

liberator



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COMMENTARY

THE CONSENSUS FRAYS

A lot is now hanging on one vaccine for Covid-19 and no-one knows how effective it will be or when it will be available in mass quantities.

There is now at least the possibility of escaping the cycle of lockdown-relaxation-lockdown, which threatened to stretch into the indefinite future, but it is still only a possibility.

Meanwhile, millions of (mainly young) people are having their jobs and job prospects wrecked by lockdowns, while the travel, hospitality, leisure, arts and much of the retail and manufacturing sectors already lie in ruins.

Last spring the lockdown and the virus were startling novelties, and a political consensus unsurprisingly emerged in which very few questioned either the lockdown's scope or necessity.

This time a chunk of the Conservative party is opposed to the government's measures, Labour has jumped on a bandwagon labelled 'the science' - as though all scientists thought alike - and the Lib Dems have faced both ways.

The Lib Dems got it right in opposing the government's ludicrous 10pm pub curfew. Ministers refused to produce any evidence for this - presumably because there was none - and it stuck another knife in the hospitality industry while encouraging parties in private homes for those who would otherwise be in covid-secure pubs.

They then got it wrong by leaping on the bandwagon labelled 'circuit breaker lockdown'. This led to the spectacle of the Lib Dems supporting a nationally-imposed, top-down, one-size-fits-all policy at a time when a Conservative government still supported tailored regional and local measures. It was not a good look.

Public confidence and trust in the government have fallen and will continue to, and the hurling overboard of the renowned Barnard Castle tour guide and optician Dominic Cummings looks a desperate attempt to undo the damage he caused to the Tories' reputation.

There is the litany of a test-and-trace scheme that does not work (except when taken away from Tory donors and handed to local authorities or the armed forces), a first app that did not work either, a chaotic approach to travel quarantine, bafflingly rapid changes of restrictions on people and jobs and official misuse of statistics.

Governments that lose public trust and respect become vulnerable. They do not though become vulnerable to opposition parties that have concurred with them.

Sooner or later the political consensus over Covid-19 will fray entirely, and the Lib Dems needs to be free to explain that the government is not uniquely

incompetent over the pandemic but also over everything else too - including the imminent economic calamity it of Brexit - and unworthy of voters' support.

A BIDEN IN BRITAIN?

It's tempting to say, 'one down, one to go', with the defeat of Donald Trump in America. Are the days numbered for his Mini-Me in Downing Street?

This was not easy. What looks from here like a titanic act of organisation from the Democrats was needed to remove Trump, and even then the presidential election was a lot closer than hoped, and the Senate and House results were relative disappointments.

Joe Biden's eventual victory did though show that right-wing populists can be beaten by mobilising all those outside their base to vote.

Since the UK has multiple parties the US experience does not map across exactly but it's not hard to see who aspires to be the British Biden - step forward Keir Starmer.

His suspension of Jeremy Corbyn and likely purge of Labour's hard left from all positions of influence is clearly intended - whatever he said during his leadership campaign - to resurrect something like New Labour.

The Conservative government's stunning incompetence over the pandemic, Brexit and just about everything else is doing Starmer's work for him.

After the havoc caused by Boris Johnson someone who seems calm and normal and an adult in the room may be as appealing to UK voters and Biden was to American ones.

Given the UK election system, Starmer though can't be Biden. There are places the Lib Dems could gain but Labour never can, Scotland is lost to the SNP (though its seats end up in the non-Tory column) and Labour has to recover its 'red wall' before it can contemplate power.

Since Starmer is not a fool he must know that he needs the Lib Dems, just as a generation ago Tony Blair needed them in at least an informal arrangement to keep out of each others way.

And since Ed Davey is not a fool either he will realise that some sort of approach will come from Labour over this.

Long spoons are required. Labour's support for allowing spies and the police to commit crimes shows that New Labour's instinctive authoritarianism is still alive and well, and any Lib Dem who is starry-eyed about a 'progressive alliance' ought to be allowed nowhere near any negotiations.

But events in America make it more likely UK politicians' thoughts will turn towards defeating the Tories. Are the Lib Dems yet war-gaming such scenarios?

RADICAL BULLETIN

ENGLAND DOESN'T EXPECT

It is not every day that one finds three Lib Dem committees publicly brawling over a policy motion.

That though happened with the one at the virtual conference on a 'Federal UK', which forms an acronym perhaps best not used.

The problem arose from the motion, which originated in Scotland, barely mentioning England, as the movers wanted a something that would help with the elections due next May in Scotland and Wales, and not to get bogged down in disputes about English regions.

An infuriated Lib Dem English Council is thus due in December to debate a constitutional amendment to withdraw the powers delegated to the Federal Policy Committee (FPC) to make policy for England.

This could mean part of the federal conference would have to be designated as 'English' - as happened in the party's early years.

The conference motion was an attempt to give the party in Scotland and Wales a clear stance for their elections on how it thought a federal UK should work and the

Federal Conference Committee (FCC) decided not take any amendments related to England.

As a result the motion omitted almost any mention of England, and indeed at one point called for: "The enactment and endorsement of the [proposed] Federal Declaration by Westminster and the Parliaments and Assemblies of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland", which implied that the Westminster parliament would still double up as the English one even in a federal system.

English Lib Dems proposed a variety of amendments, the main one of which would have added: "To vest with the party in England and regions of the party in England the determination of what form the Liberal Democrat proposals for regions of England would take, how border disputes might be addressed, and to formulate all policy on matters within the remit of principal administrations."

It also noted the party had already rejected an English Parliament as impractical (since it would be so dominant in the UK) and called for "a tier of regional parliaments across England as constituent parts of the federal union which will achieve constitutional parity with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland".

When FCC declined to take this, the English Council passed a motion which acidly noted: "Several English regional parties have developed policies on regionalism which have been largely ignored by the federal policy process."

It went on: "Federal party committees are preventing the federal party in conference from debating on behalf of the party in England what the constitutional arrangements should be for England within a federal

United Kingdom."

The motion instructed the FPC to "provide a clear route to a fully and coherently regionalised England as a necessary step towards a federal United Kingdom".

FPC made some enquiries, which led FCC chair Geoff Payne to write to FPC members: "The case for debating the motion at this time is primarily the upcoming general elections in Wales and Scotland and the need for us to have up-to-date policy so that people would vote Liberal Democrat in those states.

"The motion was never designed to solve the question of English devolution; as the FPC knows well, that particular debate is controversial and Liberal Democrats have, in the past, taken many different viewpoints on it."

He did though say FCC would "welcome a motion in the future that would allow the party to reach a position".

English devolution is fraught with problems that have tripped up every previous attempt at forming party policy.

The difficulty is the lack of obvious and accepted boundaries in much of the country.

To take a few examples, does Cumbria belong in a 'north' region with Northumberland and Tyne & Wear or in a north west one dominated by Greater Manchester and Merseyside? Lib Dems from Gloucestershire like to point out that they reside closer to Scotland than to Land's End, so is it sensible to put them in the south west? Can workable regional boundaries be drawn at all in the south east, East Anglia, the southern midlands and the Thames Valley?

English devolution has long been a sort of adventure playground for Lib Dem constitutional enthusiasts. Does another playtime loom?

DIGITAL DIVIDE

Was the Lib Dem's enforced experiment with a digital conference in September too successful for its own good?

Those who liked it - in particular those who would not normally attend a physical conference - are likely to demand that future conferences offer at least a hybrid physical and online event.

This is where things get difficult. While spring conference in general makes a loss, the autumn one can be a considerable money spinner, especially in times when the party's fortunes are better and commercial concerns are happy to pay large sums to rub shoulders with what they see as influential people.

September's exhibition was though one part of the digital event that did not work, with several stallholders (including Liberator) reporting the number of 'visitors' during the staffed sessions negligible.

It's hardly likely that commercial firms would shell

out for that sort of non-event, but nor would companies be much interested in a physical event with far fewer people than normal present because the digital option proved unpredictably popular.

There were also issues with training sessions, where trainers could not tell who they were training or even if those present were entitled to be there, nor easily gauge any reaction.

The problem is having to spend money both on a physical venue and on the licence and facilities for the online platform, with little idea of how many people will opt for each and whether many exhibitors will turn up.

No-one knows how easy it would be to run such an event with, for example, both digital and actual votes being cast in debates.

Another problem is the media. In better times large numbers will attend and while the formal agenda will occupy some of their time, an equally important reason for their presence is to informally meet senior politicians - preferably while not wholly sober - aspiring ones, activists and troublemakers.

None of this is easily done at a digital conference, so will they come unless there is a substantial physical one? If they don't, whinges about the media ignoring the party will be hard to justify.

WE KNOW WHAT YOU DID

London region's catastrophic shortlisting of Geeta Sidhu Robb as a possible candidate for the capital's mayoralty (Liberator 403) could lead to significant changes in how the party approves and selects candidates.

Sidhu Robb was found - rather late in the day but soon enough to remove her from the ballot - to have told voters not to vote for Jack Straw "because he is a Jew" when she was the Tory candidate in Blackburn in 1997.

She had also written an article for Grazia - billed as a 'health expert' - which argued that obese people should not be allowed NHS treatment because they had chosen an unhealthy lifestyle, and was found to hold questionable views on vaccination.

This episode led to a review by Baroness Suttie, billed as 'lessons learned' to avoid pointing the finger over this debacle.

She said Dave Raval, the chair of the London Candidates' Committee, carried out a "skeletons in the cupboard" interviews with Sidhu Robb, the eventual candidate Louisa Porritt and Anna Ahmad - who later dropped out - and "nothing of particular concern emerged as a result of these interviews".

That was hardly Raval's fault since few people would volunteer unbidden "oh, and by the way I made anti-Semitic comments when I was a Tory".

Suttie noted that archived and forgotten social media footage, reports and recordings can be unearthed and used by opponents and so "it is now necessary to work on the assumption that no past deed or utterance can ever be assumed 'to have disappeared' or have been removed for good".

She proposed the candidate application form should include a section on 'your online history', which would ask for explanations of "any references made by or about them that could cause the party concern and that could be found following an online search".

There would be a 'due diligence' process applied to all

high-profile selections, but a question mark hangs over who should do this. As Suttie said: "There is always a danger that everyone assumes that 'somebody else would have done the necessary checks' at an earlier stage."

One more contentious recommendation from Suttie was that if a candidate dropped out of a London mayoral election in future votes for remaining candidates should be redistributed rather than draw up a new shortlist.

That would have been difficult in this case when the other three candidates, Lucy Salek, Dinesh Dhamija and Rob Blackie were bunched together but all so far behind the original candidate Siobhan Bonita that none could reasonably be called an obvious second or to clearly have enjoyed members' endorsement.

WHO GOT THE DOSH?

There is a very curious section buried in the depths of the Federal Appeals Panel's (FAP) report to conference, which was approved with few likely to have noticed.

FAP sets its own procedures subject to approval by conference and one part said: "The rulings of the case manager...and the panel are final and binding on all parties and the party as a whole.

"However the powers of the panel and case manager are in the form of rulings, directions and declarations only, neither the case manager nor panel has power to award any form of monetary compensation to any party."

This suggests that the FAP previously could and has awarded financial compensation, something borne out by the report's summary of cases.

This is anonymised but says an appeal made over a candidate's exclusion from a shortlist in the European Parliament elections of 2019 saw FAP decide the appellant had her rights infringed and "that the appellant was entitled to damages for loss of chance". It did not say how large these damages were, but clearly someone somewhere has decided this practice has to stop.

Two other anonymous cases were highlighted in the FAP report but in both it was easy to guess their identity.

The first was former Bradford East MP David Ward's bid to rejoin the party after he stood against an official Lib Dem candidate in 2017 having been in unexplained circumstances removed as a candidate by Tim Farron (Liberator 396).

FAP said it could not interfere with the English party's decision since it found no procedural defect.

North Devon was the other case, where the hapless Kirsten Johnson had to step down as candidate in September 2019 after insulting her would-be constituents in a broadcast interview (Liberator 395).

The FAP allowed it to drop its all-woman shortlist status, given there was no local approved female candidate and a replacement for Johnson was needed urgently.

SPEECHES DEFECTS

Who is writing Ed Davey's speeches? As one Liberator Collective member noted: "It's not so much what he says as how he says it."

First up was his speech on becoming leader - one of few times when he is guaranteed a media soundbite -

which he wasted on telling the party to “wake up and smell the coffee”, a lame management-speak cliché that meant little (Liberator 403).

Next came his leader’s speech at conference. This was obviously more difficult than a conventional speech having no live audience with which to interact and no way of gauging the response.

He began with a moving account of his time as a youthful carer for his terminally ill mother and then talked about caring for his disabled son.

Nothing wrong with that, Davey has a somewhat unusual personal back story and it will resonate with many voters that he has such first hand experience of care provision.

The problem was that conference speeches, even virtual ones, normally inform the public - in at least a broad way - of what the leader wants the party to do, and build to a point where they inspire the party to go and do it.

Davey though had no such peroration and just came to a low-key end. Even in a virtual event this was a pretty odd finish.

SAY CHEESE

It turned out to be possible to do a number of things virtually at conference but how did a bizarre virtual wine and cheese event go?

Peers, MPs and other notables were instructed by the fundraising team to attend a ‘virtual wine and cheese tasting experience’ presided over by Ed Davey.

The incentive was buried at the bottom of a registration form: “Where can we leave your delivery if you are not in?” suggesting invitees would get a consignment of cheese and wine from sponsor Gleeds, which describes itself as a “global property and construction consultancy”.

Small tasting portions can be offered at live events, but in a virtual one the organisers risked high-ranking Lib Dems swigging the entire bottle in one go and then saying something embarrassing while Davey’s mouth was stuffed with gorgonzola preventing his intervention.

Will those who usually sponsor conference fringe meetings at which hotels serve up what they satirically refer to as ‘food’ find a way to deliver all conference-goers cartons of curling sandwiches, small snacks tasting of frying oil and pastries encasing mystery substances?

A TIMELY LOSS OF INTEREST

Little had recently been heard in the British media about Azerbaijan until fighting erupted again between it and Armenia over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Azerbaijan though had an election of sorts last winter and a Young Liberal member Peter Banks went as an observer for the European Liberal Youth Network.

He said in a Lib Dem Voice posting: “Ilham Aliiev, the son of the first president of independent Azerbaijan Heydar, leads a deeply illiberal regime tainted with corruption and an entrenched hatred of their neighbour Armenia.”

