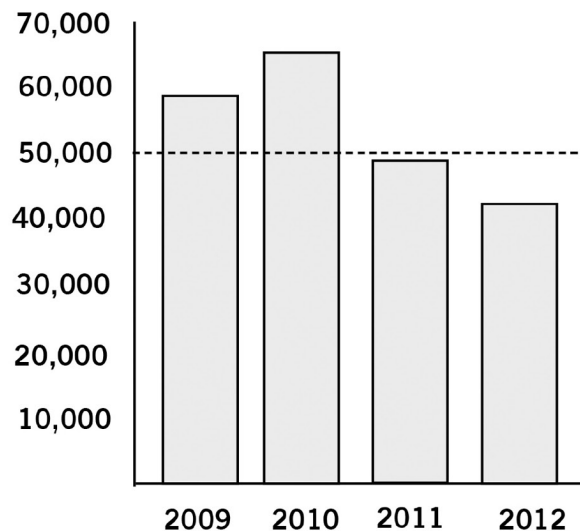


liberator

***Lib Dem
membership
in crisis...***



...Party takes action!

Improving Membership Experience

In conjunction with the state parties, a key project for FE this year has been upgrading our membership experience. As we reported in January, we have established a membership working group, chaired by Jock Gallagher, to look at how we can improve our membership situation. Whilst the party has to do its best to manage a challenging situation in terms of membership, specific measures

Firstly, we are reintroducing high quality plastic membership cards. These are being sent to all new members as part of an upgraded New Members' Pack, which also contains a pin badge and a range of new materials communicating the value of membership. It's a small gesture – but we don't believe you can underestimate the value of having a bold, high quality membership card that truly reflects how we feel about our members.

- 💣 A step down the nuclear ladder – David Grace
- 💣 Redundancy for the jobs campaign – Tony Greaves
- 💣 The coalition's bedroom trouble – Ruwan Uduwera-Perera

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COMMENTARY

A PARTY BIGGER THAN ITS LEADER

One might have thought that a leader who has presided over a catastrophic slump in his party's membership would have better things to do than insult those who remain.

Yet the media were being briefed assiduously over the summer that the Liberal Democrat conference in Glasgow is the event at which Nick Clegg would confront his party over whether it accepted 'grown-up' politics. Translated into English, that means, "will it do what I tell it to?"

Having evaded any real debate on the economy for the past two years – helped by the fiasco over two competing amendments last September – the party leadership has now gone to the other extreme and staged an economy debate that Clegg himself will sum up.

The motion he will commend to conference is a recitation of things the coalition has done, together with some rather uncontentious ideas for limited improvements. This, as the movers well know, faces the party with the choice of publicly repudiating its leader or endorsing the economic record of the coalition, which has seen three years of recession, followed by a tiny upturn in growth paraded as though it were a miracle.

In this situation, Clegg may well get his victory, but it won't be worth having. Does anyone in his bunker seriously believe that the party will be enthused by, or voters impressed by, a policy that says, "You've just been through the longest recession on record; we were right and everyone who disagreed was wrong; now please vote for us and, if we have a coalition again, we'll knock a few more rough edges off the Tories' more lunatic ideas"?

When not discussing being 'grown-up', Clegg's usual line is to accuse his Liberal Democrat critics of being uninterested in power and preferring opposition. Entire armies of straw men have been lined up by Clegg to be demolished like this. Who are these people, and why has no-one except Clegg ever met any of them?

The people that Clegg alleges are not 'grown-up' or 'serious' are the remnants of those who gave him a majority in favour of coalition in 2010 so large that even he described it as 'North Korean'.

Those who disagree with Clegg do not, with rare exceptions, object to being in coalition at all. They object to the conduct of this one; to Clegg's failure to use his influence well; to Clegg being too close to David Cameron; to Clegg permitting policy disasters like the Health Act and bedroom tax (which will return to

haunt the party's candidates); and to Clegg appearing altogether far too comfortable in working with the Conservatives.

Clegg would appear to wish to fight the next election on the platform of "didn't we do well?" A few conversations with most of his MPs, and some pretty senior ones at that, ought to convince him that fighting the next election by offering more of the same is likely to prove inimical to his prospects of continuing as deputy prime minister, because there will be too few Liberal Democrat MPs to sustain a coalition. But then perhaps he thinks his own MPs are not serious.

There is also a hard message for those of Clegg's critics who have given up and left the party in disgust at something or other the coalition has done. What did you expect? You joined a political party that seeks power and, unless you believed the Liberal Democrats were going to vault from third place to first, it was inevitable that a coalition would arise at some point were the party ever to exercise power.

Undoubtedly, most party members would have preferred Labour as a coalition partner, and things would have been less problematic on economic policy. But since suspicion of civil liberty is part of Labour's DNA, such a coalition would likely have caused equal if different anguish. Probably a mirror image of those who have left because of this coalition would have left because of one with Labour.

Each social liberal who leaves the party makes life easier for Clegg and the clique of economic liberal extremists around him, and harder for those social liberals who remain. The least helpful of all are those who have left the Liberal Democrats but say they might be back "when it turns into a social liberal party". By their own actions, they make such an outcome less likely. If the party is to be rescued for social liberalism, it needs social liberals in it. Each of those who leaves does Clegg's work for him.

No coalition was ever going to be easy. Even a majority Liberal Democrat government would have created its share of anger and disappointments. But the only people with good reason to leave the party are those who have undergone a genuine intellectual conversion to a rival cause.

For lapsed members who remain social liberals, the choice is simple. The party is bigger than Nick Clegg and will be there when he has gone, and it is worth saving. Clegg wants you to leave, which should be reason enough to stay. Or rejoin.

RADICAL BULLETIN

WITHOUT A NET

Liberal Democrat membership has become the political equivalent of an extreme skydiving sport – how low can it go before utter disaster?

Those who persevered to page 24 of Reports to Conference will have found that party membership has sunk to 42,501, although the rate of decline has slowed. Membership was down 13% as of 31 December 2012 from the previous year's 48,934, itself a 25% fall on 2011 when figures were inflated by the 'Cleggmania' bout of recruitment.

Income from membership is reported as £890,251 compared with £930,389 the previous year, a drop of 4%. This modest fall is explained by the fact that remaining members are coughing up more per head, paying an average of £20.94 each compared with £19.01 last year.

The report delicately describes the membership position as "challenging", a well known euphemism for "we've no idea how to get out of this".

Someone is at least trying to put things right. In a section with the horrible marketing-speak heading 'Improving the Membership Experience', the failure to retain new members or make sure existing ones feel valued is described as "problems that many of our local parties have told us that they are experiencing". Astonishing!

So what is the solution? "Firstly, we are reintroducing high quality plastic membership cards", it says, as opposed to presumably to using any old plastic. Deckchairs? Titanic?

Lucky recipients will get "an upgraded New Members' Pack, which also contains a pin badge and a range of new materials communicating the value of membership". It's a wonder they aren't getting a free toy too.

No acknowledgement, then, that of the key groups from which the party drew its support, the leadership has since 2010 taken students, young professionals, the rural poor and – in some places – the urban poor, and royally pissed off each one in turn without doing anything to attract any other voting group.

THE POWER OF PATRONAGE

Thanks to our informants, Liberator had a pretty good strike rate in predicting who would be the new Liberal Democrat peers named this summer.

We were right about Olly Grender, Christine Humphreys, Brian Paddick, James Palumbo, Alison Suttie, Rumi Verjee and Ian Wrigglesworth, and sort of right about Jeremy Purvis, having predicted that 'a Scottish Liberal Democrat,' would be nominated. Cathy Bakewell and Zahida Manzoor weren't on our radar, and Liz Lynne and Julie Smith went empty handed.

So who is getting measured for rodent fur? Brian

Paddick has got his peerage for having twice carried out the thankless task of standing for Mayor of London, while Purvis and Humphreys are former members of the devolved legislatures in Scotland and Wales respectively. Grender and Suttie are party apparatchiks, who have put in years of work, albeit often in paid posts, and will be dependably loyal to Nick Clegg.

In case younger readers don't know who Ian Wrigglesworth is, he was an SDP MP who, after a catastrophic spell as the merged party's first president, chose, probably very wisely, to disappear for many years before devoting himself to good works in party fundraising. His immediate colleagues were all made peers donkeys years ago.

Bakewell was leader of Somerset County Council and Manzoor is a quangocrat, and appears to be unknown to her local party in Leeds. Palumbo and Verjee are there for services to the party's bank account.

Liz Lynne, the only person to be both a former MP and MEP, was on the list at one point but fell off, we understand, because of objections from Clegg that she might be insufficiently pliable and dangerously likely to follow her instincts.

Only two of the new peers were ever elected to the Interim Peers Panel; Paddick in 2008 and Grender in 2006. Of those elected to the most recent panel (2010), only Sal Brinton has so far been made a peer, while only three from the 2008 list have previously been ennobled: Jonathan Marks, Monroe Palmer and Ben Stoneham. It is probably safe to assume that Clegg does not have much time for the panel.

Since the panel has now become 'a list of people elected by conference who will be completely ignored by the leader', some must be wondering about its future, and here Reports to Conference can shed a little light:

"Last year, FE came to the conclusion that given (at the time), we were hoping for a more wholesale democratic reform of the Lords, and that the Peers List was not operating as well as might have been hoped, the existing list would stand until we could produce a more appropriate replacement."

The only reason it is "not operating as well as might have been hoped" is that Clegg has consistently ignored it and, rather in the style of a medieval king, made peers of donors, trustees and worthies as he pleases.

Former MP Sue Doughty is to lead a consultation on the panel's future with proposals to be brought to spring conference next year.

SPRING NOT IN THE AIR

Proposals to abolish or scale down the Liberal Democrat spring conference are out for consultation. Spring conferences run at a loss

and, while solving this financial problem is the immediate cause of the consultation, those who want party members to keep their noses out of policy making will doubtless see this as a providential opportunity.

The origin of spring conference lies in a grudgingly-conceded partial replacement for Liberal party council during the merger in 1988. Party council met quarterly between the annual Liberal Assembly, and made policy and held officers to account.

Spring conference also turned out to be necessary because of the policy paper system – otherwise all consultation sessions and debates would have had to be squeezed into the autumn conference, which would have caused inordinate delays to the publication of these papers.

Conferences contribute 27% of the party's income, the consultation paper says – more than do membership fees – suggesting that the autumn conference is very profitable indeed. Spring conferences, however, have not produced a profit in a decade and the past four have made losses of up to £37,971.

A consultation on the conference's future lays out a number of options – and for anyone used to reading consultation papers where the drafters already have their preferred option, it is clear that, from 2016, spring conference is likely to become a one-day event in London.

Given that, even when it was in Gateshead, most attendees came from the south, and that London is the best connected place in the country, there may be some sense in that. But spring conference is supposed to debate policy, allow for consultations, hold officers to account and give the leader a platform for a headline-grabbing speech. It has recently also had an enormous training programme grafted onto it.

How could all that take place in one day? The answer of course is that it couldn't, so policy making would doubtless quickly transfer to the Federal Policy Committee alone, purely you understand because there would be no time to wait until the next conference slot.

SUSPENDED STATE

The brief suspension of the whip from Bradford East MP David Ward over his comments on Israel was a slap on the wrist, given that parliament was not sitting anyway for most of the two months covered.

Ward's original words in January were ill-chosen, when he conflated Israel with 'the Jews', though his words in the summer, when called Israel an 'apartheid state' and wondered how long it would survive, were controversial but reflected widely-held views.

If a Liberal Democrat MP asked, for example, how long Iraq can survive in its present form due to the errors of its government, or questioned the future of any other place contested by two or more peoples, would they get suspended?

Baroness Neuberger and Lord Carlile were due to meet Ward to try to conciliate, but this meeting never happened, it was reported because Ward made its existence public. After the second complaint about Ward before his suspension in the summer, another would-be mediator put himself forward.

Ian Sharer, leader of the Liberal Democrat group in Hackney, has gained a deserved international reputation for the work he and his co-councillors Sam

Jacobson, who is also Jewish, and Dawood Akhoun, who is Muslim, have done for community cohesion, in particular in mobilising the local Jewish community to help protect their Muslim neighbours following threats in the wake of the Lee Rigby murder.

Sharer offered himself as a mediator between Ward and his critics, and received the initial impression that his offer would be enthusiastically accepted, even that Nick Clegg wanted to meet him. But then utter silence fell and no-one said a further word to Sharer about his offer, and soon afterwards Ward was suspended. So who decided that there would no fresh attempt at conciliation?

BOOMERANG EFFECT

Having not been to Glasgow in 18 years, the Liberal Democrat conference is now going there twice in 13 months.

The 2014 conference was due to be in Liverpool but would have coincided with the run-up to the referendum on Scottish independence. This offended Scottish Liberal Democrats, who would have been unable to attend the conference. It would also have seen prominent Liberal Democrats tied down in Liverpool rather than campaigning for a 'no' vote.

Another factor was the Scottish party's desire for federal support, though it is hard to think of anything more likely to be counter-productive than large numbers of English or Welsh Liberal Democrats going to Scotland to tell its inhabitants how to vote on their country's future.

Once the case was conceded, the conference then had to move on several weeks to avoid clashes with the Conservative and Labour ones. The only venues available then were Glasgow and Brighton, but Brighton could offer only a Wednesday-to-Saturday slot, not the normal conference span, so it was back to Glasgow.

This has caused some understandable resentment on Merseyside, and six-figure cancellation sums have been mentioned. There has also been grumbling that very few Scottish representatives attend the federal conference in England anyway, whether it is in Liverpool or anywhere else.

The Liberal Democrats are thus in the curious position of having booked their 2014 conference into the largest city of a country that might by then have voted to leave the UK. Still, at least it's not Blackpool.

One advantage of Glasgow, rather under-reported, is that Federal Conference Committee has been able to negotiate with Strathclyde police that party members do not need to go through police accreditation to attend.

Accreditation has caused huge controversy at the past two conferences, and objectors have been told that it was essential to getting the conference insured. Not in Glasgow, it seems. So, if the conference can take place there without the police believing that would-be terrorists will first take the trouble to join the Liberal Democrats, can we expect the end of accreditation at other venues?

POLICIES, NOT GESTURES, OVER TRIDENT

It's easy to vote for no nuclear weapons, but the Liberal Democrats need a policy that a future coalition might actually implement, says David Grace

In 2007, I urged the Liberal Democrat conference to oppose the replacement of Trident, which Tony Blair in his final hours was rushing through parliament.

Quoting a retired general, in speeches, on T-shirts and stickers, I described nuclear weapons as “expensive, useless and dangerous”. This is still true.

No-one doubts the expense. They have no use other than supposedly to persuade others not to use them. No-one argues for their actual use.

Their danger is their point and recent research suggests that the environmental consequences of their use would be comparable to the impact of the asteroid believed to have finished the dinosaurs. Have I then become a dinosaur by signing up to the Defence Working Group's recommendation not to do away with nuclear weapons immediately?

I have long thought of politics as a system of three layers. The top layer is the ideal – freedom, equality, community and, in this case, peace. The bottom layer is the detail – Habeas Corpus, codes of progressive taxation, the vast complications of the welfare state and, in this case, the details of international law, summits and treaties.

Nearly all of the strange animals like us who embrace political life can declare with confidence our allegiance to the top level, one or other ideal (or several contradictory ones at once), what Bush called the vision thing.

