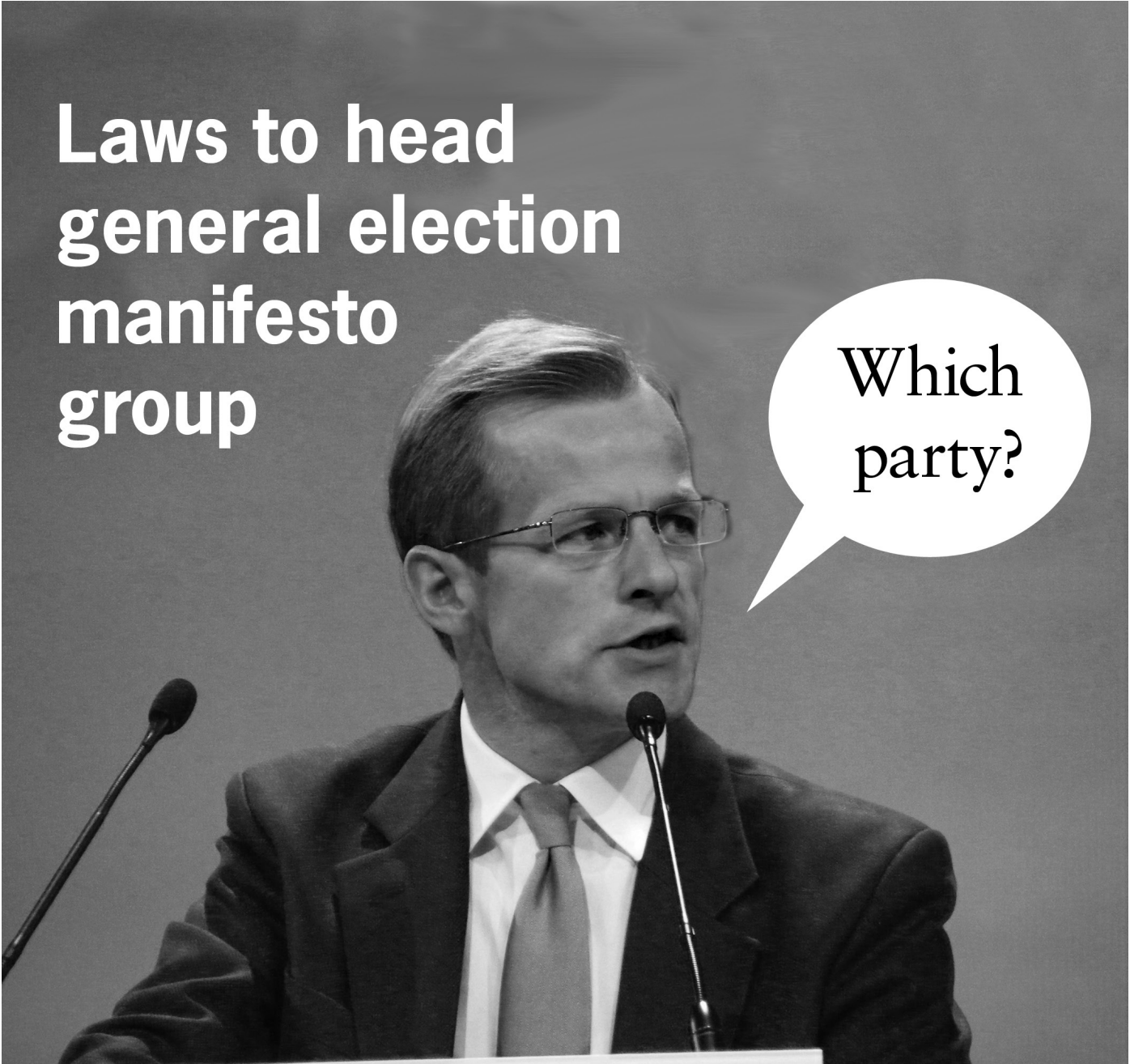


# liberator

Laws to head  
general election  
manifesto  
group



Which  
party?

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- 🔥 Battle for hearts and minds - Michael Meadowcroft
- 🔥 Race for an equalities policy - Janice Turner

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# COMMENTARY

## SQUARE PEG

The choice of David Laws to chair the working group writing the 2015 Liberal Democrat manifesto is yet another two-fingered salute by Nick Clegg to most of his party.

Laws has caused the party repeated embarrassments, from the ham-fisted launch of the Orange Book to his flirtation with health insurance to his expense claims problems.

The problem with handing him such a powerful position is not that Laws will personally write every word of the next manifesto – he has to keep a working group on board and gain ultimate approval from the Federal Policy Committee – but that the man has no political nous.

Laws is no doubt very clever as a policy analyst, but that isn't that same thing. He was unable to see why declaring "George Osborne is proving to be a very strong chancellor who gets the big decisions right" might be unhelpful in winning back former Liberal Democrat voters, or why calling (via, of all things for a Liberal Democrat, the Thatcherite Institute of Economic Affairs) for further and permanent spending cuts might also cost the party a few more seats.

He is simply too comfortable with the idea of the Liberal Democrats being in coalition with the Conservatives, unlike most party members, who see it as an inevitable but difficult step after the last election.

Laws would be fine if he were still a policy adviser, or if he were in a think tank where he could harmlessly dream up ideas, some of which would no doubt be useful. But he isn't. He's a politician in a party facing an electoral rout, who goes out of his way to defend the very things that have proved so appallingly unpopular with the party's present and former supporters.

Given how close Laws's economic thinking is to that of the Tories, it is hard to imagine him wishing to produce a manifesto that allows the Liberal Democrats to distance themselves sufficiently from their coalition partner to fight the next election on a credibly independent platform.

Other members of the working group may be able to dig their heels in over some of the wilder ideas that Laws produces. So might the FPC, so indeed might any MPs who fancy the idea of holding their seats and who will therefore be well able to see that promising more of the same economics would be a recipe for disaster.

If anything is to be salvaged at the next election, the Liberal Democrats will need a manifesto that puts a great deal of clear water between them and the Conservatives, and which reasserts the party's traditional beliefs and priorities.

Laws is just about the least likely member of the parliamentary party to do that. So why does Clegg keep indulging him?

## LESSON FROM AMERICA

Liberator's American correspondent Dennis Graf discusses in this issue some of the reasons why President Obama won re-election despite an economic record that would sink most contenders.

One reason is that the Republicans have become a 'nasty party', only a little more extreme than the UK Conservatives.

Admittedly the religious element and gun lobby are, happily, absent from UK politics, but both these parties fundamentally support the rich and powerful against everyone else. That has proved among the reasons for the Republicans' undoing in the USA and may yet undo the Tories here.

The Republicans have also suffered from the growth of an ethnic minority population that they have alienated. That is a lesser factor in the UK but one that cannot but do the Tories harm too.

There is considerable public resentment against the cut in the 50% tax rate for the very wealthy at the same time as the government is cutting back on benefits even to those in work – both of which the Liberal Democrats were forced to accept for gains elsewhere; not things they actively supported.

Everything the Conservatives say and do shows that, beneath Cameron's 'rebranding' gloss, they are the same old party that believes that the rich should be protected and everyone else can go and starve.

This is hardly an attractive platform at the best of times and, even slightly disguised, it didn't deliver the Tories a majority in 2010 when they faced a monumentally unpopular Labour government.

It certainly won't help them in 2015. The government's economic credibility has taken a severe dent from its failure to deliver growth and from the double dip recession. If there is a triple dip, what little credibility remains will vanish entirely.

The Liberal Democrats merely have to distance themselves from all this by pointing out what they have done to restrain the Tories, and also (see above) by coming up with a manifesto that is strongly different from theirs.

A tall order indeed, but maybe not as tall as that which faces the Tories. By 2015, they will be an unprecedented 23 years away from their last outright victory, and such prospects as they have of winning will involve not just – as with the Liberal Democrats – reclaiming some temporarily mislaid politics, but a complete cultural change. A taller order surely.

# RADICAL BULLETIN

## A LAWS UNTO HIMSELF

Nick Clegg has appointed David Laws to chair the working group that will write the Liberal Democrats' next general election manifesto (see also Commentary – page 3).

Not surprisingly, this provocative act has caused much outrage in the party. Laws is considered a poor choice because of his views on economics, which are well to the right of most members of the party, and because of his cavalier attitude to party policy. The expenses scandal of 2010 is also a factor behind the objections.

Members of the party's Federal Policy Committee (FPC) were notified of the nomination only three days before their meeting on Monday 7 January, which gave them little time to organise. One member who did was Liberator Collective member Gareth Epps.

Epps proposed a motion to the FPC that would have declined to endorse all the nominations for membership of the working group (including Laws) unless two conditions were met: first, the proposed chair would have to undergo a hearing session to ensure that he accepted the primacy of mainstream thinking in the party; and second, there would have to be terms of engagement.

Epps's motion was rejected by 14 votes to 8, although some of the 14 who voted against were nevertheless openly critical of Laws's nomination. Indeed, the motion would probably have been passed had there not been assurances that the working group would remain subordinate to the FPC.

A story was put about after the meeting that the FPC ended its debate with a unanimous 22-0 vote to approve Laws as chair. No such vote took place, and it would not have been unanimous if it had.

The manifesto drafting process has got off to a poor start. Laws does not enjoy the full confidence of the FPC and, given his habit of shooting from the hip, the working relationship between them is likely to get worse.

## STICKING TO THE SCRIPT

Liberator's blog ([liberator-magazine.blogspot.co.uk](http://liberator-magazine.blogspot.co.uk)) caused a bit of stir at the end of December when it leaked the Liberal Democrats' 'message script', a prescriptive list of officially-sanctioned slogans intended to keep everyone in the party 'on message'.

The script was said to be based on audience research, although quite what audience would be impressed by its hackneyed language is a mystery. These sort of rehearsed phrases make politicians seem false, insincere and lacking in spontaneity, and are a major reason why most people think politicians are weird.

In an introduction to the script littered with PR jargon, party HQ's director of communications Tim

Snowball urged readers to "stick to and get some volume behind this script".

Snowball, who is clearly oblivious to the fact that managing liberals is like trying to herd cats, instructed, "If you're at a post-Christmas, pre-New Year lull over the next couple of days – please take a look at this script – read it, learn it, work out how to use it."

Readers at a loose end during the "post-Christmas, pre-New Year lull" would have discovered a long laundry list of mantras intended to convey how well the coalition is doing. But the list is far too long to achieve any focus, it is doubtful anyone would be able to memorise it, and anybody trying to recite it would rapidly send their audience to sleep.

The most important message, repeated ad nauseam in bold type, is that the Liberal Democrats "are building a stronger economy in a fairer society, enabling every person to get on in life". This breaks a basic rule of politics, that if the opposite of a statement is clearly nonsense, the statement isn't worth making in the first place: "We are building a weaker economy in an unfairer society, preventing every person from getting on in life."

Meanwhile, in a clumsy attempt at damage limitation, the party tried to claim the credit for Liberator's leak of the script. In the 'Letter from the Leader' e-mailed to party members on 5 January, Nick Clegg wrote, "We also got a bit of attention after the party's central message for spokespeople was featured on the BBC." Glad to be of service.

## SPRINGING A DECISION

Not for the first time, there is a move to abolish the Liberal Democrats' spring conference. The party's Federal Executive (FE) has set up a working group to consider the idea but it has trodden on the toes of the Federal Conference Committee (FCC). At the time of going to press, even the FCC's officers had not been informed who was to chair this group.

The motives for this proposal are said to be financial, since the spring conference attracts fewer delegates and exhibitors than the autumn conference, and struggles to avoid making a loss. We are sure that the embarrassment caused to the leadership at recent spring conferences has nothing to do with it.

