

liberator

Bacon health shocker



*I've had
it with the
Tories*

- 🍌 We knew the polls were wrong - Nick Harvey
- 🍌 'In' campaign, all in suits - David Grace
- 🍌 Perils of equidistance - Nick Barlow

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COMMENTARY

AVOID THE CORBYN TRAP

As Paddy Ashdown noted at conference, Liberal Democrat fortunes ought to revive with Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader and the prime minister having allegedly been up to no good with a pig.

The second of these may or may not have happened (though will probably see David Cameron pursued by demonstrators in pig masks in future).

Corbyn's ascendancy to the Labour leadership is though entirely real and the conventional view in the Lib Dems is that it means Labour has - as in the early 1980s - chosen to make itself unelectable thus opening up terrain for the party to exploit.

It's true that some of those around Corbyn don't seem much concerned with whether Labour wins so long as they control the party.

It's also true that the arithmetic of the last general election means that Labour must, at least in England, win back Tory voters to have a hope of power and that Corbyn's agenda hardly seems calculated to do that.

One interesting factor will be what the Labour centre and right does now. Will it sit tight, hope for Corbyn to perpetrate some error so outrageous that he has to go, or hope he is felled by catastrophic defeat, and then seek to take over again? Or will it break away?

The latter course seems unlikely. An eight-strong band of Lib Dem MPs can't look a very attractive thing to join and the history of the SDP is hardly encouraging to centrist splinter parties (and indeed no one in their right mind who went through top-down seat share outs with the SDP could possibly wish to repeat the experience).

So the Lib Dems are more likely to face a Labour party consumed by internal fighting and led by people with little traction beyond their most hardcore supporters - many of whom will live in safe Labour seats anyway.

The worst response would be for the Lib Dems to start drivelling about being 'moderate' or 'in the middle' let alone speculating on providing Corbyn with 'a head' or any other item of anatomy.

May's disastrous general election campaign obliterated what identity the party still had after the coalition and another headlong rush into a space defined by others would destroy what remains of it.

Tim Farron has made a decent start in identifying the party with campaign themes and stances that are brave but not necessarily wildly popular, such as on refugees.

Corbyn's arrival may bring a temptation to chuck this overboard and rush for 'the centre'. That would be the worst reaction. Other parties should not dictate where the Lib Dems stand.

HOLDING THE WRONG SUITS

If one were asked to design a campaign in favour of staying in the European Union it would no doubt include some leading business figures who can articulate the message that membership is good for jobs.

It would not though be confined to them. The launch of Britain Stronger in Europe (quite apart from the unfortunate acronym) looked like an array of establishment suits, one of whom, Danny Alexander, was allegedly there to represent the Lib Dems. Be grateful for small mercies, he was at least chosen by the campaign not the party.

Where were the trade unions, who will be needed to mobilise in favour of continued membership in the interests of their members' jobs and working conditions? Where were the World War 2 veterans, who might have told us they didn't fight so that Eurosceptics could frivolously throw away the subsequent 70 years of peace in Europe?

Where were the young people, the demographic most overwhelmingly likely to vote to stay in and least 'drawbridge down' in outlook? Where were the ethnic minorities, who might have something to fear in any future isolationist 'Little England'?

The trouble with campaigns led by business figures is that they have no clue how to conduct political campaigning.

They might be able to campaign in the sense of agreeing to advertising for clothing or dog food, or conduct some discreet lobbying, but that isn't the same as political campaigning.

Nor will a European Union referendum be won by trying to bore the public into submission with a deluge of statistics.

The 'out' case is almost entirely emotional - about doing things the 'British' (or rather English) way, controlling 'our' laws and keeping out foreigners. Quite apart from blithely disregarding the extent to which chunks of UK policy have been for decades made in Washington in ways over which this country has minimal influence, this approach perpetrates a fantasy that the UK can tell the rest of the world to get lost and proceed its own way without reference to anyone else.

It appeals to nationalism and emotionalism and when people have formed an irrational view they are rarely moved from it solely by a rational one.

The pro-EU campaign is going to need some 'good tunes', an emotional case of its own based on being open to other countries and influences and part of the world rather than shut off from it.

A bunch of suits spouting trade statistics will not deliver that.

RADICAL BULLETIN

THINGS THAT DAWN SLOWLY

Lib Dem chief executive Tim Gordon may have chanced his arm by presenting the Federal Executive with a *fait accompli* in his reorganisation of party headquarters.

Gordon was a Nick Clegg appointee and Tim Farron's views are not publicly known.

The FE was told the review would reduce staff costs from £3m to £2.3m with very few formal job losses due to natural wastage and fixed term posts expiring.

After a two and a half hour debate the FE accepted it even though the reorganisation was not obviously aligned with either the general election campaign review or the governance review, since neither is yet complete, and contained a bizarre proposal to switch all campaigning support to digital away from paper.

Nor was any support obviously earmarked for Farron's key announced campaign priorities.

Not for nothing do many past and present members refer to the FE as the worst committee they have ever sat on.

It took a while for the implications of what they had voted through to sink in, but only a week or so later a group of members called an emergency FE meeting to discuss: "The response from party staff to the proposals; future capacity for staff and volunteer training and skills development; future training and support for IT systems such as Connect, Nationbuilder and Salesforce; the role of the field campaign team and their relationship with other party field resources; responsibility for proposing and implementing the party's core campaign messages; policy development; the future balance between support for digital and 'traditional' campaign methods; future capacity to support national and parliamentary issue based campaigning, integrated with local campaigns."

Quite a substantial list of concerns, and one that did result in a few tweaks to Gordon's proposals.

Some were concerned about the lack of staff consultation on the plan (as opposed to the formal consultation with those whose jobs would go) and with the deluge of management marketing-speak in the proposals.

Just when this might all have died down the English party has kicked off mightily as there is a feeling there that regions should oversee campaign staff.

A motion for the English Council Executive states that campaign staff should be deployed in and accountable to the English regions and "That the top down campaigning approach adopted by our headquarters resources in the past is not well suited to the current reality [and] the resources of the party do not lend themselves to creating an organisation where there are layers of management".

Among other pleasantries the motion calls on the executive: "To make it clear to the chief executive that

the current plans are unacceptable, will not receive any support from the English Party and that they should be withdrawn." Watch this space.

THIS YEAR, NEXT YEAR, SOMETIME...

The debate on Trident replacement at Bournemouth showed the Liberal Democrats to be admirably consistent on this issue - they still refuse to make up their minds.

While the party's MPs will vote against like-for-like Trident replacement, the question of whether there should be some lesser replacement will now go to the third working group to consider the issue in less than five years.

This device allows the party to offend no-one over nuclear weapons by the simple expedient of never taking a final decision. Whether it can keep this up indefinitely is matter for conjecture.

At least those who support like-for-like Trident replacement have an honest view, however wrongheaded, but the Lib Dems yet again have no settled view on what if anything should succeed Trident.

There are now three possible outcomes for the working group, due to report in 18 months' time.

The first is that it will contrive some reason to never report since the whole thing is too controversial. The second is that it will decide it cannot decide and a further review is needed.

The third is that it will come up with a policy compromise so complex and tortuous as to be incapable of simple explanation, so the public will conclude the Lib Dems cannot make their minds up anyway.

All the big guns were wheeled out to speak in favour of boldly not coming to any decision, including Simon Hughes - whose local party had refused to table the relevant amendment to the anti-Trident motion - and Shirley Williams in her first such foray since the fiasco of the 'Shirley Williams motion' in the health debate at Gateshead (*Liberator* 352).

Prize for least helpful speech went to Scottish leader Willie Rennie, who tried to turn the debate in to a 'back Tim' issue. Since the debate went the leadership's way by only 570 to 450 this may not have been wise.

MIGRATORY PATTERNS

The coming of autumn sees numerous species change habitat with the seasons, and so it proves with the Liberal Democrats.

With many former MPs having decided to call it a day, there will be opportunities galore for the ever-ambitious to stand in what, at least once, were winnable seats.

Richmond may soon be the scene of a by-election if

Tory incumbent Zac Goldsmith is either elected mayor of London or sticks to his pledge to resign if a third Heathrow runway is permitted.

With last May's candidate Robin Meltzer having decided not to stand again, flocks of Lib Dems are circling, some from as far afield as Guildford.

Next door in Twickenham, which Vince Cable almost held, a similar effect can be seen.

Elsewhere, former Reading councillor Daisy Benson has appeared to be engaged in a research project on the state of the train service between there and Yeovil, having received some sort of blessing from its former MP Paddy Ashdown, whose endorsement was critical in getting Surrey carpetbagger David Laws selected for the seat in 2001.

Up in Sheffield Hallam, there are suspicions that Nick Clegg will be off to an international job during this parliament, or at the latest in 2020.

The fanatically loyal Clegg acolyte Joe Otten has made little secret of his ambition to succeed Clegg, standing in neighbouring Sheffield Central to further press his claim (though he secured the second-biggest swing against any Liberal Democrat in the UK).

However, he was just about the only core Hallam activist to not get a gong in Clegg's dissolution honours list and is now the object of widespread derision after his conference speech proposing a leader's veto on policy.

The migratory pattern therefore continues as Otten's woes have convinced many other Lib Dems point their compasses to Hallam for a look round.

YOUR OWN, YOUR VERY OWN

Talking of which, conference was treated to unintentional comedy of a rare order when Sheffield councillor Joe Otten proposed that the leader should be given a veto over the content of the party's general election manifesto.

Otten cited the tuition fees debacle and built up to a bellowed, fist pumping crescendo of "and we must never let it happen again" only for this coup de theatre to be received with dead silence.

Looking baffled by this non-response, he ploughed on arguing that the party's entire policy making structure should be junked on a leader's whim.

So unimpressed was conference by this ludicrous proposal that, for the first time this century, it mustered the required two-thirds majority to pass a motion to move to next business, thus bringing Otten's cabaret to a premature end.

Otten claimed that tuition fees were forced into the manifesto against Nick Clegg's wishes by the Federal Conference Committee.

Even if this were true - and any leader worth their salt ought to be able to convince their own party's policy committee - it was not the reference to tuition fees in the manifesto that did the damage but the pledge later signed by all Lib Dem candidates.

Sitting MPs who thought signing the pledge was unwise found themselves strong-armed into doing so.

Otten might like to ask his local MP in Sheffield Hallam from where this strong-arming emanated.

Kingston sage John Tilley has been banned from Liberal Democrat Voice for submitting a posting after the debate in which he called Otten, one of LDV's editors, "a clown". Sounds rather mild.

VERY SECRET BALLOT

In democracies it is normal for the electorate to be told that an election is being held.

But not in the Liberal Democrat English party.

With multiple people using the governance review to gun for this useless bureaucracy and the self-perpetuating elite that runs it, one might have expected it to be on its best behaviour.

Not so. Elections for officers were to be held with no communication with English council members unless they happened to visit the English stall at the Bournemouth conference, thus neatly allowing those in the know to get nominated themselves while keeping out others.

Protests were made that elicited this extraordinary response from deputy acting returning officer Darren Briddock: "Whilst it is not required in the Standing Orders for individual members of the council to be notified of the elections, the returning officer understands that it has been past practice for the English Party administrator so to do." The close of nominations was then extended to 28 October, having originally been set for 7 October.