Banks went on to note: “What we found was deeply disappointing, and should give cause for concern for any liberal anywhere in the world. Ballot-box stuffing, obscuring of official webcams, harassment of candidates and election officials were all not just

commonplace, but apparently institutionalised, almost accepted as part of the process.”

It must therefore be a great relief for Lib Dem treasurer Lord German that he is no longer co-chair of the Anglo-Azerbaijani Society. The House of Lords register of interests showing that his connection ended on 21 July, well after the election that so appalled Banks.

He must be equally pleased that The European Azerbaijan Society has closed. German hosted receptions for it at conference until two Scottish members began a campaign against the presence of these regime apologists (Liberator 370).

WHAT A COCK-UP

What is going Witney? The aptly-named councillor Jake Acock has defected from the Lib Dems to the Tories after not being selected as a candidate at last year’s general election.

This was a surprise move after he took an anti-Brexit peoples’ vote motion to West Oxfordshire council in 2018 - and spoke so stridently that his own group leader resigned. He fell foul of his council colleagues including Liz Leffman, who fought the 2016 by-election, during which Acock had joined the Lib Dems from the Greens.

Acock is pally with another Witney Lib Dem who has been on an even odder political journey, one Derek Laud.

He wrote an opinion piece for the Daily Mail on 27 September in which, despite still being listed as an officer of Witney Lib Dems, he said: “The Lib Dems aren’t known for much these days, apart from being ‘serial losers,’ as a friend put it.

“They’re not even known for being particularly liberal. Despite the party’s open-minded reputation, it’s not a comfortable place for a black man such as myself, willing to question orthodox views.”

Laud mentioned he resigned from the Tories over the May government’s treatment of the Windrush generation, but could not find room for further detail.

As his Wikipedia entry notes, Laud was once a member of the Monday Club, an organisation considerably less welcoming than the Lib Dems towards black people.

It was strongly anti-immigration, at one point supporting voluntary repatriation of ethnic minorities, and became so extreme that even the Conservative party disavowed it in 2001.

CONFLICT, UNCERTAINTY AND BEING WRONG: WELCOME TO ‘THE SCIENCE’

Science isn't about boffins imparting hard facts – it involves a lot of disagreement and uncertainty. Acknowledging this could improve both how politicians use science and public trust in them, says Christy Lawrance

John Maddox, a former editor of Nature magazine, was once asked: “How much of what you print is wrong?” He immediately answered: “All of it.”

Given that Nature is a reputable academic journal, this seems strange and very much at odds with statements on ‘the science’ that have sprung up during the Covid-19 pandemic.

It appears we are surrounded by people – academics, journalists and armchair epidemiologists – who are convinced about what's happening regarding Covid-19 and what should be done (Davey Smith et al, 2020).

Yet Maddox is right. Science is not – in contrast to what you might have been told at school – about hard facts and yes/no answers, handed down by eminent, white-coated boffins.

It involves a lot of argument and debate. You make your findings public in a scientific journal so others can critique your research and say why they do or don't agree with you, and if more research is needed before conclusions can be drawn.

The question-and-answer session after research has been presented at an academic conference “is often a bloodbath”, says author and doctor Ben Goldacre. “Everyone expects it, and we all consent to it, as a kind of intellectual S&M activity.”

Further research may support the findings of your study, or have conflicting or more modest results. Eventually, enough evidence is produced to support a plausible conclusion.

“Scientific disagreement is an integral part of science,” statistician Sir David Spiegelhalter told The Times. “When I hear a politician saying: ‘We are following the science’, that is when I start screaming at the radio. You do not follow science because it doesn't tell you what to do. It is sitting there beside you humming and hawing” (Sylvester and Thomson, 2020).

As Maddox said: “That's what science is about – new knowledge constantly arriving to correct the old.”

Disagreements continue. Even if experts get together to draw up continent-wide advice and guidance on health conditions based on published evidence, their recommendations can differ.

European and US guidelines on a condition called dyslipidaemia have markedly different definitions and treatment thresholds for high-risk patients, as well as concerning several medical conditions that affect risks to patients (Agarwala and Shapiro, 2020).

Bear in mind that a lack of evidence on something being harmful does not mean it is safe. This is one reason why controversy and debate continue over the regulation and health policy on vaping (Orimoloye et al 2020).

WE'RE ALL BIASED

Related to the view that ‘the science’ gives right or wrong answers is that scientists are impartial and honest, imparting only what is true.

Scientists, like anyone else, can be biased for a number of reasons. Studies are designed to minimise this and researchers have to declare any conflict of interest they may have.

We are biased. All of us. We favour material that reflects our values (this is called confirmation bias) and interpret information with which we disagree as wrong. This is especially so when research conflicts with your beliefs on sensitive topics, such as immigration or drug misuse.

We prefer certain sources in the same way. You'll have heard someone say a story cannot be trusted because it's in the Daily Mail. It can also be grating to realise that someone whose views you abhor is right.

Likewise, a politician may be more likely to base a decision on evidence that supports their worldview than information that contradicts it.

There are far too many types of bias to discuss here. To get an idea of their extent and variety, check out the list at <https://catalogofbias.org/biases/> provided by the aptly named Catalogue of Bias project.

Treating science as something that churns out indisputable facts allows people to hide behind it. It's easier to yell “the science says!” than allow someone to pick apart your reasoning or the figures you're using.

It would be interesting to see the data Covid experts present to politicians and how the latter question them.

Unfortunately, those citing ‘the science’ may brook no opposition or debate. Views have become polarised as certainty has hardened during the pandemic – even if the evidence remains the same (Davey Smith et al, 2020)

You can declare or do something if it's ‘common sense’ without having to point to evidence, right?

The common sense defence is a practice of politicians and amateur epidemiologists alike.

It's not a strong basis for action, as the government

found when it came unstuck in the media over its decision to make pubs and restaurants close at 10pm.

When asked for evidence to support this, housing and communities secretary Robert Jenrick said it was “just common sense” as closing the pubs an hour earlier would mean people would be in contact for a shorter period of time.

It did not occur to him that people might go out earlier in the evening and spend the same amount of time there in total or hold impromptu street parties afterwards.

The curfew comes across as a desperate effort to be seen to be doing something. Not long before it was introduced, a survey asked members of the public if they would support a curfew to reduce the spread of the virus. Anyone reading that question would infer that curfews were effective. Would there have been as many ‘yes’ had the question been less loaded?

CONFLICTING ADVICE

Differences over how best to deal with the pandemic among scientists were illustrated recently in two open letters sent to the UK’s chief medical officers on how the government should tackle the second wave.

The first letter called for a more targeted approach, with the most vulnerable people being shielded, rather than lockdowns. The second said blanket policies should continue (Wise, 2020).

It has been argued that the former would be unfeasible and cause extensive deaths and illness and the latter would cause long-term damage to physical, mental and economic health while merely deferring another wave.

Testing is seen as central to tackling spread of the virus. Across the world there is a “clamour” for Covid-19 testing, with the World Health Organization encouraging countries to “test, test, test” (Watson et al, 2020).

Again, there’s uncertainty here. No test is 100% accurate and a British Medical Journal (BMJ) article published back in May advises that a positive result is more likely to be correct than a negative one, and that clinicians should tell patients how accurate Covid-19 tests are (Watson et al, 2020).

In addition, ‘the science’ does not exist in isolation – putting testing into practice requires taking operational and human factors into account.

The ‘world-beating’ test and trace system promised by Boris Johnson is having a “marginal impact on transmission”, according to the government’s scientific advisers.

“Relatively low levels of engagement with the system” and “likely poor rates of adherence with self-isolation” were among the reasons given by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (2020) for this.

Its report said: “Unless the system grows at the same rate as the epidemic, and support is given to people to enable them to adhere to self-isolation, it is likely that the impact of Test, Trace and Isolate will further



Robert Jenrick claimed it was ‘common sense’ to shut pubs, but had no evidence

decline in the future.”

Waiting is an ethical issue. It can take years to get enough evidence that is strong enough to inform decisions but we have a novel coronavirus to deal with now.

Striking a balance between the harms and benefits of lockdown is difficult to say the least. Politicians are having to take decisions on the evidence they have, inconclusive or otherwise, while trying to sound confident and informed.

However, ‘game-changing’ pronouncements have not improved the government’s trustworthiness and authority (Davey Smith et al, 2020).

Indeed, a report issued in October by UCL found that 27% of people in England have ‘no confidence at all’ in the government’s handling of the pandemic, up from just 6% at the start of lockdown. Fewer than 5% of had ‘full confidence’.

Lead author Dr Daisy Fancourt said: “Confidence levels in the government have decreased markedly in England since the beginning of lockdown.”

In The Times, Spiegelhalter describes the daily press briefings during the lockdown as “just statistical theatre ... This performance that happened every day in which numbers were just thrown out and graphs were put up ... was not actually helping very much.”

People may worry they could lose authority if they acknowledge they are uncertain but this seems unlikely to be true, say Davey Smith et al (2020) in the BMJ. Acknowledging uncertainty could improve both the science – and the fevered debates around it – and public trust, they note. An open mind is needed given that evidence changes and grows.

Davey Smith et al (2020) warn against commentators who are “utterly consistent”. They write: “When deciding whom to listen to in the Covid-19 era, we should respect those who respect uncertainty, and listen in particular to those who acknowledge conflicting evidence on even their most strongly held views.”

The refreshingly honest footnote to the article declares “that all three authors have been wrong about



Covid-19”.

It often takes time to accumulate enough evidence – a problem with coronavirus given how recently it arrived. Perhaps the pandemic may even provide a lesson in how to do science.

For now, don’t dismiss someone who admits “we aren’t sure yet” as ignorant or weak. They may be right.

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ADVICE CHANGES WITH EVIDENCE: IBUPROFEN AND COVID-19

Earlier in this year, people were warned against taking ibuprofen for Covid-19 symptoms as it might increase severity.

At the time, no serious research into ibuprofen and the Covid-19 virus had been done. However, previous work had suggested that non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), of which ibuprofen is one, may affect the body’s ability to fight off infection (Moore et al, 2020). In March 2020, the French authorities warned against ibuprofen to treat Covid-19 symptoms. Sales dropped 80%. European and global authorities cautioned against using ibuprofen, then, as evidence emerged, changed their view (Moore et al, 2020).

It was even suggested that long-term use of NSAIDs could protect against both the occurrence and the severity of COVID-19 (Moore et al, 2020).

FURTHER INFORMATION

- NHS. Coronavirus (COVID-19)
Latest NHS information and advice about coronavirus: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>
Cochrane Library
The Cochrane Library provides high-quality, independent evidence, using methods to minimise bias: <https://www.cochranelibrary.com>
Cochrane coronavirus resources
High-quality research evidence to inform health decisions for the public, patients, carers, healthcare workers, researchers and policy and guideline developers: <https://www.cochrane.org/coronavirus-covid-19-cochrane-resources-and-news>
NHS. Behind the headlines
A guide to the science that makes the news. It is shame that this free, clear source of advice and information is being discontinued: <https://www.nhs.uk/news/>
HealthWatch
UK charity that promotes science and integrity in healthcare: <https://www.healthwatch-uk.org/>

COVID STATISTICS

- Office for National Statistics. Coronavirus (COVID-19)
Latest data and analysis on coronavirus (COVID-19) in the UK and its effect on the economy and society <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases>
Office for National Statistics. Coronavirus (COVID-19) roundup.
plus a link where you can sign up for email alerts. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/articles/coronaviruscovid19roundup/2020-03-26>
WHO and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control
<https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/covid-19-pandemic>
World Health Organization
WHO Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) dashboard <https://covid19.who.int/>
World Health Organization
COVID-19 situation in the WHO European region: <https://who.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/ead3c6475654481ca51c248d52ab9c61>

DAZED AND CONFUSED

Constantly chasing regulations, the failure of ‘track and trace’ and local political incompetence have combined to make Covid-19’s second wave worse in northern England, says Jackie Pearcey

So what is the view of the Covid crisis from the North? It’s always been a rather different picture to London.

There is a lot more to the North than a convenient place to drive to (350+ miles with a five-year-old in the back and not stopping – astonishing) for an eyesight test.

Back at the beginning, the crisis started to be acute in London. As the situation escalated, once the rich people had enjoyed themselves at Cheltenham and Boris Johnson had reassured the nation that we were not going to lockdown, we all went in to lockdown.

North and South, most people tried to do our bit. Social distancing, staying indoors emerging once a week to applaud the NHS (and actually get to exchange a few words with our neighbours). Meanwhile those working in the front lines, in the NHS, in care homes, shop workers, taxi drivers and others started to get infected and the numbers started to go up, followed by the deaths a few weeks later.

The more working class the area, the more cases. The areas with multi-generational households

were also hardest hit. So far, a similar pattern to everywhere else in Britain, with BAME communities particularly hard hit because they are disproportionately represented in the jobs where working from home is not possible, jobs where people are highly likely to be exposed to the virus and who are most likely to live in large households. The casualties were devastating.

The British Isles stand in stark contrast to other island nations around the world, who were able to use their island status to exercise control over people entering and insisting on quarantine.

CHANCES MISSED

There were ample chances missed to learn from what New Zealand did to bring their outbreaks under control nationally. Ruthless tracking down every contact and isolating those infected worked. This wasn’t done here. Right at the start of the pandemic people were reporting arriving in the country and not being asked about where they’d been, not being tested and not being required to give the addresses where

they could be contacted. People have died because of that failure.

Meanwhile the fact that the establishment decided to support Dominic Cummings in his flagrant rule breaking both in driving to the North in the first place, then his breach of several parts of the Road Traffic Acts by driving when he thought his eyesight was not adequate did much to destroy the consensus about



following the rules and even now is creating a great deal of scepticism about the every-changing rules.

The first wave started to get under control in London. Due to the numbers of cases in London, this drop in cases masked the fact that much of the North was three or four weeks behind London. So when the country started to open up again, it was at exactly the wrong time for large parts of the North. The stuttering opening in the North reflected this, with places like Accrington and Burnley kept under extended restrictions, along with parts of Greater Manchester.

As lockdown started to be lifted, various parts of the North were left in different degrees of lockdown. At the same time, the Government was actively encouraging people to get out and about, start visiting pubs again, stop working from home and go on holiday.

Unsurprisingly, the figures continued to creep up across the North, but mainly in the urban areas. Large areas of the North, such as rural Lancashire, Northumbria and Cumbria, parts of North Yorkshire are very rural, thinly populated and currently at the same sort of risk from Covid as the South West. So in Northumbria, the outbreaks were mainly in their populated areas such as Berwick, whilst Barrow-in-Furness was a Cumbrian hotspot.

