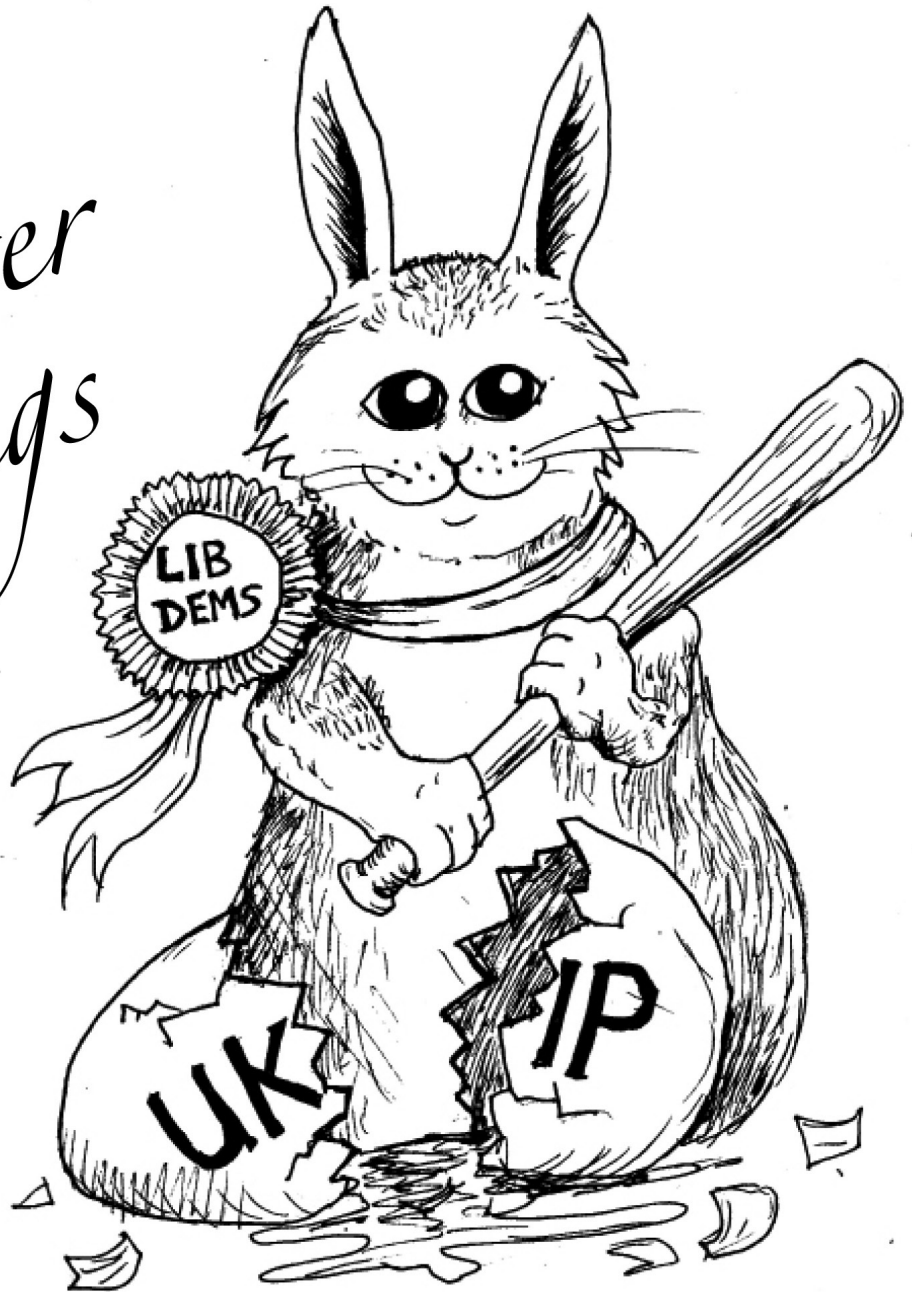


# liberator

*Easter  
Greetings*



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- ✱ “Tell Israel it’s won” – Chris Davies
- ✱ Better outside ‘Better Together’ – Tony Greaves

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London N4 2LF  
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Liberator is printed by Lithosphere  
Studio 1, 146 Seven Sisters Road, LONDON N7 7PL

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Cover illustration - Christy Lawrance

# COMMENTARY

## OFF AT LEAST ONE FENCE

Nick Clegg's decision to challenge Nigel Farage to television debates on the European Union was certainly brave – even if Clegg's jokes suggested a career in stand-up comedy does not await him after politics.

Although commentators mostly said Farage had won the debates, Clegg was able to say reasonably enough that he could not reverse decades of populist eurosceptic bile and alarmism in two hours. What he did do was make the pro-EU case unabashedly in public – a refreshing change from previous European elections when the Liberal Democrats campaigned on more or less anything except the EU.

As Charles Kennedy has now revealed, in 2004 he wasn't allowed (it remains unclear by whom) to run an avowedly pro-European campaign, and the Liberal Democrats duly concentrated on local issues and government bashing. Things were no better in 2009, when Clegg was still trying to disentangle himself from Ming Campbell's attempts to appease anti-EU voters by making convoluted promises about referendums.

As *Liberator* has long pointed out, every opinion poll shows a pro-Europe vote vastly in excess of the number of people who have ever voted Liberal Democrat, and it ought to have been self-evident long ago that this was the pool in which the party should fish. Instead, it muttered about referendums in an attempt to buy off those minded to support UKIP or the Tories.

Finally, the Liberal Democrats have realised that anti-EU voters have a choice of two parties that really mean their hostility, and there is no earthly point in trying to posture as the third such party by promoting something in which they do not believe anyway.

Whatever viewers may have thought of the debates, Clegg has established himself as the country's most prominent pro-EU politician and has given his party something on which to fight the European Parliament elections.

Will this approach be extended? Clegg has clearly come down on one side on the question of the UK's membership of the EU. Yet on other matters, he keeps insisting that the Liberal Democrats are 'in the centre', a stance interpreted widely as meaning the party simply wishes to split the difference between the Conservatives and Labour.

As has been often repeated, though it would seem not often enough, if you are in the centre you allow those on either side to define your position. It is also meaningless as a political stance. By declaring oneself to be there, what are you and what are you against, and in power what would you do? Why would being 'in the centre' at the next general election give people any particular reason to vote Liberal Democrat?

Clegg has learnt the lesson that his party cannot again fight the European elections by campaigning about nothing in particular and seeking to offend no one. Indeed, by cultivating the pro-EU vote for May, Clegg has explicitly set out to offend eurosceptics and signal that he doesn't seek their votes.

Good. Maybe this step will see the party at last drop the delusion that it can 'win everywhere' and realise that it needs a core vote, of which the pro-EU one is an important part but not the whole.

Misguided or (at best) forced decisions in coalition have alienated the students, young professionals and rural poor who were the main props of the party's support in 2010. Perhaps the party will now see who it should appeal to and who it should not waste its breath trying to cultivate, and so develop a platform that stands a chance of enthusing some badly needed voters.

## LOCAL FROM THE BOTTOM UP

It was predictable that one of the most heated debates at York spring conference was about English devolution, as argued out in the pages of *Liberator* 364.

The party has now got a fairly easily explained policy – that areas can apply for devolution but will not have it forced upon them.

A large minority voted for the division of England into regional governments, a position the conference rightly rejected. The boundaries would have been a top-down imposition and those used for the old regional assemblies and development agencies – which supporters appeared to wish to keep – make no sense in the south west, south east or East Anglia. They are also open to interminable arguments about which place should be in which area elsewhere.

Councils in urban areas are already forming into combined authorities, districts are merging in all but name, local enterprise partnerships have formed loosely around local economic areas and so the glimmerings are apparent of local government based on travel-to-work areas. This is happening without specific local referendums, but then neither option debated at York offered them.

There are still some anomalies, though. The policy eccentrically allows any single district to stymie the plans of its neighbours to seek devolved powers, and lacks any mechanism to settle such disputes.

It did, though, see the party going with the grain of what is happening in local government, a slightly surprisingly spreading from the bottom up of new governance units, rather than a top-down drawing of arbitrary boundaries.

# RADICAL BULLETIN

## NOTHING TO SEE HERE

Relations between the Liberal Democrats' Federal Executive and the Federal Conference Committee have hit a new low over the former's efforts to 'increase democracy' at conference and in committee elections without talking to the latter.

It has thoroughly got FCC's goat that FE embarked on its 'democracy' venture while, its members feel, demonstrating little thought about the practicalities. "Many of us on FCC are amazed that FE would look at this without talking to FCC before starting," as one prominent member put it.

There has also been a row between FE and FCC over the absence from the York spring conference agenda of the FE's motion on reforming the interim peers panel.

Aggrieved FE members might look to their own chair, party president Tim Farron. He did not attend FCC's agenda setting meeting (or indeed any other FCC meeting, although entitled to do so) but did send an e-mail. That urged FCC to put the digital rights motion on the agenda – which it did – but did not refer to the FE's own motion on the peers panel. If the FE's chair thought its motion not important enough to mention, who were FCC to dispute that?

One particular fear now stalking FCC is the loose talk about allowing, some time in the medium-term future, remote voting by party members watching internet streamed conference policy debates. It doesn't require a lot of thought to see where that might lead – not all that many members would have to take that option before there would be nothing for any of them to watch.

The economics of staging conference depend on there being a critical mass of people paying registration fees, which in turn attracts exhibitors, fringe meeting organisers and lobbyists, all of whom who pay handsomely to attend, and the media to provide the most extensive coverage the party normally gets in any year.

Conference would become impossible to stage were any significant number of members to opt not to attend but to watch over the internet instead. That's quite apart from intangible losses like the opportunity to attend training sessions, fringe meetings or simply for party members to meet each other.

## THE SOUND OF SILENCE

Bemused members of the Federal Policy Committee are still waiting to hear what they are supposed to discuss about how tackling the deficit will be approached in the next Liberal Democrat manifesto.

Since nobody, Labour included, disputes that there will still be a deficit then, this might be thought an important point and crucially influential on anything else that goes into the manifesto. But whenever the

manifesto process gets reported back, there is a hole where the fiscal policies should be.

Lists of possible policy priorities are put forward for the pre-manifesto document, most of them perfectly sensible, but there is silence on the deficit. Should the party commit itself at the next general election to clear the structural deficit by a specific time, and should that time be the same as that given by the Tories? Answer comes there none. Nor have members heard anything about whether the Liberal Democrats would opt for continuing austerity for years to come or to reduce the GDP-to-debt ratio.

It's only a year to go, which makes the continuing silence on these fundamentals rather alarming.

## BLESSED FROM ABOVE

As Liberator correctly predicted last autumn (Liberator 363), Baroness Brinton has indeed been lined up as the leadership's 'safe pair of hands' candidate to succeed Tim Farron as party president.

It has been Brinton's good or bad fortune – depending on one's view – to be the party establishment's go-to person for awkward jobs like running the process to choose members of the Leadership Panel and chairing the Diversity Engagement Group, activities that have not endeared her to Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats.

Also a declared runner is a very different candidate, Pauline Pearce of Hackney. Pearce shot to national fame as the 'Hackney heroine' when she faced down a mob in the 2011 riots that was trashing the estate where she lives. She soon after joined the Liberal Democrats and has been a local authority candidate. Whether possessing public celebrity status outweighs relative newness in the party remains to be seen.

Also seen at York taking soundings of whether to throw her hat into the ring was former MP and MEP Liz Lynne, who Nick Clegg has several times overlooked for a peerage, a possible indication of his view of the prospect of her as president.

Brinton has, though, already got one new job, as the lone peer in the team to handle any future coalition talks. Not that peers were asked who they wanted; an electorate of one called Nick Clegg chose her.

