

liberator



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- 🌟 Mali gets a breathing space – Laura Gordon

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Commentary	3
Radical Bulletin	4..6
SIX STEPS FROM THE BRINK	7
Trevor Smith suggests how the Liberal Democrats can save themselves from the coalition's unpopularity	
THIS TIME IT MATTERS	8..9
Election manifestos are usually largely ignored, but the next Liberal Democrat one will show whether the party has a liberal message for the public or is tied to a hopeless defence of the coalition, says Tony Greaves	
HURTING, NOT WORKING	10..11
Coalition economic policy has failed and it is time to stimulate demand and investment, says Chris Layton	
ANSWERS IN STRANGE PLACES	12..13
With coalition economic policy failing, Liberal Democrats should look to the surprising source of Milton Friedman, says Bill le Breton	
A BREATHING SPACE FOR MALI	14..15
French intervention has been popular in Mali, but driving out Islamist rebels is not enough in one of the world's poorest countries, says Laura Gordon	
SOFT SKILL SHUFFLE	16
Helping young people succeed in education and work means much more than a narrow focus on academic results, says Claire Tyler	
KAFKA WOULD KNOW IT	17
Ruth Bright complained about sexism and abuse in the Liberal Democrats and found an amateurish party unable to respond	
FLAG WAVING	18
Northern Ireland's Alliance Party saw its offices burned and members threatened with violence when its support led to the Union Jack flying only on certain days. Its stand has made the party stronger, says Chris Lytle	
TEN YEARS AFTER	19
The Liberal Democrats briefly caught the public mood over the Iraq war, but only despite their leaders, says Donnachadh McCarthy	
DO NO HARM	20
A liberal tax system should reflect John Stuart Mill's 'harm principle', says David Thorpe	
FORGOTTEN ARGUMENT	21
Gareth Epps finds in the Green Book open despair about the willingness of Tories to break their own green promises, and sprawling detail rather than vision	
Reviews	22..23
Lord Bonkers' Diary	24

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COMMENTARY

SECRET DISSERVICE

The secret courts row is one that anyone with even a glancing acquaintance with the Liberal Democrats' gut instincts ought to have seen coming.

That Nick Clegg, Tom McNally and others involved with this shameful bill could not see that, or considered party opinion unimportant, speaks volumes about whether or not they are instinctive liberals.

Last September's party conference saw an overwhelming vote against secret courts. The reaction of those involved with the Bill was muted. When the parliamentary vote was eventually taken on 4 March, the two Liberal Democrat MPs on the committee that scrutinised the Bill – Mike Crockart and Julian Huppert – were among the rebels. If the Liberal Democrats who have studied the Bill more closely than anyone else were that unhappy, it is impossible to swallow the leadership's arguments in its favour.

We have ended up much where we did with the health bill a year ago – being told that, because parliamentary work by the Liberal Democrats has taken a catastrophe and turned it into a mere disaster, the party should therefore swallow its reservations and support it. It is only a wonder we weren't told that "many people have worked hard" to improve secret courts legislation.

Many, perhaps most, party members would not tolerate secret courts on any basis, and rightly so. Others might have done had they been convinced by Clegg and McNally's arguments. But there weren't any. Silence reigned from September until March. Chief executive Tim Gordon issued a brief explanation of why the party voted as it did; McNally wrote a detailed explanation on Liberal Democrat Voice (14 March), ten days after the Commons vote had taken place; and Clegg confined himself to claiming in his conference question and answer session that the Bill affected only civil litigation, and therefore by implication did not matter much.

As former MP David Howarth pointed out in the spring conference debate – again an overwhelming vote against secret courts – civil litigation includes some extremely serious matters like habeas corpus and judicial review.

If the Bill's supporters had made their arguments after the conference vote in September, they might at least have had a fair hearing. Waiting until after the final vote in the Commons looked like yet another case of sticking up two fingers.

Worse, Clegg deployed the argument that Liberal Democrats might as well support the Bill, as it could not be defeated since the Tory and Labour parties

supported it. So what? If a Bill that almost the entire party finds deeply objectionable is going to pass anyway, why not oppose it and at least communicate what the party really thinks? As it is, the party has been made to look weak, bereft of principle and a prisoner of the Tories. It has also lost some prominent supporters over this issue that it could ill afford to lose, and will no doubt lose some less prominent ones.

The party was right in its instinct that justice must be visible, and also right in its unspoken assumption that, if given an inch, the security services will take a mile and use this Bill as a means to hide all manner of dubious activities that might embarrass this government or a future one.

The whole episode was a disgrace to the party and will further erode the already fractious relations between it and its leaders.

BEASTLY OUTSIDE EASTLEIGH

If it had to defend a by-election, there is nowhere the Liberal Democrats would have chosen above Eastleigh – big majority, well-organised local party and sound intelligence on voters.

The result showed that the party can still turn out hordes of activists when needed and can fight well in its strongholds. MPs with medium-to-good majorities facing Tory opponents will breathe easier.

But will anyone else? Apart from the peculiarity of Oldham East, the party's results have been dreadful in every other by-election and regular local election this parliament, and it is hard to see why Eastleigh should provide any comfort for those fighting Labour, except in the sense that it showed Labour has no steamroller going outside its heartlands.

The result also showed that the protest votes the Liberal Democrats used to rely on to bulk up those of their actual supporters have now gone to UKIP. Exposing UKIP's wish to turn the clock back to about 1950, without the rationing, may cut its vote – and it will now get more scrutiny – but since one cannot logically protest against a government by supporting a party that is part of it, the Liberal Democrats must reconcile themselves to having lost a chunk of their previous vote.

Eastleigh showed that, where the party has built up long-term support, it can still win. But there are few places where it has done that, preferring for decades to rely instead on fleeting support from those temporarily aggrieved about one thing or another.

The party may now be forced to seek and secure committed support as best it can. If, as Liberator repeatedly advised, the party had done this years ago, it would now be better placed instead of deluding itself that it could 'win everywhere'.

RADICAL BULLETIN

HOW TO INFLAME A CRISIS

It is a good liberal principle that somebody is innocent of charges unless proven guilty, but a Martian landing during the media feeding frenzy in February over the allegations about Lord Rennard's conduct might have assumed this notion had been cast aside.

The story was a gift to sensationalist parts of the media, and the party's confused and confusing responses made it a gift that kept giving.

If any of these allegations are true, and it must be noted that Rennard has strongly denied them, the distress caused will be understandable. But very few people know the truth of what he did or did not do and, with a police inquiry and two party investigations in progress, no one is likely to be any the wiser until these conclude.

Liberator first heard allegations about Rennard's conduct in the summer of 2008. Our informant was a man associated with the left of the party and without any obvious animosity toward Rennard. But there was nothing beyond rumours – it was unclear from where – that some female party members had been upset by unwanted attention. Liberator could hardly approach Rennard, or anyone else, on such slight information.

Apart from a rumour that the 'Rennard issue' had landed in Ros Scott's in-tray when she became party president that autumn, Liberator then heard nothing further.

In the late spring of 2009, a different controversy about Rennard arose, concerning his expenses claims from the House of Lords for maintaining homes in both London and Eastbourne. This preceded by a few weeks the scandal about MPs' expenses, and Rennard was not found to have committed any impropriety.

But the furore coincided both with the European Parliament elections and with his health problems – widely reported at the time and without any suggestion that they were not genuine – and so he stood down as chief executive of the party citing these medical issues (Liberator 334).

Since then, Rennard has been an active member of the House of Lords, chiefly on constitutional matters and the boundary changes, but has otherwise kept a low profile. He played various informal roles out of the public eye in the 2010 general election campaign.

Allegations about sexual issues went quiet with Rennard's resignation and might have stayed that way had his accusers not concluded that he was making a comeback into high party positions.

Last autumn Rennard appeared, by invitation, at both a Gender Balance Task Force 'political speed dating' meeting and at an event to encourage female candidates. He was also elected top of the poll for the Federal Policy Committee last autumn and was expected to take up a senior role in the team planning

the 2015 general election.

This sequence of events appears to have provoked his accusers to take their story to Channel 4 News – an interesting choice given its widely admired lack of party bias and a news agenda quite unlike the muck-raking redtop newspapers.

While the broadcast of the story coincided with the Eastleigh by-election campaign, the initial approach did not. Filming is reliably understood to have taken place in January, before Chris Huhne pleaded guilty and before anyone knew there would be a by-election in Eastleigh.

Thus while those who made similar allegations after the initial Channel 4 broadcast might usefully have kept quiet until after Eastleigh, his initial accusers do not appear to have sought intentionally to damage that campaign.

Channel 4 may have damaged it, but it was sitting on a story of considerable interest and would have been in a quandary – broadcast it and face allegations of bias against the Liberal Democrats, or suppress it until after Eastleigh and face allegations of bias in favour of the Liberal Democrats.

Inevitably, a good deal of conjecture surrounds a case of leaks and anonymous claims, but Liberator has been reliably informed that similar allegations about Rennard were hawked around the media during the 2010 general election campaign, not by the women concerned but by someone aggrieved over what they believed was Rennard's role in unrelated issues while he was chief executive. However, with a general election in progress, none concerned were willing to speak and the story consequently died with nothing the newspapers could print.

This, according to one party media figure, partly accounts for the ferocity of the storm that broke over the party, Rennard and the Eastleigh campaign. Quite apart from their normal animosity, the Mail, Telegraph and other press felt that the party had cheated them out of the story three years earlier.

Rennard must have had a difficult time during this period, and his accusers may also have done so, as the story shifted from the safety of Channel 4 into the worst of the tabloids. The storm was hardly doused by the staggeringly inept response of the party.

With Nick Clegg on holiday in a remote part of Spain, it appeared as though those speaking on his behalf were making a series of uninspired guesses at what he knew about Rennard, or what he might have said were he in the country.

The party's media handling was dreadful, with a series of continually changing stories put out that made it look both ignorant about something which, if true, it should have known about, and shifty in its response.

Only after a week of appalling headlines did someone

finally get a grip. Indeed, as former defence minister Sir Nick Harvey noted in a diary column for the House Magazine (11 March): “27 February, Belatedly the communications strategy has switched to ‘shut the **** up’, which it should of course have been since announcing the inquiry.”

The party launched an inquiry into whether disciplinary action was needed, but almost immediately halted this pending the outcome of a police investigation. A separate independent investigation, set up by the party and headed by external expert Helena Morrissey, is to review procedures and “thoroughly examine how allegations made in the past have been handled,” according to a message to party members from chief executive Tim Gordon.

The media feeding frenzy ended abruptly at the end of the Eastleigh by-election campaign. With the lack of media interest until such time as the inquiries conclude anything, it was inevitable that curious theories emanated from both sides at the Brighton spring conference.

These were, on the pro-Rennard side, that the whole thing was part of a plot by the Conservatives and their media allies to destabilise the Liberal Democrats in revenge for Rennard’s important role in scuppering the boundary changes and past election successes.

On the anti-Rennard side, there was the belief that elaborate machinations had been in progress for years to smother the issue and silence those who raised it.

There are also now those who hope, or fear depending on their view, that the end result of all this will be to push an embarrassed party into accepting all-women shortlists 12 years after it rejected that course.

It was noticeable at Brighton that the Rennard imbroglio had become one in which few men would venture a public view, while among women a sharp generational divide was evident. Younger women were inclined to believe his accusers, while older ones who know Rennard were among his most vehement defenders.

If any further revelations do emerge from this sorry tale, party members will hope that its media operation can learn from mistakes.

A WASTE OF TWO CELLS

Whatever one thinks of Chris Huhne and Vicky Pryce, it is absurd that two people should be in jail for eight months for a non-violent offence.