Many people in politics (you will know many of them in your own circle) are superb at the lowest level, the detail thing. Some even propose conference motions bloated with the stuff. What we miss most and need most if we are to see our ideals succeed is the middle level, the strategy that converts them into detail.

The mere word ‘strategy’ will not do. Thus this year's economics motion, which calls for “a comprehensive strategy to tackle youth unemployment”, is not itself a strategy but a declaration of its absence. However, I do believe that *Defending the Future*, the paper that Liberal Democrats will debate in Glasgow, provides a strategy for British nuclear disarmament.

From the 1960s, when I went on an Aldermaston march, to the 1980s, when Liberals and Social Democrats fell out over nuclear weapons, to the present day, the debate has been a dialogue of the deaf.

On one side always were the Tories whose unstinting support for Britain having the ability to kill millions of people quickly has not wavered or modified with the passing of the years or the vast changes in global security. Joining them today are the ranks of Labour MPs, many of whom opposed nuclear weapons at the

height of the Cold War but now bizarrely expound their virtues in a world where no state threatens a nuclear attack on the UK. Neither group is daunted by the inability of the Ministry of Defence to devise a single scenario involving such a threat.

On the other side are our friends in CND, who will urge us simply to reject nuclear weapons now, whatever the consequences for our chances of ever implementing such a policy. Clinging to the 1960s doctrine of MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) is not a strategy; it is a mantra. Sadly, so is another chorus of “Ban the bomb for evermore” from ‘H-Bomb's Thunder’ (Liberator Songbook; latest edition available at party conference). I enjoy the songs but I would enjoy ridding the world of nuclear weapons much more. As ever, the question is how?

What is this new proposal, the Contingency Posture? Tory and Labour MPs and their lazy friends in the media have seized on the one point that really doesn't matter. Liberal Democrats, they say, will propose two nuclear submarines instead of four. If this were our main suggestion, people would rightly condemn it as a Liberal fudge, splitting the difference between four and none.

MORE RADICAL

The point however is rather more radical, that no submarine would carry nuclear warheads. The UK has maintained a Continuous at Sea Deterrence posture (CASD) since the 1960s, providing the ability to launch a missile with a nuclear warhead at a few minutes' notice. This posture assumes that somewhere in the world there is a nuclear weapon state with the desire and the ability to mount a nuclear attack on the UK.

No such state exists. Professor Malcolm Chalmers of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) has pointed out that modern defence planning assumes that a “significant threat of attack on the UK homeland by other states will not re-emerge without an extended period of strategic warning”. It is RUSI that has developed the Contingency Posture, under which the UK would maintain submarines, store nuclear warheads ashore and train crews in the use of them.

If the world situation declined to the extent that an enemy of the kind envisaged by CASD emerged, the warheads could be loaded into the submarines. This would not be a 13-day surprise like the Cuban Missile Crisis but a situation that would develop over months or even years. I doubt that it will ever arise, but for those who fear it, we would have years of operating the submarines without nuclear warheads to reassure them. The Contingency Posture would provide a period and a pathway to build confidence

that could finally lead to the abandonment of nuclear weapons.

Bruce Kent was occasionally asked whether he preferred unilateral or multilateral disarmament and he would reply that he didn't care which, he was a disarmer tout court. The reduction of the debate to unilateralist versus multilateralist

is a favourite tactic of people who oppose nuclear disarmament in all forms.

One Liberal Democrat MP and minister told me we should keep nuclear weapons as long as anyone else has them. That is the extreme form of multilateralism, which means we would keep nukes as long as Israel, for example, has them.

The practical reality of disarmament is more complicated. Multilateral disarmament has never worked. Bilateral disarmament, as between Russia and the USA, has worked. Most decisions about weapons systems, whilst taking account of other countries' armaments, are made unilaterally and not by mutual treaty.

The coalition government has unilaterally cut viciously into the numbers and the equipment of all three armed services. No one argues that the future is so uncertain that we might face an invading army across the channel and therefore should keep troops in readiness behind the beaches. Yet our political opponents continue to insist on the nuclear equivalent. Adopting the Contingency Posture would be the biggest unilateral step the UK has ever taken on nuclear weapons. But not, I hear you cry, as big as getting rid of them now.

What we decide about nuclear weapons should be based on principle (what we want to achieve) and on strategy (how can we achieve it). Let's first put aside the costs argument. Complete nuclear disarmament in 2015 when the next parliament meets would not save a penny during that five-year term.

Depending on the rate at which decommissioning was carried out, it could even cost more in the short term. Clearly removing an expensive weapons system would save money in the long run but there should be no misconception that ending Trident would somehow contribute to solving the UK's current deficit and debt problems.

On the other hand, if nuclear deterrence were as essential and as effective as its supporters claim, the price would be worth paying. I don't argue that it is. I argue that changing the world is not as simple as changing the vote at a party conference. If it were, tuition fees would have been abolished by now.

There is of course a UK political party that already advocates UK nuclear disarmament immediately – the Green Party – but we need not hold our breath for its chance to do it. In the 1980s there was another – the Labour Party.

Labour attributes its failures in the 1983 and 1987 elections at least partly to its support for

“What happens if we fight the election on a platform of ‘no nukes’ and find ourselves once again negotiating with another party to form a coalition?”

abandoning nuclear weapons. Strangely, that experience has not provoked any real new thinking in Labour policy, only a squalid retreat to the Tory policy. When Nick Harvey announced the Trident Alternatives Review (TAR), the Labour defence spokesman responded: “The Liberal Democrats are playing fast and loose with British

defence.”

Earlier this year, front and backbench Labour MPs maintained that scornful line in the Commons debate on the results of the TAR. I do not expect the Labour Party to change its tune before the general election, but what would it do in government?

What influence if any will the Liberal Democrats have on the next government? We could decide right now to end Britain's nuclear weapons but on our own we cannot deliver it.

What happens if we fight the election on a platform of ‘no nukes’ and find ourselves once again negotiating with another party to form a coalition?

What happens if a Liberal Democrat spokesman stands up as Vince did and defends another compromise forced upon us?

As a party, we have many times proclaimed our ambition for a world without nuclear weapons but we have never produced a realistic pathway to that world. The Contingency Posture provides such a pathway. It is the bottom rung on the ladder of nuclear deterrence before stepping off.

We have to be in this fight for the long run. It would be so easy to vote to end nuclear weapons, just as some councils announced that their boroughs were nuclear-free zones and just as effective. We are in politics to change the world, not to pat ourselves on the back. The world remains a hard place to change, but it is our task as politicians not only to proclaim our ideals but also to devise a strategy to turn them into the messy details of reality.

David Grace was a member of the Liberal Democrat Defence Working Group

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A PETITION TO OURSELVES

The Liberal Democrat Jobs Campaign isn't a campaign, and is anyway useless outside held and target seats. Can the party remember what community campaigns look like, wonders Tony Greaves?

I asked when the party would start campaigning again in *Liberator* 359. Before that issue came out, party HQ announced a new Jobs Campaign and we heard at a parliamentary briefing that “for a year we are going to talk about jobs”.

But the stuff handed out was all about what an MP could do – party propaganda and MP self-promotion. I don't decry either of those things but, except in the terminology of the PR industry, they do not amount to a political campaign.

Questioners were told: “You can do as much as you like, we are not going to stop anyone doing anything.” Good of them, I thought, and wondered how they thought they could stop us. But then they said: “We will provide the exact words to use on your local radio programme.” I wondered if I'd been transported to the People's Republic of China but no – the faces around the room all seemed to be our own familiar lot.

The Jobs Campaign was sparked off by some genuine local campaigning. Eastbourne MP Stephen Lloyd worked with his local paper to achieve 181 new apprenticeships in his constituency in just 100 days. Jo Swinson ran a local campaign to create 100 local jobs for young people. But the focus on MPs was emphasised by the first leaflet artwork provided by the national party, with a prominent space labelled “Local MP name and area working here”.

The briefing set out sensible things for MPs to do – a press release and a visit to a school, ‘proactive letters’ to schools and young people, a ‘round table event’ (I think that means a meeting) for local businesses, and spending a day as an apprentice. It was not clear what the 90% of constituencies without an MP might do. It was even less clear what you should do if you have a Tory MP who is doing very similar job promotional work (like where I live).

Its first big push was an Action Day on Saturday 15 June. It seems not many local parties did anything; nothing in Lancashire, for instance. I checked a rough and ready random list of a couple of dozen local party websites around England with a bias to places where I knew we have an active presence (including three MPs' seats and the London Liberal Democrats).

I found two or three really good campaigning sites; rather more did not exist or were moribund. None had any information about any ‘action’ on 15 June or any genuine campaigning on jobs, though a handful (including Ian Swales's website and London) displayed press release type material.

So I Googled “Liberal Democrats jobs” and found a scatter of local party and MP sites that mention the Jobs Campaign. There is the odd bit of action from MPs such as Stephen Williams visiting a science park in Bristol and an MEP candidate visiting an EU

investment project in Sunderland.

The Loughborough site includes useful links to the apprenticeship stuff on the national site. But most just regurgitate national press releases, locally customised or otherwise. They don't even include the national petition form, possibly for good reason.

FRANKLY PATHETIC

Petitions are a mainstay of good campaigns but they must have a practical objective and be directed to people who can bring that about. The Jobs Campaign petition is frankly pathetic. It reads “I'm backing the Lib Dem plan to double the number of businesses with apprentices.”

Well, yes, I'm backing Bradford Park Avenue to get promotion to the Conference this year, an unlikely proposition perhaps, but to help them achieve this or even avoid relegation I have to do more than just sign a petition! One target seat localised it by including their candidate's name and the name of the constituency and claims great success in its use. But it's still bogus – a petition to ourselves?! – just an excuse for collecting phone numbers and e-mail addresses that can be used to target votes. The Tories in Pendle and no doubt everywhere else do this all the time – survey after petition just to collect this data. The survey results are never released and the petitions never get presented.

None of the sites had anything about the next Action Day on 28 September. The party website amillionjobs.org (not to be confused with the American onemillionjobs.org, which looks like a genuine campaign) is largely a slow-moving collection of press releases but includes an interactive map of nearby 28 September events.

I tried it and found just three within a range of 100 miles, each one in a Liberal Democrat held seat. More may be set up though the Action Day timetable started in early August. There is no sense of a frenzy of campaigning. Such zeal may all to be found in the realms of Facebook and Twitter, largely beyond my ken. But I think I'd have heard about it.

There is a fundamental problem. The twin aims of the Jobs Campaign, as they were set out on *Liberal Democrat Voice*, are “to highlight the fact that with the Liberal Democrats in government a million jobs have been created and to campaign for a million more.”

The first would be a legitimate propaganda campaign even if it lacks some credibility. Who is to say that the Liberal Democrats are responsible rather than the Tories – or how much of the million can we credibly claim? In a seat with a Liberal Democrat MP, it's reasonable to say it's down to the coalition. In most other seats, particularly those with a Tory MP, it's

just not a sensible spin on the facts. It's back to the problem we have if we promote the coalition rather than a distinctive Liberal line. In most places, people will say "fine – we'll carry on voting Tory".

You can order various survey forms, national leaflets and letterheads from the party's printers if you have a few hundred pounds to spare, along with the 36-page Day of Action Planning Pack.

I've not seen most of these because I am not signed up to Google (surely a requirement the party should not be making?).

How many local parties are going to order lots of these standard leaflets anyway? But the planning pack is on the ALDC website as a pdf (along with all the June stuff) and is revealing.

It turns out that the Day of Action is not actually about campaigning for more jobs. It's about recruiting members and helpers. It's an intensive drive to get members and strong supporters to come and help, and to target Liberal Democrat voters by phoning them and knocking on their doors. All good stuff, though I doubt if many local constituencies have the capacity to follow the checklists in detail, and most will not be able to join in because they can't afford the fees to sign up to Connect. And I would like to see and hear anyone plough right through the 224-word door-knocking script that is provided!

There is another interactive map on amillionjobs.org, compiled by someone in the party's research department and full of 'drop pin markers' which purport to show how many jobs 'we' have 'delivered' in different places. The only item for my local party in Pendle reads: "Liberal Democrats in government have given £666,869 to support the local council to create 56 new homes in Pendle..."

Putting on one side the fatuous wording, I haven't found anyone locally who understands this figure. There are indeed some other sums the government have 'given' in the past three years that are missing, not least £1.5 million to buy a historic old mill for business and job creation purposes, though they don't add up to the millions of funding for schemes that were coming to Pendle that the coalition peremptorily scrapped when it took office. Nor does it match the value of the cuts in public sector jobs. Someone has spent a lot of time compiling this map but its usefulness seems equally doubtful in other areas I have checked.

Real community campaigns are rather different. First, you find the issue (or it finds you). Second, you set yourself objectives, some short term, others long term. They might be to achieve something practical in your area, or they might be a petition to a national government body – a local issue or a contribution to a genuine national campaign.

"I would like to see and hear anyone plough right through the 224 words door-knocking script that is provided"

Third come the actions, the kind of stuff the party briefings don't cover. Fourth is the publicity that follows up the actions, helping to create and maintain momentum, and gaining more support for our cause. But they have to be about something real.

FURTHER DISREPUTE

Of course, working to get new members and helpers and campaigning to increase electoral support is valid and

vital, and must often be done in its own right. But to pretend to campaign for something tangible when all you are doing is promoting the party is cheating and will bring our politics into further disrepute.

It is clear that a lot of campaigning is still taking place in a lot of areas (though less than before). It's about local stuff where campaigners can have some effect. The Sheffield Liberal Democrat website contains some excellent diatribes against the follies of the Labour-run city council. It also includes some real campaigns – to stop plans to close 14 community libraries and cut both bin collections and recycling; to bring high-speed broadband to rural areas of Sheffield; to stop the closure of a dementia care centre. But I can find nothing about Days of Action on the Jobs Campaign. There is still more campaigning going on around the country than I had thought. But it's still all in spite of party HQ (and sadly ALDC) rather than as a result of their help and support.

My conclusions are these. First, stimulated by party HQ, a number of held and target seats will be making an effort on 28 September to find more helpers and members. This is all to the good, though the vast majority of local parties will not be taking part other, perhaps, than by sending a few people to the held and target seats. The Action Days will have little or nothing to do with creating more jobs in the local area.

Second, the Jobs Campaign is no such thing outside a few seats where MPs and a handful of target candidates are using their positions to do some useful things. Otherwise it consists of no more than occasional press releases and pious postings on websites. It is of little value to most activists on the ground.

Third, party HQ still does not understand the meaning of community campaigning and is making no efforts to promote it. Neither, and more seriously to judge by its programme of training at the Glasgow Conference, is ALDC. Where and how will we find the road back to once again becoming the campaigning party that is in our Liberal heart and soul?

Tony Greaves is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords and a member of Pendle Borough Council

BEAT THE PATCHERS

All three parties are united in doing nothing in particular in the face of the recession, but Beveridge had the answer, says Bill le Breton

“A revolutionary moment in the world’s history is a time for revolutions, not for patching.”
(Beveridge Report – Part 1,7).

When those words were written, the country was only three years into the war with Hitler. Although support for the Report’s implementation grew irresistibly from ordinary men and women during three further years of total war, the proposals addressed issues raised prior to the conflict, as a direct consequence of the Great Depression.

