

liberator



After election disaster, Nick Clegg responds with a radical new strategy

- 🔥 Clegg's bobbing cork sinks – Trevor Smith
- 🔥 Why the 'Party Of In' is out – Andrew Duff
- 🔥 A liberal case for an independent Scotland – Andy Myles

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London N4 2LF
England

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

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🌱 acts as a forum for debate among radical liberals in all parties and none

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COMMENTARY 3

RADICAL BULLETIN 4..6

IN POOR HEALTH 7
A Liberal Democrat policy group is running scared of debating changes to recent health reforms, says Charles West

EVEN BOBBING CORKS SINK EVENTUALLY 8..9
Trevor Smith two years ago described Nick Clegg as “a cork bobbing on the waves”. Now he’s not sure of even that, and its time for change, he argues

THE ‘PARTY OF IN’ THAT FINISHED ALMOST OUT 10..11
The Liberal Democrats were reduced to one MEP because they fought on defending the status quo, not on a vision of what the European Union could be, says Andrew Duff

REAPING WHAT WAS SOWN LONG AGO..... 12..13
May’s election disaster was not just Nick Clegg’s fault but the predictable outcome of decades of targeting with content-less leaflets, says Michael Meadowcroft

LONDON’S BURNING 14
Dire results in London suggest the limits of conventional activism, says Mark Smulian

HOW BAD CAN THINGS BE? 15
When support has slumped to all-time low, is this a time simply to repeat the same old slogans, warns Simon Titley

A LIBERAL CASE FOR ‘YES’ IN SCOTLAND 16..17
Scottish Liberal Democrats are campaigning for the country to stay in the UK but Andy Myles says he has a liberal case for independence

WE GOT OUT OF THIS ONCE BEFORE..... 18..19
Nick Winch helped get the party out of its 1989 collapse. It could be done again, but would the leadership obstruct this, he asks

GIVE ME CLEGG’S HEAD, BUT NOT YET 20..21
Changing leader now would saddle Nick Clegg’s successor with an impossible task, says Roger Hayes

UKRAINE’S HERD OF ELEPHANTS 22..23
Russia, Crimea and economic reform are among elephants lurking in Ukraine’s rooms, but Kiron Reid finds the troubled country’s presidential election went off smoothly

A LONG ROAD IN HUNGARY 24
Recent election results point to new life for Hungary’s liberals after a collapse, says Howard Cohen

TRADING FAIRNESS 25
Mathew Hulbert explains why he has helped found a new organisation to promote Fairtrade issues within the Liberal Democrats

REVIEWS 26..30

LORD BONKERS’ DIARY 32
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Page 6 picture credit - Claire Tyler

COMMENTARY

TOXIC SHOCK

After four years in government during a severe recession, no-one could reasonably expect a party leader to be popular.

The problem with Nick Clegg's leadership of the Liberal Democrats after May's election debacle is not one of popularity – that can be lost and regained. It is that even after a spell in government, one could expect a leader to still be respected. Clegg's problem is that he is not, and respect is hard indeed to recover.

Events four years ago promised a different kind of politician that kept his promises – and then reneged within six months on the most famous of these on tuition fees, hang round his neck like an albatross.

“Nick is toxic”. Not our words but those of Keith House, council leader in one of the Liberal Democrats' few electoral bright spots in Eastleigh, referring to the public's sceptical refusal to believe anything Clegg says.

Discontent in the party has been growing with each round of elections since 2010 but boiled over with the humiliating massacre of MEPs in May and the proof offered by the dreadful results in London that the collapse of the party's appeal in urban areas has not diminished as the coalition has gone on.

'Liberal Democrats 4 Change' anonymously initiated an open letter calling on Clegg to go, and gained several hundred signatories. Others came out with similar sentiments and some local parties have debated motions calling for a leadership election.

None of this was surprising and indeed things have come to a sorry state when pretty much every argument in favour of keeping a party leader in place is a negative one.

Negative reasons can, though, be powerful, and this is why Liberator isn't calling for Clegg's rapid defenestration, despite recognising some serious factors in favour of this course.

The main objection to a change of leader now is that, while there are half a dozen or so MPs who one could credibly imagine as leader, none is obviously outstanding.

There would be a far more serious and bloody leadership election than the one-sided one that followed the post-merger disasters of 1988, with a new leader taking office, presumably, in the late summer. That would give whatever poor sod was chosen about six months to try to make an impression on the public and to try to change the party's stances and messages.

They would have to accomplish that difficult task while either also being deputy prime minister, and so inextricably bound into the government, or competing with Clegg if he remained as deputy prime minister and thus treating the public to the spectacle of a

new Liberal Democrat leader having from political necessity to continually contradict the incumbent Liberal Democrat deputy prime minister.

Next May's election results are unlikely to be happy for the Liberal Democrats and a new leader would then be indelibly stained by them. In such a difficult set of circumstances, it is surely better that a new leader gets a clear five years in which to rebuild the party rather than being expected to somehow slightly mitigate a poor result.

A lengthy list of offences can be laid at Clegg's door: the determination to prove the Liberal Democrats could 'do' coalition by getting too close to the Tories in the early days; the 'asleep on the job' approach to health and welfare reform, both of which will return to haunt the party; the failure to recognise that tuition fees needed to be sorted out in the coalition agreement, having been such a high profile pledge; and the suspicion that his economic liberal instincts made him far too comfortable with too much of what the Tories have wanted.

In short, he has failed to convince voters that there is a point to the Liberal Democrats because he has failed to distinguish them from the Tories.

Many other serious faults, though, long pre-date Clegg. As contributors to this issue suggest, the party is reaping the results of 30 years of neglecting to build a core vote while believing in the delusion that 'we can win anywhere' by relying on opportunist exploitation of transitory local grievances.

The party for decades assumed that either the Tories or Labour would be down at any one time and it could therefore prosper at the expense of one or other depending on voters' negative feeling about another party rather than a positive one towards the Liberal Democrats.

For years, few Liberal Democrats have been willing to say or do anything that might offend anyone for fear of losing support among some part of the incoherent and conflicting groups from which the party drew support.

Clegg at least deserves the credit for trying to break out of this with the 'Party Of In' campaign on Europe, however inept its execution. Now the Liberal Democrats core stands nakedly exposed as around 6% in the European elections. With a year to go, surely even Clegg will want to leave a better legacy than that.

RADICAL BULLETIN

COCKEYED OPTIMIST

There's looking for silver linings, and then there's the preposterous letter sent by Annette Brooke to Liberal Democrat activists as the full enormity of the May elections disaster unfolded.

Brooke is chair of the parliamentary party, a low profile but generally popular and respected MP. No-one thinks she wrote this rubbish herself. Indeed, some doubt she even saw it before party HQ sent it out under her name.

As one member of the Federal Executive put it: "This letter caused an astonishing surge in anger among councillors and others. Someone wrote and signed this off – I hear a policy wonk at HQ. This shows how hopelessly out of touch HQ is: it solely featured Westminster targets, it rather obviously ignored the results in areas where we had MPs but the councillors were flushed down the toilet."

The letter rather desperately referred to parliamentary seats "where we have strong and established campaigns, we're seeing some very good results".

It went on to cite the Liberal Democrat fortress of Sutton, and an odd collection of other untypical results, before concluding, "in many of our strongest areas we are winning elections. We're now less than a year away from the general election and these results in our held seats show that we have everything to play for."

Whoever wrote this appeared utterly ignorant that it was a story of "where we work, we've still lost" in most of the country.

The letter could hardly have been bettered as an example of Clegg's complacency showing how utterly out of touch with reality the party leadership in the Westminster bubble has become.

Another issued on 22 May came close, though. It was from chief executive Tim Gordon and complained about the leak that day to the Guardian of Liberal Democrat communication plans in response to various scenarios for the European elections, including having no seats at all.

Gordon rather unfortunately urged all concerned to: "show everyone exactly what this party can do". In the event, one seat was held.

ST AUGUSTINE STRIKES

"Oh lord, give me the Liberal Democrat leadership, but not yet," Tim Farron has been heard saying, paraphrasing slightly St Augustine's reported opinions on chastity.

As we speculated (*Liberator* 359), Nick Clegg's decision to put Farron in charge of the European election campaign had the benefit for him of more or less ensuring that his most open challenger for the leadership would be indelibly associated with a

catastrophe.

Farron was unusually silent after the European results unfolded, as well he might be. He had boasted to his local newspapers that he helped Clegg prepare for his television debates with UKIP leader Nigel Farage, saying: "It was the easiest thing I've ever had to do. All you have to do to play Nigel Farage is think of the easiest and laziest thing to say and then come out with it. I roughed Nick up a bit – trying to be Nigel Farage and saying the sort of things he says."

So how come Farron did not anticipate presenter David Dimbleby's easiest question of all – asking Clegg how he saw the EU a decade from now?

Here was the chance to expound his vision of a reformed and liberal Europe. Instead, Clegg said he expected it to be much the same as it is now. Cue Liberal Democrat heads landing in hands across the country.

ANIMAL ANIMOSITY

Somebody somewhere in party HQ is keeping very quiet about their authorship of the dreadful document *Labour & Tory Council Waste & Incompetence*, issued in early May.

It is unclear who was responsible, since no-one came forward to defend the document when it was soundly abused by some of the party's most prominent local government figures.

The Liberal Democrat office at the Local Government Association was shown only a late draft by party headquarters, by which time it had only the opportunity to get some embarrassing things removed, such as when Liberal Democrats had been involved in running the council concerned at or near the time of the alleged incompetence/waste.

It began with an unexceptional list of Liberal Democrat achievements, but then took a plunge into alleged Labour and Tory misdeeds, all of which pretty obviously resulted from a cursory trawl through newspaper websites with no further attempt at substantiation.

Thus we had the embarrassing spectacle of a Liberal Democrat document citing the *Daily Mail* as an authoritative source – a paper best known for its bile-filled hatred of the party.

Even worse, numerous items were sourced to the Taxpayers Alliance, a far-right lobbying group that is essentially opposed to all public spending.

Whoever compiled the document also seemed to harbour a bizarre hatred of the kind of cute furry animals over which voters tend to go "aaaah".

The first example of Tory waste flagged up was classes in hamster welfare offered by Northamptonshire County Council. These turned out to cost £9 to attend, which presumably covered most of the cost.

Horsham council was berated for having acquired two llamas. If anyone had bothered to look beyond the Daily Telegraph headline concerned, they would have seen that these were bought to graze a local park, were funded entirely by lottery money and they arrived three years ago.

Also long in the tooth was the tale of Tory Cotswold District Council hiring a magician to motivate its staff, which happened in 2011.

The document sunk without trace. Presumably local Liberal Democrat campaigners felt that their lives were difficult enough in May without having to explain away this idiocy.

HEALTHY DIFFERENCES

A series of rows has marred the work of the Liberal Democrats policy working group on public services, resulting in both an expected minority report and a complaint to Federal Policy Committee chair Duncan Hames about the way the group has been run.

FPC set it up with an unwieldy brief to examine education, health, transport and 'cross cutting public services', each of which could probably have sustained a working group in its own right.

There was a dispute right at the start when the chair was awarded to Jeremy Hargreaves, a long-serving denizen of the party's policy processes, and not to former Romsey MP Sandra Gidley, who is viewed as unsound by what many refer to as 'the Clegg children'.

They do not of course mean his actual children but rather the coterie of academically bright but politically clueless young advisers with whom he has seen fit to surround himself.

Most prominent among the dissidents is Charles West, a general practitioner who fought Shrewsbury and Atcham at the last general election.

In is complaint to Hames, West has noted: "You may be aware of the fact that a number of us in the policy working group discussing public services have been seriously concerned about the way in which the group has functioned."

He went on to set out concerns that Hargreaves had acted autocratically and rejected input with which he disagreed, and that votes had not been held on contentious matters.

West has elaborated on his concerns (see page 7) and it now looks like the Glasgow conference in October will be presented with either a lot of options or amendments.

Hargreaves told *Liberator* that disagreements had arisen over West's wish to commit the party to ending the purchaser/provider split in health. He said the rest of the group had simply not agreed with West.

It was quite usual for FPC to be given differing views by a working group but Hargreaves said West had suddenly called for a vote on the split long after the group had rejected the idea and this had not been taken. He described the group's work as "very consensual". How consensual will no doubt become apparent at Glasgow.

THE MAN FOR THE JOB

A job advert went on the Liberal Democrat website while most people's attention was fixed on the May elections, seeking a "world class individual", whatever that might be, as general

election director of strategy.

Amid much of the usual human resources bollocks-speak about being "able to offer vision, leadership and inspiration", the winner of this £70-120,000 a year post would require a myriad range of qualities including "a deep understanding of UK electoral politics, a proven track record of delivering electoral success, the ability to work with and relate to a wide range of people and a long held commitment to liberal values".

One criterion was omitted, doubtless by pure oversight. This was that the successful applicant also had to be called Ryan Coetzee.

Coetzee is almost alone in Clegg's circle in being well-regarded by MPs, and indeed by almost everyone else. But he has been on Clegg's payroll and needed to be moved to the party one in case this public funding proved embarrassing.

NUISANCE CALLS

The telephone is a splendid invention, allowing for rapid oral communication between people, and has been around now for about 100 years.

Some Liberal Democrats, though, appear to have little grasp of it when it is best not to use it – like eve of poll night to people standing in elections.

The party HQ phone operation managed that night to ask a series of party chairs in London boroughs, parliamentary candidates in target seats and, most extraordinarily of all, Watford's elected mayor Dorothy Thornhill – who was standing for re-election – whether they were prepared to help in the next day's election activities.

Has nothing been learnt from notorious events 20 years ago, when a series of MPs were called by the party's then telephone fund raising operation to ask if they were aware that elections were being fought in their area?

HANCOCK'S HALF COCK

The attempt by Portsmouth South MP Mike Hancock to win election to the city council as independent ended in defeat, perhaps finally bringing down the curtain on his political career.

Hancock lost the Liberal Democrat parliamentary whip last year because he faces a civil case over his alleged conduct towards a female constituent, and so also lost the whip in the Liberal Democrat council group, where he has been a 'double hatted' MP and councillor.

This tends not to be the kind of thing that impresses the public. So why did the local Liberal Democrats not run a candidate against the independent Hancock?

Doing so sent out an incoherent signal that he could not remain a Liberal Democrat councillor or MP but that the Liberal Democrats were perfectly happy to support him to be an independent one.

AN UNWELCOME WELCOME

Remember how the Liberal Democrats decided the solution to their plummeting membership was a 'high quality' plastic membership card (*Liberator* 361)?

This was followed in early March by a message of welcome to new members, supposedly from deputy leader Malcolm Bruce.

Among recipients were two Liberal Democrats peers of many years' standing and a *Liberator* Collective

member, who joined the Liberals in 1970.

NO HOLDS BARRED

Reports by a member of one body representing it on another can be deathly dull, but not for these of the Lib Dem English Council receiving a report of Federal Executive proceedings from their elected representative Brian Orrell.

