

liberator



- 🔦 Put power where it belongs - Norman Lamb
- 🔦 Limits of a progressive alliance - Sarah Olney
- 🔦 The state has work to do - John Pugh

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Commentary.....	3
Radical Bulletin	4..7
PUT POWER WHERE IT BELONGS.....	6..7
Liberals must rediscover our radical roots to tackle the endemic powerlessness that helped lead to Brexit, argues Norman Lamb	
NO SHORTCUTS	8..9
Sarah Olney benefitted from a progressive alliance but says this approach has severe limitations	
THE STATE HAS WORK TO DO.....	10..11
Orange Bookers and Blairites thought the state could be reduced to mere commissioning of services, but a state that wants to enable has to be active too, says John Pugh	
DEAR VINCE.....	12
Any new leader has a relatively short window of general goodwill and the opportunity for a fresh start to show where they want to take the Liberal Democrats. So, Liberator asked: "What is the most important thing Vince Cable should do now?"	
WHO ARE THEY ALL?	13
New Liberal Democrats now vastly outnumber old ones, but who are they and what do they want, asks Sarah Green	
THE THINKER WHO FORESAW TRUMP AND BREXIT	14..15
Neglected philosopher Richard Rorty has a lot to tell liberals now about what happened when the cultural left supplanted the reformist one, says Jonathan Calder	
MISSION IMPROBABLE	16..17
Opposing Brexit and the economic crisis it threatens isn't Liberal Democrat policy, but the context against which the party must set its policy, says Roger Hayes	
THE ANSWER IS IN OUR POCKETS.....	18..19
More homes are urgently needed, but how can they be financed? There is plenty of money that savers could be tempted to part with for local projects, says Wendy Kyrle-Pope	
SOMETHING NASTY IN THE GARDEN.....	20..21
Building 'garden' towns and villages will eat up land wastefully and increase traffic. There is another way to deliver homes, says Jon Reeds	
THE GHOSTS WHO TEACH AFRICA'S CHILDREN	22..23
Too much foreign aid money goes into perpetuating inadequate education systems in sub-Saharan Africa and the Liberal Democrats should press for radical change, says Rebecca Tinsley	
THE TEN TRIBES OF THE LIB DEMS	24..25
Just joined the Lib Dems and wondering where you fit in? David Boyle offers a handy guide	
TWO-TIER TEARS.....	26
The split between cabinet and backbench councillors has made the former unaccountable and the latter powerless, says Andrew Hudson	
WHY VINCE WORRIED ME	27
Peter Wrigley went to Vince Cable's 'hustings' in Leeds and heard six things that alarmed him	
REVIEWS	28..31
Lord Bonkers' Diary	32
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COMMENTARY

SHOCK OF THE NEW

A thread runs through a number of articles in this issue of *Liberator* - which can be described as 'the referendum has exposed a large number of people who feel (justifiably or otherwise) left behind, so how could the Liberal Democrats become relevant to them'?

Juts after the referendum, *Liberator* 379 noted that while everyone who is any or all of idiot, bigot or nostalgic fantasist voted Leave, not everyone who voted Leave fitted these categories.

An issue later, *Liberator* argued that while the party had been correct to identify with Remain voters - as the most obvious source of support - it had to think about what being the party of 'Remain' would mean if Brexit came to pass, given the Lib Dems are not in control of events.

How is the party to get from here to there?

Some, not necessarily the writers in this issue, look back to the glory days of community politics when Liberals could quite often be found representing deprived communities.

Others talk about reconnecting with the party's 'natural supporters', although since the party spent the Coalition period pissing off each group of 'natural supporters' in turn it is questionable how amenable they would be.

There tends to be an assumption that everyone knows what 'community politics', 'natural supporters' and 'liberal values' mean, but in a party undergoing a potentially major change with a vastly increased membership, can anyone be sure?

Community politics too often morphed from its original intentions about local people taking power into super-activists being expected to take an area's problems on their shoulders.

This was sometimes successful but the party risked local evaporation each time a few key people burnt out. This is hardly a model to follow.

Also doing a good impression of having evaporated are the traditional votes (in no particular order) in the Pennines, Scottish borders, the Highlands outside Caithness, mid-Wales outside Ceredigion, northern cities and parts of the south-west.

No law says any of these places have to return to the party and there may be a hard calculation needed about the use of scarce human and financial resources.

Those resources have increased in a quite astonishing way since 2015 with a huge influx of new members.

While they should certainly not be viewed as a monolithic bloc (and anyone who claims to 'know' what new members think should be ignored), we can make some observations about their likely inclinations.

Those that joined in 2015 having never previously belonged must have been at least not fundamentally alienated by the party's role in the Coalition.

Common sense suggests that, given the party's positioning under Tim Farron, those who joined since the referendum are extremely unlikely to be Leave supporters.

An analysis of new members in this issue of *Liberator* suggests they live overwhelming in the south east, and have started to set up new informal structures that bypass local parties which they find - presumably - either moribund, parochial or run by small groups not easily joined by outsiders.

Will thousands of new members, many of whom must have been motivated to join by national and international issues, be interested in traditional community politics anywhere, let alone in formerly Lib Dem 'left behind' areas in which few of them live? Will they demand non-geographic means of party membership?

There is no reason why a party cannot be proudly pro-EU and also concerned for the welfare and prosperity of those on lower incomes, and indeed if this connection had been more apparent the disaster of the referendum might have been averted.

But 60% of the party is now new and those versed in traditional community politics, and who think they know its natural supporters, are now vastly outnumbered by new members who know may both know little of these matters and have joined for other reasons. This is going to be interesting.

ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

A little remarked anniversary took place this year - it is 30 years since the Conservative party won a general election with a convincing majority.

True it won by 20 in 1992 but that was whittled away by defections and by-election losses, as surely would have been the majority of 12 won in 2015 had Theresa May's rush of blood to the head not happened.

We might note in passing that the Conservatives' beloved first past the post system - which supposedly delivers strong government - has now failed to do so for 12 years, having successively delivered a hung parliament, a tiny majority, then another hung parliament.

This suggests the Tories may be a good deal more beatable than they look. In 2010 they couldn't win outright against a startlingly unpopular Labour government and in 2017 fought a campaign so dire that it reinvigorated their opponents while destroying their wafer thin majority - and that despite the collapse of Ukip and May's posturing over a 'red, white and blue' Brexit.

The Tories will not vanish - there will sadly always be a political market for selfishness - but perhaps history is not on their side.

RADICAL BULLETIN

GORDON GALLOPS

Tim Gordon's departure as Lib Dem chief executive will be a loss borne with fortitude in parts of the party, in particular those decidedly unimpressed with HQ's nationally-mailed out campaign literature during the 2017 general election (Liberator 385).

Gordon was a Clegg-era appointment, and like most people appointed to any post by Clegg was chosen, among other things, for being unlikely to challenge the leader.

His political experience extended little beyond having unsuccessfully contested an Islington council seat in 2006, and while Gordon won genuine plaudits for his financial management - keeping the party afloat when it might well not have - his touch was less sure on political matters.

Among the problems at HQ were that Tim Farron never put his stamp on it. It has largely been run by Clegg-era holdovers without any sense that Farron had his own people there to deliver what he wanted.

When Gordon went it was sudden. Federal Finance and Resources Committee chair Peter Dunphy has said that the Federal Board was notified of Gordon's departure only five minutes before a meeting of party staff, while HQ directors were told only two hours earlier.

Gordon had, before his decision to leave, become involved in three disputes, and while the precise rights and wrongs of them are unclear, they are unlikely to have helped him.

The first (Liberator 385) concerned a donation made specifically for tracker polling in target seats, where the donor was offended by this work not being completed.

Next came Gordon's failure to pay the party's €14,000 subscription to the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE).

Officers of the Federal International Relations Committee requested in February that this should be paid, but nothing happened.

Most of the money involved finds its way back for campaigns work, but the Lib Dems' failure to affiliate left the party with the embarrassing prospect of being 'named and shamed' at ALDE meetings - or even refused permission to vote - just when it is trying to maintain its influence there ahead of Brexit. ALDE covers countries beyond the EU.

Gordon's other problem was less clear cut but concerned the new members' body Your Liberal Britain (YLB).

YLB has done some useful policy and digital engagement work and with Gordon having not allocated resources in HQ to engage with and mobilise members for the election, YLB offered to help.

The problem was that YLB was simultaneously fund-

raising, seeking some £200,000 over several years and had quite sensibly talked to HQ to avoid approaching the same donors used by the party.

HQ staff who were there to work on member engagement - but who had not been enabled to do so - thus saw an external body offering to do the same job and winning Gordon's enthusiastic backing. The fundraising issue then became a source of confusion with some getting the idea that Gordon wanted to give YLB a huge sum of money to do work that HQ already paid staff to perform.

Needing a chief executive fast, Vince Cable appointed former North Devon MP Nick Harvey on an interim basis.

Harvey may spring a few surprises. Beneath the urbane exterior there lurks a ruthless campaigner.

TARGET PRACTICE

Maybe the cheery cockney shout of "leave it aht will yer", could be heard directed at London region officers when a group of recent Lib Dem candidates in the capital gathered for a less than convivial drink in Westminster's Clarence pub.

London region came down heavily on Chelsea & Fulham candidate Louise Rowntree and Kensington's Annabel Mullins for running full campaigns and failing to divert to the target seat of Richmond Park (Liberator 385).

Both their campaigns scored substantial vote increases but with shares of 11% and 12% respectively were miles adrift of winning. Matters were hardly helped by Rowntree holding an 'election pint' drink at 7pm on polling night.

Rowntree has now left the party after she had her candidate status put under review for this.

It's not just London where this is happening, similar reports come from far and wide of candidates being unhappy about being 'reviewed'. The English party undertakes a review for every candidate that stands in a general election, but the howls of anguish seem louder this time.

Other London candidates, notably Putney's Ryan Mercer and Poplar & Limehouse's Elaine Bagshaw, were also angered that they were told to soft pedal and help target seats instead and are now plotting to unseat London region chair Chris Maines. The Clarence meeting is understood though to have been unable to agree on a rival candidate.

Seeking to oust Maines on the grounds that any of Putney, Kensington, Chelsea or Poplar should have been allowed to fight full campaigns sounds like a line unlikely to find favour with party members.

There is though a serious point to resolve here. A lot of candidates were new and may genuinely not have known that they were only really being asked to fly the flag in a hopeless seat rather than fight it with

enthusiasm.

A candidate who has been told they are a name on the ballot paper and should go elsewhere is clearly delinquent if they do not, but was this made clear to all beforehand?

And was the English Party's usual post-election review process outlined and explained to them in advance?

PERPETUAL MOTION

Federal Conference Committee's original decision to have no debate on Brexit at Bournemouth but instead a mere consultative session was greeted with the sound of raspberries being blown.

A petition was duly got up to call a special conference, which led to complicated deal in which the consultative session is still on the agenda but a motion is waiting in the wings that would commit the party to repeal article 50.

To suspend standing orders to debate that motion its proponents must exhaust all avenues of appeal, so to quell this rebellion FCC has contorted itself into the faintly mad position of agreeing to reject an appeal so that a suspension of standing orders may be debated to get the motion taken instead of the consultative session.

This is all the by-product of an oversight made when the party switched to one member one vote for conference.

The number of people needed to call a special conference was left at 200 from 20 local parties - quite a high hurdle in the days when this was 200 conference representatives rather than 200 members (and especially before they were connected electronically).

Now almost anyone can round up the requisite number. It is only a wonder we have been spared special conferences on site value rating, estuarial barrages or other common hobbyhorses.

Meanwhile this procedural horror must be about the worst possible advertisement for conference to put before new members.

SOMEONE, ANYONE?

Mark Williams' defeat in Ceredigion - aided by a monumental cockup by party HQ (Liberator 385) - has left Wales without a Lib Dem/ Liberal MP for the first time since the dawn of party politics.

Which is awkward since the Welsh party's constitution requires the leader to be an MP or AM and there are now no MPs and the only AM, Kirsty Williams, is the country's education minister and does not want to be leader too beyond the immediate short term.

A special conference was due in early September to widen the circle from which leaders may be drawn. The question is who?

A peer possibly, though there are fewer than half a dozen from Wales, or maybe a recent candidate? Don't all rush.

HARMONY AMONG NATIONS

Bemused Federal Board members listened with growing surprise as Federal International Relations Committee chair Robert Woodthorpe Browns tore into his own committee's report at its summer meeting.

This curious situation arose after FIRC's then secretary Mark Valladares submitted a report that said FIRC was expected to "advise the party on European and international policy", yet had no formal place on Federal Policy Committee or policy working groups.

It went on to describe the relationship between FIRC and the FB as "non-existent since our re-designation as a constitutionally-defined committee" with FIRC "left to its own devices in seeking to define its role and develop its purpose," and finally asking the FB to advise what its representative on FIRC was supposed to do.

"Think of [this report] as a cry for help in a seemingly uncaring world," Valladares concluded.

Valladares says FIRC saw his report first. Woodthorpe Browne, who found its tone embarrassing and belittling of his committee, says he would have stopped it going to the FB had he been able to.

The FIRC report in the conference reports to party members now bears little resemblance to Valladares' original, which described FIRC as "the Cinderella committee of the party, erratically mentioned in the constitution" and for good measure "generally overlooked by the Federal Board...we're trying not to take it personally." Valladares has since resigned as FIRC secretary.

TOILET TROUBLE

The Mitcham and Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet nearly got a trip to the seaside this autumn, but will instead be in the Home Counties, there having been two strong contenders for the worst motion submitted for the Lib Dem conference.

Worthing's motion at least had the merit of brevity. Its read in its entirety: "We propose that any news item shown to be inaccurate has to be corrected with the same prominence as the initial story was promoted."

Shown to be inaccurate by whom? Who is to be the great arbiter of the accuracy of news items? What does 'accuracy' mean anyway when so many news stories depend on readers' values for interpretation?

The toilet - awarded at every conference since 1983 - though is going to Wycombe, for a long and convoluted motion on a bafflingly complex local dispute which, whatever its rights and wrongs, is plainly incapable of being sensibly debated at conference.

The nub of the issue appears to be that the Buckinghamshire County Council's Lib Dems sit in a group that includes the sole Labour member and two councillors who, at district level, sit as the East Wycombe Independents and stand against the local Lib Dems.

Wycombe's motion calls for the approval of local party executives to be required before a council group can form any group (in this case an opposition one) with any other party.

Whatever the merits of that idea, it would need a constitutional amendment, not a motion so detailed as to be incapable of debate.

PUT POWER WHERE IT BELONGS

Liberals must rediscover our radical roots to tackle the endemic powerlessness that helped lead to Brexit, argues Norman Lamb

Returning to Westminster with 12 MPs felt like something of a triumph after a gruelling campaign, but there is no doubt that this was a sobering election for the Liberal Democrats.

The fall in our national vote share and a record number of lost deposits was disappointing given what we were up against: on the one extreme, an increasingly arrogant and unsympathetic Conservative Party with a prime minister who had fought a woeful campaign, content with sacrificing the country's economic and social interests in pursuit of a hard Brexit; and on the other, a backward-looking Labour Party in the grip of an emboldened hard-left, hoisting the red flag of 1970s socialism.

