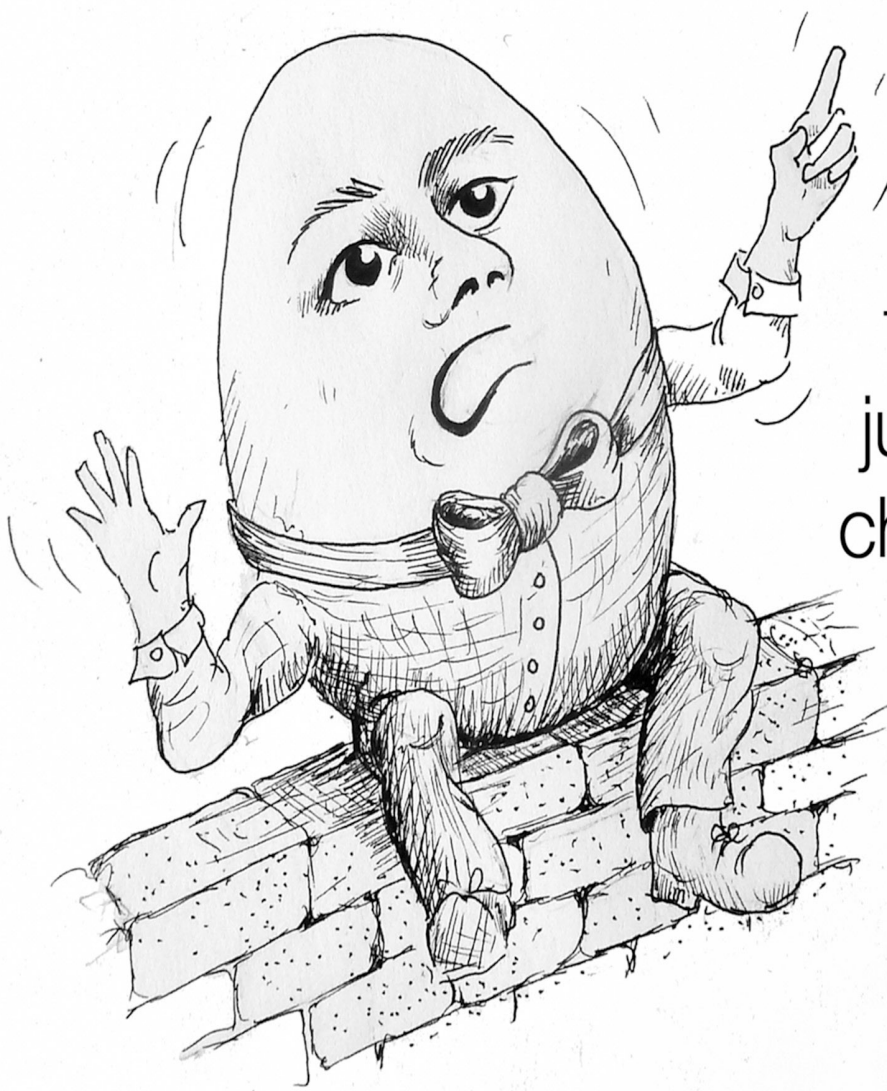


liberator



When I set
five tests
on Syria,
they mean
just what I
choose them
to mean

- * How Clegg nearly fell - Seth Thevoz
- * Getting Syria wrong - David Grace and Susan Simmonds
- * Back to the pavements - Peter Chegwyn

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Jonathan Calder, Richard Clein, Howard Cohen, Gareth Epps, Catherine Furlong, David Grace, Sarah Green, Peter Johnson, Wendy Kyrle-Pope, Tim McNally, George Potter, Stewart Rayment, Kiron Reid, Harriet Sherlock, Mark Smulian, William Tranby, Claire Wiggins, Nick Winch

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COMMENTARY

BOMB SURPRISE

Wrong, wrong, wrong. On the Syria vote the majority of Liberal Democrat MPs managed to mess up the communication and consultation process with the party, arrived at conclusions contrary to those signalled and then claimed the process by which they had done all this was perfectly fine.

The MPs did not have an easy decision before them and Tim Farron set five tests for supporting bombing in Syria. Of those, only legal sanction by the UN was unarguably met - and that called for action against ISIS without specifying bombing.

Of the other tests a "wider diplomatic framework including efforts towards a no-bomb zone to protect civilians" was plainly not met, "pressure on the Gulf states to stop funding jihadi groups", was undeliverable since they fund these or not according to their own interests and "the government must be absolutely clear on what Syria and Iraq will look like post-ISIL", was also undeliverable since the UK government has little idea of what might be possible and cannot be more than a minor player anyway.

The tests thus looked to be, and appeared from party mood music to be, the prelude to a 'no' vote.

When that suddenly turned to 'yes' the party was left floundering to explain this sudden volte face.

For a party still with considerable post-Coalition trust issues with voters, this was simply misguided.

The idea that a call from France required answering with British bombing is also bogus. France did not invoke the NATO charter - which would have required other members to support it - but merely made a request.

Are we to believe that the UK must go along with what its allies are doing irrespective of whether that is effective or sensible?

ISIS will be defeated only by troops on the ground and not even David Cameron has proposed sending British troops there - indeed the presence of any western troops would likely make things worse.

Cameron instead said the bombing was in support of a 70,000-strong opposition army.

Even if this exists, which is open to question, is it unified, can it fight effectively, what are the objectives of those dominant within it and are they the same as ours?

The Syrian conflict began because of the brutality of the Assad regime. It and its supporters are fighting for their lives and have no incentive to stop fighting the rebels, and vice versa.

Some rebels are fighting ISIS, though Assad regime is generally not. Yet Cameron's plan, which most Lib Dem MPs accepted as constituting "what Syria and Iraq will look like post-ISIL" depends on the idea

that the Assad regime and its opponents will form an alliance to tackle ISIS.

Desirable as this may be, neither Assad nor the opposition has any incentive to stop fighting so long as it appears to them that the safer course is to continue since each would annihilate the other were they to lay down arms.

The UK is thus bombing in support of an army that might not exist and which, if it does, might not wish to fight ISIS to any significant extent as it sees Assad as a greater danger.

Bombing on its own has only a limited effect. Parliament's vote in favour of it came from a desire to be seen to 'do something' after the dreadful Paris attacks, regardless of whether that 'something' made any realistic contribution to bringing about ISIS' defeat.

Let's be clear. ISIS will be defeated only on the ground. Absolutely no-one thinks it sensible to put western troops there, so if the bombing is done it has to be in support of local forces. The Syrian opposition's strength and priorities are barely known, other Arab countries show a marked reluctance to put their troops in the field while the Kurds will, reasonably enough, fight only for what they consider their area.

In the middle of a three-sided civil war - where two sides are appalling beyond description and the third may contain other fundamentalist factions and is engaged in periodic internecine battles - the UK has now waded in without either a war strategy or an exit one.

ISIS funds could be cut by pressing neighbouring countries ceasing to trade with it, rebels could be given anti-aircraft guns to try to bring Assad to heel by stopping him dropping lethal barrel bombs - the one thing that might allow the opposition and regime elements to talk - the Kurds could be better armed to fight ISIS in their sector.

There is not exactly a lack of actions against ISIS short of a questionable bombing campaign, which may endanger civilians, in support of an army whose capability no one knows.

If the majority of Lib Dem MPs had decided from the outset to support bombing they would have been mistaken but at least coherent.

To send signals one way, go another, fail to consult the relevant party bodies and allow Nick Clegg, of all people, to announce the U-turn on television turned honest controversy into awful farce

RADICAL BULLETIN

LOST CHICKEN HEADS

The Syria vote has caused understandable political controversy in the party, but what about the process?

An email was sent out in Tim Farron's name seemingly randomly to some but not all party members.

This explained the 'five tests' and Farron later explained why he thought they had been met, though the grounds for this appeared deeply contentious except for the one about action being legally sanctioned by the UN.

Excuses came thick and fast about how the reduced state of party headquarters made it impossible to consult members more widely.

It ought though to have been possible to consult both the Federal Policy Committee and, more to the point given the expertise there, the International Relations Committee.

Neither was consulted on the matter leaving the IRC angry and the FPC sufficiently roused to pass a protest motion in which it said the MPs should have consulted it and regretted a "breakdown of communications".

It has also emerged that the international affairs team formed under the Coalition of various office holders and internal experts has ceased to meet.

One can usually count on Nick Clegg to make a shambles worse and he duly did.

The five tests were presented as though the prelude for a Lib Dem vote against air strikes and when the U-turn came it was announced not by Farron but by Clegg going on Sky News to upstage his successor after a day of confusing and contradictory briefings.

As a lesson in how not to make policy and how not to consult - even when there is a very short time frame - the fiasco of the Lib Dem MPs and the Syria vote takes some beating.

RED AND DRIPPING

Just how bad is the Lib Dems' financial position?

Sources suggest the party is about £2.3m in the red and that this parlous state arises from the slump in parliamentary representation being worse than anyone budgeted for, combined with cuts made by the government to 'Short money' for opposition parties, which could not reasonably have been foreseen.

The other problem is the failure of expected income from last autumn's conference to materialise, given that the party's reduced size in parliament led to high-paying lobbyists and commercial organisations staying away in droves.

Optimistic assumptions were made when the finances for the Bournemouth conference were prepared by party HQ (not the Federal Conference Committee, which simply has to work with what it's allocated) based on the belief that the party would still be in

government.

The venue costs are not anyone's fault, since these are booked a couple of years ahead and in 2013 it probably seemed quite reasonable that the party would still be in government, or in opposition but not miles adrift of its pre-Coalition size.

Thus the party could do little about the costs of conference, but did it budget to cope with a slump in income once the general election results were known?

Liberator understands that even the 'worst case scenario' budget failed to anticipate what actually happened, since it assumed 20 MPs and the accompanying Short money.

Having eight MPs and a simultaneous cut in the rate of Short money left the party working to a pared down version of that budget, but six-figure monthly variances have knocked it off course.

The finances looked healthy until last autumn; indeed the party spent the summer comfortably in the black. But the failure of conference receipts to materialise put paid to that happy situation.

Meanwhile, this problem has seen the Legacy Fund now 'resting' (whether or not in peace) in the party's account to offset its overdraft, rather than acting as a reserve as party policy says it should.

There has been talk of moving some of party HQ out of expensive central London accommodation and leaving only the press office and those needing immediate access to parliament there.

The lease is up on the Great George Street office soon and HQ may be off over the water to the unfashionable environs of Vauxhall.

At least there its headquarters might look like that of a membership organisation rather than a bank.

NOT QUITE SO WELCOME

Helena Morrissey's final report said that with no finding against him "there is no justification for it remaining ambivalent towards Lord Rennard - he should be just as welcome a participant or guest at party events as any other".

Whether a Federal Executive meeting is a 'party event' is a moot point but when the Lords' group elected Rennard as its representative there in preference to Tim Razzall the shit hit the fan.

It was obvious that choosing Rennard would cause a colossal row. His supporters in the Lords are understood to have felt that the dire post-Clegg state of the party meant that Rennard's election-winning skills were needed urgently, and that they could be used since Morrissey had said he should be treated like any other member. There was also concern about whether Razzall would be effective in the role.

Some also felt that as an ex-chief executive Rennard would be able to stand up to the current incumbent.

Those who had taken the side of Rennard's accusers

in the row over alleged sexual harassment (Liberator 370 and others) launched a campaign to call a special conference to strip the Lords' group of its representation on the FE.

Channel 4 News, to which the accusers took their case in 2013, gleefully waded back into the story and appalling publicity duly followed.

It's unclear whether a special conference could have retrospectively removed the Lords' FE seat, but the potential for embarrassment was huge and faced with this, a way needed to be found to allow Rennard to withdraw with dignity.

Only a direct call from Tim Farron could have given Rennard the political cover needed to step down, and such a plea duly arrived. Rather than leave their FE seat vacant in protest, the Lords then elected Lindsey Northover to the role.

It's unclear what would have happened had Rennard successfully stood for election to the FE (or anything else) from among conference representatives, or in future under OMOV from among the whole membership.

But the inadequacy of the party disciplinary process remains exposed with neither side in this unresolvable dispute satisfied.

Rennard's detractors remain angry that he has never been convicted of anything and his supporters angry that he cannot clear his name.

This goes back not only to the process itself but the way in which the investigation report by Alastair Webster QC was handled (Liberator 364).

His report was either confidential or it wasn't. Instead, while the report itself has never been published a summary was issued by the party.

It has never been made clear who wrote this summary, how whoever wrote it was given the task, or with what degree of accuracy and completeness they reflected Webster's findings, a situation that has made the information that did appear prey to selective quotation by both sides.

This episode also showed up a problem in the new rules under one member one vote. Finding 200 conference representatives from 20 local parties to call a special conference, as under the old rules, was a reasonably high hurdle.

But finding 200 ordinary members from 20 places under the new system means in these days of social media that a special conference about almost anything could fairly easily be called. Those rewriting the rules couldn't agree on a number so left it at 200, Liberator hears.

NEWBURY FRUITS

Lib Dem disciplinary processes have yet again failed to cover themselves in glory following the expulsion of Ruwan Uduwera-Perera and his subsequent rapid reinstatement.

Uduwera-Perera has been chair of Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats (EMLD) since May, a position that has given rise to a separate dispute, and at a time when the party is trying to stress diversity expelling the chair of the ethnic minority body was no doubt embarrassing.

Although some have suggested otherwise, it is hard to see that the original issue had any bearing on Uduwera-Perera's ethnicity.

It concerned a complex row over whether Newbury

Town Council, of which he had been deputy leader, had acted properly in pursuing the costs of a planning dispute.

This led to complaints that he had addressed the council chief executive as "a numpty" and in other disobliging terms, and had had an altercation with its leader Julian Swift-Hook.

