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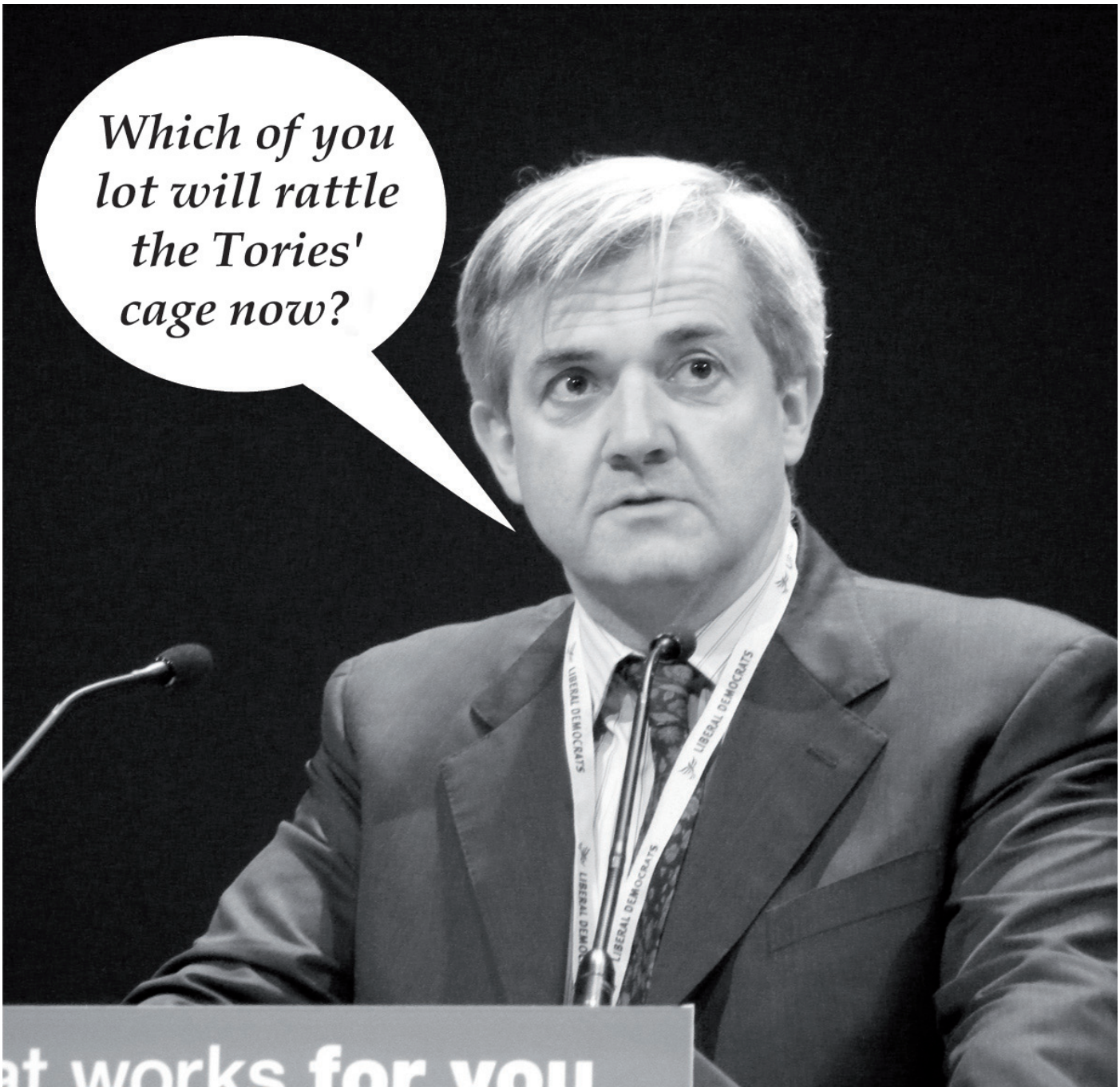

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- Technocrats are never the solution - Trevor Smith
- Wellbeing isn't a luxury - Claire Tyler

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CONTENTS

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COMMENTARY

SITUATION VACANT

With charges laid, there is little that can be published about the legal case surrounding Chris Huhne until the courts come to a decision. Few, and certainly not political commentators, know the truth or otherwise of what happened near Stansted nine years ago, and speculation is unwise.

What can be speculated about is the impact of a Huhne-shaped hole in the Liberal Democrat ministerial team, whether temporary or not.

A few votes different and the party could have been looking at its leader facing charges of perverting the course of justice. Huhne's near-miss for leader made him the only person apart from Vince Cable to have a stature in the party independent of Nick Clegg's patronage and, rather more so than Cable, Huhne used it to illuminate differences between the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives.

As the catastrophic 'rose garden' strategy ploughed on in 2010/11, destroying the party's position and reputation in its wake, it was Huhne more than any other prominent Liberal Democrat who gave sporadic signals that the party was still an independent force with a mind of its own.

He was not merely unafraid to take on senior Conservatives, but was happy for it to become known in public that he had done so, notably over their conduct during last year's referendum. Being Huhne, some of this may have been motivated by a wish to be noticed and to maintain a profile against the day that Nick Clegg might fall beneath a bus.

But it served a more important purpose too. Huhne's occasional outspokenness raised the morale of Liberal Democrats tired of apologising for every Tory outrage with which the party has tamely gone along. It also reminded the public that the Liberal Democrats were not the same as the Tories and had, at the least, accepted some positions under duress rather than because they really supported them.

Someone publicly visible has to do this. The party's prospects at the next general election depend on it being seen as distinct from – and indeed on most issues, opposed to – the Conservatives. Whatever Huhne's motives, his role was a useful one.

Huhne may not have been very popular with his colleagues – as the sparse number of MPs prepared to endorse his leadership campaign in 2007 showed – but he was an obvious future rallying point for dissent. His disappearance, whether temporary or not, leaves a vacuum in that respect. Since politics abhors those, who will fill it?

HOW POLICY IS UNMADE

When the party is rattling the tins to get people to register at exorbitant rates to attend conference, it makes much of the democratic process that takes place there, and the opportunity to influence the policy of a party now in government.

Those registering in future may wish to contemplate the two fingers stuck at conference by all but a handful of Liberal Democrat MPs in the debate that reversed various House of Lords amendments to the Welfare Reform Bill.

The motion at last September's Birmingham conference was clear, committing the party to ensure "people with disabilities getting the support they need" and "opposition to an arbitrary time limit on how long claimants can claim contributory employment and support allowance".

Yet most MPs voted with the government to reverse the Lords amendments, and this despite many Liberal Democrat peers being given the impression that they were taking part in a rebellion informally authorised by a party leadership that did not wish to see the party associated with an assault on unemployed parents, cancer patients and young people with disabilities.

There is a convincing argument that Iain Duncan Smith is the stupidest person ever to have led a major political party, and this bill reinforces that.

Tim Leunig, chief economist of Centre Forum, hardly a nest of bleeding heart lefties, has cogently shown how the inclusion of child benefit within the £26,000 benefit cap will hit larger families where a breadwinner has lost a job worst of all, since those families have the number of children they already have.

Nor is the cap regionalised, meaning poor people in the south will be hit hardest of all, as their housing costs are higher.

Others have pointed out that this is a perverse incentive to family break-up – since households can get £26,000 each – something Duncan Smith has spent his wretched career drivelling about allegedly wishing to prevent.

The Liberal Democrats do not have to go along with this, and should not. As Liberator went to press, attempts were being made to raise this whole issue at the Federal Policy Committee, with what outcome we must wait and see,

There is a wider issue here than the details of welfare reform. What does a conference vote matter if it can be so brazenly ignored? It might be courteous to warn members so that they can decide whether to spare themselves the considerable cost of attending.

RADICAL BULLETIN

REBELS WITH A CAUSE

The rebellion by Liberal Democrat peers over the inclusion of child benefit in the benefit 'cap' marked the first time in which the party's rebels made a difference to a vote in this parliament.

But was it just a matter of individual decision, or was it in some way organised? Many took Paddy Ashdown's announcement that he would oppose the government as a licence to do so too, not least as the former leader is viewed as close to Nick Clegg.

There were hints from MPs that a rebellion in the Lords would be 'useful' – not that many of them rebelled when the matter resurfaced in the Commons – but "if there is any strategy there it is not obvious to anyone at the Lords end," as one rebel peer noted.

Lords whips were displeased because there were no clear messages coming from the Commons, or anyone else of note in the party, about what would be happening. "We can organise a rebellion if that is what Clegg and Co want," said one of the party's Lords leadership. "But they need to tell us!"

The vote was to exclude child benefit from the 'cap' as opposed to the principle of the cap itself, but was spun in public by the government as Liberal Democrats voting against the cap.

As another Lord remarked: "One thing is obvious – there is no attempt by anyone to explain Liberal Democrat votes in the Lords to the media, what concessions have been gained in return for votes with the government, and who is leading the charge on what. The whole thing is a shambles."

MY HUSBAND AND I

The saga of Diana Wallis's bizarre behaviour over her resignation from the European Parliament was finally resolved when her husband Stewart Arnold did the decent thing and declined to replace her, even though he was number two on the Liberal Democrat list in the Yorkshire and the Humber constituency.

Wallis stood for the presidency of the European Parliament to challenge the traditional cosy stitch-up whereby the two biggest party groups share the post between them. All very commendable, but she failed to get elected. The next day, to general astonishment, she resigned her seat.

In her resignation statement (19 January), she said: "I think all of us, whatever our professions, need to turn a new page from time to time… I want to take a break from politics and to take time and assess what next." Perfectly reasonable sentiments, but rather surprising ones for someone to hold only 24 hours after they were soliciting votes for the same parliament's most senior post.

Wallis's resignation meant that her place would normally have been taken by Arnold, whose pedigree in the party stretches back to the fabled Maldon Young Liberals branch in the early 1980s. But a seat transfer

between spouses alarmed those who could see how it would appear in public. To make matters worse, Wallis employed Arnold as her assistant.

North West MEP Chris Davies wrote: "You don't have to be a supporter of UKIP to know that it would be seen as an illustration of 'remote and unaccountable' MEPs keeping their nests well-feathered. Many people, including many Liberal Democrats, would think it stinks."

Davies then went further by resigning as the party's European Parliament whip, stating: "There would not be the slightest possibility that I could exercise any function as an officer with impartiality towards Stewart Arnold."

Meanwhile, attention turned to Rebecca Taylor, who had come third on the regional list behind Arnold. If he did step aside, would she take the post?

With accusations flying around, group leader Fiona Hall addressed a stern missive to the MEPs: "I am aware that a number of you have overtly or covertly been taking steps to have Stewart Arnold replaced as the successor to Diana by the no.3 on the list, Rebecca Taylor. May I remind you what is relevant in the replacement of Diana and what is irrelevant.

"What is irrelevant is: whether you like or dislike Diana/Stewart/Rebecca; whether you think Diana/Stewart/Rebecca is or was useless; that Diana employed Stewart as her assistant; that Diana stood for President one minute and resigned the next; that Stewart only beat Rebecca by a small margin; that actually the Chief Executive legally has the final say."

Hall said Arnold was the duly elected number two and that was that, a position she said had the full support of Nick Clegg. Despite this backing, the pressure was such that Arnold stood aside and Taylor got the job, but for how long?

The Liberal Democrats in fact have two MEPs in the Yorkshire region, the other being Edward McMillan-Scott, who defected from the Conservatives in 2010. If Wallis had waited until the next election to retire, Arnold (or for that matter, Taylor) might have struggled to beat McMillan-Scott in the selection contest for the regional list, since incumbency is a powerful factor.

With the exception of London, incumbent MEPs usually win first place on their lists with North Korean-style majorities because few party members have heard of any of the other candidates, who lack the resources to campaign across such vast areas.

