liberator

Alarm clock Britain ...

... a nation sleeps

- Why I'm working with Labour – Richard Grayson
- Forest for the trees – Tony Greaves
- How not to win a by-election – Chris Davies

Issue 344 - February 2011 **£ 4**

Issue 344 - February 2011

SUBSCRIBE!

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

You can subscribe or renew online using PayPal at our website: www.liberator.org.uk

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

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

THE LIBERATOR COLLECTIVE

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

LIBERATOR

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

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

DATA PROTECTION

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

YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS BY EMAIL

We accept your Liberator contributions by email to collective@liberator.org.uk

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

INTERNET

Email: collective@liberator.org.uk
Website: http://www.liberator.org.uk

Facebook group:
www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=6806343091

CONTENTS

Cover Picture - Christy Lawrance

COMMENTARY

ONCE BITTEN

Given the coalition's economic record to date, it is little wonder that some Liberal Democrats are thinking about how, when and to what extent they should build bridges with Labour, as two articles in this Liberator discuss.

Spending cuts are about to make both coalition parties extremely unpopular, while statements by both David Cameron and Nick Clegg in January to the effect that they should also have a policy on promoting economic growth made the coalition look remiss. It should have had such a policy from the start.

Another change, signalled in January by a steady run of press stories, was that Clegg has realised the Lib Dems need a profile and purpose separate from that of the coalition, to replace his previous strategy of the party 'owning' the whole coalition and taking responsibility for all its works.

Labour's manifesto in 1983 might have been history's longest suicide note, but Clegg's strategy of aligning the Lib Dems exactly with the coalition would surely have been the longest-term planned suicide in politics.

So it's no huge shock that some Lib Dems will want to talk to Labour either as a potential coalition partner after the next general election, or to encourage those within Labour who support voting reform, or even as part of a possible alignment by those who hope to bring down the coalition in this parliament.

They would be wise to keep communication with Labour open – not least as success in the AV referendum would make future coalitions almost inevitable – but they would be even wiser to look behind Ed Miliband's smiling façade and remember what they are dealing with.

There is a good reason why past attempts to realign Labour and Liberals have foundered. It is because, when anyone tried to form a 'progressive coalition', they found that Labour's progressivism rarely extended beyond the economic sphere.

Hatred of liberty and reverence for the state run deep in Labour's DNA, and a few encouraging statements from its new leader will not change that quickly.

Labour was the party that lied to the country because it wanted to start a war, centralised on a scale undreamed of even by the Thatcher government, did its best to turn the UK into an American colony and launched an assault on civil liberty on a scale unmatched by any peacetime British government.

And, as any Lib Dems who have tangled with Labour in its urban strongholds will know, it is mostly not the well-meaning vaguely progressive vehicle that some find it to be elsewhere.

What is more, Labour has form here. The last Lib Dem to trust and work with Labour was Paddy Ashdown, who was used, betrayed and humiliated by Tony Blair exactly as many warned he would be.

If Labour really is moving on from the Blair and Brown eras, well and good, and let us judge what it says and does.

But Lib Dems would be right to wonder whether the Labour Party grasps that it was a Labour government's efforts to destroy civil liberty that made it unexpectedly easy for even left-wing Lib Dems to endorse working with the Tories last May.

That shameful part of Labour's record, in particular, ought to make Lib Dems wary and remind them that they should look for proof of changes in the party's thinking, not just some warm words from its leader.

DON'T FEAR DEMOCRACY

At the time of writing, it is unclear how the unrest in Tunisia, Egypt and other Middle East countries will play out.

But if any political space does open up, it will be important for liberal parties in Europe to try to help their counterparts in the Arab world to organise effectively.

It might surprise some to learn that there are organised liberals in Arab countries at all. However, some of these countries have been dictatorships but not totalitarian and have allowed a measure of pluralism within circumscribed limits.

Thus Morocco has two liberal parties, which have shared power, though the king retains the last word. Egypt has three (Liberator 337) and Tunisia the Social Liberal Party. Some other countries where parties cannot function have liberal-aligned think tanks.

This is at least something to build on and the widely-voiced demand for democracy in those countries ought to silence those who have argued that Arab countries – uniquely in the world – are somehow 'not ready' for it.

The danger is that western politicians who laud Arab democracy in theory will seek to undermine it in practice through fear of religious parties and/or of relations with Israel. The best way to keep the religious parties from power is not to rely on indefinite repression but to bolster secular opposition parties, to move such parties from their present, necessarily elitist, fringe into the mainstream.

As for the argument over the peace process with Israel, lasting peace is made between countries, not between one country and a transient dictator.

Democracies do sometimes fight each other but nothing like as often as dictatorships do, and a peace that wins popular consent in the countries concerned is far more likely to last.

RADICAL BULLETIN

DEEP IN NUMBER 2S

What is the difference between 'Coalition Phase 2' and 'Coalition 2.0'? The answer is that both are attempts to work out what the coalition should be doing once it has exhausted the measures in its original agreement.

Danny Alexander gave a presentation on what this 'phase 2' might be to the Federal Policy Committee, and the co-chairs of the assorted Lib Dem backbench committees were favoured with a paper from Tory policy wonk Oliver Letwin, Alexander's partner in this endeavour.

Notes of the co-chairs' meeting with Letwin, seen by Liberator, suggest all the "difficult things" in the coalition agreement will have been done by the middle of 2012 and the government will therefore need something with which to occupy itself between then and 2015.

The main proposal is for a 'second programme for government', which would concentrate on issues that are "easier for the coalition to absorb" and less "heroic" (an interesting way to describe the first phase).

Alexander and Letwin are leading the process, and rumours that there are debates as to which of them is the most right-wing are of course wholly unfounded.

According to the notes, things will kick off with a "seminar with David and Nick to start to identify issues", which might include "questions without answers", such as productivity and the state of the housing market and some intractable matters left over from phase one, like individual care budgets.

A further seminar in March is due to decide which of the original proposals are sensible ones to proceed with, followed by the first involvement of civil service departments and both parties more widely. This will lead to, in late 2011, (wait for it…) another seminar.

This is all separate from the development of policies to put to the voters in 2015.

Informing this process on the Lib Dem side is a description of what a liberal Britain might resemble, produced by Nick Clegg's £85,000-a-year adviser Richard Reeves, which looks like one of those charts given away by newspapers to show the evolution of life to primary school pupils.

Since Reeves's chart is strictly secret, we have reproduced it for the convenience of readers on the next page. Its practical purpose, if any, is said to be to show the government's liberal credentials and to help with finding a profile and position distinct from that of the government, something Clegg's inner circle has finally realised the party needs and is thrashing about to find.

The inner circle has also, according to this theory, realised the party needs a 'core vote', having systematically alienated such former cores as public service professionals, students, young people generally, and left-of-centre people pissed off with Labour.

One worry expressed about Reeves's chart is that it has nothing to say about equality and tries to get the party to define 'fairness' in narrow terms of social mobility.

Meanwhile, over at the Centre for Um, 'Coalition 2.0' is in progress. This is a joint initiative with the Tories, under the CentreForum's auspices, that is planning coalition policy for the 2012-15 period. It is separate from the Alexander-Letwin exercise. Chief executive Chris Nicholson has written to Liberator to correct some points in the item about this in the previous RB (Liberator 343), (see letters, page 30).

While we are grateful to Nicholson for clarifying that Coalition 2.0 is distinct from the 'Facing the Future' group under Norman Lamb, which is reviewing party policy within the Lib Dems, CentreForum needs to justify the membership of Coalition 2.0.

The Lib Dem side of this group comprises (as we noted in Liberator 343, which has not been disputed by CentreForum) Chris Huhne, David Laws, Julian Astle (a director of CentreForum), economist Tim Leunig and Paul Marshall, (hedge-fund millionaire and CentreForum's main backer).

With the exception of Huhne, the membership comes from the right-wing free market fringe of the Lib Dems and therefore cannot be trusted to represent adequately the views of the wider party to its Tory counterparts. The membership of 'Facing the Future' (see Nicholson's letter on page 30 for the full list), on the other hand, seems reasonably balanced.

Of 'Coaliton 2.0' and 'Facing the Future', which group will have more real influence, one wonders?

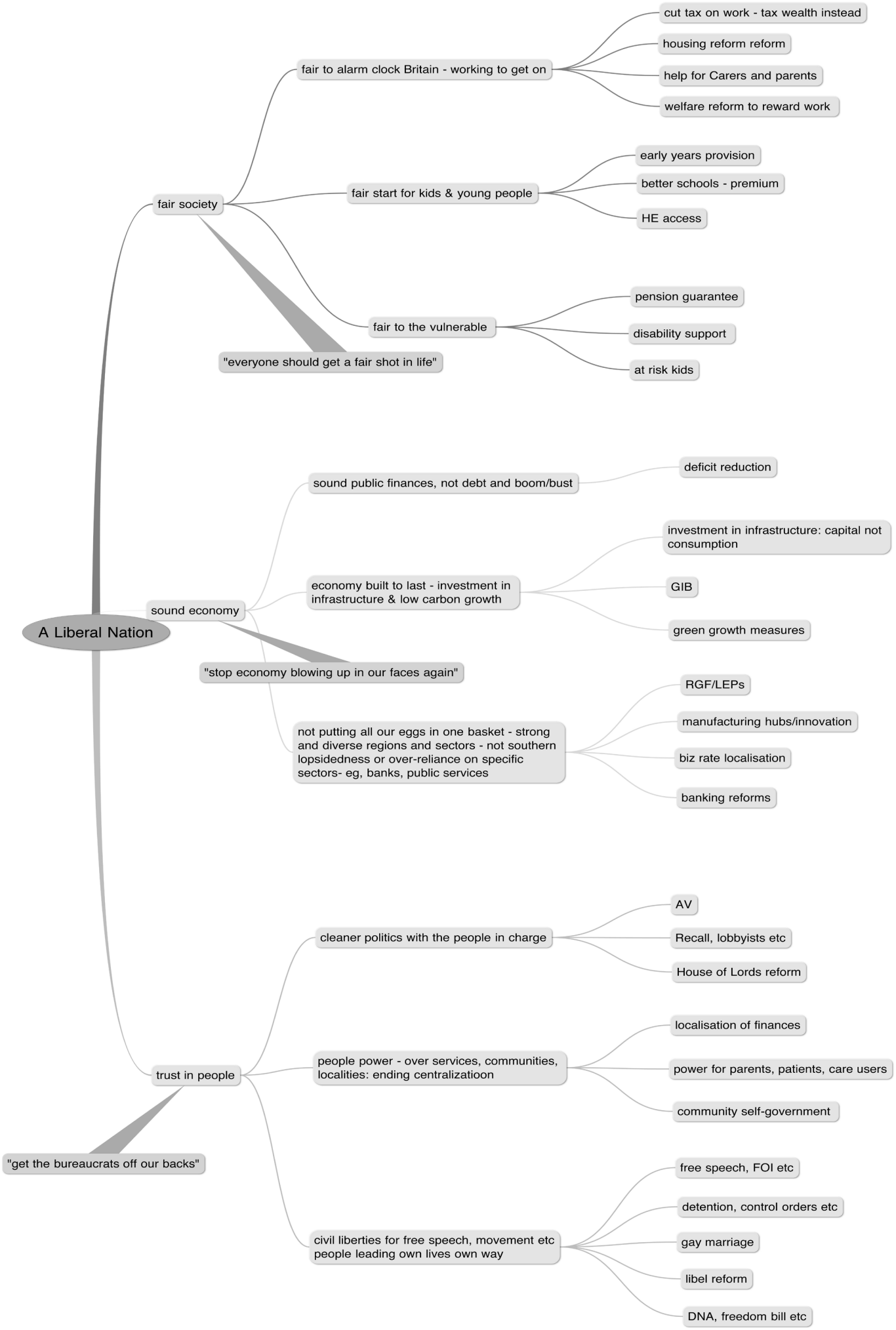
END OF THE PEERS SHOW?

Eight of the 15 new Lib Dem peers were drawn from the various extant peers panels elected by conference representatives. This innovation, largely the work of the now-vanished Donnachadh McCarthy, has not succeeded in restricting party leaders to nominating peers solely from it (with the exception of one permitted nominee of their own) but it has at least made the process a little more transparent and accountable.

New peers are understood to have been told that they will not merely be expected to be working peers, rather than ornamental ones, but also that they must vote for any reforms to democratise the House of Lords. Turkeys? Christmases?

The nominations leave the party in the curious position of supporting the creation of more unelected parliamentarians but fewer elected ones, since it has supported the reduction in the size of the House of Commons – a piece of half-witted populism that deserves to rebound on its proponents.

(continued on page 6)


A Liberal Nation
fair society
fair to alarm clock Britain - working to get on
cut tax on work - tax wealth instead
housing reform reform
help for Carers and parents
welfare reform to reward work
fair start for kids & young people
early years provision
better schools - premium
HE access
fair to the vulnerable
pension guarantee
disability support
at risk kids
"everyone should get a fair shot in life"
sound economy
sound public finances, not debt and boom/bust
deficit reduction
economy built to last - investment in infrastructure & low carbon growth
investment in infrastructure: capital not consumption
GIB
green growth measures
"stop economy blowing up in our faces again"
not putting all our eggs in one basket - strong and diverse regions and sectors - not southern lopsidedness or over-reliance on specific sectors- eg, banks, public services
RGF/LEPs
manufacturing hubs/innovation
biz rate localisation
banking reforms
trust in people
cleaner politics with the people in charge
AV
Recall, lobbyists etc
House of Lords reform
people power - over services, communities, localities: ending centralizatioon
localisation of finances
power for parents, patients, care users
community self-government
civil liberties for free speech, movement etc people leading own lives own way
free speech, FOI etc
detention, control orders etc
gay marriage
libel reform
DNA, freedom bill etc
"get the bureaucrats off our backs"

Most of the new peers are uncontentious, but would general election campaign manager John Sharkey have become a peer quite so quickly had not the accident of the hung parliament diverted attention from the flat-footed campaign of last May?

The name of Raj Loomba must have caused some head scratching, not least among those Lib Dems at one point slated for peerages but who fell off the final list. He has a record of philanthropic works, and former party president Navnit Dholakia is understood to have supported him strongly.

New peer Paul Strasburger has been a substantial donor, including assistance in funding the party's legal defence over the Michael Brown affair. He told his local newspaper he thought he had been ennobled for his non-political philanthropic work.

COME IN NUMBER 5

Scarcely three months after he sought to be the Lib Dem London mayoral candidate, Jeremy Ambache has left the party.

Ambache failed in his mayoral ambitions (Liberator 342) but secured fifth place on the list of candidates for the London Assembly. That might sound an enviable position but is in fact one of the worst – too low for any real chance of election but high enough for everyone to expect you to work hard.

But in January he circulated a letter in which he resigned from the party, leaving the London region with the awkward problem of filling the vacancy on the list.

There were no defeated candidates for it to promote – members had merely put the 11 applicants for 11 places in order – so the region is expected to appoint someone to the lowest slot, since holding another election would be difficult.

And what of Ambache? His letter states: "I have come to the conclusion that the Social Democrat wing of the party (now more usually referred to as Social/Liberal) is not represented by the leadership of the party. I do not find the party's previous commitment to 'social justice' and greater equality is represented by our government ministers – and I have written to Nick Clegg saying just that!"

Quite apart from equating social democracy with social liberalism, this letter is puzzling. Ambache objects to the party's record on tuition fees, NHS reorganisation, benefit cuts and public service cuts, almost all of which, whatever one thinks of them, were already in train while he was still seeking the mayoral nomination.