Some peers are concerned that, since Brinton is also the anointed establishment candidate for party president, there would be an obvious conflict of interest between the president's role in protecting the interests of the party plus overseeing its response to any coalition agreement and the president having just been part of the team that negotiated it.

One more obvious peer for the negotiator role would have been the peers' leader Jim Wallace, the former MP who was involved in the successful negotiation of two coalition agreements in Scotland, where he

was deputy first minister. This experience seemed, however, not to count with Clegg.

## LAST MAN STANDING

Welfare reform is turning into such an appalling embarrassment for the coalition that no Liberal Democrat MP can be found to be co-chair of the work and pensions parliamentary committee.

Despite the subject being important and the position carrying some status, MPs have stayed away in droves since Greg Mulholland resigned partly over a dispute about researchers. That leaves Lord German on his own, as a co-chair with no 'co'.

## UNWELCOME VISITOR

The debate on the political reform paper at York, which was dominated by disputes over English devolution, was abruptly enlivened by a speech by Alastair Calder McGregor, the appropriately-named PPC for Calder Valley.

Earlier in the debate, Lord Shipley had argued for acceptance of the 'devolution on demand' position advocated in the paper (*Liberator* 364). McGregor in mid-speech suddenly rounded on Shipley, saying he would "take no lectures in local democracy from Lord Shipley".

It turned out that Shipley had gone to Nottingham in 2012 to campaign in favour of an elected mayor, when McGregor was a member of that city's Liberal Democrats, who opposed the concept. Shipley also caused some anger among his erstwhile colleagues in Newcastle when he supported mayors there. In the event, the voters of every city except Bristol had the good sense in 2012 to reject the attempt to concentrate unaccountable power in one person in every major city.

Shipley's excursion clearly caused ill feeling in Nottingham. Maybe he'll consult the local Liberal Democrats before he intervenes in any locality in future.

## SITUATION VERY VACANT

With the four-yearly poll for London boroughs coming up, it's quite understandable that few Liberal Democrats in the capital have yet given much thought to who should contest the London mayoralty in 2016.

This contest is always troublesome for the party since it is effectively derelict in some boroughs and so cannot fight an effective London-wide campaign. Even if it could, it has found serious difficulty in articulating what a Liberal Democrat London would be like, and at each election so far has put forward a somewhat random collection of mayoral policies and hoped for the best.

The candidate in 2008 and 2012, Brian Paddick, was beaten into fourth place and, having secured his peerage, is unlikely to stand again. Those so far mentioned as potential candidates are former Islington councillor Marisha Rey, who stood in the no-hope Croydon North by-election, and Paul Reynolds, an international relations academic associated with London universities who fought North West Leicestershire in 2010.

Rey is both female and from an ethnic minority, factors that Reynolds's supporters think may count against his candidacy. Still, plenty of time remains for others to throw their hats into the ring.

## ROOM FOR SIX MORE

As if the House of Lords were not absurdly crowded enough, there is talk of yet more new peers, including six from the Liberal Democrats. *Liberator* correctly predicted most of those ennobled last summer, though Liz Lynne and Julie Smith went empty handed.

Sudhir Choudrie is now unlikely to be on the list after a report in the *Guardian* that he appears on a list of 'unscrupulous persons' held by the Indian police. That type of thing, if true, tends to snuff out peerage prospects, no matter how much support people give the party.

There is also likely to be fierce competition for the place awarded by custom to ex-council leaders, with Kath Pinnock from Kirklees and Carl Minns from Hull in the running.

## AN UNUSUAL BOAST

Few politicians set out to make boring speeches, but Liberal Democrat president Tim Farron is one.

In advance of a Labour debate in the House of Lords to 'regret' the bedroom tax changes, peers were startled to receive from chief whip Dick Newby a missive that said they might have been confused by one of Farron's speeches.

Newby said Farron had been in touch to say: "There was some nonsense yesterday around the 'bedroom tax' where I was supposed to have single-handedly changed our policy or some other such rubbish."

Aware that Labour might cite his words, Farron explained: "This has all come about because I gave a fairly dull speech about housing at the Centre for Social Justice that has been in the diary for months and I said very, very little about the spare room subsidy, and what I said was very measured... but the *Guardian* completely distorted what I said. I was interviewed by ITN at the event and am very proud of the fact that I was so very, very boring that they didn't even run the piece on the news."

## GOOD RIDDANCE

Something was missing from official materials both on the new Liberal Democrat website and at this March's party conference in York. Gone was the awful aqua colour that some idiot wished on the party five years ago, oblivious to its close resemblance to blue.

The low point was the backdrop to the 2011 spring conference at Sheffield, when the entire thing was aqua and looked like a Conservative event. There may be artistic reasons why aqua and yellow normally work well together but in politics colours have meaning, and we all know what blue and shades thereof mean.

Party members will surely hope that whoever originally approved the use of aqua has been also consigned to the bin.

# WHERE LIBERATOR LEADS, NICK CLEGG FOLLOWS

## Will the Liberal Democrats' pro-European election campaign appeal to target voters, asks Simon Titley

Liberator has a reputation for being a critic of Nick Clegg, so let us be fair and give credit where credit is due. The Liberal Democrats have long needed testicular fortitude on the issue of Europe. With his resolute pro-European stance in this year's Euro elections, Clegg has provided it.

But Liberator is also due some credit. As Mark Pack pointed out in his monthly e-mail Newswire ('Nick Clegg takes the Liberator line', November 2013), Liberator has long argued for such a strategy when most of the party preferred to duck for cover.

The Liberal Democrats fought previous Euro elections in a cowardly fashion. They campaigned mainly on local ward issues in the hope this would avoid causing offence to Eurosceptic voters.

This strategy failed. Hardly surprising, really. After all, if you are anti-EU, why vote Liberal Democrat when the Tories or UKIP offer the real McCoy? Hence at previous Euro elections, the Liberal Democrats have performed worse than their poll ratings.

Throughout this period, British public opinion has changed little, with roughly one-third being pro-European, one-third anti-European and one-third undecided. And the issue of EU membership is not a priority for most voters. It matters as a big issue only to about 1 or 2% of the whole electorate. But until now, the Liberal Democrats thought it was more important to avoid any risk of offending the two-thirds of the electorate that is not pro-European than to enthuse the one-third that is pro-European.

It was always unwise to dismiss that one-third. First, 33% may not be a majority but it is a much higher percentage of the vote than the Liberal Democrats received in recent Euro elections (14.9% in 2004 and 13.7% in 2009, lower than the party's opinion poll ratings of around 20% on both occasions). Second, every other party is also trying to appease Eurosceptics, leaving the pro-European field clear. And third, the turnout in Euro elections in the UK is low (38.5% in 2004 and 34.7% in 2009), giving any party that can enthuse and mobilise people a higher percentage of the vote than it gets in the polls.

Instead, the Liberal Democrats won a lower percentage of the vote than they got in the polls. If they had focussed on enthusing and mobilising the pro-European minority instead of trying not to offend anyone, surely they would have done better? So why was the party so foolish? The answer is sentimentality. Most party members seem to think that anyone and everyone can be persuaded to vote Liberal Democrat, so it's more important not to offend sceptics than it is to enthuse friends.

There is no evidence to justify this view. Over half of the electorate would never vote for the Liberal Democrats under any circumstances. It's the same for

every other party. Nowadays, no party can ever win more than about 40% of the vote.

If the Liberal Democrats were regularly polling over 30%, there would be a case for reaching out to more tentative voters. But they are polling only about 10%, so the need is to build and consolidate a base. The party should therefore focus its efforts on the minority of the electorate with the greatest sympathy for it. And as it turns out, the demographics of voters most likely to support the Liberal Democrats (younger, better educated, more cosmopolitan) are roughly in line with the sort of people most likely to be pro-European.

So it's good news that Clegg has at long last adopted a pro-European strategy, even though its success may be limited by the fact that it started only about six months before this May's Euro elections, and even though Clegg's performance in his two TV debates with Nigel Farage could have been better.

### MOVING TARGET

But there's a catch. If you are going to focus your appeal on target demographic groups, you must do so not merely in terms of a dry exposition of your policies. You also need to understand the interests and emotions of these groups, and appeal to these too. Furthermore, you are aiming at a moving target, as voters become increasingly disillusioned with the political establishment and the economic system.

One rather extreme measure of this disillusionment was the sympathy Russell Brand won in his famous interview with Jeremy Paxman on BBC2's Newsnight (23 October 2013). Brand also set out his arguments in the *New Statesman* the day after the interview, in an article titled 'Russell Brand on revolution: We no longer have the luxury of tradition'.

It is easy to dismiss Brand's point of view. He argues that people should not participate in the political system but instead offers only a vague idea of a "utopian revolution" as an alternative, while justifying popular apathy in the meantime. Nevertheless, Brand has a point when he observes the extent to which politics has been taken over by a privileged elite that communicates in terms to which most people can no longer relate. Brand's arguments also explain why so many people under 35 are completely disillusioned with politics and never vote. This lack of participation actually makes things worse, since it enables politicians to ignore the needs of younger people and instead focus on the demands of the elderly middle classes. Even so, we need to understand the disillusionment and alienation that has led to this situation.

TV reporter Paul Mason, in a Channel 4 blog post ('Worlds collide as Russell Brand predicts a revolution', 24 October 2013), explained why younger people are

inspired by Brand:

“What Russell has picked up is that they hate, if not the concept of capitalism, then what it’s doing to them. They hate the corruption manifest in politics and the media; the rampant criminality of a global elite whose wealth nestles beyond taxation and accountability; the gross and growing inequality; and what it’s doing to their own lives.

“Russell’s audience get pay cheques, but their real spending power is falling. They don’t just need help to buy, they need help to pay the mortgage; help to get out of relationships that are collapsing under economic stress; help to pay the legal loan shark and meet the minimum credit card payment. Above all, they need help to understand what kind of good life capitalism is going to offer their generation. Because since Lehman Brothers that has not been obvious.”

The financial insecurity of the younger generation was also highlighted in Anthony Hilton’s column in the London Evening Standard (‘Sacrifice is needed to stop this slide into poorer times’, 18 December 2013):

“The Institute of Fiscal Studies published a forecast yesterday which suggested that people born in the 1960s and 1970s would be less well-off in retirement than those born 20 years before them.

“They will be in trouble, according to the IFS, because fewer will own their own homes, fewer will have good company pensions, and fewer will have accumulated significant amounts of private savings throughout their working lives. Unless they get a generous inheritance – and here the odds are stacked in their favour – they will be less well-off in old age.”

How can things have got worse? The Thatcher revolution, concludes Hilton, was not all it was cracked up to be.

Liberal Democrat blogger David Boyle also commented on the Brand-Paxman interview (‘Why Russell Brand isn’t completely wrong’, The Real Blog, 8 November 2013). He disagreed strongly with Brand’s argument that people shouldn’t vote. Nevertheless, he identified three reasons why Brand has a point about political disengagement: “the corrosion of political language”, in which conventional political language is no longer believed or listened to any more; “the hollowing out of political parties”, in which party membership has collapsed because parties no longer have anything to offer their members; and “there seems no purpose behind it all” because “modern politics seems so often to be defending indefensible and useless institutions or worn-out ideas, rather than imagining how things might be run more effectively.”

The situation is not entirely one of despair, however. In an earlier blog post (‘Why radical change is coming’, The Real Blog, 26 August 2013), David Boyle quoted from a speech he had just delivered at the Edinburgh Book Festival, in terms that were both revolutionary and optimistic:

“This is the calm before the storm. Given the poverty of the current political and economic arrangements – and our own understanding of the way things actually work – I believe that change is about to happen. If we

*“The party should focus its efforts on the minority of the electorate with the greatest sympathy for it”*

meet again here in five years’ time, there will be a different political spirit abroad. There will be a much greater focus on finding ways for our children and our children’s children to live meaningful, interesting, comfortable lives away from the tyranny of landlords and employers.”