They discovered that the FE had heard in June from James Gurling, chair of the Campaigns and Communications Committee, for the first time in nine months.

This was not due to any lapse on Gurling's part, but because "the CCC had not really been able to meet or function due to The Wheelhouse, the campaign working group which Paddy Ashdown had set up under his direction".

A "full and frank discussion" of the 22 May fiasco ensued, at which there was "general agreement that the party's campaign slogan 'Stronger economy, fairer society' was completely uninspiring and had been a complete flop.

Given the effort put into establishing this as part of the party's identity, this damning verdict on something that has not been previously been particularly controversial suggests a major rethink will be needed (it is though a better slogan than October 1974's infamous 'One More Heave').

There was a lot of criticism of the campaigns department by the FE, which observed that no-one appeared to be in charge of the party's strategic direction.

Candy Piercy, who of her own volition had actually gone out and talked to people and, with Chris White, made sure that the current review of the campaign took place, then proposed that the next manifesto should be "liberal, saleable and inspiring". Extraordinary that anyone should need to propose something that should be taken as read.

The on came Nick Clegg, who accepted that 'Stronger economy, fairer society' had made the party sound insipid and that it was not distinct enough from the Conservatives. That's something, if he means it.

The FE also received a report from party chief executive Tim Gordon on headquarters matters, which Orrell curiously described as "which as usual was very difficult to hear".

PARTY OF IN A BIT

Why did the Party Of In campaign for the European elections morph from one that was supposed to be about jobs into a defence of the EU status quo?

It was supposed to be about staying in the EU for positive reasons concerned with prosperity, international co-operation and job creation and, by implication, to explain how Lib Dems would want to try to change it.

Instead it became, in particular with Nick Clegg's television debate with Nigel Farage, an uninspiring defence of things as they are. Even in a happier political climate in would not have resonated with the public.

One theory is that Clegg really sees the EU like this, as something mainly concerned with trade and markets than anything more elevated.

Two former MEPs noted: "He can be dismissive of

us for banging on about rights, rules and treaties", preferring to tinker with treaties than propose any big bang reform.

One added mysteriously that Clegg "may be about to move on to more ambitious territory". Well, better late than never.

CLUTCHING AT STRAWS

The dreadful Newark by-election result tested even the Lib Dem press office's ability to always look on the bright side of life.

In its 'lines to take' it correctly noted that the party had "never come higher than third", in the seat before, while omitting to mention that it had not previously managed sixth place either.

It noted that the Lib Dems were "undoubtedly affected by heavy tactical voting, which saw people actively voting for the Conservatives in order to stop UKIP", which is possibly true, and the discussed the Eastleigh result, which was comforting but irrelevant.

It ended on the mind-numbing note: "What we need to do now is get on with governing the country in the national interest, ensuring the recovery continues and does so as fairly as possible, creating jobs and cutting taxes for working people."

DON'T ALL RUSH

A report to the Lib Dem English Council in May said the party had a grand total of 136 selected candidates in place.

This presumably includes all the seats the party holds, or thinks it could, but even so, leaves 397 still to go, of which a mere 78 had a selection process in progress. Scotland and Wales were not included.

The lowest total of selections by regions was the four in the north east, two of which are, presumably, the places with sitting MPs.

The report ended with a grim warning: "The European election results show that it is highly likely that some Liberal Democrat candidates may lose their deposit of £500. In these circumstances it is vital that the issue of finding the deposit in our weakest seats is addressed."

ROUND THE BACK

Socialism only goes so far it seems at home in one of the most opulent parts of Haringey. A 'Vote Labour' poster is accompanied by a sign telling the working classes where they can go.



IN POOR HEALTH

A Liberal Democrat policy group is running scared of debating changes to recent health reforms, says Charles West

Recent election results would suggest that the voters are no longer very inspired by the Liberal Democrats. Will we go into the next election with policies that inspire them?

Indeed, will party members going to Glasgow this autumn face a series of inspiring debates? My recent experience of the party's policy making procedures would suggest that that is unlikely.

Having spent a lifetime working in the NHS, it has long been a frustration to me that our party has not had a comprehensive look at health policy for at least a decade. The Federal Policy Committee (FPC) decided not have a health policy working group but one to examine public services including health, schools, public transport and other locally delivered services.

It was a vast remit. We were expected to produce a consultation paper in less than six months and a final policy paper in less than nine months.

Five of the group were members of FPC. Four were current or previous employees of the party working as researchers for ministers or policy analysts. Attendance at meetings was somewhat patchy, especially from members outside London. The party does not pay any travel or subsistence expenses to members. On the other hand special advisers and party policy analysts were very regular in attendance. On the whole, this was not a recipe for the exploration of exciting new ideas.

The way the group has functioned was even less inspiring. Timetable, agendas, choice of evidence-givers, notes from meetings and documents produced have all been decided by Jeremy Hargreaves, the chair.

He accepts input that he agrees with and rejects that which does not accord with his view. During the meetings, the chair, instead of facilitating discussion and contributions from the members, is very quick to put in his viewpoint. There have been examples of statements made by the chair in introductory papers that have been refuted at meetings by members and by evidence givers, but which continue to appear in the outputs of the working group.

Two members suggested that it would be worth hearing the views of people who actually deliver our public services. Finally, a date was set to hear from a group of 'coal-face workers', but by then the policy document had already been written. The meeting was cancelled.

There has been no use of democratic process. At no point has a vote been taken on any subject. The use of consensus in decision making may be very laudable if one is able to reach a consensus but, where there are clear differences of view which cannot be reconciled, one would normally expect a vote to be taken.

Papers have been circulated on the day of the meeting, though some members would already have been travelling to London and would have no opportunity to read them. A discussion paper that I submitted and circulated was repeatedly sidelined and, when it was eventually allocated a place in a meeting, the agenda crowded it out with other items. The paper was never adequately discussed and the notes of that meeting made no reference either to my paper or my proposals.

The notes of meetings have been described as minutes, though they have never been agreed by the working group, neither at the meeting itself nor at the subsequent meeting.

Part of the remit of the group was "to review the current legislation governing the provision of these services, including recent reforms to the NHS, and consider what changes to recommend."

This topic did not appear on any agenda in the proposed timetable. There seemed to be considerable reluctance to discuss it. When some of us insisted that we should do so, a date was eventually arranged. It was after what had been scheduled as our last meeting: the one where we would finalise our paper.

Very quickly it was suggested that nothing need be changed. Objections to change ranged from "it would be difficult" and "it would be disruptive" to "it would look bad if we were now to criticise changes that our parliamentarians helped to introduce as part of the coalition".

The discussion at the group has swung back and forth between high level generalisation and highly specific minutiae and this is reflected in the final paper. It will not surprise you, therefore, to hear that some of us are unhappy with the report that we expect to be submitted to FPC by the chair of the working group. We hope to submit an alternative report. I wonder which will be debated at the autumn conference?

It has been said that our party has grown up. Now we are a party of government, we are responsible. Well, if that means that we have lost our campaigning zeal, lost touch with our Liberal Democrat values and lost our ability to inspire, then we are in for a series of anodyne policy papers in Glasgow and we shall not inspire the voters next May.

Charles West was the Liberal Democrat candidate for Shrewsbury and Atcham at the 2010 general election

EVEN BOBBING CORKS SINK EVENTUALLY

Trevor Smith two years ago described Nick Clegg as “a cork bobbing on the waves”. Now he’s not sure of even that, and its time for change, he argues

As most thinking Liberal Democrats knew at the time, entering into coalition with the Tories May 2010 was going to incur heavy political costs: junior partners risk being blamed for failures in government while receiving scant recognition for contributing to any successes.

The strong adherents to Orange Book economic liberalism – and they had been in the ascendancy under Clegg’s leadership – salivated at the prospect of office, especially when it would be sharing power with the Tories whom they regarded as more congenial bed-fellows than Labour. This was a far cry from the Blair/Ashdown conversations regarding potential future Lib-Lab collaboration prior to the 1997 general election.

Steps could and should have been taken to mitigate the risks. The coalition agreement should have been more tightly argued and more time should have been taken before finalising it. But that is, largely, a judgement of hindsight.

What was apparent, in the year or so after 2010, was that no coherent strategy was being worked out subsequently. The starting point for that should have been: what would be the exit strategy before 2015?

This did not happen. Instead, a series of reactive tactics were adopted as and when the need arose – very little seems to have been anticipated. In *Liberator* 355, I adjudged that the absence of strategy meant that Clegg was simply “a cork bobbing on the waves” buffeted by tides and currents. This expression received wide currency when it was taken up by Marie Woolf in *The Sunday Times*.

Earlier, I predicted what would happen if a more strategic approach was not developed. I forecast there would be continued losses of local government seats and a wipe out in the EU elections. May’s elections were confirmation of that, while coming sixth with a lost deposit in the Newark by-election compounds the widespread gloom.

LOP-SIDED PROFILE

Furthermore, likely increases in the number of Liberal Democrat peers would present a very lop-sided parliamentary profile for a party ostensibly committed to Europe, progressive politics and constitutional reform.

I suggested the Liberal Democrats should state, well in advance of May 2014, that they would step down from the coalition, leaving a minority Tory government to see out the remaining year or so of the fixed-term, being supported on ‘a confidence and supply’ basis by the Liberal Democrats.

This would have enabled the Liberal Democrats to contain the worst excesses of right-wing Conservatism

while visibly distancing themselves from their erstwhile partners and, equally important, giving themselves time to prepare a worked-out manifesto for the general election in 2015.

I predicted that Nick Clegg was unlikely to take such a step but that, if he did, it would strengthen and enhance his position as leader. I also observed that politicians invariably opt to hang on, Micawber-like, hoping for something better to come up.

Both Jim Callaghan and Gordon Brown took this line, trading-off the enjoyment of a few more months in high office rather than gamble on an election that may have been a success and thus ensuring an even longer tenure. A ‘bird in the hand’ reaction, it seems, is allowed to cloud more calculated judgements.

“Enjoy the perks of office while you can” becomes the order of the day. If the rumours are true, it explains why the Clegg family spent the fateful weekend of 24 and 25 May – after the local government election and before the outcome of the MEP results were known – at Chevening, the-grace-and-favour residence afforded to the deputy prime minister. It might be the last opportunity to enjoy this perk. Perhaps that was evidence of a dawning sense of intimations of political mortality.

My suggestion of ending the coalition in 2014 was, somewhat belatedly, earlier this year taken up by Ming Campbell but, unfortunately, he did not pursue it. But there were other outside voices echoing much the same sentiments.

One such was Nick Cohen in the *Observer* of 30 September 2012 in an article entitled “Is this the death-knell for the Liberal Democrats?” Having failed lamentably to bring about Lords reform, Cohen observed that Clegg’s speeches had “degenerated into a cliché-infested jibber-jabber in which words no longer connect to coherent thought... Clegg does not talk to make an argument but to pass the time and fill the silence... I’ll miss the Liberal Democrats if they slink off into obscurity”.

Why did Clegg not see this for himself, one wonders? One answer is that he is part of that generational cohort of politicians that lacks any real experience of the world outside politics and, of course, there are legions of them.

Prior to the 2010 election, I was tempted to put down a parliamentary question: “Would HMG conduct a national referendum to ask if the Miliband brothers and Messrs Cameron, Osborne and Clegg should be allowed to wear long trousers?” It wouldn’t have been allowed, but you see what I mean.

Margaret Thatcher, who at least worked as an ice-cream analyst for Joe Lyons before her entry into

politics, felt in need of the more experienced Willie Whitelaw as a sounding board.

Since Blair, party leaders have not felt the need for such assistance and advice. Former cabinet ministers Shirley Williams and Bill Rogers volunteered their services to Clegg but they were rebuffed. Sages with their experienced advice seems to unnerve the new breed. Instead they surround themselves with younger versions of themselves. Ex-student politicians, who on graduation work at think tanks or in party research departments, then become special advisers to front benchers, before being elected to Westminster and climbing the 'greasy pole'.

Clegg has no less than 20 SPADs around him. He cannot effectively use them. He doesn't ask them to help promote his policies because he doesn't have any. Instead, he's overwhelmed by the babble of their voices as they seek to justify their employment.

It's doubtless apocryphal, but it was said of Ernie Bevin, Attlee's foreign secretary, when accosted by a handful of officials who explained that there were seven reasons why his desired policy wouldn't work, glanced at his watch and, in his distinctive Somerset burr, replied: "It's eleven-thirty now and I'm taking a long lunch. I'll be back at three by which time you bright lads can contrive to come up with eight reasons why my policy will work!" And that's how relations between ministers and civil servants should be. Clegg's coterie of SPADs simply reflects his own indecision and lack of both direction and self-confidence.

If Clegg was once a cork bobbing on the waves, he's now all but dead in the water – Newark should have been the fateful blow. The one elder statesman Clegg has relied upon, of course, is Paddy Ashdown whom he has made the 'supremo' directing the 2015 election campaign. But this further compounds the problem. As a former Marine captain, he is well-versed in tactics. Unfortunately, he did not go on to Staff College where he would have been taught strategy.

The lack of strategic planning has been the hallmark of Paddy's political career. The disastrous European Elections of 1989 occurred under his leadership of the party. At that time, I was chair of the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust (JRRT) – the largest continuous benefactor of the Liberals since 1945. At my suggestion, the Trust stopped all further funds to the central party and devoted its giving to the Association of Liberal Councillors (now the ALDC), which was housed at Hebden Bridge. It seemed to be the only efficient element in the party and local government the only terrain worth tilling.

Under Bill le Breton, it deployed JRRT funds in a planned and business-like way, which resulted in the resurgence in Liberal fortunes through a large national network of local councillors. The party was subsequently able to increase its parliamentary numbers from this new local power-base. That would not have happened had Paddy had his way.

“Clegg’s coterie of special advisers simply reflects his own indecision and lack of both direction and self-confidence”

As Tony Greaves has lamented, in concentrating on his 'fortress seats', as he calls them, Ashdown has sacrificed our local councillors and, for that matter, the party at large which has all but atrophied.

DAMAGE LIMITATION

Three things need to happen to halt further erosion in our electoral support.

First, a change of leader which, characteristically, Ashdown dismisses out of hand; change would be a necessary signal which would help damage limitation. Public schoolboys used to be taught to put their hands up and admit their failings.

Secondly, social liberalism must become once more the main driver with an emphasis on public values not private greed. Relevant policies need formulation, Drawing on traditional concerns that include: civil liberties and rights; mutuality and especially encouraging industrial co-ownership, peer-to-peer lending and other such manifestations; gender, racial and regional equality; a radical reform of health and social services; a Royal Commission on the Police; and a renewed commitment to internationalism attuned to the UK's position in Europe and the wider world. These are the sorts of areas that should be developed.

Thirdly, post-2015 a local government renaissance should be initiated once more.

Without a renewed determination along these lines, the Liberal Democrats will become largely an irrelevance at best, or at worst completely depart the political scene. Nick Cohen's worst predictions will have been realised.

