

liberator

Will the
bird fly
again?



- My 'yes' campaign hell – James Graham
- Election frontline – Chris White, Caron Lindsay and Peter Black
- I can't get no antis faction - Simon Titley

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COMMENTARY

WE CAN LOSE EVERYWHERE

The First Law of Holes states that, if you are in a hole, stop digging. The hole in which the Liberal Democrats have resided since the May elections is already deeper than any encountered since the merger.

There have been some welcome signs since 5 May that Nick Clegg has decided to ‘stop digging’ and is finally prepared both to claim credit for Lib Dem influence in the government and to stress the differences between his party and the Conservatives.

Not before time. Whoever thought up the line ‘not a cigarette paper between us’ used in the initial months of the coalition should be sacked before they do any more damage.

The party’s fortunes in the past year have been so dire that one is tempted to question the sanity – never mind judgement – of those who decided to present the coalition as a seamless meeting of minds in which the Lib Dems took responsibility for everything the government does.

From the start, the coalition should have been presented as it is now beginning to be – that the results of the last election left the Lib Dems with no other viable option, that the party has a coalition agreement delivering at least some of its goals, and that the whole thing is a pragmatic response to the parliamentary arithmetic and the country’s dire finances.

Leading Lib Dems instead spent most of the past year presenting themselves as indistinguishable from the Tories – in which case, why vote for the monkey when one could vote for the organ grinder?

The party has been incalculably damaged by those who chose to promote this government as being akin to that of a conventional single party. It isn’t. Coalitions by their nature have parties with different philosophies and objectives in them and it is only by showing what makes this government different from a majority Conservative one that the Lib Dems can begin to find a way back into winning the public confidence.

It is of course perfectly sensible that Lib Dem ministers should have courteous working relationships with their Conservative counterparts. The damage has come from turning this into the public impression that, in addition to sinking personal acrimony, the policy differences have all gone too.

The task that faces the party is harder for the loss of over 700 councillors – the engine room of the party at local level – and the demoralisation of its grassroots.

Just about the only thing that might re-energise them is the spectacle of the party not only having influence in government but being seen and heard to.

The Tories will just have to put up with it.

The dire election and referendum results present very few silver linings, but at least they demolish some myths that have sidetracked certain people at different times from the core job of building credibility for the party.

The first is the idea – long beloved of a certain kind of well-meaning liberal – that “voters want to see parties working together”.

Not judging by the results of 5 May they don’t. Voters want to see governments doing things of which they approve, or least judge to be necessary. Whether that is a single party or a coalition is irrelevant.

Anyone who now thinks that a promise of pluralistic politics in itself appeals to voters should be locked in a padded cell with nothing to read except May’s election results.

By all means let’s hope the Lib Dems can be credibly judged on the influence they have had on the coalition by 2015, but it is beyond belief that they will now gain anything by the mere fact of having participated in a coalition government, whatever the exponents of pluralism as an end in itself once thought.

The second myth is that Labour can be relied upon. As the referendum showed, Ed Miliband, even when he has been in office for too short a time to become unpopular, commands so little influence in his own party that he cannot even get a majority of its MPs to agree with him on AV.

Behind Miliband’s pleasant and plausible countenance lurks, as the ‘no’ campaign showed, the real Labour Party – the Blunketts, Reids and all the other loathsome authoritarians who brought us the Iraq war and ID cards.

We now know where Labour really stands on political reform, just as the record of the last government amply demonstrated what it really thinks about civil liberty.

To those Lib Dems intending to engage with Miliband’s policy review, save your breath after this. Even if he took any of your ideas on board, he lacks the clout to quell Labour’s repellent illiberal core.

The final myth is that the public would like to have lots of referendums and will engage in serious policy debates around the issues raised.

We now know better. The AV contest showed that referendums by themselves do not catch public attention, and that vested interests of one kind or another, and their press supporters, will simply buy the result.

Avoid the diversions, rebuild trust and credibility – it will be a hard slog but 5 May destroyed the idea that there are short cuts.

RADICAL BULLETIN

LESS CHOICE FOR YOU

Winning a referendum on electoral reform was always a tall order. It became taller once the Liberal Democrats – the main proponents of a ‘yes’ vote – lost their moral authority in the tuition fees debacle last autumn.

The party had to campaign in effect leaderless, because Nick Clegg evoked such hostility among voters that he was judged a liability to the campaign. Combine that with the ineptitude shown by the official ‘yes’ campaign (discussed in detail by James Graham on pages 6-7) and it is no wonder that AV went down to a heavy defeat.

But would it have been defeated by quite such a huge margin had it not been for some startling tactical errors by Lib Dems?

Tim Farron, the titular head of the party’s ‘yes’ campaign, made a speech about Thatcherism having been “organised wickedness” and akin to “slavery”. In most circumstances, these remarks would be entirely unexceptionable. Here, they served to suggest that AV would prevent the election of a majority Tory government again, and so spurred Tories to go out and vote ‘no’.

That did for many Lib Dem councillors, who might have held their seats had they faced the normal Tory local election turnout, rather than something nearer the general election one.

Then there was Chris Huhne’s carefully publicised outburst at a cabinet meeting, including the bizarre threat to take legal action against some Tory cabinet ministers over the admittedly vile content of ‘no’ campaign leaflets. This move would have been hard to sustain in court and merely gave the impression of politicians fighting like ferrets in a sack about something that left the public largely unmoved.

Clegg did make periodic interventions, presumably being unable to restrain himself, but each served to remind the public why they have lost trust in him.

These errors, though, were as nothing compared with the basic ones made by the official ‘yes’ campaign.

One person on the ‘yes’ side who might have appealed to Tory supporters was UKIP’s leader Nigel Farage who, on the principle the even a broken alarm clock is right twice a day, supported the ‘yes’ side. He was scarcely used by the ‘yes’ campaign.

Also unused was the national Freepost delivery on offer, something the ‘no’ campaign did use. There were also ‘no’ posters up in many places too. The ‘yes’ campaign may have been financially outgunned but was it to such an extent that it couldn’t use Freepost?

Its slogan ‘MPs working harder for you’ was dire. It made no link between why the introduction of AV would make MPs work harder (supposing that it would) and elicited a predictable response somewhere between disbelief and ‘so what’ from the public.

As one Lib Dem MP put it: “How not to run a campaign. Start off by insulting your most motivated and loyal supporters with campaign slogans about making your MP work harder that undermine and demotivate [MPs], then tell your most motivated and loyal supporters to distance themselves from the campaign because an association with you might prove negative, then in the last weeks of the campaign ask your previously most motivated and loyal supporters to come to the aid of the campaign as it is failing. One silver lining, I won’t now have to work harder.”

The ‘yes’ leaflets were also woeful. No self-respecting Lib Dem council by-election campaign would have used the main one, which conveyed little, didn’t explain how AV would work or what it would do, and used pictures of voters saying “I’ve never had my say”, a meaningless formulation. Even in areas that did vote ‘yes’, the main leaflet went out three to four weeks before referendum day and no others followed.

One prominent Lib Dem councillor noted that his regional ‘yes’ organiser disappeared without explanation and, once this was noticed after three weeks, a Lib Dem organiser was hurriedly installed, who found 100,000 letters were to be delivered in the main town six days before the referendum. He accomplished this, although he noted: “It is a long time since I have delivered a single-sided letter!”

And what of John Sharkey, who ran the campaign? Sharkey had recently been ennobled after running the Lib Dem general election campaign last year, the result of which will no doubt have led many to believe that some different act of recognition would have been more appropriate.

Sharkey gave a briefing shortly after 5 May. One MP present remarked, “At least Sharkey didn’t try to pretend it had been anything but a disaster.”

EVERYBODY OUT

It is said that history repeats itself as either tragedy or farce. Long ago, as financial crisis engulfed the newly merged party, Cowley Street staff were told their jobs were on the line (Liberator 176).

Now it has happened again, with the campaigns staff complement of 18 under threat. Half of them are based in the English regions and are to become employees of their region rather than being part-funded by Cowley Street.

This approach presupposes that the regions can afford to do this. While London – always the easiest region to organise because of its small geographical size – has said that it can, the position elsewhere is less clear,

A letter circulated by director of elections and skills Hilary Stephenson insisted the changes were neither a cost-cutting exercise nor a reaction to May’s dire

election results, even though donations have been drying up and the changes were announced a few days after polling day.

She wrote: "When the full plan is implemented the party should end up with the same or more campaigns staff. The current funding is being invested in a different way rather than reduced."

There would be a centrally funded team of 12 specialists "to enable us to drive innovation and improve the connection and uptake of message, materials and organisational input out in the seats," Stephenson wrote in a piece of management speak that needs textual analysis.

"We are then working with the regions with the aim of them moving part funding of posts to fully funding staff who can be more tailored to specific regional needs."

"With the aim." That can mean only that the new structure was agreed, people were told their jobs were at risk and the resulting disruption caused, *before* the regions had agreed to take on funding these posts.

The regions' ability to take on this cost will not have been helped by the net loss of 747 councillors and with them both their contributions to party funds from allowances and their ability to create local teams so that organisers have people to organise.

The idea of dispersing staff around the regions arose from the Bones Commission in 2008 (*Liberator* 325). This was quietly ditched then, when it was realised that dispersing the management of a resource often makes it less effective, and that the ability of regional chairs to manage staff was, to put it politely, rather variable.

MPs have been alarmed to see campaign staff on whom they rely facing either redundancy or being handed over to the whims of regional executives. An attempt to debate this at a parliamentary party meeting led to a detonation from chief executive Chris Fox.

If these staff vanish, or are rendered ineffective, there will no doubt be an 'uptake of message' to Cowley Street.

IN WANT OF ADVICE

The coalition agreement is the gift that keeps on giving. The problem is not the policy contained in it (which was endorsed overwhelmingly at the Birmingham special conference) but the loose ends left.

The largest of these was the failure to secure either some continuation of the Short Money, which previously funded many policy adviser posts in opposition, or to secure an adequate share of paid adviser posts around Whitehall (*Liberator* 343), something the Tories took good care to do.

This has left the Lib Dems outnumbered, and people who have gone into government posts as special advisers don't have time to look at things outside their departments and spot political difficulties. Lib Dems are thus run ragged and sign-off on policy they don't really grasp.

Parliamentarians are questioning the role of Nick Clegg's main adviser Richard Reeves, who came from the think tank world without a party background and who once notoriously advised social liberals to join Labour (*Liberator* 340).

Since it is hard even for MPs and peers to work out

from where some things emanate, it is possible that Reeves is being unfairly blamed. But blamed he has been by some as the origin of the damaging initial strategy of playing down differences with the Tories, and of Clegg's recent pointless obsession with 'the centre'.

COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

Elected police commissioners are an insane idea, even by the standards of the Conservative Party. It is replete with opportunities for grandstanding loonies to take control of the police and politicise them, after campaigns fought between candidates posturing about who will be 'toughest' on crime.

Lib Dem peers deserve congratulations for rebelling against this idiocy. But they had their maths rather embarrassingly awry. The Lords vote saw 13 Lib Dems vote for the amendment moved by Baroness Harris, 34 against, 20 abstaining and an indeterminate number absenting themselves.

They had planned, however, to lose this amendment narrowly and then all vote for an amendment from Lord Bradshaw to limit the police commissioners to three pilot areas. But once Harris's amendment was passed with Labour and crossbench votes, Bradshaw's amendment fell because the Lords could not vote to pilot something they had just voted not to create.

FAMILY MAN

"Given much reflection and after talking with my family, it is with regret that I have decided to stand down as a candidate for the by-election. I remain committed to the people of Leicester and am proud to represent the Liberal Democrats, but I have a very young family and I fear the toll that fighting the by-election with all the commitment and dedication it deserves would be too much."

That was the statement with which former MP Parmjit Singh Gill stood down as Liberal Democrat candidate for the Leicester South by-election, having been selected to fight the seat only five days earlier.

Had he acquired a 'very young family' in less than a week? It seems improbable. More probable is that Gill had managed to offend prominent local Lib Dems in disputes over who would stand for the simultaneous council elections. They responded with an ultimatum – stand down or fight this election on your own.

Gill was replaced by Zuffar Huq, who fought the neighbouring Harborough seat last year and is a prominent local personality with roots in the area stretching back nearly a century.

Gill was MP for Leicester South from 2004-05 and came second in 2010. Huq held on to second place this May, a considerable feat given the simultaneous local and mayoral elections and referendum in the city, and the dreadful results in those.

Huq's performance suggests that all may not be lost, despite the Lib Dem mayoral candidate coming fourth and the Lib Dems losing all but one council seat (including Gill's), in a city where they and the Tories ran a joint administration until 2007 (*Liberator* 345).

MY 'YES' CAMPAIGN HELL

The 'yes' campaign in the AV referendum failed mainly due to its own mismanagement, reports James Graham

If you want to understand why the Yes to Fairer Votes campaign failed so badly, you won't get much sense out of the Nick Robinsons or even Vernon Bogdanors of this world. You need Dian Fossey. I'm quite sure the famed zoologist would have been able to explain it all.

The list of the Yes campaign's mistakes seems to grow with every account. How could it make so many fundamental errors? The simplistic analysis was that the people at the top of the campaign were stupid or incompetent. I don't believe this was the case, but what they certainly were guilty of was developing a management culture in which group think and the laws of the jungle were allowed to thrive and take over.

The saddest thing for me personally is that it started so well. The small group of democratic reform organisations correctly calculated that electoral reform would rapidly, albeit temporarily, rocket up the political agenda immediately after the 2010 general election, when the gross disparity between how people voted and what they got lumbered with in the House of Commons briefly entered the public consciousness.

In an attempt to capture the zeitgeist, we spent the last couple of weeks in April 2010 working together to establish Take Back Parliament. The effect of this was not just a demonstration in London that captured the media's attention during a crucial phase in the coalition negotiations, but the spontaneous formation of dozens of local groups across the country.

Once the coalition had been formed and it became clear that an AV referendum was going to happen, the organisations again came together to start planning the Yes campaign. At first, it appeared as if we were doing all the right things: learning from the trials and tribulations of past referendum campaigns, commissioning extensive polling, and building a team with a specific focus on avoiding it being dominated by Liberal Democrats. I certainly spent the summer of 2010 feeling that, although the scale of what we needed to achieve was immense, we were at least learning from past mistakes and were determined to adopt an evidence-based, non-dogmatic, approach to campaigning.

RIGIDLY HIERARCHICAL

But towards the end of August, something fundamentally changed. The campaign suddenly, and at first imperceptibly, became rigidly hierarchical and obsessed with secrecy. I found myself in the odd position of being nominally in charge of the website while being excluded from talks with the contractors who were being charged with building the thing.

As the weeks went by, it became clear that the small team of senior managers was being made even smaller. The planned 'research and rebuttal unit' was merged into a communications unit headed by former spin doctor for Gordon Brown, Paul Sinclair. Far from a mere press office, 'comms' was to have control over

every aspect of every statement and leaflet put out by the campaign. Yet bizarrely, this super department was to have only four members of staff for all but the last month of the campaign.