With only one Liberal Democrat likely to be elected in most regions, it is the top slot that matters.

LEADERS OF THE PACK

After years of disputes about whether quotas or better training should be used to increase diversity among Liberal Democrat candidates, 40 people have been chosen to enter the candidate leadership programme, described as "designed specifically to identify, develop and support some of the best candidates from under-represented groups within the party".

The party website did not say what the chosen 40 would actually get from the programme in the way of bring 'developed'.

Inevitably with something like this, there will be many disappointed people, and some objections can be dismissed as sour grapes.

Nick Clegg said that, of those chosen, more than two-thirds were female, a third from BME backgrounds and a significant number "disabled, openly LGBT, under 30 years old and/or from a lower socio-economic background".

Even so, some of the choices have raised eyebrows. Dorothy Thornhill has been three times elected mayor of Watford and was a councillor for ten years before that, and so some have wondered what extra help she needs to get elected.

Emily Davey is indeed married, as her leadership programme profile states, but, as it doesn't state, she is married to government minister Ed Davey and is a seasoned parliamentary candidate.

However, the real upset has arisen over all this among the leadership of Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats, which supports positive action for minority ethnic candidates, a position that was defeated at the 2010 conference in Liverpool.

Their annoyance has been heightened by the presence on the leadership programme of Chris Lucas and Munira Wilson, who helped to defeat EMLD's motion seeking quotas for minority candidates.

Another programme member, Layla Moran, proposed a motion a few months ago to the London regional conference calling for an end to the positive action used to select London Assembly list candidates.

There has also been concern about how beneficiaries were chosen. The programme depends on a generous donation from philanthropist Rumi Verjee. Even so, some applicants were surprised to see him on the selection panel.

One failed applicant said there appeared to be little paperwork involved in their assessment and "after all the work done on selecting people based on competency (like the beefed-up PPC assessment), the candidate leadership programme is undoing this by becoming an 'A-list' of favoured ones to be parachuted in, just as the other two parties do".

TO BE OR NOT TO BE?

What is happening to Coalition Phase 2 and Coalition 2.0? These are the two initiatives, reported in RB 344, intended to drive the policy of the coalition government in the period 2012-15.

The Independent on Sunday (29 January) reported that Coalition 2.0 had been cancelled, news that was welcomed by the Social Liberal Forum in an announcement on its website (1 February).

Unfortunately, the story was wrong on two counts. Coalition 2.0 is a small group of Tories and Liberal Democrats meeting under the auspices of the think tank CentreForum. The Independent's story had confused this group with Coalition Phase 2, the government initiative led by Danny Alexander and Oliver Letwin charged with the job of drafting a second programme for government.

As early as 17 June last year, the Financial Times reported that Coalition Phase 2 had been "put on the back burner" (although the FT made the same mistake, referring to it as 'Coalition 2.0'). The FT also reported a division within government about the need for a second programme, which cut across party lines, with some ministers in both parties clearly nervous about reopening a can of worms.

The other mistake in the Independent's story was to suggest that Coalition Phase 2 had been wound up. At

a joint meeting of the Federal Executive and Federal Policy Committee in January, Danny Alexander went out of his way to play down the significance of Coalition Phase 2, saying that it was now merely fleshing out the original coalition agreement.

However, Coalition Phase 2 is still in business and will produce a report later this year, which the FPC will not be allowed to amend; it has only the nuclear option of rejecting it entirely (with what consequences are unclear). And although this report may no longer be styled as a 'second programme for government', no one yet has any idea of its scope and ambition, or to what extent it will guide the coalition government.

Meanwhile, whether CentreForum's Coalition 2.0 cabal is still going is anyone's guess, since nothing about its activities has been publicised since it started in the autumn of 2010. So much for open government.

THE LOCK TURNS

A mere 19 months late, the party has got around to publishing the Federal Appeals Panel ruling that the 'triple lock' – the mechanism used to authorise the coalition deal in 2010 – was unconstitutional.

The triple lock was set up by the 1998 spring conference, at the height of suspicions that Paddy Ashdown was about to sell out the party to Labour, and laid down a series of votes required by the parliamentary party, the Federal Executive and conference before deals could be struck with other parties.

Although Nick Clegg used it happily in 2010, former regional party chair Mike Simpson lodged an objection with the FAP to rule on whether or not it was constitutional.

Gordon Lishman, who proposed the triple lock in 1998, was invited to make submissions but the panel ruled it was unconstitutional. But nobody knew this important step had been taken, unless they were a constitution wonk or a Liberator reader (see RB 345).

The FAP failed to publish its ruling, a situation that cannot be repeated now that last year's constitutional amendment has required it to make a report to conference.

Philip Goldenberg, who then chaired the FAP, has said that he reported the decision to "the federal president, chief executive and operation director leaving it to them to determine how it should be published". Why the FAP could not publish it for itself, and why these three august people took 19 months to get around to doing so, are matters for conjecture.

An amendment due for debate at the Gateshead conference in the name of party president Tim Farron restores the triple lock but in a rather different form. It would set up a reference group to which any coalition or pact negotiating team would report during the course of negotiations.

At the end of that, if the Commons parliamentary party decides, after having consulted the Federal Policy Committee, the Federal Executive and the Lords parliamentary party "to support a government which contains members of one or more other political parties," it must seek the approval of conference.

This removes the FE's veto by a weighted majority, which it had under the 1998 mechanism, and also allows the conference to endorse a deal by a simple majority, rather than a two-thirds one.

The reference group is a welcome idea, so that negotiators exhausted from a campaign do not plough on regardless, but the loss of several hurdles from the process is less so.

DISGUSTED OF...

The Mitcham and Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet is heading to Tunbridge Wells, in recognition of the local party's submission of the worst motion for debate at the Gateshead spring conference.

It expresses concern that public bodies can fail to answer freedom of information requests within the set time limits but do not face the threat of a fine or penalty for this. But did Tunbridge Wells then offer a range of options for such penalties to conference? Er, no.

"Conference instructs the Federal Policy Committee to study the workings of Freedom of Information legislation in USA, Canada, EU partners and other democracies, consult with local Liberal Democrat parties in the UK and Brussels and with parties in the Liberal International and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats," and then to "bring forward proposals for the next Federal Conference with a view to including them in an updated coalition agreement and the next manifesto." Sledgehammers, nuts?

An honourable mention goes to the Women Liberal Democrats, who sought to have the elected seats on each federal committee made an even number so as to allow them to be 'zipped' with equal male and female representation. Unfortunately, its amendment provided for the evenness but said nothing that would give effect to the zipping.

BY JINGO IF WE DO

The Liberal Democrats' 2010 manifesto stated: "...we oppose military action against Iran and believe those calling for such action undermine the growing reform movement in Iran." But will the party honour this policy or sleepwalk into supporting a war?

There is a strong chance that Israel will attack Iran's nuclear facilities later this year, for fear that it will be a final chance to destroy them. This is despite the fact that the latest IAEA report clearly states there is no evidence that Iran has diverted any enriched nuclear material to a weapons programme. And even if there were, any attack is merely likely to cause a short delay to Iran's plans.

Such an attack would draw the USA and UK into a disastrous conflict. And given that British involvement would require the support of the coalition government, the Israelis will want to get the Liberal Democrats on board.

On 30 November, Paul Reynolds reported on Liberal Democrat Voice that a British Liberal Democrat emergency motion opposing a war had been carried heavily by ELDR's annual congress. This provoked a disingenuous response from Matthew Harris (vice-chair of Liberal Democrat Friends of Israel), who wrote: "I wouldn't call US bombing of Iran's nuclear facilities 'war'; I'd call it 'military action'."

Then on BBC1's Question Time (26 January), Foreign Office minister Jeremy Browne not only declared support for blockade-type unilateral sanctions, which do not have UN support, but also gave the distinct

impression that he was in favour of the UK joining a major war against Iran.

When Tony Blair took Britain to war against Iraq in 2003, the Liberal Democrats distinguished themselves by opposing that war. Can we expect similar courage this time or is another manifesto pledge about to be abandoned?

SNAP ELECTION

On 20 January, Liberal Democrat News carried an advertisement for an election for the party's federal treasurer, following the resignation after only a year in office of Richard Duncalf.

Yet the following week, it was able to announce that the job had gone to Ian Wrigglesworth, scarcely time enough for any other candidate to have made their interest known.

The original advertisement stressed that Federal Finance and Administration Committee chair Duncan Greenland does the administrative job of treasurer, while the federal treasurer is solely concerned with fundraising. With Wrigglesworth in office, that division may gratify anyone who remembers the party finance debate at Bournemouth spring conference in 1989.

Whoever is treasurer faces an uphill struggle. The party chucked money around in 2010 when it thought Cleggmania would make unwinnable seats winnable, and then donations dried up when the tuition fees debacle occurred, not to resume to any great extent.

The Electoral Commission's figures for party donations in the third quarter of 2011 look improved on the surface, at £1.2m, but £585,722 of that is marked from 'others', almost entirely the Methuen Liberal Trust, a body that is understood to have made a one-off donation prior to its closure.

DON'T PANIC!

The ability to stand firm in a crisis seems to have eluded Liberal Democrat MPs. The eurozone crisis has provoked a fresh outbreak of nervous Eurosceptism in the parliamentary party.

The first sign was a bizarre attack on the European working time directive by Tim Farron, writing on Liberal Democrat Voice (16 December). This directive is a favoured target of those who want to make the UK even more of a sweatshop than it is. A similar attack on the directive was launched by Ming Campbell and heavily publicised in the London Evening Standard (4 January).

However, a more significant move was revealed in the Guardian (2 January), which reported: "Informal talks between Tory Eurosceptic MPs and centrist Liberal Democrats are being planned in a bid to see if an unlikely common agenda can be formed on Europe."

The report alleged that a section of the parliamentary party, particularly MPs from the south-west, is "desperate to avoid the label of Europhile" and named Alistair Carmichael, Jeremy Browne, Nick Harvey and David Laws. Such MPs were also said to have "warned their own party must not be seen as starry-eyed uncritical supporters of the EU". But these often-cited 'starry-eyed' people are a straw man because no-one ever seems able to name one.

Quite who this unprincipled manoeuvring is meant to impress is unclear, since anyone wanting a Europhobic party can vote for the real McCoy. The Liberal Democrats are not credible competitors on the Tories' and UKIP's xenophobic turf. Instead, Eurosceptic posturing will serve only to alienate still further the Liberal Democrats' already weak base.

SANTA FE TRAIL

For some years, wealthy establishment figures in the Liberal Democrats have gathered at secret 'Santa Fe' dinners organised by Neil Sherlock, who has been a speechwriter for – and a regular donor to – successive party leaders.

Now that Sherlock has become a special adviser to Nick Clegg, Santa Fe nevertheless continues. This was revealed publicly in an e-mail sent on 8 January to members of Liberal Democrats in Public Relations and Public Affairs.

This message said, "As you may know, LDiPR member Rob Blackie is a candidate in the GLA [Greater London Authority] elections this coming May. We understand that the Santa Fe Group are hosting a dinner in support of Rob's campaign and have been asked to publicise it to LDiPR members."

This request will doubtless have puzzled many LDiPR members, since the very existence of the Santa Fe Group had hitherto been kept secret, and the e-mail provided no explanation of what the group is.

The Santa Fe Group is partly a fundraising body and partly an establishment salon. It is organised by a triumvirate of Peter Ellis (who made large donations to the leader's office in Charles Kennedy's time and recently became Western region chair), Duncan Greenland (FFAC chair) and Ian Wright (a former Owenite who has been at the centre of right-wing plotting in the party for over a decade, and has also been a major donor to Nick Clegg).