BAGS OF FUN

It's been a close contest for the coveted Mitcham and Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet for the upcoming Sheffield Lib Dem conference.

Liberator has awarded the toilet to the worst motion submitted at each conference since 1983, when Mitcham and Morden proposed detailed regulations on the siting of public conveniences.

This year's efforts offered rich pickings among the motions calling on the party to explain its position better – based on the age-old delusion that the problem is the way messages are conveyed and not the messages themselves.

Bronze goes to Western Counties, for a motion that not only thinks the tuition fees debacle could be solved if the party were to "dispel misconceptions" about it, but also makes the alarming proposal to "explore the role which graduate employers might play in funding and shaping our university system", thus turning the whole of higher education into something that trains people according to the passing whims of the business sector, rather than actually educating them.

The silver award goes to Winchester and Chandlers Ford local party for a motion so blithely uncritical of the Conservatives' 'big society' idea that it refers to it as "this concept can drive lasting and positive change, through the fundamental liberal and social democratic principle of empowering individuals and communities".

Gold, though, goes to Salisbury for a motion laudable in its aim but hardly appropriate for taking up time at a conference.

It calls in 338 words for a 'Plastic Bag Free Olympic Games', brought about by a ban on the use of non-biodegradable plastic bags at all Olympic and Paralympics venues, including concessions, and all sponsored retail outlets.

The motion also seeks to "request Government to extend the ban nationwide after consultation with retail and manufacturing sectors", whether just for the duration of the Olympics or not is unclear.

If we're going to all the trouble of debating a motion, why not call for a ban on these bags or a tax on them all the time?

Salisbury does however cite one clinching piece of evidence in its support: "A survey of Italian shoppers demonstrated a clear preference for the use of their own re-usable (albeit fashionable!) shopping bags rather than paper or bio-degradable bags being issued by retailers".

ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

One Lib Dem MP from the south west was surprised to be told by Treasury chief secretary Danny Alexander that voting against the government on tuition fees (i.e. voting in line with party policy at the general election) might be unwise as this would make it more difficult to persuade the Conservatives to seek a resolution to the 20-year-long grievance of high water charges in the region.

Alexander appeared to have forgotten that there are now more Conservative MPs wanting action on the region's water charges than Liberal Democrats, and that they had also won their seats promising to solve the problem.

The MP surmised: "The only difficulty within the coalition on this issue is probably coming from the chief secretary to the treasury."

ARMS FOR OBLIVION

David Alton is a largely forgotten figure in the Lib Dems, and did himself no favours in his last few years in the party – he became a crossbench peer in 1997 – by his famously semi-detached status from it while still an MP.

But since then, among other things, he has been much involved in human rights work and has piloted a bill through the House of Lords to control the re-export of small arms.

It is these weapons, rather than larger and more obviously alarming ones, that are causing 'mass destruction' in conflict zones, as UK arms export

rules are not sufficiently stringent to stop arms being re-exported from approved countries to more volatile ones.

Alton's bill would impose such controls and it has gained support for its passage though the Commons from many Lib Dem MPs, including Ming Campbell and Alan Beith.

The all-party Commons committee, which looked at the principle underpinning the bill, was unanimously in favour.

But has it lost one of its main supporters? Human rights campaigners counted Vince Cable as one of their most reliable parliamentary allies before the general election, but now find things have changed.

Cable's Department for Business, Innovation and Skills has been heavily lobbied by the arms industry against Alton's bill and the department has allowed the bill to be listed as one that government whips will block by objecting to it and not giving the necessary time for it to proceed.

An early day motion, titled Re-Export of Arms To Places of Conflict, will soon give Lib Dem MPs a chance to make their views clear.

NO COMMENT

Control orders are an issue close to many Lib Dem hearts, being a test of whether the coalition really will undo Labour's police state. In January, however, MPs and peers were not being encouraged to chip in on the issue in public, whatever they might have said in the past.

A missive from chief whip Alastair Carmichael read: "The BBC are running a leaked story on control orders at lunchtime. It is important that colleagues do not comment. Discussions on securing the best possible solution are on-going and it is important that they are not prejudiced by stray comment. If you receive bids please call the Press Office immediately.

"The line is: 'No decision has been taken on control orders, there are ongoing discussions in government and we are not going to get into a running commentary.'

"It is very important that colleagues do not freelance on this issue."

AND SO TO BED

The bed imagery around the coalition has become ever more elaborate, after Shirley Williams insisted that the Lib Dems and Tories were in two beds not one, which led to David Grace's 'two beds' campaign (Liberator 342).

Now, in an early contender for 'most disturbing mental image of 2011', party president Tim Farron has got in on the act.

His retort to the critic who accused the party of being in bed with the Tories and of becoming Tories was: "I sleep with my wife every night but that doesn't make me a woman."

CHARD AT THE EDGES

What now for the Chard Group, the body set up by Richard Denton-White in 1992 to foster Lib-Labbery but which has been better known in recent years for running eccentric raffles at conference?

Its most prominent member Frances McKenzie has said on Facebook: "I have left the Lib Dems after much soul searching as I couldn't stay in a party that no longer appears to stand for social justice and caring about the underdog."

McKenzie still sits on Bridport Town Council as an Independent, having presumably not been tempted to follow the example of Denton-White, who a few miles away represents something called the Citizen Party on Portland Town Council. The party's website is defunct and its Facebook page has only 15 followers, one of whom has posted at length about his diet.

Liberal Democrats will surely have borne Denton-White's loss from their ranks with stoicism.

WARRIOR CLASS

When new Lib Dem peer Claire Tyler went to see 'Garter', the heraldic official who approves peers' titles, he was unsure about her choice of 'of Enfield', since it is an entire London borough. But he had a helpful suggestion.

He beheld Tyler, a lady with a lifelong career in the voluntary sector and civil service, and enquired: "Do you have any military victories? Many peers like to take their titles from those." She settled for Enfield.

LEICESTER PIG'S EAR

After the score-draw of Oldham East and Saddleworth, two more parliamentary by-elections may impend. One is in Barnsley Central, vacated by Labour's expenses-fiddler Eric Illsey.

Last May's Lib Dem candidate Chris Wiggin has already said he will not stand again and, though he secured second place, he was just six votes ahead of the Tories, with both around 17% of the vote. Nothing much to get excited about there.

The other seat is Leicester South, which the Lib Dem Parmjit Singh Gill won from Labour in the 2004 by-election. Labour's Peter Soulsby won it back in 2005 but Soulsby now fancies the Labour nomination for the city's elected mayor in this May's election. Were he selected, never mind elected, he would almost certainly have to resign as an MP.

Gill retained second place in May 2010, a creditable performance given the woes of Leicester Liberal Democrats. In 2003, they took control of the council, with the Tories as a minority partner. The following year, the Tories pulled out, temporarily restoring Labour to minority control. The Tories and Lib Dems then patched up their differences and took control back from Labour, but in 2006 the Lib Dems split over the allocation of cabinet posts, with seven councillors departing to sit as the 'Focus Group'. The two groups then fought each other in 2007, when, to no great surprise, Labour won back the council.

Gill will surely be a strong contender if he wants to stand, not least having been the only ethnic minority Lib Dem MP for aeons, but former East Midlands party chair Michael Mullaney is also thought to be interested.

IS THIS SUPPING WITH THE DEVIL?

Richard Grayson has come under fire for accepting Ed Miliband's offer to participate in Labour's policy review. He explains why he did, and names the other Lib Dems involved

In December 2010, Ed Miliband asked if I would encourage Liberal Democrats to engage with Labour's policy review. I saw that invitation as part of an effort to move Labour away from the tribalism that has been such a feature of its past.

I have long been committed to pluralism and have a history of working with people from other parties. I have done that for some time through Compass, and will be speaking at the Green Party conference in February. Consequently, I was very happy to accept, although I would not have done so unless I believed it was a genuine act of pluralism.

I appreciate why many Liberal Democrats have reservations about this offer. I understand why some clearly in the centre-left mainstream of the party wish to remind the public of the failings of the previous Labour government. So they should. I would counter some of the more florid comments (such as the party's formal response, "why would any sane progressive even give them [Labour] a second glance?") simply by pointing out that Liberal Democrats already engage with Labour on an almost daily basis through think tanks.

We have even recently learned of parliamentary discussions between Labour and both the Leader and Deputy Leader of our parties. However, many of the criticisms of my role are based on misunderstandings about what it involves. So I am extremely grateful to have been offered space in Liberator to explain it to Liberal Democrats.

Since the early days of Nick Clegg's leadership (specifically his early 2008 speech proposing 'free schools'), I have argued that the leadership does not understand in the same way as most party members how the 'balance' between "the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community" enshrined in our party constitution should translate to policy.

Many others have shared those doubts, and that led to the formation of the Social Liberal Forum in late 2008 following the debate on tax and public spending at party conference in the context of the *Make it Happen* policy document.

TOO DOMINANT

We feared that a strand of centre-right liberalism was becoming too dominant in the party. That strand of thought can and should have a place in a broad liberal party. But I do not believe the party would accept it as the party's guiding force if it were offered openly during a leadership election that debated policy (the last one definitely did not), even if our leadership-loyal membership appears willing to go along with it.

I assume that the Liberal Democrats are big enough to allow differences of opinion with the leadership. Indeed, I suspect the party would be very small if a commitment to centre-right liberalism was required. So I have been, and will be, a critical voice of the direction in which the party is being taken.

Meanwhile, Labour appears to be changing in a way that should be welcomed both by those who want to see centre-left policies influence public policy and by those who truly believe in 'new politics'.

Some in Labour have long been against the tribalism which has dominated the party, but they have seldom been in positions of influence, let alone leadership.

Consequently, when Liberal Democrats have considered co-operating with Labour, the Labour leadership has been a barrier. However, I believe that Ed Miliband is different. He is clearly on the centre-left, firmly rooted in the territory inhabited by social democrats and social liberals. He is also different because he has opened the door to co-operation with people in other parties over policy development.

He said last year: "Wisdom is not the preserve of any one party. Some of the political figures in history who I admire most are Keynes, Lloyd George, Beveridge, who were not members of the Labour Party."

I am not sure how far Liberal Democrats have understood the significance of this. For the leader of the most tribal party to say it is groundbreaking. For him then to act on it by calling on people from outside Labour to engage in Labour's policy process, *while remaining in their own parties*, is nothing less than revolutionary. Indeed, it goes further than the Liberal Democrats have ever done. While our policy process routinely encourages 'experts' to engage with policy working groups, we have never gone out of our way to seek contributions from people from, for example, Labour or the Greens.

I've heard some say that they will only talk to Labour when its leaders apologise for X, Y and Z. But that's not how negotiation works in the real world. We cannot expect to say: "We will only talk when you are just like us." I don't remember anyone saying last May that we would only deal with the Conservatives after they had apologised for 1979-97. Why apply this uniquely to Labour? On what planet do negotiations begin with one side admitting that the other is right about everything? Moreover, how can we expect Ed Miliband to continue to take a risky position without getting any positive results? All those who wish Labour to change should realise that, unless there is some give-and-take, and unless Liberal Democrats respond positively to an offer to talk, then a fragile project to move Labour

away from tribalism might founder.

In what will Liberal Democrats be engaging if they take part? It does not mean joining Labour, leaving the Liberal Democrats or ending electoral competition with Labour. Nor does it mean joining a Labour policy group and accepting collective responsibility for its conclusions. All that is involved is talking, in particular through policy groups chaired by Labour shadow cabinet members. Some of these are discussing broad subjects, such as Britain's place in the world; others are looking at specific questions such as what people want from schools. In much the same way that we invite experts to speak to our policy groups, Liberal Democrats have been invited to attend sessions, put their views and debate them.

"On what planet do negotiations begin with one side admitting that the other is right about everything?"

I am very pleased that some Liberal Democrats have agreed to do this in areas where they have expertise and/or strong opinions. I hope others will follow. Anybody who wishes to should contact me.

Thus far, there are seven other former parliamentary candidates: Dr Ron Beadle (Newcastle-upon-Tyne North 2010), Ruth Bright (Hampshire East 2005), Linda Jack (Luton North 2005, Bedfordshire Mid 2010), Margaret Phelps (Cynon Valley 2005, Witham 2010), Nick Rijke (St Albans 2001), Tim Starkey (Chesham and Amersham 2010) and Prof John Howson (Reading East 2005).

They will make contributions on issues such as public services, crime, the environment and business and have been joined by others with specific expertise: Professor Stephen Haseler (banking and finance), Simon Hebditch (charities/voluntary sector) and Dr Jo Ingold (labour markets).

Some of these people have expressed concern about the coalition and the direction of the party, some are relatively happy with both and are engaging because they believe in pluralism. All can be relied upon to sound the alarm at the first instance if this is anything other than an exercise in political pluralism. But we can never know that unless we engage in the first place.

Where will this lead? I hope we can encourage Labour to move away from tribalism. Its leadership wants to, but it also needs us to respond. I believe that encouraging Liberal Democrats to engage can be a second step on that journey (the first step was the issuing of an invitation).

Will this process liberalise Labour? Pluralism means respecting the values of others and we need to accept that Labour is not primarily a liberal party. However, it has always contained many people who are broadly liberal. We are familiar with where it has been illiberal, but we must also recognise where it has advanced liberal causes. Today, many in Labour already want to change its approach to civil liberties. Perhaps we can help bring the views of those people more to the fore, a process that can only help to promote liberalism.

Changing politics in this way would be a significant advance for the kind of politics we have put forward over so many years. We have always pursued our politics in a variety of ways: through local action, campaigning, talking with other parties, maintaining our role in Liberal International, and now we also do it through a national coalition. That says something important about us and our distinctiveness as a political party. If Labour moves towards us in adopting a pluralist culture, then that would mark a significant achievement for our kind of politics.

We also have to think about the prospect of a different coalition in the foreseeable future. Anybody remotely interested in giving ourselves more than one option should start thinking now about what those options might be. Liberal Democrats are regularly engaged in dialogue with Conservatives in government, and there is a clear mandate for that from the party.

NO MANDATE

However, senior Liberal Democrats are discussing with the Conservatives what comes after the coalition agreement has been implemented and there is no mandate whatsoever for that. Such discussions risk boxing ourselves into a position where the Conservatives are effectively our favoured partners for 2015+, even if our Federal Executive has declared that the party should not express a preference.

Coalitions rest on many pillars. They partly depend on understanding between leaders. That exists between Clegg and Cameron. Too much persistent belittling by Gordon Brown meant it could not exist between him and Clegg.

Engaging with Labour's policy review won't affect how the leaders relate to each other. That's down to them. However, it can lay the basis of understanding at different levels within the party. If we speak to Labour constructively, we might persuade them of our case. Who knows, we might even learn from them. But we cannot even claim to be pluralists unless we are prepared to take up a once in a lifetime chance to help make Labour less tribal. What does it say about our 'pluralism' if we won't talk to people until they are just like us?

There has been much talk of the 'new politics'. But unless we are prepared to engage with Labour, then there is a danger that 'new politics' will simply mean 'working with the Conservatives'. I do not believe that anybody in the Liberal Democrats wants that to be our only future.

Professor Richard Grayson was the Liberal Democrat candidate for Hemel Hempstead in 2010, vice-chair of the Federal Policy Committee 2008-10, and director of policy in 1999-2004. He is a member of the Liberal Democrats' policy review working group, 'Facing the Future'

KISS, MARRY OR KILL?

How should the Liberal Democrat left respond to Labour? Not by joining them, say David Hall-Matthews and Prateek Buch

Everyone knows that some Liberal Democrats have serious concerns over aspects of coalition policy – not least over university tuition fees, but also in other major areas, such as school and healthcare reforms.