English chair Steve Jarvis had earlier sent an equally extraordinary message to those who questioned the secrecy of the election arrangements, stating: "As regards the elections, the publication of the timetable is a matter for the returning officer. It would of course be possible for English Council to change the rules requiring all Council members to be emailed but that is not what they require at present. It would seem to me that it would be appropriate to make this change as part of any changes we make at the June meeting."

This does not make it clear who was informed. Presumably just the cosy clique that runs this pointless institution.

BROOKS STOPS FLOWING

Liberator 374 told the tale of the stitching up of the selections for Lib Dem candidate next year for mayor of London, including the resignation of Duwayne Brooks, the only person shortlisted alongside Caroline Pidgeon.

Brooks at that point cited work commitments for withdrawing but stayed on the list of those seeking to become London Assembly candidates.

But on 1 October he resigned from that too, citing in a letter to London region: "The recent events for which we have a different opinion, especially and most significantly, on how breaches of the straight forward, unambiguous rules are enforced".

This is understood to refer to allegations that another candidate sent more than the permitted number of texts to members, an offence the returning officer concluded was unimportant.

The English party is now to conduct an investigation into the fiasco of the London selections.

Brooks had though come only seventh on the list, far too low to get elected even in the best of years.

Rather surprisingly, incumbent Stephen Knight fell to fifth place so making his re-election problematic while Rob Blackie, who came third, was pushed down to fourth to accommodate Merelene Emerson under rules concerning the placing of ethnic minority candidates.

Although London region commendably published a

full list of votes for each assembly candidate (which showed a surprisingly low vote for almost all the BME applicants) it did not publish by how much Pidgeon defeated 'reopen nominations'. Surely it can't be embarrassing?

SITTING ON A CHESTERFIELD

Whatever the opposite is of glory, the clueless bureaucrats of the English regional parties committee (RPC) have covered themselves in it once again.

After the fiasco of its handing of the Rennard affair (Liberator 368) the RPC has learnt nothing and contrived in March, just before the general election and on the eve of spring conference, to issue a statement suspending the Chesterfield local party (Liberator 371) at a time and in a manner certain to ensure a dire result in this once Lib Dem seat.

The cause of that was a series of allegations that former MP Paul Holmes had bullied his successor as candidate Julia Cambridge.

These alleged events had occurred a year earlier and the only finding ultimately upheld against Holmes was in relation to verbal bullying at one constituency executive in March 2014.

A year later, as a general election loomed, the committee got around to publicly suspending Chesterfield.

A mere seven months after that, in October, the RPC bestirred itself to decide it would take no further action, but would not allow the Chesterfield local party to reconstitute itself until January, thus wasting a further two months in the local election run-up during which the local party would not be allowed contact with new members in the area.

Committee vice-chair Margaret Joachim wrote to Chesterfield members: "We hope that the new local party will swiftly become a lively and vigorous campaigning organisation and will encourage newer members of the Liberal Democrats to take a full part in its activities." Not much hope of that with the RPC around.

IN THE CLEAR

An investigation against two Norman Lamb supporters over alleged data protection breaches during the leadership election campaign has led to at least one being exonerated.

Lamb supporters Gavin Grant and Mark Gettleson were said to have sent party membership information to an external polling company so that it could telephone members.

Grant has now been told by the English party that it has concluded there is no case to answer although it is unknown whether it has yet reached a view on Gettleson.

As western counties chair Grant has also played a bystander role in a strange dispute in Wiltshire, which has seen Jon Hubbard resign as leader of the county council group.

He convened a meeting to discuss the 2016 local and police and crime commissioner elections, the EU referendum, the 2017 county elections and how to engage new members, one of several for each county in the region.

Former MEP Graham Watson was invited to speak and the county council group organised the meeting.

But Hubbard decided he wanted to discuss only the county elections and did not want Watson there, though other councillors did, and this led to a dispute that saw him quit.

BOTH SIDES OF THE FENCE

News from the Liberal Democrat Friends of Israel that Tim Farron had "announced the appointment of Lord Monroe Palmer as his adviser on the Middle East", perplexed many at conference.

Not 24 hours earlier Farron had, in a question and answer session, opined that the time might be drawing near when the UK should recognise Palestine whether or not this formed part of a wider United Nations backed deal, given the persistent misbehaviour of the Israeli government.

In any event, appointing such a partisan figure as Palmer as sole adviser on such a contentious issue looked irrational.

It turned that the 'friends' were spinning. Farron had appointed Palmer as one adviser on the Middle East, not as the only adviser as their press release implied.

Some rapid footwork by Farron aides reassured the Liberal Democrat Friends of Palestine that their activist John McHugo could also advise the leader.

A further row erupted after conference when Farron's criticism of the Israeli government was mysteriously deleted from the party's YouTube footage of his question and answer session.

A SONG FOR CHARLIE

A confected storm appeared in certain newspapers during conference about 'disrespectful' songs about Charles Kennedy continuing to be published in the Liberator Songbook.

Liberator removed Skye Boat Song, given its emphasis on Kennedy's drinking, but the other songs remained with the consent of his family.

Kennedy's relations were contacted before the songbook was printed and they took the view that Kennedy had had no objection to the songs while alive and they had none following his death.

If they were content for the songs to be printed it was really no-one else's business.

BUCKETS AND SPADES

Anyone who attended the Bournemouth conference will have noted the town's pristinely clean beaches and thus the pointlessness of the Lib Dems' 'social action' beach clean-up, which must have found precious little to clean.

Even members of the House of Lords were urged to part in this exercise, a request that met with a well-known phrase involving sex and travel from a number of them.

Still it was not as bad as in 2004, when Charles Kennedy was asked to lead a clean-up stunt.

Liberator's Bournemouth contact assures us that the town's then Lib Dem-run council was obliged to find some rubbish and tip it on the sands to be cleaned-up, so immaculate were the beaches.

TURN OFF YOUR TELLY

The best that can be said for Danny Alexander 'representing' the Lib Dems in the Britain Stronger in Europe campaign is that he was at least not the party's choice but that of the campaign group.

This is a disaster. Alexander's five years of cringe-inducing television performances as George Osborne's human shield, when he was Treasury chief secretary, were an unremitting embarrassment to the party throughout the Coalition.

He has little following in the party, zero appeal outside it, and without Nick Clegg's inexplicable patronage would have been lucky to have ever moved beyond the back benches.

The 'in' campaign already suffers from being top heavy with establishment figures from business and politics, so why should the party tolerate being represented there by someone identified above all else with an unpopular, dogmatic and inarticulate defence of spending cuts?

THE COMPANY YOU KEEP

A motion was passed at Bournemouth to support of the Trans and Intersex Health Charter, an event marked by the right-wing Liberal Reform group inviting a surprising contributor to its fringe meeting on diversity.

The choice of someone from among the Thatcherite headbangers of the Adam Smith Institute will in itself have raised some eyebrows.

But they rose yet further when the speaker proved to be the institute's Sam Bowman

who had, in February, made a series of startling comments on Twitter which began with "hell hath no fury like a man pretending to be a woman scorned" and only got worse from there.

It would be one thing if he had since repented, yet when challenged on them Bowman appeared to deny there was anything wrong about what he had said. When questioned, Liberal Reform's leaders complained they were being bullied.

Bowman's other Tweets include the observation: "Doubt any actual trans person is so nuts that saying they're pretending to be women would offend them."

WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?

Some of those who attended a parliamentary party meeting at Bournemouth were baffled to hear confident assertions that the arrival of 20,000 new members would change the party.

In numerical terms it would of course simply restore it to roughly the pre-coalition position.

In political terms, why should it necessarily change anything, as some of the more excitable people around Tim Farron seem to think?

There is not the slightest evidence that 20,000 people have joined the party with a shared agenda to change or do anything, or indeed even that any significant number of them knew each other before joining or do so now.

When most people join something they spend some time getting to know the body concerned and how it works. Why should new Lib Dem members be expected to conduct themselves any differently?

MAIL CHIMPS

The problem with mass e-mailings is that no one pays attention to who will receive them.


"Liberal Democrats represent people in Britain who care about helping those in need, who believe that those with the broadest shoulders must carry the heaviest burden, who care about how free and fair our society is, and who believe we need to spend within our means to achieve it," an email purportedly from Tim Farron said just before conference.

"If that sounds like you, I have one big offer to you: join the Liberal Democrats today and become a part of our movement."

At least one recipient of this missive was a Lib Dem peer of more than 50 years standing as a member.

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FALLING FOR OUR OWN PROPAGANDA

Liberal Democrat polling during the general election showed the party losing almost every seat and that its messages were unpopular. So why did those in charge not change, asks Nick Harvey

It remains the great unsolved mystery of the 2015 election: how did the pollsters call it all so wrong?

How did they lead the nation to believe for at least two years beforehand, throughout the six-week campaign and right up to polling day itself that Labour and Conservatives were neck-and-neck and a hung Parliament was almost inevitable?

And more tantalisingly, did that widespread belief contribute to what actually happened – a sort of self-denying prophesy?

A fringe meeting at Bournemouth examining this conundrum attracted my attention and I went to listen to a representative of the British Polling Council, an executive from Survation and Tom Smithard of LDHQ.

The external pollsters disagreed somewhat about the 'late swing' theory and during questions ex-MP David Howarth rather punctured it. He observed that their own charts showed 6% of Lib Dem voters departing to the Tories in the late stages, while 2% of Tories swung to us. There being vastly more Tories to begin with, this meant more actual votes coming towards us than away!

IPSOS-Mori offered a different explanation to the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, which I now chair. Their analysis suggests all parties secured votes on the day broadly in line with pollsters' predictions, with one dramatic exception. More than 1.5m 'firmly intending' Labour voters simply failed to turn out, 'throwing' the entire outcome.

More interesting than any of this, however, was Smithard's observation that every seat poll LDHQ commissioned during the short campaign (and immediate run-up) showed us losing in every case to the principal opponent in each seat. Which begs the question, I pointed out, why – if every poll showed us losing every seat – we were so surprised when exactly that happened? Paddy Ashdown's hat need never have been threatened with mastication.

More seriously, at face value this meant LDHQ knew there was a severe risk of us losing 30 or more seats to the Tories, who were starting with 307 and could therefore realistically win outright, contrary to popular belief. So a better strategy might have been to scare the nation witless about what a majority Tory Government would be like, rather than continuing to talk up the hung Parliament scenario which just reinforced the Tories' 'chaos' narrative.

CONCEALED HORROR

One wonders whether the horror of the true picture was concealed over some time for fear that if it became

known it would open serious debate about the coalition and even the leader?

There is a history of our party polling being used to reinforce pre-determined strategies, rather than inform rational debate about alternatives. The high priest of this was the late Richard Holme, whose polling enterprises were shrouded in mystery, but with the findings always cited as robust evidence supporting his own preference.

There was a 'Prague Spring' during the Rennard era, when professional pollster and former parliamentary candidate Julian Ingram was used both to frame questions and analyse findings, and an in-house polling operation tested all parties' messages rather than pretend we were the only people campaigning.