Two years after paying a heavy price for our role in government, the scene was set for the Lib Dem fightback. It failed to materialise. Theresa May's snap election gamble backfired spectacularly, but not enough to cost her the keys to Number 10.

Jeremy Corbyn is now riding high in the opinion polls. Meanwhile, the Lib Dems are floundering in the single digits, struggling to assert our relevance in a volatile political climate.

Liberals have to ask ourselves why we have been so roundly rejected at the last two elections, why our very existence is being so embarrassingly ignored at a time when the need for a progressive Liberal force, which could genuinely compete for power, is greater than ever.

Corbyn offers no solutions to the big challenges we face. But it has become painfully obvious that many people simply do not know what the Liberal Democrats stand for.

We have failed to articulate how our principles are relevant to people's lives, their concerns and anxieties. We came across to many of our natural supporters as arrogantly dismissing their views. I met countless people who felt that we regarded them as stupid for voting for Brexit. This is never a good position for a political party.

The irony is that the revolution under way in society – a smashing away of deference, technology giving people a voice, people no longer willing to accept bog-standard public services, traditional authority and elites – makes this age ideally suited to Liberals. But we have to understand and respond to these changes to prosper.

FRUSTRATIONS AND DISCONTENTS

If we are to rebuild our party and become the fulcrum of a new Liberal progressive force, we have to first understand people's frustrations and discontents, not

dismiss them.

We then have to define an optimistic and compelling vision which resonates with people. We have to win the battle of ideas for how we meet the big challenges – re-defining ourselves as a radical, dynamic and positive force for change. We will not win by just opposing, defending the status quo, hurling abuse at our opponents.

Liberalism has a rich heritage. But throughout its history, the core principle that has underpinned our philosophy is a fundamental belief in individual and community power: trusting in people, spreading power and opportunity, and giving individuals the freedom to flourish and shape their own lives. This conviction, burning at the heart of British liberalism, is the reason why I am, and always will be, a liberal.

Brexit was partly the result of people's concerns about power that is remote, unaccountable and bureaucratic.

It was also a symptom of a much wider social malaise: a crippling sense of powerlessness and injustice. Extreme and growing inequalities of wealth, a country horribly divided between the rich south east and the rest. The anti-establishment rhetoric of Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson et al exploited the discontent among the vast swathes of society who have long felt neglected, disenfranchised and left behind. They sought to divide people. Yet Liberals should be able to understand and identify with this sense of helplessness, of lack of power. We should think about how we address those concerns in a constructive way.

Powerlessness is endemic in modern Britain. I witnessed it with a vengeance as health minister. So often, I heard stories of people without a voice, ignored by an uncaring centralised bureaucracy. The father of an adult patient in Winterbourne View, who told me that he felt guilty that he could do nothing to help his son. No one would listen to his complaints. The treatment of Fauzia, a teenage girl with autism kept locked up in an institution for two years, suffering constant physical restraint and seclusion. The family banging their heads against a brick wall, trying to get her out of there with no-one listening. I hear it in my advice surgeries and constituency postbag. And here's the really disturbing thing. We got help for that family. But they were articulate. They knew how to contact their MP and fight the system. But what about those who can't? How can we tolerate this in a civilised society?

But it's not just in health and care. The residents of Grenfell Tower, for instance, had made their concerns clear, but nothing happened. And then the tragedy. Powerless citizens up against an uncaring

bureaucracy.

In the workplace, many employees see their real wages and pension rights eroded as company bosses award themselves massive hikes in salary. The High Pay Centre reported that leading bosses now typically earn 129 times more than their employees. And those employees have no say, no power.

I have worked with a former bank employee who tried to whistleblow against his employer in the run up to the crash. He is now out of work with his health ruined, but none of the leaders of those banks who caused such mayhem have been held to account. My constituent has felt powerless and ignored by both his former employer and a regulator apparently unwilling or unable to confront the egregious behaviour of financial institutions.

We also know that people feel that their voices are ignored in Brussels, Whitehall and town halls. All of this contributed to the deep sense of anger that manifested on 23 June 2016. The remedy to such powerlessness will not be found in the statist, centralising instincts of Labour, nor in a Conservative Party that has consistently failed to tackle the gross levels of inequality that stain our country. If putting power in the hands of individuals and communities is the *raison d'être* of the Liberal Democrats, surely we should be best placed to address the concerns of those who feel that they have no control over their lives, their communities and their futures.

Our mission should now be a wholesale rethink of how we define and articulate Liberalism in the modern age. This will involve significant changes to how our party behaves. Too often it feels as if we are an exclusive sect divorced from the reality of 21st century Britain. We must learn to listen and to understand. And we must be open to working with others beyond our party as we shape a Liberal vision for our country.

Our guiding principle should be to confront and dismantle the concentrations of power which leave people feeling powerless and ignored. We should be on the side of the patient, the consumer, the tenant, the employee, the local community, and indeed the dynamic entrepreneur seeking to challenge monopolies and vested interests.

DISTRIBUTING POWER

Wherever power is concentrated, Liberals should be seeking to break it down, to distribute it. In our policymaking, we should scrutinise every proposal and ask ourselves: does this disperse or does it concentrate power? If it concentrates power, the presumption should be that it is rejected.

Here are just some ideas for the direction we should take.

First, we should recognise that the vital mission of building a united and prosperous Europe is undermined by the way in which the EU has evolved. As David Boyle and Joe Zammit-Lucia put it in their book *‘The Death of Liberal Democracy?’*: “The European project has been perverted by a remote, detached technocracy that seems more concerned with accumulating ever more power for its unaccountable institutions.”

It is sclerotic and resistant to change, just at a time when the world is changing at dramatic speed. Liberals must start to articulate a very different vision for the EU: flexible, dynamic, encouraging

variable partnerships between countries and regions to evolve. There is little sign of new thinking among the European elites - but let's at least articulate a Liberal vision. This may just be a more attractive proposition for the British people than the hard Brexit we are hurtling towards.

Second, we should develop a clear and radical Liberal economic policy which confronts the dreadful lopsided, unequal UK economy of today. Reform of finance, local lending institutions, radical devolution of power – critically, including taxing-raising powers – to the great cities and regions to allow them to take control.

Third, we need to rediscover Jo Grimond's passion for mutual ownership. Let's consider making reductions in corporation tax conditional on ownership being shared with the people who work for the company. That could start to address the gross inequality of power and wealth.

Fourth, the state should use its massive power to influence corporate culture. At national and local level, it contracts billions of pounds with business. Is it unreasonable to expect companies receiving public money to look after their employees' wellbeing and to behave as good corporate citizens? The concept of the B Corp from the US could be adapted to develop a standard that those contracting with the state must meet.

Fifth, public services could be transformed by transferring power from the bureaucracy to the citizen and to people who work in these services. In *‘The Alternative’*, Labour MP Steve Reed and I set out a vision for services provided by councils, the NHS and other public bodies, with the citizen in charge of how resources are used and citizens working in partnership with councils to shape their neighbourhoods, with power devolved from Whitehall to local communities.

Sixth, we should champion of the consumer, so often cheated by rip-off merchants, with the acquiescence of government. Tougher legislation is needed to sort out the unacceptable power of monopolies and oligopolies.

And seventh, we must build on our reputation as social reformers, using evidence and a sense of a moral purpose to liberate people from injustice and get the state out of people's lives when there is no case for it interfering.

Ending the spectacularly stupid ‘war on drugs’ so that, for example, we regulate the use of cannabis rather than criminalising people; reducing the number of people we incarcerate, recognising that we are failing to protect victims with such high reoffending rates.

These suggestions are far from exhaustive. In all we do, we should be guided by a moral purpose – driven by the ambition to liberate people to enjoy their lives while recognising, as a fundamental principle of liberalism, that we also accept a deep sense of responsibility for our fellow citizens. Now is the time to build a powerful, optimistic Liberal vision that can inspire people and give them hope for the future.

Norman Lamb is Liberal Democrat MP for North Norfolk

NO SHORTCUTS

Sarah Olney benefitted from a progressive alliance but says this approach has severe limitations

I haven't been able to listen to Cornershop's 'Brimful of Asha' since 9 June. The chirpy repetition of '45' in the chorus, which always sounded summery and joyful, now sounds rather mocking....

Fans of political statistics will already know that, despite the Richmond Park constituency having the third highest turnout in the country in the 2017 general election, the result came down to a difference of just 45 votes between myself and Zac Goldsmith for the Conservatives.

For those who hoped for a Liberal Democrat victory, it was particularly galling to note that Labour gained 5,773 votes, ending up a distant third. If only a small number of these voters had put their party loyalty aside and voted for the candidate most likely to represent the progressive cause in Parliament, we could have had a 13th Liberal Democrat MP, and one fewer Tory.

This of course is the essence of the argument for a progressive alliance. If the anti-Tory parties could get together and agree a joint seat by seat strategy, we could return a majority of MPs to Parliament that would be committed to progressive politics. Had such a strategy been adopted in 2017, the current make-up of the House of Commons would look very different.

Richmond Park, of course, has also recently had a by-election (you might have heard.....). This by-election has been held up by supporters of progressive alliances of an example of what might be possible if parties work together. The Green Party made a decision to step aside in that election and encouraged their voters to back the Liberal Democrats. The Liberal Democrats duly won that by-election, by a margin of 1,872 votes. The Greens had won 3,548 votes in the 2015 general election.

FRAUGHT WITH PERIL

As the Liberal Democrat candidate in both those recent contests, I am often asked for my views on the progressive alliance. My experience has led me to conclude that while a progressive alliance might be superficially appealing as a way for the Liberal Democrats to gain more seats, it is a strategy that is fraught with peril, and should not be pursued without extreme caution.

How does the proposed progressive alliance work in practice? Would a progressive alliance only field one candidate between them in each seat? This has been the approach that the Green Party have appeared to favour, which is what led to them standing aside in the Richmond Park by-election.

There are arguments against standing aside. The most important one is that it denies the voters a proper democratic choice, which Liberal Democrats need to think carefully about.

However, I believe that this argument needs to

be considered in the context of an already broken electoral system. The Electoral Reform Society's recent report on the 2017 general election estimated that 14m voters did not see their choice reflected in the outcome. A progressive alliance pact that put electoral reform at the front and centre of its programme would be doing far more to empower the electorate in the long run, for which the lack of a full slate of candidates in one general election might be a price worth paying.

Another argument is that we can't compel people to vote the way we wish them to. We have no way of knowing if the 3,548 Green voters from 2015 all switched to the Liberal Democrats in the 2016 by-election. Some of them will have stayed at home rather than give their vote to another party. Some of them will have switched to Labour (one of the less talked-about results of the general election is the huge drop in support for the Greens, with many of their former voters switching to Labour). Some of them will even have switched to Goldsmith, a prominent environmental campaigner.

But the only votes that count are the ones that are cast. And those who go to the polling station have to make a choice between the names on the ballot paper, and, if the party they would prefer to vote for aren't represented, then they are likely to opt for the next least worst option.

There was a great deal of pressure on Labour to stand down in the December 2016 by-election. Goldsmith was standing as an independent on that occasion, and was a highly divisive figure.

Many Londoners, in particular, found the campaign tactics he'd used while running for London mayor earlier that year, utterly abhorrent, and wanted to see a united anti-Zac campaign that would beat him. Labour, however, shrugged off these arguments and stood a candidate, who went on to receive fewer votes than the party had registered members in the constituency.

I believe that it was to our advantage in the by-election that Labour decided not to step aside. Goldsmith would not have hesitated to paint me as a Labour puppet and repeat some of the "Corbyn's candidate" tactics that he'd used on Sadiq Khan earlier that year. Jeremy Corbyn's reputation has improved somewhat since the general election, but back in December last year, he could not have been more unpopular, particularly in an affluent suburban constituency like Richmond Park. Any perceived association with Corbyn's Labour Party would have been very damaging to my campaign.

So, parties standing aside doesn't always help the progressive cause. What about paper candidates - putting a name on a ballot paper but not actively campaigning?

In fairness to Labour, it could be said that this is exactly what they did in the general election. I didn't see their candidate throughout the entire campaign

- the only time we met was at the count. As a resident, I had only a single piece of literature (the election address) and the candidate no-showed, or sent a delegate, to every hustings. This resulted in their third-worst result, by vote share, in the country, and the largest fall in Labour vote share for any constituency outside Scotland. There wasn't much more - or less - they could have done.

But a general election campaign is about the national message, as well as the local campaign. Labour fought a surprisingly effective national campaign which resonated with many people. They were particularly successful on social media, where 'organic' shares can't be geographically targeted. Their national message is always going to be 'Vote Labour', and they can't control how many people in Richmond Park are persuaded by that. There were some depressing anecdotes from polling station tellers about voters expressing disappointment that Jeremy Corbyn's name wasn't on the ballot paper. This suggests a lack of political understanding that goes well beyond not knowing about tactical voting.

So the experience of Richmond Park shows that, however much parties might co-operate, they cannot engineer the outcome on polling day. The theory of the progressive alliance doesn't always work in practice, which is something to keep very much in mind when considering deals with other parties

But I think that a far more important consideration for political parties is what happens next. My experience shows that we should look beyond polling day. After my election in December, I enjoyed (and continue to enjoy) a good relationship with the Richmond Green Party, and in Parliament, I was also a supportive ally to Caroline Lucas.

But I would occasionally hear grumblings from other parts of the Green Party, many of whom clearly felt that I would not have won without their support. I was quite clear that I had been elected as a Liberal Democrat and would represent that party. The Greens had stood aside to get a progressive MP elected and had achieved their goal. What more did I owe them?

This issue would be even more pressing if we were to do formal deals with Labour, especially now that Brexit is the biggest issue of the day. If Labour had stood aside in either contest, and encouraged their voters to back me, what would the reaction of those voters have been if I had voted with the Lib Dems against Labour?

I must stress at this point that I was very grateful to the Greens for standing aside in December. In Richmond, there is far more that unites the members of the various progressive parties than divides them, and there is an unshakeable logic to uniting behind one representative. By and large, it shouldn't be difficult for that person to represent the views of all the different groups when it comes to individual issues. The problem comes when you try to map local politics onto a national stage and MPs are required to vote with their party whips.

In the excitement of a general election campaign, when all political minds are focussed on which party

“However much parties might co-operate, they cannot engineer the outcome on polling day”

will win which seats, and who will consequently form a government, it's easy to get carried away with thoughts of a progressive alliance, particularly for the Liberal Democrats who want a quick shortcut back to influence after the disaster of 2015.

CALL THE SHOTS

But, once the occupants of the seats have settled in, how does the progressive alliance affect the day to day workings of Parliament? If Labour have helped the Lib Dems to win a number of seats, they would surely use that influence to call the shots on the opposition benches.

As the larger party by far, they get first dibs on which seats they want to stand candidates in, and their long-term interest is surely to secure more Labour MPs, rather than to increase Liberal Democrat representation.

The experience in Richmond Park, I think, shows that although co-operation between the parties can have limited success in a one-off campaign like a by-election where there is broad agreement between the parties, and a single issue on which they are united, it is just as likely to be either unworkable, or counter-productive. Voters won't be told what to do, and any alliance is likely to put off as many voters as it attracts.

