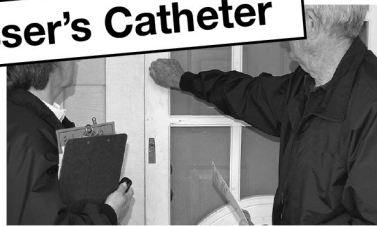


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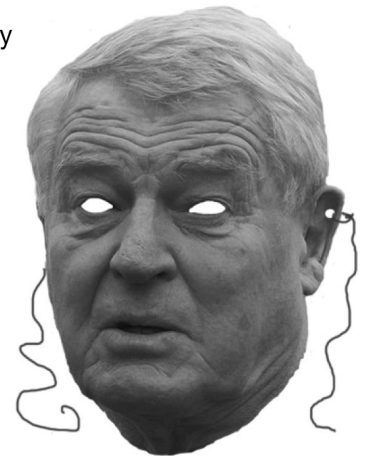
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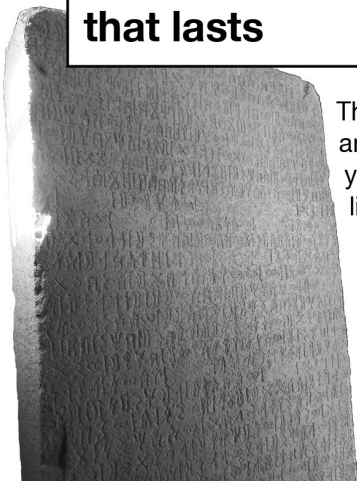
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COMMENTARY

LESS OF THE SAME

It's appropriate as the general election approaches that Jeremy Thorpe's recent death has brought back into view the experience of the Liberal party in 1974, for something similar is surely going on with the recent surges in support for the Greens and Ukip.

In February 1974 the Liberal Party garnered 6,059,519 votes but only 14 seats. The alliance with the SDP suffered a similar fate, with support a mile wide but an inch deep, nine years later, winning 7,780,949 votes and only 23 seats.

Liberals learnt the lessons of targeting from this. There is little sign the Greens and Ukip have, and even if they did there is too little time until the general election to put this into practical effect.

Thus, May's general election may have large numbers of votes siphoned off to two parties who will have done amazingly well if they win 10 seats between them.

It's possible that the Greens' damage to Labour and the Lib Dems will cancel out Ukip's damage to the Tories.

More profitable than trying to guess their impact on parliamentary arithmetic after May is to look at why such parties have surged.

It's obvious why the Liberal party and later the Lib Dems did so – they were the only place where a 'neither of the above' vote could go. It took decades to turn the random accumulation of protest votes into something like regular support and even then, as Liberator has repeatedly said, the Lib Dems never created a solid core vote.

At each election the Lib Dems have been obliged to fill a bath with votes while the plug is open. This time the flow will be weaker and the plughole larger.

The Greens and Ukip will, like the Liberals 40 years ago, be attracting votes for all manner of unknowable and even contradictory reasons quite unrelated to their policies.

They start though with the advantage of clearer definition than the Lib Dems have had – respectively of liking the environment and hating Europe and immigrants – but they will now attract greater scrutiny and people may be both repelled as well as attracted by what they see.

As with past 'Liberal revivals', the Greens and Ukip, and for rather different reasons the SNP, are prospering because people who want to give the Coalition a kicking can't see Labour as an effective vehicle for this since it appears to be an integral part of a despised political class.

The Lib Dems by definition cannot attract a protest vote having been part of a government, and are about to find the costs of not having a core vote while having alienated those groups (students, young professionals, the rural poor) who comprised such as there was of it.

Lib Dems and Conservatives are compromised by having been in government and Labour by having recently been there, while the bitter after taste of the MPs' expenses scandal has left the whole of mainstream politics at the mercy of public resentment.

May should still be Labour's election to lose, and it is doing a remarkable job of seeking to do so.

It has held a small but constant poll lead and the boundaries are still in its favour.

But Labour seems utterly incapable of articulating any alternative to the Tories, even on things where this ought to be blindingly obvious like the cost of living and the Coalition's gratuitous and damaging meddling with the NHS.

It is clear what the Tories would be like were they to win – a party now dominated by the fruitcakes, racists and loonies who David Cameron once supposed to reside only in Ukip.

A party that would ruin the economy by leaving the EU, destroy employment rights and leave anyone dependent on welfare to starve. This would make clear what the Lib Dems have stopped them doing in the last five years, but it would be intolerable.

The Lib Dems though are about to repeat the errors that have prevented them building a core vote, by continuing to be unclear where they stand.

The slogan 'cutting less than the Tories, borrowing less than Labour', might as well say: "We're the same as the others, only less."

It allows other parties to define the Lib Dem position; it gives the party no narrative in the way that everyone has a shorthand understanding of where other parties stand.

When Paddy Ashdown was leader he used to stress (almost to the point of self-parody) that the party must be 'distinctive'; it is now distinctive only in being indistinct.

There are those who have always genuinely believed in the 'we're in the middle' approach, and others who think it the best that can be salvaged from the Coalition.

May will show how well this has worked, but here is one prediction. Being in the middle will do absolutely nothing to rebuild the party in the swathes of the country where it has crumbled away, or win back significant numbers of disaffected ex-members. Both will be vital for the Lib Dems' long-term health.

RADICAL BULLETIN

TRIPLE-LOCK, OR JUST A LATCH?

Quite a lot of Liberal Democrats believe that the 'triple-lock' is still in force to give the party a voice in any decision on coalition or support for a minority government - including, bizarrely, the Federal Conference Committee.

The triple-lock was agreed in 1998 when the leadership's public position that there was no prospect of a deal with the Labour Government has since been comprehensively disproved with the publication of the Ashdown diaries.

It was applied in 2010 with a special conference to approve the deal, even though it wasn't strictly needed. After that, the Federal Appeals Panel ruled that the triple-lock was unconstitutional and must be replaced - which led to the new Article 15 of the Constitution - even though it wasted 19 months before bothering to publish its decision (*Liberator* 346). So, what's the position next time?

The decision on entering a coalition or not rests entirely with MPs. They have to consult the FE, the FPC and the Lords. If MPs decide to support a government, there has to be a special conference at which they will 'seek the approval' of the party for the proposed arrangement and which requires a two-thirds majority to be passed. The FE, FPC and Lords have to express their collective 'final view' to the conference.

So far, there appears to have been little thought given to some of the problems.

Exactly what is covered by the expression "the formation of a government supported by the party" - does it include, for instance, agreement to abstain in first vote on the government?

What happens if a majority of conference, but not a two-thirds one, votes to support a parliamentary arrangement - should the MPs go with the majority or disappoint them?

Either way, the scene is set for mass anger, resignations and bitter division. Even worse, what happens if the MPs don't go with the majority?

How is the notoriously inept Federal Executive (*Liberator* 369) to come up with a 'final opinion' on behalf of the party if it isn't interested in setting up any system to consult members, directly or through states and regions? It could be one of the most important decisions the FE ever makes on behalf of the party, but there's no sign that they are even thinking about it.

UNDER THE BED

While the Liberal Democrats remain significantly short of money compared with most of their opponents, some parts of the party are doing quite well.

A report to the English council from outgoing vice-chair Mike Wheatley said that a survey of some

270 local parties showed they collectively had cash balances of more than £2.5m.

Much was in held seats, or targeted ones, which would no doubt be thought perfectly reasonable.

But according to Wheatley: "There are also a substantial number of relatively inactive parties with high and rising cash balances. Given that there are still over 100 parties for which we do not have data, I suspect that the true figure for local parties in England alone is well in excess of £3m.

"A significant proportion of the cash held by local parties is inactive, and surely some of that could support the national campaign, the campaigns of nearby held and strategic seats neighbouring, weak parties with the cost of freeposts and deposits."

Local parties tend though to get defensive when their jumble sale proceeds are threatened.

BEES IN THE SUDS

Brian Orrell has made the last of his strikingly idiosyncratic reports to the English Council as their representative on the Federal Executive, and his views on the latter body prove deeply unflattering.

He wrote: "For me, the FE is like a washing machine with the same old washing going round and round with different detergents being applied at different times by different people but with the old stains stubbornly refusing to go away.

"At its best, the FE can attract people with very high integrity who want to improve the governance and strategic coherence of the party. But it also attracts people who in the popular parlance 'are in it for themselves'. People who just want to put a question to the leader or president and then go home. It also attracts people with a hornet's nest of bees in their bonnet who always raise the same point year in and year out ad nauseam. It attracts too many people who love the sound of their own voice and feel that they are so important because they are on the FE and must be heard."

Whoever can he mean?

THROUGH THE SIDE DOOR

Nick Clegg has taken to campaigning around the country on Wednesdays, in part to avoid appearing as a nodding donkey beside David Cameron at prime minister's questions.

This habit threatened to produce an embarrassing problem when Jeremy Thorpe's funeral was scheduled for a Wednesday in Westminster Abbey

If he missed the funeral, to which all the party's living ex-leaders would go, it would appear that he had snubbed it for fear of association with memories concerning dogs and hitmen.

But if he were at the funeral, questions would be

asked about why he missed the whole of PMQs when the two overlapped by only a few minutes.

The abbey refused to move the 12.30pm start time so Clegg, who had shifted his campaigning visit to London for that day, was able to enter by the side door just as the choir struck up.

DELUSION OF GRANDEUR

“Every major statesman needs the wilderness years. Nelson Mandela had them and I suppose that’s my lot, too, so I’m ruling nothing out at this stage.”

Who might have made such a presumptuous remark to Wales Online? Step forward, Lembit Opik.

This buffoonish interview concerned his decision to help former glamour model Jodie Marsh to enter politics - on her own and not, it seems, as a Lib Dem.

Opik told the interviewer he was still a Lib Dem member but was “very concerned” about the party’s prospects in this year’s general election.

They will surely be all the better for not having him involved.

WELCOME MAT

Helena Morrissey, the external consultant appointed to review the party’s processes after the furore over allegations concerning Lord Rennard in 2013 has made her progress report, in which she strives to bring the whole thing to an end.

Morrissey states that since “every investigation has concluded with no further action to be taken against Lord Rennard... the party can only move on if that outcome is accepted”.

She added: “At this stage, given that the party applied its own processes, there is no justification for it remaining ambivalent towards Lord Rennard – he should be just as welcome a participant or guest at party events as any other.”

There followed a rather optimistic call for those aggrieved over the issue to forgive since “forgiving is a very strong and empowering thing to do”.

Morrissey went on to note: “The women involved can also take comfort from the fact that their actions shone a spotlight on the need for high behavioural standards throughout the party and more effective processes for dealing with problems when they do occur.”

IF YOU CAN’T SAY SOMETHING NICE...

The nature, number and brainless content of mass e-mailings to Lib Dem members from party HQ has been a perennial source of discontent.

Mid-January saw an e-mail about general election printing arrangements sent to all members when clearly intended only for agents.

Then came one in the name of party president Sal Brinton (whether or not she had seen it is a matter for conjecture). It began with the mysterious words: “You were meant to be getting a slightly different email today.”

This proved to be because HQ had intended to boast of membership having risen to 44,680 members at the end of 2014, commendable in itself though far adrift of the 65,000-odd there were before the Coalition. Brinton (or whoever actually wrote it) though broke one of the rules of good communication by then going

straight into bad news pointing out that Green party now claimed to have even more members.

“We know only too well that one good week in the media can bring a lot of people to the cause who don’t hang around when things get tough,” Brinton noted. Presumably like the 20,000 Lib Dems gone missing.

What on earth was the point of sending out this message? Making every Lib Dem member aware that the party have been overtaken by the Greens in membership numbers is surely not the best way of starting a general election campaign.

ENGLAND DOESN’T EXPECT

What is the Liberal Democrats’ answer to government in England following the Scottish referendum?

The naïve might expect a campaigning party to be building up support for new structures to take power away from Whitehall and Westminster and that the Lib Dem English party might be the first part of the party to see the need.

But the English party is possibly the worst imaginable advertisement for devolution in England.

It has been firm and decisive. English campaigning was nothing to do with the English party but was up to the federal party, it concluded.

The Federal Executive decided the matter was so urgent it would put it on the agenda in a few months’ time.

LAUNCH THE PARACHUTES

As predicted, the English party has had to accept that it must parachute candidates into hopeless seats, rather than waiting to go through bureaucratic processes that threatened to last beyond May’s general election.

With the party still short of hundreds of candidates, the bureaucrats finally pulled their fingers out.

A report on candidates to the English Council from candidates committee chair Richard Brett in November stated: “There are 533 seats in England and we have completed 214 [selections].

“A further 140 are in the process of selection where the advert has been prepared and gone up on the secure website. We expect to parachute candidates into between 120 and 200 seats. This process will not formally start until mid February 2015.”

It has, fortunately, started a bit early but not as early as it should have.

LET THEM EAT CAKE

It is a continuing mystery why Ramesh Dewan is not a peer, given his generosity and long service on party committees.

Lib Dem peers in January received boxes of cakes from him, to add to the nuts, Indian sweets and other comestibles sent over the years.

The whips’ office sent round a message saying that lords could choose to pass the cakes to a food bank.

At least one peer used to pass his gifts from Dewan to the late Parliament Square protester Brian Haw.

There will soon be a dissolution honours list, but it’s the party leader who is all-powerful in these matters.

SUSTAINED BY USEFUL IDIOTS

Failures to communicate the nature and limits of coalition government left the Liberal Democrats looking like ‘useful idiots’ who supported illiberal Tories. If there is a next time this has to be explained better, says Alex Marsh

As we approach the last few weeks of this Parliament it is inevitable that our thoughts turn to evaluating the Coalition Government as a whole, the role of the Liberal Democrats within it, and the implications for the party of participating in a Westminster government for the first time in many decades. But this is by no means a trivial task. Not least because the answers depend on the angle from which the issue is viewed.

If we focus on the politics of the Coalition then one common criticism has undoubtedly been put to bed - coalition governments are not by definition weak because at their heart sits horse-trading and compromise.

This government has pursued a radical agenda renegotiating the role of the state. It has set in train structural changes in a whole range of policy areas that have yet to fully work themselves through the system. This was possible in large part because for much of the Parliament the Liberal Democrats were willing to put aside dissent, in public at least, and support a wide range of Conservative projects.

Only in the last year of the Parliament has the party made any real effort to differentiate from the Conservatives.

This two stage strategy of hugging the Conservatives close then differentiating was, we must presume, designed to demonstrate the broad principle that coalition can deliver stable government with a clear agenda.

I have never been persuaded that it is a wise strategy in the longer term. It carries obvious risks. Supporting policies you clearly don't like comes with coalition territory. Explaining that you are doing so under sufferance would at least make it clear what was happening. But supporting policies you may disagree with in private while showing a unified front with the Conservatives and doing so with seeming enthusiasm has caused serious damage to the party.

YELLOW TORIES

We live in a country, and face a media, that seemingly struggles with the concept of coalition: collective responsibility was construed as collaboration or, worse, ideological alignment – the party were ‘yellow Tories’ all along.

And once the party moved to differentiate it opened itself up to accusations of hypocrisy: it suddenly starts disagreeing with policies that it only a few weeks previously it had enthusiastically voted in to law. Sceptical voters might reasonably ask: does that mean

you weren't telling us the truth back then?

