

liberator



- 🔥 Pamphlets chart new Lib Dem paths - Paul Hindley and Susan Simmonds
- 🔥 Carillion and the UK kleptocracy - Trevor Smith and Peter Tatchell
- 🔥 No kind of strategy debate - Tony Greaves and David Grace

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COMMENTARY

BRAINS RE-ENGAGED

The Liberal Democrats are thinking again. Having more or less abandoned political thought during the Coalition in favour of perpetual disputes about the government's actions, the subsequent 2015-17 parliament was marked with rare exceptions by whatever the opposite is of a ferment of ideas.

In the past month though both Bernard Greaves and David Howarth, and the Social Liberal Forum, have produced exactly the kind of publications the party should have been generating earlier and more often.

Both are the subject of article-length reviews in this Liberator and both should be read also in their entirety (the Greaves and Howarth pamphlet is available as a free download on www.liberatormagazine.org.uk).

There will be plenty to debate and disagree with in both, but they are striking for not being cast in terms of "we can't possibly say x in case y stops voting for us" and for thinking about what vision of society the party should offer to voters. The two publications elevate their sights above the broken paving stones and short term exploitation of local grievances.

Neither will be comfortable reading for those who think the party can 'win everywhere' by acting as a leaflet delivering cult.

Greaves and Howarth indeed mount an assault on the credibility of one almightily sacred cow: "Community politics was in danger of descending into an electoral tactic designed to win council wards for Liberal candidates rather than to democratise institutions.

"Community politics largely descended into the exploitation of local grievances and, worse still, into the promotion of 'local campaigners' who would fix things residents rather than facilitating their efforts to solve problems together. One of the effects of grievance-based campaigning was that the party's political themes and its national programme vanished. Concentrating on grievances, which varied from place to place, led to the accusation that the party said different things in different places. That accusation was often accurate."

They are surely right. This kind of local campaigning has too often come adrift from anything the party has to say nationally. It is an open secret that a fair number of people with the most extraordinarily illiberal views will announce they "always vote for the Liberal Democrats" on the basis of some local matter, while the local Lib Dems keep quiet about national policy for fear of offending them if they discovered this.

Greaves and Howarth offer ideas for paths forward based on "the core policy themes that lie at the heart of Liberalism: political and human rights, democracy throughout society, social and economic justice, environmental sustainability, internationalism and

constitutional reform [and] outline a strategy for change based upon a broad-based liberal movement".

They illustrate this by reference to the campaign started by the Liberal party for gay rights in the 1970s.

"Some within the party were opposed. They took the view that it was such an unpopular cause it would inflict serious electoral damage on the party," they write.

"That never happened. Instead the Liberal Party's initiative triggered a broad change in social attitudes that was gradually embraced by the Labour and Conservative parties."

Effective campaigning inside and outside state structures achieved significant change, and by campaigning for Liberal values "the Liberal Democrats can generate a broad movement for change that can become a core vote made up of people committed to those values".

They conclude that depending on tactical voting against other parties is the root of the Lib Dems current electoral weakness, not a strength.

The SLF publication is necessarily less focussed, having nearly 20 contributors, but none the worse for that as it seeks to accomplish something different by looking at economics, welfare and climate change and specifically also siting these in an English regional context.

Its important though in recognising the issues it raises about under investment in the regions to avoid the lazy caricature that everyone in the south is rich - as our reviewer suggests, try telling that to the residents of Thanet.

There is an important section in the SLF's detailed response to its contributors that bears thinking about. This explains why the SLF "has chosen to describe a fairer distribution of political and economic power as an act of rebalancing, rather than empowerment as it is commonly seen.

"The latter betrays a common fallacy: that power, or a stake in our collective wellbeing, is something that can be given or taken away. To be truly valuable, power needs to be more than simply granted; communities need to be skilled, resilient and willing enough to determine how to use it."

Whether one agrees with some, all or none of what these publications have to say their mere existence is welcome in the intellectual desert the party had become. Let's see more from all quarters.

These ideas may or not prove to be the ones that ultimately help the party to build a core vote and rebuild its support - but that will certainly never happen without the kind of fresh thinking shown by both.

RADICAL BULLETIN

SWEPT UNDER THE CARPET

After the 2015 general election, the Liberal Democrats took pride in publishing James Gurling's review of that campaign, which if not 'warts and all' had plenty of warts.

So what happened to the 2017 version? It was barely mentioned until Liberator posted extracts from a leaked copy on its website in February.

Even the party's English executive was barred by the Federal Board from seeing the full version - it was told it would get a summary, but didn't.

The Federal Audit and Scrutiny Committee in October asked former Portsmouth leader Gerald Vernon-Jackson to carry out the review, and he reported to the FB in December.

His report then vanished - with a zombie status of being 'received' but not published.

Some FB members are understood to have thought some of his conclusions were wrong, some that they were not fully evidenced, - both of which may have some validity. There are though suspicions that some opposition to publishing any of it emanated from diehard Farron supporters, those who think senior staff should be beyond criticism and those who just found it all too difficult.

Given that 2017 was a second consecutive disaster (if with a net increase in seats) the need to identify and rectify what went wrong is surely compelling, however much the findings might annoy some.

With certain exceptions, Vernon-Jackson and his team - who interviewed 59 people from Vince Cable to local activists - reached recommendations that seem sensible and offer much from which the party could learn had the FB allowed others to make such judgements. Parts of course would have to be redacted.

If the report has a central finding it is utter confusion over who was supposed to run the campaign and what it should say, not helped by Tim Farron's evasions over gay sex.

Here are some highlights: "It was not clear who was in charge [of the campaign]. This was said across the country, within HQ and from activists and candidates in many places. The range of people that were named as being in charge included the chair of the campaign committee, the chief executive of the party, the party president, the director of communications, the director of campaigns and elections and the leader's head of office."

Just about everyone then. The report recommended: "Whoever is in charge of the running of the campaign must be full time. It is not fair for a part time volunteer chair to have to take this on. A deputy campaign chair should be put in place to ensure a point of contact for staff and activists at all times."

It proposed that the general election manager role should be restored; that at least has been rapidly acted

upon.

The report also found confusion as to who was in charge of the party's messages and said: "The person with overall responsibility for the general election must also have responsibility for message."

Another serious matter identified was the attitude at the centre to local activists, even candidates, with an arrogant 'we know best' approach.

It found: "There was a feeling that feedback from the ground was not being listened to. This was a view expressed to us from all over the country. Volunteers, candidates and campaigners should be treated with respect by HQ staff and their views listened to. This was also a recommendation of the 2015 Review. Arrogance is corrosive and destructive."

This was also evident in the much criticised national leaflets sent, in particular, to voters in Labour-facing seats.

Vernon-Jackson found: "There was strong feedback that seats needed to know what was being sent out from HQ in their seats. They needed a programme of delivery, so they didn't deliver leaflets on days when HQ was sending them out, and they needed input into designs, so they could negotiate on leaflets that they felt would harm their campaigns.

"There has been feedback and suggestion that national mailings could have been better balanced between positive messages and attacks on other parties. There was strong opposition to the content and particularly the photos used in some of the national direct mail. Strong feedback from some that this lost us some votes."

This attitude was also a problem with targeting where: "There was strong feedback from some seats that they did not know when they had been removed from the list of target seats or moved from Tier 1 plus to just Tier 1 seats. This caused real hurt and pain for some."

When it looked at the politics of the campaign, the report raised equally concerning issues, though views may differ.

It noted: "Ruling out a coalition seemed to say we would never be in power so we couldn't get any of our policies implemented. Voters don't seem to want to vote for a party aiming to be in opposition. We looked as if we lacked ambition to win."

"We also became known in the campaign for the leader's views on gay sex, and for our proposals on cannabis. None of these policies proved popular with voters. The media kept returning to the issue of gay sex and this crowded out coverage of other policies."

Among a host of other issues, it found were the party website directing members in Greater Manchester to help either next door in Cheadle or nearly 200 miles away in Ceredigion, but not in nearby Hazel Grove.

Fundraising was a success, but reviewers had "never

been able to find and see a paper budget for the election, all financial control seemed to go through the [chief executive]”.

Discussion at the FB meeting that received the report is said to have gone round in circles with different people thinking different parts were true or untrue, and some recommendations sound or wrong, and others noting a lack of data. The latter was hardly surprising given the near-total lack of resources allocated to the process.

After an hour or so of this it was 'received', with some members ready to reject it.

The FB's report to the Southport conference stated blandly that it “took the decision to refer the recommendations to the relevant party committees for consideration and to feed into their respective workplans”, while the Campaigns and Elections Committee consented to “work through the review, identify relevant learnings and importantly cross reference against any outstanding actions from the 2015 election review”.

This lack of transparency rather reinforces the finding about those at the top ignoring everyone else.

If the 2015 review could be published with redactions, so can this one.

LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR

What exactly was the point of the strategy debate at Southport? It was notable in the end only for Liberal Reform successfully amending “Working with those who share goals with us to build a progressive alliance of ideas that puts aside tribal differences to achieve shared goal” to a reference to working with anyone who shared the party's objectives.

Even though the mover of the amendment appeared unable to distinguish 'liberal values' from some detailed actions of the Coalition, this passed because of the ambiguous wording of the original motion.

Its reference to a 'progressive alliance of ideas' was taken - and not just by Liberal Reform - to be code for seeking an electoral deal with Labour and/ or the Greens.

Gordon Lishman, who drafted it, says he meant no such thing and does not favour an electoral pact with Labour.

He has said his original wording was about seeking a realignment based on shared values, campaigns, ideas and policies. It did not come over as having that meaning to an awful lot of people.

The purpose of the whole motion - a pet project of president Sal Brinton - remains opaque.

It reads rather like the only thing that could be got through the 32-strong Federal Board without someone causing a row about something.

There are restatements of long held objectives and values, and statements of the obvious like that the party should “win elections at all levels from local government through to Westminster, so we can use political power to bring about change from within the political system”.

It lists predictably desirable objectives before concluding that the whole thing is up to state, regional and local parties anyway.

Articles by Tony Greaves and David Grace in this

issue identify the strategy's shortcomings in more detail, but here's one test. If the whole paper had never been written, would anything really be different?

OLD MACDONALD HAD A REFERENCE BACK

The reference back of the proposed Liberal Democrat disciplinary process at Southport is understood to have had its author Lord Macdonald on the brink of resigning from the party.

It was not directly his fault it was presented to conference in a resolution so voluminous that it contained something to upset everybody, even those that approved of the principle of what was proposed.

One concern was the sheer improbability of the party being able to recruit 50 suitably skilled and experienced adjudicators to hear disputes.

Even were such paragons found, the stipulation that none of them could hold other party office, even locally, would make sufficient appointments impossible.

It was though two examples of the executive being licensed to interfere in what was supposed to be a quasi-judicial process that probably tipped the 102-100 vote for reference back. Surprisingly, there was no call for a recount.

One of these was a power for the party chief executive to suspend anyone's membership if they judged this necessary.

The other allowed the president to appeal against any disciplinary hearing decision they didn't like.

Given the closeness of the vote, its hard to avoid the conclusion it would have passed without these provocations.

Things were not helped by barrister Isabelle Parasram, who had been asked to review the existing processes, who told conference the concerns raised had been addressed in a report no one present had seen, which recommended the establishment of a committee no one knew about.

The process was referred back but with no obvious 'go away and sort out x and y' steer attached, which leaves it unclear who is supposed to do what to make it acceptable.

Autumn conferences are nowadays short and the party is unlikely to want to devote precious time in the media spotlight to something as publicly yawn-inducing as internal discipline. So it might be next spring before it reappears.

UNGOVERNED SPACE

What's got a £10,000 donation, staff passes to party headquarters and no elected executive? Answer, Your Liberal Britain (YLB), which was the subject of a lot of questions at Southport (see page 18).

The idea behind YLB is admirable, that a group of volunteers should take on tasks to which a skint party cannot afford to devote staff.

There is genuine enthusiasm in YLB's ranks and no one suggests those concerned plan anything improper.

It seems though disturbingly dependent on the availability and commitment of founder Jim Williams.

Answering questions at Southport, party president Sal Brinton said YLB had enjoyed a £10,000 donation from Lord Verjee, but he chose to channel this through

the party so it looked like a donation from it to YLB.

She said its work would be carried out “in an accountable way” by providing specific services for the Federal Board and its value for money reassessed in the autumn.

The dosh sloshing around YLB has annoyed other party bodies unable to raise anything this given the party’s impecunious state.

They also feel that as SAOs and AOs they must be properly run, while YLB has been allowed extraordinary latitude.

A document seen by Liberator says its target is to raise £85,000 for core costs and that all spending is approved by Emma Cherniavsky, now deputy chief executive.

It also says that the FB told YLB to seek associated organisation status but the AO Review Group then told it not to as AOs were required to have elected executives and this model was “less well suited to an organisation that seeks to achieve particular objectives”.

YLB has said it is creating an appointed executive “to be replaced by an elected executive if needed”.

Williams told Liberator that former chief executive Lord Fox has become its chair and “he and I are working together to build a committee comprising party activists of diverse skills and backgrounds” and are “considering a number of governance options”.

None of this would matter much were YLB unofficial. It is though only semi-detached from party headquarters and the FB, which could open up genuinely valuable new ways of engaging volunteers or prove a recipe for problems.

HUGE ROW - FEW NOTICE

Since its 2016 formation, the Radical Association has said and published very little and never had an obvious political stance within the Lib Dems.

It has though been riven by a furious row between chair Natalie Bird and some other executive members over transgender rights.

Bird has told Liberator: “My particular concern is the act [of] self identification and that any male with fully functioning male genitalia will be able to say ‘I identify as a woman’ and legally and otherwise there will be no recourse for not admitting these individuals into women’s safe places.”

A published statement by her opponents says: “She has taken numerous decisions, including on major questions of the association’s overall public presentation and messaging, without full consultation or taking the views of fellow committee members into account...her public and private statements regarding LGBT rights have not been compatible with being the chair of an organisation committed...to ensure respect and equality.”

There is a further dispute over the association’s stall at the party’s Launchpad Sheffield event, where Bird has complained that other executive members present declined to help her staff it, while they say health reasons prevented them from doing so and she unilaterally decided to take the stall in the first place.

THE MEETING THAT WASN'T

The circular firing squad that is Ethnic Minority Liberal Democrats (Liberator 389) has both notified members of an annual general meeting

and rescinded this within weeks, with it being disputed whether its officers are actually still in office. The air is thick with members’ complaints against each other.

Since this happening just as the party tries to act on the Alderdice review of its relations with ethnic minorities, there are signs of it losing patience and wishing to create a successor organisation.

Some ELMD members though maintain it can only be dissolved by a vote of its current members, which needs an AGM that no-one will call.

TEDDY BEARS' PICNIC

Lib Dem Image normally hosts signing sessions by prominent party figures who have published books, and sells these among its canvassing impedimenta and souvenir tat.

It was though told not to hold one for Lord Rennard’s Winning Here volume, someone on high presumably fearing it would provide a focal point for protests over the harassment allegations made against him.