A party investigation panel ruled in October that Uduwera-Perera should have his membership revoked as his behaviour had brought the party into disrepute including "by his continued communications with all forms of media in an attempt to share his grievances so as to accelerate the outcome of the internal party processes".

Uduwera-Perera duly appealed, which led to an excoriating finding by the English Appeals Panel.

This said it was "satisfied that the [investigating panel] did not sufficiently consider the background in which the meetings between Uduwera-Perera [RU] and Swift-Hook [JSH] took place particularly in respect of the outstanding complaint that had been raised hitherto in respect of malpractices at Newbury Council.

"The IP were not aware, to the extent that they should have been, of the background to the apparent animosity between RU and JSH. The EAP believes this could have been avoided had a division not been created between the complaint about RU from JSH and that about JSH from RU.

"This was a materially relevant fact that, if the IP had taken proper account of, would not have led to the conclusion - beyond reasonable doubt - that RU acted in a way that was contrary to [the constitution]."

The EAP said it was satisfied that Uduwera-Perera "is a robust individual who is equally robust in making his points", which, in EAP's view, made it all the more important to ensure that it was considered in context.

"In making its decision without reference to the background in which the meeting came about, the IP deprived itself of understanding the context in which a meeting between a group and deputy leader took place."

Not only that, the EAP found "the basis upon which the IP concluded that RU's media dealings brought the party into disrepute was factually incorrect. There is no doubt that RU made public statements about the circumstances surrounding the Newbury Council issues of 2010. However, the panel concluded that this did not amount to an act that was likely to or did bring the party into disrepute."

With Uduwera-Perera reinstated, what is to become of the chair's post in EMLD?

At its last AGM Uduwera-Perera stood in for Issan Ghazi, who resigned due to illness last April.

On 1 May, six days before the general election, Uduwera-Perera called an emergency telephone executive meeting to announce that Ghazi was indeed standing down and insisted a new chair was needed immediately, rather than waiting until after the election.

Some executive members felt the matter was not so pressing that it could not have waited until after the election but Uduwera-Perera was the only nomination made among those who took part in the phone call and duly filled the post.

After news of Uduwera-Perera's (as it turned out) temporary expulsion broke an emergency EMLD

executive meeting was called during the late-October London region conference, which decided to issue a press release in support of Uduwera-Perera although some executive members complained this meeting was called without the required notice.

Meanwhile, the much respected Turhan Ozen has been elected as EMLD's acting chair and Uduwera-Perera has said that his reinstatement included resuming the role of EMLD chair, a point on which executive members have sought a ruling from the party's compliance department.

Still on disciplinary matters, there is a loud silence over the fate of Mark Gettleson, who was alleged to have misused membership data when he was part of Norman Lamb's leadership campaign team.

Since his co-accused Gavin Grant was cleared (Liberator 375) presumably Gettleson has also been, having been accused of the same thing, and no action appears pending, but the opaqueness of disciplinary processes does not sit well in a party of 'open justice'.

JAM TOMORROW

There is disquiet among local parties who were promised a membership rebate by party HQ but who have now spent months waiting for this to materialise. This continues to be an issue between the English party and the Federal party and has left some impoverished local parties waiting a long time for rebates that are relatively small but which would make a substantial difference to them.

For example, the Redbridge local party was promised £705 last July as its share of members' subscriptions.

Come November nothing had arrived, while emails and calls to headquarters went unanswered, though payment was eventually promised for, er, January.

In the meantime, Redbridge has coped with losing £1,000 through two lost deposits last May and now has only three councillors contributing from allowances rather than the pre-2014 seven.

With a share of a deposit for a Greater London Authority constituency to find too, £705 is a significant sum for such a local party, even if not for those better financed.

To add insult to injury, local members have been subjected to the usual stream of HQ begging letters.

TARGET GONE MISSING

Ashfield was a near miss of the 2010 general election with just 192 votes separating Labour's Gloria di Piero from Lib Dem councillor Jason Zadrozny.

By 2015 it was among only half a dozen seats getting external support as a possible gain. But then the sky fell in during April when Zadrozny had to resign as a candidate after being arrested over historical allegations of child sex abuse, which he denied and over which he has not been charged.

He did though defend his council seat successfully as an independent without Lib Dem opposition.

Meanwhile, Lib Dem councillor Tom Hollis was fined £50 in October for assaulting a Labour candidate during the May campaign and by December all of those once elected as Lib Dems instead sat as Ashfield Independents.

Zadrozny is by all accounts a formidable campaigner and some think the local Lib Dem party was only ever a personality cult around him.

But questions need to be asked about how and why he was arrested at such a politically sensitive time if the police were subsequently to take no action.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

It's said there is nothing new under the sun and so it proves with the Liberal Democrat governance review which has had its initial consultation and discussion of proposals.

Some of these are sensible, such as trying to better fit England into the federal structure, since devolution to and within England will potentially make this hitherto pointless tier more necessary.

More alarming is the proposal for a large cut in the number of members of party committees who will be directly elected, and their replacement by regional and sectional representatives of one sort or another.

This was the system the pre-merger Liberal party abandoned in 1984 (Liberator 144) having discovered that it had a ruling committee (then called the national executive) that did not work because few of its members saw their role as being working contributors to the NEC but instead viewed themselves as the voices and promoters of whatever region or interest group had elected them.

There was also a marked tendency for regional parties to offload assorted bores and cranks onto the NEC to shut them up, with the result that that it was ineffective.

The Lib Dem governance review now proposes to restore something very like this, which will no doubt make the Federal Executive as useless as was the pre-1984 Liberal NEC.

There has just been agreement to one-member-one-vote for party committees, and heavily cutting the number of positions for which these newly enfranchised members can vote seems an odd way of welcoming them.

FIGHTING OVER SCRAPS

York spring conference will debate a motion on diversity that has served to reignite ill feeling between advocates of gender and ethnic equality in candidate selections.

Conference will debate a prescriptive 1,000 words motion that sets a variety of detailed rules, even though only a few dozen seats at most are likely to offer a realistic chance of victory.

These include provisions that if any sitting MP retires at the next general election, his replacement will be selected from an all-female shortlist, and that in each region with two or more seats which gained 25% or more of the vote in May 2015, one seat not yet held would be likewise selected from an all-women shortlist.

This would exclude men from ethnic minorities from fighting such seats, a restriction not lost on Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats, which had wanted to put a simpler motion calling on the party fully implement the Equality Act 2010, which it argued would address most grievances for all under represented groups. It also objected to not being consulted on the main motion.

All-women shortlists have been defeated in the past because of strong opposition from groups of women, whether that will emerge again now so few seats are realistically at stake remains to be seen.

MORE CATS NEEDED

Sarah Green offers an answer to the Liberal Democrats' essay competition

At the end of 2015 the Liberal Democrats held an essay competition as part of the 'Agenda 2020' review of the party's beliefs, values and approach. The winner will get a copy of John Stuart Mill's 'On Liberty' signed by the party leader.

If you hadn't fully grasped the party's depleted resources, surely nothing screams "we're skint" more than offering a book bought for a fiver as the prize for a national competition.

This shouldn't be read as criticism of the competition, if anything, the organisers are living and breathing the real answer to their essay question: what it means to be a Liberal Democrat today is finding ways to operate effectively as a political party with significantly fewer resources available.

Being a Liberal Democrat today means four things.

The first is finding ways to fill the gaps left by staff no longer there. Time and again I hear fellow members bemoaning the shortage of updates on the party website, slow responses to emails and lack of leaflet templates. This is the new reality - a lot of the staff we used to depend on are no longer there.

One solution is sharing. If you need a development plan or a leaflet template or a press release or a cheap print option, there is a strong chance that a helpful person online somewhere will happily point you in the right direction.

And there is no shame in stealing ideas that work for other people. Inspired by the successful 'daily editor' approach of Lib Dem Voice, my local party is trying to improve its online activity with a rota for its digital channels. Spreading the workload will allow us to make more of our online presence. The lack of national resource means we have to make things happen ourselves. The truth is we have no choice.

The second is get used to being ignored. Since last May I have found the sympathy I receive at owning up to being a Liberal Democrat difficult. Being seen as irrelevant by both the media and the voting public is no joke. I can't be the only person shouting "That's a Liberal Democrat policy" at the radio when no party spokesperson is there.

Liberals should be bold and radical. But being distinctive is a win-win because it gets the interest of a public and media who have largely stopped paying attention to us.

Roger Hayes rightly highlighted (Liberator 370) the importance of fun while campaigning. As local campaigners we can heed his advice but it's equally important that the team running things nationally express the party's values and beliefs with good humour too. One of the rare moments of joy for me during the 2015 general election was the party's response to a minor celebrity asking Nick Clegg in an interview why the party was called the 'Liberal Democats'. Afterwards some bright spark decided to change the Liberal Democrat logo on the party website

from a yellow bird to a yellow cat. The response was pitch perfect (or purrfect), bold and got positive coverage. We won't grab anyone's attention by being bland and humourless.

The third is to make a real effort to get the 20,000 new members to renew. They joined at our lowest ebb because they don't want the flame of liberalism to die. They are also the best people to give us an honest appraisal of what is working and what is not, having not (yet) been institutionalised by The Lib Dem Way of Doing Things.

Have you spoken to your new members? Do you know what makes them tick and what would keep them interested and involved? Have you asked their honest opinion of the photos in your leaflets and the tone used on your website?

If a sizeable number fail to renew it will only deplete our resources further. If your local party does just one thing this year, prioritise this.

The fourth is getting out of London. Being a Liberal Democrat also means challenging 'the powers that be'. While campaigners across the country crack on with learning to live with less, why is the federal party paying to be headquartered in London?

I accept finding a new home means staff relocation and the disposal of the current lease. These make a move hard immediately - but a reasonable request for the medium term. I don't accept that most HQ functions need to be based in the most expensive part of the country. Plenty of banks, businesses and government departments that need a foothold in London house most back office function elsewhere. Why keep our entire HQ function in London? Apart from the financial implications, moving out of the capital would also demonstrate that we aren't a London-centric party.

So, what does it mean to be a Liberal Democrat today? The same as it ever has: standing up for liberal values, campaigning for radical reform and telling truth to power - including those running our own party. If we want the Liberal Democrats to survive and become relevant again, we're the only ones who can make this happen.

Sarah Green is chair of Ealing Liberal Democrats and a member of the Liberator Collective.

A VERY NEARLY SUCCESSFUL COUP

Seth Thévoz reveals the story he saw of the attempted ousting of Nick Clegg after disastrous elections in May 2014

Nick Harvey's jaw-droppingly candid piece *Falling for Our Own Propaganda*, (*Liberator* 375) about the party's refusal to see abundant evidence that it was headed for disaster last May, should be required reading for anyone interested in politics.

Similarly, his equally scathing pamphlet *After the Rose Garden*, and recent *Journal of Liberal History* interview, contain a catalogue of failings and incompetence by Lib Dem ministers in government.

Even those of us who were Nick Clegg's sternest critics will be the first to admit that it would be grossly overestimating Clegg's ability to imagine that all the party's failings could be scapegoated to him; and the degree of collective myopia and delusion which gripped much of the party throughout coalition, blindly holding out for a deliverance against all evidence to the contrary, was a serious problem.

I fear that it still is, since many activists seem to think that the loss of 87% of our MPs last May was little more than a mild setback, that it does not suggest we did anything wrong in government to merit our abandonment by three-quarters of our own electorate, and that we'll soon be comfortably back up to 20, 30 or even 50. Such talk is as delusional as that which preceded it.

One did not have to be on the 'inside track' during the coalition years, as Harvey was, to see what was happening to our vote.

Something David Howarth laid out in great detail in a presentation to the Social Liberal Forum's agm last May was just how early the polls solidified. He identified four key decisions, each of which corresponded to a drop of 3-4% apiece in the polls:

- ☛ Joining a Conservative-led coalition (May 2015);
- ☛ George Osborne's first budget, and the Lib Dem embrace of cuts they had campaigned against only two months earlier (June 2010);
- ☛ Nick Clegg's 'first 100 days' speech on social mobility (August 2010);
- ☛ U-turn on fees (December 2010).

As Howarth characterised it, the first three were breaches of trust, and the fourth meant that voters stopped listening altogether. By January 2011, the party was exactly where it has stayed since: within the margin of error of 8%, merely bobbing up and down a couple of percentage points. Since Howarth identified the party as having a core vote of only 7%, this was about as low as it could sink. Indeed, there is some evidence that a sizeable portion of even this 7% 'core' didn't vote Lib Dem last May.

One would have welcomed a little more reflection from Harvey on his own active part in the collective delusion.

He now concedes "the rest of us were too reluctant to challenge them – I am guilty myself." He may have been disenchanted with the government's direction since he was sacked from it in 2012; but when he was armed forces minister in 2010-2, he was apparently only too happy to champion the coalition's record. Similarly, he attacks the party's failure to process internal polling, yet fails to mention that he was part of the very Wheelhouse group which received and reviewed such private polls.

The last thing we should do is expect the people who got us into this mess – through a mixture of denial, 'on-message' parroting, pig-ignorance, censorship, and (in some cases) bullying – to get us out of this mess.

UNREPENTANT 'SAGES'

The Wheelhouse is a case in point. The members of the Wheelhouse (particularly those who remain unrepentant) should not be regarded as party 'sages'; their reputation should be in tatters.

Yet we're still listening to them. The gung-ho style of Paddy Ashdown has long made him an excellent party spokesperson – and an appalling tactician. As leader in the 1990s, he was superb on television; but his over-riding strategy regarding the Labour party would have led to the extinction of the Liberal Democrats if it had ever been implemented, and he himself has acknowledged he'd have favoured a merger into New Labour in the late 1990s.