Predictably, the effect of putting so few people in charge of so much was a massive bottleneck. Slightly less predictable, but no less lamentable, was the fact that research in any meaningful sense ceased. After the initial qualitative and quantitative analysis conducted over the summer, and a huge poll in November designed to help us identify what messages appealed to each demographic, opinion poll research effectively stopped and from that point onwards we were reliant on people's hunches to muddle us through. A frustrated research team found itself with nothing to do and was not empowered to work on its own initiative. Opposition research and proactive fact-checking simply ground to a halt.

Research was not merely not commissioned; it was ignored. Our initial focus group work clearly showed that people were contemptuous of the idea that electoral reform would prevent corruption; people only approved of notions such as AV "making MPs work harder" in the context of them having to reach out beyond their core party support during elections. Despite this advice, the campaign repeatedly sought to conflate the two. Similarly, the advice we got from veterans of the 2004 North East referendum was that celebrities were of limited value. Despite this, we ran a campaign that was obsessed not merely with celebrities but with ones who appealed only to the educated middle classes.

The campaign became increasingly reductionist in its approach. In recognition of the very real problem we faced in explaining AV to a broadly disinterested public, we adopted the guiding principle of "show don't tell" over the summer. By mid-November, that became "don't tell". All proposals for explanatory videos or websites were blocked (indeed, it took a month before the comms unit was willing to sign-off any explanatory pages on the website at all).

The ground operations team was, despite strenuous objections, given explicit instructions to discourage local groups from holding mock ballots. The fear was that the people who participated in such ballots would be so outraged when they read in the following week's local newspaper that their chosen Strictly Come Dancing contestant had not won the mock ballot, that they would instantly resolve to vote No. (At the end of March, the IPPR published research showing that support for AV massively increased amongst people who had been given the opportunity to try it out, but by then it was far too late).

Possibly the most reductionist policy of all was the decision to place so much emphasis on phonebanking. Again, it was based on the perfectly sound notion that person-to-person persuasion was far more effective than showering people with leaflets, and that we would

cover far more ground on the phone than we could getting people to go door-to-door. Somehow, however, that reasonable guiding principle led the campaign to adopting an approach in which the entire ground operations campaign would be focused on getting as many people as possible to participate in one of the fifty phonebanks we were to set up across the country. At the early stages, the talk was of the largest phone operation ever seen in the UK, with 3 to 5 million contacts all but assured.

It soon became apparent, however, that not only did this strategy fail to take account of the fact that most activists did not actually enjoy phonebanking, but that considerations such as software procurement and even the legal situation had not been taken into account. In the end, just 500,000 contacts were made; and most of the data generated was not actually useable for the purposes of getting out the vote.

NOTORIOUSLY DYSFUNCTIONAL

So how was all of this allowed to happen? In my view, to understand that, you have to understand where most of the senior staff were coming from. Gordon Brown's Downing Street was notoriously dysfunctional; the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust's POWER2010 campaign had been an expensive and chaotic disaster. And then there is the nightmare that is the Electoral Reform Society.

The trials and tribulations of ERS have been chronicled over the years in *Liberator*. Suffice to say that its recent history has not been a happy one. The organisation tore itself apart over the Jenkins Report in 1998 and an unhealthy 'them versus us' culture has existed between staff and its governing council ever since. Yet despite its problems, thanks to its commercial arm, in recent years it has been extremely wealthy (at least in voluntary sector terms).

From talking to them, and overhearing them in the open plan office, it was clear that too many of the senior staff had an outlook that was deeply cynical about political activists and campaigning in general. Idealism was very thin on the ground. In retrospect, it is extremely easy to see how such a group of people with a very similar perspective and with scars across their backs from past struggles found themselves reinforcing each other's preconceptions rather than challenging them. And it is very easy to see how they might end up imposing a sink-or-swim, cliquey style of management.

The walls of the room in which the communications unit and most senior staff were based were covered in leafy green wallpaper; as a result, it quickly acquired the nickname 'The Jungle Room'. Looking back on it, it is quite striking how reminiscent it was of *Gorillas in the Mist*. You had the silverbacks in one corner of the room, masters of all they surveyed. They, in turn, were surrounded by their trusted deputies, grooming away. Roughly speaking, the further away you were from the top table, the further down in the pecking order you

“The situation was a living nightmare long before it became clear that the campaign itself was failing at the most basic level”

were. At one point, the room was even rearranged so that there was a whole island of desks between the top table and the rest of the people in the room. The point being made could not have been more emphatic.

This is the only office I've ever worked in where the female staff felt it necessary to hold regular 'ladies lunches' in the interests of mutual support. The initial attempt to get the campaign

to entrench the principles of “respect, empower, include” into the way it treated staff and volunteers was openly mocked and disparaged by members of the senior team. In the commercial sector, this would be seen as evidence of highly aberrant behaviour, yet the situation was left to fester.

For many junior staff, the situation was a living nightmare long before it became clear that the campaign itself was failing at the most basic level. I don't think any of us realised quite what we were letting ourselves in for when we signed up. But what were we supposed to do? I came close to resigning as early as November but decided instead to try to make the best that I could in the situation.

In the end, I'm quite proud of what I achieved, winning the social media war despite having no advertising budget, and helping to raise an incredible amount of money online. I'm immensely proud of a lot of my colleagues who performed above and beyond the call of duty. And I would single out the new ERS chief executive Katie Ghose for praise; she was the only person with any actual authority in the campaign who seemed concerned about morale and improving communication. If she is given the opportunity, I am confident that she will go on to sort out many of the problems that have plagued ERS for over a decade.

But we were struggling on, having been shot in the foot and with one arm tied behind our backs. And frankly, the situation made us all complicit. I'm very aware of the number of times the stress and difficulty of the situation lead me to accept uncritically and even defend a number of things that, in retrospect, were quite wrong-headed.

A lot of Liberal Democrats have been calling loudly for John Sharkey to be held accountable in some way for the campaign's numerous failures, and it has to be said that the buck did stop with him – at his insistence. He certainly does need to address his critics' points. But the organisations that set up the campaign did welcome him with open arms, in retrospect with very little in the way of scrutiny. And the Liberal Democrats anointed him, having made him chair of the Liberal Democrat AV campaign and sending him as an emissary to reach out to the other relevant stakeholders. Months into the campaign, we heard numerous senior Liberal Democrats complaining about us putting him in charge, yet during the crucial planning stages of the campaign, such voices were conspicuously silent. It is crucial, after such a monumental failure, that everyone involved recognises their share of responsibility. **(continued on Page 19)**

I CAN'T GET NO ANTIS FACTION

The Social Liberal Forum holds its first conference in June. Will it look to the future or the past, asks Simon Titley

Is the Social Liberal Forum necessary? In a members-only poll published recently by Liberal Democrat Voice (30 April), 64% described themselves as 'social liberal' and only 35% as 'economic liberal'. Isn't the battle already won?

The Liberal Democrats have always been overwhelmingly social liberal. The preamble to the party constitution makes this clear, giving equal weight to positive and negative freedoms. This tradition long predates the merger; the Liberal Party had been social liberal ever since Joseph Chamberlain installed his first municipal drainpipe.

But an unrepresentative minority is subverting that tradition. Since the late 1990s, the party's social liberalism has been challenged by a succession of right-wing caucuses and ginger groups, boosted by the totemic *Orange Book*. Despite having no democratic mandate, this movement has gained considerable power over the party.

SLF is a belated response to this trend but there are two dangers. The first is that creating a faction might inadvertently reposition the party's mainstream ideology (i.e. social liberalism) as a fringe view. The second is that merely reacting against right-wing intrigue risks ignoring the need for a positive vision. These dangers define SLF's first two tasks.

POSITION AS MAINSTREAM

Task no.1 is to reassert that social liberalism is the mainstream view within the Liberal Democrats. The *Orange Book* alleged it was "reclaiming liberalism"; SLF has a better claim and should damn well make it. But it is not SLF's job to try and restore a *status quo ante*, despite the nostalgia of some former SDP members for the post-war consensus. Circumstances have changed. SLF must refresh social liberalism to address the future, not hanker after the past.

A POSITIVE VISION

Task no.2 is to develop a positive vision, a distinct and coherent idea of the sort of society we wish to live in; not a utopia but a sense of direction and a source of inspiration. SLF cannot do this if it looks at issues in microcosm. It must enter the realm of big ideas.

The main challenges facing society – such as climate change, the global financial crisis, the atomisation of society, the breakdown of trust in our democratic institutions – demand a 'big picture' outlook. We need politicians with the vision to address these deep problems, but most of them have retreated into a world of uninspiring managerialism and banal soundbites. We need grown-up political discourse, but it has been trivialised by the media's tabloid values and poisoned by the abusive rage of online comment.

This situation demands fundamental change. SLF

claims to be 'radical' but it can be truly radical only if it argues for such change.

AN IDEA OF FREEDOM

Task no.3 is to articulate a distinct idea of freedom, since that is what the party's internal ideological argument is basically about. All liberals claim to stand for 'freedom' but they cannot agree what it means. Social liberals reject the classical liberal view that freedom is merely an absence of restraint. They believe that freedom consists of both 'freedom to' and 'freedom from' since, to enjoy freedom, people need the practical ability to exercise it.

To help win this argument, SLF should define freedom in terms of 'agency', which means the capacity of individuals to make meaningful choices about their lives and to influence the world around them.

Agency is a useful concept because it forces us to think of freedom as a practical ability rather than a theoretical abstraction. It gets to the heart of the matter, the distribution of power. Most political problems can be traced to an unwarranted concentration of power, where powerful people monopolise agency for their own selfish ends or deny it to others. An insistence on agency counteracts the classical liberal view that market forces are the only legitimate means by which people may exercise power, since markets have only a limited capacity to provide agency. Democratic association is the only power most individual citizens have to stand up to giants.

AN IDEA OF THE ECONOMY

Task no.4 is to develop a coherent idea of the economy, as a distinct alternative to the neoliberal ideology that dominated politics for the past thirty years. Fortunately, someone has already done the spade work. In their ALDC booklet *The Theory and Practice of Community Economics*, David Boyle and Bernard Greaves built on the ideology of community politics by extending its application to economics.

Their central idea is that the economy exists to serve people rather than the other way round. "In a democratic society," they argue, "the role of politics is to enable its citizens to determine their political, social, environmental and cultural objectives; economics is the mechanism for achieving them."

After thirty years of excessive reliance on the City, inflated house prices and easy consumer credit, all the talk is of 'rebalancing' the British economy. We need to get back to making and doing things that others wish to buy. The Liberal Democrats should be arguing for a much wider engagement in this process, so SLF should encourage the party to revive the interest the Liberal Party once had in co-operatives, mutuals and workplace democracy.

AN IDEA OF THE STATE

Task no.5 is to apply the concept of 'agency' to the state. Debate is currently dominated by the coalition government's plans to cut or privatise public services. This tempts critics to develop a knee-jerk defence of the centralised state.

Social liberals should know better. After all, hasn't every Focus Team spent years campaigning against bad public services? No one could argue that the NHS is faultless after the recent Stafford Hospital scandal (which was not caused by cuts).

When public services fail, it is usually because they deny agency to the people and communities they are meant to serve. They are often grossly inefficient, so SLF should adopt the Liberal case for thrift proposed by David Boyle in *Liberator* 339. Public services can be cheaper and more effective if we get rid of centralisation and bigness.

SLF should reject Fabian paternalism and develop a localist critique of public services. There is no virtue in New Labour's technocracy, control freakery and sclerotic service systems, so SLF should beware of jumping aboard Labour's anti-cuts bandwagon.

Labour's agenda also presents another danger. Labour shares with the Conservatives an assumption that the public sector and the public realm are all about service provision. This economism confines the left to arguing for the state merely as a rival supplier of public services. It does not allow for the argument that collectivised means of provision have broader social functions, by enabling democratic control or demonstrating social solidarity.

AN IDEA OF COMMUNITY

Task no.6 is to develop a distinct idea of 'community'. The question of community has become politically salient because of increasing anxiety about social breakdown. The most obvious sign is the emergence of the 'Big Society', conceived by 'Red Tory' Phillip Blond. The Labour Party has now produced an equivalent communitarian movement, 'Blue Labour' led by Maurice Glasman.

Most Liberal Democrats share concerns about social breakdown but they should be wary of the Red Tories and Blue Labour, who base their analysis on hostility to liberalism. Both groups are socially conservative, seeing conformity and a loss of individual autonomy as the price we must pay for rebuilding social cohesion.

SLF should help the party develop an alternative approach to social cohesion that does not sacrifice people's essential individuality. An idea of community that reconciles people's need for belonging and community with their need for agency and autonomy would be distinctly Liberal. If the party doesn't do this, no one else will, and we risk losing many of the hard-won personal freedoms gained since the 1960s.

KNOW YOUR ENEMY

Task no.7 is to understand what you are up against. SLF would not have been founded were it not for right-wing intrigue in the party. But is the problem 'right wing' or 'intrigue'?

The leading plotters call themselves 'right wing' but most have no sincere ideology. In the 1980s, they were social democratic; in the 1990s, Blairite; in the 2000s, neoliberal. This looks hypocritical but is actually consistent; a consistent belief in positioning, cynically

aligning with whichever orthodoxy seems to offer a short cut to power. Their guiding faith is less about politics, more about establishing a social pecking order; they imagine they are an elite with an entitlement to power and status.

But the theory that an elite knows best has been tested to destruction twice by the Liberal Democrats. First, immediately after the merger, when Liberal right wingers joined with a paranoid SDP leadership to dismantle party democracy, only to see membership, income and votes plummet. Second, when the right toppled Chris Rennard and took over the party's 2010 election campaign, only to make a complete hash of it.

Things go wrong because right wingers haven't the balls to test their ideas in open debate. To pursue their goals, they bypass the party's democratic machinery. They don't bother fielding slates in internal elections or proposing motions to conference. The focus of their scheming is now the CentreForum's 'Coalition 2.0', a completely undemocratic exercise that will have more influence on the party than anything the conference says.

SLF can win all the internal elections and conference debates it likes. But if that's all it does, they will be pyrrhic victories. To win the battle for the soul of the party, SLF must also mount a broader campaign. Given that the right operates mostly in secret, the strategy should be to flush them out. Force them to justify their actions in public. They'll love it.

DROP THE 'P' WORD

Finally, task no.8 is to stop using the word 'progressive'. What does it mean? The only discernable meaning is 'not conservative' or 'not reactionary', but those are negative definitions.

'Progressive' is a loaded word, implying a natural affinity with the Labour Party. It is based on the false premise that politics consists of only two sides; Liberals and Labour on one side, the Tories on the other. But why should Liberal Democrats give the benefit of the doubt to Labour, the party of the Iraq War and ID cards? True, the two parties are closer on Keynesian economics, but would any Lib Dem prefer Jack Straw to Ken Clarke at the Ministry of Justice? Even after Clarke's recent gaffe about rape.

SLF may enjoy cordial relations with certain Labour metropolitan *bien pensant* types. This should not blind it to the thick strand of social conservatism running through the Labour Party – a muscular Labourism typified by John Reid and David Blunkett, with a visceral contempt for liberal values.

The 'p' word is a lazy word, so give it up. It will force you to say what you really mean, and that's a good thing. Because right now, we need real politics, not empty slogans. We face a once-in-a-generation opportunity, when a clapped-out political orthodoxy (neoliberalism) will shortly be replaced by something else. To seize this chance, the Liberal Democrats need a compelling vision. They will need one anyway if, after the debacle of this May's elections, they are to survive the next general election.

