

liberator



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Cover Picture - Mark Smulian & Christy Lawrance

COMMENTARY

LOST IN THE DESERT?

Asked how long involvement in Libya might last, the Liberal Democrat armed forces minister Nick Harvey replied: "How long is a piece of string?"

Whether this was a slip of the tongue or a piece of calculated frankness, it sounds alarmingly spot on.

With Gaddafi's forces threatening to slaughter the population of eastern Libya, the rest of the world could hardly stand by and watch. Had this carnage happened, it would have emboldened other Arab despots to resort to savage repression.

The better way would have been if, following the Arab League's vote for a no-fly zone, Arab air forces had enforced it, but the League was longer on words than deeds.

Unlike the Iraq war, the Libya action has United Nations backing, and is being undertaken in response to an emergency rather than an American whim to depose a regime that was doing nothing it hadn't been doing for years.

But there is, as Harvey's remark implied, no obvious longer-term plan and no guaranteed way in which this will not end up with British or other NATO troops on the ground.

For a start, at the time of writing, no-one appears to know who or what the rebels in eastern Libya really are, or even who leads them, or whether they have the military capability to take and hold the country, let alone what sort of Libya they wish to create.

We don't even yet know what will emerge in the more open Egypt and Tunisia, and they were countries with large organised civil societies, armed forces that refused to fire on civilians and opposition parties that even the old regimes permitted to operate to some extent.

In Libya, where none of those conditions apply, there is at least a strong chance of a long-term British involvement in air, sea and maybe land, unless Gaddafi is quickly and comprehensively defeated and the country can be handed over to some other, stable government.

If that doesn't happen, NATO could end up protecting rebel held areas more or less indefinitely, or else find itself forced to fight on land on behalf of people who it hardly knows and whose objectives and capabilities are unclear.

Would the UK public, struggling under the effects of spending cuts, stand the cost of a long military engagement of limited relevance to itself?

Unlike most military actions in their initial stages, opinion polls already show a majority against this one, and support is hardly likely to grow if the UK becomes bogged down in yet another indefinite desert war with hazy objectives.

The immediate action to halt a massacre in Benghazi was worthwhile. But taking sides in an indefinite civil war in Libya, in addition to Afghanistan, will undoubtedly before long stoke resentment at western interference in the Middle East and waste yet more lives and money in an unwinnable conflict.

Entry routes to conflicts are always easy to find. The government needs to know what its exit route is.

That poll finding shows the long-term effect of public resentment at the Iraq war. The country no longer wants to be the world's policeman, however appealing some politicians may find it to pose in that role.

THE ONLY WAY TO VOTE

The 5 May referendum is the first time since the slow spread of wider suffrage in the nineteenth century that there has been a real chance to change the voting system in the UK.

The Alternative Vote may not be strictly proportional, or the system that Liberal Democrats want in an ideal world, but it offers a parliament whose composition would better reflect what voters want.

It would also break the grip of safe seats in most places, and open the way to new alignments in politics.

So this is hardly the time for the proportional representation flat-earthers to make the best the enemy of the good.

If the referendum is lost, it is frankly inconceivable that first-past-the-post would deliver some combination of circumstances in which another referendum on electoral reform of any kind would be held for a generation.

Even if it did, it is unlikely that STV would be on the ballot paper for the same reasons that it isn't now – no other party would wear it for Westminster elections and, unlike AV, it is difficult to explain to the public.

If AV passes, it might open the way to further reforms. If it doesn't, further reforms are off the table for the lifetimes of most people now voting. It really is no contest; we need that 'yes' vote.

And to those on the left who think that voting 'no' will somehow 'punish' Nick Clegg – grow up.

AV was Labour policy at the last election and is supported by Labour leader Ed Miliband, who can see (unlike some of his followers) that he is at least as likely as the Lib Dems to need a different electoral system to remove the threat of long-term Tory majorities gained on a minority vote under first-past-the-post.

RADICAL BULLETIN

MIDSTREAM HORSES

There is no obvious precedent for a conference debate so one-sidedly opposed to the Lib Dem leadership as that at Sheffield on the government's proposed changes to the National Health Service.

The government's proposals are neither Liberal Democrat policy nor in the coalition agreement (and, for that matter, are not Conservative policy either). The conference therefore felt no inhibition about saying what it thought.

And it thought that health minister Paul Burstow was talking rubbish. Burstow was unwise to put up a motion that said, in effect, that the government's proposals were perfect, and he might have expected a tough debate. This, though, was a massacre.

As Evan Harris, John Pugh, John Alderdice, Andrew George and Shirley Williams rubbished the government's plans to loud applause, it became plainly obvious that the two hostile amendments would be passed easily.

Then something strange happened. Richard Kemp, summing up for the motion, said that the mover (i.e. Burstow) wished to accept both amendments. This might seem odd, given that one of them effectively trashed Burstow's position. Kemp said later, however, that Burstow had decided to accept both amendments the previous day. Kemp added he had been surprised Burstow didn't say so in his proposing speech.

If Burstow had accepted the amendments at the outset, it would have taken the heat out of the debate and made it look less like he had been slaughtered by the conference. Did he simply forget this apparently rather important part of his speech?

TRIPLES ALL ROUND

When a body makes a ruling, it is customary for it to announce that it has done so and state its reasons. Not, it seems, when the body in question is the Liberal Democrats' Federal Appeals Panel, which has taken it upon itself to declare the 'triple lock' unconstitutional.

The 'triple lock' was originally agreed by conference in Spring 1998 at the height of Paddy Ashdown's pro-Blair madness, as a means to prevent him sacrificing the party's independence, an intention of which he was then widely suspected.

It required specified majorities of the parliamentary party, the federal executive and the conference for any changes that would inhibit the party's independence and freedom of political action.

Having duly restrained Ashdown, the mechanism was forgotten about for twelve years until last May, when it was used to seek and secure majorities of MPs, the FE and a special conference for the coalition agreement. Indeed, far from seeing it as an

encumbrance, Nick Clegg appeared to grasp that the triple lock would enhance his authority, since the party at every level would have explicitly endorsed the coalition deal. The triple lock would also make it harder to unpick the deal later.

But somebody in the party's South East region wasn't happy. 'Somebody', because the FAP declines to name the person who sought a ruling from it on whether the triple lock was constitutional.

Even more remarkable, not least in a party that prides itself on its commitment to openness, it drew no attention to its ruling and the Federal Conference Committee was told that it was confidential.

This arose when the Social Liberal Forum sponsored an amendment, which ultimately appeared in Evan Harris's name, calling for a formal mechanism to approve any 'coalition agreement part 2'.

This was ruled out by the FCC and was debated only because the movers appealed successfully. A motion for a 'triple lock' on policy that is out of kilter with anything agreed by conference was also rejected.

When its sponsors asked why, they were told that, during the second half of 2010, the FAP (at that point chaired by Philip Goldenberg) heard an appeal from 'an officer of the south east region' and had ruled that the triple lock motion agreed in 1998 was unconstitutional.

This means that, had the SLF/Harris amendment not been passed, there would now be no process by which a renewed coalition agreement or, in theory, any other set of agreements affecting the party's independence, could be agreed.

This is starting to exercise various party bodies, though the leadership appears relaxed about any 'coalition agreement part 2' being affirmed both by FPC and by conference during 2012.

Constitutional amendments to reinstate the triple lock are expected in the autumn.

ANGELS ON A PINHEAD

The party leadership was said to be relaxed about Evan Harris's amendment (referred to above) to the strategy motion at Sheffield, which dealt broadly with mechanisms to ensure the party's policy-making independence in the coalition.

It was particularly relaxed about the bit that said: "Conference calls for there to be appropriate consultation through the Federal Executive and Federal Policy Committee when significant new Government policies are proposed which are not included in the coalition agreement and which conflict with Liberal Democrat policy or principles."

The problem is not just that 'appropriate' and 'significant' are open to interpretative get-outs.

It's 'when' that is the problem. Does it mean 'when the government proposes these policies in public' or

does it mean ‘when these policies start to be prepared within government’? If the former, it gives the party committees the chance to start a public fight only once things have been announced. No doubt those who specialise in these things will have an hour or so of fun trying to define when ‘when’ is ‘when’.

MUSICAL CHAIRS

What a difference nine months can make. On 5 July last year, Nick Clegg said of the launch of the Liberal Democrats’ Fairer Votes Campaign: “I am delighted that John Sharkey has accepted this role. This is a vital campaign for the country and I can’t think of a better person than John to run it for the Liberal Democrats.”

Yet on 12 March, Clegg said: “I am delighted that Tim [Farron] will be spearheading our campaign for a Yes to Fairer Votes.”

Since Clegg thinks highly enough of Sharkey to sling him a peerage, it seems unlikely that he would forget having appointed him in July to the same post to which he has now appointed Farron.

So what are Farron and/or Sharkey in charge of? Little has been heard of the Lib Dem ‘yes’ campaign but the non-party campaign has been busy building cross-party alliances. One such would have been a public meeting addressed by former Lib Dem leader Charles Kennedy, Labour leader Ed Miliband and Green leader Caroline Lucas.

Clegg was miffed not to be invited, but since ‘yes’ campaign leaders view his presence as counter-productive because of his self-inflicted unpopularity, they did not want him there.

So Clegg decide to have his own ‘yes’ campaign, and launched it headed by Farron, though what it will do remains to be seen. What happened to the one headed by Sharkey remains mysterious.

LONDON KILLS ME

At least two of the potential contenders to be the Liberal Democrat candidate for mayor of London have chosen unusual campaign strategies.

Lembit Öpik’s latest piece of toe-curling publicity has been a short film in which he, for little obvious reason, acts out the opening sequence of the 1970s sitcom Citizen Smith. Why he wishes to emulate a fictional character who was sad loser, with a handful of sad loser followers, is a matter for conjecture.

Meanwhile Paddy Streeter decided to interrupt an anti-cuts speaker in the middle of Sheffield to put the Lib Dem case and had to be escorted away for his own safety by police.

Streeter has already taken legal action over London region’s refusal to approve him as a mayoral candidate (Liberator 342) and now plans to do so again, citing a body he called ‘the selectorate’ as having “blackballed me”. He has claimed that one member of this body, believed to be the regional candidates committee, told him: “All men have Asperger’s Syndrome,” a remark whose context is not obvious.

Another contender briefly appeared in the form of Dominic Carman, who fought Barking at last year’s general election and Barnsley Central in the recent by-election. He declared his candidacy, only to withdraw a few days later when he realised how much time and money the campaign would cost.

Also, what can that creaking sound be? Why, it’s

assembly member Mike Tuffrey’s arm being twisted!

BOUNDARY SCORED

An extraordinary missive has gone to Lib Dem local parties in the North West from the regional executive.

It reads: “It will be a matter for disciplinary action for any local party; Lib Dem council; council group; individual party member etc to submit proposals to the boundary commission other than via the nw regional office... and it is expected that ALL Regional Parties will pass a similar resolution.”