Bringing him back only reinforced that danger to the party as an independent force. Yet who was it who recently lobbied our MPs and peers for a gung-ho stance towards Syria, when the bulk of the party rank-and-file remains unconvinced that renewed bombings would achieve anything? Paddy Ashdown continues to wield much influence among the party's parliamentarians, despite conspicuously being the least successful strategist since General Custer.

Who was even in the Wheelhouse group remains something of a mystery, since no complete membership list was ever published. And if members tried to criticise one of the Wheelhouse's most outspoken exponents of dodgy 'comfort polling', Ryan Coetzee, they were banned from mentioning it on Lib Dem Voice, courtesy of a perverse decision from its editor Caron Lindsay that all party staff should enjoy a blanket immunity from criticism, no matter how senior they were.

This seems a curious and illiberal decision to take, as Coetzee was director of strategy, in charge of the election campaign; and many were running around quite happily taking instructions from him and other Wheelhouse members. Meanwhile, experienced voices like former Association of Liberal Councillors chair Bill Le Breton and ex-Kingston council leader John Tilley –

people who had spent decades working from ‘ground-zero’ to build together local coalitions that would make up a majority in a parliamentary seat and a council, and who understood how these things were done – were ignored, in favour of glorified advertising salesmen, and whizzkids I went to Cambridge with.

Even Shirley Williams and Bill Rodgers – the only two living party members with cabinet experience before 2010 – were told “no thanks” when they offered to regularly meet with Clegg to advise on cabinet issues. In short, everything we had learned over four decades of street-fighting was unlearned as Clegg handed power to a small, out-of-touch clique. And many members looked up to these people.

Those of us who foresaw so much of this – not just when it was too late, but back in 2010 (I will happily direct readers to my writings on the subject back in May 2010) – felt compelled to make a last-ditch attempt to act, in backing the May 2014 attempted coup.

The spin from Clegg’s spads at the time was that the grassroots rebellion had been ‘botched’. Actually, the coup came far closer to succeeding than was generally realised at the time, and its failure had little to do with activists, and much to do with the spinelessness of our then-MPs: the MPs initiated the attempted coup, they were not roped in against their better judgement.

Some MPs still felt wounded by the membership backlash they had faced over unseating Charles Kennedy back in 2006. Not wanting a similar backlash, a group of then-MPs asked for the rustling-up of some background ‘mood music’, so that they could be seen to be responding to grassroots pressure, rather than risk being seen to launch a rogue coup.

Vince Cable was unwilling to play any active part, though would have been a natural unity figure in the election had Clegg resigned. His presence in China during the crucial weekend, whether orchestrated or coincidence, certainly allowed him to exercise plausible deniability of any complicity. The MPs had carefully canvassed their colleagues, and found 12 MPs (including one serving minister), plus a smattering of other parliamentarians across different legislatures, prepared to go public; in addition to which, another 10 or so MPs voiced sympathy, and were wavering. They may not have been a majority of the parliamentary party, but they were numerous enough to force Clegg to go, signalling a desperately-needed change of direction.

THE WOBLERS

What destroyed the coup was when the second wave of MPs got ‘the wobbles’. A disciplined media grid had set out a detailed timetable of MPs who would go public in waves of two or three at a time, staggered with other parliamentarians, to build a sense of momentum. On day one, a members’-led open letter calling on Clegg to resign was released as per the plan.

(This was never a petition as claimed – it was an open letter which envisioned 20 signatures. It accidentally secured over 400.) On day two, the first

“The coup against Nick Clegg came far closer to succeeding than was generally realised at the time”

two MPs went ‘over the top’, publicly calling for Clegg’s resignation, and were joined by a third MP who wasn’t scheduled to declare until several days later, jumping the gun. Then on day three, we were badly let down by one MP. The response of his colleagues was “If he’s not going, I’m out” – which spread like a chain reaction among

MPs and peers. The activists roped in to do the MPs’ dirty work were left holding the baby.

Would the 2014 coup have been too late? Possibly, but then that’s a reason why it should have happened earlier, not a reason for it to have not happened at all. The May 2015 result was so apocalyptic, that we literally had nothing to lose. If the coup had saved us just five or six seats (which is certainly how many were sacrificed in the diversion of resources to save Sheffield Hallam, which private and public polling agreed was doomed one month out), then it would have been worth it.

From May 2011 to May 2015, nothing changed. Clegg’s apology over fees did not make any difference. Reshuffles and relaunches did not make any difference. Cries of a Lib Dem fightback did not make any difference. The 2015 campaign, despite being the most expensive in the party’s history, did not make any difference.

So what does the evidence suggest is our fate now? Something drastic needs to happen, because at the moment, nothing has changed. We are still on 8%, give or take a 2% deviation – the pattern since 2011 remains unbroken. If this continues to the end of the next Parliament, we can realistically expect to hold between four seats and zero.

We lost our deposit in Oldham, just as we did in 14 of the 19 by-elections contested last Parliament. The pattern across council by-elections has not appreciably picked up. The cry of “Lib Dem fightback” may be good for internal morale, but there is no evidence it has made the slightest impact on voters. We live in a crowded marketplace with many other ‘protest parties’, and we still lack a USP. Only by starting to think boldly, creatively, and by making a clean break with the coalition years which shattered our credibility do we stand a cat in hell’s chance of a comeback.

Dr Seth Thévoz of Nuffield College, Oxford, is a political historian. He sits on the Liberal Democrat Federal Finance and Administration Committee, and is librarian of the National Liberal Club.

NOT IN MY NAME

By backing bombing in Syria the Liberal Democrat MPs voted for a war with no strategy, no path to victory and no exit plan, says David Grace

I sat through the House of Commons day-long debate on Syria pretending to work but actually listening to the endless and repetitive arguments. I can sum up the hours of debate in a simple syllogism:

“Something must be done. This is something. Therefore this must be done.”

I listened in vain for a convincing argument that the addition of a few RAF bombers would achieve anything useful. Nobody made the case. Most speakers contented themselves with describing how awful Da’esh is (as the speeches wore on, it became usual to say Da’esh and not ISIS although I understand that Da’esh is the abbreviation in Arabic for the same concept as ISIS is in English).

Hilary Benn even lived up to Godwin’s Law, not by actually naming Hitler but by comparing Da’esh with the Nazis. It was fine rhetoric but not one word of it explained why British bombers were the answer to the horror. Tim Farron, in the few minutes the speaker now permits to Liberal Democrats, spoke of the Syrian child refugee landing in Lesbos who turned to his father and asked, “Are ISIS here?”

I don’t doubt that is what the interpreter told Tim but I wonder if the translation was correct. It is widely acknowledged that most Syrian refugees are fleeing from Assad, who has been bombing his own citizens all over the country for several years. Most Syrians suffering terribly under Da’esh simply cannot flee, although those nearby may well have chosen to do so. In any case, the same question applies, “Why would British participation in the bombing make a useful contribution to the situation?”

Since the decision, I have read and listened to Tim and other Lib Dem MPs make other points. The UN Security Council resolution 2249 asked us to bomb, they say, so it’s legal.

Actually the resolution called upon: “Member states that have the capacity to do so to take all necessary measures, in compliance with international law, in particular with the United Nations Charter, as well as international human rights, refugee and humanitarian law, on the territory under the control of ISIL also known as Da’esh, in Syria and Iraq, to redouble and coordinate their efforts to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by ISIL also known as Da’esh as well as ANF, and all other individuals, groups, undertakings, and entities associated with Al Qaeda, and other terrorist groups, as designated by the United Nations Security Council ... and to eradicate the safe haven they have established over significant parts of Iraq and Syria;”

“All necessary measures” is well understood to include military action but neither specifies what kind of military action nor excludes other measures.

Of the five tests set by Tim Farron in a letter to the Times legality was only one and he picked up on the need for other measures: a wider diplomatic network including efforts towards a no-bomb zone; pressure on Gulf States for increased support; an exit strategy and post-ISIS plan; investigation into foreign funding for terrorists in the UK and increased acceptance of Syrian refugees.

LITTLE EVIDENCE

There is little or no evidence of any of these conditions having been met. A no-bomb zone is a non-starter since it would involve us in stopping Syrian and Russian planes flying over the zone. There is no sign of any pressure on Gulf states. According to David Davis in the Guardian, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states have a history of enabling financial support for any jihadi group that attacked the Shia – including Da’esh. Turkey has facilitated the sale of up to a billion dollars of Da’esh oil and held open the border for jihadi groups while their intelligence agency has supplied arms to jihadis in Syria.

The parliamentary debate revealed that there is no exit strategy and no post-ISIS plan. Cameron has made no concessions on accepting more refugees. Indeed when I saw these conditions I did not expect them to be fulfilled in time for the vote on bombing.

I was then flabbergasted when Tim announced “It is my judgement that, on balance, the five tests I set out have been met as best they can.” This is some new meaning of “as best they can” which I had not come across before, a euphemism for “hardly at all”.

I have heard one of our MPs (Chatham House rules, OK) repeatedly describe the choice in the vote as action or no action, as if only the item on the order paper counted as action, ignoring all the actions our own five tests called for. There could be useful military action such as cutting off Da’esh supply lines through Saudi Arabia and up the Euphrates River into Syria and lines through Turkey. We could help the Kurds and Iraqi Government in Baghdad cut Da’esh lines to Mosul. Why was this not on the order paper? Because it can’t be done without diplomatic pressure on Gulf states, Turkey, and Russia. Oh yes, that was included in our tests, wasn’t it?

Two other arguments were advanced on the decision. “This isn’t the same as Iraq in 2003”. Well, it isn’t the same as Suez in 1956 either but that is not an argument for supporting it. The fact that other decisions to fight were made on bad grounds doesn’t mean that this one isn’t also. Indeed, Cameron imitated Blair’s absurd 45 minutes claim with his own declaration that 70,000 soldiers stand ready in Syria to fight Da’esh on the ground. Actually the Syria decision does have something in common with the Iraq one

in 2003: there is no political endgame and no military plan to achieve it.

The second argument caused hollow laughter in my household. We must respond because “our strongest ally, France, has asked us to”. Quoi? Zut alors! When has any British politician previously described France as our strongest ally? Certainly not the Tories. Of course if France had invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, we would be obliged to help. This article commits each member state to consider an armed attack against one member state, in Europe or North America, to be an armed attack against them all. It has been invoked once by the USA after 11 September 2001. France did not invoke it and, thank goodness, nor has Turkey yet. The USA used to be described as our closest ally and in the 1960s was desperate for the UK to fight in Vietnam. Fortunately Harold Wilson was prime minister and not Tony Blair and we kept out. OK, France is an ally and has suffered a terrible attack in Paris but that of itself does not explain why British planes bombing Syria is the answer.

What it does explain is the timing of the vote. Cameron knew he could get a majority in the aftermath of the Paris shootings. As Matthew Parris wrote in the Times, the bombs-away brigade were on auto-pilot. He added: “There is no right time for an unwise decision,” but of course there is a right time to call a vote in the Commons.

How then did our minuscule parliamentary party reach this decision? First, let’s remember that Norman Lamb and Mark Williams voted against the motion. From what I can discover the line entitled on the party’s website “Liberal Democrat position on Syria” is no such thing. A meeting of defence and foreign affairs spokesmen and their much reduced staff from Lords and Commons decided the line and MPs were invited but not whipped to support it.

In a Liberal Democrat Voice poll 67% of respondents opposed bombing. A YouGov poll showed 43% of LibDem voters for bombing and 39% against.

As everyone acknowledged this was a hard decision, perhaps the very occasion for our hard-pressed MPs to consult the wider party. Apparently, I’m told, the party does not have the resources to consult its members, so only to send out repeated demands for money then? Also, it was argued, there wasn’t time – only 48 hours between the tabling of the motion and the vote. We know the Commons is an archaic and executive-dominated assembly but this issue was rumbling for weeks before that motion.

Of course, as a party we have democratic mechanisms for establishing policy. Tim could have consulted the Federal Policy Committee but he didn’t. He could have taken the advice of the International Relations Committee but he didn’t. It’s a hard life for a group of eight MPs in Westminster. The speaker rarely calls them; the media don’t invite them; the public doesn’t know who they are or care very much. During the coalition years many of us experienced the scorn of the

“Actually the Syria decision does have something in common with the Iraq one in 2003: there is no political endgame and no military plan to achieve it”

army of special advisers and other bright young things who surrounded and protected our ministers and MPs from the demands of the amateurs, the voluntary party. We were told we didn’t understand real politics, we didn’t know how government works; they knew what was best.

OPTIONAL EXTRA

Now if ever is the time for parliamentarians not to treat the thousands of members, new and old, as

an optional extra, as an afterthought to be consulted when resources allow. Now is the time to learn that we are the resources. Our party is full of experienced people from all walks of life. If Tim goes on ignoring members, he will soon have fewer to ask.

I am not a pacifist but I do set a high bar for military action. I am not a Christian but I follow the doctrine of the just war. War is a great evil and should only be undertaken to overcome a greater evil. The means used must be proportional to the objective. Those turning to war to overcome evil must have a reasonable chance of success, otherwise as Yeats says: “Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere The ceremony of innocence is drowned;”

No-one can deny that Da’esh is great evil and that war will be needed (and other things) to overcome it. Our few bombers are not proportionate to the end and, worse, the end is undefined. I see no chance of success in this action. No doubt Hilary Benn is pleased that we are “doing our bit” but this is not the Desert War against Rommel; it’s not the 1940s.

No-one has made the case for this former imperial power to dive into the quarrels of the Middle East. There are not two sides here - good and bad - but a maelstrom of conflicting forces, none of which are friendly to British interests. There is neither a moral imperative nor a pragmatic necessity to bomb. If we must drop something, let it be food and medicine. Otherwise, not in my name.

