

liberator



- 💣 Leaders on a different planet – Tony Greaves
- 💣 In judgement of Murdoch – Adrian Sanders
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Cover picture - Alex Folkes

COMMENTARY

WE CAN LOSE EVERYWHERE

The problem isn't the coalition; it's what the coalition does.

Those things are subtly different and, in the wake of a second local election debacle, it is worth remembering that being in coalition was a hazard the Liberal Democrats always had to navigate at some point, were they to get anywhere politically. The alternative was some improbable conjunction of circumstances in which the party went from third to first place in one leap.

When the opportunity came, it came together with an economic crisis, a dangerously inexperienced party leader and the traditional enemy as the only partner on offer.

Two years on, the problems can be seen. The theory of coalitions was that they would succeed because, with the backing of two or more parties, they would command wider public support, and have to take account of wider interests, than do single party governments.

We know differently now. This is an almost uniquely friendless government. Many of the most prominently active members of both the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives dislike it and consider it at best a pale reflection of what they would like to see. The media is almost wholly hostile – the left because it loathes Conservatives, the right because it wants a Conservative government and thinks it might get this by destabilising the coalition.

This activist and media hostility could be coped with – indeed might not be happening at all – if the coalition were popular and successful.

Instead, it is suffering from the loss of hope among voters. There is no light showing at the end of the economic tunnel, only a dogmatic attachment to the deficit size and the AAA credit rating, things that are abstract and incomprehensible in most voters' minds.

Even that might not have mattered had the coalition's economic policy worked as intended, but it hasn't.

George Osborne has admitted he is no longer on course to dispose of the deficit before the next election, the country has tipped back into recession, unemployment is worsening and there is no sign that the private sector can or will create jobs to compensate for public spending cuts.

It's hurting, but it's not working. Indeed, things are getting worse for most people.

The public will put up with some nasty economic medicine if it can see a purpose and results but, while the coalition convinced most people of a purpose in 2010, no-one can now see the results, and that is above all what is driving hostility to the coalition parties.

Unless the coalition parties can offer voters some hope, and take some action that will encourage growth, their electoral performance will continue downwards.

The Tories, even in the dark days of 1997, could rely on a core vote of 30%. The Liberal Democrats, having not troubled to cultivate a core vote, can rely at best on about 10% at the next election. Not enough to save many seats.

BRITAIN'S WATERGATE

It is unwise to predict the outcome of the Leveson inquiry, but a path may be to hand for those who have wondered how the Liberal Democrats can successfully extract themselves from the coalition ahead of the next general election.

Suppose it becomes untenable to be in coalition because the Conservatives have become mired in a corruption scandal of such epic proportions over News International that their public standing plumbs depths last seen 15 years ago.

From what we already know, this is entirely possible. The country was days away from the Tories handing over the whole of BSkyB to Murdoch, until the revelations about Milly Dowler's phone arose last summer.

Anyone who thinks this would have happened for any reason other than actual or promised political favours is naïve.

And that would not have been the end of it. The Tories wanted to weaken rules on broadcasting neutrality so that something like America's Fox News could have set up in the UK – and guess which party would have benefited from that.

With no Liberal Democrat minister in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and with Nick Clegg's lamentable record on spotting political trouble, who is to say that it would not have happened but for the Guardian, Private Eye and a few other outlets having doggedly pursued the phone hacking story?

Material already aired at Leveson suggests both that the police were corrupted and that politicians, where not actively sympathetic anyway, lived in such fear of a 'monstering' by the Murdoch newspapers that they did as asked.

Labour was, of course, equally up to its neck in Murdoch while in office. But since the Murdochs never had any interest in trying to corrupt the Liberal Democrats, the party may emerge with providentially clean hands from all this, just in time to fight the next election.

RADICAL BULLETIN

ROOM AT THE TOP

Nick Clegg's senior adviser Richard Reeves has left to move to America, a loss borne with fortitude by MPs who despair of the coterie around their leader.

Reeves is a noted intellectual who used to run the think tank Demos, something that unaccountably impressed Clegg. But as one MP put it, "he had his head in the think tank clouds when what we need are a few streetfighters".

However brainy he is, Reeves was utterly useless as head of party strategy. He was behind the backfiring 'coalition works' strategy of 2010, which left the Liberal Democrats looking indistinguishable from the Tories. His other main innovation was the little-used 'Alarm Clock Britain' slogan.

Reeves should never have been appointed in any case, after his shameful contribution to the Guardian (19 September 2008) in which he called on all social liberals to leave the Liberal Democrats and join Labour. Choosing as your adviser someone who thinks most of your members should leave speaks volumes about Clegg's judgement and interest in his party.

MPs with real political experience like Norman Lamb, who was until recently supposed to be Clegg's political adviser, were frozen out while Reeves looked down on the large number of people he considered his intellectual inferiors, and on those who actually had to engage with voters to secure a career in politics.

It did Clegg no credit that he chose someone with no feel for the party to head its strategy. Cleverness is no substitute for that. But does anyone else round Clegg have any grasp of what is needed to avert a massacre? MPs who fear public outrage once welfare cuts and the Health Act begin to bite can already feel the hot breath of their constituents about these issues.

Clegg and Danny Alexander – the Liberal Democrats with real power in the government – "just don't get it, they are cut off and, even worse, actually believe in all this stuff", another MP said.

Unless Clegg gets some experienced and knowledgeable advice from committed Liberal Democrats, he may have ample time to reflect on policy issues after 2015. The advice at present flows from a collection of people who, whatever their other qualities, and with the exceptions of Olly Grender and Neil Sherlock, are younger than Clegg and even less politically experienced.

His head of communications is James Sorene, a career civil servant who does not have (and, to be fair, does not claim to have) any background in the party.

Sorene's deputy Grender, an activist from Young Liberal days in the early 1980s, is there only short-term to provide maternity cover. Sherlock has seamlessly attached himself to each leader in succession, seamlessly advocating whatever happens

to be the leader's line.

Reeves's deputy Julian Astle has been around the party for a long time but also holds only a maternity cover post, and worked at Centre Forum during the worst of its phase as a mouthpiece for the right-wing economic ideas of its main funder Paul Marshall.

Apart from Grender and PPS Jo Swinson, few if any of Clegg's senior staff seem to have any campaigning background or any deep knowledge of the party. His special advisers, meanwhile, all have party backgrounds, mainly as advisers to other MPs, but again are almost all young. His team needs youth in it, but it also needs experience.

Reeves's successor should not be another wonk with his feet planted firmly in mid-air, but someone with experience of the party sufficient to recognise the scale of the disaster it faces and with some realistic ideas of how to avert it.

WE KNOW WHO YOU ARE

One particular grievance among Liberal Democrat parliamentarians about Clegg's advisers is their habit of endorsing outrageous Tory policies because they have no instinct for how the party will react.

This problem was evident in an anguished conference call on 3 April between a group of policy advisers (including at least one of Clegg's special advisers) and a collection of Liberal Democrat bloggers, concerning the government's plan to include a bill in the Queen's Speech to extend internet snooping powers. This followed an ill-judged e-mail to party members on 2 April from Liberal Democrat Home Office minister Lynne Featherstone, which claimed that the proposed bill was nothing to worry about.

After a lot of back-peddalling, the Queen's Speech merely promised a draft bill on the subject, which at the time of going to press has not appeared. This process means it must be considered by a select committee and can be changed substantially before an actual bill appears.

Cambridge MP Julian Huppert, who is on the right side on this issue, told a subsequent conference call (9 May) that the issue was there to be fought over and that, if the final bill did contain powers to snoop, it would not pass.

This call thus went rather better than the one in April, when the special advisers reacted with baffled astonishment to the idea that anyone might be upset at the prospect of the police and security services freely reading their e-mails and other electronic communications. Cocooned in their bubble at Westminster, it never occurred to the advisers that the party might find this objectionable. As usual with the breed, they sought to blame 'messaging'.

For the moment, the draft bill gives the opportunity

to press for something better and to defeat it if the final result is unacceptable. But does Nick Clegg get it? His lame performance on Radio 4's World at One (3 April) suggests not. Indeed, it is even said that – as chair of the relevant cabinet committee – he signed off on the Home Office's original proposals.

Some seek to blame Featherstone for failing to brief Clegg adequately on the issue first. But on something this fundamental, surely liberal instincts should kick in whatever the quality of the briefing.

SHUTT THAT DOOR

There has been relief among some Liberal Democrat peers at David Shutt's retirement as the party's chief whip in the Lords and his replacement by Dick Newby.

Shutt was not a bully, but peers who had concerns about the bills they were being asked to approve had grown tired of his mantra, "we are here to support the government".

This attitude takes no account of the fact that peers cannot be sacked, since they are there for life, and cannot be offered either carrots or sticks if, as is the case with most of them, they have no interest in the few ministerial posts available.

"Peers are fed up with being treated as voting fodder for issues about which they know much more than the civil servants, the young special advisers signing things off for Nick, and Tory ministers desperate to make a mark quickly," said one peer who thought Shutt had caught the resulting flak.

Whipping people who object to being whipped, and cannot easily be whipped anyway, must have been a thankless task. Newby will need his wits about him to deal with a restive flock.

ELEPHANT TRAP

When their councillors start losing their seats, MPs reflect on the safety of theirs.

While it's true that places with sitting MPs fared relatively better than others on 3 May, in most cases that is not saying much.

It is easy to find MPs who are highly critical in private of the political direction of the coalition and of the party's expected behaviour within it as a sort of 57-headed human shield for the Tories.

Southport's MP John Pugh – whose councillors in fact put up a stonkingly good performance – has cogently grasped the problem, to judge from a missive titled 'The Elephant in the Room', which he sent to his parliamentary colleagues in the aftermath of May's wreckage.

His central point is that, while the party had no control over the economic circumstances the government inherited, "how we have acted within coalition is down to us" and that the loss of votes and support that has followed was not inevitable.

Pugh notes that "the 'Con Dem' characterisation has had more traction in urban areas than the alternative Richard Reeves vision", by which he presumably means the 'coalition works' message.

"Within the tribal optics of British politics we are seen to have re-aligned ourselves with the Tory tribe," Pugh said, arguing that this was because the Liberal Democrats had supported measures that appear to make sense only in terms of Tory values.

Parties are doomed if they vote for things they

don't believe in but those who draft legislation have "worked on sharing out the grief and dragooning the unconvinced".

Pugh then gave it both barrels: "We have been suckered into the Tory tribalism that involves chanting unconvincing mantras, demonising opponents, exaggerating policy differences, bowdlerising history, producing self-congratulatory press releases of staggering vacuity – all the sort of things that rational normal people don't do and don't like to see done.

"We do not allow the Commons to amend the wisdom of our ministers or change the face saving conventions bred in the days of one-party government. Thus instead of preaching the 'new politics', we have fallen victim to the anti-politics mood of the nation."

The paper says much about what should not be done, but less about what should. However, if it is indicative of the mood in the parliamentary party, things cannot continue as they are for much longer.

FORD COMES UP TRUMPS

It is rare for Liberator to welcome a Green victory, but congratulations to Martin Ford, who this May held his council seat in Aberdeenshire for that party, while the Liberal Democrats lost nine of their 21 seats.

