

liberator



- 🌟 A blue bloodbath - Chris White
- 🌟 Now go and sell guaranteed basic income - Paul Hindley
- 🌟 Western appeasement in Khartoum - Rebecca Tinsley

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Flat 1, 24 Alexandra Grove, London N4 2LF

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INTERNET

Email: collective@liberatormagazine.org.uk
Website: <http://www.liberatormagazine.org.uk>

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COMMENTARY

WHERE ARE THE WAR GAMES?

The 407 Lib Dem gains in the local elections were towards the upper end of what had been predicted but the 1,061 Tory losses exceeded that party's worst nightmares.

When the Tories briefed they would lose 1,000 seats they clearly meant they expected to lose about 600 and so would claim that was not such a bad result.

In fact it exceeded their worst fears and if the Tories are in that kind of trouble in Surrey, the Thames Valley and West Sussex the 'blue wall' must be vulnerable at the next general election.

A slightly improbable arc of orange now extends almost unbroken from Winchester and Chichester to the outskirts of the West Midlands conurbation.

Further good news came in the south west, where the party was slaughtered during the Coalition and Brexit but on top of last year's gains in Somerset took control or made substantial advances throughout Devon.

Local election results never read straight across into general election ones, but as a rough rule of thumb places with a strong local government presence can win parliamentary seats and those without cannot (except at by-elections).

There is always a 'but' and here it concerns Labour. It's only to be expected in such a year that the Lib Dems made little headway against Labour other than in places where some local factor dictated otherwise.

The consensus among academic election watchers though was that Labour did well but did not achieve the heights that Tony Blair scaled before the 1997 general election.

Labour is on course to be the largest party - but even with the SNP's self-inflicted wounds it may struggle to get an overall majority.

Unlike the case with Blair and Paddy Ashdown nearly 30 years ago, Keir Starmer has variously said that he would not seek post-election deals - and would simply dare other parties to vote down Labour's King's Speech. He has since though appeared not to rule out the Lib Dems. Reality maybe has penetrated.

Starmer's position suggests that while he is perfectly content to see the Lib Dems win Tories seats where Labour cannot, he wishes he did not have to deal with the Lib Dems and will try hard not to.

Are post-general election scenarios being 'war gamed' in the upper reaches of the Lib Dems? Ed Davey has ruled out a coalition with the Tories - as he must since they would just have been evicted from power - but little light has been shed on a coalition with Labour, confidence and supply measures or reacting to Starmer's mixed signals. Starmer has though said he

rules out electoral reform.

The details of any 'war gaming' are unlikely to become public but it would be good to know they are happening at all (as they did in the mid-1990s) rather than being left to the back of a fag packet, as Nick Clegg did in 2010. The Coalition was damned from the start by Clegg's inexperience and refusal to listen to anyone who knew what they were talking about. Is Davey preparing better?

A ROYAL PUZZLE

From what little we know of newly-crowned King Charles III's political views he is of a somewhat enlightened turn of mind with what appears a genuine concern for the environment and an interest in disadvantaged people.

He will as king have to keep these opinions more firmly to himself, but there are a few areas in which he can act, and one is making fact of the call attributed to him for a 'slimmed down' monarchy.

Revelations before the coronation of the scale of the royal family stupendous wealth must have shocked all but the most uncritical flag-wavers. The vast collection of palaces, estates and grand houses, the huge income from these and the scale of art treasurers hidden from public view have all the makings of enough to stoke - if not republicanism - then questions about how one family and its hangers-on can possibly justify this wealth, much of it gained at public expense.

Republicanism has an understandable appeal to liberals who recoil from the concept of 'subjects'. It is likely though to remain a minority pursuit in the UK given that it would inevitably open up questions of what would replace the monarchy and how.

The century-and-more failure to abolish the House of Lords rather suggests that arguments about the nature of a post-monarchy country would meanwhile keep the king and his successors safely on their thrones for decades.

Which leaves the question of how to slim down the monarchy to make it more acceptable in an age when deference has retreated and the monarch lacks his mother's revered status.

Every other remaining monarchy in Europe (except absolutist Monaco) has managed this and so it should happen here.

But with politicians of all kinds scared stiff of seeming to criticise the king, the only person who can start this process is probably Charles III himself.

RADICAL BULLETIN

RAISING THE ROOF

It's unusual for a party leader to get a mid-speech standing ovation and look embarrassed about it, and even more unusual was the comical spectacle of parliamentarians trying to hurriedly decide whether to join an ovation for their leader.

Both these things happened though at the York spring conference, when Ed Davey briefly turned in his speech to Europe.

He had been getting a fair amount of stick for making only a glancing reference to Europe in his 'not conference' speech last autumn and barely at all since while sounding like he found the subject embarrassing (Liberator 416).

Davey referred first to an "elephant in the room" of British politics, which he called "an elephant we always point to", perhaps leading some to expect that an actual pachyderm was about to join him on stage.

This elephant though turned out to be Europe. Davey said: "So let me shout it, yet again: if you want to boost our economy, you have to repair our broken relationship with Europe.

"Conference, you don't need me to tell you what a disaster the Conservatives' botched deal with Europe has been for our country. You see it every day in your communities."

He went on to say the Lib Dems would "tear down the Conservatives' trade barriers, rip up their red tape, and rebuild the ties of trust and friendship with our European neighbours".

This won him an unexpected (and possibly unwanted) standing ovation. It followed a fringe meeting the previous evening held by the Lib Dem European Group at which Baroness Brinton and chief whip Alastair Carmichael both explained why they soft-pedalled Europe as much as possible. Carmichael has a constituency issue concerning fish and Brinton said she never mentioned Brexit and simply tried to attach Europe to other issues that came up.

This provoked a sitting ovation for Southwark activist Denis Loretto, who to loud applause accused the speakers of not so much being measured about Europe as failing to mention it at all.

Carmichael had seen a similar display a few days earlier when he was the parliamentary speaker at a Liberty Network function - this being a gathering of wealthy donors.

He was said to have been visibly taken aback by almost every question being a complaint about the low priority Davey was giving to Europe.

Now that Davey has uttered the dreaded E word maybe those running party campaigns will grasp that almost every target seat voted Remain, most Tories disposed to cross to the Lib Dems did so as well and that the party can freely offend 'red wall' Leave supporters since none of them vote for it anyway.

"YOUR FEEDBACK IS IMPORTANT TO US"

The Scottish Lib Dem spring conference passed a motion which essentially demanded the party take a stronger pro-EU line. The mover was Robert Brown, an MSP for eight years, and is a former minister in the Scottish Government.

Brown wrote to Ed Davey drawing attention to the motion and pointing out that the Lib Dems lagged in single figures in the opinion polls despite the most favourable circumstances possible. He urged Davey and the leadership team to take note of the motion and urgently follow through its sentiments into the strategy and narrative of the party.

After three weeks, a reply was received that missed the point spectacularly, merely giving a formulaic response setting out Davey's position on Europe.

As one Scottish Lib Dem figure noted: "It is difficult to imagine this happening under Ashdown or other leaders who engaged positively with the membership. But since Clegg, leaders have cocooned themselves in a Westminster bubble, and insulated themselves from the views of grass-roots members. Treating members with such disrespect has obvious results."

WHERE POINTS THE COMPASS?

Curious events have taken place in North Devon around the Lib Dem selection for a parliamentary candidate, with claims of entryism by Compass.

Compass was originally a Labour body that campaigned for electoral reform but later opened its ranks to members of any party and none, and has since 2019 worked in particular on fostering local 'progressive alliances' to oust Tory MPs.

When the Lib Dem selection opened members were surprised to receive an application from Jasmine Bennett, an active local member of Surfers Against Sewage but who had only just joined the party.

They were even more surprised when she was - for motives that remain obscure - fast-tracked through the candidate approval process and allowed to stand in the selection and yet further surprised when there was no shortlisting process.

Surprise grew again when some members were phoned by people they knew to be Labour or Green supporters to canvass for Bennett and who they understood to describe her as 'the Compass candidate'.

In the event Bennett came second out of five contenders but some long way behind the successful applicant, local councillor Ian Roome.

One source told Liberator: "It's true that the surprisingly active North Devon & Torridge Compass group unleashed Green and Labour members to contact Lib Dem friends and acquaintances, saying that if she were to be selected she would have their

support...it caused suspicion and mumblings about entryism in some quarters.”

Another source said Bennett had a number of non-Lib Dems helping her campaign, which raised concerns that Compass - or people within it - had gained access to Lib Dem data.

This source said: “It all smells of a rat and should be a warning to our party. Someone should not be allowed to join the party and seek approval as a PPC until at least nine months have lapsed.

“What we have now enables entryism, but of more concern to me is who in our party enabled this to happen.”

When Liberator contacted North Devon Compass it said in a statement: “We are focussed on trying to ensure that the two Conservative MPs in the north of Devon aren’t re-elected at the next general election... by encouraging the local non-Tory political parties to avoid wasting votes fighting each other and thereby letting the Conservative candidate win with a minority of the vote.

“This non-tribal approach is something that we would love the North Devon Lib Dems to cooperate in more wholeheartedly given their party’s longstanding support of proportional representation.”

Compass North Devon denied it had interfered in the internal workings of any local party, and “whoever passed you these unfounded rumours of CoND interference seems to be confusing the preferences of individuals, presumably their own members, with the actions of a group like ours”. Compass said it had not accessed Lib Dem data.

Bennett meanwhile has chosen to advance her political career by the unusual strategy of not standing in the local council elections.

An entirely separate row concerns the PPC advert which stressed North Devon’s size and rural nature and suggested: “Stout boots and wellingtons are recommended.”

This could have been a purely light-hearted remark, or it could have been a cautionary note after a previous applicant turned out to be non-driver in a vast area with deficient public transport.

Or it could have been, as some correspondence to Liberator has claimed, an attempt to dissuade people from voting for local party chair Helen Walker, who is a wheelchair user. Walker is also a councillor and can drive and by all accounts gets around the constituency perfectly well.

NEXT PLEASE

Liberator Collective member Gareth Epps got his full house of moving business motions at Lib Dem conferences with a successful use of the rare ‘next business’ at York.

This occurred during what had promised to be an ill-tempered debate on a constitutional amendment from members of the gender critical Liberal Voice for Women (LVW).

This said: “Whenever this Constitution provides for the election by party members to a Federal Committee, not less than 40% or, if 40% is not a whole number, the whole number nearest to but not exceeding 40% of those elected shall be men, and shall be women, respectively.”

That might sound innocuous, but the wording it sought to replace said the 40% proportions should

apply to those who “shall self-identify as men or non-binary people, and self identify as women or non-binary people respectively”.

The motion was something of an own goal. It was unlikely to pass had it been debated as it appeared to be bullying a small group of people and to be addressed to a non-existent problem.

There is no case known to Liberator of anyone complaining that they have been demoted in a party election because of a diversity quota operating in favour of someone who bogusly claimed membership of a ‘diverse’ category.

Conference saw as expected a vituperative atmosphere during the ‘next business’ motion during which LVW’s Zoe Hollowood was heckled.

The party’s new party transphobia definition states that holding and expressing gender critical views is permissible so long as not done to cause offence. There was no attempt to reject or refer back the reference to this new definition in the Federal Board report at York, which rather suggests LVW might have left well alone.

HOSPITAL CALL

Ed Davey appeared to score several points at prime minister’s questions with the tragic story of ‘Jean from Eastbourne’, but this showed the peril of relying on locally-generated incidents.

He said Jean was told there was an eight hour wait for an ambulance so drove herself to Eastbourne district general hospital, paid to park her car, collapsed at the entrance to the accident and emergency unit and sadly died an hour later.

This drew an at least polite response from Rishi Sunak but a less polite one from the hospital, which said it was inaccurate.

A story in The Times said: “Almost all the details he provided were incorrect, including that the patient has paid for parking and has driven to the hospital alone. Although a woman named Jean did die at the hospital, it was after a stay of a week.”

The local paper quoted a Lib Dem statement: “We were asked by a member of Jean’s family to raise her story in Parliament at a time when ambulance waiting times around the country have reached dangerous levels...We applaud the bravery of her grieving grandson, who has explained that in his grief some details provided were inaccurate.”

SECRET INFLUENCE

Lib Dem MPs Sarah Green and Layla Moran have found themselves unwittingly involved in an internet anti-vaccination conspiracy theory.

An adjournment debate was about to start in which Andrew Bridgen - an MP so vile even the Tories have thrown him out - was to call on the Government to stop the mRNA vaccine booster programme.

Moran had just finished a heartfelt speech on the Middle East, a subject dear to her given her Palestinian ancestry. As she and Green were leaving the Tory MP Andrew Mitchell walked over to congratulate Moran on her speech.

The three of them then left, leaving Bridgen to talk only to his small fan club. A You Tube channel called Follow The Evidence Wherever It Leads then described this as “bemusing at best and really quite sinister at worst” as Mitchell talks to two opposition

MPs “who promptly leave, what is going on here?” The commentary then suggested Moran and Green were waiting for Bridgen’s debate to begin and that Mitchell - having some sinister hold over them - forced them to leave. The two Lib Dems had of course no intention of wasting their time on Bridgen who, as the commentary sadly admits, gave his address to an almost empty chamber.

