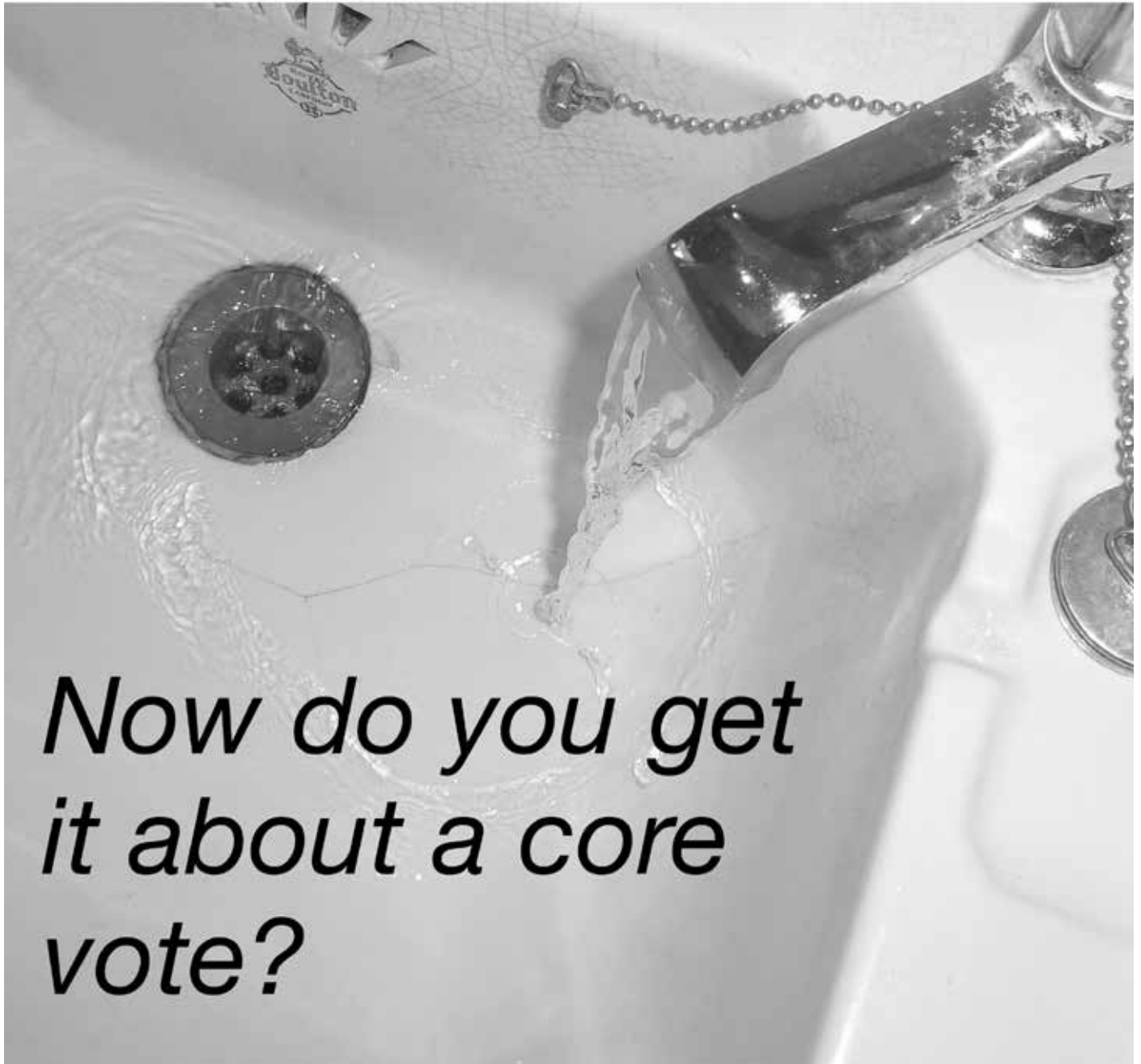


liberator



*Now do you get
it about a core
vote?*

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- * Leadership hustings - Farron and Lamb give their answers

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COMMENTARY

END OF THE CENTRIST ROAD

Was Nick Clegg up to the job of party leader? In some respects despite the carnage of 7 May, he obviously was - he is a gifted campaigner and speaker, secured a number of important policy goals under the coalition and was once a publicly appealing figure.

The crucial bit missing was his lack of political experience and unwillingness to take advice from anyone more experienced - a category that includes almost every party member who has stood for election.

Having been parachuted to the top of a regional MEP list, then into a safe Westminster seat, there were several crucial mills he never went through.

Lacking experience himself he sought advice from those who, however academically brilliant, were clueless ignoramuses in practical politics and two events early in the coalition sealed the party's fate.

The first was the Rose Garden, the event itself being bad enough, but also the strategy that flowed from that the Lib Dems 'owned' the coalition and were fully signed up to everything it did.

That attitude led to horrors like the bedroom tax, to Clegg's advisers being either too useless - or too obsessed by free market dogma - to realise that the Health and Social Care Act would bring a politically disastrous contamination (at least until conference revolted) and to Danny Alexander's cringe-inducing television appearances as George Osborne's human shield.

The second of course was tuition fees. Clegg's brainy crew could work up a perfectly good system of student finance.

But anyone with an atom of political experience would have understood the emotional impact on the public of such a blatantly broken pledge.

This went unrecognised and from that moment few voters were disposed to again believe a word Clegg said.

Despite the repeated massacres of councillors and MEPs Clegg was able to soldier on in a bunker closed to even allies, not to mention the party at large, lucky in that circumstances removed Chris Huhne, the only figure around whom opposition might have coalesced.

This lack of political understanding carried over into the general election campaign.

After years of establishing 'Stronger Economy, Fairer Society' - whatever its shortcomings - in the public's mind, there was a late change to 'Unity, Stability, Decency', the sort of slogan more normally associated with Third World generals justifying their overthrow of a democratic government.

If the first slogan meant little, the second meant absolutely nothing. Perhaps it was fitting with an election campaign that was about nothing.

The manifesto was long, it was full of sound ideas on many subjects, but it had nothing to catch the public's attention. There was no 'narrative', and the Federal Policy Committee was discouraged from providing one, and it gave no idea of the sort of society that party wanted or any strong reason to vote for the Lib Dems.

Instead of using manifesto policies expensively tested through polling, such as they were, the campaign was instead about how the party would moderate others in a hung parliament.

It was as if the slogan was "We won't go quite as far as they might." This failed to enthuse Lib Dem supporters and, as with the fate of the German FDP, the party lost its identity - voters simply voted for the real McCoy.

Anyone who had been around a while would have recalled David Steel's repeated failed attempts to induce voters to vote for a hung parliament - yet here was the party trying to promote the intrinsic instability of a hung parliament while using a slogan that stressed 'stability'.

While the campaign was in many respects good organisationally, this too failed to recognise that one cannot use organisational skills to solve political problems, except in the sense of mitigating failure.

The political problems were public mistrust of Clegg, the attempt to be 'centrist' without being clearly in favour of anything, and antipathy towards the coalition from Labour and Green tactical voters on whom the Lib Dems had previously relied. No campaign organisation, nor the popularity of individual MPs, could overcome that.

The result of these multiple follies has an election disaster unparalleled since 1970.

These experiences have tested to destruction the ideas that the public favours hung parliaments, that the party should station itself in an apolitical 'centre' defined by others and that simply bunging out more leaflets can solve issues of political trust.

Above all, the 2015 general election exposed the Lib Dem core vote at a pathetic 7.9%.

No more can the party rely on protest votes, passing grievances, being 'none of the above' or the myth that it can 'win everywhere', not least as the Greens and Ukip now compete for those votes.

The party had the glimmerings of a core vote in the 2000s among students, young professionals, public sector officers, the 'liberal minded' and poorer people in rural areas. The coalition systematically offended each, but these groups could be the building blocks of a new core vote around a liberal message not endlessly compromised by attempts to appeal to everyone at once.

That is the challenge for the new leader. We now know where the old way leads.

RADICAL BULLETIN

NOW YOU SEE IT...

The announcement of the front page of the Liberal Democrat manifesto in February created a minor news story.

Unfortunately its content was also news to the Federal Policy Committee (FPC), which is supposedly in charge of the manifesto.

FPC had expected to approve the five cover lines used, but as one member protested to vice-chair Malcolm Bruce: "Last week the expectation of FPC members, expressed at Monday night's meeting and in the subsequent 48 hours, that the final wording of the 5 priorities would be circulated for approval by us before launch was disappointed, the reasons remaining unclear."

Another observed to Bruce - who was taking the flak for a Clegg-bunker cock-up - "I'm angry that we're having to spend our time on this row when there is so much else to do. I feel I wasted two hours on Monday night discussing these blasted five points when it was all pre-arranged anyway (bar the odd word change which fitted into the already-prepared design) and the FPC discussion was essentially window-dressing.

"I don't like to be made to feel an idiot or for trust to be needlessly squandered as it has this week."

Another argued: "FPC as the sovereign body here should not have to accept surprises. There are enough communications professionals among us to understand that. Some transparency would not have gone amiss and suggests that the oft-joked about bunker mentality at the top of the party remains secretive rather than open."

One then MP protested there should be "no more surprises". A former MEP, "Made it clear that I needed to see reworded 5 bullet points before I could endorse them. Can someone please urgently explain why/ how this is not an attempt to bypass the FPC on something of huge importance? Because that is how it appears right now.

A message to FPC from Nick Clegg sought to explain the absence of civil liberty from the manifesto front page - one of the party's unique selling points - as "there isn't a way to boil down our policy agenda on freedom to a single iconic thing". Says it all.

WHERE POWER LIES

After the indignity of five years of being given 'the line' by the Clegg-bunker, the 100 or so Lib Dem peers now find themselves in a position of unusual power.

There are too few MPs to effectively shadow all government departments or to decide the party position on everything, so giving the peers greater freedom.

The Conservatives of course lack a majority in the lords and how the Lib Dems vote there will still

matter.

Thus the party's greatest political influence will reside in the unelected chamber. Will the Lib Dems still support lords reform?

UN-PEP TALK

On the Monday after the general election party staff were summoned to a meeting at Great George Street, with those unable to attend encouraged to dial in.

Chief executive Tim Gordon let it be known that the party knew what its values were and thus could hold a speedy leadership election, unlike Labour with its need to spend months soul searching.

Did he mean the values of the constitution's preamble or those of "unity, decency and stability" of the dying days of the Clegg regime, bemused staff wondered?

Staff though took some offence when Gordon encouraged them to think of those who would lose their jobs (a category in which he appeared not to include himself) with the first tranche of people mentioned being the special advisers.

Some thought sympathy should more appropriately lie with the constituency organisers and MPs' constituency staff - all of whom have much lower salaries and severance packages and most of whom live where they will find it harder to get alternative employment than in London.

POLLING ERROR

Pollsters have been widely criticised for getting the result of the general election so comprehensively wrong, but the Lib Dems' own polling was not exempt from this.

Paddy Ashdown's offer to eat his hat were the BBC exit poll correct sprang not from a sudden change in culinary preferences but a genuine belief that the party's figures were correct.

Indeed in mid-April some candidates had been contacted by Ashdown, who said 20 seats were 'won' and a similar number 'in play' (so about 17 of the 2010 haul written off as lost).

Quite how these numbers were arrived at is something those in charge of future campaigns will need to discover and act upon.

Those staffing the party's telephone canvassing centre in London were, for example, told on polling day evening to do a phone knock up for Jasper Gerrard in Maidstone. Despite a poor response volunteers were told to keep ringing until 10pm as he was only 0.2% behind. He lost by 10,709.

FOLLOW THE MONEY

Gerrard though did not lack resources. Liberator has received persistent complaints, the truth of which is a matter for conjecture, that huge sums

were diverted into holding Nick Clegg's seat in Sheffield Hallam, into a doomed attempt to save his closest political associate Danny Alexander in Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey and into Gerrard's campaign in consideration of his having written an admiring book about Clegg.

How many other seats might have been saved without this largesse being directed as it was, some empty-handed former MPs wonder?

CHOCOLATE SOLDIER

The flow of emails from party headquarters to members reached absurd proportions during the election campaign, with anyone on the mailing list at risk of getting several demands for money a day.

Quite the oddest came from Baroness Grender to promote a competition in which donors could win dinner with John Cleese and Paddy Ashdown.

She began by describing how she could see Paddy Ashdown eating a chocolate éclair (not a foodstuff normally associated with Ashdown's 'action man' image) and wondering if "in that chocolate filled moment" he was contemplating dining with 'you' and Cleese.

There were some other strange communications. In the age of e-mail, how much was spent mailing postcards of Ashdown to members asking them to help in key seats? Some were received by MPs' spouses, who it seems safe to assume already thus engaged.

BEARING WITNESS

Relations between the Liberal Democrats and Labour may plumb fresh depths if Mary Creagh is elected as that party's leader.

She was opposition leader in Islington when she complained to the thankfully defunct Standards Board for England that the borough's Lib Dem administration had appointed Helen Bailey as chief executive for improper political motives.

Creagh's case was comprehensively trashed when it reached the Adjudication Panel for England in January 2006.

The tribunal's observation was: "Councillor Creagh was not an impressive witness. The Tribunal agrees with the Respondents' assessment of her as an insensitive witness, lacking in balanced judgement and one who was prepared to make assumptions about the honesty and integrity of others without any proper basis.

"Speculation, suspicion and surmise were advanced as fact irrespective of whether there was any proper foundation for them. The Tribunal considers that her evidence was heavily influenced by her political motives and, save in so far as it is supported by other credible testimony, gives it little weight."

BOXES TICKED

Those who were not candidates in the general election were spared a spectacularly inappropriate email from the English Candidates Committee relating to a review of candidate and local party performance. No doubt this exercise is necessary, but was this letter?

An excerpt, to give a flavour, said: "All candidates must complete the review or they will not be returned

to the approved candidate list and will be unable to stand as a Liberal Democrat candidate again without attending an assessment day and starting from scratch."

It went on: "Can I stress again, that completing this review is not optional. If you fail to complete and return the review survey you will automatically be removed from the approved candidates list. It is also essential that we receive input from at least two of the three local party nominees, so that a balanced review can be carried out."

Not even a 'please', and this thoughtlessly-worded communication would have gone both to hopefuls just defeated and to the hundreds of paper candidates who probably never wished to stand anyway but did the party a favour.

After a storm of protest, candidates chair Richard Brett issued a non-apology which said: "I am aware that the e-mail sent out on Monday upset some of you with its tone and I am very sorry if this was the case for you."

He added by way of explanation: "It is however very important that we complete a review as soon as possible so we are best prepared for forthcoming mayoral and PCC elections in 2016 and indeed capture feedback while it is still fresh."

And this from a candidates committee so obsessed with its bureaucratic procedures that it insisted even paper candidates in the most hopeless places went through a full approval and selection process and refused to licence even sitting councillors as one-off paper candidates in their own constituencies.

Even paper candidates can do a bit of good if there early enough, but this attitude left many places without candidates as late as February.

Still at least the bureaucratic boxes were ticked. This committee clearly neither offers or expects any flexibility even when common sense would suggest its need.

SUPPING WITH DEVILS

The continuing Liberal party some years ago morphed into a rabidly anti-EU group, a stance quite at odds with that of the pre-merger Liberal Party. This spring the party's Cornish branch withdrew its candidates in favour of Ukip (Liberal 371), a move that led to the withdrawal of its nomination rights but not yet to any further action.

That proved enough for Fran Oborski (see page 25), former national executive chair, who has rejoined the Lib Dems.

Its also angered Rob Whewey, a well-known activist in the pre-merger party, who quietly left the continuing Liberal party some years ago though it kept his name on its website as the author of discussion papers.