Ford, whose wife Gina is a former Liberator Collective member, was with three other councillors driven out of the Liberal Democrats in a disgraceful series of manoeuvres by the Aberdeenshire group (Liberator 338, and many others).

The group was obsessed with allowing Donald Trump to build a golf resort on a site of special scientific interest, something that was initially prevented by Ford's casting vote having denied the project planning permission.

FEEDING TIME

The Social Liberal Forum's recent awayday (12 May) took place in a glass-walled pavilion normally used as a café at London Zoo.

Since no 'closed' signs had been posted around this unusual choice of venue, numerous punters pressed their noses to the glass to peer at the exotic creatures on show before wandering off looking confused.

Perhaps signs should have offered the chance to study rare social liberals in their natural habitat, and going into breakout groups next to the ostrich enclosure. Maybe SLF will be sticking its neck out more.

HOW TIMES CHANGE

Not many people know that the SDP still exists, but indeed it does and it still uses the old logo, though now rather charmingly adorned with an elephant with a knotted trunk.

SDP policy has, though, undergone a bizarre metamorphosis since the days of the devotedly pro-European and decidedly non-socialist Gang of Four. Its website states: "We believe that: the Government should protect British Jobs and Industry; we should remove VAT from heating to assist ordinary people keep warm; socialism is the only way forward for a better country; Britain should withdraw from the EU; England should have its own Parliament; immigration should be controlled with a firm but fair policy."

LEADERS ON A DIFFERENT PLANET

Tony Greaves wonders whether anyone at the top of the Liberal Democrats understands why government policies have left the party in such a dire place

The Budget was the moment when everyone could see just how much the Liberal Democrat parliamentarians are living on a different planet.

The advance leaks were meant to show that we were really calling the shots. Our MPs were dragooned into turning up en masse for the Chancellor's speech and waving their order papers like a busload of Madonna groupies.

That evening, Danny Alexander came to the Federal Policy Committee with a tale of reflected triumph, and the following day the Commons chief whip was still drooling about it all and how the Tory backbenchers really had not liked it.

In the world of Planet Westminster, it seemed like a real Liberal Democrat success. The only trouble is, they got it wrong. Budgets are always properly judged a week or two after the event. This one was soon seen as a disaster and one that contributed to awful council election results in May.

So why did it happen? Put on one side the nonsense about a 'pasty tax', which was really just bad PR. The real damage was done by the cut in the 50p tax rate and the so-called granny tax (which Alexander told the FPC was a victory for Liberal Democrat policy!). Both these appear to have been quid pro quos wrapped up with genuine Liberal Democrat policy wins, combined with more lousy PR.

It seems that the Budget was largely negotiated in the Budget Quad, a two-a-side meeting at the top of the coalition. On the Liberal Democrat side were Nick Clegg and Alexander, for the Tories the prime minister and the chancellor. Our dynamic duo had their eyes firmly locked on the personal allowance – taking lower earners out of income tax at a faster rate than had been planned. Clegg upped the stakes by going public on this laudable aim, and no doubt something had to give.

'Something' was the 50p tax rate. But another longstanding Liberal Democrat aim was to align the personal allowance rates for earners with those for pensioners. The Budget freezes the personal allowance for existing pensioners but reduces it for those approaching retirement. Hence the hysterical reaction to the 'granny tax'.

MILLIONAIRES' BUDGET

All this made it easy for the opposition and tabloids, and lots of pressure groups, to denounce it all as a millionaires' budget funded at the expense of pensioners and the poor, many of whom (as canvassers will testify) were appalled even though it did not affect them personally. As for us, we were seen not as the goodies making the nasty Tories swallow Liberal

Democrat fairness but as co-conspirators launching another attack on the ordinary people on behalf of the bankers, the oligarchs and all the rest of the greedy rich.

The point of this disastrous story is that it is so typical of the way the coalition works, and the way legislation itself is developed and promoted by people who appear to have little ability to look at the overall picture and ask and understand how it will go down with the party and in the country – and even less ability to analyse the detail and apply common sense questions to suss out the banana skins. Our ministers are busy people but they are supposed to have teams of people to support them and do this kind of donkey work. I am not impressed with the competence of these people.

Ordinary legislation starts with a few people at the top – in a department, in top-level negotiations (the Quad again though Oliver Letwin replaces Osborne on general coalition matters), rubber-stamping by the Cabinet, then down through the Houses via the whips. There is a Public Bill Committee that seems to consist of leaders and whips from both parties and both Houses, which oversees bills as they go through parliament. It also has to approve any changes the government agrees to make in either House.

The Liberal Democrat party institutions all have to fit into this already complex system. The parliamentary committees with their co-chairs, beavering away within the bureaucracy to try to Liberal Democrat-proof government proposals. The Federal Policy Committee vainly thrashing away on the margins. Party bodies trying to find some way of getting their views listened to. The parliamentary parties and backbench members trying to cope in a dysfunctional system.

As a bill goes through the Commons, there are less-than-adequate opportunities for MPs to get involved. A couple will get on to the Standing Committee on the bill and may be able to get a handful of amendments debated. By the time the bill gets to Report stage, the main debates will be on a few set-piece themes carved up between the opposition and the government.

The chance for any other Liberal Democrats to be called will be few and, like the Committee stage, it will be strictly timetabled, so typically much of the bill will not be debated at all. But the government may respond with its own amendments and, in some cases, such as the Health and Social Care Bill, these may be very substantial.

By the time the bill gets to the Lords, the bill team (the departmental civil servants working on a particular bill), their ministerial teams and the

government high-ups will hope it is a done deal. The Lords is useful as a place where the government may table some remaining amendments and iron out wrinkles and that will be that, or so they may think. Our party leadership and whips in both Houses will think it is our job to push it through in a loyal coalition manner. To be

seen in the lobbies but not heard in the chamber. But there will be a team of Liberal Democrat peers working on any bill on behalf of the group (as opposed to the government), probably led by the relevant co-chair and including the members who usually take an interest in that area. These are the people who know most about the subject and who will often be keenest to see changes and extract promises from ministers about how it will be implemented. As far as the Lords are concerned, the whole process starts again.

Liberal Democrat peers look at bills as a whole and in detail, and in Committee (where, whether it's in a Committee of the Whole House or a Grand Committee, any peer can turn up and take part) the bill will get a far more thorough scrutiny than it has had in the Commons. Amendments will be debated by the bucket load (though few go to a vote). Depending on negotiations with the government, they may be retabled on Report. There will often be shoals of government amendments before the bill leaves the Lords. All this will take place against a background of clear disapproval on the part of our leadership in the Lords, which tells us we are "doing the Labour Party's job for them".

The opportunities for conflict and difficulties are obviously huge, but the experience of the past year is that real changes can be obtained by a combination of activism in the chamber and negotiation behind the scenes. The Public Bodies Bill was gutted. The Localism Bill was significantly amended without a single government defeat in the Lords. Liz Barker set out in the last *Liberator* (#352) ways in which Health and Social Care Bill was significantly improved. There were even some concessions made during the awful Welfare Reform, and Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bills, though both were more difficult because at their heart are radical cuts in spending.

LITTLE-OBSERVED BUBBLE

But this all takes place in a little bubble within the wider bubble of the House of Lords, which is itself usually a little observed and understood sub-bubble of the wider Westminster Bubble. But it too often takes place without enough help and support from Liberal Democrats in other parts of Westminster, though real efforts have been made to improve communications. And it all happens on a completely different planet from the world outside, whether in the party, in campaign groups, or people in general.

I wrote last July in *Liberator* 347 protesting that the party was still floundering. Re-reading that piece, I am

“Whether we have any more core vote to piss off is a matter for debate, but we still seem to be going out of our way to upset traditionally supportive lobbies”

astonished by how little has changed. Indeed, the position is even worse. Morale in the country is patchy, membership is widely known to have plummeted in spite of party HQ's pathetic attempts to keep the figures secret, and we have just been hammered again in local elections, not least in the places that gave us most credibility in the

previous two decades – Scotland and the cities of the North of England. At all levels, there is a sense that people haven't got a clue what to do about it all.

We are still at the mercy of rampaging Tory warlords such as Gove and Lansley, pursuing their agendas regardless of anyone else. We are still struggling to cope with unpleasant legislation handed down from on high (and who knows what nasty little surprises await us all from the recent Queen's Speech?). The Lords party is still struggling to come to terms with its three stated but contradictory aims of supporting the coalition, promoting Liberal Democrat policies and principles, and maintaining the proper role of the House of Lords as a scrutinising and improving chamber.

Attempts to improve the dire communications within the Liberal Democrats have all been about people at the top telling worried members and activists why the top people are right and the worried ranks are wrong. There is still little explanation of the trade-offs and compromises of coalition, why and how positions have been reached.

The Tories may now be in more disarray than us, particularly on the green benches. The BBC's James Cameron commenting on the recent election for their backbench 1922 Committee in the Commons reported one veteran Tory describing "different tables in the tea rooms, rows in the corridors. It is getting very nasty" and comparing it to the time of Maastricht. This may be amusing but it is not helping us at all.

We are still being lumbered with stuff that is politically bad for our party. Whether we have any more core vote to piss off is a matter for debate, but we still seem to be going out of our way to upset traditionally supportive lobbies such as civil liberties and the environment.

It seems that, in spite of changes in personnel, the people around the leadership – the special advisers and other advisers – have no more idea of what this party stands for and what our activists will put up with than they had a year ago. Richard Reeves may, thankfully, have gone; but his successors seem no wiser. The bubble they work in may be more stratospheric even than the House of Lords, but it's just as remote from what remains of our party and, more desperately, from the real world. And that is even without discussing the disaster that is the government's 'deficit reduction strategy'.

Tony Greaves is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords

LIFE IN THE BALANCE

The phone hacking scandal presents an opportunity to restore public trust in the media, says Adrian Sanders

“With great power comes great responsibility” said Peter Parker’s Uncle Ben in the Spiderman Chronicles. The Murdoch Empire, News Corporation, has wielded huge influence over British media and politics for the last 40 years, and yet this great power was used and abused by the company, only fully exposed to the world after the Phone Hacking Scandal of 2011.

The House of Commons’s Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee has now published its second report into the subject. The report (‘News International and Phone Hacking’) focuses on whether parliament had previously been misled.

The Committee concluded that several News International witnesses had given misleading evidence and shown contempt for the select committee system. Our key conclusion, one that piqued the interest of journalists, was the following:

“On the basis of the facts and evidence before the Committee, we conclude that, if at all relevant times Rupert Murdoch did not take steps to become fully informed about phone-hacking, he turned a blind eye and exhibited wilful blindness to what was going on in his companies and publications. This culture, we consider, permeated from the top throughout the organisation and speaks volumes about the lack of effective corporate governance at News Corporation and News International. We conclude, therefore, that Rupert Murdoch is not a fit person to exercise the stewardship of a major international company.”

The Committee’s conclusion here won’t have any binding effect on policy decisions but it reflects the logical conclusion of our thinking and represents the very real concerns of many British people that our press, the tabloid press in particular, are exercising power without responsibility and failing to live up to the requirements of the role they could and should play in a democratic society.

