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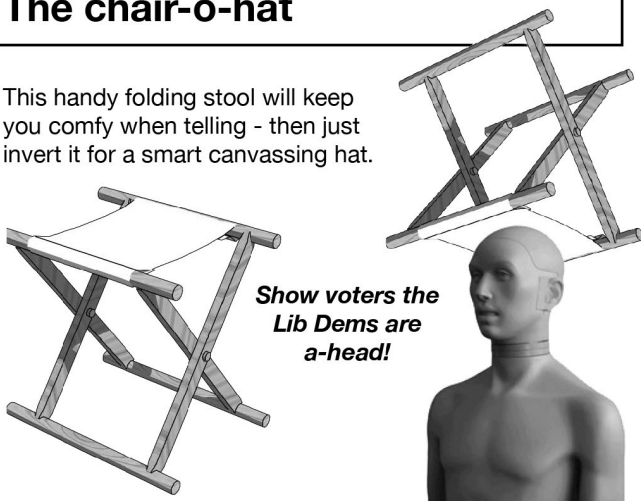
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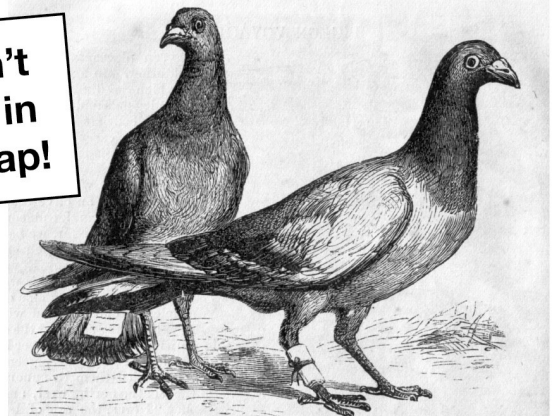
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COMMENTARY

USING PERSON POWER

Few will now remember a genuine snap election - there hasn't been one since February 1974 and every subsequent general election has come at a roughly predictable time allowing for the leisurely consideration of policy, candidates and manifestos.

This time all this has had to be done in a mad rush, though it's no wonder that at the distance of 43 years few in any party have known how to react.

The Liberal Democrats were caught on the hop - and indeed this issue of *Liberator* is somewhat truncated - with many candidates in place but some embarrassing resignations and ejections, and the first couple of weeks dominated by Brexit in the absence of other ready-to-offer policies.

Tim Farron has been right to rule out coalitions, not least as it's improbable that 8 June election result could make the question relevant, but also because the Lib Dems still need distance from the last one.

The party enters this election in a curious position. In all respects bar one it has spent the last two years making a rather limited recovery from the nadir of 2015, brightened by the success in Richmond Park last December and some useful local by-election gains.

Local elections on 4 May were a mixed bag but not the modest overall gains predicted, and surely an inquest will be open everywhere west of Hampshire on the whereabouts of the talked-up recovery in the south west.

That exception is the membership, where something without precedent has happened.

At 101,000 (at the time of writing) there has been a 140% rise in membership since the low point during the Coalition, back to levels last seen 25 years ago.

Taken with Labour's membership increase since 2015, this rather gives the lie to conventional wisdom of mass disengagement with party politics.

Even better, the new Lib Dems are not a random accumulation of people joining through local issues but a sign of the long-sought core vote starting to appear.

Many joined in 2015-16 but the real surge has come since the referendum with angry 'remain' voters scared about the country's future seeking a political home.

No-one has yet published anything to show where new members live. They should be encouraged to visit target seats where possible - not only as an effective way to help but because involvement in a successful campaign, or even a well-run but unsuccessful one, will be good for morale for a long slog ahead and for learning skills.

There are not though realistically a large number of defences and targets this time, which with such a large increase in person power carries the silver lining that some can be spared to campaign in other areas.

A debate rightly began after the last general election on how targeting had hollowed out the party, leaving it in a parlous state outside a handful of seats beyond those recently held.

Targeting delivered big gains 20 years ago but since stripped the Lib Dems of second placed seats from which to build, as non-target areas were deprived of people and resources.

This perhaps is the time to put some effort into non-target seats to build for the future, so long as this is part of local long-term planning - the last thing needed is an outbreak of the 'candidateitis' seen during 2010's Cleggmania, when all manner of improbable seats decided they were on the brink of victory.

Another facet of the snap election has been the lack of opportunity to organise any progressive alliance, even if it were agreed this was desirable.

Doing this properly would require a long period of trust building and negotiations, and also judgement of whether it could deliver what it claims.

Standing down in Brighton Pavilion for the Green party is fair recompense for Richmond Park, and if Lib Dem and Green pacts happen in a few other informal local deals some good may be done and very little harm, since few people actively dislike the Greens.

Rather a lot of people though actively dislike Labour, which is why any putative alliance involving them and the Lib Dem will not fly this time, as it would involve the Lib Dems aligning themselves with something even less popular.

Labour's showing in the local elections was beyond belief, and not in a good way - the sorts of results one might expect at the mid-point of a Labour government, not a Tory one.

Quite apart from Labour's perverse attempts to be 'all things to nobody' over Brexit, as long as Jeremy Corbyn remains leader it will be impossible for the Lib Dems to ally themselves to a person and party that is so utterly politically toxic.

Progressive alliances may prove a necessary debate after the election, but it would be best to start with the Greens and see if Labour ever sorts itself out.

This election should be a building block for the long term, and new members should not get discouraged by any lack of instant results.

RADICAL BULLETIN

DUCKS NOT IN A ROW

It is hardly to be wondered that the demands of a snap election meant that not all candidate adoptions went smoothly.

Even so, the case of former MP David Ward being adopted by Bradford East and then sacked by Tim Farron for alleged anti-Semitic remarks raised a number of questions.

Was Ward an approved candidate? If so, who approved him if he had made remarks that were genuinely anti-Semitic - as opposed to being hostile to the Israeli government - but if he was not approved, how did he get adopted?

Since the leader does not have the power to sack candidates, there was presumably some fast footwork with the candidates committee here, but even so the episode looked shambolic, especially as it appeared that Farron acted only when challenged by the egregious Eric Pickles.

Yet more shambolic was the situation in Buckingham, where the Liberal Democrat Voice website announced in the space of three hours that the Lib Dems would oppose speaker John Bercow and then that they would not.

Candidate Sarah Lowes "took the decision to stand down in accordance with the convention that the main political parties do not oppose the speaker". One can speculate as to who actually took this decision. Possibly some Lib Dem MP who fancies being called to speak occasionally in the next session.

Elsewhere, four candidates stood down in the Liverpool area and were replaced without all the approved candidates in the area being invited to apply, and Jay Risbriger suddenly vacated Bath.

WELL, THAT'S ALL CLEAR THEN

The Lib Dem strategy consultation issued just before the election was called actually contains some very sound ideas - in particular that of seeking to secure a core vote, something for Liberator has long argued and which was a notable concern of the late Simon Titley.

Wisely, it doesn't try to go into which geographical or socio-economic groups should comprise this but rather argues that there should be a core vote at all.

It also makes decent stab at positioning the Lib Dems as a 'drawbridge down' party open to the world rather than on a traditional left-right spectrum.

The paper is framed in the context of seeking to replace Labour as the main opposition to the Tories, a course which if followed would make any future coalition with the Tories extremely difficult should anyone wish to repeat the experience.

Readers with long memories may recall Paul Tyler's strategy papers of the mid-1980s which spoke of the Tories being the opposition and Labour the competition

- truly there is nothing really new under the sun.

Liberator 383 noted the incomprehensible jargon used in a Lib Dem job advert, and sadly the same mangling of language afflicts the strategy document.

What, for example, does the following mean: "Should we encourage and welcome a realignment of British politics along an open versus closed political spectrum with the Liberal Democrats at the heart of the open end?"

How one gets to situate oneself at the heart of the open end of a spectrum is a probably a matter on which gymnasts should advise.

Still, as the paper says: "We will succeed in doing this as we find ways of clearly communicating our values."

THE PARTY OF FREE SPEECH

So who tried to get an advert for an anti-Trident fringe meeting banned from the conference daily at York? The advert was submitted by Lib Dems Against Trident in the normal way that any meeting announcement might be.

After initially being accepted by the publishers at party headquarters the tone changed, with a junior staff member telling meeting organiser Kelly-Marie Blundell: "We are unable to allow this item into our Conference Daily. The Advert clashes with an Auditorium item later that day; Policy Motion: Towards a World Free of Nuclear Weapons.

"Additionally, we are not allowed to take Adverts that are deemed to influence one side of a debate."

There is technical term for that assertion, and it's called "bollocks". No such rule exists, as became apparent after organisers protested to the Federal Conference Committee.

Lib Dems Against Trident organised the fringe meeting precisely because the debate was on Saturday, as had a number of other meetings on topics on the agenda.

The panel was indeed from one side of the argument, but that too is perfectly normal for fringe meeting and 'Liberal For Bombs' - or whatever - would have been free to convene a meeting to put the opposite argument.

One theory is that this was overcautious bureaucracy. A more compelling one is that the policy department was so scared of losing the Trident vote that it invented rules to try to silence its opponents.

STICK IT UP YOUR JUMPER

What sort of person would wish to walk around in public with a badge that reads (should anyone look closely) "I Made Richmond Happen."

The slogan is meaningless outside of a Lib Dem conference and - at least in London - makes the wearer look as though they are impersonating an Overground attendant given the strange shade of orange employed.

Wearing it requires one to manipulate a lethal looking pin too.