The spring conference cannot be abolished without a constitutional amendment, which requires a two-thirds majority vote of the conference. It is unlikely the FE could achieve this without offering the membership some sort of quid pro quo, so here's a suggestion: how about restoring the pre-merger Liberal Party's quarterly Party Council? Compared with the present party conference, it was much better at holding to account party committees like the FE.

## NEW BOY

Opinions differ on the Liberal Democrats' new strategy director Ryan Coetzee but, since anyone would be an improvement on his worse-than-useless predecessor Richard Reeves, he has a fund of goodwill behind him.

Reeves's appointment in 2010 was among Nick Clegg's most catastrophic errors of judgement. Despite departing for America, Reeves will still not shut up, continuing to push his animosity towards social liberalism to the diminishing band of people prepared to listen.

One parliamentarian noted of Coetzee: "Apparently he got the job because he took apart a presentation by Richard Reeves." In other words, Clegg appointed Reeves, and then appointed a successor because he could take Reeves apart.

Coetzee has been responsible for the tortuous marketing speak contained in the party's new 'message script' (see elsewhere in RB), but has made a generally good impression as someone who grasps what the party is about.

He has also, significantly and commendably, taken the trouble to meet pretty well every MP, active peer and party officer one-to-one.

Coetzee's meeting with Liberal Democrat peers, though, took an unfortunate turn when his barrage of marketing-speak provoked Tony Greaves, who thought Coetzee was interested in the total national vote as opposed to holding individual seats. This led to an outburst from 'two jobs' Tom McNally, who accused Greaves of being "wrong about the merger 20 years ago and wrong now," at which point Greaves walked out.

Greaves and McNally were indeed on opposite sides in 1988, but this remark sits oddly with McNally's farewell message in the final edition of Liberal Democrat News. He wrote, "I will leave it to future historians to judge what the Social Democrats brought to the Liberal Democrat Party. It certainly was not instant success."

## ARRESTING THE DECLINE

The Liberal Democrats were never likely to do well in last November's police and crime commissioner elections, but the situation was exacerbated by politically illiterate meddling by the Federal Executive. Now the dust has settled, the English party has put its foot down.

The FE decided on a 'strong, clear preference' for not standing candidates, but was told it would be unconstitutional to tell local parties that they are not allowed to field candidates if they so wish.

The English party's previous regime made things worse by insisting, for no particular reason, that candidates for PCC posts would have to be approved Westminster candidates, even though these roles were local in character and could require specialist skills.

In the end, the Liberal Democrats fought some seats but not others, got their candidates into the field late because of the FE's ineptitude, and failed to provide any national press support.

As new English party chair Peter Ellis said in his report: "I know that during this process, neither the English nor Federal executives covered themselves in glory. Instead of giving clear advice and accepting responsibility, the committees left it up to regions to

make a number of different decisions without a solid framework to support them."

He added: "I want to remind us all that selection and standing of candidates in elections is a matter for the lowest appropriate level of the party – which in this case is the local parties and their membership."

The English party council passed a motion that stated: "This Council regrets the decision of the Federal Party to influence local parties about whether or not to stand candidates in the recent police and crime commissioner (PCC) elections and the consequent organisational disruption from this decision."

Meanwhile, some of the independent candidates who won are less independent than might appear at first sight.

Hampshire's 'independent' Simon Hayes is the former Tory leader of New Forest District Council, while Norfolk's Stephen Bett actually sought the Tory nomination and turned independent only when he didn't get it.

West Mercia's Bill Longmore shared something with voters in his election address that surely comes in the category of 'too much information': "During my police service I had had several lady friends but none of these relationships flourished when it became apparent where my priorities lay." In 1988, he happily met his future wife who "shared the same passion for helping others and working in the community".

## MELTING SNOWBALL

A request from Tim Snowball, 'head of political communications director' at party HQ, to devote this March's spring conference to nothing but question and answer and consultative sessions was met with a predictable, though welcome, raspberry from the Federal Conference Committee.

Not least in the FCC's calculations was perhaps that party members would stay away in droves if invited to spend a weekend in Brighton devoid of any policy debates.

Good for the FCC, but rather concerning that the director of political communications wants to have no new policies to communicate.

## WHERE'S THE MONEY?

On 27 February 2011, the Observer reported that Nick Clegg had asked Liberal Democrat ministers to pay a tithe of 10% of their government salaries to party funds.

Most of the party's council groups already operate a system of tithes, and most MEPs make substantial donations (though Chris Davies has argued strongly that this should be formalised). So, two years on, how are the ministers doing?

Not too well. There are now 20 ministers, paid anything from £20,000 to £60,000 above a normal MP salary, but the party's budget documents show they didn't meet their tithe targets last year and that these have had to be scaled down.

At £20,000, the average given was only £1,000 each, when more like £5,000 had been sought.

## ADS FOR AD LIB

People who get into one or other house of parliament tend to have a bit of experience and

resent being told to do demeaning things. So there was less than wild enthusiasm when the launch of the Liberal Democrats' new monthly magazine Ad Lib was being prepared, and MPs and peers were invited to 'like' its Facebook page and to post 'suggested tweets' of stunning banality:

"Can't wait for the first issue of @AdLibMag, a new magazine for @libdems out next month."

"@AdLibMag is a new monthly magazine for @libdems. Subscribe here. It's on Facebook too."

Both issues published so far contain editor's letters from Phil Reilly, but underneath his picture by-line he is described as 'editor-in-chief'.

On unsuccessful applicant for the editor's post says that Reilly was among those on the interview panel for the job. Since Reilly can't easily have interviewed himself, the explanation appears to be that he is editor-in-chief but not editor, and that the actual editor of Ad Lib is, as of early January, yet to be unveiled.

In which case, the appointee will become editor of a magazine already up and running, and not one he or she can plan from scratch.

## MISSING IN ACTION

When some 1,700 party members failed to receive ballot papers for last autumn's MEP selections, those who complained were dismissed as nutters by party HQ until one of those affected turned out to be London Assembly leader Caroline Pigeon, who was in a position to make a fuss about it.

It turns out that a coding error meant papers were not sent to people who had moved within the last year. To make matters worse, some 80 e-mails of complaint to the returning officer had been ignored as they had all gone into a spam filter.

## MORE MISSING IN ACTION

Liberal Democrat membership figures for 2012 have fallen into Liberator's hands and make grim reading.

Membership of the federal party stood at only 42,501 at the end of December, down 9.2% from 46,810 at the end of December 2011. Although bad, this is nowhere near as bad as the 25% drop that occurred during 2011.

A modest month-on-month increase in numbers during the final quarter of 2012 suggests that, while there is not exactly a revival just yet, the party has at least stopped haemorrhaging members.

## BLACK AND WHITE CASE

Applications are due to open soon for one of the most desirable parliamentary nominations, Montgomeryshire.

Liberals and Liberal Democrats held the seat with only a four-year interruption from 1880 until 2010, when Lembit Öpik's antics

contributed to its loss.

Would a new applicant have to fight Öpik for the nomination? Not, it would seem, if Welsh Assembly group leader Kirsty Williams has any say in the matter.

"Kirsty would rather have her limbs torn off one by one by a mad badger than have Öpik anywhere near the nomination," one well-placed Welsh party member noted.

## FUND RAISING

The post of executive director of the Liberal Democrat Friends of Israel is on offer at an annual salary of £20-30,000 (somewhat above that of most party jobs) for a "three to five day week".

In its job advert, the LDFI says: "This newly created position is intended to complement the work of LDFI's Honorary Executive Committee. From Parliamentary advocacy and the facilitation of dialogue between the party and the UK Jewish Community to high level briefings and thought leadership, this role requires a first class communicator and organiser who is versatile, experienced and highly political."

The salary seems startling largesse from a body found in the party's review of its associated organisations in 2011 to have only 30 members. That review recommended that LDFI should have its AO status renewed to 2015 but "subject to submitting a plan [by September] for increasing the membership from the current minimum of 30" (RB, Liberator 347).

Unless there has been a huge surge in LDFI recruitment since 2011, it is safe to assume that the source of funds for the salary is not membership subscriptions.

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Happy reading!

*The Liberator Collective*

# SOCIAL PRESSURES

## Policy decisions due in 2013 will affect the party for years to come. The Social Liberal Forum aims to exert its influence, says Gareth Epps

When Naomi Smith and I became co-chairs of the Social Liberal Forum just after last autumn's Federal Conference, we were conscious firstly of how far the organisation had developed from its beginnings a mere four years ago.

Our predecessor David Hall-Matthews had led SLF into one of the most dynamic parts of the Liberal Democrats; two sell-out conferences attracting some of the most senior party figures from Nick Clegg onwards, successful policy motions at conferences on a wide variety of subjects, and significant numbers of our members being elected to key positions. While a number of factions had also sprung up, none of these has to date enjoyed success on those terms.

Nor have they fulfilled the wider function of SLF as a forum for the development of policy ideas and discussion inside (and outside) the party. Neither think-tank nor faction, the SLF's ability to hold discussions in its regional groups and at conferences on issues both current and more forward-looking has benefited not only SLF but the Liberal Democrats as a whole.

However, a number of our supporters are still drifting away from active politics and (thankfully in lesser numbers) membership of the Liberal Democrats. After what to some appeared to be an officially-sanctioned full-on assault from outgoing Clegg strategy director Richard Reeves – whose strategic judgment many radical Liberals would question – Reeves's long-held goal of getting social liberals to join Labour has failed (the vast majority have joined no other party). In terms of party strategy, and with morale still struggling after the twin fiascos of student funding and the NHS, much remains a mystery after the trauma of the first half of coalition. That said, the arrival of Ryan Coetzee with his formidable track record does seem to be indicating a return of some common sense.

The coalition still has a fundamental tension to resolve between Osbornomics, accompanied by a rush for more and deeper cuts to the most vulnerable, on the one hand; and the vision outlined by Vince Cable at the 2010 general election on the other. Despite the latter, the Liberal Democrats have no clear defined economic vision to call their own; and it is now over a decade since the party even last held a debate on the subject. The infantile playground-bully style with which a false debate was offered at last autumn's Federal Conference does not give confidence that there is any appetite at the higher levels of the party for that independent economic vision. By contrast, Prateek Buch's excellent 'Plan C' pamphlet has fitted that particular vacuum.

With a forthcoming clash between the coalition's air war and the ground war referred to in some articles as a series of by-elections, too, the public face of the party will come under pressure on consistency of message.

That in turn will magnify the tensions between centre-right ministers used to working on the substance and message of the government on the one hand, and candidates and activists struggling to inspire and be inspired on the other.

Far from departing to Labour, social liberals' influence in the party, as evidenced by the recent federal committee elections, remains very strong indeed. There are many cases – from the 'shares for rights' fiasco to the battles on data communications and against secret courts proposals – where the party still unites against the overbearing authoritarianism of the British state and its pressure on Liberals in government.

But the mid-term point marks a turning point in the coalition. There are a huge number of key policy decisions to be taken this year that will define the party's platform for several years beyond. Not only on tax, Trident and energy but on the core issues that affect working families: the territory highlighted by the Commission for Living Standards in its report released last October, which maps the fall in earnings, disposable income and the groups primarily affected by this, since well before 2010 as it happens.

There are questions for SLF too. Our AGM last summer called for membership of the organisation to be opened to those who support the aims and objectives of the Liberal Democrats but are currently members of no party. Some disagree and want to see us become a subscription organisation open only to party members. I am conscious that, a quarter of a century ago at the height of the merger fall-out, retaining communications channels for Liberals unsure of their political home was key and that *Liberator* among other forums provided an essential link. That said, I am also aware that the key constraint on SLF's ambition at present is resources.