But in recent times I suspect old habits were creeping back: including findings about the relative support for proposed party messages being presented as if they were evidence of their absolute support (i.e skating over the possibility that all the offerings were rubbish).

One key poll finding which clearly was valid, was that national issues would dictate how people voted rather than local track records. But there was inadequate debate about how to respond to that.

Mark Pack – for one – warned that dangerous conclusions and extrapolations were being built onto that finding. And somehow, though stuck at 8% in national polls, we clung to the idea that incumbency would save MPs (even though it hadn't saved excellent councillors and MEPs).

Our biggest mistake in responding to that finding was to offer up a diet of backward-looking self-congratulation on what we had achieved in coalition. There were indeed many Lib Dem achievements in office of which we should be proud, and no one else would blow the trumpet for them. But many were in the earlier years so no longer news, and all were by definition done with Tory consent so they had shared credit in some cases.

Above all, voters simply aren't motivated by gratitude, as Paddy regularly acknowledged. Yet on and on we warbled like a cracked record. Not one voter raised any of those points with me once in the whole campaign – but after the Tories had the luck to stumble on it, I heard about Ed Miliband and the SNP every day.

We had returned to the failed approaches of Alliance days and 1992: talking about positioning and a hung parliament instead of setting out a forward-looking vision of what we ourselves stand for. But much has been written in Liberator's pages about that failure

and I won't divert myself now.

In some ways, despite the result 2015 was the best campaign we have ever organised. Much credit is owed to Paddy, who marshalled the team with his customary drive, determination and sheer force of character. And although the strategy proved disastrous, strategy director Ryan Coetzee was an agile political tactician.

But why the underpinning strategic assumptions were never debated more widely and candidly is hard to say. My conclusion is that people too deeply immersed in the government to be objective were simply too involved in the campaign. And the rest of us were too reluctant to challenge them – I am guilty myself. In the unlikely event we ever find ourselves there again, a clear separation of powers is vital.

The obsession with Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in the target seats was morbidly dispiriting. They measured old-fashioned campaigning tactics with a simplistic tick-box mentality. At their best they were used rather successfully by the campaigns department to motivate local parties. But at their worst they diverted effort and resource from what should have been political priorities into whatever would secure most ticks that month – a touch of Labour's NHS targets.

BLAME SHIFTING

There was a whiff of the protestant work ethos about them, while also a subtle blame-shifting game was being prepared – if we lost half the seats it would be the fault of the local parties rather than the central strategy. In the event, virtual wipe-out ensured that nobody had the brass neck to run with that.

Seat polling was another part of LDHQ's pressure on constituencies. At £4,000 a time, with local parties expected to pay half, they were expensive (though good value by industry standards, I'm told). All bar a tiny handful showed the Lib Dem incumbent or candidate behind in their seat when the voting intention question was put plainly; worth remembering in light of the result.

But clearly these would not be good results for building morale, so the polls then asked a series of questions about our messages, issues, candidates, party leaders and so on. At the end, after some minutes of solid exposure to Lib Dem priorities and personalities, but none of our opponents' pitch, the voting intention question was posed again – and in most cases showed us ahead. So, seats were told, if you just do what you are told and stick to the national messages, all will be well and you can prevail.

When Lord Ashcroft's seat polls showed rather different outcomes I, for one, suspected him of foul play. He used reputable polling companies for the fieldwork, but didn't buy their services to analyse the data – he did it himself, unregulated as he was by industry bodies. However, in my seat, despite my reluctance at the time to believe it, his poll predicted the result with uncanny accuracy. Under fire he, in turn, accused the Lib Dems of 'comfort polling' and with the benefit of hindsight we have to ask ourselves whether he maybe had a point.

“Twice as many Lib Dem voters wanted us to work with Labour as wanted us back in with the Tories – hardly the vibe we were giving off”

As the Rowntree Trust now considers whether the Lib Dems, in stricken circumstances, are any longer a viable vehicle to prosecute the Trust's objectives, we must inevitably ask what return we saw on our investment in the

last Parliament.

We asked the party to measure the impact of the grants we made and the KPI regime was what they came up with. But we see no clear correlation between seats' performance against the KPIs and their result in May. Nor, if one thinks that more 'modern' campaign techniques hold greater hope for the future, does there seem to be much correlation between successful adoption of those and the results in May. Indeed, one of the only vague correlations we could see, was simply that the longer a seat had been held – and the more over-dependent it had perhaps become on incumbency – the further it fell come the dark day.

Much has been made, rightly, of the Tories' gargantuan expenditures in their 40:40 seats (around £250,000 each) but the IPSOS-Mori analysis shows our vote only fell 1% more in those seats than the average, with the voting actually falling a further 1% in Labour-facing contests where resource wasn't generally applied so heavily. And Tories have chucked big money around before without such devastating effect. They will do so again, but perhaps the impact is only so great when conveying a message which really works. We shouldn't obsess about it: and there is nothing we can do to compete anyway.

Other IPSOS-Mori conclusions make uncomfortable reading. Only a quarter of the electorate thought they knew what we stood for, compared with a half or more for the other parties.

Nick Clegg's message was understood by half as many voters as the other leaders and, of voters who 'defected' from the Lib Dems, 69% said they liked the party but not Nick Clegg. Interestingly, twice as many Lib Dem voters wanted us to work with Labour as wanted us back in with the Tories – hardly the vibe we were giving off, even though some of our own polling had found similar signs. An ironic footnote, given the outcome: almost twice as many Tory voters wanted to see parties compromise in the national interest as did supporters of all other parties.

So, what conclusions can be drawn from all this? Firstly, our poll rating stuck firmly between about 7% and 10% from autumn 2010 onwards but we resolutely preferred 'whistling to keep our spirits up' rather than confronting the implications. Secondly, we fell into the old trap of using our own polling to reinforce our strategic miscalculations rather than helping lead us out of them. And thirdly, our campaigners worked heroically to organise the campaign, but far too narrow a cell with too vested an interest in the status quo had determined the strategy, which proved to be drastically flawed.

What we may never know is what difference a better strategy would have made. It may just be, with all that happened, that we were simply fucked anyway.

Nick Harvey was Liberal Democrat MP for Devon North 1992-2015

NOT ALRIGHT ON THE NIGHT

The European Union is one of history's greatest initiatives for peace, so why is the 'in' campaign throwing it away by letting business leaders bore the public with statistics, asks David Grace

Whenever I debate the European Union, Yeats' words in *The Second Coming* flood into my mind: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity"

Doesn't that describe the Clegg/Farage debates in 2014? It must not characterise the second coming of a referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union.

If we are to win it, we must find that passionate intensity which has been so absent from pro-Europeans for decades. We must embrace what President Obama called "the audacity of hope" and eschew the politics of fear. Running around like Private Fraser warning: "We're all doomed" nearly cost us the Scottish referendum and could lose the European one as well. Nor will clever but tangential, technical arguments about the procedures of the EU deal a death blow to the simple nationalism of the Out campaign.

We have to offer a vision of the future, not a defence of the past. If someone asks you, "How do you see the European Union in 10 years' time?" answering "much the same as now" will not cut the mustard. I question whether the In campaign has the right people, the right arguments and, above all, can become the right campaign.

I have a friend who embodies the complacency characteristic of many supporters of British membership. It'll all be all right on the night, he says, the political and commercial establishment will rally round. He forgets the heart of the eurosceptic, which is anti-establishment. Ukip and others have, with craft and consideration, focussed all the complaints and grievances of alienated voters upon this one coconut shy of Europe. Every doubt and fear is laid at the door of the monster Brussels. To wheel out against this charabanc of confusion the leading spokesmen (and they are mainly men) of the establishment in their Rolls-Royces is not the way to win the race.

We don't have one campaign. We have many and they're not all working together.

For the last few years the flame has been carried by the European Movement, British Influence in Europe and Business in a New Europe. In different ways they have promoted a message not unlike David Cameron's basic stance, which is (a) reform the EU and (b) stay in reformed EU.

This mantra has been evoked by politicians from all parties, usually with no coherent idea of what they would like to reform. Even when there is some idea, it's not the same as other people's. In his leadership campaign, Tim Farron also called for a reformed EU, but when I asked which reforms I got the vaguest

of answers. The two main parties and the Liberal Democrats (Come on, guys, we can't claim to be a main party today however righteous our principles) each plan separate campaigns.

Tories will want to weaken freedom of movement and the social chapter. Labour may want to strengthen the latter and controls over the financial sector, depending whether or not they follow their leader. I confess I am still unclear what the Liberal Democrat strategy is.

Success for one party's reform may weaken another party's support. Indeed Andrew Duff tabled an amendment at Bournemouth calling for Liberal Democrats not to support a sham renegotiation by Cameron if it resulted in anything which would weaken the union. It was not selected for debate.

On top of all these groups comes the new "Britain Stronger In Europe" campaign. Can it be true that the Liberal Democrats actually offered the services of Danny Alexander? Nick Clegg wisely does not seek a leading role and Labour have had the good sense to keep Tony Blair out of it. Bizarrely our main contributor to the management of the campaign is Ryan Coetzee, loaded with his wide experience of European politics and fresh from his strategic success in the General Election.

What were we thinking? This is not the place for old mates who need a job. Ken Clarke is very good on Europe but could you find a more establishment figure than him? In a word, yes. The In campaign, having avoided leading politicians is instead headed by Stuart Rose, a Conservative peer and former chair of Marks and Spencer.

Lord Rose, a successful businessman, has – and this is no surprise - launched the In Campaign with the usual litany of economic arguments, value of trade, numbers of jobs etc. So much we could have expected, but we should reject, "the lore of nicely calculated less or more" for it will only persuade few voters. While most people are very interested in economic outcomes, very few are interested in economic arguments. Confronted with competing statistics from both sides, the voter cannot choose who is right but only which speaker to mistrust less.

FINAGLED BY FARAGE

These arguments are in any case beside the point. Opposition to the EU is not built upon forgotten misquoted budget figures. Most people who tell you that the EU costs us too much do not even recall the false figure finagled by Farage.

He gave the game away, when John Humphries asked, "If it could be proved to you that Britain would be worse off outside the EU, would you still want to leave?" Farrago responded, "Yes, it would be worth it".

Nevertheless we should tackle misconceptions about the economics of the European Union, which may sway some floating voters the wrong way. There is a coherent anti-EU argument but it is wrong. It suits people like Rupert Murdoch, the global entrepreneurs who want unregulated markets dominating weak national governments. There are however several incoherent arguments. Some supporters of free markets see the EU as an obstacle. This is absurd. The EU has created internally the largest free market in the world and externally has always negotiated for freer markets than existed before. Some green-minded people oppose the EU's role in promoting economic growth and increasing world trade because of the environmental impact.

Very short-sighted. The union has promoted and imposed higher environmental standards than 28 independent nations would ever have managed while competing against each other. It has led global efforts to prevent climate change. The most misguided opposition comes from left-wingers like Owen Jones who see the EU as a capitalist plot. The TUC Congress voted to oppose Britain's membership if Cameron managed to get agreement to weaken protections for British workers. I cannot see why other countries would agree to give the British workforce a competitive advantage but even if they did, Jeremy Corbyn has belatedly endorsed the obvious case for staying in and voting to improve things.