Just 23 years before the Report, during a similarly climactic national experience, the cry had been, “Homes fit for heroes.” Then too, the issues addressed by the 1919 ‘Addison’ Housing Act were those that had blighted the pre-war lives of millions.

Beveridge explained that a prerequisite for revolutionary change was “the opportunity for using experience in a clear field... any proposals for the future, while they should use to the full the experience gathered in the past, should not be restricted by consideration of sectional interests established in the obtaining of that experience”.

A key expression of a social system is its mechanism for assigning blame for misfortune. Is a witch operating in the village? Has the ruler failed to propitiate the gods? Just ill luck? We moderns are not so rational in these matters as we like to think. Bureaucratic societies blame a lack of respect for authority. Highly individualistic systems blame the misfortunate themselves. “If everyone has the potential to succeed, who but you is to blame for your failure?”

In both the 1918 and the 1945 ‘moments’, the trauma of wars and depressions swept aside the individualistic point of view. A constructive imperative accompanied the reallocation of blame away from impoverished people themselves to the operation of society itself. The vitality, determination and hope invested in this national mood mocked the timidity, the caution and the plain wrong-headedness of the old governing elite. Men and women who had borne enormous sacrifices, both before and during the war, agreed in their millions with Beveridge that “This is not a time for patching”.

It does not appear that ‘our’ Great Recession will create anything similar to this shift in perspective. The same sectional interests hold sway. There has been no clearing of the field. In most cases, those who oversaw both the descent into the crisis and its debilitating continuance retain their power.

Unelected, unaccountable central bankers are free to off-set democratically-supported fiscal stimuli and, like hawks, obsess more about a half a per cent here or there in the price level than about the restricted life chances of six million people without the working opportunities they crave and whose sacrifices are

misrepresented as fecklessness.

The 2012 Institute for Fiscal Studies report into Living Standards, Poverty and Inequality concludes: “In the aftermath of the recession, average incomes have fallen by near-record amounts. Inequality has fallen back to levels last seen in the mid-1990s. Relative poverty continues to fall, but only because the poverty line is also falling: the poor have undoubtedly been getting worse off in absolute terms, on average.”

The consensus among the political elite is remarkable. All three major parties have turned their backs on the chance to borrow at 2% to fund the reconstruction of the country’s infrastructure, including its totally inadequate housing supply. Monetary and fiscal policies that delivered social and housing improvement in former times are illogically labelled ‘dangerous’ one moment or ineffective (pushing on a string) the next.

And so it looks as if 2015 (our 1945 moment) will come with Clegg, Laws and Alexander content with merely patching the roof.

Should we be surprised? The Whig governments of 1830 to 1841 oversaw a stubborn defence of the Corn Laws. The pre-war Asquith government with its landslide majority resisted women’s suffrage. But for every Whig there was a Radical like the Anti Corn Law campaigners, Bright and Cobden; for every Asquith a Lloyd George; for every Hayek a Keynes, for every Simon a Beveridge. Each determined in their time to confront those Five Giants blocking ‘the road of reconstruction’: inadequate housing, poor health prospects, deficient skills and learning, and a shortage of employment opportunities – all still unequally and unjustly distributed across society; largely a matter of birth.

Beveridge wrote, “The object of government in peace and in war is not the glory of rulers or of race, but the happiness of the common man.” He gave the returning service personnel and the war workers a programme unrestricted by the old sectional interests. Its impact transformed their lives, the lives of their children and their children’s children.

Those sectional interests and rampant individualism re-established in the last 35 years thrive again in under-regulated markets. They cast their shadow over a weakened democracy, free from the costs and obligations of the social and environmental damage they generate. Unsurprisingly, the five giants have returned to block the road.

This year is decision time. Are we Whigs or Radicals? In the days ahead, only what Beveridge wrote will do. “It is a time for revolution not for patching.”

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

BEDROOM FARCE

Nothing can be done to make the bedroom tax fair. It is so fundamentally flawed and misconceived that only abolition will do, says Ruwan Uduwera-Perera

Why should we support the bedroom tax? It is inherently unfair and goes against the core values of liberal democracy and Liberal Democrat party rhetoric regarding equality and fairness?

Some within the coalition government would have us think that this divisive policy is unarguably good in principle. So let's look at the hype and see the growing impact throughout the country.

The government says that the bedroom tax is about reforming the welfare system, which is unsustainable in its current form. Yes, some of the changes are 'reforms' as they revise eligibility criteria, introduce conditionality and alter the way welfare is administered. But the majority of the changes are straightforward cuts to the amount of money people who are in need receive (in benefits) or are a direct levy on the place they live. The so-called 'single room subsidy' taxes recipients for something they have no control over.

More 660,000 of society's most vulnerable families have been hit by a tax in which tenants are expected to make up 14% of their rent for one extra bedroom and 25% for two extra bedrooms.

The government says it's about ensuring fairness but there is enormous inequity in the changes. They are likely to affect negatively those who are already in poverty. Households that include a disabled resident are even worse hit.

Around 400,000 disabled people will each lose £650 a year to the bedroom tax. This includes rooms used by disabled adults to store medical equipment to enable them to function at home. Similarly, couples who must use separate bedrooms because of illness or disability will be equally affected. These 'spare' bedrooms are not a luxury but a necessity.

BUDGETS HAMMERED

Many local authorities will end up spending unnecessary money making adaptations to new homes to make them accessible for disabled tenants when they are already housed in adapted homes. Social care budgets will take a hammering as independent carers will have to be employed where previously family and friends took on the role.

The government says it's about saving public money. Tenants just need to downsize and they will no longer have to pay the extra tax. But nationally, 96% of tenants hit by the bedroom tax have no alternative accommodation available. Almost 700 people in Plymouth are hunting for smaller homes – but only 13 become available each week. In Pembrokeshire, the figure is even worse, with 1,000 families affected – but there are only 17 smaller properties available. This pattern is reflected throughout the country.

Over the last 30 years, there has been a growing imbalance between the type of housing available and

shifts in household composition. For example, the rise in singletons, one-parent families and older people living longer all mean that the houses built at the peak of social housing (family homes with 2-3 bedrooms) are no longer suitable for the changed and still changing demographics.

Social landlords, in making best use of the resources they have available, would allocate the 'too big' homes to these smaller households so that, on the one hand, surplus properties were at least being used and, on the other hand, people weren't being made homeless because the required size properties are simply unavailable. Common sense? Absolutely.

The suggested resolution, building new homes of the correct size, just doesn't stand up to scrutiny. New builds would have had to have started decades ago to meet the current demand for smaller properties. Despite the government rhetoric about construction being the engine room of the economy, local authorities and housing associations simply cannot deliver on such spectacular expectations.

The government says it has provided a safety net in the Discretionary Housing Payment. True, money has been made available nationally but this is not sustainable and will only help people out over the short term. The problem of square pegs (small households) in round holes (too big homes) will remain.

In the first 100 days of the bedroom tax, applications to councils for the hardship fund surged by 300%. On Merseyside, the first month of the Bedroom Tax saw more than 14,000 people fall into arrears – 6,000 of them became behind in their rent for the first time ever. When the Discretionary Housing Payment has been spent, tenants who are unable to pay the tax will be driven into the welcoming arms of the pay day loan companies.

The government says it's about getting people from worklessness into work. Recently, work and pensions secretary Iain Duncan Smith claimed that the bedroom tax had already delivered on this expectation and had pushed thousands of people into employment. This gross misrepresentation of the data was slammed by the Office for National Statistics. Duncan Smith's answer to the criticism of his flawed logic: "I know in my heart I'm right."

INEQUITABLE AND UNFAIR

So why should Liberal Democrats oppose this tax? They need to reflect on their core values of equality and fairness. The bedroom tax is clearly inequitable and transparently unfair.

Liberal Democrats believe in supporting and developing people to stand on their own two feet and empower them to make choices. Unfortunately, the choice offered by bedroom tax is no choice at all. (continued on page 28)

BE CAREFUL OF WHAT YOU WISH FOR

It is the year 2020 and Britain is withdrawing from the EU. Graham Watson provides a cautionary tale from the future

The telephone call from Washington DC had been most unwelcome. For President Clinton to turn down a request for help in quite such a brutal way destroyed any hope the prime minister had invested in the remnants of a once special relationship.

Indeed, she had spoken to him as if she were a member of the Boston Tea Party and he King George. Gone was the bonhomie with which she had congratulated him on his election victory just a few days earlier. Instead, there was a much harsher tone of *realpolitik*. It dawned on him that he may have to get used to this in the UK's somewhat reduced circumstances.

"The irony is," mused Boris, "that it was not even my government that got us into this god-awful mess. My predecessors did that for me."

And indeed, lounging in his corduroys on the floral Sanderson sofa in the sunlight of the Chequers garden room that first Sunday afternoon, the Prime Minister was right. The final pieces in the jigsaw of the UK's withdrawal had still to be completed, through unpicking the fretwork of legal obligations towards the other member states in accordance with the Lisbon Treaty provisions, but the essentials had been achieved.

British MEPs no longer sat in the now Brussels-based European Parliament, their mandates having ended in May the previous year. The British government was no longer present at meetings of the Council of Ministers in Luxembourg, the constitutional arrangements for withdrawal having been settled at the Tallinn summit in 2018. All that was left of the UK's permanent representation to the EU was a skeleton staff on the upper floors of a building on the Rond Point Schuman in Brussels, its former home in the residence at Rue Ducale having been sold – at not insubstantial benefit to Her Majesty's Treasury – to Turkey, shortly to become the EU's thirtieth member state.

TA-TA TATA

But all was not well in the maritime monarchy. The conclusion of an EU-India free trade agreement after ten years of haggling had reduced tariffs on the trade in automobiles between the two entities to just twice the tariff now imposed on the sale of cars from Britain to the EU. The subsequent decision by the Tata Group to relocate all production of Jaguar Land Rover vehicles to its new hi-tech facility in Chennai was about to cause high levels of unemployment in many of the 'swing seats' in the West Midlands, on which plans for winning a second term depended. (Tata's offer to relocate the production of some of its *Ambassador* line to Halewood to serve the lower end of the UK market,

though welcomed in a resolution at the Commonwealth heads of government meeting, was perceived privately as a paltry sop to old colonial ties).

Moreover, the growing clamour in Scotland, including in the ranks of the two parties to the centre-left coalition at Holyrood, for another referendum on independence – linked this time to a bid by Scotland to join the EU – was threatening the integrity of the realm. Though only 42% of the Scottish people had voted for independence in 2014, nearly 70% of them had voted in 2017 to remain in the EU and, with the example of a newly resurgent Ireland in stark contrast to England's economic woes, the will of the Scottish people looked settled in favour of departure. The Palace had added the issue to the agenda for the weekly audience. What should the prime minister advise the ailing monarch at this angst-arousing *entretien*?

The desperate deadline-driven decision five years ago to send Vince Cable to Brussels – after MEPs had rejected first Michael Gove as commissioner-designate and then Andrew Mitchell – had hardly made matters easier. As Commissioner for the Internal Market, Cable's first act had been to legislate to limit the activities of the hedge funds on which Conservative Party finances depended; and no inducements had yet brought them back to London.

Worst of all, the Royal Bank of Scotland was teetering on the brink of collapse after its investments in Latin America were nationalised by the host governments. With the UK now outside the EU, there was no support from the well-capitalised European Stability Mechanism, which was poised to bail Credit Lyonnais out of the same hole.

Even in Boris's own constituency of Twickenham, snatched in that heady by-election in December 2014 and held by a small majority in the general election six months later, the end of EU research grants had led to job losses and opinion was turning against him.

Perhaps what surprised the prime minister most was that people in England and Wales had actually voted so decisively to come out. He had imagined privately that, faced with the question 'in or out', the people would hold on to nurse for fear of something worse. Perhaps that ghastly socialist George Orwell had been right in depicting the UK as part of *Oceania* rather than Europe. After all, had not even G.K. Chesterton predicted, in his poem *The Silent People*, that English docility meant the people would never rebel?

Boris had been brought up in Brussels, where his family's income had depended during his childhood years on his father's employment at European Commission. Now he was beginning to wonder if the whole anti-EU prank had not backfired. The fact that Prime Minister Miliband and his deputy Clegg had

been the ones to take the UK out of the EU, in what they euphemistically described as ‘an orderly withdrawal’, came as little comfort. Had it not been for Cameron’s referendum pledge a decade ago, the Liberal Democrat and Labour manifestos in 2015 would not have contained similar pledges; and the Murdoch empire would not have been able to horsewhip them into giving the British people the referendum they had promised.

Miliband’s belief, sustained by his coalition partners, that a referendum could be won – that British business would ‘see them all right’ and that the BBC would be able to explain to the electorate what was at stake – had proven hopelessly naive. Their trust in the people, touching as it was, had hardly been qualified by prudence. The three-letter acronym CBI had turned out to stand for Cannot Become Involved. (The City, by contrast, financed the No campaign royally). And the BBC’s flagship news commentators were exposed night after night for their failure to understand even the basics of how the EU works, let alone ever to have read the Treaties.

Frankly, even without the sex scandal involving both of Miliband’s female cabinet ministers and the devastating exposure of the police and civil service collusion to hush it up, the centre-left coalition’s credibility was so seriously shot by June 2017 that the referendum would have been lost in any case. The wind in the sails of UKIP and the Tories gusted so strongly after the flawed budget just two months beforehand – immortalised in the Daily Mail’s headline ‘A Monumental Balls-Up’ – that nothing could

“He was beginning to wonder if the whole anti-EU prank had not backfired”

withstand their anti-EU onslaught.

The massive fine imposed by the EU on DEFRA for failing to monitor CAP spending; the ECJ judgment in favour of the Bulgarian care home employees; the row with Brussels and Berlin over the use of the UK-USA e-mail intercepts to allow

Westinghouse to undercut Siemens in the Brazilian deal – these had all conspired to inflame anti-EU feeling. The formal withdrawal of the proposed Working Time Directive – already withdrawn *de facto* four years previously in May 2013 – had cut little ice.

Of course, the resulting disarray had paved the way to the election that gave the new Conservative Party leader his chance. But the report from Social Security and Health, which lay dusted in tell-tale biscuit crumbs on the Chippendale, on the cost of coping with 400,000 elderly returnees from southern Spain and another 150,000 from France, had cast a pall over his first budget plans. The country he inherited was in such poor shape that ‘office’ was beginning to look distinctly unappealing, even without the now irresistible buying from his backbenchers for mandatory castration of foreigners overstaying their visas.

Sir Graham Watson is Liberal Democrat MEP for the South West of England and Gibraltar, and Leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party. His latest book, ‘Letters from Europe’, is available for just £10 from his constituency office (for more details, e-mail: info@grahamwatsonmep.org)

Social Liberal Forum fringe meetings at Glasgow Liberal Democrat Conference

A green industrial policy

How best to develop a policy that wins hearts, minds and votes, creates jobs and helps accelerate moves to a Zero Waste and Low Carbon society?

Saturday, 14 September at 8pm (Boisdale 2, SECC)

In partnership with CentreForum

Speakers: Vince Cable MP, Julian Huppert MP, Matthew Spencer (chief executive, Green Alliance), Baroness Parminter

Chair: Professor Stephen Lee (chief executive, CentreForum)

Whose party is it anyway?

