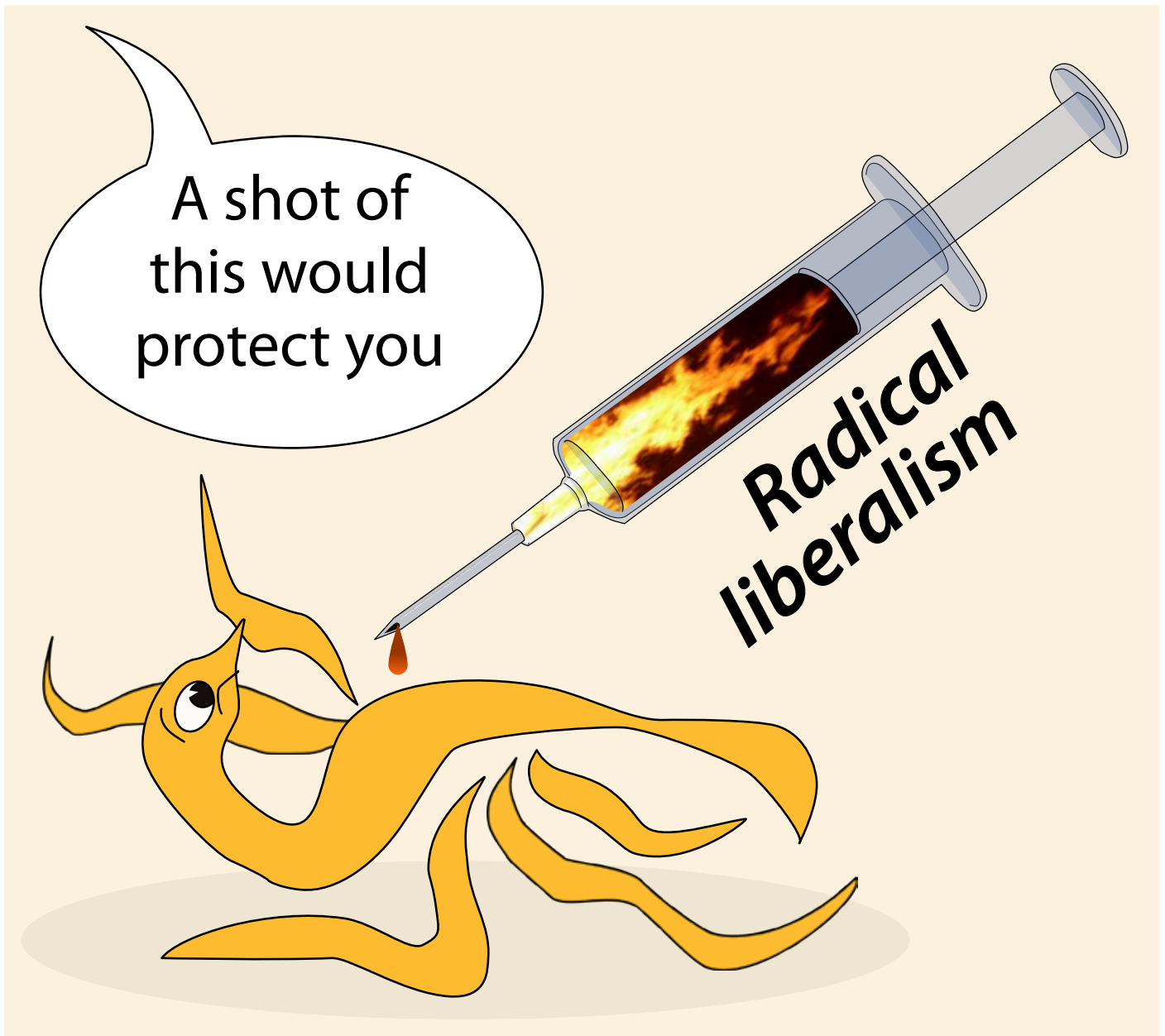


# liberator



- 💣 Illiberalism and identity politics - David Grace
- 💣 Does the Compass point to inter-party dealings - Simon Hebditch
- 💣 A pandemic of mental health problems - Claire Tyler

# CONTENTS

Liberator is now free to read as a PDF on our website: [www.liberatormagazine.org.uk](http://www.liberatormagazine.org.uk) and please see inside for details of how to sign up for notifications of when issues come out.

See the website for the 'sign up to Liberator's email newsletter' link. There is also a free archive of back issues to 2001.

## THE LIBERATOR COLLECTIVE

Jonathan Calder, Richard Clein, Howard Cohen, Gareth Epps, Catherine Furlong, David Grace, Sarah Green, Peter Johnson, Wendy Kyrle-Pope, Tim McNally, George Potter, Stewart Rayment, Kiron Reid, Harriet Sherlock, Mark Smulian, William Tranby, Claire Wiggins, Nick Winch

## LIBERATOR

🍷 was founded in 1970 and is produced by a voluntary editorial collective.

🍷 acts as a forum for debate among radical liberals in all parties and none

🍷 welcomes written contributions on relevant topics, up to 1800 words

We reserve the right to shorten, alter or omit any material.

Liberator Publications  
Flat 1, 24 Alexandra Grove, London N4 2LF

## DATA PROTECTION

We hold subscribers' names and addresses to fulfil our contract to provide copies of Liberator, and to contact them about their subscription. We do not pass details to third parties - unless required by law - with the exception of our distributor, who deletes the files used for address labels after use. To alter or remove your details or discuss any enquiry please contact: [liberatorsubs@hotmail.com](mailto:liberatorsubs@hotmail.com)

## INTERNET

Email: [collective@liberatormagazine.org.uk](mailto:collective@liberatormagazine.org.uk)  
Website: <http://www.liberatormagazine.org.uk>

Facebook group: <http://www.facebook.com/groups/6806343091>

**Commentary**.....3

**Radical Bulletin** .....4..7

**“YOU'RE ALL INDIVIDUALS”**  
**“I'M NOT”** .....8..9  
It's Life of Brian's most famous exchange, but identity politics is denying individuality and will end up in aggressive nationalism, says David Grace

**NOT ALL THAT STUFF, AGAIN**..... 10..11  
Labour can't win a majority and the Lib Dems and Greens can't make much progress, it's time again for cross-party co-operation says Simon Hebditch

**MARCHING AWAY FROM THE SOUND OF GUNFIRE** ..... 12..13  
The drift of the Liberal Democrats risks becoming terminal unless radical action is taken, to fight for people's freedoms, writes Gareth Epps

**THE PANDEMIC'S INVISIBLE SCARS** ..... 14..15  
Behind the obvious medical problems lies a pandemic-induced spiral in demand for a mental health service that is at breaking point, says Claire Tyler

**DECLINE AND FALL**..... 16..17  
Every economic sector from farming to finance faces a downturn as the government's hopeless Brexit deal hits home, says Phil Bennion

**AT LAST HE'S GONE** ..... 18..19  
Donald Trump has left the White House but bequeathed his successor appalling problems and political division, says Martha Elliott

**KOWTOWING, APPEASEMENT AND OTHER DELUSIONS**.....20..22  
Rebecca Tinsley is left "faintly nauseous" by Vince Cable's book on closer engagement with China

**FIND A NEW BEVERIDGE** .....23  
Thought is needed on how UBI can avoid pension problems, says William Tranby

**IT'S BIG, IT'S NEW AND IT MIGHT EVEN BE POPULAR** .....24..25  
Universal Basic Income could be the 'big idea' that reconnects Lib Dems with alienated voters since there will be many winners and few losers, says Alan Sherwell

**SMALL FURRY ANIMALS**.....26..28  
When Ed Davey went to Scotland all he did was visit a zoo, and the party leadership refuses to bare its teeth and campaign vigorously on a federalist alternative to independence. Nigel Lindsay looks at how an opportunity might be thrown away in the Scottish Parliament elections

**COULD BE ANYONE** .....29  
Successful Lib Dems campaigns that are devoid of politics should cause concern says Mark Smulian

**TIME FOR GOVERNMENT TO TRUST THE PEOPLE** .....30..31  
Ideas about participatory democracy and citizen assemblies in a new SLF report are welcome but must be considered alongside constitutional reform and changes in the Lib Dems, says Peter Johnson

**TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS**.....32  
Trevor Smith wonders why people rarely question the assumption that the private sector is best at everything

**OBITUARY - DAVID SHUTT**.....33..34  
Tony Greaves pays tribute to Lord Shutt, an influential Liberal over 65 years

**REVIEWS** .....35..39

**Lord Bonkers' Diary**.....40

### Picture Credits:

Cover - Christy Lawrance  
Pages 20-22 Mark Smulian  
Pages 26-28 Nigel Lindsay

# COMMENTARY

## HERE IT COMES AGAIN

A successful roll-out of vaccinations might save some of the Tory government's reputation with some voters, but the litany of on-off lockdowns, bewildering changes in rules, confusion over quarantine, inability to get protective gear to medical staff, meanness over children's meals and ruin of large parts of the economy would be enough to sink most government's prospects.

That is just the impact of Covid-19. There is also the Johnson government's mishandling of Brexit to consider, which far from freeing the country of red tape - as its supporters claimed - has ensnared everything from musicians to lobsters in the stuff.

Pandemic restrictions have even inadvertently given Brexit supporters what they always craved - a UK closed to foreigners.

Against all this the events of Black Wednesday that sank the previous Tory government in 1992 look trivial.

They were though enough to make certain John Major would lose even five years out; no such certainty yet attaches to this government's fate despite its monumental blunders.

This is partly because of the enfeebled state of Labour and the Lib Dems after December 2019. The prospect of a second Johnson term on one hand, and the parlous state of these two parties on the other, has unsurprisingly reawakened the sleeping beast of cross-party co-operation.

Headlines proffered by Liberator contributors rarely survive into the magazine, but Simon Hebditch's one for his article on Compass Liberal Democrats made the cut: 'Not All That Stuff, Again'.

Déjà-vu perhaps, but potentially important. This 'stuff' is the perennial debate about whether and how the Lib Dems should work with other parties ahead of a general election.

This time Compass has opened a Lib Dem section and is promoting the idea that the 'progressive parties', Lib Dems, Labour, the SNP, Greens and Plaid Cymru should co-operate around - if not a shared detailed programme - then at least some shared broad political objectives.

Leaving aside Scotland for now, the most obvious question is how Labour fits into 'progressive politics'.

Having ditched its collection of fantasists and Trots from the Corbyn era, Keir Starmer's Labour party appears focussed on a very narrow section of voters its crumbling 'red wall' to the exclusion of others.

Labour's shameful support for the Government's Brexit deal - and subsequently announced disinclination to change it - shows its priority is pandering to racists and reactionaries, though with the merit of so clearly sticking up two fingers to Remain voters as to alienate them.

Ed Davey's monumental gaffe about "not a rejoin party" threatens a lost opportunity here though, and was a bizarre example of him either disowning or not understanding a policy he promoted not four months earlier.

Then there was Labour's support for the Government's Bill to allow the police and security services to commit crimes, a cynical appeal to the 'law and order' lobby if ever there was one, no doubt based on the assumption that it proliferates along the 'red wall'.

This is straight out of the Blair and Brown era when Labour sought to strike 'tough' postures and was the party of war crimes, identity cards and 90-days detention without trial. Even the Conservatives balked at the latter two.

Labour's approach raises fundamental questions about whether it is, or considers itself to be, part of any broader movement of 'progressive politics'.

## RETALIATION IN FIRST

Is universal basic income (UBI) an idea whose time has come? If so, the Lib Dems' timely - and surprisingly consensual - support could give the party a 'big idea' that will actually be popular.

Once the pandemic passes public attention will turn to rebuilding an economy shattered by job and income losses and the devastation of many sectors.

UBI could help, but it will be as well to have worked out in advance answers with which to arm campaigners against the inevitable objections.

The most obvious will be that UBI is a sort of reverse poll tax - instead of taking a flat rate sum from people regardless of their circumstances it pays one out.

That will inevitably raise arguments that more should be given to poorer people by giving less - or nothing - to the rich.

UBI supporters say the tax system can recover from rich people most of what they receive in UBI, however a system that sends large amounts of money out of the Treasury and then brings much of it back again could be hard to sell.

All changes affecting benefits - which is in effect what this is - produce both winners and losers and even if the latter are a small minority they will inevitably shout louder than the former.

Some imagination will be needed to turn a policy prone to deeply technical detail into something that can be put across in public successfully; indeed the very name 'universal basic income' should probably be replaced with something more appealing.

Coherent explanations and rebuttals must be in place before any serious attempt is made to sell UBI to the public, otherwise it will struggle with hostility and misunderstanding.

# RADICAL BULLETIN

## WHERE POINTS THE COMPASS?

Here's a game for readers, what do the following have in common: Vince Cable, Jane Dodds, Chris Bones, Christopher Bowers, Ian Kearns, David Hall-Matthews, Simon Hebditch, Ben Rich, Neil Sherlock, Duncan Brack, Gail Bones, Duncan Greenland, Neville Farmer, Mathew Hulbert, Jon Alexander, Laura Lomer, Mike Tuffrey, Rev Simon Wilson, Gareth Epps, David Boyle, Julian Ingram, Gavin Grant, Linda Jack, Christine Jardine?

In some cases, not a great deal. There's a wide range of Lib Dem opinion there and it includes some people well-known to rarely agree with each other.

But they have all publicly signed the founding statement of the Compass Lib Dem Group, part of the Compass organisation.

This has its origins in the Labour party but now says it seeks to rally progressive opinion across parties and individuals. The parties concerned are Labour, the Lib Dems, Greens, SNP and Plaid Cymru,

Compass just before Christmas held an online meeting to promote this idea. It was fronted for the Lib Dems by Layla Moran rather than by Christine Jardine, the only signatory MP.

Behind it was a report by Compass on what boiled down to the extreme improbability of Labour forming a majority government, not least as on top of the collapsing 'red wall' it has lost 40-odd seats in Scotland where in the past nominating a donkey in a red rosette would have assured victory (Compass didn't quite put it like that of course).

Certainly it's report *We Divide, They Conquer* contained some startling and sobering messages for non-Tory parties, especially given Compass's Labour origins. <http://tinyurl.com/3n6tevgn>

It said: "At the next election - expected in 2024, but very possibly sooner given the Fixed Term Parliament Act is being repealed - Labour needs to gain 124 seats to win with a majority of just one.

"That would be equivalent to a uniform swing of 10.52%, larger than the Labour landslides of 1997 and 1945. And while uniform swing is known to be an imprecise measure, it's enough to give us an idea of the scale of the challenge ahead."

If Labour's woes in Scotland continued it would need a swing beyond precedent of 15% to win all 124 seats, with looming boundary changes likely to make this task even more Herculean.

Compass is pushing cross-party working as a solution and has had the good sense not to lay down any specific form it thinks this should take.

We have though been here before three times, and only one of those really worked.

No-one who has merely read about - let alone lived through - the Liberal-SDP seat share-out process could

possibly wish to repeat the experience with Labour, the Greens and SNP and Plaid Cymru involved.

It generated huge amounts of resentment and consumed enormous energy to no useful purpose in the run-up to the 1983 election, which anyway fell far short of the Alliance's fanciful forecasts.

The Unite to Remain exercise in 2019 was of limited effect (Liberator 399), though being at smaller scale was more manageable since unlike in 1983 no party had to stand down where it had any realistic prospect.

Dealings between Paddy Ashdown and Tony Blair in the mid-1990s worked only too well. The two parties made agreements on various policy and constitutional reforms and resolved to keep out of each other's way - rather than stand down candidates - a process that yielded an unprecedented 46 Lib Dem seats but such a huge Labour majority that Blair was able to ignore most of what he had agreed with Ashdown, including electoral reform.

Compass is suggesting a coming together around ideas for political reform rather than formal pacts, which is sensible in particular as Labour has never stood down for anyone (with the sole exception of Martin Bell's campaign in Tatton in 1997) and is unlikely to do so given the widespread dislike of the Lib Dems and SNP in that party.

For the moment Compass's work is something to watch, and if it becomes necessary for the Lib Dems to enter some sort of formal negotiations these should be led by people who will drive a hard bargain and not by starry-eyed enthusiasts.

## SOMEONE OUT TO GET HER?

Who has got it in for Jane Dodds, leader of the Welsh Liberal Democrats and briefly MP for Brecon and Radnorshire?

With this status she might have looked a shoo-in for the Welsh Senedd nomination in May's election.

But Bill Powell has instead been selected for the seat and Dodds has since faced attempts to keep off the top of the Mid and West Wales regional list - one of the party's few other chances of winning a seat.

A row has also blown up over Dodd's acceptance of donations from Edmond Douglas-Pennant, whose ancestors were involved in slavery.

After Powell lost his list seat in 2016 he became the president of the Welsh Party and is a Powys county councillor in Brecon and Radnorshire.

Kirsty Williams' decision to stand down then opened the prospect of Powell being able to stand for the only held seat in Wales.

He was quite within his rights to do so and has the local political CV as a credible candidate.

The problem was that Dodds looked equally credible as leader of the Welsh Party and former MP for the area.

Powell won the nomination by 112-92 votes, which gave the Welsh party the awkward problem of explaining why its leader could not secure the nomination for a seat she previously represented at Westminster.

Theories include Dodds' previous lack of interest in the Senedd and her relatively recent local roots.

There is also still resentment in parts of the Welsh party over Dodds' role in Unite to Remain, even though culpability for some of the ill-feelings is due to then party president Sal Brinton and her communication style.

The Lib Dems stepped aside in many seats in Wales and there remains deep anger among some key activists, who feel Dodds did not stand up for them as leader.

Those aggrieved may have decided to try to derail her selection campaign for the top spot on the Mid and West Wales list, for which Powell is also standing.

Powell supporters fear that if he is not in first place resources will be sucked from his constituency campaign in Brecon and Radnorshire to try to get Dodds elected on the list.

This disgruntlement may be behind a damaging local press story about acceptance of donations from Douglas-Pennant.

This included a lengthy denunciation of Dodds from Rod Lynch, chair of the Liberal Democrats Campaign for Race Equality.

Lynch lives in London and so is unlikely to be a devotee of the Brecon and Radnor Express, leading Dodds supporters to suspect that someone opposed to her provided the newspaper with Lynch as a contact.

The original source of Douglas-Pennant's fortune in Jamaican sugar plantations is common knowledge in Wales. He is a long-standing party member who took part in a TV documentary denouncing what happened in the past.

## VIDEO NASTY

Somewhere in the labyrinth that is the party disciplinary system there reposes a letter from a Merseyside solicitor enquiring about a case that has dragged on for four years - longer than the Nuremberg trials - and is still running under the pre-2019 rules. <http://tinyurl.com/6nnboh5k>

Such is the anger with the way the English party and disciplinary system has acted that former Southport MP John Pugh has taken the extraordinary step of publishing a video about his concerns.

The dispute goes back to Pugh's decision to stand down at the snap 2017 general election. That meant under the rules then in force Southport had an all-women shortlist, and chose Sue McGuire.

Her campaign generated controversy in the local party and although her vote share fell by only 4.6% that was enough for a morale-sapping third place for the first time since 1966.

Tony Dawson, a hard-working if maverick local activist, fell out with McGuire and posted on his private Facebook page that he would not support her.

That led to a disciplinary complaint. Dawson admitted the post but was suspended and the arrival of an investigator saw other matters to become entangled with this.

The Southport local party and the north west regional party have both unanimously voted that

Dawson should have his membership reinstated. McGuire is understood to have moved to Northern Ireland and to no longer be involved in this dispute.

But the regional parties committee, which conducted disciplinary cases under the old system, has refused to endorse restore Dawson's membership despite him having undertaken required training. This has left Pugh and others to suspect personal animosities are somehow involved.

Dawson's council seat is up in May and the Southport local party wants him back so he can defend it.

The solicitor's letter was addressed to the chair of the English Party and the chair of the English Appeals Committee.

Since the case has outlasted three appeal chairs and three English party chairs it is unclear who can now act to end this Kafkaesque charade.

Pugh has evidently developed an enthusiasm for videos having also published one on the party disciplinary system, saying: "Some people still understand irony." <http://tinyurl.com/1dlmc3ld>

## SIXTY GRAND TO YOU GUV'NOR

The idea that the party's left pressure group Social Liberal Forum might pay its director Ian Kearns £60,000 a year caused some consternation among members, none of whom thought SLF possessed that kind of money.