The success of the Social Liberal Forum is far from something those of us involved can feel good about. It shows that the Liberal Democrats face a fork in the road. Set out a clear vision of what Britain should be, independent of debates about alliances with other parties; or follow the Reeves strategy and become a narrow, purist sect and face oblivion.

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Gareth Epps is a member of the *Liberator* Collective and co-chair of the Social Liberal Forum

# WHAT HAPPENED TO COMMUNITY POLITICS?

Election results over the next few years need not be too bad for the Liberal Democrats, if they are allowed to recover their local campaigning flair, says Peter Chegwyn

Forty years ago, the Liberal Party was at 8% in the polls, having almost been wiped-out in the 1970 general election. Yet a radical new 'community politics' approach to campaigning resulted in a string of by-election victories and, after two inconclusive general election results in 1974, the formation of the Lib-Lab 'pact', which saw Liberal influence in peace-time government for the first time in 50 years.

There are lessons to be learnt from history and our present leadership would do well to learn some.

One of the lessons of the Lib-Lab 'pact' was that voters don't thank the junior partners in an unpopular marriage of convenience when they ultimately face the ballot box. Simply claiming that we've 'moderated' the worst excesses of our partners in government and achieved a few policy successes of our own doesn't impress the electorate. Voters are more likely to remember the unpopular things you have voted for or the high-profile promises you have broken.

But there's a much more positive lesson to learn from campaigning in the 1970s. It is that those who continue to campaign effectively in their local communities can largely isolate themselves from whatever is happening in Westminster, and can continue to win elections and put Liberal policies into practice in their local communities.

It may take time. The Liberal Party suffered a pasting in local elections during the Lib-Lab 'pact' and almost disappeared again in the 1979 general election. Local councillors, especially in the north and in Scotland, have suffered a similar pasting over the past two years (though some who lost their seats in 2011 re-grouped and won them back in 2012). With two more sets of local elections due before the next general election, I suggest there are a number of things MPs and the national party should do now to prepare for 2015 and help our local councillors win seats in 2013 and 2014.

First, **go back to the basics of effective campaigning** – Remember that elections are seldom won on the airwaves or in the national media. Elections are won through hard work on the ground. Do not neglect the ground war. Even in these high-tech days, the words of the late David Penhaligon still ring true: "If you've got something to say, stick it on a piece of paper and push it through a letterbox."

**Concentrate on our strengths and our opponents' weaknesses** – Our main strength in many places is still our reputation for getting things done at a local level and for campaigning on issues that really matter to people in their everyday lives. So our MPs should stop banging-on about House of

Lords reform, Europe and the Alternative Vote. Stop trying to defend unpopular Conservative or coalition policies. Stop apologising for the tuition fees fiasco. It only reminds people of our broken promises. Let the Conservatives go on TV to explain benefit cuts and rail fare increases. Our MPs should only appear when they have something good to report, something positive to say about the issues that voters are really interested in.

**Don't forget community politics** – Remember that this is all about empowering local communities and helping people to help themselves. It isn't just about winning elections. The Conservatives talk about 'localism' but practice the same old centralist approach as Labour. We're different. Yet when do we hear our leaders mention 'community politics'? We shouldn't be using Conservative language because our vision of 'community politics' is very different to what the Conservatives think of as 'localism'. At a time when our party is unpopular nationally, we need to re-engage with our local communities and work harder than ever to show that, whatever's happening in Westminster, we're still worthy of support at a local level.

**Remember the need for integrated campaigning** – Party HQ needs to do a much better job of co-ordinating national and local campaigns on real issues that matter to local campaigners. It's no use e-mailing bog standard national press releases of little relevance to campaigners on the ground. Neither is it much use sending out boring artwork with glossy photographs of Nick Clegg. Local campaigners know that Nick Clegg's name is (sadly) toxic to vast swathes of the electorate. You won't find many council candidates mentioning him anywhere in their campaign literature. What's needed is effective, hard-hitting campaign material that can be easily used at local level.

In Hampshire, we have Jon Havens producing local tabloids for scores of campaigners across the county. All they have to do is let Jon have some basic copy and photos. He does the rest including arranging the printing. It's cost-effective. It ensures that an integrated campaign message is delivered across the county in high-quality print material. I believe this is happening in other council areas. It could happen nationally.

**Reinvigorate the ALDC** – In the 1970s and 1980s, local campaigners received really useful artwork and campaign mailings from the then ALC under the leadership of Tony Greaves, Maggie Clay, David Vasmer, Bill le Breton and others. Now I've nothing against the present ALDC but it's not the same radical, inspirational and effective rallying-



point for beleaguered campaigners that it once was. Maybe it needs to re-invent itself? Maybe it needs to be tougher in representing the interests and concerns of local councillors to our national leaders. Maybe it needs to take more of a lead in producing the effective campaign material that is seldom appearing from national HQ or the special advisers in Westminster who have little or no experience of fighting or winning elections in difficult circumstances, or indeed of fighting elections at all.

**Give a higher priority to winning local elections** – Our MPs don't have to defend their seats until 2015. Many local councillors have to defend their seats in 2013 and 2014. They deserve more support at a national level. It's not just about winning council seats. It is also about the future of our local campaigning base. When councillors lose their seats, they often find other things to do with their time and may cease to be active party members. We can ill afford to lose them. We should be doing much more to help them hold their seats and help gain other seats, so that we remain an effective force in local government with a strong campaigning base throughout the land.

**Don't forget the 590** – Party leaders talk of fighting 60 by-elections in 2015, targeting resources where they are most likely to win parliamentary seats. That's sensible. In 2015. But what of the other 590 constituencies, including many where we can win council seats in 2013 and 2014? Are they to be largely neglected and written-off? That is not the way to maintain a credible national party.

**Make better use of Paddy power** – It's a good move to invite Paddy Ashdown to lead the next general election campaign. He has a proven track record of effective campaigning and he is popular with both activists and the public. So too is Charles Kennedy. And the party really must find a proper (and properly paid) campaign role for Chris Rennard, whose expertise is needed more than ever and who should not be expected to work for free when others far less able than he are being handsomely paid for their efforts.

**Prepare to exit the coalition** – Did our party really enter coalition without proper consideration of how we would eventually exit? Someone must surely be preparing a proper exit strategy if they haven't already done so. And in the meantime, our leaders should start distancing themselves from an increasingly divisive and divided Conservative Party. Let the Tories take the flak for unpopular government policies. Let our MPs start promoting more popular and liberal policies.

In summary, I believe the Liberal Democrats probably have more effective campaigners at a local level now than at any time in the 40 years I've been a member. But very few of those campaigners are plugged into the national set-up, which often appears too remote and divorced from the views of local activists. Despite the recent deluge of e-mails purporting to come from Nick Clegg and senior party

*“All in our party should remember that we are not Conservatives, never have been and never will be”*

figures, with a bright red 'donate' button at the foot of each, there is little two-way conversation or real effort to integrate local campaigners into the national campaign set-up.

We need to make better use of the campaign skills developed by local campaigners throughout the land. We need to develop 'integrated

campaigning' and provide better campaign themes and materials at a national level for local campaigners to use on the ground. We need to learn lessons from the past, remember the basics of effective campaigning, play to our strengths, give a higher priority to winning local elections, and reaffirm our commitment to community politics.

Oh, and all in our party should remember that we are not Conservatives, never have been and never will be.

We may temporarily be in a coalition government but the Conservative party is still our enemy, always has been, always will be. So, please, no more star-gazing in the Downing Street rose garden. No more romantic interludes in joint press conferences. The Conservatives will do their utmost to destroy us at the ballot box just as the Labour Party will. The sooner we start promoting our own radical, distinctive identity again, the happier many of us will be.

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Peter Chegwyn is leader of the Liberal Democrat group on Gosport council and ran many of the Liberal Party's successful by-election campaigns in the 1980s

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# THE BATTLE FOR HEARTS AND MINDS

Being in a coalition shouldn't change Liberal Democrat values, so why is the party failing in the intellectual battle of political ideas, asks Michael Meadowcroft

Liberal Democrat members are in danger of falling into the huge political trap of equating party policy with decisions taken by the coalition government.

Of course, Liberal Democrat ministers have a responsibility to implement Liberal Democrat policies and liberal values in government as far as is possible in the political and economic circumstances that constrain decision making. The abilities of Liberal Democrat colleagues in government have clearly had a positive influence on government policy in a number of areas, but there are other areas where government decisions have been unpleasant and illiberal. That, alas, is the uncomfortable nature of coalition.

The conditions in which Liberal Democrats entered government for the first time in 65 years could hardly have been worse. Mervyn King, governor of the Bank of England, put it in stark terms a month before the 2010 election when he said: "Whoever wins this election will be out of power for a whole generation because of how tough the fiscal austerity will have to be." The parliamentary party – with the assent of the party as a whole – entered into coalition in full knowledge of the huge dangers confronting us. But there was no choice strategically, electorally or politically. To have flunked the challenge would have destroyed the party's credibility as a major political force.

Taking on the immense responsibility of government in such circumstances entails a vast amount of party nail-biting and robust restraint. If the party accepts the liberal credentials of its representatives in government, then it has, by corollary, to accept that what they agree to is the maximum possible – unless, of course, their political skills are lacking and, arguably, to some extent the autumn reshuffle addressed this. Even so, some 'tactical' decisions were flawed – it was, I believe, an error to abandon the presence in the Ministry of Defence when a key aspect of the party's distinct identity is invested in its position on Trident.

Arguably, there has never been a similar coalition in Britain – one formed by two parties that fought an election against each other but who have entered into a formal post-election arrangement.

Every other coalition has either been formed by parties that fought an election with the avowed intention of forming a coalition or was formed with recalcitrant sections of parties – not least when parties were not as tightly knit as they have become since the war. It is hardly surprising that no one really knew how to cope with it. It has been a huge learning curve for ministers, backbench MPs and for the party

generally. Significantly many columnists, commenting on the recent Mid-Term Review, have been more positive about the nature and strength of the coalition process than their earlier cynicism had indicated.

## UNCONGENIAL PARTNERS

I also believe that, on a number of issues, it is not so much coalition policy itself that provokes a bitter response from party members but the insensitive and deeply illiberal use of language on the part of Conservative ministers. The attitude towards potential students from developing countries, towards asylum seekers and, most recently, the use of terms such as 'shirkers' and 'skivers' is appalling and vividly provides the evidence that Conservatives are still the 'nasty' party. It is cynical, and counter-productive, to use the problems with a small number of individuals as an excuse to brand whole swathes of individuals with derogatory descriptions. Such attitudes are unfortunately lodged like shrapnel in the mentality of some of our coalition partners.

Beware of assuming that the grass is greener at the other end of the political spectrum. It is true historically that, even though there has always been some traffic between Liberal and Conservative parties, the natural political partners have been the Liberal and Labour parties. The two parties have always had different perceptions of 'life chances', with Labour emphasising economic outcomes and Liberals understanding the importance of a much broader expression of human values, but traditionally they shared the progressive space. The ideological division has been much more on implementation – collectivism versus co-operation – than on aims, but the ground for co-operation steadily diminished as Labour came to believe it could achieve electoral success on its own. Thereafter, its innate hegemonic tendencies came to the fore and it became arrogant, and increasingly believed that the end justified the means, particularly in retaining control of its big city industrial fiefs. No Liberal Democrat who has to fight an entrenched Labour Party harbours any illusions that coalition with Labour would be all sunlight and roses. Coalition is inevitable, never easy and has consequences for all political parties.

