

# liberator



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# COMMENTARY

## **PARTYGATE ERODES MORE TRUST**

One wonders what exactly Boris Johnson has to do before being forced to resign.

We now know that beneath the exterior of being a posturing buffoon, lies something deeply nasty. Johnson was breaking the law by partying with colleagues while others observed the pandemic rules even while relations died alone.

His apologies have been evasive, but his lies about the lockdown rules having been followed in Downing Street have been blatant and this has tainted the whole government. Even ministers not themselves accused of breaking lockdown rules have been forced in public to adopt Johnson's slippery stances; few are left untouched.

The May local elections reflected some public disgust with this but were thought by most commentators to be rather better for the Tories than they might have been. The main factor in this may have been that the public no longer expects better of politicians.

Ever since Tony Blair lied to the country because he wanted to launch a war of aggression public expectations of politicians' probity have plummeted. Let's also not forget the damage done by Nick Clegg's lies and political incompetence over tuition fees.

May's results suggest that neither the Lib Dems nor Labour - Kier Starmer's beer drinking difficulties notwithstanding - can rely on Tory disgrace alone to defeat the government.

The last time the Tories collapsed into sleaze was under the Major government in the 1990s and that gave a helpful shove to pushing the Tories out, but there was also the tacit understanding between Blair and Paddy Ashdown that their campaigns would keep out of each other's way.

Something of the sort is emerging again, with Labour having avoided by-elections the Lib Dems can win and the latter returning the compliment by running paper candidates where Labour is hopeful. Honiton and Wakefield are likely to soon see a repeat of this. May's results to an extent saw Labour and the Lib Dems keep out of each other's way - at least outside Hull.

This approach worked in the 1990s because Lib Dem and Labour supporters were - in sufficient numbers - reasonably happy to vote for each other's parties where their own could not win. Labour supporters saw electing Lib Dems as a better outcome than Tories winning while Lib Dem supporters in hopeless seats - at that time having no idea the Blair government would turn into one led by authoritarian war criminals - were content to vote Labour.

It cannot be stressed enough though that politicians are powerless to move blocs of voters around between parties by trying to instruct them.

Nor, if one party stands down in a seat, can it be predicted what its supporters will do.

## **MARIE ANTOINETTE POLITICS**

The declaration by Lib Dem-controlled Eastbourne council of the county's first cost of living emergency might sound like a symbolic act but is at least an attempt to respond to the rapidly emerging concern over living standards.

That this has happened in Eastbourne ought to give pause to those Lib Dems who persist in believing that everyone in the south is rich.

Rocketing fuel prices and inflation may not have been entirely the Government's fault - it did not after all start the war in Ukraine - but the late and inadequate response to it most certainly is.

In contrast to what was done during the pandemic the Tories seem to have taken the Marie Antoinette approach to the cost of living of "let them eat cheaper brands".

Although use of food banks has been increasing sharply in the past few years, issues of living standards have not until now quite gained political salience, possibly because many of those most badly affected rarely vote.

As concerns spread into sections of society that do vote the pressure will increase on politicians to respond.

A look at the Lib Dem website and at recent posts on Lib Dem Voice hardly suggests that the cost of living is at the forefront of party concerns.

That will have to change because every so often an issue imposes itself on politicians whether they like it or not due to public pressure.

Soaring fuel bills, with worse to come in October, high food costs and rising inflation ought to be toxic for this government, not least as Brexit is major factor in the problem by disrupting trade. Even the most rabid Brexit supporters might be persuadable of the error of their ways when they see the consequences in their pockets.

A Lib Dem response is needed because if one is not clearly forthcoming, others will respond. Hard economic times have historically encouraged the growth of the far right - and less often the far left - with simplistic 'solutions' based on racism and isolation.

As with 'partygate' no-one can or should rely on the Tories' errors alone to defeat them. Those will help, but if the Lib Dem response to the cost of living is either silent, insufficient or bafflingly complicated others will take advantage first.



# RADICAL BULLETIN

## FROM SMALL BEGINNINGS

Behind the innocuous heading 'SAT v Complaints Panel' on the Liberal Democrat website there lies a tale that began with a social media spat in 2019 and has ended three years later with the Federal Board (FB) resolving to review the definition of transphobia used in the party complaints process.

It is not yet clear who will carry out such a review or how they will be appointed but this is intended to cover both whether any change is needed to reflect the Forstater judgment and whether any other changes are required.

Forstater is a legal case in which the Employment Appeals Tribunal [[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60c1cce1d3bf7f4bd9814e39/Maya\\_Forstater\\_v\\_CGD\\_Europe\\_and\\_others\\_UKEAT0105\\_20\\_JOJ.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60c1cce1d3bf7f4bd9814e39/Maya_Forstater_v_CGD_Europe_and_others_UKEAT0105_20_JOJ.pdf)] held that certain gender critical beliefs were protected under equalities legislation. This overturned an earlier ruling that such views were unworthy of respect.

People who are gender critical believe sex is immutable from birth regardless of a person's gender identity, as opposed to those who believe that a person's sex can change or gender identity is paramount.

The dispute began with a post about the use of gender pronouns at party events, the idea being that their wider use would avoid trans people being offensively (even when inadvertently) mis-gendered.

This eventually led to a lengthy ruling by the Federal Appeals Panel (FAP), which it said should be published with names redacted. The FAP is yet to publish this but Liberator respects this and will refer to 'the complainant' and 'the defendant'.

After the complainant stated their support for use of pronouns, the defendant replied that he considered the issue trivial in the wider political context.

As social media disputes are prone to do, this quickly escalated into an exchange of insults, with others 'piling in'.

The complainant referred the defendant to the party complaints process and the matter, after a long wait, ended up before a disciplinary panel.

This considered the defendant had expressed anti-trans views and imposed the penalty of a lifetime ban from holding party office.

The defendant, wearied by the process and no longer interested in holding party office, chose not to appeal against this.

Others though did. The disciplinary process has a chief adjudicator and below that a team of senior adjudicators and they - the 'SAT' of the case title - on their own initiative took the matter to the FAP.

The SAT's reasons included the need to consider the implications of the Forstater judgment in disciplinary cases to which it appeared relevant, but also that they

felt errors made the decision unsafe.

Specifically, they felt the panel should have decided whether or not the defendant bullied or harassed the complainant, not the nature of the defendant's views on gender.

There were also concerns from the SAT that punishing the defendant for holding gender critical views could in itself constitute discrimination since the Forstater judgment gave certain legal protections to such beliefs.

After a further wait the FAP reached a conclusion and those that were able to see it must have been startled by its vehemence.

The FAP said the defendant had been dismissive, slightly rude and patronising and should have apologised for the tenor of some comments, but nothing more was required.

It said Liberal Democrats should treat each other with respect, but that disciplinary action when used unreasonably could have a chilling effect on internal debate and went on to state that the complaints system existed to punish significant misconduct and not what it termed minor unkindness, rudeness or discourtesy.

Citing the party constitution preamble, the FAP added that no-one had a right not to be offended, and that a liberal party could not seek to compel its members to hold (or indeed not hold) specific beliefs on gender. Nor could they be forced to use terminology they felt inappropriate.

It said the lifetime ban from office was disproportionate to the original offence of what it deemed to be only slight rudeness.

The disciplinary panel - whose members have not been named - should it said have concerned itself with the specific words complained about, not sought to make a moral judgment on the defendant's attitudes on gender.

It said any right-thinking member of the public would be astonished by the way the case was handled.

Among those taken aback by the FAP's strictures were the co-chairs of FB's disciplinary sub-group (DSG) Candy Piercy and Alice Jeffries.

The DSG was set up to manage the transition from the old disciplinary system to the current one but later morphed into an oversight role for the complaints process.

After the FAP ruling in the summer of 2021, a fractious meeting took place at which Piercy criticised the FAP's ruling - and the SAT for bringing the case - which some felt was inimical to trans rights.

One senior adjudicator coincidentally asked for a leave of absence from the role for a month to deal with family matters.

When she announced her readiness to return a month later she was told by Piercy and Jeffries that she had been replaced.

Here matters become convoluted and disputed. The senior adjudicator believed she had been sacked due to her views on the relevance of the Forstater ruling in the complaints process. The co-chairs have since said they thought they were helping her by finding someone with adequate time to devote to a role where they believed she was struggling with the workload.

By November the dispute reached the Federal Board, which received a complaint to the effect that a senior adjudicator had been improperly removed because of her views on Forstater, and so the independence of the Lib Dem 'judiciary' from its 'executive' was in question.

It was first resolved to refer this to the party's whistleblowing process. This though turned out not to exist as all that could be found was a paper borrowed long ago from another organisation and never adapted to Lib Dem needs.

Instead, a party member who is a barrister was asked to carry out an investigation. He is understood to have conducted a painstaking exercise over four months.

This concluded that the senior adjudicator's removal was unfair since if this were to happen at all it should have been by resolution of the entire DSG not action by the co-chairs alone.

Rather, the FB heard, Piercy and Jeffries had acted over what they mistakenly believed were wider concerns about the senior adjudicator's capacity to cope with the workload and Piercy believed her to be distressed and thought it would be a kindness not to tell her of such concerns.

Piercy acted from good motives, the barrister found, but the impact on the senior adjudicator was unfair since the concerns about her workload were mistaken and arose from an earlier misunderstanding, and she was not given the opportunity to resolve this by answering these concerns

Criticism was made that the DSG rarely held formal minuted meetings at which its business could be conducted as at a normal committee, relying instead mostly on WhatsApp.

The FB heard that sensitivities around trans issues may have contributed to errors being made and that open discussion was likely to lead to a better informed environment in which to decide how equality might best be achieved.

Among the barrister's recommendations were that the senior adjudicator should receive an apology. Piercy has apologised to her, to other DSG members and to the FB noting that she never intended to act unfairly or to cause distress.

The report said the senior adjudicator should be reinstated but she has chosen not to return to the role, though might be able to as a job-share in future if she wishes.

Jeffries has voluntarily resigned from the DSG to concentrate on local campaigning. Piercy offered to go but was asked to remain.

FB members accepted that the party's complaints process definition of transphobia - as opposed to its policy on trans rights, which is decided by conference - should be reviewed to see if any changes were needed arising from Forstater.

The report did not say that the definition must be changed, rather that independent advice was needed on whether it should be changed.

A proposal to initiate a review of the rest of the definition was also agreed in the light of the inquiry's findings, though it remains to be determined how this will be done. These reviews may be conducted by external specialists.

Piercy told Liberator: "I was part of the team of Federal Board members that prepared the transphobia definition that was adopted by the Federal Board. A definition is a great help when a complaint is made about whether or not a member has behaved appropriately. A number of people from outside the party, and few within, have regularly challenged the legal validity of the Lib Dems transphobia definition over the last year.

"This has made it very difficult for the party's disciplinary process. I want clarity on the legal standing of our transphobia definition. For this reason, last September I asked LDHQ to get formal legal advice on the transphobia definition. I want this to end any uncertainty and allow the disciplinary process to rule appropriately and with consistency on cases that may involve transphobic behaviour."

## **OUT IN FRONT**

There was a near miss in Tower Hamlets for Lib Dem Rabina Khan, who came within 35 votes of holding the Shadwell ward at 1,451, a jaw-dropping 1,021 votes ahead of her ruling mate Simon Tunnicliffe.

Ignoring advice, including from London region and ALDC, the local party also ran an all-singing, all-dancing campaign for her in the hopeless contest for elected mayor, so draining resources from Shadwell.

Khan's 6,430 votes for mayor saw her in a distant third place behind Labour and the winner, former mayor Lutfur Rahman, who was banned from office for five years for election offences but has returned leading a party called Aspire.

Khan was once in a local party named the People's Alliance of Tower Hamlets, which joined the Lib Dems en bloc after the 2018 elections.

## **MESSAGE FROM ABOVE**

Merton Lib Dems possibly had some unexpected help in their slew of gains in May's election. One knocker-up was bemused to be told: "I'm voting Liberal Democrat because Nick Clegg has been anointed by God." No detail was forthcoming on what God had anointed Clegg as.

## **INTERNATIONAL RESCUE**

Lib Dem delegates at the forthcoming congresses of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and Liberal International (LI) faced the embarrassing prospect of not being able to vote when the party neglected to pay its affiliation fees to either.

These were hastily paid just in time but this showed a rather odd set of priorities for a party that always stresses how international it is in outlook.

Contested votes are fairly rare at LI but ALDE has plenty of them and the Lib Dems remain a large delegation even after Brexit.

# LOADS AMONEY RIDES AGAIN

A get rich quick culture and low expectations of politicians has led to the corruption of public life with ‘partygate’ only the tip of an iceberg, says Nick Winch

If a week is a long time in politics, then attempting to comment on current political issues is bound to be fraught with difficulties: doubtless during the time between Liberator going to virtual press and appearing, events will have taken any number of unpredictable turns.

Sue Gray may have reported. Durham Police likewise. We may have a new prime minister, or leader of the opposition. The Northern Ireland protocol may have been scrapped and the United Kingdom may be in breach of international treaties signed only a few years ago by the very people who are now tearing them up.

But there are two linked aspects of British life which can be confidently predicted – an ever-increasing intolerance and nastiness in Britain and the total disdain which so many in public life have for that which is decent, honourable and proper.

How did we get to this position? Has there always been an under-current in society which is dismissive of civilised norms of behaviour, and is this under-current now merely nearer the surface? Has the disconnect between the public and those in authority always existed or is it a recent development, and if so, who is primarily responsible for it? Are we just more aware of it? And does a societal acceptance of inappropriate behaviour lead to a decline in standards in public life?

There was, it can be argued, a fundamental change in British society in the 1980s. One of the features of Thatcherism was a belief that self-advancement was in itself desirable, regardless of its impact on others. Council house ownership enabled millions to get on the property ladder but resulted in fewer housing opportunities for those unable to join the property-owning democracy. People told Sid to buy British Gas shares – and those who did, financially benefitted at the expense of those who did not, this latter group having been shareholders in the nationalised industry, uncompensated for the removal of their part-ownership.