In a message to its diminishing band of members, he said: "I now wish to formally disassociate myself from the Liberal Party.

"I have been appalled by the support, by the Liberal Party, for those who have flirted with or given support for Ukip. This has been going on for a decade or more. My advice as president was ignored and this constant tolerance of Ukip supporters has led to the Cornish debacle."

PURPOSE, TRUST AND FUN

A defecting Lib Dem voter told Roger Hayes he was voting Tory as “the only lesson you lot will understand”, but there are ways to rebuild the public trust thrown away by Nick Clegg

I know this is silly hokum but bear with me.

You know that bit in Braveheart when William Wallace is badly wounded after the Battle of Falkirk and is confronted by the mysterious helmeted knight who had been fighting with the English? And then shock, horror, gasp! The knight turns out to be none other than Robert the Bruce, and Wallace stares in complete disbelief, unable to speak at discovering such betrayal?

Well, that was how our core supporters felt after the 2010 general election when the Lib Dem group made the massive u-turn on student fees. That feeling of utter dismay results first in shock, then in anger and, only if you are very lucky, work really hard and wait a long time can it then turn into forgiveness. As the election results for the last four years have shown, that time has not yet arrived, and under Nick Clegg never would.

In that one ill-judged moment of political ineptitude the party proved, unequivocally, to a nation that was for once actually paying attention to what we had to say, that we were just like all the rest – dishonourable, untrustworthy, and only in it for ourselves.

Everyone knows that's what Tory and Labour politicians do all the time, and for some strange reason their voters don't seem to mind, but this is Liberals we're talking about here, and “aren't they supposed to be different?” people ask. Aren't they supposed to be better? What are we to do if even they can't be trusted to keep their election pledges for more than five minutes?

As important as this issue is (especially to our core supporters and the large numbers of educated young people, with a lifetime of voting ahead of them, that we particularly offended), I'm not going to write about student fees. Neither am I going to suggest that it is the only, or even the main, reason for the fulsome trouncing the party received on 7 May.

But it remains a mighty powerful totem and it's emblematic of the many failures of the party in government over the past five years.

An essential failure of trust brought about by quite dreadful leadership and continuing poor political judgement. And before people start jumping up and down and try to justify things by pointing out all the really good things that were achieved: yes I know there were, but that isn't the point.

Of course Liberals achieved good Liberal things: that's what Liberals are for. I was never against coalition and we all knew that it meant compromise, but it didn't mean – should never mean – being the apologists, and even the standard-bearers, for Tory policies and it doesn't mean relying only on legislation as the tool of good and liberal government.

Instead I want to write a positive, forward-looking

piece about renewal, to regain trust through words and deeds; through campaigns and beliefs; through leadership; and through laughter.

At the risk of repeating what I've said before, there are five key things we must do and keep doing – so raise your hand and count them off:

1 Stand for something distinctive

Liberalism is not defined by what other parties think. We are not flotsam adrift on someone else's ocean, drawn this way or that by the tidal current of popular opinion. This is why the idea of a 'centre ground' is so preposterous.

There is no equidistant 'liberal place' between 'right wing' Conservatives and 'left wing' Labour – especially as in practice Labour is as right wing as most of the Tories – and anyway, Liberalism is as much a state of mind as it is a set of practical political beliefs. It doesn't fit neatly in any 'moderate place' defined as “not being either of them”.

Liberalism is about respect for the individual. Liberalism loves community, rejoices in difference and seeks to build a strong (or even fair!) society. We understand the importance and responsibility of our stewardship of our environment and its resources. We are open to new and creative ways to grow and sustain a fair (or even strong!) economy, but economics and fiscal planning are ways to achieve our greater aims, they do not define our beliefs and are not ends in themselves.

This is the great difference between us and the Tories – their political credo is rooted in economic dogma where the pursuit of wealth is a goal in itself, and for many the only goal. Goodness knows what Labour believes in anymore – if anyone deserved to get lost in the mythical centre ground it is them and their growing irrelevance.

Our old liberal friend Stephen Yolland prepared this short statement immediately after the election. He offered a clarion call that he referred to as a “refined Liberal message” and I recommend it to you:

“We exist to protect those without power. We exist to give them a voice.

“We exist to ensure that Government serves them, not the other way round.

“We do not hunt for some mythical place called the centre ground, we search for a place where there is justice, and compassion, and where the great talents of the people are liberated for the greater good of the community.

“We do not seek to rule our people, we seek to give them the tools, the knowledge and the support so that they may rule themselves.”

I like Yolly's simple words because I am also firmly of the view that we cannot define ourselves and our relevance to voters through our policies alone. Policies are temporary solution to today's issues. They will and

must evolve as the issues they seek to address change. What is important is having a political philosophy, standing for something clear and real and making that relevant to people in ways that the great mass of our citizens understand.

Policies then flow naturally from that core narrative and are shaped over time with the involvement of the people most affected. But without core principles, policies appear as random items on a shopping list and no one has any idea what meal it is we are trying to make.

2 A new leader and a redefined purpose

Choosing a new leader and have him help redefine our purpose for a clear and inspiring future will rightly consume the next six months (sadly only MPs and therefore 'hims' are eligible to stand – we may need to address that particular rule). But whoever the leader is, I hope he chooses to borrow heavily from this article.

We all love those precious words in the preamble to the party's constitution – they are at the very heart of our philosophy and define our distinct purpose. And it is from those core beliefs that a programme for an alternative government will stem. In due course practical, liberal policies relevant to ordinary people will develop from that programme, imaginatively tackling the everyday issues of concern to our people and our position in the global community. Which leads us in turn to ...

3 Real campaigns

For the avoidance of doubt, campaigning is not about fighting elections. Campaigning is about articulating the need for meaningful change; rallying others to the cause; showing practical ways in which that change may take effect; taking the argument to those in power; and keeping up the pressure until the change is secured. It doesn't happen near elections, it happens all the time, year in, year out. Lib Dems used to be very good at campaigning and will be once again.

A great example of this in recent times has been Greg Mulholland's Pubco campaign – tenacious and impactful. I am delighted that he is one of the eight.

4 Build a community, rebuild trust

The party may be enjoying a membership revival and it is truly heartening to see the return of old friends from around the country – as well as many fresh new faces but there is much more to do this year, and for many years, before we rebuild voters' trust and before we rebuild the many communities that are the lifeblood of our support and success.

Those communities also need a strong and committed Liberal party. There is nothing new or revolutionary about this, but so much seems to have been forgotten by so many in recent years. The party leadership has behaved as if the nation owes it a debt of gratitude and come the hour all good men and true will recognise that debt and gratefully repay it. Well, pah! We would

“Liberalism is not defined by what other parties think. We are not flotsam adrift on someone else's ocean, drawn this way or that by the tidal current of popular opinion. This is why the idea of a ‘centre ground’ is so preposterous”

do well to remember Tip O'Neill's famous words – “All politics is local” – and it is on the streets we have crucially lost trust by departing from the core principles that created the modern party from the mid 1960s onwards.

Trust is a fragile notion and, like respect, it can only be earned – never expected or demanded – and it is only as good as anyone's last encounter with it. I've got a mop and bucket, my sleeves are rolled up and that's now going to be the only way back we deserve.

5 Make it fun

If it ain't fun, it ain't worth doing. This is not just about going to the pub (and specifically about not going to

the pub for some members) but the best way for a new leader to bring about lasting and meaningful change is together, with others, willingly and well. We all work better when we're happy, the electorate respond better when they see we're enjoying it, and individuals and communities are inspired to join in if they too can laugh and have fun. Politics is a very serious business and so is having fun. The last few years have been pretty joyless, so this has to be non-negotiable.

These have been very difficult years for Liberal Democrats and have culminated in quite the worst election and the worst result I have witnessed in over 40 years as an active member. I do not believe that it is as a result of being in coalition but it is most certainly as a result of some of the things done (and not done) in that coalition and the woefully poor politics demonstrated year after year.

The backlash we have just witnessed was perfectly articulated by one voter I canvassed shortly before polling day. Although a past supporter he said he'd be voting Conservative this time. Clearly a Liberal at heart with nothing in common with the Tories, he put it so bitterly, “This is the only lesson you people will understand.”

My goodness, that's a hard and harsh lesson. I do hope we, as a party, can learn it and that whoever emerges as the new Leader will immediately put these five things into practice so that we never have to suffer such an ignominious defeat ever again – but more importantly so that we never again lose so completely the trust of the people.

We can and will get back. How we get back will make all the difference and only if we deserve it will we get to keep it.

Roger Hayes is a former parliamentary candidate and council leader in Kingston-upon-Thames

“PUT OUT MORE LEAFLETS”

Faced with a political problem caused by the collapse of trust in the Liberal democrats over tuition fees, the party responded only with organisational measures, says Jennie Rigg

“I told you so” is an ugly phrase. Nonetheless, in October 2010 I wrote a blog post saying that breaking the tuition fees pledge would cost us dearly, and I kept banging on about it for several years.

Eventually, most of the grassroots of the party came around to agreeing with me, and lo, so it came to pass: in May this year the parliamentary party got massacred.

Given our performance in the last several sets of local and European elections it shouldn't have been a big surprise; but many, myself included, clung to hopes that more of our hard-working MPs would be saved – by the incumbency effect, by hard campaigning, by anything.

Prior to the 2010 election we were on the up, not just because of the protest vote, nor just because of disillusionment with the Labour and Tory parties, nor even because of Cleggmania, but also because a large number of people had had experience of us governing their councils – either alone or in coalition – and found that by and large we work hard and we stick to our word. We capitalised on this favourable perception of us and our Ronseal reputation with the party election broadcast on the eve of the election. “No More Broken Promises”, it declared. We all know what happened next.

I don't propose to have a minute examination of the facts. Yes, Labour broke more promises than us on tuition fees. Yes, the settlement achieved was better than anything that would have happened had either Labour or the Tories been governing alone. Yes, we stuck to lots of other promises. Yes, we probably could have spun it better – come right out from the beginning and said “look, this is the best we could get”, or called it a graduate tax, or many other mitigating things we could have done. Yes, it is manifestly and monumentally unfair that we got the best settlement we could out of the Tories (whether we sold it well or not) and have been excoriated for it.

But the fact remains that we campaigned hard on “no more broken promises”, we campaigned hard on definitely voting agin any rise at all in tuition fees, and then quite a lot of our MPs broke their personal, hand-signed pledge.

If you break a personal, hand-signed pledge, no matter what the justification, even if sticking to the pledge would have made things worse, it necessarily entails a loss of trust. In our age of increasingly presidential politics, the party leader breaking a personal hand-signed pledge was catastrophic.

VENAL AND WEASELLY

The fact that 21 of our MPs defied the whip and voted against the rise in fees as per their pledge - and yet

more abstained or weren't present - didn't wash a sausage with the electorate. The faux apology Clegg eventually reluctantly offered, in my view, actually made things worse. In taking nearly two years to do it, and then apologising for making the pledge in the first place, rather than breaking it, he solidified the view that actually, the Lib Dems are just as venal and weaselly as the rest of them.

In 2010 we had a unique selling point. We said that people could trust us to do what we said, and people looked at how we had behaved in councils, looked at our internal party democracy, and thought they'd take a punt on us.

Nobody really believed that they could trust either Labour or the Tories, but they hoped that they could trust us. Then our glorious leader proved to them that actually, they couldn't.

Is it any wonder the response was so vituperative? Is it any wonder the electorate turned away from us in disgust and went back to the devils they know? We gave them hope that things could be different, and then we took it away.

The problem we had throughout the coalition, but especially in the lead-up to the election just gone, was a squarely political one: people did not trust us, and therefore were not going to listen to a single word any one of us said.

If the writing hadn't been on the wall from the moment of the pledge being broken, it should have been after the debate against Farage in the run up to the euro election – it's not that people disagreed with us; they didn't. They were not prepared to give Nick Clegg a fair hearing, because they fully expected every word out of his mouth to be a weaselly little lie, so they just didn't listen.

Yet the response of head office⁴ to all of this, all along, was entirely organisational. The foot soldiers were urged to target harder, chase perfection in method, hit more doorsteps. Never was the actual problem even acknowledged.

Initially head office insisted that the tuition fees issue was a storm in a teacup, and people would forget it before the 2015 election. Then, when it became clear that it wasn't actually a storm in a teacup, they released the Clegg faux apology. When that didn't do anything more than get people to extract the urine via autotune there was an insistence that if we only got across that we tried our best to get a good deal on tuition fees people would understand. After all, compromises have to be made in coalition, and surely everyone understands that?

At all stages head office behaved as though the problem was the settlement on tuition fees, not the breaking of the pledge. As far as I can tell there are those at head office who still believe that to be the

case.

I can't put it any more clearly than this: if all of our MPs had signed a pledge to vote against naming the colour of the sky blue, and then had voted for naming the colour of the sky blue, head office would be wringing their hands about the blue sky problem and wondering how to win back the trust of people who like looking up in the daytime.

BLINDINGLY OBVIOUS

Why did this happen?

Why was it that in the face of a blindingly obvious problem, head office continually and consistently pushed organisational solutions to an entirely political problem?

I can see three possible reasons. The first is that they didn't recognise the problem was trust. This is beguiling, but I don't think it can possibly be true. It wasn't just me ranting on my blog about this, lots of people were saying it, and several of them higher up than me. The evidence of the problem's existence and features was vast and being hammered down our throats in pretty much every conversation with voters. The number of people who I spoke to who had been turned off politics entirely by this was quite striking.

There are a lot of very smart people at head office, and despite their repeated protestations, I can't believe they didn't really know that the problem was that people didn't trust us any more.

The second possibility is that they recognised that the problem was trust, but couldn't see a solution and therefore suggested a solution to a different problem.

This one, I think, is more likely: "We've lost the trust of the electorate!" "Something must be done!"

"Hammering away at more doors is something! Lets do that!"

The third is that they recognised the problem was trust, saw a solution, but found the solution unpalatable

People brought up at the 2010 special conference that breaking the pledge on tuition fees was likely to cause a problem, although few had really considered how big a problem it would be. We could have amended the Coalition Agreement. We could have abandoned the idea of a coalition altogether. I don't think, had we taken the nuclear option, it would have done us that much better. People would have said: "You had the chance to hold the Tories back and you didn't. What's the point in voting for you?" We were in a lose-lose situation as far as that was concerned.

We could have played the tuition fee settlement differently – referring to it as a Graduate Tax, making more of the 'not-upfront' nature, making more of the position we were in with regard to relative power, and the fact that both Labour and the Tories were committed to a rise in fees and keeping them upfront.

We've tried to do all these things since, too little too late, but I think even had we played it perfectly from the second the Coalition Agreement was signed, the Labour party and a hostile press hankering for two

“At all stages head office behaved as though the problem was the settlement on tuition fees, not the breaking of the pledge”

party politics again would have said it was just weasel words and we'd broken our pledge anyway.

At this point, option two starts to look increasingly attractive. It's certainly easier to preach that everything will be OK if we just deliver more leaflets, target more effectively and record everything in Connect than to face up to the fact that the party's USP is gone.

I don't think that the 2015 election could have gone much better. There are things that I would have done differently,

had I been in charge, but my ego is not quite of the size to say we would have saved ourselves had we only followed my prescription. However, the thing with having made a mistake is that you have to learn from it.

Head office needs to recognise, now, publicly, that the problem is we broke our bond of trust with the electorate. Our new leader, whoever he might turn out to be, needs to seek reparation with the electorate.

The longer we go on saying that the problem was how we handled tuition fees, rather than that we broke our pledge, the longer it will be before we can work towards winning back the trust of the electorate by proving, in councils up and down the country, that we actually do know how to keep our word, and the longer it will be until we can rebuild.

