

# liberator



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- \* Sleepwalk into war with Iran – Paul Reynolds
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Cover picture - Christy Lawrance

# COMMENTARY

## PAY ATTENTION, PLEASE

The Americans have a saying: “three strikes and you’re out.” How many more body blows can the Liberal Democrats bear, after tuition fees and the Health and Social Care Bill, as a result of Nick Clegg’s inability to think politically?

Considering where he has got to, Clegg has very little political experience, a few years as an MEP and two as an MP before becoming leader.

Anyone who had fought more general elections, held a council seat, even been elected in a students’ union, would have seen that the tuition fees issue was not one of a dispassionate attempt to devise a financial support system, but a question of integrity after almost every candidate had given a personal pledge to act in a particular way.

The result was a crisis of trust in the party, which has still not been resolved.

Now it has happened again, with the health bill. There was, at least, no pledge to be broken this time, but a massive upheaval in the NHS was neither in the coalition agreement nor the Liberal Democrat manifesto and, indeed, was explicitly ruled out in the Conservative manifesto.

Whatever might be said in support of the theory of GP commissioning, anyone with a modicum of political experience would have seen that this Bill was toxic from the outset and stopped it, or at least publicly tried to do so.

Not the least of the previous Tory government’s problems was that it lost the support of the medical profession – figures who voters mostly respect were telling them the government was useless on every surgery visit. Well, the entire medical profession is alienated from this Bill.

Again, anyone with political experience would have seen that supporting increased private sector involvement in the NHS – and in particular the possibility of the takeover of parts by the spivs who run the US’s health system – was politically suicidal and would have pressed for, at most, a few pilots.

Instead, Clegg nodded the Bill through in 2010 with barely a murmur. Only when it blew up in his face at the Sheffield spring conference in 2010 did he engage with it.

Since then, he has carried out a balancing act of encouraging Liberal Democrat peers to amend it, while himself supporting the principle of the Bill without selling it to the party or the public.

The result, as our cover suggests, is another dog’s breakfast. The party is now irredeemably associated with one of the most unpopular laws since the window tax, and arguments about detailed amendments in the Lords will not shift that.

If any Liberal Democrats think there is anything to be gained politically from supporting this Bill, they are keeping remarkably quiet about it.

This has been another crisis of inattention, following tuition fees – an assumption that things will blow over and that nobody is really very upset anyway.

Wrong about the politics twice. The party cannot afford a third time.

## TIED TO STAGNATION

The Liberal Democrats certainly have something to be proud of in securing the increase in the personal tax allowance almost to the £10,000 target in the Budget, even if the price was giving in over reducing the 50p tax rate.

That reduction can at least be squarely blamed on the Tories, while the Liberal Democrats can claim with justice that, unlike their coalition partners, they are not to be primarily concerned with the welfare of millionaires.

There have, though, been justified criticisms of the Budget and the government’s wider economic policy that ought to worry the party.

While the £10,000 tax allowance is good news for low earners, it does nothing for those who do not earn enough to pay tax at all. Helping those people ought to be a concern for the party, not least for moral reasons.

Those who can work would, of course, be most effectively helped by being given jobs, and here the government is still failing.

Its economic policy (dominated, let’s stress again) by the Tories, boils down to cutting public spending and hoping that something else turns up.

The theory that the public sector is ‘crowding out’ private sector investment has been tested to destruction. If an army of entrepreneurs is just waiting for the right inducements to go out and invest to create employment, its members are unusually shy and retiring.

Under the coalition, the economy has flat-lined and the party is tied into something that is demonstrably not working.

The Social Liberal Forum’s ‘Plan C’ paper, reviewed in this issue of *Liberator*, attempts to fill this gap by arguing for the sort of economic policy the party ought to have.

It may be that the Conservative Party’s survival instincts will make it change economic course before it faces the prospect of fighting an election on a platform of having delivered five years of stagnation.

If the Liberal Democrats do not want to join them in defending a record like that, they need to say clearly what they would do differently if given the chance.

# RADICAL BULLETIN

## TOO CLEVER BY HALF

There's ineptitude, and then there is the party leadership's attempt to pull a fast one in the health debate at the spring conference in Gateshead. There's complacency, and then there is their preparation for this debate once the motion had been chosen. There's ineffectiveness, and then there is their efforts to convince the party of the merits of the Health and Social Care Bill.

In the run-up to the conference, it was obvious that supporters of the Bill would face an emergency motion on the subject, and the possibility that a motion critical of the Bill would be passed.

So some bright spark decided that they would write their own emergency motion in favour of the Bill as amended by Liberal Democrat peers, and table it in the name of Shirley Williams, the living deity who had led rebels against the Bill a year earlier.

Instead of the motion merely naming Williams as a proposer, it was actually called "Protecting our NHS: the Shirley Williams Motion."

Whoever thought up that stratagem managed, in the space of one morning, the remarkable triple of offending the conference, embarrassing Nick Clegg and demeaning Williams.

Conference delegates were clearly supposed to believe that, because someone as important and revered as Williams had their name in the motion's title, they should do as they were told and vote for it like sheep.

Instead, delegates resented being patronised. The inclusion of Williams's name in the motion's title led to objections to the Federal Conference Committee, whose chair Andrew Wiseman said that he lacked the power to alter the title of a validly submitted emergency motion.

Asked if that meant FCC would be powerless to alter the name of a valid motion called "The Nick Clegg is an Arse Motion", he admitted it would be, and would need to change the rules.

Conference representatives queuing for security checks were handed leaflets urging support for 'the Shirley Williams motion' in the emergency motion ballot. By a most remarkable coincidence, all the people handing out these fliers seemed to be party staff.

But the 'Williams' motion almost fell at the first hurdle, as the rival emergency motion (which opposed the Bill entirely) came out ahead by 270 votes to 246 in first preferences in the ballot. Only once two other motions had been eliminated, and their supporters' preferences redistributed, was the 'Williams' motion narrowly accepted for debate.

This close shave came despite a near-hysterical whips' office operation. Peers, at least, first received a peculiarly inaccurate message to the effect that the

emergency motions for debate would be chosen "in the Hall on Saturday morning at about 11.30 and will be a head count rather than a paper ballot. Please be in, or near the hall at that time and be aware that we will send you a message if we would like you to be in the hall for the vote."

This turned out to be a figment of the imagination, and the motion was duly chosen by the normal ballot. But at 10.13, 10.15, 11.30 and 11.32 that morning, peers were texted with increasingly urgent messages to vote for the 'Williams' motion and "support our colleague".

Whether Williams actually wrote the motion remains debateable, since she went on the BBC TV early evening news on 10 March to imply that she hadn't, but had merely had sight of it.

That motions ballot result ought to have alerted the leadership that something was up, but it didn't.

Meanwhile, opponents had realised that they could register disapproval of the Bill by calling a separate vote on the clause that called on Liberal Democrat peers to vote for the Bill's third reading.

FCC accepted that separate vote, possibly in revenge for having been made to look foolish over the issue of Williams's name in the motion's title.

It then turned out that the Bill's supporters had not planned for the debate. Baroness Jolly kicked off with a speech that more or less asked delegates to back it out of sympathy for peers who had worked long and hard hours on amendments, rather than to support it on its merits.

The next speech in support of the Bill was a catastrophic one from Julian Tisi, who lectured the conference on 'grown-up politics' and was heckled for his pains, a most unusual event.

Only one more inconsequential speech was made for the Bill, apart from Williams's summing-up, while a barrage of big names spoke on the other side.

Clegg was clearly embarrassed by the result, in which the clause calling for peers to support the Bill was deleted by a clear 314 to 270 votes, but then he'd done next to nothing in the 18 months since the Bill appeared to sell it to his party or anyone else.

Williams was seen as party to a shabby piece of manoeuvring that would have disgraced a school mock election.

But still, the Liberal Democrats can say that their conference voted against accepting the Bill. One day, near to the next election, Clegg may have cause to be grateful for that.

## REBELS WITH A CAUSE

While a small group of Liberal Democrat MPs were making a last ditch attempt to stop the Health and Social Care Bill, their colleagues were in a meeting at which the party leadership



attacked Andrew George, John Pugh, Adrian Sanders, David Ward and Greg Mulholland – the sponsors of the amendment concerned – and their sympathizers as wreckers in tones reminiscent of the way communists used to denounce those who deviated from the party line.

The rebels argued that they were not ‘rebellious’ since they were arguing for the position the party adopted at the Gateshead conference.

“We are not aware of anyone leaving the party as a result of our amendment,” one of the five acidly observed.

## ONE MAN, TWO GUV’NORS

Liberator is always pleased to meet peers of the realm, and those it met at the Gateshead conference all had the same curious story to impart about their leader Tom McNally.

He has piloted through the Lords the Bill to cut legal aid, and the strain seems to have got to him. When Liberal Democrat Baroness Doocey successfully moved an amendment to retain legal aid for complex welfare cases, McNally was reduced to finger jabbing outrage.

During the debate, peers listened aghast as he refused to give way to the 83-year-old Lord Avebury, the Orpington by-election victor. The exchange discourteously went:

Avebury: “Will my noble friend allow me-”

McNally: “No. I have been here for two hours-.”

Avebury: “So have I.”

McNally: “And I have heard a lot. The House has to move on.”

McNally then proceeded to insult the collected crossbenchers by telling them they would be irresponsible to oppose him. Antagonising crossbenchers, who can defeat the government if so minded, is never a bright idea.

McNally’s strictures led the crossbench peer Lord Laming to protest: “I hope that the noble Lord the minister, for whom I have the highest regard, will withdraw any suggestion that if members of the Cross-Bench group go through the lobby supporting these amendments, they are behaving irresponsibly.”

As one Liberal Democrat peer told Liberator: “His standing in the House has plummeted. How long can he last?”

McNally is both a justice minister and leader of the Liberal Democrat peers, the latter a position he held before the coalition was formed.

Even without McNally’s recent behaviour, there is discontent among peers at being led by someone who has another important job claiming his time, and at the obvious conflict of interest involved.

Suppose the party was determined to rebel over a Lords’ vote, or even that Nick Clegg for some tactical reason covertly wanted them to do so. How could McNally, as a government minister, organise that?

## TIN EARS AGAIN?

Already reeling from Nick Clegg’s disastrous handling of the tuition fee and Health Bill issues, Liberal Democrat MPs gathered to discuss the idea of regionalising public sector pay.

Those from the lowly-paid south west argued that supporting this could be the third of three catastrophes for the party.

Clegg’s response was to blame highly-paid teachers

and social workers in his Sheffield constituency for the fact that low-paid constituents can’t get on the housing ladder.

As one MP noted: “An almighty train crash is now on the cards.”

## NAME THAT SEAT

Complaints about the conduct of the selection process for the Liberal Democrat Leadership Programme continued to reach Liberator at the Gateshead conference.

The programme was designed to assist candidates from groups under-represented in parliament, but it generated objections to the final choices, and not just from disappointed applicants (RB, Liberator 351).

It needs saying that this was a new process, with no precedent to guide its chair Baroness Brinton and her colleagues. Even so, ignoring complaints based on personal grievances, Liberator was told the following, all of which seem to merit investigation by the party.

