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- 🌟 Dare the Lib Dems lead on racism? – Janice Turner
- 🌟 Why so silent on party sexism? – Ruth Bright
- 🌟 Never trust an economic forecast – Chris Bailey

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Liberator Publications
Flat 1, 24 Alexandra Grove
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THE LIBERATOR COLLECTIVE

Ralph Bancroft, Jonathan Calder, Richard Clein, Howard Cohen, Gareth Epps, Catherine Furlong, Peter Johnson, Wendy Kyrle-Pope, Tim McNally, Stewart Rayment, Kiron Reid, Harriet Sherlock, Mark Smulian, Simon Tittley, William Tranby, Claire Wiggins, Nick Winch

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Cover illustration - Christy Lawrance, based on an idea by David Grace

COMMENTARY

ALL ABOARD HMS FUDGE

The forthcoming decision about the long-term future of Britain's nuclear weapons presents the Liberal Democrats with a golden opportunity to say and do something that would be distinctive, popular and right. And that 'something' is to get rid of such weapons completely.

A decision must be made shortly after the next general election whether to replace the Royal Navy's Trident submarines and missiles and, if so, with what.

The description of Britain's Trident weapons as an 'independent' nuclear deterrent is misleading since both they and the preceding Polaris system have effectively remained under American control. There are no conceivable circumstances in which Britain could or would use these weapons independently.

During the Cold War, there was nevertheless an argument for retaining such weapons as part of a collective deterrent against the Soviet bloc. No such argument remains today.

The only conceivable nuclear threat in the foreseeable future comes from terrorists or rogue states, neither of which by definition is subject to rational calculations. And even if they were, their nuclear weapons would not be the sophisticated, state-of-the-art sort requiring a correspondingly sophisticated, state-of-the-art deterrent. Think what you would need to deal with a bloke driving a Nissan van carrying a dirty bomb, and you get the picture.

Britain has only so much money it can spend on defence. Better to spend it on the sort of equipment, intelligence and skilled people it actually needs to deal with real threats, instead of diverting such a large share of a declining budget into an expensive weapons system that is of no conceivable use.

But if you nevertheless accept the logic of retaining a strategic nuclear deterrent, there are no halfway houses. You need a weapon that is a credible deterrent, which in practice means a long-range missile system that cannot be knocked out in a first strike, which means a system that is *always* in a state of readiness, which means something not unlike Trident. You can bet that both the Tories and Labour will choose such a macho posture.

Whatever else you may think of them, either of those two positions is at least coherent. The latest Liberal Democrat attempt at a compromise is not. In mid-July, Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander proposed a scaled-back version of Trident; a two-submarine, part-time deterrent, which is sometimes at sea and sometimes not, and which would likely save only about £50 million a year compared with a like-for-like replacement of Trident (a marginal saving in the overall scheme of things).

Strictly speaking, the 'Trident Alternatives Review' is an official government report that reached no final conclusion. However, despite their call for a "fact-based debate", Clegg and Alexander have made it pretty clear which option they prefer, so it is hardly surprising that most media coverage wrongly implied that the review had already made a firm recommendation.

Laughably, Shirley Williams, writing in defence of Clegg's proposals on Liberal Democrat Voice (17 July), described this policy as "moving down the rungs of the nuclear ladder", which assumes there are any further credible rungs lower down that ladder.

Few others shared her enthusiasm – or credulity. This policy has been met with almost universal derision, and deservedly so. It fails to satisfy the wishes of nuclear disarmers, since nothing in principle would change and any savings would be relatively minor. It fails to satisfy the wishes of pro-nuclear opinion, since Britain would end up with a less reliable weapons system for almost the same cost.

Still, Clegg and Alexander will press ahead and present their option to September's Liberal Democrat conference in Glasgow. They will do so because their proposal contains a magical ingredient that conference adores: fudge.

Faced with a tough choice, too many delegates will instinctively seek out a 'middle way' and, for them, Clegg and Alexander's proposal is just the job. Who cares that these part-time nukes are not actually a credible defence policy, when there is a comfortable fence to sit on? Furthermore, this policy can be dressed up as moving on from Cold War postures, even though it does nothing of the sort.

No doubt there will be amendments tabled proposing coherent and credible alternatives from both the pro- and anti-nuclear sides. But by presenting stark alternatives, they will merely serve to enhance that irresistible taste of fudge. And if the conference chooses fudge, it will confirm the outside world's worst stereotypes of Liberal Democrats as the sort of people who cannot see a fence without wanting to sit on it.

Clegg is right when he says that we should no longer feel bound by the strategic considerations of the Cold War. But if he accepts the logic of that position, the only coherent option is to get rid of nuclear weapons completely. And if he wants, he can make that case from a macho standpoint by arguing that the crippling costs of nuclear weapons weaken our conventional defences. It's not rocket science.

RADICAL BULLETIN

STRAW MEN AND SHIFTING GROUND

Nick Clegg's speech to the recent ALDC conference (Manchester, 22 June) included a welcome call for coherence in the party's political message.

But he can't leave alone his habit of attacking things that don't exist. The entire speech was based on the idea that a choice lies before the party of presenting itself as a party of government or one that prefers the 'comfort' of opposition.

Who are these people who belong to a political party but would prefer to see it in opposition rather than governing at any level? Unsurprisingly, Clegg did not name them or even identify them as a group, and that's because there aren't any.

"Do you look to the 7th May 2015 as our release date?" he asked (well, it might become *his* release date). "The moment that, in Westminster, our party can throw off this coalition... returning to the safety and comfort of opposition? Or do you look at 2015 – and every election before and beyond – as an opportunity: a chance to govern?"

He went on: "One way embraces the future, where the Liberal Democrats seek to become a firm party of government, striving to govern at every level in order to make Britain a better place. The other clings to our past: limiting our ambitions and our prospects, consigning ourselves to be 'the third party' forever; turning away from the millions of people we have promised to serve."

Since nobody, not even Liberal Left, has ever argued that the party's purpose is to be out of power, it's pretty clear what this is all about. Clegg is taking aim not really at people who oppose the Liberal Democrats being in government (of whom there are none) but at those who dislike the Liberal Democrats being in *this* government (or whom there are a growing number, and even more who are no longer members).

The speech can thus be seen as attempt to equate support for Clegg and the coalition with support for the idea of exercising power at all. Nice try by whoever the speechwriter was, but a bit transparent.

And on what ground would Clegg like to fight the next election? Wait for it, it's 'the centre ground'.

Oh dear. As Liberator and others have repeatedly argued, being in the centre allows those to each side to define you. The implication is that, if the Conservatives moved markedly to the right, the Liberal Democrats would have to do the same to maintain a centrist equidistance between them and Labour, and the same were Labour to move leftwards.

Clegg can at least see there is question here that needs to be answered: "What does it mean to be a liberal party of the centre ground?" he asked.

"It means you embrace opportunity and responsibility with the same enthusiasm. So you don't accept that people are helpless and hapless, best shepherded through life by an over-bearing state.

"But you cannot abide laissez-faire government that leaves its citizens to sink or swim. Instead you believe that there is something great in every man, woman and child, it just needs to be unlocked."

If that is Clegg's definition of a liberal approach, why not call it one instead of allowing others to define the Liberal Democrats by claiming to be midway between Conservative and Labour?

ALL HANDS TO THE WHEEL

Paddy Ashdown has been chosen for the thankless task of running the Liberal Democrat general election campaign and, being a former marine, has named an eight-strong crew for the 'wheelhouse' of this venture.

This comprises his three vice-chairs Kirsty Williams, Danny Alexander and Alastair Carmichael together with chief executive Tim Gordon, campaign head Hilary Stephenson, head strategist Ryan Coetzee and Olly Grender, who describes herself as "Paddy Ashdown's political co-ordinator and director for special projects in his role as chair of the general election campaign for the Lib Dems", whatever that may be.

Sharp observers will notice that the vice-chairs include the leader of the Welsh party, two Scottish MPs and no one from England. Indeed the entire team includes no one other than Ashdown himself who have ever been parliamentary candidate in England. This seems a little strange given where the bulk of the party's seats are.

SPARE 50P PLEASE?

September's Liberal Democrat conference is, unusually in these stage-managed times, to be allowed to vote on options over taxation after a row at Federal Policy Committee (FPC), where establishment figures who lost a vote, in time-honoured fashion, called 'foul' and tried to overturn it.

The taxation policy working group had not included an option to reinstate the 50p top rate of income tax in its policy paper that will go to conference. FPC, able to read the politics rather better, thought otherwise and voted to include it.

This provoked a welter of foot-stamping from Treasury chief secretary Danny Alexander and working party chair Jeremy Hargreaves, who both took great offence at the idea that FPC could possibly think they were wrong.

They embarked on a concerned attempt to bully FPC chair Duncan Hames to re-open the issue. Alexander

wrote: “I understand that the proposal that was agreed last Monday night was not notified in advance of the meeting, and only decided very late after a number of committee members had had to leave the meeting.

“This is a decision of major political importance which the party needs to get right after full consideration of all the arguments. With that in mind, I am dismayed that such a decision was taken in an environment where those proposing the change in policy went to no lengths at all to ensure that I, as the relevant cabinet minister, were made aware that such a proposal planned to be debated, nor given the opportunity to put forward the stance that we as a party of Government have taken on this issue.”

Hargreaves whinged: “Clearly FPC may take a different view from the working group. However I do think working groups are entitled to believe that it would be reasonable, if FPC wishes to take a different view from it on an absolutely central piece of policy within the group’s remit, that it mention this on at least one of the occasions when it is specifically asked of them.”

FPC declined to be bullied and, as things stand as *Liberator* went to press, conference gets an actual vote rather than having this stitched up by the working party.

BOMB SURPRISE

Having, rather surprisingly, debated and agreed a motion on Trident replacement without leaks, members of the defence policy working group were surprised to hear the results of their deliberations discussed on BBC Radio 4’s Today programme.

That this leak occurred less than 12 hours after the parliamentary party was briefed on the subject may at least narrow the range of culprits.

Conference is expected to get a motion that calls for Trident to be scaled back, so that continuous at-sea deterrence ends but two submarines could be armed if some period of international tension arose.

There is almost certain to be a ‘no nukes’ amendment, and possibly one from a fringe of headbangers who support full Trident replacement, thus leaving the policy paper position likely to pass and give the party something which those involved believe is a credible platform for a general election and which might also be deliverable in a future coalition.

A LONG TIME IN POLITICS

When allegations of sexual harassment against former Liberal Democrat chief executive Chris Rennard (which he strongly denies) were aired on Channel 4 News in February, the party’s response was hesitant, contradictory and confusing.