The TUC's position is illogical: Tories have weakened EU social provisions, therefore let's leave the EU and deal with an untrammelled Tory government. Similarly, can socialists who are concerned about the power of global capital really believe that the best way to fight it is to opt out of supranational democracy and retreat into nation-states?

Winning the referendum cannot be based on scary predictions about life out in the cold nor on repeated refutation of eurosceptics' dubious economics. Farron has it right when he moves beyond the narrow-minded business case and proclaims: "The European Union is the most successful peace process in world history".

Yet, I've been told not to talk about war and peace. People aren't interested, the pundits tell me. "Peace off" as Edward Leigh, the Tory I failed to defeat years ago, once wrote. It is not my experience. You can tell it like our own wonderful Gladstonian Richard Moore: "We are enjoying the longest period of peace in Europe since the Antonine emperors", or the more visceral approach of Sandy Walkington: "I am fortunate to be part of the first generation which has not had to spill its guts on the battlefields of Europe".

My own approach is to talk about a former director-general in the European Commission named Von Moltke. I asked his wife if he was related to the general and she replied, "Which one? It doesn't matter. He's related to all of them." A Von Moltke led the Prussian armies against France in 1870, another led the German forces in World War One and yet another served in the Second World War. What has the current generation of that family spent his life doing? Sitting in committee meetings in Brussels. Whatever

"We must bring people to understand that the European Union is a peace process"

his salary, he has not cost the people of Europe what his ancestors did.

We must bring people to understand that the European Union is, as Tim hails it, a peace process. Avoid all arguments resting on the shallow proposition that we are all the same. It is precisely because within

Europe we have so many differences, so much potential for conflict which in previous centuries spilled into blood-letting, that we need this process. Two groups respond to this message with enthusiasm – the old who remember the last war and the young who have yet to lose their idealism.

The middle-aged take so much for granted and cannot imagine alternatives. Here is the problem. As with many political arguments, you have to contemplate the counter-factual to see the value of what we have. To doubt the value of the European Union, you have to believe that our continent would be both richer and safer if it had never existed.

UTTERLY FEEBLE

At present both In and Out campaigns are unready and divided but Out has the advantage because their supporters have been campaigning for decades. The pro-EU side has been utterly feeble for years and the Liberal Democrats are no exception. For years we have taken our commitment to the EU for granted and have missed opportunities to promote rather than merely defend it.

It is as if we have come to the finals having missed the semis, the quarters and the groups whilst Ukip and Tory eurosceptics have fought their way up unopposed. We cannot win by boring repetition of statistics; we cannot win by spreading fear of isolation; we cannot even win by tedious rebuttal of Ukip nonsense.

Winning not only the referendum but the argument for years to come requires a positive campaign based upon the EU as peace process, the EU as supranational democracy in place of international chaos and warfare and the EU as the key to environmental sanity.

So far the 21st century has borne an uncanny resemblance to the 1930s – global financial crisis followed by recession and the rise of nationalist parties, even a nationalist ruler invading neighbouring countries.

The creation of the European Union shows that we can learn from history and are not condemned to repeat it. Let's get out there and make sure our time does not end as the 1930s did.

David Grace is a member of the Liberator Collective

ON THE FENCE, IN THE MIDDLE, LOST IN DANGER

‘Equidistant’ is the worst political place for the Liberal Democrats no matter where other parties have drifted off to, says Nick Barlow

As Corbyn’s Labour head to the left while the Conservatives increasingly pander to the demands of their right wing, the middle ground of politics is being vacated, left open for the Liberal Democrats to claim. Indeed, I’ve seen several people speaking of the coming years as being like the 1980s all over again, holding out the prospect of us reaching the same heights in the polls the Alliance reached.

While it would be nice to be in double figures in the polls again, let alone reaching the 25% of the vote the Alliance managed in the 1983 general election, this desire misses out an important fact.

While sitting in the middle while the other two parties go off to the extremes is great at winning votes, it’s terrible at winning seats. As Ukip found this year, picking up votes all over the place is one thing, but converting those votes into seats is something else. Even if you’re getting 25% of the vote, that’s not enough to win seats on its own and something more is needed.

At this point, you’re probably thinking, “well, that’s why we started targeting seats”. and once we concentrated resources on chosen seats results did improve.

But there was another important factor at play as the Liberal Democrats became more effective at turning votes into seats: rejecting equidistance.

Throughout its existence, the Alliance waved away the question of which of the two other parties it would prefer to work with, a position that was inherited by the Liberal Democrats at formation.

After the 1992 election, starting with the Chard speech and then through innumerable internal debates, Paddy Ashdown finally brought the party to a position of being explicitly anti-Conservative and on the left. Once this had happened, we were in a position to make a much better appeal to Labour voters than we were before, and when we moved away from this position after 2007, our ability to turn votes into seats started to fade. Targeting was part of the reason for success in 1997 and afterwards, but the party’s positioning allowed that targeting to work.

To explain this, allow me to move into political theory for a moment (and for a fuller treatment, see Gary Cox’s *Making Votes Count*) and look at how voters make the decision to vote tactically. To begin with, we assume that some, though likely not all, voters are instrumental in that they’re voting to achieve a specific end, as opposed to expressive voters who merely wish

to declare their views. In simple terms an instrumental voter will consider voting for a party other than their preferred choice to achieve their ends, an expressive voter won’t.

Tactical voting requires an instrumental voter to have a preference between parties (they prefer party A to party B, but also prefer Party B to party C, so would be willing to vote for B to stop C) and also possess the information to cast a tactical vote. Thus, in the example above, a voter may choose to back party B to stop party C winning, if they believe both that party A (their preferred choice) has no chance of winning and that party B is capable of defeating party C. This is the familiar message from millions of bar charts – lend us your vote, because only the Lib Dems can beat Insert Party Here in this constituency.

KEY CHANGE

The important factor is giving voters reasons to distinguish between the parties that aren’t their preferred choice. This is where the key change came after 1992 – stating that we’d only consider working with Labour and wouldn’t back a Tory government. This is important because while a voter votes in their constituency, they are also considering the national situation. If we assume that an instrumental Labour voter’s aim is not to have a Conservative government, then they’ll be much more reluctant to switch to a party that’s ambivalent about which party they might support post-election than they would to a party that was clearly opposed to the Conservatives.

We need to recognise what a big shift there was in the party’s position from 1992 to 1997. In 1992, the British Election Survey asked voters which party they thought the Liberal Democrats were closer to: 44% said the Conservatives, 38% said Labour. Asked the same question in 1997, 56% thought we were closer to Labour, compared to just 18% thinking the Conservatives. This was a massive shift in the public’s perception of the party, fuelled by the way we’d acted throughout. Even without any explicit electoral deals with Labour, our actions had shown our intentions clearly. From the joint work on constitutional reform, through Ashdown and Blair’s close relationship and up to both parties standing down in Tatton to clear the anti-Tory field for Martin Bell, a clear message was being sent out to Labour-inclined voters: it’s safe to vote for the Liberal Democrats if they’re best-placed to beat the Tories.

This was especially important in 1997, as the new boundaries meant that almost all our targets then

were Conservative-held: we were in second place in 157 Conservative-held seats, compared to just 11 Labour-held ones. This wasn't a fluke unique to that year, but a consistent pattern in Liberal Democrat results since then. Only in 2005 were we second in more Labour-held seats than Conservative-held ones, and Lib Dem target seats at elections have almost always contained more Tory seats than Labour ones. The phenomenon of voters seeing us as closer to Labour than the Tories wasn't confined to 1997, either. In 2001, 71% of voters saw us as closer to Labour, and just 10% to the Conservatives and even after all the events around the Iraq War, the figures for 2005 were comparable to 1997.

All of these elections saw us squeeze the Labour vote to win constituencies by showing that we were the main opposition to the Tories. Our positioning before 1997 effectively created an electoral block of us and Labour, with voters choosing to back whichever party was best placed to defeat the Tories. It also allowed for the gains we made from Labour in 2005, which weren't driven by tactical voting but by certain types of Labour voters switching to us. This was different to the vote movement that gained Tory seats, and was driven much more by voters protesting against Labour but choosing a party similar to them as a vehicle for that protest rather than just switching to the best non-Labour alternative.

Tactical voters responding to our position on equidistance also helps explain the relative disappointment of the 2010 performance where there was a net loss of seats despite an overall increase in the vote.

STUDIED AMBIVALENCE

Nick Clegg had explicitly returned the party to a studied ambivalence between the two other parties making no promises or indications about which we would support, only establishing the order of negotiations according to whichever party won the most seats or votes. This reduced the incentive for Labour-inclined tactical voters to continue supporting us, and we can see that in almost all the seats we lost to the Conservatives, our vote share went down locally, despite a national increase. Now that their vote for us might lead to support for a Conservative government, Labour voters were less inclined to keep supporting us, and while equidistance brought in new voters, they were scattered around the country and not winning any seats.

"I voted for you to keep the Tories out, now you're supporting them", is something almost every Lib Dem campaigner has heard on the doorstep since the formation of the coalition, and the problem we face as a party is that our biggest period of success came from us positioning ourselves as an anti-Tory party.

That positioning allowed us to appeal to Labour-inclined tactical voters, but also gave us the credibility to pick up disillusioned Labour voters when they swung to the right. We may have convinced ourselves (and I voted for the coalition at special conference in

"The problem we face as a party is that our biggest period of success came from us positioning ourselves as an anti-Tory party"

2010) that we had moved ourselves successfully back to equidistance, but the voters hadn't followed us along that path.

That's why, I think, we were so blindsided by the results in 2015. We'd persuaded ourselves that local campaigning was enough on its own to keep a bulk of our MPs, and didn't realise that much of that local support was based on how voters saw

the national picture.

We assumed that because voters preferred us to the Conservatives locally, they would still vote for us, but instead our support for the coalition meant that enough of them no longer saw a sufficient enough national difference to vote for us.

Our explicitly equidistant national campaign, saying we could support either party, dissuaded tactical voters from either side from voting for us. How could we expect constituency voters to back us to stop another party, when all our national campaigns said we could very easily support that party in government?

This does leave the party in a difficult position as we look towards 2020. With Tories and Labour abandoning the centre ground, there is the potential for the party to move in there and claim a lot of votes. However, the lesson of the Alliance shows us that those votes are scattered all over the country, and to win enough seats to be a significant parliamentary force again we need to be more than just the lukewarm water party between extremes of ice and fire. Equidistance alone does not persuade enough tactical voters to win a significant number of constituencies.

Experience, and the fact that we are the closest challenger in more Tory-held seats than Labour-held ones, suggests that we would be best positioning ourselves alongside Labour as an anti-Tory force in 2020.

As in 1997, this doesn't require explicit electoral pacts, just a willingness on our part to rule out supporting the Tories again. The problem here is that whereas in the 1990s this tactic found a willing accomplice with Tony Blair, Jeremy Corbyn's Labour party seems as welcoming to pluralism as the post-1997 Blair, not the pre-1997 version. There's little point in us trying to work with a Labour Party that doesn't want to work with others, no matter how beneficial a relationship might be.

The attitude of the other two parties may well mean that equidistance is the only option available to us over the coming years, and while that might bring us success in the polls, we need to be prepared to accept that it may well deliver us seats only in the quantities it did in the 70s and 80s, not the greater numbers we got over the last two decades.