SLF's duty is to refresh the party by defining that vision. But if all SLF can do is parrot Labour's hackneyed anti-cuts mantras, count me out.

Simon Titley is a member of the *Liberator* Collective

TRAPPED IN A BURNING BUILDING

Reopening tuition fees after Tory treachery on AV might offer a route out, says Chris White

It is usual after elections to be able to put an optimistic gloss on the results. Gains here, moderate losses there, difficulties ahead for the other parties.

This year is a touch more difficult. True, we did not lose the 1,000 seats that some internal party bodies were budgeting for. But we did lose the 700 seats that the Sun said we would ('Goodbye to Dem') and exceeded the Rawlings and Thrasher prediction of 300-400 losses.

We did not lose all our councils, retaining Eastleigh (with gains!), Portsmouth, Eastbourne, Watford, Three Rivers and a handful more. We retained Dave Hodgson as the elected Mayor of Bedford.

Meanwhile, there were tragedies in Liverpool, Manchester, Hull and many more. Wipe-out did not take place, despite the eager predictions of unchallenged commentators on the BBC, but there were places where we did indeed cease to exist at council level.

In the state elections, Wales was not too bad (but a real pity about Veronica German), while Scotland was a disaster.

There is a nearly silver lining with Labour failing really to capitalise in either local elections or Scotland. But in the north of England, Labour forged ahead in those urban areas that we still proudly flaunted one year ago as evidence that we were the masters now.

Did we see it coming? A year ago, when the coalition was formed, we knew that this would be a difficult election year – one third of our supporters were naturally Labour-inclined rather than Conservative-inclined and would desert us simply because of the formation of the coalition. A different third may well have deserted us if we had formed the impossible coalition with Labour and the rainbow parties.

But then we thought that we would be able to herald a new politics: a cleaned-up parliament, sticking to our promises, and basic competence and humanity in government. Instead, it was a Liberal Democrat minister who was forced to resign over expenses. Tuition fees stuck in everyone's craw and the antics of right-wing Tories, not least Cameron, made it difficult to demonstrate that we are a moderating influence.

The picture is more complex, however. Many reported during April (I was one of them) that things on the doorstep did not appear to be so bad. The coalition came up regularly but elections were being fought on local issues and good candidates were being respected for their work. Clearly no-one could use Clegg on the literature (what a difference a year in office makes!) but, with decent campaigning, tight contests could be turned to our advantage.

So why was the outcome at the darker end of our fear spectrum?

The obvious first factor was the AV referendum. There were times, we must remember, that the Yes camp was ahead in the polls. We had Eddie Izzard and his million plus Twitter followers, plus other Labour worthies including Ed Miliband. The No camp had laughable dinosaurs (and Rik Mayall for some reason).

LAUGHABLE SYSTEM

The trouble was that AV as a system is itself pretty laughable. It can deliver even larger and more disproportionate results than FPTP and would likely have led to only fairly modest changes at the last election. "Make your MP work harder" is an odd slogan when many MPs of all parties do work pretty hard or at least seem to.

But there was also naked Tory treachery. The idea of the coalition agreement, or so we thought, was to have a referendum in which the issue would be discussed. There was some risk of a referendum on the coalition's performance but, given that the two parties would be on opposite sides, this should cancel out.

The Tories – brilliantly – managed to turn it into a referendum on Clegg. His was the face on the No literature.

We should not have been surprised. Tuition fees: Clegg. Cuts: Clegg. Cynical politics: Clegg. Cameron is usually nowhere to be seen when the going gets tough. The newspapers lap up right-wing rubbish from Eric Pickles and attacks on scroungers and immigrants, while dishing it out to Clegg and the Liberal Democrats with undiminished relish.

Moreover, the No camp used the secret weapon of any campaigner. If under pressure, lie. The £250m cost of AV was made up: David Blunkett has admitted it. Outright, baseless lies are difficult to refute – which is presumably why the No camp resorted to them. They certainly impacted on the doorstep.

So, on 5 May the Tories poured out in larger numbers than would have been usual in municipal elections to vote No – and to say that they still did not like Clegg. And Labour voters poured out to vote either Yes or No – and to say that if they had briefly liked Clegg, they certainly didn't now. In normal circumstances, many of these people would have stayed at home. As it was, they cast their votes for Labour or Tory.

A second factor is the 'return home' element. One of the ironies of our stance on electoral reform is that we are rather good at FPTP in contrast to our modest pickings under proportional systems. This is because we target resources and use the squeeze message.

But this was not an election in which this sort of message was going to be very effective. In many places, the "X can't win here" slogan had been exposed as baseless in the previous year's general election.

But even where it had not been entirely discredited, warning this year “Vote Lib Dem or the Tory will get in” appeared laughable given what had happened in May 2010.

“Vote Lib Dem or Labour will get in” might have worked with soft Tories but this election saw remarkably little of the anticipated credibility surge. Some of us had hoped that the reason why some Tory-inclined people could not vote Lib Dem is they thought we did not have the stomach for real political power. This, so the argument went, would now be laid aside for ever and we would become attractive to those who had hitherto doubted our cojones. No: the Mail was still telling them that we were limbs of Satan. Soft Tory voters concluded, as they had done year after year, that the best way of stopping Labour was to vote Conservative.

A third factor was the nature of our seats and our councillors. We need to be clear here. There is no suggestion that all of those who lost – or even a goodly proportion – did so because of a lack of effort. “Where we work we win” ceased operating at this election. But its half brother “Where we don’t work we don’t win” came into its own.

Councillors who got in on the wave of Blair-Brown disillusionment in 2007 or on Iraq war horror in 2003 (or in some cases on continuing anti-Tory feelings in 1999) were successful in those elections because of a benign national scene. Render that scene non-benign for the Liberal Democrats and votes start to fall away fast.

Meanwhile, our canvassing records were in some places nonsense. Our database was accumulated over years in which people split their votes, regarding the Liberal Democrats as essentially harmless locally while a bit of a risk nationally. In 2010, we accumulated huge amounts of data showing former Labour supporters coming over to us in the death throes of the Brown government. A Lib Dem voter in 2010, who had a history of voting Labour in 2009 or earlier, was a Labour voter in 2011. The more we knocked them all up, the more they came out in droves and reverted to type.

I ran a committee room for two wards this year. I knocked up one so that by 9pm we had a two-to-one differential over the opposition – usually a comfortable win. This (a ward we had held for some years) was lost handsomely. The other ward received a lighter touch and we held it. I am thankful I did not have more resources that day – I could easily have lost both by relying on a flawed database.

NEOLITHIC METHODS

Finally we were outgunned nationally. There are now no newspapers which love us – and certainly not the BBC. Our resources are depleted while those behind the Tories are seemingly bottomless. So I am not surprised to hear that they have started using robo-calling on polling day to knock up their supporters.

“One of the ironies of our stance on electoral reform is that we are rather good at FPTP in contrast to our modest pickings under proportional systems”

We are still using neolithic methods to fight space age election campaigning – and slipping behind further and further each year.

At this point, I am supposed to pull out the Pet Theory about what should happen next. There are plenty around on social media sites at the moment. “Clegg must resign” say some. “We must leave the coalition” say others. “We need to sort out the coalition’s policies” is also popular.

It is true that Nick is toxic at the moment. But it is perhaps time to recall that it is mainly because he is leader of the junior party rather than because he is Nick Clegg. Replace him with, say, Chris Huhne or Tim Farron and the tabloids, the internet pranksters, YouTube and Twitter will have a different hate figure to pillory.

So do we leave the coalition? There is then a general election in which the Tories say (I can write their literature now and save them the time) “the Liberals cut and run” and we need “strong government” and “Give Dave a mandate – no half measures this time”. Meanwhile, Labour will demolish us on our record – tuition fees, cuts, selling out. And we – already 700 councillors down – have fewer activists and less money (not least less money from councillors), and precious few wanting to give us donations once we have declared that we never want to be in government because it hurts too much.

I increasingly have the sensation of being trapped in a burning building. The exit routes are certainly closed. So we have to fight the fire from within while hoping that something will come up (an even more unsuitable Labour leader than Miliband?) to rescue us from the outside.

While Tories might be saying to Cameron that he should make no more concessions to the Lib Dems, we can turn round and say:

“We had a deal. We would behave on tuition fees and you would behave on AV. You didn’t behave on AV – so we want to reopen the issue of fees. And no more mucking around with the NHS and the police.”

He may call our bluff. But now we have nothing to lose. And at least this way we might have a record to defend.

Chris White is a Liberal Democrat county councillor in Hertfordshire

THE EN MASSE DESERTION

The recent Scottish parliamentary elections were disastrous for the Liberal Democrats. Caron Lindsay explains why

The council elections in England were bad, taking the party back to 1993 levels of representation. The situation in Scotland, where elections to the Holyrood parliament took place, was much worse, taking us back to pre-Alliance days. I want to take a look at why that happened and how we can rebuild the party up here.

The Scottish Parliament has 129 members – 73 in first past the post constituencies and 56 on a proportional list basis. The first three Holyrood elections returned 16 or 17 Liberal Democrat MSPs, the majority of them constituency based. We spent the first eight years of the parliament in coalition with Labour.

Four years ago, the SNP made a remarkable leap forward and, due to 48 votes in deepest Ayrshire going its way, became the largest party. It governed as a minority but was not able to implement key policies like a referendum on independence and minimum alcohol pricing because the opposition voted them down. However, SNP ministers were reasonably competent, likeable and tight knit. Their policies of freezing the council tax and introducing free prescriptions were popular.

Despite that, even until six weeks before polling day, it looked like the Nationalists' grip on government was going to end. Labour had a convincing 10-point lead in the opinion polls. Nobody would have predicted that, come 6 May, Holyrood would have its first single-party majority government.

PSYCHOLOGICAL BLOW

We Liberal Democrats knew we were going to lose some seats but the scale of the defeat, reducing us to just five with no mainland constituency seats, shocked the most hardened pessimists. Our voters switched en masse to the SNP. The loss of our seats in the Highlands, Borders and North East Fife, held for decades, is a tough psychological blow.

Labour's result was shockingly bad too. Its net loss of nine seats included a wipe-out of many of its front benchers, with the SNP storming through Labour's west and central Scotland heartland.

For us, it was undoubtedly our involvement in the Westminster coalition that angered our voters. Most of Scotland's voters loathe the Tories with a passion unrivalled in its intensity after the damage Thatcher did here in the 1980s. Even those who understood that we had no realistic choice but to go into coalition were angry with us, even if they could see that we were making a difference for the better. The breaking of the pledge on tuition fees was brought up time and time again on doorsteps, even though our record on the issue here is unblemished.

The coalition was not the only factor, though. Our campaign was reasonable when we needed it to be of stellar quality. Even our opposition to a Scottish national police force, popular particularly in rural,

highland areas, was not enough to persuade people to stay with us. Our key messages were not ready early enough, or articulated often enough, and we were simply too timid. When the SNP questioned our key policy of generating £1.5 billion from selling off Scottish Water's debt, we virtually stopped talking about it. We didn't push our plan to abolish the council tax for poorer pensioners nearly enough. This policy appeared from nowhere in March when we should have been campaigning on it for much longer.

The early days of the campaign were not helped by the resignation of our sitting MSP in Central Scotland in opposition to the coalition, and the endorsement by a retiring Highland MSP of Alex Salmond, the SNP leader, as First Minister.

Our campaign effectively became background noise to the coalition. We fought it with significantly fewer resources than we had four years previously. We also made some mistakes during the 2007-11 parliament. While we stood up against the other parties' collusion when they casually quadrupled pre-charge detention times, we lost too many opportunities to show our liberal heart. The compassionate release of the Lockerbie bomber was vehemently opposed by our MSPs, to the disappointment of many members and activists. We also opposed the SNP's plans on minimum alcohol pricing, against much expert evidence and the wishes of our own health spokesman.

We knew the minute the coalition was formed that these elections would be hard. Labour, however, squandered a big lead with a chaotic campaign, which Malcolm Tucker would call an omnishambles. The farcical scenes of Labour's hapless leader Iain Gray hiding from protesters in a protracted escape from Glasgow Central Station was an ominous start. Labour was all over the place on the cost implications of its six-month mandatory sentence for carrying a knife policy. It spent the first half of the campaign telling people to vote Labour to weaken the Westminster coalition, and the last ten days or so scaremongering about independence. This was not inspiring.

The SNP's campaign was virtually flawless. The Nationalists were very lucky that, because of others' problems, they weren't really tested. The debates revealed that Alex Salmond didn't have a clue how he was going to pay for a further five-year council tax freeze. The SNP had enough money to out-campaign the union-funded Labour Party. What chance did we have, with thruppence ha'penny and a couple of polo mints in the bottom of our handbag?

The proportional structure of the Scottish Parliament is supposed to ensure that no party should be able to win an overall majority. It was designed that way primarily to stop the SNP. If I had felt a system had been constructed to confine me, I'd be trying to find a way round it and I'm sure the SNP campaigns team wanted to unpick that lock.

The way the SNP did it was to build on a successful

tactic from 2007 – making the regional list election less about the balance of the parliament and more a presidential-style contest for First Minister. When your leader is one of the most effective politicians of our generation, you can do that. The Nationalists’ regional literature told people to vote SNP on the list to elect Alex Salmond as First Minister. Their clear messaging, enhanced by Obama-style campaign technology, enabled them to ramp up a massive list vote. In the final days of the campaign, their message was simple – both votes SNP. That unleashed the huge list vote into the constituencies, tearing up the rule book on winning first past the post seats.

As in England, the Tories largely escaped punishment for the coalition. Their loss of two seats, though, was enough for their formidable leader Annabel Goldie to join Iain Gray and our leader Tavish Scott in quitting within days of the election.

NEW LEADER

We don’t have time to cry into our beer, though. Every council seat in Scotland is up for election next May. We already have a new leader, Willie Rennie, elected unopposed on 17 May. If I had to design a blueprint for the leader the party needed at this time, it would look very much like Willie. He’s a likeable, energetic guy who never takes the easy option. Even when he goes running, it’s with a sack of coal on his back, or up a hill. He helped build up the party in the South West in the 1990s before becoming chief executive of the Scottish Liberal Democrats. He then went to work as chief of staff in Holyrood, and his fingerprints are all over our major coalition gains of free personal care and free university tuition.

Crucially, Willie has earned the respect of Nick Clegg, who knows he gives credible advice. Managing the 2009 Euro campaign was a risk as we were predicted to lose many seats, but we performed respectably.

I interviewed Willie for the Liberal Democrat Voice blog as he launched his leadership, and I was encouraged at the way he was prepared to reach out to the party. Many members have felt powerless and disconnected from our MSPs, so this is a welcome development. I asked him how he was going to get members involved and he said: “The Liberal Democrats are not easily led. We work together as a collective more than a direct leadership and that’s how I want to do it.”

Although some in the party want to distance themselves CDU/CSU style from the coalition, I don’t see how that would work. Our opponents are hardly likely to throw their arms around us and kill the fatted calf in our honour. They’d be even more vehement towards us for trying to evade responsibility.