If you wanted to create the lingering impression that you're a bunch of untrustworthy chancers that's probably quite a good way of going about it.

If we think about the processes of Coalition government one of the things the Liberal Democrats got right, given the objective was stable government, was convening a special conference to make sure that there was broad backing for going in to coalition. It has made party management easier for the Liberal Democrats than the Conservatives. And it appears the other parties are quite keen on trying to adopt some sort of similar approach, if there is another coalition after May, even if they don't have such obvious constitutional mechanisms available.

On the other hand, I have long been puzzled by the Liberal Democrats' early approach to coalition. For a party that has long appreciated coalition and whose only real chance of participating in government in Westminster was in coalition there seemed to have been limited thought about how the party could work at the pace of government.

Policy making through biannual federal conferences was obviously not going to be sufficiently nimble. And it was inevitable that the party was going to have to respond in government to emerging issues about which it had no settled policy. But it seemingly took a while to work this out and to put in place more responsive mechanisms that meant Liberal Democrat input into coalition policy did not simply rely on whatever views Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander happen to contribute to the Quad or whatever ministers and their Spads cooked up on the move.

I think there are still unresolved issues about how party policy relates to coalition policy. Greater thought needs to be given to how the party at large can be helped to understand what is going on when the parliamentary party not only doesn't follow party policy but actively votes against it.

That has happened several during this Parliament, including on matters outside the coalition agreement and hence for which there was no obvious obligation to vote with the Conservatives. There may well be reasons. It may well be tied up with strategy and the long game; with tactics and the realpolitik of coalition. But there needs to be a better way of communicating this. Otherwise, federal conference becomes something of a charade.

Indeed, you already pick up that feeling from some conference reps. Yes, we're the only party where policy

is developed and voted on by the members. But when push comes to shove that policy will be set aside by the leadership if it suits the purpose – even if that purpose is rather mysterious.

Finally we can think about the programmes pursued by the Coalition government. Clearly the whole of the Government's agenda has been framed in relation to the deficit and austerity policy. We could debate at length whether austerity policy was the right economic response in 2010. My sense is that among economists the balance of opinion lies against the government, and even some of those who supported austerity in 2010 have tempered their enthusiasm subsequently.

In one sense this is a bit of a moot point because the Government largely abandoned its Plan A after a couple of years, then rather implausibly argued it has been steadfast in its approach. In practice it has delivered a level of deficit reduction pretty close to that which Labour were proposing back in 2010.

Of course, in 2010 the Coalition argued that Labour's deficit reduction plans would have led to the sky falling in. Strangely enough the sky hasn't fallen in. But then the chancellor's argument in 2010 was characteristically nonsensical.

Coalition politicians have spent five years telling us about the "difficult decisions" they have had to make in trying to cut the deficit. If we rewind to 2010 we should recall the claim that "fairness is at the heart of those decisions" and "those most in need are most protected".

It depends on who one thinks are those most in need, but across a broad range of policy areas the cuts have hit those on the lowest incomes hardest. As recent reports published by the London School of Economics make clear, while there are some bright spots, many of the social policy changes implemented by the coalition have been regressive or affected the most vulnerable most directly. Britain's already meagre welfare safety net has been eroded further. For example, we spend a lot of money on social security not because our benefit system is particularly generous to the individual but because a lot of people are poor. Coalition policies such as restricting levels of benefit uprating mean that levels of absolute poverty worsen.

As more evidence is gathered it becomes clearer that criticisms of policies such as welfare reform are well-founded. The argument that fairness is at the heart of policy becomes harder to sustain, if not entirely implausible. The policy changes don't save anywhere near as much money as claimed; indeed they may save no money overall. But they have made the lives of many vulnerable people immeasurably worse in the process.

I think of those inspiring words in the preamble "We champion the freedom, dignity and well-being of individuals" and I think of changes to disability benefits, work capability assessments or the draconian sanctioning regime that the Coalition has overseen and I know – I just know – that had the Liberal Democrats been in opposition they would have, rightly, condemned those policies in the strongest possible terms.

ENSLAVED BY POVERTY

If we're serious about the statement "No one shall

be enslaved by poverty" we should have some harsh things to say about the direction of current welfare policy. The same would apply to the Coalition's reforms to legal aid or judicial review, which save little money but undermine key liberal principles relating to access to justice and the rule of law. I am genuinely bemused by the Party's support for them.

Liberal Democrats are inclined to claim some key policy victories such as the rise in the personal tax allowance and the triple lock on pensions. I find it difficult to get quite so enthusiastic about them, if I'm honest. Not that they are bad policies in themselves, but when we talk of policy success they tend to be viewed rather partially.

Pensioner poverty was undoubtedly a problem that needed addressing. But the triple lock in the context of a relatively fixed, or declining, overall envelope on spending means a larger and larger proportion of resources going to the retired while those of working age see their incomes fall further behind. At some point it would be wise to say that pensioners are doing OK, relatively speaking, they aren't the ones most in need of a further increase in their income.

The Liberal Democrats can rightly identify a range of Coalition policies – such as the establishment of the Green Investment Bank – that have the Liberal Democrat stamp all over them. Indeed, it is possible to produce a long list of government actions that chime with Liberal Democrat priorities and policies. But most headline policies upon which the government will be judged – on the economy, NHS reorganisation, welfare reform, immigration, security – carry the Conservative hallmark.

That is perhaps inevitable. But in many cases those policies not only grate on liberal sensibilities but are badly thought through and/ or poorly implemented. The challenge is how to tell the story of coalition in ways that get beyond the accusation that the Liberal Democrats have been useful idiots propping up a radically illiberal Conservative government and highlight its positive, liberal achievements.

In the public mind these are never going to outweigh the broader thrust of policy originating with the dominant partner. But that takes us back to the point that we need to be better at communicating the nature and limitations of coalition.

In the absence of that understanding of the dynamics of coalition politics being firmly embedded among the electorate it is hard to see beyond the party getting further punished at the ballot box in May. But if the next Parliament also produces a coalition government, of whatever flavour, then at least the novelty of the arrangement will wear off.

Given that it appears the era of two party politics is well behind us, we might expect to see a growing appreciation of coalition politics emerge. Whether, and how, the Liberal Democrats might benefit from that process of enlightenment remains to be seen.

Alex Marsh is a member of the Liberal Democrats and Professor of Public Policy at the School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol. He blogs at www.alexarchives.org

Parties that aren't clear what they stand for don't impress voters, but even those that do will be tripped up by events in government, says Gordon Lishman

Politicians and commentators tend to assume that yesterday is the best model for understanding tomorrow. There are a lot of easy certainties about.

For instance, because coalition was the outcome of the last election result, the assumption is that a result with no overall majority will again lead to coalition.

Another assumption that should elicit a hollow laugh from Liberal Democrats is that there will be a close correlation between votes and seats so that the Ukip national vote will be a reliable guide to the number of seats. An even less convincing assumption is that Ukip would be capable of fielding ministers in a coalition government. More broadly, there are assumptions that governing parties' policies are coherent, up-to-date and that they are only being held back by a dastardly conspiracy of officials and other parties.

To start: the most likely outcome of the next election, looking at current predictions and the underlying politics, is a minority government, probably led by Conservatives.

Another unconvincing assumption is that this government is best understood as a coalition of two parties - what have the Lib Dems cajoled the Conservatives to accept, what have they been forced to concede in return?

Another perspective is that all successful policies came from my party; all the failures from yours. It is true that many of the details of government have been affected by negotiation and discussion between the coalition partners. On the other hand, it is overwhelmingly the case that, as in most recent governments and certainly since 1990, the government's agenda has just that: the same agenda and the same policy choices, regardless of who happened to be in power.

Choices by ministers on particular policies do make a difference. They can add up to a government, which is more or less progressive. But they don't define an era or change the underlying politics in the way that governments did in 1906, 1945 or 1979. They don't lead people to think that a party of government stands for something distinctive or important.

Tony Blair argued: "The challenge for government is delivery; the problems are the same and the answers are the same choices." I suspect that David Cameron would agree. It's the sort of pragmatic approach that works for an established leader of an established party in an established two party system.

This emphasis on specific policies leads to the belief that they are what matter in terms of winning elections. If only, they think, we can add together the good things that we've done or want to do in each department of state, the electorate will deduce what

we really stand for and, what's more, they'll like it and vote for it.

VENAL APPROACH

It's a rather more venal approach (because there is some bribery involved) than the traditional Liberal Party way of thinking: "If only we can get the manifesto right, the electorate will see how wonderful we are and all will be well." As the SNP and Ukip are demonstrating rather effectively (and Labour is trying to demonstrate, but failing), it's not detailed policies that make the difference; it's a feel for a few big issues.

Parties of government, their leaders, ministers and strategists become oppressed by the parliamentary timetable and possibilities. The compromises that are needed to construct a parliamentary majority, deliver a policy or please an interest group become ends in themselves and can obscure any sense of a longer-term direction.

Of course compromises are needed in the short-term; my argument is that people in government tend to get the balance wrong as a result of their focus on the short-term and that imbalance undermines campaigners and leaves ordinary people with no clear idea about the direction or purpose of a party: what do you really 'stand for'?

As an example, take 'devolution on demand'. All the emphasis is on the compromises that are needed to construct a parliamentary majority for any sort of devolution in England. There is no move - and as far as I can see no interest - in building the demand side of that equation. The party's position is all about the details of policy and not annoying our potential partners in eventual legislation. In politics, the whole point about compromise is that it's where you finish the negotiation; and it's never where you start it.

And then there's the Civil Service - assumed by Conservatives to be staffed by unregenerate lefties and by the Labour faithful to be run by right-wing mandarins. In my experience it generally contains intelligent, hard-working people who want to get it right (the same is true, against popular feeling, of the vast majority of politicians of the mainstream parties).

The biggest reason why a governing party's policies (or prejudices in the case of the Conservatives) are not simply enacted into law is not a malign conspiracy by officials.

It is much more likely to be that detailed policy doesn't add up when it comes to implementation. The policy was often agreed some years ago; it doesn't articulate with any other policy area; the problem it was trying to fix has changed; in any case, the costing was done on a wing and a prayer; it was produced mainly by the party's 'experts' (that is, members with an interest and perspective which doesn't always coincide with the country's needs); and it may not be

politically possible.

On this last point, imagine that I was to convince my party of my views on the NHS as a bureaucratic nightmare run primarily in the interests of its staff.

What would happen when the Lib Dem secretary of state started to legislate and the British Medical Association launched its campaign against the changes? Either the popular feeling would overwhelm the reform or the price of doctors' added incomes to agree to implement the reform would bankrupt the Treasury. Or both.

Ah yes, the Treasury - the powerful centre of the government machine which uses its control of the purse-strings to influence policy. However, I rather doubt that its influence runs counter to the preferences of its political masters when those masters are intelligent enough, firm enough and competent enough to set the direction of travel.

Treasury officials (and the same is true in other departments) take over when ministers are weak. Gordon Brown, George Osborne and Danny Alexander have all used Her Majesty's Treasury to lead policy in the overall direction they wanted. It is true that the Treasury doesn't generally trust the Department of Health's economists or the Ministry of Defence's accountants and prefers if possible to keep a firm oversight of what they are doing. On the other hand, it would be difficult to argue that that view was mistaken.

Sometimes, a good policy is rammed through by a governing party against effective opposition which vows to repeal legislation and then does so. It is rare. How many parties are planning to go into the next election with a manifesto which repeals the whole of tuition fees practice, replaces Universal Credit, or turns their back on Scottish devolution - whatever they may have said in the original debate?

Good legislation has a long-term life, regardless of who first enacted it. The most important moment in the post-war Beveridge settlement was when the Conservative Party of the late 40s/ early 50s accepted the Attlee government changes for the long-term.

It's particularly important when a policy needs to look beyond a single parliamentary term. A key area of pensions policies is that people need to save more; it is essential that they can do that over a long period with security.

Defence policy, which can mean sending our citizens to war on our behalf, needs to be more than a one-party, one government policy. The funding of social care or transport infrastructure needs to be clear over at least a couple of decades if they are going to work.

In the UK, we have neither the formal nor the informal machinery to create a basis for 'settlements', the term I've taken from constitutional debate to apply to other areas. A 'settlement' is a medium to long-term agreement on the general direction or structure of policy.

I had some role in achieving it on pensions policy before 2006. Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and Alan Johnson saw beyond Ian McCartney's claim as pensions minister that it is the job of government to do what it wants and for later governments to change it if they want. As Norman Lamb argues, we desperately

need the basis for a cross-party, cross-society approach to paying for health - both creating the conditions for better health and coping with ill-health. It is, however, unlikely that any party will give up on the empty attractions of simplistic sloganeering on the subject.

Party policies and manifestos exist to prove differentiation and to win votes by promoting the certainty of their own opinions and the stupidity of their opponents.

Occasionally, it works as a political strategy: look at Greece. The problem is that effective vote-winning at those sort of extremes is pretty difficult to reconcile with good government. The same principle will apply to a range of extreme parties, which are appealing to the disaffected around the world.

So, what's my basic argument? It is that parties are necessary for good government, but the challenges of democracy can undermine good government. I'm saying that party policy isn't always a guide to good government, but it's needed to drive change. Above all, I'm saying that what matters in politics is basic belief and direction. People need to know what's you stand for, beyond the detail of specific policies and electoral bribes.

The sort of approach I am setting out ought to be good for liberal parties. That is because we have, when we remind ourselves, a clear, underlying philosophy and perspective on people and the world.

BASIC LIBERALISM

That's not 'the achievements of the coalition'; it's basic liberalism. It means that we are different from others in our approach to politics and government, founded on our belief in the precious nature of each individual; a sympathy with the different aspirations of different people; a burning faith in their ability to get things right for themselves and those around them if they are given the freedom and the help to do so; and a firm belief that people are more important than classes or nations. The major alternative throughout the history of the world is conservatism, although aspects of that conservatism come through in other beliefs including Labourism, Peronism and the Poujadism of current European protest parties.

The challenge for the Liberal Democrats is to have a firm hold on its traditions, its philosophy and its beliefs, sufficient to challenge our leaders when they are too focussed on the short-term and Parliament; our activists when they are too obsessed with the detail of that curious artefact 'party policy'; and our supporters when they demand strong, one-party government instead of compromise and settlement.

And, of course, challenging Liberator when it gives way to the temptation to encourage angry old men to sound off as if their opinions mattered to anyone much!

Gordon Lishman is a member of the Liberal Democrat Federal Executive

A LONG RIDE ON A ROLLERCOASTER

Coalition

The Coalition delivered on many Liberal Democrat priorities but lack of engagement with the party led to needless errors, says Caron Lindsay

Last year, I wrote a book chapter about the Coalition while sitting in the shadow of a rollercoaster. It seemed appropriate given the sometimes disorientating white-knuckle adventure in government the party has been involved in for the past five years.

It's also like we've been on a giant Snakes and Ladders board. We've had highs when we can see the positive results of our policies but we've also seen a massive erosion of our local government base and our Holyrood and European representation decimated.

We can point to by-election successes in 2014 but we have retreated to our strongholds with little representation or recognition elsewhere. We've had to vote for measures as part of the government that make any good liberal wince. There are signs that the worst may be over, though. Membership initially plummeted but is now showing a sustained recovery. Some of the people who left in horror in the early days are coming back to us. Others have drifted to the Greens and SNP and our strategy for the future has to include a way of attracting them back.