Wigan, which had small numbers, was initially allowed to open while Bolton continued in full lockdown, with Manchester somewhere in between. As Wigan and Bolton share a border this resulted in a lot of Bolton residents crossing to enjoy Wigan's pubs and shops. In one case, police tried to close down a pub which is located in Wigan, licensed by Wigan, pays rates and council tax to Wigan and is about 100 yards from the border with Bolton, arguing that because a lot of their customers lived in Bolton they should be closed. These piecemeal lockdowns bear no relationship to actual community boundaries. Unsurprisingly, Wigan's Covid rates started to shoot up. Who would have guessed?

Over the summer, while we were being encouraged to eat out and go on holiday (and just look at how many of the current wave are of a variant of Covid which originated in Spain), the hotspots in Greater Manchester matched those areas which had large multi-generational households.

LANGUAGE PROBLEM

One issue which was never addressed when test, track and trace was being lauded was the issue of language. Many Liberator readers helped in the Manchester Gorton by-election (which never was) and are well aware that there are areas where canvassing is best done in groups of people who have a wide range of languages between them. If test, track and trace didn't match languages to the people who they were trying to trace, it would fail at the first hurdle, especially when trying to track down members of large extended families.

This is where local councils and the local NHS could and should have collaborated to go door to door

“In none of the northern Tier 3 places have the new rules been in place long enough to begin to assess whether those restrictions actually had any effect”

and ensure that the messages were getting across, but no, this was to be done by Dido Harding and her merry bunch of people who spent July and August complaining that they were sitting by their phones all day waiting to be asked to do some work. Barrow-in-Furness managed to improve contact rates by repurposing the teams which usually track down contacts for sexually transmitted diseases. However other councils asking for resources to

do similar have been met with silence.

The first problem that everyone could see from a distance was the opening of the schools. In the densely populated areas, the daily list of schools where whole year groups, or year group bubbles, or the entire school where there'd been a positive test and need for isolation, has grown to the point where almost every school has had some sort of Covid issue.

Schools are also dealing with issues involving space, as the traditional way of assessing whether a school had surplus places was based on floor area, so over recent decades schools have had to get rid of unused space, lest they be financially penalised. This leaves very few options when there is a sudden need for space and separation.

Now for the other problem that everyone could see coming a mile away. Manchester, Newcastle, Leeds and Liverpool have several universities each. Other northern cities also have significant numbers of students. Indeed, Manchester has one of the largest student populations in Europe. It was inevitable that when the students turned up for the start of the new academic year, there'd be a spike in cases. The Covid maps showed those areas with a high student population corresponded exactly with the sudden spike in cases at the start of October.

It should have surprised nobody – not even the government – that student halls of residence became Covid hotspots as soon as the students started to turn up. In fact two weeks later, the numbers of Manchester started to drop sharply as the 10 days' isolation of infected students clearly worked to bring the numbers of students cases down.

In essence, the universities were quarantining correctly and seemed to be bringing the issue under control. However this didn't stop the Government from panicking, starting a series of rules changes, often altering every few days without any attempt to see if the previous measures had worked. Random-seeming rule changes with little or no notice which are making less and less sense to local residents who were increasingly deciding to ignore whatever the current rules demanded.

In Merseyside, attending a gym was banned (though there are moves to reverse this) but car boot sales are just fine and safe. Meanwhile in Lancashire, car boot sales are apparently superspreader events but gyms perfectly safe.

When Greater Manchester was dropped into Tier 3, this actually meant that restrictions in Oldham, where numbers were still rising were actually lessened.

However all of those local negotiations have been rendered pointless by the national lockdown. In none of the northern Tier 3 places have the new rules been in place long enough to begin to assess whether those restrictions actually had any effect.

The northern cities have spent the last 30 years recovering from the decline of traditional industries and have reinvented themselves, with a heavy reliance on the entertainment and hospitality industries. Theatres, galleries, night clubs, pubs, restaurants and bars with the associated hotel places have been vital to the regeneration of the North, bringing life and energy back to the city centres. Tier 3 lockdowns are lethal to the wellbeing of the cities of the North. Meanwhile, of course the national lockdown is thoroughly killing off the tourism revenues of the more rural areas, which have had three winters in a row.

FAILED MAYORS

So in all of this mess, what about local government? Well, some local councils like Manchester have a track record of trying to add as much as possible to any injuries done by a Conservative government. When the bedroom tax came in, Manchester returned the entire discretionary grant unspent to the government, preferring to maximise the pain. Those of us who have seen how councils like Manchester work have a fair degree of scepticism when Labour council leaders start talking about helping vulnerable people. Something to reflect on when seeing Labour council leaders from Greater Manchester showboating about failure to fund support for vulnerable people. However the Government has failed to fulfil its original promise that they'd fund local councils to "do what was necessary" and in that the North fared no better than the rest of the country.

Of course we now have mayors. In Greater Manchester Andy Burnham is mainly known for looking sad in public. When he was campaigning for election in 2017, he looked very sad a lot about the homelessness problem, which is highly visible in the city centre and promised action. The homelessness problem has not visibly improved in the last three years. Whenever there's been a problem or a tragedy, he's turned up and looked very sad while doing little or nothing about the issue.

Unfortunately the negotiations for Greater Manchester entering Tier 3 have ended up making Andy Burnham looking sad into a sort of superpower and seems to have propelled him into some sort of unlikely stardom. However it's noticeable and unsurprising that he failed in his negotiations.

Meanwhile over in Liverpool Steve Rotherham did go along with Tier 3 and failed to get some important concessions that the council leaders in Lancashire managed.

So the net effect seems to have ended up giving undeserved credit to a bunch of people who frankly have done very little with their mayoral roles. Ironically the Greater Manchester mayor has specific responsibility for health, but doesn't seem to have been given either the resources or powers to do anything other than look sad about the situation.

Though it pains to admit it, the local leaders had a valid point. When being shoved into Tier 3 we in the North were repeatedly told by the Government that

extending furlough above 67% was unaffordable. This means that northerners, including large numbers of people in the hospitality trade were expected to be just fine on two-thirds of the minimum wage. However the national lockdown extended the 80% furlough. That alone speaks volumes as to just how much this government really values northerners, even 'red wall' northerners.

The North isn't another country, but we need a better voice than these ineffectual mayors. This whole crisis had brought the northern democratic deficit into sharp focus.

Jackie Pearcey had fought four general elections for the Liberal Democrats in Manchester Gorton, and was the candidate for the cancelled 2017 by-election

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NOW GO AND SELL IT

The Liberal Democrats have backed the idea of a universal basic income. Now they must promote it as the cornerstone of a new radical politics, says Paul Hindley

Following Brexit, the Liberal Democrats are in need of new and distinctive big ideas.

Ideas that will shape and rebuild the party's progressive identity as being a force for social justice in British politics. The party appears to have found just such a big idea, the universal basic income (UBI).

On the Friday night of the online federal conference I, no doubt like many party members, let out a large cheer of happiness and relief as the party overwhelmingly endorsed the principle of UBI.

After years of seeing the party turn away from big ideas and having seen personal friends quit the party following the leadership election, the conference vote gave me hope that there was still something worth fighting for within the Liberal Democrats, and that something was bold, radical and driven by a core commitment to address systemic inequalities within our economy and society.

As I wrote in a blog article for Lib Dem Voice earlier in the year, the Liberal Democrats should aim to become the party of the universal basic income.

DIFFICULT CHOICES

Now that the party is committed to the principle, it is over to the Federal Policy

Committee to design a funded policy for the party moving forward. This leads to some difficult choices about what kind of UBI the party should endorse and how it should be paid for.

The party needs a big eye-catching policy that is equally going to capture headlines and people's imaginations. For a decade or more the party has been gripped by a dogmatic centrism which has led to it being reluctant to engage in a battle of big ideas. The result has been a masterclass in the politics of mediocrity whereby well-meaning policies are assembled which do next to nothing to inspire 90% of the voting public. This is a recipe for irrelevance.

Ultimately, UBI needs to be at the heart of a new social liberal consensus.

The party must be unafraid to make the case for universal basic income, that everybody should have a guaranteed right to access a certain amount of capital, and that a UBI has the potential to be the great vehicle to advance individual liberty in the 21st century, as the welfare state was in the 20th century and constitutional democratic government was in the 19th century.

UBI is first and foremost about the autonomy of individuals. It is about giving everyone greater security and even mastery over their own lives and future prospects. It is about ending the precarity within the economy and abolishing extreme poverty, epitomised by food banks.

If the party is to achieve this it needs a bold commitment to UBI. At a minimum the party should strive to give everyone aged 18 and over at least £70 a week and perhaps be even more ambitious and make this over £100 a week.

Such commitments would carve out a unique space for the Liberal Democrats and will give it a clear *raison d'être* within post-Brexit British politics. UBI could be a centrepiece of a radical social liberal agenda in the run-up to the next general election in 2024.

Despite UBI appearing to be a relatively new idea, it has been around for many decades, even within sections of the Liberal Party, SDP and Liberal Democrats. The idea has long historic roots. As early as the late 18th century the republican liberal writer Thomas Paine was discussing the idea of a citizens' dividend. The great liberal economist, John Maynard Keynes was a supporter of UBI as was the Nobel laureate economist James Meade, whose work went on to inspire not just the great American liberal philosopher John Rawls, but also Paddy Ashdown.

In his book *Citizens' Britain* Ashdown discussed the ideas of Meade. Under Ashdown, the party first endorsed what was called a "citizen's income". The policy even made its way into the 1992 Liberal Democrat manifesto.

But why should we support a UBI today? Because it delivers justice for the left behind and the left out. It would help to remedy the inequalities within our economy and give people from the poorest communities a real stake in society. It would be a vehicle for social justice within our contemporary economy. A UBI would help to support those in low pay and insecure employment, such as workers on zero-hours contracts and those workers in the gig economy.

It would help part-time workers and people with caring responsibilities. It would help to deliver justice for the 'WASPI' women.

Finally, it would present people with opportunities to develop their careers, do extra studying later in life and reduce the initial economic risks of setting up a new business or pursuing a career in the arts.

It is also likely that UBI will deliver a boost to the economy as the poorest in society will have greater spending power and a new flow of productive capital will therefore begin to enter into the real economy.

We are at the dawn of the fourth Industrial Revolution, when the economy will be transformed by automation and artificial intelligence. The rise of such technologies risk results in many job losses as workers are replaced by machines. A UBI would help to prepare workers for the possible loss of employment caused by this radical change to the

economy.

It is evident that a UBI would help to mitigate the drastic economic impact of Covid-19 or a future global pandemic, something that is becoming more likely due to climate change and ecological breakdown. It is essential in helping us to face the challenges of the future.

FINNISH PILOT

The socio-economic benefits of UBI are clear. As the recent basic income pilot in Finland discovered, it will have the added bonus of improving people's mental health and sense of well-being. This fact along with the reduction of inequalities within the economy will lead to a more cohesive society and a stronger democracy as a result. At a time when populism is dividing societies and even undermining democracy, UBI could act as an antidote to that divisiveness, especially if it is twinned with the politics of liberal inclusive citizenship which gives people a sense of belonging to a bigger political community.

UBI is about power. It is about placing power in the hands of the people and strengthening the autonomy and self-mastery of each and every individual. In this respect it echoes the radical Liberal Party politics of the 1960s and 1970s. To echo John Stuart Mill, it would enable individuals to pursue experiments in living and give them a wider array of choices in relation to their careers, vocations and lifestyles.

When the Liberal Democrats come to campaign for UBI with the general public, the party should be unafraid to make the bold philosophical case for the policy, one based on justice, community and power.

UBI needs to be at the heart of a big political narrative about building a new economy and even a new form of politics and society to go with it. The party should strive to create nothing less than a more democratic and more egalitarian form of capitalism by giving everyone the right to own some capital.

Ultimately, UBI epitomises the values of the party that, "no one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity".

It will not be enough just for the party to make a strong philosophical case for the policy, it also needs to be prepared to have an argument with its political opponents, not least the Conservatives and possibly also Starmer's Labour.

SCARE TACTICS

The Tories are likely to use scare tactics about people using UBI to pay for cigarettes and alcohol and other things which may not be socially desirable. The party needs to respond to this Tory pessimism by arguing for a liberal generosity which places its faith in individuals, and that we as a party trust people and refused to endorse such negative views which do nothing to address deep social injustices.

The doctrine of conditionality has been so ingrained into sections of the population that some people may

find it difficult to understand why they should get a guaranteed income.

This is where universality is so important because this is not just another welfare benefit, it is an article of citizenship, it is an article of empowerment. It is the embodiment of your rights as an individual. Do people question their rights to have access to a health service free at the point of use or the right to send their children to state comprehensive schools free of charge? No, because these are seen as pillars of a civilised and just society, they are necessary for people to get on in life. UBI is just such a pillar of what is necessary to live a free and decent life.

So, how should we pay for universal basic income? The first thing to say is that giving adults a weekly £100 universal basic income would be very expensive. But then again so is the National Health Service, our education system and our current social security system. The reason we spend such large amounts of money on them is because they have the ability to transform people's lives.

A UBI could be paid for through a mixture of reallocating pre-existing welfare spending, adjusting current forms of taxation and introducing new forms of taxation.

Firstly, in relation to pre-existing welfare spending, the majority of working age benefits and a large chunk of the old-age pension budget could instantly be rolled into a UBI. In itself, a UBI would save the government large sums of money by reducing bureaucracy and the need to have unnecessary welfare administration, client monitoring and means-testing, not to mention abolishing benefit sanctions. The savings would instantly go to help pay for UBI. The test for any viable social welfare policy is whether the most disadvantaged are better off as a result, the same would be true for the introduction of a UBI.

Not all pre-existing welfare benefits could be rolled into a universal basic income. We would need to maintain sickness and disability benefits, housing benefit and child benefit to ensure the additional support for those who most need it in society on the basis of disability, the risk of homelessness and the help with bringing up young children. There would also need to be a pensioner top-up to ensure that no pensioners were worse off as a result.

In relation to current taxation, the rates of income tax would need to be adjusted to ensure that we entirely tax back the UBI of those in the top 10% of incomes (currently those earning more than £55,000). Those earning over £20,000 a year should have a portion of their UBI taxed back. This would currently account for approximately two-thirds of earners, a figure that would rise to approximately 80% of earners once a UBI is factored in. The size of the portion taxed back would rise progressively in line with a person's income. The more you earn over £20,000, the more UBI would be taxed back.