It delphicly adds: “The Regional Executive recognised that this is a high handed and illiberal directive and was sorry for it.”

So why issue it? It seems that someone got it into their heads that Liam Pennington, who annoyed the party by being elected a councillor in Preston and then resigning within days, was going to make his own submission and decided on overkill.

Nothing in these terms has been heard from other regional parties.

PAPER TIGERS

Vince Cable’s unguarded comments about “declaring war” on press baron Rupert Murdoch saw him stripped of powers over media regulation in December, but what would he actually have done?

We will never know, but presumably it would have been more than extract a few worthless assurances, as culture secretary Jeremy Hunt has done.

To get his hands on the whole of BSkyB, Murdoch has merely had to put the loss-making Sky News into an arm’s-length company, overseen by a ‘corporate governance and editorial committee’, an arrangement that will no doubt curb him as effectively as have the independent directors imposed on the Times by the Thatcher government thirty years ago.

Not that Lib Dem MPs have been allowed to express such doubts. A standard letter prepared for their convenience states: “There will be legally binding agreements that mean, in effect, News Corporation will have no control over the editorial content of Sky News nor will it be able to hire and fire senior staff. Additionally, and unlike at present, a Corporate Governance and Editorial Committee will be created to ensure compliance with the principles of editorial independence and integrity in news reporting.”

It concludes: “However, given details of and the legally binding nature of the proposed deal, if it goes ahead it means that Rupert Murdoch and News Corp will have less influence and control over news and current affairs than they do at present.” Oh yeah?

ANIMAL CRACKERS

One might have thought that Mark Oaten would face hard times after his exposure in 2006 for his unusual recreations.

But no, there is someone who wants him. He has taken the helm of the International Fur Trade Federation (slogan “fur for fashion, fun and style”) as its new chief executive.

No doubt seals, mink and sables will all benefit from Oaten’s wealth of experience. Indeed, it is said that, in parts of the UK, beavers are making a comeback.

DANGER STALKS A DAMAGED PARTY

The party has been taken over by opportunistic careerists, and its real supporters must act to save it, says Adrian Sanders

The Daily Telegraph recently published one of its usually scurrilous stories, stating that Nick Clegg had ordered a radical re-branding of the party including a new logo, new name and new approach, amid further rumours that ‘senior’ Lib Dems were plotting a coup.

Apart from the usual problem of being almost entirely untrue and based on anonymous sources, the story posed a very prescient point. The Liberal Democrats are in trouble.

The problem is not wholly electoral. Council by-elections where we have a track record and work hard show we can hold our vote. The May elections might not be the Armageddon some have predicted for the party. Certainly, canvassing in my patch looks better than the last full-council elections in 2007.

It is more a crisis of confidence and image, both within and without the party, and this will be far more damaging in the long term.

Our grassroots activists are keen, idealistic and uncompromising. It was inevitable that any coalition would raise a level of discontent; it simply has so many more political ramifications than entering coalition at local authority level – although it is there that you will find the professional advice based on experience for how the leadership should be operating nationally in order for the party to survive to the next election.

We could have done so much more to explain what we were doing, highlight the successes, and more importantly show that we were fighting for what our members and voters believe in.

IRREVOCABLY DAMAGED

We have also irrevocably damaged our public image. Public perception is hard to build up but very easy to lose; it is also remarkably potent, far more so than having fair and equitable policies or decent, upstanding candidates. We have spent more than 20 years building up an image of trust, of straight talking, of looking for radical policies that go to the heart of the social problems that have befuddled previous governments, and most importantly of listening to and working with people at a local level.

The way the party took to the coalition and the way it has behaved in government have shattered all of this and we now face the brutal realisation that we have fractured our core vote, lost a generation of young voters, and alienated thousands of tactical voters in seats where it makes the difference between electoral success or failure.

The message on the doorstep before the election was often “I support another party, but you seem to have more integrity and do more for local people so you have my vote.” Now it is “I used to vote for you, you still work hard for your local area, but you are discredited

and lied just like the rest of them.”

These people can be won back where we are able to communicate with them on a regular basis. It’s the tens of millions of voters we have no contact with, who get their political information from our opponents or their supporting newspapers, who are presumably behind the opinion polls showing us losing up to two-thirds of our support since the general election.

This is what it comes down to. The televised party leader debates in April last year showed the potency of offering something that wasn’t just like the rest. Our campaign wasn’t planned or run well enough to capitalise on this bounce and our actions after the election showed that, rather surprisingly, we were just like the other parties.

Better organisation on the ground, planned months and years out from the election, might have seen us gain rather than lose seats.

Indeed, it seems like the leadership has done all it can to copy the method of governance of Labour and the Conservatives.

Our grassroots has been effectively divorced from having input into what the party leadership does. What our ministers do is often driven by special advisers, who never have to face an electorate, and while some are very good and understand this, others seem to have a cosier relationship with journalists than the parliamentary party.

INTO DISARRAY

It is as if we had never even thought a coalition would occur before one actually arrived. This is astonishing; while some of us have always viewed the march to Downing Street as a slow, street by street, ward by ward, council by council, constituency by constituency battle for an eventual majority in the House of Commons, those who never believed in community politics and couldn’t ever imagine a majority Lib Dem government were totally unprepared; the party machinery was thrown into disarray, and it has still not recovered.

There were too many consequences of this. One was not having a plan for the loss of Short money that paid for Liberal Democrat policy research and the ongoing ability to challenge a better resourced Conservative or Labour half of any coalition. Another was parliamentary party unity; we managed to split almost four ways on tuition fees and, to come, we have the challenge of unity over an NHS policy that should never have seen the light of day.

The lack of engagement between leadership and party is of some concern; I don’t believe the leader spoke to our ministers in the Foreign Office or Ministry of Defence before going for intervention in Libya, let alone sought out opinion among us humble

backbenchers before any decisions were made.

Not that parliamentary party meetings are fit for such a purpose. They are not much of a forum for debate given the constraints on the leader's time. Questions are taken three or more at a time, with the leader's answers rarely addressing the detail of the expressed concerns. Consultations when they occur are merely presentations on which MPs can comment. I'm sure there have been occasions when the parliamentary party has changed government policy since May 2010, it's just that I can't recall any.

With no debate, the party strategy of distancing itself from the 'yes' campaign so that it was not seen as a Lib Dem campaign has been U-turned in panic just weeks before the poll, on the orders of those who oversaw our poor general election campaign and recent disastrous parliamentary by-election performances.

Since the sidelining of Chris Rennard, the talented campaigners in Cowley Street, the regions and Hebden Bridge must feel like the proverbial lions led by donkeys.

How on earth do we recover from this seemingly downward spiral?

The Telegraph suggests re-branding, but re-branding is what has got us into trouble. Over recent years, our leaflets have moved from yellow or gold to Tory turquoise, our strategy has moved from ground war to air war, and our leadership has gone from principled long-term party servants to more pragmatic, dare I say it, opportunistic careerists.

We don't need to re-brand all of this, we need to sweep it away and return to what the party is all about. A devolutionist, anti-authoritarian, internationalist, pro-environment, fair-tax, socially

“We have fractured our core vote, lost a generation of young voters, and alienated thousands of tactical voters”

progressive Liberal Party in the tradition of Beveridge and Keynes, offering a non-socialist alternative to the Tories and campaigning for a society where none are enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity.

We need the leadership to start acting like the leadership of an independent political party that just happens to be in coalition, not the leadership of a coalition that seems to forget it has an independent political party to take into

consideration.

We need to fight for our backbenchers' rights to challenge legislation from the Liberal Democrat perspective, submit amendments and force them to the vote where appropriate.

We need to support Lib Dem MPs with private member's bills aimed at saving lives, not cave in to Tory ideological anti-regulation objections.

We must stop acting as if we are in awe of the Tories. We need to remember, as I have written before, that the Tories need us to enable them to govern far more than we need to be in government.

The real challenge is that we seem to have let our party be taken over by a culture that has diluted our basic principles. In the eyes of the public, we have misplaced our integrity and lost our way.

It really has come to something that a 'yes' vote for an electoral system the party doesn't support might be viewed by some as a vote of confidence in the leader. I doubt that's the kind of rebranding those behind the Telegraph story had in mind, but it's where their actions could lead us.

Adrian Sanders MP describes himself as having “represented Torbay in the Liberal interest since 1997”

The Social Liberal Forum

Works to help the party develop – as a priority – a distinctive, radical and progressive set of policies and manifesto for the next election

Rejects any electoral pacts with any party and any pre-election preference for future working with any other party

Seeks to help create and communicate a distinctive Liberal Democrat position on government policies and their implementation

Opposes the adoption of any non-progressive or illiberal policies by the coalition

Campaigns to maintain the internal democracy, transparency and vitality of the Liberal Democrats as an independent political party

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TOO MUCH LANSLEY CAN DAMAGE YOUR HEALTH

John Bryant says the resolution at the Liberal Democrat spring conference might stimulate some useful changes to the Health and Social Care Bill, but the damage could already have been done

The Liberal Democrat spring conference in Sheffield was much enlivened by a first class debate on a motion entitled 'Updating the NHS: Personal and Local'.

Liberal Democrat health minister Paul Burstow was forced to accept two amendments to avoid the humiliation of losing a vote by an overwhelming margin. Both amendments in their different ways aimed to increase the accountability of local institutions and were in line with the party's manifesto commitment to democratise local primary care trusts (PCTs).

Strengthening the role of scrutiny by local councils had been a message heard loud and clear by our health minister in official submissions from local authorities to the earlier White Paper and from individual councillors (like myself) at the Liverpool conference.

Paul has listened to this point and the Health and Social Care Bill now does provide greater scope for scrutiny as a separate function from that envisaged by Health and Wellbeing Boards within councils. The motion at conference stressed this by welcoming the proposals to enable local authorities effectively to scrutinise "any provider of any taxpayer funded health services". So far, so good.

The amendments at conference wanted to strengthen all this further by making sure that democratically elected individuals were involved in every stage, not just in scrutiny but also through 'councillor-led' Health and Well Being Boards and with places on GP commissioning consortia.

The debate also highlighted a widely shared hostility to the concept of 'any willing provider', which is possibly the most controversial concept in the Bill. There is a great concern that private operators will cherry-pick the routine operations to make money out of high volume work, leaving complex and serious conditions to be catered for in the public sector.

The last Labour government had already promoted this private sector entryism into the health market by guaranteeing fees to private operators that were above the standard tariffs agreed for NHS hospitals. The conference was relieved when this was criticised by Paul Burstow but one has to remember that the fixed tariff system covers only around 30% of current procedures, so there is still room for the profiteers from the private sector to make money in any newly created health market.