## GREED CULTURE

The deregulation of the financial markets – Big Bang – led to the growth of a greed culture, the ultimate “I’m alright, Jack” environment, not only creating what were by any standards ill-gotten gains, but also fuelling the gap between the haves and the have-nots. Indeed, it encouraged a view that those who did not choose to capitalise on the opportunities available to some were either feckless, stupid or parasitic.

In due course, the generation who ‘got ahead’ during this period – often achieving considerable levels of financial security and material advantage while still

in their 20s or early 30s, became those who were in a position of power and able to shape society. This was, perhaps, the only generation who, almost as a matter of principle, resolved not to improve society for future generations. For them, comfortable retirement was more important than a decent start in life. Winter fuel payments were for the elderly regardless of wealth, not for the poor regardless of cold. TV licences and rides on buses were made free for them, but not the rest of us. Above inflation benefit increases were for the well-off, not for the needy, and higher education was no longer something available for free. This generation well and truly kicked away the ladder having climbed it to the top.

One of the features which was subliminally generated – and which permeated into politics and public life – was the belief the public service (or indeed any activity) need not just be for the public good but could also be for private gain. While many clung to the idea that public service was in itself a noble calling, the alternative view was not just tolerated but actively encouraged.

This was the generation where politicians thought it was acceptable to claim more than £1,200 in expenses for mirrors for a London flat (never mind the 67p for a packet of ginger biscuits or 70p for a bag of horse manure), where brown envelopes of cash were handed to MPs for asking a few questions, where massive public sector contracts are handed out corruptly and where bullying, improper sexual behaviour and dishonesty are not just rife but tolerated.

When caught, the apology is not for the act itself, but for being found out: “I’m sorry if people were offended by my actions”. And, of course, should these issues ever need to be scrutinised, policed or challenged, that is done by the colleagues of those accused. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*

Indeed, who will guard the guards themselves? In a democracy, that duty should surely lie with two groups: the public and a free press. The problem is that neither of those groups are proving fit and proper people do so.

The public (in so far as the public can be seen as a single entity) has shown a total disregard to do anything meaningful about the excesses and malfeasance of those in public office. There was an element of outrage about MPs expenses (driven, I suspect, by envy as much as by a sense of injustice) but corruption in public life, abuse of power and cronyism are largely met with a resigned shrug of the shoulders.

The recent local election results shows that in traditional Conservative areas, many Tory voters are appalled at the behaviour of the Government.

For them, breaking lock-down rules in Downing Street was as unacceptable as it would have been in their homes in Woking. They registered their protest. However, not all Conservative voters showed that sense of duty. For many, the 1980s disregard of acceptable standards lives on. In the 'Red Wall' seats the Conservative view was summed up by the Tory voter in Ashfield who said: "What does it matter? We all broke the lock-down rules."

Well, no, actually, we didn't. And it does matter: it matters because an acceptance of law-breaking by those in power, and a lack of concern about it by the governed is a very large step towards a society which is not just undemocratic, but anti-democratic.

The second group who should be guardians of the public good are media. They of course, see themselves as an essential safeguard for a free and fair society. They are in reality and collectively and individually, nothing of the sort. At the beck and call of their owners, the printed press has their own agendas. As one ex-Daily Mail employee said: "The ideal Daily Mail story leaves the reader hating someone or something." Not for them a rational examination of the issues of asylum, for example. There is no longer from the editors – nor it would seem from the readers - a desire for the unvarnished truth, for balanced reporting and reasoned comment.

This is, of course, nothing new. The printed press has always been partisan. What has changed recently is the role of the broadcast media. The rise in broadcast media outlets and the chase for a finite number of viewers has, by any standard, seen a decline in the quality of news broadcasting. As with the written press, broadcasters are seen as having their own bias – 'typical BBC-lefty' some will say about Question Time while other rail against the pro-Tory coverage on the Today programme.

The late Robin Day once remarked that every viewer thinks that an interviewer is being too soft on those with whom the viewer disagrees. He may have been right, but there are two problems. The first is that the politician has mastered the art of answering the question he wished he'd been asked. "Why are you not doing more about the cost of living crisis?" is met with "What the public really want to see us doing is..." The politician knows that he can play for time, that an answer cannot be forced out of him. But more important is that the interviewer allows him to do that.

When did an interviewer last try to extract useful information from a politician instead of trying to play a kind of Interruption Gotcha? Why does an interviewer not ask: "What alternatives did you consider before coming to this decision?" or "How will you judge this policy to be a success?" If the media has a duty to inform (as it claims) why does it invite two 'experts' – usually ill-informed or partisan - to argue whether it is raining?

It is the job of the media to look out of the window and tell us if it is raining and then ask real experts to give us the information to help us decide how best to react to the rain.

*"This generation well and truly kicked away the ladder having climbed it to the top"*

If the press and the public cannot effectively hold to account those whose actions shape our lives, how can we ever create an environment where mutual trust and respect exist between the elector and the governing?

Liberals will all say we need a new written constitution, a fairer electoral system, a better system of recall. We must end politicians being the judge and

jury in case involving their behaviour. Genuinely independent panels should monitor the ministerial code. The Government must have far less control over the Parliamentary agenda.

## REVOLVING DOOR

The Freedom of Information Act needs to be strengthened. The political 'revolving door' should be ended for legislators and civil servants. But we should seek more. Being an MP is – should be – a full-time job. MPs should not be allowed any outside earnings from a source they did not have before being elected. A farmer should be able to continue owning his farm and the director of a family firm should not have to give it up. But no new source of income should be permitted. After all, Hutchison Ports Europe do not pay Chris Grayling £100,000 per year without wanting something in return and a German investment company does not give David Davis £33,000 for 16-hours' work each year for fun. (We may need to pay MPs more to ensure their total commitment to serving us, the people, but that is a price worth paying).

Political parties should seek candidates with more experience of life than just being a lobbyist or Parliamentary aide and what they are allowed to spend needs to be not only more closely regulated but properly enforced and to ensure transparency, there should be strict rules on political spending by PAC-type organisations.

Such a programme is, of course, unlikely to work until the public are themselves prepared to recognise the harm which is being done by their disengagement from the political process.

Unless they are prepared to say: "We're not going to take this any more", there are unlikely to be major calls for reform either from the political world or from the media who benefit from confrontation, trivialisation, bigotry and intolerance.

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Nick Winch is a member of the Liberator Collective



# GLOBAL BRITAIN OR LITTLE ENGLAND?

The Social Liberal Forum conference on 25 June looks at the UK, the European Union and the relationship with it the Government seeks to avoid, says David Grace

A bookshop recently displayed a poster reading 'Post-Apocalyptic Fiction has now been moved to Current Affairs'.

The general unreality of public life over the last few years has been magnified by the inability of people to meet and confer. Francis Bacon wrote: "Conference maketh a ready man". Today he would have to write: "Online Conference maketh a bored, sleepy man".

It is therefore with great joy that I await the Social Liberal Forum's summer conference on Europe, to be held really, physically, in the flesh, in London. If you need to be online then you will be able to Zoom in as the conference will be hybrid.

Why has the SLF chosen Europe as its theme this year? The liars in government today obtained power by lying about the European Union and have been compelled to go on lying ever since, hooked on deception, Brexit junkies.

The body apparently known as 'Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition' having pathetically failed to campaign effectively to stay in the EU, remains silent on the subject of the consequences of their failure, terrified to alienate their voters who switched to Boris Johnson in 2019.

Liberal Democrats have, not loud enough in my opinion, continued to make the case for the EU and British membership. However, with all the counterfactuals bamboozling us one fact is true: the UK has left the EU. The question then is how is the UK to relate to the EU in future before the blessed rapture of reunion?

The government seems determined to carry on as if the EU did not exist a mere 22 miles away from Dover and just over the border from Armagh and Newry. Their proposed approach to economic issues is to pretend there are no problems, strengthen control of immigration and negotiate feeble and disadvantaged trade deals with the Faroe Islands and Australia.

Jacob Rees-Mogg is in charge of finding the unicorns labelled 'benefits of Brexit'. The Queen's Speech suggests that the benefit is to dismantle EU legislation which protects consumers, protects the environment and keeps Britons in the human race, not to mention the government's threat to break an international treaty with the EU, just to please the DUP (Oh, I just did).

As for defence and security, Johnson has declared that our focus is the amorphous land called the Indo-Pacific, whither he has dispatched the UK's biggest behemoth, the aircraft-carrier which the Chinese describe as a huge floating target. After all, it's not as if there's ever been much trouble in Europe. We

needn't bother about that irrelevance. We'd much rather get into war with China.

The SLF Conference will examine how the UK can continue to work with the EU in the three crucial realms of economics, environment and defence.

Putting their considerable expertise and experience at our disposal on 25 June will be Liberals from the Netherlands, another European country (yes, we are one, Liz Truss): Sophie in 't Veld and Gijs de Vries from D66. Professor Chris Grey from Royal Holloway College, probably the UK's greatest commentator on Brexit, will lead our discussion on economics. I recommend his blog: *Brexit and Beyond*: <https://chrisgreybrexitblog.blogspot.com/>.

Other speakers include Louise Harris, Duncan Brack, Denali Ranasinghe, Julie Smith, Will Hutton, and Jane Dodds. We will also be joined by Alistair Carmichael to give the annual Beveridge lecture. We look forward to a day establishing that the Times was wrong when it wrote: "Fog in Channel: Continent Cut Off" and Johnson is wrong today. We will proclaim that the UK is still part of Europe and, what's more, we will investigate how to make that mean something.

The conference is open to members and non-members. You can find more about the SLF here: <https://www.socialliberal.net/>. Look out for more information about the conference and how to attend on that website and on Lib Dem Voice.

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David Grace is a member of the Liberator Collective

**SLF CONFERENCE DETAILS,  
SEE PAGE 13**



# WHERE ARE OUR UKRAINIANS?

## Rose Stimson wants to offer shelter to a Ukrainian mother and child but finds the UK government thwarting this despite its rhetoric

Seven weeks ago Maria, her 12 year old son, Tomas and their cat, escaped Ukraine. They had left behind her parents, her brother and his family - who knows if they will ever meet them again?

As a single parent with a growing son, she had established a good life for them both and had found a secure job and home whilst Tomas had many friends in a school he loved.

Then the Russians came visiting. We can only imagine the fear and anxiety that causes you to suddenly leave everything and heading to where? And what?

Maria had headed for Warsaw where two friends of ours, themselves former refugees and UNICEF workers, were providing shelter and support for people they met at the station. They have provided support for more than 80 families, finding temporary accommodation family, friends, friends of family, families of friends, as well as giving practical support like nappies, money for travel and the emotional support of friendship.

The Homes for Ukraine scheme twinkled in our sky and through our friend we made contact with and offered shelter to Maria and Tomas. They submitted their visa applications four weeks ago. This in itself is a difficult process when you have just a basic phone, are using a foreign language and have to scan in documents, pressured at the best of times.

Since then we have all been waiting and waiting and waiting for the approvals to come through. We have been told 48 hour turn around, then all will be done in three weeks and then..... There is no one person to talk to. We have now turned to our MP in the hope that he can expedite matters. As others have outlined the communication channels are muddled and confusing at the best of times, when you have time and bandwidth to negotiate them.

Maria and Tomas have had to move from temporary to temporary accommodation three times. Maria has found work cleaning windows by day and caring for an elderly woman by night, but that means she sometimes has to leave Tomas alone in their room. He has managed to find a friend but life is lonely for him, his best comfort is taking their cat for a walk on a lead. Very scared of what lies ahead, the delay in getting their visas will only be increasing their anxiety. We talk regularly, but what can we say to them?

This compares with the experience of our son who lives in Berlin.

On the second day of the war, he and his wife made social media contact with a very young couple escaping Odessa. They took them in, giving them immediate refuge and shelter. No visa applications, no biometric checks and immediate support was available. Even now, with that comparatively smoother experience and seven weeks on, the young couple are still traumatised.

On this side of the channel there has been some incredible response from our local community, our area support, the church (very willing but unknowingly nominated alongside other charities by Gove, into that role for which they were not prepared). Most impressive was the response from our beleaguered and forgotten local council, Herefordshire. Within 12 hours of the visa application being submitted, we had received DBA and house inspection application forms, invitation to special counselling and training sessions, terrific zoom meetings with specialists in areas of education, work, school etc. The local school have responded with open arms and we even might have a job waiting for Maria provided she can get here soon.

But more than four weeks, and there is still no sign of the visas. When we talk, I don't know what to say to Maria, she is so optimistic and positive. She speaks good English but Tomas doesn't and he is scared and very fearful of what lies ahead. The sooner we can get them here, the sooner they can begin the road to recovery – what benefit is it to anyone to keep them waiting? It is cruel and inhuman.

Surely it doesn't need to be this way, haven't we proved that as a people we are better than this? I think our government just hasn't heard that message and are hiding behind the goodwill of all who are trying to help. You might almost think that there is an agenda is to block entry – who knows?

When our prime minister can use the situation to do his Churchill impersonation three days before local elections, but is not willing to follow the examples of Kindertransport or the boat from Bilbao, something is out of balance.

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Rose Stimson is a former member of the Liberator Collective now involved in community work in Herefordshire. Names of the Ukrainian applicants have been changed

# SPEAK AS YOU LIKE

## In the language question in Ukraine discrimination against Russian speakers is an invented grievance, say Iryna Barlit and Vladyslav Bandrovsky

Since the 17th century, questions on language use were of high political sensitivity for Russia. So-called 'protection' of the rights of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers outside of Russia has been the subject of Russian political discourse and propaganda for a long period of time.

In 2014 Russian Federation used such 'protection' as a pretext for the annexation of Crimea and Donbas. They used it now. Again.

Even though some Ukrainian regions were originally Russian-speaking, there is no connection between the language and ideology anymore. Actually, the Russian-speaking people do not want a 'Russian world' and 'liberation'.

By now, in Ukraine, the Russian language has become simply the evidence of the past, but it is no longer a means to consume Russian culture and propaganda. Those who speak Russian actively show their position on social media, they protest on the streets against Russia, and they join the territorial defence and armed forces units to fight against Russian invasion.