Faced with the deeply illiberal attitudes of our present coalition partners, it is unsurprising that a number of Liberal Democrats have become increasingly vocal in their criticism of the party's participation in the coalition.

Some of the criticism has been focussed on the role and performance of Nick Clegg, feeding off, and in turn feeding, the almost continuous and unwarranted media denigration of him. Whatever one's assessment

of Nick's performance is, I am absolutely sure that the press must not be allowed to decide which politicians should survive and which should go. Time and again, politicians have been targeted by one or other newspaper, followed by others feeling the pressure to get in on the act until, in the end, the individual feels unable to continue in office. The latest victim was Andrew Mitchell. I was unhappy with events at the time and even more so as the story has unfolded.

The media's agenda thrives on conflict and intrigue. Political ideas and philosophy are not sexy and the press pursuit of attention and thus circulation leads to curious predictions and assumptions, even from those who should know better. I heard the veteran commentator and pollster, Peter Kellner, opining on the Radio 4 Today programme recently that he could not see how Nick Clegg could conceivably recover from his current poll ratings.

With over two years to go? It's not just a long time in politics – it's an eternity. Those of us who remember the Lib-Lab pact of 1977-78 recall that the party's poll rating halved during its 15-month duration but recovered to a higher level than before in the 1979 general election less than a year later. The different problem today, with a fixed-term parliament, is how one achieves a sufficiently long separate existence before polling day to demonstrate the party's very distinct values and philosophy.

It is perfectly legitimate to have serious concerns with Liberal Democrat influence in government and of the party leader's performance, and these have been openly and forcefully put to Nick and robustly dealt with by him at his question and answer sessions with party members, but it is a grave error to think that we have a press suffused with sympathy for the party and its representatives.

Liberal Democrats must not fall into the elephant trap that the press enjoys placing enticingly in their path. The key point about Nick, which few in the media like, is that his responses to issues are liberal, from his advocacy in the leaders' debates at the general election of an amnesty for long-resident asylum seekers, to the recent minor but significant issue of supporting his office cleaner who left union leaflets on desks. He is also the only party leader who understands and is enthusiastic about a united Europe.

## **ILLIBERAL SOCIETY**

It is, of course, not possible to avoid the linkage between the party and its involvement in government but the party itself has a crucially different role and it is failing to pursue it. When one joins the party, one is doing just that. One doesn't join the government; nor, indeed, does one join the party leader. The party has its distinctive values and has its clear vision of the kind of society it works towards. These have not changed by one iota since entering government and the party needs to keep on promoting them.

We are living in an increasingly illiberal society in which the public dimension in service provision is being steadily diminished, in which there is more surveillance of public areas than in any other country, in which narrow nationalism is exploited and in which cultural values are being eroded. And, despite the occasional gain, the destruction of local government largely continues, not least through the control of

finance.

To take just a few issues: why is the party not arguing for worker co-operatives, which can make a significant contribution to creating employment? The curious concept of a mansion tax is becoming accepted, as if the bricks and mortar increases in value, as opposed to the land, which certainly does. The taxation of land can inhibit the hoarding of development land and bring sites into use and provide the means of paying a land tax. A possible referendum on membership of the European Union is now hardly challenged despite the fact that no referendum ever answers the question – see Chirac's disaster in May 2005, when his low personal political ratings cost him a 'yes' vote on the EU constitution.

We have two other parties whose test of successful policies is expressed narrowly in economic terms and there is a great opportunity for a party that understands the importance of human values, life chances, community identity and internationalism, to drive into the huge liberal-shaped space in British politics.

In common with other major parties, membership of the Liberal Democrats is declining. It matters more to us simply because we happily have a smaller class base but unhappily we have to work harder for our support. The only way to sign up and retain members is to recruit on the basis of values and vision. Those who join on the basis of the local councillor's work or because of a specific policy will fade away unless the reason why there is such commitment is set out.

Where are the party leaflets, booklets and pamphlets setting out the party's key principles? Where is the material taking apart the fallacious educational arguments of Michael Gove? Where are the briefings analysing the tiresome insincerities of Andrew Adonis? Why was Michael Sandel speaking at the Labour conference and not at ours? How has the Labour Party managed to latch on to Danielle Allen? We are increasingly losing the intellectual battle. Previous supporters such as columnists Henry Porter and Deborah Orr have become disenchanted and only John Kampfner argues the liberal case regularly in the serious press. Only in the columns of *Liberator* do Nick Harvey, Peter Downes, David Boyle, Simon Titley and other colleagues set out the liberal case on key issues.

If the Liberal Democrats promote a powerful case for the party's values and vision, it will not only help revive the party's poll ratings but it will also strengthen Nick Clegg's arm in government.

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Michael Meadowcroft was the Liberal leader on Leeds City Council for 13 years and Liberal MP for Leeds West, 1983-87.

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# WHY HAVE LIB DEMS GONE NUCLEAR

The pursuit of nuclear power is wrong on environmental grounds and also deprives people of power over energy providers, says Steve Bradley

The mid-term stage of the coalition government demands a degree of retrospection. Of all the claims made when the coalition was formed, perhaps the boldest was the commitment to be “the greenest government ever”.

It was a promise that was always likely to be attainable because the bar had been set so low by previous administrations. But it was also a boast that would inevitably and deliberately be misinterpreted in absolutist rather than relative terms. Hence every decision taken is scrutinised on the extent to which it matches the most stringent of environmental criteria, rather than a mere comparison to the Blair and Brown years. So not only has that low bar been lifted out of our reach, it's also been used to hang a noose around us. As with tuition fees, it's another lesson in the art of expectations and communications management.

The coalition government is undoubtedly doing better than Labour's limited progress. As energy secretaries, Chris Huhne and Ed Davey have encouraged a boom in Britain's renewable energy provision – with the first full year of the coalition delivering an impressive 42% growth (against a measly 1.5% growth in the last year of Labour). For the first time, a UK government has also agreed that there should be a ceiling set for the maximum acceptable level of carbon emitted in the generation of electricity.

And in Norman Baker's transport department, we've electrified (i.e. reduced the emissions from) over 100 times more track in the first year of the coalition than Labour did in its 13 years in power. Perhaps most remarkable is the fact that we're genuinely making this a greener nation despite, rather than because of, our Conservative coalition partners.

But it isn't enough for our party to simply strive to make Britain a greener land. As the first Liberals in government for decades we also have a duty to ensure that the changes we make help build a much more liberal society as well. And where our decisions have long-term impact, it's imperative that we avoid laying foundations that will embed illiberal solutions for many years to come.

An example of where we're in danger of doing just that is in the realm of energy. Ed Davey has been lumbered with one of the trickiest tasks in British politics. Over time we've built a nation that is now utterly dependent upon electricity to function effectively.

## PLUNGED INTO CHAOS

Our cities would be plunged into chaos if the street lights, traffic junctions, burglar alarms, computer systems and tube/tramways that we rely on were

deprived of power. It is difficult to comprehend just how ill prepared we would be for a prolonged and widespread outage of power, and the social and political consequences it would trigger. Yet that is the ‘do nothing’ scenario, which is predicted to be less than a decade away if we fail to address the looming capacity problem in our electricity generating infrastructure.

Almost a third of the UK's electricity is currently provided by coal-fired power stations – infrastructure that is both highly polluting and nearing the end of its life. To keep the lights on while meeting carbon reduction commitments, these facilities must be decommissioned within the next decade and their output shifted to less-polluting alternatives. Failure to guarantee that sufficient new capacity is introduced on time risks not just power cuts but also serious economic, social and political consequences. And the decades-long life span of generation infrastructure means that a failure to choose wisely over those new alternatives risks hard-wiring climate change failure for at least a generation.

To address this challenge, the Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC) is pursuing a mixed-basket approach of three main sources of new generating capacity. Firstly there has been a rapid and welcome growth in renewable energy, which now accounts for 10% of all output. Renewables will be encouraged to grow further, with a target to ideally double their current capacity by 2020. Secondly - gas is being handed a central role in our future generating infrastructure. This not only reflects that it is the most flexible source of power, but also seems to be driven by an insistence from George Osborne that it have a more central role than originally expected. As gas is a polluting fossil fuel sourced largely from areas of political instability, this decision alone undermines our chance of both meeting future emissions reduction targets and of keeping the lights on.

The third source of new electricity generating capacity preferred by DECC is nuclear. The controversial nature of this power source from an environmental perspective is well known. The economic argument against it is equally as strong, yet sadly less rehearsed. In short - as a mature industry of more than 50 years that still cannot exist without massive public subsidy, it is patently obvious that nuclear power is an economic basket case.

Even with the coalition government rigging the terms of its new carbon floor pricing mechanism to create a de-facto subsidy for nuclear (something which Lib Dem party policy specifically states should not happen) there are still no concrete proposals for the

construction of new nuclear infrastructure in Britain.

On the contrary, a number of companies have actually stepped back from their previous commitments to develop nuclear here. With DECC insisting that nuclear should be one of the three pillars, who is going to ride to its rescue?

Even if a genuinely committed partner could be found, the timescales involved in planning, building and commissioning it are such that it wouldn't be contributing for another decade anyway - well into the predicted crisis in our electricity capacity. So not only is nuclear power environmentally reckless and economically illiterate, it simply won't deliver within the timescales we need.

As well as not providing the answer in building a genuinely green Britain, clinging to nuclear power would also represent a failure to build a truly liberal one as well. From a philosophical perspective liberalism is primarily concerned with the distribution of political, economic and social power within society via the creation of 'agency'.

Agency can be defined as the capacity for individuals and communities to make meaningful decisions about their circumstances and to genuinely influence the world around them.

Given that we have ordered our nation such that electricity is a fundamental human need, access to it therefore has the potential to either build or erode individual and community agency. From this perspective, any fair assessment of our current electricity sector could only conclude that it is the antithesis of liberal.

It is dominated by an oligarchy of six huge foreign-owned companies who operate as a de-facto cartel, with individuals and communities reduced to the status of passive and enslaved consumers in the face of ever-upward price changes. In this way we have largely destroyed the ability of those for whom electricity is generated to have any meaningful influence over it - we have eroded their agency.

With its huge scale, economic barriers to entry, upfront costs and unresolved waste issues, nuclear power represents centralised energy provision at its most illiberal. There can surely be no greater way to erode the position of individuals and communities in fulfilment of their fundamental need for energy than to make them dependent upon such an undemocratic, unresponsive and oligarchic source.

Any new nuclear infrastructure that is developed would remain operational for at least 30 years - hard-wiring an illiberal solution to an environmental problem for at least another generation. Whether nuclear can be considered green is the source of much debate. Whether it presents an empowering and agency-creating liberal solution cannot be.

Germany offers us a view of how a greener and more liberal alternative could be pursued. In the wake of the 2011 Fukushima disaster, Angela Merkel declared that Europe's biggest economy would phase out nuclear power entirely by 2022. For a country which generates almost a quarter of its current electricity needs from nuclear (against 16% and falling in the UK), this was a politically brave commitment. In their quest to fill their nuclear-sized capacity hole, the Germans are pursuing a two-fold strategy.

Firstly they hope to deliver a 10% reduction in electricity demand overall through energy efficiency in both buildings and in industry. Reducing energy requirements is hands-down the optimal environmental solution - the equivalent of weaning someone off of drugs. It is also arguably the most liberal solution, by improving the conditions in which people exist while giving them a greater degree of choice over the energy they use.