BOUNCING BERGER

Luciana Berger was seen at the Lib Dems’ fundraising winter ball but soon after she announced her re-defection to Labour claiming that party had been cleansed of anti-Semitism.

Berger is among a large group of MPs who defected to the Lib Dems in 2019 who have since - with the honourable exception of Antoinette Sandbach and very few others - been heard of rarely if at all in the party.

Having defected, Berger was given Finchley & Golders Green to contest in 2019 - a seat no-one in their right mind would previously have regarded as a target - on the naive assumption that she would appeal to the area’s large Jewish community. She got into second place but has now obviously decided a safe Labour seat if it comes along is more appealing.

AND THEN THERE WAS ONE

The Racial Diversity Campaign continued its tradition of making somewhat unusual reports to conference with its entry for York.

This came from Christopher French, the second vice-chair, on the grounds that no other executive members remained in office.

French said the executive comprises three members, a chair and two vice-chairs.

But chair Ade Adeyemo and first vice chair Julia Ogiehor had both resigned and “understandably, this has been a challenging time with essentially only one person working on the RDC”. The Federal Board is now to fill these posts.

French continued: “It is often the case that it’s those from diverse groups who, already under-resourced and overstretched, must make the initial effort to build relationships for the collective goal to help the party better represent our richly diverse communities.”

He said the party had approved an initial £5,000 budget in 2021 and long-term funding proposals were needed.

That £5,000 was found after the RDC’s initial report to the autumn 2021 conference (Liberator 410) gave both barrels to party HQ and the Federal Board, complaining that it had been left unfunded with members having to finance its work from their own pockets.

This magically produced £5,000 after which the report to conference was amended to remove all the complaints.

SITTING ON DEFENCE

Litigation between the Lib Dems and the expelled former chair of its East of England region Jo Hayes (see past Liberators) continues with a dispute over the timetable of the case.

Hayes has said that the party failed to serve a defence by the required date and so she should have had summary judgment in her favour.

The party though says it applied for an extension and

that since the court could not hear this until after the deadline had passed to file a defence it was therefore extended until such time as the court can determine the application.

Hayes is proceeding against party president Mark Pack and Duncan Curley, Alexandra Simpson and Serena Tierney, the three members of the complaint panel that revoked her membership.

Her argument is lengthy and complex and raises numerous procedural objections to the way in which the party handled her cases.

She will ask the court for an injunction reinstating her membership of the party, or damages in lieu of an injunction, the interest on these and her costs.

That is not all. Hayes also seeks a Norwich Pharmacal order against the Liberal Democrats. This a legal measure under which information can be obtained from third parties, in this case concerning the origin of allegations made against Hayes.

MUSHROOM MANAGEMENT

Liberator hears the new Federal Council has got off to slow start having been fed only minimal information about the Federal Board’s activities.

The FC was set up after all but three directly elected FB posts were removed last year. It is supposed to be a scrutiny body though it must meet high thresholds to call in - let alone overturn - any FB decision.

So far, FC members have worked on the basis of questions taken in threes (which always makes it easy for those answering to evade anything awkward) with responses of varying usefulness from party president Mark Pack and vice-chair Jeremy Hargreaves.

One member commented: “There is no sign of a coherent approach to addressing the issues of strategy, general election management and messaging and it may be too much to hope for.”

The FC has though bared its teeth over the arcane subject of how the FB elects members to their party committees.

It noted that latest batch of such elections were barely advertised and lacked any email to party members to alert those interested. There was particular controversy over the re-appointment of Candy Piercey to the Disciplinary Sub-Group despite her role in the row over the removal of a senior adjudicator in 2021 (Liberator 413) and the appointment of recent ex-staff member Greg Foster.

Seven people applied for six posts and four were re-appointments. Elitism is indeed self-perpetuating.

2+2=5

Bath MP Wera Hobhouse clearly forgot her abacus in a tweet about Government support for energy costs. She posted that without this continuing “it will double the number of households who won’t be able to pay their bills from one in five to one in ten”.

FROM THE PEOPLE WHO BROUGHT YOU LIZ TRUSS

Something called London New Liberals has started posting on Twitter, which is linked neither to the Lib Dems nor the pro-Brexit ‘Liberal’ party.

It turns out to have been formerly called ‘London

A BLUE BLOODBATH

Despite trying to fix elections in their favour with voter ID and abolition of the second vote for mayors, the Tories suffered a massacre - but Lib Dems should beware of the Green Party, says Chris White

There is an old joke: "If elections changed anything then they would be made illegal". It's not a very funny joke but it does have historical justification in many parts of the world.

We are not immune from governments abolishing elections in this country: Margaret Thatcher abolished the Greater London Council because it was making changes and reminding her across the Thames of rising unemployment figures.

More recently the 'Trump agenda' seen in the USA has started appearing here. We haven't reached a point at which election results can be denied (we sensibly have stuck with manual counting which makes such claims rather a challenge in practical terms given the intense gaze of party workers across the trestle tables). But making voting more difficult for a section of the voters has appeared in the form of voter ID.

Personation has rarely been an issue in Great Britain although it was a feature of Northern Ireland politics – indeed one of the reasons why we have the concept of polling agents. Elsewhere it has always been more or less unknown.

VOTER FRAUD

There is evidence of voter fraud, of course. Postal voting was relaxed under Labour which is generally a good thing - why do people continue to vote in person anyway? - and this has meant that it is open to fraud including false addresses, harvesting from vulnerable people or the biased supervision of voting in the privacy of a family home.

These problems are not currently being seriously addressed. Nor are the real problems of family voting where voters are escorted into polling stations and told how to vote by senior family members. This is a problem in various parts of the country, including now in Scotland with 16- and 17-year olds.

You would have to be a dangerous naïve to suppose that the reason for voter ID was anything other than voter suppression: crudely, forms of ID commonly available to pensioners are valid and those available to young people are not. Young people are less likely to vote Conservative (or for Brexit, should it come to it).

I didn't do much telling on polling day, naturally enough, but did see people turned away for lack of ID: there was no unpleasantness and it looked likely they would come back. Equally, I saw people being turned away because the polling station had changed location or rather served a different bit of the ward from before. That was a local decision.

The effect is difficult to monitor because the real problem is not the casual forgetter ("Oh silly me: I'll nip back home") but the person who has no ID and so

decided not to bother. There is an argument that that sort of person may not have voted anyway. Further research will need to be done.

Less noticed was the legislation to abolish the alternative vote system for mayoral and police and crime commissioner elections. Leaving aside the outrage that any Liberal should feel at an increase in first past the post systems, this was designed to make it easier for Conservatives to be elected.

And it worked. In Bedford we lost Dave Hodgson as elected mayor, which is a tragedy for Bedford as much as for the party. More troublingly, the reason why mayors need proper mandates is because of the power they wield over the council, basically owning a supermajority in relation to a wide range of services.

This power has now passed to a Conservative who does not have the support of a majority of the people. He beat Dave by 145 votes on 33% of the vote. No mandate at all, especially since Labour was in a strong third place.

A new government needs to act swiftly to restore the alternative vote for these elections - and introduce proportional representation for other elections while it's at it - but with Starmer as prime minister that appears unlikely.

This was a good election for the Liberal Democrats in most other places. The Tories had predicted 1,000 losses and were, to everyone's surprise, more or less on the nail. Normally we expect them to say 1,000 so that they can spin in their Tory papers that the (say) mere 800 losses were in fact a triumph ('mid term', 'Covid-19' etc). So one guesses that these are worse than expected.

The shocks for the Tories included Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (23 losses), Bracknell Forest (27 losses including the leader and deputy leader), Central Bedfordshire (19), East Hertfordshire (23), East Suffolk (24) and Wealden (19).

But there were some high spots for them, including Fenland (up 9), Herefordshire (up 7), Leicester (up 15) and Slough (16) and some of these have been seized upon by desperate ministers.

Local Tories put the Bracknell Forest massacre down to a Lib-Lab pact. On that I have no information but know that a pact takes various forms from sitting around a table agreeing a seat strategy - and even a joint programme - to spotting strengths and weaknesses and directing the increasingly limited candidate pool in the appropriate direction. At the end of the day after the repeated disasters of Johnson, Truss and the rest of the gang, most of the electorate know what they have to do.

Liberal Democrats saw massive gains in a number of councils and modest gains elsewhere. There are

12 authorities newly under Liberal Democrat control with scintillating gains in places like Mid Devon (perhaps unsurprising), Stratford-on-Avon and Surrey Heath and West Berkshire.

In my own Hertfordshire the change is remarkable. There are 10 districts and we went into these elections with five Conservative leaders, three Liberal Democrats and two Labour. As far as I can tell at the moment, there will be one Conservative, four Liberal Democrats and two Labour. But there is a good chance, as coalitions and understandings are built, that there will be one more Lib Dem and Labour leader.

But also a Green leader. Here is the rub for the Liberal Democrats. There were 17 Green gains in East Hertfordshire, with the Greens now the largest party in what was predictably, year in year out, a rock-solid Tory area. The Liberal Democrats did quite well with four gains. The difference in success depends in part on geography – the Greens are in Hertford and the Lib Dems in Bishops Stortford.

Mid-Suffolk was once good for the Liberal Democrats but we went slightly backwards while the Greens swept to power.

And they nibbled in both St Albans and Three Rivers. The argument that they used in St Albans was that there needed to be an opposition after we destroyed both the Tories and Labour last year (or they destroyed themselves, take your pick). “We love what you do, Chris, so we are voting Green.” Thanks. They are not our friends. But why should they be?

Labour of course did well, as one would expect, with 635 gains at the time of writing against 416 for the Liberal Democrats.

But it's not scintillating. In some parts of the south, Labour has disappeared, including St Albans where they evaporated last year and did not come back this. St Albans had a Labour MP at the 1997 general election.

So what does this mean for the general election? In some ways predicting from local results is a bit of mug's game because some of those results are indeed local. Slough, one presumes, saw Tory gains because the Labour Party had run the council into the ground financially. Herefordshire's results were a lot about the collapse of the various independents.

Nevertheless, a satisfying array of cabinet ministers are feeling the heat – at last.

FINANCIAL TRAUMA

To those of us who have arguably been around too long, this reminds us of 1993. A financial trauma (coming out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism – gosh those were the days) led to a permanent rejection of Conservatism by a solid majority of the population. This in due course led to the Labour landslide of 1997, which did the Liberal Democrats no harm at all. So if there is an election next year, the Conservatives look to be out.

But the contrasts are noticeable: Europe is still a significant issue, though was mainly an internal Tory spat then, and Tony Blair was a charismatic young man linked to a competent looking technocrat

“The Greens are not our friends. But why should they be?”

in Gordon Brown. And there was the Dark Lord of Elections, Peter Mandelson.

Starmer is solid but won't set the world on fire. His front bench team is arguably less well known than Blair's. The antisemitism problem is very clearly still there: Diane

Abbott has revealed that in no uncertain terms. And I'm not clear what Labour stands for. Similar jibes can be made at the Liberal Democrats, I know.

How will the Government react over the next year? It probably hoped that the Coronation would be a distraction – there must be some reason for its strange date. This probably hasn't worked because so many people are no longer royalists and the Metropolitan Police has again managed to disgrace itself twice in relation to its policing of the royal event.

It is difficult to see the Government ditching its wilder reactionary policies – Rwanda here we come – although never say never: the ludicrous slamming of the door on EU trade envisaged in the bonfire of EU legislation (all of which was agreed by the UK, of course, at the time) has been slimmed down partly because of the horror of the business community. And because the Clown Car Minister Jacob Rees-Mogg is no longer close enough to the levers of destruction.

The Government, of course, is unlikely to be providing more cash to local authorities despite the fact that it is increasingly on its knees: so no substantial increases in grants, local fund-raising powers or easing of burdens. After all they want the 35 councils newly under the control of other parties to fail.

It may resurrect the massive distraction they attempted in 1994, namely local government reorganisation, which usefully turned council against council. There is a big prize here for Tories: if there were fewer district councils then there would be fewer opportunities for Lib Dems and Greens to gain seats.

And we know full well that this government is not above changing the landscape for purely party-political advantage.

That said, a single election for Hertfordshire would not have been fun for the Tories at all (it wasn't in Somerset), as the Tory leader of Hertfordshire County Council will no doubt already have noticed.

Chris White is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Hertfordshire and St Albans

AN END TO THE FOOD BANKS

The new Guaranteed Basic Income policy gives the Lib Dems a radical means to end deep poverty. So will they put it top of their manifesto asks Paul Hindley

Liberals have been passionate believers in welfare provision for almost 120 years.

From David Lloyd George to William Beveridge, the foundations of the welfare state are solidly Liberal. Poverty and social hardship are giant moral evils, giant evils that social liberals exist to eradicate. This is not just to advance fairness or to reduce inequality, this is to increase the freedom of the individual. Poverty and social hardship can constrain the actions of individuals just as much as any authoritarian state.

It is set against this background, that the Liberal Democrats are needed once again to be in the vanguard of delivering social justice to the poorest and most vulnerable members of our society. Britain today is facing a historic cost of living crisis. Food poverty and fuel poverty are on the rise as the poorest people in our country struggle to put food on the table and struggle to keep the lights on.