David Grace is a member of the Liberator Collective

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REASSEMBLING SYRIA

Susan Simmonds looks at how likely peace can be in a fractured country beset by numerous powerful armed groups

Requiring the government to “be absolutely clear what Iraq and Syria would look post ISIL” was a high bar to set —and frankly impossible given the number of variables including an assumption that IS could be removed in any short term timeframe.

However, the principle of requiring the government to have some accountable strategy was correct after the lessons learned in Iraq. Since the vote has taken place, the UN Security Council approved a resolution endorsing a road map for a Syrian peace process with a show of unity among the major powers with a timeline for a ceasefire and elections.

The idea of a ceasefire is though deeply optimistic and there are two serious areas of concern with the expectations that the Vienna process will end the Syrian civil war.

The first is that it does not provide enough incentives to the armed opposition factions to take part in the process and secondly, it relies on agreements made between international power brokers who are independent from the demands of both pro and anti regime Syrian factions.

Either of these issues is enough on its own for the process to fail. The lack of incentives is a problem which currently falls under three major issues – firstly the future of Assad, secondly who represents the opposition and thirdly there is still considerable appetite for conflict among a wide range of actors.

The military actions of both the US and Russia in Syria have demonstrated that they support conflicting outcomes, however they managed to agree a deal on the text of the resolution – in part because the resolution does not prescribe the future of Assad’s presidency.

The Syrian government has made its position clear by saying that it will participate in any process where Syrians will determine their choices through dialogue under the Syrian leadership and not foreign intervention. The opposition will start to find common ground – but it will be a tough process

DEEPLY DIVIDED

The most fundamental challenge for the opposition is that they have no single unifying voice which can speak for them. They are deeply divided around critical issues for the future and character of the Syrian state, most fundamentally the competing opposition visions of a democratic and pluralistic state or an Islamic state based on Islamic Law.

While these divisions within the opposition cannot be resolved, creating a coherent alliance with some common ground who can engage in negotiations with the regime will be a start towards the peace process – currently the one issue is that Assad can play no part in the future of Syria.

The opposition know this – over 100 representatives met in Saudi Arabia in December. The participants

signed an outcome document which reiterated that Assad should leave power at the start of any transitional period and elected former Syrian prime minister (for six weeks in 2012) and staunch Assad loyalist Riad Hijab to lead the High Negotiating Committee.

The fighting will get worse before any cease fire is able to take place.

However, despite my personal optimism about the capacity of the opposition to engage, the agendas of particular armed groups will drive them to attempt to escalate the fighting to increase their presence to leverage their influence in the peace talks. However, no side is able to secure a clear military victory and sadly there is still some appetite for conflict as armed groups expand and contract.

The longer the conflict continues, the stronger an institutionalised war economy becomes which will give emerging warlords, militia leaders and criminal networks a vested interest in continuing the conflict despite the best efforts of the opposition. It may be that ensuring ‘Somalia-isation’ does not take hold is where any “boots on the ground” from regional powers have to focus.

There will be a major row over the elections. The UN has set a very challenging timetable for elections – within 18 months from the date of the resolution and under their supervision. While elections and this timetable are to be welcomed, I suspect there will be a ‘rush to vote’ in an attempt to allow the elections to resolve a myriad of fundamental issues that the opposition are not able to resolve by negotiation.

This raises the stakes and the international community needs to take considerable care that the elections don’t set up the Syrian state to fail.

Assuming that a sustainable peace process is in place as a prerequisite to any credible election being held, probably the most challenging issue is the notice that the UN has given that the electorate will include the Syrian diaspora.

While out-of-country voting (OCV) is a well-established process; the Syrian diaspora currently stands at somewhere between four and eight million depending on your sources.

I’m not aware of an election that has included a diaspora as large - according to the Iraq High Election Commission; they had registered 785,000 OCVs for the Council of Representatives election in April 2015. Assad has already indicated that he will oppose this move as he sees it as an attempt by the international community to fix the election and ensure he is deposed.

Assad is almost certainly right in terms of outcome. His expectation that he will be part of the elections despite the explicit negotiating positions of many opposition elements is an uncertain assumption.

Free and fair elections which include the diaspora would almost certainly see Assad lose – assuming that the opposition elements would take any part

in an election where he is included. While it would be an error to assume that the entire diaspora vote would support the opposition, it is a reasonable assumption to make that those who left because of Assad would not be keen to see him remain in power.

There are also legitimate concerns around process for OCV, in particular the control of electoral spending and ensuring that messaging of candidates does not incite violence or use undue influence.

Assad has already started to exploit these fears to undermine the legitimacy of the election with the inevitable consequences that the election process - whether Assad is included or not - could struggle to have the credibility that it should.

KURDISH RECOGNITION

The Kurds will want some recognition. The Kurds will almost certainly want to negotiate some recognition for taking on a significant role in containing the military expansion of IS. This could be an autonomous region but a minimum demand is likely to be some influence in the Syrian parliament. The current Syrian constitution prohibits the formation of political parties on the basis of regional identity which will proscribe the setting up of a specifically Kurdish party.

The lessons of the reconstruction of Iraq have been learnt and the privatisation of the reconstruction of Syria will not take place.

But two absolutely key areas need to be explored before the elections. The first is a strategic reconstruction plan underwritten by the international community for Syria so that parties and candidates in the election have some idea of what the future looks like and can develop effective programs for government on the basis of this.

Without such a plan, the risks of unattainable promises in manifestos raise the stakes of the elections failing to create a stable Syrian state.

According to the UNDP, four in every five Syrians lived in poverty in 2014 – most acute in the governorates which experienced intensive conflict. The unemployment rate increased from 14.9% in 2011 to 57.7% by the end of 2014. The population has fallen from nearly 21m in 2010 to 17.65m by the end of 2014 and will have fallen further since then. At least seven million people live in Syria as internally displaced persons. Any institutions which are supporting the candidates around developing governance capacities and programmes for government priorities need to work with these facts.

The second is how the international community can legitimately influence the shape of future Syrian institutions. Obviously the international community wants pluralistic and democratic institutions signed up to human rights conventions with protections for minorities and equality for women. The nature of some of the demands from the opposition means that there may have to be serious compromises.

“The longer the conflict continues, the stronger an institutionalised war economy becomes which will create vested interests in continuing the conflict”

IS will be degraded in Iraq and Syria but not destroyed. There seems to be a consensus building among some commentators that IS is in a more vulnerable position than it was a year ago. IS has lost territory and key personnel in both Iraq and Syria but the recent expansions of their attack zones means the situation is not straightforward.

Some ground has been reclaimed in Iraq, but the situation is still fluid and IS is demonstrating that it

still has military capacity in areas which the Iraqi army has claimed to have regained. While the Iraqi army should continue to make progress this year and possibly attempt to retake Fallujah; unless there is a cataclysmic weakening in IS ranks they will retain Mosul but possibly lose Aleppo to Syrian forces.

Affiliates in Libya and Pakistan have expanded their attack zones and this gives IS resilience outside of their strongholds in Iraq and Syria. They are also expanding their influence in traditional Al-Qaida areas in Afghanistan and Yemen.

Whatever negotiations and elections preparations take place, it will do so against the background of IS continuing to hold significant areas of territory and others where they are vulnerable to the ISIS narrative and the instability this brings.

The refugee flows to Europe will continue. Europe has opened its doors to desperate refugees fleeing Syria. The mass movement of people shows few signs of slowing down and any Syrian refugee who can muster the resources will inevitably attempt to get to Europe, rather than living a marginalised life in the countries surrounding Syria or waiting in a camp for the conflict to end.

As of November 2015, there were more than 800,000 Syrian asylum applications lodged in Europe with an estimated one million people who had already fled. There are nearly four million refugees registered in Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon according to UNHCR – and the likelihood is high that many of them are still planning to come to Europe.

The positive leadership from Germany is now becoming more nuanced as the realities of integrating such a substantial number of refugees are becoming clear. Tensions will inevitably build, but must be hoped that these will be managed in a way which will not prevent the further acceptance of more refugees.

All of this has demonstrated that the EU asylum process is irrevocably broken and one would hope that this was an opportunity to create an effective system of burden sharing. However Europe needs to prepare for two things; for further large refugee flows - potentially from Libya as IS create instability in a very fragile state - and preparing people who want to return to a hopefully democratic Syria.

Susan Simmonds, a member of Mitcham & Morden Liberal Democrats, has worked on election projects in Iraq and was in Irbil during the attempted ISIS attack on the city

BACK TO THE PAVEMENTS

For a Liberal Democrat fightback the party must learn both from its own past and the Tories campaign techniques, says Peter Chegwyn

In his excellent article in *Liberator* 375 Nick Harvey identified numerous faults with Liberal Democrat campaign tactics and messaging during the coalition years and asked “what difference a better strategy would have made”, adding: “It may just be that we were simply fucked anyway.”

Maybe. But as well as learning from our own campaign mistakes (and those of Labour), we should also learn from what the Conservatives did right in 2015. And we should also learn lessons from past electoral debacles and their aftermath as we seek to re-build and start winning elections again.

After all, we've been here twice before. In the 1970 general election the then Liberal Party came close to electoral wipe-out winning just six seats. The party fared little better in 1979 at the end of the Lib-Lab Pact winning just 11 seats. Yet on both occasions we were winning spectacular victories in parliamentary by-elections just a couple of years later and, through effective local campaigning and the practice of the new ‘community politics’, we also made great progress in local government, often in areas that never came remotely close to electing a Liberal MP.

Almost one year on from the 2015 general election there are few signs of a Lib Dem fightback nationally. The party claims 20,000 new members (a claim disputed in some quarters) but most constituencies have far fewer members, activists and councillors than they did in 2010.

Tim Farron and his seven MP colleagues struggle to get any coverage in a national media that regards the Liberal Democrats as being largely irrelevant now. Party HQ is laying off staff and in the one parliamentary by-election so far, Oldham West and Royton, we polled just 3.7% despite us having an excellent candidate and a decent campaign in a constituency where we polled 20% in 2005 and 2010.

Clearly we cannot rely on spectacular parliamentary by-election victories to revitalise our fortunes nationally. Even if we had a by-election this year in a constituency like Eastleigh, would we win it? Is the party still employing anyone with the campaign experience and expertise required to win an election when the odds are stacked against you?

Leaving aside all the other issues surrounding Lord Rennard, what a tragedy it is that our most successful campaigner of the past 30 years has been sidelined and told that his campaigning skills are no longer wanted. It's the equivalent of the Conservatives dispensing with the services of Lynton Crosby. How the Conservatives and Labour must be laughing.

As we enter 2016 with the party stuck on around 6% in the polls and with the prospect of heavy defeats in the police commissioner and London mayoral elections ahead, if there is to be a Liberal Democrat fightback

this year it is going to have to be from the grass-roots upwards and it is going to have to start with local government successes.

To achieve local government success in the future we should perhaps look back at how we built our local government base in the past. It is worth dusting down and reading again the 1970s Tony Greaves and Gordon Lishman publication *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics* as well as some of the ALC (as it then was) campaign pamphlets from the 1970s and 1980s.

From what I see of campaign literature being produced across the country now, it strikes me that the quality of design is far superior to that of the past (as it should be given we all have computers and desk top publishing packages now instead of scissors, paste and Letraset) but, and it's a big but, the leaflets are not as effective at conveying a clear, distinctive and popular message as they were in times past.

Recent academic research by former party campaigns officer turned academic James Ault shows that party support increases by more than 50% if people recall receiving six or more leaflets from the party. But for people to recall receiving our leaflets, the leaflets need to catch their eye and contain clear messages that they remember.

STILL TOXIC

We need to improve our messaging. We need to recognise that our national image is not great right now. There are few votes to be gained from the Liberal Democrat name or through campaigning on purely national issues, even less to be gained by reminding people of the coalition, policies such as the pupil premium, or Nick Clegg (still toxic). But there is a huge amount to be gained from going ‘back to basics’ and re-establishing our reputation for hard work in our local communities. In short, we should start practising community politics again.

In many areas we still enjoy respect and support at a local level from people who have stopped supporting us nationally. By practising community politics all-year-round, and not just at election time, by campaigning on the issues that really matter to our potential supporters, by working within local communities and helping people to help themselves, we can gain the respect and support which can gain us local, if not national, electoral success.

And we have one big issue to campaign on this year which we've not easily been able to campaign on while part of the coalition. Public spending cuts. Cuts that are going to decimate public services including police, fire, health and local government. Cuts by the Conservative government and both Labour and Conservative councils that will hit hard those services which the public value most. S.O.S. - Save

Our Services. It's our job to defend those services which the public want and which both Conservative and Labour politicians seek to cut.

We should campaign to protect public services from Conservative (and Labour) cuts and we should keep repeating a clear and effective message. In my area (Gosport) Conservative cuts are responsible for our police station closing, our fire cover reducing, and our ambulance station closing. We now include photos of the police, fire and ambulance stations on all our leaflets with the headings 'Going', 'Going', 'Gone'. As some people have swallowed the Tory line that spending cuts are necessary for our economy to recover (a good example of effective Conservative messaging) we include a line saying: "We all know that in a recession savings have to be made but when the Conservatives are hitting our police, fire and health services, Conservative cuts have gone too far." It strikes a chord with the public.

As the SDP taught us in the early 1980s, it's always worth including a 'Three Things To Remember' box on leaflets, summarising your key messages in simple language: We're good, our main opponents are not, and none of the others can win. As Paddy once said to me before he became an MP: "You know you're winning when people talk to you on the doorsteps in 'Focus-speak' repeating your own messages back to you."

Effective messaging is crucial. As Nick Harvey noted in his Liberator article, the Conservative message about Labour and the SNP was devastatingly effective in the general election, far more than any Lib Dem message. How long, I wonder, before we see a caricature of Vladimir Putin with Jeremy Corbyn in his pocket?