WILFULLY BLIND

The Committee concluded the Murdochs were either complicit in the unethical behaviour undertaken by its executives and journalists, or else wilfully blind to it, though the Committee did not have access to evidence to determine which. Given the make-up of the Committee; 5 Labour, 5 Conservatives and myself, I had something of a decisive role where there were disagreements that often occurred along party lines. The vote on condemning Rupert Murdoch was such a split and this was not a decision I took lightly, making sure to go through all the evidence before voting.

A few national commentators argued that this had detracted from the report and highlighted a committee split along party lines. This amused me, as what would others have said if the votes had gone the other way, with the coalition MPs on one side and Labour on the other? That would just as surely have been portrayed as a split along party lines, only by Labour rather than

Conservatives!

The report is a public document, and the detailed evidence and questioning is there for people to see and make up their minds. But, as if to confirm my judgement, after our report was published, Neville Thurlbeck, former senior News of the World journalist writing in the News Statesman, revealed this:

“At the height of the hacking scandal, News of the World reporters were despatched to spy round the clock on the members of the culture, media and sport committee. The objective was to find as much embarrassing sleaze on as many members as possible in order to blackmail them into backing off from its highly forensic inquiry into phone hacking.”

Responsibility for the ethos and culture of an organisation that thinks blackmail is an acceptable tool to get its own way has to rest at the very top.

In the immediate future, our report will be debated by parliament with a recommendation to refer it to the Standards and Privileges Committee, which will look at how parliament was misled and what if any sanction to impose. It is unlikely that any MPs will oppose our report but the debate itself ought to prove very uncomfortable for the Labour and Tory leaderships.

The report complements our earlier investigations into media standards and ethics, and will hopefully contribute to the work of the Leveson Inquiry. As a whole, the Committee has been looking at this issue for many years, going back to the Operation Motorman reports, the initial phone hacking allegations and Rebekah Brooks’s comments that payments had been made to police. Along with dogged campaigning from the Guardian, Mark Lewis the legal representative of many of the victims and others, we have kept this in the public eye and contributed to what will hopefully be the wholesale clearing up of the British press. I think that, without our inquiries, a Leveson inquiry, which I was pressing Cameron and Clegg to set up very early on, would have been less likely and the Metropolitan Police may not have opened up the investigation once more.

It has been a long process, in part due to the lack of engagement by the police and unwillingness to investigate fully by News International. Our report criticises both the Metropolitan Police and the Criminal Prosecution Service for failing to investigate properly and it was remarkable for how long News International stuck by its claim that wrong-doing was limited to one rogue reporter. The result has been to open up the issue of media ethics more fully than could ever have been hoped, and firmly against the wishes of the two main parties. One can only hope that, in the post-Leveson world, the media will cease its anti-democratic tendencies to resort to personal attacks, hyperbole and wilful misrepresentation, levelling the playing field for political debate and treating voters with some respect.

For Leveson, our report will be extra fire power to recommend looking at some radical options for the media. Creating a regulatory or oversight regime that is politically independent, impartial and also capable of correcting the mistakes the press accidentally and occasionally deliberately make will be crucial. The Press Complaints Commission has already fallen on its sword and we should have reached the stage where the need for this is unanimously accepted.

Leveson will, however, produce some more equivocal recommendations on the wider problems the inquiries lay bare. His investigation takes into account the relationship between journalists and the police and politicians.

Destroying the often cosy relationship between politicians and the press is crucial for maintaining democratic accountability. Perception is the key and the vote on the fitness clause in the report is a case in point. My Conservative colleagues voted against this amendment as a block, since they believe they were not presented with enough evidence to draw the same conclusion as me and my fellow committee members on the competence of Rupert Murdoch. And, of course, it is true that there was clearly a strategy undertaken by the News International and News of the World employees to protect the Murdochs from any admission of guilt or incompetence throughout the Committee's evidence session. However, the Murdochs still have a large sphere of influence due to their ownership of many media outlets including the Times, the Sun and a part share in Sky. It is therefore perhaps inevitable that, whilst this relationship between politicians and media remains, certain politicians would vote against criticising the competence of Rupert Murdoch. This is the strongest evidence, in my view, of the need for reform in the relationship between media and politicians. We not only need robust safeguards to highlight any personal or business relationships between journalists and politicians; we also need to find a way of building the perception that the interaction between the two is unbiased and constructive. A significant contribution to the apathy we see in the UK comes from the irresponsible ethos of the current relationship and how it appears to the population.

We also need to see the future of the press in the context of the growth of online media. Applying the current regulatory climate to the internet would be impossible; attempting to do so would be counter-productive. The recent spate of Twitter versus celebrities with super injunctions has also shown that we need to look at this area of law closely.

The Inquiry itself, as well as the Murdochs' unofficial trial in the court of public opinion, has also served to vindicate Vince Cable. Although he faced undue criticism for his anti-Murdoch stance, the rulings of this committee have shown Vince to be ahead of the curve in his handling of the BSkyB deal. The real

“Destroying the often cosy relationship between politicians and the press is crucial for maintaining democratic accountability”

shame is that it has taken so long after Vince's 'declaration of war' against Murdoch to get the ball rolling on media reform.

A further aim must be to increase competition between newspaper proprietors. This will help to increase quality and drive down prices, as well as reducing the leverage media magnates hold over politicians. The

reason the Murdochs held such power over successive governments was that their many publications meant unprecedented readership levels and thus too large an influence over the electorate. It must never again be "The Sun wot won it"; rather, the British public must have access to a wide range of views to help them make an informed decision about who they want in government and what laws they want passed.

Sorting out the mess of privacy law is also essential. The press must afford all people, whether they are crime victims or celebrities, a proper degree of privacy, as set out by the European Convention of Human Rights. Of course, a free press is vital for a liberal democracy and we must not infringe on the ability of newspapers to expose corruption and hold decision makers to account. However, this power must never be exploited into unnecessarily and invasively breaching privacy laws. The insidious breach of privacy in the case of Milly Dowler and her family must never be allowed to happen again.

Lastly, the press must be held to a far higher standard. Journalists must treat all stories and all people with a certain level of respect and sensitivity. The media must not be used as a platform to demonise innocent people. For instance, when Chris Jefferies was questioned by the police over the murder of Jo Yeates on Christmas Day, it became a witch hunt for a man who had committed no crime and had done no wrong. Even when the real killer was identified, the media made no apologies for its brutal treatment of Chris Jefferies. This is fundamentally wrong and we should ensure that efforts are made to increase the standard of reporting.

The phone hacking scandal was disturbing on so many levels and, as the scale of the problem became apparent, the public lost its trust in the media. The response made must ensure that, through reform, the public can begin to trust the media again. The Press Complaints Commission failed spectacularly in regulating the crisis. It is time for a new board that is far more rigorous, thorough and, most importantly, independent from editors and politicians alike. I very much hope that, though the fallout from the scandal was painful for all involved, the reforms it prompts will leave a lasting legacy on the future of British media for the better.

Adrian Sanders is Liberal Democrat MP for Torbay and a member of the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee

GOING MOBILE

Help with parenting is essential to social mobility and need not be a ‘nanny state’ activity, says Claire Tyler

Talking about social mobility can excite quite polarised responses both across the political spectrum and indeed within our own party. There are those who see it as an overarching crusade – indeed the very essence of what they stand for in politics – and others who regard it as a distraction from more entrenched problems of income and social inequalities.

Reactions to Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett’s oft-quoted book *The Spirit Level* exemplify this. They argue that social mobility is lowest in those countries that have the highest income inequality and therefore contend that the policy prescription should be mainly about reducing the gap between the rich and the poor through the tax and benefit system and tackling earnings differentials.

I’ve noticed how easy it is to go down a fairly absolutist ‘all or nothing’ path in these debates, but I don’t find this approach particularly helpful. I think the gap between the rich and the poor matters a lot, not just to those at the bottom of the income ladder but also to everyone.

In these perilous economic times, when many people are understandably fearful about their jobs, or chances of getting one, falling living standards and what the future holds, a greater sense of social cohesion (dare I even say social solidarity) becomes ever more crucial.

However, that is not anywhere near the end of the story. For me, both structural inequalities and social mobility matter and both need tackling. Yes, they are related but it’s a question of ‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or’.

I guess that is why I decided to join the all-party parliamentary group on social mobility fairly soon after joining the Liberal Democrat team in the Lords 15 months ago. It’s been a key policy interest since my time in central government as the head of the Social Exclusion Unit and sharpened by my time in the voluntary sector working with the emotional consequences of family and relationship breakdown.

On 1 May, the all-party group launched its first report. It was an unusual line up: Damien Hinds, the Conservative MP who has chaired the group, Hazel Blears and myself. So what – if anything – did we have in common? To be honest, the answer was more than I expected.

Our central message was that much of a young person’s chance of a good job or university place is shaped long before age 16 or 18. Therefore, the drive to equalise opportunities for those who don’t enjoy the privileges of a private education – the vast majority of us – or can’t access the best state schools needs to begin well before school starts.

The group was established to look at why social mobility in Britain has remained stubbornly low by international standards, despite successive governments’ efforts – indeed, in a number of respects,

the evidence suggests it has got worse. The report *Seven Key Truths About Social Mobility* took evidence from a range of expert witnesses and organisations, and brings together findings from a range of other studies, to draw out the most important challenges for policy-makers.

The Seven Key Truths are:

- The point of greatest leverage for social mobility is what happens between 0 and 3, primarily in the home
- You can also break the cycle through education... the most important controllable factor being the quality of your teaching
- But it’s also about what happens after the school bell rings
- University is the top determinant of later opportunities – so pre-18 attainment is key
- But later pathways to mobility are possible, given the will and support
- Personal resilience and emotional wellbeing are the missing link in the chain

This formed the main framework for the rest of the report, which looked at all of these key truths in more detail. In doing so, the report also recognised that, while social mobility is generally viewed as a single subject, it is in fact three related but distinct subjects:

- Breaking out – helping people from socially excluded and troubled backgrounds get their foot on the first rung of the ladder.
- Moving on up – making sure that everyone can reach their full potential or moving up the ladder.
- Nurturing outstanding talent – allowing stars to shine.

The full report recognised that the policy responses needed in these three phases were different.

The early years are critical – including the quality of parenting. Much attention has been given – quite rightly – to the fact that a fifth of places offered by elite universities go to the privately educated, though only 7% of the population go to fee-paying schools.

In fact, the gaps between the private and state sector, and between the better off and worse off in the state sector, can be traced right back to the earliest years. Even test scores for very young children vary dramatically by income group and there is no narrowing of this gap between the ages of three and five. Indeed, the gap persists – and may even widen – through the school years. Early assessment of cognitive skills relates fairly strongly to later academic attainment and eventual job prospects, income and social class.

I find it telling that countries with better levels of social mobility tend to invest in the training and

professional status of staff in early years settings. This seems fertile territory for policy development, even though I can already hear the cries of “there’s no money”.

My instinctive response would be look at the overall quantum of money going into the education system from early years to higher education and ask whether it is distributed in the right place.