I don’t like all the coalition’s policies, but I know Nick Clegg is as decent and compassionate a guy as he was when I interviewed him when he first applied to be a leadership candidate in 1998. His first major speech as party leader was on helping people with mental health problems. In government, he put serious money into

“The scale of the defeat shocked the most hardened pessimists”

doing that. We could keep him at arm’s length and leave him, forever, as the bogeyman in London, but I think it makes more sense to try to improve Scotland’s relationship with him. I want to get him up here often, not always in the full glare of publicity, talking to ordinary people.

I want us to pick public fights with the Tories on issues that people actually care about. So far, we’ve done it on Rupert Murdoch and AV. When David Cameron makes despicably inappropriate comments about incapacity benefit claimants, we should call him out for it. Noisily.

We need to be far better at showcasing how we are influencing the government. Many members were moved by defeated Edinburgh Central candidate Alex Cole-Hamilton’s election night tweet: “If my defeat tonight has been in part payment for ensuring that no child has to spend the night in a detention centre for immigration purposes, then I accept it with all my heart.”

The public doesn’t necessarily know that it was the Liberal Democrats who got rid of George Osborne’s cruel plan to cut housing benefit for claimants after a year. We have had a number of similar wins and are taking the sting out of the Tories. We must be better at communicating them.

There will be a referendum on Scottish independence within five years. I couldn’t bear the No campaign to be like the No to AV one. We must make it positive. We need to inspire people with liberal ideas to provide affordable, decent housing, tackle poverty and improve health and well-being. We need to get back to good, old-fashioned community politics.

Labour’s recovery will be helped by a ready supply of union cash. We are not rich, so we’ll need to get noticed and excite people by being creative, bold and wearing our liberal heart on our sleeve.

We have to dust ourselves off and start fighting back. Scotland needs a strong liberal voice to stand against the forces of nationalism and conservatism.

Caron Lindsay is a Scottish Liberal Democrat member. She blogs at:
<http://carons-musings.blogspot.com>

COALITION POSITIVES

The Welsh Liberal Democrats managed to withstand the electoral tsunami that hit other areas. Peter Black explains how

Thursday 5 May was an historic day for Wales, the start of the 4th Welsh Assembly, the first to have law-making powers in its own right. It was also the day when the Welsh Liberal Democrats defied the pundits and the polls, and held on to five of their six seats.

It was not a day without disappointment. Cardiff Central was lost by just 38 votes to a concerted Labour campaign. Montgomeryshire fell to the Tories again and, although we halved Plaid Cymru's majority in Ceredigion, we still missed out gaining it by 1,700 votes. We also lost Veronica German in South Wales East.

The compensation lay in the regional seats. In Mid and West Wales, Bill Powell was elected, while John Dixon took a seat in South Wales Central. In my own region, I held on by 54 votes out of 154,000 after a difficult campaign in a solid Labour area. Kirsty Williams also held on to her Brecon and Radnorshire seat comfortably.

If our resilience were simply a matter of being saved by the electoral system, the Liberal Democrats would not have done so badly in Scotland. Instead, there were three factors that assisted the party to hold on.

The first of these was the strategy of concentrating resources and work in our strongest areas so as to bolster our core vote. It worked in South Wales West, where the results in the three Swansea seats were just enough to counter poor outcomes in the valley areas. It worked too in North Wales, where predictions that we would lose our regional seat to UKIP were proved wrong.

The second factor was the campaign itself. In Kirsty Williams, we have a charismatic and talented leader, who effectively won the leaders' debate. It was just a shame that it was screened late at night on a bank holiday.

We took a decision that, whatever the issues with Nick Clegg and the party as a whole being in government, seeking to distance ourselves from them was a recipe for disaster. We would still suffer from protest votes while offering no reason to those who wished to give us the benefit of the doubt to come out and vote for us.

Instead, we promoted our achievements in government, countering the negatives about tuition fees and being in government with the Tories, by proclaiming the 50,000 Welsh workers who no longer pay tax, the 1.1 million who will have a tax cut, linking pensions to earnings, and extra money for tax credits.

We also adopted a major principle of good campaigning: keep it local and keep it relevant. We produced a costed manifesto with strong campaigning themes, highlighting the failures of Labour and Plaid Cymru on education, the economy and health. We supplemented these messages with our own policies: an innovation fund to grow new businesses, a training grant for firms that take on new permanent employees,

a pupil premium and a pledge to start closing the £604 per pupil funding gap between England and Wales, and a promise to investigate claims by professionals that one fifth of the health budget is being misspent. We hammered home these messages wherever we could.

Finally, the last factor that helped us was the decline in the nationalist vote. On a constituency level, Plaid Cymru was down 3.1% on its 2007 result. That compared with a drop of 4.2% in the Liberal Democrat vote and an increase of 2.6% for the Tories. In the regional vote, Plaid lost 3.1% of its vote, not far off the decline of 3.7% for the Welsh Liberal Democrats. The Tories were up 1.1%.

Plaid Cymru's campaign was a mess. Plaid attacked Labour's record in government without once acknowledging that it was there with them and had collective responsibility for the government. It did not have any clear message and, as a result, Labour, with its theme of standing up for Wales against the Westminster government, took a huge chunk of the nationalist vote. Plaid Cymru had the worst result on the night of any party, losing four seats and its status as the second largest group.

There is no doubt that this loss in support for the nationalists helped me hold on in South Wales West, assisted us in holding our North Wales Regional seat and in taking the other two regional seats in Mid and West and South Wales Central under the D'Hondt top-up system. The full impact can be seen at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/election2011/overview/html/wales.stm

Our job now is to rebuild for the local council elections next year. We cannot fool ourselves that our great escape is a sign that everything is OK. We still lost 17 deposits and a huge amount of support. Intensive campaigning and ruthless targeting is vital if we are to buck the trend again in 2012.

Peter Black is Liberal Democrat AM for South Wales West

RED BENCH BALANCE

Lack of progress on women's representation in the Commons means Liberal Democrats must seize the chances offered by Lords reform, says Dinti Batstone

A recent paper by the Fabian Society predicted a wipe-out of female Liberal Democrat MPs at the next election thanks to a “toxic triple cocktail” of low poll ratings, reduced numbers of Commons seats and precariously thin majorities.

This is just the latest in a growing narrative that ‘male and pale’ Liberal Democrats are retreating from egalitarian progress made under Labour. It’s a narrative we urgently need to rebut.

A preferred panacea for many, all-women shortlists (AWS), is problematic for Liberal Democrats – not only philosophically, but also pragmatically. Unlike Labour and the Tories, we simply do not have the luxury of safe seats through which to parachute more women into the House of Commons. At the last election, despite having women candidates in 50% of retiring MPs’ seats and 30% of target seats – a higher percentage than the Tories – we depressingly went backwards to just seven women MPs out of 57.

Aspirin alleviates pain, but it won’t heal a broken bone. The underlying driver of female under-representation in our party is not women failing to win selection contests in notionally winnable seats.

It is electoral volatility coupled with a leaky pipeline of female candidates (fewer women come forward, and women disproportionately resign or choose not to re-stand). AWS would not fix these problems.

Proponents and detractors of AWS can however agree on one thing: a critical mass of women across both houses is urgently needed to change Westminster’s male-centric culture – a culture that deters too many capable women from standing and which leads others (including Labour MPs elected via AWS) to stand down. Without the critical mass required to kick-start culture change, we will remain stuck in a vicious circle where women self-select out of politics not because they lack the talent or work ethic, but because Westminster’s macho, ‘presenteeist’ culture drives women away.

Evidence from business and the professions strongly supports the critical mass argument, especially at senior levels. Lord Davies’s report into women on corporate boards, commissioned by Lynne Featherstone and Ed Davey, concluded that while tokenism is both patronising and ineffective, a critical mass of senior women positively impacts the talent pipeline, corporate governance and the financial bottom line. The hard-headed ‘business case’ for gender balance is now widely accepted and politicians have not been shy to threaten quotas for companies that fail to put their boardrooms in order.

So now seems a particularly propitious moment for the coalition to practice the gender balance it preaches. If the argument is compelling for business, is it not even more so for politics?

Actions speak louder than words and our woeful

track record in the Commons makes it all the more important that Liberal Democrats seize – and are seen to seize – the opportunity of Lords reform to signal that gender balance is an essential, non-negotiable part of an effective 21st century parliamentary democracy. Failing to use our flagship constitutional reform policy to promote gender balance in our own backyard would irretrievably damage our credibility on this both inside and outside the party.

Precisely how we can use Lords reform to promote gender balance (and diversity more generally) will depend on the election/appointments split as well as the electoral system chosen. Likely retention of bishops plus ‘grandfathering’ for existing peers together mean that even the newly reformed chamber will kick off with an in-built male bias. The elected element will therefore be crucial to redress imbalance.

In geographically large multi-member constituencies where voters may have insufficient information to differentiate meaningfully between several candidates from the same party, an open list system can be a user-friendly option. Unlike the closed lists introduced by Labour for Euro-elections, an open list system would empower voters to override party pecking orders if they want to, while allowing parties to put forward a ‘default’ list order conducive to diversity. So an open list system would facilitate one-off zipping of the kind that successfully delivered lasting gender balance in our MEP group, but would still enable voters to promote or demote candidates as they see fit.

STV, our party’s preferred system for smaller Commons constituencies, can prove unwieldy for electing large numbers of candidates (for example, the federal committee elections – a challenge for the conscientious voter). From a diversity point of view, STV could require our party to put more resources into supporting our women and black and minority ethnic candidates as they would be competing against established ‘male and pale’ Lib Dems, not just at selection stage but also in the election campaign itself. This could be expensive and divisive.

The draft Bill on House of Lords reform will be subject to extensive pre-legislative scrutiny and debate. What is needed here and now is a strong and unequivocal commitment from both leadership and grassroots that, whatever the mechanics, gender balance will be a Liberal Democrat priority for a reformed second chamber. Having gone backwards on the green benches last year, we cannot afford to be complacent about the red ones.

Dinti Batstone is a member of the Federal Policy Committee and vice-chair of the Campaign for Gender Balance

IVORY COAST'S LIBERALS WIN THEIR WAR

Fighting in Ivory Coast saw the eventual triumph of the legitimate president Alasanne Ouattara, whose party is a Liberal International member, reports Issiaka Konaté

Although pushed from the front pages by the political hurricanes that are ripping through North Africa, the Ivory Coast got some coverage in the UK when, after four months of stalemate after November's presidential election, and with a defeated president clinging on to power, forces loyal to the legitimate new president finally managed to remove the reluctant loser, Laurent Gbagbo.

But the cost to the country has been immense. President Ouattara believes that more than 3,000 people have been killed in the last four or five months, and the country has lost some €1bn in revenue, and much more in trade.

Peace has now been established, and the country as a whole is almost secure, but even in May there was still one borough in Abidjan which was infested with militias, tribal militias and mercenaries from Liberia. The area was finally recaptured by forces loyal to President Ouattara. Although some militias have decided to surrender, there are thousands of AK-47 rifles and other weapons hidden all over the country; many were found at several locations across Abidjan including inside the presidential palace.

Because of the situation with the militias, public joy at the resolution of their four-month semi-civil war is muted. The Ivorians are feeling relieved, but would like to feel even more secure. They are worried that several weapons are still to be seized as Gbagbo distributed AK-47s to thousands of people before he was removed from power.

Many have lost cars, possessions, homes and jobs in the rioting and looting. But joy there is, principally because health care is now free; under Gbagbo you paid to enter a hospital, and then for treatment, drugs and beds. President Ouattara also managed to pay the arrears and all salaries with help from France and the EU. Export sanctions have been lifted, and both ports, Abidjan and San Pedro, have resumed trade. An arms embargo will remain in place for another year at least. However, the economy is very slow, with a big deficit and an equally worrying inflation rate.

STASI STYLE

It will not be a simple matter to rebuild the economy, or the infrastructure of the country. Before he 'left' office, Gbagbo had every computer, every piece of wiring, every piece of paper in all public buildings destroyed, Stasi-style. So there are almost no public records; taxes, land or business registration; any official records will have to be completely rebuilt, on new computers. The country, particularly the lagoon of Abidjan, is horrendously polluted. Industrial and

personal waste must be cleared from several areas. Gbagbo's treatment of foreign companies and banks in the Ivory Coast has driven many away, and it will be a hard job to lure these, who are so vital to the economy, back again, unless their security can be guaranteed.

And where is Gbagbo? Gbagbo is under house arrest in a luxurious former presidential palace built by the country's first president Houphouët-Boigny, more than 600km away from Abidjan, in Korhogo in the far north.

And what will happen to him? Gbagbo will be tried eventually, but firstly an Ivorian judge is to interrogate him. President Ouattara is very concerned about human rights abuses and has asked the UN Human Rights Council to send its own team to investigate these.

Whatever the outcome, it is likely Gbagbo will spend the rest of his days in prison. There is a chance he will be tried in The Hague, but if the Ivorians prove they can conduct the enquiry and the trial fairly and correctly themselves, then Gbagbo will face only his own people. Former prime minister Charles Konan Benny from the PDCI party will chair the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. His team will work as quickly as possible to get this commission started, and it should involve religious leaders (Muslim and Christian) and many influential Ivorians.

The Ivory Coast (Cote d'Ivoire) was one of Africa's success stories in the post-colonial world. It has served for centuries as a conduit for trade for its landlocked neighbours. Its French colonial rulers left a department-based national structure and a unifying language for the 62 main tribes (each with its own language or dialect). Rich in agriculture (it produces 40% of the world's cocoa), oil, fish, timber, palm oil and livestock, with a highly developed infrastructure of roads, its economy grew from independence in 1960 until the 1990s, when it began to fall as the rate of growth was not sustainable.

The population also grew, from around 3 million to today's 20 million. This prosperity attracted workers from other West African countries (Liberia, Mali, Burkino Faso, Nigeria, Guinea), who now make up 20% of the population, 33% of which is Christian, living mainly in the south, and 39% Islamic, mainly in the north.

Of the remainder, 12% follow indigenous religions and 16% have no affiliations. Until fairly recently, all groups coexisted peacefully, but the combination of the country's economic success with the resultant immigration, political rivalry and manipulation have created the problems that the country has undergone over the past 20 years.

The Ivory Coast gained independence from France

in 1960 and Felix Houphouët-Boigny ruled absolutely until 1990, when the country's first multi-party election was held. Houphouët-Boigny won, beating Gbagbo and remaining in power until his death in 1993. The city of his birth, Yamoussoukro (where he built a basilica rivalling the Vatican in size), is where President Ouattara was inaugurated on 21 May.

President Ouattara's RDR (Rally of the Republicans) party is a member of Liberal International and faces having much to do.

STRONG INSTITUTIONS

To avoid situations such as the Ivorians have just experienced, all African countries need strong institutions.

Ivorians also feel very grateful to the international community for their help in assuring that their will was fully taken into consideration during last election, but the rest of the world should only help countries which will work on creating a free and fair society.

The Ivory Coast needs to look at the constitution and remove or alter confusing, damaging articles. The separation between executive, parliament and judiciary should be clearly established for the institutions to work. Ivorians should have the same rights regardless of their religion, ethnic origin, race, culture, level of education and so on.

The spectre of the concept of 'Ivorite' (being a true Ivorian, which was used for years to prevent President Ouattara, whose father was born outside the country, thus making him of 'doubtful citizenship', from standing in elections) still hangs over the country.