Will this happen in time? The minds of the grassroots members are clear on the steps to be taken. Nick Clegg and Paddy Ashdown's authoritarian leadership style will try to resist the inevitable and in this they will be assisted by the praetorian guard of retiring MPs who hope to be given peerages in the dissolution honours.

The action has now to come from the MPs. So far, too many of them are in denial, hoping their 'incumbency effect' will immune them from the popular anti-Liberal Democrat surge among the voters. Otherwise, it will be a tsunami that will overwhelm the party and we'll all be dead in the water.

The crunch, albeit belatedly, will come at the autumn conference. That will be the very last chance to take steps to avoid oblivion. What more evidence is needed to galvanise Liberal Democrat activists, particularly our MPs, into taking the necessary and drastic course of action.

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

THE 'PARTY OF IN' THAT FINISHED ALMOST OUT

The Liberal Democrats were reduced to one MEP because they fought on defending the status quo, not on a vision of what the European Union could be, says Andrew Duff

This was my seventh attempt to be elected in the Liberal interest to the European Parliament, but this time, as the European Parliament's official slogan went, 'This Time It's Different'.

Even a year ago, it was clear that the Liberal Democrats faced a major difficulty in retaining its 11 MEPs (a delegation boosted to 12 by the defection in 2010 of Edward McMillan-Scott from the Tories).

The party's new election strategist Ryan Coetzee, who is a clever man, looked at what the Liberal Democrats had done in past European elections and assessed our likely chances as the junior partner in an unpopular and unexpected coalition government. Coetzee, who knows about abroad, crunched some numbers, sniffed the air and came up with the startlingly novel idea that this election would be fought on European issues.

He was right on three grounds: first, our disagreements with the Tories on Europe would allow clear differentiation within the coalition; second, our leader, Nick Clegg, knew the territory; and third, many party activists ached to fight an election campaign for something they actually believed in rather than, as in previous European elections, being forced on the defensive. Despite appearances to the contrary, indeed, we Liberal Democrats actually know that all politics are not local.

The 'Party of In' theme was agreed well in advance and communicated to the ranks. I was told to shut up about federalism (which, Twitter aside, on the whole, I did – at least in English). The campaign was to advocate staying in the EU to protect jobs, fight crime and help the environment. It was in many ways a self-conscious rehearsal for the referendum campaign about the UK's continued membership of the EU into which the British political class will shortly stumble.

UNSETTLING THINGS

In the run up to the campaign, however, two unsettling things happened. The first was the passage by Federal Conference of the dullest working paper on Europe that I can ever recall, devoid of aspiration, way out of touch with the current state of the European Union and as dull as ditch water. The eventual manifesto 'In Europe In Work' was marginally better, but still failed adequately to address the big issues that really affect the future of Europe, notably how to sort out the banks, salvage the euro and deal with social hardship. Cutting the EU budget and saving the City of London from the apparent perils of European banking union were lauded, wrongly in my view, as Liberal Democrat achievements.

The second worrying sign was the inexplicable

decision of the party leadership not to back the best man to champion the EU-wide campaign of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), who was standing to succeed José Manuel Barroso as president of the European Commission. That man was Guy Verhofstadt, leader of the ALDE group of MEPs, former Belgian prime minister, and as intelligent and charismatic a liberal as one could hope to meet.

Liberator 364 covered the quarrel between Clegg and Verhofstadt, and the attendant struggle against the Westminster Liberal Democrat hierarchy to get a half decent manifesto through the fraught ALDE Congress (held, incongruously, at Canary Wharf).

Having failed to block him as the Liberal presidential candidate, Clegg did pay a quiet courtesy call on Verhofstadt in Brussels. But apart from a lecture at Manchester University and several interviews with the BBC, the Verhofstadt bandwagon was not allowed to enter the UK for the duration of the actual election campaign.

This was a mistake and blunted Liberal Democrat credibility to be Britain's truly confident European party. (Labour likewise barred Martin Schulz, incidentally, and there was of course no Conservative candidate for the job).

The decision to challenge Nigel Farage to debate directly with Nick Clegg was a clever Coetzee tactic, and a right one. The purpose of the debates was not to convert nationalists to the federalist cause, although it might help to expose the shallowness and sheer barminess of what passes for UKIP policy. And the head-to-head debates would surely allow Nick to do what we know him to do well, raise the Liberal Democrat profile and motivate supporters - and marginalise David Cameron and Ed Miliband.

Clegg was, as expected, fluent and urbane. His rival, however, was more emotional and used better common language: while Clegg was trading statistics about immigration, Farage was telling stories about how he was on the train the other day with a load of foreigners.

The worst and most telling moment of the adventure was Nick's answer to the last question in the second debate. He was asked what Europe would be like in 10 years' time. His answer was, roughly, "much like now".

This was wrong on two counts. First, it is surely not true: in my view, by 2024 the EU will either have been transformed into a decent federal union, or it will have fallen apart. Second, Nick's answer was not at all what people wanted to hear: his supporters wanted him to say "Europe will be better, stronger, larger, more democratic, green and prosperous." Yet Clegg's actual response implied that the Liberal Democrats

were happy to settle for the status quo when everyone else, Tories included, were arguing for reform, for a better EU and a new deal for Britain.

A speech in Oxford during the last week of the campaign where Clegg tried to talk of the need to complete the single market, to move on the digital agenda and to have the deep trade agreement with the USA was not enough to dispel the impression that Liberal Democrats were complacent about the present state of the European Union.

The 'Party of In' was a good place to start the election campaign, but not a good place to end it. We were very exposed to criticism for being just the party of in (and nothing else), or worse, for being the party of just in (thus far and no further). Neither characterisation is correct, but both are telling. I think that is the main reason we lost the election.

HARSH DISJUNCTION

Tactics apart, the party still seems unsure about how to fight a campaign under proportional representation. There is of course a harsh systemic disjunction between a first-past-the-post election, where one must try at all costs to distress as few people as possible, and a proportional representation election, in which one only wins by appealing very strongly to those inclined to share one's views.

A campaign under PR requires parties to take on all comers. While the Liberal Democrats were right to confront UKIP (and to point out that nobody else did), we could and should have attacked Labour's nervous weakness on Europe, as well as dismantling the wacky economic policies of the Greens. Above all, because this is our central mission as a party, we ought to have fought more vigorously against the Conservatives whose European policy is as preposterous as it is divisive. UKIP in one sense was a distraction: the key feature of the 2014 European election is that the Tory Party decided to march rightwards to the beat of the nationalist drum.

Meanwhile, we Liberal Democrats are left wondering, yet again, why wanting to stay in the EU and make more of British membership is such an unpopular position. Catherine Bearder deserves good fortune as the party's sole MEP. Otherwise the election result has no silver lining for the Liberal Democrats. At home we have lost much of our regional party organisation. In Brussels we have lost the significant leverage we had. We have been defeated on our core battleground. And Europe's interminable British problem has just got a whole lot worse. David Cameron is blundering into a referendum on a false premise. He has no credible agenda for EU reform. Staying in or leaving the present EU is not a serious question because the present EU will not persist long beyond next year once the new leadership of the EU institutions is in place.

“ ‘The ‘Party of In’ was a good place to start the election campaign, but not a good place to end it”

There will be a treaty revision. It will not be over by 2017. Cameron's spurious demands will have to take their place at the table of a constitutional convention whose main purpose will be to deepen fiscal integration in the eurozone and,

commensurately, to build up democratic federal government at the EU level. The Liberal Democrats, just like Labour and the Greens, really have no idea where we stand on all that.

If there were to be a Lib-Lab coalition after next year's general election, a detailed and comprehensive agreement on European policy will need to be quickly negotiated. The weakest point of the Con-Lib pact of 2010 was that 'Europe' was simply parked. The Lisbon treaty had just come into force, and both sides of the coalition negotiation believed – or pretended to believe – that nothing much more was going to happen in the EU for the next five years.

With Labour, in 2015, there can be no such wishful thinking. Answers must be found for various questions. Does Britain continue to behave as if it can never be part of the solution to Europe's common problems? Will the UK seek to block the federal progress needed and desired by almost everyone else? What accommodation between Britain and its EU partners will be needed to persuade the hostile British people to accept a new package deal of a federalist hue? Can we begin again to have a serious debate about whether to join the euro? Or should Britain settle for some form of affiliate membership?

One of the matters to be discussed at the convention is whether to add to the European Parliament a number of seats elected for a pan-European constituency. The effect of this would be to give each elector in 2019 two votes, one on which to vent his or her spleen for national, regional and local issues, the other to choose a preferred European party.

The gift of a second 'European' vote will come as a shock to the British political establishment, but it will be a godsend to us Liberal Democrats as we struggle to marry at one and the same election the politics of the speed-bump and pothole with the politics of European integration.

If there are transnational lists at the next European Parliamentary elections in five years time, I would hope to be on the list of the European Liberals. But this was my last campaign as a Liberal Democrat candidate.

Andrew Duff was the Liberal Democrat MEP for the East of England, 1999-2014, and President of the Union of European Federalists 2008-13

REAPING WHAT WAS SOWN LONG AGO

May's election disaster was not just Nick Clegg's fault but the predictable outcome of decades of targeting with content-less leaflets, says Michael Meadowcroft

If it is true that the prospect of death concentrates the mind, there should be quite a number of furrowed brows among Liberal Democrat MPs.

There is little time left to rectify the ravages of the past four years, the seeds of which were sown some 30 years ago. The election results of 22 May, both local and European, should not have surprised colleagues who have largely survived by dint of sacrificial commitments of time and energy in their wards and constituencies, with very little external assistance from a party whose portrayal of the immense attractions of a Liberal society has been subdued, to say the least.

Sadly, while many loyal colleagues around the country could manage to survive, they did not rise up and demand that the party fulfilled its prime task of defining, expressing and promoting Liberal values for today.

That is not the immediate role of Liberal Democrat ministers or parliamentarians; it is not even that of the elected councillors. Theirs is to apply Liberalism to the current political agenda and to show it works in the day-to-day arena.

The party is not driven in the same way by the practical day-to-day agenda and can – or should – define its own agenda, relevant to the needs of society.

It has simply not done this in any way that has impinged on the wider debate. Increasingly, the party has become dominated by its elected representatives and has lacked powerful political figures in its own right.

FUNDAMENTAL WEAKNESSES

The party is to undertake a review of the election defeats, but I doubt that such a review will look beyond the superficial tactics and strategy that were inevitably incapable of overcoming the more fundamental weaknesses.

The fact that a few places were able to buck the otherwise ubiquitous trend – Eastleigh, Southport and Sutton among others – gives the lie to any suggestion that the results were somehow inexorable. The fact that these are places where, in addition to exemplary and consistent work, there is a longstanding awareness of Liberalism as a philosophy with its own values and view of society.

I accept that a number of other places have also the same tradition but did not fare as well electorally for one reason or another, but the point is still valid. Without a healthy and effective party, and the intellectual foundation it provides, there is no possibility of political success beyond the very short-term. You cannot build tactics and strategy on sand.

The party is more important than its elected representatives. The party is permanent but its elected representatives, vitally important though they are, are temporary – in the corporeal sense if not bound by electoral limitations.

One example of the present malaise will suffice. When I was chair of the Leeds Liberal Democrats Campaign and Development Group, I had an excellent team that worked consistently to build up a political presence in Leeds, in addition to its work on organisation. On candidate recruitment and panelling, we produced local literature, training materials and briefings but we needed a publication on the party's national and international values.

To my astonishment, such a document did not exist. In other words, any interested person who asked for information on the party's values and philosophy could not be supplied with any such document.

With some difficulty, I tracked down a statement on values passed by conference in 2002, updated only to accommodate changed circumstances, and published in Leeds. It has proved effective and is now in its third edition.

Before the recent elections, I wrote to the editor of *Ad Lib* with a review plus a scan of the cover, to ask for it to be publicised. I have had no reply! This monthly, publication can manage to publish recipes, favourite records and four pages on a worthy but tiny by-election in Little Puddicombe but not publicise a booklet setting out the party's essential values. It says it all.

NAÏVE OAKESHOTT

The post-election outbursts came up with the rations but were, even so, depressingly naïve. Let's start with Matthew Oakeshott, whose style and tactics did more to entrench Nick Clegg's position than any other single individual. One can always get a good assessment of an individual's status when the deeply illiberal press describe them as "a leading Liberal Democrat".

I suspect that a fair number of party members would have heard of the name but wouldn't have had any idea of any party activity of his – for good reason. The penny dropped as to his background when he averred, with apparent seriousness, that he wanted to go back to the values of Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams and Bill Rogers (though, it appeared, not David Owen).

I guess that it might just rankle a little that neither he nor Shirley could win Cambridge but solid Liberals such as David Howarth and Julian Huppert could. However, a few respected colleagues, and some others, did attempt to get a "Clegg to resign" movement underway. We can come to the substance of this idea in a moment but first let us ponder what scenario of Nick going could conceivably be other than even

more disastrous year before a general election. So we go through several months electing a new leader whereupon David Cameron welcomes him or her as deputy prime minister for, say, nine months.

I believe the current abbreviation is 'LOL'.

Cameron would instead put on his serious face for a moment and state that the Liberal Democrats' instability and lack of commitment to government meant that he had to carry on with a minority administration until the approaching general election.

Whereupon the other Liberal Democrat ministers would lose office, and our MPs would have the unenviable task of voting Conservative proposals down or of allowing unpleasant items to go through. Each of these alternatives would put us in an impossible pre-election situation. Or, of course, with Miliband's connivance, an early general election could be precipitated. Again, try campaigning in that circumstance. Colleagues need to realise that, in effect, a fixed term parliament brings fixed term leaders, certainly in the last year or so of that parliament.

So what is the case against Nick Clegg? Assiduous readers of *Liberator* will be aware that I do not subscribe to the 'silver bullet' theory of politics. To those who do, there is always a simple way out of electoral problems: change the leader, find the elusive winning slogan or grasp at the straw of an Alliance with the SDP.

There is no such simple answer. Apparently the party was content to build local government successes largely on delivering thousands of content-less and often protest-based Focus leaflets. It fails to develop a political base firmly rooted in a vision of society, accepts a suicidal party (not leader-led) strategy of targeting, which has destroyed all organisation in, for instance, 27 out of 33 Leeds wards, and then be surprised when UKIP comes along and steals its clothes. Furthermore, instead of doing some rigorous analysis, it takes the easy way out of blaming the party leader. Look at the history of the party in Eastleigh to see how to build a political party able to withstand these difficulties.

I have many criticisms of Nick Clegg. His espousal of an illiberal economic policy against all the evidence; his curious early belief in Cameron and the Conservatives as sincere reformists and reliable partners; his bizarre apology over tuition fees when the 'new' policy was far better than Labour's and eminently winnable in argument; his poorly briefed performances against Farage – an entirely correct initiative in itself – and some early negotiating weaknesses inside the coalition.