In fact it doesn't, and this largesse is more an indication of an intention to have a paid director at some point and the sort of dosh required.

This idea was supposed to remain private, but like most things in politics that are intended to be confidential it rapidly became public.

Inevitable misunderstandings around this have overlapped with concern from some members about whether SLF is going to keep its role of being a left-wing internal critic of the party leadership or become something more like a policy think tank.

Some have argued that so little is going on in the Lib Dems that it is impossible to position SLF as an internal dissident when there is nothing substantive to rebel against.

They therefore want it to become something that develops and promotes ideas and indeed in the last year it has done more in the way of online talks, meetings and publications than for a long time.

Others suspect a watering-down of SLF's position as the voice of the party's left, a suspicion driven in part by Kearns' decision to publicly endorse Ed Davey in the leadership election.

That might be considered unwise on his part given he would have had to work with Layla Moran had she won and SLF must have a high proportion of Moran supporters among its members.

Some enlightenment came on a very long Facebook thread from SLF treasurer Gordon Lishman who first of all faced questions that officers - including Kearns - had avoided questions at the forum's annual general meeting about what it was doing to influence party policy.

Liberator Collective member Gareth Epps said to Kearns on this thread that the AGM had seen "a significant shift in direction away from SLF's role of influencing the direction of the party".

Another member, William Barter, noted: "A large number of members concerned that SLF was focussing

on external debates, to the detriment of influencing the internal party debate - something the AGM didn't really address despite people bringing this up multiple times".

Barter also complained that his question on plans to employ staff and the financial implications of that went unanswered.

Lishman apologised for the delays in answering questions and said: "SLF Council has decided that we can best influence the party's political direction by developing and expressing our own agenda and seeking to convince our (mainly new) membership, rather than trying to influence them from inside.

"This view is partly informed by my experience of serving on several policy working groups in the last ten years. The Citizens Britain publication is one way of doing that. <http://tinyurl.com/ynxdfejq>

"Our earlier publication on Winning for Britain (Liberator 404) has been influencing Party thinking on strategic and campaign priorities."

<http://tinyurl.com/55alum5t>

He said that employing a director, "isn't a change of direction, but more one of ambition and planning.

"We have wanted to employ someone to manage and lead the organisation...we are now planning to raise more money from diverse sources and our substantially growing membership to enable us to make that move."

## GANG OF THREE

When Baroness Thornhill called in her general election review (Liberator 401) for a close and harmonious partnership between the party leader, president and chief executive she did not perhaps envisage all three being on the losing side in a Federal Board budget row.

Chief executive Mike Dixon sought to cut the Scottish and Welsh party grants for 2021-22, arguing the money should be conserved for the next general election.

The Scottish and Welsh parties pointed out this was not funding for the devolved administration election in May but their ordinary grant on which they had already based spending plans.

With a coup in the offing, astonished Federal Board members found Ed Davey himself phoning them to lobby in favour of Dixon's plan.

He had not counted though on the English party - which was not directly involved in the dispute - using its weight in solidarity with its counterparts - along with ALDC, which was concerned that some of its external funding is related to what it gets from the party.

Faced with this coalition, Dixon's proposal failed though some of those on the winning side fear he will soon contrive a way to have his revenge.

## STONE UNTURNED

A breathless email to Lib Dem members from Federal Conference Committee chair Geoff Payne seeks to entice them to register for the spring virtual conference: "Our conference is where our party makes decisions. Our members make our policy and guide our values."

Well, up to a point. Opponents of the renewal of the Trident nuclear missile system wanted to debate the issue at the conference so politely first approached

defence spokesperson Jamie Stone.

They told Stone that Lib Dems Against Trident was drafting a motion which might include "support for the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and opposition to Trident" and asked his thoughts.

Stone replied that he had consulted Julie Smith, the Lords defence spokesperson, and both were "strongly opposed to this motion being on the Spring Conference agenda".

This was not because they were pro-Trident but because - heaven forfend - people might disagree with each other.

Stone wrote: "This is because the nuclear issue is potentially extremely divisive as other conference debates on the topic have shown.

"A divisive debate will focus on splits when our recently elected leader, Ed, will be seeking to contrast us with the deeply divided Tory and Labour parties."

He added there was "no current reason to depart from the present policy which we fought the last general election. It is proportionate and pragmatic", and noted rather gratuitously that Menzies Campbell shared his opinion.

Those with long memories may recall that when Trident was debated at spring conference in 2007 Campbell - who was then the newly-elected leader - took the rare step of speaking in the debate.

So successful was his intervention that his policy of prevarication triumphed over getting rid of Trident by a whole 40 votes (Liberator 317).

## SOUTHERN DISCOMFORT

Two of the odder examples of Jo Swinson's inimitable skills in dealing with people came in the disasters at Eastbourne and Lewes at the last general election. Now, a bit more of the truth emerges.

Eastbourne MP Stephen Lloyd resigned the whip because of his misguided decision to tell constituents in 2017 that he would back any Brexit deal negotiated.

By 2019 he wanted the whip back so he could stand again and it was obvious to the rest of the parliamentary party that while Lloyd would probably lose Eastbourne any other Lib Dem candidate would be certain to.

Swinson though prevaricated about restoring the whip until the last minute, and tried get Bethnal Green candidate Josh Barbarinde moved there on the grounds that he happens to be a native of Eastbourne (Liberator 399).

Her meddling in Lewes only came to light after the general election when it emerged she had offered the seat to former Labour deputy leader Tom Watson were he to defect.

Watson ultimately decided to retire from politics but the Lewes selection was delayed dangerously late while this manoeuvring continued (Liberator 403).

Confirmation of the negative impact of all this has now from Dawn Davidson, who chaired the south east region candidates committee until its November conference.

In a report to members, Davidson said: "In my position as chair of the candidates committee the level of frustration in my dealing with the federal party as I attempted to get all our candidates in place in time, was extremely high.

“I am convinced that the time lost in not allowing Lewes to move forward on selection and in refusing to reinstate the whip to Stephen Lloyd in Eastbourne, probably cost us both seats.”

As to the Watson affair, it turns out even Davidson was kept well out of the loop. She said: “To then read earlier this year that the party had been considering offering Tom Watson, then deputy leader of the Labour Party, Lewes caused much disquiet amongst our members and activists who had worked so hard there. There should never be a repetition of this.”

Davidson then gave vent to her views on the bureaucracy that surrounds candidate reviews after general elections.

She said each candidate is expected to complete a review, as are two other members of the constituency concerned.

There are more than 40 questionnaire fields to be completed by each and with 44 constituencies in the region, this generates more than 5,000 pieces of data to be examined.

“Whether this is a sensible system of reviewing performance is open to discussion,” Davidson said, noting that if every review was completed nationally by everyone involved there would be more than two million items of data held by the candidate’s office “and probably never looked at again”.

## **ELECTRIC INTERWEB**

Reverberations continue from the defenestration and subsequent expulsion of Geeta Sidhu-Robb, who was briefly on the shortlist for Lib Dem London mayoral candidate (Liberator 404).

The region’s shortlisting committee refused to remove her even when evidence came to light that she thought obese people had forfeited their right to NHS treatment, but finally kicked her off when a video emerged of an anti-Semitic attack she made on Jack Straw when she fought Blackburn as a Tory in 1997.

Sidhu Robb’s conduct was the subject of a complaint from 16 members, which found its way with unusual speed through the party disciplinary process to a panel chaired by Laurence Brass, a former party activist who is now a judge.

Its ruling included a helpful You Tube link to Sidhu Robb’s outburst - at about 24 minutes in - in which among other things she said: “Jews are the enemies of Muslims.”

The panel noted: “[Sidhu Robb] put her name forward to be considered as the Lib Dem Candidate for Mayor of London but at no time did she reveal the existence of the [You Tube] film referred to above notwithstanding the fact that she was aware that high profile candidates are subjected to intense media scrutiny.”

She apologised and said she did not mention the incident during the selection process because “she did not believe that something that happened 23 years ago would be construed as a problem today”.

Sidhu Robb also “vociferously and emotionally denied that she is an anti-Semite and told the panel that in 1997 she was unaware of the tensions in the Middle East between Jews and Muslims”.

There was also a claim that she was “the victim of a personal vendetta being waged against her by various Lib Dem WhatsApp groups”.

The panel was unimpressed and booted her out of the party. It also laid into London region’s shortlisting process, saying it was “disappointed with the lack of due diligence shown by the various committees who were responsible for approving [Sidhu Robb’s] candidacy”.

Shortlisting panel members have defended their actions by saying they proceeded on the basis of evidence before them and were not expected to turn detective. They kept Sidhu Robb on the shortlist despite a 9-7 vote by the regional executive asking them to reconsider.

The disciplinary panel though said: “A cursory perusal of the internet would have revealed the existence of the infamous TV broadcast and might have prevented the embarrassment this unfortunate episode has caused to the party.”

This episode has led to a further row over former regional secretary Simon McGrath, who resigned that post to be free to attack the shortlisting committee.

He made statements in his election address for November’s regional executive poll about Sidhu Robb to which regional candidates chair Dave Raval objected on the basis that the disciplinary panel had not at that point judged her case.

A different version was ultimately distributed but returning officer Cec Tallack’s ban on the original may be appealed.

## **BYE GEORGE**

The Lib Dems are due next summer to vacate their large and very expensive headquarters on Westminster’s Great George Street for somewhere smaller and more appropriate.

At the time of the 1988 merger the party took over the old SDP headquarters in Cowley Street despite the building’s acres of unusable space and costly full repairing lease.

This was done to stop David Owen’s breakaway SDP getting hold of an address that was well known at least among politicians and the media.

After the Coalition was formed, then chief executive Chris Fox (since ennobled) decided something more fitting for a party in government was needed and also close to Nick Clegg’s office as deputy prime minister.

The party relocated to the plush Great George Street, which comfortably accommodated 90 or so staff in a modern open plan office on one floor.

Cowley Street though had cost about £250,000 a year and Great George Street three times that.

After the rout of 2015 the party did not need this space but was stuck with an expensive rent, which it would have been even more expensive to leave because the landlord wanted all tenants to stay until the building could be completely vacated for renovations and would charge a premium for early departure.

# “YOU’RE ALL INDIVIDUALS” “I’M NOT”

It’s Life of Brian’s most famous exchange, but identity politics is denying individuality and will end up in aggressive nationalism, says David Grace

For my fiftieth birthday I assembled Liberal friends for dinner and favoured them with a speech over coffee.

“As Liberals”, I offered, “we all believe in freedom”. A cynical voice at the back muttered, “This is going to be deep.”

I developed my theme, “Everyone says they believe in freedom. Do Liberals mean something more? We believe in the freedom to be different. Look at you lot, you’re all different.” Lord Bonkers spoke up on cue: “I’m not.”

The preamble to the Liberal Democrat constitution proclaims: “The Liberal Democrats exist to build a fair, free and open society, in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community, and in which no one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity.”

Most political debate seems to hover around the balance between liberty and equality and much policy is addressed to poverty and ignorance. I want to take a look at conformity, which apparently we are against. I ask if the widespread attention to identity politics celebrates diversity or just creates new conformities.

## UNCOMFORTABLE EXPERIENCE

I had the uncomfortable experience at our online conference in September 2020 of finding myself in small minorities opposing two different expressions of identity politics.

To my surprise a sensible business motion on how the party should behave towards transgender and non-binary members contained one almost metaphysical statement including a tautology: “Conference believes that...Trans women are women, trans men are men and non-binary identities are non-binary”.

To my greater surprise, Federal Conference Committee refused requests for a separate vote on this one sentence. To be honest I hadn’t considered enough about the issue to know what I thought but I was fairly sure that conferences of political parties should not attempt such definitions.

A resolution that the state and the law should treat Trans women as women etc. is definitely our business and I would sign up without hesitation, but this went further.

There was another problem. I suspected that anybody who spoke against that statement would be pilloried. I was right. Formal complaints were made to party disciplinary bodies against those speakers but mercifully they were dismissed.

My second minority was those of us who voted against the idea that the party should campaign for legislation to allow all-BAME shortlists for candidates

for public office.

There’s much more to say about restrictions on electoral choices but for the moment I just challenge the concept at the heart of identity politics that what matters is not the individual but the group.

This approach not only sets group against group but also assumes the internal coherence of the group, that everyone in it is in agreement.

We are familiar with this view of religious groups throughout history and we know how many have died for it and still do. Marxists and fellow-travellers have always asserted that what matters about you is your role in the process of production - your social-economic group. Bakunin denounced Marx for this because it ignored all the other differences between people and treated all workers as having identical aims.

In his *How to be a Liberal* (Liberator 404) Ian Dunt devotes a chapter to how identity politics has become illiberal.

A brief summary is that when we advance the rights of the group over the rights of the individual we deny the liberal assertion of universal rights, that all individuals are of equal value. We seize on one social characteristic of a person and promote it above all others. We deny empathy between members of different groups, we require true representation of a black person to be by another black person or of a woman by another woman.

Dunt explains how this has happened with an account of standpoint theory, the idea that our views are determined by our experiences. This simple truth has been distorted into an absolutism which means we may not think for ourselves, that our views can be discounted or valued because of who we are.

This was the evil which Liberals fought to overcome for centuries. For years, being a woman or a black person or simply a man without property was enough to deny you a vote. Liberals struggled against this, although it is a sad fact that in the UK no Liberal government has ever been elected by universal suffrage. South Africans used to defend apartheid against criticisms of liberal Brits on the grounds that we did not live there, we did not have the right experience. Radical feminists adopted the Marxist critique of dissidents that they had “false consciousness”. If you disagreed with the leadership of your group, obviously your experiences had prevented you from seeing the light.

As a student I took part in a sit-in at the economics faculty. As we settled down in a lecture room for the night in our sleeping bags a few men entered, set up a projector and showed pornographic films (Mary Whitehouse would have called them pornographic but



I doubt that a modern television audience would have been at all startled). After a while a shadow no bigger than a man's hand appeared mid-screen and grew until it appeared as a protest notice reading "This is sexism."

There was a discussion about what to do next and opinions differed. Eventually a very Cambridge agreement was reached to alternate between porn films and discussions on sexism. The cinéastes then showed a porn film by a feminist director. Then the protestors asked my wife, well known for her feminist views, to chair the discussion. Naturally she called the film guys and the women alternately but this displeased the latter so they proposed that their sister should no longer chair. False consciousness, you see.

What, you ask, has all this to do with BAME-only short lists? I start by questioning the category BAME. Does anyone really think of themselves as BAME? Does a Hindu from Leicester feel part of a group with an African-Caribbean person from London or a Muslim from Bradford? Who has decided that this classification is a real social group? To be honest, I wouldn't support a Hindu-only short list either.

I oppose all restrictions on the free choice of voters. Along with many of my female friends I voted against women-only short lists. "Well", you may say, "You would, you're a man." Do you also say that the women who voted against them were in a state of 'false consciousness'?

In Soviet Russia and communist satellites like Poland there were elections. Citizens had votes but the party controlled who you were allowed to vote for. Today this happens in Iran with different criteria. At the root of all these restrictions is the idea that someone has the right to limit your choices for what they have decided is the greater good.

Note that the greater good varies depending upon who is imposing it – communists, mullahs or feminists. Surely all demographic analysis shows that the biggest determinant of disadvantage is social class? Should we campaign for all-working-class short lists?

As a party the Liberal Democrats have gone further when it comes to internal elections. Article 2 of the Federal Constitution requires that 10% of federal committee members shall be from under-represented ethnic backgrounds, 10% shall be disabled and 10% from under-represented sexual orientations and gender identities.

There are of course difficulties with these rules. For example I have a friend who is a quarter Welsh, a quarter Malay and half English; how do you work out if he is under-represented? Disability is undefined. I have cataracts and flat feet, so probably not qualified. I have no idea how a returning officer copes with the competing demands of sexual orientations and gender identities within that last 10%.

The more serious objection comes back to the innate problem of identity politics. Why do we imagine that a Muslim from Birmingham is better represented by another Muslim rather than a Christian from Birmingham or an atheist from Cambridge?

*"I just challenge the concept at the heart of identity politics that what matters is not the individual but the group"*

Why should a woman who supports Universal Basic Income be better represented by a woman who opposes it? Because I am part of a social group I do not have to agree with every other member of that group and should be free to choose someone who shares my opinions but not my skin colour, sexuality or flat feet.

The justification advanced for interfering with the voter's free choice is that the social group, which others have decided in advance is that voter's most important characteristic, has been oppressed in the past, suffers from prejudice and is now 'under-represented'.

Just in pragmatic terms, can we be sure that fiddling with the results of elections actually advances the conditions of that group? Indeed I would argue that imposing quotas relieves the liberal conscience and removes the need to do some serious work about widening diversity among members (which is much harder than arbitrary quotas).

## GRAVE DISSERVICE

As Liberals we are committed to equal rights and of course champion anyone whose rights have been denied, but we do them a grave disservice if we reduce them to the anonymity and spurious homogeneity of being just a group member. Nor do you advance the conditions of those who are oppressed or suffer from daily prejudice by condemning as racist, sexist or whatever-ist anyone who does not share your view of identity politics.

It is flip and lazy to throw these words about at others who disagree with the remedies you propose. Always begin by examining your own prejudices. It will be hard enough to change those. All I ask is that in the party and in politics generally we remember and follow Martin Luther King's dream that his children will one day not be judged by the colour of their skin but by their character.

The saddest and most dangerous consequence of identity politics is of course nationalism. What has been embraced as a left-wing or progressive approach to social difference has empowered the right-wing nationalists.

If what matters about you is your group, then the strongest group identity throughout history is the nation.

Can you doubt its power when you see the millions who follow Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson or Viktor Orban or count the dead of centuries who fought and killed for their country right or wrong? You respond that the identities which your policies protect are the oppressed. Millions who voted for Brexit felt they were oppressed. Thus an approach which commends diversity deteriorates into oppression by conformity.

When I was a Young European Federalist we wore stickers saying: "Xenophobes Go Home". A woman in Grimsby asked me where xenophobes came from and I explained the joke that they were the people who dislike foreigners. She replied, "I like everyone, me". There's a simple affirmation of liberal universal values. David Grace is a member of the Liberator Collective

# NOT ALL THAT STUFF, AGAIN

## Labour can't win a majority and the Lib Dems and Greens can't make much progress, it's time again for cross-party co-operation says Simon Hebditch

I am glad to be a 'member' of the newly formed Compass Liberal Democrats. We are committed to upending the political system in the UK through the adoption of fundamental electoral reform and encouraging cross party working. Well, that at least is what I am looking for. Time will tell. But the launching of this initiative at least gives us the opportunity to analyse the current political situation and look afresh at the way forward. The following are my personal reflections and not the result of any discussions with other members.

Immediate reactions to the founding of the Compass Liberal Democrats have been, inevitably, mixed. If we simply start trying to analyse how a pact would work, the likelihood of some candidates standing back and being prepared to urge support for other parties, then we are on a hiding to nothing.

Any cross party co-operation must be based on political agreement to support a policy programme for a five year period.

If we simply say that we want a co-operative government just to pass an electoral reform bill, we will be seen as having no political programme beyond electoral reform which will benefit opposition parties

The general public would be entitled to think we were trying to change the system to benefit ourselves rather than transform the way in which politics works to better serve the people.

### FIVE-YEAR COALITION

Therefore, I believe that it is imperative to initiate cross party discussions, and to involve civil society organisations as well, to arrive at a common set of policy objectives and priority programmes that would underpin a coalition for a five year term. This must be a pre-condition for any further debate about how future electoral arrangements might work.

Once you start discussing a common programme for radical change it is, of course, tempting to try and include every area of policy interest but we would need to identify a number of clear priorities. In my view, these should include:

- a new constitutional settlement;
- specific programmes addressing the climate emergency;
- a set of commitments concerning the funding and organisation of social care and the work of the NHS;
- a comprehensive house building and

refurbishment programme, including insulation, to address housing need and measures to address the rental market;

- major reform of our social security system and level of benefit payments
- a common economic development and public investment plan;
- a new constitutional settlement.

The present arrangements between the UK government and the devolved administrations are not working effectively and fairly. The Covid-19 pandemic has been but one illustration of the disconnection between the different parts of the UK.

We must recognise that the peoples of the UK exist in four 'nations' currently represented by England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We need to establish new representative structures for all four, hopefully within the context of a federal entity with limited powers covering overall economic development planning, foreign policy and defence. All other matters would be the responsibility of the nations.