The Ukrainian-speaking population does not discriminate against Russian-speaking people simply on the basis of their language. In fact, Russian language is still present in private communication, business, and social media. However, there is a huge difference between Russian-speaking Ukrainians and pro-Russian beliefs.

But if Ukraine is distinct from Russia, why do so many Ukrainians speak Russian in the first place? The answer is genocide.

After the collapse of the Russian empire at the beginning of the 20th century, Ukrainians were fighting for their independence. The new wave of the cultural was thriving due to the fact that Ukrainian writers, poets, directors, and other artists, worked even under the conditions of total prohibition of the Ukrainian language. The Ukrainian elite was then massively arrested, deported, and executed by Stalin's regime. To date, the exact number of repressed Ukrainian artists is unknown. According to some estimates, this number reached 30,000 people.

In 1932 communist party of the USSR issued a resolution banning the Ukrainian language in schools and media. For several decades after that, the majority of universities taught exclusively in Russian and highly-paid positions were only open for Russian-speakers. It was only by 1959 that 23% of students in Kyiv studied the Ukrainian language. Because of the propaganda, it was even unpopular in some cities to learn Ukrainian up until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Consequently, fewer people were speaking Ukrainian as it was artificially wiped away.

Holodomor was a man-made famine that ravaged

Soviet Ukraine between 1932-33, resulting in the death of up to 10 million ethnic Ukrainians. One of the methods was blacklisting, an element of propaganda in the Soviet Union, especially to target Ukrainian farms and villages. The territories of blacklisted communities were encircled by special forces and armed troops, preventing the population from leaving these territories and seizing all food and harvest. It affected all the population of such villages, farmers, teachers, tradespeople, and children. At the same time, the USSR government had more than enough significant reserves of grain, was exporting it abroad, was banning and blocking travels outside of Soviet Ukraine, and was refusing to accept aid for the starving from abroad.

There was arranged migration of Russians to Ukraine. By the end of the 1930s, the USSR authorities settled Russians in Ukraine, largely to replace the millions of Ukrainians who perished from Holodomor.

Russians were moved to Kharkiv, Kherson, Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk, and Odesa regions. Since then, because of the urbanisation and settlements, a lot of Ukrainians have lost their native language in favour of the dominant urban Russian-speaking environment.

As a result, ethnic Ukrainians were forced into Russian language assimilation. Nowadays, Ukrainians think of Russian-speaking people as a part of their history. But it is now more than clear that the Russian-speaking Ukrainian population today is not identical to pro-Russian ideology.

The Russian-speaking population of Kharkiv, Sumy, Mariupol, Berdyansk, and many other cities are not welcoming Russian troops. Armed or unarmed, they are combating them.

But Ukrainians remain strong and support the country. More than 40,000 people volunteered to go to the army only during the first week of the war. More than £100m in private donations were made to only one specially opened bank account at the National Bank of Ukraine. The current numbers of donations are dozens of times more significant, as Ukrainians donate to many charity organisations supporting the defence. There is no way Ukraine can lose this war against the barbarians.

Iryna Barlit and Vladyslav Bandrovsky are lawyers in Kyiv with national and international law firms. Their home city of Zaporizhzhia is mostly Russian speaking and a main target of the Russian offensive in south east Ukraine.

Vlad has organised for Finnish ambulances to be donated to Zaporizhzhia, while Iryna and her husband Anton have been fundraising for medical and equipment assistance to the military.

Language is such a controversial and ideological or mythologised topic in Ukraine that a necessarily anonymous Liberator collective member asked Barlit and Bandrovsky follow up questions to challenge their rosy story. They are two high achieving and patriotic young Ukrainian professionals, but were they putting a positive spin on the situation?

Q: I don't agree with the perfect image of Ukraine as a perfect multilingual ethnic society. I understand loving Ukraine rhetoric during war but I've heard far too many of these perfect narratives - from Irish history (always the crimes of England, rarely the flaws of the Irish), from the Balkans etc.

In many cities of what is modern Ukraine, Russian, Yiddish, German, Polish (even French in Odessa) would have been predominant languages?

A: The way the questions are framed shows you are likely of a little bit shifted impression of what is happening in Ukraine and what are the peculiarities of Ukrainian history and culture.

Ukraine is a multicultural, multiethnicity, and multireligious state. Ukrainian culture and language were though always predominant, until Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union tried to wipe it out to assimilate people in Ukraine

They partly succeeded in doing that in some big cities, like Kharkiv and Donetsk for example. But the smaller cities and villages in the same regions still spoke and speak Ukrainian. But the big-city influence creates an image of a Russian speaking region.

But you should not view Ukraine as a nationalistic country at all, I can assure you of that, as, for example, Poland, where I lived for six months as an exchange student (and nationalism idea there is different from chauvinism and Nazism).

A typical nationalism ideology would simply not work in Ukraine because the Ukrainian national idea envisages full respect and support for other cultures. Maybe except those like Russian language which is used as a weapon for propaganda and an excuse for invasion. I think it's normal to have some precautions against the enemy that comes to kill your friends and family.

That's also a Russian propaganda narrative to frame Ukraine as a mixture of two parts of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires.

This narrative omits the fact that Ukrainian history, as a state, starts in 5th century with the state of Kyiv and Kyivan Rus. Thus, at a time when neither of these empires yet existed.

Q: Several people have complained to me that in eastern cities where people's language is Russian teachers and students are forced to have the classes only in Ukrainian even though the language spoken in the city is Russian, it is the native language. And I believe Ukrainian history and language are still compulsory in first year of studies? This struck me as replacing one ideology with another.

A: As to the language limitations, there are Russian speaking schools for those willing. At the same time history and the Ukrainian language is part of a Ukrainian school programme, that's correct.

You can easily speak Russian at Ukrainian speaking schools, but the books and teaching are in Ukrainian. Plus, you can easily speak Russian language in any part of Ukraine and there would be no issues at all. I can judge from my personal experience.

And, on a personal note, it's not the same as with Brexit and Trump supporters, climate change or covid deniers.

Forgive me for my straightforwardness, but I'm under an impression that these movements are more popular among less-educated people. Supporting Ukrainian independence and Ukrainian multiethnic culture was and are more popular among the educated part of Ukrainian society.

Since 2014, and especially now, there is a boom in the blossoming of all Ukrainian.

But rest assured, all other cultures, religions and languages remain loved and supported in Ukraine. Russian would be also supported unless they started a war against us eight years ago.

# WHEN THE WHEAT RUNS OUT

## Russia's invasion of Ukraine threatens to devastate world wheat supplies bringing starvation to poor countries far from the war, warns Phil Bennion

As 2021 ended, world grain prices were climbing to levels never seen in cash terms, and in real terms taking us back several decades. Most of the key producer regions had experienced poor yields at some point since 2019, so world stocks were being drawn down. We were not, however, experiencing anything like the crisis of 2008-09 when world grain production slumped by 7%. The price increase was more likely a response to high fuel prices. Commodities such as grains do generally see prices fluctuate with the oil price. So how has the war in Ukraine taken us from a normal price spike to a crisis in just a few weeks and how can the problems be mitigated?



### POOR BET

When President Putin was limbering up for his invasion, the price of wheat rose by around 10%. I made a very poor bet by selling almost all my wheat in the week before the invasion. I was fairly sure that the price would fall by 20% if the Russian army manoeuvres were called off and the troops returned to barracks. The invasion took place and wheat rose by a further 40% to double the price of summer 2021.

Although China and India are the two biggest producers of wheat, they are not exporters. One third of world wheat exports are supplied by Russia and Ukraine and about a quarter each by North America and the EU. Ukraine is also the biggest exporter of sunflower seed and other crops such as soya are also important.

The biggest importers of wheat are Egypt and Turkey, with Algeria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Sudan and Ethiopia all major importers from the Black Sea ports.

Within weeks of the invasion Egypt announced it was unable to import sufficient wheat at any price. A combination of sanctions on Russia and Russia blockading Ukrainian exports has already created a cost-of-living crisis in the developing world that makes our own look trivial. If supplies cannot be delivered in due course, this will turn into a real hunger crisis over the coming year. The World Food Programme has already sounded the alarm.

A political colleague suggested to me that surely farmers would do their best to increase production given the extraordinarily high wheat prices. Some governments and the EU have made efforts by relaxing the area farmers need to leave for greening measures, or by encouraging farmers to plant wheat instead of grass, as in the Irish Republic, or soya as in Brazil.

But the bigger picture is that cereal farmers are going to produce less, rather than more, a theory borne out by recent statistics from the United States Department of Agriculture and others.

Russia is the biggest exporter of nitrogen fertiliser, largely as natural gas is the key ingredient. Some EU producers also depend on Russian gas for fertiliser production. Here in the UK our biggest plant has been mothballed due to the high gas price. The cumulative result is that ammonium nitrate is now trading at 3.5 times its price of summer 2021.

The combination of wheat at twice the 2021 price but fertiliser 3.5 times is that the economic optimum rate of fertiliser application to wheat crops has fallen by about 20%. Hence the economically rational approach for a farmer to this grain shortage is to produce less. This is as clear a case of market failure as I have



encountered.

What can or should be done to alleviate this crisis before people begin to starve?

## **POLITICAL WEAPON**

The one thing that I would rule out is waiving sanctions on Russia. Many suspect that grabbing Ukraine's best grain land is part of Putin's motivation for the war. Success would give him huge power over grain supplies which he intends to use as a political weapon in the same way as he has been using gas. We could and should do all that we can to get Ukraine's grain to its markets, but the capacity to use trains as a substitute for ships is limited. It is at least as important to make sure that Ukraine's current crop receives its fertiliser. That will probably be too late by the time this is published.

Similarly governments in grain growing countries should intervene to ensure that fertiliser is available and that crop areas are not artificially restricted, at least until the situation in Ukraine stabilises and exports can get out. We should of course continue efforts to help developing countries feed themselves, but this will not deliver in the short term.

It already appears that too little is possible to avert real food shortages next year, even if supplies can be maintained for the time being.

The UK government has been an example of exactly what not to do. A domestic crisis in agriculture is unfolding as support payments are phased out and trade deals signed to import from others what we currently produce ourselves. These imports will be bought from the mouths of the hungry as our own farmers give up, despite having highly productive land. They have made no effort to keep the fertiliser plants operating despite not being reliant on Russian gas.

The real crunch will come if Ukrainian farmers are unable to harvest this year or plant for the 2023 harvest this autumn. Putin will be waiting for starvation to play into his hands as he believes that the world will let him keep his ill-gotten gains and end sanctions in order to be fed.

Such would be a rod for our own backs as blackmailers always come back for more. Western allies need to give as much thought to securing supplies, not so much for ourselves, but for African food importing countries, as they are giving to the military situation. If they do not, the impending crisis could well undermine the solidarity of the response to Putin's aggression.

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Phil Bennion is a former Liberal Democrat MEP for the west midland sand owns an arable farm in Staffordshire. He is chair of the Lib Dem Federal International Relations Committee.

# **SOCIAL LIBERAL FORUM CONFERENCE**

**UK and Europe: Offshore island or part of the main?**  
**Resource for London 356 Holloway Rd London N7 6PA**  
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Although Brexit has happened and Boris Johnson pretends the UK's focus is on the "Indo-Pacific", wherever that may be, and the government sees trading with Australia and the USA as the future, we remain part of the continent of Europe and must not throw away the history of peace, prosperity and environmental protection built by the European Union. This conference asks the question, how are we to continue to co-operate with our close friends and allies in Europe and who are those friends ?

Speakers include former Liberal Democrat MEPs Phil Bennion, Jane Brophy and Rebecca Taylor, leaders of our Dutch colleagues D66, Sophie in 't Veld and Gijs de Vries, Professor Chris Grey (author of *Brexit & Beyond* blog), Will Hutton of the Observer and our own Duncan Brack, Jane Dodds MS, Alistair Carmichael MP (giving the Beveridge lecture) and Baroness Julie Smith.

To register to attend in person or online, go here: <https://www.socialliberal.net/>

# DELUSIONS OF GRANDEUR ON THE DANUBE

Budapest resident Rupert Slade explains why Orbán's 'illiberal democracy' won Hungary's recent election and how this has disturbing parallels in the UK Tories

Three years ago I had a Facebook spat with an over zealous Liberal Democrat, no names mentioned, who said something on the lines of "any foreigner who chooses to live in Hungary is a panderer to fascism". He was very pious and wasn't open to discussion. I am not sure who blocked who, but we are no longer friends on Facebook. Prior to the recent Hungarian election my wife Kath and I said that if Orbán and Fidesz get a super majority we should leave. He did and we are still here.

Like the UK and much of Europe the story of Hungary is complex and has many parallels to the UK. In Budapest and the university cities of Debrecen, Pécs and Szeged you hardly ever meet a Fidesz supporter. In our very privileged leafy suburb on the Buda side of the Danube, we live in the most liberal borough in the whole of Hungary.

I am a comfortably retired advertising man, who now runs international English stand up comedy nights as a hobby. My business partner is a 22-year-old Bangladeshi student from Dakka. On a typical night our acts will come from Iran, France, India, Palestine, Finland, the USA and Hungary. The audience will be

even more diverse. I live in an international liberal bubble. I have a broad group of friends that include journalists, writers, playwrights, NGO workers, film people, actors, entrepreneurs.

There are no jackboots, no homophobes, no racists in our lives. Well, certainly not ones we are aware of. We live a rich and full life in the same way millions in the UK do, despite the fact we have Orbán here and the UK has Johnson. The narrative, normally correct but also misleading, from the western media would make you think we are living in a neo-totalitarian state. It simply isn't the experience, but as I said we do live in a bubble.

I can never profess to be an expert on Hungarian history, but to better understand why we are where we are I will give you a summary of the last 100 years. I am writing in a few hundred words that really need volumes to tell the full story, but I think to understand modern Hungary it is important to look back.

## ONCE VERY POWERFUL

Hungary was once very powerful. Of course it was one half of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Hungary stretched out into Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine.