First was that applicants were asked to name the ‘dream seat’ they would like to contest, and were failed if they answered with somewhere not deemed a ‘strategic seat’. Yet the party did not have, and still does not have, any such officially sanctioned list of ‘dream seats’. If such a list was used, who compiled it, how and why?

The use of the word ‘dream’ is also questionable, since it could refer to an aspiration to fight a seat narrowly missed last time or, for example, to an aspiration that the candidate’s home seat might be one day winnable.

Some applicants claim to have been told that they were failed for lacking ‘passion’, again a difficult term to define.

There has also been a complaint that the selection processes used were neither seen nor approved by the Federal Executive, and indeed that the FE had no report on the programme between 17 January and 12 December 2011.

After attending an assessment day for the parliamentary approvals process, every candidate receives a written report of his or her overall performance, but formal feedback seems to have been lacking for the Leadership Programme, with only a generic rejection letter sent. Liberator has put these points to Baroness Brinton.

## WESTERN MOVIES

A rebellion is growing in the Liberal Democrats’ Devon and Cornwall region over its executive’s decision not to contest November’s police commissioner election.

Torbay, North Cornwall and South West Devon local parties have called a special conference to try to overturn that decision and field a candidate.

The decision not to stand was originally taken when it was thought that former Devon County Council leader Brian Greenslade wanted to stand as an independent.

Greenslade considered that idea when he thought there would be no official Tory or Labour candidates, but it now appears there will be. Also, as a prominent Liberal Democrat councillor for decades, a sudden appearance as an ‘independent’ might be less than convincing.

The rebellion against the Federal Executive’s cowardly call not to stand (Liberator 350) is growing,

with reports of Liberal Democrat candidatures being prepared in many parts of England, with a full slate talked of in Western Counties.

In *Liberator* 351, we mistakenly listed Peter Ellis as chair of Western Counties. He is in fact the new chair of the English party executive. *Liberator* named him as chair because the regional website did. It also listed Gavin Grant as chair. It turns out that neither of them are.

## **BOMB SURPRISE**

The launch meeting of Liberal Left at a Gateshead conference fringe meeting featured a speech from Professor Stephen Haseler. He was also one of several platform speakers at the preceding Social Liberal Forum fringe meeting.

Haseler stressed several times his centre-left credentials, stretching back to the formation of the SDP and frequently name-dropped Roy Jenkins.

All of which may surprise *Liberator* readers with long memories. Thirty years ago, Haseler was an SDP cold warrior of a kind that made David Owen look like a CND member by comparison. He was involved with several organisations that opposed campaigners against cruise missiles (Liberal Party policy at the time) and generally banged the drum for NATO and nukes.

It is said that you can tell a man by the company he keeps, and the introduction to Haseler's curiously-titled book *Battle for Britain – Thatcher and the New Liberals* describes him as “co-chairman of the Radical Society, founded by, amongst others, Norman Tebbit, Brian Walden, lords Chapple and Chalfont and Neville Sanderson”. For those too young to remember, Walden, Chapple, Chalfont and Sanderson were ex-Labour figures by then on journeys way to the right, indeed all the way to the Tories in Sanderson's case. Tebbit needs no introduction.

Haseler was not the only curious attendee at Liberal Left's launch. Lembit Öpik turned up, having not a year ago hitched himself to the right-wing libertarians of Liberal Vision (itself an offshoot of an even more deranged body outside the party called Progressive Vision). He startled those present by welcoming left-wing activity in the party, but his assertion that the last general election was the second worst result for the party since the Second World War suggested his grip on reality had slipped.

## **CUTTING OUT THE TONGUE**

The last time *Liberator* questioned whether Jenny Tonge's views on Israel merited the imposition of penalties by the party (*Liberator* 338), we received ill-tempered remonstrances from people associated with the Liberal Democrat Friends of Israel.

Now she has lost the whip in the Lords for refusing to apologise for her remarks at a pro-Palestinian meeting, a step that now puts her beyond the party's sanctions.

As is often the case with Tonge, her remarks were ill-judged and badly expressed, and an experienced politician ought to be able to find their way round sensitive issues, no matter how deeply held their views. But the remarks in question turn on the interpretation of a video of part of a meeting from which she was selectively reported.

Her assertion that Israel would not be there forever

in its present form has been taken by some as looking forward to its violent end. Others say she simply meant that any feasible Middle East settlement would not leave the country as it is. Others yet point out that freedom of speech should not be lightly curtailed however offensive some listeners find what is said.

While LDFoI welcomed Tonge's loss of the whip with enthusiasm, John McHugo, chair of Liberal Democrat Friends of Palestine, said: “This is a witchhunt based on trial by blog. It is also an attempt to make Jenny the story, and to detract attention from the evils of Israel's occupation.”

## **ALL TOGETHER NOW**

At the parliamentary party meeting the evening before the budget, Liberal Democrat MPs were encouraged to make a great deal of noise and wave their order papers when the Chancellor announced increases to personal income tax allowances.

A party spin doctor stated that they wanted the media to report that the Liberal Democrat benches went wild with enthusiasm at this point.

Since MPs dislike being asked to act like performing chimps, the next morning the whips sent round a message to say that, following representations from MPs, it had been decided that they should not make too big a fuss when the Chancellor made his statement. Only Sir Bob Russell was seen to break ranks and wave his order paper.

## **CLOCK TIME**

In his speech at the Gateshead conference, Nick Clegg came up with the moving image of “a friend” whose father, on becoming unemployed, still “set the alarm for the same time as he had done for his job. He got up, shaved, put on a shirt and tie and sat at the kitchen table, working to get a job.”

And who might that friend be? Step forward Richard Reeves, Clegg's adviser and speechwriter, and the originator of the little-used phrase “alarm clock Britain”.

## **BRUSH WITH FAME**

*Liberator* has instituted a new award, the Mitcham and Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet Brush, to mark the worst question submitted for any ministerial question-and-answer session at conference.

Who knows, it may in time become as coveted as the fabled Gold Toilet, awarded for the worst motion.

The inaugural winner is Simon Pike, of Newbury. For some reason, Federal Conference Committee declined to put his question to Nick Clegg: “At recent international meetings, a top UK priority was saving the leap second. Why was this ranked above issues that could create jobs and growth?”

The meetings in question turned out to be the Radiocommunication Assembly and the World Radiocommunication Conference, not obvious forums for the discussion of economic growth.

“The question is unlikely to be a high priority to most delegates. For these reasons, a written answer is probably more appropriate,” Pike admitted. Did he get one?

# A MATTER OF NUMBERS

## Body confidence campaigns are fine, but the Liberal Democrats will not win women's votes without more female candidates, says Ruth Bright

All the rhetoric about the coalition consciously pushing women back into the home can be taken with a pinch of salt, but the government's current policies for women and families are hardly likely to capture female hearts.

While the Liberal Democrat blogosphere was set alight with debates on cuts to Employment and Support Allowance, the party waved goodbye to the Health in Pregnancy grant without a whisper. The changes in childcare tax credit alone are estimated to have priced at least 30,000 women out of the workplace because the costs of paid childcare outweigh the income of paid employment.

For woman in the real world, if you are the one of the one-in-ten people aged 25-34 or of the one-in-seven of those aged 35-44 who have double caring responsibilities, it is not the party's campaign on 'body confidence' that will capture your interest but a reassurance that your toddlers' Sure Start Children's Centre will not be closed or whether your elderly mum's social care will not be downscaled to critical care needs only.

The party is fooling itself if it does not understand that the need to appeal to women voters cannot be separated from the need to make the party itself look democratically representative of the country.

We are rightly jealous of Labour's achievement in securing a 31% female parliamentary group (the Liberal Democrats currently stand at 12%). We should not forget that the real target should be 52%.

Gender balance is an area where the Liberal Democrats simply cannot use the Tories as an excuse for making insufficient progress. If anything, the small but significant number of prominent Tory women helps the government disguise its blushes about the dearth of prominent women in the Liberal Democrats.

There has been much heart-searching about the culture of the party itself and why the goods are not being delivered on gender balance. The party has 925 males and 248 females approved for parliamentary selection. Much has been made of the fact that the selected candidate figure merely reflects the number of women going into the system. Deal with the supply side (the argument goes) and all will be well – hence the leadership programme.

The quality of the women is the only issue. The argument is that training and raising confidence is the single solution. It assumes that women are not natural speakers and that, if they are taught to put together a speech with a beginning, an end, an anecdote and a three-point list, they will shine at selection meetings. There is no critique of the prejudices they might be up against. All the training in the world does not stop women being asked (in a way men are not) about their family commitments when canvassing party members for selection.

The emphasis on new candidates is understandable but should surely be complemented with more efforts to retain the women already on the approved list by addressing the issue of 'one-term-itis' among women who have received insufficient support and do not stand again.

Then there is the Stakhanovite problem. Liberal Democrat campaigning is inevitably more labour intensive than for the two main parties. Without donations from big business or the unions to pay for glossy campaigns, the Liberal Democrats depend far more on candidate visibility and 'boots on the ground'.

All candidates have to make sacrifices and work hard but they should not have to do everything in a way that makes candidacy almost incompatible with family life. It is unlikely that prospective Louise Mensches and Yvette Coopers would have been considered failures by their local parties had they respectively failed to deliver 3,000 leaflets every week.

Simon Titley in his article 'A Class Act' (*Liberator* 345) points out the strains on all candidates, not just women. There is a failure to acknowledge that women are acting rationally in assessing the structural problems of candidacy and not therefore stepping forward.

What rational woman would take on an unpaid job (in fact a job that has to be subsidised) without any maternity, carers' or sick leave? Any such terms and conditions are purely informal with a candidate's local party. It would be delightful if breastfeeding was always welcome at meetings and if childcare arrangements fell through, party members would tolerate a child colouring at the back of the room. Sadly, some anecdotal evidence suggests not.

The leadership programme is well worth a try but the party will have to find a quick cure to its obsession with local candidates for such a 'top-down' national device to succeed.

The party must bolster this with at least an insurance policy of all-women shortlists in held seats (women stood in only half of held seats last time and we can see the dire consequences). Morally and politically, the embarrassment of a party of 12% female representation is one we can no longer risk.

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Ruth Bright is a former member of the *Liberator* Collective and was Liberal Democrat candidate in Hampshire East in 2005



# CLEGG'S AVOIDABLE HEALTH DISASTER

Robert Hutchinson argues that the Health and Social Care Bill should have been strangled at birth, and that well-intentioned Lords' amendments will make little difference to the political price the Liberal Democrats will pay

Liberal Democrats went into the May 2010 election saying that the NHS often feels too complex. Over the next two years, the great majority of the 57 Liberal Democrat MPs and 90 Liberal Democrat Peers supported the passage of the ultra-complex 450-page Health and Social Care Bill until it finally became an Act.

On 24 February 2012, party president Tim Farron said on Granada TV: "The Bill has been an absolute mess... Lots of us are guilty for allowing it to get as far as it has done now. This should have been dealt with far earlier in the cycle... dropped... massively changed."

There is no shortage of analyses of what has gone right and what has gone wrong with the NHS over the last couple of decades. But it is easy to make a difficult situation worse.

There are two main overlapping views in the party about the Health and Social Care Bill. The first is that it is largely unnecessary, potentially very damaging and hugely disruptive. The majority of party members and a minority of Liberal Democrat parliamentarians seem to hold this view. The second view – apparently held by a majority of parliamentarians and a minority of party members – is that the Bill is not perfect, but is a much better and safer Bill as a result of the work of Liberal Democrats; and therefore deserves support.