However, despite all this, he was the correct choice in 2007 as very much the Liberal of the two eventual contenders, and, in the light of developments since then, a fortunate choice. The party was happy to benefit from his performances as leader in the 2010 campaign and signed on for a five year, fixed term, coalition under Nick's leadership.

No other Liberal leader has ever put himself about

“You cannot build tactics and strategy on sand”

as much as Nick with his weekly radio broadcast, his willingness to debate and his many party 'Any Questions' sessions around the country, and he has been the target of a sustained and quite scandalous personal media vilification, against which he has maintained a dignified

and commendably positive response – I do not wish to give these anti-Liberal forces a victory.

The coalition was always going to be electorally damaging. Indeed, Mervyn King, the then Governor of the Bank of England, was reported as saying just a week before the 2010 election that the necessary austerity measures would mean that the victor “would be out of power for a generation”.

It may be perverse for the electorate to blame the only party not responsible for the economic crisis, but that is the reality of politics. But the heart of the problem in the local elections lies in the inability of most local associations to have a sufficiently healthy political basis to counter the national antipathy to the coalition.

The mountains of superficial Focus leaflets are not in themselves capable of developing a political basis. Local election defeats certainly cannot be laid at the door of the leader.

Turning to the European elections, the party had an additional handicap: the inevitable consequence of 20 years of the targeting strategy. Arguably it is a risk worth taking for one single election but its constant repetition destroys the party where it does not campaign and produces diminishing returns in the target seats. I imagine that Leeds is not entirely untypical. As a consequence of targeting, the party is now defunct in five of the eight constituencies and has a presence in only one ward in two others. Consequently we now have only a miniscule 'base' vote in 27 wards and have retrenched from 13 target seats in 2004 to six today. Hardly a successful strategy, even in its own terms.

But worse still, when one comes to the European elections, to be successful one has to have a significant vote across a whole region. Alas, targeting has killed off the vote in 80% of it. How then can one expect to win?

UKIP spouts dangerous nonsense, redolent of 1930s right-wing scapegoating, but it is the Teflon party, and nothing sticks to it. It has no policies, only the two aspirations of getting out of the EU and stopping immigration. It relies only a picture of an ancient utopian society and can only be defeated by a counter vision of society – a pluralist, diverse, convivial, attractive and liberal society. We have less than a year to take this view of society to the electorate.

Michael Meadowcroft was Liberal MP for Leeds West 1983-87

LONDON'S BURNING

Dire results in London suggest the limits of conventional activism, says Mark Smulian

During the next four years, a political experiment should be seen in London. It will test whether Liberal Democrat local parties can recover from collapse without the opportunity of annual elections.

From 1986 until 2010, the total of Liberal Democrat and predecessor councillors across London was a shade over 300 – some places were up and some down, but it never varied much. Five of the 32 boroughs have been under outright control for spells during that period and there have been joint or minority administrations, by my calculation, in a further 12 at various times.

The total of councillors fell to 250-odd in 2010, a setback explicable by the borough elections being held the same day as the general election. It is now 117. And this in London – a small 'l' liberal city with the country's most diverse and youngest population, the place least affected by the recession and least impressed by UKIP, and the home of an eighth of the parliamentary party.

Its inner boroughs, in particular, have a curious mix in which social housing estates rub shoulders with multi-million pound homes. People with 100 times differences in annual incomes can live in the same street, making it hard to call an area for a particular party just by looking at it.

In good times, this factor can open up Liberal Democrat possibilities in some outwardly unexpected places. Surely a liberal party should prosper here, despite the coalition and Nick Clegg's abysmal rating among voters? It didn't. Even some very well-organised and well-resourced campaigns proved only to stem the losses, but could not fully hold Labour back.

After last month's debacle – apart from boroughs with held parliamentary seats – the largest Liberal Democrat council group is the four-strong one in Ealing. In 18 boroughs, the party is unrepresented, suggesting that whoever runs for London mayor in two years' time will be more or less a paper candidate.

London's all-out four-yearly electoral cycle protected the capital's Liberal Democrat councillors from the carnage seen elsewhere since the general election, but it has now caught up with them, and past disasters suggest it will be hard to rebuild.

Four-yearly elections make it impossible to rebuild slowly by one seat here and one there – it's all or nothing. The parlous state now of Harrow and Tower Hamlets, where the party ran administrations 20 years ago, and its disappearance in Waltham Forest after a precipitous collapse in 2010, suggests the answer may be 'nothing'.

So here are some tentative suggestions for what might be done ready for when the political wheel starts to turn again.

I spent most of the elections in Islington. Say what you like about Islington Labour party, but when the Liberal Democrats slaughtered it in 2002 it didn't disintegrate as some defeated Liberal Democrat groups have. It got itself a political narrative about being 'on your side' and exemplified this by its intention to create a Fairness Commission to suggest remedies for local inequalities.

One does not have to agree with all this commission proposed, or believe in its effectiveness, to see the power of the idea. It associated Labour with 'fairness', not just with a 'we think the council is crap and we'd run it better' message, though they said that too.

I suspect Labour also had enough members to sustain it. All too often, I've seen impressive Liberal Democrat operations that turned out to be based a handful of activists, relied on councillors doing their own delivering, and claimed to be doing community politics when in fact the community was barely involved with the party.

This has proved a recipe for disaster, in particular, in the event of holding or sharing power, when the councillors are busy running the council and turn round and find there is nobody behind them to keep a local machine in being to sustain them in office.

There have also too often been campaigns based almost solely on the incompetence of other parties' administrations. Such operations are fine while they last and have some substantial achievements to their credit. But when beaten, other parties have a habit of reforming themselves, discarding the causes of their problems and coming back to woo voters who are basically at heart their supporters.

Such people may have wanted to give their 'usual' party a short term kicking but never really had much commitment to the Liberal Democrats because the Liberal Democrats never tried much to involve them, preferring instead to flog a few committed activists to exhaustion.

If the Liberal Democrats are going to recover, they need strong political narratives, and a large enough number of committed supporters to form local core votes. Neither of those things are shortcomings unique to London and both are easier to describe than to resolve. But we've surely tested to destruction the approach to campaigns based on exploiting others' failings and relying on the unfeasible commitment of energy by a handful of activists.

Mark Smulian is a member of the Liberator Collective

HOW BAD CAN THINGS BE?

When support has slumped to all-time low, is this a time simply to repeat the same old slogans, warns Simon Titley

Just how bad can local elections be? Could May 2014 present the same dismal results as the previous three?

In short, yes. The conclusions were everything as bad as the previous three had predicted. Four elections in a row have dealt some disastrous results since the 2010 outcomes. And the resulting deep and unpleasant slime is not a pretty sight.

Not that such bad results could be glossed over more than the most ridiculous propagandists. Immediately following this May's elections, Annette Brook (Liberal Democrat MP for Mid Dorset and North Poole) issued a bizarre statement declaring that this year's results were a triumph.

A triumph? Yes, if you confined your results only to the handful of good results, suggested that such results were the only ones that mattered, and ignored all the others. Finally, it seems that the party could not accept such ridiculous absurdity any longer. The 'triumph' was so bad that not a single party member seemed to accept them.

It gets worse. It may well be that the MP for Mid Dorset and North Poole was not even aware of the party's official press release. The news report may well have been reported by party officials either too stupid or unaware just how ignorant their judgements could be.

But do not imagine that these local results, however bad, are just a passing phase. Results declined for many years before 2010. The Liberal Democrats have been losing every result since 2006. The gains in 2002-05 were just a phase, however, and most results since 1996 have been lost as well. In other words, the party peaked in 1996 and have been losing seat in most years ever since.

This means that, so far as local government is concerned, the Liberal Democrats reached their peak in 1996, a year before Nick Clegg even joined the party. It is true that Clegg's propaganda line subsequently claimed that no-one seized power before he became leader. Ridiculous though that is, the fact that local government reached its peak back in 1996 is hardly a notion for joy.

In most areas, it seems that the Liberal Democrats find it difficult to capture any lasting territory. For every area such as Sutton, which has lasting dominance, there are dozens of areas throughout the country that once ruled the roost but have now disappeared almost without trace.

This pattern has repeated sufficient often by now to suggest an alarming trend. The Liberal Democrats seems to have no lasting roots. They have no lasting values but merely support a small elite, which can briefly capture support only eventually to sink without trace.

One might expect Liberal Democrats to lose control of a council group after a period, only to regroup and regain control after a term or two in opposition. Losing groups then losing control entirely without trace is another matter entirely. It suggests that Liberal Democrats have in most cases nothing more than a small elite that is too easily lost without trace.

In retrospect, we can now see what a fraud most Liberal Democrats were. They appealed to everyone and consequently appealed to no-one. They appeared to everyone that their audiences want to be, yet ultimately possessed to no-one you could trust. And eventually, most of them lost without trace.

We cannot go on like. We cannot assume that, after a small interlude, we can simply repeat the same errors again and again. Even if we were to make some small term gains, in the long run it is doomed.

In stead, we must make a radical shift and stop repeating the errors of the past. We must recognise that we cannot appeal to everyone and anyone. If we try to appeal to everyone, we will have no lasting support. And why should we? What on earth would anyone believe that absolutely everyone is a Liberal Democrat, if only they had a chance?

In that naive believe, we can offer no universal belief without saying nothing of anyone substances. So let us break out and declare some substance. Being honest means risking losing as much as we gains winners. On the other hands, we can gather a more solid and lasting support, instead of losing support after a fleeting gain.

We have to start supporting some groups and not others, because we can support only some and not others. You may be reluctant to admit that some people will never vote us. But if you disagree, how could you continue to try to call all voters when we know that this game is always doomed to fail?

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective

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A LIBERAL CASE FOR 'YES' IN SCOTLAND

Scottish Liberal Democrats are campaigning for the country to stay in the UK but Andy Myles says he has a liberal case for independence

I'm Andy Myles. I'm a liberal. And I'm voting Yes. In recent months, many have suggested that, if I'm voting Yes, it must mean I'm a nationalist.

What they have failed to appreciate is that both sides in this debate contain shades of nationalism. On the Yes side you have Scottish nationalists. And on the No side you have British nationalists. Identifying with a nation is a state of mind that is very common across our species and almost everyone does it to a greater or a lesser extent. We're no different here in these islands – except that we make it terribly complicated by having two nationalities at the same time.

This leads to endless bickering and a huge expenditure of energy on constitutional debates. Well – I am a very, very ordinary nationalist. I'm a part of the Scots and British nations but the referendum forces me to make a political decision, and I've decided that my main nationality is Scottish. It had to be one or other, I'm afraid.

In reaching this conclusion, I have tried to go back to the essentials. As a liberal, I believe in striving for a society in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community, to pursue freedom, fairness and openness, and in which none is enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity.

I have tried, all of my life, to follow these precepts – in UK and Scottish politics. And I continue to do so with my decision to vote Yes. This is why.

FRIGHTENING EXTENT

Where liberty is concerned, I've always struggled to preserve and enhance our liberty, but the power of the state has been growing. Corporate power has been growing to a truly frightening extent and, as a liberal, when I see power being concentrated, my natural instinct is to question that accumulation because concentrations of power, almost always, erode personal freedom.

I have always worked to bring power back closer to people, in Europe, in the UK, in Scotland and in our communities of place and interest, and nothing has changed. Now, in the pursuit of liberty, I shall be voting Yes.

Where equality is concerned, I am sad to say, the UK has become more and more unequal in recent decades, despite the efforts of the many. We have become one of the least equal societies in the world, and I can see no serious evidence that any of our UK political leaders or parties has a plan to narrow the gap between the richest and the poorest in our society.

Well, I think Scotland can do better than the UK. This is the home of the democratic intellect, with a tradition of understanding that the wealth of our

civilisation is held in common. It is a delight to see, as part of this debate, the revival of the idea of the common weal. In the pursuit of equality, I shall be voting Yes.

So – what of community? I am fond of borrowing a phrase from one of my favourite writers – Ursula le Guin – and asserting that Scotland is not so much a nation as a family quarrel. Let's face up to it. We are good in an argument but not so good at decisions. After 1,000 years of Scots history, we have ended up with two flags and no national anthem.

But in that time, we have come to know quite a bit about community. And our central constitutional principle has been that sovereignty rests with the people. As a liberal and a Scot, I believe that true sovereignty starts with individuals and is passed upwards. It can be passed to various levels – a village, a town, a city, a nation, a federation. I even dream that it can be passed to a global level – to solve global problems.

But we should keep as much of that sovereignty as possible close to ourselves. The further away it is handed, the less chance we have to hold it to account. This is why I campaigned for the parliament in Holyrood.

Westminster may have thought they were benevolently passing power downwards, as the word 'devolution' suggests, but I never really saw it that way. I thought, though, that it might shake the UK constitution and lead to major reforms. I have concluded, with sadness, that this was a naïve hope.

I can see no evidence of devolution leading to a modern British federation, where Scotland is an equal partner with the other parts of the UK. None of the UK parties are even talking about what I consider to be federalism, which is where nations share some of their sovereign powers, and they do it on the basis of equality between the partners.

Well I'm sorry to say this but, in the United Kingdom 'family of nations', it is perfectly clear to me that some nations are more equal than others.

I have come to the conclusion that the best way to seek federalism is with Scotland taking its place alongside the other nations of the European Union. So for both federalism and community, I will be voting Yes.

What then about a fair, free and open society? We have made progress here too. As a liberal, I have played my part in pursuing fair votes at every level of government. Since 1999, that good liberal, Donald Gorrie, led us into the debate to banish sectarianism. Liberals have played their part in taking forward gay marriage and adoption rights. Another good liberal,

Jim Wallace, shepherded the best Freedom of Information legislation in these islands through our parliament.

On all of these issues, while there is still a long way to go, but the indications are that Scotland wants to go in the right direction. I think that we can best continue along the path of reform, unencumbered by a Westminster that seems determined to resist almost every proposal and, indeed, often seems to want to move in the other direction.

How many centuries does it take to reform an unelected House of Lords? How many muddled referendums does it take to achieve fair votes? How much secrecy in government can Whitehall hold on to? The only significant reform of my lifetime has been the creation of Holyrood, and that was done, not in Westminster, but here in Scotland. For a fair, free and open society here in Scotland, I will be voting Yes.

And where fighting poverty is concerned? In a smaller country, with power held closer to the people, I believe we can do much, much better than imposing the bedroom-tax and massive cuts, while at the same time creating tax breaks for the corporates and millionaires.

BURDEN OF SERVITUDE

I am not going to pretend that it will be easy to narrow the gap between the richest and poorest, but it will be a lot easier in a country that frees itself of the burden of servitude to the Thatcherite view of the supremacy of the markets, and the belief that corporate power should be allowed to grow ever larger with as little regulation as possible. To fight poverty, I will be voting Yes.

And what of fighting against ignorance? I am proud of the small part I played in abolishing tuition fees, and establishing the principle that all education in Scotland should be free.