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), Sue Doughty (chair of party’s Internal Democracy Working Group), Gareth Epps (co-chair, SLF)

Chair: Paula Keaveney (member, SLF executive) <http://socialliberal.net/>

“WHAT ARE YOU LOT FOR?”

Liberal Democrats have increasing difficulty answering this question from voters and the latest slogan is only a stopgap. A real commitment to ‘community’ could be the answer, says Steve Bradley

Among the challenges facing the Liberal Democrats, one arguably looms taller and broader than the rest. The party lacks a distinct, motivating and easily communicable explanation of what it is all about. Voters simply do not know what the party’s fundamental purpose is.

This is not a problem unique to the Liberal Democrats. IPSOS/Mori conducted research into voter perceptions of political parties in May 2012. In that study, 64% of all respondents agreed that they “don’t know what the Liberal Democrats stand for these days”. The equivalent figure for Labour was 57% and for the Tories 44%.

This identity crisis was echoed even among each party’s own supporters. 41% of Liberal Democrat voters didn’t know what their party stood for, compared with 42% of Labour voters and 37% of Conservatives. The study concluded: “Our polling now shows that the Liberal Democrats have the toughest task telling voters what they stand for”.

This research merely echoed a broader debate about the impact the coalition is having on party identities. You might expect a party of government to have a clearer identity than one in opposition. Given that the coalition is dramatically reducing the size of the state (something that sits more naturally with Conservatives), it’s no surprise that Liberal Democrat voters are confused these days. Similarly, Labour’s rating reflects its struggle to define itself in opposition.

There is little doubt that an identity crisis exists for the Liberal Democrats. The key questions are: to what extent is that due to the coalition; is it a challenge that runs deeper for them than for the other parties; and what can the party do to address it?

SELF-DELUSIONAL

Blaming the coalition for the Liberal Democrats’ current identity challenge would be lazy, convenient and self-delusional. The lack of an overarching and meaningful explanation of what the party stands for has long existed and would have endured without any coalition. Not since the days of Paddy Ashdown’s ‘penny on income tax for education’ has the party had something close to a coherent and oft-repeated message. But that was more than 15 years ago and, since then, the party has switched the messaging light on and off, leaving voters groping in the dark in pursuit of its purpose.

As a relatively small party with strength in isolated geographical areas, this is a more fundamental problem than for other parties. Most voters instinctively have some notion of what Labour or the Conservatives stand for, and could articulate broadly consistent attributes in both positive and negative

terms. Ask a voter to explain what the Liberal Democrats are all about, however, and I fear the vast majority would be flummoxed. This has undoubtedly limited the party’s ability to build a meaningful core vote built on anything more than hard work and personalities at a local level.

The party faithful understand that the Liberal Democrats have a long-standing commitment to the principles of individual freedom, fairness, community empowerment, localism and devolution. They also know that their party is internationalist and pro-European in outlook, and environmentally concerned, as a rule.

Yet the party has failed for many years, possibly even since its formation, to bundle those values together into a distinct, coherent and motivating message that it can use to explain itself to voters. Instead, it has often left the expression of its values to local parties. This has been a suitably devolutionist and practical approach for a party without the resources or media sympathy required for national communication. But it is also an approach fraught with danger.

Within Britain’s binary voting system, the party has capitalised on the prejudices many voters have against one or other of the larger parties to define itself locally as ‘not them’. This has allowed Liberal Democrats to claim second place in many areas over time, from where they can further capitalise on fear of whichever party dominates. The downside is that they are often accused by opponents of meaning different things to different people in different places. David Heath didn’t win in Somerset by positioning himself and the party in the same way that John Leech did in inner-city Manchester.

As both these MPs demonstrate, Liberal Democrats have also harvested votes in numerous places through sheer hard work and candidate personality – qualities largely divorced from the party’s messaging. Now, courtesy of the coalition, the party finds itself for the first time with the sort of national profile and image it had been previously denied – and many of the voters attracted to the party through localised positioning feel greatly betrayed. It’s not so much that Liberal Democrats have changed, more that they were never clear in the first place who they actually are.

So if the Liberal Democrats have failed for 25 years to communicate meaningfully their *raison d’être*, how can they begin to address that? Let’s start by looking at the party’s current approach.

The appointment of Ryan Coetzee as director of strategy last year indicates at least a partial recognition of the party’s identity challenge. Coetzee commissioned research into voter perceptions of the major parties and, from this, developed the party’s

new oft-repeated mantra that it is “building a stronger economy within a fairer society, enabling everyone to get on in life”.

However, this collection of words could be considered more of a positioning statement than a genuine political message. It seeks to anchor the Liberal Democrats firmly in the centre ground – better than Labour on the economy and the Conservatives on social justice. But it also makes the party reliant on reference to the traditional weaknesses of the other main parties for its own stated sense of purpose. It successfully creates a link between its policies and positioning, but does nothing to articulate what the overarching purpose of liberalism or Liberal Democracy is or why voters should support it.

As a tag-line for election material, it will serve a purpose in the current era of austerity, but it’s essentially a time-specific continuation of the hackneyed ‘we’re not them’ positioning. I have no doubt the party will eventually find itself back at the drawing board in search of a succinct explanation of what exactly it is about.

So if the ‘stronger economy, fairer society’ mantra is not the answer to the Liberal Democrats’ identity challenge, what is? How can the party communicate its purpose in a succinct, meaningful and distinct way, motivating voters to rally towards it in large numbers?

I believe the answer lies in communicating Liberal Democracy not as a marketing tag-line but as the pursuit of a cause. There is a cause that is a core value of the party, with which it has a long pedigree of association. It is one that the other main parties occasionally talk about, but which does not sit well with their underlying ethos. It is therefore one that Liberal Democrats could credibly make their own. That cause is community.

HUGE OPPORTUNITY

There is a zeitgeist around the concept of ‘community’ these days – fuelled in part by the reduction in role of the state, a growing disconnect with large national institutions, and the growth of local solutions to challenges from climate change to village pubs. Community’s time has come as a genuine political concept, and I believe a huge political opportunity exists for any party that can articulate its core purpose as being the empowerment, encouragement and development of strong local communities.

The concept of ‘community’ is often considered by Liberal Democrats to be their natural territory. However, there is little real evidence to support any such claim. There have been some positive examples of community-centred initiatives among Liberal Democrat-run councils over the years – such as restorative justice projects and limited redistribution of decision-making power – but these have hardly represented a sea change in community empowerment.

Despite the Liberal Democrats being in local authority control in some areas for well over a decade, the party has little of substance to show for on this topic. One exception was Tower Hamlets in the 1980s, where the Liberal-run council devolved a considerable level of power to newly created neighbourhood councils, but Labour reversed the experiment when it regained power. The party needs to acknowledge that, despite its rhetoric about localism and community, it has done precious little to deliver on this meaningfully

whenever it has been in power.

Now that the Liberal Democrats are in government at a national level, they are likewise implementing centralised top-down solutions instead of genuinely advancing the cause of localised empowerment.

There are few policy challenges to which credible community-based solutions could not be proposed among the range of possible answers. Take, for example, the banking crisis – a problem of such scale that community-based solutions may seem implausible. That crisis offered an opportunity for Liberal Democrat ministers to push for community-focused responses amongst their menu of solutions.

They could have encouraged community-based alternatives to retail banking’s lack of genuine competition, for example, by tackling the red tape that limits the role of credit unions that offer community-based financial services to those often in direst need of them, yet are prevented from holding business accounts. They could have sought to enable the creation of new community-owned banking services, or a new wave of mutualised institutions to revitalise a sector that was largely ‘carpet-bagged’ in the 1990s. Instead, they focused entirely on centralised top-down solutions, leaving innovative community-centred financial solutions to the likes of Archbishop Welby and the entrepreneur behind the ‘Bank of Dave’ programme.

The same is true in other policy areas. In response to the national shortage of social housing, the party could seek to encourage small-scale localised housing co-operatives as community-based alternatives to the dominant council or social landlord models. Or to help meet the nation’s energy needs, more could be done to enable communities to play a genuine role in meeting their own energy needs – such as removing the law that prohibits community-produced energy from being sold locally and instead insists it be sold only to major utilities at a fraction of market price.

Locally-produced energy sold cheaply within its community would help tackle fuel poverty and climate change, reduce opposition to new infrastructure like wind turbines, and retain the economic benefits of energy production locally. Precisely the type of liberal outcomes the party should be seeking to deliver in government.

The party’s instinct should be to actively seek and promote community-based solutions to societal challenges at all times and at all levels. It should communicate its core purpose as being about genuinely putting ‘Community First’, and constantly develop policy proposals to enable it to do just that when in power.

A genuine and constantly demonstrated commitment to the empowerment of communities would provide the distinct, ownable and motivating reason the Liberal Democrats currently lack for voters to support them. Without such a clear and meaningful cause and identity, large numbers of the electorate will continue to be oblivious as to why it is the party actually exists.

Steve Bradley is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Lambeth

A VICTIM OF ITS OWN SUCCESS

The riots that convulsed Turkey in the summer show that the country's ruling party needs a liberal alternative, says Turhan Ozen

I was recently in Stuttgart, where my parents have lived for the last 40 years. There are about four million Turkish-speaking people in Germany, mainly as a result of immigration that was needed due to the labour shortage for rebuilding the country after the destruction of two world wars.

A third generation of the community born and brought up in Germany has now graduated from university. They play an important role in society in all levels and fields, from politics to international sports. With thousands of businesses set up, which employ hundreds of thousands of people, their entrepreneurship is proving vital for the German economy.

The secret of their success is the ability to turn their unusual experience into an advantage by maintaining bonds with their roots and embracing the German identity, a combination of characteristics that amalgamates typical Turkish values of strong community and family ties with German discipline and hard work. They started life from humble beginnings and are improving their living standards by investing in educating their children. They have a close-knit community despite their mosaic of identities. Their strong identity consists of multiple layers; they are German, Turk, Stuttgarter and European.

The town where my parents live is like a small Ottoman-era Anatolian town. The Greek Orthodox Church is next to the Diyanet Mosque. There are Alevis, Sunnis, Bosniaks, Serbs, Turks, Greeks, Kurds and Armenians living altogether in harmony. They share a similar culture, cuisine, music, social class and even language, with few nuances that require effort to identify. Away from the lands of their ancestors, they are indifferent to differences and have bonded even closer. They not only work with each other and share the same class at school but also have regular home visit exchanges, celebrate each other's festivals, and welcome each other's visitors by bringing gifts and cooking special dishes. Moreover, through increasing mixed marriages, they are turning into one big real family.

During my four-day visit, our house was full with a constant stream of visitors who came to celebrate the end of Ramadan and welcome me. During our conversations, what made me most happy was observing the pride when our visitors talked about how, when they first arrived, the most senior of them in the factories were the interpreters, and how common it is now to find engineers, designers and even managers from immigrants who improved their skills or their children who grew up in Germany.

We spoke about many things but Turkey and the Middle East occupied most of attention during our long discussions, because the region is boiling and people are deeply grieved by the suffering. Let me try to summarise a few points that I learned.

The majority of the community goes to Turkey for holidays. They have witnessed the progress made. They have so much confidence in its future that they are transferring their pensions to Turkey. Apparently, health service and pensions are better in Turkey.

They especially praised the new built 22,000 kilometres of dual carriageways, which have significantly reduced traffic accidents. A couple of people who got caught speeding were pleased when their hint of a bribe was reacted to as an insult. This is noteworthy praise for an institution that is often criticised.

MILITARY TYRANNIES

The ruling in the Ergenekon military coup trial in Turkey was the most recent event that grabbed international headlines. Many of the accused were found guilty and an ex-army chief received a life sentence. He will also lose his title and pension. This conclusion has not only sealed off an unlawful avenue in Turkish politics but will also be a deterrent for military tyrannies around the world.

Since the beginning of the trial, a campaign to discredit it was launched. The last trick was comparing the sentences to what the leader of the terror organisation PKK received, expecting anti-terror sentiments to create sympathy for the military personnel.

But the Turkish diaspora is informed, and made the following points. Terror at the hands of your own military is worse than that of a terror organisation. Military coups are crimes against humanity, and lives lost in torture chambers following previous coups were countless. The Turkish military staged four coups previously, each at a devastating cost. Participating actors, including civilian partners, were rewarded well and never held to account for their crimes. Defendants in the Ergenekon trial were accused of two coup attempts during the AKP government's first term. Their confidence made them complacent to the degree of documenting their plans, which were presented to the court.

In Turkey, after the revolution that followed the First World War, the state quickly established a ruling class. However, it could not improve the lives of the people. The revolution was a significant breakaway from the past but, beyond what is visible, the old order remained intact. The ruling class consisted of

Ottoman-era elites and nothing changed in terms of redistribution of wealth or reorganisation of power.

Instead of focusing on growth that could lift the whole nation out of poverty, all energy was wasted on efforts to create a uniform nation, which crushed the cultural wealth that the diversity of the Anatolian people had to offer.

Similar to the Russian and Chinese revolutions, it was brutal but it was not fully successful. People who lived in inaccessible terrains managed to hold on to their identity, and the establishment and the people drifted apart due to the gap in living standards.

Consequently, the CHP party, which used to rule the country under a single party system, lost the 1950 plural party elections by a landslide. The CHP has remained the defender of the establishment ever since and never won any democratic elections again. Therefore, it adopted Machiavellian principles and relied on military coups in order to hold its grip on power.

The big waves of immigration from Turkey stem from these conditions. In their host countries, these Turks live beyond the reach of the cruelties of the establishment. They demonstrate that a unity that respects natural differences works better than the unity of identical individuals. They set an example for progress and wealth that is achieved when the state does not interfere with the liberties of the individual.

The AKP was established after the 1997 military intervention, which forced the government to resign and close the then ruling party. It managed to win the next elections despite a media campaign orchestrated by the psychological warfare unit of the army. However, it was not allowed to govern during its first term in office. It was constantly threatened by the CHP and bullied by the army and judiciary.

The AKP focused all its attention on growth and improving living standards. It opened the country to free market competition, engaged with the world and made allies, despite the Islamophobic propaganda of the establishment. The wealth it created and its humble stance in the face of harassment increased its popularity. With the confidence of renewed support, it started to tackle many long delayed problems head on. It engaged with the EU, took initiatives to resolve problems with Cyprus and Armenia, and took democratisation steps that improved the condition of the Kurds, Alevis and other ethnic minorities. And through EU integration reforms, it curbed the power of army and judiciary over politics.

After uncovering the Ergenekon organisation and arresting the members, the AKP brought an end to the crimes of the deep state such as assassinations, lost people, inflaming violent clashes between communities, and staged civil unrests.

The AKP is now a strong party and ideology in Turkey. In the 2011 elections, it received 21 million votes, while the other three parties represented in the parliament together received 18 million. Today, AKP has more than 8 million registered members. Its leader Erdogan has more than 3.3 million followers on Twitter (for comparison, the leaders of three major UK parties together have 700,000 followers). The AKP's grassroots has a presence on every street and constantly surveys households to gauge public perceptions of its policies. On polling days, nine volunteers staff each ballot box.

TAKEN BY SURPRISE

After a decade of success and record rates of growth year on year, despite the global economic crises, in May 2013 the Gezi park protests took place, which took everybody by surprise. Everybody is trying to understand what happened.