In other words, we need to embrace federalism within which there are four individual states. If we cannot do that, or if we are too late because Scotland has already voted to leave the UK over the next two years, then we will be saddled with an outdated and fissiparous UK for the foreseeable future.

The process of building a new federal system across the UK will include appropriate citizens assemblies within each of the four nations to enable citizens to consider options and make recommendations.

Any new settlement would have to include new, updated and fair electoral arrangements. Proportional representation would be included in these plans

Hopefully, very few people still deny the reality of severe climate change which will have serious repercussions around the world.

A huge amount of work has been done on what needs to happen between now and 2030 to halt the exponential rise in carbon emissions internationally. Now is the time for clear, measurable targets across the board and for political action to ensure that they are met.

The emergence of the pandemic has simply illustrated the parlous state of social care in the UK both in terms of the funding system needed to underpin services as well as the scandalous pay levels of social care staff. Again, there have been innumerable reports on how to fund the social care system. We don't need any more analyses, just a commitment to fund social care services effectively.

In addition, we have all benefitted from the work of NHS staff over the last year but there must be a long term commitment to provide the funds the service needs over at least a five year period rather than the current piecemeal approach to NHS finance.

There is currently much controversy as to the full extent of housing need across the

UK. There must be an assessment of the sometimes contradictory evidence surrounding this to enable us to coalesce around a clear set of both housebuilding targets, the needs in relation to both affordable housing and social housing and also the elimination of the vast majority of homelessness. The adequacy or otherwise of the housing stock, including the rental market, is absolutely central to helping to resolve other social problems.

## **CONCERTED ATTACK**

The last decade witnessed a concerted attack on social security claimants, including with the complicity of the Lib Dems from 2010-15 in a Coalition government. This attack was based on an austerity programme which made the poorest in society pay the price of the financial crisis caused by the banks in 2008-09. Public expenditure was cut, local government budgets were savaged and we wonder why so many people feel 'left behind'.

There will need to be a massive programme to increase benefit levels, including Universal Credit, to ensure that there are dramatic moves towards great social equality.

Naturally, our economic policies are controversial at the best of times and it will not be easy to put together a joint approach across opposition political parties.

Issues of public ownership must be resolved – for example, cohering around the need to bring the big six energy companies into public ownership as well as the water companies. It will also be necessary to

***“Party loyalty is not top priority – rather the need to arrive at a new way of working across previous boundaries”***

unequivocally reject austerity policies when addressing economic issues and build a new consensus around creating a green, sustainable economy for the future.

Finally, I will revert to the arguments around why different political parties must begin to operate on a different basis – not necessarily holding on to all their old shibboleths about the purity

of their individual objectives at all costs. Party loyalty is not top priority – rather the need to arrive at a new way of working across previous boundaries. As an individual I have my own values and objectives and I am prepared to support and work for any party which reflects the same objectives.

So, why do we need cross party agreements at all? First, Labour has no chance of achieving a House of Commons majority on its own. The mountain is too high to climb. Therefore, anyone half sensible in Labour must see the need for co-operation. The Lib Dems have endured disasters in both 2015 and 2019. Even with a fair wind, which is not apparent at the moment, they will be lucky to increase their number of parliamentary representatives to around 25. The Greens are too small and like the Lib Dems, need electoral reform to be able to acquire a fair number of MPs.

We will, therefore, need some form of electoral arrangement to be able to introduce proportional representation as part of a number of constitutional reforms.

And, for those who argue against party co-operation or coalitions in principle, one of the clear results of electoral reform will be produce new ways of working including coalitions when desirable. Get used to it!

---

Simon Hebditch is a long-standing member of the Lib Dems. He has worked in the civil society with Age UK, MIND and NCVO and has served on the management committee of Compass

**Remember Liberator is now free online for anyone to read so please pass on the link [www.liberatormagazine.org.uk](http://www.liberatormagazine.org.uk) to liberal friends, enemies, associates and anyone else who might be interested.**

**Our archive back to 2001 is also available free on the website:**

**<http://www.liberatormagazine.org.uk>**

# MARCHING AWAY FROM THE SOUND OF GUNFIRE

The drift of the Liberal Democrats risks becoming terminal unless radical action is taken, to fight for people's freedoms, writes Gareth Epps

Since the disastrous 2019 general election instead of resurging the Liberal Democrat voice has diminished. The country is in the grip of both a pandemic and the most malign Government in living memory, marching in lockstep with the deranged lame duck about to exit the White House; a government responsible for tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths, presiding over the worst performing economy in the G7, and hell-bent on impoverishing its citizens on a scale unprecedented in modern times. Yet the opposition is silent.

The party's challenges are obvious. The cyclical process of rebuilding on scant resources is familiar to many of us. Even with a fully functioning and cohesive set of parliamentary parties, the national media will continue to react to regular parliamentary activity with sublime indifference.

However, even the pandemic has seen precious little sign of campaigning. Only Layla Moran, Daisy Cooper and Tim Farron have any sort of presence directly campaigning on what might be seen as a Liberal platform. They have spoken up clearly for those working in education and small business. Where are the rest?

The electoral cycle ensures attention on former redoubts in Scotland and Wales; both are challenging. The Scottish party's chosen positioning in a Unionist cul-de-sac only just saw them retain recognised group status in 2016. The party's position in Wales is even worse and Kirsty Williams retirement as the sole send member has been followed by the party's leader failing to win her parliamentary selection. Retaining any presence will be a triumph.

## LONG-NEGLECTED

An extensive set of local election campaigns will serve to bring the party together but depletes the time for strategic thinking. What it does do is provide scope to reassure a long-neglected local government machine.

Last year's leadership campaign showed itself to be singularly uninspiring. With the candidates in a peculiar mutual non-aggression pact, both with serious known issues with the potential to derail a general election campaign, debate has focused on trivia. Unlike any of the previous four elections, there were substantive differences of opinion on both policy and strategy; these, too, were swept under the carpet. So if you wanted to ask about relations with Labour, attitudes to austerity or the party's position on pub protection, you could take a hike. Nick Barlow has written persuasively that the party fails to confront internal debate in a manner that is almost a phobia:

a hangover from merger, perhaps? Besides a few 'culture war' issues of little interest to the wider public, there are few debates being waged within the party to any great effect.

Those 'culture war' issues are not the tune to which Liberals will march forwards; they are attacks by the extreme right on the status quo. Like defending the few and diminishing successes of the Coalition era, they do not present Liberals in the best light; it makes the party seem backward-looking and defensive.

However, by failing to mount mass, multi-level attacks on the most damaging Tory initiatives that affect people's lives and particularly the most vulnerable, it appears that the party leadership is doing a reverse Grimond; marching away from the sound of gunfire as fast as possible. Sir Edward? Meet brave Sir Robin.

A symptom of this is the feeble listening exercise that started with the new leader berating the members who had just voted him in; continued with a drizzle of uninspired photo-opportunities, then ground completely to a halt.

It is unclear whether this exercise is finished; no conclusions have been aired. It has served no purpose, and convinced nobody. A similar grey drizzle appears in the form of a small and steady stream of press releases, generally reactive, never really setting an agenda, destined for permanent irrelevance.

The looming presence of the UK's dysfunctional relationship with the European Union and the rest of the world was brought into sharp focus over Christmas, as the world beyond Dover closed its doors to Britain. With the considerable political space for a pro-EU party in England vacated by Labour, the leadership shown by the party in 2019 has disappeared, replaced with Davey denying the party's aim of rejoining the EU.

While the general election result was hardly a success, the party appears to have concluded that the considerable funds raised and the campaigning energies from being the party of restoring links to Europe are superfluous. Nothing to do with any will to attract Brexit voters – not that there is any chance of that happening anyway – but symptomatic, it seems, of general drift. It may even appear to be a 'dustbin strategy' to position the party, without any real sense of values or focus, as a repository for the disillusioned in an attempt to Hoover up local government votes; or to pick up target seats purely by dint of previous general Election second places in the hope of public outrage against Tory mendacity and corruption. An outcome that's harder to achieve when the party is invisible and polling 5% or less.

An added inconvenience is that the UK is no longer symmetrical in its governance. Scotland shows no sign of the SNP's dominance waning, in spite of scandal, internal division and over a decade in government. Privately, I am told, Davey boasts about being capable of destroying the SNP working with Scottish Labour; one glance at the state of Scottish Labour atomises any such notion.

He has already blundered in his declaration that the party will step back from advocating EU membership. This plays into the hands of the SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Greens who now have the political space to argue that they are the only vehicles to secure a European future. This further reduces the role of the Lib Dems as a tactical adjunct to the Tories in some pockets of the country under first-past-the-post elections, not to mention a recipient of relatively lavish funding. Not much use in the list elections that offer the only realistic path to the party's growth in Scotland – or to its survival in Wales.

The party has pulled together an approach to online training and some support, commendably enough; backstage efforts to streamline organisation are under way.

As the Trump era ends, Georgia's grassroots and community organisation should inspire all Liberals in both its motives and its outcomes. Inspiration, too, at a more local if more contentious level can be seen in parts of the climate activist movement.

While the antics of sections of Extinction Rebellion are seen by some as toxifying the whole movement, a huge number of people in all parties are now working on local initiatives as communities grapple with the climate emergency, filling the vacuum left by central Government.

It is peculiar that green liberal democrats (with capitalised initials or not!) are so quiet and ambivalent about this form of community activism; and that more is not made of the party demonstrating its principles of working to help people take and use power.

After all, there are many battles on this front that could be fought by communities that emulate notable successes of the modern era, and are of benefit universally, not just to the comfortable, middle-class the base that is the party's comfort blanket.

By far the biggest challenge, though, will be to develop a non-Brexit domestic narrative for a campaign. If a by-election occurred where the party stood a slim chance it is hard to determine how it would campaign, or on what.

The party possesses few ideas, none on issues of significance which would disrupt or challenge the status quo in ways that capture the hearts of a community. The policy process, still divorced from this, is unlikely to provide the answers for reasons space precludes me from going into. While a familiar-looking policy working group debates Liberal values in a manner that will not set the heather on fire, the big Liberal issues of the day go without the Liberal voice being articulated.

## UNHOLY ALLIANCE

Covid-19, for example, has meant acceptance by most people of temporary restrictions of their freedom to prevent harm to others. Barring a peculiar unholy alliance of anti-scientists and the libertarian Right, a broad consensus has held until this year.

There is nothing wrong with being evidence-based politicians who follow sound science., however, nobody has articulated a Liberal case as to the circumstances under which these freedoms can be restored and enhanced.

Those of us relatively recently returned to lockdown may still be aware from relatives and friends that places such as Tyneside, Leicester and Greater Manchester have been in almost continuous lockdowns. Friends in other countries are under curfew, genuinely fearful of the power of the state; the unfolding furor about policing individuals' exercise is a Liberal issue if ever there was one.

While Johnson lies and lies away, further dividing the public in his Trumpian way, there is a growing sense of genuine anger that the freedoms of individuals in parts of the Midlands and North dance to London's tune. Again, on this agenda, Liberal voices are silent. All the more curious in a party which in recent years has had vocal wings on both the laissez-faire libertarian wing and the radical, social liberal front.

The Julian Huppert-influenced Generous Society initiative was one optimistic manifestation of the recognition of the need for clear Liberal thought, and its application to the problems of 2021.

Identifying others is a challenge. The Social Liberal Forum, for example, appears to have entirely abandoned its original *raison d'être* of articulating a clear social liberal direction for the Liberal Democrats. It hasn't articulated, for example, what many see as the headline policy of a Universal Basic Income. On the one hand, it's refreshing that for once, the party has taken an in-principle decision rather than grinding itself into indecision via discussion of the practical challenges of implementation.

However, that has resulted in a slogan that risks meaning all things to all people, without broad parameters being set, advantages outlined and risks a detailed policy emerging in a typically timid way, even though literature exists such as Annie Miller's *A Basic Income Handbook*.

The party has for some time lacked an attractive headline 'retail' social policy headlines, brief enough to be explained by a soundbite and powerful enough to get the wider headlines that with narrower appeal, as 'Stop Brexit' or 'No War On Iraq' did. Worse, when liberal ideas are articulated by politicians in an eye-catching way, no longer do they seem to be articulated by Liberal Democrats.

These issues go beyond the current leadership, although a sense of strategy or direction would not go amiss.

It is as though a sense of paralysis has affected the entire party structure. While at local level, people dig in to win council seats, not only is there a continued hollowing out of ideas and values, but of leadership and structure. It would not take much of a stumble for the party representing Liberals to simply cease to exist. Marching backwards makes such a stumble only more likely.

---

Gareth Epps is a member of the Liberator Collective

# COVID'S INVISIBLE SCARS

## A pandemic-induced spiral in demand for mental health services has reached breaking point, says Claire Tyler

It was well known that mental health services were struggling and in need of extra resource – both money and people - before the pandemic began. It was also clear that there were major pre-existing health inequalities – for example the average age of death of people with learning disabilities who were black was a shocking 35 years old. In many ways, the pandemic has simply laid bare some of what has been known a long time.

There were early signs that Covid-19 was having a bad effect on the nation's mental health, since March last year.

In the early days of the pandemic the first forecast from the Centre for Mental Health (CMH) estimated at least 500,000 more people in UK could experience mental ill health as result of covid-19.

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS)'s wellbeing survey in late March 49.6% the population of Great Britain reported high levels of anxiety, compared to 21% the previous year – a large but perhaps not surprising increase.

### AFFECTED DISPROPORTIONATELY

The CMH was quick to point out that the mental health impact of Covid-19 was not being experienced equally: people with existing mental health difficulties were being affected disproportionately. In addition, people facing violence and abuse, and some from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities, faced especially high risk to their mental health.

Move forward a few weeks, and according to the mental health charity Mind people with existing mental health problems were often struggling more than others with the lockdown and nearly three-quarters of those with an eating disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder or a personality disorder said their mental health got worse between April and May 2020.

A survey conducted between April and May 2020 by Rethink Mental Illness showed that 79% of people with pre-existing mental illnesses reported that their mental health had got worse or much worse as a result of the pandemic, with 42% saying their mental health was worse because they were getting less support from mental health services.

By June multiple reports from the ONS, Institute for Fiscal Studies, MIND and others were showing that the effects of the pandemic and lockdown were greater for women, for young people, those living with disabilities, frontline workers and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. And the CMH highlighted that concern was also growing for frontline health and care staff and those who have received intensive hospital treatment for the virus.

The ONS found that almost 20% of adults

experienced depressive symptoms in June 2020, approximately twice the number before the pandemic.

Against this backdrop, clinicians became increasingly worried about the drop off in appointments. Appearing before the Commons Health and Social Care Committee in May, Claire Murdoch, national mental health director of NHS England, reported a reduction in referrals of children and adolescents to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) - a service with a history of very long waiting lists and high threshold referral levels - of 30-40% and warned of a likely increase in anxiety, worry and depression.

According to a Royal College of Psychiatrists survey in May, members working with older adults saw the biggest decrease in regular appointments, due to worry about the impact of shielding and self-isolation, anxiety about virus and the difficulty some older people find in using technology to video-call a doctor.

At this point the Royal College of Psychiatrists was pointing to the worrying implications of lockdown for those already detained in hospital under the Mental Health Act, who are likely to have experienced even greater restrictions on their freedom, including the suspension of visits from family and friends. Alarming the Care Quality Commission reported that 54 patients subject to the Mental Health Act died due to suspected coronavirus in the period April – May 2020.

The nature of the mental health services available was changing significantly too. According to the British Medical Journal (6/6/20): "The biggest change for mental health services was the rapid adoption of video and phone consultations – an approach that has rarely been used in a field where relationships and trust between clinicians and patients are vital, and where body language and eye contact are a key part of assessment." Mind warned that not everyone would have access to the technology or right skills to enable them to receive support via digital channels.

By early June NHS Providers was arguing that policy makers must take account of the pressure mental health services would continue to face, given the predicted - and soon to be realised - surge in demand for mental health care as lockdown started to ease from July onwards.

They pointed to the unprecedented challenge of managing day-to-day demand, which was already outstripping supply due to historic underfunding of the sector, alongside the surge in demand as a result of direct and indirect impacts of Covid-19 including unemployment, housing issues and social isolation.

For some people things eased up over the July to September period as the restrictions were lifted and life felt more normal again. But the respite didn't last long. By autumn there was no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic had greatly increased the number of people dealing with mental health issues.

By October 2020 the CMH estimated ten million

extra people with mental health needs due to the pandemic – a quite staggering figure with huge implications for funding and workforce levels - the majority thought to be driven by increased depression and anxiety.

On rates of self harm and suicide during the pandemic, the jury is still out. Major academic studies have so far found no clear evidence of a rise in self harm and suicide although data is sparse. Given the strong links between unemployment, economic deprivation, and suicide, it remains likely that the impact of economic downturn could take some time to play out.

What was the Government's response to all these reports? It is probably best characterised as too little, too late, without a real sense of urgency. In November the Government announced an additional £500m in the Mental Health Winter Plan to help with discharges to community care, workforce issues and waiting times. This seemed a good start but doesn't come on stream until 20-21 leaving a gaping hole over the tough winter period. And there remains no commitment to sustained funding after that.

To plan an effective mental health response, it's important to understand the different ways in which the pandemic is generating demand for mental health services. The NHS Confederation have identified described three key drivers of increased demand underlining the scale of need:

Covid-19-suppressed demand: people who would have been referred into mental health services earlier this year, but weren't due to the pandemic;

- ☛ Covid-19-exacerbated demand: people with existing mental health problems which have been exacerbated by the pandemic;
- ☛ Covid-19-driven demand: additional demand for mental health services as a result of the pandemic and the lockdown, such as worry about the virus or death, bereavements, lockdown, loneliness, lack of stimulation, job losses.
- ☛ Good practice on the ground, which seem to be working, includes focusing on social determinants of health, including supporting employment, education, housing, community resilience and social connectedness; enhancing social care support; supporting access to mental health services; signposting and help with navigating the system; support for digital appointments; and supporting carers. Crucially attention also needs to be paid to protecting and supporting the mental health needs of frontline health and social care workers stretched to capacity and beyond, with many suffering from severe fatigue and burn out.

These innovations are a tribute to dedicated and compassionate mental health staff trying their level best, but essentially sticking plaster for a grossly underfunded and neglected system creaking at the seams, now more than ever. What is badly needed is sustained increased funding, investment in the workforce and political will so that mental health stays high up on the NHS and political agenda and doesn't get put back in the box again.

The Government in mid-January published its long awaited Mental Health White Paper. This wasn't looking primarily at the impact of the pandemic on the nation's mental health, but a very long

overdue response to the Wessely Review of the 1983 Mental Health Act. The review was set up to look at rising rates of detention under the Act and the disproportionate and discriminatory application of the Act on the BAME community.

It set out a swathe of recommendations to deliver a modern mental health service that respects patient's voice and empowers individuals to shape their own treatment and care. It contains important measures to strengthen people's rights including more advocacy and support from family and friends, tighter criteria for detention, and greater focus both on therapeutic benefit and ensuring the Act's powers are used in the least restrictive way.

## DEEPLY DISAPPOINTING

Liberal Democrats have welcomed in principle the White Paper which sets out the Government's response. It contains proposed changes to the legislation but it's deeply disappointing that after a wait of over two years it only commits to bringing forward legislation in 2022, three years after the Wessely Review reported. Either the Government doesn't view this as a priority, or the political will just isn't there. The Government hasn't accepted some of the Review's recommendations and on areas that don't require legislation there is little progress. The Government recommits to expanding mental health services through the NHS Long Term Plan but there is little sense of urgency in responding to all the new needs generated by the pandemic.

The increased level of safeguards and a commitment to improving the quality of inpatient care in the proposed legislation will require a huge recruitment drive for mental health services.

Hard pushed mental health services urgently need further investment and a larger workforce to help people before they reach a crisis point. Recent workforce forecasts indicate only 71 additional consultant psychiatrists will be added to the mental health NHS workforce by 2023-24 against a requirement of 1,040 to deliver the NHS Long Term Plan if urgent action is not taken.

Many of the Review's recommendations will require additional substantial funding for mental health services that go beyond the money allocated in the Long Term Plan, including capital investment to improve inpatient services such as abolishing dormitory accommodation.