Since 1999, I have watched, with disgust, the constant pressure from London to abandon this principle. Scotland was one of the first nations in the history of the world to establish near universal literacy and numeracy. I believe that this torch will be best held aloft by voting Yes.

And what of the fight against conformity? As humans, I am afraid conformity is always with us, but it is always easier to fight it when the power to impose it is reduced.

Moving power closer to the people cannot but help us in this fight. In the process, we can build and strengthen our personal independence of thought, and reinforce our rejection of unearned deference.

I want to live in a country where respect is given to others for their innate qualities and abilities. To continue the endless fight against enslavement by conformity, I will be voting Yes.

Some have suggested that I am brave to break free of party thinking. I have always found it easy to think for myself, especially when the leadership offered up nonsense.

“I have always found it easy to think for myself, especially when the leadership offered up nonsense”

Nick Clegg has been using as his core argument that “We are stronger and more powerful together”. When did ‘strength in numbers’ become a liberal virtue? I don’t want any level of community to which I belong to have any greater power than is its right. I don’t want to live in a ‘big’ state that starts out with imperial delusions about how we must have a military with a ‘global reach’, and ends up

as George W Bush’s poodle.

I will be perfectly happy to live in a country with a simple defence force. To tackle lingering imperialist delusions, I will be voting Yes.

I am looking forward to the end of this debate. I have spent far too much of my life on it. I want us to be able to use all of the energy we spend currently on constitutional issues on the seriously important issues, on fighting climate change, and ending poverty in the developing world, and curbing the overmighty global corporates.

I do not believe it has been necessary to shed a single liberal principle in taking my decision and I hope that other liberals will consider the case I have made.

Andy Myles is a former chief executive of the Scottish Liberal Democrats

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WE GOT OUT OF THIS ONCE BEFORE

Nick Winch helped get the party out of its 1989 collapse. It could be done again, but would the leadership obstruct this, he asks

The dust settled. The recriminations rightly began. The internet hummed with calls for steady nerves and more of the same, for resignations and post mortems. The bloodied infantry buried the wounded and tended to the injured.

Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrat leadership muttered their expressions of regret but refused to recognise the depth of the crisis the party is facing. As someone who joined the Liberal Party in 1974, I cannot recall a situation when the outlook has looked so bleak.

Assuming that the party goes into the next election with a leader still perceived as toxic by a huge proportion of the election and a substantial number of its own members, how can it hope to emerge from May 2015 with a significant group of MPs and a strong local party in at least a few other constituencies that might provide areas for future growth?

Work over many years to position the Liberal Democrats as a non-Tory alternative to Labour has been undermined, possibly fatally for a generation, by the coalition.

This is most starkly illustrated in the council chambers of the cities of Britain: from 38 seats and control in 2010 in Bristol to 16 now; from 31 to 12 in Hull, 37 to three in Liverpool, 33 to nil in Manchester, 42 to 24 in Newcastle and, of course, from 42 to 18 in Nick Clegg's home city of Sheffield, to pick just a few. In London, the situation is almost worst.

The idiocy of Annette Brook's claim in a post-election message to members ("In our held seats, where we have strong and established campaigns, we're seeing some very good results") suggests she either has not seen the results in Southwark (25 seats down to 13), Haringey (23 down to nine), Brent (17 down to one), Richmond (down nine to 15) or disregards the efforts of some of the party's finest campaigners.

But no matter. She trumpets that, in her own area (Purbeck), the Liberal Democrats took a seat off the Tories who lost overall control, not mentioning the fact that the Liberal Democrats were regaining by 28 votes a seat they had previously held and which saw the intervention this time of a UKIP candidate who secured 248 votes. Equally, she glosses over the fact that the gain of four seats in Sutton was achieved with a reduced level of popular support and a strongish UKIP showing splitting the right-wing vote.

Of course, some results in local elections can always be put down to local factors. A planning issue here, an invigorated opposition there, even a single individual working hard over a period of time and certainly the imprisonment of the council leader can all blur attempts to get a clear national picture.

However, the leadership cannot get away from the

fact that nearly 1,400 council seats have been lost in the last full cycle of council elections. Over half of defended seats were lost in May 2014. The share of the vote has collapsed in almost all parts of the country and there are now fewer councillors than at any time since the creation of the SDP.

DEPTHS ALMOST UNIMAGINABLE

Being driven into fifth place in votes in a national election, and being sixth in terms of the numbers of MEPs, plumbs depths almost unimaginable and certainly unknown in living memory.

The European election result is worrying for another reason. The party rightly campaigned strongly on the issue of support for Europe. As Liberator has often pointed out, about a third of the public are consistently in favour of the UK being part of the EU. Tim Farron was right on election night to say he was proud the party was fighting for what it believed. However, even he must find it alarming that less than one in five of those who believe in what Liberal Democrats are saying are actually willing to vote accordingly.

The loss of the MEPs will also prove particularly shattering for the party; not only for what they might have achieved in Brussels but because of what they provided to local parties.

Until this May, Liberal Democrats in every constituency in England and Scotland could claim their area had parliamentary representation and the offices of the MEPs were (to varying extents) invaluable in providing campaigning materials, ideas and resources for local party.

That resource has vanished. Combined with the loss of the Short Money and the decimation of party campaign staff, there are now virtually no resources on which local campaigners can draw as the start the fight back.

It may sound platitudinous but the party needs both locally and nationally to get back to basics – communicating with the electorate, developing and getting support for new initiatives and not just pandering to the latest 'nimby' or chattering class issue.

There needs to be a reason why voters – and particularly young voters – should offer support. The public are now sufficiently cynical and turned-off by mainstream politics that only by the Liberal Democrats appearing to be non-party political or, better still, anti-political can they become engaged.

Looking back to the last time the party was in a situation anything like this (a quarter of a century ago after the 1989 Euro elections when we came fourth

behind the Greens and our opinion poll rating was so low as to be statistically meaningless), a group of 30 campaigners from around the country were invited by ALDC head Bill Le Breton to meet for a weekend at Hebden Bridge to try to provide a new sense of direction for activists and local parties.

“The share of the vote has collapsed in almost all parts of the country”

HEADLESS CHICKENS

The party nationally was like headless chickens unaware of what should be done and was looking desperately for answers to questions it did not really know how to ask.

That group came away from the Hebden Bridge weekend (it was mostly ALDC staff, hand-picked leading councillors/campaigners and some of the party staff and area agents) with a basis for a series of ‘off the peg’ campaign packs under the title of People First.

Launched at the party conference in September 1989, they provided a focal point for local activists and provided the key messages and activities for the party to campaign on from the corridors of Westminster to the front doors of Britain. Background briefings, draft survey forms, petitions, motions to council, topics for parliamentary questions, etc, were all provided focussing on three areas – the Environment (including Air Quality), Food Safety and Transport – and they were all designed to create properly integrated campaigns.

The initiatives in the campaign packs were largely non-party political and therefore were not seen as a clear electioneering technique. It contrasted starkly with the current national (and frankly notional) campaigns of the ‘petition for a million jobs’-type or whatever they are called, which have no clearly defined objectives, just appeal to believers in what used to be known as ‘mindless activism’, achieve precisely nothing and certainly do not convince anyone to vote for, support or help the party.

People First aimed to engage with people in a different way, and with those who were not really aware that they were interested in political issues. It is part of the approach of telling people that if, for example, there are no buses to their housing estate late at night or no accommodation for those wishing to leave the family home, that is because of political decisions and they have the ability to influence those political issues. It is to do with separating political actions and issues from party political activity and issues.

There is no shortage of potential issues around which a new People First approach can be taken. Why are we hung up with building new houses on brownfield, or even greenfield sites, when over 800,000 homes are empty – far more than is needed to solve the housing crisis.

Should Liberal Democrats not be campaigning for those houses to be returned to occupation? This would be more desirable and politically coherent than trying to make developers release the land they currently hold.

Why are we so opposed to new approaches to energy generation? Should Liberal Democrats not be campaigning vigorously for greater use of wind farms and tidal power? This would be more valuable and politically coherent than advocating Ed Davey’s nuclear approach to energy generation.

Why are we so wedded to investing billions in one major railway project? Should Liberal Democrats not be campaigning for increased investment in more, smaller public transport schemes throughout the UK? This would be more valuable and politically coherent than advocating a marginal reduction in travel time between Birmingham and London at disproportionate cost.

These are merely three issues on which Liberal Democrats could focus their activity in an attempt to reconnect with the public. There are many more and Liberator readers will doubtless have their own priorities.

In 1989, People First was successful in re-motivating the activists and giving a sense of purpose to the party as a whole because of a range of circumstances. There was an activist base hungry for campaigning action; a choice of very good campaigns; the initiative came from an independent and decentralised organisation (ALDC) distanced from the fiasco of the central campaign; a leader eventually willing to give his authority to that organisation’s intervention; a group of staff members within the Westminster village signed up to and knowledgeable about integrated campaigning; a motivated team driving the initiative forward; and a virtuous cycle of campaign production, local implementation, reinforced by the party in Westminster, feedback to the campaigners, and development of additional materials.

Rebuilding trust in the integrity of the party will not be easy. The damage done to the party in the public’s mind is by its support for Conservative policies, which were never in the coalition agreement, and the demotivation of its activist base may take many years to recover.

It may well be impossible under the current leadership, but People First showed a way forward for the party and the membership 25 years ago. Something similar is needed – and needed urgently – if the current haemorrhaging of support is not ultimately going to lead to the complete ex-sanguination of the patient.

Nick Winch was campaigns officer for ALDC in 1989 and is a member of the Liberator Collective

GIVE ME CLEGG'S HEAD, BUT NOT YET

Changing leader now would saddle Nick Clegg's successor with an impossible task, says Roger Hayes

Like so many of my friends and colleagues in the party, I despair at the lack of understanding that Nick Clegg and his Westminster-bubble chums have displayed since inheriting the leadership. But to have a leadership election now would, I believe, be just spiteful revenge; distractingly and destructively self-indulgent; and above all utterly pointless.

When telephoned during the last leadership election, I remember saying that, if Clegg or Huhne were the answer, it must be a very silly question. Little did I realise at the time how right both candidates would prove me.

At the risk of repeating myself, the party still has not properly analysed why it did so badly at the 2010 general election. Because it has failed to learn that electoral lesson, it has no useful context in which to set the annual lemming-like slaughter that the Liberal Democrats have suffered every year since.

It has become too easy to salve our vengeance with chants of 'Clegg must go'. I am not sure that is even a useful headline let alone something that will adequately deal with the deep and complex mess the party is now mired in. What the European election campaign and results show, like the last four years before them, is that it is not so much the message but more often the messenger, and particularly the way the message is packaged – its tone – that is at fault.

The strange group that has been gathered and allowed to run down the party and its campaigns are largely to blame. The party has become far too presidential in style and, as a result, it is far less liberal.

From a central, Westminster-biased, leadership point of view – which is of course the only thing the media understand and are interested in – we no longer appear to be a devolved party concerned about people, but a government party concerned only about its leader and his status.

Well that isn't my concern. So, before we clamour for the leader's head, we need to be able to address four key points.

ANGER AND REVENGE

Beyond obvious anger and revenge, what is it exactly we believe Clegg is guilty of? We of course need to be able to clearly articulate this for two reasons: so that the true nature of the problem can be understood and, importantly, having understood it, ensure we are best able to avoid similar traits being repeated in any successor for the leader's role.

Apart from the obvious desire to rid ourselves of such a constant liability, we need to consider who might possibly take over. I am not going to run through the likely contenders – that would be far too tedious – but

suffice it to say that there is no one obviously waiting in the wings, free of contamination by association, who could pick up the pieces and offer a credible alternative.

Now, that's not to say that there isn't someone out there who has what it takes and will emerge, given time, to help rebuild a very badly battered party image and eventually lead us once again to the sunny uplands.

Surely we haven't sunk so far as to now be clutching at straws and magically believing there is some quick panacea that will make it all alright. And to say that anyone is better than what we have is simply to choose an alternative train wreck.

Please, that is the same clumsy thinking that led us from an amiable drunk, to a frequently mocked old man, to the present mess we find ourselves in. We cannot afford another mistake, another stop-gap, another bland man.

It is now such a crock of shit with that that no one, however gifted, could do anything useful with it in barely more than half a year – which is all there will be left if the party has to go through a proper leadership election. The only beneficiaries will be the forces of darkness.

I want Clegg to go as much as the next sane member – I never wanted him in the first place – but how will having a leadership election now help? Who will we get to replace him? Certainly not the most able candidate; all that would be on offer today is the most eager, or desperate, or opportunistic one. And even if they were any better, what on earth do we think that poor soul will be able to do in a handful of months as we hurtle towards a general election with the media sitting in wait for the slightest gaffe? Akin to Mark Twain's wise words, "It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt."

We are a liberal party so it is not about the leader; it is about what we stand for and how we stand for it that really matters. Yes, of course, the leader needs to be part of the mix, but only if we wrongly choose it to be is it all about the leader.

We need to redesign our party so that it is once again 'of the people' and then pick a leader that understands that and will lead it accordingly.

Unfortunately, we have allowed the party to be seduced by those who only live in the Westminster bubble and have no real concept of ordinary people and their everyday lives – one expects that of Conservatives, but not of Liberals. So, before we worry about who should be leader, let us first consider what should be led. Consider what comes after for the party – worrying about this leader, any leader, really is not the best use of anyone's time right now.

INEPT, WRONG AND EMBARRASSING

Let us be clear, there is much that is good about what the Liberal Democrats have achieved in government. It was right to go into coalition and that remains the right choice today – I can, and do, argue its value. But oh so sadly, all that good is lost in a sea of the so much more that is inept, wrong and frankly embarrassing. The time to end it will come but I fervently believe that that time is not now.

There is a long litany of, at best, ill-judged decisions and, at worst, disastrous choices. We could have sacked Clegg every month for the past 50 months with good cause. There is no more reason to do it now.

The 2010 leaders' debates: I am sure we can all remember the elation we felt after the first debate – no one expected it; no one had seen anything like it before; Clegg clearly on top; Brown and Cameron reeling on the ropes. The problem, as we discovered a week later, was that was it – we had seen and heard all Clegg had to offer. And then, again in the third debate, there was just more of the same. What seemed at one point so promising was in fact a lack-lustre 2010 campaign that lost us seats when we should have been gaining them by the dozen.

Tuition fees was of course the moment when the party proved to its most loyal voter base that we were just like all the rest. Establishment lackeys, not to be believed or trusted. A dire moment of Armageddon from which we have never recovered.

Liberals in government have been sadly far more concerned with policy and legislation than with the way we govern and the style of leadership we can offer. Easy lessons that could have been learned from the

“Before we worry about who should be leader, let us first consider what should be led”

thousands of councillors we have elected over the years to local government. So many ministers and leading party figures have become the cheerleaders and apologists for Conservative policy adding further to the belief that we are just the same. As the anarchist slogan says, “Don't vote, the government always wins!”

We suffered the embarrassing farce of the AV referendum. We are sent weekly internal emails that purport to come from this MP or that, but are really badly expressed by HQ staff and are often downright insulting to the intelligence of the membership.