Some anti-Rennard activists though visited Lib Dem image and hid the book under other items on sale such that it looked as though Winning Here was being incubated by yellow teddy bears. Maybe others will adopt this as a sales strategy.

THREE'S A CROWD

An unfortunate email has circulated in the East of England ahead of the May elections when a successor to elected mayor Dorothy Thornhill will be chosen in Watford.

It announced: “Watford has one of only two Liberal Democrat elected mayors in the entire country. We want to keep it that way!”

VIDEO NASTY

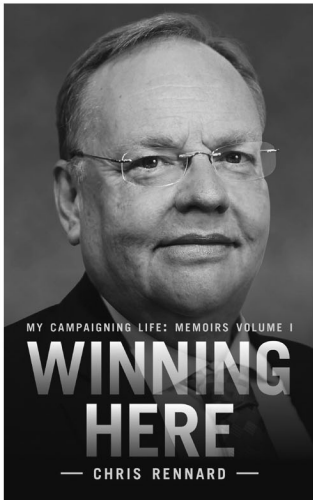
The Liberal Democrat video for International Women’s Day managed to omit any women who were either young, from an ethnic minority or declared as LGBT, leaving Baroness Barker among others flatly refusing a request to promote it.

It did though include some men. Ed Davey’s presence was reasonable, discussing how he introduced shared parental leave as a Coalition minister. What though was Tim Farron doing there, given he is neither a woman nor someone to whom it seems wise the draw attention just now (Liberator 388).

No songbooks!

The Liberator songbook for 2017-18 has sold out. A new edition will be produced for the autumn conference. Suggestions of new songs for inclusion may be sent to: collective@liberatormagazine.org.uk

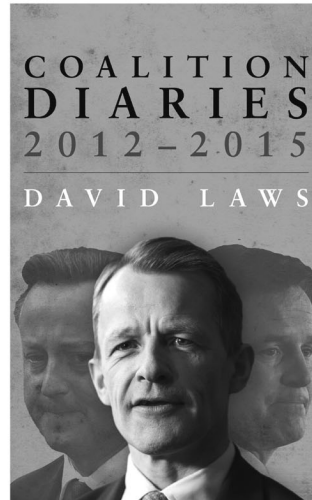
A GREAT SELECTION OF LIBERAL DEMOCRAT TITLES AWAIT TO PURCHASE ONE OF THESE TITLES FROM OUR WEBSITE AT 50% OFF PLEASE ENTER THE CORRECT PROMO CODE



WINNING HERE
BY CHRIS RENNARD

- 448pp
- Hardback
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- CODE WH50

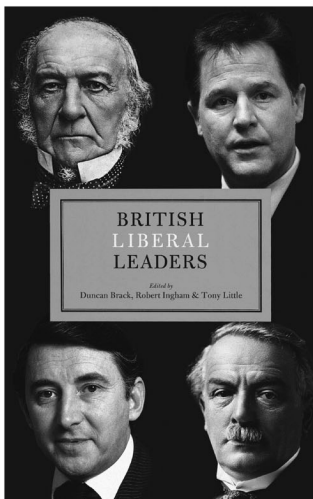
There will never be a better insider account of a political party, or contemporary history of the Liberal Democrats. *Winning Here* is a record that shows how election campaigns are really fought and won and how party leaders change and parties develop. Similarly, there will never be a commentator better placed to tell this story.



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BY RICHARD ASKWITH

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This is the story of a chamber crying out to be abolished, a chamber crying out to be created, and a people who have reclaimed the right to govern themselves. It is the story of the threats posed by populism to our most precious liberties; and of how, by conceding a little to direct democracy, Parliament could secure its future and turn people power into a force for good.

FUTURE TENSE

A pamphlet by Bernard Greaves and David Howarth has mapped a route back to being a radical party for the Liberal Democrats, says Paul Hindley

It is a rare thing to see Liberal Democrats acknowledge that the liberal tradition “has become lost not only in the minds of the public at large but to a considerable degree amongst the members of the party”. So write Bernard Greaves and David Howarth in the introduction to their new pamphlet *Towards a Liberal Future*, which presents a vision of what a liberal future should look like.

Greaves and Howarth however are no ordinary party members. They are intellectual heavyweights, who have shaped Liberal Democrat thinking for many years; in the case of Greaves for many decades. Their latest contribution is very timely considering the nature of the current party leadership apparatus which is seemingly devoid of any big ideas, beyond that of opposing Brexit. The central pitch of Greaves and Howarth is for Liberal Democrats to once again embody radical reform, democratic participation and social and economic justice, while continuing to cherish the central rights and freedoms of individuals.

Greaves and Howarth present a healthy diagnosis for the state that the party now finds itself in. While the Coalition Government has caused many problems for the party, not least the loss of its identity, it would be too simplistic to blame this period for the current situation of the Liberal Democrats.

One aspect they identify has been the misuse of community politics (a central stream of Liberal Democrat philosophy, which was pioneered by Greaves himself in the 1970s). Instead of adopting a dual approach of working both inside and outside political institutions to achieve radical change; the concept has been reduced merely to the promotion of populist ‘local campaigners’.

ILLIBERAL DOGMAS

The authors accurately pinpoint the willingness of Liberal Democrats to adopt illiberal political dogmas. Be it in the form of the Orange Book, which far from reclaiming liberalism merely just regurgitated the Blairite economic dogma of the mid-2000s, or support for mild eurosceptic populism in an attempt to win over voters in the south west.

Greaves and Howarth conclude their diagnosis by stating that the “disappointments of the Coalition were the result, not the cause, of the party losing its way”. They remind us that the party had politically begun to lose its way long before the Rose Garden ‘love-in’ between David Cameron and Nick Clegg.

No restatement of liberalism would be valid without restating the values that underpin it. Greaves and Howarth naturally identify the importance of the role of individuals to any liberal society. However, they manage to avoid the ultra-atomism and the egoism

that accompanies right wing libertarian notions of individualism.

They strive for a liberal community, one that has an internal organisation that is “broadly democratic, recognises the equal standing of all individuals, upholds their individual rights, including respecting their privacy, safeguards minorities and promotes diversity.” Much academic debate has surrounded the dichotomy between liberalism and communitarianism. Greaves and Howarth successfully bridge the divide between liberal individuality and communities by following a similar philosophical framework to that of the New Liberals (such as TH Green and LT Hobhouse) more than a century ago.

Of course, in the 21st century, no conception of individual liberty can be complete without concern for the environment. Environmental sustainability is a consistent theme throughout the pamphlet. The need for an environmentally sustainable model of growth that neither drains natural resources nor pollutes the air, land and oceans is conducive towards liberal ends. Greaves and Howarth forge a conscious link between environmental sustainability and the preservation of liberty and social justice; fearing that climate change could lead to the rise of authoritarians who extend the power of the state in order to prevent further ecological degradation.

Greaves and Howarth devote most of their time to developing four prime policy themes: democracy, social and economic justice, constitutional reform and internationalism. Of these their section on democracy is of increasing importance to our contemporary political culture.

Liberal Democrats often talk of ‘liberal democracy’ with little emphasis on the need for society-wide mass participation in democracy. Greaves and Howarth are critical of notions of democracy that simply just boil down to majority rule, they emphasise the importance of democratic discussion and representation. For them, a ‘democratic revolution’ is needed which could see as many as 700,000 people acting as representatives at any one time. The experience of democracy should be “one that as many people as possible should experience”, this would encompass aspects of work, education, health and economic activity.

They develop some distinctive policy ideas to embed their democratic revolution. These include, the election of non-executive directors to the board of NHS England, the election of consumer representatives on the boards of utility companies, the creation of teacher cooperatives, the revival of parent and graduate governorship and a renewed commitment to German-style industrial democracy and co-partnership.

These in themselves represent bold liberal democratic reforms, which provide the opportunity to advance liberal democracy beyond the traditional institutions of

government.

Their conception of society is one where democratic participation becomes a part of everyday political culture with the state supporting democratic activity by mandating paid time-off work and forbidding discrimination against representatives. This rediscovery of a republican style of democracy (one of democratic citizenship) is very much needed if we are to combat the rise of populism which is so easily distributed through 24-hour news media and the mass use of social media platforms.

Greaves and Howarth correctly identify that the provision of social and economic justice is being undermined by the amount of wealth being taken out of the economy, such as: the hoarding of wealth assets; the use of tax havens; companies centralising their profits and the concentration of wealth into the hands of an elite few. This impacts negatively on the amount of public money available to spend on public services, welfare and housing.

The Liberal economy advocated by Greaves and Howarth revives the historic Liberal support for economic democracy. By supporting the concepts of works councils, shareholder rights for workers and the creation of new mutuals, the authors are reviving a radical liberal economic model, which is distinct from that of state socialism or Tory neoliberalism.

The most striking proposals that Greaves and Howarth advocate on the economy are in relation to tax and housing. Successive governments have continually neglected housing due to a mixture of governmental incompetence and blind faith in the powers of the free market to replenish housing supplies. The authors believe that “taxing land values would end speculation in land and result in more and cheaper houses being built”. Britain is clearly overdue for a radical tax shift away from income and profits towards wealth and ‘unearned increment’.

They propose to replace current property taxes with a national land value tax and to administer income tax at the local level and as the main source of revenue for local government. This is an ambitious plan for tax that holds out the potential of both helping to solve the housing crisis as well as revitalising austerity-ridden local government bases.

The most important part of Greaves and Howarth’s discussion about constitutional reform is on the nature of creating a liberal democratic constitution, that prioritises individual political rights. They contrast this position with those of populists who prioritise majoritarian democracy and Hobbesians who prioritise effective government. Beyond political rights, they coherently argue for having a multi-layered structure to any constitutional government.

REPUBLICAN FLAVOUR

Much of what is discussed in the pamphlet has a republican flavour to it from mass democratic participation to economic democracy. However, it is therefore disappointing that while making an excellent case for electoral reform and federalism, that the role of the British monarchy is overlooked. It is entirely possible to retain the authors’ Whiggish view of the importance of Parliament as well as their rejection of the US republican model, while supporting the election of the British head of state. The Irish model of republicanism, for example, would allow for the

direct election of a head of state with few limited constitutional powers. This is a notable omission in an otherwise excellent statement on the need for radical constitutional reform.

The Internationalism section of the pamphlet has a timely warning that nations should work together to combat cyber attacks. Although, I thought it lacked a clear commitment to nuclear disarmament (preferably on a unilateral basis). Greaves and Howarth restate the Liberal commitment to internationalism and the need for Britain to once again become a full member of the EU. They suggest some important EU reforms, such as electing the European Commission president and individual national commissioners.

Greaves and Howarth conclude their work with a brief overview of strategy. This section could have been more detailed although the commitments to building a core vote and a strong local government base are welcome. As is often the case with works of political theory, they lack when it comes to turning thoughts into action. However, in fairness by this point the document was going on for seventy pages and the definition of pamphlet only stretches so far.

The reassertion of a dual approach to community politics is both welcome and overdue. Greaves and Howarth are right about the need to generate a broad movement to change social attitudes, in a similar way that the Liberal Democrats have been able to do regarding the rights of LGBT people. From Momentum to Brexit campaign groups and political movements are becoming a bigger part of British politics. If a liberal society is to be achieved, then a radical liberal movement will be needed to spearhead its creation.

In their latest publication, Greaves and Howarth present an excellent restatement of radical liberalism. It is no less than the duty of every Liberal Democrat campaigner to read it. It challenges the party to reflect on its history, its core values and its radical policy framework. I hope that it will be as influential on the party as their other contributions (if not more so).

Greaves and Howarth promote the holy grail of political traditions; a non-utopian radicalism, that advances social justice, democratic participation and environmental sustainability, while prioritising the rights of individuals. In the spirit of Asquith, Lloyd George, Grimond and Kennedy, they promote a non-statist form of centre-left politics.

The Liberal Democrats (and with it the liberal tradition) are in their weakest state than at any point since 1959. And yet with the rise of statist extremes and a ruinous Brexit on the horizon, liberalism as an active political force has never been more needed. The work of Greaves and Howarth details a framework of values, ideas and policies that may very well offer the party its best chance for revival.

Echoing their words, the Liberal Democrats must once again embody the radical liberal creed by enabling individuals within their communities to “realise their potential” and to “take control of their destinies”; the political stakes could not be higher.

Paul Hindley is a member of the council of the Social Liberal Forum
Towards a Liberal Future is available as a free download at: www.liberatormagazine.org.uk

SEARCHERS AFTER TRUTHS

Four go in search of big ideas, and even manage to find them for the Social Liberal Forum's new book, Susan Simmonds discovers

The Liberal Democrats have had better times. Despite our principled and well publicised opposition to Brexit, our poll ratings seem resolutely stuck in single figures, we have a long way to rebuild our decimated local government base - particularly in the north - and the size of the parliamentary party has only recently crept back into double figures.

However, we have a leader who is widely judged to be economically competent and memories of some the more brutal events in Coalition are starting to fade - at least for party members if not the comments section of the Guardian. We are not yet where we want to be but the turbulence of the past few years seems to have passed.

And the political landscape around us is not dull. Whatever one's opinions on Corbyn's leadership of the Labour party, ironically, his incoherent political views have brought some much needed energy to a UK policy debate, which was pretty stale and devoid of any political ideas.

The Conservative party is in permanent crisis mode and - understandably - utterly obsessed with Brexit to the exclusion of providing any policy initiative capable of improving the lives of its citizens by solving the housing or social care crises.

ORANGE RUCKSACK

So maybe now would be a good time for Liberal Democrats to pack the Kendal mint cake into an orange rucksack and head north in search of Big Ideas.

The four northern Liberals - Helen Flynn, Iain Brodie Brown, Gordon Lishman and Ekta Prakash - who share the writing of the introduction of the book, are the four who are going in search of Big Ideas. They contend that people in the north, midlands and west have felt the effects of bad policy, underinvestment and neglect more keenly and for longer than those who live in London and the south east.

So as a counter to that, they have published a book which they assert contains essays by authoritative contributors who have important things to say about the state of our country today.

However, they state that their goal is not to win political office and manage the system within the constraints of existing opinions and policies but to create a shared analysis of problems and a shared approach so that a new future can be forged based on very different attitudes.

To do that they have included writers who are not Liberal Democrats but have something important to say about progressive policy. And while I have concerns about progressive alliances on ballot papers, I have no qualms about the embracing discussions and ideas - Graham Allen, formerly a Labour MP

and chair of the commons political and constitutional reform select committee has written on the importance of early intervention and Norman Warner, a former Labour health minister and now a crossbench peer, has written on the choices needed to create a sustainable NHS - and these are some of the most compelling and strongest essays in the book.

The introduction promises that this is the first of an SLF series, which has given the book the opportunity to focus on three major areas: towards a new economics, the welfare society and climate change. This allows the essayists freedom to cover ground in depth, as well as allowing space for different and newer perspectives and introductions and afterwords which review some of the policy areas and put them into context.

People who are members or follow the activities of SLF will not be overly surprised by the contents of this book. It follows well trodden and debated paths with the intellectual rigour and clarity of prose that we expect. We know writers such as David Boyle, Duncan Brack and Gordon Lishman and their contributions do not disappoint.