The allegations would have been awkward enough to deal with at any time but, coming on top of the Eastleigh by-election, could hardly have come at a worse moment.

A media response that changed almost daily and to no positive effect did nothing to retrieve the situation and made it look as though the party was engaged in an inept cover-up.

The party appeared to have been caught flat-footed by this embarrassment landing in the middle of the by-election campaign, and also looked as though it were extemporising a response without any coherent line

being followed, thereby making things worse.

That might be excusable for an ‘on the hoof’ response, but now along comes the report from independent human resources expert Helena Morrissey – who was commissioned to investigate what had gone on – which reveals that the party had three weeks’ warning of the Channel 4 programme.

Say that again? Three weeks. Surely that was time enough to devise a response that would hold water as far as possible at such a sensitive time?

Worse, Morrissey confirms what was widely suspected (*Liberator* 358) that a dossier of allegations about Rennard was floating around the media two years earlier – put there by a former employee disaffected over an unrelated matter – and that newspapers had already from time to time sniffed round the story.

If Morrissey is right, senior MPs and party officers had three years’ general warning that such allegations might surface publicly, and three weeks’ specific warning of when and how they would do so.

Morrissey wrote in her report: “I have deliberated over whether there was a conscious cover-up, which would suggest a more corrosive culture. One of the women involved has specifically alleged a blatant cover-up. I understand her frustration, anger and suspicion but I did not find evidence to support this regarding these events.”

That was hardly what it looked like to any disinterested member of the public in February.

As Morrissey further noted, classic ‘crisis media’ handling is to tell the whole truth right away, since it will come out and “any obfuscation at the start compounds the damage”.

She says: “In this situation, the party was limited in what it could say as it had not conducted a proper investigation and did not know the truth. Nick Clegg was therefore not in a position to ‘cover-up’.

“Mistakes were made, though, particularly in the first three days after the first Channel 4 programme, when Nick Clegg was away and officials seemed to downplay even his general (and therefore limited) knowledge of the matter.”

Clegg was indeed away, and by all accounts at a remote Spanish location with his wife’s family. However, he is deputy prime minister and it is hard to believe that he was completely out of contact in the event of such a crisis.

When Clegg returned, “he then made it clear that he had been aware of concerns about Lord Rennard’s conduct in 2008 but not the specifics, either of the alleged incidences or the identities of the women”.

As Morrissey concludes: “A self-interested approach would have actually suggested a much quicker response from the party when it was given three weeks’ advance notice of the ‘controlled explosion’ of the Channel 4 News programme.

“A proactive statement explaining what the leadership had and had not been aware of and announcing proper, albeit belated investigations might not have defused the bomb but would have been better for the party than the damage limitation that followed.

“While it is not clear why this opportunity was missed, the party appears to have been anxious not to pre-empt or prejudge the positions of anyone involved.”

Morrissey also states, as reported in *Liberator* 358, a partial reason why the party might not have been

prepared to deal with the matter earlier – though it still does not explain wasting the three weeks in February.

Rennard resigned a chief executive for health reasons in May 2009 after which such roles as he took in the party were low profile ones (other than being a peer) for the next three years.

Morrissey states: “I believe that the complainants would not have pursued their allegations further had Rennard not subsequently returned to an active role, including being elected to the Federal Policy Committee (he received more than twice the number of votes as his nearest contender). The final straw was when he accepted an invitation to attend a Campaign for Gender Balance training weekend in September 2012.

“This invitation was directly extended to him by the Campaign for Gender Balance group and shows that there was no widespread knowledge about the allegations. It was not the type of invitation that anyone would have considered as needing to be run by the leader’s, president’s or chief executive’s offices.

“Even though this was an innocent mistake, the women who had raised their concerns previously were understandably dismayed at this development and felt betrayed. They felt they had no choice but to escalate the issue, ultimately via Channel 4 News.”

So after Rennard’s resignation, nothing further had been heard about the allegations and the complainants, in Morrissey’s view, would have allowed them to drop had it not been for Rennard’s re-emergence in two roles that would not be in Nick Clegg’s gift anyway.

This may perhaps explain why those concerned concluded the allegations had gone away, only for them to return in February with full force, though with three weeks’ prior notice.

DROPPING THE PILOT

The Morrissey report was not set up to delve into Liberal Democrat internal politics, but did so as an inevitable result of setting the context around Chris Rennard’s period as chief executive.

It is intriguing as the work of external person coming to conclusions about how the party works. Morrissey concludes that Rennard accrued an unusual degree of power because Charles Kennedy’s leadership was so laid back that no one was running the party and someone had to fill the void.

“The relatively relaxed management style of the party leader, Charles Kennedy, compared with Paddy Ashdown who has a military background, also contributed to Chris Rennard’s power base,” Morrissey diplomatically puts it.

After the interlude of Sir Menzies Campbell’s ill-starred leadership, Nick Clegg’s arrival appeared to signal no change in Rennard’s position, at least as far as most people could tell.

The party still practised ‘Rennardism’ even though a few people were starting to question explicitly the merits of this approach – essentially the one of concentrating all resources on target seats and campaigning on the basis that the party could win anywhere.

It had paid big dividends in the 1990s but, as Morrissey notes, in April 2007 the former MEP Robin Teverson put a paper to the Federal Executive, “which

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praised the successes to date of that strategy but suggested its future application was limited and that an alternative strategy was needed to give the party its next electoral breakthrough. ‘Rennardism’ was now being questioned.”

But in something made public for the first time, according to Morrissey, Clegg himself was questioning it. By 2009, Rennard was embroiled in an expenses controversy (in which no wrong doing was found) and had serious health problems.

“It appears that Nick Clegg had accumulated doubts about him, which included the harassment allegations and the expenses issue, but also the fundamental concern that ‘Rennardism’ was not the way forward for the party.”

What, though, changed if this assessment of Clegg is correct? The 2010 election was fought by rigid adherence to target seats just as it would have been in Rennard’s time.

Clegg’s concern seems to relate to whether the party speaks consistently across the country, or at least in seats it fights seriously, rather than to whether Rennard-style targeting continues. In his speech to the recent ALDC conference, Clegg said: “Going forward, the idea that in a general election we can be under a national spotlight and yet run the campaign as a series of loosely linked by-elections simply isn’t possible. We can be singing different verses – but they must all be from the same song.”

Despite these doubts, it will be surprising if, at the next general election, serious campaigning takes place anywhere except in seats currently held plus a few other hopefuls.

DON'T FORGET THE SHOPPING

The Mitcham and Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet this summer heads not to a place but to an organisation.

It is awarded to Liberal Reform for the worst motion submitted to conference, leaving the right-wing group following in a proud tradition of recipients stretching back 30 years to the fabled motion on the siting of public conveniences.

The problem with Liberal Reform's motion is less with its content, sections of which are perfectly unexceptionable, than its construction. It is an un-debateable shopping list, which, were it to reach the final agenda, would be open to an unmanageable flood of calls for separate votes.

It contains, to wit, seven "notes progress" points, four observations on "challenges still facing the UK economy" (is that really all?), seven "welcome actions of the Liberal Democrats in the Coalition" and then calls for ten substantial policy initiatives, each of which could make a debate in its own right and each of which has at least two sub-sections. This tends not to be a successful approach.

DEAF EARS

Liberal Democrat MPs, smarting from the row over the recommendations of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority on their pay, did not have their tempers improved by a proposal from English party chair Peter Ellis.

Ellis, not short of a bob or two himself, suggested they should all pay a tithe to party funds from their existing salaries.

"So because the leadership has fucked up the politics so badly that we've lost members, we're now expected to pay to make up the difference," one fumed.

The way membership figures have gone since the coalition's formation, the party's remaining ordinary members can probably count themselves lucky they are not being asked for an income surcharge.

Social Liberal Forum fringe meetings at Glasgow Liberal Democrat Conference

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Chair: Professor Stephen Lee (chief executive, CentreForum)

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***As the 2015 manifesto takes shape, who takes ownership of it and of the party –
members or ministers?***

Sunday, 15 September at 6.15pm (Argyll 2, Crowne Plaza)

In partnership with Liberator

***Speakers: Tim Farron MP (invited), Gareth Epps (co-chair, SLF)
Sue Doughty (chair of party's Internal Democracy Working Group),***

Chair: Paula Keaveney (member, SLF executive)

DELIVERING ON RACE WHERE LABOUR MESSED UP

A major report gives the Liberal Democrats the chance to lead on tackling discrimination, but is the party brave enough for this, asks Janice Turner?

A year-long campaign by Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats, assisted by the Social Liberal Forum, looks set to transform government policy on race equality. It will make the Liberal Democrats the only political party with a race policy that clearly understands the issues and delivers what ethnic minority communities actually want and need.

The party's autumn conference is due to debate a motion arising from the Liberal Democrat Race Equality Task Force report, committing the party to a range of measures specifically addressing race discrimination. Our representatives in government have already begun implementation in some areas: Nick Clegg personally intervened recently to add a raft of diversity issues to Michael Gove's national curriculum, to the hearty cheers of activists. But the journey to this point was a tough one.

A year ago, Clegg was approached by Baroness Hussein-Ece who was concerned at the direction of party and government policy on race equality. In response, he invited her to set up and chair a task force on race equality and come up with proposals.

The task force resolved to look first at education and employment. It read all the main government policy documents in the area, took evidence from acknowledged authorities in their field including Professor Gus John, and undertook further research.

The evidence amassed in the Task Force Report was damning, comprising 20,000 words of closely argued text, including more than 70 references to academic and government reports and papers.

The report demonstrated that discrimination is alive and well and affecting black and minority ethnic (BAME) citizens in different ways throughout their early years, education and careers.

SCHOOL EXPULSIONS

For example, a major concern of black parents is the high rate of expulsion from school of children, particularly boys, of black Caribbean origin. If there was a problem with the behaviour of this group of children, then the more there are in a school, the more expulsions there would be. But the task force noted data from the Department for Education, which showed that the reverse was true. The fewer black Caribbean children there are in a school, the greater the likelihood of their expulsion.

At degree level, BAME and women graduates reading this will be most upset to hear that, when Leeds University moved to name-blind marking of student

work, their scores shot up by 12% overnight.

In the workplace, a report prepared for the Department of Work and Pensions showed that, when a BAME worker applied for a job, there was a 4% chance that a public sector employer would throw their application in the bin because of their race – and a 35% chance with a private sector company.

More than 50% of black youth aged under 24 are unemployed, compared with about 22% of white youth. Though Chinese men are among the highest paid of all ethnic groups, another study found that their pay was 12% lower than would be expected for white people working at their level.