As a result, it has been suggested – by, among others, Jackie Ashley and former Lib Dem Director of Policy Richard Grayson in The Guardian – that those disaffected by Nick Clegg's leadership should see their future in alliance with a reformed Labour Party, renewed by Ed Miliband's new-found liberalism.

Miliband himself has more than once urged Lib Dems to join him in that century-old dream, a progressive alliance – most recently in his speech to the Fabian Society. So how should those of us who disagree with many of the cuts and reforms being pushed through by the coalition government respond?

With a handful of exceptions, including Grayson, most progressive Liberal Democrats supported the decision to go into coalition with the Tories. We do not trust them, so all the more reason to go in and try and stop them doing terrible things – and get a few liberal ideas and principles into government, after all the decades of two-party illiberalism. The Coalition Agreement, full to the brim with Liberal Democrat policy, strengthened that case.

Since then, a fair amount has been achieved – but a lot of it quietly. In the nature of things, when we win arguments around the cabinet table, we can hardly crow about them in public if we ever want to win any more. By the same token, no politicians will ever instinctively proclaim that they have just agreed to something they don't like.

Combined with the need to make coalition government itself look a solid option, this has meant our ministers have not told the public (unless you include secretly recorded conversations in constituency surgeries) when they have lost battles. Nonetheless, on almost every issue, a Liberal Democrat stamp has been put on new policy. Sometimes it's more obvious than others, but our ministers have, in good faith, been working to make policies we don't support a little fairer.

However on the really big questions – NHS reform, tuition fees, Education Maintenance Allowance and even core principles of economic policy – this approach just won't cut the electoral mustard. Nor will it placate Lib Dem members unhappy with the leadership's positioning.

LEADERSHIP MISTAKES

Nick Clegg has to judge better when to be bold and distinctive. We can argue internally over how good or bad the policy detail is on this or that, but that isn't the point. It isn't even about where you stand on the spectrum within the party. The leadership has taken us into single figure poll ratings through strategic and political mistakes. How could they fail to notice how much the tuition fee pledge mattered to MPs, activists and supporters – not to mention voters? Sometimes principles are so stark that tinkering just won't do.

According to Grayson's analysis, there is now a growing distance between most Lib Dem members' position and the government on a number of issues; he suggests that "most Liberal Democrat members... have more in common with members of the Labour Party and the Greens than we do with our own leadership".

That may be true – there is no doubt that the Lib Dem majority remains left of centre, though by less every time a disillusioned member resigns or defects.

However, the answer is not for disaffected Lib Dems to feed Miliband's opposition to the government or "become part of Labour's future" as Ashley recommends. There's still plenty to win by staying and fighting. Mainstream progressive Liberal Democrats should work constructively with the leadership to produce a distinctive influence on government – and to better demonstrate that influence to voters.

Besides, Labour does not offer much of a solution. Attractive though Miliband's direction of travel may seem superficially, there is little logic – political or strategic – in helping Labour recover from the doldrums.

First, Labour is a party we oppose for good reason. If the coalition's university funding policy sticks in the throat, why cosy up to the very Labour Party that scrapped free higher education and introduced top-up fees? If the nature of public spending cuts is hard to take, why flatter Labour when its failure to rein in the City and foster a sustainable economy reinforced the deficit?

Why, when Liberal Democrats aim to create a more open, free and fair society, should members alarmed at their party's direction of travel hand the centre-left ground to those who presided over 13 years of the concentration of power, freedom and capability in the hands of the few at the expense of the many?

Progressive Lib Dems naturally have more in common with progressive Labour supporters than we do with (by definition non-progressive) Tories. But that doesn't mean we are the same. And we should never forget how many Labour big hitters are not progressive either.

Second, tempting though it may be for left-leaning Lib Dems to support Labour, we must ask ourselves why we would give up the opportunity to govern for the luxury of opposition. Why would we step outside the sphere of influence in government – hard though it may be to exert our values – merely to throw stones from outside?

Being a party of government brings with it the access to, and influence on, power that Labour (and the Tories before them) singularly failed to utilise for the advancement of all; surely it is better to try

and reform, recast and redeploy the state, rather than stand by and watch the old establishment parties further sacrifice the freedom and capabilities of individuals at the altar of market fundamentalism?

And third, there is the consideration of electoral positioning come 2015. If Lib Dems spend the next four years looking like a party that can be trusted with power, which can govern with liberal principles and socially progressive goals at its heart, then we can demonstrate to voters our genuine achievements during our time in power.

"There's still plenty to win by staying and fighting"

Electorally and strategically, we are where we are in terms of the coalition – far better to make the excellent Coalition Agreement deliver our policies, then return to the people in four years with an even more liberal democratic agenda. If we hope for a left-of-centre coalition next time, first we need to ensure that voters think coalition itself makes for sound government. If we undermine this one, why would they?

We need to distinguish between some very mixed messages here. Ashley wants individual Lib Dems to defect to Labour, to prove they're progressive. How progressive is the blind old Labour assumption that Liberal Democrats shouldn't really exist? They seem to think that we're just misguided social democrats who should rectify the error of 1981.

But Grayson has made it clear that he has no intention of defecting. Rather, he calls for Lib Dems – as a party, as well as individuals – to at least talk to Labour. There are both strategic and political reasons for taking the idea seriously.

If the future looks promising for the Liberal Democrats, it is primarily because we might be entering the long-hoped for era of permanent coalition – or at least one where it is more common than not. Even without success in the AV referendum, long-term trends show support for the two biggest parties – and the two-party system itself – ebbing gently away.

To maximise that, we need to be smart – and light on our feet. We got a great deal out of the Coalition Agreement precisely because we needed a lot of persuading. It was very obvious that we would turn our back on the Tories if they didn't beg.

But what will things look like after the 2015 election if parliament is again balanced? If we spend the next four years attacking Labour ceaselessly – and they us – our options will be limited. If the well is poisoned, we won't be able to work with them – and the Tories will see no reason to offer us any more concessions. Successful European centre parties operate as hinges, able to go one way or the other till they see which way the land lies.

So equidistance is essential. But equidistance can't be achieved easily while in coalition. We need to show our distinctiveness from the Tories more, but also respond maturely when Labour overtures are friendly. It will help Lib Dems – and potential Lib Dem voters – if we say honestly where we agree with Labour, as well as where we don't.

It is, after all, possible that the Miliband era signals a real departure from the bad old days of Labour tribalism. We should give credit where it's due for Ed's endorsement of the Yes to Fairer Votes campaign. It also seems more likely that the Labour Party could be converted to the cause of civil liberties under him, than could the Tories under Cameron. When it comes to environmental policies, to reform of the tax base and to some aspects of foreign policy, Lib Dems and Labour have much in common.

On these issues then, while acknowledging the sensitivity with which it should be carried out, we should see greater cooperation between Labour and Liberal Democrats – not least to explore how the ground could be prepared for a more engaging coalition negotiation between the two parties, should the electoral arithmetic be favourable in 2015.

BURN BRIDGES

It isn't worth lowering our bargaining position within the current coalition government to achieve that much-vaunted realignment of the left, but equally it isn't smart to burn bridges with those who genuinely believe that the country is best governed from the centre-left in future.

Of course, Lib Dems should listen to what Labour has to offer – as champions of pluralist politics we can hardly say less – but Ed Miliband needs to make himself much clearer. He talked during his leadership campaign of "peeling off" Lib Dem members. You can't blame a party leader for trying to recruit, but co-operation depends on a degree of non-aggression. He needs to distinguish himself from the tribalists who want us to diminish, so that they can return to the false certainties of two party politics. But he has distanced himself from them – and also acknowledged that principled, progressive Lib Dems are right to stay and fight in their own party.

He is taking a gamble when he declines to bash us in public. If we reject his pluralism, he'll have no option but to go back into the embrace of his dinosaurs. So let's at least encourage him to think strategically that we are a good thing. He will almost certainly need us if he ever wants to run the country himself, so – if for no other reason – we can be sure that he sincerely wants to work with us as a party. We would like it to be more than that.

It would be nice to think that Miliband understands why liberalism is important; that a progressive coalition would create something vital that Labour on its own can never do. But if we want him to believe that by 2015, we'd better, quietly, start talking to him now.

David Hall-Matthews is chair and Prateek Buch an executive member of the Social Liberal Forum (http://socialliberal.net)

FOREST CHUMPS

Why is the government allowing Tory dogma to set it on a monumentally unpopular policy of selling forests, wonders Tony Greaves

Mark Harper is the Tory minister who was given the gruesome job of getting the Parliamentary Voting Systems and Constituencies Bill through parliament. But when hundreds of people chanting "hands off our forest" turned up on a Friday evening early in Friday at a meeting in his constituency – the Forest of Dean – it wasn't to tell him their views on the Alternative Vote.

They were protesting at the government's plans to dispose of some (or most, or all) of the National Forest Estate, including the historic 'heritage' Forest of Dean. Hundreds of people were locked out due to the size of the hall; at the end, Harper had to escape via a back door and police van.

A lot of the Tories in high positions in the government are notoriously out of touch with public opinion on public services, and so it has proved with the forests. Around half a million people have (as I write) signed the petition launched by the online 'instant agitprop' group 38 Degrees and there may be a million by the time the legislation gets to the Commons. Some 1,500 people turned up to a rally in Grizedale Forest in the Lake District addressed by, among others, Chris Bonington and Tim Farron.

A fleet of new websites and Facebook pages have sprung into life to *Save England's Forests*, *Save Our Woods* and *Save Our Forests*, with lots of local variants. If you want to scan the field, the SOW site is a good place to start. SEF was launched with a letter in that revolutionary sheet *The Sunday Telegraph* and is fronted by self-styled yummy mummy and editor of *The Lady* Rachel Johnson. There has even been a discussion about me on Twitter. Strange days indeed.

Existing outdoor and access groups such as the Ramblers and the British Mountaineering Council are up in arms, in league with bodies such as the Campaign for National Parks, the Open Spaces Society and the Sport and Recreation Alliance. A bevy of organisations representing horse-riders has galloped into the fray. The Woodland Trust is worried about ancient woodlands. And so it goes on.

So what is it really all about? The Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) last summer included up to £100m to be raised during this parliament by selling Forestry Commission (FC) land. Lawyers advise that the FC can sell up to around 15% of its estate under existing Forestry Acts. The other 85% needs new legislation, which is where the increasingly infamous Public Bodies Bill comes to hand. Meanwhile, the FC and its parent department (DEFRA) have set up a public consultation called *The Future of the Public Forest Estate in England* with a response date of 21 April. They are also promising a Natural Environment White Paper in the spring of next year, which will include their policies on forestry.

OVERLAPPING MUDDLE

If all this seems to be a bit of an overlapping muddle, a quick reading of the relevant bits of the Public Bodies Bill will not help. Clause 17 gives the Secretary of State, currently Caroline Spelman, powers to do what she likes in relation to the disposal, management, and letting and granting of rights over forestry land. Clause 18 gives her similar rights over the constitutional arrangements and functions of the Forestry Commissioners. All she has to do is make an order and get the consent of parliament, which it rarely refuses on such unamendable orders.

Around 600 years ago, parliament gave such rights to the then king, which is why they are nowadays often called Henry VIII powers. The Public Bodies Bill is the 'bonfire of quangos' bill which, whatever your views on quangos generally or individually, is a constitutional scandal in the way it uses these kind of powers.

Most of the bill is a list of hundreds of bodies that – if it is passed as it stands – can be abolished or changed in various ways by ministerial whim, without proper parliamentary scrutiny. Since the forests themselves belong to the state, they get their special clauses because the FC is not a true quango, more a hands-off government department run by commissioners nominally appointed by the Queen.

So we have a government trying to pass legislation giving the environment secretary almost absolute powers over disposal of the forests, on the basis of policies that the government is only now consulting on and a White Paper (and a new bill) not due until next year.

It's yet another example of Tory ministers who are out of control, rushing ahead with controversial new policies while the going is good. And yet again, none of it was in the election manifestos or the coalition agreement. And DEFRA is a department with no Liberal Democrat ministers at all.

Can we expect a Liberal Democrat rebellion and, if so, how might it come about? Might there indeed be a growing backlash from Conservative MPs, some of whom voted for the Labour motion in the Commons in early February? It's reported that, before that debate, MPs received around 100,000 emails and letters opposing the sell-off. Many of the new MPs were reported to be in a state of shock! Well, I suspect that they ain't seen nuthin' yet. Most of the Liberal Democrat MPs have so far been more compliant, but there is deep concern beneath the public surface.

The government's response is that its proposals are much misunderstood, and the wave of outrage has been caused by its lousy PR. Well, yes, there is that too. First, the government said in the CSR that 15% was to be sold off. Then, during the summer and autumn, different ministers said 100%, or 50%, or

it would depend on who wanted to buy. It took them many months to say anything coherent and, by then, the Public Bodies Bill was over three months old and plodding slowly through its committee stage in the Lords. It's all been a microcosm of so much else the government has botched. But the real problem is the substance of what is planned.

The consultation paper itself is full of nice words. 'Heritage' forests such as the New Forest, Forest of Dean and Sherwood will be handed over to existing or new charities or trusts. The cost of running them will be met by government grants in the short term, though they are expected to find ways of raising money themselves in later years. There will also be local community woodlands, which the consultation paper suggests "community or civil society groups" may buy or lease. How they might raise the money to do this is not clear, since even for quite small areas of land the market price might be in tens of thousands of pounds.

There has been some talk that small non-commercial woodlands might be given away. This is certainly not the case with what ministers call the 'middle group' and the consultation document calls multi-purpose forests and woodlands, which "combine timber production with significant recreational facilities, high visitor numbers and high levels of biodiversity".

For this land – a third of the total – there will be a right for charities and community groups to put in bids but if they can't come up with the dosh they'll be flogged off to commercial interests. All this links in, apparently, with the sections of the new Localism Bill (which has started in the Commons) that cover the 'community right to buy' public assets that are on the market!

The mainly or purely commercial forests will be flogged off – though this includes the largest in England at Kielder in the north Pennines, which has been provided with lots of leisure facilities in recent years, has the largest population of red squirrels in England, and is in a National Park. There's an unsatisfactory small-scale map on the FC website of which woods and forests fit into which categories but the FC admits they are just guidelines. With the FC managing 1,500 different plots of land, there is scope for quite a lot of (embarrassing for the Tories) local campaigning!

So why are they doing it? It's hard not to think that DEFRA has blundered into a programme it will live to regret. Money is one reason. The FC was told to flog off assets over the four years of the spending review and it is now saying it can get in net receipts of £74.5m, less than the round £100m first thought of. If it sold the rest pro-rata, the total would come to about £600m, but there are all kinds of reasons for thinking that the net receipts would be nothing like this.

"It's yet another example of Tory ministers who are out of control, rushing ahead with controversial new policies while the going is good"

At present, the FC makes what the government call an operating loss of £12-13m a year, but this includes all the leisure, amenity and biodiversity work it does on the national estate. It's not clear that the annual costs will reduce just because the size of the estate is reduced, not least because the profitable forests are the ones the government is keenest to sell.

PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTION

The agriculture minister Jim Paice is in charge of the forests and he may have let slip the truth recently when he told peers that the "shift to amenity forests over the past ten years" had been "a mistake in overall terms because it is not commercial". He also suggested that, as well as raising money, "there is the philosophical question of whether the state should run forests". We could call it free-market ideology or Tory dogma but it's lurking there in the undergrowth.