Nick Barlow is a former Liberal Democrat councillor in Colchester 2007-15, and has completed an MA at the University of Essex on tactical voting, national positioning and their effects on Liberal Democrat electoral performance. - www.nickbarlow.com/blog

FORWARD TO THE DOORSTEPS

Time for a crusading liberalism, says Gordon Lishman

UK politics is entering a new phase; the structure of parties may return to business as usual or there may be a major realignment. What should be the Liberal Democrat strategy and where is the political space they should occupy? Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters have a strong hold on the Labour Party. They have the members and the votes. If they stay through necessary compromises, they will influence parliamentary selection, membership of the national executive, policy-making and local activism.

They are set for the long haul – the polling evidence is that they accept that a Corbyn-led party will not win the next election. Even if defeats and the press bring down Corbyn, they know what they want.

With the exception of the Gang of Four and a small number of followers, there has been no serious move away from the party's tribalism and commitment to 'Labour movement values' in over a century and it is difficult to see where they might go without large enough numbers to hope for early major wins. Without union support, they would be reliant on a few big donors.

Corbyn's policies have some overlap with British liberals – he is trying to find a credible and workable alternative to austerity and deficit-obsession; there is some internationalism (albeit of a peculiar variety); he has some sympathy with refugees and the disadvantaged. But his general approach is 1950s state socialism and a rigid unwillingness to think new thoughts.

Conservatives are less party-tribal. They know that they stand for simple enduring beliefs and prejudices. However, it is noticeable that more former Conservatives have found a home among Liberal Democrats than Labourites. It's worth remembering that not only are former Tory MEPs and MPs now good Liberals, but so was that Conservative Peelite, William Gladstone.

Douglas Hurd's biography of Peel distinguishes between traditional Conservatives, interested in governing, business and responsibility for people who need support to do better in life – those who were comfortable with Shaftesbury, Baldwin, Macmillan and Major - and those he calls "sour Conservatives" – the people who backed Disraeli, loved Thatcher's rhetoric and love Teresa May's migrant-bashing.

The key dividing-line in recent decades has been the EU, which will split the Tories again in the next few years; they will find it very hard to stay together, particularly after the EU referendum vote and with a new leader elected by the anti-EU faithful against George Osborne.

Cameron and Osborne have developed a new strategy, 'Cambornism', the rhetoric of the liberal centre-left on poverty, aid and development, care

leavers, regional economic development and the socially liberal causes of diversity and gay rights. For the time being, they will continue to promote their version of centrism, which has wide appeal. But it doesn't represent the heart and soul of their party. And Ukip or its successors will continue to appeal to a slice of the English electorate, even if they rarely find it possible to break through first-past-the-post

The English electorate is less tribal than at any time since the Second Reform Act. They may respond to the mixture of economic competence and socially liberal values which is the Camborne agenda. The Scottish electorate has already broken with its traditional basis of voting between three traditional parties in different regions. Short of independence - a real concern in the context of an EU referendum, their star will wane.

Add to that mix the unthinking but powerful anti-politics conventional wisdom and an electoral system in which votes and parliamentary seats diverge ever further and the future is very difficult to predict.

First-past-the-post is a powerful disincentive to party realignment, but it becomes unsustainable when election results are massively out of line with voters' preferences.

STRONG CHALLENGE

All this is a strong challenge to those who believe that our party only needs to set out 'liberal values', build a core vote to a respectable level and then strike out for a majority. (Mind you, that's more intelligent than the belief that repeating "fightback" is a charm to deliver success much in the way that a successful incantation always delivers rain).

It is difficult to build a core vote in a world where loyalty to any single set of ideas and policies doesn't match the needs and wants of the largest part of the population. The belief that the right answer is a mix of specific policies for each voting group turned out to be simply wrong.

Regrettably, it's a Lynton Crosby world, not a Ryan Coetzee one. They also ignore the key insights of the Rennard strategy: building from local activism to local authority strength to parliamentary clusters is necessary to crack the system under first-past-the-post, and is different from building a national percentage of the vote in the style of D66, and crucially is based on winning the votes of local third and fourth party voters by not saying anything to alienate them.

Consider an ordinary Burnley voter, one of those who represent the changes in our town's voting record. She traditionally voted Labour because she's 'working class'. She supported the BNP for a time because they reflected her worry and anger about politics. She turned to the Liberals because they fought for her hospital and looked as if they could run the town better than the Labour hegemony (not a difficult task). She reverted to Labour in reaction to the coalition

and considered the Tories because of her worries about the SNP. The crucial fact is that neither she nor her views changed; only how she voted.

Details vary around the country, but the underlying reality is a world where people report that they vote for particular policies, but actually decide on the basis of a campaign or leader or on the basis of fear - of independence, job losses outside the EU, a Labour-SNP Government, or immigrants. Those fears may be based on a general feeling rather than analysis, but that makes it harder to counter.

A SIX STEP LIB DEM STRATEGY

In this morass of shifting politics, party tensions and voters who are worried, angry, fearful and uncertain, what is a convincing Liberal Democrat strategy?

Firstly, build on being the only established party outside Scotland which is broadly united. That gives a freedom denied to Labour and Conservatives. Both need to stretch policy and belief over widening cracks.

Secondly, recognise that we will only win by changing what people think. In first past the post, there are no prizes for third or even second place. We build a core vote by persuading people, not by following their shifting prejudices while keeping quiet about our real priorities. Votes without mass support for a programme may lead to office, but not to power.

Third, recognise that convincing people, not just through TV but on the doorstep, in the family, with friends and in the workplace, means that all of us have to understand and be comfortable with the breadth of ideas and argument that constitutes liberalism. That does not mean (ludicrously) expecting all candidates to be able to regurgitate policy details without being able to argue the case and approving them to be candidates on that basis. When I was assessing potential European Parliament candidates, I asked three questions: are you in favour of deepening the powers and functions of the European Parliament (answer: yes); are you in favour of extending EU membership to new democracies in central eastern and southern Europe (answer: yes); and how do you resolve the contradiction between those two things (rarely any answer of substance). It's a small example of a wider problem.

Jeremy Corbyn calls for open debate because he has no alternative in a deeply divided party; David Cameron favours open debate for the referendum because he has no option. LibDems have the luxury of open debate and disagreement, because we agree on fundamentals. As the founders of both our party and Labour knew, it is debate, disagreement and compromise which give confidence in arguments and ability to communicate them. We must create fora for such debates, stop pretending that minor disagreements are about basic belief and, above all, understand that liberalism is itself a debate not a single book or a leader and his friends.

Fourthly, start where people are. That means talking with them, campaigning with them, representing them and helping them to take and use power. It means

“The English electorate is less tribal than at any time since the Second Reform Act”

that we do not expect them to engage with us on our terms. That was a starting point for community politics; it's a pity that success in elections led too many to see votes as an end rather than a means.

Fifthly, rebuild a campaigning mass party and find, motivate, train, support, and respect leaders at every

level. We won't get far in building a core vote without core leadership. Much of that is about helping people to develop confidence in their own abilities. It is a more effective route to diversity than patronising favouritism.

Sixthly, re-discover that politics is about issues and campaigning, not slogans for the lowest common denominator of voters plus technical fixes to get out a vote that isn't there.

Tim Farron has set out the big national campaign issues. Local campaigners will find campaigns to mobilise people. There's a gap for regional and sub-regional campaigning. We can hope that LibDem campaigners will lead campaigns rather than following the latest local or internet-fuelled set of self-interested prejudices.

Above all, we need integrated campaigning which sees each campaign as part of a coherent whole and supports campaigners in getting across the messages of an insurgent, crusading liberalism, dedicated to helping people to achieve and exercise power in diverse, self-confident communities.

Behind campaigning will be policy. That's not detailed policy buried in lengthy papers produced by experts. It's simple headline policies with strong symbols. Policies must be about what matters most: delivering a good education to everyone whenever they need and want it: being honest about the real funding choices for a twenty-first century health service; being part of the wider world in terms of economics, security, generosity and peace; creating homes and communities where people are comfortable, respected and happy; respecting other people for who they are in an open society; sustaining our fragile environment; creating government and politics which help people to live the lives they choose; and enabling and supporting people to find a way out of poverty and powerlessness.

Most policy is underpinned by economics, but for liberals, that is economics in which people matter. Liberal Democrats need a radical, credible economic policy. It's not about the details of one or another deficit or surplus in terms of national debt or current account. It will address the housing bubble, unsustainable private debt and strong infrastructure. (It's interesting to note that all George Osborne's emphasis on infrastructure development, seconded by Andrew Adonis, is to be based on a declining cash investment). We need a complete re-think after that dictated by the exigencies of coalition.

Gordon Lishman is executive director of the Social Liberal Forum, writing in a personal capacity

EASING DOES IT

Jeremy Corbyn's 'people's quantitative easing' idea holds some merits for liberals, says David Thorpe

Many ideas emanating from Jeremy Corbyn and his acolytes since he became Labour leader, whether of merit or otherwise, have not been blessed with any great originality.

But one, the so-called 'people's quantitative easing', is new, and while there is much ground to be covered before one can say that the policy is good, or even necessary, it should certainly be given consideration that it might be a useful tool in the armoury.

The first point is that the form of quantitative easing deployed in the UK and other major economies in recent years has certainly not been progressive, and increasingly looks to have failed.

Advocates believe that QE will inflate asset prices, which it certainly does (that's one of the reasons why house prices and stock markets recovered even as the economy spluttered). But the second part of the equation was that rising asset prices would repair bank balance sheets, making it easier for them to lend, and people would feel rich, and so more confident about borrowing, generating the economic activity to get the world out of recession.

The problem is that at the same time as policy makers caused asset values to increase, they (justifiably) levied those financial institutions with fines and a new regulatory framework.

So while bank balance sheets might have made lending easier, the banks had less inclination to do it. People weren't as keen to borrow anyway because their incomes were squeezed by recession. Many in the city of London have been highlighting the flaw with this argument for years.

This failure should come as no surprise: trying to leverage a country out of recession by making borrowing cheaper and easier failed in the depression era, the great economic liberal JM Keynes had to fix the mess then by highlighting that increasing demand in the economy, not supply of credit, is what gets countries out of recession.

Corbyn's plan is essentially an attempt to mix both ideas, Keynesians borrow and spend to generate demand (as Gordon Brown's government did to get us out of this recession, QE is delivered by the Bank of England, independent of government). Keynesians required borrowing to spend at the start, then cuts to stabilise the inflation picture later, (as the coalition did), making for what Vince Cable acknowledged was a deeply Keynesian policy from the coalition.

Corbyn proposes that, instead of borrowing money to create the demand, and then later have to deal with the consequences of the debt, the money be created by QE and spent.

The criticisms used against this idea are that it is inflationary, and that it is unnecessary, as UK borrowing costs are very low.

Those problems are linked and valid, but not necessarily valid in the world now.

While QE has created souped up property and financial markets, most of the world can bask in very low, or no inflation as a result of the over supply of commodities and oil. Both of those have the potential to be long-term trends, meaning that inflation levels can be muted, even with a government printing money to reduce the value of the currency, if global inflation is moving towards even normal levels then there would be a problem, but the advances of capitalism (fracking) and vanity of capitalists (over production of commodities) mean that is not the certainty of the past.