Lawyers will say that perverting the course of justice is, like perjury, always treated severely by judges because it is a crime against the legal system itself. Even so, with the prison population as it is, adding these two seems wholly pointless; they are, after all, unlikely to repeat the offence and could have been given community service.

It was always difficult to see how Pryce could give evidence to indict Huhne without landing herself in the same predicament, as indeed proved to be the case. The whole thing, in particular the family break-up, is a personal tragedy for all involved.

But since Huhne left the cabinet (Liberator 351), no one has really filled the gap of a prominent Liberal Democrat willing to take on the Tories in public, and that role is still going begging.

It also remains to be seen where Huhne’s following will go. He nearly became party leader in 2007 and had

devoted supporters. Although this support was largely personal (since ideological differences with Nick Clegg were few), he and his supporters would have been the most obvious rallying point in the party for anti-Clegg dissidents.

RUNNING SCARED

It is hard to avoid the impression that, knowing they are defending the indefensible, Liberal Democrat ministers are scared of allowing economic policy to be debated at conference. How else to explain the arm-twisting that attended attempts to get an emergency motion on the economy debated at Brighton spring conference?

Last September, the Social Liberal Forum submitted an amendment moderately critical of the coalition’s approach to the economy. This was not taken by Federal Conference Committee, which instead accepted an amendment from Liberal Left that, unlike the SLF one, stood little chance of being passed (Liberator 356).

In January, SLF tried again, in the continued absence of any Liberal Democrat economic strategy, by submitting a comprehensive motion. This time, representatives of the leader’s office argued it would require a full two hours to debate were it on the cramped spring conference agenda – unheard of for an ordinary motion to conference, and a decision which, to many, reeked.

By contrast, the last comprehensive Liberal Democrat Conference debate on macroeconomics, in autumn 2003, was allocated 75 minutes; the shortest time ever given to an FPC policy paper.

Thus thwarted of a full debate, the SLF tried again with a more tightly-focused emergency motion and, keen to demonstrate the broadness of its appeal, invited Sharon Bowles MEP to move it. She agreed subject to a minor redraft. But on the eve of conference, she changed her mind, having been contacted by Treasury chief secretary Danny Alexander, and wanted the motion rewritten or would withdraw from moving it.

SLF was reluctant to hand FCC a redraft that – not being topical – would have been a gift-wrapped excuse to throw the motion out. FCC regarded the original SLF motion as in order for the emergency motions ballot, but then it was suggested that timing should be looked at.

Led by Clegg’s bag carrier Matthew Hanney – not a member of the committee but allowed to speak – those close to the leadership claimed that the SLF motion would need an hour to be debated, unlike the half hour that normally suffices for an emergency motion.

There were two 30-minute slots available for emergency motions and ordinarily this means that the top two in the ballot would get a slot each. But the stitch-up meant that the SLF’s economy motion would be debated only if it topped the ballot and took the full hour, and would not be taken if (as happened) it came second. Since other motions included those on the important subjects of secret courts and Leveson, this put the economy motion at a fatal disadvantage.

Hanney also stated that a minister would be moving at least one separate vote if the economy motion were debated – presumably on the part about increasing borrowing if necessary to drive economic growth.

He was supported by an odd coalition of FCC

members, while SLF co-chair and Liberator Collective member Gareth Epps disagreed. As the discussion degenerated and Epps asked for Hanney not to be allowed to interfere further, a vote was called and Hanney's proposition won 9-6.

On the Saturday of conference, SLF texted supporters citing Vince Cable's comment at its fringe on Friday evening that he felt the motion should be debated. This triggered high-level rants at SLF co-chair Naomi Smith and threats being made that, if the economy motion were voted top of the ballot, the leadership would appeal, though how was unclear.

Faced with this stitch-up, SLF tried to suspend standing orders to challenge it. It gained a simple majority though not the required two-thirds. Hanney was seen at this time dragooning random members into the hall to "vote against the suspension of standing orders, because Nick wouldn't like it".

He is reputed to have used a phrase involving sex and Trotskyism to describe the SLF.

GROVES OF ACADEMY

When the Liberal Democrat Education Association submitted a motion for spring conference on the need to bring rogue regulator Ofsted under control, it was open to feedback on improving the draft.

Back came the message that its motion required more 'political clout' and should also cover the issue of schools being in effect forced to become academies.

The association duly obliged, and was then told its motion could not be accepted by FCC because 'someone' supported forced conversion to academies. And who might this vastly influential person be? Step forward, David Laws.

RACING UNCERTAINTY

There should have been a debate at spring conference on a new race equality policy for the Liberal Democrats. Like other blocked conference initiatives reported in this edition of RB, was it the victim of another stitch-up?

The proposed policy was developed by a Racial Equality Task Force, set up at Nick Clegg's behest. Its members thought they had secured his support when, at the end of last year, he congratulated them on it and demurred only from some minor points. But the Federal Conference Committee rejected the motion for debate at the spring conference after its vice-chair Baroness Brinton was put in charge of liaising with the motion's movers.

Ill-feeling between Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats and Brinton goes back to her last year chairing the panel that chose applicants to go on the party's leadership programme (Liberator 352). EMLD felt that too few people from ethnic minorities were chosen, and the situation has been exacerbated by personal hostility between prominent EMLD member Baroness Ece and Brinton – indeed the two baronesses are said to have entertained fellow peers with a public row in the Lords' tea room.

Task force members objected to the motion's exclusion, and here things get obscure. They say they had Clegg's support for all but minor issues and that, despite this, Brinton excluded their motion by citing Clegg's displeasure with it.

Clegg's bag carrier Matthew Hanney told a meeting

with task force members that Brinton had accurately reflected Clegg's view, though choosing to lecture them as though they were disobedient school pupils may not have been the best way to convince them of this.

Brinton stated on the Liberator blog (22 January) that the Task Force motion was rejected for "misrepresenting current party policy, being overly complicated for a debate without a paper that people could refer to (because changes were still being negotiated), a number of education points that were either inaccurate, or not clear".

This subject may now get on the agenda for the autumn conference but, with Clegg and his aides giving out conflicting messages, an old saying about elbows and posteriors comes to mind.

ANYTHING ON TELLY?

It's refreshing pints of Doombar and the finest pasties for the Mitcham and Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet, as its heads for a Cornish holiday.

The toilet, awarded for the worst motion submitted to each conference, is heading west because of a motion from North Cornwall on the entirely serious subject of 'Fairness for Remote and Rural Areas'.

Not that one would have concluded this subject was in the least serious from reading the motion. This included the observation: "Wealthier pensioners will not don mufflers and mittens if they lose their winter fuel payments; they will pay the bills. Wealthier pensioners will still buy their TV licence; how could they resist kicking Nadine Dorries out of I'm a Celebrity?"

It added mysteriously: "The issue in Cornwall is not preserving Lord Sugar's bus pass but preserving and improving the routes we have."

GHOST WRITERS

Eccentric magazine *The Liberal* has not been heard of for some years. That hasn't stopped lazier parts of the media continuing to invite the magazine's last editor Ben Ramm to act as a respected pundit on party matters.

The Wikipedia page for *The Liberal* states that it "ran in print from 2004 to 2009 and online until 2012". But its own website states that there is a "new website coming soon" and has a link to the old website, which touts for subscriptions to a magazine that no longer exists.

Meanwhile, as of late March, the official Liberal Democrat website still carried a page advertising the party's weekly newspaper *Liberal Democrat News*, four months after its demise. Rather unfortunately, this was illustrated with a picture of Chris Huhne.

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SIX STEPS FROM THE BRINK

Trevor Smith suggests how the Liberal Democrats can save themselves from the coalition's unpopularity

The remaining two years of this parliament may well witness continuing public disaffection with the main parties and a concomitant loss of credibility in the party leaders. Ed Miliband is not achieving the poll lead he should be, given the coalition's very poor performance on many issues. Cameron and Osborne refuse to change economic policy, while U-turning on almost everything else, while Clegg and Alexander remain glaringly complicit in coalition economic policy but, without any strategy, continue to bob like corks on the waves.

The growing chorus of discontent within Tory circles serves only to strengthen the prediction that they may well ditch Cameron and Osborne before 2015. Whether Clegg and Alexander could escape being engulfed by this imbroglio is doubtful: as members of 'the Quad', they are too enmeshed to avoid being part of the collateral damage.

Clegg, indeed, may not last that long as Liberal Democrat leader. The Eastleigh by-election win bought him time but if the local elections in May prove disappointing, he will come under severe challenge. His internal support is fragile: there is simmering discontent among the rank-and-file, which itself is seeing a continuing loss of membership; among federal office-holders, there is resentment of the 'power freakery' exercised by Clegg's immediate circle; and a discernible apathetic resignation among parliamentarians that gives way to dismay when, for example, Clegg supports the creation of Secret Courts.

Clegg would do himself a favour if he could be seen as convincingly addressing the challenges the next general election will pose. There is virtually no money to fund any serious policy making, which in part explains the 'cork bobbing' and the general sense of lack of direction and purpose. There is a crying need to select, say, six areas to add policy weight to the otherwise vacuous slogan of promoting "a fair society and strong economy" as presently parroted.

First, it is vital to formulate new economic policies specifically aimed at remedying regional imbalances, a broken banking system and other selected topics. Liberal Democrats must distance themselves from the Cameron/Osborne mantra that their 'Plan A' is unchangeable.

Second, energy and environmental priorities must be re-examined: possibly greater emphasis on renewables; the growing cost of nuclear energy; the potentialities of shale and getting the Green Investment Bank functioning. These must be part of a coherent plan that successive governments have woefully failed to produce.

Third, gender, racial and social class inequalities must be robustly dealt with: the situation is getting worse. Pay differentials and job opportunities are not changing and pale, male and stale predominance in

corporate and professional life continues unabated. Recruitment quotas now need to be seriously considered, lasting for up to a decade.

Fourth, we must encourage a realistic appreciation of the UK's position in the world. Iraq and Afghanistan should have taught the political elite the folly of military adventurism based on an unwarranted nostalgia for an imperialist past. There is no case for continuing to act as deputy-sheriff to the US. The UK should not contemplate creating a Franco-British alliance to intervene in Mali, Syria and other such failing states – they are fool's errands. Such overseas excursions should only be undertaken as part of NATO on a proportionate manpower and financial basis.

Liberal Democrats must declare their opposition to a re-equipment of Trident. It is of dubious military significance, but most certainly is not affordable. On both grounds, Trident must be scrapped.

Fifth, there must be a determined effort to re-assert the Liberal Democrats' unique selling-point of being the foremost champion of civil liberties and human rights both at home and abroad.

Sixth, some attempt must be made to retrieve the disastrous fiasco over university fees. Clegg's belated 'apology' will exorcise the memory of reneging on the 'cast iron' pre-2010 pledge. It is an irremovable stain and will linger long in the public memory. However, it might just be mitigated if an undertaking was made to use the savings from Trident to reduce fees and significantly increase grants for those from poorer homes. This also chimes in with the reduction of inequalities.

The above is not an exhaustive list of policy priorities and doubtless others could be chosen. But the number should be kept down to a marketable limit of no more than six.

Small working parties should be immediately created to elaborate on a limited range of specific policy areas and to report by May 2014. Resources are limited and need husbanding. Start by seconding (part-time) six MPs' staff to act as rapporteurs to the working parties composed of half a dozen Lib Dem peers, who are an underused resource. Their proposals would be forwarded to relevant front benchers and the Federal Policy Committee for refinement and endorsement by the autumn 2014 conference, for incorporation in the general election manifesto. It would be opportune at that time to withdraw from the coalition, leaving a minority Tory administration to see out the remaining year of the parliament.

That might rekindle our spirits and enthusiasm, and help us to begin sailing on a chartered course again rather than just bobbing along.