Our leader's approval ratings have fluctuated between terrible and not very good. I doubt anyone else could have done any better. He has not faced any serious challenge during our time in government, and retains the confidence of the majority of members who respond to Liberal Democrat Voice surveys, but his critics are vocal. In fact, he loses out because those who are sympathetic towards him don't hesitate to criticise when they think he deserves it while his detractors do not often give him credit for anything. He has certainly made mistakes, howlers, even, but he has shown that Coalition government can work and given us the chance to implement some key priorities. His affable manner and sense of humour can still engage people as his recent appearance on *The Last Leg* shows.

The party knew that it wasn't doing itself any favours going into coalition with the Conservatives, but the special conference that so emphatically endorsed the Coalition Agreement in 2010 knew there was little choice. If we hadn't taken the opportunity to provide stable government, what would be the point in us?

FEARSOMELY CRUEL

Everyone feared that a failure to join the government would lead us to a majority Tory government in a second election with consequential potential wipeout for us. That could easily have happened and we just have to take a look at any Tory party conference to see the fearsomely cruel and illiberal state they would have created. Nobody under 25 would receive help with housing costs. Child benefit would be capped at

two children. People would access their benefits via a card which would define where and on what the meagre funds could be spent. All our internet data would be retained for the security forces to go through pretty much at will. Our human rights legislation would be in tatters and employment rights would have been hugely eroded. And we all remember what happened the last time the Tories were left in charge during a recession.

It's taken Liberal Democrats to ensure that there has been investment in opportunities for young people and to ensure that jobs have been created across the country. Cameron would have been at the mercy of his right wing, of people who want to ban the burqa and pare back the state to almost nothing. We may even be inexorably on the road to EU exit by now, with all the economic disaster that entails.

As well as holding back the tide on noxious tea-party style conservatism, we can take pride in implementing transformative reforms. Shared parental leave is a proper liberal policy that gives power to families to decide the arrangement that suits them best. Giving extra money to help disadvantaged kids in school is already helping to increase attainment and will improve their life chances. Transforming mental health care is more than a one term job but significant reforms have been forced on an unwilling NHS.

Elsewhere we have expanded consumer rights and curbed payday lenders and pubcos, doing that classic liberal thing of protecting people from abuse of power. Reforming the pensions system has given people more options in retirement and ensured that women's entitlement to a state pension is expanded. We've ensured a massive investment in renewable energy and, while some of us might be disappointed at limited tolerance of nuclear power and fracking, these were agreed by our conference.

One of the biggest snakes was, of course, tuition fees. We should never have nailed our colours to an unrealistic pledge that even the NUS didn't believe in. However, our intervention has created a system that now has the highest number of university applications from people from disadvantaged backgrounds and it's fair to say we have learned a painful lesson.

We should have come out of any spell in government with a clean slate on civil liberties. While we've held the Tories back a lot, secret courts and cuts to Legal Aid should never have been agreed to. We should never have entertained the idea of imposing the Bedroom Tax on current tenancies, at least when the official research after it was implemented showed up the flaws. We changed our position but it was too late.

We have not improved the immigration system. After

the flagship win on ending child detention, we have been unable to reform a

system that is often hideously unfair. In fact, we have made it worse. One of the most egregious examples is the introduction of a minimum income for British citizens who want to bring their non-EU spouse to live here. This is hugely discriminatory to women in particular.

It's a huge disappointment that we weren't able to advance our cause during the Scottish Referendum. We have a distinctive, positive federalist position that our deeds have advanced but our words have not matched. We devolved power, enabled the referendum and made sure that the post-referendum Smith Commission proposed meaningful, radical reform. Not only that, but when the Tories tried to wriggle back from that when drawing up the legislation, we wouldn't let them. We have a solid record, but our Liberal Democrat voice was airbrushed from the execrable Better Together campaign where we were never made welcome or allowed any real influence. The referendum campaign as a whole was poorer for the loss of Michael Moore's reasoned, moderate tones from the national stage.

It's quite possible that the situation we face in May will be more complex, with no two parties alone being able to form a majority. What can we learn from our five years' experience in government that will help us next time?

It will be much more important to listen to the party. In the early days of the Coalition, communications with the party were poor and very much one way. While ministers and Nick in particular were good at webinars and question and answer sessions, there were occasions when they rubbed salt in wounds and refused to listen.

REFUSAL TO ENGAGE

Nick's refusal to engage with campaigners against secret courts left lasting resentment and his disparaging remarks about Lords getting paid £300 a day just for turning up were counter-productive, especially when you consider the huge contribution that our Lords team make to the work of the Upper House.

In the very early days of the coalition, I wrote some friendly advice to ministers about the importance of working on their relationship with the party based on the experience in Scotland. It's only under Willie Rennie's leadership in Scotland that the avoidable disconnect of our period in Scottish government in much easier circumstances have started to heal. They might have done well to have heeded some of it,

It was through listening to party members that Nick is now able to say that he stopped the Snoopers' Charter. He had initially agreed to it but pulled back after an angry conference call between bloggers who had the relevant expertise. That led to a parliamentary

“On too many occasions some Westminster Bubble trade-off was made without any serious consultation within the party”

committee rejecting the measures on civil liberties and effectiveness grounds. This should teach him to trust us more.

It's been suggested that we might want to take sole control of entire departments if we're in coalition again and forget about having a wide cross-government presence. That would enable us to make a big difference in key policy areas such as business, innovation and skills or energy and climate change. I would caution against this. We shouldn't think this sort of arrangement would insulate us from any of the blame for mistakes elsewhere

and unpopular measures. It would severely dent our effectiveness.

We know from Norman Baker that working at the Home Office was a nightmare. Theresa May just pretended not to notice that there were Liberal Democrats crawling over what she saw as her territory. It's important that they are there, though, and that they are effective at keeping tabs on what our coalition partner is up to. We need the special advisers and ministers to be checking what's being developed within each department. It's not a failsafe. The 'Go Home' vans were one case where having a minister and having a clue what was going on were mutually exclusive.

Our leader must be deputy prime minister with a cross-government overview. A vital part of any coalition agreement is a protocol up front that establishes how issues which arise outside the coalition agreement will be dealt with.

This was done in both Scottish coalitions and should have been a priority this time. There must be a proper process of consultation within the party before measures are agreed to. On too many occasions some Westminster Bubble trade-off was made without any serious consultation within the party, which caused further resentment.

The most important thing, though, is that we must be able to deliver a properly liberal, radical agenda. If that's not possible, we need to walk away. It's likely that the party will have more regard to its own interests having seen the consequences of the last four years.

We can go into the election showing that we have delivered on most of our key priorities and can credibly blame both Labour and Tories for failure to reform party funding and the House of Lords. We can show that at a time when there was no money, our priorities were to give to those with less and to break down barriers for people. We're all individuals so we will all have our own reasons to persuade people we are worth voting for. It's important we get out there and do it because, whatever you think of the coalition, a Parliament without strong liberal voices in the current climate is a terrifying prospect.

STANDING AT A BROKEN WICKET

Coalition

Basic errors by the coterie around the Lib Dem leadership have seen the party take blame it could have avoided for the Coalition's actions, says Matthew Huntbach

It is remarkable that in the five years we have had of coalition government in Britain there has been little serious discussion of coalition, meaning discussion that bears some attachment to reality.

The three views of the current coalition that were expressed when it first formed are still the three views put now. The first is that the Liberal Democrats have given up all their principles just to gain 'power'. The second is that the Liberal Democrats have been over-powerful, stopping the government from being effective with unreasonable demands. The third is that the Coalition has been a wonderful success, resulting in much good Liberal Democrat policy being put in place.

None of these views is remotely realistic. The first is obviously that pushed by the Labour Party, but seems also to be held by most people who don't have strong political attachments.

The second may be held by few people, but it is the dominant view among committed supporters of the Conservative Party. The third is held by no-one except Nick Clegg and those surrounding him, with all attempts to spread it further having utterly failed.

The realistic view is never heard because no-one wants to make it. It is only in the interests of the Liberal Democrats to push it, but it is not pushed because the image of the Liberal Democrats nationally is made by people who think promoting the party is like selling a product: it must always be pushed as super-duper wonderful.

So we cannot admit to the weakness of the position we were in following the 2010 general election, and we cannot admit that we have had only a very limited influence on this government and that is as much to be expected given our position.

The consequence of this unwillingness to be realistic and admit our weakness is that most people believe we are far more in support of the central aspects of this government and far more responsible for what it has done than is the case. The resulting loss in support for the party has been catastrophic. The bulk of our support is from people who see us as the main opponents to the Conservatives in those places where Labour was pushed out of competition in the 1970s, and people who see us as a less arrogant political left alternative to Labour in those places where the Conservatives were pushed out of competition in the 1980s.

There is little support anywhere, certainly not clustered in a way that wins seats under first-past-the-post, for the sort of party we seem to have become: one which shares the extreme-right economic policies of the Conservatives but lacks the populist small-c conservative instincts which win the Conservative

Party support from a far wider social spectrum than would support it on economic policy alone.

KING MAKERS

Part of the problem goes back to how coalition was always discussed prior to May 2010: that the third party would be 'king-makers', in the position to choose whomever they want to form a coalition with, and to impose whatever demands they want.

It is still widely put that way, hence the line that the "Liberal Democrats put the Conservatives in" when actually it was the distortional electoral system which ruled out the alternative, and the line that failure to enact policies from our 2010 manifesto is due to "betrayal" rather than because the Conservatives would never support them.

Anyone familiar with coalitions in other countries, or no overall control councils here, would know it doesn't work like that. The classic situations where small parties have been able to play kingmaker are where they have a strong 'tribal' support, one which is not going to switch to another party and is obsessed with a few fringe issues and so can easily be bought off by submitting to its demands on those issues. The Ulster Unionists can play that role, as they did at the tail end of the 1974-79 Labour government, but the Liberal Democrats are the opposite of that sort of party.

The situation is muddled by the coincidence of the coalition being formed shortly after the start of a determined push of economic right-wing policies by a small but well-funded group within the Liberal Democrats.

This was signalled by the publication of the Orange Book. A hotchpotch of essays rather than a coherent manifesto, yes; an initiation of a necessary discussion over complacent social democratic thinking in the party, maybe; but in itself a far too complacent acceptance of views which were perhaps radical when first pushed as part of Thatcherism, but had become orthodoxy when the promoters of the Orange Book urged us to say "we too" to them.

The line that the Liberal Democrats had given up their own principles and given in to the Conservative Party, not as a forced compromise but because secretly that's what they wanted to do anyway, is far easier to push when the leader of the Liberal Democrats makes no secret of his bias towards that stream of the party.

I am a strong opponent of the idea that right-wing economics is what true liberalism should be about, and I am appalled at much of what is coming from this government. Nevertheless, I have an antipathy to conspiracy theory, and from that dismiss the idea

that we had a planned right-wing coup in the party. I see the policies of this government as

about what one would expect from a government which is five-sixths Conservative and one-sixth Liberal Democrat. The core thrust of such a government can only be that of the Conservative Party. The only real effect the Liberal Democrats can have is to shift the balance where the Conservative Party itself is fairly evenly divided.

Our line should have been that if you want a Liberal Democrat government, you have to vote Liberal Democrat. To get a government with more Liberal Democrat influence, we need more Liberal Democrat MPs. In May 2010, the first-past-the-post electoral system did what its supporters say what is most good about it: it twisted the representation of the biggest party upwards and of the third party downwards, not quite enough to give an absolute majority to the biggest party, but enough to rule out anything except a government dominated by that party.

The sensible reaction to the Conservatives being so strong and the Liberal Democrats so weak in the coalition would have been to demand proportional representation. The foolish reaction was to close the door to electoral reform by voting against even the mildest reform using the absurd argument that was at the centre of the 'No to AV' campaign: "If you disagree with the Liberal Democrats propping up the Tories, you should vote to prop up the Tories by supporting the electoral system which always does just that".

Instead of pushing the point that as our influence was severely reduced by the distortions of the electoral system the Coalition was far from our ideal, our leader never mentioned that point, and pushed an image which suggested we were almost equal partners. The golden opportunity to make the point in the AV referendum was completely lost.

A back-of-an-envelope calculation saying "75% of Liberal Democrat policies have been implemented" was heavily pushed by our party's leadership, without investigation into how it was calculated, and in the face of what any sensible person could see: this is a far-right Conservative government, not a Liberal Democrat one.

Most people in this country lack the mathematical skills to see this did not mean how they tended to read it: "This government is 75% Liberal Democrat in its policy." When the people who did the original calculation did it slightly differently, giving the more believable figure of 40%, the trumpeting of the 75% was quietly dropped and never mentioned again, but no-one was reprimanded (at least publicly) for the appalling damage this did: in effect telling the country that the horrible policies coming out from this government are mostly what we really wanted to do anyway.

Not surprising that so many of our supporters have turned away from us in disgust. I am disgusted not just by the incompetence in public relations and leadership skills that this incident showed, but

"Clegg's actions have been like tying a 'kick me' label to our backside"

also by the more general incompetence this showed at the top of our party. Much of being in government involves analysis of statistics, basic reasoning skills which look beyond the surface figures and ask questions about where they came from instead of blindly accepting them because an 'expert' produced them.

I remember the feeling of foreboding that came over me on election night, as the results came in and it became clear the only real option was a Conservative-Lib Dem coalition. The poor leadership of our party meant the novelty factor of Cleggmania was over by election day, we were clearly the biggest losers as our vote fell way below predictions. Another general election called on the grounds "the existence of the Liberal Democrats makes it impossible for this country to be governed" would have seen us eliminated. An unstable Labour-and-everyone-else coalition would clearly never have worked, and seeing the mess the country was in, Labour was very happy to have a spell in opposition. Our negotiating power under those circumstances was minimal.

INEVITABLE FATE

Knowing the inevitable fate of junior coalition partners, I could see that our survival required strong defensive mechanisms. The fate of the Irish Green Party in its 2007-11 coalition with Fianna Fáil is a good example to study (wiped out in the 2009 local elections and 2011 general election), and should have been studied by those who took us into the 2010 coalition. The lines that would be thrown at us were obvious. We needed to be well prepared in advance to fight them off. Yet, incredibly, at every step on the way, our leader has taken the opposite approach. His actions have been like tying a 'kick me' label to our backside. Quite obviously, we were going to be hit by accusations that all we wanted was power, so our leader went out of his way to put on a smug self-satisfied image, and to push the line that we are now proper politicians" with our comfy government jobs.

I can see, and have argued the case for, all the sad compromises we have had to make. However, all the arguments I would like to make are undermined when our leader keeps promoting them not as necessary compromises but as if they were what we always wanted in the first place.

Going into the 2015 general election campaigning for the Liberal Democrats under these circumstances reminds me of Geoffrey Howe's famous resignation words: "like going to the crease only to find your bat has been broken by the team captain". Sadly, I cannot do it.

Matthew Huntbach is a former Liberal Democrat councillor in Lewisham.

SURVIVORS' GUIDE

The electorate is about to tip a bucket of ordure over the Liberal Democrats. Roger Hayes suggests how candidates can avoid the worst of it sticking

It's clear that Britain is in uncharted electoral waters and the outcome of the general election is uncertain. As the main parties have merged over recent years into an amorphous, self-serving blob of indifference so the cynicism of the electorate has grown exponentially and multi-party politics with lower turnouts has taken over from the long-term comfort and certainty of a two, or briefly three, party system.