In Stuttgart, the view is that the AKP was too much growth driven but should be sensitive to the environment, history and aesthetics of the cities. The party was also thought to be becoming complacent. For example, a regulation aimed at preventing the sale of alcohol and tobacco to children was portrayed as an outright ban on alcohol consumption but the AKP did not make enough effort to explain it better.

The AKP had also slowed down on its pace of reform. This is of course due to a lack of competition. There is not an alternative party that people could vote for. The CHP cannot break away from its 'defender of the establishment' role, the MHP is an ultra-right nationalist party, and the BDP is focussed only on Kurdish issues. Turkey needs a credible alternative that will make the AKP work harder to win elections.

The initial reaction triggered by images of how the police had treated environmental activists was genuine and shared by many. If you have been in power for three terms, you are bound to make mistakes and alienate some people, or even part company with some allies. It is impossible to make everybody happy. Unhappy people have the right to demonstrate and deserve to be listened to.

Unfortunately, the protests were quickly hijacked by other political agendas. Radical groups started to attack the prime minister's offices, demanding the overthrow of the government. This was not a view shared by a majority of the protesters, who just wanted the AKP to take their views on board. The MHP and BDP did not support the protests, fearing that violence was escalating beyond control, but the CHP's involvement was visible from the beginning.

The AKP worked hard behind the scenes. In one week, just in the Uskudar district of Istanbul, it visited over 90,000 members to check public opinion about the protests. During the protests, 117,000 new members joined the party.

When protests continued to escalate, the prime minister and the mayor of Istanbul took part in dialogue personally. Most people thought the protests should end upon their concessions. Unfortunately, radical elements decided to continue. By this stage, they were dominated mainly by those who were behind the 2007 'republic rallies', which were staged to stop the selection of Abdullah Gul as president because of their objections to his wife's headscarf.

The AKP must have learned important lessons from this experience but it must be pushed to maintain a high performance. The best outcome of the Gezi protests would be the emergence of a new party that can appeal to people. A party that focuses on the environment and individual liberty, and which champions diversity, has a good chance of winning elections.

Turhan Ozen is chair of the Liberal Democrat Friends of Turkey

THE ROCK FENCED IN

Spain's right-wing government has torn up its relationship with Gibraltar and imposed restrictions reminiscent of Franco, says Joseph Garcia

In December 2011, the Liberal Party of Gibraltar was elected into government in an alliance with the Labour Party. This followed many years of working together in opposition and coincided with a new right-wing Partido Popular government coming to power in Spain.

The PP had pledged in its election manifesto to turn its back on dialogue with Gibraltar. It was true to its word within weeks. A Trilateral Forum had been established in 2004 where the governments of the UK, Gibraltar and Spain met on a regular basis to discuss Gibraltar-related issues.

In 2006, this resulted in an agreement over the payment of pensions to former Spanish workers, a new Gibraltar air terminal (which was built next to the frontier fence), telecommunications, frontier flow, the inclusion of Gibraltar airport in EU civil aviation measures, and the setting up of an Instituto Cervantes cultural institute on the Rock.

The new Spanish government unilaterally withdrew from the Trilateral Forum. This left the United Kingdom and Gibraltar at the table and Spain outside the door.

The Forum counts on the continuing support of the coalition government in London. It enjoys the support of the Lib-Lab government in Gibraltar and also of the main opposition parties in London and Madrid. This means that only the present Spanish government is totally opposed to tripartite dialogue.

This raises questions as to how any future Spanish government can be trusted to honour anything it signs about Gibraltar, after the high-level political agreement signed in 2004 by the socialists has been dumped without qualms.

Not content with dismantling the forum for dialogue, the Spanish government is now set to unravel the agreements arrived at in 2006 under that framework. Madrid has threatened to impose restrictions on civil aircraft using Gibraltar airport (the restrictions imposed by General Franco on military aircraft were never removed).

In short, the Spanish government has publicly threatened to dismantle everything that its predecessors had achieved. This translates into a campaign of economic sanctions, which seeks to undermine different pillars of the Gibraltar economy. One of these is tourism.

The impact has been reflected in the way in which it operates the border between Gibraltar and Spain, with delays of up to seven hours, both to enter Spain and to leave Spain. The Spanish customs authorities stop every vehicle, generating these unnecessary delays.

In just one weekend, the Gibraltar government distributed 11,000 bottles of water to persons waiting in the queue to cross into Spain. Those waiting included children, the elderly and the infirm. Some

people were taken to hospital in Gibraltar after hours of waiting in 30 degrees of August heat.

There is no doubt that Spain is entitled to conduct checks on persons and goods crossing the border. However, such checks must be proportionate and Madrid must provide adequate resources at the single crossing point. There are, for example, four lanes of traffic leaving Gibraltar, which then merge into one single green lane at Spanish customs. This alone creates a bottleneck, which is compounded further when the policy of checking every car means that this solitary green lane is effectively suspended as cars are stopped there in order to create a tailback.

The delays are deliberate and politically motivated. They are a carbon copy of those imposed by General Franco in the 1960s, which were designed to bring Gibraltar to its knees. Franco failed and his successors will fail too. The Spanish foreign minister's first public words on Gibraltar, to a UK MEP, were "Gibraltar Espanol!" This bore echoes of Franco's policy and now with hindsight was a harbinger of what was to come.

But Franco's Spain could flout the laws of common decency and behaviour at its border with Gibraltar almost with impunity. The present Spanish government is constrained by the laws of the European Union and by the views of many of its own citizens, including politicians, who do not agree with what is happening.

The EU has already taken an interest and observers are expected at the Gibraltar-Spain border in September. The right of EU nationals to freedom of movement over an EU border is being undermined and threatened by Spain almost on a daily basis. The irony is that those most affected are thousands of Spanish and other EU workers who live in Spain and work in Gibraltar. This group has no choice but to commute back and forth every day. The measures also affect tourists of many different nationalities.

In the final analysis, there are vital Liberal principles at stake in the dispute that Spain has chosen to generate over Gibraltar. Freedom of movement is not the only one. At base, this is about a small people in a small country who are being openly bullied by their large neighbour next door in order to browbeat them into submission. We should stand up to bullies because this is part of what being a Liberal and what being a Democrat means.

Dr Joseph Garcia is leader of the Gibraltar Liberal Party and deputy chief minister of Gibraltar

NUCLEAR REACTION

The conference debate on nuclear power has put LibDem energy policy under scrutiny. Camilla Berens says endorsing nuclear would mean higher bills and more risk of disasters

Greenpeace is often quoted saying that using nuclear energy to tackle climate change is like taking up smoking to lose weight.

But like attitudes to smoking, the UK's addiction to nuclear power seems to be intensifying, despite the increasing weight of evidence showing that backing 'new nuclear' will do a great deal more harm than good.

Given energy and climate change secretary Ed Davey's apparent enthusiasm for nuclear power, it was more than a little alarming to learn that a proposal to support nuclear new build has been put forward at the Liberal Democrat conference. Are members really willing to abandon one of the party's unique selling points and support a nuclear U-turn this time around?

The proposal asserts that nuclear power could play a limited role in achieving a zero carbon Britain, provided that concerns about safety, disposal of radioactive waste and cost (including decommissioning) can be adequately addressed.

If we could turn the optimism behind this motion into energy, we'd be able to keep the lights on forever. We are talking about a global industry that has a habit of going through a major catastrophe on average every 20 years (despite assurances that it will never happen again), that has left us with enough radioactive waste in the UK to fill 250 Olympic-sized swimming pools and which has always relied on public subsidy – precisely because of the high cost of mitigating the multiple risks. Nuclear has had 60 years to prove that it is sustainable and it has failed.

The second clause of the motion states that, for nuclear to be acceptable, the industry must fully finance new nuclear and concludes, "We will not allow any public subsidy for new nuclear build." So how would the Liberal Democrats deal with the backdoor subsidies currently being brokered between DECC and EDF Energy? The boxed text gives more details.

The 'contracts for difference' deal alone is enough to raise your blood pressure. Last summer, Professor

Stephen Thomas, an expert on nuclear economics and policy at the University of Greenwich, calculated that the total cost to British businesses and householders over 30 years could be £155 billion. And this particular gem will sting us through our taxes and our electricity bills.

Enough of the doom and gloom. The burning question is: what are the alternatives if nuclear is mothballed?

We could do a lot worse than look at Germany's energy turnaround. Not only is the German government phasing out its entire nuclear fleet by 2022 but it has created a roadmap for a safe, affordable energy future. The 'Energiewende' strategy demonstrates that the decentralisation and re-democratisation of energy systems is possible. Overall, it shows vision and courage – things severely lacking in the UK's corridors of power.

Nationally, it would be entirely possible to replace the capacity earmarked for new nuclear with a combined heat and power (CHP)/district heating model. As a modern, more energy-efficient form of conventional generation, the CHP option probably wouldn't be as effective at reducing carbon emissions as new nuclear. But

bearing in mind that it takes 7 to 10 years to build and commission an EPR reactor, the CHP model could be up and running in far less time and would act as a carbon reduction bridge while investment is ramped up in renewables.

Pie in the sky? A group of anti-nuclear academics who visited Chris Huhne while he was still at DECC were told that the CHP model was on the table and could be implemented if the public found the nuclear option unacceptable.

Clearly, it's time for the UK to kick the nuclear habit. I would urge delegates taking part in the zero carbon debate at conference to kick new nuclear into the long grass and 'just say no' once and for all.

Camilla Berens is a founder of Kick Nuclear and the Stop New Nuclear Alliance

Here's what's on the table in terms of backdoor subsidies:

Contracts for Difference – Proposed in the Energy Bill, the government will pay a fixed wholesale price for nuclear-generated electricity over a 30-40 year period. EDF is reported to be asking for roughly double the current wholesale rate.

Major liabilities cap – It has now been agreed that corporate liability for serious nuclear accidents in the UK will be limited to €1.2bn. Best estimates for cleaning up Fukushima are some \$250bn.

Support for waste management commitments – According to Greenpeace, £4.4bn could go towards subsidising radioactive waste management from new reactors.

Carbon floor price – Artificially elevating the carbon floor price was partly a sweetener to attract investment. Greenpeace and WWF predict this could also provide windfall profits of over £3bn to nuclear generators by 2026. Meanwhile, the public faces the direct effect of higher electricity bills.

Construction guarantees – After EDF Energy's minority partner, Centrica, pulled out of building Hinkley C, it transpired that EDF is pressing the government to underwrite some of the construction costs.

THERE'S GOLD IN SHALE

Don't believe alarmist internet postings from America. Shale gas exploitation will bring cleaner energy and more jobs, and works alongside renewables, says Graham Dean

"I love shale gas," says energy secretary Ed Davey. So should we all love shale gas?

The first time Davey said he loved shale gas, his testicles had somehow become twisted during a meeting with George Osborne. But now, when Davey says he loves shale gas, he means it. Davey is a man with impeccable green credentials and yet he loves shale gas. Here is why we should all love it.

Shale gas is gas. The more we use gas in place of coal and oil, the more we reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. This country made large reductions to its GHG emissions in the 1970s and again in the 1990s, when the UK replaced coal with gas for heating and for electricity generation.

We still use a lot of coal for electricity generation and so we could make a large reduction in GHG emissions by switching from coal to gas, plus as much renewable electricity as is feasible.

The US has made a very large reduction in its GHG emissions thanks to shale gas. In the US, shale gas has replaced some of the coal in electricity generation. This has resulted in less demand for coal and in less US coal being produced. The reduction in coal demand is not all a result of shale gas – there has been a large increase in electricity generated from wind turbines – but most of the coal demand reduction is because of shale gas.

LOWER EMISSIONS

Shale gas has lower emissions than imported liquefied natural gas (LNG) – estimated to be 13% lower. So simply replacing imports with our own shale gas helps with climate change.

It's not about wind power versus shale gas. We need both. To do this securely and at an affordable price, we need to produce wind power and shale gas here in the UK.

Shale gas alone won't solve the energy problems in this country overnight. But unless we start drilling exploratory wells, we will never know how long it will take to get the huge gas resource out of the ground in an economic way.

It will take time, but not as long as new nuclear or even renewables. Renewables may eventually provide all our heat, electricity and transport but that will take several decades. Gas provides 40% of our electricity, 90% of our heating, and feedstock for hundreds of industries.

In the medium term, we do need to reduce our reliance on more intensive carbon-based fuels and allow renewables to develop into a cost-effective long-term alternative. Let's stop the rhetoric about the shale gas industry starving renewables of investment and support. We need both renewables and shale gas for a low carbon future.

Some 74,000 long-term jobs will be created by the

shale gas industry. If you're at the Liberal Democrat conference this year, ask anyone in Glasgow and they will know someone who lives near them down the road or round the corner who works in the oil business. The closer you get to Aberdeen, the more people are employed in the oil industry directly or indirectly.

Aberdeen is a very pleasant place to live in part because it is so affluent, and it is so affluent because of the oil industry. Shale gas will create more of these jobs but centred in areas such as the north of England and the central belt in Scotland.

Fracking has already created a lot of jobs in Scotland and has made a significant contribution to the Scottish economy. But this is not fracking for shale gas. Fracking – hydraulic fracturing – is now used a lot in North Sea oil and gas fields. The advances in fracking technology from US shale gas are being applied to many of the new North Sea oil and gas developments. As a result, there is a new boom in the North Sea. One of the reasons Aberdeen is so fracking prosperous is because of fracking.

Look at Pennsylvania. It is about the size of Scotland with approximately double the population of Scotland. Shale gas production in Pennsylvania has created more than 160,000 jobs and created economic activity equivalent to 5% of Scotland's GDP. Pennsylvania now produces a lot more shale gas than our North Sea gas production. We could do the same here with shale gas from northern England and the Scottish central belt. We don't need to pay Qatar for ever-increasing amounts of LNG. Why pay for more Ferraris for Qataris when we can produce the gas here?

Our gas bills are already cheaper thanks to shale gas. That's cheaper than they would have been without shale gas, and it is shale gas in the US, not here, that has reduced our gas bills.

Any economist will tell you that, when supply increases, prices decrease. Increased gas supply will reduce our gas prices. Economists will also tell you that reduced prices caused by increased supply increase demand. The increased supply of gas in the US has resulted in the use of natural gas for transportation as fuel for trucks and buses. Our cities would be much pleasanter if the buses and taxis ran on natural gas instead of diesel.

WATER CONTAMINATION

There is a lot of hearsay on the internet from far-away places about water contamination of aquifers, large truck movements, earthquakes, fugitive emissions and radioactivity. But this country has thorough and extensive regulations and controls that prevent any significant risk of any harm to people or the environment.

Much of the stuff on the internet comes from the US, where they have an odd and unfair ownership of

the rights to the gas. In the US, the farmer owns the gas rights and earns a lot of money from production under his land. Farmers in the US are often the wealthier members of a community. They get richer from shale gas but the people in the villages get nothing. The rich get richer and the poor get pissed off and set fire to their water taps and post it

on YouTube. They know it has nothing to do with shale gas but they are upset that their neighbours are being paid for doing nothing.

Here in the UK, onshore oil and gas fields are so discreet that most local people do not know they are living close to one. There was a gas well drilled in 1990 in the city of Glasgow. This gas well was fracked and produced gas for a few months.