Towards a New Economics is introduced by Iain Brodie Brown, and he introduces David Howarth's elegant essay on Liberal economics, Stuart White on Alternative Liberalism, David Boyle on Trying to Remember what Liberal Economics Meant, and Sir Vince Cable on Regulation and Competition in the World of Datafication.

While all the essays are strong, there are a couple which are worth some review and further thought.

As someone who pays their council tax to a Ukip administration in a rundown seaside town in the south east of England, I was particularly interested to read "social rights at the seaside: giving left behind communities a stake in society". Although firmly aimed at communities in the north of England, it also has huge resonance for seaside towns in the south that suffer from limited economic opportunities and have highly transient and outsourced populations living in cheap and multi occupied property.

Author Paul Hindley poses the profoundly important question about how Liberals can reach out to left behind communities and he contends that if we can't reach out to deprived and alienated communities and to the places that most need social justice then there will be no meaningful future for progressive politics.

The solution is to introduce a new culture of rights to give people a stake in society and to protect the poorest and most vulnerable from the inequalities of the modern globalised economy.

Hindley calls for a Social Rights Act to enshrine the most fundamental rights into law and develop a political culture which protects and advances those social rights. He asserts that the introduction of social

rights would create new jobs, bring investment in housing and a right to secure employment would encourage government to create new jobs especially in areas of high unemployment.

My tolerance for books and essays which have excessively long descriptions of the problems before suggesting a really concise policy solution is low, however this really is an essay which could have usefully been longer and discursive of complex issues.

The theory and practice of social rights is not new and the UK has signed international treaties which protect them, but they have not been incorporated into UK domestic law. While I am an evangelist of human rights and welcome the call to action which this essay espouses and the massive impact which it would potentially have, I think that this is not the whole solution for left behind communities and other regenerative components are needed.

There is no doubt that being a rights holder as opposed to a service user can be personally transformative but that is only part of the equation and citizenship education is also important. And while we need to enshrine social rights into UK domestic law, we do, as a party, also need to ensure that we campaign to protect any of our existing social rights which are vulnerable to being compromised under the EU (Withdrawal) Bill.

The other brave essay worth highlighting is by Suzana Carp on climate change, migration and human rights.

Carp notes that this new intellectual terrain; bridging ideas and conceptual frameworks is urgently needed as is bringing together migration studies and climate change analysis, as currently separate legal regimes exist for both. Her argument is that a conceptual framework needs to be developed which allows a long term focus on increasing the resilience of individuals to the shocks driven by the global phenomena of climate change which enables us to move beyond the short term crisis management approach.

As Liberals who have long demonstrated a commitment to championing the individual rights and human dignity of the rights of refugees and asylum seekers I would argue that we are the party best placed to provide some impetus into the further work that Carp concedes is needed.

The final part of the book is a response by the SLF, which aims to highlight the overarching themes and to set a direction for the future of social liberal thinking which includes a cohesive narrative.

It also asks whether the way that these narratives are framed can affect whether they inspire a movement for reform. It further challenges readers, whether as policy makers, community leaders or simply as active citizens, to frame these goals in terms that most people can identify with, act upon and take pride in. It is the combination of co-ordinated action

“There is no doubt that being a rights holder as opposed to a service user can be personally transformative but that is only part of the equation”

from national governments and an active vocal citizenry.

PERSONAL RISK

I think that this offers us two issues that need further thought. Firstly framing is work that requires considerable expertise; how something is said is just as important as what is said. This actually affects how people perceive their level of engagement

and personal risk and in this context how they will vote. The big vision matters, but so does what a policy offering looks like that puts it into action. And if there is a desire to transform a system rather than manage within it then that does provide an element of risk that needs to be considered.

Secondly, books are wonderful things but nowadays not sufficient in provoking discussion or disseminating messages in an era of digital.

Engagement with social media such as a podcast with essayists discussing and expanding ideas would help to disseminate, test and provide some feedback on the ideas and the trust issues attached to radical policy-making much more effectively than a book alone.

If we are, as a party, to become more powerful and coherent at telling our stories than we currently are, digital engagement has to be a step forwards in terms of reaching audiences other than the already politically engaged. It may also help in reaching a more diverse audience for ideas.

So did the four find the Big Ideas they went in search of? In the areas that they explored, yes they did. But the areas they explore and the policy solutions which they propose are not limited to the north, despite them feeling the effects there more acutely.

Hopefully the remainder of the series will be as successful in terms of stimulating debate and potential solutions. I'm not sure that there is any point in writing yet another book of policy ideas which does not seek to radically change the way we govern ourselves. Simply wanting to govern in order to continue to spend money on services or in ways that are not working as well as they could is no longer good enough. I think we have a moral obligation to do more.

Four Go In Search of Big Ideas: putting progressive Ideas at the heart of politics. Helen Flynn [ed]. Social Liberal Forum. £9.50. www.socialliberal.net

Susan Simmonds is a member of Thanet Liberal Democrats

LAND OF THE ROBBER BARONS

Carillion's collapse was symptomatic of a process that will be stopped only by jailing kleptocrats, says Trevor Smith

The sudden liquidation of the previously little-known but vast outsourcing conglomerate was as spectacular as the ensuing ramifications will be enduring. Carillion, founded in 1999 out of a group of merged firms, including some household brands, carried on absorbing others. At the time of its demise there were some 43,000 employees, of whom 20,000 were in the UK.

The dimension of the downfall itself is bad enough, but the factors which led up to it are even graver. If these are not fully identified for what they are and dealt with, they will continue at work. Or, as before, will they be papered over?

Media commentators regularly report on the deleterious effects of both Jacob Zuma's cronyism in South Africa and oligarchs in Vladimir Putin's Russia. The widespread kleptocracy is closely identified with the regimes. In stark contrast, in the UK kleptocracy is regarded as a series of one-off discrete events rather than being in any way systemically endemic which, of course, it is just as in the other two states.

The different media treatment arises because the situation in the UK has evolved much more slowly over decades. (In South Africa and Russia corruption has festered uninterrupted by official action because those in authority have actively participated in it themselves.) In the UK, kleptocracy emerged alongside the increasing retreat of ministerial responsibility since the end of WWII. Both factors made it so much easier to camouflage what was happening.

MINISTERS RETREAT

Ministerial retreat began with the invention of the 'Morrisonian' public corporation to run utilities nationalised by the Attlee government. Unlike the General Post Office, which came under direct ministerial control, cabinet members would be at arms-length from the boards of the public corporations charged with the day-to-day running of the state industries. On returning to office in 1951, the Tories continued the practice as part of the mixed economy consensus which The Economist termed 'Butskellism' (a compound of the surnames of successive Chancellors Gaitskell and Butler).

In the mid-1950s this gave way to the new consensus of the two Harolds (successive prime ministers Macmillan and Wilson) following the example of the French Fifth Republic's introduction of indicative planning. This necessitated cabinet ministers sharing power with representatives from the trade unions and industrial organisations through a number of tripartite channels at the apex of which was the National Economic Development Council. Neddy, as it became called, although losing much of its influence over

time, even managed to survive during the wholesale Thatcherite privatisations of the nationalised industries.

Privatisation was purported to reintroduce the discipline of market forces to control the public utilities but, in the event, it did no such thing. It merely created a series of monopolistic cartels (ironically often part-owned and controlled by state undertakings from abroad). The reality was tacitly recognised when an army of regulatory agencies was empanelled to oversee the running of these entities.

Privatisation was all part-and-parcel of a new consensus that took it as axiomatic that private=good, public=bad. This formula led to a widespread series of innovations that would still further distance ministerial authority from the formation and execution of public policy.

One of the most visible was the invention of private schemes to finance and administer erstwhile government-run activities. The first private finance initiative (PFI) was employed for the Heathrow Express, providing a fast line from Paddington to Heathrow Airport. This at least had the merit of generating a positive cash flow.

On assuming office, New Labour had no qualms about earnings, as it embraced the PFI concept with a messianic fervour. PFI schemes were extensively used to build a plethora of prisons, hospitals, schools and other erstwhile public services. PFIs were drawn up by coteries of engineers, architects, accountants, lawyers, builders and other commercial firms that negotiated with government. The claimed advantages of PFIs were that they would make for faster provision, provide better expertise and spread the costs to the public exchequer more evenly over time.

Usually, PFIs had an operational span of 30 years, during which time they would re-coup start-up costs and continuing service charges from the taxpayer. The latter were very highly calculated, especially when changes were required as would be very likely over three decades. In the event, these costs have crippled the finances of almost all major health authorities.

PFIs were to prove disastrous in many more ways. First, if they failed, as some did as in the case of the Hinchingsbrooke Hospital, the public had to assume responsibility.

Secondly, the contracts were drawn up in secret, thus avoiding public scrutiny. Thirdly, original contractors were often bought out by other enterprises and a secondary market in PFIs soon developed. Neither made for ease of ensuring contractual compliance which was exacerbated still further when PFI firms outsourced necessary service to secondary suppliers.

The very unsatisfactory start of PFI schemes was at the root cause of the difficulties experienced. The civil

service lacked the necessary skills to negotiate the contracts. Whitehall had to call upon outside expertise from accountants, lawyers and other consultants to facilitate PFI provision. This, inevitably, involved recruiting such experts on the 'revolving door' principle whereby sometimes they would be acting on behalf of government while on others they would be involved with would-be PFI contractors which could include themselves. PFIs were a new, highly lucrative growth industry for those involved; little heed was paid to safeguarding the public interest – and least of all on the part of Ministers themselves who continued to abnegate from their responsibilities.

But worse was yet to come. The axiomatic private=good, public=bad consensus led to a much more ubiquitous phenomenon, the knee-jerk recourse to outsourcing. Like the regulatory agencies and the PFI merchants, outsourcing has spawned its own cartel, which includes Serco, Capita, G4S as well as Carillion.

The so-called 'night watchman state' held sway in the mid-nineteenth century but even its most rampant advocates drew the line at what should be retained as strictly state activities. Home security – including police, prisons and the administration of justice, the conduct of foreign affairs and defence would be the sole preserves of government.

Nowadays, the incursion of privatised outsourcing into these traditional activities is a commonplace; mercenaries abound. As the armed services have shrunk, so security firms have been brought in, even on the front lines in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many prisons are now built and run by private firms who employ their own warders. The Probation Service now includes private employees, many without qualifications, while greater reliance on private firms for forensic analysis has had its own disasters.

Legal Aid has been drastically reduced so that the courts are overwhelmed with actions brought by individuals with little knowledge of the law or its procedures. And, to cap it all, it is reported that senior British diplomats are often seconded to private PR firms working for foreign governments, the latest example being Saudi Arabia. The scale and extent of outsourcing is mind-boggling.

Another deleterious consequence is that traditional forms of accountability have been under severe threat and can no longer be relied upon to serve the public interest.

First, the statutory position of shareholders as the ultimate repository of overall control of commercial companies has long been largely a fiction which enabled the rise of a new breed of robber barons among chief executives. The advent of electronically traded funds, which are triggered algorithmically to buy and sell shares often for nanoseconds, further weakens shareholder power. Company law needs a complete overhaul to up-date its remit.

Secondly, professional accountancy firms have also failed in many respects. Deloitte, PWC, E&Y and KPMG (Carillion's auditor throughout its existence), the so-called 'big four' form yet another of the cartels that litter the firmament of contemporary commerce. As statutory auditors they have never once qualified the annual accounts of a FTSE 100 firm. They share in providing internal accounting and more general consultancy advice to these firms. As in the Carillion case all four received very high fees for

over a decade. The situation has long called out for close investigation. Journalists, MPs and financial regulators are beginning to give it the attention it needs. At the minimum reforms should include requiring statutory auditors to be completely divorced from other accountancy and consultancy services, together with splitting up the 'big four' so that choice can be enlarged with more auditors to bid for such work.

GROSSLY EXCESSIVE

One of the main reasons for the collapse of Carillion must lie in the kind of top executive remuneration packages paid nowadays. They have become grossly excessive and the differential between these packages and those of the average worker continue to widen. Often, these extortionate payments bear little relation either to individual or overall corporate performance. Despite recent critical mutterings, including some shareholder adverse votes, there is little sign of much abatement in outlandish payments being awarded across the scene. These play to the greed of chief executives and their senior colleagues and this only encourages mergers and acquisitions to enlarge their range of duties thereby increasing still further their rewards. Thus, mergers and acquisitions are pursued relentlessly despite research having shown for well over 50 years that the results frequently do not live up to expectations even when they are carefully planned. How much greater, then, must be the failure rate when additions are made in an almost mindless manner as in the case of Carillion?

The conglomerate grew to the point that it was beyond the intellectual capacity of any one individual or group of individuals to comprehend what was happening. As things increasingly got out of hand, very questionable remedies were sought by its directors. These included, delaying payments due to suppliers, not paying in to pension funds (Carillion's was £580m in deficit) or borrowing from them, seeking new contracts (even when loss-making) and unsecured bank credits and other such baleful methods in attempts to keep the show on the road. In the end time ran out and the inevitable occurred as with the 2001 collapse of Enron.

How many more disasters will have to occur before the realisation dawns that the condition of British capitalism is now so very parlous and in need of comprehensive examination and subsequent radical reform to render it fit for contemporary commercial activity?

Many more criminal prosecutions of the most senior staff must be activated. Fining corporations, though equally necessary, merely takes more shareholders' money - swingeing prison sentences, as in the Madoff and Enron atrocities, are the only way to reduce outright fraud and/or gross derelictions of duty. The UK authorities have been most reluctant to institute such proceedings.

The betting must be on the continuing and cowardly retreat of ministerial responsibility and further postponement. Carillion will not be the culmination but merely yet another staging post on the road to engulfing catastrophe with all the enormous difficulties that will be imposed on both the economy and polity alike.

CARILLION SHOWS THE WAY

The construction and outsourcing giant's collapse shows why we need economic democracy, says Peter Tatchell

The Carillion scandal isn't the first and won't be the last – unless we radically reform the economic system. We've been here before – Northern Rock, Royal Bank of Scotland, British Home Stores and many others. They all highlight what can go wrong, given the largely undemocratic and unaccountable nature of our economy. Without better checks and balances, bad decisions in the boardroom pass unchallenged, often with dire consequences for hundreds of thousands of employees and consumers.

I have a simple question: We expect political democracy, why not economic democracy too?

One significant factor in many economic meltdowns is the universally undemocratic and unaccountable way in which economic power and decision-making is organised. A small elite of directors, managers and major shareholders decide everything, to the exclusion of employees, consumers and the wider public.

Britain is, in effect, an economic dictatorship, with an extraordinary concentration of economic power and wealth. It is, in part, this lack of economic democracy and accountability that brought Britain to the brink of catastrophe in 2008 and has left the country vulnerable ever since.

Regrettably, none of our political leaders are committed to serious reform of the economic system that allowed irresponsible decisions by corporate kingpins. This absence of reform leaves Britain at risk of more economic chaos in the future.