Without making rash predictions, I want to look at what might realistically happen over the next few months, how that is affecting the body politic and what individual Lib Dem candidates might do to survive the impending shockwaves and emerge from the wreckage with any sort of reputation. This is undoubtedly one of those times when it would have been useful to have the late Simon Titley around. I am sure his take would have been illuminating.

To be clear, I do not believe, in the current circumstances, that there is much chance for the Lib Dem party in its current form, or its leadership, to survive May.

I believe it will, at best, be left battered and broken – destroyed by ego and incompetence. But that is a matter for another article when we see what is left once the smoke clears and we have sifted through the rubble.

Even though they ought to know better, media commentators and every party's top brass chooses to believe the fantasy that we have 'national elections' that can be measured by 'national polls', affected by a 'national swing' and 'one-size-fits-all' messages.

With at least five credible parties to choose from wherever you are in Britain, national poll ratings are a meaningless tool for predicting the number of seats each party might win. Lord Ashcroft seems to be the only pollster to understand the impact of multi-party Britain, and what a very different picture his detailed data shows – visit: lordashcrofthpolls.com/constituency-polls for a fascinating insight.

Marginals used to be short hand for closely fought contests between Labour and Conservative. A marginal can now be any permutation of two from half a dozen parties – or even perm any three or four in some seats. As Mike Smithson of policalbetting.com correctly reminds us, our general elections are 650 separate contests affected as much by local circumstances and the individuals standing as they are by what is going on nationally and what we see on the box in the corner.

And if you're a Liberal Democrat standing in May thank goodness for that, because quite frankly that is your only chance of survival.

Here's what I think we might be heading for:

* not only don't I think any one party can win a

majority, I doubt that any two parties will be able to either (unless the Tories form a coalition with Labour – I think they'd be quite well suited);

* for every seat the Labour Party wins in England it could lose one in Scotland and be lucky to end up with many more MPs than it has now;

* the SNP are on course to replace Labour as the principal party of Scotland and may well have the third largest number of seats in the new parliament

* for all their noise and bluster Ukip are likely to take less than a handful seats if they're lucky

* the Greens will probably see their national vote-share soar and may well push the Lib Dems into fifth place, but in terms of seats they won't do better than see Caroline Lucas returned and they might just squeak Norwich South.

I hate to say I told you so, but this is what first-past-the-post elections deliver with multi-party politics, and for once it will work to the Lib Dems' advantage.

RIGHT ROYAL PASTING

In many parts of the country the party is in for a right royal pasting, but let's have a go at thinking what the outcome might be. I have considered five categories of Lib Dem seat and you might like to think who you'd drop into each: those we will almost certainly lose; those we will most likely hold; those in the balance but with a chance; those in the balance with barely a chance; shock gains.

I have 18 in the first category – I suspect my list will be fairly similar to yours, but I am not about to give succour to the enemy by naming them. I think we will hold at least 26 of the current seats, including introducing new members like Lisa Smart. I have 13 across the two balance categories, more I think with a chance than those with very little hope. And I wouldn't rule out the possibility of the odd well-deserved gain. Best placed is Dorothy Thornhill in Watford and there might just be an outside chance for Layla Moran in Oxford West.

So, there is a chance we could return more than 30 MPs – maybe as many as 37. But, whatever the actual number turns out to be it will be far, far better than any national poll rating could ever predict.

In stark contrast will be the other end of the spectrum. In 2010 the party didn't lose a single deposit – not so this time. In much of the country we will simply crash and burn and many a brave standard bearer will find themselves in fourth or fifth place through no fault of their own. This, combined with the hundreds of good councillors and MEPs we have lost over the past four years, will make it an incredibly difficult job to rebuild the party post May.

Despite the impending gloom I do think there are still a few things sitting MPs could do to try to be one of the survivors, and strategies that may help other

candidates hold on elsewhere.

Here are my top five tips:

Campaign. Most good Lib Dem MPs and candidates campaign as a matter of course. However, many – too many – have found excuses to be less vociferous since the party has been in government. Many have been a lot less radical about what they will campaign on; less robust in standing up for what is right; and far less vigorous in coming out against what is wrong. But maybe it's never too late to remember you're a Liberal and do the right thing.

When I was a councillor in the controlling group, and even as leader, I would still campaign against the council – often it was stuff officers did and we and local people wanted change. The same applies in government, but this has been very poorly applied by many in the parliamentary party, and not just ministers.

Most of the electorate are already heartily sick of the election campaign so goodness knows what reception politicians will get on the doorstep come April. One thing that's almost certain to make it better however is to be relevant and to stand for something.

At all costs resist this wishy-washy sloganising. It's been bad enough having to suffer, 'Stronger Economy, Fairer Society' for the past four years, but where on Earth does 'Firmly anchored in the centre ground' come from? Good grief, give me strength! Liberals have never been a 'centre party' because it's arrant nonsense and doesn't mean anything.

The biggest problem ordinary people have with politicians is that they're all the same. They all look the same – middle aged, middle class, privately educated, white men, in suits. They all sound the same – having invented the never-never land of the 'centre ground' they all want to occupy it and offer the same bland platitudes. Clegg/ Cameron/ Miliband – three tedious little peas in a pod, no wonder voters reject them.

And why do they think people are turning to UKIP and the Greens? Because they seem to stand for something and aren't afraid to say so. Lib Dems used to stand for things, lots of things, liberal things – and we weren't afraid to say it, campaign for it, stand up for it.

If you play it safe because you are afraid of upsetting people in a key demographic, carefully defined by your focus group studies you will come across as a pale imitation and people will then have every reason to ignore you and vote for the real thing, or take the Russell Brand option and militantly not bother to vote at all.

Wake up – stand for something, be something, make a difference!

Build a community. When we were walking through Kingston Market Place the other morning a woman with a clipboard asked us to sign her petition against a particularly ugly proposed development. Lynda asked her who she represented and she said, "No one, I'm just a local resident, we can't leave it all to the Lib Dems to do." I shall seek her out as a potential council

“Never has the national party got it so hideously wrong – never has the leader been so out of step with the national mood”

candidate for 2018.

Collect around you the doers and leaders, agitators and fighters, campaigners and activist, shouters and complainers. Build a community of people with heart and passion, ideas and creativity, for they will get the job done. And don't moan about it being like trying to herd cats – of course it is. If you want easy, stay at home and watch the telly.

Have nothing to do with HQ or the leader. To a degree this has always been true (sorry Paddy) but joking aside, it is absolutely vital for survival this time – for never has the national party got

it so hideously wrong – never has the leader been so out of step with the national mood and so far removed from the heart of the party.

SLOGANS AND PLATITUDES

I implore you: don't listen to anything coming out of Great George Street; steer well clear of the slogans and platitudes; don't have pictures of Clegg in any leaflet; and be very choosy about what you mention Lib Dems achieved in government. If you are offered a leader's visit I'd tell him the best use of his time is in Sheffield Hallam trying to hold on to his own seat – a feat very far from certain.

Make it fun. I have always said, "we work for three things: love, laughter and liberty – if it ain't fun, it ain't worth doing, and why would anyone want to do it again." Read Hunter S Thompson's 'Better Than Sex'.

So, there we have it – we're hurtling towards hell in a hand-cart; we are led by fools; the future is very far from certain; and we may not survive the fall. But hey, what else were you planning on doing for the next few months and who wants to live forever anyway?

Good luck and see you on the other side.

Roger Hayes is a former Liberal Democrat councillor and parliamentary candidate in Kingston

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GARDEN OF DELIGHTS

Five years on, the errors committed during the Coalition negotiations have become apparent. Mark Smulian reviews Nick Harvey's take on what happened

When the Coalition was being formed neither side knew what it was doing. No living British politician had formed one at Westminster and experience from Scotland, Wales and local government was paid little attention.

But as Nick Harvey reveals in his booklet for the Institute of Government, *After the Rose Garden*, the Tories had planned for a hung parliament a great deal better than had the Liberal Democrats (despite having for decades argued the virtues of holding the balance of power).

Harvey looks at factors that were mistakes from the outset, things that appeared sound at the time but proved not to be, and suggests a series of lessons for Lib Dems involved in any negotiations in May.

While flaws became evident in both the policy prospectus agreed by the two sides and the machinery of coalition that they devised, his sharpest criticism concerns how the Lib Dems approached how many and which government jobs they should have.

As Harvey writes: "This appears to have been dealt with entirely on a one-to-one basis between David Cameron and Nick Clegg. But...the Conservatives had game-planned the hung parliament scenario far more meticulously than either the Lib Dems or Labour.

"We Lib Dems did not have any internal discussions or consultations about what we wanted from this part of the negotiation...it seemed to be thought either unseemly or tempting providence to dare discuss the 'bums on seats' issue, and instead we sent Nick Clegg – who had served only one term in the Commons and had very limited familiarity with the mechanics of the Lords – into battle entirely alone, with no support and no indication from his colleagues as to what we wanted."

This surprisingly casual approach led inevitably to a second problem Harvey identifies – some departments had no Lib Dem ministers in them while others could be by-passed by Tory superiors because the agreed machinery of the Coalition did not protect their role and status.

Harvey argues that the Lib Dems (or any other minority partner in a future coalition) must demand one quarter at least of government jobs to enable them to have sufficient influence. With just 23 out of 122 posts this could not happen.

He swiftly dismisses the idea of the Lib Dems 'running' two or three departments, in line with some foreign practice, arguing this would make the party appear to voters unconcerned with other issues.

Instead he suggests the party should demand one of the 'great offices' probably the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, one of the 'hot potato' ministries, either education, health or work and pensions, one out of business or energy and one other.

Beyond that, there would be Lib Dem ministers in every department. "It is utterly ridiculous and wholly unacceptable for there to be any government department with no Lib Dem minister. Why on earth should Lib Dems support or vote for any measures put forward by a department where we have had no input?" Harvey asks.

To a surprising extent the booklet reveals how much Lib Dem influence depended on personal relations with Tory ministers. The Coalition Committee, the body supposed to iron out disputes on whether one party speaks for the other in parliament and issues such as access to papers, civil servants and the media, seldom met.

A further problem was that the early decision to drop ministerial policy advisers meant that inexperienced special advisers (Spads), appointed through opaque processes, drifted into policy matters when they are supposed to be dealing with politics.

"Our spads can't all be people in their twenties – some will require decades of relevant experience in the party," Harvey says.

He also criticises the reluctance of ministers to forge links with MPs, peers and councillors, never mind party members, something of which Harvey says: "I was uncomfortable about this while in government and view it as a crisis now I am out."

Harvey ends with 12 recommendations and says: "The greatest lesson we Liberal Democrats should learn would be to heed the memorable words of Nancy Reagan and 'just say no'. It is difficult for the smaller party in a coalition to make the larger party do things it doesn't want to do. But it should be relatively simple to stop our political partners doing things we don't want them to do."

Would that Nick Clegg had heeded such advice over horrors like the Health Act and the bedroom tax.

Harvey has assembled a powerful case for being tougher coalition negotiators if the Lib Dems get the chance again, being less mesmerised by the prospect of government and more concerned with ensuring, as he puts it: "All Lib Dem MPs and peers must be able to look themselves in the mirror as they brush their teeth before bed, confident that the sound sleep of the righteous awaits them because nothing they have been asked to do that day has been an abandonment of the liberal and democratic values that drew them into public service in the first place."

Mark Smulian is a member of the Liberator Collective

After the Rose Garden: Harsh lessons for the smaller coalition party about how to be seen and heard in government
by Nick Harvey www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk

OBITUARY: JEREMY THORPE

Jeremy Thorpe had strong liberal instincts but was felled by a risky private life and lack of political judgement, says Michael Meadowcroft

One should start any obituary of Jeremy Thorpe by stating the positives. Coming from a strongly Conservative family he joined the Liberal party while a student at Oxford for exactly the right reasons: industrial co-ownership, the statutory ending of monopolies, civil liberties, colonial freedom and electoral reform.

He opposed the Suez invasion, and in parliament he opposed capital punishment, supported abortion law reform and homosexual law reform - none of which would be likely to go down well with his constituents. He maintained his key principles throughout his life. He was adopted as candidate for North Devon in 1952 at 23, just one year after the worst Liberal general election result ever.

The problems with Thorpe were to do with the outworking of his beliefs and with the lack of a strategic ability to make them effective. Part of the reason was an apparently innate lack of respect for the party nationally and a consequent inability to regard it as a partner in the task of promoting liberalism.

He certainly had charisma and an ability to charm individuals and to make excellent speeches, often with a compelling turn of phrase, but the concern was whether there was anything more than the showman who enjoyed the aura of high society and of sometimes indulging in student-like japes.

There is, for instance, no book or pamphlet written by him in his nine years as leader. There was also a certain illiberal sense of social superiority, presumably stemming from his background and education, which from time to time would show in disparaging treatment of party staff and even of a belief that he was entitled to sack an individual whose work he felt inadequate.

It took him seven years 'intensive work in the constituency to win North Devon in 1959 and, being the only Liberal gain in that election, it heartened and enthused the whole party. He held the seat until the publicity surrounding the criminal charges he faced brought his defeat in 1979. In contrast to his relationship with the party at national level, he had a warm affinity with his electors and he evinced a remarkable ability to recall individuals and their interests on subsequent meeting.

When Jo Grimond gave up the leadership in early 1967, the party faced a dilemma. In key respects Thorpe was the exact opposite of Grimond, lacking intellectual depth, embracing gimmicks, flashiness

and a with risky personal life, whereas Jo would refuse to do 'photo opportunities' saying, "politics is too serious for gimmicks".

Retiring when he did limited the potential candidates for the succession, effectively ruling out MPs only elected nine months before, including crucially, Richard Wainwright.

Those party managers who believed Thorpe was politically shallow and personally risky, including Gruffydd Evans, Tim Beaumont and Pratap Chitnis - and, apparently, Frank Byers, though I was unaware of it at the time - had a dilemma. They had, rightly, kept their doubts about Thorpe away from the party generally and had no legitimate means of inhibiting his candidature.

FINANCIAL CRISES

There was a further question mark against Thorpe. He had become the party's treasurer in October 1965. The party was in one of its perennial financial crises and Thorpe tapped a few big donors. Thorpe and cash were a continual problem and from 1961 he had personal access to funds, which he was able to use tactically to develop his stature within the party. It eventual led to the resignation of Sir Frank Medlicott as party treasurer in 1971. Sir Frank told me that he "was not prepared to be treasurer of a party in which the party leader controlled secret funds". Loyally, Sir Frank publicly gave ill health as the reason for his resignation and he did, indeed, die shortly afterwards.

Neither eventual leadership candidate against Thorpe had enough salience. Emlyn Hooson was regarded as right wing and out of sympathy with Grimond's whole realignment strategy while Eric Lubbock was a fine 'fixer' but not charismatic enough to be leader.

Even so, the headquarters cabal made one last attempt to thwart Thorpe, by running Wainwright, entirely without his connivance, or even knowledge, as a possible additional candidate. There was only one full day between nominations and the election by the 12 MPs but even so 'soundings' were taken. As local government officer, my instructions from Chitnis, as head of the party organisation, were to telephone every council group leader and ask, given the three candidates, which they would favour. Almost without exception they named Jeremy Thorpe. I would then ask what their view would be "if Mr Wainwright was a candidate"; almost invariably the answer was the same. The same response was forthcoming from candidates, Women's Liberal Federation members and Young Liberals. The latter came to regret that opinion a few years

later.