Most disappointing of all, the White Paper has little to say on preventative measures and boosting community mental health services. With new data showing that more people that ever being referred as an emergency to crisis care teams, much needed reforms to the Mental Health Act must come as part of wider investment in mental health, to prevent more people reaching crisis point in the first place.

Ultimately, we need clear commitments from Government to expand the mental health workforce, significantly increasing funding across the board, and put a greater focus on preventative measures by boosting community mental health services. Only this combination will respond adequately to the mental health emergency we face as a nation.

---

Claire Tyler is a Liberal Democrat peer and House of Lords spokesperson on mental health

# DECLINE AND FALL

## Every economic sector from farming to finance faces a downturn as the government's hopeless Brexit deal hits home, says Phil Bennion

Businesses around the country may have breathed a collective sigh of relief when the Brexit deal was agreed at the last minute, but this was due to exceedingly low expectations rather than the merits of the deal itself.

The main source of the relief was that the UK and EU could continue to trade without tariffs or quotas. However it was non-tariff barriers that drove Margaret Thatcher to recognise the need for a European Single Market during the 1980s and saw the UK as its main architect in its formative years up to and following the Single European Act of 1993.

The deal we now have is very thin indeed on the avoidance of non-tariff barriers as exporters are already starting to find out.

It is clearly good news for industry that tariffs will not apply, but the country of origin rules will create unwanted bureaucracy, and in some cases a tariff will apply due to third country components. Supporters of the Brexit deal will point out correctly that coping with the paperwork will get easier with time and experience, but for smaller companies it could be decisive in their withdrawing from the export market.

There is already evidence that this is the case. Under the Customs Union rules any EU tariffs on components would have been paid on entry into the UK, so the finished product could be traded into the rest of the EU free of tariffs and bureaucracy.

### DIFFICULT AND EXPENSIVE

With rules of origin now applying, manufacturers will need to know the precise origin of each product line they produce. Additionally products will need to prove compliance with EU regulations. This will not pose too much of a problem initially, but divergence of standards will inevitably make complying with two sets of standards more difficult and expensive in future.

Some products such as chemicals also need to be registered and hefty fees apply. Many chemicals have specific uses and volumes are too low to justify dual registration. If the UK market is the smaller, then companies may forego the UK market altogether. This could well create knock on effects of short run production migrating to the EU.

Withdrawal from the EU VAT system is already causing problems. It has emerged that VAT registration in an EU member state is required for

retail and online sales. Again, this is a bigger problem for smaller companies. Big companies are more likely to swallow the extra cost whereas small companies are likely to withdraw from exporting.

The agri-food sector would have had the worst outcome of all from no deal as tariffs are typically in the region of 50%. This of course would have snuffed out the trade entirely as such extra cost would be impossible to absorb. Initial relief at the deal has quickly turned as the sector is also subject to the strongest non-tariff barriers.

Phytosanitary and veterinary checks are mandatory

for most products as food safety has long been an EU priority. Without divergence the UK will easily meet the required standards, but the bureaucracy and delays still have to be faced. Attempts to export seafood have already hit problems and with much of the produce perishable supply chains need to work seamlessly. Conversely the import of fresh fruit and veg into the UK from the EU faces similar disruption.

Financial services are not covered by the deal at all and the loss of euro passporting means that around €6bn of daily trade has been lost from the City to EU centres.

It is likely that London will remain the premier trading centre in Europe due to incumbency and its sheer size. However the loss of trade at the edges still means thousands of well paid jobs moving to EU locations.

Future power over the relationship also lies with the EU as the judgement on equivalence of financial regulation lies unilaterally with the EU. It could be withdrawn at very short notice.

Some financial commentators have also pointed out that exchanges that already have equivalence status from the EU such as New York could become more attractive than London for a range of trades and that the trickle of trade away from London has an outside chance of turning into an avalanche.

The university and science sectors face uncertainty in attracting students, staff, researchers and project funding. The agreement does allow for the UK to participate in Horizon Europe but this does not necessarily mean that the UK will apply to become a full associate in the project. UK universities have attracted far more than their share of the fund in recent years, but a half-hearted approach by our government could undermine this success.





The decision not to take part in the Erasmus programme does not give a good signal. This sector is notable for exploiting its access to an international market in research talent, which will be held back by the loss of freedom of movement with the EU.

The arts and creative industries have already hit problems in arranging tours to EU venues as we have suddenly had to face third country rules. These include the limits to the number of stops that hauliers can make so that designated transport for the sets becomes impossible. Longer tours or individuals appearing in theatrical seasons come up against work permit problems. These are examples that have already come to the fore by mid-January. Others will follow.

Clearly the immediate economic impact of the deal will be negative, even if not quite as bad as a no deal scenario. Some of the problems will be ironed out but others will be intractable. Queues at the ports will be unlikely in the longer term as the cost to hauliers of standing lorries will reduce the traffic to meet the capacity. New ferry routes from Ireland directly to continental Europe have already sprung up.

Whether it be problems of logistics or bureaucracy, the bigger firms will find a way to keep on trading. Hence I doubt that the impact on the UK economy will be too abrupt. However I do not share the optimism of the Brexiters that an initial downturn will be followed by a journey into the sunlit uplands. During the referendum campaign of 2016 I pointed out at every appearance that the main danger to the UK economy if it were to leave the EU Single Market and Customs Union would be a squeeze on foreign direct investment. When I was a member of the European Parliament Employment Committee before the 2014 election I used to have regular meetings with the American Chamber of Commerce. I asked them what the impact of leaving would be in terms of US companies in the UK. The answer was clear. There are 16,000 US companies operating in the EU and most have their EU HQ in the UK. Would an American company seriously have its EU HQ in a country that is outside the single market? The question was rhetorical.

Thus far I have only dealt with the scenario we currently face. Any significant divergence or signing of third party trade deals that differ markedly from the EU's own agreements will complicate matters further. The agreement allows for tariffs to be introduced or goods to be barred if either the UK or EU drops standards.

## YEARS OF UNCERTAINTY

The biggest risk of this is the UK signing trade deals which allow for imports either at lower standards or lower tariffs than is current. We are therefore facing years of uncertainty and continued negotiation.

Hence my prediction for the UK economy is a moderate downturn on Brexit followed by stagnation as the incentives for global companies to invest in the UK disappear: attrition rather than rebirth.

For the electorate, this may not produce the obvious logical link between Brexit and economic decline that "rejoiners" might need for any subsequent campaign. It will be difficult, particularly with the government using every opportunity to confuse the effects of Brexit with those of the pandemic.

Could the situation be saved or improved by a different approach? Indeed it could, but I cannot

***"The loss of trade at the edges still means thousands of well paid jobs moving to EU locations"***

see this government with its obsession with sovereignty taking such a course.

Most of the economic advantages of EU membership could be retained even without full single market membership. A Customs Union-plus arrangement including close alignment on product standards was, and probably still is, negotiable. The government's strong aversion to freedom of movement probably rules out single market membership, but most of the bureaucracy and non-tariff barriers could be averted with Customs Union-plus, retaining the high levels of foreign direct investment from around the world that we have enjoyed for two decades.

The best bet for the UK economy is for the electorate to remove this government at the first opportunity. A Lib-Lab government in 2024 could start by repairing some of the damage and re-aligning our standards with the EU, negotiating a Customs Union agreement at the first instance.

However this will not turn things around immediately. New supply chains will have been built and new trading relationships established. Trade lost will not be easy to win back. However it would be a start and who knows where it might end.

---

Phil Bennion is a farmer (pictured) and was Liberal Democrat MEP for the West Midlands 2012-14 and 2019-20

# AT LAST HE'S GONE

## Donald Trump has left the White House but bequeathed his successor appalling problems and political division, says Martha Elliott

When Benjamin Franklin left the Constitution Convention, someone shouted: "What have we got, a republic or a monarchy?" Franklin quipped, "A republic, if you can keep it."

On 6 January many Americans wondered if our republic was in danger - its threat fuelled by the inflammatory rhetoric of a president who wanted to be a monarch. For four years, many legislators and citizens allowed Trump to break the rules, to break the law, and even violate the US constitution. But when insurrectionists, trying to overturn the legitimate votes of the American people, stormed and desecrated the sacred spaces of Congress, the people of America had their own epiphany: Trump was a dangerous man who must go.

As Lindsey Graham, one of Trump's most ardent supporters, said later that night: "Count me out. Enough is enough." The question was and is: how do you put a fence around him and keep him from another incitement and from future holding of a federal office? How can he be ejected forever without further dividing our country?

### ATTEMPTED COUP

Trump's drum beat that ultimately led to insurrection and attempted coup began at 2:30 am on election night. He stood at the podium with the presidential seal and declared that he believed that he had won the election and that it was being stolen from him.

In what appeared to be a desperate clutching of power, he directed a team of lawyers to begin filing lawsuits that challenged the results of the vote in several states. All failed including two appeals to the US Supreme Court. In more than 60 law suits, Trump and his legal team made wild and baseless claims of widespread voter fraud, all rejected by state and federal courts.

Using his bully pulpit - Twitter - Trump constantly berated the governors and secretaries of states in the states he thought he won. He was especially critical of Republican officials in those states, calling them disloyal.

Just days before the certified electoral college were to be counted in a joint session of Congress, he called Georgia's secretary of state asking him to "find" 11,780 votes, one more than Biden had won the state. There is no doubt about this because the call was recorded.

In the weeks before the vote count, Trump began Tweeting that his supporters should come to Washington on 6 January 6, saying: "it will be wild." And thousands of 'patriots', as they called themselves, came from states across the country. They listened to Trump's ardent speech again making the false claim that he had won the election by a landslide. He told the crowd that they should march to the Capitol and take

back the country and reminded them that it couldn't be done with weakness. They needed to use force.

Trump said he would be walking with them, but instead he retreated into the White House and watched on television as the armed crowd stormed Congress. They were armed with guns, Molotov cocktails, shields, military gear, and even zip ties, presumably to take hostages. They used makeshift weapons to break through the windows and storm the building. They reached the floor of the House and the Senate as well as the offices of Congressional leaders. They threw blood and faeces on the statues. One man carried a Confederate flag into the Capital - something that didn't even happen during the Civil War. The only other time the nation's capitol had been breached and burned was by British forces during the war of 1812, but never by our own citizens.

While the riot threatened many senators and representatives, Trump was silent. Uncharacteristically, no Tweets. He didn't ask for calm; he didn't tell them to retreat. He didn't disavow them until it was clear that he was being blamed for the violence, and he would be held accountable. Then he said he loved them.

Five people, including two policemen, died as a result of the melee and many more were severely injured. It's been reported that some were overheard saying that they hoped to kill vice president Mike Pence and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Video shows the rioters scouring the halls looking for the two leaders. They escaped the House and Senate chambers just as the doors were being breached. A makeshift gallows was erected nearby.

Knowing that Trump was calling his supporters to oppose the results of the election, the mayor of Washington DC asked for the national guard to be sent in, but she had no power to order them in because only governors of states, the president, or some leaders in the military can make that order.

It's not clear why they were not called in. Some suspect that the request was blocked by the White House. During the violence, the chief of the Capitol police (unarmed officers whose job it is to protect the buildings and people in them) requested backup six times. It took more than an hour for the Metropolitan Police to respond. Only after several hours did Trump relent and call in the National Guard. Pelosi's and Pence's lives were within a minute or two of being captured.

In contrast, during the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, the national guard was out in full force and there is video of the peaceful protestors being sprayed with tear gas and even beaten. The rioters who tried to stop the vote were primarily white males.

It wasn't until much later that evening that the

Capitol building was totally cleared and checked and the joint session of Congress resumed the counting of the electoral votes. The members of Congress were not about to allow an insurrection to keep them from their constitutional duty. A little before 4 am, Pence declared Biden and Harris the winners of the election. It took hours to complete the count because senators Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley as well as dozens of Congresspeople continued to challenge the results the electoral votes in Pennsylvania. In the end 139 representatives and eight senators voted to object to at least one state's electoral college vote. Most senators stopped objecting after the attack on the Capitol, but Cruz and Hawley continued their objections.

It is difficult to understand how our representatives could continue to try to overturn the election after the Capitol was under siege and their lives were at danger - except some of them might have been complicit in the planning and execution of the riot.

It has been reported that representatives Louie Gohmert, Matt Gaetz, Lauren Boebart, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Andy Biggs, and Paul Gosar were recorded on camera giving 'tours' to people who stormed the Capitol the next day. Tours of the Capitol building were suspended because of Covid-19. If they helped the insurrectionists know how to break into the Capitol or show them how to find offices such as Pelosi's, they might be on the next list of government officials to face impeachment.

First in line is Trump, who lost his bully pulpit because Twitter and Facebook banned him for life. A week after the riot, the House voted to impeach him. It was the first bipartisan impeachment in American history. Ten Republicans joined the Democrats to impeach.

It may seem like a useless gesture because the earliest the Senate could begin their trial to convict him is after the inauguration. But if convicted, Trump could never serve in any federal office. Congress also has the power to deny Trump his lifelong salary and his \$1m annual travel and security funds. It will take all 50 Democrats and 17 of the 50 Republicans to achieve a conviction. Interestingly, even Republican leader Mitch McConnell has said he has not decided how he will vote. Trump has the distinction of being the only president to be impeached twice. He could be the first to be convicted.

So where does all of this leave Joe Biden? He's facing more crises than any other incoming president: the pandemic, the economy, violent protests, and a racial divide.

He's kept at arm's length from commenting on the trial that must be carried on in the Senate as soon as Pelosi delivers the House's vote on impeachment (like indictment). There is no doubt that Trump must be punished for his actions. Some would call them treason since he tried to encourage others to take up arms against the US in order to overturn a legitimate election. According to the Constitution, a conviction for "high crimes and misdemeanors", the definition of

***"It is difficult to understand how our representatives could continue to try to overturn the election after the Capitol was under siege and their lives were at danger"***

impeachable offences, cannot be pardoned.

On the eve of leaving office, Trump issued 73 pardons and 70 commutations, including many to the people who worked with him on the 2016 campaign or in the White House, including one to Steve Bannon who was his chief strategist but was convicted of defrauding \$25m in a bogus scheme to get people to "build the wall."

Biden was quick to make clear the impeachment trial would not overshadow his goals. He's asked

that the Congress work on important business in the mornings and hold the trial in the afternoon. The day after the impeachment, he announced a massive \$1.9tn Covid relief bill that includes \$1,400 for every American, funds for states and cities to deal with the pandemic, an aggressive plan to increase vaccinations, suspension of payments of student loans, and help for renters and homeowners who could face evictions or foreclosures.

## **BIGGEST RELIEF**

It's the biggest relief bill ever proposed, but he collected some of the provisions from recommendations of state and local officials, Republican and Democrats. The night before the inauguration, Biden and Harris led a memorial for the 400,000 Americans who have died because of Covid, an acknowledgement of the human loss caused by the virus.

He will announce a new immigration bill that will reopen our borders for those seeking asylum and create an eight-year path to citizenship for those 11m immigrants who are undocumented. He's expected to ask Congress to raise the minimum wage from \$7.50 to \$15. Some of his first actions were to issue executive orders reversing Trump's policies, including rejoining the Paris Climate Accord, reuniting the families who were separated at the southern border, reinforce protection for 'dreamers' - undocumented people brought here as children - and reversing the so-called Muslim ban. He is ordering mandatory masking on all federal lands. And issued an order advancing racial equity across the federal government.

I took 27 high school students to the inauguration in 2009. It was a very different inauguration and very different time. Almost two million people filled the National Mall to witness Obama's swearing in and there were no arrests.

Now Washington is an armed camp with 25,000 national guards stationed around the city. The Mall is filled with 250,000 American flags and 56 lights. Conspicuously absent was Donald Trump, the first president to boycott the inauguration in 150 years. But as he was leaving Washington, he said: "We will be back." In his inaugural address, Biden said: "Today, we celebrate not of a candidate, but the will of the people....As of this hour, democracy has prevailed."

---

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

# KOWTOWING, APPEASEMENT AND OTHER DELUSIONS

## Rebecca Tinsley is left “faintly nauseous” by Vince Cable’s book on closer engagement with China

During the coalition government of 2010-15, Sir Vince Cable was deeply engaged in what he calls the golden age of the UK’s relationship with the People’s Republic of China.

Now, the former Liberal Democrat leader and Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Trade is urging Britain not to join the ‘posse’ of Trumpian cold warriors freezing out China.

China is the world’s largest economy, and we must acknowledge that it will not be a liberal democracy, says Cable. To benefit from the enormous business opportunities, he writes, we must be aware of and manage the security threats entailed in giving Chinese big data and tech firms access to our economy and institutions.

But we should not be paranoid about China’s increasingly belligerent foreign policy, he argues, since the risks of expansionism are overstated. When dissected, these assertions are found wanting.

### RACIST NOTION

Cable rightly dismisses the racist notion, popular in the USA, that the Chinese lack creativity or entrepreneurship, and he lauds the lifting of 850 million citizens out of extreme poverty since Deng’s reforms began.

World-beating progress in infrastructure, high speed rail, robotics, research and development, strategic industrial policy, online shopping and mobile payments are noted, as are President Xi’s attempts to rectify lax financial regulation and property rights, intellectual property theft and corruption.

But Cable warns that the consolidation of the Communist Party’s centralised power under Xi leads to “more obsequiousness and a reluctance by subordinates to make difficult decisions, to make even constructive criticisms or to pass bad news up the chain (as with the Wuhan pandemic)”.

Corruption persists, he concedes, as does intellectual property theft, although the World Bank says it is easier doing business in China than in its competitors, Mexico, Brazil, India or Vietnam.

Cable urges the UK to follow Angela Merkel’s nuanced approach to China, rather than joining American-led alliances pressuring Beijing. The German Chancellor has visited China 12 times, and Germany exports \$1.5tn worth of goods to China annually, only slightly less than the USA does. So it is odd that Sir Vince suggests that until Brexit, the UK was positioned to be China’s doorway into Europe, when Berlin is the more obvious candidate. This is as delusional as the nonsense about London having a

special relationship with Washington (which no one in the US knows about).

Cable’s illuminating analysis of China’s economic strength makes difficult reading for Americans in particular, many of whom are in denial about their dwindling hegemony.

Written before the Biden-Harris victory, Cable’s arguments assume a continuation of Trumpian fear-mongering, echoed by a growing number of Conservative MPs in the UK. He may be right that the isolationist genie is out of the American bottle, whatever the Biden-Harris administration may wish.

For the purposes of this article, I contacted several people doing business in China, testing Cable’s arguments. Of the ‘golden age’, a Chinese-born UK resident said he was embarrassed by how the British kowtowed to the Chinese Communist Party.

“They have no sense of history,” he commented, “so they don’t understand how deeply China’s elite still hate the British, following the humiliation of the 19th century. This kowtowing will add to their contempt. They will see it as weakness.”

Cable styles himself as a lone realist amid the west’s human rights agitators. Stable and authoritarian government “appears to work for China.” But how does he know this, given that he admits there is no freedom of expression, faith or assembly, 200 million surveillance cameras and that Beijing has an ever-tightening grip on society?

There are hundreds of demonstrations each day across China (one of which was witnessed by your reporter on her first of three trips there), in which citizens protest about pollution, food safety, the bulldozing of neighbourhoods to make way for commercial developments benefiting the ruling elite and eye-watering corruption.

If the Chinese system is working so well, then why do so many Chinese emigrate? (In 2018, China overtook Mexico sending the largest number of legal migrants to the USA). Why do wealthy Chinese send their money and children to Vancouver? Does anyone, apart from North Koreans, move to China?

I know from traveling with a UK politician in Africa that VIPs see a different side to a country than the ordinary but curious visitor, or someone working there (as I do).

Is Cable aware of the scale of repression of Uighurs, Tibetans, Christians and other minorities and dissidents, including forced organ harvesting (China markets ‘halal organs’ to Gulf Arabs) and slave labour in 135 detention camps?

Does the disregard for Hong Kong (pictured)’s Basic



Law and the imposition of the new National Security Law engender confidence in China's promises to abide by international trade norms, to become more commercially transparent or to improve property rights? What message does it send to Taiwan?

In Active Measures writer Edward Lucas says of the recent China-EU trade agreement: "The deal protects European investors against discriminatory subsidies and intellectual property theft. But past experience suggests that these promises are unenforceable - just like China's supposed concessions on labour rights and political freedoms. In short, the EU looks simultaneously careless, cynical, greedy and gullible. The deal snubs the incoming Biden administration, kowtows to Beijing, and exemplifies how German mercantilism and French vanity trump any attempts at strategic thinking in Brussels."

