

liberator



Pandemic – the Tories act

- 🍌 The Tories' social care scandal - Claire Tyler & Margaret Lally
- 🍌 Government 'worse than incompetence' - Paul Clein
- 🍌 Time for universal basic income - Paul Hindley

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LIBERATOR

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COMMENTARY

SOUNDS OF SILENCE

Boris Johnson affected Churchillian rhetoric in dealing with the pandemic but doesn't his conduct and that of his ministers remind one of a quite different wartime character - Private Walker of Dad's Army?

"Get you some PPE, gov, Turkish it is, best quality, I know someone who can get you a load of testing kits and apps too, this bloke down the bookies swears they work fine."

Maybe it's no surprise that a government of spivs should so utterly fail to provide PPE to health workers, neglect care homes and casually disregard of the early stages of Covid-19.

The failings of John Major on Black Wednesday pale beside those of the present government, but Major's reputation for competence never returned and the Tories were slaughtered at the next general election.

Johnson never had much of a reputation beyond a jovial persona and opportunist support for Brexit. Meanwhile Labour has ditched the terminally useless Corbyn and got itself a leader who might regain credibility.

This may remind anyone around in the 1990s of the last time a government crumbled into public contempt in the face of a re-energised opposition such that even its natural supporters lost faith.

Which makes the reticence of the Liberal Democrats unfortunate. While it's true that the party struggles to get into the media, a look at its website in mid-May had little to say about the pandemic and far from attacking the government's competence was largely anodyne.

The government's performance puts it there for the taking and if the party does not do that, Labour will with its new burst of energy.

Having had a general election review that criticised the 2019 campaign for - among much else - being concerned with niche subjects, the position of the Lib Dems should be about defending jobs and liberty.

Among the many irritations of the lockdown has been people who ought to know better wittering about hearing birdsong due to the unaccustomed silence. That's the silence of 40,000-odd graves, and not an occasion for rejoicing.

It's also the silence of an imminent serious recession with lost jobs, lost incomes, lost spending and the familiar consequences of unemployment and poverty - poorer health, crumbling infrastructure, rising crime, xenophobia, even a danger of violence.

That is what will concern people above all, not fanciful so-called 'positives of the lockdown'. Indeed, Brexit still lurks round the corner ready to destroy what remains of the economy.

It's not only jobs and the economy that must be defended, so too must liberty.

Lockdown measures saw vastly increased and intrusive powers for both government and the police and history suggests that neither will give these up without a struggle even when the pandemic passes.

GET IT RIGHT THIS TIME

Baroness Thornhill's review of the 2019 general election fiasco (see age 4) puts into stark terms what its under-resourced predecessor of 2017 was only able to allude to - that Lib Dem headquarters was a shambles and that both campaigns were, unlike most earlier ones, damaged rather than enhanced by the party leader.

The report makes clear there were gross errors - most of which boil down to only believing good news, refusing to listen to criticism and holding the party's local activists in contempt.

All this reached its nadir in 2019 but the report demonstrates that the roots of disaster lay far back. As Thornhill says; "Many of the challenges faced were well documented in the reviews of 2017 and 2015, and were still to be implemented."

Even where changes were implemented there were problems. It is alarming that not four years after former party president Baroness Brinton's governance review, Thornhill can find: "Our governance structures are a mess and don't do what they are supposed to."

It's also alarming that nothing was done to learn lessons: "It was not clear who was in charge [of the campaign]. This was said across the country, within HQ and from activists and candidates in many places. The range of people that were named as being in charge included the chair of the campaign committee, the chief executive of the party, the party president, the director of communications, the director of campaigns and elections and the leader's head of office."

That preceding paragraph in fact comes from the 2017 review, but the concerns expressed can be found in almost identical terms in Thornhill's report.

Most Liberator readers will have studied the report and drawn their own conclusions.

But as the party gears up for a leadership election this summer, the report raises some warning signs to look for, though of course does not express any view on who should win.

Jo Swinson comes out of it as having spent years plotting and positioning to be leader without having much idea why she wanted the job or of how to do it.

Will the next leader be more open, less prone to unwise interference and initiatives and willing to accept the curbs on their powers Thornhill suggests? There are some questions for the virtual hustings.

RADICAL BULLETIN

LIONS LED BY DONKEYS

Ever since the 2017 general election review was swept under the carpet because it embarrassed some senior figures, there had been fears that a similar fate would befall its successor.

Not a bit of it. Baroness Thornhill's excoriation of the campaign, its preparation and pretty well every leading person in it pulled few punches, though it did pull some.

Most Liberator readers will have seen the review and drawn their own conclusions, but it's worth noting that Thornhill found that things at party headquarters and in Jo Swinson's inner circle were even worse than most people outside could have imagined.

Every leader ends up in a 'bunker' listening only to a trusted coterie of advisers - Swinson is found to have broken new ground by starting in one.

The report said: "As soon as she became leader Jo had serious concerns about how best to handle the effectiveness of the party's headquarters at Great George Street."

Having decided to oust chief executive Nick Harvey just ahead of a likely general election, Swinson then "created around her a group of people whom she trusted.

"This had the unintended consequence creating an 'inner circle' of advisors at arm's length from the resources of the party machine, and put decision making in the hands of an unaccountable group around the leader...when it later came to scaling up for the election, members of this inner team of advisors were given very broad remits. This proved unmanageable and removed the necessary debate and challenge, which are vital for driving improvement."

This led inexorably to a general election campaign in which there was "a culture of decision making in small closed groups, where opposing voices were ignored or criticised" and where "it was unclear who was in charge and making decisions. It cannot be said any more plainly and it is as bad as it sounds".

The report says the 'Revoke' policy originally arose out a desire to head off a potential conference vote in favour of this by agreeing to Revoke only were there a majority Lib Dem government.

It in fact passed largely because the support of Brexit spokesperson Tom Brake appeared to suggest Revoke was a leadership position and so - as the more naïve may have thought - part of a considered strategy.

But it wasn't, and proved too complicated to explain in the campaign with the effect of forcing canvassers to say, "but it's all right because we won't win".

Equally unhelpful was the 'Jo Swinson could be prime minister' message, which told voters that someone of whom they had never heard appeared to suffer delusions of grandeur.

This started life as a bit of morale boosting in her

conference speech, and after the conference the polls rose again, as they often do when the party gets the media spotlight.

Fatally though, "this was taken internally to be an endorsement of the messages presented".

"When the team were later hunting for their campaign messages it was here they came back to - Stop Brexit and Your Candidate for Prime Minister - messages designed for a conference attended by Liberal Democrat party members rather than the general public. When the electorate focused on them for the first time, in the election campaign, they went down badly." Not that that stopped them being used for a long time after.

The report makes a subtle criticism of the stress on Brexit to the exclusion of other policies in the campaign. It admits that the party clearly wanted to be firmly anti-Brexit and that it would have been fruitless to seek to appeal to those who actively wished to leave the EU.

This meant though that the party ignored the large segment of the electorate for whom the whole Brexit debate was not very important and having said nothing to them duly failed to garner votes there.

Thornhill's criticism of the dire quality and unwelcome quantity of national leaflets poured into voters' homes during the campaign was by contrast far from subtle.

This unwanted deluge arose from the gross over-optimism shown by those around Swinson and other senior figures about how many seats the party could win.

Before May 2019 there had been an assumption that 32 seats could be targeted.

Favourable polls then, and later in the European elections, led to there being 40 targets seats, 40 in a lower tier and 140 in an "if something amazing happens" category.

This meant the party was targeting seats where it had little local government or 'on the ground' resource.

Because of this "we put in place heavyweight direct mail campaigns...while some lower tier seats appreciated the support there was a lack of dialogue and coordination between local and national teams, which caused much antagonism.

"The quantity of leaflets, high volume of target seats, resource limitations, lead times and logistics challenges meant it was impossible to control what went through a particular door on a particular day. Many teams suffered from 'five leaflets at once'."

Local campaigns told Thornhill of "frustration when constituents were receiving both specific locally nuanced messages as well as generic national messages which often contradicted each other. If the quantity was questionable, the quality and coordination were poor".

The contempt in which headquarters staff held the voluntary party was identified in the 2017 review (a leaked partial version of the original reposes on Liberator's website) and remained unaltered to judge from Thornhill's finding: "We need to repair the rift that has occurred over several years that has led many of our activists to feel things are 'done to us' by a central HQ that doesn't know what it's doing and has sidelined skilled and experienced local teams."

Thornhill found that the disaster of 2019 was long in the making with lessons not learnt from the previous two general elections and a party structure that did not work well.

There were four leaders and three chief executives in this period but the one person there the whole way through was party president Sal Brinton, who increasingly took power to herself.

The report describes the relationship between leader, president and chief executive as "out of kilter for several years, thus contributing to the dysfunctional nature of the organisation.

"Perhaps inevitability in this culture, we have seen the emergence of a 'fire-fighting', hands on president, usefully filling management black holes but thus blurring lines of responsibility and modes of operation of the roles of CEO and president; necessary in extremis but not desirable."

It noted elsewhere: "There is a lack of both command and control; the governance between the many and various parts of the organisation are in different ways confusing, contradictory or missing and the responsibilities of party leader, party president and chief executive (CEO) are unclear."

The report appears to advocate a further governance review, but there was one only in 2016 driven through largely by Brinton and which created the present structure including a Federal Board now described by Thornhill as "too large a group to be a realistic decision-making body".

Among the report's loose ends, there are several references to the party failing to communicate with black and minority ethnic communities but it does not explain what was done and not done or why - beyond calling for implementation of the largely forgotten 2018 Alderdice review.

Another point not really developed was why Swinson lost popularity during the campaign - the reverse of most leaders' experiences apart from Tim Farron's gay sex embarrassments.

It says: "There was clearly a lot of misogyny and sexism at play, and Jo's appeal to women also fell significantly during the election."

Why female voters felt disenchanted with someone suffering misogynistic attacks is not explained, but there were certainly plenty of Lib Dems who blithely assumed a female leader must be popular regardless of who she was.

Nor does it go into how the MPs who defected from other parties were handled. Apart from Chuka Ummuna, who came within shouting distance in Cities of London and Westminster, huge resources were diverted to no effect to the seats they fought.

For example, people and money poured into Sam Gyimah's campaign in hopeless Kensington while Carshalton and Wimbledon were narrowly lost a few miles away.

Apart from mentioning "we depleted senior

resources on an exhausting, stressful and ultimately unproductive process for handling defectors and Unite-to-Remain seats" this is left unexplored.

Nor are these gaps covered in any confidential appendices, of which Liberator understands there are none.

Thornhill has proposed a detailed action plan to overhaul the organisation and how different parts of the party work together, including a way to mend the "broken three-legged stool" of the relationship between leader, president and chief executive.

Intriguingly, this implies a clipping of the leader's wings unparalleled since the mid-1980s battles to remove the old Liberal party leader's veto over the manifesto.

The report said the party must "ensure that none of the leader, CEO and president should be able to unilaterally overturn agreed strategy, manifesto, messaging or branding".

This is a reference to Swinson arbitrarily ditching the well-tested Cable-era slogan 'Demand Better' and replacing it as first with nothing and then with the dire 'brighter future', which was tested on no-one.

Thornhill has set the Federal Board a timetable to implement the actions on her recommendations with specific items to report back, and it will be instructive to see how many are adopted and how many tipped into black holes by those who feel threatened.

This timetabling is clearly an attempt by Thornhill to ensure that people don't say "what a splendid report, we must do this" and then do nothing.

Whether the FB can do that is another matter given that Thornhill found it "too large a group to be a realistic decision-making body".

One must go back 15 years to find a successful Lib Dem general election campaign. The Thornhill report shows that in 2019 - as at every election after 2005 - Lib Dem activist lions were led by donkeys.

A SPANNER IN THE WORKS

There has been a long and tortuous route to the Lib Dems. summer leadership election.

When the Federal Board decided to postpone the election until May 2021 there was consternation over whether it had the power to do this and why the party could not hold the election online.

Hustings could be held virtually - and might attract a large audience than do physical ones - and voting could be online with only a small proportion of those lacking email addresses needing to be sent postal ballots.

No sooner had the decision been taken than Liberator was contacted to be assured that interim leader Ed Davey was not behind the long postponement - which is believable as it left him as neither one thing nor the other for an extended period.

The May 2021 postponement was not originally on the FB agenda but emerged in the course of a meeting and so could not have been planned for in advance.

Members who were obviously aligned to the campaigns of one or other declared candidate were obliged to leave the 'room' while the postponement due to the pandemic was virtually discussed.

Backers of Davey, Layla Moran and Wera Hobhouse duly departed. So too did Chris White - a prominent supporter of Daisy Cooper - fuelling speculation she

might run for leader having not formally declared.

To some surprise Christine Jardine also left the meeting at this point, but this turned out to be to attend to an errant pet dog. She later publicly ruled herself out of standing.

Suggestions that FB members should randomly leave meetings to fuel speculation about new leadership challengers are of course to be deplored.

An account of the meeting published by FB member Luke Cawley-Harrison stated that members voted on whether to wait for a month to decide and when that fell voted 15 for postponement to May 2021 and 10 for postponement to September.

The decision for May 2021 was challenged by FB member Jo Hayes - chair of Eastern region - who took it to the Federal Appeals Panel, which acts as a sort of supreme court for the party.

Its chair Alan Masters has issued a complicated legal ruling, the upshot of which is that the FB had the power in an emergency to postpone the leadership election, but not the power to postpone it to such a distant specific date - it should have kept the matter under review as 'emergency' circumstances changed.

The guts of Masters' ruling were: "I find that the Federal Board did have the power to revoke the timetable it published on 18 January and suspend the election in the current 'exception circumstances'.

"I do not find that the Board had the power to suspend the election until May 2021; though if the present 'exceptional circumstances' continue, I do not rule out that a delay to that time could be justified. However it is not at the present time."

Masters said the FB must "keep this under continuous review"

Duly chastened it decided at its May meeting that the leadership election would take place in the summer with the winner expected to be announced on 27 August.

UNWANTED GUESTS

Increased use of online meeting technology rapidly highlighted security problems that must be tackled if it's to be used for virtual elections and conference.

London region's weekly online quiz was interrupted in mid-April by what one participant described as pornography vile enough to require reporting to the police.