Cancellation of the Liberal Democrat autumn conference in Brighton means we will not be printing a new version of the Liberator Songbook this year.

Plans for a 'virtual' Glee Club unfortunately had to be abandoned due to insurmountable technical problems. We hope the Glee Club will return next spring

Corporation tax would need to be raised and measures taken to address the tax avoidance used by the wealthy and big business. VAT may need to be increased; however, politicians should be careful not to increase it too much because it is a regressive flat tax that impacts the incomes of the poorest. In addition, we would need to reduce the tax-free personal allowance or even replace it with a new income tax regime.

Finally, we should explore new forms of taxation. Liberals have long called for a comprehensive land value tax. In our current rentier economy, taxing wealth assets, such as land values, would be an essential policy tool for funding UBI. The UK should also work with the EU to help to introduce a Tobin tax on financial transactions, something that the EU has previously attempted but has been thwarted by vested interests in the City of London.

A UBI is not a single policy, it is the core of a new policy framework and it will cause us to overhaul not just how we distribute wealth throughout society, but how we tax wealth and how we allocate public spending. A UBI should be paid for through a combination of reallocating pre-existing welfare spending, taxing back a large proportion of it and by introducing new forms of taxation, such as a land value tax. For it to be a viable policy, the poorest and most disadvantaged must benefit the most from the introduction of a UBI.

The old neoliberal consensus has been shattered by Covid-19, the rise of populism and the looming climate crisis. A UBI advanced by Liberal Democrats must be at the heart of a new social liberal consensus. This is a policy that will not just deliver social justice, it will deliver individual freedom, personal autonomy, mental well-being, cohesion throughout society and a sense of citizenship. Let's give people the power to 'take control' of their lives and their destinies.

The great era defining Liberals of the past; Gladstone, Lloyd George, Keynes, Beveridge and Grimond did not shy away from difficult arguments for big ideas which they believed would transform the country.

Today those of us striving for a universal basic income are walking in their footsteps. Britain needs a UBI, and the Liberal Democrats are the party to deliver it. Be brave, make the case, and let's build the future together.

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

***“UBI is about power.
It is about placing
power in the hands
of the people and
strengthening the
autonomy and self-
mastery of each and
every individual”***

Liberal Revue from the vaults!

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

THE NORTH MOVES THE POLITICAL PLATES

Liberal Democrat conference had to duck the issue of English regions, but anger is rising in the north at the lack of devolution, says Tony Greaves

“The existing constitutional arrangements throughout the UK, including in England, are increasingly unstable and unsustainable. A major cause is the economic, social and political dominance of London and south-east England and the London-based elites in all areas.”

That was me in the Lords in early November asking the Government to set up a constitutional convention covering all parts of the United Kingdom, including the regions of England.

The minister’s answer told me to wait for a review by Lord Dunlop which Theresa May set up some 16 months ago.

It has not yet been published. Its job was to investigate how the union could be strengthened, after a report by MPs said relations had “broken down” between the UK and Scottish Governments.

Its terms of reference include: “[Within the context of the UK leaving the EU] the UK Government has asked Lord Dunlop to undertake a short, focused independent review to ensure that, within the context of the existing devolution settlements, we are working in the most effective way possible to realise fully all the benefits of being a United Kingdom...The review will not consider the powers or responsibilities of the devolved administrations and legislatures.” Well, that’s pretty clear and pretty useless.

Among some leaked proposals are that policy officials should not “cluster in Whitehall” and some should move out to the devolved nations “to engage directly with stakeholders”. (That may explain why Whitehall bums are sitting firmly on the report!) Another proposal is said to be the appointment of a ‘devolution czar’ or ‘minister for the union’, and there is some suggestion that the prime minister has appointed himself to that role. Meanwhile Lord Dunlop himself spoke in the Lords to express his concern about some of the stuff in the Internal Market Bill which divvies up ex-EU powers, mainly it seems to Whitehall.

The various fall-outs from Brexit are just one reason for the creakings in Britain’s constitution and the rows with between Scotland and the UK Government play into the SNP’s hands. Elections to the Scottish Parliament are due in six months time. Current signs suggest that the SNP under Nicola Sturgeon may win an overall majority and claim a mandate for a new ‘Indyref’ and that they may win.

The measures the UK government are considering seem to have the same defects as how things were done before the creation of the Holyrood Parliament. In essence they are top-down, condescending and arguably imperialist, however generous they may

or may not be. Combined with the prevailing incompetence of the Johnson regime, there are many people in Scotland who will lap up such talk.

Meanwhile the Liberal Democrats passed a resolution at their virtual conference in September which purported to be about the creation of a federal UK. Most of what it said was okay and rooted in a long Liberal tradition – over a hundred years ago Liberal leaders were talking of “home rule all round” in response to the pressures from Ireland. But like so many Liberal Democrat policy motions it was like an old-fashioned sweet shop, full of very many good things but all stacked together in their jars on the shelves with no clear sense of strategic order – and some big gaps. Of which the biggest is England.

When the Federal Policy Committee (FPC) was consulted on the proposed motion (which had come from Scotland) there was a note at the bottom saying: “It is essential that the motion on federalism passes and is not either rejected, emasculated or referred back”, which would be “disastrous” for Liberal Democrat campaigns for the Scottish and Welsh elections next May. Be that as it may, the problem was that debating a policy for England would have seriously risked those outcomes. So it was decided not to include English regions, which did not go down well with some of the English party.

WISHY WASHY MESS

The problem is that neither the English regions nor the English party have got their act together on what they want to see, let alone negotiated that with other state parties. And existing policy on devolution to English regions, dating from 2014 and 2018, is best described as a wishy-washy mess.

The FPC has therefore set up a working group to look at the matter. If it can find a way through the usual languid morass of the party’s policy-making systems, it’s a chance to get things sorted.

But none of this is new. I recently came across a copy of Current Topics which was a monthly publication from the Liberal Party’s Research and Information Department in the 1960s. Edited by its director Harry Cowie CT was an important part of the drive under Jo Grimond’s leadership to drag the party’s policies into the modern world. The issue of September 1963 was entitled Regional Government and starts by quoting Jo’s words in a speech in the Commons almost 58 years ago: “If the [Conservative] government are sincere about developing the depressed areas away from London, they must deliberately bring back power into those areas and encourage them to develop their own

centres of political, industrial and social growth.”

It goes on to say: The need to reshape the structure of British government so as to shift more power to the regions of Britain is now of the utmost urgency.

“As the recent plight of many areas in the North and West has shown, the steady concentration of power and wealth in London and the South-East is undermining the whole fabric of social and economic life of this country.

“But wealth will not move so long as London and the South-east remains the nucleus of power - the seat of government, the centre of the nationalised industries, and the heart of much of the nation’s life. Not only wealth, but also political power, must move away from London.”

The answer then was to create regional councils in England. The seminal Report of the Liberal Commission in 1970 called them provincial assemblies. The Liberal Party manifesto for the 1979 election is a classic statement of Liberal policy at a very difficult time for the party but is well worth a read today. It puts political and constitutional reform at the head of its proposals and calls for: “the massive decentralisation of power from Westminster and Whitehall to Scotland, Wales and the major regions of England - for which we have long called – [which] must involve legislative, executive and fiscal powers taken together”.

It stressed: “The need for a federal approach, which will involve a written constitution and a Supreme Court, as the only approach which can achieve legislative devolution within a workable framework of government for the United Kingdom.”

Of course the clever folk who believe we should just follow opinion polls and focus groups will say (as always) that ‘constitutional’ matters have no interest for most people. But the evidence of the past 20 and more years is that this is just not true. In any case it is now very clear that the constitutional settlement in the UK is bust, and if Liberals don’t get involved in sorting it, what we end up with will be much worse.

But does it really affect England? The most immediate crisis is in Northern Ireland where the back-of-fag-packet botch-up in the withdrawal agreement is set to cause problems that may just get worse as time goes on. It seems inevitable that growing problems of daily life following Brexit combined with demographic changes over coming years will lead in time to the reunification of the island of Ireland. And will anyone really care, other than a declining number of dyed-in-the-wool Unionists, so long as citizens in Northern Ireland retain their right to choose to be Irish or British (or both) and retain all rights of citizenship whichever they choose?

So: isn’t it really mainly about Scotland? It seems clear that the present settlement is less and less sustainable, yet ‘pure’ independence is an obvious nonsense. My guess is that unless there is a clear and sensible third alternative which is fully worked up and promoted, the increasing polarisation of Scottish debate between the SNP and the Tories will result in a break. If the Brexit negotiations have been a nightmare, imagine negotiating with the SNP after they have just won a referendum.

If Liberal Democrats cannot free themselves from a general media view in Scotland that they are just the

Unionists’ little helpers, who else can or will promote anything sensible? And that has to be a genuinely federal solution – perhaps even a confederal one which (slightly illogically) I would promote as federalism-plus.

Which leaves Wales. Except it doesn’t. Wales is not Scotland and the independence movement there still finds it hard to take off outside the Welsh speaking counties. But much of Wales does share the post-industrial problems and discontents that have overtaken much of the North of England.

In *Liberator* 399 I set out the new geography of what I call the Greater North, using the Trent as a very approximate boundary for all those former industrial areas and tracts of wonderful moorland somewhere ‘north of Watford’. The way the Tories’ election victory was created by the collapse of much of Labour’s former ‘Red Wall’, people who had voted for Brexit as a protest not just against the EU but perhaps even more over the neglect and condescension by the perceived metropolitan liberal elite – political, economic and social – based down in “that London”. And who went on to elect Tory MPs.

TORY TOEHOLDS

As I set out, the new Tory strongholds (or toeholds - who knows) are in the towns and former industrial villages – the areas on the edge and the places in between, many on or next to former coalfields. The Accringtons, Worksops, Workingtons, while the big regional cities themselves stayed solidly Labour. I strongly recommend that all active politicians from ‘south of Watford’ get and read a copy of Deborah Mattinson’s new book *Beyond the Red Wall*. Let me tell you, as someone who lives here, it is all true.

But now something else has happened. With Covid-19 and the shambolic and arrogant incompetence of London-based politicians and their ‘experts’, the protesting “left behind” towns of the Greater North have been joined by the big regional cities and their elected mayors – led by Andy Burnham of Greater Manchester. As a former MP for a new-blue mining town (Leigh) and former cabinet minister without any sense of awe and subservience towards London ministers and civil servants, he has turned overnight into a northern hero. Is this new alliance temporary or will the underlying resentments of the townfolk now meld with the ambitions of the big northern city dwellers (many of whom are much more like the ‘London elite’ than the denizens of Barrow or Dewsbury) to create a new Northern movement?

We’ve seen what happened in Scotland when the political status quo collapsed. The North of England is different in many ways but the plates are moving. In Scotland the political void was filled by the SNP, which with all its flaws is not alt-right or proto-fascist. If a political void is opening up in the Greater North who can or will fill that? The dangers are obvious and it is not clear that there is a progressive alternative available. But first we Liberals must work out what we think should be done.

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

WILL HE GO QUIETLY?

Donald Trump has another two months in which to make baseless claims of voter fraud and even turn out armed supporters. Has he really gone, asks Martha Elliott

People were literally dancing in the streets by the thousands from New York to California because Joe Biden won the presidency. His ticket with Kamala Harris won the popular vote by at least four million votes and have received more electoral college votes than are necessary to secure the presidency.

But as of the time of writing Biden's not received a concession call from Donald Trump, who is out golfing. The question is will he? Before the election, Trump would not commit to a peaceful transition of power. And he's already grabbed at straws to try to hold on to the White House - frivolous law suits, wild and unsubstantiated accusations of fraud, and even not-so-subtle calls for his supporters to rise up and fight for him.

The backdrop to this scenario began many months ago when the pandemic forced states to look for ways to avoid voting in person in the presidential election.

During the modern 'Jim Crow' era in America, many obstacles have been used to keep African Americans, other minorities and other traditional Democrats from voting.

FRAUD CLAIMS

Polling places were consolidated, creating long waiting lines, and some states established complicated identification requirements. But states wanted to make voting easier and not risk their health during the pandemic. This effort must have frightened Trump because it meant almost all Biden supporters would be able to vote. In response, he disparaged voting by mail by saying it would lead to widespread voter fraud—even though it's how he votes in Florida. His constant drumbeat was: "voter fraud, voter fraud, voter fraud".

Pre-election polls began to predict a big blue wave - a big Biden win and the Democrats taking back the Senate, so Trump told his loyal followers not to vote by mail or to vote early, but to vote in person on election day. Democrats were urged to vote by mail - and to mail the ballot in early or drop it off in person to make sure it arrived on time.

Both groups followed the recommendations of their parties. But in our federal system, each state has its own rules and processes. Some states allowed the mail-in ballots to be processed and counted as they arrived, so those ballots were the first results reported and Democrats appeared to do very well, a Blue Mirage. An example was Ohio where Biden took an early lead but ultimately lost.

Other states did not allow those ballots to be opened until the polls closed, so same-day voting was reported out first, giving big numbers for Trump and other Republicans, a Red Mirage. Example: Trump jumped ahead of Biden by hundreds of thousands of votes in

states such as Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Georgia.

About 2.30am on election night, Trump declared that he thought he had won the election, but that the election was being stolen from him by voter fraud. This was even before many mail-in ballots had been counted. Then he stayed inside for two days.

On the Thursday Joe Biden had made a statement announcing that he had just come from a briefing on the Covid-19 and economic crises, then asserted that after all the votes were counted, he believed that he and Kamala Harris would be the winners. He did not declare victory. He said democracy can be messy and asked all to be patient. "Each ballot must be counted, and that's what we are going to see, and what it should be."

That was all Trump could take. He would no longer stay quiet. He called a press conference at 6.30pm when the networks broadcast their nightly news reports. I thought I'd seen the worst of Donald J. Trump during the last three years, but I was wrong.

He came out swinging, repeating what he had Tweeted earlier: "If you count the legal votes, I easily win. If you count the illegal votes, they can steal the election from us (translation: from Donald Trump)." His fifteen-minute statement, given from the press briefing room at a podium with the seal of the President of the United States, went downhill from there.

Trump said that the blue wave that was predicted, didn't happen, although it may have, but just wasn't apparent at first. He said the pollsters conspired with big media, big money and big tech to suppress the Republican votes and make it more difficult for Republicans to raise money.

He again alleged voter fraud. "We were winning in all the key locations by a lot, actually, and then our numbers started miraculously getting whittled away in secret (not true), and they wouldn't allow legally permissible observers" (not true). He accused Democrats of rigging elections in the states where he was losing (false).