Openness and transparency was another theme highlighted by the amendment sponsored by the Social Liberal Forum. This called for meetings of

GP consortia to be open to the public. But one has to remember in calling for changes of this sort that we have secretive GP practices now. Each practice acts as a separately traded business, with no openness regarding its business operations. While general practice accounts need to be registered with their local PCT, they are private and confidential and no one really knows how much the partners are paying themselves or how much they are re-investing in their practice facilities, except the PCT, which is not at liberty to reveal all. (There may be some principled GPs in the country who are willing to reveal their accounts but it is not the norm in my part of London).

Paul Burstow and Nick Clegg might well feel emboldened by the clear messages from conference to seek major changes to the Bill, bearing in mind this top down reorganisation was specifically ruled out by the Coalition Agreement, but I fear the real damage to our health service has already been done by another decision of the Secretary of State, which I presume had Paul Burstow's blessing.

SLASH AND BURN

My local PCT in Camden was ordered by Andrew Lansley to make 54% cuts in management costs this year. This meant that, by the end of the financial year about to close this March, 54% of the staff were to be made redundant. There would be some natural wastage and some voluntary redundancies, of course. But anyone reading this with any experience of local government efficiency savings, where 10% cuts in staff in one go are just about manageable, could only describe cutting out half your staff in one go as 'slash and burn' on an epic scale.

There are several risks involved in doing this. Some staff with commissioning experience might jump ship and start working for the 'any willing providers', helping them to find the corners to cut. Others might be so disheartened by yet another health reorganisation that they seek employment in another field entirely or retire to look after their gardens, their expertise lost forever.

The remaining staff are required to soldier on with the specific task of helping the GP commissioners take on their responsibilities while at the same time looking forward to losing their own jobs by 2013, which is hardly a great incentive to go the extra mile.

Health is, if anything, a people business. For successful commissioning, we need to have the right people with the right skills carrying out the right tasks to secure good and improving health outcomes, while

achieving good value for the taxpayer.

This will not be achieved in my view by a bunch of well-meaning GPs with little training, without a team of experienced commissioning staff who know and understand the intricacies of health contracts. What cannot be guaranteed by this imposed revolution from the centre is that we will end up with commissioning teams that secure both improved health outcomes for patients and

good value for the taxpayer, because the transfer of the right people in an orderly fashion from the PCTs to the GP consortia is not guaranteed.

It does not matter if the final Bill passed by Parliament establishes that the award of contracts will be on quality rather than cost, because if the contract specification is not written correctly the snags will emerge after the contracts are in place.

Anyone with local government experience will know that outsourcing contracts for services like refuse collection and recycling, or housing maintenance, is fraught with dangers. The so-called best value contractor will often be commissioned but, when the operation appears not to be working, the contractor nearly always has an excuse along the lines of, "what you have now requested is not in the contract but we can now do it for you, but it will cost you extra..."

Having councillors added to commissioning boards might bring some worldly wisdom to these decisions, but it is whether commissioners secure the expertise of those who can write watertight contracts that will determine whether this whole experiment will succeed or fail, and with half the available staff already lost from PCTs, I think the die is already cast.

FRAUGHT WITH DIFFICULTY

Another area fraught with difficulty is the way in which specialist and low volume treatments will be commissioned in the future. In recent years in London, the treatment of cardiac arrests, major trauma and strokes has been significantly improved through commissioning on a regional basis. For example, one of the great success stories now emerging demonstrates that creating eight Hyper-Acute Stroke Units in the capital has radically improved survival rates. The proposals were developed by Healthcare for London, an offshoot of the strategic health authority, which was answerable to the joint committee of PCTs in London and scrutinised by a pan-London Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (JHOSC) on which I served as Camden's representative.

How will proposals for improving specialist acute services be developed in the future? It may be that the NHS Commissioning Board might create local outposts to lead on these developments, but where will the boundaries lie with GP commissioning consortia? And how will these developments be scrutinised? Local authorities are increasingly stretched for resources to undertake their scrutiny duties as they are now. If the government is serious about strengthening scrutiny,

“Do we as Liberals in government for the first time in 70 years want our first-term legacy to be a reasonably managed muddle?”

and creating quality pathways for acute services, then there is more work to be done and more resources are needed.

I suppose the summary of what I am saying is that if the conference decisions lead to real improvements to the Bill, then that is to be welcomed. But, as the saying goes, "if I wanted to get there, I wouldn't have started from here". Sacking half of the PCT staff before embarking on this change

to the commissioning arrangements was clearly the wrong step in the wrong direction at the wrong time.

We might be able to muddle through. The NHS has made great improvements in the past, often despite the meddling of secretaries of state and not because of them, but does the service have the capacity to do this one more time?

And do we as Liberals in government for the first time in 70 years want our first-term legacy to be a reasonably managed muddle?

John Bryant has been a member of the Liberator Collective as 'William Tranby' for 20 years. He is a Camden councillor and chair of its Health Scrutiny Committee, and vice-chair of the North Central London JHOSC)

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OUR BARNSLEY CHOP

The Barnsley Central by-election was awful, but Geoff Reid had been there before

How did we get from Oldham to Barnsley? These two North of England Labour holds were as different as Pennine chalk and Wensleydale cheese. So were the results.

But there were similarities. They were both triggered by Labour MPs falling foul of the law. We had very strong candidates in both, albeit both white males. And our local party in Bradford pioneered the process of labelling an outsourced split Freepost in both.

In 1983, when I was the general election candidate for Barnsley Central, we had enough volunteers to address leaflets by hand to every household; no unaddressed freepost then! I considered myself a good candidate for hopeless northern seats. In the event, we secured just over 7,000 votes to claim our traditional place just behind the Conservative, with both opposition candidates more than 14,000 behind the Labour MP. His successor avoided defeat by a still impregnable majority of 11,093 in 2010, when we came six votes ahead of the Tory with UKIP very nearly saving its deposit.

Barnsley Central, however, is a very conservative Labour seat. I struggled to persuade local people that there was meaningful life beyond Junction 37 on the M1. During the Falklands episode, I watched a strong vote in a target council ward melt away back to Labour, which provided the comfort blanket at a time of crisis.

Actually, my 19.2% in 1983 was our highest share of the vote in Barnsley Central or the former Barnsley seat between 1931 and 2011. The 1983 boundary changes did us no favours, but I had some advantages. This was Labour's worst performance during the Alliance's peak performance nationally, and there were substantial Labour abstentions in a town with a very right-wing MP in a party led by Michael Foot.

As a Methodist minister in a traditional Methodist area, I had something of a local profile. I worked with the town centre churches and lived across the road from the Yorkshire NUM and round the corner from Roy Mason MP. That didn't stop him wondering who I was at the count. In such territory, neither left nor right in the Labour Party has a monopoly of arrogance.

It is perhaps worth noting that our highest ever total number of votes in that 80-year period came in 1950 when, after an absence from the ballot paper since 1929, a prominent local solicitor and Methodist lay preacher got 10,779 but still more than 30,000 behind the winner.

Pre-1974, there was a respectable Liberal presence on the council, which I see as part of the old nonconformist/bloody-minded radical Pennine tradition. This was decimated in the transition to a metropolitan district. Indeed, without a strong and coherent opposition, Barnsley Met has always been more dysfunctional than most.

In the wake of the parliamentary expenses debacle, we could have predicted that any Labour MP facing criminal charges would represent a constituency that was very difficult for us. What we probably underestimated was the forgiving tendency of tribal Labour voters evident in both Oldham and Barnsley, which even manifested itself in some Labour MPs ("He may be a lawbreaker but he's our lawbreaker!").

What else can we learn from the Barnsley result? Incredibly, the box count, I am reliably informed, suggested that our strategy worked in the two wards we concentrated on. A deliberate decision not to divert professional and voluntary resources from crucial big city local defences within Yorkshire and the North East was understandable but risky. We could not have known in advance that only 452 votes would separate us from the BNP but, in view of the insularity described above and the local Sun readership, we should have expected UKIP to do well.

As Dominic Carman cogently explained in the Guardian on 10 March, in a weak constituency it is very difficult to overcome national trends. Meanwhile, that the constituency is so weak is partly down to people like me, who put a lot of effort into building up a local party and then moved on. With the benefit of hindsight, I realise that while packing up to move in 1986 I should have spared an hour to forward to the region copies of local party data as an insurance against the collapse of the local party infrastructure. Even in a low priority by-election, this could offer a starting base, which could engage local support and helpers from outside who will come to any and every by-election. We certainly should have had an accessible contact number ready well before Eric Illsley resigned.

It remains to be seen whether others outside the Labour Party in places where it matters in May will remember our by-election ranking. Perhaps in Nick Clegg's 'Alarm Clock Britain' this is a wake-up call to have a clearer and better understood strategy for by-elections in hopeless seats.

Geoff Reid is secretary of Bradford Liberal Democrats and a councillor in Bradford East

OUT OF THE PAPER BAG

Matthew Oakeshott explains why he quit as a Lib Dem Treasury spokesman over the government's deal with the banks

I've been fighting the Tories for 50 years. So, like most Liberal Democrats and almost all Liberator readers, I felt sick at the idea of doing a deal with Cameron and Osborne last May. But, like almost all my colleagues in parliament, once I saw the coalition agreement our negotiators had squeezed out of the Tories by implying we could also do a deal with Labour, I swallowed hard and backed it.

It's an amazing achievement, and proves why Chris Huhne and David Laws were worth millions in the City. A deal's a deal, and it's a great deal for Lib Dems in the circumstances of May 2010.

The foreword to the agreement promised to "ensure that fairness is at the heart of our decisions", and to "build a new economy from the rubble of the old", with "radical plans to reform our broken banking system". The very first item says "we will bring forward detailed proposals for robust action to tackle unacceptable bonuses in the banking sector", "reduce systemic risk" and "establish an independent commission to investigate separating retail and investment banking". So business and bonuses as usual on the banks was clearly not meant to be an option.

We chased the Labour government up hill and down dale for its failure to reform the banks, get a grip on bonuses, or make them lend. Vince Cable was on the front foot on this, right from the failure of Northern Rock, with George Osborne trailing behind trying desperately to keep up and the Labour government and Treasury unable to see beyond the end of their noses, in just trying to recoup our investment in RBS and Lloyds without changing the banks' behaviour.

Like Rupert Murdoch, Britain's banks have got used to being far too powerful for far too long. They started thinking the Vickers Commission was just a sop to the Lib Dems – but when we kept up constant pressure on them last year for letting the country down on lending, they started to realise we really meant it. So they got to work behind the scenes, through Oliver Letwin, with two aims: not just to try to call a truce to public criticisms – fat chance! – but much more seriously, they tried to do a backstairs deal to nobble the Vickers Report before it even appeared. Vince and Nick stamped on that idea hard once it became clear, and breaking up the banks and making them safe when Vickers reports remain our essential objective. But the banks should never have been led to believe by Tory ministers that it was worth trying that on.