Yet these objects have been sent out to anyone who signed in to help at the Richmond Park by-election, accompanied by a breathless letter from chief executive Tim Gordon which said: "This victory belongs to you and we want to say thank you!"

Unfortunately the badges were also distributed in Richmond Park itself, where one disgruntled member told *Liberator*: "Local members of Richmond Park are affronted on several levels. A colossal waste of money and what did Great George Street think we would do during this historic by election? Sit on our bums? We have been at it for centuries. We do not need gee-gaws; victory is sufficient.

As *Liberator* 383 noted, Great George Street is seeking a 'director of people', whose key responsibilities will include "improve the membership experience so that party members can clearly articulate the benefits to being a member". Will they get a badge too?

BOMBS AWAY

Just before the general election, Tim Farron was quick to support Donald Trump's cruise missile attack on a Syrian airfield in response to the Assad regime's chemical attack on civilians.

Farron landed in a lot of trouble when he supported the UK becoming involved in the US-led bombing campaign in Syria (*Liberator* 376) accused by many in the party of backing a war that lacked any strategy or even real objectives and in support of ground troops whose existence and competence was highly questionable.

Taking advice from foreign policy establishment peers was one likely cause, and this time round *Liberator* understands none other than Paddy Ashdown was responsible for advising Farron.

Ashdown has credibility from his military record and his work 20 years ago over Yugoslavia.

He was also though the only Lib Dem of any consequence to support Tony Blair over the Iraq war (even though his role in Bosnia meant he did not say so at the time) and he was a cheerleader for the fruitless conflict in Afghanistan. Perhaps Farron might widen the circle of those to whom he listens?

STRANGERS ON A TRAIN?

A probably apocryphal story used to circulate that Hugh Jones, the Liberal party's secretary general in the late 1970s, once fell into conversation with a total stranger on a train and had by the end of the journey convinced him to be a Liberal parliamentary candidate.

Might this scenario come true in Scotland? The snap general election caught everyone unprepared but in England the party had taken steps to get at least the most important seats covered with candidates in case of this eventuality.

In Scotland though those wishing to apply to stand have been hurriedly asked to list "the usual campaigning experience, causes supported etc." and then face vetting that "will have to be done on a local level so those people who have the minimum party membership time duration (nine months) but have not undergone approved candidate selection are free to apply". This unusual approach will be followed by something described as "an extraordinary hustings".

No doubt.

TAKING PUNISHMENT

Baroness Falkner gave comfort to the party's enemies by defying the whip to vote with the Tories and Labour in the Lords against a second EU referendum.

Leader Tim Farron duly responded by refusing to re-nominate her to the bureau of Liberal International.

This is a post effectively in the leader's gift, a situation reaffirmed by the recent governance review and perhaps that is not ideal, although it carries an element of acting as the leader's personal envoy.

Nothing says that anyone from the UK must be on the LI bureau, but in practice there usually has been.

Farron's punishment came too late for any replacement nomination but outraged Falkner, who thought she could still hold the post despite breaking the whip on an important international issue.

SPECIFIC GRAVITY

Life continues to be exciting in some of the party's specified associated organisations.

The travails of Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats (*Liberator* 383) go on, now with long-serving treasurer Jonathan Hunt having resigned and with no hearing having yet been held by the party into whatever it is former general secretary Ashburn Holder is supposed to have done - and the general election may push that back yet further.

A letter to EMLD executive members from Hunt said: "I would continue to serve my term if I believed we were still focused on our important objectives of campaigning for race equality within the party, informing party members about the needs and rights of ethnic minority people and promoting the party's principles and policies to them. Sadly that has ceased to be the case, and I see no hope of it resuming in the near future. I will, of course, offer every assistance to my successor."

EMLD has a permanent chair, unlike LGBT Plus Lib Dems, whose short-lived chair Chris Cooke resigned in February after a row over the degree of influence other executive members enjoyed over its activities. Jennie Rigg is filling the role on an interim basis.

The normally somnolent Liberal Democrat European Group has been shaken by a contest for its officer posts complete with rival slates, with one led by incumbent chair Nick Hopkinson defeating that associated with long-serving former chair George Dunk.

THE COMPANY THEY KEEP

A poster has surfaced in Cornwall which reads: "Because the Liberal party and Ukip have similar policies on the European Union, each party are now asking their supporters to support the other, where there is no Liberal or Ukip candidate in the same ward."

The party's Cornish branch withdrew its 2015 general election candidates in favour of Ukip (*Liberator* 372) an action that led to the lightest of slaps on the wrist. How long will any real liberals who remain in that party tolerate the antics of their Cornish members?

WHY DO THE POOR PAY MORE?

Being shut out of financial services worsens the lives of those who already have little money, says Claire Tyler

Last year I became chair of the House of Lords Select Committee on Financial Exclusion, something that builds on many of my policy interests past and present.

The cross-party committee reported in April with a wide range of recommendations calling on the Government, the Financial Conduct Authority and the banks to give much greater priority to tackling financial exclusion and making sure that vulnerable consumers get a fairer deal.

So what exactly is financial exclusion and why does it matter?

Simply put, it's when people – particularly the poorest – can't get access to even the most basic financial services that most of us take for granted and are forced to rely on extortionately priced and often substandard products.

It's deeply ironic that while the UK is considered a world leader in financial services, some 1.7m people don't have a bank account, some 8m experience problem debt and 40% of the working age population have less than £100 in savings, and so no buffer to help deal with unexpected emergencies.

Then there's the unpalatable fact that the poor pay more – often referred to as the 'poverty premium'. Currently they pay more for services from heating their homes to accessing credit – contributing to a vicious circle which can drive people ever deeper into debt.

The situation is made worse by the growing number of bank branch closures, with 53% shutting between 1989 and 2016, a far steeper decline than in many parts of Europe.

So the problems are stark but what's to be done? The evidence the committee received made it abundantly clear that the lack of a strong lead from Government and a coherent strategy for tackling financial exclusion has been at the heart of the problem.

Thus we recommended that the Government should appoint a clearly designated minister for financial inclusion, who should publish a strategy for addressing financial exclusion, and make annual progress reports to Parliament, including on high street bank closures and the take up of basic bank accounts.

This emphasis needs to be matched by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), which in recent years has introduced a much needed and successful cap on payday lending.

That is why we recommended that the Government should expand the FCA's remit to include a statutory duty to promote financial inclusion. Additionally, we recommended that the FCA establish new rules requiring banks and other financial services providers to have a duty of care towards their customers. Taken together, these measures could transform the delivery

of financial services for vulnerable customers.

We received plenty of evidence that low levels of financial capability can also be a significant cause of financial exclusion. We were told one third of the UK population – 17m people – struggle to manage a budget and that 1 in 6 people struggle to identify the balance on their bank statement.

EKED OUT EXISTENCE

The committee fully acknowledged that this was often caused by a sheer lack of money. Indeed we heard anecdotally that people on low income are often better at budgeting than many others because they have to be to eke out an existence. The relationship between poverty and financial exclusion featured in much of our evidence and visits.

In 2014 financial education was added to the statutory secondary school curriculum in England. However, with only around 35% of state-funded secondary schools now being maintained schools, this obligation does not apply to the remainder.

Thus we recommended that Ofsted's Common Inspection Framework should be updated to include financial education, and that this should be added to the primary school curriculum in England as it is in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

It became clear to us that some groups – particularly the elderly, those living with a disability and those suffering from mental health problems were particularly ill served by the current system.

We heard that one third of people over the age of 80 had either never used a cash machine or preferred to avoid using them, and 93% did not use internet banking. For them, the ever increasing rate of closure of physical bank branches is a major cause for concern.

We felt that the Government, regulators and banks could be doing more to develop new digital platforms and apps that simplify access for older people.

Our report also recognised the two-way relationship between financial exclusion and mental health and received some very compelling evidence and how this worked and what could be done about it.

We recommended that the Government, FCA and financial services sector should work together to introduce a wider range of 'control options' for those customers who experience mental health problems, for example, allowing potentially vulnerable consumers to voluntarily opt in to features such as 24 hour delays before processing large transactions, and bank accounts with partial third party control or 'nudge' type notifications of changes in spending patterns.

It is over 20 years since the Disability Discrimination Act was passed, introducing the concept of 'reasonable adjustment' into UK law.

Banks have had a long time to get it right when it

comes to making reasonable adjustments to serve disabled customers. Sadly, we heard far too many examples of banks' failures to tailor their services effectively and appropriately. These included repeatedly contacting deaf customers by telephone and sending written PIN numbers to blind customers instead of using Braille .

We considered this totally unacceptable and recommended a review of reasonable adjustment practices for disabled customers.

Basic bank accounts represented a major step in reducing the number of people who are unbanked in the UK. While there were over 3m adults without a bank account in 2006, this figure has fallen to just over 1.7m.

However, the number of 'unbanked' people has started to increase again. Too often, we heard banks weren't being proactive in offering basic accounts to customers suited to them, or that these accounts weren't advertised or promoted properly.

Some banks working hard in this area clearly felt that others weren't pulling their weight. Thus we recommended that the Government require banks to promote basic accounts effectively and take steps to ensure that the burden of providing these accounts (which are loss making to the banks) is shared more equally.

Barely a week seems to pass without further news of bank branches being closed. This trend should worry all of us, but is of particular concern for those who rely upon physical access or prefer the reassurance of face-to-face communication.