Can we stop it? It's too soon to be clear about whether there is a broad consensus in the Lords that the forestry sections of the Public Bodies Bill should be ditched. There's a lot of concern around the House but there are also landowners and their pals who seem quite keen on the idea. We also need to be sure that, if we kick it out rather than demanding and getting concessions to strengthen things like access, landscape and biodiversity issues and continued funding for community ownership, the government will not put it all back when it goes to the Commons.

The people who are concerned about what is going on are classic Liberal Democrat core and target voters. Even if this were not the case, there's no doubt that the party at all levels and in all places is pretty horrified. This is gung-ho Tory nonsense and we need to find ways of stopping it.

The rising tide of public protest, from all corners of the political spectrum, may do it for us. Why should a government drag itself through the mire for no good reasons? Apart from the ruffled suits within DEFRA, stopping this is not going to bring down the coalition. But not stopping it will do further real damage to the Liberal Democrats – and to our forests and woodlands. I hope we can stop that happening. Meanwhile, please sign the petition and write to your MP.

Tony Greaves is Liberal Democrat spokesperson on Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs matters in the House of Lords and a co-chair of the Liberal Democrats Parliamentary Committee on DECC and DEFRA

THE BY-ELECTION THAT COULD NOT BE WON

The Liberal Democrat performance in January's Oldham East and Saddleworth by-election was creditable, but where was the political content, wonders Chris Davies

It reveals naïvety on my part that it was only after the polls had closed in Oldham East and Saddleworth that I learnt that no opposition party had lost a by-election since 1982 in a seat it held, when Labour was beaten by the Conservatives at a time when the latter were riding the crest of the wave after Britain had recaptured the Falkland Islands. Had I known this beforehand, I would not have placed a small bet on the Liberal Democrats to win, even with the odds at 10-1 against.

We campaigned to win OE&S. There may have been some in the organising team who realised from the beginning that a respectable second place was the best that could be achieved but, if so, they did a remarkable job at maintaining morale by keeping such sentiments to themselves. They showed great dedication to the job, leading from the front and working themselves into the ground. For weeks on end, they also braved the lowest temperatures that most of us have ever experienced in an election campaign.

If the election had taken place in the immediate aftermath of the court case that saw Phil Woolas disbarred as an MP, all might have been well. But parliamentary by-elections are not mere local affairs, they command national attention, and it was inevitable that the agenda would move on quickly from Phil Woolas to the record of the coalition government.

Labour and the Liberal Democrats were neck and neck last May, separated by just 103 votes. Since then, according to the polls, Labour's support has risen by 10 points and ours has fallen by at least 13. The tide hasn't simply turned since May; it has raced out in a torrent. How could we possibly have won such a by-election in these circumstances?

GRAINS OF SAND

The challenge was clear enough on the doorstep. During every canvassing session, I met a couple of people who had voted Lib Dem in the past but who were not going to do so this time. The mere fact that we were in coalition with the Conservatives was repellent to some; the impression of broken trust over tuition fees saw off the rest. Each time I would return to the campaign HQ feeling that a few more grains of sand had slipped through our fingers.

Anyone who assumed that Labour supporters might feel betrayed by the actions of Phil Woolas was quickly disabused. However bad the nature of the divisive and racist ("make the white folks angry") campaign he ran, Woolas's past supporters didn't like him having been thrown out by the courts. That said, I'm still pleased that Elwyn Watkins mounted his legal challenge; his success drew a line that candidates and agents everywhere may be reluctant to cross in future elections.

On the other hand, we did mount one of the most effective third-party squeeze efforts in the history of parliamentary by-elections. The Tory vote collapsed as their supporters took the tactical decision to back the Liberal Democrats. But we needed to gain two votes from the Tories for every vote we lost to Labour, and that was too tall an order.

Political commentators question whether the Tories pulled their punches and mounted a campaign that was less than wholehearted. It's true that they didn't launch an all-out assault on their coalition partners but the Tories don't have a single borough councillor in the constituency and no party organisation worth mentioning. They were always going to come third, and a more vigorous Tory campaign would have had only one consequence – to increase the size of the Labour majority over the Liberal Democrats. How would that benefit the coalition government?

We didn't win, and realistically we couldn't have won, but Liberal Democrats secured a creditable result in the circumstances. The question that has to be asked now, as it should be after every such event, is what could we have done differently and better? The OE&S campaign left me convinced that we need to review our approach and learn some lessons for the future.

I have no complaints about the organisation; administratively it seemed close to flawless. The Campaigns Department pulled together a team of dedicated young people, some of whom were not born when I set about the task of turning derelict wards in the constituency into strongholds of local Liberalism. Among them was a great *esprit de corps*, with apparent rivalry to demonstrate who could go without sleep for the longest period and drink the greatest amount of Diet Coke. Their efforts and tactical planning suffered initially from having too little outside support (it was before Christmas and weather conditions across much of Britain were terrible) yet, even with the pavements covered in snow, a great many leaflets got delivered.

RELIGIOUS DOCTRINE

My concerns are not with the organisation but with the politics, and particularly with the belief that in some quarters seems to have taken on the mantra of religious doctrine; that elections are won by pushing out more paper than our opponents and that sheer hard work will win the day. I do not share this view. Good graphics and technical wizardry ("look, we are so clever that we can produce individual leaflets with the elector's own name on them") do not make up for the lack of effective political content.

Too much of our election literature in OE&S was simply vacuous and, for all that the Tory squeeze was effective, there were some examples ('personal' letters in particular) whose content made me squirm with embarrassment. On a number of occasions, I delivered pieces of literature that I thought would not persuade a single extra person to vote for us, and sometimes I feared that they might do us actual harm. Voters complained that they were assaulted by the sheer number of leaflets, but a criticism of greater concern is that too much of the paper we distributed said nothing worth saying. If electors felt that our approach was condescending, they had good reason.

"On a number of occasions, I delivered pieces of literature that I thought would not persuade a single extra person to vote for us, and sometimes I feared that they might do us actual harm"

Why do we do this? I learnt many political lessons in Liverpool from Sir Trevor Jones ('Jones the Vote'), who used to tell me never to underestimate the stupidity of the electorate. By this he meant that we should distil the messages, keep them simple, and repeat them often. But he countered this by telling me that at the same time I should never underestimate the intelligence of the electorate, by which he warned not to patronise the voters and to make sure that I had something worthwhile to offer that would hold their attention. I'm not convinced that our present strategists have got the balance right.

It might be argued that Labour's campaign literature in OE&S was wholly negative; it attacked us for broken pledges on tuition fees and imposing excessive cuts. But if the position had been reversed, we would have done the same. We didn't confront criticisms that found a strong resonance amongst the voters. More importantly, we did very little to counter them by promoting the achievements of Liberal Democrats in office. I know the arguments about not allowing opponents to dictate the agenda but if we are not to celebrate the role of the first Liberal Democrat ministers in our lifetimes then what is the point of us fighting elections in the first place? We surely should adjust our mindsets, treat the voters as adults, and be prepared to address serious issues – while doing it in a way that ensures that the appearance of our literature secures sufficient attention to pass the 'doormat to dustbin' test.

It's difficult to write these words without implying criticism of people I like and for whose efforts I have admiration, and I am well aware of the rebuttals that can be made. Whatever flaws I might suggest, surely the fact that we not only held our own against the outgoing tide but made a tiny advance in percentage terms speaks for the success of the strategy? How can I prove that the result would not have been worse had we done differently?

It's possible that we would have done less well if we had devoted more space in our election literature to putting across the arguments of Liberal Democrats in government. It is indeed a risk, but it's not a question that can be answered because we have not attempted to convey the achievements of our party in an attractive manner. Now we are in government, we must start to do so.

I want Liberal Democrats to do well in elections. I also want us to be proud of ourselves and of the political messages we convey. There are lessons to be learnt from the Oldham East and Saddleworth campaign, and there are new approaches that must be explored.

Chris Davies is Liberal Democrat MEP for the North West of England. He won the by-election in 1995 in Littleborough & Saddleworth (the predecessor constituency to Oldham East & Saddleworth). This article originally appeared on his blog (http://chrisdaviesmep.blogspot.com)

GLITTERING GENERALITIES

Voters who hear Nick Clegg's 'Alarm Clock Britain' are likely to hit the snooze button, warns Simon Titley

Not sure of Liberal Democrat strategy? Don't know which demographic the party should pitch at, in this confusing, post-tuition fees debacle era? Nick Clegg has come up with the answer: 'Alarm Clock Britain'.

In an article in The Sun (11 January), Clegg wrote: "There are millions of people in Alarm Clock Britain. People, like Sun readers, who have to get up every morning and work hard to get on in life. People who want their kids to get ahead."

In case that sounded too vague, Clegg elaborated: "People who don't want to rely on state handouts. People who don't need politicians to tell them what to think or how to live their lives. People who are not poor but struggle to stay out of the red. They are the backbone of Britain."

It is almost beyond parody. Almost, but not quite.

It's more a case of life imitating art. Clegg's assertion echoed the 'British common sense' of Al Murray's pub landlord: "Down-to-earth, normal, hard working, honest, sensible, normal, law abiding, taxpaying (ish), normal, hard working, honourable, decent, reasonable people."

And it's not particularly original. 'Alarm Clock Britain' mirrors the phrase used by Nicolas Sarkozy in the 2007 French presidential election, when he lauded "the France that gets up in the morning".

Despite Al Murray's prescience, 'Alarm Clock Britain' was still a gift to satirists. Following the publication of Clegg's Sun article, two leading satirical columnists stuck the boot in.

David Mitchell (Observer, 16 January) speculated how the idea came about. "A keen aide, annoyed by having to get up so early to recover public respect for his master, suddenly sees that very annoyance as something that might unify everyone the coalition hopes to appeal to. Decent people like him. People who have to get up in the morning. But don't want to. But know they must.

"Not people who put their alarm clocks on snooze, the scum! Or maybe, yes, people who put their alarm clocks on snooze once – who doesn't do that? We're all human – but absolutely not the scroungers who put their alarm clocks on snooze twice. Parasites! Unpunctual layabout benefit cheats!"

Mitchell concluded that "this kind of approach – Clegg appealing to 'alarm clock Britain', Miliband to 'the squeezed middle' or any politician to 'hard-working families' – is maddening because it's inane. These terms are meaningless. It's trying to classify people according to their own estimation of their contribution to society. 'Do you sometimes feel exhausted and conscientious?' Yes, almost everyone does, including dyed-in-the-wool slackers and hypochondriacs."

Clegg had also written in his Sun article, "Now more than ever, politicians have to be clear who they are standing up for. Be in no doubt, I am clear about who that is."

To which the satirist Charlie Brooker (Guardian, 17 January) retorted: "Who? Ethnic minorities? The poor? The disabled? The original lineup of Gerry and the Pacemakers? Beekeepers? Milkmen? Necrophiles? Yeomen? No. They can all piss off. Because Cleggsy Bear has someone else in mind. But despite claiming to be "clear about who that is", it's a group he defines in the vaguest, most frustrating terms possible – almost as if he doesn't really know what the hell he's going on about."

Brooker concludes that, "Basically, Alarm Clock Britain consists of people who use alarm clocks. That counts me out, because I wake each morning to the sound of my own despairing screams. Which I guess makes me part of Scream Wake Britain – a demographic Clegg has chosen to ignore. There are millions of people in Scream Wake Britain, and approximately half of them voted for him."

Brooker also notes the loss of one other key demographic. "Alarm Clock Britain is [not] an amorphous group with no boundaries whatsoever. Students, for instance, are notorious for waking up late, so they're definitely excluded, which is just as well since the average student trusts Clegg about as much as I'd trust a hammock made of gas."

DOG WHISTLE

We could perhaps categorise 'Alarm Clock Britain' as what is known in the trade as a 'dog-whistle' – a coded message that appears to mean one thing to a general audience but has a different or more specific meaning for its target audience.

A more accurate classification of 'Alarm Clock Britain' would be 'glittering generalities', defined by Wikipedia as "emotionally appealing words so closely associated with highly-valued concepts and beliefs that they carry conviction without supporting information or reason. Such highly-valued concepts attract general approval and acclaim. Their appeal is to emotions such as love of country and home, and desire for peace, freedom, glory, and honour. They ask for approval without examination of the reason."

Glittering generalities have two basic qualities. They are vague and they have positive connotations. The pioneer of such phraseology was President Nixon, who in 1969 referred to the 'silent majority', an unspecified category of people who (unlike the anti-Vietnam war protestors of the time) did not express their views publicly.

More recently, the slogan 'hard-working families' was the cliché of the 2005 British general election, with politicians of all parties laying claim to it. It had all the hallmarks of a glittering generality; positive connotations while being sufficiently vague to mean different things to different people. Politicians using this phrase intended that all their listeners would perceive it was referring to them.

Following Nick Clegg's election as party leader,

he and Danny Alexander produced numerous variations on this dismal formula: 'hard-pressed families', 'struggling families', 'ordinary families' and 'modern families'. No one knows what any of these phrases really mean and, in any case, they are so devalued by overuse that it is unlikely they do any good.

"Why do politicians resort to such risible slogans?"

Why do politicians resort to such risible slogans? Obviously, they want to get re-elected so they want to be everybody's friend. But there's more to it than that. Voting in Britain used to be strongly class-consonant; if you were middle class, you were likely to vote Tory, and if working class, Labour. Most politicians could therefore make a simple appeal to class loyalty if they wanted to appear to be on your side.

But this sort of voting behaviour has been in steady decline since the 1960s. Increasingly, people look at politics from the standpoint of an individualised consumer rather than membership of a large, traditional bloc. This presents politicians with a problem; they now need to make targeted appeals to individual voters but can do so only through techniques such as tailored letters or e-mails. They cannot do so through the mass media, which is where most voters still get their information. Glittering generalities are an attempt to get round this problem.

There's another significant reason. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 marked the alleged 'end of history'. With the defeat of socialism, it was assumed that all the basic ideological questions had been settled for good. My article in Liberator 338 (available on Liberator's website) explored in more detail why this assumption has had such a toxic effect on democratic politics, but the main problem is that politicians stopped competing with one another on ideological grounds and started competing with one another to agree with public opinion. Politics was drained of content and politicians resorted to the techniques of marketing and advertising, in particular polls and focus groups. Instead of identifying and rallying different groups of voters, politicians converged on the same territory, the so-called 'centre ground'. In British politics, this meant a competition to appeal to 'Middle England', another glittering generality that no one has ever been able to explain satisfactorily.

In Liberator's 2007 leadership election hustings (Liberator 322), both candidates were asked whether they agreed with this approach. Nick Clegg replied, "No. I've spoken out against this sort of 'sat-nav' politics. Turn this way to shore up the core vote, that way for the floating vote. Go left for the approval of the Mirror, right for the Sun. This is the politics of cynics for whom tactical 'positioning' is all – a hollow, gutless politics stripped of all meaning."

Clegg seems to have fewer qualms about relying on his sat-nav now.

The 'centre ground' is a chimera. It is a statistical average that does not reflect the wide variety of interests and values people hold. In my article in Liberator 322, I explained why a 'middle ground' strategy is doomed to failure: "Public opinion is not monolithic. The average is not necessarily typical or normal; the 'average voter' has one breast and one testicle. In reality, public opinion varies considerably and it isn't possible to please everyone."

In the same article, I argued that, rather than compete with Labour and the Tories for the same narrow territory, the Liberal Democrats should focus on winning their natural support, which can be found primarily among people who are younger, better educated and more cosmopolitan. I set out a substantial body of evidence for why this is so.