But one of the key findings of the task force report was its conclusion that Labour's change in the approach to equality, or more specifically the way this change had been implemented, was a major cause of the failure to address race discrimination successfully.

The Labour government had evolved a new approach: the human rights-based (termed by some the 'holistic') approach to equality. The previous approach had been to address each equality strand separately. But it was argued that each individual had multiple facets of identity and should not be seen merely as black or white, or male or female, gay or straight. The new aim was to address the denial of rights to each individual or group of individuals.

The unassailable truth was that the denial of a human right is as important if someone is not a member of a 'protected group' as it is if they are. This approach won all-party support and, on this basis, the Equality and Human Rights Commission was established, replacing the old Commission for Racial Equality, the Equal Opportunities Commission and others.

Unfortunately, although the human rights-based approach was supposed to address the denial of rights to groups of individuals as well as each individual, this part was ignored despite the fact that ethnic minority citizens are discriminated against collectively because of their race. When Stephen Lawrence's brother announced he was suing the police, having been stopped two dozen times as he drove his car, he said that they had not stopped him because of the individual he was, but because he was a member of a particular ethnic group against which the police had consistently discriminated.

The black community had expressed grave concerns that the focus on racism would be lost with this new approach, and they were right. The Runnymede Trust was among many organisations that in recent years

have expressed alarm that, since the new approach was adopted, race had fallen right off the political agenda.

When the coalition took office, Labour's policy was continued without question. The task force read all the main government policies on equality and it was clear that there was no strategy to address race discrimination. There were many activities that would have been excellent in an ancillary role, but it was as if there were icing but no actual cake.

So while Labour had failed to address race discrimination, things were no better under the coalition. The latest census of employment in the creative industries, for example, shows that, while 9% of the British population is BAME, representation in the creative industries has actually declined from 6.7% in 2009 to just 5.4% last year. In London, home to half the BAME population of Britain and where nearly a third of the working population is BAME, representation in the creative industries is only 8.9%.

Although the coalition parties had voted for the Equality Act, they failed to implement essential codes of practice that should have been issued. Instead, 'guidance' was issued, which could be ignored.

And the coalition parties were taking through parliament three proposals that would abolish parts of the Act. They proposed – in the teeth of opposition from all the regional chairs of the industrial tribunals – to get rid of the statutory discrimination questionnaire employers had to fill in prior to a discrimination case going to an industrial tribunal. They also proposed abolishing protection from third-party harassment. And they wanted to abolish the general duty of the EHRC, which sets out what it is for – to fight discrimination and foster good relations in society.

This was on top of having brought in vast fees to take discrimination cases to tribunals, which will make justice unattainable for many people unless they are trade union members (trade unions pay such fees on behalf of members they are representing).

So the job of EMLD, assisted by SLF, was to persuade the government and its machinery that it wasn't enough just to look at individuals; they needed to adopt policies that tackled race discrimination.

The task force circulated its report around the party and it was widely welcomed, with only minor criticisms. However, a motion put forward for the spring conference was rejected by conference committee in circumstances that EMLD felt were controversial, to say the least (Liberator 358).

The team supported Lord Lester's attempts in the House of Lords to retain the questionnaire and the protection from third-party harassment but this failed. However, it also supported the crossbencher Baroness Campbell's amendment to retain the all-important mission statement of the EHRC. Ministers, peers and MPs were all lobbied by EMLD, SLF and the Liberal Democrat Disability Association, and SLF liaised with other organisations who were on the same side.

SUCCESSFUL REBELLIONS

Together, the campaign orchestrated two successful rebellions in the House of Lords, after which equalities minister Jo Swinson gracefully announced that the government was dropping the proposal – a decision

many considered unheard of.

In March, Clegg signed the foreword to the Task Force Report, and SLF and EMLD resolved to galvanise support for it with a joint conference on 1 June. Vince Cable, Tom Brake and the leaderships of SLF and EMLD spoke at the conference, which drew more than 100 party members.

As the conference was being organised, it emerged in the Queen's Speech that another Tory-inspired proposal was on the way: to abolish the power of tribunals to make wider recommendations to employers who had been found guilty of discrimination.

EMLD and SLF members at conference declared that they would campaign hard against its abolition. In June, the government let it be known that this was not a priority and it may not go ahead. EMLD is now monitoring the ongoing inquiry into the Public Sector Equality Duty and any attempt to weaken it will be vigorously opposed.

The team consulted widely within the party on a redrafted motion for the autumn conference. This time, the motion – whose supporters included seven members of the House of Lords – was accepted for debate. The task force was delighted to hear in early July that Clegg had personally intervened over the national curriculum, which now includes world history (for example early Islamic civilization, Mayan civilization, Benin from AD900-1300; Mughal India and China's Qing dynasty). Children will also learn about social and cultural change in post-war Britain. Human rights have been added to the citizenship strand, as well as "diverse national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the United Kingdom and the need for mutual respect and understanding". World literature is to be included so that teachers can choose translated texts as well as those originally written in English. Primary schools will no longer be restricted to a list of seven foreign languages they can teach. This already fulfils one of the key recommendations of the Task Force Report.

At the next general election, the electorate has to be convinced on three fronts: that we understand the issues, that we will act on them if they vote for us, but also that we can prove our worth through our record of achievement in office.

If the party adopts this policy in September and implements it in government before the election, we will be able to show ethnic minority communities that our party has delivered where Labour messed up. It is to the great credit of our party's ministerial team and its political advisors that they have been prepared to listen to the arguments and respond.

One final word: having worked closely with EMLD, I have been deeply impressed with the determination and commitment of its leadership. EMLD is a serious, heavyweight force for change and has earned the respect of this party.

Janice Turner is a member of SLF Council and assisted the Liberal Democrats' Race Equality Task Force

THEY CAN'T GET US ALL

The Morrissey Report uncovered appalling examples of sexism in the party, but Ruth Bright wonders why more women didn't join her in going public

My mum is a Liberal Democrat councillor in her late sixties, an understated lady, not prone to iconoclasm or exaggeration, but she and I used to 'joke' that one Liberal Democrat councillor was so untouchable (he had been much lauded for his defection from another party) for his sexist behaviour that he would have to rape someone at Cowley Street for there to be even a flicker of concern from the party about his conduct.

A sick thought, maybe, but an understandable one given the party's recent record. I am bored with cataloguing the sexism I encountered within (very rarely without) the party as a parliamentary candidate. I have gone through it many a time (on LDV, in *Liberator*, in evidence submitted to Helena Morrissey's inquiry).

Suffice it to say that, even if I use the very kindest language I can muster, I found my party to be an organisation where embarrassments had to be managed at all costs but where no one prioritised actually *solving* problems.

To give a small example: some years ago, I complained to the Gender Balance Task Force about its prominent use of an old picture of me with my baby daughter. I asked the GBTF to remove the picture from its literature as I resented it being used to project a 'family friendly' image for the party when I had been informed that I had no statutory maternity rights as a candidate.

Jo Swinson was deployed to call me but it was obvious that she had little interest in my experiences. She used bland expressions of the "I hear what you say", "I am sorry you feel that way" variety. Her main interest was clear – that I should be appeased sufficiently so that the costly glossy GBTF literature would not have to be pulped.

And so it is a profound relief that someone of Morrissey's calibre "gets it". It is salutary to hear her say time and time again that party management came before addressing injustice and that the party therefore, in her words, "failed to live up to its own ideology". Indeed, if we were reading such a report on racism in the party rather than sexism, it would be difficult to see how the party would have a future at all.

Morrissey gets to grips with the obvious fact that, if all complaints that cannot be resolved informally are investigated, it protects accuser and accused. The prolonged limbo between investigation and non-investigation (of the Rennard and other cases) was far more destructive than investigating at once according to due process.

GROWING PAINS

Morrissey is at her most sympathetic to the Liberal Democrat party culture, where she acknowledges

that much of this illustrates the "growing pains" of an impecunious party where campaigning came before everything. Indeed, for a party like ours, campaigning should come before most things but not before our duty of care to our many volunteers who enjoy neither the protection of a union nor the legal rights of employees.

Like Channel 4, Morrissey often emphasises how articulate, experienced (and middle class?) and therefore how credible the complainants are. Woe betide them, presumably, had they been inarticulate, inexperienced or not middle class like the unbelievably victims of abuse in Bradford.

Morrissey rightly expresses concern that, though the party as a whole recognises the political stigma of an 86% male parliamentary party, it concentrates on changing the women not the party culture.

"Most of the training currently provided seems to be focused on the women rather than the party itself. There is too much segregation of groups rather than integration into the whole. The training programme at the Spring 2013 Conference, for example, included two sessions orchestrated by the Campaign for Gender Balance – both open to women only."

This reminds me of one of those worthy public health campaigns on teenage pregnancy, where all the effort is addressed towards improving the behaviour of the young women, with rarely a thought about addressing the behaviour of the prospective young fathers.

Thus goes the logic: the party is not at fault for the abysmal imbalance, there is no need to address equalities issues across the party – all that needs to be done is train up those girlies with confidence and a motivational weekend with a party bigwig (sounds familiar?) and all will be well. It is not Morrissey's style to give this nonsense the kicking it deserves but she does at least give those who favour this approach a stern talking-to.

The report drily mentions the oft-heard cry that it is "impossible to find good women", and corrects this by saying it is often difficult to attract good women, which is not the same thing.

When I stood down from my PPC seat in 2007, the party went ahead with an all-male shortlist. Alas, cried the returning officer, he had begged every approved woman in the entire region to stand but they had turned him down.

Had the party created the conditions to keep me (given me more than the 48 hours maternity leave I was graciously granted), it would not have had to beg for a token woman; but no one seems to monitor or address female candidate attrition rates. The report does not say this explicitly but surely it is better to try to keep some of the women that are there (even if they will go and do things like have babies) rather than begging someone, anyone, to stand on a list as a token woman at the last minute.

Morrissey has said that she has no party allegiance but it would be interesting if she put herself forward as new blood. I suspect nine times out of ten (or should I say 86 times out of 100) she would lose out to a man, with selections weighing the candidates' local connections and time-serving more heavily than freshness and ability to campaign on issues that 52% of the electorate would empathise with.

On a more positive note, she tries to get us to sell success stories (often at local level) with more gusto. When I was first elected as a councillor, I was in an opposition group of 23 with a female majority. That same group had some great female leadership over the years but no one much seems to have noticed.

I would like to raise something that is not the fault of Morrissey but is rarely addressed. Where is the courage or sense of solidarity of the women quoted here? Imagine if all 42 of us had asked to be named. Those of us who have 'come out' on this subject are less than popular but it would be difficult to spike the careers of all 42 of us for speaking out.