In 2015 the British Banking Association launched the Access to Banking Protocol – a voluntary process where banks consult customers when they have decided to close a branch, and seek ways to ensure that services continue to be provided. We noted that there was no evidence that this process had ever led to a branch closure decision being reversed and that there is currently nothing forcing banks to take action to prevent the financial exclusion of people in areas where branches have closed.

We were also struck by the sheer scale of the Post Office network which, at 11,600 branches, has more outlets than all of the high street banks combined. What is more, the Post Office can offer banking services to 99% of UK current account customers. This is a little known fact, and we believe that the Government, banks and the Post Office need to do more to raise public awareness of these services

SHUT OUT OF ON-LINE

The increasing reliance on online banking runs the risk of shutting out large parts of the population. The elderly and some of those living with disabilities are at high risk – 42% of disabled people are not online, while 37% of retired people are not regular internet users, compared to just 6% of the general population. There are also 3.8m households without any internet and 12m people live in areas with poor or limited access.

This is why the committee felt strongly that 'digital by default' should not mean 'digital only'. It is vital that financial service providers – and, indeed, those Government departments providing financial benefits and services – continue to complement their online services with face to face and telephone services.

An area of particular concern to the committee

was the high cost credit market. In 2015, the FCA introduced new regulations to tackle some of the most egregious practices by placing a cap on both daily interest rates and total interest charges and fees for payday lenders, which were a marked success.

But the committee felt strongly that these new rules were too limited in scope and should equally apply to other areas of high-cost credit.

In particular, we called for urgent action to introduce new controls on 'rent to earn' products and unarranged bank overdraft fees. In both instances the committee received evidence of eye-wateringly high interest rates being charged to vulnerable people. In some cases it was nothing short of extortionate and Government and the FCA must act quickly and decisively.

The committee heard evidence of the capacity of credit unions and other not-for-profit lenders to provide an alternative to high-cost credit such as payday lenders, doorstep credit and rent-to-own.

Their interest rates are capped by law at 3% a month, which makes them far cheaper than their commercial equivalents - and many credit unions also provide debt counselling and benefits advice to help get people on the road to financial stability.

And yet many of our witnesses told us that the credit union sector is extremely weak compared to other countries, particularly the USA. In some countries credit unions are able to offer a wider array of products such as their own credit cards and rent-to-own - which they are prevented from doing here. We felt that there was a lot more the Government could be doing to expand the scope of Credit Unions and recommended that the Government and banks should increase the lending of investment capital at reasonable rates to credit unions.

The Committee wasn't set up to examine social security benefits or the implications of the Welfare Reform Act 2012, but nonetheless received a large volume of evidence about the impact of changes to the benefits system on financial exclusion.

As a result, we made recommendations in three important areas: abolishing the seven-day waiting period at the start of a Universal Credit claim; allowing greater flexibility in the frequency of payments so that can be paid fortnightly as will soon be possible in Scotland and Northern Ireland; and allowing tenants in receipt of Universal Credit in England and Wales to decide whether their housing costs should be paid to them or direct to their landlord.

There is much to do to build a financial services system that works fairly for everyone and helps to tackle inequalities rather than exacerbating them.

All too often vulnerable people and those on low income are being failed by banks and the wider system. The current levels of financial exclusion are simply unacceptable and much more can and must be done.

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

HOW THE LIB DEMS LOST THEIR THINK TANK

Seth Thevoz analyses Centre Forum's slide out of liberal politics and eventual demise

Last year, there was much surprise when CentreForum, the liberal think tank, announced that it would be abandoning its political mission in favour of a much narrower focus, as the renamed Education Policy Institute.

This culminated a decade-long transformation from one-time Liberal Democrat-affiliated think tank, to billionaire hedge fund manager Paul Marshall's plaything. And with Marshall having severed his links with the party in 2015 around the same time he came 'out of the closet' as a Brexiteer, CentreForum soon followed. But it didn't have to end this way.

One might raise the question of what any think tank is for. There is a very real, urgent place needed in public debate for the overlap between rigorous, in-depth academic analysis, and an appreciation of the topical urgency of political issues.

Unfortunately, many think tanks struggle to do both - or either. The Tax Payers' Alliance, for instance, hires more press officers than researchers, making it clear where its priorities lie. Or if you visit the Henry Jackson Society's website, you will see staff biographies routinely place primacy on 'media profile' over 'publications'. Today's UK think tanks are usually poor at filling the very space they are supposed to occupy.

Liberals like ideas. It's often been one of their biggest weaknesses as well as their biggest strengths. And as a way of refining and communicating ideas, the old Liberal Party had a vibrant pamphlet culture, from its eighteenth century roots to the merger with the SDP. From Ramsay Muir to Michael Meadowcroft, pamphlets continued to act as a vehicle for ideas among twentieth century Liberals. Yet this fell by the wayside, a victim of the 1990s demise of print culture, before the internet started to (partly) fill the void a decade later.

In the meantime, there were the think tanks - a curious, mostly post-war invention, born out of frustration at university thinking being too theoretical, and encouraged by successive leaders of the 'big two' parties, not least as a way of circumventing the formal party policymaking apparatus.

The old Liberal Party conspicuously lacked a think tank (though the SDP had the Tawney Society) - and I would suggest the reason for this was the vibrant print culture; liberals didn't need such an organisation to outsource their thinking to, when they had pamphlets to think aloud and respond to one another. And Liberal pamphlets weren't an exclusively 'elite' activity — activists and councillors up and down the country would pen them, comparing reflections on campaign strategy and tactics as well as philosophy.

The mid-1990s had become an age of think tanks - lobbyists desperate for an entrée into both the

Conservative government and resurgent New Labour frequently found that funding a think tank was a perfect vehicle to getting inside access; and the Lib Dems felt a noticeable lack of heavy artillery on this front. Additionally, by 1997, the growth of the Lib Dems to 46 MPs meant that it was felt they would benefit from such resourcing.

MISSING LINK

Early in the merged Liberal Democrats' existence, there were some attempts at unofficial Lib Dem think tanks — the much-missed LiNK (Liberal Information Network) pre-dated merger, and did much to bridge the thinking of the merged party and the breakaway Liberals. Other laudable but under-resourced attempts, like the John Stuart Mill Institute, or the Liberal Institute, regrettably seem to have become dormant.

The Centre for Reform was launched in March 1998, a spinoff of party magazine *The Reformer* which had launched five years earlier. It was primarily the brainchild of ex-SDP Lib Dems close to Charles Kennedy, keen to reach out across the political divide to other progressive politicians.

It enjoyed modest funding of an annual £50,000 from former Liberal MP Richard Wainwright, and was headed up first by Dr Richard Grayson, then Anthony Rowlands.

Grayson recalls Wainwright being "very much" at arm's length, with them only ever meeting twice, and Grayson being given a free hand at the Centre. Despite its strong party links, the Centre's original incarnation promoted genuinely independent and radical ideas.

Publications like Francis Wilkinson's *The Leaf and the Law* (2000) made the case for cannabis legalisation in the context of wider European drugs policy, followed by a look at *Heroin* (2001). Meanwhile, Ross Laird's *Education Outsourcing: A Privatisation Too Far?* (2002), inspired in no small part by the author's experience shadowing education on Labour-run Haringey Council, one of the first British authorities to outsource education, took a position it is hard to imagine later CentreForum pamphlets taking.

Not all publications were so subversive - many, like Ed Davey's 2000 pamphlet on the mechanics of budget scrutiny - took a more technocratic, even 'safe' approach. But by and large, the old Centre for Reform was creative, bold, left-leaning, and yes, occasionally bonkers. (It memorably published a 2002 State of the Union address by Tony Blair, as edited by Norman Baker. Yes, you read that right.)

All this changed after its fifth anniversary. With Wainwright's death in 2003, the Centre found itself desperately in need of a new sugar daddy. Enter Marshall. Marshall, though politically involved since

the days of the SDP, as Charles Kennedy's one-time research assistant and the 1987 parliamentary candidate for Fulham, had until this point been a relatively marginal figure in Lib Dem politics, but this was about to change with his de facto acquisition of the Centre.

Guaranteeing three years of funding from 2004, he rapidly set about transforming the think tank in his own image. Moving from a room rented from the Wildlife Trust on Horseferry Road to a large suite of penthouse offices on

Dartmouth Street, the Centre's politics noticeably shifted to the right, matching Marshall's own free marketeering instincts which at times seemed to border on fetishism.

Staff were recruited from unlikely quarters such as Goldman Sachs, and Thatcherite think tanks like the IEA and the Adam Smith Institute. As reported by Lib Dem Voice in 2009, and recounted in Donnachadh McCarthy's *The Prostitute State* (2014), the Centre became "the source of opposition in the party to the Tobin Tax", and a slew of publications started to make the case for slimming the state. There was also a noticeable rise in the Centre's longer-standing technocratic tendencies.

Even the name changed - in 2006, Centre for Reform became CentreForum - was a conscious effort to stress an ideology of the centre rather than the more left-leaning, radical direction of Kennedy's party leadership. Predictably, it was swiftly lampooned in the pages of Lib Dem News as the Centre For, Um?

The changes also coincided with Marshall co-editing the controversial *Orange Book* of 2004, not the cogent articulation of a shift to the right often argued, though its editors sometimes claimed it to be precisely that, despite the rather bland collection of essays largely failing to match such ambitious goals.

The newly renamed Centre undoubtedly professionalised its operation, but arguably at the expense of the quality and innovation of its output, which became formulaic, even predictable. The impression given was of a think tank that spent the next decade going through the motions: the obligatory fringe events at conference, a slew of publications which no doubt generated ongoing employment for the Centre's staff but which seemed light on new ideas and, in some cases, appeared to simply be reiterations of the Centre's pre-existing publications.