Secondly, Germany is investing heavily in renewable energy to make up the rest of the shortfall. Slamming the door shut on nuclear has had a transformative effect on the German energy sector - giving investors little choice but to divert their attention towards renewables. And by also introducing a series of mechanics to encourage ordinary citizens and landowners to get involved in small-scale localised energy generation, a role for individuals and communities has also been introduced. A technology which could only erode agency is being phased out in favour of ones which have the potential to build it.

It is unclear whether Germany's bold venture will work. What it has done is create a wide expectation that the nation will become a global trailblazer in this burgeoning industrial sector. And by forcing a shift from the most to the least form of centralised energy they have managed to increase agency in an approach that is both greener and more liberal.

By comparison, Britain tends to prefer evolution to revolution in policy changes. We have our own Lib Dem-led national energy efficiency drive - the Green Deal. Fears are widespread however that it will have only limited impact upon the energy efficiency of older housing stock, and it certainly won't lead to the net reduction in total energy demand that Germany is striving for.

And while Liberal Democrats in government have pushed the case for renewable energy, by continually holding the door open for new nuclear we have diverted attention and resources away from green alternatives. We are not only missing the opportunity to establish Britain as a powerhouse in this booming global industry and reducing our investment in forms of energy which are much quicker to bring on-stream than nuclear, we are needlessly delaying the inevitable point at which it will be clear that nuclear just won't deliver economically or chronologically.

Viewed through the prism of the "greenest government ever" boast, the creation of a core subsidised role for nuclear power in will see us fail in the eyes of many to deliver a Britain that is truly greener.

We should be concerned that our reliance upon nuclear is hard-wiring an agency-eroding technology into the heart of our daily lives for the next 30 years.

Germany has shown how it is possible to work towards an energy sector which maximises, rather than erodes, individual and community agency. Don't bet against them trumping us to the greener and more liberal land which we'd all expect our own party to be delivering here.

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Steve Bradley is Chair of the Green Liberal Democrats and a councillor in Lambeth

# DEFEAT OF THE EMPTY SUIT

Who was Mitt Romney? Few are any wiser after his defeat by Barack Obama, and the Republicans will be in trouble so long as extremists dominate them, says Dennis Graf

The long American presidential election of 2012 has finally come to a merciful end and Obama received, if not a mandate, at least a significant victory. He is only the third Democratic president to win a second term in the last 75 years. Franklin Roosevelt and Bill Clinton are the other two.

The right wing points out that Romney won the white vote by a huge 25% margin while not mentioning that this is not unusual. Democrats have a real problem with white voters, especially men, and one senses that many Republicans silently question the validity of the minority vote. This vote, Romney charged, is bought with governmental largesse.

Up until the last moments when the final votes were totalled, most Republicans believed that Romney was going to win decisively and they were genuinely shocked when he lost. Romney himself was so confident of victory that he didn't even think it necessary to compose a concession speech. The Republicans actually had very little evidence for this confidence aside from vague feelings about 'momentum' and an assumption that the public shared their distaste for Obama.

Top Republican leaders had been counting on public anger over the high unemployment rate. Finally, once they were able to take retake control of the state governments, they were able to work to suppress the vote of probable Democratic voters. Only a few voting machines might be delivered to inner city precincts rather than the several dozen needed.

Some people were forced to endure long waits to vote – sometimes as long as eight hours – and this usually happened to those who could not afford to miss work. Early voting, a common practice in recent years, favours Democrats and many Republican-controlled states tried to restrict it.

Mitt Romney had a big problem: few really liked him. Everyone knew that he was going to be a weak candidate. No matter what he tried, he could never relate to ordinary people and he was supported by most Republicans only because they thought that, among those who ran, he had the best chance of winning. One by one, those considered the strongest candidates had stepped aside, probably to wait until 2016 and the next election.

## STRANGE THINGS

Romney almost seemed to be from a different country with an unfamiliar culture. He said strange things. His movements were clumsy, his smile uncomfortable. And worst of all, he refused to take and maintain a position on almost anything. The one unmentionable subject was Romney's religion – Mormonism. Christian fundamentalists, one of the pillars of the Republican party, have traditionally despised Mormonism (non-

Christian, they call it) but in the end the distaste for Obama was so strong that virtually all of them backed Romney. Probably the biggest loser after Romney himself was the 94 year-old evangelist Billy Graham, who endorsed Romney. He had never taken sides in politics before.

Nearly all the polls forecast an edge for Obama and they were right. Aside from Obama, one of the real winners on election night was Nate Silver, a mild-mannered young statistician writing for the New York Times, who predicted perfectly which states Obama would win.

Obama was probably helped by the hurricane that hit the north east a few days before the election. It took people's minds off the economy and it provided a crisis in which he could display the role of government. And, quite surprisingly, Chris Christie, the tough-talking governor of the hardest-hit state, New Jersey, who many Republicans had preferred to Romney, showed real respect for Obama and was eager to work with him. Whether this will help or hurt Christie if he runs in four years is hard to know.

The Republicans are badly torn apart right now and there are two contrary appraisals of their loss. Most observers believe that they lost the presidency and control of the Senate in large part because of a public perception that their party was more than a bit crazy and unreliable. The Tea Party far right claims the loss was because of Romney's ideological weakness. A true conservative could have won, they say.

Romney had, however, received the nomination as a far right candidate, the only conceivable way that anyone could navigate through the primary election process, and it was difficult for him to change. He later, during the summer, tried to make himself over into a centrist.

He publicly disagreed with his vice-presidential pick, Paul Ryan, a darling of the Tea Party people. That might have worked, but then he was caught on camera denigrating nearly half of the electorate, the 47% who he claimed lived off government support. Romney seemed to offend almost every voting block – blacks, Hispanics, gays, the elderly, the uninsured, students, young people in general and finally, with his strong statement against abortion rights, younger women.

Romney had a problem. No one could figure out what he believed or what he really advocated. Was he a far right person who had one term as a moderate, even slightly leftish, governor of Massachusetts? Or was the real Mitt a moderate and pragmatic person who was forced to advocate positions in which he didn't really believe? Most of the Tea Party thought this. Or was he the proverbial 'empty suit', the person who has no real convictions? We'll never know. The only certain thing is that he has no future in the Republican party.

A year ago at this time, Obama was not doing well.

He was finding few Republicans who dared work with him or even give the impression of being willing to talk. The new Tea Party people holding the balance of power in Congress felt that Obama would have to capitulate to them. These were people of extreme views on the role of government, the level of taxation and even the legitimacy of Obama as President.

After their victory two years earlier in 2008, the Democrats hoped that they would finally be able to achieve some of their goals, but in 2010 they lost seats in the Senate, enough to wipe out their needed 'supermajority'. Both houses of Congress operate under some complicated arcane rules and, to be effective in the Senate, you need not only the simple majority of 50 out of a hundred seats, but 60. According to current Senate rules, any senator can demand a hold, a 'filibuster' on legislation. In the old days, a senator had to physically stand up in front of Congress and talk, supposedly in favour of or against some bill, but in reality he could use any words at all. There was a period of a few months when the Democrats did have a working majority, but the death of Senator Edward Kennedy, the head of the liberal wing of the party and the surprise victory of Scott Brown, a former male model and a popular Republican, meant that they lost this.

## **EXTREME 'PRO LIFE'**

Abortion became a major issue late in the campaign, much to the delight of Democrats. Romney as governor had been 'pro choice' but during this election he took very extreme 'pro life' positions, constantly refining his answers to suit the audience. He chose as his vice-presidential running mate Paul Ryan, a young Congressman with specific plans for slashing the budget.

Ryan also had championed an extreme position on abortion, essentially saying that legally protected life begins at the moment of conception. Many voters were uneasy since this, if taken to the kind of extreme some Republicans wanted, could not only eliminate the possibility of abortion but also end use of the birth control pill. The Democrats were delighted by the political fumbblings of two Senate candidates from Republican states, Missouri and Indiana. Both of these Tea Party men were tangled up in controversies about rape, something not usually discussed in national campaigns. Both lost.

Democrats had been very worried about keeping the Senate. They had more seats to defend and some of their stronger people were resigning. However, they actually gained seats, although there's another election in two years in which a third of the Senate will be up for a vote. The Democrats won even in North Dakota, a very small and conservative farming and oil producing state. They won a significant seat in Massachusetts with Elizabeth Warren, a Harvard law professor and

***“Most observers believe that the Republicans lost in large part because of a public perception that their party was more than a bit crazy and unreliable”***

an unashamed liberal.

Romney is clearly a very bright man with two advanced degrees from Harvard and a record of financial success, but he ran essentially as the 'not Obama' candidate and that was not enough. He ran against a bright man who is also an accomplished politician. Obama's political organisation was unmatched in its ability to bring out his voters. He was helped

by a strong stable of Senate candidates, while Romney was handicapped by a number of weak and even self-destructive ones.

We don't know if the Republicans will continue to be obstructionists but there were initial suggestions that some may be ready to follow the public longing for compromise on needed legislation. The near future of American political control will hinge on whether or not the far right will allow any compromise. Not all Republicans, of course, are to the far right, but they hold a balance of power in the party.

As of the moment, we stopped short of the 'fiscal cliff', but there will be another debt ceiling vote in a few months and possibly the further potential downgrading of America's credit rating.

Gun control has again assumed public attention after 20 small children were murdered in their Connecticut classroom. The Republican party generally follows the leadership of the National Rifle Association on gun issues and the NRA position now is to require an armed guard in every school. (About a third of American schools already have such a person).

America is in a perpetual political campaign and already people are discussing 2016. It is generally assumed that, if Hillary Clinton wants to run in four years, the nomination will be hers. She has had a high profile in the Obama administration and her public image is favourable. If she doesn't run, it is thought that Vice-President Biden might step forward. Another name raised is that of Andrew Cuomo, governor of New York.

The Republicans will have a number of contenders. Ryan is likely to get the far right vote. Christie, a man with unusual charisma, might be drawn in. Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, the son of Cuban immigrants, is said to have a political future. Jeb Bush, brother of George W, and a popular former governor of Florida might well run. Any of these would probably be stronger than Romney.

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Dennis Graf is Liberator's American correspondent

# HOW TO BE A PCC

## Newly-elected police and crime commissioners have unprecedented powers but face serious pitfalls. Wendy Kyrle-Pope offers some advice

On 15th November 2012, the first police and crime commissioners (PCCs) were elected in 41 out of the 43 counties and metropolises in England and Wales. Previously, police services were managed (in the broad sense) by local police authorities, comprising elected councillors plus some co-opted members. The 2011 Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act removed these authorities and replaced them with one person.

Most Liberal Democrats found the idea of PCCs outrageous because it places so much power in the hands of one individual. The party's peers fought valiantly against the concept, but to no avail.

PCCs are accountable for their police service and its policing policy, the latter involving other agencies in the criminal justice system, and the appointment (and removal) of the most senior officers. In today's economic climate, their budgets will be much reduced, and cuts and savings will have to be made throughout their term of office.

11 of the 41 PCCs elected are independent; the rest are split between Labour and Conservative. The turnout was more interesting than the result (a record low, 19% being the highest, blamed on the season, the lack of publicity and a lack of understanding on the part of the electorate).

How successful these PCCs will be remains to be seen. Some, no doubt, will be brilliant, others mediocre and a few disastrous. Any success depends on how they go about it so, to help them, here is a brief guide on How To Do It. Properly.

### HOW TO DO IT PROPERLY

*Dear New Commissioner,*

Congratulations on overcoming public apathy and securing enough votes (if not exactly a mandate) to be elected as an historic first PCC. Some of you may have had previous experience as a member of a police authority. Others will be coming to it in innocence, awe and a desire to drive through the night, very fast, accompanied by flashing lights and sirens. It matters little which category you fit into. This is an entirely new game and one fraught with danger, the danger of potentially too much power, without the former checks and balances of a shared, corporate responsibility.