The Conservatives spent a fortune in the general election on identifying the key concerns of swing voters in target seats. They then bombarded them with emails, phone calls and leaflets talking about the issues that concerned them most.

While helping Adrian Sanders in Torbay I came across a full-colour glossy leaflet addressed to 'Brenda' in which every article was personalised - "Are you concerned about your pension Brenda?" etc. It's hard for us to match such sophisticated and targeted campaigning although targeted advertising on social media is relatively cheap. As Nick Harvey also said: "The Tories chucked big money around [but] the impact is only so great when conveying a message which really works."

DEVASTATING EFFECT

I believe we have a great opportunity to re-build our strength at a local level by presenting 'a message which really works' on the devastating effect that Conservative (and Labour) cuts will have on vital and valued public services.

I also believe that as the Tories implode over Europe, as Labour divide over Corbyn, and as Ukip continue to decline in local polls, we can seize the initiative,

"If there is to be a Liberal Democrat fightback this year it is going to have to be from the grass-roots upwards and it is going to have to start with local government successes"

re-discover our campaigning zeal and present a clear and effective message that only we can be trusted to speak up for local people and defend local services from Conservative and Labour cuts.

It's not rocket science. It's something we can all do. Challenge the Conservatives on their cuts for which they alone are now responsible. If they put up the council tax as well as cutting services, use their own past 'Double Whammy' slogan back at them, accusing them of higher taxes for lower services, "they

charge you more, they give you less", etc. Effective messaging repeated at every opportunity.

It would be helpful if someone at party HQ could start producing useful campaign materials instead of a succession of boring "wasn't it better when we were in government" press releases, which no sensible local campaigner ever uses. It might also be worth the ALDC looking afresh at the campaign materials they produce, whether their artwork is used as much as it used to be, and if not, why not. But even if they don't there is no reason why local campaigners cannot develop an effective local message which resonates with local voters.

Of course we should embrace new technology and new campaign techniques. But sometimes the old ways are best. Effective campaigning and messaging on the issues that matter most to local people, community politics practised all-year-round, can bring us the same success in 2016 and beyond as it did pre-2010.

Nick Harvey may have been right that "we were simply fucked anyway". Well, now in 2016 it's time for us to shaft the Conservatives (and Labour) in the same way that they shafted us.

Peter Chegwyn is leader of the Liberal Democrat Group on Gosport Borough Council and a former full-time party agent, and winner of 18 of 19 council elections he's contested since 1979

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POWER OF THE GUN OWNERS

America's easy access to firearms baffles Europeans. It led to a massacre in Christine Graf's own town

Years ago we were staying at a hotel in Chicago and happened to have the TV on. It was a superannuated Hilton, a bit grubby, past its prime. I was half asleep, not really paying attention when the announcer mentioned "mass murder in Iowa town" which grabbed our attention.

The town he named was ours, Algona, a sleepy and unremarkable village of about 6,000. Then the commercial break cut in and we sat there shocked: who was it, were any of our friends or acquaintances hurt, what exactly had happened?

It seemed like a very long intermission before the broadcast started up again, and we heard the name "Dreesman" and, I'm not proud to say it, were relieved that we did not know the people who had been the town's wealthiest family.

Back home a few days later, we found out more about the murders when we talked with Marian, our neighbour; she had been to school with Mr Dreesman's daughter, Marilyn, who with her three young children and her elderly parents had been gunned down by Robert, her mentally unstable brother that afternoon in late December.

According to our neighbour, Marilyn had come to Iowa from Hawaii to celebrate Christmas with her parents. She had confided to Marian that she knew she could handle Robert - what preoccupied her was the challenge of selecting good universities for her children. Now there would be no future at all for them.

We learned that Mr and Mrs Dreesman were quite aware that their son had problems and that they had tried to do their best for him. They had worried about him for years - sometimes Agnes, we heard, would leave her house and sleep on a cot in the local Congregational Church because she felt unsafe at home with her son.

But like many Iowans, the family still kept guns in their house, and on that December day Robert went to the local hardware store on Main Street, bought ammunition for his hunting rifle, and, as the family was sitting down to lunch, turned the gun on them and then on himself.

Soon afterwards I spoke to an acquaintance at church whose husband, a policeman, had been one of the first on the scene of the carnage. "it was so horrible it didn't seem real," she reported, "Worse than any horror movie. That's what kept Tom going. It just didn't seem as if what he saw in front of him could possibly be true."

In the US many people you meet will know someone, or know of someone, who has been gunned down for no reason. In 2013 alone, 33,169 deaths in the US were related to firearms. Being the president surrounded by secret service agents is no guarantee of safety: we

all know about the assassination of John Kennedy, but how many are aware of the failed assassination attempts against Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Gerald Ford? Ronald Reagan, critically wounded in 1981 from such an attempt, was the only US president to have survived being wounded while in office.

GAG RULE

The power of the National Rifle Association (NRA) is hard to comprehend.

Knowing that their jobs are always vulnerable, politicians are loath to upset the NRA with its millions of members, and have even imposed limits on Americans' freedom to criticise the gun culture. Responding to an American Medical Association recommendation that physicians caution the parents of young children about the dangers of keeping guns in the home, the Florida legislature passed what has become known as the 'Gag Rule', making such conversations illegal. Eleven other states have followed Florida's lead.

After the murders last June of Rev Clementa Pinckney and eight parishioners at Emmanuel AME church in Charleston, South Carolina, Charles Cotton, a longtime board member of the NRA, wrote that Mr Pinckney was partly to blame for the tragedy: when serving as a state senator he had voted against a 2011 bill that would have legalised people bringing their guns into church.

Joel is a friend; he's an intelligent man in his early 60s, retired from the factory where he used to work. Sometimes he comes around and fixes things for us.

He is also a staunch Republican and supporter of the Second Amendment rights (to keep arms), and like many of his former co-workers, suspects that Obama might try to take them away. (Gun sales have soared under the first African-American president). Joel tells us, "I respect your [anti-gun] position", but adds that we and everybody else would be safer if we owned guns.

There are a number of reasons why Americans like Joel have a passion for guns. Probably the one you might hear most often is for self protection. People feel safer, they say, if the stranger walking towards them thinks that they might have a gun, too. Guns may fill a deep psychological need, especially for men who don't feel sufficiently respected. It's also a common belief that there's a sexual component to gun ownership.

It is true that some of the cities with the highest homicide crime rates have the most stringent gun control laws. Chicago is one such place. Washington DC is another. This is understandable since the problems there are obvious and people are more willing

to accept extreme solutions. The gun culture tells us that more guns make everyone safer. The only solution, they say, is to have a good person with a gun confronting a bad person with a gun. Many people believe this to be true, but it's hard to believe that a city like Chicago would be better off if more and younger gang members had access to sophisticated weapons.

In the US it's quite easy to buy a firearm, even for people on the terrorist watch lists, people with Alzheimer's, young people, mentally unstable sorts. They only have to go to the ubiquitous gun shows. Even easier is buying a weapon from a friend or even a stranger. In any case, many guns are stolen, not purchased.

In 2012 an unarmed 17 year-old, Trayvon Martin, was fatally shot on his trip back from getting candy and tea at a local store near his uncle's place in Florida.

The man who shot him, George Zimmerman, did not go to jail for murdering the black teenager, because Florida has a "Stand Your Ground" law that entitles any citizen to use deadly force if he feels threatened.

Our state, Minnesota, would have such a law today had we not had a liberal governor, Mark Dayton, who vetoed it against the wishes of the Republican-controlled legislature.

Right now Americans are obsessed with terrorism. Many applaud Donald Trump when he talks about keeping Muslims out of the country. They disregard the statistics: Their chance of dying at the hands of a terrorist is three-to-four times less than the chance of being struck by lightning. It is considerably less than the chance of being murdered by another American.

In an article in Forbes, Dan Diamond quoted the statistics on the leading causes of death in the US. 11,000 people were murdered last year, a third

"It's hard to believe that a city like Chicago would be better off if more and younger gang members had access to sophisticated weapons"

of the 33,000 killed by guns. Many of the gun-related deaths were suicides, and many, including those of young children, were caused by accident. In fact toddlers, children between the ages of one and three, Diamond pointed out, are more liable to die from firearms than in car accidents.

MASS KILLING

Every time a mass killing occurs the usual routines are followed: politicians express concern, there's talk of thoughts and prayers for the afflicted families, and editorials appear about the need for putting more money into mental health services. The NRA routinely cites mental illness and the actions of career criminals as causes of gun-related deaths. But the Iowa family, the Dreesmans, used their financial resources to make sure that their son had long-term help from therapists, kindly, understanding professionals who tried to help him make something of his life. The sad thing is that he also had access to a gun.

Recently President Obama has decided on executive action to impose background checks and other measures to restrict gun violence. In an emotional speech he recalled the killing of 20 first grade children, mostly six year-olds, at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown Connecticut, mentioning that at around the same time a disturbed man had tried to kill "a bunch of children" in China.

He added: "Most of them survived because he didn't have . . . a powerful weapon." The US has too many of these weapons, and worse still, too many politicians who will side with the gun industry that produces them instead of with the people who are their victims. In the few days since Obama's speech, we hear, gun sales have soared.

Christine Graf is an American correspondent for Liberator

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IT'S THE NHS THAT NEEDS SURGERY

New funding options should be explored as the health and social care services face existential threats from funding cuts and rising demand, says Claire Tyler

These are challenging times for the population's health and the health care system, trying simultaneously to come to terms with an ageing population, many more people living with long-term conditions, rising demand and expectations, breakthroughs in medical science leading to new treatments, as well as major public health challenges linked to obesity, smoking and lack of exercise. The list goes on.

The impact of poverty and other social determinants of poor health such as education and poor housing can, and should, never be underestimated. As some commentators have noted, this near-existential crisis of the health and care sector has brought some services close to breaking point.

What is abundantly clear is that it is time for our health and social care sector to undergo surgery.

The NHS efficiency and productivity improvements currently being driven through are being pushed to their limits and will not close the projected £30bn funding gap by 2020. At best, they are like sticking a plaster to a health and care system that needs major surgery. For a sustainable and long-term approach, we must devise a totally new model of integrated health and social care – one that moves away from institutions to integrated systems of care which are place and community based.

I think we all understand that the NHS is not simply a public good. For some it is a national treasure - the jewel in crown of our public realm. For me that's too misty eyed - the NHS has a lot that is wrong with it including some deep seated cultural attitudes that militate against change and transparency, a failure to put the patient at the centre of things and the dismal way that staff - from doctors to porters - are treated so they don't feel valued. But, as any survey will tell you, the NHS is a top public priority and there are very good reasons for that. It's also worth remembering that NHS and social care spending already accounts for around £1 in every £5 of government spending.

The current health funding gap already sounds like a huge figure but is actually simply the start of the story. According to the Health Foundation over the next 15 years, pressures on the NHS are projected to increase by £59bn, but over the same period GDP is expected to increase by almost £800bn. So, as the GDP grows, health and social care should take a larger share of the much larger cake, or so argued the Barker Commission (Commission on the Future of Health and Social Care in England.)

Indeed that commission, which reported in November 2014, called for a new health and social care settlement

with a single budget and joint commissioning. It also recommended that the country should be spending some 11-12% of GDP by 2025 in line with other developed countries – substantially more than the current 8.4% of GDP we spend. It staggers me is not just that we will be spending a smaller GDP share on health care than Germany and France were spending in 2012, but that we are spending only half of what the US Government is spending (16.4% of GDP) according to recent OECD figures.

DEAFENING SILENCE

No wonder there has been a deafening silence from Government since the Barker Commission reported – indeed forcing the commission to issue a statement in November 2015 lamenting the lack of any formal response to what I regard as a very serious and well respected piece of work.

Was it, I speculate, because the report largely rejects new NHS charges and private insurance options in favour of public funding? Indeed the report contained an interesting analysis of other ways of increasing public funding through taxation, including national insurance, and benefit changes of which more later on.

So what actually has the government done? Well, it did start to address the issue in the 2015 Spending Review by committing to an £8bn increase of the NHS funding by 2020-21. So that leaves some £22bn to be found from efficiency and productivity improvements. The government is putting its faith in the recent report by Lord Carter recommending ways of improving operational productivity of hospitals and across the wider NHS system. This is meant to happen at the same time as making improvements to the quality of care, introducing seven day services and putting a much needed greater focus on prevention. While these are laudable aims frankly one would have to be living in cloud cuckoo land to think that this will all happen simultaneously given the huge and growing pressures in the system.

While the chancellor's decision to front-load £3.8bn of the NHS England funding is welcome, the 2015 Spending Review measures simply won't be anything like enough to close the funding gap in health and social care.

Yes, the £8bn funding will stabilise the NHS services in the short term, but much of it is likely to be absorbed in addressing the growing deficits facing NHS trusts and foundation trusts (certainly according to the National Audit Office) and additional pension costs. Critically, it will allow neither the implementation of the seven-day services requirement nor the investment in much needed new care models.

We also need to understand where this £8bn promised to the NHS is coming from. Cuts to other parts of the Department of Health total budget will clearly have knock-on implications for the NHS. So the fact that other health spending, including in such critical areas as public health, education and training and capital is expected to fall by more than £3bn is troubling indeed. A clear case of robbing Peter to pay Paul if ever I saw one.

To me, and I'm sure many Lib Dems, it's absolutely critical that the additional money does not come at the expense of funding for mental health or indeed social care – something I have been consistently fighting for in the Lords.

For example, the Coalition pledged a much needed transformation in mental health services with almost a £1bn investment, something I feel is one of our proudest achievements in Coalition. Curiously the prime minister, who has previously been notable for his silence on mental health, made much of this government's commitment in January by re-announcing the money already pledged before the election, re-packaged as part of a wider announcement on parenting and family support, poverty and life chances and support for run down housing estates.

