

liberator



- 🍷* Liberator at 50 - special historic section
- 🍷* What the general election numbers mean - Michael Steed
- 🍷* Runners and Riders for next leader

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COMMENTARY

BIRTHDAY WISHES

Liberator is 50 years and 400 issues old and we've an anniversary surprise that marks a radical departure from the past for us (see page five).

This issue deals with current topics but also includes a look back at how Liberator has been produced over those decades and some of what it has published. Going through back issues can induce an unwelcome sense of déjà vu - in particular as writers struggled with the unresolved problem of how and why the party should stress liberalism rather than seek transient wheezes to win. For those interested the more recent Liberator from 2001 onwards are available on our website.

Current events though crowd in with the coronavirus outbreak causing havoc with - most importantly - death and illness, but also with the political timetable and activity.

At the time of writing the May local elections have been postponed, the Lib Dem conference in York had been cancelled and it was unclear what would happen with the party leadership election, which although conducted online and by post normally involves hustings meetings to question candidates.

Given this will eventually go ahead, one question that readers might wish to put to whoever stands is whether they think the geographical areas and demographics the party has lost can be recovered or whether those it has newly won compensate enough.

As Michael Steed's detailed analysis of the results in this issue suggests, the west country is now a Lib Dem-free zone apart from Bath at parliamentary level, and the liberal tradition in the Pennines looks in poor shape. By contrast the position in and around London and university towns looks somewhat encouraging.

Political parties do change shape. In the past there have been Liberal fiefdoms in rural west Wales - almost all now gone - Conservative administrations in northern cities and indeed 40-odd Labour MPs in safe Scottish seats.

Of course it is not desirable to lose any base of support, but it happens as voters' priorities and party positions change. Successful parties comprise coalitions of different, even conflicting, groups of voters and stay in business by keeping these on board by offering each enough to want to stay.

There are times though, and Brexit may have been one of them, when this can no longer be done because the compromises involved have stretched to breaking point.

At the recent general election the Lib Dems, for example, struggled to appeal to Brexit supporters in the south west (where there were too few Remain supporters to win from) while successfully appealing to Remain supporters in places where few voted Leave.

This has provoked a flurry of postings on Liberal Democrat Voice and elsewhere to the effect that the party cannot possibly hold position X in case it only appeals to voter group Y and so alienates Z, and therefore it must try never to offend anyone but somehow magically take positions that appeal to voters with fundamentally different opinions in their 'drawbridge down versus drawbridge up' view of the world.

It's one thing being a broad church, but quite another being an open-air one. There have to be some 'walls' - limits on who the party appeals to - or it will appeal to no-one.

One thing the party should have learnt by now is that going back to the 'we can win everywhere' approach is a recipe for relying on transient support that has to be won afresh at each election because it does not involve political commitment to the party in the way that the Conservatives and Labour still enjoy the automatic loyalty of those who see them as defenders of their interests.

Another factor for voters in the Lib Dem leadership contest to bear in mind is how the public are likely to see the eventual winner.

Probably not even her most dedicated internal detractors expected Jo Swinson to perform as poorly as she did in the general election campaign - compounded by losing her own seat - let alone that she would prove unpopular with voters. Having a female leader is laudable, but it's now clear that it matters a lot who that female is.

Failure to engage the public is not though a matter of gender. Apart from the brief flaring of Cleggmania, Nick Clegg was neither very popular or much respected either before or after that event. Tim Farron did little better with voters, Ming Campbell's performance as leader was so ineffectual that the other MPs rapidly ousted him (Liberator 322).

Leaders can be people who command public respect (Paddy Ashdown, Vince Cable, or going back a long way Jo Grimond) or who simply appear likeable (Charles Kennedy, and Jeremy Thorpe prior to his canine entanglements). What they cannot be is neither liked nor respected.

Liberator offers a guide to the Runners and Riders for leader in this issue - since whenever the leadership election occurs the same 11 people are eligible to stand - and when it does come will send our traditional questionnaire to those who stand, while Liberator will as usual remain neutral.

RADICAL BULLETIN

COMING INTO FOCUS

Baroness Thornhill's review of the general election fiasco is in progress, aided by copies of *Liberator* 399 which - slightly surprisingly - *Liberator* was asked by another peer to supply to her team so members could read the critiques of the campaign in it.

Although Thornhill is still to report the anecdotal evidence has already piled in many corners of the party.

It comes down to:

- * it bordered on insanity to run a personality-based campaign around a leader hardly anyone had heard of
- * the 'revoke' policy, even if one supported it, required too much doorstep explanation to work
- * the centrally produced literature was poor, repetitive, ignored non-Brexit issues and carpet bombed voters' doormats without linkage to what local parties were doing
- * hardly anyone who worked in party headquarters appears to have known who was really in charge of the campaign
- * whoever was in charge believed the polls they wanted to and ignored data that pointed towards what actually happened.

Since the election, campaigns director Shaun Roberts has gone voluntarily but his position must have become difficult, while the collection of peers who boasted of being part of Jo Swinson's inner circle during the election now pretend they scarcely even knew her.

Thornhill's team appeared mercifully free of usual suspects and took on board suggestions that it should include someone from a sister party who could look at what happened without having been involved, in this case Annelou Van Egmond from the Netherlands' D66.

Another choice that appeared uncontroversial was Sara Bedford, long-serving leader of Three Rivers District Council in Hertfordshire.

This though led to an attack at the Federal Board from Jo Hayes - chair of the eastern region, which covers Hertfordshire - who said Bedford was concerned only with local politics and not national matters.

Other FB members were unmoved, but this must make for some interesting regional meetings.

TEN'S A CROWD

Some Lib Dem members - including female ones - have been left less than impressed with the selection of '10 Awesome Lib Dem Women' issued to mark International Women's Day.

These were: former leader Jo Swinson; former

president Sal Brinton; peer and former MP Lynne Featherstone; campaign manager and agent Candy Piercy; deputy chief executive Emma Cherniavsky; London mayoral candidate Siobhan Bonita; vice-president Isabelle Pasaram; former MEP Shiela Ritchie; Wales education minister Kirsty Williams; Tara Copeland, chair of the Young Liberals.

Nothing wrong with any of those, though it was left unsaid what anyone outside the party was supposed to deduce from this list.

There were though no council leaders - indeed no incumbent councillor - and no out lesbian or bisexual woman.

Some descriptions were a bit economical too. Swinson's said she "showed grit and determination to win back her seat in 2017. We look forward to seeing what she does next", while omitting to say that she lost it in 2019, while Copeland's entry only got around to mentioning her YL position after a long exposition of her education.

Those aggrieved by both exclusions and inclusions have searched in vain for who was responsible for picking the 10. Nobody is owning up.

HISTORY LESSONS

With Ed Davey, Layla Moran, Wera Hobhouse, possibly Daisy Cooper and maybe others are likely to vie for the Lib Dem leadership thoughts will turn to the equivalent contest in 1999 the last time there was such a crowded field.

Paddy Ashdown had stood down and Charles Kennedy, Simon Hughes, Malcolm Bruce, Jackie Ballard and David Rendel, all stood to replace him, while Nick Harvey and Don Foster both had embryonic campaigns but ultimately decided not to run.

The result was a five-way contest in which Kennedy adopted a campaign tone of studied blandness (*Liberator* 261) while Hughes got closer than many expected though his campaign got off to slow start.

Ballard, an MP for only two years, offended some constituents by seeking the leadership so early - and so having less time for her new Taunton seat - and was defeated at the 2001 general election.

Rendel's campaign gained him respect little traction but Bruce unexpected prospered and ran third.

It took four rounds of eliminations of the lowest candidate before Kennedy beat Hughes by 28,425 to 21,833.

Thoughts may also turn to what would have been the last three-way contest in 2007. This was ultimately between Nick Clegg and Chris Huhne and in the end Clegg won only by 20,988 to 20,477 amid mutterings never fully resolved about postal vote delays.

There would have been a third candidate, Winchester MP Mark Oaten, but a newspaper exposure of his unusual hobby put paid to that.

SURPLUS VALUE

Despite the financial loss from the cancellation of the York spring conference due to coronavirus, the Lib Dems are still in the unaccustomed position of being fairly flush with cash because of the amount raised in the general election.

A sum not unadjacent to £3m is left over and it's been decided to use this for 'special projects rather than day-to-day spending.

This seems sensible, though which projects and how they will be chosen remains to be seen.

It is a moot point how much more might there now be in the coffers had not so much been wasted on the dire direct mail literature sent out from HQ during the election.

One possibility is that once the albatross of the Great George Street headquarters is removed the party will get into property.

Great George Street was leased after the party moved out of the imposing but expensive ex-SDP headquarters at Cowley Street, but it is understood to be due for renovation its landlord did not want any incumbent to leave early - since they could not easily be replaced - and so the party has been stuck with prohibitive costs unless it stays until lease ends.

After that it's possible the idea of moving some 'back office' functions out of expensive central London accommodation will be revived, leaving a smaller operation of things that have to be near parliament, and even then those could be over the bridge in the less fashionable environs of Vauxhall.

The election treasure chest means though the party might buy property somewhere to provide an asset and income instead of being at the mercy of leases.

WE DON'T WANT TO LOSE YOU...

It's rare for any Lib Dem officer to go after only a year but that has been the fate of Paul Hienkens, who was chair of the regional parties committee.

This innocuously-named body was the committee responsible for disciplinary matters before the new machinery was introduced and has a pile of residual cases that occurred before that with which to deal.

Things were slow enough in the past under Margaret Joachim but ground more or less to a halt in the past year leading to members deciding they could bear Hienkens' departure with fortitude.

NOT ME TOO

Lib Dem members at the Western Counties and Devon & Cornwall joint conference were startled by an incident when Gavin Grant, chair of the former region, was interviewing then-MEP Caroline Voaden on stage as part of the main agenda.

He asked her why she got involved in politics, as she only joined the party in 2016. Voaden replied to the effect that she was someone who couldn't say "no". Grant responded, to mixed laughs and groans: "My room is number 56."

ALL GOOD THINGS COME TO AN END

You'll soon be seeing Liberator only as a free PDF, not in print. Here, the Liberator Collective explains why, and how this will work

Liberator is 400 issues and 50 years old, milestones that few - least of those all involved - ever imagined it would reach.

And since we're supposed to be radicals we're marking this with a radical change.

From September, Liberator will be a free online only publication. This has not been forced on us by a lack of subscribers or content but rather is a step we've decided on and planned because the model of selling face-to-face at Lib Dem conferences no longer works.

Few conference-goers - and even fewer new members - visit the obscurely located exhibition areas used at the party's main conference venue, and stalls at regional events have never been economic.

We're very grateful for the support of longstanding subscribers, but Liberator clearly ought to be reaching a lot more Lib Dems (and others interested) than it does, but it can't as long as it remains a subscription publication.

There's another reason too. Maintaining and administering a subscription list and payments, and coping with a large volume of small financial transactions generates a huge administrative burden. We'd be unlikely to find anyone to do this if those now involved wished to stop.

Liberators 401 and 402 will appear in print between now and the end of July, which will exhaust most people's subscriptions.

If you pay us by bank standing order or PayPal, please cancel these, as arranging refunds would be complicated for our volunteer administrators.

Then in September, Liberator 403 will appear online only. As a PDF you can download it to read on any device you like, or print out all or part for your own use, and freely forward the PDF to anyone interested.

Those already on our email list will be sent notifications when each new online issue is available.

If you think you might not be on this list but would like to be, please send your address to: liberatorsubs@hotmail.com

We'll still be covering the main debates around liberal politics and the goings-on of the Liberal Democrats and we'll still have a stall at conference - at least for the foreseeable future - to promote the online version and sell the Liberator Songbook.

Going online gives us the opportunity to try a few things out being no longer tied to multiples of eight print pages, a bi-monthly format or articles that fit neatly on one or two pages.

Both longer and shorter pieces and more frequent but smaller issues are possible, but we're going to take this one step at a time and see what works.

As Liberator enters its second half century this is going to be an interesting journey. We hope you'll come with us.

RUNNERS AND RIDERS

Liberator offers a look at Lib Dem leadership contenders

At the time of writing, the UK is grappling with a pandemic with no end in sight. The leadership election is due to kick off on 11 May but will anyone care what's going on in the Lib Dems in the middle of such a crisis? It may seem self-indulgent of the party to go ahead with the current timetable.

That said, whenever it takes place, there is a leadership election on the horizon. Here's Liberator's take on the possible runners and riders. It looks likely to be a diverse field that includes established figures and new faces. Hopefuls are expected to include a former minister keen to defend the party's coalition record and those who want to make a clean break with coalition or actively opposed it.



ALASTAIR CARMICHAEL

Carmichael has the credibility and experience to run for leader and holds one of the safest seats compared to other possible contenders. Regarded as a safe pair of hands, but he isn't expected to seek the nomination. He hosts the regular whisky tasting at conference and is popular on social media where he can be found sharing banter with members on a regular basis. Perhaps he knows the party too well to want to try and lead it!

Achilles heel: His judgement has been called into question after some of the defections he helped orchestrate as chief whip last summer didn't all go to plan.



WENDY CHAMBERLAIN

First elected in December 2019, the new MP for North East Fife has expressed no interest in the top job. Nonetheless, her contributions have been solid

and as a former police officer, her backstory is one the public can relate to should she have leadership ambitions in the future. One to watch.

Achilles heel: New to Parliament, not yet widely known.



DAISY COOPER

A long-standing party activist, the newly elected MP for St Albans is rumoured to be thinking of throwing her hat into the ring. She will appeal to coalition critics as she actively campaigned against several coalition policies at the time. She also impressed some with her 2014 bid for party president. Her status as a newbie MP may be a blessing and a curse - some will see her as the dynamic fresh face the party needs, but she may be too new (and too dynamic) for others.

Achilles heel: Still establishing herself as a new MP.



SIR ED DAVEY

Stood unsuccessfully against Jo Swinson so could be the only MP in any party to stand for leader twice in a year. MP for 23 years (with a short break), the former energy secretary carries Coalition baggage. He's currently doing the job on an interim basis and while he hasn't bombed, he will be disappointed by his lack of traction. This looks like his last chance for a shot at the permanent post.

Achilles heel: Not having the public impact he'd like as interim leader (sorry, co-leader).



TIM FARRON

Having stepped down as leader after the 2017 general election, Farron has unsurprisingly ruled himself out of this race. The MP for Westmorland and Lonsdale remains a committed campaigner and still delivers a tub-thumping performance when asked.

Achilles heel: Been there, done that; thought it was a Sin.



WERA HOBHOUSE

The MP for Bath since 2017 was the first to announce her leadership bid. A former Tory councillor, Hobhouse criticises the 2019 election campaign for not attacking the Tories enough and rejects the coalition years. She says the party must continue to advocate for membership of the EU and hints that under her leadership we would be the party of rejoin.

Achilles heel: Seen as an outlier unlikely to win by the media, Members may think noticeable German accent a disadvantage with the public.



CHRISTINE JARDINE

First elected for Edinburgh West in 2017, the former journalist and broadcaster is understood to be considering a shot at the leadership. Jardine does have her admirers, but any serious contender status is weakened by her unsuccessful bid for party president a few short months ago.

Achilles heel: Credibility deficit having failed to beat Mark Pack for party president with the same electorate.



LAYLA MORAN

Untainted by coalition, some commentators regard Moran as the front runner. The former teacher will score top marks with some for her criticism of the 2019 general election campaign, saying the 'revoke' policy was "arrogant" and pitching Jo Swinson as a potential prime minister a "mistake". The MP for Oxford West and Abingdon, first elected in 2017, has said climate change and electoral reform would be high on her agenda.

Achilles heel: Untested, and outside her education brief she is still an unknown quantity. Revelations about assaulting a previous partner will also be a concern.



SARAH OLNEY

Re-elected as the MP for Richmond Park, Olney has not expressed an interest in the leadership. She may be focussing on establishing herself as a constituency MP after narrowly losing the seat just six months after her famous by-election win in December 2016.

Achilles heel: Members may be wary of a candidate who had to be dragged off air by a press officer after drying up in a radio interview.



JAMIE STONE

Oh no he isn't! The MP for Caithness and Sutherland since 2017 is not expected to stand for the leadership. He has a long record as a local councillor and still performs as a pantomime dame. Sadly, he is the MP most of us forget.

Achilles heel: Nobody knows who he is.

continued on Page 45...

NEVER WASTE A CRISIS

Be very afraid, even when coronavirus is over, about what the government will seize the opportunity to do, says Tony Greaves

It seems to have been Nicollo Machiavelli who first said: “Never let a good crisis go to waste.” Or perhaps Boris Johnson prefers the Winston Churchill version. I don’t know whether Dominic Cummings ever says these words but he has been described often enough as a proponent of chaos theory and the shock doctrine – a ‘political anarchist’, ‘steely ideologue’ and ‘single-minded insurgent’ wrote Jenni Russell in the New York Times. The Covid-19 crisis must seem to Cummings like manna from heaven.

If you are locked up or down at present and wondering what to do I recommend you dig out that dusty copy of *The Shock Doctrine – The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, published by Naomi Klein in 2007, that you never got round to reading at the time.

As I write both Cummings and his mate Michael Gove seem to be out of the limelight and leaving the crisis to the ever bumbling prime minister, rising man of the moment Chancellor Rishi Sunak, and their newly acquired expert friends. I have little doubt that along with some of the brighter members of the pack and the odd freak and weirdo they will be thinking hard about the end game. They won’t be thinking of reinstating the status quo ante in their brave new post-liberal world.

OVERLAPPING CRISES

We are cursed to live in a period of extraordinary overlapping major crises. Some such as the 2008 financial crash and the coronavirus pandemic bounced upon us almost without warning (though not without prediction by some people). Others such as austerity and Brexit were deliberately generated by governments or by campaigners. But they all have the effect of taking government at all levels by surprise and forcing it to take actions that had not been foreseen or planned or indeed welcomed.

They all cause disruption to governance, to politics, to economies, to societies and to people in their lives and the way they regard the world. Governments usually try to stop the worst, then to adapt to and mitigate them, but the aftermath is rarely business and life as usual. What Klein famously set out was how right-wing governments and global and American corporate bodies had since the early 1970s used such crises to entrench their power and wealth at the expense of the mass of people, at first by taking advantage of economic crises and even, later, by causing them.

Shocks can be at any scale but the last four really big recent ones have been usefully strung together by TruePublica as ABCD. First the financial collapse in the late 2000s which resulted in ten years of austerity. Let us be clear that while the crash itself was a major crisis, the subsequent policies which have held back economies and personal incomes and life

qualities (particularly of the poorest quarter – and not least in killing many more people than will be killed by Covid-19) undermined public services and local democracy and severely reduced people’s support for politicians and the political system, and constitute a major crisis in themselves.

Brexit was a result both of the weakening of governmental and democratic structures in this country and of many people’s sense of well-being, and of a determined and competently run campaign against the ‘establishment’ led by Cummings and his funders and self-promoters. It was made possible by the country still being in the shock of austerity; it was in itself a new disruptive trauma. Businesses large and small were thrown into a state of confusion while politics seemed unable to function in any coherent way.

You could argue that ‘C’ should be the massive 80-seat Conservative majority that followed from austerity and Brexit but it is of course Covid-19. We must assume that Cummings and Co are as horrified as the rest of us, but the opportunity presented to them is enormous. The two major wars in the 20th century, and the Spanish flu pandemic that followed hot on the heels of the first, were bigger, and probably the 1929 Crash and its aftermath during the Depression. But there’s been nothing to match Coronavirus since 1945.

With the country rocked back on its heels, the people in a state of bewilderment and practical confusion, the economy falling back to unknown depths, normal social networks in a state of collapse, and the Government introducing astonishing measures almost by the day – this is shock and disruption on a massive scale.

We’ve no idea when it will end or what the effects will be. The Government has for the moment forgotten that money is, supposedly, a finite commodity. Apart from the money they are effectively printing by a new wave of quantitative easing, there will be a huge new mountain of public debt. The national debt seems certain to be more than GDP, something that was previously thought to be suicidal.

So what will the post-Covid world look like? That depends a lot on who is planning it, if anyone. Of course the government may just continue to drift from day to day and month by month. And hope that when the virus goes away things will work out all right. We can guess this would be the Johnsonian way. Other people (more sedulous than Johnson himself) may have other ideas.

The Shock Doctrine starts with the floods in New Orleans in 2005 and a quote from no less a figure than Milton Friedman, the patron saint of the radical small-state free-market right: “Most New Orleans schools are in ruins as are the homes of the children who attended them...This is a tragedy. It is also an opportunity to radically reform the education system.” Which they did, changing a mainly public (ie state) school system

to one of charter schools – rather like academies but commercial in nature.

The rest of the book covers nearly 40 years of change, from Latin American counter-revolutions to the fall of the Berlin Wall, from Russia itself and the rise of oligarchy capitalism to the collapse of the Asian tiger economies and Bush's war on terror.

In all these and many more the disorientating aftermath of major shocks and system collapses are exploited by right wing politicians in cahoots with rich and powerful corporate bosses to produce radical change – massive privatisations in dodgy circumstances, the dismantling of social welfare systems, undermining of liberal democracy (free parliaments and independent judiciaries) and the appearance of strong unaccountable leaders (what in Europe people now call illiberal democracy), enrichment of powerful businessmen and hugely favourable contracts to large often American companies.

All this was in the context of an enfeebled state and over-indebted banks, with the big private companies galloping in to provide the intellectually credible solutions of the Chicago School, and shock therapies to reconstruct broken economies on their terms. And so the disaster capitalism complex rises from the crisis in an environment of “creative destruction”. Hmm – where have we heard that phrase recently?

In particular the revolutionaries in the Government may want to seize the moment. With a Parliament that not only has an 80-seat Tory majority in the Commons but along with the whole system of governance is operationally debilitated by Covid-19, a Lords that is half-functioning, an opposition with a new leader that can do no more than try to react, and a media still looking the other way at Covid and its immediate practical consequences – factories closing, firms going bust, traders going bankrupt and high streets emptying of shops, pubs and trade, sport slowly creeping back – the field will be clear for ministers and their advisers with clear agendas.