CentreForum did have some successes. In its final years, it became a model of transparency— a Who Funds You? assessment of think tanks gave them only a C-rating in 2012 after they initially refused to list their donors; but by 2015, the think tank had achieved a coveted A-rating for transparency over whom they received funding from.

Such welcome transparency unfortunately made it all the more obvious what was going on: Marshall had only guaranteed funding for the first three years, and while he continued to play a dominant role through its advisory board, it would be wrong to characterise the

“It had ceased to be a think tank seeking distinctively liberal solutions, and the whole advantage of being a genuinely independent think tank had been forfeited”

Centre as having been 'owned' by him, as was sometimes claimed. Instead of depending on Marshall for money, as the Centre had done in 2004-07, the think tank increasingly funded part of its output by providing producer-interest pamphlets funded by the very bodies they were analysing.

Examples included *Access and Equity: Positioning Alternative Providers in Higher Education Provision* (2014), co-published with Bimm music academies and the private higher education college GSM London; *The*

Liberal Case for Aviation (2015), which acknowledged "generous support" from Gatwick and Heathrow Airports, Let Britain Fly, Heathrow Hub and GTMC; and *Reforming Retail Energy Markets* (2015), supported by comparethemarket.com.

INTERESTED PARTY

Such publications were not always as one-sided as their titles might suggest, sometimes offering balanced lists of the pros and cons of issues. And of course, this was all standard practice across the think tank sector, and funding from an interested party was fully declared. It was no worse than any other think tank. But that was the problem - it had ceased to be a think tank seeking distinctively liberal solutions, and the whole advantage of being a genuinely independent think tank had been forfeited. The cumulative effect was to give it an increasing air of a hired gun agency.

With Marshall's increasing estrangement from the party after the fall of the Coalition, and with the influence of his long-term interest in education (he runs ARK Academies, whose top team is beginning to resemble a JobCentrePlus for former coalition policy wonks), it is therefore unsurprising that the Centre decided it had limited mileage in its pre-existing model.

Given the position it had found itself in, the move away from a party political think tank, and towards a niche education policy study group, made perfect sense, if one's only concern was the continuation of a think tank, rather than the flourishing of liberal ideas. But it was an abandonment of the Centre's original mission.

So farewell, Centre For Um. Good luck, Education Policy Institute — you'll need it. What the EPI faces is the same perennial question: "What is a think tank for?" If it is simply a device for party leaders and a circle of donors to circumvent a party's policy-making apparatus, by deploying resources to develop alternative policy without wider membership input, then I don't see much political 'buy-in' for that.

If, on the other hand, it is to bring analytical rigour combined with topical relevance and political sensitivity, then think tanks would need to follow a very different model to CentreForum's.

Dr. Seth Thévoz of Nuffield College, Oxford is a political historian. He sits on the Council of the Social Liberal Forum

OUT WITH THE OLD

English county results show some old guards should step aside, says Chris White

Well: not what we expected.

It was all going so smoothly. We were told by experts (and we still listen to experts) that we would see 85-100 gains in the county council elections and might even control county councils again. Membership has been soaring and many of these have proved useful as leafleters, canvassers and candidates.

What was also abundantly clear was that a snap general election on 4 May was no longer a danger and so our hurriedly selected parliamentary candidates could relax a little and concentrate on winning council seats.

I suspect we have all underestimated Theresa May. What we knew for certain, we thought, is that she finds it difficult to take decisions. She is risk averse.

In one sense we were right. But we didn't carry through the logic. This risk averse prime minister, on her country walks over Easter, realised she faced a number of unacceptable risks.

Possibly the starkest was that a number of her MPs might be successfully prosecuted, triggering majority-threatening by-elections.

There was also the Corbyn factor. If Labour truly took a pasting in the county council and metro mayor elections, as was certainly likely (and what actually happened), then Corbyn might be ousted, or at least throw in the towel.

Third, there was the risk that Brexit might lead to a massive economic upheaval either through uncertainty or because the negotiations failed and Britain was left at the mercy of WTO arrangements. The road to 2020 began to look like an obstacle course.

Finally there was us: a Liberal Democrat revival was most likely to be felt in seats we had so unfortunately lost in 2015. 100 local gains would mean that we were back in town and that the BBC, for instance, might have to give us a reasonable share of air time again.

So a risk averse prime minister, without any warning, fired the starting gun.

The effect was felt immediately. The Conservative vote noticeably hardened. Those who had offered to help county colleagues were suddenly – and rightly – called back to the ranch.

Her belligerence towards the EU gained traction, even if she appeared to have taken leave of her senses when she accused the EU leaders of interfering in the general election, where she seemed to tell us that we were now at political war with Europe. People seem to like her.

These are terrible tactics for a negotiator but brilliant tactics for someone who wanted a good Conservative vote in the county elections to bolster the forthcoming general election campaign.

So where are we now? Up in a handful of counties (Hampshire, Hertfordshire, East Sussex); down nearly everywhere else – a net loss of seats. There were similar problems in Scotland and Wales. Labour,

meanwhile, went backwards at a rate of knots losing hundreds of seats, and UKIP was effectively abolished, retaining only one seat.

There are lessons to be learned. The first is that May is a master tactician. Whatever we might think of her approach to Brexit, she knows when to strike and how.

Second, Corbynista Labour is still electable in a few parts of the country but their much-vaunted increase in membership has not produced activity on the ground. My experience is that Labour were barely players in seats they had held comfortably under Blair.

The Conservatives are triumphant and looking forward to their landslide and a tighter grip on county government, with consequences that are yet to become clear. Conservative local government has not always been a comfortable bedfellow for its Westminster masters and there are massive battles ahead over social care funding.

As for the Liberal Democrats, there is reason to suppose the results are different depending on how people voted in the referendum. Campaigning remained quite straightforward in St Albans, for instance, with some massive majorities for some of us: I had my largest majority in 24 years.

Much of this, no doubt, is because I am such a splendid chap but the reality is that we played the anti-Brexit card and deployed our vigorous anti-Brexit parliamentary candidate Daisy Cooper to good effect. The seat we lost in the area was much more evenly divided over Brexit.

But that was not the only issue. Activists in that seat, lost after being held for 32 years, refused to attack the Conservatives, refused literature produced in the Lib Dem house style and didn't do very much campaigning.

There were a number of near misses in Hertfordshire. In some of them, at least, campaigning started far too late (not in 2016 or earlier) and the literature was poor to shocking: the long arm of ALDC does not reach into all the crevices of Lib Dem Land.

Some of us have learned the hard way that we have to raise our game. Others have a way to go. We have over 100,000 members now and it is time that some of this new talent was unleashed. The old guard may in a number of areas need to step aside.

Chris White is a Liberal Democrat county councillor in Hertfordshire

BETTER THAN THE PIGS?

Scottish Lib Dem leader Willie Rennie's eccentric stunts added little to a campaign that lacked a narrative, says Nigel Lindsay

There is symbolism in every electoral stunt, and the context of each publicity gimmick contributes to how the electorate perceives a party's image.

So it is perplexing that Willie Rennie chose to launch the Scottish Liberal Democrats' local election manifesto astride a ride-on lawnmower. An Aston-Martin it wasn't, nor even a Harley-Davidson. It failed to give an impression of chic, of compassion, or of any political stance. Opinion is divided on whether it was better or worse than last time round, when he spoke in a farmyard in front of a couple of pigs who chose that instant to share a romantic moment or two. Willie is a good and able leader but whoever thinks up these stunts does him no favours. He deserves better.

Similarly, the party's literature in many seats was lacklustre. Colourful and glossy, with lots of pictures and relatively few words, our leaflets were sometimes hard to distinguish at first sight from the weekly Farmfoods brochure.

We lacked a clear narrative. Positive reasons to vote Lib Dem usually took second place to large bar-charts purporting to show that "only the LibDems can beat the Conservatives/ SNP/ Labour here". Has any recent evaluation been done of the impact of these leaflets on individual electors?

Conservative leaflets were illustrated with a finger-wagging Ruth Davidson and with bar-charts projecting a different message. Labour and Green leaflets tended to focus more on specific policy issues, but were usually better on what they wanted to do than exactly how they would achieve it.

Local election material in the Scottish media was almost obliterated by coverage of the General Election.

As Lesley Riddoch wrote in *The Scotsman*: "Across every TV channel Labour and the SNP are vigorously questioned – Theresa May and the Westminster government are faintly challenged...since the local elections have been contemptuously sidelined, (the local) vote will likely have (Mrs May's) 'do your duty' overtone".

And so it turned out. The Conservatives, who have been almost eliminated from Scottish political life for the last 20 years, came back with a vengeance. Their vote rose, and they won seats across Scotland. In the district with the smallest population but the longest name, Clackmannanshire (a former mining area) they rose from one councillor to five. They also won a seat in Ferguslie Park, in Paisley, statistically Scotland's most deprived area. Across the country, they took seats from Labour and SNP alike.

The SNP inevitably lost some seats from their peak a few years ago, but still maintained a strong presence. In Glasgow, they deprived Labour of overall control of the council for the first time in almost 40 years, and remained strong in the cities.