David Boyle explained why it is not just the younger generation but also the older middle classes that will demand change:

“The middle classes are waking from their long dream, understanding that the economic destruction visited on the working classes is now in store for them – understanding the futures their children face: 25 years indentured servitude to their mortgage provider, in jobs they loathe, paying out such vast sums to tyrannical landlords in the interim that they can’t quite manage to bring up families of their own.

“What the middle classes want, they will eventually get. When they understand the dark future ahead – and the slow corrosion of UK life as our lives become unaffordable – they will create a political force capable of tackling it.

“Every generation or so, UK politics generates a radical shift. It did so in 1906, in 1940, in 1979. It is now 34 years since the last one and we are due another. It will happen sooner than we think.”

By this stage, you may be wondering why this article appears to have gone off at a tangent. It was meant to be about Liberal Democrat strategy for the Euro elections. What has the disillusionment of people with the economy got to do with this?

The answer is one of context. The people most likely to vote Liberal Democrat are also the sort of middle class people who David Boyle predicts are waking up to the danger of economic destruction. They will look for radical leadership, so the party must offer something radical to address their perceptions and needs. On European policy, the need for a context means arguing why the opportunities presented by the EU will help them through the economic crisis and create a more prosperous future.

The trouble is, Nick Clegg has reoriented the party around the prevailing orthodoxy of 1980s/90s economic ideology because he cannot imagine any alternative. If as a result he presents his policies in totally dry language or in terms of the appeasement of small-c conservative opinion, as he did in the recent TV debates on the Euro elections, he will fail to enthuse or mobilise more people.

It is not enough to be pro-European. If the Liberal Democrats are to mobilise significantly more pro-European votes than their 10% poll ratings, they must explain why their policies represent a radical approach to people’s problems rather than a safe establishment position. If Clegg hasn’t the balls to do that, expect support to remain stuck at 10% and a bad election result in May.

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Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective

# HERE COME THE F WORDS

Nigel Farage is a farrago and a fake, yet public distrust of Nick Clegg and the EU led him to ‘win’ the two television debates. David Grace concludes that Clegg was nevertheless right to try to turn the eurosceptic tide

I imagine many F-words were shouted at televisions across the country as Nigel Farage trotted out his litany of lies in the debates with Nick Clegg. Watching the BBC2 debate at the National Liberal Club, I controlled the desire to swear out loud.

However, F is for Farage and, when he warned against the rise of right-wing extremists across Europe, I simply had to shout, “Yes” and point at him. Farage was warning us about himself. How is it, then, that pundits and polls widely agree that Nick Clegg lost both debates?

In the first debate, Nick concentrated on economics, the major plank in the Liberal Democrat European election campaign, as the slogan “In Europe, In Work” summarises. Anyone who considers the economic arguments carefully will vote for Britain to stay in the EU and therefore, he hopes, vote for the party unequivocally in favour of staying. F is for Facts and F is for Fantasy, two words which Nick Clegg used repeatedly when contrasting his argument with Farage’s.

However, there are many problems with this approach. Firstly, most people are turned off by economics and remain unconvinced when asked to choose between two arguments on the subject. This is particularly true when such arguments are bolstered by competing statistics. The voter cannot easily decide whose statistic is right and will often take the path requiring the least energy and no further research – “Whom do I trust more?” or perhaps “Whom do I trust less?”

## TOXIC DEBACLE

At the moment for many, this is Clegg. The tuition fees debacle has proved as toxic in this respect as many of us predicted. Secondly, as President Bartlett points out in a West Wing episode, the benefits of free trade are general while the costs are particular and can be easily cited and understood.

Of course, Farage likes to say that he is in favour of free trade and that the EU is protectionist, stopping the UK from having a wonderful trading relationship with the rest of the world. This is arrant nonsense, as the EU has established free trade in a single market between 28 nations that formerly maintained both tariff and non-tariff barriers against each other. The EU has also consistently fought for lower tariffs between third countries and itself.

The third problem is the killer. The argument isn’t about economics. Farrago gave the game away when interviewed by John Humphries recently. Humphries asked, “If it could be proved that Britain would be worse off outside the EU, would you still want to

leave?” “Yes”, replied Farage, “It would be a price worth paying”.

F is for Farrago (definition – a confused mixture), as we should call him. F is for Fear of Foreigners, his underlying message. Here is the nub of the argument. Farrago appealed to deeply held British prejudices when summing up the second debate, “We must take back control of our country”. Explaining carefully how European democracy works doesn’t quell these underlying fears because a xenophobe just doesn’t get the idea that a foreigner should have a vote on anything affecting a Brit. It’s as if a football team insisted that other teams in the league had no say in the rules. Indeed, the Cameron approach is that games involving Britain should be played by different rules.

F is for Figures. Farrago follows Goebbels’s dictum that repeating lies often enough makes people believe them. Hence the absurd proposition that 70% of UK law comes from Brussels. Decades of bias in the media have fed such lies. Eurosceptics never say, “The European Parliament and Council have adopted new legislation”. When a new British law is enacted, no one says “London has dictated” or “Whitehall has decided” but new European legislation is usually characterised as “Brussels dictates” or “Unelected bureaucrats have imposed”. British politicians have failed to nail this lie for forty years, either out of their own ignorance or fearing that the electorate will not understand, and Nick Clegg did not even try to correct it in either debate.

Unable to scream at the screen, I tweeted in frustration, “Nick, for God’s sake tell them about the elected European Parliament!” possibly an appropriate response during a European election campaign. So Farrago gets away with repeated assertions that the EU is undemocratic.

Moreover, he gets away with the idea that a nation state acting alone has more power than a member-state of the European Union. There is a distinction between sovereignty – the theoretical power to decide – and the global economy Farrago cites so often, where actual power to decide follows from the clout of a larger trading bloc.

F is for Fighting. In the second debate, Nick Clegg widened the discussion beyond economics. He began with the role of the EU in promoting peace in Europe. I find this argument plays well with the elderly with their own memories or memories of their parents’ experiences in World War Two. It also appeals to the youngest voters who do care about war and peace and would like to share the privilege of my own generation in never having to fight. The EU deserved its Nobel Peace Prize.

To believe otherwise is to imagine that human



nature has miraculously changed, that Europeans who have fought and killed each other for centuries have suddenly become better people. F is for First World War. If we cannot make this argument on the centenary of that ghastly war, when will we? When working in Brussels, I met a European Commission official called Von Moltke. His forefathers led German armies in the Franco-Prussian War, the First and Second World Wars, whereas he sits in committee meetings arguing about policies and directives.

Yet Farrago admitted in the second debate that he doesn't just want the UK out, he wants the EU dissolved entirely. Can he really believe that 28 independent nation states will never revert to war to settle their differences? The truth is that we have not ended difference or conflicting interests in Europe but have created institutions that resolve them peacefully and without resort to arms.

As Richard Moore wonderfully declaimed at this March's Liberal Democrat spring conference in York, "We live in extraordinary times, the longest continuous period of peace in Europe since the Antonine emperors of the second and third centuries".

## PROMOTING PEACE

I did not expect Nick Clegg to use that line but was delighted that he opened on BBC2 with the subject of peace. Nick also scored whenever he mentioned Farrago's admiration of Putin. He needed to remind people that Farrago had said that the EU had "blood on its hands" in Ukraine. There is a secondary point about peace, that the economic attraction of the EU to countries wanting to join has played a significant role in their development of democratic constitutions, a requirement of membership, and democracies do not go to war with each other.

In the first debate, I waited in vain for Nick Clegg to talk about the environment. Farrago mentioned it but only to say that environmental policies imposed costs on British business, ignoring the value of the policies themselves and the fact that, because of the EU, businesses across the continent bore such costs whereas, without the EU, each country acting alone would resist such policies on the grounds of competitive disadvantage.

In the second debate, Farrago went further. He said that he didn't care whether EU environmental policies were right or not; he opposed them because they were European. Nick did argue that we need the EU to tackle climate change. This will not persuade UKIP supporters, many of whom deny that climate change is happening. However, not only is it an important argument for Liberal Democrats but it resonates with the vast majority of voters. When asked by Eurobarometer polls, as many as 80% of voters accept that this is a proper role for the EU.

F is for Format. The Nick vs. Nigel debates followed a format now popular and widespread but inimical to rational discussion. The most important questions in

*"Farrago follows Goebbels's dictum that repeating lies often enough makes people believe them"*

life cannot be considered in two-minute snatches, but that was the longest either man could speak. Most of the discussion was conducted in shorter sound bites.

This suits Farrago very well, the genius of the public bar. Confronted with a typical factitious Farrago fabrication, what do you do? Do you spend your precious few seconds

rebutting the nonsense or making your own positive case?

The dilemma is also our fault. Supporters of the European Union have failed for so long to make the case for its existence that they are inevitably on the back foot. Nick Clegg's approach changed between the two debates. Calmly stating facts didn't work first time so he tried injecting emotion the second time, even adopting Farrago's own tactic of constant interruptions.

F is for Fun. Nick's game was to poke fun at Farrago, characterising him as putting the clock back (repeated several times) and as a peddler of fantasy, the kind of man who says the moon landing didn't happen and Elvis is alive. In the hands of Marcus Brigstocke or Eddie Izzard, this might have worked but Nick's jokes didn't suit his personality and didn't work better for being repeated.

The modern world versus the Britain of the 1950s is the right framework but needs polishing. You cannot characterise Farrago as a man of the past by simple assertion, and Nick referred to Nigel's view on gay men and women to lend colour to it. Of course, many public bar philosophers will share these prejudices as well. We can perhaps undermine Farrago's credibility by dismantling his carefully assembled but false anti-establishment image.

F is for Fake. He poses as the defender of the white working class and scourge of politicians and rich bankers. It's time to remind people that this public schoolboy earned his money as a commodities broker and is a career politician himself, who joined the Tory Party at the age of 15 and has tried to become an MP six times. Nick did tell people how little work Farrago actually does for his MEP's salary. Perhaps he should have told them about his expenses claims too.

Was Nick Clegg right to challenge Farrago to debate? As commentators noted, even the minority percentages that Nick got in the immediate polls were larger than the Liberal Democrat share of the vote in any election (1st debate: 36%, 2nd: 31%). It is possible to regard UKIP's current support as pressure cooker steam but we would be foolishly to assume it will evaporate.

Rightly or wrongly, Clegg's brand is toxic but on Europe it's not all his fault. All pro-Europeans have themselves to blame. Two hours of debate will not undo 40 years of neglected argument. Oh yes, F is for Federalism. Don't get me started.

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David Grace is Vice-Chairman of the European Movement and a former President of the Young European Federalists

# POTS AND KETTLES

## Western invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq ill-equip the West to criticise Russia for its takeover of Crimea, says Simon Hebditch

Recent events in Crimea and Ukraine have led to a return to the politics of the big blocs of influence in the world.

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to greater freedom for eastern and central Europe to the benefit of most of their populations. Many will remember the popular movements leading towards greater democracy within the territories of the region. The consequence for Russia was a loss of influence and standing in the international community.

If you link that loss with the historical fear of the Russian state that it will be surrounded by enemies, you can see why Russia has wanted to find ways of grabbing back influence in what they call the 'near abroad'.

Russia's unilateral move into Crimea and massing of troops on the Ukrainian borders found no tangible response from the West. Ukraine was not a member of NATO. If it had been, NATO would have come to its assistance under its founding treaty.

Of course, it can be argued that Crimea had been handed over to Ukraine in 1954 and all Russia was doing was to reclaim that territory, which has a majority of ethnic Russians as citizens of the region.

The reality for Ukraine was that neither the European Union nor the USA was going to take any military action and were hoping that they could get away with only symbolic sanctions. All we had was a wringing of hands and sanctimonious rhetoric from David Cameron and William Hague. I am not arguing that we should have taken military action – rather I am pointing out that the web of apparent treaty relationships is built on sand.