NOISE AND SPIN

Sadly despite all of the noise and spin, the Spending Review still does not anything like address the fundamental disparity between the ways physical and mental health care are funded and delivered. There is simply so much more to be done in this area as Norman Lamb's recent cross party Equality 4 Mental Health campaign so clearly demonstrates.

The funding gap also does not allow for the additional costs generated by the new national minimum wage nor the implementation of the cap on social care costs as a result of the 2014 Care Act – shamefully now delayed by this Government until 2020. Despite the new powers to raise council tax by up to 2% to spend on social care (which would disadvantage deprived areas with low tax bases) and the additional money through the Better Care Fund, it's the worst kept secret in Westminster that the social care system is on the brink of collapsing. Even worse, the budget is expected to fall over the next five years. On the ground, according to the NHS Confederation, 99% of NHS leaders said social care cuts are increasing the pressures on the NHS.

I do sense a growing consensus about the unsustainability of the current system and the need and indeed appetite for a new vision and new care models.

The NHS England Five Year Forward View - authored by NHS England chief executive Simon Stevens - has a lot of important things to say about new and more joined-up models of care. In essence these new models are fundamentally about abolishing long-standing boundaries between GPs and hospitals, between physical and mental health, between health and social care, and a far greater join-up with community services, preventative services and public

"It's the worst kept secret in Westminster that the social care system is on the brink of collapsing"

health. And finally much better public engagement.

As the Barker review made plain, commissioning health and social care separately simply does not make any sense; better integration would ensure that fewer people need to be admitted to hospital in the first place and stay for shorter periods

of time when they do because there is good social care available to look after them in their homes.

We are already seeing this happening in Manchester and Birmingham as part of the regional devolution push and I hope to see a lot more as devolution really kicks in. The last thing anyone wants is another "top down reorganisation" to achieve the vital integration and reconfiguration of services.

A smaller scale but interesting example of this approach is happening in Greenwich, where a pioneering integrated care model in early stages has already seen a reduction of 5% in community health expenditure, critically combined with fewer emergency admissions and fewer people moving permanently into nursing care homes.

It's going to be vital to harness public acceptance of these new integrated models of care. This will mean much better informed and more grown up approaches to public engagement of the type that Healthwatch Cumbria have recently instigated to support a major configuration of services.

We simply can't go on applying more sticking plaster to a broken system. Norman Lamb has proposed the creation of an independent cross-party commission on the future of the health and social care system to report its conclusions to Parliament. This has been supported by two former secretaries of state for health and chief executives of more than 40 charities. I strongly support this move as part of a long-term solution to these intractable issues.

As Norman has said, this work needs to explore the various tax and fiscal options as part of the solution to the funding gap – something politicians of all-stripes have long shied away from.

There are plenty of options and combinations to look at including a hypothecated tax for health and social care which would show up on people's pay slips, income tax, national insurance, VAT and what the recent Health Foundation report have called 'sin taxes'.

All have pluses and minuses and careful work is needed on the distributional impact of any such approach, including the age profile. I don't think the entire burden of any increase in tax can come fall solely on those of working age. And we certainly shouldn't leave out of the equation changing current planning assumptions about creating a fiscal surplus - a key pillar of George Osborne's current economic policy.

Claire Tyler is Liberal Democrat mental health spokesperson in the House of Lords

LET'S BE 'AVIN' YOU IN NEIGHBOURHOODS

Police cuts are damaging community safety in London, but not as badly as in Scotland's authoritarian and misguided centralisation, says Wendy Kyrle-Pope

We had been warned that cuts of between 25% and 40% were inevitable, but, in his Autumn Statement, George Osborne left the policing budget as it was, a zero increase, but no more actual cuts.

In London, the proposed mayor's budget for 2016-17 shows a tiny increase of 1%, and guarantees at least one police officer and one police community support officer (PCSO) in each ward.

"Paris saved us, most likely" was what I said to a PCSO who, like the rest of the 600 plus in London, had been expecting a P45 for Christmas. Doubtless other constabularies will be adjusting theirs with the same sense of (however temporary) relief. The bottom line is that some elements of community policing are being retained, but far below the numbers we saw in the early 2000s and the heyday of safer neighbourhood policing.

So why does this matter? Crime figures in London are going down, and have been over the past decade (and that with another 5m souls inhabiting this country in the same period). It matters because community policing is one of the main reasons crime has been falling. The dedicated safer neighbourhood teams in London had got to know their wards, the good and the bad and the vulnerable, and used this knowledge to reduce a great deal of the less serious crime, and some of the more serious by raising awareness of ways to prevent crime.

It is the combination of local knowledge, local connections and local ownership of a ward, by both the police officers and the residents, that has brought such improvements in London.

The Age of Austerity is upon us and all our public services. Despite the respite of the Autumn Statement, more cuts in the Metropolitan Police Service are inevitable, some in the form of amalgamations of borough commands (each London borough has its own command unit, which works with the council and other agencies to make each borough unique and as bespoke for the needs of its citizens as possible, in keeping with its character), others in the form of sharing back room services, custody, forensics etc.

A mass of police property has already been sold off, including the iconic New Scotland Yard in Victoria. And although the mayor and the commissioner have promised that the number of police officers will remain the same (at around 32,000), many of these will be new recruits.

Ease of communication with the police, now that most of the actual police stations have gone, is crucial. 999 call centres were reduced to three some years ago,

at Hendon, Bow and Lambeth, each with 'pods' which look after one borough or sometimes two smaller ones, the idea being that the operators are familiar with their borough's geography, crime hotspots and policing requirements. After a slightly rocky start, and the odd hiccup, this system seems to be working well.

TERRIBLE MISTAKE

But what the mayor, the commissioner and indeed the government must be wary of is cutting too far and amalgamating too much, because there is a very thin line between efficiency and losing the connections, the affinity which exists between the police and the people.

They would be wise to look north of the border and learn from the terrible mistake that Police Scotland has turned out to be.

The Police Service of Scotland was formed in 2013 out of the eight regional police forces. It is now the largest force in the UK after London, with 17,400 officers, and is the largest in terms of the area of its jurisdiction (which is all of Scotland and its islands, 30,414 square miles) and a population of 5.3m.

Even before its formation, serving officers, politicians, journalists and the most of the Scottish people were all aghast at what they felt was a one size being forced to fit all in a country of such differences and diversities.

How could the massive Highland Glens be policed in the same manner as parts of the East End of Glasgow? The difference in population density and diversity, types of crime and actual geography just for starters made the concept ridiculous. Even the logo or emblem, the cap badge, could not be agreed upon, and the service launched in April 2013 wearing the old one, which had to be reintroduced anyway, with minute changes, when the proposed new thistle on a stylised Saltire shield emblem was turned down by the country's Heraldic Court. A symbolically shambolic bad start, and, alas, a prescient one.

Communications with the police and the manner of how people are policed have made the headlines outside Scotland again and again.

Scotland's control centres (999) were to be reduced from 10 to three, and several disasters ensued, most tragically last summer when a young woman lay undiscovered next to her dead partner for three days in their crashed car, despite the fact that a report had been made to the police a few hours after the crash. This report had not been entered in the police system, apparently, and the injured woman died in hospital. Her doctors said that, had help come immediately, she would have survived. The independent investigation into the incident was not really independent because

it is carried out by the police themselves, and was already severely compromised before the start by its own chief constable, Stephen House, who publicly denounced a police systems operator, demonstrating a lack of judgement and crassness which one would not expect from someone in his position. He resigned at the end of 2015.

One chief constable, with one vision, for a whole nation, simply cannot work. Scotland has lost its reputation as a land robustly but fairly and appropriately policed. Stop-and-search is another example of a vision out of control, affecting all of Scotland, and attracting criticism from across the globe.

So many people have been stopped and searched in the last year, including 83 children under the age of 11, that United Nations human rights advisors said that Police Scotland's over enthusiastic deployment of stop-and-search was in danger of breaching international law.

Smaller forces can watch one another, and see what works where, and what does not. If an organisation which is basically about people, not manufacturing or technology, is too large, too corporate, it is in danger of losing sight of what is appropriate.

"We do not know who we are or where we are going next," a Tayside, sorry, Police Scotland officer in Dundee told me.

"Everything comes from the centre, and Dundee isn't Glasgow". The sense of belonging to the local community is still there, but officers feel hamstrung by the diktats on what is expected and feel they are losing the all-important discretionary powers that the warrant bestows. They also complain about the operators not knowing anything about the area, whether it is rural or urban, how long it takes to go from one place to another, or the feel for the everyday problems.

LOSS OF KNOWLEDGE

The Scottish public is similarly unimpressed by the amalgamations and loss of local knowledge. I was told of a farmer in very rural Dumfriesshire, out with his gun on a Sunday morning after rabbits, a ritual he performed most weeks. Someone saw him, dialled 999, and suddenly three vans full of armed police, plus Scotland's only extant police helicopter (the others all crashed, and this one is borrowed), descended on this peaceful backwater. The farmer had gone home by this time. A local operator and dispatcher would have considered the background and other more, likely, more local possibilities before sending in the big guns of counter terrorism and major response troops.

When he took up his post, the commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, fresh from Greater Manchester, had envisaged a London policed by five crack divisions, swooping on all manner of criminals in huge operation after even bigger operation, a Mancunian-style super force.

"If an organisation which is basically about people, not manufacturing or technology, is too large, too corporate, it is in danger of losing sight of what is appropriate"

However, the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime liked the borough system, it worked, and was suitable for London, and they prevailed. At about the same time, I gave the vote of thanks to him at a dinner where he had made a speech outlining his plans for London.

During my bit, I talked about the mystical union between the police and the people in London, based on community policing and face-to-face contact. This did not go down well and he probably thought I was mad, but, if I am, then so was the Nobel Prize winning economist Elinor Ostrom.

She came up with the very same thesis, but called it by the less fanciful term 'co-production', which is basically the indefinable co-operation between the police and the public.

As David Boyle recounts in his essay "Two Stories from the Second Dawn of Liberalism", her research done in the 1960s in Chicago found that the smaller police forces in the outer suburbs of Chicago were just as effective as the much larger force in Central Chicago.

The Chicago police asked Ostrom why their crime rate was rising when more money was being spent, there were more patrol cars, more police presence. Ostrom pointed to her research which showed that where officers stopped walking the beat and being seen by the people, patrolling in cars instead, those people believed that their involvement was no longer required, and the 'co-production' wilted away.

There may not be the money in this economic climate to throw at public services, however much it is needed. Technological advances do save time and money and manpower and ought to be utilised to their fullest extent, but, with policing, only officers on the ground, the same ground, close to their communities, can truly understand them, and have the knowledge both fact based and intuitive to make the difference. And if the outer Chicago suburbs are anything to go by, cheaply too.

Wendy Kyrle-Pope is a member of the Liberator Collective and has been an independent advisor for more than 20 years with the Metropolitan and British Transport Police and chaired the London Communities and Policing Partnership until last year

DOWN FROM A MOUNTAIN

Other parties have betrayed an agreement on free elections in Macedonia, explains Marjan Mihajlovski

Przino is a small urban area on the mountain Vodno in Macedonia's capital Skopje, very popular among local politicians and foreign ambassadors as a place of residence.

It was in this exclusive part of the Skopje that a new framework agreement with guidance and support of the European Union and USA as guarantors was signed and has taken its name.

The Przino Agreement was a dedication of the political leaders of four main parties in Macedonia: VMRO-DPMNE and DUI ruling coalition, SDSM and DPA - opposition parties for a set of measures that will lead to the early parliamentary election on 24 April.

In early January 2015, The leader of the SDSM in a dramatic press conference announced the biggest illegal intercepted communications scandal in Macedonia since the post independence referendum in 1991. More than 15,000 people from every walk of life, from politicians to ordinary citizens, were subject of illegal wiretapping by several government bodies.

The Liberal Party of Macedonia, as a progressive left liberal opposition force committed to defend individual freedoms, strongly condemned these illegal actions and asked those apparently responsible for this situation to answer before the law and for the resignation and bringing to justice of those responsible.

This was followed up with the idea of forming a Concentrative Government, to be initiated by the president and the assembly with the consultation of political parties. Something the Liberals had raised October 2014, many months before the crisis happened. This Concentrative Government should have mandate, minimum of one year, to prepare fair elections which will be in the end recognised by all involved parties and the international community.

In the meantime, on 17 May 2015, one of the biggest civil society protests in the history of Macedonia was launched on the streets. Several thousand people from all ethnicities, religions, NGOs and opposition political parties, including Liberals, raised their voice against the government ruling parties corrupt policies in every sphere of living from the illegal intercepted communications scandal, economy, to Government controlled media.

As a result of these protests during April-May, the European Commission recruited a group of independent senior rule of law experts to carry out a rapid analysis of the situation and provide recommendations to address these issues, which is popular known in the country as a Priebe's report, named after the head of this group retired commission director Reinhard Priebe.

Unfortunately, the Priebe report's recommendations as a major step towards free and fair democratic elections has been almost ignored, lost in the labyrinth of negotiations between the parties signatories.

In the midst of the scandal, in a Government

attempted damage limitation, and few senior ministers have resigned.

Liberals have constantly warned that it would be a crucial mistake if the Priebe Report's recommendations were not follow up immediately. Additionally it is essential that a properly conducted, externally, independently, supervised census be implemented before any date of an election is set.

Warnings came from not only the report but from experts, that if the deadlines are not respected then the whole process will be intimidated.