Trump said a tremendous amount of litigation had already begun "because of how unfair this process was." He reminded everyone that he had been talking about mail-in voting for a long time (true). "It's really destroyed our system. It's a corrupt system and it makes people corrupt...They want to find out how many votes they need, and then they seem to be able to find them." He said it could be seen on election night when all of a sudden, the election officials find one-sided (i.e. for Biden) mail-in ballots. (All false.)

Trump said that at one point he was up nearly 700,000 votes in Pennsylvania (true), but that it got whittled down. "They keep finding [votes] all over and they don't want to have any observers." (false) He claimed he had won Georgia by 300,000 votes. (False).

He wanted those counts to be stopped, but he was supportive of Arizona's continued count of the vote, because Biden's lead was decreasing as more votes were counted.

"Our goal is to defend the integrity of the election. We'll not allow the corruption to steal such an important election, or any election for that matter," Trump asserted. "This is a case where they are trying to steal an election...and we can't let that happen. Detroit and Philadelphia, known as two of the most corrupt political places anywhere in our country, cannot be responsible for engineering the outcome of a presidential race."

RACE CARD

There is no evidence of corruption in either city, but the insidious part of these accusations is that they are two cities that are primarily African American. He was playing the race card. For many of his loyal followers, which include White Supremists, this was a call to action.

To their credit, as Trump began to make these false charges, MSNBC, NBC, ABC, and CBS all cut away from the news conference. CNN continued to broadcast the whole statement, and although I'd heard enough outrageous falsehoods, I turned the channel to hear the end of his speech.

Trump claimed that Democrat officials never believed they could win this election honestly, and that's why they had to cheat. He went on and on about alleged irregularities and secret counting rooms where they 'found' ballots with the name Biden on them. He said there would be lots of litigation and ultimately the judges would have to decide.

What he meant by this was that the Supreme Court would decide who won. Just before the election, the Republicans in the Senate pushed through a replacement for Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg to sure up the conservative majority. Trump even said that he wanted to make sure that there were nine judges in case the Supreme Court had to decide the election, so his endgame is to get the election into the Supreme Court because he has appointed three of the nine justices and believes they are loyal to him and will vote in his favour. I want to believe that all of those justices have more integrity than that.

Interestingly, during the speech, he took credit for the fact that it appears that the Republicans won some seats in the House of Representatives, kept control of state legislatures, and may have kept control of United States Senate. Taking that to its logical conclusion, it means that all Republicans did well except Trump, so apparently the people committing voter "fraud" only conspired against him, not other Republicans. Talk about a persecution complex.

He made no mention of the more than 100,000 new Covid-19 cases that had been diagnosed in the previous two days.

Biden's campaign expected him to be declared the winner by Friday night, but out of caution the race had not been called. He had scheduled a speech and must have felt he needed to respond to Trump's disgraceful rant. He began by saying that there was

"I thought I'd seen the worst of Donald J. Trump during the last three years, but I was wrong"

no final decision, but it was clear he and Harris would win. He pointed out that he already had 74m votes, more than any presidential ticket ever received. "[A] record number of Americans of all races, faiths, religions, chose change over more of the same. They've given us a mandate for action on Covid, the economy, climate change, systemic racism." He said voters

made it clear that they want the country to come together.

He said he and Harris had begun work on Covid, and they feel the pain of the families of the 240,000 who have died. "Our hearts break with you." He urged people to remain calm. "We're proving again what we've proved for 244 years in this country; democracy works. Your vote will be counted." He said the work of the nation is not "to fan the flames of conflict but to solve problems, to guarantee justice, to get to improve the lives of our people. We may be opponents but we're not enemies, we're Americans." He sounded like a leader, presidential, not a whiny, petulant child.

Although Trump said the Blue Wave did not materialise, if Biden has 306 electoral votes it will be a landslide. The fate of the US Senate is still in limbo because there are probably going to be runoffs in at least two Senate races. The Senate race in North Carolina has not been called and appears to be lost because the Democrat who ran on family values and was ahead was caught sexting.

Has anything good happened from all of this? Definitely. More Americans voted than ever before - at least 144m and the percentage of eligible voters who cast ballots may also have broken records even in the midst of a pandemic. Harris is the first woman to be elected vice president and she is also a woman of colour.

My fear? Trump will not accept defeat and will rally his armed loyalists to take to the streets to help him keep the White House. On the other hand, it's rumoured that Trump's already talking about making a comeback and running in 2024.

God willing, Joe Biden will become the next president.

Martha Elliott has been a journalist for 40 years. She is writing a book on conscientious objectors in WWII. She also works for Democrats running for office in Maine and was on the board of Democratic Women of Santa Barbara County, California for nearly a decade.

FIRING UP TO TACKLE NATIONALISM

A new book *How To Be A Liberal* seeks to inspire liberals battered by populist governments. Susan Simmonds takes a look

How many books on liberalism does anyone need?

How many books can find a way of making this political philosophy fascinating or reinvigorating its ideas? How many times can you read about John Stewart Mill, Bentham and Locke and learn something new?

Do we fear that any more books will end up sitting forlornly or unloved on a bookshelf at the National Liberal Club? Can it ever exceed Conrad Russell's brilliant book *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Liberalism*?

Some of these questions need to be answered and others do not. Although I believe you can never have too many books on liberalism this book certainly does not fall into the category of 'too many'.

What makes this book significant – even more so than its ability to engage in its ambitious narrative - is its timeliness and within that its criticism. There are any number of texts on liberalism of varying depths of intellectual integrity and elegance.

This book works not just as an examination of historical ideas, but as a critique of applying those historical ideas to recent political events and demonstrating where liberalism has missed the mark. And it is critical of liberals and how they have allowed nationalism to take hold into the UK debate.

The book has a mix of both academic clarity around the historical and philosophical sections and first class

journalism when describing the more modern developments of nationalism, particularly the attacks on parliament, the courts and media in the run up to the 2019 general election.

RESISTANCE MOVEMENT

The introduction gives a clear overview, intending to tell the story of liberalism, from its birth in the age of science to its new status as a resistance movement against nationalism. It is the story of a single idea, which grew more complex and daring over the centuries, and of the dangers and tragedies of its articulation. It is the story of some deeply unusual,

stubborn, freethinking people, who lived life on their own terms and devised a system that would allow others to do likewise.

Dunt absolutely delivers on this promise with a huge historical vista of liberal history, philosophy and events. The story of the individual begins with Descartes and his struggles with doubt, the radical writings of the Levellers, a delve into the English Civil War and the discussions at Putney, and reviews the revolutions in France and America and their consequent constitutions.

He develops his theme further with analysis of the thought of John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill, to whose intellectual partnership Dunt gives equal credit for consolidating liberalism into a coherent system of political thought. He also considers lesser known figures such as Benjamin Constant and George Orwell as a liberal writer rather than the self-proclaimed socialist.

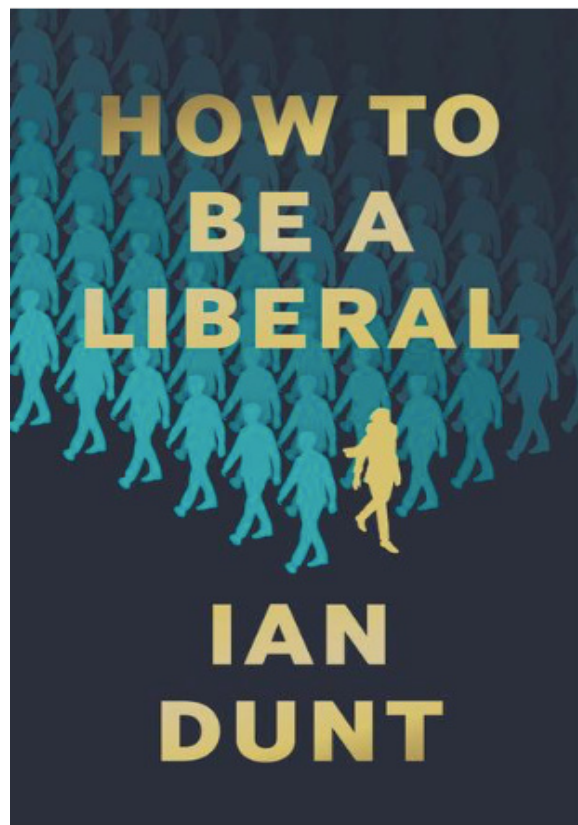
Dunt continues his narrative with an analysis of the cataclysmic events of the twentieth century. He reviews how the individual was nearly destroyed by communism and fascism; systems of government which on the face of it considered themselves polar opposites but shared a common strain of thought which resulted in both killing millions of their own citizens. Each promoted the power of the state over the rights of the individual leading to concentration camps and gulags.

He also carefully charts how the post-war repair work on liberalism focussed on economics, international relations and human rights.

There is an excellent section on the creation of identity politics, how the individual within liberal philosophy ceased to be a white heterosexual man and the development of standpoint theory.

Liberalism's record in understanding and promoting feminism is also examined, as is its historic treatment of race, where I believe more thinking needs to be urgently done.

Dunt moves the narrative forward with his explanation of how Liberalism faltered; how a



combination of economics, culture and technology weakened it. He takes us through the economics of the financial crisis in 2008, the rise and impact of social media and a detailed examination of the tactics used by Orban in Hungary, Johnson in the UK and Trump in the US.

His chapter on immigration 'The Other' is a largely journalistic piece about the injustices perpetrated on immigrants trying to get into Europe, the UK and the US, which he sees as a key focus of nationalism. The harm is undeniable and the emotion around the inhuman treatment is occasionally difficult to read.

He is clear that Europe's failure to manage this positively, despite frameworks being in place to do so, is a failure of liberal values by a number of Europe's governments.

His retelling of the "hostile environment" created by the Coalition government is saddening to re-read.

One of the most illuminating things throughout the book is that there is very little mention of Liberal parties, politics, or politicians.

It is written as if the main proponent of liberal thought and action has been removed from the historical tableau and what is left is a book which focuses on ideas and the personalities behind them leaving their relevance and effectiveness exposed.

It could be concluded that this scenario of Liberalism faltering under the pressure of nationalism exposes the fallibility of Liberalism as an organised political force or merely that of the actors and their actions that attempt to implement it within government.

Liberalism – arguably - is at its best as a political philosophy which is available for the guidance of wise people across a wide political spectrum and its internal competing strands do not make it possible for one political party to own it and implement Liberal policies effectively. Or one could argue that proposition is nonsense but that our leaders have not always served us well.

TOUGH MESSAGES

Dunt's then sends a couple of tough messages - his view is that liberals have failed to argue for our values; instead have apologised for them, been embarrassed or not mentioned them at all.

He argues that the case for immigration was made by civil servants and business people, but not made in trade union meetings or town halls or news programmes. While it is difficult to deny the truth that not enough people were making a pro-immigration case at the grassroots, there were many liberal individuals, NGOs and other groups that put the case that immigration was an enriching thing.

Dunt then talks about nationalist framing of the debate and how its assumptions and values became the assumptions of the mainstream conversations which led to international institutions being perceived as useless and undemocratic.

There are a couple of very pertinent passages where Dunt suggests that liberals effectively handed over

“Complacency allowed liberalism to fossilise. Fear left it exposed. And nationalism could then, with shocking ease, shatter it into pieces”

their narratives and then asked themselves why they kept losing individual battles blind to the fact that they had already conceded the war.

He further adds that after Brexit and Trump, liberal complacency turned into liberal fear: “fear of being branded an elitist, fear of being targeted by online mobs, fear of being out of touch with one's own country.” He further states: “Complacency allowed liberalism to fossilise. Fear left it exposed. And

nationalism could then, with shocking ease, shatter it into pieces.”

Dunt makes a call to arms in the last pages of the book. He argues that liberal complacency is over; it is rediscovering its values and that people are standing up against nationalism. His last few paragraphs urging action as individuals would not shame a leader's speech at conference: “Some of these battles will be lost. Some will be won. Regardless, we keep fighting. We organise. We plot. We make the case. We stand firm when others turn away.”

There may be those who want to draw lessons for liberal and Liberal parties from this. And potentially there are many that are offered about bravery, progressive policy and the timelessness and utility of complex political ideas. But fundamentally this book is not a cool, calm dissection of the history of liberalism, or necessarily a blueprint for more effective policy making or better communications strategies. It is an exercise in persuasion and evangelism. Whilst clever and precise, it seeks to inspire, to change and to enthuse. It is deliberately readable and set in a time and place as a manifesto to counter nationalism.

Like all evangelism it occasionally runs to hyperbole to illustrate a greater truth.

While I would be delighted to write that it was the forces of liberalism that defeated Trump's nationalism in the US election, it would be far from true. While delighted to the point of dancing that Biden won, the conditions which allowed Trump's simplistic rhetoric of otherness to take hold have not disappeared. The huge voter base which voted for Trump has not been won over – that remains an aspiration for probably a generation of Democrats. Biden's presidency will undoubtedly stabilise the world stage and no longer give succour to other nationalist regimes. It may be pertinent to think about how else nationalism could still thrive in the UK and other European states and how liberalism works within that.

Susan Simmonds is a member of Thanet Liberal Democrats.

Ian Dunt is the editor of Politics.co.uk and a host on the Remainiacs podcast and wrote *Brexit: What the Hell Happens Now?*

How to be a Liberal. By Ian Dunt, Canbury Press £25.

He can be heard discussing the book at:

<https://www.socialliberal.net/podcasts>

<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/latenightlive/how-to-be-a-liberal-ian-dunt/12719534>

<https://iandunt.com/2020/09/21/the-great-big-how-to-be-a-liberal-film-marathon-part-one/>

TRIBAL DISLOYALTIES

A new publication has found 14 UK political tribes - and the Liberal Democrats lost all of them heavily in 2019. David Grace runs the numbers for some lessons on core votes

I have always followed David Boyle's advice on the tyranny of numbers: "Weighing the pig more often doesn't make it any fatter." I was therefore not brimming with excitement when opening the Social Liberal Forum booklet which sets out statistical analysis of the December 2019 election by Datapraxis.

I was of course chuffed that the statistics bore out what a lot of us had been saying in *Liberator* for many years. But *Winning for Britain* goes beyond that and party strategists would do well to learn its lessons when facing the future. It is fact-heavy and there's a lot of graphs. Perhaps not keep it by the bed.

Once you have overcome your initial reluctance to engage with a 'multilevel regression with post stratification model' it begins to make sense.