Less seriously, Lib Dem controlled South Somerset Districts Council found an area committee meeting infiltrated by 'Mike Coxslong' and 'Ben Dover' and what the local paper called "audible adult content".

NO CONFERRING

Liberator's decision to go online only was taken before the pandemic struck but looks just as well with the cancellation of York conference in March and now Brighton in September.

There has been a clamour for some sort of online alternative and Liberator understands that while sections of conference like speeches by MPs and reports from committees could probably be handled this way, the problem may come with policy motions.

Does the technology exist that allows hundreds - possibly thousands - of people to participate online in a complex series of amendments and votes? There are hopeful noises, but no-one seems sure.

As most people who go to conference have realised, sitting in the hall listening to all the debate is for first-timers, obsessives and those needing to sleep off a good lunch.

Policy papers come pre-digested from working groups and are little more than rubber stamped, while odd corners of days are filled with motions on worthily uncontroversial and/or recondite subjects (once satirised by Liberator in a mock agenda as "9 am debate: Treatment of Octopi in Droitwich".)

The unspoken secret of conference is that very few seriously contested votes take place.

When they do feelings run high and results would only be accepted if there can be certainty that that all those entitled to vote have been able to, and all those not have been excluded.

Solving that though will not replace the real value of conference in simply allowing members to meet in person, and get to know and learn informally from each other.

The chief risk - apart from security issues - is surely that of being crashingly boring.

I'VE GOT A LITTLE LIST

The wholesale postponement for a year of the elections due in May 2020 will have caused difficulties but also perhaps opportunities for those involved.

For the Lib Dem campaign for London mayor it has brought time for a review of why this has remained obstinately stuck on about 5% in the polls with a lack of input from the clump of seats in the capital's south west that the Lib Dems hold, or very nearly do so.

All was going reasonably well until conference last year when Siobhan Bonita's campaign unveiled the meaningless slogan 'Love London Better' and later started talking about 'kindness', neither of which carry any political message.

When hundreds of thousands of leaflets in like vein were printed most of south west London declined to distribute them.

This mutiny was also fuelled by the complicated way in which the London Assembly is elected. The assembly is powerless talking shop - a scrutiny body with only a never-used sanction to reject the mayor's budget by a two-thirds vote.

It does though provide a public platform, ably used by Caroline Pidgeon as the only Lib Dem at present on it. Roughly half its members are elected from giant constituencies and the rest as top-ups from party lists.

Lib Dems in south-west London decided that even though the assembly seat including Richmond and Kingston also contains the less fertile territory of Hounslow, this was worth a shot at winning and chose Richmond council leader Gareth Roberts as candidate.

If Roberts were successful that could though mean that fewer or none of the Lib Dem top-up list candidates could get elected, and the list is headed by Pidgeon.

Local parties in the south-west of London feel they were told by the regional campaign "we'd be delighted if you did well, but not so well that you win", which has caused considerable ill-feeling.

Kevin Lang, an experienced election organiser from Scotland, has been asked to review the campaign and say how 'kind' he feels towards it.

MERGER MOST FOUL

A curious document comes Liberator's way, which is the New Declaration of the Social Democratic Party.

Like the so-called Liberal Party, the SDP has a vestigial existence and has been taken over by rabid Brexit supporters.

While the real pre-merger Liberal Party was strongly pro-EU, and support for the European Union was one of the real SDP's founding principles in 1981, both the modern day abusers of those names are pro-Brexit.

The New Declaration is clearly intended as successor to the real SDP's founding Limehouse Declaration. The new version considers "the nation state to be the upper limit of democracy" and the desire for "people to shed their national identities and unite in a pan-European or universal civilisation to be a recipe for conflict and hopelessly utopian". There is much more like that.

The so-called Liberal Party ran former Ukip candidates in Cornish seats at the general election (Liberator 399), and in 2015 local members there even endorsed Ukip candidates (Liberator 373).

With both parties enjoying derisory electoral support, perhaps the time has come for another Liberal-SDP merger, this time of these minuscule pro-Brexit forces. They could even call themselves the Social and Liberal Democrats.

FAST SHOW

The Lib Dem Iftar was a dubious idea; party members fasting for a day to show support for Muslims fasting for Ramadan. This might have been well intentioned but patronisingly implied that the fast is some external imposition upon Muslims, not something they choose as an act of faith.

Unfortunately, Cambridgeshire county councillor Ian Manning marked the occasion with a tweet in which he said: "Up early to start my fast for LibDemIftar. Really not sure I'll get through to the evening but we'll see."

Manning included a photograph of the pre-fast meal with which he would fortify himself, which included bacon - something observant Muslims don't eat at any time of year.

GOING ONLINE ONLY

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As we said in Liberator 400, we'd planned this move last winter but the cancellation of two consecutive Liberal Democrat conferences would have forced it on us.

If you pay us by bank standing order or PayPal, we'd be pleased if people wish to continue these as donations. Otherwise, please cancel these, as we cannot cancel them for you and arranging refunds would be complicated for our volunteer administrators.

Liberators 402 will appear in print in July, which will exhaust most people's subscriptions.

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.

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

THE PEOPLE THEY FORGOT

It was too little, too late when the Government tried to protect care homes from Covid-19, leading to a scandal of needless deaths, say Claire Tyler and Margaret Lally

Coronavirus has caused death and enormous hardship, but it is only in the very last few weeks that its impact on care homes has been acknowledged. As of 1 May there were 8,312 co-vid deaths in care homes according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

This does not include residents who died in hospital or other 'suspected co-vid' deaths. (The London School of Economics has argued that current data only covers 42% of all excess deaths in care homes). A similar pattern has been seen across Europe with many counties reporting high numbers of deaths in residential care. Why has this happened?

There are approximately 15,000 homes in the UK with more than 400,000 beds run by approximately 8,000 providers – some are very small; others with a large network of homes.

FATAL WEAKNESS

It is a mixed economy - 84% of homes are run by the private sector 13% by not-for-profit organisations, and 3% by local authorities. Funding is a mix of private, local authority and NHS. This diversity, once seen as a strength, may prove its fatal weakness.

Although many places are privately funded care homes have been hit by cuts in social care funding. Between 2010/11-2018/19 total spending on adult social care fell by £86m in real terms – a 4% reduction in local authority spending.

It was inevitable that care homes would be a hotbed of infection. Residents need personal care from a range of staff and may not have the capacity to understand social distancing. Older people seem to be disproportionately at risk of being severely affected by the virus.

So it would have been sensible to have had a national strategy supported by local plans to protect care homes. Sadly this simply did not happen – despite it being previously recognised that the social care sector would need additional support during a flu pandemic.

Health secretary Matt Hancock did not produce his social care action plan until mid-April. While the sector welcomed the attention on their issues it was widely seen as too little too late

Most of the problems experienced by the NHS have been replicated in care homes. These were magnified by their dispersed and fragmented structures, but also because the needs of social care were often seen as secondary to those of health.

The strategy to protect the NHS massively backfired onto care homes. To free up beds patients were discharged back to care homes without checking if they had co-vid (which may have been hospital acquired) so care homes became a dumping ground. There have been (unproven) allegations that hospitals discharged patients back actually knowing they had co-vid. In any event Department of Health and Social Care guidance issued on 2 April stated “negative tests were not required” before discharging people into a care home. This guidance has now been dropped. We may

never know the extent to which co-vid was imported into care homes. There have also been concerns that many residents were categorised as 'not requiring resuscitation' in the event of them contracting co-vid without this being fully discussed with them. The Care Quality Commission has warned that the practice must stop.

As co-vid became more prevalent health support to residential care reduced. Homes have reported GPs refusing to come in for consultations or to certify deaths on site, and lack of health support generally. Poorly paid staff without professional qualifications have been increasingly asked to take on complex clinical tasks. This problem has now been belatedly recognised and health instructed to ensure timely clinical advice is provided to care homes.

Care homes were not initially considered a priority for testing, and when it was extended to care homes there was no plan for enabling staff to get the test. Many staff complained of being offered appointments a long way from where they lived or else not for 4-5 days.

Even with testing now ramped up managers report inconsistencies of approach with some local Public Health England teams refusing to issue home tests. Training for staff on how to test residents has also been an issue.

Throughout this staff have faced a terrible dilemma about how they protect both their clients and their own families. Some staff have made enormous sacrifices to square this dilemma including camping on site to make sure that the residents are cared for by someone they knew. There have also been amazing examples of staff coming up with creative and imaginative ways to provide some form of normality for residents, like spa days and tea parties which families can join in virtually.

Care homes already ran at high staff vacancy rates (approximately 120,000) and were heavily dependent on agency staff. During the pandemic there have been reports of absence levels running up to 25%. Unlike the NHS, care homes cannot close certain parts of the business and redeploy staff. Until recently there was no national initiative to encourage individuals to either volunteer in care homes or to apply for a paid role.

There is now an ambition to recruit 20,000 within three months, but it is questionable whether this is enough and feasible when social care has been so under-valued. It is consistently referred to as an unskilled role – despite staff needing the ability to support individuals who often have limited mobility and mental capacity, and complex health problems.

Most staff are paid at or just above the minimum wage. Staff working in the care sector generally love their work and are totally committed to the individuals they look after but often ask why is their work not valued more than that of the person who stacks shelves in a supermarket. Many of the staff will be from BAME backgrounds and may be facing additional risks given the excess death rate amongst this group. Some are also from outside the UK. At the writing it was unclear whether the visa exemptions recently given to NHS staff will be extended to social care.

We now know that people working in social care have been twice as likely to die with covid as the general working age population (ONS) – a damning indictment.

Obtaining PPE has been a time-consuming challenge. There were examples of good practice with local authorities purposefully supporting the care sector but also numerous problems with some care homes reporting that the PPE they had obtained got diverted to the NHS.

Until a couple of weeks ago, unlike the NHS, privately run homes (the majority) also had to pay VAT on PPE. There have been mixed reports about how well the new Clipper system (a national procurement system for care homes set up by Whitehall) is working. Little of the initial emergency funding the Government allocated to local government seemed to reach care homes.

There was no national strategy instead there was a panoply of policies and procedures some of which were contradictory. As at 30 April care homes had received nearly 50 pieces of guidance which they had to interpret. Guidance needs to be concise, consistent, and where feasible consulted on.

NATIONAL DISGRACE

Why did this happen? Was it because the government's strategy was simply incoherent and care homes were just forgotten? Whatever the government may have intended essentially the message was that if you are living in a care home your life did not matter. It's a national disgrace.

There will need to be an accounting of why this all went so terribly wrong.

But there also has to be a fundamental rethink of social care generally and particularly how we provide residential care for older people. The fragmented nature of the care home sector left it both without a single powerful voice to represent its needs and practical difficulties in directing support.

Many homes were already running close to bankruptcy – now they are facing increased costs and the likelihood of vacancies (people scared about going into care homes and the difficulty of selling homes to pay for such a move). The state has to ensure sustainable funding.

Liberal Democrats should position themselves as the champions of social care and make it one of our clarions calls as a party.

Long overdue and fundamental reform of social care must be a top national priority and hopefully - in the light of the pandemic - one that engages and resonates with the public in a way it has never done before. We need a fully integrated health and social care system which is properly funded and run on an equal basis to health so that social care is no longer, as one social care professional expressed it: "Simply an afterthought at the back of the queue." This means the organisational structures of both must change to ensure effective collaboration and accountable leadership at both national and local levels.

Reforming such a fragmented and underfunded sector will be very tough. There are big decisions to take on structure and funding needing a grown-up debate with the public about how it is funded - from general taxation, a hypothecated tax or some form of social insurance scheme.

The Kings Fund has suggested that people might start contributing at age 40 with increasing contributions at 50 and 60 matched by employer

"The strategy to protect the NHS massively backfired onto care homes"

contributions. And of course, we already have the Dilnott scheme sitting on the statute book if it can be funded.

Whatever the organisational and funding structure, we have to design care environments which can provide older people with safe care and dignity. Care must be personalised to each individual, focused on

maintaining their well-being and enabling them to live optimal and fulfilling lives. A care home should really be a home, not a large impersonal institution

Key to this are care staff, who need to be as valued as NHS staff treated as skilled professionals with commensurate training and remuneration.

We should propose an early start on workforce reform particularly focusing on the low pay and lack of career progression routes which contribute to the very high turnover. We could propose a special rate minimum wage for the care sector that was higher than the National Minimum Wage (at the moment many care workers are paid less than shop workers). This would need to be coupled with developing and remunerating career progression so that more experienced staff and team leaders are also adequately rewarded. (Homes report difficulties in retaining more experienced staff as increases in the minimum wage erode differentials).

It would, however, need to be done in such a way that funding required actually reached the care homes and wasn't used to offset other cuts in local authority spending.

Doing something on this quickly may be a relatively easy win and then policy could move on to structure and funding which is bound to take longer.

Baroness Tyler is a member of the Liberal Democrat health and social care team in the House of Lords. Margaret Lally writes in a personal capacity as a trustee of various social care organisations and is a member of Islington Liberal Democrats.

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BLOOD ON THEIR HANDS

The Tory Government's response to the pandemic has been marked by something even worse than incompetence, says Paul Clein

In last year's election campaign, prospective prime minister Cummings and his crew decided the route to victory was combining a snappy slogan with much more resonance than "Strong and Stable Government" and avoiding any interface with the media except with those who were "one of us".

And it worked. If you've seen the unavoidable daily car crash Covid-19 briefings, you'll know exactly why they did that....

I wrote the following in 2015 for a government consultation about UK FOI legislation: "The traditional *modus operandi* of the British state for many centuries has been rooted in a paternalistic mindset which deems that the people are basically children who need to be kept as ignorant of the realities of this harsh world as much and for as long as possible, only to be given information at a time and in a way that won't rock the boat."

This precisely summarises the Government's current attitude. You can safely assume Government ministers or health officials talking publicly about this pandemic will somehow be misleading us through the prism of state management of these affairs.

What has been long obvious to me and to most with knowledge of the internal state of the NHS is that we are coping with the current crisis despite the 'leadership' of HMG rather than because of it, is largely because many NHS staff - as usual - contribute above and beyond the call of duty.

VERGE OF BREAKDOWN

My perception as a community pharmacist was that the system was verging on breakdown last autumn, which thankfully didn't happen because of a mild winter without a significant influenza outbreak.