Any Commission for Truth and Reconciliation should be allowed a free hand, and all outcomes should be made legal, acted upon and publicised.

The international community has a wonderful chance to help this potentially prosperous, peaceful and influential country by supplying the IT, infrastructure, environmental clean-up technology, transport system, school and academic infrastructures and continued medical assistance, and support the Ivorians' journey to democracy.

The dividends such help will yield in terms of stability and trade with the whole of West Africa are immeasurable. In a few decades' time, Africa could be the richest continent in the world; already it has more mobile phone subscribers than all of the US and Canada, and it is through trade that the rest of the world will recoup its aid many times over. Liberia's president (and Africa's first woman president), Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, says there are no poor nations, only badly managed ones. President Ouattara intends to manage his country well.

Issiaka Konaté is the UK President of the RDR (Rally of the Republicans), President Ouattara's party and a member of Liberal International. Wendy Kyrle-Pope, a member of the Liberator Collective and vice-chair of Liberal International British Group, contributed to this article

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VOLUNTEERING ISN'T FREE

The plan to foster a 'big society' won't work unless the government acknowledges the paradox that volunteering costs money, warns Claire Tyler

I recently participated in a debate in the House of Lords sponsored by Tony Greaves, asking the government what measures it was taking to encourage people to participate in the Big Society. As the Chief Executive of a national charity, it's a subject dear to my heart and I decided to focus on what is needed to turn the rhetoric into a reality for *everyone*, not just the better off.

Of course, there is still much debate along the lines of "what on earth does the Big Society mean" and, until recently, that has obscured all other discussion on whether or not it is intrinsically a good thing. Simply put, I see the Big Society as being about strengthening families, neighbourhood and local communities to come together and play a more active role in the things that really matter to them in their everyday lives. I find it hard to object to that.

However these things don't just happen by magic. They need to be orchestrated. In short – and to use more liberal language – people need to be empowered and the state has a role in helping that to happen.

I recently attended a meeting where (Lord) Nat Wei, David Cameron's chief adviser on the Big Society, set out three main planks of the Big Society policy agenda:

- **Community empowerment**, giving local councils and neighbourhoods more power to shape their local areas (something we in the Liberal Democrats have described and acted out for many years under the banner of 'community politics').
- **Opening up public services** so that charities, social enterprises and others in the voluntary and community sector can compete to deliver high quality public services.
- **Social action** to encourage people to play a more active role in society, including through volunteering.

Both the strand on localism and opening up public services to competition are worthy of articles in their own right. I'm going to focus here on volunteering.

The reaction to the Big Society by quite a few in the voluntary and charitable sector has been lukewarm, to say the least. One of the main reasons for this is that the government needs to show a much more sophisticated understanding about the realities of running a charity – be it big or small – in modern day Britain, particularly the costs of volunteering.

Clearly timing has been an issue. Making people feel positive about the Big Society at a time when we are experiencing substantial cuts in public expenditure, and when those cuts are often being passed on disproportionately to the voluntary sector, was never going to be an easy sell.

In common with many others in the voluntary sector,

reaction from some of my own colleagues in Relate has often been to say, "well we've been part of the Big Society since 1938 so what's really new here?" Like so many other charities, volunteering (be it as a fully trained counsellor, a volunteer receptionist or a local trustee) has underpinned so much of what we do.

Another chief executive colleague from a well known charity, with a proud heritage over the last 140 years, recently said to me: "Our supporters have been fundraising, baking cakes, adopting children, volunteering for projects with us through generations, passing this on as a civic and enjoyable duty through their families and communities". The point here is that they didn't feel the need to be lectured on the merits of the Big Society.

In reality, this country has a long philanthropic tradition – giving of both time and money – and many in the sector have been rather surprised, not to say a little insulted, to find this being presented as a novel idea.

Let's look at a few facts. Although the figure has declined somewhat since 2001, in 2009-10 66% of adults volunteered at least once during the year and 42% of adults volunteered at least once a month in the same period. 58% of adults in England give both time and money.

I recently conducted a very quick straw poll of some charity chief executives in the children and families sector to get their views on what both encourages and hinders volunteering. Many of these charities employ co-ordinators to recruit and train volunteers, to ensure that they are properly equipped to work with vulnerable families and children. These charities are often providing practical help and advice, tea and a chat, peer support groups, helping severely disadvantaged people participate in leisure and community activities, and so much more. It's the stuff that really binds people together.

Four key points emerged from my quick survey:

First, on a positive note, the majority of the volunteers are themselves (in a different way) beneficiaries of the service. For example, some are parents who are being supported towards paid employment through their volunteering activities and benefiting from the skills they develop while volunteering. Others may volunteer as part of their own recovery programmes. Often, this habit of volunteering is being passed on from one generation to the next.

Second, the more volunteers there are, the more supervision and training is required to ensure safety and good outcomes for children and adults. There are additional costs for training the professional outreach staff to undertake this, which can mean that the number of volunteers has to be capped. A ratio of one paid worker to 10 to 15 volunteers would be quite

typical in the sector. Other costs relate to insurance, producing materials, computers, meeting health and safety regulations, and so it goes on.

Third, expenses need to be reimbursed if volunteering is to be a socially inclusive endeavour; for example, transport or training sessions, which may entail childcare costs. If this is not fully recognised, we are in danger of turning the clock back to the 1950s, when virtually all volunteers were middle aged, middle class women not participating in paid employment.

This is not in any way to denigrate their enormous contribution but simply to say that, in 2011, we need people prepared to volunteer from all walks of life if the services provided by charities are to look and feel representative of the communities they serve.

Fourth, voluntary activity often needs to be facilitated to help people acquire the skills to make it happen. Skills such as fundraising or managing a bank account and taking responsibility for a local community groups finance are cases in point.

And this May, a Commission on the Big Society, set up by the sector umbrella body ACEVO and chaired by my colleague Chris Rennard, concluded that the government had failed to communicate its own Big Society vision clearly and consistently, which in turn had fuelled high levels of cynicism and led to inconsistent policy-making within Whitehall. In particular, the report highlights how the government has failed to recognise the correlation between volunteering rates and deprivation, which means wealthy areas are better placed to flourish under the

“Many in the voluntary sector have been rather surprised, not to say a little insulted, to find philanthropy being presented as a novel idea”

Big Society because of their higher levels of social engagement. The report warned that this divide between rich and poor areas could be exacerbated by local authority spending cuts.

The report calls on the government to take a stronger lead, saying: “To date, there has been insufficient co-ordination across Whitehall, with insufficient definition of measurement of and accountability for success and failure in fostering the big society.” I totally agree with these findings.

Volunteering is of fundamental benefit to our society and a means by which charities create real social value, which should be recognised in the national balance sheet alongside wealth creation. To do this requires an upfront investment of time and money. Where that money should come from, particularly the balance between public and private sector funding, is a matter for legitimate debate. Circumstances will vary. For a charity like Relate, the cost of recruiting, training, supervising and managing a body of highly skilled counsellors is substantial.

It is a complete myth that volunteering is a ‘free good’. We need much more recognition of this, instead of the more simplistic rhetoric currently surrounding the Big Society, if we are to turn it into a real force for good for everyone, irrespective of their background or where they live.

Claire Tyler is chief executive of Relate (www.relate.org.uk) and a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords

(continued from Page 7)

I will, however, end on an optimistic note. If nothing else, the referendum has clarified things. It has clarified the scale of the vested interests opposed to even the mildest political reform and the dishonest lengths to which they will go in defending the status quo. It has shown how important it is that advocates of a better, more inclusive form of politics actually practice what they preach. And it has demonstrated that the cynics can be far more naïve than the idealists that they are so quick to disparage.

Regardless of the fate of the Liberal Democrats, it is

clear that multi-party politics is here to stay. With that in mind, electoral reform is liable to rear its head again far sooner than its opponents would like. If any good is to come out of this referendum at all, it is crucial that we learn from our mistakes and make sure that we are absolutely ready next time the opportunity arises.

James Graham is campaigns and communications manager for Unlock Democracy and a member of the Liberal Democrat Federal Executive. For the ‘Yes to Fairer Votes’ campaign, he worked as the web and social media manager. He writes here in a personal capacity

RACE TO THE TOP

It was inevitable that almost all universities would charge the maximum £9,000 tuition fee, says Matthew Huntbach, because assumptions that competition would work depended on teenagers being wiser investors than the middle-aged

It is reported that government ministers were surprised to find, when they set £9,000 as the upper limit on university fees, that most universities set their fees at that level or just below.

They had supposed a vigorous market would develop where competition would drive down prices. When this did not happen, the economism movement which currently dominates elite political thought in this country (see my article in *Liberator* 341) came up with an excuse – UK universities are not competitive bodies because the government sets the number of places each may offer.

One of the spokesmen for this movement, Tim Leunig, put this in an article in the *Times Higher Education* magazine (17 February 2011) “We know how to get prices down: introduce competition and allow new entrants – this has worked in (almost) every sector of the economy”. Dr Leunig was billed in the magazine as “chief economist at CentreForum, the liberal think tank”.

Like Tim Leunig, I am a university lecturer, though as my politics do not suit the wealthy elite, I am not asked to join ‘liberal think tanks’ or to provide quotes for right-wing newspapers eager to paint the current coalition as a meeting of ideologies.

I spent a period of more than ten years as my university department’s admissions tutor (the academic responsible for making decisions on which applicants to admit). From this position, I could say plenty to those in government making policy or statements on higher education. Had I been asked, I would have told them that there would not be a market driving prices down; instead most universities would set their fees at the maximum level.

The reason for this is simple: university applicants will think “the higher the fee, the higher the quality”. No university will want to advertise itself as ‘substandard’ by setting a fee substantially below its competitors.

EXTREMELY SIMPLISTIC

The idea that competition based on free setting of cash price will drive down costs and drive up quality is extremely simplistic. It works best in real markets where people are using real cash to buy goods with which they are very familiar for immediate use. As one moves away from this, it works less well. Products that are purchased for their prestige value but where the purchasers are uncertain of how to judge real quality may exhibit the effect that a judgement is made on the basis of price: the higher the price, the better. A similar effect applies to products that are marketed as an ‘investment’. When the price is paid through a long-

term financial plan rather than through cash, people find it hard to think in terms of the real price rather than the immediate effect on their bank balance.

Our economy is in a mess to quite a large extent because people did not exercise sound judgement on house prices. They were led to believe that the more you paid the better, as it was an ‘investment’. They paid whatever they could afford to pay, working backwards from what they could afford to pay as a monthly mortgage payment. More freely available mortgages did not, as often advertised or believed by the naive, make it easier to buy a house; they just drove prices upwards.

The boom comes when people switch from productive work to feverish activity creating ‘wealth’ that is nothing but numbers, supposing it is best to borrow a little more than you can really afford in order to avoid losing out. The bust comes when what may be a minor setback causes some to default, and the structure is seen in reverse – looked at in the other direction, all that ‘wealth’ created was really debt.

The Labour Party should not be forgiven for its leading figures having declared they had “abolished boom and bust” when they were presiding over stoking it up, but neither should the Conservative Party for its earlier role in the process.

Throughout the growth of this false economy, the extent to which Tim Leunig’s words were so wrong was illustrated so many times by various financial mis-selling scandals.

Greater competition in financial products saw people fooled into buying poor products: quality driven downwards not upwards, by competition. The gabby salesmen, still lauded as the height of ‘entrepreneurship’ in the culture the British elite have pushed onto us, were the key to this. The salesmen have to be stupid because they have to be the first to be conned, to believe the poor quality product being sold is worthwhile, and to believe the prime goal a person should have in life is to make money by selling, and to take the dog-eat-dog attitude to other people this entails as the highest moral value.

To suppose that teenagers applying to university will be able to exercise a finer market judgement on quality exercised through market forces than was managed by older people who bought poor quality mortgages, pensions, insurance policies and so on is surely foolish.

Although our party has been immensely damaged by the headlines about cash payments, as we have argued, the fees system is really a long-term financial plan. The fact that it is promoted as an investment where one cannot lose, because one only pays it back if it pays off in terms of a job, makes it very much like financial products such as mortgages or

pensions. Teenagers are not known for an ability to make careful balanced judgements about their finances and where they will be in middle age. Optimism will win out, when they find the £9,000 is automatic and payment is made when they become the wealthy person they all suppose they will, they will take it and not settle for the 'second best' of a cheaper degree – even if the cheaper degree is better.

The argument against tuition fees is over-done. If it costs £9,000 a year to pay for a degree, as the universities are arguing, it would still cost that if paid out of taxation or from state borrowing, and if paid by state borrowing (as those most relaxed about the deficit urge), it will be much the same people paying back personal student loans who would pay it instead through taxation to pay back the state loans in the future.

I am perfectly happy to agree it would be better paid for from current taxation. It would make a great deal of sense for it to be paid on taxation on the wealth those who have benefited from the boom have made at the expense of the young: much higher inheritance tax, on housing capital gains, on land values, and the like.

Precisely how is not the issue; the issue is that those accusing the Liberal Democrats of 'betrayal' should be honest about the alternative. The emptiness of the left in British politics is shown by their incapacity to start talking about the hard choices that are the real alternative to the hard choices currently being made on the right.

"Stop the cuts" is not enough, particularly when it comes from metropolitan elite types, who take huge dollops of cash through home ownership but whose resistance to the slightest suggestion of tax on it, such as the 'mansion tax', takes realistic discussion of this option off the agenda.

CUT-THROAT COMPETITION

Contrary to the claims of Tim Leunig and others, there is cut-throat competition amongst British universities for British students. Perhaps it is not felt in those institutions or subjects who have enough applicants to be able to turn away top grade A-level students, but it is critical in middle-ranking universities, particularly in subjects where there is a shortage of applicants with suitable qualifications.

Just because the currency is A-level grades rather than cash does not make it any less competitive.

Students with poor grades or unsuitable A-level subjects are more effort and less rewarding to teach. Being beaten by the competition in the scramble for students may mean you teach remedial mathematics rather than your academic specialty, or it may mean your department closes, as several formerly prestigious science and engineering departments have.

My experience, however, is that this competition does not drive up quality, and I have no reason to suppose it would be any different if an effective cash market did arise.

"The issue is that those accusing the Liberal Democrats of 'betrayal' should be honest about the alternative"

During my time as an admissions tutor, my experience was that most applicants made their choice between universities on an extremely superficial basis, the most common being "University X is better than University Y" with little consideration of the actual departments in the universities, let alone details of their teaching.

This is one reason, the other being the nature

of government funding, why most UK universities have put their real effort into trying to improve academic research rather teaching. The international reputation of universities is based entirely on their research. Research rating dominates positioning in the university league tables and that, more than anything else, attracts better students. This can result in sloppy teaching, or teaching passed to PhD students paid on an hourly basis, because all that counts in an academic career is churning out the research papers. It can result in good university teachers being forced out of their jobs by fair means or foul, so the university can instead recruit 'research stars' who are almost inaccessible to undergraduate students.

Yet most people not employed as academics are unaware of this issue. Friends and acquaintances outside work almost always ask me "when do you break up?" in June and "when do you go back?" in September, supposing when the students are on vacation so am I. The reality is that, if I did not spend most of my time over summer doing research work, my job would be in danger.