I worked closely with Vince on the principles of Project Merlin, and its aims were fine – more lending to small businesses, restraint on bonuses and more disclosure on top pay packages. But, sadly, the final version just didn't deliver on any of those key aims.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Since Merlin was signed, the bonus bonanzas at Barclays and the Royal Bank of Scotland have shown us, yet again as if we didn't already know, that Britain's big

banks are run for their bosses, not their shareholders or their customers. Voluntary restraint on bankers' bonuses? That's as likely as pigs flying over Canary Wharf and it's why I said if Project Merlin was robust action on bonuses, my name is Bob Diamond.

In every other private sector industry and service, if you take pride in your product, you prosper because your clients prosper. But when you run a bank guaranteed by the British taxpayer, the top people can still collect tens of millions each when shareholders have lost half their money, dividends have been slashed, you've been fined for selling junk bonds to pensioners and you make loans to small businesses or mortgage customers as rare as hen's teeth.

Only a net lending target for small business, as Labour tried but failed to enforce on the state-owned banks, cuts any ice at all. Merlin's gross lending targets are weak and waffly with vast wriggle room. And on disclosure, many of the biggest pay packages off the board will still stay secret.

So when my old friend and leader Tom McNally told me Nick Clegg was upset at me criticising the Treasury for not being able to negotiate their way out of a paper bag, I decided I'd be happier fighting to implement the coalition agreement on the banks from the back benches.

If banks like Barclays are openly trying to be the biggest investment bank in the world on the back of a British taxpayers' guarantee, it's heads Bob Diamond wins, and tails we lose. It's high time our banks acted again as stewards of other people's money, not symbols of their own greed.

We passed an excellent emergency resolution on banks at our Sheffield Spring Conference, confirming all my concerns about Project Merlin. Let's carry it out and radically reform the banks once and for all when Vickers reports. Our economy will never be safe again till we cut them down to size.

Matthew Oakeshott was a Liberal Democrat Treasury spokesman in the House of Lords

A CLASS ACT

The Liberal Democrats rightly want more of their MPs to be women, ethnic minority, disabled or gay. Simon Titley asks why the party lacks a similar concern about social class

Another conference, another diversity debate. Last September in Liverpool, a motion proposed by Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats was torn to shreds for emphasising the rights of ethnic minorities over other considerations. This March in Sheffield, a diversity motion was passed overwhelmingly.

The successful motion provides a formula to help women, black or minority ethnic (BAME), disabled and gay people to become parliamentary candidates. But it failed to acknowledge social class, even though Nick Clegg is making social mobility a major plank of his programme in government. It seems the party is content to allow politics to become an exclusively bourgeois pursuit.

The Liberal Democrats' angst about diversity begs the question: what is the party's fundamental idea of representative politics? A health polity reflects the whole of society; it would engage and involve everyone, regardless of gender, ethnicity, class, age, disability or sexual orientation.

But, in choosing our political representatives, there are more important criteria to consider, such as values, honesty, intelligence, articulacy, dedication, hard work and empathy. Gender or ethnicity does not trump any of these qualities.

Even so, the Liberal Democrats have a problem. Only 7 of the party's 57 MPs (12%) are women. Things are better in the Lords, with 29 of the party's 96 peers (30%). Women also fare better where there are list elections, with 6 out of 12 MEPs, 2 out of 3 London Assembly members, 4 out of 6 members of the outgoing Welsh Assembly, but only 2 out of 16 members of the outgoing Scottish Parliament. Just over 30% of the party's councillors are women.

This under-representation suggests something has gone wrong – but what? So far as women candidates are concerned, while there remain some isolated cases of sexism, the basic problem is not discrimination. The number of women selected as parliamentary candidates is actually proportionately higher than the number of them on the approved list. More important than overall proportions is the proportion of women candidates in the seats that matter. At the 2010 general election, 40% of the party's target seat candidates were women and 67% of candidates in held seats where the MP was standing down were women.

The problem is rather one of supply. Not enough women are coming forward for approval. This is partly a matter of self-confidence, which the party's Campaign for Gender Balance is addressing. It is also due to the absurd demands that local parties often place on their candidates, the result of a Stakhanovite work ethic that makes it impossible for many people to combine the job of PPC with their home life and career.

And we must also face the fact that fewer women

enter politics in the first place. Why should this be so? Why are women less interested in politics than men? Whatever the explanation, it is probably the same reason why fewer women than men watch TV news and current affairs programmes (as the viewing figures attest) and why fewer women than men read newspapers or current affairs magazines (as the circulation figures attest).

The Liberal Democrats remain divided over all-women shortlists but seem increasingly attracted to the idea. It would undoubtedly increase the number of women selected. But it would be an artificial fix that doesn't tackle the root causes and solve the problem of not enough women coming forward in the first place.

With BAME candidates, the problem is different. The party has no BAME MPs, MEPs, MSPs or AMs at all. There undoubtedly is discrimination, which is due not so much to racism within the Liberal Democrats as a fear of racism in the electorate. Bluntly, there is a crude calculation by some local parties that a BAME candidate will lose votes. As with women, there is also the question of supply, since proportionately fewer members of ethnic minorities join the party, let alone apply for approval.

CLASS SNOBBERY

The question of diversity is rightly agitating the party. What we rarely hear of, though, is the question of social class. Class snobbery is not just a problem in itself. If you tackle gender or ethnic imbalance in isolation, you will undoubtedly worsen class discrimination. If you offer new opportunities to women or ethnic minorities, the women and BAME beneficiaries will tend to be more affluent people. And since any advantage given to women or ethnic minorities will disadvantage white men, the men who lose out will tend to be the least affluent. Few if any sacrifices will be made by privately-educated men. In solving one problem, the party risks exacerbating another.

The Liberal Democrats have a problem with class, which they inherited from the pre-merger Liberal Party. They believe that, because class shouldn't matter, it doesn't matter, and therefore tend to deny there is a problem. But just look at the party's MPs. About 40% are privately-educated (compared with 7% of the population as a whole).

The party's antipathy to class issues has its roots in the post-war Liberal revival, which was a product of the decline in class-consonant voting. This sort of tribal voting – when most working class people loyally voted Labour and most middle class people loyally voted Conservative – reached its peak at the 1951 general election, when 97% of the electorate voted for either Labour or the Tories. Since then, class-consonant voting has steadily declined, with the Labour-plus-

Tory vote falling to a post-war low of 65% in 2010.

The Liberal revival was due to the party's ability to exploit the electoral space opened up by the decline in class-based voting.

The party appealed to an emerging educated middle class that did not share the tribal loyalties of its parents and grandparents. Neither the Liberals nor the Liberal Democrats relied on the blind loyalty of a social class, so it is easy to see why the party lacks class consciousness and denies that class is a problem. Hence there is no check on class snobbery within the Liberal Democrats.

ACE, KING AND QUEEN

How does the English class system work? It is rather like being dealt a hand in a game of cards. As in a real game of cards, it helps if you hold the top three cards.

The 'ace' is having been privately-educated. Despite comprising only 7% of the population, the products of our so-called 'public' schools dominate politics, the civil service, the judiciary, the military, merchant banking and, increasingly, newly-prestigious spheres such as the media.

The 'king' is having been an undergraduate at Oxford or Cambridge. And since nearly 50% of Oxbridge undergraduates come from public schools, an ace is the best way to acquire the king.

The 'queen' is to come from London and the Home Counties, provided you're also middle class (growing up on a council estate in Basildon or Peckham doesn't make the grade). The automatic disdain that people from the south-east show for those from the provinces is palpable.

For the record, my social background is neither privileged nor underprivileged. Like many others born in Britain in the 1950s, I was brought up on the cusp of the upper working class and lower middle class. Unremarkable, you might think, but crucially I hold none of the top three cards. And anyone without those cards can expect to be on the receiving end of some unpleasant class prejudice, particularly if they dare to trespass on what the elite sees as its territory.

Rarely have I encountered worse snobbery than within the Liberal Democrats. The symptoms are wearily familiar; the snide put-downs, the supercilious smirks, the casual discounting of one's skills or arguments. The low point came when a 'fellow' party member once addressed me as "your sort".

More generally, I'm struck by reactions to my articles in *Liberator*. If you're a regular reader, you will know that my style is polemical and therefore controversial. The intention is to provoke and stimulate thought. Despite this, a common reaction is not an engagement with my arguments but to question my right to express an opinion at all. My participation is treated as impertinence; it would seem that I don't know my place.

The Liberal Democrats must ask themselves why they still tolerate class snobbery within their ranks, when they no longer accept sexism or racism in the party (which, indeed, would probably lead to expulsion). Because it all comes down to the same

“Liberal Democrats believe that, because class shouldn't matter, it doesn't matter”

thing: whether we believe in mutual respect.

In a just society, respect would be earned. You could earn respect over a lifetime in various ways; through your good character, your kindness and honesty, by raising a good family, by career success, through your talents and skills,

or through contributions to your local community. Likewise, you would lose respect by having the opposite attributes.

The English class system acts to neutralise these factors. Instead, it operates on the principle of an officer class. Just as a young new lieutenant expects to be saluted and called 'sir' by an experienced sergeant major twice his age, so the social elite expects automatic respect without having to earn it. Meanwhile, those not in the elite are denied respect, no matter how good or talented or hard-working they are.

To Nick Clegg's credit, he is doing something serious about social mobility. He has recognised that, for most people, their fate is settled by the time they reach the age of seven. Early learning and the pupil premium are a serious attempt to correct this problem. But English class privilege does not give up easily. Clegg faces stiff resistance from Oxford dons to his demand that the university may charge the maximum £9,000 fee only if it dramatically increases its intake of disadvantaged pupils from the state sector.

Our guiding principle should be Ralf Dahrendorf's concept of 'life chances', the social conditions that define how much individuals can realise their full potential. We should not tolerate class prejudice because the English class system is a barrier to providing equal life chances.

But the class system is deeply embedded. As another Liberal, Sir Roy Denman, put it, because Britain has had the good fortune not to have suffered a revolution or lost a war, its tragedy is that it has never had a house clearance of its establishment.

The Liberal Democrats are unlikely ever to be able to engineer that, but they can do something about the culture in their own party and their candidate selection system. If the party were serious about achieving 'balance', not just for women and ethnic minorities but also for anyone state-educated, the single most effective thing it could do would be to introduce an indefinite moratorium on adopting as candidates privately-educated white men.

But that will never happen. It will never happen because too many privileged people benefit from the present set-up. And that is why, whenever the party debates diversity, the special pleading of privileged women will always be heard over the voices of working-class men or women.

Simon Titley is a member of the *Liberator* Collective

BARRIERS OUTSIDE, AQUA WITHIN

Sheffield conference took place under siege. No wonder, since the Lib Dems vary between being unwilling to explain themselves or incapable of it, says Mark Smulian

It must have all seemed such a good idea eighteen months ago. The Lib Dem spring conference would meet in the city that its leader represents in parliament, give him favourable publicity among his constituents and followers, and do the city's Lib Dems some good in the local election run –up.

Yes, well. Confronted by an eight-foot tall metal barrier around the conference hall, enough police officers to make it look as though *they* were holding a conference in Sheffield and enough enraged demonstrators to outnumber the delegates, it seemed a less good idea.