We're getting there. We have thousands of new members, and a lot of people receptive to the idea that actually, we might have been holding the Tories back a bit. Let's not waste that. Let's make sure we don't pollute the fresh start of a new leader and lots of new members with the mistakes of the last administration.

Jennie Rigg is chair of Calderdale Liberal Democrats

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EVANGELISTS NEEDED FOR LIBERALISM

Building up again from cracked pavements to parliamentary seats will only work if campaigns for liberal ideas run alongside, says Gordon Lishman

There seem to be two main narratives around the election result and its effect on the Liberal Democrats.

The first is about coalition: the original decision, the way it was managed, the way we fought the election at the end of coalition government. The second simply says: the fightback begins now!

Both narratives are right and both are insufficient. In deciding what to do next, we need to look back at the history of how we got here; to look at other parties and forces and how we are positioned; and to look inside ourselves, individually and collectively. I have called them the long view, the wide view and the deep view.

THE LONG VIEW

How did we get from the Liberal Party of 1951 (2.6%; six Celtic fringe seats) to the Liberal Democrats of 2005 (22%; 62 seats)? I suggest there were three stages, which unfortunately didn't overlap enough.

Stage one was the 'party of ideas'. The liberalism of Elliott Dodds, Ramsey Muir and Maynard Keynes was given new life by the leadership of Jo Grimond and the influx of a new generation of people who were interested in new ideas and new policies and, crucially, who understood that Labourism did not represent their progressive vision of individual freedom and development combined with social and economic justice.

There was a brief period in which the party of ideas was also a national campaigning force, particularly on apartheid, immigration and racism, the campaigns associated with David Steel's Abortion Bill, the movements for gay rights, feminism and against other discriminations.

The second stage was the community politics generation, applying ideas and principles initially to local government in order to build a new relationship with local people as the foundation of a new liberal movement. It developed new techniques and it didn't allow much time for national campaigning - and, anyway, banging on about Europe, constitutional reform, worker participation and pensions reform didn't much help in building the local coalitions necessary to win wards.

Stage three, sometimes known as the Rennard strategy, built on local government success to gain second place in parliamentary elections, then to squeeze third parties, then to create regional clusters where LibDems were clearly the main challengers and to create professional campaigns centred on a local hero. The final stage, it turned out, was "a laser-like intensity on defending our fortresses".

There is no doubt about the underlying villain in this

story: the first past the post electoral system (FPTP). That's what makes it difficult to build a national party spread throughout the UK; makes it necessary to choose between high profile liberal campaign issues and not frightening the voters we need to squeeze; leads us to invest in local heroes (very occasionally heroines) who may not have much time or incentive to think about wider issues and ideas; and to run local authorities just a little bit better and more efficiently than the others. Regrettably, the 2015 election result probably means that FPTP is not going to change anytime soon.

My challenges to the proponents of both the narratives above are: how far back in the strategy from 1951 to 2005 are you going to go in re-building our party and its appeal? The challenge is greater when you remember that the Liberal Party I joined in 1963 had 350,000 members. What's the member/ activist/ leader ratio we need to build a national party?

How exactly are you going to apportion the party's scarce resources between, say, national campaigning on liberal ideas and themes to create change now, investing in our recently-lost fortresses with a view to regaining them, building a party with roots and campaigning members in every community, finding and motivating new long-term leaders at every level?

Neither the lessons of the coalition nor the laudable commitment to fightback take us very far in answering these challenges.

THE WIDE VIEW

Parties in democratic systems develop their strategies by deciding how to position themselves against their opponents: what themes to emphasise and to whom. It's possible to over-emphasise this approach and get too detailed in crafting and tailoring messages to 'our market'. That seems to be how a party of diversity, change and individual freedom ends up with a slogan like "unity, stability, decency"!

The basic problem isn't that the Conservatives are elected as and govern like conservatives. It is that the Labour Party is (occasionally) elected on an anodyne manifesto and then governs like conservatives. When was the last general election that elected a majority Labour government on a radical manifesto which it then set out to implement? 1945 is my best guess.

Wilson and then Blair were elected on generalised promises of change (the "white heat of new technology" and "things can only get better"). In the Blair/ Brown case, they felt, perhaps rightly, that they could only get elected on a business-friendly campaign and a commitment to maintain Tory spending plans.

After that, as Blair and several of his acolytes have

written in retirement, the relentless theme was “delivery, delivery, delivery” – the belief that modern government is about addressing the same issues with the same options as any other governing party and that the challenge is to choose the right one to give people more of what they want and then to manage the system better than the other lot. Sometimes that is the appropriate approach. On the big issues of the sort of society and world we want to live in, it is desperately timid and shallow.

The reason for this approach is clear. Labour, including their local leadership, is caught between the demands of its two core constituencies, the first of which is the liberal, progressive, educated, usually urban and often younger group of people whom Keynes called “my class: that of the educated bourgeoisie”. The second group is often self-defined as ‘traditional working class’ and which is socially illiberal with a visceral liking for traditional left attitudes including re-distribution and nationalisation. The challenge is how to keep both on board at the same time when challenged by liberals from the progressive side and now Ukip from the populist side.

This mix explains the occasional Labour forays into nationalism (“British values”) and under-the-radar racism (immigration and integration). It also explains why Labour so desperately needs the slogan of “one week to save the NHS” to appeal to both parts of its core audience – whatever the validity or otherwise of the message.

There is a shared Labour and Tory reliance on pragmatism in electoral appeals to specific constituencies and ‘markets’. The electorate has now been trained to believe that elections are about a series of personal calculations about which party will enable them to be better off on the basis of a purely financial calculation. At the same time, they yearn for a stronger, more uplifting appeal which can unify on principles rather than dividing on the details of delivery. That’s the basis on which people voted for the SNP and Ukip; their voters felt that they were being offered a big picture rather than simple, selfish details. In the last election, the Liberal Democrats failed utterly to communicate a vision of liberalism and the specific appeals to ‘our markets’ weren’t heard or heeded.

The last big question about the Labour party is how much of a future and organisational capacity they really have. Might it be that Labour in its English heartlands is as hollow in ideas, motivation and structure as Labour in Scotland? This isn’t the Labour party of Compass, or of Islington, South Somerset or Surrey. It is Burnley and Wigan and Knowsley and Walsall – all the places where decades of institutional Labourism have hollowed out the heart and fire of their party.

The good news is that the influx of 15,000 new members since 7 May appears to be made up of liberals who want to hear, to communicate and to fight for the basic values and philosophy of liberalism.

“We have to stand for what we believe in and to persuade and convert people to a wider liberal view”

THE DEEP VIEW

So we come to the biggest underlying challenge for liberals and Liberal Democrats as we come to deciding our strategy for the next 5-20 years. How can we communicate and fight for our big ideas while still winning seats and votes and hearts and minds?

We have tried the approach which says in essence: “If you read our manifesto in detail, then you must vote for us as thoughtful, caring and good people.”

That produced some votes but not seats. We have tried taking on the system on its own terms: finding ways to create local coalitions of support to build from dog-fouling and cracked pavements through third-party squeezes to parliamentary seats. That produced seats, but not, when the pressure was on, enough votes either to hold those seats or build a national mood and swing.

We have to stand for what we believe in and to persuade and convert people to a wider liberal view.

The only answer is to do both at the same time. In doing that, we have to expose the tensions which underpin modern Labour’s appeal. We have to continue to earn the right to be heard and then to use that opportunity to be evangelists rather than apologists for liberalism.

That will involve a much higher national profile in campaigning for what’s important to us and creating and leading a social movement for the changes we want. The Clegg legacy, particularly when freed from office, gives us a starting point: it is immensely heartening that the key motivations of new members are internationalism as part of the EU, human rights, and generosity towards people in need.

It also means that our limited commons party and the larger group of liberals in the Lords need to combine a national campaigning role outside parliament, a commitment to building a campaigning movement, a re-assertion of liberalism and effective use of parliament as a tool of campaigning. That is a mix which no-one else can offer. Call it a “dual approach” if you like!

This strategy will need a much greater willingness to use all the resources of the party to support it. We will require much clearer and more accountable decision-making. It will also be based on powerful members who will be articulate and confident ambassadors for everything we believe. It will use all the resources of technology as well as face-to-face debate to empower and invest in those members.

One new member I spoke to asked me what liberals and Liberal Democrats stand for. I said the phrase “none shall be enslaved by poverty ignorance or conformity” was a touchstone. He said that it “made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up”.

The duty of those of us who have been around for some time and have some small influence in our party is at least not to disappoint our new members – and many of the longer-serving ones. At best, it is to feed and nurture their enthusiasm so that it becomes an unstoppable movement for liberal change.

IT'S A LIBERAL MOMENT

Voters did not reject liberalism on 7 May, they just weren't offered it. The ensuing disaster has created the conditions for recovery, says Michael Meadowcroft

It is a huge paradox but the scale of the electoral disaster on 7 May was so great that it provides the party with the opportunity to reconstruct itself without any of the baggage of the past 20 years.

The new leader has to have the intellectual security to be utterly confident in his Liberalism to underpin an arrogant stance as the leading opposition to the most poisonous and unprincipled right-wing Conservative party in my 50 years in politics. This is not a socialist moment, whatever the usual Labour suspects may parrot. But, perhaps perversely, it can certainly be a Liberal moment if the whole party can add an intellectual - in the broadest sense - foundation to its instinctive awareness of the rightness and the attraction of the Liberal society.

First, the depths of 7 May must be plumbed. The first general election I recall was 1950. As an eight year old in a very political family I remember the radio announcer stating for result after result, "and the Liberal candidate lost his deposit".

It seemed to me very unfair to the Liberals and may have subconsciously encouraged my decision to join the party eight years later.

At the time the deposit level was 12.5% - it is now the much lower figure of 5% - and the Liberals lost 319 of them. If the deposit level was still 12.5% we would have lost 538 this time! There were many humiliating results, with 160 seats polling less than 3% of the vote. There were even three with less than 1%.

Part, if not most, of the responsibility for this debacle is the targeting strategy that has been imposed by headquarters on the party for 20 years. In 1997 targeting delivered 46 MPs for some 17% of the vote - more than twice the number of MPs than at the previous election and on fewer votes.

Thereafter the number of MPs increased roughly pro rata with the votes achieved, with the apogee of 62 MPs with 22% of the vote in 2010. The price paid for targeting is the abandonment of great swathes of seats surrounding the targets with the concomitant consequence of derisory votes, in other words, precisely what happened on 7 May, but only winning eight of the target seats; quite apart from asking the logical question as to whether the target seats should surely be self-sufficient after 20 years of special attention.

One regular refrain of electors has been that they want politicians who put country before party but, when the Liberal Democrats do precisely that, they clobber the party. It was right in principle to go into coalition in 2010, knowing that in historical terms of the political position of the party, it could only be with the party which has always been its main enemy. It was also accepted that the electoral risk was considerable and one recalled the comment of Mervyn

King, the then governor of the Bank of England, just before the election, that "whoever wins this election will be out of power for a whole generation because of how tough the fiscal austerity will have to be." Even so, it is clear that at the recent election the electorate rewarded the Conservatives for the record of the government because they expected tough measures of them, but punished the Liberal Democrats because they did not expect such policies of them.

It proved impossible to make a sufficiently persuasive case for the numerous benefits of the Liberal Democrat presence in government to create a separate case for backing the party. The constantly reiterated theme during the campaign of the 'centre ground' and of preventing extremism had no traction, possible because it is an untenable philosophical position.

ULTIMATE IRONY

The ultimate irony of the past five years is that Nick Clegg made the Liberal Democrats a party of government but made the party irrelevant electorally. The party failed to maintain an independent presence. It had occasional flurries, such as over the National Health Service reorganisation, but it made no consistent attempt to sustain the Liberal Democrats' separate political identity. The party largely permitted its ministers to assent to policies that were unsupportable by Liberals. It must be said that Clegg bore the stresses and strains of the leadership extremely well and in no way deserved the shoddy treatment he received from far too many commentators.

The paradox is that had Nick Clegg made the splendid content of his resignation speech the theme of the campaign, the party may well have performed better. It must be said that he bore the stresses and strains of the leadership extremely well and in no way deserved the shoddy treatment he received from far too many commentators.

The gap in the party's armoury is not particularly a want of policy but rather a lack of material in the party's political philosophy expressing the kind of society Liberal Democrats want - and within which policy can be founded. A sacrificial commitment to Liberalism, such as kept the party going in the 1950s, and which enabled the party to win seats in the 1980s, requires a keen awareness of what constitutes a Liberal society. The key point is that the current situation - 8% of the poll and a tiny number of MPs - is not unique but has all too often been the case over the past half century. In the 30 years before the bad result of 1979, the Liberal party had similarly been at 8% or less in the opinion polls on and off for 10 years. In every such situation the party has regrouped, recovered its essential values and revived itself. It may well be the case in today's more volatile politics that

this can be accomplished quicker than hitherto, provided that there is a sound basis for revival and an organisational plan for promoting it.

Britain has arguably the most right wing Conservative Party since the war. It is dangerously nationalist and isolationist, it is insensitive to those in need, and it panders to selfish desires at the expense of any sense of community, public service or common citizenship.

No talk of 'one nation' will make a difference - the Conservative leopard never changes its spots, it just rearranges their pattern from time to time. Its current list of promises will embitter swathes of families who need the help of the state for their basic needs, and will offend many individuals who have a sense of decency and fairness.

When the actual effect of its policies is evident, it is going to suffer a significant loss of support. (The effectiveness of the Liberal Democrats in coalition in preventing much of these extreme policies being enacted may then well be realised but that will be history.)

All the precedents are that a government with such a small majority will have it steadily diminished and removed by the attrition of by-elections over the years of the parliament. The Liberal Democrats need to be ready to fight by-elections wherever they occur, particularly the moment a vacancy occurs in a potentially winnable constituency.

The Labour party is in serious trouble. It has relied throughout its history on a core working class vote. Demographically this has diminished over the years but it believed complacently that there was still a significant swathe of people who had nowhere else to go politically and, however disenchanted they were with their circumstances, they would invariably vote Labour.

With the success of the SNP in Scotland (and in votes if not seats, of Ukip in England), this election has brutally dispelled that assumption. All the commentaries since the election, from within and without the party, suggests that, fatally, Labour is looking for a strategy rather than a core belief.

TOXIC ALLIANCE

The SNP has brilliantly focussed its strategy on the arrogant complacency of Labour and on the toxic alliance of the Liberal Democrats with the Conservatives. Even though it has delivered an SNP majority in Holyrood and an almost clean sweep of Scottish seats at Westminster, it is now paradoxically highly vulnerable. Nationalism is essentially a cul-de-sac which relies on continually feeding its dependants, inevitably at the expense of 'outsiders' to justify what is fundamentally a non-ideological and essentially reactionary basis. Now out of the coalition, the Liberal Democrats are arguably in a stronger position than Labour to take on the SNP.

Because Ukip, with its appeal of 'back to the 1950s', could capture the "none of the above" vote, its comparative success was devastating to the Liberal

“Had Nick Clegg made the splendid content of his resignation speech the theme of the campaign, the party may well have performed better”

Democrats. However, even in this election campaign it found itself in a huge and unresolvable dilemma: should it stick to its original focus on the UK out of Europe and, as a corollary, a virtual ban on immigration, or should it develop into a more mainstream party.

It chose the latter and, while this did not affect much of its 'Teflon' vote, it now appears to be tearing the party apart, as is the usual course of extreme right-wing parties. However, the lesson for Liberal Democrats is clear: we can no longer rely

on capturing the protest vote but will have to make the cogent argument to counter the genuine fears that concern many Ukip supporters.

At this election the Green party became the haven for many idealistic and otherwise Labour supporters who saw the Greens as a party that was on the left but was not a fringe party.