The report makes clear that a child’s development from zero to three is the “point of greatest leverage” for social mobility. Ensuring all children are ‘school ready’ by five should be a pivotal goal. Research shows that factors such as being read to on a daily basis at age three translate into the vocabulary a child has at age five and therefore their ability to thrive at school.

This isn’t really rocket science but the report acknowledges that this is “difficult territory” for policy makers as it relates to parenting and what goes on in the home as well as what happens in childcare and nursery settings.

And of course there is, as the report says, “both outstanding parenting and poor parenting in every income group and background”. But there is a growing recognition that few people know instinctively how to parent and many would welcome more support if provided in an appropriate way that doesn’t feel like the state telling you what to do.

The evidence from people who have voluntarily participated in parenting programmes is encouraging and I think that this is good territory for civil society – charities, the voluntary sector, peer to peer support both within the local community and increasingly these days through interactive websites. Initiatives such as the Family Nurse Partnership are proving effective for some of the most troubled families we hear so much about.

More broadly, I strongly support recent government measures such as parenting vouchers to encourage new parents to find approaches that suit them to enhance their parenting skills – and indeed to recognise the strains that the birth of a new child can place on the adult relationship and try to support that as well. The reaction from some of the right wing press – especially the cries of “nanny state” – was all too predictable but I think the evidence is so compelling that we as a party and as politicians need to be brave.

The report finds that there are multiple ways to improve social mobility throughout childhood and adolescence – both in and out of school. Particular focus needs to go on school readiness and progress in reading, having excellent teachers in schools in less affluent areas, and increasing the participation of lower-income children in out-of-school activities. Much improved careers advice and the type of programmes from innovative employers that can help to narrow the gap later on in life are also highlighted.

Another and less well known factor at all ages is the development of emotional wellbeing, personal resilience and ‘character traits’, which the report says

“Few people know instinctively how to parent and many would welcome more support”

warrants more public policy focus. This is an area I have led on for the group. There is an emerging body of fascinating research in this field, which points to the importance of young people developing the social and emotional skills, which in turn gives them the confidence, resilience, persistence and motivation to deal

with the stresses and set backs of everyday life and still come through.

This capability or character trait is increasingly being linked in the academic literature with the ability to move up the social ladder and take advantage of second and third chances. These social and emotional capabilities range from the softer end of the spectrum – empathy and the ability to make and maintain relationships – to the harder end of discipline, application, mental toughness and self-control.

In policy terms, the really interesting thing is that these skills can be taught – not just in early years but also into adulthood – and that effective interventions in this area can make a real difference to educational attainment, employability and job success.

The American Nobel prize-winning economist James Heckman has shown that there is also a clear economic case, with good economic returns for investing early in this area, particularly for disadvantaged children. He concludes that identifying and scaling up these interventions is fertile territory for tackling disadvantage and improving social mobility. And lest this should sound too academic and American, it’s interesting to observe that developing psychological or emotional resilience and mental toughness is seen as a very important life skill by some educationalists here. As one director of children’s services put it: “Not only can we, in many cases, enhance a young person’s performance; these particular skills are useful for just about everything that a person is going to have to do in life.”

A fundamental part of social justice is that everyone should have an equal chance to get on in life. For too many people, it is still the case that their future prospects are determined by the circumstances of their birth rather than by their talents and efforts.

If we are to break out of this cycle of privilege and disadvantage, we need to shine a spotlight on the early years, provide more support to parents, and pay more attention to nurturing emotional wellbeing and resilience.

The all-party group is now entering its really interesting phase – attempting to come up with some new policy ideas that have a wider resonance in a time of severe austerity. It will also be fascinating to see whether the current cross-party consensus holds or whether we end up with dissenting reports.

Claire Tyler is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords. The full report of the all-party group is at www.appg-socialmobility.org

MEET THE LINOS

A recent flurry of Liberal Democrat factions suggests a divided party, but the main division is not where you think, says Simon Titley

What is going on? Until recently, the Liberal Democrats were seriously under-factionalised. Now it's factions-a-go-go.

The Social Liberal Forum has emerged as a serious force representing the mainstream left. Opponents of the coalition recently set up Liberal Left. Opponents of the left recently set up Liberal Reform. If you want stronger right-wing meat, there's Liberal Vision. Those who think the leadership ought to communicate more with the membership have set up Grassroutes to Government. Faced with this sudden outbreak, one exasperated member announced that he was launching Lib Dems Against Factionalism.

But then something remarkable happened. At the beginning of April, the coalition government announced it would include in the Queen's Speech a bill to extend internet snooping powers. And the party spoke as one. Liberal Democrats from across the ideological spectrum joined to express outrage at this threat to civil liberties. Everyone in the party was united on this fundamental issue. Everyone, that is, except the party's policy advisers.

In an ill-tempered conference call on 3 April between some of these advisers and a group of Liberal Democrat bloggers, the advisers could not comprehend why the party was up in arms about internet snooping. They sought solace in the excuse that grassroots anger could be attributed to a problem with 'messaging'.

NO LIBERAL INSTINCTS

How have we got into a situation where the party's policy advisers seem to have no liberal instincts? Why are we being 'advised' by people who think politics is all about 'messaging'? Why has Nick Clegg surrounded himself with people who have little or no grasp of liberal values or grassroots campaigning?

To help answer these questions, let me introduce you to a party faction you may be unaware of. They gather in secret. They never test their ideas in open debate. They never deliver speeches or publish articles explaining their views or actions. They don't have a website. They rarely run for election (in either public or party elections). Yet they've wormed their way into the leader's affections.

Meet the 'Linos': Liberals In Name Only. They are almost all men. And let's name names: Ian Wright, Neil Sherlock and Gavin Grant are not the only culprits by any stretch, but at least one of these three can be found whenever the Linos are plotting (though Grant is currently *hors de combat* because of his new employment). Anyone who has been their ally over the past couple of decades, or a regular at their gatherings, is probably a Lino.

Why a 'Liberal In Name Only'? As we shall see, at roughly ten-year intervals, they change their creed like a pair of trousers. They do not seem to be guided

by constant liberal values but by political fashion and tactical calculations. Theirs is the politics of superficial positioning.

This behaviour looks unprincipled to anyone with enduring values, but it has its own logic, the 'Overton Window'. This concept was devised by an American right-wing libertarian called Joseph P Overton as a means of visualising the limits of acceptance of political ideas. The 'window' can slide back and forth across the ideological spectrum. But at any given time, it includes the range of policies considered politically acceptable in the current climate of public opinion, which a politician can safely recommend without being considered too radical to win elections.

Overton devised his window as a means of helping libertarians move their ideas from the realms of the unthinkable to the popular, and their opponents' ideas from the popular to the unthinkable. Nevertheless, his concept usefully describes how mainstream politicians tend to coalesce around the same narrow range of ideas.

The Overton Window became narrower in the 1990s. Politicians in all three main parties – notably Tony Blair – concluded that Thatcher's victory was definitive. There was no longer any scope for ideological debate because 'There Is No Alternative'; the window seemed permanently fixed over the neoliberal bit of the spectrum. So the Linos aligned with neoliberal ideology not because they care particularly about free markets but because they believe one can win power only if one adopts a position within the window. The idea that the window can be moved never occurs.

The Liberal Democrats have thus ended up with two conflicting groups: a majority whose motivation derives primarily from values and ideas, and who understand that parties must be anchored in coherent political thought if they are not to be wafted by every passing breeze; and a minority whose object is to gain and hold power at any price, which believes that political parties should compete for votes the same way that companies compete for customers, that policy positions can be reduced to a matter of cynical calculation, and consequently that values and ideas *get in the way of* winning power.

One could unfairly characterise this division as one between head-in-the-clouds idealists and sensible pragmatists. And that is precisely what the Linos did. During the 1980s, the coterie around David Steel and Richard Holme regularly talked about being "serious about power", even though the Liberal activists they were attacking had won thousands of council seats and were exercising real power in local authorities, whereas the Linos had never won so much as a parish council seat. The smears against grassroots members have continued to this day.

In this, the Linos were aided by the Labour Party's internecine warfare in the 1980s, between Neil Kinnock and the Militant tendency. It set the template and, ever since, the media has framed the debate about internal party politics in terms of a wise and all-knowing elite confronting a backward and unruly membership. This frame is exploited by each of the party's elites, who monopolise the language of modernity and maturity to denigrate their own members.

Thus the Linos have spun a story to the media about how they are the 'modernisers'. We are never told precisely what it is that was previously not 'modern', or what the process of 'modernisation' consists of. Instead, the Linos' strategy seems to have been little more than an elite project to control the party. To achieve this, besides denigrating party members to the media, they have used two tactics. One was to seize control of the party's communications, which they attempted by setting up the front organisation 'Liberal Democrats in Public Relations and Public Affairs'. The other was to make hefty donations to the leader's office, thus manoeuvring their way into the leader's kitchen cabinet. This strategy ultimately led to the Linos taking control of the 2010 general election campaign.

At the heart of the Linos' political activity is a huge conceit; that they are better than the rest of us. They are 'the people who know', with an entitlement to power, while the rest of us should just shut up and deliver the leaflets. And they are superior to us because they are more professional and 'modern' – but this claim does not stand up to scrutiny. Because they've been wrong about everything.

In the 1980s, they told Liberals they were old-fashioned purists and that social democracy was the coming thing. Merger with the SDP, they claimed, would provide a short cut to power. Instead, it wasted years of Liberal energy in endless negotiations. They also told the Liberals they were unprofessional and that a benefit of the merger would be the imposition of centralised, top-down management on the party. In the event, this 'efficiency' delivered three successive years of council seat net losses in 1988-90, a disastrous performance in the 1989 Euro elections, and a haemorrhage of the new party's members and money.

In the 1990s, they switched ideologies and backed 'the Project' (Paddy Ashdown's cunning plan to merge with New Labour) – enough said. At the time of 1999 leadership election, they were desperately searching for a pro-Project candidate, even though it should have been obvious two years after Blair's landslide that the Project was dead.

In the early 2000s, they switched ideologies again, this time backing neoliberal economics. They bet all their chips on Mark Oaten as Charles Kennedy's successor for leader. Admittedly, most of the Linos eventually dumped Oaten in 2005 (no, not that kind of dumping, although Gavin Grant soldiered on

“They should not be surprised if people assume that they're in it only for themselves”

as Oaten's campaign manager until after *that* scandal). But really, can we trust the judgement of anyone who for one moment considered Oaten as a suitable person to lead the party?

After the banking crisis of 2007-8, they stuck with neoliberalism even though it was plainly a train wreck of an ideology. In 2010, they ran the party's

general election campaign and made a complete hash of it, because they had no idea how to run a political campaign.

And throughout this time, they have shown contempt for the party membership, denigrating activists and seeking to dismantle or bypass internal democracy. But this arrogant disdain is potentially fatal, since a party in which the members have less say is one that fewer members would want to join or work for.

It is not just the Linos' judgment that is wrong but also their values. They are not democrats. Their self-importance means they wish to remain apart from yet in command over the party. They seek to impose their will on the party without the members' consent. They are not liberals either, since a liberal democracy presupposes the equality of political status, and the Linos show no sign of believing in that.