This is nothing new. Just going back about 200 years, the Monroe Doctrine said that the whole of South and Central America was the USA's 'sphere of influence'. In other words, everybody else should keep out if the USA defined such involvement as a threat to its sphere of influence. In the last 50 years, the principles of that doctrine have been used to defend American action in Chile, Guatemala and other countries of Latin America to ensure that their governments were sympathetic, or at least not hostile, to the interests of the USA.

Wasn't it the Allied leaders, meeting in Yalta in 1944, who divided up eastern and central Europe among the big powers in terms of influence and control? Exact percentages of control were agreed in relation to each potential country. Rightly or wrongly, the Soviet Union was insistent that it needed a string of buffer states that would protect it from yet more invasions from powerful enemies in the West. It had lost at least 20 million people in the Second World War and that experience defined its paranoia.

A number of readers of Liberator would have been involved in campaigns in the 1960s through to the 1980s supporting the freedom movements of a range of eastern and central European countries, especially trying to combat the Russian invasions of Hungary and

Czechoslovakia. It is interesting to note that Soviet interference in a direct military way only happened in countries that they regarded as being in their sphere of influence.

Of course, there were interventions at some level in a range of African and Middle Eastern countries when the big powers were competing for influence, and the Cuban crisis was a miscalculation as this was an example of a potential military threat to the USA in its claimed sphere of influence.

So, if we bring it up to date, we need to look at the Ukrainian crisis in relation to this concept of the sphere of influence. I would argue that it was wrong in the circumstances of the break-up of the Soviet Union to open up NATO membership to a range of countries sitting in this buffer zone.

The buffer zone is a reality of life and those countries living within the immediate region where a superpower has interests must take those into account. The West took advantage of the collapse of the Soviet Union to push NATO membership, and has been trying to extend the territories within which missile bases may be established. Many would argue that this was intended to protect the new democracies of central and eastern Europe. Russia will see it as imply trying to expand NATO borders right up to Russian borders, and therefore constitutes a threat to the country.

The West is perfectly capable of hypocrisy as well. To shout about defending a country's territorial integrity when we have only recently invaded Iraq and Afghanistan is the height of hypocrisy.

Territorial integrity is also not the defining principle underlying international relationships. Although military interventions have not had a good history recently, there is still an argument that the international community should be able to take action, through a reformed United Nations, where genocide is either being practised or threatened. We do need a concept of liberal interventionism for the twenty-first century, but maybe that is a matter for another article.

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Simon Hebditch is a founder of Liberal Left

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# TELL ISRAEL IT'S WON

## Chris Davies found that ideas of a two-state solution might be past their sell-by date when he led a delegation of MEPs to assess the situation in Palestine

Surrounded by their possessions are some 40 people sleeping in the corridors, some of them elderly. It's a surprising sight in a hospital that carries out advanced operations, including cardiac surgery on infants, but then the Makassed hospital has unusual problems to overcome.

Situated on the Mount of Olives in East Jerusalem, it's the main referral hospital for all Palestinians. The old folk are the grandparents of child patients from Gaza. For alleged 'security reasons', the Israeli authorities deny many people under 60 a permit to accompany children brought for emergency operations, so parents have to leave their offspring in the care of others.

They are issued only with day permits so are trapped at the hospital, unable to leave the grounds for weeks on end. The hospital has to provide them with food. A building permit has been refused but it's hoped that some prefabs can be erected to provide bed spaces.

The day after my visit, I enjoyed a stroll along the esplanade between Tel Aviv and Jaffa, an hour's drive away. I wondered whether the Israelis around me had any appreciation of the human consequences of their government's policy.

Israel continues to consolidate its control of Palestine through confiscations and demolitions, settlement building and new roads for the exclusive use of Israelis. Area 'C', which includes the Jordan Valley and makes up 60% of the West Bank, is now being closed to Palestinians in a massive Israeli land grab.

And then there are the killings. We get to hear of rockets being fired disturbingly but fruitlessly by idiots in Gaza but not of the 68 Palestinians killed since last July, mostly by the Israeli Defence Force. Too often, these deaths occur in situations that should raise demands for inquiries into the use of lethal weapons but the perpetrators appear not even to be admonished.

The 'peace process' grinds on but makes no advances. Palestinians are convinced that Israel wants it to continue solely to provide PR cover while it makes the creation of an independent state ever more impossible. After eight months of 'negotiations', no agreement has been reached on final status issues, although these matters were previously addressed in talks between president Abbas and prime minister Olmert and apparently resolved. A new demand has been made that Palestinians accept that Israel will be 'a Jewish state' – whatever that would mean, given that 22% of Israel's citizens are Palestinian.

John Kerry's personal commitment to the process is undoubted but the lack of progress speaks volumes about the obstacles being placed in his way. Palestinians doubt the USA is an honest broker and assume that it wants them to accept the unacceptable. The talks should conclude on 29 April but calls

are being made for an extension. If Israel honours its commitment to prisoner releases, Palestinian negotiators will no doubt accept this rather than be blamed for their collapse, but their eyes are turning back towards New York and new approaches to UN bodies that may embarrass Israel.

How to free the logjam? Most Palestinians just want to improve their lives free from Israeli restrictions but there is always the risk that a spark could be fed into flame by the anger and resentment bred by the occupation.

Our delegation was urged to support a boycott of Israeli goods and services associated with the occupied territories, and sometimes encouraged to back a campaign to disinvest from Israel. Mention was made even by governmental sources in Palestine of possible civil disobedience and non-violent protests, although there was no indication that a campaign of this kind was seriously being organised.

There is a changing mood. The two-state solution may still be the best option for both sides but could have had its day. Israel may have already gone too far in changing the facts on the ground. Fatah politicians seem still to be wedded to the old mantra but among younger Palestinians there is more talk now of a one-state solution, perhaps with separate administrations but a number of shared institutions.

The words of a teenage Palestinian girl living in the West Bank were reported to us by her father, a businessman, and deserve wider circulation. One day, he tore her away from her I-pad for long enough to ask whether she understood what living under occupation really meant.

"Yes dad," she replied. "We live 40 minutes' drive from the sea but we can never go there. We live 14 minutes from Jerusalem but we cannot visit the city unless we are granted a special permit."

"Israel is not interested in negotiating with us. It has one of the strongest armies in the world and we cannot beat it. Intifadas got us attention but left us with broken bones; they led to a strengthening of the occupation. The international community expresses concern but doesn't deliver. We went to the United Nations and won a vote 138-9 in favour of Palestinian statehood, but the nine include the USA."

"Maybe we should tell Israel, 'OK, you win.' There will be no Palestinian state. But we live here, this is our home, and we want our rights as equals."

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Chris Davies is the Liberal Democrat MEP for North West England and has been a member of the European Parliament's Palestine delegation since 2004

# BETTER TOGETHER?

## Scottish Liberal Democrats could campaign more effectively for genuine federalism outside the all-party Better Together campaign, argues Tony Greaves

In 1987, during the merger talks between the Liberal Party and the SDP, David Steel said I was a “North of England Nationalist”. We were of course discussing how to fit the demands of Liberal and SDP negotiators from Scotland and Wales – for Scottish and Welsh autonomy within a federal constitution – with the conundrum of the much larger England.

I remembered this while watching Willie Rennie call for the No campaign to get some “sunshine” into its strategy. I never understood why the proposal for a ‘Devolution Max’ question on the ballot paper was so strongly opposed by all the Westminster lot – including Liberal Democrats – since it would have provided something positive to campaign for. I still do not understand why the Scottish Liberal Democrats are not running a much clearer and separate campaign for a federal solution which, as I understand it, would mean going just one step further than dev-max.

But who am I to comment? My involvement in Scottish politics has been minimal. A couple of branch visits when I chaired the Young Liberals. A week or so at the Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles by-election in 1965 (that man Steel again), when I ended up running the polling day organisation in Hawick. A couple of days at Kincardine and Deeside, where those of us with English accents were sent to canvass Labour voters on the housing schemes on the edge of Aberdeen (some were thinking of voting SNP, so I entertained them with Liberal theories of sovereignty, and autonomy within a federal system. It didn’t seem to do any harm, though they were more interested in getting their bins emptied).

And a couple of days at the Dunfermline by-election (that Rennie lad again). Apart from that, I’ve been to Liberal Assemblies at Edinburgh and Dundee, and Liberal Democrat conferences in Glasgow, and I did various training sessions in Scotland back in the ALC days. My wife is half Scottish and we’ve spent many holidays in the Highlands and Islands, most recently in the wonderful remoteness of Uig on the Isle of Lewis. And I’m a fervent fan of the Highland rock band Runrig!

All this is not to prove my deep personal experience of Scottish politics, but the reverse. By and large, English natives either think Scotland is part of England (my mother once came back from a Mediterranean cruise to report they had met “a really nice English couple from Edinburgh”) or recognise that, while it is not exactly foreign, it is, in undefined and mysterious ways, a bit different.

The Scottish referendum campaigns, with six months still to go, are already building an astonishing crescendo. For what it’s worth, I have felt for some time that there will be a No majority but small

enough for the issue not to be killed off, and another referendum within five or six years. But it could go the other way and if UKIP ‘win’ England in the European elections in May it might tip the balance.

So I ask myself what I would do if I had a vote. I am getting requests to phone voters in Scotland, even at this early stage, but what would I say to them? I’m afraid that following a script laid down by HQ is not my style – I don’t believe that Liberal politicians should be automatons! I am not going to say things I think are nonsense, and much of the No campaign as we hear it south of the Border seems to me to be nonsense, and counter-productive nonsense.

The more I listen to the Better Together campaign, the less I like it. I was appalled by the threats by the Westminster parties, including ourselves in the person of Danny Alexander, over the pound. The view that a currency union would be out of the question, full stop, not to be discussed; and that it could not be negotiated in any circumstances; is or is not sensible policy. But as a blunt statement at this stage, it was stupid politics and anyone with an ounce of common sense could see that.

It is a perfectly reasonable argument and probably correct that the best currency arrangement for both Scotland and residual UK (rUK) is the status quo: a single currency, the pound, within a substantially unitary state. (I say “substantially unitary” because more powers are likely to slip away to Scotland whatever happens in September, and some federal or quasi-federal elements – entrenched checks and balances – are not out of the question). If it is true that the status quo is better than any of the four options put forward in the Scottish government’s white paper, that is certainly a good argument for voting No.

But to present it as a patronising threat is stupid. It’s common sense that, if there is a Yes vote, all these things will be on the table. The question for the Westminster negotiators will then not be “Can we frighten the Scots into voting No?” It will be “What is now best – or least worst – for rUK?” It is at least possible that, if the status quo is no longer on the table, a currency union is the least worst option. Or at least that it should be considered and negotiated to see whether that is the case.

I cannot see that the Noes are helped at all by posh rich English Tories such as Mr Cameron and Mr Osborne lecturing the people of Scotland on these matters. And Danny Alexander may represent a Highland constituency but I guess that, for many Scots, he is just another government minister in that remote south-eastern corner of Britain that nevertheless acts as though it has an eternal right to rule the roost over the rest of us. And if here in the North of England Pennines we sometimes feel like that about “that London” and its arrogant metropolitan

ruling elite, how much more must it resonate in Glasgow and Aberdeen, not to mention on the Isle of Lewis.

So why might we have got it so wrong? When I talk to Liberal friends in Scotland, I hear a lot about Mr Salmond and Ms Sturgeon and the SNP. I hear them denouncing “the nationalists”. And often with a fervour that seems

to me to go beyond reason. As I write this, Alistair Carmichael has just made his call to arms and his warning that “the nationalists” have more hunger as well as more money. Yet it is becoming clear that the Yes vote already includes many people who are not committed SNP voters, and many who consider their usual ideological attachments to be elsewhere on the ordinary spectrum.