There are such people around. Apart from Gove and Cummings there are others who may be less aggressive in intent but who are on the record with views that are not much different from those of Friedman. You may find another dusty old paperback from 2012. *Britannia Unchained* is a slim volume written by a cabal of young and pushy Tory MPs – three of whom are now in Johnson's cabinet including two with top jobs. Priti Patel (for it is she) and Dominic Raab, together with the ever willing Liz Truss; plus middle-ranking business minister Kwasi Kwarteng, and Chris Skidmore who Johnson hired then sacked.

Most people have never noticed anything beyond the much quoted intro to the chapter on work ethic which states that in the workplace “the British are among the worst idlers in the world.” But the whole book is a mixture of random anecdotes, cod history and geography, and hard right free market policies. I am not aware that they have repudiated any of this stuff.

“the revolutionaries in the Government may want to seize the moment”

EYEBROWS ALOFT

Yet surely – as various contributors to the *New Statesman* have taken to noting with eyebrows aloft – with the Sunak/Johnson policies in the budget, the wonders of the following week, and more by the day before this article appears in print – surely we have a new

wave of Tories churning out crisis laden policies more socialist than Kinnock, Miliband and even Corbyn ever dared to dream about? Well, so were Churchill's policies during the war. A crisis is a crisis and needs must, and even Milton Friedman invented the idea of helicopter money.

Others write in hope that post-Covid capitalism may be milder and more rational, and more citizen-based. And so Mariana Mazzucata (economics professor at UCL) writing in the *Guardian* wants to use the crisis to do capitalism differently. Governments to invest in institutions that help to prevent crises; to better co-ordinate research and development; to invest to steer innovation to public goals; to set up public-private partnerships to ensure that citizens benefit not just the corporations; and to attach public benefit conditions when companies come for bail-outs as in 2008.

All sound and sensible, but who in government today will think this way? Klein on the other hand sees the state and public realm as “the new colonial frontier” available to be seized by a corrupt alliance of top politicians and capitalist corporations. “Since the most significant privatisation deals are always signed amidst the tumult of an economic or political crisis, clear laws or effective regulators are never in place. The atmosphere is chaotic, the prices are flexible and so are the politicians.”

Friedman again, from 1982: “Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.” The point is that they will be able to do whatever they want. Here are a few thoughts. The NHS for sale. Corporatisation of social care. Dismantling of democratic local government. Human and civil rights. No Deal Brexit. An awful US trade deal. Emasculate the Lords and judges. Schools - 100% academies and turn MATs into commercial bodies. Effectively close down planning (including powers to force through big infrastructure projects in quick time). Scrap lots of environmental laws. Massive new programme of austerity. Close the BBC and Channel 4. You can probably think of lots more – they won't do them all but they don't need to!

Be afraid. Watch them like a hawk. Read the books. Then be even more afraid.

Tony Greaves is a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords and has been a Liberal Councillor in Lancashire for almost 50 years

GET LIBERALISM DONE

The answers to the Liberal Democrats' plight can all be found in the party's constitutional preamble, if only it would act on them, says Adrian Sanders

It's over, finished, done, our membership of the EU has ceased to be.

The Withdrawal Bill is now an Act and at 11pm on Friday 31 January our membership of the institutions of the European Union was terminated.

This is very sad for our wonderful team of MEPs and their staff, it's heart-breaking for those who support the idea of ever closer union, and very worrying for anyone concerned that the uncertainties of the future are going to harm our country, economy and standing in the world.

Dwelling on what might have been has become something of a preoccupation for many Liberal Democrats, myself included. I won't forget where I believe responsibility lies for our and the nation's current predicament.

Sir Nick Clegg and his advisors were directly answerable for losing so many seats in 2015 that handed Cameron a majority that enabled him to hold the EU referendum.

GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

Brexit gives many of us a chance to close one very disappointing and depressing chapter and to open a new, positive one. It is a golden opportunity for all of us to realign both our purpose and our image. If anyone is in any doubt as to why this is necessary just look at where we were before the 2010 general election and compare to today.

Alongside the loss of thousands of councillors and political control over billions of pounds of national, regional and local government spending, losing our place as the third party in the Commons cannot be understated.

We have not overcome the loss of house privileges, media coverage and money that came with it, and our ability to do so has been hindered by competition from other parties such as the Greens, Ukip/Brexit, and Independents as well as the Scottish Nationalists, who became the third party in 2015 and have held on to it.

We have been defined by the coalition years and our opposition to Brexit to the exclusion of all else for far too long. The time has come, to coin a previous slogan – for one more heave, to remember another - to get Liberalism done.

Getting something done is what political movements that are not content with the status quo do.

It was a Conservative Party that promised change at the last election, with our party, the supposed vehicle for radical reform, wanting to keep things as they were against the mood of the nation as expressed in a referendum. Since the referendum we have been seen to blame the voters for the result and to compound this by appearing to want to change what they had voted for at the general election.

No amount of explaining the basics of democracy and

how Governments work could trump public perception that we didn't care about their vote, the one tiny bit of power millions of people can exercise however they wish.

We need to own up to having misdirected tactical voters in 2010 and failed to reward them with a proportional voting system for 2015. We should accept that the public were not wrong in voting to leave after we had failed to correct the misrepresentation of the EU over five decades, and were hopeless in challenging the emotional arguments for Brexit with our over-the-top projections of Armageddon the day after the vote.

Few campaigned using the political and emotional reasons for an ever-closer union with our nearest neighbours, namely, peace, security and prosperity.

What frustrates me most is that we seem to have forgotten whom we were before 2010. I recall a growing political movement with a preamble to our constitution that contained a wish-list of all the reforms we would wish to see to get Liberalism done.

Our preamble starts with the eradication of poverty as the first action point in the first paragraph. What more could you want to attract public support than a primary purpose to ensure none are enslaved by poverty.?

It doesn't end there, we also don't want anyone to be enslaved by ignorance, or conformity either.

We can even point out that while we couldn't enact our whole manifesto in coalition and sadly supported measures we now regret, we did follow our beliefs. To tackle poverty and mitigate the Tories austerity programme, we took the lowest paid out of tax altogether. To counter the cut to school budgets we introduced the pupil premium to help the poorest and potentially most disadvantaged. And, what better way to address conformity than to allow people to marry whom they are in love with regardless of gender?

We have a most attractive offer for the electorate across every nation and region and it's all laid out in our preamble with its aim to spread power, save the planet and create prosperity for all. When did you last put that on a piece of paper and stuff it through a letterbox?

The first of the five preamble paragraphs also commits us to build and safeguard a fair, free and open society.

Paragraph two covers our commitment to the planet, to peace, human rights and to reforming how and we govern ourselves.

The third is about creating prosperity and using the state to ensure markets operate freely.

In paragraph four is our commitment to property ownership, a fair distribution of wealth and responsive public services.

It is only when we get to the fifth and final one where our internationalism is promoted with an

acknowledgement that we have to set aside national sovereignty when necessary, that we find a mention of the European Community.

All five paragraphs are vital to understanding who we are and what we stand for. In recent years we have failed to communicate our story and purpose beyond Britain's relationship with the EU, and in that we failed.

We have to rebuild trust that we will not take votes for granted and use them against the wishes of those who lent them to us. We won't enter a coalition without clear rewards for those who gave us that opportunity. We will be a progressive force for change and not a defender of the status quo and we will always respect the ballot box.

We need to remember how we used to campaign on the issues that most affected peoples' lives when they were consistent with the values and principles laid down in our constitution.

New technologies and platforms of communication have not substituted the need for 'Focus' newsletters and constituency wide newspapers, they have added to the number of ways we can and must communicate our message.

Far from making our task easier, social media and broadcast technology has simply added to the number of things we have to do on top of the basics. It is much harder to win a constituency or district-wide local election as a Liberal Democrat today than it was 30 or 40 years ago. Harder still, in the majority of constituencies we once held that voted leave and now have Conservative MPs with record breaking majorities.

THE HARDER THEY FALL

This can change. Liberal and Liberal Democrat community campaigners have proven time and again that the bigger they are the harder they fall, but we need to learn some lessons and change.

Over 40 years of political activism in the seat I was born in I have identified four distinct groups that made up our vote. It was a seat the Conservatives had held for 73 years before we won by just 12 votes in 1997 in the first of four consecutive victories.

The first group are traditional Liberal voters whose numbers are small in Torbay by west country standards as a consequence of the constituency being populated largely by people who moved there from other areas and for being urban rather than rural. But even the smallest Liberal vote is a base to build from.

The second group are the protest voters we have attracted in the past for being different from the other parties in their pursuit of power.

The third group are the tactical voters who when they support us can help defeat the party they like the least. Their vote is vital in making the difference between winning and losing but it needs to be handled with care nationally. At the last election our simplistic national tactical voting message when Labour's leader had a record low poll rating encouraged some voters to back the Tories fearing we could give Jeremy Corbyn the keys to number 10.

“We have been defined by the coalition years and our opposition to Brexit to the exclusion of all else for far too long”

It is the fourth group that is the most important to our growth, credibility and success, and they are ultimately the most loyal. These are the voters won over by our party and its candidates for being on their side. People helped through casework, people we worked alongside on campaigns, people who got involved in campaigns we instigated or ran.

There was no great swing in Torbay in 2015 from the Liberal

Democrats to the Tories yet our majority of just over 4,000 was turned into a 3,500 Tory one. The Tory vote in 2015 was just 500 votes higher than in 2010.

A thousand fewer people voted in the election. The Greens gained a thousand votes while Labour's candidate also attracted an additional 1,000. It was the loss of 3,500 votes to Ukip that did for us.

Some voters said on the doorstep they couldn't vote for us because of our very vocal stance on the EU in a seat where over six out of ten electors the following year voted to leave. For others it was a protest vote against the party's broken promises, even though I personally voted against tuition fees, NHS reforms and welfare changes. These were people who could not bring themselves to vote Conservative, but they couldn't support us again either.

Having lost some of our traditional voters, most of our tactical voters and thousands of our protest voters it was the people we had won over through our campaigning and casework who remained most loyal, but mainly as a personal vote that sadly failed to transfer to new candidates in 2017 and 2019.

When the party is viewed by people from the majority of seats that voted Leave and are many miles from Westminster, where they do not feel their voice is heard, the worst thing the party could do would be to promote itself as the 'Remain or Rejoin Party'.

Liberal Democrats are always going to support transnational, shared sovereignty organisations consistent with our overriding values, but we need political power and influence to put our beliefs into practice and we gain them by campaigning with individuals and communities on the issues that affect their immediate lives.

As Paddy Ashdown used to warn us, do not underestimate the scale of the task ahead. It is bigger now than in Paddy's day, but the future could be bright, it could be orange, we just have to get Liberalism done.

Adrian Sanders was Liberal Democrat MP for Torbay 1997-2015 and is now a Focus deliverer in Paignton

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Leave voters were seduced by an imagined past, but that was no reason to ignore them, says Matthew Huntbach

Some months before the 2019 general election, I wanted to express concern over this in the Commentary in *Liberator* 396: “So if the recent campaign has alienated Brexit supporters that should be cause for neither surprise nor concern.

“Let them be alienated from the Lib Dems, for the same reason that liberals are alienated from the Brexit party and Ukip.”

Not because I supported Brexit, but because I felt it was typical of the attitude causing Brexit to flourish and damaging our party.

I am sorry the 2019 election proved me right. The Liberal Democrats should have put effort into showing sympathy for those who supported Leave due to unhappiness over how our country has developed, explaining to them why Leave would not solve their problems. Instead, by dismissing them in this way, and stating we had no concern for them, we encouraged the firmness of supporters of Leave to grow.

People with low incomes, and in places where many feel the ruling establishment have no concern for them, are a big proportion of Leave voters. Many were previously key supporters of our party. We stated our support for them by defining ourselves as standing for “none shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity”.

POVERTY CONCERNS

But by ignoring their poverty concerns, and putting little effort into explaining how the EU actually works to win back their support, we broke this, encouraging them instead to conform to the Conservatives pushing for Leave.

The UK has moved from being one of the most equal countries in Europe to one of the most unequal. The rich growing richer and the poor growing poorer started in 1979 with the new Conservative government pushing the sort of economics every government since has supported. Privatisation and reduction of public spending has moved most control of how our country runs to an extreme wealthy elite.

So, when people were told that leaving the EU would “return control”, it is not surprising that they supported it. One of the most influential statements encouraging people to vote Leave was the claim it would “turn the clock back”, as stated by Nick Clegg in his televised debate with Nigel Farage. For those unhappy about the way our country has developed in recent decades, that’s precisely what they would want.

The idea of a return to more equality in wealth, with employment not so competitive and stressful, and housing more available to those needing it, is very attractive to those with good reasons to be unhappy about how our country is now.

It may involve a partial golden memory of the past. However, the claim that used to come from the

Conservatives that the development of a more unequal society is worthwhile, because overall it means more wealth, clearly needs contesting. Poor people supporting Brexit considered that the loss of overall wealth was worthwhile if that meant a return to the past, and a new development of a better and more equal and people-controlled society. The argument for remaining in the EU with the principle reason that it would generate more wealth overall can be dismissed by those who think that way.

What convinced me more than anything else to actively campaign against leaving the EU was reasons like this that so many ordinary people gave for supporting Leave.

For who is it that led Brexit? It was those who pushed the economy in the way many of those voting for Leave thought they were voting against. In discussions between themselves, right-wing Conservatives made clear that the reason they want to leave the EU was to be able to push our country even further towards an extreme free market economy, run by and for shady billionaires.

Of course, they put it somewhat differently when communicating to ordinary people through their media supporters. However, when they said things like leaving the EU for more ‘control’ they did not really mean control by ordinary people. They meant complete control by themselves, paid by the billionaires to run the country for them.

Back in the 1970s it might just have been possible to suppose that some sort of insular socialist society could be created by keeping out of the EU. The way our economy developed since then means that is not a real possibility now, and no serious political model was proposed by the likes of Jeremy Corbyn who used to support it.

Was it really impossible for us to point out that the right-wing Conservatives who led Brexit are unlikely to be people who want to reverse what the Conservatives have done to our country since 1979? Why couldn’t we point out that to a large extent blaming the EU for how our country has changed has been a convenient way for right-wing Conservatives to hide from the blame they deserve? Why was it suggested that instead we should alienate those people who voted Leave from even considering us, and be happy that instead they carry on supporting right-wing Conservatives doing the opposite of what they thought Leave would lead to?

The claim, continuously made, that Brexit did not happen before the 2019 general election because it was stopped by those who oppose it is blatant nonsense.

Brexit did not happen because there are many different forms it could take, and whatever form was proposed was rejected by many MPs who said they supported Brexit. The form proposed by Theresa May was a reasonable compromise, but was rejected by both

those who wanted a softer form and those who wanted a more extreme form.

The consumer deals held by Norway and Switzerland were mentioned in the referendum to suggest that leaving the EU could be done without serious consequences, as a similar deal could be organised. If just a small proportion of those who voted Leave did so under this assumption, it is false to claim that a majority supported a no-deal Brexit.

However, some who supported an extreme form of Brexit stated that they would rather stay in the EU than leave but have such a deal, as in effect the deal means the EU retains control. This shows that there was no real majority for Brexit, since whatever form it took, a significant proportion of those who said they would support Brexit then said they would rather stay in the EU than have that form.

If, as a worker, you were asked to perform a task, and there were several contradictory forms the task could take, the correct thing to do would be to ask for confirmation on exactly what form the task should take. If you were asked to perform a task in order to achieve a particular result, and you knew it would not produce that result, it would be your duty to state that and ask whether under these circumstances the task should really be performed.

We needed to make clear that a second referendum was for these reasons, and not just to turn down what people had voted for. So why did we allow claims about the second referendum being undemocratic to persist? Who would take on a task, insisting it must be done and refusing to allow the person who had asked for it any chance to reconsider, even though they know it would not do what they wanted it for?

The answer to that is a fraudster, someone wanting to perform the task for their own benefit, having tricked the consumer into asking for it using falsehoods. Why didn't we say this about Brexit, rather than dismissing anyone who has supported Brexit, actually stating we want to be alienated from such a person?

NAÏVE SUPPORTERS

In that way, we were actually supporting the economic right-wingers behind the Leave campaign by ensuring their naïve supporters remained with them.

Despite Brexit dominating politics for several years, there was no clear discussion on exactly what role the EU has and the extent to which this is useful collaboration rather than unnecessary control. Instead just pointless insults were made: the accusation that anyone who opposes Brexit is antidemocratic, and the dismissal of those who used it to express concern by the silly phrase "bollocks to Brexit".

The precursor to my ignored but correct criticism of the way our party was campaigning and so losing was the referendum on Alternative Vote. I attended the London Liberal Democrat conference before the AV referendum and what struck me, as the material to be used in the referendum was presented, was the lack of

“One of the most influential statements encouraging people to vote Leave was the claim it would “turn the clock back”, as stated by Nick Clegg”

any clear explanation of exactly how AV works. When I asked why that was so, I was told that ordinary people would find that boring.

At that time, opinion polls were still suggesting majority support for AV, but I predicted we would lose, as we did. The lack of detail in the explanation meant that opponent campaigners could also be vague. The referendum became more on the vague issues they pushed, with many voting “No”

to AV primarily to punish us for joining the Coalition.

AV is not proportional representation, it still means only the majority view in any place gets represented. We should have made that clear and stated it indicated the extent to which what we could do in the Coalition was limited, with this being an example of the way the Conservatives would go only a small way to what we really wanted.

In the 2015 general election we needed to state that the way the disproportional representation system reduced our share of MPs meant that in 2010 the only stable government that could be formed was the Conservative-LibDem coalition, and we would have only a minor say in it.

We could get small things done where they were not in contradiction to what the Conservatives want, and perhaps just slightly shift some other aspects, but we were not in a position where we could force the Conservative to completely change the main thing they are about: keeping tax low and so making cuts in government spending necessary. But we didn't say that then, and we didn't in the 2017 or 2019 general election. As such, the belief spread, encouraged by Labour, that we were in full support of everything the 2010-15 Coalition did, and if a Liberal Democrat dominated government was elected, it would do much the same.

Meanwhile, by pushing Brexit, the Conservatives managed to lose the image of what they are really about, and get support from people who felt, wrongly, that leaving the EU would return us to a more equal and happier country. We encouraged this by pushing the idea that the 2019 general election should be seen as a second referendum on Brexit.

Hence what happened in the 2019 election: large numbers voting Conservative supposing that was how to oppose what is actually what the Conservatives stand for.

Matthew Huntbach is a former Liberal Democrat councillor in Lewisham.

AN EXERCISE IN INSANITY

The targeting strategy has delivered three poor general election results in a row. Time to ditch it, says Mick Taylor

For three general elections in a row the party has been trounced winning eight, 12 and then 11 seats.

For all these elections party members have been repeatedly urged to go to 'target' seats and to neglect their own. Up to 2010 this targeting strategy seemed to bear fruit with increasing numbers of MPs, 63 at the peak. It should perhaps have been a warning that we fell back in 2010, when it can fairly be said we had a good campaign and got more votes.

In 2019, with few exceptions, this strategy failed abjectly. Almost none of our targets were won, four seats won in 2017 were lost and although we increased our overall vote many deposits were still lost, with 22 in Yorkshire and the Humber.

MONUMENTALLY STUPID

In any other walk of life, continuing to follow the same strategy after it has failed three times would be regarded, quite rightly, as monumentally stupid. Any business doing so would soon fail or go bankrupt.

Why then do our party continue to pursue a strategy that so manifestly fails to deliver success?

In politics this 'targeting strategy' has an additional deleterious effect. Non-target seats, especially those that have been non-targets for several elections, have lost the ability to get out of the pit the policy has dug for them. The party devotes neither time, nor resources to non-target seats with the result that their organisations have collapsed and their ability to mount a general election campaign has been all but destroyed.

There is another factor to be brought into the equation. Who chooses the targets in the first place and on what basis?

Burnley, a seat won in 2010 for the first time since the 1920s, was abandoned by the national party in 2015. I live seven miles away, yet during the 2015 campaign I was asked, repeatedly, to go Leeds North West, which is 30 miles away.

Without any national support, Burnley came nearer retaining the seat than many of the so-called targets. With a modicum of national support, I am confident it would have been retained in 2015. It is now a Tory seat for the first time in 109 years and given that the man who won the seat and fought hard to retain it and get it back is now 76, there is little chance of us winning it any time soon with a new candidate, unless we find a new approach to winning seats.

It is my view that those running campaigns for our party have little idea about the political situation north of Watford and nothing at all about industrial seats in the north.

My inbox during the 2019 campaign was filled with exhortations to go to Leeds North West and Sheffield Hallam, both of which we failed to gain, and was also littered with optimistic forecasts about all the seats we were going to gain, if we all mucked in and went where

we were told.

As for the idea that we were going to win seats like Esher & Walton held by Dominic Raab, well I've read better fantasy novels.

So, if we can't win seats by targeting – and 2019 clearly shows we can't – then what is the alternative?

I think that there is no alternative but to start rebuilding the capacity of the party to fight elections right across the UK. The main obstacle to this is lack of money, so we need to start raising cash far more than ever before, to enable the party to start campaigning – at all levels – in every constituency, every council, every devolved unit of government.

There also needs to be a strategy, tried for the first time in some places in 2019, of recruiting volunteers, US-style, to build and run campaigns in their areas, not just for one election or one campaign, but on a permanent basis.

We are never going to advance from the wretched base we now find ourselves in, if we continue to do what we've always done (or at least since Rennard). We will always get what we've now got for three successive elections, a poor vote and a handful of seats. We seem incapable of learning any lessons or of building the party as an attractive vehicle for progressive people.

But what do I know? I've been a party member for 56 years, since I was 14. I have been involved in every general election since 1964, except 2017 when I was travelling. I have been helping in by-elections since 1962 (Orpington) until 2019 (Peterborough and Brecon & Radnor) I have also won a huge number of local elections, helped others to do so, led my local council and been a parliamentary candidate five times. Most recently I was agent in Burnley in 2019.

I have been involved in rebuilding the Liberal Party in the early 60s, 1973-74, after the 1979 election meltdown, 1983-88, and the Liberal Democrats after the formation of the new party in 1988, during the Iraq crisis, 2005, 2010 and the various attempts to rebuild after the coalition.

However, one of the main reasons why our strategy failed in 2019 was because we ran a poor campaign that entirely missed the real reasons why so many people voted as they did.