Surely having to speak under siege in his own city was not the image Clegg wanted? And when one asks a benign looking old lady for directions and she points expansively to the conference venue and says, “you know all this is costing us two million pounds,” it seems unlikely the local election campaign will benefit greatly from the event.

An old friend lives in Sheffield and so I met some of his colleagues on the Friday evening who work at one of the city's universities. It was not a comfortable experience as a Lib Dem.

“I made the mistake of delivering leaflets for Clegg at the last election,” one said. I asked where his error lay. He replied, “I was told if he didn't get in we'd get a Tory government; well he did and we did.”

One could make all kinds of arguments about how this is a coalition government and not a Tory one, or how the parliamentary numbers didn't add up any other way, but I sensed this was not likely to be a fruitful line with people worried about their jobs in academia in the light of university cuts and the effects of the new tuition fees system.

What they were really angry about was not even government policy as such. Much as they disliked the Tories, they did not feel deceived by them. They did feel deceived by the Lib Dems, and that is a far more difficult perception to turn round than mere disagreement.

One could also have reached for examples of the Lib Dems making a difference in government. But quite apart from attempting instant recollection of policies (and I was still just about sober at this point), the idea that the Lib Dems have been a benign influence on the Tories has not reached the public because of the party's idiotic decision in the coalition's early days to ‘take responsibility’ for the whole thing.

This meant the public identified the Lib Dems with everything they most disliked about the government while giving the party no credit for its successes because it refused to claim it had had any, preferring

instead to present a united ‘coalition’ front.

I arrived at the hall on the Saturday morning, passed through security (where the guard on duty appeared not to have realised that wielding a metal detector on someone while two inches away from a metal marquee support is liable to make an alarming noise) and descended into the labyrinth that led to the Liberator stall.

BURSTOW MAULED

It was clear there was an unusual atmosphere about the conference. I'm usually an opponent of bloodsports, but it had become obvious that Paul Burstow was about to be hunted, cornered and, if not killed, at any rate unpleasantly mauled.

I have never seen the like of the health debate at Sheffield. I've seen the leadership lose the odd debate, I've seen steamroller majorities (having been run over by one at the merger conference) but I've never seen the leadership on the wrong end of a steamroller of quite these dimensions.

Apart from Burstow himself, no-one could be found in the hall with a good word to say for the government's NHS reforms. If Burstow had announced: “It is essential to tackling the deficit that we slaughter all the first born, and may I remind you we are in a coalition,” he would hardly have got a more hostile response.

These reforms are not Lib Dem policy, nor part of the coalition agreement, and so the conference felt released from its self-denying vow of good behaviour over government policy.

Speaker after speaker right up to Shirley Williams (the Lib Dem equivalent of a papal pronouncement) laid into the NHS reforms, so much so that Burstow's summator Richard Kemp said he had decided to accept both hostile amendments. Since they went through almost unanimously, this seemed a wise move. It also showed rather more intelligence on the part of this party leadership than that of some of their predecessors.

Let's imagine for a moment that a time machine had descended from the heavens and taken us back to the early 1980s, when the conference was debating some offence to Liberal principle insisted on in the Alliance by the SDP.

David Steel would have spent the run-up to the conference having his lackeys brief the press that the vote was a trial of strength with activists, a matter of confidence in the leadership, that he would be appallingly humiliated were he defeated and that his opponents were saboteurs if not actually certifiably mad. He would then either win amid bitterness and

rancour, his authority yet further diminished, or would lose and look ridiculous.

Nick Clegg instead gave no word in public that he was worried in the least by the amendments, allowed Burstow to back down, acknowledged the strength of feeling on the matter in his speech and, while not saying anything would definitely change in the government's approach, gave enough of an impression that he would try to satisfy most delegates.

After that debate, the stall and catering area was busy – hardly surprising since most who had got through security would have been reluctant to leave and re-enter the building, especially as there were so few metal detectors that queues spread out into the streets where delegates were harangued by protesters of one kind or another instead of being able to quickly reach the shelter of the venue.

The new rule against distribution of literature in the catering and bar areas has, though, surely deprived the conference of much of its colour. I imagine the (presumably by now) late Louis de Pinna would get short shrift from stewards were he to strew copies of his noted tract *New Uses For Pure Water* around conference nowadays. By such 'professionalisation' is the event slowly robbed of its character.

This 'professionalisation' was presumably the excuse for the hideous stage set. It was blue. I don't care if its official name in the design industry is 'aqua'. At a time when the party's most urgent task is to distinguish itself from the Tories, some idiot decided to have a stage set that was entirely blue (apart from a minute bird of liberty) and, even worse, must also have looked blue on television.

Not only is this turquoise-mixed-with-shit shade of blue aesthetically revolting, it hampers the party's attempts to prove that it has not become some wholly-owned subsidiary of the Conservatives.

SMASH THE CISTERN

'Aqua' must subliminally suggest 'Conservative' to the public. The only alternative is that it is roughly the colour of one of those dissolving tablets that some people use to disinfect their lavatory cisterns. "We're Tories," or "flush us down the U-bend". What an inspired choice of slogans aqua conjures up.

Almost as inspired as those in Nick Clegg's speech. When the previous issue of *Liberator* (343) went to press, we were slightly concerned that satirising 'Alarm Clock Britain' on the cover would leave us making a joke about a short-lived slogan that was already defunct.

Not a bit of it. Having not rung since Clegg's article in January, alarm clocks turned out to be the centrepiece of his speech.

It is, I gather, supposed to convey the party's support for people who would be called 'hard-working families' had Tony Blair not managed to discredit that slogan by association with himself.

“Absolutely no-one describes themselves as part of ‘Alarm Clock Britain’ unless they are a Lib Dem using the term ironically”

In 'Alarm Clock Britain', people "want to get up and get on", "have no choice but to work hard to make ends meet" and are "only ever one pay cheque from their overdraft".

You can see what Clegg is getting at, but surely the problem is that, while people might have seen themselves as part of a 'hard-working family', absolutely no-one describes themselves as part of 'Alarm Clock Britain' unless they are a Lib Dem using

the term ironically. It doesn't speak to any kind of self-identification, and I don't see it catching on if the party has to constantly remind the presumed inhabitants of 'Alarm Clock Britain' that this term applies to them.

This verbal foray was, though, as nothing compared to Clegg's attempt in his speech to define the party's political position. It is worth quoting in full: "Our opponents try to divide us with their outdated labels of left and right. But we are not on the left and we are not on the right. We have our own label: Liberal."

Fine so far, but wait: "We are liberals and we own the freehold to the centre ground of British politics."

Sorry? Quite apart from wondering whom we've sold the lease to, this seems to mean that we don't wish to be defined as right or left so we'll define ourselves as 'centre'.

Isn't the centre something one finds located between right and left (or possibly 'top' and 'bottom', but that hardly makes it clearer) and isn't the centre something that shifts depending on where 'right' and 'left' happen to have located themselves at any given moment, powerless to fix its location for itself?

As a ringing definition of where the party stands, 'the centre' is meaningless. Is it some free floating spot that is half Cameron and half Miliband? If not, where is it?

Help was at hand, or not. "Our politics is the politics of the radical centre," Clegg said. Roy Jenkins invented the 'radical centre' term in 1981, and thirty years later it still sounds like it means something, but doesn't.

"We are governing from the middle, for the middle," Clegg elaborated.

Interpret that. "We are governing from a position others fix for us."

The Lib Dems are in the middle of something that cannot be defined, surrounded by ringing alarm clocks. No wonder the country's head is under the duvet.

Mark Smulian is a member of the Liberator Collective

OPEN ON ALL SIDES

Equidistance means keeping lines open to Labour and the Greens, says Simon Hebditch

I arrived in Sheffield for the Lib Dem spring conference in a rather grumpy mood – largely as a result of the inertia, at that time, of the international community over the Libyan crisis. The city centre was eerily quiet when I walked up from the railway station, and then suddenly the anti-cuts demonstration appeared.

I felt distinctly uncomfortable – most of my political life I would have been participating in such protests but now we Lib Dems were their targets! This feeling of discomfort was not because I revelled in the world of protest politics or because I would, by definition, not like the idea of taking up the “reins of power”, as Nick Clegg has referred to the Lib Dem position.

It was simply that I felt the protesters were right and the party was wrong. I still believe there was no need for the coalition to embark on such a drastic economic path in such a short time period.

So, I support the various anti-cuts initiatives around the country and felt some sort of solidarity with the Sheffield protesters. Of course, I felt ambiguous as well, as I believe that the majority of Lib Dems are what I would describe as centre left supporters and are themselves distressed at the economic programme being pursued by this government. My lack of comfort was also mitigated by the plethora of Socialist Worker slogans and placards that dominated the small demonstration on the streets of Sheffield. Therefore, I compromised as all good Lib Dems do from time to time. I spent an hour marching with the protesters and then entered Sheffield City Hall to participate in the conference.

There was undoubtedly a progressive and positive feel about the spring conference this year. The passage of critical amendments to motions on the NHS and Social Care Bill, the mobility component of Disabled Living Allowance and the emergency resolution on banking were all positive developments.

Taking the NHS and Social Care Bill as an example, we now have to see whether Nick Clegg and Paul Burstow do manage to obtain substantial changes to the draft legislation or whether they have come back to the party empty handed. It is vital that amendments of substance are made to the legislation – we should not be satisfied with vague changes to phraseology. If significant changes are not made, then we should expect the parliamentary party as a whole to vote against the report stage and Third Reading.

In the same vein, we should expect major changes of banking structures as a result of the Vickers commission, which is due to issue a final report in the autumn. All the rhetoric from the party leadership about banking and bankers will come to nothing if no firm action is taken to break up the existing monoliths and split away the casino bankers from the retail banking functions of supporting business and individual customers.

The next few months are going to be vital in relation to the perceived success or failure of the coalition and the position of the Lib Dems within it. I accept entirely that the party finds itself currently between a rock and a hard place. Many argue that we have no option but to soldier on to 2015 hoping that the electors will have forgotten all about the bad news by the time the election is called. However, Labour is likely to remind everyone and show clips again and again of that Lib Dem party political broadcast on broken promises and the new politics.

We must also win the AV referendum or the chances of real electoral reform will disappear for the next 30 years. It is very unlikely that another referendum will be held on electoral systems in that period and so, despite the manifest faults of the AV arrangement, it should be supported as a step in the right direction.

The future strategy session at the spring conference was helpful in stating that the Lib Dems plan to enter the next election as an entirely independent party – equidistant from other mainstream parties. However, I remain a sceptic. There will be a huge temptation for the coalition parties to come to an agreement as to how the election in 2015 will be fought. Why would the Tories and Lib Dems fight each other in particular seats and simply hand the victory to a resurgent Labour Party? Somebody, sometime, will suggest either a formal or informal pact as we get nearer the date and Lib Dems must be ready for that eventuality.