I went to a Gender Balance meeting in 2010 where a very prominent woman told of some appalling sexism in her local party. She is a talented person and has every right to be ambitious but, if everyone puts ambitions first in order not to rock the boat, nothing will change. I believe she is of sufficient prominence that it would have had a powerful effect had she spoken publicly.

At that same meeting, I told the group that, since I had given birth during the lead up to reselection, the chair of the local party had ordered the birth announcement to be taken down in case it was seen as a promotion of a candidate (she later apologised and it was put back up) but the sad thing was that no one was surprised – not in the least.

Women all over the world are doing brave things every day of the week: women in Africa fighting against female genital mutilation; girls in Afghanistan just wanting to go to school. They risk their lives for women's rights but we, members of a governing political party in a liberal democracy, are too full of fear to speak out and put our names to the calls for change. This is an indictment of our party but also of us.

Some will cite loyalty to the party, rather than the protection of their own careers, as a reason for not coming forward, or as an excuse for not listening to those that do. With the Morrissey report, we must surely now be able to see the cost of such misplaced loyalty.

“Shirley Williams has been unbelievably dismissive of the most prominent allegations”

It is interesting that the issue of the bullying of Julian Huppert in the House of Commons has garnered sympathy but that the consistent bullying of women in the party has taken so many years to be taken seriously, and then only with the catalyst

of the media furore and a report from an outsider.

Pretty typical of the reports of sexual bullying is the following from 'Witness 6' in the Morrissey Report: "He followed her out to smoke... cornered her... acted irrational and angry when she tried to rebuff his advances... It was just accepted because he was a councillor and we weren't going to damage the party by making it 'a thing'."

Why is Julian Huppert able to speak out but 'Witness 6' has to remain anonymous and accept her fate?

No one, but no one, comes out of this with any glory. Paul Burstow at least has had made a fulsome apology for his part in failing to follow-up allegations. Clegg (who recently implied to LBC that he is too important to attend diversity training), Swinson and Danny Alexander are all found wanting. Norman Lamb and Ros Scott are both found to have at least had a go at bringing party procedures and practice into the twenty-first century.

Meanwhile, aside from the report, other high-profile party members have nothing to be proud of. Shirley Williams has been unbelievably dismissive of the most prominent allegations. Simon Hughes does not even seem to have been aware of the party's disgraceful treatment of one of his own Southwark councillors during her pregnancy.

The Morrissey recommendations are clear and correct. But implementation will be a challenge in a party structure that is so fiercely devolved. Morrissey herself recognises the labyrinthine decision-making layers as problematic but unlikely to change.

Sadly, the party has placed itself in the baleful territory of the Catholic Church and the BBC, where an organisation has put saving its own face before the fate of whistleblowers.

Can this change? With a heavy heart, after 28 years in the party, I would not bet on it.

Ruth Bright fought East Hampshire for the Liberal Democrats in 2005

BULLS, BEARS AND FOG

Never trust an economist who claims to see the future from one statistic. None of them know what they are talking about, says Chris Bailey

Economists don't know as much as they say they do. You have seen them on television and heard them on Radio 4 confidently interpreting the day's economic statistic, predicting whether this will add 0.1% to GDP over the year ahead.

But they simply don't know. No one knows. Yet there seems to be a simple correlation between how much an economist is paid and the confidence with which he or she broadcasts predictions of very doubtful accuracy.

And there is a good reason for this. These instant-comment economists on television and radio inevitably work for banks or other financial institutions whose name appears prominently in the caption and the interviewer's introduction.

For the banks, this is a brilliant piece of free, prime time broadcast advertising. And they want to appear as confident, all-knowing institutions – and let's face it, they have had a lot of image problems in recent years – so the last thing they want to display is a nervous, introverted economist who shrugs his shoulders and mumbles that he doesn't really know.

And the media enthusiastically join in this fraud. Broadcasters and newspapers want to seem clever and all-knowing too. They have to, or otherwise the viewer and the reader might find better ways of spending their time and money. And as for politicians, well, when did you last hear a politician say, "I don't know"? They readily join in the game of instant, dogmatic comment on preliminary statistics if it gives them a media appearance. Even ministers at times break free of the cautious restraints of their civil service advisors and trumpet the announcement of a favourable statistic, hoping this will be forgotten when the statistic is unfavourably revised a few months later.

So my first lesson is, never, ever, believe instant commentary on today's economic statistics. The truth is that no one knows the significance of a single, new statistic, though there are plenty of people who like to claim they do.

GNAW YOUR OWN ARM OFF

But that is not to say that all economics is a waste of time. On the contrary, it is essential to apply careful reasoning based on the best available evidence to understanding where the economy is now and where it is most likely to be headed. But that takes a lot of time and can often yield rather dull results hedged round with probabilities. And if you don't believe me, try reading the Bank of England's quarterly *Inflation Report*. This is painstakingly researched, immensely thorough and written in so dull a style that by Chapter 4 you want to gnaw your own arm off, which would be a pity as Chapter 5 has got the forecasts that are the crux of the report!

And the Bank's forecasts of inflation and GDP growth are not the confident, firm number given by

City economists but are a range of probabilities, which get wider the further ahead you look. Thus in its latest forecast, the Bank says that it is 95% sure that in 2015 the economy will be growing by up to 4.5%, which would be mega-fast by British standards, or shrinking by up to 0.5%, in which case we would still be in a recession. And there is a 5% chance that growth could be even outside this wide range. Now although outcomes around the centre of this range, say 1.5 to 2.5%, are more likely, the size of the possible range reflects the Bank's honesty about how little economists really know about the future.

While the Bank has problems forecasting GDP and inflation, the Treasury has an even tougher problem forecasting the budget deficit. This is the difference between two very large numbers, total government revenues and total government spending, which are themselves uncertain and so the difference between them will be even more uncertain. No wonder Chancellors in all governments regularly have to explain why their budget numbers have turned out so wrong, and look relieved and pretend to be so clever on those few occasions when good luck puts them close to the target.

So why are economic forecasts so awful? First, a lot of the data is unreliable and difficult to use, and that is a reflection of the sheer size, complexity and changing nature of the economy.

Take GDP, which is an attempt to measure the total spending in the economy. This would be simple if everybody spent all their money in large shops, which kept accurate accounts, which were reported promptly to the government. But in the real world, there are powerful tax incentives to understate income and an active cash-in-hand black economy whose size can only be guessed at. The growth of internet retailing, particularly through vehicles such as eBay, raises real questions about how the relevant data can be collected and interpreted.

And this is only the start of the problems the statisticians face. No wonder they revise GDP data, sometimes significantly, years after they were first published. To illustrate this uncertainty, the Bank of England publishes its 'backcast' of GDP, that is, its estimate of the range in which the back figures might be revised. So its GDP forecast does not have a simple starting point of the latest published number, but begins with a range showing what that number might eventually be revised to.

So if economists are not sure where we are now, they should certainly be very uncertain as to where we are going.

Another reason for economists' poor foresight is that they do not really understand financial markets and how they behave. This may seem surprising given that the study of money would appear to be central to

economics. And indeed, in the distant past economists did seem to understand finance better than they do today – Keynes not only wrote extensively about finance but also made a lot of money for his Cambridge college by shrewdly managing their investments.

But in recent decades, economists have turned away from looking at how financial markets actually operate in favour of creating large and elaborate mathematical models based on simplistic underlying

assumptions of profit-maximisation. Needless to say, macro-economists and their models completely failed to forecast the 2008 crisis and the depth of the ensuing global recession – the largest economic catastrophe since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Interestingly, in recent years micro-economists have become much more sophisticated in their understanding of how people actually behave and have noticed that, in their decisions, people are not simple profit-maximisers but often have multiple objectives and are strongly influenced by the behaviour of those around them. And people often have curious psychological flaws in their logic, which would be surprising to nobody except, it seems, a macro-economist.

An understanding of the psychology of markets is central to understanding what happened in the 2008 financial crisis and, indeed, what is happening in economies around the world today. Although it is fashionable to blame the crisis on bankers' greed, in fact it was their fear once the crisis became apparent that did the damage.

SUDDEN STARVATION

By sharply cutting back on all lending, particularly to other financial institutions, they suddenly starved the economy of credit, with predictable results. The massive and unprecedented size of the Bank of England's credit injections just seemed to add to the market's sense of panic and gloom, and the banks hoarded the extra liquidity.

Now this is typical crowd behaviour in a time of crisis. Ignore logic and the long-term view and instead do exactly the same as everybody else is doing. After all, if all bank officials make the same mistake and all lose money, they all get to keep their jobs. In banking, you lose your job only if you are the only one who loses money. And today we see crowd behaviour all around us in the world economy as well as financial markets. The run-up of global stock markets to their recent highs, and the subsequent correction, has had typical capital market herd characteristics where investors try to ride the bull-wave and then the bear-wave, carrying both to excesses. (Hence Keynes's shrewd investment advice: when everyone is buying, sell a little, and when

“Economists have turned away from looking at how financial markets actually operate in favour of creating large and elaborate mathematical models based on simplistic underlying assumptions of profit-maximisation”

everyone is selling, buy a little).

And in the real economy, investment has been held back although large companies are sitting on mountains of cash, as businesses sense a lack of confidence around them. In the end, the herd will start to run forward, investments will be made and indeed eventually overdone as the economy rushes into another unsustainable boom.

When will this change of mood take place? No one knows. Perhaps

it is starting now, as the media have certainly been talking up the recent raft of more positive economic indicators, though it is still early days and the mood could yet be dampened by unexpected bad news or uncertainties. But the curious thing about market moods is that when they are bullish they tend to ignore bad news, and vice versa when they are bearish, so fingers crossed, we may at last be on the road to economic growth again.

So what is the moral of this story? There are several. First, do not believe any economic commentary based on the interpretation of a single economic statistic. If you want to know what is happening in the economy, look at all the data over the last three or six months and you might start to see something through the fog, though you will still see mostly fog.

And as for looking ahead, remember that macro-economic models do not take sufficient account of herd behaviour, so they underestimate the depths of recessions and also the strengths of booms. And they are hopeless at spotting when the mood will change between bullish and bearish behaviour.

When Gordon Brown boasted that Labour had ended the cycle of boom and bust, it reflected not only his own megalomania but also the hubris of most macro-economists at the time. Alas, they were all hopelessly wrong. The mad mood swings of markets are a reflection of mankind's fascinating psychological instability. Unfortunately, no economist has yet been able to reduce that to a successful mathematical model.