For political parties, the danger is that a progressive alliance can't work unless it's a co-operation of equals. The larger party will always be able to hold the smaller party hostage - "Vote with us on x, or we won't stand aside for you next time".

And the smaller party cannot hold the larger to account for failing to deliver their side of any bargain.

Consider the concessions we have made to the Greens in return for their Richmond Park support. We stood aside in Brighton Pavilion where we didn't have a hope. But did we stand aside for them in the Isle of Wight or Bristol West in the general election? Did we heck, and Labour would do the same to us, if they thought there was a chance of getting a Labour MP elected.

For Liberal Democrats, I think there is only limited value in the progressive alliance. We should be looking to build our own vote, on our own policies, according to our own principles. We have paid too heavy a price in the past for trying to wield power that was borrowed from others. There are no shortcuts.

Sarah Olney was Liberal Democrat MP for Richmond Park 2016-17

THE STATE HAS WORK TO DO

Orange Bookers and Blairites thought the state could be reduced to mere commissioning of services, but a state that wants to enable has to be active too, says John Pugh

Try singing “Imagine there’s no Brexit” in true John Lennon style and work out where that leaves the Liberal Democrats.

Historically Liberals have always been internationalists and over time that has been transmuted into us being a pro-EU party - a journey which has been neither uncontroversial or inevitable. Now it seems like our entire destiny hinges on our belief that leaving the EU, or more specifically the Single Market, will be economically disastrous.

I do not know for sure that it will, but suspect it might be and hope that we will be given credit, as with Iraq, for a brave and not necessarily popular judgement call.

However, I did not join the Liberal Party in order to bang on about Brexit for the rest of my days. I feel any genuine Liberal’s revulsion at narrow-minded jingoism and national prejudice, but I never saw EU membership as some paradisiacal condition beyond which lies only woe and suffering.

In fact it has been the unwillingness of pro-EU supporters like myself to bang the drum for EU reform that has landed us in our current pickle. Stuck between Europhiles on one side and xenophobic head bangers on the other, we chose unwisely to keep our own counsel and concentrate on other things.

Until recent times the clarity of our official party position on Europe has only be matched by its unpopularity and Lib Dem electoral success was predicated on our ability to talk engagingly about other things.

On the other hand the confusion found in Labour ranks on the subject accidentally propelled them into talking about issues to which neither Brexit nor continued membership of the EU was an answer.

In so doing they, largely unchallenged, re-defined the 2017 election - while we were seen as struggling to respond to the gauntlet Theresa May had in her foolishness thrown down.

INCOMPLETE STRATEGY

Our political antennae and canvassing told us this was at best an incomplete strategy - and locally and nationally we presented a strong offer on health, education and the economy - but our USP was anti-Brexit and any cut through on other issues was hard.

Labour, on the other hand, was offering hope in areas of immediate concern to key cohorts of voters – on student fees, the NHS, the pains of austerity, frozen wages and the costs of ageing.

Much of it, like the Tory manifesto, belonged to that utopian world where you can have your cake and eat

it, but couple that with a very selective and viciously intended account of our role in coalition and you begin to understand how they ate into our vote to such effect.

We were slow to attack the basic dishonesty of the offer and underestimated the zeal and the determination of Corbynistas and their clever use of social media.

However, Lib Dems are no mugs at campaigning on the ground and were not under-resourced in the areas that mattered. It was though, the message wot done it – along with a certain deafness to our own message that set in among the young and the public sector in the Coalition years.

I have claimed before that it wasn’t Coalition per se that did for us but how we allowed ourselves to be duped by the Tories in coalition and I don’t want to pursue that argument here - save in one respect.

We mistakenly bought into the idea that this is a meritocratic world where talent and worth is rewarded and the job of the state is primarily to see everyone gets a fair crack at the whip - hence our commitment of huge amount of public resources to the pupil premium.

The flaw in this is that social rewards for an individual in terms of money or power are not, in a globalised world, remotely proportional to their social value and contribution. It’s not a fair world and the vast inequalities in power and wealth do not reflect the social worth or contribution of individuals.

We seemed to imply that it’s basically a fair world and the job of a well meaning government is to make it just that little bit fairer - give people a better start in life, make markets works a little better, provide some economic stimulus for disadvantaged areas.

It was an understandable perception given the social background of much of our leadership at that time.

The public narrative of swathes of migrants arriving in our shores looking for work, a lost and struggling generation looking for housing, imperilled public services, a government that had run out of cash, the unwillingness of the super rich to pay tax and the obviously looming threat of increased automation contrasted with the meritocratic model.

Anxieties, fears and anger were generated despite the public profiting from some aspects of globalisation such as lower consumer prices, more affordable holidays and loans.

Perception and feeling can impact as much as reality. The spectacle of a Sir Philip Green significantly offset any dry statistics about the rich paying an increased share of tax.

Labour plugged into these anxieties armed with a good slogan, promising lollipops all round and with

a small array of demons to blame - the very rich, the Tories (agents of the former) and in dog whistle manner – migrants. Corbyn got a free run at presenting himself as the Messiah who could deliver salvation.

Part of the success of the Corbyn-Momentum message was the implication that their political opponents - Blairites, Lib Dems, Tories, journalists were not simply mistaken but evil.

Whether austerity measures were wise, ill-conceived or used opportunely to reduce the size of the state are all legitimate questions. But if you assume that anyone advocating them was a bad person up to no good, you don't need to detain yourself long in answering them. Social media helps here. It is far easier to get an insult than a critique into 140 characters.

It's comforting to tell a nation with an eroding manufacturing base, an age weighted demography, an inadequate skill base, high levels of public and personal debt dismal productivity levels etc – that all we need to do is spend more on infrastructure and claw back tax from the highest earners.

It's comforting but not actually true. The unhappiness of Liberals, as opposed to Liberal poseurs, is that they are perpetually tortured by the thought of what is true.

For obvious reasons of personal consolation I have taken to reading the statements of Liberals after the depressing election results of the 1950s and almost without exception you hear the voice of eminently decent people who could not stand amongst the massed cohorts of Conservative (Right) or Labour (Left) pinioned by their own scruples and the recognition that to join one of the big battalions was to blind yourself to the truth, accept a one sided view of a complex world.

We cannot buy into the Corbynist simplicities nor should we follow the Tory ideology of adopting a market solution for all problems. We believe neither in a laissez-faire state, nor in an omni-competent state but in an active, intelligent state that seeks to remove the obstacles to people thriving and fulfilling their potential. That's what the preamble to our constitution binds us to.

We campaign for good public services because they are the principal means by which we seek to do just this - remove obstacles to people thriving - an inherently noble objective. It has been the tragedy of my political life time to see this, for mixed motives, subsumed under a consumerist model.

Public services are the means through which we try to construct or at least set limits to the kind of society we want - a vehicle of our collective will - but too often they are presented as a kind of product that governments deliver to an increasingly disappointed set of citizens.

Thus we end up with citizens believing they have a right to services they begrudge funding, with governments being systematically horrid to public servants (the producers) and professionals feeling

“Social rewards for an individual in terms of money or power are not, in a globalised world, remotely proportional to their social value and contribution”

disempowered and put upon.

One of my first acts as an MP was to try to form a group of parliamentarians prepared to defend the public sector ethos – the Beveridge Group. None of us thought naively this was embodied perfectly in every public service, but we did think it was an ideal worth fighting for and promoting.

HAEMORRHAGING VOTES

Our failure to do so has resulted in us over time haemorrhaging very significant elements of the public sector vote that once came our way and certainly lost us the constituency I was privileged to represent for 16 years.

We need to recognise that the business of public service is not a business, cannot be run as a business, as some kind of pseudo-market. To do that distorts its objectives and nature and adds little in terms of real efficiency. Competitive market places are great, exciting and innovative places but they are not places where public services comfortably sit. Indeed we need some public services to set limits on how markets operate.

All Liberals believe in an enabling state but the Orange Book/Blairite view of the world was that enabling could be reduced to mere commissioning. What I am suggesting is that a state that wishes to enable has to do stuff too, has to run services if it wishes to deliver any kind of moral vision and has to support and value the people (public servants) who choose to spend their lives working for that purpose.

Equally it should celebrate those who create the economic wealth essential to underpin public services notwithstanding their own material success, but it should not confuse the two endeavours.

Labour lauds the public sector; Tories the wealth creators. We, hopefully, can be wise enough to see both sectors as different but essential to the commonweal. We are a party without blindspots. That at times is very uncomfortable in an age of populist frenzy, but it is only this unfortunate curse of clarity of vision and belief that gives us the strength to survive the tough times.

John Pugh was Liberal Democrat MP for Southport 2001-17

DEAR VINCE...

Any new leader has a relatively short window of general goodwill and the opportunity for a fresh start to show where they want to take the Liberal Democrats. So, Liberator asked: “What is the most important thing Vince Cable should do now?”

**John Bryant (William Tranby),
Liberator Collective**

“Vince needs to follow up his acknowledgement in Liberator 385 that decisive action is needed to tackle the widening generational divide. This could mean selective tax increases for richer pensioners, such as charging an NHS tax to replace the NI that pensioners don't pay, on those earning above the state pension level.

“It also means bringing back rent tribunals to cap housing rents in the private sector and restoring maintenance grants for all students. And an exit from Brexit would be the boost that younger generations really need to maximise their career opportunities and quality of life.”

Gordon Lishman, Federal Board member

“Can Vince reach out beyond Brexit-hating, often self-satisfied, graduates to people whose main day-to-day concerns are about having a fulfilling job with security, bringing up children with hope and high aspiration, having health and care services to rely on, and having a good life? They are the people who are left unrepresented in today's politics.”

**Rosemary Tilley,
Lib Dem member, Richmond Park**

“For the Country, do anything and everything possible to mitigate the Brexit chaos. For the party, purge the Orange Bookers and Cleggites, return to proper community politics in local campaigning.”

Geoff Reid, Lib Dem councillor, Bradford

“Urge local parties to get target seat selection for next May's council elections firmly on track, particularly where they were thrown off course by the excitement of a general election and a change of leadership. This is a very basic building block for recovery.”

**Elizabeth McWilliams,
Lib Dem member, Yorkshire**

“Vince should use his relative distance from the party establishment to clear out a lot of the Clegg-era dead wood. The departure of Tim Gordon is a good start, but some will doubtless try and use past tension as an excuse to undermine Cable if he does not.

“Abolishing the ludicrous English Party should be next. Getting the party on an immediate election footing must be done and will be easier if this is done.

“Set out a clear and simple policy agenda that is identifiably radical and Liberal, that differentiates

itself from a resurgent Labour Party and is clean of Coalition baggage, which it is clear still toxifies the brand. That means being unapologetic in seeking to reverse Brexit – but gets into domestic policy. A proper focus on housing policy – including detail on implementing land value taxation while rejecting the municipal nimbyism seen all too often – is one way to go about it. Vince's Government experience leaves him well placed to be listened to on the subject.”

Sir Graham Watson, former MEP for South West England

“The most important thing Vince Cable should do now is to keep on being Vince Cable. He brings a credibility to the party based on age, experience and professional record which is hard to match and he will be judged favourably by many against May and Corbyn. He should play to his strengths and follow his instincts.

“What the party must do is to recognise the appalling state it is in, hire a chief executive with the professional skills to develop the organisation and keep its nerve. If longer serving party members do not act quickly and thoroughly to involve better the more recent joiners we risk losing them.”

**Gwyneth Deakins,
Lib Dem councillor, Redbridge**

“Show how do we counter the naive idealistic enthusiasm generated by Corbyn and get left-leaning voters to take a more rational view of the best way to combat the Conservatives?”

**Alan Sherwell, former leader,
Aylesbury Vale District Council**

“I am hearing disturbing things about candidates committee getting over-Stalinist about investigating candidate performance and threatening to unapprove candidates on fairly flimsy grounds. Vince should intervene.”

Stewart Rayment, Liberator Collective

“Watch his back from the grey people of the party and express contempt for the media saying he's an old git.”

WHO ARE THEY ALL?

New Liberal Democrats now vastly outnumber old ones, but who are they and what do they want, asks Sarah Green

Do you really know the Liberal Democrats? More than half of members have joined since May 2015 and are overwhelmingly in the south east. This record membership of more than 103,000 is undoubtedly something to celebrate. But with the make-up of the membership changing so much in two years, it's worth asking if the Liberal Democrats are still the same party?

Let's not forget how unlikely this membership boom seemed in 2015 when the party was close to the brink. By the end of coalition membership had dropped to around 40,000.

If the parliamentary party was a rump by May 2015, so too was the activist base. It is probably fair to say the party also lost a lot of its left wing in the coalition period as well.

In the two years since the 2015 general election there has been a huge surge in membership. But because the party is the biggest it has ever been, it does not follow that the skills and experience lost during coalition have been replenished.

Often referred to as Newbies, the newer members are all too easily lumped together. Unlike the traumatic SDP-Liberal party merger these are not easy to identify groups and we cannot assume common political outlooks. When we talk about 'liberal values,' are these commonly understood by us all to mean the same thing?

There have been several 'surges', around national events like the general elections of 2015 and 2017; the EU Referendum and the Richmond Park by-election. This implies new joiners are mainly motivated by national or international issues (like Brexit). If so, they may not take well to being given a pile of Focuses about local pavements, drains and wheelie bins, and so may drift away.

Historically, membership retention has been a strategic weakness for the party - especially for new members. However, an overwhelming majority of the post-2015 general election joiners did indeed renew and, thanks in large part to a retention campaign undertaken by HQ, the same can be said of the post-EU membership surge (resulting in an impressive 84% retention rate). Has the number of staff employed to service the membership grown in line with this? No.

To maintain such retention figures and to convert them to engaged and active members we need to better understand what motivates these new members. And, more importantly, we need to empower them to be the change they want to see.

With 60% of the party falling into the 'new member' category, we cannot assume the same level of knowledge about elections or campaigning as we once did. Indeed, a large number of candidates and agents in 2017 were taking these roles for the first time.

Nevertheless, given a chance to shine, our newer members are a force to be reckoned with, as Sarah

Olney demonstrated. I discovered this in a committee room in Cambridgeshire back in May, where it slowly dawned on me that the entire operation was run by people who had joined less than a year previously. It was the friendliest and most efficient committee room I'd experienced in some time. And I'm not ashamed to say I stole some of their ideas for one I ran a few weeks later. Instead of being patronised, this group had been encouraged to run their own patch and I got a glimpse of what might be possible, if only it could be scaled up around the country.

Local parties are notoriously hit and miss. And as *Liberator* 382 reported, there was shockingly low engagement with the most recent internal party elections, with 7,347 voting out of a then 78,000-odd membership, of whom only 91 stood for election.

It is therefore interesting that the influx of new members spawned Lib Dem Pint events, Your Liberal Britain and the ever-expanding Lib Dem Newbies group on Facebook. These groups were created by new members for new members and suggest that the official party structures designed to engage with them either weren't available, didn't appeal or weren't up to much. It may at some point create an issue where people assume these groups have an official status they don't possess. But that aside, perhaps the Newbies have a point. Maybe the existing ways we expect members to engage with the party need a re-boot?