The first ballot gave Thorpe six votes, whereupon Hooson and Lubbock withdraw giving Thorpe an unopposed election. The leadership die was thus cast and the party walked the tightrope of Thorpe's political and personal adventurism thereafter.

Bodmin MP Peter Bessell was regularly engaged in keeping Thorpe's gay lovers at arms length and, unlike Jo Grimond who managed to engage with the radical excesses of the Young Liberals, Thorpe naively supposed that he could discipline and stifle them and he thus managed to have a public falling out. Other important groups both in and out of the party were also increasingly frustrated by his lack of depth and as early as January 1968 Beaumont and the four other original dissidents, plus Richard Holme, were discussing whether it was possible to engineer his resignation.

The continuing problem was the lack of a viable alternative. Wainwright's name was continually mentioned and that autumn he asked William Wallace and me to see him. He instructed us to stop promoting his name saying that he was not a leader. Leadership required a 'first thinker' capable of virtually immediate sound analytical judgement on issues whereas he was a 'second thinker' whose skill was to consolidate and develop.

Thorpe's out of the blue wedding to Caroline Allpass in 1967 only partially muted the criticisms, although the dissident quintet made an ill-timed strike while they were on their honeymoon. Obviously Thorpe was perfectly entitled to celebrate his wedding any way he wished but the ostentatious and establishment-laden festivities jarred with radical colleagues.

Thorpe had never been able to command the warm support of the party as a whole and for the rest of the parliament he struggled with criticism from a number of influential individuals and from Young Liberals while receiving loyal support from a bewildered membership.

The Young Liberals were a numerous and intellectually radical force and Thorpe could have harnessed their enthusiasm and commitment to radical causes but instead he chose to take them on. Ironically, one of the Thorpe 'ideas' that they applauded - the suggestion that rail lines into Ian Smith's Rhodesia could be bombed to deny him supplies - was actually planted on him by a South African BOSS agent with a view to discrediting the Liberal party. Once Thorpe had made the speech, the agent returned to South Africa.

Following the leadership election there was little evidence of an electoral honeymoon and a year later the party had gained just one percentage point. 1968 was a year of missed opportunity. With Labour at its lowest rating since polling began - it dropped to 28% in the middle of the year - the party could have mounted a determined and focussed national appeal to disillusioned Labour voters, just as was done in some localities, but the leadership had no real awareness of how to tackle traditional Labour areas and the chance passed.

The single bright spot came the following year with the party's by-election gain in Birmingham

Ladywood in June 1969 but this was a personal victory for the candidate, Wallace Lawler. At the following general election, in 1970, the party vote was down slightly on 1966 and Thorpe's own majority in North Devon dropped to a perilous 369.

REGULAR PAYMENTS

Throughout this whole period the spectre of Thorpe's homosexual liaisons, illegal at the time, hovered over him and also, by association, his close friend Bessell who, to stave off potential disaster, was making regular payments to one such, Norman Scott, who had also managed to contact Caroline by telephone. Whereas Thorpe showed no external sign of the turmoil of his personal life, it must surely have had a detrimental effect on his - and Bessell's - political judgement and capacity.

As if these problems were not enough, just two weeks after the 1970 election polling day Caroline was killed in a car accident.

Not surprisingly Thorpe was devastated and for some 18 months was only able to carry out the minimum of duties so that the party staggered on lacking firm leadership with poll ratings hovering around 6-7% through 1970 and 1971 and fighting only six of 14 by-elections - coming third in each one.

The most significant initiative was promotion of the community politics strategy mainly by Young Liberals, which was formally adopted at the 1970 Assembly and towards which Thorpe was decidedly lukewarm.

In 1972 there were a number of parliamentary issues on which Thorpe made a positive Liberal contribution. First, he led the Liberals into the government lobby to save the day against an anti-EU proposition from Enoch Powell which split the Tories; second, he opposed the Rhodesia deal Sir Alec Douglas-Home had reached with Ian Smith; third, he opposed the support being given to the Stormont Assembly on internment; finally, he supported the right of the Ugandan Asians being expelled by Idi Amin to come to Britain.

On all four issues the government eventually adopted Thorpe's Liberal line. The electoral tide began to turn for the party in 1972 partly through the happenstance of a by-election in Rochdale won, as in Birmingham Ladywood, by a popular local councillor, Cyril Smith, with the active support of the party leader.

A by-election in Sutton and Cheam, eventually in held December 1972, had been trailed since June when it was known that the Conservative MP was to be appointed as Governor-General of Bermuda. It was regarded as a safe Conservative seat and the Liberal candidate had finished a poor third in 1970. However, at the September party assembly. Trevor Jones, deputy leader of Liverpool Liberals, and an enthusiast for community politics easily defeated Penelope Jessell, the leadership's candidate for the party presidency, and he moved into Sutton and Cheam with his Focus leaflets and immense enthusiasm. Liberal Graham Tope, took the seat with a majority of 7,000. The victory had little to do with the party leader, and Jones led the subsequent by-election campaigns to substantial second places

in unlikely places, such as Manchester Exchange and Chester-le-Street, neither of which the party had even fought in 1970. The momentum lifted the poll ratings to 22% and enabled the gains in Ripon, the Isle of Ely and Berwick. Meanwhile Jeremy had married Marion, who divorced Lord Harewood, the Queen's cousin, six years earlier. The wedding celebrations attracted the same comments as the earlier ones had but there was no doubt as to the pleasure the marriage brought them both.

The party went into the February 1974 general election in extremely good heart. Given his narrow majority at the previous election, Thorpe decided to stay in his constituency, broadcasting nation wide from a makeshift studio in Barnstaple Liberal Club. The opinion polls showed that he scored over the other leaders and it was thought that staying out of the rough and tumble had in fact helped the Liberal campaign.

A great deal has been written on the immediate post-election negotiations with Edward Heath on the possible formation of a coalition. There was no doubt that Thorpe wanted to be in office - going to see Heath without consulting anyone in the Liberal party is a strong hint - but it was never a possibility given the arithmetic and the political reality. What would have happened had it had been possible, given what was known in security files on his background, remains an interesting speculation.

With six million votes and almost 20% of the poll, and a Labour minority government, it was clear that there would be a second election within months. The party, and its leader, were clearly popular and activists would have responded to the leader launching a barnstorming crusade across the country. Alas, it didn't happen and a huge opportunity was lost, with the leader apparently preoccupied with his personal problems and, later, bogged down in the risible failure of his hovercraft gimmick.

MOUNTING CRITICISM

Instead of achieving a breakthrough, and despite fighting all but four British seats, the vote dropped, in real terms, by 5%. There was mounting criticism of Thorpe from within the party, muted only by the three month European referendum campaign in which Thorpe played a significant and positive role in securing the pro-EU vote in June 1975.

Thereafter it is the record of Thorpe's long delayed descent into the depths of the scandal, the court case, the eventual reluctant resignation as party leader and the loss of his seat in 1979, punctuated by further examples of his poor judgement and manipulation.

The collapse in 1973 of the somewhat shady London and Counties Securities secondary bank, with which he had got involved on the advice of a close friend, led to trenchant criticism from the two inspectors who investigated its failure. There was the personal introduction in 1977 of a crook, George de Chabris, real name George Marks, to the National Liberal Club, which he asset stripped mainly for the benefit of himself and his family, and the obtaining of a great deal of money from Jack Hayward,

including considerable sums under false pretences and on occasion diverted to uses other than those for which Hayward had given it - including to buy incriminating documents from Norman Scott.

It is all a very sad story and it is only surprising and, in a way, a relief that it took so many years for the simmering pot to boil over. As Michael Bloch's biography makes clear, Thorpe carried on a dangerous double life that at any point could have seriously damaged the party. I remember vividly the embarrassment of canvassing at the 1979 election when the party leader was on a charge of the attempted murder of his homosexual lover. No wonder we did so badly on polling day.

As was their right, none of the principal defendants chose to give evidence at the trial. Whether, had they done so, given what has emerged since - not least from the late David Holmes - the jury's verdict would still have been for acquittal must be in doubt. Nevertheless, what was disclosed and accepted was quite sufficient to discredit Thorpe.

As party officers realised at the 1978 party Assembly at Southport, most party members were still unaware of the history. Thorpe had promised his successor David Steel that he would not attend.

But he insisted on arriving in style and effectively hijacking the proceedings for his own selfish purposes. He was publicly criticised at the assembly and a very loyal Liberal candidate from Hove, James Walsh, put down a motion of censure of the party officers for their treatment of Jeremy Thorpe as leader.

The three key officers at Southport, Gruff Evans, president, Geoff Tordoff, chair, and myself, assembly committee chair, were furious and decided to take the motion head-on at a closed session of delegates. We all agreed that if the motion was carried we would resign on the spot. Gruff opened the proceedings with a forthright detailed exposé of Thorpe's actions and behaviour extending from before he became leader. The delegates were astounded and Walsh was very distressed at what he had caused. In the end the motion was not put and the damaging resignations avoided.

Thus ended Jeremy Thorpe's career within the Liberal Party. Lots of froth, a great deal of posturing, a curious fondness for high society, an inability to conduct potentially damaging liaisons discreetly, a willingness to manipulate individuals for his own survival, a regular refusal to accept political advice and a lack of political depth and judgement. Not a great CV for a Liberal leader.

Michael Meadowcroft was Liberal MP for Leeds West 1983-87.

ELECTION FEVER OR FUTILITY IN AFRICA?

In 2015 the international community will spend millions on elections that do little more than legitimise monsters and crooks, says Rebecca Tinsley

An endearing Liberal Democrat characteristic is our enthusiasm for elections in the most obscure countries. While few relish our own forthcoming general election, 2015 provides a bumper crop of worldwide polls, from Burundi to Finland and Suriname.

Surveying the results, commentators will no doubt argue that democracy is winning in the global struggle against totalitarianism, reprising Francis Fukuyama's giddy 'end of history' arguments.

However, this is wilful self-deception. For who benefits from general elections in Sudan, the Central African Republic or South Sudan? Why does the international community continue to legitimise leaders who manipulate the army, police, media, judiciary and election commission to their benefit?

In the words of a Congolese activist who must remain anonymous for his own safety, "The vast majority of our villages have no school, no nurse or doctor, no water and no electricity. But they have an electoral registration officer, thanks to the international community."

"Do we really believe any of these conditions will improve if we elect national politicians whose sole interest is in enriching themselves and whose writ extends barely to the suburbs of our capital city?"

The 2006 Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) election cost the international community half a billion dollars. The local activist told me the money would have been better spent creating and sustaining institutions to help democracy take root in his homeland, starting with local elections. Also, he pointed out, his country comes second to the bottom on the UN's human development index: they have other pressing needs.

The predictable response from election-true-believers is that polls will bring to power politicians who will then address those pressing needs. Sadly, in many places, that isn't how it works. Polls simply give international credibility to thieves/ war lords/ party leaders who continue to drain the nation's wealth for their personal benefit, or that of their gang/ tribe/ party.

PURELY SELFISH

On a purely selfish level the Congolese activist's questions concern us because our taxes pay for many deeply flawed election processes around the globe and the international community regards elections as ending its responsibility to pay attention to countries where human rights abuses and economic mismanagement thrive, eventually precipitating mass emigration to our shores, warping our own political

dialogue.

According to John Mukum Mbaku, of the Brookings Institute: "Even if the 2015 elections are successfully carried out and are considered fair, free and credible, many of those countries will still continue to suffer from high levels of corruption, violence, inequality and low economic growth and development unless they are provided with institutional arrangements that guarantee the rule of law."

This is not to argue that desperately poor nations with high levels of illiteracy are not 'ready' for elections. Anyone who looks at opinion polls (or goes canvassing) in the comparatively wealthy or developed world can point to dismal levels of knowledge among populations who have benefited from decades of free universal education.

For instance, 58% of Americans didn't know what the Taliban was, even after 10 years at war in Afghanistan, and 29% can't name the US vice-president. Rather, we should ask what purpose is served by general elections in places where there is neither the security nor the freedom to hold a fair vote.

Elections as deliverers of peace and stability in conflict zones were promoted during George W Bush's presidency. However, the wheels came off this particular clown car when the Palestinians voted for Hamas in 2006 and the Muslim Brotherhood was elected in Egypt in 2011-12; these weren't the results Washington had anticipated.

Following elections in Afghanistan in 2004 and Iraq in 2005, the international community turned its ever-skittish attention elsewhere, wilfully believing countries broken by war, with shattered institutions could somehow succeed in battling insurgency and economic collapse.

What was going through the minds of the UN Security Council when in January 2014, after fighting broke out in the wake of a coup attempt in the Central African Republic (CAR), it passed Resolution 2134, demanding elections be held "as soon as possible," and "no later than February 2015"? CAR is considered a failed state by Freedom House, and labelled a phantom state by the International Crisis Group. Fighting continues to rage, displacing untold numbers of voters.

Yet, we continue bankrolling elections because they are considered benchmarks on the path to moving troubled countries out of the UN's in-tray. Voting equals democracy, conferring legitimacy on leaders. It also means human rights abuses can be regarded as internal affairs. Sovereignty – the right to do to your citizens what you please - is as potent today as when it was enshrined in the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia.

The EU spends about €38m annually on election

observation, but more significant are the opaque contributions made by the EU, and by EU member countries individually, to elections in developing nations.

In addition, donor nations like the UK and US give generously to UN agencies supporting election organisation, funding national election commissions (whether independent of the ruling party or not), voting officials (ditto), ballot papers, materials, polling day security, tabulation, herds of UN personnel, and in the weeks prior to the poll, voter education.

In my experience of African elections, voter education consisted of UN staff promising villagers they would get schools, clinics and jobs if they voted. The villagers' disillusion was apparent when I asked if they would participate in the following election if they did not get a school, a clinic and a job following this election.

No, they would not bother to once more walk 10 kilometres through the 40-degree jungle heat to stand in line for four hours in the blazing sun to vote.

Newly independent South Sudan's election is due by July 2015, despite the bloody civil war and the determination of all sides to continue embezzling as much donor money as possible.

A group of 75 civil society groups has proposed postponing the poll until 2016, given that 20% of people are displaced by the violence, and the current census seriously understates the population.

However the politicians and men with guns have rejected this, having at no stage displayed concern about the destruction they are bringing to their nation. Naturally, the international community believes elections will make peace more likely, ignoring the fact that there is little will for peace among the candidates.

To the north, Sudan's president Omar Bashir, indicted for genocide in Darfur by the International Criminal Court, will be re-elected in April. Sudanese media personnel are routinely harassed, opposition politicians and civil society leaders are in prison, and electoral rolls exclude millions of people in areas where Bashir's regime continues its ruthless campaign of ethnically cleansing.

Yet the international community will go through the farce of pretending the vote might be worth monitoring. And Bashir's colleagues in the African Union, the Arab League and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference will applaud him when he claims victory. There is a video* of ballot box stuffing during the 2010 Sudan poll: expect the same in 2015.

The Council of Foreign Relations estimates 31,000 people have been killed by Boko Haram in northern Nigeria since 2009, with more than a million displaced and disenfranchised. Nigerian elections are a delicate balancing act between the comparatively wealthy, non-Muslim, oil-rich south and the deprived Muslim north. Voters in the north are unlikely to attach much credibility to the process while electoral rolls are in chaos and Boko Haram threatens to kill anyone who turns up at a polling station.