UNWILLING TO OFFEND

We appear to be unwilling to offend, unwilling to boldly state our radicalism, unwilling to put forward the progressive policies our country needs. Just as for years we were told not to mention the EU (even in EU elections) because it was toxic. Policy by focus group has been an unmitigated disaster. We are one of the reasons why Brexit is now happening because for years we failed to promote the EU when we should have been doing so.

I agree, in part, with Mark Pack and David Howarth that we need to build a core vote, but that won't be enough to get us from 11 seats to the magic 326 (or 301 if constituency boundaries are changed). As I'm now almost 70, there are not as many years left as I might wish to get our party into government in its own right. So what should we do?

Start to build up every constituency to be able to fight and win an election

Without a programme to build the party (or its sister party the Alliance in NI) in every part of the UK, we have no claim to be a national party. Many of us have experience of rebuilding the party from an almost non-existent base, but we need people to do it.

We need to take a serious look at the techniques, pioneered by Bernie Sanders and Barack Obama, for recruiting an army of volunteers, largely currently outside the party, to carry out the tasks of organising elections all over the country.

Rather than asking people to deliver leaflets or knock on doors we first need to recruit people whose job will be to recruit and organise people to deliver leaflets, knock on doors, run the phone banks, do the social media and get out the vote. Our membership is far too small, our activist base even smaller. If we are to make serious inroads in any election at all we need a small army to do it as well as candidates and cash. (See: Elizabeth McKenna, Groundbreakers; Becky Brand, Rules for Revolutionaries)

We need to build up our funding resources so that constituencies are turning over £80,000 a year. This means upping fundraising to levels never achieved before and we will need serious professional advice on this. However, 56 years in the party has taught me one thing about money. If people believe in your cause they will give you money, so having a credible radical programme for the UK is a prerequisite to getting the cash.

We need at least one full time professional in every constituency and a whole raft of field organisers to help point one to succeed.

On canvassing, we need to do far more door knocking and have to persuade volunteers to do it rather than offer them leaflets as an alternative.

A huge UK wide training programme is required that all members and volunteers get to take part in. We will only change people's minds by personal contact. Talking to people wins elections, not flooding their homes with repetitive leaflets.

I am not convinced that our current IT systems are delivering what we want or need. At the very least the Connect database must be reviewed by people who are not linked to the experts who say it's so good in terms of what it actually delivers. (Why for example did our data not tell us to put more resources into Carshalton and East Dunbartonshire, when we should have known that North East Fife, Edinburgh West, Richmond, Kingston and Twickenham were nailed on.)

We have spent years pushing out thousands of bland leaflets often repeating the same 'Mr/Ms Nice Person' message, almost devoid of politics. Why are we so afraid of offending people? We need to appeal to people at an emotional level.

“Who chooses the targets in the first place and on what basis?”

So, a radical programme that tackles the real problems of the UK must be prepared and refined and then pushed at every level until it gets a fair wind behind it. Devolution, fair votes through STV, constitutional reform, democratisation of work,

investment in health, education and housing and above all tackling the climate emergency.

It is clear that the established rules we thought existed to win elections have failed us.

Only a root and branch review of our whole election strategy will begin to build the new system that will enable us to win gain. Such a review should not be conducted by those who have run our campaigns in the recent (or even less recent) past.

Mick Taylor is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Todmorden

Liberal Revue from the vaults!

**The Liberal Revue can now be enjoyed
again online at:
<https://tinyurl.com/ya2w6l7d>
or by searching on “Liberal Revue” on You
Tube.com**

**The revue entertained party conferences
with songs and sketches in 1984-86, 1988-
89, 1992-94, 1996, 2002-04 and 2008
before calling it a day.**

**You Tube now has all the shows that were
filmed from 1988 and onwards, although
sadly the recording of the 2003 show is
lost.**

**Sound only recordings exist of the first
three shows, plus a one-off performance
in London in March 1986, and will be
added when efforts to improve the sound
quality are complete.**

**An archive of Liberal Revue scripts,
programmes and recordings has been
lodged in the
National Liberal Club library**

RESPECT FOR CULTURE, OR RESPECT FOR WOMEN?

The UN shouldn't congratulate itself on women's rights until male leaders become role models, says Rebecca Tinsley

This spring, the United Nations will indulge in an orgy of self-congratulation, celebrating 25 years since its Beijing conference on women's rights. Is the fanfare premature?

In her maiden speech to the British Parliament, Eleanor Rathbone raised the low status of women in Africa. She told MPs that poor families sold their powerless, illiterate girls to older husbands who treated them like slaves. Harmful practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) killed many girls, and those who survived it endured infections throughout life, and excruciating difficulty giving birth. All this, she said, was tolerated because of traditions and customs.

Eleanor Rathbone made that speech 90 years ago. Many of the same problems persist now. For instance, FGM still affects more than 80% of women in Egypt, Eritrea, Sierra Leone, Mali, Djibouti, Somalia, Guinea and Sudan. Yet, globally, there have been undoubted advances in other areas that concerned Rathbone: fewer women die in childbirth, more babies survive infancy, and a greater proportion of girls attend school. Women's rights have been enshrined in law, if not in practice.

WORRYING PICTURE

However, the statistics look less impressive if 'developing' countries like China are stripped out. East Asia's astonishing economic growth distorts an otherwise worrying picture. The Brookings Institute confirms that poverty is now concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa.

Each day, 37,000 girls are forced into marriage, sold to pay their parents' debts or to appease a powerful family, a situation familiar to readers of Jane Austen. Even in countries where presidents boast that school is free (ignoring the prohibitive cost of uniforms, books and transport), girls are kept home for domestic and farming chores, caring for younger siblings, the ill and the elderly. Yet, parents may have other reasons: predatory teachers, a lack of lavatories (meaning girls are vulnerable to attack when going behind a bush), or teachers who are unskilled or absent.

In many places, custom dictates that women do much of the work, handing over their earnings to their husbands. Hence, many microloan providers only do business with women; they fear men might use cash unproductively (gambling, alcohol, prostitution). Women may be trapped in violent relationships because, by tradition, their children belong to the father's family. Hence the spread of HIV, when mothers must choose between losing their children or becoming infected by male partners.

Many women also believe their men should be able to 'discipline' them. Network for Africa, the NGO I founded, works in remote northern Uganda. An



alarming percentage of women we surveyed thought their husbands had the right to beat them. A survey in Rwanda found that 54% of women thought mothers should tolerate violence to keep their family together.

In comparatively prosperous South Africa, the police service reports that a woman is killed every three hours. The UN describes this as "hate crimes against women perpetrated by men simply because of the gender roles assigned to women".

The UN concedes the situation for woman and girls is even worse in India and Pakistan. Girls continue to be raised thinking they are inferior. Even if laws protect women, some men have little incentive to enlighten illiterate or semi-literate women. This is especially

true in rural areas.

The UK was not immune to regrettable customs: before the 1882 Married Women's Property Act, British wives' inheritance and earnings went to their husbands. Not until the 1920s could women sue for divorce for adultery or serve on a jury. Into the 1970s, some married women needed their husbands' permission to open a bank account or rent a television.

Thankfully, we made progress. But dangerous attitudes persist around the globe, meaning rulers put few resources into women's health. In Niger, women have a 1 in 7 lifetime chance of dying in childbirth. In South Sudan, a girl aged 15 is more likely to die giving birth than finish school.

The World Bank says childbirth is the leading killer of girls aged between 15 and 19; for everyone who dies, 20 are left disabled or injured. Meanwhile, the UN says two thirds of all maternal and new-born deaths could be prevented by a trained midwife. Over-population can cancel out economic progress: 200 million women have no access to family planning.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, tradition means that women wash dead bodies, exposing them to ebola. In some villages in Uganda, a panel of elders beats women who do not produce a baby each year. Superstition also feeds the stigma faced by people with mental health issues or epilepsy – as Network for Africa sees each day.

Many presidents embrace the mantle of 'father of the nation' while refusing to confront male voters with the truth: their countries will remain poor so long as men rely on their exhausted wives to do 'women's work' (agriculture, all domestic duties).

There is a direct link between educated, prosperous, peaceful societies, and those in which women have an equal place. There is also a link between cultures in which men shoulder their share of work (East Asia, North America, Europe, the Antipodes) and prosperity.

SIDING WITH DESPOTS

Should the UN be celebrating when it cannot even agree to condemn violence against women or to make contraception more easily available, (not helped by the Trump administration siding with the despots)?

Donor nations should challenge father-of-the-nation-style leaders to tackle the unhelpful myths that hold back prosperity. Often, our fear of being labelled racist or neo-colonialist silences us. We must affirm that human rights are a universal value, not a relative one.

“An alarming percentage of women we surveyed thought their husbands had the right to beat them”

Thankfully, there are some leaders who understand that educating girls has an enormous economic return. There are also enlightened men who are local role models. For this reason, Network for Africa trains community leaders to challenge dangerous traditions and myths. Their social positions make them trusted bearers of new ideas.

President Kagame of Rwanda is vocal supporting a network of coaches teaching men about positive masculinity, showing men that their families will prosper if they nurture their children, playing and talking with them, rather than leaving it up to their overworked women.

Britain is a generous donor nation and a high-profile member of the UN. Its representatives should therefore challenge leaders in underdeveloped countries to man-up. Otherwise, we shouldn't expect any deeply-rooted, lasting progress to result from development aid.

Rebecca Tinsley founded Network for Africa a charity delivering psychotherapy training to survivors of genocide and conflict. A shorter version of this article appeared in the Washington Post. <https://network4africa.org>

Pictures: Rebecca Tinsley



ANYONE BUT TRUMP

Joe Biden could beat the worst president in American history and it's time for Sanders supporters to unite behind him, says Martha Elliott

American politics is only predictable in its unpredictability. I would have bet serious money that Hilary Clinton would be president right now. From my vantage point, Donald Trump is the most inept, corrupt, and untruthful president in American history. Most Democrats have vowed that they will vote for anyone who can beat Trump. Policy is important, but not as important as ousting Trump - anyone but Trump.

The nomination process for both parties is somewhat arcane. Each state is allotted delegates to the party's nominating convention, based on population and registered Democrats. Then delegates are apportioned based on votes - both by statewide vote and by congressional district. Plus if a candidate doesn't get at least 15%, he or she doesn't get any delegates in that state.

As soon as Joe Biden announced his candidacy, he was far ahead of a very crowded field. I thought he had the best chance of beating Trump. But after the Ukrainian bribery scandal led to the failed impeachment of Trump, it appeared that all that Congress had accomplished was to give Trump a bully pulpit to insist that Joe and Hunter Biden were crooks.

Biden's political future seemed doomed. This was exacerbated by the pundits continually saying Biden was performing poorly in the debates, although I didn't agree with their critiques. It was difficult to make judgments on performance when there were as many as a dozen candidates on the debate stage, all scrambling for a few minutes during the two hour free-for-all.

ZIGZAGGING POLLS

The polls kept zigzagging among the candidates after Biden's numbers plummeted. Elizabeth Warren was ahead until she wasn't. Former South Bend, Indiana, mayor Pete Buttigieg and Senator Bernie Sanders were ahead going into first contest, the Iowa caucus but we wouldn't know who actually won (Pete by a nose) until weeks later when they finally finished sorting out the disaster caused by a reporting app. Pete and Bernie were virtually tied in the New Hampshire primary with Senator Amy Klobucher coming in third and Warren a distant fourth. Biden took an embarrassing fifth place and no delegates. But in 2016, Bernie had trounced Clinton in New Hampshire, so tying with a political novice was not a good sign.

I don't think anyone thought that Pete had a chance to win the nomination. He lacked the experience, having only governed a city of 100,000, and had lost the race for Indiana state treasurer by nearly 25 points. Since announcing his candidacy, he had not been able to win minority support.

Sadly, America may not be ready to elect an openly gay man as president, despite his superior intellect and poise.

The unknown was how former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg would do on Super Tuesday, the day when the most states voted and the most delegates were up for grabs. He came into the race late and sat out the first contests, banking on doing well on Super Tuesday by blanketing the airwaves with political advertising. He was seen as the most possible challenger to Bernie.

I was despondent. I thought that the United States was headed towards a disastrous two-candidate race: one who promised the world but didn't have any idea how to deliver it (Sanders) and another who was trying to buy his way into the presidency (Bloomberg).

I had my doubts that either could win the election against Trump. Bernie's baggage is that he is rated the most liberal of all senators and until 2016 was a socialist, who once praised Fidel Castro. In 2016 he changed his affiliation to Socialist Democrat so he could run against Clinton.

Bloomberg also had several problems. He switched back and forth between the Democratic and Republican parties and was basically betting he could spend his unlimited resources to win over the public. He hadn't factored in the anti-billionaire attitude of voters. Another big negative is that he has the charisma of a wet dishrag. The first time he was on the debate stage Bloomberg looked like a quivering lump of Jell-O. I knew Trump could wipe the floor with him.

I didn't want either of them. If pressed I would admit that I thought Bloomberg would make a better President than Bernie. As mayor, he was able to accomplish a lot, from expanding health care to 750,000 New Yorkers, to uniting the city after 9/11 to increasing the number of minority-owned businesses that got city contracts. Bernie, on the other hand, was elected to the senate in 2006 and as of 2019, he was tied for last (out of 100) for getting bills out of committee to a full vote. He was at the bottom for being able to get his bills cosponsored by a Republican, and he was the second most absent for Senate votes.

He has lots of ideas, but no concrete plans for how to accomplish them. To me, he is the Wizard of Oz. He does, however, deserve credit for pulling the party back into the liberal column during the 2016 race. But he's a broken record - Wall Street greed, Medicare for all, corporate America screwing the little guy. But there's no explanation of how he's going to do it or pay for it. If he can't even get legislation passed in Congress, how can he get anything done as president? But I kept reminding myself: anyone but Trump.

In America experience doesn't seem to matter. It's seen as being a Washington insider. If experience

mattered, Biden's forty year career as an effective senator from Delaware and as vice president for eight years would have made him the logical choice. As a senator, he sponsored 42 bills that became law and was able to get bipartisan support. His

“Sanders has lots of ideas, but no concrete plans for how to accomplish them”

bête noir is a now-controversial crime bill that resulted in American prisons being packed with black males. Barack Obama picked him as vice president in large part because of his superior expertise in foreign policy. After his defeats in the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary, Biden kept reminding people that only 2% of the population had voted and his time would come. But I would have voted for the ultimate winner and got on phones and knocked on doors to help him or her win. Anybody but Trump.

What was unknowable, even to the political pundits who talk endlessly on American television, was that one primary, South Carolina, would change everything. Biden not only won that but received 48% of the vote, more than double the number of votes that Sanders received. No other candidate won a single delegate. All of a sudden, Biden was seen as back in the race even though he spent almost no money and had little or no staff. An army of older black women had manned the phones from their homes, convincing their friends and members of their congregations to vote for Joe.

Suddenly, Democrats were aggressively split between Bernie and Joe. And it became ugly at times. People I respected were questioning my sanity and loyalty for thinking that Biden was the better candidate.

Super Tuesday was only three days after South Carolina. Importantly, Thomas Friedman, columnist for the New York Times, had written an astute column suggesting that the winner of the nomination (whom he thought would be Sanders or Bloomberg) should follow Abraham Lincoln's example and put together a "team of rivals."

Lincoln followed the adage: keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer and named all of his political rivals to his cabinet. Friedman suggested that the nominee should pick Amy Klobucher as vice president and name his major contenders to cabinet posts that matched their expertise. Perhaps Buttigieg and Klobucher read the column because after South Carolina, they withdrew from the race and supported Biden. Almost immediately, Kamala Harris and Cory Booker also rallied behind Biden. With the support of his former opponents, Biden trounced Sanders on Super Tuesday. Biden's popularity with black voters gave him a solid victory in the southern states, even Texas. Sanders came away badly wounded having won only California, Nevada, and Utah. And Sanders got 211 of California's delegates, but Biden was not far behind with 163. This was a major embarrassment because Sanders had promised to bring out the youth vote and take the state by a wide margin. Bloomberg only won in American Samoa and very quickly realised that even a half billion dollars can't buy American voters and bowed out of the race, pledging his support and money to Biden. Although Bernie had vowed to support the winner of the primaries, even if it wasn't

him, he immediately accused the "Democratic establishment" of colluding to defeat him.

DEMENTIA SLUR

And Bernie supporters were suggesting that Biden was suffering from dementia. Did they forget - anyone but Trump?

On 10 March, the next big group of state primaries was held, the biggest prize being Michigan where Bernie edged out Clinton in 2016. Bernie put all of his effort into that one state, but Biden beat him by ten points, a crushing blow because of the state's large working class vote to which Bernie's "revolution" should have appealed. Of the six states up for grabs, Bernie only won North Dakota. Bernie's path to the nomination seemed impossible, but then this is America and voters are fickle.

The first real debate between Biden and Sanders then took place and more than half of the discussion centred on how each candidate would handle the Corona virus crisis. Quick to rattle off a list of what should be done in a pandemic, Biden showed his leadership ability while Bernie stammered and kept trying to turn the discussion towards Medicare for All. During the discussion, Biden chided Sanders saying the pandemic was not about Medicare for All; Italy had proven that more was needed than universal healthcare. He also slammed him by saying that what the American people needed was not a revolution, but leadership, which Biden demonstrated he possessed.

In March, Ohio's governor postponed in-person voting until June, citing a health emergency. Nevertheless, Illinois, Florida, and Arizona held their primaries. Biden swept all three by wide margins, and the delegate count now stands at 1,147 to Sander's 861, all but extinguishing Sanders' hope for the nomination. Will he drop out to try to unite the party? I hope he does, but if 2016 is any indication, he'll stay in "to keep the movement going." But Bernie needs to support Biden rather than create any more divisions in the party, and he needs to call on his supporters to join him.

Perhaps more ominous than the medical crisis is that Trump could create a political crisis. Will he try to delay the November election even though the Constitution gives Congress the power to set the date? It was set as the first Tuesday after the first Monday of November in 1845, and voting has never been delayed, even during the Civil War.

But America is being run by the most dangerous president in our history. Anyone but Trump.

Martha Elliott is a Democrat activist and has been a journalist for more than 40 years. She is the author of *The Man in the Monster: Inside the Mind of a Serial Killer*

WHEN THE COUNTRY BURNS AWAY

Steve Yolland reports on the impact of Australia's devastating fires on homes, farms and people and wonders if there is more to come

Australia is known for many things. Lovely beaches, great cuisine, a laid-back attitude and now ... fires. Blistering, unstoppable and unprecedented fires.

The fires in Australia have been so vast, so complex, and so terrifyingly new in their scale and ferocity, that all a member of the general public is left with are impressions. Facts are hotly disputed. News is garbled. Political agendas abound, and they skew people's reportage. People take sides, and seem incapable of getting out of their trenches once in them.

Certain facts, however, bear repeating, as they are undisputed.

New South Wales has officially been in drought for three years. The last three years have been the driest on record. We have family in rural New South Wales whose gardens have turned to dust. Farmers in their hundreds are just shooting their animals, or weeping over their inability to grow crops, and walking off the land.

Great swathes of rural Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland are drier than at any time in recorded history. On top of this, the heat. The mind-numbing, seemingly never-ending heat. 2019 was New South Wales' hottest year on record.

LIVING ON THE EDGE

The political debate is split between those who figure this is the inevitable result of untackled climate change, and those who say "well, Australia is a rugged place with a history of fires, drought and floods et al." What very few have said is that both points of view have validity. We have always existed "on the edge". But the climate indicators are now unmistakably trending all one way. And what is now blazingly clear is that in the driest continent on the planet, this means earlier fires, and worse fires.

What is also clear and undisputed is that the Australian fires show us starkly what happens when climate change impacts the unwary or the ill-prepared.

Despite the heroic efforts of the emergency services and fire-fighters, many of them volunteers, and some of whom have paid for their service with their lives, Australia was and is quite unable to effectively fight fire fronts running to hundreds of miles, on 40 degree days, across four states, with high winds, and without the equipment or the personnel to finish the job.

It is hard to know where to start. The affect on the nation's psychology has been profound. Almost everyone knows a family touched by fire, whether that be people directly impacted – injured or worse, or lost homes and towns – or simply people inconvenienced,

forced to sleep under the stars – if you could have seen them through the smoke – holidays ruined, children terrified, and hundreds lifted off beaches on naval vessels.

Everyone knows people who were forcibly evacuated from the holiday locations their families had travelled to for generations, driving circuitous routes home to avoid incineration.

Something of a Dunkirk spirit has grown up – vast sums of money are being raised for those whose lives have been turned upside down, and a grim determination to survive is on everyone's lips. A sense of the seriousness of this is that after most newsworthy events, gallows humour usually surfaces in off-colour jokes that everyone enjoys, despite themselves. But not this time.

Politicians though are the butt of jokes. Politicians are always fair game in Australia. When prime minister Scott Morrison, until very recently the hero of the unexpected Liberal-National election victory, disastrously miscalculated and failed to return from his family holiday to deal with the crisis, and even refused to reveal that he was on the beach in Hawaii, and was roundly castigated as a result.

It may yet prove to be a fatal wounding of 'The Prime Minister for Hawaii', as he was immediately dubbed. When he did return, his tin ear was again demonstrated when he visited fire-ravaged towns and insisted on shaking hands with people who clearly wanted nothing to do with him, and engaging with fire fighters who simply delivered him trenchant and swear-word laden criticism of the country's lack of preparedness.

Worn out, Australians just lopped 10-15% off his opinion poll ratings, and – reflecting his past career before politics, and his apparent incompetence and lack of gravitas in a crisis – promptly christened him #ScottyFromMarketing. The sarcastic tag has stuck, and will haunt him.

Some politicians came out of it moderately well, but the political class as a whole is even more distinctly on the nose than it usually is. Australia, which prides itself on being a rich and capable country, has been shown largely helpless in the face of such challenges, hoping and praying for cooler weather and rain. We've had some, but everyone knows it is likely to be just a temporary respite.

Increasingly, what we have endured in recent times starts to look like "the new normal", and it has introduced intense fear and introspection in the population. It's not just in 'the country', as everywhere outside the major cities is called. Australia's cities have also been inundated with smoke, ash, and dust.

My home town of Melbourne at one point had the unhealthiest air quality in the world. People scrambled to buy face-masks, which rapidly sold out. The alternative was to stay indoors, and set cooling and heating systems to recirculate. Smoke haze became so common it was hardly worth commenting on after the first few days, until it became so bad that people couldn't see the end of their gardens. The blanket of choking smoke lay thickly on the cities hundreds of miles from where the fire fronts actually were.