The Green party position is not intellectually sustainable in that the green imperative is not a separate philosophy but is an analysis of the acute situation that the planet is in.

As such the green imperative must underpin the policies of all parties and, insofar as by being a separate party it leeches from the other parties those who accept that imperative, it actually damages the green cause. The Liberal party was always the party most aware of the green imperative and the Liberal Democrats can and must visibly become so again.

Britain is certainly not devoid of men and women who have a sensitive regard for the community as a whole and for those, at home and abroad, who are in need of assistance.

Historically it is Liberals who have best understood this human trait and who have been able to recruit concerned individuals to work for political solutions to add to individual effort. The Liberal Democrats' current failure to make an impact on this constituency was palpably clear when the Church of England Bishops felt moved to issue its letter *Who is My Neighbour?* at the outset of the election campaign. Presumably unconsciously, this is a remarkably politically Liberal analysis of the country's current malaise and of the Liberal prescription to transform it. It is simply a pity that it was not Liberals who were promoting it. It does with great, if unconscious clarity make the point of the kind of target Liberal Democrats should have for this appeal.

We have been here before, twice in my time, and have had the resilience and determination to recover.

The problem was not that the electorate rejected Liberalism but rather that it was not offered it. The current leadership contest is a superb opportunity for candidates to articulate the party's vision and its values. It can be made the start of the party's revival.

Michael Meadowcroft was Liberal MP for Leeds West 1983-87

WHAT DID SCOTLAND REALLY CHOOSE?

Increased turnout and a renewed sense of national identity saw the SNP almost sweep the board in Scotland. Gillian Gloyer (below) and Nigel Lindsay (right) explain what happened and how to counter it

There is no possible interpretation of the night of the 7-8 May which makes happy reading for Liberal Democrats in Scotland. Not only were 10 of 11 seats lost, so too were dozens of deposits, including in seats which were winnable only five years ago, such as my own of Edinburgh North and Leith.

It would be easy to conclude that the Scottish Lib Dems have been annihilated beyond recovery, punished by an angry electorate for the vaguely articulated crime of coalition. However, closer inspection of the lost seats reveals a more complex story.

In most of the eleven constituencies, it is not that the voters abandoned the Liberal Democrats. Indeed, in Argyll and Bute, Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, Dunbartonshire East and Edinburgh West, the outgoing MPs actually secured more votes than they had in 2010. In Gordon, Christine Jardine even managed to win more votes than Malcolm Bruce had done in 2010. Why, then, such a disaster?

I cut my political teeth in Lanarkshire, one of Scotland's one-party states. Even today, the only councils in which Labour has an overall majority - and this is thanks to the success of Liberal Democrats in the Scottish government in forcing their Labour coalition partners to agree to STV for council elections - are in Lanarkshire and Glasgow.

Across central Scotland, generation after generation has reliably elected Labour MPs, MSPs and councillors, despite ample evidence that doing so failed to improve the voters' lives in any way. But on 7 May, these same people switched in their thousands to the SNP. Throughout Scotland, in many Labour-held seats as well as in ours, Labour's vote collapsed, typically to less than half of its tally in 2010. Meanwhile, in seats where we were able to convince Conservative voters that the Lib Dem candidate was the only one with a chance of beating the SNP, many Tories lent us their votes, no doubt through gritted teeth. Unfortunately, they were evidently unconvinced in Robert Smith's and Michael Moore's former seats, in both of which the combined total of Conservative and LibDem votes would have easily seen off the SNP candidates.

It is true, of course, that Nicola Sturgeon had 'a good election'. This is at least in part because the supine (or captured) Scottish media and the uninformed English media failed to challenge the preposterous assertion that the SNP is a progressive party.

In government in Scotland for the last eight years, the SNP has starved local authorities of resources, by

forcing them to freeze council tax. It has subsidised the middle-class parents of university students at the expense of college courses to which working-class kids might have aspired. It has subsidised the prescriptions of the wealthy and (generally) healthy, while presiding over crisis in our hospitals and a real-terms cut in NHS funding.

It has centralised everything that twitched, from the fire and police services to local enterprise companies. Now it is creating a massive ID database, populated with information about everyone who has ever consulted an NHS doctor or dentist in Scotland, which we provided in the belief that it would be used only within the NHS but which will be made available to every last tentacle of government, including Quality Meat Scotland and the Forestry Commission.

Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg attempted to challenge Sturgeon on some of these points during the televised leaders' debate. Her response? Shouting 'Rubbish! Rubbish!' over them until they stopped talking, then inventing some figures to pretend that she was right and everyone else was wrong.

The SNP's strong campaign and success in maintaining the momentum of the referendum meant that turnout was far higher everywhere in Scotland than in any previous election - lower than the referendum, but typically over 70% and in some constituencies over 80%. These 'new' voters seem to have turned out overwhelmingly for the SNP. This is why, despite increased or stable numbers of votes for most of our outgoing MPs, their share of the vote dropped in every case. Combined with the transfer of votes from Labour to SNP, the increased turnout put the SNP candidate ahead in all but one of our seats and in all but two of the other 48.

Yet those who lent the SNP their votes on the 7 May - those who had previously voted Labour and those who had never bothered voting at all until the referendum - will realise, sooner or later, that the party they supported is not the progressive movement they had believed, but an authoritarian, populist junta.

When that day comes, if we get our strategy right, they may look on the Liberal Democrats more kindly. For that to happen, we need to rediscover the radical vision we once had for Scotland. Only if we offer an alternative based on economic and social justice, genuine power to local authorities and communities, and steadfast defence of individual liberties - only then will we have any appeal to these disillusioned voters.

“It’s about national identity” explained a voter as he left the polling station. He’d previously supported the Lib Dems in Edinburgh West but had decided to vote SNP. I’d been working for Mike Crockart – whose near miss was one of our better results – and this was a more articulate and courteous version of what had been said by many others. It was also perceptive and accurate. While SNP wins in the past have illustrated the ugly side of nationalism and were often built on resentment and negativity, this year has been different.

I believe the extraordinary success of the SNP on 7 May resulted from three positive factors. These were first, a “yes, we can” mentality about Scotland; second, a clear vision and unambiguous message with a leader who could project these convincingly; and third, an effective organisation that enthused a large number of activists and employed them fruitfully according to their skills. Let me examine each.

A lengthy and detailed national conversation preceded the 2014 independence referendum. This made many people in Scotland (Scots and others) think more deeply about what Scotland is and could be and it led to a heightened sense of Scotland’s ‘otherness’.

Scotland and England come from different continents, geologically. Anglo-Saxon and Norman influence is much less marked here. Topography, climate, and industry have shaped people in different ways. Culturally, Scotland produces more than its fair share of composers, singers, novelists and other artists. And so there is a feeling of confidence about Scotland and its place in the world. If the SNP used to be the political expression of a national inferiority complex, this year it morphed into the face of those who decided that Scotland was different (not better) and competent. That is a separate constituency from those who want independence, but it is one which went unrecognised by the Westminster parties.

The 2015 election was won by parties which had a clear, strong message. It was lost by those who seemed ambiguous. In England the Conservatives won. Obnoxious though their message was, few people were unclear about their intentions, or about their leader’s determination.

The SNP slogan, “A Stronger Voice for Scotland” was unambiguous. To very many voters, this was an expression of their confidence in Scotland, its culture and its competence. It did not necessarily imply independence but there was a widespread feeling that the label on the tin was truthful.

That impression was fortified by the steady and clever leadership of Nicola Sturgeon and the quality of her candidates. The SNP has chosen two successive leaders whose ability has been head and shoulders above those of what we used to call the three major parties. Alex Salmond was always going to be a hard act to follow, but Nicola Sturgeon succeeded. Her performance in the national TV debates was effective and her message was clear. She looked different and she sounded different from the three London leaders, and what she said was different too. Polling suggests many people thought she outshone Clegg, Miliband, and Cameron. A week into the campaign, many Scots voters began to identify with her and feel a sense of ownership of her performance – perhaps even in this

expressing a sense of national identity.

SNP candidates in individual constituencies were often impressive, too. There was a welcome lack of over-promoted party researchers and interns in their ranks. Although there were a few idiots, most had a hinterland, and many had demonstrated considerable success in their chosen professions. In standing against Trident and clearly opposing the conservative approach to welfare, they disproved the claim that these stances make a party unelectable.

In the lead-up to the referendum, the SNP recruited many new members – a process that continued unabated after they lost. They were able to call on more voluntary help than the other parties, and they used it well. They knew where their vote was and they ran successful polling day organisations. Their use of social media was excellent: while we exchanged self-reinforcing messages with our own supporters, they reached out and expanded the support they’d gathered in the referendum campaign.

Liberal Democrats held 11 Scottish seats in 2010. This year we held one. Yet events unfold in unpredictable ways, and sometimes the greatest triumphs follow heart-breaking defeats. There will be opportunities for us again, but only if we learn from others and change.

What changes are needed? First, we need to develop a new, radical vision for Scotland, based on banishing the inequalities that blight the lives of so many people here. Second, we need to challenge unaccountable concentrations of wealth, power, and media influence in a way the SNP will not or cannot. And third, we need to clear out the useless strategists and campaigners who gave us such forgettable and ineffective slogans as “Only the Lib Dems can stop the SNP” (Edinburgh) and “Only the Lib Dems can stop the Tories” (Borders). Let’s realise we can do well without them, and rebuild a party of true Scottish Liberalism.

Gillian Gloyer is convenor of Edinburgh North-East and Leith Liberal Democrats and Nigel Lindsay was a Liberal councillor in Aberdeen. They were co-editors of the *Unlocking Liberalism: Life After the Coalition* book, reviewed in *Liberator* 369

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SITUATION VACANT

There is never a good time to take over as Liberal Democrat party leader.

But whoever becomes leader this year faces a worse inheritance than any predecessor since Jo Grimond, with just eight MPs, only 63 second places, outright control of six councils and a shattered local government base.

The only advantages perhaps facing whoever becomes leader are that they have had a pretty graphic demonstration of what doesn't work, and that there will be a fund of goodwill - at least for while - towards any leader who shows that they understand how to get the party back on its feet.

Liberator always send a questionnaire to leadership candidates, which we hope will provoke answers that shine a bit more light on their thinking than would straightforward questions about policy.

Tim Farron and Norman Lamb were each given the same questions and the same total word limit to use as they chose for their answers, and invited to write 100 words about themselves.

As usual, Liberator makes no recommendation. Read and decide for yourself.

Question 1

The general election has exposed the Liberal Democrat core vote at only 7.9% of the electorate. Should the party continue to maintain it can 'win everywhere', should it or build a core vote, and if so from where should a core vote be built?

TIM FARRON

In past elections the party has been good at mobilising the protest vote – and, as Jo Grimond said, there's a lot to protest about! The problem, of course, is that protest voters abandoned us when we entered government. On top of that, some of our actions in coalition alienated some of the groups which were becoming more strongly attached to us: students, healthworkers, teachers and other public-sector professionals, . We must rebuild their trust and belief in us. A core vote is vital in winning list seats in Wales, Scotland and London next year and for Europe in 2019. Realistically, we have to start by building on our previous parliamentary representation – the sixty or so seats where we are still in second place – plus others where we still have local strength. The very disparate nature of the eight seats we still hold offers some comfort here, representing a wide range of different areas, urban, rural and small-town.

NORMAN LAMB

I want to reach out to liberals everywhere across the country. Almost 2.5m people voted for the party throughout the UK and we must ensure that we continue to represent them while also engaging with those who share our ideas, beliefs and values even if they didn't vote for the party this time around. This is

a liberal age. We must convince all those people who share our values that the Liberal Democrats are the party for them.

At the same time, we must ruthlessly target our efforts in seats where we can win at council level, in the Scottish and Welsh Parliamentary elections and in the 2020 general election. But it is important that we continue to offer the public a proper liberal choice.

Question 2

What are you most proud of among the Coalition's actions, and least proud?

NORMAN LAMB

Coalition necessarily involves compromise. But we lost trust over the tuition fees pledge and we made a mistake, in my view, over the so called bedroom tax. But there is so much we should be proud of. My own proudest achievement was making real headway in achieving equality for those suffering mental ill health and, in particular, introducing the first ever waiting time standards.

We also legislated to introduce a cap on care costs for the first time. The pupil premium, which targets £2.5bn at children from the poorest backgrounds in school, has the power to change people's lives. We were also right to raise the income tax threshold, taking millions on low pay out of income tax.

TIM FARRON

I have always said that the party did the right thing by signing up to coalition. It was the only option at the time to bring the country's economy back on track; and the alternative would have been a minority Tory government and a second election. I believe history will judge the party – and Nick Clegg – more kindly than the election result suggests.

There are many things we achieved in government of which I am incredibly proud – an £825 tax cut for 25 million people, £2.5 billion to support the most disadvantaged school pupils, a state pension rise of £800 for millions of pensioners, the world's first Green Investment Bank, support for renewable energy, the UK being the first major economy to meet the UN target for development aid, the beginnings of parity of esteem for mental health services, and much else. Given that we are a democratic party in deciding policy, Liberal Democrat members can be proud of having a hand in changing millions of lives across the country for the better.

Which actions am I least proud of? As Birgitte Nyborg's mentor Bent Sejro says in Borgen, sometimes in politics you have to do things you don't like. We were the junior partner in a coalition with the Conservatives; of course the government implemented Tory policies we wouldn't have done but in turn it introduced Liberal Democrat policies that the Tories wouldn't have brought in, and we stopped many, many unacceptable Tory policies too; all of this is what coalition means. Apart from tuition fees, the worst problems arose when we departed from the coalition

agreement for no good reason: the NHS reform bill and the bedroom tax are both examples – though the amendments to the NHS bill that we forced on the government thanks to pressure from the party at the 2011 spring conference made it much better. The failure of most of our political reform agenda was also a major disappointment – but remember that it wasn't only the Tories' fault: many Labour MPs campaigned against the AV referendum (despite it being in their own manifesto in 2010) and it was Labour and the Tories combined who stopped House of Lords reform.

At the end of the day, though, the government was more liberal, greener and fairer than it would have been without us – if anyone doubts that, just look at what the Conservatives will do now – but we failed to make that clear enough to the British public.

Question 3

If you were in the same position as Nick Clegg was over tuition fees, (a pledge made then broken) how would you handle the problem?

TIM FARRON

The tuition fees episode was a disaster from start to finish. Having lost the argument within the party, fought an election with phased abolition of fees in the manifesto, and forced all our candidates to sign a pledge opposing any increase in tuition fees, the worst possible thing to do was to junk all of that and sign up to a rise in fees – but that's exactly what we were asked to do. In retrospect, we should never have agreed to any element in the coalition agreement which involved our MPs abstaining on the way forward – it gained us no credit while attracting all the blame.

Of course there was a limit to what we could do – we were the junior partner in the coalition, after all. But we should have argued for it harder in the coalition negotiations; and if we were unable to reach agreement, we should simply have agreed to have no coalition policy on it. Having signed the pledge, we had to keep our word which is why I voted against the government on this.

And the tragedy was that the row obscured what was in the end a pretty good policy. We didn't go along with the Browne Review's recommendation of lifting the cap on fees entirely, we raised the threshold at which loans have to be repaid from £15,000 to £21,000, we ensured more money was spent on helping the most disadvantaged students get into university. The new system has not prevented young people from going to university – the number of students is now at a record high – and we also protected funding for further education. But that all tends to be forgotten.

NORMAN LAMB

Trust in politics is critical. We paid a very heavy price for losing trust. We have to convince people that we have learnt a painful lesson. That means only promising what we know we can achieve and then sticking to it.

Question 4

Nick Clegg has frequently been criticised for surrounding himself

with advisers inexperienced in practical politics. From where would you draw your advice?