Perhaps this team has decided to end the secrecy. But if you want to attend the dinner, LDiPR's e-mail reveals just one catch: "a minimum charge, usually £50".

SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS

A strange Liberal Democrat News advert in January sought a campaigns officer to work in 'the south east and Berwick'. This did not refer to 'south east Scotland', which might have made some geographical sense, and there is no reason to think that the Sussex village of Berwick (population 289) needs its own campaigns officer.

How is anyone supposed to do a job that spans two places hundreds of miles apart, and which will inevitably fight general elections on the same day? Is this yet another example of the forward thinking that lay behind last summer's devastation of the campaigns department?

OFF THE CARDS

As noted in Liberator 350, all Liberal Democrat parliamentarians have been asked to work phrases such as "As a Liberal Democrat" and "Cleaning up Labour's economic mess" into media interviews.

It seems that people who have merely got themselves elected to parliament cannot be trusted to think up appropriate answers to questions, so MPs were confronted at their weekly meeting with a pile of cards with these witless phrases on them and told to take them away for study.

"I didn't notice any rush for them and can only

surmise that, like myself, most colleagues are sticking with the membership card already in our wallets and purses that reminds us of our aims and aspirations," one noted.

EARS WAGGLING

Former Liberal Democrat chief executive Chris Fox sent out a memo to MEPs before he left office suggesting that they should not pass on their electronic copies of the register to EARS because the national party was now using Connect for such purposes.

Meanwhile, EARS was telling local parties that they should arrange for their MEPs to forward the stuff to EARS for updating as usual.

When all this was queried by some MEPs' offices, Fox sent out a second much firmer memo saying that to use their copies for local EARS would be contrary to the Data Protection Act, complete with a ruling by the data protection registrar to this end. To continue to use EARS, one must therefore get a local electronic copy and send it direct.

Is this all part of party headquarters, having decided to move to Connect, doing everything it can to obstruct local parties that wish to continue to use EARS?

WRIST JOB

Online polls are always open to abuse and it seems this is what happened in January, when Liberal Democrat Voice's 'Liberal Voice of the Year' poll was won by Mark Littlewood, director general of the Thatcherite Institute of Economic Affairs.

The editors of LDV probably realised something was up, since – unusually for one of their polls – the 'View Results' button did not work during polling, which prevented readers from telling how well each candidate was doing.

The person chosen must not be a Liberal Democrat member. But Littlewood seemed an odd choice in a year when the Arab Spring and the exposure of phone hacking suggested other, more deserving winners. And even the staunchest of Littlewood's admirers would have to admit that their champion had done nothing exceptional in the past year. Not that Littlewood won a majority of votes cast. Curiously, LDV conducted a first-past-the-post election.

Presumably the juvenile right-wing libertarians who rigged this poll must have sore wrists from all that click-voting. At least we assume that clicking was the cause of this ailment.

CARELESS WORDS

It seems that something embarrassing has leaked from the parliamentary party.

A stern note from Tom Brake sent to other MPs and peers reads: "Colleagues are reminded that work plans and other sensitive documents should not be circulated by email. Hard copies should be handed out at PPC meetings, and collected back in at the end of each meeting by the co-chairs responsible."

And it seems someone has been deviating from the coalition line. Brake adds: "You may also wish to consider the phraseology used when circulating agendas and other items by email."

OUT OF PRINT

On the day Chris Huhne resigned from the cabinet, BBC2's Newsnight report included an interview with Ben Ramm, captioned 'Editor, The Liberal'.

But can anyone be styled 'editor' of a magazine that was last published about three years ago? If not, what authority does their media punditry have?

LIB DEM LEFT HAND

Simon Hebditch explains the formation of Liberal Left to rally opponents of the coalition within the party

It should be axiomatic to any Liberal activist that her/his activities should be guided by beliefs, principles and values. Liberal Democrat principles are cogently and clearly set out in the preamble to the constitution and the party's political decisions should, therefore, be driven by reference to those principles. In my view, the current coalition is fundamentally flawed in terms of its economic and fiscal policies and a range of consequent social policies.

Without replaying the tired record as to whether we should have ever entered the coalition, it is clear that the government is failing across the most centrally important political issues of the day. The Health and Social Care Bill is a dog's breakfast, which should never have been given the initial green light by the Liberal Democrat leadership. The welfare reform changes are deeply dangerous and have targeted the poorest in society. The AV referendum campaign was a disaster, with our so-called allies going back on their commitments.

On economic policy, the party has rowed in behind a deficit reduction programme based on large-scale public expenditure cuts and minimal changes for the richest 1% of the population. The government's economic strategy has failed in that we are fast approaching yet another recession, unemployment is rising, lending from banks is still restrained and no serious attempts are being made to encourage the productive economy to grow.

I don't doubt that the Liberal Democrats have had some influence on the Tories and have achieved some of their aims and objectives. But they are not significant enough, in the context of the current economic position, to tip the balance of the scales towards support for the coalition programme.

The hopes of the Liberal Democrats now revolve around the strategy of 'differentiation'. I know that it can be argued that many of our continental friends operate in such ways in various proportional systems but I am not convinced that the British public will make a distinction between different parts of a coalition. Either you are in government or you are not. If you are, you must be jointly responsible for the delivery of a political programme.

Of course, I accept that the party voted overwhelmingly to join the coalition in 2010 but that does not mean we should suspend all critical judgement and simply go along with a political programme that is a demonstrable failure. We are constantly being told that, as the special conference backed the coalition in 2010, we cannot oppose the venture. At the very same time, we are told that we cannot hark back to the last manifesto or other statements of faith because circumstances have changed!

Yes, circumstances have changed. The coalition has failed. A time for detailed, radical analysis has arrived and the work must begin on a potential new programme that could attract a new alliance between the centre left. That is why I am involved in the new group, Liberal Left, to be launched at the Gateshead conference in March.

The second reason why I think it is important to support a new initiative is that I remain an adherent of that ancient political objective – the realignment of the left. I know it is fashionable to claim that politics has moved away from such directional images but I still believe that our values and principles clearly place us in the centre left of British politics. Remember William Hague, standing on Whitehall steps in 2010, hailing the creation of the coalition as a "realignment of the right". He was correct.

So, it is incumbent on us to explore the possibilities of creating an alternative alliance that would consist of Liberal Democrats, a transformed Labour Party, the Greens and a range of new political movements. We should be supporting specific campaigns across that centre left spectrum and engaging in some hard work to see if a common programme can be forged by the time of the next election.

I have no idea if it would work. The Labour Party would have to be radically reformed and the Liberal Democrat leadership would have to reflect a genuine centre left alignment. But it is worth a try and Liberal Left could provide a mechanism for that sort of work.

Some might argue that we already have the Social Liberal Forum, which is a vehicle for the centre left in the party. As a member of its council, I see that it has an important role to play in trying to push radical measures to the parliamentary party and influencing the democratic machinery of the party. But it certainly does not take a position of being in opposition to the coalition. We had a number of early debates in the council on this issue.

Liberal Left clearly opposes the coalition and will provide a venue for all who now doubt the coalition programme to help build momentum towards alternative alliances. We will be concentrating attention on analysing and publicising the fundamental flaws of the coalition and building strong links across the centre left over the next two years.

Simon Hebditch is a founder of Liberal Left (www.liberalleft.org.uk)

Liberal Left will be launched at a fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrat spring conference in Gateshead (8pm, Saturday 10 March, in Hall 2 of The Sage)

HOW CAMERON BLEW IT IN BRUSSELS

The prime minister has destroyed Britain's influence in Europe. Dirk Hazell wonders why the Liberal Democrats' response was so pathetic

As sure as night follows day, Cameron's Brussels Blunder at December's EU summit will confront Britain with massive and permanent consequences. There is every reason for optimism as to the eventual outcome. However, in the interim, the British body politic may face deserved turbulence.

The Weekend Wobble in the wake of the Brussels summit was not a great start. Well-placed Liberal Democrats have fed the line that the deputy prime minister "knew nothing" about the Brussels Blunder while his subsequent "fury" was widely reported in the following Sunday's papers.

But there is a problem with this particular version of Tory perfidy. During the Weekend Wobble, many Liberal Democrats – appalled at the apparent blood sacrifice of our party's European mission on the Tory altar – spoke to each other as we heard Liberal Democrat spokesmen rush to Cameron's defence in the critical post-summit hours.

Two facts are clear. First, in the day or so following the summit, furious Liberal Democrats of integrity quite properly made their principled views unambiguously clear to the party's leadership. Second, Liberal Democrats looked like patsies whose stature in the coalition was a mere trifle for a prime minister willing to place mismanagement of the Tory party above the clear national interest, which, in the worst misjudgement since at least Suez, he manifestly failed to secure.

One had already sensed, at the November meeting of the party's international relations committee, that our parliamentary party was as likely to be as effective as suet pudding in prevailing on the foreign secretary to correct relations between the British and German governments, which were, contrary to the strongest dictates of our national interest, at their lowest ebb since the first quarter of 1945.

Roll forward to motion-drafting time for the spring conference. I was among those determined to see a European motion and, to that extent, the mission appears to have been accomplished.

PECULIAR EMAIL

However, I was also among those who received a peculiar email. In our brave new world, the soi-disant spokeswoman of the Federal Conference Committee expressed concern "at the suggestion within your motion that the Liberal Democrats should tell another party which group it should belong to in the European Parliament". Well, pardon me for living.

One might have thought the Tories have so far got off incredibly lightly for spurning the centre-right alliance of Merkel and Sarkozy in favour of the nastiness and irrelevance of their new Euro-chums, who include those who believe women should not be allowed to vote, homophobes, Waffen SS commemorators, climate change deniers and various forms of racists!

Heaven forefend that a mere Lib Dem should have the temerity to criticise the poor baby blue darlings, even if, as a direct result of their teensy weensy naughtiness, the British national interest is in the meantime manifestly going down the pan.

The end of the Cold War brought Britain both a fake homogenisation of politicians and a much greater willingness to brazen out whatever line focus groups say will secure votes. This is an ultimately doomed strategy. In the same way as businesses must risk rejection with products they offer, so politicians must lead, and stand or fall, on issues of openly declared principle. Anything else, and politicians cannot be trusted. Anything else, and there is no point in being in politics.

A viable democracy also requires the voting public to know who makes what decisions and exactly how to vote to secure change. While the British public was, in fact, told the truth when Britain went into the EEC, successive generations in the Palace of Westminster have been more slippery.

It is an inescapable inevitability that Europe must present Britain with a moment of truth. Britain's role within the EU is a defining issue of our times and, driven in part by economics, its salience in the public consciousness as an issue will rise. On top of that, Britain itself is approaching an internal choice of whether to hang together or to fall apart.

The best and patriotic outcome is for a much more democratic and federal Britain positively to engage in a revitalised Europe. Of course there will be thrills and spills on the way but, given the chance, this is probably the sensible choice the British public will make. It is at once the progressive, liberal and conservative choice.

A core duty of a democratic politician is to look to the future: to analyse the big trends, to identify and pursue the national interest and attractively to communicate, with the maximum practicable transparency and honesty, the proposed means and end.

One big trend resulting from the Second World War has been erosion of the concept of national sovereignty, embedded in the 1648 Westphalia settlement. One mostly hears Liberal Democrats speak of this in the context of the Responsibility to Protect, about which Jonathan Fryer has recently and powerfully written. Although I personally consider RtP more double-edged than do many Liberal Democrats, I also believe it is

not in practical terms the most significant post-war erosion of Westphalia.

In a misplaced determination to hang on to what no longer exists, the British parliament has glossed the 'dialectic' between economic and other globalisation on the one hand, and the need on the other for the most local practicable democratic accountability.