As for the second argument, well, borrowing costs are low now, but they will not stay that way. Firstly, when US interest rates rises that pushes up everyone else's borrowing costs, and those rates will almost certainly rise by the time Corbyn could win an election. The second point is that, a far left leader in the UK would reduce the status the country, and its currency, presently enjoy as a safe haven, pushing the value of sterling down and borrowing costs up, so while it would be an act of economic vandalism to use people's QE in the circumstances of today, the very chance of a Corbyn win means the circumstances change.

There are real reasons to object, the independence of the Bank of England would end with people's QE, storing up long-term problems. The UK economy is growing now anyway, and there are structural problems with the housing market that people's QE cannot solve. If the money created is used to build anything else, such as a hospital, that is not simply to short term expenditure to solve an immediate problem.

And finally, Corbyn has indicated he will support George Osborne's desperately dangerous plan for a fiscal charter, achieving a budget surplus is normal times gets harder when you are devaluing the currency, so the biggest flaw may be that the traditional desire of the far left to have its intellectual cake and eat it is what stymies Corbyn's plan.

But that doesn't mean there isn't enough in it for Liberals of all stripes to pay it some heed, and play our usual role of applying liberal rationalism to other people's intellectual conceits.

David Thorpe is an economics journalist and sits on the London Liberal Democrat regional executive

MR SOUND AND FURY

Jennie Rigg wonders what the arrival of Jeremy Corbyn means for the Liberal Democrats

“We’d like you to do a piece on the implications for the Lib Dems of Jeremy Corbyn being elected Labour leader”, spake the missive from Liberator HQ.

“Easy!” I thought, and readily agreed. Why did I think this would be easy? Because there are as many views on the implications of Jeremy Corbyn as there are people.

Here is a selection of the views I have had expressed to me:

“It’s great! He’ll make Labour completely unelectable! All their right wing will defect to us!” (Because the current right rump of the Labour party is absolutely not the most authoritarian bit at all, and would feel completely at home in a Liberal party).

“It’s awful! He’s taking all our protest voters!” (Like we had any left after five years in government anyway).

“It’s great! He’ll pull the Overton Window to the left and the Tories will be dragged to the centre after chasing Ukip for years!” (Because the Overton Window totally exists in the form people think it does and public opinion isn’t mostly decided by the media at all).

“It’s awful! We’ll lose our left wing to him completely!” (Speaking as the second most leftwing Lib Dem I know: not likely. Not even with my well-known fascination with beards am I even slightly tempted by a Corbyn-led Labour).

“It’s great! He’ll kill the Greens - why, the person who was our local Green parliamentary candidate last time has already jumped ship to Labour!” (Because the Greens haven’t been a repository for watermelons - green on the outside and red in the middle - for years).

“It’s awful! He’s actually quite liberal for a Labour leader so we won’t be able to bash their authoritarianism as much!” (Like the authoritarian tendency in Labour is going to let him be liberal enough for that to actually apply).

“It’s great! He’s in favour of voting reform and Lords reform and all our constitutional dreams will come true!” (Because Labour haven’t been promising voting reform and lords reform in every manifesto for decades, yet somehow never quite getting around to it when in power).

There’s a kernel of truth in all this, but none paints a full picture. They certainly all say more about the hopes and dreams of the person voicing the opinion than about Corbyn himself.

On the other hand: “Meh. It’s Cleggmania all over again. It won’t take long for him to break a promise, and then the disillusionment will set in.”

That one I have the most sympathy with. The press and the public love a politician who seems authentic, who seems like they will tell the truth and keep their promises. Clegg captivated the nation by appearing open and honest. By saying: “No more broken

promises”.

Of course, that is a very difficult ideal to live up to, and we are still reaping the rewards of not doing so, even with all the good things we did besides. Despite the number of people who say to me on the doorstep “yeah, we can see what you were doing, now” they generally still add “I still can’t forgive you for shafting the students, though”.

Corbyn is the new messiah, the new recipient of the At Last An Honest Politician Award which Our Cleggy got in 2010, and while Corbyn has been an MP for decades he is unknown enough to be all things to all people, just as Clegg was in 2010.

Thus everyone, friend and foe alike, is painting him with the colours they want to see him in. He’s a rabid lefty. He’s a thoughtful moderate. He’s unelectable. He’s the first electable leader Labour have had since Blair. He’s the new Michael Foot. He’s the new Margaret Thatcher. The one thing we can be certain of is that none of this will last. At some point very soon a view will become ascendant, and that’ll be the one that’ll stick to him for the next 10 years. Like Clegg, once it’s stuck, he won’t shift it no matter how justified or not it is, or how hard he tries.

I think that Corbyn is all sound and fury signifying nothing, and will soon come under the complete control of the Labour machine. He’s already rowed back on or watered down a host of things he made big fusses about in the leadership election. As I type we are witnessing the fallout from Labour lords abstaining on the fatal motion on tax credits - because, you see, principle is all well and good, but the most important principle is stabbing the Lib Dems, even if it means shafting the poor in the process.

The implications for us of a Corbyn leadership? Business as usual. Labour is as furiously tribal, mean spirited, and incompetent as ever and we should be fighting them with the same vigour we fight the Tories.

Corbyn might appear, for now, to be a new kind of politician, but that won’t last. History has proven this with every politician who has promised a new kind of politics, even when they were ours.

Jennie Rigg is chair of Calderdale Liberal Democrats.

THE BALD COMB-FIGHTERS

Membership blip aside, the position facing the Liberal Democrats is so bad that some shibboleths may have to fall in the governance review. writes Gareth Epps

A relatively positive leadership contest, a big influx of new members, a feelgood conference: shouldn't the Liberal Democrats be looking at a quiet set of reviews and just get on with doing things the way they always have done?

No. The party's existence is threatened not only from without but within, with many parts of its infrastructure damaged or infirm, and the documentation seen so far about the governance review seems narrowly-focused, tame and determined to avoid asking a number of enormous questions that need to be asked.

The strategic dilemma – the challenge of detoxifying the party after coalition – could be dwarfed by the need to reform the party's internal workings. Tim Farron's in-tray is full of so much distraction and nonsense that it is barely surprising he has been relatively quiet.

Meanwhile, those parts of the party with which no leader should interfere need attention, with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to effect major improvements in the party's organisation.

There are many convenient scapegoats being lined up to accept collective blame for May's abomination, and several of these probably do need attention as a streamlined party simplifies its organisation. However, it is hard to escape the impression that some parts of the party are being treated with kid gloves.

First and foremost there is the party's campaigns organisation. Despite near-universal criticism of the general election campaign and its chaotic, accountability-free structure, the consultative session on James Gurling's review was surprisingly tame.

Nothing about the party's well-resourced targeting operation which has barely moved forward since the 1997 breakthrough, arguably going into reverse over the last decade, and could foresee none of the impending apocalypse; nothing about the three sets of parallel, non-communicative campaign structures (the Wheelhouse/Clegg bunker, HQ and the campaigns and communications committee) and nothing about the appalling internal communications from a non-functioning website to hugely costly IT systems that don't talk to one another.

ILLUMINATION IN THE BARS

The conversations in the conference bars were far more illuminating, highlighting among other things that the party's polling predicted in some detail that the messages being used lacked impact and that many seats spun as being 'in play' were in fact lost long before the election.

The shoving of fingers in collective ears affected the highly-paid 'communications consultants' at least as much as the campaigners.

And where was or is the Association of Liberal

Democrat Councillors in all this? Tony Greaves, a lone voice in this regard for many years, is right to highlight the decline of what was once the most dynamic part of the party; one that came to the fore in dark days past for Liberalism.

Its low profile and lack of dynamism must give rise to its continued existence being put under question in a party that needs to rethink its approach to campaigning right back to the cube root. A party that has ceased to campaign at almost all levels needs a different approach, and the recent splashing of Joseph Rowntree cash will do little in practical terms if it is just used to parrot obsolete campaign techniques.

In particular, the party needs once again to embrace innovation, after many years of it being stifled or even positively discouraged within the campaigning sphere in particular.

I visited seven held seats during the election campaign, one of which we won. All were using bland and uninspiring, centralised literature, with only odd exceptions. I was told that those questioning the centralisation and avoiding local issues were talked down to and patronised in a way much worse than either of the four previous election campaigns. Only one seat that I visited ignored the advice from campaigns. That was the seat that won.

The party has a major and widely-acknowledged diversity problem, across a number of the equality characteristics protected by law. Although there has been significant staff turnover, some very diligent and useful work in HQ has made significant progress against a very challenging context.

There are too many people making special pleading for their particular protected characteristic (an approach that is not at all Liberal and rarely called out, and when it does is met by an equally illiberal reaction). The Diversity Engagement group formed under Clegg's leadership appears to have gone completely dormant, at a time when it should be facilitating a difficult debate that the party needs. The party bodies, meanwhile, fill this vacuum through more special pleading.

There has been very little sign of a proper embrace towards the huge influx of new members. Some of these, particularly on social media, have been taken onside somewhat cynically by groups of longstanding members and organised into something resembling a clique; taking childish swipes at individuals to settle old scores and engaging in narcissistic back-slapping.

This will achieve little, partly because outside the self-selecting social media group there is precious little engagement with these new members. An example: Liberal Youth's membership has reportedly rocketed to over 7,500, the highest figure for years. It has just held its annual election in which the talented and

distinctly radical Liberal Ryan Mercer and Natasha Chapman very narrowly lost (we will hear more from both of them). Since the then LDYS made its elections fully one-member-one-vote (OMOV) in the mid-1990s (a change that made very little difference to its turnout), around 15% of the youth and student wing's members have voted in elections – sometimes higher. This year very few additional votes were cast – the turnout for this greatly enlarged electorate was down to less than 10%.

While the attempts to use the enthusiasm of new members for people's hobby-horses are little more than predictable, more serious is the need for many parts of the party's organisation to engage with the membership in a way it never has before. Nowhere is this more apparent than in policy-making, and indeed Federal Policy Committee is consulting on ways to reform the policymaking process.

The consultative session held at conference was most interesting in the way that it exposed the lack of innovation in the party – as well as a raft of more fundamental problems. Local party dysfunction, lack of a skills audit or database, and the party's appallingly amateurish online presence are just three big barriers to using the talents of our members and enabling them to play their full part in policy. The practical implications of OMOV, in the form of party committees becoming the preserve of 'big names' who will do less work than most of the current incumbents, has similarly not been thought through.

UNACCOUNTABLE TIME SERVERS

In England, meanwhile, the long-overdue debate about the organisation of the party risks merely setting one vested interest against another, as the unaccountable committee time-servers of the English Party face down their regional variants several of whom have already set out to scrap the English Party. However, many regional parties have demonstrated themselves barely fit for purpose; many are full of people who enjoy holding the trappings of office far more than doing anything with it.

Meanwhile the Federal Executive continues to transact business ridiculously trivial compared to its constitutional role, a deliberate tactic of party managers going back many years to which far too little resistance has been shown by those elected to provide strategic leadership to the party. Unless the impact of boundary changes, too, is understood then the party will not be able to put a coherent set of proposals forward.