Our natural environment has been devastated. Perhaps half a billion living creatures have been destroyed, perhaps even more. And anyway, it's not over yet. It's not so much the primary animals like kangaroos and koalas that ultimately matter. They should rebound. It's the unknown and unmeasurable destruction of insects and pollinators, which may inhibit the re-growth of natural flora, which will in turn inhibit the usual re-establishment of the food chain.

Water catchments have been razed, which will lead to uncontrolled run off when it does eventually rain steadily, clogging and pollution of water courses, with its knock-on effect on fish and other water creatures.

Some have tried to lay blame for the fires at the feet of ecologists and 'Greens' who have argued, it is claimed, that we should reduce 'back burning' and removal of undergrowth to reduce the severity of any fires.

But that has been shown to be a mis-casting of the truth driven relentlessly by the fossil fuel industry and the Murdoch media. Because, you see, it simply doesn't matter how much 'fuel load' there is in the forests, when whatever is there is tinder dry because it hasn't rained for three years.

In short, a more stark example of a sudden and massive climate catastrophe you could not imagine than this year's Australian fires.

And the rest of the world needs to take urgent note. Because in our case it was fires. In yours, maybe floods, winds, snow, or other phenomena. Or maybe, if you live on the edge of comfort like Australia, you may experience a bunch of them.

Australians have been deeply gratified by the friendship offered by the rest of the world. We are a reasonably inoffensive little nation – except perhaps on a cricket pitch – and this seems to have been reflected in the response of people from the great and good donating millions of dollars to the widow sending us her mite.

And the money is desperately needed. The costs of these fires will run into sums that even one of the richest countries in the world cannot afford, and the money is needed now. Charities and governments will inevitably fiddle and faff around, but there is a great will to get the relief funds through to those who need them most.

But it won't end there. After we deal with the immediate effects, infrastructure will need to be repaired, there are massive restorative works required in the bush, and the disruption to our economy

“My home town of Melbourne at one point had the unhealthiest air quality in the world”

will be incalculably large. A fundamental re-think of where people live, and how we farm (we have one of the biggest agricultural sectors in the world) is already underway.

So please: send whatever cash you can to the many people trying to help. We really do need it.

ECONOMIC SUICIDE

But at the same time, turn on those climate change deniers who think that dealing with the problem is economic suicide and unnecessary, and ask them what they think the cost of not doing anything will be.

Ask with fury, because over here, we know what it will cost: it will mean reduced social spending, increased taxes, a budget out of whack for years, and an uncomfortable and unfamiliar reliance on the generosity of others. We simply didn't do enough to tackle climate change – Australians are the second worst carbon polluters on the planet per head of population – and now we're going to pay for it. Not just in pain, and social disruption, but in cold hard cash. Inaction on climate change is economic madness. Spread the word.

With changes, Australia will be OK. We're "tough as old guts" over here, to use that wonderful Aussie phrase, and we'll make it through, with a little help from our friends. But nothing will ever be the same again.

Across much of Australia, for hundreds of years the agricultural landscape has been denuded of trees to make room for livestock. But our topsoil is only about two inches deep. Below that, solid rock. And when that topsoil is all blown away, nothing will grow. Which is bad news not just for our domestic consumption, but we are a food bowl for much of Asia and beyond.

And the hotter it gets, and the drier it gets, the more often it will simply just blow away, and the less we will grow. Farmers who are now carefully curating their land and re-planting native forest as fast as they can may not have time left to make effective restitution. And even if they do, will re-forestation simply create another problem, with more fuel for fires?

Do we, effectively, just have to abandon large parts of the continent? That's climate change. Welcome to the new normal.

Steve Yolland contested Fareham for the Liberal party in 1983 before moving to Melbourne.

BRING DEMOCRACY TO EVERYDAY LIFE

The UK needs a democratic revolution, drawing in decades of liberal thought, says Bernard Greaves

One of the central values of Liberalism is the belief in a society in which all individuals are enabled and encouraged to fulfil their potential in the way they choose both within their personal lives and the numerous communities of which they are a part.

The prime mechanism for achieving that is democracy. Within Liberalism there is a presumption that all communities, all organisations should be democratic; where they are not they should become so.

That message could not be more relevant in Britain today. Large numbers of people feel that, whatever they do, nothing changes. They cannot influence events. Voting makes no difference. They are powerless. It is that alienation, that disillusionment with politics as a vehicle for change, that led to Brexit.

In the referendum for once every vote counted. Across vast swathes of the country those who were most disadvantaged sent out a howl of protest: "Nobody has listened; we want to be heard."

That won the day along with the nostalgia of an elderly deeply conservative population, unsettled by the pace of change in the modern world, for a mythical past where Britain stood alone against the might of Nazi Germany and where the British Empire brought civilisation to every corner of the globe.

That too was another manifestation of alienation. "The world is changing. We don't like it. We want to return to the way it used to be." It is that same alienation that has led to the growth of nationalism in Scotland and to a lesser extent in Wales and Northern Ireland. "That privileged elite in far off London do not understand the reality of our lives here. Let us throw off the yolk. Let us decide for ourselves"

PROBLEMATIC STRUCTURES

The Liberal Democrats have not heard that message. So preoccupied have they been with the prospect or the reality of sharing in power through coalition at Westminster that policy has been dominated by proposing short term pragmatic changes that can be delivered through existing governmental and administrative structures.

It is those very structures that are the problem. They entrench and reinforce one of the most unequal societies in the developed world. Run by people who are well educated and prosperous with little experience of deprivation they are over-centralised and over-bureaucratic. Faced by the sheer volume of routine administration and decision-making those structures enter a kind of political constipation that inhibits the taking of and implementation of clear and timely decisions.

There could be no better time than now for the

Liberal Democrats to set out a strategic long term programme of reform to bring democracy to every area of life in Britain: a democratic constitution; democracy in the delivery of services; democracy in the workplace; democracy in environmental sustainability.

Piecemeal changes to the constitution over several decades have not been successful. They have not strengthened democratic control; they have not increased effective administration; and they have not satisfied the electorate.

We have increasingly autocratic and ineffective government and an increasingly alienated population. We require comprehensive and coherent reform to the constitution. A new constitutional settlement should embrace the following elements.

The United Kingdom should become a federation of states in which Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland acquire domestic home rule within a framework of guaranteed civil rights and political rights, including the use of the single transferable vote in all elections, and common foreign and defence policies.

Within their own jurisdictions they should have the freedom to determine and administer their own policies and services, set their own budgets, and raise their own taxes. Their internal local government structures should be for them to decide.

The creation of a separate Parliament for England may not be necessary. An English Grand Committee of the House of Commons might be sufficient.

The House of Lords should become a wholly elected chamber based on constituencies representing the nations and regions of the country. In addition to its function of revising legislation it should have powers that are not safe left in the hands of the government of the day.

Foremost among these should include the calling and supervision of elections and devising equitable formulae for the distribution of tax revenues between different authorities.

Within England there should be established devolved elected regional assemblies. They should be responsible for economic development, land use planning and transport, and with oversight of regional policing functions and specialist healthcare provision.

The regions and local authorities at the more local level, including a new tier of urban neighbourhood councils similar to town and rural parish councils, should within the scope of their powers be able to determine their own policies, services and priorities, and raise the revenue to pay for them. They should be free of the stultifying tight control currently exercised by central government.

Liberals have always been committed to representative democracy. Elected mayors, police and

crime commissioners, and referendums are a denial of that. They prevent the participation of relevant interested parties in the debate that is essential to formulate effective and broadly accepted decisions.

There are two different but related aspects of democracy in the provision of services: democratic control, and user representation. Public services in the UK are deficient in both and have over recent times been getting worse. Both need addressing. For instance the insensitivity to user opinion and the funding crisis in the NHS can be addressed only if its front line services, the bulk of which is local, are brought under democratic control, its services planned and its budgets set jointly with social services by local authorities.

The barriers between the two have had an immensely harmful impact on the efficiency and quality of the delivery of care. Likewise the appalling standards of our local prisons, that hold the majority of prisoners, and the catastrophic reorganisation of the probation service are best addressed by bringing them jointly under the democratic control of local councils. In each case there is a need for more specialist provision at both a regional and national level to be planned and budgeted by democratic bodies at the appropriate level. The need for national and indeed international standards of provision and care does not require vast bureaucratic centralised control impervious to local conditions and demand.

Similarly the crying need for more social housing can be met best through an expansion of council housing, free from the constraints imposed on it by central government, and co-ordinated with local land use planning so that we create balanced and environmentally sustainable communities rather than dysfunctional single use estates. The majority of 'affordable housing' provided by both private developers and housing associations is financially inaccessible to those most in need.

There should in all public service provision be meaningful dialogue, through structured consultation, with service users. The agenda in state education of competition, academies and free schools has not advanced educational standards, indeed in some instances reduced them without the means to hold them effectively to account. It is axiomatic that they should return to the democratic oversight of local authorities with inbuilt consultation with parents and guardians.

But in education democracy needs to go an important step further. Schools and colleges need to prepare their students for full participation in the practice of democracy in the outside world. From first entry into primary school they should be practical workshops in the processes of democracy, with students progressively acquiring a greater role in the decision-making of their places of learning. We cannot aspire to create a democratic society unless its citizens grow up acquiring the necessary skills to participate in its processes and with the expectation that all organisations of which they are part should be run democratically.

WORKPLACE DEMOCRACY

The introduction of democracy in the workplace involves addressing the running of companies, public sector organisations and charities. Changes to company law could include: establishment of

supervisory boards made up of equal numbers of elected shareholders and employees to supervise boards of directors; a requirement for profits to be shared with employees; the creation of workplace councils made up of equal numbers of representatives of management and employees to agree conditions of employment and pay.

Within public sector organisations similar arrangements should be put in place where the elected members of political authorities replace the role of shareholders. The granting of charity status should be dependant on organisations having constitutions that incorporate democratic representation for trustees and employees in those organisations that have them. Consideration needs to be given to how such requirements should apply to multinational bodies and how they extend to short-term and part-time employees. In addition there should be incentives for the development of co-operative and co-ownership enterprises.

The threats to the environment are many and varied. The responses need to be many and varied too. They require action at every level of government from the global to the local neighbourhood, from businesses, voluntary and charitable organisations, and individuals.

The ossified and centralised structures of government and administration in the UK are simply not up to the task. It creates a danger of simplistic 'big ideas' being imposed from the top in an autocratic manner. Highly risky, likely to be controversial and divisive, they are likely to make matters worse rather than better. The solutions are likely to be found through democratic debate and partnership, where organisations of all kinds, and individuals too, discover the appropriate role they can play.

In Britain a programme of democratic reform, bringing democracy to every area of life, to the constitution, service delivery and the workplace, offers the best prospect of success. It may indeed be a prerequisite for it.

The Liberal Democrats are heir to a long tradition of Liberal and Social Democrat thought. It is represented by John Stuart Mill, Lord Acton, LT Hobhouse, Jo Grimond, Nancy Seear, Bob Maclennan, Shirley Williams and community politics.

These themes of radical reform placing democracy at the heart of a reformed constitution, service delivery, the workplace and environmental sustainability stem directly from that tradition. In recent times they have been marginalised at the expense of proposing pragmatic short-term changes, worthy though many of them have been.

Now that a presence in government seems a remote prospect the party needs to return to that fundamental vision of creating a Liberal society. Those themes need developing and applying to the realities of today's world. They are central to addressing Britain's dysfunctional government and deeply alienated population.

Bernard Greaves has written about Liberalism and community politics for more than 50 years and is co-author with David Howarth of *Towards a Liberal Future*. This article follows up Liberalism after Brexit, which appeared in *Liberator* 398

OUT WITH THE OLD

The general election was bad for the Liberal Democrats but left them with a new source of winnable seats. Michael Steed crunches the numbers

The deep disappointment of last December's election may haunt Liberals for many years. No doubt about the severe setback to British involvement in the noble cause of European integration, even if eventually reversible. Does the seemingly similar severe setback to Liberal hopes merit a similar verdict?

The conclusive Johnsonian majority in seats hides a much more nuanced result in votes. The Conservative percentage share of the British vote expanded only a little, up 1.3% on 2017, while the Lib Dem vote jumped by 4.3%, easily the best 2019 performance of any British party, and the biggest rise in popular support for our party since 1983 – the next best being the Iraq-war rise of 3.8 in 2005.

The Brexiteers' victory was one of successfully playing the electoral system, not a true popular mandate. It is a sad comment on the shallowness of the sense of democratic right in British political culture that there is little sign of popular awareness at this outrage. Or is it rather English political culture? There is more anger in Scotland.

EBBING FAST

The Liberal share of the vote demands to be seen in a wider context; 11.8% is a historically pretty low level, below any of the 10 general elections held between 1974 and 2010. But that support had started ebbing fast in 2011-12, with the positioning of the party in its too-close coalition with the Conservatives. Further support was lost as the party failed to heed the warning of those by-elections and local elections: the 2015 result was the catastrophic outcome, while we looked into an abyss in 2017, disguised by the net gain of four seats that year.

The depths of that abyss is shown by the number of seats in which our vote dropped below the 5% deposit level in 2017 – 375. In 2019 we were only below that level in 136 seats. At any rate in votes, we are now back as a significant force across most of the country, something that could not be said a year ago.

Yet we must still ask why, given the Euro-election vote in May and the party's poll ratings over the summer, we did not do a lot better than that.

In perhaps the nearest historic parallel, the party went into the miners-strike election of February 1974 following a wave of by-election victories and on a rising tide in the polls. Pundits then predicted a scramble back to two-party politics as voters focussed on the polarising choice of a Heath or Wilson government. That did not happen: the Liberal vote shot up to the one-fifth level we were getting again in summer 2019.

Two main explanations have been widely offered for the failure to maintain that support into December 2019 – the party's positioning on Brexit, and Jo

Swinson's leadership.

It has also been suggested that somehow it flowed from the support offered by Lib Dem MPs for holding the early election, but it is difficult to see how. Anyway, SNP and Conservative MPs together had enough votes to pass the necessary legislation and I cannot see anything in the data indicating that would-be Liberal voters were seeking to punish our party for an unwanted election. All three parties that supported the snap election actually gained votes in December.

Brexit is a very different matter. Clearly the Revoke position came under attack, and was cited as a reason for not voting Liberal. But was it a net vote loser? John Curtice has detailed clear evidence from polling on attitudes (see *Journal of Liberal History* 105) that the party's clear anti-Brexit position was approved by those to whom it was appealing, the Remain supporter. It made them more likely to vote Lib Dem.

The precise line of the party's falling poll support lends weight to Curtice's conclusion. The party's vote in May had topped one-fifth and if Change UK is included (most of its leading figures later switched to Lib Dem), support in the Euro-elections was 23.7%. By the time parliament reassembled at the end of August, the prospective Lib Dem Westminster vote was 19%. Thus a significant part of the May peak had gone before in September the party announced its shift in position.

That 19% had remained remarkably steady for a period. I checked 39 polls published between 28 August and 25 October: there were variations between differing polling companies but not really over time during these eight weeks. The only wobble was a slight rise in mid/late-September (seemingly a positive, if temporary, response to the Revoke positioning), especially with YouGov, who twice registered the Lib Dem vote overtaking Labour. Those who maintain that the Revoke positioning was a fatal error have to explain why it took so long to make its impact.

Then, as the campaign started and the focus came on to leadership and, with Jo Swinson's encouragement, prime ministerial capacity, the party's support seemed to slip steadily away.

That is how many remember the campaign, but the detail is worth scrutiny. The 19% dipped at once – to an average of 16.6% in the cluster of seven polls published by the end of October. But then it steadied and the only substantial polling movement in the period up to 22 November was the increasing Conservative lead as the Brexit Party vote melted away.

That day was the nearest Jo got to exposure on a par with Johnson and Corbyn, in the four-leader questions programme from Sheffield. As the four prepared to perform, most of the polls were registering 15-16 Lib

1. The Variable rise in the LD vote

	All seats	Except old wins
England & Wales:		
Remain >53%	+6.8	+7.7
48-53%	+5.7	+5.9
43-48%	+4.1	+4.5
38-43%	+2.8	+3.3
<38%	+2.5	+2.8
Scotland	+2.7	+3.0

2. Credibility and Incumbency in the ‘Old Wins’

Area	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII
	New MP	Same MP	MP retires	Seat lost	ex-MP goes	ex-MP stays	Other old seat	All
Scotland	+4.1	-3.8	none	none	none	-4.0	+2.5	+1.4
Wales	+6.7	none	none	-11.6	none	none	-0.3	-1.3
Devon & Cornwall	none	none	none	none	-8.3	-1.6	-1.0	-3.0
Greater London	none	+3.2	+3.3	none	-4.5	none	+7.4	+4.4
Rest of England	+8.4	-1.4	-18.1	-10.0	-0.5	-2.2	+4.1	+1.1
GB	+6.3	-0.6	-7.4	-10.4	-3.5	-2.5	+3.3	+0.8

Table 2 shows the mean change 2017-19 in the LD share of the vote broken down by (I) the 5 seats with a new incumbent, a sitting MP facing re-election for the first time; (II) 6 MPs defending a seat already defended (even if lost in 2015 & regained in 2017); (III) two sitting MPs standing down; (IV) 4 seats lost in 2017; (V) 9 seats lost in 2015, where the ex-MP stood in 2017 but not in 2019; (VI) 5 seats lost in 2015, where the ex-MP stood in both 2017 and 2019; (VII) 38 other seats held at some point since 2009.

Dem support, hardly a significant change over the preceding three weeks. However, by the following week that dropped sharply to 13-14%, and only then slipped steadily further up to the election day in early December. It is as if over that weekend something like one in eight of those intending to vote Liberal were lost.

Personally, I much regret the conclusion to which this examination propels me – that the performance of the party’s first woman leader lost us significant support. In most past election campaigns, the extra exposure received by Liberal leader has produced a bonus (the main exception being the ‘Two Davids’ farce of 1987); this time, the more the voters saw of Jo, the less they liked her.

This analysis of falling support and voters’ answers to leadership approval ratings questions tell the same story – the party election managers who decided to put all our eggs in the Swinson basket got it wrong.

As we contemplate lessons, perhaps the right one is not to blame a person (or even a certain misogyny among the electorate) but to reflect on the appropriate response to the illiberal over-concentration of power in the Westminster party leaders’ hands. A more collective style of leadership, projecting a range of leading figures, would have made us less vulnerable.

It would have fitted a different political strategy. Curtice, in his JLH article, emphasises the failure to communicate any message except on Europe, concluding from his analysis of polling data “The party’s domestic policy programme was not so much unpopular as unknown.” The increase in support was due to a clear, consistent and principled position on one issue; where was the strategy to deepen and broaden that support by promoting a wider range of policies?

We will never know how much extra support a more

collective style of leadership with emphasis some key policies unconnected with Brexit might have won. We do know that the chosen strategy succeeded in cementing the party’s popular support as representing those who voted Remain in 2016.

The party’s vote rose almost everywhere, but not evenly. The detailed pattern shows how the European issue largely determined the local outcome. In Scotland, where the pro-EU voter had a credible alternative in the SNP; the swing to Liberals was in line with the English seats with a large Leave majority in 2016. However, even across the most Eurosceptic areas south of the border, Liberal candidates garnered a steady 2-3 percentage points swing. There are pro-EU voters everywhere. But, in England and Wales, the more there were locally, the bigger the swing to us – as clearly set out in my table 1.

However, the places where the Lib Dems lost ground were not the most eurosceptic but essentially defined by recent strength. I have defined as an ‘Old Win’ 69 seats which had had experience of a Liberal Democrat MP in the previous decade – that is, all those won in 2010 plus those defended by the party that year.

In these seats the swing averaged only 0.8 and this figure was significantly boosted by the ‘new incumbent bonus’ in seats such as Bath or Edinburgh West. Table 2 examines the various different ways in which the credibility attached to a sitting or former MP affected the 2017-19 swing.

The loss of credibility was greatest in columns III and IV in that table. In these six seats the Lib Dem vote dropped, on average, by over nine points, yet these are generally pro-Remain areas (average 2016 Remain vote 57.5%). Only the biggest drop (18 points in North Norfolk) can be explained by local euroscepticism on top of the loss of Norman Lamb’s personal vote.

Decaying credibility explains almost everywhere with

a lower Lib Dem vote in 2019. A couple of small exceptions are worth noting for the clear-cut cause involved.

In South-West Hertfordshire, the Independent candidature of former Tory cabinet minister David Gauke shaved 1.4 off the Lib Dem vote, while the shambles over putting up a Liberal candidate in Canterbury (Liberator 399) sliced 2.4 off. Strikingly, all other 25 seats with a drop of 1.3 or more since 2017 had elected LD MPs in 2005 or 2010, mostly in both years.

This marked feature of the pattern of voting is the main reason why a substantial rise in popular vote led to no increase in seats. As we want to know why the outcome in December was so disappointing, understanding this feature is key.

In part it reinforces the lesson of the impact of leadership in the national campaign.

TRIBAL BASE

Lacking a tribal base as strong as those enjoyed by the two main parties, potential Liberal voters are more swayed by identification with a personality. However, I believe there is a deeper reason, explored in the geographical rows in table 2.

Ever since the historic Liberal Party dropped to third place nearly a century ago, Liberalism retained a regional credibility and won seats in the more rural parts of the Celtic Fringe – northern Scotland, Wales and the south-west peninsula of England. This drew on their distinct cultural traditions, but was also itself a distinct political tradition. The Liberal Party here was the traditional radical force, or the anti-Tory party; Labour never quite achieved the displacement here that it did nationally. This, as well as the presence of sitting MPs, gave Liberalism its political character and standing.

That political character was deeply challenged by the 2010-15 coalition, whose memory Labour campaigners in 2019 worked hard to keep alive. Especially in areas such as Cornwall (where Labour widened its lead over the Lib Dems in the popular vote, despite Andrew George's valiant showing in St Ives), but perhaps also generally among the student vote, they appear to have succeeded. What Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander did with the party then probably has more to do with the local failures of 2019 than any current leading figure.

Table 2, however, suggests a new area of regional credibility in London. Almost all the largest rises in the Lib Dem vote in 2019 were in the wider London area, that is including the ring of London-influenced seats just beyond the M25.

This reflects the pro-EU feelings of this part of England, but the new strength of the Lib Dem vote here appears to go beyond that and suggests a regional level effect.