Practical pressures in certain constituencies will be very strong. Coalitions are likely to become more common in the future. If we are to remain equidistant, we must keep open our lines of communication with both Labour and the Greens. We must seek to talk with both those parties, well ahead of the next election, to see if there is the possibility of a framework for a different coalition than the present one. We cannot wait until the election results have been announced to see if an alternative focus would stand a greater chance of meeting our political objectives.

Simon Hebditch is an active Liberal Democrat committed to realignment of the left. He was among Liberator's founders

PARTY FIRST

The Lib Dems can survive 2015 only with a vision of an attractive future, says Jonathan Hunt

The words hit a raw nerve, somewhere between intense toothache and pulling a hamstring: “We own the freehold to the centre ground of British politics, governing from the middle.” Nick Clegg went on to declare that we are the radical centre, surely a contradiction in terms.

An irrational thought process recalled a rusting button badge: “I’m nowhere near the centre,” it proclaims. How appropriate for this occasion, as the party was seemingly pushed into a huge and unilateral lurch to the right.

The logical outcome was that we would fight the next election on the success or otherwise of the coalition with the Conservatives. In my pessimistic view, we would be out of business for at least one parliament. It makes it all the more important that we put the Party First. And come up with a radical programme to support it.

‘Left’ and ‘right’ mean different things to different people. But Clegg had just altered the location of the centre. As commentators have observed, Liberals are a natural party of the left. Shirley Williams describes us as “progressive, somewhat left of centre, concerned above all with the inequalities in society”.

As Jackie Ashley, normally a strident voice of Labour, said in the Guardian: “Lib Dems are not a centre party. Their centre of gravity is to the Left. They want to change the world, and you don’t do that by sitting in the centre.”

It may be true, as Clegg observed, that we are “governing from the middle”. That is not desirable. For those who stay in the middle of the road eventually get run over.

Our party has far too much to offer the British people to be knocked down and out as a result of continuing in coalition. Our stance on civil rights alone makes a Liberal presence invaluable.

Cast our minds back a few years, when a succession of Labour home secretaries, little more than authoritarian ants in historic terms, plotted hard to remove many of those rights that Englishmen had enjoyed long before King John.

That is just one reason why Lib Dems must always remain on the libertarian left of British politics, wherever the centre may be found.

More specifically, it means we must survive the next election as a meaningful force. I support the coalition and wish it well. It shows that parties can work together to attain stated goals. In our case, it is to demonstrate that majority government can and does work in Britain – and provide stable government required to tackle the deficit, avoiding a successive and inconclusive election.

But the solutions required to solve the deficit within that timescale mean that the coalition government incurs huge unpopularity. Anyone who has canvassed recently is only too aware of the sense of betrayal voters feel.

My fear, and that of a rapidly increasing number of members, is that Clegg intends to fight the next election on the back of coalition achievements. That would be disastrous. Not because the coalition won’t have successes to sell. But the electorate won’t thank Lib Dems for the sacrifices they have made, largely because no-one has told them that is what we are doing. Any credit will go to the Tories. Blame will fall on us. No junior coalition partner has ever emerged stronger from an alliance by adopting a please-sir, me-too-sir line.

The Liberal history of coalitions in the last century was calamitous. The only party to emerge victorious from coalition was Labour in 1945. And that was for, Fawcett-like, not mentioning the war. It was for stealing Liberal ideas, promising massive social reforms and starting what was to be called the welfare state.

Voters rarely thank politicians for what they have done; they want to know what the parties are going to do. And therein lies our only chance to survive and prosper.

After five years of austerity and falling living standards, voters will be hungry for policies that offer hope, fairness and prosperity. Which is why we must start by challenging the Federal Executive’s strategic business plan. It consists of two main themes: promoting credibility in government to ensure the coalition is judged a success; and developing an effective narrative to support that line.

Our narrative, based on the first objective, has totally failed to explain reasons for joining in coalition that might win some sympathy or understanding. Putting the Party First means concentrating party resources on devising and producing radical and redistributive policies designed to demonstrate distinctive differences.

OK, so there is a fairly high-powered group developing policies for 2015. But while the strategic objective is to support the government and coalition, there is little point. The review to take place in 2013 might alter that. But it will be too late.

We need to be looking to our future now. Policies based on our traditional principles and values within a modern setting could yet bring about a magical transformation in our fortunes. The party can still emerge with a brilliant future, setting the agenda for a different coalition or strong minority government.

But only if we put the Party First – coalition second.

Jonathan Hunt is a former Lib Dem councillor and parliamentary candidate

THE TRIBE GATHERS

Geoff Payne explains why the Social Liberal Forum will hold a conference in June for Liberal Democrats concerned about the coalition's direction and the party's future

So who is fully signed up as an avid supporter of the coalition? Well, not those who voted by a 10–1 majority against free schools and academies at last year's autumn conference.

And yet the public image of the Liberal Democrats is now being defined by what appears to be a cosy coalition with the Tories.

This, of course, affects the kind of party we become. It is a fact of life that, within political parties, people always come and go, but the extent to which they do is influenced by how well the party is doing and its ideological direction.

In this regard, the leadership of the party occupies a very powerful position but really it is up to all of us to get involved and contribute to the agenda of the party.

Which is why the Social Liberal Forum has organised a conference this summer on the theme 'Liberalism, Equality and the State'. At the time of writing, we are still inviting speakers. However, this is what we have pencilled in.

We will look at the historical perspective of how we got to where we are. David Laws's chapter in the 2004 *Orange Book* made possible a vision of Liberalism in which public services could be marketised and the 'nanny state' demonised. This was in a context where it appeared neoliberalism was succeeding and, for the first time, economic growth around the world had become even, with Africa included. A smaller state, it was argued, was more liberal.

Then in 2007 we had the collapse in the banking sector, and the disaster of under-regulated banks was laid bare. Vince Cable was the first to recommend the nationalisation of Northern Rock, and the New Labour government, which had previously signed up to free market dogma, was suddenly nationalising banks and doing precisely the opposite of what it intended to do. All of a sudden, the Liberal Democrats appealed to the left of centre again.

INTO REVERSE

The 2010 general election result threw that all into reverse. A coalition between the Liberal Democrats and the Tories was the only viable option, and neoliberal ideology has become emboldened again.

As a consequence, the reason why we want to focus on equality and the state is because the coalition agenda is shifting ours as well. Nick Clegg has distinguished between old and new progressives in his Hugo Young lecture recently, in which new progressives are very keen on social mobility but are more ambivalent about reducing poverty. It is argued that reducing poverty equates to "poverty plus a pound", whereas social mobility is far more ambitious.

But where does that leave people – likely to be a big majority who can't or won't be socially mobile no matter what is done to change that? How do we value

people who are low paid or unemployed? Many low-paid workers do valuable work, but are not rewarded properly by a market economy. The Barnsley by-election result is a warning about what we might have let ourselves in for.

At the root of a constant stream of bad news from the government is the decision to prioritise deficit reduction and the consequences of that in public spending cuts and VAT rises. No one says they want to do it, and there are dangers in public spending of seeing the costs and not accounting for the benefits.

During the general election campaign, the Liberal Democrats warned of the dangers of attempting to cut the deficit too soon, and appeared to be closer to Labour on this. After the election and suddenly the message changed. We will be looking at whether the course of the coalition has been set by necessity or ideology.

Also we will be comparing the Big Society with Community Politics. When it comes to the Big Society, David Cameron's big idea, there are a number of clichés associated with it: that it is poorly defined and has little meaning, is a cover for cuts and a small state, replacing paid public service workers with volunteers who may or may not exist, and the official line from the Lib Dem leadership; "it is the same as community politics, it is what we have always believed in".

We will be looking into this. My view is that none of these positions stack up. A lot of effort has been made by Conservatives to define the Big Society; it is not a cover for cuts, having been originally defined before the cuts agenda came to the fore, and it is not about taking and using power, so it is not community politics.

It is, though, something that makes it easier for us to be in coalition with the Tories, compared with the centralising days of the Thatcher era. But there are problems, such as lack of accountability because of the exclusion of local government (which itself would be more accountable if we had a fair voting system), and the possible lack of involvement of marginalised communities.

We will be looking at inequality and social mobility. The stakes are high as far as social mobility is concerned and there are coalition policies in place such as early learning and the pupil premium to try to encourage it.

But will free schools and academies undermine this? Middle class parents are more likely to value education and put in the investment to make this work, but will this hinder social mobility from working class communities?

What do we think about *The Spirit Level*? This research demonstrated scientifically that the more the gap between rich and poor is reduced, the better outcomes you get from the indicators of a good society, including obesity levels, crime levels and social

mobility. Given this research makes uncomfortable reading for Conservatives, it is no surprise that there has been a backlash from right-wing think tanks. There is also no evidence that *The Spirit Level* has had any impact at all on anything Nick Clegg has said on inequality. Is he right to ignore it?

No conference like this can ignore ecological concerns. In the last parliament, we campaigned on fuel poverty, and now we are in government we can do something about it.

Not easy, however. In recent times, one of the drivers for low inflation has been cheap imports from China. However, from China there also comes increasing demand for energy, which is now pushing inflation up, and interest rates are a blunt instrument to deal with it. Interest rates cannot kill inflation in energy and food prices, but can dampen demand for other consumables, putting pressure on them to reduce their prices.

That pressure might, though, cause some businesses to collapse. Increasing fuel and food prices will hit those on low incomes and overall could derail an economic recovery. Maybe economic growth is no longer possible? The technological fix has not delivered. We still rely on oil not only for fuel but for the agrichemicals that keep food prices down and for many consumer items. Demand for oil has gone up, and supply looks uncertain. So how should we deal with this?

“At the root of a constant stream of bad news from the government is the decision to prioritise deficit reduction”

We will be looking at the NHS reforms where, at the time of writing, it looks as though we in the Liberal Democrats have some leverage. Will we be left with top down marketisation or will we have a viable NHS that is devolved and democratic? We would love to cover the whole spectrum of public sector reform and maybe will in a future conference, but on this issue there

appear to be changes afoot and we want to influence them.

Finally, we will be looking at political alignments. Anti-Liberal hatred has resurfaced in the Labour Party once again. Those of us who remember the 1980s will remember then that that it was all about the SDP. Today, of course, it is the Tories. Can the Liberal Democrats be equidistant at the next general election when they have a record in government to defend with the Tories? Can the Liberal Democrats resist overtures from the Tories for an electoral pact? Can the Liberal Democrats in the future form a coalition with Labour at a time when the tribalist element within Labour is stronger than ever? How strongly can the Liberal Democrats negotiate with the other parties if we have a hung parliament again?

For Liberal Democrats, there is a lot to think about. So come to our conference.

Geoff Payne is a member of the Social Liberal Forum executive



Conference Liberalism, equality and the state

Saturday 18 June 2011 – 10am to 5pm

City University

Northampton Square

London EC1V 0HB

Registrations: until 30 April, £15 waged or £10 concessions; £25 and £10 thereafter.