The authors build on the party's own general election review with a more detailed critique of the use of data. One very simple flaw was that the party's strategy was based upon polling data from June 2019 and was not updated as fresh evidence emerged. That provides the first recommendation: make better use of data and keep it up to date.

The booklet pours scorn on the Liberal Democrat election messaging in 2019. Quite rightly it describes the 'Build a brighter future' line as "a classic example of a lowest common denominator message which tests well in focus groups because people find nothing to disagree with in it".

I have always felt that a good test of a message is to express the negative and see if anyone could possibly support that. Stopping Brexit was a popular idea but Datapraxis called 'Stop Brexit - Revoke Article 50'," a sugar high, bad aftertaste message".

RIDICULOUS MESSAGE

As we know, it was a ridiculous message for a party unlikely to form a government. The motion adopted by conference expressed continued support for a People's Vote but the party failed to emphasise that and people thought we had given up on it.

Repeatedly calling Jo Swinson the next prime minister was even worse and met with widespread

contempt. Building on work with Barack Obama and Bernie Saunders, the Real Change Lab used a technique called implicit response testing (IRT). This is a polling method which tests how quickly people respond to messages.

Quick instinctive or emotional ('implicit') responses are stronger whereas slower, more logical responses are generally weaker. The party did not use this technique and failed to test and change its messages in 2019. Apparently Daniel Kahneman's 'Thinking Fast and Thinking Slow' explains the science behind this. There's another book I bought but didn't get round to reading. It seems that Dominic Cummings did know about this – damn !

The third section of the booklet reports the results of the general election using the magic of multilevel regression.

This analysis confirms what many of us feared: there is no such thing as a Liberal Democrat core vote at present.

Datapraxis used the responses to 85 questions by 10,000 people to build a 'voter tribe analysis'. By examining how answers formed clusters, they identified 14 tribes.

Here's their list: Young Insta-Progressives, Older Traditional Recalcitrants, Older Establishment Liberals, The Green Left, Establishment Tony Brexiters, anti-Tory Heartlands, Progressive Cosmopolitans, the

Younger Disengaged, the Older Disillusioned, Older Brexit Swing Voters, Centre-left Pragmatists, Young Apathetic Waverers, Mainstream Tories, Anti-Establishment Hard Brexiters. Try fitting those categories on a canvass sheet or Minivan!

SAD TRUTH

While the choice of names is subjective, the groups they name come from the data, not just anyone's opinion about how the electorate is divided. The sad truth is that Liberal Democrats failed to obtain a majority in any of the tribes. The strongest performance was from the Older Establishment Liberals, described as "older, wealthy, concerned with fairness and order", and the party took 48% of their votes. Pity they are only 6% of the electorate.



In only two other tribes did the party manage to get more than 10% of each. The Progressive Cosmopolitans, a high turnout group, are strongly anti-Brexit, mostly left of centre but pragmatic in their choices. In 2017, 59% of them voted Labour and 27% Lib Dem, but in last year's Euro-elections 59% voted Lib Dem. At the start of last year's election 57% planned to vote for us, because of Brexit and Corbyn, but in the end we only got 28% and 63% voted Labour.

We also lost support among the Young Instagram Progressives, a small, politicised, very young group (so named because 60% of them use Instagram) who are characterised by their willingness to vote tactically against the Conservatives.

It found 29% of them intended to vote Lib Dem but only 16% did. The Liberal Democrats were also the second choice for 25% of the Mainstream Tories tribe (which together with the Older Establishment Liberals included most of the Tory Remainers). Thanks to fear of Corbyn we picked up very few of them.

The understatement of the booklet is that the Liberal Democrats ended up under-performing their theoretical potential massively in all the other tribes. First-past-the-post played a part of course but the party seemed unaware of, and incapable of, appealing to all these people. We benefitted a little from tactical voting but Datapraxis concludes that even if we had attracted every possible tactical vote, we would still have only won 28 seats. To work out your family's and friends' tribes and your own, find the booklet here: https://www.socialliberal.net/winning_for_britain

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

As Lenin asked in 1901, what is to be done? In its fourth section the booklet canvasses possible strategies for the party. Like a local government officer reporting to councillors, the authors set out three options but with a clear steer for one.

The first is called 'Strategic Challenger to Labour' which could involve attempting to outflank the centrist Starmer. Something like this worked under Charles Kennedy. While we could gain some votes on the left we would probably fail to win votes from unhappy Conservatives. This would be unfortunate given that of the 102 seats in which the party is in first or second place in 87 the Conservatives are the challenge and only in nine is it Labour.

The second option is called 'Tactical Supporting Act for Labour'. This would involve some sort of explicit alliance with Labour and would exploit tactical voting, but we know that is not enough so a formal pact including standing down against each other would be required.

This approach could remove the Tories from government but what would become of the party? People could end up asking what is the point of the Liberal Democrats? What do they stand for? One could see this being viable if it was for one time only given a definite commitment to proportional representation by Labour. Paddy Ashdown moved in this direction only to be cheated by Blair who promised a referendum

"I have always felt that a good test of a message is to express the negative and see if anyone could possibly support that"

on electoral reform but never delivered it.

The third option, clearly preferred by the authors is called 'A Distinct, Progressive Liberal Alternative'.

This is not 'equidistance' but shows the Liberal Democrats as clearly different from Labour, not just John the Baptist to their messiah. We would need to appeal to different tribes but not by the oft-repeated and

sometimes valid criticism that we say different things to different people.

The booklet identifies themes which would have wide appeal – fairness, internationalism - including welcoming refugees - and the environment. It suggests tackling the question of where power lies in Britain and promoting 'deeper democratisation' through community politics and deliberative citizen engagement. This all rings bloody great bells for old Liberals like me. However, it also recommends addressing the concerns of some tribes over order and patriotism.

Now it's alarm bells, but the booklet warns: "Addressing concerns of key voter tribes on such issues may be the entrance fee the party must pay in order to win a hearing for the rest of its ideas."

This reminds me that when I was a parliamentary candidate opposing capital punishment, I forgot to say that I thought murder was a bad thing and should be punished. With the need to address those concerns and the stark fact of so many Tories to beat, the party must take great care not to sound like pale Cambridge blues as against Johnson's classic Oxford blue.

Most of this booklet draws on data analysis to remind us of facts we should have known already. Keep the polling up-to date, analyse it well and don't ignore it. Test and change messaging.

The latter part of the document moves away from fact to recommendation, albeit fact-based. With long thought and deep consideration it should be possible to say more. The conclusion that we should present a distinct Liberal alternative warms the cockles of my heart but is a little thin. Essentially the booklet is about addressing our failures. It concerns how we should campaign and, above all, how not.

After all the impressive analysis, we still need to answer the question "What are we for?" and when we are sure of that we must use the best methods to tell people.

David Grace is a member of the Liberator Collective

Winning for Britain – Rebuilding the Liberal Democrats to change the course of our country. Social Liberal Forum. https://www.socialliberal.net/winning_for_britain

CAPTURING CARBON ON THE WIND

Solar and wind power, electric vehicles and battery storage all bring problems. It's time to look at nuclear fusion and man-made hydrocarbons for energy, says David Ridgway

In these uncertain times, can it be possible to ignore Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic?

If we can, there are many other matters to consider, two of which are climate change and energy generation. Both are linked, but should be considered separately.

The growth of the world's population has caused an extraordinary increase in the use of fossil fuels. The burning of coal fuelled the industrial revolution and, more recently, the extraction of oil and natural gas has been the dominant factor in the economies of all nations.

Prior to the use of coal, mankind burned wood, deforesting the land and creating more arable land for farming. There have been attempts at reforestation, but these fall far short in comparison with the loss of forests and woodlands.

WASTE PRODUCTS

All these activities have resulted in a growth of waste products, primarily carbon dioxide particularly from the burning of coal. Latterly, the growth of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has given rise to considerable concerns of some climate change experts, especially in respect of the holes in the ozone layer, which protects us from the ultra-violet light of the sun. There have been explanations that mankind need not worry about this growth because trees and other plants naturally absorb carbon dioxide and create oxygen, on which we all rely to breathe.

This balancing argument has become rather silent in recent years with the world becoming increasingly aware of the considerable reduction of the rain forests to create even more arable land.

It has been argued that the loss of the rain forests of South America, Central Africa and the Far East is contributing to the growth of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and that this could be a specific cause of the acceleration of climate change.

Different forms of production of power were slowly introduced. Hydro-electricity, using the gravitational force of rivers and the natural movements of the tides to drive the turbines and nuclear power where energy produced by the splitting of atoms (fission) was used to produce electricity. The first creates no noxious waste, but the second does and has caused considerable debate over the past 60 years.

Latterly, there has been a drive towards wind power and solar power, but the promoters of these forms of energy production never take into consideration the cost of construction and, indeed, the use of vast amounts of land.

I have never seen a satisfactory explanation of how

a reliance on such forms of power production can be acceptable when the wind doesn't blow nor when there is cloud cover (or at night). There are growing concerns that linking the intermittent supply of energy with the main power supply grid is complex and can actually increase costs.

Mark Mills, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, said in a paper that it is a reality of physics that all sources of energy have limits that cannot be exceeded. The maximum rate of conversion of the sun's protons into electrons is 33% and the best man-made solar conversion achieves about 26%. The maximum capture of wind for energy is about 60% and the best turbines produce 45%. So all the claims that big gains are coming must be looked at realistically. There is hardly any gain left to achieve.

To provide a constant supply to the power networks from wind/solar provision, there will have to be a massive investment in batteries.

However, it is worrying to note that, to provide just one day's worth of the electricity needs in the United States will require 500 years of the output of the largest battery factory in America. And this is why the world's total output of wind/solar power is only 3%, even after 20 years of build-up and billions dollars of investment.

It must not be forgotten that wind turbines, solar panels and batteries are constructed from non-renewable materials. A car battery may weigh upwards of half a ton, but it will require 250 tons of raw material. A 100mw wind farm, which would be sufficient to power 75,000 homes, would require 30,000 tons of iron ore, 50,000 tons of concrete and 900 tons of non-recyclable plastics. For a similar solar-panel farm, the needs rise by 50%, plus an array of rare earths. There will be a 200% - 2000% increase in mining for lithium, cobalt and dysprosium.

MASSIVE MINES

Where on earth will these massive mining operations be placed? Lithium might have been found in Cornwall, but in the main production will be in non-friendly countries, third-world countries and so on. It is highly unlikely that most mines will offer their personnel union protection. Indeed, to steal a quote "marketing of state-of-the-art technologies are a stark contrast to the children carrying bags of rocks".

And then there is the question of the energy required to extract the materials needed for these new, so-called green technologies, as well as the waste. Wind turbines and solar panels have a short life of around 20 years. As a comparison, a current gas turbine will last 40 years.

Mills estimates that, by 2050, the disposal of used solar panels will equal double the current global plastic waste. Add to this the waste in used wind turbines and batteries and an idea of the picture begins to emerge.

Alongside this trend is the desire to replace all petrol/diesel forms of transport with electric vehicles. This will require a completely new form of power distribution infrastructure.

Charging of vehicles tends to take much longer than filling up with petrol, even overnight.

But we don't use our cars on that basis. We use them as we require them and fill up as necessary. We may even carry

a spare can of petrol in the boot, just in case. How can that be done with an electric car? How can it be re-charged on a long journey, without vast amounts of time being incurred? And what will happen to all the old petrol/diesel cars?

Today, the growth of the world's population is creating an ever-increasing need for energy, resulting in an increased outpouring of waste gases. It is argued the world is facing an energy crisis and because research and development times are invariably long, we should be looking much more closely at different options today, developing them for tomorrow.

Nuclear fusion has been talked about for decades. The generation of power by joining atoms together creates very little noxious waste. The major problem, however, has been that the amount of power needed to force the atoms together is broadly the same as the amount of energy produced and this negates the whole process. Even so, experimental work continues in this field and slowly it appears that nuclear fusion may become economically viable, within the next few decades.

The other really interesting development is the harnessing of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and extracting the carbon to join it with hydrogen extracted from water, thereby creating a man-made hydrocarbon fuel which can be used in vehicles just like petrol.

The debunkers of this suggestion point to the cost of this system including the production of hydrogen from water by electrolysis. However, as in so many areas, there has been considerable research and the cost is now reduced to the level that the process of creating a hydrocarbon fuel can be economically viable.

The reason why it is so important to be looking at such suggestions today is that it will take upwards of 30 years to develop sustainability on a commercial scale. But if we wait, the opportunities will simply be postponed and possibly forgotten. If all the major world powers are encouraged to pool their resources to seek such solutions, then the whole world will benefit and, indeed, development times might very well be considerably reduced.

Why should this be considered? Well, the infrastructure for the provision of such fuel for the public is already in place. They are called petrol stations. The waste products of the fuel are carbon

“The major problem, however, has been that the amount of power needed to force the atoms together is broadly the same as the amount of energy produced and this negates the whole process”

dioxide and water, both of which can be used over and over again. The need to build new plants for the manufacturing of new vehicles is negated and, indeed, the cost of creating the new infrastructure for the provision of electricity for charging is removed as it would no longer be necessary.

This issue is not going away, but there are different solutions and the Liberal Democrats should take advantage of those differences. In this regard, we can make the difference

David Ridgway is a former Liberal Democrat councillor in Kirklees

FORGOTTEN NEIGHBOURS

The western Balkans have slipped out of the news but still harbour an area of instability on the EU's eastern edge, says John Martin

The Trump's administration may have had some unlikely fans in Serbia and the Western Balkans. The 'Western Balkans' (former Yugoslavia countries and Albania not yet in the EU) is a relatively unstable and less integrated region on the boundaries of the European Union.

EU diplomacy had effectively stalled here in trying to get Kosovo and Serbia to normalise relations, while a dispute on different historical interpretations of Slavic history has come into the open between politicians and some people in Bulgaria and North Macedonia.

This has risked upsetting progress in the region spearheaded by the courageous effort to solve the 'Macedonian name dispute' (of Greek and Macedonian nationalists) by new North Macedonian leader Zoran Zaev and Alexis Tsipras of Greece, and the apparently surprisingly good personal relationship between Edi Rama of Albania and Aleksandar Vučić of Serbia.

ETHNIC CLEANSING

The USA is seen by many in Serbia as pro-Kosovo as it spearheaded the NATO bombardment in 1999 that ended Serbian state's ethnic cleansing but put in charge the former guerrillas of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA; Albanian: Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës – UÇK) viewed as terrorists by many Serbs. Trump being anti the American establishment is therefore seen as being more pro-Serbia by some Serb nationalists (who tend also to be Putin fans), while many Kosovo Albanian commentators are definitely pro-Democrat and Biden. Incidentally while Serb people give the impression of feeling aggrieved that Britain took a large part militarily in resolving the Kosovo conflict, they often speak fondly of the historical alliance in World War One that most people in Britain do not remember.

