

liberator



*"I promised a year
of stability in my
new year's message"*

"Nick, did you ask
the Scots or Ukip?"

- 🔥 Fighting back in a general election – Paddy Ashdown
- 🔥 How to solve the housing crisis – Matthew Taylor
- 🔥 US Republicans leave the mainstream – Dennis Graf

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COMMENTARY

FUTURE IMPERFECT

There are two certainties and one conundrum coming in 2014. Barring some utter cataclysm, there will not be a general election, and the fevered speculation about “will the prime minister go early”, usually heard at this stage of previous parliaments, will be absent.

In May, there will be the European and local government elections. In the former, the Liberal Democrats have finally, and rightly, decided to fight an explicitly pro-European campaign (*Liberator* 362).

The realisation has been a long time coming that a pro-European vote exists and that hardly anyone disposed to vote Liberal Democrat gives a toss about referendums on the EU. Now that it has come, it will be interesting to see whether the ‘party of in’ holds its nerve in the campaign.

If it does hold its nerve, this should embolden it to take other positions that may not be popular with a majority of voters but which are popular with as many of them as the party needs for a decent result. Green taxes, provision of land for house building and a trenchant defence of civil liberty, among other things, could all come into this category.

There are local elections around England but probably of most interest are those in London, where an oddity of timing means the Liberal Democrats have escaped the municipal carnage elsewhere, as the London boroughs have not been contested since the 2010 general election.

One possibility is that party campaigners in London, having not previously been through the anti-coalition fire, face a mauling. The other is that initial anger with the coalition has worn off and they will survive in rather better shape than in urban areas elsewhere. Inner London’s peculiar social mix of the rich and poor living side-by-side also makes predictions difficult.

The conundrum is the referendum on Scottish independence. So far, the ‘no’ campaign has exuded confidence that Scotland will stay in the UK and it has had polling evidence behind it. But people are seldom rational when they hear nationalist drums being banged (just look at UKIP supporters) and that could change.

While it is unlikely to be helpful to send large numbers of Liberal Democrats from England and Wales north of the border to tell Scots how to vote on their country’s future, Liberal Democrats elsewhere will surely wish the ‘no’ campaign well.

This is because, despite Tory noises about saving the union, it is hard to think of anything more likely to benefit the Tory party than getting shot of Scotland, which is no doubt why David Cameron so readily agreed to a referendum there. An independent

Scotland would see the Tories lose one MP, the Liberal Democrats 11 and Labour dozens, radically changing the make up of the remaining UK parliament.

Speculation about potential coalitions after 2015 rarely takes account of the possibility of an absent Scotland. Maybe it should, and Scottish Liberal Democrats should make clear what kind of assistance if any would be useful.

We can also be certain that 2014 will see the bulk of the work done on the Liberal Democrat manifesto for the 2015 general election. As Paddy Ashdown argues elsewhere in this issue of *Liberator*, a manifesto will be rather pointless if the numbers all add up but to no purpose that voters can see.

There is an obvious danger in boring voters with technocratic detail when they, not to mention party activists, need rather more than that to motivate them. Indeed, Ashdown takes credit for adding the words “enabling everyone to get on in life” to the “stronger economy, fairer society” message, his idea being that the Liberal Democrats want to bring people the freedom to live their lives as they want, not as conformity demands.

It seems Ashdown at least does not want to play safe by having a manifesto that seeks to offend nobody and which persists with the mistaken belief that everyone is a potential Liberal Democrat voter. But as the time draws closer to it being completed, expect any number of grave warnings about “you can’t say X in the manifesto in case it offends Y”. If Y is not likely to vote Liberal Democrat anyway, there is no earthly reason to avoid giving offence to them, since saying something that does so could secure the allegiance of those much more favourably disposed to the party.

The ‘party of in’ approach to the European elections recognises this idea, and the party should not be deflected from fighting on what it believes in – rather than what it thinks a majority of voters want – even if the European results are poor. Voters do not treat European elections very seriously and they are an unreliable guide to general elections.

The danger, though, is that the party leadership only half believes this and is quite capable of the next minute boasting of being ‘in the centre’. We all know what happens there – you end up splitting the difference between other parties who define your position for you, offending no one and inspiring no one either.

RADICAL BULLETIN

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE LIKELY LADS?

Every so often, the media carries some Liberal Democrat ‘senior source’ belittling Tim Farron’s supposed intention to run for party leader when an opportunity presents itself.

Since more or less the whole party must know both of Farron’s ambition and the identity of the ‘senior source’, this hardly counts as news, but Farron might need to worry.

It is too early to judge how Nick Clegg’s political career might finish but, with two exceptions, everyone since Paddy Ashdown who has held, sought or merely been tipped for the Liberal Democrat leadership (even if only by themselves) has come to grief.

Just consider: Charles Kennedy (forced out by drink problem); David Rendel (subsequently lost his seat); Jackie Ballard (subsequently lost her seat); Simon Hughes (embarrassing disclosures about his private life); Chris Huhne (prison); Ming Campbell (forced out by an obvious lack of aptitude); Mark Oaten (revelations of unusual hobbies); Lembit Öpik (turned himself into a public figure of fun).

The only ones to escape unscathed were Matthew Taylor, who retired from frontline politics of his own choosing, and Malcolm Bruce, who was neither damaged nor enhanced by his 1999 bid.

Perhaps the next leader will be someone with the wisdom to have so far kept their head down, such as the increasingly muttered about Alastair Carmichael. Any leadership bid by him would, however, depend on which country he finds himself a citizen of by 2015.

Energy secretary Ed Davey is sometimes mentioned as a potential leader, but Farron appears to lack serious competition. David Laws is too far to the party’s right, Vince Cable declared himself too old at the time of the 2007 contest, and Danny Alexander’s career as George Osborne’s media human shield will have done him serious damage.

No doubt a ‘stop Farron’ candidate will emerge, not least among those disturbed at the idea of an evangelical Christian leading the party – in particular one who abstained on gay marriage – but as yet it is not obvious who.

A SAFE PAIR OF HANDS

Meanwhile, Tim Farron’s term as party president draws to a close next autumn, and thoughts will be turning to a successor.

Farron has been able to use the post to burnish his future ambitions, not least by holding an important, high-profile post that does not require him to be in government and do anything unpopular.

The party leadership is likely to want someone more pliable and devoid of personal ambition in the job. Are they looking to Baroness Brinton? She has been

given various chores such as running the leadership programme and the diversity group, in both of which she has collected a fair number of enemies and has in particular got into spats with Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats (*Liberator* 358), but has become the go-to person for posts that need someone seen as ‘sound’ in them.

Nothing in the party constitution says the president has to be a parliamentarian but that has invariably been the case. So who else might throw their hat into the ring?

SHUFFLING CHAIRS

New chief whip Don Foster has some work to do in keeping the co-chairs of the Liberal Democrats’ backbench committees on board.

There is a committee for each policy area, co-chaired by an MP and a peer, a mechanism set up to give backbenchers some input after the coalition was formed.

Recently, however, Southport MP John Pugh resigned as co-chair of the health and social care committee, over general disaffection with the party’s direction and specifically over the row about the anonymous abuse directed at Vincent Cable at last autumn’s conference in Glasgow from within the Clegg circle (*Liberator* 362). Former health minister Paul Burstow has taken on the job.

Greg Mulholland has also departed as co-chair of the work and pensions committee, either over a row about the bedroom tax or a personal issue.

The Liberal Democrat backbenches now contain an odd mix of the spurned, the oddball, the about-to-retire and those who Clegg would never touch in a million years.

ENGLAND EXPECTS

A promising row impends over the political reform policy paper, expected at the Liberal Democrats’ spring conference in York.

On one side stands working group chair Dinti Batstone. The cornerstone of her proposals for devolution in England is the idea that this should be on an ‘as requested’ basis, rather than imposed in one go. It will also include her perennial call for job-share MPs.

On the other side stands Gordon Lishman, one of the originators of community politics, who has resigned from the group over what he sees as the inadequacy of the paper. He notes: “The approaches to Lords reform and English structures seem to me to start from the compromise rather than asserting a clear party position. If our party’s policies in these areas are not clearly founded on our long-term political ideas, we will fail to do more than to tinker with administrative arrangements.”

He also believes the paper emphasises technical fixes rather than major policy themes such as federalism and devolution. Batstone replies that her position had majority support in consultations and the sympathy of the Liberal Democrat group in the Local Government Association.

Few things bring out strange obsessions at conference quite like English regionalism, and a good time should be had by all.

SPRING IN THE AIR

When someone says they will spend a weekend doing something, they normally mean a Saturday and Sunday, plus possibly a Friday evening.

The Liberal Democrats' Federal Appeals Panel (FAP) knows better than the calendar, it seems. It has said that, when the party constitution was written specifying that spring conference would take place over 'a weekend', the writers in fact meant it might occur on one day.

Fortunately, the weight of opinion against reducing – let alone abolishing – spring conference was such that the Federal Executive looked and decided to leave well alone.

Those who argued for a shrunken event on financial grounds (Liberator 362) managed to antagonise the Federal Policy Committee, the Federal Conference Committee and almost everyone present at the consultation at last September's conference in Glasgow.

They then realised the constitutional problem – that it said 'a weekend' and that getting a two-thirds majority to rescind this would be impossible given the mood of conference on the subject. So they tried the wheeze of getting the FAP to declare that a weekend wasn't a weekend.

Sensing defeat, those wishing to scrap the spring conference (chiefly Federal Finance and Administration Committee chair Peter Dunphy and James Gurling, who led the review of the event) argued for a conference in London that would have started in the middle of a Saturday and finished on Sunday lunchtime.

That would have forced most people to spend two nights in a costly London hotel, destroyed fringe meeting and exhibition income, and still left almost no time for policy debates once unavoidable party business was complete.

Spring conference was anyway intended to run as normal in 2014 and 2015. After that, it will perhaps be on a 'use it or lose it' basis.

AMONG THE LOWER ORDERS

Liberal Democrat peers thinking of making a foray among local parties have been sent a helpful crib sheet.

Much of it is about how to fend off awkward questions about everything from the 2010 tuition fees debacle through to welfare changes, but two sections are of note.

Having told peers to tell local parties to "ignore the national polls", it says that the slogan 'a stronger economy and a fairer society, enabling every person to get on in life' needs to be "delivered in volume (so lots of it) over a long period of time", in what seems an attempt to bore voters into submission.

There is then a homily on the need to do well in the

European elections, which addresses past failings with startling frankness: "We have historically underperformed and ducked the issue of Europe but we cannot do so again. The whole party needs to rally behind the European campaign to ensure that we return as many MEPs as possible."

THE NAME'S BOND, EUROBOND

It is perhaps a strange manifesto that is written not to appeal to voters – who are unlikely to ever see it – but to avoid handing ammunition to opponents, who will.

That is what the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe did in London in November, preparing its manifesto for May's European Parliament elections. A fairly short draft nevertheless had 187 amendments for delegates to wade through. The big rows came in three areas: eurobonds, rebates and the environment.