This is hard to forgive, not least because the solution is so much easier to sell in any European country than, for example, in the more parochial Republican heartlands of the American Midwest.

I offer the thought that, while the British economy paid a long-term post-war price for its economic infrastructure not having been more totally smashed, the December summit marks a point where the British political system and national interest paid the price for our institutional continuity not having been smashed like that of virtually every other member state.

Of course, it is wonderful that British democracy has for so long been continuous but – broadly – its form has now been unambiguously overtaken by the substance of events and we have temporarily passed not only to profound decadence but also to the lapse of the British genius: knowing what and when to change in order to conserve what truly matters. Europe is the only show in town that can conserve what truly matters.

Before re-visiting the significance of the December summit, it may be worth noting two Tory failures of leadership in the post-war period. The first, in the 1950s, was the failure to lead construction of the European project. Had the Tories done so, we would be in a much better place today.

The second was the Major government's failure, albeit in testing circumstances, to provide an appropriate and honest narrative relating globalisation and local democratic accountability to the context of the Maastricht Treaty. A cancer that should have been removed has instead grown in a manner wholly inimical to the national interest.

Tories in the 1990s who wanted to safeguard democratic accountability had an honourable point. So did those who saw Britain's future in Europe. Of course, it is easier for me to say now than it was for Major to do then, but we have paid a high price for these two strands of the unavoidable post-war dialectic not being properly united in a new and better constitutional settlement.

Britain needed Major's government to deliver both real and more local democratic accountability within a modernised constitution and also rock solid British commitment to the European project. Instead, Blair as the next prime minister castrated parliament while Cameron in Brussels in December prejudiced the national interest by turning away from Europe.

TURN FOR THE BETTER

The potential importance of the December summit is massive. As far as the immediate future is concerned, the summit is far more likely than not to prove to have been the decisive turning point for the better in the euro crisis. The strong balance of probability is that, by 2020, the euro will have for some years been firmly established as the world's premier reserve currency and that Britain will be established in the Eurozone.

But the December summit is perhaps even more significant for two further reasons. First, however clumsily, it marks the end of an understandable post-war inhibition: that neighbours do not comment on neighbours. The balance of the EU has tilted from one of diplomacy between member states to one of genuinely transnational politics, where politicians in one member state feel able to participate more directly in the politics of other member states. Having lobbied the European Parliament for decades, I believe this cultural change to be long overdue.

One might have wished for more cuddly circumstances to tilt the balance, and it is not without risk, but this is the underlying *realpolitik* of our time and there is, to quote a phrase, "no turning back".

We must now find both broadly acceptable parameters everyone understands and the most local practicable democratic accountability. No point in pussyfooting: at some stage not too far in the future, there will indeed need to be a new federal treaty structure and far more substantive pan-European political campaigning than we have so far seen.

Second, the British people cannot indefinitely be denied the real choice we face. On the one hand, a smashed Britain with an authoritarian England sulking in the sea, detached from the EU, and sinking ever lower as increasingly strident bombast fails to mask absolute and relative decline.

Not the slightest chance of social cohesion. Not the remotest possibility of our 'independent' parliament having any significant influence on anything that matters. It would be a sort of cold, grey and wet version of Franco's Spain, with only pitifully low wages as an ineffective inducement to attract investment.

On the other hand, a modern, responsive and vibrant federal British democracy positively working to make the EU the best place in the world.

The stakes could not be higher. In such a context, Cameron made his tragic choice in opposition. With Merkel and Sarkozy, the most Atlanticist of German and French leaders, he had a chance denied to his predecessors: to build Europe in the context of the closest co-operation with North America.

I knew the mood and it was so. He blew it. He chose Europe's embittered, impotent, pessimist far right. He spurned Europe's normal core power, the relevant, optimist centre-right. For Cameron, the Brussels Blunder of the December summit, no matter how it may be spun, will over time be seen to unfold as part of his personal tragedy.

His tragedy must not become Britain's. Liberal Democrats must ensure that for Britain, the summit marked the point not only where a better and freer Europe turned a page, but also that our great national epic emerges as a prominent and positive theme indelibly embedded on that new page.

Dirk Hazell is secretary of the Liberal International British Group and a member of the Liberal Democrat International Relations Committee

THE ONLY WAY IS ETHICS

Liberals will always be on weak ground if they argue for liberty and freedom in purely abstract terms, says Simon Titley

When Liberals express their values, the words they most commonly use are 'liberty' and 'freedom'. But what does this ethic actually mean in concrete terms?

The great liberal intellectual Ralf Dahrendorf was in no doubt what liberty meant. He began his 1974 Reith Lectures ('The New Liberty') by recalling an unpleasant wartime experience from his teenage years:

"The elementary desire to be free is the force behind all liberties, old and new. Indeed, there is little need to explain what this desire is, and some of us have found out about it in ways which we will not forget.

"I can still see myself, pacing up and down my cell in the prison of Frankfurt-on-Oder in November 1944 (I was 15-and-a-half at the time), clutching an almost blunt pencil which I had pinched when the Gestapo officer during my first interrogation had left the room, and trying to write down all the Latin words which I could recollect from school on a piece of brown paper which I had pulled from under the mattress of my bunk.

"The youthful organisation which had brought me into this predicament had been called, somewhat pretentiously, 'Freedom Association of High School Boys of Germany', and it had combined childish things like wearing a yellow pin on the lapel with more serious matters such as the distribution of fly-sheets against the SS-state, which had now caught up with me.

"The concentration camp afterwards was a very different experience, really; dark mornings queuing in icy east wind for a bowl of watery soup, the brutal hanging of a Russian prisoner who had stolen half a pound of margarine, slices of bread surreptitiously passed to a sick or an old man: a lesson in solidarity, perhaps, and, above all, one in the sacredness of human lives.

"But it was during the ten days of solitary confinement that an almost claustrophobic yearning for freedom was bred, a visceral desire not to be hemmed in, neither by the personal power of men, nor by the anonymous power of organisations."

When you have been through an experience like that, any justification of the case for liberty seems superfluous. But most of us have not been through an experience like that, or anything remotely resembling it. We have grown up in a stable democracy where, although things are by no means perfect, we do not live in terror. So the case for liberty has to be argued.

And that argument is made more difficult by the fact that, on the face of it, nobody disagrees with us. Everybody says they believe in democracy and freedom nowadays. No one ever argues for dictatorship the way they did in the 1930s. And in countries less fortunate than our own, even the most dictatorial state feels obliged to call itself 'The Democratic Republic of' (a gesture that Adolf Hitler never bothered with).

Hitler never bothered with elections either (at least not after he had won his first one). But these days, every dictatorship needs the imprimatur of an election, even if it has been blatantly rigged. So in a superficial sense, the argument has already been won.

But we know that the situation remains highly deficient. The argument is more subtle. It is about how one interprets 'liberty' and 'freedom', and what priority one attaches to them.

Whenever dictatorships are challenged about the lack of freedom, the reply is invariably along similar lines. Freedom and democracy are all very well, they say, but the priority is to feed the people, or build the economy, or ensure security, or wait until the people are better educated. The implication is not that freedom and democracy are necessarily bad, rather that they are not a priority and would get in the way of doing more important things.

MUSCULAR LABOURISM

The idea that liberty is a second-order issue is also widespread among liberals' opponents here in Britain. The Labour Party may have been reinvented by Tony Blair as a thoroughly bourgeois animal, but there remains a thick seam of working class social conservatism running through the party – a culture of muscular Labourism typified by John Reid and David Blunkett, with a visceral contempt for liberal values.

This is why the Labour Party is uncomfortable with civil liberties or the environment. The gruff, tough, Labourist regards both issues as effete bourgeois concerns, and therefore a sign of weakness, and consequently an object of disgust. When Labour MP David Lammy recently extolled the virtues of spanking children, he quickly found the G-spot of that reactionary culture.

Not that the thoroughly bourgeois Mr Blair was any better. True, he helped advance the cause of gay rights, for example. The trouble was, he believed that rights were something the government granted to you instead of something you already had. And insofar as New Labour granted us rights, it regarded this as some sort of indulgence; it certainly wasn't central to Blair's idea of what it meant to be 'modern'.

Blair subscribed to the idea that freedom is a luxury, a political dessert that you can eat only when you've finished your greens. As the post 9/11 response to terrorism showed, Blair and his allies believed that there was a direct trade-off between liberty and security. This belief positioned liberty merely in the 'nice to have' category, where it could always be sacrificed if expedient.

The Conservative Party may have seemed more sympathetic to civil liberties, but its commitment to freedom remains doubtful. One only has to consider the party's hostility to the Human Rights Act to see that.

Elderly provincial Conservatives remain suspicious of freedom; it's all well and good but it can sometimes

go too far. They believe the country went to the dogs in the 1960s (presumably at the point identified by Philip Larkin, "between the end of the Chatterley ban and the Beatles' first LP") because people were given more freedom than was good for them. The overriding need of such Tories is to restore the discipline, standards and certainties of an imagined golden age.

> ***"Liberal Democrats should be talking about real, felt freedom, not just legal rights and procedures"***

Younger metropolitan Conservatives, on the other hand, can't get enough of freedom. They are not bound by the social conventions of their elders – there is "no such thing as society", after all. But for them, freedom is something you may exercise only in the limited sphere of the marketplace. It is all about 'choice'; you can be free to choose a car, a hat or a pot of yoghurt. And some can pick a school or hospital. But you cannot make coherent or meaningful political choices about the sort of society you wish to live in.

The ambivalence of Labour and Tory politicians towards freedom and liberty suggests there is a big space for Liberal Democrats to occupy. The field should be clear for the party to 'own' this cause. The trouble is, the party isn't very good at arguing its case.

The basic problem is that the Liberal Democrats talk about freedom and liberty in abstract terms. Unlike Ralf Dahrendorf, they have not been imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, and nor have most of their voters, so they cannot appeal to such a dramatic personal experience of loss of freedom.

If you believe that freedom and liberty are a prerequisite for tackling the issues of the day, not tangential to them, this should not be a problem. But the party seems unable to relate freedom and liberty to the lives people lead. It has policies on education, healthcare and crime, and then it has a separate policy on this abstract thing called freedom. This sterile approach was evident most recently in the party's *Facing the Future* policy document.

Even when the Liberal Democrats do discuss freedom, they tend to talk more about processes than outcomes. They emphasise legal, formal freedoms and neglect real, felt freedom. But people need more than formal political rights; they need to be able to exercise their rights. Indeed, this is essential if the party is serious about encouraging people to take and use power.

So if the Liberal Democrats sincerely believe that freedom and liberty are at the core of their values, these ethics should permeate their policies on bread-and-butter topics and not be treated as a discrete issue. Because if the party disconnects freedom and liberty from people's everyday concerns, it plays into the hands of its opponents, who can depict liberty as nice-in-theory but a low priority and, moreover, something that must always give way to concerns about security or prosperity. There is a cogent argument that freedom makes us more secure and more prosperous, but we rarely hear it from the Liberal Democrats.

The party's tendency to discuss freedom and liberty in abstract terms was identified as a problem by Chris Rennard in the 1990s. He realised that banging on about electoral reform, for example, made the party look like a group of obsessives who were out of touch with the concerns of ordinary people. Unfortunately, the chosen remedy was to drop the subject entirely and talk about bread-and-butter issues in conventional terms.

This strategy eventually led to the absurdity of party leaders talking about 'hard-working families' and 'Alarm Clock Britain'. The objective seemed to be to blend in with the other main parties, and the Liberal Democrats succeeded only too well.

It is because the Liberal Democrats have such difficulty talking about freedom in meaningful terms that I have been regularly referring to the concept of 'agency' in my writing. By 'agency', I mean the capacity of individuals to make meaningful choices about their lives and to influence the world around them. I define freedom in these terms because it is better to think of freedom as a practical ability than as a theoretical abstraction. Unfortunately, 'agency' is jargon in some professional circles but I shall stick with it because it encapsulates the meaning I seek better than any other word I can think of.