If that is the base on which the party can now build, it will be challengingly different to its more traditional one in northern towns and the Celtic fringe.

The party last had 11 MPs in 1979, when its national vote (14.1%) was a little higher than in 2019. Forty years ago, five of the 11 sat for rural seats in Cornwall,

“I much regret the conclusion to which this examination propels me – that the performance of the party’s first woman leader lost us significant support”

Scotland or Wales and none for the London area.

Forty years on those figures are just two from the far Scottish north but four from around London. Looking at the base from which further gains can most easily be made, the contrast is more striking.

In 1979 the party won, or was within 20% of winning, 33 seats, 16 of them in Scotland, Wales or the south-west and only three in or anywhere near London.

Now, there are 41 such winnable seats – nine in London, seven in a tight ring round the capital (epitomised by the newest gain, St Albans) and another seven not far away.

The 2019 vote, though a bit lower, is better distributed for further advance than the 1979 one. The party's vote, its main distinct policy and its zone of strength are now in alignment in mutual reinforcement. However, it has become very different party in areas of strength.

Michael Steed was president of the Liberal Party in 1978-79 and was a parliamentary candidate seven times. He wrote (or co-wrote with John Curtice) the analytical appendix to the Nuffield series of general-election studies 1964-2005

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A LOOK BACK

To mark the milestones of *Liberator* being both 400 issues and 50 years old, there's been a raid on the archives

The next few pages have a history of *Liberator*, some historic covers, histories of the associated *Liberal Revue* and *Liberator Songbook* and a reprinted article from each of *Liberator's* five decades.

This starts with Helen Tovey's guide from 1972 on how to hold protests against road schemes, from a lost era of Young Liberal direct activism.

Next is Roger Cowe's 1980s piece on the perennial (and as yet unsolved) problem of the need for liberals to understand liberalism and convince others.

From the 1990s there is one of the late Conrad Russell's excoriations of New Labour.

International coverage has long been important in *Liberator* and from the 2000s we have one of Rebecca Tinsley's attacks on misgovernment in Africa.

Finally from the 2010s, the late Simon Titley argues that Liberals will always be on weak ground if they make the case for liberty and freedom in abstract terms.

WE NAME THE GUILTY

Liberator has been put together by many people over its 50 year existence and these are the ones we've managed to identify. There are a few omitted who surfaced only briefly, and there may have been others involved in 1970, for which we cannot trace copies. Apologies to anyone missed, but this is the roll of honour

Louis Eaks 71
Peter Hain 71 and 73-75
Jackie Lawrence 71
Des Donnelan 71
Simon Hebditch 71 and 73-75
Stuart Mole 71
Helen Tovey 72-75
Glyn Jones 72-73
Gordon Lishman 73-75
Joanne Hain 73-75
Ashley Wood 73-75
Patricia Western 74-75
Richard Saunders-White 74-76
Julian Cummins 75-76
George Binney 75
Martyn Everett 75
Sandy Walkington 75-76
Pat Coleman 76-78
Manchester Collective unnamed 76-78 known to have included Roger Cowe, Paul Hannon, Pat Coleman, Catherine Furlong, Mark Hunter, Becky Bryan, Ruth Addison, Christine Asbury.
Paul Hannon 78-80
Leighton Andrews 78-79
Sally Hannon 78-07
Roger Cowe 78-82
Catherine Furlong 78 to date
Harriet Smith 78-79 and 90-06
Christine Asbury 78-82
David Coulthred 79-80
Stewart Rayment 79 to date
Peter Johnson 79 to date
Alan Leaman 79-89
Gavin Grant 79-80
Mark Smulian 78-80 and 81 to date
Mark Rathbone 80-83
Julie Sleaford 80
Peter Johnson 80 to date
Phil Lingard 81
John Tilley 81-83
Derek Jackson 81
Ralph Bancroft 81-16
Margaret Prain 82-83
Phil Middleton 82-85
Ed Lucas 82
Jonathan Calder 83 to date
Julian Carpenter 83-88
Andrew Lee 83-97
Rose Stimson 83-88
Malcolm Lowe 84-92
Colin Darracott 84-94
Rosemary Henley 86-97
Liz Barker 86-97
David Powell 86-87
Ruth Clark 86-89
Jon Summers 88-90
Simon Titley 91-14
William Tranby (John Bryant) 91 to date
Harriet Sherlock 92 to date
Ben Dunlop 91-92
Tim McNally 94 to date
Nick Winch 95 to date
Kiron Reid 95 to date
Alex Wilcock 96-09
Rob Herbert 96-98
Gina Buckley 96-04
Richard Clein 96-98, 03 to date
Gareth Epps 97 to date
Emily Chandler 98-01
Howard Cohen 01 to date
Wendy Kyrle-Pope 03 to date
Clare Wiggins 09 to date
David Grace 14 to date
George Potter 15 to date
Sarah Green 15 to date

WHAT A LONG STRANGE TRIP IT'S BEEN

Mark Smulian looks at 400 issues and 50 years of *Liberator*

In 1970 The Beatles split up, 18-year-olds got the vote, Edward Heath unexpectedly beat Harold Wilson in a general election which reduced the Liberal party to six seats, and *Liberator* was born.

It's still here, kept going by a small band of volunteers, many of whom have now been involved for more than 30 years, through to this 50th anniversary and issue 400.

Liberator launched as 'a newspaper of the Young Liberal Movement', perhaps a rather grandiose description for the eight pages of densely-typed A4 that was associated with the YLs but not owned by them.

Peter Hain - then famous as a YL anti-apartheid activist and later a Labour minister - was involved in the early editions and was later editor for a spell.

The earliest *Liberator* I've seen comes from April 1971 and covered a now-lost world where the YL conference could attract 1,000 delegates and debate "will we drop back into the rut of conventional politics, or will we set the tone for a creation of a mass radical movement campaigning at community level for a participatory democracy?"

Some of the issues covered remain pertinent now, but the most startling difference for any modern reader is the space devoted to industrial issues and trade unions.

Liberator started life in Putney - oddly enough where its administration is handled now - and around 1975 moved to Cambridge but kept the same format.

PUNK TABLOID

In September 1976 *Liberator* moved to Manchester and went punk - in keeping with the times - with a tabloid format and more anarchic layout designed to appeal to a wider young audience on the left in times of high youth unemployment, industrial unrest and a tottering Labour government.

This era marked the first use of the term 'collective' for those producing *Liberator*, as previously everyone had had assigned roles, but the Manchester version went to the other extreme by rarely listing anyone by name.

Liberator then took another turn. When Paul Hannon and Roger Cowe - who had been involved in Manchester - moved to London in 1978 they brought *Liberator* with them and turned it into a magazine format which intended "to have copy typeset for future issues".

This was the end of *Liberator* as a YL organ; from now on it became a magazine for all radical liberals.

Elements of the 'punk' layout remained alongside other more sober examples of presentation, as did some of *Liberator*'s past 'youth' targeting and the idea that it could have some significant circulation beyond the Liberal party.

Liberator began to carry campaign news from around the left in general, ran glossy covers and big

interviews.

The first issue in this format covered rent control, civil liberties and detailed accounts of fledgling Liberal campaigns in inner cities.

Despite its editorial success, this incarnation of *Liberator* didn't really work financially, and when a few survivors from the previous collective took over in the spring of 1982, the red ink frankly alarmed us.

From this crisis, the current *Liberator* was born. We cut it down to 24 pages every six weeks - much later going to 32-page bi-monthly issues - from its previous larger monthly version, and gave up any idea of newstrade distribution or street sales by enthusiasts out to rival *Socialist Worker*.

The economies made then and the forbearance of Lithosphere, still our printer, kept the show on the road but taxed the collective's ingenuity.

Newspapers were just starting to bypass traditional typesetting by direct inputting of copy by journalists, and we evolved a primitive version by requiring contributors to present their copy typed in nine centimetres galleys so we could paste it straight down.

This resulted in a bizarre mixture of fonts, aided by some mysteriously acquired Italian version of Letraset - with an awkward shortage of the letter 'e' - and illustrations pillaged from whatever other publications were to hand.

One advantage was that we had the field more or less to ourselves. The amount of publishing undertaken by the Liberal Democrats and their predecessors has been minuscule, the only other regular publication having been the now-defunct *Liberal (Democrat) News*.

Radical Press, Alliance, New Democrat, Radical Quarterly and Reformer all flared into life but rapidly vanished.

Nowadays blogs have filled some of the gap in which Liberals claimed to have important things to say but did not publish them, but they can have an unfortunate habit of descending into abuse in their comment sections.

While the technical and financial sides of *Liberator* were being salvaged, political circumstances conspired to give the magazine a new role.

These were the early days of the Alliance, and *Liberator* had fought a lonely battle as a vehement opponent of that strategy when the rest of the party was gripped by hysterical enthusiasm.

Despite the huge vote in favour of forming the Alliance, it was obvious that many on the left of the Liberal Party opposed the whole thing and their numbers grew with its malign influence on policy and the injustice of the seat share-out between Liberals and SDP.

Here was a ready made readership, and the magazine became a voice for anti-alliance Liberals.

Another boost came when *Radical Bulletin*, then a separate publication, merged with *Liberator* bringing

new subscribers and a title for what became our news section.

One of the last independent RBs had been denounced from the rostrum of assembly by Clare Brooks as “a foul and loathsome document”, which was an endorsement of sorts and *Liberator*’s later occasional satirical publications have been known among the collective as ‘foul and loathsome’.

Around this time too, the late Ralph Bancroft had the idea that *Liberator* should print and sell a songbook for the assembly Glee Club.

This has kept going ever since and is now probably the only book of political songs published in the UK, with new ones each year added to those that date back well over a century. An account of the Glee Club appears elsewhere in this issue.

ENTERTAINMENT FRANCHISE

Although not planned in advance, the songbook also marked the start of a decade or so when *Liberator* informally had the entertainment franchise for conference.

It was quickly followed - exactly when is lost - by *Liberator* putting on a conference disco. Nobody else wanted to, so we did. Perhaps wisely, we hired local DJs rather than play our own record collections for the questionable delight of the audience.

In 1984 the Liberal Revue began. This was throughout its 24-year on-off existence put on by an overlapping group of people with those running *Liberator*, which was a regular recipient of donations from it.

Nobody knew how a revue would go down, although the other parties’ successful Blue and Red revues suggested an audience must exist.

A fuller description of the revue appears elsewhere in this issue, but its director, the late Simon Titley - who would later join *Liberator* - was able to steadily push the boundaries of what the performers could get away, memorably including the ‘crucifixion’ of David Alton in 1992 and the post-merger burnings at the stake by the ‘Liberalfinder General’.

While these entertainments kept *Liberator* afloat, things were less than fun within the party. The 1983 general election result saw the Alliance stagger on eventually making the preposterous claim in 1987 that David Steel and David Owen could work together to deliver a functioning government.

We again kept *Liberator* at the centre of the battle being waged in the Liberal Party to stop Steel’s habit of caving in to every demand Owen made.

This made *Liberator* plenty of enemies, including Steel himself, who greatly resented the ‘runners and riders’ feature in 1984 which said he should go and gave the likely form on his successors.

Releasing this on the first day of the conference grabbed the headlines and infuriated his entourage, leading to his quote that *Liberator* was “a trashy rag run off on a duplicator”, an endorsement we used for years on our subscription forms.

With merger imminent in 1987 *Liberator* issued a flyer at conference aimed, largely successfully, at securing a strong team of elected negotiators on the Liberal side. We weren’t to know that - as Geoffrey Howe later said of Margaret Thatcher - the captain would go round breaking the negotiators’ stumps.

In the winter of 1987-88, emergency editions were

rushed out and frantic efforts made to keep up with the plotting as the merger appeared to unravel, then went through amid much recrimination.

After the merger, it looked as if many on the ‘anti’ side would leave politics. Ironically, it was the hostility displayed towards the new party’s Liberal heritage that kept most of us both involved in *Liberator* and the party.

We had to fight that, and were rather humbled that so many readers kept telling us that *Liberator* was a vital rallying point; more than a few said the magazine was all that kept them involved.

After the bloody aftermath of the 1989 European elections and the change of name to ‘Liberal Democrats’ things calmed down, and unlike the situation with Steel, *Liberator* then had quite a cordial relationship with Paddy Ashdown, who had been an occasional contributor and recognised that dissenting voices were a sign of political health rather than a threat.

No doubt he would have preferred a bit less dissent, but *Liberator* became more a forum for debate rather than the voice of one side of an argument. Some light relief arrived at this time when Jonathan Calder said he had written a satirical column in the style of an Edwardian Liberal, and would we try it out?

This was how the initially anonymous Lord Bonkers’ Diary was born, and became the thing many subscribers tell us they turn to first.

Liberator acquired a new regular contributor in the mid 1990s in the late Conrad Russell, a hereditary peer and prominent academic historian. Conrad’s articles were always full of insight and interest but he played another role as *Liberator*’s chief parliamentary source during the post-1997 manoeuvrings between Ashdown and Tony Blair.

Conrad despised new Labour’s authoritarianism and was determined to stop the Lib Dems’ further involvement with it. Conspiratorial late night phone calls would tip us off as to what latest outrage had happened and where to look for information.

Since then we’ve recorded and commented on the overthrow of Charles Kennedy, the Coalition and its disastrous aftermath when the hopes invested in it crumbled in the face of Nick Clegg’s arrogance and incompetence, the revolving door of leaders since then and much else.

Although they can’t be named, we’re particularly grateful for information supplied by our regular sources in parliament, party committees and other parts of the Lib Dem jungle. You know who you are.

We’ve sought to shine light into some dark corners of the party and highlight abuses of power, stupid ideas and murky plots. To anyone offended or shocked by some of these stories we can say only: “You should see the ones we didn’t publish.”

Mark Smulian is a member of the *Liberator* Collective

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A NEWSPAPER OF THE YOUNG LIBERAL MOVEMENT

APRIL 1971

This year's Young Liberal Conference sees the movement at the crossroads: do they look back to the era of conventional politics, or will we set the pace for a new era of participatory democracy? The YLM has weathered a difficult time: previous years consolidated our position at a time when most "left" organisations have experienced an appreciable drop in membership & support. And we are in a position now to build on this basic strength - to bridge the gap which at present is preventing the movement from taking off.

This is the background against which the Plymouth conference is set: the issues likely to dominate the conference are: Basis of general strategy and tactics; Communications; Important political issues raised; The economic political conditions would go a long way to providing the basic strategic framework which have been outlined in Young Liberal ideas on economic issues - or by the fact that all political approaches to economy.

Now, we have never been at the start of an ideological search of

economic issues, but have always looked a practical and independent-minded for its implementation.

Young Liberalism is not likely to provide much interest and controversy. A paper from, Brian Terry gives a look at the first major coherent approach to Young Lib from the YLM, which outlines an outline and short-term commitment will also provide linked discussion with the theories behind us, which, providing the new doctrine line-up of Christian politics across international politics.

A very good paper from the South East YLM on Housing, linked to a radical outline on Old Age Pensions, should appear off a good report from the Family Foundation on questions in which the YLM has paid inadequate attention in the past. There are also interesting proposals on education and the environment, a radical outline on politics and what changes could well lead to a new Young Liberal campaign over the next few years. While an equally radical outline on the role of the state, which will capture everyone's attention.

On foreign issues, the Common Market is likely to figure prominently. Young Liberalism has not discussed the EEC since the present situation, relative stability, and the Plymouth conference could be an important contribution to articulating debate on the next issues at issue in British

politics. The situation given in Latin America rather than other areas, such as Southern Africa, is a welcome development since the YLM has largely ignored this part of the Third World Programme.

The political action against world issues with specialism are something less likely to be covered out. On industry, some Young Liberalism will be hoping for a more radical paper than that presented at the last conference while education will provide the normal situation, with the debate concentrating this time on a totally comprehensive - nursery, primary, secondary and higher - educational system linked to the economy.

There are still some of the issues which will come up at the conference.

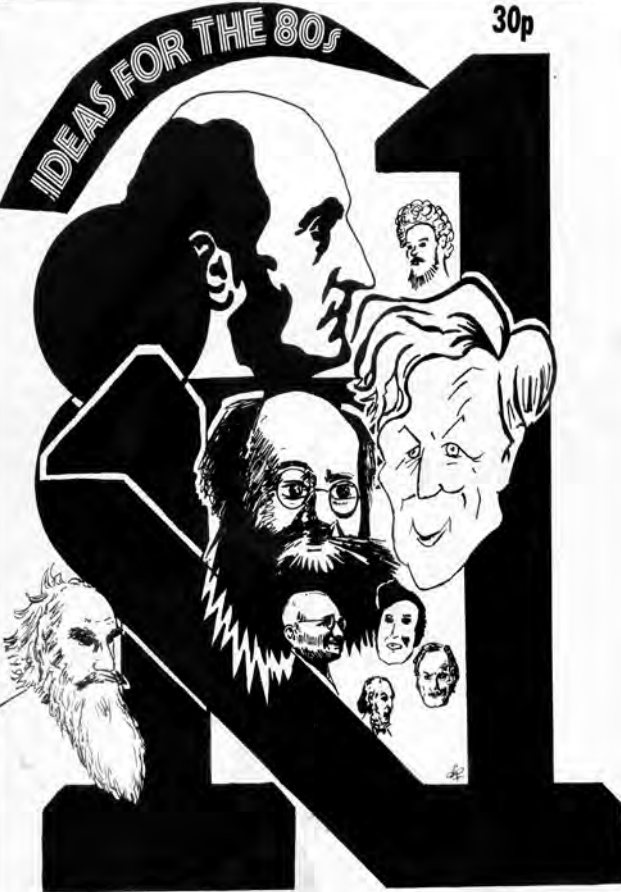
In the final analysis, however, the importance of the Plymouth conference will not rest on the limited facilities made, but on the general direction given to the movement in the future. The choice adopted at Plymouth will be a crucial factor in determining the shape of radical politics over the next few years. It is for this reason that every Young Liberal should be at Plymouth over Easter, participating in the creation of a genuine movement towards the new politics.

EDITORIAL

TOWARDS THE NEW POLITICS

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Alarm clock Britain ...



... a nation sleeps

- ☛ Why I'm working with Labour – Richard Grayson
- ☛ Forest for the trees – Tony Greaves
- ☛ How not to win a by-election – Chris Davies

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In this issue

- ☛ How we'd spend the cash - Matthew Taylor
- ☛ Foot dragging on the march - Tony Greaves
- ☛ Head and heart on asylum - Conrad Russell
- ☛ Coalition again for Scotland? - Gina Ford
- ☛ What is waiting in Iraq? - John Hemming
- ☛ Future of conference - Liz Barker

The issue of road closing has been very much to the fore in recent months. Many branches and individuals have expressed an interest in the issue - wanting to undertake closure but not having the technique or the confidence. LIBERATOR has therefore produced this guide for local road closing. Much of the guide is based on information given by those experienced in the technique of road closing. For further information or advice, please contact the Editor.

LOCAL APPROACH

The first most important step is to assess the local problem you have. Action which sounds good but has no relevance to the local situation is bound to fail. The problem could be one of four possibilities.

1. A small town or village - with a busy road through the centre, bringing noise, congestion, dirt and danger. This would concern the whole town and might involve the blocking of the road and disruption of the traffic as part of a campaign (e.g. for the building of a ring road).
2. A residential, accident-prone road, where many young children play. This would primarily concern the residents in the street and might involve the closing of the road in order to create a play space.
3. A High Street or shopping area, where shoppers are squashed onto the pavement, while their street is noisy congested and dangerous. This would involve all local shoppers and to a certain extent the shopkeepers. The aim would be to close the road in order to campaign for a pedestrian precinct or if the residents have an alternative plan, the road closing would also be an attempt to implement the alternative scheme by means of diversion signs etc.
4. You may be faced with a situation whereby there is a traffic problem but no-one really cares about it and has accepted it as part of modern living. In this case, a symbolic demonstration or sit-down in the road with leaflets, banners etc. might be useful in order to get the issue discussed.

LOCAL INVOLVEMENT

One of the vital aspects of a closing roads strategy is that it incorporates the community

politics approach and that the campaign is built up around and by the local residents in the particular communities to be affected. There are two initial approaches to this.

1. If a lot of local interest exists around a problem in a city or town, then the YLs can take the initiative in calling a meeting of all the local groups and interested individuals in order that an action group can be formed.
2. If a specific problem affecting one or two streets is identified, it is very likely that, despite dissatisfaction, nothing will have been done by the residents. The YLs can act as a catalyst and by using the questionnaire technique can contact all the residents. This involves using the questionnaire in order to approach people. (It also gives you results which can be used as leverage on the Council). However, the main point is to find out what people really think and who the activists are, whether people can hold meetings in their houses etc. In this way a street meeting can be held and possibly a Street Committee formed. Once an action group has been established, it is obviously vital that all the usual political activity is undertaken - e.g. petition to Local Council/Ministry of Environment, letters to press, posters, stickers, leaflets etc. YLs can offer their knowledge and facilities for helping in this. The aim should be to make the issue as well known as possible.

One of the benefits of using all the conventional protest channels is that one soon realises the ineffectiveness of them. However, depending on the area, it is likely that many local residents will not be prepared to take the initial step in going so far as to break the law by physically blocking the road. In this case it is important for YLs to identify the real militants and the other people who will help to form a planning group, which can remain in contact with the wider group, but can take the action further. Once the first step is taken others are likely to join in.

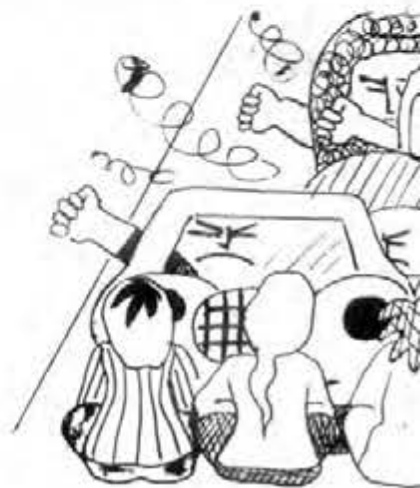
Call a planning group of all those who are committed to closing the road. Don't just invite anyone who may be interested - you may get

bogged down with arguing the case instead of planning the action.