To help prevent a repeat of the economic disaster of a decade ago, and the more recent Carillion fiasco, we urgently need greater economic democracy, participation, diversity, transparency, decentralisation and accountability. There are four ways we could move in this direction.

* Make corporate negligence and recklessness an explicit criminal offence, to rein in big business sharks and ensure more responsible economic management. Bankers and company bosses should not be able to damage the economy and squander with impunity people's jobs, pensions and savings. They ought to be held personally liable for damaging corporate decisions, in the same way as are other professionals such as doctors and solicitors. The spectre of fines and imprisonment is likely to result in more prudent corporate governance, and would have probably deterred the irresponsible, high-risk decisions taken by the directors of RBS and Northern Rock.

* Oblige medium and large-sized companies, and public services like the NHS and local councils, to be accountable to their employees and to the general public by requiring one-third of their management boards to be made up of employee-elected directors

and independent directors to represent the interests of consumers. Giving employees direct representation at board level would mean that workforce grievances could be more readily identified and resolved; making for better industrial relations and fewer strikes. Consumer representatives could feedback on the public impact of products and services; ensuring better quality and greater consumer satisfaction. Employee and consumer directors could also act as watchdogs and whistleblowers against corporate irresponsibility. Not being driven so much by the profit-motive, they are more likely to push for company policies that are ethical and socially inclusive.

* Give employee mutual societies a majority stake in the management of their members' pension funds, to decentralise and democratise investment decision-making. Pension funds comprise about one third of total stock market investments, which makes them a sizeable counter-weight to the economic clout of big business. If employees have an input into the direction of pension fund investment they might direct it in ways that are more mindful of the impact of their investments on their communities and, as a result, choose to invest locally and regionally rather than overseas. They might also be inclined to make investments that focus more on people's needs and socially valuable production, such as new medical technologies, renewable energy, affordable housing and green public transport.

* Grant employees the legal right to buy out their companies and turn them into workers cooperatives; possibly with funding from employee-controlled pension funds. These co-ops would weaken the power of big corporations, diversify and decentralise the economy, localise decision-making and give employees incentives for greater productivity. Evidence shows that people who are employed in worker-owned enterprises tend to have higher output, fewer sickies and strikes, better job satisfaction and greater social solidarity.

These four reforms are the embryo of a new democratic, cooperative, accountable and socialised economy that would significantly reduce the chances of a re-run of the 2008 crisis and the subsequent near-failure of the whole economy.

They would achieve this goal by a combination of decentralising economic power, incentivising wiser economic decision-making, improving corporate social responsibility and strengthening the accountability of private and public enterprises to their staff and the wider public. In the process, they'd also improve industrial relations and thereby boost the economy. It's a win-win for everyone.

Peter Tatchell is a human rights and social justice campaigner

WHAT HAVE YOU JOINED?

The Liberal Democrats still cannot explain their values, even to their new members, says David Grace

Thousands recently joined the Liberal Democrats. Why? What do they think they're joining?

I asked local newbies. One hated the coalition and joined now it was over, one really liked the coalition and one could only join now he had retired from the Cabinet Office. More significant are the two moments most widely quoted on the new members' road to Damascus: 8 May 2015, Nick Clegg's resignation speech and 23 June 2016, the Brexit referendum. What we don't hear is "I have a deep-seated, burning commitment to Liberalism. This is the party where I can express it". Perhaps that's asking too much. How about: "I have always wanted to know what Liberals stand for and this seems the place to find out"? Fat chance.

I don't expect thousands to read John Stuart Mill and then join inspired that the Liberal Democrats embody their fully-formed ideology. When I joined the Liberal Party in 1974 I had read Mill but I joined because of current issues. I cannot claim I understood liberalism. If anything, I was a social democrat but that option didn't exist then. By the time it did, I had received an education in liberalism. My question is whether new members will receive anything of the sort.

Given the inability of popular media to lift debate above the soundbite, Liberals have difficulty in getting across what they are for. The temptation is to define ourselves by saying what we are not. In parliamentary terms it's a necessity because the agenda is set by Conservative or Labour governments.

Things were not much better during the coalition. At the special conference in 2010 Clegg accepted my amendment that we remained an independent party able to develop our own policies, but over the next five years attempts to do this were frowned upon and blocked.

No surprise therefore that voters often have no idea what we stand for. Ask non-political friends what they think Liberals stand for and see if you get a coherent answer. Before 2010 we were seen as Labour-light but with a commitment to human rights and internationalism, including international law, which Tony Blair lacked. That narrative evaporated in five days when our negotiators were rolled over and we adopted the very austerity policies we had fought against.

Five years later, the new narrative was Tory-light. The nadir was the slogan "Give a heart to the Tories or a head to Labour" which translates as "We won't tell you what we stand for but we will stop other people doing what they stand for". If our role is only to make other parties better, forming a third party is a bloody stupid strategy. We would achieve much more by joining those parties and working from within. I have a strange belief that we stand for a little more than that.

A disastrous election like 2015 gives the opportunity to stop, think and reinvent. We didn't stop. Buoyed up

by the explosion in membership the party plunged into an orgy of campaigning. Sadly, we neither thought nor reinvented. Naively, I expected some debate between social liberalism and orange-bookism but Tim Farron avoided that and instead proclaimed the gospel of 'massive' campaigning sustained by enthusiastic cheerfulness. Not bad in itself but without an underlying narrative, noise without a signal.

Both Tim and Vince occasionally defined the party as a centre party. Thus we define ourselves in terms of other parties, tempting now, given the perception that Tories are more right-wing than usual and Labour more left-wing. Yes, we are neither socialist nor 'neo-liberal' but this focuses debate on management of the economy and ignores so many issues which define liberalism.

In resigning Clegg said the values were "opportunity, fairness and liberty" which proved attractive, perhaps because where would you find any politician campaigning for lack of these?

This Southport spring conference endured the mind-numbing so-called strategy debate, an empty collection of aspirations to do better. Liberal Reform removed the word 'progressive' from the inoffensive phrase "Working with those who share goals with us to build a progressive alliance of ideas..." by the dog-whistle expedient of repeating 'progressive' means Labour and Labour means Corbyn. The proposer of this deceptive amendment also referred to 'Liberal values', which he defined as three achievements of coalition.

Whether or not you like those policies they are not values. Perhaps he didn't know the abiding values which should underpin all our policies. In this he is not alone. Many newbies have joined because we are not the other parties and, above all, not brexiters. To be more than a receptacle for angst and protest, we must 'educate our masters' just as we old hacks were educated. The Social Liberal Forum has started with Four Go in Search of Big Ideas (see pages 10-11) and David Howarth and Bernard Greaves with Towards a Liberal Future (see page 8-9). As Clegg said in 2015, "Liberalism is more precious than ever". Let's be the party which tells people what it is.

David Grace is a member of the Liberator Collective

APPLE TURNOVER

A strategy motion that isn't a strategy and two policy papers no one will read stuffed with apple pie but not motherhood. What was the point of the Southport conference, asks Tony Greaves

I stirred myself to go to Southport it is a couple of hours away and I could stay with lifetime friends and because, for reasons which remain mysterious, the BBC invited me to their Friday evening dinner for a couple of dozen senior Liberal Democrats. Lots of free wine too. At the conference itself I had a lot of enjoyable and even useful conversations with old and new friends.

But what of the party? Here was a conference that the national media did not attend. It was a real chance to look hard at what we say and do and what our priorities are, out of the glare of publicity. The agenda headings suggested that this might be done. In the event it was flat, obsessed with detail and with no clear overall vision of what we need to be doing to get out of our present political doldrums.

There were one or two exceptions. The best thing to appear was a new pamphlet by Bernard Greaves and David Howarth, launched at a lunchtime fringe meeting, with a brief guest appearance by Vince Cable who had written a short preamble and said some supportive things.

Greaves and Howarth start from the evident position that there is not a clear view of what the Liberal Democrats stand for; and that this is so not just among people generally but within the party as well. The pamphlet's title - *Towards a Liberal Future* - makes it clear where they think the answer lies and what they offer is an attempt to revive the vision of a capital L Liberalism which will provide "a sense of direction towards the kind of society we should be aiming at".

This is in antithesis to both the old corporatism of both the other parties and to the new neoliberal consensus around "the infallibility of market mechanisms and an obsession with outsourcing".

ELECTED DICTATORS

This is not the place for a full summary of their clear and impressive arguments. Forty years ago Liberals were putting participation at the heart of proposals to transform representative democracy. Now, they argue, the very existence of representative liberal democracy is under threat, with the rise of populism not just of the far right and the growing belief that elections should be for (all) powerful leaders rather than representative councils. Rule by elected dictators rather than by deliberative assemblies.

Greaves and Howarth are two of the party's deepest Liberal thinkers and this short work includes a great deal more than this, but at heart it is a clarion plea for a recommitment to democracy as the most fundamental Liberal process of deciding things at all levels, in every place and in all kinds of institutions.

By contrast the conference itself was presented with two more of the ever burgeoning Policy Papers (now at number 129), one on children's education (*Every Child Empowered: Education for a changing world*) and one on rural areas (*A Rural Future: Time to Act*). As usual they are packed full of sensible policies, and the education paper includes a 200-word Liberal Democrat Vision for Education 2030 which gets about half way to being really good, though it feels as if it's been written by providers.

The rural paper is just full of dozens and dozens of unobjectionable policies, but fails to tackle most of the seriously crunch issues about 'rural areas' (which it does not appear to define), and doesn't really add up to a can of beans. There is remarkably little motherhood but every page is stuffed full of apple pies, from 'affordable housing' to 'community hubs' to 'good broadband connection' to 'further devolution of power to local authorities' (further?) to converting lamp-posts to charge electric vehicles (one of the very few ideas in the whole thing that woke me up).

So here are two more policy papers to add to the list, numbers 128 and 129, and both will join most of their predecessors on the shelf or in the recycling, never to be read again by anyone. I will not comment on the conference motions that went with them, just as long-winded and awful as ever. The point is that either could have been written by competent professionals in the field and possibly were. They are pragmatic, utilitarian, impeccably liberal. But they do not begin to define why this party exists and they do not provide a real basis for campaigning. They are not distinctively Liberal.

I am not saying that no-one in the party is trying. In the cemetery slot at 9am on Sunday morning there was Motion F15. With the encouraging title of *Ambitious for Our Country, Ambitious for our Party, Ambitious for Writing Excessively Long Useless Motions: Liberal Democrat Party Strategy*. (I made up the middle bit) and frankly this is the Biggest Apple Pie in the world. *Having Your Pie and Eating It!* About 750 words, 84 lines, and actually utterly useless as a strategy for the party.

Strategy should be about defining some clear objectives, considering the various things that might be done to try to achieve them, and fairly ruthlessly deciding which to choose. Of course if resources of all kinds are limitless you can try to do everything. But our party is in a very difficult position financially, in much of the country our organisation is effectively derelict, and (as Greaves and Howarth point out) there is no clear understanding of what we fundamentally stand for that is clearly and radically different from

anyone else.

Still, we now have a strategy that is claimed to be based on the Vision for a Liberal Britain (I assume they mean Your Liberal Britain: Your Vision for Liberal Britain, a slim but well-meaning effort by an energetic party group that knows that something must be done to clarify our message, but doesn't seem to have a clear idea what that is.

It also references It's About Freedom which I assume refers to a policy paper published back in 2002 which is still an interesting and Liberal document but in some areas like economics reads as (to be kind) rather old-fashioned; and "a policy overview paper" The Opportunity to Succeed, the Power to Change which I think was a basis for much of the 2017 Manifesto, hardly a prospectus for the future.

Anyway this motion says we should "win elections at all levels", run local and national campaigns, build our core vote and support beyond that, develop a mass campaigning movement, build a progressive alliance, get more members and money. Also set out to create fairness, local people controlling their lives and working together so that "a better future is possible", "heal the nation's divides", "deliver a party organisation fit for these objectives", "increase our capacity" by "empowering our members and providing them with a rewarding experience", improving training, support and "management of party staff", bring in "new ideas" and "best practice", getting and supporting more local leaders and fundraising...

It goes on to require more diversity and inclusion, more digital opportunities, more local campaigning (more support for local leaders again)...but how to do this will be down to "state, regional and local parties as well as party bodies" and we need to "inspire very member to find their own way to put it into practice and help bring about our vision for a Liberal Democrat society".

Well, yes. Lots and lots and lots of Apple Pie, followed by heaps of Apple Pudding. But a strategy for doing some of these things - and deciding priorities - it is not!

OVERWHELMED AND PARALYSED

British politics are in a mess. Brexit is dominating almost everything, certainly at the Parliamentary level and in the national media, and the processes of Government seem overwhelmed and paralysed. The Conservative Party is in a state of internal warfare and its members seem to have stopped paying their subscriptions – though no-one seems to have tried to find out why this is. It is still not clear whether the corporatist money or the right wing members are going to come out on top, or whether May has any concept of where she is going on Brexit other than just pressing on.

Labour continues to churn out oppositionist policies dredged up from the past (not all wrong) with little forward thinking, while the leadership continues

“So here are two more policy papers to add to the list, and both will join most of their predecessors on the shelf or in the recycling, never to be read again by anyone”

its Leninist strategy of strengthening its grip on the party by means of encouraging action from the grassroots (with John Lansmann acting the role of Trotsky to John McDonnell's Lenin – and recently getting a bit frisky rather sooner than I expected.)

The good news for the Liberal Democrats, such as it is, comes from the clear signs in council by-elections that in more Conservative areas – and in some Labour

areas – the blocks to voting for us that grew during the Coalition, and were again reinforced at the 2017 general election, have faded away. There still have to be good local reasons for a good result – still strong on the ground, a recent history of strength, a really well run election campaign, a popular candidate, helpful local issues – these are all helpful. But we are back to the position a year ago when Liberal Democrats were either polling over 40% and winning, or getting hammered with less than 5%, and not that many in between.

The 'less than 5%' places are of course those polling the national vote, still stuck at around 7% in the opinion polls which have hardly budged for any of the parties since the general election apart from the Ukip collapse, which is showing everywhere in the by-elections with the votes still going to any of the other parties and none depending on local circumstance.

Of course the party is, like everyone else, obsessed with Brexit. In the Lords we are told that it is our intention to help to stop it. I am happy with that. But where is the party? Are we taking the lead, forming the vanguard, calling on the country, and (incidentally) getting the credit from all the people who agree with us that this awful nonsense just has to be stopped?

Are we even launching a massive campaign for a referendum? Evidently not. If we had a strategy worthy of the name surely campaigning to stop Brexit would be there up front? But no – we are too busy passing long vacuous resolutions calling for everything. Surely if we want to "empower our members and provide them with a rewarding experience" we should be calling them out for the most important campaign in our lifetimes?

But no. The Liberal Democrat party bureaucracy seems all too often to be capable of nothing more than the endless wind of huge piles of policies and meaningless motions, and a few two-line press releases. Full of (not much) sound and fury, and lots of apple pie, signifying nothing.

Tony Greaves is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords

YOUR WHAT?

