign were short-changed when he was caught on the job a year or two after that nice Mr Jenkins had released him because "the conviction was deemed unsafe" – not, as the famed graffiti proclaimed, because he was innocent.

Paradoxically, those friends of civil liberties, New Labour, extended the period of official embargo on the release of the Public Records Office of official papers relating to the 1976 decision to free Davis, until 2026.

Rose died last year and this autobiography was published posthumously. It is a great study of working class life in east London in the last half of the twentieth century and I would recommend the book for that.

But central to it is the campaign to free George Davis.





The girl looked at the chain of flowers in her hands. Quickly, she made a final piercing and joined the two ends of the necklace together.

Then she took three swift steps towards the old woman and looped the necklace round her neck. As she did this, the girl heard her mother's voice calling her name and looked behind her – and when she looked back again, the old woman was gone. The girl turned and ran through the trees.

By the time the picnic was over, the girl had started and finished another flower chain and she said nothing to her parents about the old woman.



The Young Liberals, many of whom devoted a lot of energy to the matter, are hardly mentioned, and Peter Hain only disparagingly so.

Rose thought we were just jumping on the bandwagon for our own ends, which may have been the case so far as Hain was concerned, but many of the rest of us, the local YLs (some of whom were the graffitists) took it quite seriously.

There seems to be a lack of documentation on the George Davis case within the public domain and I'd been interested to hear from any who were involved in the campaign from the YL side to put the record straight.

Stewart Rayment

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## Churchill: An Unruly Life by Norman Rose IB Tauris 2009 £12.99

Winston Churchill is perhaps the only character with two chapters in the national myth. There is the chapter on the Second World War, naturally, and the chapter on 'how Winston got there'. Rose's biography, which first appeared in 1994 and is now re-published in this revised edition, doesn't deviate from that much, except in the sense that he gives us a Churchill that is easier to love and hate.

We like the idea that Churchill loved life and lived it to the full. We like him being rude (preferably not on the receiving end). His weaknesses are our weaknesses.

And somehow he managed to get us through it. Could anyone else have done it? Lloyd George, perhaps, but time was running

out, and the grey men detested him even more than they detested Churchill. And this overrides all of the things on which he was wrong – India most glaringly.

One simple observation is that he was not a general, in the sense that perhaps Hitler was, and he did not particularly trust the generals he had. The First World War coloured his attitudes on how to fight the Second; the dominance of the grey since 1918 being partly explained by the loss of the inspired in the trenches, an experience not to be repeated.

Once picked up you won't put the book down; I agree with David Cannadine, possibly "the best one-volume life".

Stewart Rayment

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## Long Walk to Freedom By Nelson Mandela abridged by Chris Van Wyk & illustrated by Paddy Bouma MacMillan 2010 £6.99

It's Christmas, and Santa's elves at Liberator have solved that nagging problem for you... an abridgement of Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, suitable for all neoliterates and those who didn't quite manage the long read to the end of the original back in 1994.

Chris Van Wyk is a fitting person to attempt such a task – a poet, one of the Soweto generation, who has honed his skills on other members of the ANC pantheon, Oliver Tambo and Solomon Plaatje. Paddy Bouma was a runner up for the Kate Greenaway Award in

1986; one can sense the emotion of the people in her images of the apartheid and post-apartheid eras. Her work should be better known here.

While apartheid should be confined to the dustbin of human memory, the dignity of the struggle for freedom and of Nelson Mandela should live forever. Many young people now have no personal memory of those events. What better *aide-mémoire* than this?

Stewart Rayment

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## Why Join A Trade Union? by Jo Phillips and David Seymour Biteback 2010 £7.99

I've belonged to a trade union all my working life though, to be honest, I've rarely called on it, or it on me.

The existence of organisations that allow employees to work collectively and not be picked off one-by-one is an essential part of attempting to balance employers and employees a shade more evenly.

But for most of the last 35 years, trade unions have been either reviled or ignored.

This began during the unions' period of collective madness in the late 1970s when – with a Labour government tottering and Margaret Thatcher standing in the wings for all with eyes to see – the dead went unburied and strike committees decided which goods lorries were allowed onto the roads.

It was regrettable that this chaos

paved the way for the Tory victory in 1979 but scarcely surprising that, for an exasperated public, it was the final blow to the Callaghan government.