Too often local parties are ill-equipped to engage with their members. And with home-ownership out of the reach of increasing numbers of members, with many not making roots in the same way as previous generations, perhaps the party should look again at how membership is maintained.

We could, for example, allow individuals to maintain their membership via SAOs they feel a close affiliation to, rather than a local party. Or we could introduce online-only membership that isn't linked to any specific geographic location. I'm not suggesting we replace local parties, but rather expand the membership options to better serve our shiny new membership. Because they are shiny and new, and our party structures are creaking and old.

Sarah Green is a member of the *Liberator* Collective

THE THINKER WHO FORESAW TRUMP AND BREXIT

Neglected philosopher Richard Rorty has a lot to tell liberals now about what happened when the cultural left supplanted the reformist one, says Jonathan Calder

The days when we expected philosophers to be prophets are long gone, but the widespread sharing of this quotation after the election of Donald Trump reawakened interest in the work of Richard Rorty:

“Members of labor unions, and unorganized unskilled workers, will sooner or later realize that their government is not even trying to prevent wages from sinking or to prevent jobs from being exported. Around the same time, they will realize that suburban white-collar workers—themselves desperately afraid of being downsized—are not going to let themselves be taxed to provide social benefits for anyone else. “At that point, something will crack. The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for - someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots.... “One thing that is very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past forty years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion.... All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet.”

What particularly impressed people was that Rorty wrote this back in 1998 when Bill Clinton had been elected for a second term and Tony Blair was enjoying his extraordinarily long honeymoon with Britain’s voters.

Rorty, who died in 2007, is the most interesting liberal philosopher of recent decades.

He managed to combine being at the cutting edge of postmodern thought in rejecting the idea that philosophy’s role was to discover ‘The Truth’ or ‘Things as They Really Are’ – so much so that his name carried with it a whiff of brimstone in more traditional academic departments – with a reasoned defence of the institutions of the liberal democratic state and draw for enlightenment upon the Western literary canon.

Beyond that, as the quotation above shows, he stood

out among philosophers – particularly postmodern philosophers – for the clarity of his prose and his commitment to carrying the non-specialist reader with him. So much academic work today is written to be published rather than read, and so many philosophers seem determined to dazzle or obfuscate rather than enlighten. To those who doubt this I say two words: Slavoj Žižek.

That quotation comes from Rorty’s *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*. In the book Rorty draws a distinction between the reformist left that flourished in America until the 1960s and the cultural left that supplanted it.

The reformist left, he argued, shared “the conviction that the vast inequalities within American society could be corrected by using the institutions of a constitutional democracy – that a cooperative commonwealth could be created by electing the right politicians and passing the right laws.”

This reformist left covered a broad spectrum of opinion from Marxists to moderate Democrats, but they were united by a belief in pragmatic reform. There were no purity tests for membership – some of the reformist left cared little for the rights of American Blacks, others were keen supporters of war in Vietnam - but, says Rorty, they were “feared and hated by the Right because they laid the foundations of the modern welfare state”.

Rorty was well aware of this, but in a characteristically wry style, he pointed out that “in democratic countries you get things done by compromising your principles in order to form alliances with groups about whom you have grave doubts”.

It was Vietnam that broke this coalition. It was not just that the war was morally wrong and impossible to win: it was that younger leftists saw it as an indictment of America as a whole. And that meant, argued Rorty, they lost interest in the idea of moderate reform:

“For if you turn out to be living in an evil empire (rather than, as you had been told, a democracy fighting an evil empire), then you have no responsibility to your country; you are accountable only to humanity. If what your government and your teachers are saying is all part of the same Orwellian monologue – if the differences between the Harvard faculty and the military-industrial complex, or between Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater, are negligible – then you

have a responsibility to make a revolution.”

I thought of this when I heard Harriet Harman interviewed by Peter Hennessy recently and she said had gone into politics wanting to “change everything about society”. ‘Change everything’ is an expression of personal despair, not a programme for government.

This trend towards cultural leftism accelerated on the British left after Iraq. Tony Blair won three consecutive general elections, but his name is rarely heard in Labour circles – unless it is part of the insult ‘Blairite’. We Liberal Democrats suffered our own miniature moral catastrophe over the Coalition’s decision to increase tuition fees.

Instead, the left has embraced Jeremy Corbyn, a figure whose appeal lies precisely in the fact that he has never held power and is thus innocent of the compromises it demands. Labour now expends little effort on policy formation as its 2017 general election manifesto, an unconvincing document that escaped proper scrutiny during the election campaign because of the supreme incompetence of the Conservatives.

A style of argument flourishes on the left, perhaps encouraged by social media and certainly most apparent there. It is summed up in a widely used quotation whose origin is not clear: “The right looks for converts, the left looks for traitors.” Someone’s words – and it is usually words and not actions – are examined until they are found guilty of some departure from the prevalent moral view on the cultural left, whereupon they can be given a pejorative label and their opinion on every subject ignored.

The right has not been idle while this has been going on. Rorty, confirming his uncanny ability to see where politics was leading in 1998, wrote: “While the Left’s back was turned, the bourgeoisification of the white proletariat which began in WWII and continued up through the Vietnam War has been halted, and the process has gone into reverse. America is now proletarianizing its bourgeoisie, and this process is likely to culminate in bottom-up revolt, of the sort [Pat] Buchanan hopes to foment.”

If all this sounds familiar from a thousand comment pieces blaming the left and ‘political correctness’ for the rise of Trump or of Ukip, it is worth emphasising that Rorty came from a left-wing background himself and his sympathies already remained with what he described as the reformist left:

“For the Right never thinks that anything much needs to be changed: it thinks the country is basically in good shape, and may well have been in better shape in the past. It sees the Left’s struggle for social justice as mere troublemaking, as utopian foolishness. The Left, by definition, is the party of hope. It insists that our nation remains unachieved.”

And even when being critical of the cultural left in the New York Times in 1994, he paid it a generous tribute, saying it was “doing a great deal of good for people who have gotten a raw deal in our society: women, African-Americans, gay men and lesbians. This focus on marginalized groups will, in the long run, help to make our country much more decent, more tolerant and more civilized”.

But he warned in the same article: “A left that refuses to take pride in its country will have no impact on that country’s politics, and will eventually become an object of contempt.”

So it is not such a surprise to find that the opening words of *Achieving Our Country* are: “National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals, a necessary condition for self-improvement.”

If these words seem strange on the left today, Rorty would no doubt have said, it is because the reformist left has been displaced by the cultural left.

For a way out of this impasse we could turn to Rorty’s 1989 book *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. It has many virtues, among them this description of how we actually argue about politics and other important things.

“All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes.

“They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. ...

“A small part of a final vocabulary is made up of thin, flexible, and ubiquitous terms such as ‘true’, ‘good’, ‘right’, and ‘beautiful’. The larger part contains thicker, more rigid, and more parochial terms, for example, ‘Christ’, ‘England’, ‘professional standards’, ‘decency’, ‘kindness’, ‘the Revolution’, ‘the Church’, ‘progressive’, ‘rigorous’, ‘creative’. The more parochial terms do most of the work.”

Rorty also emphasises the importance of being an ‘ironist’. That is, we should recognise that our own beliefs cannot ultimately be grounded on bedrock beyond our own chosen ‘thick’ vocabulary yet still be prepared to act upon them. He approvingly quotes Joseph Schumpeter: “To realise the relative validity of one’s convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian.”

These days the idea that studying the great writers can teach us lessons about how to live our lives is deeply unfashionable in English departments with their post-structuralists (and quite possibly post-poststructuralists too). Yet it is to this rather traditional view of literature that the avant-garde philosopher Rorty turns in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, with chapters on Proust, Nabokov and Orwell.

He suggests that what Orwell did in *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was to give readers an alternative vocabulary with which to understand totalitarianism.

continued on page 31

MISSION IMPROBABLE

Opposing Brexit and the economic crisis it threatens isn't Liberal Democrat policy, but the context against which the party must set its policy, says Roger Hayes

All political experiments end in disaster and some catastrophically. Let's see if we can learn some lessons this time.

I seem to have been writing this article for most of this year, but events kept taking another twist and the relevance shifted. Hopefully this version will have a shelf-life of a few more weeks and will still seem vaguely relevant when you read it at Conference.

My central theme has not changed: in a dramatically changed world, how do British Liberals find relevance, build a core vote, and regain support for our values and ideals to build an open and tolerant liberal society?

Way back in the spring, probably not more than six months ago, arch-strategist Lynton Crosby must have thought he was on to a humdinger of a winning plan – kill seven birds with one stone. Like Viktor Frankenstein, he would raise Thatcher from the dead in the guise of Theresa May; smash Labour; bury Ukip; geld the Tory backbenchers, tame the pesky Lib Dems; quell rebellious Scots; and win Brexit for the nation – proper job! and all in three months ...

It started so brilliantly well. Carpe Diem, surprise election that no one could deny; in fact let's steal two elections. By not waiting for the local results, but by announcing early, the locals became the hors d'oeuvres before the rare meat – the expected landslide blood-bath that would follow a month later.

Labour was a spent force, hopelessly out of touch, it had run out of feet to shoot. With Crosby's clever tactics, the Tories could see the back of them for a decade. Ukip, having 'won' the referendum, ceased to have a reason to live and reverted to its favourite game of picking the least-worst leader (they still haven't spotted the flaw in that plan). Putting it out of its (and everyone else's) misery would be an act of kindness, not to mention the handy transfer of millions of votes. However, those irritating Lib Dems were presenting a bit of a threat. The plan must be complete and must take out this uppity competition – Crush All Saboteurs!

Since the referendum Lib Dem membership had been surging. Not a week went by without another clutch of by-election gains, all around the country, in leave as well as remain areas. The wonderful Sarah Olney had won Richmond Park. Solid gains in the county elections were predicted and the cherry on the cake was to be a sensational gain from Labour at Manchester Gorton. Liberalism was finally on the march – Vive la Revelation.

The stakes were high but Crosby obviously smelt blood and by calling a snap election the locals could be derailed to become an early indicator of the national landslide story essential to his new narrative. To hijack two elections was his audacious Game of

Thrones-style total domination strategy.

The timing was perfect, the predominantly Conservative shire vote presented a softer target for Crosby to build his landslide vote myth. He would craft a tale of Theresa d'Arc: she had heard the voices and is now emboldened by the will of the people; pure of heart and strong of purpose; ready to defeat all foes, foreign and domestic; and all in the national interest. The Tories would be rebranded with her front and centre, portrayed as fighting across the land with lion-hearted determination, to bring about strong and stable government that only she could lead. You have to admire the magnificence of the man's chutzpah.

And of course, Murdoch, Dacre and the BBC could all be relied upon to print and broadcast whatever they were given without question. "Landslide" was on everyone's lips and would be helpfully embellished because no one would let the facts get in the way of a gripping story.

The initial salvo had the desired effect. Not only did the Conservatives make gains in the county elections to secure the chimera of success, Labour lost ground and the Lib Dem advance was halted in its tracks as we seemed to offer little resistance.

Of course, come the main event, as history will no doubt delight in telling, what Crosby had utterly failed to realise was that May is no Cerci Lannister and his Frankenstein's experiment created more terrified Maybot than terrifying Monster.

SHAMBOLIC CAMPAIGN

Tim Farron is a good man, but once again our shambolic national campaign was ill-conceived and poorly executed. The Maybot hid away and was frankly embarrassing when she did emerge, the Lib Dem single issue was never developed and, in the inglorious battle of mediocrity that ensued, Corbyn looked just slightly less incompetent than everyone else. It was the election that everyone lost, none more so than the British people.

Having lost the election, and without a majority, poor Theresa quickly became the prisoner of the rabid right – that unholy alliance of Tory backbenchers, the DUP and the shameless fake-news media. She will be cruelly used and made to suffer the indignities of Brexit until the gig it inevitably up and, like Irritable Duncan Syndrome and William Hague before her, she will be tossed aside as the convenient scapegoat once she has served her purpose and failed.

My goodness, if a week is a long time in politics, three months is an eternity.

For me, the joy of regaining Kingston was completely marred by Sarah's narrow defeat in Richmond and our very poor national campaign that saw us move further backwards. The dust has now settled and there can be no doubt that these are the ruins and ash from which

we must build.

It wasn't wrong to take an unashamed pro-European stance, far from it. But it was wrong to bang on about it to the exclusion of everything else. It reminded me of 'Clegg-mania' in 2010. We hit a winning streak and then failed to develop it and just repeated the same sentence week after week, after week, until people just wandered off when then realise we had nothing more to add. But we have loads more to add. We are pro-European for a reason. We are liberals for a reason. Let's tell 'em why. Let's get 'em involved, get 'em enthused, you know, community politics style.

As dishonest and duplicitous as Labour's campaign was this is where they succeeded. They appeared to have answers for the things people were really concerned about. Lib Dems? What do they stand for?

We must continue to oppose Brexit, vehemently, purposefully, but this just shows we have principles and understand reality, it is not an entire policy platform.

I still don't believe Brexit will actually happen but, regardless of the process or the outcome of the negotiations, this Tory government will be paralysed for years as this farcical waste of time sucks in ever more energy and resources. This is our opportunity. It's going to hell in the Tories own handcart. We can help propel them all downhill.

Vital services like the NHS, social care, education, housing and transport are being ignored, starved and mismanaged, while essential investment in infrastructure is mishandled, cancelled and delayed. Climate change denial seems like the least of it, as we wrap ourselves in the flag and race headlong for oblivion. And all the while the four horsemen of the apocalypse have free reign over half the world.

Of course the Tories look hopelessly incompetent. Anyone would. It's a 'bricks-without-straw', undeliverable enterprise. Sooner or later a little boy in the crowd will shout out, "But the king is in the all-together, as naked as the day that he was born!" It is not possible to fool all the people, all of the time. Truth will out. Let's make sure it is our truth and our alternative that is heard.

Three years running my friends, three years running we have messed up. In coalition we forgot our politics and pretended we had some lofty purpose – 2015 was the result. Last year, once again, we saw it coming, had ample time and opportunity to avoid it and yet people embrace it and, in the teeth of all evidence, went and voted for it. How can that be? Well, in large part it's our fault, because they just went and did it again. We have failed to make the case, failed to be believed and failed even to convince what ought to be a core Lib Dem vote, let alone broken out to talk with a wider community.

THREE-PRONGED CORE VOTE

To build a sustainable core vote we will need a three-pronged approach: a compelling, coherent and

“It wasn't wrong to take an unashamed pro-European stance, far from it. But it was wrong to bang on about it to the exclusion of everything else”

comprehensive message; a campaign strategy that can target, win and hold key seats; but, just as the Tories have targeted their competition - Ukip, we must target our competition, Labour Remainers, and bring them to us as their natural home. This is not about squeeze messages, 'borrowing' their votes for tactical purposes, and it certainly isn't about 'a new centre party'. This is about converting their allegiance and making them Liberal voters, capital L Liberal voters now and into the future.

Opposing Brexit and the economic crisis it threatens isn't our policy, it's the context against which we must set our policy. These should be our real 'big six to fix':

- * The NHS, mental health and social care
- * Housing for all – now. No more waiting, no more excuses
- * Climate change, environmental protection and clean energy
- * Education – for all, but mostly for the young
- * A liberal approach to public safety and national security
- * Real, thorough and lasting constitutional and governmental reform

Let's tell people, but more importantly let's show people, what being liberal means and how the Liberal Democrats will make a real difference to their lives and their future.