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

THIS TIME IT MATTERS

Election manifestos are usually largely ignored, but the next Liberal Democrat one will show whether the party has a liberal message for the public or is tied to a hopeless defence of the coalition, says Tony Greaves

Election manifestos might cause trouble but they don't win votes. We have often thought them rather boring, and few people read them apart from the other parties looking for things to stir up bother about.

They are a throwback to elections from the past, a chore to be carried out. All in all, not top of the priorities for harassed Liberal Democrat activists.

Perhaps, this time, such ideas are wrong. After five years of coalition with an ever more right wing and desperate Conservative Party, what will the Liberal Democrats have to show for it – and what will we have to say to the people? This time, at the heart of the campaign will be the manifesto, its shape, purpose and content.

I thought Nick Clegg's speech at the party's spring conference was less dire than last September, though he still seems wedded hook, line and sinker to the coalition's disastrous economic policies. He did say one interesting thing, though: "The longer you stand side-by-side with your opponents, the easier your differences are to see. We don't lose our identity by governing with the Conservatives. The comparison helps the British people understand who we are."

It might have been better if they had all listened to those of us who were telling them this two and a half years ago when they called us disloyal, but converts are always welcome.

There is also a lot more thought now going into how to put forward a clearly distinctive Liberal Democrat identity in at least the last nine months before the election in June 2015; how to create a coalition endgame that is not just a Tory pre-election ramp. But no-one seems to have any more clue how to do this than when I set out the issues in *Liberator* 355.

A worry for mainstream radical Liberals ('social liberals' in the new jargon) must be the message that will be put out in two years' time. Will the Liberal Democrats emerge from the coalition as the progressive centre-left Liberal party that we were three years ago – and which we have been for most of my political lifetime? Or will our message succumb to what seems to be the Clegg-Alexander vision of a much blander centre party whose aim is little more than tempering the 'excesses' of left and right.

USELESS AND DAMAGING

A second worry, tied up firmly in the first, is our economic policy. There may be a wish amongst some Liberal Democrat ministers (notably but not only Vince Cable) to revert to more of the kind of Keynesian policies that the Liberal Party and Liberal Democrats promoted during most of the last 100 years, with the need for a substantial government-created stimulus

(not austerity) when in the depths of a recession. Or will the Clegg-Alexander commitment to the useless and damaging neo-classical prescriptions of Osborne prevail? At the political level, there is the threat to tie us into the medium-term financial policies of the coalition government well beyond the next election. This is economic madness and potential political suicide.

The dynamics of the manifesto process are interesting. The Federal Policy Committee may not be quite as radical and stropky as recently, but there are a lot of people there who will want to make sure that the manifesto is indeed the Liberal Democrat manifesto and not an apologia for five years of coalition. This is a central issue. Of course, it will not be possible to wish away the previous five years. The Liberal Democrat record in government will have to be set out more clearly and more honestly than anyone has so far been prepared to do. But if we fight the election on that record (however many successes we can trumpet and however much damage limitation we can claim), we risk disaster. Surely we need a separate document setting out the past, and a manifesto setting out the future.

Who will be able to make a real input into the manifesto process? The FPC has appointed a manifesto steering group chaired by David Laws. The FPC is responsible for the manifesto, working closely with the leadership, but the signs so far are not encouraging.

Laws is (as they say) a controversial choice though my view is that, rather than promoting his own personal right-wing libertarian/free market views, he will see it as his job to push the views of the leadership, and particularly those of Clegg and Danny Alexander. The rest of the membership is fairly balanced (though along with Laws it was presented to the FPC as almost a *fait accompli*). To be fair, the FPC was resolute in demanding that it is reported to and consulted at all stages of the process – we will see how well members stick to that resolve.

There is something called the 'Manifesto Engagement Outline', which involves a first phase of general input leading to a Manifesto Themes Paper, which the FPC will sign off in June as a basis for debate at this coming September's conference. The following year will see most of the detailed work take place prior to another debate in September 2014 – a conference that looks more and more like a really crucial moment in the history of this party.

The coming months include consultation with party bodies such as ALDC and Liberal Youth, but it's already clear that the main input will be from inside Westminster. There's already a call for the 'top five policy headlines' to "meet challenges in each

portfolio” from the Liberal Democrat parliamentary committees. This seems both worrying and premature.

The committees certainly think they ought to be in there, not least their co-chairs (one from the Commons, one from the Lords). They’ve already raised a fuss and ways will be found to calm them down. I’ve no doubt they should be involved – and, although I handed over the job of Defra co-chair last year, I’m active on both the CLG (Communities and Local Government) and Decc/Defra committees, so I would say that wouldn’t I? But with the best intentions, ministers, MPs and peers are always going to be engulfed in the details of the parliamentary short-term.

TORY RUBBISH

There is a real danger that the powers-that-be will mistake consultation with parliamentarians for debate in the party. One of the advantages of coalition (we are told) is that our ministers have access to civil service support in developing policies. So it may be, but would you trust Danny Alexander (as a ‘for instance’ taken at random) to ask for the right kind of policy development on economic policy for the next five years? And would you trust Treasury civil servants to have the slightest idea what a Liberal party returning to its roots might want to say? We already see some Liberal Democrat ministers in parliament and on TV reading out Tory rubbish that they have been given by civil servants who have no idea what our party stands for.

But where are the countervailing policy-making resources in the party? Some do exist, such as the Liberal Democrat group in the Local Government Association. Even here, the response of the CLG committee, with its strong LGA support and input, has been to go back to the stuff produced for the ill-fated Mid-Term Review (*The Coalition: together in the national interest*), which by its very nature is coalition based and by 2015 will be the past, not the future.

There are token plans to involve the wider party – for instance, a Webinar with party members may take place with more traditional pizza and politics packs for local parties in September. How much help these will be remains to be seen.

There is a real problem in the party, in this respect at least, with the political weakness of many pressure groups and the lack of effective factions. This may be the biggest test for the Social Liberal Forum. Perhaps Liberal Democrat Voice may find ways of developing more substantial and less ephemeral means of debate.

There is also going to be a huge clash between people who think (shock, horror) that the manifesto should set out a programme for government based on what Liberal Democrats stand for – policies rooted in principles and Liberal ideology – and those who will follow the party’s newly risen saviour, ‘he who must

“Immigration will be an acid test of just how far the Liberal Democrats are prepared to adopt illiberal attitudes in the face of focus group research”

be obeyed’ Ryan Coetzee, or rather the messages which he devises from his hundreds of spreadsheet pages purporting to tell us what our target 20% of the electorate think about everything from the immigration of Bulgarians to funding for tiddlywinks tournaments in Tooting.

The drive for poll-driven policies may be at its most acute where there is a perceived and probably real threat from UKIP and the growing

right-wing populism in the Tories. High among these are immigration and Europe. Europe may lead to more populist nonsense like the original party commitment to a referendum – one of Paddy Ashdown’s silliest mistakes as leader. Immigration will be an acid test of just how far the Liberal Democrats are prepared to adopt illiberal attitudes in the face of focus group research.

No-one can argue against presenting party policy in the most attractive way (rather than to deny or disguise it), and perhaps that is what Coetzee is all about. Chris Rennard was criticised for populist campaigning, but he was often misunderstood. He was actually a useful bulwark against abandoning our beliefs in the pursuit of votes at any price and his withdrawal from the team for 2015 is, in this particular aspect, more of a blow than many will realise.

Yet I was a little shocked (yes, even me) to learn that a senior press officer in the party wanted to remove all policy debate and decision-making from this March’s spring conference. And there are still over two years and four conferences to go to the general election. Watch out for more of this insidious pressure from High Places as time goes on. The mystery is why these fifth columnists did not make a serious attempt to stitch up the Federal Conference Committee in the elections last autumn.

I have no doubt that our very existence as a radical left-of centre Liberal force is now at stake. For 25 years since the merger of the Liberal Party and the SDP, this has always been the only credible reason for our existence. The first few years were difficult as many people pretended that we are “neither social democrats nor Liberals but something new, something more and something different”.

This was always nonsense but there are similar siren calls now, which are equally vaguely defined (and that’s ignoring the tiny fringe of right-wing libertarians who are still hanging around). The process of creating the manifesto for 2015 is probably the most important current battleground to maintain the Liberal Democrats as the mainstream progressive Liberal party of British politics.

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

HURTING, NOT WORKING

Coalition economic policy has failed and it is time to stimulate demand and investment, says Chris Layton

When Vince Cable breaks cover and suggests a prudent shift in strategy to enable an investment led recovery, it is a moment to treasure.

He lifted the spirits of social liberals at a fringe meeting at the spring conference in Brighton. Through his New Statesman article two days before, he cheered many others who are unhappy with a fiscal squeeze that has relied on rhetoric to promote growth and placed 80% of the burden of austerity on public spending cuts.

In his article, Vince thoughtfully flew a kite. At Brighton he was more forthcoming, urging public bond issues to fund a housebuilding programme, rejecting a further round of spending cuts, and arguing that future efforts to close the deficit should be split 50-50 between tax increases and spending cuts.

We need a shift in economic strategy within the coalition and, more radically, in the election manifesto. This must set out goals which all Liberal Democrats can support, give substance to the empty slogan of 'stronger economy, fairer society', and set terms for pre-election dialogue and post-election bargaining not only with Conservatives but also with Labour.

What is the economic picture? Liberal Democrats are right to claim credit for their useful achievements, from taking the lower paid out of tax to the Green Investment Bank and more. The trouble is that key policies, notably on climate change, have been emaciated by the Treasury and overall the coalition's economic policy has failed to achieve its goals.

Despite a recovering world economy, the UK's national output last year remained well below the 2008 level in the longest prolonged slump since 1929, with no sign of recovery ahead. Closing the fiscal deficit has been pushed into the distant future. Stagnant business investment means that when and if demand recovers, the economy will be less able to respond.

The government can claim that 800,000 net private sector jobs have been 'created' but that is offset by the loss of 521,000 public sector jobs in the last two years. There has also been a major increase in part-time working, with many wishing they could work longer hours. Under the coalition, differences of wealth and wellbeing in the UK, already the highest in Europe, have widened further.

The only surprise about this stagnation is that many people in government appear surprised by it. It is in part the direct consequence of the government's economic policy. Less public spending means less consumer or investment spending and a lower tax take.

Britain's urgent economic problem in 2008 was not the government's fiscal deficit. It was the collapse of banks and business investment and excessive indebtedness, which risked becoming a global slump. In that context, deficit financing by Gordon Brown, the US and other countries successfully prevented worse.

Brown's political and economic error was his earlier

deficit financing in a time of excessive boom, masked by various tricks, such as the Private Finance Initiative, while a crazily unreal exchange rate in terms of market prices accelerated the decline of Britain's share in world manufacturing and drove 40% of British farmers into loss. Once the boom collapsed, governments of any party were faced with the painful task of narrowing the fiscal gap (6% of GDP) in an economy debilitated by delusions.

Economists, split in 2010 between fiscal hawks and Keynesians, are now virtually unanimous that a new stimulus is needed.

British government debt has lost its Moody's AAA rating because markets, and advisors to banks and investors, see that without growth the British government has to go on borrowing and investment in a stagnant UK does not promise good returns.

The IMF backs a change of policy. Low interest rates and massive 'quantitative easing' of credit have staved off worse but failed to bring recovery. In Keynes's phrase, monetary policy is now "pushing at a piece of string".

The global banking crisis makes a solution more difficult than in the time of Keynes. Banks are under contradictory government pressures – to strengthen their balance sheets to avoid a repeat of their profligate disaster yet extend more credit at the same time. It is time for a change of course in the coalition's present policies and for a much wider strategy for the next ten years

The fresh thinking cannot mean merely relaxing the squeeze. It must mean increasing some taxes to enable others to be cut, to help job creation and halt excessive cuts in public spending that hit recovery or hurt the poor.