The translation of legislation into increasing change will help clarify which of these views is closer to the truth. But erstwhile Liberal Democrat voters may not be so patient.

At the end of February, a YouGov poll for the Sunday Times asked: "From what you have seen or heard about them, do you support or oppose the government's NHS reforms?" Just 5% of those who voted Liberal Democrat at the 2010 general election said they supported the reforms, with 55% opposing them.

Bad legislation needs to be strangled at birth – particularly when it is not the agreed policy of one or more parties in government.

## STIFLING DEBATE

The Liberal Democrat leadership listened to the wrong advice on the Health and Social Care Bill and stifling debate on major issues is not in the interests of 'liberal' political parties.

While principle responsibility for the Health and Social Care Act lies with parliamentarians, the party as a whole is also responsible.

Tim Farron's comment above points to the first lesson that this battle on health policy holds for the junior coalition partner: when major new

legislation is proposed – particularly if it departs very considerably from what has been negotiated in the Coalition Agreement – the time to take action is on its publication. With hindsight, it is easy to say that Liberal Democrats should have strangled the Health and Social Care Bill at birth. The Bill had been foreshadowed in the Health White Paper in July 2010. When the Bill had its second reading in the House of Commons in January 2011, no Liberal Democrat voted against it, though Andrew George argued, "for it to proceed and not damage the NHS it needs further major surgery".

By the time of the Sheffield conference in March 2011, Shirley Williams was telling the Observer that she "felt very deeply that this was something that was completely misconceived". But, while a few senior party members – particularly those with NHS experience – were beginning fully to realise the politically toxic nature of the Bill, the main call at Sheffield was not for the Bill to be withdrawn. Instead, delegates voted overwhelmingly in favour of an amendment calling for radical changes to the Bill – including more democratically accountable commissioning, and an NHS based on co-operation rather than competition and which promotes quality and equity and not the market.

By the time of Andrew Lansley's statement to the House of Commons on 4 April 2011, in which he said that government will "take the opportunity of a natural break in the passage of the bill to pause, to listen and to engage with all those who want the NHS to succeed", the Grand National Amendments Steeplechase was well under way.

The process continued through the summer, autumn, winter and spring. For both Liberal Democrats and Conservatives, the potential 'loss of face' from withdrawing the Bill grew even as amendment was piled on amendment – the sum of which failed to deliver what was demanded by the Sheffield conference.

By the time of the Gateshead conference in March 2012, it seemed likely that the party leadership would have ignored almost any resolution of the party conference.

It's a matter for speculation how much more successful a 'kill the Bill' campaign in the party would have been if it had started early in 2011. What was not clear a year ago was the full extent of opposition to these reforms from staff, professional and patient groups.

There was still scope for the Bill to be withdrawn at



its second Lords reading in October 2011. The Lords is primarily a revising chamber but it is empowered to send Bills back to the Commons for a fundamental re-think. Whose advice did the Liberal Democrat leadership take? Not that of the vast number of medical professionals, who can point to a mass of research evidence to show that the longer-term consequences of increased marketisation are detrimental to the provision of safe, high-quality health and social care. Nor did they take the advice of the experienced health experts in the party. Nor did they pay attention to crossbench peer Lord Crisp, former head of the NHS, who said of the Bill in February: “I think it’s unnecessary in many ways and I think it misses the point. I think it’s confused and confusing, and I think it’s unfortunately setting the NHS back.”

Rather than take seriously the expert advice available inside and outside the party, the leadership opted for political expediency and put its faith in a group of Peers – hardworking dedicated Liberal Democrats, but with very limited experience of working in the NHS or first-hand experience of the disruption and demoralisation caused by the English disease of frequent massive re-structuring.

The question and answer session with the Liberal Democrat health team at the Gateshead conference was revealing. Shirley Williams was indignant about a dispute she was having with Polly Toynbee in which, sad to say, she clearly got the worse of the argument.

Jonathan Marks seemed to think that ‘good practice’ across the country was best generalised through legislation – very much a lawyer’s view, as though you can legislate for quality in any area of life. And Liz Barker said that the Bill was necessary to undo much of Labour’s 2006 and 2008 NHS legislation; but, of course, it wouldn’t take a 450-page Bill to do that.

## PEERS IN A BUBBLE

To many in the audience, this was a group who spent too much time in the Westminster bubble and who failed to realise that it made no sense to attempt to institute the biggest shake-up of the NHS at the same time as the biggest ever squeeze on NHS resources.

This whole episode should prompt serious re-thinking about the optimal balance between elected and appointed members of the House of Lords and how to increase the pool – and influence – of dispassionate expertise in the Upper House.

The history of motions on the NHS submitted by Charles West and other health experts in the party for debate at the Federal Conference over the last two years is unedifying, but also instructive. The detail need not detain us here.

Those with the power to do so have deliberately stifled debate. At Gateshead, during a two-day conference, just 40 minutes was allocated for debate on the NHS, currently one of the most important issues

*“Nick Clegg carries a particularly heavy responsibility. He and his team have misjudged what is at stake at every single stage”*

facing the party. An unusually uplifting 40 minutes it was too. But in a party that prides itself on building an open society “in which no-one shall be enslaved by... conformity,” it is chilling how the ‘tunnel vision’ of maintaining and sustaining a coalition government over a five-year period seems to have permeated all aspects of the party’s life.

Truly a new conformity to which many seem enslaved. If the party is to have any prospect of re-vitalising itself and attracting more people with liberal and social democratic instincts, then the tradition of full, open and honest debate needs to be rapidly restored, and the culture of cynical manipulation and spin exposed and defeated.

The more the Liberal Democrats become like the two major parties in the way that party members are treated and conferences organised, the more likely the party is to shrink back to the size and influence that the Liberal Party had in the 1950s.

Whether the understandable Liberal Democrat claim that our activism has improved the disastrous original Tory Bill will prove sufficient cover from electoral fire seems extremely unlikely.

Every day now we are losing active members and supporters. It didn’t have to be like this. Liberal Democrat parliamentarians must take principal responsibility for failing to insist that reforms to the NHS should be more gradual, more focused on the main health challenges – particularly the public health agenda – and fully in accordance with the Coalition Agreement.

Nick Clegg carries a particularly heavy responsibility. He and his team have misjudged what is at stake at every single stage – from the Health White Paper to the Gateshead conference – and have manipulated and spun in true New Labour fashion.

But party members also need to take responsibility. With somewhat better organisation, we could have secured a proper debate at Birmingham in September 2011 or made sure that the ‘Withdrawal of the Health and Social Care Bill’ emergency motion was selected for debate at Gateshead in March 2012. And, of course, political parties tend to get the leaders that they deserve.

Like the tuition fees debacle, the Health and Social Care Bill has been a spectacular own goal. We need to start kicking the other way.

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Robert Hutchison is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Winchester and one of the group that submitted the ‘Withdrawal of the Health and Social Care Bill’ motion at Gateshead

# A BAD BILL MADE BETTER

## Liberal Democrat peers' efforts have kept hospitals as a public service and blocked the march of privatisation started by Labour, says Liz Barker

To understand the political storm around the Health and Social Care Bill, one has to go back a decade. In 2002, Derek Wanless was asked by Gordon Brown to report on what was necessary to maintain the NHS as a sustainable public service. In summary, Wanless recommended:

- Increased funding from 7.7% of GDP in 2002 to 12.5% by 2022 and increased staff.
- Increased productivity, by better use of IT and greater involvement of clinical staff in service and system design.
- Greater co-operation with the private sector.
- Greater focus in health promotion.
- Investment in social care to decrease demand, especially by people with long-term conditions.

Brown immediately increased investment and Labour spent £11bn on Connecting for Health. In 2004, the GP contract was renegotiated, with the result that many out-of-hours services went to private providers. In 2005, the then health secretary Patricia Hewitt stated: "Where we mean competition, we should say so, instead of pretending contestability is something different. Yes, money will follow the patient. But why should choice, innovation, competition and financial discipline be confined to private markets?"

In 2006 and 2008, Labour passed health legislation that opened up the NHS to competition. So determined was Labour to stimulate a competitive market that it gave preferential terms to private providers – £250m to independent sector treatment centres for work that was never done.

In 2007, the Tories announced that they would set up an independent board to oversee the NHS. Since they sold it as taking politics out of the health service, bodies such as the Kings Fund and the BMA welcomed it, albeit in the latter case with the caveat that any move to a social market in healthcare would be unwanted. The idea promptly disappeared from view until it emerged in the 2011 Bill.

Prior to the last election, a Liberal Democrat policy working group, chaired by Julia Neuberger, placed its emphasis on the development of directly-elected local health boards. The intention was to move the NHS towards prevention and addressing health inequalities, and away from acute care.

We also committed the party to the abolition of strategic health authorities in a bid to return decision making, which under Labour had been increasingly centralised, down to local level. We, like all other parties, were wrestling with the fact that NHS costs are rising by approximately 5% as more people live longer and that around 30% of acute hospital admissions are avoidable.

## WOEFULLY UNDER-RESOURCED

I have no idea who was involved in drafting the White Paper or the Bill, or who was responsible for advising Nick Clegg on the policy or strategy. I can imagine that, in the early stages of government, when the deputy prime minister's office was woefully under-resourced, a presentation that set out how the Bill was designed to address issues that had been known about for over a decade would seem reasonable. Labour threw money at the NHS, this government cannot. Labour introduced competition and produced evidence that it improved patient care. So given that the coalition had agreed not to cut the NHS budget, what could go wrong?

When the Bill first saw the light of day, people like Norman Lamb and John Pugh, who know the NHS well, realised that the scale of the proposed changes and the timetable were not achievable. The medical professional organisations raised a number of issues with which readers will be familiar, as they were reflected in the motion passed at conference in Sheffield: The secretary of state to be responsible for a comprehensive health service; commissioning groups to be accountable and free from conflicts of interest; competition to be based on quality of patient outcomes, not price; no cherry-picking by the private sector; all providers to provide research and ongoing medical education and training; and Health and Wellbeing boards to have greater democratic accountability.

The Sheffield motion and the report of the NHS Future Forum set the basis on which Liberal Democrat peers approached the Bill. We set ourselves three main objectives, to:

- ensure that the secretary of state remained legally responsible for a universal, comprehensive health service, accessible to all;
- make the new commissioning structure accountable and transparent; and
- limit the application of competition law as much as possible.

In a letter to the Guardian, signed by over 40 members of our group, we stated our intention to fight for these, and other, amendments. It was a signal to the government, in particular Andrew Lansley, that the Bill in the form that it was then would not get through. Quite why Allegra Stratton of the Guardian wrote an article with headline 'Lib Dem Peers end war with Tories over health bill' remains the subject of speculation. Six months on, it is evident that this statement was inaccurate, but it did sharpen the resolve of the health team in the Lords to take control of messaging.