The party's shortage of funds has not been spelt out in great detail; but the implications of 'business as usual' are stark. Several Parliamentary seats have openly set out their desire to select candidates in a matter of months. That means, for a couple of dozen candidates, putting career and family on hold, or taking a decision whether to stand while still getting over the trauma of May.

At the same time, there is the debate about the party's equality problem, with renewed pressure by some white middle-class women for special treatment at the expense of everyone else. There is now an unanswerable case for the party to take one-off action to ensure that in 2020 its MPs resemble the wider electorate; this, of course, requires conference votes to

endorse action that is fair and legal.

Some defeated MPs, all male, have already declared their intentions to re-stand. With the party's candidate selection committees among the least accountable of all, the result is of course a total mess. No candidate in their right mind will want to rush into standing again; many will need significant support that has never previously been offered. Unless a sensible pause is placed on the rush to select PPCs, the party will end up with an unrepresentative shambles of incompetent dilettantes ill-equipped for the existential fight ahead.

There are many other stones needing a good turn. Some can be overcome by the act of listening from our sister parties; it is good that D66 is one. Our Canadian colleagues are another.

One question the governance review does ask is: are the values in the preamble to the party's constitution still valid? The events of the last dozen years in the party's history have shown that there are now two interpretations. Now is a serious time to test those values and decide whether there is to be one party or two. Because it is right to question the commitment of those who do not believe in 'the widest possible distribution of wealth' and do not want to 'promote the rights of all citizens to social provision and cultural activity'. I know what I mean when I say 'no-one shall be enslaved by poverty'; do those who back cuts in welfare provision to the most vulnerable? If this debate is not had, then the dancing of angels on the pin of whether people are left, right, centre or upside down will continue to bedevil any viable attempt to unify the party into one purpose.

Meanwhile, reports from a number of sources suggest turf wars between the party's chief executive and among others members of the FE (who are right for once) about staff restructuring and an apparent pre-emption of the Gurling Review to curb its influence on the shape of the party's future structure in any strategic way.

It is even reported that the restructure (not the review) is designed to move the party's campaigning to a digital-only basis; possibly the silliest thing I have heard in more than two decades as a party member (passing a bar that was already set stupidly high). The English Party is navel-gazing as usual. Other parts of the party appear to have fallen entirely dormant. A once-in-a-generation opportunity to recalibrate the Liberal Democrats as a more efficient vehicle for campaigning Liberal politics is thus being wasted due to ego and personal agendas.

The best leaders will tell you that you should never waste the opportunity presented by a good crisis. Instead of taking this opportunity, the party appears to be retreating into a series of internal power struggles and silos that resembles a series of bald men fighting over a comb.

Gareth Epps is a member of the federal policy and conference committees, chairs the Policy Equality Impact Assessment group and is a member of the Liberator Collective

VOTE SPLITTING

‘One member one vote’ for party elections cannot be democratic if its impossible for voters to know much about candidates, says John Smithson

The Liberal Democrat party claims to have a federal constitution but in reality this is little more than a name; it does not in any real sense of the word operate in such a way.

There is and always has been an inner clique who actually run the party. When I first joined the Liberal Party in 1964 there was the mysterious ‘inner circle’ supplemented by the Liberal Central Committee neither of which as I recall were open to membership by any democratic means.

It’s still the same now with, for example, the Wheelhouse and other ad hoc bodies really deciding what happens.

However perhaps now we have an opportunity to change all this.

The very welcome agreement by the Federal Executive, at the instigation of our president, Sal Brinton, to have a ‘major constitutional and governance review’ should enable real and hopefully democratic change.

Their Governance Consultation Paper bluntly states: “Members have made it clear that they feel the party is out of touch, often unaccountable and our complex structures unintelligible to all but those heavily involved in them.”

How true; they are absolutely right so what should we do about it?

One of the big problems which enables these arrangements to flourish is the way party elections are conducted. It is all very well to say that every member has a vote (OMOV) but the constituency is the entire party. It is akin to electing all the members of parliament with the one ballot covering the entire nation – without breaking it down into separate constituencies.

This inevitably leads to the continual election of ‘the great and the good’ to the massive detriment of the rest of us and the party as a whole. The vast majority of members registering for our conference cannot possibly know more than a fraction of the candidates standing for the various committees. A single sheet election address does not answer the point at all. Members cannot arrive at a rational and logical way of voting. It is quite clearly undemocratic in all but name. This is not a healthy dynamic democracy; it is stagnation and conformity.

To give the ordinary member a chance to get elected we need to break up the electorate and I believe the most effective level would be the regions of England together with Wales and Scotland. They should between them elect the bulk of the committees’ membership with nominations for and from members of that particular state/regional party. The places currently reserved for SAOs should be retained. This would be a major step towards ensuring properly representative committees and removing the overbearing presence of many of the ‘great and the

good’.

However for this to happen we need to create a genuine federal structure. The current position of Wales, Scotland and England as the three components of the federation is nonsensical. How can a federal structure of three parts where one part represents about 85% of the whole be properly representative, effective or acceptable?

We need to bite the bullet, scrap the English Party and make the regional parties full members of the federation.

This will no doubt cause some consternation in Scotland (and possibly in Wales). I remember in 1968 when the idea of a federal government for the UK was proposed at the Liberal assembly, an amendment (moved by Bernard Greaves) to create regional parliaments instead of ‘provincial assemblies’ in England was soundly defeated with Scottish members almost incandescent with rage at the very idea.

However given that they now have their own government they should hopefully be a bit more sanguine about English regional government – at least for and within the Liberal Democrat Party.

The other main objection will probably be the current capacity and effectiveness of at least some English regional parties. This though is chicken and egg stuff – if they don’t have the responsibilities or the powers to do the job properly they are unlikely to develop them.

If really necessary in individual cases, the devolvement of the requisite powers and responsibilities could be introduced through a phased process. In any case I understand (and welcome) that the English party intends to seek significant devolution of its role to the regions – which of itself may well diminish its purpose to the point where it is not sensible to retain it.

There are of course many other matters to be considered in any constitutional and governance review but whatever structure finally emerges it will not be truly democratic, representative or fully effective unless the voting system is drastically changed to embrace an approach outlined here.

John Smithson is a former Liberal Democrat councillor in Kirklees

WHILE ENGLAND SLEPT

The English Liberal Democrats' reform proposals are madness, says George Potter

The session at Bournemouth Lib Dem conference on the governance review was quite illuminating, though it must be said that this was more down to the insightful contributions from party members than the content of the document itself.

For instance, the governance review, among several failings, all but manages to completely leave the massive question of how to reform the party's manifestly unfit for purpose structures - assuming, of course, that the theoretical purpose of the structures is to make it easier to win elections and not just to create ineffectual bureaucracy. If their purpose is actually the latter then the party structures seem to be working just fine.

Fortunately there was no shortage of suggestions on how to improve things, and there was even a very novel idea on improving the diversity of Lib Dem parliamentarians - capping the number of candidates from over-represented groups rather than introducing quotas for under-represented ones. Who knows, some might even be taken on board.

But while the governance review trundles on, the English party, very much the elephant in the room on structural reform due to its opaque structure, Rennard-scandal disciplinary failures and comprehensive failure to get parliamentary candidates in place in time for the general election, has decided to throw a spanner in the works by coming up with its own reform proposals.

Eschewing dangerous ideas like actually consulting members or taking time to think things through, the English Party has consulted itself in a matter of months and produced a list of recommended reforms which will be presented to English Council in November in a take-it-or-leave-it fashion.

These reforms are very remarkable in what they do, and do not, propose. Whether it makes sense to have an English party, or regions thereof, is not considered. Nor is whether its current remit makes sense.

Instead the internal structural reform proposed is simply to replace indirect elections with direct ones and to have the English Council Executive composed of a mixture of elected officers and regional chairs. Certainly better than the status quo but hardly a radical rethink.

Yet where the report does show alarming radicalism is with its suggestions of removing staff from HQ to put at least one in every region and of outsourcing the management of party membership services in England from the federal party to a private contractor.

The fact that Atos, the former contractor for the chaotic and widely loathed disability benefits assessment system, is one name which has been bandied about as a potential provider shows how ludicrous and ill-thought out this is.

But the biggest issue with both these proposals, and with the report as a whole, is the lack of awareness

and consultation which has gone into it. For instance, both the Scottish and Welsh parties also base staff and membership services at party HQ and are only able to do so because of the economies of scale afforded by the English party doing so as well. If the English party had bothered to consult with either of them then they might have realised that their unilateral withdrawal of England from these arrangements would make the situation for the other state parties untenable.

Furthermore, the minimal thought given to the impact of the proposed staff changes on campaigning in England alone speaks volumes. With the increasing sophistication of campaigning the need for specialised staff has never been greater. So the proposal to move back to jack-of-all-trades staff handling everything in each region at the expense of specialised teams would be a complete disaster when it comes to the effectiveness of the party's campaigning.

That doesn't mean it's impossible to provide better regional support for campaigning while simultaneously maintaining specialised staff. But ways of achieving this appear not to have even been considered. Instead a return to regional campaign staff is recommended without even a mention of the historical problems which caused the shift to a more centralised campaign team at party HQ in the first place.

Whether the English Council decides to accept these proposals remains to be seen. But if they do then at least they can be certain of securing the enmity of their Welsh and Scottish colleagues, as well as the party's existing campaign staff, for some time to come.

Regardless of what happens there, however, it's a pretty good bet that direct elections for the English Party will be endorsed. If so, then at least it will mean that in a year's time members in England will have a mechanism to come back and reform the English party properly. And they'll need to given how tepid the English Party's proposals on the subject are.

So eventually someone will have to bite the bullet and decide what's going to happen to the English Party to make the party in England functional. It's just good luck for those who take a delight in constitutional wonkery that this doesn't seem likely to happen anytime soon.

George Potter is a member of the Liberator Collective

**After The Storm:
The World Economy and
Britain's
Economic Future
by Vince Cable
Atlantic Books 2015,
£18.99**

Having devoured *The Storm*, Vince Cable's first book on the economic crisis, I felt compelled to buy the sequel, just to see if the economic outcome was as good as we had all been told by Osborne.

I had also attended the Liberator fringe meeting at the Bournemouth conference where the book was much in evidence as the underlying text for Vince's contribution. My overwhelming memory of the meeting was that Cable had clearly been at odds with the Tories over capital spending, believing that borrowing for infrastructure investment should not be cut while trimming the current spending of Government departments.

This argument is played out again in the book, which offers some clear analysis of the immediate past, the present and the immediate future for the UK economy. This is set within a structured analysis of how the British economy will be affected by international economic developments over the next few years.

Despite his disagreements with Osborne, Vince reserves more criticism for Theresa May. He provides a glimpse into the ongoing arguments that occurred within the cabinet over immigration.

There were a number of fights over overseas students, and while Vince was trying to get more inward investment from China, the Home Office was turning back businessmen who turned up at Heathrow. It was annoying to Vince that other countries were more accommodating. He comments at one point – "George Osborne was generally an ally in these scraps, but neither he nor David Cameron were ever willing to face down the home secretary.