Since then, the eruption of the miners' strike apart, few outside their ranks have known or cared what trade unions said or thought. The sudden spate of coverage accorded the TUC this autumn as spending cuts loomed read rather as though the media had rediscovered some quaint sect.

This book is written in a jokey style to try to convince readers that trade unions are not alien, violent or scary but do much useful day-to-day work on pay, equality, safety and training.

It debunks some myths usefully, and demystifies the terminology, but since trade unions now exist largely only in the public sector, the whole argument may be a bit academic for most of the workforce.

Mark Smulian

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## **Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5 by Christopher Andrew Penguin 2010 £14.99**

This is an authorised history although, as the current director general says in the introduction, not an official history of the security service. Christopher Andrew has had access to the MI5 archives with restrictions on the use any material that may still be prejudicial to national security.

The Security Service was formed during the German spy scare mania during the 1906 Liberal government. At a very early stage, the boundaries were drawn between its remit and that of the Secret Intelligence Service, which dealt with obtaining information from outside British territory. However, particularly in its early years, MI5 had turf wars with the Metropolitan Police Special Branch. In dealing with its initial remit of foreign espionage, MI5 was very effective in both world wars, resulting in German spies being rounded up quickly and virtually no sabotage on British soil.

However, MI5 became increasingly involved in dealing with subversion, which was defined as "actions intended to overthrow parliamentary

democracy by political, industrial or violent means". Investigations showed there to be little German money involved in pacifist and revolutionary movements in the First World War. After the Russian revolution, surveillance was carried out on the Communist Party, which continued until the end of the cold war. The records show that there were people in the higher echelons of the Communist Party who were sending information to Moscow.

The British Empire was regarded as British territory and under the remit of MI5 rather than MI6, with the arrangement continuing after independence in Commonwealth countries until the early 1970s, and with MI5 helping newly independent countries build up their own intelligence agencies.

MI5's role in the decolonisation process appears to be fairly enlightened. Sir Percy Sillitoe, its head in the late 1940s and early 1950s, expressed concern about links with the South African authorities and rebuked a senior intelligence officer in Salisbury for providing information to the South Africans on an anti-apartheid cleric.

MI5 also recognised the difference between nationalist leaders such as Kenyatta and Nkrumah and movements under the influence of Moscow, and regarded information obtained under torture as unreliable. However, the recent allegations of information obtained under duress appears to be glossed over.

As well as espionage and 'subversion', MI5 also dealt with terrorism, particularly from 1969 onwards in Northern Ireland. Terrorism has become its major preoccupation.

Peter Wright is described as an individual who, far from being an enlightened whistleblower, saw reds under every bed and had an obsession that Sir Roger Hollis, a head of MI5 for a period, was a Soviet spy. Wright also had a grievance over pensions.

The Wilson plot is demolished as a myth largely created by Wright, who is described as a one-man plotter against Wilson. Wilson himself is described as paranoid while Colonel Wigg, who was supposedly given a portfolio dealing with security in the early Wilson government, is described as more like a private detective in a grubby

raincoat spying on the private lives of Labour MPs to make them easier to control while real security was dealt with by the home secretary.

The book is fairly frank in its criticisms and, in particular, describes an anti-Semitic recruitment policy from the post-war years until 1960 following the threat of Zionist terrorism in Britain, despite many Jews having served with distinction in the Second World War and the condemnation of terrorism by mainstream Jewish organisations in Britain.

However, the image of MI5 as full of bowler hat wearing Colonel Blimps is dispelled. Far from seeing subversives under every bed, MI5 had problems with several prime ministers who wanted to persuade it to go beyond its charter in industrial disputes, which was limited to "actions of persons or organisations... which may be judged to be subversive of the state".

The Communist Party and Trotskyite organisations were regarded as such, ordinary trade unionist weren't. In 1977, the then deputy director general John Jones wrote that ministers and their senior officials had "a natural tendency, which the service must continue to resist, to equate subversion with (any) activity which threatens a Government's policy or threatens its existence".

It is a relief to read that the security service adopts this approach. MI5 also showed what was, in the context of the time, a relaxed attitude towards gays, with the main concern being the potential blackmail risk, particularly when homosexuality was still treated as a criminal offence, resisting pressure from other government departments for an absolute ban. MI5 has now become an equal opportunities employer that recruits openly.