Despite serial warnings in the recent past about likely future pandemics from various quarters, the government carried blithely on, reducing hospital beds, increasing bureaucracy instead of investing in clinical services and encouraging as much NHS privatisation as it thinks it can get away with.

Rule One of British politics is that you can never ever trust the Tories with the NHS. Ever. Don't forget they planned their detailed strategy for the 1984 miners strike seven years before when in opposition. This is no accidental, unintended side effect of austerity.

The current crisis also exposed some other fault lines of ten years of austerity, not least insufficient stores or supply lines of PPE, lack of systemic contingency and chronic staff shortages (most of the NHS workers from elsewhere in the EU who left in the past two years weren't replaced).

After initially stating government strategy was based around acquiring herd immunity -implying infection

rates of 70% + and up to 500,000 deaths - immediate criticism caused an apparent U-turn. This was untrue. Herd immunity is still HMGs main game in town, with various bits of window dressing thrown in to mislead critics.

The four-week window in February when we were behind the curve was wasted. Countries like South Korea coped much better than the UK in limiting and controlling spread of the virus.

It was obvious early on that an adequate response relied on extensive testing, assiduous contact tracing, implementation of early lockdown measures and strict 14-day quarantine for those entering from abroad.

OVER-ENTITLED CLOWNS

The Government patently made it up as they went along on the issue of testing, lying consistently while pretending to be "guided by the best scientific evidence". The complacency of these over-entitled clowns was breathtaking.

Their latest plan is for everyone flying in from abroad to be quarantined for two weeks. Leaving aside how you ensure that happens, this should have been done three months ago as in Australia and New Zealand, for example, with very successful outcomes. If only we could have got back control of our borders from the wicked EU in time.....

There are questions about the quality of the tests used with significant numbers of false positives. The focus nationally has been exclusively on numbers of tests when there should have been more emphasis placed on reliability. Better to have 20,000 accurate tests each day than 50,000 with a 20% failure rate.

One issue never mentioned (don't frighten the horses!) is the proportion contracting the disease, testing positive but asymptomatic. In South Korea, they did rigorous three-week follow ups on their very extensive testing, revealing there could be as many as 15% in this category.

If so, these could be the main source of those spreading the disease. It's reasonable to hypothesise that most of those will be younger people, more active and more likely to resist lockdown restrictions.

Latest research indicates the virus has already undergone several mutations, with three main strains identified. One is said to be particularly nasty compared with the others, replicating much faster.

If correct, this could explain some anomalies. Why do some apparently recovered still test positive? Why do a high proportion of those contracting it have mild symptoms or none? Why are so many frontline staff contracting it and dying? If patients hospitalised are those infected with the most virulent strain, that could explain that higher mortality rate, especially with repeated exposure partly due to a shameful lack of sufficient PPE.

Such mutations not only drive a coach and horses through any unacknowledged herd immunity strategy, but make getting an effective vaccine soon, or ever, very difficult indeed. You won't hear that from the Government, which is betting the farm on having an effective vaccine before long.

The Office for National Statistics recently revealed 17,000 extra UK deaths in the first three weeks of April 2020 compared with 2019, many due to Covid-19. Some are not and is inevitable collateral damage, probably caused by both lack of access to health provision and patients' fear of catching the virus by attending hospital.

Meanwhile, in its headless chicken response to circumstances and critics, the Government wasted untold millions on the now-mothballed Nightingale units, unused commandeered private hospitals and RAF dashes to Turkey to fetch unusable PPE.

European experience should have informed the Government early on that social care could be particularly hard hit with disproportionately high mortality rates given the multiple vulnerabilities of many residents.

Despite this, this sector was very neglected until weeks after residents started dropping like flies. There is no local authority provision now as successive governments (Labour and Tory) forced councils out to facilitate privatisation, triggering a race to the bottom in terms of care quality, directly related to the decreased per capita funding available.

This Cinderella service is nowadays largely owned by offshore hedge funds deriving most of their profit via high interest leveraged loans, staffed by inadequate numbers - nearly all women - on minimum wage.

We have a chancellor with a hedge fund background and a Tory party largely dependent on donations from hedge fund operators. Little surprise that the Government don't rock this particular boat.

With our ageing population and high demand for places, losing a chunk of their current inmates shouldn't really affect their mates' potential earnings.

Chronic shortages or non-availability of PPE in nursing and residential homes verges on the criminal on the part of the Government. Was this really an accident?

Some 90% of victims had underlying health issues. Therefore 10% of fatalities were apparently in good health before being stricken. Why wasn't the idiotic early internet myth that younger people were unaffected by Covid-19 not robustly contradicted? This is patently untrue and a likely stimulus for those ignoring lockdown rules. As some of these will be infected but asymptomatic, this is especially dangerous.

Some suggest Covid-19 is man-made. Viruses have existed for a long time and regularly exhibit regular mutation - not always making them more harmful. This is no different. Unfortunately, one unconfirmed anecdotal report swiftly transmutes into incontrovertible fact on the internet these days.

If this 'fake' pandemic doesn't exist at all - or if it does exist is evidence of a gigantic global conspiracy to cull most of humanity - this would require a reliable antidote distributed secretly beforehand to the chosen few. If so, you would think the conspirators might have devised something rather more efficient at killing people.

As for Bill Gates being the fount of all evil in this, I am bemused by this and I love a good conspiracy theory.

Gates forewarned the world in 2015 that this was a real possibility (as Dubya did in 2006). His foundation has spent a fortune in Africa trying to improve infrastructure and mitigate the effects of diseases like malaria. In Liverpool, they gave £30m of the £32m cost of new facilities for our world-renowned School of Tropical Medicine. I know this is true because I was one of the council cabinet members who agreed our £2m share. If there is a conspiracy to kill us all off, why have life expectancy and infant mortality improved so much in Africa in the past 25 years?

It doesn't compute and illustrates the tendency for over-paranoid internet conspiracy theorists to conflate two completely separate things, identifying connections where none exist. The sun comes up every morning and Donald Trump is the president of the USA so he must be the president because the sun rises every morning.... Er, no.

No doubt some homegrown neo-Fascists see this as an opportunity to field test some tailored strategies for future implementation of a genteel English style police state. I won't be having a contact tracing app on my phone for example, although given the past performance of every British government computer project, the idea that the Government could efficiently collate and utilise all that data for their nefarious purposes is laughable.

Social distancing will be the new normal probably for at least another year, although getting the Government to treat the people as though they are responsible adults is probably a forlorn hope.

There will be further disease spikes and further impositions of partial or total lockdown in response. It is inevitable that some airlines and associated companies will go bust in the next year due to the decline in holidays taken abroad.

One silver lining for BoJo is that the coming mega-recession will swamp the inevitable economic damage caused by Brexit, which will all be blamed on Covid-19 (and the EU) for years to come.

One area of concern could be food. Those panic buying two months back were actually being rational in assessing future risk. We import 40% of our food. As yet another Brexit bonus there weren't enough low wage Europeans coming here to harvest our crops even before lockdown, never mind afterwards. Some crops could be incompletely or not harvested.

Thus, as well as shortages of certain foodstuffs, there will probably be significant price rises looming. I doubt the Government will be overly concerned this far away from the next general election. Anyway, they have told us there is nothing to worry about on the food supply front.

What could possibly go wrong.....

Paul Clein has been a community pharmacist for 46 years and is a former Liberal Democrat cabinet member for education and children's services on Liverpool City Council.

OWNERSHIP FOR ALL

An old Liberal idea of universal ownership can be matched with a newer one of universal basic income for a post-pandemic world, says Paul Hindley

The outbreak of Covid-19 has changed the world as we knew it. Tens of thousands of people have died from it in the UK and the economy, according to some measures, is facing its biggest recession in over 300 years. Politics, society and the economy - if not the world - are likely to never be the same again in its aftermath.

How should radical liberals respond to the post-Covid-19 world? Where should the Liberal Democrats look for original and distinctive policies?

Finland would be a good place to start. Kela (the Social Insurance Institution of Finland) conducted analysis into the country's limited basic income experiment. This showed that a basic income improved people's mental wellbeing, led to them having a more secure financial situation and even having on average more days in employment when compared to a control group.

If the coronavirus crisis has shown anything it is that people lack access to basic capital. This fundamental insecurity has left many of the poorest and those in precarious employment struggling to get by. A universal basic income (UBI) would help to resolve this by giving everybody the right to a guaranteed minimum income and to get access to a basic amount of capital. The right to a universal basic income for liberals in the 21st century should be as fundamental as the right to welfare was in the 20th century or the right to vote and speak freely was in the 19th century.

LONG PEDIGREE

The idea has a long pedigree with roots stretching back at least as far as to the liberal republican writer Tom Paine. Forms of the UBI have had supporters across the political spectrum from socialists to right-wing libertarians. In April, Ed Davey, Layla Moran, Daisy Cooper and several other Liberal Democrat parliamentarians put their names to a letter calling for a "Recovery Universal Basic Income" in response to Covid-19. The leader of the Welsh Liberal Democrats - and former MP for Brecon and Radnorshire - Jane Dodds has consistently called for a trial of UBI.

The Liberal Democrats are clearly beginning to warm to the idea of introducing UBI and the party should unequivocally endorse it and design policy around it.

This brings us onto a very important point in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. That is the impact on the mental health of people across society. Rates of anxiety and depression have increased because of the pandemic and the lockdown. Baroness Claire Tyler delivered the 2015 Beveridge Memorial Lecture at the Social Liberal Forum conference on the politics of wellbeing. The need to improve mental and emotional wellbeing was vital long before the current crisis.

A wellbeing-centred approach will need to be at

the heart of any radical liberal response. Just as important, issues such as health and safety and accessibility inform much of our engagement in the workplace and society more broadly, the same must also be the case for the issue of individual wellbeing.

The results from Finland show that a UBI would deliver higher levels of wellbeing and life satisfaction. In addition, we will need to have well-funded mental health services, building on the good work of Norman Lamb in particular.

A second issue that the post-Covid-19 world will have to grapple with is the economic impact on regional inequalities. The centralisation of wealth and power in London and the South East of England is a major imbalance in our political economy.

It is though worth noting that some of the poorest parts of this country are within London boroughs, so the issue is not as binary as London and the South East versus the rest.

Those communities which have been left behind by economic globalisation over the last few decades cannot continue to be left behind in the aftermath of this crisis.

Radical liberals need to support political and economic federalism to all the regions and nations of the UK. There also needs to be substantial regional and local investment to create decent, secure jobs in the poorest parts of the country, especially now in the absence of EU regional and development funding.

At the time of writing this, I am spending the lockdown in my hometown of Blackpool, which has an example has experienced more decline, deprivation and economic hardship than most. It consistently ranks as one of the poorest parts of the UK and north west Europe.

Blackpool still depends on the tourist industry and continues to be a major tourist hub in the UK. That industry is going to be devastated by the impact of Covid-19. The fate of Blackpool and of its tourism sector are closely interwoven, both of which have declined steeply since the 1980s. Tourism provides for thousands of permanent and seasonal jobs, many of which are going to be lost during this crisis. Not to mention the local hotels, bed and breakfasts and businesses which depend on income from tourists, who now risk going out of business. Overall, the economic impact of Covid-19 will have a devastating impact on the lives of individuals and the fate of small businesses in Blackpool.

Inequality and deprivation across the UK are only going to grow wider if there is not a persistent approach from government at multiple levels to addressing these deep divides.

Because of this, we cannot return to austerity following this crisis, we Liberal Democrats must revive

our Keynesian anti-austerity credentials. The economic hardship of the 1930s enabled the rise of Nazism and Fascism. Today, we can already see reactionary right-wing demagogues in power from Budapest to Brasília working to undermine liberal democracy. Radical liberal social justice can deliver the hope needed to stifle the hate of right-wing nationalists.

To develop a radical liberal alternative, a prevailing narrative will have to be forged. The Liberal Democrats will therefore need to develop a driving mission for radical change.

I was struck recently when reading an illustrated history of the Liberal Party written by RJ Cruikshank in the late 1940s, to see the level of radicalism in relation to the party's agenda of 'Ownership for All'.

Cruikshank writes that the objective of the Liberal Party was "to abolish the proletariat and make all men owners". The statement represents a striking inversion of the classical Marxist political formula. Whereas Marx and Engels wrote famously about the proletariat overthrowing and thus abolishing the 'ruling class' of capitalist property owners (the bourgeoisie) in a moment of revolutionary socialism; here 1940s Liberals wanted to abolish the proletariat by making everyone property owners.

This difference between the radical liberal approach and the classical Marxist approach also belies one of the fundamental divisions between liberalism and socialism. Whereas socialist political theory places a greater emphasis on reducing the position of the wealthy, social liberal political theory places a greater emphasis on raising up the poorest in society. Such an approach is evident in the writings of social liberal theorists, such as Leonard T Hobhouse and John Rawls.

But what does the radical liberal approach to the economy represent? Is it closer to contemporary capitalism or to socialism? The truth is that it represents a genuine alternative to both.

The Oxford University academic, Stuart White has done a great deal of research into this political tradition which he has called 'alternative liberalism'. This tradition sought to universalise the ownership of property, assets and capital. Access to property ownership and wealth was seen as necessary to achieving individual freedom and what Thomas Hill Green called self-realisation. It also supported giving employees a mutual stake in their workplaces through worker share ownership schemes and profit-sharing. In addition, it supported forms of economic democracy, such as German-style works councils and worker cooperatives.

UNIVERSAL CAPITALISM

From the 1930s until the 1980s, the Liberal Party sought to create what was in effect a universal capitalism for the masses, or put another way, to create an egalitarian form of capitalism. The benefits of individual property ownership were to be brought to everyone in society, especially the poor and dispossessed. No doubt the notion of egalitarian capitalism would appear like a huge oxymoron to committed Marxists and neoliberals alike. However, it represents a radical attempt to universalise the emancipatory potential of owning property, wealth and participating in the market economy. This tradition was developed further by the Nobel laureate, James

Meade and directly influenced Rawls' preferred model of political and social justice, property-owning democracy.