I am not a prophet so I do not need to be listened to in my own land, or anywhere else for that matter, but we as a liberal movement; as citizens of a (just about) united nation and a (still for a while) united Europe; and as a global community, we must pull together.

Gone is the time for slogans and protest – those we oppose know we don't like them and many of those that give a damn already agree with us. Being relevant to the many others is the challenge. Not just angry youth or the rudderless remainers of the metropolitan liberal elite, but the utterly left behind, the unthought of and the uncared for, those without a voice everywhere. That is the community liberalism must understand and must speak to. Brexit is not their priority, they don't have that luxury, but if we listen hard enough their issues are also ours, they always were. Community politics is your unique tool in this mission, let's brush off the rust, oil the works and once again put it to good use.

Roger Hayes is a former Liberal Democrat leader of Kingston-upon-Thames Council

THE ANSWER IS IN OUR POCKETS

More homes are urgently needed, but how can they be financed? There is plenty of money that savers could be tempted to part with for local projects, says Wendy Kyrle-Pope

The secret of surviving Brexit is to adapt, and start looking at a future without (in both senses of the word) Europe. One where the UK stands alone, staring into an abyss or a golden sunrise, depending on your view, an island nation. Brexit will happen, and despite our hearts being broken and our dreams crushed by an uncaring, uninformed electorate, we must accept it. To keep Liberal values alive, and this party viable, we must embrace the new era and capitalise on the Dunkirk spirit (as the Mail and Express will no doubt trumpet it) which will emerge in the next few years.

The country will start to look inwards, and we must look inwards with it. We need to capture the imagination of the people, and produce ideas and policies which are novel but also very practical, policies which will work, addressing the most urgent problems of the day.

The 2017 election did not go well for Theresa May, but we were not covered in glory either. The joy, the hope born of Sarah Olney's winter victory has evaporated. We got a few more seats, but remain at the back of the back benches. Why? Labour surges, resources allocated to the wrong seats, bad luck – take your pick.

Or was it the fact that we presented no policies which looked beyond the inevitable Brexit, no policies to either excite and inspire the voter?

BRANDED PERFIDIOUS

Are we still haunted by the spectre of the student fees fiasco, branded forever as perfidious?

Our 2017 manifesto pledged that that we believe in “helping everyone share in prosperity”, a fine declaration that was intended to mean that everyone will share in prosperity through state help, an improving economy, better services and better education.

However, we can take it further by looking at that ‘everyone’ and developing it into a radical policy to address one of the most pressing issues of the day, housing, and most particularly its poor, neglected relation, social housing.

The UK needs more housing, 300,000 a year according to our 2017 manifesto, which called for £5bn for a new British Housing and Infrastructure Board.

But the manifesto did not say where this £5bn would come from specifically, implying that tax receipts and ordinary revenue or borrowing would fund it. Neither did it mention the need to remove barriers which effectively prevent councils building new social

housing. Nor did it mention, anywhere, ethical local investment by individuals. The following may help frame the direction of future policy making.

Firstly, we need to understand the history of social housing provided by councils. In 1919, Lloyd George's Coalition government passed a Housing Act which, for the first time, required councils to provide housing. He promised 500,000 new homes ‘fit for heroes’ to be built in three years.

Only 213,00 were built in that time, but between the two world wars 1.1m council homes would eventually be constructed, despite the depression of the 1930s when council subsidies were slashed. Housing and land was cheap and that inter-war period saw a boom in home ownership, helped by the building societies.

After the destruction of the bombing of the Second World War, (which resulted in a housing shortage far worse than that we are experiencing now), Attlee's government saw 1.0m homes built, 80% of which were by councils; 160,000 in 1949, 280,00 in 1950, and on into the 1960s.

When Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979, 40% of the population lived in council properties. In 1980, her government introduced the Right to Buy, and grants for council house building were later scrapped, and limits introduced on the amount councils could borrow. From the 1980s, councils could transfer their housing to housing associations, and government grants to build new social housing switched from councils to housing associations. In 2004, only 130 units of council housing were built in England. Although some councils have developed affordable and public housing partnerships with the private sector, but more housing is urgently needed now, throughout England and Wales.

The main challenges to providing social housing are the cost of land, (especially in the south east and London where the demand is highest), the legacy of Thatcher's Right to Buy, and the borrowing cap imposed on councils.

This cap is based on a very complex calculation (using the Housing Revenue Accounts system) which limits the amount of borrowing to what is left as ‘headroom’.

So, a council such as Greenwich, which has a waiting list of 11,000, little available land - and that land being very expensive - has virtually no headroom to build.

The reason for the cap is, although councils may borrow under new self-financing rules, all council borrowing affects government debt. So, the cap stays.

Housing associations are not classified as part of government, and therefore the cap does not apply. Scotland had the power to exempt itself, and builds as many council homes in a year as are built south of the

border, for a population one-tenth of the size.

The removal of the cap would free councils to start building.

How can this be done? The UK's Public-Sector Net Debt (PSND) is the main measure of how government debt is calculated. It is unique to this country, as the rest of the Europe uses the General Government Gross Debt measurement. If the UK were to switch to the European measurement, or merely amend the PSND to have council housing excluded from the measurement, an enormous barrier to our housing shortage would be removed. Councils would then rely on the financial markets as housing associations do, governed by the same market disciplines.

Let us look at the financial markets available. UK local authorities have always had the power to issue municipal bonds to finance public works. They have been doing so since the late 18th century, when the industrial revolution was getting underway and the populations of small towns like Birmingham and Manchester were beginning to explode, on their way to being metropolises of the future.

They urgently needed cash to build the city centres, roads, libraries, schools – the infrastructure of their cities. To raise this money, they issued bonds for sale on the open market. Each bond would be for a specific period at a fixed rate of interest. Bonds were used regularly in the first part of the 20th century, but fell into disuse in the 1970s and 1980s when the Government, in the shape of the Public Works Loan Board, became the main source of borrowing.

Providing a council qualifies by having a good credit rating, there is nothing to stop them issuing bonds now. Indeed, the Local Government Association proposed the creation of a collective bond issuing agency in 2012, and this was established in 2016 as the Municipal Bond Agency.

Prior to this, Warrington, Birmingham, Salford, Aberdeen, Leicester and the Greater London Authority have issued bonds for infrastructure projects.

The international credit agencies, Moody's and Standard and Poor, do produce ratings for local authorities in the UK. Birmingham and Cornwall are both rated AAA, and the GLA at AA+, (the borough of Kensington and Chelsea was AAA, but whether that remains after the Grenfell Tower disaster remains to be seen).

But none of these bonds are for social housing projects, when it is social housing which is required.

Investment in infrastructure projects, in bonds like those mentioned above, tends to be by institutions, not individuals.

TURN ON ITS AXIS

This is where our 'helping everyone share in prosperity' policy comes in, by turning it on its axis, and asking individuals to help fund new local bonds, to provide the much-needed social housing for their community.

We have a population with vast amounts of savings, but who don't know where to invest their money.

"We have a population with vast amounts of savings, but who don't know where to invest their money"

Low interest rates, concerns about security of capital, ethical issues, distrust of the Stock Exchange (currently too high, and may suddenly plunge come the autumn storms), distrust of the banks, all these factors have led to an under the mattress investment mentality.

Now, couple that with most people's desire to be help their community prosper, help others

have a better life, and find a secure investment with a guaranteed rate of return, and you have, as one investment publication put it, "a fresh market for sterling investors".

This is nothing new; until the 1970s, most savers used municipal stock as part of their investment strategy. The uncertainty of life after Brexit, married with a Dunkirk spirit, will create an enthusiastic market for such investment instruments.

Our policy should be to remove the cap on councils and create the legislation to develop housing bonds; like Lloyd George, we should help ensure homes for heroes, funded by heroes.

People also once had War Loan bonds. Perhaps we could create Brexit bonds to ease the economy through the rough seas to come, or is that going too far.

Wendy Kyrle-Pope is a member of the Liberator Collective

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SOMETHING NASTY IN THE GARDEN

Building 'garden' towns and villages will eat up land wastefully and increase traffic. There is another way to deliver homes, says Jon Reeds

Politicians across the spectrum talk about "the housing crisis" but it's a very peculiar crisis. No-one agrees what constitutes it.

Is it young peoples' inability to buy their homes? The rising costs of rents? Lack of affordable housing? Lack of social housing? Or just a simple lack of new homes for a rising population?

Most politicians bemoan a lack of 'family homes' for young people, but 'family homes' tend to be defined as a detached or semi-detached house in a low-density development on a greenfield site. Many families live in other sorts of home, of course, and many 'family homes' are not occupied by families. There's some complex history behind all of this, as we shall see.

The Government's own household growth projections, however, indicate where the real housing challenges lie. They project that 74% of the new households expected to form over the coming decades will be over-65s. Most of the rest will be single people. It is a crisis, but not as we know it.

The response of successive governments over the past 15 years, however, has been to blame the planning system for releasing insufficient greenfield land for building 'family homes' and to force councils to release more and more such land, even in protected areas like green belts and areas of outstanding natural beauty.

The 'brownfield first' policy was abolished in England in 2012 and we now have urban sprawl on the grand scale. Yet still Whitehall grizzles it's not enough.

This approach has many shortcomings. Housebuilders find it most profitable to build greenfield homes at low-densities, so scarce building land is used wastefully. Most is far from stations or urban transit and that and the low densities ensure the vast majority of journeys are made by car, increasing greenhouse gas emissions and congestion.

And destroying undeveloped land destroys the 'ecosystem services' that land provides: food and water production, flood control, biodiversity,

outdoor leisure, carbon sequestration and all the intangible benefits countryside delivers.

WASTED LAND

England is the most densely populated country in western Europe, yet we persist on wasting land by building at Europe's lowest densities. This didn't happen by accident; it's the result of more than a century of adherence to principles laid down in Edwardian times by the garden city movement.

Only two garden cities were built, although the post-war new towns were expanded examples. Where the movement did succeed was in creation of garden suburbs, the low-density greenfield housing development that has been our paradigm since the Great War.

And it's the underlying principle which still drives the sprawl that is causing so much conflict across the nation.

Some parts of the planning profession are still in thrall to garden city principles and the government, to show its greenfield obsession is not simply fuelled by housebuilder profit, has signed up to a programme of 'garden towns' and 'garden villages'. So far England has had 10 garden towns and 14 garden villages imposed and Wales has one official garden town, called



Letchworth - one of few garden cities to have been built

Plasdwr, on farmland outside Cardiff.

Beyond those, cynical developers are applying dabs of greenwash to any bit of greenfield sprawl they're building and calling it a 'garden village'. Nowhere is there much sign of the communitarian principles that drove garden city gurus like the movement's founder, Ebenezer Howard, just the movement's insistence on ultra-low building densities and greenfield sites.

Howard decreed garden cities should be new separate settlements, so is there any sign of this in the official garden towns and villages?

Would they make good use of our scarce building land, and use the derelict land that disfigures run-down areas? Would they help to meet housing shortages? Would they have great environmental performance? Or would their inhabitants drive everywhere, and drive up greenhouse gas emissions? Do they really enjoy 'community support'?

It doesn't take a great deal of digging to discover many of their shiny claims are mostly or wholly bogus. A recent report by Smart Growth UK - a coalition of organisations and people who favour a more compact, traditional and sustainable form of development than garden suburbs - revealed they fall woefully short.

While Howard insisted his garden cities should be separate from the existing towns he wanted to see destroyed, disciples who supported garden suburbs were more grounded in reality.

Only three of the government's garden villages can make any claim to be a new settlement; the rest are just plain urban extensions. Most grotesque of all are the 'garden towns', none of which are towns in any real sense. Most are just collections of urban extensions outside several towns, sometimes many miles apart.

As promoters of one such bit of sprawl in Hampshire put it: "Welborne Garden Village will be a distinct new community set apart from, but connected to, Fareham". Quite.

Ebbsfleet apart, few of the garden towns or villages make much significant use of brownfield land and many are 100% greenfield. And while they're chary about revealing densities of the proposed houses, they obviously favour the land-hungry, low-density, garden city model. It's more profitable.

Where the programme falls down most painfully, however, is its claims to do anything for housing need. At very best, the 10 garden towns and 14 garden villages could generate around 10,000 homes a year, a tiny proportion of the homes the government says are needed, and that's certainly optimistic.

Their contribution to local housing need would be further undermined by inclusion of employment space. Those new jobs would need people to fill them, many of them people from outside the area who would all need housing.

The rural locations and low densities of these developments militate against residents' opportunities to use sustainable transport and, despite rhetoric about walking and cycling, the best most could expect is low-frequency bus services. A few are close to railway stations, but proximity to a rail-based network is needed to attract significant proportions of residents away from cars. Almost all the approved schemes, however, sit beside or astride major trunk roads or motorways. These are high-carbon developments.

Nor do they enjoy much, if any, of the 'community support' they are supposed to have.

True, they've all been endorsed by cash-strapped councils lured by the prospect of government cash if they approve them, and by local enterprise partnerships. But most are the subject of intense local opposition. This is just dismissed as "nimbyism" but what, in reality, is a nimby?

Answer: a person fighting to protect their local environment from someone seeking to profit from its destruction. What's shocking about that?

The full case against the garden towns and villages is set out in the Smart Growth UK report, but the country plainly needs more homes, so how could a Smart Growth approach help?

PREVENTING HYPERSPRAWL

The idea emerged in North America in the 1990s in response to the hypersprawl and car dependency over there that our garden city movement helped to inspire. Smart Growth has brought about a flowering of urban living, public transport, active travel and promotion of more traditional townscape.

In the UK we need to overhaul the way we assess housing need and start providing for our real needs. We need to provide a range of housing types and tenures for those who actually need them, not just young owner-occupiers.

We need appropriate urbanist densities for housing; that doesn't mean high-rise but the functional and community-friendly medium-density housing our Victorian forebears created. And we need brownfield-first policies to ensure suitable sites are used first for housing before we have to destroy countryside.

We urgently need regional policies too. Why concentrate economic activity in overheated hotspots with acute housing shortages? Backing favourites is a poor economic strategy; we need to move growth to places where there are people crying out for jobs and with homes to accommodate them.

Above all perhaps, we need to embrace the concept of 'transit-oriented development'. Some of the garden villages wouldn't even have a railway station, but recent research has shown that even a local station only means a small minority of the journeys made by multi-car households are made by rail.

Major developments should only be considered where they have access to a rail-based public transport network and that normally will mean a location in a conurbation.

For the past 15 years central government, under instructions from the Treasury, has been attacking the planning system and pushing a desperately unsustainable model of dispersed, low-density, greenfield housing reminiscent of inter-war sprawl.

We urgently need to start planning again, just not in the way the garden city movement decrees. The 21st century needs to be a century of urbanism and transit-oriented development, not car-dependent sprawl.