From outside the hothouse of Scottish politics, it's easy to forget that Scotland really is different. There is a political culture, a regional (or to Scots national) forum of politics, politicians and debate, with its associated media and the Scottish parliament and government at the heart of it, that does not exist anywhere in England except to an extent in London, where it is much more intertwined with national (i.e. Westminster/English) politics. It seems to me that this Scottish insularity has led to an obsession with Salmond and the SNP. Salmond may be an unprincipled opportunist who would dip his granny if it served his advancement, and the SNP may indeed be full of English-hating Celtic racists and local political thugs urged on by the likes of Ms Sturgeon. I am not close enough to know.

But looking from outside, these views seem to me to be exaggerated, rather like the caricatures I might sometimes express about the Labour Party! Perhaps it is necessary to develop such myths when faced with an efficient political force led by a person of undoubted political competence and charisma. When it throws Liberals into bed with and under the leadership of our natural political enemies in the Labour Party and the Conservative and Unionist Party (its official name since 1912, when it absorbed the Liberal Unionists).

I am astonished that the Scottish Liberal Democrats are now content to be labelled as Unionists. Back to anecdotes at David Steel's by-election (and there are many) – the Tories had strung a huge banner across the main street in Galashiels. A certain Liberal agent had a small car (a Morris Traveller?) on which he placed a step-ladder, which he climbed with a big pair of shears. The car was pushed slowly under the banner and the shears did the trick. The point of the story is that the banner simply said “Vote Unionist”.

Perhaps some conscious uncoupling is needed to create some of Willie Rennie's campaign sunshine and the promotion of a distinctive Liberal Democrat version of dev-max. Secretary of State for Scotland Alistair Carmichael is probably one of the few members of the present government who has credibility in Scotland as an independent-minded Scot, and I think he is right to start to bang on about the positive side of the union, though promoting the coalition's policies will not be easy in areas such as the welfare cuts, undermining of employment rights and public service cuts in general,

*“The more I listen to the Better Together campaign, the less I like it”*

when the view from north of the Trent/Watford Gap, never mind Hadrian's Wall, is more of a gang of upper-class Tory right-wingers using austerity to line the pockets of the London-based elite.

To be fair, Ming Campbell and Michael Moore have been leading a call for more powers for Scotland and a federal relationship with

rUK, though this is not easy when the party's policy on devolution or federalism in England is in such a mess. Moore's call for “True federalism [which] will allow for a system of government that accommodates for the expression of different identities within one system, but combines with it the additional influence and strength which comes from co-operation and common purpose” is spot on, but as a party we don't know how to achieve it, which is a bit awkward at this stage of the debate.

So what do I conclude? First, that the referendum will be decided by Scots (i.e. residents of Scotland) in Scotland. And that the rest of opinionated UK should let them get on with it. Second, with six months still to go, what else is there to say and who else to say it? In which context generating scare stories from London will have less and less effect unless that is counter-productivity. And third, that Willie Rennie's strategic sunshine is unlikely to beam out from the Better Together lot since it depends on having a vision of the future which they can't produce because they don't agree about it.

It's time for our friends north of the Border to crystallise their Liberal Democrat vision for Scotland, disengage from all-party establishment mush, and join the likes of Michael Moore on a distinctive Liberal campaign trail. Or we might all be saying bye-bye.

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

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# JEWEL IN THE CROWN

Internal democracy sets the Liberal Democrats apart from the other major parties, so why not extend internal votes to all members, asks Louise Shaw

Liberator 364 carried a spirited critique by Gareth Epps of ‘one member one vote’ in an article entitled ‘Empowering the Famous and Lazy’. It dismissed the idea of ‘One Member One Vote’ (OMOV) as tackling imaginary problems. This was surprising, as radicals usually want new solutions to fix things.

Although conference is populated by thousands and our party is 50,000 strong out in the wider country, most conferences I have seen are dominated by a very small band of people.

In response to the point about our committees being liable to being taken over by celebrity Liberal Democrats – it’s not as if we have plucked the members of the Federal Policy Committee from obscurity and forced them to consider our policies.

Members of this group have actively fought elections to do this since 1998 and a number of them are ‘famous Liberal Democrats’. I never get the impression they are lazy though! Some are elected because of their profile and media appearances – conference reps vote for him on this basis, so why wouldn’t the wider party?

We all know members who never go near conference, even some who don’t go to the local AGM, but are wise enough to support us and consider policy closely. These members chose our current leader and kept us away from choosing Chris Huhne. They have always chosen our leaders well. Why not let them make more decisions?

I joined the Liberal Democrats because I am both an instinctive liberal and a believer in democracy. I, like many others, was pleasantly surprised to find that members vote on policy and for our most important committees – the Federal Conference Committee (FCC), the Federal Policy Committee (FPC) and the Federal Executive (FE).

My first interaction was with the strong neighbouring local party. I’d joined on the website, you see. Apparently I’m on the more proactive end of members, classing myself and I think also classed, as an activist. However, at that time, I was merely a new member. The membership secretary contacted me and, during the next few months, explained the party structure, the local party structure, the idea of conference representatives and was very positive about the nature of the member led policy process.

The first time I went to conference, I was a conference rep – I was in the first local party I mentioned, and voted excitedly on a motion on the NHS Bill in Sheffield. I think I did OK for my first shot. Moreover, as this was the motion that helped Nick Clegg “strengthen his hand” within the coalition, I was enthused about exactly how members could influence policy.

A few conferences later, I was chatting with some of my younger friends in the party in the bar and one of

them went round asking us to come to the (first) secret courts debate, an issue we all felt strongly against as liberals. But as we moved towards the conference hall, more and more of our group said they were interested but they “couldn’t vote”. All were committed and active members, attending AGMs, campaigning and very interested in party policy. We were all at conference after all and it wasn’t just for the beer and Glee club (in some cases in spite of both!).

It’s a fact of life for many under 35 like myself that we haven’t been able to get on the housing ladder. This can mean many, again like myself, that move areas because of insecure rented accommodation, short-term tenancies and the like.

I moved to another area at the terribly planned (for local Liberal Democrat AGMs anyway) time of November – ergo I was disenfranchised and won’t be able to vote in the FPC, FCC and FE elections. I think this is difficult to argue why this might be the case, as it was simply accident of timing, rather than a lack of interest in either local parties or the AGM.

## MORE WELCOMING

To turn away from individual newer members and their membership experience for a bit, and turn to the party itself, OMOV would be important to encourage more people into the party. We need to welcome more people into the party – we can see from the success of 38 Degrees and the government’s petition site (including the recent successful campaign to get Alan Turing pardoned) that there is appetite for being part of the political process. The Liberal Democrats have a distinct unique selling point, in that we do have a high degree of internal democracy, and the Labour and Conservatives have been known to comment enviously about this.

Our own membership surveys bring this factor out as the most important reason people join the party. So it cannot be emphasised enough that this is the jewel in the Liberal Democrat membership experience, and we must let it shine to the best of its ability by encouraging everyone to take part.

The most persuasive point in the OMOV consultation paper is about the fact that people have changed the way they join the party in the main. At least two-thirds of members are joining through the website like I did. From newer members, it’s a regular complaint that they’ve turned up to conference and only then found out that they cannot vote – and how disappointing must that be? Encouraging good liberally-minded people to join us should be one of the things that drives us forward – and part of that is having a good offering for them.

We also need to take a look at the diversity of conference reps. I think that all of us who attend conference can see we need to improve the diversity,

both the younger members as I talked about earlier and also people from minority ethnic backgrounds, women and disabled people. We need to encourage more diverse viewpoints within the party, so our policies can best match the ever-changing world that we live in.

Liberals especially need to look to experience from as wide a range of voices as possible, as it is often us left to speak for those not often heard – the awkward squad speaking up against child detention for instance, or as previously mentioned, the secret courts debate. Therefore I would like as many of my fellow Liberal Democrats to participate in party policy-making as possible.

Time and technology have changed the landscape that we operate in as well. The excellent Jennie Rigg did a sterling job last time the committee elections came up. She used the internet to the best of its ability to host questions posed to candidates and their responses. It would have helped my decision had I been able to vote (I was a substitute representative, having moved areas again at that time!) and more than adequately deals with the question about informing the electorate.

Now restrictions on online internal campaigning have been lifted, people are free to use the internet to research candidates. This levels the playing field against the celebrities apparently about to descend on Liberal Democrat internal party processes.

There's an argument of efficiency as well – not all voting representatives go to conference. The consultation paper details how only 80% of the available conference rep places are taken and of those less than half go to conference. However, one-third of people attending with a full pass do not have voting rights. So if, from a logical perspective, we examine the argument that those who go to conference should be the ones who make policy, what price the people who are there but cannot vote? How do we value their contribution?

Many local parties are not sending any reps whatsoever, meaning there are 5,000 members completely without input into policy – the aforementioned “jewel in the crown” of being a Liberal Democrat – is that really fair or democratic?

Is it even liberal not to be concerned about the lack of opportunity these members have to take part in the aspect of being a Liberal Democrat that most membership surveys return as being the most important? Not an equality of opportunity, I would argue, nor the dispersion of power. With 15% of local parties actually locked out from sending representatives to conference, through not notifying HQ of local officers, having less than 30 members or not having sent in PPERA, which can lead to members being excluded through no fault of their own.

*“We do have a high degree of internal democracy, and the Labour and Conservatives have been known to comment enviously about this”*

Membership of our main committees is unlikely to change too much. They are a coalition of the willing. Membership of FE, FPC or FCC requires hard work and dedication. It is a drain on the finances too. But if the leadership wanted to fill it with nodding dog candidates, they could do it right now. If having a famous name was all that was

required, they could get 80 votes under the current system.

There is a fair point in that membership of these committees is harder on northern or West Country reps and probably leads to a London-centric bias. OMOV does not address this, but I am a member in Hazel Grove and notice a lack of northern candidates. Technology may help us in the future but is outside the scope of the consultation at the moment. It may be worth in the future looking at the viability of telephone conferencing.

This radical party should embrace a system which allows and encourages more members from all round the country. In addition, as was mentioned at the consultation sessions, we need to have our federal committees report to the membership better and the gagging of them is ridiculous. Local groups have the decency to put their minutes up on noticeboards, but you just try to find out what goes on at Federal Policy Committee and you'll be frustrated.

Arguing that universal suffrage (which OMOV effectively is) must hinder accountability is erroneous. Currently, the 1,200 or so, who vote wonder what these committees are up to, much harder to hide from 50,000. There is definitely a case to be made for keeping the party better informed about the goings-on of the party committees. Federal conference report sessions will stay. The only change is that you won't have to be inside the cabal of your local party to vote on them.

The consultation sessions at conference were lively and with a good variety of views aired. It's important all groups within the party have their say, and want us to work together to bring a better membership experience for all members, new and old – and hopefully better, more diverse participation at conference and within our important committees.

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Louise Shaw is a board member of Liberal Reform and was a member of the OMOV Working Group

# WHAT A LACK OF CONFIDENCE CAN DO

The failure of liberals to promote their own values has left the field open to the most reactionary of opponents, says Michael Meadowcroft

I didn't for a moment think in 1958 when I joined the Liberal Party and began, almost immediately, to speak and write on Liberalism, that half a century later I would still be trying not just to coax an unevangelised electorate to support Liberal values but more perversely to persuade Liberal colleagues to have confidence in their beliefs.

We have a more illiberal society today than at any time over those 50 years and it is Liberals who must bear the blame. They have manifestly failed to believe in their values and, as a consequence, have lacked the confidence to proselytise and to proclaim the most relevant and attractive political philosophy ever.