Jennie Rigg has started asking questions about Your Liberal Britain, and finds the answers throw up rather more of them

Those of you who attended the Southport conference (and even some who didn't) might have noticed that there were a few questions in to federal committees on the topic of Your Liberal Britain from myself and various other people, and be wondering why that might be so.

I can't speak for anybody else, but my disquiet was with the fact that Your Liberal Britain appears to be taking over a lot of basic functions of the party despite claiming to be completely independent of party HQ, and without being elected, or overseen in anything but the most cursory way. I know the party is skint at the moment, but that should not mean we let our basic principles of democracy, openness, transparency, and accountability slide.

I'd had worries for a little while, and had had some email correspondence with Jim Williams, who to all intents and purposes appears to be Your Liberal Britain. He assured me that YLB only wanted to further Liberalism and the causes of Liberal Democracy, that they were completely independent of party HQ, and yet that any work they were doing would still somehow be overseen by the Federal People Development Committee, but the FPDC wouldn't actually have any power over YLB; YLB were just reporting to it, without it being able to do anything about any bits of those reports it didn't like.

As you can probably tell, I wasn't massively reassured by this. Where is democracy? Whither accountability? And openness and transparency appear completely absent.

The thing that spurred me to greater action, though, was the announcement of the Ashdown Prize for policy ideas.

Where did the £500 prize money come from? Why were they implying that any resulting policy would go straight onto the conference agenda and have Paddy speak in favour of it (albeit with a tiny "this bit is out of our hands" at the bottom, presumably to deflect the inevitable uproar should Federal Conference Committee (FCC) not select the motion or Paddy not be chosen to speak)? Why do people need £500 as an incentive to submit policy ideas to what amounts to a glorified drafting advice service anyway? This appeared to me to be treading on the toes of both Federal Policy Committee and FCC, so I decided to submit some questions.

The answers I got from Sal Brinton were... well, they were answers. For example:

Q Does YLB plan to have an elected executive?

A They plan to sort out an executive soon

Note, not an elected executive, merely an executive

Q Why does Your Liberal Britain have a staff pass?

A A: Well, I have a staff pass

Well, yes, but you're the president of the party. Your Liberal Britain claims to be completely independent. I accept that there are people who are not staff members who have staff passes; that's different from someone 'completely independent' having a staff pass.

Q How come they get so much money from the party?

A Ah well, that wasn't actually from the party, it was from a donor who wanted to donate to YLB and it just passed through the party's accounts.

OK... so would that donor have given the money to another bit of the party if not YLB? How does YLB identify donors? How is this information shared with the party? What are the GDPR implications? What is the donation going to be used for? How is this being tracked?

Q How do SAOs and other party bodies access the untrammelled publicity that Your Liberal Britain seems to get?

A A: Well, you only have to ask.

Not in my experience, but I'm willing to let that stand as a promise for the future.

As you can see, some of those answers do little but raise further questions. Sal did also promise a review of the party's relationship with YLB for autumn conference. I am very much looking forward to that.

I don't have an issue with Jim Williams. He seems like a perfectly nice young man. I don't have an issue with the party using independent contractors to drive engagement. That seems to me to be an acceptable solution to some of the problems we are facing. What I do have an issue with is murky, opaque solutions and unelected, unaccountable bodies in a party that is meant to champion and embody democracy, openness, transparency, and accountability in all that we do.

It's probable there is nothing improper here, but how are we meant to tell? I'd really like to be able to tell.

Jennie Rigg is a member of Federal Conference Committee

CALL THE INTERPRETER

John Alderdice's review of the Liberal Democrats' relations with ethnic minorities doesn't quite say what it means. Alex Dee translates it for us

In late 2016, Lord Alderdice was commissioned to look into the barriers Black and Minority Ethnic (BaME) members face in the Liberal Democrats. Alderdice was an excellent choice and he has written a good report. But you don't need to be a genius to understand what the careful language of the report is really saying.

Alderdice outlines the party's many attempts in the past 20 years to address race equality. Time and again inquiries are set up, reports are written, advisory groups convened and motions put to conference. The most notable is the From Barriers to Benefits report approved by conference in autumn 2008 which contained comprehensive, practical recommendations. Yet here we are, 10 years later commissioning yet another report and discussing the topic all over again. In short, the party pays lip service to the issues facing BaME members - but ultimately nothing significant ever really changes.

Alderdice says he found no evidence of widespread racism in the Liberal Democrats, but those who gave evidence "agreed that there is a serious problem". Submissions from BaME members to the inquiry describe "unpleasant experiences"; "negative attitudes by individuals towards people from different racial or ethnic backgrounds"; individuals and groups within the party are "unwelcoming to people of colour"; and instances exist where there was "clearly a race/ethnicity issue". He concludes that to address this the Liberal Democrats need to "change the culture of the party, especially at the local level". This is a polite way of saying that everyone's a little bit racist.

Given the lack of progress on this issue and the need for a cultural change in the party, Alderdice has something to say about Liberal Democrat affection for complicated procedures. Referring to barriers to progress he says, "only democratic fundamentalists refuse to acknowledge that leadership and action may be needed to break through a problem". That's a new one (but a good one), I'm sure we can all name democratic fundamentalists.

The report also makes a plea for complaints to be addressed in a more timely fashion. Unfortunately, progress on this front has been delayed...by standing orders. The Macdonald review recommended an overhaul of the party's disciplinary process but was 'referenced back' at Southport conference. As such, improvements to the complaints procedure are paused and anyone already in the system is stuck in no man's land.

There are some good solutions offered in the Alderdice Report, not least that the party should implement the recommendations of previous reports. Alderdice supports the idea of setting up a Campaign for BaME Representation along the lines of the

successful Campaign for Gender Balance. There are also interesting suggestions around mentoring, internships, offering childcare, focusing less on localism and campaigning on principles. One of the more bizarre suggestions is that Baroness Lorely Burt should start a social media campaign on this issue. It isn't clear why, and perhaps it is just as well that the general election put this particular idea on ice.

Those who are genuinely interested and keen to create a more diverse party will read Alderdice with interest and try to put some of his findings into action. But they aren't really the problem - the culture Alderdice refers to relates to members unlikely to read this report or to take action themselves. The major flaw with the review is the lack of ownership; it says the party needs cultural change at a local level, implying it is the responsibility of every member and therefore nobody really has overall ownership of making anything happen.

One way of putting Alderdice into action fast is to implement some sticks and carrots using existing mechanisms. Why not incentivise local parties to make progress towards a membership that more closely reflects the make-up of their area? Local parties are already incentivised to recruit supporters through the membership rebate... why not adapt it accordingly? And as for sticks, anyone familiar with the party's disciplinary process knows it is a mess. So part of the answer lies in making sure our disciplinary process is robust enough. We shouldn't shy away from saying: "This person was racist, their behaviour was unacceptable and we have expelled them from the party". Ensuring the Macdonald report returns in autumn 2018 so improvements to the disciplinary process can be made swiftly is crucial.

But to truly achieve the culture change Alderdice is suggesting, it must start at the very top. The party hierarchy needs to avoid getting bogged down in meetings and roundtables and resist falling back on its trusty 'something must be done' response that usually ends in tokenism. Our membership is now the largest we've ever known and newer members (who now outnumber the more established members) are restless, unfamiliar with the archaic process-driven ways of the party and hungry for change.

Alex Dee is a Liberal Democrat activist

A REPUTATION LOST, A DANGER LOOMING

The scandal that hit Oxfam over sexual exploitation in Haiti raised important issues but should not be used by the enemies of overseas aid, says Margaret Lally

The exploitation of vulnerable people is always wrong. Understandably there was a huge outcry after newspaper revelations that Oxfam GB (Oxfam) staff working in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake had paid for sex.

Prostitution is illegal in Haiti where the legal age for consent is 18. Although none of the initial allegations of use of under-age prostitutes were substantiated it cannot be ruled out that some of the women were under age. Four staff were dismissed; three resigned. Is this a case of a few 'bad apples' and some process failures or is sexual exploitation happening on a much wider scale in the sector?

Let's focus on Oxfam for a start. In 2011-12 it had more than 5,000 employees, more than half of whom worked overseas. Approximately 500 staff were in Haiti. Even using internal surge capacity, Oxfam wouldn't have had enough permanent staff to respond to such a major disaster and recruiting quickly and at scale after a major disaster is a big challenge - particularly when there is quick and generous public response, and the media is beaming in pictures of people not being helped.

Oxfam brought in additional people primarily on short term contracts. Some of these would be specialists in logistics, engineering, sanitation and might work for other agencies, including the private sector, as well. They were interviewed and the chief executive of Oxfam has stated that those who had 'direct contact' with 'beneficiaries' were checked by the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS).

CRIMINAL OFFENCE

But as best DBS will tell you that individuals have not previously been identified as committing a criminal offence in the UK. Using prostitutes in the UK is not a criminal offence.

DBS checking would also only apply to British personnel. At least one individual in this scandal was not British.

The definitions of beneficiary and eligibility for DBS checks are narrow.

Further, temporary staff will not be as embedded in the organisation as its permanent staff and may not have absorbed its values. Providing supervision and support to response staff is challenging, particularly in the early days of a disaster. Oxfam has rightly been asked if it did enough to prevent abuse happening, investigated and dealt with the perpetrators rigorously and were sufficiently open about what happened.

Oxfam has accepted that its recruitment and disciplinary processes were not rigorous enough. The allegations were investigated by an independent staff

team but Oxfam was wrong to allow some individuals to resign rather than be dismissed.

The issue of providing references, which meant the perpetrators could be recycled to other organisations, is a bit murky. Oxfam has argued that for "legal reasons" it could not go into detail about an individual's conduct as they had resigned rather than been fired for misconduct. It tried to get around that by providing a reference which simply confirmed that an individual had worked with Oxfam between certain dates, which it believed was a minimum obligation.

Most UK employers would recognise this reference as worthless but that might not apply to overseas employers. One person did get employed by another country Oxfam - despite Oxfam UK circulating a list internally.

A key charge against Oxfam has been a lack of transparency to protect funding. It did not report the issues to the police or key stakeholders in Haiti (possibly to protect the victims). Nor were the matters reported to the UK police. Oxfam did inform the Charity Commission and the Department for International Development (DfID) that individuals had been dismissed for sexual misconduct, but also said that this misconduct had not involved beneficiaries (an inappropriately narrow definition of the word). A press statement was issued saying that people had been dismissed for serious breaches of conduct. A summary of complaints of this nature are also noted in Oxfam's annual reports. The current chief executive accepts that the organisation was not transparent enough but arguably Oxfam did as much as most publicly funded organisations.

Both the Charity Commission and DfID should have probed deeper. In the end what matters, however, is whether or not people felt that they knew what had happened - and on that criteria Oxfam failed.

Did Oxfam do enough to identify and prevent abuse in the future? Changes were put in place including establishing a central safeguarding team and setting up a whistleblowing line. But the ex-head of safeguarding manager has gone on record to say her concerns were not taken seriously enough by Oxfam's leadership. Oxfam has now accepted that her team was over stretched, that there was a fear of reporting and that there was a failure to tackle on a systematic basis the cultural issues.

Oxfam got quite a bit wrong - not least focusing on individual incidents rather than tackling systematic failures. But in this it is not alone. Over the last few weeks it has become clear that sexual abuse and harassment was not just an issue for Oxfam but for the sector as a whole, and also DfID.

Perhaps we should not be surprised. In 2002 Save the Children (StC) published a report with UNHCR highlighting the role of powerful men as gatekeepers to food and security in disaster areas, and the consequent scale of sexual exploitation by aid workers and peace troops. When giving evidence to the DfID select committee, Kevin Watkins of StC noted that predatory males (and it is most often males) will seek out vulnerable individuals - and where better to do so than within a charity? Abuse and exploitation is not confined to international work but the risks there are greater. There has been a collective failure to address these issues that goes well beyond Oxfam. Charities and DfID have now started to join up the dots and recognise that abuse will happen and there needs to be a systematic global response.

There are some practical steps. It is wrong that people who are working with some of the most vulnerable people on the planet do not have the same professional certification and regulation as educational, health, and social care professionals, and that perpetrators of abuse can move between organisations at will.

This needs an international response. One proposal is for an international certification system of humanitarian aid workers which would effectively result in them having (or not) an international 'passport' to practice. This would mean aid agencies could draw on people already vetted.

Charities have to be more transparent and less protective of reputation. The sector has to rebuild trust with the British public which is incredibly supportive of overseas aid but wants to know it is being delivered effectively. Arguably charities have had to focus too much on providing data for organisational donors and need to think about talking to their end donors (you and me) about what they do and the enormous difference it makes.

There has to be a better understanding of power relationships and an acknowledgement that power can be abused. As we have seen elsewhere women are often (albeit not always) in a less equal position to men and this creates conditions for exploitation.

Development agencies which send teams to difficult environments when people are particularly vulnerable have to recognise this. Delegations are more likely to be led by, and staffed by men, simply because it is often harder for women to leave families at short notice. (In 2016-17 half of Oxfam's employees were women; but this dropped to 38.6% for its international work; and it had fewer women in management positions overseas particularly at the top levels).

More needs to be done to ensure women occupy positions of power. But also charities have to work even harder at embedding values which enforces the dignity of every human being whatever circumstances they are living in - everyone has to own these values and feel able to call out those whose behaviour contravenes them.

There has to be a proactive checking that organisational codes of behaviour are fully understood and embedded into the culture of the organisation. Stronger investment by all agencies (and their donors) in safeguarding teams is also required.

To be fair, Oxfam did understand this at least at the theoretical level. It has done good work on developing strategies for empowering women (which

I have in the past used as a model). In 2010-11, at the Commission on the Status of Women, Oxfam advocated for an international monitoring and accountability mechanism based on their framework of gender based violence /violence against women and independent reviews have highlighted that the culture and gender sensitivity of some their work such as cash for work programmes. But there is a difference between having good policies and strategies and having values which are constantly reinforced and shine through in how everyone works.

HELICOPTERING IN

We also have to ask why are westerners are always helicoptering into disaster zones – why not train up more responders in the areas/regions known to be at risk when this has been known to be a gap for some years now?

DfID funds organisations such as the Red Cross to train individuals from across the globe who can led disaster response. But there are still too few coming from African and Asian countries. Having said that in a major disaster – 220,000 were killed in Haiti – others will also be needed. Ideally many should come from the surrounding region. It will still be necessary to bring Europeans but they should be part of a wider team. This of course will not stop exploitation – it is not the prerogative of Europeans.

Finally we need to challenge those who use this issue as a mechanism for to divide and beat up the charity sector. It is interesting the amount of media bile that has accompanied Oxfam but not say StC, ICRC or DfID. True Oxfam managed to handle the publicity badly but the ongoing bashing of the charity may also be associated with Oxfam's outspoken comments on the impact of capitalism on the poor.

The government must not be allowed to use scandal as an excuse to cut funding to development agencies or to shackle the terms of that aid. The Liberal Democrats (through Tom Brake's private members bill) got the government to commit to giving 0.7% in aid. At the recent BOND (the umbrella group for international organisations) conference the overseas development secretary Penny Mordaunt, in an under-reported speech, said some potentially worrying things about how the aid budget might be used in the future.