Germany's FDP regards eurobonds as politically toxic, as they would in effect see Germany pay for the eurozone's debts. For the same reason, parties from debtor countries think they are a splendid idea. The Germans couldn't live with them in a manifesto; debtors couldn't live without them.

Rebates were a major issue for the UK and certain other countries. The very economically right-wing Venstre, one of two Danish member parties, wanted them all scrapped. The Liberal Democrats could hardly enter an election subscribing to a manifesto that made any such call. This again took convoluted wording but ended with the UK delegation getting its way.

The third problem was the environment. The mere word 'green' is a provocation in itself to parties in countries with effective Green parties, so amendments calling for 'green growth' – innocuous in the UK – caused difficulty and had to be worded differently.

Correction: In RB in Liberator 362, we reported that the original and controversial draft of the manifesto was the work of the Dutch VVD party. We have been asked to make it clear that in fact it came from a member of the other Dutch liberal party, D66.

BACK IN ONE TAXI

A Facebook posting has said that attendance at the Liberal Party's annual assembly this year in Wolverhampton struggled to reach double figures.

Sources have told Liberator that this assertion is correct, which must raise questions as to the party's continued viability.

A proposal to change the name is being considered, since the party fears the Liberal Democrats have 'toxified' its current one.

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HEARTS, MINDS AND FIGURES

Paddy Ashdown wants to run a general election campaign where no-one has to apologise for being Liberal Democrat and that isn't based on arguments about statistics

I have never really been a numbers man. If I had been, I may have had second thoughts about taking leadership of our party when our polling remained stubbornly around the asterisk mark.

I have never been a numbers man for a simple reason: I am not the sort of politician who dreams of being an accountant. While I doff my cap to this breed of politician and will always bask in their brainpower, concentrating on the numbers has never really been my style.

Which, you may well think, might make co-ordinating a general election campaign a little tricky. To which I would reply: "With numbers like ours, frankly it helps!"

Clearly, I jest – as, indeed a man of my considerable years is entitled to do. But within this there is a kernel of truth. For instead of being a numbers man, I am a hearts-and-minds man. I see the role of politicians not just to scrutinise but also to lead. And the role of a leader is to pioneer, persuade, enthuse and cajole.

I enjoyed this part of my job during my time as captain of our ship. And that's how I see my role now that I'm back down in the engine room, stoking the fire.

So, guess who in this rather tortured analogy are the flames? Yup, that'd be our members. They are the bright light that heats this party, the furnace of activity that powers our ideas, the flames that will singe our opponents if they venture too close.

OK, enough of that. The general election campaign will feature numbers, of course it will. The number of jobs created under this government, especially apprenticeships. The amount of pupil premium funding awarded to each school. The proportion of people we will take out of income tax in your constituency and so on. These are all hugely important figures that we will all need to learn by rote as the campaign approaches (though there's no time like the present...).

I am sure that, true to form, our manifesto's numbers will shine, the sums will add up and confound the critics with the simple purity of both its liberalism and practical common sense. Described begrudgingly in 2010 by the IFS as the "least worst" of the three main parties, our numbers are often right.

BIG DOLLOP OF CYNICISM

But numbers alone will not be enough come 2015. We live in a deeply cynical age where anything a politician says will be taken with a big dollop of cynicism by a sceptical electorate. We're just not getting the benefit of the doubt any more. Pure statistics run the risk of hitting an impenetrable wall of doubt and distrust.

Even the most finely-crafted arrow cannot pierce that kind of granite.

So I see it very much my role to make certain our campaign speaks directly to people in a way that does penetrate those defences. It is to make sure that we take each of our achievements and policies, and craft a narrative that explains how each helps reach our fundamental goals: creating a society that is fairer, freer; much less conformative and much, much more meritocratic.

That is why, when our team crafted the central message on which we will fight the next election, the argument that the Liberal Democrats will create a stronger economy and a fairer society, I insisted we added a third prong: enabling everyone to get on in life – that means empowering them and giving them the freedom to live their lives as they want, not as conformity demands. And it's why you can be sure we'll always strive to run a campaign with heart and passion that will both unite our activists and inspire the voters.

We must never forget what makes us a unique political force. In my opinion, it is summed up in that one little verb, to enable. Our mission in 2015, as it is in every election, is to explain on the doorsteps of Britain why we are the only party that will harness the powers of the state to set the individual free. Why we are the only party that will hammer away at monopolies that shackle us all, whether they be in the private or public sphere. And why we are the only party that embodies the spirit of Gladstone through a humanitarian interventionist outlook that keeps the world safe.

This is what inspires our activists to go out in all weathers to win us elections. This is what brings young and passionate people into the party, and keeps them with us for life. And it is this central tenet that will inspire activists to keep working to 2015 and beyond.

I believe history will show Nick Clegg is, by some margin, the best political leader of our day. But whether it is Nick on the front of leaflets, or Ming, Charles or myself, we are merely there as glorified ciphers. It is the people delivering those leaflets, and conversing on the doorstep, who are distilling the very essence of liberal democracy. And it's that key message of liberalism – enabling, empowering liberalism – which will stay with voters long after the statistics have left their minds.

However, if you think this is me giving you permission to trash the coalition's record or pretend we have not been part of government over the last five years when on the doorstep, it is most emphatically

not.

We will be judged on how we have governed. It will be absolutely fundamental to how most people decide their vote. We cannot hope that a strong record of local action and a passionate declamation of liberalism will be enough to push us first over the finish line.

So my challenge to you, no matter how fed up you may be about some of the actions of this government, is to think hard about how our party has married our long-cherished belief in enabling citizens to the realities of governing in both a coalition and in an economic downturn.

Because if you cannot speak passionately and eloquently about what we have achieved in difficult circumstances – and more importantly, why we have achieved it – it will make it very difficult to persuade the average voter to put a cross next to the bird in 2015. Starting a doorstep conversation with an apology for being a Liberal Democrat will rarely win a floating voter over. Put simply, if you cannot convince yourselves of the merits of having our party in government, you will not be able to convince others.

DISASTROUS DEALS

So how would you look a voter in the face and defend health reforms, for example? For a start, there's the shield: Labour started these reforms and signed disastrous PFI deals that we'll be paying back for generations; while the Tories are ideologically in-hoc to privatising healthcare and probably would have succeeded in doing so without us in government stopping them.

Then there's the stick: not only have the Liberal Democrats made certain there are now 4,000 more doctors in the NHS than under Labour but we have ensured that, in the new system, not only is there more integration of services but also that patients have a more personalised system and more democratic oversight – making healthcare work better both for the community and the individual.

Secondly, welfare reform. There is a truly liberal case to be made for changing a system that traps people in poverty, as Labour managed, by ensuring those with families would lose money if they took a job.

Our changes to the income tax threshold, extra help with childcare and free school meals for infants all help give people on benefits the freedom to go into work. And what about the other parties? Labour, let's not forget, introduced disability tests for those on welfare, which we have improved – and Labour pioneered the 'bedroom tax'.

And what would the Tories do on their own? Cap child benefit at two children, stop housing benefit for the under-25s and talk relentlessly about the so-called 'scroungers'. Many Conservatives look forward to the day they are unleashed from the Liberal Democrats, not realising they would be held captive once again, this time by the likes of burkah-banning Peter Bone.

Labour will want to talk about jobs. It mustn't be

“If you cannot convince yourselves of the merits of having our party in government, you will not be able to convince others”

allowed to get away with it. No party recently in government has plunged more people into poverty or destroyed more jobs and businesses than Labour did when it trashed our economy and plunged us all into debt during the last government.

This election is going to be the toughest fight

of our lives. We will be asked searching questions and we won't be able to rely on a lack of scrutiny to dig us out of a hole.

Regrettably, thanks to our cynical and unimaginative national media, everything will be seen through a prism of Liberal Democrat MPs being sent like lambs to the slaughter. I suspect a regular question we'll get asked both on television and on the doorstep will be: “Why should anyone vote for you when your party is going to be annihilated?” When you think about it, not much of a change from the regular question before 2010: “Why should anyone vote for you when you are never going to be in power?”

Nothing angers me more than this lazy and sneering cynicism. It does all of us a huge disservice – we have all given our time and energy to achieving a more liberal Britain for the benefit of all of society. No one should feel anything but pride when they knock on a door with a yellow rosette pinned to their chest.

But it also isn't true. Because of the hard work of activists over many years, we have now earned the right to be listened to with an open mind. They have ensured that doors will not be slammed in our faces; that people will hear us out.

What it doesn't do is guarantee us the benefit of the doubt. It doesn't automatically transfer people into our column, even if they have voted Liberal Democrat many times previously. But it does mean that they will be willing to hear what we have achieved for them and their families; what our vision for a more liberal society entails and why we deserve to have their vote propel us back into government.

We must seize this opportunity. We must each be able to mould our achievements, our ambitions and our vision for liberalism into a simple doorstep pitch we can explain with positivity, pride and panache.

Others have the job of making the numbers add up. Mine is the easy bit – to ensure we run a campaign with heart, soul and vigour; a campaign that inspires our members, the voters, and maybe even the cynical media too. I have a first class team to work with and a great tribe of activists relishing the fight.

I could not ask for more. It's time to stoke that fire. It's time to get out campaigning again for what we have done in this government, what we will do in the next and what Liberalism means in the modern age.

Lord Ashdown is a former leader of the Liberal Democrats and is coordinating the party's 2015 general election campaign

HOUSE AND GARDEN

The ‘nimbys’ have a point. We can crack the housing crisis only by building garden cities, says Matthew Taylor

Call me simplistic, but I tend to the view that, if the supply of something people need is way below the amount needed, then it is no surprise that the price of that something is rocketing. Those who can afford it (or are allocated it) get what they need – others go without.

However, if the supply is not intrinsically limited, then the response of a free market would be a rush to increase supply (to get the benefit of the rising prices) and, as supply increased, prices would fall back and there is enough to go round. Only the poorest would need help. Simple, huh?

Let me put my cards on the table. In my view, the growing housing crisis is not a failure of economics or finance, but a failure of supply. So when it comes to housing, why do successive governments place so much emphasis on helping people to afford high prices, which simply increases demand and so also prices, rather than tackling the lack of supply that is generating the rising prices?

Whether mortgage tax relief or help to buy, why do we pretend that the problem is access to finance rather than a shortage of homes? That shortage is primarily because the planning system has in too many places been abused as a means to limit development – effectively rationing supply.

Good planning is vital to ensure the supply is well designed and located, not scattered across the countryside as ribbon development or a bungalow in every view. But it shouldn't stand in the way of people having a decent home.

GREEDY DEVELOPERS

There are those who argue that the existence of 400,000 un-built permissions proves that there is no shortage caused by planning. Those who take this view say the housing shortage arises from permissions hoarded by greedy developers, empty homes hoarded by speculators, council houses hoarded by the undeserving, cash hoarded by the banks.