Long-term public investment in infrastructure and skills is one key. Recovery must be greened to become sustainable in a time of accelerating climate change. Ethics must play a part in the taming of greed and the redistribution of wealth, which is crucial if humanity is to rein back its excessive demands upon the planet. Many valuable Liberal Democrat ingredients are to hand – the Green Book, conference resolutions, the useful tax consultation paper.

Public investment in infrastructure stimulates recovery most because it multiplies useful activity more than any other form of public spending and far more than tax cuts. For some time, Robert Skidelsky, Keynes's biographer, has suggested making use of low interest rates and Britain's still adequate credit rating to issue long-term infrastructure bonds in addition to our current borrowing. Cable has been moving towards a similar position, suggesting that public bonds be used to fund house construction. A first step would be to remove at once the government cap on borrowing imposed on local authorities, a change they strongly urge. If markets are supportive, further bond issues could help reverse cuts in the building programme for

hospitals and schools.

Despite low interest rates, Britain's big banks are still disappointing many small businesses seeking loans. What a pity the publicly owned giant, Royal Bank of Scotland, was not fully nationalised, stripped of its bad debts and turned into a public investment bank on a far larger scale than the coalition's modest Green Investment Bank or the Business Bank that Cable is just getting off the ground. The Business Bank now needs to expand and challenge the Leviathans, none of whom should be considered as too big to fail.

A Europe-wide Tobin, or financial transaction, tax is to be implemented by France, Germany, Italy and eight other countries: turkeys in the City don't like Christmas but it makes sense for the public purse to tax a share of the gigantic flows of parasitic money that rush round markets, contributing little to the useful long-term allocation of investment.

To avoid displacing financial markets to countries without the tax, the aim should be to spread it throughout the EU, dialoguing with the United States, where the Obama administration is sympathetic, towards a global tax on the main world financial markets. A simpler levy on banks' balance sheets is proposed by the Economist.

Taxing capital gains at the same level as income tax would tackle a difference that has been a big source of unfairness and distortion, since a huge proportion of income in the financial sector comes from capital gains. This is why Liam Fox wants to cut capital gains tax to zero. Cutting it spurs quick turnarounds of companies by asset stripping but not the long-term investment the country needs.

The coalition's relaxation of planning restrictions should be matched with the introduction of a tax on land, including agricultural land. If successful, planning relaxation will mean a massive profit bonanza for the 200,000 people who own 90% of Britain's land, as land is freed for development. Land taxation will transfer that benefit to the public purse, paying over time for the huge cost of infrastructure projects.

With more than 800,000 empty houses in Britain and growing numbers of homeless, taxing the land under unused properties would ensure they are better used.

Land taxation will have to be introduced gradually but immediately the coalition should tax unused land with planning permission which developers sit on, waiting for a speculative rise in land prices.

The benefits of so-called growth have gone mainly to the wealthiest during the last twenty years. Yet a recent study at MIT showed that high bonuses, while encouraging output and performance among the lowest earners, were counter-productive when applied to higher earners whether in Detroit or Bangalore. They devoted increasing attention to their social status and money and less to their creative job. We see this most in the financial sector.

Trying to curb bonuses by invidious political interventions or relying on shareholders is not enough.

“The only surprise about this stagnation is that many people in government appear surprised by it”

The new EU measure (limiting bonuses to twice annual salary if shareholders agree) and the tougher new Swiss cap are helpful. If there is a risk that this will push up basic salaries in banks, the answer is to tax them more.

Let's start by pushing the top rate of tax back to 50%. That will not

drive anyone out of the country. Taxing all incomes above £500,000 with a super tax at 80% or more would help create a sense of justice and do no harm to management performance.

This might spur tax avoidance as the golden eggs laid by rich people in London rarely come to the Treasury, since some of the world's best lawyers and accountants advise them on how to smuggle the eggs abroad. In the view of the Tax Justice Network, the UK and US are two main havens for an estimated \$20-30tn of global wealth belonging to people who pay no tax.

It would be better for Britain to be home to half the present number of super rich – if they actually paid tax. The coalition is making a serious attempt to help HMRC tackle the problem, but key legislation needs to be changed like the non-domestic status, which may have enabled dubious wealth from Africa or Russia to dodge tax.

The European energy industry needs a clear commitment from governments to a rising carbon price, so that the huge long-term investment to replace power stations can get under way. That floor price will have to be set by 2014 to meet Britain's energy security and green objectives. Regulatory pricing, carbon taxation and a revived European carbon market must be the means.

The tax increases I suggest would make possible such changes as cutting NI contributions further at the bottom end and to abolish them for people under 25 or under; increase capital allowances; restore cuts in funding for renewable energy; increase the capital of the Green Investment Bank from £3-10bn over two years.

In the first 25 years after the war, an all-party consensus based on the thinking of the Liberals Keynes and Beveridge held that policy should support full employment and that government had a responsibility to protect the weak.

The Thatcher-Blair counter-revolution dropped that and rested on the myth that wealth trickling down from eternal global economic growth could defeat poverty. The myth has collapsed, leaving Britain, like America, with vast differences of wealth just when reality requires a global fairer sharing of demands upon the planet.

With Labour still in search of policy, it is for Liberal Democrats to pioneer a new practical and ethical vision, worthy of the hopes that briefly flourished after the bank crash of 2008.

Chris Layton was economic advisor to the Liberal Party in the 1960s and is a former parliamentary candidate

ANSWERS IN STRANGE PLACES

With coalition economic policy failing, Liberal Democrats should look to the surprising source of Milton Friedman, says Bill le Breton

Erasmus believed that, “in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.” But it was H.G. Wells, in a short story *The Country of the Blind*, who showed us that the one-eyed man’s sight is first ridiculed by the country’s elite and then, when found to threaten their command of power, the offending organ of sight is hacked out.

Our children and their children will come to recognise the prolonged slump we are living through – the effects of which will affect the quality of their lives – as the failure of a self-serving meritocracy pressing blindly on, unable to see the lesson of history.

In an interview with Patrick Wintour in the *Guardian* (8 March), Vince Cable said, “I have always supported the argument that the big bazooka is monetary policy, and the big problem has been that the way monetary policy has been operating has been very conservative ... what we need is a much more creative monetary policy.”

To the high command of the Liberal Democrats, Cable is the one-eyed man. His peers and their advisers persist in their view that austerity is both necessary and sufficient. “Look,” (their favourite way of starting a sentence, brooking no opposition, admitting no blemish to their conviction), “Look, monetary policy could not be more creative, or looser – interest rates are close to zero, we have bought £375bn of bonds.”

When, Cable published a long article in the *New Statesman* (6 March), this high command, having been shown a pre-publication copy, first waived it through and then publicly slapped down its author in a way that H.G. Wells would have recognized as one step away from ‘surgical removal’.

MAGIC MONEY TREES

Fiat – Let it be done! Monetary policy presents a number of difficulties for those who advocate that its mismanagement was the main cause of the economic crisis that engulfed the world in 2008 and that its continuing mismanagement blocks recovery.

Once money derives its value entirely from government regulation or law – fiat money – all of the ‘household budget’ metaphors beloved of politicians and commentators become redundant, disinforming and dangerous to the common weal. These metaphors are especially counterproductive in the circumstances in which economies find themselves today. Above all, they make austerity seem a seductive remedy, especially to those ideologically predisposed to a smaller state. Most of the difficulties arise from the tendency for people to think of currency in nominal rather than real terms – face value or nominal value is mistaken for its purchasing power or real value. But a

fiat currency has no intrinsic value and its real value is derived from its purchasing power.

Let’s be blunt about this. In the world of fiat currencies, there really are Magic Money Trees, Mr Cameron, but the puritan mindset finds it especially difficult to cope with the apparent ‘something for nothing’ nature of the way that fiat currencies can be managed to escape slumps.

Another difficulty, and one not to be underestimated, is that the most helpful ways of thinking about monetary policy today, specifically those of the market monetarists, are linked inextricably with the ideas of Milton Friedman, and even more so with the ideas Friedman had for tackling the problems of the great inflation of the 1970s, which entailed severe cuts to government expenditure.

But Friedman’s work originated from his study of the causes of the Great Depression and the problems of stagnation in the 1930s. This in itself causes a further difficulty for Liberals (with a capital L) because Friedman’s conclusions challenge the long-held belief that the world was saved by the ideas of the Liberal John Maynard Keynes.

Friedman, working with Anna Schwartz on *A Monetary History of the United States*, concluded that the Great Depression was caused by a severe contraction in the money supply, which fell by over a third between August 1929 and March 1933.

The situations leading up to 1929 and 2008 are strikingly similar. An increase in the rate of increase of the money supply prior to those years produced asset bubbles. The central banks on both occasions tightened monetary policy too deeply and for too long. Fear gripped the public, who cut back on their expenditure, so increasing their demand to hold money. The increase in demand for money and the destruction of fiat money as consumers and firms sought to reduce their debt worked exponentially to magnify the imbalance between the demand and supply of money. Central Banks failed to realise in time what was happening and delayed before taking corrective action. In the UK, the Bank of England’s policy rate remained at 5% six months after the collapse of Lehman Brothers. As the Bank reduced its policy rate, step-by-gradual-step, national income as measured in cash plunged by 8%. By the time it did act, fear was entrenched. A criticism of the central bank is also a criticism of the scrutineers of the Bank – the Chancellor (after 2010 the Quad), the Treasury, parliament, the media, and a large part of the established economics profession.

Friedman had left a number of messages about what to do if the conditions of 1929 ever returned. Two are of

particular note. The first was a paper published in the American Economic Review in 1948, *A Monetary and Fiscal Framework for Economic Stability*, which was referred to by Adair Turner in a lecture on 6 February, *Debt, Money and Mephistopheles: How do we get out of this mess?*

Turner said, "Milton Friedman is rightly seen as a central figure in the development of free market economics and in the definition of policies required to guard against the dangers of inflation. But Friedman argued in an article in 1948 not only that government deficits should sometimes be financed with fiat money but also that they should always be financed in that fashion with, he argued, no useful role for debt finance. Under his proposal, "government expenditures would be financed entirely by tax revenues or the creation of money, that is, the use of non-interest bearing securities" And he believed that such a system of money financed deficits could provide a surer foundation for a low inflation regime than the complex procedures of debt finance and central bank open market operations which had by that time developed."

Arborealists among Liberator readers may detect a reference here to those Magic Money Trees kept under lock and key in the orchard of the Bank of England.

Friedman's second message was recorded in 1998 and contains instructions for 'Reviving Japan', which was mired in a similar slump to the one being experienced now. He opened his article bluntly: "A decade of inept monetary policy by the Bank of Japan deserves much of the blame for the current parlous state of the Japanese economy."

He first praises Japan for reacting in the 1970s to an accelerating rise in inflation by bringing monetary growth down, and instituting a period of monetary stability that produced steady growth of 4% between 1977 to 1987 (Japan's Great Moderation). But he castigates Japan for, largely at the behest of the Americans, buying dollars with 'created' yen and fuelling an asset bubble, which it eventually had to bring to an end in 1990 by drastically tightening monetary policy.

"Tight money was spectacularly effective; the stock market, and also nominal income growth, plunged." But continuing the tight money policy for too long meant, "Low inflation turned into actual deflation by 1994."

Friedman's remedy? "The surest road to a healthy economic recovery is to increase the rate of monetary growth, to shift from tight money to easier money, to a rate of monetary growth closer to that which prevailed in the (Great Moderation) but without again overdoing it. That would make much-needed financial and economic reforms far easier to achieve." Recall the advice of 1948, think money-financed deficits.