Certainly I have failed over the years to convince the party but I have never lacked confidence in Liberal values. Frankly, it is not difficult to win the argument for Liberalism: the arguments are there, and they just need promoting with intellectual rigour and with an awareness of how to apply them in the wider community.

This analysis is not universally a counsel of despair. There are individual examples of effective Liberalism in practice. To take just one. The Eastleigh by-election in February 2013 was held in the most unprepossessing circumstances imaginable; the sitting MP, Chris Huhne, had pleaded guilty to a criminal offence, the Chris Rennard scandal was making headlines and the party languished at 12% in the polls. Yet remarkably Mike Thornton held the seat for the Liberal Democrats.

Much analytical attention was focussed on the solid local government representation of the party in Eastleigh but no one asked on what these local successes were based. The basic fact is that there has been 50 years of political Liberal activity in Eastleigh and thereabouts, not least led by Martin Kyrle and his late wife Margaret, so that the identification locally with Liberalism and its values underpinned the local government successes and transcended the adverse circumstances of February 2013.

## HATRED OF THE CONSERVATIVES

Although expressed in terms that lack a certain delicacy, I have always agreed with John Pardoe's statement that, "Hatred of the Conservatives is the beginning of political wisdom." The cynicism and opportunism of the Conservative Party has always been a spur to my political activity, and my battles against Labour in Leeds over the past 40 years have been underpinned by the evidence of that party being simply a mirror image of the Tories.

Even so, the Conservative Party of the 1950s, 60s and 70s, under MacMillan, Douglas-Home and Heath, however inherently reactionary it was, was nothing like as illiberal as that party is today – a party that now holds similar views on immigration to those promoted by Enoch Powell in 1968, for which he was summarily sacked by Edward Heath.

Praising those with an eye for the main chance and extolling "devil take the hindmost" began under the cold steel of Margaret Thatcher but it has reached its apogee under David Cameron. The sheer lack of compassion and the harsh language used are something new.

Just when one thinks they cannot go further, they produce a new outrage – the latest today being the inhibiting of books being sent to prisoners, which is a pointlessly vicious hit on a vulnerable target for a populist gain.

I am not arguing against coalition with the Conservatives. That was politically and arithmetically inescapable and was always going to be painfully difficult, particularly when the ephemerally reformist Cameron of 2010 turned into the cynical right-wing prisoner of 2013 onward. The judgement of the Liberal Democrat participation in the coalition has to be whether or not the party's ministers have negotiated successfully enough. Nothing more.

Incidentally, the Conservatives' vivid reversion to the 'nasty party' reminds me of Sir Frank Medlicott's speech to the 1962 Liberal Party Assembly, having returned to the party after some 20 years as a "Liberal and Conservative" (sic) MP: "From time to time I thought that my Conservative colleagues were changing; they were not – they were merely shuffling their prejudices."

My case is not merely for better policies, nor for more campaigning activity, but for an awareness and understanding of on what those policies and that campaigning need to be based. I am arguing, as ever, for a values-based politics and for the enthusiasm and commitment that the vision of a Liberal society engenders. It was this that kept the mighty handful of Liberals going in the dark ages of the 1940s and 1950s and it this that is manifestly needed today.

The party is never again going to flourish primarily based on mindless activism and extra millions of Focus leaflets. Quite apart from the impossibility of maintaining the activity without burn out, or even of permanently out-delivering opponents, UKIP has now grabbed our anti-politics niche, often in identical wording to countless Liberal leaflets over recent years.

Sadly I find myself depressed by my own foresight. In 1979, following a very poor general election result and



the election of the first Thatcher government, I asked the Liberal Party's assembly committee to embark on a long project to renew and to re-express Liberalism. This began with a half day assembly debate on Liberal philosophy, at which Russell Johnston as ever spoke brilliantly.

My contribution, with community politics in mind, was to say that, "Electoral success may fall unbidden into our grasp but political success has to be worked for." The project to achieve such an aim carried on in 1980, with the approval of my *Liberal Values for a New Decade* and then with work on applying these values to the current political agenda in *Foundations for the Future*.

## RUDE ENDING

The fourth stage in 1981, involving the whole party in developing these ideas into a manifesto, was rudely ended by the plunge into the Alliance with the SDP. Once again the search for the 'silver bullet' overcame the efforts to build and entrench a political movement with its potential for commitment to a defined set of values.

Let us now examine the state of our society as a consequence of the failure to win the case for Liberalism:

- ☛ Social welfare – the government has crossed a vital line by limiting social security in ways that harm children. Previously, even if a plausible case could be attempted for penalising 'feckless' adults, it was never thought acceptable to do it in ways that made the situation for any children involved even worse. Nor is it acceptable to cap benefits in ways that arbitrarily harm vulnerable individuals – rather than, for instance, controlling rents instead of capping housing benefit.
- ☛ The high-handed disdain that imposes the 'bedroom tax' without any understanding of the hurt it causes to many elderly people who treasure the home they have occupied for decades.
- ☛ The continuation of 'right to buy' legislation even though a quarter of the properties sold are now being let out by the buyers.
- ☛ The denigration of the concept of 'public service', which is pilloried as being ineffective and inefficient, and the promotion of outsourcing and agencies acting in compartments and largely unaccountable, even though it invariably leads to undermining key services.
- ☛ The narrow focus on the minority of children more able – whether for academic, social or economic reasons – to gain high paper qualifications, even if travelling miles each day, at the expense of the majority and at a high cost to integration of the school and its pupils within the community.
- ☛ The callous and miserable attitude to immigrants, whether students, asylum seekers or just those seeking a better economic or social life.
- ☛ The imposition of 'targets', even for work in which such box-ticking is actually detrimental to the quality of service being provided.
- ☛ The narrow nationalism that suggests that a single country can opt out of globalisation, climate change and transnational capitalism.

- ☛ The determination to keep locking up more and more men and women, often with longer sentences, so that we have a prison population at its highest level ever with a diminishing possibility of rehabilitation and yet no understanding that it is detection that deters, not punishment.
- ☛ The increasingly pervasive methods of surveillance, not just of CCTV but of bank accounts, car documents and of travel.
- ☛ The virtual end of local government, with municipalities merely agents of the government with almost all their income controlled and earmarked centrally, coupled with the cynical manipulation of grants so that richer areas receive more than poorer localities. Thus pluralism has been seriously damaged.
- ☛ The obscene levels of executive pay, which pander to the politics of envy and which provide a malign example to those living in poverty.

All these examples combine to create a selfish and unfeeling society incapable of creating a sense of solidarity, of interdependence and of community.

The evolution to today's society has not arrived overnight but over years so that the cumulative effect has less impact. If you want some very trite examples of how it has affected our lives, take just four cases. First, we now, apparently, have to have certain seats on buses designated as being for those elderly or infirm. Since when have we not automatically given up all seats for those in need? Second, we not only now have to seek commercial sponsorship for roundabouts, but the company paying has to have an obtrusive board announcing it. So much for the Quaker principle of doing good by stealth. Third, is it not a commentary on current values that a high proportion of grants for charitable projects come as a consequence of gambling on the lottery? Lastly, is it not appalling that at least in urban society it is essential to have a burglar alarm on one's house?

Do we have to accept all this? Of course not. We have to believe passionately that a Liberal society can bit by bit transform how we can live. Alone of political philosophies, Liberalism puts human values ahead of economics. It believes in "the market where possible, the state where necessary." It does not blindly accept economic determinism but places economics at the pragmatic service of society. It understands that human nature is a mixture of selfishness and altruism and that the aim of politics is to enhance altruism and to diminish selfishness. It understands that we are "spirit, soul and body" and that culture and linkages are vital after food and shelter. It understands that electors want to vote for "right thinking" and should not be bribed nor pandered to.

Once Liberals grasp the basis of their faith and become the emissaries for their values, we have the foundation for the necessary policies and for action. The texts are all there. It is the only view of society that has a chance of providing a survivable, civilised and human future. Without it, we will sink even further into the abyss.

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Michael Meadowcroft was Liberal MP for Leeds West 1983-87

# A PLACE OF SAFETY

## The plight of asylum seekers led Suzanne Fletcher to a long-distance attempt to change Liberal Democrat policy

How does party policy get made? Back of Nick's disused fag packet, a bit of Googling added onto some university research, secret plotting by one faction or another in a late conference night bar? Some may think that, but I've found out differently.

A determination to do something to build a good and Liberal policy on asylum began from my and other members' experiences of living with and hearing about issues experienced by some of those seeking sanctuary as asylum seekers in the UK.

After hearing some excellent and moving speeches on human rights at the March 2012 party conference in Gateshead, Liberal Democrats for Seekers for Sanctuary was formed.

Months later, I was at a meeting hosted by Sarah Teather in the House of Commons to mark UNHCR Day but, although it had the makings of good meeting with good contributions, it all ended abruptly as officials turfed us all out because of a mix-up with the bookings.

So some of us drifted to the pub over the road, I being determined to get the most of a long and expensive trip down to London. There I met Jerome Phelps, from Detention Action. Jerome started to tell me about the work of Detention Action, and the issue of people who could not be returned to their country of origin for many reasons out of their control, so they were in detention with no time limit on their stay in detention. I was shocked.

Having already lobbied candidates for the Federal Policy Committee (FPC) for a look at a new asylum policy, I had found there was to be a policy working group on immigration, asylum and identity. Not an ideal grouping, as immigration issues are based on economic and other principles. Asylum is based on human rights.

However, the opportunity was there, so I applied to join the group. I had no idea how it would work, how often or where meetings were held, and what the situation about expenses would be, but it was a chance to get policy made on issues dear to my heart. We had got our policy on the ending of child detention being put into practice, if not law, so why not other issues?

Having been accepted onto the group, I turned up at the first meeting in the grand setting of a committee room in parliament, armed with lists of ideas, evidence and a return ticket for the last train to Darlington.

### EVERY TEN DAYS

The setting, and the list of others on the committee who held high office with lots of experience, was daunting, but here was the chance. I was disappointed to find that we were to have meetings lasting just two hours in the evening, and rather taken aback to find they were to be around every ten days until the summer break, but no turning back now.

I began to see why not many people out of the London area, or with business there, are part of our policy-making process. Expenses are not payable, and there is no pooled fares system.

I broke the news to hubby the next morning (not getting home till nearly 3am in an expensive taxi from the station), and am so thankful that he readily agreed to my continuing, and to picking me up from a slightly earlier train at midnight each time. The working group had many presentations, ranging from results of opinion polls, researchers and pressure groups.

Most were helpful and in our line of thinking. One was not at all, but nobody can say we didn't listen to all sides. I was surprised that we didn't make any start on thinking of what our policies may be, but did begin to draw up the questions that we would ask in the consultation paper.

I had been circulating links and documents on the issues I most cared about relevant to asylum, but fast realised that people did not have time to read. I had the luxury of two long train journeys every time, of course, to be able to read all that was sent out.

A lot was packed into those meetings, but not helped by division bells calling MPs and peers to the vote, sometimes several times in a meeting. We had moved to Portcullis House for the meetings, which was more modern, but I quickly found you needed to go in armed with refreshments.

Non-parliamentary people like me are not allowed to go anywhere unaccompanied so could not use the café there and needed to stock up with water before going in. Nothing had been raised about the ending of indefinite detention, but thankfully I did manage to get it into the final consultation paper.

We had a summer break, but during that I made sure that I contacted all of the organisations working on asylum issues that we had linked to the LD4SOS website, and whose documents I had read, with the consultation. We needed their views.

The September 2013 party conference in Glasgow included the big consultation session, with which all conference goers are familiar. It was a relief to see the large room being full of people wanting to contribute. Far more people wanted to speak on asylum than any other session, but all views were encouraged to be submitted in writing.

Then there was the mammoth task of looking through the consultation responses. I don't know what others did, but I read every single response on asylum, including very lengthy ones from some organisations. They were condensed circulated and the fun began. What was going into the policy document?