Former Young Liberals might be upset to find they receive absolutely no mention in the book, suggesting how seriously they were taken by anyone but the party hierarchy. In fact, other than Churchill's role as home secretary, the only major reference to Liberals is that Jeremy Thorpe was regarded as a potential blackmail risk owing to his private life.

The main problem with the book lies more in its omissions than its



content. There is nothing about whether the Duke of Windsor was under surveillance in the Second World War, nothing about whether Ted Heath was regarded as a security risk owing to his private life.

There is no mention of UFOs; in the United States, conspiracy theories about aliens were covertly encouraged to divert attention from the testing of high performance military aircraft. There is no mention of the fuel protests in 2000, which do represent a potential threat to any future policy to combat climate change.

In short, this is a heavy-going academic text by an expert on intelligence with numerous footnotes deriving from primary sources, but with no great revelations.

Andrew Hudson

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**Mervyn Peake: The Man and His Art**  
 compiled by Mervyn Peake & Alison Eldred  
 Peter Owen 2008  
 £19.95

The news of the manuscript of a fourth Titus book, events after Gormenghast, left unfinished by Peake at his death but completed by his wife Maeve Gilmore, is the cause of great anticipation.

Equally, the British Library has now acquired Peake's papers. Towards the end of the 1960s, two young students of librarianship approached the Peake house and offered to catalogue his work.

They were greeted with some suspicion; probably Maeve Gilmore was a bit strapped for cash after her husband's death, for they were asked to pay for the privilege and, alas, had no money at the time. It would have been a labour of love but wasn't to be. One of them went on to design a classification scheme for film images for the BBC.

Much of the book is anecdotal, but this serves as an amiable way to convey Peake's modus operandi. Predictably these add to the charm of the book; often about the writer's discovery

of Peake and what was found on that discovery. Contributors thus include Joanne Harris, Michael Moorcock and Chris Riddell. However, it is Peake's own work that you'll most want this book for; do pause and read 'The Glassblowers' – and meditate that our salvation once rested on so arcane a process.

Stewart Rayment

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**Brown Hares in the Derbyshire Dales**  
 by Christine Gregory  
 Lepus Books 2010  
 £15.00

In this coalition for the best of reasons, the Clegg Dancers need to be especially vigilant in protecting aspects of life that cannot easily speak for themselves.

Although the nature and countryside lobbies can, of course, be very vocal, it is obvious that things like wildlife can be especially vulnerable in meeting economies. For example, one voluntary body that I am familiar with has lost all of its local government funding (although the local authority in question could not manage without them) and has seen its corporate sponsorship drop by about a third since Labour's recession cut in.

On the title page of this book, which is under the auspices of the Peak District National Park Authority and Derbyshire Wildlife Trust, we read: "One of the declared aims of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan was to use the popularity of brown hares to highlight the impact on biodiversity of modern

agricultural practices and loss of mixed farms."

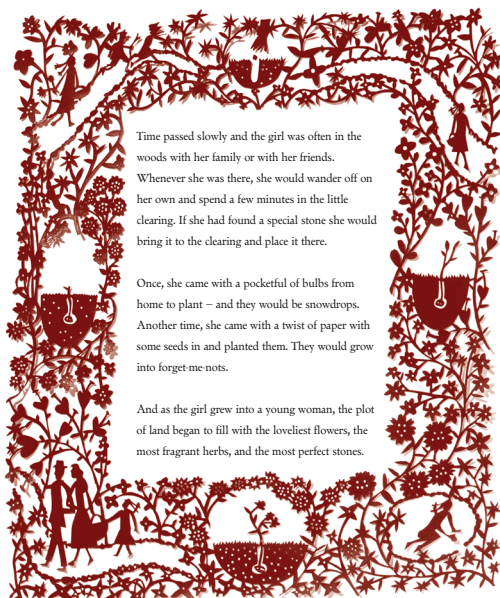
Governments since the Second World War have been in the hands of the 'big agriculture' lobby, increasingly dominated by the large supermarket chains. Conrad Russell maintained that the Liberal Democrats did not have an economic policy as such (rather a political economy meshed in with other aspects of policy), but I have always tended to see Liberals as advocates of small-scale capitalism and, given the long dependence of the parties on rural constituencies, would expect them to be alive to such issues.

Aside from the general ecology of hares, Gregory goes into contentious issues. Hares are game and have long been victims of various field sports, most of which are now illegal.