Defining freedom in these terms forces us to realise the extent to which the maldistribution of power is at the root of most of our political ills. It also forces us to realise the relationship between exercising freedom and wellbeing. We can then incorporate freedom as an integral part of our policies across the board, rather than tack it on as an afterthought or omit it altogether.

An insistence on agency also counteracts the classical liberal argument that market forces are the only legitimate means by which people may exercise power. Markets have only a limited capacity to provide people with agency, because of disparities of wealth; because of various market imperfections; because using the price mechanism as your only means of expression severely limits what you can say or who you can say it to; but mainly because buying and selling isn't the only thing or even the main thing that we do in our lives. An insistence on agency means recognising people's right to act politically, since democratic association is the only power most individual citizens have to stand up to powerful people who monopolise agency for their own selfish ends.

Above all, agency recognises the distinguishing ethic of social liberalism; that formal political rights are not enough and that we also need to be able to exercise those rights. Freedom must be linked to an idea of social justice and a realisation that political rights are more difficult to exploit for people lacking economic or social power. So Liberal Democrats should be talking about real, felt freedom, not just legal rights and procedures. Then we can make the idea of freedom sing, instead of sounding like a bunch of nerds.

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective

MORE VALUABLE THAN MONEY?

Measuring and promoting wellbeing is not a distraction from the economic crisis; it's more important now than ever, says Claire Tyler

I awoke this morning to an unlikely refrain. Alistair Campbell was on the radio praising David Cameron for putting happiness and wellbeing at the heart of the policy agenda.

I think we all know intuitively what wellbeing is, but there is no standard definition. There is general agreement from a growing body of research that a combination of physical, social, environmental and psychological factors influence wellbeing. Good mental and emotional health is a crucial element, but by no means the whole story.

Back in 2008, the Government Office for Science's Foresight report on mental capital and wellbeing referred to "a dynamic state, in which the individual is able to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others, and contribute to their community.

"It is enhanced when an individual is able to fulfil their personal and social goals and achieve a sense of purpose in society". I think that sums it up very nicely.

The idea has started to creep into the mainstream of public policy and political thinking. All three parties are talking about wellbeing and quality of life – albeit using their own language. It has prompted quite a deep philosophical debate about the central purpose of public policy and indeed government itself, building on the likes of Disraeli, JS Mill and John Maynard Keynes.

And I sense a greater recognition that economic growth is a means rather than an end in itself, and that 'good government' is ultimately about improving the lives and wellbeing of all our fellow citizens. But it is a very tough time to be having these sorts of ideas, and sceptics are bound to view it as a distraction from critical economic concerns over the lack of growth and jobs. This was a criticism levelled at the – I thought excellent – policy paper on 'Quality of Life' in last September's party conference debate.

In November 2010, David Cameron announced that, from April 2011, progress would be measured not just by economic growth, or our standard of living, but by our quality of life. In saying this, he recognised that some would see a distraction from the urgent economic tasks at hand and others would consider it beyond the proper realm of government – that 'nanny state' we hear about so often – and yet others would think it felt woolly and impractical.

The practical result is that the Office of National Statistics (ONS) is consulting on wellbeing measures. It said: "Some of the aspects that we know affect national wellbeing include: income and wealth; job satisfaction and economic security; ability to have a say on local and national issues; having good connections with friends and relatives; present and future conditions of the environment; crime; health; education and training; personal and cultural activities, including caring and volunteering".

In its response, the New Economics Foundation (NEF) drew the distinction between personal and national wellbeing: "*Personal* being the extent to which people experience happiness and satisfaction, and are functioning well, and *National* being the overall state of the nation in terms of environmental sustainability, social and economic factors and human wellbeing."

Findings from the first 3,000 responses indicate that some of the main themes are: children and the future; freedom; equality and fairness; health; job security (not necessarily wealth); spirituality/faith/religion; and the importance of a good quality local environment.

PROFOUND DIFFERENCES

Others have rightly pointed out that there may be profound differences in conceptual understanding of wellbeing across different cultural groups and generations. For example, NEF revealed that 16-24 year olds in the UK had the lowest levels of trust and belonging of any age group in Europe.

Wellbeing therefore depends not just on the circumstances of our lives but also on how we as individuals interpret and respond to those circumstances.

New ONS statistics have found that around 75% of adults rated their life satisfaction at seven or more out of ten. The findings were that having a partner and being in good health were positively associated with life satisfaction. Some considered this surprisingly positive given all the doom and gloom around, and it sparks the inevitable quips about the usefulness of the 'happiness index'.

But other countries consistently score above eight out of ten, and it was particularly worrying that some 8% of the population had a score very similar to countries such as Cambodia. And 27% recorded high scores for levels of anxiety.

A single national measure of wellbeing should help generate a national debate about what really matters to people. It will be relevant to government, employers, the media, producers of consumer goods and many others.

Others are calling for a wider set of indicators that local communities can use to measure themselves against other communities. Given the general thrust towards localism, this has much to commend it. Done effectively, the data collected could be of significant benefit in assessing the impact at community level of national and local policies around education, training,

health, housing and the environment, to name but a few.

What kind of evidence is already available? According to NEF, the following are some examples:

- **Income** is important, but only up to a certain level, normally significantly higher than median incomes. Beyond this level, there are sharply diminishing returns.
- Wellbeing tends to be lower in countries **with higher inequality of income and wealth**. The link between child wellbeing and income inequality is significantly stronger than the relationship between child wellbeing and absolute incomes.
- **Loss of income** is more damaging to wellbeing than a comparable gain is beneficial.
- **Unemployment** is very damaging to wellbeing, and significantly greater than the associated loss of income (while loss of income much worse than the equivalent gain is good).
- The opportunity to do **interesting, stretching work** is highly valued, as are good relationships at work.
- Wellbeing rises as **hours worked** rise, but only up to a certain point, after which it starts to drop. Most people in Europe say they would like to work fewer hours and would even accept a corresponding drop in income to achieve this.
- There is a positive association between doing some work and wellbeing among those otherwise **retired**.
- **Commuting** is associated with negative emotion and a reduction in life satisfaction.
- **Consumption decisions** do not maximise wellbeing; they are influenced by advertising, and more active forms of consumption are more conducive to wellbeing than more passive ones.
- **Walkability** of neighbourhoods and street layout are positively related to wellbeing; this relationship probably operates indirectly via benefits to social capital for residents.
- There is a positive correlation between wellbeing and **participation in the community** and **volunteering** but time spent in informal care-giving is associated with lower wellbeing.
- **Trust in key public institutions** is associated with higher life satisfaction. There is a positive relationship between child wellbeing and national spending on **family services and benefits**.

NON-MONETARY ASSETS

When asked what matters most in people's lives, individuals across nations and social classes consistently put more value on non-monetary assets than their financial situation. A survey several years ago for the Young Foundation's research on how public policy can shape people's wellbeing and resilience found that the biggest factor by far was partner and family relationships, with things such as health, a nice place to live and money coming a long way behind. Would that still hold true in 2012 I wonder?

What does all this add up to?

Improving wellbeing for all should be a key political priority and a driver to reduce inequalities. It encompasses things important both for society and individuals. While this includes a stable and thriving economy, markets alone cannot create wellbeing. We need a much broader view of success – or the good life – than can be measured in monetary terms.

We should therefore warmly welcome the government's attempts to measure people's subjective wellbeing in a meaningful way. It is a huge step forward and we must continue to argue against those who suggest this is a distraction or waste of money in the current climate. It is quite the opposite.

But we need to move rapidly from measurement to action. It is essential we reshape policy development, implementation and evaluation to take wellbeing into account. There are already some encouraging signs here. The Treasury Green Book has been updated so that new initiatives must consider the potential impact on wellbeing alongside that on growth and employment, and a Social Impact Task Force has been set up within government.

I welcome this focus on practical action. Nowhere is this more important than in family policy and the services available to support families and children. Badly-handled family breakdown or relationship conflict can have a dramatic impact on our wellbeing and particularly on children's wellbeing.

I firmly believe that, in these areas of personal and family life, we should empower people to take control of their own lives. That means equipping them with the tools, information and advice to help them take the decisions right for them. Ensuring that such independent and expert services are available is not about the nanny state telling you how to run your life, but about a responsible state that understands what is important to the quality of your life.

Nurturing emotional independence means focussing on resilience and wider personal and social skills. Evidence from the Young Foundation shows that developing resilience skills – particularly when people are in their formative years – can help us cope in crises. That's why support for families, such are parenting skills, are so important as a key public policy measure to support the early intervention agenda.

The UNICEF 2011 Child Wellbeing Report stated that British parents often feel stressed, lack the time or indeed the confidence to build a strong nurturing relationship with their children and family than do those in other countries.

The message from children was clear. Their wellbeing centred firmly on being able to spend time with a happy family, having good friends and having plenty of things to do outside the home.

That's why Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) – focussing on the critical importance of relationships – is so critical and should be part of the core national curriculum, with a strong focus on emotional wellbeing.

It is no coincidence that schools that have pioneered this sort of approach say there is a clear link to improved academic performance. It is also why I would like to see counselling and other types of emotional support available in all schools in England, as it is currently in Wales and Northern Ireland.

Claire Tyler is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords

THE HUMAN ELEMENT

Faceless and formulaic management techniques such as targets and standardisation have made public services worse. David Boyle explains why we need to rediscover human beings

People make a difference. It's common sense, if you think about it. But it is a truth that sometimes gets missed in the strange world of public service policy-making, on both sides of the Atlantic.

Education experts in the USA have been mulling over the studies carried out on President Bush's 'No Child Left Behind' programme. What they found should not have surprised anyone with an ounce of common sense, but the idea that it is individual teachers – not bonuses, targets or testing – that make the most difference to results has come as a shock to the bitterly divided education American education world.

The figures showed huge gaps between pupils when everything else was exactly the same – the same curriculum, same school, same background, but different teachers. But then most of us know perfectly well what works from our own experience. Individual teachers, and their ability to inspire and make relationships with pupils, are bound to have more effect than exhausted teachers sticking rigorously to national guidelines.

A similar argument is emerging in healthcare. There was something deeply disturbing about the report of the Care Quality Commission on the plight of older people in hospital – and it goes beyond simple humanity. These were, after all, among the most targeted, standardised and audited hospitals in history, yet half of them were still not feeding older patients properly.

If the public service ethos has been excised from so many corners of our NHS hospitals, what hope has the rest of our public services? There is an argument that this is down to spending cuts, and the extra pressure on staffing. But anecdotal evidence suggests that the worst offenders are not necessarily the most cash-strapped – and it certainly isn't happening everywhere.

That suggests that the real reason for the leaching away of the humanity of public services – and hanging on to most government call centres strongly suggest this – is precisely these same targets, standards, audits and KPIs.

The 'new public management' has treated services as if they were assembly lines, with standardised products, and that is what they became. This is as expensive as it is counter-productive. Naresh Khatri and his team of health management researchers at the University of Missouri found the most controlling hospital cultures also have the most drug-related errors.

- 21% of Year 8 pupils say they have never spoken to a teacher (Times Educational supplement survey, 2008)
- 75% of patients in one US hospital couldn't name any doctor who had treated them and, of the other quarter, 40% got the name wrong (University of Chicago Hospital survey)

Controlling management and IT systems have a great deal in common, and staff who really want to make an impact often have to break out of them to do so. Some people – whether they are doctors, probation officers or local government officials – know how to make things happen. They inspire people, and are often prepared to break rules to do so.