Statistics from the food bank charity, the Trussell Trust, show that in the 2022-23 financial year, it delivered almost three million emergency food parcels across the UK. This is more than double the figure from five years ago.

GIANT EVILS

Britain is one of the richest countries in the world and yet millions of our fellow citizens cannot afford to feed themselves. One of Beveridge's five giant evils was 'want'. In Britain in 2023, the giant evil of want is on the rise, as the poorest want for the most basic thing in life, enough food to eat. Even people in work are having to use food banks, including NHS workers, with several hospitals having to set up their own food banks, not to feed their patients, but to feed their staff. This is a national outrage.

Our national social fabric is beginning to decay. In addition, the NHS is facing the biggest crisis in its history, our education system is struggling to cope and workers across multiple sectors of the economy are striking for fair pay. This is the consequence of years of Conservative misrule, chronic underfunding and austerity.

While disastrous Conservative policies continue to make the cost of living crisis worse, there is little comfort coming from the Labour Party of Sir Keir Starmer. Those progressives who hoped that Starmer would champion the radical social democracy he laid out in his Labour leadership election platform, must be bitterly disappointed. He appears to have abandoned strong social democracy and embraced culturally conservative Blairism.

The Tories are unwilling to address social hardship and Labour currently lacks a radical alternative. That

is why it is once again up to the Liberal Democrats to deliver policies of redistribution and social justice.

At the Liberal Democrats spring conference in York in March, party members passed the ambitious Towards a Fairer Society policy motion. The centrepiece of this policy motion debate was a choice between adopting as party policy a universal basic income (UBI) or (what the party termed) a guaranteed basic income (GBI).

UBI is a universal payment given to everybody as an article of citizenship, whereas GBI is a payment targeted just at the poorest in society. The party would fund GBI by building on the framework of universal credit and increasing it gradually to the level where it would end deep poverty within a decade, while abolishing benefit sanctions.

In Autumn 2020, the party committed itself to the principle of introducing UBI, something that as a long-time supporter of UBI I was thrilled to see. However, despite passing the policy motion in support of UBI, Ed Davey and other leading party spokespeople had rarely, if ever, spoken in support of the policy. This seemed very odd to supporters of UBI in the party. After all, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and an already looming cost of living crisis meant that UBI was the ideal policy for delivering social justice in this environment.

The party's establishment sometimes falls foul of crippling centrist caution. This caution suffocates the potential for greater radicalism. It appeared that UBI had become its latest victim.

During the policy debate, several of the party's MPs rose to speak against UBI and in favour of GBI. This confirmed that the party leadership had clear doubts about the party's prior commitment to UBI.

The problem is that UBI is not a single policy, but a whole package of policies that would represent a fundamental overhaul of our welfare system and our tax system. It would transform society and lead us to re-evaluate the nature of work and citizenship. In short, to do UBI justice would require a significant philosophical debate about the structure of our society and economy. Clearly, the party is not currently prepared for what could be a very complex and sophisticated debate.

In addition, those of us who support UBI in the party had not sufficiently explained the policy. Since the policy would be universal, everyone would be entitled to it. However, although the richest would receive UBI, it would be taxed back by the state probably several times over. In truth, UBI in practice would essentially be a GBI in all but name. The importance is in the value attached to universality and the need

to reduce stigma towards those who would most need a UBI. Universality embeds public support for social policies from the NHS to old age pensions, while strengthening a republican notion of citizenship.

The party ultimately decided to vote to abandon the prior policy of UBI and instead adopt GBI and perhaps surprisingly, so did I in the conference hall.

I was very satisfied with the outcome of the vote at spring conference. For me, pragmatism won out over idealism. Why make the best the enemy of the good

Davey and the party's MPs were clearly reluctant to campaign for UBI. However, now with GBI, the party has a radical policy its MPs can campaign on. A basic income targeted at the poorest, with the aim of abolishing deep poverty, is much easier to sell to voters than trying to explain the complexities of how a UBI would be structured.

GBI is not a new idea; in one form or other has been around for decades. It has also attracted support from across the political spectrum, from great social liberals like Martin Luther King Jr to the right-wing American economist Milton Friedman (even a broken clock is right twice a day). It is not even a new idea for British Liberals. In the social services chapter of his book *The Liberal Future*, published in 1959, then Liberal leader Jo Grimond called for the introduction of a "national minimum income".

The party should consider enhancing its GBI policy by ending the requirement for claimants to opt into it. This could be done by linking it to the income tax system. Every citizen aged between 18-66 would automatically start to receive a GBI when their income fell below a certain threshold. This would essentially turn GBI into a negative income tax in all but name. It would end the indignity of the very poorest having to visit a government welfare agency (such as JobCentre Plus) and/or the requirement for them to complete complex welfare forms. This would help to reduce the stigma faced by the very poorest who would need the support of a GBI, as well as reducing the need for government bureaucracy.

HIGH HERESY

I hope *Liberator* readers will forgive me for speaking high heresy, but I often think that we Liberal Democrats place too much faith in the power of our conference. Sadly, the great policies that Conference passes are not enshrined in stone, nor is the party leadership compelled to campaign for them. Conference is only a mid-way step in having something adopted as a campaigning policy for the party. Our Conference can pass the best policy motions in the world, but if our party leadership does not campaign for them then they are essentially meaningless. I do not want our best radical policies to be buried somewhere in a general election manifesto, where 99% of voters will never hear of them (assuming that such policies make

“The Liberal Democrats are needed once again to be in the vanguard of delivering social justice to the poorest and most vulnerable members of our society”

it into the manifesto at all). I want them to be campaigned on by our MPs and leading activists. Only then, do they have a chance of being enacted and have a chance of persuading people of their merits.

In a couple of previous general elections, the party placed its top four or five policies on the front cover of its manifesto. I do not think that GBI should be in our top four or five policies at the next general election, I think it should be our top policy.

We should go into the next general election with GBI as our number one policy. It is the cornerstone of the fair deal the party wishes to deliver for the country.

GBI is the policy means to abolish deep poverty in Britain. I look forward to the day when every food bank in Britain is no longer needed, because the Liberal Democrats have successfully campaigned for the introduction of GBI, which would ensure that carers and parents bringing up young children would receive a secure decent income, as well as low-paid and part-time workers.

A GBI would greatly increase the freedom, rights and opportunities of the poorest and most vulnerable people in our society. It has the potential to fulfil the commitment in the preamble to the party's constitution to build a society where "no-one shall be enslaved by poverty". It would embody Liberal Democrat social justice for the early 21st century, just as the welfare reforms of Asquith and Lloyd George embodied Liberal social justice for the early 20th century.

It is now up to you, each and every person reading this article, to make the case for GBI. We must make GBI the top Liberal Democrat policy. Put GBI in all of your Focus leaflets. Continually, lobby Lib Dem MPs to mention it in interviews and to campaign for it at every available opportunity.

Demand that the party puts GBI at the heart of its general election campaign next year. I hope the Liberal Democrats will soon become known as 'the party of GBI'. Fellow radical liberals, let us abolish deep poverty in Britain and liberate the poorest members of our society once and for all.

Paul Hindley is a Liberal Democrat activist from Blackpool and is studying for a Politics PhD at Lancaster University

WHAT WILL FOLLOW THE FORENSIC TENTS?

The implosion of the Scottish National Party may have come too late to save the Liberal Democrats from the consequences of aligning with the Conservatives on independence, says Nigel Lindsay

Harold Wilson observed that a week is a long time in politics. This was vividly illustrated during the recent SNP leadership election where almost everything changed between nomination day and the result being declared.

After Nicola Sturgeon resigned, there was surprise when the strongest MSPs and MPs failed to put their names forward.

By the end of the contest, the reason was only too obvious. And while there was a change of leadership in Scotland, the SNP's Westminster leadership had also changed. The relatively effective Ian Blackford was replaced by the little-known Stephen Flynn for reasons which are still not clear to outsiders.

The facts of the leadership election are well known. There were three candidates. One, Ash Regan, was not widely known, performed badly under questioning and gathered little support. The eventual winner, Humza Yousaf, positioned himself at the start of the election as the 'continuity candidate', though that phrase was notably absent as the election and circumstances around it wore on. The third candidate was Kate Forbes, an undeniably bright MSP still in her twenties and recently made finance minister.

UNFORTUNATE IMPRESSION

Of the two leading candidates, Yousaf gave the unfortunate impression that he wanted to be somebody, rather than to achieve something. He had previously held government portfolios for transport and health, and had established a reputation as a gaffe-prone and ineffective minister. Forbes is a member of the Calvinist Free Church of Scotland, and was not able to hide her socially conservative views on issues such as equal marriage and transgender issues.

When the election started, Sturgeon was still seen as fairly saintly, though questions were staring to appear about why she resigned at that particular moment.

By the end of the election three weeks later her husband had been arrested and questioned by police (later released without charge) and all candidates were doing their best to dissociate themselves from her. Yousaf, as the self-styled continuity candidate suffered particularly from this. He eventually scraped home as the winner by 52:48%, probably because many members had voted early in the process, before damaging facts appeared. Forbes would almost certainly have won had the election been held two or three weeks later.

Transgender issues played a large part in the campaign. The Green Party, on whom the SNP

government relies for its parliamentary majority, was uncompromising on this issue but the large vote for Forbes suggests many rank-and-file SNP members wanted to demonstrate opposition to these policies.

The Green Party also held the SNP to ransom on the unpopular deposit return scheme for cans and bottles, which had been hastily introduced with inadequate thought as to how it would work in practice.

It was interesting to watch the demeanour of the candidates when the result was declared. Yousaf looked slightly uneasy when he was declared the winner, knowing that a massive, unexpected and perhaps impossible task lay ahead of him to re-establish the party's reputation. But Forbes, who narrowly lost, looked delighted. She is now well placed to take over if Yousaf fails in the very difficult circumstances that lie ahead of him.

The result is encouraging for Liberal Democrats. Yousaf is not seen as a strong opponent, and Scottish Lib Dem leader Alex Cole-Hamilton has a chance to shine against him. A win for Forbes would have been perilous for Lib Dems, as her religion and uncompromising views would be popular in the Highlands. It would have been very difficult for us to win votes in areas like Skye, Ross-shire, Caithness and Sutherland if she had been elected leader.

SNP support has imploded since the election, and that will probably benefit the Labour Party more than anyone else – good news for Keir Starmer, who needs a strong Scottish cohort if he is to win a majority or get anywhere near one. Interestingly, though, support for independence does not seem to have dwindled in the same way as support for the SNP.

Lib Dems can feel a sense of schadenfreude from all that is going on. We lost many seats at all levels to the SNP in 2007 and 2011, and the wounds from those losses still run deep. Alex Salmond, who masterminded our losses, was comprehensively trashed after a memorable court case a few years ago. Now something similar is happening to his successor but there is no sign that any of this will lead to our regaining the lost seats.

Before we get too thrilled by the demise of the SNP it may be worth reflecting on the role of the SNP as an insurgent party, and how it was taken down by the establishment, ably assisted by its own incompetence.

Ten years ago, Alex Salmond was arguably the most effective politician in the UK. He achieved the extraordinary feat of winning an outright majority under an electoral system specifically designed to prevent such an outcome. He repeatedly got the better

of David Cameron, Nick Clegg, and David Milliband and there was a grudging admiration for this even from voters in other parties. After a few successful years, though, he was brought down by his own hubris and allegations of sexual misconduct (though a trial did not find him guilty of any of these).

Sturgeon was seen as an even more effective leader, and was widely admired for her role in the Covid-19 crisis.

How, then, did the establishment react? First, there was a concerted campaign to build opposition to a further independence referendum. This was led by Scottish Conservatives, with Labour in support. Unfortunately, Lib Dems joined in this, echoing the Conservatives again and again rather than pushing for a Federal UK which has been party policy for over 100 years. This un-nuanced approach made us look like Conservatives and was deeply troubling to many members.

DAMAGE TO LIB DEMS

The constant repetition of an anti-referendum line damaged the Lib Dems as a party with its own image, and clearly helped the Conservatives. Scottish newspapers united to oppose a further referendum, and any further discussion of independence. Even Private Eye printed frequent and well-informed poems mocking the SNP, allegedly written by William McGonagall.

All of this created fertile ground when police action against Nicola Sturgeon's husband (the SNP's chief executive) became public.

The police had an investigation to conduct, and it was

“Unfortunately, Lib Dems joined in this, echoing the Conservatives again and again rather than pushing for a Federal UK which has been party policy for over 100 years”

right for this to be followed through effectively. But questions have arisen over whether the way the police acted was fair.

Sturgeon and her husband don't live in a magnificent mansion like Rishi Sunak. They occupy a standard Taylor Wimpey estate house. Yet this did not stop the police erecting a white forensics tent in their front garden, of the sort associated with digging up gardens to find bodies. And later, when the police arrested the SNP treasurer for questioning (he was later released without

being charged) they did so amid wide publicity on the day that Yousaf was to make his first major speech as First Minister to the Scottish Parliament.