The current crisis has shown quite clearly that whole swathes of the population do not benefit from a guaranteed income. People lack the guaranteed wealth that mass asset ownership would bring. Both aspects fuel wider injustice between the generations; the younger generations who lack assets, property and a secure income and wealthy older generations who own their own homes, have large savings and have a guaranteed pension. One response to this inequality within the radical liberal tradition would be a universal capital grant or what is occasionally called a universal inheritance. This is where a one-off capital grant (usually of at least £10,000) is given to every citizen on their 25th birthday. Such a policy could be funded by a radical overhaul of inheritance tax or by establishing a citizens' wealth fund (as detailed by research from the Institute for Public Policy Research).

The reality of insecure ownership, insecure income and insecure employment manifests itself in a precarious existence for millions in the UK. This is what Guy Standing has termed the 'precarariat'. It should be the Liberal Democrat mission to abolish such 'precarity' within society and the economy. Whereas once the party sought "to abolish the proletariat and make all men owners", today the Liberal Democrats should stand to abolish the 'precarariat' and make everyone individual property owners in terms of access to wealth, capital and assets, therefore, truly universalising the fruits of capitalism on an egalitarian basis.

The old Thatcherite (so-called neoliberal) consensus must be swept away in the aftermath of Covid-19 and replaced by a new consensus built on the radical social liberal foundations of 'Ownership for All', the centrepiece for which would be a UBI.

Thatcherism has created deep inequalities of wealth and ownership, not to mention systemic social hardships for the poorest in society. If social justice is to be realised, especially following the current crisis, then the politics of fair ownership need to be at the heart of Liberal Democrat politics.

As the great social liberal welfare reformer William Beveridge once wrote, "A revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions, not for patching".

If the coronavirus outbreak does not constitute such a revolutionary moment, then it is difficult to conceive of what does. We need to do politics and economics very differently from now on. Liberal Democrats must lead the way.

Paul Hindley is a member of the Social Liberal Forum council and a politics PhD student at Lancaster University

THERE GOES THE HIGH STREET

Online shopping and home working will reshape town centres and commuting, but don't think it's all good news, says Mark Smulian

Where are you now Maplin, Woolworths, Toys R Us and BHS?

These and many other high street staples have gone, and the lockdown-driven boom in online shopping may take a lot more.

With them will potentially go the whole concept of 'retail-led regeneration' - beloved of many local authorities - and the idea of a town centre as it has been known since permanent shops replaced occasional markets centuries ago.

I'm sceptical of some wilder predictions made how the lockdown will fundamentally change society.

More credible though are predictions that it might intensify changes already in progress, and the high street and the idea of it as a community's centre were in dire trouble.

Of course a community does not need a physical centre to exist - plenty of us live in non-geographical communities - but the Lib Dem idea of community politics has almost always been based around a very traditional idea of people who live near each other using the same services and having common interests.

What if they don't because they may shop with a supplier who could be based anywhere? And what if the numbers of people entering a town centre plummet because it has far fewer shops - and so fewer customers for other amenities - and also fewer offices if the lockdown gives a push long-term to working from home?

In addition to the deluge of psychobabble about social change that has attended the lockdown much nonsense has been talked about it benefiting the environment.

But the group least affected in terms of mobility were car drivers, who unless they made long unauthorised drives to national parks could go pretty much where they pleased, stock up mightily at supermarkets and take exercise in the country.

Those dependent on public transport were and remain hampered by reduced services, admonitions that these are only for key workers and real or imagined fears of catching disease; the latter also applies to urban pedestrians and is an attitude that may persist.

There had been real, if inadequate, progress in encouraging people out of cars and into public transport ('modal shift' as the transport planners call it) but the contrasting lockdown experiences of car drivers, public transport users and walkers could slam that into reverse.

That is though speculation; what is not is the state into which retail had fallen even before the lockdown.

WORST YEAR

The British Retail Consortium called 2019 "the worst year on record for retail" from brick and mortar premises, while online retailers were doing fine.

According to the Centre for Retail Research, in 2019 - before anyone had heard of Covid-19 - there were 143,128 retail jobs lost and 16,073 store units closed, both a noticeable increase on 2018, when those figures stood at 117,425 and 14,583 respectively. The lockdown's boost to online retailing may not last at its present rate but it is safe to assume that some former physical shop customers will stick with it.

What then does a council, or community or landlord do with a lot of unwanted shops?

Before anyone says "convert them into homes" stop and look at what is there. Many have huge floorplates, are not energy efficient and are windowless except at the front.

Long, narrow, single storey homes lacking daylight and set amid the remnants of town centre retailing might be a hard sell.

And there is the unhappy experience of redundant converted offices to consider. Eric Pickles - one of the least distinguished Coalition ministers - introduced permitted development rights, which in plain English means that buildings used for business could be converted to homes without the need for full planning permission.

The result has been a profusion of tiny flats that must have been particularly unpleasant places in which to be locked down, let alone if one also tried to work.

Let's turn here to the Royal Town Planning Institute - not a body normally given to overstatement. Its president Sue Manns has noted: "The [virus] crisis has revealed the cruelty and folly of recent permitted development rights which have allowed the conversion outwith planning control of commercial premises to residential uses, with units as small as 13 square metres in size, with no natural ventilation, no windows and no outdoor space.

"Those now 'locked down' in these units must be suffering immensely. We cannot allow this to continue."

Individual small shops might be convertible to single homes but for the vanishing chain stores and malls the only way of turning them into housing involves bulldozers.

One obvious issue here is that local plans are arrived at by lengthy processes and few will have been able to keep up with the rapid collapse of retail.

Plans may still designate areas for retail even as its evaporation makes it impossible to attract any retailer,

so to avoid sites becoming derelict some other use will have to be found and allowed.

Few will have much sympathy with the problems faced by landlords of retail premises - often large property companies - though a series of failures there might affect both their employees and those with pensions invested in them.

It's not yet become apparent what might happen, but if demand for retail premises falls significantly retailers will obviously be unable to pay their rent.

Given the lack of any easy alternative use, property companies would then find they had a mass of unlettable buildings whose value had collapsed - a bit awkward if borrowings are secured on them.

The same problem could affect offices, if more slowly. Some people will have benefitted from working at home during the lockdown and decided they'd like to keep doing this.

Others may have found a workaround by commandeering a kitchen table but have hated the experience as they live in accommodation too small and/or crowded for a reasonable working environment.

Employers though may eventually conclude that if enough of their employees are willing to work at home at least some of the time, they need not rent such large office premises and can simply pocket the difference minus equipping staff with some new laptops and software.

For those who thought that home working will be an unalloyed boon for the environment - think further.

It may cut commuter traffic, but if lots of people work from home they will eventually want sufficient space for a proper home office, not just a temporary intrusion into somewhere normally used for some domestic purpose.

GREEN INK

Homes will be expected to come complete with work space, which will mean they will be larger than at present. Simple maths means fewer can then be built on any given site. That will worsen the housing shortage unless more land is released for housebuilding - a proposition that usually has Lib Dems reaching for their electronic green ink - and if that land is released there will be issues of 'urban sprawl'.

While the converted rabbit hutches deplored by the RTPi were an extreme there were good arguments

“What then does a council, or community or landlord do with a lot of unwanted shops? Before anyone says ‘convert them into homes’, stop and look at what is there”



for increasing density on sustainability grounds - people who live near where they work, shop and play have less need of cars.

If people are scared of public transport and want larger houses on greenfield sites accessible only by car much of that progress will be undone.

A decline in town centre shops and offices will still leave much intact - restaurants and cafes, personal services (try getting your hair cut online), convenience stores, charity shops and supermarkets will stay.

But traditional department stores have already been clobbered, Debenhams, House of Fraser and even Marks & Spencer (pictured) have closed large stores, others will follow into retail oblivion.

What of business rates? Online retailers pay these on cheap large sheds in the middle of nowhere while conventional retailers pay them on costly town centre sites. The unfairness is obvious, but it's also problematic for any council that budgeted on the basis

that the government said it could retain a slice of the increased business rates arising from local economic growth.

Most of that growth came from retail and offices - though some from industrial - and if both those are declining then so will the rates income on which the council based its assumptions.

Some councils have turned to arts, education and leisure investments to attract people to town centres in which they will also find the remaining retail offer and perhaps some health and education facilities.

In the past the standard way for a council to regenerate a town centre was to clear some large sites, secure a prominent retailer as 'anchor store' (John Lewis was the most favoured), improve the public realm and transport and see the local economy revive.

If that model of regeneration is closed off, and if lots of abandoned shops and office buildings make dereliction worse, what other ways might emerge to rescue town centres?

Other questions follow. If a town's centre ceases to be where people gravitate for shopping and work, what is it for? And if people work at home and order their purchases from there too - without any pressing need to regularly step outside - what is a community and what is community politics?

Mark Smulian is a member of the Liberator Collective

BLOWING A HOLE IN COUNCILS' BUDGETS

Richard Kemp looks for opportunities despite the plight of local authority finance in the pandemic

Council finances throughout England are in a total mess. I suspect that if these were 'normal times' there isn't a senior finance officer who wouldn't be preparing a Section 114 notice to restrict Council spending to statutory services only.

In fact, some councils have suggested that is what they will do only to have the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) beg them not to.

The problems have been caused because of two factors – the push/pull of council finances.

Our expenditure has been massively ramped up to deal with

Covid-19 requirements of both the Government and the humanitarian beliefs of council. This is largely, but not exclusively a problem for the 151 councils in England with adult social care responsibilities.

In Liverpool's case we have spent or committed approximately £78m and have so far in the two tranches of Government

money announced received about £33m. We don't know whether £78m will be the end of it as we still have no clear idea of the numbers that will be coming into care homes from hospitals or community situations. This will lead to an extra range of support for care homes and domiciliary services. It is possible that we will be about £100m adrift on a base budget of £500m.

MONEY PLUMMETED

However, we have also suffered a huge drop in income. The money that we get from parking fees, planning fees, concerts and a host of other routes has plummeted. Nor is our tax base safe. Out of desperation many council taxpayers are simply stopping their standing order payments and hoping that we will not take action. This will take time to work through and we have staff working flat out on a range of benefits activities to help those who have been

a laid off or having reductions in their income because of furloughing.

It's not only big councils that are affected. A district council I am working with has a base budget of £32m of which only £15m is met by tax with the remainder coming from parking concessions, rents and other sources. Their income position is proportionately almost as bad as that of Liverpool.

The situation has not been helped by mixed messages from the secretary of state Robert Jenrick. He first of all told us that money was not the issue and that our cash requirements would be met providing we were doing things connected with the Covid-19 issue. Three

weeks later he told us that not necessarily all expenditure will be met. He then told us that the Government were open to discussion after the second tranche of £1.6bn.

We now need to work out what to do locally and nationally. The response will be different from council to council. In Liverpool for example we have decided to vigorously and publicly back the Labour mayor in a request for cash

to remedy the situation. I have been involved loosely in the spending decisions and know that although in hindsight small amounts could have been better used, the money has been used properly and effectively to meet the Government's needs to reduce pressure on the NHS.

Whether in control or opposition I think that we should, if at all possible, work with the other parties in local government on an issue which affects us all.

In particular I think that it may be possible to do a judicial review or take other legal action if the Government does not come through with the cash. It is quite clear that whatever Jenrick intended his initial promise to honour our spending is the one that council leaders have acted upon.



So what do we do nationally? I have suggested that all Lib Dem council leaders, their deputies and opposition group leaders should write to Jenrick saying two things:

- * That local government is not making this all up. They can pick at random any set of councils and send their staff to look at our expenditure to see for themselves that we are not bluffing; and
- * We should jointly threaten a judicial review of Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government before any other group of councils such as core cities (who are considering this) do so.

The financial problems discussed above will mean that cherished dreams might not now happen. Two Lib Dem councils that I have worked with on change of control activities have produced new 10-year plans based on their manifestos. How much of those are now deliverable needs to be tested. They might need in the short-term to set new priorities which involve keeping things intact. Revenue and capital programmes will clearly be distorted for years to come. This will affect adversely what things might be done.

The lockdown for people and businesses however produces both threats and opportunities. Some things will definitely be different. The way that we shop, the way that we take our holidays, the way that we work as communities; how we think about education; how many will want to work from home more.

On top of that there will be things that people will want to take more seriously. Certainly in our cities and urban areas there has been a much greater regard for our parks, nature, environmental issues, cycling and walking, the need for good public transport. People have been eating more healthily, communities have bonded, the problems of mental and physical health have been discussed in greater detail.

ACHIEVING VISIONS

Whether it's for negative or positive reasons every council needs to reassess if not its vision, then the things it needs to do for the next three years to deliver differently to achieve that vision.

Some things will have to slow down but we might be able to seize the moment to accelerate other things that the public are not backing. Whether in control of our councils or in opposition Lib Dems need to be establishing a new paradigm for our councils. We need to create a coherent Lib Dem vision in the vastly changed post pandemic times.

In Liverpool we have set out a series of challenges to the council and have started publicly discussing them. You can find them at www.richardkemp.wordpress.com.

“Out of desperation many council taxpayers are simply stopping their standing order payments and hoping that we will not take action”

The party is already working on this with Ed Davey and working with the Federal Policy Committee on a series of policy pods looking at a post pandemic era. Some of that will be of use to us as local government policy makers. This is our opportunity now to take the lead in 'brave new world' thinking.

The Local Government Association group, the LGA itself and the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors need to work with Lib Dem groups to bring forward these new programmes and policies. With

no council elections this year there is no 'change of control' activity going on so let's use those resources to help our council groups find ways forward in these challenging times.

Richard Kemp is leader of the Liberal Democrat opposition in Liverpool and Lib Dem spokesperson on health and social care at the Local Government Association

Liberal Revue from the vaults!

**The Liberal Revue can now be enjoyed again online at:
<https://tinyurl.com/ya2w617d>
or by searching on "Liberal Revue" on YouTube.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

CHINA SEIZES ITS CHANCE AS COVID-19 HITS AFRICA

The coronavirus recession is plunging Africa further into debt as demand for commodities falls along with oil prices, says Rebecca Tinsley

The Covid-19 financial crash will have devastating consequences for Africa, halting or even reversing recent success in fighting poverty.