A feeling of victimhood is exaggerated by 200,000 Serb (and Roma) people displaced from Kosovo after the fighting, most of whom have not returned. The failure of the Serbian state, presided over by a leader who was minister of information under the Slobodan Milošević, and popular media to acknowledge the scale

of atrocities allows nationalist to continue a climate of misinformation and denial.

Readers may have seen some strange headlines about talks between Serbia and Kosovo at the White House in early September and a signing ceremony on Friday 4 September.

The Serbian president and Kosovo's prime minister Avdullah Hoti were shown meeting to the assembled media. This commentator summarised: "The US diplomats have pulled off something on economic ties for Donald Trump to sign in the White House. Probably good news ... extremists on both sides would have exploited any suggestions on exchanges of territory between Kosovo and Serbia." 'Swapping' largely Serbian populated

parts of north Kosovo, for largely Albanian populated parts of southern Serbia has long been touted as a way to solve ethnic tensions. This ignores the fact that many of Kosovo's ethnic Serbs do not live in the North Mitrovica area concerned, and that Kosovo Albanian nationalists and patriots only talk about gaining territory not giving any up.

The US diplomats' and Trump administration's emphasis on normalising economic relations as the top priority, to improve economic prospects for all, was inspired. The EU led talks had been stalled in intractable pre-conditions put by both sides, especially by the Kosovo side that Serbia has to recognise Kosovo (which it does not) before other problems can be solved, and the failure of the Serbian authorities to implement earlier agreements on people movement (including identity documents), economic and educational issues.

Now there may be some further normalisation and investment. Mutual recognition of qualifications between the two countries is one regional issue that is important for graduates of the main minority populations, if implemented - as it wasn't after commitments made to the EU in 2013.

The strange headlines were because talks brokered by the White House between two European countries were presented as being about Israel. The putting in stuff about the Middle East and Israel was bizarre,



not very constructive and obviously for Trump's re-election campaign.

Trump team presenting the 'deal' as Muslim country recognises Israel so helping peace in the Middle East. And Serbia agreed to move its embassy to Jerusalem. That the US insisted on putting content about Israel in an 'agreement' (separate papers signed) between Kosovo and Serbia and that is the part that got most of the media coverage and is universally recognised as being solely for the benefit of Trump's re-election campaign.

Kosovo Albanians are often secular and largely cultural Muslims as was mostly the case in post-war Yugoslavia and Albania. Many international critics and some domestic commentators complain that the changed stance of Serbia regarding Israel is denying the positive attitude towards Palestine inherited from Yugoslavia.

APPALLINGLY ILLIBERAL

Likewise geopolitical pressure about relations with Russia and China are unhelpful even given the appallingly illiberal nature of those states. Bullying Serbia to take sides in economic disputes with China - not to use untrusted telecoms providers - and Russia, to diversify from Russian gas and open up the market, is damaging to the country's more neutral stance.

The Serbian president Vučić has played off China, Russia and the EU and USA, especially regarding arms deals. Receipt of Russian aid is widely celebrated by official voices in Serbia but not far greater amounts from the EU. Though I'm implacably opposed to the Chinese and Russian regimes, it is not edifying that smaller countries are bullied in to taking sides in geopolitical economic disputes. The EU however does the same as part of the expansion of its role into foreign policy, which is one area where it has become detached from regular domestic politics of its member states.

The other big regional news was elections in Montenegro meaning the incumbent President losing power for the first time in 30 years. Ironically a pro-EU voice lost narrowly to an opposition split between more liberal reformist and 'pro-Russian / pro-Serbia' parties. A peaceful and relatively swift transition to this unlikely coalition took place, with the leader of the latter party promising not to derail pro-EU and NATO aspirations.

This balanced approach was presumably choreographed with Belgrade and Moscow. The leaders in Montenegro had alienated the still influential Serbian Orthodox Church allowing Serb nationalist rhetoric to influence the result in a country with a large ethnic Serb population.

ABSURD SITUATION

Montenegro's formation of a government (and North Macedonia's after earlier elections) contrasted favourably with an absurd situation in Serbia where elections two months earlier, 21 June, led to a Government formation four months after that date,

“the small but real achievements of the American diplomacy appears to have reignited work of the EU negotiators in the Western Balkans region”

with Parliament not working in the meantime.

The opposition had largely boycotted the elections (there were protests at the results for a few weeks) meaning the president had to decide to which of his many followers he would give jobs. The only official opposition is made up of three Bosniak and three Albanian party MPs and one independent. The group leader, Albanian party MP Shaip Kamberi, made a blistering speech in Parliament on the formation of the largely old 'new' government.

The Leaders of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia have resumed working for a mini-Schengen zone including Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo as well. This was supported by the US but is in line with the aim of EU diplomacy. Many media commentators, trolls, bots and some politicians have presented a rivalry between the USA Government and the European Union leaders / negotiators. Whether this is true or not the small but real achievements of the American diplomacy appears to have reignited work of the EU negotiators in the Western Balkans region.



With the US Embassy and others working behind the scenes, the poster boy for Trump diplomacy has been his special envoy Richard Grenell. A prominent libertarian Republican LGBT figure and Trump diplomat, Grenell is prone to aggressive or bizarre tweets like his leader but in the complex politics of the former Yugoslavia his shoot-from-the-hip approach seems to have given his leader some small foreign policy results. Cynics abound but normalisation of economic relations, could be good for everyone.

'John Martin' has worked in several countries of south eastern Europe on elections and politically sensitive work

Pictures show campaigning from Montenegro's previous general election

ON HIS WAY OUT

Europe's last dictator faces an eventual fall in Belarus, says Rupinder Singh

Belarus is, by one measure, the geographical centre of Europe and also has the less savoury marker as a country with the 'last dictator in Europe'.

President Alexander Lukashenko was elected fairly in the post-Soviet politico-economic rubble in 1994 and remained popular for at least a decade, able to continue a planned economy, continued

economic model relied on cheap Russian energy and the subsequent clearance of energy arrears by selling of prized Belarusian assets: "Russification of Belarus" which I first wrote about in the late 1990s while an economic advisor there.

That model has come to an end as Putin's Russia has become more aggressive in its approach to its 'near abroad' and ended the energy premium that previously meant both cheaper domestic energy pricing for Belarusian consumers and industry but also for Belarus's ability to arbitrage by selling higher priced petrochemicals made in Belarus to the EU.

The country suffered horrendously and disproportionately during World War II as a soviet republic – and the USSR lost 17-20m people relative to say 420,000 in Britain, including the 40,000 poor civilians who died from the German bombing.

Every family was affected and this left an imprint on the Belarusian psyche – Belarusians are generally passive and conservative in character but also strong-willed and well educated and these characteristics define the changes afoot.

The social contract in many former soviet states of citizenry happily turning a blind eye to authoritarianism in exchange for economic bliss started to fade over the last decade in Belarus.

Despite a fantastic health system that helped to deal with the Chernobyl fall out after 1986 that hit Belarus, Lukashenko's response to



state ownership of assets and - unlike the 'oligarchisation' of formerly national assets in Russia and Ukraine - continued job security at state factories albeit at massively reduced real wages.

There was also continued subsidisation of basic food supplies and he retained much love from the large cohort of pensioners in the country who were paid regularly and unlike the mass arrears in Boris Yeltsin's Russia of the 1990s.

Magic money tree? Niet, he mastered playing off Russia against the West but fundamentally the



Covid-19 showed he was out of touch with an increasingly digitised population able to bypass the previously hypnotic reach of state-controlled media to muzzle any anti-Lukashenko sentiment.

Lukashenko lost his sixth election for the presidency in August by a heavy margin but remains as leader, nominally in power but without legitimacy – both domestically and internationally.

The difference with a similar recent event in another ex-soviet state of Kyrgyzstan is that Lukashenko has been willing to use force to face down sustained protests.

Russian president Putin - himself in a quandary on how to respond – sanctioned a threadbare financial line that was sufficient for Belarus to pay back Russian banks and keep the Belarusian budget ticking along but Belarus faces major liquidity and potential trade issues even if Russia and potentially China step in. A Democratic presidency in the US can be expected to further sanctions and economic squeeze.

Recent measures announced by the EU, US and the UK have been co-ordinated and have had the desired effect of pressurising the regime – Lukashenko spoke to political prisoners recently and continues to face continued protests.

The indications are that the Belarusian state apparatus is generally tired of him and while Russian military engagement cannot be fully discounted it remains unlikely given the political risks to a Russia already itself suffering from western sanctions, covid-related economic slowdown and a major economic hit from falling prices for hydrocarbons.

The role of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) remains the ideal avenue for a co-ordinated and peaceful resolution coupled with an exit strategy for Lukashenko and the promise of major financial support packaged from the International Monetary Fund and also the EU for stabilisation and structural reforms. Britain should continue to press for the OSCE to oversee fresh and fair elections in Belarus.



Pictured are various imaginative ways in which Belarusians have shown support for the banned white-red-white pre-Lukashenko flag]

Dr Rupinder Singh is a member of the Liberal International British Group executive. He is a policy advisor on economics, budget support, aid and international affairs

WHO WILL THEY COME FOR NEXT?

Adrian Hyyrylainen-Trett reports on the fight to defend LGBT rights against repression in Poland and Hungary

I chaired the first collaboration between Liberal International British Group (LIBG), Liberal Democrat European Group (LDEG) and LGBT+ Liberal Democrats on LGBT+ rights in Poland and Hungary, with speakers, Katalin Cseh, a Hungarian MEP from the Momentum Party, (part of Renew Europe), and Jarek Kubiak and Magda Oldziejewska who are both Polish activists based in London trying to establish support and solidarity for their LGBT+ friends in Poland.

The discussion focussed on the need for international solidarity and to create a new movement of forces to counteract the situation in the past decade or so whereby the rise of far-right activists globally has interconnected forces with funding, educational institutions, religious support and political parties to back them in their pursuit of denying LGBT rights around the world.

Katalin alongside her Hungarian MEP colleagues including Anna Donath, has been fighting the retrograde steps that Hungary has been taking under President Orbán with, for example, rejection of transgender rights earlier this year.

In Poland, the recent re-election of President Duda, and his openly homophobic comments, along with the 'LGBT free zones' has meant a severe step backwards to that experienced during 2005-15, commented on by Leamington Spa Liberal Democrat councillor Daniel Russell who lived there with his Polish boyfriend and felt things had improved.

But these recent backward steps are why Jarek established the Facebook group Polish Rainbow in UK, with multiple demonstrations outside the Polish Embassy in August which I attended to show my support with our LGBT+ brothers and sisters both here and in Poland.

In August 2020, the arrest of Malgorzata Szutowicz – known as 'Margot', a non-binary activist became international news as she was ordered for two months pre-trial detention to be held in a single person cell as well as being refused contact with their lawyers.

All major LGBT+ organisations as well as new President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen called for her immediate release but further brutal police treatment of activists continued which unleashed another wave of protests not just in Poland but around the world with protests outside Polish embassies in London, Manchester and elsewhere in solidarity with 'Margot' and all LGBT+ people in Poland suffering from attacks and persecutions.

Magda, a queer Polish activist in London, has also been organising rallies for the past five years in solidarity with feminist, pro-democratic and LGBT+ communities.

These recognise that this danger to human rights is not only just to LGBT rights but also women's rights around abortion laws and the general crackdown on democratic rights, and rise of authoritarian governments not only in Hungary and Poland but also outside the EU in Belarus and Russia.

We urgently need to recognise the seriousness of this threat and to organise on an international scale to counter this dangerous trend.

To facilitate the knowledge sharing from our webinar, I am including links to read from all our speakers and there will be a follow-up task force to concentrate our work on this issue.

Adrian Hyyrylainen-Trett is chair of Liberal International British Group

RESOURCES AND SOCIAL MEDIA LINKS FOR LEARNING ABOUT AND SUPPORTING LGBT+ ACTIVISTS IN POLAND AND HUNGARY

- * The Feminist Library, <https://feministlibrary.co.uk>
- * Stop Bzdurum, <https://www.facebook.com/stopbzdurum>
- * "Worse than Communism and Nazism put together" - War on Gender in Poland, https://www.academia.edu/21504550/_Worse_than_communism_and_nazism_put_together_War_on_Gender_in_Poland
- * Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe, <https://core.ac.uk/reader/160110010>
- * All Out - To Poland With Love, <https://action.allout.org/en/a/to-poland-with-love/>
- * Open Democracy - How a harsh Polish abortion bill sparked women's strikes around the world, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/how-a-harsh-polish-abortion-bill-sparked-womens-strikes-around-the-world/>
- * City for LGBT+, <https://www.crowdcast.io/e/w9epagub/register>
- * Campaign to create 'equality homes' in Poland, <https://zrzutka.pl/2bkztk>



LETTERS

motions have been accepted, but our attempts to propose an amendment have always been rejected.

We submitted a motion for the autumn conference this year which we were told was “controversial”. Another motion was initially preferred

VIRTUALLY SILENCED

Dear Liberator,

Firstly, congratulations to the Federal Conference Committee (FCC) for the excellent conference they have organised with the sterling team from HQ. Online and hybrid meetings can clearly involve more people and make the party less ‘London/south centric’.

I do however have a concern about how policy is made. We are told that Lib Dem conferences really do make policy – unlike in our rival parties. This is true up to a point. The reality is somewhat qualified, as shown over three issues this year where the FCC has failed to find time for debate on issues of interest to significant groups of members.

The motion put forward for debate on Europe was not felt strong enough by many. More than 700 members supported an amendment that would have required the party to support re-joining the European Union within 10 years. The majority of those involved in drawing up the motion accepted for debate were content not to have that pledge in their motion.

But those 700 were plainly not content. The Federal Policy Committee (FPC) and the FCC didn’t select the amendment to be debated. I didn’t support the amendment, but I felt it was only right for conference to decide. I hope we don’t lose too many members because the 700+ were unable to have their say.

The second example concerns the federalism debate. The motion that was debated originated in Scotland. The convenor of the Scottish party invited suggestions from the English party for inclusion in the motion and it proposed some policies to spell out how federalism might work for England.

This should be very topical. An agreed motion was put forward. The FCC took out the clauses relating to England. This incensed the English Council, which is the governing body of the English party. At its August meeting it sent a strong rebuke to both FPC and FCC and reminded the federal party that while the English party delegates policy for England to it, the English party can also remove that delegation.