But think about it. We build around 120,000 homes a year at present – so 400,000 permissions are barely more than three years' supply. Within that 400,000, many are part of larger schemes that will take years to complete. Others are in places of low demand. Others are held up by negotiation over planning requirements, access, demolitions, or the implementation of pre-development requirements.

In any event, it is not three years' supply – not even close – if we look at the need for homes. According to analysis by the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research, even if the economy remains depressed and household formation rates remain low, “there will still be almost a 20% increase in the number of households over the 20 year period to 2031”. That's between 240,000 and 245,000 additional homes required each year, around double the current delivery rates and one third higher than peak delivery pre-2008

when housing finance was not in short supply.

This demographic change is not going away, it's accelerating. Those babies have already been born; the elderly have no plans to die younger. More than 10 million people are now aged over 65, and that rises to an estimated 19 million by 2050.

A rising, aging population requires at least twice our present building rates. So the 400,000 extant permissions is equivalent to less than two years' need, in an industry that needs more than two years in the pipeline just to maintain a steady development flow and viable businesses.

And that's without addressing the existing two million home backlog of undersupply. To deal with that, as well as the future population growth, we should be building some 300,000 a year according to the Royal Institute of British Architects. In this context, 400,000 permissions is laughably inadequate even were they all viable, in the right place, and ready to be built at short notice.

Empty homes? Strip away those awaiting redevelopment, those caught up in probate and those in places with low demand, and what you have left is tiny numbers – worth doing something about, as the coalition is, but no solution.

Immigration gets headlines, but in much of the south the impact of net immigration is as nothing compared with the pressure of net internal migration away from northern industrial areas to the ‘new economy’ of the south, plus the move from inner urban to the suburbs and rural communities. So while net immigration has impacted on London, 500,000 Londoners have moved in the last decade into the wider south-east.

So that's the demand – or rather the need – for housing. In a civilised country, a government ensuring enough land for housing sufficient to provide a decent roof over every head is surely an obligation, not an option.

Yet while the need for housing has been driven up, for decades the ‘politics’ of planning has driven delivery down. This is the ‘planning’ problem. As local people and therefore far too many politicians resist development for all sorts of reasons – sometimes good and sometimes blatantly selfish – the unintended consequence is the imposition of an overbearing supply constraint that gradually excludes people from finding a decent home.

Housing need in general is increasingly recognised but, when it gets to specifics, the debate about development often fails to move beyond pressure that it should be ‘there’, not ‘here’. And a vocal case is still made that it's not a failure at all (those 400,000 ‘un-built’ permissions).

In an open market responsive to demand, the great majority of those in work could afford to buy or rent a home, since the bricks and mortar do not cost all that much relative to average earnings.

However, where housing land supply is highly

constrained, prices are pushed up far beyond that by the price of land. That's one thing in Kensington and Chelsea, where there is an inevitable development constraint – it is quite another

when it becomes the norm across most of the country.

We need increased land supply for more homes in places where the demand is and, if possible, regeneration of those where it is not, sufficient over time to bear down on the real price of homes.

This does not mean concreting over the countryside. Across England, only 9% of land is developed, and that includes roads, gardens and parks. Even in the south-east, the Generalised Land Use Database shows that only 12.2% of land outside London is developed. So more than 87% remains green fields, even in the most developed and highest demand region.

I don't wish, or see a need, to carve up the countryside into building plots and concrete over the green belt, nor do I want to abandon good planning. Quite the opposite. As Kate Barker's Review of Housing Supply pointed out, three million homes at the densities built in the 1990s would take only about 0.1% more land. Even if all went into the south-east, it could add less than 1% to that existing developed area.

There is a view among some MPs and councillors that localism means that councils are empowered to ignore any government's wish for sustainable development. By stripping out regional-level housing numbers, the government's 'localism' approach means figures will not be handed down from on high, and solutions are locally shaped. However, while local authorities and neighbourhoods are empowered to find their own solutions, they cannot wish the issues away. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) provides the opportunity for communities to identify and decide how to tackle local needs – but it does not allow them to ignore these needs.

If localism is to collectively meet the nation's housing needs, every assessment of local housing need has to be robust and based on a full understanding of the local housing market. This does put pressure on some local authorities, in the south-east in particular. And of course, not all local authorities can accommodate these needs. This is where the other key element of the NPPF has to kick in – the duty to cooperate.

STERNEST TEST

The sternest test for NPPF is what happens to those local authorities proposing plans with massive under-provision. No single authority can evade its duties because they all have a part to play and if this doesn't happen, cumulatively we will fail to meet the housing needs of millions of people. If a planning inspector accepts that one local authority cannot meet its own housing needs due to clearly evidenced local constraints, that unmet need must then fall to surrounding local authorities – it cannot just be forgotten.

One thing is for sure – a lot of local bets are being placed that any government will lose its nerve before election time. The bet is that, in practice, the government will water down the numbers rather

“A rising, aging population requires at least twice our present building rates”

than face the toxic political consequences of allowing appeals and throwing out local plans that under-provide. That points to a fundamental truth – the NPPF alone is not enough. Political will is

also necessary – locally, and ultimately nationally too.

So if providing enough homes has been too politically toxic to deliver for at least three decades now, can we change this political calculus? The impact is now reaching the children of the middle classes – dinner-table conversations have turned to “can my children ever afford a home?” That helps. But barely. I don't see many politicians clamouring for a lot more housing locally yet. So I have a modest proposal. I believe we need to recognise that the 'nimbys' have a point. That might sound odd given what I have said above but, until we do, we will never deliver the homes people need.

Sequential development, building on the next field, endlessly adding to existing communities, directs development to the very bits of environment most precious to people. The result is that supporting development becomes ever more politically unacceptable. So we should change the approach.

We should offer to protect communities from being ringed by yet more bland unattractive housing estates. Instead, insist that the only local development is on brown-field sites or well planned, community-agreed new neighbourhoods, while meeting the extra needs by creating new communities, new market towns.

This is how we stop an endless fight over each next housing development on the green spaces on the edge of our historic towns. We create great new neighbourhoods, towns and villages to deliver much of the development we need. These are all about attractive, well-planned and integrated new communities that deliver the housing and economic development we need in ways that are far more attractive and sustainable than endless new housing estates around every market town. It follows the principles of 'Garden Cities' but, sadly, despite a government 'prospectus' promised more than two years ago on this, nothing has been done.

Some see delivering on housing as just a numbers game, but I think that will only happen if we address the politics too. We need to cut that deal with the nimbys, who are powerful precisely because, far too often, development has indeed been as bad as they say it will be. It's time to offer something altogether better. Then, and only then, can we crack the housing crisis – and crack it we must.

Matthew Taylor is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords and former MP for Truro. He chaired the government's review of planning guidance

A LETTER TO DAVID LAWS

The Liberal Democrats will perform badly at the next election if they stick with the neoliberal consensus, warns Simon Titley

Dear David

First, allow me to congratulate you on your appointment as chair of the Liberal Democrats' Manifesto Working Group. Drafting the party's manifesto is a job that almost every party member would like to do – and thinks they can do.

The job's attractions are undeniable, notably the undoubted influence you can wield. But it also has its downsides, notably the torrent of petty demands from special pleaders who cannot see the wood for the trees, whether from within the party (potholes and dog shit) or outside the party (the plight of Nicaraguan bogie clenchers).

These attractions and downsides both carry risks. You are an undoubted partisan figure within the party, so there will be a temptation to skew the manifesto to your personal tastes. Even if you resist such temptations, suspicions will remain. There is also a temptation to buy off the special pleaders by accommodating their demands, resulting in an incoherent ragbag of short-term policies in a manifesto that might as well be titled 'beads without string'.

Still, you have got off to a good start. You are to be congratulated on carrying out widespread consultation within the party on the manifesto. But to what extent will this process elicit coherent suggestions and critiques? It is not easy, but I hope you have been able to insist on intelligent contributions while not skewing the outcomes or cynically treating the exercise as a mere safety valve.

Much of the manifesto's content will find a broad consensus within the party. On issues such as constitutional reform, civil liberties, education or the environment, there will be disagreements about some of the details but probably no great controversy.

MAIN PROBLEMS

The main problems will be to do with economic policy, and not just because the recent economic crisis remains the dominant issue. You are a controversial figure within the party precisely because you have been one of the cheerleaders for 'economic liberalism'. Together with City millionaire Paul Marshall, you have been one of the key people aiming to convert the Liberal Democrats from a broadly social liberal ideology to an economic liberal one.

Oh, and please don't do what many right-wingers do and claim that there is really little significant difference between economic and social liberalism. That sort of dissembling is obviously bollocks and we both know it. After all, why would you and Paul Marshall have considered your partisan campaign necessary if that claim were really true?

Despite your best efforts, and despite the considerable loss of party members since the last general election, social liberalism remains the dominant ideology in the party. We know this because, the last time Liberal Democrat Voice conducted a poll

(30 April 2011), 64% of respondents defined themselves as social liberals. Given the likely skewing of the results due to the 'clicktivism' of young right-wing libertarians, the real proportion of social liberals is probably even higher.

So you can see why there will be a fear within the party that you will abuse your position to cement economic liberalism as the dominant ideology behind the manifesto, despite the fact that a majority of members have never agreed with it. I don't know whether such fears are justified. Even if they were, I doubt you would get away with it, since the party's Federal Policy Committee has the final say and would be unlikely to endorse a blatantly skewed manifesto.

The real dangers are related but subtly different. They are a set of pessimistic beliefs: a fatalistic assumption that neoliberalism is here to stay, and a fear of stepping outside the comfort zone of the dominant consensus. I doubt that this is where you are coming from, but you could easily exploit those fears if you chose.

So allow me to explain why it would be disastrous if the Liberal Democrats went into the next election arguing for some variant of neoliberalism or economic liberalism or whatever you choose to call it.

The first and most important reason is that neoliberalism is well and truly fucked. It became the dominant ideology during the 1980s. Such was the confidence of neoliberals that, when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, Francis Fukuyama declared "the end of history" and nobody laughed. Previous dominant ideological fads have rarely lasted for much more than thirty years, but this time it was to be different. The argument had been settled for all time.

This ideological hegemony could survive only so long as the middle classes felt increasingly prosperous. These voters decide elections, so the neoliberal consensus shared by the Tories and New Labour seemed the place to be if you wanted to be "serious about power". That was the calculation underpinning your *Orange Book*.

There were a few naysayers, notably Vince Cable, warning of impending doom. But who cared? House prices were continuing to rise, and life for the middle classes was good. What could possibly go wrong?

The financial crisis of 2008/9 and ensuing global recession are what went wrong. It was not just one of those minor downturns we suffer now and again, but a catastrophic failure. Deregulation had turned the economy of the developed world into a vast casino, in which eye-watering sums of money are gambled each day. And the slicing and dicing of debt means that no one is quite sure who owes what to whom.

But you probably disagree. You are probably convinced that the recovery is underway and that the events of the past few years are merely an unfortunate blip. Well if you think there is life in the old neoliberal dog yet, let us proceed to the second argument.