Since the Linos have never articulated any coherent political values or vision, and since they prefer to remain in the shadows and avoid engaging in any public forum, they should not be surprised if people assume that they're in it only for themselves. But if all they want is power for its own sake, why not join the Tories or Labour? Perhaps the Liberal Democrats' relative weakness is the party's attraction, since it is easier to influence.

The Linos – as self-anointed 'modernisers' – like to smear their opponents as 'dinosaurs' but the historical trend shows who the real dinosaurs are. For most of human history, power was monopolised by small groups of men who pursued their own selfish interests. Today, most countries are democracies, if imperfect. And all around the world, people are rising up against concentrations of power. The internet is making it easier to dismantle hierarchies and disperse power. You cannot claim to be 'modern' if you defy this trend.

The greatest criticism that can be made of Nick Clegg's party leadership is that, both in his kitchen cabinet and the deputy prime minister's office, he has chosen to surround himself with Linos or young political novices who share their outlook. Most of his key advisers either don't understand the party's culture or do understand but hold it in contempt. The resulting delusional bubble has led to a string of misjudgements.

When the next leadership election comes along, my advice would be not just to examine the candidates but also to take a good look at their hangers on. And if you spot any Linos, give that candidate a wide berth.

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective

BRIDGING THE NEW GENERATION GAP

This year's Social Liberal Forum conference will focus on intergenerational justice, as the recession sees the young get poorer. Geoff Payne explains why

The first Social Liberal Forum conference last year had the theme 'Liberalism, Equality and the State'.

Having just started a coalition with the Tories, and given the danger of our identity as a party being both defined and overwhelmed by theirs, we obviously needed a debate about how we should deal with that.

How do we ensure the electorate understands what the Liberal Democrats stand for, particularly in relation to the issues on which the Tories most strongly disagree with us? Clearly, issues around equality and top-down marketisation of state functions were our biggest concerns. This was addressed by conference, and the general feedback was that we picked the right agenda and we should do something like it again.

This time round, it has to be conceded that things have not got any easier. Heavy losses in the local elections affect all Liberal Democrats, and the negative quarterly growth figures suggest serious flaws in the government's economic policy – in particular, George Osborne's timetable for budget deficit reduction. In addition to that is a long list of concerns about the policies the government has passed that have been regressive, damaging the environment and even threatened civil liberties.

However, we have deliberately decided that this event is not going to be an introspective affair. The Liberal Democrats continue to be in government making decisions on our behalf, so it is important that SLF members and Liberator readers do what they can to make sure that their views are heard. After all, passing a motion at party conference – although well worth doing – does not always seem sufficient to stop the parliamentary party from whipping its MPs to vote against party policy, as we saw on the Disability Living Allowance.

The theme of the SLF conference this year will be social justice across generations. From 2007, we are already halfway through what looks like a Japanese style 'lost decade' of low growth. One of the consequences will be that, for the first time since the Second World War, the younger generation will be poorer than its parents. However, at the other end of the scale, we are now expected to work for longer. People in their 60s will have to compete for jobs with the younger people that employers would usually prefer to take on. Also, with an ageing population and limited local authority budgets, there will be hard choices for providing care for the elderly.

Last year's riots were a dramatic symptom of intergenerational strife, worse even than during Thatcher's rule in the 1980s. Normally, riots take place

in the summer, so what if anything will stop them from happening again this summer and from now on?

We will be debating this in one of the breakout sessions and I am delighted that one of the speakers for this will be Pauline Pearce, a recent recruit to the Liberal Democrats. Pauline was dubbed the 'Hackney Heroine', a title she earned at the time of the riots when she was secretly filmed giving a very perceptive rant – later posted on YouTube, which made her famous – imploring people not to get involved in the riots, which were destroying the local community. She will be debating with Tom Brake MP and the academic Cliff Stott.

Other issues we will be looking at will include: the housing generation gap; responding to the coalition – new political movements, including a speaker from Occupy; education – an aid to social mobility?; intergenerational inequality; well-being through the generations; the great care scandal; and what is happening to benefits?

Not all of these topics are meant to put the party on the defensive although, given the economic pressures we now have, it is hard to avoid this. The party leadership believes it has a good story to tell on how education is the key to better social mobility and, although there is a lot of opposition within the party to free schools and academies, it would be interesting to debate how this policy may or may not work.

We are delighted to start the day with Nick Clegg as our guest speaker for the inaugural William Beveridge memorial lecture. This is a great opportunity to find out how he intends to push the social justice agenda within government and of course we can ask questions afterwards.

Last year, Nick Clegg gave a controversial Hugo Young Memorial Lecture, in which he identified the 'new progressives' who believe that the best way to tackle poverty is to improve social mobility and provide better incentives to get jobs, and the 'old progressives' who believe in more public spending and increasing benefits. However, unemployment has gone up since then and some benefits have been cut, so how progressive are the 'new progressives'?

One of the key debates taking place at the moment is how to tackle the budget deficit. We debated this at the last conference and the SLF will continue to make this a high priority for the foreseeable future, particularly after my colleague Prateek Buch published his 'Plan C' recently (*Liberator* 352), which you can download from Amazon via: <http://tinyurl.com/c87ox9a>.

However, for this conference there was a view that we should do something different. Thinking along those lines was useful because, if there is one thing

that is even more important, it is 'economics for future generations', which fits into the theme of the conference. Ed Davey has agreed to speak on this topic, as will Professor Mary Mellor from the Green Economics Institute.

It is easy for Liberal Democrats to be smug about the confusing position of the Green Party in relation to this issue. Historically, the Greens have always presented the strongest critique of economic growth, even to the extent of actually opposing economic growth, and yet now they are making the case for a Keynesian-style economic stimulus from which we can grow our way out of recession and reduce the budget deficit.

However, the economic crisis we are facing is not of their making and the contradiction they are facing is one we need to face up to as well. If we think the Osborne timetable for deficit reduction is depressing growth and is counter productive – just for the sake of argument – then an alternative stimulus policy that arguably could solve that problem may well put further pressure on resources and the environment that Greens, and some Liberals, have long argued are not sustainable.

So growth, if it can be achieved, comes at a price. In addition, there has long been a debate in the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats about the social price of economic growth given the influence of J.S. Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*, and it was interesting to hear Ed Davey at a Green Liberal Democrat fringe meeting at the last Liberal Democrat conference refer to his influences from the seminal book *Small is Beautiful* by E.F. Schumacher. It was hard to see any influence from Schumacher in the more recent and influential *Orange Book*, so it will be interesting to hear what Ed will say about that.

Finally we will be looking at 'Reasserting the Liberal Democrats'. In the early stages of the coalition, the Liberal Democrat leadership decided to "take ownership" of the decisions made by the coalition. This unfortunately gave the impression that we were simply propping up the Tories, and so our poll ratings slumped. In response, the Liberal Democrats have started to emphasise their differences – a strategy known as differentiation.

However, on some key decisions, such as the 50p tax rate and introducing the mansion tax, we did not get these policies through. Given the outcome of the recent Queen's Speech, there are concerns that the Tory right has more leverage over the coalition than the Liberal Democrats. So the question now is: how do we reassert the Liberal Democrats in government so that the electorate can appreciate that the Liberal Democrats really are making a difference?

How much room for manoeuvre do we have short of ending the coalition, and what are the red lines from which we would want to demand that the coalition should end? Conversely, if government policies start to become more popular, how do we get credit for those that work?

Geoff Payne is events organiser of the Social Liberal Forum. Details of the conference are at: <http://socialliberal.net>

Social Liberal Forum conference

Saturday 14 July 2012

Early Bird rate is £35, or £25 concession (students and unwaged). This includes lunch and refreshments throughout the day.

Venue: King's College London (Waterloo campus),
Franklin-Wilkins Building, Stamford Street, London
SE1 8WA

Theme: Social Justice Across Generations

Topic sessions:

- * Is the government tackling the causes of the riots?
- * Does inequality only matter when it becomes intergenerational?
 - * Well-being through the generations
- * Is education the key to social mobility?
 - * The housing generation gap
- * The great care scandal: what should be done?
 - * Responding to the coalition: new political movements
 - * What is happening to benefits?

Speakers:

Nick Clegg
Simon Hughes
Ed Davey
Linda Jack
Evan Harris
Prof Mary Mellor
Pauline Pearce (the 'Hackney heroine')
Naomi Colvin (Occupy)
Gordon Lishman
Emily Davey
Tom Brake
Paul Burstow
Michael Meadowcroft
Alex Marsh
Tim Nichols
and many others...

book online at <http://socialliberal.net>

IS IT TIME TO PULL THE PLUG?

The Liberal Democrats tried to make coalition work, but they've forgotten about fairness and the Tories have proved unfit to govern, says Chris White

After most difficult elections, we can usually find some crumbs of comfort. The disappointments of 1992 were accompanied by Don Foster's victory in Bath. In 2005, the failure to capitalise on Labour's warmongering at least saw a record number of Liberal Democrat seats in the House of Commons. And in the dark days after the merger, one very large crumb was the defeat of David Owen's SDP by the Monster Raving Loony Party.

But this time, it was a Liberal Democrat candidate who was defeated by a penguin, while we fell behind the Greens in the London mayoral race. We lost 367 council seats. Fourth places were not uncommon.

There were some gains, the party was eager to tell us: a couple in Brentwood, some good results in Portsmouth and Eastleigh and a few other areas, and some signs that we coped reasonably well when our opponents were the Tories. And in some areas where we were hit hard last year, we recovered our position, most notably in Hull.

But these were just crumbs. The cake went mainly to Labour – and dramatically so in Cardiff, Edinburgh, Manchester and Liverpool. As has been noted elsewhere, the results in the last were the same as we achieved 50 years ago, as if the Liberal Democrat hegemony in that city had never been.

We thought – foolishly it would seem – that, in the absence of an AV referendum flushing out conservative-minded voters, it would be easier than last year. At least the Tories also got a kicking this time – another crumb.

In reality, it was never going to be easy. Some of it is the unfairness of office: “If you're in government, you lose seats”, one council leader has said to me.

We are bound to be unpopular if we make massive cuts: no-one is really listening if you point out that the national debt is still rising and that we are therefore still inflating the economy like good Keynesians.

The public, moreover, is remarkably quick to accept the arguments of public sector staff – even if they have to pay for pensions and pay levels that the ordinary private sector worker no longer receives.

And every single daily and Sunday paper pumps out anti-coalition, and especially anti-Liberal Democrat, bile, with the Guardian and Independent, always fair-weather friends, happily targeting Nick Clegg even when there is some government initiative of which they would normally approve.

Couple all that with a eurozone crisis, and a public that has no experience of how coalitions actually work, and our electoral task becomes truly Herculean.

Yes, life's tough. But while we were warned that dealing with the crisis was going to be “bloody awful”, as Vince Cable told us at the special conference two years ago, the government's unforced errors are much more difficult to parry.