Africa Confidential reports the Nigerian Election Commission has "no plan" for how those displaced by the spreading violence will vote on 14 February. Some 30m of the 68m eligible voters haven't received their biometric voting cards. The incumbent, Goodluck Jonathan, ignored the insurgency until January 2015, when he finally had a photo opportunity with bereaved families. He expressed solidarity with Charlie Hebdo

before acknowledging that hundreds of civilians (Amnesty International estimates 2,000) were killed by Boko Haram on the same day as the Paris attacks. Jonathan's wife had representatives of the kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls arrested, accusing them of raising the issue to harm her husband's election chances.

VOLATILE AND VICIOUS

Human rights groups warn the February elections will be "volatile and vicious." As a Nigerian commentator observed, Nigerian politicians campaign with much more enthusiasm than they address the nation's many problems. Yet, the international community will embrace the victor as the legitimate head of state, while bank-rolling Nigeria's expensive yet inept security services. Why expect voters in the north to be satisfied with this state of affairs or to buy into the next government?

A credible poll requires durable institutions, an independent judiciary and election commission, and a free media, at the very least. An alarm should sound when presidents try to overturn term limits rules - as in Burundi (polling in June) and the DRC, where, at the time of writing, a dozen have been killed in protests against the president's attempt to extend his rule while a new census is conducted, a process that could take years.

In many communities the 'big man' (an inherited position, irrespective of merit) tells villagers how to vote. In rural Mozambique, for instance, the 'big man' need do little to intimidate 'his' people, who have lived in fear of him for centuries. Men humble themselves, approaching him in a crouching position, clapping. Women shuffle up to him on their knees.

In parts of West Africa the big man gets the pick of each family's virgin daughters, whom he rapes as he wishes, before the girls reach puberty. It is considered an honour to hand over the little girls, even when the big man in question is bleary-eyed and feeble-minded, drunk by noon each day.

Submitting is how many people survive, and they will vote as the big man says. Let's not deceive ourselves that this represents a free and fair election, just because polling day procedure runs according to the rules.

Obedience cannot be blamed on colonialism - it is a centuries-old tradition. We should bear it in mind when we indulge in fantasies of Scandinavian democracies taking root any time soon in conservative rural societies, if only we throw enough cash and consultants at them.

This is not to argue against encouraging elections in the developing world. However, creating sustainable institutions, fostering civil society, and educating people to expect accountable rulers, was a long process in Europe.

Why should it happen any faster in Africa? In the meantime, we should be careful which elections we award our stamp of approval and to whom we accord the status of legitimate rulers.

Rebecca Tinsley has worked on numerous civil society projects in Africa

The video may be seen at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8633162.stm>

PUTIN'S WAR ON EUROPE'S EASTERN EDGE

Kiron Reid reports on the damage being done by Russia to a part of Ukraine that is indisputably part of Europe

Vladimir Putin has turned the Russian-speaking population of much of south east Ukraine against Russia. His forces were currently winning the battles, as of late January, and they may detach Donetsk and Luhansk from Ukraine.

They may destroy the goodwill that President Poroshenko has to modernise the country, combat corruption and improve its economy because the war is subsuming everything else.

But Putin's expansionist nationalist state is creating a rift with the people who are the natural friends of Russia, and causing fear and hostility to his regime in every neighbouring democratic country that was formerly part of the Soviet Union.

Putin and his regime (backed it seems by most of the Russian public) may bolster Russia's actual control in its immediate environs, but at what cost? The man could have been a colossus on the world stage; now the comparisons with a wannabe Nazi or Stalinist seem more and more apt, a man trying to resurrect the barbarity of the past in modern Europe.

I spent two months as a visiting professor in Zaporizhia in south east Ukraine – the major city in the southerly region next to Donetsk. I arrived in a glorious Indian summer in early October, and left in early December with the city covered in a foot of snow and bitterly cold.

Zaporizhzhya National University (ZNU) is the equivalent for Ukraine of a UK red brick. The Faculty of Foreign Languages is the university's largest, and the Department of English specialises in British English, which nearly all students learn. Language was political when I was first in the city as an election monitor for the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe in May last year (Liberator 366).

One of three changes I really noticed in just four months was that language was even more political now. Almost all native Russian speakers are now using Ukrainian more as a conscious effort. I noticed it mostly among the young. People were also changing from email addresses that end in .ru. Another change was much more visible patriotism. Not necessarily nationalism, but patriotism – flags on display in student bedrooms, ribbons in girls' hair or on bags, railings and even trees painted in the Ukrainian flag.

Students and assistant professors alike were collecting for basic provisions for the troops, grannies were knitting socks and jumpers. On the main Russian speaking social media VK (In contact; vk.com), girls' romantic and cultural interests are interspersed with pictures of guns and men in uniform.

The university's official web feed and social media is also full of fundraising events for the soldiers in the ATO (Anti-Terrorist Operation), amid typical charitable work and academic events.

Thirdly there were more men in uniform around. Not a huge number, but significantly more. This is a city of 750,000 people that has more shopping malls than Liverpool and more coffee shops than any typical English town. The city was spotlessly clean. There was much dereliction but none of the litter or dogfouling I see in Liverpool. Whether the gangs of old people who swept the university precinct early every morning, and the city's open spaces, just loved their work or were working so hard as they were desperate for money I don't know. I guess both. There is some great beer and excellent cognac but far less drunkenness than in Britain as people always eat when they are drinking. Dancing, sushi and karaoke were other passions in the city.

PART OF EUROPE

Young people asked me if they would get to be part of Europe. I repeated always that they clearly are European. I was a long way from Hampstead but this could not be anything other than Europe. Zaporizhia is very eastern Europe, very Soviet, it has influence from the Asian former Soviet republics, but it is modern Europe. The students all had much better mobile phones and laptops than me; the students and lecturers were incredibly smartly dressed in fashionable (often secondhand) clothes; the big supermarkets had nearly all the stuff that we'd have in our big supermarkets. This war that Putin has unleashed on his own countrymen's friends and family is not a war on the edge of Europe, it is a war in Europe. It is a crime.

While businesses gamble with their investors' money through the lack of rule of law in Russia, while EU governments hedge their bets on business and gas supplies, the war criminals who murdered the passengers of MH17 and their Russian state backers are getting away with it.

This is not a hill tribe in Afghanistan. Donetsk and Luhansk are like Leeds and Bradford. Zaporizhia to Donetsk was the equivalent of Liverpool to Leeds. Donetsk was host to England football fans just two years ago.

Ukrainian government forces and volunteers are killing civilians with shelling too. The Kremlin's propagandists (their army on social media, and 'left' and 'right' apologists around the world) seize on every real misdeed by the Ukrainian side to make excuses for their war.

How can anyone using mortars and heavy artillery on urban areas not be a war crime? The Ukrainian army and government fail to answer this. What they don't do, as the separatists have done at Mariupol, is fire multiple rockets into a civilian town where there is no war. Does the person who pulled that trigger, does

the mercenary who flicked a switch to massacre the passengers of MH17 really do that without President Putin's men knowing. It is state sanctioned terrorism in Europe.

Here we don't know that Ukrainian university degrees are minimum four years long; that a master's takes two years; that their PhD system is more rigorous.

I was incredibly impressed by the quality of students that I taught. Many spoke better English than first year British English students. Compulsory PE lessons, and compulsory Ukrainian politics and language studies in university, seem very nationalist / communist. S

Speaking at a conference on 'Patriotic Education' was a slightly surreal cultural experience. I argued they should learn from the positive language policy

in Wales and the lessons of a modern celebration of different cultures in the north of Ireland. The young people have a rose tinted view that everything is better in America, in Europe, in Britain. I pointed out all the time that most things were the same except many of their buildings, roads and pavements were pretty derelict like ours were 20 years ago. T

True their mini-van buses (marshrutkas) were mainly an horrendous experience, and the old trams falling apart. True we don't eat lots of types of cabbage, buy bottles of vodka in bars, or have any good soup. Traditional sleeper trains were exactly as described on Seat 61, but the new inter city Hyundais better than anything in the UK.

Ukrainian graduates will be very talented on the world stage. What they won't find is that everything is better elsewhere. The post-Communist collapse of the health service was one area where I could easily see that things were better under the Soviet Union.

To Western cultural eyes some things would seem old fashioned. The huge pride everyone has in the beauty of Ukrainian women, and British universities would not have a Miss University contest with entrants in bikinis; the fierce pride of every modern female student in Ukrainian borsch. The universities were also run in a very bureaucratic way. These seem old fashioned but the people simply want to live their lives in peace, preferably able to travel and work freely like other Europeans. Now they can't easily travel to the Crimean or safely to the Sea of Azov coasts, which are the equivalent of Spain's costas for the region.

The UK government, the EU and US are totally committed to Ukraine as an independent state. That doesn't mean that NATO or the EU will ride to the rescue. They won't. Their politicians wouldn't support it because their public won't support it.



When I was first in Ukraine I didn't know whether the Russian regime was really behind the war. By the time I was there again it was impossible to believe otherwise.

POWER GRAB

A century after World War I the Russian leader's power grab is killing youth on an eastern front. Across from Zap's 'Big Lenin' statue was a memorial hung with recent photographs of recently killed young and middle aged men from the city, fighting just 120 miles away.

Ukraine feels like a still centralised post-Communist state where national symbols have been substituted for Communist ones. Zaporozhia combines the passion of being the birthplace of the Ukrainian Cossacks (at Khortitsa Island) with fierce pride of the part played in defeating the Nazi invasion.

The city was the headquarters of Hitler's Army Group South and entirely destroyed during the war. They had a celebration of their Cossack heritage a day before celebrating the city's liberation by the Soviet army. A couple of weeks later they commemorated the millions of deaths caused by the famine by Stalin started to persecute the Ukrainian farmers. This is a city that will not accept authoritarian rule from Russia.

I met some young nationalists and some middle aged and older people happier with the Soviet times. No one wanted war. All want an end to corruption. With some shops selling trousers, women's shirts or jackets that were the cost of a university lecturer's salary for a month; with perfectly kept '70s and '80s Soviet cars intermingled with the blacked out limousines, with giant Apple branded stores, some people in the city clearly have a huge amount of money but most are struggling. The war is a distraction from ending this disparity.

There is one other aspect of the emergency where the Ukrainian state is falling down.

There seems to be little support, and little public sympathy, for the people displaced from Donetsk and Luhansk. I met many students who've had to move from those universities. They were made welcome. There are more than 50,000 displaced persons in Zaporozhia region and I know of fantastic relief work being done by Estonian and Polish charity and local volunteer teams. The war is all over the media, this generous relief of the human cost is not. George Soros is right when he says "By enabling Ukraine to defend itself, Europe would be indirectly also defending itself."

Kiron Reid is a member of the Liberator Collective

GRIDLOCK IN WASHINGTON

Compromise is out in the American political system as the country limbers up for another probable Bush versus Clinton presidential contest, says Dennis Graf

The results of the US mid term elections last November were a disaster for the Democrats. They always knew that they had been dealt a difficult hand but they seemed genuinely surprised when they faced defeat almost everywhere.

There are several things to consider. Historically, the president's party in a midterm election usually loses a fair number of seats. Everyone expects this. Americans seem to be more comfortable with a weak and divided government.

Secondly, the type of people who turn out at the polls are those who are angry and right now most of them are far-right Republicans. Also, Democrats are more likely to find it difficult to vote. They are usually not given time off from their lower paid work to vote. Many will have to wait in long lines and may be less inclined to wait.

The American government is very complicated, made deliberately so, in order to discourage change and to encourage continuity. Until fairly recently, this 'balance of powers' served us well. Now we have something approaching gridlock and even some partial governmental shutdown.

To oversimplify, Congress consists of two houses, the 'lower' House of Representatives consists of 435 men and women, each representing around 700,000 people, somewhat comparable to the House of Commons.

Our 'upper' chamber the Senate has two senators from each state, no matter their size. For a bill to pass and be presented to the President, both the Senate and the House has to pass something hammered out between them. The President then decides, but generally signs unless it's something really unacceptable. If the President vetoes the bill, Congress can override the veto, but this is rare.

Finally, and this doesn't happen often, the Supreme Court can decide if a bill violates the Constitution. Its decision is final and cannot be challenged. The only legislative alternative is to start again with a new law that the Supreme Court might then accept. The President has the power, of course, to execute the laws and he (or she) decides what the limits of this power might be. Needless to say, Congress will, most likely, not agree but

There's not much that they can do, though, except refuse to pay for what they don't like.

This seldom happens since it would reflect badly on an already deeply unpopular Congress. The government has been shut down several times recently and the public doesn't like it.

Americans have very mixed feelings about government, especially the Federal government in Washington. They like what government provides but they don't like government workers and they eagerly

listen to people who tell them that they pay too much in taxes.

In November a half dozen of the Democratic Senate seats were lost in deeply 'red' states - Republican strongholds. The Democrats had some strong candidates but, alas for them, so did the Republicans. This time the

Republicans selected their candidates with more care. There were fewer extremists and eccentrics though it still has such people from earlier elections. One of them now leads the Senate environmental committee - a very powerful position - who does not accept the validity of man made climate change or even Darwin's theory of evolution. However, the Republicans will have to defend a large number of seats in the 2016 election and the Democrats are hoping that they can take back the Senate. They might have a good chance of doing so.

The Republicans also made substantial gains last November in the House of Representatives and because of redistricting after the 2010 Republican landslide, there is almost no chance that the Democrats will take the House anytime in the foreseeable future.

DEFY CONGRESS

So, Obama has two years left and he's facing a solid strengthened opposition in Congress. He has apparently decided that the kind of compromise that he could accept would not be acceptable to the Republicans and thus his best approach is to use his inherent powers that he has and defy Congress. There's a good deal he can do and this more muscular approach has raised his public approval ratings.

Obama now faces a Congress totally controlled by a very right wing Republican party. These opponents have frozen in place our political system for the last four years though they may try to compromise with Obama on some issues.

They will need to prove to the public that they're more than just the party of "no."

Our next presidential election will be in November of 2016. Hilary Clinton is thought to be nearly certain to be the Democratic contender and she might be unopposed. She would be the first woman nominated by a major party.

Mrs Clinton does have strengths. Her party is angry and relatively united. She's well known and widely admired, especially among women, now the majority voter. She was an unofficial but a close advisor to the still popular Bill Clinton. She's been in the White House at the centre of power. She has run for the office before, in 2008 and nearly succeeded.

She disappointed many people and it was clear that, unlike Bill Clinton, she's not a political natural. However, she was a popular and effective Senator

from New York. Her years as secretary of state gave heft to her career. She has good connections with Wall Street money and talent. She is also said to be a friend of Rupert Murdoch. I will not comment.

Jeb Bush is widely believed to be a strongest potential candidate against Hilary Clinton. He might have trouble, though, navigating his way through a primary system dominated by Tea Party extremists.

Though definitely a conservative, he has staked out a position to the left of the other would be candidates. He hasn't been on the national stage and much of his political thinking is unknown but what is known is anathema to the large number of far right voters. To many of the independent voters and even some Democrats, he might be a safe choice.

A possible great advantage: Bush is married to a Spanish-speaking woman of Mexican background and his children are Hispanic in appearance. In the future, they will be a major voting bloc. We're a long way, however, from the next election and there are always surprises.