And finally, as anxious Liberal Democrats we ask, against this background of uncertainty will the government's economic strategy really work?

The only honest answer an economist can give is that it has got a better chance of working than any alternative strategy, but we really can't be sure at this stage. So we are sailing through a fog on the course that seems most likely to miss the icebergs, but that does not mean we won't hit one! Now, where did we stow the life jackets?

Chris Bailey has retired from a career as a City economist and is treasurer of Rochford and Southend Liberal Democrats

HALF TRUTHS IN THE FOG

Leading Liberal Democrats make five common justifications for the party's performance in the coalition. All are myths, says Jeremy Sanders

There is no doubt that the period since the last general election has been a difficult one for the Liberal Democrats, and in particular for many party activists at local level.

The coalition has clearly lost the party support, and in many cases has put members in the position of having to try to justify the party's support for the government, despite the fact that it is introducing policies with which many members fundamentally disagree.

As time has gone on, however, our support for the coalition seems to be increasingly being justified by the regular repetition of a number of statements simply put forward as fact, without any real discussion. Over the last couple of years, these have achieved the status of almost urban myths within the party, and largely gone unchallenged. Unfortunately, like most urban myths, these often don't really stand up to much examination. No doubt there are others, but these seem to me to be the five biggest:

I – THE GOVERNMENT IS DELIVERING 75 % OF OUR MANIFESTO

This has been repeated endlessly over the last couple of years both by senior figures in the party and other supporters of the coalition, with implication that the coalition is somehow "75% the same" as a majority Liberal Democrat government would be. The problem with this statement is that it's not true, and even if it were, it would be both misleading and largely meaningless.

This figure seems to have originated in a piece of research carried out a year or so ago. What this actually said was that approximately 75% of the items in our general election manifesto were covered in the coalition agreement. Given that much of the coalition agreement comprised fairly general statements of intent, which could be agreed by both sides, rather than specific policies, this is hardly "delivering 75% of our manifesto". Principles such as "a radical devolution of power" is clearly in line with our manifesto, but are actually so general that they can be (and are) interpreted completely differently by the Conservatives from ourselves, and in practice have even by used to justify policies such as NHS reform to which we are fundamentally opposed.

Even if this figure were true, however, it really doesn't mean very much. Much of any party's manifesto is fairly uncontroversial, as is most of what any, reasonably mainstream, government does. In practice, most of the things that governments do are fairly practical, non-controversial measures with which all parties would broadly agree. On this basis, it's probably true that, in purely percentage terms, we

do agree with the majority of what the government is doing, but the same would quite probably have applied to the Brown, Blair, Major, and even Thatcher governments.

What actually matters is where the government stands on the major, politically controversial issues. Since the formation of the Coalition these have included such issues as student fees, 'free' schools, NHS reforms, secret courts, and, more generally, economic policy and benefits reform. In these areas, far from delivering 75% of our manifesto, the majority of policy has clearly comprised things, which at best we don't agree with, and at worst, to which the party is actively opposed.

2 – BEING IN GOVERNMENT IS PREVENTING THE WORST EXCESSES OF THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

It's certainly true that a Conservative majority government would be far worse than the Coalition. The problem, however, is that that is a largely meaningless comparison. The only reason that the Coalition exists at all is because the Conservatives did not win a majority at the last general election, and therefore could not form a majority government. There are lots of things that the Tory right would like the government to be doing, especially with regard to privatisation, tax and benefits and (particularly) Europe, which it isn't – but what is preventing the Tory right implementing some of their favourite policies is mostly the fact that the Conservative party does not have a majority in the House of Commons, and therefore could not get legislation through parliament without the support of other parties. Whether or not the Liberal Democrats are part of the government is irrelevant to this.

If anything, having the Liberal Democrats in government has probably meant that the Tory right has been able to get more of its agenda implemented than would otherwise have been the case. It is highly unlikely that a Conservative government without a parliamentary majority would even have tried to get through parliament such measures as free schools or marketisation of the NHS, because there simply wouldn't have been a majority in the House of Commons to support them. The sad fact is that, in reality, the involvement of the Liberal Democrats has probably meant that more of the agenda of the Conservative Right has been implemented than would otherwise have been the case.

3 – PEOPLE MUST REALISE THAT WE “CAN’T GET EVERYTHING WE WANT” / “HAVE TO MAKE COMPROMISES”

This is a classic example of arguing against something that no one was ever suggesting in the first place. No one is suggesting that we should never make compromises – that’s a basic part of democracy – the question is whether the end result of these compromises is acceptable, or in some cases whether they can really even be described as compromises at all. My dictionary defines compromise as “an agreement that is achieved after everyone involved accepts less than what they wanted at first”.

Is this really the case with something like secret courts, or NHS reform, or student fees, where the party has made it quite clear that we completely reject the whole underlying basis on which the legislation is based? What compromise certainly does not mean is agreeing to support something which the party fundamentally opposes, on the basis that it’s slightly less bad than what the Tories were originally proposing. Readers of Liberator will be only too able to think of a whole variety of other policies where the same would apply.

4 – RAISING OF THE BASIC INCOME TAX ALLOWANCE AND THE INTRODUCTION OF THE PUPIL PREMIUM SHOWS THAT LIB DEMS CAN GET POLICIES ADOPTED EVEN WHERE THE TORIES OPPOSE THEM

The fact that these two issues are so often quoted probably shows how little in the way of major policy issues the Liberal Democrats have actually achieved. On the most basic level, it is true that they were both Liberal Democrat policies and not Tory ones, but how much they represent a great achievement has to be highly questionable.

The raising of the basic income tax allowance above the rate of inflation is probably a broadly good idea. It’s hard to imagine, however, that the idea of what is effectively an across the board cut in income tax was something to which the Conservatives were ever likely to hugely oppose. It may not have been exactly how the Tories would have chosen to cut taxes, but it’s hardly something they would oppose on principle. Indeed, under the Major, and even late Thatcher governments, the Conservatives actually did precisely this as part of their policy of income tax cuts. The Conservatives true feelings on this were probably best indicated by the fact that, far from being embarrassed that he had been forced into a U-turn by the Liberal Democrats, George Osborne chose actually to take credit for this in his speech to the 2012 Conservative party conference.

This also can’t be seen in isolation from changes to the benefit system. Full-time workers on low pay will certainly see their take home pay increase, but they are also one of the groups most likely to lose out from benefit cuts. It’s difficult to generalise, but in many cases those in most need will simply see their reduced tax offset by reductions to benefits.

The Pupil Premium is probably also a broadly good idea. Few Liberals would disagree with the idea of targeting additional funding for education to areas of greater need. The problem is that this was never meant to be something taken in isolation. It was intended to be additional funding, and to be part of an overall package of programmes to tackle social deprivation. Unfortunately, it’s likely to be of limited benefit if it has to be used to offset cuts being made elsewhere in the schools budgets. The Ofsted report of September 2012 suggests that is largely the case and that, for many if not most schools, the Pupil Premium is simply a case of giving with one hand what is being taken away with the other.

The basic fact here is that the Conservatives probably have little objection to the Pupil Premium provided it doesn’t cost anything, and the Coalition Agreement itself specifically states that it will be funded from savings elsewhere. Given that, it’s hard to see this as a great triumph.

5 – THE LIB DEMS CURRENT DIFFICULTIES CAN BE SOLVED BY COMMUNICATING OUR POSITION MORE EFFECTIVELY

This is really simply a variation of the excuse, which has frequently been used by people holding unpopular political views over the years. It tends to be particularly popular with the Labour left, and generally comes down to “our policies aren’t unpopular, it’s just that the media is biased against us”.

It’s certainly true that much of the press isn’t particularly sympathetic to the Liberal Democrats. In reality, however, our main difficulty is that we can hardly be expected to communicate our message effectively when we don’t really know what that message is ourselves.

Are we an independent, progressive, centre-left party, as we have been for the last 20 years or more – as most party activists clearly still see themselves? Or are we natural allies of the Conservatives, who may differ on some specific policies but broadly share the same political agenda – which is the message coming across, week in week out, from our leadership and the parliamentary party? Are we a party that believes in strong, democratically accountable public services? Or are we a party that believes that the private sector and free market competition are almost always preferable to the public sector – the fundamental assumption that clearly underlies much government policy?

However much work we may do at local level, until we address these issues we are unlikely to regain the trust or support of the public. If the party is to go forward, we need to look seriously at the way ahead, not simply rely on the repetition of a series of convenient half truths.

Jeremy Sanders has been a member of Colne Valley Liberal Democrats for more than 30 years

‘YES’, BUT COULD BE DOING IT BETTER

The campaign to keep Scotland in the UK is finding its feet but needs to tug at heartstrings, not just heads, says Caron Lindsay

When I last wrote for *Liberator* about Scottish politics in February 2012 (*Liberator* 351), it was as both the UK and Scottish governments were consulting on the process for conducting the independence referendum.

At that time, nothing had been agreed. In the intervening eighteen months, much has changed, except the polls, which remain heavily against independence. We have a date, 18 September 2014, and we know how the referendum will work. We have two rival campaigns, Yes Scotland and Better Together (the latter led by former Labour chancellor Alistair Darling), which have been slugging it out for the last year.

Sadly, the atmosphere of the debate has at times lived down to everyone’s expectations, with activists on both sides indulging in petty slanging matches. During the hour after Andy Murray’s spectacular Wimbledon victory, some, including parliamentarians on both sides, were arguing over whether he was Scottish or British and having a go at Alex Salmond for unfurling the Saltire in the Royal Box. Honestly, what else was he going to do? I don’t recall any censure for anyone displaying a St George’s Cross in Tim Henman’s day.

Critically, though, Alex Salmond has personally been caught out on the question of legal advice over an independent Scotland’s EU membership, while the SNP’s position on the currency Scotland would use has been exposed as, at best, ragged. On the other hand, the Better Together campaign needs to think about making a case that tugs at the heartstrings as well as making the hard-headed economic and political arguments for the UK.

There are signs, from Alistair Darling’s recent lecture, that Better Together is starting to get this, but the language and presentation isn’t quite there yet. The most encouraging thing to emerge from the pro-UK side, though, is a recognition from both Conservatives and Labour that further devolution is essential. Both parties are working up their own proposals. It’s too early to hope that these will form a basis for future change.

The undoubted hero of the last year has been Michael Moore, Liberal Democrat Secretary of State for Scotland. The reasonable and respectful manner in which he turned the bickering over the referendum process into a firm agreement both sides are happy with is to his credit. Moore had to persuade sceptical Tories that this was the right course of action and bring the Labour Party, with its innate antipathy towards the SNP, on board too as its support was needed to get the relevant orders through Westminster.