Bluntly, the 2012 elections were fought against a backdrop of sometimes blithering incompetence. Just a quick reminder:

- ☛ The ridiculous ‘pastagate’ episode, where grown men outshouted each other in their desperation to suggest that they were ordinary Joes who snuck out of Whitehall offices each lunchtime to feast in Greggs (I have never eaten in Greggs – come and stone me).
- ☛ ‘Granny Tax’ – a non-issue turned into a soundbite by one of the least credible Labour leaders in history.
- ☛ The pointless cut in the 50% top level of income tax, while banking bonuses continue to outrage the public.
- ☛ The scandals linked to News International – the Liberal Democrat innocence on this score is neutered by the fact that we are working with the guilty in government.
- ☛ The NHS – much less of an issue than I feared, probably redeemed by the fact that the public still hasn't the slightest idea what the argument was about.
- ☛ The assault on charitable giving, the political equivalent of making off with the collection box on a flag day.
- ☛ The Heathrow queues.

This is not a comprehensive list. I tell myself it could have been worse. Tuition fees came up only once in my campaign. And people haven't registered the implications of internet snooping yet. There's always next year, I suppose.

But the key problem is our increasing irrelevance. If we have some unpleasant messages and yet are identified with things we value, then we could conceivably break through even this catalogue of errors and inconsistencies.

We are indeed making progress on things like House of Lords reform, increased devolution to local authorities, better parental leave and so forth. We have indeed delivered a remarkable percentage of our manifesto (another crumb here), but it was a pretty poor manifesto in the first place.

I know the Queen's Speech contained rather more than the press, the CBI and Tory backbenchers were willing to admit, but the perception is that the voters are supposed to say: "I have lost my job with the council and can't find another but I will support you because you're keen on constitutional reform and passed an interesting motion about the Quality of Life at your Conference."

It is hardly surprising that, too often in this election, I and others were told: "You're a good councillor but..." Three encounters have especially stuck in my mind.

The first was a long-term mentally ill man who is losing benefits but cannot work. He said he couldn't vote for me because of what the government had done to his income and well-being.

The second was a single mum with three children, who is losing £300 a month in tax credits: a party member since childhood, but feeling finally betrayed by a government which appears indifferent to poverty and women.

The third: a man in constant pain with an incurable illness, who finds he will not be getting ESA. He was given just three weeks' notice.

When bankers are still getting bonuses, when industry still pays itself too much, when there is a crassly-handled symbolic cut in the top rate of tax, it is hardly surprising that people like these are asking questions about fairness.

When you shave away the presentational errors and the simple horror of the economy, you are left with the simple problem: it's not just that we have become irrelevant (we are used to that). We have failed to concentrate on the most important liberal value of all:

fairness. Bluntly, we can't go on like this. If it was the right decision to enter into coalition in 2010 – which it was – is it the case now?

The Tories were also scarred by these results and will want to concentrate more on key Tory values, like immigration, despite the fact that limits on immigration will weaken the economy – but don't expect joined-up thought from Tories.

They are not going to deliver on fairness: they hate single mums (favouring subsidies to marriage), they are not very interested in the economically inactive and believe that deregulation and happenstance are more likely to yield growth than Yellow Book-style industrial leadership from central government.

There was always a risk that there would be too much difference between Liberal Democrats and Tories. Were we offering positive differentiation that actually meant anything to the voters – trumpeting fairness rather than constitutional reform – then there is an outside chance that we might re-engage with the missing voters. But it is an outside chance, let's be honest. And the failure of the party to engage with the police commissioner elections in November will only make things worse.

We have tried to make coalition government work. We showed our patriotism in attempting to prioritise the economy. But the Tories are just unfit for government. It's time we said so. But will the coalition survive home truths?

Chris White is a Liberal Democrat county and district councillor in Hertfordshire

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BEHIND THE PENGUIN

Scotland's Liberal Democrats turned in a dismal performance in May. Can they rebuild by 2015, wonders Caron Lindsay?

For the second year in succession, Scottish Liberal Democrats suffered a bruising at the polls. Every council seat was up for grabs on 3 May. In 2007, the first elections held under the single transferable vote introduced by the Liberal Democrats, we won 166 seats and were part of 13 administrations in Scotland's 32 local authorities. Now, we have just 70 councillors and are part of four administrations.

Most humiliating is the enduring image of a candidate dressed as a penguin (who in reality had run a serious local campaign) attracting more first preferences in one of our weaker areas of Edinburgh.

There's no getting away from the fact that these results are disappointing. We've lost some excellent councillors and our local government base has been wiped out in seven areas. It's not as bad as last year's Holyrood elections, where we lost more than two-thirds of our seats, but it's still nowhere near where we need to be. We started the campaign with 152 councillors, after by-election losses and defections. We didn't defend all of those. In 14 wards where we had two councillors, we stood only one this time. We weren't helped by the fact that 30% of our councillors stood down so we didn't have the benefit that incumbency brings.

The Liberal Democrat group in Edinburgh was decimated. From leading the council we are now in fifth place. The big issue was the massively over-budget, delayed, curtailed tram project which, ironically, the Greens support. The administration inherited a contractual minefield and, with unhelpful coalition partners, the challenges proved almost insurmountable. The Liberal Democrats were the only party to show consistent leadership, but residents had had enough. The local paper ran a vitriolic campaign against the administration. The trams cast a long shadow over an otherwise impressive performance in the capital.

Despite inheriting a financial mess from Labour (sound familiar?), ex-leader Jenny Dawe and her team sorted that out while building the first council houses in a generation, slashing homelessness, cutting crime, improving social care and increasing educational attainment. They had some ambitious plans in their manifesto but all the press wrote about was a tiny, ill-advised sentence on extending the tram network in the future. That was the last straw for residents who were fed up after four years of huge holes in the road.

Generally, wherever we were in administration we suffered, a sign that the workload our councillors took on didn't leave them enough time for campaigning and dialogue with the electorate.

There are some things to take a little comfort from. The three seats we retained in Edinburgh were all in Mike Crockart's Edinburgh West constituency. Similarly, the three wards where we won two seats

were in held Westminster seats. We lost North East Fife last year, but would have won it back easily from the SNP.

Alex Salmond's SNP came out on top overall but failed, against a divided Labour Party, to win control of Glasgow, a disaster for the SNP. The resurgence of the Labour Party in Central Scotland is challenging for the SNP ahead of the independence referendum.

There is no getting away from the fact that the Westminster coalition continues to hurt us. While everyone is less angry than last year, in three years' time we have to rebuild trust. Leader Willie Rennie ruefully commented: "These results should dispel any myth that the Liberal Democrats are only in the coalition for ourselves. We never were. It has always been about doing the right thing for the fortunes of the country."

Our ministers are delivering a great deal on issues important to the electorate – from saving the sleeper train service to local post offices. They need to get out there and get that across.

With no elections next year, the danger is that activists will just retreat. We can't afford for that to happen. Nobody else is going to make our case for us and we face well-funded party machines itching to trash us. The evidence from the results is that we did best where we campaigned intensely over a long period. The old mantra "where we work we win" has never been more relevant. Being in opposition to Labour-led councils that are already introducing cabinet systems and giving pay rises to senior councillors should reinvigorate campaigning on the ground.

The next electoral test is the 2014 European election. Holding our seat is a challenge in the best of circumstances. That campaign has to start now. In the independence referendum later in 2014, we have to be seen to play a positive, intelligent and enthusiastic role.

In 2015, our MPs face their day of reckoning. Their fortunes will depend not just on the economy but on the local organisations they can build. They will be helped Rennie, who has already proved likeable and effective, and is popular with activists. He made Alex Salmond squirm over his links to Rupert Murdoch, Donald Trump and Brian Souter.

So the conclusion is that we have little choice but to keep calm and carry on campaigning. And some good recipes for penguin wouldn't go amiss.

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

WALES STAYS AT HOME

Deliberate abstention by supporters angered by the Budget damaged the Welsh Liberal Democrats, says Peter Black

There is no getting away from how bad the council elections were for the Welsh Liberal Democrats. Not only did we fall back from our high tide marks of 2004 and 2008, when we had benefited from national swings against Labour, but we lost a lot more ground on top of that.

Swansea, Cardiff and Wrexham, which we had led for eight years and where it has been acknowledged that we had done a good job, were lost and two council leaders were unseated.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats did achieve one or two remarkable results. In Aberaeron, for example, Elizabeth Evans polled 91% of the vote against her Plaid Cymru rival. Nevertheless it was a difficult and disappointing night for many candidates and councillors. The final total was 74 councillors, a net reduction of 92.

In Cardiff, the Welsh Liberal Democrats produced one of the lowest council tax rises across Wales over the four-year term, in stark contrast to the increases in many Labour areas. Cardiff under the Welsh Liberal Democrats was praised by the Wales Audit Office as showing “clear and firm leadership within the council and finances are managed effectively”. It has become a capital city to be proud of. Despite that, we lost 18 seats, including leader Rodney Berman, and dropped to being the second largest party. Labour gained 33 seats to secure overall control.

In Swansea, the Liberal Democrats froze the council tax this year, having previously kept rises at less than half the rate of the previous Labour administration. They reopened the leisure centre that had been closed due to Labour neglect, funded free bus travel for under-16s in the holidays, opened a new bus station, a central library and contact centre, as well as refurbishing and building new schools. And yet they lost 10 seats as Labour gained 22 to take control.

In Wrexham, the WAO said that the Welsh Liberal Democrat-led council “has strong and well developed financial management and a history of not overspending on its annual budget”. Careful financial planning does not just result in lower council tax bills, but in improved quality of life. Regeneration of Wrexham town centre, reduced waiting lists and higher quality services are all benefits of the readjustments of the way money was spent. Unfortunately, that record of success was not reflected in the way people voted. The leader lost his seat and the party’s representation fell from 11 seats to four. For once, Labour failed to take overall control, though it is the largest party.

What is surprising is how few activists saw this coming. The opinion polls were very clear, but the message on the doorstep was consistently that people liked our record locally and supported what we were doing. Yes, many were disillusioned with our role in government but it seemed that the message that this election was about local issues was getting through.

This was evident in my own ward too. However, over 600 people who normally vote for the Welsh Liberal Democrats failed to come out to cast their vote. That was a pattern repeated across Wales. This was not a turnout issue or apathy; it was a deliberate abstention to make a point, and it cost the party dear.

The issue that exercised most people was the Budget. Despite the fact that the rise in the income tax personal allowance contained in it will put £130 back in the pockets of more than a million low and middle income workers in Wales, and will take a further 51,000 of the lowest paid people in Wales out of paying income tax altogether, that message was not getting through.

People instead focussed on the ‘pasty tax’ and the cut in the higher rate of tax to 45%. The weeks of poor publicity around the measures announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer took their toll and people voted accordingly or, in many cases, decided not to vote at all in protest.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats have benefited in the past from protest votes. On 3 May, we found out what it was like to be on the receiving end. We cannot ignore the views that have been expressed.

The UK coalition and the Liberal Democrat ministers in it need to listen. We need to reduce the deficit but we also have to recognise that there is a human cost to that and respond accordingly. Above all, we need to revisit measures that might stimulate growth in the economy and get people back to work.

We can recover and rebuild our support and our local council base. But now we are a party of government, we have to understand that local work and successes may no longer be enough. Listening and responding to concerns at a national as well as a local level are essential as we pick ourselves up, dust ourselves down and get back to campaigning. We have been at lower points than this and bounced back. We will do so again.