LOOSE POLICY

But haven't we in the UK already got loose monetary policy? Look at our low (nominal) interest rate and quantitative easing. Friedman replies, "Initially, higher monetary growth would reduce short-term interest rates even further. As the economy revives, however, interest rates would start to rise. That is the standard pattern and explains why it is so misleading to judge monetary policy by interest rates. Low interest rates are generally a sign that money has been tight, as in Japan; high interest rates, that money has

been easy." And QE as practiced is reversible open market operations.

He went on: "The governor of the Bank of Japan, in a speech on June 27, 1997, referred to the 'drastic monetary measures' that the bank took in 1995 as evidence of 'the easy stance of monetary policy.' He too did not mention the quantity of money. Judged by the discount rate, which was reduced from 1.75% to 0.5%, the measures were drastic. Judged by monetary growth, they were too little too late..."

Market monetarist Marcus Nunes puts it succinctly: "What drives the economy? Nominal spending. Who controls nominal spending? The Central Bank."

Sixteen years after Friedman posted this advice, a new Japanese PM is busy putting the Friedman lesson into practice and the liberating effects, just five months on, are already plain to see.

Why not here, then? As Cable writes: "The British economy is still operating at levels around or below those before the 2008 financial crisis and roughly 15% below an albeit unsustainable pre-crisis trend. There was next to no growth during 2012 and the prospect for 2013 is of very modest recovery."

It is the Bank of England that has its foot planted firmly on the throat of the UK's economy but, according to the Chancellor's adviser Rupert Harrison, the Quad will continue to indulge the central bankers by ruling out the radical option of changing the Bank's remit to include a growth target based on nominal GDP, at a stroke removing their discretion, their power.

If this is the case, it means that, within the Liberal Democrat High Command, Cable has lost the argument and austerity-fuelled stagnation will go on and on, crushing the weak and favouring the powerful.

The new meritocracy of Cool Britannia – the bright stars of civil society post-Blair – is succeeding in its object of defending the interests of the few. Obsessed with the efficiency of deregulated markets, they first gave a free hand to greed and profligacy and then resorted to the old errors that brought about the Great Depression. Their policies, pre- and post our Great Recession, are different sides of the same coin. Their blind perspective of isolated privilege continues to license the exploitation of the weak. They sabotage all sense of society, remove each obstacle to their interest's licence to exploit. They are desperate to 'see' austerity work. It won't. The failure of this country's new elite is as damaging, if not more so, than any previous in our country.

It was the campaigning of great Liberals in the nineteenth century that overcame the interests that built and protected the pernicious Corn Laws. Today, our task is similarly to remove an elite and the self-sustaining system it has constructed. And that task is no less fundamental for liberty.

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

A BREATHING SPACE FOR MALI

French intervention has been popular in Mali, but driving out Islamist rebels is not enough in one of the world's poorest countries, says Laura Gordon

Since the French military launched Operation Serval in January 2013, Mali has gone from being a country that few knew to being regularly in the newspapers. Unfortunately, the complex origins of the conflict defy easy understanding, and the country's previous backwater status means that genuine analysis has often been lacking.

Mali's most recent problems date to early January, when Tuaregs returning from Colonel Gaddafi's African Legion launched a rebellion in the north.

The main group was the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA, Azawad indicating a Tuareg homeland), accompanied by Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith; an Islamic group led by the same Tuareg clan as the MNLA), and MUJWA (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, another Islamist group). In the background was Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, rich from ransoms and smuggling.

Faced with the ill-trained and poorly armed Malian army, the rebels made significant gains, including capturing the garrison town of Anguelhoc where it massacred soldiers. In protest, a group of soldiers led by Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo marched on the presidential palace, their protest swiftly becoming a coup when the president, Amadou Toumani Traore, fled. In the confusion, the rebels made further rapid gains, taking over Mali's northern regions before halting at Mopti, while in the north, the secular MNLA was rapidly displaced by MUJWA, Ansar Dine and AQIM.

These groups imposed sharia law in the areas under their control, including amputations, stonings and, echoing the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan buddhas, the destruction of Timbuktu's famous mausoleums.

Although the return of the 'Libyan' Tuaregs played a part in triggering the revolt, the causes go far deeper. Tuareg dissatisfaction dates back to independence, with a string of rebellions. Each was accompanied by a peace deal promising greater Tuareg integration into the state and development for the north, much of which was not delivered. However, it is important not to overstate the importance of this; although the Tuareg can destabilise the north, they are a minority even there, and there is limited support for independence even among the Tuareg. Alone, they lack the numbers and the resources to take, and hold, the whole of the north.

The key to the rebellion's success therefore lies in the alliance with Islamic groups. Of these, the most important is AQIM. The group's origins lie in the Algerian civil war of the late 1990s, when the

government cancelled elections won by Islamic groups, leading the Islamists to take up arms as the GIA. A brutal civil war ensued in which both sides carried out atrocities, with the Algerian army eventually gaining control of most of their territory and the key towns. The GIA became the GSPC, focusing mainly on attacks within Algeria, before in 2006 signalling an increasingly outward focus by rebranding as AQIM.

KIDNAPPING FOR RANSOM

AQIM's strategies have included bombings, largely of Algerian military targets and other armed attacks, but the major source of their power has been kidnapping westerners for ransom, raising some \$50m in the past decade. This has enabled it to become a sophisticated fighting force.

The other rebel groups in northern Mali, MUJAO and Ansar Dine, are more home grown. Ansar Dine, which controlled Timbuktu during the occupation, is led by Iyad Ag Ghali, a long-time Tuareg rebel and intermediary in hostage negotiations. Closely related to the leaders of the MNLA, he founded this group, with AQIM providing financial and logistical support, when the MNLA would not accept his Islamist agenda. The origins of MUJAO are more obscure, but it is essentially an AQIM splinter group.

As well as the rebel groups, the Malian state contributed to creating the conditions for rebellion. Although pre-coup Mali was frequently praised as a beacon of democracy, this concealed a system in which power changed hands within a small elite that controlled the country's resources as well as its politics.

In this system, the remote northern provinces were largely ignored by the Bamako-based ruling class, creating a vast ungoverned space that was used as a base by terrorists and a transit corridor by drug smugglers. These drug smuggling networks allegedly paid off the government to look the other way, and garnered huge sums for the groups that controlled them – which included AQIM and MUJAO.

This context of negligible state presence in a large, isolated area populated by rich, well-armed and determined jihadist groups meant that, when the MNLA rebellion was started by returnees from Libya, the situation quickly escalated, enabling the groups to gain control of the entire north of the country.

Following protracted negotiations, UN resolution 2085 was passed. This authorised the deployment of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), following training for the participating armies, but also called for elections to be held in April 2013 or "as soon as technically possible," and highlighted AQIM and MUJWA as terrorist organisations with which negotiation would not be

authorised.

Almost as soon as it had been passed, Resolution 2085 was overtaken by events. In early January, a rebel advance began, with Ansar Dine massing troops ready to attack Mopti. Mopti falling would have been a disaster; it is seen as the first town in the south, so has huge symbolic impact, and it controls the only large airstrip in central Mali. It is also the crossroads where all the roads to the south meet before fanning out again to the north; capturing it would have opened up the south to rebel attacks.

The interim president appealed to France for assistance. Swiftly deploying, the French army met initial fierce resistance, admitting to surprise at how well and how fiercely the rebels had fought. After a week of bombarding the northern cities, however, rebels withdrew, enabling the French army to take control. Fighting is now concentrated in the northernmost region of Kidal, while other rebels have changed tactics to asymmetrical attacks on government and military targets in the north.

Inevitably, there has been a great deal of discussion about whether the French were right to intervene, and about their real interests in doing so. The answer to the first question is relatively uncontroversial, particularly if you happened to be living in Mali at the time of the rebel advance. Militarily, the intervention has been an almost unqualified success. It prevented a rebel assault on Mopti. Swift action was undoubtedly necessary. As a result, the north has been liberated and, although instability remains, the long hard work of rebuilding the country can begin.

ACCUSATIONS OF NEO-COLONIALISM

Although a military intervention by a former colonial power makes many liberals instinctively uncomfortable, opening France up to accusations of neo-colonialism, there are strong arguments for not seeing it through this lens. The action was undoubtedly legal under international law; France was asked for assistance by the president of Mali.

The intervention can also be seen to have had positive impacts on human rights grounds. The armed groups running the north were committing abuses, including amputations, floggings and executions, often after summary judicial processes. Although a number of abuses have been reported against the Malian army, notably executions of civilians, these do not have the same widespread and systematic nature as those carried out by armed groups. Similarly, investigation of army abuses is easier, as there is at least some democratic accountability in place, and legal redress is possible.

Finally, the intervention remains hugely popular in Mali. From a Malian perspective, the French army saved them from disaster. Bamako is draped in French flags, many taxis have pictures of President Hollande on the windscreen, and t-shirts and printed cloth with his face even outnumber those featuring President Obama. Undoubtedly the euphoria will wear off, but Malians know best what is right for their country, and they currently overwhelmingly feel that that was the intervention.

It is also hard to see what ulterior motives could have pushed France to intervene in Mali. Northern Mali has very little strategic importance. It is in the middle of

the Sahara desert, several days drive from anywhere and with negligible transport infrastructure. It has no natural resources to speak of. It is possible that there is oil, but no test drillings have been conducted, and there may be uranium but, given the large supply in neighbouring Niger, almost entirely controlled by French companies, this would be an unlikely motive for intervention.

France does have 6,000 citizens living in Mali and there were undoubtedly domestic concerns, with the intervention effectively restoring Hollande's image and rescuing his tanking opinion-poll ratings. However, the efforts France made to convene an African force to dislodge the jihadists, and the speed with which it is planning to hand over to AFISMA, suggests that the motives were largely humanitarian. If comparisons are to be drawn, they should be to the British intervention in Sierra Leone in May 2000 rather than to the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Almost two months after the intervention, northern Mali remains insecure. Around Gao, formerly controlled by MUJWA, there have been a number of suicide attacks and in Kidal fighting continues between AQIM and the French and Chadian armies. Banditry is widespread, with occasional attacks. The French army professes confidence that, by the end of March, it will hand over to AFISMA, for which 6,000 of the 8,000 troops needed have been pledged.

Military success, however, is far from being the whole story to reintegrating the north. Many northerners from non-Tuareg ethnic groups blame Tuaregs and Arabs for the conflict, and many have fled in fear of reprisal attacks. As these groups make up much of the merchant class, this has had a devastating impact on the economy in the north.

On the political side, progress is even less clear. Elections are scheduled for 7 July but, given the work needed to register the electorate, continuing displacement and instability, delays seem inevitable. There are also questions over whether immediate elections are wise; much of the support for the coup derived from dissatisfaction with the ruling political class. Without a reasonable lead period to elections, with time for genuine national dialogue, this dynamic will only be reinforced.

Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation in the north and centre is bad and worsening. The departure of merchants has made it impossible for pastoralists to sell their animals, meaning they cannot buy food, while insecurity has prevented them from migrating on their traditional routes to access water. The cash system and markets are not working effectively, while displacement meant that many were unable to plant. The UN estimates that 1.2 million people in northern Mali are at risk of food insecurity.

Mali's likely future remains hard to predict even in the short term; in any scenario, progress is likely to be erratic and slow. Now that the immediate crisis has passed, Mali remains poorly governed, divided, and one of the poorest countries on earth. Without substantial international support for development, governance and peacebuilding, as well as military capacity building, it will remain unstable and continue to provide a 'safe haven' for armed groups and drug traffickers.

SOFT SKILL SHUFFLE

Helping young people succeed in education and work means much more than a narrow focus on academic results, says Claire Tyler

When we talk about education, our first thoughts often turn to exam results and academic achievement. However, if our education system considered teaching so-called ‘soft skills’ to pupils, they would leave the education system much better equipped to face life and its challenges.