CLOSING ROADS a liberator guide

PLANNING MEETING

1. Define your aims and target. Don't confuse the issue. Decide on a date and stick to it.
2. Decide on your method of closing the road - depending on the issue. It can be either an attempt to close it for as long as possible - e.g. by physical barricades, chains etc. or non-permanent closure for a specific time. This is more likely to involve human barricades. Alternatively, you may want to attempt to re-direct the traffic so that the road concerned is emptied of cars.
3. Get a map from a local newsagent. Study the best way of closing the road.
4. You must delegate responsibilities:-
 - a) Making posters - a clear slogan is vital. e.g. 'People Before Roads' 'Shop in Peace' 'Ban the Car' or 'Close ---- Road'. They must be well produced as they may appear on television or in photos.



NG S ator

HELEN TOVEY

b) Produce your own duplicated leaflet. This must be well-produced. Give clear reasons why the road is being closed. State all the action that has gone on before. Don't get carried away with political clichés. They don't mean anything and will put people off.

c) Make a banner using unbleached calico and black felt tip markers. This will help in the blocking of the road.

d) Get equipment, depending on the type of action. Poles, chains, padlocks and handcuffs must be obtained well in advance. If a residents take-over of the street is planned, then 'carnival' type apparatus may be needed - e.g. balloons, bands, whistles, football rattles, etc.

5. Decide on your attitude to the police. Either consult them in advance and risk the action being prevented by masses of police (You could lose credibility this way) or keep the whole thing secret.

6. Decide on a suitable time to announce to the press that ----- group is intending to close ---- road in the near future. This

could coincide with the Council's rejection of a petition. Press Releases must be clear and well written, type them double-spaced and in the past tense - as a report. Make sure you give a contact name and telephone number.

7. If you haven't already done so, now is the time to establish sympathetic contacts with the press.

BEFORE THE DAY

1. Check all equipment.
2. Make sure everyone knows exactly what to do, where to stand, when to move etc. If you are relying on a mass of people to spill out onto the road, you need someone to take the lead.
3. If possible, arrange for two 'known' cars to be at the head of the queue when the traffic is stopped. This prevents the possibility of cars not stopping!
4. Brief all participants as to the possibility of arrest. Make sure that you all know your legal rights (Street Aid, 33 Southampton Street, WC2. do a leaflet on this) Assure people that they will be helped afterwards.
5. Send out a Press Release or 'phone the day before (if it is being kept secret). You needn't give exact details as to what you intend to do, but make it dramatic enough for them to be interested. Arrange for someone to be responsible for meeting the press at an arranged venue, a short distance away from the place of action. Nothing is more off-putting than for demonstrators to arrive and to see a crowd of pressmen waiting for them.
6. Contact local T.V. and radio stations. Make sure newspaper picture desks are informed too.

ON THE DAY

1. Activists should meet at an allotted place and time. Have last minute briefings to remind everyone.
2. One person should be responsible - once the action starts - for phoning ambulance and fire stations - warning them that the road is now closed.
3. This extra person should also be an 'observer' to watch exactly what happens. Note down any police brutality, who is arrested etc. Go down to the local police station to help those being detained.

4. In the event of any arrests - resist non-violently - e.g. sit down. It is important that passers-by do not get frightened.
5. If the action is successful for a short time, continue with further closings on other days. You should get more people each time.

LEWES CLOSURE

Peter May, one of the Oxford Street participants, was very involved in a road closing in Lewes, Sussex, in the autumn of '69. The road was a trunk coast road which passed through a narrow shopping street. There were plans for a ring road.

Things started when a small group ran a petition to close the road. This served as a formal protest to the Council and also showed the strength of feeling in the area. An unofficial committee of 7 people of all ages was formed and the road closing plans formulated. They decided to inform the police in advance of their intention, which resulted in threats of arrest. However, on the morning of the proposed closure, the police diverted the traffic along another road! However this only affected a small proportion of the traffic.

The road was closed simultaneously at both ends. Two cars were arranged to stop at a certain time and at that point about 15 people began to walk in a continuous circle, crossing and re-crossing the road. A delivery van was arranged to deliver some goods just at that point. The cars left in the road were allowed out one by one, until the whole road was clear. They kept this up for half an hour as previously stated. Other residents including lots of Mums with prams, spilled onto the road once the action had been started. There were no arrests.

Two weeks later they repeated the action this time with 500 people. After further action which included driving cars very slowly down the street, the result was that the Ministry of Transport arranged for the ring road to be built in 9 months instead of the scheduled two years.

This is an example of a successful road closing. Let LIBERATOR know if you intend to take up any of the ideas in this guide, and keep us in touch with any new developments.



BREAKING THE CHA

Liberalism is not easy, to understand, to communicate, or to implement. One of the greatest mistakes we can make is to look for easy ways of doing all these three, to match the easy solutions which our political opponents put forward.

This is not just a philosophical matter. I believe that the most important challenges to Liberals are firstly to live out their ideals, and secondly to convince others that they are right, and this is long term and somewhat nebulous. But my distrust of easy solutions applies equally to the short term - to tactical, organisational and policy arguments.

There are no quick and easy steps to Liberalism, or to power for Liberals, which is of course not the same thing at all.

It's true that there are some campaigning techniques which have proved successful, and should continue to do so. It is also true that there are some policies which could prove popular, and fit our ideals. And there are some organisational changes which could make the party more effective.

'There are no quick and easy steps to Liberalism, or to power for Liberals, which is of course not the same thing at all'

The techniques are increasingly well known, having achieved notoriety in Liverpool, and considerable success elsewhere as well.

They have unfortunately become synonymous with 'community politics', which is sad because this term is much more than just a technique.

True, the techniques used in Liverpool and elsewhere are not just techniques. They are a style of campaigning, irreverent, suspicious of bureaucracy and the status quo, and prepared to use any non violent means to achieve obviously just ends.

But this style is still no more than that, and can be used (as the National Front know well enough) with any kind of politics. All the same it is successful, and it should be used much more widely throughout the party, in parliamentary action and European campaigning and not just at the local level.

To be Liberal, the style must be allied to Liberal policies. And there are naturally areas of policy which I think are not sufficient to match the challenge of the 1980s. I say 'naturally' because there are almost as many views on policy as there are people prepared to write them.

But there are undoubtedly gaps, and it seems to me that they are mainly in the

sphere of economics. That could be just because this is where my main interests lie, but I think it is also because economic issues are particularly difficult for Liberals. Too many Liberals have been happy to ignore them, and concentrate instead on the safe ground of civil liberties and human rights.

If we are to succeed we cannot ignore the much more fundamental economic and industrial issues, especially over the next decade as Britain, perhaps ahead of the rest of the world, comes to terms with limited resources.

I have posed this as one issue. In fact it is a 'can of worms', and family size at that.

The question of growth is the most obvious component, and influences many others. The Liberal party has been ahead of its major rivals in turning away from economic growth, but is still a long way from understanding, let alone finding solutions for, the consequences.

One of the major consequences is in international relations. We must work out a realistic policy for the '80s on international trade, and third world development. And with our traditional understanding of worldwide interdependence we must work for truly international, rather than just national or European solutions.

There are equally difficult problems at home. The Liberal party is still schizophrenic about trade unions. And we need to work out realistic policies for social services, and for industrial and 'social' investment - policies which make sense for the '80s, and make sense when put together with other policies.

All this might seem a tall order, especially since the party has concerned itself over the past few years more with parliamentary strategy than with major policy issues.

But I am confident that it can and will be done. There will of course be aspects of policy which I, and many others of varying political stance, disagree with. But on the whole, I think the party will work out sensible and useful policies on all the issues I mentioned, as well as improving others. There are lively minds in the party who are not afraid to face this challenge, or to challenge conventional 'sacred cows' - in the party itself or in a wider sense.

Having worked out the 'right' policies we then face the greater challenges which I referred to at the start - to practice what we preach, and to persuade the unconverted.

Neither of these are easy, and I am not nearly so confident that they will be achieved. Without their achievement even the best policies may produce a better



ROGER COWE suggests that the main challenge is in the economic and industrial sphere. But more importantly, it is for Liberals to understand Liberalism.

society, but it will not be a Liberal one.

The first step is to convince the unconverted - to explain what our policies are and why we believe they are right. To explain what kind of society we want.

And the 'unconverted' are not just those who vote Conservative, Labour, NF or whatever, or even those who don't vote at all. They are also Liberals, voters and 'activists' who do not think about politics, so do not understand Liberal policies and cannot begin to explain them

AIN OF IGNORANCE



policy gaps which need filling are in the more important than policy is the need to be able to convince others.

or to put them into practice in their own lives.

The extent of this 'apoliticism' is alarming. It is not of course peculiar to the Liberal party, but is more understandable in other parties which do not challenge the status quo and do not attempt to involve people in their politics.

It is evidenced at constituency level in the 'jumble sale mentality'. Fundraising becomes the major, if not the only, activity. And because the funds are raised

so painstakingly they are jealously guarded, and not to be spent on 'unimportant' local activity. Instead they are used to finance yet another parliamentary lost deposit, and perhaps another affiliation fee to support a central organisation which does nothing for anyone except those involved in it.

Every party has its 'little old ladies', of course. But many so-called activists in the Liberal party seem to be 'little old ladies' too, in spirit if not in form.

So far as I can see this applies to all sections of the party, including the Young Liberals. And this failure to develop political thought, through informed political debate and argument, must be the biggest indictment of all, for a party which ostensibly aims to help people take power for themselves and thereby change the face of Britain.

This position could, but should not in my opinion, be blamed on the sterile political atmosphere in Britain. But this wider problem is certainly a greater obstacle to explaining Liberal values and beliefs to a wider audience.

And it is the most depressing problem facing us, because it is not something that we can do much about on our own. It is a deep seated problem, which starts in our schools where children are taught 'facts', and taught not to challenge them. It continues in higher education, which has depressingly low standards so far as original thought is concerned.

And it is enhanced, it seems, in just about all our political and social institutions, where phoney antagonists fight phoney wars, distorting evidence to suit themselves, suppressing meaningful debate, and creating myths to support their positions.

What can we do about it? Not a lot, at present, and not much more, even with a more politicised Liberal party. We can work through all the usual committees, of course, and we can politicise *Focus* leaflets. But the power of the established propaganda machines is tremendous, and will take a tremendous amount of effort to match.

This is a more significant problem than it might first seem, and more immediate.

For without a more informed and more political electorate the Liberal party is unlikely to come to power. Or it will only come to power through the faults of its rivals or the misunderstandings of the electorate.

This is a problem which the left of the Labour party faces right now, in its dual struggle for power in the Labour party and power in the country.

It seems obvious that in the present political climate, if the Labour left does gain control, then the Labour party

stands little chance of forming the next government.

That might be good for Liberals in terms of votes, but it is certainly not good in terms of achieving our aims. For if we get elected by 'false pretences' (deliberately or otherwise) we will not stay elected long enough to implement radical policies. Paradoxically, to be in a position to implement them, we would first have to deny them.

This is a vicious circle which we must try and break into, but the present system strengthens that circle and makes it more difficult.

This was the first major problem I mentioned. We can at least make a start to it by having a campaign of 'internal education' throughout the party, and hoping that will lead to greater things.

The second problem I described as practising what we preach, being Liberal as well as believing Liberal.

Many of us have actually started already, and the party is apparently more Liberal than ten years ago. But it is not easy, in an illiberal society, and it depends greatly on the politicisation of Liberals. For how can you be Liberal if you don't understand what Liberalism is about?

There is still a long way to go. You cannot wipe out a lifetime of illiberal conditioning in just a few years. There is still racism and sexism in all of us. We still like to follow leaders. If the stakes are high enough we would still rather win by deception, or even force, rather than by force of argument.

'There is still a long way to go. You cannot wipe out a lifetime of illiberal conditioning in just a few years'

We still find it difficult to work cooperatively, in Liberal company as well as at work itself. And we find it difficult to share and to care.

In short we find it difficult to combine the individual freedom in Liberalism with the collective responsibility which is an equal part of it.

As I said at the start, Liberalism is not easy. And we will not achieve it quickly.

Hopefully by 1990 we will have made some progress, with more appropriate policies, with Liberals who understand them and can communicate them to others, and in an atmosphere which is more conducive to true political debate.

Then, perhaps, we will have even more chance of living Liberally.

BLAIR'S BLACK HOLE SUCKS IN POWER

Prime minister Tony Blair is carrying out a massive centralisation of power behind a smokescreen of decentralist rhetoric. Closed candidate lists, an appointed upper house and cowed MPs are good reasons to suspect his intentions, argues Conrad Russell, Liberal Democrat social security spokesman in the House of Lords.

The constitutional reform programme has always been defended, both by us and Labour, as a process of decentralising power. The stated objective has been, and remains, to return power closer to the people, to disperse it, and thereby to make it more accountable. These are good objectives. If that is the effect of the programme, it will be to be very warmly welcomed, and will be a major landmark in the reform of our political system.

It is in that hope that I have supported it, do support it, and will continue to support it. Yet it is not to be taken for granted that it will automatically have this effect. Like a child, it needs upbringing as well as conception and birth. Since it is a natural tendency of governments of all complexions to seek after more and more power, they will instinctively try to use the new constitutional system in ways which maximise their power. The system must be designed to make this difficult for them. That is one of the big tasks facing our representatives on the Cabinet Committee.

The most immediate danger lies in the potential for confusion between the authority of the political party and that of the state. Some weeks ago, the Labour Party proposed to make a contract with its MPs. It escaped their notice that they cannot do this. They are not the employer of their MPs, who are employees of the Crown.

While Tony Blair is decentralising the state, he is busy centralising his party. Power is thus travelling on a two-lane road, one going in to the centre, and the other out to the periphery. If there is more traffic going one way than the other, we may end up with a system which is more centralised than it was before.

Consider the first case of Scotland. The point of the tax-raising power in the Scottish Parliament was to give the Scots control over their own level of taxation. Yet the decentralisation offered to the Scottish Parliament is not offered to the Scottish Labour Party. Tony Blair has promised there will be no increases in income tax in this parliament. Jeremy Paxman, in the

first week of the election campaign, asked him: "What, not even in Scotland?" Tony Blair gawped at him, clearly at first failing to understand the question. A few days later, once it had been explained to him, he announced that a Labour prime minister of Scotland would not be allowed to use the tax-raising powers. Tony Blair would remain in control, and levels of Scottish taxation would still be determined in London. Where is the decentralisation in that?

In elections to the Scottish Parliament, Labour candidates are being very carefully selected. Once they are chosen, they will be ranked in a closed list, whose order voters will be unable to alter. When people like Dennis Canavan are left off the list, are they left off because they have displeased Scots, or because they have displeased Tony Blair? Is it going to be like 1066 And All That's picture of the old Irish Parliament - the Scots should have a parliament, but the English should choose all the members in it?

Unless David Steel can lead our peers to victory over the Commons, we are getting closed lists for elections to the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, and the Welsh Assembly. The parties, not the voters, will choose who represents the voters. There will be no accountability of members to the electorate. The incentive to those who want to keep their seats will be to please their party, in order to get higher on the list. They will not be able to get more votes by pleasing their constituents.

Is this a democratic system, and does it return power to the people? We and the Conservatives are at least choosing our candidates by a process of internal party democracy, but Labour are choosing theirs through their National Executive Committee. As the state is decentralised, the party is centralised. Will Tony Blair be able to choose his MPs as freely as he chooses the staff of his private office?

If the Jenkins Commission should offer us a closed list, even though this is outside its terms of reference,

could our party remain united in any position in the resulting referendum?

I used to wonder why Tony Blair was so keen on the principle of elected mayors. I simply did not see what a useful purpose it served, and wondered whether it was just a gimmick. The penny suddenly dropped when I read that Ken Livingstone "will not be allowed" to stand. The NEC is expected to choose the candidates who will be allowed to compete for the Labour nomination. If this principle is extended to other cities, we will find, wherever Labour is in control, Tony Blair will be choosing the mayors as well. This ends a tradition of elected English local government which, for once, actually is 1,000 years old. We will be governed instead by appointed agents of central government, as much agents of centralisation as the Intendants under the French Ancien Regime. Is this returning power to the people?

In Tony Blair's lecture to the Institute of Public Policy Research, 'Leading The Way', we read that local government has a changing role. "If you are unwilling or unable to work to *the* (my italics) modern agenda, then the government will have to look to other partners to take on your role." What does this mean? I am afraid I can guess.

This centralisation by the back door does not necessarily taint all the constitutional reform programme. The Human Rights Bill looks like the most obvious exception. That genuinely passes Alan Beith's test of a government coming into office committed to reducing its own power.

The Lord Chancellor, who is largely responsible for this Bill, is the source of many genuinely liberal impulses in the Cabinet, and like Pugin, he is worth preserving. Yet even here cutbacks in legal aid may threaten the Bill's genuinely good purposes.

Freedom of Information could be another genuine exception, yet we hear distant echoes of a mighty battle about whether that Bill will be allowed to work. Jack Straw, asking for an exemption for the police, then steering through the Lawrence Inquiry, is symptomatic of the schizophrenia at the heart of New Labour. If our representatives on the Cabinet Committee can make that ambiguity come out the right way, they will have done something important to justify their presence there.

It is not coincidence that the two measures in the constitutional reform programme with the greatest potential to limit the power of the executive are the two which transfer power to judges. The independence of the judiciary needs perpetual defending, and I have not forgotten Nancy Seear saying: "If my party should ever abandon the independence of the judiciary, then I would promptly abandon my party". At present though, all is calm on that front.

However, judicial control is not an alternative to Parliamentary control. It is complementary to it. They are two different types of control, and designed for different problems. Judges may deal with sudden acts of arbitrary power, but they cannot check plain errors of political judgement or bad drafting of legislation. Only

Parliament could have stopped the Child Support Agency, or the Football Spectators Bill.

This government's attitude to Parliament is suspect. All governments say they want the House of Lords as a revising chamber, yet they never want to be revised when the House of Lords tries it. To have a revising chamber only when you want it is tantamount to having no revising chamber at all. There is nothing new about that. What is new is the proposal to follow the abolition of the hereditary peers (which is not wrong) by setting up a purely nominated assembly, to endure, like the system which has lasted from 1911 to today, until further notice. That must be suspect.

A Government which can pick all its Scottish, Welsh and European members of Parliament, all its mayors, and all the members of the House of Parliament which is supposed to check it when it goes to far, is not a government which believes in decentralising power. It is essential that the abolition of hereditary peers should be followed, within a fixed timetable, by the provision of replacement members of the Second Chamber who are not chosen by Tony Blair. A nominated system which might have been tolerable a few years ago is not tolerable when it is seen as part of an overall programme for the centralisation of the power to choose people in political authority.

What of the House of Commons? This is supposed to have the dual role, both of sustaining a government, and of criticising and advising it. The task of balancing this dual role falls on Government back-benchers. There is not much sign that Tony Blair values this balance. When Andrew Mackinlay complained of "fawning, obsequious" planted questions, Blair replied by praising him for independence of mind, "and I will see that he retains it". The threat was of Goldfinger quality. Many of the new Labour MPs are, if one knows them outside the House, able people. You would not guess it to hear them in the chamber.

It is also the task of the Commons to act as a representative think-tank - to float ideas being discussed within government circles, and to give them an airing and a scrutiny before the Government decides to adopt them. This vital function of back benchers has been almost abandoned to Demos and the IPPR. Again power is, in effect, passing from elected representatives to people chosen by Tony Blair.

The House of Commons is also supposed to be a training school in the exercise of political judgement. From that training school, the next Cabinet ministers and the next leader should emerge. In fact, it is clear that those who exercise judgement of their own will be eliminated from competition. Since Labour have not yet started singing: "O King, live for ever!", they must admit that one day Tony Blair will need a successor. Will he (or she) have to start learning political judgement after moving into 10 Downing Street?

The Blair-Ashdown Declaration said the two parties will not agree on all measures of constitutional reform. That is an important recognition. It is an equally important one that negotiations between the parties on constitutional reform must be between two competing philosophies.

AFRICA'S LEADERS SAINTS TO THUGS?

The west is outraged over Robert Mugabe's oppression in Zimbabwe but it keeps backing African leaders who turn tyrant, says Becky Tinsley

Once more, Africa's leaders have declined to give Robert Mugabe his marching orders. The conventional wisdom is that they are reluctant to castigate an anti-colonialist stalwart of the liberation struggle. But does 'solidarity forever' explain it, or is it part of a pattern?

Only Julius Nyerere of Tanzania denounced Idi Amin, hardly a guerrilla leader of the Mugabe 'long march' pedigree, for slaughtering 300,000 of his fellow Ugandans.

The continent's rulers averted their eyes during the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and the carve-up of the Democratic Republic of Congo where, the Lancet calculates, four million people have died since 1998. There was no unified condemnation throughout 25 years of slaughter in southern Sudan (an estimated 2-4 million dead). Nor does the Africa Union demand that the racist Arab junta ruling Sudan stop killing black Africans in Darfur (200,000-400,000 dead since 2004).

Frustrated by Africa's repeated failure to hold its own to account, the west rails at Mugabe, leaving African intellectuals asking where was the uproar when Mugabe 20,000 killed in Matabeleland in the 1980s.

(And, by the same token, if Tony Blair cared so much about the Iraq, why didn't he sign the parliamentary early day motions when Saddam gassed the Kurds in 1988?)

BRUTAL AUTOCRAT

Zimbabwe's octogenarian dictator is without argument a brutal autocrat who has murdered thousands and plunged his country into economic chaos. His indifference to his peoples' suffering is shocking, even by the standards of the privileged African elites running many of the continent's 53 countries.

However, given the roll call of recent murder and mayhem in DRC, Sudan and Rwanda, some Africans wonder why Mugabe is being singled out.

They reel off the names of monsters like Mobutu in Zaire and Bokassa in the Central African Republic, who were propped up by Washington and London during the cold war. Bokassa, lest we forget, spent a third of his poverty-wracked nation's revenues on his own coronation, a Busby Berkeley-style event attended by world leaders who happily accepted Bokassa's champagne despite the starving masses beyond the palace gates.

So, is it the fate of white Zimbabweans that concentrates our minds on Mugabe? Our selective fury and equally our

wide-eyed optimism when we find new heroes bemuses African commentators.

Both Blair and George Bush have made a great show of hailing African paragons who will redeem the continent, turning the page on decades during which the elites have stolen the wealth of their nations and oppressed their wretched citizens.