The resulting Edinburgh Agreement, reached through negotiations between Moore and SNP deputy

first minister Nicola Sturgeon, satisfied honour on both sides. The SNP got its way on timing, while the UK government was assured supervision by the Electoral Commission and not a body concocted by the SNP. With both parties being in favour of votes at 16, it wasn’t too difficult to agree the historic step of allowing 16- and 17-year-olds a vote. Let’s hope that the momentum will lead to a similar change at other elections. It will be hard for Scottish 16-year-olds to be allowed to vote in the referendum, but not in the Westminster election eight months later.

Moore’s role in securing the agreement was lauded in the press. The Independent’s John Rentoul even compared him to James Bond at the time: “But [Salmond] may have met his match in Moore, as skilful in judging the politics of Whitehall as he is the mood of Scotland. It may be that, after the referendum, Moore will be counted the most successful Liberal Democrat in the Cabinet, and, even, the man who saved the United Kingdom.”

To the consternation of some, the referendum will not contain a third option for devolution. This was something that suited both parties to the negotiations. The path to more powers, though, is far from clear. For the Liberal Democrats, Sir Menzies Campbell headed a commission whose report outlined a route map to home rule for Scotland within a federal UK. It was published with the clear intention of developing a consensus to be put to the people in the 2015 general election. Campbell, however, in my view, missed an opportunity to extend the influence of the Scottish government over immigration.

MORE IMMIGRATION

Bluntly, Scotland needs more immigration and the UK government system has been less than helpful, humane and compassionate. However, the strength of the report is that it has as much about devolution from Holyrood as to it, highlighting our liberal commitment to localism.

Labour and even the Scottish Conservatives have since announced their own reviews, which will report in the months to come. The process to more powers seems inevitable, but is not guaranteed. A narrowing of the polls, with clear evidence that people would vote yes without progress on powers set in stone, might provide an incentive to clearly set out a blueprint for achieving that. The wide poll margin at the moment has the potential to breed complacency.

I’ve been worried for some time at the depth, in some quarters of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, of antipathy towards the SNP, which has at least some of its roots in the latter’s refusal to participate in the Scottish Constitutional Convention. The SNP may be obsessed with independence but then what

do you expect from a nationalist party? There may be some inherent conflicts between liberalism and nationalism, but our contribution would be much better if some could recognise and move past their instinctive personal enmity.

I have, though, been greatly encouraged by Willie Rennie's constructive engagement with the SNP since he became Scottish Liberal leader two years ago. He has been justifiably robust in his criticism of Salmond's links with the wealthy and powerful, on the SNP's college cuts and the way in which the nationalists are becoming way too comfortable with power.

However, Rennie backed the SNP on the controversial policy of minimum alcohol pricing. In fact, Nick Clegg could learn from the way in which he went about that. He announced that it was what he wanted to do and said that he would then ask the party's conference to debate the issue. He spoke in that debate, a brave thing for a leader to do. At all stages, he showed respect for members, and that has paid off.

On Scotland's future, Rennie has on many occasions said he wants the SNP to help develop the consensus on more powers in the event of a 'no' vote, an encouraging and inclusive step.

There is a small minority of Liberal Democrat members who are in favour of or leaning towards supporting independence. Andrew Page sees it as the only way of achieving any constitutional change at all. On his blog *A Scottish Liberal*, he says: "Devolution is not by nature a liberal arrangement and has a tendency to deliver over-government. Independence on the other hand, while clearly going further than federalism, does have the potential to provide both more effective local government and less government. From a liberal perspective, this has to be the best of both possible worlds."

He is distrustful of the Better Together campaign, which he feels is a "coalition of cynical negativity" and feels that a vote against independence would be, in the absence of a guarantee, a vote for the status quo.

TWISTED WORDS

Despite the establishment of the two referendum campaigns, Yes Scotland and Better Together, the quality of the debate has not improved. The most innocent of words are twisted. I once talked in a podcast about how being part of the UK gave Scotland much greater influence abroad, citing Lynne Featherstone's work on violence against women. This was wilfully misinterpreted by a pro-independence blog as "Vote 'yes' for global rape".

The act of questioning SNP policy attracts accusations of "scaremongering". Using the Twitter hashtag #projectfear to answer a question highlights the lack of answers that the SNP has. Describing the pro-union campaign as Tory-led has no credibility, unless the SNP knows something about Darling that I don't. On the other hand, the use of the word

"It may be that, after the referendum, Moore will be counted the most successful Liberal Democrat in the Cabinet, and, even, the man who saved the United Kingdom"

'patriotic' in Better Together's campaign literature makes me feel uncomfortable. We all have to accept that everyone involved in this loves Scotland, even if their ideas for the country's future are different.

Moore's Scotland Office is producing a series of papers on the benefits of remaining

in the UK and the challenges an independent Scotland would face. These make a more intelligent contribution to the debate than almost anything produced by Better Together.

While Darling and Moore are themselves measured in their comments, the pro-UK campaign needs to pay more attention to diversity in its approach. Alistair Darling's July lecture started that work. It was forward-looking and more engaging, but not quite there yet. Its language was still a little prescriptive and not inclusive enough. To describe a lack of feeling that you belong to the UK as a "half-hearted nationalism" is not likely to change many minds. Might it not be better to try and instil that sense of being a part of something good? To be fair, the lecture does much to set out that case, but that phrase jarred with me.

There are some things that Better Together is getting very right. An emphasis on grassroots campaigning, door knocking, street stalls and the like is very welcome. It is currently in the process of recruiting more official youth representatives, doubling the number to 300 over this summer. More encouragingly, it is allowing these young people to shape the campaign and we should see the results of that in the months to come.

For both sides, the challenges are much the same as they were last year. The pro-independence camp has to convince Scots that the inevitable risks of change outweigh the benefits. Its White Paper due out at the end of the year will have to put a lot of flesh on currently very brittle bones. While robust rebuttal is the essence of debate, Better Together needs to be much more people-focused and play to the heart as much as the head.

For the Liberal Democrats, the opportunity to showcase their federal vision at their federal conference in Glasgow is both a blessing and a test that we can't afford to fail.

The campaign so far has not enthused and engaged enough people outside politics. It's time to become much more inclusive, respectful and positive. We all have to live with each other whatever the result, as Bill Clinton told us on a visit here last month:

"You just have to run up the pluses and minuses and do it in a way that doesn't tear the place apart while you're trying to reach an agreement. You will come out of this better, regardless, if you go about it in the right way."

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

CLEGG'S CRIMEA

A valley of death beckons for the Liberal Democrats, and their leaders haven't the least idea how to avert it, says Naomi Smith

A senior Liberal Democrat, when recently asked about his view of the prospects for the party, is rumoured to have replied, "The Valley of Death", evoking thoughts of the Crimean War.

That was an accurate assessment born out of the formation of the coalition in 2010. The casualties, in terms of membership losses however, have been greatly in excess of the 800 British cavalrymen at the Battle of Balaclava in October 1854.

Indeed, the party president Tim Farron, in an interview with *The House Magazine* earlier this year, warned that the party was in a "critical state" and that Liberal Democrats "shouldn't assume our survival is guaranteed".

The party leadership's response has been to adopt very strict seat-targeting – a sort of Rennardism cubed, you might say. This is an attempt to devise a realistic 'damage limitation' exercise.

A central, so-called 'wheelhouse' has been created under the direction of Paddy Ashdown, ex-leader and former Royal Marine, hence the nautical title. This group has undertaken a very robust assessment of constituencies' prospects: currently held ones and potentially winnable ones will be monitored against a set of criteria to test determination and progress.

Financial rewards will be allocated to those achieving prescribed-from-on-high targets, and other inducements including visits from leading Liberal Democrat personalities. Those deemed to be falling short would be punished by the withdrawal of such perks. The composition of the 'wheelhouse' crew is a mixture of parliamentarians, party employees and others who are deemed to have relevant expertise.

The problem is the basic premise of this strategy. It's a top-down approach consistent with the bunker mentality that has prompted so many activists to withdraw or resign from the party. The premise behind the exercise is diametrically opposed to what was previously one of the party's unique selling points, namely: maximising inter-party collaboration and encouraging maximum public participation. That was what lay behind localism – pavement politics, community activism – that made for a broader-based local government presence that heralded the party's revival.

The Liberal Democrats should be the party that seeks to contradict or, at least, minimise Robert Michel's Iron Law of Oligarchy (which states that the elite groups seek to protect their own power rather than advance the will of the organisation/electorate they are supposed to serve). Indeed, that's what Cameron and Clegg signed up to at the start of the coalition, when they promised to hold primaries to select candidates in at least 200 seats for the next general election.

It turned out to be mere rhetoric, like implementing gender equality, but despite being dropped continues to have a powerful resonance, as Labour's recent

turmoil over its selection of a candidate for Falkirk shows. The coalition parties should have stuck to their original instincts and been ahead of the game. It is this essentially macho approach that was criticised in the recent Morrissey Report on process and culture in the party.

The alienation of political parties from the electorate will not be adequately dealt with until authentic attempts are made to address it. Utterances such as 'The Big Society', 'Alarm Clock Britain', 'One Nation Labour', 'Red Tory/Blue Labour' and, equally, the current Liberal Democrat mantra 'Stronger Economy, Fairer Society' are bereft of content. They are PR speak and, as such, are inauthentic; they fail to engage the public's imagination. Nevertheless, they do reveal that the party leaders are vaguely aware of the problem of the need to re-engage with the electorate but just lack the courage to begin to take the bold steps required.

The Liberal Democrat leadership, above all, should recognise the realities of the situation. The political malaise is by no means confined to the UK but affects all western democracies. Hence the rise of Le Pen in France, the Tea Party in the US, UKIP in England and the various neo-fascist, anti-immigrant parties in Scandinavia and the Netherlands.

The trick, in part, is to resolve the tension between globalisation and community. The Liberal Democrats should be among those at the forefront of devising remedies. Our long-standing commitment to internationalism, including a vision for Europe, coupled with its equally longstanding commitments to industrial co-ownership and asset taxes such as Land Value Taxation – all now seemingly deposited in the trashcan of history – could and should have informed its policies.

Only by a return to the mindset that inspired the thinking behind those ideas will the Liberal Democrats contrive a 'Florence Nightingale'-type set of remedies that brought much needed reforms to medical care after the Crimean War. The Liberal Democrats, and other political parties for that matter, will need more than sticking plasters to rejuvenate and refurbish themselves.

As it is, Clegg's admonition is that the Liberal Democrats are at a crossroads and must opt for either government or opposition. It is a false antithesis in a democracy because we are likely to be in both roles from time to time, depending on election outcomes.