The way the police pursued their enquiries was arguably helpful to anti-independence forces and specifically the Conservatives.

There is much we do not yet know about what is happening in the SNP and why. The role of prominent MPs and MSPs is not fully understood. But before we celebrate the party's demise – welcome as it is – we should reflect on the possibility that something similar could happen to Lib Dems or other parties if they pose a long-term threat to the established order of a two-party state.

And meantime some in Scotland find it curious that forensics tents have not been seen at the houses of UK ministers and peers who are believed to have been involved in the lucrative supply of useless PPE with huge losses of government funds.

Nigel Lindsay was a Liberal member of Aberdeen City Council for 13 years. He later worked for the Scottish Government managing European Union programmes of economic development. He now sits on the Scottish Liberal Democrats commission on justice in the economy

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APPEASEMENT IN KHARTOUM

The tragedy in Sudan was predictable with two generals as bad as each other slaughtering civilians. This is what Rebecca Tinsley says Liberal Democrats must do

In March, King Charles III invited himself to Waging Peace, the NGO I founded 19 years ago after visiting Darfur. Buckingham Palace said he wanted to meet our friends, the British Sudanese community, in the same week the government introduced its Illegal Migration Bill to Parliament. (Make of that what you will). An hour before His Majesty arrived, Foreign Office people appeared, instructing our 40 bemused British Sudanese attendees “not to be political.” They were followed by the king’s emissary, who told us to be as political as we liked.

This anecdote illustrates where the UK has gone wrong in Sudan (“don’t be political”) and why the Sudanese now face a catastrophe. Instead of learning from the disastrous diplomatic process that midwived South Sudan, the Quad negotiators (UK, US, Saudi and the UAE) repeated those mistakes north of the border.

WARRING GENERALS

It was entirely predictable that the Sudan military would never voluntarily hand power to a civilian authority unless that was the best option facing them. It was also clear that the Islamists who have run Sudan for decades would provoke the two warring generals to fight each other, thus stopping the transition to civilian authority. A window of opportunity to transfer power peacefully has been lost.

For years, the UK has treated the architects of Sudan’s decades of violence (the men with guns) as their partners in the search for sustainable peace, rather than holding them accountable for their crimes.

Liberal Democrats in Westminster and our friends in the European Parliament should be calling for concerted and robust action against the warring generals including targeted smart sanctions, asset freezes, excluding them from future peace talks, and proscribing the terrorist groups involved.

But first, some context. Since independence in 1956, Sudan has mostly been ruled by military juntas. The army’s brutal network of security and intelligence agencies enriched itself while turning an ethnically diverse country into an authoritarian, fundamentalist Arab-Islamist regime. The generals continue to be supported by Saudi Arabia and Egypt, neither of which want a democratic civilian government in the neighbourhood.



Over three decades, the ruling Arab junta led by Field Marshall Omar Bashir attempted to eliminate the sizeable Black African minorities living in the peripheries, (Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile) on the cheap, by arming local Arab tribes who coveted the increasingly scarce land of Black African

farmers. It didn’t take much to incite Arab militias like the Janjaweed to loot, rape and kill hundreds of thousands of Black Africans (whom they regard as racially inferior, akin to slaves). An estimated two million died in the south which broke away in 2011 to form South Sudan: the UN stopped counting the dead in Darfur in 2005, at the Khartoum regime’s request, at 300,000.

Islamists controlled Sudan’s civil service, education, judiciary, media, security services and a web of commercial interests, creating a deep state. The international community never acknowledged their ideological motivation. Hence diplomats parrot glib nonsense about how climate change is to blame for the “competition for resources.” They also favour the “ancient ethnic hatreds” narrative as if this absolves the international community of concern for Sudan’s persecuted minorities.

Mohamed Hamhan Dagalo, nicknamed Hemedti, rose to power through his leadership of the Janjaweed militia, responsible for ethnically cleansing Black African communities in Darfur. An Arab from the

Darfur region, Hemedti made a fortune from gold mining and renting out the services of the Janjaweed, rebranded as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and paid to fight the Houthi in Yemen on behalf of Saudi Arabia.

In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, Putin needed a way to circumvent Western sanctions. The answer was illicit gold smuggling, \$4bn or 16 planes worth of it, from Sudan. His friend Yevgeny Prigozhin, founder of the Wagner Group of mercenaries, went into business with Hemedti, supplying mining equipment through a company called M-Invest and refinery capacity through another Russian-operated firm called Al Sawlaj. Wagner also supplies the RSF with weapons, as does another Wagner client, General Haftar of the Libyan National Army in Benghazi, who is trying to overthrow the UN-supported government in Tripoli.

For years, Hemedti and Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) chief General Burhan worked together to ethnically cleanse Darfur. In 2019, a popular uprising on the streets of Khartoum threatened the 30-year dictatorship of their boss, Bashir. Hemedti and Burhan astutely joined the people, overthrowing Bashir.

Then, the international community made a fundamental mistake: they believed Hemedti and Burhan when they said they would support a transition to a civilian-led government. Anyone familiar with the track record of the RSF and the SAF knew both would never willingly hand over either their power or their grip on sundry lucrative commercial interests. Moreover, Hemedti and Burhan knew from the flawed negotiations that gave birth to South Sudan that all they had to do was tell the international community what it wanted to hear, make vague promises they never fulfilled, and then drag out talks for as long as possible.

After the 2019 popular uprising, a worthy but powerless technocrat civilian, Abdalla Hamdok, was appointed as head of the transitional council, charged with overseeing the move from military to civilian rule. With the economy collapsing after decades of kleptocracy, Hamdok juggled the interests of Sudan's discredited political parties, while the civil society groups (who had bravely confronted Bashir's forces on the streets) were marginalised. However, an Empowerment Removal Committee dismantled the Islamists grip on the deep state and charged the elite with corruption. This prompted Hemedti and Burhan together to stage a coup in 2021, taking control of the government.

Since then, like Lucy promising Charlie Brown she will hold the football still while he takes a running kick, Burhan and Hemedti have assured diplomats they would transfer power to a civilian government. They have faced no sanctions for staging the coup, dragging out negotiations, or indeed for ethnic cleansing in Darfur from 2003 onwards.

“Hemedti and Burhan knew all they had to do was tell the international community what it wanted to hear, make vague promises they never fulfilled, and then drag out talks for as long as possible”

No sooner was Burhan at the helm of the transitional council, with Hemedti as his deputy, than the Islamists, banished at the fall of Bashir, re-emerged. After the 2021 coup, the Empowerment Removal Committee members were arrested and the Islamists let out of jail.

Women were once more abused and beaten on the streets by security services and civilian men demanding strictly interpreted sharia. (During Bashir's rule, 42,000 women and girls a year in Khartoum state alone were publicly flogged for

indecent, which meant daring to go to school). The media, opposition figures, Christians and human rights advocates were once more intimidated, tortured and arrested. Hundreds were killed in Darfur as disgruntled Arab militias took Black African land.

The international community registered muted disapproval, but did not threaten to sanction Burhan and Hemedti, or set benchmarks to guarantee a transition to civilian rule. Sudanese civil society repeatedly pointed out that without justice mechanisms there could be no sustainable peace.

When Putin invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Hemedti went to Moscow to express solidarity. He assured Putin that Sudan would stand by a deal, made in 2017 by Bashir, that Russia could station four warships and hundreds of military personnel in Port Sudan.

This would potentially let Russia harass global shipping, including oil tankers, going through the Red Sea to the Suez Canal. Even this development did not sound alarm bells among the diplomats overseeing the transitional deal arrangements.

RUSSIAN WEAPONS

Back in Sudan, as the economy imploded, Hemedti flirted with 'the street', distancing himself from the Islamists whom he previously embraced. He got Russian weapons via Libya and Syria, and when Burhan made a move against the Russians running his gold business, Hemedti surrounded a contingent of Egyptian air force planes, knowing the Egyptians would back Burhan and the SAF. Then, on 15 April the fighting began.

Hemedti thought the people would rise up to support him, but he is as detested as Burhan and the SAF. The RSF has fewer soldiers and weapons than the SAF, but they have experience fighting in Yemen, whereas the SAF is skilled only at persecuting civilians. The SAF jets bomb anywhere it believes the RSF may be, irrespective of the cost in civilian lives. This alone should convince the international community that Burhan belongs in jail, and not at the negotiating table deciding Sudan's future. The RSF shows similar contempt for civilians, with allegations of widespread looting and rape. Both sides have bombed and shelled hospitals and other infrastructure, unconcerned by the

impact on non-combatants.

Hemedti may retreat to Darfur where he will no doubt slaughter those Black Africans he hasn't killed in the past 20 years. At the time of writing, 200,000 Darfuris are on the road to refugee camps in Chad. Darfuri civil society fears the international community will settle for a cessation of violence that leaves the SAF in charge of most of Sudan while Hemedti rules Darfur.

Here is a policy shopping list for Liberal Democrat MPs and our MEP friends:

- ☛ The US has already proscribed the Wagner Group as a terrorist organisation, and the UK should follow suit. The RSF should also be classified as terrorists.
- ☛ The US has threatened to apply targeted smart sanctions on Burhan and Hemedti, and so should the UK and EU.
- ☛ The EU and UK should freeze and seize Hemedti and Burhan's extensive business interests and bank accounts (including accounts in London), and confiscate their overseas properties.
- ☛ An EU member country should threaten to refer Hemedti and Burhan to the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity in Darfur – unless both sides immediately return to barracks.
- ☛ The Quad and Troika negotiating teams must be extremely cautious about treating Burhan and Hemedti as their partners in the search for peace. The FCDO is already hinting they expect both men to return to the negotiating table, as if nothing has happened.
- ☛ The military must be removed from Sudanese politics for good by empowering civil society groups (and not the discredited old parties). This means supporting and creating resilient institutions in Sudan enabling accountability and transparency.
- ☛ The international community must pay attention to Sudan long enough to ensure there are severe consequences for Burhan and Hemedti if they break their promises. This means enforcing deadlines and benchmarks.
- ☛ The international community must oversee and fund a justice mechanism to end the impunity of the military and the Islamist deep state actors who have destroyed what should be a prosperous and diverse country.



Rebecca Tinsley is director of *Waging Peace*

INDEPENDENTS' DAY

Organised independents can do community politics just as well as Lib Dems. Tad Jones assesses the threat

Just before the 2015 general election prominent Lib Dem councillor and prospective candidate in Ashfield Jason Zadrozny was charged with serious criminal offences. Although charges were later dropped, he was suspended from the party and became an independent.

Several other key party activists later joined his Ashfield Independents group, which has since grown in strength. Their best result in Ashfield as Liberal Democrats was a respectable four county councillors and nine district councillors, as independents they managed to elect 10 county councillors and 28 district councillors prior to this year.

This year's local election saw them win 32 of 35 seats. Clearly the key activists in Ashfield took modern community politics methods learnt as Liberal Democrats and applied them effectively. Perhaps the party should take heart that our approach can be so successful and reflect on missed opportunities under difficult circumstances, but I would argue a more important lesson can be drawn.

From my understanding, little has changed in terms of campaign techniques. What has really changed is the party brand. The Ashfield Independents chose to leave a tarnished political brand and did not take up another. They doubled down on the community activist identity that they had built up as Lib Dems and the voters backed them.

In the 2019 district council elections several Ashfield Independents won their seats with 80% of the vote, even with the Tories and Labour standing. A recent YouGov survey showed seven out of ten people in the UK had a negative view of politics. If party politics is seen by many as toxic, ditching this identity whilst maintaining your organisation and community politics approach can lead to great success.

Although I'm sure the Ashfield Independents work hard and understand local politics, their avoidance of party labels helps them not only in persuading voters but also in attracting new activists and candidates. One councillor is a former UKIP parliamentary candidate, another came from Labour, most I believe were not party political. Like us, they need volunteers to make the campaign approach work, and they can recruit from a larger section of the population than we can.

Looking at things from the Ashfield Independents perspective, what benefit did being Liberal Democrats have? The loss of training opportunities, templates and advice from ALDC or the campaigns department doesn't appear to have held them back. The loss of membership subscriptions can be easily offset by tithing a healthy council group. Not being able to use Connect hasn't stopped them connecting with voters.

The national party framework is either not needed or they get sufficient support from the LGA independent group.

The danger for us is that we rely on our identity as local champions to get elected in many areas and independents can inhabit that identity more closely in the eyes of the voters. A rise in the number of organised independents with an understanding of our techniques could destroy our councillor base. Yes, other political parties would also take a knock, but not as much.

Should we be worried? There are about a thousand more independent councillors than there were in 2017, they now make up roughly 10% of councillors, so there is evidence of wider electoral success. Ashfield Independents have been expanding their influence by supporting independent candidates elsewhere. In the recent local elections one of our former PPCs elsewhere in Nottinghamshire went independent and won with 1,200 more votes than they got in the same ward as a Lib Dem. I appreciate that not every independent councillor has the skills and drive to maintain effective campaigning and build up a group, but they don't have to be that good to pick up enough votes stop us from winning.

Once entrenched, organised independents appear difficult to dislodge, so the best strategy might be to prevent the formation of such groups. As a party, we work really hard to convince voters to give us their vote, we are perhaps less good at campaigning to our members about our values.