With the latest developments of the Przino Agreement, on 15 January, the international community lead by EU Commissioner Johannes Hahn, once again brought the four parties round a table to discuss postponing of the elections and resolving the voters list and media issue, which at the end saw opposition party SDSM rejected 24 April, as a election date, because all conditions previously set up within the agreement were not fulfilled.

From today's perspective, it is obvious from the implementation of the agreement that delaying of the elections for two or three months will not bring any substantial changes, neither in the voter's list, media, judiciary, police, caretaker government.

Neither will the special prosecutor be able to implement procedures in a timely manner because the Przino Agreement is already in a state of disarray and ruling parties are not fulfilling their obligations and the deadlines. As a result, fair and democratic elections cannot be organised for 24 April.

The Liberals are calling for this document to be deemed as void, party signatories should not be allowed to take decisions in the name of the majority of the citizens, and are reactivating idea of establishing of Concentrative Government.

Those who have made this crisis cannot solve it, therefore The Liberal Party of Macedonia, no matter when the elections will be held, should act independently and step aside from the four main parties.

The draft election programme is based on three themes: economy, organised state, youth and education.

While the Liberal Party has seen good support over that past years, particularly in the past 12 months, given the difficult times that Macedonia is going through, it has seen a huge rise in membership.

The new membership has come from people from a wide range of backgrounds, all, with one universal complaint, which is dissatisfaction with how the mainstream parties are running the country, and a wish, and realisation that it can be better, but only if, the voice of the real people is heard.

Marjan Mihajlovski is international secretary of Liberal Party of Macedonia

LINES ON A MAP

A lesson from Albania shows the dangers for Scotland of single party domination, says Gillian Gloyer

The structure of local government which democratic Albania inherited from its communist past was a patchwork of administrative units of hugely differing sizes. There were municipalities (bashkia) with healthy tax-bases, such as the capital city, Tirana, but there were many more small municipalities without any decent-sized businesses on which to levy rates.

Then there were over 300 'communes' (komuna), some of which, after 20 years of depopulation as their residents moved to seek work in the cities or abroad, had practically no people left, never mind businesses. Even the mayor and the councillors often lived elsewhere and travelled to 'their' commune only for council meetings or official duties. These rural authorities, although on a legal par with large municipalities, had no financial resources and no skilled staff. Almost everyone in Albania recognised that the system was completely dysfunctional and needed wholesale reform.

One might have hoped, therefore, that when the Socialist-led government initiated a review of local government structure in 2014, shortly after it came to power, broad agreement could have been reached. Regrettably, however, the polarisation which has plagued the country for the last 25 years came into play again. The main opposition, the Democratic Party, boycotted Parliament for five months, while the reform process was under way, and then complained that the boundaries of the new local government units had been drawn in order to maximise the Socialists' chances.

The Law on Local Government, merging the 373 old municipalities and communes into 61 new municipalities, was approved by Parliament without opposition support. The Democratic Party challenged the reform in the Constitutional Court, but lost. Citizens' groups, backed by the Democratic Party, then asked the Central Election Commission to hold 130 local referenda to confirm or overturn the new municipalities; the commission granted these requests, only to see its decision over-ruled by the Court of Appeal's Electoral College.

The local elections duly went ahead in June last year and the Socialist Party and its coalition partner in government, the Socialist Movement for Integration, secured most of the mayoral positions (45 out of 61) and nearly two-thirds of the councillors (1,049 out of 1,595). They achieved this result despite a proportional system in which each council is elected through closed lists, with the mandates for each party or coalition calculated using the D'Hondt system.

Many of the new municipalities are coherent in terms of the geography or communities they cover; some, however, were quite clearly created in order to siphon off Democratic Party votes and give the surrounding municipalities an in-built Socialist majority. Would the outcome have been different if the opposition had

taken part in the review process? The Democratic Party's MPs returned to Parliament in December 2014, following an agreement - brokered by the European Parliament - which commits the government to seek consensus with the opposition 'whenever possible'.

The Law on Local Government did not determine the precise competencies of the new municipalities and this will be the next challenge for Albania's political class. The agreement also refers to the need to resolve the problem of convicted criminals who have been elected to parliament or to local authorities, an issue which the Democratic Party has - so far unsuccessfully - been trying to force the government to address.

The similarities between Albanian and Scottish politics are alarmingly close. The government, insouciant of parliamentary or civic opposition and eager to entrench itself at all levels of power; the opposition, baffled and demoralised by its inability to land any punches on a Teflon-coated majority party; ordinary voters, tired of how polarised political discourse has become, but somehow unable to stop themselves from joining in. Both countries suffer from the absence of effective oversight of government; both ruling parties have elected members within (or temporarily outside) their ranks who should probably never have been selected as candidates.

Corruption within the SNP is amateur, of course, compared to the millions of euros which change hands in Albania, but by British standards alleged mortgage fraud, tax evasion and traffic of influences are an impressive start. Like the Scottish government, Albania's current government has done some positive things. Both, though, seem more concerned with presentation than with substance. The Albanian prime minister keeps the media away from his events, barring them even from public meetings and using the government's in-house camera crew to record favourable footage; the Scottish first minister has no need for this, since the Scottish press were long ago captured by the SNP.

Albania now has two years with no elections scheduled, perhaps enough of a breathing-space for political dialogue to replace polarised point-scoring. In Scotland, unfortunately, there will be no such breathing-space.

Gillian Gloyer is convenor of Edinburgh North-East and Leith Liberal Democrats and author of the Bradt Guide to Albania

SCUM OF THE EARTH

London faces a housing crisis so why is nothing being done about foreign criminals buying up its homes, asks Jonathan Hunt

Housing is the most important domestic issue for Londoners and many throughout the nation. It also ranks high for most economists, and the Bank of England. Yet any serious attempt to introduce Liberal solutions is dismissed as 'London-centric' by the party establishment. The only mention of London's housing crisis at the autumn conference is that it is a "property hotpot".

This hotspot is almost inflammable. Property ownership has become just a dream for many young, even well-paid people. Renting will soon be out of reach for the working poor. Those who work for those employers who rely on them for essential tasks cannot afford to live near to their jobs, nor the high fares to travel from further out.

Our policies state the bleedin' obvious like "build more houses", as do all the parties. But with big construction companies holding on to land where more than 600,000 homes could be built, including 475,000 with planning permission, they have little incentive to use. They will not threaten the laws of supply and demand while land costs continue to provide high returns by doing nothing. What is required is urgent legislation to force them to build low-cost housing or forfeit the land.

Sadly, our tired and timid tinkering does not include any degree of such coercion. We have nothing truly radical to set us apart from other parties, let alone provide a flying start to the Greater London Authority election campaign.

London has become the second-mansion capital of the world. All manner of the ultra-rich own bought-to-leave-and-occasionally-visit properties. More than one in 20 residential properties in inner-London boroughs are in the hands of overseas owners. Foreign companies own properties valued at an estimated £150bn and rising.

Grubby developers are marketing their flats directly to the rich in Asia and the Middle East. About three-quarters of those bought are registered in the name of overseas-based nominee banks, many in very dodgy domains. Government admits that overseas property ownership is a serious vehicle for money-laundering, but has so far failed to prosecute.

Among these foreign buyers are the scum of the earth, parking the proceeds of drug-dealing, people smuggling, slavery and oppression into up-market homes in well-kept streets.

Even honest buyers make little or no contribution to local economies or community life. They are too smart to leave homes empty for more than six months, as some party luminaries believe. Action is required.

But a correction does not have to resort to draconian measures, or generating illiberal hounding of foreigners. It is quite simple. Those who own or occupy residential property for business or financial reasons

should pay business rates (currently about 2.5 times council tax).

Overseas-registered companies should pay double business rates. Those nominee companies which won't identify the beneficial owners should be charged multiples of business rates, rising regularly until they name the beneficial owners – before courts order their seizure.

Indeed, there is also a strong case for excluding most UK companies from business rates for owning residential property, such as company flats, for business or renting purposes. That way no EU regulations are broken. Exceptions should include charities, diplomats, and tied homes.

Current legislation is intended to deter buy-to-let small landlords who may be tempted many to turn themselves into limited companies. Those that do should again have business rates levied. We need small landlords to provide a cheaper supply of rented housing. They should be incentivised to let property at modest rents. Others may decide to quit.

How do you predict the number of homes freed for ordinary Londoners to occupy, or whether it would reverse the downward ripple effect we have seen of owners of posh central London property accepting sky-high offers, moving to inner suburbs, whose sellers in turn move further out or across London?

Would the original inhabitants want to move back? Probably not. Which makes building new homes imperative. In the capital, Lib Dems' desire of building 50,000 new homes a year is ambitious, and presents threats to green open space. Cities need to breathe, especially if London, for example, is expected to accommodate another two million people by 2030.

Far better that many new homes should be in garden villages in the country, where 93% of land is untouched, and close to cheap, fast transport links. The Green Belt must not be used to strangle city-dwellers.

Such policies and action would help persuade voters that Liberal Democrats mean business in returning homes to citizens. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's famous slogan Property is Theft correctly describes too many housing situations today.

Yet Proudhon, the great 19th century Anarchist thinker, also coined a complementary slogan: Property is Freedom in the context of people taking control of their homes; it preaches a message that should still echo throughout the Liberal movement.

Our message to victims of the huge housing crisis is that we want tenants to takeover, and start to make that possible. And offer hope in place of despair.

Jonathan Hunt is President of Camberwell and Peckham Liberal Democrats

**Against the Grain
by Norman Baker
Biteback 2015 £20**

I first encountered Norman Baker when he joined the *Liberator* posse seeking rare 1960s vinyl at some conference or other; I knew of him as one of the most effective of the talented band of 1997 MPs.

A senior civil servant friend said that she could always tell the new MPs with previous local government experience – they hit the ground running when they entered the Commons, and Baker kept up a Marathon throughout, earning the early ire of failed MP and Times columnist Matthew Parris.

I had been anxious that Liberal International British Group become a more active campaigning organisation, and mooted Tibet as a cause. Norman had made a statement on that country and there was an obvious synergy.

The humorous side of this came when Norman visited St Peter's Primary School in Chailey, in the north of his constituency. The teacher asked the class if they had any questions for Mr Baker, and my seven year old nephew shot his hand up and asked if he knew me? Norman replied, "Yes, we've just exchanged emails this morning."

Norman's autobiography falls into three phases – his local government career and the prelude to Parliament, the back-benches and the Coalition. He devotes a chapter to the parliamentary questions that so incensed Matthew Parris – his prize scalp from them being Peter Mandelson, acclaimed by almost everyone outside of the Blair circle except the Liberal Democrats.

I had puzzled about which grain Baker was going against – as we move to the next chapter – the Iraq War, this becomes most obvious. Lord Chilcott has still to report, so far the time being we may as well take note of Norman Baker's account of how Blair, Straw and a handful of others from the Labour establishment led us into an illegal war, the consequences of which are ongoing, and constitute the greatest threat to our national security. I don't have any particular doubts about the death of David Kelly the UK weapons inspector, not based on any evidence or deep knowledge of the event, rather the balance of probability.

For Baker, some would say this



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aspect of the Iraq War became an obsession; his point is that the people should not be lied to, that Parliament, as their representative, should not be lied to. The Labour establishment lied consistently and sought to cover their tracks at every opportunity. The grain gets even coarser when we come to the 'self-serving and hypocritical' behaviour of the House of Commons in dealing with the question of MP's expenses.

As a minister, Baker contrasts his time at transport and at the Home Office; Transport might be described as a Coalition department, the Home Office clearly was not. Vince Cable's opinion that Cameron and Osborne are wimps in the face of May tends to back Norman's views up.

That notwithstanding, he has some respect for Theresa May, though not her poisonous special advisers; he also generally respects Nick Clegg, though critical of times when he, and other central figures – notably Danny Alexander and David Laws, failed to be team players (none of them previously schooled in local government I believe).

Cameron isn't particularly admired; his weaknesses shine through, along with the general nastiness of his party. I'd particularly recommend the chapters on the Department for Transport to councillors and activists, inevitably in opposition these days, since they may reveal initiatives or funding that could be exploited. A criticism occurred to me that there was too much detail in places, but not if the book is intended to be a working document.

So after a sterling job Norman deserves a break – if not the one either of us would have preferred, but I look forward to his being back on the campaign trail soon;

there is still too much of the grain to go against.

Stewart Rayment

**The Liberal Party and
the Economy, 1929-
1964**

**by Peter Sloman
Oxford University
Press 2015. £65.**

Peter Sloman aims to provide "for the first time, a detailed analysis of how British Liberals thought about economic questions during the years of the Keynesian revolution and a mixed and managed economy in Britain ... roughly between the 1929 and 1964 general elections."

The first fifth of the book examines the elements that fed into British Liberal economic thinking in the early twentieth century: classical political economy, New Liberalism, Georgism, and what Sloman terms 'constructive' Liberalism. By this he means an attitude supportive of practical government intervention in markets, which overlapped with New Liberal policies, but was inspired more by Liberal engagement with the wider intellectual interest in 'efficiency' and planning. Sloman sees 'constructive' Liberalism coming into its own in response to the First World War's economic demands on government.

In the course of the twentieth century, Keynesianism developed as a fifth crucial element in Liberal economic thinking, as is made clear in the remainder of the book, which is organised into chronological chapters, brought together in a (too) brief conclusion. Sloman traces not only official policy at the elite level, but also something of economic attitudes among the party as a whole. This is all very solidly researched,

clearly written, and careful in its judgements. It is especially helpful in its deployment of conceptual terms – such as neoliberal and Keynesian – which are too often oversimplified or left unexamined. Sloman stresses the nuance and eclecticism of Liberals' economic thought: neither ardent 'social' nor 'economic' liberals will find support here for claims that they are custodians of the true British liberal flame – there isn't one.

The book is based on a doctoral thesis in history. It benefits greatly from this background, rather than being written by an economist or political theorist.