Jon Reeds is co-ordinator of the Smart Growth UK coalition and author of *Smart Growth – From Sprawl to Sustainability*. The report *Garden Towns & Villages – Unwanted, Unnecessary and Unsustainable* can be found at: <http://www.smartgrowthuk.org/resources/downloads/Garden%20Towns%20and%20Villages%20-%20May%202017.pdf>

THE GHOSTS WHO TEACH AFRICA'S CHILDREN

Too much foreign aid money goes into perpetuating inadequate education systems in sub-Saharan Africa and the Liberal Democrats should press for radical change, says Rebecca Tinsley

Imagine you are visiting a primary school in an East African town. As you approach the cube-shape cement building, there is silence, so you assume no pupils are present.

But when you enter the dark, steaming-hot classroom, you find 70 children sitting quietly on benches at long, narrow tables. The lights are off and the blackboard is barely visible through the gloom.

A teacher reads from a book, in English, adding no intonation to the words over which he stumbles. It isn't clear he understands punctuation either, because he drones on in a monotone. Although he is describing a feature of geography, he does not use pictures, draw on the blackboard, or gesture out the window to the mountains on the horizon. Yet, the children sit, silent, obedient, and uncomprehending.

Teachers are absent for days or weeks. Still, they draw their tiny salary and give a cut to the headteacher or local government bureaucrat turning a blind eye to 'ghost teachers'.

In one South African province alone, they recently identified 4,000 ghosts among their 30,000 teachers. In Uganda, 27% of the payroll was absent; in Kenya, 30%. Teachers may charge for giving pass marks on homework and exams. If parents cannot pay, the teacher may demand sex from pupils in exchange for good marks.

Shocked by what you have seen, what is your reaction? Do you want to improve the quality of teaching, and get to the root of the corruption at local and national level? Build safe lavatories so girls will not fear being raped by men who lurk around the bushes where they urinate? Prosecute and disbar teachers who abuse their power? Turn on the lights so children might see the blackboard? Print text books in the local language, or give English language lessons, rather than assuming that teachers and pupils will acquire English by osmosis?

No. You decide the answer is to build more schools. Even worse, you will use volunteer Europeans to build, rather than hiring locals, whom you could employ for a year, just for the price of your airfare.

The dismal portrait of African schools, above, is not typical, but it is true in too many parts of the continent. It goes some way to explaining why, after 60 years of international aid, there has been so little progress in literacy, and why so few pupils make it to a university where they might earn degrees that are considered worth having by potential employers.

We, the West (the international aid agencies, foundations, NGOs and the UN system), are

complicit because it is easier to keep writing cheques and building schools than to confront the abysmal standards of teaching.

FICTITIOUS STATISTICS

We also accept fictitious statistics from African education ministries. Typically, they measure school attendance on the first day or week of the school year, not the second month, when attendance will typically have dropped by 30%.

Literacy is often gauged by asking someone if they can write their name (the one thing everyone can do). In a country that must remain nameless, an aid worker did her own literacy survey in a village regarded as typical. Of the 80 inhabitants she found there, only three could actually read and write, although everyone could scrawl their name and recognise it.

Yet, we do not often question official statistics because our 'investment' in 'developing' countries must appear to be paying off. If there had been decades of 'progress' why isn't there a significant middle class, or medium-size businesses, or competitive productivity, or efficient institutions at local, regional or national levels?

According to a Brookings Institute study of sub-Saharan African education outcomes, there are nations in which 40% or more of children do not meet a minimum standard of learning by age 10.

"In countries such as Ethiopia, Nigeria and Zambia, over half of in-school students are not learning basic skills by the end of primary school.....Half of sub-Saharan Africa's total primary school population – 61 million children – will reach adolescence without the basic skills needed to lead successful and productive lives."

The study also finds that fewer than 10% of students entering primary school in sub-Saharan Africa will make it to African universities. Pupils in east Asia and the Pacific nations are four times as likely to enter local universities, and in North America and western Europe, they are 10 times as likely.

In much of Africa, school is free, but the obligatory uniform costs a month's earnings, and books and transport are a significant financial burden for most families.

It is hardly surprising when parents conclude there is little point in the education on offer when youngsters could be helping on the farm or around the home. In addition, parents may fear the financial value of their daughters will be massively diminished if they lose

their virginity to the teacher.

Nevertheless, some African leaders and their education ministers are skilled at telling Western donors what they want to hear. "Education is our national priority," they declare. In a country that also must remain nameless, the president talks up a storm about his plan to make each pupil computer-literate and fluent in English. Yet, his local council officials (jobs given to ruling party worthies) are paid at least four times what a teacher makes. Draw your own conclusions about the quality of people attracted to teaching as opposed to paper-pushing.

A Sussex University study concluded: "Teaching has become 'employment of the last resort' among university graduates and secondary school leavers in many countries. Consequently, teachers often lack a strong, long-term commitment to teaching as a vocation. Finally, teachers are paid considerably less than the mainstream professions."

What can be done? UK universities have a world class reputation; hence the popularity of offshoots of for-profit British colleges in relatively affluent China.

To quote a young East African called Abdoul, "If I had a UK qualification, a government bureaucrat would find it much more difficult to give the job to his cousin. A commercial firm would hire me, whereas my MBA from a local university lacks the status of a British university. Business people just don't take most African degrees seriously. They know the standards here are low."

Here is a proposal: part of the UK's £13bn annual aid budget could help UK universities establish African off-shoots. Teachers could be trained in their home countries, and given grants to cover tuition and lodging.

Unfortunately, making these colleges for-profit would ensure only the local elite would benefit. However, charging wealthy locals to study desirable disciplines such as business, medicine or law might generate income to cross-subsidise teacher training programmes. Where possible, the UK off-shoots would work hand-in-hand with existing African universities, supporting and developing their capacity and status.

To avoid abuse of the system, the African nation would guarantee to pay graduates an attractive salary once they start teaching; and the graduates would undertake to remain in teaching, and in their home country, for at least 10 years. The UK would also have to promise not to head-hunt African graduates to British schools, as we do with doctors and nurses, to Africa's detriment.

Moreover, to get good quality staff into rural areas (where most Africans still live), teachers should be supplied with motorcycles, enabling them to commute from the nearest town, where they can live with like-minded people. The Sussex University study found that a high proportion of teachers in rural schools were untrained.

"It benefits no one, least of all Africa's young people, to pretend that standards in many African schools (especially in rural areas) are acceptable"

ILLITERATE LOCALS

Put bluntly, few educated people would tolerate being paid \$3 a day to live in rural squalor among illiterate locals.

The Sussex report also concluded: "Teacher management is nothing short of chaotic in many countries." Hence, off-shoots of UK institutions should teach talented and well-motivated Africans about school administration. Studies show that the ghost teacher

syndrome can be tackled through improved oversight, monitoring, inspections and consistently applied systems.

Encouraging UK teachers to spend a year or two in Africa, doing teacher training in British institutions, is also a win-win option. Teachers in the UK might welcome a mid-career break in Africa, and younger UK teachers could cut their teeth in Africa before settling down in British schools.

None of this is rocket science, yet it is likely to be greeted by accusations of neo-colonialism. It benefits no one, least of all Africa's young people, to pretend that standards in many African schools (especially in rural areas) are acceptable; or that teacher training is taken seriously in many African countries; or that the teaching profession is accorded the appropriate status and financial reward to attract the best applicants.

Yet, those in the West who should know better continue to be cowed by excessively privileged African leaders who portray constructive suggestions as patronising insults rooted in racism. In this way, they ensure our aid flows into their government bank accounts, paying for the latest fleet of SUVs in which rulers sweep past the destitution plaguing their wretched citizens.

At a time when the right-wing media is savaging foreign aid, the Liberal Democrats must do more than parrot the pious mantra about devoting 0.7% of gross national income to aid.

There are legitimate grounds for finding fault in some of the UK's Department for International Development's programmes (see reports by the Commons' Select Committee and the impartial Independent Commission for Aid). An ORB poll last year found 71% of people wanted to scrap the 0.7% goal. We must respond not with lectures about how we must be a nicer society, but with ideas that our own tax payers believe will tackle the roots of persisting poverty and ignorance. Creating local branches of UK universities to train teachers in poor countries would be one such proposal.

Rebecca Tinsley founded the development NGO Network for Africa in 2007

THE TEN TRIBES OF THE LIB DEMS

Just joined the Lib Dems and wondering where you fit in? David Boyle offers a handy guide

I chaired a session with Vince Cable at the local festival in Steyning in Sussex last year. It went very well. So well, in fact, that one of the audience came up to me afterwards, and hissed conspiratorially at me: “I want him to be our monarch.”

I mention this now because of Vince’s amazing ability to break out of categories. I never exactly had him down as king material, but he has certainly come a long way since he was the representative of the free market in the Lib Dem shadow cabinet.

It is true that the Lib Dems are often people who do, in a sense, burst out of categories. Sometimes quite deliberately, holding fast to their right to do so.

There are a good 50,000 new members of the Lib Dems since the 2015 general election. So this is a guide for them to the categories of tribes within the membership organisation they have joined. It is a deeply biased account, but we have to start somewhere.

I should say that very few people fit precisely into any one of these, but these are the archetypes that draw them in different directions. It therefore helps to know which tribe you nearly belong to. Here are the top ten, in alphabetical order...

☛ Community Politicians

Not so many of these now, because many of them took control of their town halls and went on to higher things and to exhaustion. They remain true to the 1970 principles of community politics, convinced that their task is to spread the power stuff, not hoard it. They are respected members of their communities and recognised everywhere – inside their ward boundaries, about which they will probably tell you interminably. Dress code: 1970s anoraks, faded by the sun, and weather-beaten, exhausted features.

Giveaway signs: Focus deliverer’s elbow and fore-shortened fingers from encounters with too many dogs. Favourite Liberal leader: Ashdown.

☛ Distributists

Again, these are few and far between – you don’t see much sandal-wearing at party conferences these days – but they used to make up the majority: those who looked outside conventional policy for a liberating programme, and were much attached to obscure causes, from wind farms on hospital roofs to basic income.

Dress code: visible yellow socks, soup stains.

Giveaway signs: beards.

Favourite Liberal leader: Grimond.

☛ Greens

A slightly upmarket version of Green Party activists, who are better dressed (and possibly better paid) but are still convinced that the basic principles remain true and that everyone-remains-out-to-get-them.

Dress code: tweed jacket, a little worn around the lapels from all the badges hung there.

Giveaway signs:

Favourite Liberal leader: Steel.

☛ Liberal Brexiteer

Curmudgeonly, cross and often Cornish (the 3Cs), they find the uncritical admiration for a centralised supra-national body pretty infuriating and clearly now interpret their Liberalism in different ways to the rest of the party. But since they hold the key to the seats in the so-called Celtic Fringe, they can’t be ignored.

Dress code: agricultural, wellies, stubble (not the women), pub style.

Giveaway signs: They never appear at party conferences, and therefore may not actually exist (until you look at the results).

Favourite Liberal leader: Asquith.

☛ Liberator Readers

Fifty-something activists from the days of yore, with trenchant opinions and a deep suspicion of authority, and Lib Dem authority in particular.

Dress code: check shirts, leather jackets, occasional furtive glances.

Giveaway signs: They read Private Eye, and suffer from mild paranoia. Favourite Liberal leader: Lloyd George.

☛ Orange Bookers

Combining a fascination for economics pre-1870, and a fondness for the great days of the coalition, they may not actually have ever read The Orange Book, which was really about something else entirely.

Dress code: youngish intern from free market think-tank.

Giveaway signs: spots; no facial hair.

Favourite Liberal leader: Clegg or Gladstone.

☛ Radicals

This was a specific group but all these groups refer to themselves as ‘radicals’ so the tribe – if there is one – is too amorphous to pin down.

☛ Social Democrats

Followers of no particular political tradition, except a vague Fabianism, they have followed the course of UK social democracy over the years, up and down with Jenkins, then Owen, then Blair and finding themselves then with nowhere much to go – except where Remainers are strongest.

Dress code: yuppie, professional, competent and smiley.

Giveaway signs: dangly ear-rings.

Favourite Liberal leader: Kennedy.

☛ Social Liberals

Admirers of state control in most things, with aspirations for the Social Liberal Forum as the kind of

Lib Dem version of Momentum.

Dress code: 1990s university lecturer.

Giveaway signs: A marked pendant for cats.

Favourite Liberal leader: Farron (up to a point).

☛ Whigs

Well, let's be honest, they are not terribly interested in policy, except legal rights. There are local Whigs too – those who aspire not to change the council they have been elected to, but to run it more efficiently.

Dress code: cocktail reception at a public relations sector knees-up.

Giveaway: They are different from us, as Dorothy Parker once put it – they have more money.

Favourite Liberal leader: Rosebery or Davies (or perhaps even Campbell).

I have tried to disguise my own tribe here, partly because I wanted to be equally rude about everyone and partly because I fear it is on the endangered list. I am a Distributist, not in the strict sense of a follower of Belloc and Chesterton, but in the sense that the term is used by academics now to demarcate the Lib Dems – and because I deprecate the lack of interest shown by some of the other tribes in a radical new Liberal economics (or any economics, to be frank).

More broadly, it refers to a bundle of ideas around radical independence, and the radical devolution of power. It provided the beards and sandals that used to be de rigueur at Liberal assemblies but now feel so absent at Lib Dem conferences.

But if you are new to the party and don't know exactly where you belong, here is my ready reckoner, based on two knotty and up-to-date issues, both – as it happens – about parenting:

☛ Do you believe that parents should have the right to decide whether to take their children out of school for the day?

1. Of course they should – if we win, they win.
2. Yes, it's their right as parents to decide.
3. On the one hand, on the other hand...
4. Yes. The Daily Mail called it right.
5. What was it David Steel said on the issue from his bunker?
6. But what is really important is having more academies.
7. See (1).
8. No. The teachers know best.
9. But what's really important is stopping the further privatisation of education.
10. No, it confuses regulations, but please don't disturb me again – I'm at a party.

Right, with me so far? If you put a tick by the opinion you agree with most, then you can compare it with the next question.

☛ Whose side did you feel you were on in the tragic tussle between the parents of Charlie Gard and his doctors at Great Ormond Street, about whether he could be treated abroad?

1. The parents, of course.
2. Yes, it's their right as parents to decide.
3. Not absolutely sure what the relevance this has to

global warming.

4. Yes. The Daily Mail called it right again.

5. There are powerful forces in the leadership who want us to believe one of these, so we won't say.

6. Who was paying?

7. See (1).

8. The doctors know best.

9. It's dangerous to cast doubt on the judgement of professionals.

10. Really, this kind of populism is designed to piss me right off.

Finally, here's the last question. Complex, this one...

☛ Liberal MPs didn't oppose the original sale of council houses, on condition that they were replaced. How would you solve the housing crisis?

1. It depends on the aspirations of the tenants.
2. Build and then give away – people need control of their homes.
3. Self-built eco-homes.
4. I don't mind selling them, as long as they go to Cornish people.
5. Whatever it is, I'm against it (Groucho Marxism).
6. Turn rents into mortgages.
7. See (5).
8. Build for rent.
9. More council homes.
10. Bring down house prices by building a little bit of both – and I've told you before: next time, make an appointment!

I realise this is my personal interpretation and I will be flung out of the party for my temerity and lese-majeste. But what did you come out as? If you ticked the same number twice, it has to mean something.