After the first world war, after the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, they lost two-thirds of their territory. This is a constant starting point used by Orbán to underline his nationalism, euroscepticism and anti-liberalism. Hungary always feels unfairly treated. Hungary has blues like the UK of a former power and a love of celebrating a romantic and somewhat delusional nostalgic past. They love pageantry, royalty etc. In my job in media I remember a TV data analysis of William and Kate's wedding. Hungary, outside of Australia, New Zealand and Canada had the highest rating figures in the world. In contrast hardly anybody watched in neighbouring Poland



**Hungary's Parliament**

or the Czech Republic. Straight after World War 1 there was the Red Terror, which was a brutal attempt to turn Hungary communist. This was followed by the White Terror which was even more brutal counter to this revolution. Following the

White Terror the country was run by Admiral Horthy, who was a far-right regent who latterly appeased the Nazis, by agreeing to take Jewish people's property, but refusing to send them to camps. This obviously wasn't enough for the Nazis as they kicked out Horthy and set up a puppet government called the Arrow Cross who oversaw the deaths of 500,000 Jews. Horthy fled to Portugal and lived there until his death in 1957.

The communist government straight after the war were brutal and seized property and killed. A student uprising occurred in response to this hard nosed communist dictatorship resulting in Russian tanks coming into Budapest in 1956.

In the 70s and 80s Hungary liberalised much more than most of the Eastern Bloc. They could travel. There was more stuff in the shops. The government ruled by Janos Kadar tried to be equidistant between the East and the West. Although 'goulash' communism, as it was called, wasn't sustainable many Hungarians liked it and feel nostalgic for those days.

Between 1988 to 1992 were perhaps the best time in our lives to be liberal. The wall came down. the brutal Soviet Empire came to an end and a better world seemed possible.

## LIBERAL OPTIMISM

A man called Viktor Orban was the embodiment of this new liberal optimism. The problem was that the young urbanites saw the benefits of the change towards liberalism, but the old and the many living in small towns and the countryside saw a huge drop in their living standards. The security rug was taken from beneath their feet. The end of communism and speed of change was scary to many.

Since 1990 the divides between city and small town, young and old, rich and poor, educated uneducated have widened. Many middle class people can never give their vote to the left (the left are a very soft left these days) as the leading figures are often former communists or the privileged descendants of communists.

There is a fear of international influence. There is a narrative the country was sold off to foreign money. NGOs and the George Soros-owned Central European University( hounded out and now to Vienna are seen as internal agitators trying to overthrow the democratic system( There is some truth in this as Hungary moves closer towards fascism.

Orban realised very early on that the battle in democracy wasn't about winning the educated outward focussed international new middle class, but to be

*“Just imagine a coalition of UKIP (whatever they are called now), the Greens, the Lib Dems, the social democrat wing of Labour and the Corbyn left all getting behind one candidate to try and save democracy”*

the hero to the working and lower middle class. He knew how to create fear. He appealed to those terrified of immigrants, who live in places where immigrants never go. Evil atheistic liberals will pollute your children's values. Nasty internationalists

are selling the country. Orban professes to be deeply anti communist, yet behaves like one. He controls the media, the judges and like Kadar in the 70s/80s has positioned himself as equidistant to Russia/China and the European Union.

When I arrived in Hungary in 2008 Ferenc Gyurcsany was the MSZP socialist president. It was the time of the financial crisis. Gyurcsany, like many on the social democratic left of European politics, was really struggling fiscally. There were many in the party who were still clinging onto hard left Marxist philosophy.

He encouraged people to take out mortgages in Swiss Francs. Many middle class voters were burnt by this as the Hungarian Forint collapsed in value against the Swiss franc. Gyurcsany was deeply polarising. He was an ex-communist and extremely rich. On a day in 2006 he made a private speech to his party near Lake Balaton and apparently said: "We have obviously been lying for the last one and a half to two years."

In all honesty he was telling the truth, the economy was in deep trouble. Something had to change. Unfortunately this private meeting got leaked to the media. Orban exploited it to the maximum. He almost immediately created the image of "the out of date elite lying to the Hungarian people" It was only a matter of time before the left were dead in the water in Hungary.

Even to this day Orban knows that Gyurcsany is toxic to three parts of the electorate. The middle class whose families suffered under communism looking at the mega rich internationalist ex-communist, the middle classes who were hit by the Swiss Franc mortgage crisis and the working class who saw the left as elitist and anti-patriotic. He has even gone as far to say democracy is a threat to our country. He coined the term "illiberal deomocracy" at the Bálványos Free Summer University and Youth Camp, the overtly homophobic evangelical Christian festival.

Since this moment the left can never muster up enough votes to form a government. So if you are still with me, let me give you some parallels. We have a formerly liberal president who has shifted to the populist right to remain in and seize power. We have a leader here who knows how to connect with the uneducated small town population through identitarian nationalism. We have a leader who invents imaginary enemies to create fear (be that the European Union, Soros and thinly anti-Semitic international money, the Roma community, migrants and refugees, liberals, the left, the LGBTQ community). He understands the culture war and





**Redundant communist statuary in Budapest's Memento Park**

knows how to play it. Imagine a world where Johnson stays in power for another 10 years and you have a picture of Hungary's politics: Cronyism, corruption, no independent media, cultural pluralism under threat, universities run by the right, people in positions in all walks of life there through loyalty to government and not ability. Sounds a little like the current Tory government.

So what happened in the recent election? As a taster to the election Orbán recreated a Hungarian section 28. For those not old enough to remember, this was a law the Thatcher government created in the mid-80s stating that it was illegal to promote homosexuality to children.

## **GAY 'THREAT'**

Apparently, according to Fidesz the young in Hungary were under threat from gay people. In October last year I got a phone call from an old gay American advertising industry friend Frank. He said: "Rupert, my husband is the communication director for one of the presidential candidates, can we meet? I wonder if you can help."

I agreed to meet. The MSZP (the left) had finally decided that they could no longer win on their own. Quite extraordinarily, the five opposing parties were going to put up one candidate to represent all of them. Those parties moved from the far right Jobbik, who had become more of a kind of anti corruption party (Fidesz had flanked them on the right), Momentum

and the LMP (liberal/green parties) and the MSZP.

Just imagine a coalition of Ukip (whatever they are called now), the Greens, the Lib Dems, the social democrat wing of Labour and the Corbyn left all getting behind one candidate to try and save democracy.

My friend Frank and his husband Gary worked for Peter Marki Zay, a relatively unknown chap who had won a mayoralty against Fidesz in a small Hungarian town. He has spent years in Canada and identified himself as a conservative, although he was pro gay marriage and was revolted by Fidesz' corruption.

My response to these guys' question to help came back very quickly and pretty much describes what happens in a country that is losing its democracy. The agency I worked for previously, wouldn't touch it. Why? it would restrict their chances of winning 40% of the business available in Hungary. Billboard companies would just give Fidesz unsold stock in return for future favours. The banks, the government business, telecom companies and many companies that have done deals with Fidesz would blacklist my old agency.

This happens in all areas of business life here. A clever entrepreneurial friend of mine won something similar to the Dragon's Den here with his wife. He quickly discovered that the investment fund that was going to back him was run by Orbán's daughter. Orbán's rather average son in law owns one of the



biggest public infrastructure firms in Hungary.

To better understand Hungary, the articles in the likes of the Guardian and the Economist talk a lot about Orban's culture war, racism, xenophobia, homophobia and anti refugee rhetoric. Although all of this is important, they often miss the central point. Much of the culture war is a deflection to hide government cronyism and kleptocracy.

In my business a few years ago, Fidesz introduced a law that media companies that made profits of more than 5.0m euros would be taxed at around 50%. There was only one media owner who made this kind of profit and that was Luxembourg-owned RTL. As soon as they introduced this tax RTL started buying up small TV stations to minimise profits and running Orban critical editorial. Within the year the tax was eliminated on the condition that the chief executive was fired and the editorial stopped criticising the government.

Marki Zay came third in the first round behind Gergely Karascony (liberal mayor of Budapest) and Klara Dobrev. Dobrev was married to the polarising Gyurcsany. After a lot of backroom dealing Marki Zay was announced to be the man to represent this extremely unlikely coalition. For the next few months the internet was bombarded with messages calling Marki Zay the puppet of Gyurcsany. For a while there was a feeling Marki Zay might just do it or at least get rid of the super majority. The coalition voting for an 'honest' conservative made him quite a difficult figure to attack.

Imagine someone like Ken Clarke representing a coalition of everybody against Johnson. It was something similar. One of Hungary's worst kept secrets is that apparently Orban's son is gay. This became a major line of attack. Orban tried to smear Marki Zay's wife who worked as a midwife. It was very dirty politics. The problem was the Fidesz government had the resources to outspend Marki Zay by 10 to 1. Objectively Fidesz should have been in big trouble. Hungary had nearly the highest covid death rate in Europe( twice that of the UK) and the economy was tanking (far worse than its neighbours) and is now in a super precarious position with rampant inflation. Then the war came...

## POPULIST MASTER STROKE

This enabled Orban to perform a populist master stroke. My liberal Hungarian friends were angry before. This made them even angrier. Some 70% of Hungary's energy supply comes from Russia. Orban has been cosyng up to Puiin in recent times, making himself equidistant between the EU and Russia/China.

We thought this would put him in an untenable position. So much in Hungary is defined by 1956 when the Russian tanks came in and 170,000 Hungarians fled for their lives. We thought he was in a very tricky spot. He did agree to take refugees and the volunteerism in Hungary has been something to behold, but he started trying to be peacemaker, which obviously didn't work. His messaging quickly became one of appeasement. He was saying something like "We will not provoke Putin by letting weapons come through our land. I will keep your sons safe from war" and "the left want to drag us into war". His implication was pretty much backing up Putin's propaganda machine. The west were inherently aggressive and Nato had provoked Russia to invade Ukraine.

March 15 is the nationalist holiday when Hungarians celebrate the 'Hungarian revolution' in 1848 when they fought for independence from the Austrians.

This year was a sunny day and I went to meet a friend near Nyugati railway station. I went to the refugee centre to ask what they were short of. They needed paracetamol. It was a national holiday, so I spent two hours looking for an open chemist. I eventually found one. I bought 100 euros worth of Panadol. The man behind me heard me buy the Panadol and said "please wait for me". Ten minutes later he came out of the pharmacy and handed me another 100 euros of Panadol. In these awful times, little moments like this make you realise there is lots of good in the world. The trams weren't running. I started to walk the 4km trip home. The trams had stopped, because 100,000 people were marching for so called 'peace'. The evil liberal left right green coalition were apparently going to drag Hungary into war. This is Hungary, the nation that was invaded in 1956 by Russian tanks. This is the nation that wrongly appeased Hitler and took away Jewish property at the beginning of WW2. I felt I was in a scene from Bob Fosse's Cabaret as this crowd of nationalist Orban supporters sang nationalist songs. I knew at that moment Orban was going to win. I went home and wept. He won and he won with his super majority.

A few weeks later I am now doing eight nights of comedy a month. My life is rich, but somehow politics has got more personal. As a liberal I have always had friends from every wing of politics. Somehow that is more difficult now. Similar things are going on in the UK. Budapest is my home and i have too much invested here to leave.

Liberal democracy is so worth defending. This ghastly war cements that. There is no middle ground.

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Rupert Slade is a British Liberal Democrat resident in Hungary

# HOW MACRON WON AGAIN

French parties are more fluid than their UK counterparts, changing name and shape as they hunt for votes.

Marianne Magnin explains

At the start of May, the results of British local elections were colliding with waves of announcements of alliances and candidates for the French Parliament, whose election in June shortly follows April's presidential race.

Far-right leader Marine Le Pen is still on leave reflecting on her third failure to be elected president, whilst the third runner, far-left Jean-Luc Mélenchon, is day-dreaming of becoming prime minister to Emmanuel Macron's second term government.

What are the deep shifts affecting French political waters? How did Macron manage to be re-elected, the first time for a French president since Mitterrand in 1988? What is looming ahead with the MP elections in June? Will Macron conserve a governing majority at the National Assembly?

The political dichotomy between the socialist party (Parti Socialiste) and the traditional right (Les Républicains) that had prevailed for decades started to flounder when Sarkozy and Hollande took positions remote from their parties' values for short term electoral gain. Macron's La République En Marche successfully destabilised the status quo in 2017, and completed that capsizing in 2022.

In 2017, the election as resident of Emmanuel Macron – who had been finance minister under Hollande's mandate, was partially attributed to his ability to syphon the socialist votes.

## VERTIGINOUS PLUNGE

On the first round, the PS candidate had dropped from 28.63% in 2012 (Hollande) to 6.36% in 2017 (Hamon) and 1.75% in 2022 (Hidalgo). The absence of an engaging political vision promoted by the PS and poor leadership are two of the root causes of such a vertiginous plunge.

In 2022, Macron improved his score on the first round by almost 4% (27.85% vs 24.01% in 2017), this time by tapping into the traditional right. His governmental measures reforming the labour market helped boost French economy. Taken with his 2022 programme in favour of a reform of the pension system and minimal social aid dependent on recipients engaging in community work convinced a large portion of right-wing voters.

Valérie Pécresse from Les Républicains only secured 4.78% of the votes – below the 5% threshold required for her campaign expenses to be fully covered by the state. This score has to be compared to the 20.01% achieved by François Fillon in 2017 despite the Penelopegate scandal that had undermined his performance. The blame goes to the contortions of Pécresse during her campaign trying to reconcile three diverging right tendencies - orleanist (France as a dynamic, entrepreneurial and liberal spirit, pro-

European for meta-order, with strong institutions and moral ground), legitimist (France as an eternal entity, with cherished traditions and the Catholic church at its core) and napoleonist (France as a grand nation and global player, proud of its Republic and meritocratic education system). Pécresse's unreconcilable posture was further undermined by strong alternative political propositions, respectively by Macron (orleanist) and new-comer Zémour (legitimist). Having alienated the orleanists by trying to retain legitimists, Pécresse squeezed her electorate's trust, who opted to split their votes between Macron and Zémour.

Back in 2017, Macron's second external success factor was the critical support he had received before the first round from François Bayrou, the leader of Mouvement Démocrate who had scored 18.57% at 2007 presidential elections. This alliance also led LREM and MoDem to constitute the first and third largest parliamentary groups (2017-22), securing a comfortable majority to support Macron's policies.