Cable notes that the RAND corporation reckons China and the USA have equal military strength in only one crucial theatre: Taiwan. But it's a long way from the UK, he implies, and we shouldn't fear a Pearl Harbour scenario. Cable's tone throughout is similarly morally equivalent: we do business with equally awful or worse countries; China isn't alone in crushing minorities seeking self-determination.

The chief of the UK defence staff disagrees. General Sir Nick Carter says: "Covert warfare by Russia and China, including cyber-hacking and disinformation, risks an uncontrollable state of all-out war."

## **BULLYING AND BRIBERY**

Surely Beijing's bullying and bribery of UN members in order to mute criticism of the Uighur concentration camps indicates that its belligerent diplomacy is not merely rhetoric, but has consequences.

Expansionism is about more than occupying another country's territory: it is about undermining its nascent and struggling institutions, in favour of authoritarianism, cronyism, tribalism and corruption.

Cable mistakenly assumes Chinese loans are aid, but in fact these loans are on prejudicial terms to developing-nation leaders, many of whom care nothing about the consequences for their wretched citizens.

He underestimates the negative impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on some emerging economies whose leaders lack the will or skill to negotiate a better deal for their people.

Moreover, Beijing's example has a disastrous impact on nascent democracies: China's authoritarian model appeals to corrupt leaders who wish to abolish term limits, skim off contracts awarded to Chinese firms for projects of dubious benefit, and avoid environmental impact assessments. Decades of work promoting institutional accountability, transparency, and the empowerment of citizens is being lost because of China's influence.

An American (requesting anonymity) who will shortly join the Biden-Harris administration promises that the National Security Council, eviscerated under Trump, will take China's rampant cyber warfare and human rights abuses more seriously.

Biden aims to build international partnerships to pressure Beijing, while acknowledging that America's reputation is in tatters. Foreign decision-makers fear a return to Trumpian populism in 2024, and that China is peeling off countries that should stand in solidarity with the USA on cyber threats, intellectual property theft and human rights.

My American contact also warns that every Chinese company will obey Beijing's orders to spy and



sabotage: “No one, not even the biggest private firm, is beyond the reach of Xi.” Even enormous wealth does not protect business people: Ren Zhi Qiang was disappeared for months, and at the time of writing Jack Ma (Alibaba and Ant Group) has vanished.

Describing a dark period ahead, my Washington DC friend says: “China excels at artificial intelligence and data because they are central to watching every Chinese citizen, arresting or silencing them before they criticise Communist Party hegemony.”

The global business community is unconcerned, he claims, because they simply want to make money. Biden will reverse Trump’s green light to Beijing on the Uighurs, but while no Muslim-majority nation condemns China, America will probably stand alone.

Cable urges us to work with China to tackle climate disruption, pandemics and global economic challenges. But perhaps we should also recall the advice of former US Defence Secretary in the Obama administration, Leon Panetta: “Never, ever, ever trust the Chinese.”

Cable’s strongest point is warning that shutting China out of key networks will only encourage it to develop alternative systems that appeal to other undemocratic countries. It will also hasten its self-sufficiency in semi-conductors and batteries. He wants us to work through the WTO to persuade Beijing to act on its trade barriers, subsidies and theft of intellectual property. Our leverage, he says, is allowing China access to market economy status, and persuading Beijing to make its currency fully convertible.

Yet, Lucas suggests it would be more effective if Biden were to form ad hoc informal alliances of democratic countries and tech giants to work in harmony, pressuring Beijing.

An American with factories in China for the last 30 years advocates a more Confucian approach: “Face, respect and dignity matter. That doesn’t have to mean kowtowing. Let China be at the forefront of discussions about a global vision of living peacefully and sustainably, focusing on equality. Let access to education and health be part of the human rights agenda. And instead of sanctioning China as a whole, impose targeted smart sanctions on individuals implicated in human rights abuses.”

The American businessman says we need to find ways to reach the Chinese people using the BBC and online, asking them to be a leading part of a dialogue about how we shape the future of the planet. “Part of ‘face’ is providing more than one path toward goals. But we also cannot lecture them from a position of hypocrisy regarding Saudi Arabia and other repressive regimes.”

I read Sir Vince’s book on the day that 53 Hong Kong pro-democracy leaders were rounded up, and Trump’s followers launched an attempted a coup at the Capitol. Cable’s conclusions and tone left me feeling faintly nauseous.

---

Rebecca Tinsley is founder of the human rights group Waging Peace.  
China: Engage! Avoid the new cold war. By Vince Cable. Bite Size Books 2020

# FIND A NEW BEVERIDGE

## Thought is needed on how UBI can avoid pension problems, says William Tranby

Last September the party committed itself to introducing a universal basic income (UBI). The motion was light on specifics but committed the Federal Policy Committee (FPC) to do the heavy lifting.

I have long supported UBI, and I'm concerned about the need to dovetail it with the new state pension.

One of the continuing successes of the Coalition Government was the major reform of pension policy led doggedly by Steve Webb. One result was the new state pension, now being rolled out in eligible age groups like mine. Eligibility was changed to 35 years of National Insurance (NI) contributions and Webb made sure that women who had interrupted employment because of child-rearing did not miss out.

The new state pension is £175.20 per week or £9,141.69 a year. This is due for an upgrade under the triple lock from next April. Assuming 2.5% is applied then the figures become £179.58 and £9,338.16 respectively.

Our new policy needs to determine what happens to recipients of UBI when they reach state pension age. The 'old age pension' was in effect the first UBI when it was introduced by a Liberal Government in 1908, originally paid out to people over 70.

Eligibility for the state pension was age-related back in 1908, but contributions to NI became the norm after the implementation of the Beveridge Report by the post-war Labour Government.

FPC must work out the eligibility criteria for UBI. As it is universal this should be relatively easy. All adults above a certain age perhaps?

We should not underestimate the challenges from those who will resist extending eligibility from UK citizens to those who may have settled status, and who have contributed to the economy. NI contributions could be a simple criterion to allow all non-UK citizens to receive UBI. This proved an effective mechanism to provide evidence for EU citizens to get settled status, so why not use the same method?

The eligibility for the new state pension relies on NI contributions but if implementing UBI interrupts the way that NI operates for low income workers, it is possible that they will miss out on qualifying for the state pension.

Some Conservatives have argued for raising the income level required before NI contributions are made. It is a typical Tory trick to reduce a worker's tax contribution to improve their income rather than increase the minimum wage. It is a real con because this could easily penalise low income or part-time workers who would miss out on building their contributions towards qualifying for the state pension.

We must decide how UBI changes eligibility for other support through Universal Credit (UC), and how it impacts on triggering NI and income tax.

That is why UBI should be evaluated in relation to

other benefits and the state pension to minimise the number of potential losers.

Introducing UBI will create a minefield of winners and losers unless the whole tax and benefit system is taken into account. Without properly evaluating the transition from UBI to the state pension - and the tax rules that might impact on any additional private provision - the party could create difficulties for itself when policy is scrutinised.

All advocates of UBI sensibly suggest starting with pilot schemes. An ideal pilot could be chosen now as the country tries to crawl out of the pandemic-related recession.

The tool used by Government to stimulate the economy was quantitative easing, but this only has an indirect effect on household incomes. It supports the balance sheets of banks and big business but does not increase the incomes of low-paid workers.

A better stimulus would be direct payments to households eligible for UC, introducing UBI payments of, say, £1,000 a month for three months in the poorest neighbourhoods with clear advice to recipients to consider clearing debts first.

One of the unexpected outcomes of the Covid lockdowns has been the increase in saving by middle class households, largely because they had no way of using their discretionary spending.

But those on the lowest incomes who were furloughed to receive 80% of their income (without a top up from their employer) were made poorer and more indebted.

Those who live hand-to-mouth spend all their available cash on essentials, and if given a UBI tax-free top up would spend it on immediate consumption, immediately improving the cashflow of local businesses. This is the one (and only) thing we should learn from the US. The extra stimulus packages driven through Congress with bilateral support has put cash in the pockets of the poorest households. This has a more immediate impact on the economy than QE will ever do.

In the long term the party has a lot of work to pitch UBI at a level which would mean reliance on UC reduces. We need to work out the right eligibility criteria for UBI and how it will dovetail with the new state pension.

Do we have a present day William Beveridge in our ranks to lead this major task?

---

William Tranby is a member of the Liberator Collective

# IT'S BIG, IT'S NEW AND IT MIGHT EVEN BE POPULAR

Universal Basic Income could be the 'big idea' that reconnects Lib Dems with alienated voters since there will be many winners and few losers, says Alan Sherwell

I read Paul Hindley's article on universal basic income (UBI) in *Liberator* 404 with great interest.

He writes from a Social Liberal perspective and there is nothing wrong with that (and I agree with nearly everything he said) but there is a much wider perspective that supports the policy and helps tackle the obstacles to gaining acceptance that need to be countered firmly and robustly.

The principle objections that we will face are that it is socialist and very expensive. In reality, it is neither. Certainly there are socialists that support it and organised campaigns for it within the Labour Party but what is less well known is that it also has supporters in the Chicago School of economists.

Now I concede that saying that something was favoured by Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek is not an immediately attractive argument for Liberals but it is certainly a counter to those who see it as socialist!

It is worth considering why some Chicago School economists support UBI. It is for a very liberal reason – reducing the power and influence of the state. Liberals believe that using state power is the last resort. We are happy to use that power when it is necessary but only when it is. In the UK, we have a pervasive benefits system that makes too many people reliant on the state for food, shelter and clothing for themselves and their families.

They often have to jump through demeaning and quite arbitrary hoops to get those benefits.

Admittedly UBI still comes from the state but if it is at the right level a whole swathe of benefits can be removed; Universal Credit (UC) - and the dreadful delay before it is paid) - for starters.

## ABOLISHING BENEFITS

Abolishing benefits that you have to claim also improves the personal dignity and self-worth of many of the recipients and buys back some of UBI's cost by saving both those benefits and the bureaucracy necessary to deliver them. The recent debate on free school meals is another example. Being unable to provide good food for your children hurts people's personal pride as well as the children's health. How much better that they have the money to pay for that school lunch and the school doesn't have to invest time and money in dealing with administering the scheme.

For this to happen, as Paul says, the benefit has to be at a decent level. Setting it at, say, £20 per adult per week would be a significant cost to the exchequer because, at that level, it would not be possible to recoup much of the cost without killing any benefit from issuing the payment.

Another objection is that it gives money to the rich as well as the poor but Paul is right here too - that is easily overcome.

By way of illustration, the current tax system will recoup 40% of the cost for the main high band of tax payers with no change. If you drop the starting point for that band by the amount of UBI that they receive, that recoups another 40%. Actually it is even better than that because of National Insurance payments. So you are nearly there without doing anything substantive at all.

For Liberals raising people out of poverty is an important moral purpose that should guide policy but there is a wider economic value to it as well, which is particularly important as our economy struggles to recover from Brexit and Covid.

Simply put, poor people who receive extra money spend it, which stimulates the economy. Rich people may spend some of it locally but much of it will be saved or spent on things that do not necessarily stimulate much – like holidays abroad and imported luxury goods

Another attack is that it will reduce the incentive to work and, if people get a basic income without working, then some will not work. Inevitably that will be true of a few but every scheme and system has people who abuse it – including the current benefits system.

The trials that have taken place in Finland and elsewhere are really important on this. They have shown that, even in receipt of basic income, people still want to work, although some of them do voluntary work rather than being paid but, to a Liberal, that is real work too.

The existence of security from UBI may well change wage structures over time. Currently, the pressure for most people is "I must get a job so I have some money" even if it is a shit job. Well, employers having to pay people more to persuade them to do 'shit jobs' isn't a bad thing in my view. And there is a counter balance. Employers who provide a decent environment in which people do jobs that they love may actually find it easier and cheaper to recruit staff. It would change the balance of how wages are determined.

Currently, all the power rests with the employer. As potential employees need work, the employer can keep wages at the lowest level that provides them with sufficient staff to do the job properly. The employee has virtually no say. UBI changes that balance by making it easier for the worker to refuse the job. Then employers can still hold wages at the lowest level that gets them the necessary labour force but with low paid jobs it will usually be at a higher level than it is now.



Wage determination becomes more balanced between worker and employer and that has to be a good thing too.

Being able to defeat the ‘anti’ arguments is necessary but it is not sufficient for UBI to be ‘the big idea’. For that to happen it needs to be positively popular with a significant number of people that we want to vote for us. To do that, we need to determine our target audience and see how it might be presented to appeal to them.

The starting point is identifying what has been happening electorally in this country over the last 50 years. I believe that there has been a clear trend which is not much commented on.

I was told by a colleague of a discussion she had with Nick Clegg shortly before the 2019 election. He argued that there was a significant demographic shift in voting patterns in the US with cities and, to a lesser extent, suburbs moving away from the right wing parties and small towns and rural areas moving the other way and that the same was starting to happen in the UK. In the US that trend escalated in the recent election. For instance Trump polled just 9% in Seattle (a city with a very low black population) but most rural areas swung towards him despite Biden’s significant vote improvement.

It is happening here too. In 2017 Labour made unexpected gains, which rather masked the effect but almost every ‘red wall’ seat outside Yorkshire swung to the Tories – in some cases massively. For instance, there was a 7.7% swing against Denis Skinner in Bolsover. It was a largely ignored warning of what would happen in 2019

Post 2019, all the talk was of Labour losing seats that it had held since 1935 without recognising that that means it held seats that it lost in the similar Tory landslides of 1959 and 1983.

Only four seats changed hands in London; all three parties came out with the same number as they started. In the other four biggest English cities – Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Bristol – the Tories had 20 seats in 1959, 10 in 1983 and just one now. So there is plenty of evidence that the demographic change that I mentioned is happening. We are behind the US in this trend but the fact is that the Republican party barely exists in large US cities and is disappearing in their inner suburbs – and so are the Tories here. Democrats are disappearing in the small towns and rural areas and so are Lib Dems and Labour here (though not as fast).

## VOTING BY CULTURE NOT CLASS

This can be summarised as a move from voting by class to voting according to culture. In the US Biden’s greatest gains were from affluent white people in the suburbs. In the UK our and Labour’s greatest gains were in similar territory – south-west London and the Home Counties in our case with our ‘red wall’ equivalent being the West Country and similar seats.

The rural and working class move to the right in the US has been exacerbated by a fall in turnout among the poorest in society. A graph of turnout

*“The principle objections that we will face are that it is socialist and very expensive. In reality, it is neither”*

against income that I have seen for November’s election shows 80%+ turnout from the top tenth of earners and little over 40% for the bottom tenth. Socially conservative lower income inhabitants of small towns and rural areas are either voting right or not voting at all. I haven’t seen a comparable graph for the UK but isn’t that precisely what happened in the fabled ‘red wall’?

So, we have a significant chunk of the electorate who are alienated from Labour and are voting Tory, although that is not in their economic interests, or are not voting at all.

We are not going to get these people on board by reflecting their conservative social values but UBI is a policy that, pushed properly as the ‘big idea’ and explained satisfactorily should be very attractive to them. It is new and easy to grasp. A way of tackling poverty which also benefits the people who are above but not far above the poverty line – there are no marginal tax rates issues with UBI – that is the real importance of the ‘U’ bit.

Most governments since the war have pledged to tackle poverty and, while life is undoubtedly better for the vast majority than it was in 1945, the traditional means of tackling poverty don’t seem to work or at least are not seen to do so by the poorest in our society. Saying that we will do more of the same but better will not work, as Starmer will find out.

We have a workable, liberal policy that is new, has no track record of failure, tackles the most important social ills and fits in with the way that voting patterns are changing by targeting those whose voting is in a state of flux.

Furthermore, there is no reason it should be unacceptable to our affluent, pro-EU supporters among whom we made real gains in 2019. It does them no harm and most of them have a social conscience or they wouldn’t have been willing to vote for us in the first place.

---

Alan Sherwell is a former chair of the Liberal Democrat Federal Conference Committee

# SMALL FURRY ANIMALS

When Ed Davey went to Scotland all he did was visit a zoo, and the party leadership refuses to bare its teeth and campaign vigorously on a federalist alternative to independence. Nigel Lindsay looks at how an opportunity might be thrown away in the Scottish Parliament elections

May 2021 will see elections for the Scottish Parliament, provided the pandemic does not cause a postponement.

There is potential for Lib Dems to gain new seats and reassert themselves as the fourth or even third party in the parliament, overtaking the Greens and maybe also the Conservatives.

Alternatively there is a risk that the party will tread water and emerge from the election with no more than its present five seats. Much will depend on whether an exciting campaign can be mounted addressing new issues, or whether a risk-averse leadership chooses to repeat the unsuccessful strategies of the past.

The party presently holds four constituency seats (Orkney, Shetland, North East Fife and Edinburgh Western) and one list seat (NE Scotland). This contrasts with 2003 when LibDems won 17 seats and were able to continue their successful governing coalition with Labour. How can that success be recovered?

One immediate concern is that Covid restrictions have made local face-to-face campaigning difficult, so the party is more dependent than usual on its national (that is, Scottish) poll ratings.

The likeliest constituency gain is Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, which was regained in the 2019 Westminster election and could be won in May by Molly Nolan. For further gains the party must look to the list seats, whose outcome is dependent on its poll ratings and a different sort of campaigning. With a strong and effective national campaign with local back-up, as many as six more seats could be won in this way. Assuming no losses, therefore, Lib Dems could hold as many as a dozen seats after May. What factors will determine the outcome?

## FOUR VARIABLES

The variables can usefully be grouped under four main headings – the question of a second independence referendum (indyref 2); other policy issues; the relative standing of the party leaders in Scotland; and how the campaign is run.

At the time of writing, controversy about indyref 2 seems likely to dominate the election. Support for Scottish independence has grown since the 2014 referendum and recent polls have suggested there is now a significant majority in favour of independence.

Pompous pronouncements from Conservatives that they will not allow Scots another chance to vote have of course only served to strengthen that majority. Pro-independence sentiment might well prove in firm if tested with questions about currency, border controls

and so on but will probably remain vigorous so long as the only question is whether to hold indyref 2 or not.

Scottish opinion has not been well served by the union. A majority of Scots have voted against the Conservatives in all general elections throughout the last 50 years but they have had Conservative governments and policies foisted upon them for 32 of those years, against their expressed will. Scots voted strongly in favour of remaining in the European Union, but they have been forced out of the EU, again contrary to their expressed will.

It is an irony not lost on Scots that Northern Ireland also voted to remain, and has been able to stay in the customs union while Scotland has not. All of these things quite reasonably encourage pro-independence thinking, support for indyref 2, and therefore for the SNP.

The Liberal Democrat response to all of this should of course be to offer a wise alternative to independence, that of reforming the UK on a federal basis. This has been party policy for many decades and could easily gain traction in serious debate.

Senior figures in other parties (Malcolm Rifkind, Gordon Brown, Andrew Adonis) are now talking about federalism, whether they use the F-word or not. Unfathomably, however, LibDem leaders have seemed reluctant so far to press home their own policy, preferring instead to echo Tory demands to block another referendum.

Not only has this proved ineffective in the polls, it threatens splitting the party, with almost 20% voting against the line at the recent Scottish LibDem autumn conference.

The tectonic plates of English politics and Scottish politics are moving rapidly apart. For some members in Scotland, independence is now seen as a way to work towards a more equal, liberal and properly democratic society, though probably in the earlier years a poorer society. They believe that independence is the only way for the Scottish Lib Dems to undergo a proper revival. Meanwhile the majority of members who don't favour independence would appreciate greater interest in and commitment to the idea of federalism from colleagues south of the border.

Less paranoia about the SNP, and more interest in developing a loose federal structure, would also allow Scottish Lib Dems to explore ideas about how Scotland could work more closely with the EU, perhaps staying in Erasmus, for instance, or seeking trade arrangements more like those which apply in Northern Ireland.

Management of the Covid virus has of course been the policy most under public scrutiny. The Scottish Government is widely viewed as having responded more effectively than the UK government and SNP ministers have usually acknowledged mistakes rather than blustering.

Lib Dem leader Willie Rennie has offered positive support for most of the actions of the Scottish Government in this regard, and has acted as a 'critical friend' on testing, vaccine distribution, and care homes. His stance has been generally well-received but may not have gathered the credit it deserves more widely.