If there is a serious interpretation of this article, it is that Liberalism is under some strain, not electorally – though there is a strain there too – but either because nobody knows what it means or because nobody agrees.

This may be inevitable for a creed which is designed for odd people out, and the right to be such. But it betrays an awkwardness about the ideology and the politics that might flow from it.

The Liberal narrative has become forgotten over the years – the flaws in the way Beveridge's welfare state was constructed which led to current doubts about its survival. Or the central importance of tackling monopolies if we are ever going to achieve inclusive growth. Or the way that health and environmental policy weave themselves together in Liberal thinking in a way that seems to work nowhere else. Which would all be obvious, except that Liberal thinking seems to be atrophied from under-use.

These are important issues. In fact, if the Lib Dems were to survive but the liberal story was forgotten, both the party and UK politics would be the poorer.

David Boyle is a former member of Federal Policy Committee and the author of *The Berlin Affair* (Endeavour).

TWO-TIER TEARS

The split between cabinet and backbench councillors has made the former unaccountable and the latter powerless, says Andrew Hudson

Councillors are and always have been the backbone of the Liberal Democrats and following the reduction of the size of the parliamentary party in 2015 and the possible move back to two-party politics they are likely to be the focus of our recovery.

However how accountable are they to ordinary party members? Councillors make decisions at council groups but rarely discuss council business in any detail with party members and tend to concentrate on personality differences within the group rather than decisions made, sometimes to the extent of wasting members' time with issues that ordinary members can't do much about. Councillors' approach to members tend to be top down rather than bottom up despite them relying on members to do the work that gets them elected.

The Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors (ALDC) is almost entirely techniques orientated and rarely adopts policies. To some extent this is inevitable in that a lot of local government policies will vary according to local circumstances.

ALDC is largely an election machine to maximise the Liberal Democrat vote, albeit an effective one. The Liberal Democrat group in the Local Government Association (LGA) is more policy orientated although it tends to be in the form of publishing examples of what Liberal Democrats have achieved in individual authorities rather than suggesting any policy approach.

One of the biggest problems has been the growth of the paid political advisor to council groups, although there are probably on the decrease with the next losses of seats during the coalition era resulting in fewer authorities voting to fund them.

At a time of cuts in front line services they are not perceived favourably by the general public or by other local authority staff. Nor should they be by activists in that they are there to serve councillors not the party in general and, incredibly as it sounds for political advisors to groups, they are restricted in what they can be used for so they can't be used for campaigning.

Their existence suggests that lay members are not to be trusted as they, rather than the activists, will influence policy and this implies that the activists are not to be trusted.

One example occurred when the Blairites' restricting of local government took place with the replacement of the committee structures by salaried cabinet members and the two tier system of councillors that has ensued.

Various Liberal Democrat councillors within one London borough were evasive regarding what party policy was on the new structure although I was under the impression that we were against the changes although retention of the traditional council structure

wasn't an option.

The lure of a few salaried cabinet positions proved to be too strong and they went into coalition with Labour after the next election. During a subsequent by-election in which the two coalition parties took to accusing each other about what their respective cabinet members had mismanaged it was difficult to understand what the election was about other than how many members of the public they could get out to vote.

There also seems to be an attitude that councillors alone are qualified to speak on local government in conference debates and people who work in local authorities should know their place.

Regrettably we now have a system that provides a career structure for people who have failed to make the grade for Westminster in the form of salaried employment and status and a two tier system of councillors.

The increasing number of coalitions on councils is motivated as much by salaries and bums on seats as it is by a new conciliatory approach to politics. Local government is being effectively turned into local administration through cuts in funding. Councillors, we are told, should be seen as the enablers rather than the providers of services, dishing out the contracts rather than being responsible for services.

If there are problems, then it's not their fault but it's down to the contractor. In other words, its payment without responsibility and the less they are responsible the more they get paid.

The Grenfell Tower fire showed local government at its worst although in Kensington and Chelsea a major service provider might actually have done a better job with housing.

I am not sure what the solution is. Ideally it would be a return to the committee system, the ending of salaries and their replacement by compensation for any loss in earnings, with allowances for committee chairs and maybe salaries for council leaders.

Because a vested interest group of paid cabinet members has been set up it is going to be difficult to remove it. The problem with cabinets and salaries is that councillors are beginning to think like chief officers, albeit less well paid, but the pigs are becoming increasingly indistinguishable from the humans.

It's time that our local government groups became more open and accountable and time we started to think about what we are here for, or are we merely here because we're here?

Andrew Hudson is a former local government officer and a member of Barrow-in-Furness Liberal Democrats

WHY VINCE WORRIED ME

Peter Wrigley went to Vince Cable's 'hustings' in Leeds and heard six things that alarmed him

Having heard Sir Vince Cable speak, I came away both encouraged and disappointed.

Encouraged because Sir Vince is confident, assured, has a sense of humour, and speaks with conviction. He gives simple explanations (e.g why a graduate tax is not as easy as some of us would like to think), has some interesting new ideas (e.g a lifetime education fund for all rather than just finance for university students), and is an enthusiast for the social enterprise sector, of which he has personal experience.

Cable will come over well in media interviews and even better in parliament (remember: "from Stalin to Mr Bean" on Gordon Brown?) He has both gravitas and 'bottom' and clearly outshines anyone presently on the front benches of the other parties. We can be grateful that, rather than sitting back and nursing his constituency, he's prepared to do the job.

But there are at least six areas from his talk and answers to our questions that worry me.

He praised George Osborne as a competent economist. Given that, for Liberals, Osborne took the wrong track, the very antithesis of our heritage from Keynes and Beveridge; and that for Conservatives he missed all his targets, that is risible.

He was also dismissively critical of Jeremy Corbyn and claimed that the Labour Party is now "to the left of Foot."

This is shorthand too far. Of the BBC's list of '24 things Jeremy Corbyn believes' most Liberal Democrats can go along with 80% or more, from justice for the Chagos islanders to taking our trains back into public ownership.

So simply dismissing Corbyn as far left is neither honest nor helpful. If there is to be a progressive alliance then we need to be polite about Corbyn, (a friendly critic rather than try to demonise him) and look for and emphasise policies on which we can agree. True there is not yet much sign as yet of Labour responding to such courtship, but it is up to us to make the weather.

Cable also takes a somewhat hubristic view of many of the achievements of the Coalition, particularly of his own department. For example he takes credit for the great expansion of number of apprenticeships created, though many were simply re-branding of in-service training for over-25s which already existed. My question to him concerned HS2 and whether this was more urgently needed than an upgrade of the northern rail network. I was hoping he would dismiss HS2 as the grandiose folly it is. Instead he compromised by agreeing that HS3 should be built first and HS2 start from the north. Both would be better than the present wildly expensive HS2 scheme, which is more likely to drain talent out of the north to London rather than vice versa. It should be scrapped, (along with Hinkley Point C and the like-for-like replacement of Trident, though these issues weren't raised.)

My fifth worry was his argument against nationalisation, that any borrowing by nationalised industries for investment purposes adds to the Treasury's deficit. Surely if that is a problem the answer is to change the rules. If Gordon Brown can invent PFIs and PPPs surely we can come up separate sinking fund alongside but separate from the normal national debt. I stand by the argument that there is no point in privatising something that cannot be allowed to go bankrupt.

Lastly and most seriously Cable argues that while we have a Tory party far to the right and a Labour Party far to the left there is a big space in-between for our "common sense" policies.

That's very similar to the approach taken in the 1980s and the formation of the SDP and the Alliance. It didn't work then and it won't work now. Liberals, not least Michael Meadowcroft, Gordon Lishman and most of the Liberator collective, have been banging on for years that we are not a 'centre party' taking moderate versions of the ideas of the two extremes and thus allowing them to dictate our position.

Rather Liberal Democrats are dedicated to ensuring liberty compatible to the liberty of others (and that includes asylum seekers and those fleeing poverty and violence overseas), eradication of extremes of poverty and wealth in our own society and sustainable development in the rest of the world; devolution of power to the lowest sensible level: fairness, especially in electoral systems; a sustainable domestic economy with the fruits equitably spread; and engagement as partners with international institutions including judicial ones, and especially the United Nations and the European Union.

This is what fires us up, and will be the basis of our resurgence. Sir Vince is ambitious in claiming that he wants to be prime minister, not just the leader of a minor party. I have no doubt that he will make a better prime minister than anyone else currently on the scene from any party. But our chances of achieving this will be greater if he campaigns on our fundamental values rather than simply offering the soggy centre.

Peter Wrigley is president of Batley and Spen Liberal Democrats.
keynesianliberal.blogspot.com

Decolonization
by Jan C. Jansen &
Jürgen Osterhammel
Princeton University
Press 2017 £22.95

The road to independence for former European and Japanese colonies was one of the most striking features of the second half of the 20th century, yet the process of decolonisation has received scant academic analysis. A lacuna in the market has thus been filled by two German authors, who provide a beautifully crafted account of historical developments and social changes, while also identifying the seeds of decolonisation in events and personalities between the two world wars.

Colonialism had outlived its function, even from the subjective and exploitative point of view of the colonial powers, but it was the passionate defence of the rights of colonised peoples by both political and intellectual leaders in Africa and Asia that helped tip the balance in favour of greater justice and the acceptance of self-determination as a fundamental human right.

Of course, the resultant new nations did not all progress smoothly once they had their independence, but a degree of dignity and self-worth had been reclaimed for their peoples. Jansen and Osterhammel's great strength is to provide not only a credible and useful analytical framework for considering decolonisation critically but also to do so within a fluent historical narrative. This means that their book, elegantly translated by Jeremiah Riemer, will be of great interest to both scholars and the interested general reader alike.

Jonathan Fryer

**Protest Camps in
International Context:
Spaces, Infrastructures
and Media of
Resistance**
Gavin Brown, Anne
Feigenbaum, Fabian
Frenzel and Patrice
McCurdy (eds)
Policy Press University



REVIEWS

of Bristol 2017 £60

It is highly likely that many political activists have had some involvement with 'protest camps' during their lifetimes. So what kind of camps might they be: well organised and planned or spontaneous arising due to a particular event? Did they have open or closed boundaries? What kept the camps going? How were they publicised and how was the decision-making handled?

Protest Camps in International Context is a multi-authored, multi-edited and multi-disciplinary book covering the theories and recent histories of various camp protests throughout the world and including the UK, even though at one time during the 2012 Olympics, home secretary Theresa May banned tents.

So, what do tents represent that they should be such a threat to the authorities even in a democracy? According to the book, it is often 'civil disobedience'. Protest camps might represent a social or environmental movement such as that of the UK climate camps or Occupy Wall Street. Alternatively, they could be 'defensive' or 'reactive' in nature. Camps might last for days, weeks, months or years. They might be peaceful and fun or violent and revolutionary. In short, they are diverse.

Feigenbaum describes protest camps as a unique sociological phenomenon functioning as representational space where participants form individual and collective identities. This book is organised into three main sections: assembling and materialising; occupying and colonising; reproducing and re-creating. It is rich with examples from all over the world including Turkey, Hong Kong, Ukraine, Israel, India, north Africa and Mexico as well as London and other EU cities.

My experience of visiting a recent protest camp was in early 2014 on a European Movement

fact finding mission to Kiev and the 'EuroMaidan'. Shevtsova compares this violent camp with the earlier 2004 Maidan during the 'Orange Revolution'. While both helped to effect change, there were differences in that the first was well planned and non-violent whereas the second arose almost spontaneously (with help from social media) after President Yanukovich refused to sign an association agreement with the EU.

It began peacefully with EU flags being waved but became violent when protestors were shot and a small percentage of right wing activists joined, in part to protect the camp. The sights and smells of burnt tyres, captured ammunition, photos of those who died, street paving torn up and walking on oily mud – as well as the tents and the stage erected for speakers and entertainment - are still with me. It felt like a scene from Les Miserables where the barricades represented a fight for less corruption and more democracy.

Istanbul is another city that has had its fair share of political protests and violence in recent years, including in Gezi Park off Taksim Square which is the example here. The role of infrastructures is analysed as well as political atmosphere. Initially the protest in 2013 was against Gezi Park and Taksim being redeveloped. A few people assembled when trees started to be cut down.

The police under orders from the state retaliated violently and although the mainstream media did not report this there was widespread internet coverage which resulted in increasing numbers assembling in Istanbul and other Turkish cities. Gezi was more 'open space' than many camps. Nothing was planned but large numbers of people brought necessities or ordered food for the protesters via the internet. The

participants became closer after tear gas was used with their actions of care increasing solidarity.

One interesting thread within the book is the role of social media and the intersection between actual and virtual space which allows many more participants than can be counted physically at any one point in time.

My recollection is that in Ukraine there was much real-time communication via this method, including requests for activists to help to protect each other by attending hospitals in order to prevent the police from arresting the injured.

Another thread is how the camps provide an education, both in media training and in political activism as well as, in some cases, embodying a participatory study in the development of democracies.

The camps are not all homogenous often attracting members from very different political and social spectrums as well as the homeless. Decision-making might be shared between all groups.

The book is well written and edited and, in conclusion, has much to recommend it to academics, students, activists and practitioners. More analysis and empirical research in the future on how effective protest camps can be in achieving their goals would be useful, although it is appreciated that the outcomes desired could take many years.

Protest camps are often populated by the young and demonstrate their concern with politics and the future shape, space and quality of their world.

Carol Weaver

Dunkirk (film) Christopher Nolan (dir) 2017

Dunkirk - the film - covers the evacuation of the British troops trapped on the beach by the advancing German army. Dunkirk effectively marked the end of the Battle of France. At the beginning of May the Germans had unexpectedly managed to move through the lightly defended Ardennes to take the Low Countries. The combined efforts of the French, Belgium and British armies were unable to prevent them advancing to the coast effectively cutting off the Allied

troops. This was a major defeat for the British and the Allies which could have resulted in Britain's surrender and probably the collapse of the Allied resistance. Churchill ordered the evacuation of 45 000 troops in order to have a core army to protect Britain from the inevitable invasion.

Director Christopher Nolan does not provide a lot of this background. What grabs your attention is the film's ability to show both the grinding hardship endured by the soldiers, the chaos and bloodiness of the evacuation while providing the space for the reflections of some participants.

The story is told from three different perspectives and time slots – that of two soldiers who over a week try to escape from the beach; that of a civilian captain on the day when he, his son and a friend sail for Dunkirk to take the soldiers off the beach; and that of an RAF pilot who for an hour tries to protect the men and the ships while running out of fuel.

To begin with the stories seemed completely separate but gradually merge as the film comes to a conclusion. Heroism abounds and sits alongside the misery of getting wet all the time; the soldiers are terrified and quarrel with each other. This is war – it is not glorious.

There are strong performances from Mark Rylance (of course) as the quietly courageous captain determined to bring back some soldiers; Kenneth Branagh does what he does best - portraying the grizzled naval lord who will ensure Churchill gets some men back to protect Britain. Cillian Murphy's traumatised soldier tears at your heart as does Thomas Hardy as the brave RAF flier juggling his fuel. Harry Styles provide a strong performance as one of the soldiers (may have a second career there?) Christopher Nolan's excellent direction brings you into the centre of the action – you really felt you were in a sinking boat (particularly if you see it in 3D). This is not a film with a lot of dialogue – it would have worked as a silent film. Some people I know who have felt this made the film a bit tedious but I thought it enhanced its quality.