A review the Hunting Act 2004 would be welcomed, hopefully with greater attention to detail than one has come to expect from parliament. Among the things that might be considered would be a close season for hares, as is common in many other European countries. This won't be urgent business for the coalition, but should not be ignored.

There is much of value for rural activists in this book, particularly if you are in a position to influence biodiversity matters, but most people will want this book simply for Gregory's wonderful photographs of hares and the Derbyshire countryside.

Stewart Rayment





## Monday

Finding myself passing the kitchens, I call upon Cook to thank her for a delicious luncheon (and ask if there might be any of that magnificent spotted dick left). I find her in her sitting room watching her new portable moving television. As I study the screen, I see men eating a kangaroo's penis while being showered with maggots. Something about him is familiar... "By Gladstone!" I cry. "It's Lembit Öpik." I am about to observe that the restaurants in Welshpool have clearly got no better, when Cook explains that Lembit has been sent to the jungle with a number of "celebrities" (though I must confess I have not heard of any of them except dear Brit Ekland, Nigel Havers' lad and the sprinter fellow) and that TV viewers can vote by telephone to choose which of them should undergo an awful ordeal. I spend the evening pounding the keys of my new mobile telephone.

## Tuesday

It is strange how new policies come to prominence. Until recently, we Liberal Democrats devoted all our efforts to helping the poor, but today a new cause has become popular amongst us – that of Not Terribly Bright middle-class children. If you don't support giving thousands of pounds to Not Terribly Bright middle-class children so that they can go to university, then you are no Liberal Democrat, or so some would tell you. These Not Terribly Bright middle-class children throng the streets, occupy libraries (which may, in all fairness, do them some good) and force the cancelation of political conferences. I am all in favour of higher education, and regard the Department of Hard Sums of the University of Rutland at Belvoir as one of the jewels in our national crown, but do we need quite so many universities as we have these days? They choke our cities, ruin our public houses and force the working class into exile. When I have thousands of pounds to hand out in this way I prefer to dig wells in Africa, house the homeless and – one must move with the times – buy shoes for the Well-Behaved Orphans. No doubt I shall now be picketed by Not Terribly Bright middle-class children myself.

## Wednesday

I am not sure I trust this new mobile telephone. This morning I dialled Mike Hancock's office at Westminster, only to be put through to a number in Moscow!

## Thursday

Poor Clegg is a bit under the cosh at the moment, not least because of his failure to adopt the cause of Not Terribly Bright middle-class children. Even his appearance on Desert Island Discs caused controversy when he chose the odd packet of

# Lord Bonkers' Diary

Woodbines as his luxury. (When I appeared on this show, I chose Dame Anna Neagle as mine. I had to send Roy Plomley a case of particularly fine claret to get him to agree to the idea, but I am happy to report the investment proved well worth it). I was not surprised by Clegg's choice as I was one of the few listeners who already knew that he smoked. That was because I organised a boat trip on Rutland Water

for the Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party last summer, during which we were marooned on an island by an unseasonal storm. After we had built a camp (under my supervision), I found Clegg enjoying a cigarette. "How did you manage to light it?" I asked. "That's easy," he said. "I stole Danny Alexander's glasses."

## Friday

I spend the day phoning up to vote for Lembit to be buried alive with deadly scorpions, but they put some ghastly woman who keeps fainting on the screen instead.

## Saturday

That unexpected sojourn on the island did at least solve the mystery of how Evan Harris has been getting on. After his sad defeat at the last election, he asked me if I knew of somewhere quiet where he could conduct his experiments. As the triumphal arch I had erected on the Bonkers Hall Estate built to commemorate Mark Bonham-Carter's victory in the Great Torrington by-election is currently undergoing renovation, I pointed him towards Rutland Water. While there with my fellow Liberal Democrat parliamentarians, I came across the Good Doctor and he proudly showed us the tower he had built in which to conduct his experiments in search of the "Liberal gene". I did not like the sound of this so, after we had been rescued, I had a word with the villagers of the shore. I expect they rowed out with pitchforks and flaming brands the very next day.

## Sunday

On returning from Divine Service at St Asquith's, I glance at yesterday's post. It is just as I thought: the mobile telephone company does not know what it is doing. The bill is far too high! These people would do well not to underestimate me, for I was the first person in Rutland to have a telephone (it never rang, because no one else had one, but you take my point).

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