The nurse who bypasses the 22 pages of her A&E IT system she is supposed to go through to get someone quickly into hospital. The social worker who breaks health and safety rules to include a disabled child's healthy brother in local swimming sessions, because that is what they both need. The probation officer who builds a relationship with a client that helps them get a job.

They are not just heroes and heroines. People like that keep the wheels of public services in motion. We know that. The trouble is, once we become Whitehall policy-makers or IT consultants, a strange amnesia comes over us and we tend to forget it.

We systematise. We become prey to the idea that the real way to increase efficiency is to treat services like assembly lines where identical users are processed ever faster. We struggle to get rid of the human element as far as possible, on the grounds that it is expensive and fallible (human beings get ill, make mistakes and have funny moods).

That was why the last government spent as much as £70 billion on management and IT consultants and huge controlling IT systems. It is why six people now handle every tax return at HM Revenue & Customs when two people used to – not surprising that 7 million people have been affected by errors in their tax demands. It is why our contacts with most services involve an alienating struggle with call centres, which – when we eventually get through – find their software can't handle our particular problem.

The new coalition scrapped screeds of targets, but Whitehall seems to have been unconvinced. So the rot continues, the systems get bigger and more complex. The effective merger between the London boroughs of Hammersmith and Kensington & Chelsea (with some services from Westminster) will not make anything less faceless. Education Secretary Michael Gove is also determined to end the face-to-face careers service in schools, replacing it with the internet.

Of course human beings make mistakes. The truth, according to my new book *The Human Element*, is that they are also the only real key to success and source of genuine change. Removing them is increasingly expensive and wasteful, because our institutions are that much less effective as a result.

There are serious implications to this. We have employed people in public services for a generation because of their ability to manage systems obediently, not because they have a human flair for making things happen. Nor are most privatised services any better. Quite the reverse. Try getting a Virgin Trains supervisor to depart from the rulebook and you will see.

The vast majority of public servants and those who work for large organisations, public and private, are recruited using formulae, given formulaic training, and then abandoned on the job. Lip service may be given to their ability to make things happen and their entrepreneurial flair, but people in big organisations are usually expected to keep rules, not bend them. The fact that so many people do actually make things happen every day, especially in public services like the NHS, is simply evidence of their potential to do more.

One way forward would be to borrow from the 'Upside Down Management' rulebook of John Timpson, chairman of the key-cutting chain that bears his name – and recruit people for their personality, not their qualifications, and then train them up. Timpson has taken this idea to its logical extreme, throwing out the EPOS computers that control his staff, letting shop managers choose their own prices or allow customers to use the lavatories if they want to.

He also has notices above his tills, signed by himself, that say: "The staff in this shop have my authority to do whatever they can do give you amazing service." Imagine if we had one of those at NHS reception desks, rather than those ubiquitous notices warning that they will prosecute anyone who is abusive.

Of course, there have to be some safeguards and systems. You can't reinvent every situation from scratch. But if you drive out the human element completely, our organisations will grind to a halt and become very expensive indeed.

The good news is that these human skills are not rare. My experience of people who can make things happen is not that they are exceptional – though they are often awkward people who refuse to accept defeat – but that they are everywhere.

When I think back to all the examples of people who make things happen that I have seen – as we all have – it seems to me that situations are changed, not just by headteachers or chief officers or business leaders, or anyone with a reputation as a transformational person, but by very ordinary people in playgrounds, front rooms and front gardens.

The important thing to remember about human catalysts is that we were all born with the necessary skills. We see them put into effect around us every day, in families and neighbourhoods. We need them to bring up children, make relationships work and make any kind of living. The fact that many of us make a mess of these tasks proves nothing; most of us manage it in the end, and many of us do so spectacularly.

There are particular people with a genius at making things happen, who have managed to hone and transfer to the workplace the human skills that most of us already have. Most of us learn to live, to bring up children, to lead generally happy lives where we fall in love and make things happen all over again. This awesome individual genius is the key to the Human Revolution.

In these areas, so much does work. Children are socialised and turn out humane and imaginative. People look after their neighbours in their hundreds of thousands every day, despite the rhetoric about 'broken Britain'.

There are 'super-catalysts' everywhere, and the best way to make our organisations work is to recruit them, then train them, and – as far as possible – get out of their way. But for some reason, our leaders have become determined – at huge expense – to make sure these skills are excised from our public services.

It's time to put them back. The key question is: how do we hammer out a political programme that makes this crucial issue political, and which has some chance of making things work again.

THE TEN NEW RULES

- Rule 1: Recruit staff for their personality not their qualifications
- Rule 2: Dump the rulebooks and targets
- Rule 3: Put relationships at the heart of organisations
- Rule 4: Demerge everything
- Rule 5: Obliterate the hierarchies and empires
- Rule 6: Give people whole jobs to do
- Rule 7: Chuck out the big IT systems
- Rule 8: Give everyone the chance to feel useful
- Rule 9: Make organisations into engines of regeneration
- Rule 10: Localise everything

David Boyle is a fellow of the New Economics Foundation and the author of 'The Human Element: Ten new rules to kick-start our failing organisations' (published by Earthscan)

TUG ON THE HEARTSTRINGS

The Liberal Democrats must argue from their hearts as well as heads to have any traction in Scotland's independence referendum, says Caron Lindsay

It's been an eventful, febrile and occasionally farcical month in Scottish politics. We've attracted the attention of not just the wider UK's media but the world's as we prepare for a long debate on our constitutional future.

The stakes are high – the United Kingdom really could break up after the referendum on independence. That has obvious implications not just for Scotland, but also for the rest of the UK.

During the first period of minority government and the campaign that won an overall majority last May, the SNP adopted a 'don't scare the horses' approach to independence, barely mentioning it.

Since May, however, the SNP has talked about little else, picking fights with Westminster at every opportunity. It saddens me that, when told our legal system doesn't comply with the European Convention on Human Rights, the SNP's greatest concern was to complain that Scots had to go through the UK Supreme Court rather than straight to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

While the SNP has been ramping up the attacks on Westminster and the UK, by the New Year it had given precious little detail about what independence would mean or its exact plans for the referendum. The SNP wouldn't even say when it planned to hold the referendum.

The first issue is that the Scottish Parliament doesn't really have the powers to hold a legal referendum. The SNP's chief strategist Stephen Noon knows it, blogging that "measures to protect the poll from mischievous intervention in the courts by those with the determination (and deep enough pockets) to try to stop the people from having their say" were welcome.

The UK government could just have left the SNP to deal with all the legal challenges from the people with the deep pockets. That would have been a total waste of time and taxpayers' money, when the destiny of Scotland is something that should be decided by the people in the ballot box, not by judges in a courtroom.

Either that, or the UK government could have waited for the SNP to ask for the power to hold the referendum to be devolved. It's funny that the SNP hasn't, because it has demanded every other power under the sun. Understandably, it hasn't wanted to admit the reality of the situation, and the thought of asking Westminster for any favours would not have sat easily with the First Minister.

SUBTLETY OF AN ELEPHANT

So, an offer by the Westminster government to give the power to hold this referendum actually gets the SNP government out of a big hole. Secretary of State for Scotland Michael Moore has been working out how to do this in his own ever-reasonable style.

Unfortunately, David Cameron waded into the debate on the Andrew Marr show with all the subtlety of an elephant who'd been on the cooking sherry, after which his aides told the press that he'd force Scotland to have the referendum within 18 months.

This played into the hands of the SNP, with Deputy First Minister Nicola Sturgeon accusing him of dictatorship. Hyperbolic though that was, Cameron's intervention was only ever likely to be incendiary. I've said many times that I think that, every time he or George Osborne want to talk about Scotland, they should be locked in a cupboard until the urge passes. They have to realise that, even if they are right, they will not help the pro-UK cause.

Thankfully, Liberal Democrat ministers were there to clean up the mess. The Guardian reports that Nick Clegg made sure that the 18-month time limit was kicked into touch very quickly.

Two days after Cameron's Marr interview, Moore launched a consultation, asking Scots for their views on issues like timing, the question(s), whether it should be supervised by the Electoral Commission and who should have the vote.

While Moore was still on his feet in the Commons, Alex Salmond, in a blatant attempt to grab the headlines, went live on the television news and announced that the SNP government intended to hold the referendum in the autumn of 2014. The whole thing put me in mind of that moment in 1994 when Diana went out in an amazing dress as Charles gave his interview to Jonathan Dimbleby. Except, clearly, Salmond isn't quite as sexy.

The SNP's position is that Westminster should grant the necessary powers to hold a legal referendum, but attach no conditions. Westminster's preferred position is that there should be agreement on a number of issues from the Scottish Government.

On timing, Westminster says that business is being adversely affected by the uncertainty over our future; the SNP won't budge on its date. I suspect the autumn 2014 date will stand unless there is serious evidence of economic harm.

The SNP didn't want the Electoral Commission, a body set up by Westminster, to oversee the referendum, preferring to set up its own body. The SNP is now likely to agree to Electoral Commission supervision as long as Westminster directs it to report to the Scottish Parliament.

The SNP also wants 16 and 17-year olds to vote in the referendum. Westminster says that the franchise should be the same as for every other election. My own view is that there is a majority at Westminster in favour of votes at 16, so Westminster should just legislate for that and have done with it. However, I don't think it's feasible to have the referendum alone on a different basis to every other election. This will be more difficult to resolve.

Everyone says they are agreed that a single yes/no question on independence is the way to go. However,

there has been talk of adding a third option, for something called 'devo max'. Not yet properly defined, this basically means full fiscal autonomy for Scotland, what Liberals would call home rule. Willie Rennie's intervention in October secured an unwise answer from the SNP that, in a two-question referendum, if devo max and independence both secured over 50% of the vote, independence would win even if devo max secured almost double the vote. Experts, including the SNP's constitutional expert of choice, urged caution. Dr Matt Qvortrup recently wrote in the Times: "One does not need to be an existentialist to feel a sense of anxiety about a multi-choice referendum. Whatever you may feel about independence, such referendums are rarely a good idea."

"My main worry about a straight yes/no question was that Liberal Democrats would be lumped together with reactionary unionist parties"

Where does that leave those of us who want to see the Scottish Parliament with substantially more powers? Is there more than one way to bring about home rule and quickly?

I had initially been keen to see a second question on the referendum ballot paper but am now persuaded that there's too much potential for a disputed or unclear outcome. When emotions are running high, we can't afford to take that risk.

My main worry about a straight yes/no question was that Liberal Democrats would be lumped together with reactionary unionist parties and our distinct federalist voice would be lost. Also, would a 'no' vote set back the case for constitutional change, with Labour and Tories using it as an excuse to block further devolution?

Consideration should be given to giving the Scottish people a quick choice, in the event that independence is rejected, on devo max. Why not put legislation in place from Westminster ahead of the 2014 referendum to that effect? That would show willing and provide an option that much of Scottish civic society wants to explore.

POISONOUS LANGUAGE

A consensus on the referendum process may be developing, but we're most likely almost three years away from the actual poll. I'm interested in this stuff and already I'm fed up with all the bickering and poisonous language, predominantly from Labour and the SNP. Recently, Salmond aide and MSP Joan McAlpine described Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat leaders as "anti Scottish" for disagreeing with the SNP on the referendum process. Days later, Labour's new media adviser was forced to resign after making fun of McAlpine's comments with a well-overused 'Downfall' parody.

Come the day after the referendum, we're all going to have to get on and live together, whatever the result. There will be a winning side and a losing side. The divisions will need to be healed. That process will be much easier if we avoid corrosive language, and conduct the debate with civility and mutual respect, acknowledging each other's views, each other's right to hold them and each other's genuine love for Scotland. It'll get passionate, angry and fiery at times, but there are limits to what's acceptable and we should all make efforts not to cross the line.