On other issues, the party has painstakingly built policy appeals around mental health and inadequate provision of mental health services in Scotland. Good work has also been done on support for further education students and colleges. There may be recognition for these strengths in niche areas but they are not on their own enough to build mass support.

And so to the issue of leadership. Nicola Sturgeon has a high profile and high approval ratings. The attempts of other parties and even some in her own to undermine her from time to time have, at the time of writing, entirely failed. She is seen as calm, grown-up and effective, and the contrast between first minister and prime minister is obvious to all.

It is often said that Sturgeon is a better communicator than Johnson but that is only half the story. She is also seen as being of better character than Johnson, and that consideration remains important in a nation whose Presbyterian heritage has not entirely vanished. Scotland is a small country and most people have now met Nicola or know someone who has. They tend to regard her as serious but likeable.

## POINTLESS STUNTS

Willie Rennie ranks well above the other opposition leaders in favourability ratings. His intelligence, hard work and serious approach deserve reward but don't always come across. This may stem from his weakness for pointless stunts in photo opportunities, but his interventions in Parliament are usually well-targeted and get good coverage.

He is a survivor, unlike the long list of those who have held the Labour leadership for a year or two each since the SNP gained power. The Labour Party in Scotland is now looking for its fifth leader since the 2014 referendum following Richard Leonard's resignation.

The Conservative leader, someone called Douglas Ross, seems to be propped up by Ruth Davidson whose own credibility is undermined by her imminent departure for the House of Lords. Neither of them



is well-equipped to withstand the anger of fishing communities, who were used as a pawn in Brexit negotiations with the EU but who now consider themselves betrayed by the final deal. Conservatives are currently thought likely to lose seats rather than gain them in May.

Against this background, how the Scotland-wide Lib Dem campaign is run will be crucial. To succeed, it needs to project a vision for Scotland based on a clear set of values, an image of what the party is about and an exciting array of new policy approaches.

As always, there will be opportunities and threats. To start with the negatives, the biggest threat is perhaps that the campaign will be run by the same people in the same way as before. Amazingly, there does not seem to be a clear recognition by party strategists that trailing all four other parties, with a poll rating consistently around 6%, is completely unacceptable.

The 'same old' approach is based on extreme caution, fear of upsetting former Conservative voters, and repetition of the anti-indyref mantra. If used, it can be expected to deliver a national vote of 6%, and a continuing nadir of Lib Dem seats in the Scottish Parliament. There are worrying signs that this approach is still in favour. When Ed Davey visited Scotland after becoming UK leader, he eschewed visionary politics in favour of a photo-opportunity with small animals at a private zoo in Fife. It is hard to see how anyone expected this to increase interest in him or the party among Scots voters.

A better approach would be to look forward to how Scotland can be rebuilt in a Liberal way after the pandemic.

Recent months have brought increases in inequality, and have helped mega-companies profit at the expense of small businesses. Amazon and Tesco have increased their dominance at the expense of corner shops and small booksellers. Wealth has been shown to be the best protection against Covid. A group of Scottish Lib Dems (of which I was one) prepared proposals

last summer for constructing a more equal and widely prosperous society after the pandemic, and brought together names of Liberal-minded academics and others who could advise further.

These proposals were presented to the leadership but, sadly, not taken up by them. The new agenda for radical change which could have resulted has therefore not yet been devised.

Party strategists repeatedly ignore the obvious truth that LibDems did well in Scottish Parliament elections when they were seen as a radical grouping, willing to work with Labour in the achievement of a joint agenda.

## CONSERVATIVE-LITE

In such circumstances, they won 16 or 17 seats out of 129 in each of the elections in 1999, 2003 and 2007. They fared much worse when posing as 'Conservative-lite', winning only five seats in the post-coalition elections of 2011 and 2016.

If the main issue in the election is to be another indyref, there is a way for Lib Dems to grasp the nettle and simultaneously promote their own policy. This would be to offer support for a referendum, on two conditions.

First, that it is not presented as a false binary between unionism and independence but includes the third option of Scotland being part of a federal UK and second, that the vote is held using STV/AV. This would enliven the national debate, and would provide a platform to promote an attractive Lib Dem alternative to what has become a sterile and repetitive argument.

The national campaign can be enhanced by work on the ground, if restrictions have been lifted and the vaccine programme is well underway when the electioneering starts in earnest.

A textbook example of how to do this was provided by Liz Barrett (pictured)'s success in winning a Perth council seat from the SNP in December 2020. Liz's campaign motivated a team of workers to turn out several times a week over many months, leafleting, conducting surveys, following up local issues and engaging voters in socially-distanced conversations. Her hard work paid off and provided an unexpected shock for the SNP.

Equally intense work needs to be done in places where Lib Dem strength has faded. This will be especially important in the Borders and in North-East Scotland, areas where the party used to be able to rely on many votes but now will only gather them if visible and effective campaigning takes place. Good candidates are in place in both areas, and the party's strength needs to be rebuilt here by early work and efficient election organisation, if seats are to be regained from Conservative incumbents.

Part of this needs to be a vigorous campaign for list votes. Last time, the Greens concentrated almost entirely on list votes, and ignored constituency seats.

***“Amazingly, there does not seem to be a clear recognition by party strategists that trailing all four other parties, with a poll rating consistently around 6%, is completely unacceptable”***

Using this tactic they ended up with more seats than the LibDems. We need to emphasise the importance of the second vote in all we say and do, and in every leaflet. There are voters who will not back a Lib Dem against a sitting member but will favour the party with their list vote. We need every one of these possible votes.

In conclusion, the result in May will hinge on decisions made now about strategy, image and priorities, and on effective grass-roots campaigning by good candidates. On one hand, the mixture as before will lead to holding perhaps five or six seats,

and struggling to appear relevant as Scotland's fifth party.

## COURAGEOUS APPROACH

A more courageous approach will involve realigning the party as a radical force, prepared to work with other centre-left parties in pursuit of a reforming agenda. Such an agenda will involve a vision of a better and more equal Scotland post-Covid, and promotion of federalism as an alternative to separation, perhaps in the context of a three-question referendum. It will mean photo-shoots with sleeves rolled up and involvement with real problems, rather than pictures of politicians with furry animals.

It will mean engaging effectively with the causes of Scotland's health problems, its drugs epidemic, the poverty and low life expectancy in some areas, and the need to rebuild local communities and businesses after the pandemic. It will mean attacking the corruption in the UK government which harms us all.

The gains from being seen as a reforming party willing to tackle such difficulties rather than just talking about the constitution could be decisive. It could mean Lib Dems returning as Scotland's third party, perhaps able to determine the shape of a governing coalition and certainly wielding more influence in the Scottish Parliament. It remains to be seen whether this opportunity will be grasped.

---

Nigel Lindsay was a Liberal member of Aberdeen City Council for many years. He now co-ordinates Liberal Futures, a group interested in radical Liberal thinking in Scotland

# COULD BE ANYONE

## Successful Lib Dems campaigns that are devoid of politics should cause concern says Mark Smulian

It was one of those chance conversations that get you thinking: “We still hold some council seats but it’s just community politics.” I was puzzled by ‘just’, since most Lib Dems point proudly to their community campaigning.

The person speaking was a professional contact who I’ve never met but we email and phone from time to time and recognised each other’s names as being Lib Dems.

He’s active in an urban area in northern England where the party still has a decent number of councillors despite the Coalition and its aftermath.

This though results from ‘just’ community politics, he explained. In his area Lib Dem campaigning and activity is more or less devoid of political content; people like the way the party and its councillors take up local issues and will vote for it.

But my contact noted that an independent, a candidate from a residents’ association or from a purely local party (Bogborough First, that kind of thing) could do the same work on the same issues with the same results.

Those in his area happened to be badged as Lib Dems and the local people who joined the party had little sense of what it stood for or even that it was a national concern.

I know nothing at first hand of my contact’s patch but I do know Islington and Tower Hamlets; I live in Hackney in between them. Both have had comparatively recent Lib Dem controlled councils (in 2000-10 and 1986-94 respectively) based on intensive community campaigning.

We now have no councillors in Islington and one by defection from a rather questionable local organisation in Tower Hamlets.

From the 2018 borough election results, Islington has only one realistic second place, and Tower Hamlets has two wards that at a stretch might be called three-way marginals.

Both had specific problems - Paddy Ashdown’s meddling in Tower Hamlets and Islington’s ill-advised 2006 decision to take its strongest wards for granted and pour resources into trying to win Labour’s safest ones - losing the former without gaining the latter.

Both though ultimately depended on huge quantities of campaign work from volunteers who eventually had their own lives to get on with.

This approach induces burn-out in councillors and activists and even when it doesn’t people have professional, family or personal reasons to stand back and do something else.

When a few key people do that the whole thing can collapse, showing a party that can grow some crops but not put down roots.

A party with a solid core vote can ride the withdrawal of some important activists as there will be others coming through the ranks and voters’ commitment can

be expected to remain intact.

Without that core vote - and precious few places have one - the Lib Dems are always highly vulnerable to a handful of people losing their seats, losing interest, putting work or family first, moving away or dying.

When they do, the community campaigning falls away and since there was never much else to the party’s support base so do the votes.

The work rate required of activists will probably have left them too busy to recruit and train successors, and even if they had if those successors might have largely non-political local motivations.

Other parties have core votes drawn from particular classes or segments of society that will stick with them in most circumstances because they see the party standing up for their interests.

The arguments about core votes - and how the party had developed some before 2010 and lost them all since - are now familiar to Liberator readers.

If you have a core vote you do not need to win every vote from scratch at every election and do not need to worry that pretty well every seat is vulnerable.

Nor do you rely on unfeasible amounts of work by volunteers who spend their waking hours running up the political down escalator.

Whatever that core vote proves to be, it must be found and nurtured in this parliament. Successful parties can embrace wide - even conflicting - groups so long as those see that party as acting in their interests.

There was nothing wrong in itself with Tim Farron’s call in the desperate circumstances of 2015 to “pick a ward and win it”. Doing so provides a local example of success and attracts interest and support. The problem comes when all the party does is find wards and win them with purely local messages disconnected from national - indeed any - politics.

We’ve tried that and we know if can work for a while. But we also now know that it doesn’t work long-term, makes unreasonable demands on activists and that the support won is fragile and tends to crumble whenever another party mounts a decent fightback or key activists withdraw.

That kind of community campaigning leads to the glorified residents’ associations bemoaned by my contact.

---

Mark Smulian is a member of the Liberator Collective

# TIME FOR GOVERNMENT TO TRUST THE PEOPLE

Ideas about participatory democracy and citizen assemblies in a new SLF report are welcome but must be considered alongside constitutional reform and changes in the Lib Dems, says Peter Johnson

The day after the Brexit deal vote in Parliament the BBC's Chris Mason reported that the SNP and 'others' had voted against the deal.

So we are now referred to as 'others'. Leaving aside their editorial stance on Europe during and since the Referendum, the BBC seems to take the view that at 6% we can be ignored. We have taken a battering since our involvement in the Coalition and the result of the wretched referendum.

One of the reasons we have sunk so low is our inability to build a core vote, instead we have relied for too long on our 'we can win anywhere' approach, which has run its course.

There is now a mood to appeal to Tories in all the seats where we are in second place. There are 102 seats, 87 of those are in seats held by the Tories. A strategy, as if we didn't already know, that is fraught with electoral danger. In the end the voters will vote for the real Tory.

Marching on the three or four pro-EU demos last year, I observed my tens of thousands of fellow marchers and thought, "this is our vote". It is certainly not Labour's, a party hopelessly divided on Europe since we joined in 1973. As an aside there some evidence that Labour's core vote is crumbling too though.

## GLOOMY BACKGROUND

It is against this gloomy background that Social Liberal Forum director Ian Kearns and Jon Alexander have published their report *Citizens' Britain – A radical agenda for the 2020s*.

This hard on the heels of their publication *Winning for Britain* which David Grace reviewed in *Liberator* 404, and which to add to the gloom confirmed that the Lib Dems only topped one demographic group which made up 6% of the vote coinciding with our current poll position.

The report describes citizens who can and want to shape society for the better, building a better country drawing on the energy of every citizen and every community. The authors say 'citizen' is often a euphemism for either an authoritarian subject governed by the powerful who know best and encapsulating the 'keep calm carry on' politics' which avoids accountability, or is the neo-liberal consumer who is individualistically served.

The neo-liberal consumer chooses the option that best suits them on the basis of narrow self-interest measured in a material standard of living. This self-interest it is supposed will aggregate up to a collective

interest. The citizenship is understood as in 'Eat Out to Help Out', where consumption is the extent of the citizen's contribution.

Citizenship, they say, is an active state of engagement, contribution, and action rather than a passive state of being or receiving. As citizens, we are defined by what we do: we care, take responsibility, acknowledge our own inherent power. We cultivate meaningful connection to a web of relationships and institutions.

The authors say that citizen-led politics must be understood as complimentary to representative democracy, not in opposition. Elected representatives will still have an important role to play. I suspect Lib Dem councillors will be delighted to hear it.

But I don't think it is just a question of grafting on citizen forums to the local democracy and parliamentary systems. Instead they should be part of an overall, long overdue constitutional reform which Liberals have been advocating for decades.

Reforming our parliamentary democracy with of course proportional representation, and part of a federal structure across the country. And with that develop a participatory democracy that the report advocates.

The second part of the report is entitled 'inspiration'. Three examples are given. How Taiwan has been dealing successfully with Covid-19; the successful outcome of the Irish Referendum on abortion and how Iceland dealt with the banking crisis of 2008.

The Taiwanese example centres around participatory democracy where the nation worked as a team to counter the threat of Covid-19. Since the Sunflower revolution in 2016 power changed and with a desire to trust the people. There has from last January been no lockdown, instead there is a system of participatory surveillance.

Interventions there included a simple telephone hotline to allow any citizen of any age to propose ideas to contribute to the national effort, with the best then reported back to the nation and adopted; a series of open challenges to make government data more useful, which quickly enabled every citizen to see in real-time not only where cases were detected, but also for example where face masks could be purchased; and a major participatory campaign to support creative responses to misinformation from all over the country, which has made combating misinformation almost more a national sport than a national threat.

The result has been Taiwan has of the most successful countries in world at tackling the pandemic.

The Taiwanese government's view on participatory democracy is summed up by Audrey Tang the digital minister: "We don't care that much whether people trust the government or not, but we care a lot about the government trusting its people."

The report draws the following lesson from the Taiwanese case: "The work to build a Citizens' Britain will be less about the adoption of any one tool or process, than about making this shift in mindset."

"There is far too much discussion today about whether citizens trust government, and virtually none about whether government trusts citizens. Yet everything flows from this. Once government trusts citizens and respects their agency, it will become essential to invite their participation. The rest is detail."

The rest is detail? Quite a lot of detail in my view. Apart from anything else we have some considerable way to go in the UK before there is trust in either direction.

The second example is the Irish referendum on whether to liberalise the draconian law on abortion. The excellent outcome for women in the Irish Republic was due in no small part to Citizens' Assembly drawn from a randomly selected representative of Irish citizens who listened to experts and then made a very Liberal recommendation to the Irish Government. The report argues that the referendum was won because voters identified with people like them on the assembly.

It points to the UK Climate Assembly, which made recommendations to the UK Government but they fell by the wayside because no commitment from the Tories. So a rather similar story, the trust or the will doesn't, unsurprisingly, reside in this Tory Government.

The final example was one from Iceland where a grass roots uprising in Reykjavik followed the Icelandic banking crash in 2008. A citizens' foundation was set up. Only one minority party showed interest. As a result they won the Reykjavik mayoralty. By 2011 the elected representatives would debate top ideas from the citizens' platform every month.

Kearns and Alexander commissioned a YouGov survey of 1,650 adults, at the end of May 2020, to ascertain the desire for the approaches used in these three examples.

It asked respondents to choose between 'citizen' 'subject' or 'consumer', the differences being as I described at the beginning. The result was 40% identified as 'citizens', 18% as subjects, 19% as consumers, conflicted 7% and don't know 16%.

The report says these findings suggest two hypotheses for further investigation: first, that the desire to come together as active participants in solving the problems of our country - to be treated as citizens, not just as consumers or subjects - is widely held across the British population; and second, that this represents a major political opportunity.

## WINNING COALITION

No party is as yet offering this opportunity, positioning itself as a channel in the way of the examples; but such an approach could earn the support of a winning coalition of voters.

The authors draw great strength from the poll, and they were buoyed by the example of the 750,000 who volunteered as NHS Covid first responders.

I would add a note of caution. As is often the case it depends on the question asked. It doesn't surprise me that most surveyed identified with 'citizen' with the exception of Conservative voters who were more likely to identify with either 'subject' or 'consumer'. Furthermore I think we can assume that not all those who volunteered to help the NHS would necessarily be up for a bit a participatory democracy.

As the authors make clear, this is just the start of a conversation about participatory democracy and there is a lot more work to be done including further polling research to challenge the work in Conservative circles that has led to the politics of belonging, which the authors believe is heavily linked with the abuse of the concept of citizenship.

This report reminds me of Ed Davey's "wake and smell the coffee" message and his listening tour.

Listening then what? This report is rather too mint with hole; that plenty of good ideas but with an unsatisfactory disconnect; missing any relationship with the party. I have no feeling on how this idea will work in practice.

Jon Alexander writing about the report on Lib Dem Voice, gave a further clue to their thinking:

"A Citizens' Britain approach could equip us to work on this in a big, inclusive, participatory way. I'd love to see us launch a 'National Care Conversation', gathering stories of personal experiences from carers and those who depend on it; generating ideas for the future of care from everywhere (perhaps working in partnership with the brilliant Social Care Future campaign); and then tasking an independent Citizens' Assembly, representative of the national population, to make recommendations as to what policies should be enacted.

"We could then respond to these recommendations at our conference, with a view to adopting them as our policy."

Would we just adopt them as our policy? I can imagine a number of issues where recommendations might be highly contentious. Then what happens?

This project could end up disappointing both the Citizens' Assembly and the party.

Having said all that, our party's participatory record doesn't stand up to rigorous inspection. I can't remember a year when Liberals haven't complained about dull the conference agenda and Liberator has had no difficulty, at every conference, in awarding the Mitcham & Morden Commemorative Gold Toilet for the worse motion submitted.

So there are questions about the Citizens' Britain report and we need to ensure the party's own house is in order ready for future changes to come, as well as constitutional reform. But if this report and the ones that follow trigger reform inside and outside the party they will have a very good job.

---

Peter Johnson is a member of the Liberator Collective.

# TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

## Trevor Smith wonders why people rarely question the assumption that the private sector is best at everything

With many well-known retail firms having collapsed as a result of the pandemic, it is timely to consider why the phrase ‘private good, public bad’ has rarely been questioned by the media and other commentators on the issue of good governance for the past half century.

The term Butskellism, a portmanteau of the Tories’ Rab Butler and Labour’s Hugh Gaitskill, came to refer to the bipartisan postwar consensus that there was little to be gained from privatising natural monopolies.

Indeed, beyond British Steel, little was denationalised, and before them Macmillian and other Tory radicals in the pre-war era favoured state funded share holdings of natural monopolies. From the 1980s onwards, that was all to change.

The academic and newspaper treatment of the public corporations set up by Herbert Morrison during the Attlee government to run the newly nationalised industries differs markedly to that accorded to their privatised replacements created by Thatcher and Major.

This treatment extends to the more recent private finance initiative (PFI) which began with the Tories’ building of the Heathrow Express and was furthered by the Labour government under Blair as private-public partnerships (PPP). Joint state/private enterprises now comprise an extensive and growing sector of the economy, where profits get privatised, and losses, nationalised.

The Morrisonian corporations generally received very negative publicity which is echoed to this day though without any new evidence. As a group they have been judged mainly as failures. This is partly because they were subjected to full and open public scrutiny.

Their privatised successors largely remained monopolies whose investors, ironically, included staff from state corporations from overseas and frequently failed or underperformed in many respects.

Single instances were reported but this never dented or questioned the basis of their organisational structure. Indeed, vast monopolistic conglomerates appeared usually winning contracts for state business and, in some cases, relying on them for the bulk of their work. There were many failures the most spectacular to date being the bankruptcy of Carillion in 2018. And yet the bipartisan mantra “private equals good/public equals bad” remains largely intact and is the unchallenged accepted wisdom.