‘Soft skills’ is something of a misnomer because these aren’t fluffy or cosmetic – this is about having the fundamental drive, tenacity and perseverance needed to make the most of opportunities and overcome obstacles.

In February, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility held a summit with practitioners, academics and opinion formers from the worlds of education, employment, politics and the voluntary sector, as well as young people who have to had to cope with adversity, to share ideas and new approaches to developing resilience and character in young people as a way of narrowing the life chances gap.

The summit looked at the growing body of research highlighting how character traits and resilience are directly linked to being able to do well in education and at work. We heard how building resilience to setbacks and developing an increased sense of control over their lives lead to improved literacy and numeracy results.

Increasingly, we hear schools saying that developing these traits is their core business and that for employers these more intangible skills – of sticking at it and not giving up or accepting second best, empathy and teamwork – are precisely what they are looking for in potential recruits.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility has been working since 2011 to get an in-depth understanding of what enables some people to get ahead in life while others do not. What became glaringly obvious through our report ‘The Seven Key Truths of Social Mobility’, published last year, was the importance of these ‘soft skills’.

To summarise what we heard from witnesses: “Whatever qualifications you might have, where you are on the character scale will have a big impact on what you achieve in life.”

We heard from varied speakers, from how the headmaster of Eton, Tony Little, teaches his pupils about failing and pick themselves up again, to how Camila Batmanghelidjh (founder of Kids Company) works with some of the most deeply traumatised children to rebuild their basic self-worth. Alan Milburn, chairman of the Social Mobility Commission, said we needed to break down the ‘Berlin Wall’ between schools in the state and independent sectors to help create opportunity for all.

The summit confirmed for me that the group is onto something important for those who care about social justice. These skills really can be taught and do make a difference.

The group will be preparing a report on our findings for the government, which will be presented to Nick Clegg, who takes a close interest in our work.

It is my hope that, when we consider educational achievement in future, our focus will extend beyond academic targets. But how do we spread the message and the good practice wider? What examples could be scaled up cost effectively and what does this mean for wider public policy?

A lot of good ideas were generated for focus on emotional development and building relationships in early years settings; support for parents at home; introducing incentives to put more focus on these skills in schools; greater awareness in teacher training; better collaboration with the youth and voluntary and community sector.

It also became clear that the needs for these skills don’t stop at the age of 18. Some employers – including BT, which we heard from at the summit – invest directly in the resilience and emotional wellbeing of their employees. The most telling quote was “people are hired for their skills and fired for their attitude”.

Certainly there is food for thought, both for young people starting out in the world of work and adults trying to progress. Are schools and colleges doing enough to help young people prepare for this world? Almost certainly not.

Claire Tyler is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords and represents the party on the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility

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KAFFKA WOULD KNOW IT

Ruth Bright complained about sexism and abuse in the Liberal Democrats and found an amateurish party unable to respond

SUMMER 2006

“You are in red tonight Ruth, and you are hot!” Was I in micro-skirted finery at an Essex nightclub? No, I was in an advanced state of pregnancy, wearing a red maternity dress, sitting in a Liberal Democrat council group meeting in sleepy East Hampshire.

The comment was from a Liberal Democrat councillor who later declared that a female Tory councillor was “a cow who should be milked” and then speculated (amid the giggles of his fellows) whether or not the councillor concerned wore a thong. On another occasion, the same councillor compared the breast size of two Liberal Democrat councillors; he found both too petite up top for his taste.

When I complained angrily about the councillor’s behaviour to a senior woman in my local party, I received an e-mail warning me about my “outburst”. It went no further – what was the point?

FEDERAL CONFERENCE, BOURNEMOUTH 2001

Hearing the rumour of an upcoming parliamentary selection in East Hampshire, I went to meet some of the local conference representatives, among them my mum. After she and the others were gone, I was left alone with someone who regaled me with his conference philosophy by theatrically holding up his ring finger, covering up his wedding ring and telling me: “I keep this covered up at conference”.

On subsequent occasions, he ‘joked’ that everyone thought he had bedded the previous female PPC and that he planned to make a pass at the only other female candidate for the selection. I did not complain, as I did not want to damage by chances of selection.

MAY 2011

A cheery missive hits my inbox: “Poxy dog shit Tory government sent my Census Form back!! In answer to the question: ‘Do you have any dependants?’ I answered: asylum seekers, pikeys, smack heads, unemployable bastards, the cast of the Jeremy Kyle Show, Northern Rock, RBS, Ireland, Portugal and half of Eastern Europe!’ apparently this wasn’t an acceptable answer!”

This came from a local Liberal Democrat parish councillor. Fearing that his warm and welcoming take on the inclusion agenda might end up in the local press, I complained at once to party president Tim Farron.

Tim and one of our diversity officers replied at once. They were very sorry but, though Tim deplored the sentiments expressed, he was powerless to act and I would have to go to my regional party. This I did and the regional party sat on the issue for months. I went back to Tim and it was referred to the new regional party chair who referred it to the constituency who referred it to the branch. After 18 months, the

complaint went around nine different party officials. In the end, I was told an apology had been sent. I never received it. Welcome to the Kafkaesque world of Liberal Democrat complaints procedures, where nothing ever appears to be anyone’s responsibility.

As a PPC, I felt in the end like an Uncle Tom figure going along with a culture I didn’t like, turning a deaf ear to degrading comments about other women and feeling unenthusiastic about recruiting other females because I knew what they might have to contend with.

Is there any mitigation for our party? As a member for nearly 30 years, I would perhaps plead the following.

An amateurish culture does not help. Our party is small and largely voluntary. We have something over 40,000 members. Even my small branch of Unison has more like 60,000. As a PPC, I had no line manager to confide in and even well-meaning people in my local party did not have the training or skills to deal with my concerns. We have to ditch this amateurish approach and build a proper HR structure to better protect paid and unpaid staff alike.

A change of generation will help. Our leadership is in its forties but our party in the sticks is much older. Alas, certain figures in my local party appeared to take their inspiration not from Eastleigh’s Liberal Democrat campaigners but from Eastleigh-born Benny Hill. Perhaps as some of the worst Neanderthals die, the ‘stuck in the 1970s’ attitude to women will wane.

The Liberal Democrats are not the only ones. Three wrongs do not make a right but I am certain the other two main parties have their own problems. Nearly 20 years ago as a young councillor in Southwark, I was nicknamed by my Labour opponents (presumably because of my long dark hair) Barbie, Morticia and Mata Hari. These names were used openly, sometimes in front of officers and members of the public and even in committee meetings.

So the Liberal Democrat party is not the first nor will it be the last political organisation to sometimes treat women with contempt. I truly hope for some justice or I will not be bothering to sign up again.

Ruth Bright fought East Hampshire for the Liberal Democrats in 2005

FLAG WAVING

Northern Ireland's Alliance Party saw its offices burned and members threatened with violence when its support led to the Union Jack flying only on certain days. Its stand has made the party stronger, says Chris Lyttle

In recent months, my Alliance Party colleagues and I have withstood systematic misrepresentation and intimidation to stand up for a shared and better future for everyone. The resolve of our party has never been stronger, and support for our alternative to the destabilising and economically fatal politics of the past is steadily increasing.

Alliance councillors in Belfast put a shared future policy alternative on the table when it came to the display of the Union flag on Belfast City Hall. They did not side with Sinn Féin, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, or with Unionist councillors, but instead presented a long-term and stable solution for everyone, which saw nationalist councillors historically support the flying of the Union flag at the City Hall for the first time, on the designated days. The sincerity of this support remains to be tested, but we are committed to the task of scrutinising others.

Across the world, people of all backgrounds, who had grown complacent about our peace process, took notice. In the days and weeks following the flag decision, Alliance did not falter in the face of attacks and threats – and they noticed. My constituency office has continued to serve all the people of east Belfast in spite of ongoing daily protests – again they noticed. Alliance stood up for balanced solutions in a divided society – and everyone noticed.

I am glad that people are beginning to accept that it is no longer an option to sit on the sidelines and watch so-called political leaders play Russian roulette with our future. Alliance membership has grown substantially, with people of diverse backgrounds ready to make a difference. A recent poll, highlighted in the media, reported that 44% of people surveyed believed that designated days is the best policy for the respectful display of flags in our community.

For too long, people in positions of responsibility have allowed the divisions that clearly still exist in our society to ferment and the difficult task of achieving deep and meaningful community relations has often been glossed over. But those divisions disappear with the desire of so many people here to live in an economically prosperous society, with jobs, world-class education and safety for everyone. That can only happen in a shared society, where all are respected, allowing us to address the challenges ahead.

Alliance values remain consistent, in spite of the political expediency of others. We have backed up our vision for this society with our Shared Future Strategy entitled 'For Everyone', which challenges political institutions and wider society to change how we live, work and play. Our document lays out a clear vision of

how we can move forward together, leaving behind the politics of the past, to start and build a better future for everyone.

The continued divisions in our society are at risk of deepening if we don't take the necessary steps – and soon – to come together and address all the issues that keep us separated. A shared future can only strengthen Northern Ireland; making it a better place to invest, strengthening our economy and increasing employment opportunities.

The Alliance leader, David Ford, has written to the first minister Peter Robinson and deputy first minister Martin McGuinness proposing a new framework for talks, including greater engagement with civic society. It is only by doing this that we will gain a meaningful shared future that all can contribute to.

In the meantime, David has facilitated the opening of peace walls and improved community safety in interface areas, while Alliance employment minister Stephen Farry is reviewing segregated teacher training. They have both introduced Shared Future Proofing, a policy appraisal system to promote sharing over duplicating budget allocations in their departments.

Momentum is gathering behind Alliance and growing stronger as we lead change from the heart of government to address inequality and build a sustainable economy. Make no mistake: Alliance is proud to be a party for everyone and committed to delivering a shared future.

Chris Lyttle is the Alliance MLA for East Belfast. The Alliance Party is a full member of Liberal International

TEN YEARS AFTER

The Liberal Democrats briefly caught the public mood over the Iraq war, but only despite their leaders, says Donnachadh McCarthy

This February marked the tenth anniversary of the historic march in London against the approaching disastrous Iraq War. It also marks the tenth anniversary of the Liberal Democrats' official participation in that march.

Two months before, James Graham and Susan Kramer successfully proposed at the Federal Executive that the party should officially participate. As the party's deputy chair, I contacted the chief executive Hugh Rickard the following day to organise the decision's implementation, only to be told the instructions could not be implemented because the leadership had changed its mind.

Constitutionally, Charles Kennedy could overrule the FE only by requesting an emergency meeting of it to rescind its decision. He called no such meeting and I decided to implement the party's decision.

Along with other volunteers, we set about organising the party's presence on the march, despite the party machinery being barred from us. The Euro-candidates allowed us to include details in their mailings to members. James Graham set up a special website. Liberal Democrat Youth and Students produced thousands of placards saying "Lib Dems Say No". We raised donations independently. For two months, my back bedroom became the de facto campaigns department of the Liberal Democrats. I took leave of absence from work to organise it.

Finally, ten days before the march, I wrote to the Guardian telling members where we were officially meeting on the day of the march. The following day, the Guardian picked up my letter in its editorial and demanded to know if Kennedy was going.

David Frost then confronted Kennedy on television and demanded to know if he was marching. Kennedy finally caved in and said yes. He then allowed the campaigns director Chris Rennard to meet me on the following Tuesday before the march. He demanded the slogan be changed to "Give Peace a Chance". I said it was too late but they printed half a dozen placards anyway.

On the morning of the march, an extraordinary sight unfolded. Thousands of party members from all over Britain had responded to our call and the South Bank was a sea of yellow. Young and old, pregnant and disabled. They all turned up. The largest meeting ever of the party's membership, united and excited that they alone of the major parties were standing up against Blair's dishonest march to war. But the establishment was furious. The sea of "Lib Dems Say No" placards drowned the puny number of "Give Peace a Chance" – Kennedy could not avoid being photographed with the slogan he wanted to avoid.