Clegg's generally poor performance culminated in the Farage fiasco. It was a bold idea to state our case for European Union, but whoever thought that debates in that format would be anything other than the trouncing they proved to be, even if our man was up to the task.

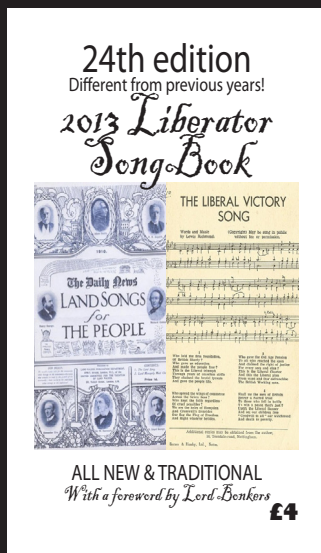
So that's a fairly damning list and, with all of that said, it is clear to see why much of the party wants to hang Clegg upside down from a lamppost and beat him with sticks.

And if that is done over the next few weeks or months, so be it, but I will not be part of it. I will continue to counsel against and I do not relish the prospect of the spectacle or its potential outcome.

Like so many dear friends scarred by a lifetime of battling for liberalism, often against those twin forces of external conservatism and internal party stupidity, I am too old, too drained, too impatient for true success to ever again run the risk of another catastrophe.

Roger Hayes is a former leader of Kingston-upon-Thames Council and parliamentary candidate

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UKRAINE'S HERD OF ELEPHANTS

Russia, Crimea and economic reform are among elephants lurking in Ukraine's rooms, but Kiron Reid finds the troubled country's presidential election went off smoothly

The Ukraine seen on television and Ukraine seen by the overwhelming majority of 1,000+ observers from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) are as different as Brick Lane and Belgravia. The contrast is as stark as Belfast in the troubles and a sleepy English village.

International election observers have declared that the election largely met national and international standards, except in Donetsk and Luhansk where very few citizens were able to vote.

Petro Poroshenko, the chocolate (and vodka and automotive) magnate, was overwhelmingly elected president in nearly 90% of the country. The voting process went well nearly everywhere, the counting was quick by the standards of previous elections in Ukraine (and by British standards), but many teams faced extra shifts and long delays as the final protocols from the tabulation of the counts in the districts were resolved. Part of the delay may have been due to a cyber attack on the Central Election Commission computer system but we were not told this until returning to Kyiv.

The UK Foreign Office sent 10 long-term observers and 90 short-term observers to support the 900 strong OSCE and Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) election mission in Ukraine.

After briefing in Kyiv, my group flew down via Dnipropetrovsk to Zaporizhia, which is in the south-east but not an area where there has been any major trouble. (Putting aside the attempt by armed persons to take over a large nuclear power station, which was readily thwarted).

I saw a checkpoint on the edge of Kyiv (familiar from the television pictures), the army dug in at the regional airport, and we went through a self-defence unit checkpoint en route but they were only looking at people going the other way into Dnipropetrovsk. We expected self-defence units at every polling station in our city but there were none in the inner and outer suburban districts we covered – only regular police and emergency services. This was 370 miles south-east of Kyiv. As the crow flies, we were about 80 miles from the border of Donetsk region but 120 from the city of Donetsk itself.

Unlike the Dombass region, where industry and jobs had gone, there were a lot of heavy industry, parts still very industrial and functioning. There are modern giant shopping malls, nice coffee shops, and many bars and restaurants, three universities plus a medical school. This is a quite prosperous city and no one wants to make trouble.

STATUES OF LENIN

Although pro-Russia/devolution demonstrations had been banned, and a large number of protesters arrested only a month before, they had all been released. This is a city that is both definitely Ukrainian but also a very specifically and clearly 'Soviet' city. They are very proud of all their statues of Lenin. The main boulevard is Lenina Prospect, and our district is Leninska. Everyone speaks Russian unless on official business. (In the west of the country, Ukrainian is more common). The region is also the birthplace of the Cossacks so they are proudly independent. Some housing here looks very run down but it is only the roads and pavements and crazy driving that are bad. We saw very little election activity – campaigning by Yulia Tymoshenko supporters, and billboards for Poroshenko and a few others.

Lenins'kyi district on the west side of the hydroelectric dam is a large suburban district, of mixed old and modern municipal type and garden suburb type housing. We also covered two residential districts on the city side of the dam. Apparently these are bad areas due to being near the heavy industry but they looked quite nice to us. The buildings were not particularly bad, and there were kiosks, street vendors, cultural facilities and parkland around. Some of the modern housing was pretty crammed in and concrete jungle like. A nice bar was next to a school, our driver joked about the teachers and pupils being able to have a beer together.

My election partner, Dr Marketa Smrckova, is a young Czech expert on south-eastern European politics, from Brno University. We were jointly responsible for a city district of 80 polling stations and 161,000 people. We visited 15 of them and saw no significant irregularity. The election and counting process was really quite smooth but completing the paperwork afterwards was interminably slow – partly for a series of unverifiable reasons. Computer system glitch was a main one.

There was no evidence of any wrongdoing. We saw very few domestic observers – apparently they had mostly been deployed to the troubled east. One senior Canadian observer led a team and also independently inspected our area. There were no signs of the far right group Right Sector anywhere, despite a report on pro-Russia social media that they were in every polling station. I only met one observer in the west who had seen any of them.

People turned out in blazing sun in the morning to vote, and there was a party atmosphere – with music playing at the polling stations (rock and folk

– everyone asked me about the Beatles), and catering in the foyers. Our driver was a senior engineer in the largest aluminium smelting plant in Europe, and our interpreter a highly-qualified English expert who trains overseas English speaking medical students in Russian. There are many African and Indian students.

Even those who didn't particularly support Poroshenko voted for Poroshenko. Voters wanted and got a clear winner so that they could show the outside world that Ukraine has a genuinely democratically elected president. But most of all, people are enjoying summer and are out in the streets, the coffee shops, at the beach or beach bars along the river, in the parks or the national park. They want to live their lives as modern Europeans who are Ukrainian but also friends with Russia. I hope they will be allowed to do so.

The Canadian presence on the mission was particularly impressive – they sent a full contingent on the OSCE mission, and a full independent Canadian government election observation mission as well, about 300 observers for this first round alone. Many Canadians are of Ukrainian extraction. Neighbouring states, except the one to the east, were well represented too.

The elephant in the room was the role of Russia on the mission. Russia is an OSCE member and usually has a strong presence in nearby countries. They did not send any observers. The OSCE failed to comment on this even when asked a direct question by an observer, which treated everyone as if they were stupid. Maybe they thought the facts spoke for themselves.

Communication by the core team with STOs while on mission was a sole weak point. Special monitoring mission civilian military observation monitors were detained in Donetsk and Luhansk. There was fighting and a helicopter shot down at Donetsk airport on the night of the election day. We heard about these developments by text message from home.

Of 36 million voters, there was a 60% turnout. However, in Donetsk 10 out of 12, and Luhansk 14 out of 22 districts, had no voting. This was the equivalent of nearly all of the population of Liverpool and Manchester not being able to vote. There was voting in 800 out of 3,908 polling stations in these regions but none in Crimea for citizens there who wanted to.

Fellow Liberal Yuan Potts was back in Ukraine, having been in Crimea last time – now de facto part of Russia. The OSCE preliminary findings covered this but PR wise should have put it on the front page – another elephant in the room.

CONTROVERSIAL LANGUAGE

Language is controversial and transliteration is confusing. Spelling variations, language variations and different policies and politics lead to words, places and names being spelt different ways. The language question does exist. The model should be Wales, language as part of a cultural celebration and revival. A flowering of language not in a nationalistic way, but that is inclusive, welcoming to visitors and

“We expected self-defence units at every polling station in our city”

tourists. This can apply to both Ukrainian and Russian.

So what are the future prospects? Many election observers, and more so the locally engaged staff, were personally disappointed that there would be no second round of the election, but all delighted for Ukraine.

Political stability is needed. Other elephants are lurking.

NATO cannot expand to Russia's borders and should back off from doing so. Economic reforms are needed but some politicians and commentators are talking of sweeping post-Perestroika style market nihilism that would be disastrous and lose a huge amount of public support. The country has abundant sun in summer and plains. It is crying out for large solar use.

The referendums on devolution or separation in the south-east had no legal basis and were badly run, but they expressed the will of many people. The response of national and western leaders to simply dismiss them is unrealistic and hypocritical.

William Hague has staunchly supported Ukrainian sovereignty and democracy. But his soundbite that the referendums had less validity than the Eurovision vote was a brilliant line and shallow political one, clearly the inspired work of a bright young researcher.

It seems crazy that fighting is continuing when people in Ukraine and no doubt in Russia want to live, love and work in peace. The rest of Ukraine is going about life as normal, albeit with an air of new age traveller camp around Maidan. It is insane that there is fighting in the east. No one that any observer I spoke to met believed there was any discrimination against the Russian language, although there was more nationalist sentiment in the west. Ironically, it was in Donetsk that the British Council had recently completed a two year project encouraging local and youth participation in decision making. Will there be local decision making if they are absorbed into Russia? From the pattern of other regions Russia has adopted, it appears not.

It seems impossible to genuinely tell whether many of the insurgents are Russian and whether they take instructions from Russia. The paranoid and contradictory statements by Russian officials do not help. However, it appears only Russia can end the fighting by getting the fighters in the east to stand down and helping negotiate a peaceful ceasefire.

NATO's cold war warriors can help reassure, but they should stop ratcheting up tension. The same applies to the Colonel Bufton-Tuftons in Washington and London clubs.

Kiron Reid is a member of the Liberator Collective and was one of the 90 UK short term election observers deployed to the OSCE election observation mission in Ukraine for the 25 May presidential election

A LONG ROAD IN HUNGARY

Recent election results point to new life for Hungary's liberals after a collapse, says Howard Cohen

Back in 2010, a quiet revolution took place in Hungary, where the Social Democrats (MSZP), widely seen by the electorate as discredited, dishonest and corrupt, were swept out of power, along with their Liberal (SDSZ) coalition allies, who were blamed even more, to the extent that 'Liberal' is now a word with which no politician dare identify!

The Social Democrats achieved just 19% of the vote, whilst the Liberals gained fewer than 1% and the party was wound up soon after. Barely two percentage points behind the former governing party were Jobbik, Hungary's fascist party, while the only bright light came from the newly formed LMP (Politics Can Be Different), a party with a broadly green and social liberal agenda.

Returning to power after an absence of eight years and with an unprecedented two-thirds super-majority were Fidesz, a party which just 10 years earlier had been members of Liberal International. In the 10 years since, however, Fidesz has evolved into an autocratic, populist party which simply doesn't fit comfortably in to any ideological labels.

Fidesz set about using its super-majority to completely restructure the Hungarian state. It rewrote the country's constitution, reduced the size of parliament, changed the electoral system, established a new set of media laws and introduced an economic policy more akin to a party of the far left than the conservative party that much of the UK media portrays them as, with huge taxes on the (mainly foreign-owned) banks, nationalisation of private pension funds, and tobacco sales and price caps on utility prices.

Underpinning all of this was a populist strategy to ensure re-election in 2014. Almost all printed and broadcast media is now either under the control or influence of Fidesz supporters. Fidesz's total control of national and local government means that even foreign-owned media companies know that they will lose lucrative contracts if they upset it too much.

With echoes of the early years of Thatcher in the UK, the opposition Social Democrats, instead of concentrating on challenging Fidesz, ripped themselves apart with bitter infighting and eventually split in to three different parties, with both their previous prime ministers leaving to set up new parties.

Even the new LMP, which had offered some hope, was bereft with splits and infighting. This left Jobbik as the only effective opposition party in parliament. Moreover, Jobbik became much more professional in their approach and campaigning style. The uniforms and skinheads disappeared and were replaced by children and bright colours at their rallies, with happy, smiling faces and an insistence that they are not extremists at all.

Fidesz set about challenging Jobbik by deliberately using nationalistic rhetoric to appeal to Jobbik's supporters. This has played well in a country where the national identity and culture remain a high priority in the minds of most citizens, along with a genuine fear of the damage that could be done to their culture by foreign domination. While no Hungarian party, even Jobbik, calls for a withdrawal from the EU, they all want to be seen as standing up to foreign 'bullies'.

And so to the 2014 election. The Social Democrats agreed a truce with their two breakaway parties and fought on a common while, in a surprise comeback, former Liberal leader Gábor Fodor formed a new Liberal Party and also got himself on to that combined centre left list.

Despite the Fidesz vote dropping by more than 8%, its changes to the electoral system ensured that its 44.5% of the vote retained the two-thirds super-majority. The combined centre-left vote rose by more than 6% and Jobbik's vote rose slightly to more than 20%. LMP also achieved the 5% required to retain their presence in parliament, and Fodor successfully returned as his party's only MP.

As soon as the general election was over, the centre left list parties chose to fight separately in the European elections. This led to a surprisingly different result from the general election of the previous month. The Fidesz vote rose to 51%, largely at the expense of Jobbik. The three centre-left parties shared 28% of the vote quite evenly, with the new party of former prime minister Gyurcsanyi coming within 26,000 votes of overtaking his former party, with the new party of his successor, Gordon Bajnai, not far behind.

The next four years will be interesting. Fidesz will undoubtedly continue its efforts to control or influence all levels of society. The fragmentation and partial collapse of the Social Democrats could finally create a more ideological party structure. The new parties of the centre left could start to attract new support from those who would never have voted MSZP, due to its communist roots. Bajnai's Egyutt Party has chosen to sit with the Greens in the European Parliament, whilst Gyurcsanyi's Democratic Coalition is following a broadly social liberal agenda.

I do believe that the next four years are likely to see plenty of changes to the political landscape, which might just mean a positive long-term future. I hope so.

Howard Cohen is a member of the Liberator Collective and managing editor of The Daily HU, Hungary's only online English-language newspaper

TRADING FAIRNESS

Mathew Hulbert explains why he has helped found a new organisation to promote Fairtrade issues within the Liberal Democrats

If the definition of a nation is how it treats its poorest and most vulnerable citizens, then surely that goes double for what we do, as the seventh richest nation on earth, to help those in the developing world who face even harsher conditions.

That's why I've long supported the need for developmental aid and the Blair government's setting up of a stand-alone Department for International Development (DfID)

I have to say I still find it rather saddening that the international development secretary is not a Liberal Democrat, especially as the present incumbent, Tory Justine Greening, seemed to deem it a demotion from her previous lofty heights at transport.

Thankfully, we have junior minister Lynne Featherstone in DfID doing fantastic work, especially her fearless campaigning for an end to the horror of female genital mutilation.

For many years, I have been a local Fairtrade campaigner in my area, Hinckley and Bosworth in Leicestershire, and was very proud when in 2012 I became the local Liberal Democrat-run council's Fairtrade Champion, to my knowledge the only councillor to hold such an office in the country.