So keen are we to appoint saints, that we cannot face the central point about power and government in Africa: most members of the small ruling class care nothing for their illiterate and downtrodden masses. They are quietly amused by our desire to provide schools, hospitals and roads to people they hardly consider human. No wonder they help themselves to the aid money that we naively hand over.

Consider this comment from a Cameroonian lawyer, and a member of her country's elite. Driving through the Liberian jungle, monitoring the 2005 poll, she objected to soliciting voters' views about the election process. Pointing at a line of ragged, thin, shoeless women carrying water jugs on their heads along a seemingly endless road, she grumbled in the style of Jane Austen's Lady Catherine de Burgh, "They are stupid and they smell. Look how black they are! Disgusting!"

As Kofi Annan told a meeting of the now defunct Organisation of African Unity in 2000, "We have mismanaged our affairs for decades, and we are suffering the accumulated effects."

Well, Kofi, not so much 'we' as 'they': the children of below average height in rural areas who have to walk 10 miles if they want education; the one in five babies who die before they reach 12 months of age because of simple and preventable diseases; the one in 12 women who die in childbirth; the one million dying of malaria each year.

Despite evidence to the contrary, we persist in shutting our eyes to the grim reality about Africa's ruling classes. After meeting Nigeria's President Obasanjo, Blair giddily announced that "There is a new generation of African leaders" committed to reforming the troubled continent. Certainly Obasanjo is an improvement on what came before.

However, Human Rights Watch found that, in one Nigerian state alone, the man in charge took a daily travel allowance of \$90,000. Of Nigeria's 35 state governors, 31 are being investigated by the economic and financial crimes commission. When an anti-corruption minister gets his teeth into rooting out the most flagrant kleptomaniacs in Nigeria, he tends to be sacked or promoted elsewhere.

The Carter Center did not bother to monitor the April 2007 vote because it was a foregone conclusion that there would be massive fraud. This may become monotonous, but perhaps our lack of outrage is connected to Nigeria's oil.

Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia was one of Blair's 'new generation' in 2002, leaving us to wonder about his judgement or the advice he receives from the Foreign Office.

A former US State Department Africa boffin recalled that, within five minutes of meeting Zenawi ten years ago, he knew he was in the presence of a murderous thug. Still, Blair elevated Zenawi to the pantheon of worthies, praising his "enlightened approach to the continent's problems".

There followed the usual sad revelations about corruption, nepotism and human rights abuses, including shooting peacefully protesting students, and mass arrests of those who dare voice their opposition to his rule. During my visit last year, there were nine bombs in public places that virtually every man and woman in the street assumed had been set by the government itself, Putin-style.

BLATANT CORRUPTION

Zenawi's corruption is blatantly obvious. Anyone who bothered to open their eyes would notice that the region from which he and his government ministers hail receives a massively disproportionate slice of public spending for schools, hospitals and infrastructure. Nevertheless, the UK Department for International Development is increasing its aid to Ethiopia from £60m in 2004 to £130m this year.

Uganda's Museveni was another golden boy until he started locking up opposition leaders, and changing the constitution to get a third term. "Only I have sufficient vision to lead this country, and that's that," he declared.

Ghana's John Kufuor is currently enduring the same simplistic adoration. As a British parliamentarian familiar with Africa remarked, "I'm worried for poor John because they'll set him up as a saint and then tear him down again when it turns out he is human. They don't judge him as a politician but as an African, a special category immune from the normal rules. It is fundamentally racist."

Apart from racism, perhaps economic self-interest plays its part in our value-system. Why, for instance, do we not heap abuse on Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, the leader of Equatorial Guinea? Savvy Africans know the answer: Equatorial Guinea has the third largest oil reserves in sub-Saharan Africa.

According to a US Senate report, Obiang and his family have stolen at least \$700m of oil revenues. Global Witness and other human rights groups rank it among the 10 most appalling regimes in the world. The US State Department concedes that Obiang treats the nation's oil as his personal property, while his people live and die short lives in extreme poverty (121 out of 177 countries on the UN Human Development Index). He rigs elections and spends 10% of the GNP on the military. Nevertheless, the State Department insists, Obiang is better than his predecessor (his uncle, whom he had shot).

But surely the Pol Pot award for killing the highest percentage of one's own people must go to Field Marshall Omar al-Bashir of Sudan. His can claim credit for an estimated 2-4 million in the south, and between 200,000-400,000 in Darfur.

Sudan has no free press or freedom of speech, and it imposes Sharia law on everyone, irrespective of their religion. Africans despise Bashir: just listen to phone-ins on

the BBC World Service. Why doesn't the west pour scorn upon him, Mugabe-style? Happily for the repressive junta ruling Khartoum, Sudan has oil, and the regime is now our partner in the war on terror, having once given Osama Bin Laden shelter for five years.

A Kenyan opposition MP wrote recently, "Like chiefs, emperors, kings and other slave dealers of old, our presidents and prime ministers preside over a system of power that continues to make our peoples 'hewers of wood and drawers of water'."

They allow the continent's natural riches to be siphoned off, "so long as their grotesque and gratuitous lifestyles, and those of their families and hangers-on, can be guaranteed."

While the UK's DfID boasts about promoting good governance, transparency, sustainable development and building capacity, Africans not in limousines tend to be either mystified or angered by our actions. Many poor Africans refuse to believe we give away millions of pounds: they never see any sign of it. Others ask, why are you propping up the people who steal from us and oppress us?

Mike Sansom at African Initiatives goes from one Tanzanian village to the next, explaining how much aid has been earmarked for local schools. He provokes formerly timid villagers to demand answers from their local and regional rulers. If we wanted to promote good governance, we would be supporting groups like African Initiatives, or One World Action, which trains illiterate Bangladeshi women to stand for local councils and agitate for change.

Will a Conservative government take a more cynical view of "Africa's new generation of leaders"? David Cameron is leading a group of Tories to Rwanda this summer to work on community projects, explicitly supporting President Paul Kagame. (Some might ask if the Rwandan people have not suffered enough already).

Cameron and Andrew Mitchell, who shadows DfID, are fulsome in their boyish enthusiasm for the guerrilla-turned-father-of-the-nation. There is not a whiff of corruption about Kagame, and he has far-sighted plans to lift his people out of poverty.

However, any future DfID secretary would be well advised to read Human Rights Watch's scrupulously researched reports about any country he intends to support, a notion Mitchell dismissed because he has "met the man several times and had dinner with him".

Meanwhile, we are confounded when Africa's big men close ranks around Mugabe. Abdelatif Ismail of the Darfur Centre for Human Rights suggests it has nothing to do with solidarity with a fellow anti-colonialist. "It is about not setting a precedent. No one wants the spotlight turned on them."

The tragedy of Africa is its leaders, and its salvation will be its people, once they are given a voice.

Becky Tinsley is director of Waging Peace, which campaigns for Darfur

THE ONLY WAY IS ETHICS

Liberals will always be on weak ground if they argue for liberty and freedom in purely abstract terms, says Simon Titley

When Liberals express their values, the words they most commonly use are 'liberty' and 'freedom'. But what does this ethic actually mean in concrete terms?

The great liberal intellectual Ralf Dahrendorf was in no doubt what liberty meant. He began his 1974 Reith Lectures ('The New Liberty') by recalling an unpleasant wartime experience from his teenage years:

"The elementary desire to be free is the force behind all liberties, old and new. Indeed, there is little need to explain what this desire is, and some of us have found out about it in ways which we will not forget.

"I can still see myself, pacing up and down my cell in the prison of Frankfurt-on-Oder in November 1944 (I was 15-and-a-half at the time), clutching an almost blunt pencil which I had pinched when the Gestapo officer during my first interrogation had left the room, and trying to write down all the Latin words which I could recollect from school on a piece of brown paper which I had pulled from under the mattress of my bunk.

"The youthful organisation which had brought me into this predicament had been called, somewhat pretentiously, 'Freedom Association of High School Boys of Germany', and it had combined childish things like wearing a yellow pin on the lapel with more serious matters such as the distribution of fly-sheets against the SS-state, which had now caught up with me.

"The concentration camp afterwards was a very different experience, really; dark mornings queuing in icy east wind for a bowl of watery soup, the brutal hanging of a Russian prisoner who had stolen half a pound of margarine, slices of bread surreptitiously passed to a sick or an old man: a lesson in solidarity, perhaps, and, above all, one in the sacredness of human lives.

"But it was during the ten days of solitary confinement that an almost claustrophobic yearning for freedom was bred, a visceral desire not to be hemmed in, neither by the personal power of men, nor by the anonymous power of organisations."

When you have been through an experience like that, any justification of the case for liberty seems superfluous. But most of us have not been through an experience like that, or anything remotely resembling it. We have grown up in a stable democracy where, although things are by no means perfect, we do not live in terror. So the case for liberty has to be argued.

And that argument is made more difficult by the fact that, on the face of it, nobody disagrees with us. Everybody says they believe in democracy and freedom nowadays. No one ever argues for dictatorship the way they did in the 1930s. And in countries less fortunate than our own, even the most dictatorial state feels obliged to call itself "The Democratic Republic of (a gesture that Adolf Hitler never bothered with).

Hitler never bothered with elections either (at least

not after he had won his first one). But these days, every dictatorship needs the imprimatur of an election, even if it has been blatantly rigged. So in a superficial sense, the argument has already been won.

But we know that the situation remains highly deficient. The argument is more subtle. It is about how one interprets 'liberty' and 'freedom', and what priority one attaches to them.

Whenever dictatorships are challenged about the lack of freedom, the reply is invariably along similar lines. Freedom and democracy are all very well, they say, but the priority is to feed the people, or build the economy, or ensure security, or wait until the people are better educated. The implication is not that freedom and democracy are necessarily bad, rather that they are not a priority and would get in the way of doing more important things.

MUSCULAR LABOURISM

The idea that liberty is a second-order issue is also widespread among liberals' opponents here in Britain. The Labour Party may have been reinvented by Tony Blair as a thoroughly bourgeois animal, but there remains a thick seam of working class social conservatism running through the party – a culture of muscular Labourism typified by John Reid and David Blunkett, with a visceral contempt for liberal values.

This is why the Labour Party is uncomfortable with civil liberties or the environment. The gruff, tough, Labourist regards both issues as effete bourgeois concerns, and therefore a sign of weakness, and consequently an object of disgust. When Labour MP David Lammy recently extolled the virtues of spanking children, he quickly found the G-spot of that reactionary culture.

Not that the thoroughly bourgeois Mr Blair was any better. True, he helped advance the cause of gay rights, for example. The trouble was, he believed that rights were something the government granted to you instead of something you already had. And insofar as New Labour granted us rights, it regarded this as some sort of indulgence; it certainly wasn't central to Blair's idea of what it meant to be 'modern'.

Blair subscribed to the idea that freedom is a luxury, a political dessert that you can eat only when you've finished your greens. As the post 9/11 response to terrorism showed, Blair and his allies believed that there was a direct trade-off between liberty and security. This belief positioned liberty merely in the 'nice to have' category, where it could always be sacrificed if expedient.

The Conservative Party may have seemed more sympathetic to civil liberties, but its commitment to freedom remains doubtful. One only has to consider the party's hostility to the Human Rights Act to see that.

Elderly provincial Conservatives remain suspicious of freedom; it's all well and good but it can sometimes

go too far. They believe the country went to the dogs in the 1960s (presumably at the point identified by Philip Larkin, “between the end of the Chatterley ban and the Beatles’ first LP”) because people were given more freedom than was good for them. The overriding need of such Tories is to restore the discipline, standards and certainties of an imagined golden age.

Younger metropolitan Conservatives, on the other hand, can’t get enough of freedom. They are not bound by the social conventions of their elders – there is “no such thing as society”, after all. But for them, freedom is something you may exercise only in the limited sphere of the marketplace. It is all about ‘choice’; you can be free to choose a car, a hat or a pot of yoghurt. And some can pick a school or hospital. But you cannot make coherent or meaningful political choices about the sort of society you wish to live in.

The ambivalence of Labour and Tory politicians towards freedom and liberty suggests there is a big space for Liberal Democrats to occupy. The field should be clear for the party to ‘own’ this cause. The trouble is, the party isn’t very good at arguing its case.

The basic problem is that the Liberal Democrats talk about freedom and liberty in abstract terms. Unlike Ralf Dahrendorf, they have not been imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, and nor have most of their voters, so they cannot appeal to such a dramatic personal experience of loss of freedom.

If you believe that freedom and liberty are a prerequisite for tackling the issues of the day, not tangential to them, this should not be a problem. But the party seems unable to relate freedom and liberty to the lives people lead. It has policies on education, healthcare and crime, and then it has a separate policy on this abstract thing called freedom. This sterile approach was evident most recently in the party’s *Facing the Future* policy document.

Even when the Liberal Democrats do discuss freedom, they tend to talk more about processes than outcomes. They emphasise legal, formal freedoms and neglect real, felt freedom. But people need more than formal political rights; they need to be able to exercise their rights. Indeed, this is essential if the party is serious about encouraging people to take and use power.

So if the Liberal Democrats sincerely believe that freedom and liberty are at the core of their values, these ethics should permeate their policies on bread-and-butter topics and not be treated as a discrete issue. Because if the party disconnects freedom and liberty from people’s everyday concerns, it plays into the hands of its opponents, who can depict liberty as nice-in-theory but a low priority and, moreover, something that must always give way to concerns about security or prosperity. There is a cogent argument that freedom makes us more secure and more prosperous, but we rarely hear it from the Liberal Democrats.

The party’s tendency to discuss freedom and liberty

“Liberal Democrats should be talking about real, felt freedom, not just legal rights and procedures”

in abstract terms was identified as a problem by Chris Rennard in the 1990s. He realised that banging on about electoral reform, for example, made the party look like a group of obsessives who were out of touch with the concerns of ordinary people. Unfortunately, the chosen remedy was to drop the subject entirely and talk about

bread-and-butter issues in conventional terms.

This strategy eventually led to the absurdity of party leaders talking about ‘hard-working families’ and ‘Alarm Clock Britain’. The objective seemed to be to blend in with the other main parties, and the Liberal Democrats succeeded only too well.

It is because the Liberal Democrats have such difficulty talking about freedom in meaningful terms that I have been regularly referring to the concept of ‘agency’ in my writing. By ‘agency’, I mean the capacity of individuals to make meaningful choices about their lives and to influence the world around them. I define freedom in these terms because it is better to think of freedom as a practical ability than as a theoretical abstraction. Unfortunately, ‘agency’ is jargon in some professional circles but I shall stick with it because it encapsulates the meaning I seek better than any other word I can think of.

Defining freedom in these terms forces us to realise the extent to which the maldistribution of power is at the root of most of our political ills. It also forces us to realise the relationship between exercising freedom and wellbeing. We can then incorporate freedom as an integral part of our policies across the board, rather than tack it on as an afterthought or omit it altogether.

An insistence on agency also counteracts the classical liberal argument that market forces are the only legitimate means by which people may exercise power. Markets have only a limited capacity to provide people with agency, because of disparities of wealth; because of various market imperfections; because using the price mechanism as your only means of expression severely limits what you can say or who you can say it to; but mainly because buying and selling isn’t the only thing or even the main thing that we do in our lives. An insistence on agency means recognising people’s right to act politically, since democratic association is the only power most individual citizens have to stand up to powerful people who monopolise agency for their own selfish ends.

Above all, agency recognises the distinguishing ethic of social liberalism; that formal political rights are not enough and that we also need to be able to exercise those rights. Freedom must be linked to an idea of social justice and a realisation that political rights are more difficult to exploit for people lacking economic or social power. So Liberal Democrats should be talking about real, felt freedom, not just legal rights and procedures. Then we can make the idea of freedom sing, instead of sounding like a bunch of nerds.

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective

ADMINISTERING THE BEST MEDICINE

Roger Hayes recalls the heyday of the Liberal Revue and wonders whether anything like it could happen now

First, let's get the name right, it is, was and always has been The Liberal Revue, nothing else. And, please, let's also spell it right...

The Liberal Revue was first made possible, and then made good fun by the presence of Simon Titley. Although the concept started in the early 1980s as a group of friends who regularly gathered around a blue gingham tablecloth at one end of the National Liberal Club bar known as 'The Table', it was undoubtedly Titley's organisational skills and wicked sense of humour that first willed it into being, kept us going for so long and, importantly, told us when to stop.

There were three main reasons that The Liberal Revue was necessary in the 80s and that kept it going into the new century. At the time of the SDP and the Alliance there was such a rich vein of often pompous, centrist claptrap that not to take the piss would have been a disservice to the party in particular and to British politics in general. The Liberal Revue undoubtedly helped prick a few balloons and ballooned a few pricks.

Some might argue that the need never went away and that there are many more than three reasons today, but I'll leave that for others.

As with all things in life, everyone must be able to laugh at themselves before they poke fun at others. And if you can't laugh at yourself you shouldn't be in a Liberal party let alone at the Revue. The frequent absurdities of the party leadership and bureaucracy provided a regular source of revue material well beyond the Alliance and merger. The other parties, and issues of the day, were of course parodied too and although the revue could lay into the party at times it was mostly done with affection: witness sketches like '40 Years On' and songs such as 'Every Vote is Sacred' and 'Climb Every Staircase' which became the traditional show finale.

Both Labour and Tories had revues (even though neither knew how to spell it correctly) and if we were to be "serious about power" the Liberal Party ought to have one too. The first show was in 1984. We called it the Lymeswold Declaration, a parody of the Limehouse Declaration with which the SDP had been founded, and named after a newly-launched brand of soft cheese – I wonder where they both are now?

Although rarely discussed in these terms, laughter is an important tenet of liberalism. I fondly remember a very serious conversation I had decades ago with the wonderful Phoebe Winch (mother of Revue member Nick) when we discussed how Britain was essentially a liberal country because of its sense of humour and love of the absurd. Freedom from conformity means the right not to obey convention and satire and laughter are essential elements of that non-conformity. Just as the pen is mightier than the sword, so the laugh is

mightier, and definitely preferable, to the punch.

I think the party would still benefit from being poked – frequently and often hard, but where are the young radical, talented, satirists of the party? A question we have asked repeatedly over the years.

In its heyday of the 80s and 90s, the Revue regularly performed to 1,000 people, we even played at a charity gig on the West End stage. At conference, no one serious ran a fringe meeting against it as it had become something almost everyone knew about and wanted to attend.

The BBC recorded the show for us and the Revue would feature on Newsnight and Channel 4 News. The colossal giants of competent broadcast news journalism (remember that?), would seek previews and broadcasting rights. Vincent Hannah even took to the stage in a cameo role in 1986 at Eastbourne.

By the mid-2000s however, the shape of conference had changed and so was the party changing. There was no longer the right slot for the Revue and after a couple of indifferent mini efforts at the Glee Club we decided to call it a day.

Political satire is essential in any democracy and even more necessary in authoritarian states. Laughter is a great cure and a great leveller. The Liberal Democrats should find more opportunity for it.

As Mark Smulian wrote in his brief history of the Liberal Revue to accompany the archived scripts, programmes and other paraphernalia now housed at the NLC Library: "It aimed itself at those we considered were letting the party down either through incompetence or mendacity (chiefly those around David Steel given his wretched performance during the Alliance and merger) and later those who wanted to repudiate the Liberal Democrats' liberal heritage. Working on this basis there was rarely any need to hold a script meeting about 'who shall we take the piss out of now', as the targets were obvious."

Sadly, they are still all too obvious today and just as deserving of ridicule. Oh, to be 40 years younger again.

Roger Hayes was a member of The Liberal Revue team and a former Liberal Democrat councillor in Kingston

MUSIC LOVERS BEWARE

Gareth Epps looks at the history of the Glee Club and Liberator Songbook

The unparalleled exercise in political song, satire and self-expression at the end of every Liberal Democrat conference happened, as most of the best things do, by accident. It was not an American import, nor was it a form of now-obscure English song or a franchise of comedy clubs. My knowledge of Glee starts, as for so many people: it was my first conference and I was told that I absolutely couldn't miss this thing that happened on the last night that was anarchic, often chaotic, utterly relaxed and totally unique. With one exception, I've not missed any since 1996: indeed, I can now say I've been to more Glee Clubs than conferences.

Glee used to happen spontaneously. In the days when every conference hotel had a grand piano, someone would take the opportunity to sing around it. This linked into a broader tradition of political song appropriated by radical Liberals, notably during the 1967 Brierley Hill by-election where candidate Michael Steed produced a songsheet from which Young Liberals would serenade no doubt bamboozled passengers on the bus. As a by-election tactic, it somehow didn't catch on.

Also in 1967, Alan Butt Philip, Mike Flanagan and other Oxford University Liberals produced the Songs for Paper Tigers pamphlet, reprinted, mimicked but the first recognisable Songbook. At some point during the Liberal Party's mid-70s low ebb, Liberator produced an A3 Songsheet, mixing recognisable Liberal songs with others. Around 1977, after one hotel denied representatives access to the piano, the Assembly Committee ensured a room was provided for the by-now traditional Glee Club.

The first Liberator Songbook was produced by Ralph Bancroft in 1981, after he had somehow become compere for the event. With quite different content from the songsheets, this was an amalgam of Liberal songs from the party's glory days, more recent material and widely recognised community singing material. The advent of the SDP and its rolling conferences drove travelling hacks to produce a songsheet of their own. Early editions of the Songbook changed little until the advent of the Liberal Revue widened the pool of contributions. Even then, only a small number of songs made it over; it did, however, mean that topical new editions of the Songbook became a regular occurrence. After the final Revue in 2008, both quality and quantity of songwriting dipped, not really to be picked up until the fag end of Coalition, since when there has been a steady revival in topical and often scabrous satire.

In parallel, Richmond Liberal Adrian Slade, himself a prolific and highly accomplished songwriter, started to 'do a turn' and for 15 years he performed his own songs, which themselves found their way

into a benefit songbook, Party Pieces, and then two CDs. Since then, star turns have from time to time enlivened proceedings. Paddy Ashdown may have been the only serving leader to appear more than once, and his subsequent appearances to tell (invariably) The Joke became the stuff of legend. Tim Farron wrote a song of such simplicity that it could be accompanied on guitar - as it only needed two chords - but he has never been brave enough to submit the text to Liberator for inclusion. Someone one year convinced Roy Jenkins he needed to appear at it to win the affection of Liberals. He sat on stage in a chair while the Glee Club took place around him. Reports suggest that "no-one has so clearly looked as though they had been socked in the face with a haddock".