It's still very early, but at this moment it looks as if we might have another Clinton - Bush race a quarter century after the first. Jeb Bush, a one-time governor of Florida, the brother of George W Bush and the son of George Herbert Walker Bush is widely assumed to be running. Current polls show him as an acceptable choice among ordinary Republican voters and much more important, he appears, to be the choice of the 'heavy hitters' of the party. Jeb would find it fairly easy to raise immense sums of money. The party plutocrats usually get their way.

Most voters seem to understand that our present system is exceedingly corrupt and based on what I would call legalized bribery. Cynicism is widespread though there doesn't seem to be any grassroots attempt at reform.

Obama surprised everyone when he changed our approach to Cuba. We have had, with few exceptions, only a minimum of contact with the Castro brothers' regime. Obama would like to have full normal relations with Cuba though much of this would require approval of Congress, something he's not going to get. Florida is a key 'swing state' and the Cuban-Americans are the key to winning and Florida is often necessary to win the Presidency.

POROUS BORDER

Probably the most intense political issue in the United States now concerns the long and somewhat porous border with Mexico and how to control the flood of undocumented immigrants, especially from Central America.

These people have taken great risks coming here. There are probably 10-15 million people here illegally and no-one has any idea what to do with them. Everyone concedes that it would be impossible to "send them all back". Some have been here for decades, even generations. Many have children who were born here and are citizens.

"Americans have very mixed feelings about government. They like what government provides but they don't like government workers and they eagerly listen to people who tell them that they pay too much in taxes"

They have champions. The scandal-weakened Roman Catholic church needs and welcomes them. The large industrial farms, with their time-sensitive produce, need them. They do the work that Americans don't want to do, or are unable to. They make very little money by American standards and business people are tempted to exploit them even more. Democrats generally welcome them since those who

eventually become citizens will probably vote for them. Cuban-Americans have been the exception though it seems now that the younger generation are as likely to vote for Democrats as they are for Republicans.

Probably the most important, though currently dormant, political issue is the role of human activity in climate change. Most Republicans in government deny or question this so anything done will depend on president. Representatives of the Obama administration have met their Chinese counterparts and have agreed there is a real problem. It's getting more and more difficult to deny the reality of climate change though many Americans believe that the subject is 'controversial' and we can't really trust the scientists. We have a powerful propaganda machine instilling this doubt and selling the idea that man has not influenced climate and thus, political decisions are unnecessary.

It's hard to imagine that the torture of war prisoners would become controversial in the US, but it is. The former vice-president, Dick Cheney is the strongest champion of the practice and he contends that torture is not immoral if there's the slightest chance it would provide useful information.

Proponents of this point of view, of course, don't call it 'torture', since Americans love euphemisms, they call it 'enhanced interrogation'

Republican Senator John McCain, a former prisoner of war tortured during the Vietnam War contends that getting useful information through torture is not likely.

Americans are paying attention now to the possibility of more terror in the United States. Americans were deeply affected by the events in France and they know that, we too, have young Muslim men, recent immigrants, who have gone to the Middle East to fight against us and who will probably come back.

After the French Charlie Hebdo killings most Americans may be more afraid of terrorism than anything else but they're unwilling to fight another war in the Middle East. T

They look upon the Iraqi invasion as a tragic decision, something that must not be repeated. Most still blame Bush though the Republicans try to portray Obama as weakling unwilling to stand up for America and thus encourage our enemies. Some were comparing him unfavourably to Putin. They don't seem to have any alternative, though, aside from macho posturing. Everyone says that a nuclear-armed Iran is unacceptable, though how they would prevent it is something seldom discussed.

MUTED JAZZ

Why is Federal Conference Committee allowing proponents of Azerbaijan at Liberal Democrat conference, ask Sophie Bridger and Robbie Simpson

Ah, Lib Dem conference. A gathering of minds, a place for debate, packed with those dedicated to personal liberty and free speech. Well, mostly.

For the last few years, an organisation called The European Azerbaijan Society (TEAS) has held fringe events at the conference, and other major party conferences too. They represent a government that has no regard for human rights, for freedom of speech, or freedom of the press.

TEAS describes itself as an independent organisation dedicated to forging relationships between Azerbaijan and Europe. In fact it has troubling links with the highest echelons of the Azerbaijani dictatorship. A leaked US government cable acknowledges that far from being independent, “[TEAS’s] talking points very much reflect the goals and objectives of the GOAJ [government of Azerbaijan]”. Independent? Hardly.

TEAS promotes an image of Azerbaijan as a free, law-abiding nation well on its way to becoming a full-fledged western democracy. But, according to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, that’s far from the truth. In Azerbaijan, elections are rigged, and those who oppose the regime are locked away for years at a time. The current ruling dynasty came to power after a military coup in 1993 and have not held a single fair election since. Opposition party members are routinely arrested and their offices firebombed; journalists are subject to arbitrary raids and detention.

In 2013 eight youth activists, some under 18, created a Facebook event calling for a peaceful protest for democracy in the country. They were arrested, and some were tortured. They are still being held, and have now been sentenced to between six and eight years in prison. According to Human Rights Watch the government’s “poor record [has] dramatically deteriorated” with crackdowns on journalists, opposition activists and civic society.

Even by the standards of the region, Azerbaijan’s record on human rights is simply appalling. Independent watchdog Freedom House rates Azerbaijan as worse for civil liberties and political freedoms than Russia or Iraq, and equally as bad as Iran. Press organisation Reporters Without Borders ranked Azerbaijan 160th in their Press Freedom Index, worse than Egypt, worse than Russia - even worse than Belarus.

So why is TEAS allowed to run events at conference, despite evidence that they represent the agenda of a dictatorship?

One of the reasons frequently given is one about ‘healthy disagreement’. Geoff Payne from Federal Conference Committee told us that “the party has always been prepared to take bookings from those that it may disagree with in policy terms on the basis that it believes in free speech and freedom of debate.”

And so it should. But there’s a huge gap between disagreement over policy, and disagreement over fundamental principles - things like democracy, human rights and freedom of speech.

We’re not talking about giving a stall to Gatwick Airport or the tobacco lobby, so that we can politely weigh up the merits of their suggested policies. We’re talking about giving space to an organisation that backs up a dictatorship. In Azerbaijan, journalists and opposition politicians are tortured. This is not about policy, it is about principle.

The principle of freedom of speech lies at the heart of our party. The nature of democratic debate relies on it. Unfortunately it’s not one that the government of Azerbaijan subscribes to. There’s a great irony in defending their freedom of speech when they spend so much time silencing others. What about freedom of speech for dissidents in Azerbaijan? What about the right of ordinary citizens to openly criticise their government? Whose freedom of speech are we defending exactly? The Government of Azerbaijan doesn’t need to attend a UK conference to make itself heard - by letting them speak all we do is further silence their citizens, journalists and political activists.

At a TEAS Lib Dem conference event, you’ll be entertained with jazz and offered complimentary wine. Briefly during the evening, a representative of TEAS will come on stage, say a few words and promptly vanish. They’ll never mention the teenage protesters that the government has imprisoned, or the journalists they have silenced. They don’t allow for debate or criticism, for people to raise concerns about the regime, or to press them on their shoddy record of human rights.

FCC appears to be under some kind of illusion that they’re allowing engagement and debate, but TEAS’s events aren’t about engagement - they’re about whitewashing their human rights record and presenting a deceptively positive image of Azerbaijan.

FCC and its various sub-committees see “no basis” to block TEAS from running events at conference. We have no doubt that they will be back at next year’s conference. Conference is not a tool for despotic regimes to buy respectability; as Liberal Democrats we should not allow our name to be used to rehabilitate torturers. It’s time for FCC to stop hiding behind false claims of ‘engagement’ and stand up for our principles.

Sophie Bridger and Robbie Simpson launched the campaign against TEAS presence at the Glasgow October 2014 conference

OUT OF THE SMOKE

The crumbling Palace of Westminster could be replaced outside London, says Sarah Green

The building housing our seat of parliament is crumbling - an appropriate metaphor perhaps for the state of the traditional political parties.

In October 2012 the powers that be commissioned a report into the options for the renewal and restoration of the Palace of Westminster. The annual maintenance bill is about £30m and the report states very clearly that restoration and repair will top £3bn. Helpfully there is a section of the UK Parliament's website dedicated to the entire project which is expected to take years - if not decades - to complete.

There is no denying this is a fascinating and historic building, instantly recognisable from the outside. On the inside you step into the past with surprises around each corner and up every staircase. Indeed, curious traditions have grown up around it.

Not only is the building antiquated but conventions, traditions and practices exist that to the uninitiated seem truly baffling. The process of voting is just one example, where parliamentarians walk down one of two corridors (a 'lobby') with a door at the end where their vote is counted as they walk through the aforementioned door. It might make for great theatre but it means every vote takes far too long and when you consider this process is repeated when several votes need to take place, it is hardly a good use of anyone's time. The language and practices that have built up around the place are equally confusing. It is a club and an arcane one at that - one seemingly immune to change and reform.

The building has been undergoing repairs for years and is riddled with asbestos. Indeed MPs have raised the idea of building a new parliament building several times, including Tory MP Hugo Summerson who in 1990 said: "This place is a museum, and that is how it should be in future. We need a brand new facility, and we should leave this place to the Americans and the Japanese."

I can't help agreeing with this assessment. The Palace is a Grade I listed building and, with Westminster Abbey and St Margaret's Church, forms part of the Westminster UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is a fantastic tourist attraction and London landmark. I'm not suggesting we bulldoze parliament. I'm saying we should allow her to retire as a working parliament.

This would mean finding a new home for the House of Lords and the House of Commons. The 2012 pre-feasibility study into the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster ruled out building a parliament outside London because all of the workings of government are also based in the capital.

But that doesn't have to remain the case. Why are we so wedded to the idea that parliament (and government) must be in the capital? Plenty of other countries have their seat of government and financial centres in different cities (Berlin and Frankfurt;

Washington and New York). Indeed Brazil built Brasilia as a new capital in the 1960s specifically to move away from Rio de Janeiro and ensure its capital was located in a more central location.

We could benefit from doing something similar. We should separate the financial and political centres of the UK. In so doing we would make much needed inroads into the south east-centric nature of life in the UK. While I'm not suggesting we build a new city, regenerating an area such as Birmingham or Liverpool or Leeds by building a new UK political hub would do more to address the north-south divide than three decades of economic projects have achieved.

There are benefits for the capital too, for example the pressure on housing in London puts home ownership out of the reach of anyone on average earnings.

There are plenty of candidates who could play host to our new political centre - parts of the country that are perhaps too often neglected and would welcome the challenge.

There is a real opportunity to reinvigorate and re-energise politics by moving parliament out of London altogether. In the process we could start new traditions (like electronic voting) and scrap the impenetrable language. A new parliament in a different part of the UK - one fit for the 21st Century - would also make it less remote to many part of the country, including Scotland.

So I do hope that those looking at this ask themselves what our parliament is actually for. They might just conclude that a mock-gothic palace reminiscent of Hogwarts is no longer a suitable home.

Sarah Green is a member of the Social Liberal Forum executive.

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ALL IN THE MIND

The Liberal Democrat campaign on mental health has seen improved services and attitudes, but there is a long way to go, says Claire Tyler

As one mental health campaigner has summed up the problem: “Why does the NHS pull out all the stops to stop me dying of physical health problems, but does not care if I die of mental health problems.”

For too long, mental health has been ignored, marginalised, or left to the realm of social experiment or institutional stigma.

Just like physical health, we all have mental health, which affect one in four people in any given year, and the numbers continue to rise. In 2013, referrals to community mental health teams were up 13%, and up 16% for crisis services. With demand rising and some services unable to cope, mental health services need sustained investment.

People are not getting the support that they need. While 75% of people with physical health conditions get treatment, just 65% of people with psychotic disorders and 25% of those with depression and anxiety successfully access treatment.

Yet mental health problems are estimated to cost the country £105bn a year through lost working days, benefits, lost tax receipts and the cost of treatment. So there is a very strong economic case for us investing in wellbeing, resilience and mental health

Thankfully, the last few years have seen the most significant shift in public attitudes for a generation. All political parties are beginning to recognise the importance of improving mental health care, and there have been very welcome and significant achievements led by Liberal Democrat ministers – not least the introducing of the first waiting time standards for mental health care, backed up by cash.

We need to ensure that mental health services are equipped to respond to people with all sorts of needs, ranging from preventative work and early intervention through to crisis care and that those who need mental health services are able to access care quickly, and have choices about what kind of care they receive. We also need programmes that reduce discrimination and stigma so people feel able to speak out and seek help openly.

This Parliament has seen real progress, with the cross-governmental strategy ‘No Health Without Mental Health’, which was a breakthrough moment, and led the way for the commitment of parity of esteem now enshrined in legislation and £400 invested in talking therapies.

The Mental Health Crisis Care Concordat should ensure that no one affected is left without support. All localities having made declarations to work together across agencies to improve crisis care and progress is already happening on the ground.

Of course, good mental health care isn’t just about treatment, but about empowering people to live better

lives. We now have more peer support workers in mental health trusts and some 30 recovery colleges in place, to help people with mental health problems achieve their own goals for recovery.

We have seen a sea change in the way people think about mental health.

Much praise is deserved for the MPs who spoke in the House of Commons so openly and movingly of their own experiences of mental health. The courage of those in such positions to be open about their mental health problems has undoubtedly raised the issue’s profile in Parliament and, I hope, made it easier for others to speak out.

Meanwhile, the Time to Change programme - England’s biggest anti-stigma programme, run jointly by Mind and Rethink Mental Illness- is making a notable impact on both public understanding of mental health and perhaps more importantly, on people’s experiences of discrimination.

But there remain barriers to achieving a real parity of esteem for mental health

After generations of missed opportunities, I guess it’s inevitable that it will take time achieve the standards of care we aspire to. So what are the remaining barriers that need addressing?

Bluntly put, funding for mental health services has faced disproportionate cuts. Mental health has always been known as the Cinderella service because of chronic underfunding: mental health receives only 13% of NHS health expenditure despite making up 23% of the ‘burden of disease’. But austerity has hit hard: mental health has seen real-term cuts three years in a row.

At the same time, demand is rising – by 2030 there will be approximately two million more adults in the UK with mental health problems than there are today.

FALSE ECONOMY

Often it’s early intervention services that are the first targets for cuts, but this is a false economy when problems get worse and need more intensive - and costly - support.

With their new public health responsibilities, local authorities have a real opportunity to prevent mental health problems developing in their communities. However, research suggests that mental health has not been sufficiently prioritised, with councils on average spending only 1.5% of their ring-fenced public health budget on it.

Even when people receive care, it isn’t always helpful. When we’re unwell, we’re often told to see our GP in the first instance, and 90% of people with mental health problems are treated in primary care. But GPs admit they don’t always have the training they need to support people with mental health problems. All primary care services urgently need GPs and practice

nurses with the necessary confidence and expertise.

Evidence shows that a choice of care improves treatment outcomes, but people often do not receive the type of care they want. Therapy is the preferred choice of most, but only one in seven people receive it. That's why I would like to see the right for patients to choose the type of treatment they receive enshrined in the NHS Constitution. And for those who would rather have talking therapies than medication there should be choice of evidence-based therapies available backed up by high quality information.