The council urged that an amendment be submitted that encapsulated the English party’s thinking on how federalism might apply to England. Such an amendment was submitted and rejected for debate by FCC, again denying conference the opportunity to make its own decision.

The third example is over Palestine. Although I have been involved in both the other two matters discussed, I should declare a particular interest in this one as secretary of Liberal Democrat Friends of Palestine (LDFP).

LDFP members have submitted no less than seven motions, or amendments to motions, since 2013. None of them has been accepted for debate. Other

to ours but, in the event, there was not space in the timetable to discuss Palestine at all.

As in the past, the preferred motion didn’t suggest any real steps to put Israel under pressure to stop the creeping annexation of the West Bank and the serial and flagrant breaches of international law involved in the occupation. This shouldn’t be controversial for a party so committed to human rights and the rule of international law.

Once again the opportunity was missed for conference to debate what a significant number of members considers to be the real issues at stake.

The Thornhill General Election Review states: “Despite core Liberal Democrat beliefs of fostering diversity and encouraging people to contribute fully to decision making, the review found a culture of decision making in small closed groups, where opposing voices were ignored or criticised.”

Although this was written in the context of the general election campaign, it does seem to have some relevance here as well.

I hope there will be some serious reflection on the part of both FPC and FCC on what Dorothy Thornhill said and how it might apply to them.

John Kelly

Member, Liberal Democrat English council executive and Federal International Relations Committee.

The Diary of an MP's Wife: Inside and Outside Power

By Sasha Swire
Little, Brown

Depending on your mental health, this is either a deliciously gossipy escape from reality or proof that Britain's Conservative Party should never be let anywhere near power. Or both. The most sensational revelations have been widely excerpted, but there is plenty in these 500 pages to amuse or distress you.

Sir Hugo Swire's wife, Sasha, provides a sharp-eyed portrait of the Camerons, that born-to-rule bubble around David Cameron; the arrogant and out-of-touch George Osborne incapable of working a room (surely an essential qualification for a politician); the incessant manoeuvring of those freak-show exhibits, Michael Gove and Boris Johnson; the unworldly naivety of Rory Stewart and Amber Rudd; and endless dinners at Pratt's and White's, and country house weekends.

Lady Swire unintentionally reveals what an empty shell Cameron is. Although she and her husband adore him, he emerges as entitled, but without a single original thought or notion of why he wants to be prime minister.

He appears to read no books, and his conversation is Bullingdon Club level (like the size of people's private parts, and who has shagged whom). All credit to Cameron for being a conscientious father (unlike too many self-absorbed politicians) but his hinterland doesn't stretch beyond the caricature tweedy 1950s lifestyle (shooting, riding and drinking too much).

The diaries begin in 2010, when Hugo and his friends feel cheated of ministerial jobs by the Liberal Democrats. Her contempt is such that Lib Dems are hardly mentioned, except for a reference to Lord Shutt ("the smelly Liberal Democrats") and Nick Clegg's ability to talk at length without saying much.

Instead, their days are filled with plots to keep Gove and Cummings away from power.

Most enjoyable are her descriptions of East Devon Conservative Association, where very old members (they're all



REVIEWS

very old) fail to show deference to her husband, endlessly airing their ignorant, UKIP views. Their constituency meetings are high farce.

When Hugo, then a junior Foreign and Commonwealth Office minister, returns from inspecting the Falkland Islands' defences, his locals refuse to believe there are RAF jets stationed there to deter attack. Only two members ever do any campaigning, and only one of them thanks him for his efforts when he stands down, after 20 years as their MP.

It is painfully enjoyable to read Lady Swire's observations about the perpetually awkward Theresa May, a woman incapable of holding a normal conversation (how do these people get selected to fight safe seats?) Although her government depends on the DUP, the 'Maybot' never chats to Arlene Foster (who is more approachable than you would think).

The Swires are like moons, eagerly orbiting any member of the House of Windsor they can latch on to. Yet, it is clear from these diaries that the royals are dim at best, and tediously arrogant (and worse, in the case of Prince Andrew).

As one might expect, Boris is self-interested, lazy, and without fixed political views. Yet, tellingly, when they have dinner with him in Downing Street, he is keen for them to stay for hours, whereas Cameron would send his guests away at the end of the evening, content to go and watch Poirot.

Instead, she concludes that Boris is lonely and desperate for an admiring audience. Well, he's certainly got an audience now.

Rebecca Tinsley

And What Do You Do? By Norman Baker Biteback

Tony Blair used to say he had a two-word answer to republicans: "President Thatcher". To which the two-word response was "King

Andrew".

Had Prince Charles died before breeding we would have faced the arrogant, venal habitué of Woking Pizza Express on the throne.

Baker's overall points are that the hereditary principle means you get whatever breeding throws up next and that while he is instinctively anti-monarchist, if we are to have a monarchy it should at least be run on the low-budget lines of those on the continent.

For the thrust of the former MP for Lewes' book is not about constitutional issues but the astounding greed of the Windsors.

Baker has clearly conducted a lot of research and while we are all aware that the royal family reside in palaces, the scale of freeloading revealed here is jaw-dropping.

The duchies of Lancaster and Cornwall are merely the most glaring examples of the royal habit of having it both ways - public when it suits them and private when not.

Then there is the day-to-day greed. Helicopters and limousines routinely summoned for perfectly ordinary journeys that can be done by train, free holidays blagged from wealthy owners of Caribbean retreats and gifts pocketed without being publicly recorded even when presented in connection with a public role.

Security, accommodation and other benefits are also provided at public expense for obscurely distant royal relations of whom few have heard.

Baker also has an eye for the ludicrous ceremonial on which the royals still insist, he says even at private family events.

He has some time for Princess Anne, who he sees as diligent and - by royal standards - fairly frugal, but shows how the rest of the royals have few financial scruples and cannot avoid doing harm even when trying to do good.

He thinks Prince Charles' environmental beliefs are entirely sincere but that his background does not equip him to see the

contradiction between worrying about climate change and flying around in personal helicopters.

The Duke of Edinburgh managed for decades to be associated with wildlife charities while laying waste to prodigious quantities of everything from grouse to tigers on shoots.

Prince Andrew is now well-known for his dubious associates, but should be also for the questionable business interests Baker has unearthed. Typical of him is his insistence on titles and publicly-funded security for his children, things for which neither Princess Anne nor the invisible Prince Edward have felt the need for their offspring.

Nothing will change with the extended Windsor family's powers, money and status while the Queen lives, but Baker gives a timely warning that none of the rest of them are held in anything like such respect.

If Prince Charles is wise he will slim down the monarchy before someone does it for him.

Mark Smulian

The Political Lives of Postwar British MPs - An Oral History of Parliament **Emma Peplow & Priscila Pivatto [eds]** **Bloomsbury Academic** **2020 £61.20**

This book comes out of the History of Parliament's oral history project and is a remarkable work of transcription. It comprises extracts from 178 interviews with former MPs only eight of whom declined to allow their interviews to be published.

Seventeen Liberal or Liberal Democrat colleagues are included. I need to state that I am one of the former members interviewed. When the interviewer phoned me he asked if I could spare two hours to talk about myself. I replied that I could give him two days! What becomes apparent from reading the different extracts is that politicians are much more frank when speaking than when writing, so much so that this book is an invaluable reference book political writers and particularly historians, quite apart from being a very

entertaining and revealing read.

The book is organised under topics, including political development, finding a seat, party splits, gender issues, personal life and politics, with quotes from the interviews in the relevant places. This layout, coupled with one of the best and most comprehensive indices I've seen in years, makes this a very easily accessible reference work.

It is also valuable in having former cabinet ministers, including Michael Heseltine, and long-serving MPs side by side with those, such as Liberal Elizabeth Shields, who alas were only in the House of Commons for five minutes. It is clear that there is no single, settled view on candidate selection, campaigning and constituency work.

Amongst the Liberal contributions Graham Tope retells how Trevor Jones, the human dynamo and architect of the Liverpool Liberal successes, took over his by-election campaign in 1972 and conjured up a gain out of nowhere.

Diana Maddock recounts how when heavily pregnant a Liberal canvasser in Southampton followed her up after an election and got her involved. Through this she "got hooked on campaigning." A message there for all canvassers. Jenny Tonge has a very different story, coming from a Liberal family. And she also emphasises the importance of local attachment to a constituency. One curious anecdote, typical of the book, comes from Jackie Ballard who recounts how she played bridge with David Heath and Evan Harris during the long evenings in the House rather than inhabiting the many bars. It prompts the question: who had the fourth hand? Later Jackie recounts how she became disillusioned with parliament and with the party.

Martin Bell recounts how the Liberal Democrats - and others - stood down to give him a straight fight against Neil Hamilton in his successful 1997 election in Tatton. Emma Nicholson tells how the Conservative whips "manhandled" the lobby which made her so angry that she joined the Liberal Democrats, although "I am intrinsically I think a Conservative." Which no doubt explains why in due course she re-defected back to the Conservatives.

There are a number of

enlightening contributions on how cross party alliances are formed, particularly by women MPs on key issues, such as breast cancer services, as well as information on arcane traditions such as how the Members' Dining Room is organised into particular tables for party members and groups, and the idiocy of overnight queueing to be first in line for a 10 Minute Rule Bill. An unnamed Liberal tells of the wonders of the dreaded Focus leaflet!

To my knowledge there is no other book that provides direct information from one-time MPs on the trials and tribulations of parliamentary life and on the failure to organise the place to enable constructive discussion to take place on key issues.

Oral history projects are increasingly common and no doubt contain a great deal of valuable material but I imagine that I am not unique in never getting around to organising a time to book an appointment to go to a library and to listen to long hours of interviews. To have project staff transcribing the interviews and selecting significant passages is therefore a great boon. They have produced an excellent book, even if its price is rather excessive.

Michael Meadowcroft

Thursday

I surprised my closest inner circle with a trip to a private island where we could pretend things were normal just for a brief moment in time. The island, of course, was one of an archipelago in Rutland Water that I happen to own, but now I am back at the Hall and working on my latest invention. Do you remember the "Teasmade"? This was a contraption sold with the promise that if you set it up by your bedside it would wake you at the appointed hour next morning with a piping hot cup of tea. Well, I tried one once but found it in every way less efficient than a valet. Nevertheless, it has given me an idea and I spend the day in my workshop tinkering with a cafetiere and the engine from an old steam-driven Shuttleworth press. The result is that I now have a working prototype of my new Morning Coffee Maker.

Friday

To my own Home for Well-Behaved Orphans for a chinwag with Matron, only to find a desultory picket of Conservative MPs at the gates. "NO FOOD FOR KIDS!" say their placards, and "LET THEM STARVE!" To distract this rabble I lob a subsidised pork pie from the House of Commons canteen into the rhododendrons and they are soon diving on top of one another in their attempts to retrieve it. It happens that I pride myself on the excellent diet provided to my young charges, though I am always mindful that it is no kindness if they get stuck in a chimney after breakfast while out on what I like to call their "work experience". Besides, it is only when journalists take to hanging around the gates here that I get concerned; as in the Edwardian era when both Horatio Bottomley and C.T. Stead got a bee in their bonnets about why there were so many orphans in Rutland in the first place. As it turned out, Bottomley went to gaol and Stead went down with the Titanic – I flatter myself I am not without influence.

Saturday

It has long been my custom to invite new leaders of our party to stay at the Hall so I can measure the cut of their jibs and impart a little of the wisdom I have gained over the course of a long career in public service. The latest in this long line of guests is, of course, Ed Davey. We pass a sociable if socially distanced day, with Davey telling me all about his 'listening tour' – his next port of call will be Fife Zoo. I see that he is put up in a comfortable bedroom in the East Wing when it is time to retire and, as a special treat, I have my new Morning Coffee Maker placed on his bedside table.

I am woken in the small hours by a terrific explosion. Snatching up my twelve bore, I hurry to the East Wing, whence the sound came. I find poor Davey sitting up in bed, drenched in coffee grounds – clearly my prototype is in need of a little fine-tuning. Seeking to lighten the mood, I remark: "I see you have woken up and smelt the coffee."

Sunday

How to interest the young in the noble game of cricket is a problem that has long troubled our greatest minds. Some have seen shortening the game as the key, hence such innovations as Twenty20, The Hundred and matches of one over a side, but I beg leave to demur. Let us keep to the formats that fill a summer's day or five, but make it a little more exciting for the youthful spectator. With this insight in mind, I have been in

Lord Bonkers' Diary

negotiations with some of our leading television production companies. The outcome is that next year you will be able to watch a supernatural drama in which teenagers battle the forces of darkness in cricket. So one week you will see a Minor Counties scorer prevailed upon by said forces to award the home side extra leg byes, while the next will see them tempt an England women's prospect deliberately run one short in a close finish. In the series finale, one of the most respected figures in the game will be identified as the

satanic mastermind behind these diabolical acts. I am sure you will agree that Buffy the Umpire Slayer is bound to be a great success.

Monday

I telephone Capar to see how Davey is getting on at the zoo: he began work there this morning. "I'm afraid I've already had to let him go," replies the Head Keeper. "One of the bonobos has taken over for the time being."

Tuesday

Lunch with the High King of the Elves of Rockingham Forest, who tells me of their plans to help during the new lockdown: "We like to think of ourselves as putting the 'elf' into 'welfare'." In my experience these fellows seldom do anything without there being a profit in it for them, but I keep my own counsel as it is wise not to get on the wrong side of them – one of the Revd Hughes predecessors at St Asquith's was turned into a toad and eventually moved to a parish in industrial Cumberland by the ecclesiastical authorities. In the afternoon I call on the Wise Woman of Wing and purchase some of her herbal remedies as a precaution against the virus. "I'm much cheaper than those elves, dearie" she tells me, "and what's more my shit works."

Wednesday

I write these words in front of the Library fire as the first results are about to come in from America. When I spoke to the Governor of New Rutland – the State founded by settlers who left Oakham Quay aboard the Mayfly – he was confident that the forces of light will prevail. "But what," I asked him, "if that tangerine baboon you have in the White House refuses to accept defeat?" His answer is that they would "send in the seals". As I pointed out, if you want an animal to do that job then sea lions are a better bet: they are more aggressive and if it turns into a siege they could balance balls on their noses and play horns to entertain the children. Still, I did offer the services of The Great Seal of Rutland. Though of a naturally pacific disposition, he could undoubtedly come up with a good left hook if called upon to do so.

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