The main thing that convinced middle-class, middle-aged voters to stick with the neoliberal consensus was ever-rising house prices. Assets they bought for modest prices in the

1960s and 1970s are now worth considerable six-figure sums and, in and around London, often seven figures. Who can argue with a political ideology that makes one a millionaire with such little effort on one's own part?

But now, that dream is turning sour. Today's middle-aged homeowners, quite apart from their own inflated property wealth, were looking forward to an inheritance windfall from their elderly home-owning parents. But, oh dear, look what happened. All that money they assumed they would inherit is instead being spent on care home fees. Meanwhile, their twenty-something children have little hope of getting on the housing ladder, not when average property values are more than ten times average salaries.

Inflated house prices don't look so attractive now, do they? And the problems go well beyond the property market. David Boyle, in his recent book *Broke: Who Killed the Middle Classes*, explains how the middle classes have gradually lost their independence, wealth and status.

On his blog (The Real Blog, 29 August 2013), Boyle warns: "The middle classes have had their economic purpose surgically removed by a combination of management re-engineering, globalisation and the internet – and it matters.

"It matters because the existence of a middle – rather than the huge sprawling proletariat and tiny elite that Marx predicted, which seems to be emerging ever faster – is absolutely vital for democracy. If the middle class can't escape, then nobody can.

"...the traditional values of the middle classes, smug as they may be, are completely at odds with the demonstrable values of the new elite. Greed instead of thrift, irresponsibility instead of responsibility, immediate gratification instead of deferred."

CHANGE WILL COME

Boyle ends this blog post with a prescient warning: "When the middle classes realise that their children will face the same tyranny from landlords and employers that faces the working classes now, then change will come."

In a subsequent blog post (20 December), Boyle refers to a report from the Institute of Fiscal Studies, which suggests that people born in the 1960s and 1970s will be less well off than those born in the 1940s and 1950s. This generation, remember, was the first to begin work during the Thatcher era. House price inflation is simply not sustainable but, in the meantime, it makes civilised life, particularly in south-east England, increasingly difficult.

Face it, David, this is the legacy of neoliberal ideology. Maybe you could dismiss scepticism about that ideology when it came only from young people. But when the property-owning middle-aged middle-classes become disillusioned, any politicians or parties who remain adamant that "there is no alternative" are in big trouble.

"Don't feel constrained by an economic orthodoxy that is on its last legs"

But again, maybe you disagree. Maybe you think a modest recovery and some token house building will see popular disillusionment evaporate. If so, let's try a third argument.

The more the Liberal

Democrats attach themselves to neoliberal ideology, the less they look distinctive. Because every other major party – the Tories and UKIP naturally, but even the Labour Party – will not reject neoliberal orthodoxy outright. The Tories and UKIP won't because they positively embrace its values. Labour, perpetually afraid of the right-wing press, is simply too scared to say anything that it thinks might offend the middle classes.

This conformity is less of a problem for the other parties because they can still rely on a large core vote that strongly identifies with them. We Liberal Democrats, unfortunately, lack a significant core vote. Unlike most party members, who seem to believe naively that everyone is a potential Liberal Democrat voter, I think the party needs to cultivate a core vote (and our party's Euro election campaign strategy suggests a first step in the right direction). But to do so, we must be distinctive.

Without going into detail about core vote demographics, the point is that expressing similar ideological views to the other parties makes it harder to build a core vote. After all, why should anyone vote Liberal Democrat if we sound the same as the other parties?

But maybe you still agree with Mrs Thatcher that "there is no alternative". In which case, here is my fourth argument (and you may not like it because it involves dangerous ideas like ethics and morality). The neoliberal orthodoxy is immoral. It is immoral less because of specific outcomes than because it is rooted in the idea of economism: the reduction of all social facts to economic dimensions, and the belief that the laws of supply and demand outstrip any other moral considerations.

Where is the space in that worldview for family, friendship and love? For neighbourliness and community? For culture and the arts? For appreciation of the natural world? For morality and faith? For anything without a price tag on it? The failure to value such considerations is, I would argue, at the heart of the deep unhappiness increasingly felt in society – unless, of course, you believe that there is no such thing as society.

So don't feel constrained by an economic orthodoxy that is on its last legs. Write a manifesto that not only addresses people's hopes and fears but also makes them punch the air and cheer. You might not appeal to everyone, but you'd appeal to a damn sight more than the meagre 10% who pollsters say will vote for us now.

Yours Liberally,
Simon

Simon Tittle is a member of the Liberator Collective. He was a member of the central teams running the Liberal/Liberal Democrat campaigns in the 1987 and 1992 general elections

HOW TO OFFEND ALMOST EVERYONE

America's Republicans used to be in the mainstream but, under the influence of extremists, the party has alienated major blocks of voters and is now united only by a loathing of President Obama. Can it recover, wonders Dennis Graf?

I cast my first vote in 1960 for Richard Nixon. Like most young people of any generation, I wasn't especially interested in national affairs or the political game and, since my parents and their friends were Republican, so was I.

I can remember, though, with great clarity the instant that I changed from a conservative by default into a leftist centrist with a wistful look even further left. This was in 1962. A young English friend needed a cheap place to stay in Manhattan and he had through the *Village Voice* found a decrepit hotel serving the elderly poor. He wanted me to go along and advise him.

In the course of our tour of the place, I spoke with an elderly black woman. She was living in a tiny room, and she seemed to be surviving on tins of food. The tins turned out to be cat food, different varieties neatly stacked on her table. I learned that she had spent 40 years doing laundry for a large private hospital, a facility that would never accept her as a patient. To me, this seemed wrong. After a few moments, something clicked inside me and after that I understood things more deeply and from a new angle.

The Republican Party in those days was a party striving to maintain its image of rectitude and competence, respectability and inevitability. Both parties back then had a liberal and a conservative wing. Both Republican wings were run mainly by Eastern patricians – middle-aged white men with Ivy League educations and inherited money.

Americans trusted government, even when they learned that Eisenhower had been forced to lie to them. The Russians claimed that we had sent a spy plane over their country, serious if true. We had, of course, and they had captured the pilot. This was probably the first tiny crack in many Americans' faith in government.

Richard Nixon lost the 1960 election to John F Kennedy, though many suspected that the Democratic machine in Chicago had stolen it from him. In an extremely close election, the state of Illinois provided Kennedy with his margin of victory.

LAST LIBERAL PRESIDENT

Nixon did win the elections of 1968 and 1972 though, as everyone knows, he was forced to resign in 1973. Still, there's a common observation that he was our last liberal president.

He campaigned on a platform of activist government, even asking for universal health care. He attempted wage and price controls, unsuccessfully, and brought

in the Environmental Protection Agency and OSHA for workplace safety, agencies detested by present-day Republicans. His most dramatic accomplishment was the opening up of Communist China. Gerald Ford, who provided a sensible and dull one-term caretaker government, was followed by the conservative Democrat, Jimmy Carter.

The dominant figure in the late twentieth century Republican Party was Ronald Reagan, ex-movie actor and ex-governor of California. Reagan did usher in an era of transformation though, from my perspective, it was primarily destructive. His worst legacy was convincing the American public that government itself was essentially bad, that government workers' unions should be weakened and that poor people who depended upon government help were deserving of contempt. As he would say: "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.'"

Reagan was not a bad man, but he unleashed dark forces and made them attractive. He appealed to people's selfishness and those who do this are seldom disappointed. Reagan was a captive of his rhetoric, a man who was blessed with an unusual ability to communicate with the general public and who, alas, did not use these gifts to strengthen our weakened social fabric.

Reagan was the American version of Margaret Thatcher, though far less intelligent. We still debate how much he had to do with ending the Cold War and how much Gorbachev was responsible, but we have to admit that Reagan had something to do with it. This will be his positive legacy. What we are also living with is the increasing poverty and hopelessness of so many working-class Americans, something that I believe he set in motion.

The *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman has referred to the current leaders of the Republican Party as the Plutocrats and the Preachers. Several years ago, the US Supreme Court decided a case – *Citizens United* – which essentially said that corporations and individuals could spend unlimited amounts of money on elections, anonymously if they wish. Now some immensely rich men are bypassing the party and pouring money on their preferred candidates. To me, this seems like bribery, but the Court disagrees. With rare exceptions, Republicans don't see a problem with this. Religious leaders, especially fundamentalist Christians in the southern states, bring out the voters for the Republicans and they're quite willing to follow the Plutocrats if their social concerns will be

addressed.

About five years ago, and about the same time that Obamacare was being signed into law, groups claiming to be grassroots and holding far-right points of view sprang up, especially in the south. People within these groups did not hold identical ideas, but in general they could be described as populist with a libertarian twist. All want lower taxes. Nearly all want an end to legal abortions and some of the more radical wish to restrict birth control as well. Rick Santorum, the man who came in second after Mitt Romney for the Republican presidential nomination, declared: "Contraception is not OK." What brought them together was a hatred of Obamacare and what seems to be a loathing of Obama himself. The opposition had a visceral hatred of Bill Clinton but their feelings against Obama seem even more intense.

They call themselves the Tea Party people. The original Tea Party was one of the first acts of rebellion during the Revolutionary War. The story is that a group of 'patriots' disguised themselves as Red Indians and boarded an English ship in Boston Harbour. The British had imposed a new tax on tea and, to these people, this was the final insult or, at least, an excuse to break ties. They tossed the bales of tea into the harbour. This, at any rate, is the legend.

None of the latest Tea Party people is under the control of the national Republican Party but, because of the influence these otherwise ordinary people have over the selection of the presidential ticket, all the candidates try to curry favour with them.

Primary elections and caucuses bring out the most fervent voters, people who tend to be extreme. Candidates who win these primaries often take positions that they later regret. Not all of the Tea Party is religious conservatives, but most probably are and they are people who look toward the past and see a Christian America, which is slipping away. Nearly all of them will finally vote for Republicans, but there is a widespread disappointment in both parties.

ABRASIVE AND UNPOPULAR

The most trusted voices for the Tea Party members are probably radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh and the new Senator from Texas, Ted Cruz, a man of Cuban background, abrasive and unpopular with his peers. Also in the spotlight are the father and son, Ron and Rand Paul. Both were physicians before entering politics and both are appealed to by the simplicity and elegance of libertarian thought. Like many of the Tea Party people, they are, somewhat surprisingly, isolationist and suspicious of military solutions.

One prominent Republican who represents the old traditional establishment moderate wing of the party is Chris Christie, the popular governor of New Jersey, an otherwise strongly Democratic state. Many people who work in New York actually live in New Jersey and residents of this amusingly named Garden State have the image of being loud, brusque and provincial. They're thought to be direct, not masters of nuance.

"Reagan's worst legacy was convincing the American public that government itself was essentially bad"

Governor Christie embodies these stereotypes in concentrated form. He's a very fat man, even by American standards, though he is trying with some success to slim down. Christie is not trusted by the Tea Party voters, in part because of his relatively tolerant

social positions but, above all, because he was able to work with President Obama after the hurricane that caused tremendous damage to New Jersey. In ordinary times, Jeb Bush, the moderate ex-governor of Florida, would be an automatic establishment candidate – but his name is a handicap.