People join the party for many reasons and at first may not have a particularly good grasp of what it means to be a Liberal Democrat. If local parties have a membership development officer, they are, understandably, likely to focus on getting people active.

Our liberal identity should be just as valued by our members and activists as our identities as champions of our communities. We should talk more about our party values, and issues that highlight our distinctiveness as this would help anchor activists in the party.

We should also re-examine the relationship between the central party, regions and local parties, and improve our offer to local parties. You sometimes come across an unhealthy cynicism towards the central party as a remote and irrelevant structure to local campaigners. That feeling of 'them and us' should be anathema to a party reliant on volunteers for its success. Local parties need to see the benefits of being part of the whole party.

Tad Jones is an activist and PPC in Nottinghamshire and secretary of the East Midlands region

FOG IN CHANNEL - LIB DEMS CUT OFF

Ed Davey inched towards being positive about the EU at York, but David Grace wonders why there is continued caution on a topic the Lib Dems should have made their own?

The European Union is a mist opportunity (excuse the pun) for the Liberal Democrats but perhaps the fog in the Channel is getting thinner and we are getting braver about not cutting the continent off.

Since the 2019 election debacle Ed Davey has been almost as scared as Kier Starmer about mentioning Brexit or the European Union and many Liberal Democrats have been frustrated by his silence.

The Tories have kept up their pantomime of wonderful if unspecified Brexit opportunities and have co-opted Labour into the oath of omerta but Liberal Democrat parliamentarians have mostly joined the silent order of St Edward the Unobtrusive with a vow not to rock boats. However, the mood music is beginning to change, if only in a minor key.

UPSTANDING DELEGATES

An HQ email celebrating the York Conference in March claimed that the leader's speech was interrupted by standing ovations. Setting aside the obligatory final one which would have followed even the dullest speech, the long and loud ovation from upstanding delegates was conference's endorsement of Ed's recommendation that the UK should repair its trading relationship with the EU.

Whether or not the speechwriters expected it, the audience's response was strong, heartfelt and unambiguous even if the words responded to were a little vague. Even the media, whose attention to the party is rare, noticed. The i reported that Ed claimed Brexit is "the elephant in the room of British politics". Good heavens! He must have been reading Liberator.

At a conference fringe meeting, a similar response greeted former MEP Graham Watson's call for improving trade with the EU. The question remained whether words to delight party conference-goers would be repeated in public or at Westminster.

The answer came on 24 April when the House of Commons debated the consequences of Brexit. Lest joy be unconfined, let's be clear this was a Westminster Hall debate, not proposed by any political party but as a result of a European Movement petition signed by more than 180,000 people.

The petition noted: "The benefits that were promised if the UK exited the European Union have not been delivered" and called upon the Government "to hold a Public Inquiry to assess the impact that Brexit has had on this country and its citizens."



These debates can be called by the Commons Committee on Petitions in response to petitions which get at least 100,000 signatures. They take place in a committee room off Westminster Hall and are open to any MPs to attend. The motion is always the anodyne and non-committal "This house has considered a petition to ...". A minister replies to the debate but otherwise attendance is voluntary and reflects the interests of the MPs who choose to be there.

Apart from two unreconstructed brexiters (one Tory, one DUP) the room was filled by MPs who campaigned to remain in the EU including Sarah Green, Wera Hobhouse, Christine Jardine, Layla Moran and Munira Wilson. As Wera put it, "Discussing Brexit has become a bit of a political taboo" but on this occasion the taboo was well and truly broken. You can find Hansard here: <https://bit.ly/3HqzoUw> and a video of

the debate here: <https://bit.ly/3nil35E>. Many speeches rehearsed the familiar impacts of Brexit on UK's GDP, fall in trade and investment from overseas as well the widespread disaster of ending Free Movement.

Yet Labour refused to support the call for a public inquiry and their Stephen Doughty repeated their mantra "We will not seek to rejoin the EU, the Single Market or the Customs Union" adding for a good measure "We do not support a return of Free Movement".

TWO UNICORNS

Labour propagates the delusion they can achieve a good Brexit (How?). Perhaps King Charles could oblige this feeble opposition by changing the royal coat of arms to the unicorn and the unicorn.

Of course the Tory minister Leo Docherty rejected the call for an inquiry and announced that the government was "seizing the opportunities of Brexit" without being very clear about what they were.

The Liberal Democrats present supported the call for an inquiry and Layla Moran gave the classic party line of four steps of which only the fourth is to rejoin the single market.

This is the position which the leadership got an online conference to endorse over a year ago. Why so cautious? Whom are we afraid of offending?

So now as the malicious miasma of Brexit thins enough to allow Liberals to talk to each other and to parliament about it, what will we say to the voters?

Ed Davey reminds us that we have to talk to voters not about what concerns us but what concerns them. It was never my idea to knock on doors and launch uninvited into the virtues of the single market. If voters raise, as they do, the cost of living why not respond with the impact of Brexit and the solution of joining the single market? If voters raise, as they do, problems with the NHS, why not respond with the loss of European doctors and nurses and the solution of joining the single market and allowing freedom of movement (only this time enforcing the rules which we never did before)?

Tories repeatedly claim that one of the key issues for voters is stopping the boats bringing refugees across the channel. No voter has ever mentioned it to me. If any voters are raising it, it's because the government has made it a key issue by endlessly talking about it. If we are serious about wanting the EU to rejoin the single market, we cannot wait for that magic day when voters spontaneously raise the issue on the doorstep. We need to spread the word and change the debate or it will never happen. If not now, when? If not us, who?

So I ask again, why so cautious/ What the party dignifies as a strategy is winning over discontented Tory voters. Our three parliamentary by-election wins were gained by Tory abstention and voters from all

"If we are serious about wanting the EU to rejoin the single market, we cannot wait for that magic day when voters spontaneously raise the issue on the doorstep"

parties switching to Liberal Democrat, not just Tories.

Given the party's fear of upsetting people and the media's habit of ignoring us, it is commonplace for voters to claim they don't know what Liberal Democrats stand for ("although they are very good round here"). The one thing they all do know is that we are the most pro-European party in the UK. Tens of thousands joined after the referendum for that very reason, although our shamefully cautious line let them drift away. What stops us putting flesh on the bones of being 'pro-European' with

meaningful policies proudly and loudly proclaimed to rejoin Erasmus, Horizon, Europol and, yes, the single market? Is it that unhappy Tories who voted for Brexit won't lend us their support? I'll let you into a secret - they weren't going to. That did come up on the doorstep when I was in Tiverton & Honiton

The only advantage of being a party which cannot form a government is the freedom, indeed the duty, to say what others are afraid to say. Unless we seize the role of converting the regret of remainers into a positive, practical programme of actual engagement with the EU, we deserve no better than the current continuous plateau of 8-10% in the polls.

Alternatively we can content ourselves with not upsetting anyone, being "very good round here" and winning a few more council seats. If we know what we stand for and why it matters it's time to share the good news with the voters.

David Grace is a member of the Liberator Collective

ALGORITHM AND BLUES

Is artificial intelligence a threat or opportunity? When corporations and crony governments know more about individuals than the persons themselves it's time to resist, says Paul Reynolds

There is much in the media about artificial intelligence (AI) and its many applications in IT, manufacturing, and knowledge-based service industries, on balance is this a good thing or a bad thing?

Is it just a new IT tool or, as is often claimed, a technological set of products that will change everything?

Should political parties pay attention to this, and if so should liberal democratic public policy see AI as something to be encouraged, even subsidised, or should sceptical governments attempt to protect people from its potential downsides?

This has been made more difficult to assess since the future of AI and its effects on commerce and people's daily lives are often woven into a politico-economic narrative favoured by neoconservatives, and indeed by others of a 'statist' perspective both on the left and right.

To synthesise, the story goes that, as the industrial revolution eliminated vast numbers of agricultural jobs, and as the personal computer eliminated less-skilled clerical jobs, so AI will eliminate vast swathes of more skilled 'white collar' jobs, and all kinds of related repetitive tasks. Doctors, lawyers, banking staffs, skilled factory workers, teachers, and middle managers will no longer be needed in the same way.

UNWANTED HUMANS

This, it is said, will bring automation in our daily lives to another level altogether, improving aggregate economic performance but leaving much of the population with little or nothing to do. This will require enhanced monitoring of the population, who will be increasingly isolated from economic activity. The birth rate will need to shrink; a Malthusian echo which makes the population akin to an enemy. Humans not wanted.

The 'remedy' will be state-encouraged cultural, leisure and community activity and some form of universal basic income (UBI), which will increase as economic power concentrates in the hands of AI intellectual property owners. The population will be willing to trade freedom for an easier, happier, digitally-controlled life, the narrative goes.

This narrative however is not only highly contestable, it raises questions of democracy, free will and quite a few lessons from history. It is also dangerously self-fulfilling, as a quasi-religious drive to a utopian future. We should not accept this narrative.

It tends to assume that such AI-related developments are inevitable; the return of fatalism by the back door. However, all such developments are the result of

human decisions, by people that have actual names, and thus if desired, can be held accountable.

By assuming away choices made by individuals, including individuals associated with large monopolistic corporations and investment groups, the public are led towards defeatism and then acquiescence. With no-one responsible, the takeover of human activity by AI appears as a quasi Act of God, and resistance is supposedly futile.

Is AI a servant or master? History does not travel in a straight line, and extrapolating to the future from the last handful of years, invites us to discard our collective wisdom (ask any ex-Marxist).

Mass acceptance of this narrative, conscious or otherwise, has induced organisations to fit human activity into algorithms, rather than accept the obvious limitations implied by the reverse. Readers may have heard of the many cases of doctors restrained from making holistic diagnoses and remedies in the best interests of their patients, because they might lose their jobs if they don't follow algorithm-friendly centralised protocols and mandatory 'guidelines', (where the tyranny of 'one-size-fits-all' dominates).

There are thousands of examples across many sectors and professions. Companies used to have a thing called 'management by objectives'. No longer. Humans cannot be trusted to make judgements and pursue objectives in the best way under the circumstances. Now we must increasingly process algorithm-friendly tasks, where our every muscle movement can be monitored.

One aspect of collective wisdom not to be discarded is that major technological developments do not 'change everything' as the advertising tells us. In the end humanity tries to benefit from the change and mitigate the downsides as best it can. The personal computer and then the internet made the world more efficient, and now we are grappling with the downsides of social media, but the threatened mass unemployment did not arrive.

UBI wasn't needed after the industrial revolution, electricity, the automobile, the computer, the internet and self-cleaning glass, and it won't be needed with AI. Sure, the UK has a dramatic low skills problem, worsened by Brexit, but Germany, South Korea, Japan, Netherlands and Singapore have no such problems. It is rather UK-specific policy and services problem arising from lamentable centralised governance, and absurd rigidities, not the result of technologically-induced sloth.

There are self-fulfilling doctrines and 'stroads'. There's a good historical parallel in the political dangers of self-fulfilling assumptions about the future. Much of the USA was 'constructed' after the arrival of the Model T Ford in 1908. The car was 'the future'

and Europe, with its towns and cities built for people and horses was seen as relatively backward. The feature that typifies post WW2 US 'automobile exuberance' is the 'stroad'; towns built around six or eight lane roads instead of streets, with no sidewalks and every shop having a parking lot.

Sometimes known in car-talk as 'surface streets', stroads are not only environmentally catastrophic, they are a key cause of loneliness, crime, fatal crashes and obesity. Relative to Europe, Japan and elsewhere people in the US in general don't walk, mingle randomly, take public transport or just pass the time of day. Humanity plays second fiddle. You drive everywhere, except in just a handful of cities. Assuming we will all be slaves to the AI algorithm carries similar self-fulfilling errors that we will regret. The grave error of forgetting humanity and building society around the car, does not have to be repeated by forgetting humanity and building society around AI. More importantly, we should all know where embracing the concept of 'inevitably unwanted humans' can lead.

HIDDEN TECHNO-ELITE

Rather than dutifully accept dominance by a hidden techno-elite controlled by global monopolistic investors, there's a thing called the democratic infrastructure which features anti-monopoly measures, an educated, skilled, healthy, free-thinking population, an independent judiciary not cowed by the state, free media, assent for treaty obligations, scientific method and free academia, and a political system focused on public, not private, policy.

It also features effective transparency and accountability systems; and corruption driven out by sunlight. A 'Kaizen' approach to the democratic infrastructure is the primary way to equip people with the tools to ensure AI is the public's servant, not its master.

The utopian vista which is supposed to be before us, is built upon a number of conveniently unstated

"For those of a liberal democratic persuasion, the AI narrative must be challenged. If not us, who?"

assumptions. So let us get at least some of them into the open, and address them.

While AI technologies are often advanced by small hi-tech businesses and university departments, it is large corporations, and gargantuan global investment groups, opaquely intertwined with the organs of state, which oppressively productise and excessively profit from their application.

This would not be so with effective anti-monopoly measures; avoiding de jure monopoly born of lobbying, removing competition law exemptions for banks and financial organisations, making excessive secrecy protections unlawful, and many other measures.