The meetings resumed at the same pattern, till the week before Christmas. I will say no more than that 30 years' experience on Stockton Council, dealing with councillors and officers with varying views, stood me in good stead.

Asylum was only one section out of eight, but I was determined to make sure that points needed were in there. I was disappointed that drafts increasingly cut down the words to what was acceptable to the FPC, so many good points were left to be covered by catch-all phrases – but those phrases can be referred to by both campaigners and future policy implementers.

Most importantly, the ending of indefinite detention is in there, along with the end to the notorious Detention Fast Track. I would have preferred having the “right to work” to “require to work”, along with a number of issues I would have worded differently. But I was part of a team, and needed to respect their views, as they did mine.

The final meeting last December was not the end, though. The final, final draft was to be read over the Christmas break before it went to the FPC. I was relieved that it made a number of changes for the better and, hooray, “Making Migration Work for Britain” was done.

I must pay tribute to Andrew Stunell, who chaired what must have been one of the most difficult policy making issues ever, given the current climate on immigration. My colleagues in LD4SOS offered endless support, both morally when times were tough, joined in the consultation process, and fed me with lots and lots of information and ideas for the policy-making process.

Only one more hurdle, getting it through party conference this March. Thankfully, it was a very good debate and it was all agreed unamended. Here is a flavour of some of the policies now agreed:

- An end to the disgraceful, and expensive, practice of indefinite detention for immigration purposes.
- An end to the inappropriate use of the notorious ‘Detained Fast Track’ process.
- The end to child detention to be put into legislation.
- ‘Getting it right first time’ on decision making.
- Re-establish the six month decision-making target for asylum claims.
- Better training for Home Office staff who deal directly with more vulnerable groups.
- Better interpretation and translation services to be available at each stage of the process.
- Accurate, up-to-date understanding of relevant country of origin information must be provided to decision makers to stop removals to unsafe countries.
- All working-age asylum seekers to be required to look for work if their case has not been resolved within six months. Current restrictions on which occupations asylum seekers can work in to be lifted.
- Abolish the Azure Card and Section 4, and provide all asylum support under Section 95,

*“I was inspired by the experiences of those who have been, or still are, seeking sanctuary in the UK”*

which will be uprated in the same way as other benefits. End-to-end support will end destitution.

• Outsourced contracts for the delivery of enforcement and asylum services (including housing) must be monitored more effectively, with more accountability and transparency in their work.

• Deportation, transportation and the accountability of enforcement functions to be transferred to the public sector as soon as the current contracts permit.

I was inspired by, and continue to be driven by, the experiences of those we know and know of who had been, or still are, seeking sanctuary in the UK. They deserve and must be treated with humanity, compassion and respect.

The work that I have put into this is a tribute to those brave and dignified seekers of sanctuary that we all know. What we need to do now is to make sure we get enough good MPs elected to get these policies on the statute book.

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Suzanne Fletcher is chair of Liberal Democrats for Seekers of Sanctuary

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# NOW WE KNOW HOW NOT TO DO IT

Planning for the 2010 coalition agreement offers a great source of lessons on how this process should be handled if the opportunity arises again in 2015, says Peter Wrigley

In February, David Cameron promised that, if he failed to win an overall majority in 2015 but was the largest party, he would not form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

Len McCluskey has called on Ed Miliband to make the same undertaking. So if both the other two major parties adopt and stick to this pledge, Liberal Democrat participation in government is ruled out for the foreseeable future.

In one sense, we fully deserve to be excluded. Although it is a commonplace of political experience that the junior party gets most of the opprobrium for the bad things that happen in a coalition and the senior party gets the credit for the good things, it is hard to see how the current Liberal Democrats in government could have made a greater mess of things.

They have destroyed our reputation for integrity by reneging on our much-flaunted promise to vote against any increase in student fees, and tarnished our green credentials by abandoning our opposition to nuclear power.

By supported a policy of 'savage cuts' in government expenditure, which, given the condition of the economy, is exactly the opposite of what is required, they have betrayed our heritage as the heirs of Keynes and Beveridge and prolonged the recession. Many of the cuts have been directed at the poorest in our society with apparently ideological zeal.

In spite of having promised more honesty in politics, they have supported, indeed repeated, Tory lies about "clearing up the economic mess left by Labour," when in fact the economic collapse was caused by the policy of excessive deregulation of financial markets introduced and supported by the Tories.

They have failed to achieve either electoral or House of Lords reform, flogged off a large part of the post office at a knock-down price, and connived at reorganisations of the NHS and education system, both of which are widely seen as preludes for further privatisation.

## WORST EXCESSES

I am aware that many members of the government, particularly those at more junior levels, feel that they are and have been beaver away tirelessly to ameliorate the worst excesses of Tory dogma. I'm sure that, in many cases, they have had some success. Nevertheless, I can assure them that the above grim picture is what our participation in government looks like to many of us on the outside.

Of course, we can claim that at least some of these failures are not our fault. The failure to achieve electoral reform rests partly on the duplicity of the

Tories in their scandalously dishonest campaign against (having previously given the impression of remaining at least neutral) and the failure of the Labour Party to give reform their wholehearted support in spite of promising it in their manifesto.

The failure to achieve an elected second chamber can also be blamed on Labour, which willed the end but, by failing to support the measure that would have given parliament the time to deal with the issue, did not facilitate the means.

We can also argue that the new arrangements for student finance are actually better than the scheme introduced by Labour (after it too broke its promise, not to introduce fees at all) in that no fees have to be paid up front. For the first time, loans are available to part-time as well as full-time students, and in practice the scheme does not leave students in debt at all, but merely subject to a graduate tax.

Then, of course, we can attempt to balance our failures by trumpeting our achievements. For the first time in our history, we have a fixed-term parliament. For the elderly we have achieved a triple-lock on pensions, and for families and children shared parental leave, increased provision for childcare costs and an end to the imprisonment of immigrant children awaiting deportation.

Some of the achievements widely lauded by our publicists are not, however, quite as wonderful as they would like to pretend.

Raising the income tax threshold has benefited the middle-income earners rather than the low-waged and those without jobs: the retention of VAT at 15% would have done more both to help them and to stimulate demand.

The pupil premium seems to have been not so much new money as a diversion of existing provisions, though that is of course to be welcomed. Free school meals for infants have undoubted educational advantages but, again, will help the comfortably off rather than the very poor, who already get them.

And the Tories themselves promised to reach the 0.7% target for aid and abolish ID cards, so our influence there may not have been decisive.

The most important triumph, which we do not trumpet sufficiently, is the fixed-term parliament. In what other circumstances could a prime minister have been forced to abandon the trump card of being able to call an election when he thinks he has the best chance of winning? Sadly, of course, this achievement could, I believe, be undone by a simple majority in a new parliament, despite the provisions of the 2011 Act.

We can argue that our gains are more than sufficient to balance out our losses, but this will not be easy.

I deeply regret that we have identified ourselves so clearly with so much of Tory policy, rather than, sensibly, accurately and repeatedly pointing out that they have 305 MPs and we have only 57, and that had these figures been the reverse our priorities would have been different.

## DUBIOUS CLAIMS

We cannot rewrite the past four years. However, rather than making dubious claims about the past, we should campaign positively about the future, dropping the mendacity of blaming Labour for the economic crisis that has engulfed the whole of Western capitalism, and putting the blame firmly where it belongs, with the policy of financial deregulation introduced by the Tories. After all, if Labour emerges as the largest party but without a majority in 2015, which seems a likely outcome, continued misrepresentations about its past financial culpability are hardly likely to engender confidence and trust in negotiations for a coalition, should Labour actually prefer that to an attempt at minority rule.

We need to campaign on our strengths: our genuine achievements in the present coalition (not least the surreptitious increase in infrastructure spending achieved by Vince Cable, which is probably largely responsible for the present modest recovery); on civil and human rights; enthusiasm (yes enthusiasm, not apologies) for the EU; commitment to the international rule of law; abandonment of Trident; the restoration of a genuinely compassionate welfare state; and further constitutional reform (STV for local government, for example).

Assuming that the other two parties are no more likely to keep their promises on 'no coalitions' than they have on much else, we should be preparing now for agreement on the process for negotiations for the next coalition.

The first step should be to obtain agreement to abandon the expectation that a new government should be formed within hours of the declaration of the polls. After all, the Germans recently took three months without any hitch. I suggest that we should agree now that the existing government should continue as a caretaker for a minimum of ten days whilst the next government is formed. Such a 'convention' could well be adopted even in circumstances where there is no change in majority party or prime minister, because it would enable a continuing prime minister to reshuffle the government after reasonable consideration rather than in a state of exhaustion in the immediate wake of a demanding election campaign.

Then, rather than accepting that that the same convention of collective responsibility should apply to a coalition government as has applied in the past to single party government, we should try to reach agreement on the categorisation of issues along the following lines:

*“The most important triumph, which we do not trumpet sufficiently, is the fixed-term parliament”*

- ☛ Those areas where both (or all) the parties are agreed and on which they will work together and support each other, both inside and outside parliament.
- ☛ Those areas on which the minority party(ies) do not agree with the majority party, but promise to offer 'confidence and supply', while reserving the right to

offer alternative courses.

- ☛ Those areas where the minority party(ies) do not agree with the majority party and reserve the right to campaign on alternative policies and to abstain on any vote in parliament.
- ☛ Those areas on which there is no agreement and on which the minority parties have the right to campaign and vote independently.

Such categorisation would avoid some of the embarrassments for Liberal Democrats that have arisen over the past four years, many arising from Nick Clegg's naïve early assertion that the coalition members must 'own' all that the government does.

An attempt to categorise issues in the above manner in the 2010 agreement would, for example, have helped clarify the Conservatives' intentions on electoral reform and reform of the second chamber – that their promise to introduce measures to facilitate them did not, we realised too late, imply that they would actually vote for them.

It is important that, whatever the public rivalries and protestations of the possibility of outright victory, party managers should be getting together discussing these ideas now rather than leaving everything to be sorted out in the flurry of post-election exhaustion.

Eastleigh indicates that a wipe-out of our parliamentary representation is unlikely, and the disillusionment with our rivals makes a majority government by either of them also unlikely.

Entry into the next coalition on the lines outlined above will enable us, I believe, to participate in the next government with our reputation and integrity more intact, and may help restore some confidence in our democratic processes.

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Peter Wrigley is president of Batley and Spen Liberal Democrats. He blogs at: [keynesianliberal.blogspot.com](http://keynesianliberal.blogspot.com)

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**21st Century Education:  
A Social Liberal  
Approach**  
by Helen Flynn  
**Social Liberal Forum  
2014 £3**

A short review can't do justice to 45 pages covering the whole of education to age 18.

This booklet is full of good ideas and will stimulate the thought processes of anyone interested in education. Indeed, the useful and necessary executive summary extends to five pages alone.

Flynn's finale gives a cogent argument for state involvement in education. It ends with five fundamental questions, which are key to how a liberal education system should develop in future. If you think them easy to answer, then you aren't thinking hard enough.

Helen also quotes John Stuart Mill (always good in a social liberal document): "Is the buyer always qualified to judge the commodity? If not, the presumption in favour of competition ... does not apply."

If this booklet has a fault, it is that several contributions rather assume that 'the buyer' (the parent) is qualified. That does not lead them into Govean realms of competition but it does lead to assumptions – whether implicit or overt – about parental support and what happens outside school that are not universally justified.

The school where I chair the governors has a very challenging catchment and middle class parents tend to send their children to other schools. Less than 20% of our year one and two parents read to their children, and 30% of the children are on our watch list for child protection. We even had a day last term with nine active child protection issues, two of which resulted in the school calling the police.

Before we can teach anything, we have to make them feel safe. These children can't achieve their potential unless we break the cycle of educational failure. Parents who had a bad experience of school, low achievement and low expectations can easily pass that on to their children. Many distrust authority and see teachers as precisely that. So even getting started on parental engagement is hard.