To protect yourself, the public you serve and those you are responsible for, you must create your own PCC persona; three vital elements must be present to prevent you becoming a monster, and a monstrous failure. These are humility, political independence, and true understanding of and empathy with the service you have (temporary) charge of.

Humility is the knowledge that you are just one person, however well-intentioned and passionate, and that you cannot function alone. Police officers know

more about policing, crime, and service to the public than you will ever know, so let them get on with it. Remember, they will be there long after you have gone.

Your role is much like that of a nanny, charged by the public to watch over the service, be responsible for them, dole out the money, guide and discipline them, but that is all it is, a nanny role, and nannies can be replaced. Some nannies are Mary Poppins-like figures, with that magical ability to govern with the lightest of touches, enabling their charges to develop and come into their own. Others are feared dragon and bullies, loathed and despised, useless at anything other than fermenting dissent. Some faff about pontificating, and nothing much is achieved.

If you have even a scintilla of sensitivity, you should be humbled by the work your officers do. So know your place; you have the stewardship of your police service, not the ownership. Yours is to strengthen and enable them, protect them from unjust or undeserved criticism, take the fall for them more often than not, and put the interests and wellbeing of your officers and those they serve above all else, especially your own ambitions.

Political independence is vital, as policing and police officers must be politically independent. For those of you who were party candidates, you must begin by de-party politicising yourself. You won't understand this to begin with, coming, most likely, from a career in party politics, where you are constantly challenging and being challenged by your rivals for the affections and votes of the electorate. But you cannot drag your officers into such squabbles, as they are above and outside such things. So must you be. The public instinctively hate constant political one-upmanship when it involves a major public service.

Cynics would say that, because all this power is in your hands, you will not be so dependent on the support of your own party, or so vulnerable to attack by others. And, in truth, the main parties' policies on policing and crime are much of a muchness; reduce crime, protect the public, eliminate corruption, racism and bad practice. So you aren't letting your own side down. Policy differences arise on the ways to go about this and, once you have settled into your role and found out how policing actually functions, you may find that a once vaunted policy 'method' of delivering the above does not actually work.

It is a question of re-inventing yourself once you are established. Part of this reinvention will happen organically, naturally, because of your growing relationship with your police service and understanding of how it all hangs together; the different relationships and tensions between the various agencies and partners, public expectation, the experience of how a particular serious incident pans out. You will not forget where you came from



politically, it will inform a lot of what you do, but you must be prepared to leave behind your party label. And if your own criticise you for not waving the party banner and leaving them behind, just tell them that the role of a PCC must be above

such considerations and, by demonstrating just that, you can show how honourable members of your party are (which might just make them more electable). Remember, historically you are the first elected PCC. Surely to do the job well for the sake of those who follow after you in that role, to set the example, is a far better legacy than being remembered as a party politician.

One of the most important relationships of your life will be with your chief constable (and other senior officers). The chief constable has probably dreaded your advent, so you must win over him/her. It may be a partnership where you have the upper hand but, without mutual respect and cooperation, you are scuppered. Do not pontificate; instead ask for an overview, ask them what they want and what they need, given the budget. Ask about their problems (too many officers/too few). Ask them how it really is; can burglary be reduced; how bad are the drugs? About local issues, especially in rural areas. How effective are the other criminal justice partners? As part of your scrutiny role, you will have set piece, public meetings bi- or tri-monthly with the chief constable and his/her team, to ask all the searching questions. For the sake of this partnership, this should be a pre-planned quadrille. All the real business should be conducted behind closed doors, which is how you will build up trust and thus hear the truth.

It is a strange alchemy that creates policemen; the concept of service to others, being part of such a service, desire to make things better, take thieves, protect people and many other reasons that are impossible to articulate. To really understand policing and policemen, go out with them, talk to them, not in a suit with your acolytes around you, but alone, dressed in plain black or navy casuals to blend in on patrols, raids (stay in the car), discoveries (drug hoards or people who have been dead for some time), major incidents (stay in the car). When on patrol you will see the streets as the officers see them; full of drunks, the mad, the homeless and the desperate. Watch the faces of your public from the patrol van; you will see hostility and hatred, suspicion and, only rarely, relief. You will meet those who offend, 90% of whom do so because they are stupid/drunk/drugged off their faces/victims in their own right, and could have avoided trouble with just a little forethought. You will see loneliness and despair, poverty (both actual and spiritual) that you could not previously have imagined. And things so disgusting that no other profession would touch them; try looking for the head of a decapitated motorcyclist in the rain, in the dark, in November. You may even meet real evil; it is rare, but it does exist (ask any of your officers); the child killers, the abusive partners, the mindless racists. The police family is a very close one. You will not be accepted, so do not try to be. But

## *“You have the stewardship of your police service, not the ownership”*

if you listen, take heed, roll up your sleeves, ask advice, you might win a grudging respect, and with that respect comes cooperation, ideas and information. Be very slow to chide but very swift to bless.

After these three components for a happy

and successful partnership between the people, the police service and you are fulfilled, consider how to make your tenure as a PCC effective and transparent. Your main task is to act as the voice of your electorate in all policing matters.

The voters (or the few that care, at any rate) have put you in office to be their voice, so listen to them. Ensure you have regular public meetings in particular areas so you get firsthand accounts of how the residents feel about crime and the types of crime which blight them, and how they feel the police are coping. You will discover that those residents may have simple solutions to certain problems; shut a pub early on a Friday; remove benches from a certain street; ensure officers patrol later on Saturdays. Listen, consider and then act. They make the best scrutineers, of both you and the officers closest to them.

Who will scrutinise you? Nationally, the Home Office and the Department of Justice will be watching your every move and utterance, as will the Association of Chief Police Officers, the Police Federation and the media. But locally? The various councils in your demesne, the MPs and local media will all have something to say, but it is the people who count, who notice and who care.

Never forget that, as a PCC, you must be above suspicion, a veritable Caesar's wife in the integrity department. That probably includes your immediate family too, so if a member is inclined to light fingeredness or a little too fond of the puff, perhaps an extended break might be in order? Somewhere far away, like Australia. As for you, if you have so much as a sniff of a sherry cork, do not drive. Avoid getting too close to any of the officers in your charge, as no group of people gossip so much as police officers.

None of the above will make much sense now, in the early, confused days of your appointment. But come next spring, you will begin to realise that humility, empathy and independence are the keys to making you a good elected PCC. Power such as yours must be worn as lightly and transparently as a garment of gossamer.

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Wendy Kyrle-Pope is a director of the London Communities Policing Partnership and a member of the Liberator Collective

# THE ELECTION THAT NEVER WAS

Kiron Reid left the Liberal Democrats to stand as an independent police and crime commissioner candidate.

Was it worth it, he asks?

On 15 November 2012, 85% of the voters of England and Wales did not vote for a police and crime commissioner and 150,000 people spoilt their votes.

I stood as an independent candidate for Merseyside, coming third of six with 11.4%. Former New Labour minister Jane Kennedy won with 56%. The public said that they wanted independents and do not trust politicians but, as in most of the country, they voted for the kind of politician that they say they don't like.

Was my standing a waste of time? Not for me – I have spent 20 years campaigning on, teaching about and writing on police accountability. I would have been annoyed with myself if I had not stood. For the 14,379 people who voted for me, it gave them the chance to vote for an independent they thought was qualified to do the job.

I left the Liberal Democrats after 25 years only to stand for PCC. The election was like being a Liberal activist when I started – the system rigged in favour of political parties, the inability to do much without organisation, no resources, nearly all the media ignoring or biased against you (the BBC an exception).

I didn't stand for nostalgia or in protest against the coalition or Nick Clegg. I stood because I believed the post should not be party political. That meant I competed against the Liberal Democrat candidate (my friend and leading social liberal activist, Paula Keaveney). The Liberal Democrats came fourth with 9,192 votes (7.3%).

The Liberal Democrat performance was worse than it looked. I came second in four out of five boroughs (the Conservative was a good second in the Wirral, his home area). The party did not manage second place in any of the boroughs it ran in recent years.

I couldn't believe that the party stood. I argued against it. After the terrible result in the Liverpool mayoral election with well known Richard Kemp as candidate, I couldn't believe they were stupid enough to stand.

Party activists all asked "how would you pay for the deposit?" when I mentioned possibly standing. I paid the £5,000 out of my own savings. Members of the public only asked me why I would stand or what it was for. Colleagues said I would have no credibility as an independent, having been a prominent Liberal Democrat. I worried about that – ironically the party helped by standing against me. I found that ordinary people appreciated the difference between supporting a political party and standing as an independent because I did not think the job should be party political. If a credible independent had stood (for example, a victims' campaigner or former senior police officer), I would

have backed them. Many good candidates were put off by the restrictive rules anti-rehabilitation of offenders (that Labour supported) and huge deposit (which Labour opposed).

Ironically, in an internal debate, I had taken the party leadership line – that we should not contest the PCC elections – against the position of Liberator and most activists on Liberal Democrat Voice that we should stand. The activist line was that the party had to fight significant national elections to support the base for the next elections.

That proved my point. The Liberal Democrats did not fight the PCC elections because of their distinctive policies on police and criminal justice, but because of other strategic priorities. The Liberal Democrats and Conservatives behaved like Labour at the height of public anger over the Iraq War and tuition fees – they never mentioned their parties but Labour mentioned itself all over its leaflets. The Green Party demonstrated tactical superiority; it decided not to stand and put out literature in its key ward, and some other areas, explaining its decision but adding that it was still active campaigning on community, city and national issues. The Greens did not endorse any candidate but several leading members, including Cllr John Coyne (a former Liberal Democrat) and national leadership contender Peter Cranie, personally endorsed me. If the Liberal Democrats had done the same, they would not have been humiliated and an authoritarian Labour ex-minister might not have walked into the police commissioner job so easily.

## FIVE MISTAKES

I made five mistakes:

- ❖ I never told the party in the spring that I wanted to stand as an independent candidate.
- ❖ I did not start an open internal campaign against the party standing but tried to persuade behind the scenes. I had been going to declare in August but delayed for personal reasons.
- ❖ I never tried to canvass *any* of my party political friends. I didn't want to cause embarrassment or upset. Many Liberal Democrats supported me, several leading campaigners helped with advice, a few helped publicly (although I advised them not to) and a few Labour and Conservative activists helped or encouraged my campaign. I found that many friends I thought were members have left the party in disillusionment with Nick Clegg and the coalition.
- ❖ I never attacked the Labour candidate on her political track record. I thought it would be debated during the election – it wasn't. So attacks

on our civil liberties and support for policies that encouraged international terrorism went unmarked.

☯ I was hopeless at badgering people for help.

Mine was a virtual campaign – by website, text message, Facebook, e-mail, word of mouth and latterly by Twitter. I was hostile to Twitter as soundbites have damaged our quality of journalism and political debate, and are dangerous for good policing. However, Twitter became invaluable. It enabled people to hear about and engage with my campaign who would otherwise not have.

Getting 100 signatures on nomination papers was incredibly time consuming – accomplished with the help of friends across the university, students, graduates, family, my wife's choir and knitting circle, and friends' football team. People had heard that the publicity for the election would all be on the internet so they thought the voting would too.

Only people particularly interested in the election looked up information about it. I thought people interested would look up my website, decide they agreed with me, and then vote for me. What I got wrong was assuming people would be interested.

Former Law School IT manager, Steve Cooper, helped me design a WordPress site. Website hits went up to 100 to 200 to 500, then in the last couple of days to thousands, but it was too late.