NORMAN LAMB

I have never felt like an insider in Westminster. I am not a career politician and so I have always been willing to take advice from all quarters. There is a wealth of knowledge from so many different walks of life within the party.

My leadership would be open and always willing to engage with people across the party and beyond. It is vital that we draw on the resources that we have. I am also a big believer in evidence based policy - I even won an award for it from the Political Studies Association.

TIM FARRON

I'm not sure I agree – Nick, and indeed the party, was supported by talented advisers from a whole range of backgrounds. Many of our wins in government were achieved thanks to their work behind the scenes and the support they provided to the parliamentary party.

Personally, I look for advice from many people – party volunteers, party staff, my constituents, my family, parliamentary colleagues. I also think it is crucially important to be advised by people who are reflective of the party (and society) as a whole – women and men, BAME, of different abilities and sexual orientation – as the advice one receives is inevitably reflected in the positions one takes and provides a wide perspective on issues. The most important thing is to make sure I listen to people who tell me when I'm wrong! Anyway, in the end advisers advise but leaders decide - and it's the leader, not the advisers, who should be blamed when something goes wrong

Question 5

Some argue the recent general election campaign was fought as a centrist party aiming to blunt the actions of others, rather than on Lib Dem policies. What did you think of it, and what you do differently in future?

TIM FARRON

We actually did both, but unfortunately the centrist message came over more strongly than our campaigning on our – very good – manifesto. The 'cut less than the Tories and borrow less than Labour' message may have been accurate, but ultimately defined the party by what it wasn't, rather than what it was. Our stress on our negotiating 'red lines' at the end of the campaign was a good try, and helped to highlight the manifesto's key commitments, but sounded like we were just interested in getting into government, not why we wanted to do so – it didn't tell a liberal narrative.

With hindsight, however, probably the campaign didn't make all that much difference – and certainly our opinion poll rating (which the pollsters more or less got right) hardly shifted from start to finish. It was what had happened over the previous five years that had cemented the electorate's view of us, and we

couldn't change it in six weeks.

NORMAN LAMB

I feel very strongly that we should be speaking about our values as a party rather than seeking to define ourselves in relation to others. I want to build a progressive, radical, Liberal force. We have our own voice, and we must always speak up for liberalism.

Question 6

What should be the Liberal Democrat response to the rise of Scottish and English nationalism?

NORMAN LAMB

Our response should be based on our core Liberal values and, in particular, the principle that we give power to people and to communities. We should be clear in advocating a federal United Kingdom. We are the most centralised country in Europe in terms of where taxes are raised. So real power must be devolved from Whitehall - and we should be radical in advocating this not just to Scotland and Wales but within England as well. But we must also be clear that we believe in uniting people, not dividing them.

TIM FARRON

Nationalism is the opposite of liberalism, exalting the tribe above the individual, always looking for a scapegoat on whom to blame all evils, and revealing a deep intolerance to those who don't share nationalist views. David Cameron's pandering to UKIP's Europhobia and bigotry against immigrants and his stoking up of English fears against the SNP's potential influence on a Labour government are despicable, and pose the greatest threat to the unity and stability of the UK. To counter UKIP, we need to create a positive and emotive case for EU membership and the benefits of an open economy and immigration (while recognising its impacts on some communities). To counter the SNP, we need to offer a genuinely decentralised federal solution to the governance of the UK.

Question 7

Would you regard your election as leader as a mandate to take the party in a particular direction, and if so, what?

TIM FARRON

You can see what I believe on my website here (www.tim2lead.com/my-values/). If the party votes for me to be leader that's what I'll aim to do.

Some people like to talk up the differences between social liberals and economic liberals, as if they could never get on. Others pretend the two can be stuck together, as though social liberals only care about social issues and economic liberals are only interested in economic ones. Neither view is right; there is a spectrum of opinion running from those more prepared to accept government intervention, over taxation and spending, corporate regulation, or environmental action ('social liberals'), to those who, wary of the dangers of big government, favour less intervention

and more scope for markets. Neither view is absolute, and both have much to teach us. And if we were a party in which members all held the same view, we wouldn't be a liberal party!

In reality, what unites us as liberals is much more powerful than what we disagree over: the rights of individuals and communities, the duty of government to ensure they flourish, beliefs in civil liberties, human rights, an open and internationalist approach, political reform, liberal environmentalism, social justice – this is the direction in which I want to lead the party.

NORMAN LAMB

We are a democratic party. Decisions about the party's direction are made by the membership and I am very proud that we are unique in consulting and voting to formulate our policies. It's also critically important that we reconnect with the party grassroots and with all the people in our country who share our values but who don't identify themselves with the Liberal Democrats. I want our party to be clear and consistent and radical in advocating liberal values so that people are proud to say they are a Liberal Democrat.

ABOUT NORMAN LAMB

Norman Lamb has been MP for North Norfolk in 2001 having stood there in two previous elections, slashing the majority of his opponent each time.

Between 2001-10 Norman had a number of roles for the party in parliament including shadow secretary of state for trade and industry and shadow health secretary.

In the Coalition, Norman served as a junior minister in BIS before being promoted to minister of state at the Department of Health.

There he championed a number of high profile liberal policies. His achievements include reforming the care system and, perhaps most prominently, introducing parity of esteem between treatment for mental and physical health in the NHS.

ABOUT TIM FARRON

Tim lives in Cumbria, with his wife Rosie, his four children.

Tim joined the Liberal Democrats when he was 16. Tim worked for ten years in higher education, while serving as a county and district councillor.

He became MP for Westmorland in 2005. Tim has held various parliamentary roles including shadow secretary of state for environment, food and rural affairs, shadow Home Office minister and co-chair of the International Affairs Party Parliamentary Committee and parliamentary private secretary to the then party leader Ming Campbell.

From 2011-14 he was party president and in 2015 he was appointed foreign affairs spokesperson.

OBITUARY: CHARLES KENNEDY

Gareth Epps pays tribute to the former Liberal Democrat leader

Like our late good friend Simon Tittley, Charles Kennedy was in his own words a “fully paid-up member of the human race”; flawed, genial, witty, at times infuriating.

The two men were utterly different. Like me, Simon was instinctively sceptical in 1999 about Kennedy as leader; both of us were happy to be proved at least partly wrong. His talent for allowing the party to thrive, not least in winning election campaigns, was derided but proved successful. Liberator, over time, warmed to him.

Many memories of mine are of the grand Cowley Street committee room where Charles chaired Federal Policy Committee and regularly attended Federal Executive. His reported lack of interest in policy details was slightly overplayed; distaste for the party habit of proposing new government bodies to obfuscate an issue, for example, was met by a pithy comment disdaining the overuse of capital letters.

Kennedy was first elected as an SDP MP for Ross, Cromarty and Skye, holding the seat under two boundary changes until May this year, when he lost to the SNP.

Unlike most SDP MPs, he supported the merger and held a number of front bench roles in the Liberal Democrats under Paddy Ashdown, and served as party president from 1990-94.

When Ashdown retired, he won the five-way contest for leader that followed, holding the post until January 2006.

As leader his strategic and somewhat distant approach created a vacuum; while Kennedy was getting the big decisions right, others were trying to orchestrate the shift in the party resulting in the coalition that Kennedy almost alone opposed. His internationalism, moral code and social conscience made the party's values clear.

The failure to achieve an even greater breakthrough than the record 62 MPs in 2005 hit him hard. Arrival in Westminster straight from university curbed development of his organisational skills. The loss of confidence did far worse. Straight after the election, his aides

unsuccessfully demanded a bonfire of all past policy; a distraction technique to hide not the flaws in policy, or in Kennedy, but because of the inability to communicate a succinct narrative. Not the first time his advisors let him down, as the Michael Brown donation scandal proved.

That loss of confidence had been prefaced by the open dissent of right-wing and ambitious MPs opposed to the general thrust of party strategy since the Grimond era, of realignment of the Left. Led initially by Mark Oaten, there followed the

publication of the Orange Book (timed, remember, to deliberately spoil the launch of the party's 2004 pre-manifesto).

As 2005 progressed and it became clearer Kennedy was struggling to function, the plotting among MPs became unstoppable. Those involved would do well to reflect on the human consequences of their actions on a man they knew to be ill, although his leadership after two elections had probably run a natural course.

Quiet times followed – ominously so, especially after the sudden death of his assistant and confidant Anna Werrin in 2010. But a return to

Scotland to care for his ailing father coincided with a partial return to form.

A couple of well-received interventions in the Scottish independence referendum were

followed by a determined attempt to hold onto his seat against the nationalist onslaught. Even after that, he wrote of the challenges to come: “A tale of two unions – the UK and the EU. Despite all the difficult challenges ahead the Liberal Democrat voice must and will be heard.” His warning about the tone of the Better Together campaign, as with the strategic mistakes of 2010, was unheeded, but again right.

The last time I saw Charles was at the Glasgow party conference in 2013, outside the media area, waiting to be interviewed with the regulation polystyrene cup of tea.

Healthy and on form, my last words to him were: “Great to have you back.” Sadly, I was wrong.



Gareth Epps is a member of the Liberator Collective

ONE YEAR FOR WALES

With elections due in 2016 the battered Welsh Liberal Democrats must plot a swift recovery, says Energlyn Churchill

Like everyone else watching the BBC's election coverage that night, I could not quite believe what the exit poll was suggesting. It was even worse than we pessimists had feared and it prompted me to recall a passing conversation with a work colleague. When pressed, I had guessed at 29 Lib Dem seats in total, two of which I thought would be Welsh. "If it is really bad", I had said, "We should, at the very least, see Mark returned in Ceredigion".

I had no idea at the time just how prophetic my comment would be. Mark Williams is indeed the last Welsh Liberal Democrat left standing.

I had always believed that Jenny Willott would lose in Cardiff Central, but I never for one moment thought that Roger Williams would lose in Brecon and Radnorshire. Like most other candidates facing Tory challengers, poor Roger was swept away as part of their ruthless Lib Dem decapitation strategy.

His prospects were not helped by the residents of Ystradgynlais either, a Labour facing part of the constituency that traditionally voted Lib Dem to keep the Tories at bay. The word was that they had put their cross next to the Labour candidate en masse. After five years of coalition with the Tories they weren't any longer assured that a vote for Roger would keep the Conservatives out of Downing Street. Not that it mattered much; Roger's undoing was down to direct Tory switchers, no doubt spurred on by the SNP fear-mongering Tory tactics.

Montgomeryshire had been our only realistic prospect of a Welsh gain. Here Jane Dodds came a creditable second, but still polled five percent less than the bumbling Lembit Opik, who had lost the seat in the otherwise good year of 2010.

If it was bad in mid and west Wales, where we have traditionally had something resembling a core vote, it was even worse in those south Wales seats where we don't usually do so well. My local party, South Wales East Valleys, covers four constituencies and we lost all four deposits. In my own constituency of Caerphilly we managed 935 votes, sixth out of seven with 2.4%. We had achieved nearly 15% in 2010. In Pontypridd, Newport East and Merthyr, where we had installed ourselves as the unlikely challengers to Labour, our vote share imploded. The pattern repeated itself all the way along the M4 corridor, and it was mirrored along the north Wales coastline, too.

Across Wales we were outpolled by every significant party other than the Greens, but even their 2.6% represented a 2.1% increase. A year out from the Welsh Senedd elections we are now the fifth party in Wales with an underwhelming 6.5% of the vote.

The 'middle ground anchor' rhetoric failed to communicate a distinctive reason to vote Lib Dem and, depressingly, it was parroted verbatim by the

Welsh leadership at every opportunity. There was nothing to distinguish the Welsh Liberal Democrats from the toxic Clegg, but this approach is no different to that taken in previous general election campaigns. The media report everything on a UK-wide basis, which means that any variances in federal and Welsh messages are lost. The Welsh party followed the standard approach for UK elections, it's just unfortunate that the message was useless and part of a coalition-infected brand.

We will barely have time to breathe before the 2016 Welsh general election is upon us. It will allow us to carve out a distinctively Welsh Liberal Democrat message, but we are unlikely to be able to set the agenda. The Tories will own health, hauling Labour over the coals for its abysmal record on the NHS. Plaid Cymru will offer the panacea of more powers as the cure for all Wales' ills. Labour will try to deflect attention by saying that you need to vote Labour to oppose the tyranny of the Westminster Tories. Among this mix we will have to find any opportunity that we can to get across our message, whatever that may be.

The time for navel gazing is limited and we need to have a clear campaign plan in place by early summer. By far the biggest challenge we face in 2016 is Ukip. Our Senedd presence depends mainly on the regional lists, with four of our five AMs being elected this way. If Ukip was to repeat its 2015 performance we could be left with only one or two seats. To even be officially recognised as a group in the Senedd we need at least three bums on seats.

Ukip does not draw support from us, and we are unlikely to draw it from them, so we need to squeeze the life out of the Green vote and persuade progressive voters to "come home".

Whoever emerges as federal party leader, we need to make sure that we carve out a distinctly Welsh Liberal Democrat message between now and May 2016, one that helps to put some distance between us and the Coalition era. The challenge is huge, but we are more than up for it.

'Energlyn Churchill' is a Welsh Liberal Democrat who works in a politically restricted post.

CLEANING OUT THE STABLES

The next leader must sort out hypocrisy over party finance, says Donnachdh McCarthy

In 1994, I wrote that if the Liberal Democrats did not address lack of integrity at the heart of its leadership, that no matter what good intentions it had, when it got into government it would not have the moral backbone to stick to its principles. The dishonesty varied from the small fact that the party did not use recycled paper to the big ones on sales of Lib Dem peerages, corrupt party funding and Lib Dem peers selling their services as corporate lobbyists for the global arms, nuclear and GM industries.

The organisation New Radicalism did its best to tackle this leadership refusal to practice what we preached. We got motions passed requiring the use of recycled paper, elections for Lib Dem peers and an end to peers corporate lobbying. But it made no difference. The rot was too entrenched. The corporate lobbying, private equity and tax-haven cabal that has ruled the party's rotten core since the Ashdown days, ensured that none of our integrity project got implemented. Kennedy and Clegg insisted on continuing appointment of rich donors and cronies to the lords, over the heads of those elected by the party. My own resignation as deputy chair of the Federal Executive was demanded by the party's president Lord Dholakia, for telling conference that the leadership was refusing to implement the ban on peers lobbying.

Disastrously for liberalism, the 1994 thesis proved to be correct. While there is no doubt having the party share power diluted the worst right-wing excesses of the Tories, the party leadership's dishonesty was exemplified by the catastrophic betrayal of the pledge to abolish tuition fees. The rights and wrongs of the policy change do not matter here. It was the party's top pledge and was not only broken but tuition fees tripled.

It was not just on tuition fees that the party's activists were betrayed by the leadership. For years the party had opposed nuclear power. They not only abandoned that opposition but forced the European Union to likewise drop it opposition to nuclear power. The party conference voted to oppose genetically manipulated foods. Yet, they not only supported GM contamination of UK organic crops but successfully pushed for all EU countries to be able to do the same. Despite the party's priority to tackle the climate crisis, they supported tax relief for fracking and huge subsidies for oil exploration. And despite millions of Focus leaflets proclaiming "Save Our Post Office", they sold the profitable Royal Mail off for a song to City of London financiers.

And so the party's precious branding as the honest party in UK politics got smashed to smithereens under the former gas-corporation lobbyist Nick Clegg. The electorate passed a devastating judgement on that

failure of integrity. The party has lost thousands of councillors and almost every MEP and MP. The public now see the party as a bunch of liars. And to a certain extent they are right.

So, where should the party go from here? Under Tim Farron, the party has the possibility of having a leader not anointed by the party's corporate elite. But electing such a leader is not enough. The party has a huge job to re-establish its reputation for integrity with the electorate. Why should anybody ever believe any promise the party makes again, no matter how wonderful any leader is?