A teacher told me this week that she was devastated when she



# REVIEWS

innocently asked a child whether he had had any nice meals from the new oven she knew his [single] mother was getting, only to be told that she couldn't read the instructions.

On the other side of the coin, another teacher told me that she had told a parent how well her child was doing with "conjunctives" (and, but, etc.) and got the proud reply "I helped her with that – we are doing conjunctives on my literacy course at the moment." A course we helped persuade her to take.

Trying to get our parents involved is like that, alternately heart-breaking and inspiring but it is key to achievement in a challenging area and recognition of this does seem to be the one big gap in this booklet.

Finally, many of John Howson's thoughts about upskilling teachers and giving them greater professional status are welcome but I do wonder whether requiring greater qualification – particularly to be a maths or science teacher when it is so hard now to get decent candidates to interview – is practical.

Alan Sherwell

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**How to Read a Paper:  
the basics of evidence-  
based medicine (fifth  
edition)**

by Trisha Greenhalgh  
**Wiley-Blackwell/BMJ  
Books 2014 £29.99**

Why should a book on understanding clinical research appear in a political magazine? Isn't this best left to the experts?

After reading this book, you'll realise that "leaving it to the experts" is rarely a good option. Also, even if you don't understand the technical aspects of a study, you'll know when to smell a rat.

This introduction to examining research is clear and engaging. It aims not to intimidate, with chapters including "Papers that tell you what things cost (economic analysis)" and "Papers that go beyond numbers (qualitative research)".

Those involved in politics will be drawn into healthcare. A lobbyist tells you about a new drug that is only slightly more expensive but would save far more lives than the one the NHS provides; it has a scientist on board and graphs to prove it. A charity tells you a new screening method could prevent early death. A constituent has been denied a therapy by their GP. This is an excellent reference for such situations, advising what you should consider.

Yet, you might be on the board of a healthcare body, and feel you already know enough for your role. However, the book describes a study that shows that those making policy and funding decisions could be ignorant and need better training.

The researchers asked health authority board members which out of four cardiac rehabilitation programmes they would be most likely to fund – one reduced death rates by 20% and another increased survival rate from 84% to 87%, for example. Just three out of 140 board members spotted that all four programmes had the same results. The other 137 chose one above the others.

The book starts out by explaining what evidence-based medicine is, with a pyramid diagram giving a guide on how trustworthy different types of study are. At the top is the systematic review – the good news is that the best of these are available free with short, plain language summaries at <http://summaries.cochrane.org>.

The book's numerous checklists and questions will be most useful

for a busy non-specialist. So, if you're asked about a guideline for managing obesity, you'll know what to ask, including whether it's worth introducing such a guideline in the first place.

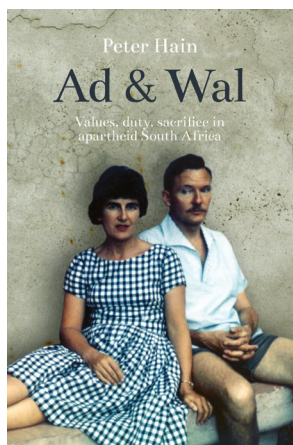
A chapter on economic analysis shows, with a striking and simple calculation, how a drug can be shown to be far more expensive than it actually is. If you ever have to canvass opinion, there's some solid advice here on questionnaires.

The details around each topic are supplemented with sources of further information.

In political arguments, people often cite only on findings that support their case, or draw different conclusions from the same results. This book should enable anyone to question whether all the evidence on a matter has been included, and spot whether the fault is with the research itself or how its findings are being described.

At the end, the book asks why health policy based on evidence is hard to achieve, adding that having policy entirely dependent on evidence may even devalue democratic debate about society's main goals.

Christy Lawrance



of non-racialism and justice”.

Hain's biography of his parents focuses primarily on their roles and those of their friends and colleagues in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. He makes their day-to-day struggles much more personal than anything I

recall hearing or reading myself and, when exiled to England, credits them with a more significant role in the Stop the Seventies Tour campaigning than I recall in his book at the time. His accounts of the problems of exiles in settling in our cold and damp clime are useful in themselves as a response to the carping of our racist press and its followers.

The Hains' active involvement in Putney Liberals is small beer alongside all of this. Since the book makes it clear that they are close family, one suspected that their move to Labour had more to do with their son than anything else. Putney was at one time in the early 1980s the home of the Liberator paste-up and they remained quite friendly on chance meetings. Peter on the other hand, seemed to have a problem with his former involvement; sad man.

Rosemary Tilley recalls that Peter's selection as a Labour candidate drew Ad away first, though the merger was the official excuse for her resignation. Walter was evident for longer; he masterminded the fundraising book sales and carried on after he was no longer a member. Rosemary always got the feeling that he was less keen to leave the party than Ad, but had no specific basis for saying that.

Jo Stocks, Ad's sister, was the last member of the clan to be involved.

John Tilley adds that, in the mid 1990s, Walter attended the naming ceremony for Donald Woods Close in Kingston. He was invited by the borough's Liberal council, as he had been Donald Woods's chess partner.

Stewart Rayment

**Making allowances: tax cuts for the squeezed middle**

**by Adam Corlett  
CentreForum 2014 £6**

Somewhere, somehow, CentreForum has changed. Having been perceived as in the vanguard to push the Liberal Democrats ever further to the right, it appears to have undergone a very welcome shift in strategy as a much more pluralist body.

This pamphlet is among the more eyebrow-raising signs of that shift, as it directly challenges Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander's promotion of income tax threshold increases and in their parlance 'tax cuts' as the principal aim of Liberal Democrat policy.

While it does not look at the desirability of tax cuts overall – a discussion definitely needed given the £11 billion cost of Clegg's commitment at a time of austerity – it does look at prioritising which taxes to reduce. In doing so, it parallels a very live debate among Liberal Democrats at all levels, and makes a significant contribution to that debate.

It unequivocally shows that the effect of the policy given the ugly 'workers' bonus' moniker is to benefit those on middle incomes and those even more comfortably off.

Eschewing the political argument that the policy is identifiably Liberal Democrat (borne out by the polls in spite of Tory efforts), it makes the argument that Liberal Democrats should say "job done, now we will help those on lowest incomes further by taking them out of paying National Insurance".

The simple reasoning is that the effects of raising the NI threshold are dramatically fairer for those on the lowest incomes. By simply increasing the basic rate from 12% to 12.8% to pay for increasing the threshold, you put £250 back in the pockets of those earning £10,500 without giving higher rate taxpayers a net tax cut.

Whether Clegg and Alexander will face a formal challenge on this is unclear. Last year's tax working group wasn't exactly encouraged to enter the debate. However, if the proposed platform for the Liberal Democrats in 2015 is centred on tax cuts for the comfortably off, then a lot of people will have a lot to say about that.

Gareth Epps

## Monday

Lunch with a Conservative acquaintance who, being of a moderate bent, is not happy with the way things are going in his party. "When Cameron came on the scene, I had high hopes of him: all those huskies he kissed at the North Pole and that windmill on his roof. Now it's all changed. Did you hear that he has asked five Estonians to write our next manifesto?" I agree this does not sound a good idea, pointing out that we Liberal Democrats once entrusted the task to Lembit Öpik – with the most unhappy of results.

## Tuesday

The mysterious disappearance of that Malaysian jet has put me in my mind of a sad story from the 1920s. One bright April morning, the 11:15 for Northampton Castle left Nottingham London Road Lower Level as usual, but it never reached its destination. It was seen to call at Melton Mowbray North, and there were unconfirmed reports of it reaching Clipston and Oxendon, but one thing is sure: it never arrived in Northampton. Extensive searches were undertaken and reports of sightings from as far afield as Bodmin Road and Leeming Bar were followed up, but not a trace of the train or its passengers was ever found. It was because of this tragedy that the nation's youth was encouraged to take up locospotting. The authorities reasoned that, in the event of a similar occurrence, the spotters' notebooks could be called in and the mystery solved in short order. Happily, this has never proved necessary.

## Wednesday

Last week's debate with M. Farage, the Frenchman who leads the UKIP Party, went tolerably well for our own Nick Clegg, but I am called in this morning to help brief him for this evening's second contest. I come armed with a particularly fine specimen of the orchard doughty – the sturdy, rugged staffs which I issue to my gamekeepers (for dealing with poachers) and tenant farmers (so that, red-faced and panting, they can wave them whilst ineffectually chasing scrumpers).

"The very first time he tries to be clever," I tell Clegg, "give him one across the snoot with this". "Oh, I don't think Nick should attack his opponent," sneers one of the 12-year-old PPE graduates with whom our leader insists on surrounding himself these days. "I don't mean Farage, you booby," I return shortly, "I mean Dimbleby."

## Thursday

I was unable to stay for last night's debate, having already agreed to give the after-dinner speech at a fundraiser for the Home for Distressed Canvassers in Herne Bay. When I finally catch up with the proceedings on the electric internet, I am somewhat disappointed. It is not just that my orchard doughty is nowhere to be seen: it is the way Clegg puts over one of my best lines.

Yesterday afternoon, the 12-year-old PPE graduates were desperate for jokes, so I told them the one about Roy Jenkins and the lavatory brush that won me a standing ovation at three consecutive Liberal Assemblies during the Alliance Years. They didn't like it, not even after I had told them who Roy Jenkins was, and I eventually fell to reminiscing about my

# Lord Bonkers' Diary

successful campaign in 1906. I recalled for them a public meeting at the *Bonkers' Arms*, where I contrasted our own rough conviviality and fellowship with the effete manners of my Conservative opponent, who was known to be a frequent visitor to the Tsar's court in St Petersburg. "We are the party of inn," I said, gesturing at the familiar around me, "and they are the party of Rasputin." Clegg, as you will no doubt have seen for yourself, used my line, but I am afraid I am obliged to say that he

foozled it.

## Friday

Though the wheweys have arrived and are eying the hamwees suspiciously as they select the best sites for nests, it proved necessary to cancel this afternoon's natural ramble with the Well-Behaved Orphans. Industrial fumes from the Continent and the sand blown in from deserts in the arid south of Rutland make the air unpleasant to breathe, and Matron is quite adamant on the subject. Her remarks on my own oil rigs on Rutland Water, however, are both unkind and ill-founded.

Instead, I lead the little mites in a game of by-elections. In the most enjoyable of ways, this entertainment of my own devising instructs the young in delivering, canvassing, good committee room practice and the efficient deployment of the Bonkers Patent Exploding Focus (for use in marginal wards). The winning team kidnaps the returning officer and forces him to sign a false declaration of result. Isn't that enterprising?

## Saturday

Sad news from the West Country: David Laws has broken his elbow in a canvassing accident. I immediately consult the Revd Hughes and arrange for prayers to be said for him daily at St Asquith's.

This intelligence is contained in a copy of the *Western Gazette* mailed to me by an old friend who has underlined the passage: "He said he is still able to carry out Department for Education duties in his role as schools minister, as he signs letters with his right hand."

Whilst Laws's determination to continue working is to be admired, I wonder if it is wise. Would not a prolonged period of rest and recuperation (perhaps in Herne Bay) be better advised? Carrying on as if nothing has happened often prove foolish in the long run: I can still feel my wound from the Great Torrington by-election when the wind is in the wrong direction.

## Sunday

Did you see those extraordinary comments by Wendi Deng, the former wife of the newspaper magnate Rupert 'Stinker' Murdoch? (His first wife, incidentally, was the novelist and philosopher Irish Murdoch). She was quoted as saying of Tony Blair: "He has really, really good legs, butt." I was not convinced at the time and wrote to the headmaster of one of our leading public schools on the subject. This afternoon, he telephones to confirm that Deng was talking rot.

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