Via Liberal Democrat Voice and Liberal Democrat News, the team endeavoured to keep the party

informed about what it was doing. Given the number and complexity of the issues we were dealing with, this was not an easy task, but anyone who wants to assess our work during six intensive months should read <http://www.libdems.org.uk/health.aspx>

While Shirley Williams led on the responsibilities of the secretary of state, the rest of the team worked on other issues. The most important of these was competition. The debate centred on the role of Monitor, the new health sector regulator, and the status of Foundation Trusts. Lansley's original Bill made it plain that the Tories intended to build on Labour's 2006 deals with the private sector and extend the market in healthcare as far as possible. We were determined that the NHS should remain a public service, and that commissioners should be able not to put services out to tender when to do so would be in the best interests of patients. So we set about building a series of defences, which would protect the NHS from the full force of competition law.

We changed the role of Monitor from promoting competition to protecting and promoting the interests of people who use healthcare services. We also inserted a requirement for providers to co-operate in the best interests of patients. We got a commitment that Monitor will produce guidance designed to reduce legal challenges. Secondary legislation will be used to clarify that there will be no creation of new markets where competition would not improve services. We also removed the Competition Commission from oversight of Monitor.

Having sat in countless meetings, listening to competition law experts and opponents of the Bill, it became apparent that the only thing standing between the 2006 Act and a full-scale market in health care was political will.

If a government wanted to turn hospitals over to private providers, it could do so. Since we believe that hospitals should be available to all and firmly within the public sector, we put forward amendments that would prevent private healthcare companies mounting legal challenges against the NHS. One means of preventing hospitals being deemed 'undertakings' under EU law is to keep them subject to regulation by Monitor. The government had proposed that this would cease in 2016 but, because of our efforts, it will continue.

Another significant protection for hospitals is the Private Patient Income Cap. One test of whether a body is subject to competition law is how much of its income is public money. The original Bill had no cap, so we proposed an upper limit of 49% private income. At the moment, a few specialist hospitals, such as the Royal Marsden, generate private income from research and treatment of around 30%, but most trusts have private income levels of less than 5%.

Labour, and its chief mouthpiece Polly Toynbee, misrepresented 49% as a target. They also ignored the other conditions that we put in the legislation. The NHS, for the first time since 1948, will have to account for private income and demonstrate how it has been used to benefit NHS work. In addition, governors of Foundation Trusts will have to state in advance how private income will benefit their NHS work, and they will have to show that access to the NHS services will not be adversely affected. In addition, Monitor will be able to contest any proposal to increase private income

by more than 5% if it will destabilise the continuity of other NHS services. Most importantly, hospitals will remain in the public sector with the primary duty of providing NHS care.

There are those who believe that there should be no private work in the NHS. I am no advocate of private medicine but, if it does exist, I would prefer that the profits go to the NHS rather than into the pockets of private healthcare companies.

## RETOXIFY THE TORIES

All of this took place against the backdrop of a Labour campaign, which was simple and relentless. By simply denying the record of their government, they saw their chance to retoxify the Tories on the NHS and to take a step towards their main goal – annihilating us. On paper, the Labour campaign in the Lords was about the Bill; on Twitter, it was about us. (If you are not on Twitter, don't worry, it was repeated word for word in the Guardian). While we struggled to explain difficult legal issues, Labour just repeated the mantra 'Kill the Bill'.

Labour was abetted by David Owen. Anyone who thinks that Owen deserves a medal for defending Freedom of Information should read the article in the Telegraph of 24 January. Owen's e-mails to the Labour front bench set out how the NHS can be used as a dividing line between Labour, the Tories and us. He sets out how the Bill can be used to force a vote of no confidence in 2013, thereby returning a Labour government. We knew that any risk register worth its salt would contain worst case scenarios. Nevertheless, Lib Dem peers, especially Shirley, urged the government to speed up its response to the Information Commissioner to try to get the register published. In the end, so blatant were Owen's motives that even Liberal Democrat peers who voted against the Bill opposed Labour's cynical manoeuvring.

I have been in parliament for 12 years and I cannot remember any health Bill that the BMA and the Royal Colleges have not actively engaged with, until now. For six months, this Bill was scrutinised more than any other, and the professional organisations were not involved. Many of the significant changes came late, during report stage, so many of the polls in which members of those bodies voted were about earlier versions of the Bill. When we talked to health professionals, many did not know what was in the legislation, and it became a magnet for unrelated concerns such as pensions.

Now the Bill has passed, the government needs to consider who should oversee its implementation. Liberal Democrat parliamentarians need to scrutinise the secondary legislation like hawks. As a party, nationally and locally, we need to ensure that commissioners do not use competition when it is not necessary. We need to support Health and Well Being Boards and HealthWatch, working with GPs, to improve services for patients. We need to say, over and over again, that we kept hospitals as a public service, so that the NHS will be better for everyone.

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



# SLEEPWALKING INTO WAR

## UK participation in an attack on Iran would lead to a bigger bloodbath than did the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and tear the coalition apart, says Paul Reynolds

There are mixed and often confusing messages emanating from the British and American governments on the subject of Iran.

Is Iran about to make a nuclear bomb, deliverable by missile to Israel and Europe? Is Iran intent on 'wiping Israel off the map'? If Iran had a deliverable nuclear weapon, would it commit suicide by striking Israel or Saudi Arabia out of religious fervour? Will Israel strike first, dragging the US and UK into a war in the midst of the 2012 US elections?

By contrast, why have US senior security and military officials, such as defence secretary Leon Panetta, emphasised so strongly that Iran does not have a nuclear weapon, and that the evidence indicates that Iran has not decided to build one, warning Israel not to attack? How does this square with the huge, quiet, US and UK military build-up around Iran?

Not only is it hard to sift fact from spin, but the waters are muddied by briefings to politicians in the UK – that the *real* aim is pressure on Iran (military and sanctions-related) in order to force it to negotiate and accept measures designed to ensure it does not make (and implement) a decision to build a deliverable nuclear weapon in the future. This is the briefing given to Liberal Democrat ministers in the UK, and the reason why they seem to be supporting sanctions and war with Iran – and indeed why they are at pains to point out that Iran and Iraq are different. Are they being duped?

The answer is probably 'yes'. In the 1970s, the US government helped the Shah of Iran develop nuclear power and nuclear research facilities. This was interrupted by the Islamic revolution in 1979, which initially had a good measure of Western support. In 1982, Western allies began to claim that Iran was building a nuclear weapon, predicting that it would have a weapon by 1984. In 1984, Jane's Defence Weekly boldly stated that Iran was weaponising its nuclear capability and would have a deliverable weapon by 1986.

### ACCUSATIONS

Every few years, the message has been the same – the last wave of 'two-years-away-from-a-bomb' accusations came in 2009, despite a US intelligence assessment in 2007 stating that Iran abandoned its initial weaponisation research in 2003. What might seem strange to informed readers is that the IAEA report of 8 November 2011 (which precipitated the latest round of accusations and warmongering) said the same thing as the 2007 assessment, despite all the spin to the contrary.

This 2011 IAEA report did refer to additional information suggesting that Iran may have concealed some facilities, and may have tested nuclear weapon triggers at a (non-nuclear) missile development site at

Parchin. However, this information was not regarded as credible by US intelligence agencies and technical advisers – the source of this information allegedly being the Israeli government via a mysterious laptop that the IAEA was not allowed to analyse.

However, the spin has continued. One could easily believe that Iran was trying to conceal nuclear weapon development at Parchin, given the reports that IAEA inspectors were 'refused' a visit to the site in February 2012, following satellite photos allegedly showing suspicious activity, and then showing a clean up at the site 'after access was granted'.

Contrary to the impression given in news reports, the IAEA had visited this site many times, and declared it 'non-nuclear', but it *is* the development site for Iran's conventional ballistic missile programme. Many might suspect that this is the underlying reason for the accusations, especially given the previous accusations of nuclear trigger testing at this site. IAEA inspectors did not demand immediate access to Parchin in their February 2012 visit, since they had given no notice of this request. The reported 'visit refusal' story was therefore mere spin.

A similar pro-war narrative about Iran's uranium enrichment (to 20%) has been spun. Obama's director of national intelligence (DNI) stated that uranium enriched at this level has *both* civil and military applications (enrichment past 90% is needed for a weapon). News reports, however, portrayed this only as a step towards a bomb. William Hague parroted the pro-war spin by declaring that there is 'no plausible civilian use' for Iran's 20% enrichment, in contradiction to the US's DNI.

So if the White House and Obama's security and military chiefs don't want war, and don't believe that Iran has even an intention of developing a weapon, who is behind the spin, and why is the UK going along with it?

This is largely because post-Islamic-revolution Iran is seen as a threat by Israel and pro-Western Gulf states in the region – and not subject to 'containment' as Egypt, Syria and Libya used to be.

More recently, however, pro-Bush parts of the US security establishment have found common cause with the Israeli prime minister and defence minister and the small group of Likud ministers who support their pro-war stance (much of the cabinet and security chiefs in Israel are against a war). One result is that the powerful America Israel Public Affairs Committee and similar pro-Israel lobby groups in the US have swung firmly behind the drive towards war with Iran.

In Washington, arguments for war behind the scenes also point to Iran's strengthened position following the inconclusive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – suggesting the nuclear weapons issue may be a pretext.

One key aim for all three campaigns is to ensure Obama is not re-elected.

Trans-Atlantic links – military, diplomatic and political – have resulted in this Washington battle being reflected in the UK scene.

Cameron's new declaration in Washington that an Israeli attack on Iran is "not justified" suggests a shift towards the Obama-Panetta position.

On the other hand, his repetition of the claim that Iran wants to "wipe Israel off the map" (a gratuitous mistranslation from a speech by President Ahmedinejad) suggests that Obama hasn't won yet.

Further support for the view that the pro-war groups in the US government system have the upper hand is the military build-up, in which the UK has participated. The US has stationed thousands of troops on the Yemeni island of Socotra, the Omani island of Masirah, Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, Kuwait and in Afghanistan near the Iranian border. The UK has four warships off the Iranian coast.

Meanwhile, the Israelis still threaten the US with a unilateral attack on Iran, which would start a major war involving the US and UK, and give the Republicans a big stick with which to beat Obama during the US election campaign.

Alongside this, the pro-war groups in the US have been successful in persuading Congress to impose blockade-type unilateral (non-UN) sanctions on Iran, which kick in on 1 July this year, leaving Obama since to save face with a 'sanctions will avoid war' narrative. The UK in turn persuaded the EU to follow suit; another victory for pro-war groups in the US.

## WHO WILL PREVAIL

Who will prevail in this Washington battle will determine whether the world has another major war based on 'unproven WMD accusations' – with a much larger loss of life than Iraq and Afghanistan combined.

One can easily see how Liberal Democrat ministers in the UK will increasingly struggle to argue convincingly that Iraq and Iran are very different situations.

If Obama and his team prevail, on the other hand, we will see new negotiations, and hopefully the prospect of pro-democracy reforms in Iran. Following his recent 'roasting' in the Iranian parliament, and criticisms from Supreme Leader Khamanei, it also looks like President Ahmadinejad's chances of winning re-election are fading.

However, the battles in Washington continue and there is much at stake, not only Obama's re-election but also the 'global war on terror', which has underpinned a rapid acceleration in US military and security spending across the planet, and resulted in the proliferation of new institutions. In the midst of this high-stakes tug o' war, the effect on UK politics is unlikely to feature prominently.

However, it will have dramatic effects on the UK.