Lib Dem performance was patchy. Edinburgh was a bright spot, with the group growing strongly,

and good results on a high poll in Edinburgh West constituency. The election there of Gillian Gloyer as well as the re-election of Dobbie Aldridge gives the group an encouragingly radical component. In South Lanarkshire, Robert Brown was returned at the first stage of the count. There were good results in the Highlands, where Kate Stephen, Carolyn Craddock Angela Mclean, Linda Munro and Trish Robertson helped build a strong Lib Dem group. Another bright spot was Dundee, where Craig Duncan, who has done good work opposing zero-hours contracts, was elected and joins Fraser MacPherson

But in our former fastness of Aberdeenshire - now Alex Salmond's base - the Tories became the largest party on the council.

LibDems held 14 seats and Martin Ford and Paul Johnston, who were expelled from the Lib Dem group some years ago - unbelievably for opposing Donald Trump's golf course plans in the area (*Liberator* 336) - were both re-elected, Martin as a Green and Paul as an Independent.

Overall, though, it wasn't a great night for the Lib Dems in Scotland. Sooner or later the leadership is going to have to face the fact that what we're doing just now isn't really working.

We need a new strategy, a convincing narrative, and some compelling reasons to vote for the party. Otherwise we shall continue to float along as Scotland's fourth or fifth political party.

Nigel Lindsay is a member of the Scottish Liberal Democrats and was an author of *The Little Yellow Book: Reclaiming the Liberal Democrats for the People*

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SCATTERED SEEDS

Local election results in Wales were disappointing but with patches of progress that bode well for the future, says Mark Cole

All of Wales' 22 unitary authority councils' seats were up for election on 4 May – for the first time in five years.

The 2012 results saw the typical 'coalition' era collapse in representation as Welsh Liberal Democrat unitary councillor numbers were more than halved from 163 down to just 73 – a net loss of 91 councillors.

Expectations for 2017 were modest but there were legitimately optimistic signs that inroads could be made into that 2012 result and an increase in Welsh Liberal Democrat representation in county halls would result.

Theresa May's snap general election call brought an end to such aspirations and when the dust settled on Friday 5 May, Welsh Liberal Democrat numbers had in fact dipped by 11 down to a new total of 62 councillors.

Any hopes for Jeremy Corbyn of a Welsh-inspired comeback were jolted with a net loss of 107 seats which resulted in Welsh Labour's worst return since reorganisation in 1995, apart from their 2008 collapse.

Plaid Cymru meanwhile made modest gains but it was the Welsh Conservatives who rode the crest of the snap election wave to post 80 net gains for a total of 184 Councillors – their best return since reorganisation.

The worst of our results were in areas where we had expectations of doing well. In Cardiff for example, a net loss of five seats saw our formidable council group there reduced to 11.

While Labour were losing control of councils such as Merthyr Tydfil and Blaenau Gwent in their Valleys heartlands to the Independents, their vote held up in their more urban backyards with losses in Cardiff to the Tories marginally offset by gains from Plaid and ourselves.

A similar Welsh Lib Dem net loss of five seats followed in Swansea where the Welsh Conservatives again moved into main opposition to the Labour leadership.

Across the rest of Wales, Welsh Lib Dem results were 'patchy' with the odd gain offset by the odd loss. But below the radar and that disappointing top-line figure, in the traditional 'liberal' heartlands of mid-Wales, the results were solid.

In Ceredigion, all seven seats defended were comfortably held with one narrow four vote gain in Penparcau from Plaid Cymru along with a string of frustrating near misses. In Powys meanwhile, incorporating both Montgomeryshire and Brecon and Radnor, the four net gains were part of a wider picture that saw the Independents lose their dominant hold on that traditional rural authority.

As well as those more hopeful results in mid-Wales, there are also signs of a liberal renewal throughout

Wales.

Energetic campaigns saw the excellent Tudor Jones elected to Flintshire Council and the fabulous Helen Ceri-Clarke in Neath-Port Talbot.

It was also great to see Holly Townsend elected alongside her mother Carmel in Newport's St Julians ward, which was the only ward there to elect a Welsh Lib Dem councillor in 2012 and that by just a single vote for the much missed and loved family patriarch Ed Townsend.

But dig a little deeper and the hard work and commitment of passionate liberal campaigners that did not achieve the victory hoped for on this occasion helped to build a firm foundation for campaigns ahead.

Matt Kidner in Caerphilly's Newbridge ward, Jonathan Pratt in Porthcawl and the fantastic team of campaigners that have really started to shake things up in rural eastern Carmarthenshire have a lit a liberal torch in some areas where that flame has not flickered for years if not decades.

Finally, a word for Mary Megarry in Pembrokeshire's Amroth ward. A former councillor for Amroth, she stood once more on her return home and lost by just two votes to her Conservative opponent who rode Theresa May's wave that quadrupled the Conservative group in Haverfordwest on the Friday morning.

Mary encapsulates the Welsh result – a narrow miss because of the national swing that overcame previous hopes of local gains across the board.

But we're Welsh liberals. We'll brush ourselves down and go again. Because Wales needs liberalism more than ever and we're not going to let Wales down.

Mark Cole is deputy president of the Welsh Liberal Democrats

WORD ASSOCIATION

The Lib Dems should press for an associate deal with the EU, not EEA membership, says Andrew Duff

In pitching for pro-European votes, Tim Farron will reinforce the Liberal Democrats' long-standing reputation as Britain's European party.

No surprises there. But he has a delicate path to tread. Even though the Lib Dem membership has been swollen by those who want to reverse Brexit, the party's official position is to accept the result of last year's referendum, the holding of which it promoted strongly. That makes the party fairly complicit in the country's decision to leave the European Union.

In calling - and presumably winning - the general election, Theresa May is entrenching her own form of Brexit. She proposes first to reach a deal on an Article 50 secession treaty and then to establish a new "deep and special partnership" with the EU based on a comprehensive free trade agreement plus cooperation in fighting crime and terrorism.

Quite fairly, she has challenged the opposition parties to spell out their own ideas for Britain's future European relationship.

Jeremy Corbyn, self-evidently, has no coherent alternative prospectus for Britain in Europe: his policy is to negotiate good 'access' to the single market. That is not a big ask: the Americans and Chinese have good access to the single market.

Farron wants more than Corbyn. He wants to stay in the single market. May, he says, "has no mandate to take us out of the single market". Well, up to a point. But there are only two ways to be a member of the single market: one is to remain a member of the EU; the other is to join EFTA and the European Economic Area, like Norway.

EEA membership could cost the UK up to £10bn gross per year in payments to the EU; it would allow the UK to try for its own international trade deals; it would liberate the country from the common agricultural and fisheries policies; but it would mean having to accept EU laws that it had not voted for; it would oblige the UK to continue with free movement of labour; and the UK would have to respect the jurisprudence, if not the direct jurisdiction, of the European Court of Justice.

The EEA is designed to prepare a country for EU accession. Would the EEA really be in the British national interest? Focussing the campaign on membership of the single market may well pall as election pounding takes its toll. As Jacques Delors remarked, nobody falls in love with a market.

So perhaps the Lib Dems should not trap themselves into the EEA option. There are better alternative forms of 'soft Brexit'. The European Parliament, under the guidance of Liberal leader Guy Verhofstadt, has invited the UK to negotiate an association agreement with the EU.

That seems a sensible proposition. The EU, which likes to do things in neat packages, already has a template for an association agreement in the one

crafted for Ukraine in 2014. There are also a number of useful political precedents for striking an association agreement - the earliest, with the UK, was signed in 1954.

A new UK-EU association agreement would be based around a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement and would allow for a much greater volume of trade in both goods and services than is permitted, for example, in the EU's recent free trade agreement with Canada.

It would allow the UK to retain its membership of a number of EU regulatory agencies. It would provide a framework for the negotiation of a deal on migrant workers. It could convert the rights enjoyed by EU citizens living in Britain into guaranteed privileges, and facilitate new arrangements for borders and customs, including a special deal for Ulster. The treaty of association would include provisions on political cooperation in justice and home affairs as well as in foreign policy, security and defence.

To allow the UK to exercise a greater political influence than that accorded to Norway in the EEA, there would need to be strong institutions, including summit meetings, a ministerial council, technical committees to ensure regulatory equivalence, a joint parliamentary committee between Westminster and the European Parliament, and a juridical tribunal to arbitrate disputes.

A joint secretariat would seek in the first instance to resolve legal, commercial and political difficulties that are bound to occur in the post-Brexit relationship. The engagement to mutual consultation would guarantee that the EU 27 could not in the future ignore its erstwhile partner.

For fear of upsetting her nationalist wing, the prime minister has not yet dared to flesh out her concept of the special relationship. The general election is the right time to put the prime minister to the test.

She is reported to loathe the Court of Justice, which she would have to learn to tolerate in any such association agreement. She would have to eat her words on not retaining "bits of EU membership". She needs to face down the far right, change her mind on institutions and commit the country to a dynamic political partnership with the EU 27.

If Liberal Democrats can show the way forward to an association agreement, we will have justified our reputation as Britain's European party.

Andrew Duff was Liberal Democrat MEP for the East of England 1999-2014.

ZOOPLA KEEPERS

Taxing the increased values of empty homes would see them either used or generating money for the UK, says David Cooper

The Liberal Democrats have proposed increasing income tax by 1p which would raise just £4.6bn pounds annually.

Income taxes have the harmful side effect of reducing the incentive for productive work. There is a better alternative, which would raise nearly twice the amount: a new tax called the Zoopla Recovery Tax.

This would work as follows: if an owner of domestic property is not resident in the UK for tax purposes, an annual levy would be payable on any house price appreciation for that property. The tax would be paid by all those who own housing and are either: foreign citizens not resident in the UK for tax purposes, or British citizens who are have non-domiciled tax status, or have been non-resident for over 15 years (the current time limit on voting rights), or corporate entities registered offshore.