It is generally believed that in an election, Christie would be by far the strongest candidate. His problem, though, is that, to get the nomination, he will have to run a political gauntlet through 50 states, all different and many suspicious of the New Jersey-New York axis.

The Tea Party base demands purity in its far-right candidates. Rand Paul and Ted Cruz are two freshly-minted senators with national ambitions and outside egos. Both are widely admired by the Republican base. The Governor of Wisconsin, Scott Walker, became a favourite after he severely weakened the public sector unions. Each of these people will have to raise their own money – the party will supply enough after the candidate is chosen. Since none of them is wealthy, they'll each need to latch on to their own billionaire.

The passing of the Affordable Care Act or Obamacare was the spark that ignited the Tea Party. Professional organisers assisted, but it was a popular uprising. Many Republicans have been going down this road for at least 30 years and the party is now badly split between the Tea Party people and the traditional conservatives. There has always been a strain in American thinking that wanted independence from Washington, its taxes, sophistication, sympathy with minorities and the poor and regulations.

One major development has been the constantly expanding influence of the very rich. This gained momentum back in the 1980s when the Supreme Court decided that a candidate could spend as much of his or her own money as they wished. This brought really wealthy people into politics.

Congress has tried – these were in the old days – to restrict the amount that candidates could spend but the court has almost always rejected this. It's hard to think of anything that could change this situation now. American elections are bought and paid for by the richest and strongest. Of course, they don't always win, but usually they do.

Republicans have offended many voting blocks – unmarried women, Blacks, Hispanics, gays, Asians, young voters, people in California, New York and Chicago. And Republican attacks on the government pensions and Medicare for the elderly won't help them with one of their last remaining voting blocks. The party is now badly split between the Tea Party people and the traditional conservatives, united only by their hatred of Obama.

TOWER OF BABEL

London's mini-Manhattan saw liberals from dozens of countries try to forge a common manifesto despite disputes over green policies and finance, reports David Grace

There was something weird about the 34th Congress of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), which took place at the end of November.

No, it wasn't the presence of Liberals from all over our continent, including those from countries that have not long had Liberal parties or indeed any democratic political parties for much more than 20 years. It wasn't even the few delegates from the Movement for Rights and Freedoms or the National Movement for Stability and Prosperity, the two Bulgarian parties in the Alliance, or indeed the representatives of the Partidul National Liberal of Romania.

To a habitué of European conferences like me, the presence of many nationalities in one organisation and indeed one vast hall was normal. The weirdness was that little slice of Manhattan squatting like alien invaders in London's docks – Canary Wharf.

Our meetings were housed in the grandiose architecture of twenty-first century international capital. As a patriotic Englishman and European Federalist (yes UKIP, they are really the same thing), I am well used to conferences in the exotic but generally nineteenth century or earlier ambiance of Paris, Copenhagen and Venice. Meeting in London and in that odd offshoot of Wall Street was just wrong.

The Alliance has a range of views on economic, social, environmental and constitutional questions. Each national party's flavour is shaped by a different history even if all claim allegiance to John Stuart Mill.

Many British Liberals have long regarded Germany's Freie Demokratische Partei as our most right-wing allies, but I am not so sure. FDP delegates proclaimed their support for human rights louder than any and called for European action over the anti-democratic policies of Hungary's government led by Viktor Orban of Fidesz, a former vice-chair of Liberal International.

Orban moved his once radical party to the right and out of the Liberal family. In the 1960s, Germany had a grand alliance coalition government of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats, and the experience of opposition radicalised the FDP. But Germany's new grand alliance will not find the FDP opposing it in the Bundestag as the party failed to pass the threshold of 5% of the votes and elected no MPs. Perhaps the experience of opposition with no MPs will radicalise the FDP again.

There was sympathy for the FDP's position at the Congress but not so much for its views on the economic policy of the European Union. To my surprise, the FDP did not seem the most right-wing group at the Congress. Leaving aside the British delegate Simon McGrath, there were the highly vocal ranks of Denmark's Venstre and the Netherlands's VVD. In both countries, there are two Liberal parties and these two are the right half of the split. Venstre and VVD

consistently voted against the views of the British Liberal Democrats and our allies, Denmark's Radikale Venstre and the Netherlands's D66, the left half of the split.

One Venstre MP appeared absolutely furious whenever she spoke (which was often) and glared at me. I sought help from a Danish friend by text (a Radikale Venstre member) who replied, "She's a nightmare. Glare right back!" I discovered later that glaring was her natural expression, not aimed specifically at me.

IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDES

The ideological divides among Liberals and Democrats are not as simple as the crude model, which suggests a spectrum from economic to social liberal. Other factors cut across that line. Apart from the wide range of views on economics, there is a strong difference of opinion on green issues. Some argued that the word 'green' was anathema to some member parties, possibly because of experiences fighting green parties, and that we would find less opposition to our environmental ideas if we just eschewed the word.

When the voting came, that did not seem to be the case. I had been horrified when first presented with the draft ALDE manifesto for next year's European Parliament elections. Apart from its general blandness, there was the glaring lack of an environmental policy. This isn't only an issue for British Liberal Democrats but the area of policy that opinion polling consistently reveals as the most popular for action at EU level. It deserved a whole section in the manifesto but, in the end, most greenish amendments were defeated and only a few made it into the final text.

There is also a spectrum of opinion on the constitutional development of the European Union, with Andrew Duff MEP leading the federalist vanguard.

At our own national conferences, we have been accustomed for many years to give great power to our elected Federal Conference Committee to choose motions and amendments, to redraft texts and, through chairing debates, to decide who speaks. Such procedures are not yet possible in ALDE. Consequently the thousand people attending were presented not only with a fairly short draft manifesto but also with no less than 197 amendments to consider. There were also 12 motions and three urgency motions.

Most of the three days of the Congress were taken up by fringe meetings addressed by panels. On the Friday afternoon, we got down to business with two simultaneous sessions, one on the manifesto and one on the motions. In the manifesto working group (a few hundred people), we rattled through all 197 amendments. The rule was that one person from each national delegation could speak on each item;

unfortunately, it seemed that they could speak as many times as they liked on each item. Where there was strong disagreement, we voted using handheld machines the size of mobile phones. These votes were only recommendations. Anyone could insist that the whole issue be discussed again in plenary if they didn't like the outcome of the vote. Given that attendance at the workshop was voluntary and self-selecting, the votes could hardly be regarded as representative or binding. Because of the huge volume of amendments, we could not focus debate on the main political points but also spent hours on grammar and style. Asking a committee to draft a manifesto is hard enough but getting hundreds of delegates to carry out the task line-by-line seemed absolutely bonkers. Surprisingly it worked, although there will be no literary prizes for the final text. After all, Karl Marx didn't need anyone's approval for the Communist Manifesto but Liberals don't work like that.

On the Saturday afternoon, we had the pleasure of doing it all over again in plenary. We also elected vice-presidents of ALDE by the dotty multiple-X voting system. There were six candidates for five places and, to ratchet the dottiness up a bit, we had to express five equal X votes. If you expressed fewer, your vote didn't count, so not only were you prevented from ranking candidates, you had to give an equal vote to your top choice and to someone you didn't want at all.

CLEVER MACHINES

The clever little voting machines gave up working entirely as they could not cope with so many voters. The election needed an adjournment to complete hurriedly printed ballot papers, and the second crack at manifesto amendments required the appointment of tellers to count us in our seats. The previous days' work on the text did enable the plenary to vote through whole blocks of amendments and concentrate debate on the controversial points. One of the most difficult was about encouraging the use of renewable energy, which was defeated by only two votes. If one British delegate had voted in favour as all the rest did, it would have been a draw and the excellent chair, Louise van der Laan from D66, would have cast her vote in favour. The other crisis point came over the question of Eurobonds.

Federalists like Andrew Duff (and me) believe that monetary union must be complemented by fiscal union, which would involve the mutualising of some national debt through the issuing of Eurobonds. Some delegations said they could not accept the mention of Eurobonds at any price whereas some said it was essential to mention them.

Compromise wording called for fiscal solidarity to be matched by fiscal discipline, roughly I would have thought what Angela Merkel herself would demand. Everyone accepted the compromise except the FDP, which duly lost the vote and then tried to re-run it on

“Each national party’s flavour is shaped by a different history even if all claim allegiance to John Stuart Mill”

a point of order. Before the end, the FDP asked for a brief adjournment to decide whether or not to vote for the amended manifesto. After a few minutes, it announced it would, and we had a more-or-less unanimously approved document. We then had no time to discuss motions except for an urgency

one condemning the government and police of the Ukraine, who during the previous night had attacked demonstrators protesting at their president's failure to sign an agreement with the EU. Graham Watson, re-elected as President of ALDE, made an excellent and moving closing speech (which sadly did not move the rather tired audience).

I was struck as many times before by the incomplete process of European democracy. Graham Watson has done an extraordinary job in building up this third-largest political group in the EU, seeking and finding new partners as more and more countries have joined the Union. Yet, for the most part, delegates sat and voted in national blocs and most divisions were between parties and not within them. This must distort the true picture of how party members and supporters from 57 parties across Europe actually think; each will have its own internal divisions but each will have left Canary Wharf with an averaged, monolithic view of their partners. Of course, the fact that all the plenary and workshop debates were held in English with no interpretation must limit the depth of understanding that we will all have of each other. As a native speaker I was frequently lost as we ploughed through page after page of documents. What a Finn, an Armenian or a Moldovan could have made of it, I cannot tell.

Yet UKIP and the hordes of Eurosceptics need not rejoice. Europe-wide democracy is being forged. I spent the next few days in Somerset with two Bulgarians who had inadvertently timed their visit to coincide with the popular press's warnings about the Bulgar hordes poised to descend on Britain. In a rural pub, when he discovered that my companions were Bulgarian and we joked that they were the vanguard, the man at the next table said: “I don't listen to all that rubbish. I don't read the Telegraph or the Express or the Mail”.

Britain does not belong to the xenophobic spirit of the tabloids or the pusillanimous tergiversation of David Cameron. With all its weaknesses, ALDE is part of building a democratic European Union and, as Nick Clegg said himself at the opening of the Congress, so are the British Liberal Democrats.

David Grace was a Liberal Democrat delegate at the ALDE Congress. Event speeches and papers are available at: <http://www.aldeparty.eu/en/events/alde-party-congress-2013>

WHY AM I HERE?

Mark Pack wonders about the point of Federal Policy Committee when those who elect its members can know nothing of their records or activities

Sat in one of parliament's grander committee rooms, trying to pay more attention to the proceedings of a Federal Policy Committee (FPC) meeting than to the art on the walls, I was recently waiting my turn to question a Liberal Democrat government minister about a recent government announcement.

As the sequence of questions moved around the table, heading towards where I was sat, I was struck by a simple question: what was the point of what I was about to say? This wasn't an existential crisis about the purpose of humanity and the roles of committees within it, nor doubt about the values of democracy and powers of ministers, but rather a simple calculation.