In his *Times Higher Education* article, Tim Leunig proposes an auction system where universities bid against each other for student places, the lowest cost bid winning. We have seen what this means in other sectors: dumbed-down television, skilled and knowledgeable workers in health and care replaced by cheap contracted-out labour, loss of pride in work, demoralisation and waste of time everywhere caused by the uncertainty and endless 'restructuring'.

He claims market competition works in private schools, but their quality is measured by state-controlled A-levels. Universities set their own curriculum and exams; this is key to the synergy where research expertise feeds into teaching, and provides valuable diversity. It would be a fine paradox if, in the name of the market, a more rigid state control of teaching and assessment were imposed on universities to ensure bidding down of costs was not done through reducing education quality.

Without it, however, the situation would be more like the shady world of private colleges setting their own qualifications, which is rife with tricksters duping the uninformed into paying large amounts for poor quality education and almost worthless qualifications.

Matthew Huntbach is a former leader of the Liberal Democrat council group in Lewisham

HOW NOT TO DO IT

The coalition second stage agreement should avoid its predecessor's mistakes and involve the party's democratic bodies, says Bill le Breton

For some years, the Liberal Democrats lost the ability and drive to conduct integrated campaigns. Necessarily, such campaigns require the commitment and the co-operation of the leadership. They require particular skills and experience in Cowley Street, in Westminster and now Whitehall.

Integrated campaigning is the essence of the Dual Approach, which is a commitment to campaigning inside and outside of authorities and parliaments. Together they form the bedrock of effective community politics and have been the basis of the party's expansion over the last forty years.

The Dual Approach requires elected representatives at every level to involve the membership and activists in their work and for local campaigners to combine their neighbourhood campaigns with campaigns by elected representatives in town halls, councils and parliaments.

This method too often falls into disuse when a group wins power and finds itself subject to an agenda, a time scale and a veil of confidentiality set by officers.

We are now finding this happening at Westminster.

The inability to inform and involve is exacerbated by the existence of a detailed and deep programme for government *The Coalition: Our Programme For Government*, which has driven subsequent decision-taking deep into the labyrinth of Whitehall departments.

Detailed agreements such as this one work to the advantage of the larger party and to the civil servants who thrive on certainty and the monopoly of advice and involvement.

Provided the smaller party has the mechanics that permit it to receive information and to have its 'balancing' power represented in every decision, there is a significant advantage in spreading those decisions over time and making the process more open.

Our negotiators last May had clearly taken this on board when they obtained a *Coalition Agreement for Stability and Reform*, which set out just such a set of systems for the operation of coalition government within the conventions of the unwritten British constitution. Under this agreement, no decision can be taken by a minister without consultation with the other party to the coalition. Every decision has to be consensual.

It is possible that the negotiators and leader welcomed the depth and detail of the 36-page *Programme For Government* but, if they did, they were wrong.

A less defined and detailed programme would enable us to exploit the influence of integrated campaigning. We would benefit more with the scope to pick and choose our 'fights' and to spread these over time, so that our negotiations within the coalition for our

defining policies could involve our backbenchers and parliamentary candidates who, in turn, could campaign on these issues in their constituencies, alongside their councillors and activists – the Dual Approach.

At present, it has been agreed to produce a programme for government covering 2012 to 2015 and the task has been delegated to Oliver Letwin and Danny Alexander.

This process will lead to another deep and detailed agreement, binding the hands of our ministers and excluding our backbenchers, parliamentary candidates, councillors, the Federal Policy Committee and Conference.

The single most important task for Liberal Democrats this summer is therefore to ensure that the extension to the agreement is more limited in detail than the 2010-2012 agreement and negotiated with the involvement of the FPC, Conference and constituency parties.

The leader should withdraw the party from the current process. The actions of the prime minister over the recent referendum and the anger of our party give him sufficient reason.

It does not renege on the coalition agreement and would hit hardest those who are relying on having the negotiations for policy for 2012-2015 in a few months this summer – the Conservative leadership and the civil service.

In this way, what broad areas that have to be agreed now would receive the democratic legitimacy of full party involvement and make Conference and bodies such as the FPC feel genuinely valued and utilized. It would contrast with how the Conservatives and Labour make such decisions.

But the greatest value is that it would bring true devolution, an increase in public participation, an involvement of campaigning within communities about policies that are taken centrally yet affect everyone on a community basis – from the hospital and doctor's surgery, to the park and library, to the local regiment, to the shape and texture of the high street, to the frequency, type and quality of public transport, to the safety of neighbourhoods and the security of their welfare.

Above all, it will use a balanced parliament to allow subjects to become citizens. It will bring truer and more profound change than even an improvement in the electoral system. It will put the *Reform* back into what is now a highly conservative *Agreement for Stability*.

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

OUR LOST PHRASE

Why is ‘community politics’ now seldom mentioned? It’s about more than political fashion, says Mark Pack

On a hunch, earlier this year I did a little research ahead of writing a blog post for Liberal Democrat Voice: how often was the phrase ‘community politics’ used by the party’s national spokespeople since the May 2010 election?

The answer was far worse than I’d feared. Looking through all of Nick Clegg’s major speeches, all the news releases from him and also all those from others issued via the Liberal Democrat press team, I could only find one use of ‘community politics’ – by Paul Burstow.

Andrew Stunell deserves an honourable mention for using it in an LGA pamphlet as well, but that was it. No doubt there have been some uses in other places but, particularly bearing in mind that I searched through every national press release, this is a paltry showing.

With other phrases such ‘Big Society’ to use, some may wonder if bemoaning the absence of ‘community politics’ from our political vocabulary is much like bemoaning the absence of penny farthings from our bicycle lanes. Has the world just moved on?

But it does matter – and for three important reasons. It makes for the wrong political symbolism, it is symptomatic of a deeper problem, and those other phrases are not adequate alternatives.

Both ‘localism’ and ‘Big Society’ get plenty of mentions from Liberal Democrats currently, yet one is a New Labour phrase and the other is a Cameron Conservative term. It symbolises a lack of confidence in our own beliefs to meekly adopt the vocabulary of others.

However, it would be wrong to single out those who do not use our own phrase for individual blame. Rather, it reflects a wider party cultural issue. Nick Clegg, for example, is of a post-1970s political generation, and the absence of community politics from his rhetoric reflects how little it was used in the party at the time he was getting attuned to what motivates and persuades in Liberal Democrat circles.

That wider cultural issue matters because ‘localism’ and ‘Big Society’ are not simply synonyms for what ‘community politics’ should mean to Liberal Democrats. Moreover, with the challenges of maintaining our own identity in coalition – not to mention the opportunities it gives to enact our beliefs – now is a spectacularly bad time to act as if they were.

The difference should be one about power. Devolving power within levels of the state should not leave liberals satisfied. Nor should granting greater opportunities to individuals. Community politics takes a third crucial step – that of helping individuals to come together to wield power in their own communities.

Power is about more than who provides a service, which is as far as the ‘Big Society’ goes. A group of residents collaborating to run a library is one thing, an active residents’ association pushing and prodding different service providers in the interests of the local community is another.

As *The Theory & Practice of Community Politics*, the seminal 1980 pamphlet from Bernard Greaves and Gordon Lishman, puts it, community politics “is about people. It is about their control of the exercise of power. It is about the distribution of power, the use of power, the dissemination of power and the control of power.”

Community politics, for example, should be about making it easier for residents to combine to influence planning applications – not just giving powers to individuals in the process. It should be about planning that does not just design out crime but designs in the ability for communal political action in form of leafleting, stalls and protests.

Giving individuals not only power in their own right but also the confidence, capacity and opportunity to exercise power in cooperation with others leads into all sorts of policy directions that are largely unmentioned. To give one simple example – why should it not be part of the planning requirements for new housing developments that the developer has to kick-start the creation of a residents’ association?

Or as *The Theory & Practice of Community Politics* puts it: “Our aim is therefore the creation of a political system which is based on the interaction of communities in which groups have the power, the will, the knowledge, the technology to influence and affect the making of decisions in which they have an interest. Even more, we want those communities to initiate the debate, to formulate their own demands and priorities and to participate fully in agreeing the rules by which their relationships are regulated.”

There is, perhaps, a glimmer of light on this issue. Not only did Burstow (now a minister but previously an ALDC staffer) use the phrase ‘community politics’ in his health speech at Sheffield spring conference, he used it twice. Moreover, partly thanks to my blog post, the phrase made it into the foreword by Nick Clegg to a new pamphlet on localism from the LGA.

But on a subject such as community politics above all, we should not just wait for others to take action.

Dr Mark Pack is Co-Editor of Liberal Democrat Voice (www.LibDemVoice.org). He ran the party’s 2001 and 2005 internet general election campaigns

THE ITALIAN JOB

British student Meredith Kercher was tragically murdered in Italy by a burglar. The burglar was prosecuted and found guilty so why were students Amanda Knox and Raffaele Sollecito also prosecuted? Nigel Scott explains

The application and interpretation of the law varies considerably across Europe and elsewhere, and the extension of extradition treaties has brought this home to people who would not normally give the justice systems of other countries a second thought.

Within the EU, discrepancies have been highlighted by Liberal Democrat MEP Sarah Ludford, who has campaigned for several British citizens who have become ensnared in foreign trials.

Recent entrants to the EU have reformed their legal systems and this has provided reassurance for travellers to the former communist states of the East. Few of us would think that the systems of some established members also require comprehensive reform, but Italy is such a state and the journey of premier Silvio Berlusconi through the courts will highlight this for all to see.

The problems of Italy's leader are far removed from those of his countrymen but the impact of the system on two young students, Amanda Knox and Raffaele Sollecito, is frightening and could easily happen to any of us or our children.

What is different about Italian justice and how has this shaped what has been called the 'trial of the century'?

First, and most telling, at least when compared with the UK, there is no ban on pre-trial publicity once a suspect is charged. Prosecutors brief favoured journalists and drop tidbits of 'evidence' that may not be true and are not necessarily used in court. This practice creates a climate in which the accused is assumed to be guilty before the trial starts. In the words of Daily Beast blogger Barbie Latza Nadeau, "In a country like this it's not really about proving guilt, it's about proving innocence." This turns the presumption of innocence on its head.

MAJOR FLAW

The second major flaw is that juries are not sequestered. In trials that can last a year, it is argued that this is not practical. Jurors (or lay judges, as they are called) are encouraged to read widely and discuss the case with each other as it proceeds. Inaccurate media reports become de facto part of the trial. Anyone who remembers the treatment the Daily Mail (among others) meted out to Chris Jefferies last winter, when he was arrested and released without charge during the Joanna Yates murder investigation, will know what the tabloids can do. Jefferies is now suing six newspapers for defamation. Knox and Sollecito were forced to endure two years of similar character assassination by tabloids in Italy and the UK before their first guilty verdict was announced in December

2009. They are now midway through an appeal.

The third flaw is that investigations are controlled by the prosecutor, not the police. This approach brings with it the danger that a prosecutor who has prematurely arrived at a view of the crime can direct the police to pursue one line of enquiry and ignore evidence that does not fit. In Perugia, the investigation was under the control of Giuliano Mignini, a controversial figure who was himself under investigation for abuse of office at the time and was subsequently found guilty.

In Knox and Sollecito's case, events in the days after the murder were misinterpreted as the theory that the murderer was close to Kercher was pursued. On the night of the murder, Knox sent a text to employer and bar owner Patrick Lumumba, "see you later", in reply to his message saying she was not needed that night. This was interpreted as "see you later to murder my flat mate". When Knox told Kercher's friends when she met them at the police station that the victim had been stabbed, the police supposed that Knox could not have known unless she had participated in the murder. In fact, Knox had learned this from her Italian flat mate in the car en route to the police station.

When Knox, who was by then locked out of her flat because it was a murder scene, bought clean knickers, this was interpreted as casual disregard for her dead friend. Knox and Sollecito's phones were tapped in the hope that they would say something incriminating. When police learned that Knox's mother was on her way to Italy to support her, they arranged an all-night interrogation session to break the pair and brought in specialists from Rome.

The interrogations resulted in the famous confessions, by which Knox and Sollecito were arrested. Mysteriously, they were not recorded, although they seem to be the only interviews that were not recorded during the whole case. The convenient absence of recordings allowed the prosecutor to charge Knox and her parents with 'calunnia' (slander) when they made allegations that she had been struck. Lumumba was implicated, though he was eventually able to clear himself when his alibi was confirmed.

Numerous prejudicial stories then appeared in the press, referring to 'evidence' that was never mentioned again. In the UK, serious newspapers like The Times, as well as the Daily Mail and others, printed stories that would never form part of the prosecution case. A knife that did not fit the wounds was discovered at Sollecito's flat, and a bra clasp that was recovered from the murder scene 46 days later, were found to harbour quantities of DNA that were 'revealed' by overriding machine controls. This 'low copy number' evidence was subsequently challenged in a paper written by forensic

experts and published in the New Scientist.

Thus was Knox vilified and turned from an 'A' student into an out-of-control drug crazed psychopath. Sollecito was similarly destroyed. Many who raised questions over the prosecution approach were issued with writs. Twelve law suits were started. Those indicted so far include Knox and both her parents, her attorneys, and a selection of journalists. Separate action has also been taken against Sollecito's parents.

The real murderer, Rudy Guede, was identified when his DNA was found on Meredith's body, in her room and in her purse. He had fled to Germany but was arrested there, brought back and found guilty at a separate fast-track trial. This development did not lead to the release of Knox and Sollecito. They remained in the frame as alleged co-conspirators of Guede.

ONLINE VILIFICATION

Meanwhile, the internet gave birth to a new phenomenon: online vilification. A group calling itself 'True Justice for Meredith Kercher' and a linked chat room, 'Perugia Murder File' (PMF) were set up to insult the two students and members of their families. Supporters of these sites harassed and intimidated members of Knox's family and friends, both online and in person in their home town of Seattle. PMF has been reported to the FBI as a source of hate crime.

By the time the guilty verdict of the first trial was announced, in December 2009, many observers had begun to question the Perugian justice system. A campaign to exonerate Knox and Sollecito coalesced around a website 'Injustice in Perugia'.

The Wikipedia page 'The Murder of Meredith Kercher' became embroiled in controversy and many

"There is no ban on pre-trial publicity once a suspect is charged. Prosecutors brief favoured journalists and drop titbits of 'evidence' that may not be true and are not necessarily used in court"

neutral editors were banned. Thirty pages of arguments in the 'discussion' section delineate the battle. Frustrated supporters of Knox and Sollecito eventually posted an online petition asking Jimbo Wales, the Wikipedia founder, to intervene.

Wales investigated and ordered a review. He commented, "I just read the entire article from top to bottom, and I have concerns that most serious criticism of the trial from reliable sources has been excluded or presented in a negative fashion." A few days later he wrote, "I am concerned that since I raised the issue, even I have been attacked

as being something like a 'conspiracy theorist'." Some biased editors left the page, but the fight on Wikipedia continues.

The tide seems to be turning and recent victories in the courtroom over re-evaluation of the controversial DNA evidence and witness testimony have given rise to fresh hope.

The Kercher family employed their own prosecutor, as is permitted in Italy, who has joined in cross examinations and also briefed the media.