This tax would raise about £8.5bn a year. UK housing stock is now worth £6.8tn. A report by the Bow Group estimates £680bn of UK housing is foreign owned and data from Nationwide indicates that annual real terms housing asset appreciation has been on 3% since 1990. If the tax aims to recover 50% of this, the gross tax base is about £10bn per annum, but if offset against other taxes it would net £8.5bn.

Taxes need a compelling story which resonates with the electorate, and this tax has one. We are rightly proud to live in a country with a strong economy, a stable government and respect for the rule of law. Thus housing in the UK is a safe and attractive haven for overseas investors. Often they leave properties empty: some residential developments in Britain have been likened to towers of safe-deposit boxes.

These investors are not taxed in Britain and do not fully contribute to our economy or society, but sit on vital housing assets needed by British people. Any upside of rising UK housing prices should not go to these investors, but should circulate around the UK economy. Britain has no duty to allow housing to function as a free safe deposit box service.

This is more liberal than some countries allow. In Switzerland, Denmark, Hong Kong, and Singapore foreign ownership of housing is severely restricted. A liberal approach allows offshore owners to invest in UK property provided this benefits the UK.

Foreign nationals who make Britain their tax base would not be liable to this tax. British citizens who have non-domiciled status, thus voluntarily elect for their earnings and taxation to be treated outside of the UK, should be liable, like Viscount Rothermere, part owner of the Daily Mail and Zoopla.

Britain is faced with an acute housing shortage yet the IPPR reports that there are 216,000 homes in England which have been empty for more than six months. That is more houses than are built in the

entire country during a year. The Bow Group considers pressure from foreign investors is a major factor in house price inflation and prices UK residents out of the market.

Taxes should be predictable and provide a smooth revenue flow. Since house prices are volatile it would be necessary to base the tax on averages taken over a number of years.

Housing asset appreciation varies across the country, and in a particular neighbourhood would be calculated using well accepted sources such as the property website Zoopla which uses real house price transaction data.

The tax would be additional to most existing property taxes such as council tax, but offset against some, reducing its net take to £8.5bn. Stamp Duty raises £1bn, and the annual tax on 'enveloped dwellings' for overseas corporations nets £0.1bn. Offshore homeowners who do the right thing and let out their property rather than leave it empty are taxed in the UK, via the non-resident landlords scheme, which the Treasury estimated nets £0.4bn annually. Offsetting this would provide a strong incentive to let out currently empty properties.

ALTER has long argued that long term solution to raising revenue is a land value tax. The Zoopla Tax is almost a pure land value tax; when average house prices reported by Zoopla rise by, say, 5% in a certain area in a year, this is normally due to land value increases, not because all the property owners have suddenly improved the fabric of their houses. Thus it recovers increases in land prices, and does not penalise property improvements. If successful it could set a precedent for a full land value tax.

This tax would show that the Liberal Democrats support those who contribute to our society and our economy. There would be three possible outcomes: offshore investors might hold on to their properties and pay the tax; investors might be motivated to rent out their properties; investors might sell, in which case a large number of empty homes would come onto the market at more affordable prices. The UK would win, win or win.

David Cooper is secretary of Liberal Democrats Action for Land Taxation and Economic Reform (ALTER)

CORE BLIMEY

Dear Liberator,

Nick Harvey's article (*Liberator* 382) setting his experience in North Devon against the core votes strategy makes vital points. However, it seems more an argument against a particular interpretation of a core votes strategy, than against any such strategy.

The basic concept of the argument advanced by David Howarth and Mark Pack is that we should seek to cement the support of natural Liberal Democrat voters, few of whom voted for us in 2015.

The devil is in defining what is a natural Liberal Democrat voter. As far as I understand it, their definition is based not on social profiling but on political attitudes. Polling shows that people who would consider voting for us are overwhelmingly pro-diversity ('drawbridge down') and moderately pro-redistribution (centre-left).

The Tories have the anti-diversity, anti-redistribution vote and Labour disputes the pro-diversity, pro-redistribution vote with us, held back by having to satisfy its numerous anti-diversity, pro-redistribution voters who are sought by Ukip. Of pro-diversity, anti-redistribution voters (Brownites) there are precious few.

This characterisation of our potential core vote rings broadly true for me, always remembering we'll attract voters for often perfectly good reasons who don't fit the mould.

It would be damaging to translate this strategically into social profiling. There are major short-term advantages in knowing that people with university degrees, young women, ethnic Indians and so on are more likely to vote for us than some other groups. Social information (how many council tenants, how many Methodists, how many houses in multiple occupation) has been used for ages in deciding target wards.

But applied nationally, it would exaggerate biases in the party's support. There is a small step from targeting graduates (young people, Hindu women) to not saying much that appeals to non-graduates (old people, Muslim men). It's not class or ethnicity that defines a Liberal, or specific policies, but an approach to the issues. Moreover, outside a handful of constituencies,

LETTERS



nowhere will the social profile of natural Liberal Democrat voters come anywhere near enough to win an election. Plenty of people don't fit any Connect profile but have broadly Liberal views.

So how does that fit with Nick's lost Westcountry voters? It's worth remembering the Liberal Party had a core vote, though only in a few places. There were people in Devon and Cornwall, in mid-Wales, in the small-town Pennines, in the Scottish Borders, Highlands and Islands, who stuck with the party through the hardest of times. On that bedrock parliamentary victories were built when the party revived.

What kept them loyal? How father and grandfather voted, sometimes. The strong link of Liberalism with Nonconformity and through that, a belief in collective self-help rather than selfish individualism or dependence. An instinctive leftishness (small against big, poor against rich, powerless against powerful) but a rejection of Labour's top-down statism and attempted uniformity.

Are these attitudes still relevant? Most of them, yes. They can link a Cambridge lecturer and a Ceredigion farmer, if we get the language right. A belief in 'live and let live', and a rejection of narrow nationalism are not the preserve of graduates or middle-class professionals. The difficult bit in constituencies like North Devon is where some Liberal attitudes (a belief in collective self-help and a wish to bring power closer to people, say, which can lead to a pro-Brexit vote) combine with some illiberal ones (anti-Gay, anti-immigrant).

We must appeal to the Liberal attitudes in the mix. We must not muffle our opposition to the illiberal ones. A previous west country hero, John Pardoe, said his voters were mostly in favour of hanging, and always knew he was anti and it was up to them to weigh that in the balance.

In summary: building a core vote yes; characterising it so we can't win in Mid Wales or Devon – no.

Simon Banks
Harwich

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Dear Liberator,

I read Alan Sherwell's account of the Journal of Liberal History's review of policy under the coalition with interest (*Liberator* 382) however he fails to query the overall conclusion that the decision to go into coalition was correct.

Instead of hanging together we were drawn and quartered which is probably an understatement in that our strength was reduced to a seventh the previous number. While Sherwell suggests that the reverse course would be difficult to prove it is unlikely that our strength would have been reduced to that extent even if it was halved although it would have been suggested that this would have been because we didn't go into coalition.

With a supply and confidence agreement tuition fee increases would have been dropped and probably the NHS reorganisation as well. It has been suggested that Cameron would have gone to the country after a reasonable period of time and won but there is no guarantee he could have secured a majority. It is unlikely that proportional representation will come until there are two consecutive hung parliaments as once a party wins a majority under first past the post it loses interest. Cameron's offer of a referendum was no great concession as it was unlikely to result in a yes vote and as AV wasn't proportional anyway we were at best lukewarm in our support.

The consequences of the coalition in particular the tuition fees fiasco are that the public are left with the impression that ministerial salaries and bums on seats were more important than principals. Perhaps the greatest long term consequence of the coalition albeit unintentional is that it paved the way to Brexit.

Andrew Hudson
Ulverston

WHAT ABOUT RUSSIA?

Dear Liberator,

Paul Hindley's article A vote for a Delusion (Liberator 383) rightly reminds us of the UK's current status and influence in the world. Unfortunately Mr Hindley fuels two delusions himself. First he claims "alongside the United States, Britain's armies had fought their way right into the heart of Hitler's Reich" and thus "triumphed on the continent."

No mention, sadly, of the contribution made by Russia (nor, for that matter, most of the Commonwealth countries, the Free French, Poles and several others).

The number of casualties is not necessarily an accurate measure of the effective contribution made to victory, but it is a measure of the level of sacrifice. The UK suffered 384,000 military deaths in the conflict, the US 407,000, and the USSR somewhere between 8-11m. We shouldn't try to airbrush this from history: the Russians don't.

The damage done by an exaggerated assumption of the importance of Britain's contribution to the defeat of Nazism is nothing new. As Jo Grimond noted in his *Memoirs*: "We came out of the war being told that we had saved the world by a unique act of courage against fearful odds. We naturally became convinced that the world must see that we were natural leaders of the West entitled by our deeds of valour and skill to rest on oars as far as work was concerned and owed a debt, indeed a living, by our neighbours."

Mr Hindley perpetuates this 'leadership' delusion by concluding his article with the hope that when we rejoin the EU (as I hope too), "only then will Britain be able to recognise the responsibility it has to be a leader of Europe."

Why this obsession with being leader? Why on earth can't we just settle for co-operative partnership with the other members, be it the EU, the UN or whatever?

Peter Wrigley
Batley and Spennings



REVIEWS

Limehouse [play] by Steve Waters, Polly Findlay (dir)

"The Labour Party is fucked" – is one of the opening lines of Steve Waters' play Limehouse.