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TIME FOR PRESSURE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Israel/Palestine peace process may have run into the sand but foreign aid gives both the EU and UK more power than either thinks it has to get it moving again, says Guy Burton

The international community is failing in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The US is the most visible external participant to the conflict but has failed to act as an honest broker. Despite viewing Israel's settlement activity in the West Bank as illegal, it vetoed a resolution condemning it at the UN Security Council in February.

At the same time, although Britain, France and Germany all voted in favour of the resolution, European influence remains marginal: the EU refuses to condemn Israel's occupation of the West Bank and siege of Gaza even as it provides the Palestinian Authority (PA) with its largest share of foreign aid.

It is therefore time for a change of direction. But the omens are not promising, especially given American and European involvement in the Quartet (the UN and Russia are the other two members) and their continuing commitment to the now defunct Oslo Accords process and its companion, the Road Map.

Proposed in 2003, the Road Map was designed to provide benchmarks against which progress towards the two goals envisaged in the Oslo Accords would be achieved: Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories and the creation of a Palestinian state in its place and in exchange for security guarantees.

Since then, the situation has changed little. Israel's occupation remains total while Palestinians remain no closer to achieving self-determination, 23 years after the Palestinian Liberation Organisation's declaration of independence. Instead, the treatment of the Palestinians within the occupied territories and Israel has worsened while the Palestinians remain dependent on donor aid for the functioning of the quasi-state PA. At the same time, the donor community, and especially the EU, has been complicit in this process.

FLAWED FROM THE OUTSET

The most significant aspect of the conflict, which tends to be overlooked in the West, is the power asymmetry at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Arguably, both Oslo and the Road Map have failed to achieve a final and equitable agreement because they were flawed from the outset, by framing the conflict as one between two equal parties. This disregards the dominant position of Israel both within the occupied territory of the West Bank and Gaza and in relation to the Palestinians generally.

Perhaps the most visible example of Israel's power and refusal to concede is the presence of around 120 settlements in the West Bank. Almost half of these have been constructed since 2001 (after the Oslo process was scheduled to establish a Palestinian state) and they range in size from small to large.

Supporting them is the power of the Israeli state in the form of financial assistance for their building and expansion, construction of parallel roads from Israel proper and the presence of the Israeli military to safeguard them. All these settlements are located in 'Area C', an area that makes up two-thirds of the West Bank and where Israel continues to have both administrative and security control.

For the 150,000 Palestinians who live there, it is extremely difficult for them to build either houses or utility services without authorisation from the Israeli authorities. In various recorded instances, the wells and other water management structures have been destroyed by the Israelis – despite many having had their construction financed by foreign donors.

In addition to the settlements, Israeli action in the eviction and demolition of Palestinian communities, especially in East Jerusalem, is well documented. NGOs like the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions and B'Tselem are actively documenting and working against the Israeli policy of eviction and demolition of Palestinian homes in the Arab neighbourhoods of Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan, to name two examples. Beyond Jerusalem, Israeli discrimination is evident for the 20% of Israel's population who are Israeli Arabs: they face a wide range of civil restrictions, including on intermarriage, property ownership and military service.

Despite Israel's behaviour, the response by the EU has been generally positive toward the Israeli leadership. EU relations with Israel are framed within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which promotes political and economic liberalisation with countries around the Mediterranean region through individual Action Plans with each government. In 2000, an EU-Israel Association Agreement was reached to provide a framework for political dialogue and economic cooperation. This was followed in 2004 by an EU-Israel Action Plan, which has been renewed several times. Trade has since grown between the two, despite the EU's failure to hold Israel to its commitments within the Action Plan, including in relation to democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law.

Against Israeli power is Palestinian weakness. This was brutally exposed in January with the publication of the Palestine Papers through Al Jazeera and the Guardian. The information released to date has shown how far Palestinian negotiators were prepared to go to reach an agreement with the Israelis, who remained intransigent and backed by the Americans. They included the negotiating team, led by Saeb Erekat, being willing to give up land around the

Palestinian neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem on which the Israelis have built settlements, as well as abandoning an unquestioned Palestinian assumption: the right of return for millions of Palestinian refugees and their descendents. Although the initial Palestinian public's reaction was one of shock, there has been growing anger and frustration with the PA – and especially the nationalist and secular Fatah party that dominates it – following the protests across the Arab world and the overthrow of corrupt and sclerotic regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. Fatah and the PA's response served only to alienate the population further, by breaking up several demonstrations in the West Bank city of Ramallah in support of the Egyptian pro-democracy movement. The PA has since tried to salvage its position, with Erekat offering to resign and President Mahmoud Abbas suggesting that elections could be held in September.

The election offer was quickly rejected by Fatah's main rival, the Islamist party Hamas, which claims that Abbas lacks legitimacy. Hamas has controlled Gaza since a short and violent conflict with Fatah in 2007. But Hamas's position is not so secure either. It has acted in an authoritarian manner and failed to bring an end to Israel's siege of Gaza since 2005. In January, a youth movement has emerged, which is circulating clandestine messages against Hamas.

The Fatah-Hamas struggle and the two parties' separation from the public has exacerbated the Palestinians' weakness. The PA and Palestinians are among the world's highest per capita recipients of foreign aid. The PA receives around \$1bn a year, more than its other sources of revenue (domestic taxation and customs revenues collected by Israel) and a sum that has grown from around \$500m since the late 1990s. Much of that money has been redirected away from development assistance during the Oslo period (1995-99) to humanitarian relief and the PA's general budget since the start of the Second Intifada (2000-04).

Because of the PA's reliance on foreign aid, it is therefore extremely susceptible to outside pressure. This happened most tellingly after Hamas's 2006 election victory. The US and EU imposed sanctions and an aid boycott. Within months, this had not only affected the government workers, whose salaries were not being paid, but also their dependents. The UN estimated that around a quarter of the Palestinian population was touched as a result. Since then, the donors have used other ways to ensure that the 'right' kind of Palestinians remain in charge. This has included the donors going against their own support for democracy by colluding with the PA to postpone presidential and legislative elections, since it is most likely that Fatah would lose and other, more unreliable independents or Hamas may take power.

As the Palestinians' largest donor, the role of the EU is especially important. Between 1994 and 2005, it has accounted for a quarter of the PA's funds. The EU claims to want a solution while avoiding taking

“Because of the PA's reliance on foreign aid, it is therefore extremely susceptible to outside pressure”

any action that challenges Israel's dominance. Given the substantial disparity between Israeli power and Palestinian weakness, and the impact of Israel on Palestinian human rights and the rule of law, the EU's policy does not seem particularly coherent.

What is to be done? If an agreement is to be achieved between Israel and the Palestinians, then it is insufficient to continue

business as usual. Recognition of the power asymmetry would be a first step, followed by a re-tailoring of the international community's involvement in the conflict. The US looks unable to lead this process any time soon; President Obama not only failed to get Israel to renew the now expired settlement moratorium (which was always less than it appeared, with Jerusalem and those settlements already under construction being exempt), the US was also the only country to veto the UN Security Council resolution that condemned Israeli settlement activity as illegal.

If the US cannot make a difference, it's time to look elsewhere. And perhaps the EU – and Britain by association – can be an important player in this regard. Furthermore, both Liberal Democrats and liberal democrats have a role to play.

While visiting Jerusalem last December, Mandy Turner, a lecturer in conflict resolution at Bradford University, was asked what could be done. She said that, as British and European citizens, we have the means to hold the EU to account through our government and elected representatives in London and Europe. In particular, she suggested that the EU could sue Israel for damages as a result of destroying EU-funded projects in the Jordan Valley, press the EU to pull out of the Quartet (since it has effectively become an American-led enterprise) and make more effective demands on the human rights conditions within the EU-Israel Action Plan.

To these I would add the suggestion of the EU taking a more hands-off and dispassionate approach to Palestinian political groups, since its meddling to date has served only to perpetuate the fragmentation of the Palestinian polity – most notably in the split between the increasing authoritarian rule of Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza since mid-2007.

While these measures in themselves will not be enough to end the Israeli occupation, they might at least begin to shift the prevailing dynamics in the conflict. It would be an acknowledgment that the conflict is not a balanced one when too often it is presented as such. Furthermore, it would provide some leverage to get the dominant party to take negotiations with the weaker one more seriously, especially if it is backed up with international pressure. And finally, it would ensure that, as British and European taxpayers, we would be getting value for money, rather than seeing our aid serving only to maintain this conflict.

Guy Burton is a researcher at the Centre for Development Studies at Birzeit University in Palestine. He was previously a parliamentary adviser and election candidate for the Liberal Democrats

LETTERS



REVIEWS



IS THAT WISE, SIR?

Dear Liberator,

In his review of David Laws's book *22 Days in May* (Liberator 344), Bill le Breton states "Laws is a good, hard working man," but asks "is he wise?" I have no quarrel with this statement but there are three features of the book that also cause me to question Laws's wisdom.

First, throughout the book, Laws writes of a 'hung' rather than a 'balanced' parliament. If Liberal Democrats don't use the more positive term, who on earth will?

'Hung' in this sense originated in the US in relation to juries unable to reach a decision. But the electorate has made a decision. We have decided that no single party is worthy of unfettered power. Our parliament reflects the balance of our opinions within the limits of FPTP. We should not be using old language to describe a new situation; surely an obvious point that even a second-class mind would understand?

Secondly, I had supposed that the appointment of a Liberal Democrat as Chief Secretary to the Treasury was a crafty move by David Cameron to ensure that Liberal Democrats were fully associated with the cuts (and the appointment of Vince Cable to a department that he said he'd abolish a similar crafty move). However, the book reveals (pages 205-7) that Laws actually wanted, and angled for, the job. Subsequent chapters show he went about it with almost as much relish as his successor Danny Alexander.

Thirdly, throughout the book, Laws repeats the tired mantra of 'financial crisis', and 'vast debts' caused by 'Labour extravagance'.

This is a gross distortion of the truth, if not a downright lie. Distinguished economists and commentators, including David Blanchflower, Martin Wolf, Joseph Stiglitz, Paul Krugman and William Keegan, have all pointed out that Britain's debts are not historically high (in fact the debt-to-GDP ratio is quite modest by comparison with many similar economies); that Labour's expenditure was reasonably prudent up to 2008, the year of the crisis; and that the current deficit is a result of falling revenues arising from the recession rather than profligate expenditure.

Above all, we are not Greece, are not and never have been in danger from 'the markets', which are, after all, largely institutions within our own economy, including many pension funds, lending to their own government. Clearly, the 'savage cuts' are far from a matter of necessity but are ideologically driven.

We were promised new, more honest politics. Laws's book is a continuation of the old. If this is the best the bright young minds now at the top of our party can do, wiser heads need to take them in hand.