That coalition was strengthened by the creation of Horizons in October 2021. Of centre-right sensibility, this party was founded by a former prime minister of Macron's, Edouard Philippe, who benefits from one of the highest popularity scores in France and has succeeded in mobilising a vast local network of mayors.

Under the suggestion of Bayrou, these three parties and smaller ones close to Macron at the end of 2021, launched an umbrella organisation, Ensemble Citoyens! to synchronise the voice of the majority and prepare the 2022 elections. There was for instance no centre-left/centre/centre-right dissident presidential candidate, allowing Macron to capitalise votes earlier on the first round. Likewise, the investiture of MP candidates has been coordinated by the coalition, with a calibrated arbitrage to represent the respective weight of each party. All are running under one flag: Ensemble!. By the same token, LREM has changed its brand to Renaissance, the moniker they previously used for the European elections.

Macron, mobilised by the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, announced his candidature just before the deadline. It had the effect of irritating other contenders, a presidential hook that left them fighting amongst themselves. When Macron entered the campaign waters, he positioned his message as constructive and open. "Avec Vous" – with you - was his slogan. Humility was another trait, to counter the constant critique of him being arrogant and saturnian. Macron won the race.

Marine Le Pen is well known abroad. She is the daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the founder of National Front (now National Rally) back in 1972. This dynasty of nationalist and far-right politicians has been running for each presidency since then.

Having reached the second round in 2017, Marine Le Pen spectacularly crashed during the TV debate against Macron. Having learned her lesson, she spent the next five years repolishing her image. There was no longer mention of leaving the euro or the EU, there were numerous photocalls with her cats. And Le Pen spent a significant time criss-crossing rural territories and former industrial hubs, where her electorate is primarily located.

What Le Pen could not anticipate was the emergence of a media favourite challenging her de-facto “chasse-gardée”, a decade-long well-protected hunting ground. Eric Zémour might be a new entrant in politics but certainly not a new public figure. A successful political journalist, essayist and pundit, he has been spreading his controversial views on immigration and Islam for more than ten years, notwithstanding misogynistic and racist positions. In September 2021, he was the second most talked about political figure in French media, just after Macron. There was so much excitement building-up and promising prospects that Zémour announced his candidature to presidency in November 2021 under the label Reconquête. Legitimist voters felt that he was offering a more dignified voice than Le Pen’s populist tones. His provocative statements and aggression though progressively flattened the soufflé, landing him with only 7% of votes in April 2022. This same acerbic inclination provoked Le Pen to the point of no possible joint sailing post presidential elections.

Le Pen could actually fish in a much larger pond. Her main message was focused on improving households’ buyer power, which was pooled by far as the leading priority for French voters, with social aid and security arriving next. A message that would resonate with left voters too.

## PRESIDENTIAL COMPOSURE

She scored 23.15% on the first round, compared with 21.30% in 2017, enough to secure her access to duel with Macron. Whilst political analysts and the public judged that the TV debate was again won by Macron, she had managed this time to keep a more presidential composure. This was still insufficient to convince enough voters with her unrealistic list of financial promises, vague plans and contradictions, who granted her 13,287,688 bulletins (41.45%), compared to 10,638,475 (33.90%) in 2017. The citizen barrage against the far-right proved less strong than in 2017, notably weakened by higher abstentions (28.1% vs 25.44%) whereas blank and void votes remained stable.

Whilst both the moderates and the far-right were consolidating their positions at the expense of the right, what kind of fish was swimming in the left waters?

There were six left, ecologist and far-left candidates to the presidential elections in 2022 against four in 2017. Facing split and unconvincing candidatures, left voters casted a ‘vote utile’ coalesced around the nosiest contender. None of these candidates managed to score more than 5% except for Jean-Luc Mélanchon, who increased his performance from 19.58% in 2017 to almost 22% and came in third, a close tail behind Le Pen.

The first message that Mélanchon delivered on the night of the presidential race final results, was his intention to run a third round consisting in sweeping the MP elections and imposing himself as prime

minister: “The President, it’s me” to paraphrase the sentence he threw at the police when the French justice tried in 2018 to access his HQ for search of evidence of LFI’s financial tempering: “La République, c’est moi!”.

Mélanchon, a gifted orator, has been stirring discontent on the far-left for a number of years. He had launched the left-wing populist party La France Insoumise (LFI) in 2016 in relative discretion, with an ideology promoting measures against four emergencies – democratic, social, ecological and geo-political, including a sixth Republic to replace what Mélanchon describes as today’s “presidential monarchy” and the withdrawing from NATO and free trade agreements (TIPP, CETA...). He was notably very vocal during the yellow vests’ riots that undermined the beginning of Macron’s first term.

What Mélanchon failed to achieve for this April presidential run he succeeded ahead of June legislatives: bring together dispersed left-wing parties under one banner named Nupes, for Nouvelle Union Populaire Écologique et Sociale (New People’s Ecologic and Social Union). The LFI party is led by Mélanchon without a structured governance. This is deliberate. Decisions are taken by him, there is no assembly or mechanism to escalate policies and any dissonant voice is systematically eliminated. LFI functions like an autocratic court ruled by a megalomaniac. It is noticeable that Mélanchon consistently praises authoritarian leaders such as Chavez, Xi Jinping, Castro, Lula and Putin. He conveniently condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine but put the blame on NATO.

One of Mélanchon’s mottos is the word “rupture”: he for instance promotes disobedience to European treaties, a vague term that has the faculty of feeding his school of followers but also deeply contravenes the convictions of ecologist and socialist parties forming part of Nupes. This is leading to further erosion amongst EELV and PS figureheads, militants and supporters. The question is how long the left-wing will tolerate being coaxed by Mélanchon, especially when the legislative results fail to deliver enough MPs to challenge Macron. Rocky lie waters ahead.

Macron is facing three main challenges: one existential for the planet with climate change, one European with Russia destabilising the world order and democratic fundamentals, and one at home with deep controversy and alienation amongst a large portion of French citizens. The president has announced a new method of governance, to re-establish trust in political decision making and public policies. More proportionality will be one of the tools to make it happen.

But it won’t be enough. To signal that responsibility does not mean privilege, to explain that the time of action is not the time of media, a didactic dialogue needs to be systematically engaged at all levels of society. To unleash the French creativity and collaboration needed to collectively address these challenges, trust will need to be placed in our citizens’ hands too. Adults to adults. Let’s see how the newly appointed Prime Minister, Elisabeth Borne, will captain across France charts.

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Marianne Magnin is general secretary of MoDem abroad (Fédération des Français à l’Étranger du Mouvement Démocrate)

# NOT ENOUGH JUST BEING 'NOT THE TORIES'

Good results in May are no excuse for the Liberal Democrats failing to work out what they stand for as well as oppose, says Roger Hayes

It was another assured performance across the country from the Liberal Democrats at this year's local elections. The party easily made the most net gains (224 across Great Britain) and took a respectable 19% of the national vote share, with advances including Scotland and Wales, where its performance has been less than impressive in recent years.

The Greens also made heathy progress making 81 gains from a relatively low base. But, once again, Labour failed to impress outside of London, falling short in a number of important 'Red Wall' councils and losing Hull to the Lib Dems. It was however an atrocious performance from the Conservatives that made life so much easier for all other parties, almost everywhere.

What makes the Tories net loss of 485 seats all the more pitiful is that they were defending far fewer seats as these were not, by-and-large, traditional Conservative areas being contested. They are about 25% down on the number of seats in England they went into this election defending.

Across the country, the Lib Dems took control of councils as well as making great gains in seats. Somerset, Gosport, Westmorland and Furness and Woking are now all under Lib Dem control, together with us now being the largest party on West Oxfordshire and Powys councils.

## NORTH KOREAN

The night also saw some spectacular results of North Korean proportion for the Lib Dems: 20 gains in St Albans takes the party's tally to 50 councillors, while the Tories could manage just four. In Richmond-upon-Thames the Lib Dems renewed their controversial pact with the Greens electing all 48 candidates they stood. The Greens, by comparison, could only manage to get five of their six over the line with Lib Dem support, allowing a lone Conservative in Hampton North. In effect the Lib Dems not only elected a resounding majority to run Richmond Council but they also elected the opposition!

After an 18-year sabbatical, I am now back on the council in Kingston where we so far have 41 seats and the Tories are down to three. An Independent died before polling day in New Malden so one three-member ward there had to be held over to June.

Against the expectations of some, we held onto control of Sutton and our colleagues in Labour-run Merton made spectacular gains to overhaul the Tories and become the opposition and almost banished Labour completely from Wimbledon constituency including taking the seat of the leader of the council.

The results also put the party in a very strong position to take a number of Conservative-held parliamentary seats at the next general election. Dominic Raab will certainly be looking nervously over his shoulder for the next couple of years, while Wimbledon, Cheadle, Hazel Grove, Hitchin & Harpenden, Cheltenham, Winchester, South Cambridgeshire and Carshalton & Wallington also all look good for the taking. The party's odds-on favourite position to take the upcoming Tiverton and Honiton by-election also looks well founded at the moment.

We must also note the fantastic strides made by our sister party, the Alliance Party in Northern Ireland's Stormont elections. Now clearly the third party in NI politics and seriously knocking on the power-sharing door. They too should also look forward to an increased representation at Westminster next time round.

Among all the well-deserved celebrations, however, some words of caution are still necessary. Following last year's two great by-elections victories in Chesham and Amersham and North Shropshire, this set of local elections is further evidence of solid and continuing advancement for the Liberal Democrats.

## BEATING HEART

Yet, I remain to be convinced that the party is fully returned in philosophical and policy terms. There has been a great 'corporatisation' of the party that concerns me, and it belies the last half-century of community politics that should be at the very beating heart of our party's purpose.

Following the catastrophic hollowing out during the Clegg years, the aftermath of coalition has brought five or six years, under a succession of short-lived leaders, of a party that has floundered and failed to find both purpose and support.

Even recent successes have been down to us being more the 'not-the-Tory-party' than actually because of us being a Liberal party with a strong identity and well-articulated philosophy and policy platform.

Now that some electoral success is returning, I worry that in some places, including my own area, complacency is setting in. An expectation that we will win and win big is leading to a 'steady as she goes', 'bit more of the same' attitude and the 'corporatisation' is in danger of taking over.

Johnson and his maddening incompetent circus of loathsome buffoonery can seem disarmingly soft and ripe for the taking, indeed even many of the Conservative's own members are finding it difficult to support the party, let alone its traditional voters.

One has only to look at the ragbag of misfits and make-weights that masqueraded as its candidates in



many wards this year to realise that this is a party that has truly lost its way. I think that this makes it all the more important, not less, that we are a strong, sustaining and above all Liberal alternative to an uncaring and populist Tory government and an as yet bland Labour opposition.

As the party now moves on to Tiverton and Honiton and hopefully another great by-election victory the country needs to see that the Liberal Democrats cannot just beat the Tories at the ballot box, but are best placed to replace them as the true custodians of caring community values that can create a more liberal society and help mend our badly broken and divided country.

I know we have elected some very good liberals this year and I very much hope that our many new councillors, and the councils they run and the communities they are part of and influence, will show how we are different by not just what is done but by the very way we do things.

*“I remain to be convinced that the party is fully returned in philosophical and policy terms”*

A true Liberal alternative demonstrated by everyday action, engagement, and enthusiasm.

I have often said: you may initially win by being against something but, ultimately, resilience and long-term success can only come from fearlessly standing for things, campaigning on them, being known for it and attracting members, supporters, communities and eventually votes to those causes.

Now is very much the time for that clear, Liberal alternative. As Labour falters they are realising

that just not being the Tories is not enough. Nowhere near enough, and neither should it be. We too must continue to learn that lesson, and fast, and show strong Liberal leadership at every level across the country. We have made two steps forward, let's ensure there are no steps back.

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Roger Hayes is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Kingston and former council leader

## UNIVERSITY CHALLENGE

Scotland's Liberal Democrats have got good at winning in university, suburban and rural areas but lag elsewhere while the SNP stays inexplicably popular.

Nigel Lindsay reports

Ferries are probably not high on most people's list of election campaign issues. But in Scotland they formed a hotly-contested topic throughout this year's local election campaign. Private sector operators were in disgrace after P&O had to suspend sailings between Scotland and Northern Ireland, first after illegally sacking many crew members and later when operational and safety problems surfaced.

But the SNP government was also in deep water: two new island ferries ordered by them in controversial circumstances are more than five years late, still a long way from delivery, and at least £150m over budget.

These marine problems have a direct effect on voters in the many island and coastal areas, and an indirect effect on the whole Scottish economy. They formed a fluid backdrop to campaigning in the 2022 Scottish council elections, which are of course held under a system of broadly proportional representation.

It was a buoyant night for Liberal Democrats. We increased our 2017 total of 67 councillors to 87 in 2022, and settled as the fourth party in Scotland in terms of votes and number of

councillors elected. Our representation on Edinburgh City Council rose from six to 12, and on Fife Council from seven to 13. On Highland Council we increased from 10 to 15 and on Dundee City Council we rose from two to four members.

The indefatigable Robert Brown was re-elected yet again in South Lanarkshire, this time with two colleagues, and Dobbie Aldridge extended his admirable 38-year stint on Edinburgh City Council. Liz Mowat consolidated her by-election victory in Perth, remaining with three colleagues there. Among new councillors elected were Charles Kennedy's cousin, David Steel's granddaughter, and the well-liked former MP Alan Reid. Set against that are some significant losses. The Lib Dem leader on Aberdeenshire Council, Peter Argyle, lost his seat despite our gains elsewhere in that area. We went from two councillors in Angus in 2017 to none this year, losing the seat of Ben Lawrie, a talented campaigner who will hopefully be back. We are down one in Argyll. Painfully, we no longer have any councillors in Inverclyde, an authority we used to control, following the decision of our last councillor there, Ciano Rebecchi, not to stand again.