The Morrisonian public corporations were a relatively small number, comprised of about nine fairly large public utilities and some very small entities. Their existence could be analysed within a single book as, indeed they were by William Robson in *Nationalised Industry and Public Ownership* in 1960.

When privatised, with the exception of the mail and telecommunications, they did not become at all competitive or subject to the forces of the free market, but remained private monopolies; it was just a formal change of designation but it did result in huge salary increases for the senior executives.

It also coincided with a significant reduction in the number of enterprises in the private sector where mergers and takeovers swayed behaviour. These often occurred among firms contracted to run and administer services previously provided from central government departments in Whitehall, usually more cheaply.

One such conglomerate that emerged in this way was Carillion, which despite its enormous failure attracted disproportionately little criticism. No criminal charges were made and thus it was all very under-publicised and kept quiet. Let’s not even start on the banks and their role in the financial crisis of the late 2000s.

How, one wonders, will this be investigated by future economic historians? The autobiographies of entrepreneurs, senior civil servants and ministers will be scrutinised as never before but the lack of any broad policy statements will be widely felt.

It’s one of the results of recruiting management consultants to deal with single issues of policy, rather than senior civil servants which helps to establish a corporate memory.

Yet the civil service itself is under threat. The dead hand of Dominic Cummings’ restructures may yet still be deployed by his former boss in Number 10, and the lack of punishment for ministers such as Patel, found guilty of bullying staff, will hardly endear the profession to talented young graduates.

Moreover, cuts at newspapers means little investigative journalism still exists in Britain and part of that which does is controlled by another monopoly capitalist, Rupert Murdoch.

Which leaves my former profession, academia, and it is my great hope that they will pick up the mantle and better scrutinise the recurrent poor governance of privatised, and state subsidised corporations.

As we face the worst recession in memory, that work is vital, so we can emerge from it with a new, sustainable model of business ownership, where from the proceeds of growth, might be shared by all.

---

Trevor Smith is a retired Liberal Democrat life peer and former university vice chancellor



# OBITUARY - DAVID SHUTT

## Tony Greaves pays tribute to Lord Shutt, an influential Liberal over 65 years

It was the general election in 1955, in the Liberal Party's darkest days. One of only 110 Liberal candidates was the young Richard Wainwright in Pudsey, a constituency of small towns and villages between Leeds and Bradford. As Richard addressed the streets from the back of a campaign wagon he noticed two 13-year-old lads following behind on their bikes. One was the son of a Liberal county councillor, the other David Shutt. "Well lads, if you are joining the campaign why not climb up here on the truck?" called Richard. So started a lifelong Liberal journey for David.

David Shutt's death after a short illness at 78 was a devastating blow for his wife Margaret (who he met in the local YLs), his family, and all his local friends and the bodies he supported in his adopted home valley of Calderdale.

And it was a blow for the Liberal Democrats and for Liberalism. Many party members will be surprised to learn that David was one of the most influential Liberals in the past half century, at national level as well as regionally and locally. Rather than promoting himself, David got on with the job and used his positions and influence for the common Liberal good.

Michael Meadowcroft's obituary of David can be found on the Guardian website, setting out his family, political and local community interests in Yorkshire and the Calder Valley where he lived for half a century.

He stood for Parliament seven times, all but one in that constituency and its predecessor Sowerby. He represented the Pennine communities of Greetland and Stainland on Calderdale Council for 25 years, served as mayor in 1982-83, and joined the House of Lords (as Lord Shutt of Greetland) in 2000.

There are three important strands to David's work, followed by his last twenty years as a Liberal Democrat peer of significance. These are Liberalism

in his local area, Liberalism in Yorkshire, and Liberalism at the national level, some but not all through the power of funding initiatives from the Rowntree Trust and much from his own Quaker background.

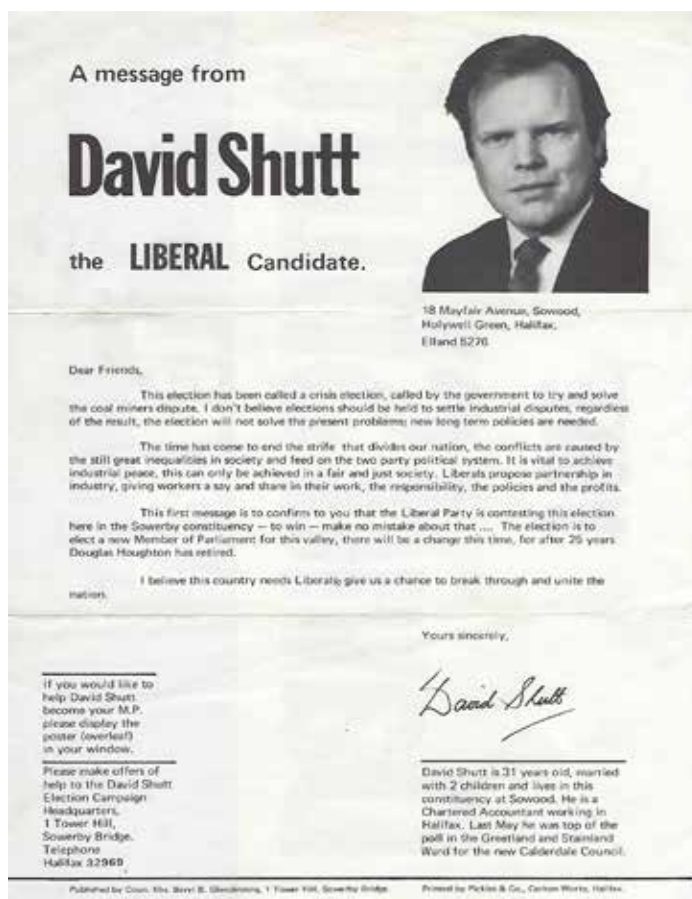
Unlike many of the leading Liberals who joined the party during Jo Grimond's leadership, David left school to learn his trade at a firm of accountants. He ended up running or auditing the accounts for a myriad of bodies he was a part of, most recently for the Liberal Democrat group in the Lords.

But none were as important as his work for the Rowntree Trusts, where he became a director of two of the three main trusts including the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, known as the Social Service Trust (JRSST) up to 1990. The latter was set up by the York chocolate manufacturer Joseph Rowntree to promote Liberalism and Quakerism in the fields of social, democratic and political reform, with a good dose of Yorkshirism thrown in.

David was originally recruited to do work for the JRSST (probably by Richard who was a director) as a sound Yorkshire accountant, and became a director in 1975. He very soon used his position to promote causes dear to his heart. In 1989 he became vice-chair and later chair until he had to resign to when he joined the Government in 2010. According to Archy Kirkwood who preceded David as chair, David's time as chair was the

Trust's most glorious period when it took risks and built on its vision to promote a wide range of liberal initiatives and reform, partly but not only through the Liberal Democrats.

But it was back in 1976 that Dorset councillor Trevor Jones was elected to chair the association of Liberal Councillors (ALC) as part of an effort by party radicals and campaigners to turn what had largely been a 'councillors' club' into a focus and resource for local campaigning.



Trevor remembers: “Not long afterwards I was approached by the Rowntree Trust with the offer of a substantial grant to the association. I had done nothing to generate the offer...but David Shutt had as a Rowntree trustee. The rest is history.” ALC set up an office at the Birchcliffe Centre in Hebden Bridge in the Calder Valley – a magnificent but redundant Baptist Chapel which was itself saved for community reuse after a campaign by David and two local heritage campaigners - with the JRSST providing the bulk of the funding.

I may be biased but the creation of the new ALC was the single most positive and important event in the party until the Westminster breakthrough in 1997 (Alliance and merger included) – which would not have happened without it.

David and Margaret had moved to the Calder Valley in 1971. David had stood in the Sowerby constituency in 1970, rather by accident, having been adopted the evening before nomination day. Richard Wainwright had adopted David as a protégé and

together with the veteran Yorkshire Liberal agent Albert Ingham helped him to take on various important jobs in the Yorkshire Federation, which he later chaired. He was a leading force in setting up active Liberal groups and fielding candidates everywhere in the county. But in 1970 the Sowerby constituency had decided not to stand. Richard persuaded them to hold another meeting and suggested in his polite but

persuasive way that any non-standers should collect their coats and quietly go home. David was adopted and saved his deposit.

Among the many legacies that David will leave in the Calder Valley is the Community Foundation for Calderdale which was originally got under way by “going round all the great and the rich” in the area. Now it employs eight people from its base in Halifax and not only funds many local charities but plays a leading part in providing support when for instance the valley is flooded (too often), there is a major pandemic, or (currently) a need to provide meals to school children.

In the Lords David got typically stuck in – he and I promoted a short debate on the development chaos at Leeds station and on the shambles of Northern trains under Arriva (that was under their first franchise!) He soon became a whip and then our chief whip, in which role he was typically supportive, fair and wholly encouraging. He was in this role when

we suddenly went into the Coalition in 2010 and he found himself as Government deputy chief whip in the Lords, a position which ludicrously doubles as the Captain of the Queen’s Bodyguard of the Yeomen of the Guard, with its ceremonial uniform of tights, spurs, and other nonsenses. He did the job with good grace for a couple of years and quietly told some amusing tales of his encounters in higher social echelons than usual. But he grumbled: “I did not sign up for the tights”.

When David was ‘elevated’ and told his mum, she thought about it and the next time he went to see her said: “David, I’ve been thinking. I think you’ve got it wrong. It’s not for the likes of you and me.”

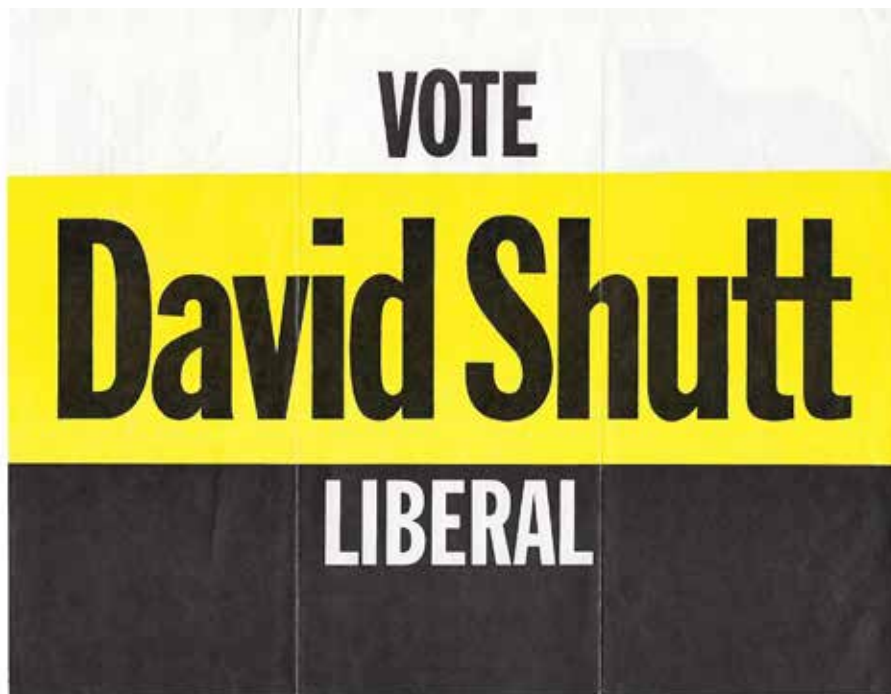
David stood out even in the modern Lords, with the demeanour of a ‘cultivated’ Bradford wool merchant and his clear ‘educated’ Yorkshire voice. (When he went to see Garter King of Arms to get his title, Garter said “You are Lord ShOtt?” “No” said David firmly, “ShUtt” with a strong uncontaminated Yorkshire U.) When in his early days he walked

across a bit of forbidden carpet in the chamber and a pompous old Tory fool told him he was a “disgrace to the House” David looked him in the eyes and said quietly but firmly: “Do not ever say that to me again.”

David had political opponents but he never made enemies.

His last work for the Lords was to chair a select committee on the electoral system and to present it to the House – and to press a proposal for automatic registration of 16 and 17 year olds, a practical progressive proposal that sums up everything he did.

Never again will I get a phone call in the early evening: “Are you eating tonight?” Never again the greeting: “How are you doing lad?” Never the latest political gossip starting: “Have you heard...?” Or the firm but considered view: “Well. It seems to me that...” All, usually, with little smile and a twinkle in his eye. I hope that our party remembers how much this committed, utterly decent and basically optimistic Quaker did for the cause of Liberalism in this land.




---

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

---

**Beyond the Red Wall.  
Why Labour lost,  
how the Conservatives  
won and what  
will happen next?  
by Deborah Mattinson  
Biteback Publishing  
2020 £16.99**

This book seems to have taken lots of London-based commentators by storm though anyone who lives in a 'Red Wall' type town won't find a lot they don't know already. For anyone who lives and operates south of some imaginary line or place (the Avon-Wash line, Watford Gap, even Watford!) it might be revelatory – though to be honest it's not much different to what happened in that long string of towns round the English coast from Dorset to the Humber, where Ukip swept up in the county elections as long ago as 2013.

Deborah Mattinson is a pollster and founding director at BritainThinks. She specialises in 'qualitative research', which means talking to people and listening to them in depth. What good politicians do when they knock on doors - what this party used to do anyway before it adopted standard tick-list canvassing on Connect.

To find out what the collapse of the 'Red Wall' was all about she went to Accrington, Darlington and Stoke-on-Trent (the third of these still an aggregation of old industrial towns rather than a full-blown regional centre), running focus groups and talking to individual people. She fills it all out with wider polling and research from the rest of the country. This is a fairly short book and like similar pieces by John Harris in the Guardian it's a readable and journalistic collection of observations, anecdotes, comments and ideas.

Perceptive Liberals will find a lot of it is about the collapse of communities, and the disintegration of the economic and civic structure of towns – by which I mean towns, not the major regional capitals such as Leeds, Manchester and Birmingham, or even a smaller university and regional city such as York.

Mattinson asks whether the Tories can hold on in what I call its new 'Blue Ditch', and provides no answer. Nor has she any coherent



# REVIEWS

answers for Labour. 'Levelling up' with lots of big infrastructure will not be enough – major new railways or roads will simply go sweeping by and we are not going to see quality new academic centres in Bishop Auckland, Worksop or Barrow. There may indeed be between six and 40 'new hospitals' but for most people they will be somewhere else, and for some places they will mean the closure of local facilities. The new money for towns may help.

In *Liberator 404* I pointed out how many lifelong Labour voters moved to the Tories via right-wing groups including Ukip, then crucially via the binary referendum that did not demand party loyalty.

It's the first break from a habitual vote that is most important. When you've done it once, even if just 'lending' your vote, you can go on doing it for the rest of your life. The frightening thought remains – what happens if the Tories do nothing for 'Red Wallers' (because they don't know what they need to do) and those voters move on again to the next populist wave. We don't know what it may be, though it won't be nice.

The author has done lots of work for Labour and its leaders in the past, and she wrote *Talking to a Brick Wall*, a tale of how voters saw New Labour. She is now reported to be an adviser to Keir Starmer which he will find useful unless he drifts into a determinist cul-de-sac where in order to appeal to 'Red Wall' voters his party has to trim to their views on everything. The recent vote in favour of the Brexit trade deal may not be a good sign for liberals with Labour's interests at heart (of whom I am not one).

Mattinson asks the big Labour question but does not provide a clear way out – how to get back 'Red Wall' votes without betraying their new strongholds in London, the big cities and the university towns where they swept up the votes of metropolitan liberals and immigrant-origin communities.

For Liberals there are ways

through the conundrum if we are prepared to go into the streets in the former industrial towns and villages and work with people to rebuild communities. Of course this assumes the Liberal Democrats still have any activists in these places, many of which used to be stuffed full of them! This work also needs a policy framework if it's to be done in a Liberal way.

But first of all read this book which sets out how and why it's happened. I promise you it's true. As someone who has represented this kind of ward and town on the local council for most of the last 50 years I can hear Mattinson's interviewees saying the things she reports.

Tony Greaves

---

**Citizens of Everywhere:  
Searching for Identity  
in the Age of Brexit  
by Peter Gumbel  
Haus 2020 £7.99**

At the Conservative Party conference in October 2016, in the wake of the EU Referendum, the then prime minister, Theresa May, spoke derisively of "citizens of nowhere" - people who had unpatriotically abandoned their native attachment to Britain in favour of a European or even global identity.

It is one of the few phrases for which May is likely to be remembered, and I doubt whether history will look on it kindly. Like Brexit, it represented a giant step backwards, away from internationalism and the values at the heart of the European project.

For many Remainers, the intervening four years have been painful and even some arch-Brexiters have, where possible, applied for a passport of an EU member state, having realised that they had curtailed their own freedom of movement. The Johnson government - personified in the smirking home secretary, Priti Patel - now trumpets with

pride the fact that it has ended freedom of movement. As British exceptionalists, they could not bear the idea that any European had the automatic right to come to Britain if they wished. And for lots of their voters in Brexit Britain, free access to the continent was never a high priority.

For the Paris-based British journalist Peter Gumbel Brexit has made him feel like an orphan, abandoned by the Britain that he thought he knew. That sense of alienation is all the more acute because his Jewish grandparents had fled Germany shortly before the war, having their citizenship and most of their property stripped from them in the process. The family assimilated into the British way of life. But as Gumbel recounts in this rather moving short book the atmosphere around Brexit prompted him to claim the German citizenship that he was entitled to as a descendant of Jews whose citizenship had been removed.

Moreover, he had come to understand that whereas Britain had been the open nation fighting against Nazi Germany, today's Germany better represents the ideals and values previously cherished by Britain. Reconnecting with the German part of his identity actually started when he was younger, learning the language and then revelling in its literature, not least writers like Thomas Mann and Stefan Zweig who went into exile to get away from the Third Reich.

As a foreign correspondent for much of his life, Peter Gumbel also experienced some of the great events of the late 20th century, including the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union - positive trends against which Brexit has established an unwelcome counteraction. By analysing both his particular personal circumstances and wider aspects of identity, the author has provided an eloquent and thought-provoking thesis that will resonate with many Brits who feel equally alienated by Brexit. As a 'citizen of everywhere', he is far from being alone.

Jonathan Fryer

---

## **The English Job: Understanding Iran by Jack Straw Biteback 2020 £12.99**

The Labour politician Jack Straw first went to Iran in late September 2001, in the wake of 9/11. He had become foreign secretary earlier that year and had the delicate task of wooing Tehran in support of what would become known as the 'war against terror'.

This proved less difficult than one might expect as the Islamic Republic understood the dangers posed by the Taliban in Afghanistan and their hosting of Al Qaida. Similarly, they had little love for Saddam Hussein in Baghdad; memories of the 1980s Iran-Iraq War, which cost hundreds of thousands of young Iranian lives, some from Saddam's deployment of chemical weapons, were still raw.

However, as Straw explains in the new, updated edition of his book *The English Job*, Iranians' collective memory goes much further back than the period since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Moreover, from an Iranian point of view, throughout much of the 19th and 20th centuries, the country was repeatedly exploited and victimised by the British. Hence the title of his book.

Perfidious Albion (in league with the United States, not for the first or last time) showed its claws notably in the removal of the founder of the short-lived Pahlavi dynasty, Reza Shah, and the installation of his ineffectual and luxury-loving son, Mohammad.

London and Washington then schemed to overthrow the legitimate prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, whose crime in western eyes was to nationalise the country's oil. The company that would rebrand itself BP had meanwhile despicably sabotaged much of the plant at Abadan as the expat employees were pulled out.

With Mohammad Reza Shah firmly back in charge, the British turned a blind eye to the brutal excesses of his secret police and intelligence services, Savak. The Shah was a valued customer of British arms (in fact, £400m of Iranian money is still being sat on in London, payment in advance for tanks that were never delivered

because of the 1979 Revolution). No wonder Iranians popularly refer to Britain as "the cunning fox".

Over the two decades since his first visit to Tehran, Straw has returned many times, developing a deep affection for the people of Iran and an appreciation for their rich history and culture.

These visits have not always been easy, notably in 2015, when a holiday there with his wife and two friends turned into a nightmare as they were hounded and harassed by the Basij, the thuggish paramilitary force that is a law unto itself. The Basij even delivered a charge sheet to the Straws, outlining the crimes against Iran committed by Britain through the ages; the author is man enough to admit that they had a point. Fortunately, he has had many other, more positive encounters with Iranians, including ministers and clerics, many of whom were western-educated, urbane and nothing like the caricatures in the minds of the Trump administration or Binyamin Netanyahu.