Leaflets went out in two polling districts in each of three Liverpool wards (ones the Liberal Democrats were not targeting), my home village and a few patches that friends, family, former students and supporters delivered in Liverpool, Sefton and Wirral. In St. Helens and Knowsley, I could do nothing except word of mouth and reply to email and website posts. Voters say they don't trust politicians but they still expected politicians to give them the literature about the election. I published my home phone number as I have always done. Callers assumed my wife was my assistant in a funded office.

How establishment our student politicians in 2012 are – Labour students lauded the candidate who was the most right wing, authoritarian and illiberal of any of the main candidates. The John Moores student newspaper promoted Labour. Liverpool University's Guild organised an election awareness meeting they failed to publicise. The Debating Society filled the gap by holding one of only three public open debates in the entire county. There was one in Southport. Victim Support did not manage to organise one.

## SPOILT VOTES

Liverpool had run an AV election in last May's mayoral election. There were thousands of spoilt votes due to lack of understanding of the system. I was horrified that the government and returning officer made no extra effort to explain the voting system to the electorate. Only the Electoral Commission did.

They should have called in experts for advice like the Electoral Reform Society. More people used open democracy websites than the official 'Choose My PCC' one to find out information. The election website was censored – you could not include endorsements, pictures of anyone else or direct criticism of your opponents. This denuded the 'election address' of politics and discriminated against candidates with a

track record and experience being able to demonstrate it – in 300 words.

I've done election monitoring for the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. I wouldn't have been able to call this a free and fair election – only the impression of one. Ironically, the restrictions were similar to those in the Liberal Democrats' internal elections.

The election presented a great opportunity for those who made the effort. Groups who would never have had their voice heard in the policing debate – animal welfare supporters (coordinated by LUSH cosmetics, LACS and IFAW), pro-drug liberalisation activists, road safety campaigners, Christians opposing discriminatory treatment by the police, criminology students who wanted to debate rational policies, also campaigners for young people like the UR Boss campaign by the Howard League. I hope all this will be taken on board by the winner.

Since my last general election candidature, I didn't know how much elections had moved to e-mail. This wasted a huge amount of my time trying to sift lobbyist and commercial touting (PR companies mainly), and national charity and pressure groups, from genuine enquiries by local people. Student reporters were enthusiastic. They tracked down and interviewed the candidates.

At the count, I had never seen anything like it. The verification for Laverpool was done in half an hour. The staff diligently doing their job had no one to check the large numbers of spoilt votes; there were four or five times the normal number on half the turnout. I saw scores of essays and protest statements against the lack of publicity, lack of explanation of the role and against the politicisation of the police. That is the real story of the election and one that is being ignored.

Reviews of the election must consider the protest of the spoilt voters and not only consider the election process. This was briefly a media, YouTube and Twitter sensation but now the coalition and winning candidates have reverted to ignoring the issue. Most PCCs elected are Conservative and Labour members of the political establishment so they won't shake things up. However, the election of 12 independents may show a trend that will continue, or may be a product of the low turnout.

Going back to academic study of a flawed system is disappointing, rather than being able to improve it, but the election was strangely fun. The experience was liberating. Journalists all asked me whether I would rejoin the Liberal Democrats, would I run for council again, would I stand for PCC in four years' time?

I made clear all the time that I am a Liberal but was glad I did not have to defend the party line. I found not being tied to someone's agenda exhilarating. So I may continue to have a break.

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Kiron Reid is a member of the Liberator Collective and a former Liberal Democrat councillor in Liverpool

# RACE FOR AN EQUALITIES POLICY

Labour did only the easy bits of race equality and the Conservatives are out to do damage. Time for an urgent new Liberal Democrat policy in this field, says Janice Turner

Members of the Social Liberal Forum and Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats (and any other party members who want to come along) will gather on 16 February 2013 to discuss a new party strategy on race equality.

This conference, the first joint initiative between the two groups, has been organised in the wake of a report from the Liberal Democrat Race Equality Task Force.

Nick Clegg set up this task force about a year ago in response to concerns that not enough was being done on race equality. It is chaired by Baroness Meral Hussein-Ece, who was asked to examine the issue and come up with recommendations.

Rather than attempt to cover all aspects of race equality, the task force focused on education and employment.

After taking evidence from educationalists and other experts, a 20,000-word report containing many recommendations is now circulating within the party. An accompanying motion, proposed by EMLD and supported by the current and former chairs of SLF, was submitted to the party's spring conference but has been rejected by the Federal Conference Committee (FCC).

What is the need for such action? A growing number of members are concerned that the party has dropped the ball on race equality. As one who joined the party in the 1970s specifically to take part in the impassioned Young Liberal campaigns against apartheid and racism, I share that concern.

During the Labour Party's term of office, some steps forward were made regarding race equality and employment but virtually all were in the public sector. As Nick Clegg said in his Scarman lecture just over a year ago, Labour took the easy road but failed to take action to improve the situation in the private sector.

But a major reason why all the main parties have lost their way has to be connected to the concept of the 'holistic' or 'human rights-based' approach to equality. In the 1990s, equality was divided up into separate 'strands' with, for example, the Commission for Racial Equality dealing with race separately from the Equal Opportunities Commission, which was concerned with gender. This led to duplication and some conflicts although, despite the CRE's faults, the black community felt that at least it had an organisation set up specifically to address racism.

The new model took the view that each individual could not be put into one box marked 'black' or 'female' or 'disabled' or 'gay' – everyone had multiple facets of identity and so we needed a system that could defend each individual's human rights. So far, so good. This model includes the essential understanding that

human rights are also about the rights of groups of people, but this was where both the Labour government and the coalition went wrong.

They missed the point that equality is about combating group-based discrimination. When Stephen Lawrence's brother Stuart recently began legal action against the police for stopping him on up to 25 occasions when driving his car, he did not believe it was because of who he was as an individual. He believes he was stopped because he is part of an ethnic group that continues to be discriminated against by the police.

As someone said to me recently: "We all want a holistic approach to health, but it doesn't mean we sack all the bone specialists and brain surgeons. We need the holistic approach and the specialists, not one or the other."

## DISASTROUS MISTAKE

But Labour's interpretation of the holistic approach (perhaps to save money?) was to reduce massively activities and programmes on individual strands. This has been a disastrous mistake.

Black Caribbean boys are three times more likely to be excluded from school than their white schoolmates. If there was an issue with the behaviour of these children per se, then the more there are in a school, the more would be excluded from that school. The evidence showed that the reverse is true: that the fewer black Caribbean children there are in a school, the more likely they are to be excluded.

When applying to university, more Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) applicants end up at the former polytechnics and are woefully under-represented at the Russell Group universities.

A lower proportion leave with top grades: is there a connection with Leeds University's discovery that, when they moved to name-blind marking, the marks of BAME and women students shot up by 12% overnight? This scale of bias can wreck careers.

And no matter how successful a BAME student is at school or university, the BAME workforce continues to face discrimination. Half of this country's economically-active black youth under 24 is unemployed, compared with 20% of white counterparts, a disaster that will blight that community for generations unless immediate action is taken.

But when the relevant Tory minister was questioned about this crisis, he did not think there was any need to address black youth unemployment separately from any other youth unemployment.

Labour's ignoring of race issues in the private sector has meant less progress on race equality. This is particularly unacceptable in areas where public money

and other benefits are being enjoyed by private and third sector organisations, with seemingly very little accountability over how well they are reflecting the diversity of the public whose money they have been spending.

Theatre and the arts receive millions in public funding and the Arts Council requires them to carry out equality monitoring – but refuses to divulge the information other than in sector-wide statistics.

You are not allowed to know how well or poorly the Royal Opera House, for example, is doing in hiring ethnic minority staff in a capital city in which fewer than 50% are white British.

The same is true of the commercial broadcasting industry, which is awarded broadcasting licences by Ofcom on behalf of the public. Ofcom keeps the companies' equality monitoring data secret and even fought successfully in court to keep it that way. The film industry has enjoyed millions of pounds of public money over the years but was never required even to carry out equality monitoring of those employed on publicly funded film productions let alone let anyone see it. The result is that just 7% of the London film industry workforce is ethnic minority, compared with nearly a third of London's overall workforce. At current rates of progress, it will take more than a century for the film industry's workforce to match London's diversity. Surely the coalition's commitment to equality, transparency and accountability should be in play here.

It's as if racism is no longer of any concern. Indeed, the Runnymede Trust is extremely worried about the growing number of people who genuinely believe that racism is no longer an issue. Black communities are also despairing at the political establishment's failure to understand what is going on.

There is no coherent government strategy for addressing race equality. Not only that, some Conservative proposals buried in the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill will weaken what legislation there is.

These proposals aim to remove the general duty of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) requiring it to promote equality, and work to overcome discrimination and prejudice towards people who are disabled or belong to ethnic minorities or other protected groups. The EHRC currently has a duty, for example, to work to eliminate prejudice and hate towards groups including race and disabled people. If it is no longer supposed to do that, what is the point of it?

We are told that these duties are only symbolic and will make no real difference to the powers and functions of the Commission. However, as Meral Ece has said, if its inclusion has symbolic value, it must therefore be the case that its removal will also have symbolic significance, and send out a signal that equalities and the role of the UK's only institution with these powers and responsibilities is to be watered down and reduced.

She also points out that this is with the backdrop of the EHRC having its budget cut by 62%, and it will have lost 72% of its staff compared with when it was established in 2007. Many feel that, while it would be fair for the Commission's budget to be reduced in line with other public bodies, these cuts are disproportionate and risk making it difficult to carry

out its work. Further cuts are anticipated in the next spending review, as a result of a zero-based budget review.

There are real fears that the proposed repeals and budget cuts are likely to further weaken the EHRC's case for accreditation by the International Coordinating Committee (ICC) of National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights.

The EHRC is currently accredited as an 'A' status body in full compliance with the Paris principles, which ministers have consistently said is a high priority for the UK government. The United Nations has been in correspondence with home secretary Teresa May about this. If the EHRC loses its 'A' status, it puts Britain on a par with Kazakhstan.

As Liberator went to press, the Task Force was reviewing the responses from across the party and putting final touches to its report. The joint conference on 16 February will discuss the themes of the report, even though the FCC has decided that the motion on race equality will not be debated at the party's spring conference.

A robust Liberal Democrat race equality policy is well overdue – and would differentiate the party from both Conservatives and Labour. Any serious initiative will inevitably put us on collision course with the Tories on some issues, such as the Equality Act and the EHRC.

But the Coalition Agreement states: "We need concerted government action to tear down these barriers and help to build a fairer society." I don't think it meant tearing down the EHRC and weakening equality legislation.

However, a tough Liberal Democrat race equality agenda would also put Labour on the defensive. Strong proposals put forward by the Liberal Democrats would force Labour to either agree these proposals are good ideas or oppose them and face condemnation by ethnic minority voters.

The Liberal Democrats desperately need a substantial, serious, practical race equality policy that makes our party better than Labour and the Conservatives on race. That's where we were when I joined the party in the seventies. It's where I want the party to be now.

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Janice Turner is diversity officer at the BECTU trades union and a member of the SLF Council. She assisted the Liberal Democrat Race Equality Task Force

## SLF & EMLD one-day conference

### Race Equality: a new Liberal Democrat approach

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# THE FAILURE OF LOCALISM

The coalition government's policy of 'localism' has turned out to be nothing of the sort, says Nick Barlow

When the coalition was formed in 2010, it seemed that local government might be one area where the two parties could enjoy a fruitful relationship. Senior Tories had regularly pronounced on their commitment to localism in the face of the centralising tendency of the last Labour government, and the idea of decentralising power and returning it to local communities is something written into Liberal Democrat DNA.