## CREST OF A WAVE

The SNP were on the crest of a wave. Unionists had been claiming that the administration had run out of steam after 15 years, that voters were fed up with the party's focus on a second independence referendum, and that the cautious approach of the Scottish Government on Covid-19 was unpopular with voters. None of this turned out to be true. The SNP actually increased their total number of councillors by 22 and achieved by far the highest share (34.1%) of the vote. Against all predictions they retained overall control of Glasgow City Council – no mean feat under a proportional system. Two of the new SNP councillors were people who had come to Scotland as refugees. Alba, the party set up as a spoiler by Alex Salmond, achieved derisory votes and failed to win a single council seat anywhere.

A vigorous anti-SNP campaign was mounted by a group called Scotland in Union, which achieved wide distribution of leaflets and campaign material slugging off the SNP. They urged people to vote against the SNP and Greens, and for the Conservatives, Labour, or LibDems. For every vote this gained us, we probably lost two on account of the association it produced in people's minds between Lib Dems and Conservatives.

The Conservatives listed to starboard and then sank, losing 63 council seats. Importantly, they lost their position as second party in Scotland to Labour, who gained 21.7 of the vote against 19.6% for the Conservatives. (Our share was 8.6%.) The Conservative leader Douglas Ross – unkindly mocked as Dross - is a football linesman but could not maintain the firm decision-making which that implies. He started the campaign calling for Boris Johnson to resign, and ended it calling for Boris Johnson not to resign. Johnson is a thoroughly toxic figure in Scotland, and Ross's vacillation on the subject cost him dear.

There were a couple of safe harbours for the Conservatives in north-east Scotland.

They won three new seats on Aberdeenshire Council, and three on Moray Council. This may reflect cultural and economic differences between the north-east and central Scotland and the lower Remain majorities in these areas, but could also show the Conservatives getting better at using the STV system. In Moray, incidentally, we won the first-ever Lib Dem seat in the fishing port of Buckie. We did this by the dastardly ruse of nominating a candidate when the other parties forgot to do so.

Labour found the wind in its sails thanks to Anas Sarwar, the first effective leader it has had in Scotland for many years. In West Dunbartonshire Council they won overall control, something that isn't supposed to happen under the PR system. They ended up with a net gain of 20 seats and a feeling of quiet satisfaction, even though the SNP remained the largest party in all four of the large cities.

Alex Cole-Hamilton ran a competent and shipshape campaign, building on the firm foundations set by Willie Rennie. His party political broadcast called for more staff for schools and GP surgeries, and an end to rail fare rises and cuts in local government finance, which he rightly blamed on the SNP.

Alex called attention to partying in Downing Street and proposed a 'Robin Hood Tax' on the huge profits of oil and gas companies.

## MEADOWCROFT TEST

Not all of this filtered through to local leaflets, some of which failed the Meadowcroft test (do they contain anything that another party couldn't say?). There sometimes seemed to be a reluctance at local level to be clear about what the party stands for and why it is different. Linked with this was a lack of active campaigning on local issues by some candidates. There seemed on occasion to be too much reliance on the electoral system delivering seats on the back of the national vote share.

To build up effective council groups we shall need more candidates to get involved at an early stage and build identification between their names and action on issues that matter in the seats they contest. An example has been set in the Almond ward of Edinburgh City Council. In this part of Alex's constituency, we won three of the four available seats. Desmond Bouse won an unlikely seat in Aberdeen by similar methods. It can be done.

There is a deeper issue, however. Our successes, welcome as they all are, tend to be in university, suburban, or rural areas where we are seen as a more attractive and more competent alternative to the Conservatives. Nothing at all wrong with that, of course – such support is invaluable. But if we are to become a party of national influence again, we shall have to address the fact that we remain unrepresented in some of the most disadvantaged parts of Scotland.

At present, there is a Lib Dem presence in 15 of the 29 Scottish local authorities run on party lines. A worthwhile challenge would be to build on our 2022 successes by finding our way into more of these. That could help bring us closer to the dream of rebuilding a Lib-Lab coalition at Holyrood.

We have become good at gaining votes from people who shop at John Lewis, and that is an achievement in itself. To move forward, we need to find a way of making the party relevant also to people who shop at Poundstretcher and Primark. That is a matter of culture as well as of policy; it is a matter of how we speak, who we speak to, and who we listen to. Can we translate our wordy policies into language that appeals on the doorsteps of Coatbridge or Falkirk?

At last autumn's conference, the Scottish Lib Dems gave consideration to a strategy for the party. The draft strategy advised: "Most of all, we have to recognise the needs of voters in severely disadvantaged areas who have been neglected by Labour, Conservatives, and the SNP. They will be loyal voters if we stand up for their needs." This could be a good time to start implementing that advice.

But Rome was not built in a day. Just now, Scottish Lib Dems have every right to feel pleased with the progress made in these elections. With a leader unsullied by involvement in the Coalition years, and morale improved by sound wins, they are surely on a rising tide.

---

Nigel Lindsay is a former councillor in Aberdeen

# A GLIMMER IN WALES

## May's elections saw a tentative record for the Welsh Liberal Democrats, says Peter Black

In contrast to England, the Welsh council seats being fought this year were last contested in 2017 when Jeremy Corbyn was at the height of his unpopularity, and the Tories were riding high in the polls, with Theresa May poised to plunge her party into a misguided and disastrous general election.

The base from which the opposition parties approached this year's elections, therefore, was not a very healthy one. In 2017, Welsh Labour had lost 112 seats and a number of councils to no overall control. In contrast, the Tories had gained 79 seats and consolidated their hold on Monmouthshire. Plaid Cymru gained 38 seats,

Welsh Liberal Democrats had emerged from the 2017 council elections with just 59 councillors, 10 down on the previous election. It was not a good year for us, as the long, slow recovery from the Clegg coalition years continued to hamper our efforts.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats performance has always lagged behind our neighbours across Offa's Dyke, simply because we have to compete with a better resourced nationalist party for protest and centre-ground voters.

Other differences with England this time included the enfranchisement of 16- and 17-year-olds, and early voting experiments in some areas. Parties no longer needed to secure 10 signatures on each nomination, which made it much easier to get candidates in place quickly.

We also appeared to be much better organised, with Powys in particular at last coming into its own. In the past, we have held parliamentary and Senedd seats in Brecon and Radnorshire and Montgomeryshire without paying too much attention to our local government base, and we paid the price.

This time we got candidates in place across the county and campaigned effectively. It made a real difference and will hopefully help us recapture those seats.

With 1,232 seats and 22 councils up for grabs it was essential the Welsh Liberal Democrats put up a good showing, however we only had 284 candidates, slightly up on last time, exposing the fact that we remain weak and disorganised in many parts of Wales.

As campaigning got underway, a number of trends emerged. Firstly, the Tories were struggling, more so even than in England. Their net loss of 86 seats was proportionally worse than elsewhere in the UK, losing 40% of their Welsh council seats, and their failure to hold onto Monmouthshire was a major blow. This was especially so as the council leader had been openly critical of Boris Johnson, which he had hoped would provide some protection.

Labour benefitted from the Welsh identity carved out by their First Minister Mark Drakeford, evidenced by the distinct approach taken by the Welsh Government during the pandemic. Their net gain of 67 seats was actually better than their performance in other nations, both numerically and proportionally, and they regained two councils from no overall control.

However, they failed to retake all the seats they lost in 2017 and saw Neath Port Talbot, a flagship, fall to no overall control. On balance their results fell short of a general election winning position, and highlighted continuing disillusion with them, Keir Starmer and with politics in general, in a country dominated by Labour.

Plaid Cymru certainly took comfort from being able to take majority control of three more councils, giving four in all, but this was very much a heartland consolidation. In fact the nationalists had a net loss of six seats and struggled to make an impact outside of the Welsh-speaking west.

For the Welsh Liberal Democrats, these elections were very much a curate's egg. We made a net gain of 11 seats (the first net gain since 2008) and became the largest party in Powys with 24 councillors. We also made gains in Pembrokeshire, Ceredigion, Neath Port Talbot, and Swansea, taking seats from Labour in the last two.

In my own authority of Swansea, we increased our group size from seven to 11, to become the official opposition. However, it was not such a rosy picture elsewhere.

We lost ground in Cardiff and Newport, and were effectively wiped out in Bridgend, Blaenau Gwent, and Monmouthshire. There are a number of councils such as Carmarthenshire, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil, Torfaen and the Vale of Glamorgan, where we continue to have no representation.

In the whole of south east Wales, we now have just one councillor, while our weakness in other parts of Wales underlines organisational and political issues that we have failed to address.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats have once more been pushed back to our heartland areas in rural mid-Wales. Some successes in urban areas like Swansea and Cardiff do not compensate for us no longer being able to claim to be a Wales-wide force electorally.

If we are to change that then there needs to be much more focus on rebuilding organisations, recruiting members and candidates, and instituting all-year round campaigning in black-hole areas. We have to start now if we are to make an impact in future elections.

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Peter Black was the Welsh Liberal Democrats Assembly Member for South Wales West 1999-2016. He is a councillor in Swansea

# GOD SAVE THE ELECTED HEAD

## The next monarch should face a confirmatory vote, says William Tranby

News about the Queen's increasing frailty has become a regular feature of TV bulletins in recent weeks as she withdraws from the duties listed in her diary, sometimes at short notice. It appears that Prince Charles is on hand from the substitutes' bench at all times.

The BBC continues to remind its viewers and listeners that Charles will succeed to the throne eventually, so all these substitution appearances are appropriate training for his future role as head of state.

At the State Opening of Parliament on 10 May not only did Charles read out the Speech but prince William was in attendance to undertake the substitute's training as well. Isn't it about time we had the debate about what happens when the Queen leaves the stage?

We are supposed to be a democracy. While the role of head of state is in public a ceremonial one for the adoring crowds to faun over, the postholder has the duty of signing off into law all the Bills passed by Parliament, has the important role of requesting a party leader to form a Government and leads the diplomatic soft power exercised through hosting state events when international dignitaries visit.

I have no criticism of the Queen in how she has carried out the role thus far, but I am not convinced that any other member of the royal family has the qualities needed to fulfil the duties. I am not even convinced that the general public has confidence that the monarchy should continue to provide us with a head of state because of birthright.

I am not arguing for a change to a presidency, but an initial confirmatory vote by referendum that the next in line gets to become the elected head of state. If a royal nominee is not successful, then a wider field of candidates should be considered in an election conducted by the alternative vote system for a 10-year term of office.

At all times when there is a vacancy for head of state then the administrative roles could be undertaken by the speaker, or jointly with the Lords speaker as a job share.

We need not worry about siren voices accusing us of all of being republican revolutionaries by instigating the initial debate on the future leadership of our country.

If we end up drifting away from a constitutional monarchy by popular choice through a people's vote, then we could redefine ourselves as a constitutional democracy, rather than a republic with an executive president.

We could continue to allow members of the existing royal family to put themselves forward for the head of state role in future electoral contests. After all we

had a longer interregnum when Cromwell claimed the role, and that could be said to have strengthened the monarchical tradition for the next 460 years.

The Tories and current Labour leadership would not consider sparking this debate but my proposal to have a confirmatory vote for Charles to take over from the Queen would mark the Liberal Democrats as the party prepared to consider extending the franchise to the people on an important issue for the country.

Are we a democracy or not? Are we citizens or subjects? Do we continue to doff our caps to those who inherit their property, wealth, privileges and titles without having a say on whether we want the establishment to stay as they are?

No doubt those the Tories managed to fool into voting for them in the red wall seats will support the monarchy in such a confirmatory vote, but there will be others from all political persuasions who might want to pause the immediate succession and think through the alternatives.

There may not be obvious candidates who could offer the selfless dedication that the Queen has shown for 70 years, but we are an island nation with many talents and so let's not make quick decisions when the vacancy arises.

---

William Tranby is a member of the Liberator Collective

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Liberator readers may be divided into those who first heard of Norman Scott in Ben Whishaw's TV portrayal, those who were confused by the references in Exmoor Baht 'at in the Liberator songbook or those old enough to remember the surreal events in the 1970s as the Scott affair played out in the courts and in the press.

Now Scott has produced a sort of autobiography, taking its title from Whishaw's description of him as 'gay icon', and a very curious, but enjoyable read it is.

Scott came from humble beginnings in Kent, with an absent father and an abusive mother who may have been keener on the good things in life than the demands of motherhood. Scott was clearly traumatised by catching his mother in flagrante and was eventually placed in a remand home.

The book chronicles in some detail his early life, drifting from mishap to mishap, finding and losing employment at a baffling rate, moving around England to Switzerland, Ireland, the Isle of Man, Germany and all points west.

Central to all this was his love of horses, a willingness to work hard and, it would appear, a certain amount of talent at training and riding dressage. He also had a period as a male model, making the most of the fashion-conscious 1960s and experienced a series of relationships, one of which implausibly involved him being whisked off to Bayreuth and Salzburg for the opera by a newly-met acquaintance and another saw him being given "an expensive silver watch in the shape of a stirrup" from someone he met in a Soho pub the night before.

While working in the Cotswolds as a groom for a dodgy cove called Brecht Van der Vater (in reality Norman Vivian Vater – a lot of people is this sorry saga adopt implausible names, including Scott himself) Scott met Jeremy Thorpe, the dashing, ambitious young Liberal MP for North Devon.