There are about 140 oilfields onshore in the UK. The Isle of Purbeck in Dorset has more than 200 oil and gas wells on it. Opponents say that shale gas will turn vast swathes of our countryside into the badlands of North Dakota. It won't. It will turn swathes of our countryside into Dorset.

In the US, the farmer owns the gas rights. Here, you own the gas rights. That is why you get the lion's share

“Unless we start drilling exploratory wells, we will never know how long it will take to get the huge gas resource out of the ground in an economic way”

of the profits. The tax rate is 62% on profits and there are also large local business rates. If you live near a shale gas development, you will benefit even more as 1% of revenues (approximately 10% of profits) will go to the local community.

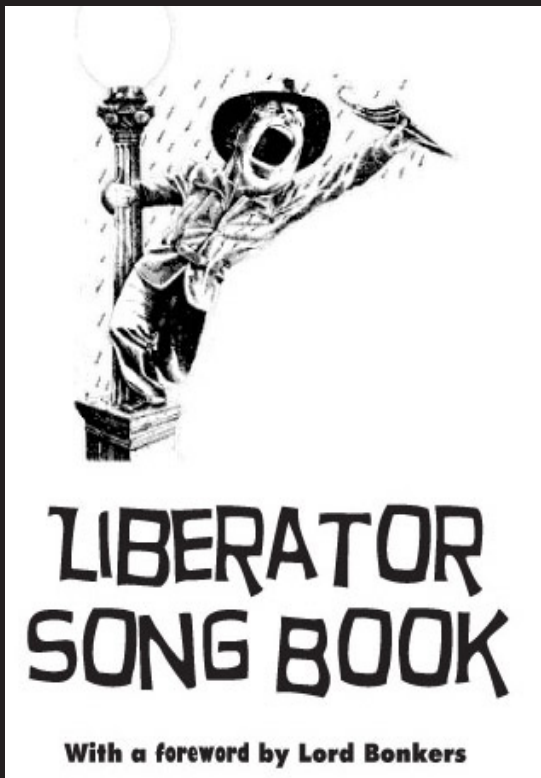
What if we don't develop shale gas? The alternative is bleak. We don't yet have a renewable solution

that covers all of our electricity, heating and transport requirements. In the meantime, we will need to import our energy at times when we can least afford it or we will have to reduce dramatically the way we use our resources, with all the damaging consequences that will have on our economy.

We have an opportunity to build on a successful heritage of oil and gas exploration onshore and offshore. What a shame if people are denied jobs and cheaper gas, and communities are denied benefits, because of hearsay off the internet.

Graham Dean is managing director of Reach RSG, a company involved in the shale gas industry. He has supported the Liberal Democrats and Liberal Party for more than 40 years

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GO BACK, AND THINK OF ENGLAND

There is little public demand for English devolution but the benefits would be large and the solution is obvious in resurrecting the historic counties, says George Potter

Liberal Democrat conference representatives meeting in Glasgow might stop to reflect on the oddity that they are meeting in a country that, along with Wales and Northern Ireland, has had its own devolved government for 14 years. Some of them might even ask why it is that England remains the only part of the UK left out by devolution.

Of course, to say that England is left out by devolution isn't entirely fair. There is now at least a London Assembly and a London Mayor, who wield a small amount of devolved power, as well as the 'city deals' agreed earlier this year, which saw the transfer of welcome, but limited, spending and borrowing powers from Whitehall increased to a 28 major English cities.

Despite this, England remains the most centralised nation in Europe. To liberals, with their long history of belief in power belonging in the hands of individuals at the lowest practical level, this is clearly unjust.

Yorkshire has a population larger than that of Scotland and yet almost all major decisions are made in Westminster rather than locally. Likewise for my native Sussex; it has a population of 1.5 million but no devolved government, while the American state of New Hampshire, population 1.3 million, has a governor, a senate, a house of representatives and a supreme court.

But if the need for English devolution is obvious, the solution is far less so. In fact, perhaps the biggest and most persistent obstacle to a workable solution is the size of England itself. With a population of 53 million people, England is ten times the size of Scotland and 17 times the size of Wales. Therefore simply giving England its own Scottish-style devolved parliament would be pointless. All it would achieve is to replace, rather unimpressively, centralisation of power in Whitehall with almost exactly the same degree of centralisation of power in another place. On the other hand, if we look at the 152 principal authorities of English local government, we find units far too small and numerous for a high level of devolution to work practically.

Labour thought it had found the solution to this with large regional assemblies for England along the same boundaries as European parliamentary constituencies. Unfortunately, when the voters of north east England were presented with the option of a North East Assembly with very limited powers and covering an area with which they felt no cultural connection, the response was a resounding 'no'.

With this rejection, other planned referendums were cancelled and the idea of regional assemblies outside

London died a quiet death. Since then, any further movement on English devolution has remained very much in limbo.

EMBARRASSING SILENCE

In fact, it is saying something that even loud proponents of constitutional reform, such as the Liberal Democrats, long-term supporters of federalism, have been at a loss to articulate what that they think about devolution in England and instead maintain an embarrassing silence on the issue.

Fortunately, the party's Federal Policy Committee belatedly woke up to this and set up a policy working group on federalism led by Dinti Batstone. Unfortunately, as evidenced by what was said at a consultation session earlier this year, the working group's current preferred option for England is the rather underwhelming concept of 'asymmetric devolution'. This would mean extending the current city deals only to those areas that asked for it in a referendum; elsewhere in England, the status quo would prevail. Over time, the amount of powers transferred in these deals would be increased incrementally.

Obviously, the final policy paper on this topic has yet to be written or debated at conference. However, such a policy (it can be stated with some confidence) will eventually ensure devolution in England comparable to that currently found in Scotland no later than by some point early in the 22nd century.

So for those of us who would like federalism and English devolution within our lifetimes, perhaps the time has come to ignore this proposal for further fence-sitting and instead find a real solution to the problem of size, which has so far stymied all proposals for English devolution.

Happily, that solution seems to be staring us right in the face, in the form of the historic counties of England. For over a thousand years, England has been divided into counties. Prior to the Local Government Act of 1888, there were 39 counties and today there are 48 ceremonial and 83 administrative ones.

But, despite the regularly altered administrative counties, wherever you go in England it is still common for people to identify with the ceremonial or historical counties in which they live. For example, if you were to ask the inhabitants of Portsmouth which county they live in, the most common answer will undoubtedly be Hampshire, despite the fact that Portsmouth has been a metropolitan county since 1992. In fact, wherever you look, you can find evidence that traditional English county identities remain alive and well in popular consciousness.

So when we look at the question of English devolution, why on earth are counties not our starting point? Obviously, no starting point is ideal but counties are certainly a better starting point in terms of population size, cultural identity and economic cohesiveness than anything else that has been proposed so far.

Let's consider how a county-based model of English devolution could work. England's large urban areas like Greater London, Greater Manchester, Tyne and Wear, Merseyside, Greater Bristol and the West Midlands would, with some boundary changes, broadly remain as they are today. Outside these conurbations, however, the historic counties of England would come into their own.

Counties that have been divided up by local government reforms, like Yorkshire or Cheshire, would be reunited while other modern counties, like Surrey or Norfolk, would stay as they are. The anomaly of the tiny county of Rutland, in order to spare the wrath of Liberator's Lord Bonkers, might be resolved by creating a joint unit of devolved government in the form of Rutland and Leicestershire.

The result of these new boundaries would be units ideally sized for devolved government, with populations ranging from 183,600 in Herefordshire to 8.2 million in Greater London. Given that the Isle of Man functions as a self-governing crown dependency with a population of fewer than 85,000 people, and that the disparity in population between the largest and smallest German länder is over 17 million people, there seems little reason to assume that these units of English devolution would not work.

When it comes to the actual form and powers of the new devolved government for these areas, probably the least controversial way to proceed would be to follow the precedent of the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament.

Single chamber English county assemblies with their own executives and first ministers would be introduced across England (including potentially in London to replace the London Mayor), following a single English referendum on devolution. Ideally, these assemblies would be elected using STV proportional representation but, given the likely opposition to this by Labour and the Conservatives, the mixed member system of proportional representation used in Scotland and Wales is realistically more likely.

Below the assemblies, local government would be reinvigorated through the breaking of existing county councils and county-size unitary authorities into new borough and district unitary authorities elected by STV and condensing responsibility for major local services like road maintenance, housing and rubbish collection under one council in each district.

As for the powers transferred from Whitehall to the new assemblies, a good starting point would be powers broadly equivalent to those of the Welsh Assembly – such as welfare, healthcare, education, emergency services, infrastructure and local government, to name but some of the powers that would be transferred.

“Perhaps the time has come to ignore this proposal for further fence-sitting”

Naturally, there would be challenges with such a large-scale transfer of power. Finding locations for the new assemblies to sit alone would be complex, let alone the handling of the transfer of civil servants and budgets away from Whitehall. Nor would the cost of such an undertaking be insignificant.

However, the potential benefits of English devolution cannot be overstated and far outweigh these challenges. In a country with major inequalities in unemployment, poverty, healthcare, economic growth and infrastructure, there is massive potential for devolution to revitalise the parts of England frequently forgotten about inside the Westminster bubble.

Decades-overdue projects like large-scale electrification of the railways outside London could finally get underway, as county assemblies used new powers over infrastructure to tackle projects that Whitehall had overlooked for decades. Job creation tailored to specific local economies across England could finally be made possible. The proper integration of health and social care at a local level would be made simpler by removing the need for the Secretary of State for Health to sign off on every single reform.

And democracy at the local level could only be enhanced by elections to bodies with meaningful power to affect everyday life, and the increased media attention and scrutiny that would come with them – including, perhaps, coverage by new local television channels similar to UTV in Northern Ireland.

Undoubtedly, the consequences of the largest government shake-up in England since the Norman Conquest would be huge. Many of these consequences would be likely to be for the good but some would inevitably be bad. But with decisions made at a local level by elected and accountable assembly members, this could only be an improvement on the status quo where decisions, good or bad, are made in Whitehall by people who normally have no connection to most of the places they decide policy for.

Furthermore, English devolution would be a major stepping stone towards the liberal goal of a federal UK, with devolved power being permanently enshrined at a devolved level rather than merely being borrowed from Westminster – something that the entire UK would benefit from.

But if English devolution is ever to happen, it is clear that it requires action and not fence-sitting by liberals. There is still very little public demand in England for devolution, despite the benefits that it would bring. A good step towards changing this would be the establishment of an English constitutional convention, to allow political and civic groups mutually to establish a framework for English devolution.

Another would be for the Liberal Democrats to get off the fence and put devolution for England on the political agenda, by deciding once and for all the model of devolution that they prefer and putting it in their 2015 manifesto.

George Potter is a member of Liberal Youth and Secretary of Guildford Liberal Democrats. He blogs at: <http://thepotterblogger.blogspot.co.uk>

OBITUARY: LORD CHITNIS

Michael Meadowcroft pays tribute to a key organiser of the first Liberal revival, whose falling-out with Jeremy Thorpe led him to a second career in social policy and human rights

Pratap Chitnis, who has died aged 77 of cancer after a short illness, was a Liberal strategist, a radical member of the House of Lords and a highly effective chief executive of a Quaker trust.

He had more influence on British politics than was apparent at the time. He was always more interested in putting ideas into practice than in spending time formulating them – though it should not be thought, as has been suggested, that he was uninterested in policy and values. In fact, he was deeply concerned about social values at home and about repression abroad.

Every speech of his in the House of Lords, and the whole thrust of the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust's work during his 20 years as chief executive, was designed to diminish inequality, to protect vulnerable individuals and to ensure that the political dispossessed achieved political influence.

It was because he had a fine mind, which saw quickly the political machinations required to implement policy, that he became highly impatient with the often interminable Liberal Party processes.

Pratap Chitnis was also a very conservative Roman Catholic. The path to this was itself somewhat curious. He was born in London of Anglo-Indian parentage. At the outbreak of war in 1939 when he was three, he was sent away from London into the care of nuns.

From there he went to the Jesuit college Stonyhurst. It is said that these decisions had their roots in his French maternal grandmother, every other close relation being Hindu. His education certainly had a deep effect on Chitnis, and he was thereafter deeply religious.

He deplored the decision to promote the mass in the vernacular, believing that the Latin mass ensured that a believer anywhere in the world would feel 'at home'. He saw no intellectual problem in being by faith a conservative catholic and by politics a radical social Liberal.

Until his involvement with the Liberal Party began in 1959, Chitnis followed no consistent path. He read English at Birmingham University, followed by a master's degree in English literature at Kansas University. He then worked as an economist at the National Coal Board, during which time he attended a Liberal rally at the Royal Albert Hall. Even in the party's dark days it could fill huge halls with rallies of the faithful and this event was no exception. Chitnis was impressed by Jo Grimond's speech but he was even more amazed that a party he thought dead and buried could pack the Albert Hall, so much so that he joined it.

He did, however, have a family link with Liberalism through his maternal grandfather, Manmatha

Chandra Mallik, who was twice a Liberal candidate, in the 1906 and December 1910 elections, and was also a member of the National Liberal Club from 1884.

Chitnis's local party was St Marylebone Borough and he was immediately enlisted as a local election candidate in the May 1959 elections. The St John's Wood Terrace ward returned five councillors. The Liberals finished third with Chitnis the bottom Liberal and, therefore, fifteenth and last, with precisely 98 votes. It was his first and last candidature! Four months later he was the full-time agent for the Liberal candidate, Michael Hydleman, in the North Kensington constituency at the general election. The presence of Sir Oswald Mosley as a fascist candidate made it a more significant constituency than it would otherwise have been. Hydleman was Jewish and Chitnis visibly of an Indian background. They tackled the Mosley presence head on and were duly met with an unpleasant and sometimes violent response.

SUPPORTING LOCAL CAMPAIGNS

After the 1959 general election, there were those in the Liberal Party, particularly Richard Wainwright, who believed that there needed to be a much greater emphasis on local elections and that it was crucial for party headquarters to take the lead in advising and supporting local campaigns and local councillors. Early in 1960, Chitnis was appointed as the party's first local government officer. He set about tracking down every Liberal municipal representative so that they could be mailed regularly and visited occasionally.

This was less simple than it sounds. For instance, Stamford, where there was little Liberal campaigning, was listed as having one Liberal. Eventually it was ascertained by contacting the local press using the devious pseudonym of the Municipal Research Association that Alderman ES Bowman sat as a Liberal. The unfortunate elderly alderman was thereafter in regular receipt of mailings urging him to take direct action on a range of local issues.

The work of the department rapidly expanded and in February 1962 I joined Chitnis as his assistant. He had already been appointed as the Liberal agent for the promising by-election in Orpington. He took me to three meetings in London to show me 'what we do' and announced that he was forthwith departing to Orpington. He never came back to the local government department.

His role at the by-election was crucial. He designed and implemented an organisational master plan, with

the basic day-to-day organisation delegated to three full-time sub-agents, and took key strategic decisions, such as keeping the then inexperienced candidate, Eric Lubbock, off three-party media events when the highly articulate Conservative candidate, Peter Goldman, was included.

In addition, he was decisive in grasping unexpected opportunities. When the Daily Mail gave him advance information that its National Opinion Poll appearing on polling day would show the Liberals narrowly ahead, he bought nine thousand copies and had them distributed to the commuters at all the railway stations in the constituency. All this, plus the party's strong local government record in Orpington, ensured that the Labour vote collapsed and that the party had a massive majority. Chitnis once told me that he had overspent the legal limit threefold!