In power, the coalition government – and especially the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) – has continued to claim that localism is a key part of its strategy, yet we've seen very little actual power transferred away from the centre. So, what went wrong?

Crucially, the issue stems from 'localism' being a nebulous political concept that everyone claims to be in favour of without bothering to define what it is that they're supporting. Indeed, the fact that almost no one will argue against 'localism' means that it can be used as a cover for actions that reduce local power, not increase it.

Far from bucking the trend towards centralisation of the last two governments, the coalition has continued it. The Localism Act has given several new powers to communities and councils but, at the same time, the ability for them actually to use these powers has been severely limited. True power lies in control of the purse strings, and the DCLG's early acquiescence to the Comprehensive Spending Review has meant that local government is now a net contributor to governmental finances – the amount given to the Treasury through business rates is now bigger than the sum redistributed to councils through DCLG grants.

Further central demands limit councils' power over their own budgets, as they're pressed to sign up for centrally-imposed council tax freezes, while those that refuse and talk about raising local taxation are threatened with referendums. Other much-vaunted localisation schemes on Council Tax Benefit and business rates also seem to be more about generating headlines than actually decentralising power. Both increase the financial risk to councils for very little reward, and this means that money that should be spent on services instead goes into reserves for protection.

This is where rhetoric about localism freeing councils to innovate and face up to the challenge of austerity falls over in the face of reality. Shrinking budgets and inflating costs – especially the spiralling costs of care services – mean councils have no power to implement what few new powers they have, while community groups that might have taken advantage of them are struggling as budget cuts force councils to remove what support they give.

For Liberal Democrats, this presents a problem. Community politics, subsidiarity, devolution, localism

– all these and more are at the heart of the party, but the version being delivered while we're in power is not giving us what we desire. Instead, we're helping to deliver a bizarre centralist localism, as ineffective as it is paradoxical, in which powers appear to be granted according to the whim of Eric Pickles. We can see this in Pickles's obsession with how councils deal with waste collection – a truly localist solution would leave councils to choose what's best for their area, whereas we have £250m being given out to councils who promise to keep weekly collections of non-recyclable waste, regardless of effectiveness.

While the coalition has pledged to leave the boundaries and structures of local government intact until the next election, it seems likely that, whatever the result of the next election, local government and localism will remain an issue. As councils struggle to deliver services and continue to have to deliver further centrally-imposed cuts – with the 2014 Autumn Statement adding an extra 2% of cuts into the mix – reform of local government will provide an opportunity for whoever is in power to claim they're cutting back on bureaucracy, waste and inefficiency. The Tories seem most likely to come down in favour of more powers for their strongholds in the county councils, while Labour will likely resurrect the plans for more unitary authorities from the last parliament.

This leaves an opportunity open for the Liberal Democrats to push forward a radical localism based on our principles. Instead of a top-down solution, we could push for a system where power flows from the bottom up. Why not let communities, villages, towns and cities decide for themselves what powers they want to exercise, not wait for central government to deign to allow them to have them? Indeed, why not allow them to run themselves properly, letting boundaries evolve according to locally expressed desires, not central fiat? This could create a truly liberal localism, with communities taking the power they need to make a difference to where they live, instead of the current form where they're expected to be grateful for whatever crumbs fall down to them from the Whitehall table.

A system where the centre truly gives up power would deliver real localism across the country, and savings could easily be achieved by abolishing the DCLG as a real sign of a commitment to true localism.

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Nick Barlow is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Colchester. He has been blogging about politics and other issues for far too long at [www.nickbarlow.com](http://www.nickbarlow.com)

# LETTERS



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## SAVE THE KITTENS

*Dear Liberator,*

Over the last few months, Liberal Democrat activists have been increasingly urged to emphasise the things we are stopping the Conservatives doing. We are told to make a virtue out of being the brakes, or at least the gears, that prevent full speed, full scale right-wingery.

It may be true. The problem though is that as a message this is rubbish. I don't mean that it's not a good idea to restrain the Tories. Of course it is. I don't mean that activists don't like to hear this. Of course they do. But the party's key messages have to be those that are relevant to, and strike a chord with, the wider audience. And the wider audience will simply not be won over by this Tory taming narrative.

Let's take a rather crude example. Imagine David Cameron, George Osborne and the lot of them with a litter of kittens. The room is full of piteous mewing. But the Tories don't want the pesky things. Imagine David is about to wield the knife and kill every single little one of them. Nick Clegg bravely steps in. "At least spare some of the kittens," he says. So instead of all ten going under, three are spared and scamper away somewhere.

The problem is that most people, and certainly most of our potential voters, don't want to kill any kittens at all. And we have just become complicit in felineicide. What is more newsworthy; the seven dead ones or the others? So the message has an obvious weakness.

But perhaps we can make it more relevant and appealing. To do this, our communications people would have to make sure that they took every possible opportunity to say just how terrible the Tories are.

Making something that is quite bad a little less bad is not a strong

message. The worse things could be, though, the more significant our putting on the brakes a bit would be.

So to sharpen the message, we have to paint the Tories as really bad. And I mean really bad, evil, nasty. We have to paint them not just as wanting to kill the kittens, but intending to wipe out the whole cat population. The Downing Street cat had better hide somewhere sharpish.

OK, so we tell everyone our coalition partners are evil incarnate. But this message doesn't work either. Any person with a brain will retort that, if they are that bad, what on earth are we doing putting them in government?

I am not saying it was wrong to form the coalition. I am not saying we are wrong to fight our corner within it. What I am saying is that we need to think more carefully about whether the Tory taming message is really going to work for us.

Paula Keaveney

Former leader, Liverpool Liberal Democrats

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## FEUDAL SYSTEM

*Dear Liberator,*

Thomas Brooks and Chris Paterson's article on leasehold (Liberator 356) rightly urged better regulation of the existing system.

But it did not go far enough. The system of leasehold is literally feudal. We should be thinking of phasing it out after a thousand years! In particular, there is an overwhelming case for allowing an individual to purchase his or her lease without having to drum up a majority of their fellow tenants – yes, people who have effectively bought their flat are still referred to my that designation.

Former Liberal Democrat DCLG minister Andrew Stunell

showed little interest in the problem. Let's hope that Don Foster will.

The Liberal Party has already passed an assembly resolution on the issue. Mischievously, may I ask if this is an indication of the differences between the two parties?

Roger Jenking  
Oxford

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## ABUNDANTLY CLEAR

*Dear Liberator,*

Bill le Breton (Liberator 354) is absolutely right in saying that the Liberal Democrats in government should do everything to promote investment and jobs, and no longer promote the 'austerity' culture, which exacerbates the differences between the 'haves' who do not care, and the 'have nots' who are going to the wall.

We have millions of unemployed or under-employed people of all ages in the UK, who have many skills, and could be provided by the government with start-up finance to create new businesses, co-operatives, local services and build infrastructure improvements.

And yes, it would be paid for by being brave enough to tax the already rich – many of whom, as Bill says, got there entirely by luck or by exploiting others.

Let our slogan be 'abundance'. We have resources, we have requirements; let us get people working again to make Britain really great.

Hilary Leighter  
London

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My less far-flung readers will be familiar with *Bonkers Hour* on Radio Rutland. Each week, members of the public telephone me with their questions on matters of current interest and I give my candid views. We encourage hard-hitting questions – though I, of course, reserve the right to evict tenants who get above themselves.

I have been telling Clegg for some time that the wireless is here to stay and that he should do something similar. So I am glad to learn that he is taking part in a programme of his own on a London radio station this very morning. I climb one of my follies with a receiver and a field telephone to join the fun.

Some fellow from Woking claims to have torn up his Liberal Democrat membership card. The fellow must be Mr Apollo himself as the things are printed on some form of laminated plastic these days and I can never tear it however sorely I am provoked. Then there is a question about some Spanish fellow called Juan Si that causes general hilarity. Should I know him?

Time to take part myself. I call the radio station and demand to be put on air at once. The conversation goes like this:

PRESENTER: Our next call is, er, Lord from Rutland.

ME: What this I hear about you supporting secret courts, man? Have you taken leave of your senses? What the devil is behind this ridiculous idea?

CLEGG: I can't tell you that.

ME: Why not?

CLEGG: It's a secret.

PRESENTER: Our next caller is Ron from Walthamstow...

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To the cinema in Melton Mowbray to watch *Life of Pie*. As this drama is set in that very town's pork pie industry, the place is packed to the rafters. The film turns out to tell the story of the hero's rise from crust-raiser's boy to that most trusted of positions – jelly man. We all had the jolliest of times and I shall give it four stars in my review in the *High Leicestershire Radical*.

\*\*\*

I see this morning's Daily Mail has got hold of rather a ticklish story:

*At the end of a long, relatively uneventful Edwardian summer, the papers were suddenly full of dire news about the 21-year-old daughter of the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith.*

*The headlines were shocking: 'Premier's daughter missing', said one; 'Miss Asquith's peril', warned another. She had been reported missing at Cruden Bay on the Scottish coast, where the family had been spending their holiday in September 1908 at a rented fortress with the ominous name of Slains Castle.*

*After a dangerous search lasting half the night, Violet Asquith was finally discovered lying in wet grass on a rocky ledge above the sea – uninjured but apparently barely conscious.*

*A doctor was summoned and she quickly revived. But rumours continued to swirl: had she fallen by accident or had there been foul play? Some even whispered that she*

# Lord Bonkers' Diary

*might have been intentionally trying to harm herself.*

*The Prime Minister moved swiftly to quiet any speculation by offering an innocent tale about his daughter stumbling in the dark. But no one could explain why Violet had remained missing for so many hours. It took several days of determined stonewalling before the Press stopped asking questions.*

*What happened that night has long remained a mystery – but buried in the Asquith family papers, now*

*at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, I have discovered an astonishing revelation: the story of Violet Asquith's brush with death is inextricably linked with her doomed love for a rising young star in her father's Liberal cabinet – Winston Churchill.*

Well, I suppose it was bound to come out sooner or later. As one who was also staying at Cruden Bay that summer, I can confirm that Violet Asquith did indeed carry a torch for Churchill and threw herself off the cliff when he made it clear that he preferred his darling Clementine.

What the Mail does not record, however, is the reason that Violet Asquith survived her plunge. It happened that I was walking along the beach composing a speech on Chinese Labour at just the time that she went over the edge. The Asquiths were always sporty, healthy girls and, if she had scored a bull's eye on my crumpet, her father might well have had to find a candidate to fight a by-election in Rutland South-West. As it turned out, she caught me a glancing blow. This broke her fall sufficiently to save her from serious harm, but I still get a pain in my shoulder in wet weather.

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I am often asked to teach Liberal Democrat candidates the theory and practice of polling day organisation. After I have taught them the rudiments of knocking up and how to prime the Bonkers Patent Exploding Focus (for use in marginal wards), I give a little homily. (Or was she a Dickensian heroine?). Anyway, what I say to them is this: "Always remember to vote for yourself."

The truth of this was borne in upon me with renewed force today. Because, thanks to my decision to follow my own advice, I am the new Police and Crime Commissioner for Rutland. I won yesterday's election with a majority of one – and that because I rushed down to the village school to vote just before the polls closed. So you can see that my vote was quite decisive. It was not just that I had a majority of one: mine was the only vote cast in the whole of Rutland.

But a victory is a victory, whatever the turnout or majority. Tomorrow, I shall begin work on my plans to ensure that all police constables are fat and jolly and spend their time alternately helping old ladies across the road (preferably when they want to cross) and clipping apple-scrumpers around the ear.

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