The solution is clear. It needs to face up to the stinking rot at its core. It needs to have the equivalent of a Truth and Reconciliation Committee, to investigate the corruption and produce a reform agenda to clean out the party's stables. It needs to admit to appointing party donors to the lords and remove the whip from them. It needs to cleanse the party of corrupt corporate lobbyists. It needs to pay back the stolen money donated by Michael Brown. It needs to ensure that every party leaflet is on recycled paper. All party committees should be open and accountable and reverse the secrecy re-introduced by Simon Hughes as president.

This is the task the new leader has to undertake, challenging though it will be. Without re-establishing the party's reputation for honesty, any new building will be built on sand, ready to be blown over yet again in future electoral storms. For the sake of the very survival of UK liberalism, it must and can be done. Tackling the existential threats to Britain's shores, economy and eco-systems posed by the fact that we have only 13 years before the planet's carbon budget is blown, freeing the UK's democracy from enslavement by the 1% and ending the dictatorship of the UK's Fourth Estate by five right-wing extremist media billionaires destroying tolerance, social and ecological justice in the UK, are among the tasks requiring a powerful liberal force in British politics.

But is the party brave enough, to be honest enough, to have strength enough, to deliver on that task? And would Tim Farron be brave enough to try? After the disastrous failure of Cleggism, I sure hope that he is.

Donnachadh McCarthy is a former deputy chair of the Liberal Democrat Federal Executive and now not a member of any political party. He is the author of *The Prostitute State – How Britain's Democracy Has Been Bought*. www.theprostitutestate.co.uk contact@3acorns.co.uk

POLITICALLY NAIVE, TACTICALLY INEPT

Nick Clegg would not listen to those who knew more about politics than he did, and went native in coalition with the Tories, says Steve Comer

Nick Clegg is a likeable person to meet, he has an easy manner of talking, and he gives an impression of sincerity. Sometimes it almost seems unfair to criticise him, but politics is a hard game, and sentiment cannot get in the way of judgement on a leader's record.

The cold blunt reality of the Clegg years is that the Liberal Democrats under his watch have gone into a massive decline so severe that the very existence of the party is under threat.

I'm afraid too many Liberal Democrats are still in denial about the scale of the catastrophe that hit us on 7 May 2015. The party's share of the vote (7.8%) is just above that achieved in by the Liberal Party in 1970 (7.5%), but back then only just over half the seats had Liberal candidates, so in real terms the 2015 result is actually much worse.

The decline is not exclusively Nick Clegg's fault, but much of it has been accelerated by a series of poor judgements on his part. No football manager can survive if his team keeps losing, yet under Clegg the Lib Dem team has been losing votes, council seats, MSPs, MEPs and now MPs every single year since 2009.

And in the wake of those losses the activist base is shrinking, and in many places ageing. The perception of many of our former supporters is that we have moved to the right, and that has vacated the political space that the Green Party has been able to move in on, whilst Ukip has cornered some of the protest vote.

A comprehensive overview of the Clegg years would be two or three chapters in the book that needs writing about the decline, growth and near death of the Liberal Democrats since the merger in 1988.

Limited space means I can only give a view from the grass roots, based my experience as a councillor, a member of the Local Government Association Lib Dem group, and also as the only Liberal Democrat elected to the national executive of the Public & Commercial Services Union.

I've met Nick Clegg several times during his leadership and some of these meetings stick in the mind. An upbeat Nick Clegg came to Bristol to celebrate our gaining of an overall majority on the city council for the first time in 2009; we all smiled for the TV cameras as Nick congratulated us and we got some much needed media coverage.

Two years later a much more downbeat Nick Clegg came to our city for the local government conference and had a fringe meeting with Bristol councillors (who had lost that overall majority on the same day as the AV referendum). He was asked why he supported elected mayors; his reply was that it was a form of

governance that seemed to work quite well on the continent.

When several of us made the obvious point that they had powers far in excess of those offered by either New Labour or the Coalition he had no answer. How could a party leader dismiss the views of those of us who had built up a local government base through years of community campaigning? Did he not know that concentrating executive power in the hands of one person was the very opposite of a Liberal approach? Or did he just prefer the local government policies of New Labour and the Tories to those of the Liberal Democrats he was supposed to lead?

When the Coalition was formed I had a good knowledge of the various Government departments, and more importantly how they worked, who was leading them, and which senior managers were traditional impartial civil servants, and which ones were still pursuing a political agenda left over from the Thatcher/ Major years.

I offered to share this information privately with ministers; that offer was never taken up. Instead it seemed Lib Dem ministers preferred to listen to officials and special advisers who had never had a job outside the Westminster bubble. I know my experience is far from unique. Liberal Democrats are blessed with a large number of talented and knowledgeable people from many sectors of the economy. In recent years we have gained a lot of expertise of government too, in Scotland and Wales we have served in the devolved governments and around the time Clegg became Leader we ran several major cities and many other Councils.

FAILURE OF LEADERSHIP

Yet there seems to have been little effort made to tap into that wealth of experience, and that is quite simply a failure of leadership.

In the first year of the Coalition I spoke to one minister and advised him that the government's policy of slashing redundancy costs, pay freezes, and pension changes that meant people had to work longer for less were creating a storm that was driving away large numbers of voters who worked in the public sector, and who had voted Liberal Democrat for years.

My concerns were dismissed as the minister took the same political line as Francis Maude, and Eric Pickles. I knew some change in some terms and conditions was inevitable, so did my union, but it was all done too brutal and handled badly, and with no proper negotiation. Nick Clegg's belated 'thank you for the sacrifice' speech to public sector workers in the election campaign was patronising and insulting, particularly

for someone like me who had to take redundancy from the civil service on reduced terms in 2011.

I supported going into the coalition largely because I thought we had to counter a fear in the British political psyche that coalitions didn't work. Of course far more governments in the democratic world are coalitions than not, but you wouldn't know that if you only see things through the prism of our highly 'Britocentric' media.

I know it has been said that we got a lot of Liberal Democrat policies into the Coalition

Agreement and then into place in government, and we have, but unfortunately we were outmanoeuvred by the Conservatives from that first day in the rose garden.

In general I thought the Coalition Agreement itself was OK, I even felt the tuition fee scheme that Vince Cable introduced was better than the one Labour had left behind. Yet why didn't we describe it as a deferred graduate tax? Presumably because Osborne was allergic to the 'T' word.

Accepted, but why could we not use the terminology we chose? Language can be important in politics. The community charge will always be known as the poll tax, and the name bedroom tax has stuck not spare room subsidy.

The Tories have successfully got people talking about 'welfare' – a more pejorative term than social security. We should have tackled tuition fee/graduate tax issue head on, rather than release the pathetic, and easily mimicked apology several months after the event.

Of course what really hurt us was not what was in the Coalition Agreement, but what was not. Why did we have to support unpopular Tory measures like a top-down NHS re-organisation, secret courts, cuts to benefits for people with disabilities etc?

I got the impression that while Liberal Democrats were being corporate and defending the Coalition, the Conservatives were undermining their coalition partners at every opportunity.

Apart from the Fixed Term Parliament Act, Nick Clegg failed to get any meaningful constitutional reform on the statute book. I know we can blame Labour for the defeat on Lords reform, but given that a rebellion on the Tory right was predictable, it begs the question as to whether there were real efforts to build a parliamentary consensus for reform, or whether a government bill was just presented with little advance discussion. Either way given that there was a clear majority in the Commons for reform, the tactics look suspect.

And why was local government not even considered when discussions were had about changing the electoral system? I think we could probably have got proportional representation in local government had we pushed for it, instead of being fobbed off with a referendum on AV for the House of Commons.

A further example of naivety and poor tactics was the ex-leader's approach to Europe, and in particular the run up to the 2014 European Parliament elections. Whether the decision to debate with Farage was a

“Nick Clegg’s belated ‘thank you for the sacrifice’ speech to public sector workers in the election campaign was patronising and insulting”

brave one, or a desperate late throw of the dice is a moot point, but having got a debate, preparation was key.

CAR CRASH

The second debate was a complete car crash, not only were the tactics wrong, but when given a gift of a question about the future of Europe, Nick Clegg waffled incoherently! If only he had even half the vision of Guy Verhofstadt (Liberal leader in the European Parliament), and had articulated a quarter of it, but no answer was the sweet reply.

I feel Nick should have resigned after the European elections, but the upper echelons of the party were in denial (and some still are). The message we were given from the political leadership was 'more of the same and it'll be alright on the night.'

And the message from Captain Paddy and first mate Hilary in the campaign 'wheelhouse' to us galley slaves in local parties was merely to row faster and harder. (Its somewhat ironic that after we managed to get rid of 'key performance indicators' in local government, this meaningless management speak became the campaign mantra for the national campaign.)

I'm pleased that Nick did at least manage to resign with dignity, and restate core Liberal principles when he did. He will no doubt bounce back and have a successful career in another field. Whether the Liberal Democrats can survive and thrive again will depend on whether we can face up to what happened since the 2005 general election and renew ourselves, or whether we are doomed to repeat the same mistakes again. The early noises emanating from the battered remnants of the former Clegg bunker are not encouraging, but time will tell.

Steve Comer was a Liberal Democrat councillor in Bristol and former national executive member of the Public & Commercial Services Union

MOURNING BECOMES ELECTION

Its time to clear out the Orange Bookers and build a Rainbow Coalition drawing on the lessons of past recoveries, says Trevor Smith

I slightly amended the title of Eugene O'Neill's 1931 drama, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, about the American Civil War, later a 1947 film, when Jo Grimond, Pratap Chitnis and I conducted a post-mortem on a Liberal electoral debacle in the 1960s.

Unfortunately, it can be returned to service once more, and this time with a vengeance, after the May 2015 electoral massacre of the Liberal Democrat MPs. I had warned of this in *Liberator* in September 2012 and again a year later when I predicted the Lib Dems would lose all their MEPs in the EU elections (in the event we held on to one) and lose much of our local council base.

I also forecast we would be reduced to some 17 MPs this year – wildly over-optimistic as it turned out - but nearer than almost any other commentators. The first article was picked up in *The Sunday Times* quoting my criticism of Nick Clegg for lacking any strategic vision and suggesting how he might manage limiting the damage. I described him as “a cork bobbing on the waves.” I continued with the marine analogy in a third article in 2014 saying he was now “a fish dead in the water” and should resign as leader.

Most of my fellow Lib Dem peers denied my forecast, though one or two secretly agreed it was likely, preferring to bury their heads in the sand, putting great store by the ‘incumbency effect’ and hoping something would turn up. It did, but not as they had hoped.

The present predicament, in some ways, is reminiscent of the past. I joined the Liberals in 1955 when we had six MPs, two of them – Arthur Holt and Donald Wade – being the beneficiaries of Lib/Con pacts in Bolton and Huddersfield respectively. The mid-fifties were very dark days indeed. The nadir came with the 1958 Torquay party assembly, which was an utter shambles.

Out of that, however, the party began a long process of re-inventing itself which, with ups and downs, maintained a momentum that enabled us to survive, even the Jeremy Thorpe crisis, until this May. Can that be achieved again is the burning question that now starkly confronts the Lib Dems?

Nearing my eighth decade, I look back over the intervening 60 years to reflect upon the similarities and differences.

Post-1958 we had some things going for us. Jo was establishing himself as an attractive leader who would later exude charismatic qualities. His somewhat lazy and relaxed style, disguised a formidable intellect which he would activate with effect from time to time. Jo had commissioned *The Unservile State* which

comprised a selection of chapters by leading Liberal academics, and added to the sense of serious thinking going on in party circles.

Further publications on a wide range of issues, under the editorship of George Watson, emanated from the same sources, while Nancy Seear oversaw a steady stream of well worked out policy reports.

INTELLECTUAL FERMENT

There were two other contributors to the growing and palpable intellectual ferment. The Radical Reform Group, under the chairmanship of Desmond Banks and with Manuela Sykes as an energetic activist, promoted new radical ideas within the party, ensuring it maintained a left-of-centre stance.

It was also a good time for the youth wings of the party. The National League of Young Liberals (NLYL) was particularly strong in Manchester, Liverpool and the north west in general. The Union of University Liberal Societies had moved from being a loosely federal body into a more centralised Union of Liberal Students (ULS). The two collaborated closely and even more so after Torquay. They formed a joint political committee to pool ideas and resources, which commissioned a manifesto *New Orbits* which reflected a fresh start in keeping with the Russian successful launching of a sputnik that had just circled the earth from outer space.

The booklet was the product of a number of regional conferences and was launched with much fanfare in Manchester, where Jo Grimond gave a major address. This was in April 1959, six months ahead of the general election of that year.

The committee was reconstituted as the *New Orbits* Group, a separate entity within the party similar in some ways to the Bow Group in the Tory Party. It continued to publish a series of policy pamphlets in the ensuing years. Its leading members, like the Bow Group, included some formidable intellects including Timothy Joyce (later chief executive of J Walter Thompson), Frank Ware (the party's head of research and after a city accountant), David Lea (later TUC assistant secretary), John Williamson (who became a leading international economist), Barbara Burwell, Derrick Mirfin, Richard Moore, Sarah Curtis, Griff Evans, Ronnie Fraser and many others conveniently dotted around the UK which afforded a nation-wide profile.

Furthermore, in contrast to the abysmal Torquay Assembly, six months before we had spectacularly won the Torrington by election when Mark Bonham-Carter was returned as MP with a very narrow majority. He was Jo Grimond's brother-in-law. Losing his seat at

the subsequent general election, he nevertheless remained active, providing much needed effective direction at the party HQ.

All in all, then, the situation had many of the ingredients that could make for a successful revival in the long run. Are there any detectable similarities now, post-May?

First, and most obviously, there is no equivalent to a Jo Grimond. There are one or two 'action men' but they lack his intellectual imagination and charisma which provided his eventual authoritative standing. The Eastleigh by-election victory in 2013 proved as ephemeral in its effect as Torrington had been and it failed to yield up a Bonham-Carter figure.

For its part, Liberal Youth lacks the dynamism that both NLYL and the ULS displayed more than half a century ago. The only equivalent to The Unserving State has been The Orange Book, but whereas the former was largely progressive in outlook, the latter is overwhelmingly a right-of-centre anthology quite out of tune with what is needed. So the portents are not very encouraging.

PARLOUS CONDITION

The real problem lies in the parlous condition of the UK polity and that has to be the starting-point. The Labour Party is weaker than it has ever been for many decades. There is now a multiplicity of parties inadequately represented in both local government and Parliament. The electoral system makes for gross distortions. Some 37% of the voters can put an, admittedly small, majority Tory government in power. By the same token, the SNP secured an excessive number of MPs while UKIP, the Greens and the Lib Dems suffered badly under the first-past-the-post system.

Devolution has been introduced into Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales haphazardly, threatening at times the continued existence of the United Kingdom and alienating England. Rather belatedly, that now has to be thought through robustly to bring about a more coherent set of arrangements.

Then there is the stark question posed by Thomas Pitketty, Joe Stiglitz and others regarding the ever-growing inequality between rich and poor – one that is by no means confined to the UK. Failure to address this, is also a threat to the UK polity as do the related inequalities surrounding gender, ethnicity and regional imbalances.

These are among the major issues that require convincing responses from the political parties. Part of the SNP's success was that it fully recognised austerity fatigue is increasing and it may well prompt the sort of public protest seen in Spain and elsewhere. We know what the Tories will do – they will continue with an austerity programme until they are forced to U-turn. That may prove a survival strategy of sorts for them, but it will do little to repair the parlous condition of the UK polity. What is needed is what Jo Grimond called for after 1959 – “a realignment of the Left.” It didn't happen as he had hoped - will it now?