When corporations and crony governments know more about individuals than the persons themselves, it is time to challenge assumptions and amend permissive laws. The concept of 'rights to data' is only in its infancy, and more progress has been made with private institutions than state ones. Many problems arise from the individual being 'the product', not 'the customer' and the law is slow to catch up. Many good schools and universities are resistant, but centralised, protocol-led education based on online over-formulaic learning, is removing the excitement of creative discovery and thinking, and reducing skills to micro-tasks, turning teachers and lecturers into one-size-fits-all web administrators, as often politely pointed out by leading educational think tanks. These and a myriad of parallel problems are there to be addressed, and the unstated assumptions behind them challenged. The problems are there to be defined and addressed, not subject to obfuscation and branded taboo.

For those of a liberal democratic persuasion, the AI narrative must be challenged. If not us, who? After all, what we want to see is not just human abilities and judgements better appreciated. We want our humanity back. Something indeed to look forward to. A campaign for the return of the humans.

Paul Reynolds works in international relations and economics, and is a former member of the Liberal Democrat Federal International Relations Committee. In his early career he worked as an adviser to most of the world's largest IT companies

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BETWEEN THE PM AND THE KING

Is there room for a new post that would allow the monarch to reject illegal advice from a prime minister - such as that given by Boris Johnson over prorogation - without dragging them into politics? Hillary Hurden has an idea

Boris Johnson abused the constitution and the monarch could not prevent it, but is there a way to keep the UK monarchy but with the democracy of a republic?

The actions of recent Conservative prime ministers have highlighted the weakness of the UK constitution and the impotence of the monarch to protect it. The passing of a Queen much loved by many people over her very long reign and her replacement by her son should be an opportunity to reconsider how the monarchy works within the political system.

This article does not propose abolition of the monarchy or have anything to say about Kings Charles III. Instead, it examines why and what should be done to make the monarchy more useful in terms of protecting the people against an over-powerful executive.

It attempts to set out a possible solution which combines the role of a president in a parliamentary republic, with the traditional British monarchy, to act as guardian of the constitution.

The incompetent, dissembling and conniving behaviour, by the most powerful politicians in the land, has caused a perpetual constitutional crisis with serious economic and political effects, which has led the UK to leave the EU, caused years of political gridlock in a divided Northern Ireland, and provided an additional reason for Scottish independence. Any constitutional brake on this has been slight.

Recent history shows that if someone in the highest political office of prime minister acts ruthlessly in their own interest then the state does not have a mechanism to prevent it. Retrospective action by the Supreme Court is shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted.

GOOD CHAPS

It is said that the working UK polity is predicated on 'good chaps' acting reasonably and with due regard to interests of the people. In reality, much of this was done on the basis that a regular change in the party of Government meant a prime minister did not want to hand greater agency to a successor from another party. The prime minister, if he or she has a parliamentary majority, is in a supreme position with few checks and balances. For the purposes of this article, I am highlighting the recent prorogation crisis.

In August 2019, the UK parliament was ordered to be prorogued by the Queen upon the advice of the prime minister, then Boris Johnson. This 'advice' to the crown was eventually ruled to be unlawful by

the Supreme Court. I will not go into the back story but will focus on the role of the monarch, who by convention had to follow the direction of the prime minister, whether that direction was legal or not.

As parliament emerged as a powerful political entity the issue became how to unite the supreme powers of an ancient hereditary monarchy with the demand of the most powerful in the land to have a definitive say in how their taxes were spent by the state, as embodied in the monarch (as the crown).

In the seventeenth century, a civil war created a short-lived republic and a catholic king replaced with a protestant monarchy. This cemented the supremacy of parliament, although it took around 150 years before the monarch was eventually forced out of organising the executive. Increases in the franchise, secret ballots, and diminution of the powers of the House of Lords all led to the primacy of the House of Commons, and with it the status of the prime minister.

This long process was essentially the power of an absolute monarch being transferred to parliament, and the prime minister, supported by a majority of MPs, became, in effect, the new absolute monarch. It was a messy process too, with many conventions arising over time.

By contrast, modern republics were usually founded on a date in recent times, with a constitution setting out the powers of the legislature, the judiciary, the executive and the head of state. These constitutions (which obviously can be abused despite the letter of the law) at least have a series of rules on how these elements of the polity behave.

The UK has few of these republican safeguards. Johnson's illegal prorogation in 2019 took a hearing and judgement in three senior courts before the most senior, the Supreme Court, decided the prorogation was not within the law ("null and no effect"). The delay meant a partial victory for Johnson, who received no official sanction. Victory in the ballot box in the general election shortly afterwards would have been taken as endorsement of his behaviour.

It was widely reported that the late Queen was not pleased with the advice provided by her prime minister to prorogue parliament. The Queen's closest advisors must have smelt a rat when Johnson came calling, yet nothing was done, in terms of a delay for serious legal advice, or an outright refusal. Under the convention, the monarch has to do what the prime minister says.

This leads us into a discussion on reserve powers that may be exercised by a head of state without

approval of another part of government. Unlike in an executive presidential system of government, the head of state is constrained by the cabinet or the legislature in a parliamentary system, and most reserve powers are usable only in certain exceptional circumstances. As the UK has a partially written constitution, it relies on convention to temper what is in theory quite wide powers for the monarch. Unfortunately the 'chaps' no longer play by the conventions.

The monarch's reserve powers in a constitutional monarchy can be thought to be the means by which they can legitimately exist as constitutional guardians or umpires, tasked with guaranteeing that cabinet and parliament adhere to the fundamental constitutional principles of the rule of law and responsible government. Effectively, this task gives a practical reason for a hereditary monarchy.

HELPLESS MONARCH

In this case why is the UK monarch so helpless? Why does the monarch follow convention, even when the prime minister does not? The answer, surely, is that they feel precarious for their own position, and the future of their dynasty. Individual British monarchs, and their English and Scottish predecessors, have been deposed or executed on several occasions after overwhelming pressure from the most powerful in the land, the most recent being in 1936, when a new king with controversial political views was replaced, to the great relief of most of the political caste, by his compliant and discreet brother.

The great weakness of the UK constitution is the extreme power of the prime minister without a head of state to rein him or her in when they and the ruling party break the law or the conventions in the constitution. This is especially important when a part of the UK, Scotland, could leave if the UK Tory government is seen as continuing to be hostile to the interest of the people of Scotland.

The answer must be to have a constitutional law that limits the power of the prime minister and sets out clearly the powers of the head of state – but with a hereditary monarch this raises issues of democracy, as the prime minister, is elected (albeit indirectly), and the monarch is not.

My proposal is to make the monarch have to take the advice provided by an intermediary, which I will call a governor-general, chosen for a fixed term (how is set out below).

It is the governor general who has to take the advice of the prime minister, before relaying it to the monarch. However, the governor general will have some constitutional powers when they are not required to take the direction of the prime minister, when they direct the monarch.

To legitimise them in a different way to the prime minister, a governor general could be selected by the constituted senior decision making bodies of the state. For example, in Germany the federal

“The great weakness of the UK constitution is the extreme power of the prime minister without a head of state to rein him or her in”

president is elected by the federal convention, which consists of the members of the bundestag and an equal number of members elected by the parliaments of the länder. In the UK the governor general could be elected by a committee of the House of Commons, and of the parliaments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This would give the governor general the legitimacy of being selected

by the representatives of the whole UK. It is important that the office of the governor general is paid, is for a fixed term and their pension on leaving the post is confirmed. This reduces the opportunities for the prime minister to put the governor general under financial pressure.

Bearing in mind the recent constitutional crises, the autonomy of the governor general could include the following, which are features of several modern western democracies with a non-executive president, and even of commonwealth countries where the UK monarch is head of state by their role is taken by a governor-general approved by local politicians.

- The ability to refuse a prime minister's demand to dissolve parliament and call a general election (as in Republic of Ireland);
- The ability to demand a prime minister's resignation and to agree the replacement prime minister's demand to dissolve parliament and call a general election when certain conditions are met (as in Australia);
- Standardisation of the rules and consequences of government referendums.
- Direction to the monarch to refuse their signature to laws passed by the parliament in certain circumstances such as formal errors in the law-making process or violations of the constitution caused by the new law (as in Germany).

In conclusion, the ruthless actions of recent Conservative prime ministers have highlighted the weakness of the UK constitution and the impotence of the monarch to protect it.

The prorogation crisis forced the Queen to agree to something which did not have a basis in law. It is not in the monarch's interest to stand up to the prime minister, so a way must be found to bypass that interest by moving the responsibility for standing up to prime minister to a governor general, who would be legitimised by being selected by the four parliaments of the UK.

Hillary Hurden is a Liberal Democrat activist in London

FIGHTING BORIS IN HIS BACKYARD

Blaise Baquiche is due to stand against former prime minister Boris Johnson at the next general election - what lessons are there from an earlier foray into the UK's poshest ward?

Nestled between Kensington Palace and the Natural History Museum lies the sleepy council ward of Queen's Gate. Home to London's first Whole Foods, the Daily Mail and Evening Standard offices, the 'community' is a milieu of mansions and town houses belonging to the urban elite, interspersed with French cafés and Italian apéro spots.

It's Blue. Bluer than the safest Tory council seat in Buckinghamshire. Full of Remainers and bankers, it also hosts a handful of mansions belonging to Russian oligarchs and Saudi Arabian royalty. So as a Lib Dem, fortunate enough to live here, what in the world possessed me to stand?

I was desperate to get out and canvass in the first election since lockdown was lifted. The loss of my father to Covid-19 and being stuck at home for so long had taken a huge toll on my mental health. A passionate Remainder himself, he enjoyed every twist and turn of my political career. Our dinner chats would be over the Brexit drama unfolding, before racing to the couch to switch on Newsnight.

My name now printed on the ballot paper spurred me on and I knew I could learn something from running in such an atypical Tory seat. In the end, my first campaign left me with an even greater passion to bring back integrity into local and national politics.

LYING BASTARDS

"Kick those lying Tory bastards out!" blared a resident through the intercom with a few days to go. "You can do it, Blaise. No one's worked as hard as you! You will make it! Inshallah!"

It wasn't hard to pick up on an anti-Tory wave last year. The first few months were plagued with Partygate, lobbying and sexual abuse scandals, and the divisive plan to send refugees to Rwanda.

By May 2022, Boris Johnson's credibility was so shorn that there were rumours of regicide if the Tories performed badly in the locals. And badly they did, as Labour took control of Wandsworth and Westminster and the Lib Dems swept to victory across the country. Everywhere of course, but Queen's Gate.

In the run up to polling day, I felt genuine momentum in the specifically anti-Johnson sentiment throughout the ward. By May 2022, the Partygate revelations had fully emerged and sent shockwaves throughout the Conservative party. Yet I still faced the peculiar reasoning that "if Johnson goes, there'd be no other Tories to do the job, so we have to show our support".

They still recognise what Johnson did was despicable.

But Johnson's backers successfully concocted a narrative that "he got the big calls right on Brexit, the vaccines and Ukraine".

As I stand against Johnson himself in Uxbridge, disproving this would be my biggest but not impossible battle. Small on the ground today, I hope to ramp up our Hillingdon campaign team in the same way I did last year in Kensington and prove that integrity matters.

We'd lost a huge chunk of activists after 2019, so I had to grow a local campaign team from scratch. We brought activists from all over Kensington and canvassed streets that had never heard from us before. I even hosted a fundraiser raising over £3,000 in our living room. Don't think dad would mind!

And in Earl's Court, we did remarkably well in getting two councillors elected and missing out on a third by just six votes.

By doubling the vote share in Queen's Gate and getting a healthy 34% of the vote, I can hold my head up high-ish. We built something out of nothing and could be a real contender next time round. But more importantly, I figured out what mattered to residents in one of the poshest parts of London.

"It's a joke" fumed one resident as soon as I mentioned cycle lanes. In the summer of 2020, one of the Mayor's 'cycle superhighways' was due to run along the length of Kensington High Street. Bollards were erected to cordon off the borough's only protected cycle lane, unfortunately at the same time as four sets of building works took place.

Even though cycling numbers more than doubled, £350,000 of public money was spent tearing them down and fighting the subsequent judicial review spearheaded by the charity, Better Streets for Kensington & Chelsea, which is still ongoing. An embarrassing U-turn for the Tory led council perhaps, but car drivers in Kensington rule the roost.

"I'll vote for you if you reverse the ban on racing" scoffed a millennial as he gestured to his Lamborghini. As I weaved in and out of grand Georgian terraces and leafy mews, hopped over ornate gates and shoved pamphlets in the letterboxes of eye-wateringly expensive properties, it was clear there were no council homes in Queen's Gate. And the most trouble I faced as a canvasser was from the private security cars that patrolled the deathly quiet streets, as residents clearly felt their homes were just too nice for the police to protect.

Empty residential streets, where the only complaint on the doors is when a catalytic converter has been nicked, feels all too familiar when canvassing in Uxbridge.

In the Kensington locals, rarely did a local issue come up on the doorstep. "A man is a man, and a woman is a woman. I just don't trust you lot." screeched another resident out the window. I don't think he was talking about the views of individual councillors on LGBTQ+ rights.