In particular she referred to greater cooperation between DfID and the armed forces, and increasing partnerships with the private sector. In her view aid had to be working harder for UK prosperity and security. Nothing wrong with that - unless it distorts making the needs of beneficiaries the first priority.

It's been a bad time for Oxfam and the humanitarian sector. Important issues have been raised which need to be addressed but let's not lose sight of the good that is achieved by the majority of charity workers who give selflessly to those in need.

Margaret Lally is a member of Islington Liberal Democrats and has worked for an international aid agency. The views she expresses here are her own

MONUMENT TO A FORGOTTEN ERA

Jonathan Calder reviews Chris Rennard's political autobiography of his time as an election winner, but finds it stops short of the controversies that were to affect his reputation

When Phil Reilly left his job as the Liberal Democrats' director of communications last November, he announced the decision in a post on Lib Dem Voice. Writing of the first leaders' debate in the 2010 general election, he said: "That night changed the course of our party's fortunes, but it also changed my life. I had joined the press office of a party that hadn't been in national government for decades, with no expectation that would be changing any time soon. A few short years later I would be working in 10 Downing Street."

After it was published I saw tweets from national political journalists congratulating Phil on the article, which suggests that his may become the official version of Lib Dem history.

The truth, however, is rather different. Cleggmania lasted only a few days and the party lost five seats at the election. We did end up in government, not because of the peculiar brilliance of Clegg or Reilly, but because the election produced a hung parliament, an outcome that will always be a fluke result.

A more accurate account of Liberal Democrat history was given in an earlier Lib Dem Voice post by Nigel Lindsay: "Liberal Democrats were arguably more effective as a party of government before Nick Clegg became leader. [In] the decade from 2000 to 2010, Liberal Democrats were coalition partners in the governments of both Scotland and Wales. The achievements of Liberal Democrat Ministers in those governments were far-reaching and radical Liberal Democrats also controlled major local authorities in most parts of Britain during those years."

Chris Rennard's 'Winning Here', which is billed as volume one of his memoirs, tells the story of how he helped the Liberal party and then the Liberal Democrats reached this position of comparative strength, ending with the defenestration of Charles Kennedy and then Willie Rennie's victory in the Dunfermline and West Fife by-election in February 2006.

ALLEGATIONS EMERGE

This has the effect of ending the story before the emergence of the allegations of sexual harassment against him that have sometimes threatened to split the party along a generational divide. Chris does mention them in his introduction, but a full discussion will presumably have to wait until the appearance of the slightly improbable volume two.

Chris's father, a veteran of the First World War who

lost a leg on the Western Front, was 71 when Chris was born. He was to die three years later, leaving Chris's mother with three children and a complicated financial situation. The help she received in gaining a widow's pension had historic consequences for the Liberal Party and Liberal Democrats.

One day Cyril Carr, the leading figure in Liverpool Liberals, called at the Rennards' house, listened to their problems and made the call that secured the pension from their own phone. So Chris joined the Liberals.

Carr was one of the pioneers of community politics in the party and Chris became his protégé. This was an era when the party twice ran the city council (1974-6 and 1978-80) and contained nationally important figures like David Alton and Trevor Jones, but Chris was to become the leading Liberal agent in the city. Alton was to win the Edge Hill constituency, which was wonderfully compact for campaigners but already identified as for the chop by the Boundary Commissioners, at a by-election in 1979.

After the 1984 Liverpool council elections, which Chris suggests were swung by personation for the Militant-led Labour Party, he left the city to become the Liberal Party's regional agent for the East Midlands, and this is what he found: "The East Midlands Regional Party was considered to be one of the most viable in England because it owned a (near-derelict) house in Loughborough. The house did not even have a functioning loo and visitors had to rely on the facilities at the nearby railway station. This was the regional office and home for the administrative secretary, a man called Maurice Bennett, who also hailed from Liverpool. Maurice made sure that the regional executive ... regional finance and general purposes subcommittee and regional council all met regularly and he tried to raise funds to cover his modest salary and the costs of the house by selling a weird assortment of pens, key fobs and party memorabilia, as well as organising draws and sponsored walks.

"The operation required the limited number of constituency associations to pay into the regional party £200 per year, unless they could plead great poverty. For this fee, they appeared only to have the benefit of being able to buy the key fobs and to send representatives to regional party meetings."

It was at this house, which was in Burder Street, Loughborough, that I first met Chris. We talked upstairs among stacked boxes of leaflets that must have challenged the joists while Maurice Bennett

watched the racing on television downstairs.

Chris had an enormous influence on the party in the region. He brought community campaigning techniques from Liverpool that enabled Rob Renold to win Crown Hills, an inner Leicester ward on the county council with a largely Muslim population in 1985. He

also put together a team of activists, based at a Liberal safe house in Kimberley Road, Leicester, who helped across the region. They ran the committee room at an important Harborough by-election, leaving us local activists free to knock up all day.

For some readers, the book will be too much of a catalogue of long-forgotten by-elections, but for me, at least in these years, it is riveting because I remember them all. I drove down with Chris to the Brecon and Radnor by-election in 1985 and was on the frontline there in Ystradgynlais.

Winning Here sweeps on through the Alliance years, giving an inside view of the seat negotiations between the Liberal Party and the SDP and showing how poorly the two Davids worked together. It was not just a lack of personal chemistry, but a lack of organisation: when they arrived for a joint appearance they had never discussed who would say what.

Then we come to the period after the two parties merged. This is chiefly remembered as an era in which we argued over the party's name – at one time we were going to be 'the Democrats' – but Chris reveals how precarious the financial position was, with the party reliant for its continued existence at one point upon a major donor who insisted upon keeping his identity a secret.

KENNEDY'S FALL

The drama that dominates the latter part of the book is the fall of Charles Kennedy. It had been rumoured for years that Charles had a serious drink problem, but whenever you asked an insider you were told that, yes, Charles used to have a problem, but he has sorted himself out. Sadly he never did.

Chris reveals more instances of cancelled meetings and campaign trips than I remember reading about before and pays tribute to the people like Tim Razzall who kept Charles going for as long as he did. He also gives Donnachadh McCarthy his due as the man who pushed the Lib Dems into opposing the war in Iraq.

I suppose it was the lifestyle of politics that did for poor Charles, and Chris himself did not find it healthy either. Living in what was in effect a permanent by-election campaign for 30 years left him with diabetes and depression when he stood down as the Lib Dems' chief executive in 2009.

In recent years, in part perhaps because of the allegations against Chris, it has been fashionable to decry 'Rennardism'. Yet this style of politics did not come just from him and Liverpool: it was originated independently across the country by forgotten figures like Wallace Lawler in Birmingham and Stanley Rundle in Kew. It was solidified into a technique for

“For some readers, the book will be too much of a catalogue of long-forgotten by-elections, but I remember them all”

winning seats by the Association for Liberal Councillors in the late 1970s, and Chris was the strongest influence on its development in the years after that.

And, though it is true that the ruthless targeting and playing up of local grievances can grate, it has never been clear what people propose

putting in place of Rennardism. Nick Clegg's charisma, which was based on a single attractive television performance, did not last a week as the centrepiece of our campaign.

When the history of the Liberal Democrats comes to be written, Chris will have a central place in it and this book, which already feels like a monument to a forgotten era, will be a valuable source. It's just that you fear the historians may decide they have more important things to do.

Winning Here. By Chris Rennard, Biteback 2008. £25

Jonathan Calder is a member of the Liberator Collective

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BLOOD ON BRITAIN'S HANDS

The carnage in Yemen is a pointless war made worse by UK complicity, and may spread unless stopped, says Paul Reynolds

The British public have mostly heard of the war in Syria, now back on news screens after the bombing of Eastern Ghouta. Few however have heard of the equally brutal war in Yemen, barely two hours flight to the south.

When the Yemen war does filter through to the mainstream media it is often characterised as a proxy war between Saudi Arabian Sunni Muslims and Iranian Shia Muslims, played out by local rivals.

The rivals are commonly described as the 'recognised' Saudi-backed Sunni government led by President Hadi, on whose behalf the Saudi blockade and bombing is being conducted, against Shia Muslim 'Houthi' rebels backed with Iranian weapons and cash for control of Yemeni territory.

Dig a little deeper and the standard expert explanation is that following the military survival of the Assad regime in Syria with Russian help and Iranian support, the Iranian government is in pursuit of military expansion across the Middle East, including in Yemen, and must be stopped.

This is the stated logic for Western (and British) support for the Saudi bombing and blockade and resultant human carnage, mass cholera outbreak and child starvation.

One should be wary of such overarching geopolitical rationales for war. The US entered the Vietnam war to prevent Chinese communist expansion in SE Asia. The overarching theory glossed over the fact that the Vietnamese and Chinese had antagonistic relations, and it inadvertently precipitated the rise of the China-backed communist Pol Pot regime in neighbouring Cambodia after bombing the border areas - the opposite of what was intended.

ENDURING CATASTROPHE

To avoid a similarly enduring catastrophe for Western policy over Yemen, it is necessary to attempt an impartial look at the events that led up to the war. This is important because of a wider danger. If politicians buy the 'Iranian expansion' narrative wholesale, for many of them the only remedy if there is an impasse in Yemen will be a full scale war with Iran, which will almost certainly draw in Russia and China. There are already enough people chafing at the bit for a war with Iran, for a variety of reasons.

Yemen is the Middle East's poorest country. It emerged badly in the 20th century from the colonial era, having endured Ottoman control in the north and west, and experienced British control fanning out from Aden in the south and the east. The independent Yemeni Republic formed in 1962 excluded the British Protectorate in Aden and southern Yemen, which subsequently became an independent Marxist state in 1967 with Soviet influence and money, riding on a

wave of anti-colonial feeling. The current Yemeni state resulted from the merger of southern and northern Yemen in 1990, as Soviet money dried up following the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In July 1978 the military governor of Ta'izz, Colonel Ali Abdullah Saleh Afash became President of the Yemen Arab Republic (northern Yemen) and the following month showed his approach to power by executing 30 potential military rivals.

President Saleh, became the new president of united Yemen after the 1990 merger. By then he was already known for his 'hoarding' of economic assets and for controlling the military and government via economic favours and chilling threats. He was a classic 'strong man' favoured by colonial states; able to hold the tribes together, and to enforce an international business deal; not unlike Hafez Assad in Syria with the Soviets, or Ben Ali in Tunisia with the French.

Saleh, a Zaidi Muslim (closer to Shia Islam than Sunni), had a 'hot and cold' relationship with the northern Houthi tribes, who are mostly Zaidi. When disquiet among the population about Saleh's kleptocratic approach to government led to Houthis mobilising against him in 2009 and 2010, Saleh appealed to the US for help.

Saleh took advantage of the anti-terrorist focus of Washington DC by describing the Houthis as affiliated to Al Qaeda, (who had been blamed on the USS Cole bombing). Despite the fact that this was plainly inaccurate, the US Congress largely bought the narrative about the Houthis, and stepped up aid and military support to their ally in Yemen.

However the Arab Spring protests from Houthis and other groups in Aden, Ta'izz, Mukhala, San'aa and elsewhere continued and grew to large scale demonstrations in major cities. In January 2011, 16,000 people braved the prospects of a violent reaction from Saleh's security apparatus, and demonstrated in the capital San'aa. Largely peaceful protests continued, but by end-March violence had spread.

By the summer of 2011 Saleh had left for Saudi Arabia for treatment after being injured on an attack on the presidential palace. Prior to Saleh's exit the US and the Saudis, and the rest of the GCC, had negotiated a deal for Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, Saleh's long term ally, to become interim President.

A year after the demonstrations started, the deal was extended to President Saleh to step down permanently and go into exile in Saudi Arabia, with immunity from prosecution.

While Saleh's exit was to an extent cheered, none of the rest of the protestors demands were met; a more democratic and decentralised constitution, less corruption, rule of law, more jobs, and above all removal of absurd restrictions on small scale

businesses, farming and trading.

It wasn't just the lack of reform promises that muted the cheers. President Hadi was known as a Saleh loyalist without the strength or tribal/popular base to establish stable government or pursue demanded-for reforms; an impression reinforced when it became clear he has quickly fallen under the close control of the Saudis, who were dead against democratisation in Yemen.

This was a particular problem for the Houthis, who had been allies of the Saudis in addressing tribal conflicts on the Yemen-Saudi border, but by then had antagonistic relations with the Saudi regime - who feared Zaidi Islam might lead to growing Shia Iranian influence on the Arabian Peninsula.

In foreign ministries in the region there was much 'rolling of eyes' when Hadi became president. Predictably, the coherence of government quickly began to atrophy. From the summer of 2011 to autumn of 2014 the situation deteriorated, with large parts of the army either siding with Houthi forces, or joining up with ex-president Saleh's security team against Hadi. Parts of the country controlled by the official government, began to shrink and quickly were reduced to small enclaves

By autumn 2014 the Houthis and Saleh loyalists, with large parts of the army taking their US weapons with them, had taken control of the capital San'aa.

Hadi's official government forces were quickly confined to Aden and other parts of the south, at least partly because he was seen by many as supporting a foreign power in bombing his own country. The US has reportedly become unpopular too, not only because of the targeting support to the Saudis but also because of popular perceptions about civilian deaths from American drone strikes on Al Qaeda suspects.

The Saudis launched their pre-emptive attack on Yemen in March 2015, using air strikes and a blockade in an attempt to pre-empt potential future Iranian influence.

Despite the official US position in 2015 that Iran has had little influence over the Houthis, and that there was scant evidence of Iranian weapons and money transfers to Yemen, there was nevertheless support from the US for the Saudi attacks. Other more anti-Iran parts of the US administration had set up a team to advise the Saudis on targeting and strategy, in Riyadh, and had already sent covert special forces into key areas in Yemen in order to assist in the 'pre-emption'.

Three years later the war continues. There have been more than 10,000 fatalities. As at January 2018 there were more than one million reported cases of cholera and more than 2,500 related deaths. The already-weakened economy has all but collapsed and the UN reports that two million children are suffering from acute malnutrition, with thousands reportedly dying of starvation already.

The US reduced its targeting operation in Saudi Arabia after the prospect of war crimes proceedings emerged, arising from the air strikes. The UAE, pursuing its commercial interests, has backed militias linked to separatists in the south who have taken control of Aden and edged out any forces allied to Hadi. Government control in Yemen is now confined to just a few small patches.

How do you stop a war designed to prevent something that was unlikely to happen in the first place? How do you militarily support a government administration and army which is reduced to a rump and very unlikely ever to take control of the country? How do you address the shifting tribal allegiances which have filled much of the governance vacuum? How do you address armed Islamic forces controlling large swathes of land in the mountains - something a decade of unpopular drone strikes from the US was supposed to prevent

INDEFINITE WAR

There are only two overall choices. One is the Afghanistan approach - allow the bombing and civil wars to continue indefinitely, with vague military and political aims, hoping that something will turn up - other than waves of refugees. The other is to find a pathway to peace., which will require negotiations between internal factions, and between the external belligerents. A Saudi ceasefire will be required sooner rather than later.