The trouble is, the Liberal Democrats, having rallied a substantial portion of this constituency in recent elections, managed to alienate it spectacularly through the inept handling of the tuition fees issue. Having lost one core vote, presumably 'Alarm Clock Britain' is an attempt to find another. But 'Alarm Clock Britain' isn't a meaningful demographic and therefore cannot constitute a target vote.

VACUOUS SLOGAN

Little wonder that 'Alarm Clock Britain' has failed to get airborne. No one else is using Clegg's phrase except to make jokes about it. It's the sort of vacuous slogan that happens when you surround yourself with advisers who are all marketing and no content.

Still, if it's any consolation, things have not improved since 1946, when George Orwell wrote his essay *Politics and the English Language*. Orwell criticised bad English among the political writers of the day, identifying two common faults:

"The first is staleness of imagery; the other is lack of precision. The writer either has a meaning and cannot express it, or he inadvertently says something else, or he is almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not. This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially of any kind of political writing. As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of *phrases* tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated henhouse."

'Alarm Clock Britain' is a metaphor. Orwell advised that "A newly invented metaphor assists thought by evoking a visual image," but warned against using "worn-out metaphors which have lost all evocative power and are merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves."

'Alarm Clock Britain' has the distinction of being a newly invented metaphor that was worn out from the moment it was first written.

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective

MOBILE MESSAGE

Lib Dems talk a lot about 'social mobility' but who knows what it means, wonders Mark Pack

The day after he was elected Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg set up a commission to look at social mobility. In the two years since then, he has regularly returned to the topic, and it has become a priority of his for party and then government policy-making, alongside making frequent appearances in speeches, slogans and soundbites from leading party figures.

Yet it is a phrase that risks becoming overused, for it fails to communicate effectively what makes us Liberal Democrats, as opposed to members of another party, and also risks being an excuse to avoid addressing some major issues of policy and philosophy.

One clue as to the phrase's limitations in explaining to the public what the Liberal Democrats are about is that this is not the language of ordinary voters. 'Social mobility' certainly is a phrase that many in policy-making and government circles use but, rather like 'street furniture', despite being popular in such circles it is almost never used by people outside such circles. You don't get many people talking about how great the 'street furniture' is near the flat they have just moved to nor about their hopes for the future 'social mobility' of their children or grandchildren.

It would be intriguing to see quite what most people actually think the phrase means. I have a strong hunch that many people would associate improving 'mobility' with getting more people to move, thinking it is just a phrase about housing policies. But regardless, when politicians lapse into vocabulary that is not found on the doorstep, it is normally time for the politicians to reach for a new vocabulary if they want to use phrases that have the power of explanation and persuasion.

The phrase also has the problem that mobility is not a one-way process – it means people moving down just as it also means people moving up. Talking up how we want people to move down is not an obvious route to political success.

But even aside from these messaging problems, the phrase leaves untouched the core question of how bothered – or not – we are about overall levels of inequality. A highly mobile and high unequal society is possible to imagine, and is one that would sit comfortably with the urgings of right-wing economists such as Milton Friedman. It was Friedman who, at the start of his famous TV series, justified inequality as long as it was accompanied by high social mobility.

Talking of social mobility has some tactical uses when in coalition with the Conservatives, given this resulting common ground. But a highly socially mobile, Friedman-style society is not a Liberal Democrat one.

There is a different vision, whether in the flavour of *The Spirit Level* or of *Reinventing the State*, where greater equality is valued for the benefits it brings to all of society, rich and poor alike.

Unless the party has a clear view – and, joy of joys, one it can now actually turn into government policy – on the importance of overall levels of equality, frequent talk of 'social mobility' masks important questions that need answering. Is social mobility the end in itself or just a means to the end? And if it is only one of the means to a different end, why concentrate on just that one means?

Both this policy and this messaging challenge were confronted by the party during Paddy Ashdown's time as leader. Take this from the 1992 manifesto:

"Liberal Democrats put people first. We aim to create a society in which all men and women can realise their full potential and shape their own successes. We believe that if we could liberate this wealth of talent we would transform our economy and create a shared society of which we should all be proud. Liberal Democrats know that this cannot be achieved without fundamental reform."

The messaging is not perfect, and during Paddy's time as leader the party – in typical Paddy fashion – went through a whirlwind of different formulations, all of which were presented as being the vital message and none of which lasted for very long. 'Unlocking potential' was another such phrase, as in Paddy's book *Beyond Westminster* when he talked of the importance of education's "capacity to unlock individual potential".

These different formulations were pithy but they were still not doorstep vernacular. Yet they worked better than 'social mobility' for they put the idea in a wider, more liberal, context. It's not that the party was dead keen on seeing more people move down the social scale, but rather on seeing more people have the chance to escape any disadvantages of the situation they were born into.

So the party can take half a leaf out of Paddy's book in 2011. A belief in 'social mobility' is only one part of what makes us liberals and we need to debate and decide on how important overall levels of equality are. And regardless of the outcome of that, the phrase should be consigned to occasional shorthand rather than making it a staple of speeches and sound bites.

Dr Mark Pack is co-editor of Liberal Democrat Voice (www.libdemvoice.org) and ran the party's 2001 and 2005 internet general election campaigns

PLAYING ARAB DOMINOES

Robert Woodthorpe-Browne describes efforts to include liberals in new governments emerging from turmoil in the Middle East

When the Liberal Arab Network was formed, many smiled and said "there is no such thing as Liberalism in the Arab World".

It is true that many Arab regimes have not permitted the formation of political parties, but many have.

Morocco boasts three parties that have joined the international Liberal family. Normally at least one is in government, and it is widely expected that the next prime minister of Morocco will be a liberal. Of course, Moroccan liberals have to be pro-monarchy and support the line on Western Sahara. Also, their political support, as elsewhere in the region, is based in the middle classes.

Algeria has liberals too, but of limited strength. In Tunisia, the Parti Social Libéral has MPs and senators.

In Egypt, there are three liberal parties, one of which, the Democratic Front Party, hosted the last Liberal International Congress. Ayman Nour, the jailed and tortured (these are pretty well synonymous in Mubarak's Egypt) leader of the El Ghad party, attended but was forbidden by the Egyptian authorities to address us: a delightful irony!

Liberal MPs can be found in Jordan and Lebanon too, and Liberals from Palestine and Iraq have attended seminars. The German liberals' Friedrich Naumann Foundation has representation in Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Turkey and Tunisia and a regional office is based in Cairo. Arab Liberals were invited to a Bournemouth Liberal Democrat party conference, funded by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

The recent upheaval in the Middle East was started by the self-immolation of a Tunisian university graduate, illegally selling fruit and vegetables as he could not find work. Tunisia's authoritarian ex-president, Ben Ali, had promoted education and industry, but competition from China had created major unemployment.

When people took to the streets, they were able to follow their own progress on Al Jazeera TV and through social networks such as Twitter and Facebook. When Ben Ali and his family fled to Saudi Arabia, a government of national unity was proposed by the elderly prime minister. No Liberals were included, only a few socialists who promptly resigned. Islamists, a potent but not dominant force, were similarly excluded.

The revolt in Egypt was inspired by the Tunisian success, and Tunisian flags have been waved by some demonstrators in the early stages. As I write, it is the sixth day of this revolt, and Al Jazeera is jammed and the social networks and internet switched off. Only Mubarak's departure and free elections will be acceptable to the huge youth population who are prepared to confront the army, which has dominated Egyptian politics since Nasser's 1952 Revolution.

Yemen is similarly seeing protests, as is Algeria. Lebanon is a democratic multi-creed mess, and Jordanians are in revolt. The Gulf states are calm, so far, as they are able to buy the loyalty of their citizens.

Israel is quaking, having needed Mubarak's complicity to seal off Gaza, and Jordan's to control the West Bank. The United States is seeing trusted allies being replaced, and is afraid of Islamism spreading into sensitive areas.

> *"We are trying to insist that Liberals are included in all transitional governments pending early elections"*

What can we Liberals do? Liberal International is in close touch with affected member parties and LI's president Hans van Baalen issues regular statements, all of them posted on the Liberal International website. We are trying to insist that Liberals are included in all transitional governments pending early elections, monitored by the EU. Liberal Ministers, including German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, are also putting on pressure.

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation called a meeting in Berlin of some of their regional operatives in February, and has invited Liberal International to participate, including Mr van Baalen, secretary-general Emil Kirjas and myself – as I am in daily touch with sister parties in Tunis and Cairo and launched a call for firm liberal action at the beginning of the Tunisian Jasmine Revolution.

Robert Woodthorpe Browne is a vice-president on the Bureau of Liberal International of the Liberal International British Group, and chairs the International Relations Committee of the Liberal Democrats

ONWARD VIRGIN TYRANTS

Corporate monopoly power is taking over our lives and the Liberal Democrats could differentiate themselves from the Conservatives by breaking up monopolies into something more human, says David Boyle

Going to the party conference, at least when it is in Liverpool, means an inevitable and rather unwelcome encounter with Virgin Trains.

As I sat there, trundling up to the North West, it forced me to think about why Virgin is so irritating. Is it the cramped carriages? Is it the assumption that I must want muzak or must be constantly threatened by announcements about my tickets or other behaviour? Is it the obscure but fearsome ticket regulations?

No, I know. It's that irritating design, Star Trek by way of Dr Who circa 1972, or the faux futuristic hand wash consoles in the loo that require you to jiggle you hands about to produce a small trickle of water. Maybe it's just the lack of green tea in the cafe.

Enough already. I have also been thinking about Virgin recently because I have been writing a book of mini corporate histories (*Eminent Corporations*, just out) which tried to do a little of what Lytton Strachey did for the Victorians.

This is partly because the corporate agenda, which is so central to politics in the USA, barely gets a look in with UK politics – and that is hugely to the advantage of the conservative forces that assail us, with Conservative or Labour.

But it is also partly because I have come to believe that history is a vital antidote to New Labour, and we should start wielding it.

In the week that the banks failed – that strange week in October 2008, where everything seemed to be unravelling – I ventured into the City Business Library, in its familiar, slightly unkempt building off London Wall. I used to spend quite some time there, when I was writing about the history of money. I remembered it – perhaps wrongly – as a font of hidden knowledge. By 2008, it certainly wasn't that.

Where were those decades of back issues of obscure American business magazines? Where were those strange 1960s books of business predictions? I asked at the desk and was informed that it was the library's policy to dispose of most material after three years, and all of it after five years.

LITTLE MEMORY

It was rather a strange discovery. Wall Street and the City of London had allowed the banking system to collapse because their risk software had little or no memory beyond ten years – barely longer than the business cycle.

Most of those taking day-to-day decisions about risk in the City were in their twenties and had little memory of the great rises and falls of the market. Their lack of history had hampered their ability to see events for what they really were.

I don't suppose the City Business Library's decision to bin anything dog-eared contributed to this historical vacuum – it was symptom not cause. Nor was the last government's strange blindness to history (heritage was one of the only areas of government funding to go down under New Labour), but neither of these can have helped.

Yet the excision of history from business commentary and corporate life – and its replacement by marketing mush – was definitely one of the major causes of the current miserable economic climate.

There is a bigger problem here about business history. There are obscure tomes of corporate history that only academics read, and there are cursory notes – written by marketing departments – that appear on websites. Otherwise that's it. That was why, with my New Economics Foundation colleague Andrew Simms, we set out to put it right by inventing a new genre, the mini-business biography.

SEEDY GREED

Virgin was one of the stories we chose to tell – the others include Cadbury, BP, M&S, the BBC and BP. They are often mini-tragedies – great visionaries brought down by the speculators, or imaginative new ways of seeing the world lost in giant bureaucracies, or huge moral visions turned to seedy greed.

But Virgin is not quite categorisable as easily as that.

For one thing, there is the manner of its creation. It gives the impression of lurching from one bizarre new accretion to the next, mainly because of financing crises, though its website says: "Contrary to what some people may think, our constantly expanding and eclectic empire is neither random nor reckless."

That is as close to an acceptance as I can find, but they must know best.

For another thing, there was Virgin's pioneering of anti-establishment, in-your-face marketing to attract the 'yoof' market. Richard Branson himself was on the boat blaring the Sex Pistols' song 'God Save the Queen' from loudspeakers at the Houses of Parliament in 1977.

Virgin's own version of that adds in a kind of tired sexual innuendo ("We give good phone"; "BA can't get it up"). Now many corporates do the same, embracing a sort of fake 'bad' hint of violence, but Virgin was among the first.

I remember that, when Dennis Rodman of the Chicago Bulls head-butted the referee when I was in the USA back in 1996, he was inundated with corporate sponsorship offers for exactly this reason. The role of corporate marketing in encouraging youth violence has been too little documented, but it is there.

Branson avoided the pitfalls of so many of his rivals by immediately regretting taking the company public,

and using the opportunity of Black Wednesday to claw it back again.

The story of Virgin is one of those very British tales of business development, which is impossible to categorise, like the company, either as entrepreneurialism or flagrant hype. It revels in the red, white and blue. It adores tabloid headlines (most of the time) and seduces prime ministers. It boasts a knighted business icon at its head. But one of the only things clear about it is that, with the offshore trusts and the business secrecy, it actually isn't quite British.

"Issues of corporate power may be a live and prominent political issue in the USA, they are barely debated in the UK"

These days, if you type 'Virgin' into the Google search engine, it comes up with a huge and diverse list. There is Virgin Media and Virgin Atlantic, followed by Virgin Trains, Virgin Travel and Holidays, Virgin Mobile, Money, Credit Card, Virgin Active, and web mail. But that's just the surface. Scratch just one, Virgin Media, and another world of possibilities opens up: television, phone, music, broadband, games, shopping, news, movies… Oh yes, and then there's Virgin Drinks, offering up everything from Cola to Vodka.

But in the UK, Branson was going through the next stage in virtualisation. He sold Virgin Mobile to a new company formed out of a merger between NTL and Telewest, creating at a stroke the second biggest phone company in the UK. As part of the deal, the new company Virgin Media would pay at least £8.5 million for the right to use the Virgin brand name, and Branson became the biggest shareholder (15%).

There were alliances with content providers like Sky, because content is vital in this new world of 'convergence' – the coming together of computers, phones and televisions. Even customer service has now been outsourced.

What now lies at the heart of Virgin is a huge database that can be mined, sold and cross-sold.

There is no doubt that brand recognition has taken Virgin a very long way, but – despite all the energy dedicated to valuing brands and all the high-paid brand managers and brand consultants – the whole idea is something of an illusion.

Brands are not, in fact, the new religions that people live their lives by, as the advertising agency Young and Rubicam claimed. The truth is that most people hate most brands, most of the time.

They are deeply disloyal to them, and the very word 'brand' has come to imply something shiny, insubstantial and basically fake – something manipulated, without human values at its heart.

The result is that, despite all the hype, brands are not really foundations for the future. They enable communications but they fade so quickly. So what is Virgin, then? Branson's friend Peter Gabriel answered the question once. "Virgin is becoming everything," he said. "You wake up in the morning to Virgin Radio, you put on your Virgin jeans, you go to the Virgin Megastore, you drink Virgin Cola, you fly to America on Virgin Atlantic. Soon you'll be offering Virgin births, Virgin marriages, Virgin funerals."

This was intended as a joke, but there is something chilly about it, and it says something about the future direction of business as rival models loom offering us different versions of everything. This is a very Liberal issue: monopoly.

Do we want the supermarket model of monopoly (Tesco or Wal-mart), or the internet model (Amazon or Google) or do we want the brand database model, like Virgin?

As a Liberal, I don't want any of them. They all mean different kinds of tyranny.

What kind of monopoly is going to truss us up and sell us? Yet although these issues of corporate power may be a live and prominent political issue in the USA, they are barely debated in the UK.