Innocent bar owner Lumumba was also represented. He sought damages for defamation from Knox.

Knox and Sollecito's defence therefore faced three lawyers and three legal teams as Lumumba's case ran in parallel with the murder trial.

As the retrial grinds slowly on, a new judge, Claudio Hellman, from northern Italy is directing proceedings. Knox, Sollecito and their families pray that he will be independent and will have the courage to instruct his 'jurors' to acquit.

Nigel Scott is a Haringey Liberal Democrat councillor and member of the Free Amanda Knox and Raffaele Sollecito Campaign

Liberal International British Group

The group hosts regular forums on international issues, with guest speakers expert on the countries concerned.

It holds several annual events, including a reception for London-based diplomats and the Tim Garden Memorial Lecture, and is represented at Liberal International congresses. The next is in Manila in June 2011; previous ones have been in Cairo, Belfast, Marrakech and Sofia.

Membership is £20 a year. Send a cheque (payable to 'Liberal International British Group') to: Wendy Kyrle-Pope, 1 Brook Gardens, London SW13 0LY

See: www.libg.co.uk

ONLINE SUCCOUR

An international online community of supporters has highlighted and eased the plight of WikiLeaks's alleged source Bradley Manning, reports Naomi Colvin

It has now been a year since Private First Class Bradley Manning was arrested in Iraq, on suspicion of releasing classified government material to WikiLeaks. Given the widespread concern at what has been happening to Bradley – his case is the subject of an official investigation by the UN special rapporteur on torture – it is sobering to remember that the conditions of his detention had been kept largely secret until mid-December, but events since those revelations provide an encouraging example of what online engagement can achieve.

The story of the Bradley Manning campaign is a long one, but I'd like to give a couple of critical instances where supporters using blogs, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook managed to change the course of events and broadcast the implications of those events to the wider world. Both the dismissal of James Averhart and Barack Obama's "unlawful command influence" show online activism is emerging as an effective means of oversight on the activities of government.

International concern over the treatment meted out to Bradley in pre-trial detention has been focused on the marine corps brig at Quantico, Virginia, where Bradley was held in solitary confinement from July last year. In mid-January, NBC reported that, on top of existing restrictions, Bradley had been placed under suicide watch for a number of days.

In the wake of this report, one of Bradley's few regular visitors was prevented from seeing him, despite the prior consent of the authorities. David House and Jane Hamsher were detained within the Quantico facility and subjected to repeated bureaucratic intransigence until visiting hours had elapsed. All of this was communicated live to the outside world using Twitter, and thereafter picked up by mainstream media.

That the brig had something to hide was confirmed by a spectacularly bad piece of press management on 25 January, in which CNN released three contradictory reports in the course of a couple of hours. The first claimed "an investigation has been launched into whether Brig Commander James Averhart had the authority to place Manning on suicide watch, which is normally ordered by medical staff." The second report retracted the first and the third carried a statement from a Quantico press liaison asserting that whatever Averhart had done was legitimate and, indeed, "responsible". The chaotic nature of the Pentagon's statements was noticed by bloggers and this information then spread very quickly. Real-world consequences swiftly followed.

On 26 January, the US Department of Defense hastily convened a press conference – its first in three months – in which the Washington press corps was

cautioned against looking into the Manning case too closely. Averhart was dismissed later that day. Details that have since emerged are extremely damning in revealing that the Quantico authorities were not abiding by international human rights standards, or their own rules, and online action played a critical role in enforcing accountability for this.

As well as revealing official panic through the scrutiny of bad press management, activists using new media have broken important stories. On 21 April, a benefactor enabled a group of Manning supporters to attend a Presidential fundraising event in San Francisco, which they then interrupted, in song. This was picked up by mainstream media outlets across the world and the impact was sufficiently embarrassing that the member of the press who filmed it has been barred from attending similar events in future.

More significant, however, was the exchange one supporter had with President Obama. Mobile phone footage in which Obama can be heard to pronounce on Bradley Manning's guilt ("He broke the law!") was uploaded to YouTube, circulated via Twitter, transcribed, blogged on and very widely viewed. Not only is Obama's pre-judging of the case now well known, so is its impact. Commentary online argued that the President's words constituted "unlawful command influence" – the jury at Bradley's court martial will all be members of the military and Obama is, of course, their commander-in-chief.

This take on events, which again invokes the idea that Bradley has not been accorded due process, was duly debated in the mainstream media.

Bradley has now been moved from the Quantico marine brig to a facility at Fort Leavenworth, where, as of 30 April, he has been allowed to associate with others. The move has been widely credited to popular pressure brought to bear on the US Government, both at home and overseas. Nevertheless, one of the onerous restrictions imposed upon Bradley – the obligation that all of his conversations other than those with his lawyer must be monitored – is still in force. This prevents Bradley speaking candidly to the many agencies (including Amnesty, Ann Clwyd MP and US Congressman Dennis Kucinich as well as the UN special rapporteur) who have requested meetings to discuss what happened during those nine months at Quantico.

All of which further demonstrates that the free transport of information is the greatest fear of those who would commit, condone or indulge illegitimate government action.

Naomi Colvin is the founder of UK Friends of Bradley Manning (<http://blog.ukfriendsofbradleymanning.org/>)

IS MOBILITY FAIR?

Social mobility is necessary but not sufficient. We must also tackle inequality, says Prateek Buch

In the past year, I've had a chance to reflect on the supposed dichotomy between social mobility and socio-economic inequality, while serving on the Liberal Democrats' policy working group on inequality.

As Mark Pack indicates (*Liberator* 344), the first difficulty is that social mobility means different things to different people: to some, it's the ability of (for example) residents of Hull to rise through societal ranks and become (for example) High Court judges; for others, it's the fluid movement of people between income deciles, even if this means mobility in both directions; for yet others, it's a meritocratic ideal whereby talent and hard work alone determine one's position in the social order, with barriers to achievement removed from the path of the vulnerable.

The last of these is a distillation of the American Dream, whereby the janitor becomes a tycoon by virtue of his genius and application. According to the Sutton Trust, however, the United States (followed closely by the United Kingdom) fares less well than this idealised myth may suggest. Defined (yet another variation) as "the extent to which a person's circumstances during childhood are reflected in their success in later life," and quantified using a number of outcomes, the circumstances of your birth dictate your position in later life to a far greater extent in the USA than in any of the Scandinavian countries, even than in neighbouring Canada. What is it about American, and to a great extent British, society that means those born poor remain so and those born into privilege continue to enjoy the fruits thereof?

Let's start by defining inequality as the policy working group did – not as the absence of equal opportunity on grounds of gender, age, race or sexuality, but as a social gradient with regards to goods that are instrumental to living a Good Life. Using inequality in a broad basket of capabilities, following work by economist Amartya Sen, we can explain why social mobility is higher in less unequal societies – not least because the journey to the top is easier to complete if the distance between where you are at birth and your desired destination is small.

The capabilities approach accounts for more than just inequality of income, and for good reason. Despite the impressive claims of Wilkinson and Pickett's book *The Spirit Level*, correlating monetary income with various societal outcomes doesn't always imply causality – but when wealth, health, voice and power are considered, inequality in these domains increasingly explains the strong social gradients between the well-off and the not-so.

Picture a society with perfect social mobility, where your birth has no bearing at all on your circumstances in later life. If in such a society, income, wealth, health and political voice were still concentrated in the hands of the few at the top, would we consider it to be a fair society? Some would say society is fair as long as

anyone who tries hard can reach the top. But according to Sen's perspective, if those at the bottom of the social gradient don't have the capabilities to achieve their potential, life remains unjust. Moreover, it should be the explicit goal of public policy to ensure that the tools to function well in society are more equally distributed.

Politicians are thought to belong to one of two camps, supporting either greater social mobility or less inequality as the sole aim of public policy, even at the expense of the other. In publishing the coalition government's Social Mobility Strategy, Nick Clegg does not fall into this trap of polarisation, although he comes close. The Strategy correctly identifies barriers to social mobility such as unpaid internships and poor early-years education, and seeks to remove such barriers throughout a person's life. Such policies will help make our society more just. The trouble starts when the Strategy attempts to define fairness as social mobility.

"For us [the coalition government], fairness means everyone having the chance to do well, irrespective of their beginning." Consider the crucial word 'chance'. The Strategy has a strong current of 'equality-of-opportunity' thinking running through it; effectively, it's a Rawlsian attempt to remove all institutional barriers to achievement, giving all of us an equal opportunity to succeed – with very little to say about outcomes.

To make our society more just, more fair, everyone must have an equal opportunity to do well, which means enhancing social mobility. Hence social mobility is necessary for a just society, but also insufficient.

Imagine not being able to take maximal advantage of the opportunities in a perfectly socially mobile society – whether through 'poverty, ignorance or conformity,' or through ill health or your voice not being heard. Does the state have a responsibility to implement policy that enhances the capacity of everyone actually to enjoy the opportunities they have?

If you believe that inequality, not just of income but of wealth, health and power, really does matter, the answer is a resounding yes – which is why any framework of fairness in public policy that neglects inequality is insufficient to achieve the aim of a just society, and why inequality should feature front and centre in Liberal Democrat political thinking.

In essence, it comes down to whether you see the state's role as simply removing all barriers to achievement, or whether you see it as a potentially positive force, raising the capabilities of everyone such that the freedom of us all to live our own lives is enhanced. I'm with the latter.

Dr Prateek Buch is an executive member of the Social Liberal Forum

CLEGGMANIA TO PUNCHBAG

Nick Clegg's popularity sank because the Liberal Democrats relied on the 'great man' theory of politics, says Matthew Gibson

The Liberal Democrat 2010 general election manifesto was launched by Vince Cable and Nick Clegg and a key theme in the campaign was that Nick Clegg, Vince Cable and rest of the Lib Dems could be trusted to deliver a progressive agenda. The strategy seemed to be working as the party watched the polls rise.

Then came the TV leaders' debates and the rise of Cleggmania. The Lib Dem strategy changed to focusing on Nick Clegg, which sowed the seeds of the destruction of Nick Clegg and the Lib Dems that we see today.

The 2010 general election was an election for change. The parties sensed the public mood for it and gave 'change' a central theme in their campaigns. Yet it seemed no one personified change quite as well as Nick Clegg: 'Cometh the hour, cometh the man'.

"In a matter of days, the Liberal Democrat has been catapulted from the comparative obscurity of third-party politics to top the ratings as Britain's most popular political leader since Winston Churchill," said Time magazine (3 April 2010).

The comparison to Churchill is an interesting one as Churchill did enjoy high personal poll ratings going into the 1945 general election, with the Conservative campaign being based on Churchill as the great man who won the war. There was a belief that he was a born leader and, having proved this during the Second World War, people would vote for him in the election. Yet Churchill lost the election decisively to Clement Attlee, a man who had been considered a potentially weak leader and a poor communicator.

There were many people who came across Churchill who would comment that they had felt they had been in the presence of a great man. The Conservative Party believed that Churchill possessed personal traits such as stamina, decisiveness and composure, which made it almost his fate to become the prime minister of Great Britain. This belief, that great leaders are born and not made and that these people reach positions of leadership in times of need, is known as the 'great man' theory of leadership. In 1945, Winston Churchill had been that 'great man' and the Conservatives' general election campaign was based on this. Yet this was not what people voted for.

BAD MOVE

In 2004, Ipsos MORI asked a number of academics to rate how successful they considered the prime ministers of Great Britain had been in office. The top three were Clement Attlee (Lab, 1945-51), Winston Churchill (Con, 1940-45, 1951-55), and David Lloyd George (Lib, 1916-22): a peacetime prime minister, a

war leader and someone who was both. And what we can learn from them can teach us a lot about what works in politics and why the change in Lib Dem strategy was such a bad move.

Attlee's approach was to seek consensus and took a managerial approach to achieving it. He acted more as a chairman than a president and this quality has won him much praise from historians and politicians alike. Despite Attlee's overwhelming mandate for change and the pressure from his own party to introduce wholesale socialist change, he instead opted for cautious reformism, which allowed him to bring the country, and other politicians, with him. He couldn't have done this from the more extreme position that many people wanted him to take. Because of this tension within the Labour Party, Attlee had to be an expert party manager capable of controlling sometimes difficult and wilful colleagues.

Lloyd George also had a huge capacity to forge partnerships and energise the process of government. Until the collapse of his coalition, he got big things done. With Asquith, he launched the welfare state and emasculated the peerage. With Bonar Law, Arthur Balfour and Douglas Haig, he won the war. With President Wilson, he negotiated a peace settlement. Lloyd George became a government man adept at compromise, constantly looking for coalitions and combinations to co-opt the very Conservatives and monopolists he condemned in public.

Attlee's approach to politics produced perhaps his greatest achievement, that of a political and economic consensus about the governance of Britain that all parties, whether Labour, Conservative or Liberal, subscribed to for three decades. Attlee's and Lloyd George's belief in coalition-building long predated them being prime minister and afforded them great success. Consensus seeking is a successful political strategy.

Tony Blair spent a great deal of time and effort in moving the Labour Party to a position of greater consensus with the public, exemplified by the Clause IV moment. The first half of the Blair premiership attempted to represent a consensus by extensive use of opinion polling, focus groups and all sorts of other political market research to inform political decisions. While he sought political consensus, his opinion poll ratings remained high.

When Gordon Brown became prime minister, he wanted to distance himself from the latter days of the Blair era, which had become authoritarian and had failed to represent a consensus, exemplified by the Iraq war. Brown stated that he wanted to run a "humbler and more austere" regime than Blair and,

in an attempt to show this distance from the late Blair era, he appointed a 'government of all the talents' (GOATs) – a string of 'outsiders' to sit in his government team. The opinion polls showed immediate approval. However, it wasn't long before this strategy changed, there was dissent amongst the GOATs and the opinion polls plummeted.

THE MAN NOT THE PARTY

The Lib Dem election campaign started out presenting the long-held values of the party. The focus on fairness resonated with the public and the skilful use of plain and simple language, along with having two men (Clegg and Cable) spearheading the campaign, represented something different for voters.

Yet it wasn't until the public woke up to Nick Clegg during the first leaders' TV debate that people started seeing him as the representation of the change the public seemed to desire. He was an honest, down to earth politician who talked of a 'new politics', a more consensual, plural politics, and people started to get excited: Cleggmania was born.

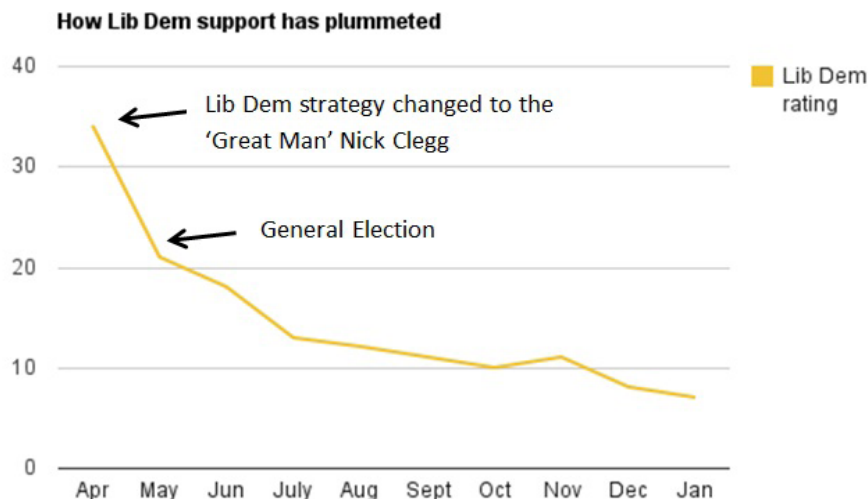
Clegg's poll ratings skyrocketed and, in an attempt to capitalise on this popularity, the Lib Dem election strategy changed. Cable was given a less prominent role and a bigger focus was given to Clegg. The decision to change the strategy meant people focused their attention on the man and not the party. The party message was one of plural politics delivered by a team; the Cleggmania message was one of plural politics brought to you by a great man, an inherent contradiction where he no longer embodied the change that people were seeking. He had gone from embodying Attlee at the right time to Churchill at the wrong time.