And so it is - torn apart by divisions; constituency parties infiltrated by Trots; weak leadership; not sure what to do about Europe. But no – this isn't a play about the current state of the Labour Party but the establishment of the SDP on 26 March 1981. Told largely from the perspective of Debbie Owen, the 90 minute play imagines a fateful Sunday lunch that led to the Limehouse Declaration.

This is a drama, not a history of politics lecture, and as such it was enjoyable and quite tightly written. If you didn't already know the outcome you would be left wondering up to the last minute if this new party would ever be formed given the divisions and sheer distrust between the main players.

All five actors gave strong and energetic performances. But the script and set (a middle class kitchen, le creuset) did give it the feel of a bourgeois comedy and that meant that it lost political sharpness, and was vaguely disappointing. Those surviving members of the Gang of the Four who have seen the play have not commented publicly the extent to which it has accurately captured the tortured discussions they must have had at the time. But surely more challenging discussions must have taken place than we were allowed to see in the between the pasta and red wine.

It also parodied the key characters, but this may be my prejudice. While Roger Allam looked the part as Roy Jenkins he portrayed the man - surely one of the best and most thoughtful of home secretaries - as a pompous ass whose main intellectual

contribution to any discussion was a commentary on the vintage of the wine; similarly Bill Rogers came across as likeable but light weight (really?)

The portrayal of the dynamic partnership of Owens (and I have to say his arrogance) and the skills of Shirley Williams came across as the most authentic. What did come across strongly was, both the differences between the four main players which nearly strangled the party at birth, and might have done without the intervention of Debbie Owen, and the torment of Rogers and Williams at contemplating leaving the Labour Party.

Throughout the play Debbie plays a key role in facilitating the discussions. This may have actually been the case but it is also a useful device to provide some continuity in the comings and goings.

The play is not really about the formation of the SDP it is about the Labour Party, and the challenges it faced then to provide a credible alternative to conservatism while maintaining its roots with the working class - many of whom were voting Conservative - and the trade union movement.

It was Labour's inability to square that circle combined with weak and romantic leadership that led to the formation of SDP in 1981 and, arguably, to the creation of New Labour. As we know the SDP's centralist European style social democracy was popular with the voters for a while but, having formed an Alliance with the Liberals, it failed to make the breakthrough it had hoped.

In her final soliloquy Debbie asks whether that was inevitable and what might have happened had Thatcher not won the Falklands war and a corresponding boost to her popularity and/or if Williams stood as leader?

Arguably the First Past the Post voting system would still have defeated the SDP but its impact on both Labour and Liberals was more far reaching than suggested in the play.

Margaret Lally

Kill Boxes: Facing the Legacy of US-Sponsored Torture, Indefinite Detention, and Drone Warfare by Elisabeth Weber Punctum Books 2017

In a reflection of our age, the producers of the popular US TV show 24 said they would no longer feature torture scenes because they had become “trite,” and no longer surprising.

As an enthusiast for state-sanctioned torture and extra-judicial detention enters the White House, a book examining torture and Guantanamo seems timely.

Fans of Jacques Derrida will appreciate this volume, by the philosopher’s closest collaborator, German academic Elisabeth Weber. Yet, the most compelling section discusses the increasing use of drones, “being to kill without being able to be killed, invulnerable while ‘the other’ is absolutely vulnerable”.

Post-traumatic stress affects

communities in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia – countries with whom America is not officially at war – where drones hover constantly over hear, bringing the threat of death at any moment.

We can look forward to nanodrones, the size of insects, contributing to the military goals now rebranded as ‘security. Kill Boxes concludes with a sizzling essay by human rights champion Richard Falk who suggests current policies are the surest way to convince young Muslims that only violent resistance can protect their cultural space.

Rebecca Tinsley

Ireland’s Immortals, A History of the Gods of Irish Myth by Mark Williams Princeton 2016

I’ve never really got on with the myth cycle of Ireland, possibly because, as Mark Williams explains, there isn’t exactly a cycle in the sense as was composed for those of the Greeks and the Norsemen. Then there’s getting your tongue around the names – all too much trouble.

There is no continuous thread; we start with what monks chose to record, sometimes, or inventing

a Christianised perspective, and later inventions to meet the needs of the Irish zeitgeist of the moment – Lady Gregory, Yeats, AE (George Russell) et al. In this, and I hope he will take it as a complement, Williams has done for the Irish Gods what Ronald Hutton has done for British folklore. If, as I anticipate, we can expect further volumes – in the main, we’re talking Gods here, not heroes. The Táin Bó Cúailnge is necessarily, all but ignored; that would be a book in itself, and one to look forward to.

Stewart Rayment

The Battle for Yellowstone, morality and the sacred roots of environmental conflict by Justin Farrell Princeton University Press 2017

Recently Eastbourne’s Liberal Democrat controlled council polled local residents, asking whether they would prefer it to sell the freehold of its four Downland farms or make cuts to frontline services.

The decision of the public was that they wished the council to retain ownership of the farms and it will honour this. The potential sale is off the table. Much of the issue was around public access to



open space in the South Downs National Park.

Councils have borne the brunt of the Government's brutal austerity programme which has seen Eastbourne's grant reduced by £6m a year; an astonishing 60% constriction. These cuts have hit all councils very hard and are having a devastating impact on frontline services, though almost uniquely, Lib Dem run Eastbourne has avoided cuts to its frontline services thus far.

I've trudged over these farmlands for many years; I wouldn't say there is anything spectacular about them (that is reserved for the white cliffs beyond), but they are part of an overall landscape of open Downland.

While I love this terrain I wouldn't compare it to Yellowstone – the world's first national park. When Justin Farrell commenced this book, he probably couldn't imagine that Donald Trump might become President of the United States, probably didn't even think that the Republicans might win the election, and even if they did, may not have thought them so malign, since it is understood, or at least believed, that there is something of a consensus Stateside for their national parks.

National parks contribute an estimated \$646bn each year to the US economy, in stimulus from recreation, and create 6.1m jobs. Yet Congress is looking to asset strip national parks. Utah Republicans seek to reverse the Bear's Ear National Park – one of the last acts of the Obama administration. Trump's ego is piqued by tweets from park employees on climate change – they are now forbidden to tweet. So, I'm sorry Justin, it looks like the battle for Yellowstone is just starting.

Arizona Republicans, funded by oil and mining interests, even have their eyes on the Grand Canyon hinterland. That said, this book may provide some of the answers. Among its studies, we find old westerners combining to fight fracking proposals at Hoback, Sublette County, Wyoming. These people were not naturally against the energy industry, nor generally against its extraction, but deemed Hoback 'too special to drill'. The broad coalition required the focus on the specific issue. There may be lessons from that for activists in

the UK.

There is also a study of the reintroduction of wolves in the Yellowstone National Park in 1995. This has been mooted in the Britain since the 1960s, so advocates on either side can draw on Farrell's analysis of the sociology of their American counterparts. The buffalo is less of an issue for us, though the European bison was once native (there is a shortage of survivors generally, making the gene-pool poor, and attempted reintroduction in the Alladale Wilderness Reserve in Sutherland was unsuccessful).

Since Farrell's focus is primarily on the sociology rather than the ecology of reintroduction and maintenance of species he opens arguments that are not usually encountered, and valuable as such, though I would add the caution, at least for UK readers, that the hunting lobby is much less of a player here, though it too maintains an interest in conservation.

Stewart Rayment

Flâneuse by Lauren Elkin Chatto & Windus 2016 £16.99

For centuries the flâneur, one who rambles about, exploring a city, has been celebrated in literature. What about his female counterpart, the flâneuse? Lauren Elkin brings to our attention the literary women who have dared to venture out, to acquaint themselves with whatever city they find themselves in. She objects to how the flâneur has from the 18th century on, been described as invariably male, as if, she says, "a penis were a requisite walking appendage, like a cane."

Much of the narrative concerns Elkin's own experiences. A native New Yorker, she is also quite at home in London and Paris, so these are cities she focuses on, like Jean Rhys, Virginia Woolf, and George Sand, all flâneuses who told of their walks in the city. Elkin also touches on Venice and Tokyo, but more lightly, more like a tourist and not a resident. (In Paris at a talk last year, she admitted that being a flâneuse can have its negative side: she's had unpleasant encounters with men, been harassed and even groped).

Still she has a marked preference

for downtowns, the city centres. Elkin rightly rejects the American suburbs: "A culture that does not walk is bad for women." She invites us to think of all the rebellious suburban women who have been killed off in literature, noting that the city supplies the best chance of a just world, that can take place only if one has the freedom of movement that a city can offer.

Such freedom came easily to George Sand, an early 'liberated woman', who identified with the working classes, with ordinary men and women. To reinvent herself, Sand had to forego the conventional clothing of the time and put on mannish attire, a jacket and pants in heavy grey cloth, this in itself illegal behaviour for a woman in the 1800s.

As a walker with a lively curiosity about cities, Elkin once followed a man whom she identifies as 'X' to Tokyo, "just to avoid choosing not to".

Her life in Tokyo was affected by this increasingly tense and unrewarding relationship, and by her stay with him in a modern high-rise apartment circled by highways that was hardly the right place for one who likes to learn a city on her feet. But she concludes, although the relationship ended, she learned to love Tokyo on its own terms.

Elkin contributes a look at the lives of major writers and their interaction with their cities. She shows the city as a place favourable to revolution, led by women in 1789 and by students in 1968. It is here that she stumbles, treating the uprisings of 1968 as a mere student frolic, while Mavis Gallant, whom she cites, saw them as a deadly serious social upheaval causing deprivation and destruction in her immediate neighborhood, and John Ardagh, in France and the New Century, mentioned that these uprisings brought in serious revolutionaries, Maoists, Troyskites, anarchists and others with a potential for violence.