As demand for commodities shrinks, and Africans in lockdown are unable to earn money, many countries on the continent will face severe economic downturns. Moreover, thanks to opaque loan agreements, some African oil-producing nations are paying their Chinese lenders in oil priced at current market rates: that means they could be shipping China five times more oil than when they negotiated the loans. The slump will also have far-reaching geopolitical consequences: in the absence of American leadership, China can count on the continent's UN representatives to look away as it flexes its muscles in Hong Kong, the South China Sea and Taiwan.

Even before Covid-19, a combination of poor governance and corruption had burdened several African nations with enormous foreign debts. Johns Hopkins University estimates that China lent Africa \$143bn between 2000 and 2017. Angola alone owes \$49bn, giving rise to a local headline: "Every Angolan owes \$754 to China". Forbes magazine estimates Nigeria's public debt at \$85bn, meaning that each of Nigeria's 200m million citizens owes China \$41.

President Xi's plan for interlinking global infrastructure projects, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is not a form of aid. The majority of Chinese investment in Africa is for projects funded by loans. The conditions attached to those loans do not necessarily benefit Africa's citizens.

SMALL PRINT

According to Nigerian economist Obadiah Mailafiya African governments should have read the small print before agreeing to loans with China. He suggests most of the money goes back to China in the form of contracts for materials, equipment and approved construction firms specified for infrastructure projects. He also believes China has laid claim to assets in several African countries in lieu of interest payments.

Noel Mbala, a former transport minister in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), says few African leaders have skilled advisors on hand when negotiating contracts

with lenders. This has led to paying loans with commodities such as oil. These contracts are rarely transparent, giving rise to fears that oil-for-loans agreements are subject to the current market price. That was advantageous when oil was \$120 a barrel, but not now. The opaque nature of the agreements makes scrutiny difficult.

Anyone working in Africa has noticed the empty conference centres, idle power plants, roads to nowhere and railways running at low capacity; symbols of the local elite's grandiose empire-building, funded by Chinese loans.

For instance, Nova Cidade de Kilamba in Angola, a city of 750 tower blocks, was built by China's CITIC group at a cost to Angola of \$3.5bn. Intended to house half a million people, it has an estimated 80,000 residents. The smallest apartments were initially priced at \$125,000 but reduced to \$70,000, still beyond the reach of all but a tiny elite. Angolan GDP per person is \$6,800, 36% live below the poverty line, and 71% of the rural population is without running water. If Angola is paying its loans with oil at the current market price, then it will be in debt to China for centuries.

Part of President Xi's BRI is the Mombasa-Nairobi-Naivasha railway. Yet, the second section, from the Kenyan capital to Lake Victoria, comes to an inglorious halt in Suswa, a Maasai village. China will not now



participate in the third section that would have connected land-locked Uganda with the port of Mombasa. The project's cost is \$3.7bn, whereas for \$205m, the British colonial era line could have been refurbished. As it is, estimates of cargo traffic on the Mombasa-Nairobi section have proven over-optimistic, to put it kindly.

Critics argue that China often calibrates its support according to the needs of the African elite. For instance, China built the African Union HQ (pictured), which is rumoured to be equipped with Chinese eavesdropping devices, the ECOWAS HQ and the new Zimbabwean Parliament for free. Although China denies it vehemently, some African commentators call it neo-colonialist for deciding what Africa needs, rather than consulting local people who might prioritise running water and electricity.

Yet, African leaders are not forced to go along with China's plans: some desire vanity projects to boost their status or kickbacks to pad their off-shore bank accounts.

China's far-sighted strategy has also opened the continent to Chinese goods, which may initially be dumped at a loss, putting African competitors out of business, at which point China can raise the price of its goods.

Since the appearance of Covid-19 in China, African social media have featured clips of Africans who work or study in China being beaten or banned from McDonald's, accused of bringing the virus to China. Confronted by an anti-Chinese backlash in Africa, officials are reported to be offended that Africans are ungrateful for the help received from China.

Yun Sun, of the Stimson Center, remarks that Africans may have woken up to racism in China against them, despite the official narrative of brotherhood and unity. Yet, it is just one episode, she says, and China's relationship with Africa remains transactional and based on elite connections, rather than African public opinion.

African leaders are already in China's pocket when it comes to supporting China at the UN when issues of contested sovereignty such as Hong Kong or Taiwan arise. She argues that some African leaders have a track record of being untroubled by human rights concerns such as the issue of Muslim Uighurs. In an absence of US leadership, there is even debate in China about taking advantage of how distracted the global community is, to further its agendas on Taiwan, stake its claim on the South China Sea and neutralise democracy activists in Hong Kong.

OIL SLUMP

The oil slump is largely due to reduced demand in the global north during the lockdown. Yet, China continues to buy oil, taking advantage of falling prices. Yun Sun points out that China's oil imports rose 5% in March, opportunistically buying crude shipments from tankers that were unable to unload at ports shuttered by the virus. China will store the oil until its economy

“China can count on the continent’s UN representatives to look away as it flexes its muscles in Hong Kong, the South China Sea and Taiwan”

recovers.

The G20 moved quickly to suspend African loan repayments until 2021, and there are calls for debt forgiveness. However, it seems unlikely China's lenders will cancel loans while the Chinese economy is struggling. Although much of Nigeria's debts were forgiven in 2005-06, its leaders have borrowed so much recently that it is back in the same position now. There is little evidence Nigerians have

benefited from the spending spree: 70% live below the poverty line, and even in urban areas the power supply is so poor that it makes manufacturing difficult. Since its citizens are unlikely to be helped by debt cancellation, it may be difficult to argue for forgiveness a second time in two decades.

The global north's economies are forecast to contract dramatically this year, while subsequent years are unlikely to enjoy a swift recovery. How popular will spending on foreign aid be when cuts in the domestic budget become necessary?

Meanwhile, Africa will struggle to contain Covid-19 in congested and insanitary cities, with few healthcare resources. Many people must go out daily to sell their labour or goods; tourism has evaporated; remittances from relatives working abroad are down; and societies relying on communal solidarity will be tested by the lockdown.

Many Africans do not trust their governments for good reason, so they question the health advice from on high. During the Ebola epidemic, Sierra Leone and the DRC learned that co-opting local leaders as legitimate messengers worked best. But Africa is short on the time and resources necessary to reach every community. According to a health worker in remote northern Uganda (who wishes to remain anonymous), the countries with the best governance will come through Covid-19 with the least devastation. She was not hopeful about the nations where the elite's credibility does not extend beyond the suburbs of the capital city. Africans will be left to rely on their resilience and resourcefulness yet again.

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 Times of Israel.

BEVERIDGE RIDES AGAIN

A response to the pandemic demands full throated and unequivocal social liberalism, says Liz Makinson

The resonance of Beveridge, writing his iconic report in 1942 while Britain was fighting a terrible war and tackling the giants of poverty and disease cannot be ignored with the reality of today's pandemic.

We are fighting disease as never before in living memory. All our lives have changed but the stark inequalities of life in Britain today are suddenly much more visible. Just as evacuation laid bare before the middle classes the deadening poverty of many children in the 1930s, a global pandemic has revealed the chronic insecurity and poverty of so many lives today.

Lockdown for someone with a job which they can now do from home, with enough food, heating and a garden is an entirely different thing to the insecurity faced by many, laid off from jobs or on zero hours contracts and relying on the diminishing supplies of food banks to provide for their families.

Like in 1942, we are seeing the worsening effects of an already bleak situation for many families. Help should not be a short term response to the virus and then we can all go back to business as usual.

It is time for a societal sea change where there is an emphasis on quality of life for all. Time and again people share on social media their relief at having a slower pace of life, even amongst the horrors of Covid 19. This is our time to step up as a party and offer people a better, healthier and more secure life.

Although I absolutely believe we should have stayed in the EU and every fibre of my being says it is a disastrous move to leave, the last general election saw us put all our eggs in our pro-EU basket.

As Liberal Democrats we should be shouting from the rooftops about our core values, our belief that no one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity. It may be just one little sentence but it sums up so much that we believe in but do not shout about.

I am as happy as the next Liberal Democrat to get potholes fixed, street lights mended and drains cleared. Many people vote for us because we conscientiously do these things. They are vital but they do not transcend to votes at national level. We need to take up the mantle of Beveridge and put before people a radical and compassionate message.

Now is the time to put across a message of full throated and unequivocal social liberalism; where everyone enjoys true freedom.

Labour believe they alone have the moral authority to speak on poverty and that a Labour government is the only choice for social justice. We have shown ourselves once again to be far more progressive than Labour in this crisis by supporting a universal basic income (UBI). Keir Starmer has displayed a worrying pedestrianism by his choice to shun UBI because it might be a bit tricky to organise. To reach out to their disaffected voters, early indications seem to suggest Labour pursuing a stultifying small 'c' conservatism

when visionary policies and people centred thinking are so needed.

Lloyd George vowed to wage war on poverty and made significant steps to doing just that. What would he have said today about nurses who have to rely on food banks to make ends meet?

Key workers are working flat out to run our hospitals, keep us fed, care for our vulnerable and provide essential utilities. For those with a little more time on our hands, the desire to make a better future after this pandemic should be part of our planning. I have long felt ashamed that under our current system, people can be sanctioned and their benefits taken away in such a callous and economically nonsensical way. We have a welfare system that in some respects is more punitive than the Victorian Poor Laws. It's high time that we made the step forward that everyone should be able to eat and heat without sanction. UBI would achieve that and would enable a flourishing of entrepreneurialism among people no longer scared that their basic needs could not be met.

Coming out of this pandemic, we need, as a party to show what kind of society we believe in. Enough of '3 key policies people can repeat'; our core values need to be communicated in a clear, simple and engaging way. So much time appears to be wasted at elections with getting a policy out there with which people can identify.

We are not a pressure group. We have always been a radical party and we should be flexing our radicalism as never before. Supporting UBI is a real step forward. It should however only be the first step to a radical, Liberal agenda which provides hope and a vision of a society where people matter and society is both caring and progressive. We are all living with uncertainty and stress during this pandemic; we need to plan for a future where those things are not an inescapable part of so many lives.

Liz Makinson is a history teacher and Liberal Democrat education spokesperson on Liverpool City Council

WONDERING WHY

The election review skewered Liberal Democrat processes but also found the party lacked a compelling vision of what it is for, says David Grace

“What is that man for ?” piped up Bertrand Russell as a child when his grandparents invited John Stuart Mill for dinner.

A good perceptive question to ask about anyone and one to which all Liberal Democrat candidates (male or female) should have a good answer. It would be even better if they all had the same answer.

“Organisations are easier to run when people are trying to do the same thing”. This basic truth comes from the Liberal Democrats’ 2019 General Election Review Report, the best report on our worst election in a long time.

The report identifies many process, group-dynamic and management problems and recommends necessary reforms, but the deeper message for me is about vision.

“Even beyond the chaos and uncertainty which came into play in 2019, the Liberal Democrats had not translated their beliefs into a clear and relevant vision or the strategy to put it into place”. If the electorate asked “What is that party for ?” the answer was “Stop Brexit. Build a brighter future”, irrelevant to half the electorate with no strong views on Brexit, silent about what a Liberal Democrat government would do, what kind of country we want to create. Was there ever a more vacuous theme than “build a brighter future”? Disappointing for all those voters who wanted a darker one.

The party’s failure to say clearly what it is for goes back further. Having spent most of the twentieth century building up social liberalism, first expounded by LT Hobhouse in 1911, the party had a narrative, some brand with voters.

The Orange Book (2004) and Nick Clegg’s election as leader (2007) undermined that vision. The party has lost focus ever since.

“Give a head to Labour and a heart to the Tories” was the 2015 answer to “What are the Liberal Democrats for?” – to make other parties better! After that disastrous election we could have used our temporary irrelevance to sort out what we were for.

Tim Farron chose instead to develop the party’s ability to campaign. In some countries, Denmark (1905) and the Netherlands (1966) for example, Liberalism was split between Social Liberal parties and the other lot. In Britain we have just one party (Sorry so-called Liberal Party’s remnants who supported Brexit – you don’t count).

It’s high time we made clear what we’re for. The European referendum and its aftermath proclaimed Liberal Democrats were against Brexit. This brought many new members who are Liberal Democrats because they’re against Brexit rather than people who are against Brexit because they are Liberals, so now the voters’ confusion about what we are for has been

imported into the party itself. Meanwhile the tired old left-right struggle continues. After a recent argument between Liberal Democrats on Zoom an invited Labour supporter commented “It’s just like a posh version of the Labour Party”. I think we can do better than that.

No doubt party organs will grind away at the election review’s many recommendations for changes in how we do things. Much harder is the essential task of answering why.

I believe that is now the key role for the Social Liberal Forum. SLF was founded in 2009 and many of Nick Clegg’s colleagues regarded it as “the internal opposition”. Quite rightly we opposed many coalition government policies, notably austerity, but we were always in the mainstream of Liberalism and still are.

The Forum is trying to answer that key question, “What are the Liberal Democrats for ?” A recent SLF webinar discussed economic, social and political challenges and opportunities for Liberalism after Covid-19, with contributions from Vince Cable, Jane Dodds and William Wallace. You can find a report on <https://www.socialliberal.net/> and its plans for this strange summer.

There will be three online meetings looking at the world after Covid-19 on : a new economic order, international relations and creating a fairer society.

Like many other organisations the Forum has abandoned its annual physical conference but plans a virtual one in September. From June the Forum will have a new director, Ian Kearns, former deputy director of the Institute for Public Policy Research, who told conference last year why he left the Labour Party to join us.

I lay down the challenge to anyone who disagrees, tell us your vision. As an atheist I quote the bible: Proverbs 29:18 “Where there is no vision, the people perish”.

David Grace is a member of the Liberator Collective

THE MISSING BIT IN THE MIDDLE

Neglected by both south and north the Midlands needs Liberal Democrat activity back, says Michael Mullaney

A group of Liberal Democrat activists from across the East and West Midlands have formed Liberal Democrats for the Heart of England (LDHE). The spur was a belief that issues affecting the Midlands needed a higher profile in the Liberal Democrats and that the Midlands needed more Liberal Democrat councillors, councils and MPs to fight for those issues.