Children and young people's mental health services are a matter of real concern. Some 10% of children age 5-15 have a mental health problem. We know that funding has fallen by 6.4% in real terms since 2010 and the commissioning of these services is far too fragmented, resulting in too many cases falling through the cracks.

Too often, children and young people are taken hundreds of miles away from their homes for treatment or are admitted to adult wards. The government has committed to fund more children's beds and invested £150m to improve support for eating disorders, and we await the report of the Children and Young People's Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Taskforce.

Children's mental health begins at birth. It is critical to children's mental health and resilience that they develop a secure relationship with their primary caregiver. More than one in ten women will experience mental health difficulties during and after pregnancy, which often go unrecognised and untreated. According to the National Childbirth Trust only 3% of CCGs report having a peri-natal mental health strategy.

Failing to provide peri-natal mental health services actually costs money in the long run: £8.1bn a year, according to the Centre for Mental Health. We could improve mothers' access to mental health support by committing to include measurable objectives in the NHS Mandate following the general election.

Schools have a golden opportunity to promote children's mental health and emotional well-being. I would like to see the next government commit to raising awareness of mental health and wellbeing among young people, by ensuring this forms an enhanced and mandatory part of the curriculum for all schools irrespective of their status.

Personal, social and health education will be central to this but such an approach must be embedded in the mainstream curriculum and the ethos of the school. As counselling can be an effective early intervention for young people experiencing mental health problems, I would like to see all children in England having access to counselling in the same way as in Wales and Northern Ireland.

People with mental health problems also face difficulties finding and keeping employment and there are 2.3m people with a mental health condition out of work. Almost half of people receiving Employment and Support Allowance are claiming primarily because of mental health problems.

Yet research shows the vast majority desperately want to work. It's clear that back-to-work schemes have little understanding of people with mental health problems and often assume they lack motivation and willingness to work.

People in this position need personalised support,

and programmes based on conditionality and sanctions have been shown to be detrimental to their health and have failed to help people to find employment.

Finally, parity of esteem needs to be genuinely inclusive and work for all, including those excluded or marginalised from society, those who are isolated or that significant proportion of people living with a long term physical condition – estimated to be a third – who also have a mental health problem.

Certain ethnic minority groups and people with complex needs are often overlooked. People without English as a first language often have difficulty accessing care. People with dual diagnoses, for example a drug and alcohol problem and another mental illness, are often denied access to mental health care on the grounds that their substance abuse make treatment impossible, and when they are in crisis, they are more likely to be taken to a police cell than to a health care setting.

It doesn't have to be this way. Charities working together in the Make Every Adult Matter Coalition – which I chair – have shown that by effective joint working better care can be achieved. I am pleased that the Department of Health is reviewing the 2002 guidance on dual diagnosis and hope the Liaison and Diversion schemes with start to address drug and alcohol abuse.

AMBITIOUS FOR CHANGE

We need to be ambitious for further change. Mental health is not just a health issue – and I want to see the next government have a truly cross governmental mental health and wellbeing strategy embracing employment, welfare, policing and criminal justice, housing, education and planning as well as seeing Public Health England lead with the establishment of a National Wellness Programme championing preventative action.

I would like to see a dedicated minister for mental health with a cross government remit and the secretary of state for health reporting annually to parliament for progress towards parity of esteem between mental and physical health.

We should rewrite systems that discriminate against mental health and lead to institutional bias, including making the NHS Constitution fairer, introducing a wider range of access and waiting time standards, along with entitlements to NICE-approved treatments for mental health problems, revising payments systems to put mental and physical health care on an equal footing, and better aligned NHS, public health and social care outcomes frameworks which place more emphasis on mental health.

Most importantly of all, the NHS budget must be rebalanced to ensure mental health services for children and adults receives their fair share of funding and real terms increases in investment in each year of the next Parliament

Much progress has been made in mental health over the course of this Parliament. The next Government – of whatever complexion - has an opportunity to build on this momentum and transform the way we approach mental health.

Claire Tyler is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords

Head of State by Andrew Marr Fourth Estate £18.99

What a busy boy Andrew Marr is. Even while still recovering from his stroke, he seems to be constantly on Radio 4 or TV; a very good TV series on Scottish writers; books with modest titles like *A History of the World* churned out on a regular basis; and now his first novel.

Set in a couple of years' time, during a knife-edge EU referendum, the Yes campaign, which seems to be entirely dependent on the popularity of the prime minister, suffers something of a body blow when, five days before voting, the prime minister rather inconveniently dies.

Downing Street insiders and rather implausible parts of the establishment whirr into action, scheming to conceal his death until after the polls close. What follows is, frankly, too lame to be called satire and might most closely resemble a sub-standard offering from Tom Sharpe.

Various real characters (Dermot Murnaghan, Ian Hislop and Rory Bremner for example) are interwoven with some quite nicely portrayed Westminster insiders and a splendidly uncouth newspaper editor of the old school.

Marr's knowledge of Whitehall and the geography of No 10 is, however, more realistic than his description of sex: "She put both arms around his shoulders and lifted herself up, impaling herself most successfully... The sex worked; they bucked like deer and squirmed like eels. And after that, vice-versa." Well, really!

Curiously, it appears that the idea for the book came from John Selwyn Gummer's brother, Lord Chadlington who, one hopes, is getting a share of the royalties. After all, now he's no longer the head of PR giant Huntsworth, he might be in need of a bob or two.

I read this book in a day after taking to my bed after Christmas with a dose of man-flu. It was perfectly good as a literary Lemsip and would probably make a decent three-part TV comedy drama, but it is not, sadly, of the standard one might have expected from Andrew Marr and one must hope that, if he continues to write fiction, future efforts are more rewarding than this.

Nick Winch



REVIEWS

A devolution dialogue: Evolution or revolution?

By Paul Tyler & Nick
Harvey
Centre Forum
free download

For one of my day jobs I had to report on the debate at the 2014 Lib Dem spring conference on devolution on demand and the challenge to the proposals from supporters of regional assemblies.

I did so with perfect neutrality since I thought both sides were wrong and events since the Scottish referendum have made a solution to the question of devolution in England simultaneously both more urgent and more complex.

The obvious flaw to devolution on demand is that it leaves England as a patchwork, with some parts still run directly by a central government whose services would soon reach a tipping point of being unviable.

Regional assemblies though make no sense south-east of the Wash-Tamar line, where regional identity is weak and few obvious boundaries exist.

This Centre Forum publication is a contribution to untangling this, though in the form of a dialogue rather than an argument for a set of firm proposals. It thus opens up thinking on this vexed question without coming to a conclusion. Lord Tyler, former MP for North Cornwall, supports devolution on demand, with some caveats. Nick Harvey, MP for North Devon, proposes a more radical approach, which I have not previously seen argued, to tear up the entire map of English local government and impose a 'big bang' solution in which there would be 120-150 local governments and 15-20 regional government above them. Both

though argue that the party should use the opportunity opened up by the Scottish referendum and the subsequent emphasis on the government of England to create a new settlement before the waters of public indifference close over the whole issue once again.

Mark Smulian

Grayson Perry 'Who Are You?' Exhibition at National Portrait Gallery, London, until 15 March

The fourteen portraits – mostly ceramic – that came out of Grayson Perry's Channel 4 documentary "Who Are You?" are now on display in the National Portrait Gallery in London. Of most immediate interest to Liberals would probably be the Huhne Vase, but it has to be said that Perry's empathy with his subjects is an object lesson in respect for the individual, which is central to our philosophy for all of us. Of particular strength is his treatment of The Deaf, of Alzheimer's Disease (Memory Jar) and of a young transsexual (I Am A Man).

Chris Huhne proved the most difficult subject to depict. In the television programme he came over as cocky, without remorse; the only chink in his armour – he wouldn't show Perry his security tag. The Vase is typically Grecian, and repeats a series of images – Huhne's face (presumably from a newspaper photo – somewhat miffed at being caught out), phallic symbols and prison bars. To complete the portrait, Perry smashed the vase – I think I'd have left it at that, but Perry is too kind for such a gesture, and put it back together again, gilding the cracks.

As it is, I'm immensely more impressed with some of the other

work, the arguments articulated in *The Deaf* for instance – not a disability, just a different way of experiencing and communicating, is something we should all take on board.

At the foot of the stairs to the galleries where the works are displayed Perry has placed *A Map of Days*; one could study it for hours, but in a corner is the sin of Hubris. Huhne would do well to reflect on it as he goes forward in his new life.

Stewart Rayment

I'm not sure if a book is the perfect medium for this as photographic work, except in keeping the argument alive. I sense a very powerful exhibition, but between two covers the work struggles – or is this a difficulty with dealing with the subject matter? What has to be dealt with is the criminality that feeds off of the sex worker and the client, but in the wider context, the imbalance of wealth and power across the world.

Stewart Rayment

which urged callers: "Please go round the back way and oblige Mrs Wilson".

When Katie first sent the chapters in this e-book to *Liberator* they didn't fit anywhere very obvious in the magazine and couldn't be used.

She has now solved that problem by issuing her own e-book. These stories take believable canvassing incidents and spin them off into what an imagined conversation might be like if it goes very, very wrong.

The elderly gardening enthusiast who begins discussing an open-air

morgue they once saw in France, the 'true blues' obsessed with horses, an exasperated mother of young children who ends up threatening an ASBO, you get the picture.

One hopes none of these conversations actually happened to Katie in Tory Land (in fact a Home Counties area just beyond the M25) but reading it they each become horribly plausible.

Mark Smulian

Pipeline, Trafficking to Italy Photographs by Elena Perlino Schilt Publishing 2014

Je suis Nigeria, but the country is not only beset by terrorists thinking that they act in the name of God. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has placed Nigeria on its list of the eight countries with the world's highest rate of human trafficking.

Italy is the destination of many women who end up trapped in prostitution, and Elena Perlino has spent many years gaining their confidence and photographing them. Her work took her through Italy back to Benin City. This is the area of work on which

Lynne Featherstone has focused in her ministerial career, which we hope will continue, and the subject matter (from an Indian perspective) of a recent Liberal International British Group forum (*Liberator* 369). So here is some evidence from the coalface to back that work up.

The supporting text, by Giuseppe Carrisi, Laura Maragnani and Isoke Aikpitanyi, is very matter-of-fact, unpleasant; Isoke is herself a victim of trafficking. Christiana Giordano's piece looks at how Italy attempts to deal with it. Like the rest of the text, it has been drawn from other sources which appear worthy of investigation.



Adventures in Tory Land by Katie Barron Ebook from Amazon or [katiealicebarron. wordpress.com](http://katiealicebarron.wordpress.com)

Almost everyone who has been involved in politics has their anecdotes of canvassing, meeting voters who are perhaps deranged, have strange obsessions or are stark naked. My own concerns a man who appeared to be in the midst of sexual congress with a dog, but that's another story. My father once saw a notice on a voter's home

Dolphins Keep Me Safe In Dreams By Ed Boxall The Pearbox Press 88 Mount Road Hastings TN35 5LA 2014 £6.00 www.edboxall.com

com

A charming little book resolving the problems of going to sleep, beautifully illustrated from drawings, collages and prints. Dolphins rescue the sleeper from the threat of goblins to worlds of unicorns and a dear departed granddad. Children will sleep easier and adults derive much from the artwork.

Stewart Rayment

Winter has come to Rutland. Polar bear have been shot as far south as Barleythorpe and the drive to the Hall remains blocked by head-high drifts – at least they were head high for the Well-Behaved Orphans who were trying to clear them this morning.

The snow lies on my roof like the icing on one of Cook's delicious Christmas cakes – I happen to have a slice before me as I write this. Long icicles hang from the eaves. As this is just the worst time of the year for a journey, I pass my days watching the skaters enjoy the frozen expanse of Rutland Water or dozing by the Library fire.

This morning the postman struggled to my front door with a bundle of letters. Here is a request to donate a prize for the tombola at a fete to raise money for the Home for Distressed Canvassers in Herne Bay. Here is an estimate from a builder for repairs to the roof of St Asquith's – it is a little on the eyewatering side so, come the spring, I shall no doubt find myself up there directing operations. Here is a package with a Yeovil postmark marked 'TOP SECRET: BURN BEFORE READING'. I suspect it will turn out to be from Paddy Ashplant and contain his latest plans for the general election campaign.

So, rather than offer you my usual diary, let me give you the benefit of my experience and assess our prospects in a number of seats at this year's general election. (Those in the know, incidentally, expect it to be held on a Thursday early in May.)

Westmorland and Lonsdale. Some readers, I know, are anxious about the forthcoming election, so let me begin with a seat where we can look forward to it with every confidence. Whilst I suspect Farron of wanting to rip the pews out at St Asquith's and having everyone sing 'Shine, Jesus, Shine' as soon as my back is turned, he remains extraordinarily popular in the Lakes, enjoying a particular following amongst the mint cake workers of Kendal. A definite Liberal Democrat hold here.

Sheffield Hallam. We can, I trust, also be confident that our leader will retain his seat. Some reason that he has upset the student vote because, after waving that wretched pledge of his at everybody last time round, he stung them for a small fortune when he got the first whiff of power. However, given that the polls closed as early as 10pm, one has to question how many students actually made it into the booth to vote for him last time. Besides, Clegg has since apologised. Whether he was apologising for making his pledge or for breaking it was hard to tell, but there can be no doubt that he was Terribly Sorry.

Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey. Whilst are own Danny Alexander is known elsewhere as a champion of austerity,

Lord Bonkers' Diary

things look rather different when looked at from his own constituency. There is not a corner of this chunk of the Highlands that has failed to benefit from government largesse. There you will find ski lifts, subsidised fuel and the electric broadband internet. Above all there is the new railway with its solid gold carriages. Its name, if I recall correctly, is the Inverness, Nairn,

Badenoch and Strathspey Railway. Isn't that a coincidence?

Oxford West and Abingdon. All this talk of holding seats is a little dull: why should we not gain a few? Take OXWAB, as my younger friends are given to calling it. Whilst I bow to no one in my admiration for Dr Evan Harris, it has to be admitted that his habit of grafting the heads of rabbits on to humans to form an army of Focus deliverers proved controversial, efficient as they were (at least in my experience). So much so, indeed, that on election night the locals, armed with pitchforks and flaming brands, drove him from his laboratory in the surprisingly mountainous country between Oxford and Abingdon and elected a Conservative. I trust the more emollient Layla Moran will recapture the seat for the forces of progress, even if she does not own a Bunsen burner.

Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross. Caithness, the most northerly part of this most northerly of mainland Scottish constituencies, was once the seat of Sir Archibald Sinclair. It is an area best known in recent decades for the Dounreay atom plant, with its habit of spilling nuclear waste on to the neighbouring beaches. Sir Archibald, the grandfather of the current member, was a gentleman, a fine leader of our party and a friend of mine; certainly, he was never one to resort to underhand methods to deprive the bookies' favourite for Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party Moustache of the Year 2014 of his rightful prize. I am not saying that John Thurso used atomic waste to make his moustache grow so luxuriantly, but shouldn't he come forward and clear the matter up once and for all? That said, I have no doubt that he will win again this time.

Hazel Grove. She is a delightful woman and I have no doubt she will hold her seat (wherever it is).

Orkney and Shetland. If the Liberal Democrats were to win only one seat at the next election, this would be it. There is, of course, not the remotest prospect of that happening, but it might be worth sticking half a crown on Alistair Carmichael as out next leader just in case.

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