Peter Black AM is Liberal Democrat local government spokesperson in the Welsh Assembly

A BAD IDEA BEATEN

The illiberal concept of elected mayors was defeated almost everywhere in May. Excellent news, says Mark Smulian

Out of the carnage of 3 May, there was one bit of thoroughly good news – the sweeping rejection in all but two cities polled of elected mayors. Let this be an end to this illiberal gimmick.

I am indebted to former Lewisham Liberal Democrat councillor Matthew Huntbach – whose council was one of the first to go mayoral – for pointing out that the arguments in favour of elected mayors are at root fascist.

That is not here a casual political insult. Proponents of mayors talk endlessly about “strong leaders”, “visible executive leadership”, someone who can “get things done” by sweeping away the tiresome compromises required by collective democracy.

This is all about one person enjoying complete power, while subject between elections to only toothless accountability, let alone recall. We all know where that has led. It is only a wonder that the pro-mayor political establishment in the Tory and Labour parties, academia and think tanks has yet to claim that elected mayors can make the trains run on time.

As has been amply demonstrated by the undignified contest for mayor of London, mayoral elections are not about policy, but about personalities. Even the turnout at 38% was nothing special, confounding persistent claims from pro-mayor groups that this boosts voter interest.

It is impossible for any party to conduct an effective campaign on the ground across the whole of London, so it is fought as an ‘air war’ in a few media outlets, and so turns into a battle based on charisma.

While I’m pleased that the Liberal Democrats held two seats on the London Assembly, the London system shows the dangers of the mayoral power imbalance in extreme form. London’s mayor can essentially do as he pleases once elected. The only restraint is that a two-thirds majority in the Assembly can reject his budget, something so difficult to construct that it has never happened.

It is a little like one of those consultative bodies that Third World dictators occasionally feel constrained to set up, in which 25 full-time politicians can question, comment, investigate, criticise and scrutinise until they are all purple in the face, but cannot compel a mayor to do anything, or to pay their proposals any heed if they choose not to.

Provincial mayoralities have seen even worse examples of celebrity politics – robocops, local newspaper proprietors, football mascots and right-wing extremists have been among the winners. Indeed, there is some evidence that the unappealing mixture of posturing celebrities, exhibitionists and Labour MPs tired of opposition – all of whom were circling around the putative city mayoralities – helped the model to defeat through public disgust in May. No doubt another nail in the coffin was David Cameron’s extraordinary offer of ‘a Boris’ for cities mostly noted for their lack of Tories.

But the main problem with elected mayors is a basic liberal one – that too much power is concentrated in one person. That person may be good and exercise power responsibly. But if they are bad or mad, they can be neither curbed nor removed.

Even the Archbishop of Canterbury can, in theory, be removed by the Queen. No-one can touch an elected mayor, short of their being imprisoned. They cannot be removed by their council; there is no power of recall, no substantial restraint.

It was questionable for Nottingham Labour party to leaflet ethnic minority voters warning them that a mayoralty could be captured by the BNP or EDL. But the idea that an independent or celebrity with racist views could win an elected mayoralty is rather less far fetched, and nothing could prevent them from harming ethnic minority residents, short of illegality.

There is also a problem of the entrenched power of incumbency. Apart from the circuses in London, the only mayoralty ever to change hands has been North Tyneside (although the Tories held Torbay after deselecting the original incumbent).

The chances of an idiot, a criminal or a celebrity devoid of any relevant background – or anyone otherwise entirely inexperienced and unfitted – becoming a conventional council leader are small. Council leaders depend on a party group whose other members will remove them if their conduct becomes too egregious or politically damaging, and will have had to have served as a councillor for some years with their abilities and failings on show. But total novices can and have become mayors.

Pro-mayor campaigners never explain why they don’t follow the logic of their argument and apply it nationally. Why not a ‘strong leader’ as prime minister, directly elected, impossible to remove, potentially devoid of political experience and holding all powers without any reference to MPs? Merely posing the question shows the problem.

If residents of any area actually vote to have a mayor (as opposed to being arm-twisted into a referendum by Conservatives desperate for a way back into big cities), they should be free to have it. But concentrating power in one person is something any liberal should find repugnant.

Mark Smulian is a member of the Liberator Collective

FREEING EXPRESSION

The Defamation Bill is the climax of a long campaign by civil libertarians and scientists to reform the draconian libel laws, says Prateek Buch

After years of tireless campaigning from a broad coalition of organisations seeking to defend free speech; after numerous heroic personal battles against lawsuits that threatened the livelihoods of those guilty of nothing more than speaking out in the public interest; after decades of libel tourists and bullying corporations exploiting England and Wales's illiberal libel laws to silence critical commentary; finally, a moment of clarity.

The Queen's Speech promised that the government will bring forward a Defamation Bill, designed to overhaul these libel laws and make them fit for the twenty-first century. Liberal Democrats from the grassroots to the parliamentary party have played a significant role in bringing about this important moment.

The battle to secure free and unfettered expression is far from over, and significant concerns remain regarding the need for a statutory public interest defence, the ability to strike out claims that chill genuine debate at an early stage, restrictions on corporations using libel laws to silence dissent, and adequate provisions to prevent online intermediaries being censored for carrying third-party content.

A draft Defamation Bill published last year, based on Liberal Democrat peer Lord Lester's private member's bill, received a cautious welcome from libel reform campaigners who backed a parliamentary scrutiny committee's recommendation that any legislation must go further in these areas in particular if libel laws are to be adequately reformed.

Julian Huppert MP, who served on the scrutiny committee and has long championed the cause, is among those who remain hopeful that, through thorough consultation with legal experts and campaigners, these concerns can be addressed to truly ensure the protection of free speech.

These concerns notwithstanding, the inclusion of a Defamation Bill in this year's Queen's Speech marks another significant step forward for this remarkable campaign that aims to rid journalists, bloggers, scientists and charities (among others) from the chilling spectre of England and Wales's outdated and restrictive libel laws.

Although reform of libel legislation had long been mooted, successive governments had taken little, if any, action. All too often, lawmakers hid behind inadequate legal instruments stemming from case law (such as the Reynolds defence, that publication of material alleged to be defamatory is in fact in the public interest and stems from 'responsible journalism'), or the unfounded fear of tipping the balance too far in favour of indiscriminate attacks on reputation.

Shaking the establishment into finally agreeing to

reform took admirable courage from individuals like Simon Singh and Peter Wilmshurst, who had suffered the slings and arrows of being sued for libel, coupled to an equally admirable public campaign and behind-the-scenes lobbying effort coordinated by Index on Censorship, English PEN and Sense about Science among others.

This coalition of campaigners managed to grab the public's attention by exposing how our libel laws were preventing open debate about issues that really matter. At the same time, they began work to convince the main political parties that reforming these outdated and illiberal laws was a pressing priority in the fight to defend freedom of expression.

I am proud to have played a small role, as an ordinary grassroots Liberal Democrat, in bringing the issue to our party's attention. With Evan Harris's support, in September 2009 I submitted an amendment to a motion proposing the Freedom Bill, which Richard Dawkins moved and was adopted in an overwhelming show of support from conference.

At the same conference, I organised and chaired a fringe meeting at which Simon Singh, Ben Goldacre, journalist Nick Cohen and Sile Lane from Sense about Science joined Evan Harris in calling for far-reaching reforms to protect responsible journalism and critical inquiry. Little did we know then that, less than three years later, the government would table just such reforms, albeit with some gaps to be filled.

Liberal Democrats have consistently led the political movement for reform, with Nick Clegg and Lord McNally driving the agenda. Following our party's manifesto commitment to reforming the law, similar promises followed from Labour and the Conservatives. The public clamour for reform matched the emerging cross-party consensus, which suggests that the campaign tapped into a genuine appetite for libel reform. Although considered by many as being of peripheral interest, this reform is crucial to ensuring that open, democratic debate in the public interest can proceed without the fearful chill of being silenced by bullying libel claims.

The ultimate aim remains to protect the freedom of speech by redressing the imbalance between the right to defend a reputation and the right to openly discuss matters of public interest, currently skewed far too much towards the former.

As things stand, it's too easy to silence honest opinion and responsible journalistic criticism using the crude and illiberal English and Welsh libel laws. Let's hope that, when enacted, these reforms go the distance and restore the principle of free and open expression to the heart of a vibrant and liberal democracy.

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

Ghosts of Empire by Kwasi Kwarteng Bloomsbury 2011 £25

Kwasi Kwarteng is a Conservative MP. Given his account of the British Empire, this is almost incomprehensible but, as Private Willis (an intellectual chap) put it in *Iolanthe*, “every boy and every gal that’s born into the world alive is either a little Liberal or else a little Conservative!” Socialists are of course, usually, the worst kind of conservative.

Kwarteng focuses on a handful of Britain’s imperial adventures, and how these have impacted on some of the greatest tragedies of the modern world. He starts with Iraq, moves on to Kashmir, then Burma, Sudan, Nigeria and Hong Kong. Therein we are treated to a catalogue of errors, usually the choice of the man on the ground, with little or no reference to parliament (which, in any case, at the time was barely up to dealing with such matters).

Change the man on the spot and, like as not, the policy would change. I believe it was Julius Nyerere who said something like the borders of African countries were so insane that there must be something sacred in them. Most of these countries didn’t exist outside of the imperialist nightmare, which accounts for their being barely sustainable, except by force, now. The partition of Sudan is important because it breaks down an old imperial frontier, though we certainly haven’t heard the end of that matter.

Though Tanganyika isn’t one of Kwarteng’s cases, Nyerere was a typical product of the imperial system – the son of a Zanaki chief, given an education (typical of the imperialist feudal mentality, to promote those who reflected their hierarchical world view), is polluted by Fabianism while at Edinburgh University and drives his country to wrack and ruin.

Progressive Liberals fought a rearguard action against all this, but we had our Liberal Imperialists and others, and tended not to overturn the policies of a previous Tory administration.

The piece on Burma is perhaps the best example of this. Randolph Churchill had flouted parliamentary sovereignty in the annexation of Upper Burma, and Gladstone undoubtedly found himself in a no-win situation. We are treated



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to Henry Richard’s denunciation of imperial war and Lewis McIver, who seems to have had some understanding of the country, attacking the move in the Commons. The gist of this is that, by overthrowing an existing government, the country would be “consigned to a long period of anarchy” (the term used pejoratively, but haven’t we seen that somewhere else more recently?). Kwarteng concludes on Burma, with the tragedies of Aung San and his daughter Aung San Suu Kyi.

Kwarteng concludes: “The British Empire, in its scale and ethos, was completely unlike any system of government that the world has known. It is highly unlikely that such an enterprise will be undertaken by any nation, no matter how powerful, ever again.” The dominant imperialisms – American and Chinese, are certainly different beasts – even in denial that they are imperialism at all.

Stewart Rayment

The Atlantic and Its Enemies

by Norman Stone
Penguin 2011 £12.99

Somewhere between Allen Lane and Penguin, Stone’s opus has lost something in its subtitle – it is no longer ‘A personal history of the Cold War’ but ‘A history of the Cold War’. Take note.

Stone is a Conservative, indeed sometime adviser and speech writer to Margaret Thatcher. As an academic, one does not doubt his expertise on Russia and eastern Europe, and he has insight on matters closer to home.