In *Flâneuse*, Elkin leads readers on a merry romp through literature, history, and film, adding her own stories to the mix. This is a book that merits re-reading and will inspire the reader to take another look at certain classics.

She leaves us with phrases and thoughts to savour: "Postcards are

the wanderer's flare signal, shot up into the dark, an announcement of presence." As an immigrant, she says, "you will always feel exposed, as if you're missing your top layer of skin". And, as a woman, a flâneuse, "we reserve our right to disturb the peace, to observe, occupy, and to organise space on our own terms". A worthy objective!

Christine Graf

Return to the Shadows by Alison Pargeter Saqi Books 2016 £16.99

For those of us who monitor developments in the Middle East and North Africa region, one of the most fascinating aspects of recent years has been the failure of what one might call mainstream Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood to fully capitalise on the so-called Arab Spring.

True, in Egypt the Brotherhood triumphed in the post-Mubarak elections and Mohamed Morsi became president, but both he and the Brotherhood proved singularly unfit for the task, leading to his overthrow by a military coup, but with widespread public support.

In Tunisia, the cradle of the Arab awakening, An Nahda did get to have a share of power, but again had largely to withdraw after showing itself not up to the job. And in Libya, the Brotherhood never proved strong enough to be a main contender after Gaddafi's fall from power.

How and why this was the case is the subject of Alison Pargeter's latest book, which uses interview material as well as documentary research, meticulously referenced but put over in a style that will appeal to both academics and general readers alike. The author is particularly strong on the rise and fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, sober but incisive in her analysis and criticism, deftly recounting a story that has certain characteristics of a Greek tragedy.

The sections on Libya and Tunisia are shorter and less powerful, but nonetheless fascinating. Overall, a significant achievement.

Jonathan Fryer

Watching War Films with my Dad by Al Murray Century 2013.

This is much more than a memoir or the book on war films and growing up in the 1970s. Yes it covers each of those aspects. It is much more interesting than being a memoir and it does include a lot of anecdotes, career history, tour highlights and some introspection.

The latter mostly to reinforce points in the narrative. Yes it is a book about war films and war toys of every type, and with Al Murray being an enthusiast for World War Two history he of course delves into the facts, the errors and inaccuracies in the movies and toys.

Anyone of the post war generation who grew up in the 1970s watching war movies will find the book interesting (he covers much more recent times too). It is a book with anecdotes about modern Britain – in the comic incisive style of the Pub Landlord.

This is mostly about World War 2 and also World War 1, but Murray covers many other historical examples and periods and he tells you a lot that you didn't know that you thought you knew about (how close the German victory on Crete was), unless probably you are another war history buff.

Murray clearly loves France and Germany and likes to explain about these countries to his British and wider audience. He loves Europe but as a patriotic kid of the '70s he loves Britain – the good Britain of values and being on the right side. Obviously he isn't uncritical. His chapter on the history of history is excellent and very educational.

Kiron Reid

Black Day at the Bosphorus by MH Baylis Old Street, 2015

I don't read a lot of crime fiction just as I don't watch much crime drama because it is always about murder. This annoys me as murder is a very infrequent crime, so the dramas are always very misleading about crime in society, and because they are not very sophisticated or interesting as they are always about murder.

As a lecturer in criminal law

we always teach the law largely through the rules about murder – because they are the most serious cases, the leading authorities and just a lot more interesting than the actual real crime, minor theft, assault, sex and criminal damage.

Of course Agatha Christie, Morse, Endeavour, Foyle's War (often filmed in Liverpool), occasional Taggart and Hot Fuzz are exceptions. I also made an exception for Black Day at the Bosphorus Café for two reasons. Firstly because I liked the brightly colourful cover, second because the author is my old school friend Matthew Baylis. I'd bought and never quite read his first two books so thought I'd better read this one.

It is the best book involving crime, north London, and planning law I have read since Terry Jones' Trouble on the Heath. Baylis' hero, Rex Tracey (is a Okocim Polish beer drinking (don't try it) cynical local newspaper reporter who also solve crime.

Set in the fictional borough of 'Harringay and Tottenham', amid the very real multicultural and frequently changing north London, the backdrop is the death of a Kurdish girl, Mina, and murky goings on at the council. In step with the mid-2010's the council is run by a charismatic former Lib Dem lay preacher turned independent. The book is a bit hard on the council, illuminates Kurdish and Yazidi identity, puts thought into the atrocities of the partition of Cyprus in 1974 and implications for communities today, and gives real insight into the challenges for local journalism amid rapidly changing technological and consumer times. It does this while Baylis weaves a colourful picture of the districts covered by Tracey.

I have three minor criticisms. A map would be useful for those of us who don't know these parts of north London, the real Haringey and Tottenham, and some of the political narrative is a bit jammed in. It would be nice if some of these characters that the author spends so much time introducing us to survive

into future novels. The ambitious young female Labour candidate, Eve Reilly, perhaps or the now disgraced council leader.

Kiron Reid

Sunday

I am writing this at the top of the hawking tower at Bonkers Hall; I have set up my HQ here for the local elections. The view commands a sweep of country from the shores of Rutland Water to the Uppingham road. Armed with a pair of field glasses or a sharp-eyed orphan, I will get an early warning if any other party has the cheek to put up in the Bonkers Hall ward.

With the Bonkers Patent Shuttleworth Press installed in the room below, and a spiral staircase giving easy access to the kitchens, I decided to run the local general election campaign from here too. Looking out, I see my tenants queueing to collect today's Focus leaflet. I am gratified that they even come out in the rain, though my tried and tested slogan 'Remember your rents fall due on Lady Day' probably has something to do with that.

Monday

Rutland, of course, will remain in the European Union. Every day ships laden with pork pies and stilton set sail from Oakham Quay to cross Rutland Water and then the North Sea. They return with wines, exotic spices and all the things that make life jolly. Why would anyone want to throw that away?

This afternoon I join a party of military engineers to inspect out border with Leicestershire. Some have spoken of a 'hard border' after Brexit. Surveying its tank traps, minefields and the Rutland Military Canal, we conclude that it would be difficult to make it any harder.

Tuesday

To the offices of the New New European. Who should I find working there but my old friends Freddie and Fiona? "We've written an article about Skegness," says one. "You won't have heard of it, but it's a funny little place in something called 'Lincolnshire'." "All the people there voted for Brexit, so we had a good laugh at them." "And now Paul Nuttall has decided to stand there, so we have laughed at them even more."

I ask if they have ever been to Lincolnshire. "Oh no, we've never been to the North." "Well, I did go to Hertford once, but I didn't like it. You couldn't get artisan quinoa."

"And do you think," I further ask, "that laughing at the good people of Skegness will make them less likely to vote for the odious Nuttall? Don't you want them to change their minds and support Europe as they did in 1975?" "That's not what the New New European is about. What we are interested in is selling our newspaper in North London."

Wednesday

Despite the blustery weather, I call on one of my neighbouring landowners - the fellow is a died-in-the-wool Tory, but a Decent Sort in his way. I find him in a state of great excitement as the prime minister is also on his estate. "She has come to Rutland to meet the voters," he explains. "And where is she?" I ask.

Lord Bonkers' Diary

"She's locked herself in my gardener's potting shed and refuses to come out." After I have offered the observation that Meadowcroft would never put up with it, we brave the wind to see how she is getting on.

A cluster of journalists surrounds the door - occasionally one jots a question on a piece of paper and slides it under the door - but of ordinary voters there is no sign. "She wanted me to have my domestic staff lined up

to listen while she made a speech, but somehow that didn't seem quite cricket to me," my host observes.

Just then a tremendous gust lifts the shed clean off the ground and deposits it several fields away in a duck pond. "Not quite as strong and stable as she thought," I remark, as we watch a muddy figure wade to the shore with a mallard on her head.

Thursday

I meet PC McNally on his beat, as he helps an old lady across the village high street - it not being the apple scrumping season, this is how he spends most of his time at present. (Incidentally, the walls around my orchard are at a sporting height to allow a fair contest between the aforementioned constable and the local urchinry.) Poor McNally is a far from laughing policeman as he tells me that Diane Abbott has launched Labour's new 'Coppers for Coppers' scheme. "They're going to pay us just £30 a year," he tells me with a sob in his voice. "I'll need a new bicycle soon and even a second-hand truncheon costs a packet." I reassure him that there is no possibility of Labour winning the election with Corbyn and 'Semtex' McDonnell at the helm, leaving him in a happier frame of mind. Incidentally, while we are talking, the old lady re-crosses the road under her own steam and then scuttles away when PC McNally catches sight of her.

Friday

Were you in York for the Liberal Democrats' Spring Conference? Perhaps I met you there? It is always a pleasure to visit that historic city, take tea at Betty's and enjoy an Old Peculier in one of its many public houses. I also think of Whip-Ma-Whop-Ma-Gate whenever I am there. What a scandal that was!

Saturday

I spend the day aboard the Liberal Democrat Battle Bus, visiting some of our best prospects in South West London and taking the opportunity to pick 'High Voltage' Cable's brains about my investments. I remain convinced that Farron would take the pews out of St Asquith's and have as all singing 'Shine, Jesus, Shine' given half a chance, but he is the most engaging of companions. No wonder the mint cake workers of Kendal vote for him en bloc.

He asks if I would like to smell his spaniel, whereupon I reply: "Try one of my setters, they're milder."

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