If there are such steps to peace, and an attempt at addressing the original grievances of the early 2011 demonstrations, it is unlikely that it can be led by the US. This is not just due to the US involvement in the bombing, but because the new US secretary of state Mike Pompeo is a strident advocate of war against Iran and is known for promoting the idea of an Iranian threat in Yemen, Iraq and Syria.

For peace in Yemen we may have to wait for a new US administration, or a newly active EU, Gulf Cooperation Council and Arab League working with the UN.

Should Iran be a part of international negotiations? There might be folly in this. Iran's involvement is likely to involve Teheran formulating demands. To put it bluntly, why give concessions to Iran to stop them from doing something they are likely not doing anyway?

However an approach to Iran is required, for example to address objectively allegations they are the source of missiles fired by militant groups into Saudi Arabia and out to warships.

Thus the institutional challenge for starting and managing a pathway to peace, represents a mountain to climb, but given the current death toll, it must be attempted.

Achieving peace is never easy. In the longer run, will allowing the brutality and carnage to continue, with its many unpredictable consequences for the countries of the region, be easier than achieving peace now? Almost certainly not.

Paul Reynolds is an independent adviser on international relations, economics, and senior governance. He is an elected member of Federal International Relations Committee and of the Liberal International British Group executive

PRIDE BEFORE A FALL

Liberal Democrats were part of a wide coalition that felled Haringey's Labour leader and halted a catastrophic privatisation, Nigel Scott reports

All successful politicians meet the same fate one day. There is overconfidence, overreach, hubris and finally humiliation. Haringey's leader Claire Kober bowed to the inevitable on 30 January. Momentum has been simultaneously blamed and praised for her undoing, but the truth is more complicated.

It had started so well. In 2008 and still in her twenties, Kober took over as leader of Haringey's Labour council in the wake of the Baby P scandal. She led her party to victory in the 2010 council elections against a national backdrop of Labour decline and a thriving local Liberal Democrat party that had secured Lynne Featherstone's election to parliament. In May 2014, the unpopularity of Cameron/Clegg gave Labour an open goal and another four years.

CANNES WE DO IT?

But in the March 2014, Kober and the council's chief executive Nick Walkley travelled to Cannes for MIPIM, the world's leading property networking event. The visit was low key and unreported but was the genesis of what was to become the Haringey Development Vehicle (HDV), the most reviled proposal in Labour's 45-year stewardship of the borough.

Back home, Kober worked quietly with a small group of colleagues and council officers. Her intentions emerged slowly amid growing concern from back-bench and opposition councillors and later from the wider public.

The HDV was to be a joint venture between Haringey and Australian property developer Lendlease to 'regenerate the area'. Each principal would take a 50% stake in new private company. Haringey's contribution would have been £2bn of public assets including the Northumberland Park estate, close to Spurs football ground as well as the council's Civic Centre, main library and administrative offices in central Wood Green, schools, public facilities and a former care home. Private housing would be added using compulsory purchase powers.

It was claimed that Haringey, lacked the skills to undertake its own redevelopment schemes, so Lendlease would do the job instead. Six board members, three from Haringey and three from Lendlease, would meet four times a year to monitor the company's activities. Day to day management would be down to Lendlease. This 'light touch' arrangement was criticised by opponents as inadequate,

considering the potential risks involved.

In March 2015 a cross-party working group under the direction of cabinet member for regeneration and housing Cllr Alan Strickland, was set up to consider options for the future management of Haringey's municipal housing stock, which is administered for the council by Homes for Haringey, an arm's length management organisation.

The working group visited councils with different housing management structures in Sunderland, Rochdale, Salford, Waltham Forest and Newham. The consensus was that Haringey should continue with existing arrangements. Strickland made no mention of the HDV option, though he was heavily involved behind the scenes.

Over a year later council cabinet papers began to refer to regeneration via a Haringey Development Vehicle, though detail was absent and questions from Lib Dems and other backbench councillors produced little clarification. The HDV was moving forward surreptitiously, but legally. Only selected cabinet members and key officers knew what was planned. Other councillors were kept in the dark.

Wider consultation with residents began, but focused on regeneration and local improvement, studiously avoiding mention of real nature of the HDV.

As concerns grew, the Lib Dem group succeeded in pushing for an overview and scrutiny committee



review. In July 2017 a local newspaper reported its conclusions, revealing disquiet on both sides of the chamber. The HDV was thrown back to the cabinet for a rethink. Criticisms included insufficient protection for leaseholders, tenants and small businesses, no guarantee of return after rebuilding was completed and no new social housing. Both Haringey's Labour MPs also voiced their opposition.

A grassroots opposition campaign StopHDV coordinated residents, tenants and political activists including members of Militant as well as Lib Dems and Greens. Green Party activist Gordon Peters launched a judicial review, citing lack of meaningful consultation over a privatisation scheme that would be unparalleled in scale for a council project in the UK.

Meanwhile a shadow HDV board had been operating from at least April 2017, three months before a July cabinet decision was taken to continue to press ahead. In a closed Labour meeting, Kober won a vote of confidence by a two to one majority, but it emerged that 22 of 49 Labour councillors were opposed to the HDV.

Within the Labour group, relationships grew toxic. On 7 November a local paper published the text of a five page resignation letter from respected cabinet member Cllr Stuart McNamara, in which he accused Kober of duping councillors over the size and scale of the HDV and accused her of using "wrecking ball tactics" and of a "horrific wasting of money on vanity projects".

He continued: "Lendlease which was, in effect, sprung on all of us when it was too late to plead for reason and restraint, is splitting the Labour Party and putting you at odds with almost everyone else, including a number of your cabinet. The HDV was not in any manifesto and yet you have pursued it through a covert and incremental approach, duping fellow councillors"

In ward re-selection meetings ahead of the 2018 council elections, Kober supporting councillors were under threat. Momentum and other members opposed to HDV began replacing established pro-HDV councillors with opponents as candidates in preparation for May 2018 elections. Strickland announced that he was standing down – he quit to before he was pushed.

Throughout this process the HDV was never voted on in principle or in detail at any full council meeting. A second overview and scrutiny review, urging caution and further consultation, was brushed aside.

PANIC IN LABOUR RANKS

Finally in February Lib Dem group leader Cllr Gail Engert called for an emergency council meeting with one agenda item. She urged Labour HDV opponents to join the Lib Dems in voting the scheme down in public. This move caused panic in the Labour ranks. It was one thing to disagree in private meetings, but the prospect of an open bun-fight was too much.

Labour's HDV-opposing councillors knew that their

“Only selected cabinet members and key officers knew what was planned. Other councillors were kept in the dark”

stance was crucial to their prospects of re-election, but voting against Kober's plan and breaking the whip at the emergency meeting, could lead to suspension and de-selection.

They appealed to Labour's NEC. Jeremy Corbyn had already cautioned against Kober's scheme at Labour's

annual conference. Now the party's ruling body was being asked to mediate between factions in a local council.

By then, the HDV was close to being signed off by a dying administration. The contract setting up a new property company could bind successor councils for years, or force a costly buyout. Only the imminent judicial review ruling and Labour's NEC were standing in Kober's way.

According to the Huffington Post: "The NEC had been asked to step in, in accordance with Chapter 13, Clause XI (5) of the party rule book, which aims to 'ensure effective political management and leadership'."

One insider said the decision to effectively order a local Labour council to change policy was "unprecedented".

The NEC is understood to have been influenced by a letter from 22 local Labour councillors who urged that the party's ruling body should intervene amid fears that the policy would be difficult to stop legally.

On 23 January the NEC voted to ask Haringey to pause and accept mediation between rival Labour factions before signing off on the HDV. The date of the emergency council meeting was fast approaching. The NEC's intervention had given local opponents the freedom to face down Kober in public, potentially causing a catastrophic open split of Haringey's ruling administration, three months before local elections. This increased the pressure on Kober.

On 30 January she announced that she would stand down from the leadership and from the council in May. She toured radio and television studios, blaming sexist bullying for her decision. Harriet Harman and several Labour council leaders praised her and blamed Momentum for the crisis, ignoring the widespread opposition across the whole borough from members of the Highgate Society in the wealthier west, to scores of vulnerable tenants in the east.

On 7 February, at the Lib Dem initiated emergency council meeting, a motion to scrap the HDV was amended and neutered by the majority group who then backed the amended motion unanimously. The final decision to proceed with the HDV was to be deferred and decided by the new administration after the elections. This all but killed it. It is now almost inconceivable that it can be revived. The Lib Dem intervention had brought the matter to a head and the crisis had toppled Kober.

In the words of one Lib Dem councillor: "The biggest bully in the borough got out bullied".

Nigel Scot is a former Liberal Democrat councillor in Haringey

TORIES TURN ON CHARITIES

The Tory takeover of the Charity Commission endangers charities' work, says Liz Barker

Charities are in the firing line, again. So it is a good time to look at the problems besetting them, the reactions of political parties, and what Liberal Democrat policy should be towards this important component of a diverse, inclusive society.

Charities are under pressure to raise funds. Without the ability to raise substantial investment to develop new fundraising techniques and technology, many charities focused on refining their source of highest return – direct-mail appeals to older people with disposable income. In so doing, they breached data protection laws and the ensuing media focus has shown up failures of governance, and in the case of Oxfam poor management.

This should not be surprising. Charities are expected to deliver top performance, but without spending on administration or infrastructure. Mary Robinson, Tory MP for Cheadle recently extolled on Wonderful.org a charity fundraising outfit paid for by businessman Kieron James, and encouraged charities to cut their fundraising costs by joining similar schemes. The problem is that initiatives run on the whims of philanthropists are unsustainable and frustrate transparency of costs.

It's not that Tories don't get charities, it's just that they greatly favour some and are deeply suspicious of others.

Small local organisations, or charities which support military causes or private education are fine. Charities which work for social change, not so good. Hence in 2015 the Tories almost implemented the gag rule, a mad idea from the corporately-funded Institute of Economic Affairs which refers to charities as 'sock puppets'. Under the rule no charity which received government funding could have produced a report critical of government, even if they had sound scientific evidence.

Limited understanding of charities doesn't stop Tories trying to tame the sector. In 2012, William Shawcross was a controversial appointment as the £50,000, two days a week chair of the Charity Commission. He knew nothing about charities, as famously attested at the time by his wife.

So why was he appointed? Who knows whether his daughter being George Osborne's special advisor was a factor, but David Cameron tasked him with rooting out extremism within Muslim charities. This he did by repeatedly stating, without evidence, that Islamist terrorism was the biggest threat facing the charity sector.

Shawcross used his position to criticise charity chief executives' remuneration. He appointed as commissioners people without experience or knowledge of charities but with known links to the Conservative Party. During a period when charities were on the ropes because of the fall out from Kids Company, the commission could have said the majority of charities

were well run. More often than not, they didn't.

This year charities were looking forward to the appointment of a chair who would develop the commission as an effective regulator. So the announcement of Tina Stowell, recent Tory leader in the Lords - whose only noted involvement with charities was joining the board of Crimestoppers (set up by Tory Lord Ashcroft) in January 2108 - has been met with a mix of disbelief and anger. All the more so since rumours are circulating that National Citizenship Trust, the Cameron vanity project being funded with £1.2bn of taxpayers money, was due to appoint Stowell as chair until she jumped ship for the Charity Commission.

The charity sector needs a fully independent depoliticised regulator, to help restore confidence. Moreover it needs politicians who trust its independence, expecting the highest standards of governance and management and are prepared to invest in infrastructure and skills.

Who knows what Corbynite Labour thinks of charities? Perhaps, as in the days Ken Livingstone, docile charities which support social justice will find favour. However, it is hard to envisage a party committed to extensive renationalisation of public services having much desire to invest in partnerships with charities.

Liberal Democrats have always had a close affinity with charities and social enterprise. We share many of their aims and values, but we also realise the limitations of the state in dealing with deep seated social, economic and environmental problems. We see the necessity of going beyond a shared vision and invest in charities to enable communities to identify and tackle the problems which they experience. This is something which we did well in local government.

Following the collapse of Carillion, large scale outsourcing of public services will be subject to long overdue scrutiny. Many public service contracts were awarded because companies boasted that their scale and technology meant they could deliver more for less and they often used charities as special purpose delivery vehicles. Without the back up of experienced, technical professionals, from planners to librarians, standards have slipped to the point when a disaster - Grenfell - happened.

Now is the time for Liberal Democrats to start a discussion with the charitable sector about the role it could, and should play, in the rebuilding of resilient, inclusive communities.

We should start by considering the fundamental questions of to whom charities belong and are accountable. From there, we should look at the unique role they could play in mobilising communities of interest to bring about social, environmental and economic change. We need to start soon.

Liz Barker is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords

Equal Power: And How You Can Make It Happen

by Jo Swinson
Atlantic Books 2018

On hearing of the arrival of a new volume of 'how to' popular feminism one might be tempted to channel Brenda of Bristol on hearing about election: "another one!"

With volumes out by Harriet Harman, Shami Chakrabarti, Catherine Mayer, Jess Phillips, Laura Bates et al, Jo Swinson enters a very crowded market with her new book. Can she really have anything to add?

To be fair she doesn't just write about this stuff; she really means it. Largely ignoring the six week old baby strapped to my (very sore) front and aided and abetted by the wonderful Jenny Willott, she once nagged, cajoled, charmed and begged me to stand in a forthcoming by-election. She has probably directly encouraged hundreds of women and girls to get involved or go further in politics.

Apart from the (rightly) harrowing chapters on female genital mutilation and rape as war crime, which probably need a 15 certificate, I would happily give this book to my young daughter.

Swinson is funny and clever about male domination by default telling women to, literally, get round the table. She successfully calls out the subliminal sexist stuff we all absorb and perpetuate without meaning to. After reading her appeal for female role models I did a little tot up of the photos, pictures and books in the main room of my house. I was appalled that male faces, photos of male relatives and friends and books by male authors outnumbered the women by about four to one. It might seem a small matter but Swinson rightly points out that our daughters absorb such all pervasive dominance.

She pretty deftly negotiates 'Carrie Gracie territory' by both showing a loyalty to the organisation in which she believes and (albeit belatedly) calling it out when it messes up in its treatment of women. She has at a very tender age when, bluntly, many women are weighing up



REVIEWS

the career limiting impact of challenging sexism, had to deal with the failings of her own party at the highest level. Speaking as someone who was very critical of her around the time of the Morrissey Report (Liberator 360) I admire her admission that: "Did I [Swinson] do enough? I fear I did not... That Rennard remains in the party, showing no remorse or contrition, while many of the women involved have left, fills me with sadness and anger.

"When I hear suggestions that the women who spoke out should not be believed, or that they were somehow manipulated, it makes my bold boil. I remain deeply frustrated that a party appeals process found they had no grounds to dismiss him from the party. I do not want Lord Rennard to continue as a member of the party. As far as I am concerned he is not welcome".