We know how it all ends. Hitler reduced his army's advance on Dunkirk (one of his early fatal mistakes) enabling the evacuation

nearly 340,000 men; thousands, however, were taken prisoner or died on the beach. A massive arsenal of tanks, artillery, ships and aircraft were left behind or lost in the fight. Not a victory but definitely a miracle.

Margaret Lally

“They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else”, a History of the Armenian Genocide by Ronald Grigor Sunny Princeton 2017

It may look bit daft but we have all tried to get rid of our shadows that once were in our childhood. At least I remember myself desperately trying to shake off my shadow while running in the streets of old Istanbul, more precisely its old Armenian district. Later in the life I had learned it used to be called Tatavla, while we were living there it was actually called 'Kurtulus', which means liberation.

Sunny's book, “They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else” has reminded me the shadow which I have never managed to shake it off.

Early pages of the book give a very useful and clear account of the circumstances which lays the road that goes to the all the way to genocide. There is a lot of discussion whether to say or to call 1915 events to genocide or not. I think every reader should decide by themselves after finishing the book. Once again, we are able see clearly the Ottoman policy against non-Muslims were not equal or even any good as it was told to us years after years. Non-Muslims were not equal or even treated as citizens of the empire they were always second class always disadvantaged in eyes of courts or anywhere where they had to deal with the state apparatus.

The other important point which is made in this book is the role of Hamidiye brigades; which consist of mainly Kurdish tribesman. They were the main weapon against the Armenian community particularly in the south east and east Anatolia. The areas where the Armenian community used to live were promised to that tribes and other disposed Muslims. It was a bloody wealth and land transfer has completed after Armenians



forcefully pushed from their land.

The point from which I think is clearly shown in the book the importance of 1909 sharia uprising. This uprising had been crushed by army which came from Thessaloniki in Istanbul. On the other hand, at the same time in Adana the uprising turned into a pogrom against the local Armenian community. As result, tens of thousands of Armenians killed; the Armenian quarter of Adana community was completely burned down.

Only six years after the Adana pogroms, in 1915 the genocide started by mass arrests of Armenian community leaders in Istanbul and the rest is history as we know it.

The neighbourhood which I grew up has lost all of its Armenian residents. Moronic nationalism and hatred are almost visibly more than ever. The city's old walls once used to reflect (Istanbul) Armenian language, old Sefarad Spanish, Greek language and even some French turned into a monolithic deaf, grey silent ugly stones.

The soil of Anatolia had been soaked with so much blood and agony that none of official lies would be able clean anymore.

Elina Minassian

Kedi (film) Ceyda Torun (dir) 2017

Readers have sometimes questioned the appearance of cat pictures in *Liberator* and received the response that cats are very liberal animals - 'nature's anarchists', as the late Simon Tittle used to call them - living alongside us, sometimes with us, but not ultimately controlled by us.

As visitors to Turkey will know, semi-dependent cats are to be found everywhere 'working' in

restaurants, cafes and even ancient monuments, where they keep down vermin and supply companionship (and charm customers) in return or food - not exactly pets but not strays either.

Not even President Erdogan has yet been able to assert control over Turkey's cats and Kedi (Turkish for

'cat') follows their adventures in Istanbul, where they live in cafes, by the docks, in various business premises and have 'their' own humans without quite being owned.

We see no-nonsense fisherman who feed abandoned kittens, cats that have attached themselves to people's homes and even a large grey one that beats it paws on a delicatessen's window for its daily helping of cheese and smoked meats.

Kedi shows a happy co-existence between humans and animals in the midst of one of the world's largest cities.

Torun has said she made this film because whenever she returned to Istanbul she saw "change that made it less and less recognisable, except for the cats, they were the one constant element, becoming synonymous with the city itself and embodying its soul".

It's not just in Istanbul where Turkish cats will attach themselves to humans. The accompanying picture shows one 'working' at Ephesus.

Mark Smulian



The Scent Of My Skin Poems By Farrah Fray Palewell Press £9.99

Palewell Press is introducing a new talent with the publication of Farrah Fray's collection. Fray was born in the UK, of Libyan parents, studied both there and here and now lives in the UK.

Any further biographical details are unnecessary as her poems speak for themselves, their narrative and sense of place are written "from every world I live in". Her work covers a great deal of ground; some are London based and western orientated, some are on the universal themes of love and heartbreak. Her more eastern poems are not a diatribe against Islamic societies' treatment of women, more a view from the inside, triggered by her response to the worlds she experiences. She has a foot in many camps, which does not make her conflicted, merely possessed of a wider lens than many.

In 'Ambition' Fray captures the differences in expectation between men and women in Islamic societies. "She should softly pad down the stairs/be softly aroused by morning prayers... accommodate, curl, taste sweet". But "if she had a bouncing baby boy she would encourage him to destroy".

Her very Libyan poem 'Meche' describes the fashion of highlighting hair by bleaching strands until shades of the lightest blonde are created. "The specific importance of this trend to Libyans is they believe it automatically makes you more beautiful, as it is synonymous with being fair which

is also a symbol of beauty". The poem describes Meche as "skipping over to the other side of the colour spectrum... but stripped of warmth".

And yet they are not so different from western women, as 'Women' notes. "I know women who... Unsure of their

identities since birth/like other women placed on earth”, as they too, like Fray, hope that “and may I know men who refuse to accept when power is given by those who are oppressed”

Many poems vividly recall the awfulness of heartbreak, of betrayal; “Life doesn’t go on, but waveringly retreats”, and who hasn’t tried “wiping old texts with fingers battling like windscreen wipers fighting off the rain”?

Others note the idiosyncrasies of London, the plight of immigrants crossing the Mediterranean, the leaving of Libya in 2011 during the political unrest “and the night fell too soon for us to cope”, and the way she feels about her (Libyan) homeland today, “of the country, of the language which breaks promises”. Her best are clarion calls to all women; in ‘Girl Combat London’ she asks, “Teach them that words are a martial art/that can be used to say no”.

Her poems get under your skin. Try them, for Fray has a lovely turn of phrase.

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A Concise History of Sunnis & Shi’is by John McHugo Saqi Books 2017 £20.00

This a useful and somewhat overdue book. There are many misconceptions about Islam and particularly the Sunni-Shi’i-Sufi divide therein. When looking at the troubles of the Islamic world, and fundamentalism in particular, there is a tendency in the West to say that Islam is 600 years younger than Christianity and is at about the stage in its development when Europe was split in half by the Reformation and that is what is going on in Islam today. Since many of commentaries on Islam deal with the split fairly superficially this might not be surprising. However, McHugo argues that the split between Sunni and Shi’i is not inevitable, and despite periodic inter-communal violence, both have lived side by side for most of history, as indeed, they have with their Christian and Jewish neighbours in the Middle East. When tensions have arisen, it has been (and is) more often due to insecurities within a particular

regime or their respective territorial ambitions on the Arab/Turkish-Persian divide.

Towards this argument, it is best recalled that Ali, the cousin of the Prophet, deferred his claim to the Caliphate in the interests of harmony within the community. Broadly speaking, the Sunnis might be seen as advocating a more democratic leadership of their religion, whilst the Shi’i followed a hereditary line. There does appear to be a reasonable case for the Shi’i argument, but it did not follow the real politic of the time. If those Shi’i who practice it were to abandon sabb, the ritual cursing of the three caliphs (literally the successor, or deputy of the Prophet Muhammed, who died suddenly) who preceded Ali, which is practiced from time to time and is held as blasphemous by Sunnis, it might go a long way towards healing the rift.

McHugo takes us through this; it is not always easy to follow the succession of what, for most westerners, are unfamiliar names. One almost wonders how the empire that the Arabs so quickly built up managed to survive for so long, ultimately to 1918, as opposed to the many Turkic/Mongol empires which rapidly collapsed. That is part of the answer of course – a succession of empires. When those empires became remote and European, a new dimension was added – new boundaries with implicit nationalisms and as armies became driving forces secular agendas. A fall-back to religious identities was a natural and predictable response.

To an extent, Islam had its reformation in the 18th century, with Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab. His puritan views, which are problematic, were disputed then as now by Sunni scholars, but their resurgence can be mainly attributed to Saudi economic muscle. As of 2015 McHugo notes, despite forming 10-15% of Saudi Arabia’s population, no Shi’i has ever been made a minister, and only one an ambassador. Intellectually, Wahhabism would influence Salafism, against a backdrop of western imperialism and its betrayals. From there, and through the Muslim Brotherhood, there is a continuity in thought towards those we generally define as Islamist radicals. Recalling Christianity’s Thirty Years War,

McHugo cautions those who call for an Islamic Reformation to be careful of what they wish for.

So, we come to the present impasse which has its roots in contemporary social and economic forces in an ill-matched post-colonial world, whatever historical arguments might be wheeled out to legitimise - by ISIS for example.

The often Shi’i related insurgencies generally have a case, but are too easily conflated as proxi-wars between the Saudis and Iran. Abandoning America’s hostility to Iran could go a long way towards unravelling those, but what of Iraq, Libya, Syria? one could go on. McHugo believes that the split between Sunni and Shi’i is not inevitable and the case that he makes shows that its resolution is one of the pre-conditions for peace and security in the Islamic world, and as we know, beyond. An understanding of these issues by political communities of all stripes is a pre-condition for this, so hopefully this book will be widely read in such circles.

Stewart Rayment

Continued from Page 15

Postmodern liberal or not, I still want to say that Orwell gave us a picture that is nearer the truth, but however you describe it Orwell’s view of the subject prevailed for many decades. Indeed, while one could have suggested 20 years ago that this view was now of only historical interest, it seems again compelling in the world of 2017.

We liberals like to insist that we are not mere centrists but have a radical view of our own. I see nothing wrong with centrism in as far as it represents a defence of institutions like the National Health Service and public service broadcasting that made Britain a better country to live in.

But if we seek something more exciting, then the postmodern world view, which accepts the breakdown of the great narratives and is tolerant of local difference, is a promising one to explore. And there is not better guide to it than Richard Rorty.

Jonathan Calder is a member of the Liberator Collective.

Monday

When I heard that Big Ben was to be silenced for four years, I wasted no time in telephoning the Director General of the BBC to suggest they broadcast the chimes from St Asquith's instead. Their tone is certainly distinctive and, though the clock is apt to run a little slow, that can easily be remedied by adding pennies to the pendulum (or is it by taking them off?) I fear, however, that I received short shrift from the DG: "It's not in London, is it?"

After giving him my opinion of Simon Mann's cricket commentaries and John Humphrys' disinclination to retire, I put the phone down on him.

Incidentally, a more radical choice would be the stables clock here at the Hall. It is complete with a small carillon and plays tunes such as 'The Land,' 'Woad' and 'Hurrah for Lord Bonkers!' on the quarter. (The horses seem to like it.)

Tuesday

Did you see the fight between Mayweather and McGregor? While it was not as one-sided as the pundits predicted, I was painfully reminded of the night I arranged for Muhammad Ali to fight the heavyweight champion of Rutland, Tubby Anstruther. That one didn't go the distance either, but it did put the Empire Pool, Oakham, on the map as a venue for boxing. What great nights they were! Henry Cooper. Alan 'Boom Boom' Minter. Vanessa Redgrave. Above all I remember Sugar Ray Michie, a tasty welterweight who later won Argyll and Bute for the Liberals. We Liberal Democrats could do with some of their fighting spirit today.

Wednesday

Here in Rutland night-time cricket is well established thanks to the Elves of Rockingham Forest and their torches, even if I will swear they shine more brightly when the Elves are batting. Still, it is best not to fall out with these fellows, as I found when I suggested they were achieving reverse swing by underhand means. "High Elven Magic" my foot! They were using a bottle top to lift the seam. Where was I? Ah yes, it is best not to fall out with the Elves: last time I did it took simply ages to persuade them to turn my gardener Meadowcroft back into Meadowcroft from being a frog.

Day-night cricket is, however, a new venture for the England test team, so I thought myself something of a pioneer when I had myself driven to Edgbaston for its first such test. I was delighted that a whole row in the Hollies Stand was dressed as me, complete with false moustaches, even though I was in dressing gown and pyjamas myself. I was proud to lead them in many choruses of... well, of the songs played by my stables carillon, as it happens.

The only trouble is that I could have sworn the ball was a lurid pink, which clearly cannot have been the case. I have therefore made an appointment to have my eyes examined. (Could it be that Nanny was right after all?) The general view was that I should see an optometrist, so that is what I am going to do this afternoon. It will be a pleasure to meet someone who always looks on the bright side of things.

Thursday

I did not take part in the Glorious Twelfth this year as it clashed with the Well-Behaved Orphans' annual holiday at Trescothick Bay in Cornwall. Bathing, running

Lord Bonkers' Diary

barefoot across the sand, burying Matron... I had a high old time of it.

In any case, shooting grouse is not to my taste as the activity is now so commercialised. Grouse are bred in enormous numbers, overfed and then have little lead weights tied to their feet so they cannot fly too high. I am happier here on my own moors. Open fire at a Rutland partridge and it will take cover and fire back at you. Now that's what I call good sport!

Friday

To Sheffield to weigh our prospects of regaining the Hallam Division at the next election. I am shocked at the scenes of desolation I find: street after street with stumps but no trees. Oak, ash and thorn are all felled, and the sycamores are look distinctly nervous. Squirrels tug at my tweeds as I pass and beg for nuts.

"I expect the socialists have decided that trees are bourgeois" I say to a sound woman with a placard. "Or have the larch and firs been heard giggling at Jeremy Corbyn?" She tells me that it is all down to some agreement the council has made with a private company – a 'PFI'. Anything that gets in the way of repairing tarmac – trees, parked cars, children on the way to school – is for the chop. "I'm not surprised no one buys PFI furniture anymore," I tell her as we part.

Saturday

The morning's post brings a letter from a young reader asking how he can break into radio comedy. In reply I say there are two sure ways of getting your own series on BBC Radio Four. The first is to go to Cambridge and take part in the Footlights show. The second is to join the Socialist Workers Party.

A lady asks which drink she should serve her guests before they go into dinner. I recommend a chilled Don Foster sherry.

Finally, a Liberal Democrat MP who lost his seat in 2015 asks me for help in finding a room. I promise to put in a good word for him at the Home for Distressed Cannassers, Herne Bay.

Sunday

Yesterday evening we held a 'Question Time' at the village hall. (The building, complete with a library and billiards room, was erected by my grandfather and the front boasts a modest statue of him accepting the tribute of the grateful widows and orphans of Rutland.) What a panel we had! There was our own Vince 'High-Voltage' Cable; the Wise Woman of Wing; the High Queen of the Elves of Rockingham Forest; and the Professor of Hard Sums from the University of Rutland at Belvoir. I was prevailed upon to join the panel myself and, best of all, there was not a member of the Dimbleby family in sight. The Revd Hughes took the chair.

Enjoyable as the evening was, I feel that what happened next was the more important. I invited my fellow panellists back to the hall. There, over a snifter or two of Auld Johnston (the most prized of Highland malts), we put the world to rights and mapped a route back to power for the Liberal Democrats. I just hope someone was taking notes.

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