The minister sat there had worked on the issue for months ahead of the announcement and would work again for months, if not years, on its implementation. During that time, thousands of expert, powerful, charismatic, moving and important people (along with quite a few others) would get to express views on it to the minister at rather greater length than I could in the time allowed for just one question (and even though some people try to shoehorn in a multiple-part question, all that usually results in is large parts of what they have asked being skipped in reply).

In among all that blizzard of other people outside the FPC meeting commenting for longer, what chance was there of my one brief contribution making a difference to anything at all? Of course, I could ask something because I wanted to find out something for myself or because I wanted to get something off my chest. But saying in a year's time "re-elect me to FPC so I can continue to feel better about myself" wouldn't be much of a slogan even in the rather arid field of internal committee election slogans.

And even for a hardened political activist like me, addicted as I am to the internal workings of a political party, I know that, if you want to learn things or make yourself happier, there are plenty of more effective and efficient ways of doing it than sitting in an internal committee meeting. AOB is fun, but not that fun.

So what chance was there of my one brief contribution making a difference to anything at all? Listening to the contributions of my fellow committee members with that question in mind, some were, either knowingly or by luck, trying to produce a good response to that question with their own contributions.

Claiming (sometimes justly) to be representing the views of many others, throwing in valuable experience on the topic or presenting critical evidence – all these tactics were on display from some although, with the best will in the world, I really struggled to divine what difference to anything many contributions would make.

My own attempted answer in the end was to look for a memorable analogy to make my point stick,

hoping that it would therefore lodge in the back of the minister's memory and tweak their conscience now and again as the issue plays out.

Whether you think my approach was right or not, and whether you would agree with my judgements on the other FPC members – were I to name them – and score each of their contributions on the 'what chance of making a difference did their comments have?' scale, one basic problem immediately arises for anyone voting in the next round of FPC elections. You will have no idea how good or bad the incumbents up for re-election are at this challenge.

RULES OF SECRECY

Given how much of the FPC's time is given over to questioning Liberal Democrat ministers, making good use of that time should be vital but, thanks to the FPC's rules on secrecy, voters have almost no information on which to judge those incumbents. And that of course in turn means that the FPC collectively ends up making worse use of its time in such sessions because those elected members who do not make good use of them are no less likely to be re-elected as a result.

There are certainly areas in which the FPC's secrecy rules could and should be relaxed – and hopefully my latest push to get all three of the party's federal committees to regularly publish reports after their full meetings will have more consistent success than the previous efforts of myself and others.

However, even an enthusiast for transparency such as me has to concede that the FPC sessions with ministers are better for having a degree of secrecy, as that makes for franker discussions and more honest answers than is possible if everything is public.

But even if others cannot judge FPC members on this criterion, for me at least the direct lesson is clear after a year on the FPC: judge your questions of ministers by the yardstick of what has a chance of making an impact when they get 999 other questions too.

That question of what makes a difference also increasingly directs my contributions to the other big consumer of FPC meeting time: debating policy papers that will end up being put to party conference.

Many of my colleagues will often spend much time debating the big controversial points in such draft papers. I can understand the attraction, but for me it has only limited value – after all, any big decision will go to conference and can be debated and voted on.

Why spend much time debating the merits of a big issue when we all know it is then going to get debated and decided at conference anyway? It is not even as if the "FPC thinks you should vote this way..." is an argument that carries much weight at conference.

For me, therefore, the more valuable way to spend time is on issues that are big enough to matter yet

small enough that they would probably not make the cut for an amendment at conference.

As an example, on the party's recent tax paper, I didn't spend time talking about my views on a 50p top tax rate, knowing that Glasgow conference would debate it anyway, but instead used the time to push for details of tax treatment of peer-to-peer saving to be changed. A good way of using tax policy to encourage the sort of economic system we support in my book, but not quite a big enough change to have a chance of making it into policy if left to conference amendments and speeches.

Again, you may or may not agree with my approach, and you might think that the FPC should spend more time instead on the big headline debates even though they will then be repeated at federal conference. Or you may even agree with my colleagues who think that the FPC's time is good time to spend on verbally discussing small points of punctuation and grammar.

But again, too, because of the FPC's secrecy, no matter how strongly you feel about this, you won't be able to use it to judge support or opposition for candidates at the next FPC elections, save that now I have blown my cover and revealed myself as someone who thinks sub-optimal punctuation placement is best left to quick emails rather than discussion at FPC meetings.

MEA CULPA

Of course, you might be able to do better at casting votes based on such issues if FPC candidates talked more about them in their committee election manifestos. Mea culpa: I did not really in mine last time round.

My excuse? Being new to the whole thing then, I didn't realise these would end up being two important ways by which I would determine my committee contributions. In part, that was because no one else previously talked about them in their manifestos that I had read in previous years either. Sorry about that. I will try to do better next time.

The secrecy problem will still be there, however – and all the more so if the issues on which you wish to judge people are neither of the two that for me are increasingly clearly the key to being effective FPC members.

For example, one of my fellow committee members does not believe in appointing experts to policy working groups. Their logic? That experts already have views, and they would rather policy working groups came to issues with an open mind. Agree or not with the point, as discussions about who to appoint to working groups are confidential, again voters cannot cast verdicts on what incumbents do – and the secrecy also means that it is hard for both voters and new candidates to identify that such issues are relevant and therefore ones to ask or talk about.

Initiatives such as Jennie Rigg's public blogging of questions and answers directed to candidates at the last federal committee elections are brilliant – but still run into this secrecy problem.

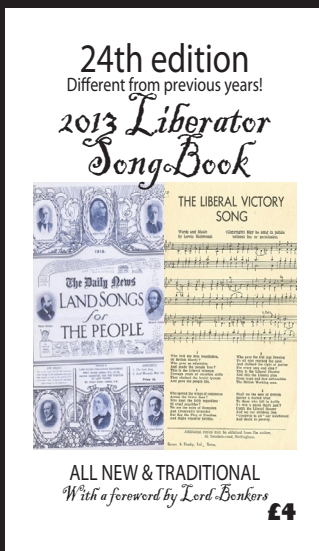
So while I have learnt two useful things about my own contributions to the FPC in my first year, I have also learnt one useful thing about the intermittent debates over how the FPC and other federal committees are elected.

The usual debate, picking up a bit of steam again recently, is over whether the electorate should be conference reps or all party members. The choice of electorate is important, but a meaningful debate about party democracy and the FPC has to include far more than just the electorate.

If you don't know what incumbents get up to and get told so little about the committee's work that it is hard to work out what are the most important issues and skills, then even giving the vote to the right selection of people does not make for that much of a democracy.

Dr Mark Pack is editor of monthly email newsletter 'Liberal Democrat Newswire' and a member of the Federal Policy Committee

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OLYMPIC HURDLE

E20 is London's newest postcode, but local people are being kept firmly out of the former Olympic site by class discrimination, says Teena Lashmore

Nowhere in London is the wave and casualties of gentrification more obvious than in the east, Stratford – home to the Olympic Stadium and international athletics of 2012.

Medals were won and sporting records broken but local people's aspirations from the Olympic development are still to be realised.

Stratford received a new postcode, E20, and a new shopping centre, ironically named Westfield even though the building is in the east. Expanding railway lines, a canopied bus terminus and the fast flowing one-way street segregates the old shopping centre of the old E15 postcode from the salubrious new build. A gated community – no gates required.

Accommodation that promised to be 'affordable' for local people remains just as elusive as the term. A year later and residential properties remain empty even though the area around Stratford, the borough of Newham, and London generally have unsustainable levels of people in housing need.

Instead of delivering on its 2012 legacy, E20 has seen politicians, economists, financiers and the Olympic organisers themselves frame the media to the contrary. They claim success but fail to explain why the legacy is unachievable, because no one fully appreciates who owns what. In fact, deciphering accountability in E20 is so complicated that it is often best not to bother. "They sold our streets and nobody noticed" said the Observer newspaper (5 July 2009), when reflecting on recent urban developments such as E20.

In E20, the hard-earned money from the working public was used to facilitate the most amazing land grab of public space for private land ownership. Unlike other aspects of diversity, classism is rarely discussed, but the failings of E20 open the debate.

Classism exists and is associated with land ownership or land grabbing. Any attempt to frame E20 as being for the 'local people' is likely to be discredited

in time. We are unlikely to see an abundance of local people there because both the physical and financial boundaries that surround E20 prevent this. Community cohesion is likely to be challenged – as it was when Canary Wharf supplanted itself over the people and history of London's docks.



Being open about classism in E20 would have been more palatable from the outset, instead of creating a facade that E20 would be accessible to all. Being open about what is 'affordable' housing and including that definition in the public consultations at the planning phase, this too would have avoided the accusation that the term was used simply to gain local people's acceptance for the

new enclosures.

Had Stratford City been the E20 strap line, instead of popping up in coffee shops, this would have made this urbanisation clear and unambiguous, and the local people could have then focused their energies on developing shared goals and business interests with the new city and its proposed inhabitants.

Classism does not have to be a negative aspect of progress but it will inevitably be framed as such because planning new urban developments – just like we witnessed with our beloved Olympics – continues to be sold to local people as a scheme that is diverse and for everyone, when in reality it is a scheme for a few.

As England faces up to the challenges of meeting our housing needs for all our classes of people, future developments that take public land away from all of us will need to be clear as to who its beneficiaries are. Classism should not be the enemy of social cohesion in urban development, but it will be unless it is open and transparent and uses its own wealth to buy land and not the public purse to achieve its land grab of public spaces.

Teena Lashmore is a Liberal Democrat prospective council candidate in Hackney

CAN KURDS BE LIBERALS?

When Jonathan Fryer was invited as a guest of honour to the inaugural Kurdish International Liberal Congress in Oslo, he wasn't quite sure what to expect and in many ways it was an unusual experience

Attending conferences is part and parcel of a politician's life and most of them have a certain sameness, however heated the debates. But I can honestly say that, until I was asked to go as an honoured guest speaker to the first Kurdish International Liberal Congress in Oslo, I had never seen an invite that promised bodyguards for leading participants.

Of course, it is easy to laugh from our comfy European background but, for many Kurdish critics of the regimes in Iran and Syria (and to a lesser extent, Iraq and Turkey), fears for one's personal safety are not irrational.

The weekend congress was organised by Arif Bawecani, leader of the Parti Serbesti Kurdistan (PSK); he is an Iranian Kurd who lives in exile between Oslo and Erbil in the Kurdish Regional Government area of Iraq (KRG). The PSK has been drawn to Liberal ideals because of its focus on human rights and those did indeed form a major part of the discussions at the Oslo Congress.

There was fiery participation from other fraternal guests, including several representatives of Iran's Ahwazi (Arab) minority, who were understandably distressed at the public execution of some of their fellows only days before.