The 'great man' cannot deliver because politics is about what is possible and so becomes about practical compromise (and people's feelings of betrayal are testament to this). While it may be seductive to build on the reputation and expectations of one man, particularly when he is doing well in the polls, it does not bring success in itself. The moment the 'great man' Nick Clegg became the Lib Dem strategy for the election, was the moment the Lib Dem poll ratings started to go down (see diagram).

TURNING VOTERS OFF

The cameras were on Clegg every time the media wanted a response yet, after making an impassioned plea to the electorate to reject the 'old' politics, Clegg used his new found media coverage to attack and criticise the Conservatives and Labour, which sounded more and more like 'old' politics. Research by Northwestern University in the USA found that, when people's confidence in their beliefs is shaken, they become stronger advocates for those beliefs. They carried out experiments where they subtly manipulated their subjects' confidence in their belief and consistently found the same thing: when faced with doubt, people shout even louder.

People feel discomfort when they try to cope with conflicting ideas. This feeling is called cognitive



dissonance and people will go to great lengths to reduce this conflict. Changing your mind to vote for another party in the face of new information is one solution but for many this is too difficult. The alternative is to try and gain social support for your existing beliefs. If other people also believe what you believe, the internal conflict will lessen.

Doubt turns people into stronger advocates and this effect is even stronger if someone's identity is threatened. Many people define part of who they are by the party they vote for. Attacking someone's identity is very uncomfortable so people become stronger believers in their chosen party.

All the hard work the Lib Dems and Nick Clegg put in to increase the number of voters was undone by the change in strategy, which offered little else following the first TV leaders' debate. Yet Clegg continues to attack people who call themselves progressives, the potential Lib Dem voter base, with distinctions between new and old progressives or attacking Labour at every opportunity. This will not attract voters to the party.


CLEGGMANIA IN REVERSE

Clegg contributed to the notion that he was the man of the moment, when what people were looking for was not a man but a change in how politics was done: a more consensual politics. Now the coalition seems less and less consensual, the Cleggmania effect remains but in reverse. When things were good, it was Cleggmania; now things aren't so good, he is a punchbag. They are different sides of the same coin.

What works in peacetime politics is building support by looking for similarities, shared values and shared goals. If we show people that voting for the Lib Dems is not a challenge to their identity or a betrayal of their background, people will begin to consider voting Lib Dem. The Lib Dems start from a smaller base than Labour and the Tories and only through widening our appeal will people want to vote for us. The strategy for any leader should be one of the values of the Liberal Democrats. No 'great man', no superhero, just an honest party, with an honest leader, open to doing business with anyone who believes in what we believe.

Matthew Gibson is a member of West Bromwich & Warley Liberal Democrats. He runs the 'Solution Focused Politics' blog at <http://solutionfocusedpolitics.wordpress.com>

LETTERS



NO SPECIAL PLEADING

Dear Liberator,

I agree with much of Simon Titley's analysis ('A Class Act', *Liberator* 345) but take issue with his final conclusion that "whenever the party debates diversity, the special pleading of privileged women will always be heard over the voices of working-class men or women".

In three years as vice-chair of Campaign for Gender Balance, I've got to know a wide spectrum of female activists and candidates and have seen a remarkable consistency in the issues they face, irrespective of 'class' (albeit sometimes exacerbated by it).

Articulating the very real barriers to political representation faced by 52% of the population is not "special pleading".

My generation of women, raised in the 1970s and 1980s, were mis-sold the meritocratic proposition that, if we outperformed men academically and professionally, the world would be our egalitarian oyster. For a while it was true; but then the twenty-something dream of "having it all" quickly became the thirty-something nightmare of "doing it all".

Men with unpaid domestic backup (a.k.a. wives) accelerated onto the fast track while women unwilling to ignore their biological clocks burned out or found themselves sidelined onto the mummy track.

Politics is no different. Standing for selection weeks after giving birth to my second child, the most frequent question I faced was not "what makes you the best candidate?" but "how on earth would your family cope?" A male candidate whose wife had also just given birth to their second child was never asked how his family would cope.

Gender constructs are deeply embedded in our subconscious.

Until we achieve an egalitarian utopia in which men and women are truly equal in both family and working life, we should recognise that men and women aspiring to public life may face different challenges. This is not "special pleading" – it's practical common sense.

Dinti Batstone
London

DANGEROUS UTOPIA

Dear Liberator,

Having raised the issue of class with the reports of the Diversity Engagement Group at conference, I was interested to read Simon Titley's article 'A Class Act' (*Liberator* 345). I would agree that the party needs to address the issue although he is not very explicit about how it actually affects the party, other than with MPs where the problem is worsening as the proportion of privately educated Liberal Democrat MPs has been rising since the 2001 election.

One example is its attitude towards trade unions. A few years ago, the party amended its rules on SAOs. Three SAOs initially failed to meet the criteria. One hadn't supplied the requisite data but met the bulk of the criteria. Two did not have the requisite number of members; the rule was waived for one representing engineers and scientists, who have subsequently met the requirement, but not one representing trade unionists, leaving the impression that the party has a different set of rules for middle class professional people.

More recently, a working group has been established on inequality; in a section of its consultative paper on inequality in the workplace, there was no reference to the role of trade unions. Does anyone in the group belong to one?

It may be that some members of

the group believe that mutualism will remove conflict from the workplace. Anyone who believes that the advent of cooperatives and mutualism will remove grievances from the workplace has either never had a proper job or holds dangerous utopian views that could lead towards an Animal Farm type of totalitarianism. The paradox is that, in a cooperative, a trade union may be needed to represent the individual employee against the collective.

What Simon Titley is short of is practical solutions. His only suggestion is an indefinite moratorium on adopting privately educated white men as candidates.

This would not stop class bias continuing, with other forms of positive action possibly perpetuating it, as privately educated women and members of ethnic minorities could still swing selection committees. There is also the problem of defining what we mean by 'privately educated'. What about people who attend fee paying schools on publicly funded scholarships who have the benefits but not necessarily the background? There are some schools whose status may be obscure; there are in some rural areas state boarding schools.

David Willetts suggested that equal opportunities legislation was favouring middle class women at the expense of working class men. Ironically, the only place where it appears to have been established this has happened was with the Labour Party's women-only shortlists. I oppose exclusive shortlists and would hope that anyone who finds a moratorium on public school boys as candidates objectionable finds any all-women or all-BAME shortlists equally objectionable.

The answer lies in inclusive rather than exclusive shortlists. However, addressing the class issue in this matter may present practical problems, including deciding on workable definitions.

Vince Cable has acknowledged there is a problem but the reports of the Diversity Engagement Group have as yet shown no evidence that the group is considering the issue. I can only hope that the inequality working group will suggest some practicable solution.

Andrew Hudson, Leyton

HIGH HANDED

Dear Liberator,

North West region's attempt (Radical Bulletin, Liberator 345) to prevent party members making submissions to the Boundary Commission is not just "high handed and illiberal", it is also a probable contempt of court.

The Commission is a judicial tribunal. It is a contempt for a body to use or threaten disciplinary process against another person to prevent a tribunal receiving evidence from that person.

A well known charity was fined £10,000 for similar action in attorney-general v RSPCA.

"There is no property in a witness" is the golden rule and the party definitely does not own freehold the souls of its members. What a region could do lawfully is merely request that members make their submissions via the region to ensure, among other things, duplication of effort is avoided.

Drafting submissions to judicial and quasi-judicial bodies is a skill and every region would do well to have someone with, preferably professional, experience.

Antony Hook
Dover

CLASSIC ERROR

Dear Liberator,

Am I a 'classical liberal'? I don't recollect ever describing myself as such, (Radical Bulletin, Liberator 343), but perhaps you have evidence to the contrary?

Tim Leunig
Chief economist
CentreForum

OBITUARY: ELIZABETH SIDNEY

Viv Bingham pays tribute to a leading liberal activist in women's causes

I felt very privileged to be allowed to visit Liz just six weeks before she died on 16 April. We phoned each other about every two months or so and when I enquired about her health in March, she replied – as ever clear, articulate and direct – "I'm dying, only a few weeks to go".

When I saw her later in March, she was physically frail but her beautiful mind was still in good gear. I had expected to stay for an hour or so, but after more than three hours it was only the need to catch my train home that meant I had to leave.

We shared three kinships. I first learnt of her in the 1960s when, as a young personnel officer, her book on Interviewing Skills (co-authored with Margaret Brown) was very welcome required reading. Later in the 1980s, I worked for her as a freelance tutor when her consultancy Mantra had contracts with many leading companies – mainly teaching recruitment, selection and interview skills. My late wife Cecilia joined the team and, in a mixture of English and French, Liz and she taught interview skills to management at Marks & Spencer, Paris before its first opening there. Liz was a superb tutor, a respected leader and sound business person.

From 1976, our second kinship had started when she joined the Liberal Party's Employment Policy Panel, which she chaired from 1980. Her main political activity was the Women's Liberal Federation of which she became president. Her campaigning for women's rights and particularly to ban violence against women became international. She was still writing on these issues days before she died and I hope very much that there will be a posthumous book.

Sadly, she only had one appearance on Question Time and an even greater pity was that there was no nomination of her to the House of Lords. More people should have heard a voice described by an ex-BBC sound engineer as "one of the most articulate, clear and pleasing".

Our third kinship was of family and she was godmother to my daughter Jessica.

My memories will be of a beautiful, strong, intelligent, compassionate and passionate campaigner, parent and grandma. Liz was not certain about the afterlife but I have a feeling that shortly she will be joining a table with Nancy Seear, Mary Stokes, Laura Grimond and a few others to share views about everything from the coalition to the wearing of the burkha.

Viv Bingham was president of the Liberal Party, 1981-82

I don't know about you, but I find these modern-day scandals awfully dull. Who cares if [redacted] has been playing fast and loose with [redacted], if you have no idea who [redacted] is? In fact, I am not sure I would recognise [redacted] if he walked into the Bonkers Arms either. How different things were in the past! Harold Macmillan's daughter Sarah turned out not to be his daughter at all but to have been fathered by Bob Boothby (a kinsman of our own Ludicrous Kennedy), who was also supplied with boys by the Kray Twins. Now that is what I call a scandal!

Fortunately, we Liberal Democrats are not implicated in these matters. I give no credence to the story about [redacted] and the glass-topped table, I have little time for the notion that [redacted] enjoys being spanked and, despite what you may have read on the electric internet, I have never [redacted] with [redacted] or [redacted redacted] either!

"Have you seen the results, man?" I demanded as I burst into the Deputy Prime Minister's office. "It's a disaster." "Don't worry," he replied, "I have the answer: Muscular Liberalism."

Muscular Liberalism? I have my doubts about that. After all: one rarely saw L.T. Hobhouse in footer bags. We Bonkers were ever loyal, however, so this morning I enjoy an early breakfast and then hurry to the barracks of the Queen's Own Rutland Highlanders (of whom I happen to be Colonel-in-Chief) outside Oakham. And, you know, Clegg may be on to something. Can it be true, as I have heard claimed, that Hebden Bridge has ceased production of the Bonkers Patent Exploding Focus for use in Marginal Wards? Certainly, it is not unusual today to come across young activists who do not know one end of an orchard doughty from the other. It is clear that Something Must Be Done, and that it must involve Swedish drill and Indian clubs.

So I have summoned all Liberal Democrat MPs and peers for training in unarmed combat under the gentle care of Regimental Sergeant Major Carmichael – it is Indian clubs and Swedish drill all round. Unfortunately, I have to leave early for a gala luncheon, but I am on hand long enough to hear plenty of this sort of thing going on.

"What's your name, you 'orrible little man?" "Lamb, Sergeant Major." "Lamb? I don't want you to be a lamb: I want you to be a tiger. Now roar!" "Greurrgh! Sergeant Major." "That's better, lad. Now give him one up the [redacted] snoot like so!"

An elderly man sits in a large house behind high walls watching films of his earlier triumphs when a group of American Navy Seals breaks in and shoots him dead. Dash it, it could happen to anyone! Osama bin Laden (who met his demise in Abbottabad, named after the popular comedian Russ Abbott) was, it has to be admitted, one of

Lord Bonkers' Diary

nature's bad hats, but his demise did make me think. Only the other evening I was watching my speech to the Hunstanton Assembly of the National League of Young Liberals in 1948 ("If we tighten our belts, put our shoulders to the wheel and our noses to the grindstone, we shall regain the sunlit uplands before the year is out...") when I heard a noise outside. I went to look. It turned out to be a fox (or perhaps a stray member of the Elves of Rockingham Forest),

but what if it had been a herd of those seals? I am not altogether surprised that the American Navy is making use of them: if they are anything like the Great Seal of Rutland, who can give you a nasty nip if you rub him up the wrong way. I give word for the shutters to be locked, barred and bolted this evening – it's not as if I have the first Lady Bonkers on hand to defend me.

I am often asked what accounts for the sad demise of Lembit Öpik. Having contrived to lose a seat that we Liberals had held for all but four of the last 130 years, he was last heard of filming a "reality moving television" series with Michael Barrymore, whose once-stellar career went into sharp decline after [redacted] the shallow end. I fear this will do nothing to restore his credibility (Barrymore, I mean, obviously).

But what, as I say, accounts for Öpik's demise? I feel Lord Acton, at whose feet I sat as a very young man, put his finger on the explanation when he wrote: "All Powys tends to corrupt; absolute Powys corrupts absolutely."

For some inexplicable reason, the belief that Twitter is a recent invention is now widely entertained. Nothing could be further from the truth. Though of late it has made use of the latest technology, the service was in widespread use as early as the 1920s. Several times a day, the Twitter boy would bicycle up the drive here at the hall in his buttoned suit and peaked cap, bringing a short message from one of my friends: "OMG Winston Churchill has rejoined the Tories", "WTF is the Commonwealth Party??? LOL", that sort of thing. Then there was the role of the notorious "Zinoviev Tweet" in Labour's defeat in the 1924 general election. Truly, there is nothing new under the sun.

There is, however, one important difference between Twitter now and then. Back in the twenties, someone like your diarist, who had many followers and a great deal to say for himself, kept simply dozens of Twitter Boys in useful employment, crisscrossing the country on their bicycles. Today those self-same messages go by electric interweb while the youths sit in bus shelters drinking white cider. I shall draw this to my fellow ministers' attention at the next Cabinet meeting.

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