Scott left the stables and, after a spell in a psychiatric hospital, found himself homeless, jobless and without his National Insurance



# REVIEWS

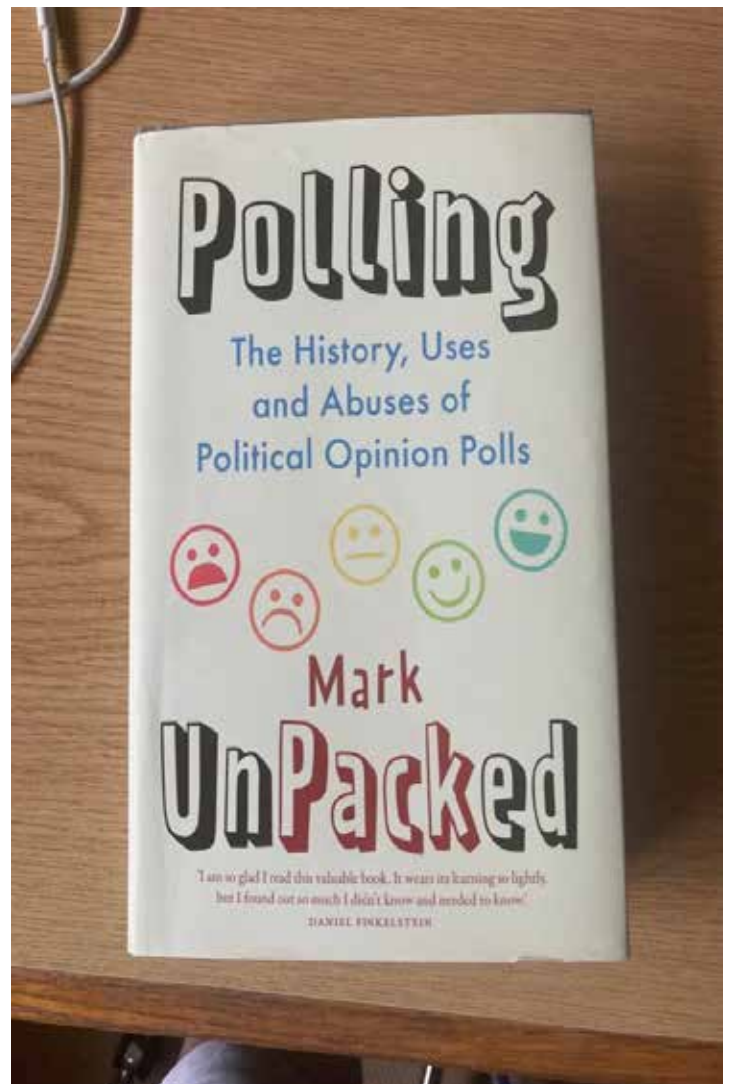
cards which were still in Van der Vater's possession. He turned to Thorpe, who was only too keen to 'help' the young man, setting him up in a flat in London and seducing him in his (Thorpe's) mother's house in Surrey. Actually, seducing may be the wrong term. From Scott's description, the scene was effectively rape.

Thorpe promised to retrieve Scott's NI cards and, over many years, failed to do so, while continuing to use Scott for sexual gratification. There is little evidence that Thorpe, who clearly had an impressive libido, saw Scott as an object of true affection or love – indeed Thorpe would bring to the flat "a hulking Swedish sailor and, as usual, I was asked if I'd like to participate".

Scott was clearly confused in his feelings for Thorpe but felt obliged to continue to press Thorpe for the return of his NI cards, with all the ramifications that entailed. It is not clear why Scott did not merely try to get a replacement National Insurance card – presumably their getting lost or destroyed was a relatively common occurrence.

As Thorpe's belief that Scott posed a threat of blackmail grew, so began the extraordinary chain of events leading to

Thorpe's 1979 trail for conspiracy to murder and incitement to murder and the public destruction of Scott's reputation. His version of these events is not as comprehensive or toe-curlingly embarrassing as some other accounts of the 'affair' and we can revel in the extraordinary range of oddballs and mis-fits who played their parts. It is still astonishing that the urbane, witty, Old Etonian, Oxford Union president and party leader was linked to a Welsh nightclub owner, a carpet salesman and a dodgy airline pilot whose incompetence was matched only by the absurdity of his alias, Hans Redwin (an anagram of Winner Hand). Mind you, Thorpe had a penchant for unreliable characters – from Peter



Bessell to George de Chabris.

Scott portrays his life up to this point with impressive detail and memory – all the more remarkable given the quantities of mood-altering prescription drugs he was taking for depression and other mental illnesses – and one struggles to believe that it was so easy for him to work into an impressive sequence of jobs, particularly without the National Insurance cards which most employers would have requested. Furthermore, it is remarkable how dependent he was on “the kindness of strangers” – people providing him with money, housing and employment. Indeed, even now he seems to be living in a lovely Devon farmhouse bought by others and offered to him to live in for the rest of his life. One does wonder whether, at a time when the South African secret police were engaged in trying to discredit and damage the Liberal Party, Scott might have been an unwitting accomplice in their campaign, benefitting from their largesse.

Sadly, the book contains very little about Scott’s life in the 40-plus years since the trial. Maybe there isn’t much to say and it clearly took time for him to build a life in which one has to wish him happiness and peace after all he was put through.

The book badly needs editing to correct factual errors: for example, Auberon Waugh was never editor of *Private Eye* and Thorpe did not lead his party to losing two-thirds of its vote in the October 1974 election (it would take a political genius like Nick Clegg to manage to achieve something close to that).

It would also benefit from an index, if only because the supporting cast includes such figures as Mick Jagger, Margot Fonteyn, Michael Heseltine, Francis Bacon and Lord Snowdon but it is a splendid read (although doubts persist as to whether it is entirely accurate).

Nick Winch

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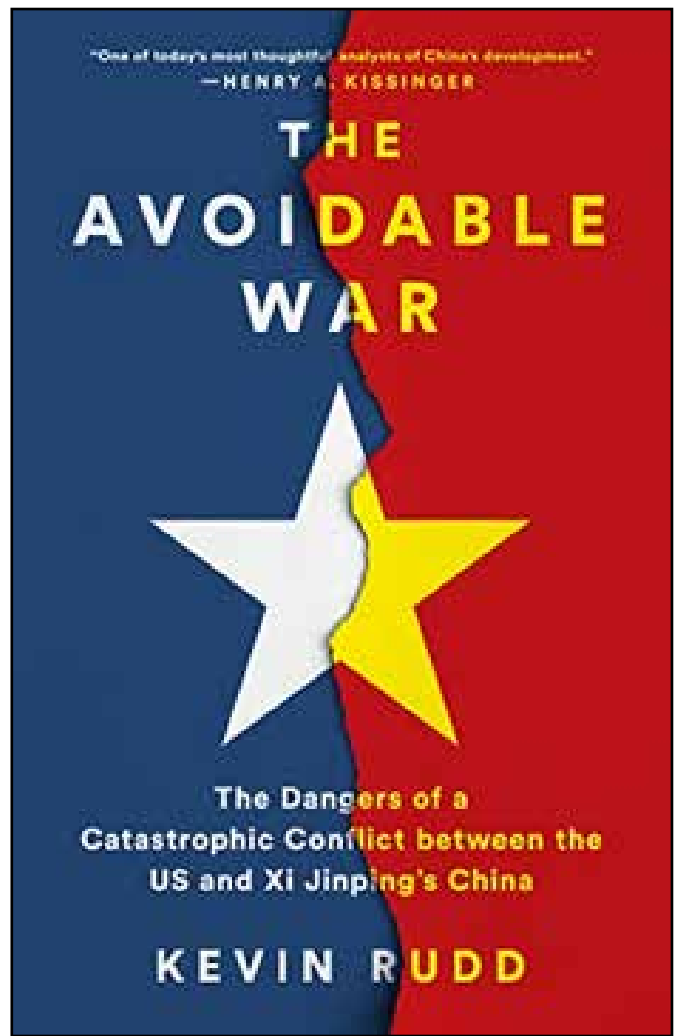
## **Polling Unpacked - The History, Uses and Abuses of political Opinion Polls by Mark Pack Reaktion Books 2022**

For anyone without a stats degree

but a passing interest in the esoteric delights of sampling error weighting, response latency and acquiescence bias, fill your boots. Mark Pack, our president, sets out in an easy to read and frequently entertaining book the answers to lots of these types of questions and gently wraps the knuckles of the uninformed. Don’t worry, it’s not as long as it looks, as 20% is copious references. You can be the judge of whether - click appropriate box - that’s enough, not enough, don’t know or don’t care?

Now, I must admit, in the interests of full transparency, I’m as biased as some of the questions Mark highlights in his book. I ran Project Target Voter (PTV) for the party from 1996 to 2005, working for a variety of our leaders and chief executives. I helped put together the opinion polling in our target seats on floating voters and presented the findings, without fear or favour, to those leaders. I also more recently had to explain why we would lose Brexit and Trump would win. So, forgive me, I’ve dabbled in the dark arts of polling and frequently sinned over sample sizes.

There is an adage about market research, the parents of opinion polling. It’s like a streetlamp on a cold foggy night. It has multiple uses. Mainly, its used by those leaving the local pub for support and relief. But its proper use is to provide safe guidance and direction for the community. Now the streetlamp that is political opinion polling is, frankly, highly corroded at the base from being the proverbial open-air urinal of choice for politicians. But as Mark points out (and you can, while reading the book, hear him talking to you in



that considered way he has) despite living in a world where “electorates have become more fluid, class has declined ...and voter volatility has increased” they broadly get it right; they agonise over how to keep it right whilst the great British public are admirably inconsistent in their recall and answers. Despite this Chapter 7, on when it does go horribly wrong, is a sobering read.

The odd uses of polling cited in the book are often as insightful. Whether the Clintons’ choice of elitist Martha’s Vineyard or the Rockies as a holiday location made a difference to re-election is not as interesting as the clear worship of polling to define image rather than help communicate values in a way that resonates with the electorate. Something Blair (and Dominic Cummings) understood so well.

Where I differ from Mark’s analysis is that i’m not convinced the voting intention scores are that important, bar charts aside. Leadership perceptions, what people think now, are far more important, lasting and therefore more valuable than what they might do later. In PTV we found that Michael Howard had an

awareness problem. Everyone in our sample who became aware of him, just didn't like him. So as the 'don't knows' came off the fence they uniformly felt there was indeed 'something of the night' about him. So, we put his image on our campaign literature knowing it helped swing voters our way.

I also feel Mark's views on internal polling are driven by the apparent expectation that leaking their results will be biased (yes, they are shock, horror!) But good internal polling is vital if used to test language, which articulation works best, expresses and aligns with core values. Importantly it is also used to test your enemy's likely narrative response. It rarely if ever gets released but is core to ensure the narrative has its best chance of success. Take one simple change as an example – the move in language from 'global warming' to 'climate crisis' helped drive urgency and removed the gentle passive nature of 'warming'. A simple, but fundamental change.

In 'The Political Brain,' by Drew Westen, he takes about 'framing', setting the emotional agenda with credible personal stories showing values and principles that capture the imagination of swing voters. This where the real value of good polling allied with qualitative research (e.g. focus groups) sits. We should know, we have been on the receiving end of it for the last decade!

Overall, this is a great read requiring no prior knowledge of market research. Indeed, without those prejudices on board it probably makes an even better read. Whilst recognising that conducted well opinion polling is an aid to democracy, he correctly identifies the dilemma of a business model funded by media which has an interest in not reporting the results accurately - because that's boring - plus the unerring ability of people to hold passionately held contradictory views, and then change them when you're not looking!

Those of us that know Mark well, know that one endearing trait is his ability to make truly awful jokes. This book is no exception, look out for the fish joke when dissecting MRP polling. How did that get past the editor?

Julian Ingram

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## **The Avoidable War by Kevin Rudd Public Affairs 2022**

As the title of the book suggests, the author believes meeting jaw-to-jaw would be far better than catastrophic conflict and war between the US and China. He also lays out in painstaking detail no less than 10 different scenarios, as a "cautionary guide" to policy makers navigating the dangerous waters in the decade ahead.

Would America have its Waterloo moment with China taking over Taiwan militarily or will it relive a new Korean stalemate with protracted military conflict and large-scale casualties on both sides? Of course, ideally China and the US could also find themselves within a new world order without the need for military confrontation (Xi's Optimal Plan).

At an interview last month following the launch of the book in Washington, Rudd said that writing it was like giving birth to an elephant. Indeed, the book is no light reading from a heavyweight Sinologist, former prime minister of Australia and current president and chief executive of the Asia Society think tank.

Yet I raced through the chapters without too much effort, finding the tone and style flowing and engaging. Rudd also managed to dissect complex issues into bite sized chapters, shedding light on China's 'concentric circles' of concern and influence.

The kernel that lies within the first concentric circle is of course the Chinese Communist Party and the politics of staying in power. Rightly or wrongly, Xi and the leadership believe that China needs strong central leadership lest it dissolves into bickering camps or breaks up like the Soviet Union had in 1991. With Xi Jinping thought now embedded in the Chinese constitution and the removal of the two fixed terms of the presidency, the next 20th Party Congress in the second half of 2022 is likely to deliver the result he wants.

Other concentric circles panning out from the centre range from Ensuring Economic Prosperity (3rd) to Modernizing the Military (5th), to Managing China's Neighbourhood (6th) and the Belt and Road Initiative (8th). It is not till the 9th Circle that

China's strategy towards Europe is mentioned in conjunction with Africa and Latin America.

The book was written before the invasion of Ukraine, so we lack Rudd's insights as to how global perceptions would have shifted since this. Nonetheless the theories and analysis still hold true in terms of the author's recommendations that the global powers build a workable framework for 'managed strategic competition' and multilateral diplomacy to achieve a balance of power and, ultimately, avert further conflict and war.

That is because "the risk of talking ourselves into a crisis is real" and the "sleep-walking of the nations of Europe into war in 1914 should remain a salutary lesson for us all".