LDHE therefore seeks to raise within the Liberal Democrats the issues that concern the Midlands and to act as a champion for those causes within the party and to help develop policies that will enable the Liberal Democrats to recover and grow their support in the Midlands

GONE BACKWARDS

To start with the second aim, after the 2017 general election I wrote a report for the Social Liberal Forum titled Northern Discomfort. It highlighted how, though the party had made some progress in the South, London and Scotland it had gone backwards in the North, Midlands and Wales. Losing three out of our four MPs in the North and Wales and all the remaining second places in the Midlands.

Although the 2019 election saw us make some progress nationally, with the party now holding 91 second places, these were overwhelmingly in London and the South East of England. No new second places were gained in the North or Wales, and we lost second place in Ceredigion and Leeds North West.

No new second places were picked up in the East Midlands either - although we came within 687 votes in Bosworth of regaining the second place we had in 2010 and 2015.

In the West Midlands there was a recovery of four second places in the southern part of the region, but still no Lib Dem MPs.

With the North and Midlands urgently needing a recovery in Lib Dem support it's good to see the launch of the Northern Liberal Network. LDHE wants similarly help see a Liberal Democrat recovery in the Midlands.

Liberal Democrats have been strong in the Midlands in the recent past. In the 2010 general election the Lib Dems were first or second in 35 seats in the Midlands, 34% of the total.

In the recent past we have elected Lib Dem MPs in the East Midlands. The excellent Paul Holmes represented Chesterfield between 2001-10. Leicester South was represented between 2004-05 by Pramjit Singh Gill. In the West Midlands we held a number of seats in recent times Hereford (1997-2010) Ludlow (2001-05) Solihull (2005-15) Birmingham Yardley (2005-15).

Liberal Democrat MPs have been elected in the Midlands in the past and if we are to be a truly national party we should be aiming to elect MPs in the Midlands again. We have shown we can still win at a local level in the Midlands.

In last year's local elections Liberal Democrat's held Oadby and Wigston Council with a massive majority. In my area of Hinckley and Bosworth we gained the council from the Tories with our biggest ever majority. Elsewhere across the Midlands we gained many councillors in places like Chesterfield, Malvern Hills and Stratford-Upon-Avon.

Now we must try to turn local election success into general election success. Both the 2017 and 2019 elections were held in the shadow of the Brexit referendum. Liberal Democrats rightly campaigned for Remain and for a people's vote. However we can't underestimate how, rightly, taking that position was likely to place a ceiling on our support in the Midlands.

The East and West Midlands were the strongest Leave voting parts of Britain, nearly 60% of both regions voted Leave and nine out of 10 constituencies voted Leave, often by very large margins.

This meant that we were seen to be seeking not only to overturn the national verdict, but in almost every seat the local verdict too.

The Revoke policy in particular was a tough sell in the Midlands in 2019. It's no wonder the party struggled in the Midlands given our view was one which went against much of the grain of the Midlands.

However, as we go forward post-Brexit we have an opportunity to develop policies that can again appeal to voters in the Midlands. We have the opportunity to, as we did in the past, turn local election successes into general election successes, using the local elections in 2021 and 2023 to increase our local government base and take more Councils.

Why though do we need more Liberal Democrats elected in the Midlands? Well, firstly because we want more people elected to advance the party's principles and philosophy of liberalism and social democracy. However it's also because the Midlands needs strong Liberal Democrat voices to be its champion. To take up the many areas where the Midlands loses out.

The Midlands has for many years been dominated by Labour and the Tories. They have elected the vast bulk of MPs. Yet they have consistently failed when in government to deliver for the communities and people of the Midlands.

Many parts of the country feel they lose out in what seems to be a very London and South East England dominated Britain. Many parts of Britain feel their voices aren't heard. Of all these places however the Midlands seems to be the one that misses out most.

In the case of Scotland and Wales they both have parliaments to put their cases across. In the case of the North there is the much discussed 'North/South' divide which is regularly raised and highlights the inequalities between the two areas. What of the Midlands though?

Many in the North may well be forgiven for seeing the Midlands as 'down south', while many in the south may see anywhere north of Watford as 'up north'. Therefore the Midlands seems to miss out.

I serve as a county councillor and opposition finance spokesman in Leicestershire. I see first hand how we are often a forgotten part of the country for the Tory government.

All the Leicestershire county seats are represented by Tory MPs and have been for some years. Yet Leicestershire is about the worst funded county council in Britain. It means people here see council tax regularly soar year on year. Yet in recent years their local services, such as Sure Start Children's Centres, support for rural bus services, have been cut right back. For years there has been a campaign for Fair Funding for Leicestershire yet we don't see any changes from government. The Conservatives pocket Leicestershire votes at election times then fail to deliver the funding our area needs.

Similarly, a number of other counties including Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire are also among the worst funded in Britain despite electing new Tory MPs in recent years. LDHE will fight for a fair deal for councils, and the people they serve, in the Midlands.

GROWING UP IN POVERTY

Leicestershire also has among the worst funded schools in Britain. This has an effect in limiting opportunities. With social mobility in places like Hinckley and Bosworth being among the lowest in Britain. It's tragic that if a young person grows up round here in poverty sadly they are very likely to stay there. Championing the funding of our local services such as education to give everyone a fair start in life is a key cause that LDHE can seek to champion.

Equally our infrastructure is often given low priority. See the failure by the government to deliver electrification of the Midland Mainline through all of Northamptonshire, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire up to Sheffield. A cause pursued by Lib Dem's during coalition but then paused and delayed by the Tory governments. Our region deserves the cleaner, greener, faster trains that other parts of the country have. To give customers the quality service they deserve and to encourage and support business in the region.

Lib Dem councillors and campaigners from across the Midlands can give similar examples of how our areas miss out currently.

The party's general election review rightly identified how the party should be seen to speak up for and campaign on the issues that people care about. If we want to recover support in the Midlands we need

“Many in the North may well be forgiven for seeing the Midlands as ‘down south’, while many in the south may see anywhere north of Watford as ‘up north’”

to be seen to emphasise the big ticket issues of improving health, education, transport, housing the environment. To offer distinctive, popular policies on these issues which are in line with our principles.

It also means being seen to care about the down to earth issues that affect ordinary people's everyday lives. When Liberal Democrats on TV and radio speak with the same level of passion about delivering

quality health care and education to every individual and community, as we do about say staying in the EU, then people in the Midlands and elsewhere will see we care about their lives enough to give us their support.

LDHE want to develop these policies and we are keen to see members across the region get involved. If you can help with producing articles on the kinds of issues the Lib Dems should be championing in the Midlands, if you want to take part in some of the online debates we'll be holding or stand for our executive when the group formally launches, or just want to know more about the group please get in touch.

If the Liberal Democrats are to be a truly national party we need more Liberal Democrat councillors, councils and MPs elected in the Midlands and every part of Britain.

LDHE aims to develop the ideas that can help revive and expand Liberal Democrat support in the Midlands. The Midlands needs a Lib Dem revival and LDHE wants to involve as many members as possible to help achieve it.

Michael Mullaney is interim chair of Liberal Democrats for the Heart of England, executive member for housing and community safety on Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council and a Leicestershire County Councillor.
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Cancellation of the Liberal Democrat autumn conference in Brighton means we will not be printing a new version of the Liberator Songbook this year.

There are plans for a ‘virtual’ Glee Club being made to take place at some point during the online conference. Please watch out for details

WHERE DID THE SEATS GO?

Northern England has gone from a region in which Liberal Democrats prospered to a near desert. Can this be turned around, asks Laura Gordon

At the 2015 election, northern England was our stronghold, with four of our eight MPs representing seats in the North.

But over two elections, it's fallen away as Southport, Sheffield Hallam and Leeds North West fell and we failed to make gains to replace them. We are left with a Parliamentary party concentrated in London and the South East, and in Scotland – and only one MP between Oxford and Edinburgh.

If we are to be a national party, we must do better than this.

SILVER LINING

The one silver lining of our electoral performance was a swathe of strong second places in remain-voting Conservative seats, primarily in the South East. But the opportunity they offer is also a risk – that we become further concentrated in a small part of the country and increasingly out of touch with the rest in a vicious cycle that becomes harder and harder to reverse.

It doesn't have to be this way.

At our peak in 2010, we had 11 MPs across the North, and even now we have strong local representation. We control councils such as York and South Lakeland, and are poised to take control in Stockport, Hull and Sheffield. And we have active members campaigning across the country – gaining council seats against complacent Labour councils in Sunderland, Wakefield and Barnsley and moving forward against the Conservatives in former strongholds like Harrogate.

This success is based on our traditional values of hard work and community politics, but it's also based on something more distinctive. We have a long tradition of northern liberalism that taps into concerns at our over-centralised state, pride in our industrial heritage and our continued excellence in manufacturing, and celebrates local creativity.

It's a tradition that resents being dictated to by London, and demands to be allowed to develop our own path – and does so with determination and creativity. It's the tradition that drove the industrial revolution, and the great enfranchisement campaigns of the 19th century, that was kept alive by legendary Liberal campaigners like Richard Wainwright, and it lives on in our commitment to devolution.

That tradition could not be more relevant today. Our country has seen decades of underinvestment in our northern regions, with the result that our great cities and towns have failed to reach their potential – with devastating consequences for many of those who live there. Worst of all, over-centralisation has disempowered our towns and cities – leaving many to feel they have no control and no influence over their

lives, and leaves even the well-off frustrated that they are being held back.

Our manifesto pledged real solutions to these challenges with £50bn of investment in infrastructure for under-served regions. Skills Wallets – a gimmicky name, sure, but also the first attempt by a UK political party to seriously grapple with the retraining needs of those losing jobs through deindustrialisation and offshoring, problems that will only worsen with Brexit. A tripling of the early years pupil premium – investing in the poorest and starting to redress decades of educational underinvestment. And most importantly, a real commitment to devolution – so that communities could control their own destiny, rather than being beholden to Whitehall for even the smallest changes.

Yet while the policies were there, the narrative fell short. While our message was strong on Brexit and climate change, we failed to weave our policies into a story to tell people how we would address the real problems facing this country.

We looked staid – as if all we stood for was stopping Brexit, taking some action on climate change, and tweaking the tax system to spend a bit more on the NHS, while leaving the fundamental drivers of inequality unchanged. We fatally undersold the radicalism of our policies – then were surprised that voters found nothing to inspire them.

While this message fell flat everywhere, I don't think it's a coincidence that our least bad performances were in wealthy constituencies in London and the South East – areas where the need for radical change to our entire economic model may not appear so obvious.

If we are to fight back across the North, we need to do better than this.

It was amid all of these frustrations that, shortly after the election, Lisa Smart – our brilliant candidate in Hazel Grove – and I met in the pub. Quickly recognising our shared concerns, we decided to found the Northern Liberal Network to act as a voice for Northern England within the Liberal Democrats.

And it was clear, from the overwhelming response when we tentatively raised the idea on Lib Dem Voice, that we weren't alone.

The concerns we were expressing were shared by many across the party – and there was a real excitement around working together to address them. Off the back of a series of articles in Lib Dem Voice, we quickly formed a committee with a view to launching at Spring conference in York.

Sadly, it wasn't to be – but necessity is the mother of invention, and with a bit of planning we arranged a launch via Zoom on 21 April. The event exceeded our wildest expectations, with 88 people joining and 150 having already signed up to our mailing list.

As well as myself and Lisa, Kamran Hussein laid down a challenge to diversify our party and our network to speak for all communities across our region, and Dick Newby spoke about the value of informality and new ways of working to enable more people to get involved.

Over the coming months, we are planning further events to take these challenges forward. A panel discussion on 12 May with former Liberal Democrat MP Antoinette Sandbach, City of Durham leader of the opposition Amanda Hopgood, and Hull councillor Jack Haines gave an impressive list of ideas about how to support communities in lockdown. And we are planning a discussion in June with Tim Farron, as our only Northern MP.

TRAGEDY UPON A TRAGEDY

But in the context of Covid-19 and the coming recession, we need to do more than this. One day, one way or another, the pandemic will come to an end and we will need to rebuild our economy. To rebuild the same economy with the same flaws – bad for the environment, driving inequality, and trapping millions without access to good jobs and a better future – would be a tragedy upon a tragedy.

We need to demand a better future – one based on green technology, where we invest in our regions, and support people across the country to access good jobs. Where we invest in our children's future, promote mental health and wellbeing, and support local businesses as the heart of our communities.

An economy that allows a small portion of our country to forge ahead while the rest is held back can never deliver for everyone – and hurts those in the South East too through higher house prices. And a country that micromanages every decision in the centre will always fail to deliver for the majority.

We can and must demand better. Just as the Liberals of the 1940s set out the Beveridge report and won the argument of the peace, we need to set out what a Liberal vision for our future looks like. And then we need to campaign our hearts out to get it implemented.

The Northern Liberal Network can be part of this – by channelling and magnifying the diverse voices of northern Liberalism, we can ensure that our vision for the future is a vision that can speak for the whole country. Over the coming months, we'll be organising further events to develop a liberal vision for the North after coronavirus, and advocating within the national party to ensure that it forms a key part of our national story.

But we don't want the Northern Liberal Network to be primarily focused on policy. The Liberal Democrats have plenty of policy bodies, and all the policy in the world isn't any use if we aren't winning elections to deliver it.

So our ambitions to help go well beyond policy. We'll be acting as a forum to share resources and ideas for campaigns – enabling local parties across our regions to learn from each other and reduce duplication. We'll be reaching out to businesses active in the region, developing opportunities to better understand their needs and opening up fundraising potential. We'll be working with regional conferences to share ideas, and developing learning on fighting metro mayor elections in our great cities. And we'll be magnifying the voices

of smaller local parties across the North that are often not heard in our party's structures.

Northern Liberalism isn't dead – and it can't afford to rest. The Northern Liberal Network exists to make sure it doesn't, and that it's as important to our party's future as it is to our past.

If you'd like to be part of our work, you can find out more about the events we're planning and sign up for our mailing list at our website, www.northernliberalnetwork.org.uk

Laura Gordon was Liberal Democrat candidate in Sheffield Hallam at the 2019 general election.

GOING ONLINE ONLY

Remember that Liberator will go free and online only from September

We'll tell all subscribers for whom we have email addresses when each new issue is available to read and download.

If you think we might not have your email address please send it to:
liberatorsubs@hotmail.com

As we said in Liberator 400, we'd planned this move last winter but the cancellation of two consecutive Liberal Democrat conferences would have forced it on us.