The effect of this result was devastating for the Conservative government and the party was determined to capitalise on it. It immediately appointed Chitnis as the party's training officer and, two years later, as its press officer. Finally, in 1966, he was appointed the party's chief executive.

The election of Jeremy Thorpe as party leader marked the beginning of the end of Chitnis's involvement at the heart of the organisation. With a few others, including Tim Beaumont, Gruffydd Evans, Geoff Tordoff and myself, he was involved in a vain attempt to stop him becoming leader, not on any grounds connected with the barely known relationship with Norman Scott, but because of a view that Thorpe had little intellectual depth and also because he had a tendency to interfere in party affairs without the authority to do so.

Thorpe never forgave those who had opposed him. Chitnis's position as the head of the party's organisation became increasingly uncomfortable. In addition, the party failed to follow his advice that cuts in the party's organisation were required in order to deal with the financial deficit, and, in October 1969, he resigned.

Chitnis was immediately snapped up by the Joseph Rowntree Social Service Trust (now the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust) in York as its first professional head and he thus began the second phase of his political effectiveness. It was an ideal appointment, which enabled him to influence public policy following discussion with a small powerful group of trustees, including Jo Grimond, rather than having to go through the party debates.

He has been described as self-effacing but this was not the case. A very private person, yes, but he was always happy to be known as the author of a particular policy or tactic. His marriage in 1964 to Anne Brand, an employee at Liberal headquarters, came rather out of the blue but it delighted their colleagues and friends. Their son, Simon, was born in 1966. He was a bright, intelligent boy and it was a huge blow when he developed a brain tumour. Eventually Simon died in 1974.

PROACTIVE AND CONTROVERSIAL

Before Chitnis's arrival at the Trust, it had pursued progressive political causes but he made it into a much more proactive and often controversial body.

It put its efforts into peacemaking in Northern Ireland and it established relations with liberation movements in Namibia, the then Rhodesia, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique to assist them to provide administration and services in the areas that they had liberated.

This work was the cause of a bomb arriving by post at the trust's York office. Fortunately it didn't go off. He was also now in charge of the grants to the Liberal Party and he was able to avoid significant funding going in ways that could be influenced by Thorpe. He was also instrumental in the introduction of the so-called 'chocolate soldiers', whereby bright young assistants were attached to parliamentarians. The scheme was later taken over by the government. Being conscious that many radical groups needed but couldn't afford a London base, he got the trust to buy a large building in Poland Street in Soho, to provide space to a host of worthy groups. Also at this time, Chitnis became a member of the Community Relations Commission, from 1970 to 1977, and of the BBC's Asian Programme Advice Committee, 1972 to 1977. These appointments enabled him to claim publicly when made a life peer in 1977 that it was for his services to race relations and to sit on the cross benches, even though the peerage was part of the Liberal Party allocation.

During his first decade in the Lords, he created a third political career as a defender of human rights, liberal immigration policies and, above all, as an outspoken opponent of authoritarian regimes that manipulated elections.

He went on election monitoring missions to El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, and attempted to go to Guyana in 1986, only to be refused a visa by the regime. He also went to monitor the Rhodesian election of 1979, run by Bishop Muzorewa and the Rev. Sithole. He travelled round the country and took direct evidence from those intimidated and assaulted by the regime. All the other monitoring bodies gave the election a favourable judgement but Chitnis condemned it in forthright terms, calling it "a gigantic confidence trick."

His Liberal Party membership lapsed in 1969 but, when Jeremy Thorpe was finally forced to resign, he was instrumental in persuading Jo Grimond to become leader again until a successor could be elected. Then when David Steel was elected leader, Chitnis became one of his advisors, particularly assisting with his election tours. He also advised Steel during the Lib-Lab Pact of 1977-78 and during the negotiations that led to the Liberal-SDP Alliance in 1981.

Chitnis retired from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust in 1988 and moved to France with Anne to bury himself in Provence growing olives and attending daily mass. He disappointed his many friends and colleagues by virtually cutting himself off from political and social affairs and was sadly missed over the past 25 years.

Michael Meadowcroft was Liberal MP for Leeds West 1983-87

REPAIRING THE DAMAGE

Liberal Youth is working to restore the party's image among young people after the tuition fees fiasco, says Hannah Thompson

Liberal Youth is on to something. The presence of young people at the Eastleigh by-election was noted. I was down there for a week and lost track of how many young people were dipping in and out of the headquarters.

After the results were known, Clegg, Farron and others all came out and said how wonderful it was that the Liberal Democrats had such enthusiastic young people. And it's true. Having a large number of young people campaigning for you can really make the difference between victory and defeat. But Liberal Youth isn't resting on its laurels and basking in former glories. Instead, it is focusing on something very important.

Two years seems like a long time but the reality is that, if the party is to outperform expectations, then it needs to start thinking about 2015 now. That's why Liberal Youth is putting all of its energies into preparing for the general election. Between now and 2015, we want to recruit more members and supporters than we've had before.

This won't be easy. Recent polling has found that just 3% of young people think that the Liberal Democrats are the party most likely to enact policies beneficial to young people. But where others see a barrier, we see an opportunity, 3% is basically rock bottom, so the only way to go is up.

Despite there only being one direction of travel for the party when it comes to young people the task is going to be difficult and will need a platform that matters to young people and that they can relate to.

We have a platform that is the basis of our Freshers' recruitment drive, which we think will go some way to help. This comprises policy options based around expanding access to public transport for young people, and providing paid internships and increasing the provision of apprenticeships to ensure young people can all get a fair start in life. These are all things that young people care about, and the sooner we get them into the policy book the easier it will be for the party as a whole and for Liberal Youth to help recruit new members.

Recruitment can only take us so far, however. We can have a small army of leafletters and canvassers but if they aren't doing things properly then we'll be missing out on a lot of opportunities for growth.

As such, our second focus is on giving our members training to help them develop. But rather than just turning them into campaign fodder, we're not just going to teach them about canvassing techniques. We're going to ensure that they are taught exactly how you can get properly involved in the party in multiple levels. We'll ensure they all know how to submit policy motions to conference and how they can get further involved with the party in ways that don't involve being a councillor or a PPC.

At its heart, though, Liberal Youth is a campaigning organisation. Our members don't just want to knock on doors, they want to set and create policy that will make Britain a fairer and more liberal place. Which is why we're going out of our way to help them do just that. When opportunities are available to sit on policy groups, we're ensuring that members know about it so that we can maximise the chances of getting young people's views listened to on subjects that matter to them.

From education to energy and defence to foreign policy, young people's views are hugely significant because it is we who are the future of the country. We need to ensure that the leadership – in the form of Clegg and its team and the various committees and executives – realises that what young people think matters, and that we should be doing more to listen to them and engage with them as people, as activists and as future leaders of the party.

Listening to young people is more important than ever. After the introduction of tuition fees, the perception is that the Liberal Democrats just don't care about young people.

We're making some progress on restoring that trust but, in order for it to flourish again, we need to ensure that all parts of the party are listening to what we have to say.

Hannah Thompson is vice-chair of Liberal Youth

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BE PREPARED

The 2015 general election could deliver results that make a coalition with Labour unavoidable. Simon Hebditch reports on early efforts to find common ground

The political world is beginning to speculate about the possible outcome of the next general election. It is time to start thinking seriously about whether an alternative government alliance could be put together.

I accept entirely that the vast majority of active Liberal Democrats voted in favour of joining the current coalition – some because they believed it would best reflect the party's interests, some because of the arithmetic and some who, with a heavy heart, felt there was no alternative.

There will be many divergent views about the record of this government and the Liberal Democrats as part of it. Raising the tax threshold is undoubtedly a good thing and the pupil premium may be making a difference in some areas. Despite the nascent economic recovery, I believe that the government's economic programme has been disastrous. There was no need for the sort of economic panic that afflicted the party in 2010 and a more measured programme of fiscal retrenchment could have been undertaken.

As it is, the government has presided over major cuts in welfare spending and a rise in the cost of living, which is hitting vast numbers of people – both those in work and outside it. Child poverty is on the increase and inequality is widening. We have submitted to an utterly unnecessary and damaging reorganisation of the NHS.

There has been a systematic attack on the role of the state, with which the current Liberal Democrat leadership has been complicit. Of course, there needs to be change. Not all services need to be provided by the state. There are big opportunities for the non-profit sector, for example, to become mainstream service providers.

But the fact that there should be a greater diversity in provision does not imply that the state is irrelevant. In fact, when a major crisis occurs, the state is the only mechanism that can deal with the immediate problem. The financial crash in 2008 was a case in point. It was the state that bailed out the banks and prevented catastrophe.

We now have three years experience of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat alliance and so have a pretty good idea of how things would proceed if the parliamentary arithmetic again pointed in that direction. We also know that a number of senior Liberal Democrats might prefer that option.

But we have no idea whether an alternative alliance with Labour would work. One of the problems in 2010 was that the electorate had no idea what might happen if a hung parliament was returned. All politicians like to keep to the 'faith' that they are going to win an absolute majority. It is yet another sign of macho politics.

The Liberal Democrats are still committed to the principle of electoral reform. If that is ever achieved, it is more than likely that coalition building will be normal rather than an exception.

That means we should be prepared to discuss during the election how we might proceed afterwards. The people have the right to know what our core programmes would be and what we would insist upon in any negotiations. Half a dozen 'star' items should be in our manifesto that are absolute commitments – other areas would be negotiable with any partner.

There should be adequate preparation of these positions prior to an election so that the electorate knows what is going on. In that context, a task force of activists from both Labour and the Liberal Democrats is being established with a view to publishing a draft document, which could outline agreed policy programmes in a number of areas. The document would propose specific policy initiatives and the areas to be covered would have to include the economy, the regeneration of housing stock, equalities, civil liberties, health and social care, energy and the environment, and the role of the state including the provision of social security. There may well be others, but that list gives us plenty to do!

The aim is to see if a potential coalition agreement is possible between the Liberal Democrats and Labour. The majority of Liberal Democrat members or supporters seem to prefer that alignment following the 2015 election. I have no idea whether this will work, but we might as well try. Some will argue that such a document would have no authority and so could be either ignored or rejected by both party leaderships.

That is why we will be discussing the draft document with senior members of both parties before and after publication. If the formal structures of both parties think the document provides at least a starting point for further work, then they could take the issues forward.

The biggest difficulties will be more to do with the culture of both parties than individual policy prescriptions. Both are tribal. Both find it difficult to talk to others in a constructive way.

Surely, Liberal Democrats should take the lead in ensuring that real, transparent debate takes place that the electorate can see and appreciate if we are to expect anyone will ever believe us when we witter on about the 'new politics'.

Simon Hebditch is a founder of Liberal Left

(continued from page 11)

The bedroom tax will actually create further dependency among people who are already vulnerable. Many people with disabilities continue to live in their homes without recourse to seeking official services. Friends, families, neighbours all chip in to provide unpaid help and support and, while this is not an ideal situation, it does alleviate some of the pressures on hard-pressed social care budgets.

And what of the social landlords whose incomes will be negatively affected by the policy? Many local authorities have only recently been able to develop 30-year business plans – the kind of long-term planning that is required – as a result of the shift to ‘self financing’. Only now they find their ambitions undermined by the very government that freed them up from a position of tenants in one part of the country heavily subsidising tenants elsewhere. Non-payment of bedroom tax – which we are already seeing up and down the country – could scupper those well-prepared plans. We place enormous expectations on housing providers to dig us out of the mire and then hobble them from the start.

Some grassroots Liberal Democrats advocate ‘trimming’ the new law to make it ‘less unfair’. This is a completely specious suggestion. If the right number of the right sized homes were not available last week, last month or last year, they will not be available next week, next month or next year.

It is time that members of the coalition stood by their Liberal Democrat principles and clearly state that the bedroom tax is a cut and not a reform; that it is constructed on wrong-headed and mean-minded flawed logic; and it is going to hurt people whose interests we claim to normally champion. Enough said?

Ruwan Uduwera-Perera is Liberal Democrat English party diversity champion and vice-chair of Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats

LETTERS



WRONG-HEADED POLICY

Dear Liberator,

Chris Bailey (Liberator 360) makes a series of persuasive points about the psychology of markets and the difficulties of macro forecasting. However, I take strong issue with his concluding paragraph, where he states that the government’s economic strategy “has a better chance of working than any alternative strategy”.

I used to teach economics and, in my retirement, I have had the opportunity to follow closely the macro events of the last five years. The overwhelming weight of evidence is that the Osborne Plan A (expansionary fiscal consolidation) has been a disaster. Any objective analysis leads to this compelling conclusion – and Liberal Democrats should give up being ‘uberloyal’ to the leadership and act in a dispassionate and evidence-informed manner.

And you don’t have to just take my word for it. I can highly recommend Paul Krugman’s book *End This Depression Now!* and Mark Blyth’s recent publication *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea*.

To the above I can add an article by Martin Wolf, chief economics commentator of the Financial Times, in the New York Review of Books (‘How Austerity Has Failed’; 11 July 2013). He wrote: “Austerity has failed. It turned a nascent recovery into stagnation.”

Of the government’s failure to borrow and spend in a Keynesian fashion, Wolf writes that it “has helped cause a lamentably weak recovery that is very likely to leave long-lasting scars. It was a huge mistake.”

I joined the Young Liberals in 1961. In the subsequent 52 years, my saddest experience within the party has been our support for the wrong-headed economic policy currently pursued by the coalition.

John Cole - Shipley

SOLUTIONS FOR AFRICA

Dear Liberator,

Could Becky Tinsley give us some solutions and not just criticism please? I have found her series of articles since 2005 on Rwanda, Darfur, South Sudan and recently on aid really interesting, informative and convincing. She has highlighted the failures of international bodies (the UN or AU), the international community (usually meaning the US, Britain, France, maybe China) and of governments in parts of Africa (usually the leading politicians).

What she does not do is present many solutions. It is usually an after-the-event ‘you should have done this’, with little advice for solving disputes. So obviously the border between North and South Sudan should have been settled before a referendum and elections. Of course there should be peacemakers in disputed areas.

Ms Tinsley reminds me of Robert Fisk, the veteran Middle East correspondent for the Independent. Always informed and persuasive but little on solutions – I suspect he thinks correctly that many are obvious (dialogue not fighting, stop settlement expansion, stop double standards). Her recent article on aid (Liberator 359) contained criticism many will agree with of big business like charities, turf wars by NGOs, and corrupt governments. It minimised the many committed aid workers – and politicians and civil servants – around the world, trying to do the right thing. Some advice for them, please.

Kiron Reid
Liverpool

A Concise History of the Arabs

by John McHugo

Saqi Books 2013 £20.00

The title belies the content because this is not a text book. McHugo's approach is more personal.

He may have had to sacrifice extensive detail to be concise but the book's success comes from its page-turning readability. Light touches of human detail help as well, such as why Assad's father turned to revolution or the analysis of the First World War and its aftermath, with the colonial powers behaving like landlords re-negotiating among themselves the leases they needed to impose so as to delay democracy, almost as if the Inevitability of Independence was like the Right To Buy.