“For the Lib Dems, this will necessitate a complete clear-out of all those who held office – whether paid or unpaid – during the Coalition”

Writing in The Times on 27 May, Daniel Finklestein in an article entitled 'RIP Liberal Democrats. It's all over for you' urged Lib Dems to promote the traditional values of liberalism by joining either the Tories or Labour. Very few, as he admits, would likely opt for the Tories as their chosen vehicle. Vince Cable writing in the New Statesman in the previous week, echoed Grimond's earlier call whereby Labour and the Lib Dems, sinking their tribalism, might come together in “a wider, progressive purpose of constitutional reform; a

liberal approach to civil liberties; anti-nationalist and internationalist; and with a modern fusion of social democracy and market economics.” While advocating this, he was not very hopeful.

Yet attempts along the lines proposed by Cable, and implicit in the Finklestein analysis must be attempted. The Social Liberal Forum, along with Liberator, are most suited to initiate the desired direction towards a reconfiguration of UK politics. They could help co-ordinate the efforts of those progressive radicals such as Julian Huppert, Seth Thevoz, David Howarth, Simon Radford, Prateek Buch, Helen Flynn, Julie Porksen, Ros Keyes and Naomi Smith (I declare an interest, she's my daughter) to produce a manifesto that might be married with the aspirations of Compass on the Labour side.

Can Labour jettison the authoritarianism of the kind displayed by John Reid, Jack Straw and David Blunkett – seemingly all too naturally – along with Tony Blair's military adventurism, that so marred New Labour? That would clearly be a pre-requisite as would the total abandonment of the neo-liberalism that inspired too many of The Orange Book authors.

As I've said, the portents are not good. It will prove very difficult to escape from the tribalism that Cable identifies. Far too many Lib Dems buried their heads in the sand when in Coalition; can we recognise the new realities of politics and determine to embark on a more ambitious course? For the sake of the UK polity, we need to look at the possibilities of a wider 'Rainbow Coalition', embracing the Greens and Plaid Cymru than that proposed by Cable. For the Lib Dems, this will necessitate a complete clear-out of all those who held office – whether paid or unpaid – during the Coalition. They're part of the problem, the very ones who were, and continue to be, in denial. They're bed-blockers and cannot be trusted to undertake the zero-sum analysis and lateral thinking that is so imperative. The challenge to all radical progressives is immense: we must raise our game to meet it.

Trevor Smith is a Liberal Democrat peer who was the youngest Liberal candidate in the 1959 general election and subsequently chair of the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust

GOODBYE BIGOTRY AND FANTASY

Former national executive chair Fran Oborski explains why anti-EU bigotry, and the arrogance of fantasists in the Liberal Party, have driven her back to the Liberal Democrats

A short dose of history is needed. I joined the Liberal Party in 1966 along with my late husband, Mike. When we married in 1968 we moved to Much Wenlock, set up a local Liberal branch, joined the Ludlow constituency executive and Mike was agent for Ludlow at the 1970 general election.

In 1971 we moved to Kidderminster and I was elected to the new Wyre Forest District Council in 1973, and Mike to the new Hereford and Worcester County Council at the same time.

Eventually, we were both on both councils and I am now the only Liberal councillor of any type in north Worcestershire.

In 1996 Wyre Forest Liberal Democrats pressed the self destruct button and forced Mike out of the party for having had the temerity to insist on voting against, at county council, a policy that the party had made a promise to oppose in its local election manifesto (a 'tuition fee' moment). Mike was immediately welcomed back into the Liberal party by its president Michael Meadowcroft. I intended to stay in the Lib Dems but was 'instructed' by the local party to have nothing to do with Mike! I was effectively being told to choose between my marriage and the party. No contest. I too joined the Liberal party and took half Wyre Forest's members with me.

In 1996 the Liberal Party was a real liberal party; guided by real Liberals such as Michael Meadowcroft, Rob Wheway and David and Joan Morrish; it consisted of those Liberals who had resisted the merger with the SDP and who had initially formed the Liberal Movement. The party was internationalist, pro-EU expansion (though against membership of the single currency), against the proliferation of nuclear weapons and generally continued with the policies and stance of the pre-merger Liberal Party.

When Michael Meadowcroft retired as president, Mike took over and the party continued on its Liberal path. In 2007 two occurrences started, in my opinion, the slow decline of liberalism within the Liberal Party.

The first, and perhaps for me the most affecting, was Mike's death, which removed, at a stroke, one of the strongest supporters of EU expansion and the desperate need to integrate the now democratic 'post-Soviet' central and eastern European countries into the EU.

The second was Michael Meadowcroft's decision in October 2007, some 20 years after the merger, to join the Liberal Democrats.

Michael has explained his position clearly and coherently in various published articles which can be

found on his website, most notably in the aptly named 'Goodbye purity'.

Cllr Steve Radford became Liberal Party president and I became national executive chair. From the 2007 Liberal assembly there was a gradual, at first almost imperceptible, move towards an attitude of almost Euro-phobia with what had been a strongly anti-Euro membership but with general support for EU membership, albeit with a call for reform, being replaced by irrational dislike of all things European.

From 2009, as well as chairing the national executive, I took over the editing and production of the party's quarterly newsletter Liberal News. Editions from 2009 are, largely, on the Liberal Party website.

A 2009 edition which reports on assembly motions includes a motion which ends with the words:"

This assembly notes the position of the European Parliament whereby only parties who are members of larger European groupings may fight future elections to the Parliament, and states its opposition to this position.

"However, whilst stating its opposition, this assembly feels that the electorate should not be denied an opportunity to vote for EU-sceptic Liberal candidates, and calls upon the NEC to make links with other Liberal parties in Europe (both within and outside the European Union) who are not members of the ELDR and who share the ethos of the Liberal Party, in order to make such a grouping to fight future European Parliamentary elections."

Typical of recent Liberal Party assembly motions, this includes a commitment that was effectively totally ignored. There has been no attempt to contact any other Euro sceptic European Liberal Parties, if indeed any exist.

INCREASING EUROPHOBIA

Increasing Europhobia has been led by the Cornish Liberal Party who are in total denial about the amount of funding the Cornish economy actually receives from the EU. The impact EU withdrawal would actually have on Cornwall is blissfully ignored.

The formation of the Coalition Government in 2010 should have been a real opportunity for the Liberal Party; below is a quote from the autumn 2010 Liberal News:

"Meeting just after the original Coalition Agreement was published the national

Executive committee of the Liberal Party thought that there were several points in the Coalition Agreement with which we agreed. However the actions of the Coalition Government in recent weeks show an almost total abandonment of Liberal principles.

We are aware of some voices of Liberal dissent within the Coalition and we urge those Liberals to come home”

E-mails were sent to Lib Dem councillors across the UK but with little response. The potential for recruitment was not helped by the visceral hatred of all things Lib Dem being openly expressed by certain national executive members.

In 2013 I stood down as national executive chair when I became chair of Wyre Forest District Council and also ceased to be involved in the production of Liberal News.

That year’s Liberal Party assembly passed a resolution on ‘Genuine Opportunity’, which called for a UK universal inheritance, out of the past wealth of our country, for all UK born UK citizens at age 25 of £10,000, roughly 10% of the average wealth of every adult and child in the country.

To finance it the Liberal Party called for a flat 10% tax on all capital given and left, down from the current 40%, without the current unlimited exemptions, in combination with a progressive rate tax on the lifetime total of all capital received. The UK universal inheritance would be included in the lifetime total and so would be clawed back in tax from those who receive or inherit substantial lifetime totals.

The ideas behind this motion seem admirable but it is the highlighted words ‘UK born UK citizens’ which must cause concern to any real Liberal.

The main promoter of universal inheritance was Dane Clouston. The proposition put was illiberal. There are very many UK born people who do not have UK citizenship; I have Polish friends whose parents came in during or just after WWII, their parents have retained their Polish citizenship, the children kept Polish citizenship, they would not qualify despite the amount of tax and NI their families have paid; I have friends who came here from Australia and whose children, though born here, have Australian Passports, no matter how much tax and NI their parents have paid, they would not qualify; EU migrants work here and pay taxes here, their children are born here, they will not qualify.

So a policy which Liberals should all applaud was made unacceptable.

In any small party there is a danger of one individual gaining too much power. A look at the Electoral Commission’s list of approved ballot paper descriptions for Liberal Party candidates makes that screamingly clear. What possible justification can there ever be for the ballot paper description, used in Liverpool of: ‘Liberal Party Steve Radford’s candidate’? When I protested I was told it was “needed”.

VISCERAL HATRED

In the run up to the 2015 general election the total illiberality of the Liberal Party and its visceral hatred of all things Lib Dem was brought into clear focus.

The Cornish Liberal Party very publicly announced that it was withdrawing all its parliamentary candidates and was urging all Liberals to vote Ukip as they felt that Ukip shared their policies and aspirations!

That any party, claiming to be entitled to use the word Liberal, could imagine urging people who were fundamentally Liberal supporters to vote Ukip against

Lib Dem MPs filled some of us with horror; but it was the reaction of the party hierarchy which was the worst aspect.

To her credit the party nominating officer immediately withdrew delegated nominating rights.

Several of us complained in writing to the national executive chair and frankly his response was appalling: “local arrangements do not fall within the purview of the Federal Party and thus no action can or will be taken against any member of Bargas Larch Kernow (the Cornish Liberal Party)”.

This statement led to an immediate challenge as the party constitution makes no mention of a ‘federal party’. This met with a threat of resignation from the NEC chair and the reiteration: “No formal complaint had been received.” Eventually some of us managed to sort out exactly what form of wording would be required to constitute an acceptable ‘complaint’. This was not dealt with, it was felt that it was inappropriate to rock the boat during an election campaign. This meant that some of us had to endure insults from other parties throughout our election campaigns.

The complaints are, very belatedly, due to be considered on 13 June.

Any self respecting national party would have, at the very least, formally suspended the Cornish Liberal Party.

However, a visit to the Liberal Party website (www.liberal.org.uk) will illustrate why it is not really a national party, with three county councillors (two when they process my resignation), 12 district councillors (soon to be 11 for the same reason) and 13 parish councillors (which should be seven if they deal with Cornwall).

The Discussion Documents page suggests comments should be sent to Rob Wheway; he is no longer a party member and shares my disgust of the Cornwall situation.

Along with the scarcity of councillors goes a collapse in membership. To the best of my knowledge this is now below 400 and falling.

The arrogance of fantasists who believe there are no Liberals in the Lib Dems and that they are ‘the only true Liberals’ has finally driven me to take a reality check.

I am no longer prepared to have one member of the NEC (which already has several vacancies) shout at me as a “Closet Lib Dem”; I am emerging from that closet.

With another hat on I am Polish honorary consul for the West Midlands. In that role I was proud to work alongside Phil Bennion when he was an MEP. I simply cannot continue to have to regard bigots as political colleagues.

There are in the Liberal Party some really great Liberals whom I have been proud to work alongside; in particular the councillor teams in Peterborough, in Ryedale, Jenny Roach in Devon and former councillors David and Joan Morrish in Exeter. I would urge them to think long and hard about where the future of Liberalism really lies.

Fran Oborski is a councillor in Worcestershire and Wyre Forest and former chair of the Liberal Party national executive

SHINING A LIGHT ON THE MONEY

Katherine Bavage questions the secrecy surrounding the Liberal Democrat Federal Finance and Administration Committee and its role in relation to donations

Liberator 371 had an article by Seth Thévoz on ‘cash for peerages’ within the Liberal Democrats, following from research he conducted with fellow Liberal Democrats Andrew Mell and Simon Radford, which I read with not inconsiderable alarm.

I have been a fundraising professional for some years, and so you can imagine the disquiet caused by the near-certainty that our party appears to be as equally mired in a quid-pro-quo approach for peerages as the other two parties.

Forgive my naivety, but when I joined the Liberal Democrats in 2006, I thought at the very least our commitment to equality would without question ensure a ‘Chinese walls’ approach between donors, and those who we nominate to the upper chamber.

Yet alarmingly, Dr Thévoz – a newly-elected member of the Federal Finance and Administration Committee (FFAC), which oversees fundraising and donations acceptance – confirmed that he had raised his concerns about ‘cash for peerages’ in writing to his colleagues. The note he finished on could not have filled Liberator’s readers with confidence: “Since I am not permitted to comment on the response of FFAC, I would encourage members to press the committee on what action has been taken; and to judge for yourself whether such action is suitably robust.”

This would ring alarm bells to anyone who works in the third sector for the glaring lack of transparency of process and due diligence.

In the last few years, there were a number of embarrassing cases for organisations that accepted financial support seen to run contrary to their values or independence.

The University of Oxford’s creation of the Rupert Murdoch-funded chair of language and communication caused great concern about the implications for curtailment of independent research in the department. As a result, both the higher education and charitable sectors made large steps to improve best practice, by improving governance, and moving towards transparent and ethical gift acceptance processes.

It is therefore unsatisfactory that a member of FFAC who can lay claim to considerable expertise and interest in ensuring our processes for accepting large gifts are unimpeachable, cannot report reassurance from the responsible body, and instead must urge ordinary members to raise further questions.

It would be sensible for members alongside myself to take up that challenge, and for conference delegates to further quiz the chair of FFAC, Peter Dunphy, at the regular question slot at conference, by considering

exactly what measures have historically been taken by FFAC to put a stop to ‘cash for peerages’.

In addition, Dr Thévoz’s piece suggested two substantive steps that at a minimum must be taken to ensure confidence for the future: re-commencing elections to the interim peers panel; and the party’s democratically-elected bodies being given advance notice of the leader’s new peerage nominees for scrutiny.

But beyond the wider party structures lies the key question of whether FFAC itself is doing a robust enough job at present in keeping tabs on the party’s fundraising.

At the moment it is unclear because the party’s policy on accepting gifts and conflicts of interest is not shared publicly, nor is the job description of the chair of FFAC, making it impossible to know what aspects of due diligence are undertaken, or not as the case may be.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

One of the basic things any organisation with a claim to principle must do is avoid conflicts of interest. Mell, Radford and Thévoz’s research demonstrated the average extra donations given by ‘big donor peers’ of all three parties as £220,000 for the Conservatives, £333,000 for Liberal Democrats, and £464,000 for Labour, and stated: “If peerages are being sold, then these could be thought of as the ‘average price’ per party”, noting that such sums are typically spread out over time, with half being paid before a peer has been nominated, and half after.

FFAC is notionally responsible for oversight and scrutiny of party acceptance of donations. I think it pertinent therefore to consider any potential conflicts of interest among FFAC members themselves, especially if any would qualify as the kind of people who might, in the words of the research paper, “stand an astronomically disproportionate chance of eventually being nominated for a peerage.”

After all, if FFAC is to be competent to oversee its remit, then all such conflicts of interest are best avoided entirely – or at least fully declared (and I am not aware of any declarations having been made to the Federal Executive, which oversees FFAC).

Electoral Commission figures on donations only run up to Q4 2014 at the time of writing, covering ‘gifts in kind’ as well as actual cash. This is all public-domain information, although I am not aware of it ever having been collated in one place. I am sure that fellow members will welcome this move towards greater transparency. My source for donations for FFAC members is the Electoral Commission website.

Peter Dunphy (Chair of FFAC) – £138,658.55 of donations, plus a further £13,978.99 from Peter Dunphy Associates, dispersed between the central party, the London regional party, and local parties in Bedfordshire North, Devon North, Hammersmith & Fulham, Hereford & South Herefordshire, Leyton & Wanstead, Norfolk North & Great Yarmouth, Ross, Skye & Lochaber, Sheffield Central, Sheffield Hallam, Sutton, Walthamstow, Westminster, and Westmorland & Lonsdale.