If you pay us by bank standing order or PayPal, we'd be pleased if people wish to continue these as donations. Otherwise, please cancel these, as we cannot cancel them for you and arranging refunds would be complicated for our volunteer administrators.

Liberators 402 will appear in print in July, which will exhaust most people's subscriptions.

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.

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

50 YEARS ACROSS A TRIBAL DIVIDE

Stephen Farry and Denis Loretto mark the Alliance Party's half century and wonder whether Brexit will undo Northern Ireland's political stability

In 1970 as Northern Ireland descended into bitter conflict 16 local citizens founded a new political party. Its main purpose was "to heal the bitter divisions in our community by... complete and effective participation in our political governmental and public life at all levels by people drawn from both sides of our present religious divide".

This meant building a membership of thousands of Protestants and Catholics working together, reflected in the party's name – the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland. Most commentators didn't give this seemingly foolhardy venture five months let alone the 50 years (and counting) that it has now achieved.

During the 28 years of horrific violence the party notably took strong progressive stances on a range of issues. One of its core principles has always been support for the rule of law and its absolutely equal enforcement across all sections of the community.

OUTRAGEOUS ACTIONS

This meant supporting the police against the vicious attacks which persistently assailed them from both extremes while insisting that the security forces must themselves act only within the rule of law. For example the party campaigned strongly against the imposition of internment without trial and expressed utter abhorrence at the outrageous army actions on Bloody Sunday.

As to economic policy Alliance took a broadly liberal and non-dogmatic stance albeit without any formal linkage to the UK Liberal Party. There had been an offshoot of the Liberals since 1956 known as the Ulster Liberal Party which followed non-sectarian principles but it struggled to gain support.

In the view of the Alliance founders, including those such as Oliver Napier who had been Ulster Liberal members, the party concentrated too much on UK issues rather than focussing on the specific

problems of Northern Ireland. After the Alliance launch the Ulster Liberal Party continued to organise but eventually disbanded in 1987. In effect the UK Liberals and subsequently Liberal Democrats have recognised Alliance as a sister party with which they would not wish to compete. However Alliance is an independent party. At Westminster it does not take

the Liberal Democrat whip but collaborates closely on many issues.

In election after election through the 1970s and 1980s growing community alienation, fear and mistrust consistently resulted in majorities for parties drawn from one or other side of the traditional divide. Nevertheless the Alliance Party fought on and gained sufficient support to maintain an influential voice, including a place in the ill-fated attempt to establish power-sharing agreed at Sunningdale in 1974.

At least this lasted long enough to allow the party to introduce fair employment legislation. The later support by Alliance for the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985) against fierce Unionist opposition marked the beginning of the process leading to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement when

the guns were silenced and the political power-sharing envisaged by Alliance secured.

In the eyes of the electorate the Good Friday Agreement may have made Alliance seem irrelevant – its work done. Indeed the Alliance vote share fell to just 2.1% in the 1999 European Election and then 3.7% in the 2003 Northern Ireland Assembly election.

However while the Good Friday Agreement did reflect the realisation of many concepts that Alliance had promoted, an adverse consequence was the entrenchment of tribal voting patterns. Eventually the struggle of the tribal parties to maintain their



enforced co-operation and some serious administrative errors led to the suspension of devolved government for three long years.

This has opened the way to the ultimate objective of the Alliance Party - elimination of sectarian labelling as the main basis of voting choice in Northern Ireland. In a society still deeply divided on ethno-nationalist identity grounds and whose constitutional status is disputed this is admittedly an enormously ambitious task but a good start has been made.

This past decade has seen the most successful period in the party's history starting with the then leader, David Ford, assuming the sensitive role of justice minister in the power-sharing executive in 2010 and then Stephen Farry obtaining a second ministerial post - employment and learning - in 2011. In 2010 the current leader, Naomi Long, won the party's first Westminster seat in East Belfast.

However, the real surge in party support came in 2019. This reflected a changing Northern Ireland, with a growing number, especially young people, breaking away from traditional identity labels, and expressing open, mixed and multiple identities.

The party also called Brexit right from the start, fighting on the pro-EU side which was the majority Northern Ireland choice. It also recognised the special problems of Northern Ireland in the wake of the UK majority vote to leave and called for special arrangements for the region if attempts to reverse Brexit entirely were unsuccessful.

There were three elections in 2019. In the local government elections, Alliance broke the 10% ceiling for the first time in more than 40 years and increased its number of councillors from 32 to 53. It also had an improved geographic spread, winning representation in every council apart from Mid Ulster.

A few weeks later, Long won one of the Northern Ireland's three seats in the European Parliament with 19% of the vote and over 100,000 first preferences. This marked Alliance moving into third place in terms of vote share after DUP and Sinn Fein.

And in the December general election, Alliance once again won a place at Westminster when Farry secured the North Down seat. The party also increased its share of the vote in almost all constituencies, achieving a number of strong second places.

When the new executive was formed in January 2020 after the very welcome resurrection of power-sharing in the devolved assembly, Long was appointed minister of justice.

Looking ahead, there are a number of challenges for Northern Ireland that the party will need to address if sectarian politics is to be defeated.

The most immediate challenge is Brexit. Northern Ireland sits on an identity faultline. It only works on the basis of sharing and interdependence. The Good Friday Agreement is based on a careful balance of relationships, namely: internal power-sharing, north-south co-operation; and the whole framework of administration across these islands. It also depends

“The Good Friday Agreement reflected many concepts that Alliance had promoted, but an adverse consequence was the entrenchment of tribal voting patterns”

on close co-operation and partnership between the UK and Irish governments.

However, Brexit, especially a hard Brexit, entails an arrangement of borders and boundaries which will cause trading friction and a bureaucratic nightmare. This simply doesn't work for a complex society like Northern Ireland.

Arising to a considerable extent from Brexit, debate around the constitutional question has become much more energised.

Given the nature of Alliance

as a party not defined by the constitutional question - and with members and supporters who may well have different preferences if forced to choose - it could be argued that the opening up of this issue would be uncomfortable territory for Alliance.

However, the party is prepared to engage in any rational, evidence-based discussions and debates with confidence and without prejudice to any outcome. The party will be guided by its underlying vision and values. The key message remains that wherever lines are drawn on maps, integration and reconciliation remain core requirements for the people of Northern Ireland. The spirit of partnership and co-operation across these islands, built on the Good Friday Agreement, must be preserved and indeed enhanced.

UNCERTAIN ENVIRONMENT

A major challenge is to manage and sustain power-sharing in this much more uncertain environment. The Northern Ireland Assembly has only recently been restored after a three-year hiatus. Even in the context of a more benign external environment, power-sharing struggled to find and sustain a shared narrative and strategic set of objectives for Northern Ireland and was undermined by continued disputes around identity-based issues such as flags, parades and the legacy of the past. The new executive needs to find a shared narrative and cohesive bonding. Right now the necessity of responding to the Covid-19 crisis may help to drive this.

As the Alliance Party enters into its second half century, it is a stronger and more relevant voice than at any other time in its history. The terrain ahead is perhaps more challenging and uncertain than ever but it can now be said with confidence that no political development can take place in Northern Ireland without the full and positive involvement of the Alliance Party.

Stephen Farry is Alliance deputy leader and MP for North Down. Denis Loretto was a founder of Alliance and is now an executive member of Southwark Liberal Democrats

LETTERS

OFF TARGET

Dear Liberator,

The argument about targeting rightly goes on and on. Mick Taylor (“An Exercise in Insanity”, *Liberator* 400) attacks the whole concept, but his arguments really impact on incompetent targeting. If we abandon targeting, we don’t say to a small, struggling, determined local party, “Pick a ward and work it”, but “spread yourselves over as many wards as you can and get happy if you reach 10% max each time”.

Mick points out repeated major mistakes such as ditching Burnley in 2015; he could have added rushing activists to Twickenham rather than Richmond in 2017 and to North Cornwall rather than St Ives and the bizarre recommendations in the East of England in 2019. Yet in effect he suggests people should have been directed to Burnley. These are not mistakes that prove targeting is wrong: they prove targeting is done badly.

There seem to be two big problems. One is that the party repeatedly gets the situation in some winnable seats vastly wrong. It isn’t just over-optimistic canvassing, since HQ thought Twickenham was neck and neck in 2017, whereas we won by 10,000. The other is that the relationship between strong and weak constituencies is unequal and often exploitative. Activists in the weak seats are repeatedly urged to go to the strong in local as well as parliamentary elections, but those in the strong seat or local party rarely go out to help the weak build up.

This is short-sighted as it reduces the pool of activists surrounding the strong seat as well as leading to virtual collapse in many areas where we once had a reasonable foothold. There are examples of excellent co-operative relationships where the help goes both ways, but there should be more.

That way targeting works and broadens, not narrows, the party’s areas of activity.

Simon Banks
Chair, Essex Liberal Democrats
County Co-ordinating Committee

RULE OF THIRDS

Dear Liberator,

Congratulations and thanks to Bernard Greaves for compressing a comprehensive programme for a genuinely Liberal democracy into just two pages (*Liberator* 400). I would particularly like to highlight his assertion: “Elected mayors [and] police and crime commissionersare a denial of [representative democracy.]“

Yes indeed: Liberals should oppose these superficially attractive forms of ‘democracy’ because they elevate personalities over policies.

I would, however, take issue with Mr Greaves on his proposals for workplace democracy, in which

he suggests supervisory boards should be made up of “equal numbers of elected shareholders and employees”. I believe such a 50/50 representation would be likely to perpetuate conflict rather than promote co-operation.

When I first campaigned for the (then Liberal) party in the 1960s and 1970s our policy was that such boards should comprise one-third shareholder representatives, one-third employee representatives, and one-third user and community representatives. With no interest having a majority, each group of ‘stakeholders’ (though we didn’t then call them that) would need to put forward a reasoned case to attract the support of at least some of the others.

As Liberals I like to think we believe in the value of variety, and so should not lay down any strict blueprint for the control of the vast variety of organisations in our complex modern economy, but we should always look for structures that promote co-operation rather than conflict.

Peter Wrigley
Batley and Spennings

ALL THAT JAZZ

Dear Liberator

Fifty years of continuous production of *Liberator* on its purely voluntary basis must be some sort of record and its service to Liberalism should be recognised.

Your nostalgia issue number 400 can be excused, but from my antique personal perspective I would add a couple of points.

First, on the revue, I am always rather zealous on any involvement of the Granny Lee Jazz band. We were initially asked to play during the revue’s interval but later came to accompany occasional musical items. Interestingly, appearing alongside the revue stars led to the recruitment of additional band members, including Tom Rippeth on trombone and television presenter, Chris Serle, on drums who both volunteered following revue performances.

Second, the glee club began quite by accident at the Royal Hotel, Scarborough, at the Liberal Assembly either in 1965 or 1971. A few of us were singing the usual revolutionary repertoire in the bar and suddenly a piano accompaniment joined in! This was the late Liz Rorison from Cardiff who was working her student vacation at the hotel. She had a phenomenal musical ear and technical ability and she became the mainstay of the glee club for many years thereafter. She also joined the party and became a Liberal activist via the glee club.

Michael Meadowcroft
Leeds

Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the forty-year rivalry that unraveled culture, religion and collective memory in the Middle East

By Kim Ghattas
Henry Holt

If you've ever wished to get to the root of what has been happening in the Middle East, this is the book for you. "What happened to us?" is the question posed by Lebanese author Kim Ghattas as she surveys the wreckage. The answer is "1979," and Ghattas reveals the region's descent into hell through the eyes of brave individuals who refused to be silenced by fear.

This superb chronicle of four decades of destructive sectarian conflict illuminates the core themes obscured by day-to-day reporting on the region. Three earth-shaking events in 1979 precipitated the downward spiral of the Middle East: the Iranian revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Islamist occupation of Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

Ghattas makes clear that after 1979, Iran and Saudi weaponised sectarian identities to pursue their own paranoid expansionist agendas. Fearing the example set by the overthrow of the shah, the Saudis continue to use oil wealth to spread Wahhabism, its joyless, authoritarian version of Sunni Islam, destroying previously more tolerant societies such as Pakistan. They exported a jihadist interpretation of Islam, hoping to rid their own kingdom of its trouble-makers, while extinguishing a more inclusive form of Sunni faith.

It was Saudi King Fahd who ordered a new, definitive translation of the Koran in which passages encouraging the hatred of Christians and Jews were inserted; he ordered the confiscation of all previous versions in Saudi, and then exported millions of his approved, racist version around the globe to madrassas and mosques paid for with Saudi money. Consistent throughout has been Saudi's refusal to take responsibility for the consequences of its actions (Al Qaeda, 9/11, the destruction of Yemen, the elimination of tolerance in



REVIEWS

Pakistan, the Muslim Brotherhood, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi).

Iran's ayatollahs have relentlessly stirred up Shia Muslims to counter Saudi, igniting proxy wars in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq. If anyone benefited from the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, it was Iran, which now controls territory and rulers from Tehran to the Mediterranean. Only the discontent of the Iranian public, fed up of bankrolling this expansionism, may eventually clip the wings of the all-powerful Republican Guard.

This is the story of leaders who thought they could use extremists to further their own political ends (Sadat in Egypt, Saddam in Iraq, Bhutto in Pakistan, the USA in Afghanistan): in each case, they unleashed destructive forces they could not control.

It is also the story of personally corrupt men who seem to hate women, taking it upon themselves to determine who is a good Muslim; and hypocritical societies such as modern Pakistan which put the full burden of honour on female shoulders, averting its eyes from the degenerate behaviour of men, rather like the Victorians.

As the power to hold their young populations in line with religion fades, both Iran and Saudi are reverting to nationalism, argues Ghattas. Sadly, there seems to be no international leadership capable of understanding the subtlety required to navigate these roiling waters.

Rebecca Tinsley

Nature's Mutiny – How the Little Ice Age Transformed the West and Shaped the Present

By Philipp Blom
(Picador, 2019:
translated from
German by the author)

It's long seemed to me that the Little Ice Age starting around 1570

must have had a big impact on society and politics, yet accounts of the Thirty Years' War in Germany and our civil wars of the 1640s are written without mentioning it. Surely the drop in temperatures of about two degrees Celsius must have driven people from marginal lands, increasing the bitterness of conflicts at least?