Perhaps that is why our competition authorities snooze, and allow Tesco to build up a third of the grocery market. But perhaps the real problem is that the political force that once put tackling monopoly power at the heart of their message – the Liberals – has lost interest in it.

In the new politics, where Liberal Democrats need to find clear areas that differentiate them from Conservatives, tackling the powerful monopolies that dominate our lives – and breaking them up into something more human – is going to be a key part of the jigsaw.

David Boyle is co-author with Andrew Simms of 'Eminent Corporations' (Constable & Robinson, 2010, £8.99) (www.david-boyle.co.uk)

A 99% VOTE THAT YOU CAN BELIEVE IN

South Sudan's citizens have voted overwhelmingly for independence. Now the south must overcome poverty and the north even worse repression, says Becky Tinsley

Within six months, Sudan, Africa's largest nation, will split into two very different countries. No one believes the future will be easy for the fledgling South Sudan, but for a few heady days in January 2011, millions of southerners forgot the problems that lie ahead and savoured their first taste of freedom.

An estimated 99% of registered voters defied logistical challenges unknown in the developed world to vote for independence from their tyrannical rulers in Khartoum. In an area the size of Texas with less than 40 miles of paved road, it was an achievement in itself that more than three million people piled into 2,600 voting stations.

The South Sudan Referendum Commission admitted that, in seven out of 76 counties, more than 100% of registered voters cast a ballot. However, international observers agree that the process was generally fair, and the scale of the victory for secession makes quibbling over details redundant.

At the Methodist Central Hall, Westminster, the Southern Sudanese diaspora from across Europe cast their ballots and then celebrated with traditional music and dance as the results were announced. Of the 626 votes cast in London, only 13 were in favour of Sudan remaining unified.

Just a month before the polls opened, most international and local commentators believed the referendum would be impossible to organise, and that violence instigated by the Khartoum regime would keep voters away.

ENORMOUS PRESSURE

Talking to Liberator as the polls closed, the international development secretary, Andrew Mitchell, described the referendum as "nothing short of a miracle." He confirmed that the international community applied enormous pressure to both Khartoum and the provisional South Sudan government in Juba to ensure the vote concluded peacefully. "Hague and I were on the phone to them every week, making it clear they had to fulfil their promises," said Mitchell.

Crucially, the Obama administration also became engaged, albeit very late in the day. Some analysts believe the defence and intelligence establishment in Washington was reluctant to risk harming their cordial relations with the indicted war criminal, President Omar Bashir, an avowed Islamist, who has cleverly convinced the Pentagon that he is, improbably, on their side in the war on terror.

However, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton broke ranks in September 2010, warning that Sudan was "a ticking time bomb." This prompted a flurry of diplomatic activity, with Obama's envoy, Senator John Kerry, offering to remove Sudan from the US's list of state sponsors of terror. Some observers suggest Kerry also quietly offered Bashir other more controversial rewards for continuing good behaviour: US help with cancelling Sudan's $35bn debt, dropping US sanctions, and even US pressure to suspend the field marshal's International Criminal Court indictment.

If all goes according to plan, the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, so diligently negotiated by officials from the UK, USA and Norway, will expire in July. Several prickly issues must be resolved before the international community can be confident peace will hold: the exact location of the border in areas where there are oil deposits; the criteria to decide who can be a citizen in areas where nomads graze their animals part of the year; how to share the former nation's debts and assets, and most vexing, how to share oil revenues.

Although South Sudan has 75% of the former nation's oil, it can only export it along pipelines running through North Sudan to Port Sudan. The deposits aren't large enough to justify building a pipeline through less belligerent neighbours like Kenya. This means the North may force the South to pay it a larger proportion of revenues, either overtly or by fomenting violence using Arab nomad proxies, as it has done for decades. Whatever happens, the new South Sudan will be massively dependent on oil to fund its government budget and army.

It is hard to overstate the difficulties facing Africa's newest and poorest country, where, according to Oxfam, 80% of people are illiterate, one in seven women die in pregnancy, and land hasn't been farmed for years because of fighting. A million exiled Southerners are expected to return by the end of this year. They will find no employment and insufficient housing, schools or clinics. Their arrival will put even greater strain on the NGOs currently feeding most of the population.

The usual western development experts are peddling recipes for turning Africa into Finland by handing everyone a laptop. Less exciting, but more to the point, aid efforts should be focused on getting the population back on the land, planting crops. If farmed efficiently, Southern Sudan could feed all of Africa. This also requires infrastructure to export produce, rather than vast ministries and fleets of government limousines in the new capital Juba.

In the words of the Sudanese writer, Francis Mading Deng, "The challenge now is for an independent South to realise the ideals of good governance: constructive management of diversity on the basis

of: full equality for all ethnic groups; promotion of inclusive constitutional democracy; respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms; pursuit of fair distribution of resources, public services, employment opportunities; accountable financial management; and consolidation of peace through equitable socio-economic development."

Attracting less attention is what now happens to the new North Sudan, the jilted, wife-beating husband stumbling away from the divorce court with a bemused expression on his face.

The Khartoum regime terrorised the South for decades, using Arab nomad proxies to kill an estimated two million people. It is a measure of their racism toward the mainly black African Southerners that it came as a shock to most Northerners that the South was so desperate to secede.

According to Abdal-Rahman al-Rashid, a commentator with the pan-Arab paper, Al Shariq, Arabs in the North of Sudan are ignorant of what has happened in the South. They knew little of the decades of killing, or the vast gap between the Khartoum region, where power and wealth has been centralised, and the impoverished regions.

During the decades of violence and ethnic cleansing sponsored by Khartoum, Southerners fled north for refuge, and an estimated two million of them stayed, starting businesses and having families in the grim refugee camps on the outskirts. Many of them tell of experiencing daily abuse from Arabs who consider them racially inferior, regularly calling them 'abid' (slave) to their faces.

Southerners who have remained in the North for economic reasons now fear for their individual and collective safety. During the referendum campaign, a presidential spokesman warned that Southerners in the North would lose their citizenship and their jobs in the civil service, and would no longer qualify for any government services such as health and education. For instance, the Omdurman Electricity Company as already fired 50 engineers of Southern origin, some of whom have worked there for 15 years.

Few Southerners resident in the North participated in the referendum vote because they were aware that even turning up at the polling station might put them in peril. Those who did vote tell of being intimidated, asked how they voted by the police and citizens alike.

DESPERATE TO LEAVE

Even now, after the referendum, thousands of Southern families remain at squalid gathering points around Khartoum, waiting for transport south, desperate to leave. There have been several reports of bus loads of Southerners being stopped, attacked, raped and robbed as they make their way to South Sudan. The regime is also counting Southern Sudanese children in orphanages, ready to put them on buses, "so they can be repatriated to their families" (sic).

Most Southerners living in the North describe themselves as Christian. They have been particularly alarmed by a speech made by President Bashir on 19 December in which he gave notice that the relatively liberal interim constitution imposed on him by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement expires in July.

"If South Sudan secedes, we'll change the constitution. There will be no question of cultural or ethnic diversity. Sharia will be the only source of the constitution, and Arabic the only official language."

Bashir also defended the routine use of public flogging of girls who wear clothing unacceptable to the regime. "They should review their interpretation of Islam because Sharia has always stipulated that one must whip, cut or kill."

In the Khartoum region alone, there were 40,000 incidents of public flogging in 2008. Local human rights activists claim the penalty is used to target students demanding civil liberties. The regime is already cracking down on opposition parties, media and civil society. Amnesty International recently documented the fate of those daring to speak out; kidnapping, torture, disappearances and closed newspapers and radio stations. Bear in mind that Sudan is already ranked among the nine most repressive nations by Freedom House.

Dr Albaqir Mukhtar, president of TAMAM, a Sudanese civil society coalition campaigning for democratic transformation, points to the recent arrest of young people involved in movements like Girifna ("We are fed up"). "We will be crushed by the regime if the world continues to turn its back on Northern Sudan."

Unfortunately, it seems likely the international community will disengage once the provisions of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement have been fulfilled in July, and South Sudan takes its seat in the United Nations Assembly.

This will be bad news for those who live in the neglected and marginalised regions of North Sudan, the most famous of which is Darfur. The Khartoum regime's campaign of bombing and ethnic cleansing continues throughout Darfur, but it does so in a media vacuum. The joint African Union/United Nations peacekeeping force remains there but it is under-funded and without the political backing to challenge Khartoum. Hence the so-called 'Rwanda in slow motion' grinds on.

At the time of writing, hundreds of students have been protesting on the streets of Khartoum, inspired by their fellow Arabs in Tunisia and Egypt. Their peaceful demonstrations have been met with tear gas and mass arrests, and it seems unlikely that the much feared security services will side with the people. In the words of one human rights activist, the new North Sudan is going to be a very nasty country.

Becky Tinsley is director of Waging Peace (www.WagingPeace.info)

YOU WAIT 14 YEARS AND TWO COME ALONG AT ONCE

The change is technical and the 'no' campaign failed to prove it was representative, but Liberal Democrats should still work for a 'yes' vote in Wales's referendum next month, ahead of the UK referendum on voting reform, says Peter Black

Personally, I blame Harold Wilson. Until he decided to hold a post-legislative referendum on membership of the European Union in 1975, referendums were not part of the British tradition.

The exception was of course Wales, which following the repeal of Gladstone's 1881 Sunday Closing (Wales) Act in 1961 saw a number of plebiscites on a county-by-county basis over the controversial issue of Sunday drinking. It took 35 years of going to the polls before all areas of Wales allowed their public houses to open on a Sunday.

Since Wilson's intervention, we have had a number of other votes: in 1979 to decide on devolution proposals in Wales and Scotland and again in 1997 to have a second go at similar, though much watered-down proposals.

Although both of these referendums produced positive outcomes, the legislative bodies that emerged were not equal in their responsibilities and powers.

Scotland was given a parliament that could pass laws and vary taxes. In Wales, we were offered the administration of the £7bn budget previously held by the Welsh Office and the opportunity to pass secondary legislation, effectively to tinker with the UK agenda and UK Acts of Parliament.

In my view, the uneven nature of the powers offered to Wales and Scotland was one of the reasons why the result in Wales was so close. It initiated a debate that has dominated Welsh politics ever since.

How we got where we are lies in the politics behind why referendums are held in the first place. As Wilson, and then Jim Callaghan, illustrated, the abandonment of representative politics in favour of a popular vote on specific legislative proposals happens when the ruling party cannot agree among itself or fears that the issue will rip apart its political unity. So, rather than argue it out in parliament or party conference, they agree to let the people resolve the issue for them.

In the case of the Welsh referendum, it got even more complicated. That is because the Labour Party in Wales could not agree on the question. The result was that the proposals put before the Welsh people were significantly watered down.

These internal Labour politics also limited the terms of the debate on how this could be put right. A commission set up by the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2000-03 recommended that Wales should have the same law-making powers as Scotland; however, that was not acceptable to Labour MPs and the wider party in Wales.

BIZARRE MECHANISM

As a result, when the Government of Wales Act 2006 was passed, it contained a bizarre mechanism by which the Assembly draws down primary law-making powers as and when it needed them. The precise method by which this occurs is through a legislative competence order (LCO).

Essentially, the Welsh Assembly draws up a statutory instrument defining what powers it wants to exercise. These orders are then scrutinised by an Assembly Committee and by the Welsh Affairs Committee in Westminster, to ensure that they are fit for purpose; they are passed around Whitehall departments to consider any unseen consequences and then laid before the two Houses of Parliament before going for royal assent. The total cost of this process is about £2m a year out of the Assembly's budget, on top of the time taken by AMs and MPs in scrutinising the orders.

The total time taken from start to finish for a non-controversial LCO is about four to six months. Despite all that time and effort, not a single new law will have been entered on the statute book once the process is complete. That requires an Assembly measure, our equivalent to an Act of Parliament, which will utilise the powers drawn down to change the law.

The inherent problem with the LCO process lies in the fact that an elected Assembly needs to ask permission of another body before it can implement the manifestos of its ruling parties. However, there are wider problems too, when politics are brought to bear to frustrate the will of Assembly Members.

The classic example of this was the Assembly's attempt to legislate to temporarily suspend the right to buy in areas of high housing demand. This had been in the manifestos of three of the four parties represented in the Assembly, together making up 47 of the 60 AMs. Despite that, when the order got to parliament, MPs protested and as a result the Secretary of State for Wales built a caveat into it that would have required further consent from UK government ministers before the power could be exercised.

Not surprisingly, the Joint Constitutional Committee of the House of Lords and House of Commons found this to be *ultra vires* and the LCO was withdrawn. A new LCO was introduced seeking wider powers over affordable housing but this was also held up, due to being caught up in the wash-up before the 2010 general election. Labour would not push it through and the Tories would not agree to its passage.

It was only recovered due to an explicit reference

being made to it in the Coalition Agreement and because attempts by Tory ministers in the Wales Office to water it down were overruled by those overseeing that agreement following an intervention by Welsh Liberal Democrats.

The Welsh Assembly now has the power to legislate on affordable housing. However, it has taken three years to get to this stage and there is little time to do anything with it before the next set of elections. This is no way to run a legislature.

It is not just the acquisition of housing powers that have been sabotaged by external intervention. A request to legislate on the Welsh language had so many caveats and conditions built into the final order that it severely limited the room for manoeuvre available to the Welsh government. We were also denied key powers on the environment.

This is not just a matter of a legislative body being frustrated in its ambitions but also that Welsh law itself is being made remarkably complex and confusing by a whole list of exemptions and restrictions being imposed on its powers by the UK government. It is not a sustainable position.

The 2006 Act contained a provision that this wasteful and time-consuming process could be done away with following a referendum. However, a 'yes' vote will not put the Welsh Assembly on a par with the Scottish Parliament. We will be restricted to passing laws only in the 20 policy fields specified in the Act. These are the same fields that we can ask permission to legislate on now.

In fact, a positive outcome will not confer any additional powers on the Assembly at all. It will merely dismantle the LCO process, a worthwhile objective in itself and one that is difficult to argue against. It is a referendum we need to win if we are to advance democracy in Wales.

FLYING KITES

Those arguing for a 'no' vote have been reduced to flying political kites. They say that, if we win the referendum, Wales will be on a slippery slope to tax-varying powers, a full parliament and ultimately independence. None of these are on the ballot paper and nor do they command majority support across the political parties. The 'no' campaign's argument therefore is fallacious.

The other controversy that has dogged the referendum is the date on which it is being held (3 March). Choosing a date is a familiar problem for those legislating for the AV referendum. In this case, there was an argument to hold the two referendums and the Assembly election on the same day; the problem with that was one of accountability.

It is only right that, when people make their choice as to who is going to run Wales for the next four years, they know what powers they are able to exercise and whether the manifestos they are being asked to choose between are deliverable or not.

"It is only right that, when people make their choice, they know whether the manifestos they are being asked to choose between are deliverable or not"

Campaigning is underway, but there are no official 'yes' and 'no' campaigns. That is because the Electoral Commission set a representative test for each, which those opposed to the extension of powers felt they could not meet. True Wales, as they are called, thus took a tactical decision not to register and to run a 'grassroots campaign' instead. As a result, neither side receives the £70,000 of public funding for administration costs, nor the ability to send a freepost leaflet to every voter.

All four parties have lined up behind a 'yes' vote, even those Tory Assembly Members who campaigned against the establishment of the Assembly in 1997 in the first place. However, it seems all three Tory MPs will be voting 'no', though so far they have not been actively campaigning in that direction. I suspect that some Labour MPs will be joining them but, again, they have hardly been vocal on their preference. The UK government will stay officially neutral, though it would be nice if the odd Liberal Democrat minister could find it within themselves to come and help out on the 'yes' side.