Baroness Brinton (Federal Party President) – £32,433.40, dispersed between the parliamentary party in the Lords, and local parties in East Dunbartonshire and Watford.

Mark Stephens (Welsh party representative) – £24,162.70 dispersed between the central party, the Welsh Party, and Cardiff Central local party.

Peter Ellis (elected member) – £16,850, dispersed between the Western Counties regional party, Lib Dem Business Forum, City of Bradford local party, and the office of Charles Kennedy.

Lord Wrigglesworth (Federal Party treasurer) – £6,839 dispersed between the central party and the parliamentary party in the Lords.

Liz Leffman (elected member) – £6,800 to the Meon Valley local party.

Edward Lord (elected member) – £2,000 to Islington borough local party.

No donations were recorded from the other members: Humphrey Amos (staff representative), Tim Gordon (chief executive), David Hughes (English Party treasurer), Glenys Hughes (elected member), Steve Jarvis (English Party representative), Caron Lindsay (Scottish Party representative), Johnny Steen (staff representative), Seth Thévoz (elected member).

I do not believe that any FFAC members have done anything improper for personal advantage, and am not suggesting that FFAC or any other committee should exclude anyone who's given money to the party – I ran for Federal Policy Committee last year, and that would have counted me out.

Indeed, we've all dug deep over the years, and I hope to be in a position to do so more in future. The generosity of someone such as Sal Brinton is exactly

in line with what you might expect of a candidate in a target seat (£22,722.40 of the £32,433.40 she's donated went to her local party in Watford, when she was the PPC); or of any number of armchair activists who can help in this way.

On the other hand, FFAC chair Peter Dunphy's generosity stands out, as what Mell, Radford and Thévoz define in their own report as a 'big donor', and raises the question of whether someone in that position is best-placed to oversee and scrutinise party donations?

He is though just one person involved – it's not as if he is personally scrutinising donations to the party himself, or doing it on behalf of the FFAC.

ROBUSTLY GOVERNED

If we are to be a robustly-governed party, surely such conflicts of interest are to be avoided. Given our values it is not appropriate that such matters remain a mystery to the wider membership - many of whom will have donated in the run up to May as well and will wish to be reassured that the size of contribution that results in a peerage is measured in lives changed and elections won, not pounds and pence.

I would hope FFAC could put an end to my speculation and concern by publicly sharing the party's policies on ethical gift acceptance and conflict of interest management on FFAC.

I also feel that Sal Brinton as president, and more broadly, members of FE may want to consider their responsibilities in terms of due diligence and party governance when it comes to donations. It would be reassuring if our party could demonstrate its integrity, and that it can learn the lessons of the third sector by taking an opportunity for positive change in reviewing its internal workings.

Given independent research has strongly suggested we may have been liable to reward major donors with more than just our sincere thanks, the safest route is one of transparency of process and confidence in those responsible for overseeing it.

Katherine Bavage is secretary of the Liberal Democrat Yorkshire and the Humber region and works in higher education fundraising

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**Greek and Roman
Political Ideas**
by **Melissa Lane**
Penguin 2014 £7.99

I was so disgusted by the revelations of Donnachadh McCarthy's *The Prostitute State* (State (Liberator 371) that I had to get back to basics. Most of the ideas underlying western politics were enunciated by ancient Greece and Rome. I will not pretend that the Athenian Democracy wasn't capable of heinous crimes, but some of the ideas beneath it were more advanced in the control of elites than what passes for democracy today. While there were limits to the citizen base, that base was more actively engaged than our media-sedated masses. Revisiting the roots of democracy may give us some ideas of how to re-engage our citizens.

Lane has provided us with a useful little book, warts and all. Those of us who have the audacity to seek election should read it and get a grounding of what they are supposed to be doing.

Stewart Rayment

The Essential Keynes
by **John Maynard Keynes**
Penguin 2015 £10.99

The title of this book may be taken as some kind of battle cry in the current political economy. As Robert Skidelsky, who edited the collection, points out in his introduction, Keynes was almost disregarded in the wake of the monetarist ascendancy.

However the strategic worth of continuing austerity is now seriously challenged. We need investment in infrastructure, and by that I do not mean the mindless building of houses, though that may play a part, I mean real infrastructure to carry our economy forward as the global adjustment to the east and south continues apace. This is not a time for the short-term thinking beloved of the Tories and Labour, and makes the outcome of the UK general election even more regrettable.

I had hoped that this would be a useful handbook for Liberals in government, but that is not to be so.

Skidelsky guides us through his selection of Keynes. He left Labour to become a founding member of the SDP. He didn't join the merged party, but I was somewhat surprised when, having been created a life peer, he became a Tory (many Soggs



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did of course). However, he fell out with Hague over NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia and now sits on the cross benches.

Keynes died in 1946 and economics writing is even more of its time than political. No one doctrine is the fount of all wisdom, and the efficacy of economic tools changes with time. Keynes himself teaches us that. The failings of so-called Keynesianism 30 years after his death lie more in the inflexibility of his followers and their political masters. Amongst the quotable quotes at the end of the book, Keynes quips: "The boom, not the slump, is the right time for austerity at the Treasury." (1937, *The Times*).

Stewart Rayment

**Heresies and Heretics,
memories of the
Twentieth Century**
by **George Watson**
The Lutterworth Press,
2013

Heresies and Heretics is a collection of essays, presumably originally published elsewhere, though not attributed as such – Watson wrote frequently for *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, for instance. His writing style was always engaging, with a mischievous wit, so it is good to have them in a durable form (there's many an obituary that it is good to chuckle over years after).

The Best of British starts with Michael Gove, 'an education minister,' saying that our national history is "one of the most inspiring stories I know" and that we should teach the British to value the liberties they enjoy. While I don't disagree with that, I might add that we should teach the Tories to value the liberties they enjoy.

History is the subject of many of these essays, alongside, as you would expect, literature. Watson sees the value of the National Myth, whether it be a Whig, or more probably, Tory interpretation. Our review pages devote much space to challenging the fallacies of imperialism. However this essay ends with Bagehot in 1876: "The characteristic of great nations is that they fail from not comprehending the great institutions which they have created." What says this of parliamentary democracy indemocracy in these grey days?

When Watson wrote "Educating the Prime Minister", 50 such were counted: 26 educated at Oxford (14 at Christ Church), 14 at Cambridge, two at Edinburgh and 11 the university of life. Since then Oxford has added another. None from the red bricks or glass, Watson mourns; what does this tell us about the British establishment?

"Thoughts of Dead Elephants" and "The Sudden Death of Imperial Guilt" take a balanced view of British imperialism. Watson denounces the claim that it was racially motivated, shows that socialists were at one time very enthusiastic about empire, that people wanted to join (one could add others on the fringe of the then expanding Russian empire).

He also points out that it was an administrative burden and that both the British and French economies have performed considerably better without empire – heresy perhaps, but a number of myths debunked there. Governments were frequently dragged by the nose into imperial expansion by bad men – one might name Rhodes and Gordon among the lionised, but there were many others, often traders, while people

like Sir Mark Sykes, a key figure in the mess that is the Middle East, were unashamedly racist. They are short essays with interesting perspectives and well worth reading.

And heretics? A brief note on Churchill may conflict with his literary merits explored by Rose elsewhere to a degree. Arthur Quiller-Couch's *Liberalism* is a pleasant surprise, a name on the title page of so many weighty tomes; EM Forster's is better known. CP Snow – a conservative Communist (arenaren't they all mostly?) - reminds us that politics is about administration as well as personality. There is a particularly touching account of one of Warson's students, Douglas Adams. Is that George pissing at the moon on the front cover?

Stewart Rayment

The Princeton Companion to Atlantic History **Joseph C Miller (ed)** **Princeton University Press 2015 £44.95.**

Princeton has brought us what purports to be the first encyclopaedic reference on Atlantic[AN1] history. We shall all be a lot better informed for it. Atlantic history really means the Age of Discovery and after. I find no reference to St Brendan or the Vikings in the index, and given an essentially 'European' perspective (wherein I include white America) this is not unreasonable – that which said, reference to earlier African and Native American developments, with which we are, alas, less familiar, are valuable.

Consider for example the essays on Christianity, which show much earlier penetration than most of us probably consider and a much earlier impact within the African continent, whereby many slaves arriving in the Americas might already practice a syncretic blend of Catholic and local beliefs. This alas, exposes the duplicity of the church, effectively maintaining that some souls were more equal than others at a time when the same equality of souls was being argued to extend human rights in Europe.

Laurent Dubois' essay *The Nineteenth Century, Consolidation and Reconfiguration* is a

particularly brutal awakening the shortcomings of our past, as one might expect from a professor best known for his work on Haiti, the exception to the principles of the French Revolution.

Paradoxically, the liberal humanism of politics in Europe and North America was intimately intertwined with Africa and parts of Asia through brutal military occupation. Not many surprises there, but an essay worth reading in itself.

Predominantly historical, interlaced with anthropology and economics, this is a very useful book that one will be able to dip into in those odd moments and come out much better informed.

Stewart Rayment

An Inconvenient Genocide, who now remembers the Armenians? **by Geoffrey Robertson** **Biteback 2015 £20.00**

2015 is the centenary of the Armenian Genocide. Geoffrey Robertson has a bit of form as a human rights barrister, He was defence counsel in the Oz, Gay News, the ABC, The Romans in Britain and Matrix Churchill trials.

It follows therefore that his interest in Armenia will be on the legal side. InterLib reviewed Raymond Kevorkian's magnum opus *The Armenian Genocide*, back in 2011.

Up to 1.5m Armenians died as a result of the policies of the Ottoman government in 1915. Some of these, typically adult men, would have been killed outright; women, children and the elderly died in droves on forced marches, inadequately provided for and abused. Survivors might end up in de facto slavery or forced conversion to Islam. Assyrians and Ottoman Greeks suffered similar fates.

The Armenians have lived through most of recorded history under one empire or another, Moslem since the 11th century, either Persian in the east, or Turkish in the west, the Ottomans since the 16th century. Russia ousted the Persians in 1813. In what is now eastern Turkey, they shared the land with Kurds, Turks and others, and still constitute

the largest Christian minority in Turkey. Under the Caliphate, non-Moslems were second class citizens. Massacres were not uncommon as a means of attempting to control the Ottoman's dissident minorities – William Gladstone had cause to call the Ottomans "the worst government that has ever existed" over the Armenians in August 1896. An estimated 88,000 died directly in these massacres, up to 200,000 indirectly through disease and starvation between 1894 and 1896.

I disagree with Robertson on one point. I don't think the Young Turks were cynical in taking their country into the First World War on the side of Germany. They had lost three wars in the previous three years. Cemal Pasha had approached the French in July 1914 with a view to the Ottomans joining the Entente; this would, of course, mean guarantees against Russia's predatory interests in Turkey (and those of Britain and France in Mesopotamia and Syria). He returned to Istanbul empty handed and with the outbreak of war Britain's seized their dreadnoughts. Robertson lines up Germany with the Turks as villains, but are not the Entente powers culpable as well, in creating the climate for genocide?

There is some feeling that Turkey's continued denial of genocide lies in the potential scale of reparations were it acknowledged. Yet the complicity of the Ottoman state has been on Turkish public record since 1919 through the published accounts of the trials they conducted, in the official gazette.

We all have unpleasant histories, and Robertson points out that Armenian hands are not bloodless. We might reasonably hope that one day both countries will be part of the European Union and look to a maturity in resolving their differences. Robertson's proposals seem reasonable, and one would like to think that the Armenians and Turks might look at them seriously with a view to resolving the malaise.

Stewart Rayment

An unseasonably cold morning as I supervise the erection of an obelisk commemorating the many good Liberal Democrats who fell at the general election. It stands on an eminence on the Bonkers Hall Estate, across a rocky valley from the triumphal arch which marks Wallace Lawler's victory in the Birmingham Ladywood by-election.

I cannot pretend I was surprised at the debacle of 7 May: indeed, I had asked for an estimate from my stonemason well before polling day, though he had to put me off for a while because he had an urgent commission "from another political gentleman". As things turned out, we did worse at the election than even I had expected, with the result that he had to Put a Bit on Top to give him room to inscribe all the names. The public, however, will not notice a thing.

Why, I hear you ask, did we do so badly at the general election?

First there was that slogan: "Stronger economy, fairer society." Ashdown did his best to perk it up by adding "Opportunity for Everyone," while I had some success here in the Bonkers Hall Ward with the kicker "Remember your rents fall due on Lady Day," but I admit that was not an addendum open to every Liberal Democrat candidate.

Then suddenly it was all about looking left and right before crossing the road. As it happens we have never bothered teaching the village children the Kerb Drill because we have kept in place the anti-tank defences that were installed at the top of the main street at the outbreak of hostilities in 1939. Some people call such measures 'traffic calming', but here they have a far from calming effect on drivers who go through them. So that slogan was never going to have much of an impact hereabouts either.

After that we had that stuff about the Wizard of Oz – one of my favourite films, but hardly likely to win over the younger voter – and after that... Well, I forget, but I think 'Decency' came into it somewhere. It sounded rather like the chaplain at school when two fourth formers had been found in bed together.

Who should I meet when I drop into a Westminster coffee bar to treat myself to a cappuccino but Freddie? You remember him: he was one of Freddie and Fiona, the two young advisers upon whom poor Clegg leant so heavily whilst in government.

I ask him what he intends to do now that Clegg has bought the farm. "I was planning to go into PR because I have such a good contacts book," he tells me, "but then I realised that all the people in it have just gone into PR too."

I give him some advice, wish him the best of the luck for the future and end by saying: "You know, I think I will have some chocolate on top. Makes a bit more of it, don't you think?" He gives me my change and I find a table and sit down with the Manchester Guardian.

Lord Bonkers' Diary

The bigwigs in the party were very pleased with themselves when they came up with the wheeze of offering the prospect of dinner with John Cleese or Hugh Grant to encourage members to donate money to the general election campaign. The idea was that anyone making a donation would be entered into a draw and the winner would get to break bread with one of other the two

stars. Being good Liberals, both Cleese and Grant donated money themselves and were consequently entered into the draw. When that draw was made the inevitable happened: Cleese won dinner with Grant and Grant won dinner with Cleese. They dined together at my club on consecutive evenings and got on Terribly Well, but I feel sure that was not how things were meant to turn out.

The Reverend Hughes calls at the Hall with some disturbing news. He has decided to hand in the keys of St Asquith's for a while and go off on a Mission. "You're not going to live with the headhunters of Borneo, are you?" I ask sternly, knowing what he was like when he got One of His Ideas. "I did think of that" he replies, "but it seemed so tame. No, I am convinced the Lord is calling me to convert the more primitive tribes of the Upper Welland Valley." "Don't be a fool, man," I tell him. "They'll eat you for breakfast," but he is not to be moved.

I detest such disruptions to the smooth running of things here on the Estate and in the village. I remember when Meadowcroft (or was it his father?) got it into his head to go off to France and grow grapes. Whilst I was busy persuading him to return, a colony of moles established themselves on the lawn in front of the Hall. It took years – and several closely argued pamphlets from Meadowcroft – before I could get them to leave.

The Revd Hughes is not to be moved, and he tells me he has arranged for a locum vicar to take Divine Service and visit the sick whilst he is away. "He's young and keen and believes every word of the Liberal Democrat manifesto is the literal truth." I eye him levelly: "It's not Farron, is it?"

It is Farron. I find him in St Asquith's taking down the signed photograph of Leicestershire's 1975 County Championship winning team from behind the altar. "Let me make a few things clear from the start," I tell him. "We are not going to sing 'Shine, Jesus, Shine,' you are not removing the pews from the church and I am not going to kiss the person next to me – unless it's Alan Beith, of course."

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