There are Kurds living in exile in many cities of Europe, North America and elsewhere, including many tens of thousands in the UK (a majority of those from Turkey). And most of the political groups that they have been involved with, including their own parties, so far have been Marxist in orientation, or at least socialist, though there are some Turkish Kurds who are members of the Liberal Democrats, including my fellow Euro-candidate in London, Turhan Ozen. So how 'Liberal' would the PSK prove to be, as well as the Gorran Movement from the KRG, which was also present?

My keynote speech focussed on Liberal interpretations of key words in Article 1 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights: freedom, dignity, equality, rights, brotherhood. I stressed how a Liberal philosophy must not only champion human rights but also recognize and both tolerate and respect diversity. Fortunately, what I said chimed in very well with the speech that followed from a member of Norway's Liberal Party, Venstre, which is one of those continental parties that is economically dry and in favour of small government but pretty sound on most social issues.

Less harmonious was a contribution from a libertarian member of the US Republican Party, whose pitch was almost entirely about small government and how people should be able to get on with their own lives free from interference, while bearing in mind the wholesome values of religion and family.

I suspect that his words were more in keeping with the thoughts of some of the Kurds present, given that many Kurds tend to have a rather conservative – or maybe one should say traditionalist – approach to Islam. However, our speaker from the Republicans (who is standing for public office in Texas) lost me when he referred to Barack Obama as a "socio-fascist". A lady from the Democrat Party was due to give her contribution the following day, when I was otherwise engaged, and I suspect I would have found her views more palatable.

It is true, though, that Liberalism is a broad church but, given the anti-clerical origins of much European liberalism, maybe it is inappropriate to use such a religious analogy. I'm aware how wide the range is among European Liberal and Democratic parties – as witnessed once again at the recent ALDE Congress in London – so one shouldn't be surprised if it is even wider on a global scale.

One thing is certain, however, and that is that the PSK is keen to join Liberal International, though it has not yet cleared the first hurdle in that process. I came away from Oslo convinced that it does care passionately about human rights and the free market, but what its social policies will be is still being formulated. As such a young movement, it is probably quite unclear about those itself. So for the time being, it's a matter of 'watch this space'.

Jonathan Fryer is a writer and broadcaster on International Affairs with a particular interest in minority rights and is placed second on the Liberal Democrats' Euro-parliamentary list for London

INTELLECTUAL DISHONESTY

Dear *Liberator*,

I write to express my sincere thanks to *Liberator* for reassuring me that genuine liberals still exist. I retain my party membership despite the efforts of the party leadership rather than because of them.

I leave on one side the error of giving support to Osborne's thoroughly wrong-headed approach to running the economy, which has caused so much damage and which Liberal Democrats like Vince Cable have managed to mitigate only marginally. There remain three other issues which cause me to despair of Clegg, Alexander and Laws to name but three.

First is the continued spouting of the lines "Labour's reckless spending crippled the economy", associated with "we have to clear up the mess left by Labour".

Forensic examination of the evidence of Labour's running of the economy 1997-2007 shows a government that followed fiscal rules fairly well and in 2007 had the debt-to-GDP ratio lower than that which it inherited.

Moreover, Gordon Brown's leadership in getting the G10 countries to follow reflationary policies in 2009 set in motion an international economic recovery, which was knocked on the head only by a complete reversal of that

LETTERS



policy in 2011. We have lived with the consequences.

I do not carry a torch for the Labour Party but I do for intellectual honesty. I am profoundly saddened by the leadership's continued circulation of falsehoods on this issue. I had thought we were supposed to stand for a more honest politics.

Secondly, I take exception to Nick Clegg's recent mantra that the Liberal Democrats are "anchored in the middle". As has been pointed out so often, such a slogan allows other parties to define our position – and this on a single axis paradigm that is plainly inadequate.

Finally, I was infuriated by Nick Clegg's apparent acceptance of Cameron's position on access to the UK labour market by Bulgarian and Romanian workers. According to the BBC, he said the Liberal Democrats are "fully signed up" to Tory proposals, which he sees as "sensible and reasonable".

It was left to the excellent

Sir Graham Watson to quietly point out that what Cameron was proposing was "not coalition policy" and would need "much wider discussion".

John Cole
Shiple

RED YUPPIE

Dear *Liberator*,

Mark Smulian says of Dominic Sandbrook's book *Seasons in the Sun* (*Liberator* 362) that the man didn't like Tony Benn. He wasn't alone. Back in the Essex marshes, we know Tony Benn as Viscount Stansgate. Once a toff always a toff, I say; red, blue or even yella, sorry to tell.

You try cutting across the seawall over their land – you'd get an earful. But when it's Stansgate's guests tramping over neighbours' land, leaving gates open and worse, it was another matter. Red yuppies worst of all.

Ernie Tanner
Maylandsea

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The *Liberator* Collective

The Dictionary of Liberal Quotations ed Duncan Brack Biteback 2013 £12.99

I've long had a theory that anyone speaking at a Liberal Democrat conference could lend an instant spurious authority to their speech by prefixing it with the words "and as our former leader Clement Davies said..." since no one present was remotely likely to know what Davies had actually said on the subject concerned, if indeed he had said anything.

This theory falls to the ground with the publication of this book, which collects notable quotes from liberal figures stretching back to the early nineteenth century, though also with a few from classical figures such as Aesop and Cicero.

Everyone you'd expect to find here is included, though the emphasis surprises a little. Tony Greaves gets one quote while David Laws – not most people's idea of a noted orator, I suspect – gets the best part of two pages.

The editors have searched far and wide and include some surprises alongside the obvious party leaders and prominent thinkers.

Jeff Roberts, the Hackney councillor who spoke against the formation of the Alliance at the 1981 Liberal assembly, is there denouncing it as "a trick to get elected without doing any work".

Orpington councillor George Worman here attributes his 1960 victory to "faith, hope and canvassing – and the greatest of these is canvassing", while the Asquith-era cabinet minister Reginald McKenna might worry Norman Baker with the observation: "If you want to ruin a man send him to the Home Office."

The fun of books like this is dipping in and finding nuggets, and no doubt many Liberal Democrat speeches next year will be studded with borrowings that speakers will seek to pass off as their own.

Sadly, we don't get the memorable quote from Bill Pitt as he was showered with champagne on live television to mark his by-election victory at Croydon North West: "No, no, not all over my suit." In the next volume, perhaps?

Mark Smulian



REVIEWS

On the Front Line by Marie Colvin Harper Press 2012 £16.99

Shoes, or their absence, that was always part of the problem. When she lost an eye, Marie Colvin was barefoot because it was easier to wade through water that way. She lost her life going back for her shoes. This may seem frivolous, but it is a common denominator.

I don't normally like journalists; as a politician I find them lazy and ill-informed, always looking for the downside. I'm not sure what their agenda is, but I doubt if their employers' agenda is mine, nor the common people's. Colvin was an exception; her agenda was very much the people who suffer the consequences of war. That said, the likeness between Marie Colvin and Carmine Zucchi is that she was always in the right place at the right time. Her motives, in the main laudable, and her reportage often made a difference. War is never right, even when the cause is. As Colvin said, "The need for frontline objective reporting has never seemed clearer."

In 1993, Marie made the front cover of *Vogue*; there's an accolade. The beginning of this book is full of the tributes of the great and the good; somehow those of the women have the most resonance.

On the Front Line is, as it says, a collection of Marie Colvin's journalism and an indispensable memoir to the wars of our time, and also why they are always wrong.

Stewart Rayment

The Politics of the Black Sea Region by Carol Weaver Ashgate 2013 £60

It's a safe guess that no one would

want to read a book about the politics of the Black Sea unless they already knew something about the subject.

For those that do, they will be richly rewarded. Dr Weaver has produced a sound piece of work, adding much to academic studies of the countries surrounding what some consider to be a sea, others (such as Russia) a lake.

The Black Sea countries themselves, with Dr Weaver highlighting their ethnicities, languages, cultures and religions as defining factors, are interesting individually, especially those less well known, and where there are internal and external challenges such as Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh. But countries like Bulgaria and Romania have also been flagged up and there is inevitably much to say about Russia.

With a well thought out structure to this book, Weaver ties together what could have been a mass of description and dense information into a narrative which links these countries to the European Union, Russia, various conflicts and what role they play in issues relating to energy supply. There is a conclusion to be reached, around the question of whether the Black Sea region will be a zone of conflict or a zone of security.

There are interesting asides. She mentions that former President Viktor Yushchenko of Ukraine continues to receive treatment for dioxin poisoning to this very day. To those puzzling over Yushchenko's sometimes catastrophic performance of his duties, this is a new fact aiding explanation.

The whole issue of energy supply and relevant pipelines is dealt with in the fifth chapter, which provides an excellent overview of where the EU, Russia, Ukraine and other major players in the Black Sea

region currently stand. It is hard to imagine a better summary in just ten pages of this matter.

The actions of three important players in the region, Russia, Turkey and the United States, are covered at relevant places in the book. Their roles as actors of influence will not surprise the informed reader.

If I am drawn to any particular part of the book in terms of the freshness of its material and full explanations about recent conflict, it would be the sections on Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh. While one is given an account of the actions of the EU in conflict resolution, there are useful facts at relevant places, such as that Azerbaijan has received large supplies of weapons from Israel.

For the interested reader, this book will be highly rewarding as academic material. It would also inform such a reader about the case for not leaving this region just to manage itself. Cooperation and trust are referred to repeatedly at the book's conclusion. While there are grounds for pessimism, with some of these countries holding elections which fail to stand up to any scrutiny, and cooperation and trust being in short supply, this is a region which deserves the attention regarding its future that Dr Weaver so well provides.

John Pindar

Parnell Reconsidered eds Pauric Travers & Donal McCartney University College Dublin Press 2013 £24

Charles Stewart Parnell was the gobshite who wrecked the Grand Old Man's attempts to bring Home Rule to Ireland. Paradoxical, since he was the erstwhile leader of the Home Rule movement in Ireland, but he couldn't keep his trousers up.

This is, of course, a simplification, but it goes a long way. For the 1880s and 1890s, Parnell had something unique in the British parliamentary arena – a disciplined party. Gladstone, by comparison, was seeking to unify a ragbag of old Whigs of various stripes and disparate Radicals (I suppose we might assume that Peelites had been assimilated by then).

The non-conformist Radicals

who formed the backbone of his progressive agenda might still be Neanderthal in their attitudes towards Roman Catholicism, especially giving its adherents majority power in an assembly, and they would be outraged at any hint of sexual impropriety. That said, they were easy prey to the landlord interests (whatever their sincerity) of those Whig magnates who would eventually become the Liberal Unionists, especially when led by one of radical credentials such as Joseph Chamberlain.

With hindsight, we can see that Home Rule of a united Ireland only really had one chance. Gladstone might have achieved this through his moral ascendancy over his party. His failure in 1886 meant that, at each consequent attempt, he encountered a better organised opposition. The less said about the dead hand of the Tories in this the better – most of the troubles of Ireland in the twentieth century can be laid directly at their door.