The latest opinion poll indicates that a 'yes' vote will be the likely outcome. 'Yes' voters number about 49% of those asked, with 26% voting 'no' and 26% undecided. The key, though, will lie in turnout, not just differential turnout but in how many people bother to make the trip to the polls in the first place.

Back in 1997, the majority was narrow but the turnout was also low. As a result, people still question the legitimacy of an Assembly that secured only 26% of those eligible to vote. Decisions are, of course, made by those who take part, but it helps if those who do take part are more numerous than those who abstain.

The campaigning does not stop on 3 March. Shortly afterwards on 5 May, there is the Assembly election itself and, providing the House of Lords plays ball, the Alternative Vote referendum as well. No doubt when he set the date, Nick Clegg took into the account that our campaigning priorities in Wales may not be the same as in England.

We will of course be working for a change in the electoral system but, in the face of difficult opinion polls and a UK government record to defend, survival as an Assembly group is our number one concern. Wales has had coalition government on and off for nearly 12 years, we know the advantages of a semi-proportional electoral system and so the country should be a natural supporter of a switch to AV at a UK level.

It may well work out that way, but on 5 May our main focus will be the outcome of the Assembly election itself and forming a government.

Peter Black is the Welsh Liberal Democrat Assembly Member for South Wales West

A PERFECT STORM HITS VOLUNTARY SECTOR

Charities and social enterprises face financial problems just as the government wants them to take on more, says Liz Barker, who has grappled with what remains of the Lib Dem policy-making machine to find answers

A year ago, a small group of volunteers was given the task of developing Liberal Democrat policy on the voluntary sector.

So it was that, after the general election, we sat down equipped only with an impossibly large remit from the Federal Policy Committee, a limit of 8,000 words and no budget, to come up with proposals for one the most important, and least understood, parts of our society.

The voluntary and community sector in the UK has a long history and commands extraordinary trust, respect and financial support from the public. The UK's 170,000 charities and social enterprises employ around 730,000 people and had a total income in 2006/07 of £33bn, of which £12bn was voluntary income.

However, the sector varies enormously, from the 2.5% of charities that earn 75% of the income to the 50% of charities that have an annual income of less than £10,000. Over the last decade, voluntary organisations have become significant providers of public services, and yet charities remain, at least constitutionally, independent of government.

As we began our task, we were conscious that the voluntary sector is about to experience a perfect storm. The aftershocks of the financial crisis of 2008 are set to hit the voluntary sector from April 2011. All local authorities must make unprecedented cuts and voluntary sector funding, especially discretionary funding for things like core costs, will be severely reduced.

Voluntary donations decreased in 2010, which, in an atmosphere of uncertainty about employment, is no surprise. However, there is a third factor, which is little noticed, that compounds the difficulties.

AGEING DONORS

The age profile of people who support charities, either financially or by volunteering, is ageing. To put it another way, older people support charities often from a sense of duty. Younger people, especially those aged under 30 who conduct their social life via social networking, have little meaningful interaction with charities.

It was against this background that the working group spent several months working out how to achieve our long-held Liberal Democrat aims of building sustainable communities in which individuals are able to exercise their rights as active citizens; communities in which poverty and inequality are reduced and all members have the means to live dignified lives.

A key moment was the consultation session at conference in Liverpool. We were given an unequivocal message by party members that, while our coalition partners may view the voluntary sector as the means by which the state can divest itself of its responsibility to provide services, we Liberal Democrats do not.

That is not to say that services should not be provided by voluntary organisations when they can do so more effectively than the statutory sector. They should. However, we believe that government must continue to take a long-term strategic view of the needs of a community and ensure that resources are allocated accordingly. Voluntary organisations are most powerful when they work alongside the statutory sector and private companies to enrich and enhance the lives of people whom they exist to serve.

Furthermore, we believe that voluntary and community organisations are about more than delivery of services. Voluntary organisations are focal points for people who share a passion and commitment for a particular cause and, as such, they should be free to conduct research and to campaign for change.

One can easily bring to mind a number of national charities that, a decade ago, were always in the news arguing for change but now, burdened by the weight of public service contracts, rarely stick their heads above the parapet. In our view, the independence of voluntary organisations is their most valuable asset. That is why we rejected the arguments of those who see the opening up of public sector contracts to voluntary organisations as the overriding issue.

A key objective of the working group was to come up with government initiatives, which could assist charities to generate income in a variety of ways. The party has long been committed to the development of a community banking sector. We propose taking that further by piloting programmes under which local authorities could act as guarantors for local investment instruments.

We have also proposed that government, in partnership with private investors, should establish a high-risk investment fund to enable innovative projects, which have the capacity to transform the voluntary sector, to be supported through early stage research and development.

I admit that my thinking on this has been influenced by working with a start-up charity See The Difference (www.seethedifference.org), which is developing a new form of internet-based charitable giving.

See The Difference trains charities to make short films in which they make an 'ask'. If donors give money

or share the project, they receive feedback which shows them exactly what difference their money made. This sort of initiative, bringing charities into social networking, is a difficult undertaking. Like any other internet business, it has taken time and effort to develop the proposition. However, there is little or no risk capital available to charities to innovate. We believe that government has a duty to fill that gap, risky though that may be.

"Our coalition partners may view the voluntary sector as the means by which the state can divest itself of its responsibility to provide services; we Liberal Democrats do not"

We considered a number of ways in which the voluntary sector could be modernised. Our main concern was to find ways in which voluntary organisations and charities could be assisted to update their management, communications and IT skills, so that they can engage what one might call the Facebook generation. We propose to fund a programme of modernisation, which would not only invest in technology but, more importantly, would also change the way that charities perceive and communicate with supporters.

VICTORIAN ATTITUDE

We envisaged a future in which charities abandon their Victorian attitude of doing good unto people, and become places where people go to engage with their fellow citizens to change those things in the world that they care about.

We were mindful of the fact that large charities do a great deal of good and they deserve support. However, small charities are highly effective in particular areas and we agreed with the Small Charities Coalition that they needed help to manage issues such as finance, legal compliance and premises. That said, we did not fall into the trap of believing that what small charities do can always be scaled up. Big is not necessarily better.

The Labour government gave a textbook lesson in how the state should not deal with the voluntary sector. Initiatives rained down as central government sought to colonise the voluntary sector. In contrast, we believe that it is the role of the state to remove the barriers that prevent voluntary organisations from thriving and prevent individuals from giving their time and talents.

So we have proposed that a Liberal Democrat government would get rid of much of the regulation and duplication of reporting, which sucks the energy out of community groups.

We would thoroughly review the vetting and barring scheme. It can be argued that the current scheme has protected children but when trustees, who never ever meet a child in the course of their work with a charity, have to be vetted, something is wrong and has to change.

The working group discussed Corporate Social Responsibility at some length. I must confess that I am something of a CSR sceptic. I accept that, over the last ten years or so, many people have worked hard to make companies recognise that they have a profound effect on the social, financial and environmental fabric of the communities within which they conduct their business. I also accept that many companies have changed the ways in which they do business to meet higher environmental and ethical standards.

However, I am less convinced that businesses become virtuous players when there is no compelling commercial reason to do so. Many charities will confess, but only privately, that their partnerships with private companies usually benefit the business much more than the charity.

CSR is a transaction between private companies and charities and it is one in which government has no direct role. Therefore the power of government to influence CSR is limited. Nevertheless, we have committed the Liberal Democrats to working with the private and voluntary sectors to find ways in which CSR can be reformed. We have used a phrase that will no doubt be loathed. We have talked about companies increasing their 'community footprint' in the hope of conveying our vision of new standards of corporate responsibility that bring lasting, tangible benefit to communities.

Some people who have seen the paper in draft have made the criticism that it lacks a clear theme and doesn't articulate sufficiently clearly our vision of strong, locally-led independent organisations.

I accept the charge. The paper is entitled 'Community Futures' but we did not manage to come up with a phrase that encapsulates a vision distinct from the 'Big Society' – whatever that is. If anyone reads the paper and is inspired to come up with a phrase, feel free to make a suggestion, but please don't come up with something as ill-defined as 'Big Society'. Despite the absence of a catchphrase, I do think that the group has come up with a set of realistic, tangible proposals that, if implemented by Liberal Democrats nationally and locally, would lead to the development of a thriving, sustainable voluntary sector – free of government constraint and able to enrich the lives of citizens.

Finally, I want to say something about the state of policy-making in the party – it is dire. Everyone who worked on this paper did so as a volunteer. Much of the work was only possible because I work in Westminster and people were happy to make time to meet me. The working group tried to include relevant spokespeople in government and engage their special advisers in discussions about what views ministers might have of our proposals.

What little involvement there was, was late and limited, and I think due to the fact that I have known the individuals for years. For this paper that doesn't really matter.

However, as a process for making policy it is unacceptable and unsustainable. What little policy-making resource we have is being poured into government. The fact that there is no party policy resource should be a worry to anyone who thinks we should have our own manifesto in 2015. The fact that nobody has even noted the problem, never mind thought about how to address it, is downright alarming.

Liz Barker is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords

AGAINST THE LAWS

The party's appetite for coalition took David Laws by surprise, his book '22 Days in May' reveals, but did Laws ever understand the party, wonders Bill le Breton

If the world's leading theoretical physicists are to be believed, there exists an infinite number of universes. With each movement of a particle, alternative universes branch out and pursue their course.

In one such universe, David Cameron has recently returned to Westminster from a most enjoyable holiday season at Chequers. He has the largest Conservative majority since Thatcher's days, having called and won an autumn election against a Labour Party racked by internecine warfare among its ambitious princes and, for good measure, having seen the impoverished, unmasked and brand-battered Liberals reduced to a handful of MPs.

Following the May election, this counterfactual Cameron ignored Nick Clegg's overtures, calculating Labour wanted out and that the Liberals would be forced into supporting his minority government with a 'confidence and supply' agreement until he called the second election on his own terms.

That we do not live in this parallel universe is down to the collective wisdom, political experience and qualities of the Liberal Democrats as a cohesive, pragmatic, steadfast, determined and well-governed political party.

In David Laws's 22 Days in May, the course of the post-election negotiations is set out in detail. It is good that his evidence is on the record, as it is in too many people's interest to give other interpretations of events and motives. But the tasks that face Liberal Democrat campaigners are so daunting that there may be more important uses of their time than looking back to something that cannot be changed. What's done is done. Move on.

That said, the party's achievement in avoiding the counterfactual outlined above cannot be underestimated. For weeks before the election, those who were likely to direct the path of Labour wanted to go into opposition, not least because most of them had either leadership ambitions or ambitions for someone else's leadership ambitions, as is the way in courtly politics.

DECAYING CORPSE

Added to this, in the words of Laws, Labour was "a decaying corpse" (p.156), to which only the mad would wish to bind themselves and only the politically naïve would imagine another party so binding itself. Which makes it hard to understand the Conservative fears, and Cameron's in particular when he went home on Monday 10 May to tell his wife that "he considered that the premiership was slipping away from him, following Gordon Brown's brave gamble" in announcing his resignation (p.157), especially as the Conservatives had just sent the Liberal Democrats the deal making *Reform of the Voting System – a Bankable Offer from the Conservatives* (Appendix 3).

Furthermore, it is not in the nature of those who have governed powerfully for years to give up the habit of governing unhindered, of lecturing, of ordering, of dictating, of bullying; all of which would have made a Liberal Democrat deal with Labour impossible.

Authoritarianism was the rock on which Labour was built; it was the substance of the bricks with which it was constructed; it was even the stuff from which it made the door handles. All this is strikingly evoked by the account of Labour's conduct, especially at the meeting held with the Lib Dems at the same time as Cameron was brooding (pp. 140-156).

How then did the Lib Dems get so much from the Conservatives? Indeed, Father Christmas appeared to come early down the Cowley Street chimney. In his sack was an undertaking that there would be no second election that year, a fixed-term five-year parliament, and substantial progress on all four key planks of the LD manifesto, including the commitment to a referendum on AV, a validation of Liberal political culture and, not least, what appears to be a meeting of minds that could make future tough decisions a pragmatic rather than dogmatic process.

As Laws describes, "Instead of the negotiations leading to 'lowest common denominator' compromises, what actually happened was that on the whole we made a choice to include either the Lib Dem or Conservative position, more or less in its entirety. This created a sense that we were picking the best of the policies of each party…" (p.117).

Well… we had been 'good children' for a long time. In the 1980s, we had expanded our local government base and begun to learn the political skills of responsible governance and, as our numbers grew and more and more councils became balanced, we had learnt the art of negotiating post-election deals when no single party had overall control.

Even in councils where Liberal Democrats were the largest group, these were third-party skills. This is why neither the Conservative nor Labour parliamentarians learnt similar lessons. Added to which, unlike the other two parties, the route into the parliamentary party (PLDP) was often through local government service and often in councils where no party had overall control.

Take two very different MPs as examples. Andrew Stunell, one of the four negotiators, had, as a member of Cheshire County Council, experience of a balanced council, had as an ALDC political adviser counselled dozens of groups 'in the balance' and had, as an expert in these matters, written the second edition of ALDC's *Life in the Balance*. Meanwhile, that wonderful maverick Mike Hancock had, as an Alliance council

group leader in a balanced council in 1986, negotiated the first non-Conservative budget on Hampshire County Council in over one hundred years.

Many, including Laws, were sceptical about the ability of the party to operate calmly and pragmatically after an inconclusive election. "The Lib Dems love consultation and relish making life difficult for their leaders" (p.75). "I thought getting the party to a position of unity on any outcome would be very difficult" (p.77). "I was worried that we would only be able to unite around indecision, fudge and soft options" (p.77). But the PLDP, the Federal Executive and Policy Committees, and Conference are stuffed with highly experienced practitioners of the politics of being 'hung'; those who, negotiating hard, make deals and coalesce around tough options daily.

"The tragedy is that those who did not enter Westminster via the time-served council route have consistently misjudged the motives of those with this apprenticeship"

The tragedy is that those who did not enter Westminster via the time-served council route have consistently misjudged the motives of those with this apprenticeship. They saw the commitment of such colleagues to community campaigning, their obsession with ensuring Conference didn't follow their leaders blindly (most notably, let's not forget, in preventing an earlier leadership from binding us to the preternaturally authoritarian Labour Party), in short, their commitment to people power, as an inability to be tough and a fear of unpopularity.

Try telling David Heath, Mark Hunter, John Hemming or John Pugh that they had a fear of power when leading the party in Somerset, Stockport, Birmingham or Sefton.

For them and scores like them, it has always been a brave politics of tough choices. Spurred on by a passion for the liberalism of community politics practiced in streets, town halls and parliaments, they have taken and used power to dismantle illiberal structures so that people have freedom and personal power for themselves and their communities. That's a hard school when you don't have a majority.

When therefore the outline of a deal with the Conservatives was put to the PLDP on the night of Monday 10 May, the responsible and timely reaction of the party actually came as a shock to Laws. "To my surprise, given my previous experience, there was a strong view that both the country and the Lib Dems would be better off with a coalition than some loose form of confidence and supply agreement" (p.133); and "There was an appetite for responsibility and power which I had not expected to be so strong" (p.134).

Because of this lack of confidence in and understanding of most elected Liberal Democrats, the party's leaders have generally not appreciated the collective wisdom of the party when it has opposed them. Never was this more evident than in the leadership's obsession with increasing tuition fees, which it was forced by Conference and later the Federal Policy Committee to back down on, and chose at the start of the election campaign to sign up to publically.