In places, this making history familiar is perhaps too loose; it would have been interesting to know which were "the many states from the wider Muslim world that joined the US-led coalition" that set about the liberation of Kuwait in 1990, and more about the explanation that Saddam Hussein (as well as Arafat and other Arab leaders) had only a limited understanding of the West and its psychology because they had had little exposure to the West prior to coming to power. This may or may not be true but it is weak – after all, it would be hard to claim that even the West understands itself and its own psychology.

The book has an essential glossary of Arabic terms and words. At the back, there is an excellent further reading list and a treasure-trove of a bibliography.

I don't usually read history books. I shall read more now. In fact, I only picked this up so as to get a handle on what was happening in Egypt where my daughter and son-in-law have been working as teachers for the last five years.

I reckon I can now talk to them in an informed and coherent way. The son-in-law teaches history and at the time of Tahrir, while their American colleagues were getting on planes home quicker than you can say 'freedom fries', they told us they just had to stay because all around them there was progress – history was going on.

Jim Pennington



REVIEWS

The Return of Feminist Liberalism

by Ruth Abbey

Acumen 2011 £18.99

What is feminist liberalism? Why not liberal feminism? The author's decision to use the former is clearly explained: a feminist liberal is a liberal first and foremost, someone for whom feminism is a consequence and extension of their liberal principles.

The three authors covered in this work (Susan Moller Okin, Jean Hampton and Martha Nussbaum) all take a position that intrinsically links liberalism to feminism, and so attempt to reconcile two potentially conflicting doctrines. Their reasons for doing so, and their successes and failures in achieving this aim, are the focal point of this book.

Liberalism was the fertile ground from which feminist thought arose, but the relationship between the two turned sour over time as liberal principles were used to prevent the advancement of the feminist agenda.

Abbey highlights several sticking points, such as the public-private sphere separation, which justifies non-intervention in domestic issues at the heart of feminist concern, and liberalism's primal value of the individual, which makes it easy to ignore group oppression.

Despite the catalogue of differences between the two doctrines, and the majority of modern feminists who reject liberalism, there are those who believe the two can be reconciled and are, in fact, necessary to one another. This book is far from biased, with criticisms and counter-criticisms examined at every turn, but it seems that Abbey believes that Okin, Hampton and Nussbaum can hold their own against their detractors, and that feminist liberalism is not a contradiction in terms.

The three authors who are examined advance radically different ways of chiming liberalism with feminism, and they provide excellent examples of the diversity within the liberal school of thought, not to mention the feminist one.

Okin does not believe that the liberal principle of individual freedom can be supported while the domestic sphere is seen as private and hence untouchable. She sees the egalitarian family at the heart of society. Her most radical proposal for crossing the public-private divide is her suggestion that the salary of the working adult in a household should be paid equally to both members, even if one of them exclusively carries out housework.

The importance of the family to the outside world lies in its function as a school, as it informs children's beliefs about gender and power. Her most criticised work is her analysis of the treatment of women in other cultures. She suggests that multiculturalism, understood as the promotion of cultural group rights, can be bad for women as these protected cultures may internally discriminate against women. Okin's beliefs are therefore sometimes at odds with the liberal tradition, and her work on feminism requires a re-formulation of some liberal principles.

Hampton shares Okin's desire to re-mould liberalism to allow scrutiny of the private. She extends contract theory, the foundation stone of the liberal ideal of a public sphere of civil rights, to a tool for analysing every relationship, including personal ones. If a relationship is just then no one is oppressed, and the contractual device helps us uncover the unfair burden on one party in an unjust relationship. Hampton is also attached to the Kantian belief in the equal intrinsic worth of every individual.

Contrary to many feminists, she supports abstraction of the universal equal being to further feminist goals because it allows us to compare the treatment of an individual to the ideal and see if they are being oppressed.

Nussbaum is very ambitious with her human capabilities approach, as she believes she has identified ten capabilities that are fundamental to all humans, at all times and all places.

Here is clearly a liberal theory applicable to everyone, from which feminist arguments can emerge, as women are most often those lacking minimum fulfilment of the ten capabilities. Once again, it enables the crossing of the public-private frontier, by giving the state a central responsibility in ensuring access to the ten capabilities.

Like any universal theory, there are criticisms to be made about how we can be sure these are the fundamental needs of every person and society. Abbey seems least satisfied with Nussbaum out of the three writers, as she does not feel that this point has been satisfactorily proven. However, she prefers Nussbaum's nuanced study of other cultures to Okin's, which can be simplistic or disparaging.

The book finishes with a look at modern feminist liberals and how the common feminist criticisms of liberalism are being overcome. The breadth and depth of Abbey's analysis throughout is outstanding and, in less than three hundred pages, she carefully brings together and explains hours of reading of original works. For any adherent to the feminist or liberal tradition who feared they had to forsake the desirable values of the other 'side', this book is testament to the reconciliation possible between two of the most important modern worldviews.

Eleanor Healy Birt

Jerusalem by Yotam Ottolenghi & Sami Tamimi Ebury Press 2012 £27

It has always been my contention, drawing opprobrium from zealots of both Israel and Palestine, that the peoples of that country have more in common with each other than they do with some of their neighbours. Their democratic

traditions are stronger to begin with. It doesn't surprise me that, unlike their supporters in the west, particularly those with another agenda, many of my Palestinian friends, at least, share that view.

One of the problems for the Israelis is that, in the wake of 1948, Jewish communities across the Arab world, whose roots went back millennia, were cast out of their homes and sent to Israel. Their descendants are the majority of the Israeli population, with all of the attendant fears of family experience.

Ottolenghi and Tamimi therefore contend that Jerusalem is a melting pot, or more specifically, a cooking pot of all that is best across the region. They chart the confluence of Arab and Jewish dishes and are excited by the prospect of these bringing peoples together, as indeed it has brought them together. The caution has to be, as I think Amos Oz pointed out, you can drink a lot of cups of coffee before you get peace. But heroism at least to try it.

What does one make of this as a cookery book? What do you know of the cuisine of Israel/Palestine? The latter at least is sorely neglected, over-shadowed by its Lebanese neighbour.

Jerusalem, with its authors more grounded in the west, doesn't suffer from this to the same extent, though a recipe for pomegranate molasses wouldn't go amiss for those of us in small provincial towns (the lamb-stuffed quince with pomegranate and coriander is superb – just when you were wondering what to do with all of those quinces).

A lot of people will probably have received this book for Christmas; it is beautiful. But don't leave it on the shelf. It is quite straightforward to use, especially if, as is inevitable, you allow a bit more time for preparation, perhaps reading through the day before in case there is something commonplace in Arab cooking, like pomegranate molasses, that is less easy to come by here. You'll never overlook kohlrabi again.

Stewart Rayment

Lincoln [film] dir. Stephen Spielberg 2013

A definite for political anoraks, as

the film deals almost exclusively with Lincoln's attempts to get the support of the House of Representatives for the 13th amendment to the constitution, which prohibited slavery.

A portrait is presented of a boisterous and often corrupt House of Representatives. Unlike in modern times, the radicals are a powerful faction in the Republican Party and the Democrats are the reactionaries whose ranks are depleted by the secession of the southern states.

The plot focuses on peace feelers sent out to pacify the conservative Republicans, whose support Lincoln needs. However, the Confederate emissaries are prevented from reaching Washington so that Lincoln can deny that talks are taking place. There is an urgency to pass the amendment before the Southern congressmen return.

The film also shows the unscrupulous tactics adopted by agents hired to influence congressmen with bribes and blackmail to secure the vote. The relationship between Lincoln and his secretary of state Seward plays a prominent role in the film.

The assassination and the actual ending of the war are given only cursory glances, as the film is almost exclusively devoted to the vote and the events preceding it, so the various conspiracy theories about the assassination are ignored. Whatever the film's praise from the critics, the 1864 presidential election and Lincoln's decision not to renege on his emancipation proclamation, and more coverage of the conflict, might have made a better theme for a film on Lincoln

Andrew Hudson

Empire of Secrets by Calder Walton HarperPress 2013 £25

Calder Walton gives an account of the role the British intelligence services played in the post war decolonisation process, drawing on recently released records. As colonies were regarded as British territory, security came under the remit of MI5 rather than the Secret Intelligence Service.

Walton demonstrates that MI5 had a surprisingly enlightened approach to emergent nationalist leaders, regarding Kwame

Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, Hastings Banda and Kenneth Kaunda as people with whom it was in Britain's interests to reach accommodation. The conclusions had, however, been reached from mail intercepts through the use of Home Office warrants.

MI5 was able to differentiate between African nationalists with socialist leanings and rhetoric, and hard-line communists. The last thing these leaders wanted was to replace one colonial master with another.

While a transfer of powerful took place relatively quickly and peacefully in Ghana, it was not to occur smoothly elsewhere, where colonial officials and the white settlers' lobby viewed things differently, regarding Kenyatta as being both a communist and involved with Mau Mau terrorism.

MI5 also warned that draconian emergency powers involving transportations of people and internment camps were likely to be counter-productive, alienating the majority of the population and turning some people into terrorists.

MI5 was also sceptical of the value of information obtained through torture. However, its views were largely ignored and, with the same mistakes being made each time, unrest occurred in different colonies. In the long run, Britain ended up ceding power to these leaders and links between MI5, then MI6, and the intelligence services of the newly independent

countries were retained.

The head of MI5 in 1948, Sir Percy Sillitoe, former Chief Constable of Glasgow, expressed concern about passing on information to the intelligence services in South Africa following the election of Francois Malan's National Party, fearing that it would not only be used against Africans but also against his English-speaking opponents.

In his summary, Walton describes a catalogue of errors being repeated in new situations but acknowledges that Britain made a better job of decolonisation than France, Belgium or the Netherlands. The book is well worth reading as it demonstrates that MI5 by that time was no longer dominated by bowler-hatted Colonel Blimps who saw reds under every bed.

Andrew Hudson

Istemi by Alexei Nikitin Peter Owen 2013 £8.99

Before the Iron Curtain was drawn back, writers like Milan Kundera gave us insights into life under socialist tyranny. Twenty years on, what is it like in those countries? Alexei Nikitin paints a grey picture of contemporary Ukraine – made worse by his frequent allusions to the weather (which tell us we have little to complain about).

Panic strikes when an e-mail of this past lands in the surviving

protagonists' mailboxes. The detective work relies too much on chance but one wonders what happens next. If this is downtown Kiev, it is grey indeed.

Stewart Rayment

Le Livre Blanc by Jean Cocteau Peter Owen republished 2013 £9.99

Books about sexual love often struggle; I wouldn't dream of plodding through some of today's grey outpourings. Cocteau, who we generally take to be the author of *Le Livre Blanc*, condenses his ecstasies and his pains into around 55 pages, give or take another dozen or so illustrations, which is just as well, for once started you will not want to put the book down. The book is about love, particularly homosexual love, and is disarmingly honest.

Peter Owen has reissued the book on the 50th anniversary of Cocteau's death. Here is a name we know, but know little of – a couple of films that you probably haven't seen (*Orphée* and *La Belle et La Bête*) and a novel (*Les Enfants Terribles*). Whilst a Renaissance Man in his day, politically on the right, he went out of fashion as the socialist left became culturally ascendant. It also took a long time for Wodehouse, who made similar mistakes, to be rehabilitated.

Stewart Rayment

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The Liberator Collective

From time to time, I like to share my accumulated wisdom with the Well-Behaved Orphans. Today I give them a little talk on the importance of Telling The Truth and touch upon the infant George Washington – no doubt you know the tale.

I emphasise that there is nothing wrong with chopping down trees – Mr Gladstone would often do so when he came to the Hall. So much so, indeed, that my grandfather kept a supply of Cow Gum to hand so that he could put the trees back after the GOM had left. For years I maintained it myself, so that it could be used by passing Focus editors, but there does not seem the demand for it these days.

Clegg arrives at the Hall in a car that looks rather the worse for recent collisions: “I’ve decided to stop looking in the rear-view mirror,” he explains breezily. He tells me he wants to lie low for a while as he has upset rather a lot of people lately.

“You will be quite safe here,” I assure him. “Why don’t you hide in my boathouse? No one will think of looking for your there.”

Later I walk down to the Bonkers’ Arms, where I recall they have one of those telephones with a Button B...

I am taking tea on the terrace when I notice an unruly mob struggling with the door to the tradesmen’s entrance. I hurry over to give them a piece of my mind.

“We’re students,” they say, “and we’re looking for that Nick Clegg.” It soon transpires that they are jolly cross with him – tuition fees and so forth.

“Now look here,” I say. “In the first place, this is private property: in the second, you are all pulling at a door marked ‘Push’. Let me assure you, you won’t find Nick Clegg in the Hall.” I may, quite inadvertently, have winked at this point.

Talking of Clegg, I wouldn’t see the fellow starve. I have Cook rustle him up a cold supper and summon a Well-Behaved Orphan to take it to him in a wicker basket, with the promise of shiny new sixpence if he is quick about it.

To the Bonkers’ Arms, which is simply chock-a-block: as soon one barrel of Smithson & Greaves Northern Bitter is breached it is time to tap another one. I get talking to some of the throng and discover that they are all civil libertarians – sound chaps to a man and, indeed, woman. Some are outraged by Clegg’s support for secret courts, while others take a dim view of his support for the smashing of the Manchester Guardian’s computers. (A woman called Miranda also comes into it somewhere, but I am afraid I did not grasp that bit. Still, I am sure she is

Lord Bonkers’ Diary

A Very Good Sort).

Conversation soon turns to where Clegg may be found. I, of course, decline to breathe a word and suggest they ask Meadowcroft. I later note him tapping his nose and leering while accepting a pint from a particularly civil civil libertarian.

Early morning sees the Bonkers Hall Estate thronged with civil libertarians hunting for

Clegg. Only a few hours later, they are joined by the students. I have to fire my twelve-bore when they threatened to walk on my cricket pitch, but otherwise I turn a blind eye to their depredations.

Out for a walk this afternoon, I find that they have cornered the very same Well-Behaved Orphan who took Clegg his supper yesterday. Naturally, I move in to rescue the little fellow, who has something of the young Christopher Robin about him.

“Now, my boy,” I ask him, “do you remember that story I told you the other day? The one about George Washington and the cherry tree, and about how a chap should always tell the truth No Matter What? Oh and here’s a shilling: I think sixpence was a bit mean, what with inflation and the price of gobstoppers.”

He assures me he does, and as I walk away I hear him lisping: “I cannot tell a lie: he is in the boathouse.”

I look out across Rutland Water in the twilight. Someone has lit a bonfire on one of the islands and is desperately waving his arms and shouting for rescue.

The telephone rings. It is someone from the Deputy Prime Minister’s office asking if I have seen Clegg.

“The last time I saw him, he was swimming away from my boathouse and a baying mob of students and civil libertarians,” I tell them. “I am afraid we must assume the worst.”

Sir Alan Beith arrives with an old lamp. “It was this quest of yours,” he explains. “I wasn’t sure where to go, so I ended up in an antique shop in Alnwick. I found this. It’s rather battered and the wick needs trimming, but for some reason the flame never goes out.”

“Good heavens man! You’ve found the spirit of Liberalism. I shall have it cleaned and polished at once.”

“I expect you will give it to Clegg when you have done that.”

I consider Beith for a moment and then reply: “No, old fellow. I think you had better look after it.”

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