The truth was that Kennedy was not against the war. He wanted to sit on the fence and let the UN decide. But I was determined to brand him as being anti-war

that day, so that he would have no option but to vote no when parliament eventually voted.

At the first FE following the march, instead of celebrating one of the most successful events in the party's history, the leadership set up a committee to oversee members' opposition to the war but I was excluded from it. They announced that nothing could be organised without the say-so of this committee. The FE agreed but balked at banning all party actions against the war. The committee did not organise a single event but independently we did, relentlessly getting across the message that the party opposed the war.

Kennedy was furious and over the following year repeatedly tabled motions of personal censure against me and sabre-rattled about libel actions due to my efforts to introduce equal opportunity procedures, and deal with the stench around the party's funding and Lords appointments. The FE rejected all of these motions of censure against me. But in the end, they drummed me off the FE and out of the party.

But seeing the party's MPs eventually vote unanimously against the war made it all worthwhile. The end of a minor political career was a small price to pay. What stuck in my craw was the blanket refusal of Kennedy to lead, even after we had engineered the granting of the leadership of the anti-war movement to him on a plate, thanks to the enormous generosity of the Stop the War Coalition.

His refusal meant that the massive momentum built up by the march was not rolled out across the country, and so was crucially unable to ensure Clare Short followed Robin Cook in defecting from Blair's cabinet of war-poodles and with her the Labour MPs needed to defeat the war motion in parliament.

So yes, this is the tenth anniversary of an enormously proud day for the party but also the anniversary of Kennedy's greatest duplicity. While posing against the war, he was no such thing. The phrase "against the war" never passed Kennedy's lips until months after the invasion and the party had won the Brent East by-election on the back of its vote against the war. The leadership did not want the party's members to ever again democratically force it into a decision.

The next generation of radical activists needs to take forward that programme of reform we were working on. The successful bottom-up organisation of the march shows what an empowered party membership can achieve.

Donnachadh McCarthy was deputy chair of the Liberal Democrat Federal Executive from 2002 to 2004

DO NO HARM

A liberal tax system should reflect John Stuart Mill's 'harm principle', says David Thorpe

As an indication that the politics of protest has become the dominant discourse in British public life, the sight of normally economically cogent commentators and policy makers clamouring to hang their every idea from the rafters of rhetoric around 'wealth taxes' is hard to beat.

While liberals of every stripe agree that the tax system needs radical and far reaching reform, the required policy responses must be framed to achieve greater economic efficiency as much as more egalitarian outcomes.

Society has moved beyond the point where taxation debates can be framed purely in terms of redistribution. When assessing how to construct a tax system based on liberal principals married to economic practicalities, one must reach deep into the liberal tradition and conclude that not all wealth is equally earned and thus should not be taxed in the same way. This would help to achieve a tax system where fairness is measured in terms of contribution to the social and economic development of society. The principal behind this is already the bedrock of the liberal tradition, through J.S. Mill's 'harm principal'.

Balzac said: "Behind every fortune there lies a great crime." But the twenty-first century reality is very different; markets are more global than ever, and trade more nuanced. And while great fortunes are often still garnered through socially reckless or damaging pursuits, the tax system should exist not merely to profit from such pursuits, but to ensure they become economically unviable, thus driving capital into those areas where returns can be generated and society rewarded by constant innovation and increased efficiency without harm to wider society.

The idea has long existed on a neophyte level; the 'polluter pays' principle and the more general memes around green taxation are examples of this. But there is scope for far greater reform, and the chance to drive far more radical economic solutions. That's why the retreat into the tired rhetoric of wealth taxes is so worrying. Real reform is in danger of being derailed as the debate degenerates into a diatribe against 'the rich' and a zero-sum game of which party can promise to 'tax the rich' the most.

Taxing unearned wealth accrued through property speculation is thoroughly liberal, but Labour's recent embrace of the 'mansion tax' is based more on 'hose the rich'. Thus the wider debate is debased, its currency besmirched by a 1970s economic infantilism, which it would do the Liberal Democrats no favours electorally to embrace.

Rebalancing the system so that a greater proportion of the tax take comes from the unearned wealth held in property investment, trading from certain types of financial instruments and other socially harmful activities would be the first step towards a truly progressive taxation system.

At the other end of the scale, greater protection in the law, and greater tax reliefs where appropriate, for the fruits of intellectual property, whether within the arts sector, bioscience and other research-based fields, would help to create a system in which the tax system is on the side of those whose innovations add value to the society and economy.

Personal tax reliefs for socially useful activities as diverse as saving for a pension, buying a home to live in, and planning for retirement, create a 'nudge' system to encourage socially beneficial behaviour. Applying the same principles far more broadly would allow for a more ethical and sustainable system of capitalism to emerge.

Liberals of all hues rail against the state's attempts to encroach on the individual's personal liberty. J.S. Mill's harm principle is frequently used in justification of this, with the idea that an individual's actions are no concern of the government as long as they do not harm others. A tax system that makes no distinction between economic activities harmful to wider society or other individuals and those that aren't is equally illiberal.

And just as the 'harm principle' in its civil incarnation allows for the state to create a system of rules and retributions for those whose behaviour does harm others, so a tax-based application of the harm principle would similarly allow for regulation, but would avoid the occasionally oppressive nature of our current tax system, which often awards innovation the same weight as income accrued for interest on inherited money.

Such blunt instruments being applied to civil circumstances would rightly be rejected as illiberal, with liberals arguing that a more nuanced approach is not merely fair, it's more efficient as in the long run it reduces discontent among the populace, and thus prevents civil disobedience and social alienation.

Tax avoidance is essentially the economic equivalent of civil disobedience. The pursuit of a tax system based on the harm principle would not just be liberal but also more efficient and would help to unite a population that feels divided, not along the class-based lines of 'haves' versus 'have nots', but by a feeling that there are those in both categories with which one cannot feel any solidarity. Such discontent is dangerous, but the potential liberal cure combines radicalism, fairness and efficiency.

David Thorpe is an economics journalist and sits on the London Liberal Democrat regional executive.

FORGOTTEN ARGUMENT

Gareth Epps finds in the Green Book open despair about the willingness of Tories to break their own green promises, and sprawling detail rather than vision

At almost 400 pages, it can't be called insubstantial; *Small is Beautiful* it isn't. But it has taken a long time coming. Green liberalism, at the forefront of party thinking throughout the 1990s, has somewhat taken a back seat and been drowned out by economic arguments in recent years, particularly in its orange counterpart, which sidelined the environment altogether.

The *Green Book* brings together many of those in the vanguard of that green Liberal Democrat movement. It is the single biggest initiative of that movement in years and, as such, an important piece of work.

Rather than wading into the economic versus social liberal argument, though, this book presents itself as a current-day alternative to Osbornomics and short-termism.

It argues that the threats posed by climate change to both economic growth and inequality are insufficiently understood within the party. It goes further than the age-old campaigner's dilemma that "one of the positive attributes of the party's brand has not yielded the Liberal Democrats any obvious electoral benefits". It sees its role as principally tactical, especially given the rapid fading of the colour green from the Conservatives' palette. It is certainly thorough, perhaps overly so. Does it succeed in setting out a policy narrative that works accordingly?

Well, on this, the jury is probably out. It is ironic that, while corporate Britain probably understands as never before the principles of sustainability and the need to demonstrate adherence, political Britain does not. This has been seen in government departments since 2010; an obvious driver for this book. It's been seen in antediluvian media attitudes for years.

What is not tackled is what matters to people. Take, for example, the energy market, the single biggest issue currently relevant to the average voter. The issue is seen not in terms of providing a compelling narrative. Neil Stockley separates the Green Deal (the mechanism for behaviour change that should put government and people on the same side against the market) from considerably less popular electricity market reform – if it ever happens – and at the same time fails to see how this can be used to put the sorely-needed counter-narrative to Osborne's anti-environment rhetoric. It is a timid approach, tempered by past defeats rather than self-belief.

The book then goes into detail, using a variety of approaches to state intervention, mostly strong, in a manner that will provide an interesting challenge to the party's *laissez-faire* arm. In one of the more effective chapters, David Howarth sets out in parallel to the intellectual challenge to the Green Party that, while liberalism is compatible with environmental protection, libertarianism is not.

As might be expected, some chapters show more experience of government than others. Where it is most effective, perhaps, is in highlighting bottom-up initiatives, such as Steve Bradley's on community energy projects and his Lambeth colleague Mike Tuffrey on environmental protection. The single most central figure to the story, the current secretary of state for energy and climate change, is striking by his absence.

A valedictory pair of chapters from Chris Huhne, poignantly, resolve the internal contradiction about the green narrative. He talks of green growth not as an option but as the only form of growth in the future; he recognises that the poorest must see tackling climate change as in their interests too.

Most telling is Duncan Brack's direct account of the 'uphill struggle' of putting green policies into practice in government. The ambition of being 'the greenest government ever' has clearly been forgotten not just by Tories such as Osborne but also by some Liberal Democrats. The Treasury's seemingly institutional resistance to enacting the coalition's programme for government is, diplomatically, highlighted.

If the Liberal Democrats are to step up in providing a green narrative, the book seems to argue, it will not come about by setting business free to pollute; climate change will in any case force the hand of change.

There is a counsel of despair about the ability of this government even to commit to its promises. If the reasons why are properly to be understood by the general public, however, and the green debate is to be won and seen to be won by Liberal Democrats, then a more structured and disciplined overall narrative is needed, with the buy-in at the very top at the party that (token foreword aside) just does not seem to be there.

Gareth Epps is a member of the Liberator Collective

'The Green Book' edited by Duncan Brack, Paul Burall, Neil Stockley and Mike Tuffrey. Biteback Publishing, 384pp, £12.99 (www.green-book.org.uk)

This House [play] **by James Graham** **National Theatre**

No, not *that* James Graham. This one has written a gargantuan play with a cast of about 25, and as many extras again, about how a group of whips kept the Wilson/Callaghan government afloat for almost five years in a gravity-defying act as its majority evaporated.

This was the period in which Ted Heath called and lost a general election in February 1974, as the play opens, on 'who governs Britain' following his battles with the trade unions. Labour ended up as the largest party but without a majority, and in another election that October secured a majority of three. By-elections and defections rapidly eroded that and, while the Lib-Lab pact briefly gave the government some stability, on most nights the rival whips offices were resorting to bribes and threats of every kind.

This history should be salutary for anyone who thinks the Liberal Democrats could have had some arrangement short of a coalition in 2010. Every night in parliament would have been as unpredictable as in the mid-1970s.

At one point, a Tory whip asks his Labour counterpart why his government bothers hanging on since it can rarely pass any legislation, and the answer boils down only to: "so we can keep you out".

Labour left-wingers voted with the Tories against their own government, two Scottish Labour MPs formed their own party, begging bowls were filled nightly in return for MPs' support.

The play tells this story by means of scenes alternately set in the Labour and Conservative whips' offices. Much as the two parties hate each other, the whips have a reasonable working relationship based on precedent, convention and honourable behaviour and try on both sides to keep style of conduct alive while a government teeters on the brink and the Conservatives try to push it over.

Audience members need their wits about them as 'the speaker' is used to introduce MPs by constituency, not name. Entirely forgotten figures of 1970s politics appear – Jim Sillars, John Stonehouse, Audrey Wise, Fred Silvester, Carol Mather and many more. If you don't know who they were, there is little help from



REVIEWS

the script and, with most actors playing more than one character, room for some confusion.

Liberator readers may be disappointed by the brief treatment of the pact. We hear one end of a phone call announcing its formation and its end is not really explained. But that is carping.