While this is what we know Parnell for, he first and foremost was a political organiser, perhaps the first to develop a party in the modern sense. This collection of essays explores this through Parnell's relationships with the press, the church, publicans, etc. Despite his abilities with his own small party, Parnell clearly didn't (or refused to) understand the complexities that Gladstone was faced with in rallying his forces. The speed of change in the early nineteenth century made for many pressing agendas, and the GOM's focus on Ireland detracted from those.

Margaret Ward's essay on Anna Parnell is a worthy inclusion. Visit Avondale, the Parnell home in the Wicklow mountains, and you will find scant reference to his sisters. Worse still, Ward recounts how women were written out of the history of the Land War and continually under-played thereafter. Jane Côté's essay aside, Ward ploughs a lonely furrow.

Stewart Rayment

The Member for Scotland: A Life of Duncan McLaren by Willis Pickard John Donald 2011 £20

Duncan McLaren was probably not

an easy man to get on with; despite his undisputed Liberalism and Radicalism. It took me a while to get into his biography as it grasped the controversies of mid-nineteenth century dissenting churches and their impact on the politics of the day.

I came to appreciate this more when considering the problems of Charles Parnell. When historians are dealing with major figures, it is inevitable that the big picture will predominate rather than the brush strokes that make it up. Thus the broad brush of the national myth tells us that there were Whigs and Radicals and that they went on to form the Liberal Party. What that doesn't tell us is of the struggles between often patrician Whigs and those Radicals in days when party allegiance was a more fluid matter.

What we know of McLaren these days is mostly that Thomas Babington Macaulay, Whig, lost his seat in Edinburgh in 1851 over the Maynooth controversy. St. Patrick's College in Maynooth was a Roman Catholic seminary training priests. The purpose of funding the college was to improve the quality of Irish Roman priests, but this evoked widespread, often bigoted opposition.

McLaren's personal issue was that the state should not fund churches at all, but as a leader of Edinburgh's dissenting community, the niceties of this are easily lost. Pickard goes some way to redress this. He also affords us more detail of McLaren's business and private lives than Mackie's 1888 biography.

It is difficult for us to relate precisely to Victorians without books like this. Those of more privileged positions would not have had the struggles to contend with, so their biographies rarely deal with them. To the national myth again, we have the apparent paradox that the Radicals might also be those associated with dark satanic mills. How is this so, we might ask? Without looking at their careers in detail, it is impossible to judge.

McLaren seems archetypal in this respect; a self-made man of strong religious persuasion, and of great concern for all around him. He embraces the causes of the working class, of parliamentary reform, including the enfranchisement of women, of peace. In his battles with Edinburgh's Whigs, one suspects an

element of class prejudice crept in, particularly when this shopkeeper espoused the causes of the working man. James Moncreiff, McLaren's chief Whig adversary, perhaps deserves a fairer assessment of his work, but their clashes were based on differences of religious opinion, which probably became personal.

Surprisingly, McLaren's last days were in the Liberal Unionist camp – he previously had a strong track record of championing the causes of Ireland. Maynooth is telling and in Gladstone's 1886 Home Rule Bill he saw preferential treatment to one part of the Union over another. How importantly that this overshadowed the Disestablishment of the Church of Scotland in McLaren's views may be a factor. For McLaren, this was a matter of fairness to all churches rather than one. The Kirk was finally disestablished in 1929, by which time there had been considerable regrouping among the various Christian factions.

McLaren (or indeed his prodigious Liberal offspring) are little known today, certainly outside of Scotland. I think this is primarily because he is clearly of the old Victorian Radicalism, rather than the New Liberalism, whose lifespans begin to coincide with our own. Pickard generously fills this gap and, in so doing, adds a dimension previously lacking in my understanding of Victorian Liberalism, in which I'm sure I am not alone.

Stewart Rayment

The Untold History of the United States by Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick Ebury Press 2012 £25

An account of the history of the United States from the Spanish-American war onwards; largely highlighting some of the lesser known events behind the scenes, and concentrating mainly on foreign policy.

The United States effectively became an imperialist power following the Spanish-American War, not so much in Cuba but in the Philippines, which became a colony with colonial rule being enforced with a degree of brutality displayed by European colonial powers at their worst.

Regarding subsequent events,

the authors, while exposing American intervention in other countries throughout the world, show a certain selectivity. In their criticism of American involvement in the First World War, they confuse submarine warfare with the unrestricted submarine warfare that brought the United States into the war, and fail to point out that it was impractical to wage submarine warfare while adhering to cruiser rules. They also suggest that the United States was effectively already aiding the allied powers but neglect to explain that the legal British naval blockade effectively prevented any large scale trading with Germany.

They rightly point out that internal repression of dissent began with Woodrow Wilson's Espionage Act and the post-war red scares that predated Joe McCarthy: the real villain being J Edgar Hoover.

The authors mention that a failed plot to remove Franklin D Roosevelt was thwarted in 1934, partly due to a gung-ho retired General Smedley Butler informing on the plotters. Harry Truman applied to join the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, only to be turned down for employing Catholics.

Events are described selectively although the faults are more those of omission than commission. While being critical of Britain's imperial intentions, Stone and Kuznick continue to refer to Churchill after he was ousted from power and ignore the Attlee government's decolonisation programme. They are critical of the delays in opening

up a second front, ignoring the necessity of gaining the upper hand in the Battle of the Atlantic before an invasion of Normandy was attempted.

America's support for repressive regimes is criticised with the exception of Stalin's Russia, where they wanted support to continue after the Soviet Union ceased to be a necessity against Nazi Germany.

The military industrial complex is shown to be all-powerful and the myth of the missile gap exposed. With the exception of Roosevelt, they are critical of all American presidents although they suggest that John F Kennedy, who had campaigned on the issue of the missile gap, had a change of heart after the Cuban missile crisis.

Some of the most critical comments about excesses in American policy are shown to come from members of the military. Dwight D Eisenhower is acknowledged to be highly critical of the military industrial complex, and opposed to dropping the bomb on Japan, but under its thumb when in office. The achievements of the 'progressives' in domestic affairs are played down such as Harry Truman's Square Deal and desegregation of the military, and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

The account is highly informative and a useful supplement to be viewed in conjunction with the official account, adding less well known information rather than providing the whole story.

Andrew Hudson

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Monday

A busy day in my new capacity as Pastoral Care Officer of the Liberal Democrats. Reading from my early volume, *Frank Chats for Young Canvassers*, I say: "Now that you are growing up, I expect you find yourselves doing things like cutting out photographs of Megan Lloyd George from the *News Chronicle*. Let me reassure you: there is nothing wrong with such feelings. However, it is important that we do not allow them to get in the way of our Liberal activism. So rise early, take a cold tub, exercise with Indian clubs and then, if you still find yourself troubled by impure thoughts, ask your branch secretary for an extra Focus round to deliver. I assure you that, after that, you will have no energy left for beastliness of any sort."

Tuesday

I sometimes think that if it were not for sales of my own works – I run a scheme whereby estate workers can have the cost of them deducted from their wage packets – the bookshop in the village would have closed long ago. For these days, the skies over it are black with squadrons of drones delivering books from a warehouse near Bletchley direct to their purchasers.

Last night, we held a meeting in the village hall and passed a resolution that Something Must Be Done *nem con*. I know just the man to turn to: someone who saw off squadrons of social democrats in some of the most fiercely contested by-elections of the Alliance years will not be afraid of these flimsy craft without pilots.

So here I am at the aerodrome talking to Wing Commander David 'Gracie' Graceworth as he sits at the control of his Bonkers Liberator – a fighter designed by the great Barnes Common himself. I helpfully remark that the best way of dealing with doodlebugs was to flip them over with the tip of your wing, but Gracie replies that he will "give the blighters a squirt and prang them in the custard". I take this to mean he intends to shoot them down over Rutland Water, but it can be hard to tell with these RAF wallahs.

Wednesday

In my younger day, I spent more time at my London residence – Bonkers House in Belgrave Square. In those days, the more affluent parts of London were home to many Russian aristocrats who had (very wisely) fled the Bolshevik revolution. Trouble was, they adopt the ways of their hosts and would be up till all hours playing the balalaika, boiling their samovars and slicing the corks from champagne bottles with their sabres. As I recall telling them one evening after a nasty incident involving a peasant and a knout: "If you are in Britain and you are coming to live in Britain and you are bringing up a family here, you have got to be sensitive to the way that life is lived in this country." My words must have hit home, for today the leader of our own party is sprung from just this stock.

Thursday

When Nelson Mandela was banged up, I sent him a cake with a file in it, but I had not great confidence that the South African authorities would be sportsmen enough to give it him. So I decided to raise public awareness of his plight here in Britain by writing a song. I called it "Free Me", but as fitting the words and music together proved harder than I had expected, it came out more like "Free-ee Me-ee-ee-ee-ee". The idea, you see, was that

Lord Bonkers' Diary

someone should sing the song while in the character of Mandela himself, and I wrote to both Harry Belafonte and Nat King Cole proposing the idea. When they failed to reply, I had hopes of persuading a popular actor or entertainer of the day – say Bryan Forbes, Tommy Trinder or Dickie Henderson – to black up and sing it, but their people never rang my people back.

The good news is that the song was eventually taken up by some jolly young fellows from Coventry who made the bold decision to recast

the lyrics so they referred to Nelson Mandela in the third person. I questioned the wisdom of this, but it turned out that they fitted the tune much better after this and the record became something of a hit. Perhaps you have heard it?

Friday

To Canary Wharf – a visible reminder of how central coal once was to our economy. For it was here that the unfortunate birds bound for the mines were landed after their long voyage from the balmy Atlantic isles after which they were named. The warehouses have long since been converted into offices and it is here that the ALDE Congress is being held.

I trust my opening address hits the right note: "It gives me great pleasure to welcome over 900 Liberals from across the EU and beyond here to Canary Wharf. The European Liberal family includes three current prime ministers, while over a quarter of European Commissioners are Liberals. Liberal parties are in government in 16 different European countries, as well as being the third largest political group in the European Parliament. This family is a truly formidable fighting force – and we British Liberal Democrats benefit massively from being part of it. A word to the wise. Don't fall asleep outside the building or Clegg will have you deported."

Saturday

Noticing that our own Evan Harris had fallen out with the press, and reasoning that this was an unfortunate state of affairs for someone who still has political ambitions, I decided to take action. Last week, I offered him the chance to write for my own newspaper, the *High Leicestershire Radical*. "Why not write about murder cases?" I advised. "People always like reading about That Sort of Thing." This morning, his first contribution arrived at the rag's offices. It begins: "A doctor always acts on his or her judgement of the clinical best interests of the patient. Therefore it is impossible for Crippen to have committed murder." After a hurried conference with the editor, I drop Harris a line politely declining his offer of a piece on Bodkin Adams for next week.

Sunday

The wireless news tells me that a number of slaves have escaped after living for 30 years in a collective they joined "through a shared political ideology". If this turns out to be the final issue of *Liberator* – those envelopes take a lot of stuffing, you know – I should like to thank you for reading me over the past century.

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