Peter Wrigley
Kirklees

<http://keynesianliberal.blogspot.com/>

Building a Liberal Europe: The ALDE Project by Graham Watson MEP

John Harper 2010 £20

Who has been the most influential British Liberal since 1945? One could make a case for Clement Davies, who, by spurning Churchill's overtures in 1951, prevented the complete demise of the Liberal Party; for Jo Grimond, who rebuilt the party in the 1950s and 1960s; for Tony Greaves, whose pioneering work in the 1970s and 1980s gave the party a recipe for electoral success; for Nick Clegg, who now holds the most senior ministerial post any Liberal has held since Lloyd George.

If one is judging 'influence' in terms of the effect on politics beyond the British Liberal and Liberal Democrat parties, beyond the borders of the UK even, Graham Watson has as good a claim as any to this title.

Watson was one of the Liberal Democrats' first MEPs, having first been elected in 1994. In 2002, he succeeded Pat Cox as leader of the Liberal (ELDR) group in the European Parliament. In 2004, he engineered a parliamentary alliance between ELDR and the newly-formed European Democratic Party (itself an alliance of mainly French and Italian centrists) to form the ALDE group, which he led until 2009.

Watson also anticipated the eastward expansion of the EU by signing up to ELDR and/or ALDE many centrist and liberal parties in the ten new member states shortly before they joined the EU in 2004.

The effect of this was to double the size of the Liberal group in the European Parliament, from

50 MEPs out of 626 in 2002 to 106 MEPs out of 732 in 2007. This expansion has had considerable effects. First, the Liberals can determine the success or failure of most votes in the parliament, since neither of the two larger groups (the EPP and the socialists) can win without Liberal support. Second, since the expansion of the EU in 2004, there is now a substantial body of Liberals amongst the European Commissioners. And third, the clout afforded Liberals by the first and second factors enables Liberals increasingly to take the initiative on policy matters.

This book tells the story of how the Liberals grew and gained influence in the EU. If there is a criticism, it is that the book has obviously been based on contemporary diaries and notes, so that it can be detail-heavy at times. Still, no one else has written a comparable history of this era, and we now have a thorough record of a British Liberal who was playing in the first division long before the coalition was formed.

Simon Titley

Eminent Corporations by Andrew Simms & David Boyle Constable 2010 £8.99

In the previous edition of *Liberator* (344), David Boyle wrote about the rise of leading British brands, notably Virgin. This is the book on which Boyle's article was based.

It is best described as a collection of biographies, but biographies of corporations not people. The subjects are Barclays, Cadbury, Marks & Spencer, Rover, BP, the BBC and Virgin.

These short histories explore a recent era in which business corporations were hollowed out. Forty years ago, companies, even large ones, were based in communities. They were valued according to their assets, which consisted of tangible things like bricks and mortar, plant and equipment. They employed large workforces and, by and large, enjoyed public trust.

Nowadays, the value of a corporation resides in things that are intangible: brand values and corporate reputation. Instead of having a relationship with these companies based on rational factors

such as the price or quality of the goods and services they provide, we are expected to have an emotional relationship with them through our feelings about their brands.

Corporations have become increasingly ephemeral. Most of the blue chip companies we knew and loved have gone, sold off or broken up. They have been replaced by the likes of Virgin, which is little more than a collection of brands.

No one much cared about these trends until the financial crisis of 2008, when people began to question the direction the economy was taking. Now, the talk is increasingly of earning our living by making or doing real things. The campaign for a real economy starts here.

Simon Titley

The King's Speech [film] directed by Tom Hooper 2011

Unless you have been somewhere very inaccessible for the past few weeks, you'll know that *The King's Speech* concerns the tale of how King George VI overcame his speech impediment with the aid of a chippy Australian speech therapist, and that the film and its star Colin Firth have won armfuls of awards. What has been less emphasised is its depiction of the overpowering weirdness of the House of Windsor.

Granted, royals do not live as do others, and we should not judge the accepted ways of behaviour of the past from the standpoint of our own time. Even so, that the second in line to throne could be terrorised by his father, starved by a sadistic nanny (apparently without his parents noticing), see his epileptic younger brother shut off from public view and be left with an untreated stammer well into middle age – even when he was expected to make speeches and broadcasts – suggests royal family dysfunction did not start with the current lot.

George only finally determined to get his voice under control when he accidentally ascended to the throne after his brother Edward VIII was forced to abdicate because he wanted to marry an American divorcee.

The kerfuffle about Prince

Charles wanting to marry the divorced Camilla Parker-Bowles suggests public attitudes towards the royals' formal morals have not changed as much as we might think, even though, presumably, most people know (and must also have done so in 1936) that royals have habitually led scandalous private lives, with Queen Victoria and indeed 'Bertie' (as George VI was known in private) being exceptions.

As far as I could tell, the only times the film mangled facts were when it wanted to get Winston Churchill centre stage, no doubt as the only figure likely to be well-known to modern, especially American, audiences.

Thus we see Churchill pressing strongly for Edward VIII's abdication, when in real life Churchill supported him staying on the throne – whether he would have once the ex-king's admiration for Hitler became more pronounced is unclear.

We also see Stanley Baldwin resigning as prime minister as an act of contrition because he thought Churchill had been proved right – and he wrong – over the need to rearm against Hitler. In fact, Baldwin simply retired because he was 70 years old and had been prime minister for most of the previous 15 years.

George VI has slipped from public consciousness – he was not king for long, and those with any adult memory of his reign are now well into their seventies. His role as a national figurehead in World War 2 was, the film suggests, important, but will be forever overshadowed by that of Churchill.

The King's Speech is a compelling story well acted, but ultimately makes a case against monarchy. George VI did not want to be king, had not been trained for the role, was driven to an early death by its demands and would have happily remained a naval officer.

But monarchy means you get whoever is next in line, regardless of their qualities or popularity. 'Bertie' hurriedly acquired enough of both to get by, once his people could hear him speak clearly.

Mark Smulian

Every morning, the postman brings a heavy mailbag (perchance one sown by a former Labour MP?) through the lodge gates, along the drive and up to the Hall – I have to say that he has pedalled more slowly since my safari park closed, but I suppose that is social reform for you. A typical day's haul will see an appeal for advice from a council candidate faced with a tricky by-election, an invitation to speak at a conference on Land Reform, a request to write the foreword for the benefit brochure of a first-class wicketkeeper, a letter inquiring about places at the Bonkers Home for Well-Behaved Orphans from one of today's modern two-career couples and much else besides.

It occurred to me that I might do worse than share some of these letters and my replies with the amusing young people who read *Liberator* magazine. Who knows? If it goes down well, I may even repeat the exercise. Though space here is limited, let me emphasise that every letter sent to Bonkers Hall is read and replied to on the same day (particularly if it contains a cheque or a postal order).

I am currently caught on the horns of a particularly thorny dilemma. ALDC tells me leaflets have to look just so. However, our local riso wrangler tells me there is "too much black". Which of these party institutions is correct? – Anxious of Notts.

The Association of Liberal Councillors, as I still like to think of it, is in many ways a victim of its own success. Once a bastion of sturdy provincials with a healthy disrespect for the party's nobs and bigwigs (its very name was enough to make little Steel gibber), it has lately become rather a part of the establishment itself; and it has to be admitted that it has not always managed this transition gracefully. Fair-minded critics will agree that the burning in Hebden Bridge marketplace of those activists who insisted on pasting up their *Focuses* with a Pritt Stick rather than Cow Gum was right and necessary, but I have been less happy with some of the ALC's decisions since then. In retrospect, the rot set in when it issued those stick-on beards for every deliverer and canvasser to wear. Therefore, Anxious, I should counsel you to Do Your Own Thing and listen to your local risosmith. If anyone from Hebden Bridge complains, refer him to me. I shall Have It Out next time I am in the vicinity to bathe in the Spring of Eternal Life that bubbles from the hillside above the Birchcliffe Centre.

How did the prisoners of war in The Great Escape dispose of the earth from their tunnels? – Well-Behaved Orphan, Rutland

What they did was Terribly Clever. Each chap carried two bags under his tunic. They were tied off with string which was looped over the neck in a sort of yoke arrangement. Pulling a drawstring released a pin so that the soil trickled down to the ground and was trodden in as the fellow strolled around the camp. Why do you ask?

Now my beloved party is the whipping fag for the Bloody Tories and we have lost all credibility after breaking our gentlemen's (and, indeed, ladies') honour, nay pledges, is there any point in wasting my pennies, and even shillings, on attending our annual bun fight and Conference? – Auld Leftie of Desborough

Lord Bonkers' Diary

Desborough is a splendid town, renowned for its corsetry. The First Lady Bonkers used to obtain her requisites there and was once presented with an Illuminated Address after keeping a whole factory in work through a particularly harsh winter. As to your question, Auld Leftie, I believe that money spent attending Conference is never wasted. If you don't approve of the party's strategy, what better chance will you have of changing it? Put down an amendment or have a quiet word with

a junior minister in the bar. I recall throwing a bread roll at Lloyd George at a dinner after he went in with the Conservatives, and I flatter myself that it had some effect.

Forgive my ignorance. Me Father, un, Granfather, and 'is Father stood alongsides yer Lordships campaigning fer tha vote, an we gottit an bin voting Bonkers ever since. Even me ol' Gran, who does the laundry fer yer Lordships followed 'er Ladyship as one of those Insufferajets and she voted Bonkers an' all. Now that Master Clegg o'yours is askin' us for an alternative vote, but roun' ere we're always votin' fer a Bonkers. Wass all this about 'Alternatives'? – Johnboat Goudhearte, Rutland

Yes, her Ladyship was a brave campaigner for Votes for Women (though I did feel sorry for that poor horse). Rest assured, Goudhearte, the Alternative Vote will make no difference to the way we conduct our politics here in the Bonkers Hall ward.

Last May, rather unexpectedly, I lost my job of 13 years. It came as a bit of a shock but I soon got over it and within 24 hours found myself back in the limelight on a popular current affairs panel show. Following the unexpected success of this performance, I have endeavoured to forge a career in stand-up comedy with mixed results. However, a job is coming up in my previous line of work and I am keen to get the post. However, for some reason my former colleagues are reluctant to support my application. How should I proceed? – Asteroid Boy

The comedy business is hard one – you might say it is no laughing matter. Look at how poor Mike Hancock has ended up, despite that fact that it is only a few years since his 'Half-Hour' was the most popular programme on the moving television. So I cannot in all conscience encourage you to follow that path. You would do better to try to re-enter your old line of work, but it is probably best not to be too ambitious at first. Let us suppose, purely by way of example, that you were a politician: then it would not be a good idea to try to be Mayor of London at once. You would do better to try a lesser post first and work your way up. It happens that I know of a village in Patagonia that is looking for a new mayor; your passage on the next cattle boat is booked and I shall be at Tilbury to wave you off – as, no doubt, will many of your Liberal Democrats.

As to your other question (for which we were unable to find space here), Asteroid Boy... I usually recommend a cold bath in such cases.

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