This era was about as dramatic as politics gets and the fact that it went on so long is testament to the dark arts both whips offices could deploy. It's a natural story for drama and telling it from the whips' perspective rather than those of the party leaders (who, apart briefly from David Steel, never appear) is a subtler way of doing so than most dramatists might have chosen.

And the real drama comes at the end in the person of Sir Alfred Broughton, a man who changed history by doing nothing. He was a Labour backbencher dying of emphysema, who could usually be paired with a Tory. Come the vote of no confidence in the government in March 1979, Margaret Thatcher refused to allow any pairs.

Should Broughton be summoned from his Yorkshire home? He was willing to come, but his wife thought the journey would kill him. Labour whip Walter Harrison decided it was intolerable to send for him, not least when he might die on the journey (it later became known that Callaghan himself shared this view).

Broughton stayed away and died five days later. A couple of Ulster MPs got the hump over personal grievances and deserted Labour, and Callaghan lost by 311-310. Had Broughton voted, the tie would have left the no confidence motion not carried and Labour might have got a few more months for something to turn up.

The dialogue given to its whips, though, suggests that Labour knew the game was up and implies that signs of the party's

subsequent descent into a decade's impotent madness could already be seen. The rest was history.

Mark Smulian

A Casual Vacancy **by JK Rowling** **Little Brown 2012 £20**

This is a thoroughly unpleasant book. I hadn't, at first, thought of reading it, but it arrived and seemed to be dimly connected with local government (not the best researched parts of the book). I nearly stopped reading, so fed up with the relentless stream of human folly and tragedy – the outcomes are more or less predictable I'm afraid. However, at the point when you get fed up with all that, skip to page 437 and read on. It doesn't get any more pleasant, but there is some redemption.

Stewart Rayment

The Road to Tahrir Square **by Lloyd C Gardner** **Saqi Books 2011 £12.99**

Unless you read the subtitle ('Egypt and the United States from the Rise of Nasser to the Fall of Mubarak'), I suspect that this might not be the book many of its buyers were expecting it to be. They will, however, be pleasantly informed, although the book may have had a different working title before the events in Tahrir Square gave it a far sexier one.

Gardner, who is primarily a diplomatic historian at Rutgers University, cut his teeth on the Vietnam wars and is among those who recognise that the USA is an imperialist power just like those its diplomacy sought to overcome (chiefly Britain and France). Many Americans remain in denial of this, or express surprise when you put it to them.

Basically, America screwed up in Egypt and we have yet to see how the latest round plays out (and where their dead hand lies). The Americans were probably drawn in deeper and sooner than they expected – stretched after the Second World War, they seemed to hope that the British might hold the line in Egypt. This proved infeasible, not withstanding the bizarre incident of the Suez crisis. Gardner doesn't quite answer the question of whether American policy drove Nasser into Soviet arms; certainly support for Israel bedevils the USA to this day in the Middle East, and the tail can too easily wag the dog.

Back in Egypt, we find that the military veto on contracts in the 1990s meant that under Mubarak “instead of fostering a rising middle class, the industrialization that took place was of a semi-feudal nature”. Add to this the shortcomings of CIA practices post 9-11, which generate more anti-Americanism, and the returns from the Egyptian investment become less attractive to the USA.

Dennis Blair, Obama's first head of national intelligence, asserted: “Not only did these intelligence relationships interfere with our ability to understand opposition forces, but in the eyes of citizens of those countries they often associated the US with the tools of oppression.” Hence Osama bin Ladin's argument that the only way to bring about change in the Middle East was to “attack the head of the serpent”, the USA.

However, come Tahrir Square and it seems to be the case that American purse strings do dictate the behaviour of Egypt's military. One to one contacts between senior US and Egyptian military personnel seem to have caused restraint on behalf of the latter. Does America get as much small change from its investment in Israel? Maybe the Democrats have greater pragmatism in dealing with these challenges than we might expect from the monster raving Republican Party. Defence secretary Robert Gates put it thus: “Many of the regimes affected have been longstanding, close allies of the US, ones we continue to work with as critical partners in the face of common security challenges like al Qaeda and Iran, even as we urge them to reform... our desire for

democratic values to take hold... may be many years or decades off.”

As Mubarak had warned Bush, popular elections led to the Muslim Brotherhood in power, which it abuses. The military remains the best card in America's hand, but the steady flow of press releases out of the Egyptian government relating to the IMF etc., suggest some shuffling of the pack. Egypt conventionally leads Arab opinion, and Gardner tells us that the stakes for the US are greater than those of Iraq and Afghanistan, concluding on Kissinger's admission “that the Egyptian revolution requires a new definition of American leadership and American national interest is indeed inescapable”.

Stewart Rayment

On the edge: Britain and Europe by Hugh Dykes and Brendan Donnelly Forumpress 2013 £9.99

Dykes and Donnelly describe their own booklet as “a gothically depressing analysis”. Their damning prose rehearses the evolution of British euroscepticism, examines the crucial, prejudicial role of the press and censures the cowardice of politicians in the face of it. The Conservative Party, which once they both represented, in Westminster and Strasbourg respectively, is now the “little-Englander-cum-US-colony-party” with a succession of failed leaders.

The Labour Party's attitude to Europe is a consistently opportunistic roller-coaster ride from Gaitskill's warning against “abandoning one thousand years of history” to Gordon Brown's “frequent... diatribes against the European Commission”.

Nor do the Liberal Democrats deserve praise. Despite the party's longstanding European commitment, the coalition has witnessed “a strange and unexpected metamorphosis”. It began with the coalition agreement emphasising what the UK would not do: not transfer powers during this parliament and never without a referendum, not join the Euro.

The agreement promised “constructive engagement” with the EU, a phrase reserved by diplomats for disliked regimes like

Iran or North Korea. The writers note how Liberal Democrat MPs routinely use the language of the eurosceptics, dwelling on ‘British interests’ and pandering to the fears of voters they themselves fear losing, particularly in the South West.

They cite Nick Clegg's reference to the “Brussels gravy train” to deflect attention from Westminster's expenses scandal. They could have added his initial attempt to support David Cameron's disastrous performance at the European Council in December 2011 before older and wiser heads made him row back.

Dykes and Donnelly refute the unreal notion that economics can be separated from politics, the nonsense that you can have a single market without the institutions which created and maintain and protect it. They touch on David Cameron's bizarre demands for British exceptionalism, the incoherence of his position, which supports a single market as long as British businesses can opt out of the bits they don't like. It is this contradiction that would condemn to failure his strategy of renegotiation followed by referendum, if the electorate were foolish enough to give him another term.

The authors attack “the wilful and dogmatic ignorance” of the British debate on Europe and defend the EU's institutions against the widespread misinformation and misunderstanding of their role, setting out instead the logic of pooling sovereignty between countries, not transferring to a mythical monolith in Brussels as the eurosceptics parody it.

The Commission is not merely a civil service but a necessarily independent body charged with proposing and implementing legislation. The Parliament and the Council of Ministers, both democratically elected, take all fundamental decisions. For opponents of the EU to describe this system as dictatorial is to fly in face of the facts, because they cannot conceive of democracy other than at the national level. Yet the booklet's real denunciation is not for the EU's enemies but for its friends whose insouciance has ever postponed advocacy for a full UK role in the EU.

David Grace

Monday

I rise early to superintend the excavations in the car park of the Bonkers' Arms. Having seen how well Leicester is doing out of Richard III, I have decided that we need to find a body of a king here in Rutland too. So far, our dig has not come up with the goods: all we have turned up are a few shards of medieval pottery, a Victorian penny, some pieces of clay pipe (which I suspect belonged to Meadowcroft – or was it his grandfather?) and two skeletons with blue rosettes – we have a tradition of robust electioneering here in the Bonkers Hall ward. I am saddened by this lack of progress, and a complicating factor is that we have to have everything put back by Friday because that is the day the Smithson & Greaves lorry comes. If it cannot make its deliveries, we shall all be reduced to drinking the dreadful gassy Dahrendorf lager.

Tuesday

In my day, if your son or, indeed, daughter was a bit on the slow side, it was necessary to slip the school a cheque to ensure good examination results. If the child was particularly dense then you might find yourself obliged to stump up for a whole swimming pool or chemistry laboratory. Things are handled more sympathetically in Wales. There, if you are dissatisfied with your children's examination results, you simply write to their education minister, one Leighton Andrews (whom I am sure I once met somewhere), and he awards them a higher grade. No money changes hands. It is an excellent system and no doubt one of the reasons why Wales has the highest educational standards in the world.

Wednesday

Down to Brighton at the Spring Conference of the Liberal Democrats the other day, I ran into Clegg. "How do you propose winning this vote on secret courts?" I asked him. "The party is dead set against them – rightly so, I might add," I added.

"Oh that's easy," he returned. "I am going to get Tom McNally to insult everybody."

Thursday

A grey morning on the coast of Fife. When the strategy of asking McNally to insult party members failed (as I said it would), Clegg decided an article had to be written for Liberal Democrat Voice defending his ridiculous decision to support secret courts. There was only one thing for it: Sir Walter Menzies Campbell CBE QC MP would have to be got out of mothballs and launched from Rosyth. It is a magnificent sight as Ming takes to the water again, urged on by Elspeth – the only woman I have ever met who could have gone fifteen rounds with the first Lady Bonkers – and amid much hauling of ropes and creaking of rivets, and is born down the Firth of Forth on the turning tide. "He's no been the same since Jutland," remarks one observer with mordant wit. "Since the Battle of the Nile, you mean," returns another, pawkily. People can be so unfair.

Lord Bonkers' Diary

Friday

This trouble about people passing off horsemeat as beef has put me in mind of one of my more successful seasons on the turf. A filly by the name of Buttercup won me several races, even though there were raised eyebrows at Uttoxeter and Plumpton when she won by a distance. There was even talk of my being "warned off" – at least I think that is what they said.

Saturday

This secret courts business is getting very worrying as Clegg seems quite set on the idea. Many politicians get like this when they first meet the top brass of the secret service: they go native and start spouting whatever the spies want them to. I have never been so impressed by these types because, in my young day, every spy I knew later turned out to have been working for the Soviet Union, and I don't suppose much has changed since then.

Still at Brig o'Dread, my Caledonian home, after the launch of the *Ming Campbell*, I learn that the Scottish Liberal Democrats are to debate secret courts this very day. I am not, strictly speaking, entitled to speak or vote at their conferences, but writing about Buttercup yesterday has given me an idea. Reasoning that the Scots would not turn away one of their own, I hire a Highland cow costume – you know the ones: they are pretty with long eyelashes, rather like the young Margaret Wintringham. Such a costume takes two, of course, but fortunately I have brought Meadowcroft with me to look at my tatties and neeps.

So after a practice during which Meadowcroft complains (a) about having to be the rear half and (b) that his udders are "befangled" by a bush we trample, we hurry to Dundee, undergo the necessary formalities and are sent on to the stage with a hearty slap on the rump – Meadowcroft's rump to be strictly accurate.

I flatter myself that the speech is well received and I am particularly pleased with my peroration: "Aye, fight and you may die. Run, and you'll live... at least a while. And dying in your beds, many years from now, would you be willin' to trade all the days, from this day to that, for one chance, just one chance, to come back here and tell our enemies that they may take our lives, but they'll never take... our freedom! MOO!!" (I added that last bit because I could see the chair leaping through standing orders with a frown, but I do not think it detracted from my argument).

Indeed, the motion against secret courts was passed almost *nem con* and a rather flushed Meadowcroft and I drive back to Brig o'Dread, the job well done. Our Auld Johnston will be well deserved this evening.

Sunday

I have heard a lot of people pointing morals over the fall of Chris Huhne. Leave the sermons to the Reverend Hughes: what a chap needs at a time like this is a cake with a file in it.

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