Unsurprisingly, Labour didn't put up a fight here, as their efforts were focussed up in North Kensington and the area surrounding Grenfell tower, a stark reminder of the deep inequalities across the royal borough.

By the time polling day came around, I was feeling ambitious if not a bit deluded, that I might just nick one of those three council seats off the Tories. Our telling operation soon fell apart, as there was no way we could find enough people to man the ward's two polling stations for the 15 hours polls were open.

TROLLER-IN-CHIEF

Telling for myself, I arrived in the morning to find myself sitting face to face with Twitter's troller-in-chief, Lord Moylan. A former councillor for this very ward, he went onto become Johnson's 'ideas man' in City Hall before getting his peerage and the green light to become a Brexit Spartan in the Lords. And despite my brimming optimism the night before, an endless cavalcade of Tory voters shuffled past one after the other muttering there's no way in hell they would vote for anything else.

After some cordial banter with Moylan, and enough accusations that I don't believe in Britain, I went on to manically knock on as many doors as my knuckles and knees could hack before heading over to the Town Hall for 10 o'clock.

Exhausted and questioning all my life choices, I banged on the door of a French family with just ten minutes to go, crying out that there was still time to vote. "Merde!" I heard yelled from inside. "Mes clés!" The mother had jammed her keys and couldn't open the door. I offered to knock it down lest she be deprived of her suffrage in a local election. After some frantic jangling we prized the door open, before dragging her to the polling station with less than two minutes to spare. All to find out that she couldn't vote as she was registered in the neighbouring ward at the property she owns and was just renting her flat in my ward. Only in Kensington.

With the polls closed, the night had only just begun. I rushed over to the brutalist Town Hall building to watch the count until 6am. I sidled up to the Queen's Gate ballot boxes, to watch over the counting staff. The Tories were already there, suited and booted, like secretaries of state in waiting.

Hours felt like minutes as my 548 votes were ticked off by hand. Again and again, a jolt of encouragement and sometimes disbelief that I was racking up so many votes each time my surname, Baquiche, was read out. Wilting after an hour, I misheard the name blur into something sounding like the Arabic 'back-shish' 9meaning 'tip or bribe' specifically regarding

"The very week that Johnson partied in Downing Street was the week my siblings and I argued over whether to go to the hospital for our father's last days"

political corruption. Oh, how I could've done with one now! Inshallah!

Hearing the name so often reminded me of my father. The very week that Johnson partied in Downing Street in January 2021, was the week my siblings and I argued with each other over whether to go to the hospital for his last days. Just to pass on kind thoughts, to hold his hand, to say goodbye. No, we should follow the rules.

Has there ever been integrity in politics? Does

it even matter in a local election? Johnson's making and breaking of the lockdown rules are not relevant as to whether the council is run well. But not one of those Tory councillors had the courage to call for his resignation.

In Uxbridge, it could be a very different story. A guilty verdict from the privileges committee would mean a by-election. If Johnson runs again, he could face a similar wrath of 'Posh Tories' determined to send a message to the government that even if they think Hillingdon Council is run well, integrity still matters in politics.

I still hold out that post-Johnson, his brand of spinning dishonesty as 'authenticity' will die out. I hope his loyalists who turned a blind eye to his rule breaking will have tarnished the party so much that they become so unelectable, even the Queen's Gate die-hards will stop voting for them.

I hope people will believe that the Lib Dems are no longer a protest vote, but a serious party of government. I hope there'll be a tide of yellow in true blue west London. I hope integrity will return to British politics and be valued as an electable asset. I hope. Inshallah.

Blaise Baquiche is the Liberal Democrat prospective candidate for Uxbridge & South Ruislip

TWO THEORIES CLASH

Reconciling Queer Theory and Critical Race Theory is just one thorny issue around gender, says Blakett Howe Lee

There are those who say we should not debate people's existence. We would not tolerate discussion with people defending the Nazi racial categories, or with those who believe that homosexuality is a curable medical disorder. Why should we treat 'gender-critical' viewpoints any differently?

This approach has the advantages of certainty, simplicity and righteousness. But it easily seems dogmatic and it does not deal with some important questions.

Start with the philosophical framework. How to reconcile Queer Theory (QT) and Critical Race Theory (CRT)? The former, put crudely, argues that the mind trumps the body. Whatever your biological sex, observed (or assigned) at birth, it is what you feel that determines who you are. Instead of the binary, reductive world based on whether your body produces large or small gametes, QT takes you to the subtle, fluid, highly personal world of gender. Many find that more attractive.

QT is a coherent belief structure, in isolation. But it clashes, to put it mildly, with CRT. It argues - again, crudely - that racism is a centuries-old political and social construct that rests on immutable biological reality.

White people, however much they check their privilege and strive to be allies, cannot 'feel' Black. Indeed, faking a darker skin colour, or appropriating the associated cultural heritage is politically loaded at best, and potentially deeply offensive.

To illustrate the problem, ponder this. Why is blackface decried as revolting, whereas drag is amusing and edgy? (That's on the left. On the right it's vice versa). Mental gymnastics can square the circle between CRT and QT but not without debate.

Next up: the legal framework. The Equality Act makes sex a protected characteristic. But if we insist trans women are women - not metaphorically but literally and without any qualification - there can be no solely sex-based rights. They are on this basis outdated, an indefensible legacy of cis privilege, and we must make the case for their abolition.

Move on to practical questions, such as under-age decision-making. Rules on marriage, sexual consent, service in the armed forces, alcohol and tobacco consumption, the right to drive different kinds of vehicles, compulsory schooling and much else vary sharply between countries.

What is the right age to decide about puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones and surgery, with the attendant risks of sterility and anorgasmia in later life? Who else, if anyone, has a say in these decisions? Parents? Schools? The courts? All of them? None, many of us would argue. Children have a sole and absolute right, at any age, to decide all of these questions for themselves.

The risk of suicide among teenagers experiencing gender dysphoria is so high that a drastic shift to absolute bodily autonomy and privacy is justified. This view has the virtue of simplicity. But it is open to empirical challenge according to the statistics and what do other countries do.

What about de-transitioners? It is possible to dismiss them as a tiny and irrelevant minority, used by the anti-trans camp to discredit the vital provision of healthcare to people who desperately need it. They argue that they were misdiagnosed and mistreated. Lawsuits are looming.

Claiming no debate is possible will not work in the courtroom. That means it can't work in politics either. Add to that the question of commercial interests. Individuals and companies are profiting from surgical and pharmaceutical intervention. Is that sinister or irrelevant?

If we truly believe in unconditional and instant self-identification we must condemn any legal, bureaucratic or medical gatekeeping as an intolerable infringement of trans rights.

That has the virtue of simplicity. But it leaves us without answers when it comes to bad actors, real or perceived. What about rapists in women's jails? Even the strongly pro-trans Scottish government backed away from an absolutist approach in the case of Isla Bryson, who changed gender between two rapes and an eight-year jail sentence. It now adopts a risk-based approach to trans women in women's jails. That policy change may be insufficient, correct, or a betrayal of trans rights. But it is not irrelevant and it is no answer to say it cannot be debated.

What about trans women in sports? Are contests where physical strength is irrelevant (chess, snooker, dressage) different from those where it matters a lot (rugby, weightlifting, swimming)? Is undergoing male puberty the decisive factor, or is it the level of testosterone in the contender's bloodstream? Should we accept different rules in different sports? This should be discussed.

History should teach us humility on these questions. In the 1860s we treated 'hysteria' (among women) with cliterodectomy. What we regard as abhorrent today was tolerated in the past: We can be sure that future generations will look with incredulity at our social mores and resulting medical interventions. We do not know how opinion will change, but change it assuredly will.

Heartfelt disagreement should not preclude honest discussion of philosophical and practical difficulties, or stop us assuming good faith among those who disagree with us.

Blakett Howe Lee is a Liberal Democrat member in London



LETTERS

philosophical belief that there are two immutable sexes in humans and that sex sometimes matters. Many people will hold gender-critical beliefs without even realising it.

A protected philosophical belief as stated in the Equality

IT'S ALL GONE QUIET

Dear Liberator,

Reading Liberator 416 made me realise how much our party has drifted over the last years away from a radical, dynamic political party to an anodyne shadow of its former self.

Liberator identified subjects that the party should be vigorously campaigning on – maternity services, the appalling increase in food bank usage, tax evasion by the super rich and public sector pay and most importantly the Brexit disaster. Liberator's cover said it all.

What happened to the party that declared that Hong Kong Chinese should be allowed to come to the UK post 1997? That was hardly a popular policy but we had the integrity to support it anyway. Our silence on Brexit is shameful in contrast. Our silence on shipping refugees to Rwanda is pretty pathetic, too.

Why are we not shouting loud and clear about the neglect of our state education? I despair when I find our big 'message' is greater support for carers. Yes, of course it's a national scandal that carers save this country millions of pounds but that is not a mainstream issue at the moment when 2.5m children are living below the poverty line and people are having to choose between eating and heating.

We seem terrified of upsetting various groups of people. The thinking seems to be we mustn't talk about Europe because we'll lose support from Brexiters.

Well, do the powers that be in our party think Brexiters would normally support us anyway? What about the Tories and Labour supporters who realise leaving the EU has caused our GDP to drop by 4%? Can't we have the courage of our convictions?

We're in danger of missing the anti-Brexit boat: The Observer has already published articles by Peter Hain and William Keegan insisting our future is within the EU. The i newspaper has also published similar articles.

Our leaders maintain we don't get coverage as we're such a small group of MPs. My answer is "be brave; show a bit of integrity; tell truth to power".

Grab the issue with both hands and you'll get publicity for being truthful, responsible and honest.

One final suggestion: Paddy had a really good campaign slogan in the days when we were a radical, campaigning party: The Five Es – Environment, Europe, Education, Economy, Electoral Reform.

Stephanie Ripley
Oxford

PROTECTED BELIEFS

Dear Liberator

Gareth Epps in his letter (Liberator 416) is mistaken regarding gender-critical beliefs.

The term 'gender-critical' describes the protected

Act 2010 must: be genuinely held; be a belief and not an opinion or viewpoint based on the present state of information available; be a belief as to a weighty and substantial aspect of human life and behaviour; attain a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance; and be worthy of respect in a democratic society, compatible with human dignity and not in conflict with the fundamental rights of others. Other protected beliefs include humanism, pacifism and a belief in man-made climate change.

EHRC guidance (<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/religion-or-belief-guide-law>) states: "Holocaust denial, or the belief in racial superiority are not protected" because they are not compatible with human dignity and would conflict with the fundamental rights of others.

The Forstater appeal judgment in 2021 established that Maya Forstater's gender critical beliefs are protected under human rights law and the Equality Act because they do not seek to destroy the dignity or fundamental rights of trans people - and neither do we.

That judgment has not been successfully challenged. Epps states that gender-critical beliefs are 'transphobic', a 'form of discrimination' and 'bigotry', and likens those holding such beliefs to 'racists, misogynists and homophobes.' He may not like it, but the courts say otherwise.

Epps says the Forstater case is irrelevant, because it was "an issue of employment law". But the issue was that the human rights of an employee were being breached. The same human rights that protect an employee protect a member of any political party.

He says the revised Lib Dem Definition of Transphobia will result in "a revival of transphobic bullying by party members in the face of legal threats against disciplinary action".

As the three sets of legal advice, from two distinguished barristers, made clear, disciplinary action based on the original definition could well result in a humiliating legal defeat for the party, because that definition disregarded our human rights and the human rights laws that protect us.

Would Gareth Epps really want that? I cannot imagine anything more shameful to a supposedly liberal party.

We stand by the preamble to our party's constitution, which rejects prejudice and discrimination based upon a number of characteristics including sex, gender identity or sexual orientation, and also upon religion or belief. We defend the human rights of all our party's members, including trans people, and we expect our own human rights to be respected equally, and in accordance with human rights law.

Zoe Hollowood
Chair, Liberal Voice for Women

Johnson at 10 by Anthony Seldon and Raymond Newell Atlantic Books £25.00

Having started with the premiership of Margaret Thatcher, this is Anthony Seldon's seventh book chronicling the occupants of 10 Downing Street. (He will struggle to get the volume about Liz Truss to run to the 500+ pages here; a short pamphlet is more likely).

Co-written with Raymond Newell, this is a crushing analysis of Johnson, both before and during his time in Downing Street. No punches are pulled in outlining Johnson's superficiality, mendacity or immorality and in his interest in little more than his own self-promotion.

Much in this book has been detailed before – from his general attitude at Eton, through his party-switching efforts to become president of the Oxford Union, his chequered period as a journalist, editor and MP for Henley – in none of which posts did he demonstrate any indication of the real level of gravitas or concentration which might have been expected from someone so driven with the desire to climb to the top of the greasy pole.

The authors are, perhaps, a bit too charitable about Johnson's time as Mayor of London. Any success was largely due to the team he assembled in City Hall – a team which, for the most part, was not willing or able to follow him into Downing Street three years later.

Unlike his predecessor Ken Livingstone, whose knowledge of London and its workings was encyclopaedic, Mayor Johnson was totally uninterested in the detail of policy or the working of London as a global centre or as a collection of communities in which people live.