The signing of the pledge elevated the issue to one of trust and therefore a deal breaker. Any council group in this situation would have known the need to mandate its negotiators to secure this one relatively inexpensive item at almost any cost.

But it was not made so in these negotiations. Laws, never doubting himself for one moment, went back for another chunk. "In truth I felt our policy on abolishing tuition fees was simply not the right priority in the current economic climate…" (p.185). "In any case, it was now clear, with the huge spending cuts that would be required under any government, that abolishing tuition fees without creating some other revenue stream would not be realistic" (p.186).

REPUTATIONAL SUICIDE

A democrat would have accepted that the collective wisdom of Conference might have had a point even if it was different to his. A campaigner would have known that, once a pledge had been so publically entered into, it becomes an act of reputational suicide to renege.

This blindness to the experience and judgement of Conference, of Policy Committee, and the wishes of the vast majority of our candidates in the election, and this breaking of a very public trust, has done more damage to the reputation of the party than any possible failure in any other aspect of the negotiations during those five days in May.

Laws is a good, hard working, successful man, but is he wise? His book reveals the workings of a temperament which is shared by many with similar intellects and successful careers. They have never developed the habit of questioning their own judgement when it is opposed by others less gifted, less fortunate but more embedded in ordinary experience. Intellect, wealth and success bring a narrowing of focus when sometimes a wider and more humble perspective is necessary. No amount of hard work can substitute for wisdom.

Because of the power these Olympians wield in our party, we shall pay dearly for their condescension and hubris. The value destroyed in this single breach of trust and in the alienation of so many young people is incalculable.

There may be other universes where Liberal Democrat negotiators insisted on and the Conservatives helpfully accepted, as I am sure they would have, the party's need to have our manifesto policy on tuition fees. But until the physicists find a way into these alternative universes, we are stuck where we are, upended on the most important issue of all – the issue of trust.

Bill le Breton is a former chair and president of the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors. '22 *Days in May*' by David Laws was published in November 2010 by Biteback, price £9.99

LETTERS

NAMES NAMED

Dear Liberator,

The article in Radical Bulletin in Liberator 343 is incorrect about the membership of the group under Norman Lamb engaging in a policy rethink for the party. It has nothing to do with CentreForum and the membership of the group is as set out below:

Bridget Fox, Ed Randall, James Gurling, Jeremy Hargreaves, Julie Smith, Kate Parminter, Kishwer Falkner, Lorely Burt, Martin Horwood, Neil Stockley, Noreena Hertz, Norman Lamb, Peter Price, Richard Grayson, Sal Brinton, Sarah Harding, Susan Juned, Tim Leunig, William Wallace.

The 'Coalition 2.0 initiative' is something completely different and is meeting under the auspices of CentreForum. We see it as an important part of our work as a think tank to be bringing together people from different parties to talk about liberal policies. We will also, in due course, be exploring with Labour politicians areas of common ground in policy.

I hope that is helpful clarification.

Chris Nicholson
Director and chief executive - CentreForum

PART OF THE UNION

Dear Liberator,

In his review of Why Join A Trade Union (Liberator 343), Mark Smulian suggests the arguments in the book are academic outside the public sector. However, to some extent a lot depends on his definition of the public sector, in that unions still retain a considerable influence in those parts of the private sector that were formerly in the public sector. A small specialised union such the ASLEF has managed to both survive and exploit a national skill shortage of train drivers within the train operating companies and has been arguably more effective than the sabre-rattling tactics of the RMT under Bob Crow. There are still areas of the private sector where collective bargaining plays an important role, such as the shipbuilding and engineering industry and parts of the financial sector outside the City of London.

However, his main error has been to confuse recognition with representation. While it might be that trade unions are not recognised in a considerable part of the private sector, collective bargaining and industrial action are not the only role provided by trade unions. Employees have the right to be represented by trade union representatives at disciplinary hearings and trade unions provide various services to members, in particular legal services. The employee may well have a framework of employment rights but accessing them can be problematical. Exercising your right can be expensive and, with the virtual abolition of legal aid, membership of a trade union provides an important access to legal representation without being at the mercy of the 'no win no fees industry'.

Litigation was the unpublicised success of the trade unions during the latter years of Tory rule. It is not exactly surprising that the high-profile discrimination cases tend to occur in areas that are not traditionally unionised, such as the City of London or the armed services. The majority of cases pursued by trade unions are settled out of court.

The book should be recommended for those members of the party who are not so much hostile as agnostic about trade unions and are still living in the age of Fred Kite and I'm All Right Jack. Some private companies actually hire union-busting consultants, which suggests that unions must still have some potential to improve working conditions.

Andrew Hudson
Leyton

REVIEWS

The political thought of the Liberals and Liberal Democrats since 1945 edited by Kevin Hickson Manchester UP 2009 £60

By accident rather than design, Liberator reviews this book after the Liberal Democrats have become members of a coalition government. It thus (almost) encapsulates a distinct period in party Liberalism in the United Kingdom.

Archie Sinclair had sat in Churchill's war cabinet and, indeed, the National Liberals had been part of coalitions for much longer, though in the main they would be absorbed into the Conservative party in the early decades of this book. The party emerged from the war at rock bottom, so the only way was up.

Several of the contributors will be familiar to readers of Liberator – Duncan Brack, Alan Butt Philip, Vince Cable, Roy Douglas, Richard Grayson, David Howarth and Steve Webb. Others from the academic world may also be familiar. Roy Douglas kicks off with classical liberalism, a thorough account of a strain that, he surmises, had it been better contained within the party, might have spared us the neoliberal exercises of Thatcherism – an intriguing hypothesis.

Mark Garnett, an academic, has to field the centre, though this is not in the sense of a 'centre party', rather the attempts of the party machine to balance the supposed disparity of the fringes. Speaking from the fringe, I have always been a 'long slog' rather than a 'quick fix' man and the experience of 43 of the years of this book, in my view, bear me out. Among the casualties of the quick fix

approach are otherwise excellent leaders in Charles Kennedy and Menzies Campbell. Some of the conspirators burnt themselves on their own pyre, none of which was much good to the party in its public or private personas.

Richard Grayson's account of social liberalism will be particularly familiar to readers and reflects some of the uncertainties of that strain in its focus on the minutiae of policy. Since this has been the dominant trend in the parties throughout the period covered by the book, it is perhaps harder to disaggregate, and the second section 'Themes and Issues' in many ways amplifies Grayson's contribution. There is nothing controversial in Matt Cole's account of constitutional reform or Alan Butt Philip's internationalism.

Little is said of the residual Liberal Party formed after the merger with the Social Democrats. There is (in practice) little difference between the two parties on most issues and members not infrequently sit in the same groups in local government. Alan might have raised Europe, however, where the confederal approach that the post-1988 Liberal Party has adopted provided an analysis that sought to overcome problems of the monolithic bureaucracy that the EU had become.

While I think that this was an attempt to be different, it was, as Liberator pointed out at the time, a train of thought, which might have been fruitfully picked up by the Lib Dems.

Russell Deacon's analysis of the hydra-headed decentralisation could have been better informed. Particularly in the new context of localism, the party needs to look at some of the experiments – Tower Hamlets especially – and see what was right about them, and perhaps also get a better understanding of how to deal with difficulties that invariably occur at the coalface of politics. There were, of course, other agendas.

Duncan Brack makes the obvious point that Liberals look at the economy in terms of political economy, and cannot dissociate ends from means. Bruce Pilbeam looks at the plethora of social and moral issues, warts and all. He is right to point out that care must be taken not to abandon "liberal inclinations in favour of seeking control… of that which [we] disapprove". I don't see how the elevation of animals' wellbeing lowers the status of human beings, however.

Andrew Russell's analysis of political strategy (the summaries of Cable, Howarth and Webb not withstanding) makes an intriguing conclusion. If the book had made a prediction, it might have hinted at a Lib-Lab coalition, though I'm not sure why anyone should confuse the social-conservatism of New Labour with social liberalism. Strategy has largely been dominated by quick fixes, none of which have got us where their proponents had expected to.

If there is a criticism of the book, it is in seeking divisions within the parties – chiefly economic vs. social. Now it might be the case that, within the international Liberal family, the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats have been closer to, for example, D66 than the VVD in the Netherlands, but within the local arena, disappointing as the press may find it, we all get along very well together.

Hickson's contributors also overstate the question that many Young Liberals in the 1960s and 1970s were not Liberals at all. Political opinion is perhaps more fluid in youth and it is perhaps easier to enter into debate. Throughout the last century, there was a movement of Liberals into other parties – arguably making Labour governments electable in the first half. Rather than losing their ideological commitment towards Liberalism, it was often more a matter of lack of opportunity for advancement within the party that moved these people on.

One or two sources might have been referred to – Ralf Dahrendorf's 1974 Reith lecture gave a theoretical base to much Liberal thinking of the time, for example. It might have made more impact if it had appeared in print sooner. Some of the Gladstone Club's publications may have given depth to some contributions, though only in detail.

This is a valuable book, encompassing a distinct period in Liberal history and becoming a useful point of reference. Put it on your shelf and refer to it when you think Clegg has dropped a clanger.

Stewart Rayment

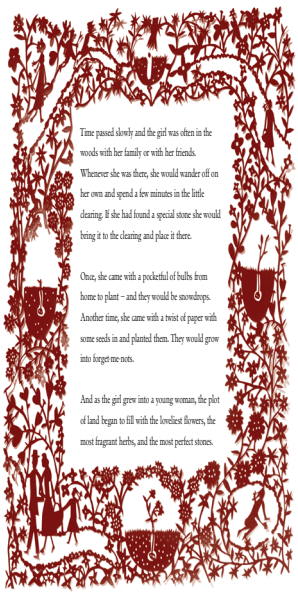
Liberator has negotiated a 50% reduction, enabling readers to buy this book for £30 plus p&p (£3 for first book, £1 for each additional copy). Make cheques payable to 'NBN International', with a note saying that you're a Liberator subscriber, and send to: Orders, NBN International, 10 Thornbury Road, Plymouth, PL6 7PP.

The Gift by Carol Ann Duffy, illustrated by Rob Ryan Barefoot Books 2010 £10.99

Barefoot Books is renowned for its use of slightly quirky media. Rob Ryan cuts up bits of paper (mysteriously appearing in Liberator 343 without this review). His collaboration with Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy is typical of Barefoot's usually beautiful work. Indeed, I'd go so far as to say that, in this one, Barefoot has excelled. I love the way the images are allowed to create shadows.

The story is quite simple; a girl wishes that she could be buried in a particular plot of land, and this goes on to inspire her throughout the cycle of her creative life. The story is enchanting by itself, but Ryan's scissors render it magical.

Stewart Rayment



Lord Bonkers' Diary

One of my proudest boasts is that I was among the first people to grasp that the moving television was here to stay. The investments I made in those early days proved gratifyingly profitable – whoever it was who described commercial television as "a licence to print money" was not so far off the mark. It happens that we Bonkers know all about licences to print money, for we were granted just such a one by George II after an engraving of him in circumstances that might be open to unfortunate misinterpretation happened to come into our possession; the Great Rutland Inflation of 1752 taught us that such privileges must be handled responsibly.

My experience of those early years of television was altogether happier...

******

Few now will remember him, but for a time there was no performer more popular than Richard Grayson. From *Shut That Door!* through *Liberals, International Relations and Appeasement* to *The Generation Game*, he appeared in an interrupted stream of hit shows. His catchphrases were on everyone's lips: "Look at the muck on 'ere," "Seems like a nice boy" and (an acid comment on the quality of some *Focus* leaflets) "The things I've had through my letterbox." Best of all were the hilarious characters he invented: Slack Alice, Apricot Lil, L.T. Hobhouse, Everard Farquharson, T.H. Green. How we laughed!

Today, Grayson is Professor of Twentieth Century History at Goldsmiths, University of London. It is funny how things turn out.

******

The Black and White Minstrels get a bad press these days. As they launched Mr Lenny Henry upon an unsuspecting and, in large part, innocent world, I suppose they rather deserve it. (Mind you, Henry went on to marry the comedy duo French & Saunders, so deserves our sympathy more than our condemnation). However, I must record that the Minstrels were mustard keen cricketers and that my XI's fixture against them was the highlight of many a summer. The details of those games have rather faded into the mist, but I do recall one of the TV Toppers taking a good running catch to dismiss Wallace Lawler when he seemed well set.

I am sorry to report that our relations soured in 1969 when, let down at the last minute by the touring West Indians, I prevailed upon the Minstrels to play in their stead. The crowd saw through this ruse distressingly quickly and I was obliged to return all of the gate money to placate them. Had the Minstrels not still insisted upon receiving their match fee, I should probably not have written my ground-breaking and influential article on racism in popular entertainment for the Manchester Guardian that autumn.

******

Not every moving television programme meets with the success it deserves. In the early days of the Rutland ITV franchise, we screened an hilarious comedy series (*On the Throne*) based upon the Abdication crisis. Sid James made a fine George V, with lovely Peggy Mount playing Queen Mary; there were also roles for such sterling actors as Julian Orchard and Hugh Lloyd. The outstanding figure, however, was a newcomer by the name of Ronnie Barker, who captured the stutter of the Duke of York (who became George VI in the course of the series) down to a T.

Yet it proved impossible to commission a second series when the Queen Mother let it be known that she did not care for the programme one bit. Yet I remember thinking at the time that Pat Coombs's portrayal of her was distinctly charitable.

******

One cannot spend all one's time reminiscing about the golden years of televison: every day, there are affairs of state and on the Estate that demand my attention. This afternoon, I ride over to Uppingham where last year three children gathering kindling in King's Wood had a vision of Nancy Seear. They maintained their story stoutly even under close questioning from Cardinals sent from Hebden Bridge and, when news came of Nancy's face being seen in the seeds of an aubergine sold on Leicester Market, it was clear they were telling the truth.

The purpose of today's meeting is to choose the design of the chapel that is to be built on the spot where the Blessed Nancy appeared to the children. As the debate threatens to drag on rather, I produce some drawings I happen to have brought with me and proceedings are soon concluded.

******

The telephone is brought to me and at the other end of the line I find one of my friends from Liberals Against Choice. "It's this Big Society thing," he says. "We don't like it at all." "What you should do then," I reply, "is all join together to oppose it." He goes away happy, but calls again later in the day: "We've talked about it and we've decided that we want someone to oppose the Big Society for us."

******

You are no doubt wondering how I am getting on as Minister for Outer Space in the Coalition Government. I flatter myself that I am doing Rather Well. For instance, I found that, if you give them a free hand, those civil servant wallahs will simply weigh you down with reports, memoranda and other beastly paperwork. I have put a stop to that by giving the firm instruction that my Red Boxes are to be closed at 10 a.m. sharp. One has to show who is that master, that is all – it is rather like training a fox terrier.

Some of my Liberal friends worry that we are losing our radical edge by aligning ourselves with our traditional enemies the Conservatives (or "the spawn of Beelzebub," as I described them in a trenchant *High Leicestershire Radical* editorial just before the general election). Two such Liberals – jolly girls by the name of Holly and Heidi, as it happens – came along to a recent surgery of mine (as well as being a minister, I am councillor for the Bonkers Hall Ward) to express their fears.

I put their minds at rest by telling them how I and my fellow Liberal Democrat minsters are fighting our corner. On reflection, my observations fell on the fruity side of candour ("Can I be very frank with you? I have a nuclear option ... and if that little squit Osborne doesn't mend his ways I shall launch Rutland's independent deterrent towards 11 Downing Street.") As, however, I can be confident that these remarks will go no further, that hardly matters.

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