With both consultations ongoing, it'll be a while before the process of the referendum is sorted out. Only then can the actual substance of the debate begin in earnest. Should Scotland separate from the UK?

First of all, we need to accept, with generosity of spirit, that a small minority of party members will want to campaign for independence. Then we must develop our case for Home Rule and campaign for it vigorously. Once Ming Campbell's Home and Community Rule Commission reports later this year, we need to work with civic society in Scotland to build the case for our vision. Our USP in this is that we want to devolve power from, as well as to, Holyrood.

We need to embrace the opportunities of this referendum. It's a great chance for us to showcase our liberal values and the sort of Scotland we want to see, independent or not. At the moment, we're doing very well at subjecting the SNP's flights of fancy about the benefits of independence to robust, evidence based analysis. The Nationalists are very good at telling us how brilliant Scotland would be if independent, with very few facts to back it up. We, on the other hand, are very good at producing lots of dry facts and figures that don't tug on anyone's heartstrings. We have to make sure our case is one that enthuses – and we can only do that if it clearly comes from our hearts as well as our heads.

Let's not just talk about the constitution, though. The SNP will want to think about nothing else, but there are 1 in 5 children living in poverty, 120,000 families across Scotland who have been waiting more than a year for housing, and young people who can't get a job at a time when 9,000 college places are being needlessly slashed. They can't afford to wait almost three years before something is done to help them.

The eyes of the world will be watching Scotland. Let's hope we rise to the challenge.

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

BEREFT OF IDEAS

The response to the banking crash needs people with ideas, not technocratic 'experts', says Trevor Smith

The continuing fall-out from the 2008 sub-prime/ banking crash unfolds relentlessly. The crisis and how to respond to it are at heart an intellectual one. As yet, no one has come up with any convincing ideas of how to remedy the situation. True, there are views in abundance but views per se only have utility when they are comments on ideas – and, there are no ideas.

That it is essentially an intellectual crisis is becoming fully recognised. It is now a dominant theme in the up-market media: The Financial Times has been running a series of articles on 'the crisis of capitalism'; successive editions of The Economist have followed suit; as have many BBC Radio 3 and Radio 4 programmes.

In parallel, there has been a revival of interest in the ideas of mid-twentieth century thinkers, such as Marshall McLuhan ("the medium is the message"), Ernst Schumacher ("small is beautiful"), the psychiatrist R.D. Lang ("the divided self"), Leopold Kohr ("the breakdown of nations"), Herbert Marcuse, C. Wright Mills and others of the 'power-elite/military-industrial complex' school. Given current concerns with sustainability, the thoughts of Ivan Illich ("disabling professions") doubtless are awaiting their exhumation.

The renaissance of these unorthodox thinkers of some 50 years ago is welcome in itself but, more significantly, it illustrates the abject condition of contemporary thought. In desperation, we look to see if any of their ideas can be pressed into service in seeking solutions to the present crisis.

Political leaders in the UK have shown an awareness of the lack of appropriate operating principles. Slogans, such as Harold Wilson's "white heat of the technical revolution" or John Major's "back to basics" were used as substitutes in lieu of anything better.

More recently, others have made more valiant attempts. Tony Blair flirted with the communitarian theorising of the American sociologist Amitai Etzioni. The current debates within the Conservative and Labour parties – those of Red Toryism and Blue Labour initiated respectively by Philip Blond and Maurice Glasman – are genuine musings as to how to address present discontents.

Meanwhile, we await a political economist who can draw from the earlier authors, develop notions of the 'big society' or 'ethical capitalism' and/or come up with new initiatives to deal with our current concerns.

In the light of the pressing problems in both the world and national economies, and in the absence of any new remedies, policy makers have had to devise other ways of coping.

A favoured option seems to be recourse to technocracy. Classical Athens, which gave us the concept of democracy, and ancient Rome, which contributed systems of law and the art of rhetoric, have fallen far from their once all-powerful imperial grandeur. Both have yielded to international pressures to appoint unelected technocrats to run Greece and Italy. There may be more countries that will take this path.

Technocracy is a very old tool of governance. Presumably, the magicians and court jesters of yore are among its forebears. Later, Napoleon Bonaparte gave it a boost with his creation of specialist *grandes écoles* to provide for an injection of expertise in policies that would aid his endeavours in the centralisation of the French state.

The UK has not escaped from the encroachments of technocracy in its body politic. In the quest for better techniques, successive governments have relied increasingly on the importation of private sector methodologies. The Fulton Report (1968) on the reform of the civil service articulated this in calling for formal management training, the encouragement of Whitehall officials being seconded into business and those from business being recruited into Whitehall in mid-career, as well as the wholesale emulation of private sector decision-making tools.

The process did not stop with the permanent executive. There were one or two attempts to recruit senior business executives, such as John Davies from the CBI, into the Commons by getting them selected for safe seats. These were not successful and were abandoned in favour of enoblement. David Young was put in the Lords by Margaret Thatcher and made a cabinet minister. New Labour extended the practice considerably. Large numbers of people with careers outside politics were parachuted into the upper house to occupy ministerial positions, mainly in junior positions, but also, as in the case of Andrew Adonis, at cabinet level. These became known as 'goats', in 'a government of all the talents'.

Tony Blair's embrace of the private sector led him to deliver annual reports of government performance akin to the annual reports provided to shareholders by business firms. He abandoned this practice after four years.

The recruitment of 'goats' has been copied by the present coalition although, to put it mildly, it had not proved an unmitigated success. With one or two exceptions, those of the Blair/Brown era were disasters so short-lived their performance could not be assessed.

The one conclusion that can be drawn is that private sector personnel and techniques are not easily transferable to politics, though the reverse seems more successful. The truth is that technocrats should only be given relatively subordinate policy roles in liberal democracies. As the old adage put it, "experts should be on tap, not on top". Technocracy, rule by experts, is anti-politics.

Trevor Smith is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords

LETTERS

KEYNES CAN WORK

Dear Liberator,

Chris Bailey's article (Liberator 350) reveals too little faith in the capacity of Keynesian economics to drag the UK economy back from the abyss of deep depression. He asserts: "Keynesian economics is not working" but then goes on to give a number of examples of how Keynesian methods have been helping – or are expected to help – our economic predicament.

If he had asserted "the conditions for Keynesian economics to operate are less propitious these days," I might have agreed with him. Compared with the 1930s, today's circumstances are more difficult in that the UK is a more open economy, financial flows are much greater and more globalised, information is more instant and, partly in consequence, markets are more febrile.

Added to which we have the pronouncements of credit rating agencies (which are given more credence than perhaps they deserve), which more often than not have a further destabilising effect.

Yes, our budget deficit at 12% is "jaw-droppingly large" and is undermining business and consumer confidence. However, this does not invalidate the Keynesian analysis or prescription; it simply defines the size of the problem. Yes, at some points there will have to be government spending cuts (or, at least, cuts in the rate of increase in government expenditure) and increases in taxation. But these can be 'afforded' when the economy is recovered and fit – and a recovery will increase tax revenues even where tax rates remain constant.

To seek to address the structural budget deficit by government spending cuts and tax rises will simply exacerbate the situation by driving the economy into depression. We should have learnt that lesson between 1928 and 1935.

Helpfully, Chris refers to Japan's lost decade of economic stagnation, but then draws precisely the wrong conclusion. Fortunately, Richard Koo, a world-recognised expert on the Japanese economy, has a very accessible article in the Real-World Economic Review.

Koo makes two very clear points. First, that "although fiscal action in Japan increased government debt by 460tn yen... the amount of GDP preserved by fiscal action was 2,000tn yen" which he refers to as "a tremendous bargain". A side-effect of this fiscal action is that Japanese unemployment over the lost decade never rose above 5.5%. Second, both in 1997 and 2001, Japanese governments engaged in "premature fiscal consolidation," which "in both cases triggered a deflationary spiral and ultimately increased the deficit".

So, do not give up on Keynesianism. It is not only the best hope we have, it is the only hope.

Cllr John Cole
Shipley

BOOMER BOOM

Dear Liberator,

Hilary Leighter (Letters, Liberator 350) just doesn't get it, does she?

The issue at the heart of politics for the baby boomer generation is not about who has done what in the past; it's about the size of the slice of cake the state gives back.

The problem is that the baby boomer generation wants to have all the cake and leave nothing for future generations. The toxic combination of deepening pension cuts, high additional marginal tax rates for graduates, and massive, deepening wealth inequality are taken for granted and generate resentment.

The Liberal Democrats' influence in this government is supposed to be about ensuring that future generations do not pay the price for the mess left in 2010. Perhaps it could get some empirical research done into what would be a fair slice of cake to give the baby boomer generation in its dotage?

Gareth Epps
Reading

THE PRICE IS WRONG

Dear Liberator,

Tim Leunig's article in Liberator 350 raises many issues. Some I agree with, some I don't, but there is one that is simply not possible, at least not without government action that Tim and most Liberals would, I suspect, abhor, and that is bringing house prices down to £75,000 for a three-bedroom terraced house by building more houses.

Of course, building significantly more houses (as we should) would bring house prices down, but £75,000 is about the cost of constructing a terraced house of this sort, including the builder's reasonable profit. That means that it is only achievable as an end price if the land is free.

Greater willingness by councils to grant planning permission and the introduction of Land Value Taxation would both help reduce land prices but they would not eliminate them, and nor should they.

Unless a landowner gets a reasonable price (admittedly, less than the exorbitant returns that they get now), they will not sell. So, unless Tim is advocating land policies more akin to those of the People's Republic of China, the level of house prices that he postulates are not achievable.

Alan Sherwell
Aylesbury

WRONG MEDICINE

Dear Liberator,

I was disappointed to read Julie Smith's article in Liberator 350, which criticised David Boyle's and my document *Really Facing the Future* (Liberator 349).

We produced this document because the Federal Policy Committee's paper *Facing the Future* failed to achieve what it was meant to do. But Julie does not address any of our actual criticisms. Instead, she suggests (a) that we misunderstood the purpose of *Facing the Future* (we didn't); and (b) that our paper is simply a personal view of what the next manifesto should say (it isn't), then proceeds to argue against this straw man.

We set out to ask a series of fundamental questions that *Facing the Future* ought to have asked but didn't. We also believe that homeopathic politics doesn't work – that diluting and diluting and diluting policy will not produce an effective cure for fundamental political ills.

A different problem arises with Hilary Leighter's letter (Liberator 350), which claims to "refute" our arguments about Baby Boomers. It does no such thing. Hilary's only argument is Baby Boomers' sense of entitlement.

Hilary asks, "Are you saying that no-one deserves any retirement benefits?" We said nothing of the sort. Instead, we challenged the party to consider what would be a more equitable arrangement given the demographic changes.

Baby Boomers' sense of entitlement, whether or not it is justified, does not alter the fact that the ratio of pensioners to workers is increasing to the point where the financial burden on younger workers will become both economically and politically unsustainable. Telling these young people that they should consider themselves lucky not to have outside toilets will not solve this problem.

Simon Titley
Lincoln

REVIEWS

The Iron Lady [film] dir Phyllida Lloyd 2011

Compared with American politics, British politics does not seem as cinematic. Winston Churchill is the only British prime minister to feature regularly in film drama, so to see any of his successors get the Hollywood treatment is unusual. John Major: The Movie? Oh yes.

But Margaret Thatcher has now received a full cinematic tribute and what better place to watch it than the eccentric Kinema in the Woods. This is an ancient and bijou wooden cinema in Woodhall Spa, in the constituency of Sir Peter Tapsell, the only remaining MP to have first entered the Commons in 1959, the same year as Thatcher.

To add to the period atmosphere, most of the audience was over 70 and the film was interrupted by a half-time intermission in which an organist rose up from beneath the floor to perform a medley of old hits. You learn something new every day and I learned that the Beatles' Hey Jude should not be attempted on a cinema organ.