Somehow, new MPs became convinced that there was a requirement to 'do a turn'. By-election victors tended to turn up wearing their celebrations well. Then Scottish, Welsh and other attendees felt it necessary to sing songs from their part of the world.

After 1997, the worsening health of Liz Rorison and then Ralph Bancroft caused some changes of personnel. Replacement pianists of varying degrees of skill included Emma Nicholson (once; surprisingly good too). Being a late night event, some order was necessary if Glee was to continue without being hijacked by one 'turn' too many. When Ralph unexpectedly didn't show, somehow I was plied with enough drink to submit to being shoved onto the stage.

With the masterstroke of discovering John Hemming, a gigging jazz pianist among many other things, Glee went into the Coalition era with not only a suitable accompanist but one who had his own PA system. As attendance soared to being in excess of 500 at times, this was absolutely essential. That audience has also included journalists wanting easy copy. Sometimes, of course, events occur which spontaneously lead to bursts of creative activity, and a number of high quality songs have appeared again in the last few years.

Unfortunately, Ralph and Simon Titley passed away without their extensive archives being handed on. Hence the need for a legacy for this unique event, which no other party would dare stage.

The library of the National Liberal Club holds the most extensive known archive. Over 300 songs have found their way into the Liberator Songbook, there will be many more, and there will be some that will never see the light of day again.

Gareth Epps is a member of the Liberator Collective

LETTERS

AN MP ABANDONED

Dear Liberator,

I have been involved in every election in Carshalton and Wallington since I returned to Sutton borough at Christmas 1997. I have been a councillor for 10 years, and was vice-chair of the party in the mid 2000s. As such, I have to say that general election 2019 was the most abysmal one I have encountered, with perhaps the one exception of the 2006 local elections.

Those two elections had a number of threads in common where mistakes were made that should not have been made, had we learnt our lessons from previous outings. As one of your columnists noted in issue 339, the failure to learn from past mistakes was a major issue, and seemed to imply that those responsible for running general election 2019 lacked the experience necessary.

Our biggest mistake in Carshalton and Wallington was going with the national campaign rather than running things locally, but we were told we had to go with the national campaign to obtain the funds on offer.

Nick Harvey's article encapsulated the situation perfectly - "Warning – Keep it local". Our Tory opponent kept it local to the extent that he pinched the Lib Dems strapline and local campaigning issues from the 2018 local elections.

Now some electors think our local wins belong to another party. Instead we were a one-subject party – we only covered Brexit and we kept talking about a major switch in party affiliation – which never happened.

In our attempts to go for Remain voting middle class Tories (many of whom were hardline Tories who would never vote otherwise) we neglected and rejected much of our core vote – that included the C2DE classes, older people and BME voters. The national party told us to aim at those potential switch voters, but not our key voters who had voted for us at every election since Tom Brake had first got elected in 1997, some of whom had voted Remain but others had voted Leave.

Many of those Vote Leave supporters still voted for Tom Brake and many more could have done so had we concentrated on more local issues.

Jo Swinson proved to be a major turn off, and I say this as someone who supports much greater female participation in the Lib Dems. On the Sunday afternoon the party conference voted to support Revoke Article 50, I and my fellow ward councillors were out canvassing locally.

Before this disastrous decision, responses had been positive, but the conference decision had a major devastating impact. Jo came across as too arrogant, too inexperienced and too young, and she was particularly disliked by female voters.

I once worked for the Lib Dems research agency,

and among other things I carried out Focus groups on voters' views of Charles Kennedy (when he was in his heyday) – voters views of Jo Swinson on the doorstep did not match those of Charles Kennedy. Our best electoral outing with women was in 2010 when the general and local elections were on the same day, and everyone agreed with Nick.

Austerity and the Coalition changed that, and we have still to recover from this episode. Labour voters were still loath to switch to the Lib Dems because they remembered Jo Swinson had been part of the coalition government.

But Jo Swinson made the mistake of trying to outshine the local candidates – I cannot recall any previous election where there was so little promotion of Tom Brake – the outslips on polling day only featured Jo Swinson and Boris Johnson, but not Tom Brake, said it all. The day after polling day I received a hate phone call where the elderly male caller said he was glad that Jo Swinson had not been elected as MP for Carshalton and Wallington. Many people thought she was standing in person in the constituency, rather than Tom Brake, because most of the (very repetitive) literature was about her and not the local candidate.

But I was particularly struck by the lack of importance attached by the national party to Carshalton and Wallington. Normally we receive outside help both during the proceeding weeks leading up to the election and on election day. On this occasion, in my ward alone, we received no help from outside Sutton borough, either leading up to the election or on election day. We were told help had been redirected to our new Lib Dem converts Chukka Umunna and Luciana Berger, and to places in Surrey and the Home Counties where the party hoped to get rid of government ministers. A basic rule of thumb is to protect your own constituencies before you go off racing to others, where the chances of winning are not high.

We only lost by 600 votes, but it was still a loss nevertheless. By coincidence, the Green vote was around 600 – they did not stand down. But it was clear in the north of the constituency, that the Tories were targeting the inner city housing estates that had voted Leave, and bore similar characteristics to the formerly Labour held areas in the north of England.

In the past our community politics had proved attractive to a wide swathe of different population groups, but if we only go for the highly educated Remainers we can never hope to gain more MPs, and gain traction more generally. May be we need to go back to basics and look at how we can renew community politics, by getting involved on a personal and one to one basis in our communities, which could prove more fruitful than just relying on Facebook, Twitter, Big Data and algorithms!

Cllr Jill Whitehead
Carshalton

NOT IN MY NAME

Dear Liberator,

I let my Liberal Party membership lapse about a year ago. If I had still been around when the party

welcomed in ex-Ukipers as 2019 general election candidates, my exit would have been more sudden.

My disillusion is aggregated by the party's recent conversion to a culturally insensitive type of narrow Whiggism.

There are some good people in the party, they have respectable economic and environmental policies and some of the Brexit sentiment was honourable.

Over the years I have written several pro-Liberal Party contributions for *Liberator* but anyone reading the *Radical Bulletin* expose (*Liberator* 399) can only come to one conclusion.

Roger Jenking
Oxford

THAT ELECTION, YOU WRITE

Dear Liberator,

I am one of your subscribers and wish to congratulate you on issue 399. I have been a member of the Liberal Democrats since its founding (indeed, I joined the Young Liberals in 1961).

I have written to Baroness Thornhill, who is about to carry out the assessment of the 2019 general election campaign. If she is not a *Liberator* subscriber she would in my view be well-served by reading articles in this recent issue. It would provide grist for her mill as she carries out the post-mortem.

John Cole
ShIPLEY

Dear Liberator,

Just a quick note to say thank you for the latest issue (399). Possibly the most engaging in the 15 or so years I've been a subscriber. Of course having an election to digest helped, but I thought the range of voices you brought together really powerful. Each individually interesting, but together devastating. A feat of editorship.

Tom Paul
Bromley

Dear Liberator,

I found *Liberator* 399 a stimulating and compulsive read. In fact it is the best edition I can recall. It had a wide range of contributors and an overwhelmingly constructive appraisal of the campaign and performance of the Liberal Democrats in the last election. Even the traditionally waspish *Radical Bulletin* section was more insightful!

Most of the articles will provide useful pointers in the necessary post mortem to come.

Adrian Slade's reflection of sixty years of general elections was particularly emotive for me when he highlighted the six million Liberal votes of February 1974.

Geoff Woodcock
Liverpool

continued from Page 7...



MUNIRA WILSON

The new MP for Twickenham succeeded Vince Cable after his retirement. A former councillor and lobbyist, Wilson hasn't expressed an interest in standing in this leadership election.

Achilles heel: New to Parliament, not yet widely known

And finally...



MARK PACK

As a Brucey Bonus, we're including the newly elected party president. As the geeky half of the current double-act that isn't registering with voters, his tenure as co-leader could continue for some time should the leadership election become a coronavirus casualty. It's worth noting that he is the only possible contender (apart from Tim Farron) to have won an all-member ballot. If you created an algorithm to create a Lib Dem member it would probably produce Mark Pack. Get ready, we may be about to see an awful lot more of him.

Achilles Heel: Not an MP so not eligible to be on the ballot. But in these brave new times – who needs a ballot?

The Lost History of Liberalism From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century by Helena Rosenblatt Princeton University Press 2018

American academic Rosenblatt's 'linguistic history' of Liberalism lucidly describes what people meant when they said they were Liberal. Ideas not then named liberal are often omitted: her UK political Liberalism starts around 1820, not with Magna Carta, the Civil War, Levellers, 1689 or Charles James Fox.

A historian of political thought, not a social historian, she concentrates on writers, academics, preachers and political leaders.

She features four countries – France, Germany, Britain and America. Some outside events feature such as Belgium's liberal constitution and the shockwaves of Liberalism in Latin America and India (just). But Spain, appearing when 'Liberal' first took on a political meaning there from 1808, soon disappears. The revolts against Spanish rule in Latin America are not mentioned. More surprisingly, she explores the long hostility between the Catholic Church (not all Catholics) and French liberalism, but not that conflict's climatic, liberal-defining event - the Dreyfus affair.

Liberalism never meant unrestrained individualism and capitalism (an unhistorical late 19th century gloss). 'Classical liberalism' as currently understood is a myth. Liberalism does not define itself by the size of the state.

So what is it? To Cicero, 'liberalitas' was what characterised a model citizen of the Roman Republic - public-spirited, generous, an active citizen, not seeking selfish advantage. It did not imply unease about slavery: Cicero defended privilege – provided the privileged were dutiful citizens. We may recognise as Liberal the focus on active citizenship, citizens rather than subjects or consumers.

Christianity adopted this. St Ambrose said any true community rested upon justice and goodwill. Puritan John Winthrop exhorted Massachusetts settlers to liberality – "bear one another's burdens".



REVIEWS

Only a few - Winthrop and John Donne - thought liberality was for all. However, by 1772, the Oxford English Dictionary defined it as "free from bias, prejudice or bigotry; open-minded, tolerant". Liberal active citizens supported a free constitution. Adam Smith wrote: "He is not a citizen who does not wish to promote... the welfare of the whole society of his fellow-citizens."

'Liberal' was politicised with the French Revolution, resistance to Napoleon and reactionary monarchist clampdowns across Europe. Liberals stressed duties and morality as much as rights. Rosenblatt may exaggerate this: the French Revolutionary document, The Declaration of the Rights of Man, set out familiar Liberal rights, like the Preamble to the American Declaration of Independence.

She highlights travails and divisions of French Liberals under Louis Philippe and Napoleon III: the latter, mixing brutal repression with plebiscitary populism, resembled modern illiberal figures like Turkey's Erdogan. German Liberals, seeing unification as a precondition of a liberal state, made peace with Prussian authoritarianism. Was Liberalism really not achievable in a multi-state Germany?

In the 19th century Liberals disagreed on the 'social question'. Some wanted minimum government intervention in the economy; others, a strong, liberal state combatting poverty. French and German Liberals worried about poverty, but, unlike socialists, did not reach out to the workers. They worried, rightly, that rapid enfranchisement of the masses might bring Caesarism: Louis Napoleon became French president through universal manhood suffrage. In Britain, where there were no 1848 revolutions, socialism was theoretical and a strong Liberal party existed since 1859, Liberals built support in the urban and rural working classes.

Apart from Beveridge and TH

Green, she omits British political Liberalism after Gladstone, focussing on modern America. Roosevelt's Universal Declaration of Human Rights gained urgency from experience of fascism, total war and the final solution. It could give Liberals moral high ground against communism.

But soon intellectual refugees in Britain spoke. Berlin proposed anything more than limiting state powers (negative liberty) meant a slippery slope to totalitarianism. Hayek argued the state – however caring it seemed – was a con trick. Thus, a split Liberalism, one based on rights, entitlements and welfare; the other, on a minimal state and people calculating personal interests producing the best outcome for society. That muddled British Liberalism has differences from the former, and opposes the latter, I celebrate.

So – a brilliant exposition of Liberalism's intellectual history, which stresses the Liberal antecedents of active citizenship and community co-operation while undermining the 'economic liberal' backstory and challenging us to rethink nervousness about moral teachings.

Simon Banks

The Assassination of Morgan Sheckler by Peter Black 2019.

In his first novel, former Lib Dem Welsh Assembly member Peter Black uses his thorough knowledge of local government and the city of Cardiff to weave a tale of murder and corruption in the Welsh capital. The author introduces themes of sexually inappropriate behaviour and abuses of position that are timely.

It is brave of a middle aged man to write from the perspective of a bisexual woman half his age and there are a number of sex scenes that may jar with the reader.

Fundamentally, however, I did want to know the assassin's identity

and this kept me turning the pages. If you are looking for a plot that revolves around local politics, abuses of power and the murkier side of economic development, you should give this a whirl.

Sarah Green

Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America by Joshua Specht Princeton 2019 £22.00

The Blues Brothers aside, Rawhide is probably a fading memory or a mystery to most people. It was a popular television series running to some 217 episodes between 1959-65, days when Westerns dominated our television viewing.

In many respects it launched Clint Eastwood's career through the role of Rowdy Yates, although he wasn't totally happy with the part. On the other side of the spectrum, the American cattle industry brought us Howlin' Wolf's Killing Floor – rather a metaphor for doubtful sexual relationships, many black Americans worked in the slaughterhouses of Chicago, typically getting some of the shittiest jobs – a friend of mine lasted three hours in such employment.

Whilst certain continentals refer to the English as Rosbifs, the epithet might be even more appropriate in America, with their beef-oriented diet. Specht is primarily concerned with the early development of the meat industry, back in the nineteenth century.

By the 1870s cattle ranchers are starting to expropriate Indian lands. Nomadic peoples don't fit into their pattern, two genocides result, of the Indians, First Nation(s) and the buffalo, with whom they had a symbiotic relationship.

The Civil War had given them an edge, but its end brought battle-hardened soldiers against them. The demise of the Plains tribes allowed the expansion of ranching, but not its ability to cope with the environment, which in turn conditioned the supply side of the industry. The Civil War was partly won on railways; they too expanded, providing the means to take the herds to the more populous east. It is easier for economies of

scale to develop at the slaughter and processing end, particularly with the arrival of refrigeration.

The argument the meat packers always put against their shoddy treatment of ranchers, workers and small local butchers was consumer interest. They democratised beef consumption in America – the rich didn't like it.

Certainly, at the farming end, I'm less sure of how American practices shaped the industry globally. Drovers was commonplace in Britain, many of the open spaces in central London being the remains of an old cattle market. The same problems are still with us. Late last year, Irish cattle raisers were boycotting slaughterhouses because of the price they were getting. It didn't work out too well, as small farmers worried about the on-costs of keeping bullocks over winter if they weren't sold.

Beef has become controversial environmentally, Specht's book outlines how we got to this position. Goldsmith's University has banned beef products from its cafeterias; change is in the air. However, if you want to make sense of those arguments, Joshua Specht is your starting point for the background to the industry.

Stewart Rayment

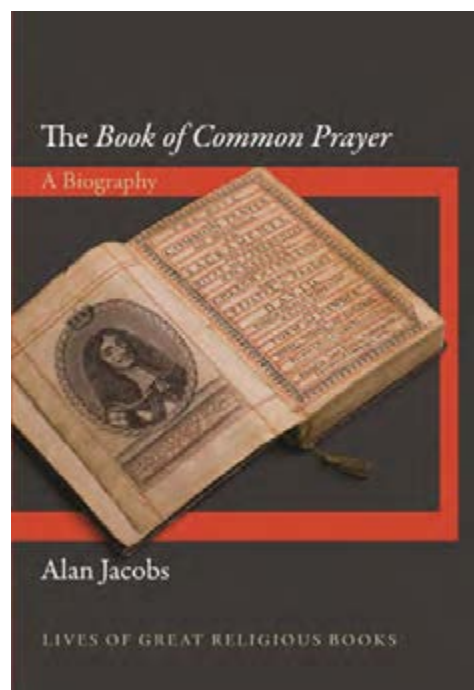
The Book of Common Prayer: A Biography by Alan Jacobs Princeton University Press paperback edition 2019 £14.99 .

A book about the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer might not be an obvious choice of book for review in *Liberator*. But as Alan Jacobs demonstrates, some books represent more than the sum of their contents.

It was not for nothing that Liberal party presidents passed on a copy of Milton's *Areopagitica* to their successor or that Liberal Democrat party presidents do likewise with Mill's *On Liberty*.

Like other seventeenth century puritans, Milton was a fervent opponent of the Book of Common Prayer which he saw as a form of tyranny with its set liturgy and the compulsion to use it under the Act of Uniformity.

As Milton saw it, the despotism of the King was inextricably linked



to the despotism of the Book of Common Prayer.

Jacobs tells the tale of this particular book which was intended to unite the kingdom around a particular liturgy and the theology contained within it. It never satisfied the religious extremes but Cranmer's glorious use of words – we need to place the Book of Common Prayer with Shakespeare and the Authorised Version of the Bible as the main influences on modern English usage – continues to meet the spiritual needs of many, including this particular Anglican.

Together with the Bible and the Thirty-Nine Articles, it remains the standard for Church of England doctrine, although it is no longer used in many parishes. Its echoes and structures remain in Anglican (and some non-Anglican) liturgies around the world which draw inspiration from it.

It is difficult to enter into the cultural mind set of a past world in which the Book of Common Prayer was the cause of religious and political controversy (with riots and many deaths) from its first appearance in 1549 to the refusal of the House of Commons in 1928 to allow a revised edition of the 1662 version to pass into law. The nearest we can enter is to consider the role the Koran has in some Islamic jurisdictions where it is a much more than a religious book and allegiance to it demonstrates allegiance to the state. Milton would not be pleased.

Paul Hunt

Monday

The authorities emphasise that this beastly new virus is a danger to the elderly, so for the past two weeks I have isolated myself to avoid any risk of infecting them. If it were not for my domestic staff and the secret passage that comes out in the cellar of the Bonkers' Arms, I should have gone stir crazy by now.

The Library here at the Hall – I now pass most of the day beside its fire – is justly celebrated. If these were normal times a stream of visiting scholars would be making their way up the drive to inspect my incunabula, but today I am alone with my books.

Among my most prized possessions is a complete run of 400 years of *Liberator* bound in leather made from the scrotum of the Rutland gazelle. (The Rutland gazelle, understandably, is an elusive creature, which is why you rarely catch sight of it on one of D. Attenborough's programmes for the moving television.)

I open an early volume and find it simply full of debate between Diggers and Levellers. In those days, of course, a writer who riled the authorities risked having his ears cropped and his cheeks branded with the letters 'S.L.' for 'seditious libeller' (or possibly 'social liberal – the sources differ). Funnily enough, I once had to step in to prevent David Steel exacting the same penalty upon this magazine editorial collective.

Tuesday

Meadowcroft has taken this damned virus badly, locking himself in his potting shed and wearing his wartime gas mask morning, noon and night. You may very well feel he is Going A Bit Far, but he is determined not to pass the virus on to his beloved geraniums. As I gaze out of the window I see Cook pushing slices of cheese on toast under the door. What a fine woman she is!

Meanwhile, all this insistence that one washes one's hands gives me some insight into what it must be like to be a Well-Behaved Orphan. You see, Matron (another fine woman) has strong views on the subject – also necks, as I know to my cost.

Wednesday

Here is an Edwardian volume of *Liberator* – an era when *Radical Bulletin* was already long established as a favourite item with the magazine's readership. Opening it I find a cutting anecdote about the Master of Elibank and a particularly amusing item about the Duke of Rutland being seen jumping from an upper window sans trousers as an irate husband bounded up the stairs of a cottage on his own estate. Who, I wonder, can have supplied those nuggets of gold?

In those days, incidentally, I wrote a satirical diary in the character of a jolly old Whig who, while his heart was undoubtedly in the right place, was all at sea in the modern world.

Thursday

It has become my custom, when the first stirrings of spring are felt here in Rutland, to offer the Bird of Liberty a short holiday. Despite my voluntary isolation, I have maintained the custom this year. More to the point, I have maintained the custom despite the Bird of Liberty. At the best of times it is a foul-smelling creature of uncertain temper, and

Lord Bonkers' Diary

these are far from the best of times. It has taken to swanking about the village telling people that birds are immune to the coronavirus, and yesterday it attempted to buy all the pasta in the village shop. It is no wonder that increasing numbers of Liberal Democrat activists are asking themselves whether it is time for the bird to go.

Friday

Despite the security precautions I take to prevent undesirable

characters – estate agents, advertising executives and, above all, Liberal MPs from the 1970s – getting into the Home for Well-Behaved Orphans, its young inmates have always proved distressingly adept at getting out. I come across a group of them by the village pond feeding dry bread to the Bird of Liberty as it swims about squawking. They enquire after my health as they have heard that the elderly are particularly vulnerable to this damned virus.

I fear they are in for a disappointment: I took the precaution of stocking up on the tonic sold by the Elves of Rockingham Forest when my agents in China first told me that things were amiss, and only this morning I had intercourse with the Wise Woman of Wing, who sold me some of her choicest herbs. There is life in this old dog yet.

Saturday

So David Steel has left the party. Not before time, if you ask me. Did you know that in the early Eighties (the 1980s, that is) he persuaded the Liberal candidates to stand down in half the seats in the country in the belief that this would see us win a majority. I tried to convince him that this was mathematical nonsense and even got the Professor of Hard Sums from the University of Rutland at Belvoir to Have A Word with him, but all to no avail. Little Steel was not to be gainsayed.

Turning to my complete run of *Liberator*, I locate the volumes from that era and have a jolly good laugh at his expense.

Sunday

St Asquith's is closed for the first time since the death of Mr Gladstone, so I decide to worship Nature instead. I walk in the woods above Rutland Water, gazing out at my oil wells and a familiar wake that betokens the presence of my old friend the Rutland Water Monster. Here, beneath the oak and the beech and the ash and the elm, spring flowers soak up the strengthening sun; in the branches overhead, the painted birds sing. The mood is rather spoilt when the Bird of Liberty runs past making what can only be described as obscene signs – in my book the case for a new party logo is overwhelming. Couldn't we have a panda? They seem much less trouble, passing their days eating bamboo shoots and not having sex.

Then, in a heart-stopping moment, I make out a Rutland gazelle standing poised for flight in the deepest recess of the woods. It carries a worried expression but springs off with the most remarkable grace when it catches sight of me.

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