***“There probably is no credible option to remain as Liberal Democrat ministers and ignore the protests of the party, especially since the war would be illegal”***

While the chances of an attack on Iran by the US, Israel or both are hard to predict, UK involvement in such a war, if it happens, is almost certain. UK involvement in the military build up assures us of that.

Advocates in the UK of an attack on Iran promote it as a 'surgical strike' affecting only a few military and nuclear sites. This is a deceit, for two reasons.

First, to complete

such an exercise, a massive attack on Iran's air and naval defences will be necessary. Second, the Iranian theocratic dictatorship remains under threat internally and, if it did not respond, the regime would almost certainly not last long. It would have to be able to show at least a partial victory – meaning an attack, among others, on UK naval assets and UK forces on the ground in the region.

Under such circumstances, the anti-war voices in the UK would be very loud indeed after Iraq and Afghanistan, and now in a recession. Vocal amongst them would be Liberal Democrat activists. Such a war would bring the anti-war Western intelligence consensus and the technical lack of justification into the spotlight.

If Liberal Democrat ministers continued with their assent to the coalition's position, in the event of war, it would become very difficult for them to retain their jobs. Attempts could be made to 'recall' them as MPs.

Under pressure from their own party, there would be three main options for Liberal Democrat ministers. To quit their jobs, resulting probably in a general election. To dissent from the Conservatives' position, which would also probably result in a general election. Or sufficient numbers could resign the party whip and become independents in order to continue to serve in the coalition and support the war effort. There probably is no credible option to remain as Liberal Democrat ministers and ignore the protests of the party, especially since the war would be illegal.

In war, things change. One thing that could change is that the Sun and Daily Mail could persuade enough voters that supporting the war is in the UK interest ('Iran will bomb Norfolk' etc.). The Tories might, at a push, win a general election on this basis. But the effect on the Liberal Democrats would be messy and existential.

Liberal Democrat ministers may thus need to think about the effect of their Iran war acquiescence on the party, and even about their vulnerability to the processes of the international legal system. Just hoping the war will not happen is not enough.

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Professor Paul Reynolds was chief political adviser in southern Iraq and an adviser to the British government and ISAF/NATO in Afghanistan. He has been a member of Liberal Democrat policy reviews on international development and the UK domestic economy

# THE PRESIDENT NOBODY REALLY WANTS

Mitt Romney is disliked by his party's keenest supporters and has sought to appease the far right, but he could be an unpredictable presence if he makes the White House, says Dennis Graf

This is proving to be one of the most entertaining political seasons in years and it is not primarily because of Barack Obama and the Democratic Party. They are a predictable centrist coalition. Indeed, according to his opponents on both the right and the left, many of Obama's policies are not all that much different than those of Bill Clinton or even, at times, of George W Bush.

The Republican opposition is providing extraordinary political excitement this year. Its leading candidate and probable nominee is Mitt Romney, a good-looking man who could well be an actor playing the president in a television series.

Everyone believes that the main concern of the voters this year is the economy. Unemployment is still high, improvements are real but slow, and there is widespread frustration and anxiety. The symbol of the economy for most people is the price of a gallon of gas and this is inching upwards. World supply and demand determine oil prices, but most people blame the president, just as they did for the BP oil spill.

The 'sleeper' issues might well be last year's Republican votes to weaken social security and to kill the present Medicare system (a universal single payer insurance coverage for those over 65).

These programmes are wildly popular and needed by a large and growing number of people. Obama's health care law, originally proposed by Republicans and actually put into effect on a small scale by Romney, does not have wide public support, even among those who will be helped by it. The Republicans promise to kill Obamacare and they have nothing to replace it, other than cutting taxes. In any case, the US Supreme Court will be deciding the constitutionality of the health care bill and again, as in *Bush v Gore*, one man, the swing vote, will probably decide the kind of health care Americans will have.

Romney has been running for the presidency for nearly ten years and, if the Republicans follow tradition, this year is now his turn. On paper, Mitt is the ideal candidate. He is the establishment choice, has the right credentials and has a vast personal fortune gained through skilful financial manipulation. Romney also has the strong support of most of America's richest people. He has an elegant, good-looking family with five sons who could well be models for Ralph Lauren. Mitt is trying to appear middle class but the fit of his jeans and plaid shirts suggests the advice of a Savile Row tailor.

Romney is clearly a bright and able man with advanced Harvard degrees in both business and law,

but he's an unusually clumsy candidate. His only governmental background was one term as governor of Massachusetts, our most liberal state. He has no real experience on the national level and much of the public is convinced that this is an advantage. When Romney later ran against Ted Kennedy for the Senate, he lost, but he lost as a liberal, and this year he has had to portray himself as a far-right conservative, something that doesn't really fool the Christian base.

## VISCERAL HATRED

Unfortunately, Romney is also a man without a modicum of charisma and, though he has not been subject to the kind of visceral hatred that's been directed at Obama, most people don't really like him. His reputation among dog lovers was not improved by the story, told by one of his sons, of the Romney family making a 12-hour trip to Canada with Seamus, their Irish Setter, in a cage strapped to the top of the car (see: [www.dogsagainstromney.com](http://www.dogsagainstromney.com)).

Super Tuesday this year was on 6 March and the Republican establishment hoped that Romney would 'seal the deal'. On that day, there were nearly a dozen contests in various states. Romney won states that he had been expected to win. In one important state, Virginia, he was essentially unopposed. He won Ohio, another major state, by an ultra-thin margin and this only after spending vast sums of money tearing down his major opponent. Ohio is a large industrial state, a 'swing' state, a heavily contested state that both parties believe is crucial in winning the election.

A week later, there were contests in two Southern states, Alabama and Mississippi. Romney lost both of these, coming in third.

Rick 'do not Google his name' Santorum, a former senator from Pennsylvania who was tossed out of office a few years ago by a very large margin, ended up essentially tied with Romney in Ohio. Santorum also won Tennessee, one of the states of the old Confederacy, as well as Oklahoma, one of the most conservative. The present-day Republican Party is based in the South and there Romney is weak. Romney has a major disadvantage: he has held prominent posts in the Mormon religion, an offshoot of Christianity, which is intensely disliked by many Christian fundamentalists. This dislike is something not to be publicly discussed: the media have tended to avoid the subject altogether.

In spite of these signs of weakness, it is still hard to imagine anyone other than Romney getting the eventual nomination. The Republicans have not had



an open or 'brokered' convention for several generations and, since Romney has the backing of the establishment, the greatest number of delegates, the core of the business community and almost unlimited money, he's almost assured the nomination.

In the 'Citizens United' case, the Supreme Court ruled that private individuals and corporations could essentially spend as much money as they liked in campaigns. Romney has benefited from this ruling and he has used the money to buy a great amount of negative advertising, 'carpet bombing' as his opponents call it. He's been willing and able to spend millions of dollars to crush the opposition and destroy reputations. Romney's campaign has been caught repeatedly in a pattern of lies. Americans say that they hate negative advertising, but it is effective. How such a deeply religious man as Romney would be willing to resort to these tactics is unknown.

There were originally a large number of challengers to Romney. All have had their moment of strength and all, except for the last remaining non-Romney, Rick Santorum, have enjoyed a few weeks of public infatuation and then vanished from the stage, almost in the manner of an Agatha Christie mystery.

Most people believe that recent primaries, especially Super Tuesday, changed very little. Romney is on the path to the nomination and, if and when he receives it, he will be a damaged and bruised candidate. However, even such a weakened candidate might be able to beat Obama, especially if the timid economic recovery stalls.

In America, a majority of white men vote Republican and white women vote Democratic. This year, the Republicans have enraged many women in their attempt to placate the far right base. They have also alienated many Hispanic voters, a major ethnic group that is growing each year.

Romney has had some very good luck. His opponents have seemed ludicrous and shallow, given to saying strange things. Among them was Donald Trump, a real estate and casino magnate and host of a popular television reality show. Rick Perry, governor of Texas, vanished after a very public memory lapse. Herman Cain, a black preacher and former food industry executive, dropped out after a sex scandal. All of the other candidates have divided the anti-Romney vote, leaving him the strongest contender.

At the moment, Romney is left with three opponents: Newt Gingrich, a much married recent Roman Catholic convert and the disgraced one-time head of the House of Representatives; Congressman Ron Paul, an elderly gynaecologist and a political libertarian who wants to dismantle the governmental social programmes as well as the Federal Reserve banking system and put us back on the gold standard; and Mitt's primary challenger Rick Santorum, an ultra-conservative Roman Catholic layman, an opponent of birth control, state-sponsored public education and the theory of global climate change.

Santorum is a man who sometimes seems far to

***“Romney’s campaign has been caught repeatedly in a pattern of lies. Americans say that they hate negative advertising, but it is effective”***

the right of the Pope. In spite of these flawed opponents, Romney does not have an easy path to the coming convention in Tampa, Florida. It should be interesting. Florida in July has a climate comparable to that of Calcutta or the Congo.

Romney is a very private and mysterious man. No one seems to know what he really believes. In

Massachusetts politics, he ran on the far left of his party but he now is running as a man on the far right. His public image is not one of authenticity.

Mitt's father in 1968 ran for President and lost to Richard Nixon. Like his son, he was also a very successful businessman and a liberal governor.

The Romneys have been Mormons for many generations and young Mitt showed leadership in his church. He spent part of his youth as a missionary in the 16th arrondissement of Paris, clearly one of the more desirable foreign postings. Mitt found his quarters a bit primitive and scruffy. He speaks French, usually the kiss of death in US politics (Spanish is always a big advantage, though).

Romney says little about his religious background. Mormons, as a group, do not have a good image in the US. Certainly they're known as strong family people, hard working, good in business, rather shrewd, but many also find them secretive, 'cultish', clannish and evasive. A bit of trivia: the greatest concentration of Mormons is in states that have vast expanses of desert.

The strengths that Romney brings to the race are difficult for him to acknowledge. His remarkable success in finance and the wealth it has brought him have only made him seem to be out of touch. His impressive experience running the Olympics is criticised as taking government handouts. The Massachusetts medical insurance system, the foundation of Obamacare, was an impressive accomplishment, which he has had to deny and denigrate. He now repudiates his original toleration of gay rights and access to abortion. His real strength is in the polls, which indicate that he is the only Republican candidate with a good chance of winning the election next November.

It is not likely, though it is certainly possible, that Romney will not have enough delegates when he arrives at the convention. If he is not able to entice any others, a 'brokered' or open convention might ensue. This has not happened for many years and the nominee might be severely weakened in the general election. However, far right Republicans might see this as a way of cleansing the party of centrists.

Some Democrats, and many Republicans, suspect that Romney might be a closet liberal. Some believe that he has always been a closet conservative. Others believe that he has no really deep-seated political beliefs and that a Romney Presidency might be impossible to predict.

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Dennis Graf is Liberator's American correspondent

# THERE IS A PLAN C

## Plan A and B for the economy have failed, but the Social Liberal Forum has developed a Plan C. Bill le Breton takes a look

We had walked beside the Clyde into the East End of Glasgow, imagining the place a hundred years before, unhealthy and overcrowded, bustling with activity, full of people and horses, warehouses and smoke.

Then we had come across a huge expansive of common, The Green, and found ourselves looking at a large red brick building with a great palm house extending from it filled with yet more greenery.