For him, the mayoralty was the opportunity for the easy headline, the photo-op and the chance to raise his profile with the rank-and-file Conservative members who ultimately held the key to the party leadership.

REVIEWS

Equally, Johnson's position on Brexit was more based on expediency rather than conviction. Expecting Remain to win, by positioning himself as a leader of Vote Leave, he could have his cake and eat it and "the factor that weighed most heavily in his mind was not in doubt: the interest of

Amid the coruscating attacks on Johnson's lack of any guiding principles, the book does accept that Johnson performed well over Ukraine. Admittedly, it was a relatively easy win-win: pay the odd visit to Kiev, say the right things and give Zelensky what he asked for, but Johnson was in the vanguard of building international support for Ukraine and there is an element of credit to which he is entitled. The same cannot be said, say the authors, about his handling of Covid-19, where, yet again, his "inability to be consistent in decision ... [and] ... provide real leadership" cost far too many lives. His career-defining lack of interest in detail and the complexities of the issue produced inconsistencies and chaos at a time when discipline and considered action were needed.

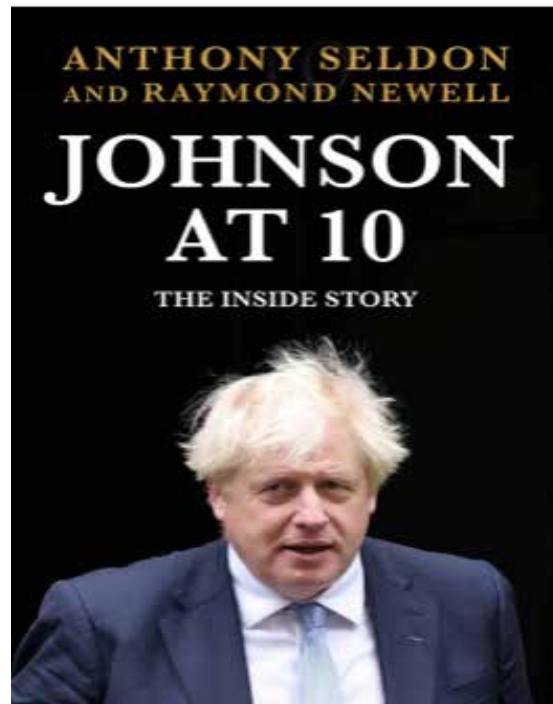
Seldon and Newell believe that circumstances provided the opportunity for Johnson to emerge as one of the nation's great prime ministers. He had exceptional skills as a communicator, an iron will and certain areas of interest – infrastructure, the environment and raising skill levels – where he could have made a difference.

But he lacked other necessary attributes. There was "no moral seriousness, an ability to work relentlessly hard, decisiveness and resolution ... the courage to appoint strong cabinet and No.10 teams and a gift for managing proactively".

The brutality of his fall from power graphically showed the feral tendencies of the Conservative Party and, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, one must have a heart of stone to read the death of Johnson's premiership without laughing.

The authors' final statement? Johnson's "unequivocal exclusion [from the club of great Prime Ministers] can be laid at the feet of no one else, but himself." Says it all, really.

Nick Winch



Boris Johnson and his desire to rule" say the authors.

The best chapter in the book – and the longest – is devoted to Dominic Cummings. Clearly talented and an original thinker, his inability to work with – or even get on with – those around him was ultimately key in both his own and Johnson's downfall. He is someone whose political significance may be best seen with the passage of more time than this type of book allows, but the authors rightly highlight the tensions between his analysis of issues (worthy of greater examination than is given here) and his abilities to act on the resulting conclusions – an ability not helped by his declarations of war on those best placed to help with their delivery.

Vodka With Stalin (play) by Francis Beckett

Dictatorships almost always imprison, torture and kill their opponents but only the really paranoid ones do the same to their most devoted friends.

During Stalin's purges thousands of foreign communists who had travelled to the Soviet Union to sit at the tyrant's feet were murdered as an obsession with Trotskyist (and particularly Jewish Trotskyist) plots curdled into suspicions of any communist who had ever lived abroad.

The play looks at the contrasting fates of two such British communists. One, Rose Cohen, went to Russia filled with enthusiasm, was for a time honoured by the regime and given an important post, but then fell victim to Stalin's increasing paranoia and was eventually shot.

The other was Harry Pollitt, leader of the British Communist Party and an intimate of Stalin who enjoyed vodka-field bouts with him on visits to Moscow.

Years earlier Pollitt has repeatedly but unsuccessfully proposed marriage to Cohen and on discovering she is in prison in Russia pleads with Stalin for her life, though not very effectively.

In a (presumably) piece of dramatic licence, Beckett imagines a meeting back in London between Pollitt and Labour party leader George Lansbury, where the latter suggests Pollitt can only save Rose by threatening to publicly denounce Stalin, as coming from someone of Pollitt's prestige this would destroy the communist strength in the UK and Stalin would be well aware of this damaging possibility.

Rather than try to save Rose, Pollitt refuses to desert Stalin and retreats into slogans about being unable to make an omelette without breaking eggs, and talking of 'mistakes' in Russia.

It says something about Beckett's skill as a political playwright that he can turn this tragic tale into a drama that manages flashes of humour and which sold out its run at a fringe theatre and returned for a second innings.

He uses the play to chart communism's descent - in barely 20 years - from high ideals to deranged violence and murder.

The play uses a small cast - some playing multiple parts - and charts their journey from starry-eyed devotion to communism and its Russian leaders through to their own mounting paranoia as they see what is happening round them. A video screen provides some helpful context that would otherwise make the script laborious.

Pollitt is shown absorbing communism after a childhood of appalling poverty in late Victorian Lancashire. Apart from opposing the Nazi-Soviet pact his faith never wavers and he changes chameleon-like with every contortion of the Moscow-approved party line.

One feels he could quite as well have ended up as a member of some evangelical sect where one is required above all never to think for oneself.

Pollitt chose not to try to save Rose because of his fear of what any apostasy on his part would do to communism's prospects in the UK. As we now know, it never had any, and Pollitt could have said anything he pleased to Stalin without having much impact on British politics.

The play imagines a post-Stalin meeting between Rose's son Aloysha (abducted as a small child as the offspring of an 'enemy of the state' and placed in an orphanage) and Pollitt, in which Aloysha is pleased above all that Rose and her husband were posthumously rehabilitated. This was as close as the Stalinists got to apologising for what - as the video screen reminds us - were several million of murdered 'mistakes'.

Mark Smulian

Locks, Bolts and Bars: A Life Inside by John Massey with Dan Carrier History Press £20

This is certainly an unusual perspective on the criminal justice system. Massey had an impoverished childhood - relieved slightly surprisingly by a friendship with the future singer Cat Stevens - and moved from juvenile petty crime to become one of the most notorious bank robbers in 1970s London and then the longest-ever serving prisoner.

By this account he ran rings round law enforcement, at one

time escaping pursuit in a hijacked police car and another on a bus.

Then he shot a man dead. This was unrelated to his bank robbing and followed a brawl in a bar. Massey got a life sentence with a minimum term of 20 years but ended up serving 43.

These extra years inside arose from Massey's several prison escapes, which saw him at one point living in Spain for five years but other times recaptured quickly. Because his escapes were in most cases related to family illnesses he was denied permission to leave prison escorted to visit sick relations or attend their funerals, so he escaped again and each time the years piled on.

Obviously, this book gives Massey's side of what did and did not happen in the course for his crimes, but its main interest lies in his account of prison life, something rarely covered in books or newspapers.

He describes constant unpredictable moves, times of crushing boredom, times of reasonably satisfying activity and regimes that varied from those committed to rehabilitation to those that depended on gratuitous violence towards inmates.

The book's co-author is a local newspaper journalist in Massey's native Camden and states that he has not personally profited from it. Massey was released a few years ago.

Locks, Bolts and Bars does not try to gloss over Massey's crimes and obviously readers have to take his word for what happened to him both before and after prison. It does though make one think about the utility or otherwise of locking people away for decades with little consistent effort to help them into a life outside crime when they are released.

Mark Smulian

Monday

Like all responsible landowners, I pride myself on keeping my farms, fences and roads in tip-top condition; you will find but one pothole on the whole of the Bonkers Hall Estate. That pothole, let me explain at once, has been intentionally left so that Liberal Democrat activists from across Britain can come to Rutland for their advanced pointing training. It is here that they learn such specialist techniques as the Single Chamberlain, Double Chamberlain, Reverse Morgan (with and without twist) and Full Carmichael – this last is invaluable on single-track roads with passing places. (In the light of the latest advice from Harley Street, we no longer teach even the half-Opik.) For months our courses have been fully booked, but as polling day is almost upon us, no activists will arrive for a week or two. I spend the day auditioning Jack Russell terriers to deliver my new letterbox training, provisionally titled “How to deliver Focus and live.”

Tuesday

Nowadays the average Conservative is interested in but one thing: money. This allows those of us who are more liberal-minded to have sport with them. All you need do is securely tie a fiver to a length of string and wait in the saddle until a Tory happens along. Then, having made sure he has sighted your fiver, you set off across country at a brisk trot: your victim is sure to follow. Lead him across ploughed fields, over stiff thorn hedges or into a bog as the fancy takes you. Much fun may be had from a pig sty and even more from the many rivers stuffed with sewage by Thérèse Coffey. As my loyal carthorse and habitual mount for this purpose, Albert, remarked the other day: “It’s better than the pictures.”

Wednesday

My electronic inbox is full of green-ink emails complaining about fifteen-minute cities – apparently they are the work of the devil, George Soros, the World Economic Forum and, no doubt, the Elders of Zion too. It happens that I live in a fifteen-minute village: though the drive of Bonkers Hall is fashionably long, with a following wind I can still reach Mr Patel’s shop within that time. If I use the secret passage that comes out in the cellar of the Bonkers’ Arms, I can arrive even sooner. But what shall I do about these vexatious correspondents? Making a brisk perambulation of the village green this morning, I have a brainwave. Some years ago, I became intrigued by the fate of the Spanish Armada and the legend that several of its ships sank in Rutland Water. I organised an archaeological investigation – the strong tides were a particular problem – but we found nothing beyond the occasional bemused whiting and I found myself left with several dozen pairs of lead diving boots. I hurry home and offer them for sale to those correspondents. Rather naughtily, I write: “Wearing these beauties, it will take you several hours to walk to the corner shop. Who’ll look silly then?”

Thursday

When nominations closed last month, I discovered that, once again, I was the only candidate for the Bonkers Hall Ward. Remembering the precepts of my old friend Tony Greaves, however, I leave nothing to chance today: we run a full polling-day operation, from five in the morning when my tenants arrive at the Hall to collect

Lord Bonkers’ Diary

their ‘Good Morning’ leaflets, to the final knock up as the bells of St Asquith’s strike ten. I am humbled to be declared the victor – you will be able to read excerpts from my acceptance speech in next week’s High Leicestershire Radical (which I happen to own).

Friday

I can remember when every council for miles around counted its votes overnight. A chain of beacons would bring news of Liberal triumphs and Liberal defeats:

an unexpected victory in Brixworth; a slew of gains on Wigston Urban District Council; disaster at Ashby de la Zouch. I was once convinced we had taken Holland County Council, only to find I was watching the distress flares from a Liberian-registered tanker on Rutland Water. Nowadays most councils count the next day, and this year the results are worth waiting for: Oadby & Wigston and Hinckley & Bosworth are held; gains are made in Harborough and Leicester. Above all, we are now the largest party in Rutland, having polled almost half the popular vote. The editor of Wainwright’s West Country Marginals rings to tell me that it is now possible to walk from the Tamar to the tidal Thames without leaving territory governed by the Liberal Democrats. I observe that, given the state to which the Conservative enemy has reduced our railways, this may well be the quickest way of getting there.

Saturday

To Westminster Abbey for the Coronation of Charles III and to swear my allegiance (provided he keeps his hands off the Ancient Liberties of Rutland, of course). I also swore at his mother’s Coronation, but only because the Duke of Norfolk trod on my heel after I offered some pithy observations on the XI he had selected to play the Australians in their tour opener at Arundel that year. The Duke was a left-footer. I don’t mean he was a Roman Catholic (though he was, as are many of my friends – including the Pope, incidentally): I mean that he trod on me with his left foot. A woman called Mad-Aunt appears as a warrior princess – I don’t recall any such character in 1953, though the first Lady Bonkers did hurry from rehearsing Brünnhilde at Covent Garden to join me at George V’s Coronation. I am relieved this time that no one has given Liz Truss a sword: she would surely have taken out the Archbishop of York, two page boys and the gospel choir.

Sunday

Inspired by yesterday’s event, I bring some of my treasures for the Revd Hughes to bless during Divine Service at St Asquith’s. Mr Gladstone’s rosette (snatched from his breast by a mob of excited Midlothian wifes), a signed first edition of L.T. Hobhouse’s *Liberalism* (though quite who signed it is a mystery) and two of A.J. Mundella’s toe bones, which have been credited with bringing about more than one miraculous by-election victory. After this weekend, I am more convinced than ever that, as a county and as a country, we are ready to face the future, whatever it may lob at us.

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