Merlene Emerson

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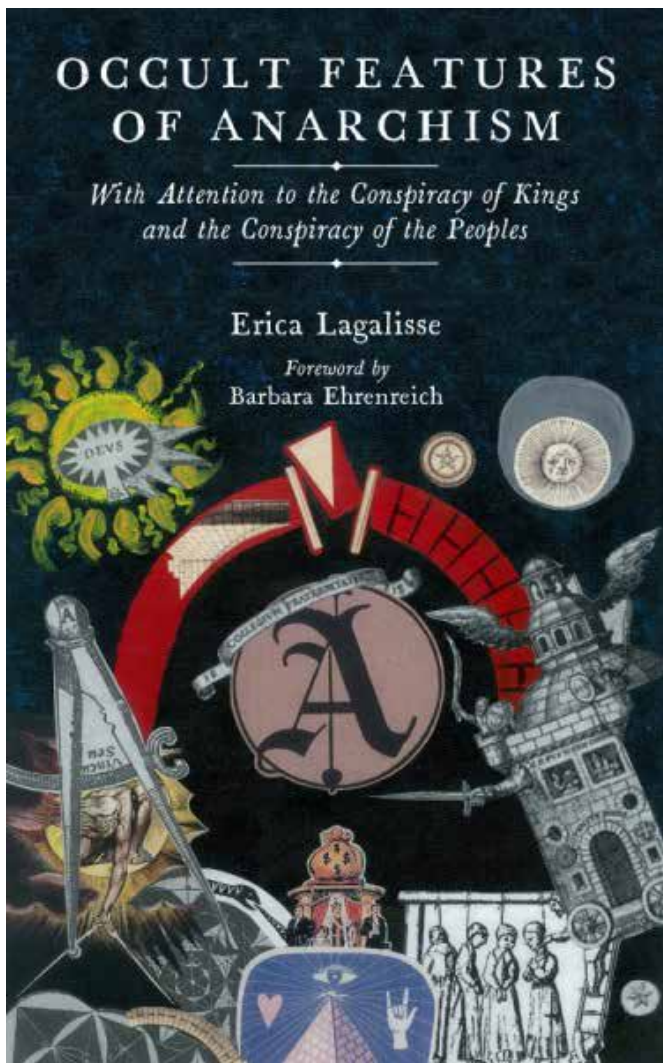
## **Occult features of Anarchism, with attention to the Conspiracy of Kings and the Conspiracy of the Peoples by Erica Laglisse PM Press 2019**

The Duke of Edinburgh died the day before this book was returned to me. He was a conservative. The day after his demise, UK television channels were dominated by his legacy; that small point wasn't mentioned – the opposite almost, as if conservatives couldn't be, almost, all things. One of the things that he was, he was a freemason, and freemasonry was represented as one of the things he did for fun.

At their conception, freemasonry and Liberalism were closely intertwined; 200 years later, they were highly suspicious of each other; as the chair of an education authority in the 1990s - and in terms of the budget under my control at least, one of a handful of the most powerful Liberals in the country - my collar was felt, and promptly let go. There were three Lodges within my borough council, perhaps some of the former Labour councillors that joined us we members, but I don't think any others; we did not fit.

I had hoped that this book would be reviewed by Michael Hunter, whose *The Decline of Magic*,





Britain and the Enlightenment (Yale UP, 2019 *Liberator* 409) is likely to be the last word on the subject in academia for the next generation, as Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* was for mine. Michael had encountered too many books on magic and anarchism, most of them silly, he said; his acolytes did not wish to take up the challenge. So, the book found its way back to me.

So, a 33rd grade freemason (good grief) reveals that Christ was just a man on his deathbed. Well, apart from an understanding of the hostility of the Roman Church to Freemasonry, what does that tell us? The obvious (I take it as the balance of probability that Jesus did exist, Michael Moorcock notwithstanding).

The book looks at the mystical roots of Anarchism, power relationships, and conspiracy theories. None of this is particularly startling if you are familiar with the genre. Too many on the left, or progressive politics, are in the thrall of Marx; interesting as an analyst of Victorian capitalism, but mistaken in his interpretation of

Hegel, as are Marxists and Marxians in their thrall to Darwin, more specifically Huxley in their anthropology. I would recommend Sorel's *Decomposition of Marxism* and George Watson's *Heresies & Heretics* (reviewed *Liberator* 372) to burst the bubble. Kropotkin's riposte to Huxley, *Mutual Aid*, is frequently cited. PM Press also do a nice edition of *Mutual Aid* by the way.

Starting as an investigation as to why anarchists from different cultural backgrounds

(Zapatistas and college-based Americans specifically) might have misconceptions about their ideas (adherence to conspiracy theories or spiritual beliefs) and ends up with some kind of synthesis. - tolerance and getting to the bottom of such assumptions rather than downright dismissal (which also extends into the politics of academia). Insert whatever you like for 'anarchists' and one can generalise the point. Otherwise, the romp through esoterica is familiar to those who've travelled that path, an introduction to those that haven't.

The essay *The Conspiracy of Kings and the Conspiracy of the Peoples*, is to some extent an add on, more directed to conspiracy theories. One of our Turkish correspondents had need of it, refuting the strange marriage of American Christian evangelist conspiracy theories with Islamic fundamentalism – topping and tailing virtually - in the pro-government *Takvim*, a daily newspaper that went digital after the AKP lost the municipal elections in Istanbul. So, it is in the

post. La lutte continue.

There is a podcast of Erica Lagalisse speaking of this book at <https://www.lse.ac.uk/lse-player?id=4676>

Stewart Rayment

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## The Drag Explosion by Linda Simpson Domain Books 2020 £45.00

This is an exciting book of photographs and essays, an insider's account that documents a golden age of drag in the nightclubs of New York City from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. Its author is the inimitable Linda Simpson, a drag queen, MC, and bingo caller who also edited her own underground magazine, *My Comrade*. As Linda explains in her book, in the early 1980s she moved to NYC from Minnesota, leaving behind years of "being shamed for my sissy persona". She would have the last laugh, however, discovering the drag scene as well as her own alter-ego, before going on to downtown stardom.

Linda was a rare phenomenon of her time: whilst every drag queen was more than happy to pose in front of a camera, she actually owned one and used it to document the queens and their milieu. "It wasn't until many years had passed that it dawned on me I had created a rather stunning time capsule. My photos are B.C. – before cell phones – when we lived in the Now and they evoke a particular freshness."

As we were all aware at the time, 'the Now' had a liberating side as well as a dark side. Housing was cheap and plentiful; part-time and casual employment was easily available; further and higher education was free in the UK and in the USA it was more affordable than it is today.

This social-economic context meant that people did not have to spend all their time working to earn money just to pay for the essentials. You could get by on a shoestring budget, living a bohemian life that allowed you lots of time to pursue artistic and creative pursuits, and hang out in the bars and clubs.

This was a vibrant, diverse culture that comprised black and white, middle and working class, all sexual orientations, drag and trans,



young and old. The commonalities were a love of dressing up, kooky performance, downtown art, underground films (John Waters, Russ Meyer and Kenneth Anger were all heroes), music and dancing, booze and pills. Alongside this was a sense of enjoying being outside the mainstream, something that owed much to the energetic fallout from glam rock, punk, and new wave.

But on the other hand, the AIDS pandemic was raging. The morbidity and mortality rates were frightening: life-saving combination therapy had yet to arrive, so attending funerals was far too regular an occurrence. Empathy and practical support were in short supply from the mainstream culture, with 'victim' blaming endorsed by too many media commentators, politicians, and churchmen.

This was because homophobia and transphobia were commonplace and normalised anyway, including bullying, targeted violence, and getting fired and evicted. Not surprisingly, lots of vivacious characters on the downtown scene were runaways who were ostracised from their genetic families. There were times when it felt you were living in a siege.

This siege mentality goes some way to explaining why the bars and clubs were so lively. These were places where marginalised people were free to enjoy themselves and experiment with appearance, behaviour, language, performance, music, art, and a range of intoxicants.

The Pyramid Club blended disco with post-punk cabaret; the Boy Bar staged young new drag and trans performers, both lip synch and live; and large dance-orientated clubs such as Limelight and Tunnel hired drag queens to host bars and to generally add glamour and excitement.

The premise of *The Drag Explosion* is that all this reinvented drag to such an extent that it crossed over into mainstream culture for a peak that lasted a few years. Suddenly drag queens began appearing on TV chat shows, and in pop videos, adverts,

fashion spreads and catwalk shows, where they added some much needed cutting edge.

Lady Bunny easily held her own on daytime TV, with her skyscraper wigs, quick wit and social commentary. Zaldy appeared in a Levis commercial, looking femme real in the back of a yellow



cab, applying macquillage before humorously breaking the spell by using an electric razor to remove a few stray hairs on her chin. Lypsinka walked for Thierry Mugler during Paris Fashion Week. The Connie Girl lit up George Michael's Too Funky video, again resplendent in Mugler. And of course Ru Paul became a bona fide pop star. Drag was hip and cool, and it was everywhere. And then after a few years it suddenly stopped. It was no longer novel, the overground jobs dried up -- but the drag queens carried on regardless, doing what they had always done: entertaining on their home turf. Nevertheless, a cultural shift had occurred, in that the general public had glimpsed a captivating netherworld that hitherto had been much harder to access.

The queens had bravely beaten a path through the undergrowth while at the same time providing young LGBTQ people with an

exciting new range of role models: the foundations had been laid for drag to eventually become more mainstream and for a greater acceptance and understanding of LGBTQ people.

Linda's photographs capture the excitement, daring and irreverence of the time. We see her friend Page in Baader-Meinhof drag, complete with beret and machine gun. In another image, a young topless male stripper has dollar bills shoved into his underwear by an admiring audience member. Further on we see Linda and her friend Glenda Orgasm in drag on the top deck of a packed bus, giving daytime sightseers an extra treat. And there are lots of images from Wigstock, the annual outdoor drag festival hosted by Lady Bunny. Premier voguer Willie Ninja is there, looking radiant; performer Billy Beyond looks Jean Harlow-esque; Bunny herself blows a kazoo onstage, looking like she wandered into Wigstock from Woodstock. And everywhere there are people with coloured wigs and sequins, drinking beer, and enjoying themselves.

I asked Linda two questions about the book. The first was what does your book say to those of us who lived through the era that it covers?

Linda replied: "For those of us who were going strong then, the book is a reminder that it was a very momentous period of time. It was filled with despair because of AIDS, but it was also a time of queer camaraderie and bravery. The drag scene was especially thrilling, morphing from an underground art form into a mainstream sensation. The book is a tribute to all of that creativity and resilience."

My second question was: What does your book say to the younger generations? The reply came: "I hope *The Drag Explosion* informs young people that the drag scene that thrived from the late 1980s to the mid '90s set the pace for today's drag renaissance. Drag history is often muddled and the book helps set the record straight.

Stephen Brogan

You left me at St Pancras station, dressed in a gorilla costume as it happens, enjoying a coffee in one of the many refreshment rooms there and looking forward to boarding the next train to Market Harborough after months away from the Hall discovering the real Britain – wandering in ancient woodlands with elves, helping win a parliamentary by-election.... You know the sort of thing. All at once the

door burst open and a voice shouted “That’s him!” I recognised a customer who had left the establishment a few minutes before and I also recognised a rifle primed with tranquilliser darts in the hands of the officer of the British Transport Police who accompanied her. With characteristic quick thinking, I overturned the table to give myself cover and the act so disconcerted the police officer that he missed his shot completely and winged the poor girl who was in charge of the espresso machine. Taking advantage of the resultant confusion (they were plying her with black coffee as I left), I made good my escape from the station, finally taking refuge in an area of wild country I found close by.

So it is that I have spent several months at what turned out to be Camley Street Natural Park. Apparently the site used to be a depot, served by the railway, from which London’s coal merchants would collect their wares. What with the Clean Air Act, central heating and so forth, the place fell into desuetude. Nature took it over and the local green types – fine fellows to man and, indeed, a woman – fought off the developers when they started slaving over it. Today it is a splendid place that can offer peace to the jaded Londoner, educational outings to school children and refuge to the wanted gorilla.

I will not deny that I did well for myself. It’s not just that the visiting schoolchildren were generous with their sandwiches – I fear that more than one will have been marked down for listing a gorilla among the wildlife they spotted that day, though I rather fell for the little girl who asked for my autograph and then demanded I sing ‘The Way I Feel Inside’ – it’s that the neighbourhood proved to be thronged with pop-up restaurants that offered every cuisine known to man. So enticing were they that I had to have my costume let out twice during my stay there.

Then, one evening as I rolled home from a favourite eatery, I spied a familiar van: the fellow was delivering the East Midlands’ most prized product to an all-night delicatessen! We fell into conversation and it transpired that his grandfather had been a deputy in one of my own Stilton mines. He kindly agreed to give me a lift home as the Hall was not far off his route back to Cropwell Bishop. One thing worried me: “What about the smell?” I inquired. “Don’t worry, your lordship,” came the reply, “it won’t affect the cheese.”

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So here I am back at the Hall. I am delighted to find that a whole wing has been given over to Ukrainian refugees – before I departed I left firm instructions that this was to be done if the balloon went up in

# Lord Bonkers’ Diary

Europe – but, to be honest, I am just delighted to find the wing. I had not come across it for simply years and was beginning to fear it was the one I accidentally burnt down as a boy. (So large and rambling is the old place that no one noticed.) However, all is well with it and I am able to reacquaint myself with another wall of family portraits, a particularly fine one of my great-great-grandfather (a Whig in a wig) by the Dutch master Van Morrison

among them.

When I call at the Bonkers’ Home for Well-Behaved Orphans the young inmates press upon me a newspaper cutting about a Rwandan orphanage that was cleared to make room for the poor people our own home secretary intends to traffic there. I put their minds at rest and assure them there is no question of it happening here in Rutland

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To London for a meeting with my publishers; inevitably, I find that Freddie and Fiona now work there. I show them the manuscript about my travels around Britain – the Elves of Rockingham Forest, Chesham and Amersham, my time in the zoo and my finding refuge at Camley Street. “No one reads political books any more,” says Freddie. “But,” continues Fiona, “we think magic realism is due for a revival, so we’d like your book to lead our autumn fiction list.”

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You can imagine how peeved I was when I discovered that I had missed a great Liberal Democrat victory: positively pea green with peevement. When winter fires burn low and talk turns to by-elections long ago, tales will be told of North Shropshire – of Wem and Ellesmere – and those of us who were not there will understand it is our part to fall silent.

I wasn’t having that a second time, so I quickly arranged a tour of our best prospects for May’s council elections: Richmond upon Thames, Montgomeryshire, Edinburgh and finally polling day in the Somerset Levels. Normally, I would have had my valet pack my gorilla suit for such an itinerary – I find it useful for scaring off Conservative tellers at remote polling stations – but in view of my recent misadventures I thought it wiser to let light tweeds suffice.

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A working day on the Bonkers Hall Estate: the hedgerows are creamy with May blossom, the horse chestnuts are alight with candles and all is right with the world. When I call at one of my farms, the tenant is busy putting heavy-duty locks, bars and bolts on his tractor shed. He explains that of late he has been pestered by Conservative MPs, who hang about the place at night and try to force entry. I lend a hand and am confident that no one will interfere with his Massey Fergusons again.

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