All Liberal Democrat activists believe that we can and should be a party of government, and activists know that the one thing you must be consistent about is your basic mission. The Liberal Democrat mission is essentially the preamble to its constitution, that we "...exist to build and safeguard a fair, free and open society... in which no one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance, or conformity". But supporting Osbornomics wholesale is at odds with such a mission; there is little

fair about tax cuts for the rich or freezing increases to welfare payments.

Part of making politics more sophisticated is admitting that, when your party is in power as a junior partner in a coalition government, it may have to support things that as a party it doesn't corporately agree with to gain influence on less palatable elements of the bigger partner's agenda and to implement at least part of its own.

This is an opportunity missed by Clegg – he has never made it clear what the Liberal Democrat contribution to the Tories' economic strategy is. There has never been any convincing explanation about why the leadership signed up to it, having campaigned for an alternative approach just weeks before during the 2010 general election.

The party's corporate strategy is therefore misaligned to its stated mission (and as history has taught us, this probably means we will fail in our mission). The strategy is instead aligned to the leadership's value set, which is rooted more in elitist, than social, liberalism. The party may well be at a crossroads, but it is not a choice between opposition and government; it is between these two missions. And elitist liberalism should be kept where it rightly belongs – on the Right, right out of our party.

Naomi Smith is co-chair of the Social Liberal Forum

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LESSON FROM HISTORY

Europhiles will win the argument for the UK staying in the EU only if they pay attention to the country's past, says David Thorpe

From the Hellenic angst of people pinned on the altar of their past profligacy, to the Germanic groans of a populace cast as banker and broker-in-chief to a euro project made yet more misshapen with each new bailout, into the harsh half-light of Europe's uneasy unity there has emerged a delinquent eurosceptic dawn.

The scepticism of Germany and Greece can perhaps be dismissed as the nascent angst of countries confused by the unfurling of truths upon which their very nation was constructed.

British eurosceptics' bellicosity and intention to first re-negotiate, then perhaps leave, the Union is rooted in far more rustic reasoning; a cultural bias against being a good neighbour in Europe. Rather, they view Britain as separate from the continent and at least as close to the US, but with a singular desire to forge alliances with businesslike brevity. Lord Palmerston's axiom that Britain has "neither permanent friends nor permanent enemies, just permanent interests" is apt.

Europhiles must understand that, if there are common benefits for Britain being part of the EU, there must be an acknowledgement that its path to this point is vastly different to that of the rest of the EU, and the arguments designed to keep Britain 'in' must be designed in deference to this.

Europhiles often tend to dismiss their opponents' arguments as, in the words of Nick Clegg, "a misplaced sense of superiority, sustained by delusions of grandeur and a tenacious obsession with the last war."

A far more relevant reference point for the pro-EU argument comes from the former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who said "Britain has lost an empire, but has yet to find a role."

This outlook, which survives in Britain long after any similar sentiments evaporated elsewhere in Europe, is due to Britain's experience of emerging from the Napoleonic era and both world wars without any of its national territory falling, even temporarily, to foreign conquest.

Britain's economic path didn't diverge simply due to its survival from conquest; the economic and political evolution of the UK differs from that of most of mainland Europe. Its economic development came first from insuring the ships of other nations pursuing colonial trading adventures. The UK economy was based less on trade and more on financial services, so Britain became a nation of clerks and shopkeepers, bringing the first groans of the middle class consciousness that would occur later in the remainder of the continent.

While the French revolution radically shaped the social, economic and political development of continental Europe for perhaps two centuries afterwards, its impact on Britain was less pronounced. The 1789 revolution was a political maturation of the

European enlightenment. But the response in Britain to such social upheaval was tempered by its own singular enlightenment, fuelled by thinkers such as Adam Smith, David Hume and, later, Edmund Burke.

While French thinkers hugely influenced the first two, Burke, in his seminal *Thoughts on the Revolution in France*, sought to chart for Britain a course distinctive from the destructive chaos of revolution. Thus Britain evolved as a constitutional monarchy, with gradualism more than revolution at its core, and a system of, and attitude to, government at variance with much of the rest of Europe.

If the tide of euroscepticism is rising across Europe, there are a number of grievances held in common between critics across the continent. The Liberal Democrats have long championed the pruning of such 'low-hanging fruit' as CAP reform, the second seat of the EU parliament in Strasbourg, and the unwieldy and often baffling bureaucracy.

If europhiles were more forthright and populist on these issues, it would rob eurosceptics of the most regular and reasonable of their refrains, robbing the 'out' camp of a chunk of potency. Such reforms are crucial to help liberals stake out their own territory in the EU debate, but they will not alone be enough to win the wider argument.

Europhiles must embrace a change in narrative. Rather, the EU should see itself as the route through which Britain can refine the role Acheson declared absent.

The language of the EU can change: a muscular alliance capable of providing another pillar in a multi-polar world order, a superpower, but not a superstate. Britain would be at its heart.

Britons also know that, regardless of the closeness of its relationship with the US, sheer size and military scope ensures the UK as forever the junior, and more dependent, partner.

Keeping Britain in the EU requires a union defined not by a shared past, to which euroscepticism is blind, but as the engine driving Britain towards the future for which it has long pined.

A strong European pivot to the world order is also of global benefit; hegemony from wherever it derives is counter to progress. A multi-pivot world requires a strong European pivot and a strong Europe requires a strong UK.

Such a position may not sit well with the contemporary europhile narrative, but it is essential for the country, the continent and the world, and most importantly, gives the Liberal Democrats a chance to win the debate.

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

RELIVING HISTORY

Jonathan Hunt warns that, without a change in economic policy, the Liberal Democrats will be in no shape to safeguard liberty

First a confession. I have never been to Bolton, though once briefly passed through Huddersfield.

But for 14 years, these two northern mill towns supplied a third of the Liberal parliamentary party, which between 1951 and 1964 could hold meetings in a telephone booth. Keeping the seats of both Bolton West and Huddersfield West was dependent on non-opposing deals with the Conservatives, whose fiefdoms here were the two corresponding east constituencies.

Donald Wade in Huddersfield, perhaps the more active MP in pursuing and defining traditional left-leaning Liberal policies than Arthur Holt in Bolton, was chief whip and deputy leader until both men lost their seats in 1964.

Blame for the Liberal demise was the failure of the leadership in 1945 to fight on the Beveridge proposals to create the National Health Service; a massive extension of a welfare state begun by Lloyd George 40 years earlier.

Labour won on stolen radical Liberal policies. So no change there, many will say. But Attlee's administration was the only junior partner in a coalition government ever to win the succeeding general election. We could make that two with a timely U-turn in economic policy. Otherwise we are bound, Lemming-like, to return to survival by electoral pacts with the Tories.

The lessons we should learn are threefold:

- ☛ voters suffering severe cuts in living standards caused by government and Tory social engineering look left for radical, redistributive programmes offering hope;
- ☛ both coalition parties share the blame equally – unless one, as with Attlee's Labour, breaks away with a visibly different manifesto;
- ☛ long-term exile from power can result when a party abandons its principles, policies and position in such an undemocratic and craven manner as the Liberal leadership in 1945.

Liberal leaders then said “no” to Beveridge, against the wishes of most members, instead supporting the negative Conservative message that it was “us wot won the war”. In 2015, history may repeat itself if the leadership continues to insist we are a party of the centre.

But with Labour retreating again to fill the centre or right-of-centre ground, the centre is a long way right. Indeed, the Macmillan government was in context further left than the Liberal Democrats of Clegg today.

Can we explain how the party of Gladstone, Lloyd George, Keynes, Beveridge, Schumacher, Grimond, community politics and Liberator could possibly be anything but a party of the left – albeit the progressive, non-socialist, liberty-loving, radical left slot we traditionally occupy?

Voters expected to find us there in 1945 and will again 70 years later. We are nowhere near the centre, unless it resides somewhere much further to the left.

Or are we? My view throughout the coalition has been that it is good for the country to have two parties working together. And that there is nowhere else for me to go.

Six weeks after the 2015 election, Britain commemorates 800 years of Magna Carta, still symbolically pivotal to our liberties and human rights. It is imperative that we can send a significant number of MPs to Runnymede. For both other parties represent considerable threats to our liberties and human rights.

It is a field wide open for Liberal Democrats to publicly protect us. I have long and fervently believed this is the bedrock of our beliefs. But the behaviour of the leadership over secret courts eroded that certainty, and still prompts doubts.

The big question remains the first one. Can the party survive in sufficient parliamentary numbers to keep a hand on the tiller and foot on the brake? We lack reassurance. The Prozac effect of Eastleigh, spreading complacency far and wide, has faded.

It is not difficult to predict three scenarios that could take us back on the metaphorical road to Bolton West, and electoral deals with the Conservatives.

That we lose many more seats in 2015 than even hard-working and able MPs can hold, and the Tories need us and vice versa; that the Tories lose in vast numbers and offer us generous terms to stay in business; that Cameron ditches agreed coalition policies to smoke out Ukip-pers next year, with an immediate referendum on Europe, and U-turn on the economy.

Any one of those would place the current leadership up a sewage-infested creek without a paddle. If that seems likely, we must wonder if it is too late to change direction to reject George Osborne's austerity (and Osborne with it). We know what essentially Keynesian policies have achieved for Obama and for more stable economies than the US.

With money never cheaper, we should come to an arrangement with our creditors to pay-off the Labour debt over a longer period, pledging our recovering banks, which even on current market value would pay off half. And invest money from newer sources; such as a withholding tax on multi-national tax cheats, on massive investment in infrastructure and with it jobs.

Otherwise, steady yourselves for a great lemming leap into the arms of the Tories. And how many card-carrying members will sign-up for the National Liberal Democrats?

Jonathan Hunt is a former Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate

LETTERS



I WAS THERE

Dear Liberator,

I have always admired your accuracy regarding party activities and entirely support your reservations about the recent appointment of Tim Farron to run next year's European elections (*Liberator* 359).

However, I fear you have your history wrong. It is correct that, after the 1997 election, it was resolved that the CCC would oversee all elections and that the chair would line-manage the professional in charge of elections.

Contrary to what you say, this arrangement did not break down in the Kennedy era. I chaired the CCC from 2000 to 2006, had overall responsibility for the 2001 and 2005 general elections and line-managed Chris Rennard.

That this was the best structure was demonstrated by the increase in seats in both elections.

The arrangement broke down when Menzies Campbell appointed Ed Davey to chair the CCC but not the general election preparations.

Your criticism of this arrangement is spot-on, but not your recollections.