Back to the film. It is dominated by Meryl Streep's central performance as Margaret Thatcher, a tour de force that deserves an Oscar. The prospect of an American actor playing an English person can bring back awful memories of Dick Van Dyke. Thankfully, such fears are unfounded. Streep avoids all the tacky Hollywood clichés of Englishness. Indeed, this is serious acting of considerable depth, going way beyond merely doing an impression of Thatcher to reveal a figure of Shakespearean tragedy.

While many of us remember Thatcher in her heyday, few know what she is actually like today, so Streep's portrayal of the present-day Thatcher must be largely based on supposition. The supposition is a pathetic widow with senile dementia, confined to her flat and reminiscing about events in her past, which are dramatised in a series of flashbacks. Such is the strength of Streep's performance that the old woman of conjecture and the younger woman of historical record are equally convincing.

But this is also the most troubling aspect of the film. We do not know how truthful is Streep's senile Thatcher, but the acting is so good that audiences are likely to take it as fact. This is a serious drama, remember, not a satirical caricature. And whatever you think of the real Mrs Thatcher, to depict a living person as a tragic and mad old bat is of questionable taste, all the more so since she is shown regularly conversing with the ghost of her dead husband Denis (played superbly by Jim Broadbent). She eventually realises Denis is an illusion but cannot get rid of him, at one point going round her flat turning on every TV, radio and kitchen appliance in a vain attempt to drown him out.

Apart from Denis, the only other characters in the film who are more than cardboard cut-outs are daughter Carol (an almost unrecognisable Olivia Colman with a blond wig, false nose and lisp), Airey Neave (Nicholas Farrell, younger looking and more debonair than the real thing) and Geoffrey Howe (a subtle study in humiliation, and it wasn't until the credits rolled that I realised it was Anthony Head, once the heartthrob of the 1980s TV commercials for Nescafé Gold Blend).

Otherwise, we get too many cameos that waste some top-drawer acting talent. John Sessions is miscast as Ted Heath, but his appearance is so brief it hardly matters. On the other hand, the casting of Richard E Grant as Michael Heseltine is inspired,

but his appearance is so brief that you want much more. One is left wondering what might have been if we had been treated to Heseltine: The Movie.

Then again, to flesh out these characters – or to bring in key people missing entirely from the film, such as Willie Whitelaw or Nigel Lawson – would have detracted from the central performance and the central story. After all, this is a human drama and not a political documentary. Yet the film demands some familiarity with British politics before 1990 and it is hard to imagine what a foreign audience or a British person under 35 will make of it.

Meanwhile, those with a clear first-hand memory of the Thatcher era will come away with a different experience according to their prejudices. Supporters of Thatcher will warm to the tale of a resolute woman from a humble background, determined to break down the barriers of a male-dominated world; a patriot determined to restore Britain's prestige with a smack of firm government; and a conviction politician with no time for flabby compromise.

Opponents of Thatcher are more likely to conclude that she always was bonkers; that she inhabited 'the zone', some sort of permanent delusional state with a pathological sense of her own destiny, perhaps a narcissistic personality disorder. Such was the strength of her conviction that she had no time for other people's advice. And the conviction politics that served her well in the Falklands War turned out to be her undoing when it came to the poll tax.

The fact that these diverse perspectives can exist simultaneously illustrates the complexity of Margaret Thatcher's personality, which Meryl Streep conveys well. Add to this the fact that audiences will possess varying knowledge of the actual history, and it means that different people will see a different film.

But whichever film you see, one cannot help being reminded of Enoch Powell's famous dictum that "All political lives, unless they are cut off in midstream at a happy juncture, end in failure, because that is the nature of politics and of human affairs." How true of Margaret Thatcher. The sudden loss of power must have come as an especially bitter blow to someone with such extreme self-belief. The continuing lack of power must be a never-ending torment.

Simon Titley

Spoilt Rotten Theodore Dalrymple Gibson Square 2011 £7.99

Theodore Dalrymple is a cultural commentator and psychiatrist, and brings these two disciplines together to examine the state of Britain today. Through a series of coruscating essays, he arrives at the conclusion that we are spoilt rotten, our children are spoilt rotten and have no future, and this rottenness has been caused by the toxic cult of sentimentality. Not your thing? It is everyone's thing, because, despite an overly forthright and frankly right-wing tone, he is (grit your teeth, Liberals) actually on to something.

Modern education and educationalist theory, the breakdown of the family, the general ignorance of most school leavers and the worship of emotion, or the displays thereof, all stem from the idea that no one should be forced to do anything, that "no child learning to write should ever be told a letter is faulty", that learning by rote, proper facts and correct grammar, are the spawn of the "hobgoblin of the schoolmarm". And because of this, we are in the state we are today – riots, unemployable school leavers (and graduates), fractured and complex families and general unhappiness caused by the desires for one's own space, me time and self-pity. The stiff upper lip had a lot going for it.

He examines the modern culture of the victim as hero, the connection between sentimentality and brutality, the bullying culture of the mob (viz. the Queen after the death of the uber-victim Diana), the distrust of those who do not display copious public displays of emotion (the McCanns), Sylvia Plath's invention of a Nazi father to suit her art and the times she lived in, and many aspects of modern culture where, as Bertrand Russell put it as early as 1950, "the oppressed were possessed of superior virtue precisely because of their experience of oppression" (think about it).

Dalrymple is witty, wicked and has the whiff of the cold North Wind of Reason about him. You may not agree with him and, indeed, you may be horrified by the sacred cows he slays, but he is worth reading because, er, um, he may be right.

Wendy Kyrle-Pope

Margin Call [film] dir JC Chandor 2011

Despite boasting stars of the calibre of Kevin Spacey and Jeremy Irons, tracking down a screening of Margin Call was difficult even in central London. We do not, perhaps, want to be reminded of the casino banking that caused the 2008 crash while still living with the consequences.

Margin Call attempts to make a thriller out of high finance and it mostly succeeds. If not edge-of-the-seat stuff, it holds the attention well. And with minimal action, a lot rests on the cast's ability to interest an audience in the arcane details of how selling bundles of worthless American mortgages brought banks to their knees.

This presents an obvious problem – the dialogue must be convincing but it must also be intelligible to the audience. Margin Call tries to pull off this trick by Irons's chairman inviting people to explain things to him in simple terms. I'm still not sure that it explained selling dodgy mortgage securities very clearly.

In brief, a risk manager is made redundant while in the middle of work on figures that show the bank owes an awful lot more than its entire market capitalisation. While being thrown out of the building, he hands a memory stick to a junior colleague telling him to look at it and "be careful".

The young ex-rocket scientist can see what his ex-boss could not – that the whole thing is unravelling. Across one night, increasingly senior figures are called in until the bank brings off a daring attempt the next day to sell these worthless packages while knowing that doing so will destroy its reputation.

Films that depend on dialogue and characters set around serious subject matter are, sadly, never going to fill multiplexes, even if they do have Spacey and Irons in them.

Mark Smulian

Lord Bonkers' Diary

It was in the 1930s that I first came across the Attenborough brothers, Dickie and David. This was through my friendship with their father F.L. Attenborough, who was then the Principal of University College Leicester. As I was Chancellor of the University of Rutland at Belvoir at the time (as indeed I am now), our paths often crossed. Though I always sensed that he was a little envious of our famed Department of Hard Sums, he was never less than a gentleman and conducted himself with great dignity after the Leicester crew was eaten by the Rutland Water Monster during the traditional race between the two universities. (That, incidentally, is why the race has taken place on the Grand Union Canal ever since – 'health and safety' is no modern invention). Of course, even in the days before the Research Impact Exercise, universities were to some extent rivals. Had 'F.L.' known that we were in the habit of kidnapping Leicester professors as they strolled down New Walk and bearing them off to Rutland to teach for us, I fear that relations between us would have been cooler; but, as Nanny once observed, what the eye does not see the heart does not grieve over.

I first met, I say, the Attenborough brothers in those days. Dickie was always adamant that he was to be an actor, though I have to confess I did not take his ambitions entirely seriously until I saw his Pinkie. Later he was to win near equal fame as a director – I thought his *Oh! What a Lovely Waugh* (a biography of the novelist) particularly well made. David, by contrast, was never happier than when hunting for fossils or collecting lizards and was eventually to turn these enthusiasms into a career, rising through the ranks of the BBC to occupy the honoured place in the life of our nation that he did until so recently.

How sad, then, to see that career end in ignominy! Why David thought that he would be able to get away with dressing up in a polar bear costume and filming himself, I cannot begin to imagine. Perhaps the desire to win the honour of being the first man to capture one of the beasts performing its legendary tap dance became too strong for him? Broadcasting has had its share of scandals, God knows – one recalls the contortionist on *Opportunity Knocks* who recruited a phalanx of supporters to sit in the front row with outsized foam hands and influence the clapometer, and also the actors dressed as sheep on *One Man and His Dog* that did for Phil Drabble – but surely poor David's fall will prove the greatest of all?

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There are too few characters in politics nowadays, so I was delighted to see Ruth Davidson chosen by the Scottish Conservatives. She is the first lesbian kick-boxer to lead a British political party since Sir Alec Douglas-Home.

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If there is a family to rival the Attenboroughs (who have always struck me as a talented version of the Dimblebys) for fame, it is the Russells. I think first, of course, of my old friend Bertrand, author (with Norman Whiteside) of *Principia Mathematica*; if I were to be asked to sum up his character in a phrase, I should say that he was "Terribly Clever". Then I think of dear Conrad: Liberal theorist, historian of the Civil War and leader of his celebrated Big Band. There were, however, other Russell brothers who were remarkable men in their own right and deserve to be celebrated. I speak of 'Hotel' Russell, who went into the catering trade, and Russell Russell, who travelled in paper bags for many years.

Yet it is the youngest Russell brother who, as Liberal Democrat MP for Colchester, has achieved the highest eminence of all; indeed, he has just been knighted. Here he is, only the other day, replying to a constituent who had written to him questioning the idea of buying a new Royal Yacht:

"Are you serious? Don't you have more important things in your life to be worried about without bothering me with this? I am not sure if you have actually read the wording of the Motion, but if you had you would have seen that I am one of the Sponsors. Thus I was one of those who was behind it being Tabled in the first place. And I am very proud that I was able to. I have pride in our nation's history and its maritime heritage. A new Royal Yacht would be in Britain's national and international interests. Are you not capable of understanding this?"

If anyone deserves a knighthood, then Bob Russell does. Or, to put it another way, if Bob Russell deserves a knighthood then anyone does.

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I was sorry to see Anthony Worrall Thompson up before the beak for shoplifting, but there are so many chefs on television these days that they cannot possibly all make a living and some will inevitably turn to crime. I have no reason to think that they will be among them, but Michel Roux Jr would have only to give people a Hard Stare and they would hand over their wallets without complaint – much as he now persuades an egg to crack and separate itself simply by looking at it – while Heston Blumenthal would be a useful chap to have in the XI if you wanted someone to mix the explosives to blow a safe.

Besides, there is nothing new in this: Fanny Craddock was believed by Scotland Yard to be the brains behind the Great Train Robbery but, despite years of surveillance, they were unable to pin it on her. Marguerite Patten, by contrast, has always struck me as a Thoroughly Good Sort.

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Some years ago, a police constable called at the Hall to tell me that there had been a complaint lodged against me. One of my motors had burst through a farmyard gate scattering the chickens, narrowly missed the farmer as the driver shouted "Get out of the way, you damned fool!" and then made its escape by ploughing through a hedge and racing across a field of newly planted wheat. I explained that it had been the First Lady Bonkers who had been driving and he went away entirely satisfied.

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