Less successful is her treatment of the coalition years. At some point we need a gutsy Lib Dem critique of the coalition's policies for women. Sorry Jo, it is not just about the number of females in ministerial positions. Outcomes matter too and painful coalition outcomes like the disproportionate impact of austerity and the abolition of the Health in Pregnancy Grant hardly helped empower women.

Nevertheless the party has come a long way since Dr Elizabeth Evans' report in 2011, when fewer than 40% of Lib Dem women on the approved list would positively identify as feminist. That figure would surely be much higher now and Swinson has been a big part of a welcome change.

Recently on Lib Dem Voice there was a sincere (troll-free) discussion about whether women should really combine motherhood and candidacy. Swinson shows how reactionary such discussions are and how we should all move on to something a good deal more interesting.

Ruth Bright

Yemen in Crisis by Helen Lackner Saqi 2017 £25

The ancient Romans referred to Yemen as Arabia Felix, but there is little that is happy about the country now. Often divided in modern history, it is now in danger of total disintegration. With only very limited oil resources, it is by far the poorest country in the Middle East, and unlike the other states located in the Arabian peninsula, it has never been allowed to join the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) - though the cohesion and usefulness of the GCC itself have been undermined with the recent stand-off with Qatar.

Far more acute than the lack of oil, however, is Yemen's depleted source of water; Sana'a risks becoming the world's first capital city to run out of water completely. In rural areas that used to be fertile, subsistence agriculture is a dwindling lifestyle, as predominantly young men migrate to the cities in search of work. Such migration is of course a common feature of many developing countries, but it has been more acute in Yemen than in many other states. Moreover, the government of the late President Ali Abdullah Saleh compounded the situation by its corrupt handling of the economy, which enriched a small elite while impoverishing the masses. Hence the size and vigour of the anti-Saleh demonstrations that erupted during the 2011 so-called Arab Spring.

However, even at the height of the uprising, the situation in Yemen was never black and white. There was always a complex nexus of rivalries, based on tribal loyalties, regional variations and a certain degree of religious difference. All too often the current conflict in Yemen is over-simplified as a battle between the



Sunni-backed internationally-recognised but largely exiled government of Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi and the Shi'i-backed Huthi rebels, but as Lackner's excellent book explains with admirable clarity, Yemen's modern history is far more complex than that.

And as she points out, the military intervention of a Saudi-led coalition in 2015 turned a political and humanitarian crisis into a catastrophe. The Saudi blockade of the port of Hodeidah, for example, led to widespread malnutrition - not least among infants - that has been described by the United Nations as the most serious humanitarian crisis of our time. A major outbreak of cholera last year compounded the situation. As Lackner rightly argues, the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman probably launched the Yemen War in the hope that a quick victory would cement his rise to power. But nearly three years on, the situation is a quagmire and it is the Yemeni people who are suffering.

Lackner is the ideal guide for readers wanting to understand some of Yemen's complexities and how it has ended up in its current dire situation. She worked in the country for 15 years - largely in rural development - and has been researching it for far longer. Her love of the place and its people shines through the text, which is academically sound but totally accessible to the general reader.

I travelled widely in Yemen

myself in the 1980s and 1990s, which Lackner now sees as the good old days. Whether it will ever be possible for such a period of relative calm to return in the near future remains to be seen, but even if so, the cost of reconstruction is going to be gargantuan, as the destruction of Yemen's infrastructure and unique cultural heritage continues apace.

Jonathan Fryer

Power to the People: Confessions of a Young Liberal Activist 1975-1987 by Felix Dodds 2018

The saying goes history is written by the winners and Felix Dodds' book certainly feels like it was written by those who won. It's an entertaining read for old Young Liberal hacks like me and I commend it to you. Whether the machinations of the famous Janice Turner versus Felix election for the chair of the Young Liberals is of really any interest to anyone who wasn't there I'm not sure, but it certainly brings back memories.

Over this event I'm tempted her to draw a comparison of Felix's book to 'What Happened?' by Hilary Clinton talking about her election campaign against Trump. All that's needed to add to Felix's torrid and clearly still painful description of dirty deeds of the Felix v Janice campaign would be to alleged Russian interference and

his description would have been even more gripping than that of Hilary. Of course it being so damn long ago there we no emails to leak as they hadn't been invented. Perhaps Alan Sherwell was in fact a Russian agent? But I digress.

My abiding memory of Felix was him turning up in Youth Office like a casting reject from Che Guevara movie or the more likely the BBC's Citizen Smith complete with the Tooting Popular Front in tow.

I'm sure Felix will wince at this accusing me of judging books by their cover, but I have to say the shame is he appears to do just that in his book about the rest of us. I paraphrase, but those of us who were around were apparently of poor intellectual standing and clearly were not radical enough. It's a trait of a lot of the radical left that they are very dismissive of others who don't fit with their view of life, which is very odd given strident views about liberty.

Felix has gone on to make a very credible career of being the political fixer in the United Nations and environmental world where working with others you may not agree with is the name of the game. I'm not sure he or others around did much of that in the days of the Green Guard. I cut my political teeth on the picket lines of Torness power station in Scotland and planning to stop train lines in the north east with Sue Younger and have plenty of war stories of on the streets campaigning, but I'm not sure Felix stopped to ask.

The book does give an insight into the debates of the time and the outflanking of the party leadership over the nuclear deterrent. There's some fascinating description of the characters and events of the day. Yes, for sure as Felix says you can be a young idealistic and make a difference. Long may that continue.

The tragedy of the book is it indirectly highlights by reminiscing about gutsy radical politics not what happened then but what has happened since. Like a lot of us from that pre-merger days Felix and I left active party politics. Was that exodus why the party became unrecognisable to many of us.

Never mind green or red guards the party seemed to descend into mush. Should we or could we have stayed? Would staying have helped avoided the unedifying demise of the party into slightly better and nicer Tories than real thing. Ironically my mate Steve Hilton, over in Cameron's office, would have on many issues made the Green Guard look tame let alone compared to Clegg's Liberal Democrats.

Perhaps those of us from those times - green guard or not - should band together to work out what did happen and what can be done now.

Allan Biggar

Roots, Radicals and Rockers by Billy Bragg Faber & Faber 2017

Anyone with an interest in popular culture in the UK should read this book. If you were born in the 25 years after 1939 then this book will stir up memories of music and teenage years which had no precedent.

"No Lead Belly -- no Lonnie Donegan... No Lonnie Donegan -- no Beatles"

This paraphrase of a quote from George Harrison is explained by Bill Bragg's book.

A multi-billion pound, world-wide music industry grew out of an unexpected phenomenon in this country that was known as skiffle. The book is sub-titled 'How Skiffle Changed the World' and once you have read it you will understand why that is not an exaggerated claim.

It is also a history of a period of musical, social and political change

which was almost exclusively British despite the very close ties to roots music of the USA.

If you were not even dimly aware of the crossover between youth music and politics in the 1950s you might be intrigued to find in a book about skiffle and the playing of the tea chest bass there are the origins of CND, exiles from McCarthyism, songs from the predominantly black population of American prisons, the Notting Hill riots and the 'folk police'.

Billy Bragg is of course better known as a singer and performer in his own right. Don't be put off by any preconceptions you may have about him, his style of music or his politics.

He has put together a very accessible yet meticulously researched history of the development of skiffle, what came before and who it went on to inspire in later generations. It has obviously taken him years and has been a labour of love. A quick skim through the five pages of acknowledgements at the end reveals that he has completed face to face interviews with a list of people that reads like an encyclopaedia of late twentieth century music.

However, the fun and enjoyment to gained from reading this is enormous - especially for anyone who was lucky enough to have been alive during that time.

I knew nothing at all about the Crane River Jazz Band, even though I live just a bus ride away from the River Crane and the pub in the shadow of Heathrow Airport where trad jazz enthusiasts gathered in the early 1950s. It was a bit before my time. I was perhaps only partially aware of how skiffle developed from those beginnings and rapidly developed into a British rock 'n roll, which went on to dominate popular music all over the planet.

The links that start with scratchy 78 records of New Orleans jazz men, develop through Leadbelly, Muddy Waters, Big Bill Broonzy et al and take in Ken Colyer, Chris Barber, Acker Bilk and Wally Whyton before moving on through Donegan, skiffle competitions, Tommy Steele, the legendary 2 I's Coffee Bar, the film Expresso Bongo and the beginnings of the Marquee Club and an incredible list of people who picked up a guitar in 1957-58

in a spontaneous burst of liberation which eventually overthrew the old order of Tin Pan Alley and the musical, social and political establishment.

It was July 1957 that schoolboys calling themselves The Quarrymen Skiffle Group played their amateurish versions of Donegan's Rock Island Line, Cumberland Gap and Putting on the Style at a church fete and their 16 year old teddy boy leader called Lennon met a just-turned 15 called McCartney who could rattle out a song by Eddie Cochran on a borrowed guitar.

Read the book, hear the music in a new light.

John Tilley

Dance of the Jakaranda by Peter Kimani Telegram Books, £8.99

This novel combines the excitement of the age of steam railways with Britain's colonial history in Kenya, making it a must for Liberal Democrats.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the British built a railway from Mombasa on the Indian Ocean to Lake Victoria, via Nairobi. They enticed 30,000 men to leave India to accomplish this ambitious task. Five thousand would die in the process and 6,000 would remain in Africa, their descendants becoming the shop keepers so disliked by modern black East Africans.

The novel is told from the perspective of a Punjabi engineer, but it also follows the mis-steps of an English missionary and a colonial administrator who fails to see why the locals resent him for taking their land. Kimani's prose is a pleasure to read, with beautifully observed word paintings sprinkled throughout the text. Yet he avoids pretentiousness, keeping the action moving along. Nor does he hide the gross entitlement and corruption of the African elite who would replace the entitled and corrupt British administrators at independence. The origins of Kenya's current problems are made obvious. Because this is an authentic African novel, however, the female characters reflect the continuing low status of women there. Don't expect a happy ending.

Rebecca Tinsley

Monday

The snow has drifted high against the hedges and no traffic can reach the village, let alone tackle the drive to the Hall. If it weren't for the secret passage that comes out in the cellar of the Bonkers' Arms, I would feel quite isolated. My fellow drinkers tell me this spell of hard weather is being called "The Beast from the East," which reminds me of our own Liberal Democrats' leadership contest in 2015. When Farron failed to give me assurances that he would

not rip the pews out of St Asquith's and make everybody sing "Shine, Jesus, Shine," I threw my weight behind Norman Lamb. "What you need," I told him, "is a good nickname. Why, it was when I christened Sugar Ray Michie 'the Brute from Bute' that she began to get title fights at the Empire Pool, Wembley, and it was the fame those won her that got her elected to Parliament." So it was that I came up with 'The Beast from the East.' Sadly, he ignored my advice and chose to run under the slogan "Vote Lib Dem and we'll let you top yourself." While this undoubtedly had some appeal to exhausted canvassers, it did not prove sufficient to swing the party behind him.

Tuesday

You may have heard of Cheddar Man, but hereabouts we were very excited by the discovery of Stilton Man. The boffins from the University of Rutland at Belvoir soon demonstrated that he had prominent blue veins and an impressive moustache not unlike my own. The family legend has always been that my De Bon Coeur ancestors came over with the Conqueror (some versions maintain that they were obliged to go back shortly afterwards), but could this be evidence that we Bonkers have been in Rutland since the year dot? I would like to think so.

Wednesday

I am no great lover of the Today programme as it can be Terribly Unfair. Only the other day I was given a hard time over the travails of my Rutland Fried Chicken empire, and a few weeks before that is was my cryptocurrency Rutcoin that attracted their scorn. I also found it disconcerting that, halfway through my interview with an irascible Welshman (who, if I might say, was Getting On A Bit), a member of the production team came in, pulled out the waistband and stuffed handful of used tenners down his trousers. (When I asked afterwards I was told the fellow is on so much they have to do this every 20 minutes or he will not get his full salary.)

All this is by way of explaining why I cheered so loudly when I heard our own Jo 'Gloria' Swinson give the same presenter both barrels over the question of equal pay. It seems, moreover, that I was not the only one. This lunchtime the thaw had set in, so I risked the overground route to the village. Passing the school playground I found the children engaged in a game of "Humphrys and Swinson" – one child would ask the others a long question, interrupt them as soon as they began to answer and have a mound of snow dumped on his head. It looked great fun so I joined in.

So I won't hear a word against Jo Swanson, not even after the Lib Dem Pint do at the Bonkers' Arms when she tried to persuade the assembled company to eschew their normal Smithson & Greaves Northern Bitter and drink carrot juice instead because it was more inclusive. Good on you, E.W.!

Lord Bonkers' Diary

Thursday

M. Farage, the funny little Frenchman who leads the Ukip Party from time to time, has long had his heart set on a career in American television. One of my agents across the pond has sent me a cine film of his latest attempt to break into this competitive world, so this afternoon I have the projector set up and the blinds drawn in the Library so I can watch it – Cook kindly contributes some popcorn to the occasion. What I saw was M. Farage wearing a green Lycra body suit and

flippers standing beside a weather map of South Dakota. Whenever the young lady giving the forecast mentioned rain, he had to break into a dance, and if the station bosses did not think him enthusiastic enough they would poke him with a cattle prod crying "Dance, Frog Man, dance." I ask my agent if M. Farage does not feel a little humiliated by this. "Oh no," she replies, "he is delighted to have broken into television."

Friday

Plans for this summer's gay conversion camps here at the Hall are in hand. I know these are a controversial idea, but it would take a heart of stone not to help the parents who come to me. "We've tried everything," they sob, "bought him Doris Day records, but he is just not interested." This summer I have decided the students will camp, and I use the word advisedly, by the lake.

Then there is the fixture list for my XI this summer. Among our regular matches against the MCC, Mebyon Kernow and the Elves of Rockingham Forest, I am pleased to see a number of new names. Notable among them, all the way from China, is Mr Xi's XI.

Saturday

When Corbyn was elected leader of the Labour Party I naturally stationed gamekeepers armed with orchard doughties at the lodge gates lest he try to claim my estate in the name of the people. However, news reaches me from the Commons that, far from leading a Bolshevik uprising, he is hand in glove with the Conservatives. For Tory MPs have taken to calling him 'Pop'. "What do you think of foreigners, Pop?" they cluster round to ask, whereupon Corbyn grimaces, shakes his fist and goes "Foreigners? Grrr!" How the Tories clap and cheer! The hilarity continues until a division is called upon some bill to do with Europe, whereupon Corbyn takes Jacob Rees-Mogg's hand and allows himself to be led through the government lobby. I think I shall stand down my gamekeepers.

Sunday

There are those (it is hard to credit) to whom not every Liberal Democrat MP is a household name, so let me give you a few notes upon the slightly less famous ones. Wera Hobhouse is heir to the family fortune, which is founded on sales of her uncle L.T.'s 'Liberalism'. Christine Jardine I have found to be a fierce competitor. She once took over the captaincy of my XI when Mike Brearley was called away to conduct an urgent session of psychoanalysis, whereupon she packed the legside field and ordered our fastest bowler to let the batsmen have a barrage of snoot-high deliveries. Jamie Stone is believed to be well thought of in Golspie.

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