It is called the 'People's Palace and Winter Gardens'. That ordinary Tuesday, the place was packed and vibrant with city folk of all ages. Inside we found a plaque celebrating the building's opening in 1898 with the words "I declare the building open to the people for ever and ever." And who was the Victorian pledging this guarantee? Was it some member of that vast British royal family, Herself perhaps?

No, it was Rosebery, the Liberal prime minister, who might not be high on your list of celebrated social liberals but who, although an imperialist, was patently if understatedly committed like all nineteenth-century Liberals to social reform; social Liberals – even before New Liberalism – and not economic liberals as many would now have you believe.

If you are more than a little uneasy about the coalition's economic policy, with its witchdoctor-like adherence to that strange Juju potion: 'expansionary fiscal contraction', if you think that deficit reduction should take place over a longer timescale, if you think that the bond vigilantes' valuations are low, not because of their confidence in the coalition's economic policy but because of their lack of expectation for the growth prospects of our country, if you are perturbed by the way your nineteenth-century political heritage has been hijacked not by Thatcherites but by people you elected to lead your party and in particular distorted by our two members of the almighty Quad into some manic libertarian crusade, if you want instead a strong connection to the New Liberalism that was reaching out to the Liberal Party at the very time Rosebery was opening the People's Palace, if you agree with the sentiments of LT Hobhouse that "The function of the State is to secure the conditions upon which its citizens are able to win, by their own effort, all that is necessary to a full civic efficiency" and that "it is for the State to take care that the economic conditions are such that the normal man (and woman) who is not defective in mind and body or will can by useful labour feed, house and clothe (themselves) and (their) family", if you know for certain that there is an alternative and you want someone with specialist knowledge to articulate it in all its detail and complexity, if all this speaks to you, then, you need to read *Plan C – social liberal approaches to a fair, sustainable economy* by the excellent Prateek Buch with a surprisingly good forward by that well-known social liberal, Will Hutton, and to forgive me for this Victorianly long paragraph that seeks only to convince you that it is very worth

you doing so.

Other reviewers have already set out Prateek's timely and valuable contribution with its signposts to and sketches of practical initiatives in pursuit of innovation, fair finance and an economy more resilient to shocks and waves of change. But to me, the great service he has done for us is to define with the social scientist's rigour most of the essential building blocks of a social liberalism true to the principles of that New Liberalism developed when the economy was in a similarly parlous state.

Prateek rightly diagnoses a twin crisis with a common core – "our economic and political maladies are joined by the want of social justice and of fairness, neither of which can be resolved without embedding these principles anew in the institutions of capitalism and of democracy".

To build such a movement for reform, you need vision and leadership and the powers of communication and connection of an FD Roosevelt, and Prateek urges us to base our 'narrative' on "the values of fairness and social justice, paired with a vision of an economic settlement that enhances the capabilities of all to live fulfilling lives".

But to hone this narrative, we also need to know precisely what we are aiming at and what our objectives are. This essential precision is contained in his 35-page pamphlet published by the Social Liberal Forum – a network that the author informs us exists "to promote social justice and actively narrow gaps in power and opportunity between rich and poor".

In an echo of Hobhouse, Prateek defines the task of an 'empowering state' as paying "attention to vulnerability, inequality and obstacles to self-fulfilment", with the aim of delivering "prosperity for all during times of plenty or fairness in times of austerity".

### GENUINELY PROGRESSIVE

"We need a genuinely progressive economic settlement, based on sound public finances, that supports rather than undermines the generation of sustainable and socially just prosperity," he says, defining sustainable prosperity as "socially just economic progress that benefits all in a manner that protects resources for future generations".

His central thesis is that lasting prosperity "stems from innovation and co-production between the public and private realms" and supports the creation of an innovative ecosystem. "Our goal is to inspire economic dynamism for the current era, as much by reviving Keynesian 'animal spirits' as through detail policy."

But here's the rub. I believe the present global economic malaise is best characterised by a remark of Will Rogers back in the 1930s. "I am more concerned with the return of my money than with the return on my money."

This is a paralysing form of risk aversion, especially

when bankers are being offered low risk returns for keeping their cash locked and sterilised away in central banks. And no amount of supply side sharpening or reductions to the size of the state will change that mentality – in fact it will further entrench it.

At this point in economic history, innovation, investment and the quest for renewed risk-taking depends on the state, as the agency of common purpose, enabling and underpinning the commitment to adventure which in better times motivates the investor in the new.

At this stage, the private sector needs patient long-term finance that can only come when the risk is shared with the state acting as partner and enabler – “investment in capital-intensive areas of the economy where returns are uncertain but potentially transformative and/or able to strengthen public goods.”

## GOOD BANKING

Prateek sketches a view of Good Banking and of financial services that “provide the capital investment and credit required by productive business, and to help spread the risk inherent in taking on business activity, in a manner consistent with an environmentally and socially sustainable economy.” He urges less dependency on debt to finance investment and more on equity finance.

I have only one issue. Prateek appears satisfied that, as the financial crisis broke and spilled over into a general economic crisis, the monetary policy from the Bank of England was loosened sufficiently.

The Bank of England in fact took six months from the collapse of Lehman Brothers to reduce its lending rate to 0.5%, and even £300bn of Quantitative Easing does not necessarily signify that monetary policy has been loose enough in the circumstances.

The unelected and unaccountable central bankers across the world ensured that a recession that could have been as mild as that which took place when the dotcom boom burst instead became the Great Recession. And they are still undermining all but a feeble recovery.

A helpful chart on page 13 of the booklet, put together by Jonathan Portes of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, shows that the ongoing recovery from the deepest recession in over seventy years has taken longer than any previous downturn.

Prateek agrees that looking at nominal gross domestic product (NGDP) is much more useful than concentrating on real gross domestic product, but he fails to move to the obvious conclusion from the plummet in NGDP and its subsequent stagnation after a slight recovery in 2010: restrictive monetary policy was the prime cause of the deep recession and it remains the most significant factor restraining recovery.

The consequence is more and longer unemployment with its devastating personal and social consequences,

*“The unelected and unaccountable central bankers are still undermining all but a feeble recovery”*

and its waste of capacity, human and productive. But there are two further consequences. It strengthens the arm, not of those who advocate the policies put forward in this pamphlet, but of those who cry for more cuts, for greater reductions in the size and scope of the state.

Paul Mason, of the BBC’s Newsnight programme, is already

warming up his audience for a huge round of privatisations (post 2015?) and in recent days spoke alarmingly of the UK “going broke by 2050” unless it drastically reduces its expenditure commitments. In building such hysteria, he is summoning a tidal wave to sweep aside the alternative prescriptions of social liberals, however well-founded.

But Mason is only voicing the concerns that must be dominating Bank of England policy, which in turn is making such prophecy self-fulfilling with its attachment to anaemic recovery.

In no other sphere of public policy is so much power given to the unelected and unaccountable. A government that rightly refuses to give power over its fiscal policy to unelected bureaucrats in Europe is happy to see the even more crucial monetary policy gifted to a handful of economists on the Bank of England’s Monetary Policy Committee. Madness.

Prateek’s starting point that, “We face a twin crisis with a common core – our economic and political maladies are joined by the want of social justice and of fairness”, surely requires us first and foremost to do what we did in the Great Depression and renationalise the Bank of England.

I hope a future SLF pamphlet addresses this issue and evolves a Liberal Democrat monetary policy in the service of the reform agenda. In the meantime, thanks to Prateek and this first pamphlet, we can assert confidently, “There is an Alternative”.

One day, it will again be possible for a Liberal Democrat prime minister, following the true and reclaimed Liberal tradition, to open some significant piece of public/private infrastructure with the avowal that, “I declare this facility open to the people for ever and ever.”

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

‘Plan C – social liberal approaches to a fair, sustainable economy’ is available via: <http://socialliberal.net/>



# SALMOND FISHING

The pro-union case in Scotland is already in danger because other parties have no idea how to take on the SNP, says Peter Arnold

This is a wake-up call for Liberal Democrats. As things stand at the minute, the SNP has already won the campaign for the independence referendum in Scotland. It seized the initiative on this issue years ago, and it has never lost it. The response of those who believe Scotland will be better off staying in the UK has been too little and too late.

Alex Salmond's strategy is based on a simple proposition: membership of the UK has held back Scotland's development, and only a fully independent country can realise the aspirations of its people. This proposition, designed for public consumption, is of course very different from the real reason for the SNP's insistence on holding the referendum on independence in 2014. That insistence has nothing to do with any legal or practical issues, whatever the SNP may claim.

The year 2014 is the 700th anniversary of the battle of Bannockburn. The harsh truth is that Salmond's real appeal to the Scottish people will be to ask them to inflict a defeat on the English who dominate the UK, which will be as decisive and as overwhelmingly humiliating as the slaughter in 1314.

It is an appeal to emotion, an emotion based on hatred of 'the owld enemy'. It is an almost unstoppable appeal because the majority of Scots voters are likely to back it, despite the many other divisions in the country along racial, sectarian and linguistic lines. Defeating the English unites the Scots like no other issue.

The SNP has reached this strong position in Scotland because its opponents have fatally underestimated its determination.

## FAILURE OF LEADERSHIP

The weakness of the pro-union campaign is a simple failure of leadership. No-one has emerged with the same level of political skills that Alex Salmond possesses. He is the dominant personality of Scottish politics. Who has ever heard, or can recall the names, of any of his opponents? He has a simple message. His opponents have none. He has a clear vision for Scotland. His opponents have none. He has welded together an effective and successful political party that is making the running on every significant policy issue in Scotland. His opponents are divided on just about every policy issue, and they have no agreed response to the SNP's determination to break-up the UK.

The fundamental question facing the pro-union camp, therefore, is simple: "Who is going to assume the undisputed leadership of the campaign to keep Scotland in the UK?"

There is only one way to defeat the SNP, and that is by disrupting its strategy. That strategy is based on the fact that its opponents are hopelessly divided. The Tories, as always, are in favour of the status quo. They

are terrified of change. Labour is split on the issue. It is waiting for someone else to take the lead so it can oppose them. The Liberal Democrats have a long-established policy of 'devolution all round' but have lacked the courage to promote it, in case it's unpopular. A bit of a shambles, really.

So, what is to be done? The first step is for the pro-union campaign to adopt a common policy, and find a leader (a charismatic Scots woman would be a good start!). The next is to challenge the SNP to prove how Scotland has been held back by being in the UK. The third step is to challenge the SNP to explain the details of the divorce settlement, because it's clear it hasn't thought about that yet.

Salmond must be challenged to explain the practical implications of independence. The list is a long one: North Sea oil. Nuclear power stations. The armed forces. Border crossing points. Immigration issues. The status of Scots living in other parts of the UK. The status of non-Scots living in Scotland. The BBC. Membership of the European Union. The Head of State. The Commonwealth. Language. Religion. Currency. UK-wide charities and NGOs. In fact, the whole fabric of life in the rest of the UK will be affected, not just in Scotland.

The SNP has made a serious mistake by not researching these and many other issues. This failure is an area of weakness that must be exposed and exploited.

Resources must be targeted ruthlessly in a relentless campaign of questions and challenges to every SNP spokesperson. The aim must be to convince canny Scots voters that the SNP is not the competent organisation it pretends to be, and that Scotland will lose far more than it will gain by leaving the UK.