Tim Razzall
House of Lords

COST OF SNOOPING

Dear Liberator,

RB was mistaken to be so dismissive of the idea that the Snoopers' Charter is in part an economic issue (*Liberator* 359). While for liberals the civil liberties angles undoubtedly are the most important part of the issue, there are three significant economic ones too.

First, the cost – especially at a time when the government is finding cutting the deficit tough going. Second, the hurdles it would add to new entrants to the communications market, as new

firms would face having a heavy regulatory burden put on them, quite possibly putting them off completely from entering the market. Third, the risk that a range of technology companies would relocate elsewhere, to more privacy-friendly countries such as Germany, so that they are more attractive to their would-be customers.

Those economic factors are both important in their own right and are also an important way to build a wider coalition by making the case against such snooping measures one that isn't only of interest to those who are concerned about civil liberties.

Mark Pack
Islington

SYSTEMATIC DEMOLITION

Dear Liberator,

How much more can Liberal Democrat members take from their party's leading lights in the coalition government? Following recent announcements of Steve Webb's promotion of the bedroom tax, Norman Baker's espousal of HS2 and Shirley Williams's proposal to charge for yet more NHS services comes Vince Cable's announcement of the flogging off of Royal Mail.

The coalition's systematic demolition of the country's infrastructure surely places it to the right of every government for a century or more, including that of Margaret Thatcher. But then Mr Clegg, I read recently, does not believe in the left/right division of political ideology. Funny, isn't it, that this dismissal of a convenient, if broad, differentiation of political outlook invariably comes from those firmly on the right-hand, establishment side of the line.

Not one of the policies promoted by leading Liberal Democrat members of the

coalition, as mentioned above, would have stood a cat in hell's chance of being endorsed or adopted at a Liberal Democrat conference. So, aside from botched attempts at electoral reform, what else, come the general election in just over 20 months' time, will differentiate the current Liberal Democrat party from the Conservative Party? Or will the party simply attempt to repudiate all it has helped the Tories to push through over the past five dreadful years under the smokescreen of economic necessity?

And no, I have never voted Labour and don't intend to.

Les Farris
South Petherton Somerset

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Anarchism and Political Modernity

by Nathan Jun

Continuum 2011 £17.99

In the dying days of the Young Liberal Movement, there was a proposal, to be put to academic boards and the like, for a degree level course in Libertarian political philosophy. This put Liberalism and Anarchism in one stream of thought and Conservatism, Communism and Fascism in the other. I don't suppose it got anywhere, but Nathan Jun has written a reasonable text book for it.

Its main problem is that, in his attempt to synthesize everything, Jun lumps Liberalism and Conservatism together. From the Liberal perspective, while there is an obvious (and necessary) dialogue between Liberalism and Conservatism (wherein I include most socialists), they are not two sides of the same coin. In doing this, Jun plays down, as he would, the links between Liberalism and Anarchism, and being in American academe, is probably unaware of the theory of community politics. Given his background, Jun may be further confused by so-called neo-Liberalism, which I would argue is not Liberalism, since it is selected pieces of Liberalism applied by Conservative politicians, or worse, neo-Conservatives. Jun makes no reference to Anarcho-Capitalism. If you approach the book with an awareness of that, the discussion is lively and useful.

Since the book is primarily concerned with Anarchism, having laid its historical foundations Jun relates this to post-Structuralist and post-Modern thinking, which is hard work if you are not familiar with the post-1968 French bunnies – Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, etc. A useful introduction, however, I recall Bergson's comments on Sorel (whom Jun seems to have missed), which were along the lines of "an accurate application of (Bergson's) philosophy, but that he would not necessarily agree with (Sorel's) conclusions".

Jun claims that "the major radical movements of the day are not just 'post-Marxist' but anarchist in orientation" – one wonders what the consciousness of the participants is of this, if they are aware of it? But this is something the developing Liberalism has to address and Jun provides us with a useful tool in that



REVIEWS

analysis. I look forward to the second edition.

Stewart Rayment

How To Be A Cat by Nikki McClure Abrams Applesed 2013 £9.99

As Scat Cat sings in Disney's *The Aristocats*, "Everybody wants to be a cat" – so here's the perfect manual. It's a beautiful book, illustrated by the cut paper technique and excellent for early readers. In less than twenty words, it has lots of tricky consonant combinations.

Stewart Rayment

State Property: My cold-war memoir by Mariana Gordan Charmides 2013

Memories of the Cold War, the 'Eastern bloc' and life behind the Wall are fading. Within fifty years, Eastern Europe will both be viewed differently and be different.

But for those born during the ghastly regime of Romania's Nicolae Ceaucescu, their memories are likely to remain intact for some time to come.

Having read a novel about life in Bucharest during the last months of Ceaucescu's life, I was interested to read Mariana Gordan's account of life in Romania, how she made a dramatic, indeed gripping, escape, and what happened to her since. I was engrossed with the account of the escape, but will not spoil it for you.

What would it have been like for a young Romanian in the UK in the 1980s, a time when there were no Romanian food shops on our High Streets, and the Securitate infested the Romanian embassy in London? Some of Mariana's adventures are disturbing, as are people she meets. When the Revolution finally comes, she is in

the thick of it, luckily in her view, having the sort of time one would expect of John Simpson.

I am recommending this book, though there are some parts not on my list of knowledgeable interests. Quite often, Mariana discusses the politics of the international art world and the ways in which it frustrates her. There are also reflections of hers on the EU, which may not fit in, for example, with the views of Liberal Democrats.

This is a piece of strong passionate writing, with its own distinctive style, which another reviewer has called "an Eastern European voice". Mariana reveals how ghastly Ceaucescu's Romania was, without discussing him personally, as some writers revel in, but also tells how life in her home town of Arad had its distinctive homely pleasures, with her account of local food and how it was grown.

It moves along at a fast clip and there are some interesting, but also unpleasant, surprises for the reader – not to mention Mariana. Also, amazing coincidences of a lucky variety. Plus an insight into how the UK press can behave.

The book can be obtained through her website www.marianagordan.com

John Pindar

Monday

"Is it true," one of my companions asks over the Smithson & Greaves Northern Bitter, "that there are as many knights among Liberal Democrat MPs as there are women?" "I am afraid so," I reply. "Their spurs and lances keep striking sparks from the stone and the Serjeant-at-Arms says they are a fire hazard."

There are those who regard women as the weaker sex and hold that they have no place in the rough and tumble of Westminster: I suspect they have never met the barmaid at the *Bonkers' Arms*. For myself, I believe we should have more women in the Commons, though I have suggested to Jenny Willott and Tessa Munt that it would be more picturesque if they wore those pointy hats with the veils as an interim measure.

As to this practice of giving every unlucky or incompetent former minister a knighthood... isn't that what life peerages are for?

Tuesday

Meadowcroft finds a youth, dishevelled and wet through, sleeping in his potting shed and hauls him before me for judgment.

"Please don't send me back," sobs the accused, "I have escaped from the Liberal Youth Activate weekend. I thought it would be fun, but all we got was endless canvassing drill and lectures on the perils of self-abuse."

I give him a hot bath, square meal, suit of clothes and ten bob for the train, but am left troubled. "What has happened to the Spirit of Liberalism, which was first brought to these shores by Joseph of Arimathea?" I ask.

Meadowcroft puts on his thoughtful face.

"You say Westminster is befangled with knights?"

"That's right," I return.

"And the Spirit of Liberalism is missing?"

"Indubitably."

"Then send them a questing for it!"

"Meadowcroft, you are a genius."

Wednesday

The morning finds me in a clearing in Rockingham Forest. I am surrounded by Liberal Democrat knights and their horses. Here is Sir Bob Russell, though if I am honest I think his brother Earl should have received a knighthood for his services to jazz. Here is Sir Robert Smith, about whom little is known, except that he is a knight. Here are Sir Alan Beith, Sir Malcolm Bruce and Sir Menzies Campbell – Sound men all. And here are Sir Nicholas Harvey and Sir Andrew Stunell, who are among our newer knights. Indeed, they are so new that I have to ask to see their credentials.

"Gentlemen," I begin, "it is many years since I last saw the Spirit of Liberalism. I believe I last caught sight of it in Ashplant's day, though I have to admit his elderflower champagne was pretty powerful stuff. Who knows where it has got to today? That is why I am sending you on this quest."

Sir Alan Beith, who is sitting the wrong way round on his horse and polishing his glasses on its tail, speaks up.

"A quest is a wonderful idea, but some of us aren't very used to horseback."

Lord Bonkers' Diary

"I have thought of that," I assure him, "and have laid on mechanised transport for those who prefer it. Think of it as a knight bus."

Before they set off, however, I lead them to the village green at a smart trot. The judges of the Rutland Best Kept Village competition are due any day and those lances look just the job for picking up litter.

Thursday

Do you know Sarah Teather? She is a charming young woman, even though

I had some sharp things to say about her reaction to the Ofsted report on the Bonkers' Home for Well-Behaved Orphans.

Like many of the knights I saw off yesterday, she is a former minister, yet she received no gong when given the bum's rush by Clegg and his 12-year-old advisers.

I am racking my brains to work out why this should be the case.

Friday

I cannot understand this fuss about allowing equal marriage. A friend of mine was once serving as best man at a wedding in a neighbouring parish when, having dallied with Bacchus at the stag night the evening before, spoke out in the wrong place and found himself married to the vicar.

The Church of Rutland being strict on matters of doctrine (it held to the back-foot no ball rule even after the Eastern Orthodox chaps had given it up), divorce was out of the question; so my friend determined to make the best of things and did sterling work baking cakes for sales and running the church ladies' group. All in all, it was one of the happiest marriages I have ever known.

Saturday

The morning's post is brought to me on the usual salver. News comes from Peking that Cumbrian lanterns are to be banned – an up and coming young member of the State Council called Tim Fal Lon had been making a terrible fuss about them and has finally got his way. I am invited to the Oakham gala opening of 'Beware of Mr Baker' – a documentary about the career of the controversial transport minister and MP for Lewes. A boxing journalist wishes to interview me about my memories of that plucky welterweight, Sugar Ray Michie. I am asked to contribute a foreword to a life of Raymond Baxter who, in 1953, blasted off from Woomera to become the first Briton in space and, along with Sir Patrick Moore (who urged schoolboys to "go out and look at Uranus"), did most to fix our gaze upon the stars. The Home for Distressed Canvassers in Herne Bay is seeking tombola prizes.

But of the quest there is not a word.

Sunday

Sir Nicholas Harvey rings at last with some news.

"Good knight..." I begin, entering into the spirit of things.

"Goodnight" he replies and puts the phone down.

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