That's why I bought this book. It's well written, but unfortunately, not quite the study that's needed. Blom is very informative about trends in science and philosophy and fascinating figures like Spinoza and Bayle, though a little short on understanding religion: in his powerful ending about the current climate emergency, he seems to think people of faith are waiting for divine intervention to save them, rather than seeing a personal responsibility to act.

In his account, many things we think of as Liberal – individual rights, widening the pool of those with power, a chance to rise in the world, an attempt to educate the masses and not just the elite – arose as responses to climate change, though he underrates the extent to which these were accompanied by co-operation and mutual support as, for example, among new settlers in North America, the New Model Army or Protestant churches.

The ideology for these groups was very much one of close mutual support: the downside was how they defined themselves to exclude people who merited no support and often enmity.

However, much of the book comes down to the old fallacy, "Post hoc, ergo propter hoc" (A happened before B, so A caused B). Unlike a professional historian, Blom does not really try to check if the changes he described could have had other causes. He gives the impression that little in European society changed before 1570 – and yet profound changes were well under way. He explains well how climate change will have undermined feudal rural structures

(though he quotes not a single statistic to show rural population change), but the top levels of feudalism were already crumbling and monarchs like Henry VIII were already relying less on barons and more on propaganda, show and a direct appeal to all people of property.

Old certainties and power structures were undermined by the discovery and looting of the Americas, with fortunes made, and by the opening of major trade routes direct to south and east Asia, which all happened well before 1570. The Catholic/Protestant split and the printing press plus cheap paper destroyed the medieval religious and philosophical consensus. To highlight the impact of climate change, Blom understates these influences.

I learnt much. Unfortunately, where I could easily check facts, there were some odd mistakes and omissions. The Spanish Armada did not anchor safely in English waters: they were French waters. His harrowing account of the first winter faced by settlers to Jamestown, Virginia, ends with the fact that by spring, only 40 were left. This rather loses impact because he failed to tell us how many they were to start with.

This book is very good for making us think, but not for a balanced analysis.

Simon Banks

Concentration Camps, a very short introduction **By Dan Stone** **Oxford University Press 2019 £8.99**

I have a problem. Not so much with this book, but its subject. I am only a third of the way through, and it has dealt with Nazi Germany. OK, so there are the Russian Gulags to follow, but it does not stop there.

Disquieting, there is the chapter 'Liberal internment' – specifically America's rounding up of their Japanese citizens after Pearl Harbour, but also the internment of 'enemy aliens' in Britain; panic, prejudice and the press as catalysts for the problem. Then there is the question of displaced persons in the aftermath of the war, were they in concentration camps?

It could depend who was running them, and where. In this there is some exoneration of the British and American camps. For Stone, it is a matter of intent, and that stretches back the British camps of the Boer War (notorious for the Nazis borrowing their name). The methods of barbarism were cock-up rather than conspiracy.

Alas, it goes on and on, the chilling last chapter 'An Auschwitz every three months' – how does one count refugee camps, or migrant holding centres such as those in Libya? Intent, cock-up, where? These are all factors.

Overall, this is a very well written, and better still, thought provoking book. Suitable for GCSE students onwards, with references and further reading to take you onwards.

Stewart Rayment

Majority Voting as a Catalyst of Populism - Preferential Decision-making for an Inclusive Democracy **By Peter Emerson** **Springer 2020**

There are campaigners for a worthy cause who carry on week after week and even year after year. They pop up with an apposite comment whenever there is an event which provides them with an opening.

Peter Emerson is one such campaigner and his current book sets out his case and recounts an amazing round trip from Northern Ireland to China and back, mainly by train, partly by bicycle and even some of it on foot. He manages to get into North Korea and, remarkably, succeeds in holding meetings on electoral reform in every country.

Over twenty years ago Emerson established the de Borda Institute as a vehicle for the study and advocacy of the preferential voting system that he has advocated ever since. Its name comes from an eighteenth century French mathematician, Jean-Charles de Borda, who devised a voting system particularly aimed at bringing a consensual result that would be recognised as such in divisive situations. It is hardly accidental that Emerson is based in Northern

Ireland, a region deeply divided by its history.

Essentially a decision taken under the Modified Borda Count (MBC) involves the individual voter's preferences being given the relevant number of points that accords to each preference. In decision making this allocation of points demonstrates the strength of support for the most preferred option and thus makes it more widely acceptable.

In elections in a multiple vacancy seat, the Quota Borda System (QBS) allocates seats accurately and, it is argued, more acceptably.

This system has essential similarities with the single transferable vote, the system to which the long-established Electoral Reform Society is dedicated, but Emerson's de Borda Institute sees the much-to-be-desired objective of the Borda methodologies as an all-party coalition government devoid of divisive party affiliations and certainly without any party whips.

He states it explicitly in relation to areas suffering from political violence: "As is recognised by some in Northern Ireland and in other conflict zones the political choice of an economic policy or of a transport plan need not depend so immediately on an MP's confessional faith. Rather, decisions should depend upon the participants agreeing to express and discuss their preferences.

"What is required, therefore, is a willingness amongst politicians and political scientists, firstly, to question the adversarial structure which is simple majority rule, and secondly, to consider a win-win polity founded on more inclusive voting procedures."

It sounds splendid but such a polity does not provide for the need for a group with some commonality of view of what kind of society it wishes to encourage and to legislate for. How else can there be any process of change, or any instructions to a civil service on which it can base an administration? Certainly Emerson is correct in wishing to expose politics that all too often lead to strife and even to violence but the answer to that must surely be better politics not no politics.

As I know from my experience in 35 new and emerging countries on five continents, a democracy

resulting from any electoral process will be ephemeral if the parties are based on tribe, region, religion, charismatic leader, an ancient 'totem' or a liberation movement. To produce a sound basis for a political structure with a workable government and an effective opposition the parties have to be based on at least a semblance of political philosophy.

Emerson expounds his case powerfully and certainly will not be at all inhibited by my criticism. His book applies his beliefs to the circumstances of each country he visits and he is impressively knowledgeable on each. His exposition of the Borda methodologies is supported by a great deal of mathematical equations, much of which, alas, I am not competent to follow.

His book deserves serious consideration by all who are concerned at the dangerous political circumstances now evident in far too many countries and with the need to realise that a country's electoral system and, in consequence, and, more importantly, its decision-making system play a significant role in the way parties can manipulate power.

Michael Meadowcroft

Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World

**By Samuel Moyn
Belknap**

**Harvard University
Press 2018 £14.95**

According to this book's blurb, Moyn "analyses how and why we chose to make human rights our highest ideals while simultaneously neglecting the demands of a broader social and economic justice".

Unfortunately, his ideas are not (clear) enough. Moyn does not explain what he is arguing for (or against) and the book frequently descends into a bland narration of historical events. It may have a powerful message, but this work is let down by poor writing style.

It is only in his concluding chapter that Moyn sets out what he has (apparently) been attempting to argue throughout the book: human rights only require that each person's basic needs are protected,

and so are compatible with an unequal distribution of wealth which Moyn considers to be unfair or even wrong.

Even here, Moyn does not expand his theory properly. What does he mean by the equality he advocates – how much deviation from the average should be permitted? Why is equality of resources a worthy goal, and indeed a better goal than basic necessity or equal distribution of political rights? He seems to work on the assumption that his readership is already on board the equality train, presumably due to an instinctive sense of moral justice, and so fails to defend his ideas with intellectual rigour.

The book consistently suffers from a lack of definitions. It is not merely a case of him assuming a high level of knowledge on the part of the reader, but many of his concepts do not have universally-accepted meaning.

For example, he writes an entire chapter on the 'Jacobin legacy' without properly explaining what he considers the 'Jacobin state' to be (we know only that it existed in France from 1793-94 and "tended towards dictatorship").

I surely cannot be the only reader who does not have an in-depth understanding of this period of French history at my fingertips, let alone one which coincides exactly with Moyn's interpretation. Similarly, Moyn does not analyse historical events as he describes them - apart from the odd veiled comment here and there - so it difficult to understand the reason he is narrating seemingly obscure political events.

Even more significantly, he does not define the two theories he is arguing for and against: sufficiency and equality, each of which he calls various names throughout the book.

Without knowing what they are, and where their great points of difference arise, it is impossible for the reader to decide which to support. In particular, he does a very poor job of explaining whether the 'human rights' he is criticising are political and/or socio-economic rights. It seems that bare minimum socio-economic rights are what he dislikes (preferring instead a more equal distribution of wealth) but there are points that could be made around political rights such

as greater wealth giving a person greater power to exercise their freedom of expression. Confusingly, he neither explores nor expressly excludes political rights.

I remain unconvinced that the supposed tension between sufficiency and equality really exists, although perhaps this is because I still do not really understand what they are!

Redistributing wealth, or generating wealth in a more equal manner in the first place, is a task for economists. Ensuring that each person can enforce their right to a particular level of basic survival is the work of the lawyer. The interaction between the two is a political decision. I see no reason why a society could not decide to set the legally-enforceable right to basic resources at a level which would lead to equal economic distribution. Of course, most societies do not do this, and only guarantee a very low level of resources for each person. That is not an inherent constraint imposed by human rights, but simply a different political decision.

It is a pity that this book is such a slog to read. It appears to have some interesting ideas which, if better developed, would give us much to ponder. It is not clear what Moyn thinks is the solution to the (supposed) tension between sufficiency and equality. Should we focus on equality and forget about sufficiency, or is it better to try and achieve both?

If you want to explore this topic further, I do not suggest you read this book. But if you happen to bump into Moyn, consider buying him a drink and asking him what he really thinks – he may have something enlightening to say.

Eleanor Healy-Birt

Monday

Ever since Dr Brian May, lead guitarist of The Queen, caused terrible damage to his glutei maximi in what has been described as a “bizarre gardening accident” I have been inundated with letters enquiring after the health of my own gardener Meadowcroft. Is, they ask, everything tickety-boo in the bottom department? This presents me with a difficult problem. Even if the rules on social distancing (which we are observing to the letter here at the Hall) allowed it, one can hardly go up to a chap and ask him how his buttocks are. Normally I would settle such questions by asking the headmaster of one of our leading public schools to secrete himself in my shrubbery, observe Meadowcroft surreptitiously and then give his opinion, but that avenue is closed to me at present. Yesterday I hit upon the idea of consulting the Wise Woman of Wing by Zoom and asking her to view the bottom in question remotely through the use of magic. This morning I receive her opinion: “It’s like a peach, dearie, and that’ll be 7/6.” Well, it’s reassuring to know and at least it was cheaper than asking the Elves of Rockingham Forest.

Tuesday

Do you remember the Coalition? I have memories of it, though it might be more accurate to speak of “flashbacks”. Whenever I questioned their actions, Clegg and Alexander assured me they were making Britain a better place to live. Yet now I find that the former has upped sticks to Seattle and the latter has fled to China. You may feel that rather gives the game away.

Wednesday

Yet another discussion of PPE on the news. I turn off my wireless and dictate my editorial for the High Leicestershire Radical. I point out that there are far too many PPE graduates in politics nowadays and that the results of this are deleterious. For it is a dabbler’s degree, giving the holder the ability to opine glibly on subjects they know next to nothing about. What we need are politicians with degrees in proper subjects such as Hard Sums. Then we would have a sporting change of getting a government that is able to get our doctors and nurses the protective equipment they need when treating people who have this wretched virus.

Thursday

How are you finding lockdown? My hair has remained uncut for so long that I now resemble a beatnik, while my moustache is now so wide that there are rooms at the Hall I am no longer able to enter. If this goes on much longer I shall have to call the builders in and have the doorways widened. However, I have not let lockdown keep me from Estate business. Consulting a ready reckoner, I find that the distance of two metres we are supposed to keep from one another equates to something a little north of six feet: in other words, the height of a good county seamer. Not having one to hand, I have erred on the safe side and kept well clear of my tenants while addressing them through a loud hailer and offering advice on the farming tasks

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in which they happen to be engaged. Looking through my field glasses, I can see they appreciate the gesture – indeed, they often make gestures of their own in return.

Friday

To Mr Patel’s convenience store and newsagent’s in the village. I arrive to find the suitably spaced queue tailing back as far as the lych gate of St Asquith’s. We are all there with but one purpose in view: acquiring a copy of the admirable Dorothy Thornhill’s review of the Liberal Democrats’ 2019 general election campaign. As we shuffle forwards the early birds emerge from the shop perusing their copies and gasping or chuckling over what they find there. I spot some Well-Behaved Orphans ahead of me and send them packing – I’m not facing Matron if they have nightmares after I’ve allowed them to buy a copy. Finally I reach the shop and its counter and secure one of the last copies, along with a six pack of Smithson & Greaves Northern Bitter. (It tastes better from the wood, but what can one do in these strange times?) I then recline upon a bench beside the village green, open a can and settle down to see how Freddie and Fiona come out of the debacle. I find it is Not Terribly Well.

Saturday

In any normal summer I would be away with my cricket XI taking on Plaid Cymru, Mebyon Kernow or the Gentlemen of Surrey (who often turn up at least one man short). As it is, I am stuck here at the Hall watching that splendid carthorse Alfred drag the roller across my own pitch. “When they asked for something heavy I thought they meant T.H. Green” he remarks morosely. As evening falls, I ask the local bats – I don’t mean batsmen but those little fellows with wings who squeak and hang upside down – if they have the inside track on the virus. The exchange proves something of a disappointment: despite a carefully tuned ear trumpet, I am unable to hear a word they say.

Sunday

Though St Asquith’s is closed for the duration, I like to keep an eye on the old place if only to ensure that the Revd Hughes’s curate Farron has not had the pews ripped out preparatory to making us all kiss one another and sing “Shine, Jesus, Shine.” All is well, however, and I wander among the familiar fixtures and fittings: the Laws of Cricket embroidered on to wall hangings by the Excellent Women of the parish; the stained glass window depicting the bright Seraphim in burning row bearing Mark Bonham-Carter to Westminster that I commissioned to celebrate his victory in the Great Torrington by-election; the sacristy that houses the John Morley’s kneecap and the foreskin of the fifth Earl of Roseberry. Shall we ever return to normal life? I shall leave you with the words of King Solomon, whom most authorities consider to be up there with the Wise Woman of Wing: “This too shall pass.”

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