"I developed a grudging respect for her obdurate defence of her ministerial silo, even though I could see that serious damage was being done to the wider economic objectives of government."

Perhaps surprisingly Vince was using his position as business secretary to advocate building good working relationships with nations



REVIEWS

such as Russia and China, and was critical of colleagues who wanted to pursue a more vocal and publicly critical line on both countries' human rights records.

Through the book, while reflecting on the growth of state capitalism in countries like China, India and Brazil he still does not identify an alternative economic model to what he broadly describes as globalism and free trade.

However he clearly advocates a role for government, local, national and international to intervene to moderate the impacts of unregulated banks, to challenge monopolistic concentrations of economic and political power, and to provide the necessary guarantees for healthcare systems, training, and research and development.

He wants to encourage different styles of capitalism, including mutuals of different types. Rewards should be paid to those who work hard or offer genuine creativity or entrepreneurship, rather than those who extort their income, or inherit it, or are just plain lucky. On the latter I am not sure I am with him. No government should legislate against those who are lucky. Tax them perhaps, but surely we must not disparage those of good fortune. Governments should not be curmudgeonly towards the fortunate.

Vince and has been warning about the perils of excess levels of private debt from well before the 2008 banking crash and he repeats this warning again here. He thinks the current level of Government debt is not as worrying as the level of private debt, which is on the increase again. A recovery based on consumerism is clearly fragile and Vince has consistently argued for some years that investing in the wider economy, especially manufacturing, would help to

counterbalance the continuing dependence on financial services.

On tax, Vince argues that rising inequality of income and wealth is damaging, but he focuses his attention most on the top 1%, which echoes the findings of Thomas Piketty in his book *Capital*. How to tax this 1% is a key issue. Vince argues that the distorting effect of the housing market can be addressed by property taxes. But he also wants to tackle the abuses of those running big corporations by building on the reforms he introduced. Strengthening the shareholder voice at company AGMs was a start in this direction, but until there is a change of approach by institutional investors the abuses of executive pay, and short-termism in future company investment decisions will continue.

Vince is mildly critical of Osborne's decision to raise the national minimum wage, arguing that a continued use of top ups through tax credits is preferable, because he warns that a sudden jump in the living wage paid by companies will lead to job losses rather than an increase in productivity which is actually needed.

The one inconsistency in his approach, and where I part company with him completely, is that after giving encouragement to the idea of developing different models of local capitalism, like mutuals, peer funding, credit unions and so forth, and after criticising the behaviour of global corporations, he offers no insight into whether we should be wary about TTIP.

While opening up markets for trade is a consistent theme in Vince's tome, he does not offer any words of caution about the way the TTIP negotiations should be concluded. Many of the scare stories about this trade

agreement say it would empower multinational corporations by providing them with legal rights to challenge government decisions on the future local markets for public services. Whether the scare stories are true or not, the fact that the negotiations are carried out in secret and little information is offered, even to MEPs, is not covered in any detail.

If the future UK economy will be stronger by having alternative models of capitalism, then surely any trade agreement to which the UK is party should not strengthen the hands of corporations that are not accountable to any government, and who could use their size to bully their smaller competitors, and national governments, into giving them greater market share by threatening legal action?

If the scare stories are not true then I would expect an economic thinker of Vince Cable's eminence to tackle this issue in detail, and explain why TTIP will be a welcome agreement, but he shies away from it. It is one area where we need leadership if the Liberal Democrats are collectively to offer a credible approach to the economic challenges ahead.

Without decent guidance on this defining issue, which will impact on our economy for decades to come, Vince is only offering incomplete advice on the way the party should develop its future economic policy.

William Tranby

British Liberal Leaders Duncan Brack, Robert Ingham & Tony Little (eds). Biteback 2015 £25

Campaigning with no time to read a full biography of every Liberal Leader since Lord Grey? Then this is the book for you. Given the book covers the 24 leaders that have led the party since Grey you might think you'd be short changed with a thumb sketch profile of each of them. Not a bit of it, this book weighs in at just under 500 pages and each leader receives their words' worth.

Quite unlike any other political biography, this book sets out a framework for assessing the leaders, considering their record before their leadership; the strengths and weakness of the

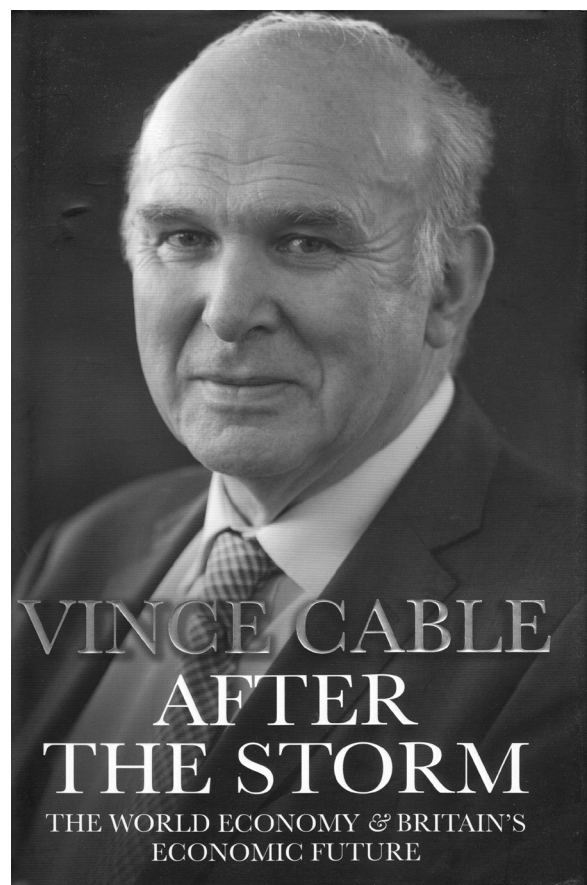
party at the time; their ideological position in it. Their record in power; their personal abilities and flaws, and their achievement in projecting the party and themselves and their development of a vision. The editors then asked each author to write bearing the framework in mind.

The editors are to be congratulated on their haul of talented authors not least the established biographer John Campbell whose published biographies include Lloyd George, Nye Bevan, Ted Heath, Margaret Thatcher and most recently his acclaimed biography of Roy Jenkins 'A Well Rounded Life'.

My personal favourite though is David Howarth's profile of Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman, leader of the Liberal Party from 1899 to 1908. Campbell Bannerman is little remembered compared with Asquith, Lloyd George and Churchill who served in his 1905 government. But Howarth argues he was on a par if not above those men. He united the party's warring factions whereas Asquith and Lloyd George's rivalry did the opposite. And Churchill opted to re-defect to the Tories (that is the trouble with turncoats that tend to turn more than once, like Lord Adonis today).

Campbell Bannerman was the last Liberal to win a parliamentary majority for his party. And he has an instinctive sympathy with the trade unions (albeit not with socialism) which put him in a position to create the progressive alliance with Labour, an alliance that, had it survived would have change the course of twentieth century British politics. Now that is just the taster of Howarth on Campbell Bannerman; an eminently readable piece; a style which will be familiar to readers of this magazine to which David is a regular contributor.

The contribution provided by John Campbell provides a sample of his excellent biography of Jenkins, who twice had the leadership of the Labour Party in his grasp



but managed to hesitate at a key moment in both.

Duncan Brack's piece on Ashdown includes an account of the dreaded Project and his dealings with Blair who ultimately stitched him up; good thing too in my view. In his piece, Brack quotes Tony Greaves's observation that Liberal Democrats' loved their leader but in so far as they sensed his strategy, most wanted none of it. If Ashdown was and remains popular what of David Steel? David Torrance in his profile reflects on how popular Steel was for a leader of a third party. Popular with the electorate he may have been, due in part to his great ability as a broadcaster. To his Party members he was a cold fish. He never really like us and rarely missed an opportunity to take a swipe.

This is an excellent read, and a timely piece of publishing as we assess our new leader. Some hope that he may grow in his leadership to acquire the organisational and political acumen of Campbell Bannerman, and the inspirational leadership and style of Grimond. Not much to ask for is it?

Peter Johnson

All the leaves are brown and the sky is grey; if the weather carries on like this, the Well-Behaved Orphans will soon be needing shoes. I sit by the Library fire as Meadowcroft dabbles and hoes outside – or whatever it is he does at this time of year. Flocks of hamwees are massing before leaving to winter in Africa, unless they have just arrived to winter here. Or are they wheways? I never can tell the difference.

Let us be honest: 2015 was not a good year for the Liberal Democrats, much as 1883 was not a good year for the island of Krakatoa. We are not, however, downhearted. The darkest hour is just before dawn, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step (as Mr Mao who ran the takeaway in Melton Mowbray used to put it) and God moves in a mysterious way and all that.

A rare ray of light in the darkness for us Liberal Democrats was our capture of Loch Ness from the Scottish National Party. It would be remiss of me at this point not to pay tribute to the sterling efforts of my old friend Ruttie, the Rutland Water Monster. Her canvassing of the postal vote, I am told by those on the ground, proved particularly effective.

As far as I can gather, what happened was this. If a local has settled down to cast his or, indeed, her postal vote, Ruttie would crane her long neck in through the window. The voter would hover his biro above the box next to the SNP candidate, at which Ruttie would give a distinct curl of the lip. Alarmed, the voter would next try the box next to our candidate, whereupon Ruttie would nod vigorously. I gather she was also extremely helpful in saving the voter the need to take the completed vote to the nearest pillar box.

I shall do all I can to encourage the old girl to help in future by-elections, but I fear there are few wards where she has such a close family connection.

To Westminster, where I run into Freddie and Fiona, who worked in the leader's office before the general election. They tell me they are now running a think-tank "to

Lord Bonkers' Diary

promote four-cornered liberalism". Not recalling anything about them in the conversation of my old friend L.T. Hobhouse, I ask what these four corners are. "Well," replies Freddie, "there's economic liberalism and... and... er..." "... the other three," Fiona finishes triumphantly.

There was outrage at the identity of the finalists of the Great British Bake Off and, though it was an ugly affair, I am pleased that Mary Berry was finally unmasked as the left-wing troublemaker she has always been. For, I can exclusively reveal, 'Red Mary' has been behind every politically motivated strike, every violent demonstration and every act of industrial sabotage in Britain for decades. And who do people imagine baked the macaroons for the Angry Brigade?

This evening I attend a viewing of a sparkling new print of one of my favourite Oakham Studios films. Set amid the trad jazz boom of the early 1960s, it is nevertheless the hard-hitting story of a schoolgirl (played by the young Helen Shapiro) who is radicalised by a pen friend and eventually travels to Syria to take part in the armed conflict there. I feel sure that 'I'm a jihadi, Daddy' will win itself a whole new generation of viewers.

Tense scenes in the House this evening as we debate Osborne's proposed cuts to tax credits. The motions before us arrange from total rejection, put forward by us Liberal Democrats, to the bishops' proposal for loud tutting.

I spy an old Socialist of my acquaintance – when I first knew him he was generally to be found on picket lines with Mary Berry and I would have offered long odds against his taking the ermine, but you know what Socialists are. "I expect you will be voting with us this time," I say brightly. "Oh no," he replies, "We are all going to abstain. It's Jeremy Corbyn's New Politics."

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