To be successful, however, the pro-union campaign must be built around a positive message: We're all better off together. Going it alone may be a fantastic ego trip for Alex Salmond but it is unlikely to lead to long-term success for Scotland. The record of history and everyday experience is clear. People working co-operatively together achieve far more than those who insist on going it alone. Teamwork always wins.

Nevertheless, what the SNP campaign has successfully highlighted is that the UK must change if it is to meet the aspirations of people in the different nations and regions of the country. The status quo is not an option, and the sooner the pro-union campaign embraces that idea, and produces a coherent policy response, the better.

## INITIATIVE SURRENDERED

We Liberal Democrats have failed to promote actively the party's long-established policy of creating a federal system of government. This would devolve most powers to the nations and regions of the UK, thus

recognising that the UK is not a unitary state, but a collection of diverse, though linked, communities. By not promoting this policy vigorously, we have surrendered the initiative to the nationalists. We must re-assert this policy, because it's going to take a very determined effort to recover the ground already won by the SNP.

We should seize the initiative now by publicly asserting the following principles, and start to campaign on them: that the people of Scotland have every right to choose the future government of their country; that the UK parliament will respect and implement the outcome of the referendum on independence; and that, if the people of Scotland vote for independence, the process of separation will be conducted in an agreed, positive, and timely manner, paying proper attention to the effect on the rest of the UK.

The question is no longer "Can Scotland go it alone?" because the answer is "Of course it can!" There are many nations across the globe that are much smaller than Scotland and which operate as independent states. The real question is "Should Scotland go it alone?" because all states, without exception, depend for their survival on their relationship with other states. The uncomfortable truth for Alex Salmond is that an independent Scotland will have to rely on the rest of the UK for many of its everyday necessities, because we live in an interdependent world.

The countdown to the referendum is well under way. At the moment, there is only one serious contender for the votes of the Scottish people, and that is the SNP. Who else cares enough to put in the effort, and provide the outstanding leadership needed, to advance the alternative point of view? Time is not on our side, but it is not yet too late to try.

Peter Arnold is a former leader of Newcastle City Council

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# FEAR AND LOATHING IN THE UK

Status anxiety is a major cause of health and social problems, and a barrier to social mobility, says Matthew Gibson

In the UK, it is culturally rude to ask how much someone earns, but it may be a more important question than we have previously realised.

So how much do you earn? Does it afford you the things that you want to afford such as pay the bills, feed the family, go on holiday, or live in an area you want to live in? How do you feel about how much you earn and what are the effects of this on you and your family? Perhaps these questions seem a little strange but they are questions that give us a window into the society we currently live in and the problems that we face as a result.

*The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* is a book that has caused a great deal of excitement and controversy in equal measure. The idea that societies with less income inequality have better outcomes for their citizens is an important one for all political parties. The responses have been typical, with many in the Labour Party pushing for greater state involvement to reduce inequality, while many in the Tory Party deny the idea; there was a quick response from the political right with *The Spirit Level Delusion: Fact-checking the Left's New Theory of Everything*. But for the Liberal Democrats, this is possibly an even bigger issue.

## SUPPORT THE SPIRIT LEVEL?

The Social Liberal Forum was set up fairly quickly following *The Spirit Level's* publication and endorses the ideas held within the book. The SLF has had a growing influence within the party, with senior Liberal Democrats attending the SLF's first conference. Others in the party have felt that the influence of these ideas has come at the expense of other ideas, so more economically minded members have sought to form a new grouping. A united party agrees on the direction and vision of the party, and internal groupings can bring valued ideas and policies to achieve this. However, internal groupings also have the potential for schisms and splits, so this is an important issue for the Liberal Democrats.

Due to the debates relating to the effects of income inequality, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation commissioned an independent review by Karen Rowlingson of the University of Birmingham. She acknowledges that this is a highly complex area both theoretically and methodologically, and there is still some disagreement among academics on many related issues, but the main conclusion is that there is some evidence that income inequality has negative effects and there is hardly any evidence that it has positive effects. The report states that the evidence suggests there is a correlation between income inequality and health and social problems, while there is very little evidence that income inequality promotes growth or

that individual incomes at the top provide incentives to work.

The report has some interesting conclusions but the one that is perhaps the most interesting is that "the most plausible explanation for income inequality's apparent effect on health and social problems is 'status anxiety'. This suggests that income inequality is harmful because it places people in a hierarchy that increases status competition and causes stress, which leads to poor health and other negative outcomes."

## STATUS ANXIETY

Status anxiety is an anxiety about what others think of us, about whether we're judged a success or a failure, a winner or a loser. The philosopher Alain De Botton claims that chronic anxiety about status is an inevitable side effect of any democratic egalitarian society. He suggests that the causes of status anxiety are lovelessness, expectation, meritocracy, snobbery, and dependence.

So if we go back to our original questions about how you feel about how much you earn, this will depend upon what you can afford and how this compares with other people. The closer you are to the bottom of the income scale, the more you are considered a failure or a loser within society: Think of how you (or others) view different people in society – people like teachers earn an average wage and are seen as hard workers, the Tesco shelf-stacker is a low earner and the job is seen more negatively, while people not in work and in receipt of jobseekers allowance are often derided. So what is the effect of this?

We have all had feelings of being judged, ridiculed, humiliated and shamed. The experiences that create these feelings vary from person to person but we all know what they feel like and the effects they have on us. Research by Brené Brown in the USA has found a common theme among all of us. We all have feelings of not being good enough; these may be that we don't feel rich enough, safe enough, attractive enough, intelligent enough, perfect enough, extraordinary enough, or whatever it is for us personally.

The sad thing is that these experiences are all too common. Just look in our schools, workplaces, families and friends. Just look at the most watched TV shows: X Factor, Big Brother and other reality TV shows that shame people through humiliation, ridicule and judgement. It's a sad reflection of our society, which breeds a need to be better than others, to be seen to be better and, if we are not, then we can put someone else down to make us look better. Nowhere is this seen more acutely than in parliament. Ministers have been brought to tears following a debate in the Commons. Politicians have given up or potential politicians have not wanted to go into politics for fear of being shamed by other politicians or the press.



These experiences leave us feeling disconnected from the world and we search for ways to deal with these feelings. Perhaps it is telling that we are the most obese, in debt, medicated and intoxicated population our country has ever seen. And what is the pattern the further down the socio-economic grouping you go? The worse it gets.

The anxiety created by how you think others perceive you is really only the beginning of the problem. It lays the foundation for more difficult emotions. An example could be weight. Today, society values people who are thin and so many people are trying to get thin. If someone who is overweight is called something derogatory, it can create devastating feelings of shame. The anxiety of being overweight, or more accurately how you are perceived by others, lays the foundation for feelings of shame when those anxieties are proved to be accurate. For someone who is at the bottom of society's ladder (i.e. not seen as a success in life), the number of potential shaming experiences is significantly greater than for someone who is seen as successful.

This phenomenon actually creates a barrier to social mobility as it does not give an incentive for people to move up the social ladder without certain emotional safeguards. There is a feeling of safety when you are with people who experience or have experienced similar things to you, as the anxiety of how you are perceived is reduced. But move up the social ladder and the anxiety is increased. Just think of a time you were in a social situation that you are not familiar with; there is a level of anxiety that is not there when in your usual social group. Ask someone from a disadvantaged area about going to university and see what they say about how they would feel being there. Moving up the social ladder creates more opportunities to be ridiculed, humiliated and shamed, which is what we all try to avoid in different ways.

So if status anxiety is a significant factor in creating health and social problems, then surely the Liberal Democrat position to inequality should be to address the cause of the anxiety. If there were no status anxiety, perhaps there would be no health and social inequality in our society? Even if this were not true, would it not be a good thing for us to work towards a change in our society to one where fear is better managed, people have less shaming experiences, and people feel supported in doing what they want?

## **MOVE AWAY FROM 'SELF-ESTEEM'**

A major factor in the creation of this fear and anxiety is the focus on self-esteem. Higher self-esteem is associated with less anxiety, and with greater happiness and life satisfaction, so we have given it prominence in our schooling of children and working with communities – particularly disadvantaged

*“Moving up the social ladder creates more opportunities to be ridiculed, humiliated and shamed, which is what we all try to avoid in different ways”*

communities, where the last government spent a lot on improving areas, which included working with communities to improve self esteem.

However, the work of Kristin Neff, a US researcher, has shown that it is also associated with the need to feel superior to others in order to feel okay about oneself – a distorted self-view, self-centeredness, a lack of concern for others, and maintenance of an unrealistically high

view of ourselves in comparison with others. This has a particularly devastating effect when we face failure; and a dismissal of negative feedback, trivialisation of failures, and less accountability for one's own harmful actions.

The whole concept of self-esteem is intrinsically linked to status anxiety. The negative aspects associated with it lay the foundations for greater social problems than they do for creating community. Community politics should not be just about politics in the community, but about politics building community. Without such a focus on competition between people, a culture of envy of those with more, within a society of fear of being shamed, status anxiety would not be such a problem and would not cause the health and social inequality that we see today.

There are many ways of doing this such as switching from a focus on self-esteem to one of self-compassion in education, which has the same benefits but none of the negative effects. It means supporting communities and networks, not just families. It means a change in the way government is run, the way our institutions are run, they way they are regulated. It means educating differently, and it means a more caring, understanding society.

Seven out of 10 people believe the gap between those at the top and everyone else is too wide and bad for ordinary people (The Independent) and so tackling this would be a popular move. But it would not necessarily do anything for the underlying problems when it comes to health and social inequalities. While there has been a focus on improving public services and regenerating poorer areas, it has not resulted in an improvement in health and social inequalities.

We should also focus on reforming that which potentially causes so much damage: status anxiety and shaming experiences. The focus on the personal and cultural as well as the structural will mean a different set of policies, which will be very different to what is on offer from politics today. This would do more for social mobility than all the coalition's plans put together. Changing society may be a big idea, but it is one people join political parties for, not to tinker around the edges of the current system.

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

# OBITUARY: VIV BINGHAM

Viv Bingham, life-long Liberal, who has died aged 79, was a man of deep principle and great humanity, and, after some doubts about the merger, an active Liberal Democrat

He rose to be president of the Liberal Party in 1981-82, when he worked closely with Geoff Tordoff and the late Gruffydd Evans in leading the Liberal Party Council and Executive. He was a guardian of Liberal values but also a supreme party 'fixer'.

Viv fought Hazel Grove as Liberal candidate in the 1979 general election, the Euro elections for East Cheshire in the same year and then West Derbyshire in 1983 – a campaign that he enjoyed, and he kept in touch with the successful Tory candidate Matthew Parris.

Viv also flew the flag in 'challenging' seats, fighting Heywood and Royton in the two elections in 1974 and Stalybridge & Hyde in 2005. He was president of North West Liberal Democrats and was a key figure in sustaining the region through tough times. His presidential dinners were always enjoyable.

He and his late wife, Cecilia, moved to south Manchester, where he continued vigorous political work, standing as a council candidate in Barlow Moor ward in 1995, and at national level constantly contributing to policy discussions, especially on education and training, youth employment and the role of co-operatives.

Strongly committed to manufacturing industry, his professional career spanned five decades at the National Coal Board, ICI, Crown and the Cooperative movement, where he was widely known, as the personnel director of CWS in Manchester.