Most people these days have heard about Fairtrade but, for those who haven't, when you buy a product with the official Fairtrade label on it, then a fairer proportion of the money you spend goes back to the original farmer/developer/grower and, therefore, it is literally a fairer trade.

I am very pleased and proud that, late last year, myself and fellow Liberal Democrat Matt Whittles co-founded Fairtrade Future, a new grassroots movement, within the Liberal Democrats, to promote Fairtrade issues and to support developing world farmers.

We are passionate about Fairtrade and helping those farmers get a fair price for their hard work and produce. We firmly believe that fairness, respect and equality should be the common standard in the twenty-first century.

Our five aims are to promote Fairtrade within the Liberal Democrats, encourage the use of Fairtrade goods at party headquarters and Liberal Democrat conferences, to provide a public forum for Liberal Democrats to discuss Fairtrade issues, to host Fairtrade events at federal and regional conferences, and to participate in the wider international Fairtrade movement.

The Fairtrade movement in the UK is governed by the Fairtrade Foundation, which has one simple but profound aim: "Our vision is of a world in which justice and sustainable development are at the heart of trade structures and practices so that everyone, through their work, can maintain a decent and dignified livelihood and develop their full potential."

There are, as of the time of writing, 354 UK companies licensed to trade as Fairtrade, and 89% of the UK public trust the Fairtrade mark. In 2012, there were 878 Fairtrade schools in the UK and sales of Fairtrade products reached £1.5bn, an 18% increase on the previous year. The Fairtrade mark is the most widely recognised ethical label globally.

So, who is being helped by the Fairtrade movement? The Fairtrade system currently works with 1.3 million people – both farmers and workers – across more than 70 developing countries, with 75% of all Fairtrade producers being smallholder farmers.

There are now more than 1,100 Fairtrade producer organisations worldwide and, in 2012, farmers and workers from some of the world's poorest countries received 80 million euros in Fairtrade premium to invest in business and in social and environmental projects in their communities.

It may be an idea scoffed at here in the UK, but this is ethical capitalism in practice. It is about having an international marketplace that bends towards justice and helping the most impoverished people in our world.

If you support the work of Fairtrade and would like to help grown Fairtrade Future within the Liberal Democrats, please contact us via our Twitter account, @LDFairtrade and/or on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/FairtradeFutureLD>

Together we can make a world that is fairer for all of our people.

Mathew Hulbert is a Liberal Democrat councillor at Hinckley and Bosworth, and co-founder of Fairtrade Future

GOVERNING AS LIBERAL DEMOCRATS Social Liberal Forum Conference 2014 #slfconf

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Book your place at socialliberal.net/slf-conf-2014, where
you can also see the latest line-up of speakers and topics.

**Smile for the Camera:
the Double Life
of Cyril Smith
by Simon Danczuk
and Matthew Baker
Biteback £18.99**

If the horrifying allegations of child abuse in this book are true, Cyril Smith should have been in jail rather than in parliament.

Danczuk's status as Labour MP for Smith's old Rochdale seat puts him though in an odd position as author – while he is no doubt concerned for his constituents' welfare, readers will suspect his motive in writing this is not to expose the dead Smith but to discredit by association his living Liberal Democrat opponents.

Rumours about Smith's behaviour were around in the 1970s but as Danczuk quotes the journalist Simon Hoggart remarking: "We heard the rumours. But paedophilia wasn't such an obsession then, it was distasteful but we just thought poor, sad, fat, unwanted. We pitied him." Hoggart adds that journalists did not therefore even try to pursue the story.

These observations lend some support to David Steel's recent statements that he heard nothing he could have acted on.

Smith was a controversial figure - indeed Danczuk quotes Liberator in a 1978 attack on his support for Greater Manchester's appalling chief constable James Anderton.

But Smith pulled off the trick of being simultaneously a politician and a popular personality by playing up to his image as a fount of blunt northern plain speaking, using his size as a prop and his jovial public persona to hide any darker side.

He was also, as Danczuk notes, one of the first politicians to grasp the possibilities of intensive door-to-door campaigning, photo opportunities, the voting power of ethnic minorities and posing as an outsider in politics.

Danczuk has assembled a case that suggests this was not the real Smith, and that the carefully constructed public face was what – as with Jimmy Saville – allowed him to get away with it.

His theories about why the police and MI5 appear to have covered up for Smith are less convincing.

The idea that Smith was protected because he might have become a minister in the unstable 1970s seems fanciful, and the suggestion that



REVIEWS

the government covered-up for Smith because it designed to use him somehow to curb trade union militancy is silly.

I suspect Danczuk gets nearer the truth in his implication that Smith was part of a ring of abusers that included some people far more powerful and influential than he ever was, and that further revelations may follow.

Mark Smulian

The Long Walk to Freedom [film]. Director: Justin Chadwick.

Anyone who knows anything about South Africa will notice the error in the opening shots showing Nelson Mandela running free as a boy. Cathedral Peak is the Drakensberg Mountains is visible in the background and is in Natal in Zulu territory whereas Nelson Mandela was Xhosa and originated in the Transkei in the Eastern Cape.

The main events in Mandela's long career admittedly could not all have been put in the film but there are omissions such as the Witwatersrand mineworkers strike in 1946, which had a marked affect on Mandela.

We are shown something of his early life as a lawyers taking up civil right cases and the advent of Francoise Malan's National Party and the formalisation of Apartheid.

Sharpeville is depicted as the police opening fire indiscriminately in panic, and the resultant outlawing of the ANC resulted in it adopting a policy of armed resistance with attacks on economic targets, ending with the capture of prominent ANC members in a police ambush and the famous Rivonia trial.

Here we are shown Mandela's rejection of his barrister's advice to give his ultimatum in the

famous Rivonia speech in which he challenged the judge to pass the death sentence. The judge however resists the prosecution under the pretext of not wanting to create martyrs and gives life imprisonment instead.

Initially conditions on Robbins Island are harsh but after a change of governor suddenly improve, but we are not shown how or why, or how Mandela's charisma unified the prisoners.

Suddenly the prisoners are transferred to a prison with privileges and the authorities try to get Mandela to talk to them way from the other prisoners.

Then he is under what appears to be house arrest but we are not shown exactly how this came about. Suddenly the authorities accept he is someone they have to come to terms with the hint that FW de Klerk has a Calvinistic belief that he is destined to bring about change during the transition period.

With the exception of Winnie Mandela and Walter Sisulu there is little mention of the other leading figures in the ANC.

While the film is worth seeing I think a lot is unexplained or missed out.

Andrew Hudson

Liberal in Coalition: Tips and Advice Before, During and After Government. Liberal Democrat International Office Peter Lesniak ed.

This is the booklet that was needed four years ago when the Lib Dems found themselves in coalition negotiations.

Quite literally, nobody knew what they were doing because no-one in the UK parliament had any experience of the situation.

The results, as we can now see, were a mixed bag - a Coalition Agreement that won a fair welcome at the time but which did not guard against horrors like the Health Act and bedroom tax, which were outside it but which could also not plausibly be called unforeseen circumstances forced on the government.

Above all, the Lib Dem negotiators appeared to have been asleep when the section on tuition fees was agreed, leading to a gift that keeps on giving for the party's opponents.

Elsewhere in Europe (and indeed Morocco, also included here) they handle these things better because they have long and regular experience of them.

The booklet comprises advice from liberal parties on how to handle the process of coalition from formation to finish and should be read by anyone involved in any future such talks here.

Two passages stand out, both from parties very close politically to the Lib Dems.

Denmark's Radikale Venstre advises on negotiating a coalition: "A key discipline during coalition participation is to address the expectations of the party's membership. If you sell your policies very aggressively during the election campaign, your own electorate can build the expectation that you believe you will be able to force those policies on your coalition partners without having to compromise." Tuition fees again spring to mind.

And this from the Netherlands' D66: "Leaving a coalition is not easy. You have to plan and strategise each step like a military operation; there is no room for surprises."

Mark Smulian

The UN's Lone Ranger by John M Sellar Whittles Publishing 2014.

One of my more amusing exchanges in the council chamber was my announcement that "Tower Hamlets [was] an anti-speciesist borough". "A what" chorused the Trots, unfamiliar with this concept?

We had a rat 'problem' ostensibly in Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park and were not going to use poisons. Almost 30 years on, careful management by the park's Friends has led to the diversification of its wildlife, while the rat 'problem' required better management of the other burgeoning species, humans, particularly their waste disposal on adjacent housing estates.

It is likely that the African elephant, tigers, leopards and

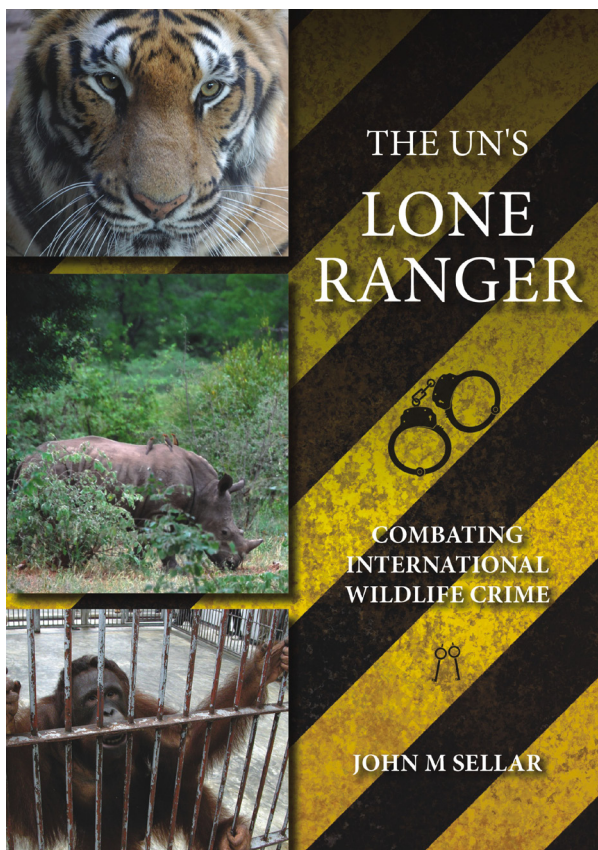
trafficking.

Much of the running, in terms of prosecutions, is made in the USA where there is current controversy over the National Strategy for Combating Wildlife Trafficking impacting on ivory in the art and antique worlds and concern that if the EU were to adopt similar measures it would drive the trade underground.

Antique pieces aside, the boom in demand coincides with the growth of Chinese market.

The title of the book alone suggests that tackling this crime is under-resourced and insufficiently understood. Sellar has a number of recommendations to that end. One of these would presumably be for the National Wildlife Crime Unit to be a part of National Crime Agency.

Stewart Rayment



The French Intifada: the long war between France and its Arabs. by Andrew Hussey Granta 2014 £25.00

This is an account of the colonial and post-colonial struggles that took and are still taking place in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco and the way these have spread to

France and Europe.

If you know nothing about the subject it is better than just a useful introduction and if you know a little then it will certainly paint a fuller picture - if you know more than that no doubt Hussey will be found wanting but never misleading.

He uses a clever device to pick out the detail in history by checking out the etymology of street slang such as banlieusards, coquillard, bougnoles, caseur, and bavure. This last one, meaning a police cock-up usually involving a death (think Blair Peach and de Menezes), derives from the Brigade des Aggressions et Violences, the French equivalent of the SPG.

Elsewhere the interludes of narratives within the outlines maintain the dynamic of this

rhinos will become extinct in the wild within the remainder of my lifetime. Loss of habitat is the main reason for this; man cannot abide sharing the planet with anything else. But in the case of these species vanity and greed are driving forces.

Sellar began his career fighting wildlife crime along the river Dee in Scotland, combating commercial salmon poachers. This gave him a specialist insight, which led to his becoming chief of enforcement to the UN body, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. Sellar now shares this insight with us, part real life adventure while also getting into the detail of the problem. It is international crime at a high level and is invariably related to crimes that conventionally have a higher profile - drug and people

tortuous (and indeed tortured) history of colonisation and how it has become a long war, going on long enough to make one wonder how it can end. Hussey certainly doesn't know.

I felt I was in the middle of a hard-boiled crime novel when the Toulouse motorcycle murders were being unravelled; ditto the account of the Medea monastery kidnapping, the subject of a calming and contemplative film, *Of Gods and Men*, and quite the opposite to Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers*" which also gets cited.

Directors, writers, musicians and even footballers are referenced throughout as a way of bringing the history down to earth - there is also a chapter on the expatriate gay artist community in Tangiers titled *Queer Tangier*.

The low cost of living for those with dollars (and pounds) made the International Zone a Mecca, dare one say, for what would nowadays be called predatory sexual tourism, but back then was just simple sexual liberation on the cheap in a tax and hang-up free zone.

Here the likes of Paul Bowles (who gets a slightly dismissive analysis, unfairly so to my mind as his political androgyny is little understood), and William Burroughs were able to function freely and this undoubtedly helped them creatively - both of these Americans produced their greatest writing in North Africa.

In fact, the scabrous, surreal violence of Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* coupled with Hussey's insistence on detailing the shocking and incredible savageries inflicted on the victims of Algeria's decade of civil terror in the 90s ("tongues stuffed in the corpse's mouth, disembowelled entrails draped over bushes") may well have prompted the metaphor I need to understand Hussey's engaging and very readable account.

It is as if we are left with an image of the history of the region as a cartoon string puzzle with the strands hopelessly twisted, and we have to work out which of the three blind mice will get the strings that lead to freedom, democracy and peace. The post-postmodern spaghetti tangle is too perfect for the puzzle to be resolved. History is, of course, a sequence of loose ends.

Jim Pennington

When Britain Burnt the White House: the 1814 invasion of Washington by Peter Snow John Murray 2013 £25.

This year is the bi-centenary of the British invasion of Washington, an event that most American's would rather forget, most people in Britain have long forgotten and only a handful of Canadians are likely to celebrate.

In 1812 the United States declared war on Britain and attempted unsuccessfully to invade Canada, but the conflict lingered on tying down troops and warships. Following the defeat and exile of Napoleon to Elba, Britain was able to send large number of warships and soldiers to America and mounted a counter invasion in the Chesapeake Bay area and then advanced on Washington.

Aided by an incompetent secretary of war, and an unwise appointment of a commander of the defending forces, British soldiers marched into Washington with fairly light casualties and the government fled. After finishing a meal left by the fleeing White House residents the senior British officers decided to burn all the public buildings but largely left private property alone, with more looting being carried out by Americans.

The invaders retreated but decided to invade the important port of Baltimore where they were repulsed by a better organised American force.

Ultimately the war was ended by peace negotiations pressed by the Duke of Wellington, but the news didn't reach America in time to prevent the Battle of New Orleans.

The war was effectively a draw; Britain entered the war with no territorial ambitions but had pressed for incorporating Maine into Canada in the negotiations and a mid western Indian state.