As Sloman observes: "British Liberalism is a historical movement at least as much as it is a philosophical creed." He's aware of the messy reality of policy formulation: for example he's good on how politicians absorb economists' work bit-by-bit, often at second hand, rather than by reading texts systematically. The tight chronological parameters derive from the doctoral project. I suppose that some outside the academic audience at which it is aimed will find this too narrow. I would like to follow the story in more detail after 1964, and hope that Sloman pursues this in the future. (He makes some promising observations, for instance, on the impact of environmentalism on economic thought.) I found it a fascinating contribution to British Liberal history. Sloman has never been a party member, but has produced a valuable resource for the Liberal Democrats. The party needs to articulate clear and distinctively liberal economic thinking – to itself as well as to the electorate. I hope that this book will help to ground that task historically.

Bernard Gowers

1956 The Year That Changed Britain by Francis Beckett and Tony Russell Biteback 2015 £20.00

I started school in 1956, but don't have strong memories of the year. With six MPs in Parliament, the Liberal party does not get a mention in this book, despite the Jo Grimond's accession to the leadership, perhaps distracted by

his taking the reins on the day that British and French troops took Port Said in the Suez crisis. Clement Davies doesn't get a mention either.

The year is mostly remembered for Suez and Hungary, but culturally it was the year of Rock Around the Clock and Elvis Presley and the start of things that would go on to influence the baby-boomers.

Like Tony Blair, Winston Churchill hung on as prime minister rather too long (probably because he didn't trust the Conservative party). Anthony Eden was past his sell-by date when he became PM in 1955, and of course, resigned over Suez in January 1957. Essentially he misjudged Eisenhower, with whom, up to that point, he'd had a good relationship - Eden was highly regarded in international relations. Ministers had grown used to Churchill's loose rein, and found Eden more of a control freak - not least because he would phone them when a matter occurred to him, no matter how late into the night.

Suez was an almighty mistake, echoing a decade on as I became interested in politics. Aspects of it undoubtedly seemed right at first – the canal was seen as vital to Britain's economy – Grimond initially supported the action (will Farron rise phoenix-like out of a similar indiscretion?). Eden doesn't seem to have noticed however, that we no longer ruled India and that Bevin had pretty much abdicated Egypt. Tied up with Cyprus, another foreign adventure was the last thing we needed, especially if the Yanks weren't on board – or worse, against us. It is probably the case that Russia took advantage of the chaos of Suez to crush the Hungarian uprising – it certainly made it pretty much impossible for the west to do anything about it. I don't particularly see Eden's fall as a game change for the establishment as MacMillan (first in, and first out of Suez) was cut of the same cloth.

One can't shed any tears for the Communist party, though perhaps one can for individual Communists. 1956 was certainly an annus horribilis for the comrades, with Khrushchev's revelations of some of Stalin's abuses, followed by the invasion of Hungary. It was the end of the road for many Commies, though I would know many who

carried on even after the Prague Spring 12 years later. 1956 was pretty much the end of the road for Communism in Britain, the New Left would supplant it.

The end for patrician Conservative party and all it stood for? I'm less sure, but the seeds of change were there for an end of deference – rock'n'roll significantly giving the young a voice. For the Liberals things were starting to look up. Frank Owen (author of the anti-appeasement *The Guilty Men*, who had won the seat in 1929) gained an 11.6% swing pushing Labour into third place in Hereford; in two years Mark Bonham Carter would win Torrington. Ups and downs, but we've never looked back. This is a good read, with plenty to reflect on 60 years hence.

Stewart Rayment

Bridge of Spies (film) Steven Spielberg (dir).

This is a Steven Spielberg classic which does not disappoint. Based on the 1960 U2 incident during the cold war the film focuses on insurance lawyer James B Donovan who, to the dismay of virtually all of America, insists on trying to provide a serious defence to his client, Rudolf Abel, a KGB agent captured by the CIA.

Donovan is then entrusted to negotiate his exchange for Gary Powers, the U2 pilot. Tom Hanks gives a strong portrayal as the honest decent lawyer pitched against not only against the hard faced ruthless Russians and East Germans but the cynical and downright unpleasant CIA.

Tension mounts as Donovan seeks to do what he believes is the right thing. If anything this is a part Hanks plays too well to be entirely credible and it would have been good if Donovan has been allowed to show some greater imperfections than forgetting some shopping.

The film is stolen by Mark Rylance's understated portrayal of Abel, which certainly made me warm to him and become interested in his fate.

While it departs here and there from historical fact, the film gives a realistic account of the political machinations behind the cold war and the deep suspicion felt between the competing nations which meant any exchange negotiations were both dangerous and torturously

complex. The plot builds up and maintains the tension throughout. The real highlight of *Bridge of Spies*, however, is the quality of the filming and its portrayal of Berlin in 1961, the building of the wall and the impact this had on a divided population, some of whom risked their lives to escape.

While some scenes had to be filmed in Poland to get what might appear to be 1960s streets, where possible shooting place where the events actually happened including the former Tempelhof airport and the Glienicke Bridge (often called 'Bridge of Spies') where exchanges historically took place.

Margaret Lally

Understanding ISIS and the New Global War on Terror: a primer by Phyllis Bennis Olive Branch Press (Interlink) 2015 \$15.00

Phyllis Bennis has got a bit of form. It's rare to come across an American who understands the Middle East, rarer still that they understand it from a human perspective. Russia admitting that they have forces on the ground in Syria, and dropping bombs, is something that couldn't be anticipated in this book, but that notwithstanding, it is a reasonable summary of events, and why ISIS has the sway and military capacity that it does.

Basically, as most of you will have guessed, it goes back to Bush and Blair disbanding the Iraqi army and sending them home (probably with their weapons – but hey, they're not exactly in short supply in the region, especially after the ill-thought out Libya action).

Bennis directs the New Internationalism Project of the Washington based Institute for Policy Studies. She is also a fellow of the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam and has written extensively on the Middle East. As an aside, she also edited *The Cafés of Paris*, by Christine Graf, wife of our regular American correspondent, Dennis, back in 1996, and overdue for a new edition.

While directed at an American audience, the primer provides a solid background to events in Syria and Iraq. I particularly liked the

section *Syrian Women Know How to Defeat ISIS*.

The argument is for diplomatic solutions, that ISIS seeks to embroil the US (and now Russia, and wouldn't mind you joining in either Mr Cameron) to defeat them on their ground. Since Russia and the USA have conflicted ends (and where is Iran in all this) the sooner they are resolved, they rein in their respective proxies, and seek non-military ways to end the conflict, the better.

Stewart Rayment

Special Branch, a history: 1883-2006 by Ray Wilson & Ian Adams Biteback 2015 £25.00

It is something of a mystery, that while many of the country's intelligence services have been more open about their past in the last two decades, this has not been the case with the Special Branch.

Metropolitan Police intransigence is one reason for this, but I wonder to what extent, of the four primary reasons listed by Adams and Wilson, both service insiders, "not financially viable due to lack of resources or manpower" stands in the way. There is something measured in the style of the authors – as ex-policemen perhaps? Or that the materials that they worked from were sparse? The pace quickens as one comes closer to the present

The Special Branch came into being when Sir William Harcourt, as Gladstone's home secretary, instructed Howard Vincent, director of the CID, to gather information on Fenian activities in the Dynamite War. The Branch would continue mostly under that name, until merged with the Anti-Terrorist Branch in 2006 to become Special Operations 15, and indeed Fenian activities would be uppermost in its interests throughout.

The National Liberal Club bomb in 1991 is not specifically mentioned. It was generally believed, in the club at least, that the Provisional IRA had intended another target, found it too risky and left their bomb near the club in panic – any old building in Whitehall might do. I don't recall the damage being great, but I've

rarely seen the club bar as crowded as it was on that night.

Various groups challenging the established orthodoxy came under the Branch's purview, with varying degrees of success. In 1917 Basil Thomson, assistant commissioner, would produce a report on Pacifists – I don't think the Union of Democratic Control was actually pacifist at the time, but Charles Trevelyan, Ramsay MacDonald, CP Snow? The establishment may have cause to fear them, but they were hardly subversive.

It is of some concern, and indeed later embarrassment to the Special Branch, that their relationship with fringe organisations on the right of the spectrum was friendlier. The violence around Sir Oswald Mosley's organisations would take them out of the category of fringe cranks.

Home grown Zionist terrorism is almost forgotten these days, but in the latter days of the Palestine Mandate it was a major concern – not least to the Jewish population, in a way that many Moslems will feel today. The focus on Yaacov Levstein, an unrepentant Stern Gang terrorist, whose activities would even lead him to doing bird in Israel, and bomb maker Monty Harris is a brief introduction – David Cesarani's *Major Farran's Hat* (Da Capo, USA 2009) gives a much fuller account.

This book fills a gap in our knowledge, but cries out for more detail, which perhaps a later edition will provide. Looking at events around us, particularly those of Paris, and we must remember that Tony Blair has made us an equal target, it is understandable that the fringes of political activity will be examined – the book is disappointingly silent of the Young Liberals in that respect – or were we too obviously respectable, even in our wildest days? I doubt it.

Stewart Rayment

My cabinetmaker calls this morning to effect some repairs to one of my Sheraton sideboards. They are occasioned by too vigorous a celebration of Graham Tope's victory at Sutton and Cheam – really, once the members of the Liberal Democrat Women's executive committee get a few pints of Smithson & Greaves Northern Bitter down them no piece of furniture is safe.

I always enjoy watching a skilled tradesman at work, but I am puzzled by the man he has brought with him. At every turn he exclaims "You're doing that all wrong" or "I wouldn't do it like that". When the fellow is out of the room, I ask who he is. "Oh," comes the reply, "he's a shadow cabinet maker".

In my view defence questions resemble a closely fought by-election: if someone is out to get you then you give them one up the snoot at the earliest opportunity. Thus I was happy to support the idea of lobbing the occasional bomb at ISIS (the Boat Race has deteriorated since my day). Let us remember that they attacked people going to a footer match, out for dinner at a restaurant and listening to the Eagles of Death Metal, who so enlivened a tea dance at Uppingham last summer.

Thank goodness there was no move to invade Syria the way we used to invade countries under Blair. It wasn't the soldiers the Iraqis and Afghanistanis objected to so much as what came after. Health workers to enforce safe drinking guidelines; animal welfare inspectors to measure the camels; social workers from Islington to enforce Jack Straw's National Bedtime.

Just after I had written this the telephone was brought to me; it turned out to be Natalie Bennett, leader of the Green Party, who has called for 'peace talks' with ISIS. "What concessions will you demand?" I asked her. "I'm going to ask them to throw homosexuals off slightly lower buildings."

To Westminster for a round of meetings. In the evening I repair to a quaint back-street hostelry with exposed beams, dimpled window glass and exposed, dimpled barmaids. The atmosphere is tense: word has got about that the press gang is on the prowl. Sure enough, the door bursts open and a group of men with lanterns and tricorne hats hurries in. The Shadow Minister for Fish cowers under the table, but they see him, drag him out and bear him away.

"What will become of him?" I ask the landlady. "Mark my words," she says, "they'll take him to the dungeons beneath Broadcasting House, put the frighteners on him and ply him with Blue Nun. The next thing you know he'll be on Daily Politics resigning from the Labour front bench."

There is only one area of our national life where the hereditary principle holds greater sway than it does here in the aristocracy. I refer, of course, to the press and broadcasting. There are whole neighbourhoods of London where it is impossible to toss a brick

Lord Bonkers' Diary

without hitting a Coren or a Dimpleby – not that one would try too hard to avoid doing so. Thus I was not surprised when the son of my old friend Milne went into journalism nor when he became director of communications for the new leader of the Labour Party.

I remember him as a golden-haired little fellow in the Nursery astride his rocking horse in a sailor suit or kneeling at the foot of his bed saying his prayers. Less happily, I remember

him down from Winchester or Oxford talking the most awful rot about the need for Socialism. Why, he even spoke up for Stalin! I don't think he would have been so keen on him if he had met the fellow as I did. Then came the Guardian and endless articles with titles like 'Did 20 Million Really die?'

Now he sits at Corbyn's right hand recommending purges every second day. No, I cannot pretend to care for Christopher Robin Milne.

One does not have memories of last year's general election campaign so much as flashbacks, but I do recall visiting a hedgehog sanctuary with poor Clegg and Paddy Ashplant. While Clegg was being shown how the inmates are cared for and educated, Ashplant took me to one side and confessed that he used to eat the creatures when he was in the Special Boat Service.

Having invited Clegg to dinner this evening, I hit upon the happy idea of reminding him of those days by serving hedgehog. Cook is not keen – "nasty, flea-ridden things that don't belong in a Christian kitchen" – and claims not to know how to manage "all they prickles," so I enlist the help of the Elves of Rockingham Forest, who quite charm her. They tell us that the trick is to bake the beasts in clay so that when they are done to a turn you simply break the clay open and then peel it and the spines clean off. The Elves also agree to catch the hedgehogs for us using high elven magic (or possibly Pedigree Chum).

I have no doubt that the evening will prove a success and that our hedgehog recipe will appear in the next Liberal Democrat Cookbook alongside Pressed Tonge and Norman Lamb Hotpot.

A sombre day: the moving television brings news of the deaths of both Pierre Boulez and Christy O'Connor Jnr. I am confident that they will go down in the annals of the game as one of the great Ryder Cup pairings.

To cheer myself up, I take a party of particularly Well-Behaved Orphans to Oakham Zoo. The consensus on the charabanc is that we want to see the chameleons.

As is the way with such creatures, they rather blend into the background. I am struck, however, by one that spends its time ranting about how much it hates "Thatcher". I ask the keeper why it does this. "Oh," comes the reply, "it's an alternative chameleon".

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