The book is pretty much what it says on the packet – a history of the Cold War; it is opinionated, and that is why a ‘personal history’ is most honest, because we know where it comes from.

In the middle of the book is an essay ‘1968: A Generation’ – it is an attack on France, and all that has gone wrong with it since the Third Republic (it is great to find somebody giving a cheer for Jean Zay – cruelly murdered by the Vichy Milice and, like so many minor ministers of governments, almost forgotten).

Essentially a collection of essays, you can dip in and out. ‘Ending History’ is worth a read as a critical appraisal of Thatcher (with a particularly jaded academic twist). I can’t help thinking that those problems are still with us; just what did New Labour achieve?

One will concede that Liberal parties were not major players in the UK throughout this period. In ‘Ending History’, Stone cannot bring himself to name us – ‘the middle party’ takes Eastbourne after Ian Gow’s assassination by the Provisional IRA. So you know where we stand. I will be more generous. Stone provides a useful insight to the events those times, especially since many of the issues are unresolved and thus work in progress.

Stewart Rayment

The Arabs: A History by Eugene Rogan Penguin 2011 £12.99

Last year’s Tim Garden Memorial Lecture, by Peter Hennessey, focussed on forecasting, and the great question is ‘Why did nobody predict the Arab Spring?’ Well Eugene Rogan might have done; in his introduction, he cites the assassination of the journalist Samir Kassir on 2 June 2005, in the wake of the Cedar Revolution that followed the murder of Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri by the Syrians.

Kassir had written of the ‘Arab malaise’ of the 21st century: “It’s not pleasant being Arab these days... feelings of persecution for

some, self-hatred for others; a deep disquiet pervades the Arab world.” The sense was that something had to change.

Since 9/11, the Islamic world, of which the Arab world is a major part, has impacted on western thinking – or rather couldn’t be ignored any longer. Of course, the interaction has gone on from the inception of Islam, and the boot hasn’t always been on the western foot. But when it has been on the western foot, for the last couple of centuries at least, we have been bastards. Our actions have inevitably been motivated by greed and our own short-term interests.

The west has consistently favoured reactionary, usually military, dictatorships, however they are dressed. If we look at the response to the Arab Spring (where our governments can certainly be said to have been caught with their trousers down), how much more venomous has it been towards Assad and Qadhafi in the radical corner than those on the conservative side – are either any better than the other?

Rogan starts his story in the sixteenth century and, the temptation to run straight to the present aside, it is worth going back this far to get a full perspective, not least the relationship of the Arab world to Turkey. Sadly, as the West becomes more engaged, all one can say is “what bastards we’ve been”, and the worst of it, the USA learnt nothing from the mistakes of the British and French. Our cultural debt to the Arab world is incalculable, going back long before the period of this book. As there may now be a chance to address old ills, a better understanding is called for, and Rogan’s book is a good place to start.

Stewart Rayment

A Guide to the Works of Art of The National Liberal Club London by Michael Meadowcroft National Liberal Club 2011 £15

Visitors to the National Liberal Club cannot have failed to notice that the walls are festooned with portraits of old buffers, their identities, for the most part, lost in the mists of time. And that is a pity, because these portraits, some magnificent, some less so, tell the story of the Liberal (and Liberal Democrat) Party, at its highest and lowest points.

Michael Meadowcroft’s excellent version of the guide (the second edition; the first appeared in 1997) brings these figures to life again, restoring to those subjects and those who painted them their history, importance and often fascinating back stories.

The collection began in the 1890s, when many busts and portraits were offered to the Club, “more often than not of Mr Gladstone”. During the Second World War, the better portraits were evacuated to Cornwall, a “wise move as the Club suffered a direct hit on 11 May 1941”, most returning in 1944.

The guide takes us through the Club room by room. Not just the portraits, but sculptures, busts and cartoons are noted and explained. The most famous and striking hangs in the entrance hall; the portrait of Churchill painted by Ernest Townsend of Derby.

Presented in 1915, it shuttled in and out of prominence as its subject crossed and re-crossed the floor of the House, suffering from the bomb damage of 1941, finally being re-hung in 1943, when Sir Winston and Lady Churchill attended its second unveiling. We are reminded that Lady Churchill voted Liberal all her life.

There are some surprising jewels hidden away. In the Business Facilities Room hangs an extraordinary portrait of Cyril Smith, by the Rochdale artist Paul Temple. Dressed in a glorious suit as blue as the North Sea on a summer’s day, cuffs, shirt and handkerchief the brilliant white of the spume of breaking waves, above which the high cheek bones

of the face and the enormous chin rise majestically, like a cliff face. A wonderful, unusual and life affirming work, which captures the strength and charm of its subject.

The collection includes many politicians of today. Andrew Festing’s very informal portrait of Paddy Ashdown in shirtsleeves hovers near Anthony Oakshett’s David Steel in full Privy Councillor rig (painted against the background of the Smoking Room where they both hang). The joy of Meadowcroft’s guide is that it makes one want to look more closely at each and every picture. A gentle faced Jo Grimond, an ebullient Lloyd George in the gorgeous robes of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sickert’s Charles Bradlaugh MP (the artist now more famous than his subject), Solomon’s Asquith, and many others, make up the glorious canon of the great and the good of the party.

One of the best and most important portraits is of the almost forgotten Sir Charles Dilke (1843-1911), considered by his political peers to be skilled and politically astute enough to succeed Gladstone as leader of the party, where it not for his unfortunate predilection for married ladies.

A naturally light room, in contrast with much of the Club, the Lady Violet Room is a gallery of ladies. Another Anthony Oakshett portrait of Nancy Seear (lovely hands), and a rather forbidding Baroness Robson by Laura Buxton, join the famous, fabulous copy of the original Orpen’s Violet Bonham Carter (nee Asquith) by Julian Barrow. This is glamorous in the original sense of the word, imbued with magic, and is, copy or not, one of the finest paintings in the collection.

The book is available from the Club Secretary (www.nlc.org.uk) for £15 (Club members £12).

Wendy Kyrle-Pope

Where better to be in early summer than Cornwall? I have come to spend a short holiday at Trescothick Bay and am pleased to report that the Jamaica Guest House fully justifies the praise it receives in the pages of *Wainwright's West Country Marginals*. It has a dinner gong, which in my experience one only finds in the finest such establishments. The Well-Behaved Orphans are romping on the sand, investigating the rock pools and exploring the cliffs. "They're better than a chimbley!" one little mite excitedly exclaims as he climbs.

Talking to the locals in the *Jolly Tyler*, however, I learn that the local economy is in a bad way. Cheap fudge imports from the Far East, the failure of the clotted cream crop and the decline of the tin mining heritage interpretation industry have hit the county hard. So it is no wonder that the people of Cornwall add to their modest incomes by making and selling pasties. Yet when I attempt to introduce this subject to the conversation, I am met with dark looks and mumbled entreaties to remain silent.

I soon discern how the land lies and tap my nose in what I like to think is a knowing manner. Later, as if by chance, I introduce the subject of Leicestershire's occupation of Rutland and how we used to run pork pies to avoid the excise duty.

As I am making my way back to the Jamaica Guest House, a local accosts me with a dreadful leer.

"Does ee want to help the pastymen?" he asks – I flatter myself I render the local dialect accurately. "Then look ee for a remote cove."

I resolve to spend the next day looking for that cove.

After breakfast, I leave the Well-Behaved Orphans on the beach and, stopping only to entreaty them to "Watch the wall, my darlings, while the pastymen go by," I set off in search of the remote cove.

All morning I stride the cliff tops on my quest and, though I am wearing quite the lightest of tweeds, I have worked up quite a thirst by lunchtime. So I allow my steps to wander towards the *Jolly Tyler*. Sipping my pint of the local wallop, I see a man sitting at a table. He is staring into the distance and ignoring those around him.

I sit down next to him, saying: "You must be the remote cove".

The remote cove's name turns out to be Black George. He signals to me to come outside, and we wander out into the Cornish countryside until there is no danger of our being overheard. I am told of the suffering of his people and am surprised to learn that even the most respectable of them are involved in the fight against the Pasty Tax.

"Be on yonder cliff tonight with a dark lantern, a pistol and a cutlass and ye shall meet Squire Rogerson and Parson Gilbert."

I have fought too many by-election campaigns to be afraid of fisticuffs and am no duffer with an orchard doughty (that sturdy club beloved of Rutland gamekeepers), but I am not accustomed to being quite so 'tooled up' – as Violent Bonham-Carter used to put it. Still, I walk up from the harbour, with its smells of tarred rope and rusted chain, armed with pistol, cutlass and so forth as requested. I reach the cliff top and await the

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arrival of the pastymen.

One by one, figures appear through the chill mist. I recognise the remote cove and also discern a prosperous-looking fellow (who turns out to be Squire Rogerson) and a fellow in clerical garb who, sure enough, is Parson Gilbert.

We spy the lines of a trim brig out at sea – and then those of a second ship that rounds the headland. "It's the Revenue," growls Squire Rogerson, "they'll be no shipping of pasties tonight." He allows his lantern to flare for a moment and

immediately the signal is answered from onboard the brig.

With that we find ourselves rather at a loose end, so we repair to the *Jolly Tyler*. My new companions turn out to be a friendly bunch. Parson Gilbert, for instance, proves Sound on any number of points of doctrine (though in Cornwall they no longer cleave to the back-foot no ball rule as we do in the Church of Rutland). Even the remote cove begins to unbutton a little.

"The trouble is," explains Squire Rogerson (a capital fellow at standing his round), "we have twenty bushels of pasties ready to go, but there we shall not be able to load them aboard the *Saucy Robin Teverson* as long as the Revenue men are watching.

"I may be able to help you," I reply. "I happen to have one of Rutland Motors' finest charabancs parked outside the Jamaica Guest House. Why don't we fill it with pasties? No one will suspect a peer of the realm of breaking the law."

"Wasn't there a lord in Essex..." begins one, but I fix him with a stern eye and he is quelled.

"The only problem," I continue, "is what to do with the Well-Behaved Orphans."

"In my experience," returns Squire Rogerson, "there is nothing as good for orphans as sea air."

And so it was that this morning the driver and I were waved through Cornish customs and took a charabanc laden with pasties over the Tamar into England. We delivered it to a warehouse owned by a fellow called Gregg (who appeared to be doing Terribly Well in the baked goods business) and were given a cheque in return. This, of course, I have already mailed to Squire Rogerson – less my expenses, petrol costs et cetera.

All seems right with the old demesne, despite my absence. The Reverend Hughes Church Lads Table Tennis Club (credited with single-handedly reducing crime in Rutland to a statistically insignificant level) is meeting in St Asquith's Parish Hall as I write. It is true that Meadowcroft has been complaining about the Elves of Rockingham Forest taking plants from his glasshouses to make their elixirs, but he is prone to grumble and, besides, these elven remedies are the only thing to ease my wound from the Aylesbury by-election of 1938.

The only problem was explaining to Matron what I had done with the Well-Behaved Orphans, but the gift of a bottle of Nicholson's gin smoothed things over eventually. She will be with me tomorrow morning when the *Saucy Robin Teverson* ties up at Oakham Quay.

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