Straw has also sought expert advice from experts such as Ali Ansari and Michael Axworthy, which means that his analysis of events in Iran past and present, as well as his prognosis of what happens next, is based on sound sources. What I found particularly illuminating, however, were the accounts of his own Persian encounters and the warmth with which he approaches the many contradictions and paradoxes of contemporary Iranian society.

Jonathan Fryer

---

## **I Never Promised You A Rose Garden by Jonny Oates BiteBack Publishing 2020**

This is a book about running away; something which many young people, especially those from minority groups, feel compelled to do.

For many of the chance to go to university or travel for work sufficed. Jonny's path was more spectacular.

In 1985 as I watched Live Aid in between sessions of the Liberal Summer School, Jonny, aged 14, was bound for Ethiopia equipped only with a determination to end

famine and a credit card taken from his father.

That got him into the Addis Hilton then, and still, the main base for visitors on commercial and political business in Ethiopia. More importantly it alerted Jonny's family to his whereabouts and they sent a friend whom they knew through the church. Father Charles helped Jonny to cope with the fact that there is no role for him famine relief operation and gave him the space to summon up the nerve to go home to a remarkably forgiving family.

Jonny opts to tell this part of his story in the third person. Some readers may find that irritating, but I think it is testimony to just how difficult coming out still is for young LGBT people.

Having come under Africa's spell, in 1988 Jonny spent a year with Schools Partnership Worldwide in a village in Zimbabwe. Unlike two fellow volunteers Jonny didn't have the resources to go travelling at weekends, but what he missed in sightseeing was more than made up for with a deep understanding of the Zimbabwean people with whom he lived and worked.

In time that stood him in good stead when in 1999, after university and stint as assistant to the Lib Dem group on Kingston Council, Jonny found himself on a Westminster Foundation for Democracy placement and ended up as election campaign coordinator for Chief Buthelezi's Inkatha Freedom Party. Such was the force of history propelling the ANC that any minority party would struggle, but the experience he gained and brought back to campaigns for Ed Davey, Jenny Tonge and Jeremy Browne led to Chris Rennard appointing him Lib Dem director of policy and communications.

Following a stint in the private sector Nick Clegg recruited Jonny in 2009 with the task of getting Nick into the leaders debate in the general election. The stories of that negotiation, and how the press team withstood the ferocity of the attacks on Nick Clegg up to and throughout the election are illuminating and unlikely to be told by anyone else.

Less convincing is portrayal of Clegg's performance in government. Despite Jonny's loyalty to his boss and explanation of how ruthless the Conservatives were, nothing

disguises the lack of political judgement during the coalition for which those of us who remain here continue to pay a high price.

This book dotted with personal vignettes which are both painful and hopeful and lighten the politics, and overall a little stilted. Maybe there are more miles to run.

Liz Barker

---

## **JFK Volume One 1917-1956**

**by Fredrik Logevall  
Penguin Viking 2020  
£30**

Anyone interested in politics and campaigning will enjoy this new biography of President John F Kennedy. Over the years, your reviewer has read many books about the Kennedy family, but Logevall's contribution adds a wealth of information thanks to recently released letters and documents.

The young politician emerging from Volume One (650 pages, without the end notes) is more intellectual, well-travelled, thoughtful, talented and braver than previous biographies reflect. But he is also a user of people (not just women) who is careless with his friends and his possessions, confident his wealth can easily replace the expensive watches or dedicated cronies he casually loses along the way.

The book covers the Kennedy and Fitzgerald clans from their arrival in the USA, through their involvement in Boston politics, Joe Kennedy's disastrous term as US ambassador to London ("the concept of honour in international affairs was foreign to Kennedy"), JFK's war in the Pacific, his older brother's death, JFK's successful campaigns for the House of Representatives and the Senate, ending with the decision to run for president.

JFK's fearsome father, Joe, vowed to make a million dollars before he turned 35, a goal he easily achieved, thanks to insider trading and disreputable stock swindles. He raised his children to always win, even if that meant cheating. Joe appeased Hitler because he could only see the economic cost of losing Germany as a market.

We are told that he prepared his children for a life of public service,

but the family did little that was charitable, beyond funding the Catholic church, so one has to conclude that public service amounted to pursuing political office, thereby missing out on more profitable careers in the private sector.

For generations, the Boston Brahmins shut the Kennedy family out of their charmed circle because they were Irish Catholics. "God damnit!" Joe exclaimed, "I was born here. My children were born here. What the hell do I have to do to be an American?"

Yet, his generosity to the church had compensations. When he went to Rome, Ambassador Kennedy had a front row seat for the coronation of Pius XII. Kennedy assumed, without permission, that he could bring his 10-strong family, taking the seats of the Italian foreign minister, Count Ciano, and other bewildered dignitaries.

Joe's priest-ridden wife, Rose, has been caricatured elsewhere as silently enduring her husband's constant philandering. But here, she is an intelligent woman who is a far more capable political organiser than Joe. Throughout her youth, Rose accompanied her politician father, Honey Fitz, to Boston events, watching him schmooze and charm the Irish Catholic voters with his saloon bar jigs and singing. She understood how the Massachusetts Democratic machine worked, and later in life, she rallied her daughters to provide an impressive support team during JFK's campaigns.

Some previous biographies of Kennedy have suggested his heroism during the Second World War has been overblown. Yet Logevall claims this is not supported by the facts. When JFK's patrol boat was sunk by the Japanese, he saved lives and provided extraordinary leadership and courage.

Joe and Rose had directed all their energy toward their eldest son, Joe junior, a thuggish and spoiled boy who lacked JFK's charm and intellect. Logevall suggests Joe junior might have been so annoyed by JFK's heroism that he volunteered to fly a dangerous mission, searching for V1 emplacements, thinking he could upstage his younger brother. He died as a consequence, and Joe senior's ambitions shifted to JFK,

despite the fact that John did not share his appealing stance and was embarrassed by his father's closeness to Joseph McCarthy (the parallels between the liar and demagogue McCarthy and Trump, including their friendship with Roy Cohn, are startling).

JFK was so fascinated by politics that he covered the campaign of his friend Alastair Forbes, the Liberal candidate at the Hendon South byelection in 1945, and spent hours in the gallery at the House of Commons.

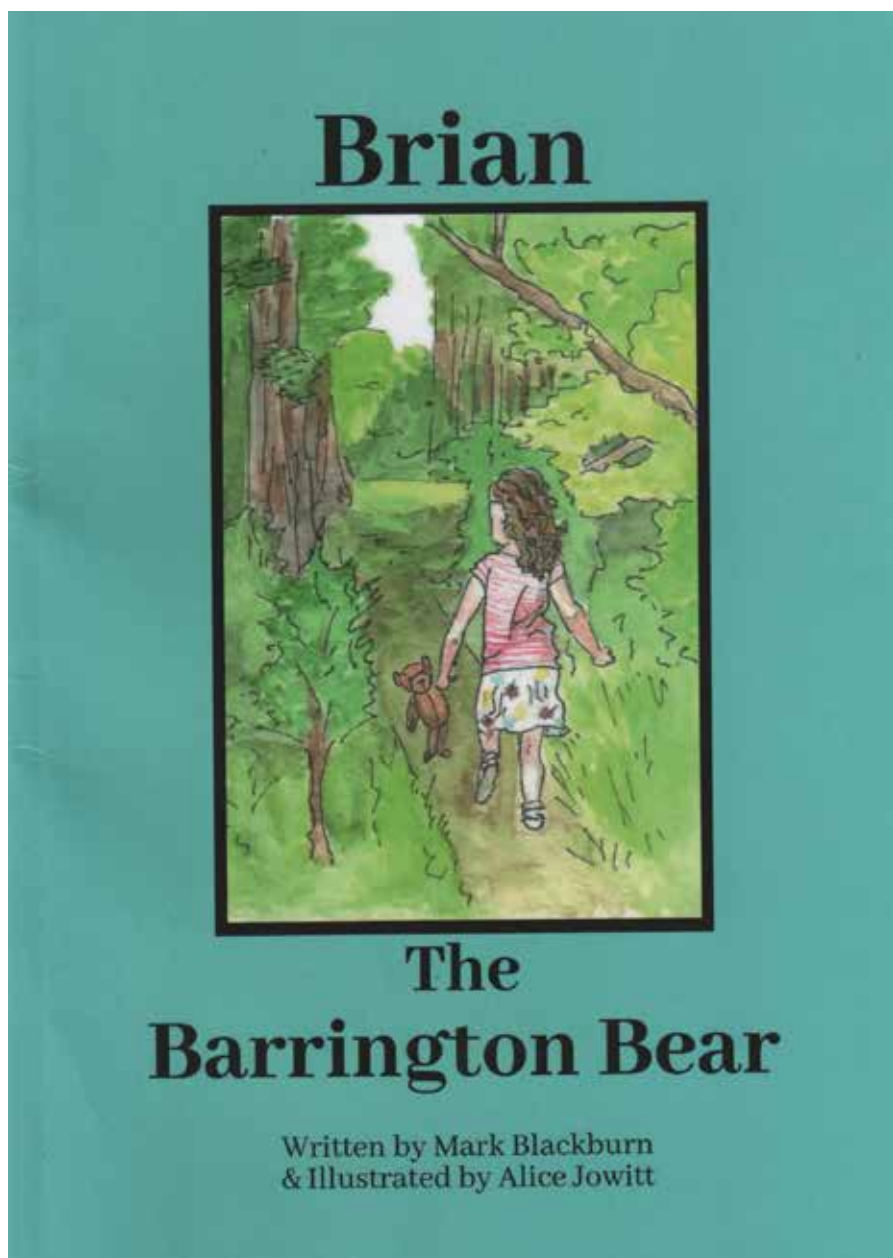
When JFK's first book, *Why England Slept* was published, and for years after, his detractors said it had been ghost written. Logevall has seen the original notes, and Kennedy's dreadful spelling and grammar convinced the biographer that it was all JFK's work. However, the arrival of Ted Sorenson on his staff added a new gloss to every word he wrote and spoke.

If the book has a fault, it is the writer's naivety about the extent to which Joe Kennedy's millions ensured his ambitious children were untroubled by quotidian problems. JFK was a lazy student and made little effort in Congress. He was sloppy and selfish, letting his staff pick up the pieces left in his wake. He spent a great deal of time vacationing in luxury in Europe or at the family mansions in Palm Beach or Hyannis Port.

He worked hard, however, when he had a goal, such as winning an election or writing a book. He was also in astonishing pain for most of his life, suffering from a disintegrating spine, Addison's disease, malaria and venereal disease. Yet, he never allowed his suffering to show in public, flashing his irresistible smile and radiating vitality.

The chapter on his 1952 senate race is a masterclass in campaign organisation, as is Logevall's telling of the wheeler-dealing on the Democratic Convention floor in 1956. (The book is worth reading for these sections alone). Years later, the Obama campaign would also bypass the Democratic Party machine, creating its own army of volunteers, with equal success.

JFK charmed almost everyone he met (tellingly, Eleanor Roosevelt saw through him), but he was remote, like his mother, and treated women appallingly.



However, he was also a deep thinker, intellectually curious, and cultured. He loved spending time in Britain with his elite friends, but in the USA, he had staff and cronies, rather than equals.

Logevall describes the way in which JFK used his father's money and connections to travel the world, meeting leaders, in a way no other future president could, giving him a sophistication about foreign policy shared by few Americans then or since. We should all be grateful he did, because when JFK was tested, during the Cuban missile crisis, he disregarded the advice of cold warrior military men and, arguably, saved the western world from a nuclear holocaust.

Rebecca Tinsley

## **Ladies Who Punch by Yasmin Alibhai- Brown Biteback Publishing 2020 £16.99**

*Ladies Who Punch* relates the histories of women who have made a significant impact on the world in the past, present and probably future.

Each chapter is short and - dare I say it - punchy which makes this an easy book to read as you can dip in and out if you so wish.

I am naturally suspicious of Alibhai Brown as her newspaper columns usually recite too easily the tedious left-wing caricatures of toxic masculinity, colonialism and racism etc. To be fair, though, in this book she gives the examples of Tories Margaret Thatcher, Penny Mordaunt and Baroness Warsi as figures for respect and admiration.

As you would expect the book features a high number of non-white women which is excellent as those individuals are probably still less well-known than their white counterparts.

The choice of women for this volume is naturally a matter of personal preference – here I find many I heartily agree with, one or two I wouldn't bother with (Princess Di) and several I knew little or nothing about, but of whom I am glad to be better informed. The life stories of all are inspiring to some extent.

If I had a criticism it would be that too many of the women selected are journalists, writers or reporters, no doubt reflecting the author's own background. I would always favour those who do rather than those who write about doing.

The idea of producing a book about noteworthy women is not as new as some may think. In my own bookshelves I find 'Heroines of the Sea' published in 1958 and 'Living Biographies of Famous Women' published in 1942. It would be hard to say to what extent such stories influenced me. Perhaps not enough. At any rate there cannot be too many such publications since the need to inspire women to fight their corner is as great as it ever has been.

Gwyneth Deakins

---

## **Brian the Barrington Bear by Mark Blackburn illustrated by Alice Jowitt**

What does one do during Lockdown? Write the children's book that has been delighting your offspring and get it published is an obvious answer. Mark Blackburn is probably best known to us through the Social Liberal Forum. He contested Westminster North in 2010, against the Labour MP Karen Buck - also a member of the LSE Liberal Society in her day - and fought Somerton & Frome in 2017. Barrington is in

that constituency. I don't know that part of Somerset, my Shepton being the one further north, but I think we can assume that the Barrington area is Alice Jowitt's 100 Acre Wood.

Brian's is a story in the Velveteen Rabbit mode, and one doesn't doubt that the core events of the tale did happen. His adventures, or misadventures, are charming, but love works in mysterious ways and redeems all. We look forward to his further adventures.

Hard copies of the book can be ordered from Waterstones <http://tinyurl.com/bnyh863p> though I'm sure your local independent bookshop would oblige, they need the trade more than Waterstones; and the eBook from Kobo <http://tinyurl.com/mobl5pjo>

The hardback is £9.99, soft cover £4.99 and eBook £3.99.

Stewart Rayment

---

## **Agent Running in the Field by John Le Carre Penguin 2019**

I bought Le Carre's book at an airport to support Smith's bookshop, because of the catchy title and to see if Le Carre was still good. I thought he might have retreated into formulaic repetitive plots like Jack Higgins or Alan Furst (and I still like both those authors).

This book, set in Brexit era Britain sees a middle aged spy, Nat, brought home near retirement, trying to settle with his high powered activist lawyer wife and turbulent daughter, his main release being his prowess at

badminton.

Given a small low level north London Russian watching unit to nurse he is pitched by passionate young female subordinate, Florence, into an operation targeting a London resident Russian oligarch.

At the same time he has one student sleeper double agent in York to look after. And he is challenged at badminton by obsessive loner Ed, who barges his way into a challenge and whose dogged anti-Brexit anti-Trump and pro-European German rants appeal to our hero.

But who is the double agent? The book is a slow burner in the style of a Richard Harris. It isn't as exciting at the snappy title, which doesn't really fit the plot for me, though I misread it all the time as Agent in the Field Running which sounds more, well active. Apart from observing Britishness (and some German, Russian and other Europeans) the book shows Le Carre's experience in discussing well the main actual subject, a spy's experience in running agents.

Kiron Reid.

**Don't miss out - read**

## **Liberal Democrat Voice**

**Every day, thousands of people are reading Lib Dem Voice, making it the most read Liberal Democrat blog. Don't miss out on our debates, coverage of the party, policy discussions, links to other great content and more**

**[www.libdemvoice.org](http://www.libdemvoice.org)**

**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**

You will by now have read of my detention by the police of Atherton, CA, on Christmas morning: I will admit that if the Attorney General of California had not turned out to an old golfing chum of the Governor of New Rutland then things might have got distinctly hairy for your humble diarist. So let me take a little time to explain what led to this unfortunate incident.

Some of my oldest friends and I have for some time been concerned for what, at the risk of sounding high falutin', one might term Nick Clegg's immortal soul. From having served the noble cause of Liberalism he has turned to the dark side and now serves Mammon. I do not have the Facebook, but I am told it is where the planet's bad hats and ne'er-do-wells congregate to plot their mischief – and the aforementioned Clegg makes a good screw from promoting it.

After reading Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol (surely he is our greatest novelist?) I hit upon the idea of staging an intervention. I would see to it that the ghosts of Liberalism Past, Liberalism Present and Liberalism Future appeared to Clegg on the night of Christmas Eve, leaving him feeling pretty small and open to being won back by the forces of light. I rather hoped, for instance, that he might volunteer to take on one of the more challenging Focus rounds in the Bonkers Hall ward.

So it was that my party took the red-eye from Rutland International Airport to San Francisco while the rest of the nation was watching Christmas movies on their electric televisions. With me were Meadowcroft and two Well-Behaved Orphans, along with some gamekeepers to help with scenery changes and a few of the Elves of Rockingham Forest to provide ghostly music. "We call them 'Aeolian cadences'" one of them replied sniffily when I mentioned this.

In retrospect, it was a mistake to allow Meadowcroft to dress up as the ghost of Liberalism Past: I should have stuck with my original plan of playing the part myself and quoting extensively from the speeches of William Ewart Gladstone. (I should have steered clear of the works of T.H. Green as they would only have sent Clegg back to sleep.) For as soon as Meadowcroft set eyes on Clegg, far from presenting tableaux of our party's history, he shouted "You be the young varmint who incinerated my little darlin's" and went at him with an orchard doughty that he had somehow smuggled through customs.

He was referring to an unfortunate incident in which a teenaged Clegg set fire to the glasshouse at the Hall which housed Meadowcroft's cherished collection of cacti – the old boy had gathered them in the arid south of Rutland on his days off. Well, he had Clegg double digging for a year to pay for the damage, but I suspect a youth from the wrong side of the GNR&LNWR Joint would have been off to the Jack Straw Memorial Reform School before his trainers touched the ground.

It may have been at that point that Miriam called the feds, but our next scene was not a success either. I had intended to bring home to Clegg the importance of spending on education and social welfare by having Well-Behaved Orphans labelled 'Ignorance' and 'Want' appear before him.

# Lord Bonkers' Diary

When it came to it, however, Ignorance indignantly pointed out that he had come second in Committee Room Theory and Practice only last term and was still doing so when the rozzers called a halt to proceedings. So it was off to the hoosegow for all of us.

\*\*\*\*\*

Little has changed in my absence: the village is still under lockdown, with the Bonkers' Arms presenting a particularly sad picture. How I miss its windows

glowing with light and the sound of merry chatter! If it weren't for the secret passage from the Hall that emerges in the pub's cellar, where I occasionally enjoy a Rutland egg – and you can't get a more substantial meal than that – and a pint of Smithson & Greaves Norther Bitter, I would feel far more despondent. I am bearing the closure of St Asquith's, however, with fortitude.

\*\*\*\*\*

A quiet day in my Library, looking over my precious collection of Classical Latin manuscripts. You will be familiar with the story about Caligula making his horse a senator, but you will never have seen one of the Focus leaflets the horse put out. They reveal that he was assiduous at carrying out casework, while his slogan "It's a One-Horse Race" show a sharp mind for electoral tactics. So those modern historians who suggest that by bestowing a high public office on his horse, Caligula was showing his underlings that their work was so meaningless an animal could do it, have got it entirely wrong. Incidentally, one of my own horses was once elected to Market Harborough Rural District Council after agreeing to stand as a paper candidate. While I will admit to putting out a leaflet in his name, I suspect his election had more to do with the racing tips he supplied to anyone who stopped by his field for a chat.

\*\*\*\*\*

This morning, still recovering from my West Coast adventures, I walked by the shore of Rutland Water and was rewarded with one of nature's most remarkable phenomena. All at once the surface of the lake was boiling with fish. They danced upon their tails, clapped one another on the back and sang in joyful voices. For Rutland fish are happy fish, perhaps most of all because no foreign trawler has ever found its way here from the North Sea. It is a difficult passage and not one to be attempted without first engaging the services of an experienced pilot. I imagine the prospect of being caught and eaten is no more attractive than that of being imprisoned while wearing an orange jump suit, so I joined the fishy chorus to celebrate my deliverance.

---

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