Viv used his considerable industrial experience to good effect as chair of the Liberal Party's employment and industrial relations panel. During the Lib-Lab pact, he worked to promote the principles of industrial democracy and employee share ownership, as well as having robust exchanges on the role of trade unions and the right to strike with his friend, the late Sir Cyril Smith, who was then shadow employment spokesman. Viv stood up to Cyril, Clement Freud and even David Penhaligon and John Pardoe when they made up policy on the hoof, and certainly moderated the party's views on trade unions and employment rights. He was happiest when working with that great northern radical Richard Wainwright and the redoubtable Nancy Seear.

Ever-present at conferences and assemblies, a highlight of the Glee Club every year was his stewardship of a rousing chorus of 'We Shall Overcome'.

He did much to encourage and inspire younger members. His speeches on nuclear disarmament were clear and passionate and, while he would not tow the leadership line on defence, he earned the respect of successive leaders.

But it was his rebellious record that was probably why he was never made a peer.

Viv could probably fairly claim some responsibility for Paddy Ashdown becoming party leader. Hereford proposed a motion to Liberal assembly in 1984 calling for the removal of cruise missiles – at the last minute, Chris Green, Hereford PPC, was asked to move another motion as spokesman on the arts. Viv suggested to Chris that a new MP called Paddy Ashdown with an exemplary military background could be approached to propose a motion that David Steel had described as politically disastrous. Viv asked Paddy, who immediately agreed and made his first conference speech, which was greeted with ecstatic applause. The leadership was overturned and Paddy tipped as next party leader.

Viv Bingham was born in Wooler, Northumberland, educated at King Edward's Birmingham and New College, Oxford, where he read law in 1952. Viv was delighted to help organise the Liberal International 50th anniversary congress in Oxford in 1997, when he persuaded Alan Ryan, warden of New College, to give a keynote address on Liberal philosophy in the Sheldonian Theatre.

In the last few years, Viv returned to live in Romiley, and never lost his love of debate, speaking in support of an amendment at party conference as recently as last September, which was adopted and will be one of his legacies – conference papers will continue to be available in hard copy format. He had no time for the internet or e-mails and was recently passionate about the rights and needs of older people.

At some stage in evenings spent with Viv – usually after some wine had been taken – he would open up the political debate: "Well now, what are we going to do about Steel / Ashdown / Kennedy / Campbell?" usually on the grounds that they weren't being nearly radical or Liberal enough. For Viv, we were always on the long haul toward a genuinely Liberal government.

Despite health problems, his energy seemed boundless, travelling across the country to support friends, family and campaigning candidates.

Last year, he did much to organise a memorial service to his late friend Elizabeth Sidney and he was delighted to see both his daughters married and the birth of his grandchildren.

There will be a memorial service at the National Liberal Club later in the year.

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Peter Brook is a former chair of Hazel Grove constituency and was member of the Liberal Democrats' North West regional executive for nearly 20 years

# LETTERS



wielding Tory government.

These concerns matter a great deal to the people of Scotland. Not by coincidence, they are also profoundly and undeniably liberal; independence for small nations has been a central liberal concern for two centuries.

Another reactionary unionist mantra: "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."

Doesn't this bear a startling resemblance to the sort of populist nonsense spouted by the, er, reactionary unionist press during the recent AV debacle? Strikingly enough, as Simon Titley said in the same issue of *Liberator* "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." Does the same apply to reactionary unionists? Food for thought.

It would appear that elements within the Scottish Liberal Democrats are content for the party to remain marooned as the slightly more respectable voice of rural Labour (see Scottish Parliament coalition negotiations, or lack thereof, May 2007), even to the extent of backing the reactionary unionist 'no' camp when the referendum campaign gets underway, but why should genuine liberals tolerate this? I think we should be told.

Bernie Hughes  
East Kilbride

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## NOT UNPRINCIPLED

*Dear Liberator,*

Your item on Euro-scepticism (RB, *Liberator* 351) correctly described press stories about Tory-Lib Dem co-operation as "allegations".

But two paragraphs later you made the mistake of believing what you had read in the papers, and condemned "unprincipled manoeuvring" by some of our MPs.

As one of those named, let me reassure your readers that I have no knowledge of any such initiatives and nor have the other named Lib Dem MPs I have checked with. And I, for one, do not favour diluting the working time directive or the broader reforms the EU social chapter has brought.

I suspect that the whole thing is wishful thinking on the part of Europhobic Tories and their media cronies.

Nick Harvey MP  
North Devon

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## LIBERALS FOR INDEPENDENCE

*Dear Liberator,*

In her article on the forthcoming referendum on Scottish independence (*Liberator* 351), Caron Lindsay goes to some considerable lengths to demonstrate her personal conviction that Liberal Democrats in Scotland are saying and doing Some Very Good Things, whereas members of other parties, and particularly the SNP, are saying and doing Some Very Bad Things.

Which is all very well, but if I wanted to read that rather wearisomely partisan sort of writing, I'd subscribe to *Lib Dem News*, not *Liberator*. What Lindsay singularly fails to demonstrate, or even mention, is precisely why liberals, as opposed to Liberal Democrat members, should be inclined to vote 'no' in the first

place. Could this be because no coherent liberal opposition to Scottish independence has yet been discovered?

Lindsay grudgingly accepts that "a small number of party members will want to campaign for independence". This fails to take into account not only the likelihood that tens of thousands of Lib Dem voters will vote for independence, but also the related certainty that the modern concept of 'independence' bears far greater resemblance to the traditional liberal vision of Home Rule than anything else on the table.

Lindsay claims to worry that "Liberal Democrats would be lumped together with reactionary unionist parties". Perhaps, then, she should avoid repeating reactionary unionist mantras, such as that "Nationalists are very good at telling us how brilliant Scotland would be if independent, with very few facts to back it up".

Independence won't make Scotland brilliant, but it could conceivably make Scotland measurably better, by which I mean more liberal, in a number of significant ways. For example, there is every chance that an independent Scotland:

- would not tolerate nuclear weapons;
- would develop sufficient sustainable supplies of green energy to render the white elephant of nuclear power redundant;
- would be a clear embodiment of the principle of subsidiarity;
- would have a far more positive relationship with Europe;
- would use a democratic voting system;
- would be sheltered from the menacing shadow of an axe-



“In 2010, I told the prime minister that his Health Bill was probably OK and I’d support it, but I didn’t read it properly first as I got bored after the first 50 pages. I now find that it is about as popular as a return to the use of leeches in medical practice. Can you advise me?” – Mr NC, Sheffield Hallam

“I keep getting mixed up between two of my jobs, Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Before Christmas, as DPM I defended David Cameron’s performance in Brussels and then as Lib Dem Leader I attacked it. This month in the cabinet, I supported the NHS Bill unamended and then as Lib Dem Leader I signed a letter with my friend Shirley asking everyone to support the amendments.” – Mr NC, Sheffield Hallam

Now look here: you cannot *both* be the real Nick Clegg. I don’t know which one of you is playing the giddy goat, but it must stop at once. As to your questions...

NC1: Yes, the bill was Rather Hard Work. My custom when I can’t stay awake past page 3 of a new piece of legislation is to see which way the most blinkered Socialists in the House are voting and then head for the opposite lobby. This has served me well over the years. As to leeches, I gather that they never quite went out of use: to this day, there are eminent surgeons who believe them quite the thing for safely removing congested blood from a wound – and that is not just at the Oakham Royal Infirmary, where I admit news of the latest advances in medical science can be slow to arrive.

NC2: This ‘coalition’ business can be confusing, can’t it? Only the other day, I was planning a raid on the lands of a neighbouring Conservative when my Bailiff respectfully asked if we weren’t meant to be on the same side now. I replied that he was Putting Things Too Strongly, but I did later issue orders for a lesser grade of explosive to be used.

My own judgement is that, if you can convince people you are on both sides of every important question that faces the country, then you may well have a future in the political game. If you really are the one who is Nick Clegg, of course.

“Why doesn’t Rutland declare UDI, secede from the UK and become a stateless society with private law and stuff?” – Jock, Oxford

Really, don’t you read my stuff? Rutland has been an independent nation since the occupying Leicestershire forces were driven back over the border in 1997 (I myself led our forces in several skirmishes in that war). We now live as an anarcho-syndicalist collective – albeit one consistent with our most ancient families continuing to enjoy full possession of their landed estates. For myself, I continue to plot the overthrow of the Duke of Rutland and his replacement with a more suitably qualified candidate.

“My husband and I are old enough now to be contemplating our departure to the next world. In keeping with family tradition, we shall have effigies carved to be placed in the family chapel. Although we shall have individual heraldic animals at the head or feet of each effigy (in our case, a Staffordshire Bull Terrier rampant for him, a

# Lord Bonkers’ Diary

weeping cloud of budgies for me), we must share an escutcheon which expresses our political allegiance. He is an (horrible) old Tory and I a fervent Liberal. We both hate the Coalition, so what would you advise?” – Barking Old Trout

Hatchments! That is what you want: hatchments. When I was a young buck and wanted to impress a popsy or a stunner, I would invite her to the Hall, then walk her down the drive to St Asquith’s in the village and show her the family

hatchments. It never failed to take the trick, though I have to record that the First Lady Bonkers rather trumped me by showing me her obelisk first.

Should you wish to see my hatchments for yourself, the Revd Hughes will sell you a guidebook – call at the Vicarage if you find St Asquith’s locked. However, I feel that in your circumstances, rather stronger meat is called for. I am reminded of an old friend of mine who had a short way with our Conservative and Unionist allies: may I recommend a stained glass reproduction of a contemporary print of ‘J.W. Logan giving Edward Carson one up the snoot during the committee stage of Gladstone’s Second Home Rule Bill in 1893’? I feel sure your husband will understand.

“No-one likes me at work. What should I do?” E. Bandymill, Doncaster

I wonder if you were wise to take this job in the first place?

“If you have room for only one fruit tree, do you go for damson or bullace?” – Jim Hartley

*The fellow goes on to ask which fruit the current of Lib Dem MPs remind me of: “Ming Campbell, something rather old fashioned, but solid: quince? Danny Alexander, orange, bitter & no good in the sun: Seville orange. The great leader is of course bland and yellow and would have to be a banana.” I think this is what the young people call ‘satire’.*

The fruit tree I ‘go for’ is neither the damson nor the bullace but our trusty Rutland fig. Each year, Meadowcroft cuts a fresh length of twine to hold up his trousers and goes down to Westminster to negotiate with the Serjeant at Arms about the trees for Portcullis House. So adept is he at playing the country bumpkin come to town that the House authorities are quite disarmed and thus prey to his wiles. Why, over the last 12 years, he has stung them for £400,000 to maintain the trees we sent to grace the place when it first opened! When a tree is as profitable as that, I look no further.

“What does Lord Bonkers think of the proposal to supplement the diet of Edinburgh’s Ailuropoda melanoleuca?” – Zoologist, Edinburgh

I take it that you refer to the scurrilous song about the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and MP for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and, indeed, Strathspey that is going the rounds. I have no time for That Sort of Thing and there is no truth in the rumour that I have been known to whistle it if I come across Danny Alexander at Westminster.

As to Ailuropoda melanoleuca – or the giant panda – I was once sent one by a grateful People’s Republic of China. And quite delicious it was too!