There was no change in territory of either Canada or the United States and the issue of the impressment of American seamen into the Royal Navy was dropped as the ending of hostilities with France meant there was no need to impress seamen anyway.

There were no winners, but there were losers. Britain's Indian allies interests were dropped during

the negotiations as they were in the negotiations that ended the revolutionary war.

Snow gives a good description of the campaign in Maryland but a limited outlined of the context. The causes are briefly outlined as are the immediate consequences, but there is little mention of the war prior to 1814 and the initial havoc caused by the infant United States Navy.

Andrew Hudson

The Outnumbered Poet by Dennis O'Driscoll Gallery Books (Ireland) 2013. €17.50.

Dennis O'Driscoll died on 24 December 2012, not quite 58. Who would have thought that the echoes of mortality, so frequent in his poetry, would be his own?

We don't read enough poetry these days, and O'Driscoll may be better remembered in the UK as a critic, particularly for his definitive biography of Seamus Heaney. *The Outnumbered Poet* is primarily criticism, the last section of the book being devoted to Heaney. The first part of the book is autobiographical; I'd commend *Making Amends* to anybody who hasn't destroyed their adolescent ramblings.

Stewart Rayment

Triangle Ted Books by Alan Barr with Peter Oram & Dave Parkin Starborn Books, 2014 £3.99 (each)

We have to thank Jenny Tonge for introducing us to these charming little books. They are aimed at six to nine year olds, introducing them to various geometrical shapes whilst keeping them entertained in travel. The characters invariably undergo some hardship before it all works out in the end, in rhyming couplets redolent of Rupert the Bear.

The first five titles are *Triangle Ted* and the *Grand TV Dance Competition*, who has trouble dancing cheek-to-cheek, *Jessica Vesica* in the *Land of Wedge Women*, captured by pirates and enslaved, the good *Patriarch Parallelogram* secures her release,

but what becomes of the statue left behind in her honour?

Penny Pentagon and the Hat Hunt, where does she get one? Rectangle Rex and his Pompous Pride, which invariably comes before a fall, and Lucy Lune and the Baby – a plea for multi-shapism. Are these the new Mr. Men & Little Miss?

More details at www.starbornbooks.co.uk

Stewart Rayment

Angela Merkel – The Chancellor and her world by Stephan Kornelius Alma Books £9.99

Enoch Powell famously observed that all political lives, unless cut off in midstream, end in failure. This might account for why so many political figures permit authorised biographies to be published while they are still at the peak of their influence.

Angela Merkel is no exception. This biography, originally published in Germany in 2013 and with a new chapter “The British Problem” appears as the German Chancellor is at the peak of her power and influence – with Obama the co-leader of the western world and the perceived saviour of the European project.

Written by a German journalist, this readable but slightly lightweight book gives a good insight into Merkel’s background: how her East German upbringing influences her every move and belief; the priority she places on freedom and her determination to succeed in creating a more unified Europe. A towering political figure, she is also something of a loner – passionate about her privacy and loth to display emotion – and similar to our monarch (“Every fibre of her being makes it clear that she sees her role as one of service, duty, structure”).

Inevitably, foreign affairs figures prominently in the book, showing how she tries to address the dilemma identified by Bismarck in the second half of the 19th century – paraphrased as “Germany is too strong to be absorbed into the structures of Europe, and too weak to impose what it believes are the right policies on other nations.” The book is good on her relations with

the USA and China, less so in the recently added chapter on Britain.

She got on well with Blair, is a very similar character to Brown but is clearly frustrated by Cameron, both with the Tory withdrawal from the European People’s Party and his constant pandering to the right, and her running out of patience with Britain is similar to the sense of frustration she shows over her dealings with Israel, a nation to whom she is emotionally totally committed.

Merkel is a classic exponent of the German longing for consensus. She will not engage in an argument she cannot win and has no desire for German domination of Europe – too many Germans have aspired for that in the past – but she wishes to see a more united Europe as her political epitaph.

Still at the peak of her power, Kornelius says in due course the zeitgeist will change and voters will tire of her style. Powell’s prediction may be right in her case, and a biography written in, say, 20 years’ time may come to portray her career in a very different light.

Nick Winch

Contesting Democracy, political ideas in Twentieth-century Europe by Jan-Werner Müller Yale 2013

We live in a ‘liberal’ age, or so popular belief would have us believe. As Liberals, we are not quite so sure of this and Müller’s thesis provides something of a corrective – perhaps we should describe the post-war consensus as a ‘liberal-conservative’ age? Christian Democracy has been the dominant ideology of post-war Europe, and has turned out to be broadly conservative, whatever its earlier aspirations, which is hardly surprising given its roots in Roman Catholicism. It might be argued that social democracy has prevailed in Britain and Scandinavia in, at least, the immediate post-war period, but with its Fabian base here, this is no less conservative.

Broadly speaking, the short Twentieth century can be divided into three ideologically; the class struggle culminating in World War Two, the subsequent discrediting of the worse elements

of conservatism and the ‘social or Christian democratic moment’ in the west paralleled by Communism in the east, and the fight back of conservatism, sometimes styled neo-liberalism.

Underlying these was progressive bureaucratisation, technocracy, call it what you like; reaching a zenith with the Commission having supremacy in the European Union over any democratic institution. The Twentieth century was not a Liberal age. This is despite the advances of our ideology and their contributions to social democratic and conservative thought, in terms of zeitgeist we have been on the margins.

One of our great thinkers, Hobhouse, not even mentioned in the book, described Stalingrad as a battle between left and right Hegelianism – poor Hegel, he wouldn’t have had much time for either of them.

Beveridge and Keynes were critical to the post-war consensus in the UK, but the programmes that they are associated with were carried out were in other hands. Beveridge recognised that a Labour government with its statist preconceptions would be the worst interpreter of his blueprint for the welfare state, bringing all of Weber’s greatest fears home to roost.

Crucial to this was how the NHS should be funded – Beveridge’s proposals weren’t acceptable to Labour and we are still picking up the pieces. Keynes, of course, died at the critical moment; what would Keynes make of the Keynesians? Any analysis of his mind shows far greater flexibility, willingness to change and adapt – Hayek recognised this in him and it is an open question as to how Keynes’ own thought would have developed. Economics writing, even more so than political, is of its day, if not its hour.

Outlining the problems for Liberalism at the outset of the century, Müller notes that Liberals were not prepared to move fast enough in meeting the demands of mass democracy – Gladstone’s cabinets, you will recall, were primarily aristocratic. Working class Liberalism was never nurtured as it could have been. In much of Europe the divisions between economic and social Liberals continue to be masked in a

multiplicity of parties.

There are questions of Liberalism. An accusation of the Trotskyite left is that in order to defend capitalism, Liberalism resorted to Fascism in the 1930s, and would so again if it had to.

How do they arrive at this? Certainly Giovanni Gentile began his career as a liberal before following Mussolini, and German Liberals in the Reichstag voted Hitler his powers in the misguided hope that they would be able to control him. This says nothing of Liberalism as a philosophy, but Müller opens his 2003 book on the ultra-conservative Carl Schmitt by quoting José Ortega Gasset, who in 1930 said 'Liberalism announces the determination to share existence with the enemy'; there is an innate tendency amongst Liberals to try to make things work – hence easily lending themselves to coalitions.

Liberalism is not homogenous over time and space, the circumstances of German Liberalism – Germany a diffuse collection of small states a bare 150 years ago led many of its protagonists to a strong state, whereas a more decentralist tradition prevails in Britain.

The argument that Liberalism per se does not lead to Fascism needs rigorous examination, especially if one takes our present stance as advocates of the European Union and globalisation. Schmitt would argue that the "liberalism [of the prevailing spirit] is alternatively helpless or hypocritical" – I hope I'm not reading too much into Müller there. Simplistically, we may think we're Jedi knights, but are we actually the Empire?

As I wrote above, economics writing, even more so than political, is of its day, if not its hour. Hayek's Road to Serfdom was written at the height of a war economy – something Asquith could not mobilise in the First World War, but Lloyd George, Churchill and Roosevelt could, if exceptionally.

To some extent Hayek took us no further than say, the Classical Liberalism of Herbert Spencer's The Man versus The State, or Hilaire Belloc's The Servile State, except in that Hayek's

observations would have nearly a century's empiricism on Spencer. Marginalised, Hayek was almost a forgotten figure in Britain until he gave a theoretical underpinning to Thatcherism.

Losing the battle in Grimond's Liberal party, Arthur Seldon would go on, with Ralph Harris and Anthony Fisher, to form the Institute of Economic Affairs, which promulgated this influence.

So far as the UK is concerned, certain Orange Book arrivistes aside, Hayek's ideas have been reinterpreted through a Conservative ideology; the then old man seemed flattered. However



with the fall of the Iron Curtain, he has been widely embraced by governments in east Europe. However there is a concern that this Liberalism has been reduced in this to a narrow economic doctrine, and one that ignores its roots in Smith, Ricardo and the Mills at that.

So much for Liberalism, but what of other ideologies? Communism and Fascism, and also Socialism as we once knew it, are dead. The Labour party is no longer the tribune of the working classes, indeed is essentially a machine for electing career politicians. Conservatism will always adapt – Michael Oakeshott giving it the necessary revitalising shot rather

than Hayek. The 'end of ideology' which characterised the Christian/Social democratic ascendancy and the 'end of history' with the fall of the Iron Curtain seem to say it all of the greyness of contemporary political thought.

The 1968 generation achieved little and theorised less according to Müller, though they might be credited with symbolizing the end of the Victorian era. For us, they are the generation of community politics. The Situationists had some interesting things to say, but I feel lucky to have graduated before the (mainly French) thinkers of the last 40 years hit the curriculum.

Nothing Müller writes makes more any more inclined to struggle further with them, but thus it's a useful summary. This is a good read and you'll certainly have a better understanding of the European dimension as a result of it.

Stewart Rayment

Goth Girl and the Ghost of a Mouse by Chris Riddell Macmillan, 2013 £9.99

Just when we were wondering when another Ottoline book would crop up we are greeted by an ancestor.

Ada Goth is the only child of Lord Goth, who bears some resemblance to Lord Byron, the first person to call himself a Liberal in the Palace of Westminster.

There is a mystery to be solved, but even allowing for a childrens' book relying heavily on illustration, characters are often underdeveloped – one might specifically cite the ghost of the mouse in the main story (his memoirs not withstanding). It's an attractive book, holds a ten year old, but could do better.

A generosity of spirit is the hallmark of Lord Goth's character, so the villains live to fight another volume.

Stewart Rayment

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The Liberator Collective

Saturday

I write these lines on the roof of St Asquith's, where I have set up my command post. As you have no doubt read, in recent days Rutland has suffered a succession of earthquakes and someone had to restore calm and public order. People have taken to referring to me as "Gold Leader," which has a certain ring to it, don't you think? The Revd Hughes has reacted badly to the quakes: he now reads the Book of Revelation obsessively and has made more than one unkind remark about my old friend Ruttie, the Rutland Water Monster – or "The Beast", as he has taken to calling her.

Sunday

Do you know Freddie and Fiona? They are two bright young special advisers who work for the party at Westminster. I first met them at the Eastleigh by-election, when we were canvassing together. Having naturally taken possession of our canvass card, I said to them: "You two go to number 27. Mr and Mrs Snowjuice. You should do well: they've been voting Liberal Democrat for years." "Oh no," they replied, "they don't sound the sort of people Mr Clegg is trying to appeal to at all."

Monday

Back to the roof of St Asquith's. As we look out across the great expanse of the Water, my companion asks if I think we might have a tsunami. "Good grief, woman!" I reply. "This is no time to worry about Japanese food. There could be a tidal wave at any moment!"

Tuesday

Who should telephone but Freddie and Fiona? "We've been told to organise a press event in a pub this morning so that Mr Clegg and Vince Cable can have a drink together and show they are really best friends despite what everyone says," they explain. "But the trouble is, we don't know how to do it." "Why ever not?" I ask. "Because we are too young to go into pubs."

Cometh the hour and all that, so I step in and organise things for them. "There's a pint of Smithson & Greaves Northern Bitter each for Clegg and Cable," I tell them when they arrive at the Bonkers' Arms, "and that dreadful, gassy Dahrendorf lager for the journalists." "Oh no," they say quickly, "we can't have journalists at a press event. What happens if they write something nasty about Mr Clegg?"

I talk some sense into them, thought I must admit the press pack does get rather frisky when the lager starts to flow. I show Clegg a loose window in the Gents that he can climb through, before leading Vince Cable along the secret passage that leads from the cellar of the pub to the Hall, where we enjoy a hearty luncheon.

Wednesday

Time to get the old ermine out of mothballs and travel up to Town for the State Opening of Parliament. When Her Majesty is halfway through the Gracious Speech, one of her pages keels over in a faint. Really! That's not the spirit that won the Brecon Radnor by-election, is it? While the wretched child is carted away,

Lord Bonkers' Diary

I ponder whether it might not be possible to have the job given to the Well-Behaved Orphans next year – being hardy types, they are not given to swooning when the going gets tough. More important, I could tip one of them to slip a page of my own composition into the speech while the Queen is busy adjusting her crown.

Thursday

From time to time, I invite one of our Liberal Democrat ministers down to the Hall to hear how

they are getting on and give them the benefit of my experience. My latest guest is Professor Steve Webb, whom all agree is Terribly Clever. He tells me all about his plans to reform the pension system so that a chap can get his hands on his nest egg and use it as he sees fit rather than be forced to buy an annuity from the insurance companies. "Of course," he goes on, "the important thing is how long someone is going to live after retirement, but these days they can work that out. Here, I'll do it for you." He begins to pound the keys of his pocket calculator, but grows steadily more puzzled as he does so. I even hear him mumble, with that pleasant Birmingham lilt of his, something to the effect that I "should have died years ago". "What you are failing to take into account, Professor," I tell him, "is the Spring of Eternal Life that bursts from the hillside above what used to be the headquarters of the Association of Liberal Councillors in Hebden Bridge. I make an annual pilgrimage to bathe in it – I've checked the small print on all of my insurance policies and nowhere is it mentioned." All in all, a pleasant afternoon and I end it by giving Webb a lift back to the station in my Lamborghini.

Friday

A bright morning on my gunnery range, which occupies a remote corner of the Estate frequented only by sheep and rambblers. My companion is my old friend and fellow peer Matthew "Knuckles" Oakeshott, who rang earlier in the week asking for personal tuition in the deployment of the Bonkers Patent Exploding Focus (for use in marginal wards). I give him my usual lecture: "The key thing after you have pulled out the pin is to get it through the letterbox, leg it down the garden path and dive behind the hedge before it goes off." I then invite him to try it out for himself on a mock-up of a front door that I have had erected for just such occasions. He pulls out the pin with gusto, but then spends an age fiddling with the letterbox, with the result that the Focus goes off while he is still holding it. Fortunately, he is unharmed (though rather black in the face). "I am afraid, Knuckles, that This Sort of Thing may not be for you," I tell him gently. "And I'd stay away from UKIP activists until I have had a good wash."

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